

## EU ANNUAL REPORT ON HUMAN RIGHTS AND DEMOCRACY IN THE WORLD

### 2023 COUNTRY UPDATES

#### Republic of Tajikistan

- 1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation:** Tajikistan's human rights record remained poor in 2023, with a particular impact on freedom of expression, freedom of the media and freedom of association. Human rights defenders and journalists continued to experience persistent pressure. The space for political participation remained extremely limited in a country with a highly centralised political system and tight control over political and civil rights. In the 2023 Freedom in the World Country Report of Freedom House, Tajikistan's scored 7/100 points for political rights and civil liberties, making it one of the countries with the worst aggregate score. The working environment for independent media remained difficult with a high number of journalists serving lengthy prison terms. Tajikistan ranked 153/180 in the 2023 World Press Index of Reporters without Borders (one rank below 2022). Scrutiny and pressure by the Tajik authorities on human rights defenders and civil society organisations remained high. During 2023, hundreds of civil society organisations were forced to close by self-liquidation following pressure by the authorities or because of lack of funding. In the Gorno Badakhshan Autonomous Region (GBAO), only a handful of independent civil society organisations remain operational. Several prominent Tajik human rights defenders and activists remain in prison with long sentences, especially in connection with the GBAO incidents of 2022. Following a visit to Tajikistan in April 2023, the UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, Nazila Ghanea, urged Tajikistan to adapt and reshape its laws, policies and practices on freedom of religion or belief. She noted that the scope for the exercise of freedom of religion or belief falls alarmingly short of the guarantees of international human rights law. The importance of minority rights issues in Tajikistan was highlighted by the visits of the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities Abdrakhmanov and of the UN Special Rapporteur on minority issues De Varennes. In particular, Mr. De Varennes stressed that much more needs to be done to implement and protect the human rights of religious and other minorities, including the Jughhi (Roma) community, users of sign languages, Uzbeks, religious minorities and the Pamiri community in GBAO. There were some positive developments, especially within the normative framework. In April, Tajikistan adopted the National Action Plan for implementation of the Universal Periodic Review recommendations. In August, the Tajik President approved the National Strategy for the Human Rights Protection until 2038 and its action plan for the period 2023-2025; the first such strategy in the Central Asian region. The authorities also showed commitment to make progress on gender equality and advance women's rights, in particular through empowerment. However, domestic and gender-based violence remains endemic, with a long-standing proposal to introduce a specific crime of domestic violence still not adopted in the national legislation.
- 2. EU action - key focus areas:** EU action focused on priorities such as increasing the resilience and empowerment of the Tajik civil society; support to independent media and access to information, including digital rights; gender equality and women's rights; upholding the rule of law; rights of people with disability; as well as support to the penitentiary system reform and the fight against torture and ill-treatment. Given the deteriorated operating environment for independent media and of human rights defenders, a focus remained on their

empowerment. The EU-UN Global Spotlight Initiative continued to provide support to the Tajik Government in countering violence against women and girls - endemic in the country.

- 3. EU bilateral political engagement:** The EU continued to monitor human rights developments in Tajikistan, held regular political dialogues with the authorities and actively co-operated with civil society and international organisations (in particular UN and OSCE). On 14 December 2023, the 14th EU-Tajikistan Human Rights Dialogue took place in Dushanbe. During the Dialogue, the EU side raised the most concerning issues, with particular focus on freedom of expression, media freedom as well as the working environment for journalists, human rights defenders, and the situation in GBAO. The EU urged the Tajik authorities to uphold its human rights commitments, including the international fair trial standards. The Human Rights Dialogue was coupled with an EU evaluation mission of Tajikistan's application 70 process to the Generalised System of Preference Plus (GSP+). This application provides a platform of continuous dialogue on human rights issues as GSP+ is linked to the implementation of UN core conventions on human rights, labour rights, environment and good governance. In addition, a number of high-level visits and meetings provided important occasions for engagement on human rights. These included, among others, the 10th EU- Tajikistan Parliamentary Cooperation Committee held in Dushanbe, and the visits to Tajikistan of the EU Counter-Terrorism Coordinator as well as of the EU Special Representative for Central Asia. The negotiations of the new EU-Tajikistan Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (EPCA), launched in February 2023 and currently ongoing, provided the EU with a unique momentum for engagement on sensitive issues, and to emphasise the role of universal human rights and democracy principles as the foundation of the EU-Tajikistan bilateral relations.
- 4. EU financial engagement:** In 2023, a number of human rights projects focusing, inter alia, on civil society support, marginalised groups, penitentiary reform, gender-based violence and gender equality were operating. A new call for proposals under the Thematic Programme on Human Rights and Democracy and the Thematic Programme for civil society organisations was launched. Subsequently, five new projects were selected that will be implemented by local and international civil society organisations focusing on the areas of prevention of domestic violence, torture prevention and penitentiary system reform, rights of people with disabilities, and supporting civil society organisations in good governance, particularly through digital innovations. Various FPI-funded projects contributed to the promotion of the rights of the child, women, national minorities, youth and freedom of media and speech, and of awareness of laws and international human rights commitments related to detainees and refugees.
- 5. Multilateral context:** Following the third Universal Periodic Review (UPR) of Tajikistan (November 2021) and the review outcome adopted at the 49th session of the Human Rights Council (March 2022), the Tajik government adopted a National Action Plan for the implementation of the accepted UPR recommendations in April 2023. Tajikistan demonstrated noticeable openness to multilateral institutions by receiving in the course of 2023 the visits of two UN Special Rapporteurs, for example on freedom of religion and belief and issues related to minorities) and the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities. The EU Delegation delivered a demarche on EU priorities at the 78th session of UNGA Third Committee, and a demarche to promote the establishment of a UN Cyber Programme of Action.