

The Batken Crisis through the Kyrgyz Media

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In August 1999, a group of Islamist extremists invaded the Batken oblast in the south of Kyrgyzstan. As more guerrillas came and took hostages, regional and international media institutions concentrated their attention on this crisis.

The coverage of Batken and Chon Alai events, as trivial as it may seem, enabled a number of press institutions to increase their audience, circulation and popularity ratings among viewers or readers. It was not surprising given that coverage of such particular events has always attracted a special attention from audiences around the world. The military activities attracted people from various layers of community and, subsequently, the need for updated information and news became very high. Unfortunately, due to difficult financial situation, most media outlets in Kyrgyzstan could not afford to have accreditation and send their reporters to the conflicting sites. Exception were several mainstream and capital based newspapers. Lack of sufficient information created poor reporting and obstruction of data.

For instance, an article in Vecherny Bishkek issue #165 dated August 26, stated following: "According to unidentified sources, the Kyrgyz general-major Anarbek Shamkeev, who acted as commander of internal forces recently died while being a hostage to guerrillas. Details are not cleared as of yet, but there is an account that it was due to a heart attack." The general Shamkeev was alive as it came out later. Soon he was freed by the Kyrgyz authorities.

Another example of non-competent approach to data is an article in the weekly Kyrgyz newspaper "Delo ©" issue 32, which was published on September 1st, 1999. In particular, this article said following: "In the morning of August 31st, Independence Day of Kyrgyzstan, guerillas released another Japanese hostage and a Kyrgyz interpreter Omurbek Janakeev." Several hours later, it was obvious that it was another false-call initiated by the media.

At present, when certain time passed, Batken events are still discussed at the meetings of military officials. Those tragic summer and autumn days are often remembered by sorrowful families of soldiers who were killed in action. And for many other families, updated information coming from battle fields was as important as it can be. For these and many other reasons, it is worthwhile to make an analysis of the role the media played in the coverage of these events.

Kyrgyz mainstream and capital newspapers such as "Vecherni Bishkek" and "Delo #" were leading in providing updated and comprehensive coverage of the crisis. On August 11th, 1999, "Vecherny Bishkek" was first to inform readers of an emergency meeting of the Kyrgyz Security Council that took place in the Kyrgyz capital - Bishkek. Amangeldi Muraliev, the Kyrgyz prime-minister, acted as its chairman. The main issue at the meeting was the recent situation and developments in the Batken rayon. In addition, it is important to

mention, that apart from delivering updated news, the Kyrghyz newspaper "Res Publica" provided ample analytical coverage and perspectives on the conflict situation in bordering regions of the Osh oblast. G. Grebenshikov's article in the newspaper's issue #28 titled "Poka grom ne grianet" ("Waiting for the thunder") offered an analytical and very critical perspective. The article highlighted faults in the Kyrghyz government's military doctrine, as well as its failure to give considerate attention and support to the army, and protection to community in general. Undoubtedly, it was the fear of losing sovereignty, innocent people and image before the international community that pushed the Kyrghyz government to look at problems of its army. Res Publica published other critical materials, which highlighted inapt efforts of the Kyrghyz Ministry of Defense in fighting terrorists and to freeing hostages.

Naturally, the need for censorship of such articles and important data was immanent. The authorities started to give high preference in distributing data and information to editions such as "Slovo Kirgizstana," "Kyrgyz Tuusu," which were loyal to the government. And while censoring and filtering information coming from the conflict area, authorities and loyal newspaper allowed obstruction of real data.

It goes without saying that the conflict in the south of Kyrghyzstan touched the neighboring republic of Uzbekistan. For a long period, apart from journalists, many politicians, public figures and community leaders there had been admonishing international community of the link between regional terrorists and international Islamic institutions, which sponsored armed struggle. The Uzbek newspaper "Uzbekiston Adabiet va Sanati" published a joint address made by public figures, statesmen and cultural representatives of Uzbekistan, which expressed their support to the peoples of Kyrghyzstan in their fight against fundamentalists.

" Today, we must act hand-in-hand for the sake of peace and security of our borders. The spirits of our ancestors who lived on this sacred land, the future of our children, the our own future, and simply life demands this.". This is the extract from the statement made on October 28th by participants of the meeting at the Tashkent National Press Center.

The interest of Russian and international press in Batken situation is quite notable too. Unfortunately, access to international press in Kyrghyzstan and in Central Asia is limited. In fact, Kyrghyzsan has been a "dark horse" for many countries in the world. Thanks to the Batken conflict, Kyrghyzstan and Batken oblast are famous in Japan now because of the Japanese hostages taken by the Islamic guerrillas. It was natural for Japanese journalists to come to Kyrghyzstan and report about the destiny of their countrymen. But most of the time, they relied on the news coming from official sources and other local journalists. Allegedly, this happened because they didn't want to risk by traveling to the conflicting sites.

The coverage of the crisis by the Russian media is a special case. In the first place, Russia is a strategic partner for Kyrghyzstan and other Central Asian republics in terms of regional stability. Subsequently, Russia's and Russian media's interest can be explained by issues of regional security.

Mainstream publications such as "Argumenti i Fakti," "Komsomolskaya Pravda," "Izvestia," tried to get to the battle fields, but most of the time, they failed to get permission. This resulted in obstruction of data and non-objective coverage of the developments on their part. Very often, they made mistakes in the dates, names of people and locations.

When reminded about the Batken crisis, every Kyrgyz citizen will refer to the information he received from the media. It was the media that played a key role in stabilizing the situation in the region. Its role was crucial in delivering news from home to soldiers involved in the crisis.

The input of the media in solving the crisis is remarkable. In spite of economic and social difficulties, journalists risked their lives while trying to get updates and news for their viewers and readers. Many journalists carried off their work to their best. Of course, there were mistakes made. But mistakes are humane, and those who don't make mistakes, they don't work.