

Central Asia: Sept '07

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Initial phase of ground-breaking, regional news analysis agency projects ends.

The first phase of IWPR's successful News Briefing Central Asia, NBCA, project drew to a close in September, having generated nearly 3,000 republications in online and print media and trained dozens of journalists since its launch over a year ago.

A regional online news analysis agency, NBCA has been providing timely coverage of events and trends emerging in the region. Its goal has been to support the development of democracy and civil society in the region through the creation of a free and fair press.

Bringing together journalists and trainees in the five republics of Central Asia - Kyrgyzstan, Kazakstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan - the news agency posted daily bulletins which were also distributed electronically to important news, business and government agencies throughout the region and the world.

With IWPR's Bishkek office functioning as a regional hub for editors based in Osh, Dushanbe, Almaty and London, the agency raised the profile of the region globally, through original reporting by journalists in the region which relied on local expertise and informed commentary.

The project continued IWPR's pioneering work training journalists, with reporting, training and public events helping to propagate the news agency mission to promote balanced analytical journalistic output from each country in the region. It also deepened its collaboration with local non-profit and non-governmental organisations.

During the project, 986 stories were published, in Russian, English and Uzbek. NBCA enjoyed wide readership with 1,891 email subscribers in the final quarter, as well as 14,212 RSS feed subscribers, and over 3, 260, 000 article hits on the website.

News agency output was commissioned, edited and published in Russian, and subsequently translated into English and Uzbek, ensuring a strong local sense of regional ownership and involvement.

The Uzbek component of NBCA was launched in October 2006, with an Uzbek editor based in Osh in southern Kyrgyzstan working with a translator and, initially, several emigre journalists from the country.

Despite security issues and Uzbek government hostility, 14 journalists - mainly from within the country - became involved in the project's training and reporting activities.

NBCA's Uzbek element significantly expanded the limited analytical coverage of Uzbekistan - involving about two dozen political commentators and analysts.

Throughout the first phase of the project, 118 stories were prepared with input from Uzbek journalists, and translated into the Uzbek language.

News agency output was widely republished across the region, with 2,953 online and print republications.

Over 45 leading online news outlets in Central Asia continually republished NBCA output.

These included Kyrgyz agencies AKIpress, 24.kg, Tazar, Kyrgyzreport, BPC, Made in KG, KyrgyzNews, For.kg, Kyrgyzstan.org, Open.kg; Tajik agencies Tribun.tj, Asiaplus, Avesta, Khovar, Varorud, NANSMIT; Kazak agencies Internews Kazakhstan, MediaProvinces, Kazakhstan Newslite, Geo.kz, Ak-Zhol, Parliam.kz, Politika.kz, Inform.kz; Uzbek agencies Muslim Uzbekistan, Journalism in Uzbekistan, Ferghana.ru Uzbek; and Turkmen agencies Turkmen Helsinki Foundation, Gundogar, Vatan, Materik, DogryYol, Turkmen Iskra.

Stories also regularly appeared in regional websites, including Centrasia.ru, CJES, IAMIK, Oasis, Central Asia Review, AFP Blog, Ferghana.ru, Ecoi.net, Registan, Asiainform, Regnum, and Roberts Report.

NBCA stories frequently ran in 15 different newspapers across the region. These included the Tajik newspapers Asia Plus, Fakti I Kommentarii, Bisnesmen, Bisnis I Politika, Vecherniy Dushanbe, Kuryer Tajikistana, Bomdod, Kulyabskaya Pravda; the Uzbek Erk opposition newspaper; Kyrgyz newspapers Obshestvenny Reiting, Litsa, Novy Kyrgyzstan, Times of Central Asia, Bishkek Observer, Bishkek Standard, Siyosat; as well as the Kazak newspapers Central Asian Monitor and Mir Evrazii.

Agency output in Uzbek and Russian was reprinted in most of the regional news outlets reporting on Uzbekistan, with the understandable exception of Uzbek government outlets. In August and September alone, 194,215 hits on articles in the Uzbek language section of the website.

Over 100 journalists were involved in different NBCA training and reporting activities across the region.

Throughout the first phase of the project, over 300 political commentators, economic experts, and civil society observers were engaged by the project and provided meaningful analysis and commentary on developments in the region.

The project also cooperated with a wide body of media, human rights and other civil society groups. The final list of direct and indirect partner organisations includes over 67 institutions, such as the Kyrgyz Institute for Public Policy, the Bishkek Press Club, a number of Tajik newspapers and news agencies, the Kazak MediaNet foundation, and the Turkmen emigre groups Turkmen Helsinki Foundation and Civil Democratic Union.

Local journalists involved in producing NBCA stories have significantly enhanced their skill in providing timely and unique coverage of events after receiving individual mentoring from editors.

A number of IWPR contributors have gone on to become senior editors and other key staff of major media outlets in the region, such as Nazarali Pirnazarov, who is now editor-in-chief of Khovar state news agency; an Uzbek correspondent working for a prestigious Western news outlet (who cannot be named for security reasons), and Cholpon Orozobekova, who is now editor-in-chief of De Facto weekly.

The experience of working on NBCA has enabled correspondents to take up new roles in other fields. For example, Aziza Turdueva, a leading Bishkek contributor, has been appointed to the post of deputy governor of the Osh region of Kyrgyzstan. In July, NBCA correspondent Gulnara Mambetalieva was selected to participate in prestigious courses on economics at Moscow State University.

IWPR's NBCA style of news coverage also seems to have influenced the output of local media outlets. IWPR contributors who also work with several important news agencies in Tajikistan, such as AsiaPlus and Avesta, now present their news analysis stories in the style used by NBCA.

The Bishkek Press Club, at www.bpc.kg, is run by former IWPR trainees and staff, and their experience at NBCA has positively influenced the news reporting style of this extremely popular news source in Kyrgyzstan.

Despite a country-based approach to story selection and programme activities, NBCA editors, analysts and journalists from all over Central Asia had real opportunities for interaction during the project.

As a result of regional networking, NBCA's Central Asia section produced 50 stories that involved cross-border cooperation between experts, journalists and editors.

NBCA staff based locally and in the London head office engaged in various training and mentoring activities with 161 local journalists from all the five countries in the region.

NBCA editors in Tajikistan will now be organising training for three regional online news agencies in the Khatlon and Gorno-Badakhshan regions, with support from the Tajik Soros Foundation. Other local news agencies have also requested training for their journalists.

The IWPR offices remain an important stop for foreign media experts, researchers and journalists coming to Central Asia and local team representatives regularly provide analysis and commentary on current developments for regional and international media. IWPR also maintains strong links with media and civil society across the region and engages in fruitful partnership with prominent local NGOs and media.

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