

# UZBEK OFFICIALS KINDLY SUGGEST AN AGENDA FOR THE UZBEK MEDIA

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**From this March onwards, Uzbekistan's mass media will not only have to defer to the opinion of the State Committee for the Press censors, but also pay heed to the chiefs at the presidential press service, who expect media to plan and announce their content one year in advance.**

National newspapers and magazines, television and radio will now work on the basis of annual concept plans, subject to approval by the presidential press service. During a roundtable meeting in the National Press Center, Rustam Jumayev, the Uzbek President's press secretary, asked the heads of the regional media to draft these plans and present them for coordination to the press service.

It follows from this "request" that each of the media outlets will be expected to present the presidential press service with a projected plan of activities for the year, including critical publications. Newspapers and magazines, television and radio will report, monthly or bimonthly, on their performance during the period under review.

## **BOOSTING PATRIOTISM**

According to Rustam Jumayev, plan-based work would prevent a lot of the shortcomings that are typical of the regional mass media. In his opinion, annual planning, especially regarding the subjects of critical materials, would help put paid to what is known as 'belated criticism'. Rustam Jumayev cited the following example to illustrate the way in which journalists simply follow in the wake of the President's criticisms: "Not one critical

remark was voiced by journalists in their reports that preceded the Surkhan Darya provincial council of people's deputies session. It was only after the session, when the President brought to light a number of drawbacks in the province's performance, that journalists launched a full-scale critical campaign." He suggested that this is because "the fourth estate lacked patriotism, enthusiasm and courage."

While centering on the importance of drafting annual concept plans, Rustam Jurayev asked the heads of regional media organizations to put the system of taxation, as well as annual military and health service spending on the list of topics to be covered. He said this would raise public awareness of the importance of paying taxes. "People abroad see it as their duty and honor to pay taxes while the situation regarding tax payment in this country is quite different," he said, and stressed that the republican media was partly to blame for the situation. He also urged roundtable participants to give special regard to publishing official reports. "The way they are being presented now shows a lack of creative thinking and journalists' personal judgment – features that differentiate one newspaper from another," he said. He pointed out that both national

and regional newspapers confine themselves to reports they get from the UzA, the Uzbek national news agency. However, he did not mention the fact that only the UzA and the Uzbek state television company are allowed to attend formal top-level events by the presidential press service.

## **MIXED RESPONSE**

The idea of drafting annual concept plans sparked a rather mixed response from the audience. The editor-in-chief of *Halk Suzi* newspaper, Abboskhon Usmanov, said plan-based work would, indeed, have a favorable effect on media activities. He said that *Halk Suzi* had been working according to a plan like this for a long time with fourteen major topics on the list. According to *Fidokor's* editor-in-chief though, journalists cannot possibly foretell and plan in advance all its hot topics and lines of activities because sociopolitical life, both at home and abroad, is changing so fast.

Furthermore, the republican media heads cast doubt on the feasibility of future plans. They pointed out that while censorship continued to block critical publications and the authorities carried on intimidating reporters no plan would be able to force reporters to run the risk. Amirkul Karimov, head of the National Press Center, pointed out one more potential barrier to the implementation of concept plans. He complained that ministers and the heads of public authorities refused to visit his Center or

give interviews to reporters. Shortly afterwards, the press secretary himself offered fresh proof of Amirkul Karimov's claim: after the roundtable he, too, refused to give an interview to a reporter, although during the meeting he had condemned public officers who shun reporters.

Independent experts reacted to the presidential press service's new initiative in a peculiar manner. The Internews-Uzbekistan international non-governmental organization lawyer, Karim Bakhrayev, called it ludicrous to plan the mass media's work. "On the other hand, though, it is a tradition of the communist past to bring reporters together and

instruct them what they should write and how. These practices constitute one of the methods used by the government in a bid to subjugate journalists and hound those that are disliked by the authorities," he said.

#### **WAITING FOR PERMISSION**

The Uzbek mass media has so far been looked upon as dependent upon government whim. Reporters are not allowed to publish articles on their own initiative, not just critical reports, but even important news. For example, Uzbek television, radio and newspapers all kept mum about the terrorist attacks in America on September 11 last year.

They just carried on reporting on achievements in Uzbekistan, transmitting normal shows and concerts as if no tragedy occurred. It wasn't until the next day that they reported on the US tragedy, because the media got a blessing from above when the President returned from Samarkand following the appointment of a new head of the provincial administration.

From now on Uzbek reporters will not have to sit on their hands waiting for permission from above to publish a piece of important news or a critical comment. The government order urges them to predict developments and plan publications a year in advance.