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## **ECONOMY: A FORBIDDEN TOPIC FOR JOURNALISTS IN UZBEKISTAN?**

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*By Iskandar Hamroh, journalist, Uzbekistan*

**For the time being, the analysis of the economic situation of the country remains a very delicate exercise for the Uzbek journalists.**

Journalists dealing with the country's economic issues took part in the seminar on "Uzbekistan's Economy: coverage in the press" held in Tashkent between 16-18 January, which was initiated by Uzbekistan's International Journalists Training Centre, Uzbekistan's *Zakovat* businessmen information support and Germany's Konrad Adenauer Foundation regional office. They did not find any revelations in the comments of U.S. expert, William Clavon. He spoke about negative effects of the foreign currency conversion restrictions introduced in Uzbekistan, unemployment among high-skilled specialists, decreased living standards among a significant portion of the population, the state's foreign debt, lobbying of "selected" companies' interests, and corruption among the officials. The American expert just confirmed these truths. However, analysis of these topics in the local media is an extremely difficult matter, if not impossible. Foreign experts discuss these issues at various seminars, but the local journalists just have to listen to them and keep silent.

### **EASIER TO SPEAK FOR THE FOREIGNERS**

"Why not speak about that if you are an U.S. citizen and today you are here and tomorrow there?" asked one of the local journalists participating in the seminar, who had requested to talk on condition of anonymity. "Who amongst us republic journalists writing on economics would risk - on his own initiative - to dwell on the issue of, say, the state debt? Probably Mr. Clavon is allowed to speak about this, but we are not allowed to do so on account of censorship." Zafar Ruziev, director of Turkestan-Press independent news agency, saw this issue in a different way: "I don't think that the U.S. expert's viewpoint differs greatly from the official one. Bureaucracy and corruption are not Uzbekistan's fault. It is the fault of the mid-level functionaries seeking their own benefit. I don't think that it's a problem to have William Clavon's viewpoint published."

### **THEORETICAL OPENING**

An article entitled "No conversion. No! Results of "Doing Business in Uzbekistan" conference in London" published in *Be Ready for the Worst* column in *Courier Invest* newspaper confirms the fact that Uzbekistan's journalists can write material with a critical view on the country's economic situation. Here is a quotation from this article: "The annual London conference has clearly shown that Uzbekistan's imperfect financial system is the main impediment in the country's investment." A detail: *Courier Invest* is a training newspaper prepared by the abovementioned seminar participants impressed by what they have heard from foreign and local experts. "Indeed this article containing such assessments under such a

title and column cannot be published in our real newspapers," one of the journalists engaged in making that "toy" edition told me. "However it shows that, theoretically, our journalists can write about the things remaining under a ban."