

Reporters Without Borders

<http://www.rsf.org/ouzbekistan-regime-steps-up-online-control-and-25-08-2011,40844.html>

Europe & ex-USSR - Uzbekistan

Censorship and repression

Regime steps up online control and media crackdown

25 August 2011

Reporters Without Borders today deplored "extremely worrying" moves by the Uzbek government to control the free flow of news in the country, notably by setting up a new official body to curb the media.

"The regime already directly controls all print and traditional broadcast media and has filtered from the locally-received Internet most independent sources of news about central Asia," it said.

"In recent months, it has started a general offensive mainly targeting the new media and including significant expansion of online filtering, greater surveillance and a number of arrests. The authorities were caught short by the uprisings in the Arab world and are now making up for lost time, even though no protests or demonstrations are threatening them right now.

"The 'Arab Spring' or national security cannot in any circumstances be used as a pretext for censorship," the worldwide press freedom organisation said.

Online censorship seems to be a new regional priority. An informal summit meeting of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) (Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Russia and Tajikistan) on 12 August in Astana (Kazakhstan) agreed to make the body an "effective barrier against all risk of revolutionary contagion in the region," according to the Russian daily paper Kommersant.

Reporters Without Borders is concerned by the growing regional trend towards online censorship and calls on regional governments to fall in line with the 1 June 2011 declaration on freedom of expression by special rapporteurs of the United Nations, the OSCE, the Organisation of American States and the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights, that Internet access should be universal.

The Uzbek government approved on 5 August the setting up of a "committee of experts on information and mass communication" to monitor the country's media. The "experts" are all government employees and the committee's purely repressive job is to hunt down publications putting out "destructive and negative news likely to influence the social conscience of citizens," to undermine "national cultural traditions," to call for "violent overthrow of the established political order" and to incite people to "hatred." The committee focuses on the new media and "satellite systems," seriously threatening foreign TV stations, which are widely received in Uzbekistan with dishes.

"Will Uzbekistan follow the frightening path taken by neighbouring Turkmenistan?" Reporters Without Borders asked, noting that the Turkmen regime last week ordered a drastic reduction in the number of satellite dishes on the pretext that they "spoiled the look of buildings."

The new Uzbek "committee of experts" is the latest addition to the government's already well-developed surveillance apparatus. It will specifically analyse and interpret data collected by the Centre for Monitoring Mass Communications and eventually suggest new laws. The committee also clearly shows the regime's intention to block any online challenge to it, as displayed by official statements in recent months condemning "destructive forces" and a supposed "campaign of provocation" against the government online.

This policy was dramatically shown by the unprecedented blocking on 9 August, on the eve of the "Internet Festival of the national domain UZ" to mark the 20th anniversary of the country's independence, of more than 50 major websites, including the New York Times, Reuters, Bloomberg and Lenta.ru news portals, as well as search-engine Google, the Reporters Without Borders site and the Soviet sports news site sovsport.ru. Most were accessible again after three days. Uzbek opposition and independent news sites have been blocked for a long time. Websites based in neighbouring Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan have also been censored by the Uzbek authorities.

"The government's decision to launch its own social networking site, moloqot.uz ('dialogue') on 1 September is another worrying sign of a crackdown on Internet users," Reporters Without Borders said. Officials at a press conference held by Uzbektelekom on 19 August said the new network was aimed at the "moral" education of Uzbeks, to counter the popularity of foreign social network sites. Facebook has 82,220 members in Uzbekistan the government would like to monitor by luring them to join Moloqot.

Some mobile phone companies, such as Beeline and Sharktelekom, are suspected of going along with this censorship. The use of proxies or virtual private networks (VPN) are growing among users who want to be secure as arbitrary arrests increase.

Contributors to the popular forum Arbus.com were arrested recently after commenting online about the Arab uprisings. Human rights activist Saida Kurbanova was picked up on 15 August after posting online last March an article criticising the compulsory use of government credit cards. She is reportedly being sued for defamation. Independent journalist **Elena Bondar** was arrested on 22 August as she returned from a training course in Kyrgyzstan organised by the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). She was freed after CDs, flash-drives and videos she was carrying were seized from her, on the pretext that they were "undeclared" goods."

"She is becoming well-known in the independent media and her arrest is clearly a bid to intimidate her or drive her into exile," a contributor to Uznews told Reporters Without Borders.
