

# JOURNALISM IS HIGH-RISK JOB IN KAZAKHSTAN

*By Asan Kuanov, journalist, Kazakhstan*

**Two well-known Kazakhstani journalists, Artur Platonov and Sergey Duvanov, became victims of cruel attacks in August 2002. Observers believe in both cases the journalists were prey to furious political tussles.**

Last November, Artur Platonov, host of the show “Profile of the Week” – a production of the KTK commercial channel – became leader of the Union of Independent Journalists, also known as Solidarity. His motivation was to challenge a general crackdown on media professionals. Platonov is known to have made a lot of enemies as he used the KTK show as a forum for scandalous revelations. As a result, a flow of anonymous threats hailed down on him. The last warnings came on March 9, 2002 in the form of two identical messages, one of which was sent to his home and the other to the TV channel’s office.

The attack occurred outside his home late at night on August 16, 2002. According to what Platonov himself said, he was attacked by three drunken policemen. “When I saw three strange people jump out from a *Zhiguli* car that had stopped behind my car I had scarcely time to press the central locking button and didn’t have enough time to close the window. They smelled of alcohol and behaved as if they were insane. A spray can of gas that I kept in the glove compartment to defend myself against stray dogs proved of no help,” the journalist said. At the oral surgery department where he was taken after the attack he un-

derwent an operation. The preliminary diagnosis was “a closed craniocerebral injury, multiple facial bruises, nasal bone tissue damage.” The offenders were caught red-handed and checked for alcohol. However, later on “an investigation was opened on a charge of offences committed by unidentified persons,” according to B.Abylkasymov, an investigator of the Almaty City Police Department.

The next day, the top managers of Karavan newspaper, KTK channel, Solidarity fund officials and Dariga Nazarbayeva, chairperson of Kazakhstan Journalist Congress’s executive committee, held a joint meeting at the National Press Club where they bitterly attacked senior executives of central law-enforcement authorities. They urged the President and the government to give attention to arbitrariness reigning in police structures and to take adequate actions to improve the situation. Surprisingly, attending the meeting were the very same persons who had attacked the journalist. Only they offered a different version of what had happened. That night they said Artur had blocked their way and responded to their remarks by spraying gas. After this they dragged him out of his car to take to the Police precinct. Artur

Platonov is still in hospital, and the Profile of the Week show is waiting impatiently for its host to come back.

## JOURNALISTS BEATEN

A short while later, another journalist, Sergey Duvanov, was attacked in Almaty. Opposition describes the attack as job-related. This time, the offenders escaped the scene. Sergey Duvanov was beaten up on a stair landing just as he was going out of the lift. Three unidentified persons pinioned his hands and struck him on the head with something resembling a baton. He could only ask, “Why?” “You know yourself,” was the answer. Then he lost consciousness and was found by his neighbors sometime later. Curiously, Duvanov’s bag, cash and documents had been somehow delivered to the Almalinsky district police department – even prior to the neighbors’ discovering the journalist and the arrival of a medical team at the scene. The ambulance was called in by Duvanov’s neighbors half an hour later, by which time the bag had gone. Duvanov was taken to the neurosurgical department of the central clinic, preliminarily diagnosed as suffering from “facial soft tissue bruises and brain concussion.” According to Yevgeny Zhovtis, the director of the Kazakhstan International Human Rights Bureau, Sergey Duvanov was well known for his sharply critical publications targeting corruption in Kazakhstan. Of late he

has also run a magazine called Bulletin, a human rights publication.

After Zhovtis visited the journalist in hospital he said, "Either Duvanov was attacked by specially trained security professionals or it was a provocation by a third party." He didn't believe the attack had been staged by the authorities as it would seriously taint the President's image. Zhovtis's view is shared by Yormukhamed Yertisbayev, a presidential aide. He said he was shocked by the news of the attack, the more so as just days before he had had a bitter online polemic with the journalist parrying his blows. "It's a provocation. I have more than once pointed to a third party that has emerged in this country – one that is fighting both against the government and opposition. It is intended to discredit President Nursultan Nazarbayev's international reputation. Especially now that he is about to

visit Johannesburg, where the UN-sponsored sustainable development conference is under way, and with the OSCE seminars in Vienna and Warsaw this fall." Yertisbayev said he regretted the incident and was ashamed of the impotence of the Kazakhstani enforcement bodies.

#### **THE PRESIDENT'S ANGER**

Elaborating upon Yertisbayev's words, Oleg Panfilov, the director of the Moscow-based Center for Journalism in Extreme Situations, said, "If we are to deal with a third-party-staged provocation then it looks like the situation in Kazakhstan has gone out of the President's control." Panfilov believes that the attack on Duvanov will spark camaraderie actions involving not only opposition forces but also the Solidarity human rights organization. This is controlled, he claimed to the best of his knowledge, by

the President's daughter, Dariga Nazarbayeva. However, the head of state responded personally to the attack on the journalist. He condemned it as a provocation aimed at bringing discredit on the incumbent government and tarnishing its record. "The President is outraged by the incident. Nursultan Nazarbayev is confident that it was an act well planned and financed by Kazakhstan's foes and executed on the eve of Constitution Day," says a press release issued by the President's media service. According to BBC reporter Tatyana Deltsova, only unbiased investigation will provide answers to all the questions. As for journalists themselves, they don't really care to know by whose orders they are being attacked or who stands behind the attacks: authority, opposition or a third party. Least of all they wish to fall prey to someone else's ambitions.