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‘Hey, Russians’: In Kazakhstan, a Popular Satirist Battles ‘Russophobia’ Charges

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Temirlan Ensebek. **Vlast.kz**

“Dear subscribers and readers of Qaznews24! How are you? I hope you're still sitting back and laughing at our news! There's plenty to laugh about in our country!” Kazakh blogger Temirlan Ensebek wrote in his latest letter from a detention center on Wednesday.

“See you soon at the Nauryzbay district court — consider this your invitation! The trial will be hilarious too, I promise!” he added.

Ensebek is the founder of Qaznews24, an Instagram page that publishes satirical articles on current events in Kazakhstan in the style of the American satirical news giant The Onion.

The 29-year-old is in detention on charges of “inciting interethnic discord” over Qaznews24’s January 2024 post responding to Russian media executive Tina Kandelaki’s criticism of Kazakh authorities for renaming Russian-named railway stations into the Kazakh

language.

“Kazakhstan slowly but surely continues to supplant the Russian language at the state level,” Kandelaki had written on Telegram. “Under the pretext of securing one's place in history, one can go very far. It is especially convenient to use history as a pretext for such dubious decisions.”

The statement caused a public uproar in Kazakhstan, prompting the Foreign Ministry to vow to ban her from entering the country.

But Qaznews24 was already ahead of officials.

“Kazakhstani rappers recorded a tough response to Tina Kandelaki,” said Qaznews24 in a since-deleted Instagram post from Jan. 21, 2024. The post was accompanied by the viral 2000s rap song “Yo, Orystar” (“Hey, Russians” in Kazakh), which would become the basis for charges against Ensebek.

Police searched Ensebek’s home in Almaty, Kazakhstan’s largest city, on Jan. 17 of this year. He was subsequently detained for two months.

“It is unfortunate that Kazakh authorities didn’t react to remarks and threats coming from a Russian propagandist. Not one deputy made a statement [in response to Kandelaki], so Qaznews24 took that burden upon themselves,” said Ensebek’s lawyer Zhanara Balgabaeva.

“Tina Kandelaki…isn’t even an ethnic Russian. She is Georgian. Yet, it is to her that the lyrics of the song ‘Yo, Orystar’ were addressed to, meaning Temirlan wasn’t aiming it at ethnic Russians, but at those who spread the ideology of Russian imperialism,” Balgabaeva told The Moscow Times, stressing that her “defendant is not a russophobe.”

“His beloved girlfriend Maria is an ethnic Russian,” the lawyer noted.

Maria Kochneva — an activist who is now Ensebek’s fiancée after he proposed to her during a court hearing last month — is also no stranger to getting in trouble over the viral song.

In July 2024, Kochneva was sentenced to 10 days of arrest for performing “Yo, Orystar” at a rap battle. The pretext for her arrest was the use of “profane language in a public place."

“Everything was pre-approved by the organizers and everyone was using profanities — it was a rap battle, after all,” Kochneva recalled in a conversation with The Moscow Times.

“But [the authorities] singled me out and focused only on my performance…because the video of it was circulating in Russian Z-channels,” she added, referring to Russian pro-war and pro-Kremlin bloggers.

First released around 20 years ago, “Yo, Orystar” is something of folklore in the Kazakh segment of the internet: it was covered dozens of times and no one knows anymore who was the original author of the lyrics, which are essentially a stream of obscenities addressed to Russians and Uzbeks.

“No one *actually* listens to this song, neither at parties nor privately in their headphones. No

one takes the lyrics seriously," explained Kochneva, noting that the decades-old track experienced a popular revival amid the Russian invasion of Ukraine as an anti-war protest song.

"It has nothing to do with 'ethnic Russians' — it's simply a response to aggression," added the activist.

Kochneva believes that the charges against her and Ensebek have an "obvious" Russian connection, given that the track never generated any negative public feedback in Kazakhstan.

"I believe the Russian authorities pressured ours to ensure that I faced some kind of punishment," Kochneva said. "The same goes for Temirlan. Certain people lobby Russia's interests [in Kazakhstan], claiming that there is Nazism in Kazakhstan, that Russians are being oppressed here, and so on. And the authorities can't ignore that."

Related article: Kazakhstan to Ban Entry to Russian Media Executive Over Language Policy Criticism

Conquered by the Russian Empire in the 19th century, Kazakhstan was a part of the Soviet Union until it proclaimed independence in 1991. Yet like other Central Asian states, the vast country still grapples with how or whether to escape the orbit of its all-powerful neighbor.

In addition to sharing a 7,800-kilometer land border — the world's second-longest — Kazakhstan's economy is still firmly linked to Russia and the country is a member of the Kremlin-led CSTO security alliance.

When anti-government protests broke out across Kazakhstan in January 2022, Kazakh President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev arranged the deployment of CSTO's military contingent to "stabilize" the country — a move that analysts warned would further cement its security dependence on Russia.

But when Russia's invasion of Ukraine came, Astana stopped short of backing Moscow and refused to recognize the independence of Kremlin-backed separatists in eastern Ukraine.

This position turned Kazakhstan into a frequent punching bag of Russian propagandists and lower-ranking politicians, who — like Kandelaki — repeatedly voiced dissatisfaction with Astana's Kazakh-oriented language policy and even hinted that the Kremlin could move to annex its northern regions in retaliation for growing "russophobia."

"I am 100% convinced that there is a Russian connection in Temirlan's case," said Bota Sharipzhan, an activist with the Oyan, Qazaqstan! civil rights movement. "Russian textbooks were used in the forensic examination and Temirlan had a few public arguments with the pro-Russian blogger Anton Budarov."

Budarov is the author of Budanbay, a Telegram channel with over 30,000 subscribers where he comments on events in Kazakhstan and "exposes" officials and activists who allegedly harbor anti-Russian opinions.

The Myrotvorets database, a Ukrainian civic initiative that collects information on individuals

whom its founders believe are threats to Ukrainian statehood, identifies Budarov as an "FSB agent."

"There have already been several instances when Anton had public arguments with someone over 'ethnic issues' and our security services acted on his reports fairly quickly," said Sharipzhan, noting that this trend could be connected to closer cooperation between the Russian and Kazakh security services since January 2022.

"It's also important to understand that there is no need to protect ethnic Russians in Kazakhstan from anything," said Sharipzhan. "Kazakhstan has always been home to various ethnic groups, especially after Koreans, Chechens and others were forcefully deported to our country [by Soviet authorities]. Everyone here is used to having Koreans, Germans, Russians, Kyrgyz, Tatars or Bashkirs as classmates. Major instances of interethnic conflict are quite rare in Kazakhstan."

Political analyst Dimash Alzhanov said he believes that the search for a "Russian trace" in Ensebek's case is merely an attempt to "shift responsibility onto something distant, powerful and sinister" like the Kremlin.

"The main reason for his arrest and the ongoing trial is jokes about Kazakhstan's political leadership and the president [Tokayev] himself. Of course, these jokes sometimes touched on Russia — as we unfortunately share the same information space," Alzhanov told The Moscow Times.

Qaznews24's posts aligned with the wider negative view of the Kremlin among Kazakhstan's public, primarily satirizing Tokayev's "weak position" vis-a-vis Russia, according to Alzhanov.

"This [trial] is, first and foremost, about the president and the criticism expressed through these jokes," he added.

Whether Russia had a hand in it or not, the trial against Ensebek has already become one of the highest-profile political cases in Kazakhstan in recent years.

While the preliminary investigation and subsequent Prosecutor General's office inquiry into Ensebek's case were exceptionally swift, the trial seemingly stalled as widespread public attention caught Kazakh officials off-guard, according to lawyer Balgabaeva.

Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International and leading Kazakh human rights defenders and activists have called on authorities to drop all charges against the blogger.

Two people were sentenced to prolonged detention and two others were fined for staging solo pickets in support of Ensebek.

Meanwhile, the first court hearing in the blogger's case was moved online an hour before the scheduled time and ended with a decision to move proceedings into a different district of Almaty, further away from the center.

If found guilty, Ensebek faces up to seven years in prison.

“One of my colleagues compared this case to a hot potato, which everyone is trying to get off their hands as quickly as possible,” Balgabaeva said in a phone interview. “I want to highlight that Temirlan’s [social media] page is satirical and that post [about Kandelaki] was in line with its aims and the satirical form it uses.”

“Satire is not a crime,” she said. “It cannot be responded to with criminal punishment.”

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