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KYRGYZSTAN

In early April 2010, opposition leader Roza Otunbayeva took to Twitter to call on President Kurmanbek Bakiyev to step down and to put an end to violence against protesters demonstrating against rising utility prices and government repression. On April 7, Otunbayeva tweeted: “We want a free Kyrgyzstan! Bakiyev and his cowards are no match against the will of the Kyrgyz people!”<sup>1</sup> Bakiyev fled to his hometown, Osh, in the south, and Otunbayeva began leading as the president during the transition period until the presidential elections, set for December 2011.

In the lead-up to this dramatic turn of events, known as the April Revolution, 2010 saw severe repression of the media. A whole parade of facts could be listed to demonstrate the lack of freedom of the press during the first few months of 2010: Internet news sites were blocked; foreign stations Azattyk (the Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Kyrgyz-language service) and BBC radio and television were taken off the air; issues of *Forum* were confiscated; and STAN TV television company were shut down for using unlicensed software. By March, the media system was under acute pressure. The government shut down several popular blogs at blog platform Kloop.kg; they included antibaks.kloop.kg and two other blogs whose authors had been sharply critical of the president, his family, and the activities of the National Security Council. According to the annual freedom rating by Reporters sans Frontières, Kyrgyzstan’s rating fell to its lowest ever in 2010, earning the “strict censorship” label, tumbling 25 places since 2009 and earning a ranking of 159 out of 178.

But the April Revolution changed everything. The new government loosened restrictions on the media, eliminated criminal penalties for libel, and paved the way to help journalists gain greater access to information. The new Constitution of Kyrgyzstan, adopted by referendum on June 27, 2010, heralded some important changes for the media, introducing an unprecedented provision: “No one may be prosecuted for spreading information, defaming, or demeaning the honor and dignity of an individual.” Thus, the legal framework was liberalized even more, bringing guarantees for freedom of speech and freedom of the media into line with international standards.

However, in June, when conflict erupted in Osh between ethnic Kyrgyz and ethnic Uzbeks, the level of censorship and self-censorship increased dramatically. The vast majority of journalists and media played down the negative and suppressed photos and videos for fear of provoking a new wave of violence and an escalation of the conflict.

Other notable issues holding back the development of the media in Kyrgyzstan include the failure to formulate a plan for the conversion to digital broadcasting, weak editorial policies, and the lack of solidarity within the profession. Even violent crimes against journalists have not prompted a spirit of unity, and the journalists’ associations and trade associations that do exist are poorly organized and ineffective at lobbying for change.

<sup>1</sup> Roza Otunbayeva’s Twitter feed, <http://twitter.com/otunbayeva>

# KYRGYZSTAN AT A GLANCE

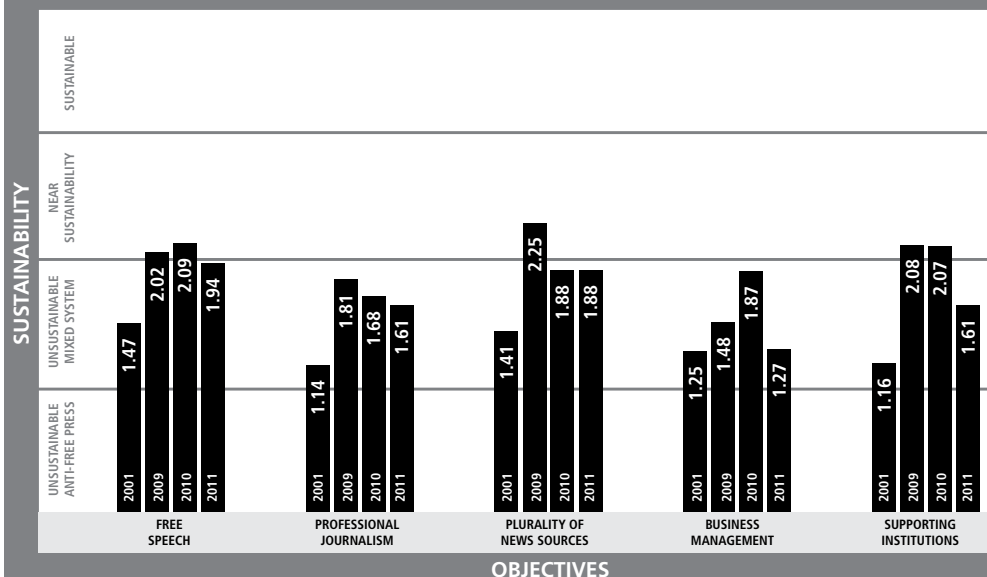
## GENERAL

- > **Population:** 5,508,626 (July 2010 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 (2009-Atlas):** \$ 4.600 billion (World Bank Development Indicators, 2010)
- > **GNI per capita (2009-PPP):** \$2,200 (World Bank Development Indicators, 2010)
- > **Literacy rate:** 98.7% (male 99.3%, female 98.1%) (1999 est., *CIA World Factbook*)
- > **President or top authority:** President Roza Otunbaeva (since May 19, 2010)

## MEDIA-SPECIFIC

- > **Number of active print outlets, radio stations, television stations:** Print: 250 including 4 main dailies and 4 other major papers; Radio: 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, Russian and Kyrgyz)
- > **News agencies:** Kabar (state-owned), AKIpress (private), and 24.kg (private)
- > **Annual advertising revenue in media sector:** Estimated \$5 million in 2008
- > **Internet usage:** 2.195 million (2009 est., *CIA World Factbook*)

## MEDIA SUSTAINABILITY INDEX: KYRGYZSTAN



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

### 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: 1.94

Kyrgyzstan's score for freedom of speech suffered due to political instability, the resulting uncertainty, and ethnic strife. On the one hand, the new government has taken steps that might yield future improvements; on the other, it is too soon to see the impact, and problems of the past continue to haunt the legal environment. The small loss in score came about from lower scores in indicators 3 (market entry and taxation), 5 (legal guarantees of editorial independence for public media), and 8 (unrestricted media use of other news sources). Most indicators scored close to the objective average, but indicator 4 (attacks on journalists) and indicator 5 lagged by more than half a point. Indicators 8 and 9 (free entry into the journalism profession) exceeded the average by a little more than half a point and more than a point, respectively.

The year 2010 was transformative for media legislation. At the beginning of the year, for example, news agencies could not easily go about their work. Often, information from an agency's website was used in trials as the evidentiary basis for finding defendants guilty. That being the case, quite often the agency itself would be made a co-defendant. For example, in 2010, AKIpress news agency was charged as a

#### 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 or registration of media protects a public interest and is fair, competitive, and apolitical.
- > Market entry and tax structure for media are fair and comparable to other industries.
- > Crimes against media professionals, citizen reporters, and media outlets are prosecuted vigorously, but occurrences of such crimes are rare.
- > The law protects the editorial independence of state or public media.
- > Libel is a civil law issue, public officials are held to higher standards, offended party must prove falsity and malice.
- > Public information is easily available; right of access to information is equally enforced for all media, journalists, and citizens.
- > Media outlets' access to and use of local and international news and news sources is not restricted by law.
- > Entry into the journalism profession is free and government imposes no licensing, restrictions, or special rights for journalists.

*As KirTAG news agency Editor-in-Chief Igor Shestakov noted, "It all depends on how democratic the officials in the president's inner circle are, rather than on how democratic the laws are."*

co-defendant in several libel cases—though it was spared punishment thanks to the court's even-handed attitude.

By spring, an expert group completed its work on a bill on radio and television broadcasting, and efforts were underway to introduce deeply conservative amendments to the media law. Additionally, a bill on secret information was sent to parliament for debate. The bill threatened to reduce journalists' access to information significantly by elevating any social or political information of even the most marginal interest into the category of "secret."

After the April Revolution, the country held a referendum on a reformed constitution that abolished journalists' criminal liability for defamation; the interim government issued a decree establishing public service television; and the state broadcaster created a supervisory council including media experts and NGO representatives.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, under the decree, the supervisory council replaces the Kyrgyz president as the appointing authority for the director-general of the Public Radio and Television Corporation of the Kyrgyz Republic (PRTC). Kubat Otorbaev, the head of the Kyrgyz service of Azattyk, was appointed the first PRTC director-general. Also as part of the decree, the interim government adopted a resolution on the PRTC regulating management issues.

Even with pro-media legislation in place, the authorities still are a major determinant in de facto press freedom in the Kyrgyz Republic. As KirTAG news agency Editor-in-Chief Igor Shestakov noted, "It all depends on how democratic the officials in the president's inner circle are, rather than on how democratic the laws are." Thus, the key means of protecting freedom of speech is a legal defense under the Code of Trial Procedure, which is adversarial in nature. If the media do not come to court "all guns blazing," then they will certainly lose, whatever the circumstances, even if the truth is on their side. Evidence, motions, results of expert reports—everything must be presented by the media as the defendant. Moreover, judges show selectivity that involves not only politics, but commercial and family pressures and even their

<sup>2</sup> After the April Revolution, the National Radio and Television Corporation became the Public Radio and Television Corporation of the Kyrgyz Republic.

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own prejudices. As a result, sometimes arguments are heard (“He didn’t have to write it,” “Why was she hanging about at night?”) that blame or stigmatize journalists for carrying out their professional duties. Freelance television journalist Alexandr Kulinsky commented, “The meaning of legislation in the media sector is always selective: Put pressure on whoever you have to. That is why the legislation is tailored with a lot of loopholes—so that through the legislative ‘colander,’ anyone can be allowed either to pass through or to be held back, if it suits someone to do so.”

For decades, the question of broadcast licensing was closed to the public; the government did not disclose the true number of frequencies in any region or nationwide, nor the criteria for awarding frequencies. In early 2010, a government decree transferred control over means of communication from the State Communications Agency (SCA) to the State Anti-Monopoly Agency. After the April Revolution, SCA took over those functions again.

Authorities allocated frequencies very rapidly in the lead-up to elections, with most of the television stations in the capital, Bishkek, expanding their coverage areas. For example, the Echo Manasa television channel, previously limited to the capital, was enabled to broadcast across the whole country. The Chinese television channel SSTV9 won the right to broadcast nationwide as well, and NTS channel was in the process of obtaining frequencies for the whole country. Now, according to information that the journalists obtained from SCA, the capital has no frequencies left, although some remain in the regions.

Shamaral Maychiyev, chair of the Commission for the Consideration of Complaints about the Media, highlighted the military’s use of frequencies and the effect on fair allocations. “The country’s armed forces have, for many years, been given military radio equipment from various countries for humanitarian purposes and have indiscriminately taken over certain frequencies—in practical terms, whatever frequencies the equipment worked on when it was switched on were used,” he said. “That is why it is quite impossible to post lists of allocated frequencies, since at the end of the day,

70 percent of the frequencies are used by the military and 30 percent by civilians.”

In addition, Maychiyev expressed concern regarding the pending digital conversion. “Now, in light of the imminent transition to digital technology, the State Communications Agency is hopeful that all the problems with the limited nature of the frequency spectrum will be solved. But neither the legislative nor the technical changes are being worked on in advance, so the transition to digital technologies and the increase in the frequency spectrum it allows may bring additional problems.”

Since the April Revolution, the licensing situation has remained unclear, but enforcement of licensing law has continued to be discriminatory. In the case of the Uzbek-language television channel Mehson, the prosecution alleged that the station played a destructive role in inciting inter-ethnic conflict in the south of the country. When the prosecution entered a plea for its closure, SCA hastily informed the channel’s owner, Mirzakhojayev Zhavlon, that it was terminating Mehson’s license. After lawyers intervened and succeeded in having SCA review the case, the license was suspended for three months but not withdrawn entirely. SCA made the decision in light of the absence of an official court ruling or government order on the allegations, or any other compelling reason. The owner elected to remake the station into an educational television channel and rename it Bashat, but according to the law, the owner must now go through the frequency allocation procedure again.

The lack of transparency in licensing and frequency allocation procedures shows in cases in which local media were granted national frequencies after the revolution. For example, the interim government announced the nationalization of a few television channels that the ex-president’s family members snapped up previously in raids or sold illegally. In this way, Channel 5 and Pyramid were nationalized. Nobody seems to know what stage the process is in, or whether there will be re-registration followed by licensing procedures.

The former government’s plan for the transition to digital broadcasting was nearly ready in Spring 2010—but as a result of the April Revolution, it has been abandoned. Media members wonder whether the country have a social package with guaranteed nationwide availability; how villagers, who mostly still have outdated television sets from the Soviet era, will be able to upgrade their television sets; and what the state’s vision is for regional television. These questions remain undecided, but the panelists were certain that the country is not ready to make the transition to digital television. For radio, going digital has been postponed until 2018.

On the other hand, the range of other services based on new digital technologies is growing actively. Kyrgyz citizens now enjoy mobile news, Internet banking, and interactive television, for example. However, SCA is trying to gain additional censorship authority by making licensing obligatory for all new parties using digital technologies. Amendments to the licensing law are resulting in double licensing: The television channel that selects and purchases content from several production studios must be licensed, and so must the production studios. So far, the government has not actively exercised control over this issue, but the provision is enshrined in law.

Online media face no licensing problems. Buying a domain name has become simpler, and the government places neither restrictions on opening blogs nor limits on the number of websites that an individual may create. A bill on electronic communications has been brought before the new parliament to cover all the new trends affecting the media, such as Internet sites and mobile telecoms.

In terms of market entry, the media continue to be treated as any other type of business. Furthermore, the tax structure for media enterprises is comparable to that of other businesses. This includes the negative side of tax assessment, which is an extremely confusing and opaque operation. Despite the positive changes in the tax system in 2009, whereby media outlets pay VAT only once they reach an annual income of KGS 4 million (\$85,000), charges for pension insurance are strangling the media and preventing any salary increases. In April, figures for the media's tax liabilities showed that Pyramid was on the verge of bankruptcy, with accumulated debts to the pension fund alone of more than KGS 1,200,000 (\$25,300). All media outlets dream of tax breaks and reductions in pension fund contributions, but so far, the media community has not formulated a collective lobbying strategy.

The basis for the position that media deserve such breaks is their belief that media enterprises are not the same as other commercial enterprises. Although advertorial and entertainment media stand a good chance at profitability, the public service nature of news and information products puts media enterprises in a different class among commercial enterprises. Further, media experience additional pressures faced by no other type of business. For example, not a single other business venture has been subjected to a sudden, all-out audit of its software usage or been closed down for using unlicensed software, but that is exactly what happened to the independent outlet STAN TV not long before April 2010. The unpredictable and punitive use of the tax code and similar laws has the effect of promoting self-censorship.

*Neither murders, nor beatings, nor threats against journalists inspire solidarity among journalists or make them stand up for their rights.*

The situation regarding violence against journalists is paradoxical. On the one hand, after the events of April, the number of crimes organized by the regime against journalists and media outlets declined sharply, down to hardly any. But on the other hand, more and more journalists have fallen victim to the mass revolutionary unrest. With cuts in law enforcement, journalists became a more vulnerable group. As the panelists noted, the perpetrators of the crimes have changed: they used to be the authorities, now they are violent mobs. The targets are no longer individual journalists and editors, but entire teams. Thus, during the April Revolution, NRTC was "taken" by storm by a mob, and all journalists and other staff members who happened to be there sustained injuries. The perpetrators destroyed the station's basic technical equipment as well. Even the Uzbek-language television stations in the south of the country, such as DDD (which had practically nothing to do with politics), went off the air—as journalists and editors were afraid of being torn to pieces by bloodthirsty crowds inflamed with ethnic hatred.

The Osh office of AKIpress news agency stopped work for two weeks after the peak of the conflict in June. When the staff met up again at their building after two weeks, it turned out that all the ethnic Uzbeks and Russians had left the city. Journalists' growing sense of fear and insecurity was evident at the open trial of a group of officials of the Bakiyev regime that had been in the former president's inner circle. Journalists were given special seats in the courtroom, but very few journalists attended the sentencing hearing. Most preferred not to attend, even for this front-page news story.

During the events of June, journalists and media outlets returned overwhelmingly to censorship and self-censorship. They suppressed photos and videos deliberately, out of fear of escalating the conflict and provoking new violence—and out of fear for their personal safety. In response to an organized Internet campaign by ethnic Uzbeks to disseminate information about the atrocities bordering on genocide in Osh, the national and local media reacted by painting an unrealistic picture of reconciliation and friendship between the two groups, obscuring the true picture.

Crimes against journalists are not considered disturbing, and have no resonance among the public, not even within the professional journalism community itself. Maksuda Aйтиyeva

provided an example of the indifference. “What happened to the photojournalist Zhyldyz Bikbaeva was indicative: she was in the midst of a face-off between two gangs of criminals. Each side took her for a photographer for its opponents and the journalist got beaten up more than anyone else. Worse, the case was not classified by the court as a crime against a journalist, but was tried in the context of a general ‘package’ of cases involving gang incidents.”

Neither murders, nor beatings, nor threats against journalists inspire solidarity among journalists or make them stand up for their rights. Owners and editors are not liable for injuries or disabilities sustained during active duty. Indeed, the reverse is often true: They push journalists into taking undue risks. Editorial policy, where there is such a thing, makes no provision for journalists’ safety, and media houses provide no life or health insurance. However, during and after the events surrounding the conflict in the south, the Soros Foundation-Kyrgyzstan launched a project to support journalists in trouble, though it is limited to providing financial assistance.

Regarding the laws protecting the editorial independence of public television, the law makes no de jure provision for preferential treatment for either the public or the private media. However, current practices allow certain media outlets some advantages in access to information, advertising and other sources of income, discriminatory assessment of the media products produced, and direct and indirect financial and material support. However, the tradition of unequal access to public information—widespread before the April Revolution—was largely eliminated during the second half of the year.

PRTC operates in compliance with the provisional government decree regarding public radio and television companies, and its supervisory council has started working actively on the development and implementation of an editorial policy. In particular, PRTC introduced a ban on paid political advertising during newscasts. Political promotional material must be put into separate segments, with different announcers.

Most of the country’s media have no editorial policy, but neither media leaders nor journalists even realize that there is a need for one. For example, PRTC’s regional outlets serve two masters: the regional state administrations, on which their budgets depend; and the PRTC administration, which has its hand on the tiller. The White House, by agreement with regional state administration heads, appoints media chiefs—a continuing practice that leads to media depending financially and editorially on those structures.

The new Constitution of Kyrgyzstan, adopted by referendum on June 27, 2010, introduced an unprecedented provision: “No one may be prosecuted for spreading information,

defaming, or demeaning the honor and dignity of an individual.” In connection with changes in the constitutional provisions on libel and slander, the government needed to introduce corresponding changes in other legislation regulating media activities. Litigation in cases of libel and slander is complicated by the fact that there is no legal concept that a public figure should be subject to a higher standard of proof. The decriminalization of libel and slander did little to change the situation in statistical terms, as the constitutional articles have almost never been used in the courts. The panelists said that this is explained by the difficulty of proving guilt at trial—thus attempts are rare.

The panelists expressed the belief that a more sophisticated law enforcement system had started to work against journalists. In 2010, authorities had begun the practice of indicting journalists under “non-traditional” articles such as “knowingly false accusation.” For example, in response to the newspaper *Tribuna*’s smears of Omurbek Tekebaev, one of the leaders of the interim government, prosecutors revived a two-year-old lawsuit against Melis Turganbaev, the editor of *Tribuna* and a senior representative of the Ministry of Internal Affairs. The editor was convicted and put in prison after the April Revolution for “deliberate failure to comply with an order of the court.” Uzbek-language journalists and media began to be charged with “inciting ethnic hatred.” Even Internet sites, which are not recognized legally as media, may be prosecuted if courts deem them to be harmful, or damaging to someone’s reputation and dignity.

Journalists do not have special rights compared to regular citizens regarding access to information. Not one state body has complied with the requirements of the Law on Access to Information Held by State Bodies and Local Self-Government Bodies, which sets requirements for information collection, dissemination, and storage to help information flow. Earlier, Bakiyev set the very same goals, but the reform did not succeed and neither has the law. Access to information in state structures still depends on the personal will of managers to be more open and to talk to the press. Most government agency websites are not informative and do not have the capacity to respond to urgent requests or provide rapid responses. Most departmental press services are essentially incapable of providing real-time information; most press service workers themselves cannot obtain access to departmental information.

In its last months, the Bakiyev administration was remarkable for its tightening of control and censorship of the media and its attempts to limit journalists’ access to information to only the official version of events. At the beginning of the year (February 2010), bloggers on the kloop.kg platform tested mechanisms for obtaining information by requesting

information from the Central Agency for Development and Investment on the sale of Kyrgyztelecom. In response to the formal request, representatives of the State National Security Service came calling, and advised that it would be unwise to follow the example of Genadiy Pavlyuk, the journalist and editor of the online edition of *Belyi Parohod*. He was killed by being thrown from his sixth-floor apartment in Almaty, Kazakhstan on December 16, 2009.

Since the April Revolution, no lawsuits have been filed for refusal to provide information, as the heads of the state agencies have become more compliant in their responses to requests for information. In the first month after the revolution, however, journalists did experience difficulties in accessing key information from the interim government because the new press service proved that it was no less sophisticated a media filter than the previous, more autocratic, regimes. For example, a few days after the June conflict began, journalists found it impossible to acquire information about the number of victims, either from the Ministry of Internal Affairs or the Ministry of Health. Kyrgyz journalists expressed that foreign journalists had much greater freedom and access to information, particularly in the post-revolutionary period and during and after the inter-ethnic conflict; top officials gave interviews and information willingly to foreign reporters.

After that initial month, access to information improved somewhat, as most agencies began to form supervisory councils. The councils may fall short of improving transparency in department activities, but they have contributed to easier acquisition of information. Also, civil society representatives have the opportunity to participate in some of these councils. But as before, in most cases journalists fail to get the information they need because of their own lack of skills.

Journalist access to foreign sources has been possible theoretically—but retransmission and reprinting of foreign material has not. Authorities have denied requests from a number of foreign (Russian) media to access governmental agency information. Early in 2010, the government started blocking the Azattyk website, Fergana.ru, and *Belyi Parohod's* website, along with a few specialized sites. By March, Azattyk's radio and television programs were taken off the air. Authorities restricted the use of foreign media during and after the events surrounding the inter-ethnic conflict in June, but in the last quarter of the year, access to foreign information began to relax again.

Entry to the profession remained free and unrestricted in 2010.

## OBJECTIVE 2: PROFESSIONAL JOURNALISM

### Kyrgyzstan Objective Score: 1.61

Objective 2 retained essentially the same score as last year, with only one indicator showing notable change. Indicator 2 (journalism ethics) received somewhat lower scores compared to last year. All indicators scored close to the objective score, with the exception of indicator 4 (coverage of key events), which scored about two-thirds of a point higher.

The Kyrgyz-Uzbek clashes exposed the bias and lack of professionalism in the Kyrgyz media. According to Iskender Bektur, "The greatest problem is that journalists do not know how to distinguish between providing information and facts and expressing their own opinions." In the panelists' opinion, the news in the Kyrgyz-language media could be visualized as an inverted sine wave: from mid-March, the leading "opposition" publications (*Forum, Alibi*) growing in anti-Uzbek sentiment and propaganda; then on the eve of the events in June, an explosion of "hate speech"; then after the conflict, deep self-censorship and an avoidance of talking about ethnic relations; then a spike in hate speech once again in the pre-election period.

The Commission for the Consideration of Complaints about the Media organized a special event in July, involving linguists, conflict specialists, and psychologists to discuss and expose bias and polarization in events coverage in the south. In a report requested by the commission, psychologist Nina Bagdasarova analyzed various publications' stories about the ethnic conflict and noted some remarkable characteristics: "In many stories, there is very reckless handling of eyewitness

#### 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 and retain qualified personnel within the media profession.
- > Entertainment programming does not eclipse news and information programming.
- > Facilities and equipment for gathering, producing, and distributing news are modern and efficient.
- > Quality niche reporting and programming exist (investigative, economics/business, local, political).



*Shestakov commented, "Most journalists do not know the rules of ethics. The media frequently call people criminals before the court hands down a guilty verdict. In most media, there are no requirements to observe the rules of ethics."*

accounts. There are stories in which only a single witness to the events is used as the source."

The panelists' evaluations confirmed that the Agency for Social Technologies carried out a study in support of the OSCE Center in Bishkek. The study sampled a population of 153 editions containing about 1,600 stories, and included print editions; three Internet sites; and publications in Kyrgyz, Uzbek, and Russian languages. A content analysis showed that 471 stories contained markers of divisiveness emphasizing ethnic and other differences in terms of superiority and preference.

Panelists cited minimal educational programs for journalists and a lack of editorial policies as the key reasons for the extremely low professional level in the media. The panelists said outlets have no editorial staff capable of implementing a coherent strategy for providing news, and in some cases, the editors and owners of the publications issue orders for biased coverage. Shestakov commented, "Most journalists do not know the rules of ethics. The media frequently call people criminals before the court hands down a guilty verdict. In most media, there are no requirements to observe the rules of ethics."

Against this background, the new PRTC editorial policy is very encouraging. The channel has departed from its tradition of unconditional service and is trying to comply with international standards of reporting, balancing views on the conflicted political situation during the election campaign when one candidate, Kamchibek Tashiyev, was accused of intending to bring back the president, who had fled, and restore the *ancien regime*.

During the inter-ethnic conflict in the run-up to the elections, the news flow could be characterized as an information war, and journalists and editors did not abide by any professional standards or ethical norms. The Kyrgyz-language newspapers in particular violated ethical standards and featured speculation, a preponderance of opinion rather than fact, and vulgar language. Following the April Revolution, NRTC and Channel 5 also stood out for launching an aggressive

propaganda campaign against all of those close to the Bakiyev family. Their use of this old technique to manipulate the public mood aroused great discontent among certain segments of the population.

Lacking in solidarity, the journalism community did not set itself to the task of developing and adopting ethical standards over the past year. Felix Kulov, the leader of one of the parliamentary parties, initiated a strengthening of legislative norms and introduced mechanisms to combat ethnic hatred and pornography in the media. However, the expert community predicts a future growth of censorship under the pretext of compliance with constitutional and other norms, and also with journalistic ethics.

Journalists and editors in the Kyrgyz media have always practiced self-censorship. However, 2010 was a very rough year in this sense: in January and February, the level of self-censorship among journalists and editors in the vast majority of media outlets reached a peak, under pressure from the office of the president—which actually functioned as a censorship institution. Even newspapers from the political opposition were forced to reduce their level of criticism substantially, and the number of taboo subjects increased.

After the April Revolution, self-censorship began to decline at first, then increased rapidly again. Journalists affiliated with political parties and individual political groups that came to power after the April Revolution could not cover the crisis within the government, the regional power centers' disobedience of the central authorities, the conflicts among the new political leaders, social and economic realities, and many other matters. Later, the inter-ethnic conflict in the south gave rise to a new cycle of self-censorship. The overwhelming majority of media avoided writing about the conflict, or put out cheerful pieces describing how the conflict was resolved and reconciliation reigns.

Alina Saginbayeva, director of Central Asian News Service, part of AKIpress, recalled that staff of AKIpress's Osh office in the south had sent in bloody images and screaming text as the conflict unfolded, but the management of the Internet site decided not to post those kinds of stories, to avoid provoking a new round of violence. Most other media followed the same policy. At the same time, the Uzbek diaspora outside and inside Kyrgyzstan used the Internet actively to cover developments. As a result, the flow of news was imbalanced, and some panelists expressed their opinion that many of the most popular reports were not credible, and even libelous. However, some Kyrgyz-language publications of the *Alibi* type flouted the law openly. Social and psychological experts analyzed stories in *Alibi* and *Diydor* and found explicit appeals to ethnic hatred.

Some in the Kyrgyz media community objected to the posture of foreign media as well in their coverage of the conflict. Nina Bagdasarova authored a report from a psychosocial perspective on media materials surrounding the inter-ethnic clashes, and she said that the conflict demonstrated the unwillingness even of a number of reputable foreign media to work without bias, with social responsibility, and in observance of journalist professional ethics.<sup>3</sup>

Immediately after the events of June, the country's human rights organizations were forced to appeal to the administrators of YouTube to ask them to block the most shocking video clips depicting people—including children—described in the clips as Uzbeks being tortured and killed. Requests for the video stream of inter-ethnic clashes to be censored were aimed at preventing a new cycle of escalation in the south and other regions of the country. After several months, the vast majority of experts in Kyrgyzstan began to say that the Kyrgyz media had lost the information war to Uzbek Internet sources.

Regarding coverage of key events and issues, the political field has expanded considerably for journalists since the April Revolution, and the increase in political players has naturally led to more leaks of compromising information against adversaries and rivals. Across the media sector as a whole, there remain relatively few closed topics: the regional (north-south) divide, calls for an increase in radical Islamic influence, and the economic crisis. At the same time, each media outlet has begun to have its own closed topics, depending on the interests of its owners. At critical times—revolutions, ethnic conflicts, economic crises—journalists have proven incapable of covering the most topical issues and subjects as they come up.

However, the new media, including Internet sites, SMS, and other mobile communications, have become alternatives to the traditional media channels. SMS information aired promptly over television channel NBT during the revolution, providing citizens with an information stream about the events. The first and only 24 hour-a-day service that reported what was happening on the eve of the revolution in Talas was the Diesel website ([www.diesel.kg](http://www.diesel.kg)). At the same time, the site blocked the subject of Christian-Muslim interfaith conflict. In turn, the government shut down the site for a couple of days to eliminate the opportunity for openly nationalistic, extremist posts on the discussion pages.

Despite the reduction in political pressure after the April Revolution, the media did not in any way become a model

<sup>3</sup> Extract from the manuscript of *Socio-psychological expert report on media materials in the area of descriptions of the conflict and interethnic relations* (Spring–Summer 2010, Kyrgyzstan), author N. Bagdasarova.

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of openness. However, the media eagerly talk now about the events of the recent past, when the Bakiyev family was in charge. For example, the media revealed to the population that last year, gas was supplied from Uzbekistan at half the price that the state supplies gas to its own citizens, and made public the bank balances of the people closest to the president.

At most media outlets in Kyrgyzstan, journalists' salaries do not cover their most basic needs. Adel Laisheva, program director of the Internews office in Kyrgyzstan, said that journalist incomes in Kyrgyzstan are the lowest in the Commonwealth of Independent States; only in Moldova are journalists' salaries comparable.<sup>4</sup> The panelists estimated that the average pay of journalists in the print media and leading electronic media in Bishkek is at best \$300 to \$400 dollars per month, about \$200 in the news agencies, and no more than \$100 for regional journalists. At the leading publications in the capital, wages have fallen dramatically since the onset of the global economic crisis. According to Shestakov, the best journalists at *Vecherniy Bishkek* pulled in about \$700 per month formerly; now the top rate is under \$500. Among private publications, employers revived the practice of paying wages that are off the books and not taxed. The low pay and prestige of the profession, and the high degree of risk to health and life it entails, result in high turnover in the field, with a constant influx of new people into the media.

Media members have no financial incentives to create high-quality material or seek professional growth. In many outlets, remuneration is more reminiscent of Soviet days, with low-quality staff serving the interests of their superiors for little pay. As a result, journalists take orders and bill for material in order to improve their financial situation. This

<sup>4</sup> Editor's note: Panelists in Tajikistan reported lower salaries, including accepting foodstuffs as payment. Moldova's panelists reported that media competition had helped to raise salaries. Comparisons are not adjusted for purchasing power parity. Although the Kyrgyzstan panelists' assertions may not be completely accurate, such perceptions and misperceptions are nonetheless worth taking note of.

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*Furthermore, commented Laisheva, “While complaining about their lack of capacity to produce quality content, regional and metropolitan television companies are basically not even trying to look for alternatives.”*

opens the door for politicians and business organizations to interfere. Journalists in the capital that are more committed to the profession and have good journalistic ability take on multiple jobs: they write for news agencies, and foreign newspapers and organizations such as the Institute for War and Peace Reporting. Regional journalists have long been forced to combine journalism with other kinds of income-generating activities. As Aytieva noted, commonly journalists in Osh work second jobs as part-time cooks, taxi drivers, hairdressers, etc. Journalists at the state publications especially employ such strategies. Unlike those in the private media, journalists at many state outlets have no prospects to receive royalties on top of their pay.

Regarding the balance of news and entertainment, news remained the most in-demand, most- featured product of the television media. On PRTC, news programs were broadcast, as before, six times a day on weekdays. A large proportion of news programming was also dedicated to the year’s political turmoil. As Aytieva noted, “During political crises and states of permanent revolution, politics and political news become the principal source of entertainment.” For the moment, it is not possible to say whether the television media show any trend toward news programs being displaced by entertainment, because the economic crisis has simply left outlets with no money to spend on entertainment programming. The panelists did not see the share of news programming in the electronic media falling in the near future, and the PRTC supervisory council’s strategic plan anticipates significant strengthening of news programs. In quantitative terms, news editions will be brought up to eight editions a day, though the main emphasis will be on qualitative changes. To that end, the supervisory council is negotiating with the World Association of Public Television for membership in order to gain access to high-quality, free content of social significance and the right to dub it into Kyrgyz.

The situation is different for print and radio. Aytieva commented, “They put the Azattyk morning news on Radio Salam in Batken. If the DJ is slow off the mark, and does not switch in the Azattyk news segment on time or overlaps music with the news, you get angry listeners—mostly old people—

coming to the radio station right away waving their canes, demanding to listen again to what was in the drop-out.” For a long time, radio listeners have been unable to find any alternative to the state radio first channel, Kyrgyz Radiosu, for talk radio. All other companies, which combine the entertainment genre with serious social, political, economic, and other programs, have changed their profiles to become “DJ desks.”

The print media continue as before, with entertainment publications leading in circulation. The newspaper with the highest circulation, *Super-Info*, dropped back a little to between 90,000 and 100,000 copies, while *Vechniy Bishkek*, which re-registered as a news and advertising publication, has kept up a consistently high circulation. In comparison, the business and socio-political press has microscopically small circulations of 1,500 to 5,000 copies per publication.

In their discussion of journalist access to modern equipment, the panelists addressed questions surrounding digitalization. By 2012, television companies must renew their equipment completely in connection with the transition to digital broadcasting, but most of them are not prepared. The country has three HD-format cameras of an internationally acceptable quality, but not one television company has the capacity or technical specifications to output HD video signals directly without format conversion. No one in the journalism environment or among media management is even hinting about converged editorial facilities. With the exception of NTS, which has an interactive (though primitive) Internet version, none of the leading television companies have websites.

Public television’s Channel One is in the most deplorable state of all, because what little technical equipment it had was looted and smashed during the events surrounding the April Revolution. PRTC’s software and technical facilities in general are at least 20 years behind international standards, in the view of the panelists. Work efficiency is reduced significantly by operators and journalists that lack professionalism, and by systematic violations of professional standards and regulations. The result is increased wear and tear on equipment, and technical staff with a minimum of productive output. Technologically, regional media are even more behind, and PRTC has problems related to the combination of different formats used in broadcasting regional television programs around the regions. The only honorable exception to this litany is STAN TV, which works online, and its young journalists, such as Marina Kim, who work actively as professional bloggers.

On the print side, journalists are equipped poorly; no capital-based publications, let alone regional press, have enough computers. Editorial offices fail to provide their

reporters with Dictaphones or photo equipment. Many journalists can be seen still using pens and paper at news conferences. At all editorial offices in the country, material is written and laid out using unlicensed software. For news agencies, the only problem is securing access to the Internet and stable connections. In periods of political conflict, mobile networks are unreliable as a rule.

So far, only a few media outlets have procured their own equipment independently. If the media sector had once hoped for grant support in acquiring equipment, those hopes have been dashed. Donor organizations are very reluctant to fund technological retooling. Furthermore, commented Laisheva, "While complaining about their lack of capacity to produce quality content, regional and metropolitan television companies are basically not even trying to look for alternatives. For example, Internews via satellite allows local television stations to pick up video content from their daily production free of charge and record it independently. But none of the television stations in the regions or in the capital does so. Pressed about missed opportunities, they say that they would need to hire someone specially to do that, to record our programming on a full-time basis." On a similar note, Aytiyeva noted, "We provided training on the Quark 7 desktop publishing software for our regional media. The editors really liked the program's features, and saw the technological advantages. But as they cannot afford to buy licensed software, they went on using versions of PageMaker. So it turned out that we wasted our money on the trainer."

The Kyrgyz media sector has no high-quality specialized journalism. First, all editorial offices are understaffed, and to retain experts on particular topics who could work on investigative material would be a luxury; second, their low degree of professionalism and the poor conditions under which they work do not allow journalists to produce high-quality, specialized products. Some successful media companies have specialized niches in the services area, such as the Russian-language weeklies on automobiles and a handful of entertainment and lifestyle publications.

So far, no broadcaster has succeeded in producing analytical news programs because the available pool of journalistic and expert talent is insufficient. "In recent years, a few news websites have appeared— Bishkek Press Club 24.kg, AKIpress, and Vesti.kg—where much of the news product is based on comments by experts on significant events," Shestakov noted. "This way of putting out material has become widely used on television channels PRTC and Channel 5. However, on the whole, the media make little use of analytical resources— especially in the regions, where there are few experts."

Though it is still rare, the blogging platform is allowing specialization to take shape. One parliamentary blog is running, along with another blog on Kyrgyz culture.

AKIpress news agency's attempt to develop political and business analysis separate from the main news stream proved unprofitable. Saginbayeva, speaking as AKIpress's Central Asian news director, also said that the team of journalist/analysts had not yet gelled or achieved the desired level of quality. Furthermore, the number of expert sources and research institutions is quite small, and the expert analysis that is available is very poor.

### OBJECTIVE 3: PLURALITY OF NEWS

#### Kyrgyzstan Objective Score: 1.88

While the score for this objective remained exactly the same as last year, indicators 1 (plurality of sources and viewpoints) and 2 (citizen access to news) showed improvement, which was offset by a lower score for indicator 7 (coverage of minority issues). Indicator 7 also fell short of the objective score by a little more than half a point. A score for the new indicator 8 (coverage of local, national, and international news) was about three-quarters of a point lower than the objective score and offset improvements elsewhere. Indicators 2 and 4 (news agencies), on the other hand, exceeded the objective score by about three-quarters of a point each.

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

##### PLURALITY OF NEWS SOURCES INDICATORS:

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

*Even before the interethnic conflict in Osh and the unrest in Jalalabad in June 2010, the mobile telephony networks launched the Kush Kabar voice news service in Russian and Kyrgyz.*

In the capital, an enormous range of media is available. The price range is also very wide: newspapers cost an average of KGS 7 to KGS 10 (\$0.15 to \$0.21), although some even cost KGS 40 (\$0.85). There are glossy magazines from KGS 35 to KGS 700 (\$0.75 to \$15). Many imported print titles are available as well, mainly Russian and Kazakh. Of course, in regional centers, the choice is much less diverse, and in remote rural areas, access to any media is very limited. "All news accumulates in Bishkek, and in practice does not get as far as the regions. The further away the district, the less presence the press will have in it," Laisheva commented. In particular, in villages only employees of local government receive—by compulsory subscription—a range of government publications, such as *Erkin Too* and *Kyrgyz Tuusu*. Furthermore, most villages do not have Internet access, while the principal domestic news sources available are PRTC and ELTR,<sup>5</sup> the foreign Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Kyrgyz Office (Azattyk), and Russian television channels ORT and RTR. In the south, Uzbek and Tajik state and private channels are also available. Frequently, local people know much more about the local news than the media members themselves.

Shestakov observed that print media publications belonging to political parties, which are focused right now on their goals and media objectives, are likely to grow in the presidential election year of 2011. He surmised that this may have a positive effect on regional print media development.

The demand for radio in regional markets changed significantly once authorities granted Evropa media group its license to broadcast nationwide in 2010 and it entered the regional markets. For example, according to local polls in the south, listeners ranked the media leaders as follows: (1) Kyrgyzdar Obondoru; (2) Evropa; and (3) Russian radio and EIFM. Local radio station Almaz-Yug (Diamond South) brought up the rear. Among listeners who prefer talk radio, the undisputed leader was Azattyk, with a fraction listening to Kyrgyz Radiosu (PRTC radio Channel One).

Regarding new media outlets, demand and growth have been on the increase. Even before the interethnic conflict in Osh and the unrest in Jalalabad in June 2010, the mobile

telephony networks launched the Kush Kabar voice news service in Russian and Kyrgyz. The networks had already been developing swiftly over the past few years. The Uzbek-speaking population has repeatedly stated the urgent need for Uzbek-language local information. Currently, programs are being developed to support news programs in those areas through voice messages in three languages: Kyrgyz, Russian, and Uzbek.

The importance of social networks is growing as well. About 1040 Kyrgyz citizens have Twitter accounts; 36,000 (mostly English-speaking) have Facebook accounts; about 340,000 use *Moi mir*, mostly via mobile; *odnoclassniki.ru* has 200,000 users; and *v kontakte* has 170,000 to 200,000 users. According to Bektur Iskender, Facebook and Twitter are probably used most commonly to obtain news, as users of both sites tend to be very educated.

Kyrgyz law places no limits on access to information from any source, whether domestic, regional, or international. However, citizens face plenty of challenges. Factors that affect access include Kyrgyzpochtasy's monopoly on mail delivery, slow service, and favoritism of select owners. For example, thanks to his closeness to the ex-presidential family, Kylychbek Sultanov, the owner and editor of the newspaper *Super-Info*, succeeded initially in creating a favorable distribution agreement that spared it any competition. As a result, *Super-Info* achieved record circulation, with sales of 110,000 copies. However, after the April Revolution and the abolition of *Super-Info's* non-competitive mode of distribution, sales fell sharply to 89,000 copies. In the regions, Kyrgyzbasmasoz JSC has a distribution monopoly, which not only inflates the price of the products sold but also means that months pass before the money is channeled back to the press outlet. However, immediately after the revolution began, kiosks of alternative distribution companies started to reappear. Many publications in the capital and regions set up their own distribution channels.

Low purchasing power is another significant obstacle to citizens' access to diverse information. During the economic crisis, demand fell for printed products, especially imported products. Consequently, even high-quality foreign magazines and newspapers, such as *National Geographic*, that used to be imported have virtually no customers now. Even newspapers published in Kyrgyzstan are simply unaffordable for many people. At the local level, other impediments include a lack of foreign language skills among the population and unfamiliarity with the Internet.

Before the April Revolution, political life was lived under the dictates of family and clan rule, and only a handful of opposition media managed to convey alternative information. After the revolution, the spectrum of political views expanded

<sup>5</sup> The abbreviation ELTR comes from the Kyrgyz word *el* (people, folk) + T(TV) + R (radio).

radically—first because censorship had been abolished, and second because political parties began reactivating before the parliamentary elections. After the revolution, the media sector did not undergo any realignment or redistribution, because the executive branch only managed to stabilize itself, and the parliament is still organizing. Following the announcement of the nationalization of leading television channels (Channel 5 and Pyramid), no further action has been taken and the fate of those companies is unknown. At the same time, NRTC owners reorganized the outlet into the PRTC quickly and decisively.

Regardless of the form of ownership, language, or region from which individual outlets come, it is difficult or even impossible for the media in Kyrgyzstan to call themselves unbiased and serving the public interest. The events surrounding the revolution, and the inter-ethnic conflict, provided vivid examples of the partiality and bias of the media of all kinds.

Kyrgyzstan has several news agencies: the state news agency, Kabar; private news agencies AKIpress, 24.kg, and Zamandash; and agencies such as Tazar and Vesti.kg that provide digests. The country has a number of foreign news agencies as well, one of which, KirTAG, opened in 2010 and is a Kazakh expansion into the Kyrgyz news market. AKIpress and 24.kg still dominate in distribution and news, and as before, their news columns continue to be in demand by practically all the media. Borrowing news without an attribution or a link is common across all media—except in cases where such action poses a risk of being taken to court, as when a story states something compromising about or by senior officials. In those cases, the media are very scrupulous about naming the source.

News agency services are free, except for archived material. To maximize prospects of commercial success, AKIpress and 24.kg emphasize producing original information, preferring to obtain and disseminate information in real time and without borrowing from foreign sources. In 2010, 24.kg encountered a lack of confidence among some media outlets because of its ties to one of Kyrgyzstan's leading politicians, Felix Kulov.

With grant support dwindling for radio news services, the number of radio stations that systematically produce news fell significantly. Currently, the news is aired on those radio stations that never depended solely on grants. But the news is a priority product only for public radio Channel One, where the major news service *Kabarlar* is centered; for the new radio station EhIFM; and for the local radio station Salam, which produces at least three editions of local news a day. Most stations assemble their news segments from news agency feeds, and do not have any correspondents on staff. For the

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past three or four months, the revamped editorial office of OshTV has been producing the news in a new format that covers the whole country and includes its own news about events in Bishkek, following the news about Osh. Although it is complex technically to produce the news in that way, by succeeding in doing so, OshTV has underscored its status as the number two station in the Republic.

In terms of media ownership, the largest bundle of media companies—four television channels and a network of regional state newspapers—is in state hands. Consumers do not know what belongs to whom, though occasionally the Kyrgyz-language media publish rumors about the media holdings of politicians.

Predicting trends even for the immediate future in the development of media conglomerates is a very difficult matter. According to some panelists, the parliamentary majority party has the best prospects of expanding the influence of their media because, as in other Commonwealth of Independent States countries, they have no obvious rivals in the form of rich business organizations. The second group of panelists expressed the belief that even though political parties are currently the only possible players in the media privatization process, essentially, foreign companies and interest groups could hide behind them.

A third group of panelists disagreed with that prediction, too: Kulinsky expressed the view that parties are now bankrupt after the election race. There is no money available in the market, and what had been brought in from outside had been squandered. Panelists said that they knew for sure only that the NBT television company is 100 percent Kazakh-owned.

Assessing the situation with minority-language media, the panelists were unanimously pessimistic. The traditional sources of “controlled news,” even if they continue to say the same information out of inertia, clearly display political and ideological bankruptcy, the panelists said. The cultural centers of the national Assembly of the People of Kyrgyzstan

*The panelists pointed to another trend of note: the expanding range of news streams in Chinese. They include SSTV 4 and the special program Zhungogo Nazar, which is broadcast with translation into Kyrgyz by television channels EITR and NRTC and is under contract to TV SUAR (Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region Television).*

publish their own newspapers or periodical bulletins; NRTC airs a program entitled *Wheel of Life*, dedicated to ethnic minorities; state newspapers in the southern regions are published in Uzbek and include *Ush Sadosi* ("Osh Echo") and *Zhalolobod Tongi* ("Jalalabad Tongi"); and there is a group of Uzbek-language private media, both broadcast and print. But the tawdry, lifeless editions and programs from those media outlets are not relevant to the lives of ethnic minorities and are not in these people's interest. Furthermore, as a hangover of old Soviet tradition, many minorities look down on news in their own minority language. At OshTV and Mehson TV, any attempt to get rid of that approach and reflect the interests of a culturally rich ethnic group was viewed as a near-criminal act.

A striking example of discriminatory treatment based on the language of the medium involved the conviction of Uzbek-language television companies OshTV and Mehson TV. Even before they began broadcasting current events in the "no comment" mode, NRTC and ITR had put out a similar thread. However, the fact that OshTV and Mehson TV featured the Uzbek leader and Uzbek protest groups was the deciding factor for the public condemnation of those media and their journalists, as well as for the prosecutor and the courts to close them down.

The panelists pointed to another trend of note: the expanding range of news streams in Chinese. They include SSTV 4 and the special program *Zhungogo Nazar*, which is broadcast with translation into Kyrgyz by television channels EITR and NRTC and is under contract to TV SUAR (Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region Television). Turkish-speaking television airtime is also increasing; Turkish television draws on financial resources as well as the production resources of the professional technical staff based at Kyrgyz-Turkish Manas University. There is also some evidence that migrants from South Korea are still producing their print edition. In recent months, several international organizations working in the

country began to actively develop projects of institutional support to Uzbek-language media.

None of the government agencies exercise any particular control over ethnic media. They arouse the interest of the authorities only when they stick their noses into the arena of national politics.

Ethnic minorities are not the only groups whose interests are ignored or restricted. The media neglect women, sexual minorities, members of certain occupational groups, people with disabilities, and others as well.

News programs in the capital usually focus on Bishkek itself and its immediate surroundings, although they include international news feeds actively. The choice of foreign news is interesting. Over the past year, it was particularly evident that the media emphasized news about disasters abroad: floods and other calamities, people's deviant behavior, and coups and revolutions. Perhaps they did so to persuade citizens that no matter how bad things are in Kyrgyzstan, they are even worse everywhere else in the world.

By contrast, coverage of the regions suffers, except in times of crisis. Outside of Osh and Chui television, the regional state television stations produce a very limited amount of media content, filling an hour or two of broadcasting over the NRTC frequency once a week. However, they submit several items a week for NRTC to broadcast in the news or in its special program on life in the regions. The weeklies, which lack correspondents in the regions, are even less focused on regional events. Members of the blogosphere prefer not to cover regional issues, because such stories tend to fuel discussion-board debates marked by discriminatory language.

#### **OBJECTIVE 4: BUSINESS MANAGEMENT**

#### **Kyrgyzstan Objective Score: 1.27**

The events that shook Kyrgyzstan, along with the ongoing downturn in the world economy, kept the score for this objective in the "unsustainable, mixed system" range and pushed it lower. All the indicators, save indicator 2 (multiple sources of revenue) received lower scores this year. No indicator exceeded the objective score by more than half a point, although none scored more than half a point behind, either.

Business management is a shortcoming for many Kyrgyz media outlets. According to the panelists, nobody in Kyrgyzstan is trained to manage media businesses; traditionally, journalists with an interest in philology occupy such posts. "Management is the weakest point of

the media business in Kyrgyzstan,” Shestakov commented. “In most media outlets, there is no systematic approach to management. As a rule, media companies do not even make business plans for the current period, let alone plan ahead to the next year. Similarly, the media do not plan their advertising income. The editorial offices are basically managed by the journalists.” Kutimov also noted that it is difficult for media companies to show honest accounting, because many suppliers and partners work illegally and do not provide their media clients with proper accounting documents.

Before the April Revolution, there was a clear split among the national media—those favored by the political elite, which received preferential treatment; and the rest, which were not only subjected to political pressure, but were struggling financially. Most private media editors, with the exception of those affiliated with opposition political forces, wanted to get into the good graces of one or another of the biased elites.

Because of the collapse of the advertising market in 2010, the volume of profits in the media—especially radio and television—decreased substantially. Under pressure from more powerful national rivals, as well as a vanishing stream of donor support from international organizations, regional radio studios could barely pay their production costs and struggled to survive. In the run-up to the parliamentary elections, many electronic media were practically on the verge of bankruptcy and living hand to mouth. Nevertheless, in commercial terms, many radio and television stations in the capital and Osh remained profitable. The most commercially profitable of all radio companies was Kyrgyzstan Obondoru, a part of Evropa media group.

#### MEDIA ARE WELL-MANAGED ENTERPRISES, ALLOWING EDITORIAL INDEPENDENCE.

##### **BUSINESS MANAGEMENT INDICATORS:**

- > Media outlets operate as efficient and self-sustaining enterprises.
- > 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.
- > Government subsidies and advertising are distributed fairly, governed by law, and neither subvert editorial independence nor distort the market.
- > Market research is used to formulate strategic plans, enhance advertising revenue, and tailor the product to the needs and interests of the audience.
- > Broadcast ratings, circulation figures, and internet statistics are reliably and independently produced.

*Before the April Revolution, there was a clear split among the national media—those favored by the political elite, which received preferential treatment; and the rest, which were not only subjected to political pressure, but were struggling financially.*

On the print media side, scarcely 15 to 20 percent could be considered business-oriented enterprises. Most publications combine the positions of editor-in-chief and manager, and for that person, there is no distinction between content and fundraising. There are no sales, customer relations, or similar departments in those media outlets.

In the regions, private commercial newspapers can develop easily, and state media have difficulty competing with the private sector. Ivan Kutimov noted that his company, Vest, has found success in the Kara-Balta region. “We, of course, have no big circulation volumes like some of the nationwide titles do, but we do have rather a successful media business. We have a monopoly in our territory; the state newspaper, with its forced subscriptions, does not come into the picture. As we have correctly identified our readership and have a profile that is in accordance with market demand, we have been operating for over a decade.” New competitors invariably make commercial blunders and fail, however.

Most panelists agreed that advertising constitutes the main and irreplaceable source of income for all types of media, but said that assessing the strengths and weaknesses of the Kyrgyzstan advertising market is difficult, as it has never been transparent. Newspapers together hold only 10 percent of the media advertising market, and survive mostly on sales. Newspapers, as a rule, do not rely on subscriptions; if a large part of the circulation were to go out to subscribers, publishers would have a difficult time extracting timely payment from the Kyrgyz postal distribution system.

Turat Akimov, editor-in-chief of *Dyengi i Vlast* (“Money and Power”), spoke of the profits eaten up by print production. “The ideal distribution for media outlets is that production costs are covered by sales, while advertising generates pure income on top. But for us, production is often not covered by sales of the production run. For example, producing a copy of *Avtogid* costs KGS 100 (\$2.13); until recently it retailed at KGS 25 (\$0.53), and a couple of months ago it went up to KGS 40 retail (\$0.85). Even with the increase in retail cost, losses are not covered, and the share of advertising has to both cover costs and generate revenue. But at most



*Before the April Revolution, the advertising agency Lenta (affiliated with Bakiyev's family media business) held more 90 percent of the advertising market in the media, while NRTC held its ongoing de facto monopoly on advertising orders.*

newspapers, even entertainment newspapers, the advertising share is small," he said.

Publications with large circulations and their own distribution systems report decent results. Most news agencies pull in 40 percent of their revenue from subscriptions and 60 percent from advertising. During the election campaign, the ratio changed to 1 percent and 99 percent. Based on backroom estimates for television stations, the election campaign brought in between \$150 million and \$300 million in advertising revenue for the media. The head of NRTC stated revenue of \$60 million. The only campaign advertisement fee made public was NRTC's price for the first three weeks: one minute of airtime cost KGS 110,000 (\$2,300). The last week of the campaign was particularly successful for the television media, as airtime was gobbled up. After the election, calm set in again in the advertising market.

In Kyrgyzstan, political preferences disallow advertising agencies from developing freely as business enterprises, and create unequal access to advertising revenue. Before the April Revolution, the advertising agency Lenta (affiliated with Bakiyev's family media business) held more 90 percent of the advertising market in the media, while NRTC held its ongoing de facto monopoly on advertising orders. In the panelists' estimation, the 2010 parliamentary election campaigns resulted in advertising spending of \$120 million to \$130 million. NRTC announced a profit from the advertising campaign of more than \$60 million.

After the April Revolution, one of Babyrbek Zheyenbekov's media outlets attempted to break the print media advertising monopoly, which has been held for many years by the newspaper *Vecherniy Bishkek* (*Evening Bishkek*). Zheyenbekov brought a suit alleging the systematic violation of the newspaper anti-trust law, which stipulates that no more than 20 percent of space in social and political publications may be devoted to advertising. In response, *Vecherniy Bishkek* re-registered itself quickly and was given the status of a news and advertising publication.

Lenta's tendency towards monopolization in 2009 and early 2010 came to an end after the April Revolution, as small

advertising agencies began to gather strength. The largest agencies specializing in print media are Imperiya Reklamy ("Advertising Empire") and Deko. Many media, especially electronic outlets, have their own advertising agencies. Fundamentally, such agencies consist of non-professional agents who learned on the job the rudiments of mediation between advertisers and the media. Alongside selling airtime and newspaper and magazine space, some advertising agencies offer services such as developing promotional campaigns, designing promotional materials, and creating advertisements. But most media advertising agencies are not particularly successful with their creative services—or even in terms of sales. Nevertheless, owners allow such organizations to survive.

For many media houses, creating an advertising agency under its media outlet is no more than a ploy to circumvent tax law. Once a media outlet crosses an income threshold of KGS 4 million (\$85,000) a year, it starts to pay VAT. To avoid exceeding the threshold, some media editors and owners organize the overflow funds into an advertising agency.

The range of advertising services is not broad, and neither advertisers nor media outlets know how to get the most out of the potential advertising field. The situation with the Kumtor Operating Company gold mining group is a case in point. The group constantly placed promotional and advertising material in the national media, but ignored the local media. Only after a series of serious strikes by local people—workers from local communities—did they begin to realize the importance of local advertising, and changed their strategies for working with the public.

Although the law limits the amount of space that can be devoted to advertising, no relevant standards have been set. In addition, regulations contain loopholes that circumvent the limits. In the flow of advertising in *Vecherniy Bishkek*, for example, there might be several columns of lowercase individual announcements. By law, those do not count as advertising, although they earned substantial profits for the paper.

For a long time, the state media survived with subsidies either decreasing (as with NRTC, the newspaper *Erkin Too*, and all the regional media), or drying up completely (the newspapers *Kyrgyz Tuusu* and *Slovo Kyrgyzstana* ["*Word of Kyrgyzstan*"]). However, even in the context of an economic crisis, the government found other ways to support "its" media. *Kyrgyz Tuusu* and *Slovo Kyrgyzstana* shared exclusive rights to publish official notices of company losses, bankruptcies, dissolutions, shareholder meetings, etc. Also, the state provided free premises for editorial offices, and the state media continued to exploit the material resources left over from the Soviet era—automobiles, office equipment, and technical equipment. The government increased subsidies

(at least in the case of PRTC) after the revolution, and the monopoly of *Kyrgyz Tuusu* and *Slovo Kyrgyzstana* persists.

Even though they were politicized, newspapers still find it very difficult to gain access to advertising. Akimov gave several examples of businesses that canceled signed contracts for advertising. Although he had no reliable data on the reasons for the cancellation, he did not rule out “recommendations” from the authorities to invest in the media that they favor.

With little market research available, regional consumption details remain a complete mystery to editors. Even the systematic research carried out by MedGrupp, which had begun to be viewed as a fixture of the media market, disappeared suddenly. There is no longer even one competent, reputable market research company, and the latest publicly available research on the advertising market was carried out more than five years ago. The researchers who offered their services were basically unknown, and their prices did not match the quality of research that they delivered. New Media Institute and Oxus International have begun to conduct market research recently—but whether the two groups will be accepted or have staying power remains to be seen.

Given the lack of reliable market research, most editors use homegrown methods: independent surveys of wholesalers and tracking where the bulk of their copies end up. Sometimes, the data from wholesalers does provide insights. Shestakov, speaking as a former editor of a Russian newspaper, explained that conventional wisdom is that the Russian-speaking Chui and Issyk-Kul regions would be the main distribution area for a Russian-language publication. It came as a great surprise to learn from the wholesalers that small mining towns in the Osh region provided the second-largest customer base. Subsequent surveys revealed that the overwhelming majority of the population in these towns focused on the strategy of labor migration to Russia, and thus followed the political and economic aspects in their intended destination. Akimov noted that a similar survey helped his newspaper, *Dengi i Vlast*, discover an active readership in the south.

In the Chui region, the editorial staff of the newspaper *Vest* continued attempts to research their readership needs even during 2010. Remembering that past marketing research had not been carried out satisfactorily for them, they independently organized meetings of readers and focus groups. Unfortunately, their efforts failed to yield any practical results, leaving the outlet with little confidence in its ability to optimize activities or increase profits with market research.

No independent companies verify newspaper circulation figures; as a rule, they are exaggerated. Shestakov said

no one has confidence in newspaper circulation statistics. However, companies do purchase ratings for the electronic media, and international companies offer a significant range of possibilities to measure Internet users. Kyrgyz news agencies, in particular AKIpress, combine the services of several authoritative foreign counters: Google Analytics, mail.ru, and life.internet. The market for domestic Internet counters is small; previously, top.kg performed this work, but now net.kg provides services. Being able to work both with foreign and local companies is very important for Internet media. Yet, for the time being, local companies cannot provide the same depth of analysis or real-time results as Google Analytics. Additionally, Google results are objective and cannot be falsified.

## OBJECTIVE 5: SUPPORTING INSTITUTIONS

### Kyrgyzstan Objective Score: 1.61

The drop in score for this objective resulted from the panelists giving lower evaluations to several indicators. Notably, indicators 1 (trade associations), 4 (academic journalism programs), 5 (short-term training), and 7 (channels of media distribution) all fell compared with last year. Panelists also rated the new indicator 8 (the ICT infrastructure) a good deal lower than last year’s objective score, which contributed to this year’s lower score. In addition to losing ground, indicator 4 also lagged behind the objective score by more than half a point. On a positive note, indicator 3 (NGO support of the media) and indicator 6 (apolitical sources of printing and

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

##### SUPPORTING INSTITUTIONS INDICATORS:

- > Trade associations represent the interests of media owners and managers and provide member services.
- > Professional associations work to protect journalists’ rights and promote quality journalism.
- > NGOs support free speech and independent media.
- > Quality journalism degree programs exist providing substantial practical experience.
- > Short-term training and in-service training institutions and programs allow journalists to upgrade skills or acquire new skills.
- > Sources of media equipment, newsprint, and printing facilities are apolitical, not monopolized, and not restricted.
- > Channels of media distribution (e.g., kiosks, transmitters, cable, internet, mobile) are apolitical, not monopolized, and not restricted.
- > Information and communication technology infrastructure sufficiently meets the needs of media and citizens.

media equipment) maintained their scores, and came in a bit more than half a point ahead of the objective score.

Associations proved to have a difficult year in 2010. Because of the revolution, continued political instability, and inter-ethnic clashes, the Association of Publishers and Distributors of the Periodical Press was unable to gather the supervisory council for an annual meeting, membership fees in 2010 were not paid, and the association suspended operations for six months starting in April. The Association of Regional Radio and Television Broadcasters operated not on the basis of membership dues, but with the support of donors. Fighting for its members' rights and lobbying for their interests was not its motto; over the past year, its work focused on developing policy papers for digital broadcasting. The only active association was the Association of Telecom Operators, where broadcasters looked out of place.

The high rate of turnover in the journalism community and the ever-growing practice of journalists working as freelancers stands in the way of cooperation and unity between journalists. "In general, there is no culture of solidarity in the professional field," Kulinsky said. Akimov experienced this lack of support firsthand. "When my journalist Syrgak Abdyldaev was stabbed to death in 2009, I knocked on every door, and if I had not, there would have been no response," he said. "And it was then I realized that I had no one to turn to, although everyone was sympathetic." Divided into camps affiliated with various interest groups, and faced with a new realignment of the media market, journalists did not even attempt to consolidate into a union or associations in 2010.

The public association Zhurnalisty ("Journalists") recognizes the importance of providing journalists in trouble with some support during a period of crisis. In 2010, the association set up a fund to support affected journalists with financial support from the Soros Foundation-Kyrgyzstan, the United States Embassy in Kyrgyzstan, and various other parties. The association gave financial support to a total of 15 journalists when they applied for the fund. Journalists saw the fund as a first step towards uniting journalists into a capable trade union.

In a number of regions, media support centers still operate, trying their utmost to provide support for journalists and their publications through training, consultations with lawyers, and other types of legal support. Osh Resource Center, in cooperation with Internews, organized a summer course at Issyk-Kul on the psychological rehabilitation of journalists from the southern region. For the most part, though, the journalism community has an attitude towards NGOs of still waiting for them to be of some use. According to the panelists, the value of the media NGOs declined sharply against the backdrop of the events surrounding

the crisis. As a result, media NGOs were not included in the day-to-day work of constitutional reform, nor did they have a voice in the Civil Society Advisory Group working in conjunction with state representatives and the donor community on policy for foreign aid to Kyrgyzstan. Without the support and initiative of human rights NGOs, the panelists said, the country would have seen no movement on the constitutional amendments to decriminalize libel and slander.

The panelists pointed also to the significant weakening in the media NGOs' institutional capacity. For many years, they have received no support from the government or from donor organizations—which, panelists perceived, are interested only in project work falling in with their missions. Maychiyev highlighted another problem stemming from donor assistance: "The grants system has given rise to a specific mindset among media NGOs that focuses only on getting new grants. Media NGOs today have to change their strategy and outlook. They must develop a package of services that they will implement for their members. Those services must be specifically designed to show members what benefits they get in return for membership dues."

Currently, Kyrgyzstan has 13 institutes of higher education that provide journalists and technical media personnel with professional training. But in the view of the panelists, the only institution that trains journalists and radio and television people to the requisite level of quality is the Manas Kyrgyz-Turkish University. Alumni of Manas University are very well prepared in radio and television journalism as well as documentation science, and they are able to work in three languages (Kyrgyz, Turkish, and Russian).

In terms of curriculum and the quality of instruction, almost all the other higher education institutions fail to meet the needs of contemporary media, or to provide even a solid general education. With the exception of Manas, practical work for journalism students at all those institutes is very limited. Journalism departments do not have laboratory facilities available year-round to provide a practical foundation, nor can they establish mutually beneficial partnerships with editorial offices, given the tight market conditions.

On the importance of modernizing journalism education, Iskander Bektur commented, "Institutes of higher education in Kyrgyzstan often provide outdated knowledge. Possibly out of a reluctance to change, they do not seek to modernize their educational systems. My suggestion is to let the television departments switch over completely to the Internet. If only journalism departments knew what opportunities the Internet offers in education! The Internet of today unites all the traditional media. Where they used to work and evolve in isolation from each other, individually, on the Internet, they evolve together, in interaction with each other."

In 2010, the Soros Foundation-Kyrgyzstan Media Support Program invited the journalism faculties of state universities to participate in its effort to promote new educational programs based on the curricula for undergraduate and graduate degrees developed by UNESCO for university-level journalism departments.

The Institute of War and Peace Reporting, the Bishkek Press Club, and the radio station Deutsche Welle, together with local media organizations and others, offered short-term training courses in 2010. Various media organizations, such as PRTC, and individual television talk show hosts offer unlicensed television apprenticeship courses. On several occasions, the Kloop blog platform has provided training for novice bloggers.

In the past year, the authorities did not use printing facilities to exert pressure on “objectionable” media, and no one held a monopoly on the supply of newsprint or other inputs for printing. The country still has two major printing plants, Uchkun and the Media Support Center free printing house, with sufficient production capacity to print large newspaper runs. In 2010, the *Vecherniy Bishkek* publishing house opened a print shop with color printing capability. About a dozen private printing houses operate in Bishkek, where competition among print services is growing, as well as a few in Osh and at least one in each region. However, production of regional independent publications has collapsed essentially. Many regional media outlets used to go to print on independent presses in Bishkek, but now, southern publications such as *Oshpark* and *Itogi* have been forced to accept a lower-quality format in order to reduce printing and transport costs. Given the insignificant number of press titles in the regions, printing companies do not consider it cost efficient to open independent presses outside Bishkek.

In contrast, delivery and distribution channels for the periodical press remain under monopoly for the most part and are not conducive to effective development of the newspaper business. In fact, 2010 could have become the year when alternative press distribution systems were eliminated, had it not been for the April Revolution.

Kyrgyzstan has no effective, transparent, or market-oriented system for managing radio and television frequencies, but de facto Kyrgyztelecom does receive significant preferential treatment over other active participants in the country’s media space and over other telecom operators. Cable television is not very developed; it exists only in Bishkek and Osh. In practice, every television company has its own transmitters, and there is a monopoly only on transmitting the signal from the capital to the regions (held by Republican Productive Association of Radio Trunk Relays for Television and Radio Broadcasting [RPO RMTR], a subdivision of Kyrgyztelecom). However, the monopoly is beginning to break; EITR has switched to satellite broadcasting nationally.

Internet information is vulnerable from a technical standpoint, as only one company offers satellite communication services. The remaining Internet service providers depend to some degree on Kyrgyztelecom, which serves the interests of the ruling elite, and on Russian and Kazakhstani Internet traffic. Each level of dependence imposes restrictions on access to online information. Thus, right up until November 2010 (the OSCE summit in Astana), the Kazakhstan Internet stream blocked *Zhivoy* (“*Lively*”) magazine and some sites in Russia.

Internet options include WiFi, fiber optic (satellite), and cable. According to Internet World Stats data, Kyrgyzstan ranked first in Central Asia in terms of its Internet penetration, at 15.6 percent. However, the Internet network outside the capital does not meet the needs of the entire population. People in the villages have started to actively explore the Internet using cell phones. Mobile operators are rolling out 3G into the market, and 4G technology is in the offing. The Kabar news agency was the first of the traditional channels in Kyrgyzstan to begin developing multimedia technologies, offering consumers various types of information such as text, audio, photos, and even video to some extent on a rapid-response basis.

## List of Panel Participants

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**Adel Laisheva**, program director, Internews-Kyrgyzstan, Bishkek

**Alina Saginbayeva**, director, Central Asian News Service and AKIPress News Agency, Bishkek

**Turat Akimov**, editor-in-chief, *Dyengi i Vlast*, Bishkek

**Maksuda Aytieva**, executive director, ORTs Media O.O., Osh

**Shamaral Maychiyev**, chairman, Commission for the Consideration of Complaints about the Media, Bishkek

**Igor Shestakov**, editor-in-chief, KirTAG News Agency; media consultant, Soros Foundation-Kyrgyzstan, Bishkek

**Iskender Bektur**, chairman, Kloop Media Social Fund, Bishkek

**Ivan Kutimov**, founder, Vvest LLC, Kara-Balta

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*The Kyrgyzstan study was coordinated by, and conducted in partnership with, Innovative Solutions Inc., Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan. The panel discussion was convened on November 27, 2010.*