

KYRGYZSTAN



MEDIA SUSTAINABILITY INDEX 2018

Tracking Development
of Sustainable
Independent Media
Around the World



KYRGYZSTAN

AT A GLANCE

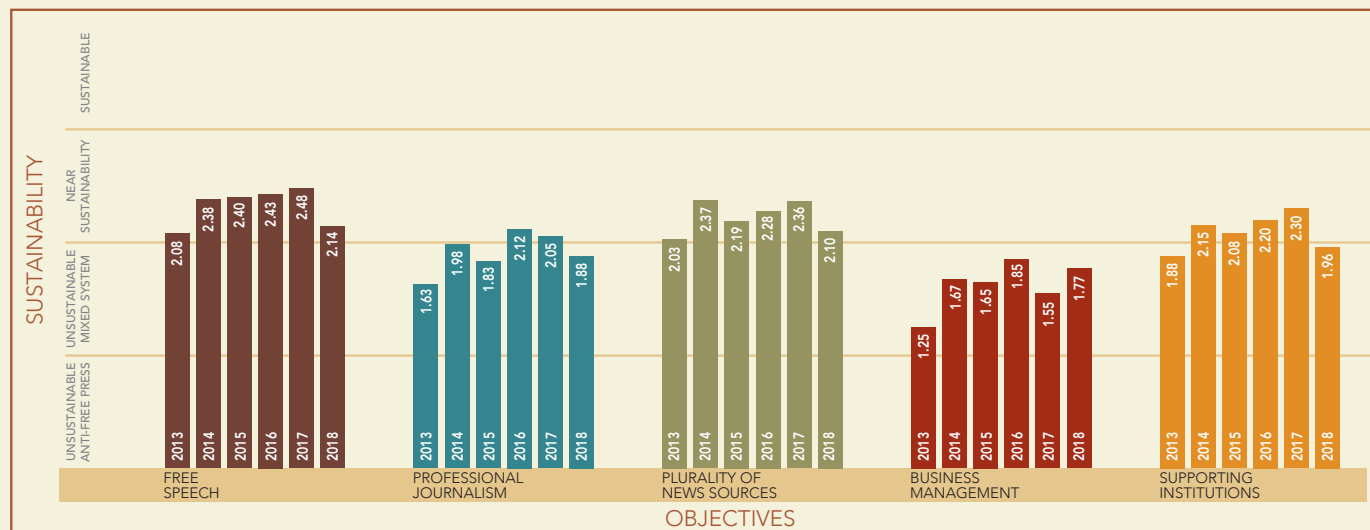
GENERAL

- **Population:** 6,140,200 (National Statistical Committee, 2017)
- **Capital city:** Bishkek
- **Ethnic groups (% of population):** Kyrgyz 73%, Uzbek 14.6%, Russian 5.8%, Dungan 1.1%, Uighur 0.9%, other 4.4% (National Statistical Committee, 2017)
- **Religions (% of population):** Muslim 75%, Russian Orthodox 20%, other 5%
- (2009 est., CIA World Factbook)
- **Languages:** Kyrgyz (official) 73.2%, Uzbek 14.4%, Russian (official) 9%, other 5.2% (2009 est., CIA World Factbook)
- **GNI (2013-Atlas):** \$6.906 billion (World Bank Development Indicators, 2014)
- **GNI per capita (2013-PPP):** \$3,080 (World Bank Development Indicators, 2014)
- **Literacy rate:** 99.5%; male 99.6%, female 99.4% (2015 est. CIA World Factbook)
- **President or top authority:** President Sooronbay Jeenbekov (since November 24, 2017)

MEDIA-SPECIFIC

- **Number of active media outlets:** More than 1,500 registered media. Print: 159 active outlets, including 3 main dailies and 4 other major papers. Radio stations: 26. Television stations: 25 terrestrials, 3 local cable networks, 3 IPTV (Ministry of Justice, 2013)
- **Newspaper circulation statistics:** Top three by circulation: *Super Info* (private Kyrgyz-language daily with 88,000 circulation), *Vecherniy Bishkek* (private Russian-language daily with 45,000 circulation), *Avtogid* (private Russian-language weekly with 12,000 circulation)
- **News agencies:** AKIpress (private), 24.kg (private), Kabar (state-owned), K-News (private), KyrTAG (private), Vesti (private), Kaktus Media (private), Kloop Media (private), Turmush (private), Region (private), KyrgyzToday.kg (private)
- **Broadcast ratings:** Top-three television stations: OTRK (state-owned), KTRK Musyka (state-owned), Pervyi kanal (Russian Federation)
- **Internet usage:** 2.08 million users (Digital in 2017 study)
- **Annual advertising revenue in media sector:** Television: \$16.5 million, Radio: \$2.7 million (January–December 2017 est., Expert Consulting Agency), Internet: \$500,000 (January–September 2013 est., Expert Consulting Agency)
- **Mobile subscriptions:** 7.49 million or 123% of population (digital in 2017 study)
- **Active social media users:** 600,000 or 10% of population (digital in 2017 study)

MEDIA SUSTAINABILITY INDEX: KYRGYZSTAN



SCORE KEY

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.



While Kyrgyzstan's MSI score for the business management objective increased slightly, all other objective scores experienced declines. This resulted in a deterioration of the country's overall media sustainability score from 2.23 last year to its current score of 1.97, moving Kyrgyzstan from "Near Sustainability" in 2017 to "Unsustainable Mixed System" in 2018.

The year 2017 was a turbulent year in Kyrgyzstan's political life, with the election to replace President Almazbek Atambaev consuming media attention and the government using the courts to take a more aggressive posture toward critical journalists.

The October 15 election boiled down to a contest between Prime Minister Sooronbay Jeenbekov, Atambaev's choice of successor, and Omurbek Babanov, a previous prime minister and former ally of the incumbent. Use of media played a major role in the dynamics of the campaign, with Babanov's candidacy gaining viability in large part through generous investment in advertising. Televised debates contributed to a vote viewed internationally as freer and fairer than the Central Asian norm. Jeenbekov was elected and took office in November in the first peaceful transfer of power in the history of independent Kyrgyzstan.

Several headline-making court cases targeting journalists and civil society marked a major step backward for media freedom and free speech. Defamation has been decriminalized in Kyrgyzstan, but a provision of media law entitled "Insult to Personal Dignity and Honor" offers means for authorities to punish media. High-level officials have stepped up their use of this tactic with the direct aim of silencing disagreeable journalists and the indirect effect of increasing self-censorship. Atambaev, Jeenbekov, and their allies in the ruling Social Democratic Party of Kyrgyzstan (SDPK) sued reporters, media outlets, and civil rights

activists, resulting in damage awards running into the millions of soms.

These suits have contributed to shaking Kyrgyzstan's reputation as Central Asia's only democracy, even as the country became the first in the region to join the Open Government Partnership (OGP), which encourages member states to promote transparency and use new technologies to improve public access to information.

The political turbulence spilled into Kyrgyzstan's foreign policy. During the campaign, Kazakhstani President Nursultan Nazarbaev met with Babanov and stated that Kyrgyzstan needed a young leader (Babanov was 47 at the time, Jeenbekov 58), which was interpreted as meddling in Kyrgyzstan's affairs. The subsequent falling-out between Atambaev and Nazarbaev led to a two-month closure of the border between the two countries. Relations thawed somewhat when Jeenbekov met with Nazarbaev during the Collective Security Treaty Organization summit in late November.

At this writing, the new president had not made any significant public statements on the course of Kyrgyzstan's foreign policy or its treatment of mass media. However, even before his election, he signaled his intentions toward the latter by suing news outlet 24.kg and journalist (and MSI panelist) Kabai Karabekov for KGS 10 million (\$147,000) in September over an article that cited allegations that Jeenbekov and his brother and fellow politician, Asylbek, had ties to radical Arab organizations.

**OBJECTIVE 1:
FREEDOM OF
SPEECH**

2.14

Kyrgyzstan's constitution and laws guarantee free speech and freedom of the press, but people in power routinely exploit the "dignity and honor" provision to muzzle critical voices. Use of the tactic reached new levels in 2017, said Elmurad Jusupaliyev of Radio Azattyk, the Kyrgyz-language service of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL). In the months leading up to the election, defamation cases were brought at the behest of the president, the prime minister, the presidential candidates, and the state registration service.

Dina Maslova, editor in chief of Kaktus Media, said the suits show an attempt to use legitimate institutions such as the courts, the prosecutor's office, and the president's office to "clean out the information field; they control all large media resources and try to eliminate the independent ones." Those institutions "are controlled by the president and knowingly deliver improper and unjust judgments, violating the norms of legislation and ignoring the statements of civil society and international organizations," she said.

Other panelists agreed that the cases were political in nature and that court processes are tilted in favor of the authorities. Media defendants must prove they did not have malicious intent in reporting or publicizing information, while complainants do not have to prove pain and suffering deriving from damage to their honor and reputation. Karabekov, now a columnist for Russian newspaper *Kommersant* and Maslova, both defendants in major 2017 lawsuits, said the speed with which judges dispatched the cases suggests they were decided before they went to court. Ydyrys Isakov, a reporter for Radio Azattyk

in Osh, agreed, saying that when the president or prime minister brings a defamation case, their victory in court is a given.

In March and April, the prosecutor general filed five suits on behalf of then president Atambaev against ProMedia, owner of the popular news website Zanoza.kg (now Kaktus Media), and its cofounders, Narynbek Idinov and Maslova. A Zanoza article by Idinov had quoted a speech by human rights defender Cholpon Jakupova that Atambaev claimed insulted his honor and dignity.

The Supreme Court of Kyrgyzstan upheld lower court verdicts for Atambaev in November and ordered the company and its founders to pay damages totaling KGS 27 million (\$396,000). They were given two months to pay, and Atambaev announced that he intended to pursue the awards to "teach a lesson" to Kyrgyzstani media to "get away from slander."

News service 24.kg was targeted in Jeenbekov's suit against Karabekov and in a case brought by SDPK over an article citing accusations by human rights activist Rita Karasartova of corruption in the ruling party's distribution of high-ranking government posts. At the time of writing, the latter case was still open. Radio Azattyk was sued in March over stories quoting opposition figures accusing Atambaev of corruption, but the prosecutor general dropped the case at the president's request after he met with RFE/RL's director.²

The government used other legal tools to harass critical media. The September television

channel was shut down in August 2017 after a Bishkek district court ruled that it broadcast extremist content. The broadcaster provided a platform for opposition figures and was affiliated with Omurbek Tekebaev, the former chairman of the Ata-Meken (Fatherland) party, who was sentenced earlier that month to an eight-year prison term on corruption charges he maintains are politically motivated. Karabekov and Isakov said the shutdown of the station was political, but other panelists were critical of September, saying it gave disproportionate airtime to opposition representatives and expressed biased opinions.

The Kyrgyz State Committee for National Security (SCNS) secured a court order to block Russian-language news website Ferghana based on an accusation that an article on relations between ethnic Kyrgyz and Uzbek users of social networks incited ethnic discord and hatred. A criminal case was opened against the reporter Ulugbek Babakulov, who fled the country in July 2017.

Maslova noted that 2017 also saw the first use of laws against inciting ethnic discord to prosecute social media users. Criminal cases were opened against users of Facebook and VKontakte as a result of SCNS monitoring posts and comments on the social networks. She said previously such incidents brought only administrative punishment for the users—for example, civil fines.

Mass media outlets are licensed by the State Agency for Communication (which was absorbed in 2016 into the new State Committee of Information Technologies and Communications) and are registered by the Ministry of Justice. The Ministry of Culture, Information, and Tourism issues permissions for channels to enter a multiplex and, under legislation enacted in October 2017, assess content. Some panelists suggested this measure could become an instrument of censorship, but

1 Titova, Alexandra, "Atambaev Does Not See a Peaceful Resolution of Conflict with Zanoza," Kloop. July 24, 2017. <https://kloop.kg/blog/2017/07/24/atambaev-ne-vidit-mir-nogo-razresheniya-konflikta-s-izdaniem-zanoza/>.

2 Kapushenko, Anna, "Prosecutor General's Office Withdrew One Lawsuit against Azattyk," Kloop. May 31, 2017. <https://kloop.kg/blog/2017/05/31/genprokuratura-otozvala-odin-isk-k-azattyku/>.

opinion was split. Almaz Ismanov noted that there are as yet no staff or mechanisms at the ministry for reviewing content.

Most panelists said licensing and registration procedures for TV and radio channels are generally clear and transparent, but some noted warning signs that the process is becoming politicized. Jalbyrak (Leaf), an Internet-TV service launched by officials of the banned September channel, has failed three times to secure registration, according to Ismanov. Sanjyra, the radio affiliate of NTS, a TV station owned by defeated presidential candidate Babanov, went off the air in November when its

license was not renewed.³

Digital media outlets do not have to register as mass media and require registration only to get accreditation to cover elections. There have been attempts in recent years to equate news websites to mass media for regulatory purposes. Amendments to the law on elections, initiated by the Respublika-Ata Zhurt party and approved in July 2017, cover "Internet publications" that reach certain traffic thresholds as well as traditional media. Begaim Usenova, director of the Media Policy Institute (MPI), said such definitions should not be part of election law but rather in legislation on media and information technology.

Sherzod Yusupov, a regional reporter with Radio Azattyk, said there have been issues with registration of Uzbek-language newspapers. He said the principals of a planned new Uzbek outlet in Osh encountered registration hurdles and instead relaunched the newspaper *Akhborot (Information)*, which had closed in the wake of conflict between ethnic Kyrgyz and Uzbeks in 2010. Isakov said Azattyk has also experienced problems extending its radio frequency license because of changes in the mass media law limiting foreign ownership of Kyrgyzstani media to 65 percent of shares.

The State Committee of Information Technologies and Communications held an unprecedented auction in December to sell frequency spectrum. Two bidders bought radio frequencies for KGS 431 million (\$6.3 million). The committee said the auction bolstered the principle of transparency

promoted as part of Taza Koom (Smart Nation), a national program launched last year to improve Kyrgyzstan's digital infrastructure and openness.⁴

Conditions for entering the media market were generally unchanged, but panelists did note that as of the May 2017 switch to digital broadcasting, there were unequal terms between state-owned TV channels in a multiplex, which do not have to pay for channel delivery, and private channels, which do.

There were few reported physical attacks on journalists in 2017. The incidents that did occur largely revolved around the election. NTS reporter Mirbek Aitikeev was surrounded by a group of young men at a polling station in Osh on Election Day and pushed out of the building. Journalists from Turmush.kg and Kloop Media reported several instances of being prevented from shooting video at election sites, and panelists said law enforcement officers sometimes physically hinder reporters attempting to do their jobs.

For the most part, panelists said, lawsuits and threats have become the tactic of choice for deterring or pressuring journalists. The Prosecutor General's Office and the security service are enlisted as tools in this pressure, with journalists who are viewed by authorities as troublesome invited to interviews with SCNS, prevented from leaving the country, or faced with seizure of their property through court decisions.

Kloop Media came under heavy pressure over its investigation into how a private website called Samara.kg, which was used by Jeenbekov's campaign to manage voter data, was hosted for several weeks before the election on a government-run server, where Samara could potentially harvest reams of private information on voters. At his

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.

3 Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, "Kyrgyz Officials Impound TV Station Property Owned by Opposition Politician Babanov," Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, December 19, 2017. <https://www.rferl.org/a/kyrgyzstan-nts-tv-opposition-babnov-officials-im-pound-property/28927074.html>.

4 "Taza Koom: Concept." <http://www.tazakoom.kg/site/index>.

farewell press conference in November, Atambaev called the report a “provocation” that would be investigated by SCNS. One of the reporters of the story, Rinat Tukhvatshin, was questioned for three hours by the security service in December.⁵

Several panelists said bullying of journalists has also come to include smear campaigns on social networking sites, some promulgated by paid trolls. The “black PR” comes in comments sections rather than actual posts or articles, Ismanov said.

The Bishkek-based Media Development Center’s monitoring of election reporting found indications of state influence on mass media. On state-owned Kyrgyz Public Radio and Television Corporation (OTRK, sometimes KTRK) and EITR (the second national TV broadcasting channel), coverage of Jeenbekov was overwhelmingly positive and that of his main rival, Babanov, was overwhelmingly negative.⁶ NTS, owned by Babanov, heavily promoted his candidacy, but it has a much smaller audience than the public channels and had proportionally less impact. State channels, with the exception of regional public broadcaster Yntymak, regularly ran news stories that were indistinguishable from campaign materials, the report states.

Media law ostensibly guarantees public broadcasters’ editorial independence, safeguarded by steering councils, but several panelists said

membership of these supervisory bodies is controlled by the government. Daniyar Sadiev, a former director of Yntymak, said its council—which had been approved in 2015 by Jeenbekov when he was governor of the Osh region—was temporarily dissolved by the government in 2017.

Karabekov said authorities also use financial means to suppress and control mass media, limiting funding for public channels and seeking defamation awards from private outlets and their journalists that are far out of proportion to revenue and salaries. He called for legislative amendments to regulate the size of damage claims.

There are no legal limitations on Kyrgyzstanis’ access to news from abroad, but panelists mentioned several occasions when media outlets suffered consequences for referencing foreign media—a new phenomenon.

Makhinur Niyazova, a reporter with the independent Bishkek newspaper *Res Publika*, said social media have created new precedents in defamation cases. After SDPK lawmaker Dastan Bekeshev sued activist Mavlyan Askarbekov over an allegedly defamatory Facebook post, in January 2017, a Bishkek court ordered Askarbekov to post an apology on the social network and leave it live for a month.

Bekeshev has also proposed setting minimum compensation for media content that tarnishes a reputation, and he and two Respublika-Ata Zhurt lawmakers are co-sponsoring a bill now before the parliament that would expand government oversight of social media content. The measure would create a registry of social network users who have more than 1,000 followers and establish several rules for

their online conduct, including requiring them to use their real names, abstain from profanity, and fact-check information before posting or sharing it. Echoing the defamation law, such users would also be barred from disclosing private information deemed damaging to the honor, dignity, or business reputation of citizens and organizations.

Journalists’ access to public information is protected by law, with matters of national security providing the only legally permissible exception. The Taza Koom initiative and the country’s entry into the OGP are encouraging moves toward transparency, including greater access to information for the general public.

However, individual media that incur official wrath do hit roadblocks. SCNS removed Kaktus Media from its e-mail list for newsletters and invitations to official events; Kaktus reporters had to send requests for accreditation to attend events and were not allocated seats for smaller events at the president’s office. Niyazova said she has encountered similar problems. Panelists said outlets that show greater loyalty to authorities, such as news outlet AKIpress, get updates and information earlier than other media.

Despite open data commitments in the Taza Koom framework, some state bodies provide information slowly or not at all, several panel members reported. According to Maslova, the Health Ministry scolds doctors for providing information and comments to journalists and has begun requiring media to submit written requests for information. State agencies used to reply slowly because they lacked press secretaries, she said, but she now believes they stall intentionally. Ismanov said he could not get information from state entities on air quality and climate impacts for an environmental article he was working on; he turned to nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), which possessed

5 International Partnership for Human Rights, “Kyrgyzstan: Will the New President Break with His Predecessor’s Troubling Human Rights Legacy?,” International Partnership for Human Rights, December 22, 2017, <http://iphronline.org/kyrgyzstan-will-new-president-break-predecessor-s-troubling-human-rights-legacy.html>.

6 *Midterm Report of Monitoring of Mass Media During the 2017 Presidential-Election Period*, Media Development Center, http://medialaw.kg/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/PROMEZHUTOCHNYI-OTCHET_Monitoring-SMI_Vybory-2017.pdf.

and provided more information on the topic. He said freelance journalists have even more difficulty accessing information because state bodies require requests to include a letter from an editor.

Maslova noted that the law on public information was tweaked this year to increase penalties for distributing information this is marked "for official use only" and relates to state secrets. Kaktus received a letter from the Prosecutor General's Office regarding an article that cited such a document, and the financial police asked that the story be taken down. "More and more, documents come with the 'for official use only' label, even if it does not seem necessary," she said.

There are no legal limitations on Kyrgyzstanis' access to news from abroad, but panelists mentioned several occasions when media outlets suffered consequences for referencing foreign media—a new phenomenon. During the election campaign, *Res Publika's* accreditation for presidential press conferences was threatened after it reprinted an article from Russian newspaper *Novaya Gazeta*. A private citizen who had filed suit over an article by Babakulov also sued Kaktus Media when it published a Ferghana interview with the exiled journalist.

The government does not impose licensing or registration requirements for journalists to enter the profession. Problems of official recognition do crop up when it comes to securing accreditation to cover official meetings and important events, particularly for bloggers and freelancers. Karabekov said authorities use accreditation to hinder certain journalists' work.

OBJECTIVE 2: PROFESSIONAL JOURNALISM

1.88

Panelists said most journalists in Kyrgyzstan opt for quantity over quality in their work and do not dedicate enough time to fact-checking. Heavy workloads were cited as a primary reason for this superficial approach. Even large, financially independent outlets such as Azattyk are short staffed, said Azamat Tynayev, head of the civic media support group Journalists. Regional journalists Jusupaliyev and Isakov said they are asked by management to prepare one or two pieces a day; newsroom colleagues use the phrase "quick and dirty" to describe their work.

"We are aware of our drawbacks, but we are dependent on how the outlet looks to an observer. We have to seem dynamic and cover diverse topics," Tynayev said. "There is no diligent journalism, but it does not mean that we do not know how it should be covered. We are limited by other factors."

The pressure to produce led to spurious stories being widely disseminated. The following are examples the panel cited: In November, news site Vesti.kg reported without attribution that schools in Southern Kyrgyzstan were sending female students to gynecologists for virginity checks. The story was found to be fake, but not before it was picked up by several media outlets, including some in Kazakhstan. A story about tourists from the United Arab Emirates not wanting to swim in Issyk-Kul Lake was covered by multiple outlets; it was based on a post by a single Facebook user sharing her observations on the popular destination.

Still, Maslova said she sees improvement in fact-checking, which she attributed to competition among news outlets. Another driving

force is that audiences now have a platform to comment on and question the quality of reporting on journalists' social media pages. Elena Voronina, a columnist for Sputnik Kyrgyzstan, said outlets are adopting instruments such as long-form journalism and infographics, and starting to practice convergence journalism, using multiple platforms and types of media to tell a story.

A code of ethics for journalists has been in effect since 2007, but it has little impact. Media Development Center monitoring found widespread ethical lapses in reporting, most notably ethnic and regional bias, violations of privacy, and unsubstantiated and unsourced accusations. The center's analysis of election coverage concluded that the "majority of published/broadcast stories in the mass media may be assessed as a manipulation, political advertisement, hidden campaigning, an appeal to vote for one or another candidate."

Panelists did note improvement in the area of privacy, with audience pressure prompting outlets to blur faces when posting and publishing photos of children, crime victims, and people with disabilities.

Self-censorship is common among reporters and editors, most panel members agreed, but more prevalent at state-owned media. Topics journalists generally avoid for fear of an official or public backlash are Islam, relations between ethnic communities, and foreign affairs.

Ismanov dissented somewhat, citing hard-hitting coverage of some topics. Azattyk did a series of pieces about Raimbek Matraimov, former deputy chair of the State Customs Service, and his family's extensive holdings in expensive real estate in Osh. Ismanov also cited questions raised by journalists about ownership of freight that was on a Boeing 747 that crashed near Manas International Airport, killing 39 people. He said such stories show self-censorship is not as prevalent as other panelists contend.

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).

He noted, however, that since ethnic tensions erupted into violence in parts of the country in 2010, Uzbek-language outlets have largely stopped covering social issues and focus instead on uncontroversial subjects such as entertainment and health.

Voronina said private or independent media cover socially significant topics, such as the rights of children, women, and sexual minorities, but without much depth. State outlets often ask for payment from activist groups to cover such issues, she said.

Panelists said national media cover key issues and events, but there is an imbalance between regional outlets and those based in Bishkek. Regional and ethnic-language outlets offer little coverage of topical political issues. An exception is the Uzbek-language program *Umut* on Yntymak, which delves into political and economic affairs, Ismanov said.

Media salaries generally correspond to the national average but are significantly lower than salaries in other white-collar sectors. In Bishkek, average pay ranges from KGS 15,000 to 20,000 (\$220–\$293), with the exception of Azattyk and the Kremlin-controlled news outlet Sputnik, where it can reach around \$1,000 a month. At Azattyk, that top level salary applies to those working on TV programs; website staff earn about \$600 to \$800. The channel's freelancers are paid KGS 40,000 to 50,000 (\$587–\$733), depending on their level of contribution, and receive gas money.

Reporters in the regions get about \$150 to \$200 a month, editors around \$500. Journalists at national independent broadcaster NTS earn about KGS 35,000 (\$513), but at TV channels in the regions, pay generally ranges from KGS 8,000 to 12,000 (\$117–\$176). At regional newspapers, journalists typically earn around KGS 5,000 to 7,000 (\$73–\$103). Sadiev, the former Yntymak director, said 40 percent of the channel's staff has left since early 2017, largely because of budget-related layoffs.

Panelists said pay for most journalists is not sufficient for a decent quality of life. To make ends meet, many reporters sell the same story to multiple outlets, with slight variations, or do public relations work on the side. To boost pay at their regular jobs, journalists must develop additional skills such as taking photos and recording and editing video.

Maslova said she has tried various pay policies at Kaktus; her current model eschews set salaries and instead bases remuneration on three indicators: quantity, quality, and number of views. This system takes into account that Kaktus's online news feed is mainly financed by advertising. For long-form and investigative articles, she relies on grants from international organizations to supplement what reporters earn from their main responsibilities.

There is a rudimentary stringer system in

Bishkek, Maslova said, but it is viewed warily. Some stringers are suspected of being in cahoots with the police and extort money from people they capture on video committing minor offenses such as traffic violations.

There is no monitoring of media content that assesses the relative shares of news and entertainment programming. Panelists said entertainment does not overshadow news and information shows. (Karabekov observed that many Kyrgyzstanis view politics as their entertainment—for example, deconstructing speeches by Atambaev.)

“We are aware of our drawbacks, but we are dependent on how the outlet looks to an observer. We have to seem dynamic and cover diverse topics,” Tynaev said. “There is no diligent journalism, but it does not mean that we do not know how it should be covered. We are limited by other factors.”

They said entertainment programs are too expensive for most outlets to produce, and the quality of those that are made leaves much to be desired. News is the most popular form of programming on Kyrgyzstani television, according to research company M-Vector's 2017 report on the public's media habits.⁷

The main state broadcaster, OTRK, offers a few channels with mainly entertainment and cultural programming, including Musyka, KTRK Sport, and Balastan (children's programming). In 2016, OTRK launched Ala-Too 24, the country's first 24-hour news channel.

⁷ M-Vector, *Media Research (8th Wave)*, M-Vector. 2017. <https://cloud.m-vector.com/index.php/s/TUBf31Y3Bti4crG#pdfviewer>.

Apart from the newspaper *Super Info*, there are no print outlets focused exclusively on entertainment, Tynaev said. Some bloggers cover entertainment and niche topics such as travel. Tynaev said there is a lack of ethics among food bloggers, who get gifts and discounts from restaurants in exchange for favorable reviews.

Panelists were ambivalent about the state of equipment at media outlets. All agreed that there is a shortage of professional gear and what is available is often outdated. Some said smartphones are sufficient to prepare most pieces, given current audience demands. Maslova said the rise of WhatsApp has habituated users to poor-quality video and photos, and they are willing to trade technical polish for speed in their news consumption. Tynaev agreed, saying “mobile” journalism is becoming trendy.

The only outlet with up-to-date equipment is OTRK. In southern regions, panelists said, news-gathering equipment and even basic workplace needs, such as office supplies and furniture, are lacking. Sadiev said Yntymak has one or two cars available for five camera crews and one restroom for a staff of 70. Ismanov said regional newsrooms do not provide Internet service for journalists.

Panelists were also divided on the matter of specialized reporting. Tynaev viewed the situation as improving, noting, for example, that there are more journalists focusing on medical topics. He also cited the financial news website Akchabar and the *Novye Litsa* newspaper, which features a section on green business. More journalists are doing investigative reporting, notably at Kloop Media. Elnura Alkanova, a young freelance reporter, made a splash looking into the finances of Liglass Trading, a Czech company that won a government tender to build a hydroelectric plant in the central Naryn region despite a history of losing money and little

experience with big infrastructure projects; the government later canceled the contract. Kaktus Media shed light on the ownership of a newly constructed trade center, Asia Mall, and its link to presidential candidate Babanov.

Several panelists noted that, given their low salaries, journalists do not want to engage in time-consuming and risky investigations; for pay purposes, a major investigative piece will be counted as a single article, no matter how long it is or how much time was spent on it. Investigation is a luxury affordable only with donor funding, panelists said.

OBJECTIVE 3: PLURALITY OF NEWS

2.10

The Ministry of Justice’s mass media registry, covering print, broadcast, and online outlets, is vast, listing more than 200 TV and radio companies, and more than 1,000 newspapers. The registry probably paints a somewhat illusory picture, as it does not reflect when outlets close, but panelists say Kyrgyzstanis have access to a wide variety of news sources, including new “digital families” of channels under public broadcasters OTRK and EITR. Still, there were troubling signs for media plurality in 2017, as the government clamped down on opposition-linked channels September and NTS.

The role of social media and messaging apps in news distribution continued to grow. Traditional outlets use direct messaging, a medium less likely to attract government scrutiny, to share news and information. Tools such as WhatsApp and Telegram were also used by partisan groups during the presidential campaign to promote, or denigrate, various candidates.

Topics that gain traction on social networking sites have spurred investigative journalists and human rights activists to action. A video in which the former chief mufti of Kyrgyzstan, Chubak Ajy Jalilov, talked about having two wives and advocated multiple spouses for men generated heated online debate and prompted activists to demand he be prosecuted for the crime of polygamy. The allegations of ties between Atambaev’s family and the plane that crashed near Manas Airport spread via social media and were picked up by traditional and online outlets.

While there are a multitude of places to get news, there is little difference in their content. NTS provides an example of forced “unification” of content. Prior to the presidential election, it was affiliated with and openly supportive of Babanov and thus delivered a very different angle on the news than did the dominant state-run and pro-government media. Following an attempt by authorities to seize the station’s property immediately after the election, NTS greatly changed the content of its news programs, becoming something like a twin of OTRK.

There are no legal barriers to access to local and foreign media, with the exception of Ferghana, which was blocked under a June 2017 court finding that it published material that sowed ethnic discord—not the first time the news site was restricted on those grounds.

Kyrgyzstan’s completion of the transition to digital television last year “provided an opportunity for the entire population to watch a wider range TV channels in better quality free of charge,” according to the M-Vector report. Analogue was switched off in May 2017, and 87.5 percent of the population has unimpeded access to digital TV. Fifty-three percent have more than 30 channels available, and 27 percent get more than 50, although variety and choice remain broader in urban areas.

Television remains the primary information source for Kyrgyzstanis but appears to be losing ground to online outlets. In the 2017 M-Vector survey, 62.5 percent of respondents said they watched TV for news, compared to 79 percent the previous year. The share of people naming the Internet as a key news source nearly doubled from 21.9 percent to 40 percent. Public trust in media remained steady from 2016 and was similar across TV, radio, online, and print, with trustworthiness scores on all platforms hovering around 6 on a 1–10 scale.

Most of the panel said public mass media cover politics in a biased fashion, but Ismanov argued that private outlets affiliated with the opposition also present skewed political news. The Media

Development Center's monitoring of election coverage found that Jeenbekov got far more coverage overall than other candidates, but that private channels such as NTS and Channel 7 gave considerably more airtime and positive mentions to candidates with whom they were affiliated (respectively, Babanov and Respublika-Ata Zhurt candidate Kamchybek Tashiev). Panel members said both state and private mass media serve the interests of the government or particular parties, not the public, and this becomes especially apparent during election periods.

Panelists were unanimous in the view that there are no independent news agencies in the classic sense in Kyrgyzstan. More than 10 domestic and six foreign online outlets identify themselves as information agencies, but they operate more like news websites, aiming to reach readers and viewers directly rather than producing content for other media. Among them, AKIpress and 24.kg function most like news services in supplying content used by other outlets. Tynaev mentioned an effort by Kurmanbek Mambetov, a former editor at newspapers *Slovo Kyrgyzstana* and *Vecherniy Bishkek*, to develop an investigative journalism outlet to produce and sell quality content to media outlets, but both the outlet and a related newspaper, *Ovyektiv*, are struggling.

Most media are understaffed, which limits production of their own content, especially news, panelists said. Even large outlets such as OTRK regularly use content from the news feeds of AKIpress, 24.kg, and state-run outlet Kabar, unedited. Niyazova said *Res Publika* has only three employees and is dependent on reprinting outside content, and panel members said news on radio derives entirely from other sources. Almost all regional TV outlets draw stories directly from blogs and social media.

Media ownership is opaque. At the websites of the Ministry of Justice and company search

portal OsOO.kg one can seek official data from an outlet's registration, but panelists said these records invariably list fronts rather than true owners. There is no verifiable information available on media control, even to journalists themselves. Ismanov said employees of private media sometimes do not know the identity of their true boss, especially at relatively new outlets such as the TV channel On1.

Panelists said regional outlets' coverage of hard news is on the decline. Maslova said the gap is being filled by WhatsApp and similar services, which have become popular means for local populations to spread news.

The largest minority group, Uzbeks, are served by what Sadiev and Jusupaliyev described as "improving media" in their language. They cited the relaunch of the newspaper *Akhborot* and NurTV's airing of Uzbek-language programs. Jusupaliyev added that improved relations between Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan have benefited the Uzbek-language Osh newspaper *Ush Sadosi*, which is now distributing 2,000 copies in Uzbekistan and plans to establish a bureau there.

Other panelists were more pessimistic about the state of minority media, asserting that Uzbek-language outlets eschew political topics to avoid clashes with the authorities. Religious issues are generally covered from the point of view of ethnic Kyrgyz, Ismanov said.

Religious matters are addressed in both traditional and online media—Chubak Ajy Jalilov's YouTube channel has more than 150,000 subscribers—as well as specialized outlets such as Ayan TV, which covers issues from an Islamic perspective, and *Umma*, a magazine that focuses on Muslim women. However, since religious topics are

Multiple news sources provide citizens with reliable and objective news.

PLURALITY OF NEWS SOURCES INDICATORS

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

increasingly sensitive in Kyrgyzstan, panelists said they are covered in less depth amid pressure from Kyrgyz nationalists and concerns about jihadism. Maslova said the media profile of nonbelievers is limited to groups on social networking sites.

National news and events overshadow regional issues, but there has been a trend in recent years toward broader coverage of certain regional matters. Information agencies and TV channels have started dedicating sections or blocks of time to the regions. It is worth noting, however, that the content differs: national outlets' regional coverage remains focused on politics and economics, whereas regional media largely feature stories that shed light on social and cultural aspects of local life. Panelists said regional outlets' coverage of hard news is on the decline. Maslova said the gap is being filled by WhatsApp and similar services, which have become popular means for local populations to spread news.

OBJECTIVE 4: BUSINESS MANAGEMENT

1.77

The panelists believe there are no profitable media outlets in Kyrgyzstan. The absence of reliable data on media finances makes it impossible to know for sure, but recent cases of poor management at Channel 5 and Piramida, which were shut down after piling up debt for years, would appear to support their view of the business challenges for Kyrgyzstani media.

Maslova also noted the seeming collapse of vb.kg, the online sibling of *Vecherniy Bishkek*, the nation's second-biggest newspaper (where she formerly served as Internet editor). In 2017, the company abruptly shut down the news site and dismissed the

staff; it now carries only aggregated content and is run by one or two employees. Its Bishkek office has been leased out.

A handful of outlets are considered to be at least self-sustaining, including *Super Info*, national TV channels NTS and Channel 7, and regional broadcaster OshTV. Again, this is speculation on the panel's part, as there is no reliable data on media finances.

Media in Kyrgyzstan have few sources of income, and advertising and distribution do not come close to covering costs. Private outlets are kept afloat by unknown owners. State-supported media took a hit in 2017 with amendments to the budget law requiring them to steer earnings from advertising and other sources into government coffers.

The change put multilingual regional broadcaster Yntymak in a particular bind. It was founded by the government and is legally considered public media, but it gets no state funding and now cannot put self-earned revenue into operations. Although Yntymak has historically received some international donor support, its future is unclear.

In some regions, local authorities boost state outlets' revenue through administrative resources and pressure. For example, Sadiev said state-owned newspaper *Ata-Zhurt* in the Leilek district sells 4,000 copies to state organizations through forced subscriptions. Other regional papers such as *Osh Janyrygy* and *Eho Osha* are in dire straits because of declining state support and have reduced staff to just an editor and a reporter, he said.

In lieu of state money, some regional newspapers have gone online-only and are focusing on local news in hopes of drawing local advertisers. Kbcity.kg, a Kara-Balta city portal that branched out of the *Vest'* newspaper, has managed to gain momentum. It has embraced convergence, with radio and TV channels along with the news website, but the volume of its broadcast content remains low.

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.

Other outlets are exploring alternative revenue sources. The outlet 24.kg is organizing social events and occasionally conducting research, such as small-scale surveys and content analysis on social issues ordered by international organizations, Voronina said.

Generally, media have seen advertising revenue drop, panelists said—except during presidential campaign periods, when many outlets make most of their ad money. The biggest piece of the political-advertising pie went to national public broadcaster OTRK, which took in nearly KGS 47.5 million (\$700,000). For purposes of comparison, OTRK received almost KGS 447 million (\$6.6 million) from the state budget last year.

The private advertising market is dominated by Kazakhstani ad agencies. The largest one operating in Kyrgyzstan is Media Forum, which covers the

regions and, because of its dominant position, is able to command discounts of more than 50 percent from media outlets. According to Sadiev, having a good relationship with Media Forum helps outlets get advertising orders.

A broadcaster's political affiliation also helps attract advertising, Sadliev said. Channel 7—which is believed to be owned by Akmatbek Keldibekov, former speaker of the parliament—has a larger share of the advertising market than Yntymak and Channel 5, which have more viewers, according to M-Vector's research. Sadiev also cited the example of NurTV, a Channel 7 affiliate based in Osh that only launched in October 2017 but gets more advertising than Osh Pirim, which has been operating for four years.

There are a few companies measuring TV ratings in Kyrgyzstan, but panelists said they are considered unreliable because they do not use standard audience-measurement tools, such as people meters, and are ill equipped to quantify viewership properly.

Only a handful of companies purchase ads directly from media outlets; these tend to be big businesses such as mobile operator MegaCom, KyrgyzGaz (an affiliate of Gazprom), gold-mining company Kumtor, and commercial banks. A few major firms work through Bishkek-based agencies, including Samsung (which buys exclusively through Noosfera) and mobile operator Beeline (which uses Quattro Media).

Given the lack of accessible data on media finances, it is impossible to reliably determine what share of outlets' income derives from advertising and whether that proportion would be considered low. Panelists offered widely varied opinions based primarily on personal experience, aside from agreeing

that television tends to earn a larger share from ads.

Maslova said advertising accounts for 60 percent to 70 percent of income at Kaktus Media—a very high figure for the Kyrgyzstani market, judging by other panelists' input. (She said Kaktus suffered a dip after changing its name from Zanoza.kg and losing audience share but has since recovered.) The company works with three Bishkek agencies, Noosfera, Namba, and Quattro Media, and offers a 20 percent discount. It prepares a yearly business plan based on annual advertising contracts.

At the other end of the spectrum, Sadiev said advertising provides 20 percent to 25 percent of revenue at Yntymak and 20 percent or less at Osh Pirim.

Government pressure skews the advertising market, as authorities have control over market mechanisms on which media outlets depend heavily, panelists said. Glaringly, state-owned OTRK has a 20 percent share of the TV ad market, and unwritten rules direct advertising by government organs to a handful of mostly state-owned outlets. Other media are at a significant disadvantage. Even those considered economically viable—AKIpress, *Vecherniy Bishkek*, Kaktus Media, 24.kg—stay afloat mainly with the support of sponsors, notably politicians who invest in them. Azattyk and Sputnik get support from the US and Russian governments, respectively.

There are a few companies measuring TV ratings in Kyrgyzstan, but panelists said they are considered unreliable because they do not use standard audience-measurement tools, such as people meters, and are ill equipped to quantify viewership properly. Advertisers pay more attention to M-Vector's report, which includes data on the most popular TV and radio stations and most-visited websites, based on survey responses.

Most Internet media use Google Analytics to measure traffic. Some use SimilarWeb or domestic

services such as Net.kg. All these tools have faults, Maslova said. Google Analytics data is viewed as useful in seeking money from donor organizations but does not affect ad orders.

OBJECTIVE 5: SUPPORTING INSTITUTIONS

1.96

There are few trade or professional associations supporting media in Kyrgyzstan, and panelists said those that do exist are ineffectual. The long-dormant Association of Publishers and Distributors of Print Media was revived in 2017 but did no effective work. Digital Technologies LLC, established several years ago to represent 22 private TV and radio stations in the switch to digital broadcasting, did secure three frequencies—two in Bishkek and one in the regions—but did little else to protect members' business interests, panelists said.

The frequency arrangement hinders private broadcasters from achieving nationwide coverage, the head of Digital Technologies told Akchabar.⁸ And compared to the "social package" of state outlets on digital TV, private channels have outdated, subpar equipment for delivering their signal to transmitters and far fewer relay stations across the regions, resulting in poorer picture quality for consumers.

Panelists said the two main professional associations, the Union of Journalists and the Independent Union of Journalists of the Kyrgyz Republic, have been passive in the face of the legal assault on

⁸ Berdibaeva, Aziza, "Digital TV: About Pirated Content, Picture Quality, and Political Intrigue," Akchabar. March 3, 2017. <https://www.akchabar.kg/article/business/sanarip/>.

journalists and media outlets. The former essentially does not function, panel members said. The latter issued statements on behalf of media defendants in defamation cases but offered no tangible support. A fragmented media landscape dominated by outlets run by the state or other interest groups lacks solidarity and the organizational muscle to defend or assist journalists facing multimillion-som judgments. The only notable effort in this regard has been a crowdfunding campaign by the Committee to Protect Freedom of Speech, an organization established in 2016, to help defendants cover the damage awards to Atambaev in the Zanoza.kg cases.

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Maslova, one of those defendants, said that the Adilet Legal Clinic, an NGO headed by her codefendant Jakupova, used to provide legal support to journalists, but eventually was overloaded with cases. Maslova said MPI is currently the only organization offering such aid. Most media support by NGOs comes in the form of training, research, and election monitoring, panelists said.

There was unanimous agreement that journalism education in Kyrgyzstan is in decline. Despite rapid changes in media technology, new disciplines are not being introduced, and panelists said instructional capacity is weak in terms of both quality and quantity. Tynaev said curricula are outdated and impractical. Voronina said the journalism department at Kyrgyz-Russian Slavic

University, where she teaches, is cutting back on courses. Some panelists view Manas University as still upholding high standards for journalism and adequately preparing the new generation of practitioners, but for the most part, short-term courses are necessary to fill the gaps in students' practical knowledge and skills.

Internews continues to offer courses for practicing journalists, but now does so mainly in the form of webinars. Topics covered in 2017 included fact-checking, ecological issues, data journalism, storytelling, and multimedia. Internews also launched a three-year media development program, with support from the US Agency for International Development, aimed at helping independent outlets produce their own content.

OTRK operates an education center that offers courses to regional journalists and journalism students, and sometimes brings in guest lecturers. Tynaev heads a media training center, the Studio of Practical Journalism, and both Yntymak and Kloop Media offer journalism courses in Osh.

The state has long had a grip on distribution of broadcast media via RPO RMTR, a branch of state-owned Kyrgyztelecom. In 2017, however, the company lost its monopoly as Digital Technologies began delivering the signals of its multiplexes.

The printing industry is centered in Bishkek; even regional newspapers are printed in the capital, Isakov said. State-run Uchkun and a printing press run by the Media Support Center are the most widely used facilities.

Kyrgyzbasmasoz, the weak state-run kiosk network, is used less and less for newspaper distribution. Many publications have all but stopped using the system, which panelists said is plagued by heavy debts and low sales, especially in the regions (where kiosks will only take two or three copies of regional papers so they will not have piles

of unsold copies to return).

Internet distribution has become politicized, panelists asserted. TV channels and news websites that air opposition views have experienced problems with Internet access and implemented backup systems. Sadiev said September (now Jalbyrak) was signed up with three Internet service providers because of recurrent issues, while *Super Info*, located in a building only meters away, did not have problems with Internet access. Azattyk also has three ISPs, for the same reason. Maslova said Kaktus Media struggles with denial-of-service attacks on important national holidays such as Independence Day. Kloop Media has experienced similar problems.

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.
- ▶ Short-term training and in-service training programs allow journalists to upgrade skills or acquire new skills.
- ▶ Sources of newsprint NGOs support free speech and independent media.
- ▶ Quality journalism degree programs that provide substantial practical experience exist.
- ▶ Printing facilities are in private hands, apolitical, and unrestricted.
- ▶ Channels of media distribution (kiosks, transmitters, Internet) are private, apolitical, and unrestricted.
- ▶ Information and communication technology infrastructure sufficiently meets the needs of media and citizens.

List of Panel Participants

Ydyrys Isakov, regional reporter, Radio Azattyk, Osh

Almaz Ismanov, journalist, *Novye Litsa*, Bishkek

Elmurad Jusupaliev, journalist, Radio Azattyk, Osh

Kabai Karabekov, columnist, *Kommersant*, Bishkek

Dina Maslova, editor in chief, Kaktus Media Group, Bishkek

Makhinur Niyazova, journalist, *Res Publika*, Bishkek

Daniyar Sadiev, freelance journalist; former director, TV Yntymak, Osh

Azamat Tynaev, board chairman, Journalists NGO, Bishkek

Begaim Usenova, director, Media Policy Institute, Bishkek

Elena Voronina, columnist, Sputnik Kyrgyzstan, Bishkek

Sherzod Yusupov, regional reporter, Radio Azattyk, Osh

The following panelists submitted questionnaires but were unable to attend the panel discussion:

Almaz Esengeldiev, lawyer; senior program adviser, Freedom House Kyrgyzstan, Bishkek

Adel Laisheva, director, Center of Media Communications, Kyrgyz Public Radio and Television Corporation, Bishkek

Moderator and Author

Gulnara Ibraeva, media analyst, Bishkek

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