

TAJIK- AND UZBEK-LANGUAGE PRESS IN NORTHERN TAJIKISTAN

Ilkhom Jamolov, independent reporter, Tajikistan

In the early 1990s, for every 1,000 citizen of Tajikistan there were over 900 newspapers. Today, there is only one newspaper per village available in the countryside. This slump in the print media is caused by low purchasing capacity, coupled with poor reporting.

In Sogd province today there are 47 print media with an official circulation of over 70,000 copies. The electronic media market is represented by 12 television companies (one state-owned provincial network and eleven private companies), and two radio broadcasters. Of the total print media, 20 are classified as provincial publications, their circulation reaching 37,000. Linguistically, the distribution of periodicals is as follows: the vast majority (37) is the Tajik-language press, six are Uzbek-language and the rest are Russian-language publications. However, local journalists themselves admit that such a wide media variety in the north of Tajikistan, albeit filling the information gap to a certain degree, gives no clue to the general media situation in that region.

NOT AVAILABLE DAILY:

Bakhrom Faizullayev, the head of the information service of the *Varorud* private news agency, says that there is no daily title available in a province with a population of nearly one million, consisting of Tajiks (65%) and Uzbeks (about 30%). Incidentally, of the total print publications, four provincial and all district and municipal newspapers are registered as dai-

lies. "An unbalance between the size of the population and an aggregate circulation of provincial periodicals is perhaps the most dramatic example of the slight effect that newspapers and magazines have on information distribution and public opinion throughout the province," according to Jura Yusufi, reporter of *Sugd*, the independent Tajik-language weekly.

An analysis of newspaper publications suggests that the print media is suffering a severe embarrassment while the provincial press is unable to withstand competition from national weeklies like the Russian-language *Asia-Plus*, *Vecherny Dushanbe*, *Digest Press*, *Avicenna*, *Aladdin* and the Tajik-language *Tojikiston*, *Oila*, and *Charkhi Gardun*. Such a conclusion reflects the evidence available from *Pochtai Tojikiston*, the provincial government post service department which deals with the distribution of print production. A free subscription campaign demonstrated that the above mentioned weeklies topped the list of the most popular publications.

WHO'S THE BOSS

As regards the press of northern Tajikistan, we can note that the bulk of the provincial print

media is made up of newspapers and magazines established by the khukumats (local authorities). Thus, of 37 publications coming out in Sogd province 23 are organs of the provincial, city and district khukumats. It goes without saying that all of the publications are tightly controlled by the local authorities, are accountable to them, and the journalists sacrifice their independence and freedom of expression to the whims of khukumats-controlled editors. Official information, including reports about the activities of khukumat departments, account for three quarters of these news media publications, which are overwhelmed by reports of off-beat achievements and milestone successes.

Readers describe these newspapers as featureless, humdrum and boring. Hence the generally lukewarm attitude to state-owned mass media. By way of example, let us compare two provincial newspapers, Tajik-language *Khakikati Leninobod* and Uzbek-language *Leninobod Khakikati* – both founded by the same provincial *khukumat*. They are absolutely indistinguishable both in design and text. If sometimes they touch upon issues of social concern, the stories are normally written by journalists so as to make every possible provision against possible fallout. Afterwards, editors smooth «prickly» passages down. The press either ignores altogether the events of political, economic and social life of the region or gives one-

sided coverage with no range of opinions presented. A gap between real life and what the state-owned mass media writes has led to public disappointment in them.

FEW PRIVATE PAPERS

The share of private print media in Sogd province is insignificant. These include Tajik-language independent newspapers *Sugd*, *Korvoni Umed* (“Caravan of Hope”, a publication for teenagers), *Tojikoni Dunyo* (“Tajiks of the World”), *Navoi Dil* (“Melodies of the Soul”) and the Uzbek-language *Kadriyat* (“Values”) – an organ of the *Tong* (“Dawn”) Uzbek community in Sogd province. As regards *Sugd*, it is still unable to make a fully-fledged newspaper in the capacity of a private publication, although it has every ground for it. True, unlike state-owned periodicals it is marked by the fair coverage it invariably gives to the economic, political and social situation in the north of Tajikistan. It publishes comments and reports providing more independent and professional analysis of domestic affairs. But having lost financing from OSCE (which it received for a year), it became a monthly publication, although previously it was a weekly. Uzbek-language Darakchi newspaper is a very popular periodical. Circulated in Uzbek and Russian versions, it enjoys great popularity with Uzbek-speakers and other residents in the province. One glowing example of its popularity is the fact that, unlike many other local newspapers, copies do not lie around on the counters of the local stalls and in fact sell very well. Private distributors willingly agree to sell it.

To exemplify the development of the Tajik- and Uzbek-language press in Tajikistan we shall cite the

following figures: in the early 1990s, for every 1,000 citizens of Tajikistan, there were over 900 newspapers. Nowadays, though, only one newspaper per village is available in the countryside. Factors contributing to this situation are obvious – the low living standard of the population gives rise to inadequate purchasing capacity. On the other hand, the slump in the print media is due to sluggish, biased and dull reporting. In turn, this affects their circulations causing them increasingly to drop. But while the khukumats’ organs somehow keep afloat, due to subscriptions and subsidies, private publications have to survive all alone by trying to sell their product at higher prices - making it ruinously expensive for the general public.

The total circulation of Uzbek-language publications is estimated at about 7,000, i.e., there is only one newspaper for every 100 Uzbek-speaking citizens in the province. “If we divide the total number of the Uzbek-language provincial press by the number of the Uzbek-speaking population we’ll see that 95% of province residents know nothing about affairs occurring around us every week,” said the Uzbek writer Muhammad Rasul. He continued, “but there are by far more grievous statistics saying that even this meager print of Uzbek-language periodicals is not always in great demand; it gets dusty on the shelves and subscriptions go badly. I have talked to a lot of Uzbek-speakers, and their answer was people don’t have enough cash to buy newspapers.”

TELEVISION FILLS IN

On the whole, readers complain that, with rare exceptions, both Tajik- and Uzbek-language print news media are featureless, hum-

drum and boring. Here is what people say across the province: “buying a local Tajik- or Uzbek-language newspaper is just the same as throwing money down the drain”, “if you get the news from local periodicals you will lag behind with current affairs”, “papers do not publish stories on burning and critical topics of public concern”, “local newspapers’ reporting is so sluggish and biased that you may as well read it a year later – you won’t notice any difference”. As a result, most northern Tajikistan residents have given up on the print media and turned to electronic outlets. Television and radio are today by far the most accessible, prompt and influential sources of information compared with newspapers.

Although the electronic mass media of Tajikistan is still under development it is singled out by all comparisons between it and print media largely in that it offers daily newscasts. Sometimes the public here can learn about current affairs, world and domestic alike, only from television. As for the standards of television broadcasts, local e-media is markedly second to its peers in the neighboring countries, above all in Uzbekistan. It should be also mentioned that geographical features of a part of Sogd province facilitate reception of broadcasts from the other Central Asian countries. So, in the Matcha, Nau, Jabborasulov districts one can easily receive television programs broadcast by three state-owned and four private networks of Uzbekistan. Like it or not, Uzbekistan’s higher-standard productions have a certain influence on and enjoy popularity with Uzbek-speakers and Tajiks alike. Considering the media is a vehicle for spreading a certain ideology, the affair is taking on the dimensions

of media security in northern Tajikistan.

FAIR REPORTING WORKS

The Russian-language press, too, is available in northern Tajikistan. It is represented by *Leninabadsкая Pravda* – an organ of Sogd provincial *khukumat* coming out twice a week in a four- and eight-page format; *Pro*

news and entertainment private paper; *Programma TV* information paper and *Varorud* political newspaper. From time to time, some of them venture upon burning issues and have, therefore, won audience of their own.

According to Oleg Panfilov, a well-known Russian journalist and the director of the Center for Journalism in Extreme Situations,

“*Varorud*, which was started this year by a news agency of the same name, promises to grow into a rival not only to regional but also to central publications due to innovation and boldness. Young though the paper is, judging by the feedback, it has started to win popularity with the local audience all because of fair, accurate and prompt reporting.”