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## KYRGYZSTAN

Despite the absence of any obvious regulatory or structural changes, turf wars for political power both in the public forum and behind-the-scenes set the stage for further turbulence in the media industry and the journalistic community.

The year 2012 began with a series of protests that rapidly spiraled into conflict. First, there were confrontations between prisoners and the management of the State Prison Service. This was followed by a series of clashes between groups of Kyrgyz youth with minority Tajik communities in the southwestern towns of Andarak and Aydarken, Caucasus youth in Jany Jer, and Uzbeks in Aravan. Domestic media outlets covered these events extensively, though not necessarily deeply.

The five squabbling, personality-driven parties in parliament continued competing relentlessly for political power, accomplishing little. In early August, a serious conflict broke out between the leader of the Ata-Meken party, Omurbek Tekebaev, and Prime Minister Omurbek Babanov, which ended in the collapse of the coalition government and the de facto assumption of control of the government by President Almazbek Atambayev, with his Social Democratic Party of Kyrgyzstan taking the prime minister's office. There were various moves throughout the year by the other parties in parliament to try and wrest back control from the president, but the dispute has yet to be resolved.

The Kyrgyz media has been at the epicenter of these turbulent events, as a willing participant, as collateral damage, and as the subject of political machinations. Repeated calls to "pull the plug" on various media outlets from political figures and "AstroTurf" social movements resulted. Kyrgyzstan's competitive and diffuse politics meant that the government could not rudely control the media, but opaque ownership, poor professionalism standards, and a weak economy allowed most outlets to be used as tools for politicians to further their agendas. A vicious circle has been created, whereby this influence led to further deterioration in professionalism and pluralism.

# KYRGYZSTAN at a glance

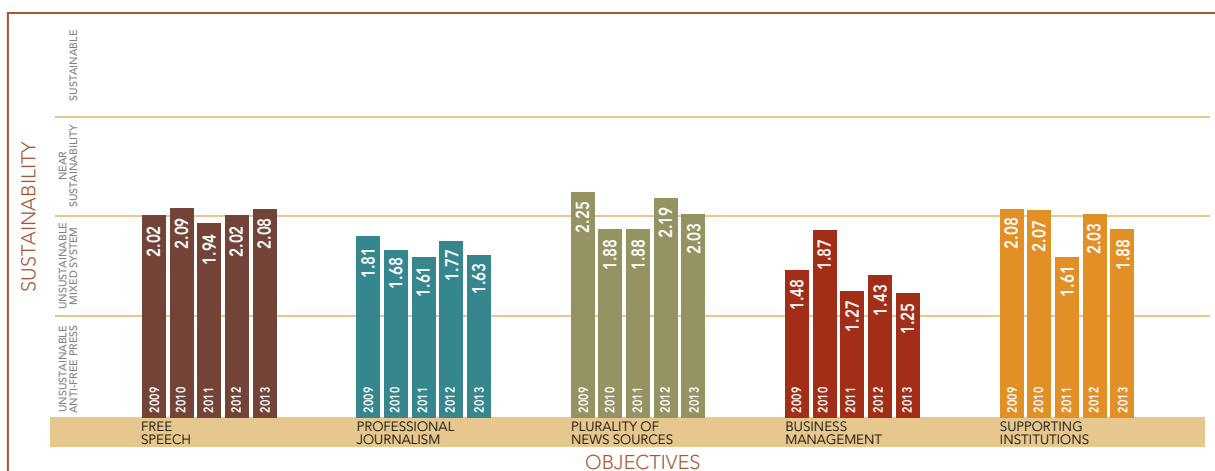
## GENERAL

- > Population: 5,548,042 (July 2013 est., *CIA World Factbook*)
- > Capital City: Bishkek
- > Ethnic groups (% of population): Kyrgyz 64.9%, Uzbek 13.8%, Russian 12.5%, Dungan 1.1%, Ukrainian 1%, Uyghur 1%, other 5.7% (1999 census)
- > Religions (% of population): Muslim 75%, Russian Orthodox 20%, other 5%
- > Languages (% of population): Kyrgyz 64.7% (official), Uzbek 13.6%, Russian 12.5% (official), Dungan 1%, other 8.2% (1999 census)
- > GNI (2011-Atlas): \$ 4.865 billion (World Bank Development Indicators)
- > GNI per capita (2011-PPP): \$2,180 (World Bank Development Indicators)
- > Literacy rate: 98.7% (male 99.3%, female 98.1%) (1999 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: Print: 250 including 4 main dailies and 4 other major papers; Radio Stations: 6 main stations, 31 others; Television Stations: 7 main stations, 3 local cable networks
- > Newspaper circulation statistics: Top four by circulation: *Super-Info* (circulation 80,000, private, Kyrgyz language), *Vechnij Bishkek* (circulation 50,000, private, Russian language), *Pyramid* (circulation 40,000, private, Russian language), *Delo No.* (22,000, private, Russian language)
- > Broadcast ratings: Top two: National TV and Radio Broadcasting Corporation (state-owned, both languages), 5th Channel (private, Russian and Kyrgyz)
- > News agencies: Kabar (state-owned), AKIpress (private), 24.kg (private), K-News (private)
- > Annual advertising revenue in media sector: Estimated \$5 million in 2008
- > Internet usage: 2.195 million (2009 est., *CIA World Factbook*)

## MEDIA SUSTAINABILITY INDEX: KYRGYZSTAN



## MEDIA SUSTAINABILITY INDEX 2013: OVERALL AVERAGE SCORES



### CHANGE SINCE 2012

▲ (increase greater than .10) □ (little or no change) ▼ (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: 2.08

The panelists agreed that media legislation in Kyrgyzstan is liberal. The right to freedom of expression, speech, press and information is all guaranteed and protected by the Constitution of 2010. Various methods of obtaining information, whether by written requests, access through government databases, or through legal proceedings, is provided for through legislation.<sup>1</sup>

Any violation of free speech or access to information could be the subject of legal proceedings, established by law, to include: complaints to senior officials, appeals to the Ombudsman of the Kyrgyz Republic, or court appeals. Libel remains a civil matter. As a result of the specific characteristics of those civil proceedings, it is up to the accused to prove his or her innocence. Officials who have hindered free speech and access to information bear administrative and criminal liability for so doing.

The year 2012 was full of policy initiatives by high-ranking politicians and public debate on the need to change media legislation. Among the politicians who demanding greater consequences for journalists guilty of libel or defamation were Prime Minister Babanov and President Atambayev. Also, as reported by 24.kg News Agency, State Prosecutor

<sup>1</sup> The Guarantees on Access and Freedom of Access to Information Act (1997) and the Access to Information Held by Departments of State and Local Government Bodies Act (2006).

### 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.

Salyanova twice made official statements decrying “the veritable storm of unfounded and unverified information coming out of both the media and politicians themselves,” and transparently hinted that her office intended to bring criminal charges for such cases under “false accusation.”

Debate continued in Parliament about the Media Act, which was described as hopelessly outdated and failing to regulate the rights of journalists and the public to be able to access socially significant information. In attempting to reform the media legislation, Member of Parliament Ravshan Zheenbekov moved for amendments to the Criminal Code related to abuse of free speech and freedom of the media. Under his proposal, journalists and chief editors would be held criminally liable for publishing false information, not the outlet’s owners, as is now the case.

According to panelist Igor Shestakov, there is already a working group formulating a new Media Act that also includes representatives of the media community. However, Shestakov himself, speaking as a member of the group, expressed serious doubts about whether the political interests of the parliament members of the group would allow the draft Act to progress. Shestakov argued, “Given how they have been going about adopting the new law, the 1992 version would have been the more democratic of the two. Right now, even if does not regulate much, at least it does no harm.” His view was supported by panelist Aleksandr Kulinsky, who said, “This has been an example of how an ordinary, pretty much technical exercise to reconcile the Russian- and Kyrgyz-language versions of the Act has all but turned the media legislation into a repressive cage for journalism, which shows that in our country, ‘if it ain’t broke, don’t fix it.’ We should not adopt any amendments to the existing law, much less adopt a new one.”

Many additional legislative initiatives were publicly announced and presented to parliament that would impact the media industry.

One such bill concerned exposing children to media images that might be harmful to their health or well-being. While on the surface the subject seemed commendable, the public consultations in June were said by the panelists to contain a series of repressive provisions that would muzzle free speech and the independence of the media. Through the internet, the Civil Initiative on Internet Policy and affiliated NGOs gathered 23,000 signatures opposing the bill.

Another bill was presented by Tekebaev to protect “the honor, dignity and business reputation” of politicians by creating a “buffer zone” between the media and the public, which would have directly conflicted with certain articles of the Civil Code. Additional bills infringed on free speech under the guise of anti-terrorism or extremism, and one

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bill on public service advertising, or rather amendments to the Advertising Act,<sup>2</sup> would have severely impacted the financial sustainability of the media industry, in the opinion of the panelists.

Although initiatives to reform media legislation are ostensibly initiated by objective reasons and needs, on the whole it can be said that there is a trend toward the tightening of the legal regime for free speech. The very idea of regulating media activities through such a vast overhaul of the legal and regulatory system is a risk and threat to journalists and the media industry. As Kulinsky observed, "This 'dismemberment by legislation,' in practice, has opened up the potential for the courts to hand down the worst possible decisions for the media industry based on legislation that favors one or another interest group."

Legal cases impacting free speech and the media were very active in 2012. There were a number of very important cases that set precedents for the future.

Human rights activists and other citizens began trying to win the right to access public information through the courts. For example, Nurbek Toktakunov, a lawyer and human rights activist, took the State National Security Committee to court for concealing expenditures and revenues in its budget. Similarly, the NGO Precedent won its case against the Office of the Prosecutor General to provide information on salary paid its head.

For the first time in the country's history, the issue of libel was raised against the head of the state's broadcast media outlet, for distorting information. The Supervisory Council of Kyrgyz Public Radio and Television (KPRT) brought the case, questioning whether the state television channel's director had spread disinformation concerning the attempted takeover of the Kyrgyz capitol building, the White House, by opposition parliamentarian Kamchybek Tashiev in October 2012.

Authorities attempted to pin responsibility for repeated ethnic conflicts in the country on the media and journalists. As a result, blogger Vladimir Farafonov was indicted under Article 299 of the Criminal Code, for "inciting national, racial, religious or inter-regional hatred," and it was predicted he would get anywhere from eight years to life in prison for his blog post, posted on a Russian website, which described the inter-ethnic clashes in Osh in 2010 and was described by certain politicians as reflecting poorly on the Kyrgyz nation.

Everywhere, heads of state-run media, especially in the regions, have been appointed based on their "party spheres

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<sup>2</sup> Included an initiative by Member of Parliament Damira Niyazalieva to oblige the media to offer 5 percent of their advertising airtime to public service advertising.

of influence,"<sup>3</sup> with no regard to professional competence or the views of their staff. The "party promotion" of editors, is a form of censorship and partisanship regarding the promotion of the platform of the parties involved and the readiness of the journalist, at any time, to deploy editorial resources for information warfare with media outlets affiliated with other parties. Everywhere there is evidence of interference by the ruling political parties and the government in meddling in the affairs of media companies. The panel described a tacit agreement between the parties in parliament, and their leaders, to effectively privatize the state media by dividing its leadership amongst themselves.

Thus, for nearly six months the applicant to head the Tumar national radio station, who had won the competitive selection process run by the Supervisory Council of KPRT, did not get confirmed. The government backers on the Council would not accept him. Shestakov noted, "In comes one party, and they put in one chief; then, in comes another party, and they put in another. Today we have the phenomenon of [parties] sharing the media and they have decided to just take over. This is what has been behind all this dressing up [the Council] as 'public interest.' It has been nothing more than a smokescreen. It is been absurd, as has the very structure of the Council—why has it been composed of representatives of just the three or four ruling parties, when there are nearly 200 parties in the country?"

As part of the program for the transition to digital broadcasting in Kyrgyzstan, which started in September 2012, no further licenses for analog television broadcasting have been issued. The new KPRT channel Yntymak, a State public television project launched after the violent clashes of 2010 that broadcasts in the South, received one of the last licenses and analog frequency allocations. But so far, the transition to digital broadcasting has seen many problems. The panelists summarized the most problematic aspects in the transition Action Plan as follows.

By October 2011, the Plan would, "Determine the conditions for the competition to obtain frequencies for operators and licenses for broadcasters," with the subsequent development and approval by the government of a regulation on the conduct of the competition for the right to use the radio frequency for digital terrestrial broadcasting. However, even towards the end of 2012, the Ministry of Transport and the State Telecommunications Agency who are responsible for implementing these measures, have not presented any drafts to the public, nor have they approved any legislation or regulations.

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<sup>3</sup> Under a tacit agreement between the parliamentary parties on sharing spheres of political influence, the parties have effectively carried out the silent privatization of the State media.

By the end of 2011, the Plan would, "Hold a competition for assigning frequencies for digital broadcasting." Rather, as was reported by the online media outlet, Tazabek.kg, the Ministry of Transport and Communications allocated four multiplexes without competition to the state-owned firm, Kyrgyztelecom.

The regime for allocating frequencies, channel assignments, and the packages to be carried has not yet been developed. Because the state in recent years has repeatedly put batches of its shares in Kyrgyztelecom up for sale, there is a huge risk that the multiplexes will end up in private ownership and the guaranteed free television broadcasting package for the public will be at risk.

The situation with licensing and issuing commercial frequencies to local radio stations in the outlying regions is not a problem, and in the past year several community radio stations did receive frequencies. The registration of newspapers with the Ministry of Justice remains a liberal, but long, drawn-out process. However, there is one caveat. It is not possible to qualify at the local level for distribution throughout a region, because the registration of such an application immediately involves the Ministry of Justice. Panelist Orozaly Karasartov, editor of the newspaper *Aimaktar*, went through this process in 2012 with his newspaper. He was surprised when the regional Department of Justice granted him a registration that arbitrarily reduced the area in which he could lawfully distribute his newspaper to one district of one region, about the equivalent of a US county. Karasartov asked, "Why, in principle, did the government have the right to forcibly change the geographic area of broadcasting or distribution coverage? Why couldn't I, publishing my newspaper in Jalalabad, be allowed to distribute it throughout the country? These are discriminatory regulations."

The professional activities of journalists in Kyrgyzstan, as well as in many other countries, are under threat. In 2012, most attacks on journalists in Kyrgyzstan were carried out during protests. The state and society are rather indifferent to such attacks. Law enforcement agencies do not link these cases to journalists' professional activities. Rather, they tend to consider such attacks as "hooliganism," street crime, or disorderly conduct. Law enforcement bodies do raise criminal cases against those responsible, but the perpetrators are rarely found, especially in the case of murder. Almaz Ismanov noted, "The investigation into the murders of Alisher Saipov and Gennadiy Pavlyuk, and the brutal beating of Syrgak Abdyldaev, even two or three years after the change in political regime, suggests that the authorities are still not morally ready to dot all the i's and cross all the t's, and investigate these cases through to a conclusion."

## OBJECTIVE 2: PROFESSIONAL JOURNALISM

### Kyrgyzstan Objective Score: 1.63

During 2012, several independent studies were conducted on professional standards and journalistic ethics. Media Policy Institute monitoring of content on inter-ethnic topics from news agencies and print media showed, "In a third of the news agency material, facts were not distinguished from commentary, and the information was not balanced. Over a third of the Kyrgyz-language newspapers published material without identifying either sources or authorship." Research by the organization Egalité, commissioned by UNDP, found that, "The media are creators of conflict. They may inaccurately and wrongly interpret the words of interviewees, drag them out of context and distort facts. The facts they present are not checked, and publications are biased, and implement the political goals of their founders." Research carried out in 2012 by the Media Consult Foundation with support from the OSCE Center in Bishkek found breaches of privacy, unwarranted identification of persons suspected of crimes, prejudice against politicians, proclamation of verdicts for cases still under investigation, deliberate publication of information known to be false, content based on speculation, and reporting that deliberately incites ethnic hatred.

Efforts to promote ethical standards among journalists and the media, despite long-standing support of international organizations, seem doomed to failure. Although the rules for a recognized ethics code are under discussion among the media community, they are seen as more of a set of recommendations and few journalists have agreed to abide

### 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).

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by them. As panelist Olga Fedotova, senior correspondent with *Vesti Issyk-Kulya*, observed: "Inasmuch as there has been war going on between the parties, each publishing house has been working on the side of one party or another, and they could have cared less about professionalism. Every one of them 'mixes' the information any way they can. No ethics involved there at all." Isamov added, "Editors and journalists get up in arms about recommendations by the Media Complaints Commission, and in their view the very name of the organization discredits them. A whole slew of media outlets have been sharply critical of the media oversight organizations. The crisis in the media in the country is obviously coming to a peak."

One example of a breach in ethical standards in journalism is plagiarism. It seems that this phenomenon has become the scourge of modern journalism in Kyrgyzstan. The panelists believed that "[Journalists] steal everything... ideas, words, full-length text, photos and even video material." Internet resources are the key targets for plagiarism. "Plagiarism exists, but the media community has attached no importance to it," said panelist Antonina Blindina, editor-in-chief with the newspaper *Chuiskie Izvestiya*, in discussing how plagiarism has become the norm.

Censorship and self-censorship is becoming common practice for the vast majority of journalists and press houses. Each media outlet has its own "taboo topics" or personae non grata who are the frequent targets of criticism. There is also bias for certain politicians to whom that particular media outlet is loyal or with whom it is affiliated. At some media outlets, it is forbidden even to mention ineffective heating in homes or public buildings, so as not to cast aspersions on the government or the municipality that is not doing its job. Other media outlets, by contrast, can almost never stop "sounding off" on the problem of poor management, and never seem to report any positive news whatsoever. One example cited was an August 2012 article by 24.kg News Agency, one of the leading online outlets, which quoted verbatim a press release by the controversial and powerful mayor of Osh. "The Mayor of Osh has been active in construction. New facilities are being constructed and roads are being repaired and widened. There are major developments in industry. Over the first half of the year, Osh became first in industrial output in the country. However, our achievements are not being fully covered by the central television channels. This is censorship," it read.

A study by the National Democratic Institute in October 2012 examined the effectiveness of parliament and determined that parliament contributed negatively to Kyrgyzstan's image. The study found that the media is helping build an opinion among the public that the members of parliament regularly, and sometimes even repeatedly, pursue businesses

interests, racketeering, and harassment of foreign investors while in session. Corruption was cited as pervasive in parliament, with parliamentarians taking bribes to lobby against laws, attack other politicians and institutions, place front men in organizations, and guarantee loyalty or electoral support.

Censorship is particularly rampant among Uzbek-language media outlets working in Kyrgyzstan. As one of the panelists observed, "After the events of June [2010], the Uzbek media lost its right to discuss political issues." Panelist Saltanat Fayzullaeva, journalist with the newspaper *Osh Sadosi*, said "In the past, *Osh Sadosi* had almost fifty people working there, but now there are only five of us, and three of those are retirees. Recently we prepared the Rights newsletter. I had to go three times to the city prosecutor's office for approval, and then changes were made, and many things were simply taken out."

In the outlying regions, the issue of minority language editions is very challenging. As the panelists noted, politicians remember the Uzbek electorate only during elections and start to produce special editions of Kyrgyz-language newspapers in Uzbek, only to forget about the Uzbeks again right after the elections. In fairness, it should be noted that in 2012, positive changes did start to take place on this issue. After two years of sharp decline in the Uzbek-language media, the space for the Uzbek language in journalism began to expand again, though it remains apolitical. Uzbeks comprise at least 15 percent of the population, and as much as 40 percent in southern regions.

It is interesting that many media outlets were opening up special economic news desks. However, what they say and how they say it, in the panelists' view, was irrelevant to people's lives. Daniyar Sadiev argued, "Osh TV, for example, does economic news. But it has done so just to tick the box. Even the presenter has said that she does not understand it, she just takes it off the Internet, and then reads it out loud once she has learned it by heart. So they have put out a report on the stock exchanges, the 'Joe Jones Index,' [sic] or whatever it is, and the average variations in prices, especially oil and gold, on the New York Stock Exchange. This has all been quite simply meaningless to the ordinary viewer."

Self-censorship is of the strategies used by journalists to avoid the problems associated with covering social and political realities. As Kulinsky said, in summarizing the discussion on professional standards, "Self-censorship is there as a safety net that spares the media from government pressure and the influence from interested parties. The degree of self-censorship depends on the region in which the media outlet operates, on the financial and political independence of that media outlet, and on its political

goals. Obviously in the state media, self-censorship prevents criticism by the authorities. While over on NTS, self-censorship cuts out all information against Babanov and his Republic party.”

Officials frequently prevent journalists from covering the most important events and topics in the country. In 2012, Media Policy Institute lawyers were involved in 24 cases in which one of the parties was a media outlet or a journalist.<sup>4</sup> In most cases, journalists and media outlets were the defendants against claimants seeking compensation for supposed affronts to the “honor, dignity, and business reputation” of the plaintiffs. In nine cases, the plaintiffs were acting government officials. Compensation claims skyrocketed up to as much as 5 million soms (about \$106,000), which was demanded by parliamentarian Irina Karamushkina stemming from an article on a fatal road accident involving the MP’s official vehicle. Karamushkina claimed that the journalist’s report, based on an anonymous source at the Ministry of Interior, that the parliamentarian was in the vehicle at the time constituted an insult to her dignity.

Among the most common problems journalists faced in covering events in 2012 were cases in which government officials and law enforcement agency personnel prevented them from obtaining information. Indeed, in 2012, the Media Policy Institute recorded the following cases of attacks on journalists covering public events.

On October 3 while a video was being shot of State Security Service officers storming a government building, Meerim Mambetova and the camera operator from the NBT television channel were beaten up. The journalists said four State Security Service personnel beat them before taking the tape and smashing their camera. On the same day, during a rally of supporters of the leaders of the Ata-Zhurt party, a police officer struck the Kyrtag.kg correspondent on the head with his nightstick while the correspondent was taking photographs of a stun grenade lying on the ground.

On September 28 in Gorky Park, Bishkek, during a protest by debtors, protesters attacked Vb.kg correspondent Marat Uraliev as he was filming the scene. The participants tried to stop what he was filming, grabbed him by the arm and demanded he throw away what he had shot. One of the protesters tried to cut him with a knife. Uraliev called the police for assistance, but they failed to show up.

On October 10, participants in a rally in defense of Tashiev and other detained opposition leaders physically and verbally assaulted Interfax’s Kyrgyzstan correspondent Natalya Lyubeznova and Kloop.kg correspondent Zamira

<sup>4</sup> Of these, eight were carried over from the previous year.

Sultanbekova. Police on the scene did not intervene in any way.

Even though covering social, political and economic news is an extremely risky activity, the salaries of the profession are very low. As a result, the level of motivation and the supply of media personnel, especially regional journalists, are very low. At regional printed press outlets, journalists earn between 3,000 to 5,000 soms (\$63–\$105). At outlets in the cities, they earn less than 10,000 soms (\$209). A few on-air personalities at private national television and public television earn a more or less “decent” salary, which is typically between 18,000–20,000 soms (\$377–\$419).

According to the panelists, in the outlying regions all journalists have to work in two or three outlets to earn a decent wage. They prefer not to produce any material they must write themselves, but instead use internet content or republish material produced by other outlets. Sadiev said, “Almost all TV and radio stations depend on entertainment, because it is cheaper and less costly in terms of human resources.” At the same time, research in August 2012 by *Vecherniy Bishkek* on media ratings and audience preferences showed that the dominant interest was in news content, especially television news. Speaking as a member of the KPRT Supervisory Council, Shestakov said, “There has been no precise analysis of the volume of entertainment as compared to news and analysis on the air. There is only a general notion that the ratio was about 60% news to 40% entertainment.

According to the research company M-Vector, the language preferences among media audiences were as follows: 58% of respondents watched broadcasts in Kyrgyz, 36% in Russian, 5% in Uzbek, and 1% picked up foreign channels and watched broadcasts in foreign languages. For a long time there has been talk in the media community about the Russian-language media space declining in Kyrgyzstan. Turat Akimov, editor-in-chief of the newspaper *Vlast i Dengi*, said to 24.kg, “The combined circulation of the Russian-language press in Kyrgyzstan is 165,000–185,000 copies per week.”

Technical facilities and equipment in journalism have, in general, not changed at all over the past few years. Ismanov noted, “Most journalists do not even have their own netbooks or digital cameras. Meeting rooms at even the largest news agencies still do not offer free internet for use by those covering the press conferences held there. In such cases, journalists must instead use expensive mobile Internet. The high cost of the Internet has not allowed us to make full use of all the multimedia features for effective and eye-catching coverage. Sending photos and videos from the scene has been an expensive [proposition] for journalists and media outlets. At most media outlets, journalists have been



obliged to pay their own mobile communication expenses. In the regions, nothing [has been available].”

The government does not provide state-owned media with subsidies for technology investments; instead, they must rely on foreign donors. In September 2012, AKIpress.kg reported that KPRT succeeded in reaching an agreement with the Japanese Embassy for a grant of \$600,000 to retrofit in preparation for the transition to digital broadcasting, which will give the state company an unquestionable and competitive advantage of private television.

### OBJECTIVE 3: PLURALITY OF NEWS

#### Kyrgyzstan Objective Score: 2.03

According to the Ministry of Justice, in December 2012 there were 986 newspapers, 109 television stations and 51 radio stations registered in Kyrgyzstan, each of with its own thematic focus and political orientation, usually based on who founded the outlet. Many of these registered outlets exist only on paper. The Radio and Television Broadcasting Act does not restrict the retransmission of radio and television programs. Five news agencies supply news using the most varied types of layout and format. In addition, unimpeded access to the Internet, with a few notable exceptions of filtered news sites, offers the possibility of obtaining a pluralistic view of the situation in the country and worldwide. Although the Internet has not yet become available to every family in the outlying regions, the

situation is gradually changing. Home Internet prices have come down, including in some of the regions, though costs for mobile Internet remain high for journalists themselves.<sup>5</sup>

Nevertheless, the available news package differs substantially from towns to villages. In remote villages, newspapers are typically not distributed at all, and the Internet is not available for home use, though mobile Internet may be available. What is available on television also depends on location. In Bishkek, 13 of the 17 channels that broadcast in an open format including proving rebroadcasts of foreign television content. Most of the major Russian-language channels (ORT, RTR, Vesti-24, Kultura, NTV) are rebroadcast locally, as are other foreign channels such as MTV, El-Arna and Khabar of Kazakhstan, and China’s CCTV. In the South, Tajik and Uzbek media broadcasters are picked up within Kyrgyzstan. It is common to see programming from Tajikistan’s Sugd-TV, as well as Uz-TV1 and TV2 from Uzbekistan. Nationalist politicians have raised concerns about violations of “information sovereignty” as a result of this cross-border viewership by minorities in both countries. In Bishkek and Osh, cable television networks offer CNNi, Euronews, ESPN, and other Russian options, whereas in remote rural areas people prefer to install satellite dishes because of the weak terrestrial signal.

News coverage throughout the country is only cut off during the elections. This is a legal provision under the Election of the President Act, which delays the broadcast of election-related news during the period of actual voting. Otherwise, access by the public, including journalists, to foreign media is not restricted by anything other than the financial means of the customer.

Even though most people are able to obtain comprehensive news and other information from a variety of sources, the domestic media prefer to employ a strategy of silence in relation to certain events in the country’s political life. For example, the deliberate elimination of opposition politician Adakhan Madumarov from television coverage immediately following his defeat in the last presidential election essentially made him “disappear.” Not a single news story was aired by KPRT on the brutal beating of the brother a slain Uzbek journalist, for which Tekebayev’s was among those arrested. The media has also stayed away from mentioning the daily power cuts in villages or heating breakdowns in the outlying regions when temperatures fall below zero. Kulinsky noted, “The public and state

<sup>5</sup> As panelist Nazira Dzhusupova, journalist with Radio Most, informed the Panel, in Talas unlimited internet access now costs the same as in the capital, i.e., from 500 to 2,000 soms (\$10–\$40) for 125 Mbit/second. At the same time, however, in Naryn region there is still no alternative to Kyrgyztelecom, and prices have still not come down enough, and the slow speed means that many operations cannot be performed, as Zharkyn Ibraeva said.

#### 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.

owned media have continued to be mouthpieces for state ‘news.’ Unfortunately, social [sector media stories] have not become truly public. They have not set aside enough time for educational, children’s and other socially important content. Not only that, the way they have set up principal news items in a way that is biased, and to the benefit of the authorities.”

The situation is slowly beginning to change at KPRT thanks to the activities of its Supervisory Council and its new editorial policy. In October 2012, KPRT announced that it has plans in the near future to open up two new channels, KPRT Music, which in the future will develop into the Culture Channel, and a children’s educational and information channel that will broadcast in both Kyrgyz and Russian.

For a long time, the news agency market in Kyrgyzstan was split between two major competitors, AKIpress and 24.kg. Although the news from those two major news agencies significantly influences the content of news output in newspapers, radio, and television, more news agencies are coming to the fore, including RFE/RL’s Azattyk, Chalkan.kg, K-News.kg, and KirTag, to name a few. Though many have stringers and correspondents in the regions, they are the focus of attention only when bad things happen. Often, the information obtained is both dubious and unreliable.

Larger private media outlets produce their own news, but even their news content is dependent on the feeds from other news agencies. The relationship between local and national news is highly unequal, with coverage of current events in the villages limited to coverage of visits from the country’s leaders. As Fedotova put it, “No one has covered the ‘little’ things. The daily lives of people in the hinterland have rarely gotten any coverage in the national media. Even we, in our regional newspaper, have rarely traveled out to the remote settlements, as the paper no vehicle, and there is little [reliable] public transportation to most villages any more.”

The public receiving information from the various sources does not know who owns the media outlets, or in whose interest the media reports on, one factor that heavily weighed down Kyrgyzstan’s Objective 3 score. For example, when the fast-growing information portal K-News changed hands, the sale was not discussed at all in the media and indeed the very fact that the sale was happening was not even made public. The panelists concluded that even if the public did know the owner of a particular media outlet, and its political bias, this would not radically alter the citizenry’s confidence in their news sources.

Muzaffar Tursunov, freelance journalist from Osh, said, “The news policy of media outlets may indicate its affiliation with one political camp or another. But only experts have come

to these conclusions. Information about the true owners of an outlet has been something that they would rather conceal. The truth has been that sometimes, especially in the regions, unbridled rumors about who owns what have become prevalent.”

## OBJECTIVE 4: BUSINESS MANAGEMENT

### Kyrgyzstan Objective Score: 1.25

As in the past, the media in Kyrgyzstan still does not have diversified streams of income. Many media outlets remain economically dependent on their owners, both state and private media alike. Even the supposedly most successful media outlets, such as *Vecherniy Bishkek* (Evening Bishkek), *DeloNo* (Case Number) and *Super-Info*, owe their success to certain political circles and groups. It is with an eye toward these groups that editorial policy is formed, and it is those groups’ sponsorship money that allows those press outlets to survive.

Just as few businesses succeed on the strength of their business model, few fail on the weaknesses of their business either. As each media outlet is setup specifically as a political enterprise, they rely on the resources of politicians supporting them to remain functional. Because of the low salaries paid to journalists, there has been a chronic problem with staff turnover throughout the Kyrgyz media industry. The most qualified journalists prefer to work in advertising, politics, or on grant-funded international donor projects.

In two years since taking power, the current leadership has managed to considerably increase its media dominance by nationalizing the formerly private channels Pyramid and

## 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.

Channel 5, on grounds that they were owned or politically connected to the ousted President Bakiev. Promised subsidies to some state-owned media has not been handed out, yet the state's leverage over those media outlets shows no sign of weakening. It has now been a long time since the entire range of state newspapers, together with the newly-nationalized television channels, have received any money from the state budget. While they remain financially self-sustaining, this does not prevent state bodies from interfering with their editorial policy. Interference may be limited to the requirement to appropriately cover public events held by certain institutions in exchange for access to inside information, loyalty in the form of subscriptions by state institutions, and cooperation in attracting local advertisers. But often in practice, officials also demand outlets not to cover certain stories that should be of public interest, or to cover news stories that conflict with the state's point of view. As a rule, the state-owned media and their directors never express dissatisfaction with these dictates and do not even consider what their businesses would be like as an independent media outlet. The panelists agreed that the poor economic health of the market is the primary evil facing the media, precluding the development of independence and quality.

Through the influence of the KPRT Supervisory Council, the channel's management has started to adopt a more active fundraising strategy among international donors with a view to enhancing the potential of the company's human resources, technical equipment, and effectiveness. In addition to the aforementioned agreement with the Japanese Embassy on retooling the channel, KPRT is now the primary beneficiary of a three-year USAID project.<sup>6</sup> The project is intended improve the company's financial systems, technology, management, and content.

The situation at KPRT's subsidiary Yntymak (Harmony) channel is completely different. From its inception, funding for the channel was not premised on it receiving money from the national budget. Despite the importance of the channel's mission—to promote reconciliation between the various ethnic groups in the southern regions—the state has not provided funding for this ambitious task. KPRT South, its operating unit, received financial support through grants from international development agencies, and is trying to find its own approach toward earning profit. In developing its strategy, the KPRT Supervisory Council and the channel's management have tried to incorporate lessons learned from the development of KPRT. If the channel succeeds in surviving and growing, it has every

chance to lay the foundation for becoming a true public broadcasting company.

There are no regulatory standards for the distribution of media income. The only restrictions under the Advertising Act are that advertising volumes should not exceed 20% of airtime and 20% of newspaper space. At the same time, there has so far been no precedent for the monitoring of advertising volumes, or sanctions against offenders. Moreover, according to the information that expert and panelist Kulinsky provided to panelists over the years, the state itself is responsible for monitoring the implementation of the Act through its authorized body (the Monopolies Committee). The Monopolies Committee, however, has issued permits in the past to the newspaper *Vechniy Bishkek* for what amounted to a "permissible monopoly" on advertising. *Vechniy Bishkek* is by far the most profitable newspaper advertiser in the country.

Traditionally, incomes of the printed press are led by sales, then advertising, then donor funds, then income from investments or affiliated businesses. It should be pointed out that the media advertising market is small and poorly developed in the country. According to a report in late 2012 by the Expert Consulting Agency, Kyrgyzstan's advertising market amounted to just \$6.6 million in 2012. Most media houses refuse to cite their print runs or production costs, merely claiming to be barely above water.

The listed budget for some television programs appears inflated. Management at the channels rarely set goals to improve efficiency or tailor their products to the demand, and are often wasteful of public funds. It is possible that operating costs are inflated in order to attract larger grants from international donors. No radio, television or printed press outlet seems to want to provide budget transparency. The only possible exception is that of KPRT, where an audit and publication of the findings are required by editorial policy.

The situation with private media is even less transparent. For example, within the space of a few days, the extremely successful and profitable Channel 5 came close to bankruptcy after parliament raised the idea of nationalizing the channel.

There is no auctioning of advertising; rather, each deal is made independently between the parties by negotiation. By law, state media must coordinate their pricing policies with the Monopolies Committee. The difference in services depends on location and on proximity to the major urban areas. In the regions and in rural areas, very often the bulk of advertising revenue comes from the advertisements placed by individuals and public announcements. In the cities, the media air more traditional consumer products

<sup>6</sup> March 2012–February 2015. See <http://internews.kg/about/about-internews/2782-proekty-realizuemye-predstavitelstvom-internjus-v-kyrgyzstane-po-sostojaniju-na-avgust-2012->. [In English.]

advertising, however, there is little interest from foreign advertisers. Kulinsky recalled on incident from 2012. “A delegation of Kazakh advertisers turned up... But even they were not too interested, because we are not very sophisticated in our advertising. When they air spots, they take care to airbrush out any trademarks that have not paid the cost of ‘hidden’ product placement. In Kyrgyzstan, we just show the whole thing with the ‘hidden’ placements left in.”

The major media institutions do have their own dedicated advertising agencies that place advertisements during their own airtime and in their own print runs. The most significant advertising agency is KPRT’s, which not only places advertising in its outlets, but also produces ads and offers services such as paid coverage of press conferences, a widespread practice in Kyrgyzstan.

Among the printed press publications, according to the media experts, advertising is the main source of income for *Vecherniy Bishkek* newspaper. The remaining printed press titles demonstrate how limited their capacity is to attract advertising income into their papers, especially in the regions, where there are effectively no major providers of goods and services that would potentially be interested in advertising. Zharkyn Ibraeva, chief of Radio Almaz-Naryn and Naryn.kg publications, described Naryn as being particularly deprived in terms of income generating opportunities. “It seems that even grant programs are allocated unfairly, focused as they are on the southern regions, even though Naryn is the most depressed region and has, at least, the potential for religious conflict,” Ibraeva said, illustrating not only the impact of poverty on the media but also the perverse incentives created by the aid programs.

Kulinsky expressed an alternative point of view. In Issyk-Kul, he calculated that the size of the media advertising market could be up to \$2 million if the media were to focus on their business management practices and critically analyze and plan their media budgets.

Karasartov observed that, “The status of a media outlet—public or private—often determines its chance of attracting advertising. For example, during the last elections for local councils, the Central Electoral Commission decided to use only the state media in the regions, regardless of the size of the audience or media ratings.”

Market and other rating research are still regarded as unreliable in the media community. For example, a study on the preferences of Internet users by M-Vector raised major questions when the names of many popular media outlets did not turn up on the list of names.

The volatility of the media market, especially in terms of changes in ownership, political orientation, and editorial policy, does not foster long-term marketing strategies. However, in 2012, the first market research was carried out and paid for, in part, by the media industry. The benefactors of the market research, Channel 5, NTS, Pyramid, MIR, and KPRT, all contributed equal shares to pay 30% of the cost, which was largely covered by the international community. Unfortunately, methodological issues and the lack of measuring technology both limited the analytical potential of the research and reduced confidence in the results of these studies, and indeed, any other research services.

As in previous years, no mechanism for providing newspaper circulation figures or to monitor them exists. Circulation figures and audience ratings continued to be subjective or unchecked. There were significant doubts surrounding the circulation figures quoted by certain newspapers, and there are no legal mechanisms for verifying what the real figures are. It is not even clear who should take responsibility for improving the data for circulation.

Hit counters have also been manipulated repeatedly. Although there have been no scandals in the last year, almost all panelists felt that Internet hit counting services in Kyrgyzstan were unreliable. The only one to inspire any confidence was Google analytics.

## OBJECTIVE 5: SUPPORTING INSTITUTIONS

Kyrgyzstan Objective Score: 1.88

In the media industry of Kyrgyzstan over the past few years, two trade organizations representing media firms were formed: the Association of Radio and Television Broadcasters of Kyrgyzstan and the Association of Publishers and Distributors of Periodical Publications of Kyrgyzstan. These associations both became inactive in 2012, however, due to their financial losses, a lack of demand for their services and a lack of understanding of their capacity to protect their members’ interests.<sup>7</sup> Not all eligible outlets were members of either organization, and they were constantly the subjects of political intrigues. As most media outlets are in business solely to protect the interests of their proprietors, not to protect the media industry per se, there

<sup>7</sup> The extremely active work carried out by the National Association of Radio and Television Broadcasters of Kazakhstan and its successes in promoting the interests of its members, illustrates some similarities. The lack of demand for association services is a result of the fact that not all electronic and print media are business enterprises, but rather political tools in a power struggle. For this reason, newspaper or television outlets belonging to a particular owner sees itself only in terms of the interests of that owner. Therefore, the future prospects for that particular media outlet depend exclusively on the fate its owner’s political career.

## 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.

was little solidarity amongst them or demand for a unified lobbying organization.

This is especially problematic as Kyrgyzstan approaches the transition to digital broadcasting. After all, all the preferences granted by the state are more or less guaranteed to only two channels considered close to the ruling political parties. The remaining television and radio outlets could lose their frequency allocations.

Two other trade organizations include the Guild of Printers and Publishers, and the Media Advertising Association. The latter successfully organized and ran the first Red Zholbors Festival of Marketing, Advertising and PR.

The discussion among the panelists, concerning the benefits of professional associations, revealed a two-way split in opinion. One group saw no difference between the missions and activities of professional associations and those of NGOs, and emphasized the lack of a real connection between practicing journalists and the media outlets, and such organizations.

The arguments were based on instances where the state issued non-negotiable changes to legislation and regulations. For example, Shestakov expressed his position on the Election of the President Act, insofar as it related to delayed broadcasting, noting, "What is this thing about the participation of business and civil society? Some hack wrote this, and now it is essentially a *fait accompli*, but nobody asked civil society or the private sector what is meant by this. I remember how *Ala-TV* was at a loss for words, asking, 'Why didn't they ask us?'"

Begaim Usenova, director of the Media Policy Institute, and Kulinsky voiced the alternative position on the panel, that the NGO sector was doing much to support the media

from outside. Kulinsky argued, "Media directors are not active citizens, they have not been willing to cooperate and set common goals. They have become used to carrying on all-out warfare among themselves. Also, they are not in the habit of planning and have no legal education. That is why until the new laws come and hit them upside the head, they do not even budge." In 2012, there were attempts to revive the Union of Journalists of Kyrgyzstan, and a new board for the Media Complaints Commission was elected, both of which were seen as positive developments.

The activities of media and human rights organizations, even the Media Ombudsman, together with the ethical standards of journalists, were cast in an even poorer light after journalists at the leading news tabloid *Super-Info* played a crude practical joke on KPRT's on-air star Nazira Aytbekova. Journalists from the tabloid abducted her, forced her to strip to her underwear and threatened her at gunpoint, all while filming the incident. This egregious offense to journalistic integrity did not become a matter for any trade union of journalists, the Media Ombudsman, or the Media Complaints Commission. Only human rights organizations stood up for Aytbekova and supported her in her intention to take the matter to court. *Super-Info's* owner publicly condemned his employees, fired them and expressed sympathy for Aytbekova.

The panelists discussed the myriad violations of the rights of journalists, to which media organizations remain indifferent. Ismanov said, "Media support NGOs have existed for themselves, and media outlets have existed for themselves. Media support NGOs have preferred to work in the outlying regions, so in lobbying for any rules or changes, they have been able to [posture] themselves solely on the basis of being a regional media outlet. The media outlets in the capital have ignored the work of media support NGOs. And even the journalists that have met here today agree that the associations do nothing."

Nevertheless, the panelists agreed that without the USAID-sponsored work of some media organizations, such as Internews, Freedom House, and of the Soros Foundation, the work of journalists and the media would be much less professional and safe.

The panelists remarked with special gratitude on training programs that media NGOs provide to journalists concerning modern technologies. In particular, panelist Fayzullaeva expressed great appreciation for the training in multimedia journalism based at *Aalam* newspaper, and panelist Blindina rated the internship program for new journalists at select media outlets as very successful. The panelists recalled that 2012 was not the first year in which journalists were trained in peace building, conflict resolution, reading budgets, and

investigative journalism. However, the training on various topics and areas for journalists was not systemic.

As panelist Blindina put it, “What we need is a Media School. It must not be dependent on donors, and it must be market-oriented. Today in newspaper offices there has been an acute shortage of layout designers, camera operators, and display artists. We need specialized seminars on economic journalism. We have need to master computer graphics. For this we have been in need of a Media School. But in Kyrgyzstan there have been no specialists who can give us that.”

Assessments of the quality of higher vocational education for journalists remained, as always, very negative. Panelists talked this year about the objective and subjective reasons for the dysfunction in journalism faculties and departments. On one hand, no institute of tertiary education, apart from the Manas Kyrgyz-Turkish University and the American University of Central Asia, had sufficiently modern technical facilities. These were also the two universities where bribes were not consistently demanded for entry and/or passing grades. The curricula at most university programs are not sufficient to the development of the necessary knowledge, skills and abilities to strengthen the media sector. Finally, the staff did not have the necessary level of competence to offer quality teaching.

The discussion on the development of citizen journalism revealed an emerging conflict between advocates of traditional and new media. The practice of organizing media schools based on the Kloop.kg platform generated a great deal of discussion. According to advocates of traditional media, semi-literate bloggers were contributing to the reduction of professional standards even further, and to the further erosion and dilution of the professional field of journalism.

Monopolies in the amenities, services, and distribution markets further hamper the media industry, including, Kyrgyzbasmasoz, the paper distributor, and Kyrgyzpochtasy, the post office, and of course, Kyrgyztelecom. All are backed by the state in their inefficient monopoly status. Even though, as the panelists remarked, some processes towards de-monopolization of these resources has been observed, the state’s efforts to hold on to a monopoly in each area has remained constant, and has boosted the cost of ICT services, broadcasting, and productions, ultimately jeopardizing the public’s guaranteed access to information.

## List of Panel Participants

**Nadezhda Alisheva**, lawyer, Media Policy Institute, Bishkek

**Antonina Blindina**, editor-in-chief, *Chuiskie Izvestiya* newspaper, Chui

**Nazira Dzhusupova**, journalist, Radio Most, Talas

**Saltanat Faizullaeva**, journalist, *Osh Sadosi* newspaper, Osh

**Olga Fedotova**, senior correspondent, *Vesti Issyk-Kulya*, Issyk-Kul

**Aleksandr Kulinsky**, executive director, TV-Club youth association, Bishkek

**Zharkyn Ibraeva**, chief, Naryn.kg public foundation, Radio Almaz-Naryn, Naryn

**Almaz Ismanov**, publishing editor, Radio Azattyk (RFE-RL), Bishkek

**Orozaly Karasartov**, editor, *Aimaktar* newspaper, Jalalabad

**Daniyar Sadiev**, deputy director, Yntymak Public Regional Television and Radio Company, Osh

**Igor Shestakov**, editor-in-chief, Region.kg analytical resource, Bishkek

**Bolot Tashtanaliev**, deputy editor, *Alibi* newspaper, Bishkek

**Muzaffar Tursunov**, freelance journalist, Osh

**Begaim Usenova**, director, Media Policy Institute, Bishkek

## Moderator & Author

**Gulnara Ibraeva**, media expert, Associate Professor, Department of Sociology, American University of Central Asia

*The panel discussion was convened on December 26th, 2012.*