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The Role of Ecology in Media

This article discusses the impact of global climate change on Kazakhstan using examples of the recent flood disaster and other ecological crises in Almaty and its oblast against the background of the media's role in preventing environmental disasters. The article argues that media have to play a watchdog role on environmental issues and have to inform citizens of how environmental issues can affect their lives. It cites relevant examples from the fire and flood damage in Los Angeles and surrounding areas and shows how future environmental disasters can affect the Almaty region's tourism industry.

Key words: Kazakhstan, Almaty, environment, ecology, media.

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Медиа алаңында экологияның алатын орны

Мақалада Қазақстанда қалыптасқан жалпы экологиялық өзекті мәселелердің бұқаралық ақпарат құралдарында көтерілуі және олардың сол мәселені шешілуіне ықпалы, қоғамдық пікірді қалыптастырудағы орыны – Алматы қаласы мен Алматы облысында болып өткен қатты дауылдың және басқа да тұрмыстық-экологиялық факторлардың қала экологиясына келтірген зардаптары туралы жарияланған баспасөздегі материалдардың негізінде қарастырылады. Оңтүстік астанада қалыптасқан қазіргі экологиялық мүшкіл жағдайдың түптің түбінде қауіпті апатқа айналуы мүмкін екендігін халыққа жеткізу, оның салдарын түсіндіру, қатердің алдын алу, оның зардаптарын жою шаралары туралы пікірлер мен жобаларды таныстыру барысындағы ақпарат құралдарының маңызы көрсетіледі. Сондай-ақ, Алматы қаласының экологиялық жағдайына халықаралық талап деңгейінде салыстырыла отырып баға беріліп, оның басты проблемалары аталады.

Түйін сөздер: Қазақстан, Алматы, қоршаған орта, экология, медиа.

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Роль экологии в медиа

В статье обсуждается влияние глобального изменения климата на Казахстан на примере недавнего стихийного бедствия, наводнений и других экологических проблем в Алматы и области. Рассматривается роль средств массовой информации в предотвращении экологических катастроф. В статье утверждается, что средства массовой информации должны более полноценно освещать вопросы, связанные с окружающей средой и информировать граждан о том, как экологические проблемы могут повлиять на их жизнь. Приведены соответствующие примеры повреждений из-за пожаров и наводнений в Лос-Анджелесе и его окрестностях, что показывает, как возможные экологические бедствия могут повлиять на индустрию туризма в Алматы и регионе в целом.

Ключевые слова: Казахстан, Алматы, окружающая среда, экология, медиа.

THE ROLE OF ECOLOGY IN MEDIA

Along with many countries in the region, Kazakhstan is experiencing a serious impact of global climate changes. However, in contrast to other Central Asian states, Kazakhstan possesses sufficient resources and wealth to promote a sustainable development program. During its 20-year history as an independent country, Kazakhstan went through a difficult period of transformations full of market reforms towards building a mixed economy that seeks innovative development; Kazakhstan recovered from profound economic stagnation and found itself on the way of economic growth and sustainable development. For example, Kazakhstan was the first CIS country to be recognized as an open market economy [1].

It is worth noting that despite the global economic turmoil, Kazakhstan's GDP growth was equal to 3.3% in 2008, 1.2% in 2009, and 7.3% in 2010. According to forecasts, this year, the GDP growth will be equal to 7%[2]. In 2011, Kazakhstan achieved a record amount of grain harvest (28.5 million tons) for the first time in its independent history. On the background of global recession and low commodity prices, these data show that Kazakhstan's economy and financial sector are sustainable and that growth priorities are aptly chosen. Nevertheless, the Government decided that state infusion of capital must be the main engine of growth. From the National Fund reserves alone about 10 billion USD was committed to this process.

The Government determined five priority objectives:

- 1) Stabilization of the financial sector and supporting banks: 4 billion USD (480 billion KZT), which is 40% of the whole allocated amount;
- 2) Housing development: 3 billion USD (360 billion KZT), which is 30% of the whole allocated amount;
- 3) Support for small and medium enterprises: 1 billion USD (120 billion KZT), which is 10% of the whole amount;
- 4) Agriculture sector development: 1 billion USD (120 billion KZT), which is 10% of the whole amount;
- 5) Innovative and infrastructure projects: 1 billion USD (120 billion KZT), which is 10% of the whole amount;

In this way, Kazakhstan is pursuing these goals to stabilize its economy and real sector, which played a positive role in social and economic development of Kazakhstan in a tactical sense[3].

According to IFC and World Bank report *Doing Business 2012*,

which was published on October 20, 2012, Kazakhstan is ranked 47th among 183 countries, making a progress from its 58th rank in 2011[4].

High growth rate and its impact on environment

Almaty is a financial, culture and science center of Kazakhstan. The city's location in a near-mountain pit strongly affects Almaty's environment. Athens and Los Angeles exhibit a similar environment because of their reliefs. In the past, Almaty used to be considered one of the greenest cities in the world. The hot steppe wind mixed with cold mountain air used to turn into a cool wind in the city. Nowadays, however, cool wind has transformed itself into a hitherto nonexistent stormy wind. This is a clear environment catastrophe threatening Almaty[5].

Historically, Almaty was known to be under threat of two natural cataclysms: earthquake and mud-flow. Nowadays, destructive stormy winds need to be added to this list. On May 17 2011, one such destructive wind (a hurricane, to be exact) destroyed 64 000 Tien Shen pines near Medeu[6]. On June 27 2011, another stormy wind destroyed 7 000 trees in Almaty[7]. The country's chief environmentalist, Mr Eleusizov, commented that he is «convinced that Almaty's poor environmental condition is caused by recent hurricanes in May and June.»[8].

Usually, trees fallen victims to strong winds used to be found on the outskirts of the city. Nowadays, however, one can find fallen trees on higher locations, such as peaks and foot Zailiyskiy Alatau. Excluding the mountain areas, Almaty is home to 2 000 000 trees. Experts have calculated that more than 70 000 trees fell during hurricanes in 2011. Around 5 000 damaged trees are sawn off annually. In 2010, more than 10 000 trees were sawn off[9]. At this rate, the city will not have enough oxygen in ten years. On average, the air has to have 21% oxygen[10]. Nowadays, Almaty air has 17% in certain districts. According to Almaty-based Hydrometeorological Monitoring Center (HMC) Almaty's air pollution level is far beyond the acceptable level[11].

Unexpected hail has recently hit the city as well. It caused soil erosion that happens during mud-flows. This, in turn, made sure that the city was left without some of its beautiful green trees. This usually happens near mountain areas. For example, 20 years ago, Zhalanash area was stripped and became a bare stone. There are many houses built around such areas near Almaty. In order to solidify the earth in such areas, the city needs more trees with strong roots. Such events often happen near Almaty. It is rare that such news reach our TV screens.

In the past, Zailiyskiy Alatau peak used to be covered with snow. The snow is no longer there, because

it melts. On the northern part of Zailiyskiy Alatau, where left streams of Ili River flows, ice covered area has decreased by 40.8% (117.26 square km) during the last 50 years. On the southern part of Zailiyskiy Alatau, where Shilik River flows, the ice-covered area has decreased by 30% (about 86 square km)[12].

Even during the USSR it was forecasted that such environmental crisis will happen in Almaty. Some measures were undertaken to prevent such crises. Specifically, it was recommended that heating system uses gas instead of hard petrol; turnpikes should be built to lessen car traffic; aerial metro should be built; ecological districts should be opened; allow only trams and trolley-buses to run in the city. The largest of such suggestions was the construction of a tunnel across Almaty-Medeu canon. This mountain canon was supposed to be sort of a ventilator, a wind-corridor, for Almaty. This wind-corridor would have an additional advantage as it would prevent mud-flows. The city's development plan was centered on preventing such earthquake and mud-flows. A large mounting plate was built in Medeu area in 1967[13]. The building was constructed so that it could withstand a 9-point high earthquake. Another such successful construction is a 25-floor hotel, «Kazakhstan». Before resolving air corridor issues, some recommended that weather control has to be improved. With the fall of the USSR, such projects meant to save Almaty from environmental damage fell into oblivion. Only issues that were meant to cause environmental crises remained.

Both government structure and political situation have changed. Economic ties have been cut off. Even living is difficult. Due to these factors, neither Government nor society was able to pay attention to the environmental threat. The environment, meanwhile, was getting worse and worse. Due to rapid urbanization, the city population grew at an alarming rate. The number of detached houses grew threefold in Almaty. This led to increase in air pollution. City's waste management alone experienced troubles that are yet to be resolved.

Nowadays, Almaty, with an index of 39.1, is ranked 9th among 215 most polluted cities in the world, according to Mercer Human Resource Consulting data. The surveying company makes the following conclusion:

«The marriage of petroleum-based industry and insufficient safeguards against pollution sets the stage for an environmental crisis in this city. Toxic waste dumps require a huge price tag for improvement and an even larger price for neglect»[14].

The Forbes magazine has the following to say about Almaty:

«All cities are positioned against New York, the base city with an index score of 100. For the Health and Sanitation Rankings, the index scores range from the worst on the list – Baku, Azerbaijan, with a score of 27.6 – to the best on the list – Calgary, Canada, with a score of 131.7. For residents of the 25 cities on this year's list, black plumes of smoke, acid rain and free-flowing sewage are part of everyday life. Not as immediately visible: the impact on the population's health and life expectancy»[15].

The main sources of greenhouse effect and polluting substances in Almaty are heating and electric energy companies, cars and industry. About 80% of environment pollution is due to cars. It is important to note that 70% of Almaty cars emit 3-4 times the accepted norm. Another 20% of the pollution is due to heating and electric energy companies, industrial companies, etc. [16].

Sustainable development reconsidered

Under the Kyoto Protocol Kazakhstan is recognized as an industrialized country (country included in Annex 1 of the KP, but not in Annex «B», is considered to be commercially developed, but has no legal obligation to reduce emissions), which in this case is important. The point is that the country cannot use financial mechanisms of the protocol for environmental projects. As part of the Copenhagen agreement, Kazakhstan voluntarily agreed to reduce CO₂ emissions by 15 percent by 2020 relative to 1992 and by 25 percent by 2050. However, it is not clear how these objectives will be achieved. There is currently no observable emission reduction tendency, but rather the opposite. The Ministry of Environment and the Kazakh Research Institute of Environment and Climate warn that CO₂ levels will exceed the 1992 baseline in as early as 2017. According to some estimates, it has already happened[17].

These disasters threatening Almaty have become one of the main topics of the Kazakh media. The question is not even about implementing preventive measures to thwart accidents, but rather to at least eliminate the effects of these catastrophes on a proper level. There are many scheduled activities, such as clearing Zailiskiy Alatau forests from fallen trees, planting young trees, reducing vehicle emissions, decreasing emissions from heating and

energy centers, and gasifying homes that are heated by solid fuel.

Under the guidance of certain writers and Mels Eleusizov, independent national ecological union «Tabigat» raises environmental issues at different levels. The press has systematically published articles about the problem, inviting society to participate in activities aimed at conserving pure forests, clean streets, green areas and safe rest areas.

There is, however, a lack of well-researched and useful information about these serious environmental issues. There are no brave and penetrating articles in Kazakhstan media that address these issues. Needless to say, TV is silent about such matters. Environmental damages are not fully reported on official state media. For example, it is not yet clear how many people died during the Kyzylagash village mud-flow. It is not clear what was the economic damage of the catastrophe and which agencies were held accountable. Instead, compensating victims and destinies of individual people were discussed. Local and national government policies were highlighted and social activism to help the flood victims was encouraged throughout the country. No systemic measures were taken to prevent such events in the future. This demonstrates that there is no mutual understanding between the Government and the free press. Catastrophe consequences are left as scars to be covered. A case in point is a national commission that could not decide on how to clean the forest after the catastrophe near Medeu. It is clear that these events are directly related to global warming. These events need a serious consideration. This is not a separate local problem; this problem is that of a nation and country. Therefore, people need to be informed about ways to prevent such catastrophes. This necessitates an open dialogue between the Government agencies and media. Unfortunately, this is not the case everywhere. Few people understand that it is we the people who are responsible for all these events and that we need to work together to prevent such events in the future. Citizens need to participate in decision-making; they have, at least, the right to do so. The only way to do this is to encourage and support free media. Such policy will be sure to prevent catastrophes akin to the ones in Zailiskiy Alatau.

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