

FIRST PRIVATE RADIO CHANNEL TO BE AIRED IN TADJIKISTAN CAPITAL

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Independence Day celebrations in Tajikistan on Sept 9, 2002, saw the start-up of Radio Asia Plus, the first private music and news broadcaster in Dushanbe, the capital of Tajikistan. It was an event largely due to the personal intervention of President Emolali Rakhmonov.

Asia Plus is an FM (107) station broadcasting to the capital and its environs; with an audience estimated at around 1 million. In recognition of the event, and in support of private media in the country, the US embassy in Tajikistan provided a grant a few days ago enabling Asia Plus to purchase a free-running electric generator to facilitate continuous operation amid electrical energy shortages.

Most international organizations in Tajikistan welcomed the appearance of a private broadcasting outlet in Dushanbe as an event of great importance and an opening of the way to consolidation of electronic media in the republic. Remarkably, the first independent radio channel came into being largely due to the personal involvement of President Emomali Rakhmonov of Tajikistan.

WAITING FOR A LICENSE

It will be recalled that the Asia Plus Ltd Society, as it was previously referred to, first approached the National Broadcasting Committee (NBC) for a permit to broadcast music and entertainment programs within the FM band as far back as August 1998 – a time when Dushanbe-based broadcasters were exclusively state-owned outlets. Having received support from UNESCO, the Asia Plus pri-

ivate radio project bought equipment and went ahead with a trial broadcast. However, for four years the NBC License Committee refused to issue a license - without giving any reasons. Eventually, the reporters did receive a sort of motivated refusal. On July 3, 2002, the License Commission of the National Broadcasting Committee under the Government of Tajikistan formally denied the Asia Plus Ltd Society a broadcasting license as “there was no need for a new music radio station in Dushanbe”.

The National Association of Independent Mass Media of Tajikistan (NAIMMT) condemned the decision as a “crackdown on freedom of expression and a bid to monopolize the broadcasting sector” by the License Commission. The Association’s board also said that “in the future, the authority to license radio and television broadcasters should be granted to a non-governmental structure, a Public License Council composed of executive and legislative government officials, on the one hand, and non-governmental and media organizations, on the other.”

Freimut Duve, the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media, sent a message to the Foreign Minister of Tajikistan, Talbak Nazatov, expressing his concern and highlighting the importance of

the private media. He said, “In the light of the standards and commitments that Tajikistan has assumed as a member country of the OSCE, the National Broadcasting Committee’s argument does not sound convincing, and if there are no other reasons, the decision to deny Asia Plus a broadcasting license should be reconsidered.”

The legal experts of the US non-governmental organization, Internews in Tajikistan, also proved helpful in forcing the License Commission to change its decision in favor of Asia Plus. “Asia Plus is reputed to be a news agency giving comprehensive and in-depth coverage to problems that may affect the lives of Tajikistani citizens,” said Ravshan Khadivi, Internews’ director, and continued, “therefore, this is both a political and economic issue.” The New York-based Committee to Protect Journalists also gave support to journalists in Tajikistan.

JOURNALISTS PROTEST...

Contributing to the success were a number of media organizations across Tajikistan which placed a series of publications in support of Radio Asia Plus. Asia Plus daily (the July 11, 2002, issue), for one, polled its readers asking if they felt there was a need for a private music radio broadcaster in Dushanbe. Almost unanimously the readers agreed that not only a radio but also television private company should be set up in Dushanbe, and the more of them the better.

Vecherny Dushanbe daily (the

issue of July 26, 2002) placed a short item mentioning NAIMMT's appeal to the Anti-Monopoly Policies and Business Development Agency under the Government of Tajikistan, saying in particular, "NAIMMT believes the National Broadcasting Committee's decision impairs free competition and, therefore, asks the Anti-Monopoly Policies Agency to put an end to monopolistic trends in the broadcasting sector."

The government-controlled *Narodnaya Gazeta* (the issue of July 24, 2002), carried an analytical article by Junaida Ibodov and Umrillo Melikov, entitled "Broadcasting Licensing: Law and Practice" which attacked licensing practices in Tajikistan. They maintain that the absence of laws and the vagueness of the legal environment, coupled with secre-

tiveness and the unpredictable changeability of the 'rules of the game' make it especially difficult, if at all possible, for private companies to obtain broadcasting licenses. The authors are convinced there is a pressing need for electronic media licensing practices to be based on civilized legal standards. Independent journalists' and licensing officers' knowledge of legal regulations should also be vastly improved. It is precisely the updating of legal procedures in licensing that may hold the key to the steady development of private electronic media – a democratic institution responsible to society.

...STATE BACKS ASIA PLUS

It is hard to say with assurance what the end of the story might have been if it were not for the President who stepped in to pro-

tect the media outlet. On July 29, 2002, President Emomali Rakhmonov received the general director of Asia Plus, U. Babakhanov. According to Asia Plus daily (the issue of August 1, 2002), in the course of a one-and-a-half-hour talk the President pointed out that "the electronic media – television and radio – of Tajikistan are largely outdated. The absence of free competition in this sector hampers the development of the republican broadcasting industry. Licensing procedures must be as transparent as possible and be placed above departmental interests." In conclusion, the President favored the idea of creating a new independent radio station in Tajikistan and ordered the government structures concerned to reconsider the issue regarding a license for Radio Asia Plus.