ECOM

Shrinking Civic Space and Its Impact on LGBTI Persons

Stakeholder Submission to the Universal Periodic Review of the Republic of Tajikistan

Fourth Cycle

The submitting organization is ECOM - **Eurasian Coalition on Health, Rights, Gender and Sexual Diversity**, an international association with a mission to support the development of national LGBT communities and their activism, to promote human rights, health, and social well-being for people of gender and sexual diversity in Eastern Europe and Central Asia (EECA). The network currently has 95 members from 19 countries. ECOM was founded in 2011 and registered as an Association in Estonia in 2013.

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I. Introduction

1. This submission is presented by ECOM – the Eurasian Coalition on Health, Rights, Gender and Sexual Diversity – for the fourth cycle of the Universal Periodic Review of the Republic of Tajikistan. It examines the contraction of civic space in the country and its disproportionate impact on LGBTI persons and persons living with HIV.

2. The submission addresses four interrelated issues: (a) restrictions on freedom of association and the progressive closure of civic space; (b) the impact of limitations on access to public space and the exercise of peaceful assembly on LGBTI people and people living with HIV; (c) risks faced by human rights defenders, including those working on LGBTI issues; and (d) the monitoring of online activity, digital repression, and the resulting climate of self-censorship.

3. These issues are directly linked to recommendations accepted by Tajikistan during the third UPR cycle[1][2], including recommendations urging the State to strengthen the legal framework for freedom of expression and association, refrain from imposing restrictions on civil society and human rights defenders, ensure that defenders can work without reprisals, and allow civil society organisations and independent media to operate without harassment and fear of reprisals. Tajikistan also adopted a 2023–2025 national action plan that envisaged measures concerning freedom of expression and freedom of association.[3]

4. During the third cycle, Tajikistan supported recommendations to strengthen freedom of expression and association, including for civil society and human rights defenders, and to ensure that defenders can exercise their activities without reprisals. These commitments are especially relevant to groups working on stigmatised issues, including sexual orientation, gender identity, and HIV. However, the implementation gap remains substantial. Available evidence suggests that the environment for independent civic engagement has deteriorated rather than improved.[4][5]

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[1] Human Rights Council, Report of the Working Group on the Universal Periodic Review: Tajikistan, A/HRC/49/12; Human Rights Council, Addendum: Views on conclusions and/or recommendations, voluntary commitments and replies presented by the State under review, A/HRC/49/12/Add.1. https://www.ecoi.net/en/document/2068130.html

[2] UPR of Tajikistan (3rd Cycle – 39th Session), Thematic List of Recommendations https://www.ohchr.org/en/hr-bodies/upr/uprtjun-contributions-s39

[3] Government of the Republic of Tajikistan, Action Plan for 2023–2025 for the National Human Rights Strategy of the Republic of Tajikistan until 2038, approved by Resolution No. 357 of 5 August 2023. https://khit.tj/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/National-Strategy-HR-TJ-2023-ENG.docx

[4] UPR of Tajikistan (3rd Cycle – 39th Session), Thematic List of Recommendations https://www.ohchr.org/en/hr-bodies/upr/uprtjun-contributions-s39

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5. The 2023–2025 Action Plan adopted under the National Human Rights Strategy of Tajikistan provides for measures aimed at improving legislation and policy in the areas of freedom of expression and freedom of association. Nevertheless, these formal commitments have not prevented the rapid deterioration of civic space in practice.

II. Shrinking civic space and freedom of association

6. Tajikistan's civic space is currently rated "closed" by the CIVICUS Monitor[6]. Reporting published in 2024 and 2025 documents a sustained pattern of repression directed against independent civil society actors, journalists, lawyers, government critics, and other individuals engaged in public-interest and human rights work.[7]

7. In March 2024, the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders publicly criticised the dissolution of 700 NGOs in Tajikistan over an 18-month period. She stated that the dissolution of human rights NGOs signalled a deteriorating environment for civil society and human rights defence in the country.[8]

8. In a February 2024 joint communication, UN Special Procedures expressed serious concern over the dramatic reduction in the number of civil society organisations permitted to operate, warning that the trend was severely limiting both the ability and the willingness of human rights defenders to carry out their activities. The communication also raised concerns that the liquidations were contributing to self-censorship and undermining cooperation with international actors.[9]

9. These developments are especially harmful for LGBTI communities. According to information gathered for this submission, there is currently no registered LGBTI organisation in Tajikistan, and many initiatives function informally, remain invisible, or avoid direct work on LGBTI issues because of safety risks. ECOM's 2025 legal analysis similarly identifies legal and institutional barriers affecting freedom of association, expression, access to justice, and health for LGBT persons and people living with HIV in Tajikistan.[10]

[6] CIVICUS Monitor/IPHR, Tajikistan: On the road to total control?, 12 June 2024. https://monitor.civicus.org/explore/tajikistan-on-the-road-to-total-control/
[7] CIVICUS Monitor/IPHR, Tajikistan's Crackdown on Dissent: Erosion of Rights and Civic Space, 17 February 2025.
[8] OHCHR, Tajikistan: UN expert criticizes dissolution of 700 NGOs, 8 March 2024. https://monitor.civicus.org/explore/tajikistans-crackdown-on-dissent-erosion-of-rights-and-civic-space/
[9] Special Procedures of the Human Rights Council, Joint Communication AL TJK 1/2024, 16 February 2024.
[10] ECOM, Analysis of the National Legislation of Tajikistan Related to SOGI and HIV, 2025. https://ecom.ngo/en/library/analysis-tajikistan-legislation-sogi-hiv-2025/

10. In this environment, the absence of a safe and enabling framework for association does not merely restrict organisational formality; it prevents community-based mobilisation, weakens peer support structures, and limits rights-based advocacy for populations already exposed to stigma, criminalisation, or police abuse. This amounts to a failure to implement accepted UPR commitments on freedom of association and protection from reprisals.

III. Restrictions on public space and peaceful assembly

11. Restrictions on civic space in Tajikistan also affect the effective use of public space and the exercise of the right to peaceful assembly. Broader patterns of repression and entrenched intolerance of dissent have created a climate in which any independent gathering, community event, or public advocacy initiative is liable to be perceived as politically sensitive and therefore inherently risky.

12. For marginalized groups, the inability to safely use public space has concrete consequences. It limits in-person outreach, community meetings, public awareness activities, mutual support networks, and visibility efforts. For LGBTI people in particular, shrinking public space reinforces social isolation and makes it harder to access trusted information, community support, and referrals.

13. Where the broader environment is marked by administrative pressure, dissolution of organisations, prosecutions, and surveillance, groups associated with sexual orientation, gender identity, HIV, or other stigmatised characteristics are even less likely to exercise their rights to assemble and participate in public life. The resulting exclusion is *de facto*, but severe.

IV. Human rights defenders and reprisals

14. Human rights defenders in Tajikistan continue to work in an atmosphere of fear, retaliation, and insecurity. Available reporting indicates that defenders, journalists, and lawyers continue to face harassment, detention, prosecution, and other forms of retaliation, especially when dealing with politically sensitive issues.

15. This problem is even more acute for defenders working on LGBTI issues, HIV, or other heavily stigmatised areas. The February 2024 UN communication explicitly warned that the contraction of civic space was reducing defenders' willingness to carry out their work and cooperate with international actors.[11] For LGBTI defenders, this often results in

[11] Special Procedures of the Human Rights Council, Joint Communication AL TJK 1/2024, 16 February 2024.

invisibility strategies: avoiding public identification, not registering, limiting documentation, softening advocacy language, or suspending activities altogether.

16. This invisibility should not be mistaken for an absence of need or an absence of violations. On the contrary, it reflects an environment in which defenders conclude that public work on LGBTI issues is unsafe. The lack of registered organisations and the prevalence of informal or hidden initiatives are themselves indicators of a hostile civic environment.

V. Online monitoring, self-censorship and digital repression

17. Shrinking civic space in Tajikistan has a strong digital dimension. Independent sources report extensive monitoring of public expression, restrictions on media freedom, and prosecutions linked to online activity. Reporters Without Borders states that the government closely monitors content on radio, television, and the Internet, while CIVICUS has documented prosecutions and chilling effects linked to social media activity.[12]

18. In May 2025, Tajikistan formally removed criminal liability for certain social media "likes" and reposts. Reuters reported that over 1,500 people had previously been imprisoned under the earlier approach. While the reform was significant, it did not resolve broader concerns around digital surveillance, politically motivated prosecutions, or the enduring chilling effect created by years of criminalization.[13]

19. For LGBTI initiatives, online surveillance has especially harmful consequences. When offline association is unsafe and public space is constrained, digital platforms often become the primary means of community connection, support, and information-sharing. Monitoring of online activity therefore narrows one of the few remaining spaces available for collective action.

VI. Disproportionate impact on LGBTI persons

20. The shrinking of civic space in Tajikistan has a disproportionate impact on LGBTI persons and people living with HIV, because it intersects with pre-existing stigma, discrimination, and insecurity. Community-led structures are often the only accessible sources of peer support, referrals, informal legal guidance, community safety information, and rights documentation for such groups.

[12] Reporters Without Borders, Tajikistan country profile, accessed March 2026. https://rsf.org/en/country/tajikistan
[13] Reuters, Tajikistan decriminalises 'liking' social media posts deemed extremist, 14 May 2025. https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/tajikistan-decriminalises-liking-social-media-posts-deemed-extremist-2025-05-14/

21. When civil society space contracts, these structures weaken or are pushed underground. This undermines not only the rights to freedom of association and expression, but also access to information, participation in public life, privacy, and, indirectly, the right to health. It also impairs access to remedies, since victims and community advocates are less able to organise, document abuses, or safely engage national and international accountability mechanisms.[14]

22. Regional analysis on shrinking civic space in Eastern Europe and Central Asia similarly concludes that restrictive legal and political environments disproportionately harm LGBTI communities, people living with HIV, people who use drugs, and sex workers, and weaken community-led responses. Tajikistan fits this broader regional pattern, but its current "closed" civic space rating suggests an especially acute level of risk.[15]

[14] Article by Mamedov et al., Analysis of documented rights violations related to sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, and HIV status in Eastern Europe and Central Asia, Journal of the International AIDS Society, 2024. https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/39030870/

[15] EHRA, ECOM, EWNA and SWAN, Shrinking Civic Space and Marginalized Populations in Eastern Europe and Central Asia, 2026. https://idpc.net/publications/2026/02/shrinking-civic-space-and-marginalized-populations-in-eastern-europe-and-central-asia

VII. Recommendations

23. Take immediate measures to end arbitrary restrictions on the registration and operation of civil society organisations, including their dissolution, suspension, and administrative harassment.

24. Bring legislation and practice relating to freedom of association, peaceful assembly, and expression into line with international human rights standards, and ensure that these rights can be exercised in practice without discrimination.

25. Ensure that human rights defenders, journalists, lawyers, and community activists can carry out their legitimate work without intimidation, harassment, surveillance, arbitrary detention, or reprisals, and investigate all such allegations promptly and effectively.

26. Guarantee a safe and enabling environment for organisations, informal groups, and defenders working on LGBTI issues and HIV, including by ending discriminatory interference by State authorities.

27. Stop arbitrary monitoring and other forms of unlawful interference with online expression and digital communications, and protect the right to freedom of expression online and offline.

28. Adopt and implement effective measures to prevent and respond to reprisals against individuals and groups cooperating with international and regional human rights mechanisms.

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VII. Recommendations

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