

Tajikistan: Profile of Media Ownership and Potential Foreign Influence Channels

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Introduction

What are the entry points for foreign actors to shape and influence the narrative in the Tajik media market? This profile seeks to address some of the entry points related to media ownership and Russian state-owned media. AidData recognizes that malign influence may affect narrative creation in other ways, including through the republishing of foreign content in domestic media outlets, interactions on social media, and journalist biases. However, this project focuses solely on direct and indirect ownership of traditional domestic media outlets to identify potential entry points for Russian influence through elites and media owners. By better understanding Tajikistan's domestic media ownership environment, including what media outlets citizens consume and who the owners of those outlets are, we can anticipate entry points where malign actors may try to influence domestic narratives.

Most of Tajikistan's top media are controlled by the government. Although independent media have emerged at various times during the post-Soviet era, the number of independently owned outlets is dwindling.¹ The Tajik government, which operates in a closed political system,² has worked to shore up control of the entire sector.³ Since owners of top media houses have the potential to influence the content and tone of topics covered by journalists in their employ, understanding who owns the media is crucial to identifying avenues for influence and potential bias in reporting. In

¹ Media freedom increased and the media opened up moderately just after independence from the Soviet Union, and then again in the years following the Tajik Civil War and post-9/11 era (Adinabay, Esfandiari. 2013. Changing media and politics in Tajikistan, pp. 7-10. Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, University of Oxford. URL:

<https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/our-research/changing-media-and-politics-tajikistan/>.

² Freedom House. 2021. Nations in Transit 2021: Tajikistan. URL:

https://freedomhouse.org/country/tajikistan/nations-transit/2021#footnote14_b7amb8b, accessed March 18, 2022.

³ We highlight two recent developments. First, a government decree in 2019 states it has the right to regulate and control content broadcasted in television and radio no matter the outlet's owners. (US Department of State. 2019. Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Tajikistan. URL:

<https://www.state.gov/reports/2019-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/tajikistan/>, accessed March 18, 2022).

Second, a 2021 license rule requires licensed television and radio to work within "the framework of the country's unified policy in the information sphere" in addition to increasing the license fee (Committee to Protect Journalists. "New Tajikistan licensing rules restrict independent reporting, increase state fees." Published May 17, 2021. URL:

<https://cpj.org/2021/05/new-tajikistan-licensing-rules-restrict-independent-reporting-increase-state-fees/>, accessed March 18, 2022).

this profile, we begin to close this gap with an in-depth look at domestic media ownership in Tajikistan.

This media ownership profile and the supporting data were prepared by AidData, a research lab at William & Mary's Global Research Institute.⁴ The data for this profile was collected manually by AidData staff and student research assistants. We began by conducting web searches to identify a list of media in Tajikistan, and then identified a list of the top-ranked outlets in terms of overall consumption. We then used this information to gather the ownership data. Given the lack of cross-country sources, we largely relied on a 2021 AidData survey of experts in Tajikistan, as well as media watchdog sources and other open source data.

In the following sections, we provide summary data on the presence of Russian state-owned media, top outlets, and media ownership in Tajikistan as of 2021. This profile focuses on the ownership of traditional broadcast, print, and online media outlets. Social media is not included in this analysis. By mapping out the ownership and influence of traditional forms of media, these profiles lend insights into potential channels for foreign influence in the top consumed outlets.

⁴ This profile is part of a collaboration with the USAID E&E Bureau made possible through a buy-in to a Higher Education Solutions Network cooperative agreement (AID-A-12-00096) in place between USAID/LAB/HESN, AidData, and William & Mary.

Russian Media Footprints

The most direct form of Kremlin influence in Tajikistan’s media landscape is via Russian state-owned media (see Table 1). Four of the eleven Russian state-owned media outlets we tracked have a physical presence in Tajikistan, which provides the Kremlin with a channel to directly communicate with, and ultimately influence, Tajik citizens. Physical presence includes physical infrastructure, such as cable packages, physical office space or local bureaus, and radio broadcasters, but excludes satellite broadcasting and online or streaming availability. Table 1 provides a footprint of Russian state-owned media presence in Tajikistan, but does not speak to how well-consumed each outlet is by Tajik citizens.

Table 1: Russian state-owned media in Tajikistan, 2021

Television		Print		Radio		News Agency	
Russia I	✗	Rossiyskaya Gazeta	✗	Sputnik	✓	TASS	✓
Russia 24	✗					Sputnik	✓
Russia K	✗						
RTR-Planeta	✓						
TV Centre	✗						
Channel One	✗						
RT	✗						

Other indirect forms of Russian influence are possible, including domestic outlets republishing narratives and pro-Russian journalists in-country. In this profile, AidData has captured direct Russian channels of influence through state-owned media infrastructure.

Top Media Outlets

Table 2 identifies the top five most-consumed media outlets in Tajikistan by medium (e.g., television, print, radio, and online) based on cross-sectional indicators such as viewership share and circulation. Television is the most consumed medium.⁵ While we cannot know the exact influence of each individual outlet, we can assume that outlets that reach higher numbers of consumers have greater potential to influence more citizens.

AidData used a weighted average of media consumption survey rankings from 2017 to 2021 to determine the top media outlets in Tajikistan. This strategy offers a more long-term perspective of top media outlets, rather than a snapshot of the top media outlets right now. As such, the top outlets may not exactly reflect the current order of most consumed outlets, but do show a reasonable picture of the media landscape over the past five years. Recent rankings are weighted more heavily to adjust for new changes.⁶

Table 2: Top Tajik media outlets ranked by overall consumption

Rank	Television	Print	Radio	Online
1	TV Safina	Oila	Sadoi Dushanbe	News.tj
2	Televizioni Tojikiston ⁷	Jumhuriyat	Imruz	Khovar.tj
3	TV Jahonamo	Asia-Plus	Asia-Plus	Avesta.tj
4	TV Bakhoritston (TVB)	Sadoi Mardum	Vatan	Faraj.tj
5	Varzish TV	Minbari Halq	Tajikistan Radio	Pressa.tj

⁵ The Research Institute of Public Opinion/Internews. 2019. Media consumption and media and information literacy survey in the countries of Central Asia (Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan), p. 20. URL: https://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PA00X2HT.pdf, accessed March 18, 2022.

⁶ Television, print, radio, and online rankings were calculated using multiple publicly available surveys and circulation data, including an AidData survey of country and regional experts conducted in summer 2021. Additional survey data and ranking information came from: IREX's Media Sustainability Index report (2019), Narzikulovych (2019), the Research Institute of Public Opinion (Nur-Sultan, Kazakhstan)/Internews (2019), Zerkalo (2018).

⁷ Formerly known as Shabakai Yakum.

According to findings from an AidData survey of regional and local media experts in 2021, the majority of top Tajik outlets mirror the results of open-source data collection by AidData researchers. However, additional outlets excluded from this top outlet list but ranked highly by local experts include the television channels Russian Public Television (ORT) and the Russian state-owned RTR Planeta; the newspapers Faraj, ImruzNews, and Reklamnaya Gazeta; the US-funded radio station Radio Liberty; and the online outlets Akhbor.com and Jumhuriyat.tj. Several of these outlets named by experts are owned by the same company that owns top outlets that appear in Table 1. The newspapers Faraj and ImruzNews are owned by the same companies that control Faraj.tj (the fourth most-consumed online outlet) and Imruz radio station (the second most-listened to radio station), respectively. Additionally, the website Jumhuriyat.tj is owned by the same company that controls the second most-read newspaper Jumhuriyat.

Media Ownership

No known transparency laws exist that require independent media owners to declare their ownership stakes publicly. Although outlets must register their organization through either the Ministry of Culture (for print media) or the State Committee on Television and Radio (for television, radio, and electronic media), the government does not make a registry of these licensed outlets publicly available. As a result, the ownership of privately owned media is not transparent and names were discovered through unofficial secondary sources. Further examples of ownership ties and relationships are discussed in the following section.

Table 3 lists the ownership information of top Tajik media outlets by medium (e.g., television, newspaper, radio, and online). The eleven Tajik state-owned media outlets are color-coded blue. AidData staff categorized the remaining privately held media outlets based upon the level of Russian ownership that might increase their susceptibility to Kremlin influence. These categories are denoted by an increasing saturation of red—no known Russian ties (no color), suspected Russian ties, known

Russian ties, and direct Russian ownership. In Tajikistan, no independent media owners had suspected or known ties to the Russian government, and none had direct Russian ownership.

Table 3: Ownership of top Tajik media outlets by share

No Russian ties
 Suspected Russian ties
 Known Russian ties
 Direct Russian ownership
 Local state-owned media

Medium	Rank	Outlet	Owner, Company	Owner, Individuals	Owner (%)
Television	1	TV Safina	Government of Tajikistan		100
	2	Televizioni Tojikiston	Government of Tajikistan		100
	3	TV Jahonamo	Government of Tajikistan		100
	4	TV Bakhoritston (TVB)	Government of Tajikistan		100
	5	Varzish TV	Government of Tajikistan		100
Print	1	Oila	Oila Media Holding	Sharif Hamdampur	100
	2	Jumhuriyat	Government of Tajikistan		100
	3	Asia-Plus	Asia-Plus Media Group	Umed Babakhanov	100
	4	Sadoi Mardum	Government of Tajikistan		100
	5	Minbari Halq	Government of Tajikistan		100
Radio	1	Sadoi Dushanbe	Government of Tajikistan		100
	2	Imruz	Orieno Media LLC	<i>Unknown</i>	<i>Unknown</i>
	3	Asia-Plus	Asia-Plus Media Group	Umed Babakhanov	100
	4	Vatan	Vatan TV and Radio Company (TRK)	<i>Unknown</i>	<i>Unknown</i>
	5	Tajikistan Radio	Government of Tajikistan		100
Online	1	News.tj	Asia-Plus Media Group	Umed Babakhanov	100
	2	Khovar.tj	Government of Tajikistan		100
	3	Avesta.tj	Muhammad-Bilal LLC	Jamshed Ulmasov	100

4 Faraj.tj	NGO Public Association Center for Journalistic Research in Tajikistan	<i>Unknown</i>	<i>Unknown</i>
5 Pressa.tj	Oila Media Holding	Sharif Hamdampur	100

Results

Television

The Government of Tajikistan owns all of the top five television outlets in the country. TV Safina is the most-watched station with general broadcasting and some news in Russian. The second most watched is Televizioni Tojikiston (formerly known as Shabakai Yakum), also featuring general broadcasting and some Russian news. Next, TV Jahonamo is dedicated to domestic and international news and broadcasts in Tajik, Russian, and English. The fourth and fifth most-consumed outlets are largely entertainment: TV Bakhoritston (TVB) is dedicated to children’s broadcasting and Varzish TV is dedicated to sports. Though Russia does not have any state-run outlets in the top five, observers report that Tajik state-run television rebroadcasts Russian television content.⁸

Television is the most trusted medium to get information, though this is less true for younger Tajiks who place more trust in information from the Internet.⁹ However, with a single owner controlling all the top television outlets in Tajikistan, there is a higher risk of vulnerability to co-optation. The concentration in decision-making authority over content could make it easier for a foreign actor to convince a compromised government to promote its preferred narratives without restraint.

⁸ IREX. 2019. Media Sustainability Index: Tajikistan, p. 9. URL: <https://www.irex.org/sites/default/files/pdf/media-sustainability-index-europe-eurasia-2019-tajikistan.pdf>, accessed March 18, 2022.; Olcott, Martha Brill. 2019. Tajikistan's difficult development path, p. 37. Brookings Institution Press.

⁹ The Research Institute of Public Opinion/Internews. 2019. Media consumption and media and information literacy survey in the countries of Central Asia (Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan), p. 6.

While independent television outlets do exist in Tajikistan, recent developments undermine editorial control over an outlet's content. In 2021, government officials announced that any broadcast media looking to renew its broadcast license would need to submit editorial content for prior approval by the state's Television and Radio Committee (KTR).¹⁰ The KTR will also require approval to broadcast foreign media content, as well a 1% payment of the outlet's profits. An outlet which refuses to adhere to these requirements risks losing their broadcast license and thus their ability to operate. Though President Rahmon argued the policy protected Tajik media from the "danger posed by foreign media," independent Tajik journalists and media observers condemned the move as further constricting media freedom in the country and increasing government control over media content.¹¹ With this new policy, any resilience the Tajik television sector had seems to have nearly evaporated.

Print

Like television, the government of Tajikistan dominates most of the print medium by owning three of the top five outlets. The government owns Jumhuriyat, the second-most circulated outlet, along with Sadoi Mardum and Minbari Halq, the fourth and fifth most-consumed outlets, respectively. Jumhuriyat is owned specifically by the office of the president, while Sadoi Mardum is owned and published by the parliament. Minbari Halq appears generally state-run, not making public an ownership distinction among government offices.

Two privately owned outlets remain among the top five most circulated outlets in Tajikistan. The most-circulated outlet is Oila, which appears to be owned by Sharif Hamdampur through his firm Oila Media Holding. Hamdampur is a veteran journalist who was formerly editor of Komsomolskaya Pravda Tajikistan before it closed in 2016, following a row when a journalist from the paper's Russian edition published an article perceived as an insult to the Tajik people.¹² IREX reports that almost all independent

¹⁰ Reporters without Borders. "Tajikistan imposes total control over independent broadcast media." Published May 14, 2021. URL: <https://rsf.org/en/news/tajikistan-imposes-total-control-over-independent-broadcast-media>, accessed March 18, 2022.

¹¹ Reporters without Borders. "Tajikistan imposes total control over independent broadcast media." Published May 14, 2021.

¹² Radio Free Europe. "Tajik edition of Russian daily suspended for 'insulting' comment." Published July 21, 2016. URL: <https://www.rferl.org/a/tajik-russia-newspaper-komsomolskaya-pravda-stop-printing/27871465.html>, accessed March 18, 2022.

press in Tajikistan is printed using Oila Media Company's printing machines,¹³ providing a connection between Oila and the remaining independent print outlet Asia-Plus.

The third-most circulated print outlet is Asia-Plus, which is owned by the Asia-Plus Media Group. The organization is one of the largest privately owned media firms in Tajikistan and has several other media holdings. Umed Babakhanov appears to own Asia-Plus Media Group. Babakhanov is a seasoned journalist who worked as a correspondent for both the Tajik edition of the Russian paper Komsomolskaya Pravda and the Associated Press for much of the 1990s. Babakhanov has owned Asia-Plus since its founding in 1995.

Asia-Plus offers alternative perspectives to the content produced by government media. This may account for the many instances of the Tajik government running interference on its operations. In 2020, the government forcibly moved Asia-Plus from the building where it had been working for years and used the space to house Khovar, a government-run media outlet.¹⁴ In 2011, the government sued the paper for libel after it reported on the torture allegations of a Tajik general.¹⁵ Much of the government's recent harassment targets Asia-Plus's online page, which we discuss in more detail in the Online section below.

While the government's presence is strong among top print outlets, some independent outlets make the top-five list. Much like television, close relations with foreign actors can influence narratives in several key print outlets. Although the two independent outlets are owned by different people, they share use of the same printing machines.

¹³ IREX. 2018. Media Sustainability Index: Tajikistan, p. 14. URL: <https://www.irex.org/sites/default/files/pdf/media-sustainability-index-europe-eurasia-2018-tajikistan.pdf>, accessed April 4, 2022.

¹⁴ Freedom House. 2021. Nations in Transit: Tajikistan. URL: <https://freedomhouse.org/country/tajikistan/nations-transit/2021>, accessed March 18, 2022.

¹⁵ Radio Free Europe. "Tajik edition of Russian daily suspended for 'insulting' comment." Published July 21, 2016.

Radio

Radio remains a popular news source in Tajikistan, with nearly half of Tajiks listening to news programs on the radio.¹⁶ The Tajik government has a strong presence among top radio outlets, but less so than television and print. It owns the top and fifth-ranked outlets, which are Sadoi Dushanbe and Tajikistan Radio, respectively. The remaining outlets are independent. The second-most listened to outlet is Imruz. While we can confirm that Orieno Media LLC owns the outlet, we are unable to identify the name of the firm's stakeholder. The government closed Imruz several times in the late 2000s,¹⁷ charging its sister print outlet with libel in 2013 and forcing the outlet to pay a fine.¹⁸ However, it seems to have navigated these attacks and still broadcasts today.

Asia-Plus is the third-most consumed radio station and owned by Umed Babakhanov through his firm Asia-Plus Media Group. The fourth-most consumed radio station is Vatan, which is owned by Vatan TV and Radio Company (TRK). While the station provides this information on their website, we are unable to confidently identify the owner. Two potential candidates include its founders Daler Amonov and Vera Kulakova-Brannerud. Amonov faced a corruption scandal in 2010 where he was investigated for taking 4 million somoni for his Arzon Mobile company, which was the largest provider of cellular phones at the time.¹⁹ We were unable to determine if he was convicted of this charge or if the accusation affected his ability to continue as owner of Vatan. Kulakova-Brannerud is currently the outlet's general director. Beyond this, we are unable to confirm if they remain legal owners of the outlet after founding it, or if other stakeholders have a share in the ownership as well.

¹⁶ However, radio consumption is reported most often outside the house, such as while in vehicles mostly in the background. This suggests Tajiks passively select into listening to radio (The Research Institute of Public Opinion/Internews. 2019. Media consumption and media and information literacy survey in the countries of Central Asia (Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan), p. 22.).

¹⁷ In 2008: Radio Free Europe. "Tajikistan: Government shuts down independent radio station." Published April 16, 2008. Url: <https://www.rferl.org/a/1109579.html>, accessed March 18, 2022. In 2009: Olcott, Martha Brill. 2019. Tajikistan's difficult development path, p. 37.

¹⁸ Human Rights Watch. 2014. World Report 2014 - Tajikistan. URL: <https://www.ecoi.net/en/document/1238932.html>, accessed March 18, 2022.

¹⁹ Asia-Plus. "Director of Vatan radio station faces fraud charge." Published October 27, 2010. URL: <https://asiaplustj.info/en/news/tajikistan/laworder/20101027/director-vatan-radio-station-faces-fraud-charge>, accessed March 18, 2022.

Though we find more independent outlets with seemingly diverse ownership in this medium compared to television and radio, the government's recent license renewal requirements for broadcast media (that includes government approval of editorial content and payment of a portion of the outlet's profits) also applies to radio. We are therefore hesitant to report greater independence and diversity of ownership in Tajik radio as a sign of elevated resilience in this medium. In addition, we were unable to find ownership information on two of the five outlets. This opacity allows more space for these outlet's owners to operate without accountability and makes it difficult for citizens and observers to evaluate the extent to which an outlet's business, political, or foreign ties could influence their content.

Online

The online sector sees the fewest government-run outlets in its top five, though one does appear. Since only about 23% of the population has access to the Internet,²⁰ the government may be less invested in online content. The increase in competition online may also mean citizens are more likely to consume information from privately held outlets. The most-trafficked website is News.tj, owned by Asia-Plus Media Group. The Tajik government has blocked the Asia-Plus website has several times²¹ and has pursued defamation lawsuits against the online edition as well.²² The Asia-Plus website has also made waves outside of Tajikistan; in 2019, Russian regulators deemed it an extremist website and temporarily blocked it from Russia after accusing the outlet of promoting suicide.²³

The second most trafficked website is Khovar.tj, which the Tajik government owns. Khovar is a state-run news agency established in 1925 that also operates well-consumed radio and print outlets. The third most visited website is the

²⁰ Central Intelligence Agency. 2022. The CIA world factbook: Tajikistan. URL:

<https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/tajikistan/#communications>, accessed March 20, 2022.

²¹ Freedom House. 2021. Nations in Transit: Tajikistan; Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). 2020. ODIHR Election Assessment Mission Final Report, p. 17. URL: <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/9/9/453243.pdf>; IREX. 2019. Media Sustainability Index: Tajikistan, p. 6; Eurasianet. "Tajikistan: Russia hinders independent Tajik news website." Published August 5, 2019. URL: <https://eurasianet.org/tajikistan-russia-hinders-independent-tajik-news-website>, accessed March 20, 2022.

²² Human Rights Watch. "Tajikistan: 'Insult' Ruling Against News Outlet." Published June 2, 2014. URL: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2014/06/02/tajikistan-insult-ruling-against-news-outlet#>; Committee to Protect Journalists. "Tajik judges seek millions from weeklies in civil libel case." Published February 3, 2010. URL: <https://cpj.org/2010/02/tajik-judges-seek-millions-from-weeklies-in-civil/>, accessed March 20, 2022.

²³ Eurasianet. "Tajikistan: Russia hinders independent Tajik news website." Published August 5, 2019.

Russian-language Avesta.tj, which is directly owned by Muhammad-Bilal LLC and subsequently owned by Jamshed Ulmasov. Ulmasov provided comments in the Chinese state-run outlet People's Daily supporting government crackdown on Hong Kong protesters in 2019²⁴ and is a representative of the Turkish Global Journalism Council,²⁵ an international journalist association that focuses on journalists from Turkey, Central Asia, Caucasus, Balkans and the Middle East.

The fourth most viewed outlet is Faraj.tj, owned by the NGO Public Association Center for Journalistic Research in Tajikistan. Although the ownership of this NGO is unknown, we can confidently identify Khurshedjon Niyozov as the key principal and chairman of the organization,²⁶ as well as the chief editor of Faraj.²⁷ AidData staff was unable to find further information about Niyozov's business or political ties. The fifth most viewed outlet is Pressa.tj, owned by Oila Media Holdings, which, in turn, is owned by Sharif Hamdampur.

Online outlets appear to have the most diverse ownership among mediums in Tajikistan. While the government dominates other sectors, the online sector has four independently owned top outlets. However, two of the four independent outlets do not have transparent ownership, which makes it difficult for consumers to evaluate the degree to which an outlet's business, political, or foreign ties could influence their content. Although only about one-fifth of Tajiks have access to the internet, the government seems to see it as a threat. It regularly blocks news sites critical to the government,²⁸ including top web portals Faraj and Asia-Plus in the lead-up to the 2020 presidential election. Asia-Plus, for example, was blocked several times in 2018 for refusing to print content prepared by government officials.²⁹ It is also increasingly blocking social media websites like Facebook, YouTube, Odnoklassniki, and

²⁴ Hanbo, Zhou. "Western interference in China's internal affairs won't work." People's Daily. Published August 31, 2019. URL: <http://en.people.cn/n3/2019/0831/c90000-9611065.html>, accessed March 20, 2022.

²⁵ See Foreign Representatives on Global Journalism Council's webpage. URL: <https://www.gjc.org.tr/foreign-representatives/>, Accessed March 20, 2022.

²⁶ Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). "OSCE Office in Tajikistan supports World Press Freedom Day conference." Published May 4, 2017. URL: <https://www.osce.org/office-in-tajikistan/315001>, accessed March 20, 2022.

²⁷ IREX. 2019. Media Sustainability Index: Tajikistan, p. 4.

²⁸ Swerdlow, Steve. "Tajikistan: Why authoritarian elections also matter." The Diplomat. Published October 10, 2020. URL: <https://thediplomat.com/2020/10/tajikistan-why-authoritarian-elections-also-matter/>, accessed March 20, 2022.

²⁹ Reporters Without Borders. "Blocking websites benefits no one in Tajikistan." Published April 29, 2019. URL: <https://rsf.org/en/news/blocking-websites-benefits-no-one-tajikistan>, accessed March 20, 2022.

VKontakte.³⁰ Since the government has the least direct control over online content, it seems to be using its ability to pull the cord on websites to exert influence.

Conclusion

In this brief, we have identified several avenues by which foreign actors, including but not limited to the Kremlin, might influence the media landscape in Tajikistan. The most direct path for Russia to influence Tajik media is via Kremlin-owned media outlets operating in Tajikistan, such as television station RTR Planeta and radio station Sputnik. Russian news agencies TASS and Sputnik are present in Tajikistan as well. However, two indirect paths emerge from our analysis that may contribute to the vulnerability of Tajik media to foreign influence, including (i) the concentration of government ownership both within and across mediums and (ii) a small but loosely connected independent media.

The first indirect path for potential foreign influence is the concentration of government ownership of media. This exists both within and across outlets. The government owns top media in all four major mediums. It completely dominates television, as all five top outlets are government owned. It also owns multiple top outlets in print and radio and at least one top internet outlet. In this respect, if a foreign actor was able to politically capture the Tajik government, it could easily influence a substantial share of the content that Tajiks consume everyday and promote its own preferred narratives.

Similarly, there is a high degree of concentration of ownership even among independent media, which may increase vulnerability to malign foreign influence as well. Only larger, more well-established firms have endured since independence, likely due to the hostile environment that the government has created for independent media. In practice, this means that companies such as Asia-Plus Media Group and Oila Media Holdings have outsized influence, as they own media across multiple communication mediums. Although diversification across mediums and cooperation among independent media groups may be an appropriate survival strategy, this concentration of content-producing power in the hands of just a few firms increases their vulnerability to foreign influence. A compromised Asia-Plus Media Group, for

³⁰ IREX. 2019. Media Sustainability Index: Tajikistan, p. 3.

instance, could give a foreign influencer the ability to affect narratives across print, radio, and online content simultaneously. However, given recent moves by the government, threats to independent media appear to be more likely to come from the domestic government itself.

In sum, Tajik media remain highly vulnerable to domestic, political, and foreign influence due the concentration of media in the hands of the government and a few large firms. This vulnerability is compounded by effects from the Covid-19 pandemic that have decreased revenues among independent newspapers and radio, as advertisers move their business to digital platforms and emphasize outdoor advertising like billboards.³¹ Transparency is not a priority for the Tajik government and it has made moves to consolidate its hold on independent media.³²

³¹ Timerkhanov, Timur. "Как из-за пандемии изменился рекламный рынок Таджикистана Подробнее." Asia-Plus. Published August 13, 2020. URL: <https://www.asiaplustj.info/ru/news/tajikistan/society/20200813/kak-iz-za-pandemii-izmenilsya-reklamnii-rinok-tadzhikistana>, accessed March 20, 2022.

³² A Tajik Supreme Court ruling led to the closing of independent news outlet Akhoboar in 2020 (International Partnership for Human Rights. "Tajikistan: Crackdown on independent media outlets, lawyers and political activists continues." Published May 20, 2021. URL: <https://www.iphronline.org/tajikistan-crackdown-on-independent-media-outlets-lawyers-and-political-activists-continues.html>, accessed March 20, 2022.