**MASS MEDIA REVIEW FOR DECEMBER 2019 - JANUARY 202**

***Score of Tajikistan in international ratings on freedom of expression***

During the visit of the President of Tajikistan Emomali Rahmon to France international organisation “Reporters Without Borders” urged European leaders to raise the issue of violations of freedom of expression in the republic in a statement published on the organisation’s website.

“The decision of the French President Emmanuel Macron to meet Tajik President Emomali Rahmon provides a unique opportunity to raise the issue of freedom of information in Tajikistan, which is constantly ignored in the country and where the independent journalists are under pressure. More than 20 independent journalists have left the country since 2016. [...] Regardless of the economic and strategic benefits of trade and relations between France and Tajikistan, an open dialogue between partners should not lose sight of the freedom of the press, ”according to the statement.

The organisation noted that since 2015, Tajikistan has lost 45 positions in the global index of freedom of expression due to the massive increase in censorship in the Internet. Since 2018, the authorities monopolised access to the Internet and continued to arbitrarily block access to the news sites of Asia Plus, Ferghana, Akhbor news agencies, instant messengers, YouTube and even Google search engine. This is how the authorities respond to social or economic difficulties or public protests, the statement said.

“Reporters Without Borders” indicates that independent journalists, who continue their work, are facing intimidation and blackmail by intelligence agencies. Human rights activists asked to raise all these issues during the upcoming Paris Peace Forum on November 11-13, where the President of Tajikistan will participate.

“We urge all European leaders to condition their relations with Tajikistan with respect for freedom of expression,” underlined the statement.[[1]](#footnote-2)

Human Rights Watch in its annual report on the situation of human rights in the world noted the deterioration of the situation with human rights in Tajikistan in 2019.

The report states that “freedom of speech is severely restricted, “massive censorship of Internet content is carried out”[[2]](#footnote-3), authorities regularly block access to web pages and social networks: YouTube, Facebook, website of Radio Ozodi (Tajik Radio Liberty office) and others, there is a severe Internet censorship observed. Over 25 journalists were forced to leave the country as a result of the persecution in recent years.

HRW notes that Radio Ozodi has been under pressure from Tajik authorities since last autumn, the authorities refused to extend accreditation to 18 journalists and staff of the media corporation.[[3]](#footnote-4)

***Access to information***

Securing the right on access to information is not always in compliance with international requirements in Tajikistan, existing legislation is often violated. Civil activists submitted their proposals for amending legislation to the state. According to human rights activists, the right to receive information is guaranteed by the Constitution, but it is respected only formally. The deadlines for providing information on requests, including journalistic ones, are often violated.

Human rights activists indicate that violations are primarily related with legal inconsistencies. They note that there are discrepancies in the time frames specified for providing the information. For example, the legislation contains several formulations: “immediate provision of urgent information”, which implies that the information shall be provided in the period of “up to three business days after request was submitted”, “no later than thirty calendar days from the date when the request was received”, “delayed response is allowed only if if the requested document cannot be provided for review within a month”. Different terms in different laws lead to confusions.

It is still challenging to comprehend the notion of state secrets. Hence, normative acts, which outline which information is considered a state secret, are not published. State bodies and organisations may classify certain information as confidential.

Human rights activists consider that the absence of legal approaches for imposing sanctions or disciplinary sanctions for refusal to provide information is another challenge. Also, there is completely no information on the consideration of cases related to access to information.

Civil society addressed a request to the Anti-Corruption Department to conduct a state anti-corruption examination of draft normative legal acts on the implementation of international obligations to combat corruption. The Ombudsman asks civil society to assist in carrying out legislative monitoring in the Republic of Tajikistan in the field of access to information.

Activists also requested the head of the parliamentary committee to facilitate consideration by parliamentarians of the amendments and additions to the legislation submitted by civil society.[[4]](#footnote-5)

*The weekly newspaper “Takhti Kubod” (The Throne of Kubod),* official newspaper in Kabodiyan district in the Khatlon province of has published December issue with an empty front page as a protest against the refusal of local officials to cooperate with journalists.

The newspaper of the executive authority body if Kabodiyon district contains only eight columns and it is the only local media. Two part-time teachers are working there.

According to Ozodi, this is the first time when a state newspaper has protested in Tajikistan.

The editor-in-chief of Takhti Kubod, Adolat Sayfulloloeva, wrote on the second page of the weekly newspaper that “the first page is a mirror which shall help every official to see their reflection.” “This is a protest against the lack of objective information,” Sayfulloeva explained and complained that none of the local officials wrote a single line to the newspaper for the year.

Inaccessibility of officials is a common problem for the Tajik media. Government agencies and other institutions rarely respond promptly to journalists' requests, and often generally ignore them, despite the fact that press services or public relations departments are functioning in every state entity. Journalists have repeatedly complained about such trend to ignore the requests, as well as the use of accreditation of foreign journalists as a pressure instrument.

The National Association of Independent Media in Tajikistan (NANSMIT) conducted a survey in August 2019 and found that 96% of Tajik journalists are not satisfied with the situation with access to information in the republic. Both verbally and in written responses, press services complained that the responsible person is not in the workplace*.* [[5]](#footnote-6)

**Harassment/persecution of journalists and activists**

Activists, journalists and even entire commercial companies are openly discredited by the so-called “troll factory” in the Tajik segment of social networks. Tajik trolls are merciless - they use foul language and curse their victims. To feel the full impact of their blow, it is enough to write a critical article or write a post on social networks that does not correspond to the “permitted” rhetoric. Some victims have been harassed on social networks for many years and see no way out of this situation. At the same time, inexperienced users fall under the influence of fake accounts and false information that they publish.

Tajik journalist Humayro Bakhtiyor, who was forced to leave the republic in 2016 due to pressure from the authorities, says that the negative information about her has started spreading in the Internet back in 2013 ... Negative comments came from users who did not have photos or friends in their accounts. None of my friends knew their names, ”says Humayro ... After her departure from the country in 2016, the persecution did not stop, but on the contrary has intensified.

Another journalist who was trolled in social networks is Anora Sarkorova, who worked in Tajikistan as a correspondent for the Russian Air Force service for 18 years, but last year she was denied accreditation and left the country. She explains that it is extremely difficult to protect oneself in such a situation, because trolls work together, they promote negative comments to the top very quickly, and ordinary users who leave comments or like such posts become parts of the bullying.

“I think that every journalist or activist in Tajikistan should be prepared for such persecution, it can start at any moment, it’s enough to hurt someone’s interests and they will hurt you ...” Anora says.

In May 2019, Radio Ozodi (Tajik office of Radio Liberty) published an investigation on the work of the Tajik factory of trolls or bots, as they are also called. A bot is an automatic program that publishes posts and comments on social networks, in a broader sense, an account registered for certain purposes. Trolls are also fake accounts created with the aim of deceiving, misleading the public, humiliating individuals or organisations.

The system of trolls in social networks is called “Factory Chavob” (“Factory of Answers”). Ozodi article outlines key principle of their work as follows: ministries and departments have groups of employees who have several fake accounts in social networks. When it is necessary to respond in a certain way to an event, they write posts, share them and comment on each other posts, initiate discussions, trying to connect other users to these discussions, and thus promote their posts to the top. They act at the direction of their superiors, who, in turn, receive a command from the law enforcement agencies of Tajikistan. If orders are not followed, the participants of these groups will face severe punishment and can even be fired. Ozodi article indicated that there are at least 400 trolls in the republic who have about four thousand fake accounts in social networks at their disposal ...

The topic of media literacy started developing in Tajikistan just a couple of years ago, before that there were no discussions on it in the Republic.“Media Consulting”, public organisation that had recently conducted a study on “Media Consumption of the Population of the Republic of Tajikistan” stated that the ability to critically perceive information is not the strongest side of Tajik people was first mentioned in its recent study “Media Consumption of the Population of the Republic of Tajikistan” by the public organisation.[[6]](#footnote-7)

**Internet**

Dushanbe municipal authorities have increased the control over public free Wi-Fi in parks, restaurants and universities. The decision of the city administration was issued on November 15.

According to the decision, from now on, everyone who wants to use free Wi-Fi in public places of the capital will receive a code to connect, which will control the use of the Internet. To connect a free Wi-Fi, you need to specify the mobile phone number of the user to whom the code will be sent. Some citizens believe that the new order violates the right to free access to the global network.

Authorities said the decision "aims to protect information security and ensure safety of citizens."

State Unitary Enterprise “Smart City” informed that the data of Wi-Fi users is not shared with the authorities by the providers of internet services, however if the citizens visit forbidden web pages they will be requested to provide clarification. “When a subscriber visits a prohibited site, this will be visible. We can call this subscriber and ask our questions”, noted the SUE. Nonetheless, the information as to which agency and who shall conduct such interrogation is not provided.[[7]](#footnote-8)

In the afternoon of December 4, there was no Internet for 1.5 hours in Tajikistan. The reasons are still unknown. Even currently the internet availability is unstable. We tried to find out what was happening. “The potential reason is the accident at the Unified Switching Center (USC), which is used to pass all of the Internet traffic passes. If the problem was related to just one provider, then internet services of this provider would have been non available. Though, yesterday the Internet was disconnected for 1.5 hours throughout Tajikistan. That means USC has a problem,” stated an expert to AP on condition of anonymity. According to him, the mobile companies Tcell and Babilon did not have internet for 10 minutes. “According to some reports, they turned on the backup channel. The company “Tojnet” (a structural unit of OJSC “Tajiktelecom” under the Communication Service) did not have Internet for two hours,” the source said.

We couldn’t get comments from ISPs - they simply didn’t pick up the phone, even when dealing the call centres. Deputy Chairman of the Communications Service, Ilkhom Atoev denied any problems with the Internet.

Meanwhile, economic losses related to the lack of Internet during the specified time can reach more than $ 120 thousand.

So, according to the calculations of the NetBlocks Cost of Shutdown Tool (COST) program, if you completely disconnect the Internet in Tajikistan for one hour, then the loss will amount to 820.867 somoni ($ 84.825). That is, losses in 1.5 hours are $ 127.2 thousand. (The NetBlocks Cost of Shutdown Tool (COST) service estimates the economic consequences of a failure or blocking of the Internet access. The program performs calculations by country, type of failure and duration, combining thousands of different real-time indicators).

It shall be noted that since 2017, all companies receive Internet through USC gateway, which is controlled by the Communications Service.[[8]](#footnote-9)

Specialists from the Speedtest service published data on the speed and cost of the Internet in the countries of the world. In terms of mobile Internet speed, Tajikistan ranks 132nd out of 141 countries, and 108th out of 176 in terms of Internet speed. In Tajikistan, fixed broadband speed averages 21.1 Mb/s, and the speed of mobile Internet is even lower - 10.8 Mb/s. However, in both categories, Tajikistan ranked higher by three points.[[9]](#footnote-10)

1. Source: <https://fergana.agency/news/112349/?country=tj> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Source: <https://fergana.agency/news/114188/?country=tj> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Source: <https://rus.ozodi.org/a/hrw-china-prava-cheloveka-russia/30377906.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. Source: <http://ichrptj.org/ru/blog/grazhdanskoe-obshchestvo-prosit-ustranit-probely-v-zakonodatelstve> [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. Source: <https://fergana.agency/news/113725/?country=tj> [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. Source: <https://fergana.agency/articles/113201/?country=tj> [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. Source: <https://rus.ozodi.org/a/30281721.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. <https://www.asiaplustj.info/ru/news/tajikistan/society/20191205/to-est-to-net-ego-chto-proishodit-s-internetom-v-tadzhikistane> [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. Source: <https://tj.sputniknews.ru/science/20191210/1030376031/strany-medlenny-internet-Tajikistan.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-10)