

Kyrgyzstan

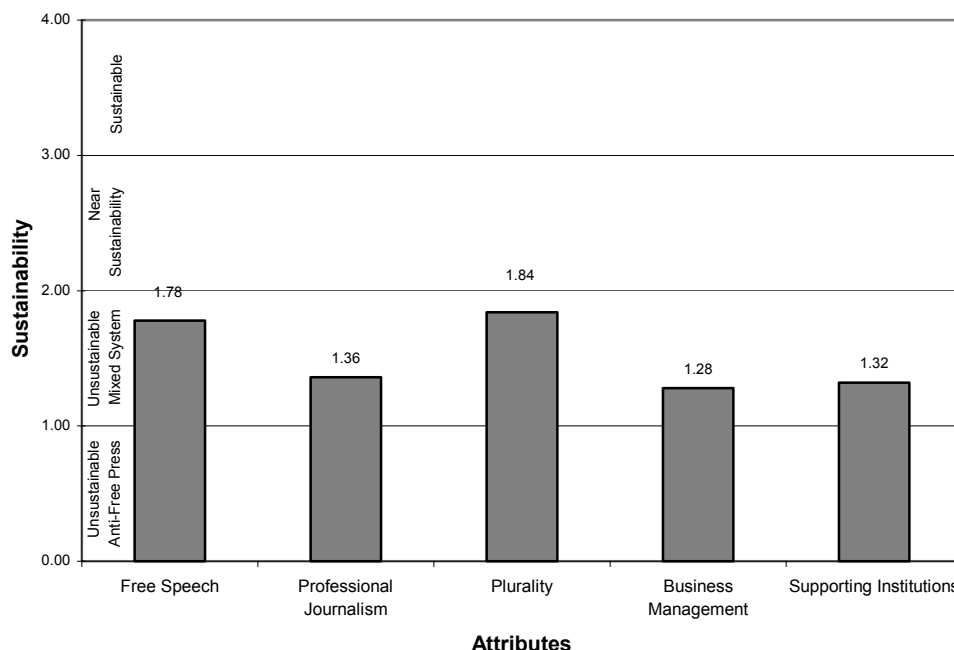
Introduction

Until recently, Kyrgyzstan enjoyed a reputation as a relatively free society compared to its Central Asian neighbors. In the early days of independence from the Soviet Union, the country was even considered an island of democracy in an authoritarian sea. That benign climate, however, has been changing over the past several years. Since 1995, the political situation in Kyrgyzstan has been increasingly tense, with the process of democratization becoming more and more unstable. In the economic sphere, most of the leading commercial companies have been taken over by public officials or were liquidated in cases where the government could not take control. The privatization of the state joint-stock company Kyrgyzalco, for example, was said to have involved official corruption and bribery.

In the political sphere, the Kyrgyz government has been increasingly less tolerant of political opposition. This was evident in the parliamentary and presidential election campaigns of 1999 and 2000 when the former mayor of Bishkek and leader of the Ar-Namys (Dignity) party were arrested; subsequently, Daniyar Usenov, leader of the People's Party of Kyrgyzstan, was arrested and all but removed from the political stage. These antidemocratic processes accelerated during the run-up to the October 2000 presidential elections and were accompanied by attacks on the independent press.

Politics also play a strong role in media in Kyrgyzstan. Although independent media are generally better developed in Kyrgyzstan than elsewhere in Central Asia, government-controlled and funded television and radio stations dominate the broadcast media. Most private stations rent airtime from government-owned frequencies, which often leads to tense relationships with the government. The independent Osh TV (which broadcasts in Uzbek), for example, has faced difficulties since 1997 when all private stations had to reregister with a newly formed government communications agency. The government forced Osh TV to change its frequency, which leveled enormous costs onto the station and fractured its audience. More recently, the government has taken measures to control the content of programs broadcast by other private stations such as TV Pyramid.

Media Sustainability Index - Kyrgyzstan



Scoring System

- 0** = Country does not meet indicator; government or social forces may be actively opposed to its implementation.
1 = Country minimally meets aspects of the indicator; forces may not be actively opposed to its implementation but business environment may not support it and government or profession not fully and actively supporting change.
2 = Country has begun to meet many aspects of indicator but progress may be too recent to judge or still dependent on current government or political forces.
3 = Country meets most aspects of indicator and implementation of indicator has occurred over several years and/or change in government, indicating likely sustainability.
4 = Country meets the aspects of the indicator; has remained intact over multiple changes in government, economic fluctuations, changes in public opinion and/or changing social conventions.

The scores for all indicators are totaled and averaged for each objective.

Each of the objectives can receive a score from 0 to 4:

Above 3: Sustainable and free independent media

2-3: Independent media approaching sustainability

1-2: Significant progress remains to be made; society or government not fully supportive

0-1: Country meets few of indicators and government/society actively opposing changes

In the print media sector, the government has acted even more boldly against independent outlets. A state-controlled company, for example, recently bought out *Vecherny Bishkek*, a widely read independent daily. In addition, the popular Bishkek weekly *Delo №* was recently fined an enormous sum for alleged tax law violations after the paper ran a series of articles in support of an opposition politician. Many more papers, including *Respublica* and *Akyiktam*, have also been pressured with sudden tax inspections and, in some instances, the government made accusations of libel. *Asaba*, one of the few opposition newspapers published in the Kyrgyz language, has been completely liquidated.

The availability of news to citizens remains spotty and is sometimes nonexistent. Although news sources are widely available in Bishkek, people living in the regions have limited access to media. While the authorities have not attempted to restrict people's access to information sources, many media outlets grapple with inadequate printing facilities and the inability to operate as professional businesses due to state control of printing houses and distribution channels. Anemic advertising revenue, moreover, makes it extremely difficult for independent media to sustain themselves financially. Subscriptions barely cover even the basic costs of running a newspaper.

Overall, panelists were skeptical about the current state of media and freedom of expression in Kyrgyzstan. Most agreed, moreover, that the situation is not improving but worsening. Although there is some self-censorship in the press, this is not caused by direct political pressures as of yet. However, editors often act without coercion to discourage coverage of topics known to be sensitive.

Attribute #1: Legal and social norms protect and promote free speech and access to public information

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

The laws protecting freedom of speech in Kyrgyzstan are compatible with international standards, but as with other Central Asian Republics, there is little or no enforcement of these laws. The current enforcement practice, in fact, aims at neutralizing the democratic orientation of independent media. Most panelists blamed executive officials for distorting the laws, and several felt that the officials are being summoned “to the top level” and instructed on what to prohibit and what to allow. As one participant explained: “They [public officials] are guilty of distorting the laws. It seems they have their instructions, saying ‘this should be prohibited, this should be stopped, this should have a veto.’”

In the early 1990s, all public officials were “open” to the press and willing to provide nearly any information. After 1995, however, they began to “close themselves up” as a panelist put it, a process that became particularly strong during and after the elections in 2000. One panelist explained the predicament of journalists as follows: “We live in the times of testing, of making errors and experimenting. It’s a pity that all these state experiments are conducted on our people. When the laws were drafted and the journalists’ rights regulated, the officials assumed that there would be tests and errors. And as an additional safeguard, they created special mechanisms that practically limit the possibility of speaking out and obtaining [public] information.”

In further discussion about access to information, the participants explained that two distinct types of information exist in Kyrgyzstan, for which there are different levels of access. First, there is information on the daily life of civil society, which is open to all and is easily obtainable; second, there is information from the government, which is a closed channel. In general, no information from the government channel is available for anyone; in fact, participants noted that the nonprovision of information is not specific to independent media. In Kyrgyzstan, press secretaries often do not make contact with the press or inform journalists of what is happening in the government. In fact, the press secretary himself is sometimes unaware that the president is traveling.

Although two representatives of the press asserted that letters and reader feedback lead them to believe that the public supports freedom of speech, other panelists mentioned that citizens are often afraid to express their views because of threats by public officials or fear of libel charges. One discussant noted that “People are now afraid of reprisals, because they are summoned to the court together with us [the media]. [In court,] everything is blamed on [the media], and we have to pay huge fines. We have turned into a country where people are resorting to leaflets. Because they know that if they approach a paper, they will be dragged to court. It’s better to print and disseminate an anonymous leaflet.”

In the area of licensing, regulatory power has not yet become a means of applying pressure on the media, but the situation is becoming more precarious. Specifically, there are signs that executive officials are going to force newspapers to go through a re-registration process with the clandestine purpose of creating

obstacles for independent papers. Furthermore, it appears that independent TV and radio stations may soon be forced into bankruptcy due to exorbitant licensing fees.

In the courts, libel laws have frequently been used against journalists. One panelist explained that over the last three years, “there have been murders, arrests, imprisonment, and penal colonies.” Among the journalists charged with libel are Zamira Sydykova (Editor-in-Chief of *Respublica*), Victor Zapolsky and Svetlana Krasilnikova (of *Delo №*), and journalists from *Asaba*.

In general, journalism as a profession in Kyrgyzstan is accessible, and the government does not impede young journalists. The quality of journalism education is low, however, and laymen often teach future journalists. Although international organizations provide assistance in journalism training, this is insufficient due to the tremendous size of the problem. As some panelists noted, the Internet is the only channel that public officials are not yet trying to control.

Attribute #2: Journalism meets professional standards of quality

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

Most panelists asserted that in print media, the government controls regional and local papers. In Bishkek, however, there is competition and sometimes conflict between the independent and state-owned press. One panelist characterized the tension as follows: “What we have here is the following: if the state-owned newspaper scolds somebody, the independent newspaper does the opposite. It’s very difficult for the reader to decide who is right. If a journalist writes an article supporting a representative of the opposition, he will have a conflict with the editor-in-chief ... and will face the decision of whether to leave or to stay.” In this context, the panelists considered the “independent press” to include not only publications, but also TV and radio stations broadcasting from Bishkek.

At the same time, authorities created what they call an “independent” press to counterbalance the truly independent press. One panelist noted that, “as soon as the authorities felt that the independent papers were starting to gain strength, they started creating other “independent” newspapers to counterbalance them.” This tactic seemingly creates diversity and, consequently, freedom of speech. These pseudo-independent newspapers, which use the “scissors” technique (cutting, pasting, and reprinting articles from other papers), usually have no more than three staff members and sometimes no professional journalists. This kind of newspaper, funded by unidentified people and organizations, creates a false appearance of pluralism while discrediting the true independent press and hindering its development.

According to the panelists, the professional standards of regional and local papers are very low. In most cases, these newspapers merely reproduce materials from the national and Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) newspapers without identifying the information source. Materials and information in the independent media, however, are usually crosschecked twice; *Radio Azattyk* (Radio Free Europe) crosschecks its information three times.

Nearly all panelists acknowledged that the country badly needs a code of ethics for journalists. Although the public association of journalists recently accepted a code, it is generally ignored. The panelists also noted that journalists in the state-owned press are frequently bribed to write articles, this practice is less frequent in the independent press.

There is self-censorship in the press, but this is not caused by direct political pressure as of yet; rather, editors simply publish conservatively in order to avoid direct coercion from the government. One journalist noted that self-censorship “regulates the flow of advertising; it regulates the activities of tax inspectors through rental payments, printing costs. This is in effect disguised censorship by the government. Sometimes we have to join in the game in order to retain our periodicals and be able to work.” In many cases, advertisements are removed because the advertiser was under pressure from the government. Panelists mentioned that journalists feel compelled to ignore stories about drug-related crime, the oil business, and Kyrgyz-Uzbek relations.

Salaries in journalism are rather low and uncompetitive, which also contributes to the poor quality of journalism in Kyrgyzstan. The salary provided by an independent newspaper often cannot compare with the amount of money an individual might offer to corrupt a journalist. As one panelist noted, “the demand for journalists is low. The budget of our paper is such that we can’t afford adequate pay. Therefore, we have to resort to the services of nonprofessional people who sincerely believe in democracy.”

Attribute #3: Multiple news sources provide citizens with reliable and objective news

Indicators
1. Plurality of public and private news sources (e.g. print, broadcast, Internet) exist and are affordable
2. Citizens’ access to domestic or international media is not restricted
3. State or public media reflect the views of the entire political spectrum, are non-partisan, and serve the public interest
4. Independent news agencies gather and distribute news for print and broadcast media
5. Independent broadcast media produce their own news programs
6. Transparency of media ownership allows consumers to judge objectivity of news; media ownership is not concentrated in a few conglomerates
7. A broad spectrum of social interests are reflected and represented in the media, including minority-language information sources

Panelists agreed that although there are relatively diverse news sources in Bishkek, people in the regions have very limited access to media. One panelist noted, “People living in the regions do not get information. There is a huge gap. All information is concentrated in Bishkek.” Although radio is the most accessible nationwide medium, many people in remote regions do not have enough money to buy radio sets and batteries. Television is the second most accessible news medium, but people in the regions can only receive VHF channels (channels 1-13), which consist of Kyrgyz State TV and two Russian channels (RTR and ORT); private channels, unfortunately, are only received via UHF channels (14 and above). Newspapers are the least accessible medium outside of the larger cities (Bishkek, Osh, Jalal-Abad, and Karakol). Distribution channels are unreliable, and there have been cases in which people are forced to line up to read one copy of the same paper over and over. The Internet is accessible only to a small minority of the urban population. Just 18 percent of the population in Bishkek, for instance, has used the Internet (and 1.5 percent have access at home), and in rural areas the population has no access.

On the whole, editors and publishers in Kyrgyzstan are motivated by serving the public interest. However, the panelists concurred that it is difficult for editors and publishers to act on this principle due to the various constraints and pressures already discussed. The extent to which each individual editor confronts these problems depends on his level of courage. Ultimately, serving the public interest is inhibited by threats to objectivity such as self-censorship and the many forms of government pressure.

News production is performed individually by all the independent TV stations (except Asman TV), along with the independent radio stations Pyramid, Russian Radio, and Europe+. The local radio stations, such as Tatina and Echo of Osh, also have their own newscasts. The authorities often make it clear to journalists which topics they would not want the media to cover. Nevertheless, there are no major differences between the newscasts of the state and private media because there are no independent news

agencies in Kyrgyzstan. The state Kabar News Agency, in fact, is considered untrustworthy by many independent journalists.

Attribute #4: Independent media are well-managed businesses, allowing editorial independence

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

The panel discussion focused on three aspects of this objective: 1) the scarcity of income sources for mass media; 2) the dependence of media outlets on state-owned printing companies and state-owned means of transfer of electronic information; and 3) the dependence of mass media on state-owned means of delivery and distribution.

Panelists were critical of the bad conditions for managing media as businesses. Said one panelist: “I put the lowest score for this objective. A new Tax Code became effective in 1998, and it had very painful implications for us. Before 1998, we had some working funds at least and could operate more or less. Now we are on the brink of bankruptcy, and it’s not only us.”

Inadequate printing facilities also constrain the development of media business management in Kyrgyzstan. There are several private printing houses in the country, but they do not print newspapers, as they are designed to print on glossy paper. All newspapers have to be printed by Uchkun, the state publishing company, which has outdated equipment and the ability to print only in one color. The press has become a hostage of this printing facility, as Uchkun has the power to delay or even cancel the printing of certain issues of a newspaper. As a result, editorial offices are unable to react to market demand quickly enough to issue additional copies of an issue when needed.

Funding of private media in Kyrgyzstan is unreliable and spotty at best. Broadcasters usually get their incomes from advertising, while the main source of income for the press is circulation. One panel member voiced his concern about media profitability: “From an economic point of view, it’s absolutely unprofitable; from a political point of view, it’s unsafe to be independent. Mass media can be self-sufficient only provided there is a market in the country. If there is no free economy, there will be no free press.”

Market development is also hindered by a lack of market research. Several firms, however, are now beginning to establish themselves in the sphere of market research to provide newspapers and TV stations with ratings; these ratings, however, are not really used for managing. One panelist explained, “All mass media conduct market research one way or another with different quality. For any newspaper, any TV station—if you probe the market, you could earn money. But the advertising market in our country is small and poor. You can’t talk about good advertising business and profit making. All newspapers and TV channels hardly make ends meet.”

Attribute #5: Supporting institutions function in the professional interests of independent media

Indicators
1. Trade associations represent the interests of private media owners and provide member services
2. Professional associations work to protect journalists' rights
3. NGOs support free speech and independent media
4. Quality journalism degree programs exist providing substantial practical experience
5. Short-term training and in-service training programs allow journalists to upgrade skills or acquire new skills
6. Sources of newsprint and printing facilities are in private hands, apolitical, and not restricted
7. Channels of media distribution (kiosks, transmitters, Internet) are private, apolitical, and unrestricted

Many weaknesses are present in the infrastructure supporting independent media. Some panelists were even nostalgic for the infrastructure that existed in the Soviet Union, and one noted, “it was nice before. There was the Union of Journalists, which we maintained with our fees. You could get some subsidies from the Union of Journalists—a bonus or something else, when they would organize professional contests. It was done in the Soviet way, but it was good. It was practically a journalists’ trade union.” The only structures that act in the interests of independent media are international organizations, including those for human rights protection. However, as panelists noted, these organizations have little influence on the public of Kyrgyzstan; they only create a minor secondary market, allowing only a small minority of people access to discussions about free media.

Human rights organizations supporting the press are gradually disappearing, as they are subject to the same pressures from authorities as the independent press. They have already stopped participating in the process of drafting media-related laws. MSI panel participants gave the example of the Glasnost Defense Foundation, which actively protected the *Vecherny Bishkek* newspaper during attacks from tax inspectors and the actual seizure of the publication by the Kyrgyzalco Company. In the course of this campaign, the Glasnost Defense Foundation, like the newspaper under its protection, became weaker and stopped being an active NGO. The panelists mentioned only one human rights organization that supports the press in the regions—an organization in Jalal-Abad, headed by V. Ulev.

Some panel members praised the work of international organizations and human rights groups for their work supporting freedom of speech in the country, noting, “[the human rights organizations] send the information from here, and by tomorrow we can receive protests from several of the largest international organizations. Five of the largest organizations [that work for] the protection of journalists’ rights follow up on what’s happening in Kyrgyzstan. They have their own monitoring here.” Others criticized it, however, noting, “they have no influence whatsoever on the local public. It simply creates an informational backdrop. And it’s only up to us to organize protection of the media the way we once organized ourselves to protect the media from censorship.”

All panelists noted the low quality of journalistic training in Kyrgyzstan. Only international organizations provide high-quality training, but they only offer such training from time to time and on a limited basis.

The distribution channels are also in the hands of the state and are of extremely poor quality. Thus, the independent newspapers from Bishkek do not reach the regions; furthermore, these papers cannot afford to establish their own distribution network. In the same way, the independent broadcasters are also dependent on the state transmission systems, particularly those working in meter frequencies (channels 1-13).

According to the panelists, the Internet has remained accessible so far, and it is not controlled by any government structures. However, there are signs that authorities are trying to establish such control by hiking up the prices for Internet access.

List of panel participants

1. Kuban Mambetaliev, Chairman, Association of Journalists
2. Victor Zapolsky, Editor in Chief, *Delo №*
3. Bibigul Dosalieva, Correspondent, Radio Liberty–Azattyk
4. Olga Grebennikova, Public Relations Coordinator, UN Development Program
5. Bolokbay Sherimbekov, Chief Producer of Ala-Too program, KTR
6. Zamira Sydykova, Editor in Chief, *Respublica*
7. Kubat Chekirov, Correspondent, BBC
8. Alexander Kulinsky, Representative, NGO Press Club
9. Andrey Tsvetkov, Director, Pyramid TV

Observers

Chinara Omurkulova, IREX Program Officer, Bishkek
Jaroslaw Martyniuk, Senior Research Analyst, InterMedia, Washington, DC

Panel moderator

Vladislav Pototski, Director, Center for Social & Marketing Research