

# KAZAKH AUTHORITIES AFRAID OF FREE PUBLIC DISCUSSIONS

*By Aigul Omarova, journalist, Kazakhstan*

**This year spring saw an unprecedented pressure on the media in Kazakhstan: the regular set of ‘legal’ pressure methods was this time added by battering journalists and attacking editorial and TV offices.**

The growing pressure on the media dates back to last fall when *KTK* TV channel’s correspondent Vladimir Mouss stated that his immediate supervisor in the company, Inna Rudakova, asked him to use any way to find compromising information against the Pavlodar Province akim (Governor) Galymzhan Zhakiyanov. The correspondent failed to get any such information and reported about that to his chief. The latter insisted that he should look for something negative against Zhakiyanov. After he once again failed to find anything compromising, Vladimir Mouss made a public statement in which he told about the pressure exerted on him by the *KTK* chiefs. And after the news conference, he was dismissed.

## **ATTACK FROM THE TOP**

In his turn, Galymzhan Zhakiyanov expounded his version of the events in an interview to *Business Review Respublica* republican newspaper. According to the Akim, the orders given to the journalists came in fact from the President’s powerful son-in-law Rakhat Aliev, at the time First Deputy Director of the National Security Committee, who didn’t like independent behavior of the Pavlodar governor. That is why materials criticizing Zhakiyanov’s activities appeared in

the media controlled by him (TV channels *KTK*, *Khabar*, *NTK* and *Kzakhstan-1* and the newspapers *Novoye Pokoleniye* and *Caravan* are parts of the holding controlled by Rakhat Aliev and Dariga Nazarbayeva).

## **NEW OPPOSITION**

As a matter of fact these events began the confrontation in the top ranks, resulted in Aliev’s resignation and the appearance of the non-governmental organization Democratic Choice of Kazakhstan (DCK). DCK was established by several high-ranking officials such as Vice Premier Oraz Zhandosov; Minister of Labor and Social Welfare Alikhan Baimenov; Deputy Defense minister Zhannat Ertelesova; Majilis (parliament) members Bulat Abilov and Tolen Tohtasynov; senator Zauresh Battalova; Pavlodar Governor Zhakiyanov, and former Minister of Energy, Industry and Trade Mukhtar Ablyazov. All of them expressed their dissent with what was happening in the country. In the DCK founders’ view, the country’s political reforms are lagging behind the economic; as a result the society is rolling back from democratic principles to authoritarian ruling.

It should be noted that the new association had sufficient financial and information resources. E.g.,

Ablyazov owned a media holding that included TAN TV channel and the newspapers *Respublica Business Review*, *The Globe* and *Kazakhstan*; and Zhakiyanov controlled almost all press in the Pavlodar Province and supported *Ibis* TV Company. These facts largely inspired Kazakhstan’s ‘information war’.

## **POWER TOUGHENS ITS GRIP**

Nursultan Nazarbayev was silent watching the battles waged by the so-called ‘young Turks’ (so does the media call representatives of business and state elite) in the media controlled by this or another group; but this year he interrupted his silence. In autumn 2001 some analysts supposed the battles between ‘young Turks’ were being waged with silent consent from the Head of the State. However it became obvious in winter and spring 2002 that things were quite different. Speaking to akims of all levels in January 2002, Nazarbayev gave to understand that he would not tolerate the media to freely express their opinions on social processes; and deputy Khakim Kushkaliev proposed to give more detail explanations on that to the newspapers and TV channels that allowed themselves too much thus encroaching on state integrity, the President and the Government.

Following these statements, the Ministry of Information, Culture and Public Accord began to weekly check up broadcasters concerning 50/50 Kazakh-Russian broad-

casting. (In spring 2001 the parliament amended the media law. These amendments have strongly restricted republican companies' retransmission of Russian channels. In addition a standard was introduced according to which 50% of the airtime should be allocated to broadcasting in the national language, i.e. Kazakh; and the rest to Russian.) In parallel, a tender was established for radio and TV frequencies. At the beginning, the Vice Premier Bauyrzhan Mulhamedzhanov chaired the tender committee. The majority of observers immediately made a proposal that the tender was held in order to get rid of disagreeable TV companies. Without doubt, these included *Irbis* regional company in Pavlodar and *TAN* channel in Almaty. This January *Irbis* broadcasting was suspended because the company showed a movie considered as pornographic, in nighttime. In parallel Majilis deputy Vladimir Dvoretzky sued *Irbis* for the journalists' allegedly insulting sayings towards him. The court decision ended in favor of the member of parliament. Hence the company was sentenced to pay 1-million tenge fine. Indeed, the company was unable to pay such money.

### **TAN CHANNEL SILENCED**

The *TAN* channel case was different: Almaty city committee of communication and computerization stated that channel broadcasting is distorted for technical reasons. For that reason the company was disallowed to air before the distortions were removed. But when all interference were removed, broadcasting was not resumed. On 29 of March, the channel workers came to their job and found the channel feeder damaged. The feeder was replaced by a temporary one - but nevertheless the

channel was not allowed to broadcast. On 15 of May, the feeder was once again damaged. As a result *TAN* has not been able to broadcast so far. Meanwhile the channel's 'Power' news and analytical broadcast was the republic's top rated one. Its position had been recognized by gaining the first prize awarded during Altyn Zhuldyz competition in March 2002. The broadcast debated some important issues for Kazakhstan, including corruption in top power ranks. Observers believe that that was the reason lying behind the efforts to shut down *TAN*. Representatives of many political parties and public associations expressed themselves in defense of the channel. A public committee to defend the channel was established, chaired by well-known TV journalist Gulzhan Ergalieva.

### **TERROR CAMPAIGN**

Between 19 and 22 of March, some events that took place in Almaty suggested to many observers that mass terror campaign against the media began in Kazakhstan. On 19 of May, workers of *Respublica Business Review* found a decapitated dog corpse hung on window bar, with a note quoting: "There will be no next time". In a day editor-in-chief Irina Petrushova found a head of that dog accompanied with the similar note in her home yard. However the journalists were not afraid and kept on issuing the newspaper. As the newspaper used to publish acute articles about unseemly deeds about top functionaries, this March its publication was disallowed under the pretext that the imprint of the newspaper was lacking. Prior to this, the state-owned *Dauir* concern refused to print the newspaper. Therefore the journalists had to use a different name and format to produce the

paper. In one of its issues the newspaper reported about the way the facilities belonging to the Presidential Office's Economic Department are being privatized. This article seems to have been the last straw. Anyway, fire happened after that in *Business Review Respublica* editorial office.

### **QUANTITY, NOT QUALITY**

One day before that, some unidentified people had rushed into the apartment leased by the opposition newspaper *SolDat*. Computers and all documents were stolen and the layouter Kenzhe Aitbakieva and journalist Bahytkul Mekenbai were beaten. Most of public figures assessed the May pressure on the media as unprecedented and referred to it as "terror". "The party Ak-Zhol condemns current pressure on the media, the unruly campaign now created by either the power or some third force. When they say our country has one and half thousand media - electronic, private - this says nothing for freedom of speech as a fact. Now we see that quantity has not turned into quality; and quality has not turned into liberty. TV channels are being closed; newspapers are being persecuted; and today physical reprisal against journalists has begun. I believe that the power must intervene; Prime minister, our democrat, must intervene; the society must not keep silent anymore. The power is merely afraid of free discussions within society and doesn't want that people can freely express their opinions about all issues the country now faces," says Bulat Abilov, Ak-Zhol party co-chairman.

Majilis deputy Ghani Kasymov seconds him: "I've spoken in the parliament to narrow 'commercial secret' notion. We don't know who owns TV channels. Now the prop-

erty redistribution is going on, and the number of foreign owners exceeds the share of our foreign investors in some companies. This is an important violation of the law. Representatives of all parliamentary factions have backed me. I believe the Prime minister must respond to this bacchanalia now going on around our media. It was he who for a long time has been in charge of ideology in the country. When the country declares that it wants to be a member in some anti-terrorist community, first of all the country should be put in order.”

#### “UNKNOWN HOOLIGANS”

The authorities tried to offer their own explanation of the events. Deputy Chief of Almaty Department of Interior, Rakhizhan Toizhaniv said at a press conference that almost all 8 cases of anti-media attacks were actions of hoo-

liganism committed by unknown individuals, and had no political connection. Remarkably, some cases are being investigated. However the police have thus far not named the two people who battered *TAN* channel chief cameraman Ruslan Tairov on 2 of April.

#### NEXT CONFRONTATION?

However, there are some fears that all cases currently under investigation will remain unexposed, like that is the case of battered chairman of executive committee of the Republican Popular Party of Kazakhstan, Amirzhan Kosanov. The former press secretary of Akezhan Kazhegekdin was beaten four years ago, however, the investigators have not yet summoned Kosanov for interrogation. According to Kosanov what has recently been happening in the country resembles agony rather than merely

convulsive actions of the power. “There’s one logic behind the authorities’ actions: intimidate to dissuade others trying again. They’re trying to intimidate potential power opponents by arresting Ablyazov or journalists who would join the opposition camp, or by setting fire in *Respublica Business Review* office. It’s a deplorable and terrible fact. I’m sure the official power is behind this because only those people who have impunity guarantees can behave this way.” After the massed attack on the media, the official power took a respite connected, analysts believe, with the first Summit on Interaction and Confidence-building Measures in Asia in Almaty. As this is over one can expect a new round of confrontation between the power and the media in the form of a next frequency tender for southern regions of Kazakhstan.