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Europe/Ex-USSR - Kazakhstan

Extreme censorship

Authorities poised to cut all communications at drop of hat

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Kazakhstan's nervous regime is becoming more and more repressive. President Nursultan Nazarbayev is on the point of signing [draconian amendments to the communications law that were passed by parliament on 2 April](#).

If he goes ahead, the authorities will not only be able to block any website or social network in a matter of hours without a court order, but also to disconnect all means of communication.

"These amendments legalize the most extreme forms of censorship," said Reporters Without Borders secretary-general Christophe Deloire. "It is intolerable that the Kazakh authorities are assuming the right to disconnect all networks at the drop of a hat.

"The explicit reference in these amendments to unauthorized demonstrations reveals their purpose, which is to prevent any criticism of the government even if it means dealing a fatal blow to freedom of information."

The communication law's new article 41-1 says the authorities are empowered to temporarily disconnect any network or means of communication and block access to any online resource in the event of "harm to persons, society or the state" or "dissemination of information contravening the electoral law (...) or containing incitement to take part in extremist or terrorist activities, mass unrest, or mass (public) actions organized in violation of the established regulations."

The Communications and Information Agency will have one hour to transmit a blocking order from the prosecutor-general's office to the competent operators and services, which will in turn have three hours to block access to the designated websites or social networks. The same procedure is envisaged for the suspension of communication services.

"The criteria serving as grounds for blocking online resources are so broad and vague that they open the way for way for the most repressive interpretation," Deloire added.

"The political use of these measures is all the more likely because they require nothing more than administrative decisions, without any hearing and without any opportunity for the targeted sites to defend themselves. And since the operators and other technical intermediaries will have just a few hours to comply, they are unlikely to pay much attention to detail."

The amendments are the latest in a series of tough measures designed to nip any protests in the bud. On 28 January, the government approved a [decree subjecting the media to prior censorship](#) in "emergency situations of a social nature." [President Nazarbayev](#), who has ruled since independence, began accentuating his regime's repressive nature after [rioting in Zhanaozen](#) in December 2011.

Aside from uncertainties about the aging leader's succession, some analysts [link](#) the latest repressive reforms to fears of an opposition movement inspired by the Ukrainian revolution. Others think they have been prompted by the panic following the devaluation of the national currency, the tenge, in February and the spread of rumours, especially by SMS, about the failure of three Kazakh banks.

The amendments to the communications law come amid a regional trend towards more Internet censorship.

In Russia, websites carrying calls for unauthorized demonstrations can be blocked without reference to the courts under [amendments that took effect in February](#). In Turkey, government

officials can block content that is “discriminatory or insulting” or “violates privacy” under [a new law](#) whose repressive scope was demonstrated when [Twitter was blocked](#) on 20 March and [YouTube was blocked](#) on 27 March.

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