

September 9, 20206

His Excellency
Ayaz Baetov
Minister of Justice
Kyrgyz Republic
Via Email ep@minjust.gov.kg

Dear Minister Baetov:

I write in regard to Baktygul Chynybaeva, one of Kyrgyzstan's most respected and recognized journalists, to express deep concern about recent threats directed against her and her family, including the actions of state officials. Chynybaeva's right to report the news and express her views is protected by international law. We urge you to take action to ensure these essential principles are respected.

In recognition of her fearless and impactful reporting, Chynybaeva was named a Knight Press Freedom Fellow in the fall of 2025. As the director of the Journalism Protection Initiative at the Craig Newmark Graduate School of Journalism, part of the City University of New York, I administer this program, which was created to support journalists who have made a significant contribution to global understanding. Based on her body of work, Chynybaeva is highly deserving of such recognition. Chynybaeva has spent her fellowship year at the University of Michigan, where she was a Knight-Wallace Journalism Fellow in 2024-25, and where she is currently pursuing her MA in International and Regional Studies with a focus on Russia, Eastern Europe, and Eurasia, and an MS in Information Studies. She resides in Ann Arbor, with her family.

Over the years, Chynybaeva has reported extensively on alleged corruption in Kyrgyzstan as a correspondent for RFE/RL, where she worked in a variety of roles from 2013 to 2024. Her reports included important and critical stories on climate change and government policy, including some stories that touched on the activities of President Sadyr Japarov. We recognize that stories alleging high-level corruption are upsetting to senior officials in the Kyrgyz government. But the obvious response is to address the corruption itself, not attack those who bring it to light.

Instead, Chynybaeva has faced extraordinary pressure and harassment. While traveling to Prague in December 2023, Chynybaeva was briefly detained by plainclothes officials at the international Manas airport in Bishkek, interrogated, searched, and accused of being a spy. After being selected as a Knight-Wallace Fellow in 2024 and relocating to Ann Arbor, Chynybaeva received a call from the president's press office telling that if she returned to Kyrgyzstan she could face "harsh consequences." Not long after she arrived in the US, Chynybaeva's computer was hacked and much of her investigative materials were lost. Over the years, Chynybaeva has experienced waves of online harassment, some of it sexualized in nature. Through online sleuthing, she was able to determine that some of the accounts that were trolling and harassing her belonged to government officials in Kyrgyzstan. Chynybaeva has saved screenshots over the years.

Even though they now live in the US, Kyrgyz authorities have closely monitored the activities of Chynybaeva and her husband Ibraim Nurakun Uulu. While Nurakun Uulu is today primarily focused on caring for the couple's special needs son, he has a long journalistic career in Kyrgyzstan, serving as a journalist and producer for the BBC from 2003 to 2015. He has been a dedicated press freedom advocate and has also served as an advisor to the Kyrgyz government on media issues.

Nurakun Uulu has maintained an active presence on social media over the years and on August 16 he posted critical commentary about President Japarov on his personal Facebook page. Ten days later, on August 26, Chynybaeva and Nurakun Uulu awoke to learn that a defamatory and dangerous video had been posted on Facebook, falsely accusing them of engaging in espionage. The video bore all the hallmarks of a government information operation and made use of personal photos taken from their social media and strung into a damning narrative that would support potential criminal charges and decades in prison. Three days after the video's release, on August 29, President Japarov declared publicly that his government was going to be punishing "enemies of the people" very harshly, including those that are living abroad.

These combined actions suggest the Chynybaeva and Nurakun Uulu are being targeted for government reprisal, and that the threat could extend outside their country. The videos and false accusations pose a significant risk to them, and potentially to their relatives in Kyrgyzstan, as part of a government pressure campaign that clearly contravenes international norms and protections. These recent actions are therefore of deep concern to the community of journalists and press freedom defenders in the United States and around the world. The evidence that the threats to Chynybaeva are linked to the Kyrgyz authorities as part of a government-orchestrated campaign obviously does damage to your country's international standing and reputation.

The role of the Knight Press Freedom Fellowship Program is to ensure that journalists like Chynybaeva are able to continue their essential work, free of harassment and intimidation. We

stand with Chynybaeva and her family and request that your government take immediate action to ensure that their rights are respected.

Sincerely

Joel Sinon
Director
Journalism Protection Initiative

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Lesslie Viguerie United States Ambassador to the Kyrgyz Republic