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KYRGYZSTAN

In 2015, several key events determined the course of the country's foreign policy and internal political climate. These include the Kyrgyz Republic's entry into the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) and parliamentary elections. While previously Kyrgyzstan's foreign policy was directed by its unique ability to maintain close relations with both the United States and Russia, joining the EEU has resulted in a shift in the country's preferences and has started a process of legislative harmonization between the Kyrgyz Republic and the Russian Federation.

Kyrgyzstani lawmakers proposed legislation against propaganda of non-traditional gender relations, which civil rights activists inside the country as well as international donors decried as discriminatory. The draft law is not only a derivative of its Russian counterpart that outlaws gay propaganda and specifies fines for those who breach the law, but the Kyrgyzstani version also proposes up to one year imprisonment. Another initiative that aimed to align Russian and Kyrgyzstani legislation was the proposed law regarding foreign agents, which would assign such a status to all NGOs involved in Kyrgyzstani political activities that receive funds from abroad. The country's political leaning towards Russia has also resulted in unilateral denunciation of the 1993 cooperation treaty with the United States, after the latter declared its support of human rights defender Azimzhan Askarov, accused by the Kyrgyz Republic Supreme Court of incitement of interethnic hatred and murder.

The 2015 parliamentary elections affected state regulation of media. Significantly, the Central Election Committee changed its accreditation standards so that online media outlets are required to acquire accreditation, while online outlets are not legally considered mass media in Kyrgyzstan. Observers of election coverage noted that state-affiliated media favored the ruling political party, devoting the majority of news programming to activities of the president.

However, these preferential tendencies did not hinder access to alternative programming from other mass media. This is likely due to the fact that all competing political party leaders have their own or affiliated media outlets, including Tushtuk, created by Kamchybek Tashiev, and NTS, affiliated with Omurbek Babanov, for example.

Unlike previous election campaigns, the 2015 parliamentary elections were not as lucrative for regional newspapers. Instead, the majority of political advertisements were broadcast on television as well as online media outlets. Traditionally, media see election periods as an opportunity to make a profit. In that manner, the Public Television-Radio Company (commonly known as OTRK, Obschestvennaya Tele-Radio Kompaniya) earned over KGS 90 million (\$1.25 million) from parties' campaign funds and was permitted by the state to keep the profit for modernization of the television station.

KYRGYZSTAN at a glance

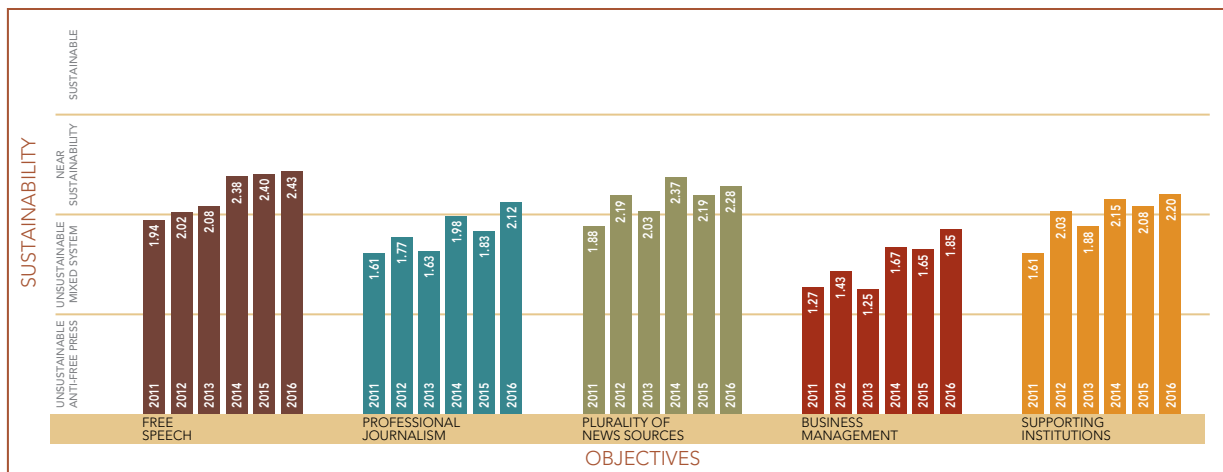
GENERAL

- > Population: 5,664,939 (July 2015 est., *CIA World Factbook*)
- > Capital city: Bishkek
- > Ethnic groups (% of population): Kyrgyz 70.9%, Uzbek 14.3%, Russian 7.7%, Dungan 1.1%, other 5.9% (includes Uyghur, Tajik, Turk, Kazakh, Tatar, Ukrainian, Korean, German) (2009 est., *CIA World Factbook*)
- > Religions (% of population): Muslim 75%, Russian Orthodox 20%, other 5% (2009 est., *CIA World Factbook*)
- > Languages: Kyrgyz (official) 71.4%, Uzbek 14.4%, Russian (official) 9%, other 5.2% (2009 est., *CIA World Factbook*)
- > GNI (2014-Atlas): \$7.318 billion (World Bank Development Indicators, 2016)
- > GNI per capita (2014-PPP): \$3,220 (World Bank Development Indicators, 2016)
- > Literacy rate: 99.5%; male 99.6%, female 99.4% (2015 est., *CIA World Factbook*)
- > President or top authority: President Almazbek Atambaev (Since December 1, 2011)

MEDIA-SPECIFIC

- > Number of active media outlets: More than 1,500 registered media. Print: 159 including 3 main dailies and 4 other major papers; Radio Stations: 26; Television Stations: 25 terrestrial, 3 local cable networks, 3 IPTV (Ministry of Justice, 2013)
- > Newspaper circulation statistics: Top three by circulation: *Super Info* (private Kyrgyz-language daily with 120,000 circulation), *Vecherniy Bishkek* (private Russian-language daily with 150,000 circulation), *Delo No.* (private Russian-language weekly with 16,000 circulation)
- > Broadcast ratings: Top five television: OTRK (several channels: Culture and Music, Children, Sport, state-owned), EITR (state-owned), 7th Channel (private)
- > News agencies: Kabar (state-owned), AKIpress (private), 24.kg (private), www.tushtuk.kg (private), K-News (private), www.kyrtag.kg (private), Sputnik.kg (private)
- > Annual advertising revenue in media sector: Television: \$7.9 million; Internet: \$500,000; Radio: \$1.8 million (Jan. – Sept. 2013 est., Expert Consulting Agency)
- > Internet usage: 1.4 million users (2014 est., *CIA World Factbook*)

MEDIA SUSTAINABILITY INDEX: KYRGYZSTAN



MEDIA SUSTAINABILITY INDEX 2016: OVERALL AVERAGE SCORES



CHANGE SINCE 2015

▲ (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

OBJECTIVE 1: FREEDOM OF SPEECH

Kyrgyzstan Objective Score: 2.43

The constitution of the Kyrgyz Republic guarantees freedom of speech and prohibits criminal prosecution for free speech. There is also a specific law “on protection of the professional activity of journalists,” designed to protect freedom of speech. In May 2014, these basic rights were jeopardized when the president signed a law stipulating imprisonment for up to five years for “making a knowingly false accusation;” however, in January 2015, the Constitutional Chamber of the Kyrgyz Republic invalidated the law, effectively deciding that reporting in mass media does not constitute a crime, thus, journalists cannot be prosecuted for their work, even if shoddy.

The panelists noted the disparity between constitutional provisions for freedom of speech and the government’s initiatives that infringe upon this right. Among such legislative attempts was the draft law which introduced amendments to the law “on mass media,” such as including the Internet as a mass media outlet. Panelists viewed this as an attempt to control mass media and freedom of speech before the parliamentary elections; they also noted that the proposed amendments resonate with the Russian law “on Foreign Agents,” which aims to restrict opportunities for NGOs and control their activity. As a result of discussions with civil society representatives, the draft law has been withdrawn.

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.

The panelist Almaz Ismanov provided an illustrative example from a conference on religious extremism, from which the Ministry of Internal Affairs representative refused to provide a transcript of his presentation, justifying his refusal on the pretext of national security.

One of the most important political events in 2015, the parliamentary elections, has also brought changes to mass media legislation. The Central Election Committee has defined requirements on accreditation for mass media that offer paid political advertising, reserving the right to revoke their accreditation. Furthermore, the decision of the judicial assembly of the constitutional chamber to prohibit local mass media from rebroadcasting news segments that disgrace the honor of candidates was ruled constitutional.¹ The judicial assembly’s conclusion exhibits that pre-election campaigning is disparate from freedom of speech and information, and the right for expressing one’s opinion.

The panelists did not observe any discrimination in the sphere of print media licensing, although they did note the attempt to control the Internet media by proposing registration as mass media. Panelist Almaz Ismanov mentioned the suggestion made by the ministry of justice in February 2015 to “punish journalists for unprincipled work by expulsion from profession, which can be considered as a certain form of licensing the profession.”

The issue of licensing is crucial for television and radio companies since the country officially transitioned to digital broadcasting in June 2015. However, it is worth noting that the official entrance into digital broadcasting has not led to the disconnection of the analog signal. According to the new regulations, television and radio companies that intend to broadcast in the digital format need to undergo the licensing procedure again.

Prior to the parliamentary elections, some newly established television companies received their registration and license in a mere two or three days, as opposed to the standard two or three months. Yntymak news editor Akylbek Orozmatov viewed this as a possible example of authorities

¹ Eshenalieva, Ainura. “Constitutional Chamber: Invalidity media reports does not constitute a crime under Art. 329 of the Criminal Code,” Institute for Media Policy. January 15, 2015. <http://www.media.kg/news/nedejstvitelnost-soobshheniya-v-smi-ne-mozhet-rascenivatsya-kak-zavedomo-lozhnoe-i-ne-obrazuet-sostava-prestupleniya-predusmotrennogo-statej-329-uk-kr/>.

supporting certain mass media outlets in exchange for favors and personal benefits. Orozmatov also mentioned the local channel OshTV, which is registered as a limited liability company, but received a large amount of money for technical modernization and was included in the social investment package for state digital broadcasting.

The panelists emphasized the problem that the Kyrgyzstan Central Electoral Commission officially accredits individual journalists to report on particular events, instead of accrediting a media outlet. Events that require accreditation include large political events, foreign delegation visits, and overseas trips of the president, for example. The panelists explained that the practice of accrediting individuals is problematic, if that individual is absent, they cannot be replaced.

The media tax structure is similar to other sectors of the economy and the requirements for mass media outlets are the same as business enterprises. However, as a result of economic decline, there has been a significant drop in print media circulation and some organizations are shutting down. Circulation of socio-political publications, for example, does not exceed 2,000 copies. Traditionally perceived as a political instrument, press is undergoing a critical period with a lack of effective management in private press, a lack of funding, and political dependence on state press.

As for crimes against media professionals, the panelists considered 2015 to be relatively calm, with the exceptions of a few cases. One example is that of Daria Podolskaya, a journalist from news agency 24.kg was violently attacked near her home, allegedly without the intent to burglarize, so law enforcement categorized the crime as an act of hooliganism. Another incident occurred in July 2015, the Bishkek office of the newspaper *Achyk Sayasat* was pelted with stones, but law enforcement representatives regarded the act as simple vandalism.

Kyrgyzstani law on mass media protects the editorial independence of public media; however, the state is often actively involved in the editorial policies of OTRK and EITR television, as well as some radio organizations. The panelists suggested that the state appoints editors and members to these outlets' supervisory boards, in addition sponsoring the promotion of particular news stories.

The 2015 parliamentary elections are a vivid example of mass media outlets' political partiality. There has been a lack of analytical pieces and editorials, journalistic investigations, and political analyses. Coverage of the election campaigns was limited to paid advertisement pieces in news programs

that were difficult to distinguish from other news pieces. The state-funded mass media predominantly released very positive coverage of the president's and government's activity. It was noted by panel participants that the Central Election Commission abused its authority when many bloggers and freelance journalists were denied accreditation. The panelists emphasized that there were severe violations of freedom of speech surrounding accreditation during the election period.

Several cases caused panelists to question the execution of laws protecting the freedom of speech. In 2014, legislation regarding libel was replaced with the article "on the protection of a person's honor and dignity." Under the enforcement of this legislation, journalist Daryir Orunbekov was accused of libel for writing a controversial article. Orunbekov's case was nearly dropped as a result of the new Kyrgyz Republic criminal code decision that presenting knowingly false information does not constitute a crime. However, the general prosecutor's office initiated an additional criminal case against Orunbekov, for the same article, accusing him of discrediting the honor and dignity of the president. The court found Orunbekov guilty and sentenced him to a fine of KGS two million.² Many panelists believe this ruling was unconstitutional. Panelist and editorial advisor at OTRK Tamara Valieva, added that "these lawsuits about damaged honor and dignity against individual journalists and mass media are accomplishing the goal of the authorities. Editorial staff and journalists are losing the majority of the lawsuits and are forced to pay large fines and waste their time on endless trials. The next time they act, they do so more cautiously, resulting in self-censorship."

The panelists' opinions regarding access to information were not uniform. Some panelists identified no problems in the legislation on access to information, while others pointed to its weaknesses and lack of clarity. The panelist Almaz Ismanov provided an illustrative example from a conference on religious extremism, from which the Ministry of Internal Affairs representative refused to provide a transcript of his presentation, justifying his refusal on the pretext of national security.

There are no limitations on access to local and foreign news, although one of the panelists noted that not all regional media outlets have reliable access to the Internet.

² Kudryavtseva, Tatiana. "Prosecutor General's Office filed a lawsuit against the journalist, defending the honor and dignity of the President of Kyrgyzstan," 24.kg. April 18, 2015. http://www.24.kg/obschestvo/11005_genprokuratura_podala_v_sud_na_jurnalista_zaschischaya_chest_i_dostoinstvo_prezidenta_kyrgyzstana/.

Also, Kyrgyzstan's Internet providers operate from Russian operators, either directly or through Kazakhstan; therefore, the websites blocked in Russian are also unavailable in Kyrgyzstan. The panelists noted a clear division among media outlets in the Kyrgyz Republic, with one group pro-United States Department of State and the other pro-Kremlin. Such a division has an obvious impact on content and programming.

There are no official limitations or entry barriers into the journalism profession; however, in practice, journalists encounter a variety of problems obtaining accreditation, as discussed previously. In some instances, members of the parliament have revoked accreditation due to journalists' appearance when they wear tee-shirts and jeans.

OBJECTIVE 2: PROFESSIONAL JOURNALISM

Kyrgyzstan Objective Score: 2.12

Kyrgyzstani editorial independence within media is questionable and, therefore, it is unlikely that events are covered thoroughly and objectively. Some panel participants believe most Kyrgyzstani journalists are professional and responsible, and that the important events are covered accordingly. However, the majority of panelists brought up issues with the competence and diligence of journalists. Throughout 2015, there have been many instances of news reports based on only one source as well as unverified sources and information, leading to many refutations. In September 2015, the online news outlet Maida.kg was

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).

accused of publishing unreliable information based on a controversial article, by Nurgazy Anarkulov, which alleged that a deputy candidate from the ruling political had close ties with Uzbek leaders accused of separatism. The news report was republished by radio and other media before Anarkulov issued an apology for misinformation. However, Anarkulov later made a statement that the apology was a fake, leaving readers with questions of overall media reliability.³

Although some panelists believe news journalism in the Kyrgyz Republic meets professional standards, all the panel participants agreed that there is a lack of analytical reporting and investigative journalism. It was also noted that journalists do not consistently cover issues in an objective manner. One primary reason, according to the panelists, is the lack of adequate journalism schools in the country. As panelist Isamova explained, "Osh State University (OshGU) journalism faculty teach according to Soviet standards and professors are resistant to change their programs." The panelists also mentioned the lack of time and the expectation to report on events as soon as they take place, as another reason for low quality journalism. This practice does not allow time for verification of sources and information. Furthermore, panelist Adel Laisheva from the Kyrgyz Public Radio and Television Corporation (KTRK), highlighted financial causes, "Investigative journalism has not taken root for several reasons, first and foremost, for economic reasons. It is just not profitable to have an employee researching one story for many months."

Ethics in journalism remains an issue in the professional community; as a result self-regulation persists. One type of violation is hidden advertising, which occurs when journalists interview the owners of businesses about their success and include product advertisements in the reporting without informing the audience about the marketing nature of the interview. Hidden advertising can occur in political form as well. During the parliamentary elections campaigning period, many media outlets and freelance journalists favored candidates in their reporting, promoting one politician's agenda or reporting negatively on competing candidates or parties in exchange for gifts and money.

All panelists noted the ethics violations that occurred during the child abuse reports, which were frequent and

³ "Nurgazy Anarkulov: I do not apologize party "Kyrgyzstan" and personally Sharshenbeku Abdykerimova ..." *Gezitter.org* (Source: Sayasat.kg). October 1, 2015. http://www.gezitter.org/vyborny/43936_nurgazyi_anarkulov_ya_ne_prinosil_izviniy_partii_kyrgyzstan_lichno_sharshenbeku_abdykerimovu/.

As panelist Ismanov put it, “Many newspapers and websites freely posted photographs of the victimized children. They also published the home addresses of the accused individuals, at the suggestion of law enforcement agencies.”

widely discussed in 2015. These reports also demonstrated a lack of editorial policy. As panelist Ismanov put it, “Many newspapers and websites freely posted photographs of the victimized children. They also published the home addresses of the accused individuals, at the suggestion of law enforcement agencies. The media outlets that chose to abstain from publishing the graphic photographs struggled over the decision. Despite the existence of an ethics code, journalists were not prepared for the influx of information surrounding such a sensitive topic as violence against children.” Similarly, journalists faced an ethical dilemma when covering the escape of prisoners from the Bishkek pretrial detention center. Several prisoners, detention center staff, and civilians were killed during the incident. Panelist Laisheva comments on the reporters’ actions, “Several publications televised the events live; showing faces of the operatives. The actions of these journalists interfered with the work of the law enforcement agencies, yet the journalists considered themselves heroes.”

Panelist Tokoev of Journalists NGO also noted that self-censorship is high due to a lack of solidarity and desire to support each other when covering certain challenging topics. Tokoev added that journalists have confessed their fear of reporting on sensitive topics, especially when it relates to high-ranking politicians.

Overall, the panelists agree that the media covers all main events in the country in a timely manner. Yet, there are topics that journalists tend to avoid. Several panelists mentioned the lack of interethnic coverage in Kyrgyzstan, which they called a “sensitive topic.” Panelist Isamova, brought up the situation in Zhapalak village, which is majority Kyrgyz, where residents complain about the cleanliness of the water in the Aravan-Ak Buura channel, which they use for drinking. However, the neighboring village of Osh upstream, which is majority Uzbeks, directs their sewage into the channel. Isamova explains that

although the issue is both environmental and health, many television outlets refused to report on the situation because of the interethnic relations. Allegedly, Osh city officials requested that stories not be broadcast regarding the issue. When journalists or editorial staff anticipate backlash from government officials, they tend to cover the story in a more timid manner to avoid accusations of ignoring certain events.

Generally, journalists in Kyrgyzstan receive low salaries, at a rate that has not significantly changed since 2005. In large regional media, such as television companies, journalists earn approximately KGS 10,000 to KGS 15,000 per month; smaller publications receive KGS 5,000 to KGS 7,000. In the capital, the average monthly salary is KGS 22,000. However, salaries at Azattyk radio, Vechenyi Bishkek publishing house, and *Super Info* newspaper are considered the highest-paying opportunities, where journalists make \$800 to \$1000 a month and editors earn \$1000 to 1300. Journalists working for state-owned media also receive annual leave allowances and maternity leaves; whereas, those in private media do not and must take time off at their own expense.

Many managements prefer to pay employees “off the books” to avoid high taxes. Journalists tend to earn less when they signed a contract, so the majority work without a contract and receive cash payments. This form of employment is unstable in terms of social security, as they do not make pension contributions or earn tenure. In order to earn a decent salary, many journalists work for several media outlets, take additional positions not related to their profession, or take on additional work, such as editing, translations, and speech-writing. According to panelist Valieva, many journalists joined political parties to make additional income during the parliamentary elections.

Entertainment programming generally does not eclipse news and informational programming, with the exception of radio stations, where entertainment is overwhelming and radio hosts do not tend to prepare their own reports and interviews. The panelists noted that broadcasting is overloaded with news programs, especially political news concerning the activities of parliament, the president, and the government. Internet-based media outlets and local television are also dominated by news broadcasting.

For television stations, the production of entertainment content requires significant financial resources; therefore, the broadcasting focuses on other types of content. Panelist Valieva, described an attempt to produce content and cover

stories from remote areas of the country. The KTRK *Kerbeni* program, in particular, about residents from other regions of Kyrgyzstan and their achievements, has gained popularity. The panelists have also noticed certain shifts in the editorial choices of some media outlets, for example, radio Azattyk, which generally covers political news made a slight shift towards entertainment when it covered the journey of a Kyrgyzstani singer on the Russian entertainment show “Golos” (commonly known by the English title, *The Voice*). On the other hand, *Super Info* newspaper primarily features entertainment, but has increased the volume of political news stories.

When it comes to access to equipment necessary for data collection, production, and distribution of news, the opinion of the panelists was not unanimous. While some panel participants did not see any issues with access to the Internet and availability of equipment in remote regions of Kyrgyzstan, the majority stated that regional media outlets encounter shortages of desktop computers, laptops, scanners, and digital cameras. Not all editors at regional media outlets provide Internet access to their employees, so journalists face challenges uploading their materials. Journalists continue using FTP servers, from which they receive information from the government and presidential press service. Among novelty technology, some panelists mentioned the use of quadcopters or drones for aerial video recording, streaming journalism, and live broadcasting.

Specialized or niche journalism is trending towards development, economic, and social journalism, as well as some investigative journalism. A number of television channels have introduced programs based solely on journalists’ investigations, including the investigative Capital program. Azattyk radio journalist Kubanychbek Zholdoshev specializes in investigations and video blogs. Among media outlets and journalists that specialize in investigative journalism, many receive financial support from donor organizations or represent larger international media outlets; such is the example Azattyk radio.

One reason there is little investigative programming in Kyrgyzstan is the lack of required courses at universities or trainings offered by media organizations and outlets. Insufficient outlet funding and limited access to investigative information also hinders specialized reporting. Panelists agree that journalists do not typically have a specialization and instead cover a wide range of topics.

OBJECTIVE 3: PLURALITY OF NEWS

Kyrgyzstan Objective Score: 2.28

Residents of Kyrgyzstan have access to various forms of mass media, including traditional print, television, radio, and Internet, as well as international and local media. Media in languages of ethnic minorities was previously more common than it is currently. However, media experts agree that Kyrgyzstani media cannot be considered objective or inclusive. Some media outlets, panelists specifically mention OTRK, 24.kg, Vecherniy Bishkek and Zanoza.kg, are limited in their coverage of certain topics which are counter to their editorial policy. The angle of the coverage is also influenced by the state when it comes to sensitive issues, such as interethnic conflicts, the national budget, and the actions of high-ranking government officials.

Access to alternative means of information, such as mobile Internet is gaining popularity. Yet, few media outlets have mobile versions of their website; these include Akipress, KNews, Azattyk, OTRK, Sputnik, and Vecheniy Bishkek. Social media websites and apps, such as Facebook, Twitter, Odnoklassniki, and YouTube, have become a regular means of getting news for the younger generation and are even

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.

Ismanov noted, "In rural areas and small towns, due to the absence of local media and limited access to national media, local residents primarily have access to rebroadcasted Russian TV channels."

becoming more popular among middle-aged audiences. One panelist, Ismanov, assumed that the increasing trust in online social media may be a result of the public losing trust in traditional media. Acknowledging this trend, some media outlets are encouraging citizen journalism by inviting users to submit their own news videos. Many of these stories consist of car accidents and other traffic violations as well as inebriated fights.

In the regions of Kyrgyzstan where the main source of information is television, print media options are also available but are costly. Radio is free and generally offers entertainment broadcasting, with rare exceptions, such as Birinchi radio. Many regions in Osh, Jalalabat and Batken oblasts receive Uzbekistani channels in Uzbek. The newspaper *Biz* is also issued in Uzbek, as are Yntymak television and radio broadcasts, among others.

Due to insufficient funding, Kyrgyzstani correspondents are not typically sent abroad for report and, therefore, local media cannot produce first-hand international news. International news is instead under the influence of Russia and these television and radio broadcasts are shown from the perspective of mainstream Russian media.

There are no legislative limitations on access to media sources in the country; however, there are various barriers to different populations' access to different types of media. Due to economic constraints, not everyone can afford to buy newspapers, and although Internet access is becoming less expensive every year, not everyone can afford it yet; the same restrictions apply to mobile Internet. As for access to digital broadcasting, the social package includes only state media channels, which are highly dependent on the government agenda. Receiving alternative television channels requires additional payment, which is not affordable for all. Internet access is also not economically accessible to all, even in Bishkek, where unlimited low-speed Internet connection can be obtained for KGS 400 per month. Residents living on the outskirts of the city have to spend much more as Internet cables are not available in all the areas.

State and public media do not reflect the spectrum of opinions throughout society; instead stories about the president and government activities dominate the programming for those outlets. Political bias during election periods is obvious and media generally considered recent the parliamentary elections as an opportunity to gain funding, by devoting paid air time to the campaigns. During the election period, positive coverage of the president consumed 29 to 42 percent all political airtime, while coverage of the candidates accounted for only seven to 17 percent of political content.⁴

Panelists described OTRK and Yntymak as media outlets that attempt to serve the public interest and cover all aspects of politics in the country, emphasizing OTRK radio broadcasting as more open to alternative views. When discussing the editorial bias of Kyrgyzstani media, panel participants brought up the case of the constitutional court judge Klara Sooronkulova's dismissal. Coverage of the dismissal was scarce and many media outlets did not even mention the story. The panelists also noted that reports on Kyrgyzstan joining the Customs Union were one-dimensional, lacking alternative views.

Several media outlets refer to themselves as information agencies in Kyrgyzstan, including AkiPress, 24.kg, KirTag, Kabar, and KNews; however, they operate mostly as informational websites and do not supply news to other media on a subscription basis. All the information available on their websites is accessible for free, with the exception of AkiPress, which makes its archive available for a fee. Panelists noted that other media outlets often plagiarize the stories from these information agencies and even copy entire articles without citing the source; this practice is generally not considered unethical in Kyrgyzstan.

One panelist stated that local media use international information agencies, such as British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), Reuters, Associated Press (AP), Agence France-Presse (AFP), as well as Russian and Turkish outlets. However, the majority of panelists disagreed, explaining that these services are considered expensive by local media and that the subscription procedure is complicated.

State media generally create their own news and informational programming more often than private media. The content of most of these news programs is dominated by reports on the president. Some private media outlets can

⁴ "International mission on election observation, Kyrgyz Republic – parliamentary elections, Statement about preliminary conclusions and results," OSCE. October 4, 2015. <http://www.osce.org/ru/odihr/elections/kyrgyzstan/189481?download=true>.

develop their own news content that differs from that of the state media; however, not all private media broadcasts news. Panelists also noted that the quality of certain media outlet broadcasting is low.

Information on ownership of media outlets is typically private. Regardless, the panelists assume that the general public can identify the benefactors from one outlet to another based on the tone of materials and choice of topics, but even journalists do not always know who the owners are and rely on rumors. In Kyrgyzstan, there are no commercial corporations in the media market, rather media are owned by deputies and ministers.

In the past, media outlets have broadcasted in languages of ethnic minorities, but after such programs disappeared, the issue has become even more marginalized. Some attempts to devote programs and entire outlets to ethnic minorities speaking languages other than Russian and Kyrgyz have been made with the support of international aid agencies. One such project resulted in the public regional television and radio company Yntymak, which broadcasts approximately 30 percent of its programming in Uzbek. There is also a newspaper *Biz*, which was initially issued in both Kyrgyz and Uzbek, but due to the high demand only the Uzbek version remains. Ismanov suggested, "The Dunghan community thinks it is impossible to create a media outlet without knowing Russian or Kyrgyz. Similarly, the Uighur community believes they could not create their own media organization because they do not speak the language of the majority and, instead, their language is based on Arabic." Laisheva mentioned the media outlets owned by diasporas, suggesting that the few ethnic minority groups that can afford it, issue newspapers in their native languages. She also mentioned Dostuk radio on OTRK, which is broadcasted on Birinchi radio in Uighur, Dunghan, Tatar, Polish, and Ukrainian languages. However, the panelists also noted that there are no popular web-resources in Uzbek.

The legislative initiatives from parliament to pass a law against the propaganda of non-traditional relationships would infringe upon the rights of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) community. Even without legislation, there are not many media outlets willing to cover such issues or assume a supportive position in their reports. In May 2015, members of the nationalist groups Kalys and Kyrk Choro attacked members of the LGBT community during a private event. Kloop Media is an ally of the LGBT community, so when the police detained both the attackers and victims and confined them in the same jail cell, journalists of Kloop Media arrived at the police station

to broadcast live coverage of the event, remaining there for several hours until the victims were released.⁵

Interest in international news has been on the rise over the past year due to an increasing number of reports of citizens moving to Syria and ISIL attempting to recruit Kyrgyzstanis. However, it is not possible for local media to produce first-hand reports on foreign affairs due to the absence of overseas correspondents. As a consequence, when covering international news, local media have to rely on media of other countries. News from Russian channels continues playing a significant role in forming the public opinion and agenda.

The panelists explained that regional news, apart from crime reports, is not covered by public and state media. Ismanov noted, "In rural areas and small towns, due to the absence of local media and limited access to national media, local residents primarily have access to rebroadcasted Russian TV channels." However, more online resources dedicated to covering regional events and stories are starting to appear.

OBJECTIVE 4: BUSINESS MANAGEMENT

Kyrgyzstan Objective Score: 1.85

The majority of panelists do not believe that media outlets are successful and sustainable businesses. Instead, they are of the opinion that business planning is rare in this industry in Kyrgyzstan. State media depends on the state budget and private media depends on their owners' funding. Print media circulations are declining, which can be attributed to the loss of interest in print media as the Internet has become more popular. Ismanov also suggested that print media audiences are switching to the Internet, just as regional television channels are turning into production studios.

According to the panelists, 2015 was not representative of a typical year, as parliamentary elections are always considered an opportunity to earn additional money in the media industry. Television and radio stations received the largest portion of money spent on political campaigns, Internet-based media are gaining popularity during election periods, and the smallest amount was earned by print media. The international commission on election observation found that on television channels 77 to 95 percent of all airtime allocated to the election campaign was provided

⁵ Bayaz, Malik. "Kalys and Kirk Choro attacked the event in honor of the Day Against Homophobia," *Kloop Media*. May 17, 2015. <http://kloop.kg/blog/2015/05/17/kalys-i-kyrk-choro-atakovali-meropriyatiev-chest-dnya-borby-s-gomofobie/>.

Tokoev explained that the Ministry of Culture, Information, and Tourism recently announced subsidies for the production of national audio and video segments in order to develop local content and support local broadcasters. The state allocated KGS 11 million for these projects, which does not substantially influence the advertising market.

for payment; 5 channel and Piramida did not allow any free airtime on top of what is required by law. State-funded national newspapers ignored the requirement to provide free space for parliamentary candidates; two of the three state-owned newspapers provided only half of the required free space and *Slovo Kyrgyzstana* did not provide any space free of charge.⁶

According to almost all panelists, the only media outlet with a chance of becoming self-sustaining is OTRK, a state media. OTRK is the only media outlet in Kyrgyzstan that receives substantial earnings from advertising, for the rest of media advertising is not the main source of income. Valieva, panelists and editorial advisor at OTRK, shared that with the new director general there have been some

⁶ "International mission on election observation, Kyrgyz Republic – parliamentary elections, Statement about preliminary conclusions and results," OSCE. October 4, 2015. <http://www.osce.org/ru/odihr/elections/kyrgyzstan/189481?download=true>.

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.

positive changes, including building repairs new equipment purchases, which allegedly not carried out with funding from the state budget. The head of OTRK, Ilim Karypbekov, has reported that the election campaign brought the channel more than KGS 90 million.⁷ Moreover, according to the 2011 government decree, OTRK is required to return 50 percent of all earned revenue at the end of the year. In 2015, the government waived this tax for one year, thus, OTRK was allowed to keep over KGS 40 million in profit.⁸

According to the panelists, Kyrgyzstan media have few sources of income. The majority of advertising spend goes to television companies; newspapers earn money only through paid publications, advertisements, and special issues. The advertising market is narrow in Kyrgyzstan, there are only several players who are willing to spend substantial amounts on advertising and are oriented to media, among them are mobile communication operators and Kumtor gold-mining company. Valieva reported that the estimated volume of the advertising market in Kyrgyzstan is \$10 to \$12 million. Panelists also identified several media outlets, such as Vechernyi Bishkek, AvtoGID, and OTRK as the ones covering the majority of the advertising market; among regional media they noted Reklama na Issyk-Kule, Rek Park, and Vest. Other media outlets receive earnings from the small share of the advertising market that remains.

Tokoev explained that the Ministry of Culture, Information, and Tourism recently announced subsidies for the production of national audio and video segments in order to develop local content and support local broadcasters. The state allocated KGS 11 million for these projects, which does not substantially influence the advertising market. Government advertising is usually printed in newspaper *Slovo Kyrgyzstana* and does not play a significant role for the media market, Tokoev said.

Panelists agreed that without reliable data from market research, advertisers cannot make informed decisions about where to place their ads and what audience to target. One of the possible reasons for the lack of development in the advertising market is the absence of regular media studies. The panelists expressed that traditionally television companies order media research, but only for certain programs and specific television companies, thus, the results remain private. Moreover, one panelist noted that allegedly,

⁷ "Ilim Karypbekov told which of the parties as the First Channel paid for airtime," Vesti.kg. October 27, 2015. http://m.vesti.kg/index.php?option=com_k2&view=item&id=37518:ilim-karypbekov-rasskazal-kakaya-iz-partiy-skolko-zaplatila-pervomu-kanalu-zafirnoe-vremya&Itemid=80.

⁸ Usenov, Begaim. "I. Karypbekov: RRTTS KTRK exempt from 50 percent of net profit," Institute for Media Policy. December 25, 2015. <http://www.media.kg/news/i-karypbekov-rrtc-krk-osvobozhden-ot-uplaty-50-chistoj-pribyli/>.

some television companies pressure research companies to falsify the data to present more favorable results, which leads to more profitable advertising contracts. In 2013, public foundation Zhurnalisty conducted a small-scale survey among journalists and editors, but some panelists mentioned that the results were unreliable. Zhurnalisty planned to produce a second issue of Kyrgyz Republic Mass Media Catalog in 2015, but according to Tokoev, financial issues have stalled the publication.

There are no organizations or companies in Kyrgyzstan that measure circulation numbers and rating of mass media outlets. Among print media, only newspapers printed by the Media Support Center publishing house have circulation numbers.

The monitoring of ethics violations among mass media in Kyrgyzstan has revealed that print media ignores the legal requirement of stating the circulation number on each issue, including the state newspaper *Slovo Kyrgyzstana*. Internet traffic ratings reported by online media raised doubts among panelists; they believe that the majority overstate the numbers for page visibility and unique visitors. One panelist specifically noted that AkiPress is often suspected of inflated their numbers.

OBJECTIVE 5: SUPPORTING INSTITUTIONS

Kyrgyzstan Objective Score: 2.20

The Association of Radio and Television broadcasters (ART) and the Association of Publishers and Distributors of Print Media have been inactive in Kyrgyzstan for several years. These associations previously lobbied at the legislative level, but now only exist on paper. Along with the process of switching to digital broadcasting a business association of private media Digital Technologies, LLC was established and united 22 private Kyrgyzstani television channels. Digital Technologies, LLC's efforts resulted in receiving the right for two multiplexes, although it did not lobby for lowering the cost of entrance into the digital multiplex for private television broadcasters, which amounts to KGS 32.4 million.⁹

Formally, there were two professional associations that focused on protecting the rights of journalists, the Trade Union of Mass Media and the older Union of Kyrgyzstan Journalists. However, neither received wide support from journalists. All panelists assessed the activity of both trade unions as passive and invisible. The only success story mentioned by panelists was that in Osh city 17 mass media

⁹ "Kyrgyzstan was unable to hold a competition for a place in the digital package of channels," *Cableman.ru*. November 9, 2014. <http://www.cableman.ru/node/12499>.

After 2010, cooperation between civil rights organizations and journalists began decreasing and became further complicated following Kyrgyzstan's entry into EEU, mainly due to the rising anti-Western climate.

workers purchasing apartments on a subsidized loan due to the support of the Trade Union of Mass Media in Osh Oblast and its chair Zhyldyz Bekbaeva.¹⁰ It was also mentioned that trade unions primarily provide legal consultations and make official statements in support of journalists when their rights are violated, on rare occasions, they protect journalists in court. The alternative trade union, under the chair Meri Bekeshova, was established on a grant from the Finnish government, it currently operates on grant money and is not yet sustainable on membership fees alone. Overall, trust in trade unions is very low among the panelists; they see them as short-lived initiatives with grant money. Among the problems trade unions face, panelists noted a general lack of financial support; as Valieva put it, "Once the grants run out, trade unions run out."

After 2010, cooperation between civil rights organizations and journalists began decreasing and became further complicated following Kyrgyzstan's entry into EEU, mainly due to the rising anti-Western climate. Generally, panelists expressed a favorable attitude towards media NGOs

¹⁰ Dzhumasheva, Aida. "In Osh, 17 media employees were given an apartment in the mortgage," *ZAO Evening Bishkek*. December 1 2015. http://www.vb.kg/doc/330111_v_oshe_17_sotrydnikam_smi_vydali_kvartiry_v_ipoteky.html.

SUPPORTING INSTITUTIONS FUNCTION IN THE PROFESSIONAL INTERESTS OF INDEPENDENT MEDIA.

SUPPORTING INSTITUTIONS INDICATORS:

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

and their efforts to support journalists' activities and protection of their rights. The Media Policy Institute and its active participation in the revision and monitoring of mass media-related legislation as well as its legal support provided to journalists and mass media outlets was regarded positively by almost all panelists. The Media Development Center was also noted among active organizations that conduct monitoring of legislation and violation of journalists' rights. Among donor organizations, they mentioned Soros – Foundation Kyrgyzstan, which is offering support throughout the transition to digital broadcasting. Panelists emphasized that the decline in grant support has resulted in a drastic decrease of media NGOs throughout Kyrgyzstan, only Naryn and Karakol still have functioning organizations. Many media organizations have decreased activities; for example, the public foundation Zhurnalisty no longer has an office and transitioned to remote work or telework.

Throughout 2015, there have not been significant changes in the professional, academic, and training programs offered to journalists in Kyrgyzstan. Media editors continue to criticize the academic programs offered at local public and private universities. As stated by Tokoev, "Students graduate from universities with outdated curriculum and without practical knowledge." Some stated that students are not even taught the most basic skills of Internet use. In 2014, the majority of panelists noted the high quality of education at Kyrgyz-Turkish University Manas, which is technically equipped for practical exercises and employs highly-qualified teachers; one panelist also mentioned the American University of Central Asia, but noted that practical training is also minimal.

With weak professional academic programs, young journalists rely on short-term and in-service trainings to acquire skills. There have been attempts to organize alternative forms of professional training for journalists with varying degrees of success. The school of Kloop Media, funded by the Dutch fund Hivos, offers trainings for young people at the beginning of their careers and aims to promote citizen journalism. The trainings focus on photojournalism, journalist investigations, and provide access to equipment, including such novelties as quadcopters and drones for video recording. Donors tend to support projects that promote investigative journalism, but as noted by Tokoev, such trainings are more suitable for experienced journalists. While almost all panelists mentioned Kloop Media's school, there were a few training initiatives mentioned by a few panelists, including the Studio of

Practical Journalism that was started in 2014 and is oriented toward young print and online media journalists and offers training free of charge under the leadership of journalist Azamat Tynaev; and Media Center Demge dem operating in Osh city and also for young journalists. Other seminars and short-term trainings are offered for journalists with financial support from donor organizations, but according to panelists, they have become rarer in the last several years.

In Bishkek city, limitations of access to equipment and consumables are only of economic nature. Large printing houses remain in the hands of the state, but their equipment is outdated and does not allow full-color printing. There is no monopoly on printing services in Kyrgyzstan; sources of paper and consumables are regulated by the market principles. There are three main printing houses in Bishkek: Freedom house that prints only after prepayment, Rubikon that is cheaper than "Freedom House but more expensive than Uchkun a state-owned printing house. According to participants, access to full-color printing is challenging; in Batken, local newspapers print in neighboring Tajikistan.

When it comes to media distribution, all channels are monopolized by state agencies. Kyrgyztelecom is the monopolist communications operator and distributor of electronic signals and Kyrgyztelecom is the player that determines the price. Lastly, the national post service Kyrgyzpochtasy is monopolizing the delivery service. Over the course of the year there were no cases of website blocking for political reasons. Freedom House gave Kyrgyzstan a score of 35 in Internet freedom in 2015, down one point from last year.¹¹

Internet access differs significantly throughout the country. In Bishkek, Internet access is much better than in the rest of Kyrgyzstan, although Internet access still remains problematic in some micro-regions of Bishkek and on the outskirts of the city. For instance, because Internet cables are not yet in the inner suburbs Aknet company charges KGS 25,000 to connect a house to the Internet. The connection in more rural regions of Kyrgyzstan remains weak and expensive compared to the purchasing power of the population. These issues limit that population's access to mass media, and as panelists suggest, information and communication technologies do not satisfy the needs of the population and mass media.

¹¹ "Freedom on the Net 2015," Freedom House. <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/freedom-net-2015>.

List of Panel Participants

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