

Kyrgyzstan's not so "wonderful" anti-disinformation law | openDemocracy

By Christopher Schwartz

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Late on the night of Thursday, 26 June, Kyrgyzstan's parliament passed a controversial anti-disinformation law. This occurred despite enormous grassroots online protests against the bill, including upwards of 1,200 critical comments from Facebook users against its main sponsor Gulshat Asylbayeva, a member of the ruling coalition's Önügüü-Progress Party.

The unusual hour of the law's passing, which invites suspicion as to its supporters' intentions, is nowhere near the most troubling of its features. Of 120 parliamentarians, 89 voted in a possibly illegitimate "expedited" procedure, in which the second and third of a three-readings process were combined. Ten parliamentarians were opposed, while 79 were in favor. When news broke late into the night, doubts were immediately raised as to whether Kyrgyz parliamentary rules permit such a procedure, much less whether a genuine quorum was present for the vote.

The bill ("On Manipulating Information") is now awaiting ratification from Kyrgyz president Sooronbai Jeenbekov. Once signed, it will come into force, although since last Friday, Kyrgyzstan's journalism and civil society communities have been calling upon Jeenbekov to veto the bill. A protest against the law organised by РЕАКЦИЯ, an anti-corruption movement led by Bishkek's intelligentsia and business class, took place today despite a ban on large meetings as part of Kyrgyzstan's ongoing Covid-19-related "situation of emergency".

While Asylbayeva has ecstatically described the legislation as "wonderful", in reality this law - evidently plagiarised from similar Russian legislation with some adaptation to the Kyrgyz context - is extremely ambiguous. This has made the Committee to Protect Journalists and many in Kyrgyzstan's journalism and civil society communities, as well as everyday internet users in the country, fearful that it is really a tool of censorship, despite Asylbayeva's claim to the contrary.

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