
TASHKENTSKAYA PRAVDA MIGHT NOT CHALLENGE CENSORSHIP ANYMORE

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***Tashkentskaya Pravda*, the only Uzbekistan newspaper to challenge censorship no longer exists in its prior form, after its redaction has been placed under the authority of a new editor-in-chief.**

Before the beginning of July this year there were two newspapers of the same name in the republic, but independent of each other: *Tashkentskaya Pravda* (Russian language) and *Toshkent Khakikati* (Uzbek language). Each newspaper had its own editorial policy, but, in addition to their names, one point united them - their common founder - the Khokimiyat (a state administration body) of the Tashkent oblast' (region). On 5 July 2001, the Khokimiyat unexpectedly decided to merge the two editions, Russian and Uzbek, under common management, thus depriving *Tashkentskaya Pravda* of its own Chief Editor. From that time onwards, the Chief Editor of the Uzbek *Toshkent Khakikati* became, also, the Chief Editor of *Tashkentskaya Pravda*.

A TYPICAL SITUATION

At first sight, the Tashkent oblast' Khokimiyat's action appeared not only quite legal, but in the spirit of the times. "The founder has the right to do this," stated the Chief Editor of the amalgamated newspapers, Mr. Fatkhiddin Mukhiddinov, referring to the charters of both newspapers which authorised the founder to nominate the Chief Editor and, moreover, to suspend and even liquidate the papers. It seems that Mr. Mukhiddinov took into account the long-term experience accumulated in Uzbekistan. There are quite a number of Uzbek and Russian language newspapers of the same name, both in the capital and oblast' centres of the country. All of them have the same founders and same Chief Editors: e.g. the parliamentary newspaper *Khalk suzi* and its Russian analogue *Narodnoye slovo*, *Uzbekiston ovozi* and *Golos Uzbekistana*, and the Tashkent city Khokimiyat's newspapers *Toshkent okshomi* and *Vecherny Tashkent*. This is the common practice in the oblast' centres of the republic. Therefore, in its decree on the *Toshkent Khakikati* and *Tashkentskaya Pravda* amalgamation, the Tashkent oblast' Khokimiyat considered the situation typical and used the following wording: "Taking into consideration the experience of other oblast's of the republic ... " For example, such amalgamated editions of oblast' Russian and Uzbek language newspapers can be found in Khorezm and Surkhan-Darya oblast's. What was the necessity of the *Toshkent Khakikati* and *Tashkentskaya Pravda* amalgamation which, according to employees of both editions, nobody expected?

TWO POINTS OF VIEW RE ONE FACT

Mr. Fatkhiddin Mukhiddinov assured that: "The action was imposed exclusively on account of economic and financial reasons." He drew attention to the Khokimiyat's decree which substantiated the amalgamation of the two papers due to the necessity to "strengthen the material and technical base and improve the usage of the budgetary resources." According to Mr. Fatkhiddin Mukhiddinov, the *Toshkent Khakikati*'s resource base was much stronger than that of *Tashkentskaya Pravda*. "We have purchased

computers and other office equipment for a total of 7 millions sums (about \$7,000)," advised Mr. Mukhiddinov. "For the first time in the history of the newspaper we acquired our own car. In addition, on the newspaper's financial account there appeared to be nearly 22 million sums (about \$22,000), which is rather a significant amount in Uzbekistan." The Chief Editor of the amalgamated newspapers believes this amount is quite enough to provide for the needs of the two papers and to complete the fiscal year with positive results. The former *Tashkentskaya Pravda* Chief Editor, A. Khodjaev, has quite a different viewpoint on what has happened. With the amalgamation of the two newspapers and the elimination of the Chief Editor position for the Russian *Tashkentskaya Pravda*, he sees, first of all, "a big political mistake." According to him, "Russian readers of Tashkent city and oblast' have been insulted, because their newspaper has lost its independence." What did Mr. Khodjaev have in mind in speaking about "a big political mistake" and "the insulted Russian population?" Here is what one should take into account: in multi-ethnic Uzbekistan, the availability of a Russian language newspaper with its own Chief Editor is considered a symbol of independence, though rather relative, in carrying out intra-edition policy, creative work issues included. It is not by mere chance that one of the amalgamated newspaper employees said: "It is a dismal fact that above you there is, though very good, the Chief Editor of the Uzbek edition..." However, Fatkhiddin Mukhiddinov, the Chief Editor of the amalgamated newspapers, was perhaps more exact in expressing the concern of *Tashkentskaya Pravda's* employees and its readers, "Many think that, now, *Tashkentskaya Pravda* will become a duplicate of *Toshkent Khakikati*. I say, it will be nothing of the kind! *Tashkentskaya Pravda* has its own personality and traditions which we are going to preserve. I'm aware the newspapers are designed for readers with different mentalities, and I shall take this into account in my work." All this makes clear the wave of fears which has been caused in journalistic and reader circles after the amalgamation of the two papers. Of important significance is the fact that the former *Tashkentskaya Pravda* Chief Editor, Mr. Khodjaev, was known as a person persistently struggling against the arbitrariness of the forbidden by law, but really existing, censorship.

ON THE ROLE OF PERSONALITY IN THE NEWSPAPER

Soon after Khodjaev's dismissal, from the front page of *Tashkentskaya Pravda* disappeared the column "The Word of the Editor" in which he presented his own views on what was going on in the country. So, only in *Tashkentskaya Pravda* could appear the article "On true patriotism," in which Khodjaev wrote, in particular, that at times "in the guise of patriotism there is a hidden, double-dyed chauvinism or nationalism drawn from the poisonous juice of arrogance, cherished superiority over other peoples and countries." (*Tashkentskaya Pravda*, 7 July 2001). According to Mr. Khodjaev, he had to justify to the censor the right to publish materials about the great Russian poetess, Anna Akhmatova, whose destiny is closely linked with Tashkent, and about the widely-known singer and poet, Vladimir Vysotsky. The censors accused the newspaper of Russophilia, quite forgetting that the newspaper focused on Russian readers with appropriate mentality. Mr. Khodjaev was the unique Chief Editor who publicly spoke about the censorship's arbitrariness, and laid bare the legality of its existence. So, one week prior to the amalgamation of the two newspapers, in the *Tashkentskaya Pravda* editorial office a stand was erected known as "The Exhibition of Censorship" - popular among journalists. "On the stand we displayed articles with censorship comments so that our colleagues could know what they should not write about today," stated one of the *Tashkentskaya Pravda* employees, who had advanced the idea of creating such a stand. The decision on the amalgamation of the two newspapers was made a few days later. The "Exhibition" was closed and the number of people who saw it began to decline sharply. The Chief Editor of the amalgamated newspapers, Fatkhiddin Mukhiddinov, denied the possibility of such a stand existence. "I never heard anything about it and I do not believe there could have ever been one," he stated.

FEW PEOPLE DARE TO ACKNOWLEDGE CENSORSHIP

It is difficult to place absolute trust in that statement as the offices of the two papers, both prior to and after the amalgamation, are on the same floor of the same building and, according to Mr. Mukhiddinov, he was always well informed of the goings-on of the newspapers' staffs. In order to understand the above, one should take into consideration that for a responsible person in Uzbekistan to acknowledge the existence of censorship means to acknowledge the outrageous violation of the law. However, few people would dare to do that. Mr. Mukhiddinov does not accept any version stating that the reason for the elimination of the position of Chief Editor of *Tashkentskaya Pravda* was due to Khodjaev's firm position concerning the forbidden by law, but in fact existing censorship. In answer to the question, why was he appointed Chief Editor of the amalgamated newspapers and not Khodjaev, Mr. Mukhiddinov substantiated the decision by referring to Mr. Khodjaev's pension age - such people are the first to be discharged in the case of staff reduction. Also, because of the *Toshkent Khakikati* and *Tashkentskaya Pravda* amalgamation, the staff of the latter lost a grant in the amount of 25,000 USD intended for the purchase of computers, dictaphones, and access to the Internet. An explanation for this was given by the public relations representative of the Soros Foundation Branch in Uzbekistan, Mr. Khurmat Babadjanov. He stated that Mr. Khodjaev had headed a Project for mass media assistance in settlement of social security issues and practical help to lonely invalids of war and retired persons. To accomplish this Project, the Soros Foundation had allocated the abovementioned 25,000 USD. Now the Project had been suspended because of Mr. Khodjaev's dismissal. To the question, whether the amalgamated *Toshkent Khakikati* / *Tashkentskaya Pravdo* editing board could apply for these resources, Mr. Babadjanov answered: "It could, but it should file a new application for the Project to get assent."