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# KEY TRENDS REGARDING CIVIC SPACE AND THE PROTECTION OF FUNDAMENTAL FREEDOMS IN CENTRAL ASIA

**BRIEFING PAPER FOR WARSAW HUMAN DIMENSION  
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## Introduction

This briefing paper highlights key concerns regarding the protection of civic space and the freedoms of expression, association, and peaceful assembly in the five Central Asian countries. These concerns include:

- **Lack of accountability for serious human rights violations related to the crises seen in the region in 2022, when the authorities employed harsh measures to end mass protests against government policies and ensuing unrest during the so-called ‘Bloody January’ events in Kazakhstan, in the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Region (GBAO) in Tajikistan and in the Republic of Karakalpakstan in Uzbekistan.** To date, measures taken to investigate allegations of excessive use of force, torture and ill-treatment, and other violations of the rights of protesters during these events, as well as to bring those responsible to justice have lacked independence, thoroughness, and effectiveness, resulting in widespread impunity for serious human rights abuses.
- **Persecution of civil society activists, opposition supporters, human rights defenders, journalists, and bloggers who speak out against injustice, criticise government policies and demand transparency and accountability of those in power.** The use of criminal prosecution as a tool to intimidate and silence critical voices is of particular concern across the region. This tactic was used during wider crackdowns launched in response to the mass protests seen in Kazakhstan, the GBAO in Tajikistan and Karakalpakstan in Uzbekistan in 2022, but is also used more broadly in all countries of the region, with criminal cases on slander, extortion, fraud, rioting, extremism and other charges initiated in retaliation against those who exercise their freedoms of expression, association, and assembly in peaceful and legitimate ways. It is of serious concern that especially the authorities in Tajikistan and Kazakhstan have misused extremism-related charges to target government critics and that a growing number of bloggers have been singled out for prosecution in Uzbekistan and other countries because of social media posts on issues deemed sensitive by the authorities. Recently, there has been an increase in politically motivated criminal cases in Kyrgyzstan in the context of a worsening climate for free speech, while the authorities of Turkmenistan have sought the forcible return of outspoken activists based abroad, in addition to imprisoning “inconvenient” individuals living in the country.
- **Pressure on independent media and restrictions on access to alternative information through the internet.** The few independent media outlets that operate in the region and those working for them are subjected to ongoing intimidation and harassment, both on- and offline. There have been several recent government initiatives to shut down independent media services and block access to their sites in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, a country where the media environment has up until now been more favourable than in other countries of the region. Draft media legislation currently under consideration in Kyrgyzstan, as well as in Kazakhstan threatens to result in increased state control over media operations. Broadly worded restrictions on blogging activities have been initiated in several countries, including Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and

Uzbekistan and the authorities are misusing the fight against disinformation to stifle free speech across the region. Internet censorship is most pervasive in Turkmenistan where thousands of sites have been arbitrarily blocked and the authorities actively campaign against censorship circumvention tools used to access blocked sites that provide information alternative to that of state-controlled national media.

- **Excessive and unjustified restrictions on the operation of independent civil society organisations.** An increasing number of NGOs have either been forcibly shut down or pressured to “voluntarily” close in Tajikistan, while several independent human rights groups have been denied registration on technical grounds in Uzbekistan, and not one human rights NGO is registered in Turkmenistan. Draft NGO legislation initiated in Kyrgyzstan mirrors legislation seen in more repressive countries in the post-Soviet region and would – if adopted - undermine the hard-won gains in terms of civil society participation in this country. In particular, foreign-funded NGOs risk being subjected to stigmatisation and excessive state regulation and interference. There are also concerns that a recent government initiative in Kazakhstan to publish a list of foreign-funded NGOs could result in increasing stigmatisation and state control of such groups.
- **Practices undermining the right to peacefully protest.** Such practices include a court-sanctioned ban on protests that has been in place in central areas of Kyrgyzstan’s capital Bishkek for more than a year; the systematic dispersal of peaceful gatherings held without government approval and the detention of protesters before, during and after such assemblies in Kazakhstan; and measures taken by authorities in Turkmenistan to promptly cut short public expressions of discontent about economic hardships, corruption and other problems.

These issues are covered in more detail in the country sections below, which also include descriptions of individual cases of serious concern and provide recommendations for measures that the authorities of the region should be urged to take to improve the current situation.

The briefing paper is based on ongoing cooperation between IPHR and Central Asian partners on monitoring and documenting developments affecting fundamental freedoms in the five Central Asian countries in the framework of the CIVICUS Monitor (<https://monitor.civicus.org>), an initiative to track and rate civic space across the world. The CIVICUS Monitor currently assesses civic space as “closed” in Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, as “repressed” in Kazakhstan and as “obstructed” in Kyrgyzstan.

## Key trends in Kazakhstan

A key concern in Kazakhstan is the **continued failure of the authorities to take effective measures to impartially and thoroughly investigate and hold accountable** those responsible for **serious human rights violations reported during the ‘Bloody’ January 2022 events**, when the authorities forcibly put down mass protests for social and political change and evolving unrest. Reported violations include the excessive use of force and related killings of protesters and passers-by, arbitrary detentions of thousands of protesters, and widespread torture and ill-treatment of protesters in detention.<sup>1</sup>

While the authorities acknowledged the use of prohibited treatment against protesters in connection with the January 2022 events and opened investigations into hundreds of complaints received about such treatment, the investigations have not met international standards, victims have not been afforded adequate protection and the majority of **investigations have been prematurely closed** due to the alleged lack of elements of crime. To date, only **about a dozen law enforcement and security officials have been convicted and imprisoned on charges of abusive treatment related to the January events**. It is of further concern that the investigations and legal proceedings initiated in cases concerning violations related to the January 2022 events have often been classified and closed to the public and the families of the victims.

When examining Kazakhstan's compliance with the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment in May 2023, **the UN Committee against Torture (CAT) stated that it was deeply concerned** about "many consistent reports indicating various forms of torture, ill-treatment, including excessive use of force" related to the January 2022 protests, as well as the "high rate of closed cases" in this context. It called on the authorities to promptly, independently and impartially investigate all acts of torture, ill-treatment and excessive use of force and punish the perpetrators in a manner commensurate with the gravity of their acts.<sup>2</sup>

The political modernisation drive initiated by President Tokayev in the aftermath of the January 2022 events has resulted in some positive steps. However, the reforms initiated have not been systematic in nature and **the modernisation initiative has been undermined by ongoing persecution of those who criticise and challenge government policies**.<sup>3</sup>

While requirements for the registration of political parties have been eased, and two new parties were registered ahead of the early parliamentary elections in March 2023, **opposition parties continue to face difficulties obtaining registration** and no genuine opposition party has yet managed to register in the country. For example, despite repeated attempts since last spring, the opposition party Alga Kazakhstan! has been unable to register and has had its application documents returned more than 15 times because of alleged inconsistencies with technical requirements for registration.

**Members of opposition groups, civil society activists, human rights defenders and journalists continue to face intimidation and harassment** ranging from threats and surveillance to detention and prosecution on politically motivated charges. More than two dozen activists were charged with rioting and other crimes related to the January 2022 protests despite the lack of any evidence of their involvement in violent, unlawful actions. While the criminal cases against some activists initiated in relation to the January 2022 events have been closed, and some activists have been amnestied, others are still under investigation, have been charged more recently or are serving sentences.

In a high-profile case, in April 2023, the leader of the unregistered opposition Democratic Party, **Zhanbolat Mamai** was convicted of organising riots during the January 2022 protests, although he only protested peacefully for political and social change. He was given a suspended six-year prison sentence (which could be turned into a real one if he is found to violate the terms of his probation) and banned from conducting political, civic or social media activities during the same period, which will effectively prevent him from opposition campaigning.<sup>4</sup> The sentence was subsequently upheld on appeal. IPHR,

KIBHR and partner organisations have called on the Kazakhstani authorities to clear Mamai of charges, saying that they were clearly initiated in retaliation for his opposition activities and criticism of the authorities.<sup>5</sup>

In recent months, new criminal cases unrelated to the January 2022 events have also been opened against activists, journalists and other critical voices under circumstances indicating that the charges constitute retaliation for their legitimate exercise of freedom of expression and other fundamental freedoms. For example, **Marat Zhylanbaev**, the leader of the initiative group behind the opposition party Alga Kazakhstan! (which as mentioned has unsuccessfully sought registration since spring 2022), was arrested in May 2023 on charges of financing and participating in the activities of a banned extremist organisation. Zhylanbaev is accused of allegedly being associated with the opposition movement Democratic Choice of Kazakhstan (DVK), which has been banned as “extremist” by court in Kazakhstan despite its non-violent nature, because of his participation in peaceful protests and contacts with co-activists. Zhylanbaev’s arrest followed immediately after he had served out a 20 days’ sentence in detention handed to him over an unsanctioned, peaceful protest held outside the EU delegation and foreign embassies in Astana in March 2023, when the participants voiced political demands.<sup>6</sup> At the time of writing, he remains behind bars while the criminal investigation against him continues. The trial is expected to start in a near future.<sup>7</sup> Local human rights defenders have recognised Zhylanbaev as a political prisoner.<sup>8</sup>

In another case documented by KIBHR, journalist, blogger and political activists **Duman Mukhamedkarim**, who is known for his criticism of the authorities, was arrested on charges of allegedly financing and participating in the activities of a banned extremist organisation in July 2023. These serious charges concern a live broadcast he aired in December 2022 together with Mukhtar Ablyazov, an exile-based opposition figure who leads the banned DVK opposition movement. According to the investigation, Mukhamedkarim published information about how to make donations to the DVK and expressed support for its programme, thereby allegedly financing and taking part in extremist activities. Prior to his arrest Mukhamedkarim had repeatedly been detained for shorter periods of time for calling for holding peaceful protests without pre-approval of authorities. While he was initially remanded to pre-trial detention for two months, his arrest was subsequently pro-longed.

In a worrying trend, the authorities continue to **routinely deny permission to opposition and civil society activists for holding peaceful protests** on political and socio-economic issues, which are inconvenient to those in power. Peaceful assemblies held without advance permission are **dispersed and participants are detained and penalised** by being fined or locked up for up to 15-20 days. The authorities have also carried out an increasing number of “preventive” detentions of activists prior to planned or expected protests.<sup>9</sup>

A new **draft media law** put forward by the government in February 2023 was **widely criticised** by the media community for increasing state control over media activities. After the criticism, the draft media law was revised. However, despite important improvements, media representatives remain concerned that the revised version falls short of international standards protecting the freedoms of media and expression and have called for additional revisions during its review in parliament.<sup>10</sup> There are also concerns that a **new law regulating blogging activities**, which entered into force in September 2023, **could**

**be used to stifle criticism**, in particular as it provides for administrative responsibility for posting and reposting “false” information.<sup>11</sup> A pre-existing criminal code provision penalising “knowingly spreading false information” has frequently been used against government critics.

At the same time, the country’s few **independent media outlets continue to operate at risk**. In the months leading up to the March 2023 parliamentary elections, **a series of attacks on independent media outlets and journalists** were reported.<sup>12</sup> The police subsequently arrested around 20 people accused of involvement in the attacks. In September 2023, legal proceedings started in the case, including in relation to the suspected organiser, who reportedly has been diagnosed with a personality disorder and deemed non-labile for his deeds. The proceedings are taking place behind closed doors at the request of victims in order to prevent personal information about them and their family members from being made public.<sup>13</sup> While it is welcome that the authorities took effective action to identify suspected perpetrators, it is also imperative that they ensure that the proceedings in the case fully comply with international standards and that all those responsible for attacks, including those who ordered them are brought to justice and given appropriate penalties.

Under national law, civil society organisations and representatives who receive foreign funding for legal assistance, surveys, and data collection, analysis and dissemination are required to report about their funding to the government. This information is included in a database, which previously has only been accessible to government bodies. However, in accordance with a Ministry of Finance order from March 2023, the information is now subject to publication<sup>14</sup>. A first list made public in mid-September 2023 features the names of over 200 organisations and individuals receiving foreign funding.<sup>15</sup> This development has sparked fears that **increasing state control and stigmatisation of foreign-funded groups and activists** might follow.<sup>16</sup>

## **Recommendations**

The Kazakhstani authorities should:

- Ensure, in accordance with the UN CAT’s recommendations, that all allegations of the use of excessive force, torture and other violations related to the January 2022 events are investigated in a prompt, impartial and effective manner – with the involvement of both national and international experts - and that those responsible for violations are brought to justice in fair trials and given appropriate penalties.
- Allow opposition political parties to obtain state registration and carry out their activities without hindrance and obstruction.
- Ensure that no one is arrested, prosecuted, or convicted in retaliation for their peaceful and legitimate exercise of fundamental freedoms and that those prosecuted on such grounds are cleared of charges and immediately and unconditionally released if held behind bars, including in the cases of Democratic Party leader Zhanbolat Mamai, Alga Kazakhstan! Initiative group leader Marat Zhylanbaev and journalist-activist Duman Mukhamedkarim.
- Uphold the right to freedom of peaceful assembly in accordance with international standards and revise current legislation and law enforcement practice to this end, including by ensuring that people are not detained, fined, or locked up for organising, calling for or participating in peaceful assemblies, even if these assemblies have not been pre-approved by authorities.



- Withdraw the draft media law in its current format and ensure that new media legislation is elaborated with due account of the recommendations made by media experts, journalists, and civil society representatives, as well as international standards and best practice.
- Ensure that charges of spreading “false” information are not used to stifle the legitimate exercise of freedom of expression.
- Ensure that all reported acts of intimidation and harassment against media and journalists are promptly, thoroughly, and impartially investigated and that both those who carry out attacks and those who order them are held accountable.
- Refrain from any measures of undue control and stigmatisation of foreign-funded CSOs and safeguard their right to work without intimidation and harassment.

## Key trends in Kyrgyzstan

The **climate for free speech and civic activities has deteriorated significantly** in Kyrgyzstan as the authorities have stepped-up efforts to suppress criticism and prevent discussion and engagement on issues of public interest.<sup>17</sup>

A **draft media law** put forward by the presidential administration in autumn 2022 has been **severely criticised** by media organisations, human rights NGOs and international experts, including the UN Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression, and the OSCE Representative of Freedom of the Media together with the OSCE Office of Democratic Institutions and Human Rights.<sup>18</sup> Following the initial criticism of the draft law, the presidential administration agreed to revise it but failed to adequately take into account the recommendations of media representatives in this process. Thus, a revised version of the draft law, which was published for a new round of public consultations in May 2023, retains **excessive restrictions on the freedom of expression and the media**. Key concerns include the designation of websites as media resources; strict requirements for the registration and re-registration of media outlets and the accreditation of journalists; vaguely worded obligations and prohibitions concerning media activities; and significantly broadened grounds for imposing sanctions on media, including the suspension and termination of their activities. At the time of writing, it is not known when the draft media law will come up for consideration in parliament.

Human rights groups have also warned that **a so-called law on the protection of children from harmful information**, which was adopted by parliament and signed by the president in summer 2023, **risks resulting in violations of the rights to freedom of expression and access to information** because of its broadly worded provisions.<sup>19</sup> Among others, it prohibits the dissemination of information that “contradicts family values, promotes non-traditional sexual relations and encourages disrespect for parents or other family members”, with those found to violate this ban being liable for fines.<sup>20</sup>

In another alarming trend, the authorities have **used a controversial law on protection against “false information” to temporarily block access to independent news sites** and have **taken legal action aimed at shutting down leading independent media services** because of their coverage. Most recently, in August 2023, the respected media organisation **Kloop** learned that a local prosecutor is requesting its closure primarily because of the allegedly “negative” nature of Kloop’s independent and investigating reporting and its “sharp criticism” of government policies.<sup>21</sup> A preliminary hearing in this case was held in late

September 2023, with the next hearing scheduled for 6 October 2023.<sup>22</sup> In addition to seeking Kloop's closure, the government has – as a first step - ordered the blocking of Kloop's website because it allegedly disseminated "false" information in an article about a political activist claiming to have been tortured in detention.<sup>23</sup>

A year ago, the government blocked the site of **Radio Azattyk**, the Kyrgyz service of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) because a video report that allegedly featured "false" information about hostilities at the border with Tajikistan, although it only presented the official views of both countries regarding these events. The government also turned to court with a request to revoke Radio Azattyk's license because of this report. While a local court ruled in favour of this request in April 2023<sup>24</sup>, Radio Azattyk later reached a settlement with the government, whereby the court decision was overturned on the grounds that the video report no longer was accessible on the service's site.

Moreover, **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.

In a high-profile case, **close to 30 civil society activists, journalists, bloggers, human rights defenders and opposition political figures** were arrested in October 2022 and charged with preparing riots, although they are only known to have peacefully engaged against a government-negotiated border deal with Uzbekistan concerning the strategically important **Kempir-Abad water reservoir**.<sup>25</sup> During several months spent in difficult conditions in pre-trial detention, the health of several of those arrested seriously deteriorated. While some of those arrested, including all the women activists were eventually transferred to house arrest earlier this year, others are still behind bars. The trial in the case began in July 2023 and is being held behind closed doors, despite the lack of any circumstances that would justify this under international law, which has reinforced concerns about the fairness of the proceedings.<sup>26</sup> IPHR and partners are seriously concerned that the criminal charges initiated against the critics of the border agreement constitute retaliation for their legitimate civic engagement on the Kempir-Abad issue.<sup>27</sup>

Another case of particular concern is that of journalist **Bolot Temirov, who was deported from Kyrgyzstan in November 2022**, although he was acquitted of most of the spurious charges that had been initiated against him and freed from penalty on others due to the expiration of the statute of limitations.<sup>28</sup> This was an unprecedented turn of developments, which lawyers have shown violated the constitutional prohibition on expelling citizens of the country.<sup>29</sup> In mid-September 2023, the Supreme Court upheld Temirov's deportation on appeal, but the journalist's legal team announced that it will continue the struggle for justice by turning to international bodies.<sup>30</sup>

Several journalists and bloggers have faced **criminal charges because of social media posts** on issues sensitive to the authorities. In a recent case, in August 2023, a criminal case was opened against writer **Olzhobay Shakir** for publishing "provocative" social media posts allegedly containing calls for riots and disobedience to authorities. He was arrested shortly after announcing on social media that he would hold a peaceful protest in Bishkek against government plans to hand over certain property to Uzbekistan and invited others to join him.<sup>31</sup> Civil society representatives have called the charges against the writer

“absurd”, stressing that his right to peacefully voice discontent about the actions of the authorities, and have demanded that the case is closed and he is released.<sup>32</sup>

NGOs fear that restrictive draft legislation affecting them will be adopted. A **repressive draft law** was submitted to parliament at the initiative of more than 30 deputies in May 2023. It is similar to a previous Russia-inspired draft law, which parliament eventually voted down in 2016, and would require NGOs which receive any foreign funding and engage in broadly defined “political activities” to register as “foreign representatives” – a highly stigmatising label – and subject them to close oversight. The draft law also provides for other **excessive restrictions on the right to freedom of association** in violation of international standards. The draft law has been severely criticised by international experts<sup>33</sup> and civil society, including IPHR and partners which have warned that it would enable the authorities to arbitrarily discredit and obstruct the work of foreign-funded NGOs.<sup>34</sup> Kyrgyzstan’s Cabinet of Ministers also issued critical remarks about it and the Ombudsperson called for its withdrawal.<sup>35</sup> Following the outcry, some deputies withdrew their support for the draft law, and its consideration was postponed until after parliament’s summer recess. However, as parliament has now reconvened, and the draft law is back on the agenda, there are renewed concerns that it will progress.

**Another draft law**, which was put forward by the presidential administration in November 2022, **also proposed to significantly increase state control over NGOs**. Following strong criticism from international experts and civil society<sup>36</sup>, the presidential administration agreed to set up a working group including both government officials and NGO representatives to revise the draft law. At the time of writing, its work is still under way (with the timeline having been extended until 1 October 2023). However, there are remaining concerns that the draft law might result in excessive restrictions on the operating freedom of NGOs.

For more than a year, **peaceful protests have been banned in central areas of Bishkek**, including outside the Russian embassy, the presidential administration and the parliament building and on the central Ala-Too Square, thereby undermining the right to peacefully assemble. The blanket ban was first issued by a local court in April 2022, after the Russian embassy requested the authorities to put a stop to public actions held outside its premises, and it has repeatedly been prolonged. Protesters have been instructed instead to gather in a park specifically designated for holding assemblies. With reference to the court-sanctioned restrictions, police have carried out detentions of peaceful protesters in several cases.<sup>37</sup> When reviewing Kyrgyzstan’s compliance with the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) last year, the UN Human Rights Committee called on the authorities to refrain from blanket restrictions on peaceful assemblies and from selective and discriminatory dispersals of peaceful assemblies.<sup>38</sup>

## **Recommendations**

The Kyrgyzstani authorities should:

- Refrain from taking the draft media law further in its current format and ensure that new media legislation is elaborated with due account of the recommendations made by national and international experts and corresponds to Kyrgyzstan’s international human rights obligations.

- Ensure that the recently adopted legislation on protecting children from harmful information does not result in undue restrictions on the right to freedom of expression and access to information and revise it in line with Kyrgyzstan's international human rights obligations.
- Cease pressuring independent media outlets and platforms because of their reporting, including by refraining from blocking access to their sites in the name of fighting disinformation and seeking their closure on unsubstantiated grounds; and terminate the legal action initiated against Kloop in this context.
- Carry out prompt, thorough, and impartial investigations into any reported acts of intimidation and harassment of civil society activists, journalists and bloggers and ensure that no one is criminally charged, convicted or imprisoned in retaliation for their legitimate exercise of their freedoms of expression and other fundamental freedoms.
- Ensure a transparent and fair trial, fully consistent with international standards, in the case of the critics of the Kempir-Abad border deal and that anyone against whom charges have been brought in this case without reasonable cause are cleared of charges and promptly and unconditionally released.
- Repeal Bolot Temirov's deportation and allow him to return to Kyrgyzstan and continue his journalistic work there without further persecution.
- Uphold the right of Olzhobay Shakir to peacefully voice discontent with government policies, close the case against him and release him.
- Ensure that all legislative initiatives affecting NGOs fully correspond to international standards and adequately reflect the recommendations made by international experts and civil society representatives before being pursued further and adopted. Members of parliament should withhold support for the draft law on "foreign representatives" submitted to the lawmaking body in May 2023 due to its inconsistencies with the requirements of international law and the president should refrain from signing it, should it be adopted by parliament.
- Put an end to the current prolonged ban on protests in central areas of Bishkek and ensure that citizens are not detained or penalised for peacefully protesting.

## Key trends in Tajikistan

In Tajikistan, there has been **no accountability for serious human rights violations perpetrated in connection with the authorities' response to mass protests that took place in the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Region (GBAO) in November 2021 and again in May 2022.** Reported violations include the excessive use of force, arbitrary detentions, torture and ill-treatment, extrajudicial killings, and unfair trials of dozens of people charged in relation to the GBAO events.<sup>39</sup>

Following the GBAO events, the Tajikistani authorities launched a **widening crackdown on journalists, bloggers, civil society activists, lawyers and human rights defenders**, both those based in GBAO and those working outside this region.<sup>40</sup> When visiting Tajikistan in November-December 2022, UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders Mary Lawlor concluded that the events in the GBAO "marked a watershed moment" in the attitude of authorities toward civil society actors and criticised the authorities for creating an "intensifying climate of fear" for such actors.<sup>41</sup>

In the aftermath of the GBAO events, several journalists and activists have been **detained, criminally prosecuted and convicted following non-transparent trials** held in violation of international standards. Many of them have faced charges of extremism- and terrorism-related offenses, which are defined in an overly broad and ambiguous manner under national legislation, in a pattern that shows how the authorities misuse such charges to silence critical voices. In a joint statement issued in July 2023, Mary Lawlor and several other **UN human rights experts expressed grave concern about this pattern** and stressed that “conflating human rights defenders with extremists and terrorists is a very dangerous practice”. The experts also expressed dismay at gross violations of fair trial standards in recent cases involving journalists, bloggers and activists defending human rights.<sup>42</sup>

One of the cases raised by the UN experts, which is of particular concern to us, is that of **Manuchehr Kholiknazarov**, Director of the Lawyers’ Association of Pamir (LAP). In December 2022, the Supreme Court sentenced him **to 16 years in prison** on charges of participation in a criminal and banned extremist organisation. As stressed by IPHR and other international NGOs<sup>43</sup>, these charges were clearly brought in retaliation for his efforts to assist victims of human rights violations and promote access to justice and the rule of law in the GBAO. Following the November 2021 events in the GBAO, Kholiknazarov joined a commission of local civil society and law enforcement representatives (the co-called Commission 44) set up to investigate these events. However, the commission’s activities were derailed in May 2022 amid the government’s renewed crackdown on protests in the GBAO. That same month Kholiknazarov was arrested and charged together with other commission members.

Another recent case of concern is that of independent journalist **Khurshed Fozilov**, who was sentenced to seven years in prison in May 2023 on charges of cooperating with banned extremist organisations and media outlets.<sup>44</sup> The charges were initiated in apparent retaliation for Fozilov’s journalistic activities, as part of which he covered problems faced by ordinary people in his home region and frequently criticised local authorities. IPHR and its international partner NGOs consider Fozilov’s case another example of the use of criminal prosecution to suppress critical reporting in Tajikistan and has called for his release.<sup>45</sup>

Human rights lawyer **Buzurgmehr Yorov**, who has been held behind bars since 2015, was recently sentenced to another ten years in prison on spurious charges of fraud following a closed trial at which he had no access to a lawyer.<sup>46</sup> His appeals against this new sentence have been unsuccessful. Yorov was first arrested in 2015 and sentenced to more than 20 years in prison after providing legal representation to members and leaders of the banned opposition party, the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (IRTP). The UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention has concluded that Yorov’s detention violates international law and called for his release.<sup>47</sup>

In addition to cracking down on people accused of collaborating with banned extremist organisations inside the country, the Tajikistani authorities have **increasingly targeted people living abroad** on such grounds, including by requesting their extradition to Tajikistan on extremism-related offenses.

In another alarming trend, the operating space for NGOs has continued to shrink in Tajikistan. In the last two years a **record number of NGOs have been closed down** in the country - some 700 in total.<sup>48</sup> While the authorities claim that most organisations have closed at their own initiative, many NGOs have reported being **pressured to do so**. Other NGOs have been **forcibly closed by court** decision because of

alleged violations of national law. For example, in recent months, at least five organisations registered in GBAO have been shut down by court because of unsubstantiated allegations of connections with criminal groups.<sup>49</sup> Among the organisations liquidated is the Lawyers' Association of Pamir, the organisation led by Manuchehr Kholiknazarov, in another retaliatory measure targeting him and his colleagues.

The authorities have also **shut down independent news outlets** after labelling them as "extremist". In July 2023, the online Pamir Daily News, which has covered events in GBAO for several years, and the New Tajikistan 2 website, associated with the opposition 'Group 24' movement, were both banned as "extremist" by court.<sup>50</sup> While **journalism and blogging already are dangerous professions** in Tajikistan because of the threat of prosecution facing those voicing critical views, there are concerns that blogging **might be further restricted**. A draft law, initiated by a member of parliament which was made public in August 2023<sup>51</sup>, would introduce several broadly worded obligations for bloggers, including requirements for them to publish "correct" information, to refrain from "offensive" statements and to moderate user comments to ensure that they do not contain statements of that nature, as well as to promote national "achievements" on their sites. The failure to comply with the obligations set out in the law could result in a blogger's site being promptly deleted without any court review. Representatives of the media community fear that the draft law, if adopted, could be used to arbitrarily delete the sites of bloggers who are inconvenient to those in power.<sup>52</sup>

## **Recommendations**

The Tajikistani authorities should:

- Ensure that serious human rights violations reported in connection with the GBAO events are investigated in an independent, transparent and effective manner and that those responsible for violations are held accountable.
- Stop misusing anti-extremism and anti-terrorism legislation to silence critical voices, put an end to the escalating crackdown on representatives of civil society and media and safeguard the right of such actors to carry out their activities without fear of intimidation and persecution, in accordance with the recommendations of international human rights experts.
- Immediately and unconditionally release Manuchehr Kholiknazarov, Khurshed Fozliov and others imprisoned in unfair trials on charges initiated in retaliation for their peaceful human rights and journalist activities following the GBAO events.
- Refrain from further persecution of imprisoned lawyer Buzurgmehr Yorov and promptly release him in accordance with the opinion issued by the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention.
- Ensure that NGOs are not pressured to shut down or forcibly liquidated on unsubstantiated grounds and create an enabling and safe operating environment for NGOs, including in the GBAO.
- Ensure that any measure taken to limit access to online resources meet the strict requirements set out by international standards protecting the right to freedom of expression and that the draft law on blogging, initiated by a member of parliament, is brought into line with Tajikistan's international obligations if it is taken further.

## Key trends in Turkmenistan

The Turkmenistani authorities **continue to tightly control the information flow** in the country and all national media outlets, including the few privately owned outlets, are subjected to **state control**. Internet access remains **slow<sup>53</sup> and expensive<sup>54</sup>** compared to international standards and the **internet penetration rate is still comparatively low** (estimated as 38 percent at the beginning of 2023<sup>55</sup>). Interruptions in internet access are regularly reported.<sup>56</sup> Moreover, internet access is **heavily censored**, with many social media networks, messenger apps, news sites and other resources having been arbitrarily blocked in the country. An unprecedented large-scale study, carried out by a team of computer scientists from several US-based universities in 2021-2022, confirmed the systematic nature of internet censorship in Turkmenistan: it found that **over 122,000 domains were blocked**.<sup>57</sup> While blocked resources only are accessible with the help of internet circumvention tools, the authorities have intensified efforts to prevent the use of such tools, including by blocking access to them and intimidating those who install and use them.

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, using tactics **ranging from surveillance and threats to arrest, prosecution and imprisonment on politically motivated charges**.

Those currently in prison on charges believed to have been initiated in retaliation for their legitimate exercise of their freedom of expression and other fundamental rights include, among others, **journalist Nurgeldy Khalykov, civil society activist Murat Dushemov and human rights activist Mansur Mingelov**. When examining Turkmenistan's compliance with the ICCPR in March 2023, the UN Human Rights Committee voiced particular concerns about their cases and called for their release.<sup>58</sup> In response, the government delegation promised to "consider" their releases but at this time they remain behind bars. Khalykov was handed a four-year prison sentence on fraud charges in 2021 after sharing a photo of a WHO delegation visiting Turkmenistan with an exile-based media and human rights organisation and the authorities found out about his cooperation with it. Dushemov was sentenced to four years in prison on extortion and other charges in 2021 after criticising the authorities online and attempting to challenge Covid-19 preventive measures that the government imposed despite its denial of a national outbreak. Mingelov was sentenced to 22 years in prison on multiple charges in 2012 after exposing abusive treatment of members of the Baloch ethnic minority and has spent more than a decade in prison.<sup>59</sup> His health has reportedly deteriorated severely while in prison, and according to Turkmen News, he was in a serious condition in late September 2023.<sup>60</sup>

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**, where a large community of migrants from Turkmenistan reside. While several activists previously have succeeded in legally challenging such requests, several individuals known for their criticism of the Turkmenistani authorities have recently been sent back to the country, despite the real risk that they might face politically motivated arrest, imprisonment and torture upon return.

In May 2023, blogger **Farhat Meimankulyiev** (also known as Durdyiev) was reportedly detained by Turkish police at the request of Turkmenistani authorities and deported to Turkmenistan.<sup>61</sup> Information obtained by the Turkmen Helsinki Foundation (THF) indicates that he was arrested, convicted and handed a lengthy prison sentence upon return.<sup>62</sup> The blogger had previously reported harassment, in particular in August 2021, when he was arbitrarily detained at the premises of Turkmenistan's consulate in Istanbul, ill-treated, and pressured to apologise for posting videos critical of the regime.<sup>63</sup> According to information received by TIHR, two civil society activists, **Rovsen Klucev and Dovran Imamov** were forcibly sent back from Turkey to Turkmenistan in July and August 2023, respectively, after being detained for alleged migration violations. They are also at serious risk of persecution in Turkmenistan because of their criticism of Turkmenistani authorities on social media and their participation in anti-government protests.<sup>64</sup> According to unconfirmed reports, they faced charges of fraud upon return. In yet another case, THF reported that **Maksat Baymuradov**, who has taken part in online discussions on political issues in Turkmenistan and criticised the authorities at such forums, was deported from Turkey to Turkmenistan in early September 2023 after allegedly having his Turkish visa annulled on unclear grounds. He similarly faces a real risk of persecution because of his online engagement.<sup>65</sup> We are greatly concerned about the fate of the activists returned to Turkmenistan to date and fear that additional returns might follow.

In an ongoing practice, the Turkmenistani authorities have also attempted to silence activists based abroad by **intimidating their relatives** who live in Turkmenistan.<sup>66</sup>

The **operating space for public associations remains highly restrictive** in Turkmenistan and **no independent NGO working on human rights issues is registered** or able to work openly in the country. Overall, according to information from the authorities, only about 130 public associations are currently registered in Turkmenistan, out of which more than 40 percent are sports associations.<sup>67</sup>

While any public expression of discontent in Turkmenistan is associated with a risk of persecution, residents have recently held **a growing number of spontaneous protests to voice their frustration** about issues difficulties related to the protracted economic crisis in the country, corruption and other problems facing them. The authorities have **sought to quickly end such protests**, including by detaining and intimidating participants but also by promising certain concessions in response to their demands if they disperse.<sup>68</sup> For example, in March 2023, around 30 women who gathered in front of the presidential palace in Ashgabat hoping to convey their concerns to the president were detained by police, questioned and made to sign explanatory statements before being sent back to their homes in different parts of the country.<sup>69</sup> In another case, in August 2023, hundreds of people gathered outside the mayor's office in the city of Turkmenbashi to protest against the shortage of flour and other basic food products sold at subsidised prices in state-run stores. They left after the mayor appeared and promised to address the issue, while also threatening them with repercussions should they try to communicate their concerns directly to the president.<sup>70</sup>

While restricting the right to freely assemble, the Turkmenistani authorities continue to **mobilise public sector employees, students and others for participation in state-organised mass propaganda events at the threat of dismissal, loss of benefits and other repercussions**. When reviewing Turkmenistan's compliance with the ICCPR earlier this year, the UN Human Rights Committee criticised this practice.<sup>71</sup>



## **Recommendations**

The Turkmenistani authorities should:

- Enforce in practice the ban on media censorship set out by law and take concrete steps to enable media outlets to operate free from undue state interference.
- Adopt effective measures to promote internet access, speed and affordability and safeguard residents' freedom to seek, receive and impart information through the internet, in particular by ending the practice of arbitrarily restricting access to internet sites and by refraining from intimidating those who seek to circumvent such censorship
- Stop persecuting citizens living in- and outside the country because of their criticism of the situation in Turkmenistan and their engagement on issues of concern to them, and ensure that no one is criminally charged, arrested or imprisoned because of their legitimate exercise of the freedoms of expression, association and assembly.
- As called for by the UN Human Rights Committee, promptly release Nurgeldy Khalykov, Murat Dushemov, Mansur Mingelov, and others held on charges initiated in retaliation for their civic engagement. As long as they remain behind bars, ensure their safety and well-being and grant them access to adequate medical assistance and contacts with family members.
- Protect the safety of Farhat Meimankulyiev, Rovsen Klucev, Dovran Imamov and Maksat Baymuradov following their recent deportation to Turkmenistan and ensure that they are not subjected to retaliatory measures because of their blogging and civic activities.
- Stop intimidating and harassing relatives of activists based abroad.
- Ensure that independent NGOs that so wish may obtain legal status in a fair and transparent process and carry out their activities without undue interference by authorities.
- Allow residents to hold peaceful spontaneous protests without facing repercussions.
- Put an end to the practice of forcible mobilisation for state-organised mass events and protect the health and well-being of participants in such events.

## **Key trends in Uzbekistan**

In Uzbekistan, the authorities have yet to **ensure an independent investigation into the July 2022 events in the Republic of Karakalpakstan in western Uzbekistan**, when mass protests broke out during the discussion of draft amendments to Uzbekistan's constitution proposed by the government. The protesters objected against proposed amendments which would have deprived Karakalpakstan of its constitutionally protected status and its right to secede from Uzbekistan. There are credible reports that authorities used excessive force, arbitrary detentions, and torture and ill-treatment when putting down the protests. According to official figures, at least 21 people died and 270 needed medical assistance.<sup>72</sup>

The investigative efforts undertaken into the Karakalpakstan events have been shrouded in secrecy and **no one is known to have been held accountable to date for the killings or violations of the rights of protesters**, although a few law enforcement officials reportedly have been charged with wrongdoing.<sup>73</sup> At the same time, the authorities have depicted the events as an attempt to seize power in Karakalpakstan, and **several dozen protest participants have been charged with and convicted of various crimes following legal proceedings falling short of international fair trial standards**. Among them are well-known

journalists, bloggers and activists, who had publicly criticised the proposed constitutional amendments, including **lawyer and blogger Dauletmurat Tazhimuratov** who has been depicted as a protest leader. In January 2023, he was **sentenced to 16 years in prison** on charges of encroaching on the constitutional order, organising riots and other crimes. His allegations of torture in detention were not referred for an independent investigation before the verdict was issued. In June 2023, his sentence was upheld unchanged on appeal. In an appeal published in mid-September 2023, Tazhimuratov's lawyer expressed concerns that his client's rights have been violated in prison, including by being held in solitary confinement, denied access to comprehensive medical assistance, given inadequate food and prohibited from using media.<sup>74</sup>

When visiting Uzbekistan in March 2023, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Volker Türk **reiterated his office's call for a transparent and independent review** of the July 2022 events in Karakalpakstan and stressed the importance of upholding fair trial standards in this context.<sup>75</sup>

**Journalists, bloggers and activists who are critical of the authorities also continue to face pressure** outside the context of the Karakalpakstan events, including by being detained, prosecuted and convicted on politically motivated charges.<sup>76</sup>

For example, in August 2023, blogger **Abdukadyr Muminov** was sentenced to seven years in prison on charges of extortion and other crimes, which his colleagues believe were initiated in retaliation for his public criticism of the authorities. Muminov has allegedly been repeatedly subjected to torture in pre-trial detention, as a result of which he signed a confession of guilt.<sup>77</sup>

Blogger **Otabek Sattoriy** continues to serve a 6,5-year prison sentence, which was handed down to him in 2021 on libel and extortion charges believed to be retaliation for his criticism of corruption among local officials,<sup>78</sup> although the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention has deemed his detention unlawful and called for his release.<sup>79</sup> Earlier this year he was denied a transfer to less harsh prison conditions because of alleged violations of prison rules.<sup>80</sup> In September 2023, Sattoriy's lawyer filed a new legal complaint in his client's case, requesting that his sentence be overturned due to a series of procedural violations.

Another blogger, **Otabek Kodirov**, who has publicly voiced concerns about the current situation in Uzbekistan and criticized President Mirziyoyev, was arrested in May 2023 on charges of inciting national, racial, ethnic or religious hatred and insulting the president, which is a punishable offense under the country's criminal code. He currently remains in detention as the investigation in his case continues.<sup>81</sup>

Some of those facing politically motivated charges have been given non-prison sentences nevertheless entailing serious restrictions on their liberty and rights. For example, in January 2022, blogger **Miraziz Bazarov** was given a three year-sentence of so-called restricted freedom on charges of slander because of social media posts about the government's use of COVID-19 related loans and alleged double standards amongst officials in relation to LGBT people. While non-custodial, his sentence entails restrictions on his freedom of movement, public activities and internet use. In May 2023, Bazarov was forcibly detained and held for several hours for what law enforcement authorities claimed was a standard

“prophylactic” discussion concerning alleged violations of the terms of his sentence. However, Bazarov reported being intimidated, physically abused and pressured to delete online content.<sup>82</sup>

Journalist, human rights activist and former political prisoner **Aziz Yusupov** was convicted on charges of the possession of drugs in December 2022 after reportedly being forced to make a video-filmed “confession” under duress. He was sentenced to five years of restriction of freedom, similarly entailing restrictions of his movement, public activities and internet use.<sup>83</sup> IPHR, AHRCA and partners believe that charges against Yusupov, who was arrested shortly before he was due to travel to Warsaw for a human rights conference, were fabricated to punish him for his human rights activities.<sup>84</sup>

In another case of serious concern, sixty-year-old blogger **Shahida Salomova** was reportedly detained in December 2023 shortly after publishing posts accusing the president and his relatives of corruption and nepotism and subsequently committed to compulsory psychiatric treatment at a Tashkent clinic based on court order. Salomova’s family has reportedly been pressured to refrain from disclosing details about her case.<sup>85</sup>

The **operating space for NGOs remains seriously restricted** in Uzbekistan. The **process of registering new NGOs remains fraught with difficulties** and several independent human rights NGOs have repeatedly been denied registration on grounds that appear politically motivated. For example, in the last few years, human rights defender and former political prisoner **Agzam Turgunov** has received a dozen rejections when attempting to register the NGO Human Rights House, with the government referring to alleged minor technical mistakes in his application. He is currently preparing to file an application for registration for the 13th time.

A resolution adopted by the Cabinet of Ministers 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 projects.

As described above, due to the threat of criminal prosecution and other retaliatory measures, independent journalism and blogging remain high-risk activities in Uzbekistan. There have also been reports of **cyberattacks targeting independent media**, as well as of **arbitrary blocking of internet resources**. Under national law, the owners of online resources must ensure that their platforms are not used for the dissemination of “knowingly false” or “defamatory” information, or other information defined as impermissible in vaguely-worded language. The fact that **slander and insult remain criminalised** has a chilling impact on freedom of expression.<sup>86</sup>

## **Recommendations**

The Uzbekistani authorities should:

- Ensure that an independent investigation, with the participation of independent international experts, is carried out into July 2022 events in Karakalpakstan and the reported human rights violations and that those responsible for violations are held accountable.

- Repeal any convictions handed down against participants in the protests in Karakalpakstan on charges initiated because of their peaceful and legitimate exercise of the freedoms of expression, association and assembly and ensure that the allegations of torture in detention of Dauletmurat Tazhimuratov and others charged in this context are impartially and thoroughly investigated.
- Put an end to intimidation and harassment of independent journalists, activists and bloggers, and refrain from using criminal prosecution as a tool to penalise and silence such individuals.
- Immediately release Otabek Sattoriy, in accordance with the opinion issued by the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention, as well as Abdukadyr Muminov, Otabek Kodirov and others who are currently behind bars on charges initiated in apparent retaliation for their blogging activities.
- Repeal the restricted freedom sentences imposed on Miraziz Bazarov and Aziz Yusupov and ensure that they can carry out blogging, journalistic and human rights activities without fear of persecution.
- Ensure that Shahida Salomova is not subjected to compulsory psychiatric treatment in retaliation for her blogging activities.
- Swiftly grant registration to the Human Rights House and other independent NGOs seeking registration and bring national legislation and practice governing the activities of NGOs in line with Uzbekistan's international human rights obligations.
- Decriminalise slander and insult and ensure that any restrictions imposed on the exercise of freedom of expression both off and online are consistent with the requirements of international human rights law.

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<sup>1</sup> For more information, see briefing paper prepared by IPHR and Kazakhstan International Bureau for Human Rights and Rule of Law (KIBHR) for the EU-Kazakhstan Human Rights Dialogue in March 2023: <https://www.iphronline.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/IPHR-KIBHR-briefing-paper-for-EU-Kazakhstan-HR-dialogue-2023.pdf>; report issued by IPHR, KIBHR, the Coalition against Torture and the World Organisation against Torture (OMCT) in January 2023 on torture, ill-treatment and impunity related to the January 2022 events: <https://www.iphronline.org/we-don-t-even-cry-anymore.html>; joint CAT submission by the Coalition against Torture, IPHR and OMCT from March 2023: <https://www.iphronline.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/CAT-submission-final-22-March-1.pdf>; as well as a report published in May 2023 by Kazakhstan's Human Rights Alliance in Support of Fundamental Rights, [https://bureau.kz/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/ru\\_final.pdf](https://bureau.kz/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/ru_final.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> The Committee's concluding observations are available at:

[https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/\\_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CAT%2FC%2FKAZ%2FCO%2F4&Lang=en](https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CAT%2FC%2FKAZ%2FCO%2F4&Lang=en)

<sup>3</sup> For more information on recent developments, see briefing paper prepared by IPHR and KIBHR for the EU-Kazakhstan Human Rights Dialogue in March 2023: <https://www.iphronline.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/IPHR-KIBHR-briefing-paper-for-EU-Kazakhstan-HR-dialogue-2023.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> See more in IPHR statement on Mamaï's conviction: <https://www.iphronline.org/kazakhstan-opposition-party-leader-banned-from-campaigning.html>

<sup>5</sup> See joint statement by IPHR, KIBHR and partners: <https://www.iphronline.org/kazakhstan-drop-trumped-up-charges-release-opposition-leader.html>

<sup>6</sup> For more information, see the following KIBHR reports: <https://bureau.kz/novosti/marafonecz-ne-otorvalsya/>, [https://bureau.kz/publ-all/sobstvennaya\\_informaciya/politicheskij-tyani-tolkaj-v-tokaevskom-novom-kazahstane/](https://bureau.kz/publ-all/sobstvennaya_informaciya/politicheskij-tyani-tolkaj-v-tokaevskom-novom-kazahstane/)

<sup>7</sup> News article from 25 September 2023: <https://respublika.kz.media/archives/106028>

<sup>8</sup> <https://tirik.info/lists/zhylanbaev-marat/>; and the following report from the Kazak RFE/RL service:

<https://rus.azattyq.org/a/kazakhstan-opposition-activist-marat-zhylanbayev/32427878.html>

<sup>9</sup> For examples of cases of the dispersal of peaceful protests and the detention of participants, see IPHR-KIBHR update prepared for the CIVICUS Monitor, which was published in July 2023: <https://www.iphronline.org/no-real-space-for-opposition-activities-in-new-kazakhstan.html>

<sup>10</sup> For more information, see IPHR-KIBHR update published in July 2023: <https://www.iphronline.org/no-real-space-for-opposition-activities-in-new-kazakhstan.html>

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- <sup>11</sup> See more in the following media articles: <https://ulymedia.kz/news/20522-v-kazahstane-zarabotal-zakon-o-blogerakh-kak-on-budet-rabotat/>, <https://ulymedia.kz/analitika/18796-nas-poschitali-skoro-nakazhut-kak-budet-rabotat-zakon-kotoryi-dolzhen-navesti-poriadok-v-sotssetiakh/>
- <sup>12</sup> For more information on the attacks, see briefing paper prepared by IPHR and KIBHR for the EU-Kazakhstan Human Rights Dialogue in March 2023: <https://www.iphronline.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/IPHR-KIBHR-briefing-paper-for-EU-Kazakhstan-HR-dialogue-2023.pdf>
- <sup>13</sup> See the following news articles: [https://tengrinews.kz/kazakhstan\\_news/delo-napadeniyah-jurnalistov-sud-otnoshenii-klubanova-510978/](https://tengrinews.kz/kazakhstan_news/delo-napadeniyah-jurnalistov-sud-otnoshenii-klubanova-510978/), <https://orda.kz/delo-zhurnalistov-arkadij-klubanov-ne-privet-v-sud-376649/>
- <sup>14</sup> See <https://nalogikz.kz/docs/komitet-gosdohodov-budet-publikovat.html>
- <sup>15</sup> The list was published at: <https://kgd.gov.kz/ru/content/reestr-lic-poluchayushchih-dengi-i-ili-inoe-imushchestvo-ot-inostrannyh-gosudarstv>
- <sup>16</sup> For more information, see the following media article featuring an interview with KIBHR's Director Yevgeniy Zhovtis: <https://respublika.kz/media/archives/84811>
- <sup>17</sup> For more information on the most recent developments in Kyrgyzstan, see update prepared by IPHR and Legal Prosperity Foundation (LPF) as part of their cooperation with the CIVICUS Monitor, published in May 2023: <https://www.iphronline.org/kyrgyzstan-tightening-the-screws-on-free-speech-and-civic-engagement.html>
- <sup>18</sup> For comments on the draft law provided by the UN Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression, and the OSCE Representative of Freedom of the Media together with the OSCE Office of Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, respectively see: <https://spcommreports.ohchr.org/TMResultsBase/DownloadPublicCommunicationFile?gId=28183>, and <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/2/c/550627.pdf>
- <sup>19</sup> See, for example, comments by the Media Policy Institute: <https://ifex.org/under-the-guise-of-caring-for-children-kyrgyzstans-supreme-council-adopts-law-imposing-online-censorship/> and Human Rights Watch: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/06/27/kyrgyzstan-attacks-media-free-expression>
- <sup>20</sup> The full text of the law is available (in Kyrgyz and Russian) at: <http://www.kenesh.kg/ru/draftlaw/634430/show>
- <sup>21</sup> See joint appeal by IPHR and five other international NGOs on the initiative to shut down Kloop: <https://www.iphronline.org/kyrgyzstan-stop-pressuring-leading-independent-news-portal.html>
- <sup>22</sup> See Kloop update from 26 September 2023: <https://twitter.com/kloopnews/status/1706545369566376112>
- <sup>23</sup> See Kloop article from 11 September 2023: <https://kloop.kg/blog/2023/09/11/minkult-otklonil-zhalobu-kloopa-i-veroyatno-zablokiruet-sajt-po-zakonu-o-fejkah/>
- <sup>24</sup> See IPHR statement on the court decision in this case: <https://www.iphronline.org/court-rules-to-close-down-kyrgyz-service-of-radio-free-europe-radio-liberty.html>
- <sup>25</sup> See joint statement by IPHR and 10 other NGOs on the arrests in the Kempir-Abad case from October 2022: <https://www.iphronline.org/kyrgyzstan-mass-arrests-of-government-critics.html>
- <sup>26</sup> See joint NGO statement on the start of the trial in the Kempir-Abad case from July 2022: <https://www.iphronline.org/kyrgyzstan-ensure-fair-and-transparent-trial-in-the-kempir-abad-case.html>
- <sup>27</sup> See joint NGO statement on the arrests in the Kempir-Abad case from October 2022: <https://www.iphronline.org/kyrgyzstan-mass-arrests-of-government-critics.html>
- <sup>28</sup> See IPHR statement on Temirov's deportation from November 2022: <https://www.iphronline.org/kyrgyzstan-corruption-busting-journalist-deported-to-russia.html>
- <sup>29</sup> See legal analysis carried out by the Adilet Legal Clinic: <https://adilet.kg/ky/tpost/aozbr0hms1-pravovaya-pozitsiya-of-pravovaya-klinika/>
- <sup>30</sup> See Kloop article from 12 September 2023: <https://kloop.kg/blog/2023/09/12/verhovnyj-sud-ostavil-v-sile-reshenie-gorsuda-o-vidvorenii-iz-strany-zhurnalista-bolota-temirova/>
- <sup>31</sup> See Kloop article from 25 August 2023: <https://kloop.kg/blog/2023/08/25/gkn-olzhobaj-shakir-prizval-k-massovym-besporjadkam-i-delal-provokatsionnye-publikatsii/>
- <sup>32</sup> See <https://kloop.kg/blog/2023/08/25/mediasoobshhestvo-prizvalo-vlasti-zakryt-absurdnoe-delo-protiv-olzhobaya-shakira-i-vypustit-ego-na-svobodu/>
- <sup>33</sup> See opinion issued by the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) in December 2022: [https://org.legislationline.org/sites/default/files/2022-12/451-452\\_NGO\\_KGZ\\_12Dec2022\\_en.pdf](https://org.legislationline.org/sites/default/files/2022-12/451-452_NGO_KGZ_12Dec2022_en.pdf)
- <sup>34</sup> See joint appeal by IPHR and seven other international NGOs from June 2023: <https://www.iphronline.org/kyrgyzstan-reject-repressive-russian-style-draft-law-on-non-profit-organisations.html>
- <sup>35</sup> See <http://cbd.minjust.gov.kg/act/view/ru-ru/219673>, <https://kloop.kg/blog/2023/07/18/ombudsmen-vystupila-protiv-zakonoproekta-ob-inoagentah-i-prosit-ego-otozvat/>
- <sup>36</sup> See joint appeal by IPHR and CIVICUS: <https://www.iphronline.org/kyrgyzstan-withdraw-draft-law-threatening-ngos.html>
- <sup>37</sup> For examples, see update from May 2023: <https://www.iphronline.org/kyrgyzstan-tightening-the-screws-on-free-speech-and-civic-engagement.html>

- <sup>38</sup> See concluding observations issued by the UN Human Rights Committee: [https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/\\_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CCPR%2fC%2fKGZ%2fCO%2f3&Lang=en](https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CCPR%2fC%2fKGZ%2fCO%2f3&Lang=en)
- <sup>39</sup> For more information, see briefing paper by IPHR and partners from October 2022: <https://www.iphronline.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Briefing-paper-on-key-concerns-in-Central-Asia-October-2022.pdf>
- <sup>40</sup> For more information on this trend, see update prepared by IPHR as part of its cooperation with the CIVICUS Monitor, published in March 2023: <https://www.iphronline.org/tajikistan-continuous-crackdown-on-civil-society.html>
- <sup>41</sup> See the Rapporteur's end-of-visit statement at: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2022/12/tajikistan-human-rights-defenders-face-increasing-threats-climate-fear-says>
- <sup>42</sup> The of UN experts is available at: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2023/07/tajikistan-un-experts-deplore-criminal-proceedings-against-human-rights#:~:text=%E2%80%9CWe%20would%20like%20to%20remind,practice%2C%E2%80%9D%20the%20experts%20said.>
- <sup>43</sup> See joint statement by IPHR, the OMCT, Human Rights Watch, Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights, Norwegian Helsinki Committee, Frontline Defenders, International Federation for Human Rights and Freedom Now issued on 3 April 2023: <https://www.iphronline.org/tajikistan-manuchehr-kholiqnazarov-must-be-immediately-released.html>; and CIVICUS and IPHR statement issued on 8 September 2023: <https://www.iphronline.org/tajikistan-release-independent-human-rights-defender-joint-appeal-on-independence-day.html>
- <sup>44</sup> See article published by the Tajik service of RFE/RL on 26 May 2023: <https://rus.ozodi.org/a/32429694.html>
- <sup>45</sup> See statements on Fozilov's case issued by IPHR and partners: <https://www.iphronline.org/tajikistan-independent-journalist-handed-seven-year-sentence.html>, <https://www.iphronline.org/khurshed-fozilov-statement.html>
- <sup>46</sup> See statement issued by IPHR on 2 May 2023, <https://www.iphronline.org/tajikistan-new-criminal-case-against-buzurgmehr-yorov.html>, and article published by the Tajik service of RFE/RL on 12 July 2023: <https://rus.ozodi.org/a/32500920.html>
- <sup>47</sup> The opinion, issued in 2019, is available at: [https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Issues/Detention/Opinions/Session84/A\\_HRC\\_WGAD\\_2019\\_17.pdf](https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Issues/Detention/Opinions/Session84/A_HRC_WGAD_2019_17.pdf)
- <sup>48</sup> For more details, see article published by Asia Plus on 17 August 2023: <https://www.asiaplustj.info/en/news/tajikistan/society/20230817/almost-700-ngos-have-been-liquidated-in-tajikistan-why-is-it-bad-and-where-are-we-going>
- <sup>49</sup> See article published by the Tajik service of RFE/RL on 8 August 2023: <https://rus.ozodi.org/a/32538999.html>
- <sup>50</sup> See RFE/RL article published on 26 July 2023: <https://www.rferl.org/a/tajikistan-group-24-website-banned-extremist/32520928.html>
- <sup>51</sup> The draft law was posted on the Facebook page of the MP initiating it on 10 August 2023 (in Tajik): [https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story\\_fbid=2041891449477047&id=100009686354814&ref=embed\\_post](https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=2041891449477047&id=100009686354814&ref=embed_post)
- <sup>52</sup> See more comments in Kloop article published on 11 August 2023: <https://kloop.kg/blog/2023/08/11/nelogichnyj-i-gubitelnyj-v-tadzhikistane-hotyat-prinyat-zakonoproekt-o-blogerskoj-deyatelnosti/>
- <sup>53</sup> For example, Turkmenistan has repeatedly been ranked among the worst countries in the Speedtest monthly assessment of the average speed of fixed broadband connections worldwide: <https://www.speedtest.net/global-index>
- <sup>54</sup> For example, in 2022, the cheapest, unlimited monthly broadband internet access rate offered by the state monopoly internet provider, *Turkmentelekom* was about 10 percent of the minimum monthly salary for city residents and five percent for rural residents: <https://telecom.tm/ru/internet>
- <sup>55</sup> See <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2023-turkmenistan?rq=Turkmenistan>
- <sup>56</sup> For a recent example, see TIHR report from 27 July 2023: <https://www.hronikatm.com/2023/07/internet-interruptions/>
- <sup>57</sup> The study, "Measuring and Evading Turkmenistan's Internet Censorship: A Case Study in Large-Scale Measurements of a Low-Penetration Country" is available at: <https://arxiv.org/pdf/2304.04835.pdf>
- <sup>58</sup> The Committee's concluding observations are available at: [https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/\\_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CCPR%2fC%2fTKM%2fCO%2f3&Lang=en](https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CCPR%2fC%2fTKM%2fCO%2f3&Lang=en)
- <sup>59</sup> For more detailed case descriptions, see TIHR-IPHR submission to the Human Rights Committee, January 2023, <https://www.iphronline.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/TIHR-IPHR-submission-to-the-HR-Committee-January-2023.pdf>
- <sup>60</sup> Turkmen News report from 22 September 2023: <https://turkmen.news/mansura-mingelova-vygonayut-iz-tyuremnoj-bolnicy-v-kolonii-on-umret-v-techenie-neskolkih-mesyacev/>
- <sup>61</sup> See Turkmen Helsinki Foundation reports from 23 May and 25 May 2023: <https://www.tmhelsinki.org/article/8ddddd3e-238d-4335-816b-644d7ec5e270>, <https://www.tmhelsinki.org/article/a6177b10-6aec-4f43-9975-11a07619d1f4>; and TIHR report from 22 May 2023: <https://www.hronikatm.com/2023/05/fargat-durdyev-detained/>
- <sup>62</sup> Report from the Turkmen Helsinki Foundation from 3 August 2023: <https://www.tmhelsinki.org/article/df999951-7b5e-41e7-8962-f1944de92a44>
- <sup>63</sup> For more details, see IPHR-TIHR update from October 2021: <https://www.iphronline.org/turkmenistan-s-government-targets-critics-at-home-and-abroad-in-its-relentless-crackdown-on-dissent.html>
- <sup>64</sup> See TIHR report from 2 September 2023: <https://www.hronikatm.com/2023/09/2-more-activists-deported/>

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- <sup>65</sup> THR report from 14 September 2023: <https://tmhelsinki.org/article/89b1a32d-c58d-49de-a0b5-5a851800dcb1>
- <sup>66</sup> For two examples from this year, see reports from the Turkmen Helsinki Foundation from 8 February 2023 and 10 April 2023: <https://www.tmhelsinki.org/article/c6c0e061-1564-463a-aebd-b6de1f313cb7>, <https://www.tmhelsinki.org/article/50e7f783-9f65-4ee7-9119-00e57d48e318>
- <sup>67</sup> Information provided by the government at the Human Rights Committee review of Turkmenistan in Geneva on 2 March 2023.
- <sup>68</sup> For more information on this trend, and examples, see IPHR-TIHR update from June 2023: <https://www.iphronline.org/turkmenistan-un-human-rights-body-issues-important-findings-as-the-authorities-continue-to-reign-in-dissent.html>
- <sup>69</sup> Report from Turkmen News, 6 March 2023, <https://en.turkmen.news/news/turkmen-women-kicked-out-of-capital-for-trying-to-see-president/>
- <sup>70</sup> Report by the Turkmen service of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty from 7 August 2023: <https://rus.azathabar.com/a/v-turkmenbashi-sotni-lyudey-vyshli-na-aktsiyu-protesta-protiv-nehvatki-prodovolstviya/32537841.html>
- <sup>71</sup> The Committee's concluding observations are available at: [https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/\\_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CCPR%2FC%2FTKM%2FCO%2F3&Lang=en](https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CCPR%2FC%2FTKM%2FCO%2F3&Lang=en)
- <sup>72</sup> For more information about the Karapalpakstan events and related violations, see updated submission for the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) of Uzbekistan by Association for Human Rights in Central Asia (AHRCA) and IPHR from August 2023: <https://www.iphronline.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/Updated-UPR-Uzbekistan-report-August-2023.pdf>
- <sup>73</sup> See more in the following news report: [https://www.gazeta.uz/ru/2023/02/09/gp/?utm\\_source=push&utm\\_medium=telegram](https://www.gazeta.uz/ru/2023/02/09/gp/?utm_source=push&utm_medium=telegram)
- <sup>74</sup> The lawyer's appeal is available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nvSH1huhfLY>
- <sup>75</sup> See the High Commissioner's statement at: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/statements-and-speeches/2023/03/un-high-commissioner-human-rights-volker-turk-concludes-his>
- <sup>76</sup> For more information and case examples, see AHRCA-IPHR submission to the UPR: <https://www.iphronline.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/Updated-UPR-Uzbekistan-report-August-2023.pdf>
- <sup>77</sup> See more in AHRCA-IPHR submission to the UPR: <https://www.iphronline.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/Updated-UPR-Uzbekistan-report-August-2023.pdf>
- <sup>78</sup> See IPHR and AHRCA statement issued on 29 March 2023: <https://www.iphronline.org/uzbekistan-overturn-the-unfounded-criminal-sentence-against-blogger-otabek-sattoriy-and-release-him.html>
- <sup>79</sup> The opinion is available at: <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/issues/detention-wg/opinions/session95/A-HRC-WGAD-2022-83-AEV.pdf>
- <sup>80</sup> See AHRCA-IPHR statement from April 2023: <https://www.iphronline.org/uzbekistan-otabek-sattoriy-denied-transfer.html>
- <sup>81</sup> See more in AHRCA-IPHR submission to the UPR: <https://www.iphronline.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/Updated-UPR-Uzbekistan-report-August-2023.pdf>
- <sup>82</sup> See more in the following media reports: [https://t.me/sarpa\\_media/396](https://t.me/sarpa_media/396); <https://repost.uz/na-prof-besedu-vizivali>
- <sup>83</sup> See statement issued by IPHR, AHRCA, OMCT and the Norwegian Helsinki Committee on 22 December 2023: <https://www.iphronline.org/aziz-yusupov-released-but-prevented-from-continuing-his-work.html>
- <sup>84</sup> See joint NGO statement issued on 23 November 2023: <https://www.iphronline.org/uzbekistan-aziz-yusupov-on-trial-on-spurious-charges.html>
- <sup>85</sup> See more in AHRCA-IPHR submission to the UPR: <https://www.iphronline.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/Updated-UPR-Uzbekistan-report-August-2023.pdf>
- <sup>86</sup> See more in AHRCA-IPHR submission to the UPR: <https://www.iphronline.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/Updated-UPR-Uzbekistan-report-August-2023.pdf>