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## KYRGYZSTAN

Several key events marked 2014 as a turbulent and pivotal year in the course of the country's foreign policy—including the Kyrgyz Republic's entry into the Customs Unions (and subsequently into the Eurasian Economic Union), the withdrawal of the U.S. Air Force from its Transit Center at Manas International Airport, and a series of economic agreements, including the deal to hand over Kyrgyzgas to Gazprom for the symbolic price of one dollar.

Almazbek Atabayev, the country's president, trumpeted Kyrgyzstan's entry into the Eurasian Economic Union as an economic turning point for the country. However, all citizens did not share the president's optimism, leading to protest meetings and the spontaneous formation of the "Kyrgyzstan against the Customs Union" movement. The militia detained some of these activists, accusing them of betraying the interests of the state and society. Adherence to the Eurasian Economic Union led to accelerated reforms of national legislation with the aim of conforming to Customs Union standards, which some viewed as an attack on civil rights and freedoms.

Other economic developments in 2014 included reforms, particularly involving small and mid-size enterprises, tax and energy tariff policy, and efforts to fight corruption and the struggle of the National Bank of the Kyrgyz Republic against inflation and devaluation of the national currency. On a symbolic level, Kyrgyzstan was promoted from the list of the poorest countries to the group of middle-income developing countries.

The Kyrgyz media alternately characterized the phased withdrawal of the U.S. Air Force (a NATO coalition base housed in Kyrgyzstan for 13 years to support operations in Afghanistan) as a success of Putin's policies in Central Asia, as the loss of a significant source of revenue for the country, and as a path to minimize the threat of revenge by radical Islamist groups against the closest partners of the U.S.

Despite the country's relative political stability, some volatility showed itself in the breakdown of the parliamentary coalition, the resignation of the former government, and the naming of a new one. Aggravated Kyrgyzstan-Tajikistan border disputes, and a number of significant protest meetings, roadblocks, and other actions by citizens and political groups also came into play. These events are part of the trend of political struggle between elites and the country's shifting political landscape. Scandals and discord within the political parties are intensifying, and efforts to change the law are underway in order to influence the electoral process and the activities of NGOs and the media.

# KYRGYZSTAN at a glance

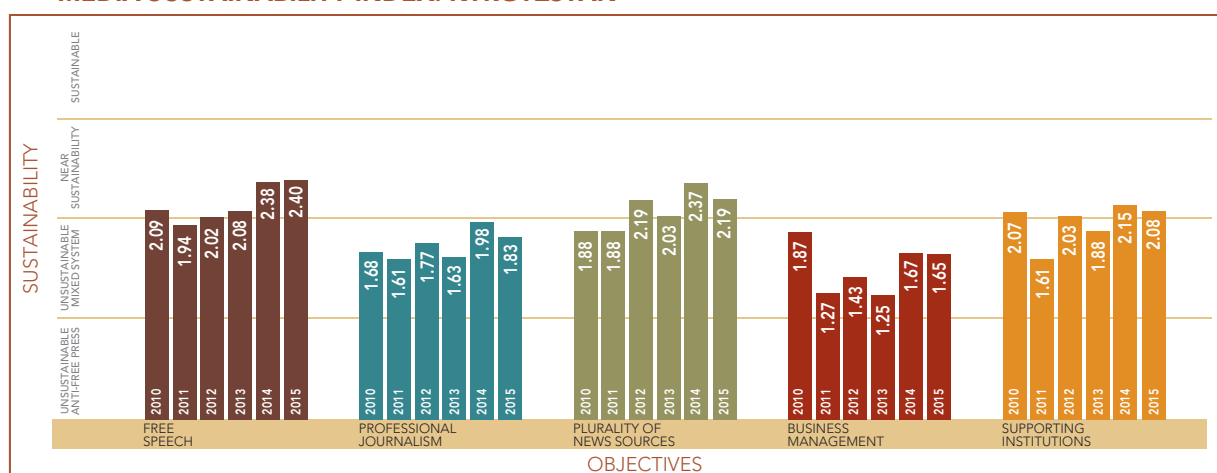
## GENERAL

- > Population: 5,604,212 (July 2014 est. *CIA World Factbook*)
- > Capital city: Bishkek
- > Ethnic groups (% of population): Kyrgyz 64.9%, Uzbek 13.8%, Russian 12.5%, Dungan 1.1%, Ukrainian 1%, Uighur 1%, other 5.7% (1999 census)
- > Religions (% of population): Muslim 75%, Russian Orthodox 20%, other 5% (*CIA World Factbook*)
- > Languages: Kyrgyz (official) 64.7%, Uzbek 13.6%, Russian (official) 12.5%, Dungan 1%, other 8.2% (1999 census)
- > GNI (2013-Atlas): \$6.906 billion (World Bank Development Indicators, 2014)
- > GNI per capita (2013-PPP): \$3,080 (World Bank Development Indicators, 2014)
- > Literacy rate: 99.2%; male 99.5%, female 99% (2009 est. *CIA World Factbook*)
- > President or top authority: President Almazbek Atambaev (Since December 1, 2011)

## MEDIA-SPECIFIC

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

## MEDIA SUSTAINABILITY INDEX: KYRGYZSTAN



## MEDIA SUSTAINABILITY INDEX 2015: OVERALL AVERAGE SCORES



### CHANGE SINCE 2014

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

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

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

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

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

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

## OBJECTIVE 1: FREEDOM OF SPEECH

Kyrgyzstan Objective Score: 2.40

Despite the fact that the Constitution of the Kyrgyz Republic guarantees freedom of speech and even prohibits criminal prosecution of speech, the president signed a law in May 2014 providing for a prison term of up to five years for "Making a knowingly false communication." The amendment stemmed from a package of legislative initiatives in parliament assessed by civil rights activists as repressive, including efforts by members of parliament to follow the Russian lead in adopting a draft law "On Foreign Agents" (aimed, like its Russian counterpart, at tightening the conditions of the NGOs and limiting their activities) and a draft law "Against Gay Propaganda" among others.

The panelists connected the uptick in legislative initiatives, including those relating to the media, not only to the influence of Russia under the pretext of joining the Eurasian Economic Community, but also to the upcoming parliamentary elections. Igor Shestakov, a member of KTRK TV's steering committee and the owner of the news site Region, said, "The general situation is that parliament, considering the upcoming elections to the Jogorku Kenesh in 2015, will try to get the media under control. This took place in 2010, when during the run-up to the presidential elections a law was adopted that prohibited pre-election stories in the foreign media. This law violates the laws and constitutional provisions on freedom of speech; the draft

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

#### FREE-SPEECH INDICATORS:

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

As Ismanov said, "The official records have amounts no greater than \$200 to \$300, but in fact the journalists receive a different amount. The tax burden makes it impossible for the editorial offices of private media to operate completely legally."

law on false denunciation may actually be seen as an effort to control the media in the pre-election period... This law will be an obstacle to the fight against corruption."

The media were not unanimous about the reactionary character of the draft laws; nor were the panelists. Regarding the draft law "On Foreign Agents," Tamara Valieva, the editorial advisor of OTRK (the Public Radio and Television Corporation), said, "Some specialists believe that this will lead to a growth in self-censorship and censorship among journalists and deliver a blow to the development of media in Kyrgyzstan. But on the other hand, this law should increase the responsibility of the media and decrease the flow of the so-called *ushaks* [gossip]."

As the rationale of the draft law states, it was "...developed to protect the morality and the moral and ethical principles of our society and to guard our citizens, including minors, from indecent content." The authors of the bill expressed their intent to eradicate commercial sex, establish a barrier to the spread of serious illnesses including HIV/AIDS, and stop the dissemination of "unethical" materials on the radio and television and in the print media.

Among the legal initiatives in the past year, it is striking that the tightening of liberal conditions regarding the media is being implemented in other areas not directly connected with the media, as is the case, for example, with the so-called draft anti-gay law. If in the end it is passed, the media will have to make certain subjects taboo. At the same time, it is important to note the strength and ability to influence decision-making exerted by Kyrgyzstani civil society, which, quickly forming a coalition, can beat back the most serious threats and attacks against human rights, freedom of opinion, etc. As a Russian journalist has noted, in Russia the foreign agents' law was rammed through in three weeks, while in Kyrgyzstan a second attempt by the sponsors in 2013-2014 was unsuccessful. To be fair, it is important to note that the campaign to promote the legislation in 2014 was distinguished not only by the fact that the sponsors attracted allies from among the national-patriotic groups, but also by the fact that the media

Voronina commented, “Such initiatives have already been taken in Russia and Kazakhstan. Our deputies blindly copy these anti-democratic initiatives. The sponsors of this law prepared it in order to protect themselves before the upcoming 2015 parliamentary elections... Most likely, a number of show trials will take place shortly...”

conducted a propaganda campaign accusing a number of NGOs of spying and harming national interests.

Although the courts cannot yet be called completely independent, last year nevertheless saw a few cases that indicated positive changes in that direction—including the outcome of a lengthy case against the news agency 24.kg and correspondent Makhinur Niyazova, brought by parliamentary deputy and member of the governing Social Democratic Party Irina Karamshina. Although in the end the court found for the plaintiff, the entire public understood the victory is suspect. In fact, the court assessed the violation of the deputy’s honor and dignity at KGS 5,000 (\$83), whereas she had asked for 5 million (\$84,950). In addition, the court declined to bring a criminal case against Adilet Aytikeev, the editor of the Kyrgyz-language *Iskra Plyus*, under the law on false denunciation, after a complaint by the leader of the Ata Meken political party, Omurbek Tekebayev.

The panelists reported that at seminars with judges of the Supreme Court, there was even an initiative on the part of the justices to amend a rule of the Kyrgyz Supreme Court so that public figures cannot bring charges over and above those of ordinary citizens.

Last year, some new issues became taboo to cover critically, including the Customs Union, criticism of the policies of the Russian and Kyrgyzstani presidents, questions of the participation of Kyrgyzstanis in the ISIL terrorist movement and others. Thus, for example, the publication on the website Kloop.kg, on November 24 of an item concerning the training of Kazakh child jihadists in the camp of the Islamic State caused a huge, almost international scandal. Kloop.kg posted the 75-second video clip, assembled by the British newspaper *Daily Mail*, unchanged. The Ministry of Communications and Information, which is responsible for Kazakhstan’s “information security,” sent a letter to the editorial offices of Kloop Media demanding that the material on Kazakh children being trained in the Islamic State camp

be removed, basing their demand on resolution 1373 of the UN Security Council on combating terrorism and on the Kazakhstani law on combating terrorism and extremism.

Bektur Iskender, founder of the Kloop.kg project, refused the request to remove the material, maintaining that the publication was absolutely neutral and did not contain any terrorist propaganda. “The Kloop.kg website is run by the Kloop Media social fund, which is registered in the Kyrgyz Republic. The laws of Kyrgyzstan do not prohibit us from covering the problems of terrorism. On top of that, the constitution of the Kyrgyz Republic guarantees us the right to free dissemination of information. We are not subject to any laws whatsoever of the Republic of Kazakhstan,” Bektur Iskender stated.<sup>1</sup> Kloop continued to face pressure and threats from the government, including the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the Office of the Prosecutor General, and ultimately Kloop decided to change its web provider and hosting platform.

In practice, the media face no impediments to registration, and it appears that the practices of political pressure and a tacit ban on registration of media by certain persons or the re-registration of certain non-governmental publications are relics of the past. Still, some lawmakers see a regulatory conflict because the existing law “On the Media” does not include websites, meaning the registration of Internet publications is voluntary.

The Kyrgyzstan Central Electoral Commission, prior to elections, officially accredits media that intend to report on the electoral process. In the last year, the head of the Central Electoral Commission, Tuygunaauly Abramov, raised the possibility of requiring media registration for Internet sites; in his view some Internet publications want to report on the elections, but they are afraid to accept responsibility. According to him, the status of news agencies in the election period raises similar questions.

Licenses are problematic for television and radio in connection with the introduction of digital broadcasting and the formation of multiplexes, including the free-to-air package. The majority of private regional media are not in a position to pre-finance the necessary equipment upgrades required to enter the multiplex. For this reason, as Almaz Ismanov, a journalist and associate with the online New Faces, said, “It may be assumed that, because of licensing problems associated with getting into digital broadcasting, some of the television companies in the regions will simply quit operating and return to being production studios. In this case a critical situation will arise in the southern regions,

<sup>1</sup> newsme. November 30, 2014. See: <http://newsme.com.ua/ukraine/politic/2743104/>

where private television and radio companies are dominant throughout the country.”

Elena Voronina, a journalism instructor at Kyrgyz Slavonic University, reported that according to the Electronic Media Association, 11 radio stations (both public and private) are in line to get their licenses; many believe that the high cost of licensing and corruption in the Government Communications Agency system are to blame for the delays.

At the same time, the decision to join the free-to-air television channel multiplex packet is raising issues of social equity. The roster of the free-to-air packet, which comes to 15 channels, now includes eight that the government has not only included at no cost, but has also provided large-scale financial support for their development. As the Deputy Minister of Culture, Information and Tourism, Aynura Temirbekov, reported, three are television channels belonging to the Public Television and Radio Corporation (a social and political channel), Madaniyat and Balastan. Also included is the government channel EITR, Piramida and Channel Five, which were nationalized after 2010, as well as the intergovernmental channel MIR. The eighth place was given to local television channel, each oblast having its own and together forming the television channel Region.

As for the private television channels, the first competition for guaranteed access to the republic’s airwaves was held in 2014, but the private channels rejected the costs, which seemed exorbitant, and the competition did not take place. Temirbekova later indicated that the ministry’s estimated price was in fact high, and will be lowered in the next competition.

The panelists added that while up to now the details relating to digital television licensing have not been completely clear, it is assumed that licensing will complicate the transition to digital broadcasting. Thus, digital broadcasting will require permits to produce content, as well as the licensing of communications services and of the broadcasting itself.

The tax structure does not differ from that of other sectors of the economy, with the one difference being that a great number of businesses are in the shadows and operate illegally. The media cannot do this because of the need for registration and licensing, the visibility of their activities, etc. However, there are quite a few gray practices in media, particularly surrounding salaries for journalists. In order to avoid high taxes and at the same time retain competitive and competent workers, editors resort to payments off the books. As Ismanov said, “The official records have amounts no greater than \$200 to \$300, but in fact the journalists receive a different amount. The tax burden makes

it impossible for the editorial offices of private media to operate completely legally.”

As a whole, however, opening a business is not a serious problem. Last year, not one court case was brought forth in connection to unlawful barriers in launching a media business.

However, after the introduction of digital television broadcasting, considerable complications can be foreseen for the entry of new electronic media into the market, especially given the heavy dependence of private broadcasters on the retransmission of foreign content—which is expected to become more complicated under the new systems, and thus a barrier to market entry.

The past year proved safer than previous years for journalists and media in Kyrgyzstan. The monitoring of violations of the rights of journalists and the media and of the freedom of speech conducted by the Kyrgyzstan Media Workers Union, made available in September and October 2014, did not identify any attacks, threats, or other crimes against professional journalists, bloggers or the media in the previous year. However, there were a couple of possible incidents. For example, in August, the poet Davron Nasibkhanov, a journalist for radio Yntymak, was beaten outside his home in Osh—but the journalist does not think that the beating was connected with his professional activities. Also, in November in Bishkek, someone broke into the offices of *Alibi*; the perpetrators have not been caught. An investigation is being conducted, but the newspaper believes that the events are connected with its professional activities, as the intruders appeared to have searched their computers.

Voronina reported, “I know of only one case of the persecution of a journalist for his stories. Ulubek Babkulov, editor-in-chief of the newspaper *MK Aziya*, said that the head of the State Agency for Physical Culture and Sport, Kadyrbek Ergeshov, threatened to take him to court.”

Viewed against the background of the neighboring post-Soviet Central Asian countries, where beatings and various forms of persecution are extraordinarily widespread, the working conditions of Kyrgyzstan journalists may appear favorable. But the personal perceptions of panelists frequently contradict the idea that professional journalists are safe. Ismanov said, “In 2014 the majority of accusations against journalists were made with regard to the reporting on religious subjects and problems in the health care system. Journalists investigating malpractice in the National Oncology Center in the area of drug coverage and the prioritization of mental illnesses were subjected to accusations by the leadership of the medical establishments.

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In such cases the journalists have to deal with the problems one their own, except for the large media in the capital, which may come to the defense of their journalists—as in the case of Makhinur Niyazova, a journalist for the news agency ‘24.’”

“Another peculiarity is the fact that incidents of attacks on journalists reporting on civil disobedience meetings and other actions have increased,” Ismanov said. These journalists are sometimes forced, unlawfully, to show their credentials or share photos they have taken.

At the same time, in the autumn of 2014, a criminal campaign was developed against the popular and financially stable *Vecherniy Bishkek*. The newspaper’s editors reported a raid on the editorial offices, and connected this criminal activity with close associates of President Atambayev. The court proceeding lasted until the end of the year, and there has still been no final decision.

The Kyrgyzstan law “On the Media” guarantees the editorial independence of public media, but the practice of government regulation of media activities indicates otherwise. Thus, for example, the government agencies hire and fire the editors of the public media and determine the editorial staffing and the level of government financing of the editorial offices. Government agencies use administrative funds to assure priority for the state media in terms of subscriptions, advertising flow, and so on.

Referencing the replacement of the editor-in-chief of the parliamentary newspaper *Erkin Too* this past year, Asylkan Shainazarova, web manager of the Tyshtyk news agency, believes that he lost his job because the paper’s political coverage did not please the government. Shainazarova’s conclusion is quite categorical: “It is difficult to say that the media are free, whether you are talking about state, public, or private media, because the financial powers behind the media want to impose their own point of view.”

Ismanov also confirms this view of the dependence of the media on the government: “Formally, the law guarantees the inviolability and independence of the media, including the state media. In practice, the government and the parliament meddle, particularly in the activities of the state media. A clear example is the anonymous video pieces about the activities of civil rights activists and public interest organizations financed by Western countries. As one of the examples, one may recall the scandalous video aired by EITR on November 25.<sup>2</sup> The state media exercise clear selectivity regarding persons and subjects. The private media also

follow this practice in order not to have any problems with the authorities.”

Valieva emphasized that, regardless of the fact that the law “On the Media” does not provide for either independence of editorial policy or financial independence, this year there was a noteworthy event that tested editorial independence. This was the dismissal of the former director general of the Public Radio and Television Corporation, and the open and transparent election (not the appointment, as before) of the new one, which took place without any apparent pressure from the political parties, the government or the parliament.

The law on false denunciation under conditions where the politicians and officials enjoy a preemptive right is essentially a re-criminalization of libel. It is interesting that the sponsors of the draft bill included parliamentarian Galina Skripkina, formerly a well-known attorney who on several occasions defended opposition groups and politicians, including journalists. Voronina noted, “This innovation is being actively used to settle accounts with inconvenient journalists. Recently it became known that, under article 329 of the Kyrgyzstan Criminal Code, ‘Communicating Knowingly False Information about the Commission of a Crime,’ not only are prosecutions now taking place between politicians and journalists, but the media workers themselves are using it to bring nuisance suits against each other. Thus, according to the editor-in-chief of the Internet publication *Maalymat.kg*, Daiyrbek Orunbekov, a lawsuit was brought against him due to the complaint of another editor-in-chief, Leyla Saralayeva [*Novyye Litsa*] using this very article.”

Voronina commented, “Such initiatives have already been taken in Russia and Kazakhstan. Our deputies blindly copy these anti-democratic initiatives. The sponsors of this law prepared it in order to protect themselves before the upcoming 2015 parliamentary elections... Most likely, a number of show trials will take place shortly so that everyone will understand what a journalist can be convicted of.”

The issue of the basis for strengthening sanctions for libel and the rationale for decriminalizing or introducing more severe criminal penalties for false denunciation occasioned some debate in the MSI panel discussion. Thus, the editorial advisor of Public Radio and Television Corporation, while agreeing that pressure might be put on journalists through the laws on libel, insult and false denunciation, nevertheless noted that “it is necessary to put a stop to this flood of filth and gossip from the media, particular in the Kyrgyz-language media.”

Shainazarova remarked on the politicization of professional activities and the impossibility of getting news to the public without impediments. She cited an illustrative case from December 2013. After the arrest for corruption of the

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<sup>2</sup> The “documentary” *Trojan Horse* sought to promote the draft foreign agents law by “exposing” the work of foreign-funded NGOs.

Jogorku Kenesh deputy Akhmatbek Keldibekov in Osh, there were protests calling for his release, led by the nationalist mayor who is a political ally. The regional correspondent of the Tushtuk news agency, Suyerbek Amanillayev, reported events online, including the point during the action when the mayor, Melis Myrzakmatov, appeared before the protestors and said, "The city of Osh is mine; you can demonstrate as much as you want." A few days later Prime Minister Jantoro Satybaldiyev removed Myrzakmatov as mayor. Myrzakmatov's supporters accused Tushtuk of biased coverage and sent out a doctored video (they cut out the seven seconds of the mayor's speech where he says the famous line). Two weeks later, when Myrzakmatov's supporters held another demonstration after the video of the mayor was released, Amanillayev also covered this action online. As a result, after this was aired, law enforcement agency personnel called the journalist in for an "informal questioning" and demanded that he cover the matter "as if he were a friend of the ex-mayor, Myrzakmatov."

According to a report of the Media Policy Institute, in 2014 the organization participated in 20 court lawsuits involving either a media outlet or a journalist (six of these were carried over from the previous year). In general, the journalists and the media appear as defendants in actions for protection of honor, dignity and professional reputation, as well as for compensation for moral damages. Government personnel, deputies and other officials brought 15 of the 20 cases against the journalists and the media.

On access to information, the panelists were split. A minority believe, based on a comparison with the laws of other post-Soviet countries, that Kyrgyzstan has the best law on access to information. Citizens can freely obtain information from government agencies, except for official secrets. The procedures are sometimes time-consuming, though, as journalists are always in a hurry and want to get the information without delay. In addition, the weak and unprofessional work of some press services also impedes access to information.

The majority, however, pointed to problems of access to information of both a legal, regulatory nature and a practical issue in applying the law. Voronina said, "In many cases the law on access to information itself has unclear wording that does not promote the transparency and openness of government documents. For this reason both the public and the media, in case access is denied, have to be guided either by common sense or by international standards. For example, very often in answer to their requests journalists hear that one government document or the other is a state secret. But access to information may be limited in only three cases: if the interests and values the authorities refer to in restricting disclosure of

information are protected by law (the principle of legality), if disclosure of the information causes significant harm to a legally protected interest, or if the harm from disclosing the information is more dangerous to society than the harm caused by failing to satisfy the public interest (the principle of priority of the public interest). The principle of legality implies that the disclosure of information cannot be restricted for interests that are not provided by law."

In one case, well-known civil rights activist Aziza Abdirasulova, director of the Kylym Shamy center, requested information from the Administrative Office of the President of Kyrgyzstan on the personnel makeup of members of the Commission on Pardons. The Administrative Office refused his request at the "behest of the Commission members themselves." The civil rights activist went to court on the grounds that the laws do not provide for concealment of the personnel makeup of a government commission of great public significance at the request of the commission members themselves. Without waiting for the legal proceeding to start, the Administrative Office of the President released the requested information to Abdirasulova.

Shainazarova also spoke about restrictions on access to information: "In spite of the legal obligation of officials under article 8 of the Law on Access to Information to provide information, in the case of an oral request, journalists do not always receive a verbal answer. If the press office of some government agency does not want to give an answer, it can simply say 'make all your requests in writing and we will answer them in writing.' For online journalists, this kind of cooperation is unsatisfactory. The online journalist cannot wait two weeks or a month, because in 20 minutes the current interest in the issue may simply disappear." Ismanov agreed; he said, "Officially, access to information is guaranteed to everyone, but in practice it all depends on the region and the specifics of the information. As in past years, the system of foot dragging is actively operating in the provision of information. A lot of time is spent on obtaining approval. For example, the Council of Ministers website does not have full information on the introduction of digital broadcasting (only some of the decisions are published there). Many government agency sites do not satisfy modern requirements. After it was revamped, the Kazakhstan government site became less functional and extremely inconvenient to navigate."

According to Nurgul Sharshembieva, director of the Karalol Press Club, the media and journalists still have problems with access to news of a non-technological nature. Thus, for example, "getting news about the budget is no longer a problem. They give you one piece of paper that has income and expenses and a pile of numbers. But where these



numbers go and how they are used is a state secret with seven seals. There are no keys to the code. A Development Fund operates in our oblast and every month it gets one percent of the revenue of Kumtor. But to find out how the money is spent, it is necessary to pound on the corridors of the Fund for days on end. Well, they can't say in detail whether the money went to a given recipient, they can't amplify the news with additional documents."

Because of the high level of mobile communications and Internet use, there are no special limitations of access to foreign and local news by the country's citizens, although, because Kyrgyzstan's providers receive their traffic from Russian communications operators (either directly or through Kazakhstan), all the sites blocked by Russian providers are also unavailable in Kyrgyzstan (Grani.ru, Kasparov.ru, etc.). Also, several times last year the State Communications Agency implemented short-term blockages against a number of sites, particularly Fergana.ru and Kloop.kg.

With reference to the technological progress of media publications and their access to news from various sources, Ismanov reported, "Many regional media are more and more actively using the local Internet site www.namba.kg for video service and placement of stories from the cloud. Recently, television companies and Internet sites have begun to actively use WhatsApp to transmit photo and video materials from their regional correspondents and civil rights activists and active readers. The only media outlet in Kyrgyzstan that has a virtual version for smartphones is the Knews press service. Also, some of the media have a standard mobile version. Generally the media do not even have their own site, and for this reason the Kyrgyz segment in the Internet space is still meager, despite the appearance of new Internet sites."

Traditionally, the sphere of professional journalism does not have any entry barriers, and there are no regulatory limitations or special rights for journalists of the various types of media. Some see a need, though, for a filter into the profession. For example, Valieva said, "Here, any cook can become a journalist, so to speak. The most important factor is the desire of the individual. Unfortunately, in my view, there are no limitations. It would be a good thing to revive, as they once had in the USSR, a creative competition for admission to the school of journalism."

In practice, there is a difference in status and capabilities of journalists in the state media and those in the private media. According to the panelists, this difference shows up in the selectivity exercised in forming the official press pool for covering visits, including visits of the president and prime minister, to official events held in the government residence or in parliament.

## OBJECTIVE 2: PROFESSIONAL JOURNALISM

Kyrgyzstan Objective Score: 1.83

The level of public confidence in the media, according to the panelists, is critically low. Journalists and media, of even the most popular publications, do not try to observe the standards of conscientious and objective reporting. The panelists cited numerous examples where obviously tendentious and biased stories were reported, such as reporting about sending women and children from Osh to the war in Syria.

Another notorious example: a story by the Akipress press service about a Muslim cleric in the village of Kochkor who turned out to be gay and cohabited with another "holy" worker in the madrassa. The agency put it on its newswire without checking the information, undoubtedly trusting the source. The news, naturally, was of broad interest and was disseminated in other media. But a little later it transpired that the story was untrue.

The initiative of deputies to identify NGOs as foreign agents provoked a wave of unbalanced and propagandistic programming. As noted above, EITR TV (a public television channel according to Presidential Decree) aired provocative program about the activities of nonprofit organizations in Kyrgyzstan called *Trojan Horses*.<sup>3</sup> It is unclear who produced the show, exactly, but despite that fact and the clearly

<sup>3</sup> Trojan Horse. YouTube: See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=epQgLHM-AJ4>.

### JOURNALISM MEETS PROFESSIONAL STANDARDS OF QUALITY.

#### PROFESSIONAL JOURNALISM INDICATORS:

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

defamatory nature of the information it spread, the film aired on the public channel.

“Ulutman,” another program similar in content and in reasoning, aired twice on OTRK (the National Television and Radio Corporation). The film disparaged NGOs, but gave NGO leaders no opportunity to present their side. One of the chief accusers in the film, presented as a representative of the NGO sector with insider knowledge, turned out to be a disgruntled former employee forced out of work for the Coalition for Democracy. After airing such reactionary programs, the television channel (and panelist Vasileva in particular) received complaints from viewers. After a long silence, the management of the channel answered that “no violations were found.”

The majority of the media also discussed the energy crisis in an unbalanced and biased way, not separating facts from opinions. For example, only public officials were invited to participate in an OTRK talk show on the problem.

Daniyar Sadiev, general director of TV Yntymak, gave an example of another kind, where the journalists made every effort to present all sides of a conflict and represent all possible positions and opinions regarding a Freedom House news report on a public opinion poll concerning inter-ethnic relations in Osh. All involved and interested sides were invited to the talk show, but Freedom House and Advocacy declined to participate. As a result, the management of Yntymak TV was forced to take it off the air in order not to appear unbalanced and one-sided.

Reflecting on the reasons for such frequent violations of the professional standards of conscientious reporting, Voronina said, “Today’s Kyrgyzstan journalist does not conform to professional standards of quality. The Ethical Code that was developed by the journalists themselves a few years ago is not observed. Local journalists do not always adhere to international standards in their everyday work. Former journalism students of the schools of journalism are few or are almost unaware of the professional standards of quality in their profession. They have no knowledge of the national adaptation programs that regulate the work of journalists in the country, or of international laws and conventions and codes of journalists’ rights. As a result, the reading and viewing audience does not get enough quality material in the local media or doesn’t get any at all.”

Voronina continued, “Local journalists, including long-serving ones, do not always cover a subject or an event from all sides, including commentary. In the words of one journalist, he understands that we must not work that way, but he has an editor and an editorial policy that does not always correspond to his own point of view or with international standards. In some editorial offices there

Sharshembieva noted regretfully, “Today the editors don’t tell the journalists about the Kyrgyzstan Ethical Code or about their own standards and rules. They do their work in whatever way the editor tells them to. The websites are especially guilty of violations. Akipress openly violates the ethical standards.”

is self-censorship. For fear of losing a job or of getting into a conflict with the founder or with various political and business circles, a journalist agrees to self-censorship and subjectivity, and so forth.”

Nevertheless, the journalist community has still not become self-regulating, and violations of professional ethics and infringements of the honor and dignity of their peers appear to have become more and more the standard. As a rule, in cases of conflicts within the professional community, journalists turn to the media complaint review committee, although the committee’s decisions do not have the force of law and the committee operates on an exclusively symbolic level, issuing reprimands in one case or another of violation of professional standards. However, last year a greater number of citizens outside the professional journalistic community appealed to the committee.

The chairman of the committee, Shamara Maychiyev, noted that basically it is civil rights activists and parliamentary deputies who complain. For example, Burul Makenbayev, the head of the Mental Health Center; Dinara Oshurakhunova, chair of the Coalition for Democracy and a Civil Society; and parliamentary deputy Ravshan Zheenbekov lodged a complaint against an article in *Delo No* speculating over the opposition’s plans to gain power. After examining the claims, the members of the committee decided that the author of the article had violated sections 17 and 18 of the journalists’ ethical code by not referring to specific experts and not reflecting the viewpoint of the complainants. Six civil rights activists immediately filed claims against a journalist of the same publication. According to members of the media complaint review committee, representatives of the movement “Kyrgyzstan against the Customs Union,” Burul Makenbayev, Almaz Alzhanbayev, Marat Musuraliyev, Dinara Oshurakhunova, Almaz Tazhybay and Ilmar Kayemaliyev, wrote a joint statement noting that in her May 9 article, the author had violated the journalists’ ethical code “by allowing distortion of information and falsification in

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the editing of pictures, picture captions, headlines and the text itself.”

Sharshembieva noted regretfully, “Today the editors don’t tell the journalists about the Kyrgyzstan Ethical Code or about their own standards and rules. They do their work in whatever way the editor tells them to. The websites are especially guilty of violations. Akipress openly violates the ethical standards.” Many panelists agreed. Shainazarova recalled a case from her own site Turmush.kg where, in an article about the murder of a young girl; the journalists and technicians posted on the site photographs with all the appalling details, and the designer even refused to carry out the editor’s decision to remove the photos.

Ismanov noted another ethically troubling aspect of journalists’ activities: “Journalists readily accept gifts from politicians and deputies. Deputy Karganbek Samakov, who organizes regular New Year’s parties with drawings for large and expensive gifts, is well known for his persistence in this practice. The same practice is followed by other politicians, and even ministers, who pay out of their own pocket—upwards of \$1,000—for flattering media pieces.

Ismanov continued, “A party in honor of Journalists’ Day, financed by the crime boss Almanbet Anapiyayev, who is a fugitive from the law in Dubai, made a big splash in 2014. Participants in the party published on social media sites a photo account of the event with words of thanks to the crime boss. As a result, the leader of the Ata Meken party in parliament, Omurbek Tekebayev, called for the creation of a list of the journalists who cooperate with criminal elements and their public censure.”<sup>4</sup>

Plagiarism is another serious issue for today’s media. The panelists pointed out several examples of the borrowing of complete texts by the journalists of one media outlet from those of another. For example, the editor of *Chuyskiye Izhvestiya*, Antonina Blindina, noted that the 24.kg press service reprinted their material in full and did not compose anything, while another journalist of *Delo No.* takes material from Russian sites and simply changes the author’s name to her own.

Journalists and editors are careful when covering subjects where there are no precedents showing what and how to cover the “undesirable” aspects. The reaction of the domestic media to the crisis of the national currency in the context of the drop in the ruble exchange rate is very restrained. The state media contain no criticism at all of the

present-day Russian foreign policy. Journalists have almost failed to notice the oddity of commercial dealings with the Russian government, particularly the sale of Kyrgyzgaz for a symbolic \$1.00.

Sharshenbieva said, “In order to understand whether or not there is freedom of speech, it is necessary to try using it. This is something that in practice does not take place in the regions. Thus, journalists do not stretch their capabilities. They do not write critical pieces out of conscious fear and self-preservation.” During the discussions of this subject, one of the panelists joked that, if this keeps on, the Kyrgyzstan may turn into “a land of happy people.”

Voronina, commenting on the issue of self-censorship in the professional environment, said, “Although almost all of the media declare their commitment to free expression of thought and freedom of speech, these are subjects which are either taboo for those media or are rarely covered—or covered with a certain dose of subjectivity. For example, the subject of the LGBT community and their rights and freedoms is a taboo topic. It is ignored by most of the media, and if stories appear, almost all of them are of a discriminatory nature. Only bloggers and certain websites such as Kloop.kg and Voice of Freedom offer a platform to people from the LGBT community. The subject of torture and violence in the penitentiary system is also unpopular in our media. In general, one can say that this genre of journalistic investigation has disappeared from local journalism. There are two or three journalists and two or three publications that carry on this work, but the genre itself has died.”

The panelists generally believe that the media cover more or less everything that is going on in the country. Nevertheless, the fragmented and sparse information in the news frequently cannot give the public an idea of the overall situation. Ismanov noted, “There is extremely little analytic information on the Customs and Eurasian Union and on digital broadcasting. Most often, this is fragmented information or references to official communications. The public does not have complete information about what awaits them after entry into the customs union and the introduction of digital broadcasting. (What attachments and television sets should you buy? What will be shown and what won’t?)”

There is a great difference between real life and what appears in the news in Kyrgyzstan, because a number of subjects and trends that are “inconvenient” for the authorities are either completely taboo or are presented in a distorted way. Thus, for example, one of the taboo subjects is the coverage of the long-lasting absence of gas in Osh because of the discontinuation of gas supplied to southern

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<sup>4</sup> The position of some journalists in the public debate on this question of the social networks is noteworthy. For example, journalist Ernis Kyyazov was very loyal to the crime boss and did not simply praise him, but elevated him to the rank of national hero. And he considered participation in the party an honor.

Kyrgyzstan from Uzbekistan after the sale of Kyrgyzgaz to the Russian Gazprom (from April to December 2014). After that time, influenced by the social networks, the system of covering the subject changed. The taboo was replaced by an unwritten rule: do not “dramatize” the cutoff of gas to the southern region. And only optimistic reporting appeared in the broadcasts of the state channels as to how the local residents had almost “not noticed” the changes in their lives thanks to the “alternative” measures taken by local authorities. And even the most daring of media do not write about the fact that there is active bugging of every citizen’s cell phone communication in the country.

Pay for journalists in Kyrgyzstan is very low. In the majority of state and private social media the average salary is \$85 to \$135. In the regional press, salaries may be even lower, a symbolic amount of \$50 or a little more. In such a situation, journalists implement various survival strategies. Some try to use the media as an instrument of extortion of hidden advertising. Others work for several publications at the same time or take on extra work, including work outside of journalism. The panelists also believe that, because of their low pay, journalists agree to informal payments for “media services,” i.e. those who can go into public relations and carve a niche have even appeared to work as professional trolls in the social networks. Indicative of this is the OTRK program *Aalam Sylary*, which had the highest popularity ratings among viewers but was closed down by management because the program’s producer, Dana Abdybekova, turned it into an advertising business for advertising clairvoyants.”

Journalists in the capital are compensated just a little better. Their average income varies from \$300 to \$700. Even where a media outlet pays journalists more than the majority of the other media do, the managers, as a matter of practice, prefer to hide the real salary level of their workers and represent them as lower in order to reduce the tax burden.

Shainazarova, who worked as an editor for the news service Tushtuk, said, “At Tushtuk, the regional journalists were hired from among those who were already working on some television project where full-time employment was not required. Naturally that affected the quality of the news.”

Frequently, journalists do not sign employment agreements and do not have an employment book, which not only prevents them from accumulating employment time for a future pension, but also gives them no protection in labor disputes. However, it also exposes the editorial office to risks, including those of corruption and extortion by the journalists.

Ismanov said, “Today the highest salaries of journalists are at radio Azattyk, the newspaper *Vercherniy Bishkek* and Channel 5 TV. They range from \$500 to \$1,000 a month. At radio Azattyk, the salary levels are set in dollars and tied to

the National Bank exchange rate.<sup>5</sup> In the regions, journalists receive from two to six minimum-wage units per month. At OTRK, competent workers for the site with a nonstandard work day cannot be found, because the salary is set at KGS 8,000 (\$135).”

There is no clear trend in Kyrgyzstan of entertainment broadcasting squeezing out news broadcasts. For the broadcast media that already retransmit Russian channels for the most part, there is a clear tendency. On the other hand, for television and radio stations that do not retransmit other channels, political news is the main product.

For a station to produce its own entertainment broadcasting requires large financial resources, and for that reason a significant portion of the television channels cannot increase their entertainment programming, even though they may desire and attempt to. At the regional television channel Yntymak, for example, entertainment broadcasts do not make up even 25 percent of the total airtime.

Last year, for the first time, the government began to provide financing for the transition of television channels to digital format, which it described as a funding priority. According to the government plan, state channels that join the free-to-air package will receive funds to acquire new equipment and prepare content, while the same amount will be divided among all the regional channels. Another KGS 10 million (\$170,000) will also be invested in the construction of communications lines and the acquisition of equipment to transmit to multiplexing centers the signals of state and public television stations.

In general, the existing equipment and technologies used in the majority of television and radio companies may be considered obsolete. Among the television channels, Piramida, which was nationalized after 2010, stands out in that regard. Last year the government explored the question of foreign, possibly Russian, participation in the development of that channel, which needs serious investments in technology.

Begayim Usenova, chief of Institute of Media Policy, said that “...the private electronic media, particularly in light of the transition to digital broadcasting, are poorly provided with modern equipment to collect, produce and disseminate information.” Even if they join together in a single digital technology association, the private television and radio channels still will not be able to solve their main problem—developing a network and beginning transition of their multiplexes.

<sup>5</sup> This means that salaries react more or less flexibly to inflationary processes and devaluation of the national currency.

Even the government is not on track for the transition. Completion of the first stage (the technology stage) was planned for the autumn of 2014, when Kyrgyztelekom, using its own funds, was supposed to cover 95 percent of the republic, reinstalling equipment and assuring signal transmission. In fact, only 59 percent has been completed.

Two or three convergent outlets, including radio Azattyk, the newspaper *Vecherniy Bishkek* and the Akipress press service, might deserve a conditional grade of "excellent." The management of Knyus is making efforts to converge. The regional press has almost no technical or financial potential, and its creative process and production are stuck in the 20th century. Some publications are simply dying and not in a condition to survive, while as far as the state media are concerned, the local authorities are keeping them from closing down. For this reason, these publications limp along, although they may have a circulation of only 1,000 copies distributed by subscription. Some papers do not even have photography equipment or Internet access.

Business media are beginning to be developed in Kyrgyzstan, slowly but surely. In 2014 specialized information resources appeared that operate in the financial sphere: [www.capital.kg](http://www.capital.kg), [www.akchabar.kg](http://www.akchabar.kg). Shumkarbek Adilbek Uulu, on his site [finbilim.kg](http://finbilim.kg), proposed an interesting financial education format for the public. The complications in developing business news include the absence of trained journalists capable of operating as columnists. There are not enough analysts and experts.

There is a small but stable criminal journalism niche. Religious journalism is developing, including a strong sector of citizen religious journalism on the social networks. In other areas, however, one cannot speak of specialized media.

Investigative journalism as a genre does not exist in the overwhelming majority of traditional media. The social networks serve as a kind of substitute in this area. They frequently allow themselves to say more about politics, economics and religion. Media experts consider that the blog platforms are becoming a source of the media's action agenda. If some subject is broached by the bloggers, it gains resonance and the traditional media either take that material and publish it or do their own stories on the subject.

### OBJECTIVE 3: PLURALITY OF NEWS

Kyrgyzstan Objective Score: 2.19

Formally, one can say that there is a diversity of information sources in Kyrgyzstan: there are national, local, and international media, there are national minority media and political party media, and there are traditional and new media.

Nevertheless, at critical times the public cannot get information from the media, particularly the traditional media. In 2014, for example, there was unrest among the Uzbek population in the Osh oblast. Children were beginning to disappear from their homes and a rumor spread that either a religious sect or a criminal gang was operating in the region and abducting children in order to remove their organs, but the traditional media did not investigate the claims.

Voronina remarked, "We can hear, see, and obtain information from various sources. And draw the appropriate conclusions as to whether or not to believe it. But there is one minus regarding the poorly informed media in the languages of the ethnic minorities. If they exist, they have a small circulation within a small geographic range and most often are supported by international grant aid. They do not always employ professional journalists."

To a great extent, the limited options to uncover disturbing information about the Customs Union or events in Ukraine

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

#### PLURALITY OF NEWS SOURCES INDICATORS:

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

has forced people to put more trust in the social networks and bloggers. In the opinion of the panelists, the social networks are the main source of news for young people and even for middle-aged people. But this popularity has also played a negative role, as more and more fake stories are appearing in the blogosphere, information leaks in the interest of certain politicians and groups. Falsifications and simple disinformation is being published, and this undermines confidence in the news from the social networks. Nevertheless, according to statistics from Google Analytics, Facebook is the absolute leader in the country. As Shestakov said, the Regional, a news resource that he publishes, reaches no more than 160 people a day, while more than 6,000 get their news through Facebook.

Up until now, there have been no limitations on access to foreign media, apart from cost. In the retail market, the selection of foreign print publications is considerably diminished than seen in previous years. People buy print media more and more infrequently. Because of limited reader demand, the average age of a glossy magazine in the country is about a year to a year and a half; many Kyrgyz language newspapers stopped printing last year and went completely online.

The Internet is becoming more accessible every year. Today the average citizen can receive unlimited use for KGS 600 to KGS 2,000 (\$10 to \$35) per month. Thanks to a special tariff, mobile Internet is a widely used consumer product. At the same time, because of the country's energy crisis, the majority of the regions, including even the capital, experience rolling electric power blackouts. System-wide electric power blackouts have hindered an increase in broadcasting volume by state television channels, despite the fact that OTRK, for example, has long dreamed of being on the air around the clock.

With rare exceptions, there are no media in the country that serve the public interest and can be called politically unbiased (the panelists named Yntymak TV and Kloop Media among the exceptions).

Some panelists expressed the view that there is great pressure from political groups and politicians on the state media in the capital, while there is room for maneuvering in the regional media. The panelists mentioned an interview for *Uchur*, with Ernis Kyrgyzov, the well-known journalist and former director of Osh TV, contrasting OTRK's support for the president and the government position, while pointing to instances where Osh TV presented different perspectives—for example, presenting some of the cons that may await Kyrgyzstan in the Customs Union, and Osh TV's willingness to air a film on Aziz Batukayev by the Azattyk journalist Zhanar Akayev that OTRK took off the air.

Ismanov commented, "The television companies Channel 5 and NTC have recently launched a number of media projects related to the regions that have enjoyed great success among the viewers. Until recently, local content was not in the lead and news from the capital still prevailed in news broadcasts."

According to Sadiev, a return of the old ideological broadcasting is not the result of a focused policy ordered by the president or key government figures. Daniyar gave the following example: traditionally the country's president is the main subject of the news. Yntymak's editorial policy is to reflect the public interest and, when he received a call from the Office of Administration of the president ordering him to cover in detail Atambayev's visit abroad, he simply requested a written order to that effect. But he never received it and safely refused to fill the airwaves with presidential content. As a result, not only did the television station and its manager have no trouble over this, but the White House quit sending them "requests." Based on this experience, Daniyar believes that it is possible to work within the public media system if only the managers have the will and the desire to do so.

The ten news agencies in Kyrgyzstan supply news to the other media free of charge or on a partially paid basis. In practice, no media outlet buys its news feed from a news service. According to the panelists, the media do not perceive the need to subscribe to a news wire since the traditional culture permits plagiarism of news stories, in addition to which news has a specific structure in Kyrgyzstan: the greater part of stories are based on covering the activities of a small number of politicians such as the president, the leading members of parliament, and the government leadership. Since foreign news agencies structure their news differently and from a different viewpoint, it is difficult for them to simply borrow their stories. Another factor is that the practice of borrowing without referring to the source has become the standard. And it may be noted that, when television channels run news from the wire services, they almost never mention the source.

It was noted several times in the past year that the Akipress news agency, which the panelists consider to have formerly been distinguished for its more professional approach and conscientiousness, republished blog stories, violated ethical

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standards, etc. Nevertheless, Akipress, along with Kabar and 24.kg, is still one of the most popular news agencies.

Branches of foreign press agencies (Reuters, Interfax etc.) also operate within Kyrgyzstan and provide news wires, which, however, have almost no focus on local news. Worldwide foreign agencies are also available online, but getting news from them is not possible because the majority of journalists, media and the public do not know foreign languages.

It would be quite hard to call any of the press services independent, although Akipress has tried to maintain a neutral and reasonable approach; it has achieved some measure of success since the owner of the agency, in contrast to the 24 news service, is not a politician, and the private nature of its ownership has deflected some pressure from the government bodies, in contrast to Kabar.

Over the last few years, regional private studios have stopped broadcasting news and other programs of their own and changed exclusively to retransmission, receiving their revenues from advertising. Such television companies include Ayan and Shankhay (in the city of Naryn), MTV and Anten TV (Karakol) and others. Among those that do produce news, their positions are not very diverse. Almost everywhere, the key subject is the government and the party leaders. The news is frequently repeated regardless of the type of ownership of the media. Despite the long-standing struggle for democratic media, the traditional government approach continues to be reproduced and the overwhelming majority of the news has no social significance and does not reflect the interests of the people. For example, for a whole week all of the country's key media may belabor as news item No. 1 the disagreement between two politicians over the statement by one of them that the other one had injured his dignity.

The absence of distinctive broadcasting, i.e. a brand as such, has kept the owners of TV Shankhay, for example, from selling the channel for the last five years; no one wants to acquire a faceless trademark.

Last year, the association Zhurnalisty attempted to describe all the current media in the country, gathering and publishing all the data in the *Media Handbook*. But for the most part, media ownership is a secretive subject. Rumors fly about who owns what in the media, but the information is unreliable. As an example, some of the panelists cited a well-known politician, Omurbek Tekebayev, as owning not only the television and radio company Sentyabr, but also the widely circulated and profitable *Super Info*—which on paper belongs to another businessman, Kylychbek Sultanov. The claim that Tekebayev owned *Super Info* disturbed some of the panelists, but they said that if it is true, it sheds light on

Sultanov's appointment as Kyrgyz ambassador to Malaysia despite his lack of diplomatic experience.

According to people in *Vecherniy Bishkek* (known to locals as *Vecherka*), media controlled by the White House were involved in the news campaign against *Vecherka*, and the partisan group April Heroes demanded nationalization of *Vecherka* and confiscation of its property. The Office of the Prosecutor General sequestered the publishing firm's shares. In the opinion of founder Aleksandr Kim, this decision was aimed at a hostile takeover of the *Vecherniy Bishkek* newspaper backed by the government.<sup>6</sup> Specifically, the management of *Vecherka* stated that people in the inner circle of the country's president, Almazbek Atambayev, participated in the hostile takeover, and in particular presidential adviser Farid Niyazov. In his remarks at a press conference, Kim rejected the story that takeover raiders were pursuing material gain. "The income of the paper may be significant for you or me," he said to the journalists, "but it is of no interest to those who are trying to control the paper. This is obviously about the struggle for a news resource."

Traditionally, there have been minority-language media in the Kyrgyz Republic. But when the daily television programs that had been broadcast in eight national languages disappeared, there was no conceptual approach to inter-ethnic media. The National Assembly members issue a number of native language-newspapers: *Maayan (Spring)* from the Jewish Culture Society; *Tugan tel (Native Tongue)* from the Tatar-Bashkir Culture Center; *Hueminbo* from the Dungan Unity Society; *Ilchi (Unity)* from the Korean Unity Society; *Payemi Ala-Too (Ala-Too Herald)* from the Tajik Unity Society; *Polonia* from the Polish society Odrodzenie; and *Ittipak* from the Uyghur Society—which also launched an online platform, *uygur.kg*.

Currently, radio Dostuk operates on OTRK, airing *Birinchi Radio* once a week in six languages. In addition, a number of media publish either in the Uzbek language (e.g., *Dostuk*, the newspaper of the Aravan district, and *Ush sadosi*, in Osh oblast) or have an Uzbek version (Yntymak TV, for instance). As for Uzbek-language print media, according to Ismanov, the average circulation of these sometimes totals 500 to 700 copies. He noted that two television companies in the Uzbek language, Osh TV and Mezon-TV, quit broadcasting; now, the Yntymak television and radio company is the only bilingual media outlet in the south. In fact, Ismanov believes, "...the interests and viewpoints of the national minorities are not represented in the large media, with the exception of the grant-funded programs."

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<sup>6</sup> <http://www.vb.kg/293798>

In 2014 OTRK aired a series of programs called *We Kyrgyzstanis*, prepared in cooperation with the Assembly, about people of the various ethnicities. In practice, media tend to focus on limited cultural aspects of life: national ceremonies and holidays, cooking, songs and dances and other creative activities. The singers and dancers representing the ethnic group and expressing joyful contentment with life in the republic do not even hint at the problems that exist in economic, political and social life, and in inter-ethnic relations.

However, there are problems. For example, in the Issyk Kul oblast, which has a Mongolian population, there is not even one media outlet for national minorities. Last year OTRK decided to shoot a series of stories on the cultures of Kyrgyzstan, and some ethnic associations were uncooperative. The Kalmaks, for example, refused to participate in the broadcast and requested that no shots be taken of their culture.

Last year, the media began following foreign news more closely, possibly triggered by the Kyrgyz public's interest in news from Ukraine—though, on the other hand, the influence of the Russian media cannot be ruled out. In view of the cooling of relations with the West and the intensification of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, Russia increased its output of international news. In any case, international news gained priority and increased in volume among the Kyrgyzstan media, led by OTRK (the National Radio and Television Corporation). This year the channel started providing BBC and Azattyk news, and Kyrgyz-language media are preparing stories in Kyrgyz from the same transnational media (from London and Prague, respectively). The OTRK management is giving time to these stories, particularly in prime time. Still, some panelists argued that the volume of international news is actually decreasing, and retransmission has also become unprofitable because of the legal requirement to provide more than 60 percent of the airtime in the Kazakh language. The fair use doctrine is not operative and in the overwhelming majority of instances even the largest newspapers do not give their news sources, but use the words “From the Internet.”

Interest in foreign news in connection with the events in Ukraine has actually been very great, but it is not possible to get Kyrgyz news from the hot spots because of the absence of a network of overseas correspondents and the lack of arrangements for cooperating with Kyrgyz freelancers from other countries. For this reason, world events are seen by the majority of Kyrgyzstanis through the prism of Russian news policy and, in the view of panelists, there is a high degree of conflict in popular awareness and polarization on the issues of the Ukrainian-Russian conflict, the annexation of Crimea to the Russian Federation, sanctions against Russia, etc.

As one of the panelists said, “The events in Ukraine showed that our domestic news services are not on the job. We don't even have competent political observers who are able to comment on the predominantly Russian images in a way that reflects Kyrgyzstan's interests.”

There are small changes in the coverage of local events. Whereas earlier, events of local significance rarely appeared on national broadcasts, and only to cover extraordinary situations (natural catastrophes, armed conflict, conflicts involving well-known politicians and events involving great costs to the public or the government as a whole), last year special programs on the regions appeared on a number of national television channels.

Ismanov commented, “The television companies Channel 5 and NTC have recently launched a number of media projects related to the regions that have enjoyed great success among the viewers. Until recently, local content was not in the lead and news from the capital still prevailed in news broadcasts. In the regions the local media are trying harder to accentuate their own subjects and problems because the viewers are receiving national news from other sources.”

#### OBJECTIVE 4: BUSINESS MANAGEMENT

Kyrgyzstan Objective Score: 1.65

Although a 2013 study by the Zhurnalisty Fund found that 68 out of 206 media surveyed throughout the republic are partially self-sustaining, the panelists' opinion of the profitability of media enterprises was very pessimistic.

Almost all of the panelists agreed that only two or three media enterprises in the country could be considered self-sustaining, and they are both private: Akipress press service and the Vecherniy Bishkek publishing house. But they deemed it impossible to compare the profitability and efficiency of these media with efficient media enterprises, even those in Russia and Kazakhstan, because of the differences in scale and approach.

The state media live off of the government budget, including OTRK (with the exception of OTRK Yntymak, which exists exclusively on grant money). But the budgets are ineffectively planned, and these media continue to exist on the brink of extinction.

Among the state media, only OTRK has demonstrated a trend towards diversifying revenue sources, including increased income from the sale of products produced by the corporation. These included CDs of music collections from the Kyrgyz national heritage (Zalkar Kүүлөрү), the launch of a music channel with planned advertising, the



development of a revenue-generating SMS system, and the possibility of increasing advertising on radio Min-Kyyal in connection with an expansion of broadcast coverage. But despite this, the survival of a television channel without state support is still impossible, although the advertising volume and the revenues from other sources are steadily growing. OTRK's management today is the result of a large-scale experiment with very significant financial support from international organizations. According to the unconfirmed report of one of the panelists, Internews Network, along with the Soros Kyrgyzstan Fund, spent more than \$2 million over the last two years reforming and enhancing OTRK's operational efficiency.

Reforms in staffing and financial management have barely begun in other media enterprises. Voronina noted, "Despite the fact that in previous years a lot of training was organized for editors, many of them failed to improve management in their organizations, to the extent that many media do not even have a manager position now. Editors devote their time more to the creative process and forget about management, and in general for the majority of them, ideas such as organizational culture, value, management of the editorial office as an organization and strategic planning remain ideas found only in management handbooks."

Frequent rotation of the journalist staff, staff turnover due to low salaries, and no financial sustainability are common across most media. Ismanov explained, "The personnel and financial policies of almost all media are not efficient because of 'gray bookkeeping,' low pay, the refusal of the media to accept trade unions, and the lack of resources to develop professionalism among the media's journalists."

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

##### BUSINESS MANAGEMENT INDICATORS:

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

The majority of media and editors do not trust research and do not consider market studies to be necessary or useful. Media enterprises do not plan their activities, and the absence of strategic planning also causes a great degree of disinterest in market research. Instead, many editorial offices prefer to carry out their own audience ratings. They work with advertising in the tried and true way, relying more on the administrative resources of local officials to organize mandatory subscriptions or advertising flow. Hitting upon the inefficiency of government media expenditures, Sharshembieva said, "The government maintains government broadcast channels and newspapers, but no one monitors how the given resources are distributed. We citizens cannot influence the process. Here's an example: why do we have the moribund newspaper *Vesti Issykulya*, on which about KGS 1.3 million (\$22,086) is now spent, when no one reads it? Wouldn't it be more reasonable to use this money for something more useful? There is even a Kyrgyz edition... Two years of this money could build a kindergarten."

As a rule, private newspapers and electronic media barely survive, and the owners, instead of reinvesting what little profits are made back into their media business and further developing it, pocket the profits instead.

The management's lack of technological literacy in the majority of media enterprises and the absence of strategic planning do not permit the media to recognize and employ the potential for diversification of revenue sources. Blindina noted that even traditional sources of revenue such as subscriptions are unstable because the Kyrgyzstan postal service holds onto the subscription money for years.

The independent regional electronic media draw revenue in the form of grants and an insignificant amount of advertising, but in the last few years most grant-making agencies have left the media market. The print media pull in small, relatively equal revenues from street sales, subscriptions, advertising and PR services.

Valieva reported that for OTRK, advertising revenue is quite significant, possibly exceeding government support. Ismanov described the situation for other media: "The basic advertisers are three cellular companies, a few big mortgage banks and construction companies, and as the New Year holidays approach, a few big candy manufacturers are added. Landing a big advertising order is extremely difficult. You have to have acquaintances and lobbyists. This is especially hard for small newspapers and regional television companies. Television companies are reluctant to run public service advertising. When such advertising is available, it is well paid. There are no alternative revenue sources for the majority of media, except for the newspaper *Vecherniy Bishkek*, which has its own printing presses and its own advertising agency."

The television companies have reservations about advertising revenue. On national and local television, as in many low-volume markets, text crawls and modular advertising are used and advertising is sold by the minute. There is no set pricing policy for producing spots. The electronic media often produce their own spots, particularly for radio, and they are not noted for their professionalism; plagiarism is common.

The panelists' opinion of advertising agencies was quite categorical: advertising agencies do not help the development of the advertising market, but interfere with it. Shestakov said, "Advertising agencies do not help the media attract funds from the advertising market. This is connected to the fact that Kyrgyzstan has no more than ten large businesses that give advertising to the media on a steady basis. In this situation, you can't expect advertising agencies to develop market services. It is better for the media to attract large advertisers directly and to operate advertising firms."

It is interesting that the size of the advertising market is not transparent, even for media experts; the panelists spoke of about \$10-12 million, but other numbers have been bounced around, ranging up to \$20 million. According to the consulting firm Ekspert, the Kyrgyzstan advertising market based on list prices is worth \$19 million a year. However, Ekspert notes that official GDP data for the country does not take into account the significant share of the shadow economy (30 to 40 percent). Moreover, in contrast to other countries, the large advertisers receive substantial discounts (up to 50 percent off the list prices). Thus, the actual size of the advertising market appears to be somewhat different.

Describing the situation in Kyrgyzstan's advertising market,<sup>7</sup> the panelists note several factors: "The leading television channels are (Russian) retransmission channels; advertising agencies have only begun to develop; and market research is unsystematic, disorderly and ambiguous."

The consulting firm Ekspert reviewed the factors that prevent the development of the advertising market and concluded that the obvious issues include the population's low level of purchasing power and political instability, and an absence of media measurements. But, it believes, that the most important is the absence of consolidation among television companies and advertising agencies—the basic players in the advertising market. It expressed optimism over the creation in 2013 of the Joint Media Committee for this reason; however, the panelists said that the Committee has shown few signs of life.

<sup>7</sup> According to the materials of PA DAS Marketing—<http://www.adme.ru/tvorchestvo-reklama/reklamnyj-rynok-sng-kazahstan-kyrgyzstan-i-uzbekistan-48525/>

Ismanov explained, "The personnel and financial policies of almost all media are not efficient because of 'gray bookkeeping,' low pay, the refusal of the media to accept trade unions, and the lack of resources to develop professionalism among the media's journalists."

The second factor inhibiting the development of the advertising market is the absence of regular media measurements. Without such information, it is difficult to carry out qualitative media planning. In addition, the lack of information on the ratings of channels and broadcasts makes it hard for advertisers to make decisions, while the television companies themselves cannot improve the quality of their content.

"The basic cause of the lack of regular media measurements is their high cost. For this reason, media research in Kyrgyzstan using the day-after recall method is used today no more often than once a year to support international donor organizations.<sup>8</sup>

The law has not established standards for the share of advertising revenues out of total media revenues; government agencies do not monitor regulations in the law "On Advertising" that limit the amount of advertising on the air or in newspaper space. In practice, *Vecherniy Bishkek* devotes 90 percent of its Friday edition to advertising, and a number of television channels may run large five-minute blocks of advertising every 20 minutes. Neither the government nor NGOs have yet raised the issue of violations of law in this area.

Government financing has been very sparse until recently, and has not even been available for all of the state media. In fact, a whole series of regional and national publications have not received any money at all from the government budget. But last year, the transition to digital technology delivered an advantage to state media. The government allocated a total of KGS 200 million (\$3,398,000) for new equipment, including KGS 10 million (\$170,000) for state media joining the free-to-air packet. Regional stations are given KGS 10 million (\$170,000), and KGS 80 million (\$1,359,000) are allocated on a competitive basis to produce audiovisual content. If the government does not decide to provide technical help for the private regional media in the

<sup>8</sup> Ekspert. <http://www.expert.kg/ru/monitoring/125>

transition to digital, then their existence will be questionable. The extinction of regional media not only deforms the media market, but negatively affects the ability to satisfy the public's information needs, the panelists believe.

So far, the print media have not received any government support for new and upgraded equipment. Recently print media, which had an advertising advantage in running the bidding and purchasing announcements of government agencies, have lost that privilege since all bidding and purchasing announcements are now placed on a special Ministry of Finance website.

The development of strategic planning by Kyrgyzstan's media companies in order to increase revenues has given rise to a paradox. On the one hand, this kind of planning is not possible without high-quality market research, while on the other hand, market research is expensive and the owners of the media are not prepared to set aside money for it. The reasons include the fact that they lack faith in the practical results. Only the first steps have been taken, with the support of international organizations, in market research of the country's media market. The majority of media players have an ambiguous relationship with the results of research conducted by the M-Vector organization. Long after its last study in 2013, the television channels, which did not agree with the ratings that were given for viewership and popularity, continued to run negative comments on their news blocks. Last year, two other consulting and research firms—Ekspert and Siar-Bishkek—announced that they were prepared to offer another methodological study and to do so regularly.

But national-level research generally rates the regional media and local audience use quite low. Thus, the regional media are studied even less than those in the capital. Since they do not trust the ratings and are also not in a position to find the necessary data on the media within their means and practices, the key advertisers in the regions run their advertising on all the media. That means that no one relies on the results of research, although Ismanov believes that the leading commercial companies do their own media market research to help with effective ad placement.

Thus far, Kyrgyzstan lacks a structure to verify and validate the circulation numbers of the print media. Ismanov believes that "this kind of research is carried out by various organizations, but not very frequently. The Zhurnalisty Fund conducted the last research of this type in 2013, and the data was published in 2014. They collected data on circulation and on viewing audiences based on reports from the management of each media outlet."

Editorial offices are also quite cautious about popularity and audience ratings, site traffic, or circulation data. Many

online and electronic media point to their top programs, but institutionalized mechanisms to support the winners' ratings do not exist. Exceptions are Kloop Media and Azattyk, where counters accurately record the popularity ratings and the journalists' income is directly connected to the ratings their products receive.

## OBJECTIVE 5: SUPPORTING INSTITUTIONS

Kyrgyzstan Objective Score: 2.08

The program to switch to digital broadcasting brought into existence a business association of private media called Digital Technologies LLC, formed by 22 private Kyrgyzstan television broadcasting companies with broadcasting licenses and frequency allocations set to expire this past January 1. Despite the unacceptable financial conditions<sup>9</sup> of the competition announced for spaces in the free-to-air packet for private television broadcasters, the Digital Technologies association has not announced its public policy nor launched a campaign to lower the entry cost into the digital multiplex for private television broadcasters.

The association of publishers and distributors of print media has been inactive in Kyrgyzstan for several years. The Media Industry Committee, created in 2012 to optimize the media advertising markets and carry out research, was also inactive last year.

<sup>9</sup> According to its terms, television channels had to have KGS 32.4 million (about \$600,000) per year to participate in the digital packet for 2015-2017; <http://diesel.elcat.kg/lofiversion/index.php?t2628947-650.html>

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

### SUPPORTING INSTITUTIONS INDICATORS:

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

Essentially, the interests of the media in this critical period of the transition to digital technologies, like the interests of the public, are substantially underrepresented and no business organizations are lobbying for them.

The news spread among the media in September 2014 that a trade union of Kyrgyzstan's media workers had begun monitoring violations of the rights of journalists and the media. Facts collected during the monitoring over a period of two months in 2014 were available on the Internet. The union also took an active part in the discussion and in the organization of discussions on the law of false denunciation.

An older trade union, the Union of Kyrgyzstan Journalists, formally exists, but does not carry out any activities on behalf of the journalists and the media. As before, the voice of this organization was not heard in the process of active change in the media laws or in discussing the issues of public access to digital television.

Ismanov explained: "Attempts to put in place an independent trade union of journalists with the support of donors has yet to be successful. The media leaders are categorically opposed to opening grassroots trade union organizations within their companies and the journalists themselves do not have a lot of confidence in it, viewing it as a temporary grant project unable to protect them." Voronina added, "Journalistic associations, where the initiative comes from the journalists themselves, have not appeared in the country. There are things like the Association of Electronic Media, but they get together from time to time when a serious issue comes up, like the question of digital broadcasting for example. But when active involvement is required, journalists can quickly organize themselves into a group and then disband again when the situation is resolved. Formally, there are no journalistic associations in the country. The union of journalists exists only on paper."

At the same time, the state media, out of inertia, collect one percent of the salary of journalists and transfer it to the accounts of cultural trade unions. In exchange for this transaction, the editorial officials receive a limited number of vacation trips, including some with their children.

According to the panelists, Zhournalisty, the Media Policy Institute, and the Center for Information Rights are most active in protecting the interests of journalists and the media. The activities of the regional media centers, which have sometimes been centers for supporting regional media, have today become significantly weaker. The only functioning media center is the Issyk Kul Journalist's House, but its activities depend on grant assistance.

Ismanov noted, "High quality printing operates only in Bishkek, while in Osh there isn't any at all... Rubikon has also set up the first full-color printing machine in Kyrgyzstan and has begun offering its services with more flexible rates and scheduling."

Until quite recently, the organization Internews Network was a key player providing and organizing help for journalists. The panelists noted that journalists have become only rare guests at the organization's office, which is symptomatic of a broader pattern and does not merely reflect the relations between the organization and the national media, they believe.

For some years now, the media complaint review committee has operated, but it has not succeeded in having enough authority for the recommendations it makes on dispute cases to gain legitimacy in the media community.

Despite the limited number of NGOs, those mentioned have been able to actively oppose a whole series of conservative attacks from legal reformers in the media and related areas.

Practically nothing has changed in the academic professional training programs for journalists in the country. As before, the practitioners berate the academics and the academics blame the practitioners for being backwards. And dozens of graduates of the journalism schools are unwanted because of their weak professional knowledge. One of the panelists said, "The universities and schools do not use modern technologies, and instruction in these is non-existent. The graduates have not even mastered the most elementary skills of working with Internet technologies and websites and the preparation of multimedia materials."

At the same time, teaching at the Kyrgyz-Turkish Manas University has compared favorably to other universities for the past few years. The university has brought together certified teachers in the fields of television directing, scriptwriting and filming and the first few classes of graduates are finding jobs in journalism and related areas.

Attempts have been made in the media world for many years now to organize alternative forms of professional training that differ from unsystematic and fragmented seminars; for example, KTRK offered a republic-wide media communications

training center.<sup>10</sup> With support from the Soros-Kyrgyzstan Fund, the center carried out a project for “increasing the potential of local broadcasters in the transition to digital broadcasting” and held a seminar on “the ABC’s of news,” a lab on “production of low-budget programs” and a mastery class by Irina Kemarskaya on “the work of the editor in the transition period.” They conduct special training for the workers in public television and radio companies on subjects that are necessary in various organizations.

Before the center opened, the editors of the Kloop portal provided basic short-term training for journalists and bloggers. Last year, Kloop Media cooperated with a number of international organizations in cooperative projects for the development of citizen’s journalism, the solution of social problems in the course of peace making in victim societies and so forth. UNESCO financed one of these projects within the framework of a project to increase social justice.

Such separate seminars are proposed through other media organizations, including the Government Media Institute and the Journalists Union, as well as human rights and other NGOs that intend to strengthen their ties with journalists in order to adequately and effectively inform the public about rights and freedoms.

As Ismanov said, “The local NGO community is working with media and journalists. Most often this is targeted cooperation with specific journalists who are loyal to the civil sector. In practice, all of the media organizations are located in Bishkek. The regional media resource centers in the oblast centers have ceased functioning, but resource centers are more or less active today in Karakols, Naryn and Osh. They are not of the scale today that they once were.”

Media access to technical equipment and consumables in the market and consumer era is limited only by economic considerations. Ambitious actions that were taken last year demonstrated how technically limited the editorial offices of newspapers, television and radio were. Thus, in shooting and transmitting *Nomad Games*, KTRK had to rent classroom equipment from Manas University since that type of equipment was no longer available to anyone in the country.

Printing facilities in the regions remain, as before, a painful issue and hence one that has the potential to be used for political interests. Ismanov noted, “High quality printing operates only in Bishkek, while in Osh there isn’t any at all... Rubikon has also set up the first full-color printing machine

in Kyrgyzstan and has begun offering its services with more flexible rates and scheduling.”

Entry into the Customs Union promises to increase the ability of publications to obtain goods and services and to strengthen competitive bidding, so the panelists hope that printing facilities may improve in quality and price. The process of developing regulations related to digital technologies has in fact broken the monopoly of the National Frame Relay Television and Radio Network and Kyrgyztelekom.

There is no monopoly in the process of producing print media. Sources of paper and other consumables and printing facilities operate on market principles.

But in practice, all of the media distribution channels are monopolized by government agencies. Kyrgyzbasmassoz is launching a nationwide retail media sales network, yielding its monopoly position to private distributors only in some regions. Kyrgyztelekom is the key communications operator and also—in the person of the National Frame Relay Television and Radio Network—the monopoly distributor of the media’s electronic signals. When necessary, any monopoly is used for political purposes, as recent history has shown. Last year, not one of the government media distribution monopolies was politicized, with the exception of Kyrgyztelekom, which illegally blocked the Kloop.kg site upon verbal order by the State National Security Committee. Otherwise, all of these organizations remain simply inefficient intermediaries between the media and their users.

Last year, the government developed a plan to reform Kyrgyzpochtasy, providing a three-step modernization program with the aim of integrating new automated systems and technologies (including a financial payment system) and creating a single corporate communications system. It is too early to predict how this will influence the provision of services to media enterprises. Kyrgyzstan ranks 71 out of 193 countries in its Internet rating,<sup>11</sup> based on the average Internet access speed and the development of Internet infrastructure. Meanwhile, according to Freedom House<sup>12</sup> Kyrgyzstan came in 34 out of 65 countries, falling into the group of countries with only partially free Internet.

<sup>10</sup> <http://internews.kg/?p=6238>

<sup>11</sup> The Worldwide Internet Index is prepared by the Ookla company: [http://www.knews.kg/society/53239\\_kyrgyzstan\\_obogнал\\_tadjikistan\\_belarus\\_i\\_azerbaydjan\\_v\\_reytinge\\_stran\\_po\\_sredney\\_skorosti\\_dostupa\\_v\\_internet/](http://www.knews.kg/society/53239_kyrgyzstan_obogнал_tadjikistan_belarus_i_azerbaydjan_v_reytinge_stran_po_sredney_skorosti_dostupa_v_internet/)

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.dialog.tj/pages/kyrgyzstan-uluchil-svji-pozitessi-v-reytinge-freedom-house>

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Of the Eurasian countries, only Armenia, Georgia and Ukraine rank higher than Kyrgyzstan.

Internet access differs significantly in the city and in the countryside. As one of the panelists noted, "In the city there are no problems. There is Internet access for every taste and pocketbook, mobile or cable. There are problems in the regions though. Internet does not exist everywhere. And where it does, the speed is slow."

Nevertheless, a breakthrough is in the works. The operators of several mobile providers have been intensively laying and testing fiber optic communication lines and joining together trunk lines throughout the country. Kyrgyztelekom has the most ambitious plans, planning to complete a single fiber optic circle from Issykul through Naryn and Osh, which will make it possible to create an independent internal Internet traffic system.

## List of Panel Participants

**Antonina Blindina**, editor-in-chief, *For You* and *Chui News*, Tokmok

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

**Almaz Ismanov**, freelance journalist; blogger; associate with online newspaper *New Faces*, Bishkek

**Almaz Karimov**, manager, 7th Channel, Djalalabad

**Daniyar Sadiev**, director-general, TV Yntymak, Osh

**Asylkan Shainazarova**, web manager, Tyshtyk News Agency, Bishkek

**Nurgul Sharshembieva**, director, Press Club, Karakol

**Igor Shestakov**, member, KTRK TV Steering Committee; owner, region.kg, Bishkek

**Muzaffar Tursunov**, freelance journalist; blogger, Osh

**Begayim Usenova**, director, Institute of Media Policy, Bishkek

**Tamara Valieva**, editorial advisor (ombudswoman), KTRK TV, Bishkek

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

**Elena Voronina**, instructor, Kyrgyz Slavonic University Department of Journalism, Bishkek

## Moderator and Author

**Gulnara Ibraeva**, media analyst, Bishkek

*The panel discussion was convened on November 28, 2014.*