

Opinion

INDEPENDENCE DAY IN UZBEKISTAN: TEN YEARS OF DECLINE FOR THE UZBEK MEDIA

By Erkin Ozod, journalist, Uzbekistan

Ten years later, the pompous declarations about democratic reforms which accompanied the independence of the country have turned into empty words, as the situation of the media shows.

The ten-year anniversary of independence celebrated in the majority of post-Soviet republics is a convenient occasion to define and understand the political and ideological changes taking place in them, as well as the economic, social and cultural development (if these are present!). It is also an opportunity to analyse the sources, motives and the effective levers of change used by the leaders of some of these latter-day independent states. These leaders began independence as usual, with public declarations of their adherence to the most radical democratic reforms, but, in the course of time, they have moved more and more toward authoritarian methods of government. These changes are striking in the Republic of Uzbekistan in general, and with regard to its mass media in particular. In defiance of the Constitution and legislation of Uzbekistan, as well as of written and verbal statements and declarations of the President, and also of the expectations of democratically minded layers of the Uzbek public that had hoped to say farewell to the totalitarian unidirectional ideology of the past, mass media is subject to rigid censorship, predilections and antipathy. Although these processes are very painful, not all intellectuals (including mass media representatives) feel the shock. There are many reasons for this. It is partly because of the evolution of the mass media in the republic, the peculiarities of the previous ideological education, and the standard training for most journalists. It is also because of the strength of national traditions, both religious and psychological, that sanctify power and respect for the elderly and for those in positions of authority who have greater life experience. These traditions and people are related unconditionally to the regime. Low wages of the mass media workers (less than \$20 per month), their dependence on their employers, and the restraints placed on independently minded people, has resulted in the total decline of Uzbekistan's mass media. Today it presents an example of a pitiful existence that is unable to broach issues of social renewal, and unable to prepare Uzbekistan to join the community of civilised countries of the world. Moreover, it does not satisfy even the elementary requirements and expectations of the readers, who are able to compare the level of newspaper publications, TV and radio broadcasts with that in other countries, for example, in Russia. To complete the picture of the status of the mass media in Uzbekistan it is necessary to emphasise some formative aspects.

LOST PRESTIGE

The first is the heritage. Prior to the declaration of Uzbekistan independence there was a varied mass media network—journals and newspapers—at the level of the republic, region, city, and district. There were newspapers in various sectors of the national economy—newspapers belonging to large associations and enterprises, to high schools (all of them were affiliated with appropriate party

committees), as well as a number of trade-union, youth and children's editions and local audio-visual mass media—all these were incorporated into the system of the State TV and Radio Committee of the Uzbekistan Soviet Socialist Republic (UzSSR). The position of journalists in society was prestigious and their financial standing was comfortable. Mass media Chief Editors were, without fail, incorporated into the administrative bodies of the party, into trade-union and young communist league committees, including the Central Committee of the CPSU (Communist Party of Soviet Union). They were elected deputies of the Supreme and local councils of People's Deputies and given state awards and premiums. They served within the framework of interests of communist ideals, and had wide possibilities to criticise careless and dishonest heads, business managers, workers of executive bodies etc. Every critical article immediately became the topic of discussion in party committees, executive committees and boards of ministries meetings. Decisions were made based on these articles and some people were removed from their positions. The price of a newspaper was 2-3 copecks, so, virtually everyone could afford to buy it. Thus, many mass media workers felt important.

A TOO HEADY GULP OF FREEDOM

In the years of Perestroika in the USSR, and during the first period of independence, the self-consciousness of journalists was given an opportunity to move outside of ideological frameworks of the past grew. On the wave of political and economic reforms, new layers of journalistic research and criticism were discovered and new editions appeared, including non-governmental ones. Six hundred sixty-four newspapers and journals, and 55 audio-visual mass media are currently registered in the country. In the name of objectivity, I should mention that in conditions of euphoria there have appeared a considerable number of materials saturated with legal nihilism and moral defectiveness. There was the squaring of accounts, and made-to-order, defamatory and indiscriminate articles. "A gulp of freedom" appeared too heady for many journalists, so their activity, as well as activities of various new political parties and movements inclined to endless meetings, appeared inadequate to promote true democratic principles. Subsequently, such activities became the formal grounds on which the authorities dared to infringe civil rights and freedoms in the country. Nevertheless, based on strategic plans for social development, on one hand, and on the desire to manipulate the mass media as the most powerful lever of influence on the population on the other hand, a thorough legal foundation has been formed for passing the following laws: "On publishing," "On mass media," "On protection of journalist professional activity," "On guaranties and free access to information," "On advertising," and "On the copyright and related rights." Also, mass media activity is regulated by the Law "On struggle with terrorism," and by the "Regulations on the order of polygraphic enterprises registration in the Republic of Uzbekistan" and the "Regulations on the order of obligatory dispatch of complimentary copies of printed matter."

CIRCULATION OF NEWSPAPERS DECREASED 10-20 TIMES

Though the titles of these laws look respectable, antidemocratic forces managed to introduce clauses in them, that, in practice, have humiliated the independent role "of the fourth power" in the country. So, Clause 16 of the Law "On mass media," despite protests of the public, still contains a record of the possibility of terminating the activity of any edition by the body that registered it, i.e., by the State Committee and oblast (region, ed.) departments on mass media activities. To illustrate these restrictions, during the last few years the newspaper *Panorama*, the radio station *Europe plus*, and the independent *Khorezm TV* studio were closed. Newspapers are not the most popular media outlet in Uzbekistan. Quite a few years ago there were republican and oblast daily newspapers in Uzbek, Russian, Kazakh, Tadjik, Korean and Crimean-Tatar languages. Currently there are only two newspapers, *Khalk suzi – Narodnoe slovo* and the *Pravda Vostoka* issued in Uzbek and Russian five times a week. Oblast newspapers are

issued twice a week, and others only once a week, or even once a month. For example, this year the newspaper *Millyi tiklanish* (National revival)—the publication of the same name political party—was issued only six times (by dual issues). As a result, the circulation of newspapers and journals has been decreased 10-20 times. In addition, the annual subscription price now exceeds the average wage in the country by several times. The most obvious problem with the mass media in Uzbekistan that decreases its popularity, is its susceptibility to boundless censorship. Though no censorship is allowed officially, all mass media especially those functioning in the capital, are under tough control of the Inspection on Protection of State Secrets in Press under the State Committee for Publishing. The Inspection is officially guided by the Law "On protection of state secrets" (1993), the categories of secrets include subjects "of special importance... military, political, economic, scientific, technical and other items of information protected by the state."

EXTERNAL SUPPORT INDISPENSABLE TO UZBEK JOURNALISTS

The Inspection is headed by an officer who has been working in the system for 43 years. He is an ardent adherent to the principle of interdiction of any material, any idea, any word that is able to raise any doubts in readers' minds of the absolute infallibility of the internal and external policy of the country's leaders. Moreover, the censorship extends to the rights of authors and editors who publish photos of singers, articles about outstanding figures of foreign culture and science, and interviews with diplomats. In other words, the control moves far outside the framework stipulated in the Law. This circumstance stokes the smouldering discontent of most journalists, because many of them are ready to accept the existence of some censorship, on the condition that it is exercised in a flexible civilised form, and if it only concerns truly important subjects. The existing system fosters a feeling of hypocrisy and double standards. Self-censorship is characteristic for the majority of editors and morally corrupts them. Despite their grumbling against the external methods of control, they trade their consciences at any cost, sticking to their armchairs, gaining their probable awards (during 10 years under the Presidential Decrees more than 260 journalists were rewarded by the state). What for, I should ask—for deputy powers (these are also defined and regulated by the Presidential environment). For these reasons it is extremely urgent to rehabilitate professional journalist associations in Uzbekistan, either in the form of unions, federations or associations, and to expand the Code of journalists' ethics. A public committee must be established on morality and the observance of ethical standards in mass media. Even if in a real situation all these institutions will be brought under the administration's control, nevertheless there is hope that increasing corporate solidarity will encourage the growth of the professional self-consciousness of the mass media workers, and highlight their responsibility for the future fortune of the mass media development in the country. In order to encourage and stimulate journalists' aspirations for honest self-expression, it is necessary, with international public support, to distribute via the Internet all materials that are prohibited without grounds, or that have been corrected by censors. Journalists should be aware that their words will be heard and supported.