

THE KYRGYZ MEDIA AND LANGUAGES: MARKET DECIDES ALL

By Tolkunbek Turdubaev, journalist, Bishkek

Kyrgyzstan's information consumers distinguish the media by the professional qualities of journalists rather than by language. Rather, people are more concerned about how soon news reports appear in the media than in which language.

Whatever the political involvement and polarization that a number of Kyrgyzstan's media outlets display, we can say with assurance that it is the market that in the final analysis determines the tenor and character of publications as well as the sphere of circulation. This is true for print publications and radio or television programs regardless of their language.

SPECIFIC LANGUAGE USE

Of late many discussions have emerged in Kyrgyzstan regarding the relationship between Kyrgyz, or the state language, and Russian. However, the fact of granting Russian the status of official language has ended these discussions. Meanwhile, one of the republic's parliamentary chambers this summer approved new Kyrgyz Orthography Rules; and there have been some good shifts recently concerning national language development.

"A new bill on the national language has been submitted to the parliament for the second time in three years. The previous draft was rejected after fierce discussions. The President has already signed the new one. So I hope it will be adopted this autumn. As regards the linguistic preferences of media publications, there are Kyrgyz- and Russian-language periodicals that are circulated

across the country, including the Uzbek-language in the south. Although the former two languages are the national one and the official one, languages of all other ethnic groups inhabiting Kyrgyzstan are constitutionally and legally protected and have the right of development in every possible way," says Kazak Akmatov, Kyrgyzstan's well-known writer and the National Language Center director.

Nevertheless the way the media, mainly periodicals, disseminate information has some peculiarities. Information in Kyrgyz or Russian alone could not reach all of the five million citizens of Kyrgyzstan. This, quite naturally, makes it indispensable to have a broader spectrum of regional media, particularly in Uzbek. If the information were disseminated, say, in Kyrgyz alone it would reach only 60 percent of people, mainly rural residents. This may only happen if the newspapers do appear in the backcountry and the area is fully provided with TV and radio broadcasting. However currently only a fifth of all editions reach it. As for the Russian-language media, the central country residents, mainly those of Bishkek and the adjacent Chu Valley areas are the main consumers. That is why one cannot say which media in which language prevails. The matter is whether a media reach-

es the audience. Besides, the level of people awareness indeed depends on the journalists' skill levels. On the whole each medium in the country has its regional niche.

IGNORING EACH OTHER

Curious situations sometimes emerge in Kyrgyzstan, where one part of the population, particularly Russian-speakers, frequently do not have the slightest idea of what this polemic is all about. The latest example was an all-nation roundtable meeting where President Askar Akayev accused Radio Azattyk of being engaged in 'information terrorism' (meaning its coverage of the Aksy events). Meanwhile, Radio Azattyk, which is the Kyrgyz Service of Radio Liberty, broadcasts only in Kyrgyz and, therefore, the Russian-language citizens knew absolutely nothing about what Azattyk centered on in its programs.

Probably that is why Kazak Akmatov has stated, "So it remains a mystery for Russian-language Kyrgyzstanis, who have no command of Kyrgyz, whether Radio Azattyk journalists were really engaged in 'information terrorism' and if so, how much. The Kyrgyz media, though, did succeed in making public the report about accusations brought against the foreign radio station journalists using all their operation languages." Situations like the one mentioned by Akmatov do not happen, eg., in Kazakhstan where every radio station regardless of its type of ownership is bound to broadcast

a fixed portion of its programs in the national language.

In Kyrgyzstan, the State does not enforce the use of the national language in society, including in the media. Ethnic minorities who believe the liberal language policy to be the basis of the country's interethnic harmony especially appreciate this situation. However, this is probably the reason why disproportions emerge in the ways different ethnic groups take and assess media publications. Unable to read Kyrgyz, they cannot compare media publications in different languages.

Says Rina Prizhivoit, politics department chief editor of Moya Stolitsa newspaper, "It is not the National Language Law that impairs but ignorance of the national language; and it was particularly Usubaliev's era when they didn't teach me it, although who was against Kyrgyz teaching at that time? When I was a sixth-year pupil for four months we were taught Kyrgyz by the teacher of... mathematics. While studying at the university we were taught grammar rather than conversational Kyrgyz. So how can I now compare Agym with Moya Stolitsa if I can't read it? They in Agym are all bilingual. What has changed in the language perspective over the last 12 years? Our grandchildren are learning Kyrgyz now, but will not be able to speak it in the same way that we were unable. But this should have started in a kindergarten, with good textbooks and competent teachers. So far we have only seen speculations around the language issue... It's time to make Russian the state language and finish this speculation that is likely to go on for decades..."

Reality corroborates these words: Kyrgyz-speakers enjoy the

advantage of knowing at least two languages; many southern Kyrgyz can speak Uzbek in addition to their mother tongue and Russian. Similarly, one can hardly find an Uzbek in the south who does not speak Kyrgyz.

BUYERS RESELL NEWS

It would be perfectly good if every Kyrgyzstani regardless of ethnicity could freely obtain daily information in several languages. However, they reside in ethnic communities throughout the country; and most commonly people in the regions obtain information from print or electronic media in one language, either Kyrgyz, Russian or Uzbek. Says Omurzak Mamayusupov, chairman of the governmental State Commission on Religions and ICT expert, "In this situation, the electronic media, and radio in particular, is the winner, as radio information, unlike print editions, can reach any region, in different languages. On the contrary, the situation is the worst with the print media - the print-run of which is too insufficient and the area of dissemination is limited.

However, a medium in any of the languages tries to look for a way-out, even in the worst of situations proceeding from their market needs by publishing news most required by the audience. Now there are people who make use of the situation by selling the information already published in the newspapers; they do it without leaving their houses, using the telephone. The point is that they are all capital residents and they read the newspapers earlier than those in the rural areas where periodicals come late, if at all. These telephone informers merely read ads and other commercial information to their business partners in back-

country. People able to read press in several languages are of particular value. The businessman paying to his informer in Bishkek does not lose money: he is always ahead of his rivals having no telephone agent in the capital.

IMPROVEMENTS NEEDED

Asked if the general level of publications (especially in print media) depends on their language, many of my collocutors were categorical: No. However the opinion of Shailoobek Duisheyev, observer of the Agym independent newspaper, was different: "Indeed the language and the degree of popularity are directly interdependent. Language is the material we use for building our stories. Capacity of this great building material is limitless but the builder's capacity is quite a different thing. I believe Kyrgyz journalism as such - in the widest and modern sense of this word - is still immature, including its language aspect.

Officially, periodical press in Kyrgyz began in 1924 when the first issue of Erkin-Too newspaper saw light. For almost 70 years it has served as a faithful Abigail of the communist regime, being an effective tool of the then 'solely true' party. Fortunately that situation began changing with independence. I thought every journalist of our country has been in his own creative quest during this decade. Sufficient difficulties still exist. So far, standard Kyrgyz orthography rules have not been approved. There has been only one unsuccessful effort by one of the former Cabinets to button up the job but it stopped half-way. So, it looks like everyone is free to write just as one feels like it.

Assessing my colleagues, I would say that Russian-language Moya Stolitsa ranks far higher than

the rest in terms of quality, finished language and journalistic competence. We the Kyrgyz-language journalists have much to learn from them. It should be said frankly that we have nothing to boast about. The more so that we can compare our work with samples of what is being done by journalists working with BBC and Azattyk (Liberty) from whom the Kyrgyz media could learn much in terms of language skills, style and authenticity of materials.

OVER-STRETCHED PRESS

As has been mentioned already, the Kyrgyz authorities do not require the media to publish materials in the national or the official languages. Therefore, one cannot speak about any direct relationship between the media language status and quality. However, “the Kyrgyzstan press includes two comparable types of newspapers representing ethnic minorities - Uzbek and Russian,” says Elmurad Jusupaliev, correspondent of Radio Ozodlik (Radio Liberty’s Uzbek service in Kyrgyzstan’s southern capital Osh). “Russian newspapers have good circulations; they are informative and they employ highly skilled professionals. These factors allow the Russian-language press to take the upper hand and increase circulation. As far as Uzbek-language newspapers are concerned here we come across a sort of absurdity. According to unofficial data some one million Uzbeks live in Kyrgyzstan; but only five newspapers in Uzbek are published for such a numerous audience across the country.

In addition, their total print-run doesn’t reach ten thousand cop-

ies. I have analysed the roots of this situation. It has turned out that many Uzbeks in Osh prefer Russian-language newspapers to those in their mother tongue. This is mainly because the Uzbek-language press lacks the spirit of modern journalism. Secondly, the Uzbek-language newspapers fail to meet requirements concerning information rapidity and capacity. Due to these reasons Kyrgyzstan’s Uzbek-language newspapers thus far fail to be adequate to social tasks.

No less important is their conservatism and the lack of understanding that the modern media not just informs the audience but entertains it as well. Therefore the newspaper materials should be arranged proceeding from modern requirements. It should also employ simple and easy-to-understand language; the most important information should be provided succinctly using different effective auxiliaries such as graphics so popular now in countries where the media is well developed. However, there are graphical representations in Uzbek-language newspapers.

Linguistic peculiarities and manner of narration are important and deserve special consideration. Current Uzbek journalism is haunted by an over-stretched style, and it cannot get rid of this serious disadvantage resulting in a lost readership generation. Why don’t Uzbek youngsters read papers in their native language but instead love Russian-speaking Lemon and Blitz-Info? They merely like the simple and easy-to-understand language of these editions, the new generation language free of heavy-handed linguistic construc-

tions.

However, what the Radio Ozodlik journalist has said about the Uzbek press can be fully applied to the state language media, believes Shaloobek Duishev of Agym. “One cannot say that nothing has changed over the past decade. There have been some shifts. However, they are not prevailing in our press which has strongly absorbed the whole arsenal of ideological stock phrases and propagandistic clichés during the years of servicing the one-party regime. So our editions now speak to their readers using bulky stock phrases and standardized word sets,” he said.

THE DANGER OF CLICHES

However, some media consumers say linguistic liberalism must not be unlimited. Says Turgunbek Jakybaev, a Bishkek student, “While reading our newspapers one develops an impression that all around speak a sort of thieves’ slang. All papers now use this language. Read, eg., Vecherny Bishkek or Moya Stolitsa - you’ll never find the word ‘dollars’ but always ‘bucks’. And more: ‘to bust’ instead of ‘to kill’ or ‘to beat’ instead of ‘to deceive’. The Kyrgyz-language papers have their special disease: they do not use a normal language but a mixture of Russian and Kyrgyz (like that used in Anthony Burgess’s *The Clockwork Orange* - transl.) . Yet, Agym seems not to misuse it anymore. As many readers remark, using stock phrases and clichés is mainly inherent in the governmental press. None of the journalists or media in Kyrgyzstan could probably regard themselves as impeccable, though.