



Submission by Freedom For Eurasia

to the European Parliament in advance of its hearing on 6 of July 2022

Regarding Human rights violations in Gorno-Badakhshan autonomous region (GBAO),  
Tajikistan

July, 2022

This memorandum provides recommendations for the European Parliament in advance of its hearing on July 6, 2022 and urges the European Parliament to adopt a Resolution with request for inclusion in the agenda for a debate on cases of breaches of human rights, democracy and rule of law in the Gorno-Badakhshan autonomous region (GBAO) of Tajikistan.

On May 18, 2022 the Tajik government launched a violent crackdown of protests in GBAO calling it a “counter-terrorist operation”. Similar narratives have been used recently in Kazakhstan, Belarus, and the autonomous Karakalpakstan republic within Uzbekistan. Unless the international community reacts firmly, there is reason to believe such narratives will be used to legitimise gross human rights violations elsewhere in the region in the future. **The systemic, decade-long targeted persecutions and killings of the residents and community leaders of Pamiri indigenous minorities urges for accountability of the Tajik government.** According to reports, crackdown of dissent, **arbitrary killings of 40 residents<sup>1</sup>** and mass detention/arrests of **over 220 residents, including local community leaders, journalists, lawyers, human rights defenders, independent entrepreneurs have been committed in GBAO** between November 25, 2021 – June 13, 2022.

GBAO is the largest region of Tajikistan, accounting for approximately 45% of its territory, with a population of approximately 230,000 people. Due to its mountainous terrain,

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2022/05/tajikistan-un-expert-fears-crackdown-against-pamiri-minority-could-spiral>

scarcity of (arable) land and harsh climatic conditions, GBAO remains the poorest region of Tajikistan. Instead of developing and supporting the region, central authorities in Dushanbe repress the region, and persistently vilify its residents, especially the younger generation, as terrorists. The region has seen repeated 'special operations' in 2012, 2014 and 2018. Protests in GBAO take place mainly against the arbitrariness of law enforcement agencies, and each time this is a manifestation of a spontaneous reaction to certain triggers. The protests have never had a planned, organized character and have not had a political basis, as the law enforcement agencies are trying to present<sup>2</sup>.

GBAO has been under extreme surveillance with large security and military presence since 2018 with the creation of the regional Inter-Departmental Committee on Security effectively replacing the local civilian government. It has been verified by prominent international organizations working on minority rights that GBAO residents have been subjected to wide ranging forms of surveillance, invasions of privacy, arbitrary detention, and coercion since November 2021.<sup>3</sup> Due to the communication blockage and physical remoteness of GBAO, information flow has been severely hampered. Foreign journalists are not able to visit the region due to necessity to get special permission and the major local Tajik independent media outlet Asia Plus confirmed that the agency has been banned from covering the situation in GBAO.<sup>4</sup>

On November 25, 2021, protests erupted in Khorugh after the alleged extrajudicial killing of Gulbiddin Ziyobekov, 29-year-old resident of Tavdem village, Roshtqala district, GBAO, in broad daylight during his attempted arrest by the special forces<sup>5</sup>. On 25 November 2021, a complete six month internet blackout was imposed<sup>6</sup>, which was only lifted on 21 March 2022. The four-day protests ended with the establishment of a joint state and civil society group<sup>7</sup> included 44 active members of civil society and informal leaders of the city of Khorugh and the surrounding area, who became actively involved in resolving the situation in the administrative center of the autonomous region and investigating the events transparently and in accordance with legal procedures.

Under pressure from the group, the authorities issued a statement in which they promised to objectively investigate the murder of Gulbiddin Ziyobekov and punish those

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<sup>2</sup> <https://cabar.asia/en/what-explains-the-endless-protests-in-gbao>

<sup>3</sup> <https://minorityrights.org/2022/05/20/tajikistan-crackdown/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://is.gd/rcdLyy>

<sup>5</sup> <https://is.gd/7nLlww>

<sup>6</sup> <https://is.gd/sOF1m5>

<sup>7</sup> Commission 44 (an unregistered public association which was created in the administrative center of GBAO on the last day of the November 2021 rallies to resolve the situation in Badakhshan jointly with the authorities)

responsible, as well as not to detain those who went out to protest at the end of December 2021.

However, from the very beginning of its creation, *Commission 44* began to report violations by local authorities and the power bloc. On January 19 of this year, Commission 44 issued a statement that the group ceased cooperation with the authorities in conditions where 'no one is investigating the circumstances of the death and injury of civilian residents, and at the same time the population is being held accountable for even small violations'.

13 members of Commission 44<sup>8</sup>, including Chairperson of Pamir Lawyers Association Manuchehr Kholiknazarov, lawyer Faromuz Irgashov and Khursand Mamadshoev<sup>9</sup>, were detained and accused. Two members of Commission Khudzhamri Pirnazarov and Shaftolu Bekdavlatov were already accused and sentenced for the organization of an unsanctioned rally to 18 years of imprisonment.<sup>10</sup> All court hearings were held behind closed doors.

Several natives of GBAO have also been extradited from Russia<sup>11</sup> and sentenced to long term imprisonment. Most prominent are the cases of well known MMA fighter and blogger Chorshanbe Chorshanбиеv<sup>12</sup> and youth activist Amriddin Avolatshoev<sup>13</sup>.

This led to a new wave of protests in Khorugh on May 16 and in Vamar, Rushon district of GBAO on May 17. Ultimately, both protests were brutally cracked down and mass arrests followed in GBAO and the capital city of Dushanbe. Protesters were interrogated, arrested, and convicted to prison terms ranging from 8,5 to 18 years without proper investigation. The latest special 'antiterrorist' operation was conducted on May 18, 2022, in the aftermath of protests that erupted in the regional center of GBAO, Khorugh.

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<sup>8</sup> <https://acca.media/en/15044/tajikistan-members-of-the-public-commission-44-were-detained-in-khorog/>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.fidh.org/en/issues/human-rights-defenders/tajikistan-arbitrary-detention-of-lawyers-manuchehr-kholiknazarov>

<sup>10</sup> <https://rus.ozodi.org/a/31922829.html>

<sup>11</sup> <https://eurasianet.org/tajikistan-mma-fighters-pro-pamiri-remarks-land-him-behind-bars>

<sup>12</sup> He was deported or extradited by the Russian authorities and arrested upon arrival at Dushanbe airport in late-December 2021, sentenced to 8,5 years of imprisonment: <https://is.gd/9HvGqB>

<sup>13</sup> Prominent community organizer among the Tajik diaspora from GBAO in Russia and one of the main organizers of the demonstration in front of the Embassy of Tajikistan in Moscow in solidarity of the protest in Khorugh in November 2021. He was arrested in Russia on January 11, 2022 and disappeared afterwards. Only on February 2, 2022, the public prosecutor confirmed that he had been extradited to Tajikistan but his whereabouts remained unknown and he did not have access to a lawyer and to communication with the outside world. Sentenced to 18 years of imprisonment on 29 April. <https://rus.ozodi.org/a/31827062.html>

Authorities face the risk of completely losing the opportunity to conduct any kind of dialogue with the population or the opportunity to involve legitimate representatives of civil society in the negotiation processes, as the population lost confidence in the authorities, and the mechanism of joint commissions will already be exhausted. In the absence of other mechanisms for a constructive dialogue with the authorities, protest moods are inevitable in the future, and as bitter experience shows, they almost always end in injuries and casualties among the population and potentially representatives of law enforcement and security agencies. It becomes a spiral of endless violence, social anger, alienation, crime. Given the turbulent border with Afghanistan, and the difficulties on the border with Kyrgyzstan, the prospect of turning an entire region into a permanent zone of instability poses a serious threat to the peace and security of the country as a whole.<sup>14</sup>

The European Union is one of the main strategic partners of the Republic of Tajikistan, sixth most important trading partner for Tajikistan<sup>15</sup> and the global leader in promoting the rule of law, protecting human rights, guaranteeing basic freedoms, and empowering civil society. These have been integral to the foreign policy of the European Union (EU), including in Central Asia.

The EU Action Plan 2020-2024 is a vivid illustration of the Union's strong engagement to promote universal values and principles of human rights. The Action Plan along with the EU key priorities also includes new elements on social and cultural rights, which are of particular importance for the indigenous Pamiri community of GBAO in Tajikistan. Natives of GBAO face imprisonment for self-identification as Pamiris<sup>16</sup>; access to information in endangered indigenous languages is non-existent and economic opportunities are severely constrained, setting GBAO as the poorest region of Tajikistan. Respecting the EU consideration of the GSP+ scheme for Tajikistan, we urge the EU to prioritize human rights and freedoms in line with the respective negotiations with Tajikistan and establish clear conditionalities for Tajikistan to uphold human rights, specifically with regards to the long-lasting systemic violations and oppression in GBAO.

Negotiations are ongoing between the EU and Tajikistan to upgrade the current Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (EPCA). With the proposed new agreement, the EU aims to update and enhance its relationship with Tajikistan in several categories, including supporting the ongoing, but slow, reform process, enhancing economic opportunities for the growing young population and promoting regional stability, security, and connectivity. All these aspects are of utmost importance to Tajikistan, and specifically to GBAO. GBAO shares an extensive border with Afghanistan, and any instability or insecurity in the border region can have dramatic implications not only for Tajikistan, but

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<sup>14</sup> <https://cabar.asia/en/what-explains-the-endless-protests-in-gbao>

<sup>15</sup> <https://gsphub.eu/country-info/Tajikistan>

<sup>16</sup> <https://cabar.asia/en/what-explains-the-endless-protests-in-gbao>

also for the rest of Central Asia. We call on the EU to consider the situation in GBAO and its role in securing stability in Tajikistan and Central Asia during the negotiations of the EPCA with the government of Tajikistan.

We urge the EU and Member States to:

- immediately initiate a proper international investigation into the crimes committed against the people in GBAO during protests (25 November 2021 and May 16-17) and “special operation” (and “special operation” (18 May-18 June, 2022 ), including disappearances, reports of torture, arbitrary detention and snipers killing or wounding peaceful protesters
- use multilateral forums to monitor the human rights situation in GBAO, including the UN Human Rights Council or the OSCE
- ensure that European institutions and agencies, including the EEAS and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, and the World Bank to halt financing programmes in Tajikistan until the government takes substantial and tangible efforts to improve its human rights record, including implementing all recommendations by the European Parliament, the UN and the OSCE, in a way that does not affect direct support to independent civil society, activists, human rights defenders and media
- impose targeted sanctions on high-level Tajik officials responsible for the serious violations committed during the protests of November 2021 and May 2022
- promote consideration of the situation in GBAO at the next session of UN Human Rights Council with the subsequent adoption of a resolution on the situation
- monitor the situation, visit and provide support to detained protesters and political prisoners, actively engage with local members of civil society by organising regular meetings without discrimination and take a role in facilitating a dialogue between the government and civil society

In reference to the aforementioned and acknowledging its strong commitment to protecting human rights, **we call on the EU to require immediate and concrete actions from the Government of the Republic of Tajikistan** demonstrative of its commitment to address the most horrendous human rights violations committed against Pamiri population, particularly:

- **disclose information** related to arrests and casualties resulting from the protests, and to ensure that all those prosecuted have access to a lawyer and are provided with fair trials in accordance with international law
- initiate a proper **international investigation** into the crimes committed against the people of GBAO during protests in 2021 and May 2022, and among other matters to investigate disappearances, as well as the reports of torture, arbitrary detention

and sniper killing or wounding peaceful protesters and to announce the results publicly

- **release and rehabilitate** arbitrary detained and sentenced on politically motivated charges demonstrators and civil society activists of GBAO, including members of Commission 44
- invite **UN special procedures and OSCE experts** to undertake field visits and to fully cooperate with them to investigate deaths among civilians and other human rights violations in GBAO
- put a halt to mass extra-judicial arrests and detentions of GBAO natives and mass sealing of ongoing trials and criminal procedures against protesters
- refrain from politically motivated **extraditions and other forms of harassment** of exiled activists or their family members residing in Tajikistan
- ensure **media freedom** and provide independent journalists with a free and safe access to GBAO and allow them to work without violence and intimidations
- stop using **internet shutdowns** in GBAO to crush dissent and violate freedom of expression and assembly, contrary to international human rights standards
- restore unrestricted **access to the Internet**, unblock all other forms of communication and stop meting out reprisals against those who share news independently
- allow international community, including the UN Human Rights Council and/or the OSCE to **monitor the human rights situation in GBAO**, visit and provide support to detained protesters and civil society activists, actively engage with local members of civil society by organising regular meetings without discrimination and take a role in facilitating a dialogue between the government and civil society as well as providing assistance to victims of political prosecution and imprisoned activists by attending trials and visiting places of detention.