Kyrgyzstan: The case of journalist Ulugbek Babakulov, June 2017

The case of independent journalist Ulugbek Babakulov from Kyrgyzstan is of serious concern to IPHR. He is currently under investigation for reporting on aggressive nationalist rhetoric and risks a prison sentence.

The independent Moscow-based Fergana news site published an article by Ulugbek Babakulov on 23 May 2017 that drew attention to aggressive nationalist statements made against ethnic Uzbeks on social media in Kyrgyzstan. With this article, Babakulov wanted to highlight the problem of anti-Uzbek intolerance and discrimination and the lack of efforts by the authorities to address it. Following the publication of the article, Ulugbek Babakulov was targeted by a public smear campaign, labelled an “enemy of the people”, and threatened with reprisals on social media. MPs suggested depriving him of his citizenship.

The situation aggravated further after a program was aired on Kyrgyzstan’s major TV channel on 27 May 2017, which accused Ulugbek Babakulov of inciting inter-ethnic hatred and called for the Fergana news site to be blocked in the country. Less than two weeks later, on 9 June 2017, Oktyabyarsky district court in Bishkek ruled to block this site, and national security services opened a criminal case against Babakulov on charges of inciting inter-ethnic hatred, an offense that carries a sentence of up to seven years in prison, or 10 years in prison in aggravated circumstances. According to the security services, Babakulov had published a series of articles on the Fergana news site and other resources that were of a “provocative nature” and “aimed at inciting inter-ethnic hostility and hatred and creating conditions for the aggravation of inter-ethnic relations”.

In a statement condemning the criminal case against the journalist, the Committee for the Protection of Journalists (CPJ) said that: “Investigating Ulugbek Babakulov for inciting ethnic hatred because he criticized those who he said incited ethnic hatred is an outrage”.

Because of the risk of politically motivated imprisonment and fears for his safety, Ulugbek Babakulov has now fled from Kyrgyzstan. In a post on Facebook, he wrote that security officials had told him that there is a plan to initiate a “show trial” against him, similar to that one against ethnic Uzbek human rights defender Azimjan Askarov. After Babakulov fled the country, the smear campaign against him has continued in pro-government media and on social media, and his family in Kyrgyzstan has continued to be subjected to surveillance and intimidation.

Ulugbek Babakulov has also previously faced pressure, in particular after drawing attention to nationalist rhetoric used in a leading Kyrgyz TV show in May 2015. President Almazbek Atambayev has publicly accused Babakulov of spreading “dirt”, and in December 2016, Babakulov and several other journalists were denied access to the president’s press conference, with the president describing them as “hysterics” and “PR:ists”.

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The blocking of the Fergana news site and the criminal case against Ulugbek Babakulov come against a background of a generally worsening environment for freedom of speech in Kyrgyzstan.

We urge the EU and other international partners of Kyrgyzstan to prominently raise this case with the authorities of Kyrgyzstan and to call on the authorities of the country to:

- Drop the criminal charges against Ulugbek Babakulov, who has been prosecuted for exercising his right to freedom of expression and for seeking to expose dangerous nationalist rhetoric in the country.
- Ensure the safety of Babakulov’s family members in Kyrgyzstan
- Promptly unblock the Fergana news site.