

“Kyrgyzstan in Central Asia is a good example of how even a more or less free Fourth Estate can remain unable to affect change in society if key institutions and Western-style governance practices are not functioning and there is a lack of any “civil society ownership” on a mass scale,” - Political scientist Denis Berdakov examines the problems facing the development of the Kyrgyzstani media environment in this cabar.asia exclusive.



There are more than 1,500 mass media outlets registered with the Kyrgyzstani Ministry of Justice, however the vast majority of these organizations are defunct. The most widespread reason for this being a lack of financing. In reality, there are roughly 210 active media outlets exerting their influence on the national media landscape.

It must be said that this number is fluid and regularly changes as some outlets are shuttered while new ones appear on the market. The largest share of active media outlets is represented by print media (i.e. newspapers and magazines) of which there are 159. There are additionally 25 television channels and 26 radio stations.

Kyrgyz is the primary language of media broadcasts. Russian is in second place with other languages represented in newspapers and on the radio. A preponderance of newspapers is characteristic of all regions nationwide, including Bishkek where the majority of the mainstream media is concentrated. This stems from financial rationality: in comparison to radio and television in particular, newspapers are the least financially costly form of mainstream media.

Types of Kyrgyzstani Media: Trends and Patterns

Newspapers

The majority of newspapers publish weekly 16 page editions, while 8 page editions are prevalent at the regional level. Newspapers such as *Vechernii Bishkek*, *Slovo Kyrgyzstana*, *Rossiskaya Gazeta*, and *Komsomolskaya Pravda* that publish four times a week can be considered dailies.

Regionally, some outlets publish biweekly or even monthly editions. The most widely circulated newspapers are published in Bishkek. For example, the tabloid newspaper *Super Info* enjoys a circulation of nearly 90,000. There are another ten newspapers with circulations larger than 10,000.

However in recent years all print media in Kyrgyzstan has witnessed declining circulations. Market leader *Super Info* has seen its circulation decrease by about 10,000 to roughly 80,000. It is interesting that the state-owned newspaper *Slovo Kyrgyzstana* has not published its circulation figures for many years. Nongovernmental organizations working in the realm of mass media have spoken out about this violation of media legislation, however the newspaper continues to hide this information.

Regional newspapers are much more modest with circulations ranging from 1,000 to 3,000. *Declining demand for print media* among readers has led to decreasing advertising sales and the financial instability of media outlets that are then forced to find financial support from politicians or the state itself. More than half of all print media outlets consider themselves to be wholly or partially dependent on their owners. This has led to a situation in which the owners dictate editorial policy and fill their newspapers with pre-prepared points-of-view on any given issue. As a rule, media owners are often drawn from national and local governmental bodies as well as politicians both loyal to and in opposition to the government. Business leaders sometimes purchase mass media outlets, but this is not viewed as a business investment but rather an attempt to become involved in politics.

Television

There are more than 25 television channels broadcasting in Kyrgyzstan. According to current legislation, no less than 50% of all broadcasts must be in Kyrgyz, however creating content in the state language is an exceedingly expensive proposition due to the relatively small size of the Kyrgyz language advertising market.

As a whole, only half of all airtime is filled with original programming with the remaining time filled by rebroadcasts of programming drawn from other television channels. The state-owned *OTRK* and privately owned *5 Kanal* are the leaders in content creation on television.

The transition to digital broadcasting has allowed television channels to increase their viewership. There was not a single Kyrgyzstani television channel broadcasting in some southern regions a few years ago, but this problem has largely been solved.

Radio stations

Because the vast majority of radio stations focus their programming on music and entertainment, the majority of political information is broadcast by radio stations owned by either the Kyrgyzstani government or other foreign state-owned media holdings. *Radio Azattyk*, *Maral FM*, *Birinchi radio*, *Radio Sputnik* simultaneously broadcast verifiable news and form a certain relationship with the political processes at play in Kyrgyzstan.

The Media Environment: Agitation and Entertainment

Initially, the small advertising market and a lack of state orders in Kyrgyzstan led to the formation of the country's specific media landscape.

According to rough estimates, by 2015 the internet advertising market was worth \$1.5 million annually. According to the "Expert" Agency's 2014 analysis of available price lists, the entire advertising market in Kyrgyzstan is worth \$19 million annually. With the operating expense of one national television station being estimated at \$1.5 to \$4 million a year, it is obvious that there is simply not enough resources for the functioning of a healthy media enterprise. Hence, an outlet's editorial policies are dependent on revenue derived from political advertising and the political orientation of an owner who covers the expenses of the operation.

The most popular television channels, as a rule, present their viewers with high-quality content comprised mainly of entertainment programs and rebroadcasts of popular Russian television shows from the Russian channels *Perets* and *TNT*.

There are currently two primary national, state-owned newspapers, the twice-weekly Kyrgyz-language "*Kyrgyz Tuusu*" with a circulation of 5,000 and the twice-weekly Russian-language "*Slovo Kyrgyzstana*" with a circulation of 6,000 and its weekly "*V kontse nedeli*" Friday edition with a circulation of 20,000. At a regional level, various local government agencies publish 48 regional newspapers, 11 city newspapers, and 11 oblast newspapers. There are 7 oblasts, 46 raions, and 11 cities in the country.

National state television and radio broadcasts are presented by *KTRK*, the Kyrgyz Television and Radio Broadcast Corporation, which broadcasts from Bishkek to the rest of the country daily. There is an oblast-level representative of the state television and radio corporation in the administrative center of every oblast.

All of these governmental media outlets are financed by local and national budgets. For this reason, they are all, without exception, completely dependent on the whims of local and national authorities. They all unquestioningly fulfill the orders of government functionaries

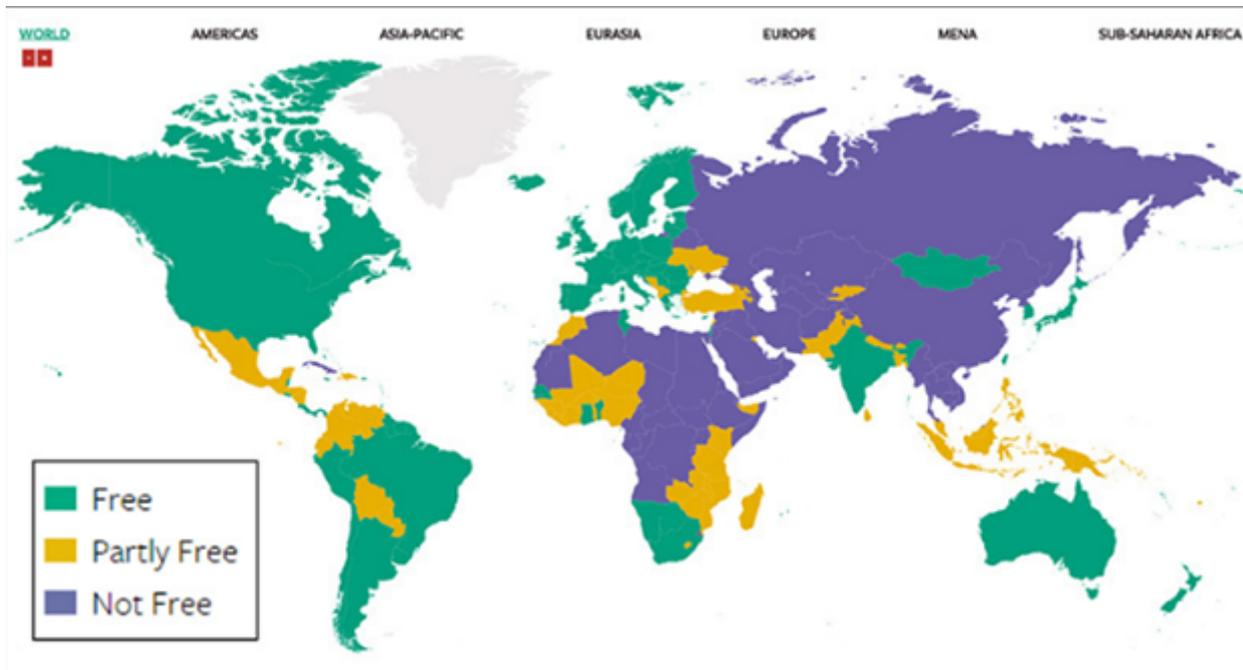
at the raion, city, oblast, and national level. In light of this, most of the mainstream media is not reactive to the informational demands of the public (hence the miserable circulation and low ratings). During parliamentary and presidential elections and in moments of intense political opposition to the authorities by civil society (pickets, rallies, political hunger strikes, demonstrations), these media concerns become mouthpieces for the powers-that-be to crush dissent.

It is worth noting that in recent years the country's most popular television channel, KTRK, under the leadership of Ilim Karybekov, an influential media expert, has demonstrated significant and positive improvements in its development of its programming and technical equipment, but we cannot truly speak of it as a truly public television network as it regularly broadcasts one-sided, pro-government, and blatantly politically motivated stories. A truly objective media is impossible in a society that is permeated from top to bottom by patronal political networks and familial ties.

While there is intense competition among the country's newspapers, the state-owned print media, content with its governmental support, does not actively compete for readers or advertising revenue. The trend in declining circulation will continue, but these newspapers will continue to exist for the foreseeable future regardless of their losses in revenue.

The state-owned television channels remain the most powerful on the market. They all continue to exist thanks to state subsidies and consequently fulfill any and all tasks assigned by the powers-that-be if necessary.

The internet remains the freest segment of the media landscape thanks to its vague legal status. There is more openly opposition media resources visible online, but there are correspondingly less financially independent online media outlets in comparison to newspapers, television stations, and radio stations.



source:

Freedom House

Freedom of Speech and Legislation

In 2011, spreading false or libelous information ceased to be a criminal offense. This played a positive role in the development of free speech in Kyrgyzstan, however a few parliamentarians attempted to reintroduce this law to the criminal code a few years later. Galina Skripkina, a parliamentarian from SDPK, proposed imprisonment of journalists for reporting “misleading information.” According to Skripkina, journalists publish whatever they want, often spoiling both the image of certain individuals and the government as a whole. This proposed legislation was withdrawn due to intense public pressure, but this question was raised once again a year later by Eristina Kochkarova, a parliamentarian from *Ar-Namys*. Granted, in her version of the legislation, criminal liability was born not by the journalist in question but by the individual that provided the false information to the media. This version of the law was approved by the Jogorku Kenesh and signed into law by the President.

This year, the Ministry of Justice presented legislation for public discussion that aimed to equate internet resources with mainstream media, but in the end this legislation did not become law leaving internet outlets as legally unregulated as before. Currently, Parliament is considering two more documents regarding mass media in Kyrgyzstan. The first document seeks to ban foreign citizens from founding or purchasing media outlets in the

country, and the second document would require that all television companies to receive operating licenses.

According to Reporters Without Borders' freedom of speech ratings, Kyrgyzstan currently occupies 85th place out of a total 179 countries. North Korea holds last place, while Finland comes in first. In these ratings, Kyrgyzstan has left its regional neighbors far behind. Russia is in 148th place, Tajikistan - 150th place, Kazakhstan - 160th place, and Uzbekistan - 166th place.

Both international researchers and Kyrgyzstani journalists alike have noted improvements regarding freedom of speech. While journalists in the Bakiev era faced physical and psychological pressure, assault, and even death, today there are no cases of such repression aimed at journalists. In the place of "dirty" tactics, the authorities now battle with journalists via legislation and legal means such as "explanatory conversations" and the courts in the most extreme cases.

Parliamentarian Irina Karamushkina sued internet media outlet 24.kg for 5 million som in compensation for emotional duress after an article about her was published. The judge decreased these damages to 5,000 som. In 2015, the General Prosecutor filed a suit with the court in defense of the honor and dignity of President Almazbek Atambaev. The suit sought 2 million som in damages from an opposition journalist. The courts complied with the prosecutor's demands. The *Vechernii Bishkek* publishing house lost a defamation case filed by former Presidential Chief-of-Staff Ilmiyanov and was forced to pay 1.8 million som in compensation.

In 2015, a well-known Kyrgyzstani businessman, Erkin Mambetaliev, filed a lawsuit against *Vechernii Bishkek* due to what he considered to be damages to his honor and dignity stemming from an open letter penned by the *Vechernii Bishkek* editorial staff in which they called him a member of an organized crime group. Mambetaliev sought 50 million som in damages. In 2016, Mambetaliev once again sued a journalist named Adil Turdukulov for an undisclosed sum.

And this is far from a complete list of the various legal proceedings aimed at journalists or publications. The internet outlets such as *AkiPress* and *Aziya News* as well as other mainstream media outlets face constant lawsuits from members of the government and businessmen. As a rule, the petitioner always seeks retractions and financial restitution for reputational damages, which are not granted as often.

A 2015 battle between the government and some journalists serves as an incredibly

illustrative example. After a series of losses in court and subsequent heavy damages, Aleksander Kim, the owner of *Vechernii Bishkek*, lost his shares in the publishing house. 65% of shares in the newspaper and 50% of the advertising business were granted to Aleksander's former business partner and Galina Ryabushkina. A large-scale information campaign was launched in state-media during the court case against the country's largest Russian-language newspaper. The *Vechernii Bishkek* journalists considered this to be the work of the government and the Presidential administration in particular. In his year-end press conference, President Atambaev announced that this case was of a purely commercial nature and had no relation to politics in any way. After the change in ownership, most of the creative team left *Vechernii Bishkek* to create a new internet start-up called Zanoza.kg.

Due to the lack of legal regulation of internet media outlets, these publishers remain the freest segment of mainstream media in Kyrgyzstan. However, opposition journalists, who are not always objective or known to observe the bare minimum of verification or impartiality in their content, are faced from time to time with pressure from certain bureaucrats or influential political circles.

Revoking credentials and banning individuals from attending certain events are yet another method for combating objectionable journalists. Makhinur Niyazova and Darya Podolskaya lost their parliamentary credentials, and some outlets are not invited to attend President Atambaev's events. In a recent press conference, President Atambaev was asked why certain journalists had their credentials revoked. According to Atambaev, these personae non-grata were "not journalists, but PR specialists working for their masters." He was referring to journalists from the opposition newspaper *Respublika*, the *Sentyabr* television channel, and the website *Fergana*.

Nevertheless, these opposition publications called out by Atambaev continue to publish and broadcast, and the state has not sought to shutter them or impede their work. As a rule, there is no intense pressure by editorial leadership on journalists as they work on their pieces.

Level of journalistic training

According to research conducted by "Journalists" Public Association, editors were able to easily answer questions on whether or not their journalists had college educations but seemed unable to answer questions on what their journalists has received degrees in to be exact. A journalism degree is not considered a deciding factor in hiring new employees. As a rule, editorial leadership is more interested in an individual's experience and skillset, but there is a notably low-level of education among Kyrgyzstani journalists on the whole. These

low education levels can best be explained by the low wages offered to journalists, which range from 4,000 to 16,000 som. Throughout practically the entirety of Kyrgyzstani mass media, the average wages of journalists are lower than the average salary in a given region. Nationwide, there have been several cases noted in which media employees and journalists sabotaged their places of work and demanded higher wages. This was first done by the journalists at NTS and later by the staff of *El TR*.

The employees of information agencies earn the highest wages, followed by radio journalists. Newspaper and television journalists earn the lowest wages.

Conclusions

Financial security remains the primary problem facing freedom of expression and the development of Kyrgyzstani media as high-quality journalism in both Russian and Kyrgyz languages. For a variety of reasons, the domestic advertising market is simply unable to generate sufficient cash flows for the media, in particular broadcast media, to become profitable and even the least bit independent.

Many media outlets are often in opposition and are openly and deeply critical of the President, Parliament, and individual bureaucrats, but this is not a battle led by the Fourth Estate for government accountability and transparency. This is nothing more than inter-elite conflict coming to light, because nearly all outlets are heavily reliant on the patronage of local political groups.

In comparing Kyrgyzstan, where the state has the resources to control a small part of the media, to Kazakhstan, where the state has sufficient resources to set the news agenda for a significant portion of the population, it is difficult to say which approach is of greater benefit to society.

In Kazakhstan, state propaganda places an emphasis on the positive aspects in national development while hiding the inadequacies of the bureaucracy, corruption, etc. Meanwhile, in Kyrgyzstan, the media model is relative destructive as the mainstream media ignores the government and society itself has become inured to the media itself, which focuses on pay-to-play content, negative information, murders, and crime reports in its never-ending quest for traffic, clicks, circulation, and the political ambitions of media owners.

But one thing is certain: Kyrgyzstan in Central Asia is a good example of how even a more or less free Fourth Estate can remain unable to affect change in society if key institutions and Western-style governance practices are not functioning and there is a lack of any "civil

society ownership" on a mass scale that would create consumer demand for investigative and analytical journalism.

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