

Kazakhstan: Opposition Pillory Dariga "PR Stunt"

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Critics of Nazarbaev regime say recent media forum was merely an attempt to improve the country's international image.

An international media conference last month organised by the Kazak president's daughter largely failed to address the problems facing the domestic press, prompting opposition journalists to dismiss it as little more than a government-sponsored public relations exercise.

Debate during the three-day Eurasian Media Forum, April 24-26, the second time the event has been held, dealt primarily with the role of the press in covering the region's most important issues, such as competition for the Caspian oil reserves, the Islamic revival and the Sars epidemic.

There was little mention, however, of the crisis facing non-state Kazak media. In recent years, the authorities have closed down all the opposition broadcasters and only three of the ten newspapers set up by government opponents have survived crackdowns.

Critics of the authorities were particularly galled by the fact the conference, organised by Dariga Nazarbaeva, made no reference to the journalist Sergei Duvanov, jailed for three and a half years in January in what many viewed as a politically motivated trial, and the former editor of Respublika, Lira Bayseitova, who was forced to leave the country after her daughter died in police custody, in suspicious circumstances.

Both Duvanov and Bayseitova were well known for their reports on a corruption scandal involving high-ranking Kazak officials.

Many key critics of the authorities were excluded from last month's forum and a good number of those invited were not allowed to participate in debates or to meet foreign correspondents and officials attending the event.

At the inaugural 2002 conference, there was a far greater number of the opposition journalists and activists, which, some observers say, allowed for more open debate about domestic media issues.

At this year's gathering, the authorities only agreed to a discussion on press freedom in Kazakhstan following pressure from the International Press Institute. But there was only one non-state media figure represented among the main speakers in this part of conference.

In general, state broadcasters and newspapers provided glowing accounts of the event, almost entirely ignored the pressures being brought to bear on their rivals in the non-state sector and parroted the government's claim to be promoting a free press and multi-party democracy.

Typical of the official media's coverage of the event was Kazakstanskaya Pravda's lengthy report on a speech by the President Nursultan Nazarbaev, in which he made a series of questionable, if not erroneous, assertions.

"Kazakhstan today is developing the fundamental conditions for a free functioning press: stable, multi-party

political system is being created, numerous non-governmental organisations are developing, the conditions for the independent existence of the media are improving, and legislation on the mass media is being liberalised,” the paper quoted the president as saying.

In contrast, the non-state media’s reports of the proceedings were scathing, with many dismissing it merely as an attempt by the authorities to improve the country’s international image.

“It was PR both for the country as a whole and for the president’s family, and his daughter Dariga Nazarbaeva, “ said Oleg Katsiev, the director of the international media development agency Internews in Kazakhstan, in an interview with Deutsche Welle.

Vremya quoted some of Dariga’s closing remarks at the conference, in which she said “our task was to put Kazakhstan on display, to show how different we are here”. If this three-day forum was only put on for this purpose, then “we can congratulate the organisers on a great success”, quipped the newspaper.

One of the main criticisms of the forum was its attempt to prevent opposition voices being heard.

Andrei Sviridov, writing in the opposition paper SolDat, said that some journalists affiliated with non-state media were not invited while those that were - including himself, the editor of SolDat, Ermurat Bapi, and Rozlana Taukina, head of the group Journalists in Trouble - were not allowed to take part in the conference debates.

These delegates were accredited as press and guests rather than participants, which meant that they were barred from making speeches or mingling with overseas visitors. At last year’s event, such restrictions were not so much in evidence.

Following a number of protests, some were eventually allowed to take part. “This was only after our appeal to foreign journalists on the second day not to fall for the attempts of the forum organisers to create the appearance of open dialogue,” said Taukina.

The authorities insisted that it had never been their intention to prevent certain journalists and activists from involvement in forum debates, with Dariga insisting that it was simply a “technical misunderstanding”.

Given that so few opposition delegates were able to participate in the gathering, there was little in the way of discussion about problems facing the private media outlets. The International Press Institute’s intervention ensured that at least one session was devoted to the subject.

But it was largely restricted to a debate between presidential adviser Ermukhamet Ertysbaev and the director of the media support NGO Adil Soz Tamara Kaleeva, in which she enumerated the various closures of broadcasters and papers, claiming it was a “politically ordered process”.

Pro-government participants in this part of the forum sought to make light of the pressure on the media in Kazakhstan by pointing to the problems faced by the press in other post-Soviet countries. Indeed, the Kazak edition of the Russian newspaper Izvestiya, which is sympathetic to the authorities, concluded that when the difficulties faced by journalists around the world are taken into consideration, the situation in Kazakhstan was not that bad.

The president's claims in the conference that he supported a free press were made to look rather lame when Ertysbaev warned that more opposition press would be closed down because they "directly or indirectly violate the constitution and media law" and, in her closing remarks, Dariga said, "Society and power are not ready for criticism, criticism annoys them."

Many of the opposition's concerns about the forum were highlighted in a Vremya interview with Lutz Clevermann, the author of a book on Central Asia, who pointed out the stark differences between this year's forum and the inaugural event.

"Last year we witnessed open debates between the Kazak opposition and the government, but this year you can feel the government control over the situation," he said. "On the first day we were told that the forum would not be a political event, like it was last time. We sit and drink cocktails and have a good time in this luxury hotel. Just don't call it a media forum, because it's not."

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