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KYRGYZSTAN

Continuing the trend noted in last year's MSI, Kyrgyzstan adhered to the regional pattern of declining media freedom, despite its liberal legislation. Last year was a presidential election year, and elections are always a litmus test for the media. Kurmanbek Bakiev was re-elected, but the election results were disputed and criticized by international organizations. To the MSI panel, the campaign season left no doubt that there are no politically unbiased media serving public interests in Kyrgyzstan.

Several journalists were murdered or severely wounded in Kyrgyzstan in 2009. Serious attacks against journalists have become more frequent, and investigations rarely seem sincere. The society is indifferent to all violations of freedom of speech, including the persecution of journalists. The panel also noted that previously, NGOs were quick to react to violations against journalists, but this year, that support has largely dissolved. Self-censorship and fatigue prevail in many organizations. Media and the NGOs work in silos, focused on their own survival. Professional solidarity is lost, but strongly needed.

Still, there were some glimmers of hope. The year 2009 was a rich for lawmaking initiatives. Media NGOs and media representatives successfully lobbied to withdraw a bill that would have introduced Internet regulation. This was an important victory that meant the state continues to allow free access to the Internet, satellite, and mass media. While it is hard to find independent viewpoints in Kyrgyzstan's media, online media have emerged to help fill the information gaps. More than 200 blogs have been registered, and the blogosphere Kyrgyz.today is being developed. In addition, Kyrgyzstan's first video website was launched, joining the regional radio website Most, the blog Next, and infosites including Talasnews.kg and Issykkulpress.kg.

Internet access is fairly affordable and available practically everywhere in the country. Even in the most remote locations, there are commercial enterprises that provide Internet service. In addition, civil-society organizations provide Internet access in the regions. Although social networks (for instance, Twitter, YouTube, and Facebook) have not fully taken off as a source of news, this looks set to change; new technologies played an important role in a national scandal that erupted in a school, when footage was posted on YouTube and disseminated on the Internet via mobile phone.

The small signs of promise, though, could not overcome the overall repressive environment for the media. Thus, this year's panel concluded on a pessimistic note, and the overall MSI score remained virtually the same as last year's.

KYRGYZSTAN AT A GLANCE

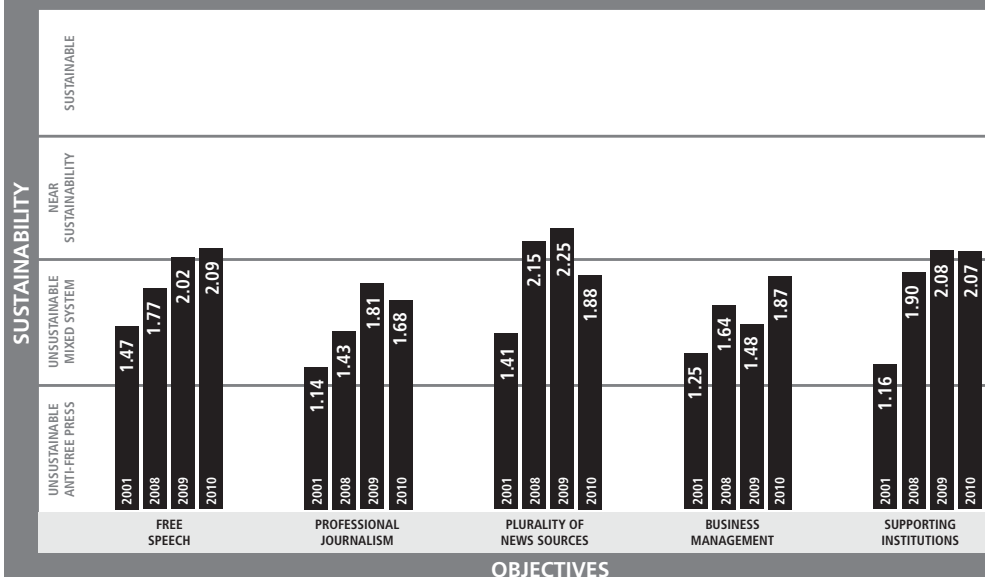
GENERAL

- > **Population:** 5,431,747 (July 2009 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%, Uyghur 1%, other 5.7% (1999 census)
- > **Religions (% of population):** Muslim 75%, Russian Orthodox 20%, other 5%
- > **Languages (% of population):** Kyrgyz 64.7% (official), Uzbek 13.6%, Russian 12.5% (official), Dungan 1%, other 8.2% (1999 census)
- > **GNI (2008-Atlas):** \$ 3.932 billion (World Bank Development Indicators, 2009)
- > **GNI per capita (2008-PPP):** \$2,130 (World Bank Development Indicators, 2009)
- > **Literacy rate:** 98.7% (male 99.3%, female 98.1%) (1999 est., *CIA World Factbook*)
- > **President or top authority:** President Kurmanbek Bakiev (since August 14, 2005)

MEDIA-SPECIFIC

- > **Number of active print outlets, radio stations, television stations:** Print: 4 main dailies, 4 other main papers, 250 total; Radio stations: 6 main stations, 31 others; Television stations: 7 main stations, 3 local cable networks
- > **Newspaper circulation statistics:** Top four by circulation: *Super Info* (Circulation: 80,000, private, Kyrgyz language), *Vechernij Bishkek* (Circulation: 50,000, private, Russian language), *Pyramid* (Circulation: 40,000, private, Russian language), *Delo* (22,000, private, Russian language)
- > **Broadcast ratings:** Top two: National TV and Radio Broadcasting Corporation (state-owned, both languages), 5th Channel (private, both languages)
- > **News agencies:** Kabar (state-owned), AKIpress (private), 24.kg (private), Zamandashpress (private)
- > **Annual advertising revenue in media sector:** \$5 million in 2008
- > **Internet usage:** 850,000 (2008 est., *CIA World Factbook*)

MEDIA SUSTAINABILITY INDEX: KYRGYZSTAN



Annual scores for 2002 through 2006/2007 are available online at http://www.irex.org/programs/MSI_EUR/archive.asp

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.

OBJECTIVE 1: FREEDOM OF SPEECH

Kyrgyzstan Objective Score: 2.09

The constitution and the legislation that regulate the media guarantee freedom of speech, access to information, and the special status of journalists. Aside from articles that criminalize libel, media legislation is in line with international standards. There are also legislative provisions that are intended to protect journalists, but they are often worded vaguely and lack enforcement mechanisms. For instance, the criminal code bars obstructing the work of a journalist. However, given multiple attacks on journalists in the past year, the article has done little to protect journalists. Given the lack of enforcement, according to the panel, even Kyrgyzstan's liberal legislation has not led to freedom of speech.

In recent years, officials have tried to improve media legislation through efforts such as the 2008 law on television and radio broadcasting, but the changes were not always progressive. Some panelists pointed to Article 8 of the new law as particularly problematic and risky for some media, as it mandated that 50 percent of all content be presented in Kyrgyz, the state language. Practically all electronic media, with the exception of the National Television and Radio Broadcasting Corporation of Kyrgyzstan, find it very challenging to find Kyrgyz-speaking journalists and video materials. They also lack the resources to dub films, concerts, and other content in Kyrgyz. Accordingly, only OshTV and MezonTV are bound by the requirement.

Last year was rich for lawmaking initiatives. Following a long debate among media, media NGOs, and Members of Parliament Alisher Sabirov and Dinara Moldosheva, an Internet regulatory law was withdrawn from the parliamentary agenda. Among other undesirable provisions, the bill would have recognized websites as mass media. Under pressure from Internet companies and media NGOs, draft amendments were revised. Later, the ministry itself was dissolved, and the bill was removed from the agenda. This was an important victory in that the state continues to allow free access to the Internet, satellite, and media.

In addition, last year parliament proposed that two bills that would impact the media be opened for discussion and expert examination, including a law protecting state secrets initiated by the state national security service and another protecting children and youth from certain types of information. Due to a lack of constructive interaction between parliament and media organizations, many initiatives came to a standstill.

Unfortunately, journalists do not use available legal mechanisms advantageously. In particular, despite complaints of restricted access to official information, no journalists have recently used legitimate measures against those who restrict access to information. At the same time, two years ago, a precedent was created when the representative of a regional NGO, Maxim Kuleshov, won a court victory over local governing bodies. Journalists, however, are passive in protecting their professional rights.

The panel noted that the system of kinship and local community pressures make it difficult for journalists to take legal action against authority figures who violate the freedom of speech, causing an underlying conflict between legal and traditional norms. According to the panel, society is indifferent to violations of freedom of speech and persecution of journalists.

Broadcast licensing has been especially contentious in the past couple of years. Previously, broadcasting did not require a license, and frequency bands were allocated by the State Agency on Communication (SAC). Despite the expected clarification of the regulatory procedures, the process of issuing frequency bands is not transparent, as reported in last year's MSI. The situation has not improved; there is still no scheme for allocating frequency bands. Additionally, there is no reliable information on the availability of frequency bands, applicants' status, and approval timeframe. Even the panelists had contradictory information: while one expert believed that there was a secret moratorium for frequency bands allocation, others presented factual information that frequency bands were indeed issued.

In 2009, the Europe Plus radio station and the television company AntennTV obtained licenses. AntennTV's frequency ban was not surprising to the panel; AntennTV's owner was a businessman and city council deputy, and the authorities felt his station was likely to benefit the ruling authority during oblast elections. As for Europe Plus, this company has been waiting for eight years to get its frequency band to broadcast in southern regions, and it is not clear why a frequency band was finally issued now.

According to media experts, allocation of frequency bands is often politically motivated. Not surprisingly, the application of OshTV Ltd. has failed for five straight years. Despite clear evidence that frequency bands are available, SAC's official response is that there are no free frequency bands, and OshTV's request is denied repeatedly.

The dearth of information about frequency bands and on the opportunities and risks related to making the switch to digital broadcasting is a key issue of the day. At a conference

on digital television and radio broadcasting it was announced that in Bishkek city there were just two spare television frequency bands and four in Osh oblast. In some northern areas, however, there was a surplus. Interestingly, 80 percent of frequency band resources belong to the military, while just 20 percent are civilian. Frequency band resources must be converted, but the issue has not been addressed.

With the transfer to digital technologies, the situation is likely to become more difficult. In Kyrgyzstan, there is no officially approved method for transferring to digital broadcasting, and there are no legal or secondary legislation acts that would regulate the transfer. Many television and radio companies are left to wonder when and on what timeframe and criteria this transfer is supposed to occur. In 2009, Kyrgyzstan started the process of transferring to digital broadcasting in Batken oblast, as a pilot location. Confusion persists over the correct mechanism to obtain a digital frequency band and exactly how—and under whose authority—they will be allocated. Five Osh television companies—OshTV, Mezon-TV, Dastan, DDD, and Keremet—applied to the SAC requesting band allocations for digital broadcasting in Batken oblast; all were denied.

According to regulations, media are the same as other businesses. In practice, however, the panel marked some key distinctions. First, the authorities do not determine the end product of other businesses, whereas in the context of radio and television, language restrictions are stipulated. Second, licensing, frequency allocations, etc. are subject to political

influence. Third, for print media, the VAT (value-added tax) is applied twice (upon purchase of materials such as paper and then upon production), significantly affecting the price of newspapers and magazines. In addition, the state-run media receive support from compulsory subscriptions, various grants, and priority advertising privileges, significantly reducing the chances of success for private media business enterprises.

The panel emphasized an amended tax code as a positive change in the regulatory sphere. The VAT was reduced, the advertisement tax was cancelled, and simplified schemes of taxation were introduced for media enterprises having turnover of not more than KGS 4 million (\$90,000). Practically all media are in this revenue cluster.

The journalism community believes that legislation should provide compensatory benefits to the media. With digital equipment costs of up to \$600,000 for an average television and radio company, electronic media have requested tax benefits on the transfer to digital broadcasting. However, as Alisher Sabirov, a member of parliament, stated, the ideology of the new tax code bars tax benefits to any sectors.

There were many serious crimes against journalists in 2009. While attacks have become more frequent, investigations into such crimes, when conducted at all, usually lead nowhere. In late December 2009, the news agency 24.kg published a piece titled “Kyrgyzstan police acknowledge their own weakness in investigating attacks on journalists.” This piece presented information, provided by the Ministry of Interior, on the results of criminal investigations initiated on more than 10 crimes against journalists in 2009, including murders, beatings, and robberies. In most of these cases, investigations were suspended because suspects could not be identified, or because the allowable investigative time period elapsed. In some cases, investigations led to charges, and the cases are awaiting trial.

In one of the most severe cases, Almaz Tashiev (who earlier worked for *Agym*), was attacked in Osh and died from his injuries. A criminal case was initiated, and two junior police lieutenants were charged by the oblast public prosecutor. The case is under consideration by the court. Seitbek Murataliev, the editor of *Jylan*, was also murdered in his home, where he was found with multiple knife injuries. The investigation is ongoing. In March in Bishkek, three unknown assailants beat and severely wounded Syrgak Abdylbaev, a *Reporter* correspondent, who was taken to the emergency room. Although a criminal case was initiated, no defendant could be identified, and the case was later dropped.

Abdibakhab Moniev, the deputy director general of *Achyk Sayasat*, Yrysbek Omurzakov, editor of *Tribun*, and Kubanych Joldoshev, a reporter from *Osh Shamy*, were physically

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.

attacked or threatened. In Moniev's case, investigative proceedings were suspended after the investigation term expired. In Joldoshev's case,¹ Joldoshev found an envelope with a live round from a Kalashnikov and a threatening note. Investigations are ongoing. Alexander Evgrafov, a *BaltInfo* reporter, was beaten. The public prosecutor did not initiate criminal proceedings. There were also a few robbery attacks on journalists. In a case against OshTV operator Bakhadyr Kenjebaev, a suspect was arrested, and the case was submitted to court.

One shocking case occurred on December 16, 2009 in Almaty, Kazakhstan. Gennady Pavluk, journalist and editor of the online edition of *Belyi parokhod*, was thrown from his sixth floor apartment. Pavluk was hospitalized in a coma; he died on December 22. According to his colleagues, Pavluk was targeted because of his professional activity in Kyrgyzstan. Pavluk has been linked with the opposition leader Omurbek Tekebaev, and had been developing the Ata-Meken political party website.

Some panelists raised the possibility that both authorities and opposition forces might be involved in such crimes. "There is certain deliberation in the crimes that have been committed recently toward journalists... Having learned a lot during elections of opposition parties, I am of the opinion that opposition leaders could be involved, although they deny it. Not everything is simple in political parties, even within the party, relationships are sorted out roughly using all resources," said Alexander Kulinsky, chairman of the Committee for Consideration of Complaints on Mass Media.

Elmira Toktogulova, owner of the news website Tazar, believes that the low professional development of journalists and their willingness to abandon their principles contribute to the sad state of journalism. In her view, the journalists' inability to work with the facts, their self-censorship, their fear of pursuing worthwhile topics, and corruption among journalists lead to a society that treats journalists with distrust and indifference. She suggested that if journalists wrote their articles on relevant topics based on careful investigations, then crimes against journalists would provoke a response from society. Today, the society assumes that if a journalist uncovers sensational information, the revelation was ordered by political forces.

Blogging has not gained widespread credibility in Kyrgyzstan as a form of journalism, although more than 200 blogs

¹ According to the opposition edition *El Sozu*, law-enforcement was involved in the attack, since highway policemen stopped the taxi and took the driver away during the period when unknown "hooligans" beat Joldoshev, slashed him with knives, and warned him to stop writing. For more details see *El Sozu's* November 6, 2009, edition.

have been registered. Politicians and authorities lag in their familiarity with new technologies, although, ironically, the panel noted that videos and photos of sex and drinking scandals involving opposition politicians made their way to YouTube.

As noted by Khaliljan Khudaiberdiev, president of OshTV, though the state guarantees journalistic freedoms, discrimination of non-state media obviously exists, and there is a bias toward state-owned media. The editors-in-chief of the state media are appointed directly by the national or regional leadership, and state-owned media are funded from the state budget.

Pressruns of the state media are maintained exclusively by forced subscriptions and services, and partner enterprises in the distribution and delivery of press, such as the Kyrgyz postal service, grant preferences for state-owned media. Still, the legislative requirements are similar to all media regardless of their ownership.

Oblast state periodicals receive some subsidies from the government, but they are scanty and cover only minimal wages. While oblast and municipal state editions are set to privatize in 2010, the staff of these regional periodicals do not wish to end their dependence on local authorities. Furthermore, there is nothing to actually privatize—there is almost no equipment in editorial offices, and the staff of periodicals have, for a long time, worked for local public administrations. The financial state of regional state-owned media is poor, and these outlets are resistant to change.

State-owned media also receive numerous incentives and awards. During professional holidays, the authorities give awards (including monetary bonuses) primarily to journalists from state-owned media. In 2009, almost 99 percent of all awards were distributed among journalists of NTVRC for the Day of the Journalist. State journalists also enjoy privileged access to official information. The panel noted that a secret journalists' pool was created by the presidential secretariat, and not even all state media representatives are included in this pool.

Libel and "insulting honor and dignity" are considered criminal acts in Kyrgyzstan. However, the panelists were not aware of any journalists brought to court in 2009 for these offenses. According to one panelist, a conference held with public prosecutors, supported by a Soros-Kyrgyzstan Foundation project, discouraged filing criminal charges in libel cases. In recent years, however, the trend has shifted from criminal against journalists to civil suits. This creates the appearance of a constitutional state that respects freedom of speech, yet many journalists fear the ruinous fines of criminal cases much more than the penalties of criminal suits.

The odds are stacked against journalists charged in civil suits related to honor, dignity, and business reputation. First, such suits have no statute of limitation. Second, there are no exceptions for “public personalities” in Kyrgyzstan, and journalists must prove their innocence. Third, the judges often have an arbitrary approach to determining damage amounts, even ignoring Supreme Court guidelines.

On the other hand, certain rules have been established to determine moral damages. According to information from the Media Representative Institute, last year court awards averaged KGS 20,000 (\$450). However, the average associated legal costs were as high as KGS 111,000 (\$2,475). In political suits against journalists, moral damage amounts could ruin a periodical completely. For instance, in 2009, the Janat hotel obtained KGS 1 million (\$22,300) in a court decision against the opposition periodical *Uchur*, without any financial justification according to the associated article on protection of honor, dignity, and business reputation.

A lack of competent judges in media legislation is another factor affecting outcomes of judicial proceedings toward journalists and media. As one panelist noted, when considering cases of protection of honor and dignity, judges tend to rely not on media legislation, but rather on legislation they are more familiar with.

Despite Kyrgyzstan’s rather progressive information access law, access to information cannot be considered open. The laws are not respected by many public offices. “Access to information for journalists is completely dependent on the whims of the leadership of various public administration bodies,” stated Marat Tokoev, the chairman of the Journalists’ Public Association, in an interview with the author of this report.

The panelists noted three main problems surrounding implementation of this law. First, public offices frequently lack organized procedures regarding information flow. Second, officials use loopholes in the law to restrict information selectively. For instance, the president’s secretariat significantly reduced access for journalists to presidential events. Third, journalists are unaware of procedures for the release of official information. If a request is denied, journalists generally lack the legal resources to fight the denial. Furthermore, they generally need the information quickly and do not have time to appeal.

The parliament of Kyrgyzstan remains fairly accessible to the press. In 2009, the parliament commenced work on improving its own information strategy and press service. The Ministry of Health has garnered high marks in this regard, while the press service and official site of the Ministry of Interior are relatively efficient and open as well. However, many

officials, especially in the regions, lack professionalism and do not interact with journalists efficiently. For instance, in Talas oblast in 2009, the Department of Internal Affairs press secretary could not manage information flow, preferring to refuse journalists access to information. This official was disciplined after journalists complained, demonstrating that journalists, at least in some settings, do have recourse. Since then, journalists in that oblast have been able to obtain information from the agency without difficulty.

As in previous MSI studies, panelists considered access to foreign information and news sources generally free. They noted, though, that central and capital media have wider access to Internet materials due to faster, more reliable Internet connections in Bishkek and in Osh, as well as more people who speak and read English. Due to the language barrier, regional media rarely use Internet resources aside from Russian websites.

Entry into the journalism profession remains unrestricted, and a license is not required. There are dozens of higher-education institutions in the country that train professional journalists. However, journalism is not considered a prestigious occupation, and society rates quality of education as very low. A majority of practicing journalists have neither special, nor professional, education. The panelists noted that remarkably, in the parliamentary press center, a 15-year-old blogger was accredited.

OBJECTIVE 2: PROFESSIONAL JOURNALISM

Kyrgyzstan Objective Score: 1.68

The events in April 2009 in Petrovka and the protests in Balykchi in July 2009 provided a sort of litmus test for journalistic standards in Kyrgyzstan. Both events were covered very subjectively; journalists failed to include the perspectives of several key sources. In Petrovka, media openly sympathized with Kyrgyz and Russian residents, who smashed up Kurdish houses after a Kurdish man was accused of raping a child. In Balykchi, about 500 supporters of the opposition presidential candidate protested against what they felt were irregularities in the election in front of the mayor’s office on election day; the rally was broken up by riot police. Most media outlets relied on materials from news agencies, which in turn presented only the official position of the White House.

“When the events in Petrovka were covered, unprofessionalism became visible. No journalists tried to find out the opinion of Kurdish minority. Nobody talked to them; nobody even tried to find out what happened from their perspective. Now the question is whether or not the

accused person is guilty. But nobody looks into it. Journalists did not try to talk to the representatives of ethnic minorities until they arranged press conferences themselves and until they spelled out their opinions in this regard. Journalists just did not want this objectivity, because of their personal perceptions toward the Kurdish minority,” said Kulinsky.

According to the panel, part of the problem is that there is pressure on journalists and legitimate challenges to accessing several sources. The primary problem, though, concerns the professional level of journalists. Journalists are frequently careless about the information they obtain, and they do not double-check it. The panel reported a lot of examples this year. For instance, newspaper *Delo* published material about a girl who was severely injured in a car accident and who needed financial support to go to Germany for surgery. *Delo* wrote that the required amount was collected and that the relatives had already taken her to Germany for treatment. After 10 days, the relatives of the girl discovered the mix-up, which resulted in the fact that instead of the €20,000 they needed, they managed to collect only €2,000. The journalist did not contact the relatives to clarify basic information.

Almost all journalists, including news agencies, print media, and electronic media, tolerate unprofessionalism, according to the panel. During interviews, journalists often do not use recorders or take notes, leading to misprinted names and distorted facts. Ivan Kutimov, founder of *Vest* and *New Farmer*, observed, “Reporters do not check their sources. They are subjective. They confuse the notions: fact, comment, and analysis. Their interviews are unprofessional, and they ask banal questions. Journalists tell what the source wants to say, rather than what the reader wants to know. Half of the interviews in media are essentially advertisements.”

Gulbara Imankulova, director of the Mass Media Resource Center in Talas, said that the majority of training events for journalists are a waste of time, noting that despite many trainings carried out on professional topics, the regional journalists from Talas newspapers still start all their brief articles with the word “recently” and leave out key elements. “Many (journalists) have never even heard about the standards. This is a painful issue for the journalism community... Financially strapped editions are forced to think about ethics in the last turn,” said Emil Kadyrov, executive director of the Association of Publishers and Distributors of the Periodical Press.

According to the panel, those journalists who use more than one source to double-check the information are rare. “Of course, there are examples of quality, professional journalism. But it would be wrong to say that this is common. Newspaper circulations are a clear indicator for this—they are limited mainly for this reason, rather than due to a small population,

as the press used to say,” said Kadyrov. Young journalists do not create their own network of sources and are poorly trained to look for the information or people able to confirm the information. In general, journalism in Kyrgyzstan remains in a deep crisis, a problem intensified by brain drain, the political situation in the country, and poor higher-education opportunities for journalists.

Ilim Karypbekov, a public relations specialist with the secretariat of the president, noted, “There are no single or commonly accepted standards in the country that are in line with international standards. The attempts of various organizations and small groups of media representatives to introduce such standards have not made a significant impact. First of all, there is resistance from a majority of journalists. The state is interested in the appearance of commonly accepted standards and ethics rules within the media community and is open to cooperation.”

Violations of the ethics code are plentiful. Often, journalists do not violate only professional, but also human, ethics. Violations often occur due to ignorance of professional ethics. Accepting remuneration for covering—or not covering—various events is fairly common among journalists. This is especially the case for state-owned media, according to the panel. Noted Kutimov, “Journalists from Kyrgyzstan today are ready to write and to publish any material, including ‘black PR,’ as long as they are paid.”

Plagiarism is routine as well. A majority of electronic media news issues borrow news tape from news agencies without citing the source, and sometimes take the credit. One panelist described how one of his articles, on an environmental topic, was published on the website of the Central-Asian

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).

information magazine *Oasis*. He said that five Internet news sites published his work without crediting him, while some even presented this material as their own.

In an attempt to address these ethical shortcomings, on April 16, 2009, the Committee for Consideration of Complaints on Mass Media held a press conference of journalists of Kyrgyzstan, where amendments were introduced into the ethics code of Kyrgyzstan's journalists (which was adopted in 2007). In a new twist, this time the representatives of large newspaper offices and state-owned media participated in the process; in general, many more media representatives were involved in 2009. The state demonstrated its interest and readiness to collaborate to establish and promote ethical standards. As distinct from colleagues in Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz journalism community does not fear that state cooperation in matters of ethics would become an additional instrument to pressure journalists.

Self-censorship is common in Kyrgyz media. In the current political situation, amid systematic attacks on journalists, such behavior is motivated by journalists trying to not only keep their jobs, but also trying to stay alive. The panelists had many examples to share, describing how they had succumbed to self-censorship to save their own lives, or the lives of their reporters. The panel explained that many editors feel responsible for the safety of their journalists, and that is why they resort to self-censorship. One independent editor, Turat Akimov, noted, "Only kamikaze or inexperienced journalists work without self-censorship. My correspondent Abdyldaev Syrgak, who emigrated later on, clashed with me because I heavily edited his materials; he became angry and shouted that I 'castrated the text.' But unfortunately, I could not act otherwise to save him."

The panel noted that a lot of pressure rests with the editors, and they should make decisions based on the principle of "do no harm." They should not pursue sensational stories and should not put the source of information at risk. That is why self-censorship in this context could be considered as a rational strategy, in the current context of Kyrgyzstan.

In covering important topics and events, the panel agreed that the problems do not stem from legal restrictions, but rather in enforcement. There are no precedents of journalists fighting for access to socially important information. Journalists understand which topics are essentially off-limits, such as criticizing the reasons behind the energy crisis in Kyrgyzstan and related matters (for instance, fatal cases in surgery operating rooms due to power outages), topics related to property of the first family, international conflicts and inter-ethnic tensions, or

analysis of Kyrgyzstan's development or economic crisis². Any information about mass riots and general dissatisfaction is undesirable. (For instance, the population found out about student disturbances in Osh related to rising education fees only several days after the fact.)

In addition, as before, specific "closed areas" depend on the level and status of media. Thus, if a newspaper is pro-governmental, then the prime minister and his activities are not criticized. The same is the case for regional media—regional authorities have immunity there. Coverage of forbidden topics opens journalists and media businesses up to persecution, and therefore they tend to avoid the most important political, economic, and social topics. In this context, the panel noted that in 2009 Freedom House's rating of media freedom in Kyrgyzstan finally was downgraded to "not free."

Salaries in the media sector remain low, and income levels are particularly unattractive for regional journalists. They are higher for the staff of Bishkek television channels. The average salary of a popular journalist working for television channels in the capital is about \$300-\$500, far higher than print media salaries. State media salaries are received from different sources, mostly in the form of various bonuses obtained from advertisements. Official salaries and royalties are still low, about KGS 2,000 to KGS 3,000 (\$45-\$67); they have not been revised in about a decade. Royalty funds save the situation and help journalists approach standard costs of living. In the regions, however, there are often no royalty funds, or they are too small to be helpful. Thus, Issyk-Kul oblast newspapers (both in Kyrgyz and in Russian) forged an agreement to equalize royalty fund allocations for journalists.

The economic crisis appeared to peak in June-July 2009 for journalists. Mass reductions of staff occurred in many private media, while advertisement cash flows were reduced significantly. Pyramid TV applied a "summer cost-reduction" plan, providing unpaid vacation for the staff. This year, for example, the whole staff of NTS had two months of forced rest. State media are not authorized to make staff reductions; usually those require governmental regulations or decrees of the president. Therefore, state journalists might work for 0.25 or 0.5 of the normal rate and show up in an editor's office once a week, doing a very small amount of work. Journalists often turn to farming or other income-generating activity to survive.

In addition, journalists, operators, and stage managers of the regional companies employ *shabashka* (unofficial

² Even statistics are contrary to global trends, according to official sources; key economic indicators in Kyrgyzstan remained stable, or even showed improvement. For instance, depth, acuteness, and area of poverty are reduced every year.

arrangements or moonlight work) strategies to survive. Sometimes they also resort to blackmail, demanding money to cover, not cover, or cover a certain event in a particular light. According to the panel, paid pieces are considered routine practice; journalists do not consider receiving money for coverage as something unethical or unprofessional.

Low salaries and increased risks have made journalism an unattractive profession. The inflow of young specialists to regional media stopped, and competition in journalism departments is a thing of the past. This is especially visible in the composition of students in journalism departments and in regional newspaper staff compositions. Men work in the media less and less frequently, since they cannot support their families on journalism. The most successful students do not work in the field of journalism at all, lured by higher salaries in advertising and public relations. According to one discussion participant, there are many ex-journalists who are working for gold-mining enterprise “Kumtor” as dump-truck drivers, mining technicians, and other specialists. Most students either avoid journalism from the very beginning or very quickly abandon it. Thus, often the students who end up working in the media are not the best. Many media workers, having obtained primary professional experience in Kyrgyzstan, have great ambitions to go abroad (Kazakhstan, Russia, and even farther) in search of a better life.

Media in Kyrgyzstan are not immune to the global trend of replacing news programs with entertainment programs. One entertainment Kyrgyz-language newspaper, *SuperInfo*, enjoys the biggest circulation in the country (up to 100,000). Practically all editions in Kyrgyz are some mix of social, political, and entertainment media. According to Kutimov, who owns some regional periodicals, circulations of social-political periodicals are at least two to three times less compared with that of entertainment magazines. Entertainment programs dominate the radio market as well; the volume of news or other non-entertainment information is minimal. Kadyrov offered another take, commenting, “The one who presents the information in a more interesting way wins. It is not so important if its news or entertainment. This is how it should be.” Television channels, as a rule, are limited to news production and two to three talk shows on social, political, and economic topics. Entertainment programs occupy the rest of the airtime.

Khudayberdiev said that he wanted to remove weekly concerts and dedications (the customary placing of congratulatory advertisements on programs) from his broadcasting programming due to their poor quality. Eventually however, he had to increase the time to 2.5 hours, since the audience of this genre appeared to be significant in number.

Many television companies utilize SMS broadcasting, using a ticker. However, for private television companies, this type of revenue generation is extremely risky, and many television operators, despite the economic benefits, refuse to broadcast these types of messages to avoid being accused of promoting nationalistic extremism or other objectionable content.

At the same time, the volume of news increased on NTRC. Evening news increased up to 45 minutes, and a new evening talk show was created on political problems. However, while the volume of news increased, the quality did not. The same traditional actors—the president, his closest circle, and members of the government—dominate coverage.

Turning their attention to equipment and facilities for the media, the panelists noted their concern about the impending transfer to digital broadcasting. Although the transfer is discussed within official circles, the panel said that the lack of real plans and calculations related to support packages to re-equip the electronic media is one of the most problematic areas in the development of journalism. For private owners of regional media, the matter of re-equipping appears to be a medium-term threat. Based on Khudaiberdiev’s calculations, the regional small television studios will require about \$600,000 to transfer to digital technologies.

In 2009, a pilot project to implement the transition to digital broadcasting took place in Batken oblast. The government purchased equipment, including 4,000 receivers made in China. However, the first Batken digital channel was not included in the package of digital cable SmartTV; this was rumored to be because the majority of the receivers were non-operable, and no funding was provided to lay fiber optic cable from Batken to Osh. According to unconfirmed information, the state plans to transfer Jalalabad and Osh oblast television channels to digital technology, which indicates there are state plans related to transition to digital broadcasting, though these have not been shared with the public.

More generally speaking, the status of equipment of private electronic media, and in particular of television channels, is far from perfect. Said Kadyrov, “There are well-equipped papers, and there are those who write on their laps. Everything depends on whom media belongs to.” As a rule, there is enough funding to buy semi-professional and cheap cameras, computers, etc. Not a single regional company (and national television companies) buys professional software to produce and process their products. Even the most successful in terms of technical equipment, such as NTVRC, encounter permanent shortages of equipment: servers and other equipment are obsolete, and breakdowns are frequent. Regional state television studios are in a terrible state—they are millions in debt for power and utilities, they are unable to

purchase equipment, and they are managed unprofessionally. State-owned national outlets, EITR and NTVRC, received significant technical support this year.

The problems of periodicals are not always related to the lack of equipment. For many years, Internews provided technical support to media, and especially to radio companies. During the past two years, such support has dried up, since most media outlets have already received such assistance, but the quality of their products has not improved proportionally. Furthermore, the equipment itself is operated with multiple violations. Often, journalists have not been exposed to even the simplest equipment. For instance, a journalist from the regional newspaper *For Coal* had to come to the capital to learn how to operate a grant-provided professional Dictaphone. In many media outlets, there are journalists who cannot use a computer; they continue writing their materials by hand and then pass them to technical staff to type, as in the Soviet days.

Specialized journalism is limited, though there have been some examples, including criminal news, automobile engineering, health care, parliament, and economics. For instance, in the news block of NTVRC, economic news became a permanent feature in 2009. Unfortunately, though, critical economic issues with a political angle, including ownership and redistribution of wealth, are avoided. Glossy magazines appeared last year for women, and periodicals on development, repair, and design have also joined the print media market.

However, in general, there are no schools in the country to train journalists on specialized topics, and media cannot afford to support specialization of correspondents. Furthermore, only limited types of specialized journalism enjoy a response from the audience. It is interesting that the stock exchange tried to create a pool of economic journalists; however, the attempt was not successful. Adel Laisheva, program director of Internews in Bishkek, noted, "Quality journalism requires more financial resources and is not highly demanded in our country. For instance, even if business journalism were developed, there would be few people who would watch or listen to it. In the context of our country, quality (specialized) journalism is unprofitable." Kulinsky commented on the demise of parliamentary niche journalists: "Several years ago, the best journalists aspired to be parliamentary correspondents; it was prestigious. Now, being a parliamentary journalist is considered exile, which reflects, first of all, the decay of the parliament in Kyrgyzstan." Investigative journalism, under the current tightening controls of the dictatorship, could not emerge; even the pilot training programs were doomed to failure in principle.

OBJECTIVE 3: PLURALITY OF NEWS

Kyrgyzstan Objective Score: 1.88

There are a lot of information sources in Bishkek and in Osh, but there is a deficiency of information sources in the regions. The panel commented that in Kyrgyzstan there is only one media outlet, which with great reserve could be called a national one: NTVRC. For the sake of fairness, EITR and Channel continue to expand, but there is no national coverage yet, unfortunately. All the rest, including the stations from Bishkek, cover local events. Bishkek media differ in that they have access to central authority. In contrast, outside the capital, oblast newspapers survive on the information available in the oblast center and surrounding areas. But there is very little information in these newspapers on what is going on beyond an oblast's center, not to mention news from other oblasts.

Practically each region of the country exists in its own information bubble, although southern regions are influenced by parts of Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, and Russian influences are felt throughout the country. Kyrgyzstan is the only CIS state where broadcasting of the First Channel RF (ORT) and RTR is provided practically without limitations and with governmental support.

The trend of citizens looking for alternatives to national media on their own increased in 2009; at a certain point, the population of the country started addressing the problem of finding information on its own. In remote regions, people are increasingly turning to satellite television.³ This is especially noticeable in such towns as Kara-Balta, Karakol, and Talas and in remote villages of all oblasts of the country.

In the regions, television and radio broadcasting are poorly developed, while the newspapers arrive late and are too expensive for rural readers. In Karakol (the center of Issyk-Kul oblast), for example, *Arguments and Facts in Kyrgyzstan* costs KGS 45 (about \$1), while in Bishkek the same newspaper costs almost two times less. During 2009, prices for print editions also increased in the capital: thus, the retail price of private opposition periodicals is KGS 12 (\$0.03), which is comparable with the cost of a loaf of bread of not the best quality. State media are a bit cheaper; national periodicals cost about KGS 10 (\$0.20), while regional periodicals are a little cheaper.

³ The cost is limited to a one-time fee for a dish; usually, there are no additional payments for channel packages. The free package usually includes about 40 channels, including such Russian channels as NTV, DTV, TV-3, some Turkmen channels, fashion and luxury channels, and some others.

As for media content, it is unlikely that media in Kyrgyzstan present the entire diversity of events and the whole range of opinions in the society. The overwhelming majority of media tend to present the official perspective, and it became meaningless to refer to different sources. Different newspapers published by opposition politicians or forces affiliated with opposition are the only alternative, but pressures on opposition media outlets and the strategy of “neutralizing” certain opposition politicians has sharply reduced the ranks of opposition media. The opposition periodicals *Reporter*, *Faces*, *Forum*, and *White Sail* have faded into history. As noted by Kubat Otobaev,⁴ “When lies and disinformation prevail in the society, it is very hard to be a source of alternative information. Under these conditions, work that was based on a range of different opinions often is perceived as the voice of opposition.”

In January 2009, the secretariat of the president was established. Formally, this structure was supposed to replace the presidential press service, but in reality it became a center to govern the country’s entire media sphere and tighten its grip; now a majority of news agencies and other media channels increasingly present official information approved by the secretariat. Oxana Malevannaya, formerly general producer of Channel 5, was appointed to lead the secretariat. Once appointed, Malevannaya quickly transferred key journalists from Channel 5 to the management of NTVRC, and now she leads both channels. The former competitors now are like twins in terms of their broadcasting pattern.

At the same time, a new online media have emerged to help fill the information gaps: the blog *Kyrgyz.today* is being developed, and Kyrgyzstan’s first video website was launched, joining the regional radio website *Most*, the blog *Next*, and infosites *Talasnews.kg* and *Issykkulpress.kg*.

Social networks (for instance, Twitter, YouTube, and Facebook) are not fully understood yet and do not serve as a source of news, with rare exceptions. Still, social networking tools were used to disseminate video materials smearing opposition politician . Tekebaev on YouTube and by Bluetooth⁵ distribution via mobile phones. In addition, new technologies played an important role in a national scandal that erupted when footage was posted on the Internet after a teacher beat a student. The material was placed on YouTube and disseminated on the net via mobile phone. Kyrgyz society became actively engaged

⁴ These remarks were made in a roundtable presentation titled “Coverage of political conflicts in the Kyrgyz Republic: How to maintain balance of views?”

⁵ It is not known who publicized this information; however, according to the panel, such video could only be in possession of the authorities, and in particular the National Security Council. Material discrediting presidential contender Atambaev was broadly disseminated on the Internet.

in discussing the problem, while some school principals then maneuvered to prohibit the use of cellular phones by students while at school.

News agencies that post their tapes on the Internet undoubtedly are sources of information for the residents of large cities. Many users start their mornings looking through news of news agencies of Kyrgyzstan and other countries. However, according to Internet providers, the number of Internet users remained the same during last year. Based on various estimations, about 10 percent of the total population uses the Internet.

Internet access is fairly affordable and available practically everywhere in the country. Even in the most remote locations, there are commercial enterprises that provide Internet service. In addition, civil-society organizations provide many Internet access opportunities in the regions. However, the limited number of Internet communication providers working in the regions leads to lower connection quality and relatively high prices. The situation is improving now, after Aknet began offering satellite Internet service in 2009.

There was no monitoring or surveys to help determine the exact reach of Internet use in the country. However, it is understood that private Internet access is still not affordable for all citizens. For example, Aknet installation costs about \$80 for private users, with monthly fees of about \$50.

In general, citizens have unrestricted access to domestic and foreign media. The main factors limiting Internet access and access to foreign media include cost, lack of foreign-language knowledge, and a lack of interest in news (or a preference

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.

for entertainment channels). Panelists additionally noted the accessibility of contraband television signals via cheap Chinese satellite dishes.

However, the panel noted that it is difficult to find local news in many regions. According to Kutimov, “only a handful of local media present local news.” He also noted, “In the regions, people use the Internet very little.” Cable television is rapidly developing in the capital and in Osh city. AlaTV has more than 50,000 customers in Bishkek. Other cable networks include Sekatel, Dolon, and SmartTV.

Last year was a presidential election year, and elections are always a litmus test for the media. The 2009 elections left no doubt in the panelists’ minds that there are no politically unbiased media serving public interests in Kyrgyzstan. First of all, a list of specialists, politicians, and public figures to be invited on the air was strictly controlled. Coverage of parliamentary activity of the opposition Social Democratic Party of Kyrgyzstan (SDPK) party was also demonstrative. While some MPs from this minority party got onto the list of forbidden persons for the air, coverage of SDPK party activity was only critical, and some SDPK representatives were openly defamed.

According to the panel, though, not only state-owned media continue to demonstrate open bias and partiality. Conflicts among opposition forces and the split of *Achyk Sayat* into two editorial offices openly fighting with each other demonstrated the interests that determine the content of the two new editions, *El Sozu* and *Nazar*.

Both local and foreign news agencies continue to operate in the country. Local news agencies include Kabar, the state news agency, as well as a handful of private agencies: Akipress, 24 kg, Z-press, and Tazar. Another, Zamandash, is more inclined to analytics, filled with analytical materials translated from English analytical materials that focus on issues relevant to Central Asia. The panelists noted a decline in Akipress’s quality recently; it is obvious to them that this agency encountered increasing roadblocks to covering key problems. Uncharacteristically, it covered the events in Petrovka village and in Balykchy in accordance with the official account.

Over the past year, 24.kg enjoyed priority access to information, along with other perks of interacting with the government, thanks to the friendly relationship between its chief and the chief of the secretariat of the president. However, all agencies sometimes work unprofessionally, making errors and failing to conduct thorough fact-checking. Practically all national and regional media rely heavily on information from two key news agencies—Akipress and 24.kg—and copyright issues are not generally raised.

Few media outlets subscribe officially to any foreign agencies, except for Channel 5 and NTVRC, which have agreements with Reuters, and EITR, which has an agreement with Euronews. The reason that foreign agencies are not more popular stems from unaffordable subscription prices, but some other factors come into play as well. On one hand, not all topics covered by western agencies are considered relevant. On the other hand, the Internet provides enough free news to adequately satisfy the demand. Third, there are outlets that manage to use unlicensed material without any sanctions.

Most television channels produce their own news, excluding some regional channels (such as the southern television companies DTV and DDD). The few radio outlets that do present news tend to borrow news digests from local agencies.

Media ownership is completely nontransparent. Consumers may only guess ownership based on who is denounced or glorified.

The panel addressed rumors of a confrontation between two large entities. The first one belongs to the son of President Maxim Bakiev and includes all key private media and influences a majority of state media. But during the past year, the president’s younger brother, Janysh Bakiev, appeared on the media scene; he already owns a group of print publications in the Kyrgyz language, such as *AyatPress* and *Tribune.kg*. In 2009, he also purchased a print distribution network, *Kyrgyzbasmasoz*.⁶

Print periodicals are published in national minority languages, with state support, under the umbrella of ethnic cultural centers. National television programs in ethnic minority languages practically ceased to exist, even in limited format. It only presented Ukrainian, Uzbek, and Uigur programs once a year, up until spring 2009. Such deinstitutionalization naturally reflects changes in the national policy of the state. The rhetorical slogan of Akaev’s era, “Kyrgyzstan is our common home” under the pressure of elites, has been completely forgotten, and international relations now are regulated not by rhetorical strategies and by construction of symbolic myths, but by repression.

Private media are regulated only in terms of restricted opportunities to cover the problem of international relations. Certain nationalistic attacks and declarations are permitted in Russian-language media. For instance, nobody restricted nationalistic hysteria in the newspaper *Delo* toward the Kurd population while covering international strife in Petrovka village. The panel charged that nobody

⁶ It is interesting that upon removal of kiosks from central streets and squares based on regulation of city administration of Bishkek, only *Basmasoz* kiosks were left in their usual places.

responds to systematic nationalistic provocations toward the Uzbek population in some private periodicals, such as the newspapers *Uchur* and *El Sozu*.

There is only one Uzbek-language newspaper among state-owned media, *Ush Sadosi*, which is dependent on the government. There are some Uzbek-language private media, including the television stations Mezon, Osh TV, DDD, DDV, and some print periodicals. Nevertheless, one panelist noted the disappearance of Uzbek media programming from state television channels as a reflection of the trend of growing nationalism in state policies.

OBJECTIVE 4: BUSINESS MANAGEMENT

Kyrgyzstan Objective Score: 1.87

The question on whether media in Kyrgyzstan can be considered highly effective businesses provoked lively discussion among the panelists. Some panelists believe that media could be profitable, even in the economic crisis. Some print periodicals that increased their circulations could serve as example, such as *Delo#* and *SuperInfo*. The following electronic media reported year-end profits: NTS and Europe Plus. *SuperInfo's* owner used his profits to found a television channel, Super TV, in the cable network AlaTV, while *Vest* profits enabled a new entertainment edition, *Vest+*, to launch, despite the reduced Russian-speaking population. Other panelists view media as low-profit and highly risky businesses in the current political and economic climate of Kyrgyzstan. The cost of producing media products sometimes is hardly covered by the revenue, and even stable incomes do not reduce the heavy political costs.

In terms of related businesses, they continue to be generally unprofitable. Even the independent printing house, which last year's MSI reported had been moderately successful, also suffered—not only because of the economic crisis and the closing of some periodicals that were published in this print house, but also because its management changed. During 2009, despite the printing of election campaign materials, the clientele base did not grow. As a result, the printing house management had to raise the tariffs for its services by 12 percent on average.

Kyrgyzpochtasy,⁷ the Kyrgyz postal service, used to be a hindrance to the print media, due to the fact that it owed great debts to periodicals (KGS 11 million [\$245,420] as of

⁷ In Kyrgyzstan, the state enterprise "Kyrgyzpochtasy" is the main partner of print periodicals for distribution and delivery; it has a wide network of post offices (more than 900) countrywide and occupies a monopoly position. More than 150 print periodicals are distributed in Kyrgyzstan with the help of this network.

April 2009). In comparison, in April 2008, the debt amounted to KGS 17 million (\$379,300). In 2009, the Association of Publishers and Distributors of Periodicals intervened and established a consultative group that was to mediate between the publishers and Kyrgyzpochtasy. Several meetings were held during the summer, chaired by the deputy minister of transport and communications. As a result of such lobbying, with the participation of business associations, Kyrgyzpochtasy started paying its debt.

Advertisements continue to provide the main source of income for media. Traditionally, regional media receive a smaller portion of advertising. In 2009, losses from reduced advertisement flow in regional media actually reached 50 percent compared with 2008. For media outlets in the capital, this dropped slowed with the entry of Beeline telecommunications company to the market, with its rather intensive advertisement campaign. Beeline's advertising strategy forced its competitor, Megacom, to increase its advertising budget. However, only a small share of this advertising revenue was redistributed among the regional media.

Subscriptions do not factor into the budgets of private print periodicals but often form a significant share for state-owned newspapers. Sponsorship is not popular in the country, and grant opportunities diminish every year. Still, regional television and radio companies depend completely on grants to buy equipment.

The opposition press is almost excluded from the opportunity to generate income from advertisements. Even if an advertiser is ready to place ads in such outlets, the authorities might exert their pressure to prohibit support of disloyal media. For state media, governmental subsidies are a

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.

prominent element in their funding, although public funding is allocated unequally among different media. The volume of financial support to the regional media is especially small.

The advertising market, according to the panel, is not yet fully formed. On one hand, there are some large advertisement agencies, such as Rubicon, Deka, and Lenta. Each agency operates under, and serves, a particular media outlet. There is no monopoly of one national advertisement agency; the spheres of influence are divided among different agencies. However, the panel did note the growing role of Lenta. Lenta diverted a huge flow of advertising money away from NTVRC by placing local advertisements on the retransmitted Russian channel RTR.

Advertising revenue depends on various factors, including the geographic status of a media outlet, whether it is state-owned or opposition-owned, and whether it is television, radio, or print. Since the market is limited, even large advertisers, such as mobile operators, are not interested in local media. The lack of reliable monitoring hinders the development of an advertisement market in the regions. Nevertheless, some advertisement agencies are rather successful in the regions. The owner of Mezon TV, Mirzakhodjaev Javlon, successfully works with advertisers in the southern region.

According to the regulatory framework, the scope of advertisement in media should be limited. It should not be more than 30 percent of all material in social and political periodicals. For several years, *EB (Evening Bishkek)* received official permission from the antimonopoly committee for advertisements. In 2009, its official permit was not extended, but the newspaper did not reduce the percentage of advertising, which continues to occupy a large portion of its space. It appears that violations for some entities are not punished in any way, whereas for other media such behavior would be a problem.

It is interesting to note that the election, for the first time, did not bring advertisement revenue to the regional media. Only a small group of media in the capital benefited. The campaign was arranged in a new way, with different terms of advertisement costs for presidential contenders. Most presidential contenders relied on print periodicals for advocacy: *Our President* for Kurmanbek Bakiev, and *Forum* and *Uchur* for the opposition candidate Almazbek Atambaev, and others.

Independent media do not receive state subsidies. There is a system of preferences for some nongovernmental media that are affiliated with the authorities in the form of forced subscriptions, in particular. For instance, the state has indirectly subsidized the party newspaper *Ak Jol*, for which

support is arranged in the regions. For instance, in Chui oblast, according to the information of our experts, each *rayon* had to subscribe at least five thousand readers.

Marketing research is poorly developed. Separate agencies conduct media research from time to time, but the quality is considered poor. One of the panelists, Kubanychbek Taabaldiev, the director of Zamandash Press news agency, described his experience when Zamandash hired a company to optimize sales and demand. The company conducted research for a significant sum (about KGS 200,000, or \$4,500), but the results appeared to be just a series of recommendations at a common-sense level. The marketing strategy fell far short of expectations.

Some media practice their own research, aimed at soliciting audience feedback to improve their products. *Vest* carries out such independent research. Many media, and especially TVRC, refer to researchers only to obtain high ratings to use to attract advertisers. There is not a single marketing agency in the country that works systematically in the media sphere. The only research group, MED Group, monitors ratings of media and of individual programs. It is impossible to determine the independence of this research, and it is not affordable for all media.

There are obstacles to studying the real picture regarding print circulation; no reliable figures are available. Leaders of the independent print house and the Support Center for Mass Media have tried many times to initiate "revisions" of circulations of various newspapers and magazines printed in other print houses, but their efforts have been ignored by other printing house managers.

Some regions have their own researchers, who carry out rating surveys once a year. The cost of this research is low, but the results cannot be considered reliable due to the lack of transparency in the methodology developed. The situation is a little better regarding Internet media, though. A majority of websites collect their own visitor data and carry out surveys on expectations and values.

OBJECTIVE 5: SUPPORTING INSTITUTIONS

Kyrgyzstan Objective Score: 2.07

Kyrgyzstan has a couple of trade associations, including the Association of Publishers and Distributors of Periodicals (APDP), which includes 20 members so far, and the Association of Radio and Television Broadcasters (ART). In 2009, APDP's first year of full-fledged work, the association proved influential in the print media sphere. APDP conducted ratings contests among print media and

actively lobbied for its members during negotiations with Kyrgyzpochtasy. APDP also works on the development of media legislation in the interests of its members. APDP intensively and consistently worked on elaboration of draft amendments to be introduced into the law on media. The association, together with the Mass Media Support Center, also contributed significantly to training workshops for print media staff. These workshops on marketing and management, publication design, and advertising issues were well received by the media community. ART also works as a membership association; it has continued its focus on attracting advertising for regional media and ensuring ads are distributed proportionately.

Although trade unions for journalists exist on paper, they have been inactive for many years, and the media community has held ongoing discussions on the need to restore them. The panel noted that there is a strong need for a trade union, citing extreme labor code violations in recent years that journalists and other media workers have no protection from.

In 2009, the leaders of some media organizations revived discussions on trade unions, with no success. A survey conducted by the Committee for Consideration of Complaints for Mass Media has shown that the level of confidence of media organizations is low and that many journalists balk at paying monthly membership fees of about KGS 100 (\$2.25). On the other hand, practically all journalists would like to receive support when their labor rights are violated. At the moment, certain trade union functions are performed by Journalists, an NGO working in close cooperation with Finnish journalist trade unions.

There are many NGOs in the media sphere that work to expand democratic freedoms and support the rights of journalists and citizens. The most active NGOs include Journalists, Media Representative Institute, Committee for Consideration of Complaints for Mass Media, and Internews Network. In addition, some human-rights organizations, such as Citizens Against Corruption, help protect the rights of journalists.

A crisis has developed regarding the activity of media organizations and media donors. Last year, the MSI panel reported a very collaborative relationship between the media and NGOs and noted that NGOs were quick to react to violations against journalists. This year, the panel reported that support has dissolved. Despite the significant volume of work performed, and the broad range of services provided, the panel felt that NGOs have not been supportive of freedom of speech. Akimov noted, "When Syrgak was attacked, only three organizations, out of more than 7,000, called and expressed their readiness to help. Many of these NGOs applied to us during better times, asking us to help

cover their activities and recognizing our influence. But it turned out that they are not concerned with the problems of media and journalists; they do not value freedom of speech." Kulinsky said that fatigue prevails in many organizations. Media and the NGOs work in silos, focused on their own survival. Professional solidarity is lost, but strongly needed.

In 2009, right after replacement of the science and education minister, work began to introduce amendments into the journalism curriculum in higher-education institutions. However, these undertakings ended quickly in a view of a new reorganization of the government. Media NGOs started working to improve quality of training for professional journalists by arranging training for lecturers. There is a particular weakness in the training of production personnel. Most lecturers do not have any practical journalism experience and are unable to teach new technologies. So far, there has been a gap between theory and practice. However, one notable development to address this gap in 2009 was the opening of an updated journalism laboratory in the BHU journalism department.

According to the experts, among higher-education institutions that train journalists, the Turkish university, Manas, excels. Its mass communications students have the opportunity to practice in Turkish media and receive hands-on practical training in television and radio.

Some large media outlets independently arrange media schools of various types and approaches. Some aim to train staff for their own outlets, while others use their brand to profit from the training process.

There are fewer and fewer short-term training opportunities for journalists and other media staff each year. Only Internews has been working in this capacity

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.

for some time now, conducting trainings for students and practicing journalists. Internews also helps to arrange practical residential trainings for local media.⁸ Clearly, one organization cannot provide enough training for the whole country. Furthermore, while training opportunities for journalists are sharply reduced, there are even fewer opportunities for technicians: operators, stage managers of television channels, press photographers, etc. Internews media training programs will continue only until the end of 2010. Khudaiberdiev commented, "As a media owner, I can firmly state that training programs for production personnel, which are arranged by Internews, perform a most important job for us. After such workshops, my staff members display a completely different, modern understanding of the business. If those programs would be closed, small regional television and radio companies would be put at risk. We cannot tolerate this."

The experience of Internews Network, according to Laisheva, demonstrates that the most effective short-term training courses are those that allow training of more than one person on a team, include editors, and adopt a practical focus. As regional participants noted, it is especially difficult for young staff members to get to Internews workshops, where the stars of Russian journalism conduct master classes and competition for training slots is tough.

Also missing in editorial offices is a mentoring system, which is a permanent challenge for both media and for the entities that provide training. Due to high employee turnover, training programs have to perform the same trainings again and again. Still, there are many short-term thematic workshops and trainings. Regional journalists need all kinds of training most urgently, because there are very few young people in the regional media, and once they obtain minimal experience and knowledge, they tend to leave. Media organizations have long tried to find a solution to this problem. There were talks about establishing an academy of journalism, but this proved impossible without private investment. Some media try to provide their own training to journalists, operators, and marketing staff, as in Kutimov's

⁸ One-time trainings are provided by other projects of international organizations; in 2009, Deutsche Welle conducted workshops for radio staff, and for managers of electronic mass media.

group, Europe. APDP and the Mass Media Support Center arranged a summer school of media management, where the training is provided on a paid basis.

A rather broad range of printing houses serve Kyrgyzstan. There are a lot of small print houses, but most newspapers and magazines are printed in two major print shops—the state-owned Uchkun and the independent printing house of the Mass Media Support Center. The establishment of the independent print house, breaking up the monopoly held by Uchkun, was a key factor in facilitating the freedom of print periodicals. Although it is not free from pressure, so far the print house has managed to uphold the right to conduct impartial business and provide service to different groups of media. The printing house also became a model of media management and helped develop the capacity of many media outlets in Kyrgyzstan by providing training and high-quality service.

In the sphere of electronic media, 95 percent of resources, such as relay, transmitters, and communication lines belong to JSC Kyrgyztelecom; signal transmission is still monopolized. JSC Kyrgyztelecom is not transparent; there is a governmental share in this company's stock, but the shares and identities of other owners are unknown. As the panelists noted, this monopoly puts pressure on the media, because the technical dependence of the electronic media could mean a lack of guarantees for signal transmission at any given moment.

Print publications were distributed through kiosks until recently, when Basmasoz was purchased by the president's brother, Janysh Bakiev. In 2009, the situation worsened, because all kiosks, except those belonging to Basmasoz, were relocated or partially liquidated. However, there is still no monopoly for the importation of foreign periodicals and periodicals distribution.

The Internet is developing intensively. Aknet became a leader in 2009 in terms of sales, according to the panel, because it provides high-speed satellite Internet. This has enabled access to live video magazines, which were previously blocked by traditional providers that received their signal through Russia and Kazakhstan.

List of Panel Participants

Adel Laisheva, program director, Internews, Bishkek

Alexander Kulinsky, chairman, Committee for Consideration of Complaints on Mass Media, Bishkek

Gulbara Imankulova, director, Mass Media Resource Center, Talas

Ivan Kutimov, founder of *Vest* and *New Farmer*, Kara-Balta

Kaliljan Khudaiberdyev, president, OshTV, Osh city

Kubanychbek Taabaldiev, director, Zamandash Press news agency, Bishkek

Natalia Lyubeznova, correspondent of Interfax news agency; journalism trainer, Bishkek

Turat Akimov, independent journalist, Bishkek

Elmira Toktogulova, owner, Tazar news website, Bishkek

Emil Kadyrov, executive director, Association of Publishers and Distributors of the Periodical Press, Bishkek

The following participants filled out questionnaires, but did not attend the panel discussion.

Ilim Karypbekov, public relations specialist, secretariat of the Kyrgyz president, Bishkek

Roman Milovatsky, director, Association of Radio and Television Companies of Kyrgyzstan, Bishkek

Moderator and Author

Gulnara Ibraeva, chair, Social Technologies Agency, Bishkek

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