

Why was the order of the Antimonopoly Service of Tajikistan to increase tariffs for mobile Internet valid only for a week?

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The order of the Antimonopoly Service under the Government of Tajikistan No. 31 “On mobile communications tariffs” dated March 4, 2019, was valid for only one week. It came into effect on April 18 and was cancelled on April 24.

The day before the cancellation, on April 23, the Press Service of the President of Tajikistan spread a message that “the cost of mobile companies’ plans and prices for the use of the Internet have been returned to the previous level.” The Press Service also stated that “measures will be taken against responsible persons who have committed such a violation.” On the very same day the head of the Antimonopoly Service under the Government of Tajikistan Saadi Kodirzoda was removed from his office and appointed the Deputy Head of the Executive Office of the President.

Such a quick revocation of the decree raises a question: why was the order to increase the price of the Internet issued in the first place?

Officials’ Version: Money and Eye Care

In an interview with “Ozodi” on April 15, the Deputy Chairman of the Antimonopoly service of Tajikistan Nazar Odinzoda said that the decision to raise the tariffs was made after a study of the market situation.

“The decision was due to the fact that the tariffs for electric communication must meet the requirements of the market economy. Nothing more. The tariffs for the electric connection must cover all costs and generate a profit for mobile operators,” said Nazar Odinzoda.

The Deputy Chairman of the Communication Service Ilkhom Atoev believes that the increase in prices for mobile Internet will help citizens “maintain health” and save time.

“With the increase in prices for the Internet, people will use it wisely. They will play less and will not damage their vision; they will maintain their health,” Ilkhom Atoev said in an interview with Asia-Plus.

At the beginning of this year, at a press conference on January 26, Ilkhom Atoev said that Tajikistan plans to increase the incoming Internet traffic by 2.5 times and reduce its cost for users.

Experts: The Rise in Price Was Approved with an Upcoming Elections and the Interests of Business Groups in Mind

The experts believe that this decision pursued both political and economic goals. According to political scientist **Nurali Davlat**, one of the aims of increasing Internet price was the desire to limit access to information for the citizens before the upcoming presidential elections. According to the legislation, these elections should be held in 1.5 years, in autumn 2020.

“The increase in the price of the Internet pursued several specific goals, including increasing tax collection and limiting access to the Internet for citizens a year and a half before the presidential election,” Nurali Davlat said.

It is important to note that the parliamentary elections should be held even earlier, in February next year.

The Head of the National Association of Independent Media of Tajikistan (NANSMIT) **Nuriddin Karshiboev** believes that the increase in tariffs was beneficial for certain groups operating in the telecommunications market.

Every argument stated by the government in favor of raising Internet tariffs was unreasonable, absurd and ridiculous. Probably, this order meant benefit for some groups so that they could fill their pockets, and also aimed to limit the rights of citizens to access information.

Revoked as No One Was Happy

The experts argue that the reason for the revocation Antimonopoly service’s order was the violent indignation among not only ordinary citizens, but even among the supporters of the government.

According to the local commentator Nurali Davlat, dissatisfaction with the increase in Internet tariffs was expressed also by those who have nothing to do with politics. Particular dissatisfaction was expressed by the families of migrant workers, as the Internet and mobile



Nurali Davlat. Photo: RFE/RL

communication are their main channels of communication with relatives abroad.

“The increase in tariff prices caused discontent even among those who have always supported the government’s initiatives. Because even these people with the existing level of income would not be able to pay for mobile services and the Internet,” says Nurali Davlat. The mobile companies of Tajikistan determined that since April 18, the cost of one megabyte of Internet including VAT and excise duty would amount to 6.2 dirams and one Gigabyte - to 62 somoni (over 6 US dollars). Previously, the cost of one Gigabyte was in a range of 30-35 somoni (about 3-3.5 US dollars).

According to the Ministry of Labor, Migration and Employment of Population of the Republic of Tajikistan, the average salary in the country is 1169 somoni (about 110 dollars). The experts say that in a case the decree was not revoked, many categories of civil servants would have had to pay a half of a monthly salary for 10 gigabytes of the Internet. The experts believe it is because of the sharp rise in prices, that there was a massive activation of citizens, regardless of their social status.



Nuriddin Karshiboev. Photo: RFE/RL

The Head of NANSMIT Nuriddin Karshiboev is sure that the discontent of the people became the reason of revocation of the order on Internet tariffs increase.

“The law enforcement agencies thought that the people would make noise for a couple of days, and then forcibly comply with the decree. But the discontent did not stop until the decree was revoked,” said Karshiboev.

Did the President know?

The revocation of the decision on increase of tariffs caused the jubilation of citizens who then gave a positive assessment to the President’s work on social networks. Thus, opinions appeared that this action was invented specifically to improve President’s rating. Other users of social networks, in contrast, believed that President Emomali Rahmon was not really aware of the situation.

However, expert and CABAR.asia analyst **Muslim Buriev** disagrees with both points of view.

In my opinion, the President was aware that such a bill will be implemented, but he was not aware of how strong the negative public reaction will be. The task was to replenish the budget deficit, which is very important for the President, as well as for the entire

government.

At the same time, Muslim Buriev “indubitably” agreed that the revocation of decision to raise Internet prices “caused a positive reaction, and the level of support of the President thus increased.”

“However, I would not draw conclusions on whether it was a planned action in the upcoming presidential elections. Moreover, it is unlikely that the adoption of such a decision would greatly affect the level of support in the whole country, as the authority of the President is very strong,” – said Buriev.

The social media users and media say that the revocation of decision to increase tariffs was a victory for citizens. However, Nuriddin Karshiboev stresses that the civil society should not relax. He believes that the authorities have an opportunity to reconsider their decision and raise prices once again.

“An opportunity always exists. This is an old dream of government agencies. After the defeat, they instructed to reduce the speed of the Internet. They think that people unhappy with the low speed of the Internet would agree to pay more. It would be perfect if the government finds a person who understands the values of the Internet. In this case, all the problems would be solved,” thinks Karshiboev.



Muslim Buriev. Photo: CABAR.asia

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