

# THE SLOW DECAY OF THE DAILY PRESS IN SOUTHERN KYRGYZSTAN

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**The daily newspaper market is on the decline. Now, three of the oldest state-owned newspapers in Osh have suffered the same fate as almost all of Kyrgyzstan's regional newspapers: they had to cut back production and are issued only once a week.**

The three regional newspapers established by the local Soviet authorities prior to dissolution of the Soviet Union were issued 5 times a week. Their founders, the regional committee of the communist party and the regional executive committee, subsidised the newspapers by up to 40 % of their total costs. At that time the newspapers were only partly self-supporting. There was no advertising, and their profit came from subscriptions only. The newspapers' names differed from those today, and were distributed from Osh, the main city in the south, to the whole Osh region which at that time also included Djalal-Abad and Batken regions. Their circulations were: Russian newspaper Leninsky put (now Ekho Osha) up to 35,000, Uzbek Lenin yuli (Ush sadosi) up to 45,000, and Kyrgyz Lenin djolu (Osh djanyrygy) about 80-85,000.

During Soviet times in southern Kyrgyzstan (as well as everywhere in the former USSR) only state-owned newspapers existed, so they never were short of finance, off-setting, production, salaries, etc. 40 tons of paper arrived every week from the Solikamsk pulp-and-paper mill in Russia. The regional printing house printed 150,000 copies a day, 5 times a week. There were no subscription problems. It was inexpensive, so

people used to take out annual subscriptions for the regional newspapers. They were readable, debated, and trusted. They presented different genres, a lot of news and critical articles (obviously only to the extent allowed by the Soviet system), and official information.

The number of subscribers to regional newspapers, and their circulation rates, has been gradually declining. Separating the Batken and Osh regions also contributed negatively. During the years of independence, the majority of Russian readers as well as Russian journalists have left the southern region. Now the population, with their low salaries and pensions, cannot afford subscriptions. Nevertheless, the mechanics of the regional newspapers are still highly rated. In the south, private newspapers could not compete with the state-owned editions because of their rather high professional level.

## CRUSHING DEBTS

A worsening financial position forced newspapers to shift to a publication schedule of three, then two, and, since October 2001, one issue per week. This single issue includes the television schedule, local official information on the front page, and advertising. The volume of self-generated informa-

tion is very low and there is almost no news. The employees of state-owned newspapers have practically nothing to do, and their readers have nothing to read.

The biggest Kyrgyz-language newspaper is Osh djanyrygy with a staff of 14 reporters. In September, the editor attempted to send his staff on temporary holiday without pay, but some complained to the Prosecutor's office so the Editor had to give up the idea.

## TEMPORARY MEASURE

The paper's chief editor, Mamaraim Dubanaev, denied all rumours about the regional newspapers' forthcoming closure, or their merger into one paper. He, and the editors of the two other papers, believes that issuing the papers once a week is a temporary measure. However in the months to come his newspaper will not even be issued twice a week.

«As of today our accounts payable are 670,000 soms (or \$14,000),» he said. «We also owe the Bishkek printing house Uchkun (at one time the newspaper was printed there). The former editor of Osh djanyrygy was forced to give Uchkun personal computers received as a grant from the Soros-Kyrgyzstan Foundation in repayment of the debt. Our accounts receivable are also significant: more than \$5,000.»

Osh djanyrygy has managed to keep afloat at the expense of its sponsors, advertising, and subscription, and by raising the circulation to 4-5,000. The paper's

founders provided for subscriptions: during a subscription campaign the regional state administration obliged by decree each regional district to subscribe to a certain number of copies of all three newspapers. In this way the local authorities are attempting to maintain the newspapers' circulation rates and also to force officers to read «their own» newspapers.

The accounts payable also exceed the money due in two other recently re-registered regional newspapers. They could recover if they managed to pay all their debts and be paid on time. The two newspapers having a common settlement account with the bank, and planned to produce editions twice a week to the end of 2001. (However, their plans did not come to fruition: they managed to issue twice only in one week in December, after which the regional printing house refused to print the second issue because of the debt. Author's comment.)

«We try to save money on everything,» says Abdugani Abdugafarov, chief editor of the Uzbek newspaper *Ush sadosi*. «Circulation reached 4,000 last year. We had to shift to one weekly issue because of a paper shortage. However, even one issue a week is open to question. We earlier managed to produce an edition by using a large stock of old paper, which ran out about one year ago.» Almost all the creative staff on Uzbek newspapers temporarily consist of part-time employees. For a long period of time, salaries and employees' fees of state-owned newspapers have been delayed for over a month or more. Nevertheless, Ad-

bugafarov is optimistic: «Our founders, the regional state administration and the Kenesh, have increased the subsidies to each newspaper by 100,000 soms (\$2000). Naken Kasiev, the Osh region Governor, clearly understands our problems. We can now make arrangements to publish official materials at our own discretion, and some of them give more for republishing.»

In the Russian-language regional newspaper *Ekho Osha*, which has a circulation of up to 1,500, 6 employees have been forced to go on holiday, and others are employed part time.

«Independent journalists constantly reproach us that we feed off the state,» said the paper's chief editor, Evgeny Breslavsky. «One million soms are spent annually on the paper's publication (nearly \$21,000). The founders' share should make 50 %, but actually it is about 25 %. It is still very difficult to work to the budget on this small money. The rest of the money we need we get from different sources. We have not raised subscription rates for three years.»

Breslavsky cannot understand attitude taken by the joint-stock company *Kyrgyzbasmasoz* (former *Soyuzpechat*) towards state-owned newspapers. For retail sales it only takes only 50 copies of each newspaper, for the whole region! In newsstands in Osh there are only one or two copies, while in many of the regions' villages there are no newsstands at all. The distributors explain this by the lack of demand for regional newspapers, while at the same time readers call the editors and

complain that they cannot buy local newspapers. *Kyrgyz Pochtasy*, an enterprise working on subscriptions, also creates financial problems. It constantly delays settlements with regional newspapers, mainly because it doesn't get money from its subscribers in time (enterprises, village councils, etc.).

## NO EASY WAY OUT

Over the last few years regional newspapers have been searching for a way to shift to offset printing, but all attempts have failed. Newspapers continue to be produced from the out of date technology (letterpress) and are unrepresentable when compared to other *Kyrgyz* and Russian newspapers.

Osh *djanyrygy*'s chief editor, Mamaraim Dubanaev, plans to shift to offset printing in the near future. He is looking for sponsors to pay for computers and says that there is an alternative already employed in Osh - using private offset machinery. However this alternative has already been tried and appears unacceptable. While the regional printing house agrees to print newspapers on credit, the private ones demand payment for their services.

«The best way out,» believes Evgeny Breslavsky, «is if the three newspapers and our founders can buy the offset machinery from its present owner. We need \$9,000. We could create a printing house independent of private capital that could print the regional newspapers along with other print media. Prices for printing services will be lower than in the currently outdated printing houses. This project is still under, but it is more realistic than the other alternatives.»