

The Safety of Journalists in Freefall in Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Turkey, Russia, Crimea, and Ukraine

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Moderator, excellencies, ladies and gentlemen, good afternoon. Freedom House is gravely concerned by the growing trend of attacks and acts of intimidation against journalists in a number of OSCE participating States. Over the last year, physical violence, punitive legal measures, smear campaigns, and other forms of harassment have been used in an attempt to silence critical voices in Azerbaijan, Turkey, Kazakhstan, Russia, Crimea, and Ukraine. Silencing these voices has a lasting impact on the state of democracy, security, and human rights in OSCE participating States.

Smear campaigns are an insidious tactic used to intimidate journalists, particularly women journalists. One of the most notorious examples is that of Khadija Ismayilova, who in 2012 was [blackmailed](#) by government actors with intimate photographs and a hidden camera sex tape shortly after conducting groundbreaking investigative work into President Ilham Aliyev's massive financial holdings. Sevinj Osmanqizi, another independent journalist who is based in the United States, ran a series of programs in April 2019 focused on corruption in the oil and gas sector in Azerbaijan. Shortly thereafter, she received [an ultimatum](#) from alleged government sources to cease her journalism work, or else her intimate photos and private information would be publicly released.

Critical voices in Russia, Azerbaijan, and Kazakhstan are often silenced through government abuse of the court system. Allegations of tax evasion, extortion, fraud, drug charges, and similar violations are used as instruments to stifle journalists who investigate public interest topics, particularly corruption. Ikran Rahimov, editor-in-chief of *Realliq*, who was arrested in 2018 shortly after he published an editorial about corruption in Azerbaijan's Press Council, [received a sentence](#) in June on the grounds of "collecting compromising information on individuals as means of extortion." He faces up to five-and-a-half years in prison. Also in June, Ivan Golunov, a well-respected Russian investigative journalist, was arrested on drug charges, a tactic that is often used to smear and silence credible and vital voices in Russia. Detained without access to a lawyer, Golunov faced up to [20 years](#) in prison. Following [mass protests](#) in support of the journalist, indicating the public's unwillingness to believe the incredulous charges, Golunov was released for lack of evidence. In Kazakhstan, *RFE/RL* correspondent Sania Toiken was [fined and detained](#) while covering ongoing protests by oil workers unfolding in Zhanaozen. In March 2019, the Zhanaozen court found her guilty of refusal to follow police orders. She is currently appealing the case.

Allegations of terrorism and propaganda are used as tools to virtually eliminate media freedom and the freedom of speech, particularly those voices representing or covering marginalized communities. In Turkey, journalists working for Kurdish media [continue](#) to be arrested and jailed repeatedly on allegations of terrorism or involvement in illegal organizations. In July, two

filmmakers who were developing a documentary on the outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) were [sentenced](#) to over four years in prison for “making propaganda for a (terrorist) organization.” In August, Turkish police detained reporter [Ergin Çağlar](#), who is affiliated with the pro-Kurdish *Mezopotamya* News Agency, on allegations of membership in an illegal organization. In Crimea, which remains under the Russian Federation's *de facto control*, professional Crimean Tatar media has been essentially extinguished save for those who carry out citizen reporting. In March, [more than 24 activists](#) from the Crimean Solidarity grassroots movement, many of whom are Crimean Tatars who report on human rights challenges, and specifically Crimean Tatar issues, were arrested and charged with alleged involvement in *Hizb ut-Tahrir*. The Russian Federation [considers](#) *Hizb ut-Tahrir* to be an extremist, Islamist group. On these grounds, the activists were forcibly transferred to detention facilities in Rostov-on-Don and remain imprisoned there.

Impunity for violence against journalists remains among [the biggest challenges](#) facing media freedom in Ukraine. The Institute of Mass Information (IMI) documented 88 incidents of physical aggression against journalists in the first half of 2019 alone. A majority of Ukrainian journalists cite “[physical aggression](#)” as the biggest impediment to their reporting in a recent poll. The case of Pavlo Sheremet, who was blown up in his car in July 2016, remains unsolved. Vadym Komarov, an investigative journalist known for his work on public interest issues in Cherkasy, was [attacked](#) with a hammer in broad daylight in May 2019. Later that month, he succumbed to his injuries. Journalists [believe](#) he was targeted due to his investigative work exposing corruption among local officials and politicians. We encourage the new government in Ukraine to take these incidents seriously and take measures to address the growing problem of journalists' safety.

Freedom House urges the OSCE to hold the responsible governments accountable for failing to protect journalists and, in several cases, for contributing to systemic harassment and violence against them. A safe environment where journalists can do their jobs to bring the public their right to truth and objective information is a critical pillar of the democratic ideals that underpin the OSCE mechanism.

Freedom House calls on the governments of Azerbaijan, Turkey, Kazakhstan, the Russian Federation, Ukraine, and the *de facto* authorities in Crimea, as well as the authorities wherever journalists face harassment, violence, and smear campaigns, to:

- Establish oversight mechanisms open to public scrutiny to ensure that attacks and incidents of violence against journalists will be thoroughly investigated and perpetrators held to account;
- Establish a mechanism to prevent the political misuse of assorted criminal charges against journalists for their work on politically sensitive material or critical perspective of the government;
- Cease persecution of journalists representing marginalized communities, especially Crimean Tatar citizen journalists and human rights reporters, and Kurdish journalists in Turkey;

- Seek assistance from the ODIHR and the RFoM to review existing and draft legislation seeking to improve media freedom and journalists' safety, and implement the proposed recommendations.