Civic Space and Fundamental Freedoms in Kyrgyzstan: Priorities, Cases and Recommendations for EU Engagement

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IPHR International Partnership for Human Rights

IPHR - International Partnership for Human Rights is an independent, non-governmental organisation founded in 2008. Based in Brussels, IPHR works closely together with civil society groups from different countries to raise human rights concerns at the international level and promote respect for the rights of vulnerable communities in repressive environments.

W https://IPHRonline.org
E IPHR@IPHRonline.org
 @iphr_ngo
f @IPHRonline

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Introduction

The current briefing paper has been prepared to inform EU engagement in relation to Kyrgyzstan, including the upcoming EU-Kyrgyzstan Human Rights Dialogue, expected to take place in November 2026. It highlights key concerns relating to civic space, democratic participation and the protection of the freedoms of expression, association and peaceful assembly in Kyrgyzstan, as well as individual cases of concern to IPHR and partners. We urge the EU to prominently raise these issues and cases with the Kyrgyzstani authorities and call for concrete steps to address them and ensure tangible improvements, in line with Kyrgyzstan's international human rights obligations and its commitments under the EU-Kyrgyzstan Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement, which was signed in 2024 and is currently pending ratification.

The breakup of the informal ruling tandem between President Sadyr Japarov and his long-term ally, security chief Kamchybek Tashiev, in February 2026 initially raised cautious hopes for a change in the authorities' approach to dissent, as Tashiev had overseen a widening campaign against critics during his tenure. As documented in this briefing, the period following Tashiev's departure has also seen some limited positive developments in individual cases, such as the release of independent journalist Makhabat Tazhibek kyzy pending a review of her case, an appeal court decision upholding the earlier acquittal of activists in the so-called Kempir Abad case, and reduced sentences issued on appeal in some other cases. However, while welcome, these developments have not amounted to a broader shift in policy or practice, and the pattern of persecution of critical voices has persisted. It is particularly troubling that criminal cases continue to be pursued under broadly worded provisions such as those penalising incitement to discord and calls for unrest or the forceful seizure of power, typically based on questionable conclusions of state-appointed experts. Repression also extends beyond Kyrgyzstan's borders, with critics who have fled the country continuing to face persecution abroad.

Recent statements by high-level officials further reflect the authorities' continued intolerance of criticism and dissent. In a highly controversial move, in July 2026, the communications head of the presidential administration published a list of dozens of human rights defenders, activists, journalists, lawyers and opposition figures, whom he threatened with prosecution and imprisonment for allegedly spreading "fake news" and "discrediting" the government in relation to China, land use and foreign debt. More broadly, in statements made in June and September 2026, President Japarov warned that authorities would take strict measures against those who spread "slander and lies", "mislead" people, and "deliberately stoke divisions" around contentious issues. He has particularly called for harsh penalties for alleged "enemies of the people", accusing them of seeking to destabilise the country with the support of external forces. This kind of rhetoric contradicts official assurances that freedom of expression is protected in the country, while stigmatising critical voices, heightening the risks they face and further contributing to a chilling environment for public debate.

New implementing regulations for the 2025 media law retain mandatory registration requirements for both traditional and online media and set out broadly worded grounds for closing media outlets. In practice, independent media platforms have been subjected to mounting pressure, including through the designation of materials published by Kloop, Temirov Live and its sister

project Ayt Ayt Dese as “extremist”, rendering it a criminal offence to share or otherwise engage with their materials.

At the same time, the 2024 “foreign representatives” law continues to pose a serious threat to civil society and has resulted in widespread self-censorship among civil society organisations. The law’s chilling impact was documented by a December 2025 UN study, which found that nearly 80 percent of surveyed organisations had reduced public activities, avoided criticism, or engaged in other forms of self-censorship to avoid being targeted under it.

The 2025 abolition of the National Centre for the Prevention of Torture (NCPT) and the transfer of its functions to the Ombudsperson’s Office raised serious concerns among civil society and international experts about the weakening of independent safeguards against torture. These concerns are compounded by persistent shortcomings in investigating torture allegations and ensuring accountability and effective remedies for victims.

Space for political pluralism and opposition remains heavily circumscribed, a trend reinforced by the criminal prosecution of opposition activists and other recent moves against opposition initiatives. There are concerns that further attempts to stifle political opposition, dissent and protest may follow as the January 2027 presidential elections draw closer.

Recent developments underscore the importance of sustained EU attention to civic freedoms in Kyrgyzstan. The EU should insist on effective measures to reverse restrictive trends, including by ending the use of broadly worded criminal provisions against critical voices; safeguarding the operating space for independent media, civil society and political opposition; and safeguarding the right to peaceful assembly in accordance with international standards.

The following sections examine the concerns summarised above in a more comprehensive manner and provides detailed recommendations for concrete steps that the EU should urge the Kyrgyzstani authorities to take.

Evolving political context

Decreasing space for political opposition

The **early parliamentary elections** held in Kyrgyzstan in November 2025 took place in a restrictive political environment and further consolidated the power of political forces supportive of President Japarov. International observers concluded that, while technically administered efficiently, the elections were undermined by limited political competition and pressure on media and civil society.

As the **presidential election**, scheduled for 27 January 2027, draws closer, the climate for free speech and discussion of issues of public interest remains highly restrictive. While the process of candidate registration is still under way, President Japarov is not expected to meet any real challenger.

Some of those who have announced plans to run in the elections have faced obstacles in terms of passing the required Kyrgyz language test. According to media reports, former high-ranking police officer Syimyk Zhapykeev and former Interior Minister Omurbek Suvanaliev both failed the test in early October 2026 after falling slightly short of the required score in the written component, while comfortably exceeding the minimum requirement in the other components. They both complained that the requirements were excessively demanding, arguing that candidates effectively need advanced written competence and that being able to speak Kyrgyz well is not sufficient to pass. Later the same month Zhapykeev retook the test and eventually reported passing it on this occasion. Shortly prior to the retake, he was temporarily detained by police reportedly based on a complaint from neighbours alleging disturbing behaviour.

Other recent developments have reinforced concerns about renewed efforts to suppress political opposition. In the lead-up to the parliamentary elections a group of opposition figures were detained for allegedly planning unrest after the elections. Among those targeted was **Temirlan Sultanbekov**, leader of the opposition Social Democrats party. Following a trial held behind closed doors, on 8 October 2026, Sultanbekov was convicted of plotting to seize power by force and sentenced to seven years in prison amid serious questions about the evidence supporting these charges. A defence lawyer stressed that none of the four expert examinations conducted had found any calls for violence, nor had any concrete plan to seize power been detected. According to Sultanbekov, a video recording presented by the prosecution as key evidence against him and his co-defendants had been heavily edited, with external audio material added, while the judge denied a request for a technical examination of the recording. Two of Sultanbekov's co-defendants, including Kadyrbek Atambayev, deputy chair of the Social Democrats, also received prison sentences on similar charges.

Sultanbekov has denounced the charges against him as politically motivated, insisting his party only seeks to address political issues using dialogue and other lawful means. In an open appeal to President Japarov, he described his conviction as the culmination of a six-year-long campaign of persecution and suggested that the proceedings had been closed to the public to conceal his lack of guilt. He called on the president to ensure that his appeal is heard in a transparent manner, as people "have the right to know and see everything". The Party of European Socialists also strongly condemned Sultanbekov's and Atambayev's sentences, saying: "The closed-door proceedings and serious concerns surrounding this case raise profound questions about the rule of law and democratic space in Kyrgyzstan."

In another recent development that has prompted concerns about politically motivated attempts to suppress political opposition, in mid-October 2026, a new opposition initiative called **Shumkar** was declared "extremist" by court order. The initiative was established by several well-known public figures critical of President Japarov and the current authorities. Shortly after the extremist designation, one of Shumkar's leaders, blogger and ex-official Syrgak Kenzhebaev was detained in Vietnam by Kyrgyzstani police, returned to Kyrgyzstan and placed in pre-trial detention on charges of fraud and calling for riots. Authorities accused him of publishing "provocative" online materials, including by allegedly calling for rallies, unrest and the seizure of power. Prior to his detention, Kenzhebaev had published video material accusing family members of President Japarov of "controlling" Kyrgyzstan's customs services and interfering in political affairs, allegations that the

presidential administration rejected as "lies". Kenzhebaev is reportedly considering running in the presidential elections.

Breakup of informal ruling tandem and its implications

In a high-profile development, in February 2026, President Japarov unexpectedly dismissed his close ally, head of the State Committee for National Security (SCNS) Kamchybek Tashiev, **ending a powerful informal tandem** that had shaped politics in Kyrgyzstan since 2020. The dismissal came amid debate over possible early presidential elections linked to uncertainty about the length of Japarov's current term. While the Supreme Court later ruled out early elections, members of a group of 75 public figures who called for such elections – and were perceived as supporters of Tashiev – faced questioning and detention. In July 2026, Tashiev and several co-defendants were convicted of plotting to seize power in this context. They received four-year prison sentences but were released on probation.

During his tenure as security chief, Tashiev oversaw a widening campaign against government critics. His departure and subsequent initiatives to reform the security apparatus therefore **sparked guarded hope for a change** in the authorities' approach to dissent. Following a civil society appeal to review cases against journalists and activists, a presidential spokesperson indicated that law enforcement practices would be reconsidered, with greater emphasis on preventive measures and less frequent use of arrest during investigations. The period since Tashiev's departure has also seen some **limited positive steps** in individual cases, such as the release of Temirov Live journalist Makhabat Tazhibek kyzy pending a review of her case, an appeal court decision upholding the earlier acquittal of activists in the so-called Kempir Abad case and reduced sentences issued on appeal in some other cases (see more in the section on the persecution of activists, journalists and bloggers).

However, there has been **no fundamental shift** in the authorities' attitudes towards dissent, and the **pattern of misusing criminal legislation** to penalise government critics for their legitimate exercise of fundamental freedoms has persisted. New troubling cases have been initiated, and new politically motivated convictions have been handed down (see more above and in the section on the persecution of activists, journalists and bloggers).

Recommendations to the Kyrgyzstani authorities:

- Implement effective measures to ensure a genuinely pluralistic, competitive and inclusive electoral environment, in line with recommendations by international experts.
- Refrain from unduly restricting legitimate political opposition activities, including through the misuse of "extremism" or other legislation.
- Stop the politically motivated use of criminal charges against opposition representatives, release those baselessly held, and ensure that proceedings fully comply with international due process and fair trial standards.

- Initiate comprehensive reforms of criminal law and law enforcement practices to prevent their misuse against government critics in retaliation for the legitimate exercise of freedom of expression and other fundamental freedoms.

Escalating pressure on independent media

The media climate in Kyrgyzstan has **sharply deteriorated** in the last few years. The country plunged markedly in the 2025 World Press Freedom Index: to 144th out of 180 countries. In the 2026 Index, its rating remained similar: 146th, which is 64 places lower than in 2020, when the current president first came to power.

In April 2026, the government adopted implementation regulations for the new media law in force since August 2025. Like the media law, the implementing regulations require both traditional and online outlets to undergo registration and contain provisions that could result in **arbitrary implementation**. In particular, while registration may only be denied if applicants lack the right to found a media outlet or another outlet is already registered under the same name, media outlets may be **closed down on broad, vaguely defined grounds**, including the dissemination of information that is deemed to contain calls for the forcible change of the constitutional order or to incite ethnic, national or other discord. Outlets receiving more than three warnings for such violations within one year may be liquidated by court order. These provisions are particularly troubling given that similar, unsubstantiated charges have repeatedly been used to prosecute and penalise outspoken journalists, bloggers and activists.

Moreover, in accordance with the implementing regulations, media outlets must undergo re-registration if they change their names or the composition of their founders and must inform the registration authorities within 30 days of other changes, such as changes to their address, phone number, website address, chief editor, or the passport details of founders or chief editors. Information about media outlets, their founders and chief editors are included in a publicly accessible register. Failure to provide the required information may result in legal liability for founders or chief editors. The new registry of media outlets was launched in late October 2026.

Other recently adopted legislation, introducing vaguely worded provisions penalising the dissemination of "false" information and the possession of "extremist" materials, has also raised fears that its implementation could stifle freedom of expression and media freedom.

In practice, independent outlets have been subjected to **mounting pressure**. The organisation running the investigative platform **Kloop** was closed by court in 2024 over allegedly "negative" coverage and "sharp criticism" of the government. While continuing its work through another organisation, the platform has faced ongoing harassment, including the arbitrary detention and criminal prosecutions of contributors, resulting in four convictions in September 2025. Two Kloop journalists were initially handed prison sentences, but their sentences were changed to probation on appeal in November 2025, although their convictions were upheld (see more in the section on persecution of journalists, bloggers and civil society activists below).

Following raids on the **Temirov Live** investigative group, its journalists were prosecuted and convicted on similar charges in October 2024. The group's director, Makhabat Tazhibek Kyzy was issued a six-year prison sentence, which was upheld on appeal but is currently under review following a damning UN opinion on her case (see more in the section on persecution of journalists, bloggers and civil society activists below).

In a further alarming development, in October 2025, a local court **declared materials published by Kloop, Temirov Live and its sister project Ayt Ayt Dese "extremist"** – without specifying what content was deemed unlawful – and banned their online activities. In March 2026 the Supreme Court rejected an appeal against the decision. This means that sharing, liking, or otherwise engaging with materials produced by these platforms can now lead to criminal liability. Following the extremist designations, social media users engaging with material posted by the platforms have reportedly been summoned and questioned by police, with such engagement cited in at least one criminal case (see more in the section on persecution of journalists, bloggers and civil society activists below).

April TV was closed by court in July 2025 for allegedly discrediting the government through "sarcasm" and "ridicule," with its contributors summoned for questioning by security services. The Kyrgyz service of **Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty** (RFE/RL) has faced renewed political attacks despite the reversal of a previous court order for its closure, compounding the challenges it faces due to funding uncertainties.

These developments have produced a strong deterrent effect across the media sector.

The emergence of **Nomad TV,** which was launched in November 2025 with great fanfare and official backing, has raised additional concerns about the information environment in Kyrgyzstan. As pointed out by Reporters Without Borders, while presenting itself as a credible national media outlet, the well-resourced nationwide broadcaster has a largely Russian management team with links to the network surrounding Russia Today's editor-in-chief and disseminates content echoing Kremlin narratives. The channel has rapidly built a sizeable social-media presence, claiming several hundred thousand followers across Instagram, YouTube and other social-media platforms, and increasingly invested in youth-oriented entertainment content, potentially enabling it to reach younger audiences who might not otherwise engage with its news programming. Its growing reach and promotion of pro-Kremlin narratives are particularly troubling against the backdrop of mounting pressure on independent Kyrgyzstani media, which has weakened access to diverse and critical sources of information.

Recommendations to the Kyrgyzstani authorities:

- Revise the new media law and its implementing regulations to ensure consistency with international standards, and ensure that their application does not result in violations of media freedoms.

- Ensure media pluralism and a level playing field for state-funded and private media outlets, and end pressure against independent investigative media and journalists and ensure they can carry out their work without intimidation or undue interference.
- Revoke the unfounded "extremist" designations of Kloop, Temirov Live and Ayt Ayt Dese and protect citizens' right to freely access information.

Chilling effect of the "foreign representatives" law

The Russian-style "**foreign representatives" law**, adopted in spring 2024, continues to cast a long shadow over civil society.

Contrary to the claims of authorities, the law – despite some revisions prior to its final adoption – is inherently flawed. In an important legal opinion issued in October 2024, the Council of Europe's Venice Commission concluded that it **violates constitutional and international standards** and warned that its implementation poses a "real risk of stigmatising, silencing and eventually eliminating" foreign-funded civil society organisations (CSOs).

While the law has not, to date, been enforced as harshly as feared, and only a few CSOs have voluntarily registered under it, it has created **a widespread climate of fear and self-censorship**.

A report published by the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) in December 2025 **confirmed the law's chilling effect**: nearly 80% of CSOs — and over 90% of human rights organisations — reported engaging in self-censorship due to the adoption of the law, including by reducing public activities and avoiding sensitive language or criticism in their communications. Almost half of all CSOs reported reduced cooperation with government authorities, 37 percent downsized or paused programmes, and 7 percent self-liquidated. CSOs also described intensified surveillance and pressure from law enforcement, alongside worsening public attitudes and social media attacks. The report concluded that civil society's watchdog role has been seriously weakened, with organisations across the board – including those beyond the human rights sector – now avoiding activities that could be construed as "political".

Public statements by decisionmakers have **reinforced the climate of mistrust** toward organisations receiving foreign funding. For example, President Japarov has accused foreign-funded organisations of spreading "false" information and concealing information about their use of foreign grants. In August 2026, he called for harsh punishment of alleged "enemies of the people", whom he accused of acting under the influence of external forces, accepting money from them, and seeking to destabilise the country.

CSO leaders have faced renewed intimidation and harassment, including detention, questioning and criminal investigation. For example, in March 2026, human rights defender **Tolekan Ismailova** was detained ahead of a planned peaceful protest (see more under Restrictions on peaceful assembly) and questioned about her social media posts condemning Russia's war against Ukraine as well as the activities and funding of her organisation, Bir Duino Human Rights Movement. Human rights groups raised concern that Ismailova was being subjected to pressure in retaliation

for her peaceful human rights engagement. In another case, in June 2026, human rights defender **Aziza Abdurasulova**, founder of the Kylym Shamy organisation, was detained and questioned allegedly as part of a criminal investigation (see more under "Persecution of journalists, bloggers and civil society activists"). Previously, in December 2024, she left Kyrgyzstan for security reasons after receiving a series of threats following a public address by President Japarov, in which he singled out her and her organisation for criticism. She returned to Kyrgyzstan several months later but reported further incidents of intimidation upon her return.

In a troubling development, in December 2025, three representatives of the **International Federation for Human Rights** (FIDH), who were due to take part in a human rights film festival organised by local member organisation Bir Duino Human Rights Movement, were denied entry to Kyrgyzstan without explanation. Other recent incidents have also prompted concerns about undue travel restrictions targeting civil society representatives. Steve Swerdlow, currently a professor at a US university and formerly a Central Asia researcher for Human Rights Watch, was denied entry to Kyrgyzstan without clear justification in May 2026, while Maksim Kuleshov, an activist who fled Kyrgyzstan in 2010 and later obtained Norwegian citizenship, was stopped at the border in September 2026 and told that he had been banned from entering the country without being given any explanation. In a joint statement, members of the Civic Solidarity Platform – to which IPHR belongs – stated that the lack of transparency, due process, and effective legal remedies in cases such as these raises questions regarding Kyrgyzstan's compliance with its international human rights obligations.

Recommendations to the Kyrgyzstani authorities:

- Repeal the law on "foreign representatives" due to its stigmatising, discriminatory and excessively restrictive nature, as called for by the Venice Commission.
- Take effective measures to implement the recommendations issued by OHCHR in its report on the law's impact.
- Refrain from stigmatising rhetoric against CSOs and their representatives, promptly and thoroughly investigate reported cases of intimidation, and ensure that they can carry out their activities without undue interference and harassment.
- Refrain from arbitrarily restricting access to the country for foreign-based civil society representatives and ensure transparency, due process, and effective legal remedies in cases when entry bans are imposed.

Dismantling of anti-torture body and lack of accountability for torture

In a move approved by Parliament in June 2025 and subsequently endorsed by the president, the **National Centre for the Prevention of Torture (NCPT)** — an internationally recognised independent monitoring body established in line with Kyrgyzstan's commitments under the Optional Protocol to the UN Convention against Torture (OPCAT) — was abolished. This step was widely criticised by civil society and international experts. For example, UN High Commissioner

Volker Türk concluded that it "flies in the face of Kyrgyzstan's human rights obligations," noting that the NCPT had served as a model for the Central Asia region.

The NCPT was liquidated in September 2025, with its functions to be **transferred to the Ombudsperson's Office**, an institution whose independence has been questioned. Human rights defenders have also raised concerns that the Ombudsperson's office **lacks adequate resources** to implement the NCPT's previous functions, which risks further weakening torture prevention efforts. IPHR and partners warned that the closure of the NCPT and the transfer of its functions to the Ombudsperson's office "risks turning torture prevention into a sidelined and diluted function, undermining the urgency and effectiveness it once had and weakening Kyrgyzstan's ability to protect vulnerable people behind closed doors at a time when reports of torture are increasing."

Of further concern are reported cases in which detainees allegedly have been penalised for complaining about their treatment to representatives of the Ombudsperson's Office. For example, in March 2026, imprisoned musician-poet Askat Zhetigen was sent to a punishment cell for alleged breaches of prison rules shortly after reporting violations of detainees' rights to the Ombudsperson's office (see more on his case in the section on "Persecution of journalists, bloggers and civil society activists"). Similarly, in December 2025, opposition party leader Temirlan Sultanbekov was placed in a punishment cell for alleged violations of internal rules after a visit by the Ombudsperson's office to the detention facility. This led his lawyer to express concern that the measure may have constituted retaliation.

According to media reports, during a meeting with Ombudsperson Jamilia Jamambaeva in September 2026, President Japarov stressed the importance of comprehensive investigations into allegations of torture and called on the Ombudsperson and her staff to firmly defend the rights and interests of individuals reporting such treatment, without fear of possible pressure by law enforcement agencies.

In a welcome development, Kyrgyzstan's Criminal Code was revised in spring 2026 to **broaden the definition of torture** to include not only physical but also mental suffering and to extend liability to individuals acting in an official capacity, even if they are not state officials. As the previous wording had allowed many perpetrators to evade responsibility, these changes have raised hopes for improved accountability, although civil society actors have stressed that their effective implementation will be key. There is still no Criminal Code provision penalising cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment that does not amount to torture.

In a persistent trend, allegations of torture and ill-treatment have often not been adequately investigated, with procedural delays resulting in the loss of evidence and undermining prospects for prosecution.

According to recent information from human rights defenders, official statistics show that while 188 cases involving allegations of torture and ill-treatment by law enforcement and prison officials were recorded in 2025, criminal investigations were initiated **in only 15 cases**. Moreover, between 2021 and 2025, **only six torture cases** were **considered by the courts**, all of which resulted in **acquittals**.

When criminal proceedings have been initiated, they have frequently been pursued under **lesser offences** such as abuse of office or exceeding authority rather than torture, diminishing the gravity of the crimes. Victims of abusive treatment also face significant obstacles in obtaining compensation and rehabilitation, with **remedies rarely provided** and often falling short of international standards. Over 30 decisions issued by the UN Human Rights Committee in cases involving torture remain unimplemented.

Thus, serious shortcomings persist in ensuring accountability for torture and ill-treatment, resulting in widespread impunity. This underscores the need for strengthened efforts by the relevant authorities to effectively investigate allegations, bring perpetrators to justice and ensure adequate protection for victims, in line with Kyrgyzstan's international obligations.

Recommendations to the Kyrgyzstani authorities:

- Reconsider the decision to abolish the NCPT and ensure that torture monitoring and prevention efforts are carried out through a genuinely independent structure, adequately funded, and closely coordinated with civil society.
- Ensure that detainees can safely report torture, ill-treatment and other violations without fear of reprisals, and promptly and impartially investigate all allegations of retaliation, holding those responsible to account.
- Ensure effective investigations and accountability for all allegations of torture and ill-treatment, including by prosecuting acts of torture as such rather than under lesser offences.
- Ensure that victims of torture and ill-treatment have effective access to adequate compensation, rehabilitation and other forms of reparation, including through the implementation of relevant UN Human Rights Committee decisions.

Restrictions on peaceful assembly

A prolonged **court-sanctioned ban on protests** in central Bishkek, first introduced in spring 2022 in response to a request from the Russian embassy to end anti-war protests outside its premises, further illustrates the shrinking space for voicing discontent in Kyrgyzstan. The ban has been repeatedly extended with protesters instructed to instead gather in a specifically designated park, Gorky Park. An exception has, however, been made for official state and municipal events, which have been allowed to take place on Ala-Too Square, illustrating the discriminatory nature of the ban. Most recently, the ban was extended by court order through 31 December 2026.

Authorities have claimed the ban is necessary to prevent potential unrest, but in practice, it has hindered citizens from exercising their right to peaceful assembly near government buildings and other key locations. It has also contributed to a decrease in protest activity.

Ahead of a planned peaceful protest against the prolonged blanket ban, human rights defender **Tolekan Ismailova**, environmental rights activist **Bermet Borubaeva**, and video operator **Bulat**

Satarkulov were detained on 13 March 2026 and questioned for several hours before being released.

Reported challenges in organising a **women's rights assembly** in Bishkek on 8 March 2026, International Women's Day, reinforced concerns about undue restrictions on assemblies. According to the organisers, they were not allowed to hold a march as in previous years and were only given green light to gather in Gorky Park following an appeal to the president, although the Law on Assemblies requires notification rather than approval for rallies and mandates that bans must be court-sanctioned. Following the rally, organisers and participants faced verbal attacks on social media and during a state TV broadcast, with critics accusing them of undermining "traditional" values.

Moreover, while the current **Law on Assemblies** is comparatively liberally worded, draft legislation under consideration **threatens a serious setback**. Proposed amendments, initiated by an MP and submitted to Parliament for consideration in May 2026, would give local authorities broad powers to restrict where protests may take place without having to seek court approval. In particular, they would be able to establish "specially designated places" where assemblies are permitted and to determine the routes of demonstrations and marches. In comparison, the current law protects the right of organisers to freely determine the venue of assemblies, except in locations explicitly prohibited by law, and any restrictions on the location or route of assemblies must be approved by court. While the amendments have been argued to be necessary to ensure public order and safety and protect the rights of those who do not participate in assemblies, in practice they would make it easier for authorities to prevent demonstrations from taking place within the sight and sound of their intended audiences.

Thus, there are serious concerns that the draft legislation, if adopted, would represent a significant regression from the comparatively liberal provisions of the current law and lead to further, systematic violations of the right to peaceful assembly, contrary to Kyrgyzstan's international commitments.

Recommendations to the Kyrgyzstani authorities:

- Put an end to the prolonged ban on protests in central areas of Bishkek.
- Ensure that any amendments to the Law on Assemblies fully comply with international human rights standards, including by maintaining the requirement for prior judicial authorisation for restrictions and guaranteeing that assemblies can take place within sight and sound of their intended audiences.
- Refrain from detaining, questioning or otherwise pressuring individuals for organising or participating in peaceful assemblies, and ensure that any allegations of intimidation or retaliation against activists and organisers are promptly and impartially investigated.

Persecution of journalists, bloggers and civil society activists: individual cases of concern

In the last few years, journalists, bloggers and civil society activists in Kyrgyzstan have faced increasing intimidation and harassment. A particularly alarming trend is the prosecution of such individuals on retaliatory charges initiated under **vaguely worded Criminal Code provisions**, such as those penalising calls for "disobedience" to the lawful demands of authorities and for riots (article 278, part 3), incitement of ethnic or other discord (article 330), and calls for the forceful seizure of power (article 327).

In most cases, charges have been solely or primarily based on questionable assessments by state-appointed experts concluding that social media posts or other online material contain unlawful content. A former employee of the National Academy of Sciences (NAS) – who subsequently was prosecuted himself – has testified about the practice of preparing expert reviews dictated by security services at this institution. UN human rights Special Rapporteurs have warned that the pattern of prosecuting journalists, bloggers and activists over social media posts using over-broad Criminal Code provisions, while relying on state-commissioned expert studies, has a "profound chilling effect" on free expression and civic activism in Kyrgyzstan.

The cases described below are all part of this worrying trend.

Journalists working with independent, investigative media outlets

Journalist **Makhabat Tazhibek kyzy** from the investigative platform Temirov Live was handed a six-year prison sentence in October 2024 on charges of allegedly calling for "disobedience" to authorities and riots. IPHR and 10 other human rights NGOs called the charges "a textbook example of retaliation against investigative journalism and reporting on high-level corruption". Her sentence was upheld on appeal.

However, in March 2026, the Supreme Court ordered a review of Tazhibek kyzy's case based on an opinion from the UN WGAD, which found her detention unlawful and linked to her journalistic work. Later the same month, she was released under a travel ban pending the outcome of the new proceedings at a local court. Human rights defenders welcomed the review of her case and her release from detention as steps in the right direction but stressed that the charges against her must be quashed, in line with the WGAD's calls. Nevertheless, in June 2026, Bishkek City Court rejected an appeal filed by the journalist's defence against the local court's dismissal of a request to close the criminal case. As a result, proceedings against her continue, with the hearings of the merits of the case starting in August 2026. According to media reports, the proceedings were repeatedly postponed due to the failure of the state-appointed experts, who prepared the assessments at the heart of the case against the journalist, to appear in court. Finally, in late October 2026, their questioning could reportedly be initiated. An independent expert previously called by the defence concluded that the material published by Tazhibek kyzy contained no calls for unrest.

In September 2025, former Kloop video operators **Aleksander Aleksandrov** and **Joomart Duulatov** were sentenced to five years in prison for allegedly calling for "disobedience" and riots. Authorities accused them of involvement in producing and distributing videos labelled "destructive" and "false", even though experts found no direct calls for unrest. Along with other human rights NGOs, IPHR condemned the convictions, saying they marked a new peak in the authorities' campaign of retaliation against Kloop, and sent a chilling message to all those engaged in independent journalism in the country. In November 2025, Aleksandrov's and Duulatov's sentences were changed to three years' probation on appeal, resulting in their release. Nevertheless, the fact that they were convicted in the first place remains of serious concern.

Other cases involving prison sentences

Musician-poet **Askat Zhetigen** was sentenced to three years in prison in July 2024 on charges of calling for the forceful seizure of power – a sentence later upheld by the Supreme Court. He was prosecuted after harshly criticising President Japarov and government policies on social media. Considering the time spent in pre-trial detention, he was released in August 2026 after serving out his sentence. When speaking to journalists following his release, he reiterated his innocence and said that he had declined offers to request pardon while in prison, arguing that this would have amounted to confessing to the charges initiated against him.

Zhetigen has alleged being tortured in detention prior to his conviction. While an internal investigation into these allegations was reportedly conducted at the time, prosecutors declined to open a criminal case. Later, Zhetigen reported allegations of abusive treatment of detainees at the prison where he was serving his sentence. In March 2026, he was placed in a punishment cell for alleged breaches of prison rules – a measure he viewed as retaliation, as it came shortly after he reported alleged corruption and rights violations to representatives of the Ombudsperson's office who visited the prison. After the case attracted wide public attention, he was released early from the punishment cell, but no prison official is known to have been held responsible for violating his rights.

Activist-blogger **Kanykei Aranova** was sentenced to 3.5 years' imprisonment in 2024 for allegedly inciting discord and calling for the violent seizure of power. The charges stemmed from Facebook posts, which she maintained had been published from a fake account – a claim corroborated by investigations conducted by the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP) and Temirov Live. These posts criticised President Japarov and called for a change of power. Aranova was extradited from Russia in February 2024 and thereafter convicted and fined 120,000 Som (about 1300 EUR). However, after prosecutors appealed, the fine was replaced with a prison sentence in June 2024, a ruling upheld by the Supreme Court. The activist's petition for a deferment of the prison sentence on the grounds that she is a single mother of a young child was dismissed. In August 2026, the Supreme Court reportedly rejected a request to reconsider Aranova's case in the light of new circumstances, i.e. the findings of the investigations conducted by the OCCRP and Temirov Live. She continues to serve her sentence.

In February 2026, **Ernis Zheentaev** – a media designer who has worked for different independent media outlets – was sentenced to six years in prison for allegedly calling for "disobedience" and riots and disseminating "extremist" materials (article 332 of the Criminal Code). The charges concerned his social media posts featuring comments on current events and criticism of authorities. In March 2026, an appeals court ruled to acquit him of the charges of disseminating "extremist" materials, while retaining the other charges and reduced his sentence to four years' probation. As a result, he was released after several months in detention. In August, the Supreme Court upheld his reduced sentence. While this was a positive development, it remains of concern that his conviction was not fully overturned.

In May 2026, blogger **Adilet Ali Myktybek** (also known as Adilet Baltabay) was released from prison after being pardoned by the president. Myktybek had been serving a five-year prison sentence imposed in 2023 on charges of calling for "disobedience" and riots after he expressed critical views on social media regarding government initiatives, such as the legalisation of casinos, the extraction of natural resources, and plans for the construction of a new presidential residence. While his release was welcome, it remains of concern that he was convicted and imprisoned in the first place in apparent retaliation for peacefully exercising his right to freedom of expression. While he was pardoned, his conviction has not been overturned.

Cases involving non-custodial sentences

In July 2025, independent journalist, **Kanyshay Mamyrkulova** was sentenced to four years' probation, entailing wide-ranging restrictions on her movement and online activities for allegedly calling for riots and inciting inter-ethnic discord. The charges concerned social media posts criticising the government's lack of transparency over a border demarcation deal with Tajikistan. IPHR and its partners stated that her case "sends yet another warning signal" that the authorities "are willing to use overly broad criminal provisions to silence critical journalism." UN human rights experts also concluded that she appeared to have been targeted for her legitimate exercise of freedom of expression. In February 2026, an appeals court acquitted Mamyrkulova of the charges of inciting inter-ethnic hatred, while retaining those on calling for riots, and slightly reduced her sentence to three years' probation. Violating the conditions of her release could still result in imprisonment.

Human rights defender **Rita Karasartova** was sentenced to five years' probation for allegedly organising riots and calling for the forceful seizure of power at a closed trial in September 2025. These charges were initiated against her after she posted an appeal on social media from Tilekmat Kudaibergen uulu, a persecuted opposition activist (see more about his case under "transnational repression"). Both human rights organisations and international human rights experts voiced concerns about her case. In an opinion issued in November 2025, the UN WGAD concluded that her arrest and conviction "lack any legal basis" and that the conduct for which she was targeted "goes to the very core of protected expression". In spite of this, Karasartova's sentence was upheld unchanged by an appeals court in December 2025.

As reported by RFE/RL, in April 2026, a local court convicted the service's retired journalist **Bayan Jumagulova** of inciting discord in connection with her social media posts and fined her 100,000 Som (around 1000 EUR). However, in June 2026, Bishkek City Court overturned her conviction on appeal and acquitted her. While the acquittal was welcome, it remains troubling that Jumagulova was prosecuted in the first place, with the proceedings dragging on for more than a year and a half. During that time, Jumagulova was subjected to a travel ban that prevented her from going to Germany – a country where she lived for many years before learning about her criminal prosecution during a visit to Kyrgyzstan in summer 2024. In particular, during the proceedings, she was denied permission to travel to Germany for surgery needed in relation to an earlier kidney transplant.

Kempir-Abad case

In the framework of the so-called Kempir Abad case, more than two dozen activists, bloggers and public figures were detained in October 2022 and charged with instigating unrest after peacefully opposing a government-negotiated border deal with Uzbekistan.

In a November 2025 opinion, the UN WGAD concluded that the detention of four women activists, including **Rita Karasartova, Klara Sooronkulova**, **Gulnara Dzhurabayeva**, **Asya Sasykbayeva**, and **Perizat Suranova** as part of the Kempir-Abad case violated international human rights law and constituted retaliation for their civic engagement on a politically sensitive issue. After spending months in deplorable conditions in pre-trial detention, the women activists were eventually acquitted in June 2024, but they remained under house arrest pending an appeal filed by prosecutors. However, in March 2026, the proceedings were finally brought to an end when an appeals court upheld the earlier acquittal of the women activists and their co-defendants. This was welcome. However, the authorities have yet to provide them with compensation and to hold accountable those responsible for the violation of their rights, as also called for by WGAD.

Cases related to the clampdown on criticism of Chinese influence

In summer 2026, several individuals were targeted amid heightened scrutiny of online discussion concerning foreign investment and China's role in Kyrgyzstan. Political activist **Mavlyan Askarbekov** was detained in June 2026 and charged with inciting discord after criticising growing Chinese influence in Kyrgyzstan on social media. Shortly before his detention, he had reported that security service officials had visited him at home, secretly filmed him, and edited the video recordings to discredit and – in his words – portray him as an "enemy of the people". On 29 September 2026, a local Bishkek court sentenced Askarbekov to two years in prison over his social media posts. Askarbekov, known for actively commenting on political developments in Kyrgyzstan and criticising the authorities, has categorically denied the charges.

Others were targeted after criticising a government move to amend regulations on the use of state-owned land, allowing land to be granted for up to 50 years to individuals and companies, including foreign investors, for certain investment and construction projects. The changes prompted

concerns that they could facilitate the transfer of Kyrgyz land to foreign investors, particularly from China despite denials from the government.

Activist **Azamat Bayamanov** was detained after publishing several video appeals opposing the long-term allocation of land to foreign investors, including an appeal to President Japarov that attracted widespread attention online. On 24 July 2026, he was reportedly forced into a car by unidentified men outside a mosque. The following day, a local court sanctioned his pretrial detention pending an investigation into charges of complicity in organising mass riots (Criminal Code article 278, part 1). Prior to his detention, he had already been summoned for questioning by the SCNS in connection with one of his videos. In late October 2026, the case against Bayamanov was handed over to court, with the charges against him having been reclassified as attempting to seize power by force (Criminal Code article 326), an offence punishable by up to 15 years in prison. Bayamanov's lawyer told media that his client categorically denies the charges, maintaining that his video messages solely constituted the peaceful expression of his civic stance. The lawyer also challenged the linguistic expert findings underpinning the charges, describing them as "groundless".

Other social media users commenting critically on the land issue were reportedly summoned by law enforcement authorities for questioning or "explanatory conversations". Among them was poet-musician **Iliyac Chingizbek uulu**, who reported being summoned on 23 July 2026 after publishing a song critically commenting on the transfer of land to foreigners at different times in Kyrgyzstan's history.

Moreover, in a highly troubling development, on 20 July 2026, Daiyrbek Orunbekov, head of the presidential administration's information policy service published a Facebook post threatening criminal prosecution and imprisonment of people accused of spreading "fake news" and "discrediting" the government on issues relating to China, land use and foreign debt. The post, which remained publicly available as of late October 2026, included photographs of **dozens of human rights defenders, activists, journalists, lawyers and opposition figures**. It drew serious criticism for its threatening and stigmatising tone and raised concerns that some photographs may have been unlawfully obtained from a state-run digital services platform. An independent journalist reported being threatened by Orunbekov over a humorous post he published in response to the official's post. Following appeals by individuals featured on the controversial list, law enforcement authorities reportedly opened an investigation into the allegations of unlawful publication of personal information but eventually declined to initiate criminal proceedings on these ground. However, after human rights defenders challenged this decision in court, the investigation was reportedly renewed in September 2026.

In another alarming development, on 15 June 2026, prominent human rights defender **Aziza Abdurasulova** was detained without explanation in the city of Mailuu-Suu in Jalal-Abad region in southern Kyrgyzstan. Law enforcement authorities later confirmed that she was being held at a regional police department and claimed that she was being questioned as a witness in a criminal case, without providing any further information. While in detention, Abdurasulova began feeling unwell and required urgent medical assistance. She was released only after several hours. Abdurasulova's detention came shortly after she published social media posts in support of

Mavlyan Askarbekov, a political activist charged with inciting discord after criticising growing Chinese influence in Kyrgyzstan (see more on his case above). In this context, she expressed concern about the pattern of imprisonment of activists, journalists and others critical of those in power, rhetorically asking: "Does everyone really need to be made into prisoners?" Following these posts, she reported receiving threats by phone and being pressured to delete the posts, which she refused to do.

Abdurasulova has also previously reported intimidation and in December 2024, she left Kyrgyzstan for several months for security reasons after receiving a series of threats (see also the section on association).

Recent cases where proceedings are currently under way

Activist-blogger **Aibek Tenizbaev** was detained in December 2025 on charges of inciting interethnic discord. Security services alleged that he had "systematically" posted "provocative" content on social media and that expert assessments had identified "signs" of incitement in his materials. Tenizbaev was initially placed in pre-trial detention but was later released under travel restrictions pending further investigation. His detention came after he criticised Russian influence and Kremlin-linked media in Kyrgyzstan. In particular, he had accused the recently launched Nomad TV channel of spreading "propaganda". The Media Action Platform expressed serious concerns about Tenizbaev's prosecution, noting that the circumstances of the case reinforced the impression that he was being targeted for exercising his freedom of expression. At the time of writing, there was no further update on his case.

In another worrying case, a social media user is currently on trial on charges of disseminating "extremist" materials (Article 332 of the Criminal Code). In a letter published on social media on 21 October 2026, **Baktybek Moldaliev** stated that the charges were brought against him because he had shared information from the Kloop news platform, whose materials were declared "extremist" by a court a year ago (see more in the section on pressure on independent media). Moldaliev was arrested in May 2026 and initially charged with calling for "disobedience" and riots. However, the charges against him were reportedly requalified after an expert examination found no signs of calls for riots in his posts. His trial began in August 2026. In his letter from pre-trial detention, Moldaliev said that he was behind bars for criticising corrupt officials who had themselves evaded accountability, describing this as "the peak of injustice".

Transnational repression

In addition to journalists, activists and bloggers based in Kyrgyzstan, exile-based critics have also been targeted by persecution, ranging from smear campaigns to attempts at ensuring their forcible return on retaliatory charges.

In October 2025, Kloop co-founder **Rinat Tukhvatshin** learned that Kyrgyzstan had sought a so-called Red Notice against him through Interpol, i.e. a request to Interpol member states to locate and provisionally arrest him pending extradition. Interpol ultimately rejected the request, citing

rules designed to prevent the misuse of its systems for politically motivated purposes. While this outcome was welcome, the case reinforced concerns about attempts by the authorities to exploit law enforcement cooperation frameworks as a means of targeting government critics abroad.

Repressive measures against family members and colleagues in Kyrgyzstan are also used as a means of putting pressure on journalists in exile. The UN WGAD noted that the targeting of Makhabat Tazhibek kyzy was linked to her being the wife of **Bolot Temirov**, Temirov Live's founder, who was expelled from the country in 2022 following his prosecution on spurious charges. (See more about the case against Makhabat Tazhibek kyzy above).

In another case involving transnational repression, in April 2025, political activist **Tilekmat Kudaibergen uulu** (also known as Tilekmat Kurenov) was apprehended in the UAE, held incommunicado for more than a week, and eventually forcibly transferred to Kyrgyzstan without any formal extradition process. Following his return, he was remanded in custody on charges of publicly calling for the forcible seizure of power in connection with his social media posts. His trial began in February 2026 and was ongoing at the time of writing. In October 2026, the court rejected a defence request for his release under a travel ban, although his pre-trial detention had already exceeded the maximum one-year period permitted under national law. In a petition submitted in May 2026, Freedom Now and Hausfeld LLP asked the UN WGAD to declare the activist's detention unlawful, arguing that he had been deprived of his liberty in retaliation for his political activism and that his extraordinary rendition and prolonged pre-trial detention violated international standards. Kudaibergen uulu previously fled Kyrgyzstan in 2020 after serving a prison sentence related to his civic engagement and resettled in the US, where his asylum proceedings were ongoing when he was apprehended in the UAE.

Recommendations to the Kyrgyzstani authorities:

- Revise broadly worded Criminal Code provisions that are open to application in ways that unduly restrict freedom of expression and other fundamental freedoms (such as articles 278-3, 330 and 327), in line with the recommendations of international human rights experts.
- Stop the practice of initiating criminal cases solely or primarily based on expert assessments of social media content commissioned by state authorities, and review all cases in which convictions were issued on this basis.
- Ensure that any criminal proceedings against journalists, bloggers and activists are conducted in full accordance with the requirements of national and international law, use pre-trial detention as an exceptional measure of last resort, and promptly and impartially investigate any alleged violations of the rights of detainees and hold those responsible to account.
- Ensure that journalists, bloggers and activists are not criminally prosecuted for the legitimate exercise of their rights to freedom of expression and other fundamental freedoms; drop all charges brought on these grounds; and immediately and unconditionally release those currently detained.

- Comply with the opinions issued by the UN WGAD in individual cases, ensuring that the measures requested by it to address identified violations are effectively implemented.
- End intimidation and persecution of critics abroad, pressure on their relatives and colleagues, and politically motivated attempts to secure their forcible return, including through the misuse of international law enforcement cooperation mechanisms or transfers conducted outside formal extradition procedures.

Additional information

For more information on the issues covered in this briefing, please see our updates for the global CIVICUS Monitor initiative tracking civic space:

Kyrgyzstan: Hopes for a Thaw Recede Amid Renewed Persecution of Critical Voices, September 2026
Kyrgyzstan: Amid Persisting Repression, Power Rift Prompts Guarded Hopes for a Thaw, March 2026
Kyrgyzstan: UN Experts Warn of "Chilling" Impact as Assault on Media, Journalists and Activists Intensifies, October 2025
Kyrgyzstan: Politically Motivated Prosecutions Amid Declining Media and Civic Space, May 2025