

UZBEKISTANI MASS MEDIA FREE OF CENSORSHIP: FIRST IMPRESSIONS

By Maksim Elbekov, Reporter, Uzbekistan

Last May saw an end to pre-publication censorship of newspapers and magazines, radio and television in Uzbekistan – a practice that had seemed interminable. This long-awaited move opened up golden opportunities to the national media, on the one hand, and gave rise to new problems, on the other.

At any rate, Internews-Uzbekistan's project called Legal Audit was launched in the wake of the abolition of pre-publication censorship. Says Internews-Uzbekistan's lawyer Karim Bakhriyev, commenting on the start-up of the new project: "Previously, any editor could say to a reporter, 'I like your article. It is bold, topical and I would publish it if it were not for the censorship - which will never give it the green light.' As a matter of fact, the editor would be not far wrong. Ostensibly protecting state secrets, censorship was merciless in prosecuting any case of dissent in the press and restricting any newspaper materials it deemed seditious, he said. Moreover, it was impossible to establish the criteria according to which it would impertinently intrude into a page-proof.

However, with pre-publication censorship lifted, the editor must now take full responsibility for the content of his journal or broadcast. From now on it is a matter of his or her personal courage in deciding whether an article should be published or not. And since the author is now free to write down everything he thinks proper it may be that the interests of many individuals and organizations will

be affected, thus spawning numerous law suits and trials implicating journalists.

"I see it as a good sign," says Karim Bakhriyev. "The rule of law, rather than telephone arrangements or arbitrary decisions by the powers-that-be, is likely to have a free hand - a system inherent in democratic and civilized societies."

DIFFERENT OPINIONS

While listening to Karim Bakhriyev, I recalled a remark made by a secretary at a popular republican newspaper. He said: "I'm glad there is censorship. It gives you a comforting sense of safety. You are aware it will surely censor any material that might anger officials. I said this straight out to the head of the Inspectorate for Safeguarding State Secrets in the Press, Erkin Kamilov and thanked him."

Happily, that's not an opinion shared by all reporters. In 2001, the very same Karim Bakhriyev wrote a pamphlet called, "Censorship is harmful, humiliating and futureless", which immediately became a bestseller. In Samarkand, Tashpulat Rakhmatullayev ventured an unprecedented move: he refused to replace censored materials and

let the next issue of Samarkand newspaper come out with blank spaces on the pages. The Samarkand municipality responded by delayed funding and later withholding it altogether.

The Newspaper Tashkentskaya Pravda even arranged an exhibition of censored articles. Anyone was welcome to read them to see that they disclosed no state secrets and contained no sedition.

Says Mikhail Gural'sky, executive secretary of Tashkentskaya Pravda: "The exhibition made the cup run over, and the authorities' patience gave way. Our editor, Alo Khojaye'v, had openly blasted censorship practices while attending various conferences.

Obviously, he could not use the press to express his views because similar statements would surely be censored." According to Gural'sky of Tashkentskaya Pravda, every time he and other staff were making up the twice-weekly newspaper it was a "regular nightmare - which gave us the jitters."

There was not a day, he said, when the censors would not demand that one or another article be removed. The newspaper's team, led by its editor, would desperately defend each of their articles. More often than not, the censors took the upper hand. The uncompromising struggle Alo Khojaye'v was fighting against censorship earned him a controversial reputation in certain

circles. With the exhibition making the cup run over he was sacked. For a few months Alo Khojayev was unemployed. Eventually, he got the job of editor-in-chief at a non-governmental news and entertainment radio station called Grand. Yet, even there he didn't cease his efforts to combat the censorship stranglehold.

THE TRIGGERING EVENT

On April 30, 2000, the Academy of Statehood and Society Development under the President of Uzbekistan hosted an international conference attended by leaders of political parties active in this country and a group of European parliament deputies. The conference was sponsored by the Konrad Adenauer fund and came into the limelight as it was held on the eve of the official visit of Germany's Chancellor Schroeder.

The conference was running without hitch; foreign and Uzbekistani politicians showering compliments on each other. During debates, Alo Khojayev asked one of the speakers, chairman of a parliament committee Akhtam Tursunov: "Addressing the 8th session of parliament President Islam Karimov said that freedoms of speech and the press are of paramount importance. He pointed out that 'we want to build an open democratic state with the rule of law. Therefore, we must make energetic efforts to attain this goal.' I'd like to ask you in this context, 'Do you realize that this move will soon give rise to opposition factions in parliament and, consequently, opposition parties and mass media?'" Naturally, he was assured that every parliament faction was free to discuss matters independently, which is the manifestation of democracy. As Alo Khojayev took

the floor again, he said he felt he was running risks as his words would be intentionally distorted later and he would be blamed for a lack of patriotic sentiment and for washing dirty linen in public. To begin with, the dirty linen in Uzbekistan is an open secret to the Western public, and one should not see the German visitors as inspectors or auditors for they came to Uzbekistan as friends sincerely wishing to boost democratization processes in this independent country. These processes, though, are out of the question as long as the institute of censorship formally, although illegally, exists in Uzbekistan and neither the Mass Media Law nor the Law on Free Access to Information really work. The journalist's statement, stiffened with solid facts, produced an explosive effect.

PUBLIC DENOUNCIATION

Two days later, on May 3, a conference was held to mark the International Day of Freedom of the Press. Its participant, editor-in-chief of the news service of Echo Dolini (Echo of the Valley) radio Lola Islamova, said it was a positive fact that, apart from journalists themselves, attending the conference were government officials in charge of news media. This had never happened in the past. "Concrete questions were asked that needed explicit and honest answers," recalls Lola Islamova. "However, the officials of the State Committee for the Press proved not ready to talk to journalists frankly and openly.

So the discussion, rather heated at times, was generally pointless until Karim Bakhriyev, Kholida Anarbayeva and Furkat Yakvalkhojayev stepped in. They accused officials of totally ignoring

the Uzbekistani Mass Media Laws and seeking justification for censorship. Moreover, Alo Khojayev proposed that they adopt an address to the President of the country, asking him to exercise his power as constitutional guarantor. The address was greeted with cheers and carried by a large majority."

It must be admitted, though, that the vote was far from unanimous. Those who didn't venture to subscribe to the address did so not only because of personal cowardice but also in the face of the conference sponsors, clearly frightened by the adoption of an unsanctioned address to the head of state.

Be it as it may, on May 6 the President of Uzbekistan dismissed the chief of the Inspectorate for Safeguarding State Secrets in the Press, Erkin Kamilov, a career censor for a total of 44 years! It was not the end of the story, though. The President demanded that censored materials be presented to him and, obviously, making certain that they posed no threat to national security, ordered the abolition of pre-publication censorship in the republican press. Similarly, the Inspectorate for Safeguarding State Secrets, that had been discrediting the country for so long, ceased its ignominious activities.

IS CENSORSHIP OVER?

'A clean sweep!' one could say. Journalists remain sceptical, though. "In the specific environment of our country censorship cannot just vanish into thin air," says news analyst of BVV weekly, Nadezhda Stepanova. "Judge for yourself, our media has been under the strict control of the authorities for decades. There was only one brief

period of relative freedom: shortly before and after the collapse of the Soviet Union — in the late 1980s and early 1990s. And when, after taking a gulp of fresh air, you again find yourself plunging into a vacuum, in which you are enfettered hand and foot, you become a pessimist deaf to rosy dreams.” According to Nadezhda Stepanova, years of harsh control have taken their toll, and journalists have turned into self-censors, far worse than any external censor. “Besides, warnings continue to come from on high that the concept of a ‘state secret’ persists even though there is no official list of secrets. So any disclosure is fraught with the threat of prison. With this being so, an author and a media leader would think twice before setting a material in type,” said Stepanova.