

# Central Asia's Evolving Censorship: From Physical Threats To Algorithmic Purges

Astana-based investigative journalist Luqpan Akhmediyarov was shocked when he opened his laptop and found that his widely followed YouTube channel, *Prosto Zhurnalistika* (Just Journalism), had been abruptly blocked. Just days earlier his Instagram account under the same name vanished as well.

Meanwhile, in Almaty -- on the opposite side of the country -- another veteran investigative journalist, Vadim Boreiko, discovered that his Facebook account, followed by more than 30,000 people, had also been deleted without warning in early July.

These incidents highlight a growing tactic in Kazakhstan's digital crackdown targeting influential voices of dissent using technical removals and opaque copyright claims, rather than overt censorship.

It's part of a broader trend across Central Asia, where freedom of expression continues to erode under government pressure.

"This is about control.... It's a message to journalists: your freedom of expression is conditional and monitored," media expert Diana Okremova, who heads the Legal Media Center in Almaty, said.

"These are not isolated incidents but part of a broader crackdown on independent journalism."

Once praised for allowing independent journalism to begin to take root in a region where a free press was pretty much absent, governments in Central Asia are now being criticized for backtracking.

Independent journalism — already a fragile enterprise in Central Asia — is increasingly under siege from these evolving and insidious forms of digital repression, analysts say.

Akhmediyarov told RFE/RL that before his Instagram page disappeared, he received a notice from social media giant Meta saying his account's content did not "correspond" to the company's standards.

He also said that almost simultaneously, a clone of his Instagram account appeared with content different from that of his original account.

"Days later, after we raised this issue with our international partner, Access Now, and other organizations involved in defending journalism, Meta reinstated our page without any explanation," he said, adding that the fake account on his media project then disappeared.

Meanwhile, when his YouTube channel was blocked, Akhmediyarov received an official explanation citing a "violation of copyrights" related to music samples used in his videos.

The copyright complaint, he added, came from a YouTube user who had created their channel just days before filing the claim — and whose account mysteriously vanished soon after *Prosto Zhurnalistika* was taken down.

"That timing is highly suspicious," Akhmediyarov emphasized.

Boreiko, who runs the popular Giperborei YouTube channel, told RFE/RL that the deletion of accounts of independent journalists looks a "new tactic" that evolved from "direct threats and intimidation" of independent reporters.

"Just weeks earlier, before my Facebook account disappeared without any warning, my Instagram account also vanished suddenly, and two clone Instagram accounts in my name appeared with blue signs verifying authenticity. One even had 134,000 followers," he said, noting that the fake accounts carried content absolutely different from that of his original account.

According to Boreiko, it took his team and him days to restore his Instagram account and eliminate the two clone accounts after he turned to the Cyber Helpline group, a nonprofit that assists with cybersecurity issues.

"It is striking to see how the methods of pressure on journalists have gradually changed," said Boreiko, who has previously received threats by text messages on his phone and had his home vandalized.

"This new tactic's goal is apparently to perplex journalists and bloggers, to impose emotional, psychological pressure, even economic pressure as many journalists use social networks as tools to earn money for living," Boreiko emphasized, adding that his Facebook account has yet to be reinstated.

Analysts and journalists are quick to point out that the spate of social media account deletions comes after Kazakh Information and Culture Minister Aida Balaeva and Meta's regional public policy director, Sarim Ali Aziz, held a meeting in Astana.

The agenda included "content moderation" on social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram, both of which are owned by Meta, Kazakh authorities announced then.

Ministry officials stated at the time that measures were necessary to address concerns about the dissemination of disinformation. Kazakh authorities also said then that as a result of the meeting, a joint working group composed of ministry and Meta representatives was created to develop technical, including algorithmic, solutions to improve content moderation.

Boreiko told RFE/RL that although there is no information proving that the disappearance of the accounts on Facebook and Instagram originated from Meta-Kazakh authorities' cooperation, "there is a chronological tie."

Neither representatives of the Kazakh Ministry of Information and Culture nor Meta officials were immediately available for comment on the situation.

In June, Kazakh authorities **refused to issue** accreditations to six correspondents of the local RFE/RL service, known as Radio Azattyq, and the head of the RFE/RL representative office in Kazakhstan as well.

The Kazakh Foreign Ministry cited vague "national security" grounds for its decision.

Critics said the move stems from **media law** amendments in 2021 that reduced accreditation terms and expanded grounds for revocation, which they say is aimed at throttling foreign and independent media outlets.

RFE/RL has filed a complaint with the Specialized Interdistrict Administrative Court of Astana seeking to declare the decision to refuse the accreditations as illegal.

Similar administrative moves also have been seen in other areas around Central Asia.

Lawmakers in Kyrgyzstan, a country once celebrated for its independent media, passed a revised media law in June, raising alarm among media watchdogs. The law reinstated registration and licensing controls that had previously been slated for abolition.

Critically, lawmakers reinstated mandatory registration for all online publications — including bloggers and news websites — under a new article that grants the Cabinet exclusive authority to

establish rules, approve registrations, or revoke them.

The law also caps foreign ownership in Kyrgyz media outlets at 35 percent. Critics argue this restricts international partnerships and cuts off global support for independent outlets.

The Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) described the law as "dangerous" and urged Kyrgyz President Sadyr Japarov to veto it, "to give substance to his verbal commitments to press freedom."

The plea appears to have fallen on deaf ears, with authorities targeting independent broadcaster Aprel TV. A court in Bishkek on July 9 ordered the closure of the outlet, halting its social media activities and broadcasting.

Authorities accused Aprel TV of weakening state authority and having a "harmful impact" on individuals and society. The broadcaster's editors reject the accusations as politically motivated.

As pressure mounts, regional experts warn that such coordinated measures — from legal restrictions and online censorship to criminal prosecutions — are systematically eroding the remaining space for independent journalism in Central Asia.

Nadejda Atayeva, President of the Paris-based AHRCA (Association for Human Rights in Central Asia), told RFE/RL that many journalists in Kazakhstan and their online reports are extremely popular not only in their country but across the region.

"These governments are learning from each other," Atayeva said.

"What is happening in Kazakhstan with digital pressure on journalists will almost certainly happen elsewhere."

**With reporting by RFE/RL's Kyrgyz and Kazakh Services**