



## **In Kyrgyzstan, Reporting on Corruption Leads to Attacks and Threats Against Media and Lawyers**

Authorities in Kyrgyzstan should immediately cease the harassment of, and investigate threats and attacks against local journalists, lawyers, and activists whose reporting and statements exposed high level government corruption and called for the probe of money laundering allegations.

Civil Rights Defenders, along with the Committee to Protect Journalists, International Partnership for Human Rights, the Norwegian Helsinki Committee and the Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights, urge Kyrgyz authorities to take all steps provided under the national law to guarantee protection to journalists, lawyers, and activists.

The recent [pressure](#) against civil society members stems from a November 2019 investigative report by a consortium of investigative journalists, whose reports have alleged that Kyrgyzstan's former and current government officials – with a former customs chief as a key figure – have been involved in a [multimillion dollar money laundering scheme](#). The report is a joint work by the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP, a global network), Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL, Prague), and the independent news website Kloop (Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan).

Although Kyrgyz authorities have announced launching a preliminary probe into the allegations and have briefly interrogated the key figure profiled in the report, former customs service deputy director Raimbek Matraimov, their subsequent actions raise serious concerns about the Kyrgyz government's compliance with its commitments to freedom of expression and its declared intents to fight corruption.

Immediately after Matraimov's lawyers filed a libel lawsuit against the main publishers of the report on 10 December, a district court in Bishkek ordered to freeze the bank accounts of the RFE/RL Kyrgyz service and one of RFE/RL's journalists. The court also ordered to freeze the bank accounts of Kloop and the independent news website 24.kg (which covered the report), [RFE/RL said](#) on 12 December 2019. Facing an outcry at home and abroad, the court reversed its orders the day after, local press reported, but the fact that the judges have failed to objectively review the plaintiff's request have left media and activists concerned with the judicial independence.

Other troubling developments in connection to the expose took place after Nurbek Toktakunov, a human rights lawyer and director of the Bishkek-based law firm Precedent, first urged the authorities to investigate those profiled in the report and then publicly voiced his concerns with the way the probe was being handled. After Toktakunov [uploaded videos on](#)

[YouTube](#), in which he criticised Kyrgyz prosecutors and pointed at the legal steps they must take, he started receiving threats. He first received threats on social media, and later over the [phone](#).

According to Toktakunov's own account, an unknown man has called him and sent text messages to his phone several times, warning him to cease his actions or face retaliation. The most recent phone call took place on 18 December, when the lawyer was on his way to a [protest rally in Bishkek](#), where hundreds of local residents and activists came out to express their support to the journalists and decry government inaction towards the corruption allegations. "Agents with GKNB [Kyrgyz national security service] have suggested that I leave the country [in connection to the threats]," [Toktakunov told 24.kg](#).

In a separate incident on 14 December, Toktakunov's driver was also physically [attacked outside his own house](#), which the lawyer believes to be part of a campaign against him. At least one other local activist, Dinara Oshurakhunova, has also received threats via a phone call from an unknown person, when she was on her way to the 18 December protest rally in Bishkek, local press reported.

Lastly, starting on 17 December, several independent Kyrgyz news outlets, including Kloop, Kaktus.Media, and Factcheck.kg have been experiencing [a concerted DDoS attack](#) that disabled and severely restricted access to the media. The attack started shortly after the websites [re-published an investigative report](#) by Factcheck.kg. The report was a follow up to the November expose, in which the journalists looked into social media accounts of Matraimov's wife and analysed the luxurious lifestyle that her family could afford and compared it to their officially declared income. Whereas Kloop and Kaktus.Media have managed to withstand the attack with external help, access to Factcheck was blocked for some 24 hours after the attack, Civil Rights Defenders' research showed.

The ongoing lack of a firm political will to address widespread corruption and protect those who exposed it have already prompted two [protest rallies in Bishkek](#), where local residents have called on the government to step up its efforts to enforce the rule of law. It is of utmost importance that those in the government and state agencies tasked with carrying out investigations – from corruption and money laundering schemes to threats against Toktakunov and DDoS attacks against the media – take appropriate actions.