

**MEDIA**  
**SUSTAINABILITY**  
**INDEX**  
**2004**



**IREX**

THE MSI PANEL SAW LITTLE PROGRESS FOR THE MEDIA IN 2004, WITH THE DRAMATIC EVENTS OF EARLY 2005 COMING ONLY AFTER ITS ASSESSMENT WAS CONDUCTED. WHETHER THE MEDIA WAS ABLE TO SEIZE THE NEW OPPORTUNITIES TO BUILD A MORE COMMERCIALY VIABLE AND PROFESSIONALLY INDEPENDENT INDUSTRY DEPENDED LARGELY ON HOW POLITICAL DEVELOPMENTS UNFOLDED DURING 2005.



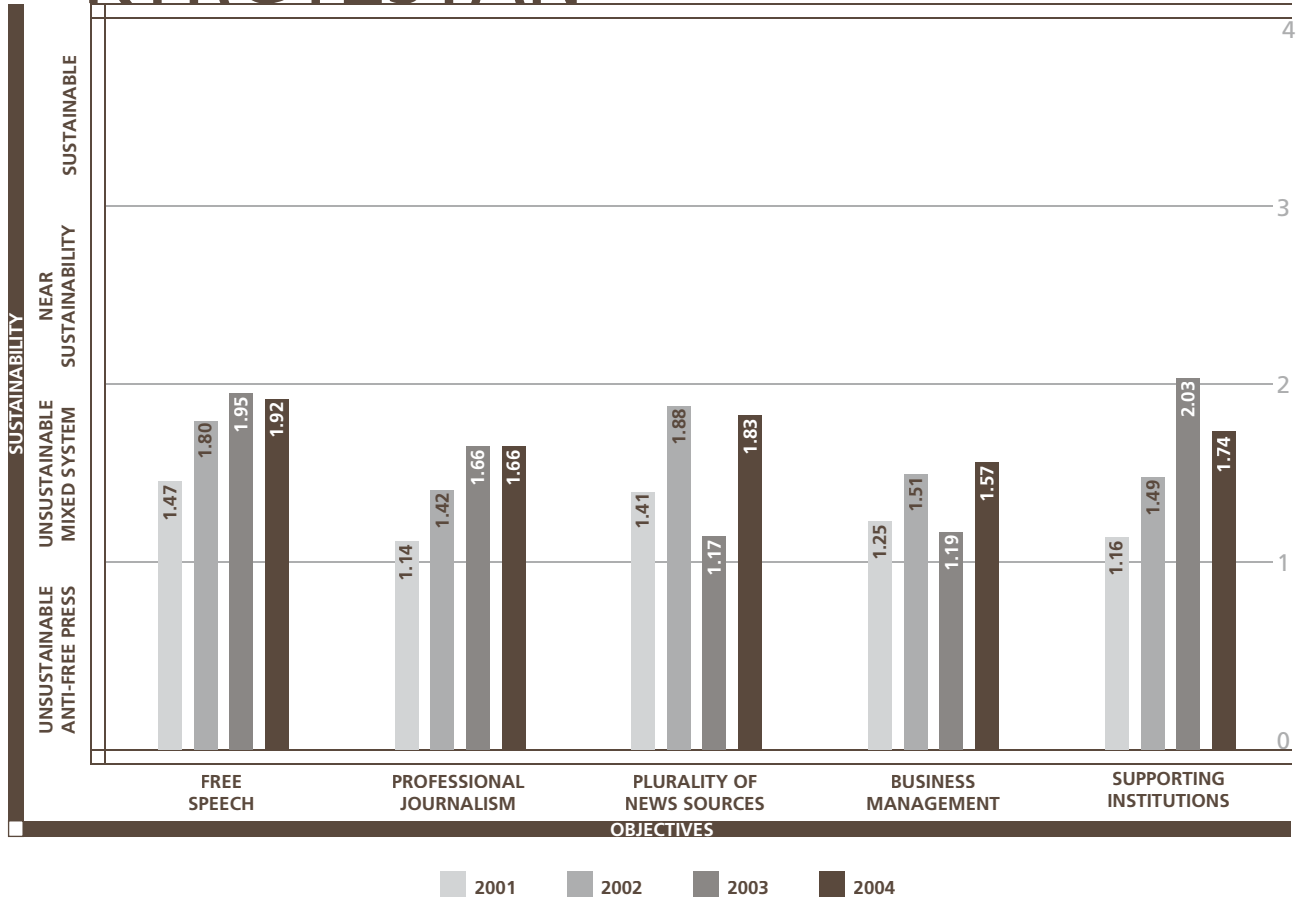
**A**fter the collapse of the Soviet Union, Kyrgyzstan confidently named itself an island of democracy in Central Asia, started reforms, and launched into a market economy. However, 13 years after independence, neither democracy nor the economic reforms were firmly rooted. Traders' markets set up on the grounds of defunct textile mills, profitable enterprises were scooped up by the well-connected, and badly managed and outdated energy and agricultural sectors were unable to meet domestic demand. High unemployment drove extensive migration to the cities. Meanwhile, President Askar Akayev proved unwilling to move democratic reforms forward, or to fight corruption. As Kyrgyzstan prepared for the February 2005 parliamentary elections, the ruling regime worked to monopolize important elements of the economy through cronyism and nepotism. Almost all the heads of the ministries, agencies, and other government bodies are close to the Akayev family, and both the president's daughter, Bermet Akayeva, and his son, Aidar Akayev, ran in the parliamentary elections.

There was, however, an unexpected merger of the long disunited opposition forces during 2004, including the People's Movement of Kyrgyzstan, the Atajurt and Jany Bagyt Public and Political Movements, the People's Congress of the Kyrgyz Republic, and the Civil Union for Fair Elections. After the two rounds of elections in early 2005 were criticized as tainted, frustration erupted in demonstrations that spread from the southern part of the country to the capital. Within just a few days, the president had fled Bishkek, surfaced in Russia, and signed his resignation on April 4. An interim government was put in place pending scheduled summer elections. The swiftly moving developments surprised virtually everyone, and neither the new political forces nor the rather weak independent media appeared fully prepared for the startling new opportunities presented after years of isolation and increasingly focused repression.

During 2004, what had once been the largest and most popular independent media outlets appeared to have fallen into the hands of the ruling elite, according to the assessment of the Media Sustainability Index (MSI). The Pyramid broadcasting company and the *Komsomolskaya Pravda*

# MEDIA SUSTAINABILITY INDEX

## KYRGYZSTAN



**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.

in Kyrgyzstan newspaper changed ownership, following the path of the daily newspaper *Vecherny Bishkek*. Use of the media as a political tool increased as state media received government support approved at the highest official level. At the same time, there was further monopolization of the commercial advertising market.

The Media Law of 1992 remained largely unchanged, and the inattention created an opportunity to drive freedom of speech into a corner. Among the means was the criminal prosecution of journalists for defamation under a law without any statute of limitations. Self-censorship was widely practiced by editors and journalists afraid to risk lawsuits or have their companies closed for political reasons. Dysfunction in media distribution led to tremendous information gaps, which received no attention and meant many in rural areas could not access media.

The MSI panel saw little progress for the media in 2004, with the dramatic events of early 2005 coming only after its assessment was conducted. The role of the media in the ousting of the Akayev government remained to be analyzed fully, and whether the media was able to seize the new opportunities to build a more commercially viable and professionally independent industry depended largely on how political developments unfolded during 2005.

#### OBJECTIVE 1: FREE SPEECH

**Kyrgyzstan Objective Score: 1.92 / 4.00**

Kyrgyz law protects freedom of speech in theory, but not in reality, and journalists feel vulnerable to becoming victims of crimes related to their profession, the 2004 MSI panelists agreed. If violations of free-speech rights are disclosed, however, the public does sometimes actively express its dissatisfaction. The criminal law prosecutes libel in Kyrgyzstan, however, and the licensing of broadcast media has depended completely on politics. The state media have had an obvious advantage over independent outlets in obtaining information, but access to international news is not restricted.

Article 6 of the Constitution of Kyrgyzstan guarantees freedom of speech, and there are three laws that regulate the media—the Mass Media Law, the Law on Defending Professional Activity, and the Law on Guarantees and Free Access to Information. However, they are largely ineffective. “These laws are not taken into consideration when judges consider lawsuits filed by officials such as the prime minister, ministers, prosecutors, judges, governors, and other public servants against journalists and the media,” said Kuban

#### Legal and social norms protect and promote free speech and access to public information.

##### FREE-SPEECH INDICATORS:

- > Legal/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 the offended party 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.

Mambetaliev, chairman of the board of the Journalists Public Union in Bishkek.

Suits are filed under the criminal code according to Articles 127 (libel) and 128 (insult). “First, ‘libel’ is considered not by the civil, but by the criminal code,” said Marina Sivashova, editor of the Open Kyrgyzstan website. “Second, any cases related to media do not have a statute of limitation. This means that any politician can sue a journalist in a few years.” Although parliamentary deputies discussed draft laws removing libel as a criminal charge, these draft laws

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failed in the legislature three times, most recently in June 2003. In a defamation case, the defendant has to take responsibility for proving his or her innocence. Iris Omurzakov, editor of *Tribune* in Bishkek, said: "Today there are four trials taking place against the *Tribune*, which is charged with criminal libel and insulting honor and dignity for 9,800,000 soms (\$239,000). In this case,

***"These laws are not taken into consideration when judges consider lawsuits filed by officials such as the prime minister, ministers, prosecutors, judges, governors, and other public servants against journalists and the media," said Kuban Mambetaliev, chairman of the board of the Journalists Public Union in Bishkek.***

articles were written on the basis of actual criminal cases, witness testimony, and video tapes." As the panelists noted, during recent years, journalists have not won a single case related to these laws.

Officials and parliament members also often file suits against newspapers for

insulting their honor, dignity, and business reputation, which falls under Article 18 of the civil code. The burden of proof lies with the defendant in these cases, too. For example, a Bishkek municipal court received a suit filed by MP Davran Sabirov against Jipara Jenalieva, a journalist for the *Kyrgyz Rukhu* newspaper. The MP is suing her for libel and defamation of character for ruining his business reputation. According to Viktor Shloyev, commercial director of Polonya Ltd. in Bishkek: "It has become almost a norm to sue papers, or other media, for any criticism. Sometimes the so-called moral damages are so high that some papers and other media simply have to close." There have been legitimate cases brought against journalists for their missteps, but few by comparison, the panelists said.

The allocation of frequencies to television and radio companies is another example of the poor legal framework for media. "In all the countries of the world, there is only one body regulating licenses and frequencies, but in Kyrgyzstan there are two of them—the State Commission for Radio Frequencies, headed by the defense ministry, and the State Agency for Communication," said Kuban Mambetaliev, chairman of the board of the Journalists Public Union in Bishkek. The State Agency for Communication issues licenses based on permits given by the State Commission for Radio Frequencies, allowing the government to restrict

broadcasting. The situation is exacerbated by the government's right to appoint the regulatory bodies.

In 2004, for example, the State Commission for Radio Frequencies and the State Agency for Communication delayed extending expired licenses, and they also did not allow new companies to broadcast. As a result, television and radio stations had to apply to the president, after which the commission decided to sell frequencies through an auction. But Alexander Kulinsky, editor of TV NTC in Bishkek, said no regulations were issued for these auctions. "Now licenses are extended for three months, a process which contradicts the Licensing Law of Kyrgyzstan, which states that licenses are valid up to two years as a minimum," he said.

Several television and radio companies waited for even temporary license extensions. According to Ernis Mamyrganov, director of the Osh Media Resource Center, "The Meson radio station and DDD TV in Osh have been waiting for their licenses for three years. One youth nongovernmental organization (NGO) from Jalalabat, which received a grant to buy broadcasting equipment, has not been able to acquire a broadcasting license for two years. This is happening, and there is not a single local radio station in Jalalabat." Panelists viewed the problem of issuing licenses and frequencies as especially acute prior to the parliamentary elections.

Media outlets appealed for an exemption from the 20 percent value-added tax (VAT), but without success. "When it comes to the taxation system, media in Kyrgyzstan are in a worse position than other businesses," said Marat Tazabekov, director of the *Aki Press* Information Agency in Bishkek. "There are two reasons for this. On one hand, media are subject to an additional tax on advertising. On the other hand, there are restrictions on the total volume of media advertising. If the limit is exceeded, the government can fine violators or initiate other types of sanctions." There also are isolated cases of tax authorities pressuring independent media outlets.

In 2004, crimes were committed against journalists that included detentions, beatings, and threats, but those who committed the acts were never prosecuted. Iris Omurzakov, editor of the opposition *Tribune* newspaper in Bishkek, said that in 2004 he was badly beaten by a police captain and an army major who came to his home, but they were not punished. Gulbara Imankulova, a journalist at the *Talas Chronicle* monthly bulletin, said that in October 2004, the editor-in-chief of the *Issyk - Kul* Tour rayon newspaper was killed. "The founder of the paper carried out his own investigation, and believes that it was definitely a murder. But

nobody will talk about it," she said. Those who burned the car of the editor-in-chief of *Moya Stolotsa – Novosti* in June 2003, as well as those responsible for beating a journalist at the same paper in January 2003, remained at large through 2004.

Panelists noted that not all crimes against journalists were necessarily seen as related to their work. "Just recently a journalist at the *Slovo Kyrgyzstana* state paper was beaten, but she insists that this crime was a robbery," according to Marina Sivashova, editor of the Open Kyrgyzstan website at the American University in Central Asia. The biggest crimes against journalists, the panelists agreed, were efforts to halt investigations. Marina Sivashova added: "Officials create obstacles to prevent access to information, and therefore media publish unchecked facts which result in libel or slander claims against them," said Sivashova. Such acts go completely unpunished.

State media receive preferential treatment over independent media in access to information. "Now that the major portion of media outlets are controlled by the state or belong to the family of the president, media operate in unequal conditions. Very often independent media are not allowed to participate at press conferences and other official events," said Kulinsky. Iris Omurzakov, editor of the *Tribune* newspaper in Bishkek, said: "Independent media have accreditation problems. *Tribune* has not been accredited by the state to cover events held by the president and the prime minister."

There are numerous examples of government and political involvement in the media, including private outlets. The family of the president owned the daily *Vecherny Bishkek*, TV KOORT, Love Radio, and 50 percent of Pyramid TV during 2004. The Alga Kyrgyzstan political party was headed by the daughter of the president, Bermet Akayeva, and it in turn influenced the content of *Vecherny Bishkek*. "Pyramid TV and radio in Bishkek, of which 50 percent of the shares have belonged to the family of the president since 2004, must get approval from the government for all of its programs," Kulinsky said. Artyom Petrov, editor of the *Internews* bulletin in Bishkek, added that "in the same manner, all editions of *Vecherny Bishkek* are subject to censorship." Big businesses continue to buy as many outlets as they can. In November 2004, a businessman from Kazakhstan bought *Komsomolskaya Pravda in Kyrgyzstan*.

At first glance, access to information in Kyrgyzstan does not seem to be restricted. But in practice, journalists have serious problems obtaining important information. According to Arkady Gladilov, acting

editor of *Vecherny Bishkek* and former editor-in-chief of *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, "After the Russian embassy was offended by the *Komsomolskaya Pravda in Kyrgyzstan* through a series of critical articles about migration and citizenship in the Russian Federation, the paper was banned from the embassy for two years."

The selecting of "desirable" media outlets is apparent at briefings and press conferences arranged by government bodies. Many journalists complain that most officials agree to give information only after familiarizing themselves with the questions beforehand. The Law on Public Secrecy also restricts access to information considerably. However, Gulbara Imankulova, a journalist at the *Talas Chronicle*, said: "Not all journalists know their rights. This can be beneficial for some officials, and they refuse to give information to journalists and impose censorship on articles which are being prepared for publication."

Kyrgyzstani journalists do make some efforts to secure their rights to public information. For example, Iris Omurzakov, editor of the *Tribune* newspaper, said that a Jalalabat newspaper editor sued a judge for "impeding a journalist's activity." Kuban Mambetaliev, chairman of the board of the Journalists Public Union in Bishkek, told the MSI panel that in May 2004 in Jalalabat and Osh, hearings took place on public information and the governor promised to set up a center to facilitate access.

In general, media can access international news, but not all local media can use the Internet due to the cost and the frequent power outages that plague the country.

Specialized education is not needed to become a reporter, the government does not control entrance to journalism faculties, and licenses are not issued. To become a journalist, it is necessary to have a university

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degree in any humanities subject. In past years, many graduates of medical, technical, and other universities have become journalists. For example, according to Marat Tazabekov, director of the *Aki Press* information agency: "At *Aki Press* magazine, all the journalists are financial experts by education." At the *Komsomolskaya Pravda in Kyrgyzstan* newspaper, not a single journalist has a degree in journalism. At *Vecherny Bishkek*, "we have an engineer, a doctor, and an expert in telecommunications as journalists," the editor said. Ernis Mamyrganov, director of the Osh Media Resource Center, noted: "In Kyrgyzstan, journalism as a profession is not prestigious, and there are no incentives to attract new journalists."

**OBJECTIVE 2: PROFESSIONAL JOURNALISM**  
**Kyrgyzstan Objective Score: 1.66 / 4.00**

Kyrgyzstan provides none of the conditions needed for journalism to meet professional standards. In particular, there is little access to information, and not everyone can work with what is available to produce coverage of an international standard. Publications tend to be subjective and politically motivated. Very seldom do journalists present differing viewpoints on important events, and self-censorship is integral to the work of both editors and journalists. Low salaries, insufficient

**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).

training, and limited resources curtail specialization, especially quality niche reporting.

State and private media outlets share a tendency toward subjectivity and lack of balanced opinions. The only difference is that state media exclusively reflect official views, whereas the independent press often sympathizes with the opposition. Journalists frequently publish unchecked, sensationalized articles to preempt their colleagues. As Marina Sivashova, editor of the Open Kyrgyzstan website, said: "Journalism does not meet high professional standards, and we journalists are guilty of this. Articles are 90 percent opinion and only 10 percent actual facts." However, Iris Omurzakov, editor of the *Tribune*, said: "The reporting should not necessarily meet international standards. People want to 'chew on' opinions."

Only journalists from local offices of international newspapers, agencies, and projects such as the Associated Press, the Institute for War and Peace Reporting (IWPR), and Interfax are trying to meet generally accepted international standards—cross-checking the accuracy of information, interviewing multiple sources, and keeping personal opinions out of their coverage. According to Arkady Gladilov, acting editor of the *Vecherny Bishkek* newspaper, "13 years of relative independence is not enough time for Kyrgyzstani journalism to meet such high professional standards. Managers and journalists are professionals from the old Soviet school of journalism, in which thinking one thing and writing another, fear of losing one's job, and servility are the norm."

The Union of Journalists, successor to a similar Soviet union, adopted an ethics code in 1997, and in 1999, the Journalists Public Union adopted its own code. In 2003, the Independent Trade Union of journalists also adopted a code. None of the standards have been widely used in practice. Kuban Mambetaliev, chairman of the board of the Journalists Public Union, said the divisions between the state and independent media impede acceptance of these standards. It was also noted that many journalists have no idea of the existence of codes of conduct for journalists in Kyrgyzstan. According to Arkady Gladilov, acting editor of *Vecherny Bishkek*, "There is no need for such codes. These ethical norms are common to all mankind. They have been recorded both in the Bible and [the] Koran."

Journalists accept pay or gifts for articles, and panelists mentioned that journalists would likely write anything for a "good bonus." This increases as elections approach. Iris Omurzakov, editor of the *Tribune*, stated: "Sometimes politicians come with their ready-made articles, and only the name of the journalist has to be



changed. They pay good money for it. Parliamentarians and other officials visited me twice and offered me 50,000 soms (about \$1,250) to publish an article which had already been prepared. I did not agree, but in a couple of days it was published in another newspaper.”

This practice of writing sponsored articles results at least in part from the low salaries offered to journalists, although pay for the media is not as miserable as that for the educational sector. At government media, salaries range from \$50 to \$100 a month. At independent outlets they are a bit higher—from \$150 to \$200 a month. However, according to Marat Tazabekov, director of the *Aki Press* information agency in Bishkek, “Salaries in media supported by the state are more sustainable because representatives of the state media are supported by forced subscriptions. In this way, they are insured against bankruptcy. As for the salaries of independent media, they are dependent on advertisers and their popularity.” Artyom Petrov, editor of the *Internews* bulletin, said print media attract more advertising revenue than electronic media and tend to offer higher salaries.

Self-censorship is routine. Media managers are guided by the threat of losing their business, journalists by the fear of prosecution. Gulbara Imankulova, a journalist at the *Talas Chronicle*, noted: “The state press is fully subjected to censorship. The independent media outlets most frequently implement the will of their founders.” Journalists in Kyrgyzstan try not to cover certain topics, among them corruption, drug trafficking, the country’s gold reserves, and problems in the oil sector. Most editors at nongovernment media do not publish articles that portray the president of the country in a negative way. Therefore, dissident viewpoints appear only in some publications such as *Moya Stolitsa Novosti*, *Respublika*, *Litsa*, *Tribune*, *Agim*, and *Jani Ordo*.

Entertainment programming outweighs news and analytical programs in Kyrgyzstan. Most panelists felt that almost 90 percent of the programming of local broadcast media is movies, music, and other entertainment. In the print media, information accounts for approximately 10 percent, while there is a growing “yellow press.” According to Alexander Kulinsky, editor at TV NTC, there are three reasons for this: “First, entertainment programming is still more attractive to the general public; therefore, it is also attractive for advertisers. Second, political programs are not as profitable, are more expensive to

produce for broadcast media, and political programs can create a lot of problems with the authorities. The third reason is a general reduction in the quality of journalism. News and analytical programs cannot be proud of their quality. This is an indicator not only of the level of professional journalism, but also the tremendous influence of the politicians.” By contrast, Viktor Shloyev, commercial director of Polonya Ltd., stated: “News and entertainment programs are more or less balanced. People can choose whatever they like in accordance to their tastes: news, sports, music, or entertainment programs.”

Some regional and urban media outlets are technically well-equipped.

Technical facilities for broadcast and print media are provided by international organizations such as the Soros Foundation and through United States Agency for International Development (USAID) grants.

The facilities and equipment for most local electronic media, however, consist of old analogue equipment, including VHS and S-VHS. A lack of modern technical facilities seriously hinders the quality of print and broadcast media, according to the panelists. This is especially evident in remote towns and villages, where local print media outlets desperately need to modernize their facilities with digital recorders, cameras, and computers.

Quality niche reporting exists only at the larger media outlets such as *Vecherny Bishkek* and *Slovo Kyrgyzstana*, which offer coverage of culture, social issues, and other topics. Most independent-media journalists must be “universal,” in that they have to be able to cover any subject. The lack of niche reporting and programming results from a shortage of qualified journalists, as well as the lack of financial resources. It is very rare for local media to conduct investigative reporting. As a rule, there are few internal financial resources for this purpose, although some international organizations provide grants.

***As Marina Sivashova, editor of the Open Kyrgyzstan website, said: “Journalism does not meet high professional standards, and we journalists are guilty of this. Articles are 90 percent opinion and only 10 percent actual facts.”***

### OBJECTIVE 3: PLURALITY OF NEWS SOURCES

Kyrgyzstan Objective Score: 1.83 / 4.00

In Kyrgyzstan, all types of media—broadcast, print, and Internet—are represented. However, diverse sources of information are more available to those living in the capital, while radio and television may be the only sources of information in rural areas. Expense may also limit people's access to available media. Major publications do not promote the views of the general public, since Kyrgyzstani media pander to the interests of certain political authorities. A network of information agencies was being created in late 2004. There is little transparency

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regarding media ownership, and information about media ownership is not publicly distributed. However, everybody knows about the holdings set up by the ruling political elite. When they can afford it, people often prefer foreign sources of information.

The operation of various media in Kyrgyzstan does not reflect a plurality of information

sources. Since about two-thirds of the population lives in rural areas, obtaining objective information is a problem for the majority. "Since most media are concentrated in the capital and in the Chui oblast, those in the more remote parts of the country have been experiencing information 'hunger,'" said Gulbara Imankulova, a journalist at the *Talas Chronicle* monthly bulletin. "The most available sources of media in the rural areas are television and radio. However, people cannot compare news and check the accuracy of information since only one national company (Kyrgyz TV and Radio) is broadcasting." According to Alexander Kulinsky, editor of TV NTC, "in the south of the country, the expansion of Uzbekistani media is obvious. Most people living in the Issyk-Kul and Chui oblasts watch Kazakh television. As for the Naryn oblast, there is an information vacuum."

Multiple news sources provide citizens with reliable and objective news.

#### PLURALITY OF NEWS SOURCES INDICATORS:

- > A plurality of affordable public and private news sources (e.g., print, broadcast, Internet) exists.
- > Citizens' access to domestic or international media is not restricted.
- > State or public media reflect the views of the entire political spectrum, are nonpartisan, and serve the public interest.
- > Independent news agencies gather and distribute news for print and broadcast media.
- > Independent broadcast media produce their own news programs.
- > Transparency of media ownership allows consumers to judge objectivity of news; media ownership is not concentrated in a few conglomerates.
- > A broad spectrum of social interests are reflected and represented in the media, including minority-language information sources.

All of the large newspapers—*Vecherny Bishkek*, *Delo*, and *Moya Stolitsa Novosti*, which have circulations of 5,000 to 80,000—are published in Bishkek and cover primarily national issues. At least 80 oblast, city, and rayon newspapers giving some degree of coverage to local concerns are published more or less regularly, but their circulation is much lower, in the 500 to 2,000 range per edition. However, for many people, newspapers are simply too expensive to buy regularly.

The Internet is available only in cities and oblast centers, but it is not subject to state restrictions. For rural people, accessing the Internet is very difficult. There is normally only one Internet provider in these areas, and prices for its services are extremely high. There are 500 villages in Kyrgyzstan that do not have telephone lines, and people living in the remote areas may not have even heard of the Internet.

Foreign media are not restricted but are expensive and often remain in stores unsold. Television channels from Russia and Kazakhstan broadcast into the territory via satellite or cable services, which operate in Bishkek and some regional centers.

Currently, most media in Kyrgyzstan do not serve the general public, the MSI panel agreed. According to Viktor Shloyev, commercial director at Polonya Ltd.,

“not many state or independent media outlets serve the interests of the country. A good example of this is the *Vecherny Bishkek* newspaper, which belongs to the family of the president. Today, the newspaper is a mouthpiece of the Alga Kyrgyzstan pro-government political party.”

Information on media ownership is not transparent, although most people know that many media outlets belong to or are controlled by the president or his circle. Viktor Shloyev, commercial director of Polonya Ltd., said: “It is well-known that one of the so-called media oligarchs is the son-in-law of the president. He owns the Airek advertising agency, KOORT TV, and Ala TV, a cable station. He also controls advertising for the Russian ORT, RTR, and other television channels. He actively interferes in the operations of the outlets that belong to him.” However, large business conglomerates do not own media outlets in Kyrgyzstan.

Under the guise of freedom, newspapers may be used to settle private disputes between media and journalists. Taking revenge on a competitor has become commonplace in media operations in Kyrgyzstan. According to Ernis Mamyrganov, director of the Osh Media Resource Center, “sometimes information wars between media reach a point that their audiences disappear. People react to this war in their own way. They stop trusting articles and buying newspapers.”

Kabar and Kyrgyzinfo are both state-run news agencies. The government supports Kabar, and the city of Bishkek finances Kyrgyzinfo. Only Aki Press news agency is independent and provides services to media outlets around the country, although many rural ones cannot afford to subscribe. In addition, some information is posted on agency websites, but rural media personnel do not necessarily have the skills to use a computer or to research using the Internet. Panelists said the recent improvements in news-agency services and professionalism are encouraging. For example, Artyom Petrov, editor of the *Internews* bulletin, noted that “some information appearing recently on Kyrgyzinfo cannot appear in any other state-controlled media.”

Independent television stations broadcast news for only 20 minutes a day. Independent media programs may offer more realistic and balanced coverage, although sometimes their programs are biased toward the opposition. The state-run television stations almost exclusively cover the government and the parliament. “In spite of the large number of Kyrgyzstani media outlets, all of them interpret news in their own way, offering their own subjective views,” said Petrov.

Kyrgyzstani media do not reflect a broad spectrum of social issues. For example, ethnic minorities living in

Kyrgyzstan are hardly covered, although journalists who do report on minority issues are not subject to prosecution. The laws of Kyrgyzstan do not restrict publications in minority languages. In the south of the country, the *Demos Times* is published in Uzbek. Issues related to ethnic minorities are also covered by *Ethnic World* magazine, but it is issued only four times a year and its circulation is a mere 350 copies. Panelists mentioned that minority-language reporting on any potentially controversial topic is restricted by government authorities during pre-election periods.

According to Arkady Gladilov, acting editor of the *Vecherny Bishkek* daily, “media do not support cultural and educational programs, since this information is seen as advertising. Even theater playbills cannot be published.”

Often topics related to the penitentiary system are unreported. Iris Omurzakov, editor of the *Tribune* newspaper, stated: “We were not able to cover the rebellion in the Osh detention center because certain officials did not allow us to do so.”

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#### OBJECTIVE 4: BUSINESS MANAGEMENT

**Kyrgyzstan Objective Score: 1.57 / 4.00**

The economic and political situation in Kyrgyzstan does not allow media to develop into well-managed independent businesses. Media operate instead as political tools, as evidenced by the fact that only a small fraction of the outlets are financially independent. Monopolization of the media and advertising markets, meanwhile, has led to decreasing demand for market research.

“Freedom of speech is under real threat,” said Ernis Mamyrganov, director of the Osh Media Resource Center. “Media have not gained the power to resist pressure and independently uphold their positions. The main reason for this is the severe economic hardship of media and their lack of financial viability.”

**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.

Inadequate tax legislation as well as insufficient circulation numbers and poor distribution networks hamper progress toward profitability for print media. In addition, printing costs are high, and there is a shortage of modern facilities. There are 10 presses, the largest being Uchkun, under the personal control of the president and 80 percent owned by the state, which subsidizes it. Freedom House, an international

**As Bektash Shamshiyev, a journalist at Radio Liberty, said: "The government simply forces businessmen and owners of private businesses to advertise only at state-run media."**

NGO, opened an independent press in 2003 with support from the US government. Regional centers have their own printing presses, but only two of them, in Osh and Jalalabat, are able to approach

modern standards. Local governors control the regional presses, and the obsolete equipment drives some newspapers such as *Naryn* and *Talas* to be printed in Bishkek at the Uchkun printing house, adding to their overhead costs.

Political pressure can be brought on the presses. Viktor Shloyev, commercial director at Polonya Ltd., stated: "If the political situation changes, very often independent printing houses become overly cautious. When the

authorities closed the *MCN* newspaper, not a single private printing house agreed to publish it. At Uchkun, a government censor worked there until recently, and he monitored everything that was published."

Media distribution throughout the country is uneven. Newspapers can reach remote areas of Kyrgyzstan only after lengthy delays, if at all. The two networks, the state-run *Kyrgyzpochtasi* and the joint stock company *Kyrgyzbasmasoz*, are not sufficient for market needs or always efficient. Iris Omurzakov, editor of the *Tribune* newspaper, said "many newspapers refuse to cooperate with *Kyrgyzbasmasoz* since the company often failed to fulfill its obligations and owes a lot of money." Most independent print media prefer to deal with private distributors.

In addition to subsidies from public monies, the state media rely on the annual subscriptions required of government employees. According to the panelists, some state-run media would rather not receive financial support from the state, but the authorities refuse to release them from their supervision. Included in this group by the panel were *Slovo Kyrgyzstana*, *Chui Izvestia*, and the oblast newspaper *Kyrgyz Tuusu*.

Independent media derive income from advertising, "hidden" advertising, and grants from international organizations such as the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), USAID, the Soros Foundation, and the Eurasia Foundation. Opposition newspapers, such as *Moya Stolitsa Novosti*, *Respublica*, and *Tribune*, operate with the support of grants.

Some independent outlets, especially those associated with the opposition, find that even private businesses are afraid to advertise with them. This seriously hinders revenues for non-state media. As Bektash Shamshiyev, a journalist at Radio Liberty, said: "The government simply forces businessmen and owners of private businesses to advertise only at state-run media."

Monopolization was a trend in the advertising market during 2004. The flow of advertising revenue went to the state-run Airek agency. Airek supplied *Vecherny Bishkek*, TV KOORT, Love Radio, ORT, and RTR with commercials. In this environment, it is extremely difficult for an independent advertising agency to carve out a place within the market. And in many areas of Kyrgyzstan, the advertising market is very weak or nonexistent due to the poor economy. Marketing surveys are conducted and used infrequently because of the monopolization and political influence on advertising. There is no independent verification of circulation figures for print media or audience share for broadcasters.

## OBJECTIVE 5: SUPPORTING INSTITUTIONS

Kyrgyzstan Objective Score: 1.74 / 4.00

During 2004, the role of supporting institutions increased, but their success could not be gauged yet. The main factor slowing their efforts was the absence of a system to lobby the government to draft media legislation. In spite of a large number of universities with departments of journalism, graduates do not work in the media but prefer public-relations positions in international companies. Many journalists are able to enhance their skills through workshops.

There are no trade associations that represent editors, broadcasters, or publishers in Kyrgyzstan. Efforts to establish such unions failed because members were unwilling to pay membership dues. Kuban Mambetaliev, chairman of the board of the Journalists Public Union, said: "The willingness of editors to set up legal associations has not matured yet." In 2003, a new Trade Union of Journalists was established. However, according to Alexander Kulinsky, editor of TV NTC: "Efforts to set up an independent trade association of journalists failed for two reasons: an inability of the media outlets to organize a trade-union movement and unwillingness by the journalism community to unite for the purposes of defending and advocating for their interests."

### 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 private, apolitical, and unrestricted.
- > Channels of media distribution (kiosks, transmitters, Internet) are private, apolitical, and unrestricted.

In contrast, there are several NGOs that support media. The most experienced of them is the Journalists Public Union. Founded in 1998, the Union actively defends the interests of journalists, including in court. The Union also lobbies the government on the principles of freedom of speech and press. Legal and advisory services to the members are provided by the Osh Media Resource Center. Others include the Press Club Public Union; the Public Fund for Mass Media Development and Defending Rights of Journalists; the Association of Television Broadcasters, made up of several private, mainly regional, television companies; the Mass Media Association, consisting of 18 representatives of electronic national media; the Association of Independent

Electronic Representatives of Mass Media of Central Asian Countries; the Association of Regional Broadcasters; and the Association of Editors-in-Chief.

Not all panelists evaluated the operations of the supporting institutions positively. Arkady Gladilov, acting editor of *Vecherny Bishkek*, stated:

***According to Alexander Kulinsky, editor of TV NTC: "Efforts to set up an independent trade association of journalists failed for two reasons: an inability of the media outlets to organize a trade-union movement and unwillingness by the journalism community to unite for the purposes of defending and advocating for their interests."***

"[Supporting institutions] do not impact on the journalists' practice." The supporting institutions experience problems since there is no lobbying system in place to assist in drafting legislation. Nevertheless, there are examples of effective efforts. Alexander Kulinsky, editor of TV NTC, stated: "This year the Association of Television Broadcasters was able to persuade the State Agency for Communications and the State Agency for Radio Frequencies to extend licenses for the frequencies used by private television companies."

In 2004, two new organizations were added to the list. A grant from the European Union set up Media Representation, which was designed to lobby for draft laws and defend journalists and media outlets in court. The Association of Local Mass Media Editors was organized by the Press Service of the President of the Kyrgyz Republic, the Kabar information agency, and the Media Council of the Kyrgyz Republic with the

support of the Ebert and Soros–Kyrgyzstan foundations. Its aim is to consolidate local media for the purpose of enhancing the professional skills of their journalists and to provide technical and advisory services to employees of media and educational institutions. In addition, the association intends to organize journalists in establishing broad relations with similar unions and institutions in other countries. The board of the association is comprised of representatives from local media outlets. NGOs actively defend the principles of freedom of speech and the press, chief among them the Coalition of Nongovernmental Organizations.

The training of journalists at the universities does not include effective practical work through hands-on workshops and specialized courses. Experienced and well-known journalists are not invited or included in the training process. Marina Sivashova, editor of the Open Kyrgyzstan website and a professor at the American University in Central Asia, said: “[The] education of journalists at the universities is very poor. Certain universities have journalism programs taught by certain instructors. However, there is no uniformly adopted program. Practical training for students is arranged in a very formal way.” As the panelists noted, few faculty members are willing or able to improve their own professional skills, and there are no textbooks or manuals on modern journalism practice. As a result, journalism graduates enter the media market without sufficient skills, and significant time is required to re-train them. The Jalalabat Media Resource Center, supported by IREX, provides hands-on training specifically for student journalists through the Media Incubator Club, which is designed to augment the courses available at the local university.

Professional training is provided irregularly, on a grant-by-grant basis from international organizations. Marat Tazabekov, director of the Aki Press information agency in Bishkek, said: “Opportunities for short-term training of journalists in Kyrgyzstan are not sufficient, and they are largely ineffective.” Topics such as media management and news production are popular, but editors and news directors may not allow their staffs to participate due to personnel shortages.

Panelists disagreed about the state of Kyrgyzstani printing houses. Gulbara Imankulova, a journalist at the *Talas Chronicle* monthly bulletin, said there were no restrictions. However, most panel participants thought that printing houses were dependent on the state and gave preference to pro-state media. Artyom Petrov, editor of the *Internews* bulletin, added: “Small private and nongovernmental printing houses are managed too much by the officials.” Alexander Kulinsky, editor of TV NTC, said electronic media are more vulnerable

than print media to government pressure “because any mistake can draw the attention of the State Agency for Communications. The agency retains technical control over transmitters and can stop the signal of that outlet, including forcing its closure.”

## Panel Participants

**Marat Tazabekov**, director, Aki Press information agency, Bishkek

**Kuban Mambetaliev**, chairman of the board, Journalists Public Union, Bishkek

**Ernis Mamyrganov**, director, Osh Media Resource Center, Osh

**Viktor Shloyev**, commercial director, Polonya Ltd., Bishkek

**Miktibek Omurzakov**, leading correspondent, Adilet information and analytical program, National Broadcasting Company, Bishkek

**Bekdash Shamshiyev**, journalist, Liberty Radio, Bishkek office

**Artyom Petrov**, editor, *Internews* bulletin, Bishkek

**Alexander Kulinsky**, editor, TV NTC, Bishkek

**Iris Omurzakov**, editor, *Tribune* newspaper, Bishkek

**Marina Sivashova**, editor, Open Kyrgyzstan website, journalism teacher, American University in Central Asia, Bishkek

**Arkady Gladilov**, acting editor, *Vecherny Bishkek* daily newspaper (ex–editor-in-chief of the *Komsomolskaya Pravda* newspaper, Bishkek)

**Gulbara Imankulova**, journalist, *Talas Chronicle* monthly bulletin, Talas

## Moderator

**Elena Buldakova**, Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan

## Observers

**Chinara Omurkulova**, director, IREX office in the Kyrgyz Republic

**Maria Stefurak**, media-development specialist, Democratic Development department, USAID

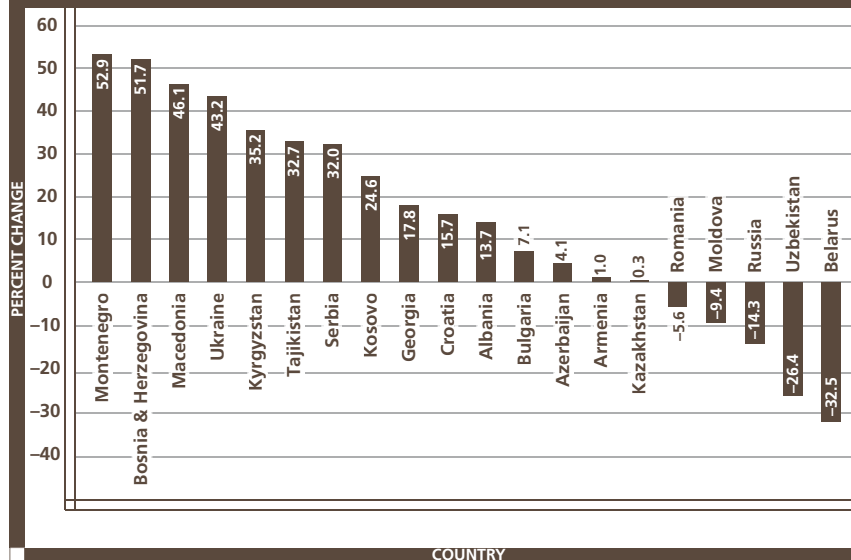
**Jennifer Kroft**, democratic-development specialist, USAID

# KYRGYZSTAN AT A GLANCE

**GENERAL** (data from CIA World Factbook)

- **Population:** 5,081,429 (est. July 2004)
- **Capital city:** Bishkek
- **Ethnic groups (% of population):** Kyrgyz 65%, Uzbeks 13.8%, Russians 12.5%, Ukrainians 1%, Dungans 1.1%, Uygurs 1%, other 5.7%
- **Religions (% of population):** Muslim 75%, Russian Orthodox 20%, other 5%
- **Languages:** Kyrgyz: state language; Russian: official language
- **GDP:** US\$7.808 billion (est. 2003); GDP per capita: preliminary estimate US\$382 (US\$330 according to the Atlas method) or US\$1,600 (est. 2003)
- **Literacy rate (% of population):** 98.7%
- **President or top authority:** President Askar Akayev
- **Next scheduled elections** Parliamentary February 2005, presidential November 2005

**MSI AVERAGE SCORES—PERCENT CHANGE 2001–2004**



**MEDIA-SPECIFIC**

- **Newspaper circulation statistics (total circulation and largest paper):** The *Vecherny Bishkek* daily newspaper circulates 20,000 copies on weekdays and 80,000 copies on Fridays with the television program. *Moya Stolitsa News* circulates 5,000 copies on weekdays and 55,000 copies on Saturdays with the television program.
- **Broadcast ratings:** TV: ORT, RTR (Russian Federation), KOORT, Pyramid, Kyrgyz National Broadcasting Company; RADIO: Russian Radio, Europe plus,

Chanson Radio, Love Radio, Kyrgyz National Radio, Pyramid

- **Number of print outlets, radio stations, television stations:** There are 64 government, 56 private, and 12 regional newspapers in the country. Electronic media (television and FM radio stations) include 10 government, 40 private, and four regional stations.
- **Annual advertising revenue in media sector:** NA
- **Number of Internet users:** 152,000 (2002) *CIA World Factbook*
- **Names of news agencies:** Kabar and Kyrgyzinfo are government agencies, and Aki-Press is independent.

**MEDIA SUSTAINABILITY INDEX: KYRGYZSTAN**

