MASS MEDIA

TWO DECADES OF REPRESSION: THE PERSISTENCE OF AUTHORITARIAN CONTROLS ON THE MASS MEDIA IN CENTRAL ASIA

Eric FREEDMAN

Associate Professor of Journalism & Associate Dean of International Studies & Programs, Michigan State University (East Lansing MI, U.S.)

Richard SHAFER

Professor of Journalism, Department of English, University of North Dakota (Grand Forks ND, U.S.)

Slavka ANTONOVA

Associate Professor of Communication, University of North Dakota (Grand Forks ND, U.S.)

Introduction

Dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 gave birth to five independent nations in Central Asia—Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan—with initial aspirations for an imminent transition from communism toward democracy. After twenty

years, however, none has developed anything close to a free press system or otherwise emerged from post-communist authoritarianism. To the contrary, each repressitarian regime—meaning both authoritarian in governance and repressive in human rights practices—imposes extensive official and extra-official constraints on the mass media. Those constraints apply both to traditional outlets such as newspapers and broadcast stations and, increasingly, to new media such as news-related websites and blogs.

After an overview of the Soviet press system, this article describes some of the abysmal restrictions confronting journalists and news organizations in contemporary Central Asia. It then suggests some factors that may explain the dearth of free press systems there, examines the impact of Western trainers and educators, and highlights limitations on the Internet's ability to provide the public with alternative sources of news, information, and opinion. It ends with a pessimistic prognosis for development of sustainable free press systems.

In the first years of independence, the five governments understandably regarded the press as a unifying tool to nurture national identity and a sense of statehood among their ethnically and linguistically diverse populations.[1] That role for the press provided a relatively easy psychological transition for professional journalists. That is because they were educated, trained, and experienced in a system where the press served as a tightly controlled mouthpiece for the Communist Party, Marxist-Leninist philosophy, and the central government in distant Moscow.[2] It was also a logical approach for the new national leaders, all of whom had headed their pre-independence Soviet republics. Yet such an advocacy-boosterism persona for the press deterred and discouraged many highly motivated journalists—especially new professionals and those who had chafed under the Soviet-era propagandizing mission—from pursuing fact-based, objective journalism based on a commitment to fairness, balance, ethics, and accuracy.

Western governments and universities, multinational agencies, foreign news media, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) have sponsored large numbers of journalism education and professional development programs in Central Asia. For twenty years, Western trainers and university faculty sought to encourage, and sometimes launch, independent, economically sustainable media outlets and to promote Western professional practices, skills, and values. At the same time, human rights and press rights advocates have focused sharp attention on governmental and quasi-governmental policies, practices, and laws that restrict journalists' ability to collect and disseminate information.

Today, international observers of press freedom rate the five regimes among the world's most repressive. For example, the NGO Freedom House classifies their press systems as "not free" (see Table 1); none places higher than 159th among 196 countries; Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan wallow among the bottom nine.[3] Another media development NGO, the International Research & Exchanges Board,[4] concludes that none of the countries has a sustainable independent media system (see Table 1). IREX's assessment is based on five sets of objectives and indicators that assess:

(a) social and legal norms protecting and promoting access to public information and free speech;

[1] See: F. Muminova, "National Identity, National Mentality, and the Media," *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, No. 5 (17), 2002.

[2] See: N. Krasnoboka, "Between the Rejected Past and an Uncertain Future: Russian Media Studies at a Crossroads," in: *Communication Yearbook 34*, ed. by Ch.T. Salmon, Routledge, New York, 2010, pp. 317-345; R. Shafer, E. Freedman, *Journalism Education and the Press in Central Asia: Soviet Foundations of the Post-Independence Era*, Paper presented to the Association for Education in Journalism & Mass Communication. 2010; Th.C. Wolfe, *Governing Soviet Journalism: The Press and the Socialist Person after Stalin*. Indiana University Press, Bloomington, Ind., 2005; E. Androunas, *Soviet Media in Transition: Structural and Economic Alternatives*, Praeger, Westport, Conn., 1993.

[3] See: *Freedom of the Press 2010*, Freedom House, Washington, 2010, available at [www.freedomhouse.org].

[4] See: *Media Sustainability Index 2010: Development of Sustainable Independent Media in Europe and Eurasia*, International Research & Exchanges Board, Washington, 2010.

Table 1

Press Freedom in Central Asia

	IREX	IREX	IREX	Reporters without Borders	Freedom House
	Unsustainable Anti-Free Press*	Unsustainable Mixed System*	Near Sustainability*	Press Freedom Index**	Press Freedom***
Kazakhstan		**5 of 5 criteria^**		**162 of 178 countries**	**Not free**
Kyrgyzstan		**3 of 5 criteria^**	**2 of 5 criteria^**	**159 of 178 countries**	**Not free**
Tajikistan		**5 of 5 criteria^**		**115 of 178 countries**	**Not free**
Turkmenistan	**5 of 5 criteria^**			**176 of 178 countries**	**Not free**
Uzbekistan	**5 of 5 criteria^**			**163 of 178 countries**	**Not free**

^ *Criteria:* 1) Freedom of Speech;
2) Professional Journalism;
3) Plurality of News;
4) Business Management;
5) Supporting Institutions

* International Research & Exchanges Board, *Media Sustainability Index 2010*.
** Reporters without Borders, *Press Freedom Index 2010*.
*** Freedom House, *Freedom of the Press 2010.*

(b) quality of journalism professional standards;

(c) public access to multiple sources of news and information;

(d) good business management and editorial independence of news outlets; and

(e) presence of other institutions that support the professional interests of independent media.

The standing of all five countries declined between 2009 and 2010 in the Reporters without Borders annual *Press Freedom Index*.[5]

Despite extensive and expensive outside efforts and some internal efforts to facilitate freer media systems, the conditions for press free-

[5] See: "Internet Enemies: Turkmenistan," Reporters without Borders, 2010, available at [http://en.rsf.org/internet-enemie-turkmenistan,36692.html].

dom and the safety of journalists show no evidence of significant improvement. That is true regardless of post-independent changes in leadership in Turkmenistan or in regime—twice in Kyrgyzstan. Journalists continued to confront obstacles in Kyrgyzstan after the April 2010 coup that toppled increasingly authoritarian President Kurmanbek Bakiev, despite a commitment from the new government to protect press freedom. In July 2010, for example, the Kyrgyz National Security Service, or SNB, raided the Osh TV newsroom and temporarily detained and interrogated its director but did not arrest him.[6]

[6] See: "Kyrgyz Agents Raid TV Station, Interrogate Director," Press Release, Committee to Protect Journalists, 13 July, 2010.

Statement of the Problem

Despite international support for democratization and criticism of their authoritarianism, the twenty-year-old independent nations of formerly Soviet Central Asia have failed to create, let alone permit, systems of governance that enable independent news outlets and organizations to operate and sustain themselves financially. Explanations for that failure by these repressitarian regimes include political, national, cultural, and economic realities in countries with no history of democracy, no geographic proximity to democracies, and no leadership committed to democratization.

Soviet Foundations of Contemporary Mass Media in Central Asia

To better understand Central Asian public policy toward the mass media today, it is necessary to understand its pre-independence foundations. Those Soviet roots help explain why leaders who rose to power before 1991 have vigorously blocked the evolution of the press into the robust, independent, watchdog of democracy that journalists and civil society proponents in most developed and democratic nations advocate.

In addition, the artificiality of the republics' borders drawn under Josef Stalin has reinforced the regimes' commitment to press constraints under the guise of nation-building. Russian occupation and Moscow-centered Soviet socialism prevented nation-building for the approximately 145 years that most of the region was under direct and proxy Russian control. Its largest cities were established as Soviet military outposts, although other great cities, such as Samarkand and Bukhara, rose and fell centuries before Russians colonization began in the 1860s. After the decline of the great Silk Road cities, there was little urban concentration to promote development of a modern press system; many Central Asians remained nomadic into the 19th and early 20th centuries.

In the early 1920s, the young communist government accelerated its propaganda campaign to neutralize or repress opposition and to build model Soviet citizens. The press became the primary vehicle for this immense propaganda effort. Low literacy in Central Asian languages obstructed the growth of newspapers and other mass media until the Soviets introduced universal education and raised literacy rates; even then, Central Asians learned to read primarily Russian, not their ethnic languages.

Important decisions to increase publication of propagandistic literature were made during the 13th Communist Party Congress in 1924: Publishing houses were to specialize in certain categories of literature, with special attention to producing political, technical, and agricultural literature. For instance, the Uzgosizdat publishing house was formed in 1925 as the state publisher in Uzbekistan under the larger Central Asian state publishing house. Such state-controlled enterprises focused on social and economic, political, popular scientific, legal, and technological, agricultural, and educational content, as well as on literature.

Journalists became party activists during the 1926 belt-tightening campaign and left their newsrooms to enter factories to help organize production. However, they continued to employ the agitational rhetoric that developed during the Civil War, a rhetoric filled with military metaphors and exhortations to action. By merging innovative forms of journalism with such militant rhetoric, journalists were encouraged not only to organize the factory floor, but to mobilize factory workers by equating increased industrial production with the epic military victories of the Bolshevik Revolution.

The masterminds of this new form of journalism called themselves *massoviki*, or "mass activists," and labeled their work massovast, or "mass work." Lenoe translates the terms as "mass journalists" and "mass journalism" and says: "The language of the shock campaign, with its command-form headlines, military metaphors, grandiose superlatives, and vocabulary of urban revolt and class war, was a complex amalgam of elements that had entered the speech and writing of Bolshevik activists over a twenty-to-thirty-year period." He writes that such a militant, inspirational and grandiose form of journalism was a means to revive the Russian sensationalist style popular before the revolution.[7]

Because of the long history of domination, first by czarist Russia and then by the Soviets, the history of the press in Central Asia cannot be easily separated from the history of the larger czarist-era and Soviet-era press systems. The experience of tight controls imposed by the Soviets creates a further obstacle to media development in post-Soviet Central Asia. Until 1990, the press was state-owned and highly centralized without independent, uncensored, or opposition media other than underground *samizdat*. Thus as in other republics in the U.S.S.R., Central Asians were informed by media content controlled almost wholly by state publishing houses that licensed and printed newspapers and magazines. Those publishing houses operated with the primary intent of furthering Marxism-Leninism and advancing the agenda of the party and government centered in Moscow, becoming the primary vehicle for propagandizing Soviet ideology.

During the 1920s and 1930s, the press also focused on reshaping the language, culture, and mental processes of the Central Asian masses to form them into politically conscious citizens of the new Soviet state. Journalists provided citizens with rational explanations of party policy, inspiration for heroic sacrifice, and a sense of classlessness. By the middle of the first Five-Year Plan, the press focused on mobilizing party activists with calls for valiant sacrifice and attacks on internal class enemies. In the early 1930s, it instilled in party members an identity as warrior heroes battling for socialism, presented optimistic images of the future, and assured the public that industrialization would make the Soviet state superior to capitalist democracies.[8]

Journalists in Central Asia were fully integrated into the Soviet system and often became well-rewarded members of the party elite. They acted as effective agents and mass mobilizers for socialist experimentation, including collectivization of industry and agriculture and dissemination and popu-

[7] See: M.E. Lenoe, *Closer to the Masses: Stalinist Culture, Social Revolution, and Soviet Newspapers*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 2004, pp. 37-38.

[8] See: Ibidem.

larization of worker literature and art. They were critical in gaining popular support for "five-year" plans and other forms of centralized economic planning. The press' successful promotion of the image of the Soviet citizens' paramount national identity was important in Central Asia. Of course, the ideal of a classless society, where ethnic and religious identities were secondary or tertiary to Soviet citizenship was never achieved. Yet many Central Asians became "modernized" and believed themselves to be full members of a larger society. The press was instrumental in furthering that identity. One result was relatively peaceful coexistence between once-mutually hostile ethnic groups. At the same time, the press was instrumental to maintaining public support in the country's Cold War engagement against the West and in legitimizing permanent Russian occupation of Eastern and Central Europe. Similarly, it propagandized for communist-imperialist expansion in the developing world, culminating in the invasion and ultimately unsuccessful occupation of Afghanistan.

Although they might have been proficient in the mechanics and skills of professional journalism, Soviet-era Central Asian journalists were guided by communist principles and instructions. They learned, willingly or not, to emphasize positive initiatives and achievements by the state and party. They were trained to laud economic achievements and heroes of socialist labor in a propagandist manner. Negative events, tragedies, and controversies were generally ignored or downplayed if they reflected badly on the Soviet system or government. After independence, many of them found it difficult to relinquish these well-entrenched Soviet-era journalistic traditions and practices.

For example, one aspect of Soviet journalism practice that persists in Central Asia is an interpretive style of reporting in which journalists incorporate their opinions and commentary into what should be straightforward and unbiased news reports. Their perceived license to include such interpretation within news stories emerged from the Soviet-era practice of interpreting news and events based on party policies and Marxist-Leninist theories. In post-Soviet Central Asia, such journalistic interpretations are influenced by economic interests or by a need to placate or serve repressitarian regimes and their allies. The empowerment of such a license for interpretation leads journalists to attempt to present knowledge or expertise they may lack. As a result, the quality of reporting is diminished and the public lacks confidence in and trust of the press.

Despite the comparative dearth of international studies and analyses of Soviet mass media during the Soviet era,[9] it is evident that seven decades under that system shape Central Asian governance, journalistic practices, and citizen attitudes. Similarly, although mass media technologies have changed dramatically, today's depth and breadth of constraints on press rights would feel familiar to Soviet citizens thirty years ago. Thus as the next section of this article illustrates, the grim current media environment mirrors pre-independence realities of acceptable boundaries for journalistic endeavors.

Contemporary Country-by-Country Press Conditions[10]

A normative assumption of democracy is that press freedom is essential to participatory, transparent governance. If "a trusted, respected, and independent mass media system is a major indicator

[9] See: N. Krasnoboka, op. cit.

[10] Unless cited to another source, information in this section is drawn from the U.S. Department of State; Committee to Protect Journalists; Freedom House; Reporters without Borders; Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty; International Research & Exchanges Board; International Media Support; Eurasietnet.org; Institute for War & Peace Reporting; and International Freedom of Expression eXchange.

of a country's development of democracy and civil society,"[11] then media constraints reflect either regression or advancement in democracy-building. In contrast to the Central Asian experience, post-Soviet developments in Central and Eastern Europe demonstrate that "the evolution of print and electronic media has been central to the larger process of political and cultural restructuring. Struggles for independent journalism [were] at once both symbolic of democratic aspirations and central to the building of the post-communist governments."[12]

By rejecting participatory, transparent governance, repressitarian regimes validate that normative assumption through what Puddington[13] labels "pushback" against defiant journalists and press rights advocates. Both the twenty-year history of constraints and the ongoing pattern of repression indicate the hostility—the pushback—that individual journalists and media outlets encounter. That history and the present situation raise serious doubts about the viability of other democratic institutions that, together, are necessary to weave the fabric of civil society.

Four years after independence, Brown attributed the region's absence of press freedom and deep media dependency on government to "the high value placed on stability in society; the persistent Soviet legacy, which involves a view of the press as political communication; and the persistent economic crisis."[14] Political scientists and media scholars traditionally have suggested governance-related variables to explain the presence or absence of press freedom, such as multiple political parties and counter-balancing, co-equal branches of government, as well as media-specific variables, such as regulatory requirements and economic sustainability. To be sure, official and quasi-official constraints by regimes and their allies cannot provide the sole explanation for the absence of aggressive, independent media in Central Asia. Nor do economic realities, such as limited potential for adequate advertising and circulation revenue, provide a single explanation.

Now two decades after independence, the five national press systems are not identical but share commonalities, including strong or total state and state-proxy control, low levels of public trust, and limited or non-existent market sustainability. Those systems also demonstrate trepidation about or hostility to the Western watchdog function of journalism that might otherwise serve to reduce corruption, protect the environment, encourage transparency, and extend effective citizen participation in governance.

Unfortunately, there is a lack of reliable data on Central Asian media outlets and on the demographics of their audiences.[15] Despite a large number of outlets (see Table 2), constraints on the press preclude them from presenting a plurality of viewpoints and perspectives.

Constraints are not aimed solely at domestic news outlets that have domestic or intra-Central Asia audiences, but also at international media reporting about Central Asian events to external audiences. They include foreign press outlets themselves—for instance by denying licenses to international

---

[11] E. Freedman, "When a Democratic Revolution isn't Democratic or Revolutionary," *Journalism,* Vol. 10, No. 6, 2009, p. 844.

[12] J. Rubin, "Transitions—A Regional Summary," *Media Studies Journal,* Vol. 13, No. 3, 1999, p. 60.

[13] See: A. Puddington, "The Pushback against Democracy," *Journal of Democracy,* Vol. 18, No. 2, 2007, p. 125.

[14] J.L. Brown, "Mass Media in Transition in Central Asia," *International Communication Gazette,* Vol. 54, 1995, p. 249.

[15] For example, in August 2010, the president of Kazakhstan announced that more than 2,600 mass media "are successfully developing" in the country ("Over 2,600 Mass Media Successfully Develop in Kazakhstan—President," Kazinform, 27 August, 2010, available at [http://kazinform.kz/eng/article/2298208]), although the International Research & Exchanges Board (see: *Media Sustainability Index 2010: Development of Sustainable Independent Media in Europe and Eurasia*, International Research & Exchanges Board, Washington, 2010) tallied only about 1,000 active media outlets there. Similarly, IREX tallied 250 active print and 32 TV and radio outlets in Kyrgyzstan, while the Central Election Commission reportedly accredited 136 newspapers and 33 broadcasters (see: "CEC Accredits 175 Mass Media," KABAR, 25 August, 2010, available at [http://eng.kabar.kg/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=948&Itemid=3]).

Table 2

Active News Outlets & Internet Access

	Print Outlets*	Radio Stations*	TV Stations/ Cable*	State-owned News Agencies*	Major Private News Agencies*	Internet Penetration**
Kazakhstan	**937**	**40+**	**14**	**1**	**3**	**34.30%**
Kyrgyzstan	**250**	**35**	**10**	**1**	**3**	**39.80%**
Tajikistan	**210**	**10**	**22**	**1**	**6**	**9.30%**
Turkmenistan	**39**	**5**	**5**	**1**	**0**	**1.60%**
Uzbekistan	**881**	**35**	**53**	**1**	**2**	**16.80%**

* International Research & Exchanges Board, 2010.
** Internet World Stats, 2010.

broadcasters and denying accreditation for their correspondents. In addition, individual correspondents for foreign media are targeted. Among them is Voice of America (VOA) correspondent Abdumalik Boboev, charged in September 2010 by Uzbekistani authorities with libel, publishing material that threatens national security, and illegally crossing the border.

This section describes the media environment in each country in 2009-2010, based on reports from foreign governments and press rights defender groups. It illuminates patterns of constraints that have changed little in the first two decades of independence and provides evidence of the difficulties ahead if press freedom is to develop in Central Asia.

Kazakhstan

The government maintains stringent control over the media through a law that prohibits insulting the president and other officials, and through a high level of government ownership and subsidies to favored private press outlets. Although the media law was amended in February 2009 by removing a requirement that media re-register when their senior editorial staff changes, the government is still criticized by oppositional politicians and civil society leaders for tolerating harassment and violence against independent journalists. Moreover, new laws that restrict the Internet have been introduced. Disregarding public outcry, authorities subjected online social media to the same restrictions as traditional media. Also, a newly created Service to React to Computer Incidents is responsible for "checking 'destructive' websites."

In July 2010, CPJ advised the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) of Kazakhstan's poor press freedom record and called for including that issue on the agenda for an OSCE summit in December 2010. Ironically, currently Kazakhstan chairs the organization and, in the words of President Nursultan Nazarbaev, that summit would be "the first international forum of this scale in

the entire post-Soviet area."[16] Among the charges against the government are its use of bureaucratic pressure, "including politicized audits on printing houses—to stifle independent coverage" and media content censorship that "has crept onto the Internet." The imprisonment of Ramazan Yesergepov, editor of the independent newspaper *Alma-Ata Info*, is also regarded as a major violation of press freedom; authorities detained him in January 2009 for publishing two internal Kazakh security service (KNB) memos that "attested to the KNB's attempts to influence a prosecutor and a judge in a criminal tax evasion case."[17]

Kyrgyzstan

In what was once the Central Asian country most open to press freedom, Kyrgyzstan's two ousted presidents, Askar Akaev and then Kurmanbek Bakiev became more hostile to the media as their regimes grew increasingly authoritarian. During the summer 2010 inter-ethnic clashes in the southern part of the country, there were reports that authorities harassed journalists who worked for opposition news media and criticized government officials. Contracts with Western broadcasters—Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) and the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) among them—were revoked. The government remains heavily involved in the media sphere. New media outlets must register with the Ministry of Justice to operate; under the 2008 media law, the state retained control over the Kyrgyz National Television and Radio Broadcasting Corporation (NTRK), despite then-President Bakiev's previous assurance that a national public interest broadcaster would be created.

In the aftermath of the ethnic violence in southern Kyrgyzstan in May and early June 2010, the editor of the Uzbek-language newspaper *Diydor*, Ulugbek Abdusalomov, and journalist-human rights activist Azimjon Askarov were charged with incitement vo ethnic hatred, extremism, calls to mass disorder, and complicity to murder. In the eyes of some human rights groups, though, the two journalists were "being held in retaliation for reporting on the humanitarian crisis and human rights abuses in southern Kyrgyzstan."[18] However, it is premature to accurately assess whether the recently elected government's long-term attitude and policies will enhance or continue to hobble media development.

Tajikistan

Although its constitution provides for a multiparty political system, Tajikistan remains an authoritarian state under President Emomali Rahmon, who empowers supporters from a favored region of the country. The government performed poorly with regard to providing or supporting human rights, and corruption continued to hamper democratic and social reform. The government enforced restrictions on freedoms of speech, press, association, and religion.

Authorities abuse or ignore constitutionally guaranteed rights. People who disagree with government policies were subject to intimidation; insulting the president carries heavy penalties. Despite

[16] "Kazakhstan's President Welcomes Decision to Hold OSCE Summit in December in Astana," Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, 2010, available at [www.osce.org/item/45662.html].

[17] N. Ognianova, "Denied Access, CPJ Manages to Interview Kazakh Prisoner," 10 June, 2010.

[18] "CPJ Decries Charges against Journalists in Kyrgyzstan," Press Release, Committee to Protect Journalists, 12 August, 2010.

restraints on speech rights, independent media were said to remain active, however. For example, print media continued to regularly publish political commentary and content critical of the regime, but certain topics were off limits. Taboo topics included criticism of the president and his relatives, as well as implication that presidential allies made questionable financial gains. Media outlets generally found it prudent to practice self-censorship to avoid government reprisal. In October 2009, the newspaper *Paikon* was found guilty of libel and fined about U.S. $68,000 for printing an open letter criticizing the nation's import and export agency. Individual journalists faced harassment and intimidation, including a Reuters journalist accused of publishing derogatory information about the government; authorities threatened to release false information about the reporter if such criticism continued. Other journalists complained about limited access to public information and were warned against covering certain subjects. Other government harassment was reported as well, including arbitrary prosecutions and threats telephoned to journalists, and personal threats voiced during authorities' visits to editorial offices. Selective tax inspections of journalists and media outlets occurred as well.

Turkmenistan

Although Turkmenistan's constitution states that it is a secular democracy that protects freedom of speech and freedom of the press, the Democratic Party remains its only legal political party; President Gurbanguly Berdymukhammedov won an election that failed to meet international standards; December 2008 parliamentary elections also failed in this regard. Although modest human rights improvements were reported, the government continues to commit serious political and civil rights abuses and to restrict civil liberties. Its long list of human rights abuses includes relentless abuses of press freedom.

The government has warned critics against speaking with visiting journalists or other foreigners about human rights problems. Law enforcement officials have harassed and detained Turkmen journalists working for foreign media outlets. Virtually all print media remain government-financed, with the exception of the Turkish newspaper *Zaman*, which is government-sanctioned and reflects the contents and views of state-supported newspapers. The government maintains rigid limitations on importation of foreign media, and although those restrictions had eased temporarily, Berdymukhammedov retightened them in August 2010; he said the country produces enough publications of its own and criticized the quality of imported ones.[19]

In 2009, government agents detained, harassed, and intimidated journalists, and RFE/RL journalists reported frequent surveillance by authorities. Journalists have been prohibited from traveling abroad, and press accreditation is routinely withheld from those deemed critical of the government. An example is RFE/RL reporter Halmurat Gylychdurdyev, who underwent continual harassment and intimidation; authorities monitored his activities, harassed relatives, and routinely disconnected his mobile telephone service.

Uzbekistan

Uzbekistani journalists operate under a legal system that holds all media accountable for the «objectivity "of their reporting, keeps major broadcast and print media firmly under direct control of

[19] See: "Further Restrictions on Foreign Press in Turkmenistan," *News Briefing Central Asia*, 3 September, 2010, available at [http://iwpr.net/report-news/further-restrictions-foreign-press-turkmenistan].

the state or government-dominated political parties, and places them at risk of harassment, intimidation, and arrest. As for media content, the law restricts criticism of the president, prohibits advocacy of fundamentalism and religious extremism, and outlaws instigation of religious and ethnic hatred, among other constraints on what the media can report.

The government permits "a few private newspapers with limited circulation containing advertising, horoscopes, and similar features and some substantive local news, including infrequent stories critical of government socioeconomic policies."[20] As for the Internet, "a few Web sites, most notably Press-uz.info, Gorizont.uz, and Region.uz, purported to be independent, yet their reporting reflected the government"s viewpoint."[21] Broadcasts by RFE/RL, VOA, and BBC World Service are banned, while Reuters and Associated Press correspondents were denied accreditation to operate in the country.

As of February 2010, seven journalists were imprisoned for their professional work, including photojournalist and documentary filmmaker Umida Akhmedova, who was convicted that month of libel and insulting the Uzbek people after publishing photographs of village life and producing a documentary about premarital sex. Also in 2010, police in Andijan jailed independent journalist Aleksei Volosevich for three days because he filmed refugees fleeing ethnic violence in nearby Kyrgyzstan; police also seized Volosevich's film and audio recorder.

The article now considers three aspects of the region's current media environment. These are factors that may further the ability of the regimes to suppress press rights; the impact of foreign trainers on the skills of journalists and their ability to work without fear or state interference; and the Internet's ability to provide Central Asians with a wide range of news, information, and opinion.

Factors in the Persistence of Press Constraints in Central Asia

Scholars of press systems generally attribute the absence of press freedom to structures of government—such as the lack of an independent judiciary or the absence of multiple political parties—or to media-specific conditions—such as state ownership, media monopolies, and lack of professional standards. Some Cold War-era researchers suggested that variables external to government and the media also may influence the existence of press freedom. They include distribution of wealth and population, gross national product, literacy, education levels, and religious tradition.[22] Later, Connolly-Ahern and Golan[23] reported a significant association between a country's Christian and Muslim make-up and its degree of press freedom. A more recent study[24] focused on the former Soviet Union

[20] "2009 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices," U.S. Department of State, 11 March 2010, available at [www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2009/index.htm].

[21] Ibidem.

[22] See: R.B. Nixon, "Factors Related to Freedom in National Press Systems," *Journalism Quarterly*, Vol. 42, No. 1, 1960, pp. 9-14; D.M. Gilmor, "Freedom in Press Systems and the Religious Variable," *Journalism Quarterly*, Vol. 39, 1962, pp. 15-26; V. Farace, L. Donohew, "Mass Communication in National Social Systems: A Study of 43 Variables in 115 Countries," *Journalism Quarterly*, Vol. 42, 1965, pp. 253-261.

[23] See: C. Connelly-Ahern, J.G. Guy, "Press Freedom and Religion: Measuring the Association between Press Freedom and Religious Composition." *Journal of Media and Religion*, Vol. 6, No. 1, 2007, pp. 63-76.

[24] See: R. Shafer, E. Freedman, "Press Constraints as Obstacles to Establishing Civil Societies in Central Asia," *Journalism Studies*, Vol. 10, No. 6, 2009, pp. 851-869.

and Warsaw Pact countries. It proposed an exploratory matrix of external variables that included Islam as a majority religion as a possible factor explaining the lack of press freedom in Central Asia; other variables included whether a former Soviet republic had ever been an independent country.

We believe that the impact of the last variable—a history of prior independence—although less quantitative than others, should not be underestimated. None of these five countries were nations of their own before 1991. As a result, many journalists felt—and perhaps still feel—a duty of citizenship to advance their young countries' national identity, spirit of statehood, and bid for international respect and recognition. Only a few scholars have surveyed or interviewed journalists or journalism educators about professional matters.[25] However, those studies did not delve deeply into respondents' core feelings and attitudes toward nationalism and how those attitudes and feelings affect performance of their professional responsibilities. Such an interpretation of journalists' responsibility may further impede development of a sustainable independent press and prolong restraints on the mass media.

Self-censorship is also relevant to journalists' attitudes and willingness to comply with constraints. Even in countries where official censorship was abolished, self-censorship deters professionals who otherwise might advance the role of the press as a responsible, independent guardian over government, business, criminal organizations, and other political and economic forces.[26] It is essential to recognize self-censorship as a pragmatic shield—a defensive mechanism—against the types of harassment, assault, arrest, loss of licenses, seizure of publications, and other risks described in this article.

That ambiguity was evident in a December 2009 when the Institute for Public Policy hosted a roundtable discussion in Bishkek about self-censorship. "Why does self-censorship exist in the political arena?" one participant asked. "Because journalists are not sure of their protection. Because … journalists have their own employers."[27] However, another participant said: "Self-censorship implies self-limitation. It is necessary for all. Not only journalists use self-censorship, or self-restraint. We should accept the idea that self-censorship among journalists should be treated calmly; it is not a dirty word."[28]

The Impact of Western Trainers on Journalistic Practices in Central Asia

The influx of foreign trainers and media development funds since independence reflects a fundamental Western belief in the cornerstone role that a free press places in democratic societies. Not

[25] See: E. Freedman, *Dimming Lights and Deepening Shadows over Press Rights in Kyrgyzstan*, Paper presented to the Association for Education in Journalism & Mass Communication, 2010; M.J. Namecek, J. Maureen, S. Ketterer, G. Ibrayeva, S. Los, "Journalism Education and Professional Training in Kazakhstan: From the Soviet Era to Independence," in: *After the Czars and Commissars: Journalism in Authoritarian Post-Soviet Central Asia*, ed. by E. Freedman, R. Shafer, Michigan State University Press, East Lansing, Mich. (forthcoming); G. Pitts, "Professionalism among Journalists in Kyrgyzstan," in: *After the Czars and Commissars: Journalism in Authoritarian Post-Soviet Central Asia.*

[26] See: P. Gross, T. Kenny, "Journalistic Self-Censorship and the Tajik Press in the Context of Central Asia," in: *After the Czars and Commissars: Journalism in Authoritarian Post-Soviet Central Asia*; E. Freedman, "Dimming Lights and Deepening Shadows over Press Rights in Kyrgyzstan."

[27] E. Mamyrkanov, "Remarks, 'How Does Self-Censorship Affect the Coverage of Political Conflicts?'" Institute for Public Policy, 2009, p. 8.

[28] A. Tynaev, "Remarks, 'How Does Self-Censorship Affect the Coverage of Political Conflicts?'" Institute for Public Policy, 2009, p. 6.

surprisingly, Western professionals and educators who lecture and train in the region often come to Central Asia with a missionary zeal and commitment to facilitate change—quickly and, of course, for the better. Foreign trainers often fail to recognize the continued importance to Central Asian journalists of: cultural, historical, and religious values; awakened nationalism; creation of state identities; traditions of authoritarian rule; lack of market support for independent media; surviving Soviet-era practices and attitudes; and the emigration or exile of many talented, independent-thinking journalists. Many foreign academics and trainers implicitly assume that concepts of civil society and press independence as rooted in Western democracies can be transposed largely intact to other cultural, political, and economic contexts. As Offe said: "While democratic institutions and economic resources can be 'transplanted' from the outside world (or their introduction facilitated and their durability protected by a host of positive and negative sanctions designed to support and strengthen new democratic regimes), the civic 'spirit' or 'mental software' that is needed to drive the hardware of the new institutions is less easily influenced by external intervention. The rise of a robust 'civil society' cannot be initiated from the outside."[29]

Nelson provides this Western perspective on the mission of foreign trainers: "Media development entails a coordinated effort to advance the common good through the free flow of information, especially in societies that have lived under severe political or economic constraints. The 'common good' presumes that projects go beyond the provision of technology to include some engagement with content or function in partnership with serious content providers. Media development contributes some 'leave-behind' value, through structural benefits that remain after the implementation is complete."[30]

To advance that underlying philosophy, foreign governments, multinational agencies, media development NGOs, foreign news organizations, and foreign universities have spent millions of dollars on media development efforts in Central Asia. Trainings for professionals and journalism students include skills and content production, curriculum and faculty development at universities, and "promotion of new media platforms for advocacy, research, and information campaigns, especially related to public health and human rights."[31]

It is impossible to quantify whether or how much Western-led training has changed or improved news coverage or the personal security and freedom of journalists themselves. Yet it is evident that massive foreign expenditures to develop "democratic journalism" and related democratic institutions have not changed regime attitudes. Specifically, they have not induced those regimes to allow press freedom. To the contrary, Fawn observes that such post-Soviet regimes "see such NGO activity as pernicious and destabilizing."[32] That is true although the regimes have generally tolerated Western trainers as a transparent subterfuge that appears to cater to democratization pressures from funders and attempts to counteract the negative publicity emanating from press rights defender and human rights groups.

Advocates of journalistic independence and professionalism and defenders of press rights face daunting challenges as they try to better determine how and why free press systems prosper in a few other former Soviet republics and most European former communist nations. Are any of the approaches,

[29] C. Offe, "Cultural Aspects of Consolidation: A Note on the Peculiarities of Postcommunist Transformations," *Eastern European Constitutional Review,* Vol. 6, No. 4, 1997, available at [www1.law.nyu.edu/eecr/vol6num4/special/culturalaspects.html. 67].

[30] A. Nelson, *U.S. Universities and Media Development*, Report to the Center for International Media Assistance, 2010, available at [http://cima.ned.org/sites/default/files/CIMA-US_Universities_and_Media_Development-Report.pdf. 4].

[31] Ibid., p. 6.

[32] R. Fawn, "'Bashing about Rights'? Russia and the 'New' EU States on Human Rights and Democracy Promotion," *Europe-Asia Studies,* Vol. 61, No. 10, 2010, p. 1788.

strategies, and techniques that succeeded in the Baltics, Hungary, and Poland realistically, culturally, politically, and affordably adaptable for Central Asia?

Whether such Western efforts have succeeded in substantively improving professional skills and protecting journalists elsewhere in the erstwhile Soviet republics remains questionable. The same question arose recently in Georgia, which has a "partly free" press system.[33] Since independence, the United States, European Union, Open Society Institute, and other funders have spent heavily on media development there. As Corso observed, "The overriding message from donors, media watchdogs, and journalists alike is that success is hard to gauge and expectations should be realistic."[34]

Even so, we would argue that simply teaching journalists and students the skills necessary to do fact-based journalism has value in itself. We believe that professional development without ideology can and should promote fairness, balance, accuracy, ethics, and use of credible sources for information.

The Internet: Alternative Provider of a Plurality of News Sources?[35]

Does the Internet provide a viable and effective platform for a diversity of viewpoints and information that offsets official and unofficial limitations on news and information content in state and private print and broadcast media? In other words, is the Web now an alternative to traditional media in Central Asia?

These questions might be relevant in countries where the population is technology-savvy, where the Internet is readily accessible and affordable, where users have the time and interest to explore multiple sites in languages they know, where users have a basis to assess the credibility of websites, and where government does not block sites. Those preconditions do not exist sufficiently in the region. First, low Internet penetration rates (see Table 2) ranging from 1.6 percent in Turkmenistan to 39.8 percent in Kyrgyzstan show that only a minority of Central Asians have any online access. There is no data on whether those users read independent or oppositional news sites and, if so, how often and for how long. A study of an independent advocacy blog in the run-up to Kyrgyzstan's 2005 Tulip Revolution[36] found no direct link between advocacy blogs and the downfall of the Akaev regime. Administrators of the online opposition newspaper gazeta.kg launched that website after the government blocked or hacked their own site; it was accessed primarily by users outside Kyrgyzstan. However, the experience suggests that new technologies may help counterbalance press controls and governmental information management by providing a space where anonymity can shield bloggers with little risk of tracing and where readers can engage in commentary and dialog.

[33] See: *Freedom of the Press 2010,* Freedom House, Washington, 2010, available at [www.freedomhouse.org].

[34] M. Corso, "Media Training in Georgia: How Much Bang for the Buck?" *Eurasianet.org,* 24 June, 2010.

[35] Unless cited to another source, information in this section is drawn from the U.S. Department of State; Committee to Protect Journalists; Freedom House; Reporters without Borders; Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty; International Research & Exchanges Board; International Media Support; Eurasietnet.org; Institute for War & Peace Reporting; and International Freedom of Expression eXchange.

[36] See: S.V. Kulikova, D.D. Perlmutter, "Blogging Down the Dictator: The Kyrgyz Revolution and *Samizdat* Websites," *International Communication Gazette,* Vol. 69, No. 1, 2007, pp. 29-50.

An international press rights NGO's roster of "Enemies of the Internet" classifies Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan among the world's ten worst violators of online freedom of expression. Writing about Uzbekistan, Reporters without Borders said: "In this country deprived of independent media outlets, the authorities impose a very strict Internet censorship, while refusing to admit it publicly. Website filtering, sanctions and intimidations are used against potential critics of the regime."[37] Among the sites blocked partly or wholly are the online news agency www.Ferghana.ru and the Central Asian News Service; social networking sites including Livejournal, MySpace, Facebook, and Twitter "are sporadically inaccessible." In Turkmenistan, the government blocks Ferghana.ru, Eurasianet, and opposition sites; in September 2010, it banned the popular social networking site agent.mail.ru. And in Kazakhstan, state-owned Internet provider Kazakhtelecom cut off access to the independent news portal Respublika and the website of affiliated Respublika-Delovoye Obozreniye. Governments sometimes rationalize such limitations on the basis of security. For example, the sponsor of legislation in Kyrgyzstan to subject the Internet to the same regulations as traditional media cited terrorist organizations, saying: "Through the global network, they promote their ideas and recruit new people, posting instructions on how to manufacture explosive devices and make poisons."[38]

Affordability poses another major deterrent to Internet use. For instance, Reporters without Borders describes the cost of access as "prohibitive" for most residents in Turkmenistan.[39] Regulation is another serious deterrent: The Uzbek government imposes regulations that undermine freedom of expression on legal and ideological grounds by enforcing legal rules on information security and the ideological "idea of national independence."[40] Libel laws further deter Internet use to disseminate news and opinion deemed critical of the regimes: In Tajikistan, the government extended libel laws to the Web, stifling communication and reinforcing self-censorship.[41]

Prognosis

We anticipate ongoing efforts to instill Western skills and values in today's and tomorrow's Central Asian journalists but are pessimistic that such efforts will catalyze meaningful improvement in the media environment. Despite uncertainties about the long-term effectiveness of externally generated media development activities, activities to build the capacity for "democratic journalism" continue. Among them in 2010: A course for Kazakhstani civil society activists and journalists on combating corruption and money laundering; it was organized by OSCE in collaboration with Kazakhstan's Financial Police, Friedrich Ebert Foundation and Transparency Kazakhstan.[42] In Kyrgyzstan, the U.S. Embassy awarded a $111,000 grant to help convert state broadcast company KTR to a public television and radio channel and to "create an informative, fair, unbiased and interactive TV platform for

[37] "Internet Enemies: Uzbekistan," Reporters without Borders, 2010, available at [http://en.rsf.org/internet-enemie-uzbekistan,36688.html].

[38] R. Safin, "Online Journalism in Kyrgyzstan: Problems and Prospects," Institute for Public Policy, 23 September, 2008.

[39] See: "Internet Enemies: Turkmenistan," Reporters without Borders, 2010, available at [http://en.rsf.org/internet-enemie-turkmenistan,36692.html].

[40] Zh. Kozhamberdiyeva, "Freedom of Expression on the Internet: A Case Study of Uzbekistan," *Review of Central & East European Law*, Vol. 33, No. 1, 2008, pp. 95-134.

[41] See: K.M. Kohlmeier, N. Nekbakhtshoev, "Internet Libel Law and Freedom of Expression in Tajikistan," in: *After the Czars and Commissars: Journalism in Authoritarian Post-Soviet Central Asia*.

[42] See: "OSCE Centre Organizes Course on Combating Corruption for Civil Society, Media in Southern Kazakhstan," Press Release, Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, 23 August, 2010.

discussion of major issues regarding the present and the future of the country;" citizens also will get "first-hand information prior to the parliamentary elections [through] a live, professionally moderated, censorship-free TV talk-show to a nationwide audience."[43]

For reasons detailed in this article, overall prospects appear poor for rapid, substantive improvements in the press environment. On a regional scale, the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media issued a July 2010 report that included all five countries, along with former Soviet republics Azerbaijan, Russia, Belarus, Ukraine, and Georgia, among those most deserving of criticism for abusing press rights. Recent events signal significant roadblocks ahead if the media environment is to improve. As reported by the Committee to Protect Journalists, RFE/RL, and the Institute for War & Peace Reporting, events during the summer of 2010 highlight roadblocks to press freedom: In Kazakhstan, for example, the editor of the newspaper *Alma-Ata Info* launched a hunger strike to protest his illegal imprisonment. In Uzbekistan, police detained a journalist for filming refugees fleeing into the country to escape ethnic violence in Kyrgyzstan. Thus we fear that the region's repressitarian leaders—or in Kyrgyzstan, the new leaders of a constitutionally restructured "parliamentary democracy"—will not accept any key elements of democratic journalism models or alternative models of free press systems as become steppingstones along the path toward freer—if not free—press systems.

At most, there are faint glimmerings of hope for improvement. For example, August 2010 marked the launch of *Imruz News* (News Today), the first daily newspaper in Tajikistan since independence, with coverage of economics, politics, and foreign news, as well as overseas correspondents. It is edited by a veteran journalist with a reputation for criticizing the government and president but reportedly is financed with a loan from the president's brother-in-law.[44] In Turkmenistan, President Berdymukhammedov pledged to allow the nation's first privately owned publications since independence, although press rights activists expressed deep skepticism about whether that pledge would be honored.[45]

The best prospects for change appear to be in Kyrgyzstan. After its March 2010 coup, the OSCE's Representative on Freedom of the Media offered to help the interim government with "ongoing efforts to restore media freedom in the country," including

- Facilitating the discussion of the role of independent media and public service broadcasting and a national multi-partisan platform regarding the role of media,
- Introducing safety practices for media professionals, including fluorescent vests that visibly distinguish journalists on duty and a free-media hotline for journalists to report cases of intimidation or violence against them,
- Assisting in identification of partner organizations to conduct professional training for public service broadcasting staff.[46]

The country's then-president replied that the government's goals included ensuring journalists' safety, advancing "universal standards of free press and restoring the media system in the country."[47] Even after that response, however, authorities charged the editor of an independent newspaper and a journalist, who is also a human rights activist, with extremism, incitement to

[43] U.S. Embassy, Kyrgyzstan, 2010, available at [www.facebook.com/usembassy.bishkek].

[44] See: F. Najibullah, "Daily Ambitions," Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 30 August, 2010.

[45] See: A. Khan, "Scepticism over Independent Press Pledge in Turkmenistan," Institute for War & Peace Reporting, RCA 615, 2 August, 2010.

[46] See: D. Mijatoviæ, *Regular Report to the Permanent Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe*, available at [www.osce.org/documents/html/pdftohtml/45552_en.pdf.html], 29 July, 2010.

[47] Ibidem.

ethnic hatred, and complicity to murder. And after inconclusive but generally fair parliamentary elections in October 2010, the stability of the country's new structure of governance is yet to be demonstrated.