

GORNY BADAKHSHAN: USSR-STYLE MEDIA

By Kurbon Alamshoyev, reporter, Tajikistan

The foothills of Tajikistan's Pamiers are home to Gorny Badakhshanis ("Mountain Badakhshanis"), people who live in isolation, suffering an information gap and with little understanding of events in the outside world. The mass media of this region resemble the Soviet-era press.

The mountainous section of the Pamiers, bordering on China, Afghanistan and Northern Pakistan, is where the Gorno-Badakhshan autonomous region lies (GBAR). Accounting for half of Tajikistan's total area, with a population of 212,000, it is one of the most isolated and remote regions of Central Asia. The geographical and geopolitical features of the area are such that it has remained, since the time of the Soviet Union, one of the few most-closed regions. Even natives moving to other cities and regions of the USSR were not allowed to return unless carefully screened and issued with a special visa. This kind of restriction, coupled with severe physical and climatic conditions, added to the isolationist mentality of the local population. The same isolationist and autarkic sentiments largely dominate the media of Gorny Badakhshan.

THE MEDIA AND THE WAR

The Badakhshani media goes back to 1932 when the first-ever newspaper saw light. Radio came to the Badakhshanis in 1956 and television in 1979, while a local television network began as recently as 12 years ago. Changes in the Pamiers press started in the framework of the general USSR-

wide restructuring (perestroika) policy in the 1980s. Mirzochalol Shojamolov, now a reporter at Radio Liberty's GBAR office and formerly a journalist of the provincial Badakhshoni Soveta newspaper, recalls that in his eyes, "it was a revolutionary change in the GBAR media life. The first independent newspaper appeared here earlier than in the rest of Tajikistan. It was an eight-page newspaper, Farkhangi Badakhshon, which journalists of the provincial state-owned Badakhshon newspaper used to work on till late at night when they were through with their regular work. This newspaper was extremely popular."

Shojamolov says the editor-in-chief of Farkhangi Badakhshon, Najmiddin Shoinbodov – in an act of courage! – started to publish cultural, literary and historical material in the Pamiers languages (totaling eight in number - *Author*). Also the newspaper won fame for venturing to cover themes forbidden in the USSR times. According to Najmiddin Shoinbodov, the outbreak of the Civil war in Tajikistan in 1992 dramatically aggravated the economic life of the Pamiers and narrowed down publishing opportunities. Due to lack of funds and the limits of both technical facilities and the distribution

network, the newspaper was closed down.

Following the outbreak of the Civil War in the Republic, Gorny Badakhshan saw a huge inflow of refugees. The 210,000-strong population of GBAR gave haven to about 90,000 refugees, consisting both of civilians and opposition groups. At the time, the only sources of information for the whole of the Pamiers were the provincial Badakhshon newspaper and the local television station, broadcasting for the city of Khorog alone (with a population of 33,000). Recalls Shobakhor Shokhumorov, former deputy editor-in-chief of Badakhshon, "Those were really tough times. Ours was the sole newspaper to appeal to the Pamiers people, international humanitarian and political organizations and to the newly installed government that was formed in the city of Khojent. Islamists, communists, democrats or just gangsters engaged in drug traffic and murder – all made claims to our newspaper. The editor and journalists were in constant fear. Armed people would often break into our office forcing us to publish their own material or forbidding us to publish some other reports."

The author of this article was witness to an incident where *Badakhshan's* editor was cruelly beaten up and narrowly escaped death at the hands of a local gunman before the eyes of the entire journalist team. However,

according to an expert opinion, the newspaper retained its image and pro-democratic stance until 1995. Its publications included criticism, readers' opinions and topical reports. Thanks to a large stock of paper - in place since Soviet times - the newspaper was able to come out on a regular basis. No national newspapers were delivered to this autonomous region between December 1992 and 1994. During this period the population of GBAR drew information mainly from Russia's ORT and RTR television channels, whose coverage of Tajikistan's affairs was not altogether fair. Still worse was the situation in the local television network. Understanding the importance of television, various Pamiers-based armed groups made frequent attempts to use it to transmit their own "addresses to the nation". Cases are on record where members of these groups forced the network's management to broadcast their own material over and above the schedule. Nazrullo Khairulloyev, the then executive editor of the network, says that when denied access they made attempts to blow up the office. Armed groups would frequently beat up provincial television journalists, he said.

But a somewhat different situation developed in district newspapers. Until 1992, there were six district newspapers across the Pamiers. With events going from bad to worse during the Civil War, four of them were shut down for a number of reasons. The printing office and editorial board of *Vantch* district newspaper found themselves kept in check by opposition groups. They launched a free Islamic democratic newspaper, *Surush*, opposing the newly established government.

After publishing three or four issues the newspaper's editorial board moved to Afghanistan. The newspaper in the Ishkashim district was controlled by refugee journalists Noyebsho Zurobekov and Nafasbek Rakhmonov. Their bold and truthful publications accounted for the paper's success and circulation (upto 2,000 copies). For two years the paper remained the most popular and had the largest audience. Until 1999, district papers were published only in the *Shugnan*, *Ishkashim* districts and in the city of *Khorog*. After 2000, all district papers were relaunched and GBAR now boasts nine district newspapers, subsidized by the Culture Ministry (40%) and local self-government, *khukumats* (60%).

NEWSPAPERS IN DEBTS

According to Jonibek Kozybekov, the editor of the *Roshtkalin* district newspaper, the Culture Ministry and *khukumats* subsidies are only sufficient to pay salaries and purchase paper, while printing services are very costly. Kozybekov says, district newspapers and provincial printing offices, where most newspapers are printed, are constantly at war as newspapers find themselves in endless debt to the printing houses. Remarkably, not a Khorog-based newspaper has a printing house of its own. District printing houses are all placed under the provincial printing house. Editors of all district newspapers complain that provincial printing houses have monopolized printing business, their ever-increasing tariffs putting a stranglehold on newspaper publishing. Generally, district newspapers are four-page monthly editions, their circulation growing due to *khukumats*' efforts. Hence,

local government-related publicity items dominate the newspapers' publications. You will not find there a story concerning the daily life and woes of ordinary citizens.

According to studies carried out by the Pamiers Mass Media Center, 30% of publications center on the district head's activities, 15% on *khukumats*' staff, 15% on features and stories praising the *khukumats*' work, 15% on congratulations and obituaries, 10% on poetry and other literary genres and only 15% on burning problems and urgent needs.

In our opinion, there are a number of factors responsible for the fact that the region's population is so poorly informed. Above all, it's the remote and isolated location of Gorny Badakhshan where central newspapers are still a rarity and people get news from Russia's RTR television network. Tajik television programs are available only for residents of Khorog and four districts. The Internet is still absent here. Regular blackouts between late November and mid-May make it impossible for people to watch television. This vacuum also affects local journalists. The Gorno-Badakhshan autonomous region is perhaps the only province of Tajikistan with so poorly developed private press. There are no private publications, except Chatri Simin newsletter which has a circulation of 300 copies.

OPPRESSIVE CONTROL

Monthly salaries paid to journalists in Khorog average the equivalent of between US \$3 and 10. No media outlet here has funds for travel and, therefore, journalists are unable to visit other regions of Tajikistan. Many proficient journalists have quit to give way to young people, who are generally

under-trained and in serious need of professional development. According to the independent journalist Alimamad Marodmamadov, it is the journalists' isolationist mentality and their failure to adapt to the changed media environment that are still working against the development of free press in GBAR. Also, the mass media situation is strongly factored by local authority pressure and control. That

is how matters have stood with *Badakhshon* newspaper and the provincial broadcasting committee since 1997.

According to Umed Mamadpanoyev, the broadcasting committee's journalist, local authorities have censored many of the author's programs. Besides, the broadcasting committee's chairperson is called to task at the *khu-kumat* office after every program

that displeases the local administration's chief. Newspaper editors say that the press attaché of the province's head has assumed censorial functions to analyze the local media's products and report "deviations" to his boss. To summarize, the press in Gorny Badakhshan is strikingly reminiscent of the press seen under the USSR of the 1970s and 1980s, both in subject matter and style.