



**Justice for Journalists**

Foundation for International  
Investigations of Crime against Media

# **ATTACKS ON JOURNALISTS, BLOGGERS AND MEDIA WORKERS IN THE CENTRAL ASIA AND AZERBAIJAN**

**2017-2019**





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- **Kazakhstan: [International Foundation for protection of freedom of speech “Adil Soz”](#)**

Major priority of International Foundation for Protection of Freedom of Speech “Adil soz” is establishment of open civil society over the statement in daily life of the country free, objective and progressive journalism. The main activity of the Foundation is monitoring of violations of freedom of speech, legal activity, educational activity and legal help to journalists and mass media.

- **Kyrgyzstan: [School of Peacemaking and Media Technology in Central Asia](#)**

School of Peacemaking and Media Technology is a nonprofit media development organization focusing on peace research, advocacy, and training on media issues based in Bishkek.

- **Tajikistan: Partner, who preferred to stay anonymous**

- **Turkmenistan: Ruslan Myatiev, [Turkmen.news](#)**

Turkmen journalist, human rights activist, and editor of the news and human rights website Turkmen.news - one of the few independent sources covering Turkmenistan. The website is based in the Netherlands, where it was set up in 2010.

Myatiev frequently writes and broadcasts for the media and speaks at various international conferences and seminars as a Turkmen expert on socio-economic subjects, on politics and human rights. Ruslan Myatiyev is Turkmenistan expert for the Justice for Journalists Foundation.

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Freelance journalist for major media outlets – [Fergana.ru](#) (Russia) and [IWPR](#) (UK). From 2008 to 2017 he authored several reports for international organisations and regional online forums on the state of freedom of speech, expression and the press in Uzbekistan. He is an active participant in the country’s activist movement. From 2007 to the present day he has been monitoring the use of child labour on cotton plantations, creating human rights content, and participating in the research projects of European human rights organisations. Naumov has been a volunteer at the School of Peacekeeping and Media Technology in Central Asia (Kyrgyzstan) since 2014.

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# Justice for Journalists

## Foundation for International Investigations of Crime against Media



Justice for Journalists Foundation (JFJ) is a London-based non-governmental organization. The foundation was created in August 2018 by Mikhail Khodorkovsky, founder of the Open Russia pro-democracy movement, an Amnesty International-recognised prisoner of conscience, and Putin's most prominent critic, together with his former business partner, philanthropist and member of the Free Russia Forum's standing committee Leonid Nevzlin.

JFJ funds journalistic investigations into violent crimes against media workers and helps professional and citizen journalists to mitigate their risks.

Our mission is to facilitate journalists' access to existing resources and make them relevant to the specifics of each region. We believe security is the essential basis for work in the media. We help journalists acquire the skills and knowledge to address their professional challenges.

JFJ's activity consists of three main components:

- ▶ Grants for investigating violent crimes against media workers;
- ▶ Risk mapping via monitoring, analysing and publicising attacks against media workers;
- ▶ Risk management and prevention by organising security and safety trainings for non-English speaking media workers in our Orkhan Dzhemal Media Safety Academy.

JFJ cooperates with international media workers and press freedom activists, human rights and educational organisations, and think-tanks on media security issues and investigations into crimes against journalists.



## INTRODUCTION

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The present research is part of an extensive study on attacks perpetrated against journalists, bloggers and media workers that covers 12 post-Soviet countries. This part of the study is devoted to Azerbaijan and the five Central Asian countries: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan.

The research has been jointly carried out by the Justice for Journalists Foundation and partners from those countries.

## METHODOLOGY

The study is based on data collected by content analysis of open sources in Russian, English and the relevant state language. Lists of the main sources are given in Appendices 2-7. In addition, previously unknown facts obtained by means of expert interviews were used for analysis in those countries with the least freedom of information – Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. Expert interviews with journalists and their lawyers were also used in compiling the report on Azerbaijan.

Based on further analysis of **1,464 attacks** perpetrated against professional and citizen journalists, bloggers and other media workers, three main types of attack were identified:

1. Physical attacks and threats to life, liberty and health.
2. Non-physical and/or cyber attacks and threats.
3. Attacks via judicial or economic means.

Each of the categories of attack shown can be further divided into subcategories, a complete list of which is given in Appendix One.

## PRINCIPAL TRENDS

The combined population of the region under examination is almost 84.5 million people, approximately equal to that of Germany, Iran or Turkey. In order to make a valid comparison of the number of incidents in these countries, it is appropriate to work with relative rather than absolute numbers – calculated as the per 100 thousand people.

	Population	Number of attacks for 2017-2019	Attacks per 100 thousand people
<b>Azerbaijan</b>	10,139,177	490	4.83
<b>Kazakhstan</b>	18,776,707	628	3.34
<b>Kyrgyzstan</b>	6,524,195	101	1.55
<b>Tajikistan</b>	9,537,645	81	0.85
<b>Turkmenistan</b>	6,031,200	33	0.55
<b>Uzbekistan</b>	33,469,203	131	0.39

Source for population statistics: [www.worldometers.info](http://www.worldometers.info)

The high numbers of attacks observed in countries such as **Azerbaijan** and **Kazakhstan** speak not so much to the brutality of the environment in which media workers are forced to work, but, counterintuitively, of the relative freedom of speech in these countries. Whereas in **Turkmenistan**, **Uzbekistan** and **Tajikistan** – where media workers are hardly ever attacked according to the available data – such incidents simply do not receive any publicity, due to the almost total information vacuum.

In **Turkmenistan** – the most closed of these countries (it occupies the last, 180th place in the rankings of Reporters Without Borders) – it is almost impossible to work as a journalist. Information about what is happening in the country is reported to foreign media by “people’s correspondents”. They pass on photographs and videos at the risk of being spotted by the extensive national tracking system. The relevant section of this study should give some idea of the dangers that people face while still trying to get across the truth about what is happening in Turkmenistan to a wider audience.



All six countries except **Uzbekistan** show an increase in the absolute number of attacks between 2017 and 2019. In Central Asia, attacks via judicial means predominate (primarily in the form of detentions, arrests and the institution of administrative and criminal proceedings). Representatives of state authorities are the main source of threats to media workers. In four countries, the number of attacks of this type increased over the three years covered but decreased in Kyrgyzstan and remained largely constant in Uzbekistan.

In the number of physical attacks, **Azerbaijan** leads by a wide margin, with around 26 such incidents reported in the last year alone. Brutal beatings of journalists in custody are characteristic for this country, even extending to the kidnapping of journalists and their subsequent repatriation from other countries.

**Kazakhstan** ranks first in attacks via judicial or economic means. On average, more than 50 cases are initiated each year in Kazakhstan against media workers on charges of defamation, slander, and causing damage to reputation. 30-40 cases reach the courts per year, with half of them leading to the imposition of a fine, and about a third resulting in a prison sentence. Non-physical attacks are also common in Kazakhstan, including harassment, intimidation, damage and confiscation of property and documents, and hacking of electronic equipment and online accounts.

**Tajikistan** leads the region in the number of media workers subject to accusations of extremism, links with terrorists and inciting hatred. Intimidation of family members of journalists is also characteristic of Tajikistan, including their harassment, interrogation, detention and arrest.

The character of attacks perpetrated against journalists in **Kyrgyzstan** has shifted towards a manifold increase in online threats, via DDoS and hacker attacks on online media outlets.

## THE RELEVANCE OF THIS RESEARCH

**D**espite the relative informational isolation of Central Asian countries, the global community should not ignore what is happening in this region.

Taking advantage of the language barrier, geographical remoteness and low degree of integration of these states into global political and informational agendas, their authoritarian rulers can “test” various methods of applying pressure on journalists with impunity – methods which are then gradually exported to other countries. Accusing journalists of extremism and connections with terrorists, as well as the criminalisation of defamation laws and violation of privacy, are widely used in Azerbaijan, Tajikistan and Kazakhstan to silence corruption investigators and opposition-minded journalists and bloggers.

In the absence of a democratic separation of powers, a lack of police accountability and the dependence of the judiciary on the executive, professional and citizen journalists cannot count on receiving protection and justice in their countries. The attention of the international community is the only means of improving their situation and enabling them to continue to work and convey the truth to the general public.

The Justice for Journalists Foundation, together with its partners and experts, carries out weekly monitoring of attacks against media workers in all post-Soviet countries excluding the Baltic states, the results of which are published on the Media Risk Map in both Russian and English. The available data covers the period from 2017 onwards.

On March, 25 Justice for Journalists Foundation (JFJ) and Index on Censorship [announced](#) a joint global initiative to monitor attacks and violations against the media, specific to the current coronavirus-related crisis. Media freedom violations will be catalogued with a map hosted in Index's [current website](#) and on the Justice for Journalists [Media Risk Map](#).

# ATTACKS ON JOURNALISTS, BLOGGERS AND MEDIA WORKERS

## AZERBAIJAN



PHOTO: Meydan TV



# 1/ MAIN FINDINGS

During the course of the investigation, 490 cases of assault and intimidation against professional media workers, citizen journalists, civil activists and editorials of traditional and online media in Azerbaijan were uncovered. The data for this investigation was gathered through the content analysis of open sources in Azeri, Russian and English languages. Information not formerly made public but obtained through expert interviews with journalists and their lawyers has also been incorporated in the report. For a list of the main sources, see Appendix Two.

1. Abduction and pre-trial detention of media workers are common practice in Azerbaijan. While held in custody, they are regularly subject to beatings and torture.
2. The main type of attacks perpetrated against journalists, bloggers and media workers in Azerbaijan are those using legal and/or economic measures.
3. The main methods of applying pressure on journalists are detentions, accusations of libel, defamation and causing damage to reputation, lawsuits and the closure of media outlets/blocking of online resources.
4. Among the methods of applying non-physical pressure on media workers, cyber attacks on their media outlets are most prevalent, and are usually followed by the official closure of online resources.
5. In Azerbaijan, family members of opposition-minded media workers are subjected to pressure, threats and arrests.

# 2/ MASS MEDIA IN AZERBAIJAN

There are 12 national television channels operating in Azerbaijan. Three of them – the channels AZTV, İdman Azərbaycan (Sports Azerbaijan) and Mədəniyyət (Culture) - are owned and fully funded by the state. In addition to these, public television is also financed from the state budget.

The remaining eight nationwide broadcasters (ATV, SPACE TV, XƏZƏR TV, LIDER TV, ARB, CBC Sport, REAL TV and ARB 24) are privately owned. However, the actual identity of most of their owners is unknown, and information about their ownership is suppressed. According to experts, these channels are owned by individuals associated with the government.

12 broadcasters operate regionally (ARB Ulduz, ARB Kəpəz, DÜNYA TV, QAFQAZ TV, ARB Günəş, ARB Cənub, MİNGƏÇEVİR TV, ARB Şəki, ARB Aran, ARB Şimal, Naxçıvan TV and KANAL 35) and are privately owned. However, it is believed that these regional broadcasters are also beneficially owned by individuals in close association with the government.

There are 13 radio stations operating nationwide in Azerbaijan (Respublikanskoye Radio, Obshchestvennoye Radio, Radio Azad Azərbaycan, the independent television and radio company Antenn, 100.5 FM, 106 FM, Jazz FM, Space 104 FM, Radio Xəzər, Media FM, ARAZ FM, Avto FM, and Radio ASAN). The NAR State Committee for Television and Radio and the Voice of Nakhchivan broadcast in the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic. 10 of these radio stations are owned by private broadcasters, most of which are subsidiaries of national broadcasters located in Baku and broadcast over the FM frequency. With the exception of the city of Ganja, where one regional radio station (Kəpəz FM) is active, none of the regions have local radio broadcasters.

Exact official data on the number of news agencies, newspapers and magazines in Azerbaijan is not publicly available. According to data from various government bodies and journalists' organisations, there are fewer than 50 news agencies in the country. According to the same sources, the number of online news sites and analytical online resources varies with an upper limit of 250. At least 30 daily newspapers are published and distributed in Azerbaijan, with an additional 30 or so weekly and monthly newspapers and magazines.

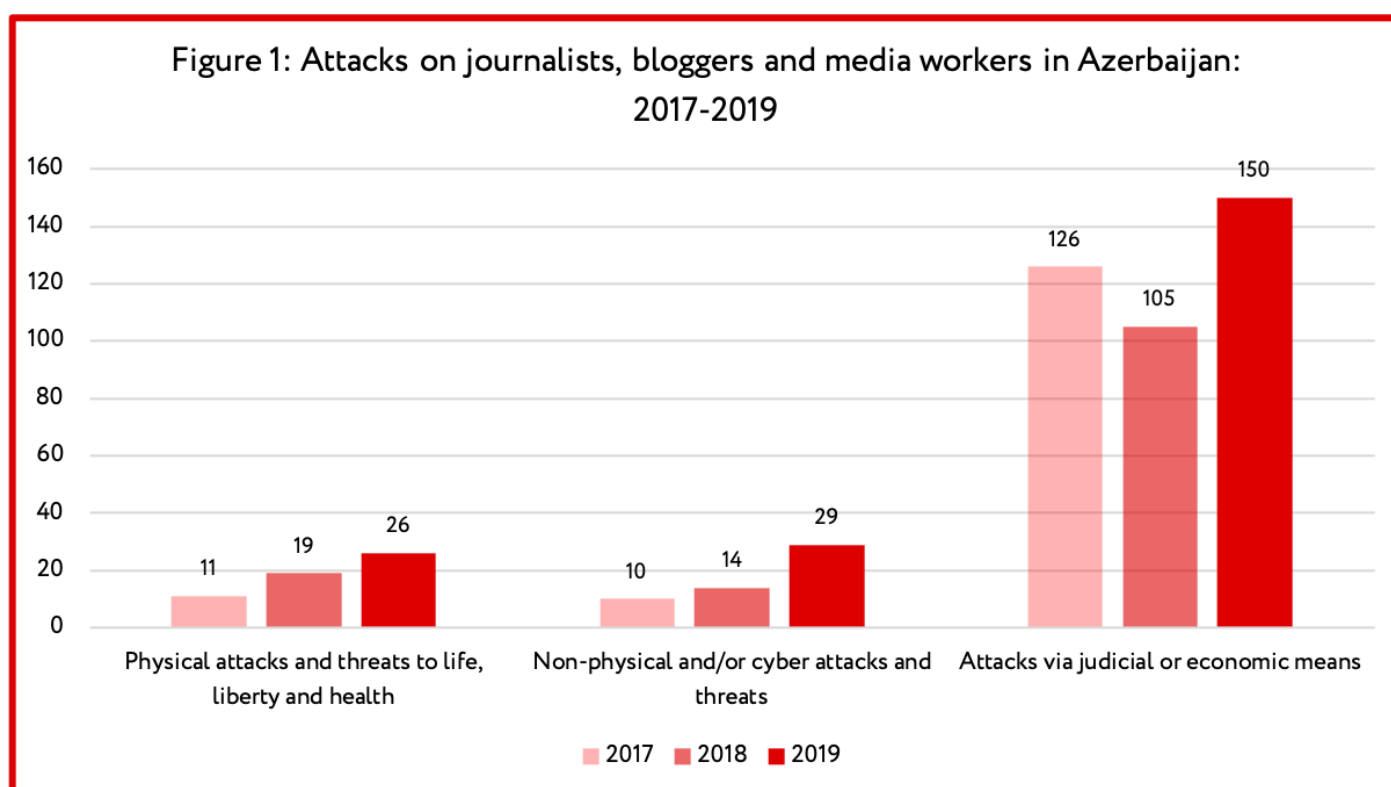
Around 50 journalistic organisations are officially registered in Azerbaijan. However, the activities of most of them are nominal; many media organisations have been forced to cease their activities since 2014-15.

Azerbaijan ranked 166th out of 180 in the [World Press Freedom Index](#) of Reporters Without Borders for 2019. Over the course of that year, the situation regarding press freedom in the country worsened: Azerbaijan was 163rd in 2018.

## 3/ OVERALL ATTACKS ANALYSIS

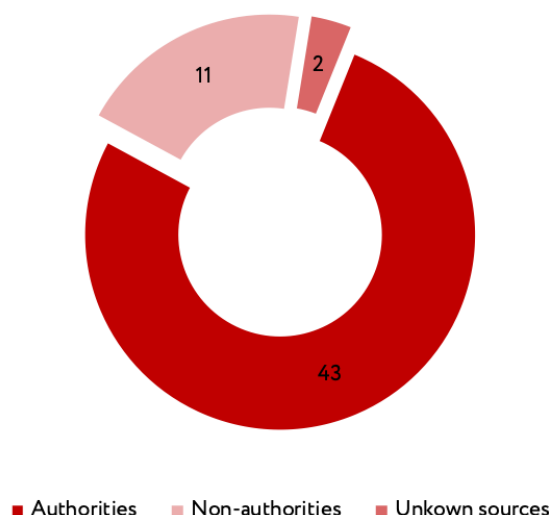
Figure 1 presents the total number of attacks on journalists, bloggers and other media workers in Azerbaijan from January 2017 to December 2019 (inclusive). All categories show an increase in the number of attacks since 2017. At the same time, attacks via judicial or economic means remained the preferred method of the authorities: most often, media workers were detained by the police, as well as targeted by accusations of defamation, libel, contempt and reputational damage. The number of attacks in this category increased from 125 incidents in 2017 to 150 in 2019.

It should be noted that in the case of bloggers who have been forced to leave the country, legal pressure has also been used against their relatives and others close to them.



## 4/ PHYSICAL ATTACKS AND THREATS TO LIFE, LIBERTY AND HEALTH

Figure 2: Physical attacks and threats to life, liberty and health (2017-2019)



The number of physical attacks against Azeri media workers increased by two and a half times over the three-year period under examination. 56 cases of physical attacks were recorded in just three years, 43 of which came from representatives of the authorities.

Over these three years, 47 instances were noted of journalists and bloggers being subjected to attacks, beating, injury and/or torture not resulting in death. Most of those targeted were harsh critics of the government. Journalists mainly faced attacks while carrying out their professional activities. In several cases, journalists were attacked for their articles and videos.

- ▶ In 2017, the political activist and blogger Mekhman Galandarov, a long-term resident in Georgia, was arrested immediately upon his return to Baku and then died in a pre-trial detention centre. According to the official version, Galandarov hanged himself. Galandarov's body was secretly buried without proper verification procedures, his relatives and the public only being informed after the event.
- ▶ Ulvi Gasanli, editor of the critical news website abzas.net, was illegally drafted into the armed forces, despite having previously been declared unfit for military service. This occurred shortly after he had organised a public hearing on 15 October 2017.
- ▶ In 2018, Famil Farkhadoglu, a staff member at the Unikal.org news website, was attacked while trying to photograph the Minister of Health at an official ceremony. The journalist was beaten and his equipment damaged. An investigation was launched following the journalist's complaint about the attacks but the results were not made public.
- ▶ In 2019, the journalist Zhalya Aliyeva was beaten while filming outside the Hotel Oscar in a Baku suburb. The attack resulted in her receiving a head injury.
- ▶ In 2019, online television channel Kanal-13 employee Nurlan Gakhramanly was attacked while preparing a report in the Baku bus station. The guards of the complex subjected the journalist to a brutal beating.



Over the 2017-2019 period, at least seven journalists were abducted or illegally deprived of their liberty, several of them being tortured in custody.

- The blogger Mekhman Guseynov, who had conducted several investigations into the assets of state officials and become famous for his video broadcasts, was kidnapped in January 2017. He disappeared without contact for over 24 hours, after which it became clear that he had been detained and tortured by the police. In December 2019, Guseynov was once again detained by the police and prevented from contacting anyone as to his situation. According to his own account, the police took him to the outskirts of Baku and beat him.
- In May 2017, the journalist Nidzhat Amiraslanov was detained by the police and prevented from contacting anyone as to his situation. As his lawyer later stated, the journalist was accused of resisting the police, for which a court sentenced him to thirty days' administrative arrest. During this time, he was repeatedly tortured and beaten, losing most of his teeth in the process.
- At the end of May 2017, the independent journalist and political activist Afgan Mukhtarly was forcibly transported into Azerbaijan from his temporary residence in Georgia. On entering the country, he was immediately arrested and charged with illegal border crossing, smuggling and resisting a law enforcement operation. Mukhtarly denied these allegations and stated that on the evening of 29 May he had been abducted in Tbilisi and transported to Azeri territory, where money that did not belong to him was planted on his person, and he was beaten. The court found him guilty and sentenced him to six years' imprisonment.
- In March 2018, the blogger Fatima Movlamy was detained for five days at the Ministry of Internal Affairs' Main Organised Crime Department. The blogger had been a participant in the "We'll Show You A Dictator" campaign aimed at the President of Azerbaijan. During the whole period of her detention, her relatives were given no information as to her whereabouts.
- An employee of the online television channel Kanal13.tv, Ismail Islamoglu, known for his critical articles about the Zhara music festival in Baku, spent 3 days at the Main Police Directorate deprived of any communication with the outside world. During his detention he spent hours without food, water or the ability to sit or lie down, as well as receiving beatings, insults and threats.
- In 2018, the journalist Aitadzh Akhmedova, a partner of the Meydan TV outlet, broadcasting from Germany, was detained while preparing material on a protest rally. She was forcibly brought to a police station and held there. Her complaints of police violence were not investigated.

In most cases, the law enforcement agencies were notified of incidents of physical attacks against journalists, but the attackers were rarely held accountable or the results of investigative proceedings were not disclosed.

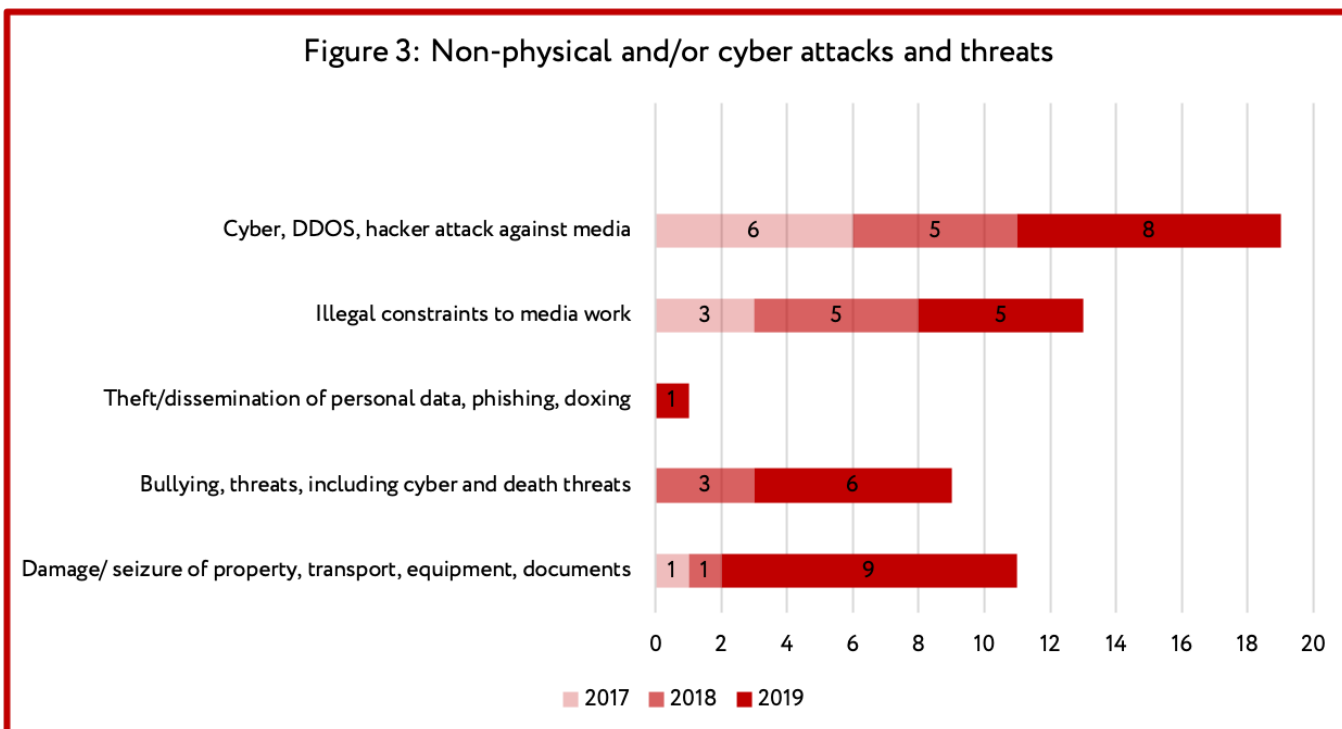
# 5/ NON-PHYSICAL AND/OR CYBER ATTACKS AND THREATS

The principal method of non-physical attacks employed in Azerbaijan involves the use of cyber, DDoS and hacker attacks on online media. The second most common method of applying pressure is the illegal constraining of journalistic work, taking the form of prohibitions on filming and collecting information for articles and television features.

Independent online media that criticise the government are regularly subject to cyber attacks. At least 19 such attacks were recorded for the three-year period in question. They resulted in long-term inability to access the resources targeted, as well as a number of websites having their database deleted. Most of the online media outlets that survived such attacks were then closed down anyway, both in court and out of court.

- The opposition sites abzas.net, cumhuriyyet.net and azadliq.info were repeatedly subjected to attacks rendering them inaccessible. In May 2017, the opposition website 24saat.org was attacked and later blocked for visitors from inside the country. According to VirtualRoad.org, this obstruction of opposition-leaning sites was most likely carried out on behalf of government agencies.
- In 2018, the State Security Service arrested Ikram Ragimov, the editor of the website realliq.info. Following his arrest, this and five other sites he ran were blocked without a court order.
- In 2019, the following websites were blocked without a court order: kanal13.tv, gununsesi.org, gununsesi.info, gununsesi.az, nia.az, neytral.az, politika.az, vediinfo.az, obyektiv.org, sonolay.org, ulus.az, qanunxeber.az, xalqinsesi.com, aztoday.az, euroasianews.org, avropaninsesi.org, euroasianews.blog, euroasiainfo.com, infoaz.org, realliq.info, realliq.az, realliqinfo.org, realinfo.az, realliqinfo.com, realliqinfo.az, abzas.net, cumhuriyyet.net, and xeber-xetti.az.

Figure 3: Non-physical and/or cyber attacks and threats

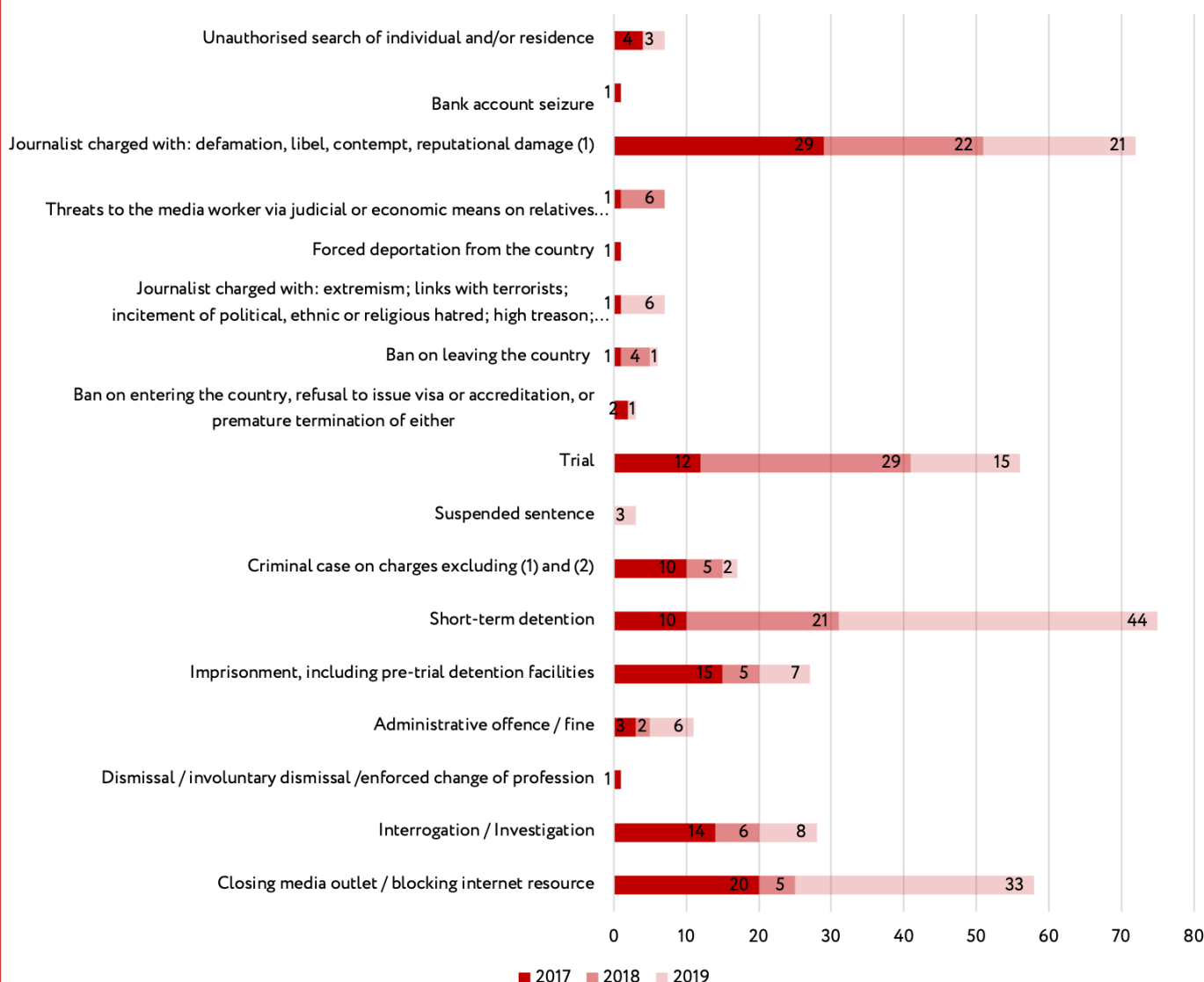


# 6/ ATTACKS VIA JUDICIAL OR ECONOMIC MEANS

The top 5 methods of attacks and threats via judicial or economic means are short-term detention, accusations of defamation, libel, contempt and reputational damage, trial, closing media outlets/blocking online resources, and interrogations.

As in Tajikistan, interrogations, detentions and arrests are used extensively in Azerbaijan against family members and others close to independent journalists and bloggers who have been forced to leave the country – with at least seven such incidents having been identified.

Figure 4: Attacks via judicial or economic means





- In February 2017, a court detained the brother and nephew of the blogger Ordukhon Temirkhan, who had previously been forced to emigrate to the Netherlands. Two of his nephews and another close relative were sentenced to administrative arrest in 2018.
- In June 2018, several relatives of Rafik Dzhalilov, editor-in-chief of the newspaper Golos Talysha, were interrogated. His brother was later detained.
- In February 2018, the father of the blogger and activist Tural Sadigly, who lives in Germany, was detained. His brother was also detained and sentenced to administrative arrest in 2018.
- The father of the blogger Magomed Mirzali, who had emigrated to France, was detained in January 2018. The police threatened him, stating that if his son did not remove his critical posts from online social networks, other family members of the blogger would also be arrested.

During the period under analysis, 241 instances were recorded of journalists and media workers facing pressure from state authorities and individuals. Typically, journalists are detained and handed over to the police while attempting to carry out their professional activities, usually when covering anti-government protests. At least 21 such incidents were recorded in 2018. The police detained the journalists, despite the press credentials they were carrying, and released them only after the protest rallies in question had ended.

## **7 / CLOSURE OF MEDIA OUTLETS AND BLOCKING OF INTERNET RESOURCES**

A Law “On Informatisation” was adopted in early 2017 which enables the blocking of any online resource at the request of the Ministry of Communications. By May 2017, five key critical resources in Azerbaijan had been blocked. In addition, access to dozens of websites unconnected to the government was restricted without court orders. Online publications were shut down and blocked 58 times over the course of the three years under study.

- On 12 May 2017, the Ministry of Communications filed a lawsuit requesting the blocking of five critical Azeri internet resources. The Ministry claimed that illegal content was being disseminated on the websites of Radio Azadlig, the newspaper Azadlig, the programme Azərbaycan saati, Meydan TV, and the online television channel Turan. This involved articles by opposition politicians harshly criticising the government. The local courts ruled in favour of the Ministry, and access to the sites was blocked. The higher courts then dismissed an appeal. The complaint is currently pending before the European Court of Human Rights.
- Realliq.info, which had been critical of the government’s media policy, was blocked in November 2018 without a court order. The team behind the site then created realliq.az, which was blocked in December, also without a court order. The sites Realliqinfo.com, Realliqinfo.az and Realliqinfo.org were blocked in a similar manner.
- The website of the independent online television channel Kanal-13 was blocked in December 2017 without a court order.

## 8 / ACCUSATIONS OF CRIMINAL ACTIVITY, LAWSUITS AND ARRESTS

Over the space of 3 years, journalists, bloggers and media workers were accused of libel, defamation, contempt and reputational damage 72 times; of extremism, links with terrorists and inciting hatred 7 times, and subject to criminal charges of extortion, tax evasion, illegal possession and sale of drugs, hooliganism and illegal border crossing 17 times. 56 legal actions were recorded in this 3-year period, though not all those accused appeared before a court. Lawsuits were filed against the media by state officials, government agencies and businessmen close to the government.

During the period in question, 27 cases were recorded of imprisonment, including pre-trial detention facilities, of media workers on various charges. In 19 of these cases, journalists were arrested before a court had reached any decision. In two cases, journalists were convicted of defamation and slander. In other cases, journalists were convicted of extortion, hooliganism, calls to treasonous activities, high treason, possession of drugs, and illegal border crossing. The journalists, their lawyers and local human rights organisations have stated that the arrests were directly related to the activities of the journalists.

In 2019, Mustafa Gadzhibeyli (head of the website [bastainfo.com](http://bastainfo.com)), Anar Mammadov (editor-in-chief of the website [criminal.az](http://criminal.az)) and Nuraddin Ismailov (editor of the website [teref.info](http://teref.info)) were prosecuted for “openly calling for the violent seizure of power or its coercion by force or a violent change to the constitutional order or a violent rupture in territorial integrity and the dissemination of materials of similar content”. All three journalists were sentenced to 5 years and 6 months’ probation.

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**ATTACKS ON JOURNALISTS, BLOGGERS  
AND MEDIA WORKERS**

# **KAZAKHSTAN**



PHOTO: Madina Alimhanova



# 1/ MAIN FINDINGS

During the course of the investigation, 628 cases of assault and intimidation against professional media workers, citizen journalists, civil activists and editorials of traditional and online media in Kazakhstan were uncovered. The data for this investigation was gathered through the content analysis of open sources in Kazakh, Russian and English languages.. For a list of the main sources, see Appendix Three.

1. The principal form of intimidation deployed in Kazakhstan against journalists, bloggers and media workers is the application of judicial and economic pressure.
2. The authorities in Kazakhstan are the principal source of threats and pressure against media workers, mainly via methods such as detention, accusations of libel, and prosecution.
3. There is a direct relationship between mass arrests and the growth of protest sentiment in society. Journalists are taken into custody during their coverage of mass rallies in the major cities of Kazakhstan.
4. The second principal form of intimidation deployed against traditional media journalists and lay journalists, according to open sources, is that of attacks and threats of a non-physical character, including those perpetrated online.
5. In the space of three years, the number of physical assaults against journalists has almost tripled, the vast majority of which involve non-fatal beatings.

# 2/ MASS MEDIA IN KAZAKHSTAN

According to data published by the Ministry of Information and Public Development, the number of officially registered domestic media outlets decreased from 3,328 in 2018 to 3,185 in 2019.

These 3,185 media outlets include 2,951 print and online media outlets and news agencies (compared with 3,130 in 2018), 161 television channels (128 in 2018) and 73 radio stations (70 in 2018).

Kazakhstan ranked 158th out of 180 in the [World Press Freedom Index](#) issued each year by Reporters Without Borders. Over the course of one year, the country fell one position in the rankings.

In the 2018 [Freedom on the Net](#) ranking tables of the international human rights organisation Freedom House, Kazakhstan ranked 46th out of 65 for levels of freedom online, falling under the category of countries with an unfree internet. In 2019, [Freedom House](#) placed Kazakhstan among 33 states (out of the 65 analysed) where the situation regarding internet freedom had worsened over the past year. Freedom House included Kazakhstan in its list of countries where “the internet, social networks and communication platforms are often blocked”, “political, social or religious content is limited”, and “bloggers, human rights activists, and network users critical of the authorities are subject to harassment and held liable.”

## IMPACT OF THE TRANSITION OF POWER ON THE MASS MEDIA

The main socio-political factor influencing freedom of speech in Kazakhstan in 2019 was the transition of power that had taken place that year. On 19 March 2019, Nursultan Nazarbayev resigned as President of Kazakhstan, a post he had occupied since 1991. The role of Acting President of the country passed to Speaker of the Senate Kassym-Zhomart Tokayev. On 9 June 2019, Kassym-Zhomart Tokayev became the new President of the Republic of Kazakhstan.

Nursultan Nazarbayev remained the Chairman for life of the Security Council of Kazakhstan. The Security Council is a constitutional body that coordinates the implementation of a unified state policy in ensuring national security and the defence capability of the Republic of Kazakhstan in order to maintain internal political stability, protect the constitutional order, and uphold the independent statehood, territorial integrity and national interests of Kazakhstan on the world stage. All appointments to key government posts are agreed with the Chairman of the Security Council. Nursultan Nazarbayev also retained leadership of the Nur Otan political party.

The change in regime prompted an unprecedented surge in civic activism. March, May, June and July 2019 saw large-scale unauthorised peaceful rallies across the country. This activation of public life reinforced polarisation in the media. Most publications receiving financial support from the state avoided coverage of sensitive topics. Independent journalists covering the rallies were detained and assaulted. A significant increase in activity was noted among users of online social networks.

The highest state authorities continue in their efforts to maintain and strengthen control over the mass media. However, they are forced to reckon with pressure from the international community, which resulted in a degree of toning down harsh repressions of the media in the second half of 2019.

## LEGISLATIVE REGULATION OF THE ACTIVITIES OF THE MEDIA AND JOURNALISTS

From 2017 to 2019, Kazakhstan passed several laws significantly limiting the implementation of constitutional guarantees on the liberty to obtain and disseminate information.

In 2017, a series of amendments to legislation were adopted that significantly waver from international standards on freedom of speech: additional mechanisms for monitoring commentators on social networks and other internet resources were introduced; the procedures for providing information were made more complex; the time period for providing information in response to requests from journalists was more than doubled; a concept of “propaganda” was introduced which virtually prohibits the publication in the mass media of information prohibited by Kazakh legislation; and the duty was imposed on journalists to obtain consent for the dissemination of personal and family secrets, despite these being concepts lacking a precise legal definition.

In 2018, the authorities announced work had begun on an information system called the Automated Monitoring of the National Information Space, with the principal intention of making state monitoring of the media more effective in identifying content that violates the laws of the Republic of Kazakhstan (propaganda of terrorism, extremism and suicide, and the dissemination of knowingly false information). In the same year, the government approved a list of several state organisations – the Prosecutor General’s Office, the National Security Committee, the Ministry of the Interior and the Ministry of Defence – which have the right to priority use of communication networks and media, suspension of networks in case of threats or emergencies of a social, natural or man-made character, as well as calling a state of emergency.

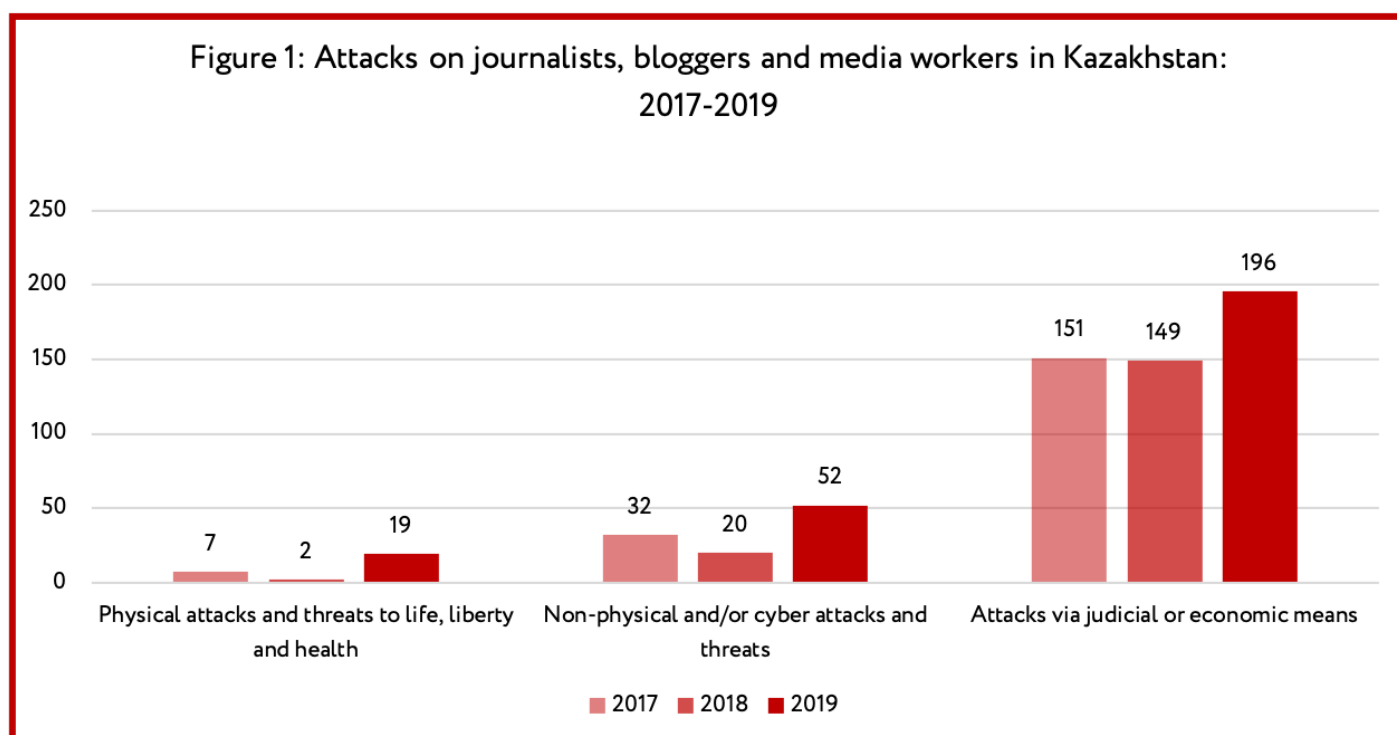
Some initiatives of the authorities to liberalise legislation should also be noted, such as the decision to remove “slander” from the purview of the criminal courts and the proposal to exempt printed periodicals that issue an online version of the publication from paying VAT.

# 3/ OVERALL ATTACKS ANALYSIS

Figure 1 presents a quantitative analysis of the three main types of attacks perpetrated against journalists in Kazakhstan, from January 2017 to December 2019 inclusive.

Over these three years, an increase was observed in the number of all three types of attacks. In 2019, the number of attacks via judicial or economic means increased 1.3 times compared with 2017, while physical attacks and threats to life, liberty and health increased by 2.7 times, and non-physical and/or cyber attacks and threats by 1.4 times.

The main purpose of attacks/threats is to prevent the publication of materials. Threats involving physical violence hardly ever lead to real assaults. This is perhaps the reason why these types of attacks are not widely covered in the media: most journalists consider them to be inevitable and as presenting no real danger.





## 4/ PHYSICAL ATTACKS AND THREATS TO LIFE, LIBERTY AND HEALTH

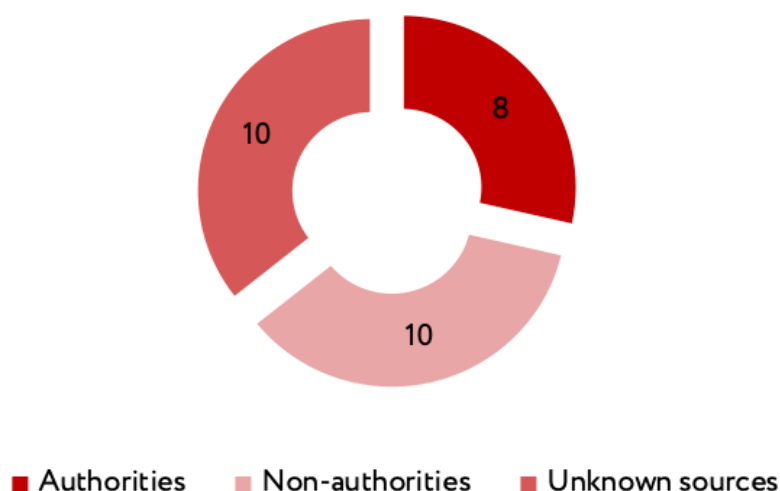
In 2017-2019, 28 cases of physical attacks were reported, including threats to the life, liberty and health of media workers. Of these, 24 cases involved non-fatal assaults (beatings and injuries).

The only death occurred on 27 December 2019: Dana Kruglova, a copy editor for the online media outlet Informburo.kz, died in a Bek Air aeroplane crash near the village of Kyzyl Tu in Almaty Oblast.

Kazakhstan is one of several countries that continue the Soviet tradition of using punitive medicine against dissidents and dissenters. So, for example, the blogger Ardak Ashim was detained on 15 March 2018 on suspicion of inciting ethnic, religious and social hatred, and on 27 March the court decided to place her in a neuropsychiatric dispensary for one month.

- ▶ In May 2017, Yermurat Bapi, chairman of the non-governmental foundation Journalists in Need, was injured in a stabbing incident.
- ▶ In June 2019, Shokan Alkhabayev, a correspondent for the online media outlet Tengrinews.kz, who had covered the mass detentions, was brutally beaten by police officers.
- ▶ In July 2019, reporters for Radio Azattyk and several other journalists suffered from a targeted pepper spray attack in the city of Nur-Sultan.
- ▶ On 22 July 2019, several journalists were attacked in the press room of the Kazakhstan International Bureau for Human Rights in Almaty, resulting in the damage or theft of professional equipment, video cameras, cameras and smartphones.

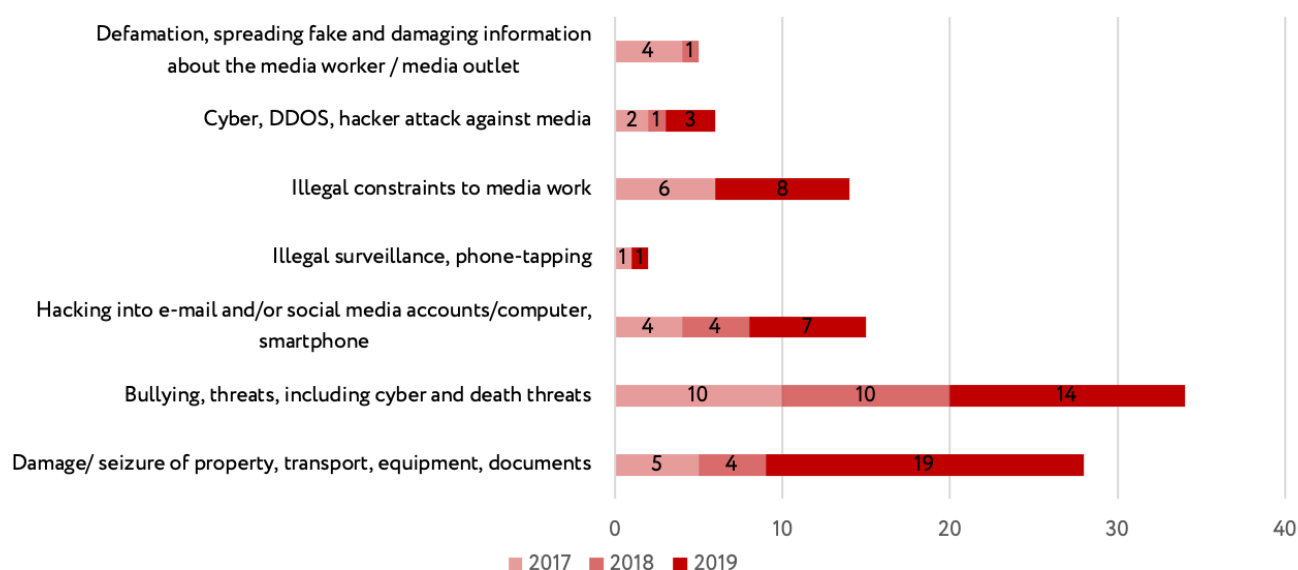
Figure 2: Physical attacks and threats to life, liberty and health (2017-2019)



# 5/ NON-PHYSICAL AND/OR CYBER ATTACKS AND THREATS

Figure 3 presents the number of attacks and threats of a non-physical character, including those perpetrated online. As shown in the chart, the most reported methods of applying non-physical pressure on media workers are harassment, intimidation and pressure, damage/seizure of property, vehicles, equipment and documents, hacking of e-mail and social media accounts, and illegal constraints to media work.

Figure 3: Non-physical and/or cyber attacks and threats

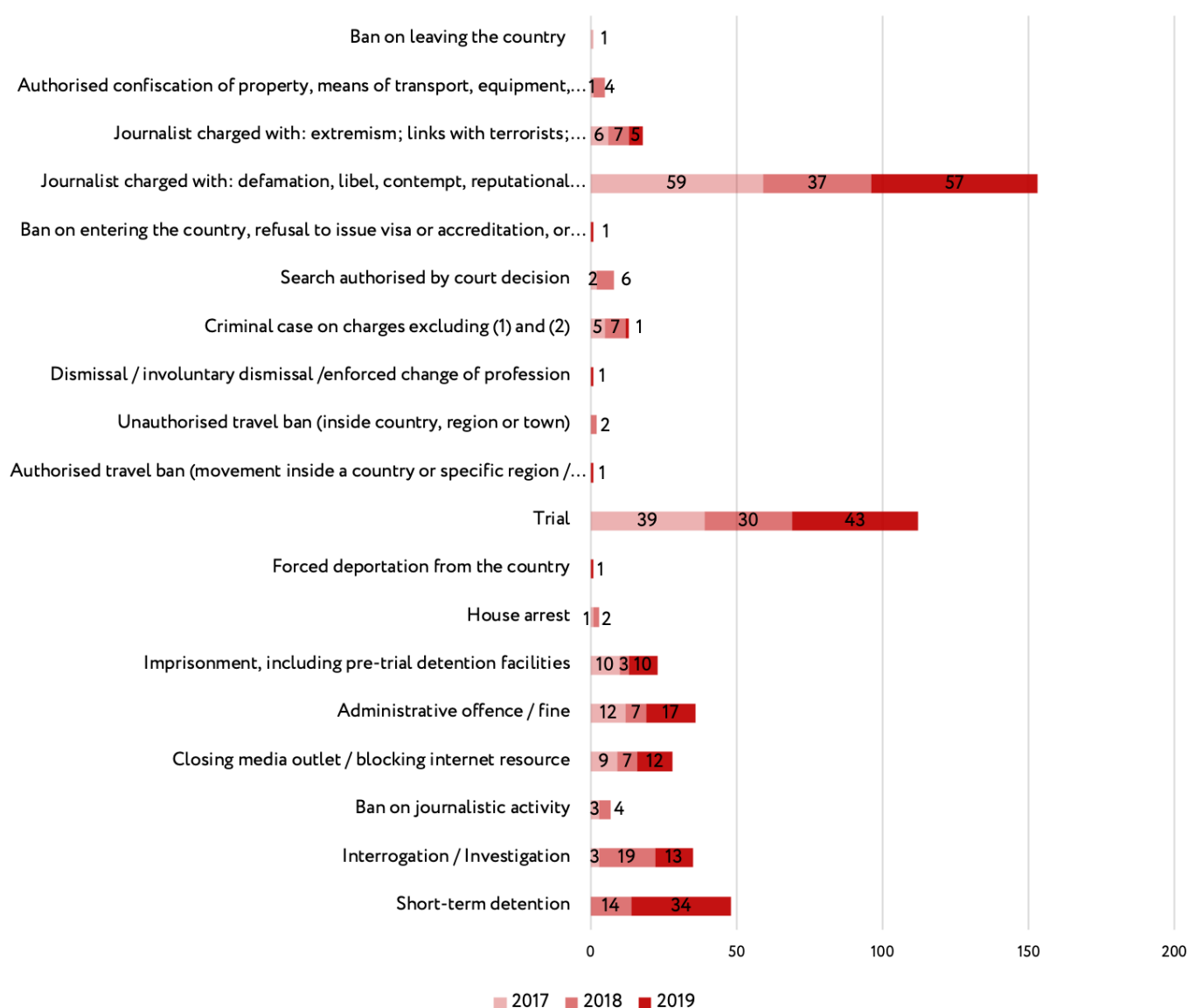


# 6/ ATTACKS VIA JUDICIAL OR ECONOMIC MEANS

Figure 4 presents the various subcategories of attacks via judicial or economic means. The top 5 methods for applying pressure on media workers include accusations of defamation, libel, contempt or reputational damage, trial, short-term detentions, interrogations, and administrative fines.

It is noteworthy that the authorities began using detention extensively against journalists in 2018, with the number of such cases increasing from 14 to 34 in 2019.

Figure 4: Attacks via judicial or economic means



# 7 / THE USE OF DETENTION

2019 saw a significant increase in attacks against media workers by the authorities. This was due to the growth of protest sentiment in society as a result of the extraordinary presidential elections. Most detentions occurred during coverage of unauthorised public demonstrations or were designed to prevent journalists from covering rallies and other protest activities. Detention was accompanied by violations of procedural rules.

Peaks in detentions were observed in June 2018, and February and June 2019.

- ▶ The detention of 7 journalists on 23 June 2018 in the cities of Uralsk, Almaty, and Astana. The journalists had intended to cover unauthorised rallies “for free education”, none of which ultimately took place.
- ▶ On 27 February 2019, 4 journalists were detained in Zhanaozen, Uralsk, and Almaty, having gone to the offices of the Nur Otan party – the venues of the planned rallies; one journalist was detained on leaving his home.
- ▶ On 9 June 2019, the day the extraordinary presidential elections were announced, large-scale protests were held in Kazakhstan, which were accompanied by numerous detentions of citizens. The protests continued until 12 June. While covering the events of 9-12 June, 14 journalists were detained in Almaty, Nur-Sultan and Uralsk.

One example of a journalist affected in this way involved the British journalist Chris Rickleton, the Central Asia correspondent for Agence France-Press (AFP). He was detained on 9 June at Astana Square in Almaty while trying to conduct an interview. After the intervention of the Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of Kazakhstan, the journalist was released; Chris Rickleton later had his accreditation card and video equipment returned, but the police had erased all footage from the devices. Rickleton appeared in person on social networks with a black eye, explaining this as a result of having “fallen onto the knee of the officer who detained him.”

The detention of journalists covering the elections was condemned by Kazakh and international human rights activists. Mihra Rittmann, senior Central Asia researcher for the international human rights organisation Human Rights Watch, said on her Twitter account that the journalists had been detained “in the exercise of their professional duties”, and the remaining people detained “for attempting to exercise their right to peaceful protest.”

“The detention of journalists covering the elections is nothing more than direct interference in their work and their task of covering an event of deep public interest,” said Daisy Sindelar, Acting President of the media corporation Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. On 13 June, at a government briefing by the Ministry of Internal Affairs, Deputy Interior Minister Marat Kozhayev apologised. He justified police action by saying journalists had not worn any clear external attributes to identify them as journalists.



## 8 / ACCUSATION OF DEFAMATION, LIBEL, CONTEMPT OR REPUTATIONAL DAMAGE

Accusations of defamation, libel, contempt, or reputational damage were extensively used against media workers throughout the period under study. From 2017 to 2019, professional and citizen journalists experienced 154 attacks/threats in this subcategory.

Even though most trials end in acquittals, the indictment itself and subsequent judicial investigation are accompanied by significant moral and financial costs. If convicted, a journalist can be sent to jail for a period of up to three years.

2019 saw two trials in which journalists were sentenced to imprisonment or restriction of liberty following accusations of libel, defamation and causing damage to reputation.

- On 16 March, Yelena Kuznetsova, editor-in-chief of the Kvartal newspaper (Petropavlovsk, Northern Kazakhstan), was sentenced to one year of restriction of freedom. On 18 June, the court of appeal quashed the verdict of the trial court and fully acquitted the journalist.
- The conviction of Amangeldy Batyrbekov (Southern Kazakhstan) to two years and three months in prison provoked an immense public outcry. Thanks to a public campaign, the guilty verdict was cancelled at the Court of Appeal, and the journalist, having by that time spent more than 3 months behind bars, was found not guilty.

## 9 / CLOSURE OF MEDIA OUTLETS AND BLOCKING OF INTERNET RESOURCES

Independent online media outlets, social networks and instant messenger services constitute a source of alternative information for many Kazakh citizens. As such, they are subject to active blocking by the authorities whenever mass demonstrations are underway in the country.

- In 2017, two independent media outlets were forced to close – the online resource Radiotochka (closed due to the head of the publication B. Gabdullin being forced to resign) and the newspaper Sayashi Kalam: Tribuna (closed by the owner in connection with the arrest of the editor-in-chief Zhanbolat Mamay).
- In May 2018, a court decision terminated the publication of one of the country's most popular media outlets – the online information and analysis resource Ratel.kz.
- The citizens of Kazakhstan experienced a complete blocking of social networks and online media on Victory Day, 9 May 2019. From the early morning onwards, access to 13 online media outlets was terminated, followed shortly afterwards by the blocking of YouTube, Facebook, Instagram and Telegram. The only social network not to be blocked was Twitter.

# ATTACKS ON JOURNALISTS, BLOGGERS AND MEDIA WORKERS

# KYRGYZSTAN



PHOTO: kaktus.media

# 1/ MAIN FINDINGS

During the course of the investigation, 101 cases of assault and intimidation against professional media workers, citizen journalists, civil activists and editorials of traditional and online media in Kyrgyzstan were uncovered. The data for this investigation was gathered through the content analysis of open sources in Kyrgyz, Russian and English languages. For a list of the main sources, see Appendix Four.

1. The main type of attack used against journalists, bloggers and media workers in Kyrgyzstan is the application of legal and/or economic pressure.
2. The main means of intimidation deployed against journalists are interrogations, baseless accusations of extremism and incitement of various types of hatred, bans on leaving the country, and closing down/blocking of media, with representatives of the authorities being the source of such pressure.
3. 2017 was a year of very high-profile, multi-million-dollar lawsuits against media outlets and journalists in Kyrgyzstan.
4. From 2017 to 2019, the number of non-physical and/or cyber attacks and threats increased by almost five times.
5. Physical attacks and threats to life, liberty and health recorded against journalists and media workers are most often perpetrated during the course of their professional activities.

# 2/ THE MASS MEDIA IN KYRGYZSTAN

According to the Ministry of Justice of the Republic of Kyrgyzstan, there are 2,048 media outlets officially registered in the country, including television, radio, online media and print media, all published mainly in the Kyrgyz and Russian languages. Some media outlets, mainly those based in the south of the country, also have an Uzbek-language version.

According to local human rights groups and media research organisations, only about a third of officially registered media outlets are actually operational. This is typically due to financial instability and a limited domestic market for advertising.

“The media sphere of Kyrgyzstan is mainly comprised of independent media outlets, including one public channel, 4 State-owned channels, and over 20 private television and radio channels. Most free are the online media, of which there are more than 30 outlets in the country. These present a wider variety of views to their readers than more mainstream outlets. Kyrgyz law has no concept of online media, which enables more objective broadcasting.”

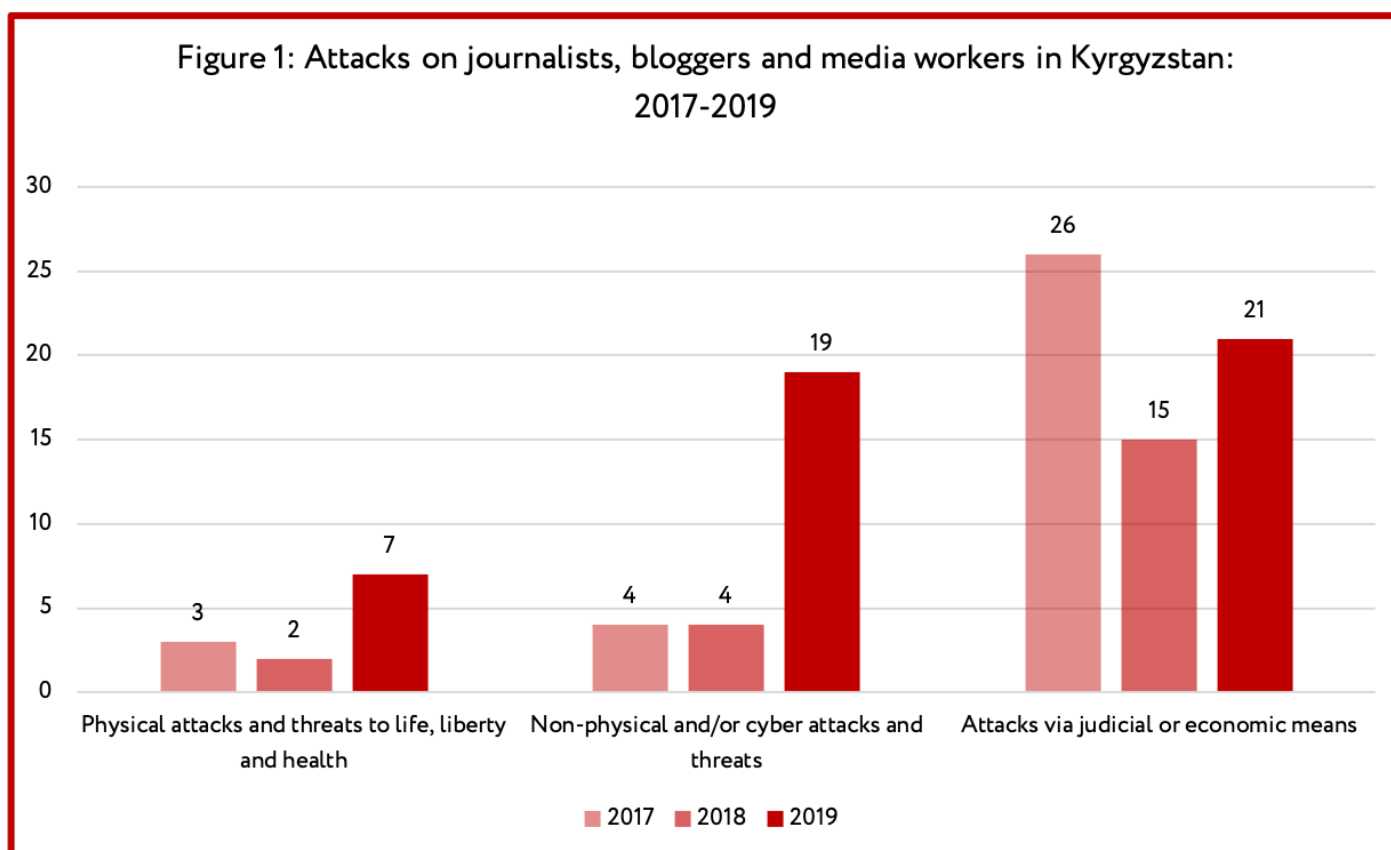
As of June 2019, the level of Internet penetration in Kyrgyzstan was 40.1%, according to the [Internet World Stats](#). A report [Freedom of the Net 2019](#), prepared by the international human rights organisation Freedom House, states that Kyrgyzstan has fallen several positions in the global Internet freedom rating, associating this with technological attacks on online news publications in 2019. The authorities’ on-going struggle against extremism has led to the censorship of web resources; the Criminal Code of the Kyrgyz Republic contains several articles that can be used for repressive purposes.

Kyrgyzstan ranked 83rd in the [World Press Freedom Index](#) of Reporters Without Borders in 2019, up from 98th place in 2018, as the country saw some improvements in press freedom.

# 3/ OVERALL ATTACKS ANALYSIS

Figure 1 presents the total number of attacks perpetrated against journalists, bloggers and media workers in Kyrgyzstan from January 2017 to December 2019. Non-physical and/or cyber attacks and threats increased by almost five times from 2017 to 2019. The number recorded for 2017 was only four, while nineteen had been recorded by the end of 2019. Physical attacks and threats to life, liberty and health increased from three in 2017 to seven in 2019. By contrast, the number of attacks via judicial or economic means fell slightly when compared to 2017 figures.

Several attacks and threats, mostly of a non-physical character, including online, were not included in this monitoring. Being faced constantly with this type of attack – trolling, online harassment and threats – journalists and bloggers do not always respond to aggression and do not record the number of threats received over the Internet, preferring not to report this to human rights groups.





# 4/ PHYSICAL ATTACKS AND THREATS TO LIFE, LIBERTY AND HEALTH

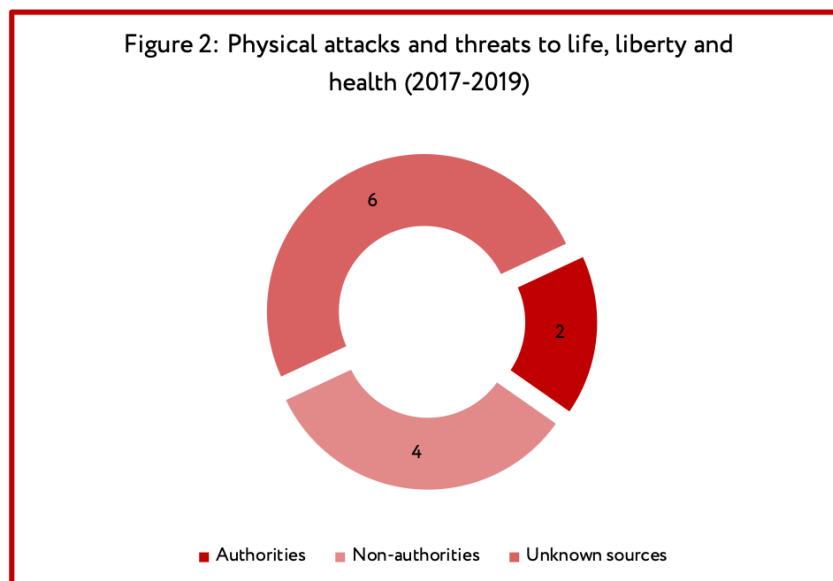


Figure 2 shows physical attacks and threats to life, liberty and health. All the attacks recorded of a physical character were non-fatal. The highest number of attacks – seven – was recorded in 2019. Nine out of twelve non-fatal assaults from 2017 to 2019 were perpetrated against journalists during the conduct of their professional activities. This type of attack was recorded against groups of journalists:

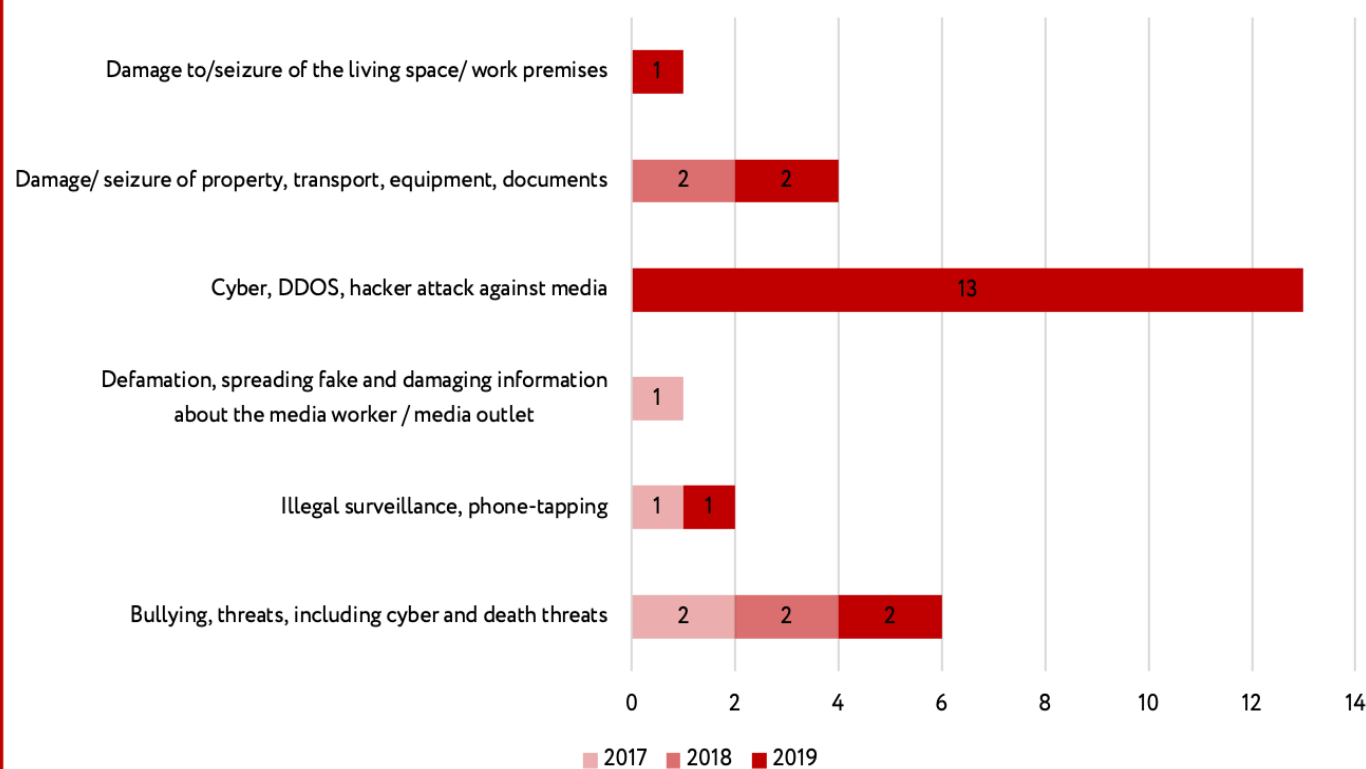
- ▶ Attacks on investigative journalists from the Kloop.kg portal in November 2019 and a cameraman for Azattyk in September of the same year took place prior to cyber attacks being launched against the media outlets they work for. According to media reports, Aibek Kulchumanov, a cameraman for Radio Liberty's Kyrgyz service, was filming near the house of the former deputy chairman of the Customs Service in the city of Osh in southern Kyrgyzstan. At that moment, several unknown persons ran out of the house, twisted the journalist's arms behind his back and confiscated the controls for a drone, his telephone and video cameras.
- ▶ In August 2019, during their coverage of the storming of the home of former Kyrgyz President Almazbek Atambayev in the village of Koi-Tash, 20 km south of Bishkek, two media workers were directly targeted by representatives of the authorities. Aida Dzhumasheva, a journalist for the 24.kg news agency, was injured by a rubber bullet, and cameraman Zhoodar Buzumov was physically assaulted.
- ▶ The Radio Azattyk journalist Ydrys Isakov was beaten while filming at the alleged site of an underground casino in Osh.
- ▶ In November 2018, a headline-making road traffic incident took place involving Inga Sikorskaya, a journalist, media expert and the head of the School of Peacekeeping and Media Technology. As a result of this traffic incident, which occurred on a Saturday night on an empty road, the taxi in which Sikorskaya was riding crashed into a parked car on the side of the road. The passenger received injuries and a concussion. The incident occurred two days after an attack at night by unknown people on the School of Peacekeeping office, where its employees held open consultations on freedom of expression. Since 2017, Sikorskaya has been subjected to intrusive monitoring and searches and detentions by border guards when leaving and entering the country 19 times.

# 5/ NON-PHYSICAL AND/OR CYBER ATTACKS AND THREATS

The most high-profile incidents featured in this category were the cyber attacks launched against a number of online Kyrgyz media outlets and websites at the end of December 2019. At this time, nine Internet resources were subjected to mass DDoS attacks, namely Factcheck.kg, Ecomonist.kg, Kloop.kg, Kaktus.media, Sokol.media, Vb.kg, Knews.kg, Today.kg and Politklinika.kg. This received coverage in local media, and “Azattyk”, Radio Liberty’s Kyrgyz-language service, linked the attacks with the publication on its website of a journalistic investigation carried out jointly with Bellingcat. The investigation revealed the expensive purchases made by the wife of the ex-deputy chairman of the State Customs Service, Rayymbek Matraimov, and the discrepancy between the amounts paid and the official income declarations of the public servant.

Illegal surveillance and phone-tapping constitute another type of attack identified during the monitoring period. A high-profile journalistic investigation carried out in 2019 by Azattyk, Radio Liberty’s Kyrgyz service, together with the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP) and a team of journalists from Kloop.kg, was beset by threats and surveillance. This investigation was devoted to the various underhand schemes that have been employed at Kyrgyzstani customs for years, allowing millions of dollars to be taken out of the country. Kloop.kg editor-in-chief Eldiyar Arykbayev confirmed to Kaktus.media that his colleagues had received threats from unknown persons during the investigation: “They approached our employees and told us not to take part in this investigation. In [the city of] Osh, we were under surveillance. It lasted several days.”

Figure 3: Non-physical and/or cyber attacks and threats



# 6 / ATTACKS VIA JUDICIAL OR ECONOMIC MEANS

Attacks via judicial or economic means were the most common method of applying pressure on journalists, bloggers and media workers in Kyrgyzstan in the period from 2017 to 2019, despite the slight fall in their numbers observed in 2019. 2017 was a year of several high-profile multi-million-dollar lawsuits against media outlets and journalists in Kyrgyzstan. In 2017, the authorities declared that bloggers who criticised the President on social media would be prosecuted. The State Committee for National Security (GKNB) reported that it was “conducting measures to identify 35 users regarding the sharing and posting of negative publications concerning the head of state”.

Interrogations, lawsuits, baseless accusations of extremism and incitement to various kinds of hatred, bans on leaving the country and closing of media outlets/blocking internet resources are widely used means of applying pressure. Media workers have their freedom of movement restricted, either by court order after the initiation of cases against them, or via the placing of journalists and media workers on blacklists for personal searches or examination upon their entry and exit from the country.

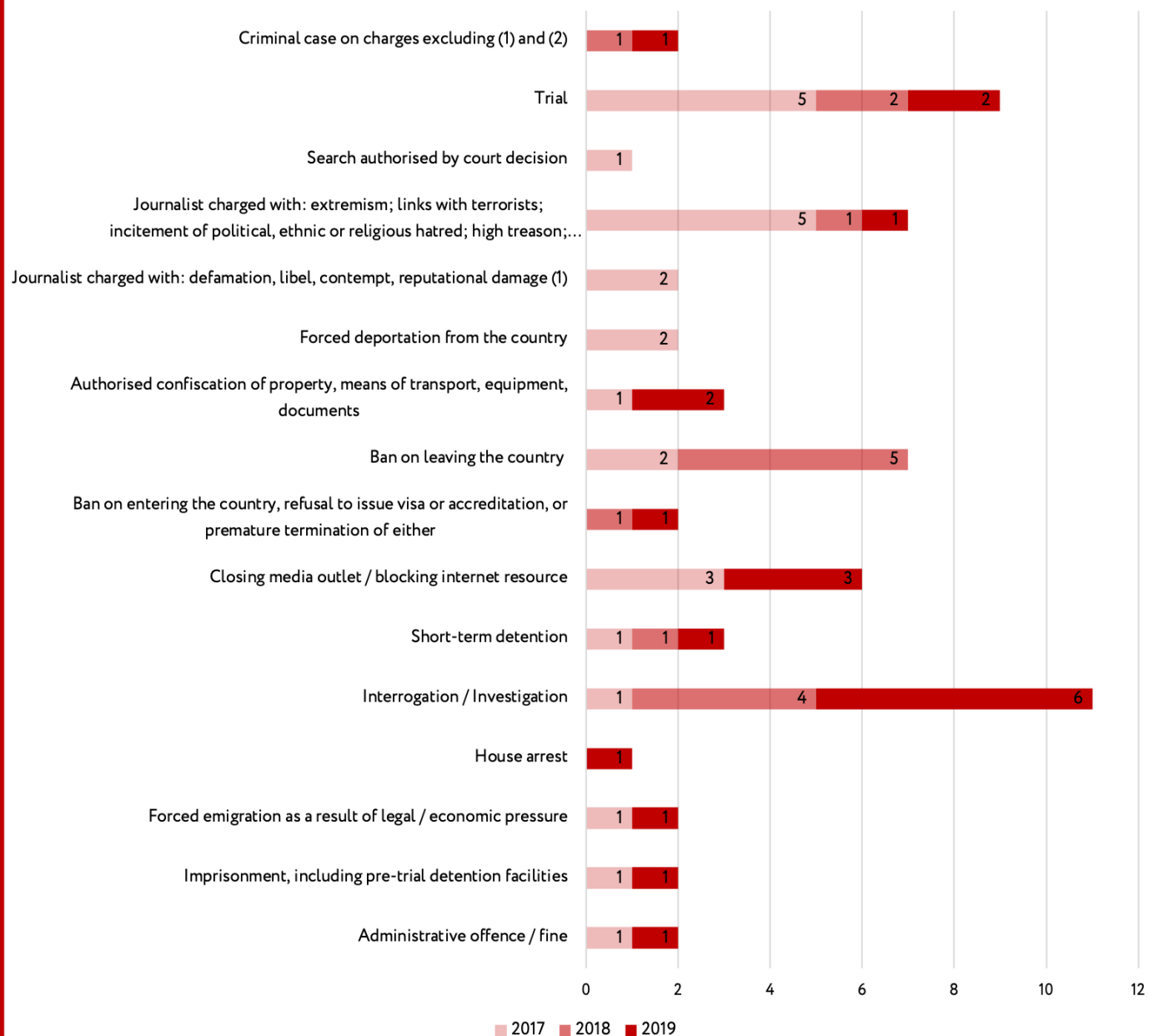
- ▶ In November 2019, Aftandil Zhorobekov, the administrator of the Facebook page “BespredelKG”, was arrested for “inciting inter-regional hatred”. He was detained until trial on 5 December, when it was decided to place Zhorobekov under house arrest. A few days later, the State Committee for National Security (GKNB) re-characterised his accusation as one of “disseminating knowingly false and provocative information that the incumbent head of state is allegedly an accomplice in crimes of corruption”. The blogger had published a post and photographs on the webpage criticising the targets of a journalistic investigation into corruption at Kyrgyzstani customs.
- ▶ In January 2018, a court demanded that the apartment of Naryn Ayyp, a political observer and co-founder of the Zanoza.kg web portal, be put on auction. Former President Almazbek Atambayev had previously believed the publication to have offended his honour and dignity and acted to spread false information.
- ▶ On 9 August 2019, armed special forces soldiers broke into the office of the Aprel television channel in Bishkek, expelling all the employees and sealing the building. The authorities had previously turned off the satellite signal for the channel during its broadcasting of the special operation to detain Almazbek Atambayev, the former President of Kyrgyzstan, at his residence. The authorities had stated that the closure and blocking of the channel was linked to the freezing of the assets of the former president, who owns the Aprel television channel.

The peak in lawsuits came in 2017-2018.

- ▶ In April 2019, an administrative lawsuit for 50 million Kyrgyz soms (\$ 716,000) was filed against Ydrys Isakov, a correspondent for Radio Azattyk, in connection with an investigation into the fraudulent activities of an Osh businessman – the allegations involving illegal business and tax evasion.
- ▶ On 14 February 2018, the financial police charged Elnura Alkanova, a journalist at the Fergana news agency, with “illegally obtaining and distributing documents containing commercial secrets”. The State Service for Combating Economic Crimes had previously opened a criminal case against Alkanova regarding the disclosure of banking secrets. The journalist had been investigating the purchase of elite cottages, involving senior civil servants.
- ▶ On 19 December 2017, the property and radio frequencies of the NTS television channel were seized.
- ▶ On 9 December 2017, authorities deported Chris Rickleton, a journalist with Agence France-Presse. The official reason was “violation of visa requirements”, though he had been denied accreditation without explanation since 2016.

- On 21 September 2017, the 24.kg agency journalist Kabai Karabekov was sued for five million Kyrgyz soms (c. \$ 72,000) for offending the honour and dignity of presidential candidate Sooronbai Zheiyenbekov. The journalist had written about the relationship of the candidate and his brothers with certain Arab organisations.
- In August 2017, the Sentyabr television channel was closed by a court ruling “in connection with the distribution of extremist materials”.
- In June 2017, a court ruled that Naryn Ayyp, a political observer and co-founder of the Zanoza.kg web portal, be fined 9 million Kyrgyz soms (\$ 129,000) for “disseminating information discrediting the honour and dignity of the president” in a critical article.
- In June 2017, a court found the web portal Zanoza.kg and its co-founders Dina Maslova and Naryn Ayyp guilty of publishing articles critical of President Atambayev, imposing multi-million fines on them.
- In June 2017, a criminal case was opened against Ulugbek Babakulov, a Kyrgyzstani journalist for the Fergana news agency, for penning an article “inciting inter-ethnic hatred”. He was accused of publishing a number of articles “of a provocative nature, aimed at inciting ethnic hostility and hatred, creating the prerequisites for the exacerbation of inter-ethnic relations”.

Figure 4: Attacks via judicial or economic means





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# ATTACKS ON JOURNALISTS, BLOGGERS AND MEDIA WORKERS

# TAJIKISTAN



PHOTO: Nozim Kalandarov

# 1/ MAIN FINDINGS

During the course of the investigation, 81 cases of assault and intimidation against professional media workers, citizen journalists, civil activists and editorials of traditional and online media in Tajikistan were uncovered. The data for this investigation was gathered through the content analysis of open sources in Tajik, Russian and English languages. Information not formerly made public but obtained through expert interviews has also been incorporated in the report. For a list of the main sources, see Appendix Five.

Considering the heightened risks journalists are exposed to in Tajikistan, not all media workers are willing to share information regarding instances in which they have been threatened or assaulted. At best, such matters will be limited to personal conversations with colleagues, while at worst they will attempt to conceal them completely, to avoid even greater degrees of persecution. Cases of harassment of Tajik journalists who have left Tajikistan and received asylum in European countries are little publicised.

1. The main form of intimidation deployed against media workers in Tajikistan is the application of legal and/or economic pressure, primarily involving charges of extremism or connections with terrorists, criminal prosecution, and imprisonment of media workers
2. The authorities are the principal source of threats and pressure against media workers and journalists.
3. From 2017 to 2019, the number of reported attacks carried out by government officials, as well as threats of a non-physical nature, including those perpetrated in cyberspace, increased by an average of three times. This growth is associated with the approach of two important political events in Tajikistan – the parliamentary and presidential elections, which were scheduled to be held in March and November of 2020.
4. The targets of attacks are not usually the journalists themselves, but their relatives, who are subjected to various forms of harassment, including interrogations and searches.
5. The coverage of any topics related to the illegal Islamic Renaissance Party is also prohibited. Journalists mentioning this party are often prosecuted and accused of terrorist activity.

# 2/ MASS MEDIA IN TAJIKISTAN

376 newspapers are officially registered with the Ministry of Culture of Tajikistan (112 State-owned and 264 non-state), along with 245 magazines (114 State-owned and 131 non-state), 71 publishing houses (10 State-owned and 61 non-state) and 11 information agencies (1 State-owned and 10 non-state). There are also 34 officially registered television channels (8 State-owned and 26 non-state) and 30 radio stations (6 State-owned and 24 non-state).

The work of the media is severely restricted by the Tajik authorities. Article 137 of the Tajik Criminal Code prohibits “slandering” the president, while Article 330 prohibits journalists from insulting other state officials. Journalists who write critical articles are subjected to threats and harassment, and may also face pressure from the judiciary. As a result, most Tajik journalists practice self-censorship.

The government controls most of the country’s printing houses, newsprint suppliers, and broadcast media. Since February 2017, printers and print media have only been able to register with the Ministry of Culture after obtaining written permission from the State Committee for National Security of Tajikistan.

The Tajik Media Licensing Commission regularly refuses licenses to independent media or obstructs the license renewal process. At time of writing, the Licensing Commission, which was established by the State Committee for Television and Radio Broadcasting, does not include a single representative from independent media or civil society.

Since the launch of the Unified Switching Centre through which all internet traffic passes and is controlled, blocking of websites and social networks has become a regular practice. The USC also enables the tracking of individuals' traffic and their prosecution for visiting "undesirable" websites or making "inappropriate comments" online.

In July 2018, the Tajik parliament passed a new law on operational-search activity, which permits law enforcement agencies to legally collect data on the online activity and text messages of citizens of the country. In August 2018, Tajikistan's Ministry of Internal Affairs created a new agency to combat online extremism, emphasising this as a government priority.

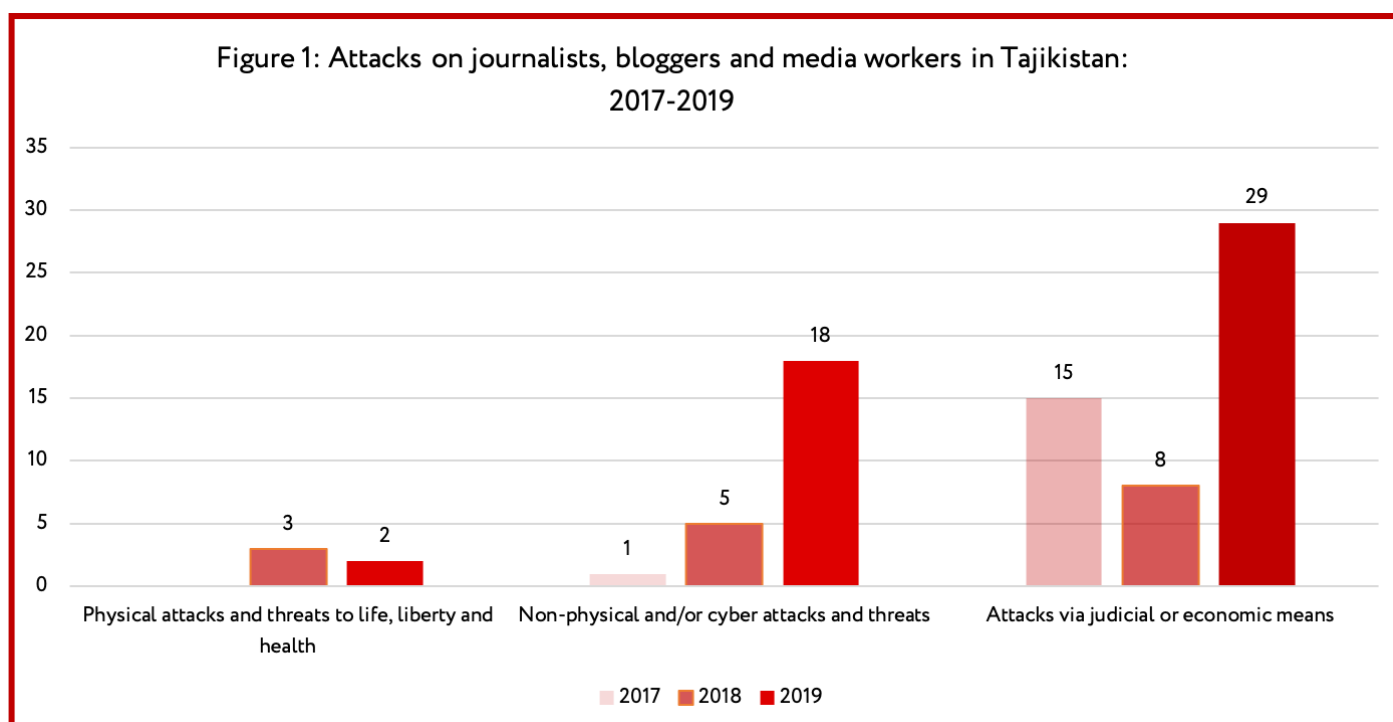
Tajikistan ranks 161th out of 180 in the [World Press Freedom Index](#) of Reporters Without Borders, dropping 12 places since 2018.

## 3/ OVERALL ATTACKS ANALYSIS

Figure 1 is a quantitative analysis of the three main types of attacks perpetrated against journalists in Tajikistan and Tajik journalists who have left the country but continue their professional activities abroad, covering the period from 2017 to 2019 (inclusive).

From 2017 to 2019, the number of attacks on journalists via judicial or economic means and non-physical and/or cyber attacks and threats more than tripled. The number of physical attacks and threats to life, liberty and health remained at an almost constant level.

It should be noted that attacks and threats perpetrated online are not, as a rule, recorded, as media workers attach little importance to them, with the exception of cases where news portals are subjected to illegal blocking. In none of the cases examined would the authorities officially confirm their involvement in blocking however, indicating that technical problems had been responsible instead.



Cyber attacks and non-physical threats perpetrated online have become habitual for Tajik journalists. As journalists have been able to establish, the law enforcement agencies have set up a troll farm in Tajikistan. This employs over 400 people, each of which maintains 10 fake accounts. Employees of institutions subordinate to the Ministry of Education and Science – university professors and secondary school teachers – are recruited for these activities. The “trolls” receive assignments from the Ministry of Education, which receives the appropriate command instructions from the Ministry of Internal Affairs or the State Committee for National Security. These commands then go down to the group level, and contain orders to immediately or on a certain specified date initiate campaigns on social networks to discredit civil activists or opposition supporters. Media workers are so used to this that they no longer regard it as a threat.

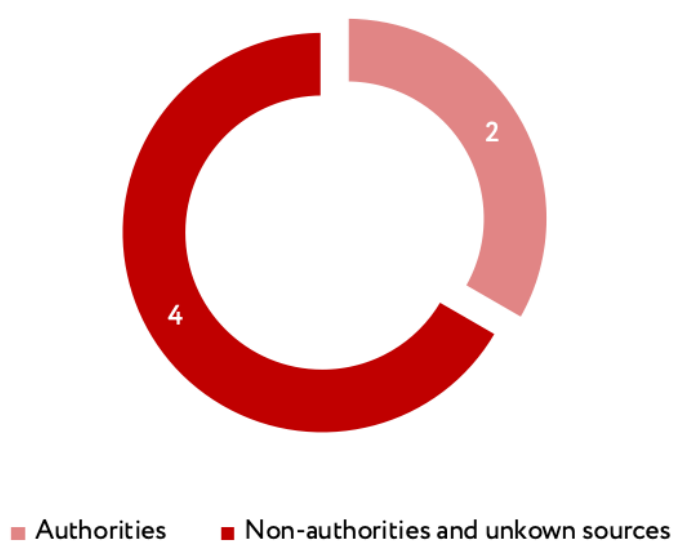
Relatives of at least six journalists who have left Tajikistan were subjected to harsh pressure during the period covered in this report. Four more journalists who have been granted asylum in European countries were added to the list of persons connected with terrorists.

## 4/ PHYSICAL ATTACKS AND THREATS TO LIFE, LIBERTY AND HEALTH

Figure 2 shows physical assaults on journalists in Tajikistan. During the period indicated, 6 cases were recorded, one of which was fatal.

- Sputnik journalist Galim Faskhutdinov was hit by a car while crossing the road at a pedestrian crossing showing a green light. The vehicle was moving at high speed. The driver responsible for this incident was sentenced to the minimum term of 3 years and 3 months in prison. The family of the deceased journalist never received the compensation specified by the court.

Figure 2: Physical attacks and threats to life, liberty and health (2017-2019)



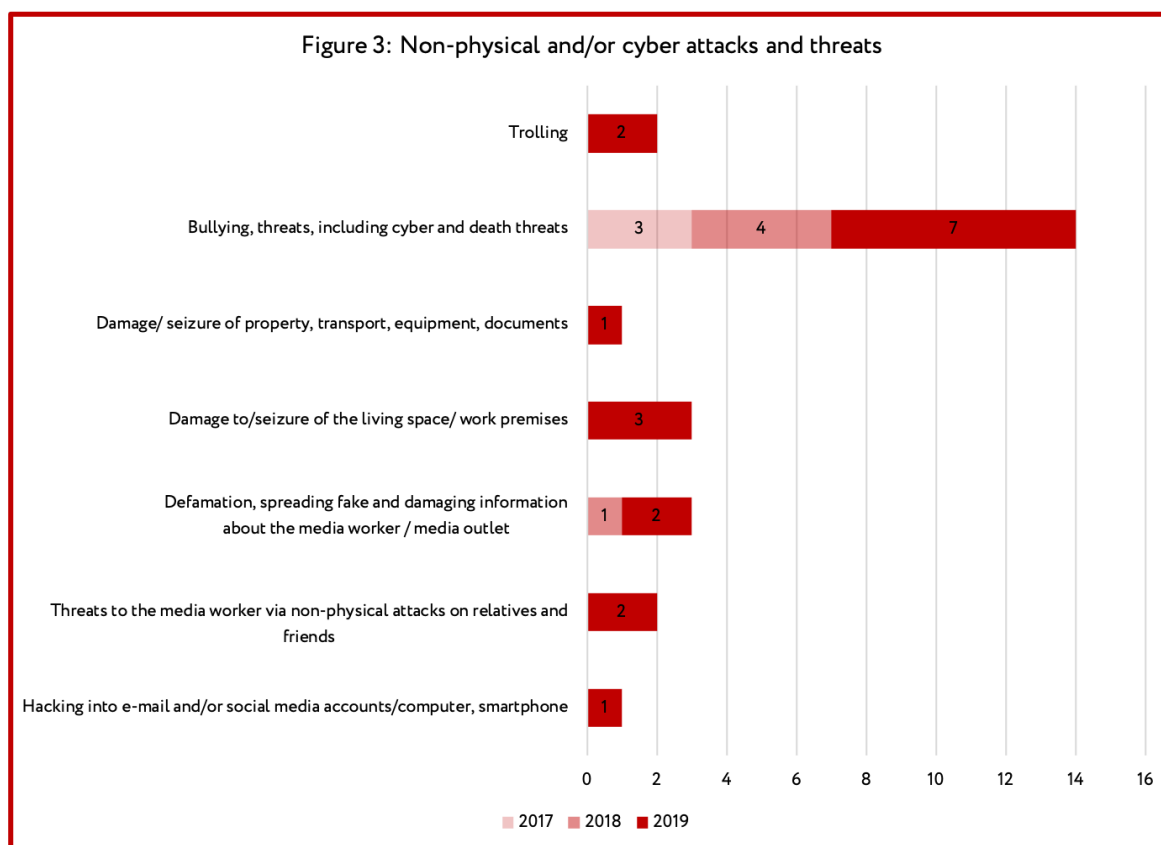


- Two cases of non-fatal physical attacks were recorded when journalists Nisso Rasulova and Mahasti Dustmurod carried out their professional activities in the illegal market of mobile phones.
- Opposition journalist Abdukakhkhor Davlat, serving a lengthy sentence for charges of extremism and terrorism, was injured during a riot at a penal colony in Vakhdat on 19 May 2019. According to the official version, this riot was arranged by prisoners belonging to the banned Islamic State organisation.

During the period of three years, two cases of physical attacks from authorities were recorded. In the second case, it was not the journalist himself who was injured, but his father:

- Asia-Plus journalist Abdullo Gurbati was forced into a car by people in police uniform and taken to a military commissariat. He was later released after calling city Department of Internal Affairs.
- Father of journalist Muhammadzhon Kabirov was detained for two days due to the participation of his son in the OSCE conference in Warsaw.

## 5/ NON-PHYSICAL AND/OR CYBER ATTACKS AND THREATS



Instances of non-physical attacks classed as bullying and threats, including cyber and death threats, are rarely reported in mass media. This is a result of the victims themselves fearing future retaliation, aimed at them and their close ones.

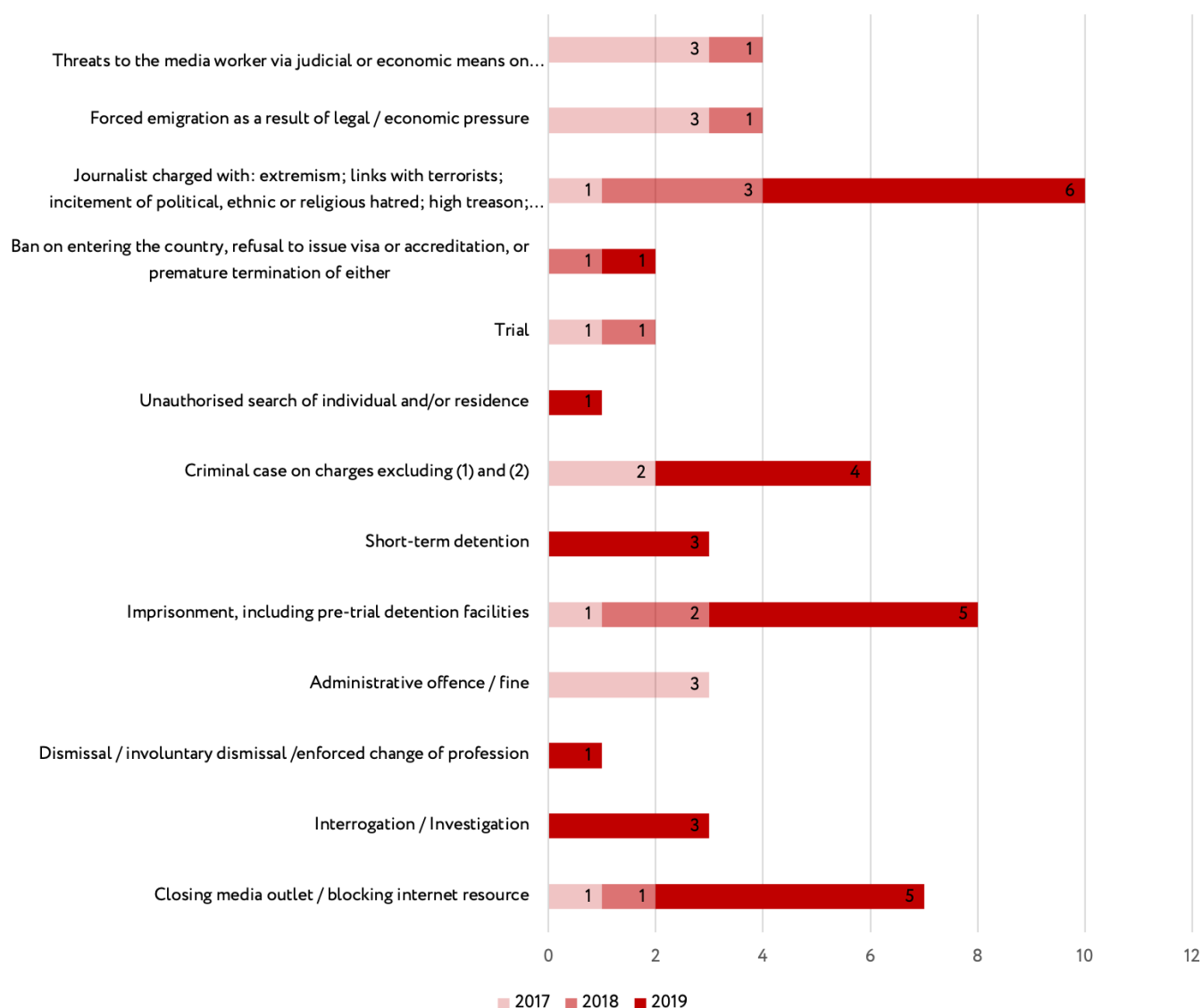
The most common feature of attacks on Tajikistani media workers is that their immediate family face threats and attacks as a means of pressuring the workers. The creators of this report know of at least one instance where a journalist received violent threats towards him and his children (name hidden for safety). The mass media did not report on this incident.

In the published instances attacks on relatives of opposition figures and journalists living abroad, they were perpetrated by authorities through legal means (see section titled THE FIGHT WITH JOURNALISTS WORKING ABROAD).

# 6/ ATTACKS VIA JUDICIAL OR ECONOMIC MEANS

Figure 4 presents the various subcategories of attacks using legal and/or economic means. The most commonly used methods for putting pressure on journalists and media workers are charges of extremism and links with terrorists, imprisonment (including pre-trial detention facilities), closing media outlets/blocking internet resources, and other measures involving criminal law (excluding charges of extremism and defamation). Trials of media workers usually end in the defendant's conviction.

Figure 4: Attacks via judicial or economic means



- On 11 July 2018, Khairullo Mirsaidov was sentenced by the courts to 12 years' imprisonment. The independent journalist's crime was to have spoken out about local government corruption in Tajikistan's northern Sughd region, through the media. His family paid around USD 13,000 to the State budget – the amount of compensation for damages Mirsaidov had caused to the State, as determined in accordance with the conclusions of the investigating authorities. After lodging an appeal, Khairullo Mirsaidov was released from the courtroom on 22 August 2018. On 11 January 2019, the Khujand City Court, relying on a law enforcement official's statement that Khairullo Mirsaidov had left the country without notice, sentenced him in absentia to 8 months' imprisonment.
- In 2017, Midzhgona Khalimova was put on trial, the authorities having accused her of not reporting a crime, and was required to pay a fine of USD 2,800, a considerable sum for Tajikistan. The young journalist's problems began after she began asking tough questions to officials at press conferences. The journalist also refused to take off the hijab – a Muslim headscarf. National Committee for State Security officers gave Midzhgona's employers a choice: either fire her, or the media outlet would be closed down. At time of writing, Khalimova cannot find a permanent job; potential employers reject her in advance to avoid problems with the authorities.

Other blatant examples of the authorities interfering with the work of the media include confiscating their domain names or revoking the accreditation of their employees.

- The Asia-Plus news agency was stripped of two domain names – news.tj and asiaplus.tj. Experts referred to this as a “sophisticated technical action” to limit access to information and put pressure on the media.
- On 1 November 2019, 11 employees of Radio Ozodi, Radio Liberty's Tajik language service, had their accreditation revoked.

## **7 / TARGETING TAJIK JOURNALISTS WORKING ABROAD**

In anticipation of the parliamentary and presidential elections scheduled to be held in Tajikistan in March and November 2020, the attitude of the authorities towards journalists who have been forced to leave the country is changing.

While 2017 saw a fall in the number of attacks against journalists who had been forced to leave the country, the proximity of elections has seen increased pressure on journalists.

- In 2019, the names of four journalists were added to the list of persons involved in terrorism. Their relatives in Tajikistan then began to experience harassment, such as searches, fines, and intimidation from law enforcement officials.
- At the end of 2019, an investigation was launched into the Akhbor news portal, created by a Tajik journalist outside the country.
- In 2019, the journalist Shukhrat Rakhmatullo's sister was detained for wearing a Muslim headscarf. Shukhrat himself was added to the list of persons involved in terrorism and had previously been forced to leave Tajikistan. During her detention, the woman was subjected to threats of physical violence and humiliation.

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**ATTACKS ON JOURNALISTS, BLOGGERS  
AND MEDIA WORKERS**

# **TURKMENISTAN**



PHOTO:turkmen.news

# 1/ MAIN FINDINGS

During the course of the investigation, 33 cases of assault and intimidation against professional media workers, citizen journalists, civil activists and editorials of traditional and online media in Turkmenistan were uncovered. The data for this investigation was gathered through the content analysis of open sources in Turkmen, Russian and English languages. Information not formerly made public but obtained through expert interviews has also been incorporated in the report. For a list of the main sources, see Appendix Six.

The heightened risks faced by dissidents in Turkmenistan and the country's highly restrictive media environment mean that we remain unaware, necessarily, of many attacks on freedom of speech.

1. The main form of intimidation deployed against media workers in Turkmenistan is the application of legal and economic pressure. Such intimidation is often accompanied by physical assaults and threats to the life, liberty and health of those workers.
2. The authorities in Turkmenistan are the principal source of threats and pressure against media workers and journalists. They use arrests and custody accompanied by interrogation and torture to bring media workers into line, or hand out dismissals and bans on working further in the media.
3. Citizens suspected of working for foreign media by the authorities and the secret services are added to a list of "untrustworthy citizens". Together with family and close friends, they become subject to constant pressure and harassment.
4. State-owned telecommunication provider Turkmentelekom is the only communications operator in the country. This enables the authorities to intercept any information that correspondents attempt to transmit to foreign media outlets.
5. Turkmenistan is one of the few Soviet successor states where punitive psychiatry continues to be used against "untrustworthy" citizens, including those working for the media or providing media workers with information.

# 2/ MASS MEDIA IN TURKMENISTAN

Since 2015, Turkmenistan is constantly ranked one of the last places (177-178) in the [World Press Freedom Index](#) issued each year by Reporters without Borders. In 2019, it dropped to the very last place (180) on the list, being overtaken by Eritrea and North Korea.

Prior to 1997, more than thirty national newspapers, five regional branches of Gosteleradio (the State Radio and Television Committee), and six regional newspapers – five published in Russian, one in the Uzbek language – were all closed down.

At present, 24 newspapers and 20 magazines, almost all in the Turkmen language, are being published in Turkmenistan. Three newspapers (Turkmenistan, Neutral Turkmenistan and the Published Herald of the President of Turkmenistan) and one magazine (Diyar) are officially published by the Turkmenistan Cabinet of Ministers. The remaining media outlets are published by ministries and government departments: they are considered State-owned and are funded from the State budget.

Seven TV channels and four radio stations operate within the country. They broadcast only in Turkmen and, like print media, are State financed. By law the media are independent in Turkmenistan; in practice, newspaper and magazine editors, and their deputies, are all appointed and dismissed by the president.



Those who have studied journalism in other countries are not allowed to work for Turkmenistan's State-run media. Every media student must obtain his or her diploma in accordance with the relevant laws and requirements, and demonstrate loyalty to the regime and its policies. It is forbidden to criticise the authorities. As a consequence, many young journalists either leave the country or do not follow their chosen profession.

Foreign journalists cannot receive accreditation to work in Turkmenistan. Those permitted to practice journalism within the country can only do so if they adopt a positive attitude to the authorities. All foreign internet resources and media outlets offering objective information about the situation in Turkmenistan are blocked, as are the websites of many social networks and services for the exchange of files and messages. The regime has purchased specialised equipment from leading Western producers to keep anyone who reveals information about the situation in the country under surveillance.

## **3/** PHYSICAL ATTACKS AND THREATS TO LIFE, LIBERTY AND HEALTH

**S**ince 2006, the following cases are known from open sources and specialist information.

- There have been sixteen assaults on journalists and Turkmen citizens working for foreign media, inflicting various levels of physical injury.
- Three individuals who criticized the existing regime in foreign media have been forcibly confined to psychiatric clinics (or alcohol and drug treatment centres).
- Gurbandurdy Durdykulyev was held in a psychiatric treatment centre in the Lebap Province from 13 February 2004 to April 2006.
- A freelance employee of Radio Azatlyk, the Turkmen-language branch of Radio Liberty, Sazak Durdymuradov was arrested, tortured and told he must stop working for foreign media. On 18 June 2008 he was forcibly confined to a psychiatric clinic.
- On October 4, 2012 Geldymurad Nurmukhamedov, a former Communist Party official and Turkmenistan Minister of Culture was forcibly confined to the Tejen drug treatment centre for nine months after an interview on Radio Azatlyk in which he talked about violations of human rights and the lack of democracy in Turkmenistan.
- The deaths of two journalists in obscure or mysterious circumstances.
- In September 2006 Ogulsapar Muradova, a correspondent of Radio Azatlyk, died in prison in unclear circumstances. Relatives found marks on her body, indicating that she had been killed. There was a cut on her forehead, signs of choking around her neck, open wounds on one hand, bruising on a knee, and a large bruise on her thigh. At first the Turkmenistan authorities announced that Muradova's death was the result of "natural causes". Later they claimed that she had committed suicide. The UN Committee for Human Rights declared in 2018 that Turkmenistan was responsible for torturing and killing Ogulsapar Muradova.
- The 68-year-old writer and playwright Amanmurad Bugayev died in a car accident on 3 April 2019 during a tour of the Balkan Province. Bugayev, an occasional Radio Azatlyk correspondent and renowned author, died in an accident, observers believe, that was organised by Turkmenistan's Ministry for National Security to eliminate a troublesome journalist.

# 4/ ATTACKS VIA JUDICIAL OR ECONOMIC MEANS

Journalists, bloggers and other media workers whom the authorities suspect of collaborating with foreign media organisations are frequently subjected to arbitrary arrest, detention and the use of direct threats of physical violence by representatives of the authorities. Media workers are often called for questioning to local police and security service departments; their mobile phones are confiscated and checked; unauthorised searches of their homes are conducted; and all their correspondence is read or listened to. In addition, they are kept under constant surveillance.

In 2017-2019, there were at least five such cases when evidence against those who provided information to the foreign media from inside Turkmenistan, was gathered by studying CCTV cameras' footage and comparing it with the video images or stills published by independent Turkmen media. Journalists are also tracked by their internet traffic, when sending large files (as mentioned earlier, there is only one State-controlled telecommunications firm in the country, Turkmentelekom.) In all of the five cases, media workers were called to a police station on some other pretext, after which they were interviewed by staff from the Ministry of Internal Affairs. Journalists were shown evidence of their links to various publications (screenshots, CCTV footage, transcripts of conversations or internet traffic) and were threatened with the consequences of pursuing such "anti-State" activities.

- ▶ Journalist (name concealed for reasons of personal security) was detained without a court order and held for 15 days in a police station. Every day the journalist was interrogated in order to determine what he/she was sending to the editors, whom he/she met, and whether money was received for the work. The journalist was able to avoid criminal charges only because the photographs found by the special services did not "cause serious harm" to the image of Turkmenistan.
- ▶ Rovshen Yazmuhamedov, a freelancer with Radio Azatlyk, was detained in 2013 for working with that foreign media outlet. He was freed two weeks later, after international pressure on the Turkmenistan authorities.
- ▶ Saparmamed Nepeskuliev was arrested in May 2015, falsely accused of being in possession of the banned medical preparation Tramadol. He worked for Radio Azatlyk and the Alternative News of Turkmenistan. The true reason for his arrest and detention was a number of reports, with photos and video recordings, from the Balkan Province, documenting a local shortage of drinking water and the poor state of its roads, hospitals and educational institutions. At the moment of his arrest, Nepeskuliyev was covering a story for the turkmen.news website. The UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention declared that Nepeskuliev's arrest and subsequent imprisonment were arbitrary. He was sentenced to three years in a penal colony and was released in May 2018. On 19 October that year unidentified assailants threw stones at Nepeskuliev. One account suggests that his attackers, whom he did not recognise, were criminals recruited by their Internal Affairs and State Security minders. On 23 March 2019, the journalist left Turkmenistan for good.
- ▶ Civil activist and blogger Hekim Hajiev was subjected to many hours of interrogation at a police station after his appeals to President Berdimuhamedov and to international human rights organisations were published on the Alternative News of Turkmenistan website (on 8 August and 17 October 2016, respectively). His wife and children were also threatened and mistreated.
- ▶ Independent journalist Osman Hallyev, who worked with Radio Liberty, was repeatedly questioned at the anti-terrorist department of the Internal Affairs directorate. He suffered public rebuke at the hands of the local authorities and organisations and was threatened with imprisonment for "damaging the image of the country". In July 2015, Hallyev was forced to give up journalism. His son Umid, then a student in higher education in the capital Ashgabat, was thrown out of his college as an act of vengeance against his father. Subsequently, Umid Hallyev was not allowed to leave Turkmenistan. Later he became a correspondent for Radio Azatlyk, left the country and was granted political asylum in Europe.

## 5/ BEATING AND TORTURE DURING ARREST, DETENTION AND INTERROGATION

- In October 2011, Radio Azatlyk journalist Dovletmurad Yazguliev was sentenced to five years' imprisonment on a fabricated charge of "having incited a third party to commit suicide". He himself told friends that he had been "beaten and tortured until he agreed to confess his guilt and sign the necessary papers".
- Civil activist and freelancer Gaspar Matalaev was detained for helping the Alternative News of Turkmenistan (now <https://turkmen.news>) to expose the use of forced labour in the country's cotton fields. He was arrested in autumn 2016, charged with fraud and bribery, and sentenced to three years' imprisonment. When Matalaev was being investigated he was tortured with electric current. The UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention declared his arrest and imprisonment to be arbitrary. He was released on 6 September 2019, having served his sentence in full. Today a free man, Matalaev is regularly called in for chats with the police.
- Freelancer Khudaiberdy Allashov was arrested in December 2016 for working with Radio Azatlyk. Accused of being in possession of nasvay (chewing tobacco), Allashov was beaten and tortured and deprived of contact with outside world. Thanks to international pressure Allashov was released ten weeks later with a suspended three-year sentence. Allashov is interrogated by the special services every time critical information about his region appears in the media.

## 6/ HARASSMENT AND INTIMIDATION OF JOURNALISTS

- Between 2017 and 2019, Radio Azatlyk correspondent Gurbansoltan Achilova was stopped five times by policemen and security service staff in plainclothes. On each occasion she was physically assaulted; her attackers also broke her recording equipment and took away her camera.
- At the insistence of the special services, journalist Annanamed Myatiev was dismissed in January 2009 as Neutral Turkmenistan's correspondent in the Dashoguz Province. From that moment until he emigrated, he was constantly harassed. In autumn 2011 unidentified assailants threw stones at his 2nd-floor apartment windows during the night; in December 2011 a criminal attacked him in broad daylight.

## 7/ PRESSURE ON THE SOURCES

- Since 2016, Hekim Hajiev and his family have been subjected to constant harassment. Hajiev formerly worked as a mechanic for the Turkmen State Oil Company. Hajiev appealed to President Berdimuhamedov in an Open Letter published by the Alternative News of Turkmenistan to investigate the numerous violations perpetrated on the workforce of the Turkmen Oil Company and the abuses committed by the head of the oil pipeline company.

Following this appeal, Hajiev was persecuted and became the victim of provocations, while he and his wife were periodically questioned by the police. In response, Hajiev issued a second appeal on the Alternative News of Turkmenistan website (now <https://turkmen.news>), this time calling on international human rights organisations.

- Despairing of finding employment, Dunyagozel Jumagulyeva gave an interview to Radio Azatlyk on 16 November 2016. Two unidentified women subsequently accused Jumagulyeva of fraud. The police promptly arrived and took all three women to a local police station where Jumagulyeva's persecutors were released. She herself was taken to court and sentenced to 15 days detention.
- In June 2016, a certain Agadzhuma, a resident of the Yenish association in the Serhetabad district (Mary Province) gave an interview to Radio Azatlyk. He was then visited at home by police officials, the village elders and his relatives who began to insult Agadzhuma and shame him for his behaviour. In the end, he gave his word "not to have any contact in future with Radio Azatlyk".
- On 21 January 2018 Turkmenistan activist Omruzak Umarmukuliev, a second-year student in Turkey, gave an interview to Radio Azatlyk in which he described setting up a society for his fellow Turkmen students in the country. The embassy of Turkmenistan in Turkey voiced its support for his initiative and invited him to take part in the upcoming parliamentary elections as an independent observer.

After he took part in an official event in preparation for the elections on 25 March 2018, Umarmukuliev was not allowed to leave the country. Nothing is known of his fate. According to the authorities, he is serving as a conscript soldier in the Turkmenistan armed forces. Unofficially, he is being held in isolation after taking such a political initiative and speaking on a foreign radio station.

## 8/ CLOSURE OF MEDIA OUTLETS, DISMISSALS AND BANS ON PRACTISING JOURNALISM

The Turkmenistan authorities have conducted mass sacking of staff working for State-run print and electronic media that have been shut down. They have also selectively dismissed journalists and media workers who, in their opinion, are "untrustworthy". Using the formula "at their own request" or "at the end of their contract" a total of 19 individuals have been dismissed:

- Elena Myatieva of Neutral Turkmenistan newspaper, who graduated from the faculty of journalism at the Ural State University;
- Two journalism graduates of Moscow State University: Sona Chuli-Kuli of Neutral Turkmenistan and Shokhrat Matveliev of the TDH State Information Agency;

- Professional journalists working for print and radio: Raisa Vasilenko, chief editor of Subbota newspaper; Vladimir Grachev [and Aidjan Baidjanova] of the Turkmen Radio Broadcasting Service; Murad Salamatov and Nina Startseva from Neutral Turkmenistan newspaper; Gurbanepes Shamyev and Amangeldy Ketebayev of the Dashoguz habarlary newspaper; and others;
- Svetlana Mamedova of the Turkmen Radio Broadcasting Service was banned from either practising journalism or leaving the country for 15 years.

One of the journalists named above was dismissed for taking part in an international seminar for journalists from Central Asia and the southern Caucasus organised by the FOJO Media Institute in Sweden (Kalmar, 2002). Others were sacked for their active involvement in NGOs, their association with foreign media workers, critical remarks about, or disagreements with their senior editors.

Given the high level of unemployment in Turkmenistan, it is a serious punishment for a journalist to be deprived of his or her job. After constant harassment by the Ministry of Internal Affairs or State Security, some journalists have agreed to work for state security. Among them are Leyla Shakhmamedova, a journalism graduate of the Ural State University, and Ashigurly Bairiev and Dovletmurad Yazguliev who formerly worked for Radio Azatlyk.

## 9/ INDEPENDENT TURKMEN JOURNALISM ABROAD

There are only three independent daily sources of information about Turkmenistan today: the Turkmen service of [Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty](#) (Czech Republic); the [Chronicles of Turkmenistan](#) (Austria); and the [Turkmen.news](#) website in the Netherlands.

All three have their own correspondents in Turkmenistan, where they are forced to operate underground. The difficulty of obtaining and checking information means that the quality and reliability of reports issued by these sources does not always attain the standards demanded of Western journalism. Despite working in these conditions, in recent years these sources have all achieved significant improvement in their output, accompanying written reports with photos and videos.

The committed citizens of Turkmenistan who pass information, photos and videos to independent foreign media outlets risk their lives by doing so. It is difficult to transfer material abroad since the only available internet messaging service IMO is under total surveillance by the State provider and any substantial volume of traffic arouses suspicion. There were cases in 2017-2019 when correspondents were identified from CCTV footage and from the large volume of traffic they were transmitting.

Once people fall under suspicion of aiding foreign media, they, their close friends and family, are added to the “untrustworthy” list and are subjected to constant pressure and harassment. The special services intimidate all who come in contact with such people. Gradually, they are turned into outcasts, shunned by family, friends, neighbours, colleagues and acquaintances.



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# ATTACKS ON JOURNALISTS, BLOGGERS AND MEDIA WORKERS

# UZBEKISTAN

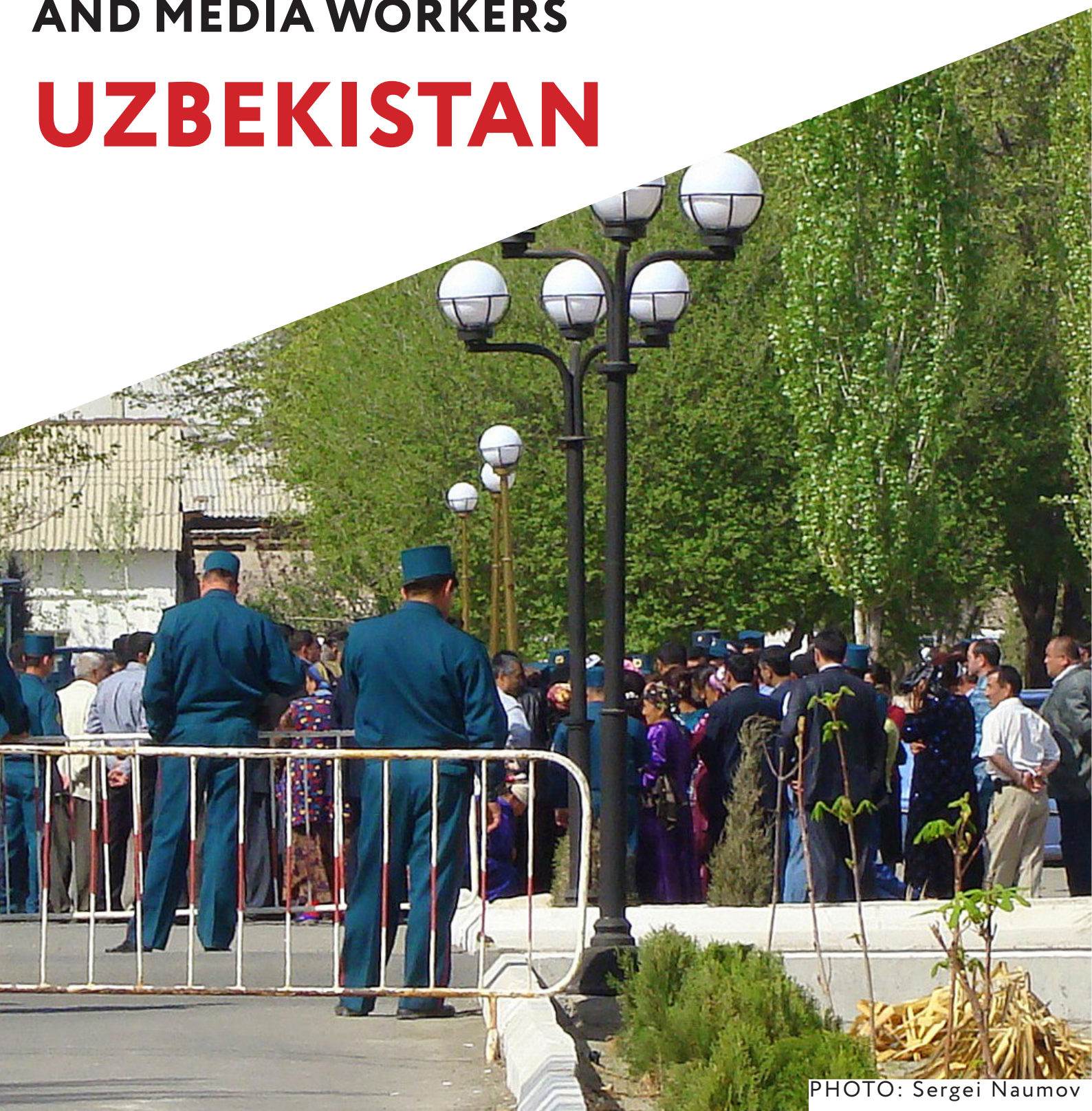


PHOTO: Sergei Naumov

# 1/ MAIN FINDINGS

During the course of the investigation, 131 cases of assault and intimidation against professional media workers, citizen journalists, civil activists and editorials of traditional and online media in Turkmenistan were uncovered. The data for this investigation was gathered through the content analysis of open sources in Uzbek, Russian and English languages. Information not formerly made public but obtained through expert interviews has also been incorporated in the report. For a list of the main sources, see Appendix Seven.

Considering the heightened risks journalists are exposed to in Uzbekistan, not all media workers are willing to share their experiences of threats or assault. As such this report will inevitably underestimate the number of cases, especially in the subcategories of surveillance, wiretapping, bans on engaging in journalism, forced emigration and phishing (cyber attacks). Additionally, while this report was being compiled, some journalists retracted previously submitted reports on attacks they had experienced, out of fear for their personal safety.

1. The main form of intimidation deployed against media workers in Uzbekistan is the application of legal and/or economic pressure.
2. Detentions, searches, interrogations, and being held in custody (administrative arrest, imprisonment, use of pre-trial detention centres, or remand) are the principal means by which authorities attack journalists, bloggers and media workers.
3. All officially registered print and online publications remain under supervision by government agencies and, where deemed necessary, the security services.

# 2/ MASS MEDIA IN UZBEKISTAN

There has been a slight improvement in freedom of speech since Shavkat Mirziyoyev became President of Uzbekistan in 2016, though severe restrictions are still in place. All officially registered print and online publications remain subject to supervision by government agencies and, if deemed necessary, the security services.

Neither the official government website, the Open Data Portal, nor the Presidential Administration's Information and Mass Communications Agency have information available on the number of electronic media outlets in the country.

However, unverified information indicates that 1,765 media outlets are registered in Uzbekistan. Of these, there are 664 newspapers, 410 magazines, 16 information bulletins, 71 television channels, 37 radio stations, 5 news agencies and 562 online publications. Uzbek remains the most popular language in the country, with limited use being made of Russian and English. The number of unique visitors to Uzbek-language websites can reach up to half a million people per day.

Liberalisation of the media sector and improved Internet speeds in Uzbekistan over 2018-2019 enabled the development of online publications and social networks, which have almost completely replaced readers' demand for print media. Nevertheless, the annual circulation of magazines and other periodicals (including anthologies and bulletins) still amounted to 11.8 million copies in 2018, while a single print run of 589 newspapers produced 4 million copies, according to the State Committee on Statistics.

Uzbekistan ranks 160th in the [World Press Freedom Index](#) of Reporters Without Borders, having climbed five ranks since 2018.



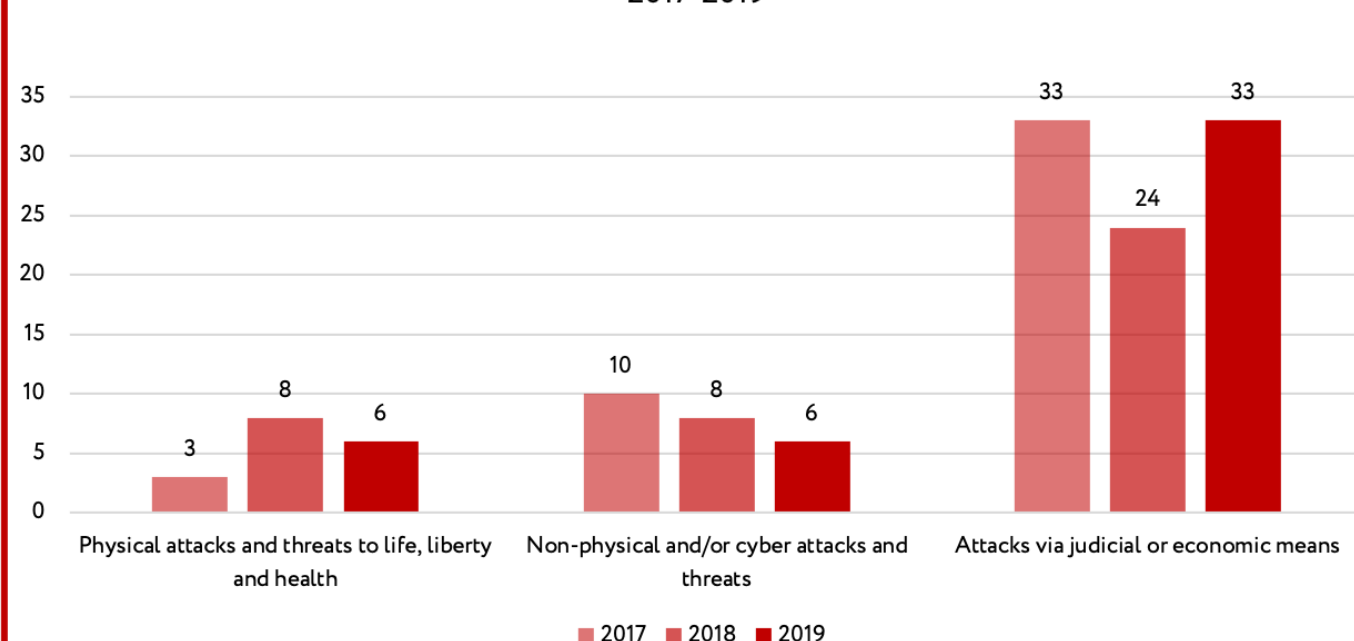
# 3/ OVERALL ATTACKS ANALYSIS

Figure 1 presents the total number of attacks perpetrated against journalists, bloggers, and media workers in Uzbekistan, covering the period from 2017 to 2019 (inclusive). As shown, the number of physical assaults, as well as threats and attacks of a non-physical nature, including those perpetrated in cyberspace, decreased from 2017 to 2019. At the same time, the number of attacks through legal, judicial and economic means remained at an almost constant level.

Information about attacks is often not disclosed by those victims who have received verbal ‘advice’ from the security services and state authorities. A striking example of such pressure is the conflict between Mayor of Tashkent Dzhakhongir Artykhodzhayev and journalists from the online publication Kun.uz. A recording features the head of the city administration calling these journalists “the last creatures ready to praise the mayor for ten thousand dollars.” His monologue contained an unambiguous and direct threat: “You could disappear from your homes without trace, and nobody would go looking for you! Not a single living soul. Perhaps they’ll write that you drowned somewhere. So it’s better to work with us and help out.”

Publication of this recording provoked widespread public outcry, drawing a response from the Prosecutor General’s Office. In a statement published on 27 November 2019, the words of the mayor of Tashkent were deemed to contain “... no signs of any criminal act”, as his words had been “of a general nature, not directed at a specific person and did not constitute a realistic threat”. On this basis, the Prosecutor General’s Office decided not to initiate criminal proceedings against the head of the Tashkent administration.

Figure 1: Attacks on journalists, bloggers and media workers in Uzbekistan: 2017-2019



## 4/ PHYSICAL ATTACKS AND AND THREATS TO LIFE, LIBERTY AND HEALTH

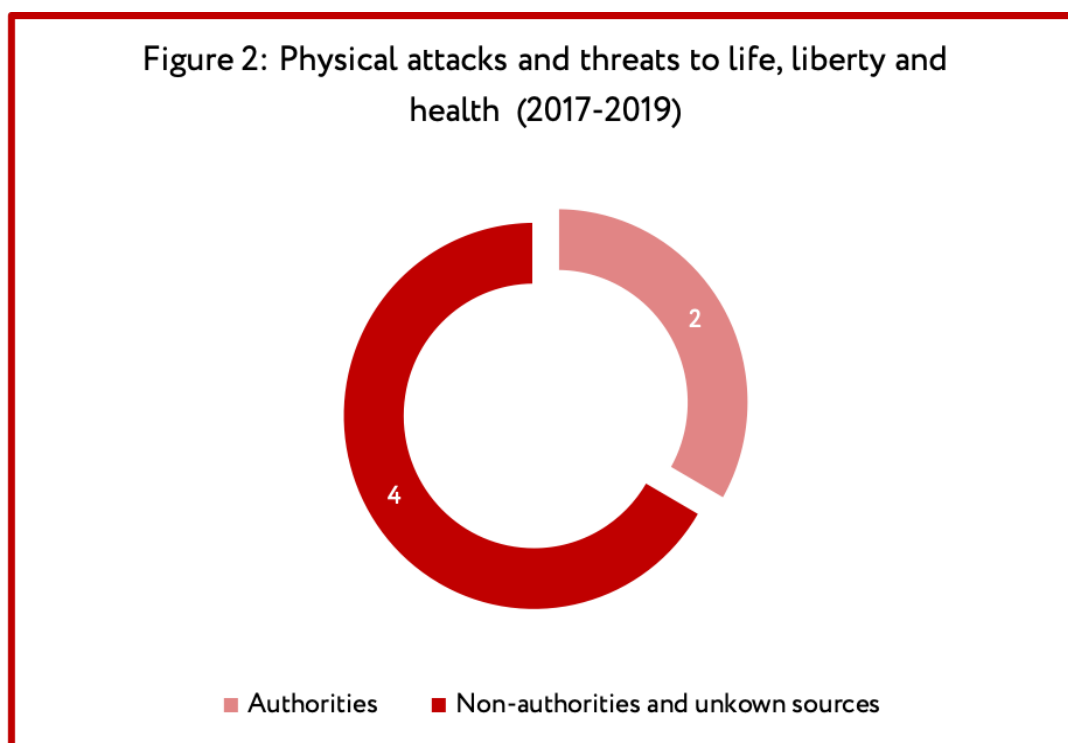


Figure 2 presents the number of physical attacks and threats to life, liberty and health perpetrated by representatives of the authorities, non-state-affiliated persons and persons of unknown affiliation.

Five cases were recorded of physical assault perpetrated by the authorities: two cases involving the use of punitive medicine and three cases of non-fatal assaults, beatings, infliction of injuries or torture.

Two cases of punitive medicine were recorded in Uzbekistan:

- ▶ In March 2017, the media activist Yelena Uralyeva was placed in a psychiatric hospital for compulsory treatment. This happened the evening before her planned meeting with representatives of the World Bank to discuss the use of forced labour in Uzbekistan.
- ▶ In September 2019, the blogger Nafosat (Shabnam) Olloshukurova, previously sentenced to 10 days' administrative arrest, was forcibly detained for three months in a regional psycho-neurological dispensary under the pretext of being suicidal, in response to her coverage of a peaceful protest.

Journalists and bloggers are subject to humiliation in custody.

- ▶ In 2017, the Uzbekistan Interior Ministry's Main Directorate for Penal Correction refused to grant early release to the journalist Dilmurod Said, then suffering from tuberculosis. The well-known investigator and human rights activist had already served eight years in the Uzbekistani penal colony of Qarshi at this point, on trumped-up charges of extortion and the forgery of documents.
- ▶ The blogger Akrom Malik (Malikov) became partially blind in 2018, while serving time in the Navoi municipality penal colony 64/29. This happened as a result of chemical burns sustained at a lime work. The colony administration ignored the inmate's condition and Akrom was forced to carry on working.

In terms of physical attacks carried out by unknown persons and/or non-state-affiliated persons, two cases of fatal incidents were recorded, along with one case of abduction, one non-fatal incident and eight non-fatal assaults, beatings, infliction of injuries or torture.

- The abduction of Amir Sharifullin, administrator of the Facebook group “Tashkent-demolition”, is one such event. On 10 December 2019, he was abducted by unknown persons and then driven by car to a guarded location. Amir was filmed being forced to make verbal “apologies” for texts and comments he had made on the social network. Then the activist was beaten on behalf of an anonymous client. This violent scene was recorded on video.

## 5/ NON-PHYSICAL AND/OR CYBER ATTACKS AND THREATS

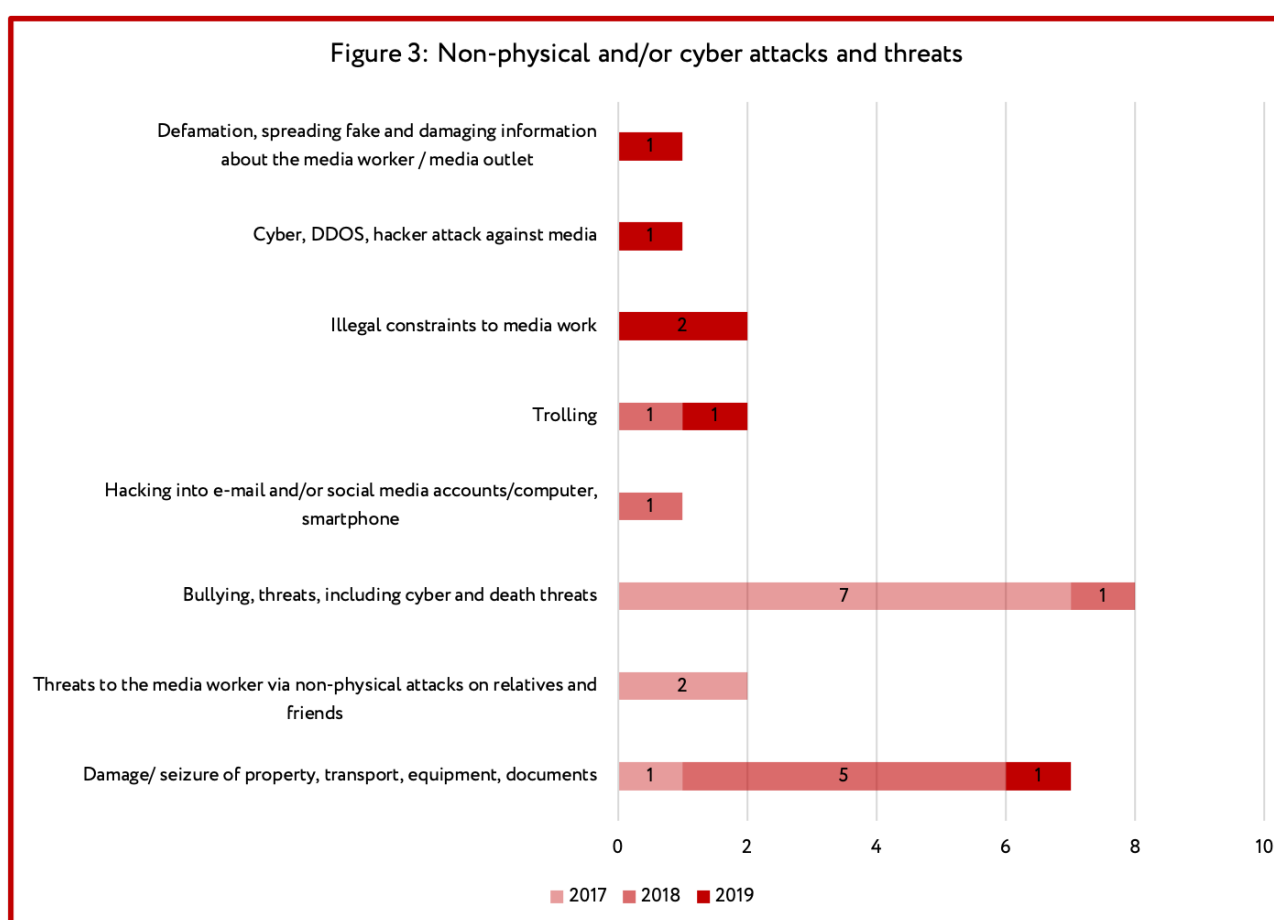


Figure 3 presents non-physical and/or cyber attacks and threats. As indicated, out of 24 attacks, 13 were known to have been carried out by state authorities.

In 2017, two cases were recorded of harassment, intimidation and pressure against family members of journalists:

- In April 2017, the authorities tried to influence two Prague-based journalists of Radio Liberty’s Uzbek service, Shukhrat and Khurmat Babadzhanov, by organising an attack on their elderly mother in Uzbekistan.
- In the same month, searches were conducted of relatives of the Norway-based administrator of the opposition website Algakarakalpakstan.com, Aman Sagidullayev. His relatives were fired from their jobs. Those close to Aman continue to be subject to moral pressure from authorities.



- In 2017, 8 cases were also recorded of harassment, intimidation and pressure against journalists themselves.

Damage/misappropriation of vehicles, equipment and documents is the second most recorded method of applying pressure on journalists from this category. 5 out of 7 cases involved attacks by representatives of the authorities.

- In August 2018, eight law enforcement officials visited the home of the blogger Shokir Sharipov, seized his telephone and computer, and took him to a police station.
- In July 2019, police officers arrived at the home of the journalist Boltaboi Matkurbanov and seized his computer without explanation. The reason behind this was his contact with the opposition journalist Makhmud Radzhab.

## 6 / ATTACKS VIA JUDICIAL OR ECONOMIC MEANS

Figure 4: Attacks via judicial or economic means

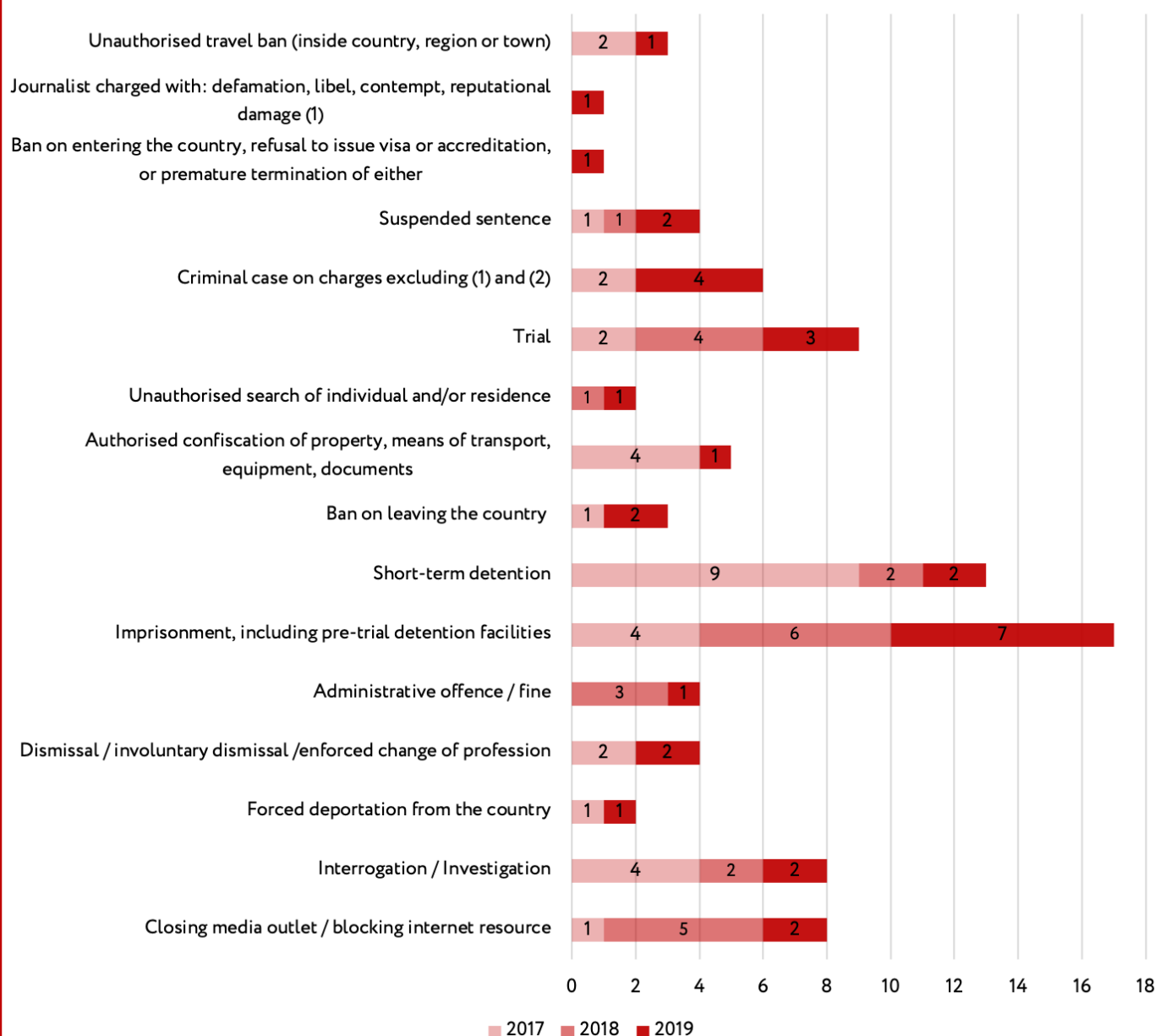


Figure 4 presents attacks carried out via judicial or economic means. The top three forms of attack are imprisonment (administrative arrest, imprisonment, use of pre-trial detention centres, or remand), detentions and being put on trial.

At the beginning of his presidency in 2017, Shavkat Mirziyoyev addressed the General Prosecutor's Office, the National Security Council, the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Uzbekistan on the need for rethinking attitudes towards critical journalists. Despite the declared

- ▶ In January 2017, the Centre-1 journalist and human rights activist Uktam Pardayev received a suspended sentence for his online activities. On trumped-up charges, the court found him guilty under three articles of the Criminal Code.
- ▶ In the summer of 2017, the activists Akrom Malikov and Rustam Abdumannopov were sentenced to nine years imprisonment for working with the opposition website Uzxlqharakati (the People's Movement of Uzbekistan).
- ▶ In the autumn of 2017, the journalist Bobomurad Abdullayev, a writer for Uzxlqharakati (the People's Movement of Uzbekistan), was arrested.
- ▶ In November 2017, the blogger Khayot Khan Nasredinov was arrested as part of the Bobomurad Abdullayev case. A government decree was then released ordering the Ministry of Internal Affairs to conduct "round-the-clock monitoring and analysis of the mass media and the internet, and immediately respond to publications containing information that is false or infringes on the authority of internal affairs agencies".

Repressions against the media community had a negative impact on the image of President Mirziyoyev. Subsequently, he changed the leadership of the National Security Service (now the State Security Service) and the General Prosecutor's Office twice during the period from 2018 to 2019.

During this period of reorganisation in Uzbekistan's power structures, blogging began to develop and telegram channels were set up. Coverage of religious issues became noticeable online, which the security forces wanted to suppress.

- ▶ 2018 saw six instances of administrative arrest.
- ▶ Along with the persecution of bloggers, the summer of 2018 saw the country's five largest news sites being blocked for several days – Kun.uz, Xabar.uz, Sof.uz, Qalampir.uz and Azon.uz. Journalists regarded the blocking as a punishment for numerous attempts to cover acute socio-political problems.
- ▶ In the autumn of 2019, sentences were announced for three media activists. The opposition journalist Makhmud Radzhabov was sentenced to three years' probation, and received a court ban on leaving the country. The blogger Rustambek Karimov was sentenced to three years and one month in prison, while his colleague Tulkun Astanov received five years' suspended sentence and a probation period.
- ▶ On 7 January 2019, the multimedia news agency Turon24 ceased operations at the behest of the special services.

In 2019, the authorities decided to regulate the development of journalism in the country. To this end, the Agency for Information and Mass Communications was created in February, under the Presidential Administration, with its head Komil Allamzhonov granted ministerial status. The daughter of the President, Saida Mirziyoyeva, was appointed deputy head of the agency. The content of the absolute majority of blogs and information resources in Uzbekistan is now controlled by the state.

- On 15 October 2019, the Togri.uz website shut down, which the site's journalists ascribed to the involvement of the Agency for Information and Mass Communications. The closure of this increasingly popular online agency was the result of publications concerning the level of competence of the Tashkent city authorities, the Ministry of Finance of Uzbekistan, and the Central Bank. The chief 'sin' of the publication, which had been operational for less than six months, was to publish a photograph of Saida Mirziyoyeva. According to insider information, the agency's director Komil Allamzhonov, for whom Saida serves as deputy, was indignant at the posting of an "ugly" snapshot of the president's eldest daughter.

By suing journalists, commercial entities also began to play a part in suppressing freedom of speech.

- On 23 October 2019, the "FIFTY" night club asked the courts to make the journalist Nikita Makarenko remove his posts from social networks and publish a retraction of the comments he had made. The club also demanded a sum of 100 million soms (\$ 10,526) from him in compensation for moral damages in undermining the reputation of the establishment.

## APPENDIX ONE: ATTACK TYPES, IDENTIFIED BY JFJ FOUNDATION

### Physical attacks and threats to life, liberty and health

- Attack / beating / injury / torture not resulting in death
- Attack / beating / injury / torture resulting in death
- Attempted murder
- Captivity / hostage-taking / kidnapping, illegal deprivation of liberty
- Death while in captivity / prison, or as a consequence of captivity / imprisonment
- Disappearance
- Fatal accident
- Forced psychiatric treatment not resulting in death
- Forced psychiatric treatment resulting in death
- Murder
- Non-fatal accident
- Sexual harassment
- Sexual violence
- Sudden unexplained death
- Suicide
- Suicide attempt
- Threats to the media worker via physical attacks on relatives and friends
- Unlawful military conscription

### Non-physical and/or cyber attacks and threats

- Bullying, threats, including cyber and death threats
- Cyber, DDOS, hacker attack against media
- Damage to/seizure of the living space/ work premises
- Damage/ seizure of property, transport, equipment, documents
- Defamation, spreading fake and damaging information about the media worker / media outlet
- Hacking into e-mail and/or social media accounts/computer, smartphone
- Illegal constraints to media work
- Illegal surveillance, phone-tapping
- Pressure/threats to the source, including death threats
- Theft/dissemination of personal data, phishing, doxing
- Threats to the media worker via non-physical attacks on relatives and friends
- Trolling

### Attacks via judicial or economic means

- Administrative offence / fine
- Authorised confiscation of property, means of transport, equipment, documents
- Authorised surveillance and phone-tapping
- Authorised travel ban (movement inside a country or specific region / town)
- Ban on entering the country, refusal to issue visa or accreditation, or premature termination of either
- Ban on journalistic activity
- Ban on leaving the country
- Bank account seizure
- Closing media outlet / blocking internet resource
- Criminal case on charges excluding (1) and (2)
- Dismissal / involuntary dismissal / enforced change of profession
- Forced deportation from the country
- Forced emigration as a result of legal / economic pressure
- House arrest
- Imprisonment, including pre-trial detention facilities
- Interrogation / Investigation
- Journalist charged with: defamation, libel, contempt, reputational damage (1)
- Journalist charged with: extremism; links with terrorists;
- incitement of political, ethnic or religious hatred; high treason;
- calling for overthrow of constitutionally established order (2)
- Search authorised by court decision
- Selective application of repressive laws
- Short-term detention
- Suspended sentence
- Threats to the media worker via judicial or economic means on relatives and friends
- Trial
- Unauthorised search of individual and/or residence
- Unauthorised travel ban (inside country, region or town)

## APPENDIX TWO: OPEN SOURCES USED FOR AZERBAIJAN REPORT

- **Turan** – an independent news agency. One of the first independent agencies to emerge in the former USSR, was founded in May 1990 by a group of journalists in Baku. The agency disseminates news, analytical articles and reviews from Azerbaijan
- **Meydan.TV** – a weekly online television channel.
- **Voice of America** – a US-based multimedia news organisation that produces content in over 45 languages for audiences with limited access to free press
- **Toplum.TV** – an Azeri news site
- **Xural** – an Azeri news site
- **EMDS** – the main aim of the EMDS is to ensure the establishment of a democratic electoral system and the formation of democratic institutions in Azerbaijan
- **The US Embassy in Azerbaijan**
- **Gozetci** – an Azeri news site with the aim of compiling information on human rights violations
- **Azadliq Radiosu** – the Azeri Service of Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty.
- **Human Rights Club** – founded on Human Rights Day (10 December) in 2010 by a group of young Azerbaijani human rights defenders. The organisation's main objective is to promote the protection and observance of human rights and fundamental liberties, as well as the broader development of democracy in Azerbaijan
- **Novator** – an Azeri news site
- **BBC** – the BBC service in Azerbaijan



## APPENDIX THREE: OPEN SOURCES USED FOR KAZAKHSTAN REPORT

- **International Foundation for Protection of Freedom of Speech “Adil Soz”** – a non-governmental and non-profit Kazakh human rights organisation whose main objective is the fostering of an open civil society by means of the establishment of free, objective and progressive journalism in the everyday life of the country.
- **The Kazakhstan International Bureau for Human Rights and the Rule of Law** – a non-governmental, non-profit organisation founded to promote the observance of civil and political rights and liberties in Kazakhstan.
- **The Committee to Project Journalists** – an international non-governmental organisation that defends the rights of journalists.
- **Radio Azattyk** – the Kazakh Service of Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty.
- **MIA “KazTAG”** – a news agency.
- **Facebook** – the social network
- Russian and Kazakh-language online media outlets open to public access.

## APPENDIX FOUR: OPEN SOURCES USED FOR KYRGYZSTAN REPORT

- **24.kg** – a website and news agency.
- **Kaktus.media** – an online media outlet.
- **Kloop.kg** – an online media outlet covering and analysing events in Kyrgyzstan.
- **K-news.kg** – an information, news and analytics agency.
- **Radio Azattyk** – the Kyrgyz service of Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty, providing daily coverage and analysis of current events in Kyrgyzstan.
- **Reporters Without Borders** – an international non-governmental organisation protecting journalists and media industry employees who are imprisoned or harassed for carrying out their work, as well as publicising cases of abuse and torture.
- **The School of Peacemaking and Media Technology in Central Asia** – a non-profit organisation specialising in media research, annual ratings of freedom of expression, and media monitoring.
- **Human Rights Watch** – an international human rights organisation specialising in monitoring human rights violations.

## APPENDIX FIVE: OPEN SOURCES USED FOR TAJIKISTAN REPORT

- **Radio Ozodi** - the Tajik service of Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty.
- **Reporters Without Borders** – an international non-governmental organisation protecting journalists and media industry employees who are imprisoned or harassed for carrying out their work, as well as publicising cases of abuse and torture.
- **Committee to Protect Journalists** – an international non-governmental organisation that defends the rights of journalists.
- **Media group Asia-Plus** - independent news agency of Tajikistan.
- **Akhbor** - news website created by Tajik journalist Mirzo Salimpur and based in Prague, Czech Republic.
- **NBT.tj** – website of the National Bank of Tajikistan
- **Khovar.tj** - national information agency of Tajikistan.
- **The Fergana Information Agency (Russia)** – a resource covering events in Central Asia.
- **Payom.net** – news website of the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan.
- **Social networks**
- Russian and Tajik-language online media outlets open to public access.

## APPENDIX SIX: OPEN SOURCES USED FOR TURKMENISTAN REPORT

- **Alternative News of Turkmenistan** – now Turkmen.news. An independent news and human rights organisation based in Netherlands.
- **Chronicles of Turkmenistan (Austria)** – a publication of the Turkmen Initiative for Human Rights.
- **The Fergana Information Agency (Russia)** – a resource covering events in Central Asia.
- **Radio Azatlyk (Czech Republic)** – the Turkmen Service of Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty.
- **Radio France International (Paris)** – a radio station broadcasting news around the world, in French and in 15 other languages.

## APPENDIX SEVEN: OPEN SOURCES USED FOR UZBEKISTAN REPORT

- **The Fergana Information Agency (Russia)** – a resource covering events in Central Asia.
- **Radio Ozodlik** – the Uzbek Service of Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty.
- **Centre1.com** – an independent media organisation specialising in Central Asian news.
- **Asiaterra** – an information and analysis site covering Central Asia
- **Front Line Defenders** – an international defence foundation and Irish human rights organisation set up in Dublin, Ireland, in 2001.
- **International Partnership for Human Rights (IPHR)** – an international non-profit organisation with its headquarters in Brussels, Belgium. Established in spring 2008.
- **Committee to Protect Journalists** – an international non-governmental organisation that defends the rights of journalists.
- **The Association for Human Rights in Central Asia (AHRCA)** – an independent human rights organisation. The initiators behind the founding of the AHRCA were citizens of Central Asian countries who had experienced politically motivated persecution.
- **ACCA.media** – an independent human rights media project that writes about human rights violations.