

II Background

SDC mandated CIMERA, a Swiss network of consultants, to coach, follow up and manage media related projects in Central Asia, in parallel to the Central Asia Media Support Project (CAMsP). Within this framework, CIMERA is engaged in strengthening the local partners' capacity, providing technical monitoring for the media projects, and consulting SDC to develop future strategy in the field of media-related projects in the region of Central Asia. A fact-finding and prospective mission has been conducted in Tajikistan by André Loersch and Mark Grigorian, two of CIMERA's media consultants.

III. History

The history of media and journalism in the post-soviet Tajikistan (1991-2000) is, on the one hand, marked by a short period of relative openness that the media experienced at the time of the independence (September 1991) until the beginning of the civil war (mid 1992). On the other hand, it is also characterised by a longer period of terror for journalists and editors. Not having been in-depth and systematically studied, the first period is difficult to imagine considering that the present media situation in Tajikistan has been deeply affected by the long list of killings, tortures, arrests, exile, beatings, that many journalists suffered from during the eight years following that short opening. The Tajik media now seems still deeply conditioned by this recent past which left the journalists with a legacy of a fear that "they feel in their bones", as a Dushanbe-based editor put it during an interview. Some well-established international organizations such as the New York-based Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) attribute, without hesitation an overwhelming responsibility to the current Tajik leadership for the terror exerted toward the journalists. But, more than three years after the signing of a peace agreement between the Tajik government and the United Tajik Opposition (UTO) under the auspices of the United Nations, no significant effort has yet been made to officially establish the responsibility for the murders of so many journalists.

War

It is a widely spread belief in Tajikistan that the media played a crucial and negative role in the starting of the civil war which, in 6 years, caused at least 50,000 dead, with some estimations going up to 150,000 victims. But, contrary to the repression which affected the journalists, this issue is unfortunately not precisely documented. Nonetheless, the importance and the influence of the political leadership -both from the government and the opposition side- attributed to media is testified by the space given to media issues during the Inter-Tajik talks that the government and UTO initiated in 1994 under the auspices of the United Nations. A book by the Tajik journalist Oleg Panfilov, due to be published in Moscow and covering seven years (1992-1998) of events in the media field in Tajikistan, indicates that media was then in no way considered as a public space for debate or information but as a dangerous weapon, the use of which had to be negotiated in parallel to cease-fires. During the first round of talks held in Moscow in April 1994, Oleg Panfilov recalls that the "constructive activity of the mass media in Tajikistan and its limitation in accordance with the goal of supporting the process of national reconciliation" was considered by the negotiators as a measure of trust in the process of political normalisation.

During the second round of talks in Teheran in June 1994, the opposition's representatives failed in getting the government's delegation to accept to include in the "text on the agreement to a temporary

cease-fire a point on the re-start of activities of the media forbidden by the authorities". Nonetheless, the final document contains a mention of the media, under the section dedicated to the "cessation of hostile activities" aiming at the "cessation of using all channels of information and mass media with the intention of undermining the process of national reconciliation"¹. Freedom of press, as well as demands for liberation of the journalists from the opposition's side have also been regularly mentioned during the successive Inter-Tajik talks, as well as the right of representatives of both sides to have access to National Television. Last but not least, the lifting in August 1999 of the ban imposed on political parties and mass media, which had been imposed in December 1993, came as part of the General Agreement signed by UTO and the government in June 1997. It was "contingent on the completion of the second stage of the military protocol, contained in the General Agreement, under which UTO fighters were to be integrated into government forces"². It is with this conceptual legacy, with the close link between the role of the media and that of political and armed forces during the conflict, that the Tajik society now faces the challenge to establish a reasonably well-functioning media system in accordance with the democratic goals proclaimed by the Constitution of the Republic.

Killing of journalists

The first years of the war constitute the darkest period for Tajik media. In 1994, the New York-based Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) noted that "over the past three years, Tajikistan has been the scene of one of the most brutal, yet least noticed, campaigns against press freedom in the world".³ With 27 confirmed cases of murder, the death toll of journalists in Tajikistan between 1992 and 1994 is "one of the highest CPJ has ever documented"⁴. As a comparison, "in recent years, only Algeria and the former Yugoslavia have seen comparable numbers of journalists killed because of their profession"⁵. Shot dead in front of their houses, kidnapped and then left dead in a street or in a field, most of the murders recorded by CPJ were attributed, by people close to the victims (mainly colleagues), to paramilitaries of the People's Front of President Emomali Rakhmonov, or to armed groups affiliated to it. Even if reasons for the murders remain unclear in some cases, many of the killed journalists appeared to be Pamiri, originating from the region of Gorno-Badakhshan, often considered as an Islamist stronghold by the government's partisans and which population had frequently been targeted during the fighting. A speech or an article criticizing certain political groups would be enough to provoke the death of some of the journalists, and reporting on sensitive subjects such as "the criminal and political Mafia" in Tajikistan⁶ could prove fatal.

Such a record brought President Rakhmonov the questionable honour to be classified in 1996 in the fifth rank on the "Ten Worst Enemies of the Press" annual list established by CPJ, with the names of statesmen considered accountable for "abysmal press conditions in their own countries". Mr Rakhmonov was only surpassed this year by the leader of the Algerian Armed Islamic Front Abu

¹ Quotations from the manuscript of Oleg Panfilov, kindly put at the disposal of the authors of the present report. The book is due to be published in Moscow. Oleg Panfilov, a Tajik journalist, lives in Moscow since 1992. On the side of the opposition, he participated as a special advisor in the 1994-1997 inter-Tajiks talks.

² "Tajikistan, Freedom of Expression still Threatened", Human Rights Watch, November 1999, vol. 11, No. 14 (D).

³ "A Retreat to Tyranny : Tajikistan Unreported War Against Press Freedom", Committee to Protect Journalists, 1994.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Case recorded by CPJ of Khushvakht Haydarsho, secretary of the editorial board of the Tajik newspaper Jumhuriyat, who was shot dead on May 18, 1994, near his home in Dushanbe. He published a series of articles on "the criminal and political Mafia" in Tajikistan.

Abdul Rahman, Chinese President Deng Xiaoping, Nigerian President Sani Abacha and Turkish Prime Minister Mesut Yilmaz⁷. The same year, President Rakhmonov was classified in a similar macabre list, the “hit parade” established by the French organisation Reporters sans Frontières: 14th out of 25 statesmen⁸. Interestingly enough he, nevertheless, was not the first Central Asian leader on the list, but the third: the Turkmen Saparmurat Niyazov appeared fourth and the Uzbek Islam Karimov seventh. President Rakhmonov does not appear on the last CPJ’s list of the “Ten Worst Enemies of the Press” established on May 3, 2000. In the sixth position, Central Asia is, however, represented by the Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev.

The pressures exerted against journalists remained constant after 1994, even if in less dramatic proportions than between 1992 and 1994. The decrease may be due to the fact, stated by CPJ, that almost all independent journalists had fled the country by that time.⁹ But, even at a reduced frequency, the incidents -murders, harassment, beatings- recorded by organizations such as CPJ, Reporters sans Frontières or Human Rights Watch would be enough to keep a constant pressure on the journalists and continuously remind them of the danger of their profession. The targets would frequently appear to be either journalists having a reputation of relative independence like Mohyedin Alempour, chief of the Persian service of BBC (shot dead in Dushanbe in December 1995)¹⁰, specializing in sensitive issues like Viktor Nikulin, specialist of armed and political conflict in Tajikistan (shot dead in Dushanbe in March 1996)¹¹, or in investigations about the drug trade, like Jumakhon Hotami, Ministry of Interior Press Centre Chief who had chaired a television program called “fight against crime” (shot down in a suburb of Dushanbe in July 1999)¹². According to data of the Moscow-based organization Glasnost Defence Foundation, not one single year from 1992 until 1999 passed by without a Tajik journalist being killed. The year 2000 is no exception with at least two victims, the last being Iskandar Khatloni, a Tajik journalist living in Moscow, killed at his home by unknown men in September.

Newspapers closed, media in exile

The ban on the activities of opposition parties was imposed by the Supreme Court of Tajikistan in June 1993. Activities of groups such as the Democratic Party, the Islamic Revival Party, the National movement "Rastokhez" (Revival) and the Association "Lahli Badakhshon" were terminated. In December 1993, the registration of six newspapers of these organizations was invalidated. According to Oleg Panfilov, 19 newspapers were then forced by the authorities to close down. As a result, wrote CPJ in 1994, “today, the national press in Dushanbe consists of a few state-owned newspapers, with one exception (...) The sole private publication, the Russian-language *Biznes i Politika*, can hardly be considered a newspaper. It publishes mostly advertisements and sparse statistical information about the economy”.¹³

Some media were coming out in exile, among which the well-known newspaper *Charoghi Ruz*, closed by the end of 1992, which resumed publication in Moscow. *Charoghi Ruz* came out in 1994-1995 thanks to a 90,000 U\$ grant from the National Endowment for Democracy. The founder of the

⁷ List reproduced in a study in Dortmund University in 1999 on the situation of the media in Tajikistan : Christoph Schüpp “ Studienarbeit, Medien in Tadschikistan unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der Situation von Journalisten ”, Universität Dortmund, Institut für Journalistik, Germany.

⁸ Christoph Schüpp, op cit.

⁹ “ Tajikistan : Year in Review ”, Committee to protect Journalists, 1995, quoted in Christoph Schüpp, op cit.

¹⁰ Case recorded by CPJ, mentioned in Christoph Schüpp, op. cit.

¹¹ Oleg Panfilov, op. cit.

¹² Recorded in “ Tajikistan, Freedom of Expression still Threatened ”, op. cit.

¹³ “ Tajikistan, Freedom of Expression still Threatened ”, Human Rights Watch, November 1999, vol. 11, No. 14 (D).

newspaper is Dodojon Atovulloev, and the Editor-in-Chief Salim Ajubov. Because they do not feel that their security would be guaranteed, they have still not yet decided to return to Tajikistan. Some issues of *Charoghi Ruz* are distributed in the country, after being smuggled into Tajikistan. Several media of the Islamic Revival Party were coming out in Afghanistan (newspaper *Najot*, radio station *Voice of Free Tajikistan*) and in Pakistan (bulletin *Jaikhun*). By August 12, 1999, the ban on the opposition parties and their newspapers was lifted and some of them resumed or started publication, such as *Najot* and *Mizon* (see below).

TV stations closed

On February 21, 1994, the Chairman of the Supreme Soviet of Tajikistan Rakhmonov signed a Decree of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of Tajikistan "On Putting in Order the Activities of Television and Radio in the Republic of Tajikistan", of which, in particular: "Pending acceptance of the mentioned law ["On Television and Radio"], suspends in the entire territory of the Republic the activities of non-state structures of television and radio". As a result, the main experiences of private television in Tajikistan (initiated in 1989 with the creation of the broadcasting company *Ekran*, which changed its name in 1993 to *Somonen*, and was followed by the launching of *Dzhaikhon-oro* and *Temurmaliq* in Khudjand) were interrupted. President Rakhmonov's decision, however, does not appear to be strictly linked to the events of the civil-war and, according to Christoph Schüpp, could just be related to political rivalry, economy (control of the limited advertisement market by the state TV) or an attempt to stop the intrusion of Western productions broadcast by the private televisions¹⁴. Apart from some local initiatives, tolerated by the authorities, Tajikistan was then left, in terms of local broadcasters, only with the strictly government-controlled national television. For political reasons, when the news coverage of Tajikistan would not suit the government, the re-broadcasting of Russian TV channels in Tajikistan would simply be interrupted, which happened several times. As for radio, no private station had started functioning in Tajikistan until in.

Requirements of "objective" coverage of events in Tajikistan since 1992 repeatedly resulted in the termination of importing Russian newspapers into the country, and occasionally became the reason of armed skirmishes for the TV and Radio centers. On May 6, 1992, supporters of the opposition captured the television building in Dushanbe. On the same day, an attempt from the opposition to capture the radio building ended in an armed confrontation which lasted around two hours.¹⁵