

Kyrgyzstan Moves to Curb Free Expression President Should Refuse to Sign the Media Bill

(Stockholm, 4 July 2025) –A series of developments in Kyrgyzstan threaten to further curb freedom of expression and the media, ten organizations including Civil Rights Defenders said today, urging the president not to sign a bill to restrict the media. The following is their statement:

Kyrgyzstan: President Should Step in to Halt the Erosion of Freedom of Expression

We, the undersigned international human rights organizations express our deepest concerns with troubling developments in Kyrgyzstan that further curb freedom of expression and the media and seem designed to encourage self-censorship among journalists, activists, and ordinary citizens. These include a draconian media draft law [adopted by the parliament on June 25](#), 2025, the prosecution of [the independent journalist Kanyshai Mamyrkulova](#) for criticizing the government, and [the independent broadcaster April TV](#).

We call on President Sadyr Japarov to refrain from signing the media bill, to send it back to the Jogorku Kenesh, and urge its members to address its troubling provisions in consultation with civil society and media stakeholders. We also call on the Kyrgyzstani authorities to drop all charges, vacate convictions, and release from custody all those imprisoned in retaliation for their critical speech and opinions.

Kyrgyzstan's international standing as a country that upholds free speech and media freedom has been undermined in recent years, falling in the Reporters without Borders Press Freedom Index from a ranking of 120 in 2024 to 144 in 2025.

Abusive Legal Actions Against the Media

On July 3, the [Oktyabrskiy District Court in Bishkek](#) sentenced journalist Kanyshai Mamyrkulova to 4 years of probation on charges of inciting mass riots (article 278 of the Criminal Code) and racial, national, religious or local hostility (article 330). She had been detained on March 20, for her Facebook posts critical of the government's lack of transparency around a March 2025 border demarcation deal between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, following a violent conflict between the two countries in September 2022. Mamyrkulova [rejected the charges](#) as politically motivated.

During the June 30 court hearing, [prosecutors had asked the court to sentence Mamyrkulova to 8.5 years in jail](#). Although the probation sentence means that Mamyrkulova has been released from custody, the verdict raises serious concerns for the

journalist, who should never have been detained or charged in the first place. Mamyrkulova is subject to a curfew and must be at home from 22:00 until 6:00. She cannot travel outside the country and must check in with the authorities twice a month, inform them of potential residence changes, and participate in the probation service activities. Significantly she is subject to restrictions on what she can write or publish online, including on social media. Any violations of these conditions risk cancellation of her conditional release and returning her into custody. Mamyrkulova's case sends yet another warning signal to civil society that the authorities will not tolerate criticism and are willing to use overly broad criminal provisions to silence critical journalism.

On [July 4](#), the independent broadcaster April TV is expecting a final decision in a lawsuit filed in April by the Bishkek district Prosecutor's Office seeking to halt the broadcaster's activities on social media and revoke its television and radio broadcasting license. The prosecution has relied on so-called "expert conclusions" that April TV hosts "undermine the authorities" by expressing, in speech and through sarcasm and facial expressions disapproval of the government. Some of the experts testifying against April TV also served as experts in the case that led to the liquidation of "Kloop Media foundation in 2024.

On July 1, [Kloop Media reported](#) that Kyrgyzstan's national security agency had summoned at least seven current or former April TV journalists for interrogation. Although the reasons for the interrogation remain unclear, the security agency summoning the journalists raises concern about pressure from the authorities.

[The Mass Media Bill](#)

The [Mass Media](#) bill passed by parliament in one sitting differs substantially from the compromise version developed through extensive consultation with the media and approved at the first reading in [April](#). The final version approved in June grants the authorities wide powers to deny media outlets registration, obstruct their work, and close them down without judicial oversight.

The version submitted to Parliament in December 2023 [drew strong criticism](#) from human rights groups, media professionals, and international experts for giving authorities excessive control over media and online platforms. In a 2023 [joint opinion](#), the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe representative for media freedom and its Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights raised serious concerns that the media bill did not correspond to internationally recognized freedom of expression standards and good practice in the OSCE region.

The Venice Commission of the Council of Europe also noted in its [opinion](#) from 2023: “If the current version of the Draft Law is adopted, it could lead to violations of the rights to freedom of expression and have grave consequences for the media as the public watchdog in the country.”

In response, in March 2024, President Japarov ordered a further revision by a working group that included media representatives, resulting in a new version that featured important improvements that media [considered](#) an acceptable compromise. After public consultation and government review, the revised draft was submitted to Parliament in December 2024. However, amendments introduced by parliament members during the final stage of consideration reintroduced problematic provisions that had been excluded.

While the stated purpose of the draft law is to uphold the constitutional right to freedom of expression and access to information, several provisions pose serious threats to media freedom, journalistic independence, and public access to diverse information. The bill contains vaguely worded provisions, including elements of constitutionally banned state censorship of the press – a regulation that no independent journalist would welcome in a free and democratic society.

Particularly troubling provisions include:

- Article 1, which expands the definition of traditional mass media to include unspecified and vaguely worded “web-based resources or other unidentified forms of periodic distribution of mass information.” This imposes all the obligations, restrictions and sanctions that media face on anyone the authorities might see as engaging in publishing and sharing information. Article 1 also effectively denies the existence of freelance journalists by requiring a person recognized as a journalist to work for a media outlet.
- Article 5, which expands vaguely worded media restrictions to prohibit content deemed as inciting “interracial, ethnic, religious, interregional hostility” or promoting a “cult of violence,” without clear definitions of the terms. The wording leaves room for arbitrary interpretation and could be used to suppress legitimate journalistic work and public discourse. As an increasing number of independent journalists and activists have recently been arrested on unsubstantiated charges of “inciting” hostility or other over-broad offenses such as calling for “mass disorder,” this vaguely worded provision is likely to lead to greater self-censorship.
- Article 19, which vests broad powers in the Justice Ministry to warn newsrooms if vaguely worded provisions of Article 5 are allegedly breached. If more than three such warnings are issued to a news outlet within a calendar year, the courts may suspend or dissolve the outlet.

- Although Article 7 clearly bans censorship, it provides the cabinet with broad licensing authority to censor the press. Several of the law's provisions impose a strict ban on foreign funding, with a (35 percent funding and ownership cap, require registration for all but state-funded media outlets, and enables the cabinet to issue or withdraw media licenses. Media outlets will be required to seek re-registration in cases of any changes in the list of its founders – an overly broad requirement.
- Article 30, which also states that foreign media and their representatives can operate in the country only with mandatory accreditation. Given the recent harassment and prosecution of Radio Azattyk, the local bureau of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, this restrictive provision adds to the government's censorship authority.

Kyrgyzstan's authorities should uphold their international press freedom and human rights commitments, stop imposing unjustified media restrictions including the liquidation of news outlets – and end harassment and retaliatory arrests of journalists and media workers. We ask President Japarov to return the draft law to the Jogorku Kenesh for revision with involvement of the nation's media experts and to use all possible means within his constitutional powers to facilitate dropping charges against Kanyshai Mamyrkulova and April TV.

We also urge the European Union and Kyrgyzstan's other international partners to respond resolutely to these new disturbing developments. Diplomatic engagement and international solidarity are urgently needed to defend Kyrgyzstan's rapidly shrinking space for independent journalism and open public debate and to support those engaged in these activities in the face of increasing repressions. We urge you to stand with the people of Kyrgyzstan and protect their right to free expression.

Civil Rights Defenders

Freedom For Eurasia

Human Rights Watch

Araminta

Freedom Now

Committee to Protect Journalists

Norwegian Helsinki Committee (NHC)

International Partnership for Human Rights (IPHR)

International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH), in the framework of the Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders

World Organisation Against Torture, in the framework of the Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders