

Internet Censorship in Authoritarian Contexts: A Case Study of Kazakhstan

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Abstract

This article explores the mechanisms and actors of internet censorship in Kazakhstan, situating the case within broader frameworks of digital authoritarianism. Drawing on qualitative research methods, including semi-structured interviews with 17 informants and thematic analysis, the study uncovers a deeply institutionalised and multifaceted censorship regime. Kazakhstani authorities employ a dual strategy encompassing digital tools, such as website blocking, internet shutdowns, throttling, and bot-driven manipulation, and administrative resources, including state procurement, journalist accreditation restrictions, informal directives, and direct interventions. The censorship system is coordinated by a hierarchical network of state actors, led by the Administration of the President of Kazakhstan and implemented through the Ministry of Culture and Information. The findings highlight how, rather than fostering political participation or free expression, the internet in Kazakhstan operates as a tightly regulated space that serves authoritarian governance objectives. This research contributes to the understanding of contemporary digital authoritarianism, providing insights into the evolving nature of state power and information control in authoritarian contexts.

Keywords

internet censorship, digital authoritarianism, website blocking, internet shutdown, information control, Kazakhstan

Introduction

The internet has fundamentally changed how individuals communicate and share information, enabling rapid interaction among multiple users. Unlike traditional media's 'one-to-many' format, the internet supports interactive and decentralised communication and exchange of information between many individuals simultaneously (Nye, 2011). At the same time, as internet access has expanded globally, internet freedoms have declined worldwide, with Kazakhstan being no exception (Funk et al., 2024). Digital technologies, once seen as tools for liberation (Diamond, 2010), now enable increasingly sophisticated state control. In Kazakhstan, censorship methods have grown more complex, combining overt restrictions like website blocking with subtler interventions such as promoting official narratives and limiting access to independent information (Rakhmetov, 2020).

Against this backdrop, understanding internet censorship in Kazakhstan becomes crucial as the methods used to

regulate and control digital spaces have profound implications for political participation, freedom of expression, and the public's ability to access reliable information. To address these issues, this article investigates the mechanisms, practices, and actors of internet censorship in Kazakhstan by examining three interrelated research questions: 1. How do Kazakhstani authorities censor the internet? 2. What online content is censored? and 3. What actors censor the internet? By focussing on these questions, the study provides an in-depth analysis of internet censorship within an authoritarian context.

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The structure of the article is organised as follows. The next section reviews the existing literature on internet censorship and situates the study within current academic debates. This is followed by a description of the qualitative methodology, including the semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis, employed to identify core patterns and themes. The article then discusses the identified key tools and practices of internet censorship in Kazakhstan, encompassing both technical and administrative dimensions. Subsequent sections address the categories of online content subject to censorship and map the main actors involved in digital information control¹. The article concludes by situating these findings within broader discussions of digital governance and considering their implications for Kazakhstan and similar authoritarian contexts.

Internet Censorship

Internet censorship, defined as state-led efforts to suppress, restrict, or control the flow of online content (King et al., 2013; Robert, 2018), has become a key instrument of state power in the digital era, with scholars examining its evolution and diverse forms. Deibert's (2015) four-generation framework traces a shift from basic filtering (e.g. website blocking) to legal-administrative controls (e.g. ISP data retention), surveillance and disruption (e.g. shutdown during political crises), and geopolitical moves to reshape global internet governance around state sovereignty. Roberts (2018) complements this with three control mechanisms: fear (self-censorship via intimidation), friction (internet access barriers), and flooding (an overwhelming volume of online content aligned with state narratives). Other scholars, including Singer and Brooking (2018), Sanovich et al. (2018), and Kendall-Taylor et al. (2020), describe a shift from open repression to more subtle manipulation, such as disinformation and bot-driven engagement, that aims to control online discourse and shape public opinion. Similarly, Guriev and Treisman (2015) argue that contemporary autocrats increasingly favour censorship and co-optation over overt repression, a theme further developed in their analysis of 'informational autocrats' (Guriev & Treisman, 2019).

The strategic deployment of digital technologies has become central to how authoritarian regimes consolidate and maintain political control. Tucker et al. (2017) and Rosenberger (2020) note that digital technologies, including the internet, once celebrated for their democratizing potential, have been repurposed as instruments of control. Similarly, MacKinnon (2012) and Howard (2010) show how information and communication technologies (ICTs), initially seen as liberating, have been adapted for surveillance and control. Meanwhile, Rød and Weidmann (2015) and Weidmann and Rød (2019) show that autocracies selectively expand internet access to enhance surveillance capacities and influence public behaviour. Diamond (2019)

places these trends within a wider crisis of liberal democracy, where authoritarian states exploit the internet to undermine democratic norms and extend geopolitical influence. Overall, these patterns reflect a broader transformation in authoritarian governance strategies, characterised by the adaptation of digital technologies to maintain control – a phenomenon often described as 'digital authoritarianism' (Roberts & Oosterom, 2024).

These modern strategies build on earlier censorship systems. Berkowitz (2022) shows that censorship historically served to protect dominant political and religious orders from disruptive ideas, while Darnton (2014) demonstrates how censorship during the pre-internet era became embedded in the bureaucratic practice of authoritarian regimes. This historical continuity underscores that today's digital censorship is not a new phenomenon, but rather an evolution of state efforts to preserve political control. The pursuit of this goal is further reinforced by media control, which facilitates the extension and entrenchment of censorship. For instance, McMillan and Zoido (2004) demonstrate how authoritarian regimes may rely on bribery and informal coercion to suppress dissenting media voices, while Lawson (2002) highlights that political pressure can continue to influence media behaviour even during periods of democratic transition. Similarly, Djankov et al. (2003) link concentrated media ownership, especially state-linked, to weak press freedom.

Despite the growing body of literature, several important gaps remain in the study of internet censorship, especially in the context of authoritarian regimes. Existing classifications often focus on generalised models of censorship mechanisms without examining their operation in politically ambiguous environments that mix democratic procedures, such as elections and referendums, with authoritarian control. Moreover, while much research focuses on formal and codified methods, such as legal restrictions and internet shutdowns, less attention is given to more subtle and informal instruments, which are harder to detect and document. Finally, the role of national and subnational actors in the implementation of censorship is often overlooked, even though they may be critical in shaping internet access and information control. This study seeks to address these gaps by offering an in-depth analysis of both formal and informal censorship practices in Kazakhstan, while also mapping the diverse range of actors that contribute to digital information control in an authoritarian context.

Methodology

The methodology employed in this study is qualitative, designed to investigate the various dimensions of internet censorship in Kazakhstan. Qualitative research is especially well-suited for studying complex issues through detailed, context-specific analysis that focuses on how people interpret and give meaning to their experiences within social

and political settings (Moses & Knutsen, 2012). Lowndes et al. (2018) similarly highlight the value of qualitative methods in examining political dynamics by engaging closely with participants' perspectives and uncovering the underlying processes that shape behaviour and decision-making. Drawing on these, this study adopts a qualitative approach to enable a comprehensive exploration of censorship practices and the identification of key actors involved in digital control in Kazakhstan.

Primary data collection involved conducting semi-structured interviews, as this method is mainly aimed at gathering in-depth and often expert knowledge (Halperin & Heath, 2020), which is crucial to explore the underlying mechanisms and developments of internet censorship in Kazakhstan. During the fall of 2024, interviews were conducted with 17 key informants as part of the broader study on internet censorship in Kazakhstan (see Table 1). The number of interviews is considered to reach saturation, indicating that additional data collection would likely produce minimal new insights or themes (Hennink et al., 2017). Interviews were conducted in Russian and lasted between 45 and 90 minutes. The first interview was a pilot, conducted on 9 September 2024. This allowed the researcher to test the clarity and relevance of the interview questions, assess the interview structure, and make necessary adjustments before conducting the remaining interviews. The informants were purposively selected based on their experience, knowledge, and professional positions relating to internet governance, media regulation, and digital rights within Kazakhstan. The purposive sampling approach ensured informants offered relevant and contextual information in line with the research objectives. Interviews were guided by open-ended questions designed to receive

detailed responses to the following research questions: 1) How do Kazakhstani authorities censor the internet? 2) What online content is censored? and 3) What actors censor the internet? Interviews were conducted in a confidential setting, and ethical standards such as informed consent and anonymity were strictly maintained.

Primary data analysis employed thematic analysis guided by Braun and Clarke's (2006) methodological framework, consisting of systematic iterative stages: data familiarisation, initial coding, thematic identification, thematic review, and refinement. First, interview transcripts were carefully read to achieve familiarity with the data. This process was followed by the coding of relevant segments. Overall, 14 codes have been identified. Subsequently, these codes were grouped into four thematic categories that directly addressed the research questions. To maintain analytical rigour, the coding process involved multiple readings and continuous cross-checking among themes. This analytical process ensured the validity and reliability of the identified key themes on internet censorship in Kazakhstan. NVivo 15 software was employed to facilitate the process of thematic analysis, including the coding of interview transcripts and the identification and organisation of emerging themes.

In addition to primary data collection and analysis, extensive examination of secondary data was also conducted to complement and contextualise findings from the interviews and thematic analysis. Secondary sources included media reports, news articles, policy documents, and previous academic studies related to internet censorship in Kazakhstan. These secondary sources provided valuable background information, enabling triangulation with interview findings to enhance the robustness, depth, and credibility of the research outcomes. Thus, the comprehensive review of secondary data contributed to the identification of broader patterns and developments in internet censorship in Kazakhstan.

Qualitative methodologies are frequently used in Central Asian studies due to the region's complex political and societal backgrounds, which require detailed and contextually informed analyses. This methodological preference can be found in the work of regional scholars (Abishev et al., 2024; Kurmanov et al., 2023; Kurmanov & Knox, 2022), whose research has addressed open government's effectiveness, citizen perceptions of state responsiveness, and political succession and unrest in authoritarian contexts.

As with most qualitative research, this study has several limitations. First, while the purposive sampling ensured informant expertise, it may not capture the full diversity of perspectives, particularly those of actors less accessible due to the political sensitivity of the research topic. Second, reliance on retrospective accounts introduces the possibility of recall bias or selective memory, especially in politically repressive contexts where informants may self-censor (Halperin & Heath, 2020). Third, while triangulation with

Table 1. List of Interviews (* conducted remotely)

№	Professional position	Date	Location
Informant #1	Media expert	09.09.2024	Astana
Informant #2	Political scientist	11.09.2024	Astana
Informant #3	Media expert	17.09.2024	Astana
Informant #4	Journalist	19.09.2024	Astana
Informant #5	Digital rights expert	24.09.2024	Astana
Informant #6	Digital rights expert	24.09.2024	Almaty*
Informant #7	Digital rights expert	26.09.2024	Astana
Informant #8	Media expert	30.09.2024	Almaty*
Informant #9	Journalist	30.09.2024	Uralsk*
Informant #10	Journalist	01.10.2024	Almaty*
Informant #11	Journalist	03.10.2024	Almaty*
Informant #12	Journalist	07.10.2024	Almaty*
Informant #13	Digital rights expert	08.10.2024	Almaty*
Informant #14	Journalist	10.10.2024	Astana
Informant #15	Journalist	14.10.2024	Astana
Informant #16	Journalist	22.10.2024	Astana
Informant #17	Media expert	29.10.2024	Astana

secondary sources strengthens the analysis, some findings, particularly those related to informal censorship practices, are difficult to independently verify. Finally, the peculiarity of Kazakhstan's political context and lack of external validity specific to a case study limit the direct generalisation of the findings to other countries, although many identified mechanisms may be relevant or applicable to other authoritarian regimes.

Internet Censorship in Kazakhstan

This section discusses the two key directions of internet censorship in Kazakhstan identified in this study (see [Figure 1](#) and [Table 2](#)). The first is the employment of digital censorship tools such as website blocking, internet shutdowns and throttling, and the coordinated exploitation of bots. The second is the use of extensive administrative resources such as state media funding, journalist accreditation rules, informal directives, and phone calls.

Digital Tools of Internet Censorship

This sub-section discusses how Kazakhstani authorities systematically resort to digital censorship tools to control the dissemination of information on the internet.

Website Blocking. With the rise of the internet in Kazakhstan and the gradual shift of media to the internet, traditional censorship methods, such as the arrest of newspaper circulation, became ineffective (Informant #12, 07.10.2024). Eventually, with the expansion of internet access, website blocking – the restriction of access to a specific website by Internet Service Providers (ISPs) to prevent users from accessing a particular internet address – has emerged as a prevalent form of internet censorship. Website blocking in Kazakhstan can be implemented through a court decision, but most websites have been blocked without a court ruling

(Informant #7, 26.09.2024) and even without any warning or explanation from the government or ISPs (Informant #5, 24.09.2024; Informant #12, 07.10.2024).

In the 2000s, while internet use in Kazakhstan remained limited (see [Figure 2](#)), the government began selective censorship of politically sensitive content. For instance, in 2000, when internet access was under 1%, Kazakhstani authorities blocked an opposition site that exposed presidential corruption ([Human Rights Watch, 2004](#)). In 2005, authorities blocked a satirical website and restricted online coverage of regional uprisings ([McGlinchey & Johnson, 2007](#); [Radio Free Europe, 2005](#)). By 2007, opposition sites were shut down for exposing a feud within the president's family ([Bolshakov & Solovyov, 2007](#)). In 2008, LiveJournal was blocked over anti-government posts, later unblocked but banned again in 2011 ([Nurmakov, 2015](#)). Similarly, access to another blogging platform, WordPress, was restricted in 2011, reportedly due to extremist content ([Glushkova, 2011](#)).

In the 2010s, the government continued to block internet resources. Websites that published political and opposition content remained the main targets ([Deibert et al., 2010](#)). For instance, from 2010 to 2015, a regional independent media site faced repeated blocks whenever it published content critical of the government (Informant #9, 30.09.2024). Also, over the 2 years from 2010 to 2012, 23 websites of Republic were eventually blocked, while the opposition media was outlawed as extremist ([Toguzbayev, 2012](#)). In 2014, Kazakhstan blocked the UK's Daily Mail for publishing an ISIS video allegedly showing Kazakh child soldiers and ignoring removal requests ([Radio Azattyq, 2014b](#)). The website of the Kyrgyz outlet Kloop was also blocked for sharing the video ([Vecherniy Bishkek, 2014](#)). In 2015, [Archive.org](#) was blocked over 30 banned links ([Kabyshev & Melyakov, 2024](#)), remaining restricted until October 2022. Between 2014 and 2016, more critical sites ([ratel.kz](#), [meduza.io](#)) and petition platforms ([avaaz.org](#), [change.org](#)) were

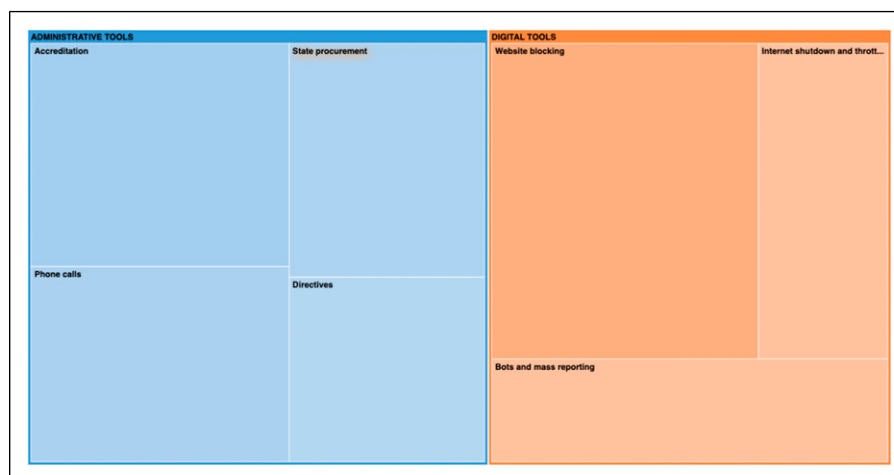


Figure 1. Tools of internet censorship in Kazakhstan

Table 2. Themes, Codes, and the Number of References

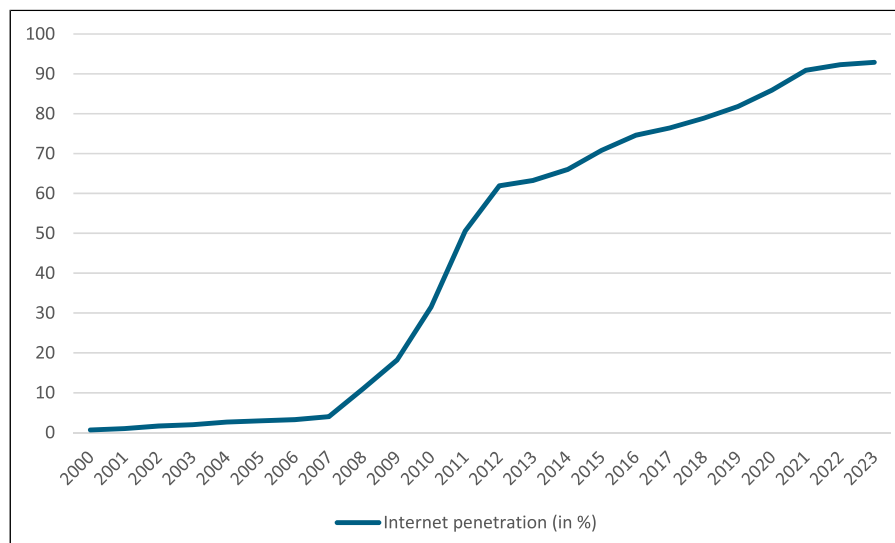
Theme	Code	References
Digital censorship tools	Website blocking	35
	Internet shutdown and throttling	17
	Bots and mass reporting	17
Administrative censorship tools	Accreditation	24
	Phone calls	21
	State procurement	19
	Directives	15

blocked without explanation, often over anti-government content (Forbes Kazakhstan, 2015; Kichanova, 2014; Mamashuly, 2016; Radio Azattyq, 2014a). In 2017, Foreign Policy was blocked after its reporter criticised the EXPO in Astana (U.S. Department of State, 2019). In 2019, Kazakhstani authorities restricted access to YouTube, Telegram, Facebook, and Instagram, and multiple independent news websites during Victory Day celebrations (NetBlocks, 2019b). These blocks occurred amid public calls for protest.

Website blocking continued in the 2020s after President Nazarbayev stepped down in 2019 and Kassym-Jomart Tokayev came to power. In October 2021, access to the HOLA News website was blocked amid the publication about the multi-million-dollar offshore deal involving the family of Nazarbayev (as one of the findings from the Pandora Papers) (ACCA, 2021). The website was unblocked only after deleting the material. On 4 January 2022, when people took to the streets in numerous cities, websites of Kazakh news media KazTAG and Orda.kz, which often criticise the government, were blocked for spreading allegedly fake information about the ongoing protests (Vlast.kz, 2022).

In October 2022, in the wake of the global outbreak of COVID-19, the website of the WHO, along with its Telegram bot, was blocked in Kazakhstan through a court order due to the distribution of information propagating suicide (Factcheck.kz, 2023). The website was unblocked in January 2023 after the WHO amended the bulletin about suicide. State officials frequently assert that there is an abundance of online content that may encourage suicide among minors (Informant #10, 01.10.2024). It is thus anticipated that such narratives can serve as a pretext for increased website blockings and restrictions on access to information (ibid).

In 2023 and 2024, Kazakhstani authorities blocked nearly two dozen media outlets, including Vice News (U.S.-Canada), Russia's Meduza, the Ferghana Information Agency, Tsargrad TV, and Kyrgyzstan's Kloop and Centralasia.media, along with more than 70 VPN websites (Open Observatory of Network Interference [OONI], 2024). Additionally, access to human rights and online petition internet resources (<https://www.change.org/>, <https://www.ipetitions.com/>, egov.press, amnesty.org.ru) was restricted as well (OONI, 2024).

**Figure 2.** Internet penetration in Kazakhstan (2000–2023). Source: The International Telecommunication Union²

These developments illustrate the evolution of internet censorship in Kazakhstan from selective blocks in the 2000s to a systematic regime of digital control by the 2020s. Authorities have increasingly targeted political content, independent media, petition platforms, and even international human rights and health websites, often without court orders or official explanations. This underscores how website blocking has become one of the central instruments of state control over the internet.

Internet Shutdown and Throttling. In addition to website blocking, Kazakhstani authorities also resort to nationwide or local internet shutdowns or throttling, particularly during politically sensitive events. Following violent clashes in Zhanaozen in December 2011, where security forces opened fire on striking oil workers, the government imposed a state of emergency and shut down internet access in the city (Lewis, 2016). Since then, authorities have understood that to prevent the dissemination of alternative and critical information during political crises, the internet should be disconnected, while the information vacuum could be filled by pro-state bloggers and royal state media (Informant #1, 09.09.2024; Rakhmetov, 2020). Consequently, internet shutdowns have been informally institutionalised by authorities and have become a widely used tool in the censorship playbook (Rakhmetov & Valeriano, 2022).

In February 2014, when Kazakhstan's Central Bank devalued the national currency tenge by 19%, internet connection was temporarily disrupted in Almaty amid public calls for protest (Freedom House, 2014). During ethnic clashes between Kazakh and Tajik communities in the South Kazakhstan region in February 2015, authorities also shut down internet access in affected areas to prevent the spread of information (Lillis, 2015). Amid widespread protests against proposed land code reforms in May 2016, users reported difficulties accessing social media and communication apps as the government disrupted internet services (Freedom House, 2016). In the aftermath of terrorist attacks in Aktobe in June 2016, the government imposed a temporary internet shutdown in the city (Toleukhanova, 2016). This blackout limited communication and access to information, with state media providing minimal coverage. The internet was also slowed down and temporarily disrupted during online broadcasts of Mukhtar Ablyazov, the oppositionist in exile, on social media (Webb, 2016).

Kazakh authorities have continued the deliberate employment of internet shutdowns to control the dissemination of digital information during periods of political unrest and public demonstrations after the political transition in 2019. During the ethnic violence between Kazakh and Dungan communities in the Korday district in February 2020, the government imposed an internet shutdown in the affected areas (Freedom House, 2020). In February 2021, amid anti-government protests in Almaty and Astana, internet access was also temporarily disrupted (Access Now, 2021). This

disruption hindered communication among protesters and limited media coverage of the events. During a rally organised by the unregistered Democratic Party of Kazakhstan in Almaty in April 2021, mobile internet access was disabled in the vicinity of the protest (Vlast.kz, 2021b). This action impeded live reporting and real-time communication among participants. In December 2021, during commemorative events in Almaty, mobile internet services were disrupted in the area around Republic Square (Vlast.kz, 2021c).

Kazakhstan has also repeatedly restricted internet access during elections. On 9 June 2019, amid the presidential election, NetBlocks, (2019a) reported that several internet service providers in the country disrupted access to streaming platforms and significantly limited connectivity for most users. This nationwide disruption coincided with the arrests of activists and journalists during protests in Astana, Almaty, and Shymkent. Notably, Twitter's Periscope was blocked as well, effectively halting live broadcasts (NetBlocks, 2019a). During January 2021 parliamentary elections, authorities disrupted internet access near protest sites in Almaty, particularly around Republic Square, where police confronted demonstrators (Vlast.kz, 2021a). Internet blackouts hindered communication among protesters and limited media coverage of the events. These instances reflect a pattern of the Kazakh government's use of internet shutdowns as a tool to control information during critical events.

In January 2022, Kazakhstan experienced 5-day nationwide internet blackouts during mass protests over rising fuel prices, with connectivity dropping to 5% of normal levels (NetBlocks, 2022). The disruptions severely limited communication and information sharing as demonstrations escalated across major cities. Network data showed the outages coincided with government efforts to control information (NetBlocks, 2022), following a similar pattern of digital restrictions during previous political crises in the country. The January 2022 events have thus demonstrated that Kazakhstani authorities have a 'switch' that can be used whenever they want to cut off the internet in the whole country (Informant #5, 24.09.2024; Informant #13, 08.10.2024; Informant #14, 10.10.2024).

The practice of internet disruptions continued after January 2022. In January 2023, the internet was disconnected during the Almaty rally of activists commemorating the victims of the 2022 'Bloody January' events (Gumyrkina, 2023). In April 2023, the internet was locally disconnected during the Almaty rally against the parliamentary election's results on the territory of the square where the rally took place and the surrounding districts (Bakhytzhn, 2023). The same month, the internet was cut off in the city of Zhanaozen amid the protests of oilmen (Korosteleva & Kaisar, 2023).

In addition to shutdowns, access to specific websites can be slowed down. For instance, in the lead-up to the early

presidential election in November 2022, access to websites of the opposition media Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) was slowed down for more than half a year (September 2022–April 2023) while the website of another news media (currenttime.tv) was throttled during the election (Filastò & Basso, 2023). This form of censorship is more discreet, as internet throttling often resembles a technical problem and, unlike direct blocking, can mislead users into thinking that there is no deliberate interference. This tactic is regularly employed within the authoritarian context: China, for instance, slowed down access to Google instead of outright blocking in 2010 (Roberts, 2018).

Thus, Kazakhstani authorities have institutionalised internet shutdown, disruption, and throttling as central elements of their information control strategy. These measures, employed consistently during politically sensitive events such as elections, protests, and moments of national unrest, demonstrate the government's determination to dominate the digital space and limit the circulation of critical perspectives.

Bots and Mass Reporting. Another identified instrument in the censorship arsenal of Kazakhstani authorities is the use of an 'army' of bots and coordinated online campaigns to manipulate and suppress content critical of the government. Bots are strategically deployed across social media platforms, including Telegram, Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube, to flood critical posts with reactions and comments, consequently reducing the visibility of opposing voices (Informant #1, 09.09.2024; Informant #10, 01.10.2024; Informant #14, 10.10.2024; Informant #16, 22.10.2024). This censorship tactic, like website blocking and internet shutdowns, is also common in authoritarian regimes (Pomerantsev, 2019; Roberts, 2018).

Specific tactics involve creating artificial surges of activity that disrupt the normal functioning of online news channels. Excessive bot-generated reactions on Telegram can slow down channels, making content difficult to post or view and causing technical glitches that undermine audience trust in independent media (Informant #10, 01.10.2024). Interviewees described how reactions, often automated hearts or likes, are triggered by certain keywords, such as Tokayev or nuclear power plant, producing thousands of fake engagements on pro-government news and drowning out critical content. This pattern, repeatedly noted by several informants, creates the illusion of widespread approval for state narratives and forces independent outlets to disable comments or reactions entirely (Informant #10, 01.10.2024; Informant #14, 10.10.2024).

Interviewees also highlighted the growing psychological impact of such tactics. One informant called bot campaigns 'a constant irritation' that erodes morale in independent newsrooms (Informant #16, 22.10.2024). Others said that the fake popularity of official news has led readers to doubt

the authenticity of independent journalism, weakening credibility and audience trust (Informant #10, 01.10.2024).

Additionally, coordinated mass-reporting campaigns exploit platform moderation algorithms to silence critics. Large volumes of identical complaints are directed at journalists, activists, or opposition figures, leading to the automatic suspension or deletion of accounts and posts (Informant #4, 19.09.2024; Informant #7, 26.09.2024; Informant #8, 30.09.2024). One interviewee reported that journalists who posted videos of officials evading questions in state venues later found their personal Instagram and Facebook pages deleted without explanation (Informant #4, 19.09.2024). Another interviewee recalled that, in the aftermath of the 2022 January events, one journalist lost access to both personal and professional Facebook accounts following coordinated bot complaints, which significantly disrupted communication and outreach efforts (Informant #8, 30.09.2024).

Several interviewees noted that such bot farms are often linked to government structures, with civil servants maintaining multiple accounts to post comments or submit complaints when instructed (Informant #7, 26.09.2024; Informant #16, 22.10.2024). One participant explained that these efforts are not particularly sophisticated but are effective in volume and persistence – 'enough to make people hesitate before posting something critical' (Informant #16, 22.10.2024).

This orchestrated use of bots and mass-reporting mechanisms reflects a sophisticated and pervasive form of internet censorship aimed at controlling the information environment by silencing critical voices and manipulating public perception. Its effectiveness lies less in persuasion than in disruption – overwhelming independent media, exhausting journalists, and fostering self-censorship among users. However, this tactic is not a new phenomenon in Kazakhstan; it evolved from the systematic use of bots and paid commentators to shape online discourse during the presidency of Nazarbayev (Bannikov & Li, 2019; Rakhmetov, 2020).

Administrative Tools of Censorship

Alongside digital censorship tools, the government of Kazakhstan consistently resorts to administrative resources to censor online content and control information flow.

State Procurement ('Goszakaz'). Kazakhstani authorities utilise state procurement (Ministry of Culture and Information of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2024b), commonly referred to as 'goszakaz', as a strategic administrative tool to exert influence over online media outlets and journalists. 'Goszakaz', financial support provided to media through governmental tenders, serves to create a substantial dependency among media organisations on state funds, allowing the government to shape editorial policies and restrict journalistic independence

(Informant #8, 30.09.2024; Informant #12, 07.10.2024). Currently, a vast majority of media outlets in Kazakhstan receives ‘goszakaz’ (Informant #4, 19.09.2024), making them increasingly reliant on government funds to stay afloat (Informant #12, 07.10.2024).

Interview data consistently highlights how ‘goszakaz’ places media into an ethically and financially constrained position, almost fully limiting their editorial freedom. Moreover, interviewees emphasise the explicit control exercised by government institutions via ‘goszakaz’. For example, officials may explicitly instruct the media not to cover particular negative incidents or sensitive topics if they conflict with the state agency’s interests (Informant #8, 30.09.2024). As a result, media outlets receiving state funding tend to avoid coverage that could potentially irritate their government sponsors. This administrative control leads to significant limitations on press freedom, as media outlets become reluctant to publish critical reports about the government to preserve ongoing financial support (Informant #3, 17.09.2024; Informant #15, 14.10.2024). As one interviewee described: ‘media outlets that exist at the expense of state procurement become disenfranchised, they even write the headlines that the Ministry of Information gives them. As a rule, the journalists of these media outlets do not ask uncomfortable questions’ (Informant #15, 14.10.2024).

Regional media and smaller outlets appear especially vulnerable, often becoming entirely reliant on ‘goszakaz’ funds and thus losing editorial autonomy. Conversely, a limited number of independent media deliberately avoids state procurement to preserve journalistic independence, despite substantial economic challenges (Informant #8, 30.09.2024; Informant #15, 14.10.2024). One informant summarised the severity of dependence: ‘media outlets have become hooked on “goszakaz” like a drug, making it extremely difficult for them to withdraw from such financial arrangements’ (Informant #12, 07.10.2024). Consequently, through state procurement, authorities have received a powerful administrative lever that allows them to censor information on the internet. As one interviewee concluded: ‘authorities have all capacities to control, regulate, generate, and integrate any content that they want’ (Informant #4, 19.09.2024).

Directives. Kazakhstani authorities also employ informal directives, known as ‘ustanovki’, as a key tool of internet censorship, exercising extensive control over online content. These directives are frequently conveyed to media outlets and journalists through regular meetings with government officials, particularly the Ministry of Culture and Information, where explicit guidelines on permissible language, topics, and narratives are provided (Informants #1, 09.09.2024; Informant #14, 10.10.2024; Informant #15, 14.10.2024). Informant #1 (09.09.2024) notes that online media significantly suffer under such a censorship regime,

as editors are given detailed instructions about phrasing and content.

The directives extend to politically sensitive topics, setting explicit ‘stop words’ that must be avoided. For instance, media outlets are instructed to handle online coverage of contentious issues, such as the war in Ukraine or the status of the Russian language in Kazakhstan, with caution or to avoid these topics altogether. The regular confusion about the proper usage of phrases such as ‘in Ukraine’ (‘v Ukraine’) or ‘on Ukraine’ (‘na Ukraine’) in publications also indicates that resolutions were imposed externally, according to Informant #10 (01.10.2024). Similarly, Rakhmetov (2024) found that the cautious language in reports on sensitive geopolitical topics is a common trend among online media in Kazakhstan.

Furthermore, authorities exert control by dictating not just what to avoid but also prescribing the portrayal of certain events and political figures in a positive light, as evidenced by directives regarding the coverage of President Tokayev and key public policies (Informant #4, 19.09.2024; Informant #16, 22.10.2024). Informant #4 (19.09.2024) emphasises that media must adhere to prearranged narratives, receiving a detailed list with theses that define exactly how information should be presented. Such explicit instructions reduce journalists to mere executors of state-approved narratives. As one interviewee summarised, these directives ensure that ‘all media sing in unison’, neutralising critical coverage on the internet (Informant #16, 22.10.2024).

Phone Calls. In addition, Kazakhstani authorities frequently use direct phone calls as an informal but effective method of internet censorship, influencing media outlets and individual journalists to remove or alter content deemed unfavourable. Multiple interviewees highlighted that calls are a standard and widely practised means of exerting pressure (Informant #10, 01.10.2024; Informant #14, 10.10.2024; Informant #15, 14.10.2024). Such phone calls often come from state officials, press secretaries, or even senior politicians and ministers, directly instructing journalists or editors to remove or amend published material.

These interventions typically follow the publication of sensitive content on the internet. Informant #15 (14.10.2024) notes that, especially with state media, ‘if a piece of material appears that displeases the Ministry of Information or a specific agency, they simply call the editor-in-chief and instruct them to remove it’. If needed, phone calls can also be made to media owners, adding an extra level of pressure on editors and journalists; this often results in online content being altered or entirely withdrawn (Informants #12, 07.10.2024; Informant #15, 14.10.2024).

Some interviewees emphasised that such interventions could escalate from polite requests to demands followed by threats. Informant #4 (19.09.2024) describes this aggressive approach: ‘direct calls come into the editorial office with a

straightforward warning: “delete this immediately.” Similarly, Informant #9 (30.09.2024) highlighted consistent pressures from authorities on journalists to withdraw critical online content. Despite this coercive atmosphere, most independent media in Kazakhstan disregard such calls, resorting to professional and ethical standards (Informant #12, 07.10.2024). Nevertheless, the systematic reliance on phone calls characterises the extensive nature of governmental censorship that aims to control information flow on the internet.

Accreditation. Kazakhstani authorities also increasingly use media accreditation as a tool to control and censor internet-based journalism. The introduction of new media accreditation rules in August 2024 ([Ministry of Culture and Information of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2024a](#)) has given the government substantial discretionary power over journalists, as authorities could now easily revoke a journalist’s accreditation for insignificant or arbitrary reasons, such as exceeding the permitted number of questions or minor dress code violations during press events (Informant #15, 14.10.2024). Accreditation processes have also become bureaucratic barriers deliberately designed to restrict journalists’ access to important governmental events. Interviewees consistently described these measures as methods devised to regulate journalists’ behaviour, ensuring they remain compliant and less critical of the state (Informant #1, 09.09.2024; Informant #10, 01.10.2024; Informant #11, 03.10.2024). Informant #15 (14.10.2024) summarised that accreditation rules were introduced so that journalists become royal and compliant, ‘fully aware that they could quickly be stripped of their ability to work’.

Several interviewees emphasised the discriminatory nature of the accreditation rules. Informant #14 (10.10.2024) noted, for instance, the rule that journalists must publish reports only through accredited media outlets and thus are forbidden from disseminating content on social media. In case this condition is violated, the journalist’s accreditation will be revoked, according to the rules ([Ministry of Culture and Information of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2024a](#)).

Notably, accreditation has become an explicit censorship instrument, selectively targeting critical voices and independent media outlets. Interviewees highlighted prominent cases such as journalist Zhaniya Orynkayeva, whose accreditation was revoked after she asked uncomfortable questions at government events (Informant #4, 19.09.2024; Informant #16, 22.10.2024; [Vaal, 2024](#)). Similarly, opposition media Radio Azattyq faced restrictions through the accreditation rules ([Tukusheva, 2024](#)).

Overall, administrative resources in the form of state procurement, informal directives, phone calls, and accreditation rules exemplify a deliberate governmental strategy to enforce media compliance, restrict critical reporting, and control the dissemination of alternative information on the internet.

Combining with digital tools, this reflects a broader state effort at internet censorship in Kazakhstan.

Censored Content in Kazakhstan

Content subject to censorship in Kazakhstan encompasses a wide range of political, social, and cultural topics, with a particular focus on protecting the image of the government and its key figures. Interviewees consistently describe a system where online coverage is carefully calibrated to avoid negative portrayals of the president, senior officials, and powerful business figures (Informant #4, 19.09.2024; Informant #5, 24.09.2024; Informant #10, 01.10.2024; Informant #13, 08.10.2024; Informant #14, 10.10.2024; Informant #16, 22.10.2024). Any reporting that threatens to undermine the reputation of senior government figures or major state projects is to be censored or reframed to present authorities in a favourable light (Informant #1, 09.09.2024; Informant #2, 11.09.2024; Informant #15, 14.10.2024).

Internet censorship is particularly strict around political scandals, protests, and critical coverage of government programs or law enforcement. Online content about ongoing protests, opposition movements, or high-profile anti-government investigations is regularly suppressed. Informant #1 (09.09.2024) notes that while limited criticism of local officials (akims) is sometimes tolerated, any negative coverage of central authorities or strategic state initiatives quickly leads to intervention, especially if it questions the president’s directives or flagship projects (e.g. construction of a nuclear power plant). Informant #2 (11.09.2024) highlights how content that ‘criticises key proposals and policies of Tokayev’ or ‘police activity’ is systematically targeted, with both official censorship and behind-the-scenes campaigns of discrediting and intimidation. Coverage of corruption, misconduct among senior officials, and anti-corruption investigations is also closely monitored and frequently removed (Informant #5, 24.09.2024; Informant #12, 07.10.2024; Informant #15, 14.10.2024).

Sensitive external and geopolitical topics are also heavily censored. Interviewees mention that media outlets receive direct or indirect signals to avoid or soften coverage of the war in Ukraine, the situation of ethnic minorities in Xinjiang, Russian language issues, and any narratives that might be at odds with Kazakhstan’s official foreign policy (Informant #4, 19.09.2024; Informant #10, 01.10.2024; Informant #13, 08.10.2024). For instance, there are ‘stop words’ around war coverage, and words like ‘war’ itself may be prohibited or replaced by euphemisms (Informant #4, 19.09.2024; Informant #10, 01.10.2024; Informant #13, 08.10.2024). Interviewees also cite cases where satire, religious commentary deemed ‘extremist’, and content about online petitions or referendums is closely controlled or prohibited (Informant #4, 19.09.2024; Informant #6, 24.09.2024; Informant #12, 07.10.2024).

Internet censorship extends beyond direct removal of material to shaping the broader information environment. Editors and journalists receive informal calls and warnings, and there is pressure to reframe stories in a more positive or neutral light. Informant #1 (09.09.2024) explains how the official approach encourages stories to be ‘either positive, or neutrally positive, at most neutrally negative, but never negative’. If a problem (for instance, an infrastructure failure) is reported on the internet, the negative angle must be diluted by highlighting the state’s prompt response. According to Informant #4 (19.09.2024) and Informant #15 (14.10.2024), Kazakhstani authorities proactively shape media narratives, making sure that any coverage of sensitive topics (for instance, floods) on the internet consistently presents authorities in a positive or protective light. The result is an online environment where journalists and regular internet users tend to pre-emptively avoid ‘taboo’ topics, which leads to widespread self-censorship across the digital space.

Actors of Internet Censorship in Kazakhstan

Internet censorship in Kazakhstan operates through a sophisticated and hierarchical system, involving a range of state bodies and affiliated organisations (see [Figure 3](#) and [Table 3](#)). This section details how these actors coordinate to control the digital space.

The Ministry of Culture and Information serves as the central hub of Kazakhstan’s internet censorship apparatus. Interviewees consistently describe it as the main operational body that coordinates the state’s efforts to control and shape the digital information landscape (Informant #10, 01.10.2024; Informant #13, 08.10.2024; Informant #14, 10.10.2024; Informant #15, 14.10.2024; Informant #16, 22.10.2024). The Ministry’s scope includes legal,

Table 3. Theme, Codes, and the Number of References

Theme	Code	References
Actors	Ministry of Culture and Information	30
	Akimats	14
	Administration of the President	12
	Other actors	12
	Centre for Information Analysis	10
	State Technical Service	10
	Security and Law enforcement agencies	6

regulatory, and direct intervention roles: it drafts restrictive legislation, communicates with editors and major online platforms, and distributes state contracts and grants. The Ministry is responsible for issuing take-down requests and overseeing the accreditation of journalists. It is also known for working closely with international social media companies to secure the removal of ‘undesirable’ content (Informant #1, 09.09.2024).

The Centre for Information Analysis (CIA), operating under the Ministry of Culture and Information, serves as Kazakhstan’s primary institution for monitoring the country’s vast information space. The CIA is a large, well-resourced organisation, employing hundreds of employees and maintaining branches in every region, where they systematically track both national and regional online content, social media, traditional media, and public discussions (Informant #1, 09.09.2024; Informant #4, 19.09.2024; Informant #5, 24.09.2024; Informant #17, 29.10.2024). The monitoring process is organised through both manual review and digital tools, such as Uscan and Brand Analytics, to sift through an immense flow of information (Informant #1, 09.09.2024; Informant #3, 17.09.2024). Specialists use keyword tracking, custom criteria, and commercial software to ensure comprehensive oversight not only of published articles but also of comments, videos, and private social media groups.

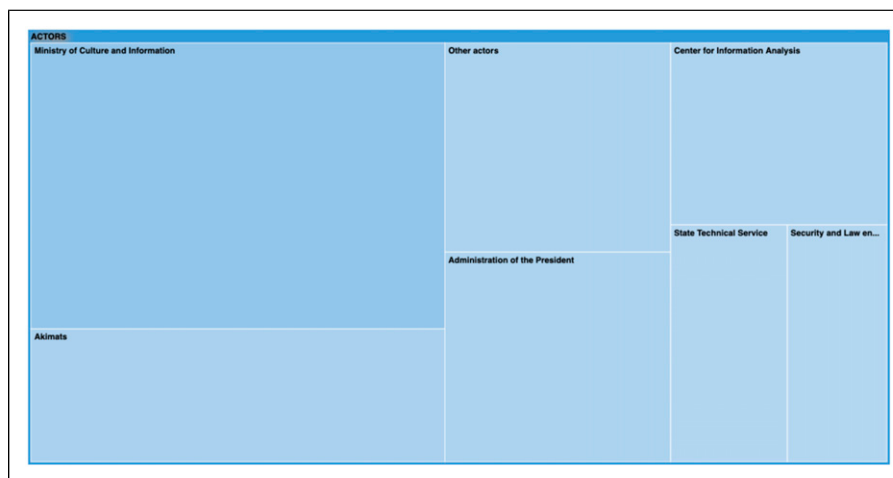


Figure 3. Actors of internet censorship in Kazakhstan

The CIA's role is both technical and bureaucratic: after identifying content that appears to violate regulations, it drafts formal notices, which are then sent to the Ministry of Culture and Information for consideration and subsequent action (Informant #1, 09.09.2024; Informant #6, 24.09.2024). If violations are confirmed, the Ministry can issue orders for removal or blocking involving internet providers, hosting platforms, and the State Technical Service. Besides, the CIA's work is closely integrated with a broader state monitoring infrastructure, in which over 20 government agencies contribute their monitoring findings to a centralised database, known as the Cyberwatch (Kibernadzor) system (Kabyshev & Melyakov, 2023; Informant #6, 24.09.2024). This system coordinates inter-agency monitoring, collects flagged content, and enables a coordinated governmental response to digital information deemed illegal. As a result, monitoring of the internet in Kazakhstan involves almost the whole state apparatus.

While the Ministry of Culture and Information implements censorship, strategic direction and top-level control rest with the Administration of the President of Kazakhstan (Informant #2, 11.09.2024; Informant #10, 01.10.2024; Informant #14, 10.10.2024; Informant #15, 14.10.2024). This state institution sets the main priorities for information policy and dictates the broader messaging to be followed by subordinate agencies. As Informant #13 (08.10.2024) notes, 'everything comes from the Administration of the President; the Ministry of Information is only the executor'. The Administration of the President is viewed as the nerve centre that not only sets the informational agenda but also supervises the implementation in regions via local government institutions.

The technical and coercive aspects of internet censorship are managed by the law enforcement and security agencies such as the National Security Committee, the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the Ministry of Defense, the General Prosecutor's Office, and the State Technical Service (Informant #12, 07.10.2024; Informant #13, 08.10.2024; Informant #16, 22.10.2024). These bodies have the legal authority and technical capability to block websites and restrict internet access, especially during emergencies (Rakhmetov & Valeriano, 2022). The State Technical Service, which is subordinate to the National Security Committee, operates the national internet 'switch', enabling the fast blocking of sites or even entire segments of the internet (Informant #6, 24.09.2024; Informant #7, 26.09.2024).

Regional and municipal governments (akimats⁴) play a crucial role in the practical enforcement of censorship in the regions. They monitor local journalists and media for criticism of officials or policies, restrict access to information, and exert informal pressure on editors and reporters (Informant #2, 11.09.2024; Informant #10, 01.10.2024; Informant #14, 10.10.2024; Informant #15, 14.10.2024; Informant #16, 22.10.2024). One interviewee recounts a deputy akim directly asking for the removal of an online

article about city infrastructure, representing the everyday reach of local actors (Informant #9, 30.09.2024). Thus, akimats act as censors on the regional level, leveraging political power to shape local news coverage on the internet.

Consequently, the Kazakhstani system of internet censorship is defined by a tightly coordinated network of actors led by the President's Administration and implemented through the Ministry of Culture and Information, CIA, security agencies, and local authorities. The system's effectiveness relies not only on legal and technical restrictions but also on constant monitoring and informal pressure. As Informant #13 (08.10.2024) sums up, 'nothing happens by accident – it is all directed from the top'. This multi-layered architecture allows the state to maintain extensive control over the internet.

Discussion

This study examined the evolving landscape of internet censorship in Kazakhstan, identifying key mechanisms, targeted content, and responsible actors. The findings reveal a complex and institutionalised system of internet control that combines both digital and administrative censorship tools, illustrating the state's sustained efforts to dominate the digital sphere.

First, in response to the question of how Kazakhstani authorities censor the internet, the study reveals a systematic reliance on a dual strategy: digital tools such as website blocking, internet shutdowns, throttling, and bot-driven manipulation, and administrative measures including state procurement ('goszakaz'), informal directives, phone calls, and restrictive accreditation rules. This combination reflects a shift from ad hoc censorship to a deeply embedded censorship regime. While digital tools are used to restrict access to undesirable information and disrupt communication during politically sensitive periods, administrative resources are deployed to shape editorial agendas, silence critical voices on the internet, and foster alignment with official narratives. These findings support prior studies that identify a growing sophistication in digital authoritarianism (Deibert et al., 2010; Roberts, 2018).

Second, regarding what content is censored, the data consistently points to a focus on politically sensitive material. This includes criticism of the president and his inner circle, corruption investigations, opposition activities, and coverage of protests. Sensitive geopolitical topics such as the war in Ukraine, ethnic minorities in China, or debates over the Russian language in Kazakhstan are also closely monitored. Internet censorship is not limited to explicit removal of content but extends to the pre-emptive shaping of narratives through informal mechanisms. The evidence supports the conclusion that internet censorship in Kazakhstan is both proactive and reactive, designed not only to suppress information but to create a sanitised and state-centric digital space.

Third, regarding the question of who censors the internet, the study finds that internet censorship is orchestrated by a broad and hierarchical network. While the Ministry of Culture and Information serves as the operational hub, strategic control originates from the Administration of the President of Kazakhstan, with implementation and monitoring carried out by the Ministry, security agencies, the State Technical Service, and regional akimats. The Centre for Information Analysis plays a pivotal role in monitoring and flagging online content. The institutional integration of these actors into a coordinated censorship regime suggests that digital control is not peripheral but central to Kazakhstan's political system.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that internet censorship in Kazakhstan has become deeply institutionalised, technologically adaptive, and politically strategic. It reflects an authoritarian response to the challenges of digital connectivity, marked by the increasing use of covert, informal, and pre-emptive mechanisms. Although the internet was once perceived as a space for empowerment and democratic participation (Diamond, 2010), the evidence from Kazakhstan highlights how authoritarian regimes have adapted to exploit digital infrastructure for political control. The results align with broader patterns of digital repression observed in non-democratic contexts (Funk et al., 2024; Kalathil & Boas, 2003; Morozov, 2011), underscoring that the liberating potential of the internet is not universal but is profoundly shaped by local power structures.

The case of Kazakhstan refines key theories of digital authoritarianism in several ways. First, rather than following a simple, step-by-step evolution (Deibert, 2015), Kazakhstan shows that different forms of censorship – technical and administrative – operate in tandem and are employed as needed in various situations. Second, it builds on Roberts' (2018) framework of fear, friction, and flooding by adding a fourth element: administrative enforcement. Through tools like state procurement, accreditation rules, and informal directives, authorities rely on media outlets and online platforms themselves to carry out censorship and promote self-censorship. Third, in line with Guriev and Treisman's (2019) concept of 'informational autocracy', Kazakhstan combines persuasion with selective repression, using incentives, access, and regulatory pressure to manage online discourse. Fourth, echoing MacKinnon's (2012) concept of 'networked authoritarianism', the study demonstrates how centralised technical control and state-directed coordination with internet providers and platforms involve private intermediaries in the censorship process. Finally, the coordinated structure linking the Administration of the President, the Ministry of Culture and Information, security agencies, and regional authorities shows how control is shared across levels of government.

While this study offers a detailed account of internet censorship tools and practices, it has limitations. The qualitative nature of the research, along with potential hesitancy among interviewees due to the sensitivity of the topic, may limit generalisation of the findings. Nevertheless, the thematic consistency across interviews suggests robust patterns of censorship and control. Future research may further explore cross-national comparisons to deepen understanding of digital authoritarianism in the post-Soviet region.

Conclusion

This study examined the architecture of internet censorship in Kazakhstan, identifying the formal and informal censorship tools, targeted content, and key actors that define the state's digital control. Based on interview data and secondary sources, the research highlights two primary pillars of censorship: the use of digital instruments and administrative mechanisms to restrict and shape online expression.

The findings also demonstrate that internet censorship in Kazakhstan is systematic and institutionalised. Website blocking, internet shutdowns, throttling, and bots are used to restrict information flows, while administrative tactics, such as state procurement, directives, phone calls, and accreditation rules, reinforce compliance and suppress dissent. Online content targeted for censorship typically includes criticism of the president, protests, opposition movements, and foreign policy issues. A centralised network under the Administration of the President directs censorship efforts, with implementation by the Ministry of Culture and Information, the Centre for Information Analysis, security agencies, and regional authorities. This structure illustrates how internet censorship has become a core component of Kazakhstan's political system.

Thus, Kazakhstan's experience reflects broader patterns of digital authoritarianism. While once seen as a space for democratic empowerment, the internet has been effectively co-opted to maintain political control. In sum, the internet in Kazakhstan functions not as a space of free expression, but as a tightly regulated sphere shaped by state power. These findings call for continued scholarly focus on digital control and censorship in authoritarian contexts.

At a practical level, the study underscores the need for stronger protection mechanisms for journalists and independent media operating online, as well as greater digital literacy and security training to mitigate state pressure and censorship. For international organisations and digital rights advocates, the findings highlight the importance of continuous engagement with local actors, monitoring of administrative censorship practices, and support for technological tools that can help preserve access to independent information in restrictive environments.

Ethical Consideration

The interview questions were approved by the head of the Maqsut Narikbayev University's ISE Committee for Scientific Research, Dr Ikboljon Qoraboyev (i_qoraboyev@kazguu.kz) in September 2024.

Consent for Publication

Verbal informed consent was obtained from all interviewees involved in this research.

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Notes

1. To avoid repetition in the text, digital information control, digital control, and digital censorship are used interchangeably with internet censorship.
2. Available from <https://datahub.itu.int/data/?i=11624&e=KAZ&v=chart>
3. Goszakaz (literally 'state order') refers to Kazakhstan's system of government procurement and funding for media outlets.
4. Akimats are local and regional government administrations in Kazakhstan headed by an akim (governor or mayor).

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