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Europe/Ex-USSR - Kazakhstan

Trumped-up charges

Journalist still facing up to seven years in prison for “inciting hatred”

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Reporters Without Borders is appalled by journalist and human rights activist **Alexander Kharlamov**'s detention on trumped up charges for the past four months for writing articles critical of the local authorities and judicial system in his hometown, the eastern city of Ridder.

Aged in his 60s, he is facing a possible seven-year jail sentence on a charge of inciting hatred under [article 164 of the criminal code](#). The prosecutor said he “spread atheist ideas” and “displayed a negative attitude towards religion.”

“We strongly condemn the mendacious charges brought against Kharlamov, which constitute a violation of freedom of expression,” Reporters Without Borders said. “There is no evidence of any incitement to hatred by this journalist in anything he wrote.

“As well as calling for the withdrawal of the charges against Kharlamov, we urge the authorities to amend article 164 of the criminal code (on inciting hatred) because, as it stands, it allows anyone to be imprisoned just for expressing an opinion.”

Kharlamov has been voicing atheist views in a blog with a limited readership since 2005. He has also written two books that were published online. In September 2012, [the security forces “revealed”](#) that he was posting calls for religious hatred on his blog and was promoting a new religious current.

Kharlamov has said his writing is just a hobby. He heads Secret Service, a small news agency that campaigns for human rights and against corruption, and writes articles critical of the local authorities for the newspapers [Flash!](#) and *Ridderskiy Vestnik*.

Two official expert evaluations of Kharlamov failed to find evidence of inciting hatred but judges nonetheless ruled that “these actions could provoke religious hatred and the formation of a negative attitude towards religion, which will contribute to conflicts between persons.”

Last January, Kharlamov [wrote an article](#) claiming that the trial of a policeman was conducted in a dishonest manner by the judge. He said he was “warned” several times to refrain from commenting on the case. Criminal charges were brought against him on 25 January and, on 6 February, the police searched his office, confiscating documents and two computers.

He was arrested without a warrant on 14 March when he went to the police to reclaim the confiscated items and, three days later, was transferred to prison, where his partner has not been allowed to bring food parcels to him.

After a [psychological investigation](#) that was carried out against his will, he was sent to a psychiatric clinic in the capital, Astana, for a month before being declared mentally fit.

Kazakhstan is ranked 160th out of 179 countries in the Reporters Without Borders [press freedom index](#).
