
UZBEKISTAN'S UNION OF JOURNALISTS: LIFE AFTER DEATH

By Piotr Ivanov, journalist, Uzbekistan

Uzbekistan's Union of Journalists liquidated four years ago keeps on admitting new members.

When Uzbekistan's Union of Journalists was liquidated in November 1996, Ziyat Esenbaev, one of the republic's oldest journalists and the Union's long-time leader, said: "It was a hot-headed decision. The name was bad. The word 'union' is tightly associated with USSR. Should the journalists' society of Uzbekistan had been called 'association', 'federation' or anything else, nobody would have raised the question of changing the name or structure of this organization." Indeed, by that time, all official reports referred to the Union as *Uiushma* in Uzbek. "Nevertheless, it is still 'the Union' in Russian and this is inadmissible", Ziyat Esenbaev stated.

MATERIAL SUPPORT

However, it was not a mere liquidation. In 1996, the country had a half-state-run Press Support Foundation with the intent to support newspapers during the market transition. By a Cabinet of Ministers' decision, this economic organization and the creative union were merged into a body entitled Social and Political Foundation to Support the Media of Uzbekistan. Sharp-tongued journalists entitled their new organization 'last-shirt supporting foundation' and one of its founders, Ahmad Akzam, said that the era of freedom had come into Uzbek journalism because the Foundation would not "step upon" anyone's personality, but help journalists within its means. The Foundation has been exempted from all taxes. It has been engaged in buying paper abroad and selling it to the newspapers and other types of successful commerce. Now, the Foundation already has a number of subsidiaries. The Cabinet decided to allot 25 million sums (about 27,700 USD) to the Foundation for primary needs, and the latter has succeeded in promoting itself. It is known that the Foundation sells paper to local newspapers at a price lower than the usual market price. However, only the 'main' newspapers founded by the governmental bodies — such as *Pravda Vostoka* and *Halk Suzi* — can use its services. There is not enough paper for everybody.

THE UNION NEVER DIES

A self-sustaining National Press Center has been created within the Foundation structure. During its two years of existence, it has held about a hundred events from news conferences to weddings. The Foundation's reports also include annual competitions and awards to journalists and students during the national holidays and those related to the Press and Media Workers Day (June 27). However, this is far from the same scale of the association and organizational work previously carried out by the Union of Journalists. Paradoxically, the Union of Journalists did not entirely disappear in November 1996. Lutfulla Kabirov, the Chairman of 1996's Union of Journalists, keeps on admitting people to the Union membership. The latest solemn and moving ceremony of this sort was held in his office on March 28, 2001. A reporter from Andijan became a new member of the Union. It turns out that people with his newspaper have, thus far, been absolutely unaware that the country has had no Union for a long time.

However, the membership card was authentic, congratulations were sincere and the man went home inspired and joyful. Now, Kabirov's Union of Journalists numbers about 3,500 members and he is ready to consider anyone who has preserved his membership card since the Soviet era as a member of the Union of Journalists. The journalist studies centre Ilkhom, headed by Kabirov, held a journalism issues research in Central Asia in 2000, ordered by Oxford University. This February, the research was issued in Oxford as an individual volume. A year ago, Uzbekistan's Union of Journalists was honoured with an European Council award for its activities in representing Uzbek journalism in the world. According to Kabirov, he is already spending the 50,000 USD award for new studies, for teaching journalists computer skills and buying computers for the Ilkhom centre.