

Press Under Threat In The North Caucasus [1]

The difficulties of working as an independent journalist in the Russian Caucasus.

In each of the republics of the North Caucasus in which I have worked, I have to communicate with the authorities, law enforcement agencies and different circles of society. On the basis of this experience, I have to confirm with regret - freedom of speech as well as the independent press are in their infancy in the region. An analysis of the mass media present on the market shows there are no independent media outlets with the exception of three or four regional newspapers.

There is no denying that in the North Caucasian republics not only the government media, but also newspapers and internet sites are published that reflect public life from points of view different from the official position of local government. But, as a rule, these comparatively independent media outlets are financed by different opposition groups and reflect points of view that very often misrepresent the true picture.

As the North Caucasian republics are geographically small, the information about ownership of the media is not a secret for the large proportion of the public. So information in this kind of newspapers is received with a high degree of scepticism and very often with distrust. These journalists can't be considered free and independent. The press is far from identifying itself as a free and influential part of the society. On the whole, a journalist in the North Caucasus is perceived by the society as a worker in the service sector, for example, as a waiter. Unfortunately, journalists themselves very often consent to this state of affairs.

Why is this happening in modern Russia, a state which declares its adherence to democratic principles? There are a lot of reasons, they are quite visible, but analysis of them requires much more time than this brief report allows. I'll say briefly: on the one hand the authorities are interested in shutting down all information and this is because the government has something to hide. Outrageous violation of human rights, corruption and crimes by the military are daily occurrences. On the other hand, the level of journalistic professionalism is very low. Reporters mostly depend on their editors, who in their turn depend on the government and the groups that finance them. The level of censorship in such a system is extremely high.

I'd like to speak in more detail about the methods which are used to fight against the independent press. In Moscow, the problem of an un-compliant media is solved with relatively civilised methods. In the North Caucasus, the same methods are used in a nastier and rougher manner. This is easily

explained: the Caucasus is objectively speaking a zone of tension. These objective realities often serve as a very convenient disguise for a crackdown by the authorities not only on the independent press but also on citizens in general. The fact that Moscow pays the local authorities generously for their loyalty and ignores all kinds of abuses of power towards the local population makes things even worse. The authorities and law enforcement agencies are not afraid to openly persecute difficult journalists. Potential publicity and scandals do not deter them.

How does the pressure on mass media occur? The first and most popular method which I have already mentioned is censorship. Censorship deprives a journalist of the opportunity to make public important facts and documents.

Insubordination as a rule leads to dismissal. This was how the Ossetian journalist Luiza Orazayeva was treated. Luiza, who is one of the most courageous and honest journalists in the Caucasus, remained unemployed for many years because of her principled stand and her integrity.

Bribery is another commonly used weapons against the independent press. And it is also very effective because of regional journalists' low salaries. The isolation of journalists and their limited access to

information are used very successfully. For example in Ingushetia, the president of the republic Murat Zyazikov regularly interferes in the hiring and firing of journalists.

As a result, we, I mean Regnum news agency, cannot find a correspondent, because we refuse to take the ones offered to us by Zyazikov's press service, and other journalists are so intimidated that they refuse to work with us under various pretexts. Unfortunately, we have to put up with it because we cannot provide security for our reporters.

The security services have more sophisticated ways of dealing with the independent press. For example, they discredit a difficult media outlet or a journalist by publishing compromising information in a loyal publication.

There are a lot of examples of this. For instance, in one such publication a well known journalist and human rights activist from Kabardino-Balkaria Valery Khatazhukov was accused of working for western security services and getting sponsorship from them.

In the spirit of the Cold War, representatives of practically all the foreign-backed media working in the North Caucasus have been called Western spies. This accusation has been made of the coordinator of the respected London based Institute for War and Peace Reporting, IWPR, Valery Dzutsev, living in Vladikavkaz. I was named a leader of Muslim community in Nalchik in one such publication and my parents' house was subsequently searched.

They said they were looking for a cache of weapons.

Criminal prosecution and physical violence have also been employed against journalists. A terrible incident happened a week ago. In Cherkessk, the father of our reporter in Karachai-Cherkessia, Murat Gukemukhov, was beaten up. As a consequence, seventy-year-old Muhamed Gukemukhov underwent two operations and lost an eye. Muhamed Gukemukhov is the son of a well-known Circassian scholar, a respected person in the society. This attack can be connected only to his son's professional activities. They tried to bribe Murat first and then threatened him. Police have launched an enquiry into the assault, but we are sure that the real motives and the people behind the attack will never be made public.

Every journalist, working honestly and impartially in the North Caucasus, is aware of danger he expose himself and his relatives to. But an honest press is the only mirror in which people of the world can see a real unadorned picture of what is happening in the North Caucasus. As a citizen and a journalist, I want to tell the public that all kinds of pressure has been put on me, efforts have been made to defame my name through criminal prosecution. This is connected only to my professional activities and my personal opinions. I represent the long-suffering Adyg (Circassian) nation.

I must call things by their true names. The Adyg people were subject to genocide. Discrimination is going on now and it is the basis for Russia's destructive nationality politics in the North Caucasus. The October rebellion in Nalchik was a manifestation of protest against this policy. The Russian government tries to represent the Nalchik revolt to the world community as an act of terrorism and the rebels as terrorists, but this does not correspond with reality. The refusal to hand over the bodies of those killed during the rebellion and tortured to death afterwards in police cells is a crime against the law of humanity and humanism. This is my personal civil position and I am sure it is the opinion of every sensible person.

As the participants of the conference were informed before my speech, I came here from Hamburg, where I had been invited by the Gerd Bucerius Foundation, which supports independent press in the Eastern Europe. My programme in Germany included visiting different newspapers, magazines and educational institutions training professional journalists. The director of the journalism school, Professor Christoph Fasel, said that after his journalistic investigations many well-known German politicians had resigned.

I listened to his words with both bitterness and hope. With bitterness, because in the North Caucasus it is not politicians and officials who are unmasked and then punished and dismissed, but the journalist that unmasked him. And with hope, because freedom of conscience, freedom of opinion and speech, democratic principles are ancient components of the mentality of Caucasian peoples.

This article is based on a speech given by Fatima Tlisova - editor-in-chief for Regnum news agency in the North Caucasus, based in Nalchik - to an international conference on the North Caucasus in Istanbul on May 21, 2006:

Pictures of her receiving her award in Hamburg last month from the Gerd Bucerius Foundation in Circassian national dress can be seen at <http://www.regnum.ru/news/kab-balk/644550.html>

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