

## V. System / structure of media

### General

No daily newspaper, no private television broadcasting in the capital Dushanbe, no private radio in the whole country: like the entire society, the media system in Tajikistan finds itself in a difficult transitional period. The sometimes contradictory and limiting laws in vigour concerning the media, and the lack of concrete judicial cases as a basis for a further development of the freedom of the press are not the only reasons for that. In fact, a purely legal approach to the question would prove a too restrictive one to envisage action to contribute to developing the media in Tajikistan. Analyses underlining the deficiencies of the laws are of course well-founded from a theoretical point of view. For example, the observation that “the absence in the Law of norms obliging the authorities’ organs and other subjects to put information at the disposal of the media can reduce to nil that same right to receive information”<sup>28</sup> is not only relevant within the Tajik context. It also fits with the path followed during the last decade by some countries in Western Europe in the sphere of the right to information, with new laws and regulations including the obligation of the authorities to provide journalists with information on their activities. But such laws have generally been the fruits of a relatively long experience of democracy, of a concrete practice and numerous debates.

In Tajikistan some legal adaptations might be needed but, more generally speaking, it is the whole social, political and economical environment in which a media system can normally function which is lacking. Beyond the legal technical problems and the general non-functioning of the judicial system, its apparent submission to the political power, it is the broad lack of discussion on the role of media which is in cause. Legality is one important concept, but so is the one of legitimacy when press comes into question. If better understood, this concept would, with no doubt, be as efficient as a new law to bring more quality into the content of the media, and more tolerance towards the journalists. Beyond the reluctance of the state apparatus to deliver licenses to private broadcasters, one is also particularly struck by the absence of any clear vision of the media system that would be adapted to Tajikistan in the near future. All debates on media now seem to focus on the opposition between the “state controlled” media, with no reference to its possible future transformation into a “public service, and the “independent” or “private” media, based on models developed in countries with a completely different political and economic background. Very little attention seems to be paid to the pluralism of the media, and the complementary role different types of media should play. And with no broader understanding of those notions, new laws run the risk to remain empty words.

### Self-censored journalism

If nothing else, the atmosphere of the Tajik capital Dushanbe gives a first indication of the psychological consequences of the civil war, with the streets rapidly emptying as dusk appears. Even if indicators show a decrease of violence in town, the feeling of uncertainty is still well spread, and so is the mistrust of the police, often considered helpless. This general atmosphere, more incentive to a withdrawing attitude than to the taking of risks, no doubt also influences the journalists in their everyday behaviour and work, the carefulness expressing itself, in this case, in avoiding to address particular controversial or sensitive issues. “There are no courageous journalists in Tajikistan,” says Galina Nazarova<sup>29</sup>, National Coordinator of WIMCA (Women in the Media of Central Asia). “But, I cannot judge them. Our journalism needs rehabilitation. Fear broke down many of our colleagues.”

---

<sup>28</sup> Djuinaid Ibodov, Bahodoor Kosimov, “ Mir informatsii bez granits ?”, Narodnaia Gazeta, Dushanbe, 24 June 1999, op. cit.

<sup>29</sup> CIMERA interview, Dushanbe, September 2000.

There appears to be no systematically organized censorship in Tajikistan in the sense that, for example, there is no special body dedicated to reading all newspapers prior to their printing and entitled to ban any article from being published. Direct censorship occurs occasionally and is conducted by the employees of the state publishing house Sharki Ozod, which is printing almost all newspapers in Dushanbe. One case of censorship of an article in *Biznes i Politika* was recorded by Human Rights Watch<sup>30</sup>, and a similar case was told to CIMERA by Mukhtor Bokizoda of the Memorial Fund in Memory and Defense of the Journalists of Tajikistan: “A story about the Prime-Minister Abdumalik Abdulazhanov was ready [to be published in *Surush*]. People from the printing house came and told the editor to take that story away from the front page. He did not. Then they took acid and erased [from the zinc forms] whatever they wanted.” Human Rights Watch also reports about occasional interruptions of programs of Russian television and radio in 1998. But even in the absence of systematically organized censorship, “journalists exercise significant self-censorship, a skill they honed in the Soviet era, because they are acutely aware that criticizing or publishing sensitive information on government figures or policy, controversial political actors, powerful war lords or drug bosses could result in reprisals. This in itself is so effective that information on these subjects rarely reaches the Tajik media.”<sup>31</sup> Some observers consider that self-censorship simply affects the whole information produced by the media. “All topics are self-censored,” says Zuhra Halimova, Executive Director of the Open Society Institute in Dushanbe. “Newspapers write about everything, but in a very diplomatic way. The journalists are cutting edges.”<sup>32</sup>

Self-censorship naturally influences much more editors than journalists. As Zuhra Halimova puts it, “the editors are thinking and thinking again – for 100 times, probably, before publishing “sharp” material. They ask themselves, will this or that story change anything, could something happen with the newspaper, journalist or themselves, or not?”. For the editor of a private newspaper in Dushanbe, however, the question is not only linked to self-censorship: “Self-censorship is another problem. I have much more information for every issue than the one I publish. I know everything that happens. I know why the military operations have started, why RTR (Russian state television) says that Khattab is in Tajikistan<sup>33</sup>. But, if I publish some of this stuff, none of my sources would confirm the information.”<sup>34</sup> Jan Malekzade, Deputy Head of Mission for the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) in Tajikistan, talking about the weekly *Asia Plus*, often considered as one of the most serious newspapers in Tajikistan, says: “The director of *Asia Plus* is not openly critical towards the government, but he does what he can – he must manoeuvre. The editor of *Biznes i Politika* cannot put everything she wants in the newspaper because of the danger that she could be harassed”.<sup>35</sup> Furthermore, the journalists would not feel supported enough to take too many risks. As Mukhtor Bokizoda puts it, not only “the journalists have no support from the government”, but “they have no support either from their colleagues. All this prevents the writing of critical articles. There are no guarantees that the author of such an article would not be “liquidated”; and harassment by telephone is very frequent.” As an illustration of this lack of solidarity and culture of association, it was striking to see more than thirty editors and journalists gathered in a seminar on media legal

---

<sup>30</sup> A paragraph in a story published in the November 5, 1998 issue, came out blank in all copies of *Biznes i Politika*. See: Human Rights Watch. Tajikistan. Freedom of Expression Still Threatened. November 1999, op.cit. **Erreur! Source du renvoi introuvable.**

<sup>31</sup> Human Rights Watch. Tajikistan. “Freedom of Expression Still Threatened”, op.cit.

<sup>32</sup> CIMERA interview, September 2000.

<sup>33</sup> Khattab, a warlord of Arab origin is a well-known Chechen field commander. The Russian television reported in September 2000 that Khattab had come to Dushanbe and that he would then have been hiding somewhere in Tajikistan, intending to join the Uzbek opposition. The report was immediately contested by Tajik officials.

<sup>34</sup> CIMERA interview, September 2000.

<sup>35</sup> CIMERA interview, September 2000.

issues, being unable to say what the case of the journalists sentenced in Vose was about<sup>36</sup> (see above “Criminal code (libel)” section).

### **Lack of professionalism**

Self-censorship is accompanied by (and results in) low professionalism. Local media professionals and analysts are unilateral in criticizing the low level of journalism and the existing journalism education. Nazarova admits that “stories printed in the social-political newspapers are not interesting. The people do not buy them, because they are not interesting”. In terms of content, self-censorship is not enough to explain the lack of substance of the information offered to the public, causing some people to rely more on external sources of information than on national media to get news on current events taking place in Tajikistan. In 1997, the Chairman of the Leninabad province made a statement which can still be considered relevant: “To get objective and accurate information, I and many friends turn to foreign broadcasters, particularly Radio Free Europe”.<sup>37</sup>

In September 2000, armed clashes in the Darband District, in Central Tajikistan, opposed government forces to a former opposition commander, Mullo Abdullo, and some of his supporters. From a journalistic point of view, there could hardly be at that time more actual events going on, with, maybe, the real end of the civil war being at stake. Nevertheless there was hardly any information available in the media during this period. *Biznes i Politika* briefly mentioned that after several weeks of confrontation, the fighting had been brought to an end and that an agreement had been found with the rebel commander. In the same week, *Asia Plus* mentioned the armed clash, but as a sub-part of an entire page dedicated to the general who headed the governmental forces against Mullo Abdullo’s paramilitaries. As in *Biznes i Politika*, there was no precision on the issue of the conflict and on the precise content of the agreement passed between the two sides.

Asked about the reasons for this absence of detailed information, Umed Babakhanov, Director of *Asia Plus*, mentioned two causes: the lack of professionalism of the journalists, and the non-availability of the information. From their side, journalists from the Russian service of *Sadoi Dushanbe* (third channel of the state television, broadcast in Dushanbe and its surroundings) explained their silence on this issue with arguments having little to do with journalism. They did not mention this event, they said, because they had no one “on the spot”. Asked then if they at least had mentioned the fact that the news had been given by other media (the little information published by *Biznes i Politika* or *Asia Plus* could have been mentioned), they said they did not. Asked if they tried themselves to get more information on that, they said they had not. Asked why, they could not give a precise answer.<sup>38</sup>

In reality not only more precise information on the subject could have been easily found by curious journalists, but also an interlocutor ready to give information to media was apparently available. On 14<sup>th</sup> September, BBC announced the news of the agreement, mentioning, as a source, the Iranian radio from Mashhad on 12<sup>th</sup> September.<sup>39</sup> On that day, the Iranian radio put on the air a report of a correspondent in Dushanbe who, unlike his colleagues from the Tajik media, managed to find an interlocutor to comment on the events in the person of the former opposition commander Salamsho Muhabbatov, presently “member of the government of Tajikistan”. Except this example, due to the lack of training or the difficulty to find proper information, journalism in Tajikistan appears also to

---

<sup>36</sup> During the seminar “Legislative Education of Journalists”, – Kairakkum, September 13-15, 2000.

<sup>37</sup> Nurmuhammad Niyoz, quoted in “ Tajikistan : Journalists Live in Danger And Fear ”, Radio Free Europe, 18 March 1997.

<sup>38</sup> CIMERA interview, September 2000.

<sup>39</sup> “ Tajik rebel group agrees to integrate into government forces – Iranian radio ”, BBC, 14 September 2000.

suffer from a lack of professional habits -including simple curiosity-, probably due to the absence of any solid journalistic tradition.

### **Private radios: a new opening?**

Given the price of paper, the lack of potential resources from advertisements and the general low financial capacity of the potential readers, there is little chance that any daily newspaper with a significant content in terms of news and analysis can be produced soon in Tajikistan and become self-sufficient. Given the dependency of the private televisions on greetings program and the general costs of TV production, the development of televisions able to compete with the state television will also take a long time. In this overall situation, private radio might bring an enlightenment and open the door to more pluralism in the media, making available a new daily voice to the public. Radio costs are far more below those of television. There is presently no private radio broadcasting in Tajikistan, but in August 2000, the State Committee for Television and Radio delivered its first license to a private radio. The latter was supposed to start broadcasting in Kurgan-Tyube in October 2000. Its structure will be private, but the project will be launched with the support of an external donator (Swiss agency for Development and Co-operation), and OSCE will supervise the implementation of the whole process during the first two years. This precedent might hopefully be the start of a new policy of the state towards private broadcasters, some of them having in vain purchased a license for years.

## **Media structure**

### **Statistics**

Around 250 media outlets were registered in Tajikistan in August 2000. According to the Mass-Media Department of the Executive Apparatus of the President of the Republic of Tajikistan<sup>40</sup>, there were among them:

- 191 newspapers
- 50 magazines
- 7 news agencies
- 19 TV stations

At the time of the writing of this report (October 2000), only one private radio station (in Kurgan-Tyube) had received a license from the State Committee for Television and Radio.

The Mass-Media Department also stated that from all media outlets registered:

- 43 newspapers
- 4 journals
- 6 news agencies
- 18 TV stations

were non-governmental, i.e. private, or belonging to different companies (enterprises), or political parties. The non-private newspapers also include regional, city, and district papers spread throughout

---

<sup>40</sup> CIMERA interview with Abdurakhmon Abdumannonov, Head of the Mass-Media Department of the Executive Apparatus of the President of Tajikistan, September 2000.

the country. This data gives a general overview of the present structure of the press, their ownership, and its locations in towns or in the regions. But those figures might be subject to quick changes. During the three weeks preceding the writing of this report, at least two new publications (weekly) have been launched in Dushanbe, but without bringing any significant change to the global news offer.

## Electronic media

### State Television

The State Television, Tajikistan Television (TVT), has one channel, with a national audience (reaching between 70% and 80% of the population, according to various estimations). TVT is considered to be the main informational and state propaganda support. As it is hardly accessible in many mountainous villages of Gorno-Badakhshan Oblast (East of the country, situated on Pamir mountains and foothills), the government installed satellite dishes to reach this area. The State television includes also TV organizations in the centers of oblasts, and in Khorog, the center of Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Oblast. These are small companies, broadcasting on the frequency of the national TVT channel, usually for 1-2 hours per day, between 6 and 8 p.m. In the capital city, Dushanbe, another publicly owned television is working, *Poitaht*, which belongs to the municipality. It is on the air for four hours per day (7 – 11 p.m.). The Russian channels ORT and RTR can be seen almost in the whole country, and are re-broadcast on the basis of an intergovernmental agreement with Russia. Uzbek state TV can be seen only in some parts of the country.

### Private televisions

Around 15 private Televisions are broadcasting in different regions of the country, none of them having a national diffusion. In Dushanbe, only one private TV station, *Somonion* has received a license to broadcast. It was already issued in 1998, however the owner, Ikram Mirzoev, could only pay the fee in June 2000<sup>41</sup>. Even though his TV station is licensed to broadcast one hour per day, Mirzoev claims that *Somonion* is in fact broadcasting seven hours on Sundays, on the seventh decimeter channel. This affirmation could, however, not be checked. The authors of the reports could not manage to see *Somonion* programs, and some observers think that *Somonion* is simply not broadcasting at all, notably because of outdated equipment.

In the televisions field, the biggest diversity can be found in the northern part of the country – the Leninabad oblast. In Khujand, its capital, four stations are on the air: the local branch of TVT (see above), and three private stations: *Temurmalik*, *SM-1* and *Asia*. *Temurmalik* is broadcasting three hours per day, but the station does not have its own production. It broadcasts pirate copies of films and concerts. Still waiting for an answer to its application, *Asia* presently works without any license. According to the Chairman of the Leninabad branch of the State Committee for TV and Radio Narzullo Dadybaev, the local authorities “friendly close their eyes on that”<sup>42</sup>. *Asia* is producing news, as well as several social and cultural programs.

The most popular station in Khujand is *SM-1*. It broadcasts almost 9 hours during the week, and 12-14 hours on Sundays. Its license allows it to broadcast for only 9 hours, but in this case again the local authorities close their eyes on this violation. Apart from its own programs, *SM-1* also broadcasts news of the State TV, and after 1 a.m. – *Deutsche Welle* in German. *SM-1* produces news, programs of public interest, literary and religious programs. On Sunday mornings it broadcasts a two-

---

<sup>41</sup> CIMERA interview, September 2000.

<sup>42</sup> CIMERA interview, September 2000.

hours entertaining and informational program, and a weekly program is run on Thursdays about the activities of the municipality (20-30 minutes), which pays for that program.

Small TV stations are working in Leninabad oblast in the following towns<sup>43</sup>:

- Ura-Tyube
- Matcha
- Nou
- Ghulakandoz
- Chkalovsk

One TV station is operation in the central part of the country, to the West of Dushanbe in the town of Tursunzoda.

In the South, in Khatlon oblast TV stations are situated in the following towns:

- Asht
- Kanibodom
- Istara
- Panjakent and
- Vorukh, which is a small enclave in Kyrgyzstan
- Kurgan-Tyube
- Kulyab
- Vose
- Vakhsh

Not all of them have licenses to broadcast (see below, section “Licensing”).

There is no private TV station in Gorno-Badakhshanskaya Autonomous Oblast, the one working in the town of Khorog being in fact a branch of TVT and is broadcasting for two hours daily on the frequency of TVT. The relatively strong media presence in the northern part of the country is due, according to local journalists, to the fact that the civil war, in general, passed by this region, and also to the fact that historically, the Leninabad oblast has always been better developed, as compared to other parts of the country. It is especially obvious in comparison with the almost non-existence of any kind of media in Gorno-Badakhshan, a remote region, which is situated in Pamir and gets isolated from the center of the country for about 6 months per year, when the snow makes the crossing of the mountain passes impossible.

The Russian military base (201<sup>st</sup> Division) rebroadcasts the Russian channel TV-6, apparently without license. For Ikram Mirzoev however, the status of the Russian base is so high that they have no need to obtain a license, i.e. the government would not reject them the right to broadcast (see below, the section “Licensing”).

## **Financing of TV stations**

Short announcements, congratulations (birthdays, other holidays) and ads (even though quite rare) constitute the main source of income for the local TV stations. Nevertheless, according to Bahodoor

---

<sup>43</sup> Information about the geography of the non-governmental TV stations is taken from a Tajikistan TV map, kindly provided by Christine Kiernan, Country Director of Internews in Tajikistan.

Kosimov “they all are self-sustainable and cover all their expenses. They have no big expenditures, however”.<sup>44</sup> In the North, an advertising spot costs up to 10 US\$ for each broadcasting, while in the South the rate is no higher than 2 US\$. Another source of income is provided by latent advertising. According to Kosimov, the stations never sell news items, but they produce and broadcast 10-15-minute films, which positively present an enterprise or a kolkhoz.

The fee for the use of the frequencies represents a high cost. “I pay 1’200 US\$ per year, and it amounts to 60% of my annual income,” says Makhmud Dadabaev, the director of SM-1. Very high for small local stations, these sums constitute another key factor for keeping them under control, because local authorities always have the possibilities to find sponsors for obedient stations, and to close the intractable ones on the ground of non-payment. “The stations are often sponsored by wealthy people having strong a strong position in their region”, says Christine Kiernan, Country Director of Internews. Usually, these people are even members of the authorities. For instance, in Anis, a small town in Leninabad oblast, the Mayor of the town himself owns the TV station. “They all are would-be independent,” says Jan Malekzade, the Deputy Head of the OSCE Mission in Tajikistan. “But all TV stations are depending on local authorities”. In Vose, the station is owned by the textile factory which pays the salaries of the employees of the station. The director of the factory supports the station, and the station reciprocally seems to support him, as was the case during his conflict with the local “Khokim” (Mayor of the town). The Khokim tried to close down the station, but lost three trials. As a result, he was fired.

The clue for a successful existence for non-governmental TV stations lies in maintaining good relations with local authorities. This helps them to avoid different kinds of possible pressures (direct torture, tax police, threats to take away the transmitters, etc.) As an example, it happens that “a police chief calls you and says: ‘Listen, you are working because I do not interfere. You should continue in a way that I will not be unhappy with your work’”, said a journalist in a interview, on condition of anonymity.

An average monthly salary for a journalist is around 20 US\$. *SM-1* pays more – \$ 40-50.

## Radio

According to a survey undertaken by the Independent Center of Sociological Research “Zerkalo” in January 2000, four radio stations were available in Dushanbe. Two are Russian – *Radio Nostalgie*, and *Mayak*. Two others are different channels of the Tajikistan State Radio – *Sadoi Dushanbe* and *Radioi Tojikiston*<sup>45</sup>.

*Radio Nostalgie* was re-broadcast in Dushanbe by radio station *NiC*, which was registered, had no license, but had a special agreement with the Russian 201<sup>st</sup> Division. Broadcasting was suspended by the decision of *NiC*<sup>46</sup> in summer 2000. In January 2000, *Sadoi Dushanbe* was sharing the highest popularity among listeners in Dushanbe with *Radio Nostalgie*. “The style of *Sadoi Dushanbe* is not traditional for Tajik radio,” writes “*Zerkalo*”<sup>47</sup>. *Sadoi Dushanbe* broadcasts “debates with listeners (...), so-called live interactive talk-shows, [with] participation of experts – politicians, economists in discussion about life in Tajik society, and modern Tajik and foreign music.”<sup>48</sup>

---

<sup>44</sup> CIMERA interview, September 2000.

<sup>45</sup> According to the information of the Tajik Branch of Open Society Institute Soros Foundation, *Sadoi Dushanbe* is half-owned by the government and the city municipality.

<sup>46</sup> CIMERA interview with Zuhra Halimova, September 2000.

<sup>47</sup> Information and Analytical bulletin *Zerkalo* # 1, January 2000, p.11.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid*, p. 11-12.

*Sadoi Dushanbe* reached 29% of popularity among listeners, and *Radio Nostalgie* 30%. The “moderately conservative” (*Zerkalo*) Russian *Mayak* came into the third position with 22% of respondents’ sympathies, attracting mostly adult and aged listeners. The state radio station *Radioi Tojikiston* was laying at the bottom of the chart with 7% of listeners.<sup>49</sup> Two radio stations, *NiC* and *Asia Plus*, were registered in Dushanbe in 1998, but they still have not received broadcasting licenses. Both of them have already received equipment grants from UNESCO, and *Asia Plus* received a grant from the Open Society Institute to pay for the license and registration, and get some training, which has already been conducted.

Another radio station, *Homs*, founded by the UNMOT (UN Military Observers in Tajikistan) was broadcasting music, and recently stopped broadcasting.

## Licensing

There is apparently no comprehensive strategy for the future development of private electronic media in Tajikistan, whether composed of a regional or national audience, which would be guiding the state policy for the delivering of licenses and distribution of frequencies. From a legal point of view, the whole procedure appears to be a pure formality. But as seen above, in practice, possibilities to broadcast sometimes seem to depend more upon the particular relations TV owners are able to establish with local authorities -even being able to broadcast without a license- than on the central government’s policy. From an administrative point of view, TV stations and radios have first of all to register. Then they have to obtain a license for broadcasting, delivered by the Committee for Television and Radio of Republic of Tajikistan. On the basis of a certificate from this Committee, they have then have to obtain a technical permit from the Ministry of Communications.

Licenses are supposed to be obtained in accordance with the “Regulation on the Order of Licensing in Sphere of Television and Radio” and they are valid for 5 years. According to the Regulations (paragraph 7) the decision about giving or refusing a license should be taken within 30 days after the request has been made. However, the same paragraph stipulates that in some cases, additional examination by experts may be needed. In such cases, the decision should be taken within 30 days after completion of the examination. So far, the practice of the Committee for Television and Radio of the Republic has been marked above all by an extreme reluctance to deliver licenses. Applicants have often been receiving evasive answers, justifying the postponing of a definitive answer by upcoming changes in the law, or no answer at all. The private company *Asia Plus*, which has a news service and a weekly newspaper has, for example, been waiting more than two years for its radio license. “We have been waiting for months without receiving any kind of answer”, recalls Umed Babakhanov, director of the agency. “Then we were given stupid arguments, evoking adaptations of the law which would have made the Committee unable to take any decision before those adaptations would be accomplished. And then we simply got tired of all those procedures.”

Patience seems to be the first virtue for anyone having the intention to start a TV or radio station. Even though the law envisages the possibility for the applicants to contest in court a negative answer from the Committee for Television and Radio (paragraph 24), this never happens in practice. “No one applies to the court”, because those who would, says Kosimov, would then face “the whole state machine working against them, and it will mean they will never achieve what they want. We must be diplomatic, and wait, wait...”

---

<sup>49</sup> Ibid. No newer polling results are available.

*Somonion*, having easily obtained a license, appears as an exception. It is generally believed that this is due to the fact that its owner, Ikram Mirzoev, had been himself an employee of the Committee for TV and Radio and had good relations with its direction. An opinion which could be confirmed by the fact that it was tolerated that he paid his license with a two-year delay, when the law clearly says that payment should be effected beforehand to receive a license. In total, despite these administrative obstacles, 19 TV stations have so far succeeded in receiving a license, not all of them using it, and none of them broadcasting in Dushambe, with the exception of *Somonion*. According to Kosimov, the capital city would be given special attention by the government, as it was not keen to be confronted there with any alternative opinion. *Radio Homs*, which had been launched by UNMOT is not on the air anymore.

## Press

The most revealing indicator on the present state of the Tajik printed press is the absence of any daily newspaper in the whole country. Most of the newspapers with information content are weeklies, with a few exceptions, such as the governmental *Sadoi Mardum*, printed in Tajik, which is coming out twice a week. Other governmental newspapers are said to be willing to come out twice a week before the end of 2000. According to the information of NANSMIT (National Association of Independent Media of Tajikistan), at least 20 newspapers are regularly coming out in the capital Dushanbe. Eight of them have been founded by state structures – the government, the parliament, several ministries, the Committee of Youth of Tajikistan. Another one – *Minbari Khalq (People's Tribune)* is founded by the ruling People's Democratic Party of Tajikistan, which is closely affiliated to the government. Two are run by opposition parties/groups, others are private.

### State-owned press

148 government-controlled newspapers form the state system of the press. Its structure has remained basically the same since the Soviet period. It is a pyramid with, on top, the central, metropolitan newspapers, followed by the provincial (“oblast”) newspapers, the regional ones (“raion”) and, at the bottom, the small municipal press (district). At the first level, there are three official governmental newspapers: *Jumhurriet (Republic)*, in Tajik; *Narodnaya Gazeta (People's Newspaper)*, in Russian) and *Khalk Ovozi (Voice of the People)*, in Uzbek). One newspaper – *Sadoi Mardum (Voice of the People)* belongs to the Parliament. These newspapers publish all Presidential decrees, all bills, approved by the parliament, other official information. “Their mission is to cover the events in the republic. They publish official information, literary works, analyses,” according to Abdumannonov Abdurakhmon.<sup>50</sup>

All oblast newspapers are state-subsidized. The state-budget subsidies are directed to them through the Ministry of Culture. Another part of financing comes from the Khukumats (regional administrations, municipalities). The Leninabad oblast administration's *Leninabadskaya Pravda* comes out twice a week, which makes it unique for the regional press, an exceptional case for the whole Tajikistan where almost all newspapers are weeklies. At a lower administrative level, the local newspapers are in principle totally funded from the local budgets. In a few regions, OSCE launched projects of rehabilitation of those local newspapers, funded by external donors (see below, “activities of the international organizations”).

---

<sup>50</sup> CIMERA interview with Abdumannonov Abdurakhmon, Head of the Mass-Media Department of the Executive Apparatus of the President of Tajikistan, September 2000..

## Private media

Two relatively big press groups hold leading positions in the market of the non-governmental press in Tajikistan.

One of them belongs to Akbarali Sattorov, who owns:

- *Digest-press* (in Russian)
- *Charkhi Gardun* (in Tajik)
- *Avicenna* (in Russian)
- *Vechernij Dushanbe* (in Russian)
- *Aladdin* (in two languages)

The second big media owner is Sharif Hamdamov, who owns:

- *Crime-Info* (In Russian)
- *Oila* (in Tajik)
- *Tojikiston* (in three languages – Tajik, Russian, English)

Others are founded by news agencies and business companies.

The analyses of the polling center *Zerkalo* in January-March 2000 show that the ten most popular newspapers in the country were<sup>51</sup>:

| Newspaper                 | Founder (Owner)                |
|---------------------------|--------------------------------|
| <i>Digest-press</i>       | Akbarali Sattorov              |
| <i>Charkhi Gardun</i>     | Akbarali Sattorov              |
| <i>Avicenna</i>           | Akbarali Sattorov              |
| <i>Crime-info</i>         | Sharif Hamdamov                |
| <i>Vechernij Dushanbe</i> | Akbarali Sattorov              |
| <i>Biznes i Politika</i>  | Sham company, NANT news agency |
| <i>Asia +</i>             | Asia + news agency             |
| <i>Oila</i>               | Sharif Hamdamov                |
| <i>Sadoi Mardum</i>       | State (Parliament)             |
| <i>Narodnaya Gazeta</i>   | State (Government)             |

The eight first places were occupied by privately-owned newspapers, and only the last two – by state media. Akbarali Sattorov with his four newspapers in the 1st-3rd and 5th places is the doubtless leader of the press market.

## Akbarali Sattorov's press group

Akbarali Sattorov graduated from the faculty of journalism in Saint-Petersburg State University in 1990. He then worked for the parliamentary *Sadoi Mardum*, where he headed the political department until 1993. Because of a too low salary, he decided to change his profession. Sattorov

---

<sup>51</sup> See *Zerkalo* # 1-3, 2000. The aggregate ratings of newspapers are determined by calculating the average ratings for three months altogether.

was then importing goods from China and selling them in the market when, as he recalls: “One day I looked around me and thought: ‘Am I going to spend all my life in the market? I am a journalist, I have a profession.’”<sup>52</sup> So, in 1994 he bought Russian, Kazakhstani, Uzbek newspapers and started a newspaper, which consisted of articles reprinted from the foreign press “about life of popular people, high-life chronicles, interesting events, facts, family and love stories<sup>53</sup>.” After 6-7 months “*Digest-Press*” became the most popular newspaper in Tajikistan. “This type of digest is always popular,” believes Sattorov. *Digest-Press* is printed in Russian, on 16 pages of A3 format. The declared circulation is 8,000<sup>54</sup>.

His next newspaper was *Charkhi Gardun* (Wheel of Fortune). It is also an example of market-oriented entertainment medium, in Tajik. *Charkhi Gardun* prints stories concentrating on moral and family problems, love stories. But, according to Sattorov, this is only a part of the contents of the newspaper. He says that the main goal of *Charkhi Gardun* is to inform the society about the cultural life of the country. The love stories and dramas are needed to attract the attention of the readers and make the newspaper financially viable. *Charkhi Gardun* appears on 16 pages of A3 format. The declared circulation is 2,500.

The same combination of commercial approach with the aims of traditional press was applied to Sattorov’s next newspaper: “*Avicenna*”. “The aim of that newspaper is to provide medical information, medical education,” explains Sattorov. “To attract readers, we print crosswords, puzzles, logical games and problems. The newspaper is so popular that people keep calling us from hospitals, asking, whether the medicines they were given are good for them or not.” Officially, *Avicenna* is a supplement to *Charkhi Gardun*. It is printed in Russian on 16 pages of A3 format, its declared circulation is 2,500.

Sattorov’s only newspaper presenting a content closer to the informative role of the press is *Vechernij Dushanbe*. He bought that newspaper in 1998 after Javokhir Kabilov, the then editor of the newspaper (called at that time *Vechernie Vesti*), was forced to emigrate. *Vechernij Dushanbe*, declares its owner, is pro-presidential: “I am financing this newspaper and, therefore, I decide, which party or political figure it will support”. It is in Russian, has 16 pages of A3 format, and its declared circulation is 2,500. Sattorov’s most recent newspaper is *Aladdin*, for children. It contains puzzles, games, logical problems, easy crosswords for children, entertaining materials. *Aladdin* is printed on 16 pages of A3 format. The declared circulation is 2,500. Sattorov presents himself as a pure businessman. “Before opening a new newspaper, I must be sure that it has at least 2,000 potential readers”, he says, adding: “I am doing business on information. I do not care, who will occupy the ministerial posts. I have no political interests. I am interested in money, bread. I have 120 employees, and I must think about them.”

### **Sharif Hamdamov’s press group**

*Crime-Info*: This newspaper prints criminal chronicles, long stories about bloody murders and rapes. It also contains a question-and-answer page where attorneys answer the questions of the readers. Another three pages are dedicated to private announcements. The newspaper also publishes horoscopes, tests and crosswords – an important set of entertaining materials. Though *Crime-info* is published in two languages, Russian is more popular. Many stories are reprinted from the Russian

---

<sup>52</sup> CIMERA interview, September 2000.

<sup>53</sup> *Zerkalo*, # 1, p.9.

<sup>54</sup> “The owners of the commercial newspapers will never declare their real circulations. They put lower figures in the newspapers to avoid taxation problems,” according to Galina Nazarova.

press. The newspaper is printed on 16 pages of A3 format. Its declared circulation is 3,000 but, according to the owner, the real figure would be 21,000.

*Oila* (Family) is out of politics. “This newspaper is the carrier of melodrama, soap operas,” says Galina Nazarova. “This makes it popular mostly among women. It is constantly publishing family issues”. It is printed in Tajik, also on 16 pages of A3 format. Its declared circulation is 2,000 but, according to the owner, the real figure would be 18,000.

*Tojikiston* was founded by the law-enforcement agencies of Tajikistan in 1997 and Hamdamov was the editor. The newspaper was focusing on crime. After three-years’ work, Hamdamov became disappointed with the little support that the founders of the newspaper were providing and decided to separate from them. So, in 2000 *Tojikiston* was re-registered with new founders but with its old name. It is printed in three languages: Tajik, Russian and English, on 16 pages of A3 format. Its circulation is not declared. According to the owner it is 6,000. He says it used to be 12,000 when *Tojikiston* belonged to the law-enforcement bodies, because the latter were buying half of the circulation.

Owners of both media groups are making business with tabloid press. But both have one “serious” newspaper, which should satisfy more sophisticated audience. While *Vechernij Dushanbe* is one of the most popular newspapers in the country, *Tojikiston* is relatively new (the first issue of the renewed formula was printed on September 8, 2000), and it intends to attract the expatriate community’s attention. “We would like to inform our readers in their own language,” says the Editor’s Note in the first renewed issue<sup>55</sup>. However, *Digest-Press*, *Avicenna*, *Crime-Info*, *Charkhi Gardum* are not pure tabloids. They lack original materials, they are not focused on Tajik life and Tajik characters, most of the stories being taken from the Russian press.

## Newspapers with political content

*Biznes i Politika* generally benefits from a good reputation. “It is a good newspaper,” says Galina Nazarova. “It has its own identity. It does not reprint articles from Russian press. Their own material is of high quality. It differs from other newspapers in the country both by style and content. People read it.” Mukhtor Bokizoda, the Chairman of the Fund for Memory and Defense of Journalists’ Rights<sup>56</sup>, agrees with Nazarova: “*Biznes i Politika* gives interesting information. Sometimes it also raises serious problems.” *Biznes i Politika* comes out in Russian on 4 pages of A2 format. According to the editor, its real circulation is about 5,000<sup>57</sup>.

*Asia Plus* was founded by the news agency of the same name. *Zerkalo* describes *Asia Plus* as an intellectual edition<sup>58</sup>. Nevertheless, the news presented, which is of a social and political nature, only represent 5 or 6 pages of the newspaper’s total of 16. The other pages are filled with announcements, ads, and tabloid-style articles about, for example, dogs that were sent to the outer space and returned to Earth as men, or two lesbians who will give birth to children of two gays<sup>59</sup>. *Asia Plus* is published in Russian, it is printed on 16 A3 pages. Its declared circulation is 1,500 copies.

On the political parties’ side, *Najot* is one of the oldest opposition newspapers in the country. Founded in 1991 by the Islamic Revival Party, it was banned on June 21, 1993 according to a

---

<sup>55</sup> *Tojikiston*, September 8, 2000, # 33 (167).

<sup>56</sup> CIMERA interview, September 2000.

<sup>57</sup> CIMERA interview, September 2000.

<sup>58</sup> *Zerkalo* # 1, 2000, p.10.

<sup>59</sup> See *Asia +* # 34, from September 15, 2000.

decision of the Supreme Court of Tajikistan<sup>60</sup>. It then came out in exile, in Afghanistan, from December 1994 until 1997<sup>61</sup>. It resumed its publication in Tajikistan in November 1999 after the ban had been lifted in August of the same year. In August 2000, the state press distribution agency refused to sell *Najot*, because it is not printed in Sharki Ozod, the government-controlled printing house. Mukhtor Bokizoda states that *Najot* is printed in a private printing house. This fact is not mentioned in the newspaper because the editors allegedly fear that such a mention would attract a tax inspection of this company, in an attempt to find a way to interrupt the publication of this opposition newspaper. Mukhiddin Idizoda, the editor, is said to be constantly intimidated. He received threatening telephone calls announcing that his wife would be raped and his children killed. He informed Said Abdollo Nuri, the leader of the Islamic Revival Party, but the latter allegedly did nothing to guarantee his security. "I am scared, I will leave the country," says Mukhiddin Idizoda.

*Mizon* is a newspaper founded by the news agency of the same name, and its first issue was published on September 7, 2000. According to Asadullo Valizoda<sup>62</sup>, the founder and Editor-in-Chief of the agency and newspaper, it has the intention of being critical in respect of the powers, whatever their political orientation. Some sources indicate that *Mizon*'s position would be close to those of the Islamic Revival Party. *Mizon* comes out on 8 A3 pages and with a declared circulation of 1,500. According to Valizoda, the real figure would be higher than 2,000.

## Economy of the newspapers

The competition among editors is not the only factor which explains the general lack of information on the financial resources of the media in Tajikistan. The regular tax inspection visits after publication of material unpleasant to the authorities obviously only reinforces the mistrust of the media-owners in giving precise figures. Nonetheless, the few partial elements gathered during this enquiry indicate that, from an economic point of view, the newspapers in Tajikistan can be divided into three groups. The first group consists of governmental press – *Sadoi Mardum*, *Jumhurriet*, *Khalk Ovozi* and *Narodnaya Gazeta*. The state covers all their expenses. "None of them corresponds to any popular demand," writes Gulchekhra Mansurova, "as they primarily publish resolutions, government decisions and official chronicles, and cannot afford to "improvise" and thus improve their content. With their miserable circulation of 700 to 2,000 copies, 75% of circulation is secured by subscriptions sold to state bureaucrats, and only 25% goes into retail. According to the Chief Editor of one of these papers, the cost of printing them would be 4 times higher than the wholesale selling price."<sup>63</sup>

"The independent and state newspapers are not in equal conditions," says the editor of a private newspaper. "The governmental newspapers are completely financed by the state, therefore they have no problems with the rise of prices of the printing services or taxes. One of the state newspapers – I do not want to name its title – owes the printing house about 1.5 billion rubles (about 680,000 US\$). Our newspaper would be immediately closed if I had only a 300,000 rubles debt (about 140 US\$)."

The second group consists of non-governmental newspapers with political content: *Asia Plus*, *Biznes i Politika*, *Vechernij Dushanbe*, *Najot*, *Mizon*, *Tojikiston*. None of these newspapers is self-sufficient. *Najot* is financed by the Islamic Revival Party; *Mizon* is said to be financed by the same party though some observers claim that the source of their finances come from the information agency

---

<sup>60</sup> Oleg Panfilov, op. cit.

<sup>61</sup> CIMERA interview with Mukhiddin Idizoda, Editor-in-Chief of *Najot*, September 2000.

<sup>62</sup> CIMERA interview, September 2000.

<sup>63</sup> Gulchekhra Mansurova. "The Market Economy and Mass Media in Tajikistan", CAMsP, [www.camsp.osh.kg/pechbilleng/pubister4.htm](http://www.camsp.osh.kg/pechbilleng/pubister4.htm)

of the same name. *Asia Plus* benefits from a grant from the US Embassy which helps it to survive. Otherwise, it is financed by its news agency. *Vechernij Dushanbe* and *Tojikiston* are financed from the income that their owners gain from the tabloids of those media groups. Sharif Hamdamov says about *Tojikiston*: “We are trying to develop a social-political newspaper for the elite. It is not self-sustainable, and will never be. We are printing it on the income from two other newspapers – *Oila* and *Crime-Info*.” The main sources of the financing of *Biznes i Politika* remain unclear.

The third group is formed by “tabloids”, which are income-generating enterprises and, as seen above, sometimes contribute to helping the newspapers with political content to survive. Their main source of income comes from street-sales. Some financing comes to the newspapers from advertising. However, there are very few advertisers in the country. “There are almost no advertisers because there is no production – the country is in a deep economic crisis,” says an editor. “The potential advertisers, in their turn, are afraid of making their names known because they are scared of the racket and of the taxation office. But, mostly of the racket. The international agencies are the biggest advertisers. In fact, they are publishing announcements but, they are doing that openly, with no fear. Others are avoiding.” Presently, the price of one square centimeter of advertisement in a newspaper costs around 200-300 Tajik rubles (9.5 – 14 cents), depending on the newspaper. As an exception, *Asia Plus*, according to the estimations given by its director Umed Babakhanov, would have benefited from advertisements amounting to 40% of the income of the newspaper in September. But, underlines Babakhanov, this especial high proportion is due to the particular situation of Dushanbe, with the presence in town of numerous international organizations, whose announcements constitute the biggest part of all the advertisement income of the newspaper. The budget of a private weekly, due to start in Khudjand with the support of OSCE, confirms the general low potential of advertisements in the country. OSCE representatives, in the best case, do not expect more than 5% of the income of the newspaper from advertisements<sup>64</sup>. And the budget for the first year of functioning of this newspaper only foresees advertisement income as 2% of the total budget.

Latent advertising constitutes a bigger source of income. It is widely used and it takes the form of articles published in a newspaper and positively describing either a personality or an enterprise. An editor says: “Usually, I go to the director of a big enterprise and tell him: ‘Listen, your enterprise has to tell the people of Tajikistan about your problems, your everyday life and (if there are some) achievements. You pay for the space in the newspaper.’ Usually, I do not name the price, they pay as much as they want.” Reliable sources say that a newspaper like *Biznes i Politika*, a private newspaper in Dushanbe, would charge \$ 50 for 1/4 of the newspaper’s page (equal to one A4 page). The fees for latent advertising are usually paid in cash. According to a reporter from *Vechernij Dushanbe*, only the editor and the owner are entitled to decide the publication of latent advertising, the journalists having only the possibility to bargain the prizes with the “customer”. The editor of another newspaper says that the income from latent advertising is paid to the employees of the newspaper as a premium every three months. In non-governmental controlled press the fees are generally used to pay salaries which usually are higher than in the state-controlled press (on an average 50,000 rubles /approximately \$ 24/ in private press vs 30,000 /about \$ 14/ in governmental press).

All newspapers buy paper from intermediary private companies. The price mentioned by editors varies from \$ 650 to \$ 1.000 per tone. The high price of the paper available in Tajikistan -which does not produce any- is a big obstacle for any development of the press in the country, and the possible transformation of any of its weeklies into dailies. According to Umed Babakhanov, the price of the paper alone would represent 30% of the expenses for *Asia Plus*. In the budget of the weekly OSCE is

---

<sup>64</sup> CIMERA interview with Sebastien Trives, Head of OSCE Khudjand Field Office, September 2000.

planing to support in Khudjand, this cost represents around 20% of the expenses of the budget for the first's year functioning.

Almost all the newspapers are printed in the biggest printing house in Dushanbe – *Sharki Ozod*. The 14-storey building, where most of the newspapers are situated, belongs to the *Sharki Ozod* Publishing House. This system of gathering in one place the redaction of newspapers and a big publishing house to print them was established in the 1970s, and such buildings were then constructed in many republics of USSR.