

TAJIKISTAN



**MEDIA
SUSTAINABILITY
INDEX**

2019

Tracking Development
of Sustainable
Independent Media
Around the World



TAJIKISTAN

AT A GLANCE

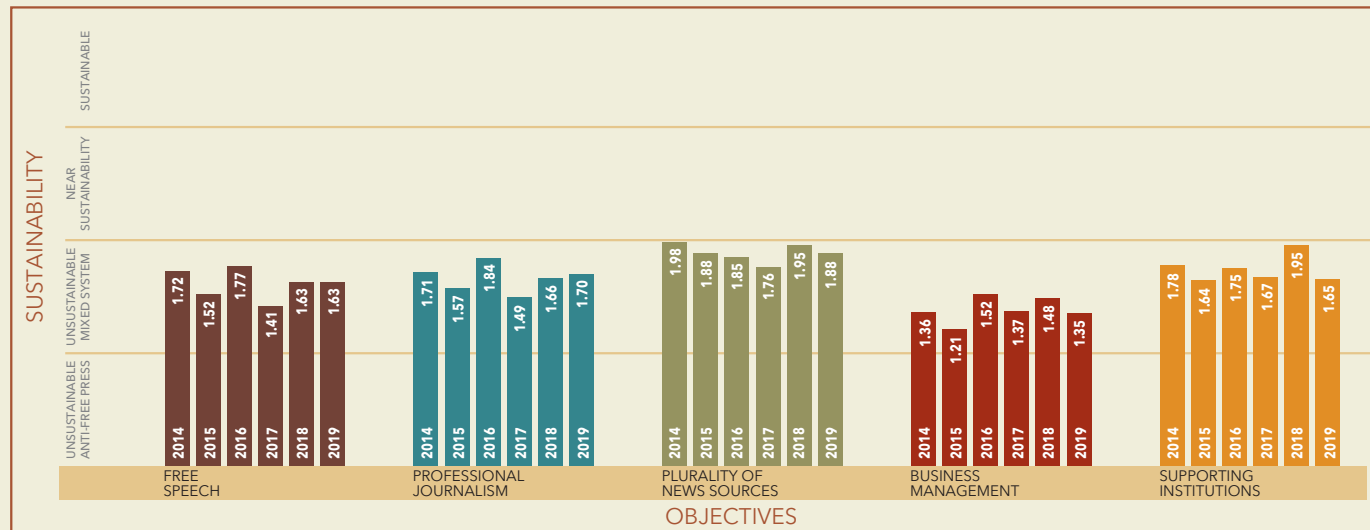
GENERAL

- **Population:** 9.1 million as of the end of 2018 (Statistics Agency under the President of the Republic of Tajikistan)
- **Capital city:** Dushanbe
- **Ethnic groups (% of population):** Tajik 85.4%, Uzbek 12.5%, Russian 0.4%, Kyrgyz 0.8%, other 2.1 % (2010 Population and Housing Census, Republic of Tajikistan)
- **Religions (% of population):** Sunni Muslims 90%, Ismaili Muslims 6%, other faiths 4% (State Committee on Religious Affairs)
- **Language (% of population):** Tajik (official), Russian (formalized in the Constitution as the language of interethnic communication)
- **GDP:** \$7.3 billion
- **GDP per capita:** \$802
- **Literacy rate:** Adult: male 99.8%, female 99.72%; Youth (15–24): male 99.86%, female 99.8% (UNESCO Institute for Statistics)
- **President or top authority:** Emomali Rahmon (elected on November 6, 2013)

MEDIA-SPECIFIC

- **Number of active media outlets:** 371 newspapers (262 non-state), 243 magazines (130 non-state) (Ministry of Culture), television stations: 40 (31 non-state), radio: 30 (20 non-state) (CIA World Factbook, 2016)
- **Broadcasting ratings:** Top television channels are Jahonnamo, Shabakai Yakum, Safina, Bakhoriston, Sinamo, Varzish, Shakhnavoz, and Dushanbe
- **Newspaper circulation statistics:** The largest independent (private) newspapers are *Asia-Plus*, *The USSR*, *Reklamnaya Gazeta*, *Faraj*, and *Samak*. The largest state-run newspapers are *Jumhuriyat*, *Sadoi Mardum*, and *Minbari Halq*
- **News agencies:** 11 news agencies are registered, 1 governmental, and 10 non-governmental. Top news agencies are *Asia-Plus*, *Khovar*, *Avesta*, *TajikistanTimes* (*pressa.tj*), *TAG news* (*tajikta.tj*), *Faraj*, *Sugd News* (*sugdnews.tj*)
- **Annual advertising revenue in media sector:** \$6 million (Statistics Agency, Government of Tajikistan)
- **Internet usage:** 1.705 million (CIA World Factbook, 2016)

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SCORE KEY

Unsustainable, Anti-Free Press (0-1): Country does not meet or only minimally meets objectives. Government and laws actively hinder free media development, professionalism is low, and media-industry activity is minimal.

Unsustainable Mixed System (1-2): Country minimally meets objectives, with segments of the legal system and government opposed to a free media system. Evident progress in free-press advocacy, increased professionalism, and new media businesses may be too recent to judge sustainability.

Near Sustainability (2-3): Country has progressed in meeting multiple objectives, with legal norms, professionalism, and the business environment supportive of independent media. Advances have survived changes in government and have been codified in law and practice. However, more time may be needed to ensure that change is enduring and that increased professionalism and the media business environment are sustainable.

Sustainable (3-4): Country has media that are considered generally professional, free, and sustainable, or to be approaching these objectives. Systems supporting independent media have survived multiple governments, economic fluctuations, and changes in public opinion or social conventions.



Tajikistan's overall score dropped from 1.73 in last year's study to 1.65 this year. Three out of the five objectives studied by the MSI saw declines, with only a modest increase in the score for Objective 2 (Professional Journalism), while the score for Objective 1 (Freedom of Speech) held steady at 1.63. The country remains in the unsustainable/mixed system category. Panelists cited a number of issues that challenge the health of the country's media sector, including: a corrupt judicial system, frequent pressure on media outlets and journalists from government bodies and law enforcement, pervasive self-censorship, narrowed space for dissenting views, a weak economy, and lack of effective professional organizations.

One of the major events in Tajikistan in 2018 was the launch of the Rogun Hydropower Plant's first turbine, which eliminated rolling blackouts in Tajikistan's provinces. Once completed, it will become the largest hydropower plant in Central Asia. Also, relations with Uzbekistan improved: the borders were opened and visa-free travel for Tajikistani and Uzbekistani citizens was introduced. Tajikistan's parliament is developing a unified information code to replace all existing laws regarding mass media to regulate all issues related to information, communication, and information protection.

Terrorism continues to be one of the major national security threats. In July, a group of ISIS and Islamic Renaissance Party terrorists attacked seven foreign cyclists who were traveling from Dangara to Dushanbe, killing four of the cyclists. The leader of the attack was sentenced to life imprisonment. Moreover, for the first time in history, a Tajikistan citizen was held criminally liable for visiting and leaving comments on extremist-terrorist websites, and sentenced to three years in prison. Because of the threat of terrorism, the State Committee for National Security (GKNB) decreed that Tajikistan citizens can now have only one SIM card in their mobile phone; only cell phone company service centers can now sell these cards, and the price for one card has risen dramatically. About seven million people in the country are subscribers of mobile operators, and 25 to 28 percent use the Internet through their phones.

Journalists increasingly complain about frequent pressure from local, tax, and prosecutorial authorities and law enforcement agencies. According to the MSI

panelists, the government maintains total control over private media under the pretext of fighting terrorism, resulting in media outlets applying strict self-censorship. Traditional methods of curbing freedom of speech and information still occur through the hacking journalists' and civil society activists' e-mail and social network accounts, creating fake accounts and tapping telephone lines. Dangers also include the hacking into a users' personal data and physical surveillance through access to geolocation data, Internet protocol (IP) addresses, and other digital tracking tools.

The role of social networks in Tajikistan has increased; they have become a place for free expression of opinions, different political positions, and criticism of authorities. However, information access is hampered by the ongoing practice of extrajudicial blocking of Internet sites to independent media and social networks. In 2018, Facebook, YouTube, Odnoklassniki, VKontakte, Asia-Plus, and Ozodi were blocked six times with no reason given.

Because of a corrupt judicial system, state bodies and influential individuals can easily prosecute journalists and the media in civil law proceedings. Last year, there were no high-profile cases against the media and journalists, although this can be explained by the fact that journalists themselves have become more cautious. Since October 2018, the Independent Center for the Protection of Human Rights resumed, providing representatives of the media with free legal protection and legal analysis of their material before publication, thus minimizing possible risks.

**OBJECTIVE 1:
FREEDOM OF
SPEECH**

1.63

Article 30 of the Constitution of Tajikistan guarantees free speech, but the reality is that these freedoms are continually trampled. Power is concentrated in just a few hands, and the judiciary is corrupt. As a result, fair treatment under the judicial system is not expected, and the rule of law has not yet been established in all areas.

Registration and licensing procedures for media outlets have remained unchanged. Licensing and registration are compulsory only for electronic mass media, television, and radio. All legal entities are registered with tax authorities. Print media is entered in the registry of active media organizations through a certificate issued by the Ministry of Culture, whereas television and radio companies operate on the basis of a license issued by the Committee for Television and Radio Broadcasting. “Legislation on broadcasting and telecommunications, especially on licensing, remains undemocratic. Independent TV channels are licensed by the State Committee for Television and Radio Broadcasting, which is itself a player in the field of service provision. The mechanism is not transparent, the possibility of appeal is nonexistent,” commented Abdumalik Kadyrov, director of Internews Network.

Because of fierce competition between state-owned and independent media, market entrance conditions worsen every year. Today, it is almost impossible to register new independent media that would criticize the government, since a reference certificate from the GKNB is required for registration. “Independent media outlets have to register as a separate enterprise, usually as a

limited liability company,” said Nabi Yusupov, director of Media Consulting. The conditions for entering the media market are the same as for any other business structure, and outlets need authorized capital. In addition, registration is impossible without a significant investment in equipment.

There are few obstacles for starting up print media in Tajikistan; however, current economic conditions make them insufficiently profitable or even unprofitable, and thus many print media have curtailed their activities. For television and radio companies, licensing still serves as a lever of pressure. “A license in this country is issued in exchange for loyalty within a corrupt framework, which practically makes it impossible to carry out an independent [editorial] policy,” commented Makhmudjon Dodobaev, director of SM-1, an independent TV and radio station. Media in Tajikistan do not receive any tax breaks, even though the journalism community has repeatedly requested such relief from the government. “Obtaining a license in all areas of the media and communications requires a large amount of collateral capital and disclosure of the sources of income—the main reason and pretext for refusing to issue a license,” said Khurshed Niyozov, director of the Center for Journalistic Investigations and chief editor of *Faraj*.

When journalists are illegally persecuted or pressured, the perpetrators remain hidden because officials close ranks and cover for each other. In cases where freedom of speech is violated, the instigating actions or inactions of officials may be appealed to higher authorities or to the courts. However, doubts exist regarding the independence of the courts, as court decisions in cases involving freedom of speech violations are not always impartial. Yusupov believes that judicial and law enforcement authorities are constantly interfering with the mechanisms in place to implement the

law by exerting pressure on journalists and media editors.

In July, a Khujand city court sentenced journalist Khayrullo Mirsaidov, who recently headed the national KVN (Club of the Funny and Inventive) comedy team, to 12 years in prison. He was detained shortly after the publication of his letter accusing a high-ranking official from the Sughd region of corruption and was found guilty of “misappropriation or embezzlement of public funds,” “falsification of documents,” and “deliberately false denunciations.” He was only released after protests by international organizations (among others) but was required to pay an \$8,500 fine. The Tajik Prosecutor’s Office stated in its official press release that the discussion and criticism of the court’s verdict by the media “can be interpreted as obstruction of justice which goes beyond journalist ethics.” Mirsaidov currently resides in Europe and does not plan on returning to Tajikistan.

“The progressive part of society believes that an independent media brings about great benefits to the state and society, whereas the opposing side thinks that a media that criticizes authorities only exacerbates situations in society and introduces antagonism between different social strata,” said Yusupov.

The media, including independent outlets, are used by security services to defame undesirable individuals or groups. Independent bloggers and human rights activists are under pressure, and their voices have practically disappeared from the media, having been replaced by fake postings in social networks and bizarre websites used for propaganda

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or libel against civil society activists and the opposition. The blocking of websites, news portals, and social networks is increasingly being used to exert pressure on media and independent voices.

The surveillance of journalists—inspecting their mail and monitoring their correspondence in social networks and “likes” for particular publications—has increased, and journalists are illegally persecuted by authorities who place pressure on their elderly parents and relatives; this includes journalists who have left Tajikistan for various reasons. Journalists’ presence on social networks, especially Facebook, are often targeted for attacks.

Legal and social norms protect and promote free speech and access to public information.

FREE-SPEECH INDICATORS

- ▶ Legal and social protections of free speech exist and are enforced.
- ▶ Licensing of broadcast media is fair, competitive, and apolitical.
- ▶ Market entry and tax structure for media are fair and comparable to other industries.
- ▶ Crimes against journalists or media outlets are prosecuted vigorously, but occurrences of such crimes are rare.
- ▶ State or public media do not receive preferential legal treatment, and law guarantees editorial independence.
- ▶ Libel is a civil law issue; public officials are held to higher standards, and offended parties must prove falsity and malice.
- ▶ Public information is easily accessible; right of access to information is equally enforced for all media and journalists.
- ▶ Media outlets have unrestricted access to information; this is equally enforced for all media and journalists.
- ▶ Entry into the journalism profession is free, and government imposes no licensing, restrictions, or special rights for journalists.

All the panelists believe that authorities make every effort to divide public opinion. “The progressive part of society believes that an independent media brings about great benefits to the state and society, whereas the opposing side thinks that a media that criticizes authorities only exacerbates situations in society and introduces antagonism between different social strata,” said Yusupov.

An independent editorial policy for state-owned media is impractical, because they are all controlled by the government.

Access to information is one of the main problems for journalists. “It is very hard for independent journalists to obtain access to government documents, especially regarding government expenditures and credit certificates,” said Kadyrov. The panelists note that the professionalism of journalists and the availability of personal connections in the government remain a decisive factor in obtaining information.

Ministries and departments, especially security and law enforcement agencies, are represented by the state-owned news agency Khovar, and other media just republish their information. Almost all ministries and agencies respond to media questions through written request only. Some ministries and departments do work in a timely manner, but if an agency has not responded within three days, a complaint can be filed against it. “Even so, the agency is still clearly late in providing time-sensitive information; their feed usually consists of three to four news items on Tajikistan, and the rest is foreign news,” said Jamila Huseynova, editor of *The USSR*. Negmatullo Mirsaidov, editor of *Varorud*, observed that there is no access to government documents.

“Security and law enforcement agencies are practically closed to the media; the heads of ministries and departments are inaccessible to

non-government media. Interviews with ministers, the speakers of Parliament, the prime minister, or the president are not to be found on radio, television, or the pages of the printed press,” said Zebo Tadjibaeva, executive director of Asia-Plus. According to Huseynova, a double standard has long been applied to government and non-government media, resulting in the media losing their watchdog function.

Although the Law on Press explains how to protect the sources of confidential information, in reality, security officers and law enforcement agencies often pressure journalists to disclose their sources of information to them. According to the National Association of Independent Mass Media in Tajikistan (NANSMIT), in March and July 2018 two journalists were summoned to law enforcement agencies, where they were required to disclose their sources of information concerning corruption in prosecution authorities and inform on their colleagues. Such cases have a negative effect on freedom of speech and expression.

Authorities often attempt to restrict journalists’ access to information that is socially important. “It is very difficult for journalists who practice investigative journalism, especially those covering religious extremism. For instance, the authorities created all types of obstacles for two journalists, Jamshed Marupov and Orz Bedimogov from Khujand and Kurgan-Tube (Bokhtar), who were conducting investigations for the Institute for War and Peace Reporting [IWPR],” reported Lola Khalikjanova, IWPR’s program manager.

Illegal blocking of sites and social networks by the Tajik Communication Service has continued. “We have repeatedly stated that restricting access to information resources on the Internet as alternative sources of information is a violation of citizens’ constitutional rights and have stressed the need

to develop mechanisms for pretrial settlement of content on the Internet,” said Nuriddin Karshiboev, the chair of NANSMIT and the director of Tajik Press Council. Internet service providers violate the rights of users out of fear of losing their businesses. Access to such sites such as Asia-Plus, Ozodi, Facebook, YouTube, Odnoklassniki, and Instagram are regularly blocked. According to the GKNB, more than 80 sites are on Tajikistan’s banned website list.

Access to international news is always open, owing to multiple TV and radio channels, as well as Internet sites. Although the cost of Internet service is high in relation to average individual income, satellite and cable TV are extensively used to obtain alternative information from abroad.

No professional training is required to start working in journalism. The new Law on Mass Media clearly defines a journalist as a media employee who works as a staff member or by contract and who is a member of the Union of Journalists of Tajikistan. Although anyone is free to become a journalist, a practicing journalist who has published critical pieces may end up on a list of “unreliable persons,” which means that law enforcement and special services will constantly monitor the journalist’s activities, putting at risk the journalist’s job in the media. Journalists are trained in eight universities throughout the country, but very few of them are professionally ready or desire to work in the media. All panelists note that future journalists lack literacy and experience, and there are language barriers.

OBJECTIVE 2: PROFESSIONAL JOURNALISM

1.70

Journalists are trying to be more objective and use several sources of information when they cover events in the media. “However, out of fear, almost all independent journalists apply self-censorship or refuse to comment under various pretexts,” said Khalikjanova.

The lack of a broad expert community results in a lower professional level of published materials. Journalists in the independent media try to adhere to at least some standards when they report on events in Tajikistan. “However, due to constant pressure, they are forced to conform to the rules dictated by the GKNB staff,” said Tadjibaeva.

Tajikistan has adopted ethical standards for journalist activities. The Media Council—which has been in place for nine years, incorporates 88 editorial offices of newspapers, magazines, electronic media, and media organizations—oversees the implementation of ethical standards for journalists; accepts appeals from interested parties; discusses these appeals at its meetings; and comes up with advisory decisions that are subsequently published in the media. These standards, based on international experience, are applied by both journalists and associations of journalist organizations. “All the media outlets that signed them subsequently ignored them due to the circumstances they were in. Today, almost all independent media outlets are forced to publish defamatory materials against persons out of favor of the authorities. This year, both state-owned and a number of independent media in Tajikistan have been actively used as a tool in the information war declared against Iran by Tajik authorities,” commented Tadjibaeva.

According to Huseynova, official sources of information are scarce because government bodies are almost completely closed to the independent media. Key state officials rarely agree to be interviewed by journalists. Yet all the panelists believed that the journalists themselves are partially responsible for this, as they often misattribute quotes or pull them out of context, thus changing the essence of the information provided by an official. It is often difficult and sometimes impossible to verify information, even if a journalist wants to. Attempts to officially verify information obtained from unofficial sources often cause problems both for the media and the journalist. “Often, the journalists themselves are guilty, as they do not even try to avoid subjectivity and provide multilateral coverage of events, including the comments of all participants. Having not studied the events properly, such reporters prepare sloppy materials and interviews,” Yusupov said.

However, the image of journalists is heavily damaged by unscrupulous media representatives who receive bribes from information sources or other subjects of media relations. “The ‘media dealers’ who have appeared in the media landscape of the country are engaged in shady affairs, but the Media Council does not bring them to justice, which leads to discrediting bona fide journalists,” said Niyozov.

The Media Council received 15 complaints and applications in 2018, mainly regarding print and electronic media. Complaints included print media that were dissatisfied with each other’s articles, authors complaining that their responses were not published, complaints about insults in articles, noncompliance with ethics in terms of information verification, and violation of journalists’ solidarity.

Self-censorship is practiced in all media outlets with no exceptions; moreover, each editorial board

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has a list of persons who cannot be criticized under any circumstances. “Today, we cannot even write about things we used to write about at the beginning of the year. The Asia-Plus website was blocked for posting information about the tax exemption of a private hotel run by people close to the president’s family,” said Tadjibaeva.

Karshiboev believed that the reason for self-censorship stems from a fear of offending certain political circles or of crossing a red line that may result in the closure of a media outlet. “Certain business interests of financial-industrial groups, advertisers, or media partners must be taken into account,” he said. Therefore, independent media resort to powerful self-censorship, and state-owned media prefer not to cover problematic issues at all.

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Despite the National Strategy on Countering Terrorism and Extremism, which emphasizes the necessity to expand contacts and work more closely with the media and civil society, security services often provide belated information that is beneficial to them, creating problems in covering national security issues. An example is the prison riot that took place in November 2018 at a penitentiary in the city of Khujand in the Sughd region. “None of the security agencies gave reliable information about the riot, and journalists cited unverified sources;

therefore, the number of prisoners reportedly killed during the suppression of the rebellion ranged from one to 50 people and the number of reportedly injured, from six to 120,” Kadyrov observed. Only in December, during a meeting in Brussels, did the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Tajikistan announce official data that 21 prisoners and two guards were killed, and six prisoners were injured.

The influence of social networks on the information field of Tajikistan increased in 2018. “Now, almost all the media in Tajikistan have a Facebook page, where they publish information, articles, graphics, long reads, and photos,” said Yusupov.

The level of payment for journalists’ work and the ability to provide them with modern and effective equipment for information collection and processing leave much to be desired. Independent journalists are increasing quitting the profession, and most migrate to Russia for work. Because of low salary levels, some journalists work for several media outlets; therefore, television, radio, and newspaper content are often very similar. “Freelance work is almost unpaid, which is precisely the reason why the volume of journalist materials produced by freelancers has markedly decreased in the last year,” said Nosirjon Mamurzoda, a lecturer in journalism at Kurgan-Tube State University and the deputy editor of the newspaper *New Khatlon*.

“No, Tajik media can’t compete with the foreign media that work in Tajikistan. Salaries in local media outlets are much lower, and this also affects the quality of media work,” commented Kadyrov. Salaries in state-owned media are higher; they receive TJS 3,000 (about \$320) a month or more, and they have a larger staff. “My salary at *The USSR* newspaper is TJS 1,200 (about \$128) a month, and we can only receive up to an additional 20 percent,” Huseynova said.

Journalism meets professional standards of quality.

PROFESSIONAL JOURNALISM INDICATORS

- ▶ Reporting is fair, objective, and well sourced.
- ▶ Journalists follow recognized and accepted ethical standards.
- ▶ Journalists and editors do not practice self-censorship.
- ▶ Journalists cover key events and issues.
- ▶ Pay levels for journalists and other media professionals are sufficiently high to discourage corruption.
- ▶ Entertainment programming does not eclipse news and information programming.
- ▶ Technical facilities and equipment for gathering, producing, and distributing news are modern and efficient.
- ▶ Quality niche reporting and programming exists (investigative, economics/business, local, political).

There is no balance between entertainment and information programs and print media materials in Tajikistan. “Even in the government newspaper *Jumhuriyat* (Republic), there are many more entertainment articles than news and political reports,” said Zinatullo Ismoilzoda, director of the Media Academy of Tajikistan and chair of the Union of Journalists of Tajikistan. Tadjibaeva reported that non-state media began printing more entertainment content, as it is safer for journalists and the media; the readers also seem to be tired of negative news—a beneficial feature in that it is the only way to survive in the market and attract advertisers and readers.

Television channels in the regions give preference to entertainment programs. The share of entertainment programs comprises 70 to 75 percent of airtime on the state-owned television,

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60 percent on state-owned radio, and more than 80 percent on private FM radio stations. News programs represent no more than 40 percent of the volume of broadcasting on the seven channels of state-owned TV and 20 percent on private TV and radio channels.

The viewers who can watch numerous satellite channels more often choose entertainment programs, concerts, and talk shows. “TV viewers can find out what is happening in Africa or America but do not have the opportunity to learn about important events in their own country’s regions, especially if they disagree with the official position of the government,” said Kurbon Alamshoev, chairman of Kuhhoi Pomir (Pamir Mountains), an NGO that has been involved in democratic social reform in Tajikistan, in strengthening principles of democracy, and in supporting civic initiatives to maintain and enhance the spiritual and cultural values of the mountains and the identity of its population..

All seven state-owned television channels have switched to niche TV, including a sports channel, a movie channel, a children’s channel, a news channel, and a cultural and music channel. “It is very difficult for independent channels to compete with state-owned TV, with its digital broadcasting, modern equipment, and good salaries—all funded by the state,” commented Dodobaev.

The media suffer from a lack of modern technical equipment and a shortage of equipment. All state-owned media outlets have modern equipment for collecting and disseminating information through terrestrial, digital, and satellite broadcasting, but independent broadcasters only use terrestrial broadcasting. Since regional channels do not have the means to convert to digital, the rural population of the country may soon remain without alternative sources of information.

Many international donor organizations are

providing multimedia equipment instead of financial awards to journalists. Equipment for print media is mainly provided by international donors. Although journalists in state-owned media outlets in Khorog have modern equipment, there are problems with Internet access, as it is often turned off and is very expensive compared to city residents’ salaries.

Over the past two years, the professional level among journalists in certain areas of expertise such as political, economic, and parliamentary correspondents, has decreased. “There is no high-quality specialized journalism in Tajikistan. The media themselves are not interested in providing this content exclusively, as there are not enough readers in the country to make such media profitable,” said Karshiboev.

Except for sports, specialized journalism in Tajikistan is rare. “Investigative journalism developed several years ago but came to a halt; its quality has fallen dramatically. Investigations are conducted only on grants from international organizations. The editors themselves cannot pay the expenses,” Karshiboev said. Only eight investigations on socioeconomic topics and human rights were published in 2018.

OBJECTIVE 3: PLURALITY OF NEWS

1.88

Despite the variety of media in Tajikistan, almost all the country’s media express the same position as the authorities, and the space for pluralism is narrowing every year. The editorial policy of most media outlets does not permit expressing different points of view. In the state-run media, there is only one correct point of view. “[Media] cannot express the whole spectrum of political

views for several reasons. First, this spectrum is practically nonexistent in the country due to limited political freedom. Second, existing political views cannot be conveyed to the public because people themselves refuse to talk about issues openly,” Karshiboev said.

Social networks and the Internet are flourishing. “More and more people prefer information obtained from social networks to that published by mass media,” said Mirsaidov. However, Internet and social media sites like Facebook, YouTube, OK.ru, and VKontakte are often subject to blocking, as are domestic and foreign Internet resources when major political events are occurring within the country.

Many print and other media outlets have created their own websites and social network pages to present news; some of them have apps for mobile phones or communicate through instant messaging. The number of social network users and those who read news from their smartphones is growing every year. “But since social networks and VPNs are often blocked in Tajikistan, it is becoming increasingly difficult for readers to access them. Independent media have to not only overcome self-censorship and fight for access to information but also solve technical issues related to the delivery of information to readers,” said Tadjibaeva.

“The influence of media from neighboring and foreign countries is observed in the information space of Tajikistan, especially in electronic media,” said Karshiboev. Plagiarism still flourishes in all print and electronic media. According to the Law on Mass Media, informational material is not subject to copyright, so such material is republished. “Foreign media—Radio Liberty, and foreign Internet portals Sputnik and Akhbor.com—are becoming the most convenient sources of information, though the latter often publishes unverified and deliberately

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misleading information,” commented Niyozov.

“Nevertheless, people have access to satellite television; there is also a cable television network, although [it is] regulated, and the rural population has access to them along with urban city dwellers,” added Huseynova. There are a few obstacles: not everyone can afford a good choice of TV channels, and problems still exist with the electrical supply in some regions.

Readers in the capital city of Dushanbe, along with those in the major regional centers of Khujand and Kurgan-Tyube, have greater access to information because of their proximity to the center, a larger variety of media sources, and better financial security than residents in the remote regions. Although the latter have access to FM radio and television, newspapers are not delivered there on a regular basis; also, many rural residents cannot afford the subscriptions that increase several times a year.

There is still compulsory subscription to state-owned media. According to official figures, 44 state-owned newspapers and four magazines are published in the Khatlon region, one of the largest regions of Tajikistan. Out of 44 state-owned periodicals (including two party and nine industry periodicals), 40 newspapers are printed in Tajik, two in Russian, and one in Uzbek. Most of these periodicals are run by local governments and are published one to four times a month.

Overall, there are about 50 local print and electronic media in southern Tajikistan, including one private newspaper and two non-government television stations. Local TV stations are specifically aimed at broadcasting news for the region’s residents. “Citizens can learn more about local news through local and regional media because national channels are more focused on nationwide information,” said Ismoilzoda.

All state-run media receive subsidies from the state budget, while independent media do not receive any financial assistance—despite the fact that the law provides for state support of all media. Because of a greater number of central television and radio channels and a large circulation of print media, state-owned and government mass media have a more significant impact on shaping public opinion. State-owned media do not reflect the whole spectrum of political life in the country, and they do not provide a platform for the viewpoints of any other party except for the ruling People’s Democratic Party. The division of the media into state-owned and independent leads to unhealthy competition and antagonism between journalists.

Regional state-run media only publish material covering the activities of central and local authorities; criticism is not allowed. “There is not a single independent newspaper, radio, television station, or news agency in Khorog. There was a newspaper that worked via a grant, but once it expired, they could not survive on their own, as there is no support from local authorities,” said Alamshoev.

Despite joining the World Trade Organization (WTO), no public media has yet been established in Tajikistan, even though it is a condition for the country’s membership in the organization. “The issue of having one public TV channel, which was an obligation of Tajikistan when joining the WTO, has not been resolved yet. First, the Law on Public Television has to be adopted,” said Karshilboev. Given the pressure from authorities on virtually all independent media, it is crucial to establish a nationwide print media and a public TV and radio company.

There are 15 independent TV stations in the country, 12 of which operate in the Sughd province in the north. “Independent television and radio stations in this area are supported by local

governments and businesses,” says Dodobaev. All but one of the regional chairmen have shown no interest in establishing independent television and radio companies in their regions.

Multiple news sources provide citizens with reliable and objective news.

PLURALITY OF NEWS SOURCES INDICATORS

- ▶ A plurality of affordable public and private news sources (e.g., print, broadcast, Internet) exists.
- ▶ Independent broadcast media produce their own news programs.
- ▶ Citizens’ access to domestic or international media is not restricted.
- ▶ Transparency of media ownership allows consumers to judge objectivity of news; media ownership is not concentrated in a few conglomerates.
- ▶ State or public media reflect the views of the entire political spectrum, are nonpartisan, and serve the public interest.
- ▶ A broad spectrum of social interests are reflected and represented in the media, including minority-language information sources.
- ▶ Independent news agencies gather and distribute news for print and broadcast media.
- ▶ Broadcast ratings, circulation figures, and Internet statistics are reliable.

There are 11 news agencies registered in the country (one of which is independent; the rest are private), but only seven are currently active, with Asia-Plus being the leader. It mostly practices an independent editorial policy, but strong self-censorship often prevails.

Private media have their own news and information programs. The content is quite rich, but most of it is entertainment. Both the news and entertainment content of privately-owned media is

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different from the news programs of government media. “The difference is that the content provided by private owners is often more objective and relevant; it is also more diverse and is of better quality than that of the state-owned media,” said Kadyrov.

Independent media in the Sughd region produce their own news that differs from the news programs of state-owned channels. “We produce news in compliance with international and ethical standards, so our news programs are of better quality than those of the state-owned channels,” commented Dodobaev. However, readers rarely know who owns what media outlet. Although the law prohibits the monopolization of media, 92 percent of the electronic media are state-owned.

“But since social networks and VPNs are often blocked in Tajikistan, it is becoming increasingly difficult for readers to access them. Independent media have to not only overcome self-censorship and fight for access to information but also solve technical issues related to the delivery of information to readers,” said Tadjibaeva.

A fairly wide range of ethnic interests is presented in the Tajik media, including information resources in minority languages. In 2018, 22 print media were published in the Uzbek and Kyrgyz languages; however, Russian language newspapers are more popular in the regions. The range of topics covered in publications in the languages of national minorities is quite broad, but forbidden topics exist: the president and his family, regional authorities, and local security and law enforcement agencies.

“A wide range of public interests are presented in the independent media, and there is no discrimination, which cannot be said about the state-owned media. The latter has a list of people who are forbidden to work for state-owned TV, radio, or newspapers,” said Yusupov.

Analytical and news programs in the Russian and Uzbek languages are on the three state-owned television channels. Ovozi Tochik radio broadcasts in Uzbek, Russian, and Arabic for one hour every day. There are news releases in Arabic and English on Channel One; news in the same languages are broadcast daily on the Jahonnamo national news channel.

When preparing foreign news, all state-owned TV channels use news segments from Russian TV channels, Euronews, BBC, Russia Today, CNN, and Al Jazeera. All newspapers reprint articles of the leading world news and local news agencies with a link to the original content.

State TV rarely shows emergencies, clashes, terrorist attacks, or natural disasters on the news, although there are special TV broadcasts of security and law enforcement agencies on state TV channels several times a week. The media do not cover problems of corruption, HIV/AIDS, and issues regarding sexual and religious minorities.

The media do not touch on the subjects of the families and private lives of the president, the prime minister, local regional leaders, or business partners with whom they have agreements; corruption in the higher echelons of power and the activities of special services are not discussed. “Also, due to various circumstances, all independent media are forced to publish mainly defamatory material prepared by GKNB ‘experts.’ There are no exceptions to this; both small independent media and large corporations carry it out,” commented Tadjibaeva.

OBJECTIVE 4: BUSINESS MANAGEMENT

1.35

Tajikistan’s economic situation and the lack of a full-fledged market policy are the main negative factors affecting the media’s current situation. The media in Tajikistan has not been self-sustainable since 2015. The financial and economic situation in the media, especially in the printed press, worsened in 2018, and independent media executives complain about the loss of readership. “All [of] this is due to the decline in circulation and reduction in advertising revenues; the prices for consumables and printing services have risen again; the circulation of even the most popular newspapers and magazines have experienced a 40 to 60 percent decrease over the past year,” said Tadjibaeva.

Advertising, public relations, circulation, organizing events, roundtables, and conferences remain the main sources of media income. Many independent media outlets are not growing because of the financial crisis but are trying to stay in the market by any means necessary. Media outlets in Tajikistan, especially the independent ones, are working under harsh conditions caused by the financial crisis. “Most of them are not self-sustainable, [and] thus are unable to hire highly skilled professionals,” commented Karshiboev. Many media outlets are attempting to attract talented managers and journalists. Bloggers mostly work on their own initiative, but it is impossible to make a list of successful bloggers in Tajikistan, as there are not any.

“Three years ago, the media outlets used to draw up business plans, try to make informed decisions on their expenditures and personnel,

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and plan capital investments. But due to the economic crisis, such business plans are considered unnecessary expenses, and now all independent media operate in survival mode,” said Niyozov. Mamurzoda added, “The regional media do not have resources for stable and sufficient funding. Therefore, even small sources of income, such as financial stipends from local authorities, affect editorial policy, management, and the content of media material.”

All news agencies are affiliated with media holdings: Asia-Plus through Asia Plus Holdings, Pressa.tj through Oila, Avesta and Tajikta.tj through the *Business and Politics* newspaper, and Sugdnews.tj through Faraj. News agencies have begun publishing more promotional materials and press releases to survive. Unlike state-owned media, private media are more focused on advertising, commercials, and PR materials. “Independent media mostly remain afloat due to advertorials commissioned by private individuals; these are not always PR or commercials but rather personal congratulations or settlements of private affairs,” asserted Tadjibaeva.

It is impossible to attract foreign capital in media companies because it is limited to 25 percent by law. Nonetheless, foreign capital is present in Tajikistan’s media through grants and technical assistance/donations from international organizations and financial institutions. Most private (independent) media operate either on grants—the number of which has significantly decreased because of the global financial crisis—or on funding from their founders.

According to official data from the government’s Statistic Agency, the advertising market amounted to about \$6 million in 2018. The advertising market in the country is underdeveloped and is represented mostly by medicines, pharmacies, private medical centers, and advertising for Internet

providers, banks, and mobile operators. Because of the economic crisis, advertisers have also reduced their participation in the market; on top of that, about 150,000 small- and medium-sized enterprises closed in 2018.

Internet advertising, tickers on the websites of newspapers and news agencies, and outdoor banners are flourishing. Famous foreign brands and cellular companies place advertisements mainly on banners and outdoor screens. “Many advertisers have started posting their ads on Facebook and VKontakte social networks, where it costs only \$7 a week; our rate is \$27 a week,” reported Tadjibaeva. “Only a small part of funds is spent on traditional media since advertising agencies receive a greater percentage of the profits from outdoor advertising than from other media,” added Yusupov. Advertising prices are set by the media outlets themselves, but no one strictly adheres to the price lists for fear of losing an advertiser.

There are six advertising agencies in Tajikistan, but many of them are quite biased along political lines and place all of their advertising in the same media; the rest have to maintain their own staff of advertising managers. There are advertising departments in all seven channels of state-owned television and in the Oila, Orienia-Media, Asia-Plus Radio, Imruz, Vatan, Love Radio, and Khovar media corporations.

According to official data from the Ministry of Culture and the Committee on Television and Radio, advertising in the independent media accounts for 30 to 40 percent of newspaper space and 10 to 15 percent per hour on television and radio. The ratio for state-owned media is 20 percent for printed editions and 30 percent on radio and TV. Of the state-owned enterprises, only the Tajik Aluminum Company (Talco), Tajik Air, and Somon Air advertise in the media. Although state-owned radio and

television channels receive subsidies from the state budget, they are also engaged in commercial activities and advertising; this process is not transparent at all.

The advertising market of Tajikistan’s independent media is notable for a large share of advertising by international organizations and nonbusiness enterprises. “For example, foreign embassies, the OSCE [Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe] bureau, the European Union office, and others constantly advertise in the independent media,” said Ismoilzoda.

Not all independent media have been able to adapt to new requests from advertisers, leading to a decrease in the volume of advertising in the independent media. “Due to the economic situation, the volume of advertising in the independent media has decreased dramatically,” said Kadyrov.

Independent media are well-managed businesses, allowing editorial independence.

BUSINESS MANAGEMENT INDICATORS

- ▶ Media outlets and supporting firms operate as efficient, professional, and profit-generating businesses.
- ▶ Independent media do not receive government subsidies.
- ▶ Media receive revenue from a multitude of sources.
- ▶ Market research is used to formulate strategic plans, enhance advertising revenue, and tailor products to the needs and interests of audiences.
- ▶ Advertising agencies and related industries support an advertising market.
- ▶ Broadcast ratings and circulation figures are reliably and independently produced.
- ▶ Advertising revenue as a percentage of total revenue is in line with accepted standards at commercial outlets.

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While state-owned media have enough business funds and receive beneficial rates for renting office space, paying utility bills, printing services, and broadcasting, the private and independent media have meager budgets and can only rely on small incomes from sales and advertising. Private media may end up in a dire situation without external assistance and government support. The successful development of the media as a type of business is constantly hampered by bureaucratic and legal obstacles, heavy taxes, and increased attention—including unauthorized inspections—from fiscal and other regulatory bodies.

“Three years ago, the media outlets used to draw up business plans, try to make informed decisions on their expenditures and personnel, and plan capital investments. But due to the economic crisis, such business plans are considered unnecessary expenses, and now all independent media operate in survival mode,” said Niyozov.

Privately-commissioned marketing research is performed, but the results are not considered reliable because such studies are generally believed to be tailored exclusively to the client. This applies to ratings, circulation, and statistics. “The results of marketing research are barely used. Only a very small number of media outlets study and apply data obtained from research. Most managers are unable and unwilling to learn how to work with marketing research,” revealed Mirsaidov.

The decline in media circulation, the reduction of revenues from the sales of products and commercial activities, and the lack of government support are the causes of media vulnerability,

leading them to be unable to act as an effective institution for democratic transformation in Tajikistan.

Circulations of print media have continued to fall. “State-owned print media are funded from the state budget and receive considerable additional income from compulsory subscriptions. For independent print media, subscriptions comprise no more than 10 percent of their total circulation,” related Niyozov. “Circulations of print media are indicated in their output data, but this year, they have become significantly overstated in order to retain their advertisers,” added Tadjibaeva.

Only one newspaper, *Imruz News*, is published daily in Tajikistan; two state-owned newspapers *Sadoi Mardum* (Voice of the People) and *Jumhuriyat* (Republic) are printed three times a week, and all other print media are published weekly on Wednesday or Thursday. The Russian version of the *Asia-Plus* newspaper is published on Mondays and Thursdays, and its 2018 circulation was in the range of 3,000 to 4,000 copies.

According to official data from the Ministry of Culture, the total circulation of all newspapers published in 2018 did not exceed 110,000 copies, falling short of the previous year’s count by 10,000 copies. As of today, there are 371 newspapers (109 are state-owned, 262 are non-state-owned), 243 magazines (113 state-owned, 130 non-state-owned), 313 printing houses (36 state-owned, 277 non-state-owned), and 11 news agencies (one state-owned, 10 non-state-owned). According to the Press Department of the Ministry of Culture, 58 state-owned newspapers are regularly published in the regions, but their circulation does not exceed 1,000 to 1,200 copies.

The mouthpiece of the ruling People’s Democratic Party, the newspaper *Minbari Khalq* (People’s Tribune), has a circulation of 40,000 copies and more than 35,000 subscribers. The

government newspaper *Sadoi Mardum* (Voice of the People) has a circulation of 25,000 copies and 22,000 subscribers; the parliamentary newspaper *Jumhuriyat* (Republic) has a circulation of 32,000 copies and 30,000 subscribers; the magazine *Bovuvoni Tochikiston* (Women of Tajikistan) has a circulation of 14,000, out of which 10,000 are subscription.

Any Tajikistan resident who has sufficient funds can access the Internet—which is common in large cities, despite its high price. It is much less widespread in the regions because of its low speed, high prices for local residents, and power outages. Approximately four million users out of nine million people in Tajikistan have access to the Internet, including mobile Internet. Some sites count not the number of visitors but the number of views instead, although there are counters of unique visits that record each visitor by IP address.

OBJECTIVE 5: SUPPORTING INSTITUTIONS

1.65

Authorities are always cautious when registering media organizations to check if their charter contains an article on the protection of journalists’ rights. “The necessity of establishing trade unions has been discussed often. Meanwhile, there is no clear vision of how this will be done, no leader who could lead such an association, and no guarantee that this association would be able to become self-sufficient,” said Yusupov. One possible reason for the latter is that many media outlets are not ready or willing to pay decent union dues. “A trade union of journalists exists only in the Khatlon region,” added Karshiboev. Media

owners are also worried about a national trade union of journalists because then journalists can defend their legal labor rights and demand social guarantees.

Although there is a sufficient number of professional associations in the country, they do not represent the interests of all media, and only a few are effective. Most often, media outlets are on their own in defending their interests. The only business structure that indirectly protects the interests of the media is the National Association of Small and Medium Businesses of Tajikistan. And for any journalist association to work, it must receive financial support or grants from the government and partner organizations, but the state has placed yet another obstacle for non-governmental organizations in Tajikistan; they must now account for grants received to the Ministry of Justice.

Professional associations, such as the Union of Journalists of Tajikistan, the National Association of Independent Media, the Media Alliance, and the Media Council, protect the rights of journalists but, because of limited financial resources and increased pressure from the state, their assistance is not always enough. The Independent Center for Human Rights Protection provides free legal advice to editorial offices and journalists on a project-by-project basis. Many media associations cannot speak out against the government's illegal actions toward journalists because there are no mechanisms for such reactions in the country.

An association of TV and radio broadcasters headed by Ismoilzoda was created by the Internews Network project. The association members include 19 TV and production studios, and depends on grants, but it has not yet made any significant progress in advancing media interests because of weak management.

Supporting institutions function in the professional interests of independent media.

SUPPORTING INSTITUTIONS INDICATORS:

- ▶ Trade associations represent the interests of private media owners and provide member services.
- ▶ Professional associations work to protect journalists' rights.
- ▶ Short-term training and in-service training programs allow journalists to upgrade skills or acquire new skills.
- ▶ Sources of newsprint NGOs support free speech and independent media.
- ▶ Quality journalism degree programs that provide substantial practical experience exist.
- ▶ Printing facilities are in private hands, apolitical, and unrestricted.
- ▶ Channels of media distribution (kiosks, transmitters, Internet) are private, apolitical, and unrestricted.
- ▶ Information and communication technology infrastructure sufficiently meets the needs of media and citizens.

Except for the Union of Journalists, all associations are independent of the government and have certain statutory duties. NANSMIT mostly deals with the issues of training journalists and the protection of media rights; the Media Council is more concerned with compliance to ethical and professional norms; the Union of Journalists promotes the interests of journalists among state authorities. NANSMIT is an official partner and the Central Asian representative for Reporters Without Borders. It also cooperates with the OSCE, the Committee to Protect Journalists, Article 19, and others to promote freedom of speech and the media.

Despite limited financial resources, NANSMIT carried out several activities on digital security,

fact-finding, and coverage of cross-border issues in 2018. "Control over the media is increasing in light of the restrictions on access to information under the pretext of combating extremism and terrorism. We held two conferences and three trainings on legal, digital, and physical security with the support of Deutsche Welle," said Karshiboev.

The level of journalism training does not meet the requirements of modern journalism. Currently, journalists are trained at one faculty and eight departments in different universities throughout the country. University administrations, with the exception of the Russian-Tajik (Slavonic) University, are still quite reluctant to invite well-known independent journalists for lectures and seminars. The only opportunity to improve the skills of young journalists is through trainings conducted by local and international organizations, although students are not always allowed to attend such programs.

More than 20 training workshops on the theoretical basis and practical skills for the preparation of analytical materials, investigative journalism, and television and radio reports on terrorism and extremism were conducted in 2018 with the support of international organizations, such as the OSCE, Internews, the Open Society Foundation, the German Wave Academy, and IWPR. "All key events related to the media usually take place in the larger cities, and their participants are mainly composed of journalists from the central region. Journalists from the periphery are rarely invited to such events. As a result, the regions are often lagging behind the big cities," commented Alamshoev.

A media academy has been established to retrain media workers in Tajikistan. "More than 185 journalists from state-owned and independent media took various courses there in 2018. The Media Academy has a distance education department

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where university students of the country can combine theoretical skills with practical activities in the academy," said Ismoilzoda. Journalists were delighted about the opening of the Media Academy in Tajikistan, but until now, the academy rarely conducted seminars and trainings in remote regions.

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About 300 journalism students graduate annually in Tajikistan. "Young people who want to study journalism abroad can freely enter foreign universities and work in the domestic media upon return," said Tadjibaeva. Journalism students can currently study abroad only on a private basis.

The number of Russian-speaking journalists is decreasing, and very few journalists know English, thus inhibiting participation in advanced training programs in foreign countries. All Tajik media are in dire need of multilevel educational training for economic, political, and legal issues that would include internships with their colleagues in neighboring countries.

Equipment sources for media, newsprint, and printing are neither politicized nor monopolized, but they are still quite dependent on the authorities. Authorities can verbally inform owners of printing houses if they want to stop an undesirable publication, and the issue will not be printed.

The same applies to the distribution channels. The Unified Switching Center opened last year, making it possible to block unwanted sites without involving Internet providers. The quality of communication and Internet speed have sharply deteriorated; moreover, connections are frequently dropped altogether. The state-owned Teleradiocom is now a monopoly. "They have extremely high fees for services, and independent broadcasters are unable to pay them; the solution is to establish an alternative operator that would allow them to broadcast [to] maintain their editorial independence," said Ismoilzoda.

The lack of an effective distribution system for the print press hinders information access in the remote regions of the country. Print media distribution channels are still politicized. Kiosks owned by Tajikmatbuot (the postal service of Tajikistan) often do not sell issues of independent, opposition newspapers, and in some cases, all issues of a newspaper that has published a critical article have been withdrawn.

The quality of printing and access to equipment is restricted because of the printing facility's politicization and dependence on the authorities. Printing houses cooperate effectively with the media, but they warn everyone not to criticize the government. "There is a long practice of printing houses' not printing a newspaper if it does not please the authorities," said Karshiboiev. Media freedom in Tajikistan can hardly be discussed when there are no independent printing houses.

The technical condition of many printing houses, especially in the regions, is at a very low level, although some quality private printing houses exist. All leading private printing houses buy paper, plates, and film themselves, but there are only three or four businessmen who supply newsprint and plates; thus, they set the pricing policy.

Equipment supply sources for the media are not politicized, but there are obstacles to importing equipment, including transmitters for television and radio stations. "Import duties are very high for independent broadcasters. At the same time, there are no limitations for state-owned broadcasters on buying equipment from abroad," said Dodobaev. Television, radio, transmitters, Internet, and mobile communications are all controlled by the Committee on Television and Radio Broadcasting and Communication Service, thus increasing the difficulties in organizing media production. Many private television and radio companies have not transitioned to digital broadcasting, as serious obstacles existed for such a transition.

Not all independent television and radio stations have their own transmitters, and if they do, they are usually quite weak. The state-owned Communication Service and Tajiktelecom (the state-owned national telecommunications operator) monopolize frequency allocation and distribution channels; both can interrupt or even close down the broadcasts of non-state electronic media who rent distribution channels from them. As of the beginning of 2018, the Communication Service has required all providers to access the Internet only through the government-owned Republican Data Transmission Network. Prior to this, providers purchased Internet access from Kyrgyzstan and other countries. Mobile operators have expressed their dissatisfaction with this decree, as Internet access was previously cheaper and not monopolized by the state. Authorities have repeatedly stated that all control measures in the field of telecommunications and the Internet are aimed at preventing radicalization, but it is assumed that the Communications Service enjoys economic benefits by being a monopoly.

All television and radio towers belong to the government, so even independent stations that have

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their own transmitters must still rent a state tower. Six cable channels exist in Tajikistan, and cable broadcasting is subject to compulsory licensing.

List of Panel Participants

Kurbon Alamshoev, chairman, Kuhhoi Pomir, Khorog

Makhmudjon Dodobaev, director, SM-1, Khujand, Sughd region

Zinatullo Ismoilzoda, director, the Media Academy of Tajikistan; chair, the Union of Journalists of Tajikistan, Dushanbe

Nuriddin Karshiboev, chair, National Association of Independent Media of Tajikistan; director, Tajik Press Council, Dushanbe

Abdumalik Kadyrov, director, Internews Network, Tajikistan branch, Dushanbe

Nosirjon Mamurzoda, lecturer in journalism, Kurgan-Tube State University; deputy editor, *New Khatlon*, Kurgan-Tube

Negmatullo Mirsaidov, editor, *Varorud*, Khujand, Sughd region

Khurshed Niyozov, director, Center for Journalistic Investigations; chief editor, *Faraj*, Dushanbe

Zebo Tadjibaeva, executive director, Asia-Plus, Dushanbe

Nabi Yusupov, director, Media Consulting, Dushanbe

Lola Khalikjanova, program manager, Institute for War and Peace Reporting, Dushanbe

Jamila Huseynova, editor, *The USSR*, Dushanbe

Moderator and Author

Lidia Isamova, media expert; correspondent, *RIA Novosti*