
WHO SAID THERE IS NO FREEDOM OF SPEECH IN UZBEKISTAN?

By Aleksandar Hamagayev, Journalist, Tashkent Radio, Uzbekistan

Without local solidarity among press workers, foreign examples are unlikely to help to improve the functioning of the Uzbek media and the freedom of speech.

Nothing surprising was signaled when a further session of the journalists club began its work on 15 February. Swiss and British ambassadors to Uzbekistan, Pierre Chrzanovski and Christopher Ingham, had been invited to speak about the media situation in their respective countries. Diplomats are known to be self-restrained people who try to keep strictly within a distinct frame, but, nevertheless, to make the audience familiar with their ideas. So the British Ambassador, Mr. Ingham, highlighted three factors to define press freedom in the United Kingdom: independence of judicial bodies from the State; diversity of press and electronic media to express different viewpoints; and the lack of the power structures' pressure on the media. His Swiss counterpart, Mr. Chrzanovski, noted in jest that he did not know what to speak about: on press freedom or freedom of government in his country. In his words, the governmental functionaries always intently look at what the local media write about them.

DISCUSSING BRITISH MEDIA IN CENTRAL ASIA

The journalists gathered in the club listened to the foreign guests' reports with interest, but there was some dissatisfaction with the information received. That, as was clear to every local journalist, occurred because they wanted to listen to some assessments, sincere although probably not pleasant, of their work. Efforts by Shahab Zainutdinov, a Tashkent journalist, to make the diplomats speak on the media situation in Uzbekistan had no success. "I've come here to discuss the media situation in Great Britain, not in Uzbekistan," British Ambassador said in this respect.

BURNING ISSUES NOT ADRESSED

Discussion did not take place because the most burning issues concerning Uzbekistan's media situation were not touched upon. A'lo Hojaev, editor-in-chief of *Tashkentskaya Pravda* newspaper, managed to merge the positive experience presented by the British and Swiss ambassadors with the audience's critical mood. "We must listen and learn before looking for drawbacks because we have not a grain of the democracy nor the freedom of speech that exist in Great Britain and Switzerland," he said and engrossed everyone's attention. "We must learn to show our people's difficulties in the press." Further, A'lo Hojaev spoke about the most serious impediments in journalists' work, mainly the censors' arbitrariness, the lack of solidarity among the press workers and the inability to protect their own legal rights. The audience expressed their agreement with this opinion by a burst out of applause. Unfortunately, this does not mean they will act together in practice. In this connection, the words by Alain Deletroz, executive director of Open Society Uzbekistan Institute sponsoring the club operation, are worth citing: "I'd like to note that one can hear more criticism in this

club than in all the Uzbekistan media." Answering to the question "Do you read local periodicals?" by *Turkiston-press* news agency journalist, Ekaterina Hlopovskih, Alain Deletroz said: "I don't read it. It's very dull. If I read same, I do it like a homework task." After that he asked the audience to think how their institute could help the local journalists in their struggle against censorship.