

Security of independent journalists in the era of digitalization: the situation in Kazakhstan and global processes

Tergembay Kenzhegul¹, Abdrakhmanova Ainur¹, Irgussayeva Assylzhan¹

¹doctoral students of the Faculty of Journalism and Social Sciences of L. N. Gumilyov Eurasian National University, Astana, Kazakhstan

Abstract

Digital technologies open up great opportunities for freedom of journalists. This allows them to conduct journalistic research, collaborate with colleagues abroad, check facts with the audience, and access databases and sources. But along with these great opportunities, the threat to the lives of independent journalists is growing every year. Now independent journalism around the world is in a difficult situation, because they spread information to society that can criticize government or other influential elites, openly tell the truth, thereby endangering their popularity and power. An official or government whose image is damaged allows censorship. Such a picture is quite common in those states that have distanced themselves from democracy and where a totalitarian system reigns.

The article analyzes the state of independent journalism and freedom of expression in Kazakhstan over the years of independence. Specific facts are collected on journalists who have been subjected to such challenges as digital surveillance, violence and political persecution, oppressed by influential people, killed, and ways to ensure the safety of independent media representatives are considered.

Keywords: independent journalist, freedom of speech, censorship, democracy, political persecution, risk.

1. Introduction

The relevance of the topic. Globalization and digitalization of the information space have affected all spheres of human activity. This trend is especially rationally applied in the direction of keeping people under control, collecting more and more data about them.

Independent journalism, also called independent media, refers to any media that is free from the influence of government or other external sources, such as corporations or influential people. This includes television, newspapers, radio, and online journalism. This means that journalists do not feel pressure to shape or refine their reporting, even if they may negatively portray the government or other power structures, even the owner of a news outlet or others. Independent journalism makes it possible to bring unvarnished facts to the public so that they can use the information to help people make decisions on important issues ([LibertiesEU, 2021](#)).

Scientific novelty. Job security and the assessment of the role of independent journalists is one of the little-studied topics. The study of this topic contributes to the solution of the conflict problem. This is a really relevant topic for many journalists around the world. According to British human rights activist and UN Special Rapporteur Irene Khan, the situation with media freedom is deteriorating every year and there is a tendency of danger for journalists in the digital age, all this negatively affects human rights, democracy and development in general. The deterioration of the situation with media freedom and the growing threat to the safety of journalists is a global trend that is most pronounced in countries that have retreated from democracy and in stable totalitarian states. She refers to a database website compiled by the *United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization*, which reports that 455 journalists were killed in the line of duty between 2016 and 2021. In more than eight out of ten cases, the perpetrators were not brought to justice ([UN Office, 2022](#)).

The object of the study is the existing threat to independent journalists in Kazakhstan in the era of digitalization and their coverage. The subject of the study: current state of security of independent journalists in Kazakhstan.

The purpose of the article is to characterize the coverage by mass media of ensuring the safety of independent journalists in Kazakhstan. To achieve the goal set in the work, it is necessary to perform the following tasks: to consider the prerequisites for the emergence, the origins of conflict situations between independent journalists and influential people or the government; to study and list international legal organizations that support independent journalists; analysis of media coverage related to independent journalists in Kazakhstan.

The practical significance of the study lies in the fact that the provisions and conclusions of the study can be useful for journalists covering the topic of safety of journalists. In addition, this scientific article can be used as a guide and assistance to journalists in matters of security.

2. Materials and methods

The material and methodological basis of the study. The source base of this research consists of monographs, textbooks, as well as materials published in domestic and foreign mass media on the topic of the safety of independent journalists. Methods of analysis, synthesis, induction, deduction, analogy, comparison and others are the methodological basis of the research. Chronological period – 2016-2024. The theoretical and methodological foundations of the study are substantiated by considering from different sides the coverage of the topic of the safety of independent journalists in the last years of independence and suggests a comprehensive interdisciplinary methodology combining descriptive and correlational types of research.

3. Discussion

The deterioration of the situation with media freedom and the growing threat to the safety of journalists is a global trend that is most pronounced in countries that have retreated from democracy and in stable totalitarian states. This was stated by Irene Khan, the UN Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression, in a report to the *Human Rights Council*. Silencing a journalist by killing him is the most egregious form of censorship, Khan said, and suggested that the Council establish an international working group to prevent, investigate and prosecute those responsible for attacks on journalists as a measure to address the problem of impunity ([LibertiesEU, 2021](#)). Everyday social processes open to the public form different ([Armstrong, 2023](#)) views on information. But in the end, the truth is linked to freedom of expression ([Tani, 2020](#)). Summarizing historical events by year, it can be seen that the threat to independent journalists has not decreased. This allowed us to monitor various aspects ([Saker, 2023](#)) of the safety of independent journalists.

Four main types of approaches to harassment and harassment of independent journalists around the world can be distinguished, and it can be seen that in recent years these approaches have received a trend (*Figure 1*).

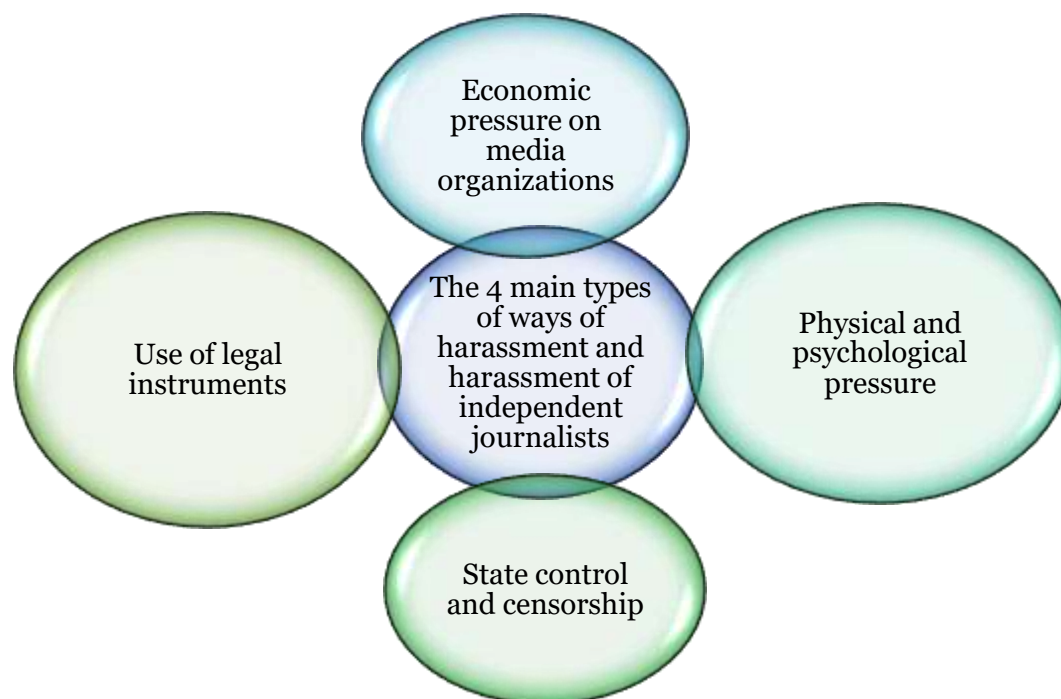


Figure 1. The 4 main types of approaches to harassment and harassment of independent journalists

As the use of legal means, one can name the persecution of journalists by many states on charges of spreading false information, cybercrime or involvement in terrorist acts. Among such countries are Russia, Kazakhstan, Turkey, India and other countries. In addition, there are also facts of physical and psychological harassment. We will consider it in the discussion section of the article.

Another way to harass journalists is to worsen their personal economic situation. It seeks to weaken media organizations by charging them with financial crimes or tax evasion. Such a practice is observed in Vietnam, Belarus. Many countries are trying to limit the work of journalists by strengthening state control over their activities. Thus, it allows censorship. Limits independent information through strict control over the internet. The same problem is observed in Russia, China, Iran, Kazakhstan.

In recent years, there has been an increase in global awareness of the digital threats faced by journalists. Online harassment, mass and targeted surveillance, data warehouse vulnerabilities, and digital attacks (including hacking) are just some of the many ways digital tools can be used that endanger the safety and integrity of journalists and their sources. These methods are used by both State and non-State actors to gain access to confidential information and intimidate journalists (UNESCO, 2021).

The threat is growing even more in the digital age (Schwabe, 2023). Independent journalists are especially persecuted in connection with the disclosure (Oschatz et al, 2024) of misconduct by officials. It can be seen that these processes accelerate during the period of intensification of political propaganda campaigns. With the help of digitalization, they can easily track all the activities of independent journalists. In recent years, social networks have rapidly and firmly entered the lives of most modern people. Inclusion and immersion in the virtual space affects many aspects of human life (Levin, 2019). But we cannot stop the threat to independent journalists around the world. Our consistent explanation is just for clarity (Cherney, 2023).

Overview of the threat to the safety of independent journalists in the world

In Europe, as in much of the world, journalism, and especially independent journalism, faces threats on several fronts. Authoritarian governments are actively trying to silence critical journalists, even in democratic strongholds such as the European Union. Authoritarian governments, such as in

Poland and Hungary, prioritize media hijacking, meaning the government hijacks the media either directly or through wealthy friends buying them up to ensure that their reporting supports its positions or targets people or organizations that the government opposes. This means that the news content provided to the public may not correspond to reality or be outright falsified ([LibertiesEU, 2021](#)).

In Georgia, 139 cases of threats/attacks were identified and analysed in the period between January 2023 and July 2024. Government officials were behind 62% of attacks. In August 2024, the so-called *Foreign Agents* law came into force. According to experts, it threatens the existence of independent media and civil society organisations in the country. Over the last 18 months, Georgian media workers and activists have faced both physical attacks and hate campaigns, with offices, vehicles, and apartments vandalised with messages such as foreign agent and traitor ([JFJ, 2024](#)).

According to the Georgian Democracy Initiative (GDI), which monitors SLAPP cases in Georgia, there currently are at least 43 cases in the courts, 39 of which are targeting local media and journalists ([JJF, 2024](#)).

Independent journalism in Russia is also in an alarming state. This fact is confirmed by representatives of the Russian independent media and the international non-governmental organization *Reporters Without Borders* ([RSF, 2023](#)). They are asking major technology companies like *Apple*, *Telegram*, *YouTube*, *Twitter*, *Microsoft*, *Google*, *LinkedIn*, *Meta* to create a group *Engineers against Dictatorship* in order to prevent the shutdown of Russian websites. This initiative is supported by Nobel Peace Prize laureate Dmitry Muratov, a journalist and editor-in-chief of the Russian *Novaya Gazeta* ([Novaya Gazeta, 2023](#)). Totalitarian regimes destroy independent media in order to establish control over society through propaganda. We are already talking about simple censorship of individual publications and messengers; this is something new, global. Dangerous attempts are being made to destroy the very means of delivering content to citizens. Now, in Russia, the entire transport of content delivery, in particular *YouTube* and *Wikipedia*, is under threat of destruction. Today, engineers can help journalism and society. They can find and implement reliable methods and algorithms for saving *YouTube*, *Wikipedia*, *VPN*. Freedom of speech today is a technology. We need a joint initiative *Engineers against Dictatorship* ([RSF, 2023](#)). They use new media (social networks, blogs) ([Hamid et al, 2016](#)) has been making good use of it to this day.

Lana Estemirova, the daughter of the famous Chechen human rights activist Natalia Estemirova, who was killed in 2009, tells Voice of America how immersion in the topic of impunity for violence against journalists revealed to her the scale of this problem worldwide: I'm releasing the *Trouble with Truth* podcast for JFJ. We started looking for interesting journalists from Belarus, Africa, and South America to somehow compare situations and find out what unites us all. I had two issues in the North Caucasus. Unfortunately, I could hardly find anyone who openly talked about what was going on there ([UN, 2022](#)). But I also had several issues about Mexican journalists, and I am horrified by the statistics there – several dozen journalists are killed every year, and 99 percent of crimes remain unsolved! It's bad for journalists in Russia, terribly bad – in the war in Ukraine, but in Mexico there is just a hunt for journalists. And when you start talking to journalists from other continents, you understand ([Galperovich, 2022](#)). Indeed, according to the UNESCO Observatory on the murders of journalists from 2016 to 2020, Mexico is in first place – 61, Afghanistan is in second place – 51, and the Syrian Arab Republic is in third place – 34 people ([UNESCO, 2021](#)).

In Azerbaijan, 147 incidents were identified and analysed in 2023. That year saw an unprecedented scope of persecution against independent and critical media and journalists. Over 20 journalists and media workers are currently imprisoned in Azerbaijan, most independent online media outlets have been shut down, and any form of pluralism is under severe threat. The Media Law, adopted in 2022, saw fewer than 10% of existing media outlets included in the new Media Register, leaving the majority de facto illegal and their work forcefully terminated. 19 physical attacks against Azerbaijani media workers took place while they were covering mass protests and gatherings. In all cases, the perpetrators were representatives of the authorities ([JJF, 2024](#)).

The current state of independent journalism in Kazakhstan

Is there independent journalism in Kazakhstan?, independent journalists themselves answered this question, summarizing their answers, we can draw a certain conclusion. For example, a well-known Kazakhstani journalist Yermurat Bapi said: due to the current political situation, there is no balance: the share of independent media is very small. This, in turn, is an indicator of how free speech is in the country. For example, according to official information, there are about 5 thousand publications registered in our country. Of these, 4,995 cannot speak out against the political regime, while only the other five can criticize the authorities. I can't say that the number of independent journalists is so large – if we go further, there may be around 100 people (Abitai, 2016). Yermurat Bapi is currently a deputy of the Mazhilis of the Parliament of the Republic of Kazakhstan. E. Bapi was interviewed through the messenger application in November 2024. The question was related to the security of independent journalists in modern Kazakhstan. There is a change in the views of E. Bapi in 2016 and in 2024. He expressed his opinion to independent journalists as follows: «In the current conditions of Kazakhstan, it is not appropriate to call an independent journalist extreme. Yes, there is a criminal or administrative case against individual journalists. But arrest, persecution, murder, as in the time of Nazarbayev (Askhat Sharipzhanov, Kumarbek Kybiraev, Batyrkhan Darimbet, Nuri Muftakh...(Uralgaisha Omarshinova), who disappeared without a trace. there is no extreme situation like this». What journalists can be called independent answered the question as follows: «We have developed an intuition in relation to journalism that understands the definition of "independent" in an anti-power, oppositional context. In fact, an independent journalist should be a professional who is not related to the authorities, the opposition, or other social groups. An independent is a journalist who is not influenced by anyone, by any political forces, in his own activities. An opposition journalist cannot be independent because he defends the interests of a public dissatisfied group against the authorities. In the same way, a media journalist under the control of the authorities cannot be independent».

According to independent journalist Kassym Amanzhol, independent media should be independent of power, financially independent. At the same time, he says that it is better not to consider opposition and independent journalism as one concept, because the opposition is a force with a certain political interest. And the media say that it is quite possible to lose authenticity when under the influence of some political force.

In the history of Journalism up to 2016, the types of pressure exerted on independent journalists were associated with negative factors such as: a warning to sue under a libel clause or the use of physical force. For example, in 2009, Bakytzhan Nurpeisov, a correspondent of *The Independent newspaper public position*, was brutally beaten by someone. The attackers were about five. ...Doctors diagnosed him with a closed skull injury and brain damage. This is the third assassination attempt on representatives of Kazakhstan's independent and opposition publications in the last 35 days. According to Rozlana Taukina, director of *the foundation for the protection of the Press journalists in danger* and senior editor of the newspaper public position, such attacks are carried out only on journalists of independent and opposition media (Sultan, 2019).

Such facts are also confirmed by Yermurat Bapi, an independent journalist, one of the organizers of the Danish project and editor-in-chief of the Soldat newspaper (Nurtay, 2018): I have been in this independent journalism for almost 18 years. In between these times, being persecuted, listening to the phone, spying on me, being tried... we have experienced many more cases. We also saw a five-year journalistic ban (Abitai, 2016). Inga Imanbay, an independent journalist from Kazakhstan, said: such things happened to me personally. During work, there is not only psychological, but also physiological harm (Abitai, 2016).

It can be seen that the negative situations that have occurred in relation to independent journalists over the past decade have become even more complicated. Today, the independent journalism of Kazakhstan is going through troubled times. Among the subsequent pressure on independent journalists, there are cases of legal and procedural harassment, imprisonment and even

murder. It is assumed that the reason for this complication of the situation was the uprising that took place in Kazakhstan at the beginning of 2022. In the first days of 2022, Kazakhstan was seized by the most intense and violent protests in its 30-year history of independence. Although they started as small-scale protests in West Kazakhstan amid New Year's celebrations, the events grew into large-scale looting and violence in the country's largest city, Almaty, within a matter of days. Spurred initially by rising gas prices, problems that have been brewing for decades exploded, producing brutal retaliatory violence from the state, with evidence also suggesting internal struggles among its elites (Zhandayeva, 2022; Zhanmukanova, 2022).

In the early hours of January 6, President Tokaev called the protests and riots an act of aggression» and requested help from the CSTO, a security alliance of six countries in the region, to respond to «terrorist gangs (...) who have undergone training abroad. He did not elaborate or offer any evidence for his claims. Within hours, Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan of Armenia, who currently chairs the alliance, announced that it would deploy a military peacekeeping force. It was later reported that the force would be composed of at least 3,000 Russian paratroopers and troops from Belarus, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Armenia (Human..., 2022).

According to government agencies, including the Prosecutor General's Office responsible for the investigation, peaceful protests were used in early January 2022 to stage a parallel coup.

In his latest interview, President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev explains that the January events were organized by a group of high-ranking officials who had great influence in the structures of the security forces and criminals and who were unhappy with the president's alleged desire for political democratization (sputnik.kz, 2024).

Human rights activist and founder of the NGO International Legal Initiative Amangeldy Shormanbayev said that the riots were initiated by special security forces in collusion with criminals and provocateurs in an attempt to suppress popular protests (Kaisar et al, 2024).

On January 9, 2022, it was announced that 164 citizens had been killed, and on January 15, 225 people were killed throughout Kazakhstan, 19 of them law enforcement officers. Now they are talking about 255 dead (KazLeft, 2024).

Some independent journalists who were on the Square during the *January incident* were charged under the article *Organization of mass riots*, and over time they were arrested, investigated and convicted. Among them are Zhanbolat Mamai, Aigerim Tleuzhan. Many of the charges or arrests were justified by existing laws. In addition, in some countries, Governments have introduced new regulations, which often have such vague wording that they make legitimate journalism illegal (UNESCO, 2021).

General trends in the imprisonment of independent journalists in Kazakhstan

In 2016, a criminal case was opened against the chairman of the *Union of Journalists of the Republic of Kazakhstan* Seitkazy Matayev and his son Aseta Matayev. Asset Mataev was the director of the independent *KazTAG news* agency. Both of them were charged with unjustified spending of state funds and tax evasion. On September 27, 2016, speaking at a court hearing, Seitkazy Matayev said that the reasons for the persecution were restriction of our professional activities, opposition to the protection of freedom of expression and civic activism of journalists in Kazakhstan. A court in Astana on October 3 found Seitkazy Matayev, head of the Union of Journalists of Kazakhstan, guilty of tax evasion and embezzlement and sentenced him to six years in prison, and his son Asset, director of the *KazTAG news* agency, was sentenced to five years on corruption charges (Toleukhanova, 2016).

On March 10, 2016, a resolution of the European Parliament was published condemning the persecution of independent and critical media, journalists and bloggers; the use of politically motivated accusations by the Kazakh authorities (admin, 2023). The government of Kazakhstan is only shaming itself with this prosecution and detention of a team of independent journalists consisting of a father and son, said Nina Ognyanova, *CPJ Program Coordinator for Europe and Central Asia* (CPJ, 2016).

The government of Kazakhstan is only shaming itself with this prosecution and detention of a team of independent journalists consisting of a father and son, said Nina Ognyanova, CPJ Program Coordinator for Europe and Central Asia ([Statement..., 2018](#)). On November 16, 2017, the Kapshagai City Court partially granted Seitkaza Matayev's request for parole, released him for the remaining term of one year, five months and four days, establishing probation control ([tengrinews.kz, 2017](#)). On April 24, 2018, the Almaty Regional Court decided to transfer Asset Matayev to a minimum security facility ([informburo.kz, 2023](#)).

On July 19, 2022, the judicial board of the Supreme Court of the Republic of Kazakhstan considered a criminal case against convicts Seitkaza and Asset Matayev at the protest of the Prosecutor General and canceled judicial acts. The proceedings in the case were terminated due to the absence of corpus delicti in the acts of the Mataevs ([Exclusive, 2022](#)).

Journalists Dinara Egeubayeva and Duman Mukhametkarim were also systematically persecuted. The latter was subjected to politically motivated criminal prosecution and was detained ([ODF, 2023](#)). The charges were brought in connection with his interview with Ablyazov (*Figure 2*) dated December 22, 2022 and the exchange of links to fundraising for Ablyazov's banned opposition movement *Democratic Choice of Kazakhstan* (DVK). In 2018, the Kazakh authorities declared the DVK an extremist movement. Association with the group or Ablyazov in any way can provoke repression ([Putz, 2024](#)).

The YouTube channel, *What do they Say?* which was created by Duman Mukhametkarim in 2015, currently has 147,000 subscribers. It is noteworthy that he reported on the events of January 2022 and their consequences in Almaty. In June 2023, he was charged under articles 258 and 405 of the Criminal Code, which relate to the financing of terrorism or extremist activities and participation in the activities of a banned extremist organization, and on August 6, 2024, the court sentenced Muhammedkarim to seven years in prison ([Kumenov, 2024](#)).



Figure 2. Screenshot of Duman Mukhammedkarim's interview with the *Bet Noir* No. 1 newspaper of Kazakh officials – former banker Mukhtar Ablyazov (right).

According to the indictment reviewed by *Human Rights Watch*: A state-ordered psychological and philological examination of Muhammedkarim's interview with Ablyazov showed that some of Muhammedkarim's words in the video propagandized extremist ideas and views and had signs of participation in the activities of the extremist organization DVK. However, the analysis also concludes that the men said that political changes must be carried out peacefully and that the material presented for analysis does not contain calls for organizing a rally and forcibly seizing power ([Putz, 2024](#)).

Human Rights Watch – investigates and highlights human rights violations in all corners of the world. About 450 people from more than 70 countries are involved in this: country specialists, thematic experts, lawyers, journalists, etc. ([Human..., 2024](#)).

Another independent journalist who opened a criminal case against the *January incident* – Aigerim Tleuzhan. Tleuzhanova pleaded not guilty, saying that she was at a rally in the central square of Almaty on February 13 as a journalist ([By RFE..., 2022](#)). A court in Almaty sentenced journalist Aigerim Tleuzhan to imprisonment in a high-security penal colony. In Kazakhstan, journalist Aigerim Tleuzhan and four activists were sentenced to terms of 4 to 8 years in a penal colony in connection with the seizure of Almaty airport during the January 2022 protests ([Daily News, 2023](#)). What they are doing is unfair! But no matter how many years they put me in jail, I won't bow my head. I will not kneel! said Tleuzhan ([Kazakhstan Service..., 2023](#)).

There have been no significant changes in the human rights situation in Kazakhstan during the year. Important human rights issues have included credible reports, among them there are serious facts on the restriction of freedom of expression and freedom of the media, including violence or threats of violence against journalists, unjustified arrests or prosecutions of journalists, censorship and the application of criminal libel laws or the threat of criminal libel laws to the restriction of self-expression; severe restrictions on Internet freedom and so on. In 2022, the national non-governmental organization Coalition against Torture reported that it had received 188 complaints of torture during the riots in January 2022. And in August 2022, the Office of the Commissioner for Human Rights announced that in the first half of the year it had received 138 complaints of torture and 221 complaints of inhuman treatment ([Bureau..., 2023](#)).

The high-profile case of the murder of a Kazakh journalist in Kiev

Kazakhstan was not included in the UNESCO Observatory's list of murders of journalists from 2016 to 2020. But after the murder of independent journalist Aidos Sadykov in 2024, there is a chance to enter this list.

Aidos Sadykov, a Kazakhstani opposition activist and operator of a YouTube channel called *BASE*, died on July 2, 2024 from a head wound received two weeks earlier when he drove into the courtyard of his apartment building in Kiev. According to the Kiev Prosecutor's Office, two citizens of Kazakhstan were identified as involved in the crime, which Ukrainian officials presented as a well-planned assassination attempt ([Mediazona, 2024](#)). His wife Natalia Sadykova said that two citizens of Kazakhstan shot at her husband. They turned out to be 33-year-old Meiram Karataev and 36-year-old Altai Zhakanbayev. Karataev worked in the internal affairs bodies of Kazakhstan until 2019 ([Zhulmukhametova, 2024](#)).

UNESCO Director General Audrey Azoulay condemned the murder of journalist Aidos Sadykov in Ukraine. I condemn the murder of journalist Aidos Sadykov and call for a thorough investigation to bring those responsible to justice. It is necessary to guarantee the safety of journalists, wherever they work, so that they can perform their professional duties, she said ([unesco.org, 2024](#)).

The President of Kazakhstan commented on the assassination attempt on independent journalist Aidos Sadykov. Kazakhstan has set a course to strengthen the rule of law. You know my principled position: law and order should prevail in the country, in other words, law and order. All conflicts and disagreements in our society should be resolved exclusively in the legal field, on the basis of current legislation, in accordance with the basic international norms. It is from this point of view that it is necessary to consider the crime that occurred yesterday in Kiev against Aidos Sadykov, a citizen of Kazakhstan, Tokayev said ([Exclusive.kz, 2024](#)).

Republic of Kazakhstan, Maulen Ashimbayev, also commented on the issue of the assassination attempt on journalist Aidos Sadykov, saying that «any statements that Kazakhstan was interested, some of our state bodies were interested, these are all provocations and insinuations.» Ashimbayev is convinced that any statements that Kazakhstan was interested in eliminating the journalist completely do not correspond to reality and are direct provocations in order to involve Kazakhstan in some kind of geopolitical games ([Andreeva, 2024](#)).

In 2014, a member of the Parliament of Kazakhstan accused Natalia Sadykova of defamation because of an article that talked about corruption. Instead of staying and challenging the charges, Sadykov, his wife and their children fled to Ukraine, where they were granted political asylum.

In exile, the couple continued to mix political activism with journalism. They launched a basic YouTube channel, which eventually gained over one million subscribers. The content posted on the channel is mainly devoted to socio-economic events in Kazakhstan, as a rule, from a critical point of view for the Kazakh authorities. In 2023, Kazakh officials put the Sadykovs on the wanted list, accusing them of inciting ethnic hatred ([Mediazona..., 2024](#)).

My beloved man, the father of our three children, is a great son of the Kazakh people. Aidos gave his life for Kazakhstan, suffered martyrdom at the hands of killers. For thirteen days, Aidos fought for life in intensive care, but no miracle happened. His death is on Tokayev's conscience, Natalia Sadykova, the journalist's wife, wrote on Facebook (*Figure 3*) on the day of his death ([Asia Terra, 2024](#)).



Figure 3. Aidos Sadykov and Natalia Sadykova. (Photo: Natalia Sadykova / Facebook).

This information has cracked the Kazakh society for a while. What is labelled as news or journalism does not always feel as such, and reversely, what is emotionally experienced as news ([Swart, 2023](#); [Broersma, 2023](#)).

Emergency assistance to journalists in danger

Journalism remains a dangerous profession, despite increased security efforts on a global scale ([UNESCO, 2021](#)). Ensuring the viability of independent and pluralistic journalism and the safety of media workers around the world is one of the most important activities of UNESCO and the United Nations as a whole. "We are working to increase the transparency of online platforms in areas such as content regulation while respecting human rights and international rules on freedom of expression," the UNESCO Director General said. We are developing citizens' media and information literacy skills necessary to navigate the new information environment in order to avoid deception or manipulation on the Internet ([UN, 2021](#)). However, countering the threat to the safety of independent journalists requires joint coordinated efforts ([Tergembay et al, 2024](#)) by journalists themselves and society.

Unfortunately, most independent journalists who face life difficulties lack legal knowledge and media literacy. A media-literate journalist who is well versed in domestic and international law is a criterion for modernization (Swati et al, 2023). Today, there are many worldwide organizations that protect the rights of independent journalists and provide them with financial or visa assistance. The levels and requirements for their assistance are also different. Any journalist who has been persecuted or whose life is in danger, faced with a political extreme, can turn to these international organizations. Among the international organizations that provide emergency assistance to journalists around the world are: *The International Federation of Journalists*, *Reporters Without Borders*, *International Women's Media Foundation*, *The European Centre for Press and Media Freedom*, *The International Media Support Service* (GIJN, 2019) and so on. among the services of these organizations are provided from providing legal assistance to journalists, helping them move to a safe area to ensure their personal safety, to ways to provide them with material access. But, as practice shows, none of the Kazakh journalists who were subjected to political persecution and harassment applied to the above-mentioned organizations. We assume that this is most likely due to the fact that journalists are not aware of the existence of such support centers or lack of trust in them.

Taking into account the current global trend related to the safety of independent journalists, the following recommendations can be given. To do this, it is necessary to improve the following three areas: legal protection, technological security and community support.

- Strengthening international agreements and norms for the protection of journalists and improving mechanisms for monitoring their implementation. For example, to increase cooperation with organizations such as the UN and UNESCO.

- To recommend to journalists on technological security the use of tools (VPN, encryption, anonymous browsers) to protect their personal information, data and contacts.

- Ensuring that active civil society and international organizations react immediately to cases of stalking or censoring independent journalists.

4. Results

Independent journalism is an integral part of democracy. Free and informed public debate is the foundation of democracy (LibertiesEU, 2021). The main forms of threat to independent journalists are: systematic pressure from influential officials or legal entities; digital surveillance; threat of criminal liability laws for defamation; prosecution; prison detention; political assassination. The danger that comes to some independent journalists in Kazakhstan can be attributed to the inability of information to inspire confidence among the public. They sometimes publish unverified information. This ends in harassment and imprisonment in the context of the law. Traditionally, it has been believed that credibility is determined by high trust (Perloff, 2020). Aharoni et al. (2024) identify six factors underlying the trust in news in different countries: selectivity, interactivity, personalization, searchability, information abundance and promptness. We conclude that independent journalists can properly perform their professional duties by strictly adhering to these six principles.

The most significant scientific results in the article are that it examines the facts step by step for each independent journalist who has been exposed to such phenomena. The content and functions of the methodology for building a new system of scientific knowledge to ensure the safety of independent journalists in the era of new technologies are very relevant. The provisions and conclusions of scientific research are in urgent need of further scientific development and implementation of the interdisciplinary theoretical and practical branch of scientific knowledge in Kazakhstan. The structure of the article is subordinated to the main idea and strategy of the research of a scientific problem and consists of an introduction, discussion, conclusion and bibliographic list.

Having studied the above data, it is possible to divide the development of independent journalism in Kazakhstan into four stages and notice that their thematic features and directions are changing. The thematic classification of the issues raised in the media in the direction of domestic extreme journalism during the years of independence is shown in the lower figure (Figure 4).

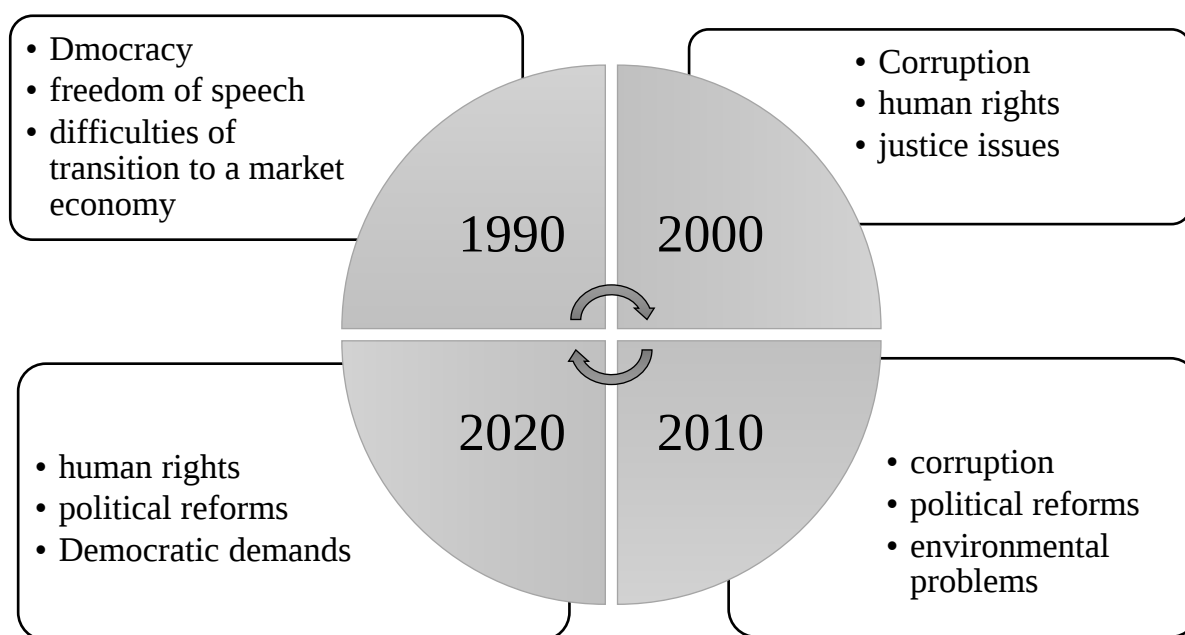


Figure 4. Thematic classification of issues raised in the media in the direction of domestic extreme journalism during the years of independence (compiled by the author)

From the picture, we can see that independent journalism in Kazakhstan every decade raises topical topics and is replenished with new directions related to the political, social and legal situation in the country. At the moment when Kazakhstan first gained independence in the 1990s, there was a high demand for democratic changes. During this period, a bold raising of political and social issues began to take shape in the media.

In the 2000s, New Directions appeared in the extreme journalism of the country. The political situation in Kazakhstan has become changeable, due to which restrictions have begun to be imposed on the open expression of certain topics. It was during this period that many independent journalists came to the extreme. They were in the nature of political pressure, criminal prosecution, extortion and threats. We see that during this period, such a threat did not only apply to journalists, but also to political figures. For example, the deliberate death of the statesman and public figure of Kazakhstan Altynbek Sarsenbayev took place in 2006.

In the 2010s, with the advent of the internet and social networks, new platforms for independent journalism appeared in the country. Journalists, using blogs and social networks, quickly published extreme situations and began to openly talk about the scandals in society. During this period, traditional media began to massively switch to online formats. This further increased their influence in society.

Since 2020, there has been a breakthrough in the development of independent journalism. The development of modern technologies and the influence of new media have made it possible to provide urgent, high-quality and exclusive information to society and monitor that information, as well as provide feedback to the public. Attempts to control censorship and information are observed. As the activity of society on the internet increases, the ability to reach the audience in the process of disseminating information about extreme situations has increased even more. Independent journalists, putting their lives at risk, still continue to raise important issues in society.

5. Conclusions

The statistics of the last ten years show that the global trends in freedom of expression and the development of mass media are disappointing. These main findings are documented in the UNESCO *Global Report (2021/2022)*.

The article considers a short period of time (2016-2024) and analyzing examples from the events of those years, it can be confidently stated that there is an increase in threats against independent journalists in Kazakhstan. It can be concluded that the instability of the political situation in Kazakhstan in recent years (*January events*) contributed to the formation of such a trend.

After studying the above facts and materials, it was concluded that at the moment there is an urgent need to protect journalists and their extremely important work both internationally and nationally. In addition, there is a need to increase the legal knowledge of independent journalists. After all, when there is a threat to the life and health, the activities of an independent journalist, in most cases they try to solve the problem on their own. The end leads to such tragedies.

We believe that it is important for every journalist to know that there are international organizations that protect the rights of journalists and, if necessary, contribute to their resettlement to safe States. When faced with difficult situations related to journalistic activities, they have the opportunity to ensure their own safety by contacting them directly.

We come to the conclusion that independent journalism is simply necessary in the era of digitalization, since it is the main guarantee of democracy around the world. Therefore, taking into account the above facts and summarizing the results of the investigation, we argue that more effective protections are needed for independent journalists in the era of digitalization.

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