**Justice for Journalists**
Foundation for International
Investigations of Crime against Media

11 June 2021

**Submission by the Justice for Journalists Foundation to the Special Rapporteur on the Promotion and Protection of the Right to Freedom of Opinion and Expression Regarding the Attacks on Women Media Workers in the Post-Soviet States**

The Justice for Journalists Foundation (JFJ) is pleased to offer this submission to the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression.

JFJ is a London-based non-governmental organisation. We believe security is the essential basis for work in the media. JFJ has been monitoring, analysing, and publicising attacks against media workers since 2018. JFJ also funds journalistic investigations into violent crimes against media workers and helps professional and citizen journalists to mitigate their risks.

JFJ presents this submission to provide a fuller picture of the challenges that women media workers[1] in the post-Soviet states face in exercising their freedom of opinion and expression online and offline. We also propose recommendations to the states.

## I. Background

In this submission, we cover the following 12 post-Soviet states: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Russia, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Ukraine, and Uzbekistan.

According to the Reporters Without Borders' **World Press Freedom Index**[2] ranking 180 countries from more to less free, their positions are as follows: Armenia – 63rd, Azerbaijan – 167th, Belarus – 158th, Georgia – 60th, Kazakhstan – 155th, Kyrgyzstan – 79th, Moldova – 89th, Russia – 150th, Tajikistan – 162nd, Turkmenistan – 178th, Ukraine – 97th, and Uzbekistan – 157th.

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[1] In this submission, the term "media workers" refers to journalists, camerawomen, photojournalists, and other employees and managers of traditional and digital media, as well as bloggers and online activists. All of them would be considered journalists in line with the functional definition of journalism adopted by the Human Rights Committee in its General Comment No. 34 (CCPR/C/GC/34, Paragraph 44).

[2] https://rsf.org/en/ranking

The global gender equality indices assess them as follows:

- The United Nations Development Programme's **Gender Inequality Index**[3] that ranks 162 countries from more to less equal: Armenia – 54th, Azerbaijan – 73rd, Belarus – 31st, Georgia – 76th, Kazakhstan – 44th, Kyrgyzstan – 82nd, Moldova – 46th, Russia – 50th, Tajikistan – 70th, Turkmenistan – n/a, Ukraine – 52nd, and Uzbekistan – 62nd;

- The **Global Gender Gap Index**[4] by the World Economic Forum that ranks 156 countries from more to less equal: Armenia – 114th, Azerbaijan – 100th, Belarus – 33rd, Georgia – 49th, Kazakhstan – 80th, Kyrgyzstan – 108th, Moldova – 28th, Russia – 81st, Tajikistan – 125th, Turkmenistan – n/a, Ukraine – 74th, and Uzbekistan – n/a;

- The **Social Institutions and Gender Index**[5] by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development that assesses the levels[6] of gender discrimination in social institutions: Armenia – low, Azerbaijan – low, Belarus – low, Georgia – low, Kazakhstan – low, Kyrgyzstan – low, Moldova – low, Russia – low, Tajikistan – medium, Turkmenistan – n/a, Ukraine – low, and Uzbekistan – n/a.

The difference in methodologies of these global gender indices was analysed, for example, in the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development Research Paper No. 39 (UNCTAD/SER.RP/2019/11).[7]

In Sections II-VI below, we provide the results of our monitoring and analysis of attacks on women media workers in the post-Soviet states in 2020.

The monitoring is based on data collected by content analysis of open sources in Russian, English and the relevant state languages. In addition, expert interviews with media workers were used to monitor cases that had not been reported in open sources. All information was verified using at least three independent sources.

The full text of JFJ's reports about the attacks in 2017-2020 and recommendations for mitigating risks are available on our website[8].


## II. Overall number of attacks and perpetrators

In 2020, at least 1,214 women media workers from the post-Soviet states were subjected to attacks for their work.

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[3] http://hdr.undp.org/en/composite/GII
[4] http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GGGR_2021.pdf
[5] https://www.genderindex.org/ranking/
[6] https://www.genderindex.org/2019-categories/
[7] https://unctad.org/webflyer/comparing-global-gender-inequality-indices-where-trade
[8] https://jfj.fund/reports/

For reference, the total number of attacks on media workers (both women and men) and media outlets was 4,611, a significant increase from 1,907 in 2019.

Three women media workers lost their lives: two in Russia (Irina Slavina, *KozaPress*, and Natalia Michurina, *Vostochno-Sibirskaya Pravda*) and one in Belarus (Lubov Zemtsova, *"Unknown Belarus" project*). For reference, the total number of media workers who lost their lives in 2020 was 13.

In 80% (970) cases, the representatives of the authorities were behind the attacks against women media workers.
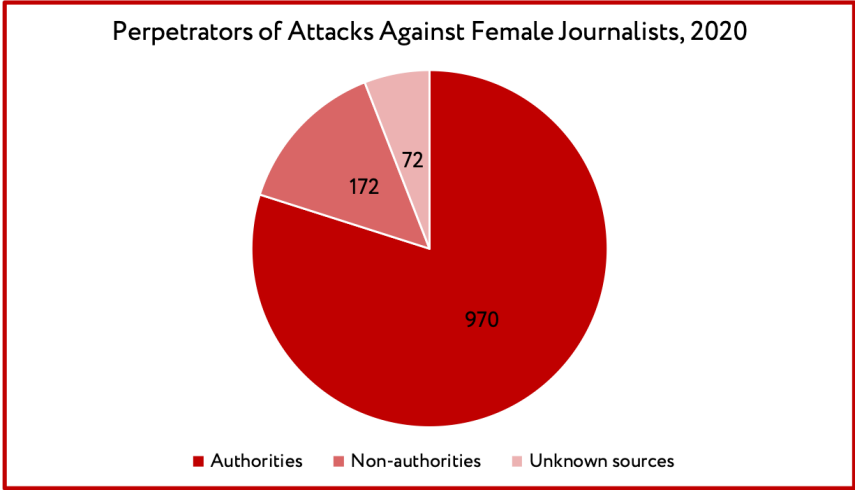


The largest number of the attacks took place in Belarus, Russia, and Ukraine. These were also the countries with the most considerable increase in the number of attacks compared to 2019.
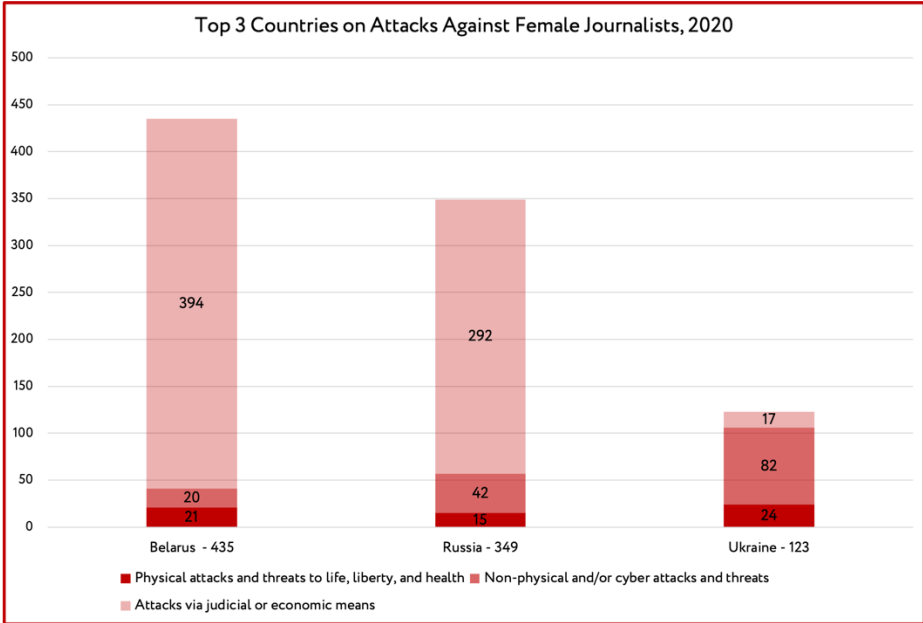
## III. Belarus

Belarus saw the largest number of attacks – 435. 11 women media workers were shot, stunned by flash-bang grenades, or beaten up while being arrested during their coverage of the protests. 107 cases of detentions (up to 24 hours) and 48 arrests (24 hours and more) were registered. In 96% of cases, the perpetrators of the attacks against women media workers were the representatives of the authorities, such as militia, riot police, and other law enforcement officers.

The attacks against the following women media workers were especially numerous and harsh:

- Larissa Shiryakova (*Belsat*, freelancer) – 26 attacks, including ten fines, two detentions, laptop seizure, two arrests;
- Ekaterina Andreeva (*Belsat*, journalist) – 16 attacks, including two fines, two detentions, two arrests, seizure of professional equipment, house search. On 18 February 2021, Ekaterina Andreeva and her colleague, *Belsat* journalist Daria Chultsova, were sentenced to two years in the prison colony;
- Alina Skrabunova (*Belsat*, freelancer) – 14 attacks, including four fines, three detentions, and one arrest.

## IV. Russia

Russia saw the second largest number of attacks, with 349 women media workers affected.

84% of the attacks constituted detentions, fines, administrative protocols, trials and other methods of judicial and economic harassment. At least 60 detentions and arrests of women media workers took place during the solidarity and protest rallies in support of arrested journalists Ivan Saphronov and Ilya Azar in Moscow and local governor Sergey Fourgal in Khabarovsk.

- On 2 October 2020, Irina Slavina, founder and Editor-in-Chief of the Nizhny Novgorod *KozaPress* news website, committed suicide by self-immolation, having accused the Russian Federation of her death in her last Facebook post. Systematic harassment of Ms Slavina continued for several years and included several civil lawsuits, fines, insulting flyers distributed in her block of flats, regular denunciations and checks. At 6 am on 1 October 2020, her house was searched, and all her and her family members' computers, smartphones, data storage devices and reporter notebooks were seized. Simultaneously, *KozaPress* website was down due to DDoS attacks.

- Another systematically assaulted journalist is Natalya Zubkova, founder and Editor-in-Chief of the *Kiselevsk News* website. She gained global recognition after featuring a video address of Podzemgas inhabitants asking Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau for asylum due to catastrophic environmental conditions

in their hometown. She and her children receive death threats. Ms Zubkova also faces several civil lawsuits, and her news site is regularly under DDoS attacks.

- Among other media workers who faced systematic physical, non-physical and judicial assaults and threats in 2020 were Malila Dzhikaeva (Instagram blogger from North Ossetia), Yekaterina Ishenko (*Sota.Vision*), Vera Oleynikova (Telegram channel *Flowers for Volodya*), Maria Magdalena Tunkara (Instagram blogger *YoungMasha*), Elena Milashina and Elena Kostyuchenko (*Novaya Gazeta*), Miriam Alieva (*Diaries of a Highlander Girl*), and Daria Sivukhina (TV channel *Zlat-TV*).

## V. Ukraine

Ukraine had the third-largest number of attacks against women media workers in 2020, with 123 recorded incidents. 20% (24) of all attacks were physical: the journalists were beaten up to prevent them from reporting. Two-thirds of incidents (82) were non-physical and cyber-attacks, including seizure and damage to equipment, harassment, violence and death threats.

- Katerina Sergatskova, journalist and co-founder of the *Zaborona* news website, was subjected to online doxing and trolling: her home address and the photograph of her five-year-old son were published on Facebook. The online trolling and smear campaign against the journalist was coordinated.

- Independent investigative journalist Lubov Velichko faced a cyber-bullying attack on her Facebook page from several real and fake accounts. She has also been subjected to surveillance and death threats. A woman featuring in one of her investigations about an online casino has filed a lawsuit against her.

## VI. Other countries

The distribution of attacks across other post-Soviet states is shown in the diagram below.



Attacks Against Female Journalists in Nine Post-Soviet Countries, 2020
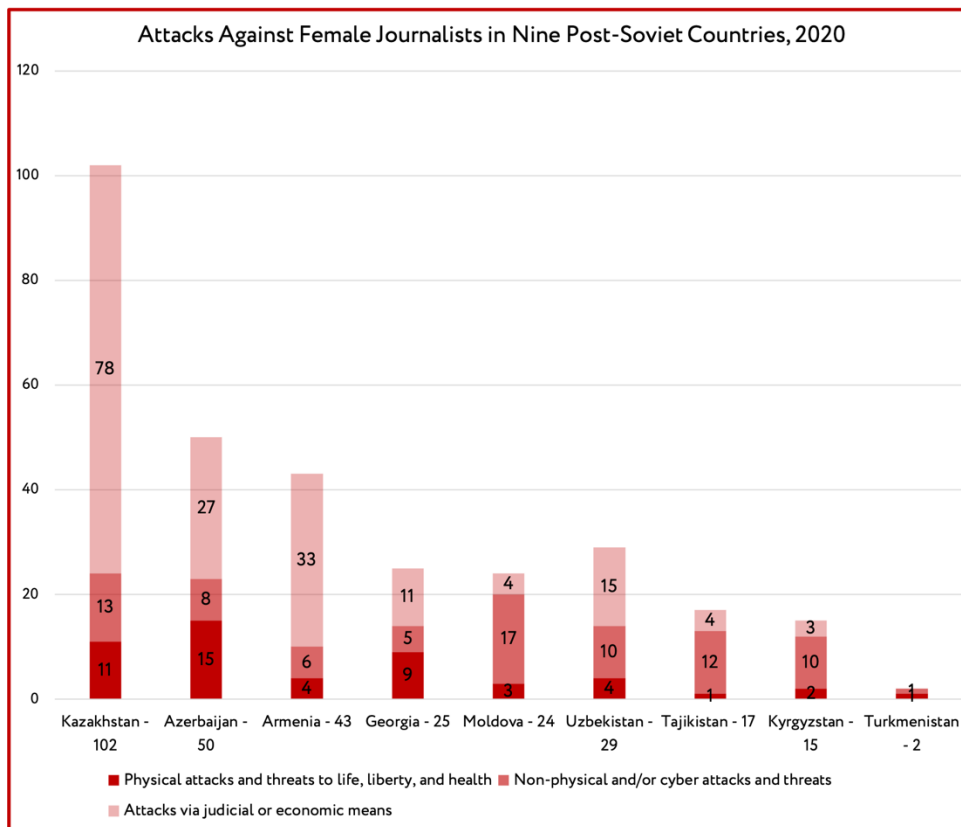
The following women media workers were subjected to the most intense attacks for their work in these countries:

**Kazakhstan**

- Blogger and journalist Aygul Utepova – eight attacks, including accusation in the participation in a banned extremist organisation, arrest, property seizure, enforced incarceration in a psychiatric ward, followed by a house arrest;

**Azerbaijan**

- Sevinj Abbasova (Vaqifqizi), *Meydan TV* – six attacks, including beating by the police, detention, trial, defamation lawsuit;

- Aysel Umudova, *Meydan TV* – five attacks, including beating by the police, damage to the professional equipment, detention, seizure of work materials;

**Armenia**

- Anna Gevorkyan, director of *Hzham.am* news site – 10 attacks, including five defamation lawsuits;

**Uzbekistan**

- Sabina Bakareva, *gazeta.uz* journalist – three attacks, including a fine for cycling during the quarantine;

- Blogger Kamola Mazhidova – 15-day arrest for shooting a video "*When coronavirus leaves Uzbekistan*" next to the statue of Amir Temur during the quarantine and ignoring the rules of behaviour in public;

**Tajikistan**

- Nisso Rasulova, a journalist with the *Tajik Radio Liberty,* was kidnapped by unknown people on the street following her attempt to organise a meeting of feminists with several colleagues. After her friends raised the alarm on social media, her kidnappers left Rasulova in the suburbs, far from Dushanbe;

- Makhina Davlatova and Saodat Ismoilova saw their personal data, including dates of birth and addresses, disclosed in the documentary called "The Treason" aired on the central state-owned TV channels;

**Moldova**

- Mikhaela Dikusar from *TV8* TV channel was attacked by the state security officers, who physically prevented her from interviewing Igor Dodon, the president, in the course of two public events;

**Georgia**

- Darina Kamadadze from *On.ge* news website was attacked by an unknown member of the European Georgia political party, who threatened her with a gun and prevented her from taking photos;

**Turkmenistan**

- Gurbansoltan Achilova, the 70-years old reporter for *radio Azatlyk* (Turkmen service of *Radio Liberty*), was attacked by a policeman. Screaming that the journalist goes "against the state policy", he attempted to seize her camera. Ms Achilova managed to escape uninjured.

**VII. Key recommendations to the states**

- End the arbitrary arrests and detentions, and other acts of intimidation against women media workers;

- Release all women media workers detained on politically motivated charges or for expressing critical or dissenting views;

- Prevent attacks against women media workers and ensure effective protection from the attacks;

- Ensure prompt, effective, independent and impartial investigations into all reports of attacks on, or threats against, women media workers, bring those responsible to justice, including those with direct and supervisory responsibility, and ensure the victims, or, in the case of killings, their representatives, appropriate forms of redress;

- Repeal the laws that criminalise media workers for defamation, insults, false information, or unduly restrict their work on the grounds of extremism; and

- Take all other appropriate measures to ensure that women media workers are able to carry out their legitimate work in a safe and enabling environment without fear of harassment, prosecution, threats or acts of intimidation of any kind towards them and their families.

JFJ would like to thank the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression for considering this report. We hope this account is useful, and we would be pleased to offer further commentary or support as needed.