

## **Journalists Slam Kazak Media Reforms**

**Author:** [IWPR Central Asia](#)

Speakers at IWPR's landmark conference in Almaty express serious concerns over new media legislation

Journalists claim media reforms due to be passed by the Kazak government later this month will threaten freedom of speech.

The reforms - being pushed through parliament without any public consultation - include limits on the number of foreign programmes broadcast on Kazak TV and radio and restrictions on Internet use. The bill is expected to become law on March 16.

Extensive press coverage of journalists' concerns followed a February 24 conference in Almaty, where regional and local journalist debated the proposed law together for the first time.

Media experts from Kyrgystan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, representatives of the independent press and NGOs attended the event, which was organised by the The Institute for War and Peace Reporting, IWPR, and the Daneker Institute for International Law and Business.

With ninety per cent of the Kazak press loyal to the government of President Nazarbaev, there has been very little reporting of the proposed legislation and its possible ramifications.

Delegates at the Almaty conference agreed the reforms could set a dangerous precedent for other Central Asian countries, which have traditionally viewed Kazak media as some of the best in the region, in terms of their diversity and professionalism.

In her opening speech, IWPR's regional director in Kazakstan, Rozlana Taukina, painted a grim picture of developments in Kazakstan over the past few years. "Thirty television companies have been closed," she said, "while many regional radio stations have been taken off the air.

" Fifteen regional newspapers have been shut down and 27 Kazak-language newspapers have effectively ceased to exist. If the amendments to the existing media law are adopted, there will be countless more casualties."

Marat Sarsembaev, head of the Daneker Institute, said the draft legislation directly contradicted those statutes of the Kazak constitution which safeguard freedom of speech, reject censorship and guarantee the population at large the right to receive and disseminate information.

Delegates - who included officials from Russia, Germany, the OSCE and other international organisations - were particularly concerned that the proposed amendments would impose restrictions on Internet websites - a development described as a "violation of the rights and freedom of both those who publish and those who receive information".

They also hit out at plans to limit the proportion of foreign-made TV and radio programmes to just 20 per cent of the overall programming schedule. Delegates commented that this would significantly reduce the opportunities for cultural exchanges with other countries in the region.

Political scientist Nurbolat Masanov said media muzzling, censorship and police intimidation endangered journalism in Kazakstan.

Accusatory fingers were pointed at the Ministry of Information, Culture and Civil Accord which has direct responsibility for policing the Kazak media. Parliamentary deputy Gani Kasymov said the proposed amendments were direct proof that the ministry had become a tool to control and suppress freedom of speech in the former Soviet republic.

"The ministry is a socio-political anachronism," he said. "It does nothing but carry out the political orders of the oligarchy and should be closed down."

Journalists from across the Central Asian region drew parallels between press freedom in Kazakstan and the situation in their own countries.

IWPR's regional director in Kyrgyzstan, Chinara Jakypova, commented, "Kazakstan provides Kyrgyzstan with a template for anti-democratic methods of governance. Violations during the elections, attacks on democratic freedoms and rights, pressure against the opposition – everything negative that takes place in Kazakstan is eventually duplicated in Kyrgyzstan.

"That's why we are here. In Kyrgyzstan, journalists still enjoy better conditions. We have a greater degree of freedom of speech than in Kazakstan. But the adoption of these amendments here is unacceptable. If they go ahead we can expect to suffer the same fate as our Kazak colleagues."

A Tajik journalist, Nuriddin Karshiboev, told the conference, "In the past, we have often drawn comparisons between Tajikistan and Kazakstan. And, for us, the kind of freedom of speech which existed in Kazakstan was an unattainable dream.

"But now Kazakstan no longer stands up to comparison. In my opinion, we enjoy far greater freedom than our Kazak colleagues. Today, Kazakstan has actually fallen behind Tajikistan."

Uzbek delegate, Alisher Taksanov, agreed, "Just a few years ago, Kazakstan was considered to be an island of democracy in Central Asia. Now, from the point of view of political regression, there is no difference between Uzbekistan and Kazakstan. Both republics have fallen victim to despotism."

At the end of the conference, the delegates issued a petition urging the Kazak government to sign up to international treaties on human rights. The participants feel there's little they can do to prevent the proposed legislation being enacted, but they believe that if the authorities agree to their petition it will be harder for them to introduce future legislation which violates freedom of speech.

The meeting was organised with the cooperation of Friedrich Ebbert Foundation, the International Foundation for the Protection of Free Speech (Adil Soz), the Press Club of Kazakstan and ANESMI (the Association of Independent Electronic Media).

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