

## Editorial

# INTERNET DEVELOPMENT IN CENTRAL ASIAN COUNTRIES

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**The explosion of information available on the Web has not yet reached Central Asia. When it does, the authorities intend to seek control of this media by monopolizing access to the Internet.**

Currently there are four ISPs active in Tajikistan. Using Tajiktelecom's infrastructure, a republican network was created with a corporate-net linked to it later on. This sector is subject to a Tajikistan Government Decree called, "On Creating a Republican Data Transmission Network and Measures Aimed at Regimentation of Access to World Information Networks", dated August 8, 2001. This document sets forth procedures for providing Internet services within Tajikistan (See Gulnora Amirshoyeva's article in this issue).

### **ACCESS RESTRICTED**

Meanwhile, on-line journalism in Tajikistan is still in its infancy. Web sites are not institutionalized as mass media outlets while existing Web sites are anything but a wealth of information. "It would be premature to say that the mass media of Tajikistan is through with its transition to a digital form as very few are able to use the Internet," said director of the Asia-Plus News Agency, Umeda Babakhanova.

A US Department of State report on human rights practices

in Tajikistan in 2001, comments in particular; "Access to the Internet is limited... High fees and limited capacity put access to information over the Internet out of reach for most citizens."

However, a free Internet is a problem in other countries too. In Uzbekistan, most citizens, including journalists, do not have regular access to the Internet. A government-regulated monopoly of cyberspace makes information flows controllable. Journalist Rustam Sydykov says, "Uzbekistan has no laws regimenting online mass media's activities except for a few regulative documents, including 'Rules of Access To and Use of the National Data Transmission Network To Be Observed By Providers and Subscribers,' and 'Guidelines for Preparation and Dissemination of Information Resources of the Republic of Uzbekistan Through Data Transmission Networks, Including the Internet.'

What matters is that both documents legitimate the Uzpak state-owned agency as a monopolistic Internet provider, free to control data transmission and

dictate tariff policies." (See Rustam Sydykov's article in this edition). Communication experts have more than once pointed to the need for a special "cyber law", continues the journalist. In all likelihood, an Internet Law in Uzbekistan is still a matter for the future. Chairman of the Parliament's Press Committee, Utkir Khashimov says there is no such bill on the 2002 list.

### **MASS MEDIA LAWS**

In Kazakhstan, the International Day of Freedom of the Press, marked on May 3, 2001, saw the enforcement of amendments to the Mass Media Law, adopted after months of debates. One of the amendments offers a unique opportunity to tame the Internet legitimately by identifying Web sites as mass media publications.

The only concession the newly-adopted law has made (to the development of Internet communications), is a provision whereby Web sites, unlike print and electronic mass media, are exempt from compulsory registration with the Ministry of Culture, Information and Public Concord, says reporter Olga Artamonova. In addition, criminal prosecution may be instigated against Web site owners and their customers if they post any kind of

information recognized as being in conflict with the law. (See Olga Artamonova's article in this issue). A well-known Kazakhstani journalist, Sergey Duvanov, identified several factors in the adoption of Web site related amendments: "Firstly, an attempt to impose State control over opening Web sites by Kazakhstani Web users; secondly, a wish to introduce covert political censorship into Kazakhstani cyberspace; and, thirdly, to get the legal power to shut down Web sites deemed untrustworthy by the authorities."

Internet users in Kyrgyzstan fear that Kyrgyztelecom's

stepped-up activities in the Internet market may result in the rise of a state monopoly of Web access provision. True, there are steps being taken in that central Asian country aimed at choking competition between the state-owned agency, Kyrgyztelecom, and private ISPs. (See Viktor Parfyonov's article in this issue).

However, computer safety expert Mikhail Ropmanenko, believes that potential monopolization of the Internet can hardly endanger freedom of expression and the press in Kyrgyzstan. The World Wide Web, he says, is arranged so that an individual user doesn't care about

the geographical location of a site with a report he is after, be it in Bishkek or in Hannover. Therefore, no screening of Kyrgyz sites posted beyond the country's national borders is technically possible.

The Web is a powerful global and uncontrollable source of information (impossible to review and non-enforceable), supposedly freely chosen by the individual. Political or economic barriers raised by authorities will hardly help Central Asian countries become fully-fledged members of the World Wide Net considering themselves to be a civilized part of the international telecoms community.