

Kazakstan: New Threat to Internet

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Authorities take opposition journalist to court over online criticism.

There are fresh fears for the future of unrestricted internet access in Kazakstan after an online article by Sergei Duvanov led to the journalist being charged with "insulting the dignity and honour of the president".

This is the second case where the authors of Internet articles criticising President Nursultan Nazarbaev's regime have been brought to trial. The leader's son-in-law Rakhmat Aliyev recently sued the local office of the media development organisation Internews, also claiming that he been impugned by online allegations that he controls a significant proportion of the country's media.

Duvanov - who was arrested and charged on July 10 - is the editor of the Kazakstan Internal Bureau for Human Rights and Rule of Law Bulletin. He is also an active member of the Republican People's Party of Kazakstan, the opposition force led by political exile Akezhan Kazhegeldin.

The charge concerns Duvanov's article headlined, "The Silence of the Lambs" that appeared on the website www.kub.kz - which features articles critical of the authorities - on May 6, 2002.

The report discusses alleged foreign bank accounts linked to Nazarbaev, and asks why law-enforcement agencies ignore their existence. "It seems I will have to prove the existence of these accounts at the trial, which is not that difficult, because documents exist and we have copies of them in French," Duvanov told IWPR.

Duvanov believes the president took offence at a section of the article which dealt with claims made two years ago that several million dollars of oil revenue were placed in foreign accounts bearing the names of high-ranking officials, including the president.

When questioned in parliament over the revelations in May, Prime Minister Imangali Tasmagambetov refused to answer them directly, saying only that a foreign account had been set up as a fund, which could be used by the government to help the population in times of hardship.

Some Kazak observers have pointed out that Duvanov has written far more critical and aggressive pieces than this, and are surprised that the government has taken offence when similar reports have been widely published.

Vladimir Kozlov, press secretary for the Democratic Choice of Kazakstan party, said it is "going after journalists with the aim of stopping the flow of information which criticises the president".

National Press Club vice president Maxim Kimasov believes the authorities are using Duvanov as an excuse to continue its crack down on the Web-based publications, which fall under the same restrictions as increasingly muzzled newspapers and broadcasters.

Two years ago, www.eurasia.org.ru was blocked and a fake site was created at the same address. And, several months ago, access to www.kub.kz was temporarily suspended.

The authorities are able to exert control of such sites by ordering Kazaktelekom and NURSAT, the area's major Internet service providers, ISPs, to prevent Kazak users accessing them.

The authorities claim that they are merely trying to regulate the Web. This is rejected by the opposition, which believes the government is likely to intimidate journalists publishing critical articles online in attempt to censor the Internet. But Kazak political scientist Berik Barlybaev says the policy won't work as, given the nature of the medium, they will never be able to control it.

Leila Makhmudova is the pseudonym for a journalist in Kazakhstan

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