

Kazakh Court Fines Ad Agency for Poster of Pushkin Kissing Another Man

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The poster, proposed as an ad for a gay club located at the intersection of Pushkin and Kurmangazy streets, drew protests from students and staff at a music academy named after the bard.

A court in Kazakhstan has ordered an advertising company to pay nearly \$200,000 in damages for a poster featuring the country's revered bard and Russian poet Alexander Pushkin locked in a kiss.

The poster, proposed as an ad for a gay club located at the intersection of Pushkin and Kurmangazy streets in the southern city of Almaty, drew protests from students and staff at a music academy named after the bard who filed 34 lawsuits after the poster began circulating online this summer.

A court has ordered the advertising agency that created the poster, Havas Worldwide Kazakhstan, to pay 34 million tenge (\$188,000) to the 34 plaintiffs who sought a million each for "moral damages," Kazakhstan's Kapital business-news site reported Tuesday.

The advertising agency has argued that the poster was created as an entry in an advertising

contest and was never intended for public use, news reports have said.

Agency director Darya Khamitzhanova said that Havas did not have the kind of money to pay the fines and would appeal, Kapital reported.

One of the poster's designers, Valery Volodin, defended the work's artistic and commercial merits, Kazakhstan's media reported.

"This work is something to be proud of," he was quoted as saying in a Facebook post by Kapital. "Firstly, because the ad works: People understand it and remember the address. Secondly, because it is a bold work, and in the case of the gay movement, which traditionally lives on the edge, it is more that accurate and justified." The Facebook account was disabled at the time this article went to print.

"It is very strange that advertisers think that there can be forbidden topics," Volodin was quoted as saying.

The dispute has prompted Human Rights Watch to speak out in defense of artistic expression, urging Kazakhstan in a statement earlier this month to respect the free exchange of ideas, even when they may seem provocative.

Khamitzhanova, the ad executive, told Kapital that the plaintiffs only sought damages in connection with the supposedly offensive portrait of Kurmangazy. They had no issues with the portrait of Pushkin, she was quoted as saying.

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