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KAZAKHSTAN: "This is not a state campaign against the Church"?

By Felix Corley, Forum 18 (<https://www.forum18.org>)

Protestants say secret police encouraged a former church member to lodge a suit against New Life Church – now in court in Pavlodar - claiming back pay and compensation for moral damages for volunteer work in a rehabilitation centre. "This is not a state campaign against the Church," a local religious affairs official claimed, though the individual met officials and a state-backed anti-"sect" centre. Jehovah's Witnesses are appealing a decision awarding large "compensation" to two former members. An assessment of their literature, claiming it caused psychiatric harm, listed a work by Andrei Snezhnevsky, leader of Soviet-era psychiatric abuse.

A spate of civil suits against Protestant and Jehovah's Witness communities appear to have at least some backing from parts of the state. A suit against the Pentecostal New Life Church in Pavlodar - by an individual who is claiming back pay and compensation for moral damages for the years he worked as a volunteer in a rehabilitation centre - is now in court.

A fifth civil suit against a Jehovah's Witness community led in June to a court-ordered pay-out to a mother and her teen-aged son who claim their psychological health was harmed by attending meetings and reading literature. The Jehovah's Witness appeal is due to begin at Nur-Sultan City Court on 23 August (see below).

In November 2021, a former Jehovah's Witness filed a civil suit against the community he had been a member of in Taraz in Zhambyl Region. He withdrew the suit, then reinstated it, then withdrew it again, and in January 2022 the court closed the case (see below).

Protestants say the National Security Committee (NSC) secret police appear to have encouraged the plaintiff in Pavlodar to lodge the suit. "This not a dispute over labour as the individual never worked for the Church," one Protestant familiar with the case told Forum 18. "It is a clear provocation by state agencies and you can tell that from admissions by the individual himself that the secret police are behind him" (see below).

The plaintiff in Pavlodar met officials of Pavlodar Regional Akimat (Administration) Religious Affairs Department. He also had contact with and support from the head of the state-backed Centre to Support Victims of Destructive Religious Sects in Kostanai, Yuliya Kalyuzhnaya. The Centre gets funding from Kostanai Regional Akimat Religious Affairs Department and other state bodies (see below).

Kalyuzhnaya has contributed to articles published in the local media and by her Centre attacking "the leaders of religious organisations who are parasites on human gullibility". She publicly accused New Life Church of violating the plaintiff's rights (see below).

Another article published by her Centre in August warned parents about the alleged dangers of children being invited to "dubious events" by "pseudo-religious organisations". She refused to identify these organisations to Forum 18. A Protestant described this article as anti-religious "in the spirit of Soviet times" (see below).

Daulet Zakaryanov, head of Pavlodar Regional Akimat Religious Affairs Department, insisted that the state had not encouraged the former church member to bring the suit. "We listened to him, but we don't speak for him," he told Forum 18. "We won't take sides." And he added: "This is not a state campaign against the Church" (see below).

A court in the capital Nur-Sultan considering the suit against the Jehovah's Witness community rejected all the assessments of the plaintiffs' health and of the Jehovah's Witness literature supplied by the respondents and accepted entirely the assessments commissioned by the plaintiffs' lawyer (see below).

One such assessment from an otherwise unknown organisation Media-Group: Psychology, Health and Rights claimed that 27 Jehovah's Witness publications – all of which are legal for distribution in Kazakhstan - contain "hidden commands". Reading them

can foster "the phenomenon of dependency" and "addictive behaviour". The literature has the effect of, among other things, promoting "a certain psycho-corrective work", "suggestion", "neuro-linguistic programming" and "introduction into a state of trance" (see below).

The Media-Group assessment echoes almost word for word statements in a 2019 "expert conclusion" which was found to be plagiarised by as much as 63 per cent from a 2008 Russian analysis (see below).

Among the methodological and reference works the Media-Group assessment cites is a 1983 book on psychiatry by Andrei Snezhnevsky. He was the leading figure in the abuse of psychiatry for political ends in the later Soviet era, developing fake psychiatric diagnoses to abuse political dissidents and human rights defenders, including Vladimir Bukovsky (see below).

Jehovah's Witnesses say they have found no information about any current activities of Media-Group. "This whole situation gives the impression that the Media-Group legal entity was created specifically for the court trial" (see below).

Beimbet Manetov, who represented the Religious Affairs Committee as a third party in court, rejected suggestions that officials had encouraged the mother and son to bring the suits against the Jehovah's Witness community. "We can't say they have the support of the authorities," he told Forum 18 (see below).

Nur-Sultan: Jehovah's Witness literature "cause of social maladjustment and neurotisation of personality"?

In December 2020 and again in February and March 2021, a former Jehovah's Witness sought psychiatric help for what she claimed to be effects of having been a member of the Jehovah's Witness community in Nur-Sultan. Psychiatrists also examined her teenage son.

On 14 May 2021, the woman's lawyer Igor Tskhai asked for an assessment of 9 books and 18 journals published by Jehovah's Witnesses "on the subject of their influence on the personality". Tskhai chose a firm Media-Group: Psychology, Health and Rights, based in Almaty. Media-Group then assigned the assessment to four psychiatrists and psychologists of the Kazakh National Medical University in Almaty, led by Fatima Bagiyarova.

All of the 27 publications which were produced after 2011 have successfully passed through the state's compulsory prior censorship of all religious literature published in or imported into the country. None has been banned.

Among the questions Tskhai put were:

- "Is it possible for the phenomenon of dependency to emerge among Jehovah's Witness members from regular reading of the literature presented?"
- "Are psychological disorders or an exacerbation of psychiatric illnesses possible on studying the literature presented?"
- "What techniques of psychological influence are used in the religious literature and how is this expressed in the literature (with examples)?"

Media-Group's 40-page assessment – completed on 1 July 2021 – claims to have found that a study of these Jehovah's Witness publications leads to a "change to some particularities of the personality, consciousness, sub-consciousness and conduct", including the "modification of mood" and "in all, the destruction of the personal construction and could become the cause of social maladjustment and neurotisation of the personality".

Reading these Jehovah's Witness publications and attending meetings where they are discussed, Media-Group's assessment claims – is a "highly structured process .. with various methods of psychological and psycho-therapeutic influence on the addressees with the help of the techniques 'provoking cognitive dissonance', 'Hypnotic trance', 'neuro-linguistic reframing', 'simulation', and 'informational overload'".

The repetition of the same ideas in Jehovah's Witness books, and the publication of "Watchtower" magazine monthly is, the assessment claims, a deliberate attempt to foster "the phenomenon of dependency" and "addictive behaviour". The literature has the effect of, among other things, promoting "a certain psycho-corrective work", "suggestion", "neuro-linguistic programming" and "introduction into a state of trance". The literature contained "hidden commands".

The claims in the Media-Group's assessment often repeat verbatim claims in other "expert analyses" of Jehovah's Witness literature, such as those conducted by the Almaty branch of the Justice Ministry's "Centre for Judicial Expert Analysis" in June 2019 for a similar case against the Nur-Sultan and Taraz Jehovah's Witness communities. As much as 63 per cent of that analysis was found to have been plagiarised from a 2008 analysis produced in Russia (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2686) (where Jehovah's Witnesses have since been banned and many jailed (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2747)).

Among the methodological and reference works the Media-Group assessment cites is a 1983 book on psychiatry by Andrei Snezhnevsky, director of the Institute of Psychiatry of the USSR Academy of Medical Sciences from 1962 until his death in 1987.

Snezhnevsky was the leading figure in the abuse of psychiatry for political ends in the later Soviet era (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Andrei_Snezhnevsky), developing fake psychiatric diagnoses to abuse political dissidents and human rights defenders, including Vladimir Bukovsky. He also "diagnosed" in absentia the writer Joseph Brodsky and the physicist and human rights defender Andrei Sakharov as suffering from his invented diagnosis of "sluggish schizophrenia".

Another work the assessment cites is a 2021 conference paper by Andrei Morozov, a historian who works for the Russian Interior Ministry Academy in Omsk, on "Religion and personality in the circles of danger".

Bagiyarova, one of the four who prepared and signed the Media-Group assessment, insisted that not all readers of these Jehovah's Witness publications would suffer the impact she and her colleagues claim to have discovered. "It all depends on the person," she told Forum 18 on 17 August. "When people smoke or drink, some become dependent and some don't."

Asked whether regular attendance at a mosque or Russian Orthodox Church and reading of their literature might lead to the dependency she and her colleagues claimed to find among Jehovah's Witnesses, Bagiyarova did not respond.

Asked whether she and her colleagues believe the Jehovah's Witness publications should be banned if they have the serious impact on readers they claim they have, Bagiyarova responded: "It is not our decision to ban literature or not."

Asked why those who had written the assessment had not provided their passport details and qualifications to conduct "expert analyses" to use in court cases, Bagiyarova responded that she and her colleagues were engaged by the lawyer not as "official judicial experts" but as "independent experts" and were thus not required to supply these.

The lawyer Tskhai refused to explain why he chose Media-Group to conduct the assessment of the Jehovah's Witness literature. "I wasn't looking for any particular conclusion," he told Forum 18 on 17 August. "We were seeking the cause of my client's illness."

A legal expert, who has looked at freedom of religion or belief issues and who has read the Media-Group assessment, expressed concern. "I am not an expert, but it seems to me that all these conclusions could be attributed - if you try - to any literature," the legal expert told Forum 18 on 19 August. "The experts don't care at all about the context, that these are religious texts." The legal expert also expressed concern that the assessment for use in the court case had been provided by an individual entrepreneur.

Media-Group created specifically for court trial?

Media-Group: Psychology, Health and Rights appears to have been set up as an individual entrepreneurship by a lecturer at Al-Farabi Kazakh National University, Aynur Urisbayeva. The website listed on the assessment does not appear ever to have existed and almost no mention of the group appears in web searches in Kazakh or Russian.

Forum 18's calls and messages to Urisbayeva between 16 and 19 August went unanswered.

Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18 that Media-Group was registered on 25 December 2020, two weeks after the plaintiff first applied to the Republican Scientific and Practical Centre for Mental Health. "And less than five months later, this individual entrepreneurship received a request for a conclusion on literature."

Jehovah's Witnesses said they have found no information about any current activities of Media-Group. "This whole situation gives the impression that the Media-Group legal entity was created specifically for the court trial."

Nur-Sultan: Suit against Jehovah's Witness community

On 8 December 2021, the former Jehovah's Witness and her 17-year-old son lodged a civil suit against the Jehovah's Witness community in Nur-Sultan, of which they had been members. The case was lodged in the city's Saryarka District Court, where it was initially assigned to Judge Bekmukhammed Adilkhanov. Judge Aliya Kasymova later took over the case, despite the fact that she had already been involved in the case at the mediation stage.

The mother and son sought "moral compensation" of 20,000,000 Tenge (411,000 Norwegian Kroner, 42,000 Euros or 42,000 US Dollars) in total, in addition to legal and medical expenses, for alleged damage to their psychological and psychiatric health during the time that they were Jehovah's Witnesses (9 years and 4 years respectively).

"This claim is also almost identical to those of Abishov-Khvan in Nur-Sultan and the Bekbembetovs in Taraz (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2686)," Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18. "The woman and her son are represented by the same lawyers who participated in the Abishov-Khvan case."

The court also involved the Information and Social Development Ministry's Religious Affairs Committee as a third party. The head of the Committee's Legal Department, Beimbet Manetov, represented it in court.

Judge Kasymova found against the Jehovah's Witness community in a 20 June decision, seen by Forum 18. Citing "expert analyses" of the mother and son, her decision attributes the psychological conditions of the two to their attendance at Jehovah's Witness meetings and reading of Jehovah's Witness literature. She rejected expert analyses undertaken by psychiatrists on behalf of the defence which disputed these findings.

Judge Kasymova copies in her decision without question many of the conclusions of the July 2021 Media-Group assessment of the Jehovah's Witness publications. The decision mentions an assessment the Jehovah's Witnesses commissioned of the same publications, which did not find any "techniques of psychological influence" on readers. However, the Judge dismissed this also.

One reason Judge Kasymova gave was that the assessment commissioned by the Jehovah's Witness community had been done on electronic versions of the same books, not on the copies of the books held with the case materials, even though they were identical.

Judge Kasymova ordered the Jehovah's Witness community to pay the mother and son 2,250,000 Tenge each in "compensation for moral harm", as well as fees of 1,459 Tenge for each. She also ordered it to pay a total of 953,971 Tenge for the plaintiffs' defence and for the "expert analyses".

The Jehovah's Witness community lodged its appeal against the decision to Nur-Sultan City Court on 2 August, according to court records. A hearing is due on 23 August.

Nur-Sultan: "Strong reasons to believe that the court is biased"

The lawyer Igor Tskhai rejected suggestions that the suit had been brought as part of a campaign that included his involvement in the similar 2020 suit in Nur-Sultan against the Jehovah's Witness community. "They suffered – this is not my conclusion but the conclusion of specialists," he told Forum 18 on 17 August. "I'm not against anyone." He declined to discuss any other aspects of the case without permission from his clients.

Beimbet Manetov, who represented the Religious Affairs Committee in court, rejected suggestions that officials had encouraged the mother and son to bring the suits against the Jehovah's Witness community. "We can't say they have the support of the authorities," he told Forum 18 from Nur-Sultan on 19 August.

Manetov said it would not be appropriate for a state official to comment on a court decision. "If the religious community is unhappy with the decision, it has the right to appeal."

Asked whether he had seen the Media-Group assessment of 27 Jehovah's Witness publications which the court had accepted, and whether the Religious Affairs Committee agrees with its claims, Manetov responded: "I am familiar with the case materials." However he declined to discuss whether he agreed with the claims that the literature, for example, leads readers into a "hypnotic trance" and declined to say whether the Religious Affairs Committee is considering banning any of them.

Jehovah's Witnesses reject the 20 June court decision, pointing out what they saw as questionable decisions by the Judge. "There are strong reasons to believe that the court is biased against the religious association," they told Forum 18.

Jehovah's Witnesses said the Judge had accepted the plaintiffs' motion to have several of the community's lawyers who were from Ukraine removed from the case. They said the plaintiffs failed to appear for a psychiatric examination at the Forensic Institute of Almaty ordered in January by the first Judge. The court refused the respondent's application to cross examine the plaintiffs, ruling that their lawyer Tskhai could answer all questions on their behalf.

"The essence of the claim is to establish causation of 'moral harm', which is inextricably linked with demonstrating actual suffering and distress," Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18. "The extent of such alleged suffering cannot be established and objectively evaluated in any other way than through the personal testimony of the plaintiffs."

Pavlodar: Suit against New Life Church

A former member of New Life Church in Aksu in Pavlodar Region lodged a suit in court against New Life Church in the regional capital Pavlodar on 11 July 2022. Aksu is 40 kms (25 miles) by road from Pavlodar. The individual had worked as a volunteer at a rehabilitation centre for alcoholics and drug addicts on the property in Aksu of Pastor Vyacheslav Shipachev.

The individual claimed he had not been given a work contract or paid proper wages for work done in Aksu between 2009 and 2022, and demanded "moral damages".

Pavlodar City Court accepted his suit on 20 July 2022, according to case documents seen by Forum 18. The case is being heard by

Judge Aliya Asanova. On 12 August, the Judge included the Regional Akimat (Administration) Religious Affairs Department as a third party in the case.

The Church lodged numerous motions to the Court in early August, arguing that the suit had not been brought within the one year deadline, that the individual had never worked for New Life Church in Pavlodar, and presenting the names of church members who could testify to that. The Church's lawyer also asked for the plaintiff to be required to pay legal costs so far generated.

On 8 August, once the suit was in court, the former Aksu church member reduced his demand for unpaid wages from 13 years to 3 years.

The Church says the individual signed an agreement each year as a volunteer and provided a copy of the agreement for 2014. It added that if the individual has any complaints, they should be brought against Pastor Shipachev.

The Church's lawyer also rejected the individual's claims that the Church had put pressure on him despite his disability. "The emergence of illness in the plaintiff is not at all connected with the respondent and any work for the respondent, and no manipulation and psychological pressure was put on the plaintiff by workers of the respondent or anyone else from the church."

Pavlodar: "This is not a state campaign against the Church"?

The former Aksu church member had support from the state-backed Centre to Support Victims of Destructive Religious Sects in Kostanai, whose president is a police colonel. This is one of numerous such centres to receive state grants (see below).

Daulet Zakaryanov, head of the Regional Akimat (Administration) Religious Affairs Department, insisted that the state had not encouraged the former Aksu church member to bring the suit. "We listened to him, but we don't speak for him," Zakaryanov told Forum 18 from Pavlodar on 16 August. "We won't take sides."

Zakaryanov told Forum 18 that he had been surprised when the Judge added his Department as a third party in the case. He sent one of his officials to represent the Committee in court.

Asked about how often religious communities in his Region use volunteers in their work, Zakaryanov responded: "This often happens. There are dozens of cases here where volunteers have built mosques and churches. Even Christians have volunteered to help build mosques."

Zakaryanov insists that the case is not about faith, but entirely about a dispute over labour. He claimed to be unaware of materials about the case in the local media – most of them deriving from the state-backed Centre to Support Victims of Destructive Religious Sects in Kostanai – which make serious allegations against New Life Church. "This is not a state campaign against the Church. I have no complaints against it."

One Protestant familiar with the case strongly disagrees, noting that the National Security Committee (NSC) secret police appear to have encouraged the individual to lodge the suit. "This not a dispute over labour as the individual never worked for the Church," the Protestant told Forum 18. "It is a clear provocation by state agencies and you can tell that from admissions by the individual himself that the secret police are behind him."

Beimbet Manetov, the head of the Legal Department at the Information and Social Development Ministry's Religious Affairs Committee in the capital Nur-Sultan, said the Pavlodar court has not invited the Committee to be involved in the case. Asked whether the support the former Aksu church member had from the state-backed Centre and reports that the NSC secret police had encouraged him meant that the state supported the suit, he declined to comment on the case.

"Parasites on human gullibility"?

An article on Kostanaiskie Novosti news website on 4 August, reposted on the Centre's own website Stop-Sekta.kz the following day, described what it called the former Aksu church member's "work slavery" at the hands of New Life Church, which it claimed was a common phenomenon. "The majority of people try to preserve their anonymity," the article claimed, "but there are others wanting to punish the leaders of religious organisations who are parasites on human gullibility."

The article claimed the former church member worked on rebuilding a church-run rehabilitation centre for alcoholics and drug addicts with very little pay (of which he was expected to pay a tithe). It said the centre was later closed and sold. At the same time, it alleged, the Church's leaders "lived an idle lifestyle". It claimed this affected not only the church member's income, but his health, both physically and psychologically.

Yuliya Kalyuzhnaya, the head of the Centre, said the former New Life Church member had approached her Centre "like anyone else". "He found our website, told us his story and asked us for help," she told Forum 18 on 18 August. She accused New Life Church of violating the individual's human rights by "exploiting him all these years".

Kalyuzhnaya added: "There are many such cases of people who have left religious organisations and seek psychological help from us." She refused to identify any religious organisations whose former members she has had contact with.

Anti-religious article "in the spirit of Soviet times"

Among other recent anti-religious materials published by the state-backed Centre to Support Victims of Destructive Religious Sects in Kostanai was an article from 13 August. It warned parents about the alleged dangers of children being invited to "dubious events" by "pseudo-religious organisations".

The article – which cites Yuliya Kalyuzhnaya from the Centre – also refers to the suit against Pavlodar's New Life Church.

One Protestant described the article to Forum 18 as anti-religious and "in the spirit of Soviet times". The Protestant noted that the organisations described as "pseudo-religious" have state registration as religious organisations. "The main thrust of the article is negative and insulting, discredits religious organisations, and draws on xenophobia," the Protestant told Forum 18 on 18 August. "Its main point is that religious organisations should not be allowed to work with young people."

State-backed anti-"sect" Centre

The state-backed Centre to Support Victims of Destructive Religious Sects in Kostanai is part of the Kostanai Region Association of Psychologists. The Centre has received grants directly from the state in previous years. More recent state grants have been channelled through the Association of Psychologists, with the projects managed by Yuliya Kalyuzhnaya, the head of the Centre.

Such state-funded "anti-sect centres" have long been used to encourage hostility against the exercise of freedom of religion and belief (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1568), including by churches such as New Life.

Among recent state grants to the Kostanai Centre was one on 15 June from the Internal Policy Department of Kamysty District Akimat (Administration) for 660,000 Tenge to conduct events on "raising the population's informational literacy on the activity of contemporary religious movements", according to the contract seen by Forum 18.

On 26 May, a state grant was agreed with the Religious Affairs Department of Kostanai Region for funding of 2,200,000 Tenge for "organising the activity of the Centre to Support Victims of Destructive Religious Sects", according to the contract seen by Forum 18. The contract was agreed by the Religious Affairs Department head, Zhanbolat Umbetov.

Asked on 19 August what the Religious Affairs Department expects the Centre to do with the state grant and why it gives taxpayers' money to an organisation that some religious communities say issues material publicly that insults them, Umbetov responded: "They have their defined work and lots of experience. People apply to them for help after suffering from pseudo-religious organisations, who conduct activity illegally. People are deceived by them."

Asked who these "pseudo-religious organisations" are, Umbetov said Forum 18 would have to ask the Centre. Told that Kalyuzhnaya had refused to identify them either, he repeated his comment.

Asked why tax-payers' money was used to support a Centre that produces material that one Protestant described as anti-religious and "in the spirit of Soviet times", Umbetov responded: "It's a very small amount of money, and she had to win a state tender."

Umbetov insists that he has no problem with New Life Church. "We work with the Church and have signed agreements with it."

Taraz: Suit against Jehovah's Witness community withdrawn

In November 2021, a former Jehovah's Witness filed a civil suit against the community he had been a member of in Taraz in Zhambyl Region. He claimed that his religious rights had been violated when he was, as he claimed, wrongfully expelled from a local congregation. He demanded moral compensation for the damage that allegedly caused.

The claimant lodged the suit at Taraz City Court on 13 November 2021, but the same day asked to withdraw it. The court returned the documents and closed the case on 15 November 2021, according to the decision seen by Forum 18. The claimant initiated a new civil case on 23 November 2021. However, the claimant's representative then asked to withdraw the suit and asked Taraz City Court to consider this in the claimant's absence. On 21 January 2022, the court closed the case, according to the court decision seen by Forum 18.

On 25 February, Taraz City Court refused to grant the Jehovah's Witness community's request to recover legal costs of 210,000 Tenge from the claimant, according to the court decision seen by Forum 18.

Earlier suits against religious communities

In two virtually identical civil cases, in Nur-Sultan in 2020 and Taraz in 2021 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2686), courts partially satisfied claims brought by former members against two different Jehovah's Witness communities. The claimants in both of these cases were the co-founders of the social fund Terra Libera, the openly-stated aim of which is to liquidate the organisation of Jehovah's Witnesses in Kazakhstan.

"The courts concluded, in effect, that a local religious organisation is responsible for consequences stemming from an individual's voluntary choice of religion and religious activities," Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18.

In a third case, a couple brought a case against the Jehovah's Witness community in Almaty using some of the materials used in the other cases. In May 2021, the claimants filed a request to withdraw the claim (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2686), owing to a psychological and psychiatric forensic expert study unfavourable to their case.

Three self-exiled Protestant pastors were given long jail terms in absentia for leading New Life Pentecostal Church in Almaty. They lost their appeal at Almaty City Court in November 2019 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2521). The NSC secret police were heavily involved in bringing the case.

The pastors were variously accused of founding the Church in 1991 with "criminal intent", and "by means of the technology of psychological and psychotherapeutic influence with the aim of causing psychological harm to the health and stealing others' property by means of deception and abuse of trust .. with the use of information technologies and methods of turning the victims into a state of changed consciousness (trance)".

At one point police accused the church of storing weapons. This charge was dropped as the only such item confiscated was an aerosol spray gun freely available on the internet.

In the case of one of the nine "victims", the three pastors were accused of harming her health from six months before she was born and when one of the three pastors was only just 17 years old.

Ban on one-person protest against "anti-sect" centre "a violation"

In December 2014, Karaganda-based psychologist Nina Erkeyeva asked permission from the city administration to hold a one-person protest on the street outside the newly-established, state-backed Viktoriya Rehabilitation Centre. Erkeyeva had seen a billboard advertising the centre promising help for victims of "negative religious influence". She regarded the advertisement as an insult and wanted to support "freedom of religion and conscience as important components of building a democratic society".

The administration rejected Erkeyeva's request, citing an earlier municipal order banning protests in the city centre while allowing officially-organised events there. She challenged the rejection through local courts but failed to overturn it.

In October 2016, Erkeyeva lodged a complaint to the United Nations (UN) Human Rights Committee. She argued that, by refusing her protest against the content of Viktoriya Rehabilitation Centre's billboard, the city authorities had violated her right to freedom of expression and discriminated against individuals who were not government officials.

In a decision made public on 8 August (CCPR/C/134/D/2864/2016 (https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CCPR%2FC%2F134%2FD%2F2752%2F2016&Lang=en)), the Human Rights Committee found that Kazakhstan had violated Erkeyeva's rights. (END)

More reports on freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Kazakhstan (<https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?country=29>)

For background information, see Forum 18's Kazakhstan freedom of religion or belief survey (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2753)

Forum 18's compilation of Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) freedom of religion or belief commitments (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1351)

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