

United States Senate

COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN RELATIONS

WASHINGTON, DC 20510-6225

January 20, 2023

His Excellency Sadyr Japarov
President of the Kyrgyz Republic
The White House
Bishkek
Kyrgyz Republic

Dear Mr. President:

We write to express our deep concern over recent regressions in press freedom in the Kyrgyz Republic, particularly regarding the mistreatment of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty's (RFE/RL) Kyrgyz Service, Radio Azattyk, and its affiliated journalists. While we recognize the historic role that the Kyrgyz Republic's leadership has played in upholding the most free, independent media landscape in Central Asia, we are concerned the decisions to block Radio Azattyk websites indefinitely and freeze the service's bank account jeopardize your country's international reputation as a beacon of free speech in Central Asia.

Specifically, we are alarmed by your government's recent crackdown on independent media, including the use of its false information law as a means to censor or silence critical independent media outlets, including Radio Azattyk. The decisions to freeze Radio Azattyk's bank account and block its website indefinitely not only violate international norms regarding the freedoms of speech and the press—they violate your own constitution's guarantees of these freedoms. We are also concerned over reported threats of violence against journalists in the Kyrgyz Republic. This includes threats made against RFE/RL reporters during an October 2022 demonstration in which protestors threatened to "spray gasoline" on journalists and "burn down" their office.

We call upon the Kyrgyz government to immediately lift the restrictions on Radio Azattyk, to cease unlawful attacks on free and independent media, and to investigate all credible threats of violence against journalists. Recalling your commitment to uphold human rights and the rule of law, we urge you to establish conditions for independent media to freely operate and to ensure Kyrgyz journalists can carry out their work without fear of retaliation.

We applaud your government's support for RFE/RL's Afghan staff and their families who have been displaced by the Taliban. While you continue to provide them safe haven, we hope that you will take an active role in ensuring the protection of their Kyrgyz colleagues who have been targeted with threats and harassment.

On November 6, 2020, to mark the International Day of Information and Press, you stated: "Today, the importance of journalism is growing in the world, and our daily life cannot be

imagined without the flow of information. In this context, the important events in the life of the country clearly demonstrate that media transparency is of great importance on Kyrgyzstan's path towards democratic development." We concur with your statement, and urge you to uphold the free and open media landscape that you yourself highlighted as central to your country's development.

Your government's commitment to uphold the freedom of the press is a critical pillar in the U.S.-Kyrgyz Republic's relationship and necessary to advancing our nations' shared interests.

We look to you, and to the Kyrgyz Republic, to continue your leadership in Central Asia and uphold free speech and an open media landscape. We ask you to swiftly take steps to uphold these freedoms in your country, and we look forward to receiving your prompt response.

Sincerely,



Robert Menendez
Chairman



James E. Risch
Ranking Member