

# Media and Politics in Central Asia

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Nearly four years have passed since the Central Asian republics of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan joined the community of independent nations free to chart their own course of political development. With Communism largely discredited and democracy re-energized around the globe, it seemed only natural to assume that the Soviet successor states would willingly embrace democratic principles, many of which had helped strengthen the dynamics of glasnost, eventually occupying the center stage in the struggle against totalitarianism during the Gorbachev era. Of all the democratic principles that entered the ideological battlegrounds of that era in various Soviet republics, none played a more pivotal role than the freedom of the press or media and freedom of expression in defining the nature and broadening the scope of reform. The dramatic consequence was the disintegration of the last great colonial empire.

Though the Soviet Union was dismantled, decades of Communist rule in Central Asia had produced a relatively well-developed state bureaucratic machinery and a well-entrenched party elite, many of whom have been neither willing to accept democratic political competition from the newly-emerging social forces, nor supportive of meaningful reforms to facilitate the institutionalization of a democratic framework of governance. While far from monolithic, the Central Asian response to the question of the freedom of the media has been well within the Soviet tradition of the last seventy years. The preservation of political stability and public accord have been the most frequently used justifications by the Central Asian leaders to define the operational parameters of the media. The opponents, on the other hand, believe that the republican leaders have established an exclusive information network designed to keep them out of the post-independence political and economic discourse. In the final analysis, however, with the notable exception of Kyrgyzstan, freedom of the media has become one of the first major casualties of democracy in the region. This study is an attempt to put into perspective the present status and future prospects for the media, and thus for democracy, in Central Asia.

## **Legislation Concerning the Media**

At first glance the laws protecting the freedom and governing the operations of the media in Central Asia bear considerable resemblance to those that have been in place in the Western democracies for decades. But a closer look reveals significant inter-republican differences not only in terms of the constitutional safeguards, but also in relation to specific legislation covering various dimensions of the subject under investigation. The most liberal treatment of the freedom of expression and of the media is presented in Article 16 of the Constitution of Kyrgyzstan: "Everyone in the Kyrgyz Republic has the right: to the free expression and dissemination of thoughts, ideas, and opinions and to free literary, artistic,

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scientific and technical creativity, and freedom of the press and to broadcast and disseminate information.”<sup>1</sup> In contrast, the Constitution of Uzbekistan offers the most restrictive and ambiguous statement in this regard. Article 15, entitled Mass Media, provides the following: “The mass media shall be free and act in accordance with the law. It shall bear responsibility for trustworthiness of information in a prescribed manner.”<sup>2</sup>

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Under the newly-drafted Constitution of Tajikistan, where the most blatant violations of the freedom of the media have taken place, the relevant provision is quite brief and out of context, addressing primarily the freedom of expression: “Each person is guaranteed freedom of speech, publications and the right to utilize means of information. State censorship and prosecution for

criticism is prohibited . . .”<sup>3</sup>

Notwithstanding the constitutional provisions, almost all Central Asian republics have enacted comprehensive legislation designed to control the activities of the media. Here, too, Uzbekistan has put in place the most restrictive set of regulations, which went into effect shortly after 14 June 1991.<sup>4</sup> In particular, four aspects of this legislation underscore its undemocratic nature. First, under Article 5 ordinary citizens are denied the right to establish any form of mass media. Only the “soviets of people’s deputies, and other state agencies, registered political parties, public associations, mass movements, creative unions, cooperatives, and religious and other associations of citizens that have been created in conformity with the law” have the right to set up mass media organizations.<sup>5</sup> Second, Article 6 of the law stipulates that those segments of the media whose activities are intended for foreign audiences must be registered by the Cabinet of Ministers under the president. Third, Article 27 requires that all foreign journalists be accredited in the republic by the Cabinet of Ministers under the president or by a government agency authorized by the president to undertake that responsibility.<sup>6</sup> Finally, Article 11, entitled “Procedure for Appealing a Refusal to Register a Mass Medium, or a Decision to Discontinue Its Activities,” offers no guidelines as to the mechanics of the appeals process or the time frame within which the state agency in charge must reply to the founder of the mass medium.<sup>7</sup> In addition to the above provisions, severe financial penalties are set for those who violate the law.

A similar law went into effect in Kazakhstan on 1 August 1991. Somewhat identical in orientation to its Uzbek counterpart, the Law on Press and Other Mass Media imposes a set of comparable restrictions equally undemocratic in character. While individual citizens over the age of 18 are permitted to institute a mass medium, Article 5 of the law, entitled “Inadmissibility of Abuse of the Freedom of Speech,” stipulates that the use of mass media in advocating “change in the existing state and social order” is prohibited.<sup>8</sup> This provision seems to have been designed to limit or altogether prevent the publication or broadcast of materials critical of the government’s policies and activities. And similar to Article 27 of the Uzbek law, Article 32 states that “the legal position and professional activity of correspondents and other accredited representatives of mass media which reaches an all-union audience, as well as mass media of other union republics” must be

regulated by government legislation.<sup>9</sup> The provision is clearly intended to establish some degree of control over foreign journalists' activities.

Moderately more liberal than the Uzbek and Kazakh media laws, the Kyrgyz legislation was enacted into law on 2 July 1992. It offers a number of legal safeguards that prevent the government from arbitrary infringement on the rights of the journalists.<sup>10</sup> There are also provisions that prohibit the banning of publications without proper legal procedures. Article 13, for instance, stipulates that a pause or complete prohibition of dissemination of information of the mass media can only be decided in court. And unlike its Uzbek counterpart, the Kyrgyz law permits ordinary citizens to establish mass media organizations. The media laws for Turkmenistan and Tajikistan have not been made available, but based on the general political climate of the republics it is safe to assume that both offer more or less the same restrictive approach as Uzbekistan's law.<sup>11</sup>

### **Status of the Independent Media in Central Asia**

Much as elsewhere in the former Soviet Union, the media in the Central Asian republics immensely benefited from Gorbachev's well-advertised policy of glasnost. Though intended to remedy an entirely different set of socio-economic and political problems in the country, glasnost became an official vehicle for expression of ethnic, linguistic, cultural, environmental, and religious grievances that had not been addressed openly in recent decades. An inevitable by-product of this process was the establishment of a multiplicity of newspapers designed to challenge the Communist authorities by capitalizing on the re-awakened cultural and nationalist sentiments of the population. Though the Central Asian *intelligentsia* were somewhat behind the rest of the Soviet republics in taking advantage of the changing political atmosphere, by 1990 a number of political movements in Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kazakhstan had introduced newspapers with a uniquely Central Asian character, focusing primarily on issues of culture, language, and history. The most pugnacious of these early expressions were reflected in the editorial columns of *Mustaqil Haftalik*, *Erk*, *Tumaris*, and *Munsobat* in Uzbekistan, and *Jam-I Jam*, *Charogi Ruz*, and *Adolat* in Tajikistan.<sup>12</sup> Though less colorful in form and more subtle in substance, the government-controlled newspapers and literary journals were also allowed to reflect the public mood on issues of national concern. Journals such as *Adabiyot va San'at* and *Sado-ye Sharq* of Tajikistan and *Uzbek Tili va Adabiyati* and *Sharq Yuldashi* of Uzbekistan helped revive the debate over the language and cultural heritage. Truly symbolic in nature, the republican governments tolerated and at times acted upon such nationalist sentiments, as they were found politically non-threatening to the status of the elite. These and other newspapers in Central Asia played a critical role in forcing the adoption of national language laws in Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan, making Russian the language of inter-ethnic communication. With the breakup of the Soviet Union imminent, the newly-established newspapers gradually broadened their agenda thus encompassing issues that were intimately related to the substance and method of government. It was subsequent to this qualitative shift in orientation of these papers and the

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sponsoring organizations that the Central Asian governments began to impose severe restrictions on the activities of the independent, as well as state-operated, media.

The year 1991 marked the end of a period of relative freedom of the media in Central Asia as stern measures, reminiscent of the pre-Gorbachev era, were taken with regard to the journalists and organizations whose message contradicted the official line. The most systematic and malicious assault on the media were carried out by the Uzbek and Tajik governments during the 1991-93 period. But the Gorbachev revolution had opened the floodgates of information, providing both the Western and Russian journalists reportage access to the Central Asian republics, thus compounding the censorship drive in the region. The battle, therefore, was to be fought on three fronts: against the Russian reporters and publications, against the Western news agencies, and against the local journalists and newspapers. Among the first journalists to be expelled from Uzbekistan were *Intersoyuz* publisher Sergei Tatur, *Oriental Star* editor-in-chief Mikhail Grebenyuk, and Vladimir Berezovsky, a staff member of the newspaper *Oriental Truth*. In June and July 1991, *Komsomolskaya Pravda* and *Nezavisimay Gazeta* correspondents Yuri Sorokin and Igor Rotar were expelled from Uzbekistan.<sup>13</sup> The Western correspondents who were forced out of the country included Astrid Takle of the Italian newspaper *Manifesto*, and Radio Liberty reporter Dimitry Volchek. Six months later, the representative of the Interfax News Agency, Abdurashid Shapirov, was seriously harassed by the government agents as a warning to halt transmission of unfavorable information. And in February 1993, Dutch correspondents Hubert Smith and Oleg Klimov were expelled from Tashkent for "infringement of the visit program."<sup>14</sup>

As for the local media, in Spring 1991 the publication of *Munsabat* newspaper, which had been registered in Moscow and published in Kazakhstan for Uzbek consumption, was discontinued, its printing facilities confiscated, and its bank account frozen upon the request of the Uzbek government. Shortly thereafter, the Tajik newspaper *Sado-ye Tajik*, published in Samarkand by Uktom Bekmuhammadov, was banned.<sup>15</sup> Warrants were issued for the arrest of Albert Musin and Anvar Usmanov of the newspaper, *Independent Weekly*. It was reported that Usmanov's house was destroyed in an arson attack—one of the many scare tactics used by the government. Mukhsin Umarzoda, the editor of the newspaper *Haqiqati Uzbekiston*, was dismissed for political perfidiousness.<sup>16</sup> Newspapers *Rokodrom* and *Tabdikor* were also closed down in 1992 and their publishers Marat Sadvakasov, Iskandar Khisamov, and Sergei Braginsky were dismissed. The same fate befell the newspaper *Erk* in January 1993, paralyzing the activities of the only registered opposition party in Uzbekistan.

A large scale crackdown on the media in Tajikistan was set in motion subsequent to the introduction of an amendment to the Law on Press and Mass Media in early 1992, thereby authorizing the republic's procurator to close down newspapers. In March, Alexander Karpov of *Izvestiya* was declared persona non grata.<sup>17</sup> A month later, the weekly publication of Kulyabi *Jomi Jam*, was ordered to cease production. In the ensuing months the government agents and the Popular Front militia set out to destroy the non-government printing houses, to murder independent journalists, and intimidate foreign correspondents who were witnesses to the ongoing clash between the government and the Islamic-democratic opposition. In a short period of time, sixteen journalists were brutally murdered and another forty were missing. Among the early casualties of war on the media were

Kishvaroy Sharifova, Tavakkal Feizolloev, Kurban Tagoev, Tohir Olimov, and Usmon Tuychiyev.<sup>18</sup>

By December 1992, subsequent to the consolidation of power by Emmomali Rakhmanov, all the opposition newspapers were shut down, including *Najot*, the organ of the popular movement Rastokhez, the weekly publication of the Islamic Revival Party, *Minbari Islam*, as well as the most widely read newspaper in Tajikistan, *Charogi Ruz*. The government atrocities also forced the migration of a host of Tajik journalists to Moscow and other destinations in the former Soviet Union, including *Charogi Ruz* co-editors Dodojon Atouollo and Salim Ayub, and one of its correspondents Sodjida Mirzo; *Adolat* editor Emomnazar Kholnazarov, Radio and Television Company deputy chairman Makhmadali Khaitov, radio journalist, Izzat Abdulloyev, and *Independent* newspaper correspondent Oleg Panfilov.<sup>19</sup>

In Turkmenistan, where the activities of the independent media have been considerably limited, the government has had fewer problems in controlling the political and economic agenda. The first attempt at exercising freedom of the press took place in January 1991 when publication of the first issue of *Turkmen Ili* was disrupted by government agents in Ashgabat. Consequently, the first independent Turkmen newspaper, *Dayanj*, was established by Muhammad Murat Salamатов in Moscow in September 1991, and its first issue was published in Russian and Turkmen in December of that year.<sup>20</sup> Quite expectedly, the shipment was confiscated at the first train station inside Turkmenistan, with only a small number of issues reaching the public. Efforts to smuggle the newspaper in April 1992 also failed when 2,000 issues were confiscated and Salamатов was detained by the authorities at the airport.<sup>21</sup>

Today only a handful of independent papers with clearly apolitical orientation have managed to survive in Central Asia. Most are not considered a source of news, and those few that have ventured into the realm of politics have been temporarily or permanently closed down by the authorities. The most popular of these independent papers in Kazakhstan is the weekly *Karvan*, owned and operated by Boris Giller, with a circulation of 300,000 copies. Its focus is primarily entertainment and advertising, yet on occasion interviews and news related to Kazakh economy have been printed. The paper, however, did engage in political discourse in January and February 1994 prior to the parliamentary elections, and consequently the government prevented its publication, forcing the owner to temporarily move its printing operations to Bishkek.<sup>22</sup> Giller also publishes *ABV*, which covers business-related information. Another paper with purely economic orientation is *Panorama*, which has been sponsored by independent bankers and merchants who have benefited from the current economic situation. In addition, some party papers with very limited circulation have been allowed to be published in Kazakhstan, including *Azat*, *Turk Birligi*, *Narodny Kongress*, and *Vremya*.

The Kyrgyz independent media has been given more room to maneuver than the media in Kazakhstan. *Kyrgyz Rukhkhru*, *Res Publica*, and *Iuzhniy Kur'er* have been permitted to criticize the government policies and officials. It is noteworthy that Kyrgyzstan is the only Central Asian republic whose government has extended modest subsidies to independent papers to help ensure their continued publication. While the Kyrgyz independent newspapers have been able to participate in the political discourse of the republic relatively freely, the Uzbek and Tajik independent papers have focused exclusively on noncritical economic and commercial matters. In the case of the former republic, three such papers,

*BVV*, *Tadbirkor*, and *Kommercheski Vestnik*, have had limited success, and with the exception of *Tadbirkor* these papers are known to have government connections. Published by the Uzbekistan Union of Entrepreneurs, *Tadbirkor* was closed down in August 1992. It had apparently published articles critical of the government.<sup>23</sup> The Tajik *Biznes i Politika* and *Kurer* are published weekly primarily for Dushanbe residents. The latter is essentially an advertising paper that includes television program schedules and the horoscope.<sup>24</sup> Apart from these, some independent and opposition newspapers have managed to continue work in Moscow by receiving outside funding. A few hundred copies of papers such as *Charogi Ruz*, which supports the Tajik Islamic-democratic opposition, have been brought into the country in recent months. But these papers do not have the type of readership necessary to keep the public sufficiently informed of current events in Central Asia.

### Official Media

The status of the official media in Central Asia was seriously compromised after the breakup of the Soviet Union as all the responsibilities almost overnight were transferred from the center to the republics. Consequently, a series of directives was issued to strengthen the financial and logistical aspects of the official media. The first such decree

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was signed on 15 April 1992, by Kazakhstan President Nursultan Nazarbayev, calling on the Cabinet of Ministers to provide the periodical publications and state book publishing houses with adequate financial assistance in the form of subsidies, exemptions from value-added taxes, and concessionary taxation.<sup>25</sup> On 29 April 1992, Uzbekistan President Islam Karimov issued a similar decree allocating 100 million rubles to the media from the annual budget. The decree also exempted the media from the

value-added taxes and raised the salaries of the personnel by 50 percent as of May 1992.<sup>26</sup> Shortly thereafter, a *ukaz* entitled “On Primary Measures of State Protection of the Republic’s Mass Information Media in Conditions of the Transition to Market Relation” was issued, outlining the mechanisms to be used to guarantee the functional integrity of the media. The *ukaz* called for the establishment of a commission composed of Deputy Prime Minister E. S. Samandarov, State Councilor B. A. Nazarov, the editors in chief of republic newspapers and journals, the members of the State Committee for the Press, and a host of other related institutional representatives to study the specific technical and financial needs of the media.<sup>27</sup> Similar measures were also taken in Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan to prevent the rapid deterioration of the media, which until 1992 was heavily subsidized by the center. In addition to government subsidies, the Turkmen parliament created a Journalists’ Fund to help improve the financial footing and technical capabilities of the media and their personnel. The fund was also to receive monetary contributions in the form of membership dues from the journalists, as well as proceeds from “all the creative, self-supporting agencies, photo studios, workshops, and cooperatives . . .”<sup>28</sup>

Despite these efforts, the official media has suffered substantial losses in both personnel and circulation, forcing them to operate at below optimum level. According to

Kulyana Irgibayeva, deputy chief of Kazakhstan's Kazbaspasoz (Soyuzpechat), subscriptions to most republican publications dropped as much as 60 to 70 percent in 1994.<sup>29</sup> There has also been a drop in total sales of the newspapers and journals in recent years. Of an estimated 453 officially registered newspapers published on a regular basis until 1989, only 78 (old and new) have survived the post-independence financial crisis.<sup>30</sup> One of the oldest surviving government newspapers is *Kazakhstanskaya Pravda*, published in Russian as well as in Kazakh under the name of *Egemende Kazakhstana*. The Almaty city newspaper, *Vechernyi Almaty*, has also been heavily subsidized. Other papers that have managed to continue publication with government help and despite harsh economic conditions are *Aziia*, which has a pan-Central Asian focus, and *Ekspress-K*, the former Komsomol paper that has been given a new orientation.<sup>31</sup> Likewise, the parliament paper, *Sovety Kazakhstana*, has been the recipient of government financial assistance. But many local government papers have ceased publication or have been forced to reduce their daily editions to two or three per week.

The number and circulation of government-sponsored Kyrgyz newspapers also have declined substantially during the last two years. Of 114 newspapers published in 1990, only two dozen or so have maintained their operations in 1994. The *Slovo Kyrgyzstana*, a Russian-language paper, and its Kyrgyz-language counterpart, *Kyrgyz Tuusu* are published four times a week. In addition, *Vechernyi Bishkek*, a city daily paper, *Molodiezhnaya Gazeta*, the former Komsomol paper, and a few oblast newspapers have managed to continue their operations. The controversial parliament newspaper, *Svobodnye Gory*, and its Kyrgyz-language version, *Erkin Too*, have also been issuing editions twice a week.<sup>32</sup>

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In Uzbekistan, where there are virtually no independent media, the government has ensured the publication of both local and national newspapers that are in essence devoid of political substance and are designed primarily to support the policies of President Karimov. On 4 June 1993, as a measure to tighten control over the media, the government issued a directive to the State Committee for the Press to re-register all publications within a month. In this connection, an estimated 400 newspapers, magazines, and weeklies were forced to submit applications. Subsequently, the Cabinet of Ministers issued a resolution “banning private individuals and journalist’s collectives from setting up their own publications.”<sup>33</sup> The major government newspapers include the Russian-language *Narodnoe Slovo* and its Uzbek-language version *Khlaq Sozi*, made available five times a week; *Pravda Vostoka*, the organ of the Supreme Soviet and Cabinet of Ministers, issued six times a week; *Turkistan (Yash Leninchy)*, published three times a week; and *Molodets Uzbekistana*, printed five times a week. On 27 September 1994, the government formally adopted *Pravda Vostoka* as the official newspaper of the republic and the Cabinet of Ministers assumed the status of its founder.<sup>34</sup>

In Tajikistan only a few government-sponsored papers have remained operational including the Council of Minister's paper, which is published in Russian, Tajik, and Uzbek under the names of *Narodnaia Gazeta*, *Jumhuriyat*, and *Khalq Ovozi* respectively. The Communist Party newspaper has also been available in three languages under the titles of *Golos Tajikistana*, *Tojikiston*, and *Tojikiston Ovozi*.<sup>35</sup> The Tajik parliament paper, *Sado-ye Mardum*, is the third main newspaper financed by the government. Apart from these papers that are primarily, though not exclusively, consumed in the capital city Dushanbe, most local papers have ceased publication for financial reasons. Even the more affluent Khojend oblast has not been able to muster enough resources to publish its paper on a regular basis. It is reported that in recent months, due to shortages of paper and printing materials, these papers have not been able to maintain regular schedules and often publish only once every ten days.

As for the broadcast media, a similar degree of control is exercised by the authorities, particularly in Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan.<sup>36</sup> The situation is slightly better in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. Three television channels have nationwide reach in Uzbekistan: Ostankino, Russian TV, and Tashkent TV. There is also Avras'e of Turkey

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available through satellite broadcasts. The news programs of the Russian channels, including “Vesti,” have been for the most part blanked out since 9 February 1993.<sup>37</sup> Much like the press, television and radio news programs are essentially controlled by the government. Local television stations, however, have been allowed to produce entertainment and local news programs that have been directly or indirectly monitored by

the state officials.<sup>38</sup> In Tajikistan, four television channels have nationwide reception: Ostankino, Russian TV, Tashkent TV, and Dushanbe TV. On 21 February 1994, the government issued a decree banning the broadcast of all independent radio and television stations until a new law on electronic media was enacted.<sup>39</sup> By May 1994, a draft of the law was prepared and submitted to the Council of Ministers for consideration. According to Eric Johnson, the law in essence creates a government monopoly over the broadcast media with direct control over the operations of radio and television stations.<sup>40</sup>

Kazakhstan also receives the Russian and Ostankino broadcasts throughout the country. In addition, the Kazakh State Television, Bishkek TV, and Turkish TV receptions are available at different hours within transmission parameters. Since 1992, there has been a gradual increase in the hourly production of Kazakh-language programs designed to revive the republic's cultural heritage.<sup>41</sup> Television has been tightly controlled by the government and a policy of intolerance with respect to programs critical of the government has been in place for some time. In January 1993, the chairman of Karaganda television station, Bakhijan Mukhushev, was fired by the government for “destabilizing the situation in the oblast and displaying tendentiousness.”<sup>42</sup> Apparently, Mukhushev had been moving the Karaganda television station in the direction of greater freedom of choice in programming and revenue generation. The Kazakh government has been wary of such tendencies that could cause substantial loss of control over the agendas of local television stations. Apart from the government television and radio stations, Kazakhstan has six



independent television and four independent radio stations, but their broadcasts have not been completely free of government intervention. On 14 February 1994, the authorities closed down MAX, a popular private radio and television station that had accused the government of violating the parliamentary election laws.<sup>43</sup> Another commercial television station, KTK, has been able to produce both news and entertainment programs that have been in line with the government policies. KTK is the first station to broadcast CNN, albeit on a limited basis, in Kazakhstan.<sup>44</sup>

Kyrgyz national television programming has been limited in scope due to the post-independence financial decline. The Almaty and the two Russian stations continue to broadcast to Kyrgyzstan. The Russian broadcasts, however, have been reduced in recent months for lack of funding. The independent television stations such as Piramida focus exclusively on entertainment and advertising. As a whole, the television reach in Kyrgyzstan is far more limited than in other republics.<sup>45</sup>

The primary source of news in all central Asian republics is state news agencies that control the agenda and channel the information to various press and electronic media throughout the country. The Kazakh and Kyrgyz news agencies, Kaztag and Kyrgyztag, are the only news information agencies that have reflected the views of the opposition in their reportage. According to Kaztag head Amangeldy Akhmetimov, "constructive criticism" has always been welcomed in Kazakhstan, "but we do not incorporate lies and information that stirs up ethnic tension and rivalries into our news portfolio. Nevertheless we make an effort to publish edited versions of commentaries that are submitted by various political organizations."<sup>46</sup> In the case of Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, the state news agencies have so far acted as government mouthpieces and there are no indications that this is going to be changed any time soon.

### **Power of Censorship and Censorship of Power**

While far from uniform in scope and intensity, the censorship drive in the Central Asian republics has continued more or less unabated since the end of 1991. Yet, given the international pressure and concern for their overall political reputation in the West, some republican leaders have adopted more subtle methods of censorship to control the political atmosphere. In Kazakhstan, where some degree of political nonconformity has been tolerated, the most frequently used government censorship strategy has been enforcement of fire department code violations to shut down printing facilities on days independent papers are scheduled for publication. The second method involves the availability of paper, an expensive and scarce commodity, the bulk of which is imported from outside Central Asia. Often, the publication of independent organizations is delayed, as priority is invariably given to the government papers. And in those instances when a commentary is submitted to Kaztag for printing, the contained information is heavily edited or the piece is flatly turned down. Finally, advance payments in hard currency for paper have been required, so as to prevent publication of materials perceived to be critical of the government. Most organizations are unable to satisfy such a demand, thus rendering their publication efforts obsolete. Though censorship has been less frequently used in Kyrgyzstan, nonpayment and scarcity of paper have been cited as the accepted methods of control. In Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, the preferred method is to deny registration permits to those publications that are considered a threat to government.

In the final analysis, disrespect for freedom of the media can be interpreted only as an attempt to deny a forum to the newly emerging social forces in post-independence Central Asia. It is also an indication of the potential threat these forces pose to the political status of those in power. The Central Asian leaders, however, have invariably pointed to the overriding need for political stability as the justification for their media policies. Granted, there is room for concern given the complexity of socio-economic and political problems facing these fledgling republics. In Kazakhstan, for instance, Nazarbayev's ethnic dilemma is real and requires a skilful balancing of Russian versus Kazakh interests. The ethnic situation has been tense ever since independence, and small-scale conflicts have frequently flared up in various parts of the country. The two-year jail sentence given to the Russian leader from Petropavlovsk, Boris Suprunyuk, for advocating the creation of an army to defend the interest of the Russians in the north, and the kidnapping of Cossack leader Fedor Cherepanov are but two recent examples of simmering ethnic conflict in Kazakhstan. Hence the government has systematically limited the public expressions of ethnic discontent in order to avoid large-scale conflict. In Tajikistan, the crippling effect of civil war has been used as the primary excuse to curtail the activities of the media. And Uzbek President Islam Karimov has argued that his people are not ready to grasp the basic principles of Western liberal democracy, stressing that economic and not political development is the number one priority of the country.<sup>47</sup> Karimov is also faced with the potentially destabilizing effect of radical Islamic movements in the Fergana Valley that have gone underground since 1992, making it rather difficult to assess their relative strength at present.<sup>48</sup>

Several political parties and organizations have been denied access to the political process simply because their platform is critical of the governments' political and economic policies. In Turkmenistan, for instance, Aqzi Birlik and the Democratic Progressive Party have been banned. In Uzbekistan, the popular Birluk Movement and the Erk Party, have been kept out of the political discourse through systematic repression and persecution. All these parties and movements have been operating within a democratic framework with genuine respect for the principles of power sharing, individual rights, and peaceful political competition.<sup>49</sup> The apparent unwillingness of the present republican governments to adopt a more inclusive approach to politics will, in the long run, force these organizations to choose more combative strategies to express their political will, the outcome of which will be more instability and not less.

The problem, however, has become alarmingly more complicated in that Central Asia is at the verge of an information crisis. Irrespective of censorship, the majority of the population can no longer afford the high prices of newspapers.<sup>50</sup> And ever increasing numbers of television sets are slowly becoming inoperable. Largely imported from Russia, these sets are difficult and costly to repair. Moreover, it is highly unlikely that average Central Asians can afford the purchase of new units in the foreseeable future. The Central Asian governments have also lost their radio audience to foreign broadcasts and commercial stations that do not provide adequate information of the socio-economic and political conditions of the republics. One possible long term political consequence of this impending information crisis is the growth of radical ideologies that could gain rapid popularity through disinformation campaigns. The crisis will also deny Central Asian leaders the ability to legitimize their political standing as the information vacuum begins to increase in size and the economic conditions continue to worsen over time.

To combat the problem, Central Asian leaders are moving to combine their resources in an effort to establish a single information space in the region.<sup>51</sup> Since 1993, several conferences have been held in various capitals to assess the needs and draw up proposals as to how the existing deficiencies in paper production, equipment, and so on can be remedied. Only two paper factories exist in Central Asia, the Uzbek *Uzbum* Joint Stock Company and the TsKZ in Kyzyl Orda.<sup>52</sup> The latter was out of commission until it was retooled in late 1993. In addition, a media organization of the Turkic-speaking countries (TKA) has been established to help solve the problems facing the media in Central Asia.<sup>53</sup> However, given the region's financial problems, it is unlikely that such organizations can avert the impending information crisis.

### Conclusion

As peripheral societies during the Soviet era, the post-independence Central Asian states have an economically difficult and politically uncertain road ahead. However, the developments of the past three years have provided ample clues as to the general political direction of each of these republics. So far, only Kyrgyzstan and to some extent Kazakhstan have exhibited

democratic tendencies, while Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan have opted for authoritarian systems of governance. Of the last three republics, the penultimate has hardly experienced any substantive political change since independence, with President Niyazov controlling the very nature and scope of information available to the Turkmen people. What is interesting is that all five republics have publicly embraced the economic principles of liberal democracy, yet Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan have systematically refused to uphold its political principles. Both the Uzbek and Turkmen presidents have frequently spoken of the inapplicability of Western notions of democracy to their respective republics. Moreover, Uzbek President Karimov has been quick to use the Chinese or the Singaporean models of development to undermine the political merits of liberal democracy, of which freedom of the press and of expression are two of the most cherished principles. On the other hand, Kyrgyz President Akayev has defended political pluralism and Western-style democracy as the most desirable arrangement.

Such diametrically opposing views on the substance and method of government also divide the Western policy makers and observers. Many are of the opinion that democracy cannot be transplanted outside of its traditional strongholds in Europe and North America, arguing that societies such as those of the former Soviet Union lack the prerequisites to become democratic, and therefore decisions to establish various individual and institutional freedoms, including that of the media, will not go far. Supporters of this view point to the post- World War II history of the Third World, which has been filled with examples of failed attempts at democracy building. But history also provides powerful evidence demonstrating that the struggle for democracy, even in the context of the European societies, has neither been short nor easy by any stretch of imagination, and that dictatorial regimes dominated many parts of the political landscape of Europe as late as the early twentieth century. The West should, therefore, continue its support for democracy in

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Central Asia simply because it is more humane than the alternative methods of government. In the context of the mass media, efforts should be made to improve the information infrastructure and to overcome shortages of materials and equipment. In short, Central Asia—and for that matter the rest of the Soviet successor states—must be incorporated into the global information network. This will in the long term help the cause of democracy in that part of the world and will eventually offer alternative and highly affordable sources of information to an ever larger portion of the population in Central Asia.

### Notes

1. For the text, see *Foreign Broadcast Information Service* (hereafter *FBIS*) *FBIS-USR*, 9 August 1993, 91.
2. Constitution of the Republic of Uzbekistan, 1992, 18.
3. For more information, see: *FBIS-SOV*, 25 April 1994, 77.
4. For the text of the law, see: *FBIS-USR*, 10 September 1991, 86-91.
5. *Ibid.*, 86.
6. *Ibid.*, 90.
7. *Ibid.*, 87.
8. For the full text of the law, see: *FBIS-USR*, 3 December 1991, 49-56.
9. *Ibid.*, 54.
10. For the text of the Kyrgyz media law, see: *Svobodnye Gory*, 3 July 1992.
11. Modeled closely after the Soviet mass media law that was enacted under Gorbachev, the Tajik media law was passed by parliament in December 1990.
12. According to William Fierman, open expressions of national issues had been reflected in the writings of the Uzbek authors and poets as early as 1988-9. For more information see: William Fierman, "Glasnost in Practice: The Uzbek Experience," *Central Asian Survey*, 8 (1989).
13. *Express Chronicle*, 8 (15-22 February 1993).
14. *Ibid.*
15. Interview, Uktom Bekmuhammadov, Executive Secretary of the Socio-Cultural Association of the Tajiks of Samarkand, 4 July 1993.
16. *Ibid.*
17. *FBIS-USR*, 1 July 1993, 94.
18. *Ibid.* As of October 1994, twenty-six Tajik journalists had been killed and four television journalists face death sentences. These include the former head of the Tajik State Committee for Television and Radio, Mirbobo Mirrahimov; former television studio director Ahmadsho Kamilov; and two television analysts, Khurshid Nazarov and Kheiriddin Kosimov. Mirrahimov was arrested in January 1993 in the Turkmen capital, Ashgabat. For more information on these journalists see, British Broadcasting Company, *Inside Central Asia*, 11 (March 1994): 2.
19. *Ibid.*, and *Express Chronicle*, 15-22 February 1993.
20. *Express Chronicle*, 17-24 June 1993.
21. *Current Digest of the Soviet Press*, 44 (1992): 27.
22. *Radio Liberty Daily Report*, 21 February 1994.
23. *FBIS-USR*, 16 September 1992, 95.
24. Eric Johnson, *Internews*, July 1994, 2.
25. *FBIS-SOV*, 16 April 1992, 61.
26. *FBIS-SOV*, 29 April 1992, 62.
27. *FBIS-USR*, 22 May 1992, 105.
28. *FBIS-USR*, 22 May 1992, 103.
29. *FBIS-USR*, 19 July 1994, 73-74.
30. According to Eric Johnson, 1,200 "means of mass information" had been registered by the Kazakh Ministry of Press prior to January 1994. The figure, however, is misleading as a disproportionate number of registrations have been granted to media organs that no longer operate

due to financial insolvency. For more information see Eric Johnson, Martha Olcott, and Robert Horvitz, "The Media in Central Asia: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan," *Internews*, April 1994, 11.

31. *Ibid.*, 9-10. The editor of *Express K*, O. Nikanov, is a member of the executive committee of the Union of the People's Unity Party, the party of President Nazarbayev.

32. E. Johnson, *Internews*, April 1994, 17.

33. British Broadcasting Company, *Summary of the World Broadcasts (SWB)*, 12 June 1993, SU/1713, B/12.

34. *FBIS-SOV*, 4 October 1994, 43.

35. As of 1 June 1994, fifty-eight newspapers had been registered with the government, most of which are economically bankrupt, or produce papers with no news value.

36. Eric Johnson, *Internews*, April 1994, 30. The bulk of information on electronic media is based on the above source.

37. *SWB*, 17 February 1993, SU/1615, B/4.

38. It is interesting to note that there exists a thriving unofficial audio media in Uzbekistan that has so far escaped systematic government scrutiny. A large number of these tapes are religious in nature and are used privately or in mosque settings. For more information see, David Tyson, "The Role of Unofficial Audio Media in Contemporary Uzbekistan," *Central Asian Survey*, 13 (1994): 283-94.

39. Committee to Protect Journalists, "Tajikistan: A CPJ Press Freedom Report," October 1994, 5.

40. Eric Johnson, "The Media in Tajikistan," *Internews*, July 1994, 4.

41. Interview, Kenesbai A. Abenov, Vice-Chairman, State Television and Radio Broadcasting Company, 9 June 1993.

42. *SWB*, 17 February 1993, SU/1615, B/3.

43. *Radio Liberty Daily Report*, 35 (21 February 1994).

44. *FBIS-SOV*, 19 July 1994, 37. On 4 April 1994, Nazarbayev issued a decree whereby the Kazakh TV and Radio Broadcasting Company was dissolved and in its place a new republican broadcasting corporation was established. Headed by Leila Beketova, the new organization is directly under the auspices of the president. Prior to this appointment Beketova was the director of a commercial television station. For related information see, *FBIS-SOV*, 5 April 1994, 46; *Radio Liberty Daily Report*, 239, 20 December 1994.

45. There is no substantive research available on the status of the Turkmen electronic media. However, the Russian television broadcasts with reduced hours reach the republic. The Ashgabat television also produces local programs under the auspices of the government.

46. Interview, Amangeldy Akhmetlimov, Director of Kaztag, 7 June 1993.

47. For more detail on the government's position on media see *FBIS-USR*, 9 April 1994, 89.

48. For more information, see Mehrdad Haghayeghi, *Islam and Politics in Central Asia* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995), ch. 6.

49. For more information on the ideological nature of the newly emerging democratic organizations see Mehrdad Haghayeghi, "Islam and Democratic Politics in Central Asia," *World Affairs*, 156 (Spring 1994): 186-98.

50. *Kazakhstanskaya Pravda*, for instance, costs 12 tenges per issue. According to one estimate, the average salary of an urban Kazakh citizen is 300 to 500 tenges per month, which makes it impossible to purchase the paper on a regular basis.

51. President Akayev was the first president to propose such an initiative in February 1992. But no substantive steps were taken until May 1993 when an interstate regional commission for issues of printing, the press and book publishing was established. *FBIS-SOV*, 28 February 1992, 56.

52. *FBIS-USR*, 28 June 1994, 87.

53. *FBIS-USR*, 25 May 1994, 60.