

# UZBEKISTAN JOURNALISM NEEDS PUNGENCY AND SPICE

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**Investigative reporting is still the black sheep of the Uzbekistan press. Problems and difficulties in obtaining first-hand evidence and writing stories, surefire unpleasantness following thereafter, low earnings and the long-standing censorship that has only recently been abolished disincline journalists to work in this genre.**

Is there any way to tell a surrogate from a truly investigative report? Indeed, one can easily compile a mountain of contrived facts and information. Professor M. Shishkina, D. Sc. (Sociology), head of the Journalism Faculty of St.-Petersburg University, in her book "Investigative Journalism", writes that it is not merely an element of high-risk journalism with a romantic aura. Rather, it involves a complex range of extensive and profound knowledge, proficiency and skills; allowing a professional journalist to discharge his or her civic duty. It is evidence published to inform society about the real state of affairs and expose facts that prejudice our rights. It is not a 'who-dun-it...'

## **BENEFICIAL LAWS**

Legally, conditions that have been created for the journalists of Uzbekistan to do their job are quite acceptable. The laws on mass media, on guaranteed and free access to information, on protecting the freedom of journalists to perform their functions, etc., have been enforced. So Article 9 of the Mass Media Law reads that, "any media worker shall be entitled to investigate into any event concerned, study the circumstances that have become known to him/her via requests or any other

source or that he/she was an eyewitness thereof, or use audio- or video facilities while collecting facts and eyewitness accounts... Any media worker shall be entitled to publish his/her personal opinion in regard with an event or circumstance concerned..."

Further on, Article 9 of the Law on Protecting Journalists' Functions grants him/her a right to disseminate through mass media results of his/her professional investigations and to voluntarily produce them to government authorities, public associations, enterprises, organizations and officials. No materials or documents obtained in the course of the investigation may be seized from a journalist. Article 10 of the same law specifies the safeguards of functions performed by the journalist. Specifically, the state guarantees journalists the freedom to obtain and disseminate information, ensures his/her security, forbids any interference in his/her activities or any demand for information that a journalist has obtained through performing his/her functions. We have already mentioned the unacceptability of censorship although this article of the Mass Media Law has not been observed until recently.

Unfortunately, both the above-mentioned and some other

provisions of the laws are, for the most part, mere declarations, and are extremely difficult to rely on in practice. Many journalists, including this reporter, have more than once learned this at first hand. Particularly when you need to contact a government organization or institution. Normally, officials demand a written request signed by a media head and insist that the article, when ready, be necessarily presented to them for approval. Obviously, one can hardly expect a journalist to be able to produce a critical article or collect negative material for an investigative report. Accordingly, one has to collect facts in secret or use indirect evidence – circumstances that, naturally, adversely affect the publication quality.

## **SCARING INVESTORS**

Let me recount my own story where long-term efforts to collect evidence and write an investigative report were eventually frustrated by censorship officials. A year or two ago I was investigating a dispute between a provincial joint-stock company and an overseas firm, the so-called 'foreign investor' that ostensibly was planning to make a major investment in a joint brewery project. For two years the foreign partner had been fooling around local businessmen and stockholders. It did not hurry to lay out the assessed contribution looking for pretexts of any kind to play for time and using unfair methods to solve the problems it was then facing. Meanwhile, it was

brazenly spending the funds of the local partners who at long last were fed up with the tricks of the ‘investor’ under favor. This kind of cooperation had brought them huge losses in cash and time. A string of suits followed with the court invariably finding the cases in favor of the domestic businessmen. The article I wrote gave the details of the conflict – all stiffened with solid figures, facts and cases. The unfair foreign partner’s actions were duly portrayed while the author evaded any generalization that could cast doubt on the investment policies of this country’s government. On the contrary, he called for more active steps in that area warning of the need to be careful, thoughtful and cautious in choosing foreign partners.

The article was circulated through Turkiston Press news agency. Three newspapers – *Narodnoye Slovo*, *Bankovskiye Vedomosti* and *Vremya I Mi* – agreed to publish it at different dates. But in all the three cases it was censored after being laid out. Explanations given boiled down to just one phrase: “Stop scaring away our foreign investors!” Otherwise, though, the article could serve as a warning to many dishonest partners from abroad as well as to over-credulous business people in this country. The author’s sole consolation was the posting of his article on the Internet where it was beyond the reach of the censors.

### **MUCH-DESIRED GENRE**

It is not at all surprising that there are extremely few journalists who choose to work in investigative reporting. Among them is a well-known journalist, Natalya Shulepina, from the government newspaper *Pravda Vostoka*. During our conversation she

agreed that the above-mentioned factors were crucial for the low popularity of this genre in the press. But neither low earnings nor problems in dealing with the heroes of her stories and the former censorship could push her away from her favorite method. She continues to make extensive use of it even now.

Natalya Shulepina told me a lot of stories from her own experience where she had fought battles with censors to defend her pre-publication materials or had been forced to stave off government officials after her articles had seen light – armed with photocopies of various documents, acts and expert reports. Such was the case when she was working on stories headlined “Gas Factory, And Other Environmental Surprises Coming from Oil Products Filtering Through To The Soil” (*Pravda Vostoka*, August 13, 1998), and “Pressures on Tashlak From Above And From Below” (*Pravda Vostoka*, August 23, 1998), in which she offered an in-depth analysis of man-made pollution in Uzbekistan. The story was prompted by the fact that a newly commissioned refinery in Bukhara and the similar long-standing operation in Ferghana were seriously polluting underground waters with their oil products. What made the situation even more dangerous was that both refineries are located in an irrigated cropping area supplying the population with farm products.

The journalist painstakingly probed into every detail of the situation; talked to environmentalists, hydrogeologists and the polluters themselves, studying step by step the entire chain of the technological process. Extensive documents, reports by various commissions and experts made her certain that the industrialists, environmentalists

and structures in power had not been idle. Rather, they all had been working to end the spills. The rural district of Tashlak, which is close to the Ferghana refinery, had developed and introduced a containment system to counter underground hydrocarbon infiltrations. Today, a second phase of the containment system is needed but the project has been stopped due to financial problems.

As regards the Bukhara refinery, Natalya Shulepina dug out some facts thus far unknown to the general public. For unclear reasons the environmental study was carried out when the refinery was already under construction. A pollution-control system was deleted from the environment-protection program of the project. The author said it straight out that it was the republican environmental watchdog’s unscrupulousness, which was to blame. As is often the case, the construction continued on the orders of some top-ranking officials anxious to report a new economic achievement despite problems that had to be solved later at the expense of taxpayers.

Referring to the complexities of this genre, Natalya Shulepina dwelt on unpleasant situations from past experience where she had to mince words under pressure from the editor, higher bodies or a particular institution. Her publications were often challenged by refutations. That’s why, Natalya Shulepina points out, you must be ready to discuss controversial points with top bosses and lawyers or they will pester you with court suits. More than once has she promised never again to engage in investigative reporting but her love for that genre took the upper hand every time. Besides, it should be said that her publications have always been very effective.

Her stories have always sparked many inspections, meetings and other measures aimed at eliminating the drawbacks she has revealed. Indeed, newspapers never venturing into investigative reporting are stale. They lack

pungency and spice. Young journalists, though, for some reason do not feel like “getting armed with this high-precision instrument.” Natalya Shulepova has dozens of investigations behind her, which she combined into two books of

collected stories on the environment. So great is the reporter’s popularity in environmental circles that she is frequently invited to attend national and international symposia, conferences and seminars.