

Editorial

INVESTIGATIVE REPORTING IN CENTRAL ASIAN COUNTRIES

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Investigative reporting in the true sense of the word is a rarity in Central Asian countries. Political partiality, pressures from authorities and criminal groups, and meagre wages are major factors hampering progress in this sphere.

Journalists in Central Asian countries who undertake investigative reporting face a number of questions crucial for the eventual success of their endeavour. First of all, they should decide what they mean by investigative reporting – whether it is a special genre or simply a task well done by a reporter. In addition, one has to realize why one problem or another is to be explored. Is it because one wants to interpret facts or figures in a light favorable to a certain group of people or, on the contrary, to publicize the investigation's results because they are important for the society in which one is living. Articles published by *Media Insight Central Asia* No. 30-31 demonstrate that journalists working in Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan have yet to develop a clear idea of what they term as investigative reporting.

ISSUE OF STORY-WRITING

For example, Marina Sivashova (see “Investigative Reporting in Kyrgyzstan”, *MICA* No. 30) quotes a reporter from the private newspaper *ResPublica*, Yelena Listvennaya, as saying that “investigative reporting is non-existent in Kyrgyzstan and cannot

exist by definition. One can speak about studying a problem as a method of pre-publication work... As far as form is concerned, investigative reporting reminds me of a police investigation, and so I think this method of journalism is more suitable for reports focusing on judiciary or crime.” Also, the head of the investigation department at *Vecherny Bishkek* (Kyrgyzstan), Erlan Satybekov admits that he finds it hard to give a clear-cut definition of investigative reporting. “Hardly can it be termed as a special genre. Media items may be written as features, stories, reports. What really matters is that they should have a common objective, which is to reveal a true picture and find a solution to a grave problem,” he says.

Marina Sivashova cites Richard E. Shafer, a journalism professor at the University of North Dakota, USA, as pointing out that investigative reporting is just well-done reporting rather than a special genre. He said this as a participant in the Summer Journalist School organized under the aegis of the American University in Kyrgyzstan in August 2002. Meanwhile, there are some other American journalists – also teach-

ing in the above-mentioned university – who have developed a more accurate definition of investigative reporting. Sherry Ricchiardi, a reporter from the *Washington Post*, is one of them. “She describes it as a genre that not only raises a subject of great social concern but also tracks links and persons involved in the matter in question. As a result, a journalist may come up with a suggestion or statement based on proven facts and evidence,” writes Marina Sivashova.

Interestingly, this characterization is very close to one termed as investigative reporting by the media legislation of Uzbekistan. Viktor Nikolayev in his article (see *MICA* No. 30) “Uzbekistan’s media needs to be more pungent,” brings up a provision from the republican media law proclaiming that a media worker shall be free to make investigation into any event, study circumstances that have become known to him, and use audio and video facilities while collecting facts and eye-witness evidence. A journalist is also entitled to publish his or her personal opinion with regard to any event or circumstance. However, it is extremely difficult to get this provision to work in Uzbekistan as government officials are very reluctant to provide negative information and demand that top bosses approve the text. “One has to collect facts in secret or use indirect evidence,

which eventually affects the quality of publications,” Viktor Nikolayev writes.

It is perhaps the problems regarding fact-finding and partiality that journalists sometimes demonstrate during investigations which are most typical for the media operating throughout Central Asia. That’s why the final results of work done by many a journalist in the region are, rather, ‘elements of investigative reporting’ than in-depth study and analysis of a problem.

ATONING SHARP DETAILS

Nargis Zakirova in her article “No Investigative Reporting in the Media of Tajikistan” (see MICA No. 30) maintains that in the news media of Tajikistan one can find publications that are a far cry from investigative reporting. In the meantime, Tajikistan has a lot of problems calling for the attention of the press. Thus, according to the editors of leading newspapers, “the majority of mass media in this country keep mum about circumstances surrounding the death of hundreds of prominent political figures, reporters and intellectuals during the years of political stand-off in Tajikistan.” To shed light on this situation, Nargis Zakirova quotes the editor of Asia Plus, Zafar Abdullayev, as claiming: “It is

still unsafe to engage in investigative reporting in the post-conflict situation that has evolved in this country.”

As follows from Nargis Zakirova’s article, quite a number of government officials in Tajikistan are linked to armed or criminal groups and, should an article come into conflict with their interests, they will not turn to court but rather find other means to settle a score with an unwelcome journalist. Any criticism of authorities or other structures in Tajikistan is fraught with the most grievous consequences. “Even journalists working for foreign news media choose to abstain from outright critical comments about official policies,” writes Nargis Zakirova.

Investigative reporting also remains a rare phenomenon in Uzbekistan. As in neighboring Tajikistan, “there are just a handful of journalists working in this genre,” points out Viktor Nikolayev in the aforementioned article. Again, the reason lies in pressures from the structures in power. The only difference is that journalists in Uzbekistan face no threat of violence from the powers that be. Among the ‘unpleasant points of their job’, reporters name the need to tone down sharp details under orders from the editor-in-chief, superior bodies or some other in-

stitutions. The author focuses on a journalist, Natalya Shulepina, who’s been engaged in investigation of environmental problems in Uzbekistan. “Her publications used to serve as a basis for inspections and conferences at various levels and programs were developed to eliminate bottlenecks revealed by her reports,” Viktor Nikolayev writes, making it clear that authorities do not leave investigative reports unanswered. What we see in Tajikistan is quite a different picture. As editor-in-chief of the weekly *Narodnaya Gazeta*, Vladimir Vorobyov, admits. “Journalists don’t believe that government bodies can take effective measures to eliminate the negative facts a journalist reveals in the course of an investigation.”

Generally speaking though, any journalist - no matter whether one lives in Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan or Uzbekistan - while starting a fair (let me emphasize the word!), investigation must realize that one faces meticulous collection and thorough study of facts, despite the handicaps raised by authorities and the very modest fees for discharging a civic duty. This is perhaps what underlies Viktor Nikolayev’s regret that young journalists do not feel like taking up the ‘high-precision instrument’ of investigative reporting.