

## **Tajik Media Breakthrough**

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Presidential backing for new independent radio station raises hopes of more media freedom.

Tajikistan's president has unexpectedly given his support to an independent radio station that has been seeking a licence to broadcast in the capital for the past five years.

President Imomali Rakhmonov's intervention has been welcomed by local and international organisations, which see it as the first step towards freedom of speech in the country.

"We have said several times that we are building a lawful, democratic society in Tajikistan, and intend to keep firmly to this course, including the area of media development," said the head of state.

Vadim Nazarov, deputy head of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe, OSCE, in Tajikistan, told IWPR that the decision to grant a licence to media company Asia-Plus could signal a move towards greater democracy.

"Undoubtedly, it is a positive factor, as opening an independent radio station in the capital allows us to widen society's information base," he said.

Dushanbe is home to around a sixth of the population, yet it does not have a single private television or radio company and a daily newspaper has not been published for ten years - almost as long as the country has been independent. State television broadcasts a diet of folk music, old Soviet films and pirated Hollywood movies, forcing the public to get its news from the Russian channel RTR.

In contrast, the city of Almaty in neighbouring Kazakhstan boasts more than ten private commercial FM radio stations.

Asia-Plus and another group, Radio NIC, have been applying for FM broadcasting licences since 1997. At the beginning of July, they were turned down again by the State Committee for Television and Radio, SCTR.

However, after an unprecedented 90-minute meeting with Asia-Plus general director Umed Babakhanov on July 29, President Rakhmonov directed the head of his cabinet to proceed with the necessary paperwork.

Babakhanov told IWPR that the announcement suggested that the authorities recognised that granting a licence to an independent radio station would boost the country's image and hopefully encourage more foreign investment.

Many observers doubt, however, that there will be significant changes in licensing as long as it remains in the hands of the SCTR. "Until an independent body is created, it is possible that this situation may repeat itself," said Nuriddin Karshiboev, head of the National Association of Media. "The decision to grant television or radio licences should be made by a public council."

At a parliamentary session at the end of July, Rakhmonov ordered SCTR head Ubaidullo Rajabov to speed

up the process of issuing Asia-Plus' permit, with a suggested deadline of two weeks.

The initial plan is for the station to broadcast to Dushanbe and neighbouring regions for eight or nine hours a day. The suggested programme consists of music, short news flashes in Russian and Tajik and entertainment and educational programmes. Once established, the service may expand to broadcast 24 hours a day.

Zafar Abdullaev is an independent journalist in Dushanbe

**Location:** Tajikistan

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