

TV in Every City :The Private TV of Uzbekistan

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Last July, for the first time, a number of private TV company managers were invited to the Yeshlar channel of the Uzbek state television to participate in a program called Erkin Fikr (Independent Opinion). Asked if they are afraid to be called non-state TV companies, one of the participants replied: "...the name non-state is not exactly correct, as we broadcast on the territory of our country. I would rather call it independent regional TV companies."

But in reality, even if TV companies are free to make a profit, they depend on the state structures and local authorities which censor them in this or that way. In order to be able to work and have an air time, regional TV companies have to have loyal relations with these authorities.

There are about 30 private TV companies in Uzbekistan which started with their own charter capital. The first ones started to broadcast in the spring of 1991, such as Mulokot (Kokand), Orbita (Angren), STV (Samarkand). The youngest is Turtkul TV (Karakalpakstan) which began its broadcasts last February.

In terms of democratic change, the emergence of more private TV companies in a country where TV was a state monopoly, is a positive process.

Even though the legal basis of the media has changed together with the development of the private TV sector, it is still not clear why the Law on Media of 1998 does not include a provision on prohibition of monopolization of any media as it was stated in the Law of Uzbekistan on Media from 14.06.1991 (with amendments and changes from 06.05.1993.)

Today the obligatory registration of media involves a complicated procedure regulated by the Law of Republic of Uzbekistan on Media from 26.02.1997, the "Decree on the Procedure of Registration of Mass Media of Republic of Uzbekistan approved by the decision of the Cabinet of Ministers # 160 dated 15.04.1998", as well as by the "Decree on Additional Measures to Increase the Efficiency of the use of Frequency spectrum, formation and dissemination of TV and Radio programs".

The last Decree gave birth to a structure with a lengthy name: Interdepartmental Coordinating Commission on Improvement and Increase of Efficiency of Informational Activities and Dissemination (transfer) of Data (abbreviated as MKK.) The Commission is headed by the Deputy Prime-Minister of RU and is impressive in terms of both the quantity and level of officials involved i.e. the heads of the departments and the ministries.

Last year branches of MKK were set up at all regional centers, and the TV companies have to include recommendations of local MKK in the package of documents for registration. The process of registration, already complicated by a long list of required documents, is being delayed due to uncertain schedule of MKK sessions. Since the TV are obliged to re-register annually, as soon as the staff of a TV company manages to collect necessary documents after

check-ups and revisions, it is already the time to submit documents again say the managers. The success of re-registration directly depends on how critical the company has been during the previous year. So the censorship prohibited in by the article 4 of the Law on Media from 26.12.97, is alive and flourishing thanks to all kinds of big and “small” MKKs.

But the new Law on Licensing of Some Activities adopted on May 25, provides some hope. It includes the media and stipulates that the period of validity of the license is not limited. The license has to be given for the period requested by the applicant or for not less than 5 years. The dream of TV and Radio stations came through - there is no need to run inside a vicious circle?! The annual registration of media used to be an additional whip of censorship for them!

That is right, but let us look at the Law on Media. Article 16 of the Law stipulates that the closure or suspension of publication or broadcast can be carried on by the decision of the founders, the registration body or the court. It means that the registration body, that is MKK, has a right to close a media or refuse to register it without consulting the court.

The normative acts of MKK do not contain any provision about contesting its decisions in the court, which contradicts to the Article 19 of the Uzbek Constitution, which states: “...rights and freedoms of citizens guaranteed by the Constitution and the laws are unchangeable and they can not be terminated or restricted without a court decision.”

News on Private TV

News is the most important thing on TV. Looking back, a lot people made a good career in this area.

For example, ALC from Urgench. It started with entertainment, and its manager did not even want to think about news, but ALC won the second prize at the First TV News competition conducted by representatives of Soros Foundation and Internews-Uzbekistan.

Some of its news, for example about the air-crash in Turtkul last summer, were picked up and aired by the official press, which is a proof of high quality of that news. This fact greatly irritated the State Press Committee, which blamed ALC in revealing a state secret. Unfortunately the local MKK closed ALC after the company sued it last November...

The last year competition of news programs revealed achievements and shortcomings of TV companies. Orbita from Angren won the first prize. The company works without fear of local authorities. The mayor of the city considers TV journalists as his assistants. It is not surprising that after an internship at Orbita TV, one of the journalism students said that it was like being abroad....

Last winter after the broadcast of news about citizens of Angren, who had to boil water and cook on fire outside their houses because of absence of propane, the local authorities conducted a secret investigation and revealed the cases of stealing of propane tanks.

The initiated criminal case solved the problem. Facts of supervising local TV news programs can be witnessed in Guzar, Kokand, Gulistan (till November 19,1999, since Aloka from Gulistan was closed. By the way, this company won the second place at the in the nomination for the best news. Aloka restarted broadcasts on August 1, 2000).

As for the production of news, the problems are mainly the same: choice of topics leaves much to be desired, too much news from sessions of local authorities, which request a TV crew - a request the TV companies can not refuse. News are dull and too long. There is no

balance - journalists either praise too much or criticize too much, forgetting their mission of reporting events.

It will take time before the private TV companies become competitive. But anyway, the results of TV rating in several cities of the country conducted by Internews have shown that the level of “TV watching” sharply goes up when local TV companies - Mulocot (Kokand), Bahtier TV (Jizak) and others, start their broadcasts. Such success promotes a further development of regional TV companies, the growth of their economic and technical capacities. It is difficult to imagine a TV company in each city, town, district - a local discussion forum, but one day it will become possible. It will be very interesting to live in that time!

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