

Kazakhstan¹

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INTRODUCTION

The current political, economic, and social situation in Kazakhstan is marked by contradictory trends. On the one hand, the state continues its course toward institutional modernization and the development of a digital economy; on the other hand, there remains a high level of centralized power, limited political pluralism, and institutional barriers to the development of a full-fledged civil society. Social expectations and demands for justice, transparency, and participation have intensified following the protest events of January 2022, which highlighted a crisis of trust and the urgent need for deep systemic reforms.

Kazakhstani journalism has a rich and complex history that blends elements of the Soviet media tradition – controlled and hierarchical – with modern approaches to digital and market-oriented journalism. Since the early 1990s, the media have gradually transitioned from being ideological tools to functioning as market-based and social institutions. However, political control over key media resources remains significant. The development of journalism in Kazakhstan unfolds amid regulatory uncertainty, pressure from authorities, and the growing influence of social media.

At the time of the study (2021–2022), journalistic activity in Kazakhstan was affected by several destabilizing factors. Chief among them were the January 2022 protests, which were accompanied by the use of force, internet shutdowns, and temporary restrictions on access to information. These events served as a stress test for the professional journalism community, revealing the risks associated with fulfilling their professional duties. Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic continued to impact working conditions, workload levels, and the safety of media workers. In this context, the journalistic profession in Kazakhstan found itself simultaneously at the center of public attention and under increasing pressure – from both external threats and internal professional challenges.

BACKGROUNDS OF JOURNALISTS

Our sample of journalists in Kazakhstan is predominantly female: 77.8% of the respondents were women. Data on age was not available in this sample. In terms of education, journalists in Kazakhstan are generally well educated: 62.6% of them held a Bachelor's degree or equivalent, 28.9% a Master's degree or equivalent, and an additional 5.1% have obtained a doctorate. Only 1.1% of the respondents did not complete university, while 1.6% had only completed secondary education.

Moreover, 89.6% of the respondents have acquired formal education or professional training in journalism. This training is primarily obtained at university or in college (95.9%).

JOURNALISTS IN THE NEWSROOM

More than half of journalists in Kazakhstan (69.9%) reported having additional jobs outside journalism. A large majority (93.6%) were employed rather than self-employed, with 90.6% holding permanent contracts. Most journalists (80.6%) worked full-time, while 19.4% had part-time positions. Only 9.4% were employed on temporary contracts.

On average, journalists in Kazakhstan had 6.5 years of professional experience (SD = 9.1; Median = 3), indicating a relatively young but varied workforce. Most professionals (57.9%) held full-time permanent contracts, while 8.6% identified as freelance or self-employed. The majority had the job title "journalist", though roles such as editor, correspondent, reporter, and editor-in-chief were also common. Just over one third (41.5) were members of professional associations or unions.

Over two thirds of respondents (67.1%) reported feeling stressed at work sometimes, often, or very often, with 10.6% experiencing stress very often, indicating substantial occupational pressure in the field.

¹ Country sample does not fully align with WJS specifications regarding maximum margin of error (see WJS3 Methodology).

SAFETY AND WORK-RELATED CONCERNS

Verbal attacks such as demeaning or hateful speech and public discrediting of journalists’ work were among the most common safety threats experienced by journalists in Kazakhstan (see Table 1). Although less frequent, more severe threats such as surveillance, legal actions, and physical harassment remain concerning. These experiences are reflected in journalists’ safety concerns: nearly a third expressed worry about their physical (31.1%) or emotional (31.5%) well-being, and over one-fifth feared losing their job (see Table 2). Moreover, nearly half of the surveyed journalists believed that those who harm journalists in Kazakhstan would go unpunished.

TABLE 1. EXPERIENCED THREATS

	N	Very often	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
Demeaning or hateful speech directed at you	273	8.8%	6.6%	14.6%	18.7%	51.3%
Public discrediting of your work	273	8.1%	6.2%	13.2%	19.4%	53.1%
Surveillance	273	8.0%	4.8%	13.9%	22.0%	51.3%
Hacking or blocking of social media accounts or websites	273	7.7%	7.7%	13.2%	10.6%	60.8%
Arrests, detentions or imprisonment	273	7.7%	5.1%	11.7%	11.7%	63.7%
Legal actions against you because of your work	273	5.9%	5.5%	11.1%	12.1%	65.6%
Stalking	273	7.3%	6.2%	8.4%	11.1%	67.0%
Other threats or intimidations directed at you	273	5.5%	7.3%	11.1%	11.3%	64.8%
Sexual assault or sexual harassment	273	5.5%	7.7%	12.5%	10.6%	63.7%
Other physical attacks	273	5.1%	5.9%	10.3%	8.0%	70.7%
Coercion	271	7.0%	6.6%	11.0%	11.4%	63.8%
Questioning of your personal morality	269	5.6%	7.4%	13.0%	17.5%	56.5%
Others using your byline for fabricated or manipulated stories	267	6.4%	6.0%	15.0%	11.6%	61.0%
Others disseminating your personal information	265	8.7%	6.8%	10.5%	11.7%	62.3%
Workplace bullying	271	7.0%	8.5%	10.0%	10.7%	63.8%
Abductions	267	7.1%	4.5%	10.5%	13.5%	64.4%
Office raids or seizures or damage to equipment	264	6.8%	4.6%	10.6%	9.8%	68.2%
Intimidation that targets family	264	6.8%	2.3%	11.7%	7.6%	71.6%
Work in Covid-19 environment	257	6.6%	1.6%	11.7%	6.2%	73.9%

Question: “In the last five years, how often have you experienced any of the following actions related to your work as a journalist?”

TABLE 2. WORK-RELATED CONCERNS

	N	Agree/ strongly agree	Mean	SD
Worried about losing job in journalism within the next 12 months	273	22.3%	2.43	1.36
Concerned about physical well-being	273	31.1%	2.81	1.44
Concerned about emotional and mental wellbeing	273	31.5%	2.77	1.42
Concerned that those who harm journalists in Kazakhstan go unpunished	267	49.4%	3.38	1.35

Question: “Thinking about your work, please tell me how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statements.” (Scale: 5 = Strongly agree; 4 = Agree; 3 = Neither agree nor disagree; 2 = Disagree; 1 = Strongly disagree.)

JOURNALISTIC ROLES

Kazakhstani journalists prioritize roles that inform, educate, and empower the public. The most valued functions include supporting national development (67.8%), counteracting disinformation (68.5%), and educating the audience (64.8%) (see Table 3). Roles like speaking for the marginalized (33.7%) or promoting political leaders (36.3%) were seen as less important.

TABLE 3. JOURNALISTIC ROLES

	N	Very/extremely important	Mean	SD
Be a detached observer	273	46.9%	3.31	1.34
Monitor and scrutinize those in power	273	41.0%	3.17	1.33
Shine a light on society’s problems	273	64.5%	3.80	1.28
Motivate people to participate in politics	273	49.1%	3.38	1.25
Provide analysis of current affairs	273	62.6%	3.78	1.17
Let people express their views	273	62.6%	3.85	1.21
Provide information people need to form political opinion	273	47.6%	3.40	1.22
Advocate for social change	273	52.0%	3.57	1.15
Influence public opinion	273	57.1%	3.72	1.14
Set the political agenda	273	43.6%	3.28	1.26
Promote peace and tolerance	273	63.0%	3.77	1.16
Educate the audience	273	64.8%	3.91	1.17
Point toward possible solutions to society’s problems	273	63.7%	3.81	1.19
Speak on behalf of the marginalized	273	33.7%	2.89	1.33
Support national development	273	67.8%	3.91	1.12
Support government policy	273	44.7%	3.31	1.27
Convey a positive image of political leaders	273	36.3%	3.02	1.33
Provide entertainment and relaxation	273	44.3%	3.26	1.31
Provide the kind of news that attracts the largest audience	273	61.2%	3.76	1.20
Provide advice, orientation and direction for daily life	273	53.8%	3.59	1.18
Tell stories that emotionally move the audience	273	45.4%	3.30	1.25
Support efforts to protect public health	273	52.7%	3.55	1.18
Counteract disinformation	273	68.5%	3.96	1.21
Discuss future implications of current events	266	56.0%	3.62	1.14

Question: “Please tell me how important it is to do each of the following in your daily work.” (Scale: 5 = Extremely important; 4 = Very important; 3 = Moderately important; 2 = Slightly important; 1 = Not at all important.)

JOURNALISTIC EPISTEMOLOGIES

Kazakhstani journalists show varied views on journalistic epistemologies. While nearly 60% agree that journalists should alert audiences to false claims, fewer support the idea that truth is shaped by power (24.5%) or that personal beliefs inevitably influence reporting (31.5%) (see Table 4). Over half believe in transparency of standpoint (52.7%) and trusting instincts in reporting (44.1%).

TABLE 4. JOURNALISTIC EPISTEMOLOGIES

	N	Agree/ strongly agree	Mean	SD
Interpretation is necessary to make sense of facts	273	35.5%	3.10	1.13
Truth is inevitably shaped by those in power	273	24.5%	2.80	1.15
It is impossible for journalists to withhold their personal beliefs from reporting	273	31.5%	3.04	1.17
Things are either true or false, there is no in-between	273	36.2%	3.17	1.13
It is possible to represent objective reality in reporting	270	32.2%	3.04	1.19
Journalists should trust their instincts in deciding what's true and what's not	263	44.1%	3.35	1.15
Journalists should intuitively know what the final story will be	262	46.6%	3.39	1.13
Journalists should let the facts speak for themselves	264	49.6%	3.45	1.21
Journalists should be part of a community to portray it accurately	265	48.7%	3.45	1.22
Journalists should make their standpoint transparent in their work	262	52.7%	3.55	1.24
Journalists should alert audiences when a source's claim is untruthful	244	57.0%	3.67	1.19

Questions: "The following statements deal with beliefs related to how journalists know what they know. For each of them, please tell me how strongly you agree or disagree." / "Using the same scale, please tell me how strongly you agree or disagree with the following beliefs." (Scale: 5 = Strongly agree; 4 = Agree; 3 = Neither agree nor disagree; 2 = Disagree; 1 = Strongly disagree.)

JOURNALISTIC ETHICS

Kazakhstani journalists largely support professional standards in ethical decision-making, with 58.2% agreeing they should always apply, and 59.3% allowing exceptions only in extraordinary cases (see Table 5). Fewer believe ethics should rely solely on personal judgment (41.4%). Some controversial reporting methods are occasionally accepted, such as using hidden devices (49.1%) or promotional content (46.1%) (see Table 6).

TABLE 5. ETHICAL ORIENTATIONS

	N	Agree/ strongly agree	Mean	SD
What is ethical for journalists should always be determined by professional standards regardless of situation and personal judgment	273	58.2%	3.70	1.16
What is ethical for journalists should be determined by professional standards unless extraordinary circumstances require disregarding them	273	59.3%	3.62	1.13
What is ethical for journalists should depend on each specific situation	273	51.6%	3.42	1.22
What is ethical for journalists should be a matter of personal judgment	273	41.4%	3.14	1.33

Question: "The following statements describe different responses journalists may have to ethical problems. For each of them, please tell me how strongly you agree or disagree." (Scale: 5 = Strongly agree; 4 = Agree; 3 = Neither agree nor disagree; 2 = Disagree; 1 = Strongly disagree.)

TABLE 6. JUSTIFICATION OF CONTROVERSIAL REPORTING METHODS

	N	Always justified	Justified on occasion
Claiming to be somebody else	273	15.0%	39.2%
Using hidden recording devices	273	18.3%	49.1%
Using confidential business or government documents without authorization	273	13.2%	32.2%
Using the personal materials of powerful people, such as documents and photos, without their permission	273	15.7%	33.3%
Using the personal materials of ordinary people, such as documents and photos, without their permission	273	15.4%	27.1%
Paying people for confidential information	273	15.4%	37.7%
Accepting money from sources	273	16.1%	33.7%
Accepting a free product or service from sources	273	15.8%	32.6%
Producing content that mimics news stories but hides its promotional nature	273	16.5%	46.1%
Publishing or broadcasting stories with information that is not yet verified	273	16.5%	21.2%

Question: "Which of the following, if any, do you think may be always justified, or justified on occasion, and which would you not approve of under any circumstances?"

EDITORIAL AUTONOMY AND MEDIA FREEDOM

Kazakhstani journalists report moderate levels of editorial autonomy, with 36.5% feeling they have significant freedom in selecting news stories and 34.5% in deciding how stories are framed (see Table 7). However, perceptions of overall media freedom in Kazakhstan are notably lower, with only 22.7% reporting a great deal or complete freedom.

TABLE 7. PERCEPTIONS OF EDITORIAL AUTONOMY AND MEDIA FREEDOM

	N	A great deal/ complete freedom	Mean	SD
Freedom in selecting the news stories	266	36.5%	3.57	1.12
Freedom in deciding which aspects of a story should be emphasized	252	35.3%	3.52	1.09
Media freedom in Kazakhstan	242	27.0%	3.29	1.18

(Scale: 5 = Complete freedom; 4 = A great deal of freedom; 3 = Some freedom; 2 = Little freedom; 1 = No freedom at all.)

EDITORIAL INFLUENCES

Kazakhstani journalists identify availability of resources (53.8%) and journalism ethics (52.0%) as the most influential editorial factors (see Table 8). Audience feedback (49.1%) and competing news organizations (47.7%) also play a key role. While external pressures like government censorship (36.0%) and profit expectations (36.9%) are noted, internal and practical influences dominate.

TABLE 8. EDITORIAL INFLUENCES

	N	Very/extremely influential	Mean	SD
Peers on the news staff	198	32.3%	3.03	1.21
Editorial supervisors and higher editors	214	35.5%	3.01	1.26
The business managers of the news organization	198	36.4%	3.12	1.13
The owners of the news organization	199	30.7%	3.06	1.18
Editorial policy	203	28.6%	3.02	1.16
Advertising considerations	205	33.2%	3.03	1.17
Profit expectations	203	36.9%	3.21	1.13
Audience research and data	211	46.0%	3.32	1.29
Availability of news-gathering resources	221	53.8%	3.53	1.24
Time limits	215	40.0%	3.26	1.15
Journalism ethics	221	52.0%	3.50	1.23
Self-censorship	204	31.4%	2.97	1.18
Personal values and beliefs	199	35.7%	3.12	1.29
Colleagues in other media	196	36.7%	3.16	1.14
Friends, acquaintances and family	204	32.8%	2.96	1.23
Feedback from the audience	212	49.1%	3.45	1.26
Competing news organizations	214	47.7%	3.42	1.20
Media laws and regulation	213	46.9%	3.40	1.22
Access to information	217	46.1%	3.34	1.27
Government censorship	211	36.0%	3.12	1.15
Government officials	209	33.5%	3.09	1.18
Politicians	200	32.0%	2.98	1.26
Business people	202	32.7%	2.99	1.21
Public relations	211	45.0%	3.34	1.22
Relationships with news sources	204	40.2%	3.19	1.31
Police	195	28.7%	2.84	1.24
Issue advocacy groups	190	28.4%	2.90	1.18
Scientists or health experts	182	34.9%	2.79	1.29
Religious groups and institutions	183	28.6%	2.70	1.30
Military	174	26.2%	2.69	1.27
Para-military groups, militias and similar groups	176	25.9%	2.57	1.37
Organized crime and criminal groups	208	25.0%	2.73	1.27
Terrorist groups	195	24.5%	2.99	1.32

Question: "Here is a list of potential sources of influence. Please tell me how much influence each of the following has on your work as a journalist." (Scale: 5 = Extremely influential; 4 = Very influential; 3 = Moderately influential; 2 = Slightly influential; 1 = Not at all influential.)