
HIGH DEMAND AND LOW SUPPLY OF (GOOD) JOURNALISTS

By Aleksey Sukhov, correspondent of Res Publica newspaper in Osh, Kyrgyzstan

While the media boom curve is on the slide, good journalists are still in need in Southern Kyrgyzstan

Despite significant unemployment, both many state-run and independent media are ready to employ good journalists. "Today, being a journalist is not prestigious due to low wages", said Ernis Mamyrganov, the executive director of *OshTV* and *Almaz Radio* companies. The owners of the media cannot and frequently do not want to pay more to their employees. The cause is that the founders regard the media as a source of income rather than a socially relevant unit. Mamyrganov believes that, as a result many graduates do not associate their future with journalism, but enter commercial structures. During the first years of Kyrgyzstan's independence, when the notion 'freedom of speech' became current among the citizens, the humanities departments' graduates began to take an interest in the media. In parallel, some foreign foundations began to pursue an active policy on improving the professional level of both experienced and novice journalists.

CUT IN MEDIA PROGRAMMES

Yesterday's students had a chance to go abroad and see how their foreign colleagues worked. Some of them realized that a newspaper or a radio station could only become profitable if run as a business. In Osh alone, about 10 mass media were established between 1993 and 1997. With the passage of time, many sharks of the pen lost their big money illusions and, having failed to cope with their challenges, began to master new professions. In addition, most of the foreign foundations began to curtail their media programmes and switched their attention to education, medicine and science. There is another, no less important, issue related to the journalists' professional level. Before 1977, none of the higher educational institutions in Osh had journalism departments. However, even though now three journalism departments in Kyrgyz, Russian and Uzbek are operating with the Osh State University (OshSU), the issue has not been resolved.

SHORTAGE OF TEACHERS

The South suffers the shortage of not journalists alone, but also of journalism teachers. Frequently students comprehend the fundamentals of the profession from lectures of yesterday's philologists, historians or theatre actors. It is good if at least some of them have some experience of working for the media. "Our journalism department opened this year; so we'll create a Chair of journalism for its third academic year", Rano Usmanova, deputy dean of the Osh State University' philology faculty, said. "During the first academic years, the students will learn general disciplines." Yet, already now, the faculties' directors think about future professors.

ABSENCE OF COMPETITION

Presumably, one of the ways to solve the issue is to sign temporary contracts with the capital's

professors. However, as one of the students said, who asked not to have his name mentioned, this is not a way out. "The capital teachers will come here just to make money. Do you really think they will care about education quality? Most likely, they will have short business trips. We'll have to continuously get accustomed to new teaching techniques and this fact will be far from positive in affecting our knowledge", he believes. Southern Kyrgyzstan's independent editions established after 1990 mainly employ young people. As a rule they have no specialized journalist education. In contrast, the state-run media are represented by a cohort of professional journalists who are 45 and older. "The mass media development is impossible without the development of journalists themselves. Unfortunately, there is nobody on the heels of us more experienced specialists. So no competition results in no progress", said Almaz Ismanov, *Oshpress-Vesti* newspaper editor-in-chief.

WHERE TO EMPLOY FUTURE GRADUATES?

The first graduation from the OshSU Uzbek Philology Faculty's journalism department will be in two years. Where to employ the graduates is already a question. Now Osh has only three actively operating mass media in Uzbek: *OshTV* and the newspapers *Demos Times* and *Oush Sadosi*. Besides, there are four mass media that either do not pay salaries at all or only pay out negligible amounts. True, the situation is not much better in the aforementioned three. *OshTV* suffers continuous pressure from the authorities; *Demos Times* lives from grant to grant; and state-run *Oush Sadosi*, employing the Soviet-style journalists, does not want to change its conservative principles and methods of operating. The Southern Kyrgyzstan media issues are so interlaced that the situation should be considered as complex. Following Kyrgyzstan's independence, the journalism 'boom' (if this phenomenon can be so called) incited many editors of the Southern media to trumpet about the necessity to establish journalism departments and faculties. Now that three departments have been opened it is becoming clear that the OshSU Provost and deans have not taken into account the demands for work-force. As the profession is not prestigious and many newspapers and radio and TV studios have closed, the media boom has passed and an urgent issue is emerging: where to employ future graduates?