

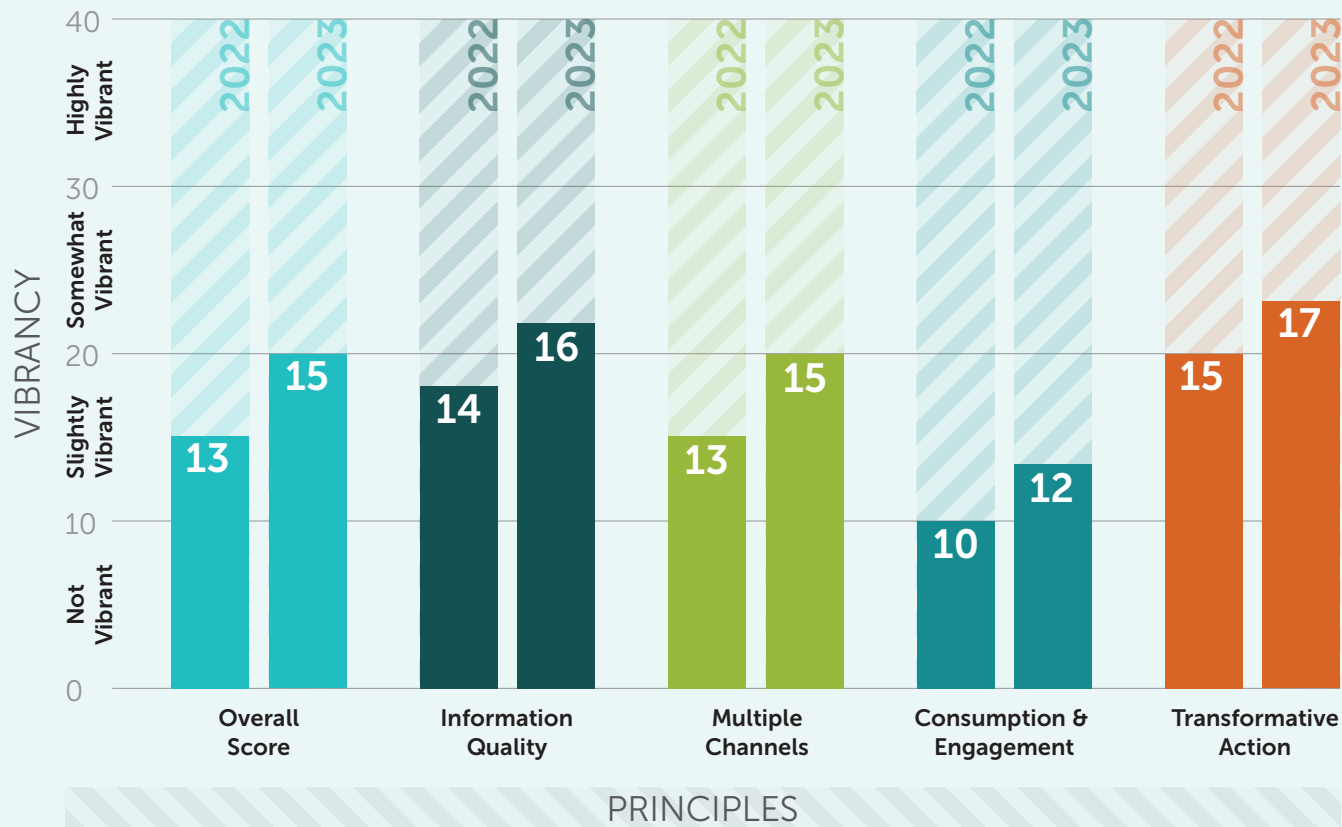
TAJIKISTAN



Vibrant Information Barometer

2 0 2 3





Highly Vibrant (31-40): Quality information is widely available in this country. People have the rights, means, and capacity to access a wide range of information; they recognize and reject misinformation.

Somewhat Vibrant (21-30): Quality information is available in this country and most of it is editorially independent, based on facts, and not intended to harm. Most people have the rights, means, and capacity to access a wide range of information, although some do not. Most people recognize and reject misinformation, although some do not.

Slightly Vibrant (11-20): Quality information is available on a few topics or geographies in this country, but not all. While some information is editorially independent, there is still a significant amount of misinformation, malinformation, and hate speech in circulation, and it does influence public discourse. Most people do not recognize or reject misinformation.

Not Vibrant (0-10): Quality information is extremely limited in this country. The vast majority of it is not editorially independent, not based on facts, or it is intended to harm. People do not have the rights, means, or capacity to access a wide range of information; they do not recognize or reject misinformation; and they cannot or do not make choices on what types of information they want to engage with.

Highly Vibrant

Somewhat Vibrant

Slightly Vibrant

Not Vibrant

OVERALL
SCORE

15

During 2022, pressure on international democratic values—freedom of speech, movement, choice, and religion—increased in Tajikistan. Dissent was harshly suppressed. It was especially hard on journalists and bloggers, seven of whom received sentences of seven to 25 years on trumped-up charges after they criticized the authorities and aired public problems on YouTube and other social media.

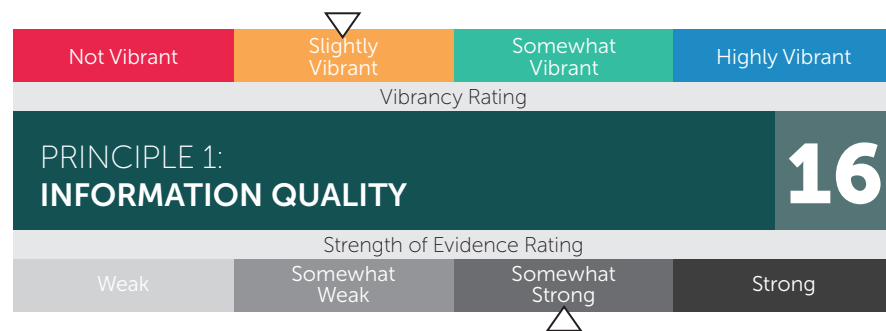
The quality of information has not improved and remains poor. Some professional media dispense dubious content based on speculation in hopes of reaching large audiences. Many journalists use unnamed sources, which undermines credibility but is often necessary to protect people from inquiries from authorities. Misinformation is the norm.

The repression of journalists, public figures, and human rights defenders has intensified since November 2021, when another round of periodic unrest in the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Oblast (GBAO) kicked off. The violence began with the killing of an arrestee and spiraled when police killed two more people at a protest over his death. In 2022, almost all the bloggers who wrote honestly about the events in Gorno-Badakhshan and the activists who organized the rallies were arrested and charged with fomenting anti-government riots, calling for the overthrow of the government, and treason. During closed-door trials, information was withheld even from relatives of the accused, whose lawyers were forced to sign nondisclosure agreements.

Tajikistan’s State Committee for National Security (SCNS) and Directorate for Combating Organized Crime conduct constant surveillance of independent journalists and

accredited foreign media, whose phones are tapped and emails and social media posts are monitored. Journalist Zavkibek Saidamini was prosecuted for liking social media posts by opposition politicians, especially those from abroad who belong to parties, such as the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan and Group-24, which are banned in Tajikistan on extremism grounds. The arrests and trials of journalists and bloggers have provoked great public outcry and criticism from Western countries and international organizations, including the United States, the EU, the Committee to Protect Journalists, and the OSCE, whose free-press advocate called one verdict “[a blow to media freedom](#).” As a result of attacks on journalists, many Tajik news producers began to leave their jobs and have migrated or entered new professions.

Tajikistan’s overall VIBE score went up two points, from 13 in 2022 to 15 in 2023 due to increased cooperation with NGOs and new development of social networks including blogging and podcasts, which has helped to produce content that reflects a more diverse point of view. However, government repression remains high, and quality of information remains low. The indicator on media literacy also scored low, along with rights to freedom of speech. Access to officials was reduced this past year with government press conferences held just twice a year now instead of quarterly. Repression of journalists coincided with a crackdown on ordinary citizens: Tajikistan police continually use the government’s law giving law enforcement agencies the right to follow citizens’ internet use. The law criminalizes the use of the “like” or “share” function for backing certain opposition sentiments on social media, which could result in prison sentences.



This principle went up two points for 2022, from 14 to 16. Panelists pointed to increased training opportunities from two universities. However, the overall quality of information in Tajikistan has declined because of self-censorship and a certain level of unprofessionalism among some journalists, according to panelists. In addition, state media journalists knowingly present disinformation as facts due to the government's full control of media outlets. Indicator 5 on sufficient resources scored low because state and party media are subsidized by the government, leaving independent media struggling to find financial support from grants and foreign funders.

Tajikistan has more than 300 newspapers and magazines, 15 state television channels, 10 state radio stations, 20 independent television stations, and 22 independent radio stations, according to the Committee on Television and Radio Broadcasting of the Republic of Tajikistan. However, panelists point out many of these media outlets deal in misinformation.

Indicator 1: There is quality information on a variety of topics available.

Content and media producers do not always adhere to ethical standards, especially in the separation between editorial content and promotional material.

Some media are full of dubious content based on speculation and rumors, without proof or references to the original source, aimed

at reaching a larger audience. The content has different ideological orientations and often low production values. "Creating content that opens consumers' eyes to reality has become extremely dangerous," said panelist Abdumalik Kadyrov, who leads the Media Alliance of Tajikistan.

Zarina Ergasheva, a panelist and data journalism expert, said the widespread practice of not naming sources has undermined trust in the press, but it is often done at the request of sources seeking "to avoid problems." Niyazov noted that a lot of upbeat content is published with the aim of supporting government policies.

Other regular media transgressions include publishing photos of violent scenes, fatal car accidents, and children, and disclosing the names of victims of harassment. Media consultant Nabi Yusupov said most violators are in unapologetic pursuit of larger audiences, which violates standard ethics and international standards of journalism. While ethical violators are sometimes summoned to the Press Council, the only complaints are from those whose photos were used without consent, who complain in comment sections.

Generally, the government is not accountable to the media; even official requests for information from editorial boards and journalists are rarely answered on time and are often simply ignored. Panelists said officials see any attempts by the media to hold government agencies accountable as attempts to smear them in the international arena.

Panelists agreed that virtually no media in Tajikistan retain editorial independence. "The media rarely raise topics related to the president's family or his entourage, and they don't criticize law enforcement agencies and the special services," said Bakhtiyor Rakhmonov, deputy editor-in-chief of the *Kulyabskaya Pravda* newspaper in southern Tajikistan.

Media analyst Negmatullo Mirsaidov said government agencies regularly meddled in the editorial policies of private media last year, mostly about coverage of the border clashes and tumult in Gorno-Badakhshan. Panelist Bakhmaner Nadyrov, editor-in-chief of the Asia-Plus news service, said the news agency has stopped covering the events in GBAO because pressure from the special services and the General Prosecutor's

Office has made it impossible to report on them objectively.

Apart from the Radio Ozodi, the Tajik service of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, no media deal with the topics of dissidents from Tajikistan and opposition figures living in the West.

Among the new formats, podcasts are now available from at least five media outlets. Nabi Yusupov said they feature “experts, analysts, psychologists, medics, figures of science and culture” who discuss topics of interest to various segments of the population, including social issues, culture, environment and education.

The law throws up no obstacles for media to create content in Tajikistan, but before independent TV and radio stations can get a license, or print and online publications can do the required registration with the Ministry of Culture, they must get permission from the State National Security Committee, a significant hurdle. That permission must be renewed regularly, creating a “lever of pressure on independent media,” said Zinatullo Ismoilzoda, chair of the Union of Journalists. Panelists said officials use this accreditation process to pressure foreign journalists. It is especially difficult for journalists from Radio Ozodi to get or renew their accreditations.

Most media outlets that do not have a firm foothold in the marketplace are not interested in gaining new knowledge and opportunities by offering training. Many training programs charge fees, so not all independent media participate in them, since the participants themselves pay for the travel if it is outside the country or city where the media is located. The state-owned media are generally not very interested in training their journalists—if a journalist is poorly educated, it is easier to lead or manipulate them.

The country’s two leading universities for journalism training, the Tajik National University and the Russian-Tajik (Slavonic) University, have good video and radio training studios, but the teachers are ill-equipped to train multimedia journalists, said Nuriddin Karshiboev, director of the National Association of Independent Media. Khurshed Niyazov, editor-in-

chief of the *Farazh* and *Samak* newspapers, said journalism departments are heavy on theory and employ few practicing journalists.

Indicator 2: The norm for information is that content is based on facts.

Content and media producers try to be ethical, but there is no separation between editorial and advertising material. Amateur content producers often do not even try to ensure that their product complies with the law, regulations, and Tajikistan’s Code of Ethics adopted in October 2009. “The negative effects of [nonprofessional producers’] activities this year have been particularly devastating. And this also affected the activities of professional content producers,” Yusupov, the media consultant, said.

Panelists said Tajik journalism has suffered significant personnel losses, which have led to a significant decline in morale, credibility, and financial fortunes.

Some journalists, nonprofessional content producers, and all state media and government agencies spread unverified or false information, including on the events on the border with Kyrgyzstan and in Gorno-Badakhshan and the war in Ukraine, and few citizens are aware of this. For example, Mirsaidov said, there is still no reliable information on the number of deaths resulting from the border clashes or the unrest in GBAO.

Shakhodat Sokhibnazarova, creator of the factcheck.tj website, said journalists do not call out state agencies disseminating false or incorrect information. Although it is illegal in Tajikistan to knowingly disseminate false information, Karshiboev said government media often do so about opponents of the authorities without any legal repercussions, unlike independent media, which are subjected to pressure from authorities, even for random errors.

In 2022, few fact-checking resources in Tajikistan existed. Only one site, factcheck.tj, worked, but few people know about it. Online resources are

Panelists agreed that virtually no media in Tajikistan retain editorial independence.

available to check facts, but most Tajiks do not know of them and are not media literate, creating fertile ground for the spread of fake information and phishing attempts. Ismoilzoda, of the journalists' union, said media and social networks cannot prevent the spread of false information and provide 100 percent moderation, and often they themselves are tricked by fake news.

Indicator 3: The norm for information is that it is not intended to harm.

The groups that face the most persecution and criticism by the media are women, especially artists whose behavior seems provocative. Sexual minorities, representatives of small religious denominations, and opposition members living abroad also face harmful media scrutiny.

Foreign media in Tajikistan do not spread disinformation and do not interfere in Tajikistan's foreign policy. Only Radio Ozodi criticizes the authorities and gives the floor to opposition leaders and disgraced politicians.

In May and April, the Ukrainian Embassy in Tajikistan posted appeals on its Facebook page for Tajikistan's journalists to oppose Russia's war on Ukraine. It later posted an appeal for recruits to fight for Ukraine. After the intervention of the Tajikistan Foreign Ministry, Ukrainian diplomats deleted these posts.

Panelists agreed that nonprofessional content producers are not regulated. They produce flawed work that sometimes includes, intentionally or not, misinformation or information aimed at inciting hatred, said panelist Lola Khalikdzhanova, an editor for IWPR.

Rakhmonov, of the *Kulyabskaya Pravda* newspaper, said items are posted on Facebook, Instagram, and Telegram that spur arguments, insults, and attempts to humiliate opponents. Panelists said this is especially true on posts about family and religious issues.

Media outlets struggle to make a profit, and most journalists leave the profession or look for additional ways to earn money.

Indicator 4: The body of content overall is inclusive and diverse.

In Tajikistan, publications appear in the Tajik, Russian, and, to a much lesser extent, Uzbek languages. However, there is little quality news and information content in Tajik, which is the only language most people speak. Citizens get diverse information from social networks and the internet, while state media is homogeneous. Panelists said the language of informational materials mostly corresponds to people's needs, but there are questions about how much people use them. Panelist Nosirjon Mamurzoda, press secretary to the governor of the southwestern Khatlon region, said Tajikistan's 2 million ethnic Uzbeks "feel that there is very little media and broadcasting in their language," while the country's

Russian speakers decry the narrowing space for their language.

Freedom of speech and access to information are at their most constricted in a decade. Few opportunities arise to hear a wide range of opinions and ideological

views, and departures from the state's ideology are persecuted as dissent.

Gender and sexual minorities are reviled in Tajikistan. They have no media representing their interests and generally stay hidden. There is no opportunity for people in Tajikistan to learn about how people of all genders live and think.

The panelists said professional media do not cover the lives and views of all population groups. "Marginalized groups aren't represented in the mainstream media," Kadyrov said. "If there are alternative ways and platforms for presenting their views, they're invisible to the mass consumer."

As for gender balance among professional content producers, Yusupov said that information is missing from official statistics, which count "media employees in general, which includes the editorial offices of newspapers, magazines, and printing houses, and the entire staff is

taken into account.” However, panelists said more women than men work in the media, especially in the state media. In Tajikistan, four women own media outlets: Lailo Tagaeva of Limu Media, Mukhae Nozimova of zira.media, Nargis Kasimova of Dast ba dast, and Kristina Borodavko of dialog.tj.

The country’s few female bloggers tend to cover fashion or celebrity news, typically on TikTok and Instagram, while male bloggers favor Facebook and Telegram, said Ergasheva, the data journalism expert. Male bloggers mainly write about topics such as politics, the problems of the state language, poverty, and migration problems.

The gender composition of nonprofessional producers is an even bigger question mark, with no clear picture of the domestic blogosphere.

Even though more than 98 percent of Tajikistan’s population practices Islam, the media often write about various religious groups, such as Orthodox Christians, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Baha’is, Avestanites, Adventists, and Krishnaites. Khalikdzhanova said lately the media “only write about the Christian Church and the Avesta, and if they write about others, then only critically or to call for prohibiting their activities, such as Jehovah’s Witnesses.”

Rano Babadzhanova, a member of parliament and a journalism professor, said women’s participation in Tajikistan’s public and political life is officially supported, with quotas for the number of women lawmakers, but they are half as many as men. For example, only two of the government’s eight ministers are women. Moreover, despite the fact that officially Tajikistan is a secular and democratic state, most men and women follow a version of Islam that discourages women from studying and working outside the home. Sexist epithets, statements, and abuse are common in press releases and TV programs on state and social networks.

Indicator 5: Content production is sufficiently resourced.

By subsidizing only state and party media, the government has badly tilted the playing field in Tajikistan. Professional content producers

lack sufficient resources to cover operating costs and produce high-quality content. As traditional sources of income, such as subscriptions and advertising, wane, professional producers are beginning to find alternative ways of making money, including presenting paid public relations material as news and holding various contests.

During the pandemic, the number of advertisements and spots in the local media plunged. Nadyrov said domestic advertisers have significantly cut back on their use of domestic media and are increasingly placing spots on their own websites, social media, and messaging apps. “Local advertising companies have significantly reduced the placement of advertising in local media and are increasingly using other forms of advertising for this purpose, including their own websites, pages in social networks, sms-mailing, etc.,” said Nadyrov. Karshiboev, of the Independent Media Association, said evaporating funding sources have killed many outlets.

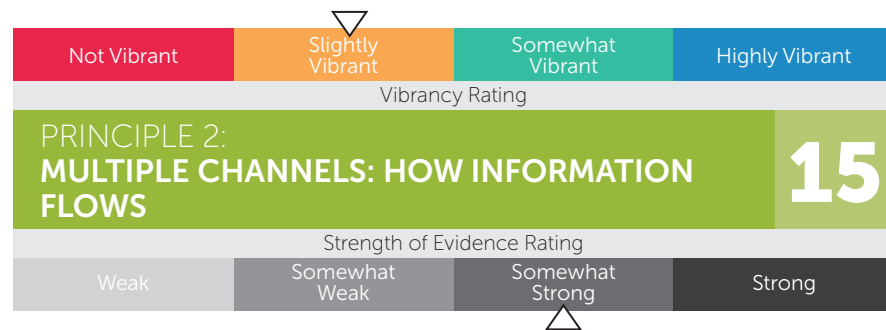
Independent media in Tajikistan have never been sustainable without the help of grants and other financial assistance, panelists said, and the situation only deteriorated with the emergence of the pandemic and the imposition of sanctions against Russia, Tajikistan’s main economic partner. The sanctions financially impacted Tajikistan’s independent media since the cost of supplies—paper, paint, fonts—is bought in Russia and prices skyrocketed. Also, the salaries of independent media employees have not increased, despite the fact that prices for products imported from Russia have increased drastically along with a rise in gasoline prices.

In November 2022, Tajikistan’s media lost a major supporter of content production, as the [Open Society Institute Assistance Foundation - Tajikistan, pulled out of the country](#). Panelists said many media also slashed freelance payments and staff during the pandemic, with a resulting cut in content. Mamurzoda, the press secretary in Khatlon, said regional media depend on subscriptions and support from local authorities.

The opaque and politicized distribution of state subsidies and advertising contracts distorts Tajikistan’s media market.

Media outlets struggle to make a profit, and most journalists leave the profession or look for additional ways to earn money. Rakhmonov said journalists are driven away by paltry salaries, ranging from 1,000 somonis to 3,500 somonis (about \$100 to \$350) monthly, to work with multiple media outlets, and the quality of the content suffers as a consequence. Ismoilzoda, the union chair, said salaries vary across the country’s seven state television channels, and Babadzhanova, the lawmaker, said that despite government support, funding for state media has not kept up with inflation.

Mirsaidov, the media analyst, said that almost all editors of private (independent) newspapers have to travel to the regions and conclude PR contracts. All independent newspapers are in a difficult financial situation, due to the rise in paper prices. In addition, some readers prefer to read information on the websites of these newspapers. But in the regions, many readers want to receive newspapers by subscription. In addition, regional leaders pay money to newspapers for advertising in their district, for positive articles about their activities through PR contracts.



This principle went up two points from last year’s VIBE report due to a slight uptick in government responses to citizens’ requests for information. However, all other indicators maintained low scores—the government continually undermines citizens’ rights to create and obtain information, and self-censorship among journalists has continued to rise from last year’s VIBE report. Media that criticize government policies or officials are monitored, and internet providers are pressured to block content that officials deem inappropriate. Many citizens cannot afford

internet access and in rural areas, and TV and radio are still the most common forms of communication.

Indicator 6: People have rights to create, share, and consume information.

The freedoms of speech and press are protected by law in Tajikistan, but the government actively tries to undermine these freedoms, via illegal and legal means, using overt and covert censorship. Journalists who cover potentially controversial or sensitive subjects risk prosecution and ultimately fines or imprisonment. Moreover, while libel has been decriminalized, insults and criticism of the government and its officials remain criminalized. Journalists themselves typically do little to defend their professional rights.

Laws protect the confidentiality of sources of information, but they are unfairly applied. There are no laws that can be used to harass journalists and citizens who openly express their opinions, but harassment happens. The number of independent journalists “interviewed” by security or law enforcement agencies increases arithmetically every year, and content producers practice self-censorship for fear of the possible consequences. The special services—the State Committee for National Security and the prosecutor’s office—summon journalists for questioning who cite anonymous sources and threaten them with arrests and fines.

“Self-censorship has intensified, the professional level of Tajik journalists has fallen sharply, and journalists who come to the field have little professional training and no particular desire to learn,” Yusupov lamented.

“Even free media giants like Asia Plus and Ozodi practice self-censorship. The presidential administration even refused to cover the events in GBAO,” said Kadyrov, of the Media Alliance.

In 2022, seven journalists and bloggers were sentenced to prison terms ranging from seven to 21 years. They were convicted of spreading false information, participating in an extremist community, and cooperating with banned organizations, all of which they deny. The number of

arrests rivals the period of Tajikistan's civil war, from 1992 to 1997, and the severity of the sentences suggests the government is increasingly determined to control public opinion. "This indicates a lot of pressure on freedom of thought, dissent, and criticism," Kadyrov said. "The consequence of this will be increased self-censorship, and Tajikistan will lose positions in international rankings, which will hold back the country's development."

In February 2023, the Ministry of Justice [ordered the Independent Human Rights Advocacy Center to close](#). Karshiboev, of the Independent Media Association, believes the move was in retaliation for lawyers from the center defending two of the convicted bloggers, Abdullo Gurbati and Daler Imomali, in court. In addition, a television director in the northeastern city of Penjikent was fined TJS 100,000 (\$9,000) for a conflict with a representative of Avangard, a youth movement linked to the Interior Ministry, Kadyrov noted.

Babadzhanova said parliament has been working since last year on new laws aimed at protecting the rights and interests of journalists and other media employees.

Mirsaidov, the media analyst, cited "unspoken threats, summonses, and explanatory statements by security agencies and prosecutors," putting pressure on media that criticize the authorities or officials, especially those close to the president's family. Sokhibnazarova said internet providers often block or throttle sites that officials deem undesirable. Internet service providers (ISPs) are usually instructed to block sites of such media or reduce the internet speed to a critical level so that the media cannot post information on them or have feedback from users

Panelists reported that many journalists complained that their phones were frequently confiscated before entering the Department for Organized Crime Control and the State Committee for National Security. If the phone uses a complex two-step password, then authorities do not return it for several days.

On May 17, journalists from Radio Ozodi were attacked after leaving

the house of journalist and human rights activist Ulfat Mamadshoeva in Dushanbe, whom they had come to interview. The unidentified assailants took their equipment and cell phones, beat one of the journalists, and threatened to shoot them. Four months later, Mamadshoeva was sentenced to 25 years in prison for allegedly organizing the unrest in GBAO that followed the death of a man while being arrested.

Over the past three years, Ozodi's Dushanbe office has had two directors and has lost four of its correspondents to other foreign media because the Foreign Ministry did not renew their accreditation.

Indicator 7: People have adequate access to channels of information.

Tajikistan's information and communication infrastructure does not meet the needs of most people, including people with disabilities and those who do not speak the major national languages. Telecommunications and internet infrastructure do not cover all areas of the country, and most people cannot afford to use information channels, including the internet and social networks. Regulation of the internet and digital broadcasting does not provide open and equal access for all users and content producers.

The country's internet is plagued by slow and unpredictable speeds and higher prices than in neighboring countries. In the event of an outage in the basic telecommunications infrastructure, such as TV, people can access other systems and devices for receiving and exchanging information, such as mobile internet and radio. State-mandated limits on wintertime energy consumption, however, mean mobile operators and internet providers cannot ensure uninterrupted operation of their towers, noted Mamurzoda.

For several years, all internet traffic has gone through a government-controlled, central switching center, allowing officials to block sites

Journalists who cover potentially controversial or sensitive subjects risk prosecution and ultimately fines or imprisonment.

with or without the knowledge of service providers. Karshiboev said Tajikistan’s government has been banning websites since 2015. For example, the Ahbor.com news website is inaccessible, and Asia-Plus has been available only via proxy servers for five years, he noted.

Sokhibnazarova, the fact-checker, said twice in early 2022, the authorities ordered providers to turn off the internet in GBAO, allegedly due to a terrorist threat. Newspapers, too, are becoming less useful sources of information, as many have reduced their frequency and offer less timely news, Ismoilzoda pointed out.

Women in Tajikistan face no legal barriers to going online, but Babadzhanova said, “In rural areas, women, even students, family members, or married—their husbands don’t allow them to use the internet.”

In rural areas, radio and state television channels are often still the only sources of information.

The Khatlon region, where most of Tajikistan’s residents live, and the eastern Rasht region and GBAO have no internet-based publications or independent TV and radio companies. “Therefore, the population of these regions has no access to alternative sources of information, [unless they could have access to] the internet,” where they can access non-government information on various websites and social media, said Rakhmonov, the *Kulyabskaya Pravda* editor.

Television still does not fully cover the country, particularly in the border areas with Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, where the channels of those countries are broadcast. Mirsaidov said people along the border with Uzbekistan prefer the television programming from that country.

Tajikistan has no TV channels in the languages of its national minorities, only newscasts in Russian, Uzbek, Arabic, and English in addition to Tajik. There are also problems because each media interprets the norms of the Tajik language in its own way, using different dialects and jargon, which is not always clear to most audience members; the information

consumers are worried about the complication of the language of some publications.

Panelists said Tajikistan’s transition to digital broadcasting has been expensive, and Ismoilzoda called the cost of a broadcasting license for private channels, which unlike state channels receive no public funds, “unbearable.”

Yusupov said Tajikistan’s media struggle to meet the information needs of people with disabilities, noting that only two TV channels, state-run First and Jahonnamo, offer sign-language interpretation.

Indicator 8: There are appropriate channels for government information.

Tajikistan has a freedom-of-information law, but its guarantees are not backed up by practice. It is also often narrowly interpreted, as when the courts closed the trials of the seven bloggers last year without explanation. Lawyers who reviewed the cases have found no reason why they should have been classified and panelists noted this as an example of an infringement on the media’s right to access information.

Babadzhanova, the panel’s member of parliament, said government officials often ignore the country’s law on access to information. Ismoilzoda, noted Tajikistan has no reliable website for checking facts related to the activities of state bodies.

Almost all state bodies have press secretaries or information services charged with responding to media inquiries, but they offer limited information, supportive of their agencies. They sometimes simply avoid answering inconvenient questions from journalists. Media representatives, in turn, rarely press their right to information, lest they spoil relations with government agencies as potential sources.

Panelists said it becomes more difficult each year to get up-to-date, official information, for which some experienced journalists resort to using personal connections in ministries and agencies.

“Internet providers often block or throttle sites that officials deem undesirable.”

Citizens have ways to get information about the work and decisions of government agencies, but there is no evidence that they are aware of them, Niyazov pointed out. “And what good would knowledge of these mechanisms do if the population as a whole has little interest in the activities of government agencies?” he wondered.

Babadzhanova said government information disseminated via state media is usually propaganda.

Ministries and departments use their own by-laws and instructions, almost all of which conflict with the freedom-of-information law, to refuse requests for information, Kadyrov said. That practice has kept secret data on military conscription and on mining of the country’s considerable natural resources.

Panelists noted that press secretaries are sometimes more of a hindrance than help to journalists. For example, Mirsaidov said, the Health Ministry “in every possible way avoided answering questions regarding the problems of the coronavirus,” as did the State National Security Committee on the border conflicts with Kyrgyzstan.

Panelists pointed out that during that fighting, officials were late in posting press releases on the website of the state news agency, Khovar. Kadyrov, of the Media Alliance, contrasted this with the experience of media in Kyrgyzstan, which “constantly received operational information from the press center of their border guards and worked from the first day of the conflict at the border areas where hostilities were taking place.” Journalists in Tajikistan did not get official access to the area until after the fighting ended, he said.

As a result, media in Kyrgyzstan were able to essentially write the story of the events. “This led to the fact that we lost the information war, which the authorities later accused us of,” Kadyrov said.

Ismoilzoda said the Union of Journalists last year held a series of seminars for press secretaries in law enforcement agencies on cooperating with the media promptly in times of crisis.

Yusupov said almost all ministries and departments have their own

websites, but only about one-quarter of them—including those of the press service of the president, the national bank, the Interior Ministry, and the Commission for Emergency Situations—are kept up to date. It has been 12 years since the president called for the adoption of e-government in Tajikistan, Nadyrov, the Asia-Plus editor, noted.

“The population has begun to use social networks (Facebook) and the newspapers *USSR*, *Farazh*, and *Asia-Plus* more often to contact government agencies, which creates more resonance,” Niyazov said. Officials monitor publications and posts in newspapers and social networks, and with pressure from the large number of users and comments, they are forced to officially respond to them or take action.

Tajikistan citizens can request information from the government by email, with an electronic signature and their address and phone number. But even though the law requires a response within three days, responses sometimes take three to six months, Ergasheva said, and the information is often poor or incomplete.

The only way for journalists to ask questions of high-ranking officials in person is at a regular, biannual press conference, which media consultant Yusupov noted media are permitted to broadcast or stream live, including on social networks.

All heads of ministries and their deputies have days when citizens can meet with them, but unspoken rules put up barriers. “To get an appointment with the minister, you must first talk with his secretary, who will find out the topic of the appeal, and if it is acceptable, then the minister can invite the visitor,” Niyazov said.¹

Indicator 9: There are diverse channels for information flow.

Foreigners cannot own media in Tajikistan, but they can advertise in the country’s media—although the market is so small it attracts few international advertisers.

Media outlets must register with the Ministry of Culture and the tax

1 <https://nansmit.org/index.php/ru/novosti/116005-pochemu-glava-khatlona-ushel-ot-vstrechi-s-zhurnalistami-video>

office, with general information on ownership but not necessarily disclosure of the ultimate beneficial owners. In 2022, the State Committee for Television and Radio Broadcasting issued no new TV or radio licenses. The licensing process, which stations must undergo every five years, is complex, and the committee can reject an application without explanation. Frequencies are usually awarded to their existing users, making it difficult to create new broadcast media.

The state operator Teleradiokom monopolizes television and radio broadcasting in Tajikistan.

Since the end of 2021, all radio stations have been obliged to coordinate with the licensing committee on content not in the state language, private broadcasters must give 1 percent of their profits to the committee, and the cost of a broadcasting license has doubled, from \$600 to \$1,200 per year, Ismoilzoda noted.

The law allows anyone to launch internet or print media, but without registration with the Ministry of Culture or approval by the State Committee on National Security, an outlet cannot operate, Kadyrov said.

Three independent cable and IPTV channels in Dushanbe broadcast Russian, Uzbek, and Iranian TV channels, but they do not produce their own content. There are no public media in Tajikistan because there is no law on public media, despite years of efforts by civil society.

Sokhibnazarova, of factcheck.tj, said internet service providers restrict users' access to certain sites. During conflicts, providers block access to communications and the internet in a particular region, district, or city.

Indicator 10: Information channels are independent.

Under pressure from the State Committee on National Security, prosecutors, and the Interior Ministry, neither private nor state media enjoy editorial independence. Government agencies that grant licenses and frequencies to media and telecommunications companies are politically biased. Media owners and advertisers, as a key source of income, also influence editorial policy.

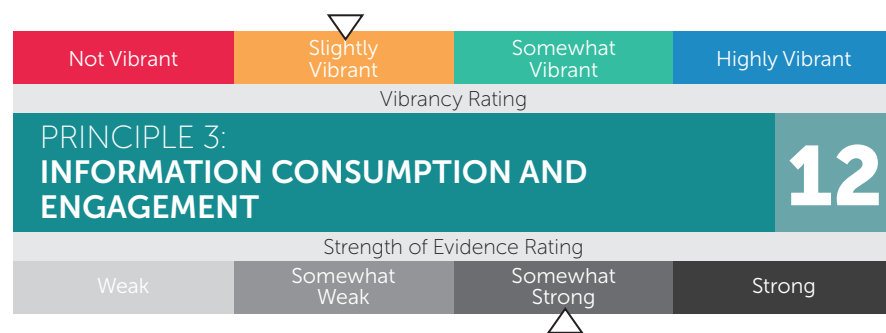
Sources of income, including advertising and investments of the owners, affect the editorial position of the media, as advertisers set their own conditions for signing contracts, stipulating that they will not be criticized no matter what, according to Yusupov. "There's a conflict of interest," he added.

In the professional media, the work of the editorial and business units is not separated, and political interests clearly influence the management and content of private outlets. Mamurzoda, the regional press secretary, said many journalists look for advertisers themselves to make up a portion of their income. "There are more and more cases of hidden advertising and PR materials being published in the media without [being marked]," Nadyrov noted.

State-owned media have exclusive access to certain sources of information and data, and they get preferential treatment in other ways, including licensing. Not all private media have access to certain sources of information, such as important statistics on the implementation of government policies, the country's anti-terrorism strategy, or government officials; the ones that do are loyal to the government. Ismoilzoda said that although Tajikistan has no official censorship, the heads of regulatory bodies that oversee media or other information channels are appointed by the government.

On all media editorial boards, journalists know the unwritten list of forbidden topics and practices, including criticizing advertisers and publishing or airing spots for those advertisers' competitors.

Nadyrov said it used to be that only sales employees thought about the interests of the advertiser, but financial pressure has pushed journalists to make concessions to advertisers.



This principle scored the lowest of all in this year’s VIBE report even though it rose two points from last year, from 10 to 12. Indicator 12 on media literacy scored lowest, because the country’s leaders do not make any attempts to instruct citizens on best media use practices. People who live in urban areas with access to the internet and social media are somewhat informed about fakes and fact-checks. However, most Tajiks believe that most web sites tell the truth.

Indicator 11: People can safely use the internet due to privacy protections and security tools.

Tajikistan has laws protecting people’s personal information, but privacy and digital security are far from assured. Panelists said officials and government organizations—such as the State Committee for National Security, the Department for Combating Organized Crime of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, and the Prosecutor’s Office—routinely violate people’s privacy and free-speech protections, eavesdropping on them and tracking their digital activity, citing the demands of national security. Basic digital security literacy is held by only a small part of society. Ismoilzoda said there are many digital-security education programs for media and other professional content producers, but state media are not interested, and many private media cannot afford them.

“The state-owned media are generally not very interested in training their journalists—if a journalist is poorly educated, it is easier to lead or manipulate them.”

Media and other professional content producers have “no reliable mechanisms for digital hygiene, and their sites are poorly protected,” Sokhibnazarova said. The emails and personal social media pages of journalists and activists are regularly hacked. Rakhmonov said many regional media sites are not secure because their founders and top editors do not take site protection seriously or cannot afford the added costs. He also noted that 2022 saw virus attacks on several websites of local representatives of state authorities in the Khatlon region.

Ergasheva noted the public lacks basic skills in information and digital literacy and security, and is ignorant of the ways in which social media use their personal data to target them. “In general, people don’t take these issues seriously,” she said, “The simplest password is often used for all accounts, which is easy to crack.”

Lacking in digital savvy, panelists said, social network users are easily led to fake news and posting their personal data online.

Indicator 12: People have the necessary skills and tools to be media literate.

Whether by omission or design, the country’s leaders do not promote media literacy, which is higher among educated people in Tajikistan. The concept entered the country’s discourse in some circles in 2018, when Internews launched its Central Asian Media Program, and along with Homa and NANSMIT, held several trainings for the media and journalism teachers. Subsequent courses by news and other organizations have had little effect.

Media literacy is taught at the Russian-Tajik (Slavonic) University and Khujand State University (KSU), and Babadzhanova said a textbook on media literacy by two well-known journalists was incorporated into the curriculums at KSU and Tajik National University in 2022.

While most people in Tajikistan are not media literate, city-dwellers who

have access to the internet and social media are somewhat informed about fakes and fact-checks. However, most people believe everything they see on the internet, especially on social networks, according to Internews Media's 2021 report on Tajikistan.²

Yusupov cited Sociological Research on Media Consumption and Media Information Literacy in Central Asian Countries, a survey in which eight percent of respondents said they would like to become more media literate or find alternative sources of information, as they currently rely on Radio Ozodi website reports. He said the development of the internet has promoted media literacy and that the percentage of the population that can distinguish between high-quality and low-quality information is growing, though it depends on education, profession, and place of residence.

“ The emails and personal social media pages of journalists and activists are regularly hacked.

Indicator 13: People engage productively with the information that is available to them

Journalists, activists, and ordinary citizens have been intimidated into largely ceding their rights to free speech and access to information. Although most people consume objective and fact-based content at least once a week, there are no platforms or mechanisms for public debate, such as public hearings, academic discussions, or talk shows, on the work or policies of the government. Kadyrov said the only place where people in Tajikistan can speak out a bit more freely than in the media is on social networks.

But Karshiboev noted that legislators changed the law last year to allow prosecutors to bring criminal charges over online content, expanding the law's scope from print and broadcast media and tightening law enforcement's control over the media and bloggers.

Such cases are frequent in Tajikistan, so activists, journalists, and representatives of civil society organizations increasingly self-censor,

even on their personal social media pages. “If someone in the country tries to exercise his right to freedom of speech by criticizing the authorities, the consequences can be devastating,” Mirsaidov said. Civic activists have gone underground and are heard from much less often.

Karshiboev said there are many online platforms for varied public discussions, primarily on the pages of leading online media and on social media pages of various groups and channels. Yusupov agreed, in part. “There are platforms for public debate in the country, but not for discussing political issues,” he said, “People are apathetic, indifferent to what's happening in the country.” Public debates take place during Media Camps, special programs for debaters.

Panelists said the arrests and sentences of the seven journalists and bloggers have made journalists fear taking risks and demanding their rights. There are public hearings in parliament, but the mechanisms for public discussion are not open to all; that is, there are no platforms for ordinary people to exchange opinions in practice except on social networks.

The internet has empowered journalists and citizens, increased the flow of information and its audience, bypassing the authorities' restrictions; they are not typically used to discuss issues related to health, music, and social life. Citing Tajikistan's strict laws against it, panelists said there is little content aimed at inciting hatred on open digital communication platforms. Mis- and disinformation is monitored by the State Committee for National Security and the Organized Crime Department of the Ministry of Internal Affairs

Indicator 14: Media and information producers engage with their audience's needs.

Media and content producers are trying to better understand the needs of their audiences through qualitative research. Notably, 2022 saw the release of an ambitious study conducted by the Media Consulting Center

² https://drive.google.com/file/d/10gt9SjyNcHyZd6wof0HAwuEMK_tGf3uB/view

to determine which types of media people in Tajikistan prefer.

Some organizations conduct surveys of their potential audiences, but there is little follow-through and trust-building. Cooperation between the government and civil society is weak and limited to a few areas of the economy, with the glaring omissions of politics and economics. Large media outlets often conduct their own analyses of their audiences' engagement and interests.

Panelists said there are practically no large audience studies in Tajikistan, especially for television and radio, as the country lacks the appropriate measuring tools. Internews released a USAID-funded [study in 2022](#) (the research for which was done in 2021) on media consumption and media literacy in Tajikistan. It showed that 77 percent of respondents noted that most often they receive information about life in the country through television, 41 percent get information from internet sites, and 19 percent from radio. More older people get news from television while younger Tajikistan citizens turn to internet sites and social networks.

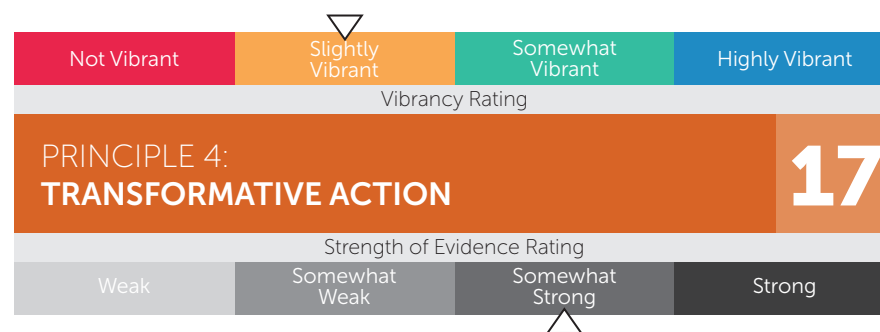
Due to strained budgets, only Asia-Plus has a marketing staff. Competition constrains the media from cooperating or exchanging information, except when covering extraordinary events like accidents or natural disasters..

In 2022, the Media Consulting Center released another [study](#) on the popularity of television, radio, print media, websites, social networks, and electronic messengers. Yusupov said much of the study concerned how widely used the newer technologies—the internet, messengers, and email—have become, but how little the population uses them. Mamurzoda said media outside the cities cannot afford to conduct audience research.

Niyazov, of the *Farazh* and *Samak* newspapers, said his journalists sometimes get direct feedback: “Readers often come to the editorial offices and ask us to publish more articles on social topics,” he said.

Indicator 15: Community media provides information relevant for community engagement.

There are no community media outlets in Tajikistan. Authorities quashed an effort to launch local radio 10 or 15 years ago by refusing to issue licenses.



Although this principle rose two points, from 15 in 2022 to 17 in 2023, scoring the highest of all principles in this chapter, the situation in Tajikistan concerning transformative action and press freedoms has not dramatically changed. Indicator 16 looking at whether media outlets encourage cross-ideological information sharing reveals that Tajik citizens do not have opportunities to engage in public debate offline. However, the indicator stands out because a few nonpartisan producers of news have been able to make inroads in the country's media market with online coverage of social problems and podcasts.

State media tends to dominate distribution channels and even in discussions on social networks, most Tajiks avoid politics for fear of running afoul of authorities. Indicator 19, concerning the government using quality information in making public policy decisions, received low scores because in 2022 the government scaled back press conferences to just twice a year.

Indicator 16: Information producers and distribution channels enable or encourage information sharing across ideological lines.

Tajikistan media do not offer a wide range of opinions and ideologies, with the exception of a few independent ones, including Asia-Plus and Farage Media Ltd. State media has many TV and radio channels, along with print newspapers, with which citizens must have subscriptions. Therefore, government-backed media dominates the information space.

There are not many nonpartisan producers of news and information in Tajikistan, but enough neutral media outlets exist that people can be exposed to different political orientations. A small number of nonpartisan news and information content producers offer entertainment newspapers, tabloids and nonprofessional bloggers, and they have large audiences. Some Tajik nonprofessional bloggers have an audience of more than one million.

Some producers of nonpartisan news content are representatives of foreign media who do not sympathize with any of the political parties. However, they most often write information about the ruling party, ignoring the opposition, so that they do not have problems with the authorities. A few publications try to be nonpartisan, but they depend on grants and projects funded by international organizations and tend to stay neutral to survive. The domestic, state-funded media comply fully with the government's orders. Officials make liberal use of administrative resources during campaigns to manipulate the outcomes.

“The consumers of information are free to choose,” Yusupov said, noting that most watch and listen to Russian media, “Those who don't know other languages are forced to watch and listen to and read domestic media, and their worldview is formed on this basis.”

Panelists lamented that people in Tajikistan have no opportunities to engage in offline debate. Even in discussions on social networks and media websites, people carefully avoid politics, Ismoilzoda said.

With external and self-censorship on the rise, most outlets focus on social, economic, and cultural issues.

Some panelists said all private TV and radio stations in the country could be classified as apolitical, as the licensing State Television and Radio Committee does not allow the production of political content, and they limit themselves to entertainment programs and short news segments. Producers of apolitical content also include entertainment, sports, medical, scientific, and other specialized publications, Yusupov said.

In the Media Consulting audience preference study, one-third of respondents consumed some media in 2022, down from 47 percent in 2019. Of those, 96 percent watched television; 39.7 percent listened to the radio; 32.4 percent read newspapers, down from 41 percent in 2019; and 7.6 percent read magazines, down slightly from 2019.

Sokhibnazarova, the fact-checker, said citizens cannot participate in an open discussion of quality news and information content.

Panelists said only government and pro-government parties remain active in Tajikistan, with their activities covered by government media. With external and self-censorship on the rise, most outlets focus on social, economic, and cultural issues.

“In the last three years, apolitical producers of news and information content, including Limu.tj, Halva.tj, and Zira.media, have been successfully operating in Tajikistan's media market, covering social problems and producing podcasts,” Ergasheva said, noting that they have up to 50,000 subscribers.

The expanding reach of apolitical news and information content producers “shows people's indifference to the life of society, shifting the spectrum of their interests in the direction of easy reading,” said Mirsaidov, the panel's media analyst.

Indicator 17: Individuals use quality information to inform their actions.

In Tajikistan, people get most of their information from television, primarily from nine state channels that presumably form the basis of

their opinions on political, economic, and social issues. With a dearth of other sources, it is difficult for viewers to know whether the content they present is factual and reliable. With no incentive to become politically engaged, most people focus instead on their daily lives.

There is no concrete evidence that citizens use quality information when interacting with their representatives in parliament on issues of concern to them. In any event, those interactions are rare: Parliament is a rather closed institution. Most constituents do not trust their representatives, whom they rarely see after elections.

“To say that people in Tajikistan understand the importance of quality information would be a clear exaggeration,” Ismoilzoda said, given that they are as likely as not to consume unreliable and false information.

Panelists said there are no quality materials produced for Tajikistan’s elections, which are pro forma and opaque, and the country has no democratic foundations.

The COVID-19 pandemic, whose dangers the government downplayed, showed a breakdown in how information about health and safety reaches the public. During the crisis, parliament changed the law to allow fines against the media or individuals for disseminating “unofficial information,”—that is, not from the Health Ministry—about cases of the coronavirus, Karshiboev noted. As a result, Babadzhanova said, “The media misled the population by publishing the Health Ministry’s assertion that no cases of the virus had been registered in Tajikistan. And citizens, in turn, based on false information, put their lives and their loved ones at risk of infection.” Only Radio Ozodi and Asia-Plus tried to give alternative statistics about deaths from COVID-19, to denials from the Health Ministry. The public was also not warned about the side effects of some vaccines for people with chronic diseases and were misled by the Ministry of Health.

Indicator 18: Civil society uses quality information to improve their communities.

Tajikistan’s civil society is weak overall—its cities have some active NGOs,

including the Coalition Against Torture, and groups focusing on human rights, women’s rights, and children’s rights that work actively with the media and disseminate reliable information.

Cooperation between civil society organizations and the media has deteriorated in recent years, as government agencies have prohibited some groups from providing the media with information or research from projects and studies. One high-profile example of cooperation is the factcheck.tj website, where journalists work to counter false and unreliable information in a joint project of the Ravzana (Okno) and Rasonanigor (Media Critic) organizations.

Civil society organizations use quality news and information materials, or official information, in their own work for distribution to the media or other recipients. For these groups, being caught spreading false or unreliable information could mean prosecution or a loss of their donors’ trust.

Nongovernmental organizations often use the work of researchers, journalists, or other respected and well-established nonprofit organizations.

Yusupov said interaction between the media and NGOs is limited to issues that pose little risk of blowback for the organizations and media outlets, which he said are selective in their coverage of human rights violations. At the same time, Niyazov said, some NGOs use “the bits of alternative and objective information that are published by the Tajik media” to develop strategic plans. Karshiboev noted the influence of civil society is limited to a few issues, such as “legal protections for citizens, or domestic violence or environmental problems.” The media cooperate only with some NGOs on socially significant topics. Most NGOs, especially outside the major cities, rarely turn to the media to disseminate their information.

As part of their mission, NGOs share quality information with citizens by publishing reports on their activities within their projects on social media pages and their websites on the internet. This is the standard way of operating by NGOs dealing with the disabled, and those who provide legal services for free.

“NGOs are practically not involved in the government’s discussion and adoption of socially significant decisions. And if they are involved, then they’re loyal to the authorities,” Nadyrov said.

Panelists lamented that the government has brought Tajikistan’s civil society to heel through a requirement that groups report their financial activities to the Justice Ministry, ostensibly to monitor for signs of terrorist financing or money laundering. Still, the groups work hard to push reforms.

Indicator 19: Government uses quality information to make public policy decisions.

In Tajikistan, ministries and agencies hold regular press conferences infrequently—twice a year, down from a quarterly schedule a few years ago—for them to be useful and relevant. Journalists have their share of blame for this, having shown up for many press conferences unprepared and ill-equipped, asking duplicative and irrelevant questions, or focusing on issues in which they had some personal stake. Journalists complain that officials soak up press conference time by reading long reports out loud, and officials complain about the quality of the questions asked.

In political discussions, parties refer to facts and empirical data, and they sometimes knowingly use false information. Objective information is rarely heard in political debates in the interest of pleasing authorities. For journalists, press conferences are the only opportunity to question the leaders of ministries and departments, but they do not always get straight or complete answers. Frequently, heads of ministries and departments will read a report for the majority of the press conference, leaving some journalists no time to ask questions. Still, Ismoilzoda said, “Despite their shortcomings, these press conferences remain one of the real tools of interaction between representatives of government agencies and representatives of civil society and the media.”

Even important events do not usually prompt officials to hold press conferences outside the regular schedule. The exception is the Foreign

Ministry, which conducts briefings before important visits or major international conferences. Nadyrov noted, for example, that on September 19, directly after the end of hostilities on the border with Kyrgyzstan, Deputy Foreign Minister Sodik Imomi gave a briefing³ where he spoke frankly about what had happened. “This was an exception, since the Foreign Ministry had been silent about all border conflicts,” he said.

Official reports on the situation on the border in April and September 2022 were slow, and Tajik journalists were forced to cite unofficial sources from the conflict sites, which were not always objective and verified.

Panelists said that lying is becoming a normal way of doing business for some government officials. Ergasheva noted that officials rarely cite their sources of information, and they move quickly to silence reports of corruption.

Yusupov said he could not recall an instance when officials cited the work of the media or civil society in explaining a decision. Instead, he said, they refer to their own internal data, which is not always correct. NGOs, in contrast, conduct anonymous surveys of the population that measure public opinion.

Indicator 20: Information supports good governance and democratic rights.

How the government reacts to reports of corruption depends on where those reports come from: if from government officials, then they could lead to proceedings. However, in 2022 bloggers’ and journalists’ reports of wrongdoing cost them their freedom.

In Tajikistan, no one knows the true extent of corruption, or whether it is on the rise or decline, since reports most often concern minor cases. Rarely will an investigation result in some action, such as

Corruption, cronyism, and regionalism are rife in the country.

³ <https://www.mfa.tj/ru/main/view/11046/brifing-o-sobytiyakh-na-tadzhiksko-kyrgyzskoi-granitse>

firing an official, tearing down a building, or otherwise punishing the perpetrators.

“The country has long been mired in corruption, and the authorities have paid little attention to this issue. Especially in power structures, where corruption has become a way to promote and strengthen one’s position,” Yusupov said.

In covering corruption, Tajik media rely on information provided by official bodies, in particular the anti-corruption agency, and sometimes use information from social networks. In this way, journalists are vulnerable to being used in political or professional vendettas among officials. Investigative journalism is rare; there was none in the domestic press in 2022. Investigations are carried out only by individual journalists and are published in international publications, for example, on the Radio Ozodi website⁴, but there is no public reaction from the authorities.

Karshiboev said the state gives short shrift to concerns of human rights, civil liberties, and clean elections. “As long as that’s true, it’s difficult to talk about the development of the media, civil liberties, and the formation of public opinion,” he said.

State media carries virtually no coverage of human rights violations, and in the independent media, the topic surfaces much less frequently than it used to.

Khalikjanova said the authorities often do not respond to criticism and ignore quality information about corruption and violence against children and women, contributing to a growing level of violence and corruption in the country. “The authorities’ failure to respond to family violence has led to an increase in divorces, suicides, and murders of daughters-in-law, mothers-in-law, and husbands,” she noted.

Panelists said officials react vehemently to quality information about human rights violations, and they pressure those who assert their rights, especially those who sue for violation of their rights, for example, during

the demolition of their homes, the death of loved ones due to medical error, etc.

Quality information does not affect the course of elections, at the local and national levels, as most people know in advance which parties’ candidates will be allowed to win.

Corruption, cronyism, and regionalism are rife in the country. This imposes its own specifics on decision-making in government bodies. For example, people from the same region as the minister or his relatives are appointed to public office. In addition, bribes are given for certain positions.

4 <https://www.mfa.tj/ru/main/view/11046/brifing-o-sobytiyakh-na-tadzhiksko-kyrgyzskoi-granitse>

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