

## **Kazak Spin Doctors Explain Police Shootings**

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First they imposed news blackout, then they devised alternative narrative for bloodshed.

By blocking access to information about the shootings in the western town of Janaozen and putting out its own line on what happened, the Kazak government has left its citizens with little awareness of the truth.

Officials say 14 people, most of them protesters, were killed when police opened fire on crowds in central Janaozen on December 16. Some 70 people were detained. Another man died in the nearby village of Shetpe the following day when police opened fire on a smaller protest. Close to 100 people were injured in the two incidents.

A state of emergency was imposed in Janaozen and will last until January 5.

Tensions have been simmering in the town for months as oil industry workers went on strike and continued to protest after their company sacked them. (See **[Kazakhstan's Unhappy Oil Workers](#)** and **[Reprisals Merely Anger Protesting Kazak Oil Workers](#)**.) What began as an industrial dispute has grown into a political confrontation, crystallised by the authorities' use of force against the demonstrators.

Rights activists, media representatives and political analysts have told IWPR about an information blackout followed by a deliberate campaign to portray the protesters as violent troublemakers.

Andrei Grishin, a staff member of the Kazakhstan Bureau for Human Rights and Rule of Law, described how the government tried to control the flow of information from the start.

"On the first day [December 16], the information blockade was total – there was no access to Twitter, the website of Socialist Resistance [workers' movement], the first to break the news, was blocked and still is, and so was the site of the independent news agency Guljan.org," he said.

"The authorities initially reacted by trying to stem the spread of information. But then they realised it would be difficult to conceal what was happening in Janaozen. Now they are trying to be ahead of the game - to be the first to put out information, and ensure it follows the angle they want reported. They've allowed journalists from independent media into the previously isolated, but only under their control."

Karagandy-based political analyst Sergei Rasov described an information-management plan that he believed was already in place for such an eventuality.

"The first reports appeared on the internet. When events unfolded on December 16, [Kazakhstan] Independence Day, many media outlets weren't at work," he said. "There were initial reports of mass unrest, bloodshed, and shooting in Janaozen. But then all the channels of information on the internet were cut. Minute by minute, more and more information sites were blocked. Only Facebook remained. All the local TV channels showed programmes about the [independence] celebrations."

It soon became impossible to get accurate information from Janaozen itself as telecommunications went down.

"The authorities acted promptly. There was probably a set of measures activated on orders from above," Rasov said. "I think this information blockade plan was prepared in advance, in anticipation of a repeat of the Arab Spring here, to prevent the public accessing information about what was happening."

While other news sources were shut out, Rasov said, the presidential office, the government and the police appeared to act in concert to manage public opinion by justifying the police's actions and shifting all the blame to the protesters.

"As a result, the following picture has been put out – a group of brainwashed, drunk and drug-addled hooligans were engaged in disorder and attacked the police, took away their service weapons and started shooting peaceful citizens. And when the police saw this happening they started shooting with intent to hit people," he said.

Sanat Urnaliev, a correspondent for the newspaper *Uralskaya Nedelya* in the Uralsk region, also in western Kazakhstan, agreed that the main news source for most people was the pro-government media, engaged in portraying the violence as the work of "destructive, disorderly elements".

"What's more, none of these journalists is trying to look at the roots of the problems – the seven-month strike, the arrests, and the prosecution of trade union leaders and activists," he said.

Tatiana Trubacheva, editor of the opposition newspaper Golos Respubliki, told IWPR that the website of its online version, Respublika.kz.info, had been hacked.

Rasov said the information blockade was continuing,

“Although the authorities say they’re trying to restore [mobile] communications and internet access, everything is just the same as it’s been from the outset.”

**Almaz Rysaliev is IWPR editor in Kazakstan.**

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