
JOURNALIST TRAINING AND EDUCATION IN KIRGIZSTAN

By Raushan Marat, free-lance journalist, Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan

Despite the growth of journalism departments in Kyrgyzstan, the professional and educational level of young journalists remains low.

Asked if he were happy with the current education of journalists, Viktor Zapolsky, Editor-in-Chief of *Delo No.* weekly, said: "No. Students who come to our newspaper for practical training are not just helpless, but they do not want to remain in journalism in the future. Those from the Kyrgyz-Russian Slavic University think about themselves as future press secretaries or official reviewers, whilst those from the Kyrgyz-American University already have plans to work abroad." Zamira Sydykova of *Res Publica* weekly was more emotional in answering the question in respect of young journalists: "99.9 percent of them come with empty eyes... Nazgul Salieva and Almaz Rysaliev are exceptions. Almaz is a 4th year student and already contributes to our newspaper, but he will not stay in this field after graduation as the salaries are too low." At their very seldom joint meetings, university professors agree with the media leaders, notes are made, but the good intentions cannot face up to the severe reality of the acute financial and organizational issues.

JOURNALISM IN HIGHER EDUCATION

It's easy to establish a journalism department now; sometimes the Rector's signature is sufficient. Among the higher educational institutions in Bishkek, the Medical Academy, the Tourism Academy, the Agricultural Academy and thus far the Physical Culture Institute have no journalism departments. It is quite possible that journalism departments will soon appear in these institutions, specialized in sport, medicine, etc. The Kyrgyz State National University (KSNU) and the American University of Kyrgyzstan (AUK) are among the most prestigious and best-equipped universities in terms of state-of-the-art technology and methodology. The students have their own radio studios and labs. A well-equipped studio is envisaged for the students of the Kyrgyz-Russian Slavic University (KRSU). Every higher educational institution defines and develops the methods of journalism department teaching disciplines, profiling exactly what they should do. On the other hand, the Republic's Education Ministry, as a rule, formulates a social approach: what specialists does society need? International journalism has been recognized as an individual (i.e. specific and separate) specialty in some of the higher educational institutions.

OLD METHODS

Most of the methods are those still remaining from the Soviet era. Also, as most of the journalism departments have been formed as branches of philology departments, the curricula used are mainly those developed for Kyrgyz (Uzbek in the South) or Russian philology departments - i.e. insignificantly changed with some very vague journalism courses. The American-Kyrgyz University is the only exception as it employs new methodology and its students, who are mainly the children of well-to-do parents, orientate themselves towards jobs which are far away from both journalism and alma mater.

DIFFERENCE OF MENTALITY

Nelli Rahmatulina, a journalist with 30 years of experience at the State TV and Radio Broadcasting Company (STRC), now an AUK (American University of Kyrgyzstan) professor, believes that the low level of the general culture of the students and their ignorance of elementary matters is one of the principal causes of their poor adaptation to practical training (i.e. trainees) and specialization (i.e. young specialists). Alla Vzhesinskaya, State Telecasting Company editor, predicts that only one or two (i.e. out of an average group of 13) probationers could become journalists. As a result of the lack of an uniform approach and the obsolete syllabus, a gap frequently appears between the theoretical approaches taught regarding modern journalism and the practical work of the editorial offices. Students in practical training and young specialists imitate, blindfoldly and thoughtlessly, the programmes of Russian or Western media and even certain journalists. This fact impairs the work of the editorial offices and entails conflicts. Nikolai Kuzmin, an independent journalist with a 15-year experience of working both with private- and state-run printed and electronic media as Editor-in-Chief and Responsible Secretary, refers to his experience of working with probationers and young specialists as "sad". "I had to explain to the overwhelming majority of my young colleagues that it is not just stupid, but dangerous to imitate Mitkova, Pozner or Larry King. The young trainee should aim at shapening his own image and in creating his own profile so that the future could guarantee him/her a stable and relatively high-paid job. Copying the style of the work of *ORT*, *RTR*, *Moskovsky Komsomolets* or *Komsomolskays Pravda* journalists is inadmissible in our situation due to the mentality of our viewers, listeners, readers and the local media traditions."

LACK OF QUALIFIED JOURNALISTS

Training outside the higher educational institutions mainly includes sporadic seminars arranged by various NGOs, international organizations and foundations. These seminars are mainly thematic and narrow-field and held without any plan or co-ordination - exactly like the university training in this area. Until recently, the only systematized non-university training courses have been provided within the framework of the Internews Educational Programme and the Practical Journalism School courses organized by the Central Asian Information Centre (CAIC) and supported on a grant-basis by the regional UNESCO office. This project terminated in 1999. So one can say, in speaking about the current journalistic training situation, that the lack of an uniform systematic approach results in different levels and quality of student training in various higher educational institutions and is still far from the desired objective. The number of specialized department graduates does not meet the actual staff demand, which fact distorts the motivation of students during their training process. The editorial staff workers, with whom students undergo their practical training, are sufficiently loaded with their own duties, but would be glad to help future journalists should "the mentors' abilities correspond to the trainees' wishes". The teachers' skill improvement system (training) which emerged during the Soviet era has been destroyed. Instead, practical training abroad is offered by international organizations and foundations. However, the number of applications sponsored by the hosts is limited, and teachers are unable to undertake training, even in part, as they have to work for two or three employers to make both ends meet. As a result, they have no spare time to improve their qualifications. The embryonal non-university training system, although proven to be productive (seven CAIC trainees, who followed the Practical Journalism School courses, have been employed by rather prestigious printed and electronic media and ministerial press services), has stopped its operation.