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**MASS MEDIA REVIEW FOR NOVEMBER, DECEMBER 2020 AND JANUARY 2021.**

**Refusals to convicted journalists in preterm release and reduction of the imprisonment regime**

On October 28, 2013, the court sentenced journalist from Asht district Mahmadyusuf Ismoilov to 10 years and 6 months in prison on charges of “extortion”, “fraud causing serious harm to a citizen” and “fraudulent activities and abuse of official position”. Since then, there were two amnesties announced in the country, however, it was only in October 2019, when Ismoilov’s term of imprisonment under the amnesty was reduced by 1 year, 4 months and 20 days.

The journalist himself called the sentence ungrounded and considered it as an attempt to revenge for his harsh and critical articles. To date, the journalist has spent seven and a half years behind bars, with one year and seven months left until his release. Ismoilov's prison term shall be over on August 4, 2022. At the end of December, Ismoilov sent a message from the prison that he had paid the damages established by the court for extortion 10 months ago and hoped that he would be released or transferred to a colony-settlement. The court considered Ismoilov's demands to change the conditions of his detention to be lawful, but the colony administration stated that this was impossible. The management of the penal institution - colony No. 3 in Khujand replied in September to an official letter from the National Association of Independent Media of Tajikistan, that it considers the reduction of the sentence of Makhmadyusuf Ismoilov impossible. In a written response, it is stated that Ismoilov is serving a sentence, including under Article 250, Part 2 (extortion), and the Criminal Code does not provide for the imposition of a fine or early release for this category of prisoners. A copy of which came to the disposal of Radio Ozodi. On December 30, the department for the execution of criminal punishments of the Sughd province reported that this decision was made in agreement with the court and the prosecutor's office.

Makhmadyusuf Ismoilov spent 11 months in custody in 2011 for publishing his critical article. The Taboshar court accused the journalist of slander, insult to the person, extortion and parochialism. Ismoilov was sentenced to a fine of 35,000 somoni and a ban on journalistic activities for three years by a court ruling following an 11-month investigation.

The journalist believes that his second verdict is a continuation of the retaliatory actions of the local authorities for his exposure in the press.

Human rights media organizations called Ismoilov's sentence too harsh for “extortion” in the amount of 400 somoni. Human rights activists believe that by sentencing Ismoilov for a long imprisonment, the authorities demonstrated their attitude towards courageous journalists who are not afraid to point out shortcomings in the activities of officials.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Another Tajik journalist, Daler Sharifov, convicted in April 2020, was refused a request to reduce the regime of serving a criminal sentence. The General Prosecutor's Office of Tajikistan rejected the proposal of the Main Directorate for the Execution of Criminal Sentences (GUIUN) of the Ministry of Justice of Tajikistan to transfer Daler Sharifov from a general regime colony to a colony-settlement. "The Prosecutor General's Office considers Daler" dangerous for society, "the journalist's father Abdumannon Sharifov told Radio Ozodi, citing an official letter from the management of the Yavan prison, where his son is serving his sentence.

The journalistic community and human rights NGOs in Tajikistan believe that Daler Sharifov was sent to jail for dissent and criticism of the current regime.[[2]](#footnote-2)

**Eviction of Asia Plus editorial office**

The Asia-Plus media group consists of several media: radio, newspaper, web page. Several dozen employees of this agency had worked for many years in the two rooms located in the Sharki Ozod building in Dushanbe, where most of the local media outlets are located. However, in November 2020, the "Asians" had to make room: journalists from the state news agency "Khovar'' moved into one of their premises. Now almost 50 employees of the Asia-Plus media group have gathered in one office. Currently, almost 50 people are sitting in two offices in a small room. Both premises were rented by Asia-Plus from the Sharki Ozod administration. By November 2020, the lease agreement ended, so there is no one to formally present a claim. "Asia-Plus'' also contacted colleagues from "Khovar": they said that they are just people and they are moving in since they were forced.

The year was rather challenging, and the media sphere turned out to be one of the most affected areas in business. For example, radio advertising revenue has dropped by 60% since the start of the pandemic. At the same time, the radio in the media group is the locomotive that brings most of the income.

Iskandar Ikromi, the executive director of Asia-Plus, says that during the year the entire media group tried to stay afloat financially, and they almost succeeded. - Nonetheless this eviction had knocked everything down. We cannot say now how much money we will need to establish a workspace, but this is a rather large amount, especially in the current conditions, ”he says.

It shall be noted that the editorial office is cold and the Internet connection is poor. Poor quality of the Network is common in Tajikistan. Plus, all Asia-Plus employees need to keep the VPN turned on at all times. The fact is that the website of the publication has been blocked on the territory of Tajikistan for several years. At first, the "Asians" fought - they wrote letters, statements, but the authorities kept saying that the site was not blocked, simply experiencing "technical problems." Journalists have almost stopped fighting for their website - they upload all their materials to social networks, the number of subscribers is growing, and it seems that Asia-Plus has coped with it.

Over the past six years, Tajikistan has dropped 46 positions in the press freedom rating and took 161st place among 180 countries. In 2014, the republic was 115th, then it began to lose ground. Around the same time, the Asia-Plus website began to be subject to endless blocking. The journalists started being cautious - they did not want to harm their editorial office.

Those that were especially ardent were reassured that it is just a matter of time, it is necessary to wait and then everything shall go back to normal. Alas, it was not possible to return to normal. Now they dream not of freedom of speech, but of a warm and clean room.[[3]](#footnote-3)

**Internet**

Internet users in Tajikistan reported in January that they could not access the social networks Instagram and Facebook for several days. During the conversation, an employee of the telecommunications company said that they are aware of the lack of access to Instagram and Facebook in the republic, but this problem does not come from the provider. In most parts of the country, social networks started working again, but the reason for the interruptions in the access was never explained.[[4]](#footnote-4)

The popular Internet service Speedtest.net which belongs to the Irish company Ookla has published a monthly Internet connection speed rating Speedtest Global Index, which contains data on the speed of mobile and landline Internet in November 2020. In November ranking, which covers 176 countries of the world, Tajikistan had received 96th place from 97 in October.

In Central Asia the fastest Internet was recorded in Kazakhstan, which is in 65th place, and Kyrgyzstan - in 76th place. Uzbekistan is in 94th place, ahead of Tajikistan by two positions. Turkmenistan is in last place in the rating - at 176. Russia is in 89th place in the rating. The fastest Internet in the world is recorded in the UAE, South Korea, Qatar, China, Australia.

According to the Communication Service under the Government of Tajikistan, during the second half of 2020, the number of Internet users in Tajikistan was more than 3 million subscribers, and the number of mobile users was over 5.9 million, of which about 5.3 million are active subscribers. [[5]](#footnote-5)

**Google Tax»**

On January 16, amendments to the Tax Code of Tajikistan regarding the so-called "Google tax" will come into force, implying taxation of electronic services. Users of electronic wallets, including Alif Bank, have already received notifications that payments for advertising in social networks, online games, foreign domains and hosting must be made by January 15 inclusive. The Law "On Amendments and Additions to the Tax Code of the RT" was approved by the upper Chamber of the Parliament as of December 9 and signed by the President as of December 17, 2020.

According to the amendments, foreign persons who directly provide electronic services on the territory of Tajikistan are obliged to pay VAT in the amount of 18% to the country's budget.

In addition, according to the innovations, the registration procedure for foreign electronic services providing these services directly, as well as tax agents (intermediaries), is carried out by the tax authorities on the basis of an application for registration. Moreover, the application must be submitted not later than 30 calendar days in advance to service provision.

Whether Google, Facebook and other online giants that provide electronic services in Tajikistan were notified and whether they were registered is still unknown.[[6]](#footnote-6)

**Troll mailout**

Since December 14, many subscribers of mobile companies Tcell and Babilon have received links from unknown numbers to a YouTube video accusing one of the Tajik opposition activists in Europe. The oppositionist himself called the content of the video a slander attempt against him. Some of the users said that before they received the mailout, they had no idea about this person. Tcell and Babilon responded to Radio Ozodi that their companies did not send such messages, calling this as a "spam" attack... Representatives of both companies did not provide an unambiguous answer when asked how hundreds, if not thousands of subscriber numbers became available to persons who sent these messages.

The phone numbers from which the links were sent are eight digits, and the numbers of mobile operators in Tajikistan are nine digits, excluding the country code. If someone tried to reply the message, the immediate response was "such a number does not exist."

The Ministry of Interior said they were unaware of the text messages and told Radio Ozodi that they had not received any complaints about the matter.

Information technology expert Asomiddin Atoev says this has not happened in the past in Tajikistan. According to Atoev, text messages to mobile phones are the most effective way to achieve the desired goal of alerting as many people as possible. “There is a risk that others who want to discredit someone can use the same approach…” - says the expert.

International organizations criticize Tajikistan for suppressing dissent. In relation to many dissident activists, articles containing threats and slander were published in social networks, and only afterwards dissidents were brought to justice. One of the examples of the sort is the articles published in relation to Daler Sharipov, a well-known Tajik journalist.[[7]](#footnote-7) At a later stage he was arrested under extremism charges and was sentenced to a year of imprisonment…

**Appeals to the authorities via social networks**

Abdusattor Pirmukhammadzoda, a taxi driver from Dushanbe, posted a video message on Facebook on November 16, which caused a vivid reaction on social media. In his appeal, Pirmukhammadzoda complained about heavy fines, widespread unemployment in Tajikistan, and also spoke about the indifference of the authorities, and about the strength of migrant workers. The video with Abdusattor's address was the subject of public and private discussions.

The authorities did not officially react to the taxi driver's video, however, separate videos appeared on social networks in which Abdusattor Pirmukhammadzoda was accused of "breaking the law" and "chasing a cheap popularity." I watched all these videos, this is their personal opinion, and I respect someone else's opinion. Unfortunately, today people in Tajikistan are afraid to speak the truth. The fear of telling the truth prevents us from living and moving forward, ”says the taxi driver.

Abdusattor Pirmukhammadzoda told Radio Ozodi that he did not expect such a vivid reaction to his appeal to the authorities. “In contemporary society, the statements like mine regarding the problems people are facing should be quite common. However, many treat me as if I have done something supernatural and unimaginable. Some people ask when they meet me: "Is it true that after the video message you were beaten?" They don't believe that such activities can go unpunished, ”says the taxi driver. Abdusattor Pirmukhammadzoda confirmed that after the video was published, he was first summoned for a conversation, and later representatives of the authorities came to his house and asked if he had any unresolved problems.

Pirmukhammadzoda is still a private driver. According to him, some passengers are afraid to get into his car. “Yes, people are afraid, they avoid those who talk about the problems in the society. I got a prove to that from personal experience,” added Abdusattor.

Abdusattor Pirmukhammadzoda previously worked at the Sadoi Dushanbe radio station. According to him, after leaving the work, he began to earn for a living as a private driver. “I wanted to go to Russia to work, but because of the coronavirus, the borders were closed,” Abdusattor says.[[8]](#footnote-8)

Another activist, Saidnuriddin Shamsiddinov, a lawyer and former bailiff who regularly complained on social networks about the actions of some prosecutors and judges, was sentenced in Vakhsh district to eight and a half years in prison. The court found him guilty under seven articles of the Criminal Code of Tajikistan, including illegal land transactions, fraud and the dissemination of knowingly false information. Shamsiddinov's relatives are sure that the lawyer paid for his criticism and fight for justice.

Lawyer Faizi Oli said: "As a lawyer, I testified in court that citizens have the right to complain to the President, to the Prosecutor General's Office or to the Supreme Court, but my colleague was convicted for these reasons anyway."

The lawyer N. Mirzoyev said that Shamsiddinov confirmed each accusation against him, noting that "this is a forced confession and his case is a demonstration." One of the witnesses said that “unlike other hearings, during the trial against Shamsiddinov, more than ten police officers surrounded the courthouse. [[9]](#footnote-9)

1. Source: <https://rus.ozodi.org/a/31030438.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Source: <https://rus.ozodi.org/a/31007565.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Source: <https://www.asiaplustj.info/ru/news/tajikistan/society/20201216/studiya-v-koridore-direktor-v-priyomnoi-kak-aziya-plyus-lishilas-redaktsii> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Source:  <https://tj.sputniknews.ru/society/20210112/1032610315/tajikistan-sboi-facebook-instagram.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Source: <https://www.asiaplustj.info/ru/news/tajikistan/society/20201217/tadzhikistan-za-poslednii-mesyats-uluchshil-svoyu-pozitsiyu-po-skorosti-interneta> [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Source: <https://www.asiaplustj.info/ru/news/tajikistan/economic/20210113/v-tadzhikistane-utverzhden-nalog-na-google> [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Source: <https://rus.ozodi.org/a/31009084.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Source: <https://rus.ozodi.org/a/31006147.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Source: <https://rus.ozodi.org/a/31044277.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-9)