

## **Astana Set to Curb Russian Broadcasts**

**Author:** [Slujan Ismailova](#)

Kazaks are furious at government plans to curb the rebroadcasting of Russian television programmes

When it comes to radio and television, Kazaks like Russian programmes. They dominate the ratings, but this may soon change.

Draft amendments to media legislation are before the lower chamber of the Kazak parliament. The changes would limit the proportion of rebroadcast Russian programmes to 20 per cent of total output.

Kazaks are up in arms. The country has a 30 per cent ethnic Russian minority and most of the channels in Kazakstan - ORT, NTV and RTR - are Russian.

Among radio listeners, Europa Plus Kazakstan and Russkoe Radio (Russian Radio) are the favourites.

"More often than not I'll watch ORT or NTV because their programmes are more interesting and the news are more honest," said pensioner Yevdokia Samokhina. "On the local television channels there's little of any interest, and I don't believe the news here at all."

According to Kazak Foreign Minister Kasymjomart Tokaev, the changes are necessary to protect the local radio and television industry.

"At present we in effect broadcast Russian television programs for free, using up television and radio frequencies that are badly needed by Kazak producers," a bureaucrat in the presidential administration said.

"There can't be any talk of infringing rights and freedoms here because we're not banning people from watching Russian television. Let them watch it on cable or with a satellite dish. I think it's fair when a sovereign state protects its own producers."

But Sergei Vlasenko, a lawyer for the non-government organization Internews Kazakstan, argues that the changes may damage domestic media. "Rebroadcasting attracts advertisers, because the Russian programmes are so popular. Thanks to that the domestic channels have the income and resources to create their own broadcasts."

Vlasenko also cautions that the proposed legislation contravenes a March 1996 agreement between Astana and Moscow on the joint creation of favorable conditions for television and radio programmes. "We have to comply with these documents," he said.

Sergei Duvanov, an independent journalist, also sees the moves as bringing more problems for private local channels.

"There will be absolutely no protection of domestic producers," he said. "A ban on the rebroadcasting of Russian channels will lead to a drop in popularity of local private channels. This means that private

channels will automatically become less attractive to advertisers. It's clear that this will lead to a further substantial cutting of financial resources, which we need to make our own programmes."

Duvanov said state channels such as Khabar, headed by the president's daughter, Dariga Nazarbaeva, stand to gain from the changes. "It's not dependent on advertising, but the proposed measure will mean that without improving quality, the channel will increase its viewing public," he said. "The amount of adverts will also significantly increase. And, accordingly, the financial resources of Khabar will also grow."

Since 1997, when several channels critical of the government were closed as a result of a redistribution of television and radio frequencies, there has been a clear tendency to apply pressure on the independent mass media.

Over the last year alone, the most popular opposition newspapers, Nachnyom s Ponedelnika, Sol Dat and XXI Vek have been closed and criminal cases brought against their managers. In essence, the programmes of all the domestic television channels are already subjected to censorship.

Against this background, the latest round of changes to mass media legislation looks very much like turning the screw.

Duvanov believes the proposals are motivated by the administration's desire to assert its independence from Moscow.

"The situation which has developed in the information field of the country is not suited to the government of Kazakhstan because, in my view, about 70 per cent of the air time is occupied by Russian television," he said. "And that means that although the state owns the bodies, it doesn't own the minds of its citizens."

Duvanov also sees it as another attempt to gag the opposition through the mass media, "Cutting foreign broadcasting means that criticism of Kazakhstan will be reduced to a minimum. And that means a lot of security for Nazarbaev's regime."

The move has cast long shadows over the future of many commercial broadcasters. "We're panicking - If they adopt the law we could simply go bankrupt," said an advertising executive at Rakhat Television. "If the prime minister is worried about defending the domestic mass media, then why doesn't he propose a cut in taxes or other forms of payment that the channels make?"

But Armanjan Baitasov, the President of Channel 31, a local news channel, believes rebroadcasting breaks the unwritten laws of fair competition.

"Our television and radio companies should be involved in producing their own productions," he said. "Or they should rebroadcast other programs which are produced in Kazakhstan. That way the creative potential that we have in the republic will be used."

In the end, it will be the audiences who decide on the success of the move.

"On the Kazak channels I only watch the soap operas," said pensioner Yevdokia Samokhina. "If they ban Russian programmes, then the majority of my acquaintances will simply stop watching the television all together. That's what I'll do, anyway."

Slujan Ismailova is a regular IWPR contributor

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