

KAZAKHSTAN IMPOSES SELECTIVE ACCESS TO INFORMATION

Aigul Omarova, reporter, Kazakhstan

The situation in the information field of Kazakhstan grows increasingly critical. Kazakhstan's mass media is facing a host of problems, with restricted access to official information taking center-stage.

In general terms, journalists are intentionally denied access to information. International experts and some journalists are convinced that the authorities are seeking to deprive society of unbiased and credible information. "Restricted access to official information means infringing on the rights of reporters and mass media," said Ganna Krasilnikova, a lawyer with the Adil Soz International Fund for the Protection of Freedom of Speech.

Under Article 18 of the Law on the Mass Media of the Republic of Kazakhstan, officials must provide citizens and journalists with any information they need. A refusal to do so is regarded as an attempt to obstruct reporters in the discharge of their professional duties, and journalists are free to challenge in court such action by government officers and other officials. In practice, though, there is no case on record of a mass media outlet or any television company bringing a suit against government officials.

Correspondent of the 31st Channel TV Timur Zhumazhanov identifies several reasons why reporters do not go to court. "It would be hard for any journalist to initiate a legal proceeding. It's all pettifoggery, and there are very few people wishing to get involved

in these matters. For another thing, this country's judicial system is so imperfect that hearings may last too long with our courts being anything but independent and judges being government appointees."

WHAT STATISTICS SAY

Kazakhstan's journalists choose other ways to get information. According to evidence of the Komkon-2-Eurasia polling service, "most journalists draw information from the tapes of news agencies (52 percent of those polled). Next come informal sources having access to desirable information (14.6%) while press services' reports come in third place with only 8.3% of respondents using information contained therein."

The polls also revealed that 6.2% of journalists get news mostly from their colleagues in private talks. Although the overwhelming majority of government authorities and national companies have press-services of their own, journalists complain that they are half-closed and sluggish. Only 12.5% of journalists polled by Komkon-2-Eurasia thought press-services were always cooperative while 8.3% believe, based on personal experience, that the press-services effectively hamper journalists in getting information.

Media workers were also asked

to evaluate the efforts of ministerial, departmental and some of the bigger national corporate press-services according to a five-point scale. None of them got a top mark. However, the press-service of the National Bank of Kazakhstan was awarded 4.1 and found to be most open to journalists.

The Bank's president Grigory Marchenko is committed to the policy of openness and cooperation with mass media. He meets with the media people every month to give details about what the leading financial institution has done during the period in review, comments on monetary and other financial matters. Also, the press-services of the Atomic Power Ministry, Cabinet of Ministers and Natural Gas Transportation Ministry were named among the most cooperative organizations.

The lowest-rated press services included those of the National Security Committee and the Ministry of Agriculture. The evidence obtained during the poll is a glowing example of the real situation regarding restricted access to information. This is due not only to the low professional level of the press service staff (hired chiefly from among non-professional journalists) but it also comes from the lack of openness on the part of the heads of the above-mentioned institutions.

JOURNALISTS' QUEST

It has become common practice, in response to requests for in-

formation from journalists, to request that they send in a list of issues they are interested in. As a rule, no reply comes after all. Says Timur Zhumazhanov, a capable reporter from the 31st Channel television company: "As regards the collection of information it is very difficult to get official information in the quantities a journalist needs to paint a total picture of any event.

Especially, if it is the case of some scandals, from time to time mentioned in the western or Russian press. Whenever you look for facts that agree or disagree with these reports, in most cases you see no response whatsoever." The journalist complained, "they just refuse to provide information and give no reason why. The whole thing turns into a red-tape issue. They ask you to write an official letter, you fax a questionnaire and, after all, instead of the 10 days during which government authorities must respond, you get nothing."

Yet, Kazakh-language mass media is having still greater trouble getting news. "Getting information is a problem, indeed. There are two general ways of obtaining information when you, for example, fax a letter through official channels. In such cases you may encounter a negative reply, or delayed information. In the latter instance, when we approach some people in order to get information, most of them refuse to give comments, saying in the Kazakh language that they don't speak Kazakh or speak

it badly. I think that Kazakh-speaking journalists have to overcome many more barriers in getting information," correspondent of 31st Channel's Kazakh bureau Erlan Atanbai.

Editor-in-chief of Continent magazine Sultan Akimbekov and editor-in-chief of Management Technologies magazine Erlan Seitimov agree that in the long run journalists have no option but to try and get information through their personal channels. Good if news is provided by senior officials, but more often than not journalists have to rely on reports coming from news agencies or the press services of government authorities.

NOT FOR THE CRITICS

There is yet another peculiarity in the way journalists get information, but saying it aloud is seen as the *mauvais ton*. The point is that most government structures divide mass media into those they favor and those they dislike (that is, opposition). Those they dislike are normally denied everything (including information). There are only "Kazakhstan" and "National" press clubs throughout the country that pursue a policy of neutrality towards all mass media and opt for observing equality in granting mass media access to information. All the other services and government authorities clearly discriminate between the two mass media camps. Naturally, in the first place information is imparted to the Khabar news agency led by Dariga

Nazarbayeva, a daughter of the President of Kazakhstan. This channel, for one, was allowed a live broadcast of the second Eurasian economic summit in April earlier this year while other journalists could not even approach foreign participants. The very same Khabar was the first to report a recent assault on the Olympic boxing champion Ermakhan Ibraimov.

It is not only the journalist corps that is worried by the new trend. The political community is increasingly concerned "All mass media must receive the same treatment as parliament, executive or judicial authorities do. Society cannot live in an information gap," said parliament member and leader of the Patriots' Party of Kazakhstan Ghani Kasymov in an interview with the newspaper "Finance. Affairs. People."

The idea is not without strong appeal in the context of the draft Code of Journalists' Professional Ethics, which reads, "any information focusing on the developments of life must cover a wide range of opinions and appraisals. It is the professional duty of journalists to give a skillful representation of this range, grouping around a real fact of life." Further on, the document contains a message, which is of great importance for Kazakhstan, reading, "any author's report relying on one view only should be regarded as an act of propaganda having nothing to do with the standards of civilized journalism."