
KIRGIZ STATE-OWNED PRINTING HOUSE HOLDS MONOPOLY

By Cholpon Orozobekova, free-lance journalist, Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan

Kyrgyzstan's independent newspapers believe that the state-run printing house, Uchkun, working at the government's bidding, restricts freedom of speech.

There are several printing houses in Bishkek, but the state joint-stock company, Uchkun, is the sole one that meets current printing requirements. Therefore, all newspapers in the republic have to cooperate with this company. Uchkun is the successor to the Kyrgyzstan Communist Party Central Committee's printing house. Following independence, the printing house was transformed into a joint-stock company with the controlling interest held by the country's State Property Fund. Charges of restricting freedom of speech began to vibrate once again last year when the printing house directors refused to print the *ResPublica* newspaper. The story was repeated this year when the *Asaba* newspaper, after having been suspended by a court order, began to publish its materials in *ResPublica* pages.

LOOKING FOR PRIVATE ALTERNATIVES

Uchkun's vice president, Valery Denisyuk, said, "the printing house never refuses to print without a reason. The *Asaba* newspaper has been closed down by a court order. We didn't publish *ResPublica* because we had received a written directive from the Ministry of Justice and the Prosecutor's Office. We must obey to them". The non-governmental newspapers dream of being independent of the state printing house and are looking for ways to bring printing equipment to Kyrgyzstan. For example, Melis Eshimkanov, *Asaba* founder, held negotiations with Germany-based plant representatives, but with zero results. They failed to find an investor or lender granting privileged terms.

PAYING ON TIME

Viktor Zapolsky, *Delo No...* newspaper editor-in-chief, calls the Uchkun printing house a monopolist. "Indeed we'd like to have our own printing house. There was a time when we looked for ways and held negotiations. Soon we understood that this was beyond our power." According to Zapolsky, the profits yielded by Kyrgyzstan's newspapers are so low that loans are virtually non redeemable and nobody gives grants for such business. Uchkun never refused to print *Delo...* . Zapolsky associates this fact with the newspaper's promptness in making payments. "We've never delayed payments; we've always complied on time to the contract terms and conditions. We know that Uchkun only remits the debts of the governmental newspapers. The governmental *Slovo Kyrgyzstana* and *Kyrgyz Tuusu* publications are great debtors, but there's no problem printing them."

PRICES TOO HIGH

Dokturbek Yussupov, *Kyrgyz Tuusu*'s deputy editor, does not agree with his colleagues' opinions. "Uchkun is a business, not a political body. Once you've paid, you'll have your products printed." It turns

out that even a governmental newspaper dreams of its own printing facilities. "Uchkun's printing services are very expensive, they eat almost all the profits, and little money remains for paying fees and wages", Yussupov says. Marat Tazabekov, *AKI-Press* magazine editor-in-chief, apprehends that even if the independent newspapers manage to buy an alternative printing house, the state will just ruin it. "An international organization must be the printing house's proprietor", he believes. Newspapers should just lease the facilities; otherwise, the government could enforce conditions thus making normal activity impossible. "This must be done for the civil society rather than for business", Tazabekov says. The Presidential press service director, Ella Taranova, was until recently deputy editor of *Vecherny Bishkek*. She has admitted that she was "sometimes tired of Uchkun's dictatorial manners".

DEFENDING THE STATE-OWNERSHIP

In contrast, a well-known journalist Rina Prizhivoit, deputy editor-in-chief of *Vecherny Bishkek*, believes that the printing house must be state-owned. "A company or a family buying Uchkun would become the monopolist. If Uchkun really has shown its whims to anyone, well let them sue it and defend their rights", Rina Prizhivoit says. Denisyuk believes that the printing service prices are quite reasonable and realistic. "Uchkun would be prepared to draw up a contract with any edition provided it had been registered with the Ministry of Justice. If an edition is not printed it, therefore, means that the respective company either has not paid or has no paper - but that's not our fault!"