

MEDIA MARKET IN TAJIKISTAN TODAY

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The media market of Tajikistan, represented mainly by print mass media, remains in its infancy. Although the media continues to grow in number, the low purchasing capacity of the population hampers the development of newspapers and is a serious obstacle for their circulations.

In spite of the fact that mass media in Tajikistan has grown to more than three hundred titles within the few past years, dominating the market are some thirty newspapers – both state-run and commercial – that come out regularly, mainly once a week. To solve the problems that these newspapers face today they need to know the market situation. Local publishers generally agree in their assessment of the current state of newspaper business in Tajikistan.

Head of the Charkhi Gardun media holding Akbar Sattorov describes the market situation as deplorable. “This is not about the poor quality of reporting or design. I see that every publisher seeks to improve reporting and design standards. It is the insolvency of this republic’s population that accounts for falling circulations. Many people here see a newspaper as a luxury they cannot afford. In 1994-1997 the aggregate daily edition of all national newspapers (just five or six in number), was 500,000 – 700,000 copies. Now that a lot of new papers have emerged their aggregate daily edition hardly amounts to 150,000-180,000 copies, which is a half or a third of what it used to be in the past,” says Akbar Sattorov. Of the same opinion is editor of the newspaper Krim-Info, Lolita Turayeva who believes that “even if the news-

papers were published at a greater rate people would still be unable to buy them.”

According to Umed Babakhonov, the general director of Asia Plus limited company, the media market in Tajikistan is still infantile. He believes several reasons account for this, including “the aftermath of the civil war, on-going economic meltdown and the ensuing drop in the purchasing capacity of people. That’s precisely why circulations are shrinking today. One can observe pretty much the same picture in the economically healthier Sogd province in the north of the country.” His opinion is also shared by Ilkhom Jamolov, director of the Varorud news agency which is based in Sogd province. He says: “I agree that Tajikistan’s media market is still in a primitive state of development. What we see today is only the initial stage, where everyone seeks to find a niche of their own. Some of the players succeed while others fail. As far as the city of Khujand – the capital city of Sogd province – is concerned, its media market is still in bud. A lot of issues here are yet to be solved, including marketing, advertising, or just developing workable patterns. While launching Varorud we hoped our paper would sell well if we published the most topical stories on the most

burning matters. To all intents and purposes, we were grossly mistaken. The way the media market is developing heavily depends on this country’s economic situation. Take Varorud, for example. It’s the cheapest paper in Khujand yet, there are very few who can afford to buy it. So, we have to change our working styles correlating them with the real situation of the evolving media market – regulate the circulation and prices or expand the network of our marketing outlets not only within the province but also outside – up to Dushanbe or Khatlon province.”

FIRST, LAUNCH A PAPER!

Editor of two Dushanbe-based independent papers, Krim-Info and Reklamnaya Gazeta, Lolita Turayeva says: “Considering today’s conditions in Dushanbe, newspaper publishing is an extremely costly business. Printing and newsprint charges are too high for most media outlets to afford. Meanwhile, advertising revenues are a pittance. Advertisers typically build relations with newspapers on a barter basis – offering free services or products of some kind in exchange for space. Surviving is the precise word one can use to describe the state of newspaper business in Tajikistan today.”

Nevertheless, head of the Charkhi Gardun media concern, Akbar Sattorov believes that newspaper publishing is a sector that pays. “The profit taxes we are paying are great. We couldn’t manage if we had no profits. Our concern has been in the media market

for eight years and we have never asked for grants during all that time. We are a self-supporting business and do the job using our own resources,” Akbar Sattorov says. However, despite all economic woes newspapers in Tajikistan show a slight rise in number. According to the Culture Ministry, as of November 1, 2002, there were 300 print media outlets in this country compared to some 250 in 2000.

ATTRACT AUDIENCES

All the newspapers publishing in Tajikistan are distributed via subscription or by distributors buying out certain portions of their editions. “Primarily, our concern is to employ individual distributors. We do use subscription channels but find that this doesn’t pay and so we don’t reinforce that sector. Look, we purchase all we need in Russia for hard currency, and if the dollar exchange rate goes up we may suffer losses because subscription rates are normally fixed in advance. Dealing with individuals is much easier for we employ flexible schemes and pay in cash on the spot. As for state-run newspapers, they are delivered chiefly by subscription. Yet, they run no risks as they are financed by the government - that guarantees them financial stability,” says Akbar Sattorov.

The commercial newspaper Krim-Info is also employing individual distributors to sell its product. According to the paper’s editor, Lolita Turayeva, both the paper and its readers find it agreeable. “When you receive a paper by subscription you have to pay extra charges to the national post office, Pochtai Tojik, which double delivery costs. What we have is an elementary market, and so

we heavily depend on the working styles of our individual distributors and their business efficiency.”

MEDIA AND PUBLISHERS:

We have already mentioned that the number of newspapers has increased over the past two years – a fact that brings about several questions. How do they manage to coexist in a market economy? Is there rivalry among them and in what form? Those questions are precisely what we asked our interviewees. Akbar Sattorov, the head of the Charkhi Gardun media concern, said: “Rather, we are competing, which is very helpful in terms of our professional development. Every now and then I am considering if there is anything I can do to improve my working style. My business rivals are true professionals – director of Asia Plus, Umed Babakhanov, and the director of the Tojikiston publishing concern, Sharif Khamdamov. Although we are on friendly terms, we choose not to let each other in on our plans.” Time was when Akbar Sattorov actually had no rivals at all. “I was alone in the market and could get along without trying hard. Now that rivals have emerged I have to revise my policies. We surpass them in some respects and are second in others.”

Krim-Info’s editor Lolita Turayeva is convinced that journalists are secretly vying with each other “for information channels, in prompt and accurate reporting.” “I don’t find this kind of rivalry harmful,” she says. Khaidar Jurayev, the editor-in-chief of the state-run newspaper Khalk Ovozi, also believes there is competition in the media market. “Each of the media outlets seeks to attract larger audiences, and this is quite normal,” he says. We

would like to mention in passing that Khalk Ovozi is, in fact, hors concours - as it is the only political Uzbek-language newspaper publishing in Dushanbe. When asked whether there was competition between state-run and private outlets, Khaidar Jurayev said: “It would not be correct to divide newspapers into government and nongovernmental as, in any event, they should both serve the readers because both are mass media. He who can meet the readers’ needs best and accurately report first will eventually win.”

TAXES AND CIRCULATION

While commercial media chiefs lament over declining circulations, editors of state-run newspapers are boasting a rise in their papers’ circulations. According to Vladimir Vorobyov, editor-in-chief of the government paper Narodnaya Gazeta, his newspaper has started selling much better precisely because reporting standards were raised and space increased. Indeed, it appears as if state-run newspapers are awaking from years of lethargy. Private publishers say the current taxation policy largely accounts for that. “It is not in our interests to cover up circulations as a means to evade taxation. Currently, we enjoy tax remissions because our paper was launched less than a year ago,” answers Ilkhom Jamolov, director of Varorud news agency. Akbar Sattoriv, though, admits he is having serious problems paying taxes. Meanwhile, all interviewees highlighted the fact that commercial newspaper circulations began to fall two years ago - when a new tax code came into effect in Tajikistan in January 1999. This imposed taxes on newspaper sales, thereby hitting badly the print media.