



Briefing paper for visit of President of the European Council, Charles Michel to Central Asia, in October 2022: Key human rights concerns

This briefing paper summarises concerns regarding serious human rights violations reported in connection with recent major crises in Central Asia, as well as excessive restrictions on civil society space and persecution of government critics across the region. The paper also provides recommendations on these issues and links to additional information. It is submitted by International Partnership for Human Rights (IPHR), Kazakhstan International Bureau for Human Rights and Rule of Law (KIBHR), the Association for Human Rights in Central Asia (AHRCA) and Turkmen Initiative for Human Rights (TIHR).

Serious violations related to recent major crises erupting in Central Asia

Under circumstances that remain unclear, peaceful mass protests against government policies evolved into violence and clashes between security forces and protesters in Kazakhstan, the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Region (GBAO) in Tajikistan and the Republic of Karakalpakstan in Uzbekistan earlier this year, resulting in significant loss of lives and other casualties. The authorities of the respective countries took harsh measures to end the protests and unrest, with allegations of the excessive use of force, arbitrary detentions, torture and ill-treatment, extrajudicial killings, due process violations and other abuses characterising their responses. There is a pressing need to ensure that alleged violations are investigated in an impartial and effective manner and that those responsible are held accountable. It would also be important to ensure an international, independent investigation into the recent hostilities at the border between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, which claimed dozens of lives and had a devastating impact on the lives of local communities.

January 2022 events in Kazakhstan

Thousands of people across Kazakhstan took to the streets to peacefully call for social and political change in January 2022. Under circumstances that have yet to be clarified, the protests evolved into unrest and clashes between security forces and people in the crowd, with over 230 people killed and several thousand injured.

There are serious concerns that the authorities branded protesters as “terrorists” in a sweeping fashion without making a clear distinction between those who used violence and those who did not and that they used excessive force, including lethal force against peaceful protesters and passers-by. Many of those around 10,000 people who were detained in connection with the January events are believed to have been rounded up when protesting peacefully, and there have been widespread allegations of

torture and ill-treatment, denial of prompt access to legal assistance and other violations of the rights of detainees. According to official information, at least six people died in detention due to torture. Among the hundreds of people who have been criminally charged in relation to the January events are protesters and activists believed to have been prosecuted merely for peacefully exercising their freedoms of peaceful assembly, association and expression. Trials in cases involving those charged over the January events have been marred by allegations of procedural violations and confessions obtained under duress.

During the January events, the authorities also severely restricted internet access in the country, with a nation-wide internet shutdown lasting for several days, and journalists covering the events were harassed and attacked, including by security forces.

The authorities have pledged to investigate the January events and reported violations. However, the investigative measures taken by the authorities have lacked transparency, impartiality and effectiveness. For example, the government refused to publish the names of those who were killed for several months and when it finally published an official list of the victims in August 2022, it failed to provide any details about the victims and the nature of their deaths, thus leaving it unclear how they were killed. The authorities have also not provided any information about ongoing investigations into allegations of the excessive use of lethal force by security officials and no official is known to have been detained in this context.

Moreover, while the authorities have opened investigations into over 300 complaints about torture and ill-treatment related to the January events, the NGO Coalition against Torture has flagged concerns that these investigations have not met international standards, that victims have not been afforded adequate protection and that many investigations have been prematurely closed. Only around 20 law enforcement officials are currently under investigation on allegations of the use of torture in connection with the January events, with five officials on trial in the city of Taldykorgan in the first court case of this kind. The NGO Coalition against Torture and KIBHR, which have monitored these proceedings, have reported procedural violations, with a particular concern being that the victims of torture have been made to bear the burden of proof despite the existing material evidence that they were tortured. The real number of cases of torture is believed to be much higher than the number of complaints submitted as many victims have been reluctant to report their experiences due to the lack of confidence in the prospects of obtaining justice and fear of repercussions. There are credible reports indicating that victims sometimes have been pressured to withdraw torture complaints in exchange for facing lesser punishment on criminal charges initiated against them in relation to the January events.

In September 2022, President Tokayev announced plans to implement an amnesty for those charged with participation in the January events, with the exception of those facing the most serious charges. It remains unclear how the amnesty will be implemented and whom all it will affect. However, a draft amnesty law, which parliament started considering in mid-October 2022, gave rise to concerns that the amnesty will be selectively implemented. As [pointed out](#) by KIBHR, it is of particular concern that those charged with participation in riots and other offenses often used against civil society activists will not be eligible for amnesty. At the same time, the amnesty will apply to law enforcement officials charged with wrongdoing other than torture, thereby allowing them to escape responsibility.

GBAO events in Tajikistan

Mass protests took place in the GBAO in Tajikistan in November 2021 and again in May 2022. Protesters demanded justice for a local resident who was fatally wounded during a police operation and also voiced broader concerns about the central government's policies in the region. The authorities responded by reportedly using excessive force, including lethal force to put down the protests, which were mostly peaceful, although some protesters resorted to violence. The authorities also carried out so-called 'anti-terrorist' operations in the region marred by allegations of arbitrary detentions, as well as torture, ill-treatment and extrajudicial killings of detainees. In addition, they imposed region-wide weeks-long internet shutdowns.

According to information from non-state sources, over 40 civilians have been killed during the recent special operations in the GBAO and many more wounded. Hundreds of people have been detained and dozens charged, convicted and imprisoned following unfair trials on charges such as alleged attacks on state officials, hooliganism, and illegal possession of arms. Among those who have been prosecuted and imprisoned are human rights defenders and journalists who have criticised the government's repressive policies in GBAO and its crackdown on protesters there. There are also concerns that people originating from the GBAO have been forcibly returned to Tajikistan and subsequently prosecuted.

The authorities have failed to impartially, and effectively investigate the events and reported violations in the GBAO. Following the November 2021 events, a group of 44 representatives of civil society and local government bodies, called Commission 44, was established to investigate these events. However, Commission 44 representatives repeatedly criticized the national authorities for obstructing a thorough and transparent joint investigation. Moreover, several civil society members of the Commission 44 were detained and prosecuted following the May 2022 protests (see more in the next section).

Karakalpakstan events

Thousands of people gathered in the Republic of Karakalpakstan in western Uzbekistan on 1-2 July 2022 to peacefully protest against proposed constitutional amendments, which would have deprived the republic of its autonomous status and its right to secede from Uzbekistan. According to available information, the authorities used force to disperse protesters in the capital Nukus and other cities in the republic, using methods such as water cannon, rubber bullets, stun grenades and smoke bombs, and clashes between police and demonstrators were reported. Videos circulating on social media showed numerous people, who appear to be dead or badly injured lying on the pavement. According to [official information](#) provided later, 21 people died and over 270 required medical assistance in connection with the protests. At the time of writing the authorities have not made public the names of those killed nor details about the circumstances under which they died. Civil society representatives believe that the casualties of the recent events are higher than the official figures suggest.

The authorities depicted the events as an attempt to seize power in Karakalpakstan and accused protesters of seeking to storm government buildings. They imposed a month-long state of emergency in the republic and suspended internet access, thereby restricting access to information. More than 500 people were detained in connection with the protests. While many of them were released after being subjected to administrative penalties, some faced criminal charges for allegedly infringing on the constitutional order and other offenses. Among those detained and charged in connection with the protests are well-known journalists, bloggers and activists from the region, who publicly criticised the proposed constitutional amendments and are accused of playing leading roles in the protests.

IPHR, AHRCA and partners have [expressed](#) serious concerns about credible reports of excessive use of force, arbitrary detentions, and torture and ill-treatment of detainees in connection with the measures taken to put down the protests in the Republic of Karakalpakstan. There are also unconfirmed reports indicating that some of those detained were extrajudicially killed. There is a pressing need for the authorities to impartially and thoroughly investigate all allegations of human rights violations related to the mass protests and to ensure accountability for them.

Hostilities at the Kyrgyzstan-Tajikistan border

As a result of the hostilities, which took place at the largely non-demarcated border between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan in September 2022, dozens of people were killed, hundreds injured and thousands forced to be evacuated from their homes. Widespread damage to both public and residential buildings were also reported. Kyrgyzstan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs [described](#) the events at the border as "a pre-meditated military aggression" by Tajikistan against Kyrgyzstan and stated that the latter "acted exclusively from a defensive position". Tajikistan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs again [accused](#) Kyrgyzstan of starting the violence. As tensions remain high, and there is risk of renewed violence, it would be important that an international, independent investigation is conducted into the recent events with a view to assessing what happened, the role of different actors and measures needed to ensure justice for victims and protect communities living in the areas close to the border. This is instrumental to facilitating reconciliation in the longer term.

Recommendations:

We urge the EU to raise serious concerns about the human rights violations reported in relation to the governments' responses to the recent mass protests in Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan and to call on the authorities of the respective countries to:

- Ensure **independent, transparent and effective investigations into the recent events and all alleged human rights violations**, including allegations of the use of excessive force, arbitrary detentions, torture and ill-treatment, extrajudicial killings, due process and fair trial violations and other violations.
- Carry out the investigations in accordance with the governments' international human rights obligations with a view to holding accountable all those responsible for violations and providing redress for victims.
- Involve national and international experts in the investigations, cooperate with civil society on them, and make the findings public.
- Release individuals who are currently in detention on charges initiated because of their peaceful exercise of the freedoms of assembly, association and expression in connection with the recent events in Kazakhstan, the GBAO in Tajikistan and the Republic of Karakalpakstan in Uzbekistan.

In addition, we urge the EU to call for an international, independent investigation into the recent hostilities at the Kyrgyzstan-Tajikistan border, including any allegations of violations of international humanitarian or human rights law by actors involved in the hostilities.

Excessive restrictions on space for civil society participation and persecution of critics

Across Central Asia, excessive restrictions on the freedoms of expression, association and assembly are in place and those who criticise the authorities and stand up for justice, human rights and the rule of law are subjected to persecution. Criminal cases against journalists, bloggers, activists and other outspoken individuals on politically motivated grounds are of particular concern, including cases initiated in the context of the recent crises in the region described in the previous section. Current key concerns and case examples for each of the five countries are described below.

Kazakhstan

While President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev initiated a process aimed at political modernization following the January 2022 events, this initiative has been undermined by ongoing persecution of critics and opponents of the government, and there are fears that pressure on dissent voices might further increase ahead of the early presidential elections on 20 November 2022.

Dozens of civil society and opposition activists were among those detained in connection with the January 2022 events in Kazakhstan, and some of them subsequently faced criminal charges in apparent retaliation for their civic, human rights and pro-democratic engagement. According to human rights groups, at least 30 activists have been charged with participating in riots (under article 272 of the Criminal Code) and other criminal offences despite the lack of any evidence of their involvement in violent, unlawful actions during the January protests. In several cases, activists have been charged with “knowingly spreading false information” under a vaguely worded provision of the Criminal Code (article 274) which has increasingly been used to stifle legitimate free speech.

The most high-profile activist case related to the January events is that of opposition Democratic Party leader **Zhanbolat Mamai**. He is facing charges of organising riots and spreading false information during these events, although he only peacefully protested and called for political and social change. These charges came on top of earlier spurious charges initiated against him. He has been held in pre-trial detention since March 2022, with his arrest most recently having been prolonged until 12 November 2022. IPHR, KIBHR and other human rights groups have denounced the case against Mamai as politically motivated retaliation for his opposition activities and his criticism of the authorities and have called for his release. A delegation of Members of the European Parliament’s DROI Committee, who visited Kazakhstan in August 2022, also [called](#) for his release.

While Mamai and many other activists charged because of their alleged role in the January events are still awaiting trial, other activists have already been tried and convicted on such charges. Several of them have received prison sentences. For example, in June 2022, a local court in Shymkent convicted civil society activists **Lyazzat Dosmambetova**, **Zhanmurat Ashtaev** and **Kairat Sultanbek** of participating in riots during the January events, although the prosecution failed to provide any compelling evidence to support these charges, and the activists insisted that they only peacefully protested. They were all given three-year prison sentences; however, on appeal, Dosmambetova’s sentence was postponed for two years because she has a young son and she was therefore conditionally released for this period.

There are serious concerns that these and other activists who have been charged in relation to the January events [will not be eligible](#) for amnesty as the draft amnesty law, which is now under

consideration in parliament, does not apply to those charged with participation in riots and other charges often used against activists.

Also, outside the context of the January events, journalists, bloggers and activists critical of the authorities continue to be face intimidation and harassment ranging from threats and surveillance to detention and prosecution on politically motivated charges. Recently several independent media outlets have been subjected to acts of intimidation carried out by unknown perpetrators. While hailing a law on assemblies adopted in 2020 as progressive, the authorities continue to selectively deny permission for peaceful assemblies on issues that are inconvenient to those in power, and regularly disperse and detain participants in peaceful protests organised without required pre-approval. Political opposition groups also face pressure, including obstruction with respect to obtaining state registration.

Kyrgyzstan

The climate for free speech has recently deteriorated in Kyrgyzstan and the authorities have increasingly sought to suppress criticism and prevent discussion on issues of public interest. This trend has been reinforced since President Sadyr Japarov's rise to power following mass post-election protests in October 2020 and the adoption of a controversial new constitution, which significantly expanded the president's powers while weakening checks and balances.

It is of particular concern that the authorities have exploited the fight against disinformation to stifle legitimate free speech. A new law on the protection against "false" information adopted last year grants the government discretionary powers to order the blocking of web resources based on any complaints received about the alleged inaccuracy and offensiveness of information posted on these resources. The law has already been used to initiate the blocking of some new sites, and law enforcement authorities have stepped up efforts to track down "provocative" information on social media, summoning, questioning and warning social media users. There are also [concerns](#) that a new draft media law, currently under discussion, might result in further undue restrictions on access to online information. Among others, it requires all online information resources to register with the authorities, while using vague wording regarding the grounds on which registration might be denied.

Journalists, bloggers, civil society activists, lawyers and others who criticise the authorities and speak out on corruption and other sensitive issues have faced increasing intimidation and harassment, ranging from online threats to criminal prosecution in apparent retaliation for their activities. Several journalist and bloggers have recently come under investigation because of social media posts deemed to feature "incorrect" information and have faced charges under broadly worded criminal code provisions, which prohibit incitement to hatred and calls for disobedience to the authorities and riots. For example, in September 2022, Next TV's director **Taalaibek Duishenbiev** was convicted on incitement charges merely for re-posting controversial comments on Kyrgyzstan's policy vis-à-vis Russia's military aggression in Ukraine, with the court placing him under probation for three years. Blogger **Yrys Zhekshenaliev** was arrested in August 2022 for allegedly spreading "incorrect" information regarding the government's plans for the Jetim-Too iron ore field after publishing an old video appeal by a political rival of the president. His arrest came the same day as the president called for law enforcement action to "bring order" among those who he said spreads "lies" about Jetim-Too. The activist is currently in pre-trial detention on charges of calling for disobedience and riots.

Journalist **Bolot Temirov** was recently acquitted and released from penalty on a set of charges initiated against him following the publication of high-level corruption investigations. This was a relief, but he

remains at risk because of his anti-corruption work. In early October 2022, human rights defender **Kamil Ruziev** was convicted and fined on spurious charges initiated against him in retaliation for his work. This unfair decision should be overturned and he should be allowed to carry out his work without hindrance.

In a further worrying development, on 23 October 2022, police **arrested** more than 20 civil society activists, human rights defenders and opposition politicians, who have criticised a proposal to hand over the territory of the Kempir-Abad water reservoir to Uzbekistan as part of a draft border demarcation agreement under consideration. They were accused of preparing to organise riots. This development came the day after President Japarov **called** opponents of the border agreement “provocateurs”, which reinforced concerns that those arrested were targeted for speaking out on this issue.

Since March 2022, a court-sanctioned ban on holding peaceful protests outside the Russian embassy and at other central locations has been in force in the capital, Bishkek, although it is inconsistent with both national and international standards protecting the right to peacefully assemble. On several occasions, law enforcement authorities have used it to justify detentions of peaceful protesters demonstrating against Russia’s actions in Ukraine and elsewhere.

Following the adoption of a new unjustified and discriminatory financial reporting scheme for NGOs last year, there are concerns that additional restrictions on NGO activities might follow. Some decision-makers and their supporters have advocated for adopting legislation to designate foreign funded NGOs and media as “foreign agents”, and calls have been made for the closure of leading independent media outlets accused of being “Western propagandists”, with **threats of violence** being targeted against such outlets at a recent rally in Bishkek.

Tajikistan

In connection with the recent events in the GBAO, the Tajikistani authorities have launched a widening crackdown on dissenting voices and civil society, targeting in particular those who have prominently criticised the authorities’ actions in the GBAO. A number of journalists and human rights activists have been detained and criminally prosecuted in this context. As the trials recently started in several of these cases, IPHR and its partners **expressed serious concerns** about the non-transparent and politically motivated nature of them, with proceedings taking place behind closed doors and being marred by serious allegations of the lack of access to lawyers, torture and ill-treatment and other violations.

Among those who are currently on trial and face potentially long prison sentences are **Manuchehr Kholiknazarov**, Director of the Pamir Lawyers’ Association, and several other civil society members of the Commission 44 set up to investigate the November 2021 events in the GBAO (see more in the previous section), whose trial began on 20 September 2022 behind closed doors at the Supreme Court in Dushanbe. They are believed to face charges of participation in a banned “extremist” group. The trial of independent journalist and human rights activist **Ulfatkhonim Mamadshoeva** is ongoing at a detention facility of the State Committee for National Security (SCNS) in Dushanbe. She is reportedly facing charges of publicly calling for the overthrow of power and other offenses, and there are concerns that she has allegedly been subjected to pressure to “confess” while in detention.

Two journalists were recently handed lengthy prison sentences in apparent retaliation for their work. On 17 October 2022, journalist **Daler Imomali** was sentenced to 10 years in prison on charges of participation in a banned organisation, making a false accusation of a crime and failing to pay taxes on his earnings from his YouTube channel. In an earlier ruling issued on 4 October 2022, Imomali’s

journalist-colleague **Abdullo Ghurbati** was sentenced to 7,5 years in prison on charges of assaulting and insulting a police officer and participation in a banned group. Among others, the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media [expressed dismay](#) at the sentences against the two journalists, saying that they were [a blow](#) to media freedom in Tajikistan. She called for the journalists' immediate release.

Also, outside the GBAO region, journalists, bloggers, civil society activists, independent lawyers and human rights activists continue to face intimidation and harassment, including by being interrogated, arrested and criminally prosecuted on charges initiated because of their exercise of freedom of expression and other fundamental freedoms. Among others, human rights lawyers **Buzurgmehr Yorov** and **Abdulmajid Rizoyev** remain in prison on charges considered politically motivated.

In addition to the internet shutdowns implemented in the GBAO (see above), other internet restrictions are also an ongoing concern with independent media websites and social media networks having been temporarily or permanently blocked without any right of appeal. *Asia Plus*, one of the few remaining independent media outlets in Tajikistan, announced in May 2022 that it had been forced to cease covering the GBAO events after being threatened by closure by the Prosecutor General's Office. The environment for freedom of association remains restricted with public organisations and their representatives being subjected to pressure to drop or refrain from addressing politically sensitive issues.

Turkmenistan

In Turkmenistan, government repression continues unabated following the orchestrated transfer of power from father to son seen in March 2022, when Serdar Berdymukhamedov assumed the presidency after his father following unfree and unfair elections. There are also reports indicating that the authorities [stepped up](#) measures aimed at preventing expressions of discontent following the January 2022 events in Kazakhstan.

As previously, the government tightly controls the flow of information, uses state media outlets as propaganda tools, and covers up developments that may reflect badly on those in power, such as the protracted socio-economic crisis and the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic in the country. It restricts access to alternative, foreign-based sources of information, with internet access remaining slow, expensive and limited compared to global standards and many social media networks, messenger apps, independent news sites and other web resources having been arbitrarily blocked in the country. The authorities have also sought to prevent the use of internet circumvention tools such as virtual private networks (VPNs), systematically blocking such tools and intimidating individuals who have accessed sites critical of the authorities with the help of VPNs.

The authorities continue to crack down on people who publicly express discontent about the situation in the country, stand up for their rights, and engage with like-minded people, including through arrest, prosecution and imprisonment on politically motivated charges. Among those currently in prison on such charges are journalist **Nurgeldy Khalykov**, who was sentenced to four years in prison on fraud charges in September 2020 after the authorities discovered his contacts and cooperation with a foreign-based news outlet; doctor **Khursanai Ismatullaeva**, who was sentenced to nine years in prison on similar charges after seeking support from exile-based human rights groups in her struggle for justice over her unfair dismissal and having her case raised at a discussion event organised by Members of the European Parliament in July 2021; and lawyer **Pygambergeldy Allaberdyev**, who was handed a six-year prison sentence in October 2020 on charges of hooliganism and infliction of bodily harm, believed to have been

initiated because of his alleged links to critical activists based abroad. UN human rights bodies, human rights groups, and foreign decisionmakers have all raised concerns about these cases.

Another case of concern is that of **Agajuma Bayramov**, who has [reported](#) ongoing pressure after being released earlier this year after serving six years in prison on charges believed to have been fabricated to penalise him for his contacts with independent media.

In addition to targeting critics living in Turkmenistan for prosecution, the authorities have sought the detention and return of outspoken activists based abroad, in particular in Turkey. While some activists have succeeded in legally challenging such requests, the threat still looms over many activists of being sent back to Turkmenistan where they would be a serious risk of politically motivated arrest, imprisonment, and torture. The authorities also continue to put pressure on critical voices based abroad in other ways, including by intimidating their relatives who still live in Turkmenistan.

While repressing rare peaceful citizen-initiated protests, the authorities continue to forcibly mass mobilise residents for state-organised celebrations, thereby violating their right to voluntary participation in assemblies and endangering their health and well-being. For example, hundreds of people were reported to have needed medical assistance after being made to participate in outdoor celebrations of the ex-president's birthday in June 2022, when the weather was exceptionally hot.

Uzbekistan

Independent journalists, bloggers and activists continue to work at a serious risk of persecution in Uzbekistan. In a number of recent cases, journalists and bloggers have been criminally prosecuted after criticising the authorities and speaking out on issues that are sensitive to the authorities.

Among those targeted are journalists **Lalagul Kallykhanova** and **Dauletmurat Tazhimuratov**, who were both arrested in connection with the mass protests in Karakalpakstan after publicly criticising the proposed constitutional amendments affecting the status of the autonomous republic. According to available information, Kallykhanova is facing charges of infringing on public safety, while Tazhimuratov has been charged with encroaching on the constitutional order. He has allegedly been subjected to physical abuse in custody.

As part of their crackdown on critical voices related to the mass protests in Karakalpakstan, the authorities have also targeted activists from this region who live abroad. Thus, at the request of Uzbekistani authorities, four Karakalpakstani activists living in Almaty were arrested by Kazakhstani police in September-October 2022 on charges of infringing on Uzbekistan's constitutional order and other offenses related to the July protests. Activists **Koshkarbay Toremomuratov**, **Jangeldi Zhaksymbetov**, **Raisa Khudaybergenova** and **Ziuar Mirmanbetova** have applied for asylum in Kazakhstan while in detention and cannot be returned pending the consideration of their asylum applications. However, they remain under the threat of being extradited to Uzbekistan, where they would be at serious risk of torture and unfair legal proceedings. Uzbekistani authorities have also sought the extradition of a fifth Karakalpakstani activist living in Kazakhstan, **Nietbay Urazbaev**, who is a citizen of Kazakhstan and a member of the Peoples' Assembly of Kazakhstan (a consultative body under the president of Kazakhstan). At the time of writing, the Kazakhstani authorities have not yet responded to this request.

Another case of serious concern to us is that of human rights defender, independent journalist and former political prisoner **Aziz Yusupov**, who was arrested in the city of Ferghana on 27 September 2022

shortly before he was due to attend the OSCE Human Dimension Conference in Warsaw. His arrest appeared to be aimed at preventing him from attending this major human rights event. According to our information, several other human rights defenders who had registered to attend this conference were questioned by law enforcement services and reportedly discouraged from attending the event. Yusupov was subsequently charged with the possession of drugs and reportedly forced to make a video-filmed “confession” under duress. He remains in pre-trial detention on these charges, which we believe to have been initiated in retaliation for his human rights work. The concerns about his case are reinforced by the fact that he already previously was imprisoned on similar charges in 2016 after being sentenced in an unfair trial based on a confession made under torture. At that time, he was widely recognised as a political prisoner by human rights groups, and thanks to international pressure, he was released from prison on parole in February 2019 for health reasons. Following his release, he has been involved in human rights work, in particular monitoring of the situation of prisoners.

The operating space for civil society remains seriously restricted in Uzbekistan. The process of registering new NGOs remains fraught with difficulties, in particular for organisations with a focus on human rights. Several independent NGOs have repeatedly been denied registration on grounds that appear to be politically motivated. For example, since 2019 human rights defender and former political prisoner **Agzam Turgunov** has received ten rejections when attempting to register his NGO ‘Human Rights House’, with the Ministry of Justice referring to alleged minor technical mistakes in the application. NGOs are also subject to excessive reporting requirements and restrictions on their activities and access to funding. A government resolution adopted in June 2022 further increased state interference into NGO activities by introducing a new mechanism for state approval of foreign grants received by NGOs and compulsory partnership with state agencies on the implementation of foreign funded NGO projects. This new mechanism contradicts the Law on Non-Profit Organisations currently in force, as well as the provisions of the Constitution of Uzbekistan.

Recommendations

We urge the EU to raise serious concerns about the trends described above for the respective Central Asian countries, including the individual cases described and to call on the authorities of these countries to:

- Put an end to intimidation and harassment of journalists, bloggers, civil society activists, human rights defenders, lawyers and others who criticise the authorities and speak out on issues that are sensitive to those in power.
- In particular, **ensure that any journalists, bloggers, activists, defenders, lawyers and others who have been arrested, prosecuted or convicted in retaliation for their peaceful and legitimate exercise of fundamental freedoms (including those mentioned in this document) are cleared of charges and immediately and unconditionally released** if they are currently behind bars.
- Refrain from arbitrarily limiting access to online information, including by exploiting the campaign against misinformation to suppress discussion and exchange of information on issues of public interest on online platforms.
- Safeguard the freedoms of expression, association and peaceful assembly in accordance with their international obligations and commitments and refrain from imposing restrictions on these rights that do not meet the requirements of international human rights law.

For additional information on the issues summarised above, see the following publications:

Kazakhstan

<https://www.iphronline.org/kazakhstan-widespread-violations-reported-during-bloody-january.html>
<https://www.iphronline.org/kazakhstan-lack-of-accountability-for-bloody-january-events-persecution-of-critics-undermine-pledged-modernisation.html>
<https://www.iphronline.org/civil-society-groups-call-on-kazakhstan-to-establish-a-fully-independent-investigation-into-the-january-2022-events.html>
<https://www.iphronline.org/kazakhstan-torture-victims-struggling-to-obtain-justice-after-the-january-2022-events.html>
<https://www.iphronline.org/facing-the-facts-or-avoiding-the-truth.html>
<https://www.iphronline.org/kazakhstan-drop-trumped-up-charges-release-opposition-leader.html>

Kyrgyzstan

<https://www.iphronline.org/kyrgyzstan-widening-campaign-against-free-speech-strong-clear-eu-message-needed.html>
<https://www.iphronline.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/IPHR-LPF-briefing-for-EU-Kyrgyzstan-HR-dialogue-September-2022.pdf>

Tajikistan

<https://www.iphronline.org/tajikistan-civics-2021-2022.html>
<https://www.iphronline.org/tajikistan-politically-motivated-trials-of-human-rights-defenders-and-journalists-behind-closed-doors.html>

Turkmenistan

<https://www.iphronline.org/turkmenistan-continued-repression-under-new-president.html>
<https://www.iphronline.org/turkmen-doctor-anniversary-statement.html>
<https://www.iphronline.org/turkmenistan-new-president-should-end-persecution-imprisonment-of-critical-voices.html>
<https://www.iphronline.org/turkmen-doctor-anniversary-statement.html>

Uzbekistan

<https://www.iphronline.org/uzbekistan-civic-freedoms-remain-highly-restricted-as-karakalpakstan-protests-turn-violent-bloggers-and-activists-targeted.html>
<https://www.iphronline.org/uzbekistan-karakalpakstan.html>
<https://www.iphronline.org/uzbekistan-activist-detained-on-trumped-up-charges-before-major-human-rights-conference.html>