

# TRIALS AND TRIUBULATIONS OF AN INDEPENDENT UZBEK NEWSPAPER

*By Kamil Satkanbaev, journalist, Kyrgyzstan.*

**The first independent Uzbek language newspaper in Kyrgyzstan, Mezon, started in 1996, covering political news. Now it is closed because of debt, an absence of quality management, a shortage of professional staff and intra-office intrigues.**

The Uzbek public in the Osh region in Kyrgyzstan were delighted six years ago when, on November 7 1996, the first issue of the Mezon was published. Everybody said that Mezon was a welcome change. In the region there were only a few newspapers for Uzbek readers: the regional state newspaper, Ush sadoci, and the city newspaper, Osh shamy (published in two languages, Kyrgyz and Uzbek), and the DDD newspaper.

The pro-government orientation of the two state newspapers did not satisfy the needs for alternative information wanted by the reading public. According to the former Chief Editor of Mezon, Mr Azam Abdurazzakov, the newspaper has given rise to independent Uzbek journalism in the area; "Before, there was not a single independent printed newspaper in the Uzbek language in the Osh region. The first issue's print run was two thousand copies".

## **PUBLICATION SUSPENDED**

Now, however, the consolidated tax debt and social fund payments of Mezon total about 90 thousand soms (\$1800). The editorial office received around 70 thousand soms (\$1400) per issue.

As a result, the newspaper has not been published for four months.

## **CRISIS IN THE MEDIA**

Difficulties exists for almost all private Uzbek language mass media in the south of Kyrgyzstan. The television company Asr could not function normally because of problems with equipment. Staff have been on leave without pay for two years. The Osh television company makes attempts to provide information for the city of Osh and surrounding areas, but the professional and creative competence of the staff are not high. The newspaper Demos, issued by Aliyans press, temporarily ceased publication on January 1st, 2002. According to the Chief Editor, Makhmud Kazakbaev, this occurred due to temporary suspension of its OSCE (Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe) grant. In 2001 Demos was allocated some \$US 26,000 for publishing two newspapers, Djany muun (in the Kyrgyz language) and Demos. Total circulation of the two was some 2400 copies.

Presently operating, there is DDD (an acronym of the first letters in Russian, Kyrgyz and Uzbek words meaning 'friendship'). It is issued in only in the Uzbek lan-

guage, and has a circulation of 1000 copies, all of which are distributed in the Osh region. They too are in trouble, like in most of the Kyrgyz and Russian printed mass media, like the state newspapers, Ekho Osha and Osh Djanyrygy, which face large financial difficulties, which has resulted in print reductions.

## **ORIGINS OF CRISIS**

Less than a year after Mezon started, the personnel began to abandon it. One reason was the low wages. Subsequent intra-office intrigues resulted in three chief editors replaced within two years. After 1998 three more chief editors left even though they were appointed by the founder. According to the founder, Mr Davran Sabirov, in the beginning the staff of the newspaper chose the chief editor. This, however, resulted in failure. Sabirov then he decided to nominate the chief editors himself. The result was the same. The newspaper's debt to the printing house and social fund began to grow. The regions did not pay for newspapers. Several visits to these regions to receive money owed saw no success. According to the current Chief Editor, Mr. Babaev, the distributors and others spent the money that should have gone to Mezon. Local journalist, Mr Elmurad Zhusupaliev, said that, "Shortage of personnel has added to all these financial difficulties. There were few professional jour-

nalists on the newspaper, and the staff knew little about the essence of the newspaper business. For example, Umurzakov earlier worked in the gas industry, Rakhim Karimov is a poet, and Akram Babaev is a technical sub-editor of the newspaper Ushadosi. Akram Babaev even has no idea where to place which articles in the paper. So circulation dropped to a little bit more than one thousand copies." As a result, management reduced the staff by a third; now there is the chief editor, a type-setter, a courier and an accountant. Not one journalist. Subsequently, popularity plummeted even further.

### READERS CAN JUDGE

However, the former Chief Editor, now the Head of the laboratory of the Osh gas department, Umurzakov, believes his tenure at the newspaper did not create the present crisis. "I have two higher educations," he said. "I worked in state institutions for many years. They say that during my editorship the authority of the newspaper decreased. Nonsense! In comparison with other editors I never published photos of the presidents Askar Akaev and Islam Karimov upside down. I know for sure which information can be given, and which can not." Since 1998, news and analytical materials were forced into the background. Due to a shortage of journalists, space was given to jokes, everyday histories, and reprints from other newspapers. Circulation dropped to 1000-1500 copies. Rakhim Karimov feels that only readers have the right to judge the quality of the newspaper when he was editor.

According to one of the original journalists of Mezon, Khakimjan Khusanov, there was an infor-

mation vacuum in the region. The state newspapers gave extremely one-sided information. "While creating the newspaper, we hoped for the best," said Elmurad Zhusupaliyev, the first Chief Editor of the newspaper. "We wanted to cover as best as possible the events occurring around us, presenting our readers with information on daily life." According to Azam Abdurazzakov, by the eighth issue of the Mezon, circulation increased to five thousand copies. A teacher of a local school, Mr Satybaldiev recalls, "At that time such a newspaper was badly needed, one that would courageously write about everything. I remember how we wrote about the corrupted officers, or covered the lottery campaign before the celebration Osh's 3000-year anniversary. Then a part of teacher's salary was paid with tickets of the state lottery. The newspaper is still needed now."

### NO MANAGEMENT

However, few professional journalists worked on the newspaper, and there were no managers. Nobody was concerned with marketing. All these factors threatened the existence of the newspaper. "Where is the newspaper that we received that time?" asks Khairullo Tulkinbaev from the Andizhan region of Uzbekistan. "Earlier we had all information on the neighbouring region of Kyrgyzstan. Later the newspaper ceased to come." Problems with the newspaper began during its second year. Temporary suspensions were invoked during the election campaign because Mezon supported the Republican Centre of Society of Uzbeks (earlier the Uzbek National Centre) headed by the deputy of the Council of People's Representatives, Mr Davran Sabirov, (and the joint-stock compa-

ny 'Prometei.') Therefore the newspaper supported its founder during the electoral campaign. As for Mr Sabirov, he has stated that at the first financial possibility he will make all possible to save the newspaper.

### READY AND WAITING

Over the past three years, the newspaper's employees tried to find ways to survive the crisis. "Currently, the newspaper's debt is some 90 thousand soms (\$1800)," said Mr Umurzakov. "The founder promises support with the provision of 30-35 thousand soms (\$600 - \$700) for use by the newspaper. In my opinion, however, we should first to pay all the debts, and then start the newspaper anew." Other opinions are less conciliatory. "When I joined the newspaper, I became very disappointed. There were no journalistic personnel," said Bakhram Doctmatov. "No local news. All information was reprinted from other sources. But in spite of anything we wanted to save the newspaper. To make it readable." According to Umurzakov, for the last two to three years they submitted many applications for grants, but came to nothing. Now staff have lost hope for any debt payment. The last issue of the Mezon numbered some 500-600 copies. Soon it totally disappeared.

### TOO LATE FOR HOPE?

Mr Kamiljan Vasilov, who followed Mezon's development and fall felt that this is just a transition period for the newspaper. "We should find a new journalistic staff. Many readers did like the newspaper," he said. "It would be indecent to leave it to the mercy of fate." Some past readers thought otherwise: "This newspa-

per has ceased to exist as normal press. So what is the reason for saving it?" Other readers are sure that the newspaper that began the independent Uzbek journalism should remain and survive. In the

region, new independent newspapers and news agencies are about to start. So, whether or not Mezon will rise again is not a big question. However, the opinion of the current staff is that a news-worthy

pre-election race in the Kyrgyz Republic will enable Mezon to reach its former audience again. After the electoral campaign ends nobody will bet on how long the Mezon will last.