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Freedom of the Press 2014 - Kyrgyzstan

The Kyrgyz media landscape experienced some openings in 2013, with a reduced number of legal cases brought against the press, the unblocking of the Ferghana news website, and fewer attacks against journalists. In June, Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) media freedom representative Dunja Mijatović expressed optimism given Kyrgyzstan's progress in creating a favorable media environment in recent years. However, access to a diversity of news sources, and particularly to Uzbek-language media, continues to be a challenge.

The constitution and the country's laws guarantee freedoms of speech and of the press, but observance of these guarantees is inconsistent. Although Kyrgyzstan became the first state in Central Asia to decriminalize libel in 2011, insult of public officials remains a criminal offense. In addition, authorities have continued to prosecute journalists and media outlets for posting material online that was deemed to be "inciting national hatred." In July 2013, a court in Osh banned the Uzbek-language news site Harakat.net on the grounds that it had incited hatred.

In 2013 the government introduced a number of draft laws that had the potential to limit press freedom, including an amendment to the criminal code that would have broadened the definition of treason to encompass many activities carried out by journalists and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). The bill was defeated in the parliament in November. Another controversial bill that would require domestic NGOs that receive foreign funding to register as "foreign agents" was strongly criticized by civil society groups and Kyrgyzstan's human rights ombudsman; the parliament had not taken action on it by year's end.

Access to public information is guaranteed by law. In 2012, Access Info Europe and the Centre for Law and Democracy rated Kyrgyzstan's access to information law as relatively strong. However, they noted weaknesses including overly broad exceptions to the access regime and the lack of a public-interest override.

All media outlets must register with the Ministry of Justice to operate. The approval process entails background checks on outlets' owners and funding sources, including whether they receive funding from international donor organizations. In September 2012, Kyrgyzstan began a program to switch to digital broadcasting and stopped issuing licenses for analog television stations. The process continued in 2013, with the goal of full digital conversion by June 2015. However, critics have expressed concern that the government has not allocated adequate funding for the switchover, leaving both state and private stations without the necessary resources.

A law enacted under former president Kurmanbek Bakiyev and implemented by an interim government in 2010 converted the state television channel into a public-service broadcaster. Kyrgyzstan remains the only Central Asian country to have done so. The 15-member supervisory board of the Public Broadcasting Corporation (PBC) is made up of media experts, journalists, cultural figures, and civil society representatives; the president, the parliament, and civil society each nominate five members. However, the parliament has the power to approve the five members nominated by civil society, and to dissolve the board if it is not satisfied with its

performance. Although the PBC has been airing more diverse content than before the reform, it is reportedly biased in favor of President Almazbek Atambayev and members of the governing coalition.

There are reports that the government occasionally pressures outlets regarding the coverage of certain stories, though media outlets anxious to avoid the ire of politicians will often issue their own directives to journalists. In a positive step, in April 2013 the State Communications Agency (SCA), Kyrgyzstan's media regulator, issued a letter lifting a 14-month ban on the independent online information agency *Ferghananews.ru*, a leading source for Russian-language news in Central Asia. The parliament had called for the site to be blocked in a June 2011 resolution, alleging that its coverage of an outbreak of ethnic violence in southern Kyrgyzstan in June 2010 was "provocative" and "subjective." As a result, in February 2012 the SCA had issued a request to internet service providers (ISPs) to block the site, but did not obtain a court order to that effect. In its April 2013 letter, the SCA told ISPs that they were not required by law to block the site. Earlier in the year, it had stated that the February 2012 request was simply a "recommendation." Although access to the site was restored, the 2011 parliamentary resolution remained in place.

Access to a diversity of news sources, and particularly to minority-language media, continues to be a challenge in Kyrgyzstan. Many Uzbek-language outlets closed down after the ethnic violence of 2010, though some new enterprises have recently emerged. Yntymak (Harmony), launched in August 2012 by the American NGO Internews with U.S. government funding, broadcasts radio and television content in Kyrgyz, Russian, and Uzbek—the three main languages in the south. In October 2013, the PBC launched an online Kyrgyz-language radio station, Dostuk, that aims to promote friendly relations between ethnic groups in the country.

No journalists were killed in Kyrgyzstan in 2013, and the number of violent attacks declined. In February 2013, a journalist was physically assaulted by a legislator after posting an online defense of another politician. In March, police acting on an anonymous tip claimed to have found grenades and detonators at the offices of the independent Russian-language newspaper *Tribuna*. There were also reports of journalists being attacked at political demonstrations and trials. The brutal 2011 assault on well-known ethnic Uzbek journalist Shokhrukh Saipov, editor of the *UzPress* news website, remained unsolved, as did the 2007 murder of his brother, journalist Alisher Saipov. In June, Mijatović called for those responsible for Saipov's murder to be brought to justice. Journalists covering sensitive topics continued to report threats in 2013, often by politicians and government figures who were known to them. Uzbek-language media outlets in particular face harassment and intimidation over their coverage of interethnic relations and the ethnic violence that occurred in June 2010. Some admit to engaging in self-censorship to avoid reprisals.

Azimjon Askarov, an ethnic Uzbek independent journalist and human rights defender, remained in prison in 2013, serving a life sentence on charges of inciting ethnic hatred and complicity in the murder of an ethnic Kyrgyz police officer during the June 2010 violence. Askarov's investigative reports had overturned convictions and cost several officials their jobs, and he was widely believed to have been prosecuted in retribution for his reporting. Among those challenging his imprisonment was Kyrgyzstan's human rights ombudsman. In February 2013, Askarov's lawyers presented witness testimony indicating that he had been in a location that would make his participation in the alleged crimes impossible. However, in October the Supreme Court denied his request for a new trial, and the ruling cannot be appealed.

There are more than 200 traditional media outlets operating in Kyrgyzstan—including 159 newspapers, 25 television channels, and 26 radio stations—and 22 popular online news services, according to an October 2013 study by the Public Association of Journalists. The PBC operates two television and two radio networks that broadcast nationwide. Russian-language television channels are widely available and garner a significant share of the audience. Overall, media conditions differ regionally, and access to media outlets remains limited in rural areas. An independent printing press run by the Media Support Center, a local NGO, surpassed the state-run printing house, Uchkun, as the country's leading newspaper publisher several years ago. State-owned media outlets benefit from government subsidies. However, the ability of authorities to use advertising to influence media content has receded as more private sources of advertising revenue have become available.

Approximately 23 percent of the population accessed the internet in 2013. According to the Public Association of Journalists' study, new online media outlets are slowly emerging, and traditional outlets are building an online presence, though a lack of funding for training and equipment, as well as low salaries for journalists, continue to hamper progress in this area. Internet news sites such as Barakelde.org, Akipress.org, 24.kg, and Kloop.kg; blogging platforms such as LiveJournal and Twitter; and forums such as Diesel.kg provide lively alternative news sources for those with access. However, internet access outside towns and cities remains limited. Around half of users reached the internet through the state-controlled ISP KyrgyzTelekom, creating the potential for government influence over the medium. A growing number of Kyrgyz citizens access the internet through their mobile telephones, and the new outlet Kush Kabar provides free news via short-message service (SMS) on mobile phones.

2014 Scores

Press Status

Not Free

Press Freedom Score

(0 = best, 100 = worst)
66

(0 = best, 30 = worst)
19

(0 = best, 40 = worst)
27

(0 = best, 30 = worst)
20

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