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Pamiri Diaspora
Human Rights Activists

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Tajikistan

The Situation of Children Belonging to Minorities (Pamiri Indigenous Minority; Mugat/Jughi Community)

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The situation of children belonging to Pamiri Indigenous Minority

Working on minority issues in Central Asia, ADC Memorial has researched the situation of Pamiris and published a number of Human Rights reports (Nationless Ethnic Groups of Tajikistan (Pamiri, Jughi, Yaghnobi): From Non-Recognition to Discrimination (2017); The situation in Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Oblast, Tajikistan: The government shuts down internet and communications and takes other excessive measures (January 2022); Discrimination of excluded groups in Central Asia (September 2022); an alternative report to the UN CERD on Tajikistan (March 2023)); alternative report to the UN CEDAW (January 2024, confidential submission); a report within the UPR process (2026). ADC Memorial is in contact with the UN Special Rapporteur on Minority Issues who is very much concerned with the situation of Pamiris in Tajikistan (see his report (2023) after the visit to Tajikistan in 2022).

In our reports, we described discriminative practices of the Tajikistan authorities towards the Pamiri population, meaning inter alia denial of their cultural and linguistic specifics, suppression of their self-identity, including bans for Pamiri languages in education and public space. In 2022, the authorities shut down many NGOs in GBAO and all over Tajikistan (see a statement of Mary Lawlor, UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders, on the dissolution of more than 700 NGOs in Tajikistan, with a special attention to almost full collapse of civil society in GBAO, March 2024).

The situation of Pamiris has seriously deteriorated since November 2021, when public protests against police violence were brutally suppressed in GBAO, while in 2022 mass repressions resulted in killings, arrests and closed trials. In May 2022, dozens of civilians were killed by military forces during a cleansing in Vamar, a town in Rushan district. Since the escalation of repressions in the GBAO in 2021, dozens civil society activists, journalists, and bloggers were sentenced to long prison terms after non-transparent trials.

These events, as well as the whole process of escalation in the GBAO, directly affected the Pamiri children population. In this report, the authors point out mainly the problem of the children's rights related to education.

Violation of linguistic and cultural rights of the Pamiri Children: risk of Discrimination, Assimilation, and Denial of Identity

Under the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), Tajikistan has clear obligations to respect, protect, and fulfil children's linguistic and cultural rights. Together, the articles **Article 29(1)(c), Article 30** and **Article 2** establish that children must be able to **learn, use, and develop their native language**, and that States must **actively support** minority languages in education systems. Any policy or practice that restricts or punishes the use of a minority language constitutes a violation of these obligations.

Pamiri children in Tajikistan face systemic barriers to exercising their linguistic rights. The State does not recognise Pamiri languages (Shughni, Rushani, Wakhi, Ishkashimi, etc.) in formal education, and **no public schools offer instruction in these languages**. This exclusion is not neutral: it occurs in a context where Pamiri identity is frequently portrayed as politically sensitive, and where expressions of cultural distinctiveness are discouraged or penalised.

Reports from civil society indicate that **Pamiri children cannot formally learn their native languages in school**, despite being indigenous to the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Region (GBAO). **Community-led initiatives** to teach Pamiri languages have been **blocked, discouraged, or punished**, including through intimidation, administrative pressure, or accusations of "separatism". Parents and teachers fear reprisals for promoting Pamiri cultural identity, creating a climate where children internalise stigma around their language. The absence of mother-tongue education contributes to **linguistic erosion**, loss of cultural heritage, and psychological harm linked to identity suppression.

These practices amount to **de facto assimilation**, in violation of Articles 29 and 30. They also constitute **indirect discrimination** under Article 2, as Pamiri children are denied educational opportunities available to other linguistic groups.

The denial of Pamiri children's linguistic rights has profound consequences:

- **Educational disadvantage:** Children are forced to learn exclusively in Tajik or Russian, languages that may not be spoken at home, undermining early learning outcomes.
- **Cultural harm:** Loss of language threatens cultural continuity and weakens children's connection to their heritage.
- **Psychosocial impact:** Stigmatisation of Pamiri identity contributes to feelings of exclusion, insecurity, and diminished self-worth.
- **Chilling effect:** Punishment of language initiatives discourages community participation and violates children's right to freely express their identity.

Children's Right to Education, Information, and Non-Discrimination: Impact of the 100-Day Internet Shutdown in GBAO on Pamiri Children

The Convention on the Rights of the Child establishes clear obligations for States to ensure children's access to education, information, and equal opportunities.

In the digital era, access to the internet is indispensable for education, communication, and participation in society. Blocking internet access for extended periods — especially in a specific region — constitutes a violation of **Article 17** which requires States to ensure children have access to information and materials from diverse national and international sources, especially through mass media and modern technologies, and **Article 28** which guarantees the child's right to education and obliges States to make higher education accessible to all on the basis of capacity, and when it disproportionately affects a minority population, it also violates **Article 2** which prohibits discrimination of any kind, including discrimination based on ethnic, regional, or linguistic identity.

Between **November 2021 and March 2022**, the Government of Tajikistan imposed prolonged internet shutdowns in **Khorog** and other parts of the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Oblast (GBAO). Internet access was blocked for more than **100 days**. These restrictions had a severe impact on the right to education, particularly for secondary school students seeking admission to higher education institutions.

As university entrance examinations were conducted online, the lack of internet access effectively prevented at least hundreds of graduating secondary school students from participating in the admissions process. In an effort to sit for the required examinations, many students were forced to travel more than **700 kilometres** to areas with internet connectivity, most commonly to Dushanbe. However, multiple reports indicate that some schools discouraged or even prohibited students from travelling to the capital to take their examinations. In addition, for many families, the financial cost of such travel, accommodation, and related expenses was prohibitive. As a result, a significant number of students were unable to sit for university entrance examinations and consequently lost the opportunity to pursue higher education

The shutdown effectively **restricted Pamiri children's right to education**, **blocked their access to information**, and **reinforced patterns of discrimination and marginalisation** already affecting Pamiri communities. Documented impacts include:

- **Educational exclusion:** Children could not submit university applications, access online learning platforms, or obtain essential information about admissions, deadlines, or scholarship opportunities.
- **Forced displacement for education:** Many students were compelled to travel long distances to Dushanbe solely to access the internet, imposing financial, logistical, and safety burdens on families.
- **Digital inequality:** In an era where education, communication, and administrative processes are increasingly digital, Pamiri children were denied tools available to children elsewhere in the country.

- **Discriminatory effect:** Because the shutdown was geographically targeted at GBAO — a region inhabited predominantly by Pamiri minorities — the measure had a **disproportionate and discriminatory impact** on this group.
- **Psychosocial harm:** Children experienced stress, uncertainty, and fear about their future, as their ability to pursue higher education was jeopardised through no fault of their own.

Children's Right to Education: The Problem of Wellbeing and Secure School environment in Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Oblast (GBAO)

Since the escalation of events in GBAO in 2021, there has been noticeable deterioration in the protection of children's rights. Reports received from residents in Khorog indicate an increasing pattern of punitive disciplinary practices in educational institutions, growing involvement of law enforcement and security agencies in school-related matters, and discriminatory treatment of children associated with families perceived as politically disfavoured.

Increasing implementation of punitive disciplinary practices in educational institutions

While schools have a legitimate responsibility to maintain classroom discipline, international human rights standards require that disciplinary measures remain proportionate and respect the dignity and educational rights of the child. Article 28 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), to which Tajikistan is a State Party, recognizes every child's right to education and provides that school discipline shall be administered in a manner consistent with the child's human dignity.

International educational standards and child psychology further emphasize that behavioural difficulties should ordinarily be addressed through supportive rather than exclusionary measures. At a minimum, schools are expected to assess the underlying causes of the child's behaviour, implement positive behavioural support strategies, involve parents or guardians in developing appropriate interventions, and, where necessary, facilitate access to psychological or mental health professionals.
Meanwhile, patterns of punitive disciplinary practices in educational institutions re increasing, which sometimes leads to tragedies.

> **Example: Expulsion of a Hyperactive Student and Subsequent Suicide**
> In September 2025, a 15-year-old student was reportedly expelled from one of the schools in Khorog due to continuous misbehavior including hyperactivity, and frequent interruption of classroom instruction. According to information received, the student had attended the same school for approximately ten years before being required to enrol in another educational institution in order to continue his education. Approximately four months after transferring to the new school, the child died by suicide.

While no direct evidence establishes a causal relationship between the expulsion and the child's death, available information indicates that the expulsion had a profound psychological impact on the student and reportedly contributed to significant emotional distress, including symptoms of anxiety and depression. The circumstances raise serious concerns regarding the adequacy of psychosocial support provided to children subjected to exclusionary disciplinary measures and underscore the importance of ensuring that school discipline is implemented in accordance with the child's best interests.

Increasing Security Sector Involvement in School Discipline

Since 2022, interlocutors consistently report an increasing practice of involving law enforcement agencies and government officials in resolving school disciplinary matters, including incidents that would ordinarily be addressed through school administration and parental engagement.

> **Example: A threat of expulsion as a possible trigger for suicide**
> One documented example occurred in December 2025, when students from the same school in Khorog became involved in a physical altercation during a football

competition. Rather than being managed exclusively through educational disciplinary procedures, the incident reportedly prompted immediate police involvement and attracted the attention of senior regional authorities.

According to multiple sources, the Governor of GBAO instructed educational authorities to expel all students who had been present at the location of the incident, irrespective of their individual involvement. Parents of the affected students were subsequently summoned and informed that their children faced expulsion.

Among those included was a boy who, according to available information, had been present at the scene but had not participated in the fight. Following notification that he could be expelled, the child reportedly returned home and died by suicide.

Although no direct causal link can be established between the threatened expulsion and the child's death, the incident occurred within a broader environment characterised by widespread fear and psychological distress among residents of GBAO following the 2021–2022 crackdown. Numerous interlocutors describe children as being subjected to aggressive communication and intimidation by state officials, creating a climate of anxiety affecting both children and their families.

These reported practices raise serious concerns regarding compliance with Tajikistan's obligations under the Convention on the Rights of the Child, particularly the child's right to education, protection from psychological harm, and the requirement that disciplinary measures respect the dignity and best interests of the child. They also appear inconsistent with provisions of Tajikistan's Family Code, which prohibit methods of upbringing or discipline that harm a child's mental health or involve degrading or humiliating treatment.

Discriminatory Treatment of Children Whose Parents Were Imprisoned

Information collected during this reporting period further indicates a pattern of discriminatory treatment of children whose parents, particularly fathers, were imprisoned in connection with the 2021–2022 crackdown in GBAO.

Several interlocutors reported that these children are subjected to heightened scrutiny within schools and face repeated threats of expulsion for relatively minor behavioural issues that would ordinarily be resolved through routine disciplinary procedures.

Example: Involvement of the police to resolvent of minor behavioral problems

One interlocutor described an incident involving her son, who, together with classmates, jokingly hid another student's school bag. Although the behaviour represented a relatively minor disciplinary matter, police officers were reportedly called to intervene. According to the source, the attending officer repeatedly threatened that the child would be expelled from school because his father was imprisoned, stating that the child was "following his father's example" and represented a negative influence on other students.

If verified, such statements constitute discriminatory treatment based solely on the status of a parent and amount to collective punishment of children for circumstances beyond their control. Such practices are incompatible with the principle of non-discrimination enshrined in Article 2 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which guarantees that all rights under the Convention shall be respected without discrimination of any kind, including on the basis of the status or activities of a child's parents. They further undermine the child's right to education, dignity, psychological well-being, and equal treatment before the law.

The situation of children from the Mugat community

The situation of children from the Mugat community in Tajikistan remains a cause for concern, even as the authorities refuse to take systematic measures to address the historical structural discrimination faced by this minority.

Thus, in the recommendations resulted from the consideration of the state report at the 109th session of the UN CERD (2023), the Committee once again expressed concerns about the situation of the Mugat/Jughi group and noted with regret the reluctance of the Tajikistan authorities to adopt an action plan to improve the situation of this minority, although in the previous recommendations and in the General Comment No.27 (2000) on discrimination against Roma groups, the Committee pointed out the importance of positive measures. The CERD urged the authorities to adopt such an action plan or strategy to improve the situation of Mugat/Jughi, paying particular attention to the situation of women and girls, their protection from discrimination and stigmatization, ensuring their right to education, work, health care and adequate housing. The Committee also recommended organizing educational campaigns to promote tolerance towards the Mugat community.

In particular, the statistical estimate of the number of Mugats in Tajikistan is questionable. In the additional information sent by the authorities if Tajikistan to the UN CERD in 2018, this number is estimated as appr. 13 000 which looks more adequate than the data provided later (~3 500), including in the state report to the UN CRC in response to the List of Issues (3 365). In this regard, the number of Mugat children involved into the school education looks disproportionately low (1083 children, as mentioned in the state report to the UN CRC in 2022).

The authorities used to replicate a narrative about "their own traditions" which prevent Mugat children from receiving education (e.g. a statement of the Children's Ombudsman Rajabmoh Habibullo, who in July 2019 said at a press conference that all conditions have been created for the education of Mugat children and, according to her, the cause of their bad education and deplorable social situation is their own traditions, therefore the positive measures recommended by the UN are redundant). Meanwhile, the problems of access to school education, attendance, transition from primary school to secondary school, obtaining vocational and higher education by representatives of the Mugat community are extremely relevant, especially for girls, as in places of compact residence of Mugat in a number of districts, the school attendance is too far from complete. Obviously, shifting the blame for this situation only to parents is counterproductive, and the lack of special support measures leaves Mugat in a vicious circle of structural discrimination and makes children victims of exploitation and harmful traditional practices.

In the Report of the Special Rapporteur on minority issues Fernand de Varennes (2023), after his visit to Tajikistan in 2022, it is stated that "There is not a single specific reference to the Mugat in the National Strategy on Human Rights or the associated Action Plan. A visit to one Mugat community confirmed their apparent segregation on small plots of land, a lack of equal access to public services and crowded and underresourced education facilities when compared with those of the Tajik majority. That is despite the call by the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination for the Government of Tajikistan to take steps to end such cases of discrimination, including by adopting an action plan to improve the situation of the Mugat". The Special Rapporteur's own observations in Tajikistan led him to a conclusion that "the lack of public infrastructure for water, sewage treatment, power and other public services, such as public education of equal quality, are the direct result of discriminatory actions by State officials in terms of resource allocation, planning decisions and other measures where double standards appear to be applied on the basis of ethnicity. He witnessed the obvious differences in budgetary investments between a Tajik majority school and a school catering to Mugat children and the lack of sewage treatment facilities and running water for parts of a Mugat community, while next door, a brand-new sports stadium was being constructed by the authorities. None of those differences were accidental or simply structural: they were the result of willful decisions and policies made by local and national officials".

Recommendations

Adopt **mother-tongue education policies** and recognize the status of Pamiri languages in schools; stop **restrictions or punitive measures** against Pamiri cultural or linguistic initiatives; Introduce **Pamiri language instruction** in GBAO schools, in consultation with local communities; Urge the State party to **protect Pamiri cultural expression** and ensure that children can freely use and learn their native languages without fear.

Adopt safeguards to prevent **targeted digital restrictions** that disproportionately affect minority children; Ensure that **digital access is protected** as part of children's right to education and information; Adopt **non-discrimination measures** ensuring that Pamiri children have equal access to educational opportunities, including university admissions; Recognize and assess negative impact of the internet shutdown in GBAO and Ensure **continuity of education** for affected children during the shutdown.

Adopt **anti-discrimination safeguards** addressing ethnic and linguistic minorities.

Adopt and implement a **government program of comprehensive support for the Mugat/Jughi minority,** with a special attention to the rights of children, especially girls, by ensuring their access to quality education and providing protection against exploitation and harmful traditional practices. It is essential that educational programs be developed aimed at overcoming the alienation of Mugat/Jughi and their exclusion from Tajikistan society and at fighting harmful traditions, not through repression, but through education and persuasion.