
PHOTOJOURNALISM IN UZBEKISTAN: ANOTHER SIGN OF THE PRESS' DECLINE

By Elparid Khodjaev, journalist, Uzbekistan

Like journalism, like the press in the country, the photojournalism in Uzbekistan shows many signs of weakness, and little possibilities for improvement.

Experienced press photographers have abandoned the editorial offices, some of them left the country, some became engaged in other businesses, some others found themselves in the so-called household photo services and work at weddings and other family celebrations. This sphere of activity does not require a large creative output, but appears to be rather profitable. "What shall I do? I have to feed my family, and keep afloat myself", said a known photographer, Vladimir Kovrein. "Journalistic labor costs so low and do not provide a worthy living." At present, the average salary of a journalist in Uzbekistan is around 10US. Author's fees for photographs do not even cover their cost price. For instance, the price of one roll of photographic film is 1600 sums (1.75 US), its development 200 sums (0.21 US), and the printing 700 sums (0.76 US). And the transport expenses have to be added to this sum... A press photographer prints an average of about ten photos from one roll", complains Vladimir Kovrein. "From them, only two at the most will be accepted. So, the cost price of one photo is around 1300 sums (1.4 US). A newspaper would pay 500 - 800 sums per picture (0.54 - 0.87 US) and cannot afford raising the fee because of the financial situation.

FEATURELESS NEWSPAPERS - FEATURELESS PHOTOS

It is not a secret that the greater number of newspapers in Uzbekistan wallows in poverty. With small circulation and rapidly-growing prices for polygraphic services, paper, distribution, lease of premises and taxes take a significant part of their revenues. In these circumstances, a newspaper editorial office has little resources for its own development. Therefore, any provisioning of a press photographer with the necessary modern equipment is out of question. "During recent years, I have not seen a newspaper in which a press photographer highlighted a topic of any significance", continues Vladimir Kovrein. "It is quite clear that, first of all, actually press photographers have no skill, experience nor outlook. Secondly, newspapers are short of resources to cover travel and lodging expenses, and to buy enough photographic film, etc." In former times, the working table of a photo-editor was the first photohack-work barrier. There, many defective snapshots were sifted out. Now, there is no such position in the staff-list of newspapers. No photo-editor is needed now, so practically any snapshot has a chance to be published. Lack of choice leads to using what is available at the moment. "We realize that the quality of photos we publish leaves much to be desired", said the Chief Editor of the newspaper *Tashkentskaya Pravda*, A'lo Khodjaev. "These are mainly saying-nothing photos interesting only those persons who appear in the picture."

NO PROFESSIONALISM WITHOUT STUDY

Elaborating upon the subject, Mr. Khodjaev speaks about the necessity of courses or seminars on photojournalism; it is desirable also that there be regular promoting for the creative growth of press photographers. This question was repeatedly raised at different levels, but there are no positive results so

far. "A few years ago, under the aegis of the Union of Journalists of Uzbekistan, there was a section actively working to form press photographers." The Secretary Executive of the newspaper *Pravda Vostoka*, Viktor Degtyarev, adds: "It used to hold various seminars, courses, exhibitions, creative meetings, and discussions. All this gave food for thought, enriched press photographers and provided for their creative growth. Now we have nothing of the sort." It is obvious that certain incentives are necessary for professional growth. For many years, not a single press photographer has taken part in prestigious photo-exhibitions or contests. Many of them even did not hear of same. In fact, they are now torn off from the world photo processes, and are not aware of what excites the photo-world. They do not have the slightest idea about achievements and problems existing in this sphere. Of course, Uzbekistan press photographers discuss this problem, but only among themselves. Not having their own professional journal, they cannot debate on the sore problems. Russian specialized photojournals, though quite understandable from the language point of view, nevertheless remain a dream; prices are too high. Thus, local press photographers have to be 'stewed in their own juice', having no guiding line for creative growth. Meanwhile, newspapers go on publishing dull and inexpressive photos. "The front page is the exterior of an issue number, its business card. An expressive snapshot is very important to attract the attention of the reader. But, from where I can take such a photo ?", said Mr. Mikhail Guralsky, the Secretary Executive of the newspaper *Tashkentskaya Pravda*. "Our photo correspondents rarely give us a treat of successful works. Some years ago, we had hopes for the Uzbek news agency, *UzA*, that was to provide the periodicals with operative photo-information. But, after experienced press photographers left the country, the flow of photo production dropped sharply. There is no efficiency, the quality of the photos does not satisfy us. Therefore, we have had to refuse cooperating with *UzA*."

FOTOPRESS INTRODUCES NEW APPROACHES

Who knows, maybe, the niche – provisioning of periodicals with qualitative photos – will be taken by the *Fotopress* news agency recently established in Uzbekistan. Vladimir Kovrein, highly-qualified photographer, mentioned above, became its organizer. Now, when our society comes to understanding that information and photos are products that can be sold and bought like any other goods, relations between the agency and periodicals will be based on business terms. *Fotopress* is not a governmental organization, so no financial support from the budget or other sources is awaited. According to Vladimir Kovrein, preliminary negotiations showed that editors of the leading publications of the country agreed to the conditions put forward by the agency: slightly increasing the purchasing prices for published photos of satisfactory quality. Large hopes are pinned upon cooperating with foreign mass media. But, let's think about this for the future.