

## 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 or dissemination of information on the internet. Internet censorship sanctioned by the state consists of online and offline methods<sup>1</sup> (or tools). The former includes blocks on websites and applications, propaganda and disinformation campaigns, and internet shutdowns. The latter includes restrictive legislation, pressure (including coercion, intimidation, and arrests) on journalists, activists, and internet users, and control of internet infrastructure (such as ISPs, IXPs, and telecommunication companies).

Kazakh authorities have been employing various tools of internet censorship at least [since the beginning of the 2000s](#) even though the internet access rate in the country was 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.

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<sup>1</sup> 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.* Blockage of websites, applications, and messengers has become routine in Kazakhstan. Usually, the formal pretext for restricting access is extremism as cases with 23 websites of Republic in 2012 and websites of Livejournal and Meduza in 2011 and 2014, respectively, can attest. Yet in all these cases censorship was politically motivated as the government tried to restrict access to politically sensitive content. Some restrictions can be temporary (for example, HOLA news, KazTAG, and Fergana) while some are still in action (for example, Kloop, Regnum, and Meduza).

Besides, 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 and anti-opposition information. As a result, the internet is flooded with content that artificially promotes and praises state policies and officials.

Another online tool is internet shutdowns that have already made Kazakhstan infamous in the world. The severest thus far disruption of internet connectivity, which lasted for almost a week, was implemented by the state during the tragic events in January 2022. Such internet disconnections, though local, are [common in Kazakhstan](#). In 2011, during the Zhanaozen unrest, communications in the city were cut off. Then, in the following decade, there were numerous digital outages amid various political events, including before or during the 2019 presidential and 2021 parliamentary elections.

*Offline methods of internet censorship in Kazakhstan.* Internet legislation in Kazakhstan has become restrictive so that the government can legally control information flows within the country. For instance, according to the 2004 communication law, internet providers must collect and store data on subscribers and, when requested, provide investigative agencies access to their networks. In addition, a data localization requirement is in place as, according to the [2013 law on personal data](#), companies must store data on Kazakhstanis on the territory of 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 and association while significantly empowering state agencies to control cyberspace.

At the same time, those who criticize the government online are targeted. In general, [press freedom in Kazakhstan is significantly restricted](#), meaning journalists (along with regular citizens) cannot freely report on government misdeeds and wrongdoings – there will be consequences for an independent stance that does not coincide with the state discourse. Thus, critical (anti-government) content in cyberspace is monitored while its [authors can be intimidated and even arrested](#). One of the latest examples is the intimidation of journalist Boreiko in January 2023, an author of a popular YouTube channel that cannot be characterised as 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 restrictive legislative framework requires communications operators to obey the government.

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

## Consequences of Internet Censorship

When the main methods of digital control are addressed together, it is possible to reveal the almost unlimited extent of internet censorship in Kazakhstan. 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.

First, it should be noted that the internet is not confined to the borders of one country. All countries are part of the global internet while some are transit countries, that is, the internet passes through them. Given such interconnectedness, censorship tools such as website blockings and digital shutdowns can extend beyond one state and disrupt internet connectivity in neighboring states. For instance, some parts of internet traffic in Kyrgyzstan [come from Kazakhstan and China](#), leading to dependence and interconnectedness between states. In another example, 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 economic impact in the form of 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](#). Internet censorship causes economic damage, especially in a digitalized country such as Kazakhstan, in which most state services are provided online and people prefer cashless payments. Policymakers and state officials should keep this in mind when trying to tame the internet.

The extent of collateral damage can be significant. For instance, internet censorship also affects businesses, small and large, that amid systematic digital disruptions and restrictions can lack incentives to innovate and create. Especially vulnerable are those companies that are reliant on electronic transactions. 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 – the latter being the greatest fear of autocrats and thus 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”. It occurs when hidden content, due to attempts to hide, ban, or delete it, attracts considerable public attention, making what was tried to be hidden more popular, thus leading to the opposite result. State efforts to censor online content can and often do unintentionally lead to greater attention to that content.

Furthermore, given that the leadership of Kazakhstan cares a lot about its image globally, internet censorship bears great reputation costs to the country. The unnecessary nationwide internet shutdown in January 2022 has significantly undermined the reputation of Kazakhstan, scaring and 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 media landscape and free flows of information, the public is at risk of being misled 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 weighted and exceptional, based on legislation, and driven solely by national security concerns. Authorities must refrain from both politically motivated censorship of sensitive information and pressure on journalists and activists.

The total shutdown of communications, such as in January 2022, was not proportional to the problem. In contrast, it led to panic in society and the spread of rumours while the information vacuum, created by the unnecessary outage, was filled by inaccurate and sometimes deliberately provocative interpretations of the ensued events by foreign media and commentators. Thus, the decision to turn off the internet proved 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 being the reliable and preferable source of information. In other words, internet censorship is detrimental, especially during crises. Politically motivated restriction of information flows on the internet in order to protect the regime does not advance the provision of national security. This is because the security of the regime and the security of the country are not the same things.

Instead of silencing alternative 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 (that is, free from lies and misinformation), then there shall be no obstacles for people not to believe in it. But to achieve that the state must first build and deserve the trust of its citizens. Only then the state can operate and communicate with the population amid the abundance of information and alternative viewpoints. Failure, unwillingness, or incompetence (or all three) to build trustworthy communication channels between the state and society so that the citizenry is timely informed eventually leaves no choice but to censor. Those in power, unable to compete with alternative flows of information, begin to resort to censorship. In this case, such as in Kazakhstan, internet censorship methods become policy tools.

The government of Kazakhstan should also stop getting 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. Previously, in 2021, Russia adopted a similar regulation with 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.

Against such a backdrop, any conversations about the democratization of Kazakhstan should also be forgotten.

To conclude, state internet censorship can hinder productivity and innovation, undermine the trust of citizens and the confidence of businesses, create a discouraging investment climate, and be a national security threat as well as it is 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.