

Internet Editions of Crimean Tatar Newspapers Disappearing

By [Paul Goble](#)

January 31, 2010



The  **Moscow Times**

VIENNA — Prior to the rise of the Internet, many students of minority nationalities often found themselves in the position of those interested in medieval heresies: The only information about them most of the time was provided by media outlets that reflected the views of their larger and more powerful opponents.

The Internet appeared to provide a way out of this dilemma. Given the relatively low cost of putting up a site, many groups were suddenly in a position to communicate their news and perspectives to far more people than ever before. And many students of these communities felt that they had entered a golden age.

But not everything has worked out as many had hoped. On the one hand, there has been an explosion of websites, often providing the kind of information no one could have dreamed earlier of obtaining, but if many were launched, few sites continued to be updated for long, limiting their value to those seeking to trace what is going on.

And on the other, both because so many sites were so short-lived and because some of them were so parochial or tendentious, the most important of these sites were those of local newspapers, not only because they often reflected higher journalistic standards but also because they appeared regularly over a significant period of time.

Now, however, many of these newspapers are going off line, the victims of the coming together of three factors: First, the impact of the economic crisis on the financial well-being of media outlets of all kinds, few of which have yet figured out how to make a profit on their Internet publications without undermining the sale of their print versions.

Second, these problems are hitting media outlets directed at relatively small audiences particularly hard. When they have only a few tens of thousands of potential readers, print outlets cannot rely on sales or advertising but must depend on backers, many of whom first try to cut off all "extra" expenses such as Internet operations before pulling the plug entirely.

And third, as important as these newspaper sites are to those who use them, the number of visitors to these outlets is often quite low, making them less potentially profitable than other websites. Consequently, the golden age of Internet newspapers for minority nationalities in the former Soviet space may be ending before it really began.

Just how serious this trend may be for those who care about these groups is suggested by Mubeyyin B. Altan of the U.S.-based Crimean Tatar Research and Information Center in a remarkable and moving post yesterday on Yahoo's Crimea-L list entitled "First Went 'Yani Dunya' and Then ..." (crimea-l@yahogroups.com)

Altan recalls that in 1971, he and other Crimean Tatar émigrés were able to subscribe to Lenin Bayragi, the only Crimean Tatar newspaper in Soviet times. Although "strictly controlled" by the Uzbek SSR Communist Party, it was the emigration's "lifeline" to the Crimean Tatars in exile in Central Asia.

At the end of Soviet times, "Lenin Bayragi" moved along with so many Crimean Tatars back from Central Asia to Crimea where it continued to come out under the title Yani Dunya. Unfortunately, Crimean Tatars in the US couldn't subscribe to it, but Altan and his friends treasured the copies that they or their relatives and friends were able to acquire and send them.

But several years ago, Yani Dunya launched an online edition, allowing the diaspora in both the West and Central Asia to stay "connected to Crimea." This "magical" medium, he continues, soon was exploited by other Crimean Tatar newspapers, both those in Crimean Tatar like Kirim and those like Golos Krima in Russian.

Other Crimean Tatar outlets followed — Qirim Haber Ajansi (QHA), which features stories in English, Turkish and Russian and also streams television, and Avdet, the newspaper of the Crimean Tatar National Mejlis. The future seemed bright for a people whose existence many around the world had denied.

Unfortunately, Altan continues, "the Internet magic did not last long for the semi-independent Crimean Tatar newspapers, which [have been such a] significant source of news and information on Crimea and on the Crimean Tatars" both for members of that community

and for those who want to know about them.

"One by one," he laments, "the Crimean Tatar newspapers [have dropped] their Internet publications." Yani Dunya put up its last electronic version in April 2009; then the web version of Kirim stopped at the end of June 2009; and in December, the Russian-language Golos Krimea ceased to appear online, "mainly because of financial difficulties."

QHA reports that another Internet newspaper, Kirim Ahvali, has been launched to provide information about the work of the Kurultay Rukh political group, Altan says. That is welcome news if indeed the new outlet fills the information gap left by the online demise of the others.

The death of a newspaper is always a tragedy, but the demise of Internet papers from places like Crimea is an even greater one, not only because of the continuing crisis there but also because it serves as a warning to those who believed that the Internet would change everything by giving those who had been kept silent a way of speaking to the world.

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