

DEFENDING AND PROMOTING
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Journalist and human rights activist Sergei Duvanov released on probation

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(RSF/IFEX) - Journalist and human rights activist Sergei Duvanov was released on probation on 15 January 2004. He had been imprisoned since October 2002. Duvanov was released following a 29 December 2003 court ruling allowing him to return to his home in Almaty and resume his job at the International Bureau of Human Rights.

RSF has welcomed this easing of the journalist's sentence but does not believe his guilt has ever been proven. The organisation believes the verdict was political.

Duvanov, editor-in-chief of the newsletter "Human Rights in Kazakhstan and the World", published by the International Bureau of Human Rights, was serving a three-and-a-half-year jail sentence for alleged rape of a minor.

He was arrested on 28 October 2002 and sentenced by an Almaty court on 28 January 2003 after an investigation and trial that were riddled with irregularities. The Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), which sent experts to the trial, reported that the rights of the defence were violated and the journalist's guilt had not been established.

Duvanov was held in the Zarechnoye penitential colony, near Almaty. His prison conditions deteriorated between July and September 2003. His notebooks and pens were confiscated, he stopped receiving parcels and letters from the outside world, his own letters did not arrive and he did not have use of a telephone, officially for technical reasons. On 5 September, the prison authorities refused to allow a member of Duvanov's family to visit him.

The day after he was accused, the journalist had been preparing to leave for the United States to present a report on democracy and human rights in Kazakhstan. He is reputed to be one of the country's most critical journalists towards the authorities. Duvanov frequently spoke out against harassment of the independent media and the opposition in the past, and is still facing legal action for "attacking the honour and dignity of President Nursultan Nazarbayev". He was badly beaten up by thugs on 28 August 2002 (see IFEX alert of 30 August 2002).