

# ICT for good practises in civil journalism

This article starts with an impression of the media situation in Kazakhstan and end with a more specific case of a blogging project -in progress- in Central Kazakhstan.



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## Media situation in Kazakhstan

June 16-22nd I made a visit to the capitals of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan for an orientation on possible media partners for Hivos. Hivos supports the development of new and sometimes also experimental media techniques, such as the use of web blogging or SMS. (For more information about Hivos, please have a look at Box 1.) This article starts with an impression of the media situation in Kazakhstan and ends with a more specific case of a blogging project -in progress- in Central Kazakhstan.

'The country is demonstrating an alarming decline in democracy and accountability', asserts a new study by Freedom House (June 13, 2006). President Nursultan Nazarbayev's grip on power in the oil rich country is so tight that the report suggests that his political position 'appears unassailable'.

Freedom of speech is a big issue in Kazakhstan. There is lot of censorship: external by officials and by media owners, and self-censorship, which is in the heads of the journalists. The most important taboo is to critically write/report about the president, his family or friends, or about the government and his officials.

No wonder all media are heavily politicised. Different power groups are competing over the media outlets. 'Own media and you control them' is often heard. Television is the most used medium in Kazakhstan. Family and friends of president Nazarbayeva have a monopoly on TV and radio broadcasters. For example, the president's daughter Dariga Nazarbayeva owns via several holdings about 50 percent of the Kazakh TV and radio outlets. There are only a few newspapers that can work relatively independent. Most in Russian, but also

some advanced in Kazakh. Language is a problem, Russian is dominating and Kazakhs seems to loose territory.

## Demaining censorship

In contrast to television and radio, everyone I spoke is convinced that the Internet is the most free public media space. Internet offers more opportunities, but access is not widespread and relatively expensive. About 10 percent of the Kazakh population is on a regularly basis online. But the growing economy has led to a tremendous growth in computers and Internet use per household. The national telecom monopolist, Kazakh Telecom expects the Internet access to grow to about 400 percent in the next year. Although Internet is seen as the most free public media space, (meanwhile) only 5 websites work as a media outlet. And also on the Internet, freedom of speech doesn't exist. Blocking of sites is a common practise.

During my visit, I had two meetings in Kazakh capital Almaty with the lawyers Didenko Olga Alexandrovna and Iryna Velska of the Centre for Legal Assistance for Mass Media, located in Karaganda. Didenko calls the media situation critical. She has lots of examples of (self) censorship; most court cases regarding media pass through to the centre. Also journalists, seeking legal advice, visit or mail to Didenko. She names among others the case of senior journalist, Sergey Duranov. Two years ago, he criticised the president in his articles. Last year he was accused of raping a child and was arrested. He is free now, but under conditional sentence, so he can't travel abroad. Another way to obstruct media is to put newspapers under pressure. For example, officials call and threaten advertisers to stop advertising in a certain paper.

## BOX 1 : Hivos' programme Media, Information and Communication (MIC)

MIC supports citizens and organisations in developing countries - especially the poor, marginalised and their organisations - by giving them a voice. This programme supports projects that improve access to information and communication resources. The media component of Hivos' MIC-programme focuses on combining old and new media. Hivos gives special attention to innovative developments; combining digital media platforms with edge-of-the-net technologies such as PDF articles that can be sent easily by eMail or which can be printed for distribution in low access areas. All the developments that are taking place at this very moment in the Media and ICT field (blogs, pod casting) offer citizens several possibilities to get actively involved in journalism/media. While practising journalism, professional as well as citizen journalists assume the journalistic basic rules, such as hearing all relevant parties, separate the facts and opinions and double check crucial information, should be respected. Hivos supports media projects which combine the democratic and approachable, open character of digital media with professional standards from traditional journalism. The users are both citizens and journalists who are active on Internet in, among others, communities or peer-to-peer networks, using digital techniques such as radio casting, web blogging, mailing lists and forums.

### Ventures in blogging and Internet

The centre wants to start a new project about blogging in Kazakhstan. Blogging is not so commonly used in Iran. But it's a matter of time and growing access. To stimulate the process, the centre wants to give some positive input through organising some seminars, so bloggers can meet in real live and a bloggers contest. In short, the centre aims to train this year at least 30 bloggers at seminars, launch 20 blogs on various topics (10 in Russian and 10 in Kazakh) and count on at least 30 bloggers from Kazakhstan, participating in the blogging contest that the centre is going to organise.

In this way, the centre hopes to form a special technical and informational platform for further development of civic journalism. A new media environment for development of democratic and independent ways of expressing one's civic position on political, economic, cultural and social issues will be established. Amongst others, staff of independent media organisations and NGOs will get the opportunity to improve their knowledge of and skills in Internet journalism.

Another interesting meeting I had with Mikhail Tyunin, at the office of Informational Initiative, located in an industry area in the outskirts of Almaty. Informational Initiative is a company that works on several ICT-projects, providing online communication and information for local government, citizens, schools and NGOs. For example, they provided more than 150 NGOs with an Internet connection. One of the latest initiatives of Mikhail Tyunin is to stimulate the use of open source software in Kazakhstan. In February 2006, he organised an Open Source day in Almaty, which was sponsored by computer multinationals Sun and Intel. "I want to promote the use of open source software. The main argument I use to convince people is: to lower the risk of a fine. Almost all NGOs

(605 online) in Kazakhstan use open office. Only a few work with the open source operating system, Linux. I convinced them by talking about the law. If Kazakhstan wants to join the WTO, one of the criteria will be copyright. Better not to risk a fine which can be as high as a couple tens of thousands dollars". At the moment Tyunin is searching for financial possibilities to start an Open Source centre in Almaty.

### Struggle to remain online

Finally, I was lucky to meet Juri Mizinov, chief-editor of the news website *www.zonakg.net*. The team of four web editors is based in an apartment. Behind the scenes, there is also a big team of freelancers (journalists and photographers) work for the site. Mizinov has been playing a cat and mouse game for years with the state. The aforementioned Centre for Legal Assistance for Mass Media has supported Jury Mizinov several times with legal advice in his battle with the government. Changing the domain name of the site is just one of the ways to keep on publishing. Because the website is unique in the Kazach digital world, the new name spreads around fast. He has lots of claims and charges behind him: 'All possible methods have been used against me'. I wondered what could be his motivation. Dryly he said: 'It's my job to do this.'

The website was launched in 2000, so it is online for almost 7 years. The site is daily updated; 5 days a week, with 10-15 articles a day. The main themes on the site are: social issues, city and local issues, interviews and political court cases. Especially the last category is difficult to cover sufficiently; Mizinov says much more investigating journalism is needed. Diversity in opinions is an important selection criterion of the editing team. That's why the contributions come from almost all political parties.

### Box 2 : Good practices of civil journalism projects, in some of them Hivos is involved.

<http://www.globalvoicesonline.org>

<http://www.denieuwereporter.nl> (Dutch)

<http://www.mask.org.za>

<http://today.reuters.com/news/globalCoverage.aspx?type=newsmakersIraq&src>  
(Press bureau Reuters works together with bloggers/civic journalists)

### Hivos extensive support

Mizinov claims the site has a broad audience of readers: governmental officials, politicians and journalists. The sites is visited between 3000 and 4000 times a day. Half of the visitors are from inside Kazakhstan, the other half from abroad. Mizinov tells a lot of readers leave their comment on the site; some articles get over 500 comments. The most popular topics are relations between ethnic groups, changes in the government, business scandals and of course murder and court trials. The trustworthy information on the site in combination with the possibility to leave a comment explains the enormous popularity of this site. But it's clearly also the reason behind the problems and opposition Mizinov meets. By supporting this type of initiatives – financially, through feedback and information or through providing relevant contacts, Hivos hopes to contribute to media diversity, journalism and democratisation in developing countries. ■