

IN KIRGIZSTAN INFORMATION SECURITY REVEALS FEAR OF THE NEIGHBOUR

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Although focusing on the danger of external information threats, the Doctrine of Information Security of Kyrgyzstan does not provide any specific measures and mechanisms to withstand these challenges.

By June 2001, the National Security Concept of Kyrgyzstan was complete. At a regular meeting of the republic's Security Council the document was supplemented with the Information Security Doctrine. The Information Security Doctrine is classified, however the author managed to familiarize himself with some of its provisions. One of the paramount information threats for the country's security mentioned in the Doctrine is the leak of classified information, the effect of external negative information on Kyrgyzstan, and the inadequate provision of information to the population by the Kyrgyz news media. As Mr. Leonid Bondarets, a military expert with the Strategic Research Institute, said: "The importance of information security is now even more pressing than any other political and economic threat." The confidential nature of the Information Security Doctrine gives rise to journalists' real fears that it can also be used as a means to limit freedom of speech. And what is more, the Doctrine does not differentiate between external and internal threats to the country's information security. The lack of exact wording leads analysts to guess what sort of threats these can be. Expert opinion is that, the current political and economic situation in Kyrgyzstan being as it is, no document can stop the impact of

external information. "Currently, by virtue of its economic potential, as well as the lack of political experience and proper management systems, Kyrgyzstan cannot adequately respond to external information challenges and threats," – said Mr. Turat Akimov, *Info-Centre Bishkek's* political observer. "Furthermore, the country cannot adequately respond to information expansion in neighbouring countries. Without question this is a real threat. However everything depends on what type of political technology we use in return. Whether we anticipate them or limit them by using prohibitive measures to deny our citizens access to undesirable externally-provided information?"

A ONE-GATE GAME

In June the Security Council, presided over by President Akaev, officially recognized the fact that Kyrgyzstan endures information pressure from neighboring countries. The Security Council is an administrative and advisory body under the President of the Kyrgyz Republic, which forms policy in the sphere of security and supervises the armed forces ministries. The Security Council is comprised of the National Security Council Minister, the minister of internal affairs, the minister of defense, as well as the minister of finance. The

Security Council also includes the Strategic Research Institute under the authority of the President. In the opinion of Security Council experts, the influence of Uzbek information on southern Kyrgyzstan is considered especially undesirable. The Namangan, Andijan and Ferghana regions of Uzbekistan have more powerful radio and TV stations covering the whole area including the Jalal-Abad and Osh oblasts of Kyrgyzstan. Kyrgyzstan cannot compete with Uzbek electronic mass media, even in its own information field. "We should have realised long ago that Uzbek TV-channels control the information space in south Kyrgyzstan," said Mr. Kubatbek Baibolov, a retired KGM colonel and current people's deputy of the Legislative Assembly. "But in the south of the republic we have no relay stations, therefore Kyrgyz TV only covers the southern areas of the country to a minor degree. Dwellers in southern areas are better informed about what is going on in Tashkent, and are absolutely deprived of information from the Kyrgyz capital. Kyrgyz newspapers are distributed only in large settlements. The only source of information is radio, but many people have no transistor radios." "The impact of Uzbek mass media on Kyrgyzstan exceeds our worst expectations," said Mr. Kuban Taabaldiev, the Director of *Kabar*, the Kyrgyz national news agency. The impact of Uzbek radio and TV is so powerful that children in Kyrgyz families prefer speaking

the Uzbek language. Furthermore, because there are more than half a million ethnic Uzbeks living in south Kyrgyzstan and being ideologically influenced by Uzbek mass media, Uzbekistan influence and the spread of the Uzbek language could grow."

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Relations between the two countries are not idyllic, what with mutual territorial claims, Uzbekistan's need for water flowing from Kyrgyzstan, and Kyrgyzstan's energy dependence on Uzbek gas. This is why Kyrgyz experts consider the flow of information from Tashkent as a dangerous means of public opinion formation inside Kyrgyzstan. Despite the fact that there is no common border with Russia, the information space in north Kyrgyzstan is now completely controlled by Russian TV-channels. Russian newspapers are sold and read in Bishkek and other cities in the north of the republic. But because of the absence of acute problems between Kyrgyzstan and Russia, the influence of information from Moscow is not considered menacing. "The impact of Russian information is a secondary problem to the influence of Uzbekistan information on Kyrgyzstan's information security," believes Mr. Kuban Taabaldiev. "Russia does not pursue a contra-Kyrgyz ideological policy. If there were no Russian news media then Kyrgyzstan would be provided with information to a lesser extent. The fact that Russian mass media is

distributed in Kyrgyzstan and are very popular here is a positive factor for the country. To us, the Russian mass media is a kind of an open gate allowing us to penetrate into the global information space."

LIMIT MEDIA ACTIVITY

Threats and hazards to Kyrgyzstan's information security are not limited to the influence of external information. Kyrgyzstan's political administration looks for threats from within the state, in particular in the sphere of the independent and opposition mass media. Mass media representatives consider information security only as a means to limit freedom of speech. The most indicative example of a prosecution of journalists in the context of Kyrgyz information security may be the pressure exerted by the authorities on the weekly *Delo* ¹. in the summer of 2000. The National Security Ministry brought a criminal case against the newspaper's reporters, who were charged with "disclosing state secrets." On July 26, 2000 the weekly published an article called "Sensational discoveries made behind closed doors", in which some details of the *in camera* hearings of the case against Felix Kulov, President Akaev's political opponent, were disclosed. The article was based on information supplied verbally to the newspaper by an officer who had access to investigation documents concerning the case. It was simply a leak, however, in the National Security Ministry's opinion it was a breach of the confidentiality of preliminary investigations, and the newspaper had disclosed state secrets. After the October 2000 presidential elections the case closed with the strange wording "in connection with the changed political situation". Analysts believe that deviation from democratic development in Kyrgyzstan allows the Doctrine of Information Security to

be used as a tool to censor the mass media. It is indicative that using information security to limit freedom of speech is usually only an issue in countries whose democracy deviates from international standards. In the countries of the CIS, where numerous changes of power have taken place as a result of legitimate elections, there are no so such attacks on openness by way of information doctrines. In this respect Central Asia is an example of the ten-year retention of power by presidents - "long-lifers." Here information security serves as a way for them to secure their personal power under the pretext of ensuring state security. "Unfortunately, information security is perceived by the mass media as a desire to limit freedom of speech, freedom of mass media, and belittle the significance of the "fourth estate," said Leonid Bondarets. "This is a deeply erroneous opinion. It is impossible to substitute concepts and squeeze the meaning of "freedom of speech" in a context of information security. What is more, the concept of information security suggests, among other things, that society is provided with information on the real state of affairs." However, journalists think differently, by colliding every day with problems of access to information.

The Chief Editor of the *Res Publica* newspaper, Mrs. Zamira Sydykova, is certain that "because of information security more secrets appear in the country, and journalists are not able to carry out proper investigations, mainly because of confidentiality bars." But the issue is not one of state secrets, but abuses of power by state officials. "To me, as the editor of an opposition newspaper, all information in this country is closed and super confidential," Mrs. Sydykova said. The problem of limited access to information under the pretext of information security is not only an urgent one for opposition journal-

ists. This does not depend on the availability of "top secret" information, but rather on the psychology of public administration, when an official simply does not wish to bear the responsibility of being a source of intra-departmental information, even for mass media loyal to the authorities.

Two vivid examples of limited access to information (prior to adoption of the Information Security Doctrine) are the military campaigns in the Batken oblast of Kyrgyzstan. During 1999 and 2000 journalists had to rely on information from the Ministry of Defense about the situation in the south of the republic and in 2001 Ministry of Defense officials chose and accredited 15 reporters to report on possible military action in the south of the country. Interpretations of the definition of "information security" differ between officials and journalists. Neither can unequivocally

answer the question of whether information security is security *from* information coming

ever, the authorities and the press are natural opponents, and it is this that insures the existence of a bal-

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from outside the state, that can have destabilizing and destructive consequences, or if it is security *for* the free distribution of information, thus ensuring the openness and freedom of speech.

"Different interpretations are a result of the different interests of mass media and the authorities," believes political scientist Erkin Bugubaev, "so all the authorities' initiatives are rejected including those that, in the sphere of information security, are intended to protect the state's interests. How-

ever, the authorities and the press are natural opponents, and it is this that insures the existence of a balance between the dictate of the state and freedom of information." Currently in Kyrgyzstan the Doctrine of Information Security somehow unbalances this status quo. However, the situation is also unbalanced in a global context by the September acts of terrorism in the USA, as well. Today, global information security is already developing within the context of the fight against international terrorism. Henceforth this tendency will also influence the situation in Kyrgyzstan.