
Tensions between critically disposed journalists and the president and other state officials simmered on in 2016, culminating in several journalists being shut out of parliamentary hearings and a presidential press conference.



KYRGYZSTAN

In 2016, Kyrgyzstan saw a series of attempts to tighten state control over mass media, capped by a December constitutional referendum. It took place despite the efforts of human rights activists and NGOs to block the amendments, and a moratorium on changing the constitution until 2020. Of the approximately 30 amendments made to the constitution, the most drastic changes put the rulings of local courts above those of international courts. The changes also allow government officials to simultaneously hold positions in both the legislative branch and executive branch, thus creating a conflict of interest. The role of the prime minister was expanded and the state may now deprive residents of citizenship. According to Freedom House's 2016 "Freedom in the World" report, Kyrgyzstan remains only partially free, although it ranked higher than the rest of Central Asia.

The constitution and laws guarantee freedoms of speech and the press, including a decriminalization of libel in 2011. However, a new article titled "Insult to Personal Dignity and Honor" opened a loophole for the government, through which several journalists were prosecuted in 2016, recriminalizing libel through vaguely worded legislation.

A number of lawmaking attempts in 2016 made it clear that restricting freedom of the press sits high on the political agenda—especially the effort to use a Russian-law derivative to limit foreign ownership of media. The editorial policies of state-owned media and private media exhibit a lack of freedom. Journalists have identified a range of sensitive topics (religious extremism, inter-ethnic tensions, mining, etc.) that they avoid. This self-censorship stems from fear of consequences for them personally and for their media outlets. Several journalists have fled the country as a result of such pressure. Tensions between critically disposed journalists and the president and other state officials simmered on in 2016, culminating in several journalists being shut out of parliamentary hearings and a presidential press conference.

The rise of tariffs among external Internet providers proved to be another form of pressure on media. It revealed the vulnerability of Kyrgyzstan's technical infrastructure, and how much mass media and consumers are dependent on Kazakhstan's official Internet policy.

KYRGYZSTAN at a glance

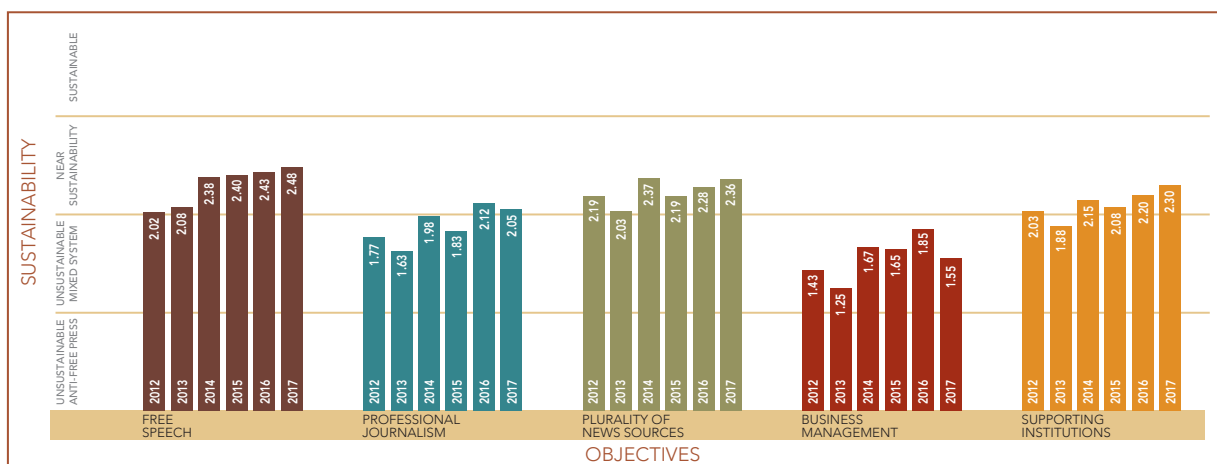
GENERAL

- > **Population:** 5,727,553 (July 2016 est., CIA World Factbook)
- > **Capital city:** Bishkek
- > **Ethnic groups (% of population):** Kyrgyz 70.9%, Uzbek 14.3%, Russian 7.7%, Dungan 1.1%, other 5.9% (includes Uyghur, Tajik, Turk, Kazakh, Tatar, Ukrainian, Korean, German) (2009 est., CIA World Factbook)
- > **Religions (% of population):** Muslim 75%, Russian Orthodox 20%, other 5% (2009 est., CIA World Factbook)
- > **Languages:** Kyrgyz (official) 71.4%, Uzbek 14.4%, Russian (official) 9%, other 5.2% (2009 est., CIA World Factbook)
- > **GNI (2015-Atlas):** \$6.983 billion (World Bank Development Indicators, 2017)
- > **GNI per capita (2015-PPP):** \$3,310 (World Bank Development Indicators, 2017)
- > **Literacy rate:** 99.5%; male 99.6%, female 99.4% (2015 est., CIA World Factbook)
- > **President or top authority:** President Almazbek Atambaev (Since December 1, 2011)

MEDIA-SPECIFIC

- > **Number of active media outlets:** More than 1,500 registered media. Print: 159 including 3 main dailies and 4 other major papers; Radio Stations: 26; Television Stations: 25 terrestrial, 3 local cable networks, 3 IPTV (Ministry of Justice, 2013)
- > **Newspaper circulation statistics:** Top three by circulation: *Super Info* (private Kyrgyz-language daily with 120,000 circulation), *Vecherniy Bishkek* (private Russian-language daily with 150,000 circulation), *Delo No.* (private Russian-language weekly with 16,000 circulation)
- > **Broadcast ratings:** OTRK (several channels: Culture and Music, Children, Sport, state-owned), EITR (state-owned), 7th Channel (private)
- > **News agencies:** Kabar (state-owned), AKIpress (private), 24.kg (private), www.tushtuk.kg (private), K-News (private), www.kyrtag.kg (private), Sputnic.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:** 1.713 million (2015 est., CIA World Factbook)

MEDIA SUSTAINABILITY INDEX: KYRGYZSTAN



MEDIA SUSTAINABILITY INDEX 2017: OVERALL AVERAGE SCORES



CHANGE SINCE 2016

▲ (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 <https://www.irex.org/msi>

OBJECTIVE 1: FREEDOM OF SPEECH

Kyrgyzstan Objective Score: 2.48

In 2016, a series of legislative initiatives shook the mass media community, starting in late January with a short-lived attempt by the president's office to develop the Kyrgyzstani concept of information policy. Building upon the national sustainable development strategy, the new policy purportedly aimed to improve transparency, access to information, and digital broadcasting. Officials invited media experts, including panelist Makhinur Niyazova, a *Respublica* reporter, to form a working group. The group has met only once.

Niyazova suggested that the concept was not developed well, due to the executive office's shifting vision and goals. For example, several deputies of the parliament proposed changes to the law on mass media, on the premise of protecting national security. The amendments would restrict foreign legal entities and persons, or legal entities with foreign capital, from owning more than 20 percent of a mass media outlet's shares or financing more than 20 percent of an outlet's annual funding. If the changes are adopted, the mass media that predominantly depend upon foreign capital would be saddled with significant financial difficulties.

Kabai Karabekov, editor of Centre1, said that apart from the apparent attempt to control mass media through legislation, it is also troubling that parliamentarians view the achievement of national security only through restrictions on freedoms such as free speech. In Karabekov's view, it should be achieved through

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.

the development of local mass media. Niyazova expressed concern that the government did not consult any media experts or journalists in the development of the draft law, which sparked active protests by the media community near the Parliament building in June 2016.

The draft law passed the first hearing, but encountered resistance from the media community. In late December, during a public hearing on the draft law, deputies announced changes: foreign financing would not be restricted, while the allowed share of foreign capital would be increased to 35 percent. Thus, the law would not restrict the activity of media outlets with foreign capital and only target outlets with foreign founders. Niyazova speculated that this group would include NBT television, as it depends on Kazakhstani funds. The panelists also noted that during public discussions of foreign-funded media, only those financed by the EU and the USA are mentioned, not those owned or financed by China and the Russian Federation.

In mid-December, the parliament hastily considered a draft law to introduce changes to the television and radio broadcasting law. Three deputies of the Respublika political party initiated the measure, proposing to allow advertisement placements in foreign television channels Pervyi kanal, RTR, and NTV. Begaim Usenova, director of the Media Policy Institute, predicted that this would leave at a disadvantage the television channels producing local content. The media community spoke out against the draft law, fearing it would drain the limited local advertising market and bring local television channels to bankruptcy. The law does not stipulate a specific amount, but states that foreign channels are to use advertising profits to cover the costs of broadcasting. Moreover, the draft law does not regulate the advertising market, which is dominated by foreign (particularly Kazakhstani) companies. Thus, a large portion of advertising profits would flow out of the Kyrgyzstani market. Usenova suggested that the lack of transparency surrounding the issue might point to a corruption scheme.

As for the confidentiality of information sources, journalists are not required to disclose their sources. However, according to the panelists, most libel lawsuits seem directed at exposing the sources of leaks, not punishing journalists.

In August 2016, the changes to a law on countering extremist activity came into force. The law is designed to standardize law enforcement and judicial practices for defining informational materials as extremist in nature, and speed up the timeline for courts to consider such cases.

With regard to licensing law, the media industry suggested that multiplex operators should receive licenses, with television channels receiving permission through the Ministry of Culture's tracking system. However, the law's drafters introduced a double system, requiring licenses both for multiplex operators and television stations.

The panelists said that they view licensing in Kyrgyzstan as generally clear and transparent: any company can sign an agreement with regulator RPO RMTR and start broadcasting. Approximately 20 channels are available to the population. Telematics, which enables television stations to forge agreements with mobile operators to send SMS messages, is another type of a licensed activity.

According to the digital broadcasting transition plan, on May 15, 2017, analog broadcasting will be disabled throughout the country. Daniyar Sadiev, director of TV Yntymak, said that 90 percent of Digital Technologies LLC members are broadcasting in a test mode. In order to broadcast Russian RenTV, local broadcasters pay \$10,000 per month, which could instead go to local journalists to produce local content, he said. In order to start broadcasting nationally, a television channel has to pay \$2,500 per month to the Azerbaijani satellite—not a cost-efficient option for regional channels.

The conditions for entering the market have not changed. Kyrgyzstan tax law requires workers to pay a “patent” (a fixed amount of money paid to the state for engaging in economic activity), and this cost applies to media members. The patent for freelance workers, including journalists, writers, and poets, is now up to KGS 2,500 (\$36).

Panelists spoke of problems with Kyrgyzbasmasoz, the weakened newspaper kiosk network. *Azattyk-Uzbekistan* journalist Elmurad Jusupaliev said that JSC, the state-owned Kyrgyzbasmasoz, tends to choose not to distribute newspapers in the Uzbek language. In 2016, it refused to distribute *Osh News*, claiming that demand was too low to justify the expense. However, other panelists pointed out that this situation is not strictly related to Uzbek-language newspapers, but rather is a general problem of Kyrgyzbasmasoz.

Moreover, panelists critiqued its distribution philosophy, as newspapers are forced on customers through social services (e.g., when collecting a pension), potentially damaging the media’s reputation. The panelists said that the shadow private market offers a more efficient solution for Bishkek, but without an efficient legal network for nationally distributed newspapers, they must rely on private distributors and taxis.

The panelists discussed a related case in Osh that circulated widely on social media sites. In January 2016, the public relations department of the Osh mayor’s office sent a letter to state-funded organizations, including universities and other educational institutions, asking them to subscribe to the Russian Federation government’s *Rossiyskaya Gazeta* newspaper.¹ The letter detailed how many newspapers each institution should purchase and requested financial proof of the purchases. The

¹ “Public employees were asked to subscribe to a Russian newspaper,” *Azattyk*, January 28, 2016 <http://rus.azattyq.org/a/rossiiskaya-gazepa-obyzatel'naya-podpiska-kyrgyzstan/27517170.html>

panelists were divided over the issue; some considered it an acceptable show of support for the Russian Federation, while others saw it strictly as a corruption scheme.

Several journalists suffered attacks in 2016, including one by law enforcement officers. However, not all the attacks are officially recorded as related to their work. According to the panelists, the attack on Turat Akimov, the editor-in-chief of *Den'gi i Vlast* [Money and Authority], in February drew the most attention. Although Akimov said that the attack was related to his opposition views, the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MIA) classified the attack as hooliganism. The journalist wrote an open letter to the president, Almazbek Atambaev, claiming that Minister of Internal Affairs Melis Turganbaev ordered the attack.² The reaction from the media community was mixed. The Media Development Center made several requests to the MIA press service regarding the case, but has not received a response.

The panelists also mentioned two instances of persecution of journalists last year. One case involves *Isrka Plus*'s editor-in-chief, Adilet Aitikeev, and the other involves journalist Dayirbek Orunbekov.

Aitikeev left the country as a result of harassment and threats. In 2014, the leader of the Ata-Meken party, Omurbek Tekebaev, sued Aitikeev for false denunciation, prompting Aitikeev to appeal, unsuccessfully, to Norway for political asylum. Tekebaev later dropped the charges. But in 2016, law enforcement authorities questioned Aitikeev about his interview earlier that year with Janysh Bakiev (the brother of former president Kurmanbek Bakiev), who was sentenced to life in prison after fleeing the country. Aitikeev claimed in an interview that he was followed and threatened; moreover, a private video of Aitikeev allegedly having extramarital relations was posted on social networking sites. Some journalists considered the video a violation of privacy and blackmail at the hands of law enforcement.³ The panelists were not unanimous on whether or not the authorities’ questioning of Aitikeev should be viewed as pressure. Some suggested that it was necessary to investigate his meeting with Janysh Bakiev, who is on an international wanted list.

Dayirbek Orunbekov’s case began in 2014, after he wrote a controversial article on president Atambaev. The general prosecutor’s office filed charges against him for “knowingly disseminating false information” and discrediting the honor and dignity of the president. Orunbekov was ordered to pay the president a fine of KGS 2 million (\$28,900). He now faces another criminal case filed in 2016, for failing to pay the fine; he could receive a two-year prison sentence. He also has reported

² “The beaten journalist addressed the president,” *Zanoza*, February 24, 2016 http://zanoza.kg/doc/333845_izbityy_jyralist_tyrat_akimov_vystypil_s_obrasheniem_k_atambaevy.html

³ “Black PR war reached journalist Aitikeev,” *Azattyk*, February 8, 2016 <http://rus.azattyk.org/a/27538640.html>

receiving anonymous phone threats and being followed by police.

Elena Voronina, a journalism professor at Kyrgyz-Russian Slavic University (KRSU), mentioned an episode dedicated to LGBT issues in Kyrgyzstan that aired on the Kyrgyz Public Television channel (OTRK) talk show *Oi Ordo*. The OTRK's board members labeled the program LGBTI propaganda, and debated dismissing editor Kokul Aripova and program host Aigul Kurbanova. Moreover, the state national security committee called in for questioning OTRK director general Ilim Karypbekov, to determine who funded the segment. The committee also advised Kloop Media's editor-in-chief Eldiyar Arykbaev to refrain from covering the topic.⁴ Nationalist groups organized an anti-LGBTI protest in front of OTRK.

NGOs, such as Internews, IWPR, and Voice of Freedom, promote the culture of investigative journalism. However, panelists said that most investigative journalists simply react to issues raised on social media, rather than shed light on new issues. Niyazova mentioned barriers, especially cost, faced by investigative journalists. Whether journalists suggest their own topics or receive an assignment by the editorial staff, she said, they have to find their own time to complete the work. They receive no extra pay for the investigative work and are still paid "per line," and receive no protection from threats when covering controversial topics. Thus, they have little motivation other than making a name for themselves. Only *Sputnik* and *Azattyk* newspapers can afford to conduct more or less quality investigations.

The panelists said that editorial independence is protected under the law. Usenova noted that OTRK covers controversial topics, such as LGBTI issues and bride kidnapping, and creates critical programs, such as *Oi Ordo*, as platforms for discussion. *Kapital* covers economic issues, youth programs, and news. However, according to the panelists, OTRK's self-censorship drives its audience to seek out other sources of information, such as *Respublica*, to learn more about the political opposition.

The panelists gave other examples of public media limitations. Voronina mentioned the newly established Committee for Freedom of Speech Protection, which includes opposition members and journalists, but OTRK has not covered this story. *Azattyk* writer Jusupaliev lamented the mass media's poor coverage of problems on the Uzbekistani border. He said he has had to refer to Uzbek-language media sources only to gather facts on the issue—and the vice-prime minister asked him to back off the topic when he pressed for comments.

Sadiev commented on the state committee on religious affairs, which restricts coverage of religious topics. He said that the

⁴ "A journalist was advised by the state national security committee not to write about LGBT anymore," June 14, 2016. Vecheniy Bishkek. http://www.vb.kg/doc/341607_v_gknb_jyralisty_porekomendovali_vpred_ne_pisat_ob_lgbt.html

committee's reluctance to share information stems from journalists' lack of competence on the issues.

On the topic of transparency, the panelists noted several problems. Voronina said that OTRK's financing is not well reported nor is it transparent. Usenova, however, said that OTRK does report on its finances once a year, while Channel 5, Piramida, ElTR, and OshTV have no financial transparency whatsoever.

Since 2014, libel has been decriminalized. However, the new article on the protection of a person's honor and dignity has been used against journalists—the most notorious being the aforementioned case of Orunbekov. Usenova suggested that Orunbekov's high fine (KGS \$2 million, or \$28,000) implies that the prosecutor wanted the administrative case to turn into a criminal non-payment case. In November 2016, Erkin Mambetaliev, an ex-bodyguard of the president, sued opposition activist Adil Turdukulov for KGS 5 million (\$72,257) on the same pretext, after Turdukulov posted information on his Facebook page about Mambetaliev. The case caused a stir in the public sphere and the journalism community alike. as it concerned infringement on freedom of speech as well as the issue of privacy when using social networking sites. Activist Mavlyan Askarbekov found himself in a similar situation, when deputy Dastan Bekeshev sued him over a critical Facebook post. Askarbekov faces a KGS 20,000 (\$260,124) fine unless he offers an official apology.

According to the law, journalists can receive comments and information from government officials on any issue except for those dealing with national security. Dina Maslova, the editor of Zanoza.kg Internet portal, requested in writing information about the Defense Council of Kyrgyzstan's activity for 2015 and the beginning of 2016. All her requests were ignored, she said. Almaz Ismanov, a freelance journalist, brought up technical issues with government websites—including the parliament's website, which lost part of its archive after a redesign and now has a faulty search function. Niyazova agreed that government websites are impractical and that official requests to government agencies go unanswered. However, she also noted that some government agency press services have made some improvements by hiring professional journalists.

The panelists confirmed that laws place no limitations on access to foreign and local news, especially given the widespread availability of the Internet. However, the panelists noted the vulnerability of the public, as well as the journalism community, given their dependence on the Internet. Panelists brought up Internet providers' 2016 agreement on price fixing, which resulted in disrupted and weakened Internet speed and a rise in fees.

Officially, entry into the journalism profession is not restricted or limited. However, officials occasionally disallow journalists access

to political events. In late 2015, Darya Podolskaya was denied accreditation to parliamentary hearings, on the pretext that she does not speak the state language. In February 2016, the non-profit legal clinic Adilet filed a suit against the parliament on her behalf, which the court rejected. In December 2016, representatives of several media outlets were also denied access to a presidential press conference.

OBJECTIVE 2: PROFESSIONAL JOURNALISM

Kyrgyzstan Objective Score: 2.05

The panelists agreed media outlets do not have the ability to produce quality analytical pieces. The majority of journalists play the role of transmitter, republishing stories from other media outlets without checking their factuality. Karabekov suggested that consumption of mass media through mobile format has changed the way news is produced. Seeking sensationalism and brevity over quality, journalists fail to use several sources of information, and repeatedly turn to a limited number of experts on economic, political, and social issues. But the panelists agreed also that new technology, such as cameras on mobile phones and Skype, have simplified journalists' work and provided easier access to experts. Sadiev mentioned that his reporters used Whatsapp to cover the results of the 2016 referendum. But in striving for speed, the panelists said, editors forget to distinguish between hard news agencies and other media that focus on analytical pieces. Jusupaliev also highlighted the lack of formalized and effective procedures to acquire information from other Central Asian countries. Panelists added that reporters depend too heavily on personal contacts and on the government agency in question.

Although an ethical code for journalists in Kyrgyzstan has been in effect since 2007, violations persist. The panelists mentioned several types of breaches that are especially common. Ismanov referred to editors' prejudice towards certain groups of citizens when covering events. For instance, in October 2016, a conflict between a bearded man and adolescents was titled "A believer stabbed an adolescent in the center of Bishkek,"⁵ which caused a wave of Islamophobic posts and comments on social media.

Panelists again mentioned the use of graphic images when covering stories on domestic violence, murder, and sexual violence against children. According to Ismanov, journalists only began posting viewer discretion warnings in October 2016. They also brought up recurring failures to change the names and contact information of victims of sexual abuse, violating subjects' privacy. The most notable of these cases involved the image of a child sleeping on a piece of cardboard at a bazaar

⁵ "A believer stabbed an adolescent in the center of Bishkek," October 27, 2016. Zanoza.kg. http://zanoza.kg/doc/346484_veryushiy_ydaril_nojom_podrostka_v_centre_bishkeka.html

in Kara-Suu city. Niyazova also mentioned that journalists sometimes show the faces of people that have been arrested for speeding, driving under the influence, and similar offenses. She commented that it the police's responsibility to punish such subjects, not journalists, thus, the faces of subjects must be blurred out.

The panelist also mentioned that some online information agencies offer readers the chance to remove any informational material from their webpage for \$1,000, or post a video, photo, or text for \$500. Niyazova and Voronina brought up a similar type of ethics violation: black PR against politicians in exchange for gifts and awards.

The panelists agreed that journalists and editors practice self-censorship. Several panelists made a distinction between self-censorship in Bishkek and the regions. According to TV UTC owner and director Almaz Karimov, some journalists in the regions refrain from writing about controversial topics because they have limited access to legal support. The majority of NGOs that could act to protect their freedom of speech are located in the capital.

Jusupaliev, however, gave counter-examples of self-censorship: Kyrgyz-language *Egemen* and *Asia News*. He defined them as nationalistic, and said that they often use ethnic slurs in their news pieces. He has filed several complaints against them with the state committee on national security, but has received only one response stating that experts did not find any misrepresentations.

The media cover most key events and topics in the country, the panelists agreed, yet they mentioned several subjects that many journalists avoid. Among them are inter-ethnic conflicts, border conflicts, Tajik enclaves, and mining on the territory of Kyrgyzstan.

Ismanov gave an example of the case of journalist and activist Azimjan Askarov. He was arrested in 2010 and accused of inciting ethnic hatred, organizing mass disorder, and complicity in murder. Many court hearings have been held on the issue, including several in 2016. According to Ismanov, despite Askarov being a resident of Jalal-Abad, none of the media in Jalal-Abad nor in Osh are eager to cover the case because it touches upon a sensitive topic in Kyrgyzstan: ethnicity.

Speaking as an editor, Sadiev mentioned two occasions in which he and his staff pulled a story for fear of inciting inter-ethnic tensions. One story was the case of an ethnically Kyrgyz traffic police officer beating up an ethnically Uzbek driver. The other story was an incident in which wastewater flowed from an ethnically Uzbek village into a ethnically Kyrgyz village downstream. Moreover, when other journalists covered the wastewater story, they framed it around ethnicity and failed to

mention that an ethnically Uzbek village also is located further downstream, Sadiev said.

In Karabekov's view, social media seems to be the force that guides journalists in their decisions to cover an issue. For instance, if some of the president's actions stir discussion on social networking sites, journalists write about it. Several panelists noted that religion is the one topic that is avoided in the traditional media but discussed openly on social media channels.

Media salaries in Kyrgyzstan are low generally. Ismanov noted a tendency towards declining earnings in the past several years, which, according to him, led the Kyrgyz-language information portal saat.kg to shut down. Panelists said that low salaries are typical for local media, while those working for Azattyk Radio or BBC earn considerably more—approximately \$600 per month for an entry-level journalist and \$2,000 per month for more experienced employees. At Sputnik news agency, executive editors in local branches of foreign media outlets earn approximately \$1,000 per month.

At local online information portals in Bishkek, journalists earn KGS 5,000 (\$70) per month, and an additional fee depending on the amount of work done. Producing 10 small stories a day and several large stories would bring a journalist KGS 30,000 (\$430) per month. The panelists report that salaries at regional newspapers range from KGS 2,000-5,000 (\$30-70) for journalists and KGS 5,000-7,000 (\$70-100) for editors-in-chief. All panelists agreed, however, that earnings in regional media outlets are substantially lower. According to panelists, directors of regional oblast-level television channels earn approximately KGS 5,000-15,000 (\$70-217) per month.

The panelists said that generally, journalists do not earn enough for a decent life, and resort to corrupt journalistic practices or doing side-jobs unrelated to their profession, such as video-recording and photographing weddings. Panelists also emphasized the necessity for journalists to possess skills in recording and editing video and audio, and producing infographics, in order to be a valued employee entitled to higher pay. Niyazova mentioned that an infographic would take an employee half a day to design and bring an income of KGS 100 (\$1.50); a photograph costs KGS 50 (\$0.75).

The panelists agreed that entertainment content does not dominate over news and information in print media or television, but radio is imbalanced. Sadiev, the director of the television channel Yntymak said that out of 14 programs on his channel, only three are entertainment-focused. This stems from the fact that Yntymak has not sold commercial content in the past. But that will change in 2017, when the channel will add four commercial programs, including two entertainment shows. Tamara Valieva, editorial advisor of OTRK, said that entertainment programming does not eclipse its news and

informative shows. However, panelists noted that the new Ala Too 24 news channel is lacking in content and dedicated too much time to covering the second World Nomad Games in Kyrgyzstan.

The panelists' views were split on media outlet access to equipment. Some, including Ismanov and Jusupaliev, said that they have seen a change for the better, because decent equipment (laptops, cameras, etc.) have become more affordable. But a majority of the panelists said that regional media outlets are lacking such equipment. Panelists also mentioned problems with live broadcasting in the under-equipped regions.

Another issue that journalists encountered in 2016 was a significant decrease in the Internet speed across Kyrgyzstan, due to surging tariffs among external Internet providers. *Azattyk-Batket* reporter Jenish Aidarov mentioned that in Batken oblast, only Kyrgyztelecom provides an Internet connection. Its lowest tariff is KGS 1,200 (\$17.35) per month, whereas in Bishkek, it is KGS 400 (\$5.80). Its speed is low also; sometimes it takes an hour to download a video, Aidarov said.

Usenova also mentioned that in the south of the country, the low quality of television signals leads viewers to switch to Uzbekistani channels, which have stronger signals.

As for specialized journalism, 2016 saw some progress. KTRK added *Madaniyat-Tarykh-Til* (Culture-History-Language) in March and Ala Too 24 in August, specializing in news and informational content. Another state-owned channel, EITR, launched an educational channel, *Ilim jana Bilim* (Science and Knowledge). However, panelists emphasized that the new channels did not automatically result in the development of niche journalism, as few journalists specialize in such topics. A new municipal radio station, Ariet, launched in early 2016

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).

in Batken oblast, offering an alternative to the only available Tajikistani radio-station in the area. Ariet targets young listeners, and apart from entertainment content, it offers a platform to discuss local issues.

Panelists said that despite the media sector's limited technical and human resources, several outlets have produced a series of investigative journalist stories. NTS has aired an investigative program since 2014, and KTRK maintains an investigative section on its video portal, posting videos on topics ranging from road repairs to corruption in state agencies. Moreover, panelists noted that NGOs try to motivate local journalists to produce investigative stories—for instance, the national competition organized for investigative journalism related to human rights in Kyrgyzstan. More than 54 journalists, with more than 100 stories, entered the competition, and ultimately 12 journalists from different regions won awards.

The panelists singled out OTRK's journalist Elnura Moldokadyrova, who investigated the black market for meat in Bishkek used to produce sausage, the most corrupt governmental agencies, and corruption in cancer treatment. As a result of the stories, Moldokadyrova withstood negative comments on social networks from the public. And while she has not received threats from her subjects, they did attempt to bribe her to shelve her work.⁶ The panelists expressed concern for Moldokadyrova's safety in the future, and said such security concerns deter other journalists from attempting hard-hitting investigations.

OBJECTIVE 3: PLURALITY OF NEWS

Kyrgyzstan Objective Score: 2.36

Kyrgyzstani media offer a plurality of opinions through various sources, including print, television, and the Internet, the panelists said. They mentioned the case referred to as "Belize-gate" as illustrative of the plurality. In 2012, the chair of the state national security committee accused three members of the Ata-Meken party of trying to sell off half the shares of Alfa-Telecom through an offshore company. The case was covered widely by mass media, many of which presented alternative viewpoints.

The panelists brought up another important event in Kyrgyzstan: the referendum that introduced changes to the constitution. They said that Azattyk Radio, Kloop, Yntymak channel, and the September channel offered audiences alternative coverage and analysis of the amendments and their consequences.

⁶ "Journalist Elnura Moldokadyrova: They do not threaten me but want to pay me off," November 19, 2016. Asel Minbaeva, Sputnik, <https://ru.sputnik.kg/society/20161119/1030362574/intervyu-s-ehlnuroj-moldokadyrovoy.html>

MULTIPLE NEWS SOURCES PROVIDE CITIZENS WITH RELIABLE AND OBJECTIVE NEWS.

PLURALITY OF NEWS SOURCES INDICATORS:

- > A plurality of affordable public and private news sources (e.g., print, broadcast, Internet) exists.
- > Citizens' access to domestic or international media is not restricted.
- > State or public media reflect the views of the entire political spectrum, are nonpartisan, and serve the public interest.
- > Independent news agencies gather and distribute news for print and broadcast media.
- > Independent broadcast media produce their own news programs.
- > Transparency of media ownership allows consumers to judge 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.

Kyrgyzstan law allows citizens unlimited access to social media, which is a major news source for many. But the cost of Internet access is a barrier for some, especially in the outer regions of the country. Language is another restriction to accessing foreign media. Panelist Adel Laisheva, director of the Center of Media Communications, noted that generally audiences lack media literacy. This leads them to limiting their choices to Russian television channels, and OTRK and EITR in the regions. In her opinion, very few viewers maintain a critical perspective on these sources. The panelists agreed that 2016 revealed how much the media and consumers are dependent on Internet access, and how the rise of fees and drop in Internet speed affected media outlet and audience media consumption.

The panelists were not unanimous on the independence of public mass media. A majority expressed the belief that the state largely controls editorial policy at state-owned media (OTRK, Channel 5, Piramida, OshTV, and EITR). Valieva illustrated state-owned television channels' financial dependence, mentioning that the Ministry of Finance has sequestered KGS 2 million (\$28,900) from OTRK's budget, forcing OTRK's director to write an open letter to the ministry using his personal Facebook page.⁷

Some panelists, such as Niyazova, had the view that OTRK should get credit for providing a platform to oppositionist politicians before the 2016 referendum on introducing amendments to the constitution. A majority of panelists, however, held that the case of the referendum showed that political opponents had very limited access to air time on OTRK and other state channels, resorting to expressing their political views through smaller platforms such as the September and

⁷ Open letter to the minister of finance, director of OTRK, Ilim Karypbekov, personal Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/ilim.karypbekov/posts/10154014122463016>

Yntymak channels. Panelists also noted that the existence of several state channels creates an illusion of a plurality of opinions. As a result, viewers that choose state channels other than OTRK believe that they are hearing alternative viewpoints.

Ismanov stated that Kyrgyzstan still has no true information agencies that collect information to distribute to other outlets. Two websites, 24.kg and AKIpress, are referred to as information agencies, but they do not distribute information to other media outlets. Moreover, AKIpress charges a fee for access to stories after they have been published for several days. Ismanov also noted that in 2016, the information website KNews was on the verge of shutting down. It has closed a majority of its media projects, and reduced its staff to just two web specialists.

According to the panelists, a number of private television companies and online media produce their own news. Most radio stations rebroadcast news collected from other sources, while print media have switched to analytical pieces and journalistic stories. The panelists said that only four radio stations (Birinci Radio, Azattyk Radio, BBC, and Maral FM) produce their own news. Valieva noted that some television and radio companies still cannot afford to produce their own content. For instance, Ayan and Shankai in Naryn, and EMTV and Antenn TV in Karakol do not broadcast news programs, she said. Aidarov mentioned a group of bloggers in Batken and Naryn cities who are referred to as civil journalists. With financial and technical support from an international NGO, they produce news pieces and are sometimes contacted for information by local journalists.

The discussion among panelists indicated that even for mass media representatives, let alone citizens, it is difficult to determine the owners of media outlets. Information regarding media ownership is not available publically, but panelists said that audiences might guess who owns a certain outlet by the general trend of its productions. Early in 2016, SDPK party deputy Kojobek Ryspaev attempted to oblige media outlets by law to provide information about their owners. The draft law is still under consideration. Valieva said that the public generally knows about the ownership of long-standing channels, such as NBT, OshTV, and NTS. But the owners of newly established channels, such as On1, Umut TV, Keremet, are still unclear.

Panelists noted that although the media sphere has information sources in languages of ethnic minorities, they leave much to be desired. One positive example is KTRK's Dostuk Radio, which broadcasts in nine languages. But most minority-oriented outlets are dedicated to cultural topics and do not raise important social or political issues. Furthermore, few professional journalists are capable of producing quality pieces in Uzbek or the other languages of ethnic minorities. This fuels a preference among ethnic minorities to read Russian-language news. Panelists also noted that some ethnic minorities, such as

Dungans, do not speak their native language. Their diaspora produces a newspaper in Dungan language, which uses Chinese hieroglyphs and the Latin alphabet. But second-generation and third-generation Dungans in Kyrgyzstan cannot read the language.

Jusupaliev said that Kyrgyzstan had 12 media sources in Uzbek language before 2010, but now there are only four state-owned press media. They include *Osh Shamy*, *Osh Sadosi* (Osh oblast administration), *Doslik* (Aravan oblast administration) and *Jalalabad Tongi* (Jalalabad oblast administration). Another two newspapers, *Bazar-Korgon* and *Nookat Tongi*, publish irregularly.

The circulation of these publications decreases continuously; *Osh Sadosi* has dwindled to 500 newspapers twice a week. However, some panelists said this problem is not necessarily related to the language, but rather decreasing government funding. These cuts have also affected other state-owned newspapers, such as *Slovo Kyrgyzstana*.

Another challenge for Uzbek-language media is the absence of an advertising market. According to Sadiev, Uzbek-speaking and Kyrgyz-speaking business owners prefer publishing their advertisements in Kyrgyz-language media, to attract more customers.

The panelists said that although political divisions persisted among Kyrgyzstani media in 2016, they were not as apparent as in the previous two years. Ismanov noted that Azattyk Radio and Sputnik's website are engaged in informational confrontation when covering issues related to Russia, such as the conflicts in Ukraine and Syria. Valieva stated that with the launch of the 24-hour informational channel Ala-Too 24, now audiences have better access to news and information from the regions.

OBJECTIVE 4: BUSINESS MANAGEMENT

Kyrgyzstan Objective Score: 1.55

The panelists agreed that Kyrgyzstan's mass media outlets are not self-sustainable economically. They draw little to no income from distribution and subscriptions; moreover, their advertising earnings do not come close to covering the running and operational costs of a media outlet. According to Niyazova, advertising covers only 20-40 percent of costs; owners pick up the rest of the tab. She added that a majority of media outlets survive through mercenary, or opportunistic, journalism.

For Voronina, a media outlet that has a managerial position, a planning professional, and a defined editorial policy are indicators of good management. Zanoza.kg has an editor-in-chief who also

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.

performs the task of media manager, as one panelist example highlighted. The panelists said that they consider *Super Info*, *Klasstash*, *AKIpress*, and *Vecheniy Bishkek* to be self-sustaining. *Vecheniy Bishkek* has its own advertising agency, for example. Bloggers do not monetize their content, according to the panelists. And they named only a few Instagram accounts that have found success selling advertising space.

The panelists said that media have very few income sources. Kyrgyzstan's advertising market is narrow and dominated by a few media outlets. They include OTRK, due to its wide coverage; *Super-Info*; *Vecheniy Bishkek*; *Klasstash*; *Vest* (a dominant outlet in Kara-Balta city); *Rek-Park* (Osh city); and *Reklama na Issyk-Kule* (Issyk-Kul oblast). In 2016, some media outlets earned additional income by providing space for political campaigning during local parliamentary elections (local *kenesh*). OTRK still monopolized the elections, however, pulling in more than KGS 15 million (\$215,000) during the campaign.⁸ Print media again missed out on a piece of the election pie, the panelists said.

According to the panelists, Kazakhstani advertising agencies, especially Media Forum, control the advertisement market. Panelists also mentioned that the narrow market is shrinking even further, as many small businesses and private advertisers have migrated to the Internet and social media (Facebook, Instagram, and free advertising websites such as *Lalafo.kg*). Niyazova noted that the *AKIpress* online news portal has charged large amounts for package advertising, spurring several political parties to agree on boycotting the outlet.

The country's advertising law sets certain standards for advertising in mass media. However, panelists said that the state

⁸ Report on the earnings made from the election campaign, director of OTRK, Ilim Karypbekov, personal Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=10154099872928016&set=a.10151185782023016.444229.716033015&type=3&theater>

has no effective monitoring or control measures that could apply to hidden advertising, nor do laws set any limits on the amount of time dedicated to broadcast advertising per hour.

According to Sadiev, in 2016 the government allocated no subsidies for content development. However, KGS 100 million (\$1,445,130) was distributed among the television channels included in the digital broadcasting social package.

The panelists said that they place little trust in market research conducted by local agencies. They cited the failure to include some of the major mass media players, which they said raises questions regarding the studies' quality and methodology. According to Niyazova, most of the Internet-based information portals use Google Analytics to measure traffic, as local tools such as *Net.kg* are not trusted. Similarly, Laisheva said that mass media ratings produced by the Quasar advertisement agency raise doubts and do not offer an objective overview.

OBJECTIVE 5: SUPPORTING INSTITUTIONS

Kyrgyzstan Objective Score: 2.30

The panelists stated that generally, neither business nor professional associations delivered substantial support to journalists in 2016. They did not assist even when journalists were restricted from parliamentary hearings or pressured through court cases. The only contribution came from the sole business association, Digital Technologies, LLC. Established several years ago, the association helped ease the transition to digital broadcasting.

Currently, Kyrgyzstan has two professional journalism associations: the Union of Journalists and the newly established Independent Union of Journalists. The new union aims to unite journalists, mass media workers, and media NGOs, and more actively engage journalists from the regions of the country. In 2016, after an unsuccessful attempt to reanimate the Union of Journalists, a group of journalists seceded and briefly established an alternative structure called the Independent Union of Journalists of the Kyrgyz Republic, which was registered in the Ministry of Justice. An alternative trade union, under the chair Meri Bekeshova, was established with financial support from the Government of Finland, but is no longer active. The Committee on the Protection of Freedom of Speech was established in 2016 and united politicians, journalists, and public figures. However, the panelists stated that the committee is an unsuccessful attempt to strengthen protection of freedom of speech.

According to Niyazova, the NGO Media Policy Institute and the legal clinic Adilet make announcements and provide free legal aid to journalists in cases of restrictions of access to information. However, she also said that they did not offer support to her when she lost her accreditation for parliamentary hearings in

2016. Among other active NGOs protecting the interests of the mass media, the panelists singled out the Center of Mass Media Support, the Media Development Center, and the Civil Initiative of Internet Policy. According to Sadiev, in the past year, Soros Foundation-Kyrgyzstan and Internews significantly reduced their support of mass media. The panelists agreed that the changes hit the regions especially hard, which shows that there is a need for representation of regional journalists' rights. Moreover, Ismanov noted that the media sector has seen a significant decrease in the grant programs supporting mass media overall, which led to the disappearance of mass media resource centers across the country.

Panelists agreed that the training of specialists at universities leaves much room for improvement. Exceptions are the journalism departments at KRSU and Manas University. Valieva noted that university programs lack practical assignments, especially in courses taught in the Kyrgyz language. Karabekov added that universities do not have enough teachers with practical experience in journalism.

In 2016, Internews and IWPR organized two extensive courses on journalistic investigations; they provided largely similar content, according to Ismanov. Also, the state committee on religious affairs conducted a short-term training for journalists on covering the topic of religion in Kyrgyzstan.

But generally, the training offerings for media did not change significantly since last year. Courses continue to be offered by the Educational Center under OTRK, the Studio of Practical Journalism, the Center of Mass Media Support (which offers a media literacy course), and Kloop media. Laisheva said that donor organizations mainly support specialized topics, such as gender or ecology and mass media. Marat Tokoev, a freelance media consultant, also said that training programs are focused mainly on a certain subject or cover new journalist trends, such as infographics or

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.

data-journalism, rather than the basics of journalism. The training programs are not filling gaps in knowledge and skills for the newest generation of journalists, he said.

Sadiev said that in 2016, government authorities ordered state-owned newspapers to print only in the state-owned printing house Uchkun. Uchkun's chair traveled to the country's various regions and personally talked to local newspaper editors. This decision was explained as a way to protect the interests of the state-owned enterprise. Sadiev also brought up the problem with Internet hosting and .kg domain names, which have to be purchased through Asia Info, a private company that charges \$50 a year—much higher than in the rest of the world.

State agencies largely monopolize broadcast media distribution, as RPO RMTR is a branch of state-owned Kyrgyztelecom. The state does not have enough resources to replace all analog transmission units with digital. As a result, when analog broadcasting stops in May 2017, approximately five percent of the population in remote areas will not have access to digital television.

List of Panel Participants

Jenish Aidarov, reporter, *Azattyk-Batket*, Batken

Elima Djararova, freelance media expert, Osh

Almaz Ismanov, freelance journalist, Bishkek

Elmurad Jusupaliev, journalist, *Azattyk -Uzbekistan*, Bishkek

Kabai Karabekov, editor, *Centre1*, Bishkek

Almaz Karimov, owner and director, TV UTC, Kysyl-Kyja

Mahinur Niyazova, reporter, *Res Publica*, Bishkek

Daniyar Sadiev, director, TV Yntymak, Osh

Marat Tokoev, freelance media expert, Bishkek

Begaim Usenova, director, Media Policy Institute, Bishkek

Tamara Valieva, editorial advisor, Kyrgyz Public Television, Bishkek

Elena Voronina, professor, journalism department, Kyrgyz-Russian Slavic University, Bishkek

The following panelist submitted a questionnaire but was unable to attend the panel discussion:

Adel Laisheva, director, Center of Media Communications, Kyrgyz Public Radio and Television Corporation, Bishkek

Moderator & Author

Gulnara Ibraeva, media analyst, Bishkek

The panel discussion was convened on December 17, 2016.