

NO INVESTIGATIVE REPORTING IN THE MEDIA OF TAJIKISTAN

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Investigative reporting in Tajik mass media is non-existent – a fact that experts ascribe to low professional skills, the possibility of authorities pressurizing journalists through the courts and the threat of physical elimination by criminal circles.

Tajik press publications at present are a far cry from investigative reporting. They basically focus on social problems, or current events, in neighboring Uzbekistan and Afghanistan. However, Sharif Khamdamov, a Tajik media tycoon, believes that his papers *Tojikiston* and *Krim-Info* have carried quite a number of articles that could be described as investigative reports. For example stories providing details of the death of Akhmadshah Masud, leader of the northern alliance in Afghanistan. At the same time, leading media editors like Akbar Sattor, Vladimir Vorobyov and Zafar Abdullayev point out that the majority of mass media in this country kept mum about the circumstances surrounding the deaths of hundreds of prominent political figures, reporters and intellectuals during the years of political standoff in Tajikistan.

REPORTING IN THE PAST

Director of the Charkhi Gardun media center, Bahodur Zoirov says: “Essentially, the Tajik media does not make use of investigative reporting as a genre. What we see is just assessment bids, with no investigation proper.” Journalists of the older generation like Pavel Geivandov and Vladimir Frolov complain that even during stagnant

communist times they were free to write stories based on investigation. Many readers still remember publications by Viktor Merkulov in *Kommunist Tajikistana* criticizing the Motor Transport Ministry’s mismanagement practices, or those by Mikhail Davidzon in *Komsomolets Tajikistana* and Atakhon Latifi in the USSR-wide paper *Pravda*.

Today, any remark critical of authorities or other groups in Tajikistan may lead to the most grievous results. Even journalists working for foreign news media choose to abstain from outright critical comment about official policies. Head of the BBC office in Tajikistan, Sukhrob Ziya insists that he abstains from any critical comments unless they are based on proven facts - and with reference to the source. He says: “It must be admitted, though, that self-censorship is typical of nearly every journalist, and this may be a factor barring journalists from calling a spade a spade”. Saidali Siddikov, editor of the newspaper *Vecherny Dushanbe*, believes that there are plenty of skilled journalists in Tajikistan able to work in this genre. He thinks that the absence of effective security is the major reason preventing journalists from undertaking investigations. He also says that in Soviet

times this genre was much more popular than it is nowadays.

SUEING OR SHOOTING?

Zafar Abdullayev, editor of the Russian-language newspaper *Asia Plus* admits that, “it is still unsafe to engage in investigative reporting in the post-conflict situation that has evolved in this country. This genre is basically critical, regardless of the subject in question. Therefore, the reporter cannot but affect the interests of the parties concerned, be it power structures, mafia groups or gangland bosses. While you may expect civilized court litigation launched in response to your stories critical of authorities, you may be dead sure that other groups will use violent methods against you.”

On the other hand, many experts tend to think that the authorities are also hardly likely to sue journalists – the more so that there have been no incidents of this kind within the past few years. They say that quite a number of government officials have links with armed groups and criminals so that they, too, see no reason to turn to the courts in order to have it out with a journalist.

Furthermore, Zafar Abdullayev thinks that investigative reporting is a rather hard genre to work in, and that there are very few journalists in this country today up to the task. Besides, he is positive that any investigative reporter needs to have very strong connections in both law-enforcement structures

and the military. That's why Tajik journalists skilled enough to work in this genre tend to write for foreign news media under the cover of pen names. Nori Khamrakulova, a Tajik correspondent of Kazakhstan's newspaper *Delovoy Kazakhstan*, is of a different opinion. "It may be that this genre is not as well developed as one might like, but it would be wrong to say that it does not exist altogether. Take, for example, a special issue of the newspaper "Nimlufar" in Sogd province focusing on a young woman who died in childbirth. No response followed from the provincial health department and the story was never cleared up. As regards the journalists, they chose to stop at that, thus halting their investigation."

NO SELF-CONFIDENCE:

"I think this genre remains relevant even today," says president of the Women Lawyers' League, Kanoat Khamidova. She continues, "We have a great deal of evidence to be covered by the press and investigated into." A widespread opinion has developed in Tajikistan that no critical publication or fact found during investigation will receive due

response from society, especially from power structures. According to Vladimir Vorobyov, editor-in-chief of the government weekly *Narodnaya Gazeta*, Tajik journalists do not expect their investigative reports to change the situation. They don't believe that government bodies can take effective measures to eliminate the negative facts a journalist reveals in the course of an investigation.

Vladimir Vorobyov agrees that the majority of critical publications spark no response from authorities. Meanwhile, he maintains that even at the early stage a journalist can be barred from investigation. He or she may encounter so many problems that they will give up the idea of their own free will. This is precisely what happened to Asia Plus correspondent Muborak Abduvakhitova, who was collecting evidence about child trade in which medical workers of a maternity home in Dushanbe (the capital of Tajikistan), were involved. Her attempt failed. In the very beginning of her investigation she met with antagonism from law-enforcement and health authorities. The story was eventually published but it was anything but an investigative

report. Apart from the above difficulties there is another important circumstance which is frequently mentioned by journalists - namely the meagre wages. These are estimated at between \$5 and \$10 per story, at best. It should also be noted that these are rates fixed in independent publications whose financial situation is far better than that of government media outlets. Journalists admit that there is no use in risking one's life for a ludicrous wage like that.

According to independent reporter Sulton Khamad, many private publications are not interested in publishing critical or investigative reports. They are more concerned about their stability and profits. He is also convinced that a period of self-censorship was succeeded by the censorship of publishers and editors-in-chief, who hold critical and investigative reports to be at the expense of the interests of society. Sulton Khamad is sure that by doing so independent news media demonstrate their unwillingness to accomplish their major mission. This is to give fair coverage to events and processes occurring in society thereby contributing to democratic values in Tajikistan.