

# WATER USE REPORTING CONSTRAINTS IN UZBEK MEDIA

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**Uzbekistan Journalists shy away from reporting the role of water use and water distribution issues in relationships between the Central Asian nations. Examining this theme requires much labor, fidelity to principles and fortitude, whereas labor remuneration is paltry.**

The Uzbek media usually divide national history into two stages: before and after the collapse of the USSR. The former is usually referred to as the time when the republic was under pressure from the center's pressure and was obliged to obey top-down instructions, often to its own detriment. Then the authors usually state that many things have changed after the proclaimed sovereignty. Successes and achievements are listed – the chief one is Uzbek's right to independently decide its fate.

This stereotype prevents one from clear-minded assessment of the post-USSR situation. Meanwhile, certain issues are both hard and painful, especially in the water use sector.

## **LACK OF AGREEMENT**

During the post-USSR decade, the five independent nations have failed to agree on how to share the water in the region's largest river basins of Syrdarya and Amudarya. Both cities and villages of Uzbekistan suffer water shortages – for irrigation and for everyday human needs. So why are the regional governments unable to agree on water use? The following facts could exemplify the way the Uzbek media inform citizens about the related events. The question re-

mains whether the reporting is comprehensive and sufficiently in-depth.

## **THE MEDIA SILENT**

Two Russian-language weeklies in Uzbekistan – *Narodnoye Slovo* and *Pravda Vostoka* – regularly publish articles on water use. In May-April 2002 alone it published several pieces by staff and freelance contributors: *When Drinking Water Is Short, Who Muddles the Chirchik Waters, Water Saving Will Be Repaid A Hundredfold, A Golden Drop, and Shortage of Water and its Effects*. Unfortunately these and many others are pure news stories, simply reporting actions or calling on readers to save water in every possible way.

Indeed there should be an education campaign in the media regarding water resources - for they are not unlimited, as people used to believe. Meanwhile citizens have the right to know why water deficit has emerged and what is being done nationally and regionally to overcome it. Journalists have a sufficient legal base to scrutinize the issue. The legal issues fall primarily within the laws 'On Mass Media' and 'On Guarantees and Freedom of Access to Information.' So why are these opportunities not

used?

At first sight it may seem that the strict censorship effective until May 14, 2002 was a problem. Still readers and TV viewers may ask why mutual water and gas claims by Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan have never been discussed in the press and TV screens. To report on this it was enough for journalists to go to the adjacent country where the press could freely and openly discuss this and other issues. Information could be obtained from Internet sites as well. So why this has not been done?

One of the former workers of the National Information Agency (UZA) said Uzbekistan had limitations for this type of information. However, these do not come from functionaries or censors but rather from the media directors themselves.

## **BUYING SILENCE**

Last year UZA received a report of the director of the Interstate Water Use Coordinating Committee of Central Asia. The report mildly and diplomatically stated that the signed intergovernmental agreements had not been carried out. Uzbekistan is no exception. The basis of the report was as follows: the issue of water would be resolved if the signing parties kept to the agreements. According to our source, one of the UZA directors prevented the staff member who had that report to even touch upon the theme. He promised to pay a fee to the jour-

nalist should he withhold that material from publication in the press media. To the journalist's question "Isn't the country short of water?" he flatly answered "No".

### **NO MATERIAL INTEREST**

Indeed, Uzbek journalists experience different types of control, including self-censorship. However one can hardly say that speaking on this issue is fully ruled out in the media. This fact is exemplified by the continuous labor of Natalya Shulepina, an ecology journalist with Pravda Vostoka. Over the last three months, she published four big analytical articles under the general title 'Five Viewpoints of Water Law in the Aral Sea Basin' in her newspaper. These articles offered a detailed history of the issue and the efforts to resolve it at interstate, intergovernmental and interdepartmental levels. They explained national water law in each of the region's five countries; and they outlined why Kyrgyzstan is aspiring to make water resource a commodity. In addition, the jour-

nalist focussed on the questions related to the Aral Sea salvation project funding and full rehabilitation of hydrometeorology services in Central Asia and Kazakhstan.

According to Shulepina, she spoke in Pravda Vostoka on water discharge from the Toktogul reservoir into the Naryn River and following dam destructions in some districts of Uzbekistan's Namangan Province.

### **SENSITIVE SUBJECT**

These articles contain no statements as to fault and no names of decision-makers. Nevertheless an ordinary reader can obtain wide reaching data on the region's urgent water use issues from the paper. Of course it was not easy to write and publish these reports, emphasized the author. However, she did find support in the President's Office. The reason why the media disregards water use issues is the reluctance of journalists to tackle the subject rather than the lack of opportunity to write openly about it. They have no material

interest in doing this. It is easier to make a PR article for a bank, a private company or any other market structure (all of which can be done), which guarantees additional money, often many times above the journalist's regular salary.

Unfortunately the republic's average salary for journalists remains very low. Many can hardly make ends meet. Ultimately, this makes them disregard 'labor-intensive' topics that require tedious examination, much energy and even personal courage.

"Why take on sensitive topics? Why contract a headache?" Shulepina concludes. She believes that serious analytical articles on natural resources and environment are unlikely to appear in the press, radio and television in the near future. Which leaves Uzbekistan with no more than two or three journalists continuously developing this theme. The Uzbek media merely have no demand for this type of information because their economic situation depends on advertisers rather than on audience.