

# MAJOR NEW HURDLES ON THE PATH TO MEDIA FREEDOM IN CENTRAL ASIA

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**Journalists from all five Central Asian countries gathered in Almaty to discuss the current problems of the media in the region. The aftermath of September 11th and the building of media monopolies dictated a highly interesting agenda.**

In Central Asian countries there is the real danger of limiting media freedom under the pretext of the fight against terrorism and extremism. This opinion of the head of the OSCE Center in Almaty, Ambassador Heinrich Haupt, was advanced at the third Central Asian conference on «Media freedom during the fight against terrorism» held in Almaty on December 10-11, 2001. «Imaginary dangers, probably resulting from the anti-terrorist campaign in Afghanistan, are being used as an excuse for illegally limiting the media's freedom of speech.» believes this high-ranking OSCE diplomat.

## GOOD TRADITIONS

The conference was organized by the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media, Freimut Duve, the OSCE Center in Almaty in cooperation with the international «Adil Soz» fund, and the Friedrich Ebert Foundation. More than 80 journalists from all five Central Asian countries as well as representatives of governments, parliaments and NGOs took part. It is remarkable that even journalists from Turkmenistan participated. Holding the regional conference under aegis of the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media has become a tradition. Two

previous conferences were held in Bishkek (October, 1999) and in Dushanbe (November, 2000). Lively discussions at the third regional conference concentrated on recent events in the sphere of mass media. Structural problems, such as the legal context and media

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property, were also discussed.

«The concentration and monopolization of media is currently underway, and this serves first of all the groups close to ruling circles,» emphasized Heinrich Haupt. The OSCE Representative also noted that state authorities and courts, that are not always independent, frequently impose technical limitations and excessive fines on the media, thus hindering their work and forcing them towards self-censorship. Some cases where physical damage had been caused were also made public at the conference. «Legal limitations exist, such as the restriction of relaying foreign electronic media, or blocking access to opposition websites. On the Internet the aim is limiting journalists' work,

most frequently under the pretext of national security,» noted Haupt.

## KNOW YOUR ETHICS

At the same time, Haupt called upon journalists and the media to adhere to the rules of professional ethics. «Passing the "Media Ethics Code" or the "Media Ethics Charter" for the region's journalists and media, following the example set by OSCE member-countries, is one of the ways of

guaranteeing the professional honesty of journalists,» he said. «The introduction of codes of conduct for journalists should not be provided by state executive bodies, but exclusively independent professional organizations in accordance with Civil Law.»

The important role of media in the development of civil society was emphasized at the conference. Special attention was given to the problems of creating opportunities for future generations of journalists, and in this respect the presentation by the OSCE «Mobile Cultural Center» project was rather interesting. Key questions in the discussion were on the new challenges faced by the media during the fight against terrorism, in particular in Central Asia. Confer-

ence participants noted that problems covered by the Dushanbe Declaration passed at the conference last year were still cause for concern. «The tendency to limit media freedom of speech continues in the region's countries,» stated Rozlana Taukina, President of Kazakhstan's Association of Independent Electronic Media. Novosti nedeli (#49, Almaty) has called Central Asia «the silent region.»

### CONFERENCE RESULTS

The result of the two-day conference was the adoption of the eight-point Almaty Declaration on media freedom during the fight against terrorism. The Declaration states that, «In the course of conflict, the governments of member-countries of the anti-terrorist alliance should not use arguments of national security to limit human rights in their countries, or reduce their support of human rights in other countries.»

«In particular, Central Asian governments should not use the conflict to justify repressive measures against their opposition,» the Declaration states. «On the contrary, they should use this situation as the catalyst to undertake further steps with the purpose of creating a free environment for the

media to operate in society.»

«The media should be free to accomplish their corrective jobs concerning their country's economic, ecological and military decisions, in particular, during the conflict,» the document states. «Free public debates are of vital necessity.»

The Almaty Declaration on media freedom during the fight against terrorism asserts the necessity of media freedom for it to accomplish its basic role as «watchdog» against corruption on

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the road to democracy. It emphasizes that, «After the events of September 11 in particular, the media should have the opportunity of informing the public about the existence of the financial interrelation between the activities of terrorist groups and corruption.»

The Declaration also states that journalists should show more solidarity and mutual support in the context of the aggravated international situation and continuing conflict in Central Asia.

The appeal to journalists to apply all their efforts towards objective reporting and to be careful while covering the conflict was one of the conclusions reached during the conference debates. «Press ethics should work especially in times of conflict, and journalists should realize their increased responsibility,» the Declaration states.

In its concluding article, the Almaty Declaration addresses international, governmental and non-governmental organizations, to work

harder to ensure the safety of journalists in conflict zones. It also states that the leading media could provide necessary training and insurance, as well as for safety pools. Donors working with the media and funding their activities could contribute financial support to these pools. The document reads as follows: «It is necessary to undertake measures for the development of more efficient identification documents for professional journalists working in hotspots.»