

TAJIKISTAN

Vibrant Information Barometer

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PRINCIPLES

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.

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.

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.

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.

Highly Vibrant

Somewhat Vibrant

Slightly Vibrant

Not Vibrant

OVERALL
SCORE

14

Ten years ago, Tajikistan's media played a more active role and enjoyed relative freedom, although criticism of President Emomali Rahmon and his family was unofficially prohibited. In recent years, however, the country's media environment has deteriorated, and now, according to the panelists, the media are in the worst state since Tajikistan's civil war in the 1990s.

The quality of information has not improved and remains poor. Some professional media dispense questionable 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. Manipulative information is the norm.

In 2023, Tajikistan authorities increased pressure on independent media, critical journalists, bloggers, and on representatives of civil society. Over the past year and a half, pressure from officials closed more than [700 nongovernmental organizations \(NGOs\)](#), including media groups that were closed [voluntarily](#) or by court decisions.

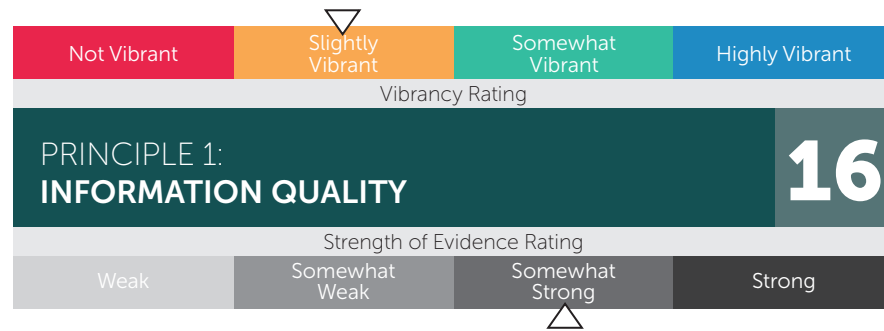
The repression of journalists, public figures, and human rights defenders by Tajikistan authorities continues. In March 2023, the State Committee for National Security [arrested](#) independent journalist Khurshed Fozilov on charges of participating in banned extremist groups. A district court sentenced him to seven years in prison. The detention and arrest in August of the author of the memoir Events of My Life, Abdukhalil Kholikzoda, and his editor, Abdukodir Rustam, represented an even higher-profile case. Kholikzoda is a well-known Tajik entrepreneur whose book includes details about two top officials. Both the author and

his editor are accused of inciting interethnic and religious hatred.

Access to official information also remained a problem in 2023. Officials [continued to hinder journalists](#) by scheduling 10 to 13 press conferences each day, which represents the only opportunities for journalists to ask questions of interest. Due to the logistical chaos this caused, independent media's small editorial offices were unable to send reporters to all the events.

Tajikistan's overall country score dropped one point this year in comparison with the 2023 VIBE study, with moderate score decreases in Principle 2 (Multiple Channels), Principle 3 (Information Consumption and Engagement, and Principle 4 (Transformative Action). Media organizations continued to have difficulty obtaining licenses to produce broadcast products or to gain frequency allocation and journalist accreditations. In 2023, the Communications Service reduced the period for television frequency use from five years to just one. The government also reduced the length of journalists' accreditation, sometimes to just three months, and some panelists said this shows Tajikistan wants to "keep journalists on a leash." Additionally, authorities attempted to take control of bloggers' activities by creating the [Association of Bloggers of Tajikistan](#), which was initiated by the Committee for Youth and Tourism Affairs.

Throughout the year, there were signs of cooperation between the media community and the state. Some members of the country's parliament joined with media NGOs and prepared an [Information Code](#), which aims to improve journalists' lives.



The score of this principle remained the same as in 2023. The lowest score occurred in Indicator 5, which deals with the assessment of independent content producers, who, in 2023, were even more constrained due to reduced funding from international organizations. This indicator was also influenced by the lack of state support and additional fees charged for television companies, which weakened the industry. This led to a deterioration in the quality of content produced and a limitation in the timeliness of covering events in the country.

A significant number of media outlets continued to operate in Tajikistan throughout the year, including print media, television and radio stations, and online news agencies. However, the quality of the content produced remains a problem, especially by state media. Despite a decrease in the number of arrests of journalists and bloggers in 2023 compared with 2022, their activities continued to be influenced by pressures that cropped up during 2023 that affected the independence of media outlets and the quality of information produced. For example, panelists noted a rise in self-censorship by journalists and bloggers that coincided with an increase in the government's attempts to control their activities, such as by creating the Association of Bloggers of Tajikistan. They also pointed out a low level of professionalism by journalists, the domination of opinions over facts in the media, a lack of fact-checking, and the dissemination of incorrect, false information, especially by state media.

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

In Tajikistan in 2023, there were about [300](#) print publications, including 165 newspapers (99 state-owned and 66 private), 149 magazines (121 state-owned and 28 private), six news agencies (one state-owned and five private), approximately 20 online outlets, 33 television companies (15 state-owned and 18 private), 16 cable television companies, and four internet protocol (IP) television companies, 24 private radio stations, and 14 production houses. All of them produced a variety of audio/video and print products in various formats and on various topics. Independent media, in particular Asia Plus and Oila, have been particularly successful in producing multi-format content for various platforms. Although all state television companies are equipped with very high-quality video equipment, the content they produce does not meet consumer needs.

Umed Babakhanov, the owner of Asia Plus, says that their existing infrastructure does not help produce quality content. "People want to produce good content, but they cannot get a license for the production of audio or video content," Babakhanov said, "To open a newspaper or renew its license, the government requires a certificate from the State Committee for National Security, which is very difficult for truly independent publications to obtain."

Expensive equipment and fees for renting digital frequencies also affect the production of quality content. "You have to pay for every hour of airtime, from 16 somoni (SM) to 40 somoni (\$1.50 to \$3.70), depending on the power of the signal," noted Habib Maqbulov, director of TV Regar, whose company pays SM4,350 per month (\$398) for seven hours of broadcasting per day, which is unaffordable for most private television companies.

According to panelists, high-quality materials on a wide range of topics in Tajikistan are mostly produced by independent publications, foreign media outlet correspondents, or freelancers.

Censorship and self-censorship strongly influence the quality of the content produced. Although most state media practice censorship,

a large number of private media journalists who produce analytical materials practice self-censorship. The events of 2022 and 2023, when Tajikistan's government imprisoned seven journalists and bloggers who criticized the regime's corruption, triggered increased self-censorship among content producers.

For years, Tajikistan authorities blocked opposition websites, including Radio Ozodi, the Tajik service of Radio Free Europe/RL, the social media account Bomdod, and the Islokh news portal, depriving the population of the right to access alternative information. According to blogger Rustam Gulov, "By restricting the population's access to truthful information within the country, the authorities are pushing citizens toward foreign sources of information, which are not always reliable."

Panelists agreed that despite the existence of Tajikistan's Media Council, which includes more than 70 private and state media outlets and has developed a Journalist Code of Ethics, local journalists and bloggers do not follow democratic norms of journalism. They noted that state authorities react differently to producers who do not comply with ethical standards: Some are allowed, while others are punished. According to Nouriddin Karshiboev, the head of the National Association of Independent Media of Tajikistan (NANSMIT), "The problem is that officials have double standards: they allow leeway to some and punish others for small infractions." Karshiboev said the memoir of Abdukhalil Kholikzoda, *Pages of My Life* serves as an example: "Its author and editor were accused of inciting interethnic, interregional, and religious discord and were imprisoned. However, independent experts claim the book does nothing of the sort."

Tajikistan has five universities with faculties or departments of journalism where journalists can receive training to produce quality materials. However, panelists note the level of teaching in these universities is very low, and the curriculum lags far behind modern requirements. In addition, NGOs and international organizations offer many free and paid short-term courses to train citizens interested in content production. However, journalists lack motivation and clear professional goals, which prevents them from upgrading their skills on a continuous basis in the long term, according to Vera Kulakova-

Brannerud, the owner of Radio Vatan. Moreover, Tajikistani journalists, for the most part, do not speak languages other than their native one, which severely limits their ability to acquire higher-quality knowledge online and in training.

Almost all media outlets, especially in rural areas, are financially dependent on service contracts with local authorities to cover government activities, which makes it difficult for them to maintain editorial independence.

Journalists have always complained that government officials are inaccessible. Babakhanov noted that this makes it difficult for journalists to cover the work of many government agencies, especially the executive office of the president and law enforcement agencies. In recent years, officials have completely stopped responding to journalists' inquiries. Press conferences, which are very rare, have mostly turned into monologues where heads of state institutions read out prepared information, leaving very little time for questions. The lack of access led the journalism community to send a collective letter to President Rahmon's administration and the General Prosecutor's Office at the beginning of summer 2023, which slightly improved the situation for a short time.

Although many local, regional, and international media outlets operate in Tajikistan, few of them have the courage to criticize the president, his close relatives, and high-ranking officials. One exception is Radio Ozodi, which provides a platform for opponents of President Rahmon. Because it airs opinions of opposition leaders, state authorities limit the outlet's journalists' accreditation period, sometimes to three months.

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

In 2023, there was a troubling trend of media outlets reporting unverified and low-quality information. Panelists pointed out that this is due to journalists' low level of education and professional qualifications, which leads to the spread of fake news and speculation-based information. Media present a lack of distinction between facts and opinions, where

for many content creators, subjective opinions become more important than objective facts, especially in state media.

International and some local publications conduct fact-checking, while other outlets do not due to the lack of information written in Tajik—most young journalists in the country speak only Tajik. Resources for fact-checking are virtually nonexistent except for the platform <https://factcheck.tj/>, which offers Tajik- and Russian-language versions. This platform operates on a voluntary basis and does not consistently publish materials on current topics. Tajikistani journalists do not check government officials' statements because it is considered dangerous, and journalists and their editorial offices often face threats as a result, according to the panelists. This leads to the production of a large amount of unverified, low-quality content containing false or incorrect information. State media often disseminate information prepared by law enforcement agencies or “troll factories” aimed at defaming political opponents, especially those who are in exile in Europe.

Nonprofessional content producers are the main disseminators of inaccurate and unverified information, especially video bloggers, “who sometimes don't even try to ensure that their product complies with legislation, regulatory acts, or accepted professional standards, rules, or the code of ethics,” said Nabi Yusupov, head of the Media Consulting NGO. He said this was especially evident during the 2022 border conflict between Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan “information war,” when authorities gave tacit consent and sometimes support to bloggers and other social media activists who spread unverified, one-sided, and sometimes false information about the situation. He noted, however, that Kyrgyz professional and nonprofessional content producers spread the same information but more of it.

The production and dissemination of manipulative information has varying consequences. If false information is aimed at denigrating

opponents or critics of the authorities and disseminated by state media, officials make no claims against them. However, when independent media criticize authorities, then authorities will definitely punish the journalist, blogger, or outlet. The Media Council used to act as an arbitrator in such disputes, but in the past few years, it has stopped participating.

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

The Russian government's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has divided Tajikistan's society into two opposing camps—those who support the actions of the Russian government and those who consider it an aggressor. Although Tajikistan's government remains neutral in this war, some content producers became tools of its propaganda and continue to incite hatred toward Ukraine and Western values.

Foreign governments and their representatives leverage the political tension between the Russian government and the West, as well as the conflict in the Middle East, to spread manipulative information and hatred. In Tajikistan, sources have funded channels, including one by

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photographer [Olim Shirinov](#), and profiles on social networks that spread manipulative information about Ukrainians. Content creators have also produced antisemitic material with suspected support from the Russian government.

Because the government has not communicated a clear position on the Ukrainian conflict, panelists noted that creators of false information and

materials inciting hatred remain unpunished. The state media continue their practice of blackening political opponents and spreading false information, and do not face punishment.

Unprofessional content producers and bloggers often rely on “hot” topics for content, based solely on their opinions, and ignore fact-

checking. This creates a fertile ground for the spread of manipulative and hateful information. The activities of these content producers, especially on social media networks, remain unregulated and unpunished, which complicates the fight against manipulative information and incitement to hatred in general.

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

In Tajikistan, publications appear in Tajik, Russian, and, to a much lesser extent, Uzbek. However, there is little quality news and information content in Tajik, which is the only language most people speak. The lack of media in the languages of national minorities limits their access to diverse information, so many of them turn to the internet and Russian-language television channels for information.

Although the constitution guarantees freedom of speech and opinion, the diversity of opinions and ideological views remains limited: Professional media, except for Radio Ozodi, rarely provide a platform for opposition politicians to express their beliefs. In addition, the government controls both official media and social media networks, pursuing even small expressions of criticism toward the president or government structures. These actions place Tajikistan among countries actively persecuting their political opponents abroad.

“Representatives of some religious, political, and ethnic groups in Tajikistan face restrictions on publishing their content,” Babakhanov pointed out. National media, especially state-owned outlets, do not reflect a wide range of ethnic groups, creating the illusion that only Tajiks live in the country. National minorities without their own media in their native language are forced to seek platforms to express their views and discuss issues on social networks.

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The vast majority of Tajikistan’s population practices Islam and coverage of religious issues, including the views of “unofficial” religious figures whose appointments the government never approved, often leads to negative consequences. Journalists can write about other religions, but they avoid serious discussions of religious rights violations, due to self-censorship. Bloggers and opposition journalists outside Tajikistan can openly criticize the government for human rights violations, including ones based on religious grounds, but their relatives and friends inside the country may suffer as a result.

Traditional notions of male and female gender limit discussions of gender and gender-sensitive issues. Experts note the complete absence of discussions about transgender women and men in Tajikistan’s media. “Gender minorities and marginalized groups are voiceless in the media and face condemnation and accusations of propaganda when they try to discuss their issues,” noted Lola Olimova, editor of the Institute for War and Peace

Reporting (IWPR) news outlet, “They rarely come out publicly with information about their gender due to possible negative consequences.”

Some panelists pointed out that more opportunities exist for women in journalism than for men, largely because of financial considerations and because female journalists face fewer risks and less pressure than men.

Indicator 5: Content production is sufficiently resourced.

Journalism in Tajikistan faces serious challenges, such as mass exodus from the profession due to low wages, especially in rural areas. Resources, such as grants from international organizations which used to support independent media, are dwindling, and local programs that once brought in some income are ceasing to exist. According to Zebo Tajibayeva, owner of online media site Your.TJ, journalism in Tajikistan is seen as an unprofitable business, and for independent outlets, the only way to earn income is through grants and advertising. Subscriptions and

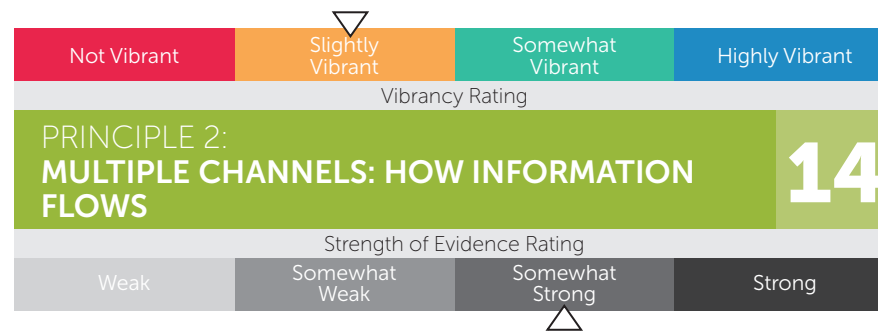
crowdfunding do not bring in significant revenue due to the peculiarities of local markets.

Independent television stations in Tajikistan face serious difficulties competing with state television channels, which receive over 70 percent of the advertising market and subsidies from the state, although they do not use these funds for content development. The remaining 30 percent of the market is divided among internet publications, radio stations, newspapers, and social media, increasing competition for independent outlets. The lack of media profitability also affects the salaries of ordinary journalists.

Not only does the government fund state television channels, which distorts the media market, but the State Committee for Television and Radio, Gosteleradio, also charges private television companies an additional 1 percent fee on their income for supposed “staff training.” This is in addition to the fee private companies pay for each hour of connection to the state multiplex, which can amount to up to SM40 (approximately \$3.70), which is a significant burden for many financially strapped media companies.

Professional content producers currently lack sufficient financial resources to cover operational expenses to create high-quality content. Nematullo Mirsaidov, freelance journalist, notes that despite the majority of journalists having the necessary technical skills, they face a lack of funds for financing creative tasks. This hinders the creation of quality analytical material and slows down the timely coverage of important events in the country.

Gulnora Amirshoeva, owner of online news site “Vecherka,” points out that journalists’ salaries are quite low, ranging from 1,100 to 3,300 somoni (SM) per month, which is equivalent to \$100 to \$300. They face significant differences in payment from different publications: Outlets that actively compete for audiences and monitor new trends are willing to pay significantly more than those interested only in survival. Journalists from both types seek additional sources of income by joining NGO and international organizations’ projects, as well as participating in various competitions those groups organize.



This principle scored one point lower than last year’s VIBE report, dropping from 15 to 14. The number of journalist arrests decreased in 2023, and attacks on them, including cyberattacks and the use of legal mechanisms, intensified. Self-censorship rose not only among journalists but also among experts and analysts, impacting the quality of content produced in the country. Authorities blocked websites without warning, creating a tense environment for freedom of speech and access to information. National minorities faced difficulties accessing information due to the lack of television channels in their languages, and access for people with disabilities was also limited. The internet infrastructure covers most of the country, but low speed and high cost prevent consumers from fully utilizing its benefits in everyday life. State control over the internet and media restricts the population’s access to it, hindering exposure to alternative information. Panelists also noted that state media agencies’ information dissemination were ineffective and inadequate—deadlines for providing information are not met, and access to state agencies’ official websites is restricted. The state monopolizes the main channels for offering information, including television, radio, and the internet, leaving little space for the activities of independent information channels.

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 does not enforce them adequately. The parliament has been working on a new Information Code for two years, which is

supposed to protect the interests of journalists and media workers. But by the end of 2023, it had not yet been adopted.

In 2023, the number of journalists arrested, along with the number of attacks against them, has significantly decreased in comparison with 2022, commonly seen as the worst year for Tajik journalists since the civil war in the 1990s. However, [Justice for Journalists](#) tracked about 31 attacks against journalists in 2023, with about 60% of them perpetrated by government officials involving legal mechanisms. Journalist Khurshed Fozilov, 37 years old, [received a court sentence](#) for collaborating with banned organizations. Authorities detained businessman and memoirist Abdughalil Kholikzod and his editor, Abdukodir Rustam, for allegedly [“inciting social, racial, national, regional, and religious discord.”](#) related to Kholikzod’s memoir.

The Tajikistan government is taking measures to control the activities of independent media. Zinnatullo Ismoilzoda, chairman of Tajikistan’s Union of Journalists, stated that the State Committee for Radio and Television requires private television companies to pre-approve all contracts with foreign organizations. Additionally, the [Unified Information Center for the Prevention of Extremism, Terrorism, and Cybercrime](#) in the nation’s capital, Dushanbe, officially opened, which analyzes and collects data on cybercrimes. The panelists expressed concerns about the possible restriction of freedom of speech due to the activities of this agency, which monitors and analyzes citizens’ online comments and statements for possible interpretation as extremist.

The arrests of journalists in 2022 significantly influenced self-censorship among media representatives and analysts who provide commentary on specialized topics, especially those who have ties to or depend on state institutions. Many experts who work for the government avoid expressing opinions without prior approval from management, even on issues within their area of expertise. This reduces the quality and diversity of content.

Mirsaidov pointed out that access to information was significantly restricted throughout 2023, especially news concerning the border conflict with Kyrgyzstan. State officials have given unofficial instructions

to journalists not to provide information, and journalists now find it difficult to enter this region without coordination with the authorities. Residents of border areas fear retribution from authorities and avoid contact with the media. Panelists believe that coverage of potentially controversial and sensitive topics has become very rare in Tajikistan because outlets and journalists are concerned about possible consequences, as defamation is punishable by criminal penalties. State institutions can openly instruct the media to exclude certain topics from their agenda.

Some websites continue to be blocked in the country without warning or explanation of the reasons.

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

Tajikistan’s information and communication infrastructure meets the information needs of citizens, although not all users are always satisfied with the topics covered and the formats of information delivery. The lack of interesting and quality content forces many consumers to turn to foreign sources, which can influence their worldview. “The development of quality media content within the country is an important task to meet the information needs of citizens and give them media education,” said Yusupov with Media Consulting.

In Tajikistan, no television channels offer programming in the nation’s minority languages, so these population groups have limited news offerings. There are only news broadcasts in Russian, Uzbek, Arabic, and English on a few national channels, as well as various programs in Uzbek on two private channels. People with disabilities also have limited access to news because only two state channels, TVT and Jahonnamo, occasionally use sign-language interpreters during coverage of important events.

The telecommunications and internet infrastructure covers almost all regions of the country and are available both in urban areas and in large rural areas, although according to some data access is only available to about [40 percent of the population](#).

Tajikistan's internet ranks among the slowest and most expensive in the world; according to the Speedtest Global Index, [the country ranks 139th out of 145 countries](#). This is primarily due to the government's creation of the Unified Communication Center at Tajik Telecom in 2016, which granted it exclusive rights to internet traffic. In just one year after this institution was established, the speed of the incoming data decreased from 10 Gbps to 4.15 Gbps. At the end of November 2023, the government allowed two private companies to directly import internet from China and signed an agreement with Huawei for the supply and installation of base stations for 5G networks. However, Olimova is concerned that using a Chinese internet provider might subject Tajik users to the Chinese government's internet restrictions. Moreover, the complete dependence on Chinese high-tech suppliers increases the risk of losing control over important information infrastructure, panelists agreed.

The majority of Tajikistan's population has access to various information channels, including social media, which helps satisfy their information needs. With the emergence of instant messengers and social networks, access to information has improved, allowing users to choose content according to their preferences.

The population has access to nationwide state television and radio channels, as well as alternative sources of information, such as mobile internet, internet radio, and IP-TV. However, print media are suffering: the culture of reading newspapers and magazines is declining, and the number of readers decreases year by year. But state media still have state employees subscribe to their publications.

Social norms do not restrict access to information for any social groups, including women; however, according to Olimova, some more religiously conservative men do not want women in their families to actively use phones and the internet, believing it could impact their moral values.

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The government's State Committee for Television and Radio Broadcasting and the Communications Service regulate the country's internet and media, including digital broadcasting. These agencies provide advantages to state companies and limit the capabilities of private internet providers and broadcasters. High prices for renting digital frequencies and connecting to the state multiplex make it difficult for independent television companies to access the airwaves, leading to limited access to alternative information for citizens.

Indicator 8: There are appropriate channels for government information.

In Tajikistan, laws provide the right to access information from the government, and media outlets are supposed to receive information within three days of a request, which corresponds to international standards. However, this often does not happen in practice, especially when it comes to meeting news deadlines. Karshiboev emphasized that “requests are often ignored, and even if information is provided, it often comes too late when it has lost its relevance.” Mirsaidov pointed out that information is provided more quickly if it is in the interests of government institutions, but difficulties arise if the information is not in their favor.

Tajikistan citizens have the right to receive information about the work of government bureaus and the decisions they make, but in practice, they rarely use this because many do not know how to obtain government information. Few people use official requests via email because it takes too long to receive a response. Even if citizens know how to request information, they rarely turn to government agencies, fearing they will be targeted: Government officials often perceive requests from citizens and journalists as a threat to their power.

Government bodies can disseminate information through different platforms, but state media tend to spread undemocratic propaganda.

Social media networks are the main source of information for Tajikistan citizens—it is where they go to find official information and to air their grievances to authorities. Sometimes public outcry on these platforms stimulates government agencies into action to correct issues of complaints.

Press conferences remain the main and most effective way for journalists to obtain government information, but their frequency decreased over the past few years from quarterly to just twice a year. “They often boil down to a formal reading of press releases, leaving little time for journalists’ questions of interest,” said independent journalist Rajabi Mirzo.

Access to information through government agency websites is important, but unfortunately, not all of them maintain up-to-date information. Press secretaries and information services play a key role in ensuring accessibility, but panelists believed their work is often limited by internal department rules and employee professionalism, which does not always meet democratic standards of information accessibility and responsibility.

Indicator 9: There are diverse channels for information flow.

The state monopolizes the main channels for relaying official information—radio and television—although the law prohibits monopolization in any form. Radio and television frequencies are entirely controlled by Tajikistan’s Communications Service, and the right to issue licenses belongs solely to the Committee on Radio and Television Broadcasting. The creation of private electronic media faces significant difficulties, because the process of issuing licenses and frequencies is nontransparent. There are no public broadcast media in Tajikistan because there is no law on it, despite years of efforts by civil society.

Conditions exist for developing online media, but regulations are often not followed. The Ministry of Culture requires individuals who want to

create their own internet media to register with the department, provide annual updates, and obtain a certificate from the State Committee on National Security, which many publications find difficult to do.

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Establishing radio and television outlets in Tajikistan is challenging since owners must obtain three licenses at once: for content production, broadcasting, and the use of a specific frequency. The Broadcasting Committee controls the licensing process, which often leads to arbitrary distribution. “This system breeds corrupt schemes and

is used as a means of rigidly censoring media content,” said Gulov. Panelists agreed that loyalty to the authorities determines whether an outlet can register and get a license.

Foreigners and foreign companies are not allowed to own media outlets, according to Tajikistan laws, although there are no such restrictions in other media areas, such as advertising, public relations, or production studios. The country does not have a significant influx of foreign investment even in media areas outside of journalism because of its weak economy and limited advertising market. When registering or accounting for media outlets with the Ministry of Culture, outlets are required to give full information about the owners.

In the north Sughd region, many private radio and television channels operate that are mainly focused on entertainment content without political bias in their news. Sughd’s IPTV channels broadcast programs from Russia, Iran, Uzbek, and India.

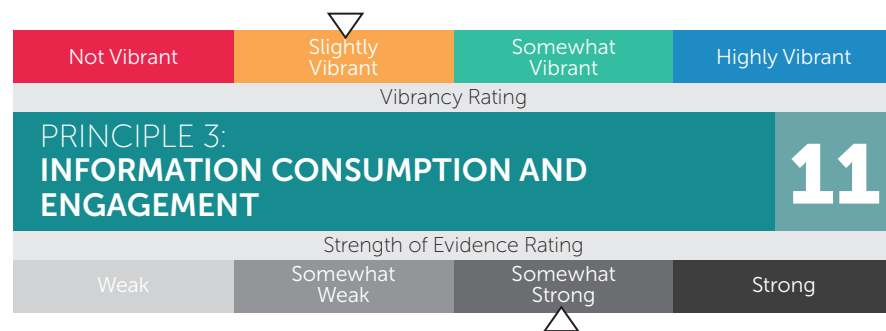
Indicator 10: Information channels are independent.

Owners manage most media outlets in Tajikistan. Often, they are professional journalists who seek profit and aim to influence information policy. The outlets are usually small and do not have separate business departments. “Often journalists, in addition to their main materials, also write advertising and PR material, which later strongly affects their activities and objectivity,” said Tajibayeva. Most publications lack sales

departments, and sales are handled by the founders or the editorial board, undermining the independence of editorial policy.

Panelists believe that because media outlets have trouble finding financing, owners often influence editorial policy based on funder preferences and make their own rules of what should and should not be discussed, disregarding journalism standards and ethics. The Committee on Television and Radio Broadcasting, together with the Communication Service, controls the process of allocating frequencies for broadcasting, thereby influencing the information policy of television and radio companies.

Interference from security agencies means both state-owned and private media face difficulties in maintaining independent editorial policies. State media have an advantage over private media because they can import equipment and be exempt from customs taxes. They also have more direct access to government officials, unlike private media, whose information requests are often ignored. State-owned media receive subsidies from the state and, therefore, comply with its editorial policies. Although advertising influences content somewhat, it is not a determining factor. State-owned media also have better access to information and statistics, which boosts the quality of their content.



This principle scored the lowest of all in this year’s VIBE report just as last year, showing information consumption and engagement has not improved. Despite Tajikistan’s fairly advanced legislation on freedom of speech and its Law on Citizens’ Rights for Access to Information, the country still faces severe restrictions on obtaining news that is critical

of the regime, as evidenced by the arrests of journalists and bloggers. Although the journalism community attempts to collectively appeal to state structures to improve the situation, such efforts have limited effect. Journalists and social media content creators often practice self-censorship out of fear for their safety, which limits opportunities for open dialogue between a range of opinions. State structures sometimes react to media content about human rights violations, but these responses address only minor offenses, ignoring serious issues. Overall, more productive interaction with information and solving complex societal problems requires improved critical thinking of the population and increased trust between them and the government.

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

Tajikistan passed a law in 2018 that provides citizens protection of their personal data. But Tajiks say the law is not followed. For example, when calling a transportation company, representatives often address citizens by their first and middle name, which raises questions. “How did the company get my personal data? I never gave consent for my information to be transferred to third parties,” said Shahlo Akobirova, director of Khoma, a local media development NGO.

Panelists agreed that journalists and ordinary people in the country have a low level of literacy on digital security. Most media outlets and journalists lack the desire to self-educate, despite the availability of online educational resources in Tajik, such as the website rushnoi.org.

Only a small part of society has basic knowledge of digital literacy. Journalists regularly attend seminars and training sessions, but their digital literacy remains insufficient. Journalism professor Rano Bobojoniyon noted more universities, such as the Institute of Arts, are including additional courses on information security.

Panelists pointed out that many state agencies--such as the State Committee for National Security, the Ministry of Internal Affairs, and the Prosecutor General’s Office--constantly monitor journalists’ and activists’ internet activity, including on social media networks, and

eavesdrop on their phone conversations under the pretext of ensuring national security. Akobirova noted that most journalists and media owners believe their information on the internet and social networks is available and under the full control of government agencies, and there is no escape from this.

Tajikistan's social networks are actively developing and attract more and more digital content producers, which increases government surveillance. Yet, the majority of the population still does not fully understand the importance of digital security. In 2023, Justice for Journalists [reported](#) that the number of non-physical and cyberattacks (or threats) on Tajik journalists significantly decreased to 13 from the previous year. While some independent media outlets have moved their domains abroad for protection, many of Tajikistan's media outlets are unaware that the international organization, [Access Now](#), provides free website protection options and free assistance in crisis situations.

Tajikistan has a significant shortage of internet security specialists, and the state's Unified Communication Center does not have any protections, posing a national threat to digital security: One cyberattack on this center could lead to the entire system collapsing, including airports, banks, and other key facilities. Nosirjon Mamurzoda, editor-in-chief of the regional newspaper *Khatlon*, noted that media sites outside cities are completely unprotected from hackers or other attacks. A recent analysis of the official websites of local executive authorities in 12 districts of the Khatlon region found that none of them are protected against possible cyberattacks, according to Mamurzoda.

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

term "media literacy" has been used in Tajikistan for a long time, but many, especially government bureaucrats, do not fully understand its meaning. Panelists noted that government officials warn young people against using the internet thoughtlessly, but they are not interested in increasing citizens' media literacy.

Some computer science courses in Tajikistan schools offer some media literacy lessons, but more education is needed. The Russian-Tajik (Slavonic) University, Khujand State University, the Institute of Arts, and the Tajik National University offer courses on media literacy. Donor organizations have attempted to introduce these lessons into the

national school curriculum, but beyond pilot projects, progress has not been made due to a lack of qualified personnel.

The website www.factcheck.tj helps citizens verify the accuracy of information, but its content is limited due to a lack of funds and volunteers. There are no government information resources for fact-checking.

Several years ago, the international organization Internews created a textbook on media literacy in Tajik, but its circulation was limited.

Adults have the opportunity to independently take online or offline courses on media literacy and critical thinking. "But only a small percentage of citizens show interest in this topic," Yusupov pointed out, "For most, several local media and Radio Ozodi remain the main sources of news."

The level of media literacy among both ordinary citizens and journalists leaves much to be desired. The amount of fake news in Tajik on the internet increased dramatically since the pandemic. The panelists noted that the low level of media literacy is especially noticeable on social media, where people often repost fake news and propaganda.

Although most people in Tajikistan are not media literate, educated city dwellers who have access to the internet and social media are somewhat

Tajikistan's social networks are actively developing and attract more and more digital content producers, which increases government surveillance. Yet, the majority of the population still does not fully understand the importance of digital security.

informed about fakes and fact-checks. However, most people believe everything they see on the internet, especially on social networks, according to Internews' 2021 [report](#) on Tajikistan.

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

Laws on freedom of speech formally provide opportunities for freedom of expression and access to information. However, in practice, journalists, activists, and ordinary citizens have been intimidated into largely ceding their rights to free speech and access to information. The arrests of journalists in 2022 and 2023 provide a striking example, as several journalists and bloggers were sentenced to lengthy prison terms.

Tajibayeva, the editor-in-chief of Your.Tj, believes journalists do not sufficiently defend their rights to access information, which leads to a deficit of fact-based information for the population, ultimately harming society. Panelists agreed that journalists need to unite to get authorities to give out information, which could improve access. For example, a collective appeal in 2023 by journalists and media managers to the presidential administration and the General Prosecutor's Office regarding the poor quality of government press conferences yielded results: Subsequent events were more productive, allowing journalists to directly ask questions to leaders rather than their deputies or other representatives.

The establishment in 2023 of the Department of Legal Support for Law Enforcement and Interaction within the Public in the General Prosecutor's Office represents an important development to ensure access to quality information—the department will be responsible for cooperation with journalists and the media.

Panelists noted citizens do not believe in Tajikistan's legal system and have become apathetic, believing that the fight for their rights is futile. In addition, many lack the strength and patience to overcome bureaucratic

barriers and resolve issues through legislative means. “Despite de jure guaranteed civil rights, including freedom of expression, many Tajiks doubt their safety after openly criticizing the authorities,” emphasized Gulov.

Certain opportunities exist for public discussions, but they are limited in scope. Citizens talk about various social issues on traditional and new media platforms and avoid political topics and issues related to the president and his circle. Political issues are usually discussed on social networks, especially by anonymous users or those outside the country.

On state television and radio channels, young people often deliberate over family issues, professional development, migration trends, and more. However, moderators of these discussions strictly control the content to avoid controversial topics. Social network participants

who use their real names often limit their statements, because openly talking about problems can have negative consequences.

A lack of critical thinking means citizens have a difficult time separating truth from lies to form their own opinions.

Panelists noted that authorities can have inconsistent reactions to various media outlet reports. On one hand, they promptly respond to minor issues raised on social media networks, such as cases of hooliganism, violations of the law, or rude behavior. Offenders in such cases are quickly punished. On the other hand, officials often have no reaction to serious issues, even when they are brought to the attention of the public council at the Ministry of Internal Affairs. Mirsaidov says that, for example, when a soldier is beaten in a military unit, no one pays attention to it until the incident receives wide publicity on social networks, such as Facebook. Only after that does the military prosecutor's office start an investigation and punish the guilty.

Panelists agreed that social media platforms are more independent and dynamic than other media platforms, which allows for a variety of topics to be discussed, including criticism of the authorities. Official platforms, such as public councils, often resemble official meetings of ministries

Panelists noted citizens do not believe in Tajikistan's legal system and have become apathetic, believing that the fight for their rights is futile.

and departments where formality prevails, and the influence of the meeting's chairperson often suppresses open dialogue. These platforms exist more for official show than for effective discussion and decision-making.

Both traditional media in Tajikistan and social media pages published material in 2023 that incited animosity. One website excerpting details from a memoir led to the arrest and imprisonment of businessman and writer Abdulhalil Kholikzoda, along with the editor of Kholikzoda's book *Pages of My Life*, Rustam Abdugodir, and the publisher of the book. The authorities accused them of inciting social, racial, national, regional, and religious enmity, and some panelists found this decision controversial.

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

There is virtually no serious audience research in Tajikistan, especially for radio and television audiences, due to a lack of resources to fund it and the lack of necessary tools, such as people meters. The rare survey of people's media preferences, last conducted in 2022, was funded by foreign donors such as the US Embassy in Tajikistan. However, the panelists were not sure that these studies fully reflect the real picture. As [reported in RFE/RL](#), television is still the main information source for the majority of the country's adult population, although young people are more inclined to the Internet.

According to the panelists, media and content producers with presences on the Internet try to study their audience, satisfy their needs, and communicate with them using digital technologies. On social networks, these media allow their audiences to openly comment on content, which helps build trust. However, other forms of media (TV, radio, newspapers) have virtually no opportunities to study and understand their audiences.

The panelists believed that all online media have the opportunity to conduct research on their audience using available free tools. However, state media are not interested in this at all and have virtually no feedback from their audience. The panelists concluded that state media do not need to consider their audience, given their dominance in

Tajikistan's media market and financial support from the government.

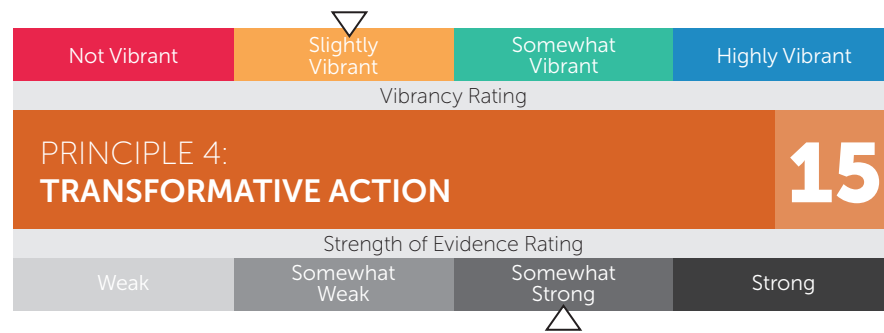
According to Mamurzoda, the Khatlon region's print media still influence the information consumed by the people who live there. He claimed that the results of the 2021 [research](#) conducted by Internews showed that about 30% of respondents read the state *Khatlon* newspaper. However, the Khatlon regional state media themselves are not very interested in conducting such research on their own, since their high circulation is maintained through compulsory subscription.

The panelists believed that there is contact between representatives of civil society and independent media and that they regularly exchange information. However, their ability to have productive exchanges with government agencies and officials is quite low. Nuriddin Karshiboev, chairman of NANSMIT, claimed that government agencies treat representatives of civil society and independent media with great caution and distrust out of fear. These agencies do not have a constructive dialogue even with state media; there is a one-sided monologue, and state media are simply fulfilling the orders of government agencies.

This year, the Committee for Youth Affairs and Sports created the Tajikistan Bloggers Association, which officials claimed was established to contact bloggers. However, panelists believe the main goal of this initiative is actually to control bloggers and use their online capabilities to promote the state's ideology.

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

There are no community media outlets in Tajikistan.



Principle 4 dropped two points, from 17 in 2023 to 15 in 2024, signaling that the situation in Tajikistan concerning transformative action and press freedoms has not dramatically changed. Although news does not significantly influence people’s behavior and the formation of public opinion, the dominance of state media limits access to diverse ideas and opinions, depriving citizens of democratic pluralism. As a result, youths’ opinions, especially labor migrants, are heavily influenced by Russian and other foreign media. Although social media networks provide access to diverse information, low media and information literacy exacerbate the problem of spreading manipulative information and propaganda.

NGOs and independent media conduct training events on fact-checking and how to recognize manipulative information. But these groups need to strengthen mechanisms to protect freedom of speech, expand access to quality information, and support civil society in its interaction with government bodies to further develop democratic processes.

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

State-owned media—especially television, which is available in 96 percent of the country--dominate the information space. In print media, state newspapers and magazines that require mandatory subscriptions dominate. These publications present information from a single government perspective, leaving no room for neutral discussion.

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. Radio Ozodi--which represents alternative viewpoints, including those of opposition politicians--offers some choice in media. Among the progressive media inside the country, Asia Plus stands out, which publishes analytical and sometimes critical news reports, although with certain limitations that prevent criticism of President Rahmon and his family. Other content producers, both formal and informal, avoid political topics, sticking to entertainment or social issues.

Tajik media try to avoid politics to retain their audience, as content consumers have developed an immunity to political news and prefer lighter topics like what is found on the internet, according to Tajibayeva. Social media also helps create more open discussions because it provides the opportunity to remain anonymous.

Babakhanov notes Tajikistan has extremely limited opportunities for public discussions. Talk shows have almost disappeared from local media, especially on television. Local television channel programs, including on privately owned channels, primarily discuss social problems from a pro-government position.

Radio Ozodi produces the only serious talk show in Tajikistan that features alternative viewpoints on various issues, “Gapi Ozod” (Free Conversation). However, even here, there are unspoken rules that participants who are inside the country observe.

Tajikistan society as a whole has become more apolitical, which is reflected in the absence of political discussions on various offline and online platforms, and the pluralism of opinions has practically disappeared, Bobojoniyon noted. Yusupov observed that private television and radio companies also display this apolitical approach due to the strict control of the Committee for Television and Radio Broadcasting, which issues broadcasting licenses and controls the use of frequencies, especially in other languages.

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

In Tajikistan, people get most of their information from television, primarily from 14 state channels and numerous mass-circulation print publications with mandatory subscriptions that presumably form the basis of their opinions on political, economic, and social issues. Additionally, Russian television channels, including major state channels, are freely broadcast in the country, which panelists said provide heavily biased news. 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.

Social media is increasingly popular in Tajikistan as another source of current events. However, risks exist: insufficient critical thinking among the majority of the population can lead to opinions formed based on low-quality information spread on these platforms. Tadjibayeva noted that the active use of social media by troll factories significantly influences the opinions of citizens who do not have proper media and information literacy.

Panelists agreed that the media do not influence election results as evidenced by citizens' low level of political activity and the absence of alternative candidates. News outlets also do not contribute to helping people interact with their elected officials, as most officials become practically invisible immediately after the elections, they noted. "In addition, parliamentarians in the country are practically voiceless, as they were not elected through fair elections," said Mirsaidov.

Bobojoniyon believed that officials still try to solve some problems of their constituents if they are approached

The lack of critical thinking often leads people to not be able to see the difference between facts and manipulative information. For example,

Government agencies often use press conferences as a platform to disseminate information about their supposed achievements rather than to create a dialogue with the media.

Tajikistanis commonly believe that corruption exists everywhere, even in the most democratic states, and that fighting it is pointless, which leads most citizens unwilling to fight it.

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

In late 2022 and throughout 2023, Tajikistan's NGOs faced a historically difficult period. Authorities closed down more than [700 nongovernmental organizations](#), claiming they were "self-liquidations." However, many NGOs complained that authorities put pressure on them to voluntarily cease their activities. Some NGO leaders, including journalist Ulfatkhonim Mamadshoeva, were arrested and sentenced to long prison terms for organizing protests in the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Region (GBAO), which experienced periods of unrest. Under threat of arrest, some civil activists from GBAO left the country.

Officials favor NGOs that work with children and people with disabilities and try to control the activities of human rights organizations. This forces many NGOs to coordinate their programs with local authorities and sometimes seek the services of consultants from state structures to be able to implement the activities. To continue working, these NGOs must act very cautiously and use only the most reliable sources when publishing information materials such as reports and research; otherwise, authorities may accuse them of incompetence, which can affect the NGO's image, especially with donor organizations. NGOs have a good amount of high-quality information about the specifics of their work, and they share it with the media and the public.

In 2023, several local and international media NGOs conducted training sessions on fact-checking and identifying manipulative information and propaganda. However, these events mainly targeted media representatives, without including other citizens. But the website www.factcheck.tj increasingly published more exposé materials during 2023.

With donor organization support, NGOs are able to conduct high-quality research in their areas of expertise, which they willingly share with journalists through presentations and press releases. In addition, NGOs often collaborate with independent media to create materials on socially significant topics. For example, the Civil Freedom Office employees often act as experts on issues such as the illegal capture of young people of military age for their forced conscription into the army or so-called raids.

In contrast with independent media, state media avoid collaborating with NGOs and consider them “agents of Western donors” that have hidden agendas. Even when state media are paid to create information material, they avoid highlighting the NGOs’ roles in the project and do not display their logos or those of foreign sponsors.

Civil society groups also collaborate with bloggers to create content; however, according to blogger Gulov, in these cases, NGOs are more interested in spreading their values through bloggers than bloggers are in receiving information from the NGOs.

The panelists said that one of the rare examples of cooperation between NGOs and the government is the joint project of the United Nations and the European Union called “[Ray of Light](#),” which aims to end sexual and gender-based violence against women and girls in Tajikistan. Although a few panelists also mentioned that their organizations cooperate with parliament in drafting media legislation, they noted that NGOs, rather than legislative authorities, often initiate the cooperation.

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

Tajikistan is an authoritarian state, and the government rarely considers citizens’ opinions when making decisions, although officials take steps to create the illusion of conducting dialogue with society. The main tool for this illusion is state and ministry institution press conferences, where journalists have the opportunity to ask questions. However, government

agencies often use press conferences as a platform to disseminate information about their supposed achievements rather than to create a dialogue with the media. Panelists agreed that both officials and journalists are to blame in this case. Journalists often do not adequately prepare for these events, and representatives, particularly of state-owned outlets, try to use press conferences to address personal issues, leaving less time for truly important topics.

Public councils--under the president, governors of regions, and the leadership of various ministries and departments--offer another method of dialogue exchanges with citizens. Authorities are supposed to “consult” with citizens during these sessions to help make important decisions. However, the authoritarian nature of the meetings does not allow participants to openly express their views, which makes them ineffective.

“Journalistic investigations in Tajikistan have become rare in the past few years, especially after the government repression against journalists in 2022.”

Tajikistan does not have open debates between political parties and movements in the traditional sense, although political disputes between supporters and opponents of the current government do occur on social media. However, during these online discussions, neither side adheres to rules of procedure or presents reasoned arguments in support of their point of view, limiting themselves to expressing only opinions.

No open data on the work of government agencies exist that could be used to assess the effectiveness of departmental activities. Furthermore, independent organizations do not have much alternative data, which means it is difficult to verify the accuracy of official information. Tajibayeva said that Tajik journalists are unable to analyze available data due to their low qualifications and inability to work with databases.

State authorities rarely provide the public with explanations for government decisions. As Babakhanov noted, officials have destroyed virtually all historical buildings in the city, despite protests from residents who want to preserve some as historical monuments. “The authorities did not consult with historians, architects, or the population,” he emphasized.

Indicator 20: Information supports good governance and democratic rights.

Over the past four years, Tajikistan's ranking dropped from 149 to 162 in Transparency International's [Corruption Perceptions Index](#), signaling a high level of bribery, embezzlement of public funds, and nepotism in appointments. The level of corruption prevents democratic standards from taking root. News about corruption scandals often appears in the media, sometimes even at the government's initiative. However, such cases are often closed to the public and to media, and accused officials avoid serious punishment limited to fines or short prison terms.

When information about corruption cases appears on the internet, state authorities react to it in a peculiar way: Often, officials accused of corruption are not punished, but those who report it are accused of lack of evidence. This reaction strongly demotivates journalists, bloggers, and activists from continuing investigations.

“For example, the Tajik service of Radio Liberty published an article directly accusing the mayor of Kulob of corruption and abuse of office,” noted Mirza, “However, no measures were taken against him.” Other panelists mentioned similar cases—such as when media publications reported on the systematic violation of construction rules by the president's close relatives and the head of the Communication Service, Bek Sabur, but no authorized agency, including the Prosecutor General's office, took any action to punish the guilty.

Tajikistan declared 2024 the [Year of Legal Enlightenment](#) in honor of the 30th anniversary of the adoption of its national constitution, but few citizens believe in the sincerity of the government's intentions. Government agencies still quickly react to minor human rights violations reported in traditional or social media, such as inappropriate behavior by drivers or domestic violence, and find and punish offenders. However, when the media report serious human rights violations by the government, such as restrictions on journalists' rights or the use of torture in detention centers, officials' responses are limited to a formal investigation without serious consequences for the violators. State media rarely cover these topics.

Journalistic investigations in Tajikistan have become rare in the past few years, especially after the government repression against journalists in 2022.

Government agencies not only face no repercussions for human rights violations but can themselves exert pressure on those who defend their rights, although there are exceptions. For example, Abdurasul Hojiev, a doctor at an emergency hospital in Dushanbe, [was sentenced](#) to six years in prison for a medical error that led to the death of a 17-year-old girl. The conviction came only after widespread discussion on social media, which, according to panelists, made the outcome possible.

Panelists noted that quality information about election violations in the country did not affect results. As in recent years, the elections were not conducted freely, and there are almost no real opposition forces and politicians left in the country.

PANELISTS:

Shahlo Akobirova, director, Khoma, Dushanbe

Gulnora Amirshoeva, owner, Vecherka, Dushanbe

Umed Babakhanov, owner, Asia Plus Media Group, Dushanbe

Rano Bobojoniyon, professor, Institute of Arts, Dushanbe

Rustam Gulov, blogger, independent expert, Dushanbe

Zinnatullo Ismoilzoda, chairman, Union of Journalists of Tajikistan, Dushanbe

Nuriddin Karshiboev, chairman, NANSMIT, Dushanbe

Vera Kulakova-Brannerud, owner, Radio Vatan, Dushanbe

Nosirjon Mamurzoda, editor-in-chief, *Khatlon*, Bokhtar

Habib Maqbulov, owner, TV Regar, Tursunzadeh

Nematullo Mirsaidov, freelance journalist, Khujand

Rajabi Mirzo, freelance journalist, Dushanbe

Khurshed Niyozov, director, Center for Investigative Journalism, Dushanbe

Lola Olimova, editor, IWPR, Dushanbe

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