

Editorial

A DEBATE ON THE ROLE OF MEDIA IS INDISPENSABLE IN CENTRAL ASIA

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Be it in established democracies or in so-called "countries in transition", crisis situation bring a light on the concrete limits and constraints of freedom of speech in given societies.

In many social and political fields, crisis situation work as microscopes: they allow us to see and perceive with an usual precision the fundamental principles which determine the functioning of groups, societies or States. In the media field, those periods always prove revealing for the comprehension of the concrete limits of freedom of speech in a given society, and to see how much politicians and journalists are ready to defend the democratic ideas which, they usually say, are the basic principles of their activity. Those moments of tension therefore reveal the role media and journalists intend to play in their society. The overview of the content of some mainstream media after the plane attacks on New York and Washington on September 11 in different countries is a particularly useful exercise (see in this issue our special focus on the media in Kirgizstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Russian and United States after September 11). It gives us various lessons, depending on the different contexts the media taken into consideration operate in: more or less free political system, more or less authoritarian regime, in a State more or less directly concerned by the events. In Western Europe or in the United States, like in all established democratic systems, the analysis on how the media addressed the situation brings light on the boundaries between the self imposed rules of the journalists (be it ethic code, or editorial policy of given media) or external constraints (be it social or political pressure, be it, in time of war, official censorship). It allows us also to evaluate the degree of pluralism, and the vitality of the political debate: by adopting a strong patriotic stand during the weeks following the attacks, the mainstream American media with no doubt pre-

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vented any open and fair discussion on a number of important issues to take place, such as the legality and legitimacy of the military intervention in Afghanistan, the need of such an action, or the adequacy of calling a "declaration of war" the terrorist attacks carried out in the US (see in this issue *Patriotism and Compassion Can Clash with Professionalism*). More than a the result of government pressure, this attitude was a the result of the choice of the journalists themselves. In so-called countries "in transition", like in the Central Asian Republic, where, since the independence, no comprehensive system of functioning of media is to be seen, the challenges are different. In a country like Uzbekistan, for instance, with a strong and organised control on the press, the content of the newspaper would hardly tell us tell us anything about what ethic code or editorial policy the journalists would think most appropriate to the present situation ("Ethical standards that limit abuses of power are necessary for those who enjoy freedom of speech", notes Karim Bakhriev, in his article *Ethic means little without freedom*). In the region, the factors which hamper the development of the mass media sector (political, economical, legal constraints), are more or less well known. What is less known, unfortunately, is how the journalists themselves would use an extended freedom of speech, how they represent to themselves the role they would ideally play in their society. A debate on that question appear today indispensable, because the nature of possible future improvements in the media sector in Central Asia might depend a lot on the capacity of the media actors to define their role in a comprehensive way. Be this issue of *Media Insight* an incitement to start the discussion.