

REGIONAL CONFERENCE CALLS FOR NEW TRADE UNIONS

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In the city of Almaty, Kazakhstan, journalists from five Central Asian countries discussed with international experts the problems of editorial independence and the reform of public television and radio broadcasting.

'Editorial Independence and the Reform of Public Television and Radio Broadcasting' was the topic of a regional conference organised by the Brussels-based International Federation of Journalists (IFJ), together with the Friedrich Ebert Foundation (Germany). The conference was held in Almaty, Kazakhstan, 1-2 February 2002. Some 50 journalists and others in the media field and representatives from regional journalist organisations, as well as a number of international experts, took part in the conference.

THE "RIGHT TO LIFE"

"The mass media in Central Asia contributes to the daily protection of freedom," said Mr Winfred Snider-Deters, project coordinator of the Friedrich Ebert Foundation Central Asia and Transcaucasia. "If a journalist suffers while carrying out this dangerous trade, then freedom of speech is infringed. It also means the infringement of human rights, including the right to life." He said that the IFJ has paid special attention to support trade unions in general, including the trade unions in the mass media. Mr Snider-Deters provided the conference his expertise to the discussions on the development of mass media trade

unions. "This topic is important for the 500,000 journalists across the world incorporated in the International Federation of Journalists," the conference organisers said.

Mr Oliver Mani-Kairly, IFJ Project Director, told conference participants about the IFJ's trade union development programme. He said that developing journalists' potential and protection of their rights are major goals of the IFJ. According to him, journalists and the media should not be exposed to pressure; freedom of press should be respected everywhere; and journalists should be provided with the opportunity of free collection and distribution of information. Observance of the above principles promotes and raises society's knowledge and realisation of fundamental human rights. However, Mr Mani-Kairly noted, during conflict and periods when corruption is rife (exacerbated by the low wages of journalists) it is difficult to ensure press freedom. According to Mr Mani-Kairly, trade unions are involved in the protection of journalists from unlawful discharges, physical attacks, and the promotion of quality journalism.

Mr John Barsby, an IFJ trade union expert, raised the question of why do journalists need a trade

union? "Unity is a force", he said. "A single person has difficulty to defend himself. The leverage of trade unions is stronger". Mr Azer Khazret, an Azerbaijan journalist and IFJ trade union expert, also delivered his opinion concerning trade unions for journalists. He noted that the success of media trade unions depends on the people's trust to the organisation.

PUBLIC BROADCASTING

The participants said that editors' independence and the reform of public television and radio broadcasting are closely bound with the activity of mass media trade unions. President of the Adil Soz Foundation, Mrs Tamara Kaleeva (Kazakhstan) emphasized that trade unions should protect the labour rights of journalists. Some other participants expressed their views that trade unions should participate in settlement of conflicts taking place in editorial offices. The participants of the conference came to the conclusion that the mass media trade unions should promote the protection and the social and economic rights of journalists.

Conference participants also discussed the problems of public television and radio broadcasting reform. These two sectors are obliged to protect the people, not the state, said Mr John Barsby, from the IFJ. He reminded the audience that public broadcasting's

base principles include editorial independence, financial transparency, political independence, objectivity, and accountability (responsibility). The participants then focused on the status of television and radio broadcasting in Central Asian countries, with special attention given to editorial independence. It was noted that in the region there is no independent information, and the media owners dictate their own political interests to the editors. "In Kazakhstan there is no public TV and radio broadcasting," stated the independent journalist Sergei Duvanov. Representatives of other republics, also analysing the situation in television and radio broadcasting in their countries, came to the conclusion that, despite of availability of debates, education programmes, interactive television and radio programmes in Central Asia, there is no public television and radio broadcasting

that could meet the definition proposed by Mr Barsby. Participants also discussed the Zagreb Declaration for Independence of Editors (Zagreb, Croatia, April 15-18, 1999) as a platform for the Central Asian region. The Zagreb declaration contains the minimum standards protecting editorial independence and defining a sufficient level of professionalism. It clearly differentiates the status of a public broadcasting organisation, the role of managing structures and administrations, fundamental rights and responsibilities of editorial collectives, as well as minimum standards for editorials.

FUTURE WORK

Internews Kazakhstan's director, Mr Oleg Katsiev said that the creation of public television and radio broadcasting, and ensuring editorial independence, is very difficult. Yet, it was also very

necessary for every editor. Further effort in the region is necessary to generate ideas, lobby for these ideas, and render support from other organisations to aid in the development of public broadcasting. While this is true everywhere, Mr Mani-Kairly noted, in the Central Asian region it was vital, and some practical questions needed to be asked and problems identified. The West know little about the region, and the Conference called upon the strengthening of ties between the IFJ and journalist organisations in Central Asia.

Mr Barsby emphasized that there is a desire for greater communication in the region by the IFJ, and expressed hope for fruitful cooperation. Participants were informed that the first step towards these goals would be a pilot project by the IFJ to create an independent trade union of journalists in Kyrgyzstan.