

Interview

UZBEK MEDIA: A VIEW FROM AN OUTSIDER LOOKING IN

By Iskandar Khamroh, journalist, Uzbekistan

Censorship in Uzbekistan impedes democratic progress and lowers the aspiration of journalists to develop their skills. A journalist from Uzbekistan who works in the West believes that the country's media and society exist in parallel realities.

The BBC has been broadcasting to Uzbekistan for several years. Mrs Shakhida Tulyaganova works in The BBC's Central Asia and Caucasus service reporting on events in the region. A former student of the international law department of the Tashkent juridical institute, Shakhida left the institute unhappy with the corrupt legal system of Uzbekistan.

She continued her education in the International Relations Department of the Tashkent University of World Economy and Diplomacy, where she graduated in 1995. In 1994 she became a receiver of a British Council grant, and for six months she attended lectures at the International Relations Department of Essex University (England). As an employee of the BBC, Shakhida graduated from Westminster University with a Masters in Diplomacy. During her visit to Tashkent to familiarize herself with the local media, I took the advantage of asking Mrs Shakhida Tulyaganova a number of questions.

Media Insight: What was the attraction to journalism?

I always dreamed to be a journalist. At school I was interested

in world politics, and avidly read books by Soviet journalists - foreign affairs specialists and about where they worked. All this was very useful to me in my subsequent job. I cannot idolize any of them now, though my idol in those days was Alexander Bovin with his TV programme "The International Panorama." I have no idols now; just many journalists who I respect very much and I try to equal. One of them is British journalist Robert Fisk, who worked in the Near East for more than 20 years.

My career as a journalist started in London in the BBC Central Asia and Caucasus service in February 1996. I have honestly to admit that when I started I had no writing experience, not to mention radio broadcasting. After the admission interview at the BBC I was sure that I would not withstand the severe competition. Also, I considered myself too young for the BBC, as I was only 20. I was amazed when my future chief called me and said that they chose me! Later I found out that I got the job through ambitiousness. When answering a question on why I wanted to work with BBC, I said that I had an idea of creating

an independent news agency in Uzbekistan, so I need journalistic experience in Britain. That dream hasn't yet come true, but I still continue working in that direction.

Do you follow media developments Uzbekistan?

I have done this constantly over the past seven years. And I keep up with developments of the mass media not only in Uzbekistan, but also of other Central Asian countries. Partially it is due to the fact that we are pragmatics at the BBC and research our competitors and the market we work in. I have to know as well about the content, format and tendencies of what the local mass media informs on and what occurs in the media business itself. These things include answering questions like is the media democratic and free, who owns the newspapers, TV channels and radio, whether journalists can write what they think of, what is the level of what they write or inform. It is a kind of monitoring.

Have you found any obvious changes?

I think there are some minor changes, of course, but no cardinal changes for the best has taken place. On the contrary, both state censorship and self-censorship has even strengthened. Now, in my mind, it will be much more difficult to break this barrier, than say,

ten years ago. The rhetoric of Uzbek officials as far as the idea of free mass media is concerned hasn't changed - they continue to insist that loosening control is equivalent to committing suicide, as there are no qualified and responsible journalists capable of objective factual writing.

However, in Uzbekistan there are outstanding and talented young journalists. Trainings and seminars are needed to teach journalists to present information that does not lurch from one extreme to the other, or express personal opinions, give own commentaries, or overload information with redundant details; any information should be clear and to the point. Thus, trained journalists should have chances to be published - and in the present conditions this is not obviously possible.

Have you seen something positive that distinguishes the Uzbekistan mass media from that in the West?

Uzbek journalists are stewing in their own juice, but this is not

their fault. The only example for them is the mass media of Russia, which, while advanced, is nevertheless far from perfect. Here in Uzbekistan, local journalists have no access to the western mass media. In addition, many Uzbek journalists do not know foreign languages. To my mind, in Uzbekistan they should work hard in order to raise the level of journalism. To do this, both assistance of international organisations and desire to develop a democratic mass media are required.

In your opinion, what are the current tendencies you see of the Uzbek mass media?

In Uzbekistan there is no culture of news. News is considered everything that the government, or the President has done. Whereas news is what has happened in the country. Mass media should reflect what people are concerned about and explore the essential issues of society. Here in Uzbekistan it seems that the mass media and people live in parallel realities. As in Soviet times, the

government considers mass media the tool of propagation and ideology, and this tendency is strengthened each year. Government legislation on mass media contains gaps, and there are provisions contradicting one another, which along with imperfect jurisdiction, reduces any attempt of a journalist to be defended from arbitrariness. In Uzbekistan there is no serious professional national newspaper. The problem is not the lack of paper or low wages, but a lack of interest in the development of a free mass media. If this attitude continues, the journalists of Uzbek will lose even the small gains it currently has.

From the results of her trip to Uzbekistan, Shakhida Tulyaganova prepared an analytical report on the mass media in Uzbekistan. The English version of this report can be found on the CIMERA website: www.cimera.org