

April 13, 2026

Kassym-Jomart Tokayev  
President of the Republic of Kazakhstan  
6 Mangilik Yel,  
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Kazakhstan

Sent via email to: [press@akorda.kz](mailto:press@akorda.kz)

Dear President Tokayev,

We, the six undersigned international human rights and press freedom organizations, are writing to express our serious concern over a recent spate of arrests of journalists and an escalating pattern of harassment of independent media in Kazakhstan. Since December 2025, four prominent independent journalists have been placed under pretrial house arrest, three of them on charges of distribution of false information under Article 274 of the Criminal Code. If convicted under this broadly worded provision, journalists face up to three years in prison.

We believe these developments clash fundamentally with the concepts of a “New Kazakhstan” and the primacy of the rule of law (“Заң мен тәртіп”) that you have set out as the basis of your presidency, and that they require your urgent attention. We welcome [news](#) that the Ministry of Culture and Information is examining possibilities for the partial decriminalization of Article 274. While this would be a positive step, it should be accompanied by more robust action to protect press freedom and free speech in Kazakhstan.

In particular, we request that you:

- Ensure that all journalists prosecuted for their work are released and the charges against them dropped.
- Initiate the decriminalization of Article 274 on alleged “knowing distribution of false information,” which due to its broad wording is susceptible to abuse — a concern repeatedly raised by international human rights bodies.
- At your convenience, meet with our organizations to discuss these and other pressing issues of media freedom.

Cases of urgent concern include:

**Gulnara Bazhkenova:** The founder and editor-in-chief of popular independent news outlet Orda, Bazhkenova has been under [house arrest](#) since December 1, 2025, pending trial on a criminal charge of distributing false information. Her detention followed claims she made during a news show on YouTube that a government minister had been involved in corruption and other serious crimes. Although the charges against her are reportedly unrelated to these claims, we believe they are in retaliation for the show and her wider reporting. We are also concerned that Kazakh authorities failed to protect Bazhkenova during months of appalling online and offline [harassment](#) before her arrest. Among other things, she [repeatedly](#) received personalized

[wreaths](#) and [death notices](#) purporting to [mark](#) her own death, and an AI-produced [video](#) was distributed of her lawyer announcing her death by suicide. Her lawyer's public advocacy on her case led to his being [disbarred](#).

**Amir Kasenov:** The editor-in-chief of prominent independent news agency KazTAG, Kasenov has been under pretrial [house arrest](#) on criminal charges of distributing false information since December 24, 2025. Charges against him and KazTAG director Aset Matayev were filed based on a complaint from Kazakh financial services company Freedom Finance, whose lead shareholder Timur Turlov [accused](#) the outlet of being part of an “information campaign” against him. Kasenov's placement under house arrest followed his vocal denunciation of the charges against him and his allegations that investigators were trying to intimidate him.

**Aset Matayev:** KazTAG director Matayev was [arrested](#) on March 18 on hooliganism charges after an incident in which he was assaulted with a crowbar, resulting in a lower forehead fracture and other facial injuries. On March 30, he was moved into house arrest pending trial. Matayev — who was previously [jailed](#) between 2016 and 2018 because of his work — had been charged on “false information” grounds in December, but those charges were recently dropped. We call for a full and transparent investigation into his case and the attack on March 18, given the possibility that the assault might have been linked to his work.

**Botagoz Omarova:** On March 21, independent journalist Omarova became the [third prominent journalist](#) to be sent into pretrial house arrest since December on charges of distributing false information. Widely [respected](#) by her [peers](#) for her careful work, she has reportedly been charged because of [a post](#) on her Telegram channel, which covered claims that a company constructing a stable on the orders of your presidential office had failed to pay subcontractors.

We would also like to highlight the case of [Lukpan Akhmedyarov](#), founder of the outlet Prosto Zhurnalistika, who was detained and interrogated in April 2025 as part of a criminal investigation into the spread of false information, and whose case we also fear is politically motivated.

More widely, a rising tide of harassment is rendering the work of independent Kazakh media increasingly difficult. Government measures such as the [repeated](#) months-long [denial of accreditation](#) to dozens of journalists from Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty — also in connection with alleged distribution of “false information” — and the [blocking](#) of news outlet ResPublika appear to have little justification beyond a desire to obstruct these outlets' reporting.

Announcing its [closure](#) on March 30, popular media project Airan suggested its sponsors had been pressured to withdraw funding. Leading media outlets [continue](#) to face [regular cyberattacks](#), which can knock their websites offline for hours or days at a time. And dozens of prominent journalists, news outlets, and press freedom groups have in recent months reported having their social media accounts and posts blocked or removed following spurious and apparently orchestrated complaints.

Mr. President, collectively these attacks on the press threaten to create a climate of fear and self-censorship that irreparably undermines the credibility of your reform agenda. We are

convinced that the criminalization and demonstrative punishment of journalists outlined above can have no place in the democratic society you aim to build in the “New Kazakhstan.”

Thank you for your urgent attention to these matters. We are ready to meet you at your earliest convenience to provide further context and answer any questions you may have.

Signed:

Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ)

Norwegian Helsinki Committee (NHC)

International Partnership for Human Rights (IPHR)

Civil Rights Defenders

International Press Institute (IPI)

Freedom For Eurasia (FFE)