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**Reports on human rights and freedom of expression situation in Tajikistan**

The US State Department criticised the human rights situation in Tajikistan in a report on the human rights situation in the world, presented on March 11, 2020. The authors included in the report censorship and blocking access to websites.

In particular, the report indicated that Tajik Foreign Ministry had withdrawn the accreditation of the journalist and videographer working in Ozodi, Barotali Nazarov (Barot Yusufi) on June 26, according to the representative of the authorities since he had mentioned the organisations banned in Tajikistan in his reports. Last year, six other Radio Ozodi journalists did not receive the accreditation and were unable to proceed with their professional activities. Until November 1, a total of 9 journalists and employees of Radio Ozodi were suspended from their professional activities as they did not have the accreditation issued by the Tajik Foreign Ministry.

On July 3 last year, Tajik Foreign Ministry accused Radio Liberty and, in particular, its Tajik service of propaganda of extremism, calling the site’s publications “scandalous”, “provocative”, “unfounded” and “contradicting journalistic ethics”.

On October 31 last year, the Foreign Ministry issued accreditation to seven radio journalists (six accreditations for six months, one for three months), while continuing to keep 11 applications for accreditation under consideration.

The US State Department also criticised Tajik authorities for regular attempts to block access to Facebook, YouTube, Google, Radio Ozodi and Asia-Plus.[[1]](#footnote-1)

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Tajikistan called the criticisms of the US "baseless" and "interference in the internal affairs of the country."[[2]](#footnote-2)

Reporters Without Borders (RSF), an international organisation, published a report on the Freedom of Press Index on April 21, 2020. The authors of the report believe that the coming decade will be crucial for the future of journalism due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The Freedom of Press Index annually evaluates the level of press freedom in 180 countries. Tajikistan ranks 161th in the freedom of press rating.

The report, in particular, states that Tajik authorities, have been blocking some news agencies sites starting in 2018. Last year, in particular, there were problems accessing Asia Plus portal through the news.tj and asiaplus.tj domains - subscribers could not access it even through a VPN (Virtual Private Network).

“Reporters Without Borders” notes that the denial of accreditation to journalists working for foreign media outlets restricts access to information. Last year, such a problem arose among journalists of Radio Freedom Europe/Radio Liberty in Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan.

Also, the authors of the RSF report indicatee that there is a clear correlation between the suppression of media freedom in response to the coronavirus pandemic and the country's rating in the index. For example, Reporters Without Borders accused China of grave violations of freedom of speech, which entailed fatal consequences.[[3]](#footnote-3)

The Justice for Journalists Foundation uploaded the report “Attacks on Journalists, Bloggers, and Media Workers of Azerbaijan and Central Asia”, studying the mechanisms of suppressing freedom of speech in Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. Analysis of 1464 incidents in these countries indicated that the main source of threats to media workers are government officials.[[4]](#footnote-4)

The report stated that Tajikistan leads the region in the number of media workers accused of extremism. The country is also characterised by the persecution of family members of journalists, persecution of journalists, interrogation, detention and even arrest

The authors of the report say that in the period 2017-2019, the number of attacks on journalists using legal and / or economic mechanisms, as well as threats of a non-physical nature and / or in cyberspace, has more than tripled.

The report identifies the types of attacks/threats against journalists in Tajikistan. The dominating type is accusations of extremism, connections with terrorists, criminal prosecution and imprisonment. Most often, such threats come from government officials, acceding to the report. At the same time, it is noted that the increase in non-physical threats and/or threats in cyberspace in 2017-2019 by the authorities was associated with two important political events in Tajikistan - parliamentary elections (held in March) and presidential elections (scheduled for November 2020 )

The authors emphasise that in most cases the target of the attacks are not the journalists themselves, but their relatives, who are subjected to various persecutions, including interrogations and searches ....

It was also noted that articles on any topics related to the Islamic Renaissance Party banned in Tajikistan is prohibited, and journalists who raise this topic are subjected to pressure in the form of allegations of links with terrorists.

The report said that Tajikistan seriously restricts the work of the media on a legislative basis. In particular, article 137 of the Criminal Code prohibits “slander” of the President, and article 330 prohibits journalists from insulting officials. Journalists who write critical articles are harassed and may be charged with various crimes. Therefore, most Tajik journalists practice self-censorship.

It is also noted that the government controls most printing houses, newspapers and broadcasted media in the country. In particular, as of February 2017, printing houses and printed media can be registered with the Ministry of Culture only with the written consent of the State Committee for National Security of Tajikistan.

In July 2018, the Parliament of Tajikistan adopted a new law on operational-search activity, which allows law enforcement agencies to legally receive data on online activity and text messages in the country. In August 2018, Tajik Ministry of Internal Affairs created a new agency to combat extremism on the Internet, emphasising that this is a priority for the government.

Another way of pressure is to shut down the media and block the Internet pages, depriving domains and withdrawing accreditation …[[5]](#footnote-5)

**Arrest of a journalist**

Daler Sharipov, a journalist was called by telephone (without prior delivery of the summons) for interrogation to the state security department of the Shomansur district of Dushanbe and after the interrogation was detained on 28 of January. The same day, police officers searched the journalist’s house and seized all books in Arabic.

On January 30, Daler Sharipov was taken to the Ismoili Somoni district court, where he was charged. The court decided to place Daler Sharipov under preliminary arrest for two months. According to the information provided the journalist was accused of inciting national, racial, localism and religious hatred (part 1 of article 189 of the Criminal Code of the Republic of Tajikistan). The punishment foreseen under this article is up to 5 years in prison. According to his spouse, they did not exert pressure on the journalist.

It has been suggested that the arrest of the journalist is associated with his active criticism of the authorities' policies. According to some users of social networks, the arrest of Daler Sharipov is associated with the publication of his book Muhammad and Terrorism. A Tajik scientist who wrote the preface to Dahler’s book said that “this book cites expressed speeches of famous writers of the East and West about the prophet, which were already published or previously and nothing more.”

The press center of the Prosecutor General’s Office of Tajikistan reported that Daler Sharipov “published more than 200 articles and notes of extremist content aimed at inciting religious intolerance in the period 2013-2019...”.[[6]](#footnote-6)

The European Congress of Tajik Journalists and Bloggers issued a statement which called Sharipov’s detention unlawful and stressed that Sharipov was trying to analyse the premises of radicalism in society.

Journalists called Daler's arrest a heavy blow on freedom of speech in the country.[[7]](#footnote-7)

The public organisation "Independent Center for the Protection of Human Rights" provided Daler Sharipov with a lawyer. After the journalist was transferred to the Dushanbe city department of the State Committee for National Security on January 29, 2020, lawyer Abdurakhmon Sharipov presented a warrant for participation in the case and a corresponding letter to the State Committee for National Security of Tajikistan in order to gain access to his client, however, the access was not granted. Human rights activists noted that the authorities had no right to detain Sharipov during interrogation for three days.

On February 3, civil society organisations and the journalistic community in Tajikistan issued a statement expressing serious concern over the arrest of independent journalist Daler Sharipov. The statement was signed by 30 civil society organisations and journalists.

On March 30, SNSC investigators completed an investigation of the journalist’s case.[[8]](#footnote-8)

The trial of Daler Sharipov took place on April 15 and 16 in ​​Shomansur district court in Dushanbe. The lawyer, witnesses and parents of the defendant were admitted to the trial. The judge denied the presence of media representatives and civil activists in the courtroom in connection with the recommendations of the World Health Organization to prevent the spread of the coronavirus COVID-19, although earlier it was reported that the hearing will be held in open mode.[[9]](#footnote-9) Journalists and civic activists expressed grave concerns with the court decision to prevent them from entering the courtroom.

By the decision of the Shohmansur district court of Dushanbe, the journalist was sentenced to one year in prison serving a sentence in a colony. The journalist admitted that he made a mistake “in the part that concerns my book, where I quoted the prohibited literature recognised in Tajikistan as extremist ...” He also added that he did not complain about the court’s decision.[[10]](#footnote-10)

The day after the verdict was announced, 15 civil society organisations and individual Tajik activists urged the authorities to secure Sharipov’s “expeditious and unconditional release".[[11]](#footnote-11)

On April 28, Daler Sharipov’s father, Abdumannon Sharipov, wrote an appeal to the Ombudsman requesting to check his son’s health in prison due to his son’s complaint on heart ache and requesting access to professional medical care.[[12]](#footnote-12)

A number of international human rights organisations (Amnesty International, International Partnership for Human Rights and Norwegian Helsinki Committee), demanded the authorities to prevent torture against journalist Daler Sharipov during the investigation of the case.

According to human rights activists, Daler Sharipov is one of the few independent journalists who have stayed in the country, and "the charges against him demonstrate lack of respect for freedom of expression in Tajikistan." Earlier, the Committee for the Protection of Journalists, OSCE Representative for Freedom of Press, Harlem Desir, urged Tajik authorities to release Daler Sharipov immediately.[[13]](#footnote-13)

The international human rights organisation "Reporters Without Borders" also requested Tajik authorities to release journalist Daler Sharifov immediately. Reporters Without Borders called the actions of Tajik authorities absurd.[[14]](#footnote-14)

Time magazine has published a list of 10 journalists who have been persecuted or killed in their own countries. Tajik journalist Daler Sharipov was included in the Most Urgent list as of March 10. The second line of the list and a short article titled "Tajikistan silenced independent media before the March 1 elections" are dedicated to journalist Daler Sharipov.[[15]](#footnote-15)

Daler Sharipov was previously hosting the talk show Muoshirat (Ethics of Conversation) and the Katrae az Bahr (Drop from the Sea) programs on the state-owned television channel Safina. In 2012, he initiated the creation of an anti-local government organisation called “Kadam bakadam” (“Step by Step”), but authorities refused to register it. In the same year, unknown persons attacked the journalist, and he spent several days in the hospital. The attackers were never found.[[16]](#footnote-16)

**Access to information related to coronavirus pandemic**

President of Radio Freedom Europe/Radio Liberty Corporation, Jamie Fly, in a letter to Tajik Foreign Minister Sirojidin Mukhriddin expressed indignation at the slander that the Tajik government and pro-government media spread about the local branch of Radio Ozodi, and also expressed disappointment at the ongoing attempts of the Tajik government to intervene in activities Tajik branch of Radio Ozodi.[[17]](#footnote-17)

“At present, when journalists of the Tajik RFE/RL service are trying to cover the topic of the coronavirus outbreak and fill the information vacuum, the Government of Tajikistan impedes their efforts and even restrains them,” stated Jamie Fly in a letter sent on March 30.

 “We assume that the government blocked the website of Radio Ozodi last week due to the prompt and objective coverage of the topic of coronavirus, and it continues to attempt to constantly interfere in this process,” writes Jamie Fly.

Interference in the activities of Radio Ozodi takes place in parallel with the refusal to issue accreditation to some Tajik journalists.[[18]](#footnote-18)

In early April, two local journalists were called in for interrogation by the police after they asked awkward questions to health officials during the press briefing.[[19]](#footnote-19)

On April 21, 18 public organisations and individual civil society activists urged the Ministry of Healthcare of Tajikistan to clarify the epidemiological situation in the country in connection with the progressive pandemic of coronavirus in the world and urged the Ministry of Healthcare to publish statistics on pneumonia, tuberculosis, typhoid fever for the first quarter of 2019 and 2020 to carry out comparative analysis.[[20]](#footnote-20)

On April 23, in response to a request provided by civil society organisations, the Ministry of Healthcare and Social Protection of the Population of the Republic of Tajikistan published statistics on the incidence of pneumonia for the first quarters of 2019 and 2020, but did not provide statistics on mortality related to pneumonia, and also noted that the epidemiological situation in the country is “relatively calm".[[21]](#footnote-21)

Until April 30, Tajikistan remained one of the few countries in the world where no cases of coronavirus were detected according to authorities. Several deaths and crowded hospitals in recent weeks have sparked rumours in the community about the coronavirus spread in the country. However, the Ministry of Healthcare denied all these rumours, accusing journalists and media of spreading false information, promising to hold the media accountable for violating professional ethics.[[22]](#footnote-22)

The WHO Permanent Representative in Tajikistan, Galina Perfilieva, also confirmed the absence of registered cases of coronavirus in Tajikistan[[23]](#footnote-23), however, in an interview with the Russian newspaper “Kommersant” on April 22, after the information about the upcoming visit of the WHO mission to Tajikistan was announced, Perfilieva noted that “it is impossible to give robust assurances that there are no cases of the virus in the country.”[[24]](#footnote-24)

On April 30, authorities reported identifying 15 cases of coronavirus in the country (5 cases in Dushanbe and 10 cases in Sogd province). This statement was made on the eve of the forthcoming visit of the World Health Organization (WHO) expert mission to Tajikistan.[[25]](#footnote-25)

*Access to judicial information*

During the press conference on the results of the past year (2019), the President of the Supreme Court of the Republic of Tajikistan, Shermuhammad Shokhiyon, said that the Supreme Court of the Republic of Tajikistan is considering the introduction of e-justice as part of the ongoing judicial reform to ensure openness and access to information.

When asked by journalists about the closed court sessions, access to information, ban on photo and video reports from the court sessions, audio recording of trials and lack of information on the Internet of the courts sessions, Shokhiyon replied that steps are being taken as part of the judicial reform to ensure the independence and openness of the courts.

“All acts, with the exception of closed trial cases, will be posted on the websites of the courts. The Supreme Court is currently working on this, ”said Shermuhammad Shohiyon.”[[26]](#footnote-26)

**Registration of electronic devices**

Government Resolution No. 208 “On the Procedure for the Registration of Mobile Telecommunication Devices and Determining the Functions of the State System for Identifying Mobile Telecommunication Means” was approved as of March 31, 2020.

All IMEI devices located in the country are subject to registration. The abbreviation IMEI stands for “international mobile equipment identifier”. The IMEI code is needed so that mobile operators and law enforcement authorities know that the smartphone or other device belongs to a certain user, thus there is a need for registration.

All electronic devices that operate using SIM cards and the Internet are subjected to the registration of IMEI. This includes not only mobile phones and tablets, but also computers, smart watches, smart TVs, e-books and more. An exception is provided for devices that are in the regime of international roaming in Tajikistan.

According to the government Resolution, the Communications Agency should determine the system operator and identify private investment by June 1. The system operator is a legal entity that will develop state identification system and carry out IMEI registration.

The first six months, registration will be carried out for free, and then each person will have to pay for the registration of their IMEI.

The Tajik authorities provided somewhat ambiguous argumentation backing their decision: "The decision was made in the interests of ensuring the security and defence of the state when conducting particularly important socio-political events, the system operator, upon request of law enforcement agencies, suspends and resumes the operation of mobile electric communication devices." As the deputy of the Tajik parliament explained to Asia-Plus, “especially important socio-political events” implies the upcoming elections.[[27]](#footnote-27)

**Prohibited web pages**

By the decision of the Supreme Court of Tajikistan, the online news Akhbor.com was blocked. The site nahzat.ru is also under the ban. Both sources are recognised as “serving terrorist and extremist organisations: the Islamic Renaissance Party (IRPT) and the National Alliance of Tajikistan (NAT), which are banned in Tajikistan. On March 19, the court decision has entered into force.

The independent news site "Akhbor" was created by immigrants from Tajikistan, its edition is based in the Czech Republic. It often prints insider information from its own sources about corrupt Tajik officials, cases of arbitrariness of the authorities, publishes statements and complaints of citizens. The site has been blocked for more than two years In Tajikistan (until now without a corresponding court decision). Earlier, the founder and editor-in-chief of Akhbor, Mirzo Salimpur, repeatedly stated about the persecution and pressure exert on him and his relatives.

In 2019, the Supreme Court of Tajikistan decided to block about 40 websites and pages on social networks belonging to organisations prohibited in the Republic, including the IRPT and NAT.

The list of banned in Tajikistan includes about 20 organisations and movements recognised as terrorist and extremist.[[28]](#footnote-28)

**Internet**

In the framework of the Digital Economy Concept, the Government, has recognised that poor Internet speed as an obstacle to the digital development of Tajikistan.

According to the authors, the most widespread is a 2G network , especially in rural areas, where 73% of the population resides. Expanding 3G/4G coverage may lead to increased Internet coverage. Broadband coverage in the country is one of the lowest in the region. The authors indicate that access to broadband is limited due to high prices for customers, and it is noted that it is one of the highest in the world.

... Obligatory registration of all mobile and broadband subscribers and social networking platforms affected the income of telecom operators.

... In the past decade, Tajikistan ranked first in Central Asia in terms of the development of mobile services. ... After 13 years, this is nothing but a sad memory ....

According to experts, the reasons for the aggravated situation with the Internet are as follows:

at the end of December 2015, the Government signed a Decree “On a Unified Switching Board for Electrical Communications”, which prescribes that all incoming and outgoing traffic of international telecommunication and Internet services pass through a single center of the state operator “Tajiktelecom”. In December 2016, several mobile companies were fined for tax arrears. According to experts, there was a decrease in the profit gained by all players in the ICT market by $ 50 million per year in the period 2012-2018.

Since 2018, OJSC Tajiktelecom has been the dominant player in the telecommunications market of the country. All Internet traffic passes through the gateway of the Unified Switching Board, which is technically managed by OJSC Tajiktelecom. This has led to the fact that the speed of the Internet has dropped significantly.

The tax burden, which consists of 18% VAT, 5% excise tax, license fee - 2.5%, turnover tax - 1%, road tax - 1%, payment for room service, also puts pressure on mobile companies. This does not include expenses on salaries for employees, maintenance of equipment to improve the quality of communications and maintenance of company buildings, prices for electricity, utilities and etc.

Experts agree that no Concepts will help to improve the situation until some of the above decisions are reconsidered. [[29]](#footnote-29)

1. Source: <https://rus.ozodi.org/a/30482483.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Source: <https://rus.ozodi.org/a/30486134.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Source: <https://rus.ozodi.org/a/30567970.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Source: <https://jfj.fund/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Joint-CA-report-RUS-1.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Source: <https://asiaplustj.info/ru/news/tajikistan/society/20200415/issledovanie-zhurnalistov-v-tadzhikistane-presleduyut-travyat-zaderzhivayut> [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Source: <https://rus.ozodi.org/a/30416885.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Source: <https://rus.ozodi.org/a/30416885.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Source: <https://rus.ozodi.org/a/30517796.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Source: <http://ichrptj.org/ru/blog/zayavlenie-grazhdanskogo-obshchestva-i-zhurnalistskogo-soobshchestvo-v-svyazi-s-arestom-dalera> [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Source: <https://asiaplustj.info/ru/news/tajikistan/society/20200417/v-seti-poyavilos-video-suda-nad-tadzhikskim-zhurnalistom> [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Source: <https://rus.ozodi.org/a/30562615.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Source: <http://ichrptj.org/ru/blog/otec-tadzhikskogo-zhurnalista-dalera-sharipova-obratilsya-k-upolnomochennomu-po-pravam> [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Source: <https://rus.ozodi.org/a/30434684.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Source: <https://rus.ozodi.org/a/30549965.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Source: <https://rus.ozodi.org/a/30466827.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Source: <https://asiaplustj.info/ru/news/tajikistan/laworder/20200131/advokati-zhurnalista-dalera-sharifova-napravili-zhalobu-v-sud-goroda-dushanbe>

    <https://rus.ozodi.org/a/30407029.html>

    <https://rus.ozodi.org/a/30411593.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Source: <https://fergana.agency/news/116675/?country=tj> [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Source: <https://rus.ozodi.org/a/30522010.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Source: <https://rus.ozodi.org/a/tajikistan-coronavirus-article/30584780.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Source: <https://rus.ozodi.org/a/30567351.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Source: <https://rus.ozodi.org/a/30577678.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Source: http://moh.tj/министерство-глубоко-обеспокоено-пу/?lang=ru [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Source: <https://fergana.news/news/116667/> [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Source: <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/4327770> [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Source: <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/4328921> [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Source: <http://ichrptj.org/ru/blog/verhovnyy-sud-rt-budut-predprinyaty-shagi-po-vnedreniyu-elektronnogo-sudoproizvodstva> [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Source: <https://asiaplustj.info/ru/news/tajikistan/society/20200417/v-interesah-bezopasnosti-pochemu-vlasti-sobirayutsya-registrirovat-imei> [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Source: <https://fergana.ru/news/116937/?country=tj> [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Source: <https://asiaplustj.info/ru/news/tajikistan/economic/20200205/internetu-v-tadzhikistane-ne-dayut-razvivatsya-sozdavaya-iskusstvennie-pregradi> [↑](#footnote-ref-29)