

POLICY BRIEF:

Internet Censorship in Kazakhstan: Extensive but unnecessary



Introduction

Internet censorship has become widespread across the globe. An increasing number of states [resort to various tools](#) to control the dissemination of information on the internet. The government of Kazakhstan has also become adept at employing censorship methods to silence alternative voices and prevent the public from seeing undesirable critical content. Yet such systematic internet censorship bears numerous negative consequences for the economy and reputation of the country and has implications for national security. This policy brief discusses the practice and consequences of digital censorship in Kazakhstan and provides policy recommendations for the government.

Internet Censorship Methods and Practices

Internet censorship comprises different methods with the central aim to prevent or suppress the publication of information on the internet. Internet censorship sanctioned by the state consists of online and offline methods¹. The former includes blocks on websites and applications, propaganda, disinformation campaigns, and internet shutdowns. The latter includes restrictive legislation, pressure on journalists, activists, and internet users, and control of internet infrastructure.

Kazakh authorities have been employing various tools of internet censorship at least [since the beginning of the 2000s](#) even though their country's internet access rate has been less than 1%. Starting from the 2010s, the Zhanaozen unrest in 2011 being one of the main triggers of strengthening control over the digital space, internet censorship has become systematic and more comprehensive. Currently, Kazakh authorities attempt to control digital flows of information within the country, resorting to the abovementioned online and offline tools.

¹ This policy brief focuses on politically motivated censorship when access to alternative and critical sources of digital information is restricted by the government. Thus, censorship due to pornography and copyright issues is not considered.

Online methods of censorship in Kazakhstan have become routine in Kazakhstan. Usually, the formal pretext for restricting access is extremism as seen in cases with 23 websites of Republic in 2012 and websites of Livejournal and Meduza in 2011 and 2014 respectively. In all these cases the censorship was politically motivated as the government tried to restrict access to politically sensitive content. These restrictions may be temporary or permanent. State-affiliated propaganda is also commonplace in Kazakhstan. [Political institutions have long been employing](#) armies of bots to disseminate and amplify state narratives.

Similarly, according to [the Oxford Internet Institute's report](#) on social media manipulation, government agencies and political parties in Kazakhstan spread pro-government propaganda which results in the internet being flooded with content that artificially promotes and praises state policies and officials. Another infamous online tool used in Kazakhstan is internet shutdowns. Thus far the most severe disruption of internet connectivity, which lasted for almost a week, was implemented by the state in January 2022. In 2011, during the Zhanaozen unrest, communications in the city were cut off. Similarly, in following years, there were numerous digital outages amid various political events, including the 2019 presidential and 2021 parliamentary elections.

Apart from the online methods of censorship, the Kazakhstan government is also known to utilise offline tools. Internet legislation in Kazakhstan has become so restrictive that the government can legally control the flow of information within the country. For instance, according to the 2004 communication law, internet providers must collect and store data on subscribers and provide investigative agencies access to their networks when asked. In addition, a data localization requirement is in place as, the [2013 law on personal data](#), states that companies must store data on Kazakhstanis residing in Kazakhstan. More importantly, state agencies such as the General Prosecutor's Office, National Security Committee, Ministry of Defence, and Interior Ministry have acquired a formal right to terminate communications without a court order.

One of the latest legal developments is the May 2022 law that requires social media platforms to open official branches in Kazakhstan and remove content deemed illegal. As such, the existing restrictive legal framework has substantially affected the freedom of speech while significantly empowering state agencies to control cyberspace. At the same time, those who criticise the government online are targeted. In general, [press freedom in Kazakhstan is significantly restricted](#), meaning journalists cannot freely report on the problematic actions of the government. Those who do not coincide with the state discourse are punished for their independent stances. Thus, any critical content in cyberspace is monitored heavily while its [authors can be intimidated and even arrested](#). One of the recent examples is the intimidation of journalist Boreiko in January 2023, the creator of a popular YouTube channel which is not deemed pro-state.

Finally, the internet infrastructure in Kazakhstan is also under the control of the state. The only internet exchange point (IXP) in the country is regulated by the State Technical Service, which is subordinated to the National Security Committee (KNB). The main telecommunication

company (Kazakhtelecom) is state-owned. Although there are private ISPs, a legislative framework requires communications operators to obey the government.

In brief, extensive internet censorship has become the new norm in Kazakhstan.

Consequences of Internet Censorship

With how strongly Kazakhstan has pushed internet censorship, its unlimited extent over the citizens and media has been made clear. Although state control over digital flows of information helps the government to cling to power, there are numerous negative consequences for both the state and society.

Firstly, it should be noted that the internet is not confined to the borders of one country. The internet passes through every country. Given such linkage, censorship tools such as website blockings and digital shutdowns can extend beyond one state and disrupt internet connectivity in neighbouring states. For instance, some parts of internet traffic in Kyrgyzstan [came from Kazakhstan and China](#) and in 2008, Pakistan, in an attempt to restrict access to YouTube within the country, accidentally [blocked the website globally](#).

More importantly, internet censorship is costly. The monetary and productivity losses can affect the economic development of the country. For example, digital shutdowns [are found to affect countries' GDP](#) while the January 2022 outage [cost Kazakhstan \\$410 million](#). The economic damage of internet censorship is especially potent in a digitalized country such as Kazakhstan, in which most state services are provided online and people prefer cashless payments. This should be kept in mind when Policymakers and state officials try to manage the internet.

The extent of collateral damage can be significant as internet censorship also affects businesses, small and large, amid systematic digital disruptions and restrictions which can lack incentives to innovate. Those companies that are reliant on electronic transactions are especially vulnerable. Furthermore, frequent restrictions on what can be accessed and viewed on the internet make it more challenging for both the state and private sector to attract foreign investment.

Besides, there is a lack of evidence proving the effectiveness of internet censorship to stop collective action, which is the greatest fear of autocrats and one of the main reasons for censorship. In contrast, information blackouts resulting from internet shutdowns contribute to the intensification of unrest as people, disconnected from others and unaware of what is happening, take to the streets to learn the latest news, thus increasing the number of protesters.

Another consequence of internet censorship is the "Streisand effect" which occurs when hidden content attracts considerable public attention, making what was intended to be hidden more popular, leading to the opposite result. Furthermore, given that the leadership of Kazakhstan caters its image to be favoured globally, internet censorship degrades the country's reputation.

The unnecessary nationwide internet shutdown in January 2022 has significantly affected the reputation of Kazakhstan, repelling foreign investors along with the international community. Besides the reputation, state-sanctioned internet censorship also undermines the trust of users in the government, which, as discussed below, is crucial to building trustworthy communication between the state and civil society.

Last but not least, internet censorship by Kazakh authorities leads to the underdevelopment of information space and media as well as a lack of independent voices. This, in turn, can be a great threat to national security of the country, especially in the context of an increasing spread of Russian propaganda and disinformation. Without the independent minded media landscape and transparent flow of information, the public is at risk of being misguided and manipulated by propaganda and disinformation, which can lead to political instability and social divisions.

Policy Recommendations

Any decision to restrict access to online content must be weighed based on legislation, and driven solely by national security concerns. Authorities must refrain from politically motivated censorship of sensitive information and pressure on journalists and activists. The total shutdown of communications does not answer the problem. In contrast, it causes panic in society and the spread of rumours while the information vacuum gets filled with inaccurate and sometimes deliberately provocative interpretations of the events by foreign media and commentators.

Thus, the decision to turn off the internet has been proven to be counterproductive. The government, instead of choosing an easy path by resorting to the “kill switch”, should work on strengthening the information security of the country by guarding people against foreign propaganda and disinformation and by providing a reliable and trustable source of information. Politically motivated restrictions on the internet meant to protect the regime and national security only protects the former and fails to provide the latter.

Instead of silencing public voices, the government of Kazakhstan should learn how to become competitive in the information space. The simple market principle is in place – interpretation of various political and social issues is in demand and the state must learn how to supply what is demanded. If the information provided by the state is reliable and transparent, then there shall be no distrust from the people. But to achieve that, the state must first build and deserve the trust of its citizens. Only then can the state operate and communicate with the population in a trust-filled space amid the abundance of information and alternative viewpoints. Failure, unwillingness, and/or incompetence to build trustworthy communication channels between the state and society so that the citizenry is timely informed eventually resort to censorship. In such cases, as Kazakhstan, internet censorship methods become policy tools.

The government of Kazakhstan should not draw inspiration from Russia as some Kazakh laws appear to closely resemble Russian ones. A recent example is the May 2022 law that requires foreign tech companies to open official representative offices on the territory of Kazakhstan which seems to take inspiration from the 2021 Russian law which adopts a similar regulation in regard to foreign IT corporations. In both cases, the main motivation is to be able to exert influence on foreign companies to force them to restrict access to undesired information.

To conclude, state internet censorship can hinder productivity and innovation, undermine the trust of citizens and the confidence of businesses along with creating a discouraging investment climate, and be a threat to national security. It is also costly to the national economy. Thus, the preferred policy tool for governments should be to compete with alternative sources of information instead of stifling them. In other words, internet censorship is not a solution to Kazakhstan's problems.