Digital Civic Space in Kazakhstan: Current Trends

This overview outlines recent trends affecting the rights of journalists, bloggers, and activists in Kazakhstan's digital space. It has been prepared by Kazakhstan International Bureau for Human Rights and Rule of Law (KIBHR) and International Partnership for Human Rights (IPHR) to inform discussions at the OSCE Supplementary Human Dimension Meeting on Safeguarding Civic Space in the Digital Age, taking place in Vienna on 11–12 May 2026.

Recent months have seen a marked increase in the removal of online content and the blocking of user accounts targeting critical voices in Kazakhstan.

These developments intensified in the context of the constitutional reform process initiated in early 2026. Incidents of content removal and account blocking were reported prior to the publication of the draft Constitution on 31 January and continued following the announcement of the referendum by President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev on 11 February and the vote held on 15 April. The measures have primarily targeted content addressing politically sensitive issues, although some neutral or factual materials based on official sources have also been affected.

In the pre-referendum period alone, at least 20 organisations, media outlets, journalists, and public figures reported restrictions affecting their digital presence. These included the removal of posts and the blocking or suspension of accounts on major platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and Telegram following unsubstantiated complaints. For example, Respublika.kz.media reported that over 50 of its Facebook posts concerning the new constitution and the referendum process were removed due to alleged copyright violations. KIBHR was also affected: a post on its Facebook page concerning the detention in Almaty of a critic of the referendum – which had garnered around 100,000 views – was removed based on an unfounded complaint. After the referendum, additional cases of content removal and account restrictions have been recorded. In April 2026, the Facebook and Instagram accounts of the KazTAG news agency and the Legal Media Centre were blocked due to alleged violations of community standards.

Efforts to challenge such restrictions through platform appeal mechanisms are often protracted and largely ineffective, leaving affected users without timely remedies. Although complaints are formally attributed to actors abroad, there are strong indications that those orchestrating these

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actions may be based within Kazakhstan. Content removals and account blocking form part of a broader pattern that includes the selective blocking of websites and individual materials, recurring DDoS attacks on independent media, and the extensive use of criminal provisions on "disseminating knowingly false information."

During the pre-referendum period, journalists, bloggers, and activists also faced other forms of intimidation linked to their online engagement. As documented by the Ar.Rukh.Khak human rights foundation, individuals were summoned for questioning, detained, pressured to delete posts, and prosecuted on spurious grounds. In some cases, they were fined or subjected to short-term detention under the Code of Administrative Offences, including for alleged violations related to public opinion polling (Article 120) or the dissemination of "false information" (Article 456-2).

In parallel, criminal charges have been brought for the alleged dissemination of "knowingly false" information under a broadly worded provision (Article 274 of the Criminal Code) that has been repeatedly used to deter critical reporting and commentary. Those affected include Orda.kz editor-in-chief Gulnara Bazhkenova, KazTAG editor-in-chief Amir Kasenov, and independent journalist and Telegram channel administrator Botagoz Omarova, all of whom remain under house pending investigation on such charges.

Blogger Sanzhar Bokayev—known for his social media campaigning on development projects—has been accused of spreading "false" information about tree felling to incite public outrage and is now facing charges of fraud and unlawful logging (under articles 190 and 340 of the Criminal Code. In another case illustrating the risks associated with politically sensitive online expression, public figure Orazaly Yerzhanov has been charged with allegedly "obstructing electoral rights" (Article 150 of the Criminal Code) in connection with his criticism of the draft Constitution and calls for a referendum boycott. His trial is ongoing.

Taken together, these practices point to a broader pattern of digital repression. Content removals, account suspensions, selective website blocking, recurring DDoS attacks, and the expansive application of vaguely defined legal provisions collectively contribute to a shrinking online civic space and restrict access to diverse sources of information.

Recommendations

To the authorities of Kazakhstan:

- Ensure that any restrictions on online content comply with international human rights standards, including legality, necessity, and proportionality.
- Refrain from misusing provisions on "false information" and other broadly defined offences to target journalists, bloggers, and activists.
- Guarantee due process and judicial oversight in all cases involving content removal, account blocking, or criminal prosecution related to online expression.
- Investigate and prevent coordinated efforts to silence critical voices, including through abuse of platform reporting mechanisms.

To OSCE participating States and relevant stakeholders:

- Raise concerns about restrictions on digital civic space in Kazakhstan in bilateral and multilateral dialogues.
- Support independent media, journalists, and civil society actors facing digital repression, including through capacity-building and emergency assistance.
- Encourage greater transparency and accountability from technology companies regarding content moderation and account takedown decisions affecting users in restrictive environments.
- Promote adherence to OSCE commitments on freedom of expression and media freedom in the digital sphere, including through continued monitoring and reporting.

To global social media platforms:

- Ensure content moderation decisions align with international human rights standards, and avoid acting on coordinated complaints or government requests that target lawful expression.
- Reinforce safeguards against misuse of reporting mechanisms by increasing transparency, ensuring meaningful review, and providing timely, effective remedies for unjustified restrictions.