Kazakhstan: Authorities must end pressure on independent journalists ahead of Kurultai elections

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Independent journalists in Kazakhstan are facing increasing pressure ahead of the 23 August elections to the Kurultai, the new unicameral parliament introduced under the constitution and approved in a referendum in March 2026. The undersigned human rights organizations are particularly concerned about recent criminal proceedings against journalists Dinara Yegubaeva and Lukpan Akhmedyarov, the recent conviction of journalist Alexandra Alyokhova, and the detention of political commentator Azamat Omarov. These cases form part of a broader, longer-term pattern of increasing pressure on independent media and journalists in Kazakhstan, including the use of politically motivated charges, online restrictions on access to information, and other forms of harassment and intimidation against those who criticize the authorities. The undersigned organizations share the alarming concerns expressed by local civil society and media freedom watchdogs that political pressure has reached an unprecedented level, warranting enhanced attention from the international community.

The undersigned organizations call on the authorities in Kazakhstan to immediately cease all forms of harassment and pressure against journalists and media entities, ensure that criminal and administrative measures are not used to obstruct or retaliate against independent journalism, and guarantee that journalists and media can freely cover the upcoming elections and report on matters of public interest without fear of retaliation or interference. They also urge Kazakhstan's international partners to use all available diplomatic and other means to help bring an end to the current escalation and to ensure Kazakhstan upholds its international obligations with respect to freedom of expression and media freedom.

Criminal proceedings against Dinara Yegeubaeva

In Almaty, police initiated criminal proceedings against independent journalist Dinara Yegeubaeva after a traffic incident that took place on 31 July 2026.

Footage from the scene of the incident appears to show a cyclist riding at speed against the direction of traffic in a residential area, before crashing into a car that is slowly driving onto the road from an adjacent street. Ms. Yegeubaeva is the driver of the car.

On 1 August 2026, the cyclist filed a complaint with the police, alleging bodily harm and seeking compensation of 3 million Kazakhstani tenge (approximately USD 6400) for material damages. The police subsequently initiated criminal proceedings under Article 345(1) of the Criminal Code of Kazakhstan, concerning violations of traffic rules resulting in moderate bodily harm.

Yegeubaeva's lawyer, Galym Nurpeisov, told the undersigned human rights organizations about what he described as several procedural irregularities in the authorities' handling of the criminal case.

According to Nurpeisov, issues relating to material damage should be addressed through civil proceedings while there is no justification for a criminal case. He noted that police failed to prepare an official diagram of the scene of the incident, an important step in establishing responsibility of those involved. Furthermore, he told the undersigned organizations that no forensic medical examination had been conducted to establish the nature and extent of the cyclist's alleged injuries. In addition, only his client's car was seized as evidence, while the bicycle in question was not.

Alarmingly, the lawyer stated that Yegeubaeva has been placed under a travel restriction preventing her from leaving Kazakhstan while the criminal proceedings against her are ongoing. Given the circumstances of the incident, restricting her freedom of movement appears excessive and disproportionate.

The undersigned organizations are concerned that the criminal proceedings and travel restrictions may disproportionately affect Ms. Yegeubaeva's ability to carry out her legitimate professional journalistic activities and may impede her ability to freely and effectively cover the upcoming 23 August elections.

While the above-mentioned video footage of the incident does show a collision between a cyclist and Ms. Yegeubayeva's vehicle, it also appears to undermine the basis for attributing criminal responsibility to her. The footage appears to show the cyclist travelling against the direction of traffic and colliding with Ms. Yegeubayeva's vehicle as she was slowly driving onto the road. While the footage alone cannot establish all the circumstances or determine legal responsibility for the collision, it raises serious questions as to why the incident has resulted in criminal proceedings against Ms. Yegeubayeva.

These circumstances, together with Ms. Yegeubayeva's role as a journalist and government critic, as well as previous attacks and pressure against her, raise concerns that the measures against her, including criminal proceedings and a travel ban, appear to be disproportionate and have the effect, or be intended, to intimidate and silence her ahead of the 23 August elections.

Criminal proceedings against journalist Lukpan Akhmedyarov

On 12 August, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty's (RFE/RL) Kazakh service reported that Astana police opened a pre-trial investigation in relation to independent journalist Lukpan Akhmedyarov under Article 274 of the Criminal Code of Kazakhstan, which penalizes dissemination of knowingly false information. Crimes under Article 274 carry

punishment of up to three years if conducted “through the use of mass media, telecommunications networks or online platforms”.

Akhmedyarov told the undersigned organizations on August 12 that he learned about the criminal investigation from RFE/RL and that police had not informed him about any ongoing criminal proceedings against him.

The case reportedly stems from a social media post published by Akhmedyarov in April of this year. In the post, Akhmedyarov shared a list published by I Want to Live (“Хочу Жить”), a Ukrainian government project facilitating the voluntary surrender of Russian servicemen, naming Kazakhstani citizens allegedly participating in Russia’s full-scale war against Ukraine.

One of the individuals named on the list subsequently filed a complaint with the authorities, claiming that he had not participated in the war and had instead worked in Russia on a rotational basis. In late July and early August 2026, two Kazakhstani citizens published videos on Instagram in which they addressed Akhmedyarov and claimed they had been wrongfully included in the list published by him. Akhmedyarov maintains that he never wrote or claimed that all 661 individuals named in the list had participated in the war, but that his intention was to draw the attention of Kazakh authorities to the reported recruitment of Kazakhstani citizens to Russia’s war against Ukraine.

The criminal investigation comes amid a broader pattern of pressure on Akhmedyarov in connection with his activities as a journalist. In June 2026, he was detained by police in his hometown Uralsk and held for hours. Before the police released him, they reportedly informed him that he was wanted by Russian law enforcement, allegedly in connection to a criminal investigation against him under Article 207.3(2)(3) of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation, which criminalizes public dissemination of knowingly false information concerning the Russian armed forces. The provision carries punishment ranging from a fine to seven years’ imprisonment in the Russian Federation, while these acts do not constitute a crime in Kazakhstan.

Earlier this year, Akhmedyarov and his colleagues had released a documentary film about Kazakhstani citizens being recruited to participate in Russia’s illegal war in Ukraine, which Akhmedyarov at the time believed to be the reason for the proceedings against him in Russia. However, on 11 August, a Facebook account using the name Shakir Sukhabedrin commented on one of Akhmedyarov’s Facebook posts and claimed to be behind the criminal proceedings against the journalist. The commenter also made threatening and derogatory statements about Akhmedyarov, including that he would continue to pursue him.

The latest development is particularly concerning given that Akhmedyarov was also prevented from leaving Kazakhstan earlier this month. On August 3, 2026, border guards prevented Akhmedyarov from leaving Kazakhstan and informed him that he was

subject to a travel ban. Akhmedyarov told the undersigned organizations that he was on his way to a planned family holiday in Montenegro when border guards stopped him at Nursultan Nazarbayev International Airport in Astana. According to Akhmedyarov, the border guards told him that Astana city police had imposed the exit ban, but he was not informed at the time about the legal grounds for, or reasons behind, the restriction.

Criminal case against Alexandra Alyokhova

On 3 August 2026, the Almalinsky District Court in Almaty convicted journalist Alexandra Alyokhova, known by her pen name "Sentsova", in a closed hearing. Alyokhova, a mother of four, three of whom are minors, was sentenced to three years' imprisonment, suspended for five years, and barred from engaging in journalism for three years. Media representatives were not permitted to attend the hearing.

Alyokhova was convicted under Part 5 of Article 147 of the Criminal Code of Kazakhstan, which criminalizes the unlawful dissemination through mass media of personal data constituting private information where substantial harm is caused to a person's rights and legitimate interests. The provision carries a prison sentence of three to seven years.

Alyokhova was sentenced in connection with the publication of personal information about an individual involved in a conflict reportedly occurring at Kenzhehan Bazaar in Almaty. However, the same information had already been publicly disseminated by a popular Telegram channel before Alyokhova published it. This raises questions about the extent to which the information could reasonably have been regarded as confidential or non-public at the time of her publication. Moreover, according to a judgement in a related case involving the journalist Oleg Gusev, an internal police investigation identified a law enforcement officer as the source of the initial disclosure of the information. The officer in question received a disciplinary sanction, while neither the officer nor the owner of the Telegram channel has faced criminal prosecution in connection with the disclosure or publication of the information. This differing treatment suggests a possible selective application of the law.

The undersigned organizations are concerned that criminal prosecution and the imposition of a ban on journalism in such circumstances risk creating a harmful precedent, where journalists may face severe criminal penalties for reporting on information that is already in the public domain. The case also raises concerns about the selective and inconsistent enforcement of privacy and criminal laws against journalists. The groups also called on authorities in Kazakhstan to review Alyokhova's conviction in light of Kazakhstan's obligations to protect freedom of expression and media freedom.

Detention of and criminal proceedings against Azamat Omarov

On 18 July, police in Astana detained journalist, political commentator and blogger Azamat Omarov, who runs the YouTube channel *Akhual Segodnya*. The detention was initially reported by human rights defender Bakhytzhan Toregozhina. Subsequent to his detention, a court in Astana ordered Umarov to be held in pre-trial detention for two months as a suspect under Article 174 of the Criminal Code, concerning incitement of social, national, racial or religious discord.

According to Omarov's lawyer, Tolegen Shaikov, the case is based on videos in which Omarova made satirical and critical comments about the authorities and President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev. Speaking to RFE/RL's Kazakh service, the lawyer said that Omarov rejects the allegations and that he considers his publications to be satire and humor.

On 22 July, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Culture and Information Aida Balayeva published a Facebook post in which she sought to counter claims that Omarov was being prosecuted for satire. In the post, she wrote that freedom of expression is guaranteed in Kazakhstan and that satire and humor in themselves do not constitute offences. She nevertheless argued that liability may arise under Article 174 when information or content containing ''signs of incitement to hatred'' is disseminated, even when the material is presented as satire.

However, authorities have not publicly identified which specific statements by Omarov are alleged to constitute incitement of discord. In the absence of such information, his detention under Article 174 raises serious concerns that overbroad and vague criminal provisions may be used to restrict and retaliate against satire, criticism of government officials and political commentary. This concern is heightened by the authorities' previous use of this article to imprison activists over legitimate and peaceful expression, including a group of activists from the *Atajurt* movement earlier this year.

Run-up to Kurultai elections

The cases of Dinara Yegeubaeva, Lukpan Akhmedyarov, Alexandra Alyokhova and Azamat Omarov come at a time when Kazakhstan prepares to hold its first elections to the new Kurultai on 23 August 2026. The Kurultai will serve as the country's new unicameral legislature under the new constitution, which entered into force in July 2026.

The undersigned groups underline that free and independent media operating without harassment, persecution, intimidation, undue government interference and obstacles is essential to ensuring that voters can access diverse information and participate meaningfully in public life without fear of official reprisal.

The undersigned groups call on the Kazakhstani authorities to:

- **Ensure independent journalism:** Guarantee that independent journalists can report freely on matters of public interest before, during and after the elections, without fear of criminal prosecution, arbitrary restrictions or other forms of retaliation.
- **End harassment and intimidation:** Immediately end all forms of harassment, intimidation and undue pressure against independent journalists and media outlets.
- **Cease the misuse of legal measures:** Ensure that criminal investigations and other legal measures are not used to obstruct, punish or retaliate against journalism
- **Guarantee freedom of movement:** Ensure that journalists are able to travel freely and are not subjected to arbitrary or disproportionate restrictions on their movement.
- **Uphold international obligations:** Protect freedom of expression, media freedom and the public's right to access information in line with Kazakhstan's international human rights obligations.

The undersigned organizations also call on Kazakhstan's international partners to:

- **Closely monitor the situation:** Follow developments before, during and after the elections, with particular attention to restrictions and reprisals against independent journalists and media outlets.
- **Raise concerns publicly:** Advise against harassment, intimidation, criminal prosecution and other restrictions targeting independent journalism.
- **Promote a safe environment:** Use all available diplomatic and other means to ensure a safe and enabling environment for independent journalism in Kazakhstan.

The undersigned groups are:

Adil Soz International Foundation

Araminta

Civil Rights Defenders

Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ)

Crude Accountability

Freedom For Eurasia

International Partnership for Human Rights (IPHR)

Kazakhstan International Bureau for Human Rights and Rule of Law

Norwegian Helsinki Committee