

# TAJIKISTAN HAS SWITCHED OFF RUSSIAN TV BECAUSE OF ITS DEBTS

*By Nargis Zakirova, journalist, Tajikistan*

**Russian ORT and RTR television broadcasts in Tajikistan has been restricted and even stopped, raising discussions within the Tajik media. Local experts believe that the main reason for these measures is not really the Russian's debts, but rather the Tajik government's attempt to stop broadcasts by anyone not under their control.**

On the evening of October 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001, Tajikistani viewers couldn't watch the ORT channel (Public Russian Television) on their television screens. The airtime of the Russian television channel (RTR) was also reduced. In a television interview the next day, Tajikistan's Communication Minister, Nuritdin Mukhitdinov, said that the channel was disconnected because the Russian side hadn't observed its commitments. The All-Russia State Broadcasting Company, which broadcasts RTR, hadn't paid its retransmission fees, its debt to the Tajikistani telecommunication agencies was growing, and had now risen to 5.5 million roubles (about US \$180,000). Thus, Tajikistani viewers lost their favorite and, perhaps, major source of information.

## **A POLITICAL MATTER?**

However, Mukhitdinov's statement failed to convince ordinary citizens because the Tajikistan public was perplexed as to how ORT and RTR, large and rich channels as they are, could be indebted to an impoverished Tajikistan. Rumors spread across the country that this was a political and ideological act, which, probably had something to do with the US counter-terrorist military operation in Afghanistan.

There was also talk of an attempt to limit the flow of undesirable information. A week later all Tajikistani newspapers published short reports on this issue and carried an official explanation from the Communication Ministry. The issue captured the headlines in some of the newspapers. The independent newspaper, *Asia Plus*, (issue No.42 of October 18,2001) ran an analytical report entitled "Tajikistan without the ORT" by Marat Mammadshoev, which said, "...the discontinuation (or reduction of air time) of Russia's leading television channels is always a political act, even if economic factors are given as the real reason. What caused our leadership to take this step? One of the possible reasons is perhaps the complicated situation around the world and in this region in connection with the US operation Enduring Freedom. Bombardments in Afghanistan continue, and an on-land phase involving the allies has begun. In this connection, there was a dramatic rise in the number of speculations about Tajikistan as a front-line state. For example, a number of publications asserted that American commandos had landed in Kulyab, where the Taliban were waging war, and so on. In this context, Tajikistani officials might have attempted to curb the

influence of the news media they couldn't control, by resorting to this simple method."

## **MAIN SOURCE**

The same issue of *Asia Plus* carried the results of a blitz-poll the newspaper had carried out among 12 respondents. In response to questions about what they thought about ORT's discontinuation, Ibrohim Usmonov, then chairman of the Oliy Majlisi (parliament) Commission for International Affairs, Public Associations and Information and the incumbent State Councilor, said, "It's bad that the channel is no longer broadcasting. Any television channel is an additional source of information. But the Communication Ministry's motivation is quite understandable. While retransmitting ORT free of charge, the Ministry had to pay value added tax."

Director of the Tajikistan Television Programming Board, Abrom Imomov, answered the question in the affirmative and said, "It's not that I am prejudiced against this channel. ORT hasn't paid for retransmission over the last four years. The channel should meet its engagements, and I strongly support this decision."

Businessman Bakhtiyor Sadykov voiced a contrasting opinion by saying, "My life has been divided into a period when I could watch the *Vremya* (Time) program and a period when I could not. I'm an ordinary viewer and I don't see why I have been deprived of access to information. I don't care

who owes whom. I have watched this channel for forty years. If the discontinuation has something to do with politics then there are a lot of loose ends. Theoretically, anyone can buy a dish aerial to watch any channel one likes, including ORT, without constraints. If, again, the decision was caused by ORT's arrears why wasn't it discontinued before?"

### THE OFFICIAL POSITION

On the same day, the independent political and economic newspaper "Biznes i Politika" (Business and Politics) published an interview with Communication Minister Mukhitdinov under the headline "Why was ORT discontinued? There are no free cakes". In particular, the reporter's interest was in issues related to the discontinuation of the Russian channel.

When asked about how the debt issues were being settled between the channels and the communication agencies, the Minister said, "We cannot say that the issue has been left unattended because the governments of both the Russian Federation and the Republic of Tajikistan are taking efforts to solve the problem. There has been a resolution at the fifth meeting of the inter-governmental commission for economic cooperation between the Russian Federation and the Republic of Tajikistan in the humanitarian field. The commission decided that the Russian party should take steps to make Russia's Broadcasting Company repay the debt accumulated during the period between 1999 and 2001 as soon as possible. The issue is under discussion but, unfortunately, the Russian Broadcasting Company has not acquitted itself of the debt as yet."

In response to the question as to which of the parties was more interested in ORT and RTR trans-

missions, and how much the Russian side should pay for full transmissions, Mukhitdinov said, "Our economies are based on market relations. And if the Russian side fails to pay for the circulation of its programs then, apparently, such is the political or economic will of these channels' management. We have transmitted these channels free of charge for too long. Economically, it is rather burdensome because the outlays we had to make for the transmission of ORT and RTR were equivalent to US \$300,000 a year." Regarding the Communication Ministry's ability to ensure the information security of the country, the Minister said, "Tajikistan has signed a number of agreements with neighboring states, except Afghanistan, on the distribution of frequencies with special regard given to the frequency band in the border country. Issues related to frequencies are coordinated by Tajikistan's State Communication Inspectorate and broadcast controlling structures. We should not disturb our neighbors just as they should not disturb us. The frequency band is rather limited today, and there should be no single-band radio stations. So far, we've had no problems. Besides, there is a United Nations International Telecommunications Union, of which Tajikistan is a member, and any violation of broadcasting regulations may incur UN sanctions."

### QUESTION OF DEBT

The December 7, 2001 issue of independent newspaper "Dengi" ("Money") published a more reassuring news story that said that Tajikistan's Communication Ministry received a letter from the RTR management. Deputy Minister of Communication Nazhmitdinov said, "They have not refused to repay the debt. Therefore, it is

most likely that the program will be resumed. As soon as the debt is paid off, RTR will continue to broadcast its programs as it did before."

Also according to the *Dengi* reports, "after three hours of talks between President Emomali Rakhmonov and the assistant to the Russian President on information policies, S. Yastrzhembsky, an agreement had been reached on the principal aspects of Tajik-Russian cooperation in broadcasting. The parties unanimously recognized that it was important to expand the information space and boost information exchanges between the two countries. The parties agreed that in order to study and settle financial and technical problems related to 24-hour broadcasting by the Russian ORT and RTR channels in Tajikistan they will set up a joint expert group to work out a document to be signed later by the respective departments of both countries."

### GIVE US BACK ORT!

Two weeks later, the state-controlled *Narodnaya Gazeta* (People's Newspaper) published a letter from Khakim Sharipov, an assistant professor at Tajik National University headlined "Give ORT Back to Tajik Viewers" in which the author criticized the professional level of television reporters and technical services of Tajik television and concluded by saying, "Concert shows still dominate the republican television channels. There are even some "videoclips" with propaganda paraphernalia associated with the Communist past clearly seen in the background, including slogans glorifying the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and insisting that "Our Goal is Communism"... I don't find the Communication Ministry's refer-

ences to a huge 5-million rouble debt convincing enough. It is well known to all and sundry that Tajikistan's debt stands today at 1 billion US dollars. Can you figure out the amount of Tajikistan's debt to Russia? After all, did our "strategic partner" cease its supplies of grain, fuel and other goods of vital importance? What's all the hue and cry about? The reasons are apparently political rather than economic. Most likely, it's because somebody at the top didn't like a critical

report about Tajikistan on ORT, hence the cut-off." In his conclusion, Kh.Sharipov called on the government to settle the problem as soon as possible. He said, "Tajikistani intellectuals need critical and topical programs that give food for thought and help them keep abreast with the times and advance new ideas. During holidays we are not averse to watching entertainment on our native television."

In the meantime, new rumors

circulated around the country saying that RTR would be cut off soon too, and the Tajikistanis would have to content themselves with only national channels, which are rather unpopular. M. Mamadshoev also quoted some figures in his article: "For example, according to polls carried out by the *Sharq* analytical center in January 1999, it is the Russian ORT and RTR channels from which the majority of Dushanbe residents (77 percent) get their news."