

*Media freedom advocates saw some success in preserving the still-fragile gains the country has achieved recently.*



## KYRGYZSTAN

Even though 2013 was not an election year in Kyrgyzstan, it turned out to be packed with political events and parliamentary struggles given the contradictions between the coalition members' individual party interests. February and March saw high-profile trials and convictions. First, the ex-president, Kurmanbek Bakiyev, and his close relatives were found guilty in absentia by a military court in Bishkek. Then three opposition party leaders, Tashiyev, Zhaparov, and Mamytov, members of the Jogorku Kenesh (parliament), were found guilty by the Bishkek District Court of attempting to overthrow the government during an October rally in Bishkek. A number of officials, including members of parliament, were arrested, sentenced to pay fines for corruption, or forced to resign.

Another significant event was the Jogorku Kenesh's February 21 decision to review the agreement with the Centerra Gold Inc. joint-stock company (Kumtor) and tasking the government with obtaining more favorable conditions for the country. This ruling was the beginning of a conflict that raged for a whole year. The debates in the Jogorku Kenesh on the issue of Kumtor were much less heated than the pickets and rallies that developed into riots with roads closed, administrative buildings besieged, and people taken hostage over the issue. The small village of Saruu, on the shores of Lake Issyk-Kul, became the epicenter of anti-Kumtor activity.

In January, a conflict arose between the inhabitants of the Uzbek Sokh enclave and the Kyrgyz village of Charbak. During the conflict power poles were destroyed in the Kyrgyz village and 30 Kyrgyz citizens were taken hostage.

Despite this upheaval, Kyrgyzstan's economy grew in 2013. Some attribute this growth to the fact that for the time being, Kyrgyzstan did not sign the "road map" for entry into the Customs Union that was the subject of the meeting of the Supreme Eurasian Economic Council in Moscow on December 24, 2013. At the same time, without any special discussion in the Jogorku Kenesh, the following decisions were adopted: the approval of the sale of KyrgyzGas to Russia's Gazprom for a symbolic \$1, along with the sale of several other state holdings. These political decisions in the economic sphere demonstrated the increasing trend toward a return to the zone of the Russian Federation's far-reaching influence in Kyrgyzstan's contemporary politics.

Media freedom advocates saw some success in preserving the still-fragile gains the country has achieved recently. Three attempts to amend laws in a way that would have eroded media freedom—one modeled after recent Russian legislation on treason and foreign agents—all failed to be passed. Of particular note, the Jogorku Kenesh rejected the law modeled on Russian legislation, which would have hamstrung media advocates who receive foreign donor funds, after negative public outcry.

# KYRGYZSTAN at a glance

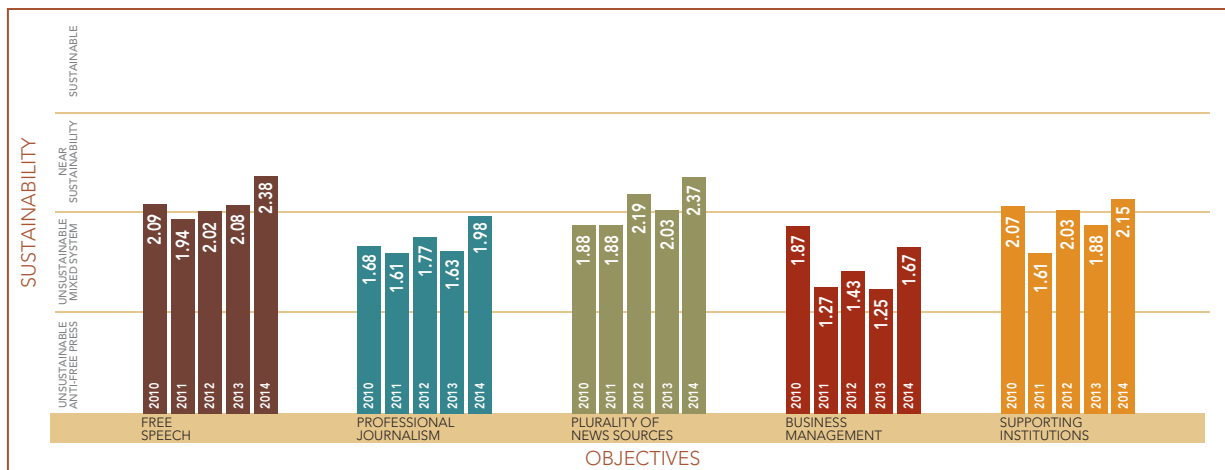
## GENERAL

- > Population: 5,604,212 (July 2014 est. *CIA World Factbook*)
- > Capital city: Bishkek
- > Ethnic groups (% of population): Kyrgyz 64.9%, Uzbek 13.8%, Russian 12.5%, Dungan 1.1%, Ukrainian 1%, Uighur 1%, other 5.7% (1999 census)
- > Religions (% of population): Muslim 75%, Russian Orthodox 20%, other 5% (*CIA World Factbook*)
- > Languages: Kyrgyz (official) 64.7%, Uzbek 13.6%, Russian (official) 12.5%, Dungan 1%, other 8.2% (1999 census)
- > GNI (2012-Atlas): \$5.543 billion (World Bank Development Indicators, 2013)
- > GNI per capita (2012-PPP): \$2,230 (World Bank Development Indicators, 2013)
- > Literacy rate: 99.2%; male 99.5%, female 99% (2009 est., *CIA World Factbook*)
- > President or top authority: President Almazbek Atambaev (Since December 1, 2011)

## MEDIA-SPECIFIC

- > Number of active print outlets, radio stations, television stations: According to the Ministry of Justice database there are more than 1,500 registered media. Media research conducted in 2013 found the following number are active: Print: 159 including 3 main dailies and 4 other major papers; Radio Stations: 26; Television Stations: 25 terrestrial, 3 local cable networks, 3 IPTV
- > Newspaper circulation statistics: Top three by circulation: *Super Info* (private Kyrgyz-language daily with 120,000 circulation), *Vechernij Bishkek* (private Russian-language daily with 150,000 circulation), *Delo No.* (private Russian-language weekly with 16,000 circulation)
- > Broadcast ratings: Top three television: OTRK (state-owned), EITR (state-owned), 7th Channel (private)
- > News agencies: Kabar (state-owned), AKIpress (private), 24.kg (private), www.tushtuk.kg (private), Kyrgyz, K-News (private), www.kyrtag.kg (private)
- > Annual advertising revenue in media sector: Television: \$7.9 million, Internet: \$500,000, Radio: \$1.8 million (Jan.-Sept. 2013 est., Expert Consulting Agency)
- > Internet usage: 2.195 million users (2009 *CIA World Factbook*)

## MEDIA SUSTAINABILITY INDEX: KYRGYZSTAN



## MEDIA SUSTAINABILITY INDEX 2014: OVERALL AVERAGE SCORES



### CHANGE SINCE 2013

▲ (increase greater than .10) □ (little or no change) ▼ (decrease greater than .10)

**Unsustainable, Anti-Free Press (0-1):** Country does not meet or only minimally meets objectives. Government and laws actively hinder free media development, professionalism is low, and media-industry activity is minimal.

**Unsustainable Mixed System (1-2):** Country minimally meets objectives, with segments of the legal system and government opposed to a free media system. Evident progress in free-press advocacy, increased professionalism, and new media businesses may be too recent to judge sustainability.

**Near Sustainability (2-3):** Country has progressed in meeting multiple objectives, with legal norms, professionalism, and the business environment supportive of independent media. Advances have survived changes in government and have been codified in law and practice. However, more time may be needed to ensure that change is enduring and that increased professionalism and the media business environment are sustainable.

**Sustainable (3-4):** Country has media that are considered generally professional, free, and sustainable, or to be approaching these objectives. Systems supporting independent media have survived multiple governments, economic fluctuations, and changes in public opinion or social conventions.

Scores for all years may be found online at [http://www.irex.org/system/files/EE\\_msiscores.xls](http://www.irex.org/system/files/EE_msiscores.xls)

## OBJECTIVE 1: FREEDOM OF SPEECH

Kyrgyzstan Objective Score: 2.38

Kyrgyzstan's National Strategy for the Sustainable Development of the Republic maps out information policy goals for the period 2013–2017, in accordance with international principles of freedom of speech. They include ensuring openness by public authorities and upholding the public's right of access to information, as well as cooperation with the media—and public and independent professional associations—to ensure the freedom of speech. The plan also supports further development of Kyrgyzstan's public broadcasting and the Internet—with the goal of providing full Internet access in all populated areas by 2017.

The past year brought no significant changes to the regulations related to freedom-of-speech guarantees. The country's constitution guarantees the right to freedom of expression and access to information. Defamation has been decriminalized, and no problems with media registration have arisen. Unlike in previous years, no issues surfaced surrounding Internet governance, either. Internet resources and all other media are legally permitted to freely express their opinions and disseminate information, although licenses are required for print media.

Still, there were three unsuccessful attempts to introduce bills that would have severely restricted freedom of speech in Kyrgyzstan: the draft Law on the Protection of Children from Harmful Information; a bill on false

accusations in the media (advanced by Galina Skripkina's ruling group) that would add an article to the Criminal Code, and a bill on treason and foreign agents, borrowed from a Russian law, which drew special concern from media NGOs and independent media that survive mainly on foreign donations. The first bill was tabled, the second was withdrawn, and the Jogorku Kenesh rejected the third following negative publicity—drawing international praise.

Almaz Ismanov, a Radio Azattyk (RFE-RL) journalist, added, "If the bill on foreign agents had been enacted, the existence of media companies such as the BBC and Radio Liberty in Kyrgyzstan would have become extremely problematic, as they have the status of free and independent media in the country's information space—against a background of the dominant role of state television and radio. Regional newspapers and radio and television companies, and international and local representative offices of foreign organizations surviving on donations, could find themselves in the same situation."

Commenting on the initiative to criminalize new offenses under the rubric of "false accusations," Igor Shestakov, editor-in-chief of region.kg, noted, "The main reason for this legislation being put forward is that the Office of the Prosecutor-General recently instituted proceedings in high-profile criminal cases involving members of the Jogorku Kenesh, so they decided to be proactive and try to immunize themselves against criticism from journalists and the public."

However, the initiatives to introduce laws and restrictive regulations increasing the scope of criminal liability could be taken as foreshadowing of the upcoming parliamentary and presidential election campaigns.

There were also some intense efforts to change the regulatory structure of Kyrgyzstan's transition to digital broadcasting, which began in the autumn. Public proposals on developing a state-funded social package were developed, but not disclosed, and a draft law on the organization of broadcast programs (to replace the current law on television and radio) was drafted, along with other materials of a technical nature, by a state-appointed working group.

A package of new regulations, including the Law on the Licensing System in the Kyrgyz Republic, was adopted; this automatically abrogated the Law on Licensing, although licenses issued under the old law remain valid until the expiration date stated in the license. The new licensing law will now include three types of licenses—for telecommunications, data transmission, and broadcasting, including the creation and transmission of programs. Nadezhda Alisheva, a lawyer at the Media Policy Institute, commented, "On the one hand, we are following the same

### LEGAL AND SOCIAL NORMS PROTECT AND PROMOTE FREE SPEECH AND ACCESS TO PUBLIC INFORMATION.

#### FREE-SPEECH INDICATORS:

- > Legal and social protections of free speech exist and are enforced.
- > Licensing of broadcast media is fair, competitive, and apolitical.
- > Market entry and tax structure for media are fair and comparable to other industries.
- > Crimes against journalists or media outlets are prosecuted vigorously, but occurrences of such crimes are rare.
- > State or public media do not receive preferential legal treatment, and law guarantees editorial independence.
- > Libel is a civil law issue; public officials are held to higher standards, and offended parties must prove falsity and malice.
- > Public information is easily accessible; right of access to information is equally enforced for all media and journalists.
- > Media outlets have unrestricted access to information; this is equally enforced for all media and journalists.
- > Entry into the journalism profession is free, and government imposes no licensing, restrictions, or special rights for journalists.

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path as our neighboring countries Kazakhstan and Tajikistan, in an effort to have high-quality content on television... but on the other hand, our television companies are not ready to create their own products, especially higher-quality products. Producing high-quality products is a costly activity, and in view of the lack of qualified professional staff, it is not yet feasible for most private companies.”

Frequency allocation is regulated by an assortment of about nine laws passed as far back as 2009, including a few 2013 revisions and additions. Recognizing the challenges in the licensing process for electronic media in the capital city of Bishkek, the panelists emphasized the technical nature of the constraints rather than the political. In the regions, where electronic media sources are very limited, especially in the northern areas, obtaining a free frequency is fairly simple. As Zharkyn Ibraeva, chief of the naryn.kg public association and Radio Almaz Naryn, said, “In our country, everyone has the right and the opportunity to start up a media company. Right now, I want to open up a radio station in Naryn, and everything at the State Communications Agency (SCA) is transparent and open. At the regional Justice Department, it is like a one-stop shop: you can get all the registration documents within a month.”

Also, the new Law on the Licensing System in the Kyrgyz Republic seems to have eliminated the lack of licensing transparency noted in previous MSI studies. The new law placed limits on terms for licensing suspensions, and licenses may be revoked only through the courts.

Media experts are already discussing the prospects for change in the licensing situation with the frequencies to be allocated in 2015, in connection with the introduction of digital broadcasting. The panelists pointed to remarks by Ernis Mamyrganov, from the president’s Information Policy Department, indicating there is no shortage of frequencies to use to broadcast multiplexes in Kyrgyzstan. Thus, the panelists assumed that there will be at least three operators in the digital broadcasting market: the public operator, Kyrgyztelekom; a single private broadcaster, Digital Technologies Ltd.; and a commercial multiplex operator. Multiplex frequencies are to be allocated on a non-competitive basis for the first two operators, and the frequencies for commercial multiplexes will be allocated on a competitive basis.<sup>1</sup>

A committee for the competitive allocation of the radio spectrum has already been formed, made up entirely of state representatives. Some panelists expressed significant concern over a lack of transparency about whether the draft

ordinance developed to regulate the criteria relating to the radio spectrum allocation has been approved. They fear the future television market could be parceled out between the state media and Kyrgyztelecom, and almost the entire transition process to digital broadcasting in Kyrgyzstan is to be carried out under the control of Kyrgyztelecom, which is also making active use of its monopoly over the Internet to lobby for Internet television.

Despite the complexity of the changes involved in preparing for the transition to digital broadcasting, the panelists did not express any concern about the nature of the regulatory changes. At the same time, external experts, such as Alexander Mikh, the head of a media holding in the Russian Federation, have pointed to the highly risky nature of the developing digital broadcasting legislation in Kyrgyzstan. Mikh pointed to elements of corruption in the process, commenting that four multiplexes in the hands of Kyrgyztelecom, a signal with conditional access, and a single type of receiver to be imposed on the public actually reflects the lobbying carried out by certain groups to destroy their competition.<sup>2</sup>

Legally and practically, the conditions for market entry and the tax structure and procedures for Kyrgyzstan media do not differ greatly from those imposed on other commercial entities. However, the government has introduced certain tax incentives for specific industries and economic entities (for example, the High-Tech Park) that it has not extended to the media. Print media owners have long decried value-added tax (VAT) on imported goods and for the costs involved in newspaper production (for example, newsprint) for amounting to double VAT payment. Although newspapers that bring in under KGS 3 million (\$58,000) are VAT-exempt, publishing houses still must pay VAT when buying computer equipment, newsprint, etc. Nevertheless, the media have not lobbied to abolish this double VAT or to introduce tax exemptions for the media.

Some panelists believe that the existing universal system of taxation makes media business uncompetitive. Alina Saginbaeva, director of the Central Asian News Service AKIPress, said, “The tax burden is a factor hindering the media’s development. The main tax problem for the media is still the tax on labor (to the Social Security Fund, income tax), which does not promote growth in wages, and therefore discourages highly skilled journalists from working in media.”

In 2013, crimes against journalists were rare. There were cases of journalists being beaten up; law enforcement agencies claimed the incidents were not related to their

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<sup>1</sup> “Ernis Mamyrganov on TV Digitization Forecasts in Kyrgyzstan.” Internews-Kazakhstan. Available at: [www.internews.kz/newspage/06-11-2013/3771](http://www.internews.kz/newspage/06-11-2013/3771) (Accessed March 2014)

<sup>2</sup> “Elements of corruption in the state program of transition to digital broadcasting in Kyrgyzstan.” Digit-All-KG website, June 15, 2011. Available at: <http://digital.media.kg/?p=302;%20www.youtube.com/watch?v=ipYXGBNYfy0&feature=youtu.be> (Accessed March 2014)

professional activities. In 2013, the victims of such attacks on journalists included the editor-in-chief of *Alibi* and two NTS Television journalists, among others.

The panelists added that previous high-profile crimes against journalists (Syrgak Abdyldaev, Kayrat Birimkulov, and others) have still not been fully investigated. Another problem is that while law enforcement agencies find the perpetrators of crimes against journalists, they do not necessarily find those who hired them.

And yet, there are positive signals. The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) Representative on Freedom of the Media, Dunja Mijatovic, commented on Kyrgyzstan's progress in this sphere during her June 2013 meeting with Prime Minister Jantoro Satybaldiev. She said, "In Kyrgyzstan, over the past three years the number of attacks on journalists in connection with their professional activities has decreased. Thanks to the country's leadership, favorable conditions for the development of freedom of speech have been created. The OSCE appreciates its cooperation with the republic in relation to freedom of speech."<sup>3</sup>

An interesting precedent of public pressure on violators of journalists' rights was established in January 2013 at Kyrgyz Public Radio and Television (OTRK), when two journalists reporting on a story about unpaid electricity bills were attacked by a resident of one of the luxury homes being investigated.<sup>4</sup> The channel continued coverage of the ensuing investigation for weeks, possibly in a bid to stop the pervasive sense of impunity that typically accompanies attacks on media professionals. Soon, however, the public was disappointed: the criminal investigation into the attack on the journalists was dismissed due to "reconciliation between the parties"—a phrase that left the impression that the journalists were somehow complicit.

According to the panelists, regional media, including the ethnic minority media, incur greater risk of being attacked both by individuals and by mobs during various political events—and law enforcement agencies, even if they witnessed the acts, never took action. Muzaffar Tursunov, editor-in-chief of *Danek*, said that journalists in the country's south have been held back in their work out of fears for their personal safety.

In 2013, there were several cases that very clearly demonstrated the political bias and dependence of not only

<sup>3</sup> Media Law Central Asia. June 26, 2013. Available at: [medialawca.org/posts/26-06-2013/72856.html](http://medialawca.org/posts/26-06-2013/72856.html) (Accessed March 2014)

<sup>4</sup> "Timeline: Attacks on journalists in Kyrgyzstan. *New Reporter*, October 1, 2013. Available at: [newreporter.org/2013/01/10/napadeniya-na-zhurnalystov-kyrgyzstan-2010-2012/](http://newreporter.org/2013/01/10/napadeniya-na-zhurnalystov-kyrgyzstan-2010-2012/) (Accessed March 2014)

the media, but also of social structures designed to provide a system of checks and balances to guarantee the media's compliance with the public interest in their output.

For example, the Supervisory Board, which selects the OTRK director-general, is composed of five members selected by the president—five from the public and five from the Jogorku Kenesh—and the panelists said it is neither balanced nor independent. As in past years, a significant proportion of Supervisory Board members are former OTRK employees or party appointees. Although the decision-making process of the OTRK Supervisory Board is more or less open, a number of viewers and readers questioned its members' impartiality.

The panelists also noted that the government appoints the top management of every state media company, except OTRK. The process of appointing editors is also not transparent. According to Daniyar Sadiev, director-general of the Yntymak Public Regional Radio and Television Company, "The leadership of the major state-owned media is parceled out among the parliamentary political parties." No matter how democratic the structures and processes may appear, media management's high degree of dependence on political parties is undeniable.

Furthermore, the procedure for EITR and OTRK to defend their budgets in the Jogorku Kenesh every year adversely affects their editorial independence. Currently, financial information is non-transparent, but the draft National Budget Act would unveil the amounts of state funding these companies receive. However, data on special funds (i.e., on income from advertising and other sources) are not accessible to ordinary citizens or even to media experts.

Zharkyn Ibraeva added, "The law protects editorial independence, but the reality is different. Every political party wants to see its own candidates win and lobbies for them among the heads of the national media...as seen with the directors of Radio Azattyk, OTRK, and EITR."

In the private media as well, executives may be hired and fired at the will of the media owner, and the editorial office's agenda depends on the owner's political interests. This points to the difficulty of implementing editorial policy based on international standards of freedom of speech and explains the lack of editorial independence in Kyrgyz media.

Criminal penalties for libel and defamation were removed from the Criminal Code several years ago. The constitution of 2010 prohibits criminal punishment for the dissemination of information defaming a person's honor and dignity, and disagreements should be heard in civil courts. According to some panelists, though, reality has not kept pace with the law, and journalists still run the risk of being

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criminally charged with libel—especially in their coverage of corruption cases and violations surrounding the presumption of innocence.

In the run-up to the 2015 parliamentary elections, Skripkina’s ruling party has tried to revive the idea of criminalizing defamation, as noted above. Thanks to a united response from media specialists and advocacy organizations, this latest attempt to take a step backward in media legislation has not succeeded. And despite the panelists’ pessimistic assessment of the courts’ application of the law, there were no serious criminal defamation cases in 2013. As a significant marker of change, the panelists pointed to a conflict between the media and the wife of former speaker Keldibekov. After Keldibekov’s arrest on corruption charges, his wife verbally threatened journalists covering the event. However, the next day she was forced to apologize publicly, through the media outlets that family owned, to all the journalists she had insulted.

Asker Sakybaeva, editor-in-chief of *Jany Agym*, said that in most cases, the courts try to be independent—a result of both judicial reforms and the influence of public opinion, especially in high-profile political trials. Still, even in a period of relative freedom of speech, civil lawsuits in cases of libel and defamation can be an effective tool to rein in or destroy the media. Alisheva noted, “Over 10 months of 2013, the number of lawsuits totaled 20. In all the statements of claim, the plaintiffs were petitioning for matters of public information to be dismissed as inaccurate, as infringing upon their rights or degrading their honor, dignity, and business reputation, and for compensation to be paid by editors and journalists for moral damages.”

There are no legal restrictions regarding access to government information. In practice, however, the private media, and especially the regional media, face a variety of barriers. Official websites of some important government departments are not updated in a timely manner. Private journalists are barred from covering government activities and are not invited, for example, on trips with the prime minister or abroad with the president. In contrast, the central state media receive privileged access to information.

Freelance journalists often have a particularly difficult time obtaining information. Tursunov said, “Government officials tend to approach reporters selectively...Personally, in many cases officials flatly refused to meet me and give me an interview...For example, last year while I was preparing my article about food security for *Bishkek Business Interlocutor*, the person in charge of the regional administration refused to answer my questions, arguing that I represented a ‘private editorial office.’ The lists of ‘sacred cows’ that are not subject to disclosure and dissemination of information

are not limited to political themes. For example, journalists are not likely to gain access to complete information on the situation at the Kumtor gold extraction plant or at other mining companies, and at foreign companies involved in implementing major investment projects in Kyrgyzstan... sometimes the subject may be something traditionally ‘non-strategic,’ such as education or health.” He pointed to a case of the plague in the Issyk-Kul region. The spokesperson for the Ministry of Health, Elena Bayalinova, who has developed a positive reputation for sharing information with the media, was on vacation, and in her absence most journalists were unable to get details. Once Bayalinova returned early from her vacation, she took steps to disseminate information—until her higher-ups prohibited her from informing the public about the plague cases. Bayalinova proceeded anyway, and she was forced under duress to resign, charged with using information to undermine national security.

For the sake of fairness, a number of panelists noted that journalists themselves often lack strong information-gathering skills. They also fail to file suits in court for refusals to provide information; in practice, they do not use the available legal mechanisms to invoke officials’ liability for withholding information.

Access to and use of local and foreign sources is generally unrestricted, per the Television and Radio Act. The media have unlimited rights to reprint and rebroadcast foreign programs with the permission of the manufacturer, and they make use of that right. However, rebroadcasted programs must be adapted to meet the requirements of the Kyrgyz Republic’s legislation relating to the national language requirements and nature of the content.

Some regard the lack of restrictions or controls as a controversial factor: on the one hand, it is positive, because it gives people an opportunity to receive information from various sources, including foreign sources; on the other hand, the availability of rebroadcasts makes their own production of media content economically uncompetitive and does not stimulate the development of the field. In strategic terms, such openness and permissiveness leads to information security risks, according to some of the panelists.

Sakybaeva commented, “We still see the world through television channels from other countries—that is, with someone else’s eyes.” Another cost of the unlimited right to use foreign materials, according to Ismanov, is plagiarism: “In Kyrgyzstan, we can say that theft of intellectual property is highly developed. Many media companies do not even bother to indicate the authorship of images and materials; even media as respectable as *Vechernyy Bishkek* (*Evening*

Bishkek) and Knyus news agency allow themselves to commit such violations. Oftentimes, people ‘borrow’ information, simply by writing ‘from the Internet,’ as if the Internet is a no man’s land or a kind of warehouse where anyone can just take what he or she wants.”

However, financial, political, and ideological considerations may limit the regional media in their rebroadcasting of content from neighboring countries such as Uzbekistan; also, the Russian edition of the Ferghana.ru website has been completely blocked in Kyrgyzstan for years. Changes in the Law on Countering Extremist Activities in Telecommunications and Postal Services, which the president signed into law in May 2013, gave Kyrgyz security forces the right to close websites on charges of distributing extremist materials over the Internet. In 2013, however, the new law did not lead to any recorded cases of websites being closed down or blocked.<sup>5</sup>

It is notable that when the Osh City Court blocked the Uzbek opposition website Harakat.net in July for “incitement to hostility between Kyrgyz and Uzbeks,” the judgment was based on an article of the Criminal Code, on incitement of national, racial, religious, or inter-regional strife.<sup>6</sup>

Any citizen (male or female) can work as a journalist; special vocational training is not required. Licenses are not required, either; however, independent journalists may, in some cases, be restricted in their access to information due to a lack of accreditation from the relevant government agency. Each government agency may establish its own procedure for accreditation.

Neither the state, nor any political group or party, controls enrollment in journalism faculties at educational institutions, whether the instruction is paid for or subsidized.

## OBJECTIVE 2: PROFESSIONAL JOURNALISM

Kyrgyzstan Objective Score: 1.98

Journalists in Kyrgyzstan do not always adhere to professional standards. The main shortcomings include a failure to validate published information, basing reporting on a single, inconsistent source and biased, one-sided coverage of events.

<sup>5</sup> “Kyrgyzstan’s legislative right to close Internet sites.” Journalist Public Association; September 10, 2013. Available at: [journalist.kg/freedom-of-speech/u-siloviyih-struktur-kyrgyzystana-poyavilos-zakonodatelnoe-pravo-zakryivat-internet-sayty/](http://journalist.kg/freedom-of-speech/u-siloviyih-struktur-kyrgyzystana-poyavilos-zakonodatelnoe-pravo-zakryivat-internet-sayty/) (Accessed March 2014)

<sup>6</sup> “In Kyrgyzstan, the Uzbek opposition blocked the site for ‘incitement to hostility between Kyrgyz and Uzbeks.’” Pr.kg, July 18, 2013. Available at: <http://www.pr.kg/news/kg/2013/07/18/23626/> (Accessed March 2014)

According to Shestakov, “At a number of media companies, methods of manipulation are used: spreading defamatory rumors and information, and publication of information containing incriminating information. The mass media impose value judgments upon our society, attach labels, and generate negative public opinion about individual politicians, public figures, and business representatives. Accuracy, authenticity of information, neutrality, and balance in the pages of a number of key newspapers are poorly maintained. Violations of journalistic standards of quality have become the norm, rather than an exception.”

“Journalists’ subjective judgments, their habit of writing about opinions rather than facts, are key reasons for the low level of public trust in journalists. Often, the reason for that is the poor quality of journalists’ educations, their lack of knowledge of ethical standards, and their inability to work under an ethical and legal banner and do so while meeting deadlines,” Tursunov added.

Marat Tokoev, chair of Journalist (a public professional association), noted an interesting correlation between the economic status of media companies and the level of professionalism and integrity. “The question of objective reporting is quite critical at many media outlets, especially those that are considered economically weak. Journalists at those publications are very busy and sometimes neglect to check the facts...At economically successful, major media companies, bias and neglect of professional standards often occur due to their greater dependence on the political affiliations of their owners.”

According to the panelists, the degree of objectivity and of compliance with professional standards also depends on the type of media. Some believe that news agencies are

## JOURNALISM MEETS PROFESSIONAL STANDARDS OF QUALITY.

### PROFESSIONAL JOURNALISM INDICATORS:

- > Reporting is fair, objective, and well sourced.
- > Journalists follow recognized and accepted ethical standards.
- > Journalists and editors do not practice self-censorship.
- > Journalists cover key events and issues.
- > Pay levels for journalists and other media professionals are sufficiently high to discourage corruption.
- > Entertainment programming does not eclipse news and information programming.
- > Technical facilities and equipment for gathering, producing, and distributing news are modern and efficient.
- > Quality niche reporting and programming exists (investigative, economics/business, local, political).



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more balanced and that presenting balanced information in the newspaper format requires more professionalism and respect for standards. However, even among the panelists themselves, this point was tested by a number of examples. Zharkyn Ibraeva pointed out, for instance, that the staff of the Barakelde website do not edit or check the authenticity of the information they receive from the regions.

Ismanov shared his view that in emergencies, companies with more liberal editorial policies run more professionally and efficiently, because they are unconstrained by requirements to obtain official confirmation. For example, in the case of tracking the events surrounding the Kumtor affair, or the political protests in the south of the country in support of the Jogorku Kenesh members in the Ata-Jurt party while the party's leader was a defendant in a court case, Kloop media covered the event in a more meaningful way than all the other more traditional media companies, by always referring to multiple sources of information and eyewitnesses.

In terms of unethical and unprofessional journalism among Kyrgyz-speaking journalists, Ismanov noted that the authorities accused the Kyrgyz-language media of "deliberate publication" of unverified facts and pure speculation. A series of meetings in early 2013 within the government and the presidential administration were devoted to the subject, and Kyrgyz-language media were accused of escalating tensions in society and of violating ethical norms. Analyzing the possible reasons for this divergence of journalistic approaches, Ismanov said, "In my opinion, (Kyrgyz-language) newspapers just take the news dumps in light of their connections in high places and later become hostages to such information. It is no accident that the powers that be recently got the idea of demonizing a certain section of the media with a view to introducing restrictions later. Not in relation to all the media, though, so that they are not accused of going after freedom of speech."

While lamenting the low level of involvement of expert opinions and analysis cited in the media, the panelists noted the challenges involved for the media, given a shortage of experts on a variety of topics and in a variety of areas. Most often, people recognized as experts in certain areas failed to discriminate between facts and their own opinions. They often concealed political affiliations.

Responding to the challenge of the lack of expertise and analytical journalism, a group of journalists, experts, and academics in various disciplines in the Central Eurasian Scholars and Media Initiative started working in a number of Central European and Asian countries, including Kyrgyzstan. The group aims to promote cooperation between journalists and scientists and to assist journalists in mastering scientific

skills and writing analytical content based on academic research and argument.

The panelists feel that the regime's liberalization and the disappearance of total control in the media, to some extent, contributed to ethical lapses. The longstanding trend toward tabloid journalism persists, and breaches of ethical standards in the coverage of conflicts, especially ethnic conflicts, are particularly typical.

As one example of the media's failure to uphold ethical standards, the panelists pointed to the coverage of a father who raped his three-year-old daughter. The Vyechernyy Bishkek Internet portal published a photograph of the victim taken in the hospital, just as all the channels showed the man accused of rape, the presumption of innocence notwithstanding.

According to Zharkyn Ibraeva, something published in the regional state newspaper *Tenir-Too* was just as strikingly unethical: the editors published an article about adoption, describing in detail where and how the children lived before and after they were adopted, their names, etc.

Ethical standards themselves are not universal in the Kyrgyzstan media and do not apply to all the players in the news and information field; the code of ethics, as developed through the efforts of civil society and media activists, is not supported by even a simple majority among the media community. Moreover, among the key leaders of the country's media, the code was mainly supported only by the regional media, which cannot actively influence public opinion due to their limited circulations and broadcasting coverage.

The self-regulatory bodies founded five years ago, mainly the Commission for Complaints against the Media, are in a deep state of ideological and financial crisis. Ismanov said, "The leading media companies have an acutely negative attitude in regard to the activities of media organizations, in particular the Commission. Facebook has a special group that includes only journalists, media owners, and editors—in fact, everybody except employees and members of media organizations; the organizers stress that they will not be included. They actively discuss internal questions and cast the activities of media organizations in a negative light."

According to Sadiev, the established self-regulatory body works, but the proposed penalties, such as public censure of an authority, do not affect the media or journalists. Sadiev added that national, regional, and local media have all been guilty of violating ethical standards, and he underscored the regional media's widespread practice of favorable reporting in exchange for some benefit—a practice both public and private media are guilty of. In recent years, the practice of

giving “gifts” and other forms of bribery to journalists has become commonplace.

In March 2013, Kyrgyzstan developed a standard public review of public media records involving propaganda and incitement to racial, ethnic, and religious hatred, as reported by Internews.<sup>7</sup> One of the standard’s developers, Tatiana Vygovskaya, director of the Egalité public association, reported a marked increase in the number of criminal cases brought under article 299 (incitement of national, racial, religious, or inter-regional strife) of the Criminal Code. In the court cases under this article, the prosecution was often based on victims’ subjective feelings and experiences; courts accepted opinions as evidence and rendered guilty verdicts.

Self-censorship in the modern media in Kyrgyzstan is a paradox. On the one hand, during a period of relative liberalization of freedom of speech, resorting to self-censorship for self-preservation seems irrational. The panelists noted that there are virtually no closed topics for the media—from corruption in the highest echelons to the peculiarities of family relations, from the problems of the borders and border guards to clandestine sweat shops, from stories about projects to finance the High-Tech Park to international relations and publications on religious extremism, etc. On the other hand, self-censorship is comprehensible in the context of politically owned or aligned media.

According to Ismanov, self-censorship became more widespread after the events of June 2010, particularly with regard to material related to inter-ethnic relations and the problems of sexual minorities, regional issues, and the endless protests in the regions.

Sadiev noted that local and state media prefer to avoid covering certain issues, such as the quality of the housing built by the State Housing Management Board, the reconstruction of Osh and Zhalabad, or the practices employed in allocating such housing.

While the time of universal taboo subjects seems to be over, now every media company, depending on its editorial policy, has its own list of forbidden topics. Ismanov said, “In some cases, the editor or the media owners cannot directly promote or prohibit coverage of certain topics. For example, the topic may appear to be a matter of national and international security, of bilateral relations with key partners of Kyrgyzstan, of national issues about the possible involvement of Kyrgyz citizens on the side of the Syrian

rebels and fighters, or of the activities of international Islamic organizations, such as the Tablighi Jamaat.”

Furthermore, in Kyrgyzstan’s media stream, absolute dominance is given to political events and information, as well as coverage of state representatives. Economic, cultural, and social issues pass virtually unnoticed.

No reliable information is accessible in the public domain about the incomes of journalists and editors in media of different types and levels. This is due partly to the arbitrariness of the established wage scales, but the factor of gray, or double, bookkeeping at virtually all media institutions is also important. Due to the extremely high tax rates, employees often decide that declaring high salaries is disadvantageous, as they must pay 10 percent contributions to the Social Security Fund; journalists, in turn, will have a further 27.25 percent deducted. Accordingly, the panelists said it is very common for journalists to receive an “on the books” salary that is quite different from what they actually receive.

The panelists were unanimous, though, that journalism salaries, with a few exceptions, are low. Saginbaeva said that at most media outlets, the monthly salary range is KGS 7,000 to KGS 10,000 (\$135–\$195) per month, although some successful media professionals might bring in average salaries of \$700–\$800.

Sakybaeva clarified that average wages are far lower in the regions than in the capital, and Ismanov said that the differences between journalists’ incomes at the various media outlets are larger with the newspapers; in television, salaries are almost the same. In the state media, journalists are more protected socially than they are at the private media companies, which comply with the standards of the Labor Code only very conditionally and arbitrarily.

According to the various estimates, the average official salaries are around the \$400–\$500 mark. No matter what the size of the official salary, it does not reflect the real picture of journalists’ incomes. An organizational audit held at OTRK showed that salary and allowances accounted for just over 56.6 percent of journalists’ monthly incomes, while 15.6 percent was in the form of fees and 27.9 percent was in the form of bonuses issued regularly and to almost all employees.<sup>8</sup>

Official salaries at OTRK, which were established by the government, have not been revised for a long time. Today, the average salary of an OTRK employee is KGS 7,908 (\$153) for creative and production personnel; KGS 3,458 (\$66.90)

<sup>7</sup> “Standard public review of public media presented in Kyrgyzstan.” Internews-Kazakhstan; February 4, 2013. Available at: <http://www.internews.kz/newspage/02-04-2013/1455?page=1> (Accessed March 2014)

<sup>8</sup> From the final report, *Analysis of OTRK Strategic Functioning*. Kappa group, 2013.

for production technical personnel; KGS 6,960 (\$134.64) for administrative personnel; and KGS 2,720 (\$52.62) for junior service personnel. Based on the matrix of OTRK employees' salaries that took place during the organizational review, researchers found that OTRK salaries fall beneath average monthly wages in Bishkek, which in 2012 was KGS 10,566 (\$204), and are uncompetitive in the labor market.

Young journalists are unmotivated at the current pay levels, so the panelists find it unsurprising that there is a high level of turnover in the media sphere. Frequently, people engage in journalism for a short period of time to acquire a name for themselves.

Freelance journalists' incomes cannot be calculated, and there is no reliable information in this area. During the past year, there was a recorded case of litigation between journalist Elena Meshkova and editors of *Finansist*, which had not paid her the promised salary and had dismissed her. The journalist sued and won the case. This is the only time in the past three years that a freelance journalist has won such a case in court, according to the panelists.

The ratio of entertainment to news content varies between regional and national, and amateur and professional media. At most regional nongovernment broadcasting studios, where there are practically no creative workers and a minimum of technical staff, the only strategy that works is to rebroadcast free foreign content with a minor inclusion of material produced by the station itself. For the most part, their own productions typically resemble amateur video of traditional music competitions, pop concerts, or theater. In the national media, the reverse is true: content is highly politicized, and news material dominates. Saginbaeva explained, "In Kyrgyzstan, politics is the largest business and the greatest entertainment."

Over the past year, a number of media companies succeeded in improving their technical platforms, led by OTRK and EITR, which invested national budget resources into retooling themselves. Even though the government did not actually allocate the planned amount of funding for technical re-equipment, it seems that the first national channel succeeded in significantly improving its capabilities for producing modern high-quality content, apparently thanks in part to a technical grant from the Japanese government.

For many compact, small editorial offices, modernization does not pose such a challenge. This is especially so for websites and e-publications. However, if the modernization and technical situation in the media area in general is considered, the situation is worse than deplorable. Publishing houses sometimes struggle to obtain updated equipment and also to secure a reasonably priced Internet

connection. Managers and owners demand maximum work with minimum technical investment.

In fact, journalists often supply their own equipment; all young journalists have a smartphone or an iPhone, allowing them to take photos and record short videos with good technical resolution, and most have laptops or iPads. Editorial offices, as a rule, do not provide any equipment for journalists to carry out their activities. The limited financial and technical capacities explain why there are so few technologically converged editorial offices in the country.

There is still no specialized journalism in Kyrgyzstan. Parliamentary journalism has not taken off yet, economic journalism has no roots in the form of transparent national, business, and development projects, and there is no investigative journalism. Sometimes in the media, most of all on the Kloop platform, freelancers carry out small investigations. Among professional journalists, there is no local, international, entertainment, or economic journalism.

Some semblance of thematic specialization is still to be found in the old traditional media (including *Vechernyy Bishkek*, *Kyrgyzy Tuusy*, and *Slovo Kyrgyzstana*), but due to limited human resources, journalists are forced to be generalists.

In the past year, local bloggers (mostly young nonprofessionals) have become more important to the work of professional journalists and the traditional media because they manage to get photos and video from the scene, interview eyewitnesses, etc. The traditional media are slowly beginning to change their attitude of snobbery in relation to Kyrgyz correspondents and are increasingly likely to use their media products. For example, thanks to such local bloggers, the mainstream media succeeded in obtaining photos of the protest by Keldibekov supporters.

In the development of specialized journalism, AKIpress has made a great contribution. For a number of years now, it has been promoting a whole family of specialized sites—business, analytical, sports and show-business journalism, and so on. Saginbaeva, speaking as the director of AKIpress, informed the panel that her news agency faced great difficulties due to a lack of personnel capable of working in specialized niches in a competent and "fun" way.

### OBJECTIVE 3: PLURALITY OF NEWS

Kyrgyzstan Objective Score: 2.37

At the beginning of 2013, there were 1,331 mass media companies registered in Kyrgyzstan, at least two of which have the formal status of public television companies (OTRK

and Yntymak). In the Kyrgyz.kg Internet zone, there are over 1,000 operational websites. Among them is Kloop.kg, which became the first Internet project set up as a blog platform for users. Consumers now have a choice among the existing range of media outlets.

Shestakov was optimistic in his assessment of pluralism in the media: "In Kyrgyzstan, unlike other Central Asian countries, there is broad access to information from local and international sources. There are no restrictions here other than in relation to the elections. Kyrgyzstan has a wide new market; new media resources are appearing in the country every year ... and new Internet resources crop up almost every month. Accordingly, the country has a broadly representative spectrum of opposition media that can exist there freely."

In practice, though, the choice is significantly reduced: in a parliamentary system with a tendency toward party control over the media, nearly three-quarters of Kyrgyzstan's media belong to political parties that use the media as tools of political combat and public influence. Politicians, public figures, and organizations affiliated with the parliamentary parties in one way or another own about a third of media outlets. Thus, despite the variety, the news stream reflects only the limited positions and interests of certain groups and individuals.

Information choices also depend on where news consumers live. While urban residents have a wide range of electronic and print media accessible to them, as well as broadband Internet, for villagers, especially in remote areas, "There

can be only one source—an 'old' newspaper, or OTRK, which covers almost the entire territory of the Republic," Shestakov said.

In Bishkek in 2013, a wide variety of cable television stations broadcasting in digital format offered packages of over 100 domestic and international channels. Cable television connections are inexpensive, and the cost of Internet access has also dropped significantly.

Most consumers have access to Russian-language channels from Russia via cable. Almost all tuners are set to pick up Yamal, where the Russian television channels are mainly located. The popularity of the Russian language in Kyrgyzstan and an increase in the influx of Russian-speaking migrant workers conditioned this choice. Consequently, the events in Georgia and the Ukraine, and generally all world events, are seen by Kyrgyz media consumers through the prism of the Russian media, mainly the trio of Channel One, RTR, and NTV.

Emphasizing the limited choices available to regional audiences, Zharkyn Ibraeva said: "In Naryn, there are villages that can pick up nothing but two Russian channels. Buying a satellite dish is cheaper than an Internet connection. In addition, the Internet speed is very slow." Furthermore, power outages are frequent. In rural areas, power outages are often planned in order to save electricity, sometimes leaving people with only a few hours of electricity a day.

The panelists agreed that the largest flow of information is posted on social networks, and access to high-speed and low-cost Internet remains Kyrgyzstan's principal problem, especially in remote regions. That said, the next challenge is the questionable accuracy of news and information on the Internet. Ismanov linked the advantages of social networks with the public's right to choose, to assess situations themselves and come to their own decisions: "Often, what is published on social networks becomes a source of important news and information, as was the case with the attack on the prominent lawyer Ikramidin Aytkulov. His brother posted information and photos about this attack on Facebook. Later, he also posted important information about his brother's health."

Citizens' access to domestic and foreign media through traditional channels is not restricted either by law (except for certain periods, such as restrictions on rebroadcasting foreign media during elections) or cost. State registration is not required for the Internet or satellite television. The panelists did express concern, however, over whether these guarantees would hold in the future. The introduction of conditional access signals with the transition to digital broadcasting in 2015 gives an effective monopoly to Kyrgyztelekom, for example.

#### MULTIPLE NEWS SOURCES PROVIDE CITIZENS WITH RELIABLE, OBJECTIVE NEWS.

##### PLURALITY OF NEWS SOURCES INDICATORS:

- > Plurality of public and private news sources (e.g., print, broadcast, Internet, mobile) exist and offer multiple viewpoints.
- > Citizens' access to domestic or international media is not restricted by law, economics, or other means.
- > State or public media reflect the views of the political spectrum, are nonpartisan, and serve the public interest.
- > Independent news agencies gather and distribute news for media outlets.
- > Private media produce their own news.
- > Transparency of media ownership allows consumers to judge the objectivity of news; media ownership is not concentrated in a few conglomerates.
- > A broad spectrum of social interests are reflected and represented in the media, including minority-language information sources
- > The media provide news coverage and information about local, national, and international issues.

Answering the question of how well state or public media reflect the views of the political spectrum, are nonpartisan, and serve the public interest, Alisheva commented on the national television Channel 1: "The content of the state media depends on political and party views, depending on who is in charge of the media outlet. OTRK is trying to diversify its programs and create its own products, but it is financed from the state budget, and the Supervisory Board, which is appointed by the president, elects its director-general. As a result, on this channel we are not going to hear, for example, any criticism of the president's activities, or other leaders in the ruling party, even though the corporation has the word 'public' in its name. However, a substantial number, proportionally, of OTRK's own programs and broadcasts have become more diverse."

The opening of a children's and cultural channel on OTRK was an important step in developing educational programming. However, so far all the new projects with the highest ratings are entertainment and in formats borrowed from foreign channels ("Two Stars," "Battle of the Sorcerers"), with a substantial share of dubbed programs and films that were made to order for international distribution.

Sadiev expressed the belief that pluralism can and should be presented in the public media: "By law, OTRK has all necessary conditions and fulfills all the requirements to ensure pluralism of opinion in their programs, but unfortunately does not take full advantage of them. As for our own public broadcaster, Yntymak, we try to provide a platform for all members of the public to express themselves. The main thing is that it must be in the public interest. Ethnic minorities have their airtime both on television and on radio, and also on our television and radio channels' website, [www.yntymak.kg](http://www.yntymak.kg). The Supervisory Board strictly enforces compliance with all the rules concerning OTRK–Yntymak. In our broadcasting schedule, there are more social programs, including programs covering local events."

News agencies in Kyrgyzstan release their news and disseminate it free of charge to both the general public and the media. At the moment, not all the news agencies offer video, photographic materials, and infographics. In 2013, the national news agency Kabar launched its first video news program, Tyyanak. The launch of a new, Russian-language news analysis videoportal, [www.vzglyad.kg](http://www.vzglyad.kg), in 2013 is another promising project for the parent news agency.

The young Knyus agency also offers textual information, photos and video materials, and infographics support. The news service [www.kloop.kg](http://www.kloop.kg) is developing as well, and it has an unlimited "staff" of reporters—fans with a variety of interests—presenting video and photo reports in a format unusual for traditional news agencies. The new [tushtuk.kg](http://tushtuk.kg)

news agency became operational in 2013 and announced itself as an agency with a specific focus on the southern regions. However, its task is feasible only up to a point, since the main newsmakers are the government and the president, who are in the capital.

Even though most major media outlets have their own news departments and produce their own news, news agencies provide a significant share of content. However, media do not always credit the source, often presenting news agency material as their own.

Private television and radio stations also produce their own news. The main sources for both public and private news are the news agencies, press conferences, and press releases from various organizations carrying out various activities. Information obtained by journalists themselves directly is rare. Furthermore, Alisheva added, "Most private news media companies rely on rumors. Their output is one-sided and based on journalists' subjective opinions. This is more so the case in Kyrgyz-language publications and also some online publications."

Normal consumers find it rather difficult to obtain information about the ownership of any particular media company, with a couple of exceptions, such as NTS, where the owners are public figures. As for other media companies, even media experts find it difficult to answer any question about their ownership. Information about the editors and managers of Internet websites is often concealed; rather than providing information about the company, a "feedback" option is offered, such as a template for a letter to the editor. However, it is often possible to speculate on who owns a certain media company, given which figures and companies are portrayed in positive and negative lights.

In the Kyrgyz-language media, there are rumors about the existence of certain monopolies and conglomerates, but none of the panelists had any data to confirm or deny the allegations. The percentage of foreign capital involved in media ownership is also clouded.

Media output in minority languages is limited and primarily driven by economics; minority languages are not restricted by law (except for the requirement that half of television airtime be in the national language). At the same time, the panelists mentioned the politicization of the Uzbek language in the media space as a problem. Over the past year, the opportunities for Kyrgyz citizens to obtain news and information in the Uzbek language have improved markedly, with an Uzbek-language version of the Kyrgyz-language *Aalam* broadcast on OTRK's Yntymak channel, along with news releases and programs in Uzbek.

Nevertheless, Uzbek-language programs broadcast on television and radio draw hostile responses from certain

political interest groups, given the history of ethnic-fueled conflicts in the south, and they can bring trouble for the editors and owners of the media that carry them. Accordingly, Ferghana.ru correspondent Yekaterina Ivashchenko, in an article specifically about the Uzbek-language media in Kyrgyzstan today, pointed to the pressure placed on the management of the private Channel 7 when in the channel announced, in winter 2013, its plans to launch news content in Uzbek, supported by USAID. In February, about 50 people gathered to protest the introduction of broadcasting in Uzbek, calling themselves patriots of their country. One of the protesters claimed that in the Jalalabad region, 8,000 signatures had been collected against broadcasting of Uzbek-language programs. Whether a result of pressure or for some other reason, the project ended, and Channel 7 did not become an Uzbek-language news source.

Currently, the Uzbek-language media in Kyrgyzstan are represented by the following public and private media companies: *Aalam*, *Osh Sadosi*, *Dustlik* in Aravan district, and the Jalalabad *Jalol-obod Tongi*. On the air there is OTRK's Yntymak television and radio. In autumn 2013, a new radio station, Dostuk, came on the air as part of OTRK's development strategy to "promote the development and strengthening of friendly relations between ethnic groups living in Kyrgyzstan."

There are a number of publications in the languages of other ethnic minorities, mainly produced by diaspora associations. Ismanov concluded, "Ethnic media are not prohibited by law, and they can be freely published and disseminated," but "...the ethnic theme is considered uninteresting to consumers and advertisers. The geographical distribution is limited in scope to their national and cultural centers. Another problem is the lack of the native language among ethnic minority youth, who prefer to speak Russian; thus the newspapers are not popular among young people."

There are no legal restrictions on the coverage of local, national, or international news, but local news is not well developed in the Kyrgyz media, even for the coverage of major events. Zharkyn Ibraeva gave the following example: "At a rally in Naryn this year, with the slogan 'Ketsin!' ('Go away!'), the 'April revolutionaries' attacked the state administration, speaking against the appointment of the police chief; not one local media company showed this event as basic news. They casually showed it just once."

International news is not highly developed, either. On the major channels and in economically sound print publications, there is some presence of international news (OTRK, Pyramid, and Channel 5 radio/television, and *Delo N°*. and *Vechernyy Bishkek* newspapers), with material "borrowed"

from international news agencies. Due to limited resources, none of the television or radio companies subscribe to foreign news agencies.

In the low-circulation newspapers, news from abroad is rare. Tursunov added, "Local news is provided selectively, without 'sharp edges.' The technical quality of local television broadcasting companies is poor. International news, as a rule, copies material from the Russian media and news agencies in Bishkek and broadcasts it after a long lag time."

## OBJECTIVE 4: BUSINESS MANAGEMENT

Kyrgyzstan Objective Score: 1.67

Journalism in Kyrgyzstan, having been a political tool in the hands of the authorities for decades, has still not succeeded in becoming an effective business. Ismanov said that media companies in Kyrgyzstan are still inefficient and unprofitable; they are cutting their staff, and management is poor.

Some media experts suggest that to break even, print media would need circulations of at least 10,000, with the entire print run sold. However, few print media in Kyrgyzstan match this standard. Out of the 112 print media using the services of the independent Media Publishing Support Center in Bishkek, only 14 have as many as 6,000 copies printed, and these include not only news media but also Scanword puzzle magazines and advertising circulars. According to AKIpress Agency, the total annual circulation of Kyrgyz-language social and political newspapers is no more than 300,000 copies, unless *Superinfo*, the record-holder in this segment, is included. *Superinfo's* circulation fluctuates between 90,000 and 100,000 copies.

### INDEPENDENT MEDIA ARE WELL-MANAGED BUSINESSES, ALLOWING EDITORIAL INDEPENDENCE.

#### BUSINESS MANAGEMENT INDICATORS:

- > Media outlets and supporting firms operate as efficient, professional, and profit-generating businesses.
- > Media receive revenue from a multitude of sources.
- > Advertising agencies and related industries support an advertising market.
- > Advertising revenue as a percentage of total revenue is in line with accepted standards at commercial outlets.
- > Independent media do not receive government subsidies.
- > Market research is used to formulate strategic plans, enhance advertising revenue, and tailor products to the needs and interests of audiences.
- > Broadcast ratings and circulation figures are reliably and independently produced.

There are not too many income sources for media: it is very rare now for media outlets, even regional ones, to receive grants from international organizations. The advertising market for regional media is very small, and inefficient delivery has rendered subscriptions nearly irrelevant. Accordingly, publications with small circulations can barely make ends meet and try to get under a sponsor's wing in order to give at least an impression of stability.

Prospects are brighter for larger print publications, especially those with their own printing shops, where they provide outside printing services to earn additional revenue. The higher the circulation and the better the image of these publications, the greater their chances of winning long-term and profitable advertising contracts—especially with cellular telephone operators. State-run media gain support in the form of confidential mandatory subscriptions, free office space, and even donated buildings, which they can even rent out as media owners. They also gain support from government advertising (e.g., public contract tenders), which must be published in state media.

Antonina Blindina, editor-in-chief of *Chuiskie Izvestiya*, said, "Most print media have three sources of income: subscriptions, retail sales, and advertising. Because of the weak economy, the advertising market is underdeveloped. Media companies set their own rates for advertising services, and the Advertising Act limits time and space for advertising. Because of the lack of advertising, these limits are not breached. Advertising agencies work only for themselves, pursuing their own promotions." Hidden advertising is a frequent phenomenon in the media.

Shetakov commented, "The media business in Kyrgyzstan is still weak, due to the weak economy and the lack of our own industrial base. The major advertisers are in the area of mobile telephone services and operators. However, their spending is concentrated on the Bishkek media, and the regional media are just trying to survive. Their situation is complicated by a significant reduction in the volume of grants from international organizations over the past eight years. Besides, there are practically no effective media managers in the region to attract advertising. The main source of income for regional media is pre-election advertising campaigns."

Sadiev, on the other hand, sees patronage from sponsors as a big opportunity for improvement: "Over the past three years, parties interested in their own progress supplied the main source of income for all the media companies. Today, parties are also the major media owners, but in this case, the media outlets become political propaganda vehicles rather than independent, socially relevant media."

Some very dynamic changes are taking place in Kyrgyzstan's advertising market, including standardization of promotional prices and criteria; diversification among the players in the market, especially in the online advertising segment; and consolidation of the advertising efforts of players interacting with the media to increase efficiency and enhance advertising planning.

A Joint Media Committee (JMC) was registered in 2013, initiated in the wake of the first and second large-scale media rating exercises in Kyrgyzstan, which were carried out with the support of USAID, experts from international organizations, OTRK staff, and several advertising agencies. Since then, JMC launched a new, fourth wave of rating exercises and public debates in the media environment in order to establish new rules in the media advertising market. Some television channels, such as Channel 5 Broadcasting Company and Pyramid, expressed dissatisfaction with the results of the fourth media research exercise, as they appeared to lose ground in the year's rankings.

Regardless, thanks to the research and efforts of JMC and its foreign advisers, a figure has been derived describing the size of the advertising market in the Kyrgyz Republic. It turns out that two years ago its size, calculated on prices, was about \$7 million, but the actual amounts did not exceed \$5 million. With the help of consultants, the regulatory figure for the advertising market was set at \$25 million.

The results of the exercises supported by the international organizations were stunning: by 2013, according to the actual advertisers, the advertising market amounted to about \$20 million, and an increase of 80 percent, almost double, was seen in online advertising. The leaders in terms of television advertising budgets were OTRK, NBT, and NTS, and the top three advertisers were mobile telephony operators, medical and pharmaceuticals, and mass entertainment.

The panelists believe that OTRK and *Vechernyy Bishkek* pull in the largest advertising revenues, especially as they have their own in-house advertising agencies. Some media outlets derive more than half of their total income from advertising (including media with a non-promotional mission and mandate, such as *Vechernyy Bishkek*), but others do not reach even 10 percent. Zharkyn Ibraeva noted pessimistically that there is virtually no advertising market in the Naryn region.

Advertising continues to play a major role only in television; it does not predominate at newspapers, except for *Vechernyy Bishkek*. In the analog broadcasting sphere, every television station has its geographical coverage area, and technical barriers restrain advertising ambitions. In light of the upcoming transition to digital broadcasting, however, each channel will obtain a number of opportunities, but small channels may not be able to compete and attract advertisers.

Ultimately, the reduction in the number of media companies that survive, and the strengthening commercial capitalist trend in the media advertising industry, may cause public access to pluralistic information to deteriorate. Therefore, the public generally perceived the introduction of these special conditions for public-service advertising as a positive change. Under newly adopted amendments to the Advertising Act, the media will now carry out some public-service advertising free of charge.

Several government media companies still receive money from national and/or local budgets. Among such media companies, the most substantial shares of the media budget are split between OTRK and EITR. Kyrgyz Television and Radio receives nearly KGS 400 million (\$8,165,000)<sup>9</sup> per year. Another KGS half billion (\$10.2 million) in spending is planned for 2014 on technical re-equipment for the transition to digital broadcasting—on top of about KGS 100 million (\$2 million) already invested out of the state's 2013 budget for the transition.

Even though the state does not allocate direct subsidies, it uses other support tools, such as government advertising. There is an established legal order that prescribes that advertisements must be posted in the national *Slovo Kyrgystana (Word of Kyrgyzstan)* and *Kyrgyz Tuusu*, and in regional newspapers, according to the regulations of the respective local government bodies. Proximity to power, especially at the national level, is what helps to obtain grant assistance from international organizations. That was how OTRK received significant technical advice and assistance from a number of donors, such as the Soros Foundation–Kyrgyzstan and the Japanese International Cooperation Agency, before EITR became the focus of donor attention.

It is evident, the panelists concurred, that the different instruments of state support used to benefit a restricted group of media companies increase inequality among media companies and undermine conditions for fair and honest competition.

The year 2013 proved a turning point in strengthening the role of market research in the Kyrgyz Republic. Work based around the fourth study commissioned by USAID and JMC continues, mostly among media executives. Market research could lead to systemic changes in planning and in regulating advertising streams. With support from donors for the third year, the work on compiling the broadcasting schedule continued, preparations were made in the form of organizational and financial audits, and training of management and other employees was

<sup>9</sup> Abdyraeva, Ayganysh. "OTRK criticized in parliament." K-News; June 12, 2013. Available at: [www.knews.kg/society/33227\\_v\\_parlamente\\_kritikuyut\\_otrk/](http://www.knews.kg/society/33227_v_parlamente_kritikuyut_otrk/) (Accessed March 2014)

conducted to introduce them to various aspects of the broadcasting program.

Therefore, the panelists are confident that as of now, the foundation has been laid for systematic market research into media consumption, with all surveys using the same methodology, and that broadcasting schedules will be based on the results of that research. However, those advances are happening on only one channel. All the other channels—and print media, in particular—are unable to commission market research and are still not very adept at using ratings.

The panelists did share some doubts in the areas of methodology and data collection. Ismanov said, "Market research in our country is not conducted professionally; alternatively, the real situation is not taken into account. It often happens that whereas one media company may be leading in the polls, in practice you know that a competitor has greater readership among the public. Or on television, they do not take into account the monopoly position of OTRK, which is always the leader by any indicator. It is because of errors like that that it is difficult to have confidence in such market research. It is also expensive, and hardly any of the local media on their own can both request it and then make use of it. There is an increasingly common bias on the part of media outlets themselves toward telephone straw polls."

However, the situation with ratings for the electronic media, unlike the situation with printed press circulation figures, is beginning to improve. In any case, the ability already exists to determine the weightings both of media companies in a competitive environment and the ratings of individual programs and product designs. Thus, according to the Kyrgyz-language establishment, the most popular and influential outlets include Barakelde.kg and ktrk.kg, the ORTK web portal, and the Western-funded Azattyk.org news and the Kyrgyz BBC.

For online media, in most cases, only authoritative counters like Google Analytics are trusted, although the various online media use a number of different devices.

As for the print publications, there have been no changes: the circulation figures are known only for those media companies printed by the Media Support Center in Bishkek. No other print publication is obliged to show its actual circulation figures in its published imprint.

Tursunov said that media executives' passivity and lack of interest in clarifying the situation with circulation figures is not accidental: "Local media companies do not conduct market research, they do not carry out strategic planning, and they are disinterested in studying circulation figures; it does not make sense to them, given the lack of major advertisers."



## OBJECTIVE 5: SUPPORTING INSTITUTIONS

### Kyrgyzstan Objective Score: 2.15

The year 2013 was fruitful in terms of the creation of new trade associations, such as JMC, and the resuscitation of some that had become inactive in the past several years. However, the developments are not well known, even in the media community; the re-registration and fresh startup of two electronic media associations was a surprise for some very well-informed panelists who were members of two different network groups. On the print side, the Publishers' Association and the Association of Print Media Distributors have not yet been resuscitated.

Given the lack of awareness about developments in this sphere, the panelists suggested that the profiles of the trade associations need to be raised. Ismanov commented that they were nearly silent during the heated discussions about the government's plan to introduce digital broadcasting, in the discussions on the draft legislation on foreign agents that would also affect media that survive on grant funding, and in the debate on the draft espionage act.

In terms of professional associations, the panelists said again this year that the Union of Journalists exists only on paper. In this year's evaluation, however, opinions were divided. According to several panelists, media organizations and professional associations of journalists have ceased to play an active role over the past few years; according to other panelists, they never did. One panelist pointed out a missed opportunity: when Eric Israilov, a parliamentary correspondent for *Obshchestvennyy Reyting*, was subjected to physical and psychological abuse by a member of the Jogorku Kenesh and former ombudsman Tursunbay Bakir

uluu, none of the organizations stood up on the journalist's behalf. They also failed to address the threat to the media community from the bill on treason advanced by Jogorku Kenesh members.

Some panelists highlighted ongoing attempts to reconstitute the Union of Journalists for a number of years, but a lack of guild solidarity and shared understanding of what the mandate of such a union should be has hampered these efforts. However, a new trade union was established under the leadership of journalist Mary Bekeshova. While still brand-new, Tokoev said that 20 journalists have already received assistance from it and had succeeded in protecting their labor rights, together with the media workers' trade union. The new union made significant contributions to the development of community media companies by training rural activists.

There are not very many media NGOs, but the most active in the field of media education, protection of freedom of speech, and providing legal assistance during 2013 were Internews, the Institute for Media Policy, Journalist, and media resource centers. The panelists noted that in recent years, due to the reduction in grant aid and the departure of donors from the region, most media NGOs have been experiencing problems with finding resources for their programs and projects. Media organizations collaborated quite well with other sectors of civil society, especially human-rights NGOs.

Information about media NGO events and activities on the Internet reveals that almost all of their activities take place in the regions. In the capital, there is a crisis of confidence in media organizations. In that regard, Ismanov observed that journalists, who critically view media NGOs' activities, also do not hesitate to ask them for help as soon as the need arises.

Recognizing the shortcomings of inflexible university education, media companies, individuals, and NGOs are starting to open up short courses, seminars, and camps. The OTRK Training Center is preparing to begin operations and hopes to enhance the skills not only of its own staff, but also of personnel from other media companies. However, assessing the effectiveness of media NGO educational programs and projects, the panelists expressed dissatisfaction at journalists' attitude toward free training.

In fairness, it is important to say that academic programs in journalism are trying to match their own standards and requirements more closely to the real needs of the journalism profession with help from a UNESCO curriculum development program. Some journalism colleges have produced better-prepared graduates over the past few years. For example, the Manas University television and radio crew represent a particular brand, as they focus on

### SUPPORTING INSTITUTIONS FUNCTION IN THE PROFESSIONAL INTERESTS OF INDEPENDENT MEDIA.

#### SUPPORTING INSTITUTIONS INDICATORS:

- > Trade associations represent the interests of private media owners and provide member services.
- > Professional associations work to protect journalists' rights.
- > NGOs support free speech and independent media.
- > Quality journalism degree programs that provide substantial practical experience exist.
- > Short-term training and in-service training programs allow journalists to upgrade skills or acquire new skills.
- > Sources of newsprint and printing facilities are in private hands, apolitical, and unrestricted.
- > Channels of media distribution (kiosks, transmitters, Internet) are private, apolitical, and unrestricted.

practical skills—working with a camera, editing programs, scriptwriting, etc.—all within the walls of their alma mater. Graduates of this faculty more often find work in their chosen field.

Tokoev was convinced that “the principal way to improve journalists’ skills is through short courses, workshops, and seminars. However, it is worth reviewing how such courses are run. Paid courses should be given more frequently. Then journalists will themselves be responsible for gaining knowledge.”

Saginbaeva also praised the past year’s on-the-job training courses for journalists, which were supported by the Soros Foundation–Kyrgyzstan through the OSCE Mission in Bishkek.

According to Zharkyn Ibraeva, limiting the number and range of training opportunities for journalists would be devastating, because in journalism—especially local journalism—there is a high level of staff turnover, with young journalists leaving within one to three years. “The older workers remain in the regions, especially women who have worked in one editorial office as correspondents for 30 years, and have no motivation left at all,” Ibraeva said.

In Bishkek, access to equipment for the media and to high-quality printing services is neither politicized nor monopolized. Newsprint and other consumables, and printing offices, are not sources of pressure on the media. However, the situation in the regions has remained virtually unchanged for decades. Due to the lack of modern printing facilities, many regional media publishers move their newspapers into the capital for printing, adding transportation costs to their distribution and compelling publishers to increase the cover prices to make up for their higher production costs. Even in Osh, there is no public alternative independent publishing house. As a result, the authorities can always exert pressure on private newspaper producers.

In the run-up to the transition to digital broadcasting, many channels may be experiencing problems re-equipping themselves. So far, there is still no complete clarity as to the technical characteristics of the signal distribution networks. The limitations of the transition period and the lack of substantial funds for equipment experienced by private television and radio companies, without access to cheap loans or state subsidies, may significantly alter the current situation in which there is no monopoly.

The distribution channels for all types of media are monopolized and largely controlled by the state. The risk of monopolization in the field of electronic media is increased many times over by the changes in the legislation and the

virtual monopoly over the management of the multiplexes. The local television and radio companies do not have access to cable networks.

The Internet is available, but frequent long-term distributed denial of service attacks on the servers of a number of government agencies and private institutions, such as AKIpress, prove that Internet traffic depends on the will of the Russian and Kazakh authorities.

In the southern part of the country, apart from mobile telephony, the ICT infrastructure is extremely underdeveloped. Frequent power outages limit not only the possibility of working on computers, but they also make it pointless to pay for an Internet connection. Internet penetration in Kyrgyzstan is approximately 20 percent, far behind the rest of the world (about 34 percent). However, mobile Internet is expanding rapidly.

## List of Panel Participants

**Akhmat Alagushev**, media representative, Media Policy Institute, Bishkek

**Nadezhda Alisheva**, lawyer, Media Policy Institute, Bishkek

**Antonina Blindina**, editor-in-chief, *Chuiskie Izvestiya*, Chui

**Zharkyn Ibraeva**, chief, naryn.kg; director, Radio Almaz Naryn, Naryn

**Almaz Ismanov**, journalist, Radio Azattyk (RFE-RL), Bishkek

**Adelya Lashyeva**, director, Kyrgyz Public Broadcasting Education Center, Bishkek

**Daniyar Sadiev**, director-general, Yntymak Public Regional Radio and Television Company, Osh

**Alina Saginbaeva**, director, Akipress news agency, Bishkek

**Shohkuh Saipov**, independent journalist; founder, Valley News Media Holding, Osh

**Asker Sakybaeva**, editor-in-chief, *Jany Agym*, Bishkek

**Igor Shestakov**, editor-in-chief, region.kg, Bishkek

**Marat Tokoev**, chair, Journalists Association, Bishkek

**Muzaffar Tursunov**, editor-in-chief, *Danek* (Russian-language version), Osh

## Moderator and Author

**Gulnara Ibraeva**, media analyst, Bishkek

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