IPHR International Partnership for Human Rights

Curtailment of Civic Space in Central Asia:
Briefing for the EU and International Partners

A briefing paper prepared by International Partnership for Human Rights (IPHR), drawing on monitoring conducted in cooperation with Central Asian partners, highlights alarming civic space trends across the five Central Asian countries – Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. It is intended to inform the actions of the EU and other international partners in their engagement with the governments of the region.

IPHR urges the EU and other international actors to place concerns about declining civic freedoms high on the agenda as they pursue strengthened partnerships with the Central Asian countries. They should use every opportunity to insist on meaningful measures to halt repressive practices, ensure accountability for violations, and improve protection for independent voices.

At a time of increasing global instability and mounting challenges to internationally agreed rules, it is imperative that the EU remain true to its commitment to value-based partnerships. Defending space for independent media, civil society and broad-based public participation must be treated not as a secondary issue, but as a core component of sustainable security in Central Asia.

The briefing covers the following key issues of concern:

Excessive and discriminatory restrictions on CSOs

Central Asian policymakers have used the debate surrounding the overhaul of US foreign assistance to intensify hostile rhetoric against foreign-funded CSOs and to propose new, restrictive measures. CSOs that expose corruption, document abuse or promote equality and non-discrimination have been singled out for particular attack.

Although **Kyrgyzstan's** 2024 "foreign representatives" law has not yet been enforced as harshly as feared, it has created a widespread climate of fear and self-censorship, leading CSOs to reduce public activities, avoid sensitive language, suspend programmes or – in some cases – close.

While foreign-funded CSOs in **Kazakhstan** were already subject to a stigmatising reporting regime, oversight has been further tightened and tax authorities granted expanded powers to inspect such groups.

CSOs in **Uzbekistan** face persistent registration barriers and restrictive procedures to access foreign

funding, with recently approved legislation requiring regular public disclosure of foreign-sourced assets.

Hundreds of CSOs have been forced to close in **Tajikistan** in recent years, while those remaining are subject to close scrutiny and frequent inspections, including with respect to their use of foreign grants.

Turkmenistan's restrictive political framework effectively prevents independent human rights groups from operating inside the country, while registered organisations work within strictly defined boundaries.

Alongside government restrictions, CSOs experience declining funding opportunities throughout the region, leaving many struggling to sustain their work.

Widening crackdown on independent media, reporting and information-sharing

Across Central Asia, media freedom is on a marked downward trajectory due to restrictive legislation, growing state control over the information space, and mounting pressure on independent media, journalists and bloggers.

In **Kyrgyzstan**, the media climate has sharply deteriorated in the last two years: independent outlets have been subjected to raids, court-enforced closures and "extremist" designations in retaliation for their reporting, while journalists and bloggers are increasingly prosecuted and convicted on flimsy charges over material exposing abuse and criticising those in power.

In **Kazakhstan**, independent media, journalists and bloggers have also come under growing attack when addressing issues sensitive to the authorities. Tactics have included online harassment, coordinated abuse of social media content-complaint mechanisms, denial of accreditation, and the initiation of criminal cases.

In **Uzbekistan**, draft legislation could introduce new restrictions, including compulsory registration for both print and online media, similar to recent laws adopted in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan. Authorities continue to prosecute outspoken journalists and bloggers, and coordinated campaigns have resulted in the removal of social media accounts critical of the government.

Tajikistan's authorities interfere heavily with the media, tightly controlling content and limiting access to information amid shrinking space for independent reporting and open debate. The number of independent media outlets has declined significantly, while a record number of journalists are behind bars.

In **Turkmenistan**, fully state-controlled media provide exclusively positive coverage of the government and promote official narratives of prosperity, while pervasive internet censorship – reportedly reinforced by corruption – restricts access to independent sources of information and dissent is vigorously suppressed.

Violations of protesters' rights

Widespread impunity persists related to the use of excessive force, torture, and other serious violations committed during the 2022 suppression of mass protests in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan (Karakalpakstan), and Tajikistan (Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Region – GBAO).

The number of officials convicted for torture and other abuses during **Kazakhstan's** "Bloody January" events remains low given the scale of reported violations, while penalties have often been lenient, and victims have received inadequate compensation.

An official investigation in **Uzbekistan** concluded that the Karakalpakstan protests were lawfully dispersed and participants' rights protected, and only a few officials were held accountable, despite credible independent reports of widespread violations.

Similarly, the lack of progress on ensuring accountability in GBAO in **Tajikistan** highlights the need for renewed international calls for impartial investigations, prosecutions of all perpetrators, and justice for victims of the 2022 dispersals of mass protests.

Meanwhile, the freedom of peaceful assembly continues to be curtailed in the region.

A court-sanctioned ban on protests – initially introduced in response to a request from the Russian embassy to end anti-war protests outside its premises – has repeatedly been extended in the capital of **Kyrgyzstan**.

Authorities in **Kazakhstan** continue to arbitrarily deny permission for peaceful assemblies, detain and penalise those gathering without official sanction, and round up activists ahead of feared protests as a "preventive measure".

While suppressing spontaneous expressions of discontent, authorities in **Turkmenistan** continue the practice of forcible mobilisation of citizens for state events.

Persecution of critical voices

Across the region, activists, human rights defenders, journalists and others who criticise government policies, expose violations and advocate for justice face persecution, including arrest, unfair trials, and politically motivated imprisonment.

Charges are frequently based on overly broad provisions of the criminal code, such as those related to disseminating "false" or slanderous information, "inciting" discord or riots, or alleged "extremism". Those convicted are often held in harsh detention conditions, compounding concerns about their safety and well-being.

Repression also extends beyond borders, with critics abroad increasingly targeted through transnational measures.

The briefing describes individual cases of particular concern to IPHR and its partners that form part of a broader pattern.

The decline in civic freedoms in Central Asia is reflected in the countries' ratings on the *CIVICUS Monitor*, a global initiative with which IPHR and its Central Asian partners cooperate on tracking civic space in the region. All Central Asian countries now fall into the two lowest categories on the Monitor: Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan are classified as "repressed," while Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan are rated as having a "closed" civic space. When new global data was published in late 2025, the scores of all five countries had *deteriorated* since the previous year, illustrating the negative dynamics.

Taken together, recent developments point to a pattern of sustained, region-wide curtailment of civic space that demands a principled and consistent response by the EU and other international partners. Clearly articulated performance criteria, sustained scrutiny and credible consequences for continued violations – enforced through available and expanding cooperation mechanisms – are essential to reversing current trends and securing tangible improvements.

The briefing paper, "Stifled Voices: The Suppression of Civic Space in Central Asia", can be downloaded *here*.