

INTERNECINE WARS IN THE NEWS MEDIA OF KYRGYZSTAN

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With an aggravated sociopolitical situation in Kyrgyzstan, antagonism between state-owned and private news media tends to grow into warfare.

In June 2002, a number of government-controlled newspapers, such as *Erkin-Too* (5/06, 7/06 and 12/06/02), *Kyrgyzs Tuusu* (11/06/02) and *Slovo Kyrgyzstana* (14/06/02), published a series of articles accusing certain opposition leaders, international missions and independent newspapers of being involved in political extremism. They accused them also of being embroiled in the events of March 17, 2002, when police shot dead a number of peaceful residents in the city of Aksiy who had come out to support an opposition deputy.

These publications said, in particular, that some of the NGOs, public figures and independent media use international grants to stage mass protests and unauthorized rallies. K. Sheraliyev, in an article headlined, "Give alms to the poor oppositionist" ("*Slovo Kyrgyzstana*", 14/06/02) wrote: "Leaders of the so-called opposition, lavishly financed from abroad, do spend part of the money organizing pickets, rallies and riots although they pocket the lion's share of the funds of which citizens, of course, do not have the slightest idea."

The independent press of Kyrgyzstan responded by publications (Agym, 11/06/02; Moya Stolitsa, 11, 14, 18, 19 and 21/06/02) saying that the government

ordered the above articles. Journalists, political figures and representatives of international organizations expressed their own views of the situation. Regional director of the Institute of the Coverage of War and Peace, Chinara Zhakypova, also charged with political extremism, publicized an open letter "Cap in Hand" (Agym, 11/06/02), in which she gave a sarcastic guilty plea.

Moreover, Chinara Zhakypova and leader of the NGO coalition Tolekan Ismailova, made public their address (Agym, 11/06/02; Moya Stolitsa, 11/06/02) to the Speaker of the Legislative Assembly of the Kyrgyz parliament Abdygany Erkebayev asking him to bring the issue before parliament committees. In the address they expressed their concern about the political situation in this country and the authorities' ineptitude in maintaining a dialogue with the representatives of civil society regarding the settlement of the political crisis."

POLITICAL DISCREDIT

On 17/06/02, the Foreign Ministry of Kyrgyzstan released a statement (see news archive of AKIpress news agency, www.akipress.kg) rejecting any connection between the Government and the articles

carried by *Erkin-Too*, *Kyrgyz-Tuuse* and *Slovo Kyrgyzstana* newspapers that discredited some opposition leaders and human rights organizations. "The Government of the Kyrgyz Republic has not initiated the said publications nor has it anything to do with them," the Foreign Ministry's statement said. "Enjoying freedom of speech and expression, the citizens of our country have the right to express their opinion on any issue of social concern".

A Coalition "For Democracy and Civil Society" comprising over 160 NGOs nationwide, responded to the Foreign Ministry's press-release by issuing their own statement. This said that the Foreign Ministry's statement, "cannot be taken seriously as all the newspapers in point are governmental organs" ("*Moya Stolitsa*, 19/06/02"). The Coalition believes that it has every ground to, "expect an official apology from authorities and a refutation of defamatory statements in the press in perfect agreement with laws in force in Kyrgyzstan."

The Foreign Ministry's press release was followed by a statement issued by the National Security Service (KABAR News Agency archive, 18/06/02, www.kabar.kg), calling on the mass media, social and political movements, parties and non-government organizations of Kyrgyzstan to abstain from publishing unproven facts that

could further destabilize the national situation.

The National Security Service's press release also pointed to unfair coverage by the mass media of rallies and pickets in southern Kyrgyzstan. They argued that, according to special services' intelligence, about 1,200 people took part in an unauthorized rally held on 17/06/02 in the city of Jalal-Abad, whereas some news media reports put the figure at up to 8,000. The National Security service says "unfair coverage of the process and contents of the rally has adverse effects on the political situation at home as it gives rise to various rumours."

Organizers of the rallies in Jalal-Abad flatly refused to talk with reporters of the Akiykat local government newspaper and KOORT television channel, asserting that the reporters would hardly give a true picture of events, said Orozaly Karasartov, press secretary of the Jalal-Abad Governor.

OPINIONS DIVIDED

Editor-in-chief of the Erkin-Too government newspaper Esenbai Kaldarov points to the opposite orientation of state-owned and independent mass media. The three government publications – Erkin Too, Kyrgyz Tuusu and Slovo Kyrgyzstana – focus primarily on the State's reform efforts with preference given markedly to good news. Thus, the

proportion of 'good' and 'bad' news in the newspaper he leads stands at 70:30. In contrast, independent news media indulges in reporting on the seamy side of life, according to E.Kaldarov. When asked about objective reporting the editor-in-chief said there is truth and truth, and if government mass media ceases to look on the bright side of things then who will?

Reporter on the Moya Stolitsa independent newspaper, Vyacheslav Timirbayev, says the ongoing conflict stems from government and independent mass media's polar stands. "This showdown knows not half-tones or the rich colors of life. The former indulge in praising everything to the skies while the latter, with the same abandon, lapse into bad-mouthing," Timirbayev remarks. It is "authorities and their certain structures which are to blame for the present situation as they drag them into a warfare in the information field and supply blatant misinformation to government mass media." Timirbayev believes the situation cannot be settled as long as this country's mass media is subdivided into government and non-government outlets. "Unfortunately, hardly can one expect the republican government to be able to relinquish this powerful means of shaping people's minds and souls in the foreseeable future," adds Timirbayev.

Head of the Government's press-service, Kurmanbek Ramatov, points to a groundless and "rather conventional" division of mass media into governmental and independent outlets as; "there are no media outlets largely or wholly dependent financially on the Government." Ramatov says Kyrgyz mass media's basic problem is rooted in a "low professional level of the journalist corps."

Chief of the National Security press service, Taalaibek Jumadylov, believes the difference in the way governmental and independent mass media treats complex socio-political processes underway in Kyrgyzstan is a "specular reflection of views shared by the sides whose interests mass media advocate." The governmental media is less prompt and informative in presenting the news picture of the day, failing to provide a full range of public opinion as it limits itself to reporting on the Government's stand alone.

In the meantime, the National Security press service chief doubts there are any truly independent news media outlets in this country capable of coming to grips with today's realities in a sound, fair and unbiased way. Both governmental and opposition news media "must be eager to seek concord and compromise for the sake of civil peace and stability in Kyrgyzstan," Taalaibek Jumadylov said.