

Central Asia: Repressive Digital Measures Undermine Civic Space and Free Expression

Statement for OSCE Supplementary Human Dimension Meeting: Safeguarding Civic Space in the Digital Age, Vienna, 11-12 May 2026

As in other parts of the world, digital technologies have transformed civic activism in Central Asia, creating new platforms, strategies and opportunities for engagement, mobilisation and oversight. However, International Partnership for Human Rights (IPHR), Kazakhstan International Bureau for Human Rights and Rule of Law (KIBHR), Association for Human Rights in Central Asia (AHRCA) and Turkmen Initiative for Human Rights (TIHR) are alarmed by the escalating use of legal, technical and informal measures to silence dissent, restrict civic space and obstruct access to information in the digital sphere across the region. We call on the Central Asian governments to uphold their human dimension commitments by ending the misuse of legislation targeting online expression, halting harassment and intimidation of civil society actors, and ensuring that digital spaces remain open, secure and accessible. Concrete steps must be taken to protect journalists, bloggers and human rights defenders from retaliation for their online activities.

Across Central Asia, independent civil society actors and media platforms face growing **online intimidation, including smear campaigns, trolling and threats**. Those working on issues such as corruption, women's rights and the protection of vulnerable groups – particularly when receiving foreign funding – are frequently portrayed as threatening national security or “traditional values.” Official rhetoric has contributed to this hostile environment. In Kyrgyzstan, for example, the [adoption](#) of the 2024 “foreign representative” law was accompanied by narratives accusing civil society organisations (CSOs) of serving foreign interests, fuelling stigmatisation and mistrust. According to a [UN study](#), nearly 40 percent of surveyed CSOs reported experiencing social media attacks. Individual human rights defenders, including those in exile, are regularly attacked through pro-state media and online platforms, with women activists disproportionately affected.

Technical restrictions further compound these challenges, with **cyberattacks, website blocking and internet shutdowns** obstructing the activities of civil society and independent media. In Kazakhstan, targeted cyberattacks have repeatedly rendered independent media sites [inaccessible](#) for hours or days at a time, and in November 2025, the Respublika.kz news site was [blocked](#) in apparent retaliation for its critical reporting. In Kyrgyzstan, the investigative Kloop platform has been [ordered closed](#) and its materials [labelled](#) “extremist” by court. Other independent news sites have temporarily been blocked over allegedly “false” information without court approval. Independent online information without court approval. Independent online platforms have also repeatedly

been blocked and [closed](#) on spurious grounds in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. In Turkmenistan, pervasive censorship – reportedly [linked to](#) corruption – has resulted in systematic blocking of independent websites, alongside restrictions on VPN services used to bypass such controls. Reoccurring [internet outages](#) and slow speeds further limit access to information. Extensive internet shutdowns linked to the suppression of mass protests in [Kazakhstan](#), [Tajikistan](#) and [Uzbekistan](#) in 2022 not only curtailed freedom of expression but also obstructed efforts to document violations and assist victims.

A further worrying trend is the **use of AI-enabled technologies to target individuals** engaged in civic activism and independent journalism, including through AI-assisted online attacks, surveillance and profiling. In Kazakhstan, blogger Sanzhar Bokayev [reported](#) being stopped by police at Almaty airport in June 2025 after being identified and flagged as a “civic activist” by an AI-powered facial recognition system. While he was eventually released and informed that this was an error, the incident heightened concerns that such tools create new risks of arbitrary tracking, identification and reprisals against government critics.

A highly troubling development is the **growing misuse of social media content complaint mechanisms**, with coordinated and unfounded claims of violations of community rules leading to the suspension or removal of independent accounts. In Uzbekistan, the accounts of several independent media platforms such as Hook Report and Sarpa Media, as well as those of individual bloggers were [suspended](#) earlier this year following such complaints. Similar practices have also targeted foreign-based organisations working on Uzbekistan. For example, the YouTube channel of the France-based AHRCA was [taken down](#) over alleged copyright infringements in January 2026, and three of its Facebook accounts were blocked in the following two months. In addition, the Telegram account of AHRCA’s president was hacked in April 2026, with false messages disseminated in her name. In Kazakhstan, in recent months, an increasing number of media outlets, organisations, journalists and bloggers have [reported](#) the suspension or removal of accounts or content following spurious and apparently orchestrated [complaints](#). Such cases [peaked](#) in the lead-up to the constitutional referendum in March 2026 but have continued thereafter.

At the same time, authorities are increasingly resorting to **legal prosecution in response to critical online expression**. Broadly worded charges – such as disseminating “false” information or inciting “disobedience” or discord – are frequently used to target journalists, bloggers and activists. These practices demonstrate how efforts to counter disinformation are instrumentalised to suppress legitimate criticism in the digital sphere.

In Kazakhstan, Orda.kz editor-in-chief *Gulnara Bazhkenova*, KazTAG editor-in-chief *Amir Kasenov* and independent journalist *Botagoz Omarova* all remain under [house arrest](#) pending investigations into charges of disseminating “false” information, which stem from their online publications. In another recent case, journalist *Lukpan Akhmedyarov* came under [criminal investigation](#) after posting video material concerning the alleged recruitment of Kazakh citizens for Russia’s war against Ukraine. While a reported initiative of the Ministry of Culture and Information to [consider](#) partial decriminalisation of the

provision in question is a step in the right direction, full decriminalisation remains essential to prevent further misuse suppressing independent journalism and legitimate public debate. A separate administrative code provision prohibiting the spread of “false” information – even unintentional – has also been applied to restrict free speech. For example, *the Kazakh service of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty* has been [fined](#) under this provision as part of a broader campaign of harassment, including the [denial of accreditation](#) to its contributors. In connection with the constitutional referendum held in Kazakhstan in March 2026, several bloggers were [fined](#) for conducting informal online surveys that allegedly violated rules on referendum-related polling.

In Kyrgyzstan, several journalists working with the *Kloop* and *Temirov Live* investigative platforms have been prosecuted under a vague Criminal Code provision banning calls for “disobedience” to authorities and unrest. Two Kloop contributors imprisoned on such charges were [released](#) under probation in November 2025, while Temirov Live’s director *Makhabat Tazhibek kyzy* was released in March 2026 pending a review of the six-year prison sentence handed to her in October 2024. The review was [ordered](#) by the Supreme Court following an [opinion](#) by the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention, which deemed her imprisonment unlawful and retaliatory. While these releases are welcome, serious concerns persist about the broader pattern of using criminal charges to stifle legitimate online expression. In recent years, numerous other journalists, bloggers and activists have [faced prosecution](#) under the same or other broadly worded provisions following social media posts critical of authorities.

In Tajikistan, a record number of journalists and bloggers are currently [behind bars](#) on charges widely believed to have been brought in retaliation for their reporting and online activities. Among them are journalists *Daler Bobiev* and *Abdullo Ghurbati*, who are [serving](#) lengthy prison sentences on anti-state charges issued in 2022. Prior to their arrest, they had collaborated on a popular YouTube channel covering issues such as alleged unlawful housing demolitions and mismanagement by local authorities and had openly criticised government policies. Their cases have prompted serious concerns from human rights organisations and [UN experts](#).

In Uzbekistan, blogger *Shahida Salomova* has been [forcibly confined](#) to a psychiatric institution for more than three years following defamation charges linked to her social media posts about the president and his relatives. Her detention has been repeatedly extended without independent medical evaluation or effective judicial oversight, raising grave concerns about the use of punitive psychiatry to silence dissent. In addition to targeting critics at home, Uzbekistani authorities have [initiated](#) criminal cases against several bloggers living abroad in apparent retaliation for their online criticism of senior officials and members of the presidential family.

In Turkmenistan, where state control over information is pervasive, individuals who challenge official narratives face severe reprisals. A stark example is the case of a blogger who disappeared in November 2025 shortly after publishing a video criticising rising food prices; independent investigations [indicate](#) that he was detained, subjected to torture and subsequently died from his injuries. Authorities have also increasingly targeted

bloggers based abroad. Of particular concern is the case of *Alisher Sakhatov* and *Abdulla Orusov*, who [disappeared](#) in Turkey in July 2025. Prior to this, they had been detained pending deportation on alleged security grounds – a move believed to have been taken at the request of Turkmenistani authorities. However, Turkey's Constitutional Court had suspended their deportation to assess the risks they would face upon return. As of May 2026, their fate and whereabouts remain unknown, with unconfirmed reports suggesting they were forcibly returned to Turkmenistan.

Recommendations

Safeguarding civic space in the digital age requires a clear commitment to uphold freedom of expression and other fundamental freedoms in this context. Central Asian governments should take concrete steps to end the misuse of digital tools and legislation to restrict civic space online, while other OSCE participating States should actively support these efforts through sustained engagement, protection and accountability measures. At the same time, social media platforms must ensure that their policies, moderation practices and business decisions do not contribute to the suppression of lawful expression or access to information but instead help safeguard open and secure digital spaces.

In light of these considerations, IPHR, KIBHR, AHRCA and TIHR urge:

Central Asian governments to:

- Refrain from using criminal law to penalise online expression and fully decriminalise broadly worded offences such as “false information,” defamation and incitement provisions that are prone to abuse.
- Ensure that measures addressing disinformation comply with international human rights standards and are not used to suppress legitimate criticism.
- End smear campaigns, intimidation and harassment of civil society actors, journalists, bloggers and human rights defenders using online platforms for their engagement, including those based in exile, and ensure accountability for such actions.
- Guarantee that any restrictions on online content, including website blocking and platform closures, are lawful, necessary, proportionate and subject to independent judicial oversight.
- Refrain from imposing internet shutdowns and ensure uninterrupted access to the internet, including during public assemblies and crises.
- Investigate and prevent cyberattacks and other forms of digital interference targeting independent media and civil society actors.
- Refrain from using AI and digital surveillance tools to profile, monitor or target individuals based on their civic engagement, journalistic work or exercise of fundamental freedoms.
- Refrain from orchestrating or supporting the misuse of social media complaint and reporting mechanisms to suppress lawful expression and engage with

platforms in good faith to address such abuse by promoting transparency, due process and effective safeguards against coordinated or unfounded complaints.

- Refrain from engaging in transnational repression against activists, journalists and bloggers abroad, including by seeking their forcible return on politically motivated grounds linked to their online criticism or civic engagement.

Other OSCE participating States to:

- Consistently raise concerns about online censorship, cyberattacks, misuse of surveillance technologies, prosecution over online expression and other restrictions on digital civic space in Central Asia, and press for compliance with international human rights obligations and accountability for violations.
- Support independent Central Asian civil society, media and human rights actors engaged in online reporting, digital advocacy and information sharing – including those in exile – through sustained political backing, funding and protection measures, such as assistance in countering online harassment and censorship.
- Use diplomatic engagement, regulatory tools and public advocacy to encourage social media platforms to align their content moderation and account enforcement practices with international human rights standards, including safeguards against unjustified content removal and account blocking.
- Ensure effective protection against transnational repression within their jurisdictions, including by upholding the principle of non-refoulement and providing safe haven for Central Asian individuals at risk because of their online engagement.

Global social media platforms to:

- Ensure that content moderation and account takedown decisions are grounded in international human rights standards, and refrain from acting on coordinated complaints or direct government requests that seek to restrict lawful expression, such as criticism of public officials or policies.
- Strengthen safeguards against the abuse of reporting and complaint mechanisms, including by improving transparency, ensuring meaningful review of contested decisions, and providing effective, timely remedies for users whose content or accounts have been unjustifiably restricted.