**REVIEW OF MASS MEDIA, INTERNET BASED MEDIA FOR FEBRUARY, MARCH, APRIL 2018**

**General situation**

The formation of national press was celebrated in Tajikistan in March. Currently a lot of private and independent mass media are facing financial challenges and local journalists admit that the freedom of press is oppressed under various pretexts.

Kudratbek Edchibekov, staff member of the Institute on Manuscript and Written Heritage of the AS of Tajikistan considers that recently the local mass media are rarely covering important issues in the country. “Who reads a newspaper which contains only praising articles? Look at what is happening in the society, there is corruption, problems in different spheres… However mass media is keeping silence”.

In the meantime editors in chief of private media are complaining due to challenging financial situation. Sayof Mizrob, editor in chief of “USSR” newspaper refers to a crisis in Tajik media. “Mass media is living through the most challenging period in their history. It is especially difficult to private media since they are not subsidized by the state”.

According to editors in chief of private mass media over the recent years the income generated by selling newspapers, advertisements, as well as paid articles had decreased by 50%. This is primarily related to drop in number of copies printed. It is known that decreased number of copies are seen as a negative trend for the advertising companies.

Analysts consider that financial crisis had indeed affected greatly mass media, specifically printed media. Dozens of newspapers had closed down, hundreds of journalists had quit. Most are resigning due to small salaries, fees and inability to combine the work in several mass media. In a situation like this, according to the editor in chief of “Farajh” newspaper Khurshed Atovullo private and independent media are not able to be concerned with freedom of expression. And according to journalists this particular freedom is being violated under various pretexts.

To remind, international organization “Reporters without borders” in its annual freedom of press rating in 2017, had ranked Tajikistan 149 place out of 180 countries. Human rights activists consider the situation with freedom of expression in the country as “challenging”. Tajikistan is following Russia in the rating, which is ranked 148.

“Reporters without Borders” critized limitation of freedom of speech and pressure on independent press in Tajikistan and called the situation which the cornered journalists are facing as a “dangerous stagnation”. Organization had stated that the Government at the pretext of combatting terrorism is terrifying independent Mass Media and limits them to self censorship.

The report of Freedom House “Freedom of Press - 2017” considers Tajikistan which had gained score of 87 as country with “not free” Mass Media.

Over the recent years several independent newspapers seized publishing, such as Sogd, Facts and Comments, Nuri Zindagi, Jomea, Millat, Nigoh, informational agencies TojNews and Ozodagon stopped functioning.

The day of Tajik press was started on 11 March 1912 when the first Tajik newspaper was published “Buhoroi Sharif”. Previously, during the soviet period, the Day of Press, like on all the Soviet space was celebrated on 5 May.[[1]](#footnote-2)

**NBT List**

NBT had published list of people accessorial to terrorism in March. This list, compiled by the Department of Financial Monitoring of the NBT contains 1,372 citizens of RT. The OSCE argues that the list "undeservedly" contains the names of 14 media employees - citizens of Tajikistan.

The OSCE Representative on Freedom of Press states that Tajik authorities have not proven that the listed journalists committed any criminal or illegal acts and believes that including the names of these media officers in the list of accused terrorists endangers their lives and safety.

On March 28, the OSCE Representative on Freedom of Press, Harlem Desir, in a letter addressed to Tajik Foreign Minister Sirodzhiddin Aslov called Dushanbe to exclude journalists from the list of persons involved in terrorism.

In total, on the information page of the Financial Monitoring Department of the National Bank of the Republic of Tajikistan there are four lists of persons who have links to terrorism: two common lists that fall under the UN resolutions on the Taliban and Al-Qaeda, the international list of persons involved in terrorism and two national lists.

Journalist Dodojon Atovulloev and many members of the Group of 24 are included to those who have links with terrorism.

Tajik authorities have not yet responded to a letter from OSCE Representative on Freedom of Press.

Nuriddin Karshiboev, chairman of the National Association of Independent Media of Tajikistan (NANSMIT), in a conversation with Radio Ozodi, said that some individuals on the list of the National Bank of the Republic of Tajikistan were previously involved in journalism, but now are active users of social networks. According to him, many of them are listed in the National Bank of the Republic of Tajikistan because of their loyalty to the opposition groups and parties banned in the country. “But they have the right to freedom of speech and to disseminate information through media or social networks”.[[2]](#footnote-3)

**International Cooperation**

Sixth session of the Committee on Cooperation between Tajikistan and European Union was conducted in March in Brussels.

The press release of the EU states that the parties consider democratic reforms, implementation of fundamental human rights as key criteria for the relations between EU and Tajikistan. EU also notes that negative trend in limiting civic rights and freedoms is preserved in Tajikistan. “Freedom of speech and expression of political, democratic opinion in he country shall support the enhancement of stability and economic development” as stated to conclude the session of the Committee on Cooperation between EU-Tajikistan.[[3]](#footnote-4)

**Web pages of state bodies**

Parade of press conferences took place in Tajikistan in the end of January. During these press conferences journalists are provided with the opportunity to freely ask questions to the management of ministries and agencies. IA Asia Plus had consolidated and published the report on how public and transparent is the activity of those agencies in the rest of the year.

10 years ago discussions on launching the e-government system were initiated. The Concept for Development of E-Government was adopted, it should have been implemented in 2020.

The first stage covers the period of 2012-2013, set up of the Unified Information Technology Network, which includes 48 ministries and departments in the country was envisaged. Also, all state authorities had to develop their own websites (pages) and launch those in the Internet.

Another side of this matter is simplification of procedures regulating public services to the public.

During the second stage (2013-2015), modern technological solutions were introduced into the practice of state authorities, for example, the formation of mechanisms for two-way and multi-party communication, introduction of a single electronic document circulation, the expansion of electronic information resources.

The third stage (2015-2020) of e-government development envisages the automation of the public services to the public and organizations, as well as receiving services from organizations for the state needs. At the same time, the development of the following e-government services is envisaged: government portal and electronic government gateway.

How and by whom this concept is implemented, is indicated on the official websites of state authorities.

It is not necessary to discuss the design of the webpages, since what is of utmost interest is the content. The perfect website, shall be updated every day and contain all the necessary profile information, which was not found. The official website of the President of the country is excluded from the analysis. Information on the activities of the head of state is sufficiently provided. There is an opportunity to write a letter to the President. However, it is not indicated whether the letters are considered or not, whether measures will be taken, whether the authors of the complaints and proposals receive answers to their questions.

The web page of Executive office of Dushanbe is not bad. However for unidentified reasons the Russian version of the web page is not functioning for 1 year, since the beginning of 2017.

Official web page of Majlisi Milli is limid to brief information on events conducted and is updated once a fortnight. The most recent news are dated end of December last year. Russian and English versions of the web page are not funtioning.

Majlisi Namoyandagon is more active, it provides news, however the Russian version is lagging behind for 2-3 weeks, and English version is lagging behind for over 1 month.

More active are the web pages of MoI, Committee on Emergency Situations, Tax Committee. Less active are those of MoF, Ministry of Transport, Ministry of Culture and other agencies.

It is surprising to see MoF inactive, since according to common logic it shall function in more advanced modality than all the other.

Some state authorities are uploading news from the web page of the President and IA Khovar, forgetting about the activities of their own agency.

Web page of important bodies, such as Ministry of Justice, Ministry of Energy and Water Resource, Ministry of Health and Social Protection of the Population, Ministry of Labour, Migration and Employment, Ministry of Agriculture are not functioning.

Web page of the Ministry of Education and Science is not provided in Russian and English languages. However the information in Tajik is also scarce, the news are as a rule outdated.

Web pages of other state bodies are not functioning at all, at best updated once a quarter there are others still living in 2015–2016. These are the pages of State Committee on Land Management, Geodesy, Committee on Women and Family, Committee on Environment.

Some agencies do not have the web pages at all, which is striking, Agency on Communication of RT is one of these…[[4]](#footnote-5)

**Criminal persecution against journalists**

Sogd province Prosecutor office announced that the criminal case against independent journalist and the captain of Tajik Youth Club Khairullo Mirsaidov is not investigated in the closed modality, however, prior to finalization of the investigation the information will not be provided.

The province prosecutor Khabibullo Vohidov informed during press conference held on 26 of January that upon completion of investigation, prosecution will provide mass media with all the details of the case.[[5]](#footnote-6)

International human rights organization Human Rights Watch (HRW) had urged the Government of Tajikistan to release Tajik journalist Khairullo Mirsaidov in February this year. According to the opinion of HRW representative in Central Asia, Steve Sverdlov “famous journalist is kept under illegal arrest for two months”. “It is necessary to stop this show”concluded Steve Sverdlov.

Investigation of the criminal case against Khairullo Mirsaidov was extended for two months in line with the appeal of the prosecution in oder to “ensure comprehensive and objective investigation of the case” in the beginning of February 2018.[[6]](#footnote-7)

In the beginning of April, the source in law enforcement bodies of Sogd province informed that the investigation term against Khairullo was extended again till June, and that such extension shall allow comprehensive review of the case.[[7]](#footnote-8)

Deputy head of US mission in OSCE a.i. Michele Siders had expressed concern due to extended arrest of Khairullo Mirsaidov and urged the Government of Tajikistan to speed up the process, noting that “This arrest reflects the trend of growing pressure on freedom of Mass Media in Tajikistan, which forced many journalists to leave the country and closure of several independent Mass Media organizaitons. US notes, that being a member of OSCE, Tajikistan shall implement corresponding obligations adhered to, including those on freedom of expression, and should comply with the Universal Declaration on Human Rights and International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

The appeal urges “to investigate the case of Mirsaidov immediately and to ensure necessary procedural measures to protect him during the criminal investigation and to implement the obligations on freedom of expression fully”.[[8]](#footnote-9)

It shall be noted that the head of department on youth and sport of Sogd province, Olim Zohidzoda was dismissed from the post. Head of the Committee on Youth and Sport Akhtam Abdullozoda stated that Zohizoda resigned and his resignation is not related to the case of Khairullo Mirsaidov.[[9]](#footnote-10)

In March 2018, father of K. Mirsaidov informed that he had met with his son in TIC (SIZO) in Khujand. He says, Khairullo does not have any health complains and hopes for just and fair criminal investigation.[[10]](#footnote-11)

In March, Prosecution of Sogd province had sent a letter to International KVN movement in Moscow requesting video tapes with the shows by Tajik team, according to the web page Akhbor.com referring to the sources familiar with the course of investigation. The representative of the prosecution informed that the request was sent to clarify certain circumstances. According to Akhbor.com, prosecution of the province had also requested RF to provide information on targeted use of funds provided to sponsor the KVN team.

“Prosecution had sent the request to confirm the hotel where the team had stayed, price of accommodation, number of people accommodated” noted the source.[[11]](#footnote-12)

To this end the head of investigation team had went to Moscow.[[12]](#footnote-13)

*Note: The journalist and captain of the Youth team from Tajikistan Khairullo Mirsaidov was arrested in December last year. Criminal case for alleged violation of four articles of the Criminal Code: Article 245, p.4, p."b" (impropriation or misapplication), 189, p. 2, p. "d" (instigation of national, racial, local or religious conflicts), 340, p.1 (falsification, production or trade in false documents, state awards, stamps, blanks), 346, p. 2, p."а" (slander). Previously Khairullo Mirsaidov was working as a reporter in Asia Plus and Deutche Welle radio.*

**Internet**

State internet provider “TajikTelecom” is the only trader for internet traffic to other companies, providing internet in the country, whereas in the past the providers were able to select themselves where to buy internet: in Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan or China.

Management of “TajikTelecom” considers that they do not breach any laws and regard the activities at stake in line with the Resolution of the Government “On setting up Unified Communication Center” which shall be the hub transferring the traffic in the country.

The authorities have decided to set up Unified Communication Center (UCC) in the beginning of 2015, under the pretext to ensure national security and combat with terrorism and extremism. The center cost 50 million US dollars to the budget of a relatively poor country and provided the Government and special forces with almost unlimited possibilities to control all means of communication in the country. The special services can directly track all the talks, control and track internet traffic and on a selective basis cut of companies and individual users as per their own accord.

However, it was not mentioned that the companies are prohibited to buy traffic anywhere but at “TajikTelecom".

Representative of Tajik providers and companies providing mobile connection refuse to comment on the situation, however they inform that such a decision is a given fact and it is impossible to change anything.

Previously the management of mobile companies were addressing General Prosecution to check the legal grounds for such a decision. According to them ECC is necessary to supervise and regulate the traffic, it does not imply that the state, specifically WTO member has a right to monopolize internet. [[13]](#footnote-14)

In the meantime Anti-monopoly service of Tajikistan informs that there is no decision related to limited purchase of internet traffic only from state company “TajikTelecom”. Such requirements are ungrounded. OJSC “TajikTelecom” did not address the Ani-monopoly service with the statement that it shall become the sole internet traffic from abroad for further distribution within the country. Anti-monopoly service did not set the prices for internet due to lack of statement by “TajikTelecom”. At the moment National provider “TajikTelecom” which is a structural subdivision of Agency of Communication under the Government of Tajikistan is currently selling internet traffic to all Tajik providers and mobile companies, prohibiting them to buy internet independently from other countries as of January 2018.

Since then Mobile companies and internet providers continue buying internet from national operator for the price of 51 thousand US dollars per one GB channel. To compare: previously they were buying internet from Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and China for the price of 10-20 thousand US dollars for the same volume.

In the meantime, “TajikTelecom” had decreased their rates for access to internet by 20%.[[14]](#footnote-15)

Agency on Communication informed that it drafts amendments to the Criminal Code of Tajikistan which set forth criminal prosecution for transfer of mobile numbers to third persons. According to the new rules, each citizen of Tajikistan has a right to possess only two numbers, registered in his/her name and two more can be registered per each child upon submission of birth certificate.[[15]](#footnote-16)

[Repoters without Borders refer Tajikistan to "red zone"](https://www.currenttime.tv/a/28452479.html) in other words to the countries where the situation with freedom of press and internet is regarded as not-satisfactory.[[16]](#footnote-17)

In border areas of Tajikistan, in Sogd province and on the territory of Lyakhsh (Jirgital) the population uses sim-cards from Kyrgyzstan, number of Tajik subscribers to Kyrgyz operators reached 10 thousand people.

According to the source from the Agency on Communication of Tajikistan, due to absence of clear borders between Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan it is easy for the Kyrgyz companies to sell sim cards in Tajikistan. Sale of Kyrgyz sim cards to the citizens of Tajikistan violates Tajik legislation since only registered operators are allowed to sell sim cards on the territory of the country.

Tajik people like Kyrgyz connection. It is of better quality and cheaper. Another benefit is that most of the web pages blocked by Tajik providers are in open access with Kyrgyz providers.

Tajik internet users are constantly complaining on the slow speed of national providers. This does not imply only Sogd province or certain operators, recently Internet connection has aggravated across all providers.

Tajikistan is rated as the country with the highest tariffs for internet in various ratings. Tajik authorities note that internet is expensive in Tajikistan due to high transit prices from neighbouring countries.

Before 2010 Tajikistan was rated first amongst other Central Asian countries due to development of mobile services. In this period Tajikistan was competing with Russia and Ukraine in terms of quality/price. However, different taxes had gradually affected the level of e-communication. In 2010 the state had prescribed 3% excise tax for mobile services and in 2015 the excise tax was increased to 5%. It shall be noted that such excise tax exists only in Tajikistan, there is no tax of this sort in neighboring countries.

According to experts, Tajikistan is losing its competitive advantage is this sphere on the annual basis, and the reason to that is excessive state control.

In 2011 the state regulator, Agency on Communication under the Government of Tajikistan had ordered to de-install all basic communication stations on the border with Afghanistan.[[17]](#footnote-18)

Agency on Communication under the Government of Tajikistan had ordered all mobile operators and internet providers to cut off Next Generation Network - NGN in the end of November last year. The consumers were deprived of cheap connection.

Growth rates in the sector were stable till 2013 at the rate of 15% on the annual basis. However, during the recent years, internet providers and mobile operators are facing the end of the fiscal year with losses which was not the case even during the crises of 2008.[[18]](#footnote-19)

1. <https://rus.ozodi.org/a/29094686.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. <https://rus.ozodi.org/a/29130208.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. <https://rus.ozodi.org/a/29093964.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. Source: <https://www.news.tj/ru/news/tajikistan/power/20180124/podalshe-ot-naroda> [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. Source: <https://rus.ozodi.org/a/29002774.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. Source: <https://rus.ozodi.org/z/11267> [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. <https://rus.ozodi.org/a/29144879.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. Source: <https://www.news.tj/ru/news/tajikistan/society/20180413/missiya-ssha-pri-obse-prizivaem-tadzhikistan-obespechit-neobhodimie-meri-zatshiti-mirsaidova>, <https://osce.usmission.gov/concern-about-freedom-of-expression-in-tajikistan/> [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. Source: <https://www.news.tj/ru/news/tajikistan/society/20180212/komitet-po-delam-molodezhi-zohidzoda-ushel-po-sobstvennomu-zhelaniyu-ego-uhod-ne-svyazan-s-delom-mirsaidova> [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. Source: <https://rus.ozodi.org/a/29088944.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
11. <https://www.news.tj/ru/news/tajikistan/laworder/20180330/sogdiiskaya-prokuratura-otpravila-v-moskve-zapros-po-delu-hairullo-mirsaidova> [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
12. Source: <https://rus.ozodi.org/a/29144879.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
13. Source: <https://rus.ozodi.org/a/29045032.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
14. <https://www.news.tj/ru/news/tajikistan/economic/20180405/rasporyazheniya-net-no-sluzhba-svyazi-trebuet-pokupat-internet-tolko-u-tadzhiktelekom>, <https://rus.ozodi.org/a/29144598.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
15. Source: <https://rus.ozodi.org/a/29068236.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
16. Source: <https://rus.ozodi.org/a/29045032.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
17. Source: <https://ru.sputnik-tj.com/analytics/20180222/1024831579/mobilnaya-svyaz-internet-operatory-tajikistan.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
18. Source: <https://news.tj/ru/news/tajikistan/economic/20180220/tadzhikistan-teryaet-rinok-svyazi> [↑](#footnote-ref-19)