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## EU-Kazakhstan Human Rights Dialogue: Key Concerns and Recommendations on Civic Space

A joint briefing paper by International Partnership for Human Rights (IPHR) and Kazakhstan International Bureau for Human Rights and Rule of Law (KIBHR), prepared for the upcoming EU-Kazakhstan Human Rights Dialogue, highlights that civic space in Kazakhstan remains under sustained pressure.

Opposition movements are excluded from political participation, independent media are subjected to growing attacks, and activists, journalists and bloggers who are critical of those in power face ongoing – and increasing – persecution. Authorities have systematically discouraged peaceful protests as a channel for dialogue with citizens, and widespread impunity persists for serious violations committed during the suppression of mass protests in January 2022. Civil society organisations receiving foreign funding have faced renewed hostility and suspicion, with security concerns used to justify enhanced oversight.

The CIVICUS Monitor, a global initiative with which IPHR and KIBHR cooperate, classifies Kazakhstan's civic space as “repressed”, assigning it a score of 30 on a scale from 0 (worst) to 100 (best). Updated global ratings released in December 2025 show a [slight decline](#) in Kazakhstan's score compared to the previous year, reflecting the ongoing restrictions on the freedoms of expression, association and peaceful assembly.

The upcoming Human Rights Dialogue offers an important opportunity for the EU to insist on effective measures to improve the protection of civic freedoms and to promote genuine democratic progress, in line with the country's commitments under the enhanced EU-Kazakhstan partnership.

Below, we highlight limited, positive steps (indicated by +) as well as major concerns (indicated by -) and corresponding recommendations in the key areas covered by the briefing paper.

### CONSTITUTIONAL REFORM

- + The constitutional reform was launched as a new step toward political modernisation.
- The reform has been implemented in a rushed fashion: a commission was established to lead the process in mid-January 2026, and a month later a full draft constitution was already finalised.
- Opportunities for civil society engagement have been limited, with only a few civil society representatives invited to join the reform commission, and the rushed timetable has made it impossible to hold meaningful, broad-based discussions of the wide-ranging changes proposed.

- Voters will only be able to vote yes or no to the entire package of changes in the referendum set for 15 March 2026.
- Observers are sceptical that the new constitution will lead to genuine political change given the continued concentration of powers in the executive and the restricted political climate.
- Civil society has raised concerns about the human rights implications of some of the proposed changes, including the omission of a previous guarantee for the precedence of international treaties over national law.
- Reported incidents of intimidation of activists and bloggers opposing the constitutional reform have prompted fears that further attempts to stifle criticism may follow as the referendum draws closer.

### **Recommendations to the Kazakhstani authorities:**

- Ensure inclusive, unhurried, public consultations and effective opportunities for civil society engagement in legislative reforms.
- Publicly reaffirm Kazakhstan's commitment to comply with its international human rights treaty obligations and implement decisions of oversight bodies.
- Promptly investigate any incidents of intimidation or harassment of those peacefully expressing views on the constitutional reform and hold the perpetrators accountable.
- Continue political reforms with a view to fostering genuine political pluralism, transparent and accountable decision-making, and broad participation by political groups, civil society and the public.

## **FREEDOM OF ASSOCIATION**

- + The "foreign agents" law proposed by a Member of Parliament last year has not advanced.
- + Civil society representatives were invited to take part in the elaboration of new general NGO legislation, which is currently underway.
- Hostile rhetoric against foreign-funded organisations has increased, with decision-makers repeatedly accusing them of promoting "alien" values and threatening national security.
- New rules entering into force in January 2026 increase oversight of such organisations, prompting fears of further stigmatisation, pressure, and undue interference.
- LGBTIQ+ groups are particularly vulnerable to harassment, and there have been recurring incidents where police appear to have cooperated with anti-LGBTIQ+ activists attacking their meetings.
- Opposition political parties are still denied registration, while their supporters are harassed, effectively depriving them of space to operate.

### **Recommendations to the Kazakhstani authorities:**

- Ensure that the views of independent CSOs are duly considered in the elaboration of new NGO legislation.
- Ensure that foreign-funded CSOs are not subjected to intrusive checks without compelling and legally justified reasons.
- Investigate any incidents of harassment against LGBTIQ+ groups and hold those responsible to account.
- Allow opposition parties to register and take part in elections and stop harassing their supporters.

## **FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION**

- + The 2024 media law has not, as yet, had as detrimental an impact as initially feared.
- Independent media and journalists have faced growing pressure, including through police raids and criminal prosecution such as in the recent cases against Orda.kz and KazTAG.
- Online attacks have ranged from direct blocking to apparently coordinated campaigns abusing the complaint mechanisms of social media platforms to initiate closures.
- The denial of accreditation to 16 journalists from Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty last summer demonstrates the misuse of accreditation rules to stifle independent reporting.
- The adoption of legislation banning so-called LGBTIQ+ propaganda despite widespread criticism is a serious setback. This broadly worded ban could be applied to the publication of basically any information on LGBTIQ+ issues and is likely to further increase stigma, hostility and discrimination against LGBTIQ+ people.
- New legislation expanding the role of so-called community assistants in crime prevention, including by mandating them to address vaguely defined “anti-social behaviour” could enable arbitrary targeting e.g. of LGBTIQ+ rights advocates.

### **Recommendations to the Kazakhstani authorities:**

- End harassment of independent media and journalists – including by investigating online attacks and dropping unfounded criminal cases – and allow them to carry out their work without undue interference or fear of reprisals.
- Ensure that requests for accreditation filed by foreign journalists are not rejected on arbitrary grounds.
- Withdraw legislation banning so-called LGBTIQ+ propaganda due to its inconsistency with international human rights standards and ensure that the involvement of “community assistants” in crime prevention does not result in arbitrary and discriminatory targeting of LGBTIQ+ rights advocates or other individuals.

## **FREEDOM OF PEACEFUL ASSEMBLY**

- + A constitutional court ruling from last year prohibits automatic denials of requests to hold protests on the grounds that venues designated for holding assemblies are occupied.
- + 30+ police and security officials have been held accountable for violations of the rights of protesters and bystanders during the January 2022 events, although up-to-date, official statistics are not available.
- Authorities have continued to deny permission for peaceful protests on various pretexts, for example, citing the alleged provision of incomplete or incorrect information about the planned assemblies. In November 2025, an activist from Pavlodar received 11 rejections on such grounds when seeking to hold rallies on various socio-economic issues.
- Those gathering without official approval, even for small-scale pickets or the submission of petitions to authorities, have continued to face detentions, fines and short-term arrests. The practice of “preventive” detentions of activists ahead of planned or feared protests has also continued.

- A disproportionately low number of officials have been convicted for torture and other abuses during the January 2022 events given that over 500 complaints about such violations were filed and over 300 investigations opened.
- Civil society concerns about the lack of accountability related to the January 2022 events were echoed by the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights in a comprehensive trial monitoring report published in May 2025, as well as by the UN Human Rights Committee following its review of Kazakhstan in June 2025.

### **Recommendations to the Kazakhstani authorities:**

- Effectively implement the Constitutional Court ruling prohibiting automatic rejections of requests to hold protests and ensure such requests are not denied on arbitrary grounds.
- Refrain from detaining and penalising citizens for peaceful assemblies, even if held without pre-approval by authorities, and end the practice of “preventive” arrests of potential protest participants.
- Implement the recommendations issued by ODIHR and the Human Rights Committee with respect to ensuring accountability for violations related to the January 2022 events, and publish comprehensive, up-to-date statistics on court cases, officials convicted, and sentences imposed in this context.

### **PERSECUTION OF ACTIVISTS, JOURNALISTS AND BLOGGERS**

+ In some cases, politically motivated prosecutions of critics of the authorities have not progressed, or they have resulted in less harsh sentences than feared. Each such case is a relief, although this does not change the fact that the charges should never have been initiated in the first place.

- Activists, journalists and bloggers continue to face persecution when addressing sensitive issues and criticising authorities, with criminal prosecution increasingly used as a tool of retaliation.
- Criminal charges are often initiated under broadly worded provisions open to abuse such as knowingly disseminating “false” information, “inciting” discord, and involvement in “extremist” activities. Journalists **Gulnara Bazhkenova**, **Amir Kassenov** and **Aset Mataev** are all facing “false” information charges over their reporting, demonstrating how authorities conflate investigative journalism with disinformation. Satirical blogger **Temirlan Yensebek** was handed a five-year restricted freedom sentence, along with a ban on social media activities, for allegedly inciting inter-ethnic discord by sharing a controversial but widely available song. Opposition activist **Amangeldy Jahin** is under investigation for “extremism,” reflecting a broader pattern of using such charges to penalise peaceful opposition engagement.
- There are serious concerns about the health and well-being of imprisoned activists, such as opposition party leader **Marat Zhylanbaev**, and journalists-activists **Duman Mukhamedkarim** and **Aigerim Tleuzhan**, all of whom serve prison sentences considered politically motivated. Zhylanbaev has reportedly faced ongoing pressure in prison, his contacts with lawyers and family have been restricted, and repeated, extended hunger strikes — most recently in January–February 2026 — have further weakened his health, compounding the effects of harsh detention conditions.
- Five activists who peacefully **opposed the construction of a nuclear power plant** in Kazakhstan were convicted of preparing riots, illustrating the authorities’ broad interpretation of the term. They spent 10 months in pre-trial detention before ultimately receiving non-custodial sentences.

- Those raising issues sensitive for relations with Kazakhstan’s powerful neighbours have also been targeted. Nineteen activists from **the Atajurt movement** are currently on trial for “inciting” national discord following a peaceful protest against China’s repressive policies, which prompted an official Chinese response. Journalist **Lukpan Akhmedyarov** was investigated for spreading “false” information over his reporting on Kazakh citizens forcibly enlisted for Russia’s war against Ukraine, while defrocked Orthodox priest **Yakov Vorontsov** has been charged with running a drug den after opposing Russia’s war against Ukraine and attempting to establish a new Orthodox community independent of Moscow.
- In a recurring intimidation tactic, activists have been summoned and questioned as alleged witnesses in criminal cases. For example, human rights defender **Bakhytzhan Toregozhina** was questioned after raising concerns about Marat Zhylanbaev’s deteriorating health in prison. After initially being questioned as a witness, LGBTIQ+ rights activist **Zhanar Sekerbayeva** has now been designated a suspect in an assault case based on an unfounded complaint by an anti-LGBTIQ+ activist who has harassed her and her colleagues.
- Lawyers representing defendants in politically motivated cases have also faced reprisals. The recent case of lawyer **Murat Adam** set a dangerous precedent: he was stripped of his license after speaking out about procedural violations in the case of his client, journalist Gulnara Bazhkenova.
- In addition to persecution in Kazakhstan, transnational repression is also of serious concern. The Kazakhstani authorities have failed to cooperate constructively with the Ukrainian investigation into the 2024 killing of journalist **Aidos Sadykov** in Kyiv. Meanwhile, his widow, journalist **Natalia Sadykova** has faced surveillance and intimidation. In a welcome development, Montenegro rejected a request to extradite women’s rights activist **Dinara Smailova** on charges relating to her work with victims of domestic violence and granted her protection. However, her organisation faces ongoing difficulties due to the freezing of its accounts as part of the criminal investigations.

### **Recommendations to the Kazakhstani authorities:**

- Stop persecuting activists, journalists and bloggers for their peaceful and legitimate engagement, drop the charges against those prosecuted on such grounds, and release those behind bars.
- Pending release, protect the health and well-being of those behind bars, safeguard their right to contacts with family and lawyers, and investigate any allegations of ill-treatment and hold those responsible to account.
- Refrain from misusing questioning in criminal investigations as a tool of intimidation.
- Ensure lawyers are not subjected to reprisals for representing activists and journalists.
- Cooperate meaningfully with the investigation into Aidos Sadykov’s killing and refrain from intimidating Natalia Sadykova and other activists and journalists based abroad.
- In line with recommendations from the 2025 UN Universal Periodic Review and the UN Human Rights Committee, repeal or revise broadly worded Criminal Code provisions frequently used against activists and journalists – including those on “inciting discord” (Article 174), “knowingly spreading false information” (Article 274), and involvement in “extremist” activities (Article 405 and others) – to ensure compliance with international standards.

**The issues summarised here are covered in more detail in the IPHR-KIBHR briefing paper.**