

HUMAN RIGHTS AS MIRRORED BY THE KYRGYZ MEDIA

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The break-up of the Soviet Union and the consolidation of its former constituent republics as sovereign countries opened the way to the development of mass media, which started covering previously banned topics.

Human rights, undoubtedly one such topic, proved to be so multifarious and extensive a subject that journalists rushed to protect the rights of their countrymen. There appeared human rights newspapers almost entirely focusing on legal issues, covering on-going court trials and trying to provide people with legal assistance by clarifying laws. The newspaper *Delo No* is a positive success in this field. It should be admitted though, that it has taken on a pointedly political focus by publishing reports dealing with home affairs.

As sovereignty and the media market progressed more and more in Kyrgyzstan there also appeared some other papers that tried to center exactly on legal issues. But the economic doldrums that journalists and media outlets eventually found themselves in demonstrated that one-profile mass media were unviable. Low popularity would bring about circulation cuts making newspapers inefficient. As a result they would end up facing a dilemma – whether to go to the wall or drastically change the newspaper's focus. Currently, Kyrgyzstan's media is giving insufficient attention to raising public awareness of legal issues.

TRUTH OR LIES:

Almost everyone with whom we talked to about human rights

publications agreed that Kyrgyzstani mass media are focusing sufficient attention on these matters. A correspondent from Russia's Interfax agency in Kyrgyzstan, Igor Shestakov, said, "this kind of report is virtually out of reach for readers and viewers in Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. Even compared to Kazakhstani citizens, the general public in Kyrgyzstan is in a better position." In his opinion, reporting on human rights has one more aspect. "Because Kyrgyzstan's media falls into pro-government and opposition with no independent press at hand, people cannot get credible and sound information. In other words, there are no media outlets representing a centrist position enabling people to make judgments of their own and take one position or another on their own unprompted by newspapers and television," says Igor Shestakov.

As a result, Kyrgyzstan's public, relying on just one publication or two, frequently finds itself misled as regards real developments in the country. Commenting on this situation Igor Shestakov says, "The pro-government press forms public opinion by ignoring some facts while highlighting others to fall in with the wishes of those in possession of power. The same juggling with facts is true of opposition newspapers. In addition, the

latter typically indulge in commenting and play upon emotions at the expense of facts. So it comes that some journalists are painting a white picture while others represent everything in black. Such practice embarrasses people leaving them uncertain as to whom to trust, unable to distinguish truth from lies."

The absence of the financially independent Kyrgyz media breeds one more malpractice – contract articles and television shows, a phenomenon that makes a muddle of things. "Journalists are all human. Suffering from underpayment they see writing similar stuff as a way to earn extra cash. As a result people lose track of events when they see in a newspaper a critical article and a couple of days later something absolutely different."

ALONE WITH PROBLEMS

The aforementioned situation brings about one more problem in treating human rights in Kyrgyzstan. The problem concerns an evident imbalance in covering the subject in favor of rights of politicians, parliament members and public figures. "Ordinary people whose rights are violated every day find themselves out of the focus of the press," comments chairman of parliamentary committee for media policy, legislator Kabai Karybekov. He continues, "This is because they cannot catch the eye of the press on their own while journalists themselves are more inclined to cover

scandals surrounding violation of rights of public figures and prominent persons.”

Such a choice made by journalists can be explained by the fact that materials related to high-profile persons work for the image of a publication, its popularity and, consequently, for financial prosperity. This has led to many Kyrgyzstan citizens developing an impression that none but politicians and parliamentarians can get protection from the press. On the other hand, though, it is not the task of print media to safeguard individual citizens. According to Kabai Karybekov, “this is a function of independent courts while the media is there to raise problems and focus public attention on them. It is distrust of courts that makes people turn to mediawomen who are not proficient in the subject and need protection themselves.”

Of course, it would be wrong to say that ordinary people are absolutely deprived of ways to turn to the media to have their rights protected. The newspaper *Vecherny Bishkek*, for one, has a long-standing column called *City and Citizens* devoted entirely to social problems and citizens’ relations with government structures. But most frequently it was limited to letters from angry readers with no legal comments or clarifications as to citizens’ rights.

LEGAL KNOWLEDGE

Also, there are many other newspapers that introduce special

columns to give replies to their readers’ questions. One of these is *Your Lawyer* in the government newspaper “*Slovo Kyrgyzstana*”, focusing on individual cases that are of no concern to the general public. “Local mass media rely basically on individual cases,” says chairperson of the parliament’s human rights committee Oksana Malevanaya. “In other words, they center on incidents that have already occurred. But those could be prevented if mass media paid more attention to advising people on human rights issues.”

Meanwhile, Oksana Malevanaya does not believe that publishing special newspapers is the only way to tackle the problem of informing the public on legal questions. This is what mass publications and television channels should do. Kyrgyzstan is reforming judiciary and human rights protection systems, adopting new laws and developing new programs. But people continue to be ignorant of their rights just as they were a decade ago. “There are many things the media can do in this respect. Especially in regards clarification of what kind of already available mechanisms can be used - and how - to protect human rights. People desperately need such knowledge. This is what NGOs are trying to do, and some of them can really help Kyrgyzstani citizens. But here we see another problem - people just don’t turn to the right institutions to have their needs met,” says Oksana Malevanaya.

If we analyze the way journalists approach human rights issues we can see that mass media do not feel like concentrating too heavily on human rights matters. There is a very simple explanation to that: to be able to write stories on this subject journalists themselves need to have knowledge of that field. The vast majority of them, though, are not expert even in their own professional rights and responsibilities set forth in appropriate laws.

Besides, a human rights focus is fraught with multi-million sum suits. This is another serious problem facing journalists as they decide whether to work on a story or not. Almost any article focusing on human rights abuses can backfire - a media may be sued even if a journalist has written a well-balanced article quoting all parties concerned and citing a multitude of facts. Legislation concerning the media and related areas in Kyrgyzstan is still in progress.

Therefore, one can expect journalists to take a keen interest in these matters in the near future. Motivation will appear for more professional covering of human rights and their abuses. Incidentally, Oksana Malevanaya believes, “a new wave of interest is to be expected in the media very soon as far as human rights abuses by government bodies are concerned; this will come with the introduction of ombudsmanship in Kyrgyzstan.”