**MASS MEDIA AND INTERNET PAGES REVIEW FOR NOVEMBER, DECEMBER 2018 - JANUARY 2019**

**Situation with freedom of expression**

Recently published Human Rights Watch Global report 2019 indicated that “the existing detrimental human rights situation in Tajikistan had aggravated in 2018”. “The limitations imposed on freedom of association, religion and conscience, expression leads to persecution of all types of disagreement, including that expressed in social networks, gently criticizing the policy of the state…  Authorities are regularly blocking access to popular social networks and news web pages, including Facebook, Youtube, Radio Ozodi/Radio Freedom, and at times restricts access to services of mobile connection providers in terms of using the messengers (usually as soon as there is a critical remark about the president, his family or government)”.[[1]](#footnote-2)

The study “The State of Mass Media and Role of Social Networks in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan”, conducted by the Institute for War and Peace Reporting (IWPR), states that the Tajik media have lost their role in society as the “fourth power”, and journalists refrain from covering serious topics and stick to the sidelines. During the interviews, respondents indicated that, in their opinion, journalists in Tajikistan did not play a role in solving social, economic and political problems, since the state does not respond to their publications and does not answer their questions. Similarly, journalists believe that they have lost their positions due to the lack of cohesion, laziness and unwillingness to protect their rights. IWPR also gathered five major obstacles and threats to quality journalism in Tajikistan: lack of professional training, self-censorship, insufficient financial resources, weak professional ethics, and government intervention in the media. Journalists said they want to cover issues related to human rights, corruption and the environment, but this is not as effective as at this time the situation in the country is not suitable for investigative journalism, and that now it is better to refrain and be prudent…[[2]](#footnote-3)

The international organization Reporters Without Borders criticized Tajikistan’s actions to block news sites. The Tajik authorities in response to protests in the country often resort to large-scale Internet censorship and blocking access to sites, according to the report “Tajikistan refers to the Chinese model of large-scale Internet censorship” published on 15th of November. Access to news sites and social networks was restrictied on November 6, when residents of Khorog went to a rally against, impunity of police officers and the presence of additional units of the security forces. The authorities blocked access to Asia Plus news portal, YouTube and Facebook, the Russian social networks VKontakte and Odnoklassniki, as well as the WhatsApp and Telegram messengers, the report says. "Many Internet users, who typically use Virtual Private Network filters to bypass the website blocking, reported that the VPN was also blocked."

Johan Beer, head of the Eastern Europe and Central Asia Department of Reporters Without Borders said that “Large-scale Internet censorship and restricted access are unacceptable.” The authorities of Tajikistan should understand that censorship contributes to the spread of various rumors. The international community should not follow the Chinese Internet filtering mode”. Nuriddin Karshiboev, head of the National Association of Independent Media in Tajikistan (NANSMIT), describes this phenomenon as “administrative feudalism”. “We have repeatedly pointed out that blocking access to websites and other alternative news sources violates the constitutional rights of citizens,” he says. Since the beginning of 2018, access to the Internet has been a government monopoly. In line with the amendments and additions to the Law of the Republic of Tajikistan “On Combating Terrorism”, the law enforcement agencies of Tajikistan received the right to restrict telephone communications and Internet access on special days throughout the country. They have the right to block news sites and restrict freedom of speech in the country. Meanwhile, Saifullo Safarov, first deputy director of the Center for Strategic Studies of Tajikistan, believes that blocking access to websites is sometimes necessary for security purposes. “Citizens' safety must be reliably protected. This is in the interests of the people themselves. If Internet blocking is related to security, then there is no need to talk about violations of the rights of citizens, ”he said.

Since 2016, Tajikistan has been ranked 149th among 180 countries in the World Press Freedom Index.[[3]](#footnote-4)

The embassies of the United Kingdom, Germany, France, the United States and the European Union Representation in Tajikistan on the occasion of the 70th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights expressed general concern about the continued periodic restricted access to news websites, including Asia Plus and Radio Ozodi, as well as social networks.“We believe that the right of every person to freely express their views is universal, regardless of whether it is exercised on the public platform or on the Internet,” as stated by the EU Delegation in the Republic of Tajikistan on Monday.“We urge the government of the Republic of Tajikistan to ensure freedom of the press in accordance with the international obligations of the Republic of Tajikistan under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights”. "We believe that the long-term prosperity, security and stability of Tajikistan requires a comprehensive commitment of the government to protect freedom of speech, freedom of mass media and protect the right of journalists to cover the news without fear of censorship or repression," the statement says. "In addition, access to the fast and affordable Internet is essential for the economic development of any country".[[4]](#footnote-5)

**Restricted access to web pages**

In November, Facebook and Odnoklassniki social networks, as well as the Youtube portal, were again blocked in Tajikistan. There was also restricted access to Viber, What's App and Telegram. The Communications Service of Tajikistan did not comment on this situation and advised users to contact the Unified Communication Center (UCC). UCC representative reported that blocking and unblocking sites does not depend on them and that the UCC only provides the Internet to its customers. Earlier, social networks and a number of local news sites were blocked in Tajikistan in August after the terrorist attack in Dangara district, which lead to deaths of four foreign tourists. Then, in addition to websites of news agencies and social networks, access to VPN and anonymizers was also limited.[[5]](#footnote-6) For several months, the site of the Asia-Plus news agency remains blocked.

The authorities have not reported the reasons for blocking.

**Internet and mobile connection**

Tajikistan was included in the list of countries with wors Internet speed in the updated Speedtest Global Index ranking (October 2018). Tajikistan is 124th after Afghanistan, which occupies the 123rd position. Kazakhstan ranks 74th in terms of mobile Internet speed, Russia is 80th, Kyrgyzstan is 94th and Uzbekistan is 110th among the CIS countries. The chairman of the Association of Mobile Operators, Gafur Irkayev, believes that “The state structures of Tajikistan cause irreparable damage to the competitiveness of the domestic market at the regional level by imposing all sorts of restrictions on modern technologies. Meanwhile, the National Strategy for the Development of Technologies in Tajikistan is aimed at the development of the telecommunications industry, he says. He stressed that the main goal of the entire communications industry is to create a modern and competitive information environment in the Republic ... ”[[6]](#footnote-7)

The Internet and cellular communication from Tcеll disconnected at about 5 p.m. on November 20 and was not functioning until 12 o'clock on November 21. Subscribers of the company could make calls inside the network, there was no access to other operators and to landlines. The company did not inform subscribers about the failure and the reasons for the failure. The call-center of the company did not respond; there was no information on the site either. The subscribers posted angry comments in social networks. According to Olga Zavyalova, public relations specialist of the company, lack of communication was due to technical problems. According to an anonymous source in the company, "the problem is not on our side, so it is not known when it will be resolved." Communication has been restored on November 21st. Some experts believe that problems with access to the Internet and the loss of inter-network outgoing calls may be associated with “unfair competition” in the mobile market of Tajikistan. According to Rustam Gulov, an expert and blogger, most likely, Tcell has some problems with the management of the Communication Service, as subscribers of other mobile operators have no problems with access to the Internet and mobile communication. Gafur Irkayev, chairman of the Association of Mobile Operators of Tajikistan, says that this is not the first time with Tcell ... According to him, the true reason for the situation is probably known in the Communication Service of Tajikistan. However, the Communications Service under the Government of Tajikistan refrained from commenting.[[7]](#footnote-8)

**Cost of sim cards**

In August last year, Tajik authorities decided to raise the cost of a SIM card to 250 somoni. According to the authorities, if the cost of SIM is increased to 250 somoni, it might prevent terrorism to afford buying a SIM card. This financial and economic rationale has caused widespread criticism of experts in social networks. This decision was to come into force as of September last year, but then the head of state decided to suspend this decision until January 1, 2019. At the end of last year, the Association of Mobile Companies of Tajikistan recommended that the government working group set the cost of one SIM card no higher than 100 somoni, which is equivalent to 10 US dollars. This term has already expired, but the antimonopoly service, mobile companies, Executive Office of the President, which are responsible for the final decision on the price of SIM cards, keep silent. According to experts, the apparent reason is a failure to come to a compromise between the authorities and mobile companies. The head of the Communication Service, Beg Sabur, noted that “the final decision is likely to be made in March, but the cost of SIM cards will not change significantly.” Now the cost of a regular SIM card in Tajikistan ranges from 5 to 15 somoni.[[8]](#footnote-9)

**Television**

According to official data, 34 TV companies are registered in Tajikistan, of which 8 are national, 2 are broadcasting in the capital and 24 regional, including 15 independent TV channels. Among them there is not a single nationwide private. And a few regional TV channels just survive. At the beginning of 2018, the civil society organization Media Consulting (with the support of the Ministry of Culture, Zerkalo Center for Sociological Research and the US Embassy) carried out the study “Determining Media Preferences of the Population of the Republic of Tajikistan”. In line with the outcomes of the study that had covered over 2,200 respondents, 93.7% indicated that they were watching TV. The survey illustrated that a huge part of the population prefers to watch national TV channels (65%). Similarly to other members of the International Telecommunication Union, Tajikistan signed an agreement in 2006, which obliged the country to switch to digital broadcasting in 2015. However, far beyond the deadline, it was decided to postpone it to 2020. The representative of "Teleradiokom" referred to the reasons that prevented to implement and underlined lack of financial resources and lack of digital broadcasting equipment. Shahlo Akobirova, head of the mass media NGO Homa, stated that the concept does not mention independent broadcasters at all in an interview to DR two years ago. At the same time, two independent companies in the north, SM-1 and SEC Asia, were included in the first multiplex locally as part of a pilot project for free for the period of six months, but they were asked to pay to continue broadcasting in digital format. “Independent television and radio companies are unlikely to afford this amount, ”Akobirova said. Heads of regional private television companies believe that switching to digital broadcasting is far too expensive for them and they can cease to exist without state support.[[9]](#footnote-10)

**Criminal persecution of journalists**

According to the decision of the Sogd Province Court, Khayrullo Mirsaidov was released from custody on 22 of August. The regional court changed the sentence related to all three articles, he was previously sentenced to 12 years in prison. In particular, under articles 245 and 340, the deprivation of liberty was changed to a fine of 78 thousand somoni, and under article 346 of the Criminal Code of RT, the sentence issued Mirsaidov to correctional work for a period of 2 years. The court also obliged Mirsaidov not to leave the territory of Khujand and pay 20% of the salary in favour of the state budget. On October 15, during a closed court session, the Khujand City Court postponed the payment of a fine to two months, until December 15 of the current year, although Mirsaidov requested a delay until April 2019[[10]](#footnote-11).

In December 2018, Khayrullo Mirsaidov paid a fine of 78 thousand somoni ($ 8,200) appointed by the court of Khujand city court. According to him, lawyers will soon submit an application for the prescheduled cancelation of a criminal record[[11]](#footnote-12). On January 11, 2019, the Khujand City Court sentenced Khairullo Mirsaidov in absentia to 8 months in prison. The court of Khujand city found him guilty for failure to comply with the court decision and unauthorized travel outside of the country. The sentence against Khairullo Mirsaidov was made in his absence. Khairullo Mirsaidov over the telephone conversation with Radio Ozodi informed that he was forced to leave the republic because he could not find work at home and, accordingly, pay a fine. Bakhtiyor Nasrulloev, his lawyer, said that his client had left the country for a good reason, and he has submitted an appeal to change the court sentence. “I told the court that Khairullo Mirsaidov left the country for treatment. Such an explanation did not suffice the executors of the Sughd province. They claim that Mirsaidov left his place of residence without notifying anyone. They say that he had to show his medical card and get permission to leave,”. According to the lawyer, the court replaced two years of correctional work by 8 months of imprisonment. “According to the law, in case of evasion of correctional work, three days of work are replaced with a day of imprisonment”.[[12]](#footnote-13)

1. Source: <https://rus.ozodi.org/a/29715454.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Source: <http://www.nm.tj/society/52385-issledovanie-zhurnalistika-kak-chetvertaya-vlast-utratila-svoyu-rol-v-tadzhikistane.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Source: <https://rus.ozodi.org/a/29605603.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. Source: <http://avesta.tj/2018/12/10/es-i-ssha-vyrazhayut-obespokoennost-blokirovkoj-novostnyh-sajtov-v-tadzhikistane/> [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. Source: <https://ru.sputnik-tj.com/main/20181107/1027346775/tajikistan-zablokirovany-facebook-odnoklassniki-messendzhery-youtube.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. <https://news.tj/ru/news/tajikistan/economic/20181123/dozhili-v-tadzhikistane-hudshii-mobilnii-internet-v-mire> [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. Source: <https://rus.ozodi.org/a/29613064.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. Source: <https://rus.ozodi.org/a/29692518.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. Source: <https://news.tj/ru/news/tajikistan/society/20181121/televidenie-tadzhikistana-populyarnoe-no-otstaloe> [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. Source: <https://rus.ozodi.org/a/29544658.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
11. Source: <https://rus.ozodi.org/a/29652088.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
12. Source: <https://rus.ozodi.org/a/29706288.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-13)