
THE TAJIK WEEKLY ASIA PLUS CELEBRATES FIVE YEARS OF EXISTENCE

By Turko Dikaev, journalist, Tajikistan

Last May, the first private information agency in Tajikistan, *Asia Plus*, celebrated its fifth-year anniversary.

Asia Plus commenced its activity in April 1996 when the first issue of its information and analytical bulletin appeared in print simultaneously in Russian and in English. The agency started to work when the civil war in Tajikistan, which had begun in 1992 and taken more than 50,000 lives, was coming to an end. Journalists tried not to speak too openly as they were afraid to be included in the number "of traitors of the people's interests." The city was drowned in hearings, conjectures and guesses, and bazaar gossiping had become an important source of information for the inhabitants of Dushanbe. Not only the inhabitants suffered from a deficiency of information, but also did the international agencies and diplomatic services of foreign states accredited in Tajikistan. Two journalists met, in such an environment, in 1996: a correspondent of the Moscow newspaper *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, Umed Babakhanov, and a correspondent of the Dushanbe weekly journal *Business and Politics*, Ilkhom Narziev. Their meeting resulted in an intent to start issuing a weekly newsletter, and they managed to locate some old printing equipment. During the first months of the functioning of the agency, all foreign embassies accredited in Tajikistan, as well as the majority of international organisations in the country, had subscribed to its information services. In 1998, the agency started a daily information tape "AP-Blitz." "It has not been an easy job to be a leader in the information market of Tajikistan for 5 years", employees of the *Varorud* information agency of the Sogdian region of the Republic stated in their salutatory message to 'the Asians'. "During those years, you not only have proved that you are really the first, but you also have opened our country to the whole world..."

OFFICIAL RECOGNITION

Nowadays, *Asia Plus* issues its own newspaper named, quite obviously, *Asia Plus*. It has been a gradual transformation of the newsletter *AP-Blitz* issued in Russian and in English and, moreover there is an electronic version. The agency has its own School of Independent Journalism, from which two groups of journalists (adult and children) have already graduated; it also renders information support to all worthy undertakings and actions. The agency has become the most efficient source of information in Tajikistan. Thus, in recent years, *Asia Plus* is the local source information in the Republic of Tajikistan most frequently cited in the world. *Zerkalo*, the Center for Sociological Research established in Dushanbe, has recently published the rating of printed mass media of the country, in which the newspaper *Asia Plus* was rated third after two entertainment-type editions. From the results of 2000, the Ministry of Culture and Information of the Republic of Tajikistan recognized *Asia Plus* as the newspaper containing the most operative and reliable news.

THE STANDING RULE

One rule accepted, as far back as in 1996, still remains unchanged and sacred: just dry facts and no interpretations. Any problem should be treated as it is seen from both sides involved in a conflict. "Today, it is sufficient to read an issue of the newspaper *Asia Plus* and the problem of finding objective and on-line information will be settled", said Anvar Akhmadjonov, an employee of the Public Communication Centre under the Ministry of Safety for the Khatlon region. It is important that the newspaper gives information, but does not comment on it. "The agency has proclaimed objectivity, disaffection, freedom from groups, local and other favours as its principles of work", writes Umed Babakhanov, the agency's Director.

PROSPECTS

The agency has good prospects. Readers favour *Asia Plus* newspaper. "Two months ago, I doubted whether I could sell more than 5 issues", stated Galina Andreevna, a night distributor of newspapers. "But, today, I can easily sell 15 or 20 copies." "The task to head the rating of the Tajikistan mass media can be accomplished by us", indicated Lydia Issamova, Chief Editor of the agency." However, we have to work even harder than in the previous five years to achieve this goal." The agency cherishes a dream: to open its own radio station. For the past three years, *Asia Plus* has been in possession of appropriate equipment and specialists, but cannot get the necessary license from the officials, although no-one has questioned the lawfulness of the request.