

KYRGYZSTAN PRINT SHOPS VERSUS FREEDOM OF THE PRESS

By Bernmet Bukasheva, reporter, Kyrgyzstan

International organizations are involved in a project to launch an independent publishing house in Bishkek. Worried about state control in publishing, Kyrgyzstan's media welcome this move as helping to protect freedom of speech.

The establishment of an alternative print shop in Kyrgyzstan with the support of the US Administration was first suggested a few years ago. In 2000, the initiative was widely discussed during a visit to Kyrgyzstan of then US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright. The first lady of world politics gave serious consideration to requests for US assistance in founding an independent print shop. She met with the leaders of political parties and non-governmental organizations and heard arguments from editors-in-chief of popular newspapers. Their main gripe was that the state-owned Uchkun printing house had monopolized the printing industry and was used by the government to pressure the independent media - read here political opposition.

TOGETHER THEY FALL

Kyrgyzstani's media complained also about the state-owned printing house's high charges. And now the situation of Uchkun and press freedom has come to the forefront. In January 2002, the monopolist stopped printing two opposition newspapers while a few other periodicals accused Uchkun of covert censorship. Newspapers with critical articles were either hit with penalties or

sensitive paragraphs in articles where censored with blank marks. After a new mass-circulation daily, *Moya Stolitsa* (My Capital City), published a series of stories attacking President Askar Akaev's son-in-law, Adil Toygonbaev, and his entourage's illegal activities, the Uchkun printing house announced on January 19, 2002 that it would no longer print nor sign a contract with the newspaper.

Uchkun's managers alleged that *Moya Stolitsa's* publications offended their honor and reputation, and accused the newspaper of working against Uchkun by advocating the creation of an international print office. "The newspaper explicitly favors the idea of creating an international print office in Bishkek and predicts Uchkun's ruin... Nobody will allow this to happen since Uchkun is a state-owned operation," said Uchkun's deputy director Denisjuk in an interview to the *Piramida* television channel.

The ongoing court trial makes it impossible for the newspaper to publish before the court's final ruling.

Afterwards, on January 23, Uchkun refused to print another opposition newspaper, *ResPublica*. Uchkun referred to a court ruling

whereby the publication was to be suspended and all its revenues taken as the newspaper was obliged to pay 100,000 soms after it lost a defamation case. Remarkably, the ruling was hastily made immediately after *ResPublica*, in a sign of solidarity, offered to publish *Moya Stolitsa's* shelved issues. In 1998, Uchkun made it a practice to accept orders only on a prepayment basis. Periodicals wishing to keep appearing turned either to the Bishkek-based Erkin-Too printing house or to operations in Kant despite the poor graphic arts quality of production. Meanwhile, publishing houses that agree to pay the high rates will be welcome to print at Uchkun. Economically, Uchkun is interested in raising its output. Yet politically, it has to refuse many printing houses since Uchkun is an informal tool employed to pressurize the independent press.

STATE RESTRICTIONS

For observers of the waxes and wanes of freedom of expression, January in Kyrgyzstan seems to have been especially eventful. On January 14, 2002, Vice Prime Minister Nikolay Tanayev signed Government Resolution No. 20, enacting the Interim Regulations on Publishing Activities. This document gave the Justice Ministry control over licensing powers and can now suspend companies from publishing. In addition, newspaper-printing rights are now only given to state-invested enterprises. Hence, no private print shop may

print newspapers any longer while the Justice Ministry was free to terminate them at any moment. According to government officials, the document was ostensibly designed to put an end to leaflets and other printed matter distributed by religious extremists. However, the editors-in-chief of seven independent newspapers, including *Agym* (Flow), *Advokat* (Lawyer), *Delo Nomer* (Case No.), *Litsa* (Persons), *Moya Stolitsa*, *ResPublica* (Republic) and *Tribuna* (Tribune), protested against the government moves. They said that the document's real purpose was to hamper the creation of a Bishkek independent publishing house and highlighted the resolution being at variance with national laws and the Constitution. They said the document not only violated freedom of the press but was economically inconsistent as it provided for no measures against monopolies and ignored the need to ensure equal protection for all forms of property.

OUTSIDE HELP

Officers of fifteen non-governmental organizations joined the protest. A letter from the organizations, dated February 6, 2002, reads: "We publish a variety of news bulletins in full agreement with our statutes. The government's new resolution, however, will force us to bring our activities to a close. We regard the government's resolution as a gross violation of freedoms of expression and religion".

In the meantime, on February 18, 2002 the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) center in Bishkek hosted an informal consultative meeting bringing together the officers of the American and German Embassies, and several international and regional organizations

to discuss concrete measures to be taken for creating an independent print shop in Bishkek. As to the composition of the Publishing House's Board of Directors, the diplomatic representatives suggested seats should be assigned not only to the representatives of the United States and European Union but also to government officials of Kyrgyzstan, independent journalists and non-governmental activists. The others, although opposed to the idea of the Kyrgyzstan government being involved in the initiative, admitted that this would be a wise step. Otherwise the project would be left hanging while foreign organizations would be accused of intervening in the country's domestic affairs. OSCE employees underlined that this would be a purely commercial project, having nothing to do with human rights issues and targeting solely the capacity building of Kyrgyzstan's independent press by providing additional printing facilities. The cost of the project is estimated at \$US 800,000, which will be provided by the US government.

EUROPE'S HELP

The European Union was also ready to extend the necessary funds when America was delaying its decision and human rights activists' complaints grew. The EU's participation, in all likelihood, will be limited to "moral functions", such as lobbying the Kyrgyz government for desired actions while being a co-manager of the publishing house. With the EU involved, will become an international project rather than American – a much more preferable outcome politically. The Publishing House is scheduled to start operation before year-end.

TOGETHER THEY STAND

Secretary General of the OSCE, Ján Kubiš, while meeting in Vienna on February 25 with Topchubek Turgunaliyev, Chairman of the newly-created non-government Institute of Human Rights and Liberties, and Ramazan Dyrlydayev, head of the Kyrgyz Human Rights Committee, assured them of his intention to help organize an independent print office. In his interview to the Vienna-based *Radio Azattyk* (Liberty) R.Dyrlygayev quoted J. Kubiš as saying, "We shall help you create an independent print office." Turgunaliyev reaffirmed this at a press conference on his return to Bishkek. Similar promises were given to Turgunaliyev at a reception in the US Department of State. The administration of Uchkun and managers of a few other inefficient and outdated state-run printing houses as well as heads of government gazettes make no secret of their antagonism towards the establishment of an alternative print office. The government press, which is thriving along side other state-owned print shops, would hate to see other printed matter enter the market, while printing houses are apprehensive that they may lose their clientele.

Most parliament members, though, speak in favor of this initiative. Small-circulation and small-budget private tabloids are also hoping tariffs in the new print shop will be relatively cheaper because printing and news-print in the region cost more than any other part of the world. Others believe that imported equipment will provide quality and reasonable prices.

As for the politically persecuted independent press of Kyrgyzstan, it looks upon the fu-

ture print shop as the only means to save a delicate situation. Even if the prices do not go down, the very fact that in the print shop management are representatives

of international organizations, who advocate human rights and liberties, will protect publications from reprisals from regional authorities.

In addition, the new print shop will safeguard journalists against unemployment as existence of their publications will secure their continued livelihood.