
AN EXILED TAJIK JOURNALIST SEES THE SITUATION OF THE MEDIA AS ENCOURAGING

By Nuriddin Karshiboev, journalist, Dushanbe

Back to his country for the first time after nine years of exile, the journalist Oleg Panfilov considers that the Tajik media shows positive changes and has good prospects of development

After nine years of emigration, the known civil rights campaigner, scientist-ethnographer, journalist, and Director of the Centre of Extremal Journalism of the Union of Journalists of Russia, Mr. Oleg Panfilov, visited his motherland last September. By invitation of Mr. Emomali Rakhmonov, Head of the Tajik state, Oleg Panfilov and his wife Victoria took part in celebrations devoted to Independence Day of Tajikistan. During the trip, Oleg Panfilov visited the Mountain Badakhshan area, and had a meeting with his Tajik fellow journalists in Dushanbe. He was also received by the President of Tajikistan, Emomali Rakhmonov.

- Oleg, you are treated rather enigmatically in the republic. So, had you any fearful apprehensions before coming here?

- I had to leave the country for political reasons and, whilst in emigration, I met with similar emigrants who had not always had a good opinion of the current policy and situation in Tajikistan. Of course, I had some fears about returning. However, two months ago my wife Victoria visited the republic and she prepared not only a number of materials for *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, where she works, but also brought back an invitation of President Emomali Rakhmonov to visit the country. After that, at nights I frequently dreamed of Tajikistan and decided to visit the country by all means. So, participation in the seminar "Laws and standards in the field of mass media", organised by the National Association of Independent Mass Media of Tajikistan, appeared to offer an appropriate opportunity. I was fearing very much to find the country in a far worse condition than it was when I left. Fortunately, what I saw proved the contrary: there are definite changes for the better due to the stability of the peace process.

- You have mentioned the peace process, so, let's talk on this topic. You participated in the inter-Tajik negotiations as a human rights expert. In your opinion, what was the role of journalism prior to the beginning of, and during the course of, the civil war in Tajikistan?

- In the course of all the rounds of the inter-Tajik negotiations, the opposition delegation constantly suggested to include in the agreements a provision regarding free press activity in the country. It should be mentioned that, prior to the beginning of the conflict in Tajikistan, there were more favourable conditions for independent mass media if compared with those in other post-Soviet republics. For more than a five-million population, there were above thirty private editions, both party and independent newspapers. Unfortunately, there were also freedom of speech abuses by some journalists. Thus, gradually the press became an instrument in the hands of political groups, which used it in struggling with one another. Probably, the reason was a certain amorphous attitude of the Tajikistan Communist Party Central Committee and frequent changes of management in the power higher echelons. During the civil confrontation, journalism inside the country went through a period when all mass media in

Tajikistan were on the side of the state and the opposition had no access to the press. This resulted in the foundation and development of Tajik emigrant journalism. At that time, the newspapers *Charogi Ruz* (in Moscow), *Paiki Piruzi* (in Teheran), and the journal *Djaikhun* (in Peshawar) were started up, and the radio station *The Voice of Free Tajikistan* (in North Afghanistan) began broadcasting in the Tajik, Uzbek, and Russian languages. In my view, the newspaper *Charogi Ruz* and the broadcasting station *The Voice of Free Tajikistan* played an important role in giving the population information on occurring events.

- How would you judge the Tajikistan current mass media?

- It is fairly easy for me to give an estimation as, during the last nine years, I received copies of all newspapers issued in the republic. For the last half-year there are clear, positive changes in the press due to the establishment of the newspaper *Asia-plus*, development of the *Charkhi Gardun* media group with the inclusion of the newspaper *Vecherny Dushanbe*. The change in the newspaper *Todjikiston* is quite obvious. On pages of Tajikistan newspapers, more and more often appear analytical articles and commentaries and, sometimes, they are very outspoken. This means that the Tajik press is reviving and has good prospects of development; it is encouraging.

- You had a meeting with the President of Tajikistan, Emomali Rakhmonov. In the course of your discussions, did you raise the questions of freedom of press and mass media development in the republic?

- More than half of the time scheduled for the meeting with the Head of State was devoted to the problem of journalism in the country. We discussed various aspects of the matter. The discussion covered the perfection of the legislation in respect of mass media, providing for access of journalists to information, and the protection of their safety while executing their professional responsibilities. The problem of freedom of access to information is very important in the course of democratic society construction, as availability of objective information allows the society to actively participate in the construction process. This problem is related to the question of licensing of private independent broadcasting stations presenting various points of view. It is hardly possible to consider the situation normal when - in such large a city as Dushanbe - there is no private radio broadcasting so far. I became convinced that the President understands the problems of journalism in the country. The Head of State suggested that I, together with Tajik journalistic organisations, prepare proposals for a situation improvement in the mass media sphere in order to establish direct dialogue with the press.

- To conclude, I'd like to hear your opinion on what kind of mutual relations should there be between the powers and the independent mass media in Tajikistan?

- It seems that authorities of the republic have become more reconciled to the activity of the newspapers. At this stage, both the society and journalists (being part of the society) should join their efforts for the sake of peace and strengthening of understanding in the country. If the authorities would create a favourable environment for mass media activities, e.g., to pass new laws promoting free press development, then they, in turn, would assist the powers in the creation of new mutual relations in the society. As my meeting with President Emomali Rakhmonov has shown, the beginning of such a dialogue is clear. Our Centre of Extremal Journalism, together with journalistic organisations of the republic, will provide for its development. As for myself, it is also important because I still have Tajik citizenship and consider myself involved in the processes taking place in my motherland.