



**CPJ Submission to the United Nations Universal Periodic Review of Tajikistan
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Committee to Protect Journalists

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330 7th Avenue, 11th Floor

New York, NY 10001

Tel 212-465-1004

Fax 212-465-9568

General: info@cpj.org

Advocacy Director: cradsch@cpj.org

Global Advocacy Manager: kpaterson@cpj.org

Europe and Central Asia Program Coordinator: gsaid@cpj.org

Europe and Central Asia Program Researcher: erodina@cpj.org

Brief description of CPJ:

1. The Committee to Protect Journalists is an independent, nonprofit organization that promotes press freedom worldwide. We defend the right of journalists to report the news without fear of reprisal.
2. CPJ is made up of about 40 experts around the world, with headquarters in New York City. When press freedom violations occur, CPJ mobilizes a network of correspondents who report and take action on behalf of those targeted.
3. CPJ reports on violations in repressive countries, conflict zones, and established democracies alike. A board of prominent journalists from around the world helps guide CPJ's activities.
4. CPJ's work is based on its research, which provides a global snapshot of obstructions to a free press worldwide. CPJ's research staff document hundreds of attacks on the press each year.

Summary

5. This submission was prepared for the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) of Tajikistan in March 2021. In it, CPJ assesses the press freedom framework and the press freedom situation on the ground in the country.
6. Independent journalists face harassment from the authorities, and those in exile report that the State Committee for National Security harasses and intimidates their families in Tajikistan in an effort to pressure the journalists into halting their independent journalistic work.
7. This creates an overall atmosphere of fear among independent Tajik journalists and curbs the work of independent journalists and freedom of speech in general.

Tajikistan

8. The media's ability to report the news in Tajikistan is heavily compromised by censorship that the country's authorities impose on independent media outlets and the internet.
9. Journalists are forced to live and work in exile, and there have been precedents of the Tajik authorities intimidating their families at home. Restrictions on accreditation of journalists working for independent media outlets in Tajikistan are also a serious concern.
10. In the spring and summer 2020, in the name of fighting the COVID-19 pandemic, the country's authorities expanded censorship of independent journalists and bloggers.
11. In the final section of this document, CPJ makes a number of recommendations to Tajikistan to address the press freedom concerns raised in this submission.

Main submission

12. The following submission is drawn from research conducted by the Committee to Protect Journalists. All CPJ publications on Tajikistan can be found [at this link](#).
13. CPJ would like to raise ongoing and grave concerns pertaining to 2nd Cycle (2016) – 25th Session - Recommendations from: Paragraph 118.52 (Lithuania); 118.53 (France); 118.59 (Netherlands);

118.65 (Belgium); Paragraph 118.54 (Austria); 118.55 (Japan); 118.56 (United States of America); 118.57 (Czech Republic); 118.58 (Czech Republic).

The concerns are as follows:

14. Independent journalists and bloggers in Tajikistan are persecuted for their critical reporting, CPJ [reporting](#) shows. The state interferes with their work for reporting on high-level corruption and on opposition political parties.
15. Websites, social media, and messaging apps are frequently subject to censorship in Tajikistan, regional [news reports](#) indicate. Revoking journalistic accreditation is used as the way to silence critical reporting, according to CPJ's [research](#).
16. On July 3, 2020, the Tajikistan prosecutor general's office in Dushanbe, the Tajik capital, [summoned](#) two relatives of exiled journalist Mirzo Salimpur, the founder and chief editor of the Prague-based independent news website *Akhbor*, interrogated them, and demanded that they cut all their ties with Salimpur because he is a journalist who was "working against the state." *Akhbor* had earlier published allegations of [corruption](#) among Tajik officials and reported critically on the country's response to [COVID-19 pandemic](#).
17. On July 4, 2020, Tajikistan's President Emomali Rahmon [approved](#) amendments to the country's administrative code, making it illegal to "[disseminate] false information about the pandemic in media, internet and social networks." Those convicted could face fines and up to 15 days in detention. The amendments do not specify how the government would determine whether a report is false.
18. On May 11, 2020, two unidentified men [attacked](#) journalist Avazmad Ghurbatov, a correspondent for the independent news website *Asia Plus*, in Dushanbe; Ghurbatov had [reported on COVID-19](#) in Tajikistan, and said he had received several threats in relation to his coverage. People identifying themselves as officers of the State Committee for National Security, the country's intelligence agency, called him and told to stop working or face criminal prosecution; anonymous callers and online messages insulted the journalist and accused him of being a traitor.
19. On April 9, 2020, Tajikistan's Supreme Court [announced a decision](#) to formally block access to the independent news website *Akhbor*, that has operated from Prague since 2016, and has correspondents in Tajikistan and other countries in the region, and prohibited the outlet from operating in the country.
20. In April 2020, the Shokhmansur district court of Dushanbe [sentenced](#) journalist Daler Sharifov to one year in a penal colony on charges of inciting ethnic, racial, and religious hatred; the journalist's family denied the charges and said they were retaliation for Sharifov's reporting critical of the state.

21. In August 2019, Dushanbe-based media group *Asia Plus* [reported](#) that its main websites and business emails stopped working; prior to the outage, *Asia Plus* was already blocked in Tajikistan, according to the regional news website [Eurasianet](#), though it was still accessible overseas and via virtual private network (VPN). Reports said the domain name records for two websites, news.tj and asiaplus.tj, had been deliberately [misconfigured](#) to disrupt access.
22. In July 2019, CPJ [documented](#) the case of exiled Tajik journalist Humayra Bakhtiyar, who reported that her family members living in Tajikistan had been surveilled and threatened for years as retribution for her critical reporting.
23. In June 2019, a Foreign Ministry official [revoked](#) press accreditation from video journalist Barotali Nazarov during a meeting in Dushanbe between the Foreign Ministry and Nazarov's employer, the U.S. Congress-funded Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty's Tajik service, known locally as Radio Ozodi.
24. In October 2019, nine journalists and support staff for Radio Ozodi were [prevented](#) from working because they had been denied credentials by the Foreign Ministry.
25. Tajikistan's expression of support for several recommendations made in the 2016 UPR seems to have been meaningless, as persecution and intimidation of journalists persisted and included the imprisonment of a journalist – the first such case in several years, according to CPJ research. Tajikistan must demonstrate its commitment by taking steps and showing measurable progress in improving safety and freedom of independent journalists and bloggers and their families.

Recommendations for the Tajik Government:

26. Stop the persecution of independent journalists and their families for their critical reporting on Tajik authorities, including about alleged corruption.
27. Ensure that the public is not restricted from accessing all the independent news websites and platforms that practice their right to free expression and prevent arbitrary and extrajudicial blocking of journalistic websites.
28. Cease using accreditation of journalists in Tajikistan as a tool for limiting reporting by independent journalists in the country.
29. Take measures to ensure that perpetrators of attacks on journalists are prosecuted through the judicial system in a timely and transparent manner.
30. Ensure that no government entity endorses restrictions on freedom of the press in any way whatsoever.
31. Repeal all pieces of legislation that limit press freedom or the free flow of information, including but not limited to legislative amendments making it illegal to disseminate “false news” about the pandemic.

32. These recommendations are consistent with those supported by Tajikistan in their 2nd periodic review.

Annex 1: Relevant recommendations from 2nd Cycle (2016) - 25th session:

Theme: Freedom of the press

1. A - 118.52 Ensure that journalists and other individuals be able to freely exercise the right to freedom of expression and have access to Internet without undue restrictions (Lithuania)
 - a. Source of position: A/HRC/25/8
2. A - 118.53 Respect freedom of the media and ensure the safety of journalists (France);
 - a. Source of position: A/HRC/25/8
3. N - 118.54 Rescind undue restrictions on the media and access to information, including on the internet, and tolerate all forms of legitimate speech, including criticism of the government and its policies (Austria);
 - a. Source of position: A/HRC/25/8
4. N - 118.55 Remove undue restrictions on use of Internet and ensure that journalists can freely exercise their right to freedom of expression (Japan);
 - a. Source of position: A/HRC/25/8
5. N - 118.56 Repeal legislation that facilitates the blockage of Internet content and telecommunications (United States of America);
 - a. Source of position: A/HRC/25/8
6. N - 118.57 Review its legislation and policies in order to create a free, safe and enabling environment for journalists, bloggers and others to exercise fully their right to freedom of expression (Czech Republic);
 - a. Source of position: A/HRC/25/8
7. N - 118.58 Prevent arbitrary and extrajudicial blocking of websites and ensure that national security concerns are not invoked to stifle peaceful dissent and criticism of the Government or to restrict the right to freedom of religion or belief (Czech Republic);
 - a. Source of position: A/HRC/25/8
8. A - 118.59 Ensure that suspension of media outlets, including online media, cannot occur without judicial procedures on the basis of strict necessity and proportionality (Netherlands);
 - a. Source of position: A/HRC/25/8
9. A - 118.65 Take the necessary measures so as to ensure that journalists and human rights defenders can do their work independently and without fear of reprisals from the authorities, be they of financial, legal or of another nature (Belgium);
 - a. Source of position: A/HRC/25/8