**MASS MEDIA REVIEW, MAY, JUNE, JULY 2019**

**Freedom of expression situation in Tajikistan**

Control over mass media control and pressure on journalists has increased dramatically in 2016 in Tajikistan. At that period, Tajikistan had rapidly dropped by 34 positions from the 150 th rank out of 180 countries in the World Press Freedom Index of the international human rights group Reporters Without Borders. In 2018, Tajikistan has lost number of positions and was put on 161st place.

According to the Ministry of Culture of Tajikistan, 371 newspapers (109 state, 262 private), 243 magazines (113 state, 130 non-state), 11 news agencies (10 non-state, 1 state), 34 television companies (of which 20 are independent) are registered in the country. However, out of all these media companies there are scarce amount of editions providing high-quality socially significant content. Most of the media avoid publishing sensitive issues, not providing journalistic investigations and disclosures.

Over the recent years, about twenty leading social and political editorials were closed in the republic, including the independent newspapers Sugd, Facts and Comments, Nuri Zindagi, Jomea, Millat, Nigoh for economic and political reasons. Popular news agencies TojNews and Ozodagon had closed down as well. The closure of a number of editorials and pressure on freedom of speech led to the departure of dozens of journalists from the republic.

According to Tajik journalist Marat Mamadshoev, “this is a great loss for Tajik journalism. Increased pressure on the media has increased self-censorship. This also affected commentators, who also became very cautious. In such conditions, it is particularly challenging for mass media to offer interesting and relevant content to the audience. As a result, the circulation rate of newspapers is falling. The country is dropping back in literacy and intellectual level, most socially active and literate part of the population is leaving the country, which also reduces the media audience. All this is happening against the background of deteriorating and increasing prices for Internet, cellular communication. The coverage of advertising market is decreasing, it is becoming increasingly difficult for editors to earn money due to the growing monopolization of the economy ... ”.[[1]](#footnote-2)

**International obligations of Tajikistan**

On 2-3 July during the 126th session of the UN Human Rights Committee (HRC) in Geneva, a discussion of the report submitted by the Government of Tajikistan was held on the implementation of human rights in the country and on the implementation of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Recently, Tajikistan authorities were criticized for persecution of opposition supporters, restricting freedom of speech and freedom of religion.

Vasilka Sancin, HRC member from Slovenia, asked Tajik delegation to comment on regular restricted access to independent news sites and restrictions to access the Internet and mobile Internet. The head of Tajik delegation, General Prosecutor of the Republic of Tajikistan, Yusuf Rahmon briefly replied that everything happened within the stipulations of the law and it did not contradict the international obligations of Tajikistan.[[2]](#footnote-3)

**Persecution of civil activists**

Civil activists Shahlo Ibragimova and Dilnoza Mukhiddinova, who collected signatures for the abolition of the scandalous directive of the Antimonopoly Agency No. 31 on raising Internet tariffs, began to receive formidable comments in social networks. The activists were accused in social networks of inciting national hatred and instability, called “rebels”, “calling for instability”, “ungrateful”, “traitors” and insulted in every possible way. Malefactors use their photos on anonymous accounts, and accompany them with offensive statements. Users of social networks are concerned that fake attacks are organized and led by someone harassment. Users of social networks believe that those who are related to the by representatives of authorities, who claim to “protect national interests”, and are hiding under fake accounts.[[3]](#footnote-4)

At least five people working in the structures of the Ministry of Education and Science of Tajikistan confirmed that they worked at the “troll factory”, creating fake social media accounts and commenting on various websites. But the educational authorities deny their involvement in the creation of a "troll factory." “Troll Factory” is the conventional name for groups that are usually used for political purposes, often by governments ... The tasks of Tajik “trolls” and “bots” include creating topics and posts on Internet forums, posts and comments in blogs and in social networks, leaving comments on online media pages, often in the aggressive form.

In a letter to Radio Ozodi, one of the "trolls" said that the Tajik "troll factory" was founded by the country's security forces, but its activities involve employees of departments subordinate to the Ministry of Education and Science — university professors and teachers of secondary schools. “Trolls”, according to him, are assigned a task by the ministry, in line with the directives of the two law enforcement agencies of Tajikistan. Then the team goes to groups and starts immediately or during the certain period of time a campaign to discredit civil activists or opposition supporters in social networks.

A letter and several documents about the activities of the Tajik "troll factory" were provided to Radio Ozodi. One of them is the order of the Deputy Minister of Education and Science of Tajikistan R. Mirboboev on the creation of "analytical and information groups" under the department. In the documents, on behalf of another responsible officer of the ministry, the groups were assigned tasks, including identification of topics to focus on, prepare articles and identification of discussions to participate in social networks. The total number of "analysts" is about 400 people. If we consider that each of them has 10 fictional names, it turns out that about four thousand “people” are participating in creating topics and posts on Internet forums, posts and comments in blogs and social networks, leaving comments on the pages of online media.

A former member of one of the “analytical and informational groups” says that “trolls” face severe punishment and even dismissal in case of non-compliance with the orders.

The Ministry of Education and Science of Tajikistan states that it has nothing to do with the creation of a "factory of trolls."

But the “factory of trolls” exists not only in the Ministry of Education and Science. An employee of the Customs Service of Tajikistan, said on condition of anonymity that all ministries and government agencies have their own groups...[[4]](#footnote-5)

**Internet pages blocks. Access to information**

On April 29, Reporters Without Borders and the National Association of Independent Media of Tajikistan (NANSMIT) issued a statement urging official Dushanbe to stop blocking news sites. The statement says that for five months already, the well-known Asia-Plus news page was not available on the territory of Tajikistan, and a number of other Internet resources are also chronically affected by censorship.

The authors of the statement indicate that Asia-Plus independent news site has been subject to periodic temporary blocking during several years, but it has rarely been blocked for so long: the site has been unavailable in Tajikistan since November 29, 2018, and “The editor’s attempts to get an explanation had failed: habitually authorities deny the very fact of censorship and refer to some "technical problems".

The editor-in-chief of Asia Plus, Umed Babakhanov, noted that “The current blocking may be related to refusal of Asia Plus to publish several articles received from the authorities.”

According to human rights organizations, a number of serious information resources such as Fergana or Akhbor are chronically inaccessible on the territory of Tajikistan; several others are blocked from time to time. Authorities also often block major social networks and instant messengers, as well as Google services and YouTube, as a temporary measure. The authorities have monopolized Internet access since 2018, which allows blocking any resource without contacting telecom operators.

After the President had canceled the order of the Antimonopoly Agency to increase the costs of online services, the speed of Internet in Tajikistan has drastically decreased.

The Communication Agency refused to be interviewed, albeit indicated that bad connection is related to the fact that people use VPN services to bypass blocks. The agency claims that the resources are not blocked by the authorities, it is the result of constant hacker attacks on the State Single Switching Center, the only node that controls traffic in the country.

Experts believe that the likelihood of authorities blocking access to webpages is high. Prior to launch of the Switching Center experts indicated its vulnerability. "The fact that the SSC is a weak point was indicated to the authorities since the very beginning. The objective pursued by the SSC at that time was different, it was aimed at monopolization of the communications market, and this objective is accomplished, “noted IT specialist Rustam Gulov.

According to experts in the field of IT-technologies, frequent blockages and the very presence of the Switching Center will not only lead to the stagnation of the market but also cessation of technology development, as well as causing direct damage to all gadget owners.

OSCE Representative on Mass Media, Harlem Désir, urged the authorities to provide citizens with unrestricted access to search engines, social networks, instant messengers and news portals, the appeal is published on the webpage of the organization. Freedom of expression and freedom of information are impossible without free Internet, states the appeal.[[5]](#footnote-6)

Several western diplomats criticized Tajikistan for restricting Internet access during the conference on World Press Freedom Day carried out on May 3.

During this meeting, British Ambassador to Tajikistan, Hugh Philpott, said that Internet should be accessible to the public similarly to electricity and water, and it is necessary to ensure free access to the global network so that everyone could hear their voice. At the same time, he welcomed the initiative of the President of Tajikistan to cancel the scandalous order of the Antimonopoly Agency to increase the cost of Internet. British diplomat harshly criticized blocking access to social networks ... and said that it is impossible to block all sites, as there are filters and VPN.

US Ambassador John Mark Pommersheim urged Tajik government to ensure freedom of speech and access to Internet. According to him, blockages are restricting not only the right to freedom of speech but compromising the economic development as well.

Niels Jansens, Political Attaché of the EU Delegation in Tajikistan, has also called on Dushanbe to ensure free Internet access to the population. Jansens noted that he understands Tajikistan’s security concerns, but free access to Internet is a way to bring the communities together. According to him, free access to Internet is not only a human right, but also prerequisite for the development of the economy.[[6]](#footnote-7)

Harlem Désir, representative of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) on media freedom, called on Tajik authorities to resume citizens' access to news sites, social networks and Google services in a statement published on the OSCE official website. “I urge the authorities to provide citizens with unlimited access to online publications, Tajik and foreign, as well as to social networks and search engines. Freedom of expression and freedom of information are impossible without free access to the Internet, ”underlined Désir.[[7]](#footnote-8)

Since 20 May, access to all major search engines was again blocked in Tajikistan. This information was confirmed by RIA Novosti in all nine telecommunication companies operating in the country. “The decision to block search engines across the country was made by the government,” indicated Tcell, Beeline and Megafon to RIA Novosti. The press service of the President informed RIA Novosti that such decision was not taken by the Government. State regulator, Communications Agency, refused to comment.

There was a riot on Sunday night, in a high security prison located in Vahdat, 15 kilometers southeast of Dushanbe.[[8]](#footnote-9) Majority people in Tajikistan associated another restriction of access to search engines with these events. According to official figures, 32 people were killed during the riot suppression, including three prison staff.

There is a common practice in Tajikistan to block information resources, social networks and instant messengers in order to limit information about the events in the country, especially those that can cause mixed reactions or unrest in society.[[9]](#footnote-10)

*Limited access to information*

*14* inmates had died while being transported from the prisons in Khujand and Istravshan to the prisons in Dushanbe, Nurek and Yavan. According to official statement of the State Inspectorate on Penitentiary under the Ministry of Justice, the reason was bread poisoning. The funeral were carried out in presence of law enforcement bodies representatives, who had prohibited the relatives to communicate with journalists.[[10]](#footnote-11)

**Censorship**

Tajikfilm intends to control the content of videos posted by Tajik bloggers on Youtube, whereas tax officials say bloggers, like other citizens, must pay taxes.

Bloggers consider such actions a new form of pressure and censorship. Tajikfilm management had sent an official request to Youtube asking it not to post video of Tajik video bloggers without the permission ...

Experts say that growing number of bloggers from Tajikistan is a good trend, and Tajikfilm’s attempts to establish control over this segment in the Internet is nothing but censorship.

Tax Committee noted that video bloggers posting their videos on Youtube must obtain a patent or certificate for implementing business activities and as a result must pay taxes. A page that is followed by more than a thousand subscribers, and viewed by at least 4 thousand hours during the year, will be able to get their percentage of income. In the post-Soviet space, one can get from 20 to 50 cents for one thousand views.

Youtube in Tajikistan does not have a representative office. According to Nosir Rahmon, they found Youtube representatives in Russia and Kazakhstan and sent them an official request not to post videos from Tajikistan without special permission.

According to the director of the Internet Public Fund Rustam Kosimov, although video hosting has mechanisms to remove content that does not comply with the platform’s policy, they hardly correlate with Tajikfilm’s position.

Youtube will not consider the appeal of Tajikfilm, confirms Dmitry Chistov, director of communications at the Internet Research Institute. In his opinion, the total number of video hosting users in Tajikistan is so small that the leadership of Youtube would not agree to preliminary moderation even under the threat of blocking the service in the country if such an issue is raised. ... Tajikistan does not represent such an important market for Youtube and Google. Moreover, the moderation of the original user content of the service, designed specifically for this purpose is absolutely outrageous, according to Dmitry Chistov.[[11]](#footnote-12)

 In the comments provided by Reporters without Borders, it is noted that ever growing censorship, frequent limitations to internet regardless of the reason in Tajikistan resemble Chinese model aimed at control over electronic content.[[12]](#footnote-13)

Tajik Foreign Ministry has accused Radio Liberty and, in particular, its Tajik service Radio Ozodi of propagating extremist ideology. A statement issued by the Foreign Ministry on July 3 stated that the radio station in its publications distorts the realms of the political, economic, social and cultural life in Tajikistan, offering readers information “opposite to the truth,” as well as promoting the ideology propagated by the leaders and activists from the opposition Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (IRPT) ) and “Group 24”, which are prohibited in Tajikistan and officially considered terrorist organizations.

Both web publications and radio broadcasts of the site are called “scandalous” and “provocative”, “unfounded” and “contrary to journalistic ethics” in the statement of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, although diplomats do not give specific examples.[[13]](#footnote-14)

On June 26, the representative of the Tajik branch of Radio Ozodi, Barot Yusufi was invited to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and informed that the his accreditation was temporarily suspended, since he had repeatedly mentioned Islamic Renaissance Party banned in the country. Four more journalists from Radio Ozodi are awaiting a decision of the Foreign Ministry regarding the extension of their accreditation.

“Accreditation should not be used as a control mechanism or restrictions the process of obtaining information. I urge Tajik authorities to reinstate the accreditation of Barot Yusufi and his colleagues, ”said Harlem Desir, OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media in his statement.

Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty called it “a clear way for the government to control independent media.”

The Committee for the Protection of Journalists (CPJ) also called on Tajik authorities to reinstate Barot Yusufi's accreditation. CPJ encouraged Dushanbe not to use accreditation as a censorship mechanism.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Tajikistan expressed dissatisfaction with the "unfounded" and "contrary to journalistic ethics" publications related to the suspended accreditation of journalists working in the Radio Ozodi.

Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty is a non-profit media corporation that disseminates information on various platforms (Internet, radio, television, video) in 22 countries in Eastern and Southeast Europe, the Caucasus, Central and South Asia in 26 languages. The Corporation, as a private grantee, is funded by by the US Congress through the US Foreign Broadcasting Trustee - US Global Media Agency.[[14]](#footnote-15)

Communications Agency under the Government of Tajikistan revoked the license of the new independent television channel Oriennur in the city of Penjikent, which is located on the border with Uzbekistan. Oriennur was supposed to start broadcasting on June 27, but two days before that, the Communication Agency had revoked the license, under pretext of the identified technical problems. However, the founders of the channel consider it nothing but excuses. “They should have started during Navruz, it didn’t work, they postponed it first to April, then to June 27th. And so, they revoked the license altogether, ” indicated Niyozov.

Experts note that obtaining a license is the most difficult step in creating an independent television channel in Tajikistan. The license is issued by the Committee on TV and Radio Broadcasting, and the permit for the frequency is issued by the Communication Agency.

34 television channels are registered in Tajikistan, 20 of them are independent. Most independent television channels are concentrated in the Sughd region.[[15]](#footnote-16)

1. Source: <https://fergana.agency/articles/108813/?country=tj> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Source: <https://rus.ozodi.org/a/30034700.html>, <https://rus.ozodi.org/a/30033393.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Source: <https://rus.ozodi.org/a/29905543.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. Source: <https://rus.ozodi.org/a/29926413.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. Source: <https://www.currenttime.tv/a/tajikistan-internet/29933306.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. Source: <http://www.dialog.tj/news/zapadnye-diplomaty-raskritikovali-tadzhikistan-za-ogranichenie-dostupa-k-internetu> [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. Source: <https://fergana.agency/news/107205/?country=tj>, <https://www.osce.org/representative-on-freedom-of-media/418964> [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. Source: <https://tj.sputniknews.ru/main/20190521/1028960193/tajikistan-zablokirovan-dostup-vse-krupnye-poiskovye-sayty.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. Source: <https://fergana.agency/news/107566/?country=tj> [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. Source: <https://rus.ozodi.org/a/30043647.html>, <https://fergana.agency/news/108821/?country=tj> [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
11. <https://tj.sputniknews.ru/analytics/20190513/1028896258/youtube-blogery-tajikfilm.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
12. <https://fergana.agency/news/107265/?country=tj> [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
13. Source: <https://fergana.agency/news/108710/?country=tj> [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
14. Source: <https://rus.ozodi.org/a/30035406.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
15. <https://fergana.agency/news/108691/?country=tj> [↑](#footnote-ref-16)