

## Editorial

# NATURAL RESOURCES IN CENTRAL ASIAN MEDIA: TABOO AND DEBATE

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**The ways in which the local media treat problems relating to the management and distribution of natural resources in Central Asian countries range from blanket bans on certain subjects to broad public debates on others that still fail to influence official decision-making.**

The quality of Central Asian publications and the range of topics they cover, in the context of the management and distribution of natural resources, depends upon the political situation within each country and the respective reporters' interest in these subjects. A contrasting picture takes shape. On the one hand, there are countries proscribing analytical reports and discussions focusing on water problems or matters related to uranium reserves. On the other hand, there are countries where the media is free to involve the general public in debates on water and land-related issues. At the same time, some local reporters - for example, those working in Kyrgyzstan - doubt whether the authorities ever respond to public opinion, as reflected by the media, and take it into account when addressing matters related to natural resources.

### **WATER SHORTAGES DENIED**

There is no denying that reports describing the management and distribution of water resources appear in the Uzbekistani media, although they are mostly of

general interest and do not get to the root of the matter. While enjoying rather free access to information, the Uzbekistani media nevertheless steers clear of such thorny issues as the conflict between Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan over the distribution and use of water and gas. According to a former National News Agency (UZA) reporter, this is because information of this kind cannot be freely circulated in Uzbekistan; restrictions are imposed by media leaders rather than from well-informed government officials or censors. One media leader explained that water management issues should not be reported on because there are no water shortages in Uzbekistan (see «Water management as seen by Uzbekistani media» by Nadezhda Stepanova in this issue of *Media Insight Central Asia*).

Another reason for the lack of analytical reports concerning natural resources is the financial situation of reporters which forces them to give preference to well-paid PR material rather than engage in journalistic investigations. «Regrettably, Uzbekistani report-

ers are still extremely low-paid, on average. Many are just living from hand to mouth. In the end, this affects the way they treat «labor-consuming» problems - ones involving investigation, a great deal of energy and, at times, personal courage» (Ibid).

### **STRATEGY OR TREACHERY?**

Negotiations on disputed territories and the interstate agreement signed by Kyrgyzstan and China last May sparked heated public debates in Kyrgyzstan. The media reported on the wide range of views shared by various political and public figures (see «Conflicting opinions about land hand-over from Kyrgyzstan to China» by Yelena Buldakova in this issue). According to Buldakova, the disputed areas along the border between Kyrgyzstan and China split the national media into two conflicting camps. «Some media responded negatively to this move by the country's leadership, seeing it as a betrayal of the people's interests,» she reports. The pro-government media favored the official course and spelled out its support for the agreement with China, whereby around 30% of the disputed territory (approximately 90,000 hectares) were to be ceded to China with 70% remaining under Kyrgyzstani jurisdiction.

Although regularly covered by

the media, the debates had no significant effect on the outcome of the negotiations. «The next time deputies discuss disputed territories - with Uzbekistan, for example - they will vote in favor of the President and our neighbors, well aware they will be pressurized to do so by both the president and government,» comments a reporter from ResPublica newspaper (Ibid).

### **THE TAJIKISTANI MEDIA**

Electricity shortages during the winter months and the dearth of water in the summer are two hot topics that the Tajikistani media report on when addressing the management of natural resources in their country (see «Natural Resources As Covered by the Tajikistani Media» by Gulchekhra Mansurova in this issue). Reporters ask why Tajikistan, a country abundant in natural resources, suffers from their dearth every year. «The mineral-rich Rasht valley - industrious people, fertile land, a hub of apiculture - is idle nowadays. No work. Machines stand idle. All because electricity is in short

supply»(Ibid). The Tajikistani media also points out that drought combined with a lack of water supplies and land-related controversies trigger conflict on the Tajikistan-Kyrgyzstan border. The media encourages debates on possible solutions to the problems arising from the management and distribution of the country's natural resources, where some call for the building of a nuclear power station to tackle the electricity shortage, while others opt for tapping glacial potential in the Eastern Pamirs. Journalists themselves explain that the national media inadequately cover the natural resources issue because of journalists' low skills.

### **KAZAKHSTAN'S MEDIA**

Water supplies in Kazakhstan and the Central Asian region at large are discussed in analytical reports in the Kazakhstani media. The peculiarity of the approach taken by Kazakhstani journalists is explained by the fact that they take the regional aspect of the water issue into account. «The struggle for control of the new «in-

ternational commodity» - water resources - may ignite new conflicts and religious wars. (...) In today's world a country may use water as a means to pressurize its neighbors, and Central Asia countries are no exception to this practice,» (see «Kazakhstani news media on the region's water» by Olga Artamonova in this issue). As in other Central Asian countries, reporters point out that «the authorities do not address the water issue except at the start of the summertime heat» (Ibid). The problem of mutual offsets and debts amongst Central Asian countries in the context of water resources management and distribution received detailed attention from the specialized political and economic media in Kazakhstan. At the same time, according to Olga Artamonova, the Kazakhstani media «tries to maintain a neutral position as it covers international affairs, especially knotty problems like the distribution of water resources in Central Asia, and leaves its readers to make their own conclusions from the facts cited.»