

## SECTION 7

# CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### 7.1 Conclusions

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This report presents the stages of historical development of media in sovereign Kyrgyzstan during the 10 years of independence. The existing media are classified into different categories and the evolution of each type of domestic media was described. The multi-sided analysis of the media system of the republic included the study of journalism within the framework of the systemic paradigm, structural and functional methodology and other theoretical positions. The work also widely used various specific sociological methods and quantitative methods (traditionally dominating in the set of instruments of the specialists in the region) were combined with qualitative ones. Such a combination allowed us to generalize the experience of media activity in the region and assess the role of the media institution in current social practice.

Among the main factors determining the model and character of development of modern journalism in Kyrgyzstan the following were singled out:

1. High degree of government control over the media;
2. Lack of experience of professional freedom with the journalists;
3. Resource scarcity in journalism;
4. Discrepancies in information supply and demand;
5. Inadequacy of information exchange within the country and information gaps between the regions.

#### 7.1.1 High degree of government control over the media

The historical development of interaction between the government and media is similar to a pendulum movement. It swings from the totalitarian dictatorship and control of the Soviet times to liberalization and sovereignty in the first years of formation of the independent democratic state and later swings back to centralization of the relations and tighter control by the government toward the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of independent Kyrgyzstan.

**Type of ownership and loyalty.** Today the government possesses a divaricate media structure which includes newspapers in Russian and Kyrgyz at the national level, national television and radio companies and corresponding oblast and rayon structures. The character of the government's interaction with these media outlets has not changed in essence during the 10 years of independence, therefore many regional journalists and editors have not changed their professional terminology from the communist times and the domination of Soviet self-identifications and notions in them is still palpable. But

current government support is in no way comparable in size with that of the Soviet system of full financial provision for the needs of the media. The amounts of today's state subsidies (in their diverse forms and varying sizes) are more the means to maintain government control over the media. However, these media are given a "framework"<sup>1</sup> of rights and freedoms, which creates an illusion of independence and even allows most of the media heads to deny their being under control.

It is not only the above squadron of the media that comes under government control. On the whole, there are several levels or degrees of dependency of the entire media system on the government. The factor already described – state control over the government and non-state newspapers of any level – is also connected with the state monopoly for strategic information resources. It is this factor that predetermines dependency of absolutely all the media on the state. The strategic information resources include: access to printing services at affordable prices (the state still keeps the monopoly in the publishing and printing sphere), access to paper markets at adequate prices (here the existing economic barriers to the import of raw materials and high transportation costs determine the limitations, especially in the regions, of paper markets), access to sources of information (the state is the main source of information and initiator/manager of all events in the country thus retaining the monopoly for information). In general, it is impossible to single out the autonomous fields of politics and economy and similarly to the Soviet era there is a merger of the spheres "state" and "society." Power is the universal equivalent and everyone who has the power has a share in the interest while every non-state media owner strives to obtain support from the power holders.

The government, or rather its highest leaders, strive to control *non-state media* through redistribution of property in them and acquisition of the control share into personal ownership by their closest circles. At the same time, the strictest secrecy about real owners is maintained. This is why today the media ownership sphere is absolutely closed, non-transparent for the public, which naturally creates rumors and hearsay (according to the rumors, a powerful private media system is being formed which is associated with the First Family of the country). The reliability of these rumors is indirectly supported by the unwritten internal staff instructions not to criticize certain individuals and government structures.

**Non-transparency** is characteristic not only of the media ownership sphere but also the entire sphere of its financial and economic activities. Irrespective of the media type, all media outlets have a closed financial system. In the current economic environment (especially under the existing tax regime), it is not for the benefit of the media to show their real revenue and expenditure and therefore they are forced to conduct "dual accounting." In a paradoxical way, it is beneficial for the state to have closed systems with financial infringements because if such media outlets decide to stray away and conduct an independent information policy it can be used as an additional instrument of pressure.

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<sup>1</sup> This means within the allowed framework. For example, today the pro-government media may be involved in commercial activities and manage the earned profits at their discretion, the control over the media content is not as tight as it used to be under the Soviet times, etc.

**Control over media diversity.** In the field of interrelations between the government and the media there are other players – international organizations. If the government earlier allowed certain media to orient themselves toward these new players and occupy the niche of the *opposition media*, at present such opportunities have significantly reduced. The media that used to be in opposition are now forced to become either loyal (Vecherny Bishkek, Pyramida TV) or radical, irreconcilable opponents (Res Publica) that sacrifice objectivity and other professional values in the struggle with the government. This is why the term “opposition” as applied to journalism has acquired a negative connotation (became the symbol of ungrounded “unbridled” captiousness, loss of connection with the real situation or serving foreign interests). The recent tendency in the professional community is that the journalists reject identification of themselves or their media as “oppositional” and “independent” and prefer the term “non-state.”

In Kyrgyzstan, there are no *public media* in the traditional understanding. KOORT TV channel, which is public by definition, is in fact a joint-stock company where the main shareholders are the people close to the ruling elite. The opportunities to establish private electronic media today are much more limited than several years ago. The state, taking into account the changes in the consumption structure (domination of electronic media in media use patterns), tries to control fully all the existing television and radio companies. In the regions (Jalal-Abad, Osh oblasts) there still exist several non-state electronic media, which the government “allows” to stay at the level of “home” television with no information policy.

Although there are many ethnic groups living in Kyrgyzstan, *ethnic minority media* are not a visible or influential force in the country. According to the government’s vision, the ethnic groups’ press shall perform the function of simulation of the national accord and democratic and ethnic tolerance. Since not all the representatives of the ethnic minority media are ready to follow these guidelines. Such media experience conflicts when interacting with the government. The methods used by the government to resolve such conflicts are quite limited and are all in the area of “force demonstration.” Accordingly, the reaction of the conflicting ethnic media may include the threat of “playing the ethnic card,” which has a significant destructive potential.

**Means of control and pressure.** The government uses a wide range of methods and means of pressure: criminal libel and other court cases, tax inspections, fines, denial of access to information sources, etc. An important tool assisting the government to maintain control is the setting of different types of media to fight with each other which results in the formation of fighting camps, splits and the absence of solidarity in the journalism sphere as a whole. As a rule, the foundation of such staged conflicts initiated by the government is unfair distribution or inadequate access to scarce resources. In the existing system of opposition within the media environment the following should be highlighted:

- a) *Pro-government vs. opposition media.* At different periods of times, the arch enemies and political opponents to each other were the early pro-presidential

"Asaba" and "Res Publica"; the government "Kyrgyz Tuusu" and "Asaba"; the national state TV under Karypkulov and lately "Asaba" as well as the national state TV of the same period and "Res Publica."

- b) *Capital vs. regional media.* There is a disproportionate concentration of functioning media in the capital; media concentration is tied to infrastructure opportunities rather than the size and needs of the audiences. The most underdeveloped regions (Naryn, Talas, Batken) have the least developed media. The degree of editorial and journalistic freedom, as well as the skills level and quality of information etc, is higher in the capital than in the regions. The research has discovered zones of "low information density," where the deficit of information is obvious. The existing national media are not capable of covering the whole country. In the regions there is still a major disproportion between state and non-state media in favor of the former. On the whole, the information exchange within the regions is as complicated and problematic as it is among the regions. The professional community lately constantly articulated concentration of all resources in the center. The survey showed the very poor state of the regional, especially rayon and city (small cities) press. As a rule, all human and financial resources are concentrated in the capital. But the position of the capital media is still not better, since under the conditions of continuing monopoly of the government on information, provision of printing services, the advertising market, they have to "sell" their political loyalty as they have always done.

### **7.1.2 Lack of experience of professional freedom with the journalists**

A relatively short period of the country's independence has not produced full liberalization of the media as declared in the Constitution. The mechanisms of implementation of freedom of press provided by the legislation have not yet been developed in practice. Absence of public discourses on the notion of freedom of speech and the media role in society has created a situation where media actors understand professional freedom in very different ways and use it respectively. For some this is the freedom of (many times groundless) criticism and political intrigues, for others it is the freedom to earn money with no professional and ethical limitations, for yet others this is the freedom to maneuver in the "corridor of ideas" provided by the government.

The research has shown that the level of knowledge of media legislation among journalists is extremely low. The reason for such functional illiteracy is the fact that most of the journalists have not changed their mental paradigm of professional activities dominating from the Soviet times. Many journalists still rely on the regulating role of the executive power seeing the legislative base as something declarative and symbolic. Only those journalists who had to face the court and justice system start understanding the importance of legal awareness and ability to use the laws for their own protection.

The models of entry into the profession that changed in the 1990s have not taken deep root and were not supported by the changing type of professional socialization. The new generation of journalists, orienting themselves to their colleagues, quickly adopt the old, Soviet in essence, professional techniques. This problem has been enforced by the absence of a strong journalism education and reproduction of old techniques in the existing journalism educational institutions. Objectively there is a situation where the old Soviet models of journalism with its subordinated relation to the government has been reanimated, supported and reinforced.

One more symptom of lack of professional freedom is the fact that there are no horizontal lines of communication in the professional environment. This is why up to this moment there have not been developed common group norms and standards in journalism and the government takes advantage of the absence of understanding of corporate spirit and interests manipulating the media for the purposes of management and control. The instruments utilized for this are setting various media and journalists to fight and a reduction in the level of sympathy, support and solidarity with those who are persecuted.

### **7.1.3 Resource scarcity of journalism**

***Unprofessional management.*** Similarly to the state structure and institutions, it is impossible to separate policy-making and the management of media. The editorial system is centralized and editors have always been, and continue to be, the persons who individually make responsible policy decisions. In the case of private media, the sphere of editorial policy and management is, naturally, the domain of the founder/owner, and in the joint-stock media – the holder of the control share package. These people usually openly carry out the editorial functions of their media. As a rule, there is no designated position of a manager in media outlets. The management is done unprofessionally which in many cases is a factor of resource scarcity of the media. Many editors do not trace the balance of revenue and expenditure, however it is among these editors that we saw those who arbitrarily managed accounting of their medium at their own discretion.

***Deficit of financial resources.*** Private and other non-state media represent two types of economic strategy: 1) the monopolist capture of existing limited advertising niches (it is impossible to talk about the existence of a full-fledged advertising market because there are very few steady economic units in the country), as it is practiced by Vecherny Bishkek and KOORT TV with the permission of the power holders; 2) reliance on sales of the newspaper as an information product – some media choose such a strategy consciously (Delo Nomer), while others are forced to do so (Asaba). Most state media are maintained only thanks to budget means. As a rule, such media outlets are lingering in half-beggary conditions. All the media that possess printing facilities try to earn additional revenue through provision of printing services. However, the technology and equipment that are both morally and physically obsolete do not allow them to make such revenue

significant and the economic entrepreneurship brings in no visible "side profits."

Thus, the deficit of sources of funding, the lack of foreign investment and the absence of crediting opportunities are objectively the main reasons impeding media development. The experts – media employees and editors – believe that the most urgent problem causing all non-freedoms is lack of financial resources. Many believe high revenues to be a prerequisite for freedom and independence. (The reality, however, shows that such understanding is illusory. Not only the information policy but also the state economic profitable activity is a potential threat for the media because in both cases such media fall within the zone of interest of the state and certain politicians).

Absence of foreign investments and difficulties with receiving credits were also formulated as very important problems. However with the existing closeness of the financial system and the unclear potential for media profitability, as well as the absence of successful examples of media business, it is doubtful that the flow of foreign investments will increase in the near future.

***Underdeveloped infrastructure.*** The extremely poor situation of all state media continues and even worsens, while there are fewer and fewer opportunities for the private and other non-state media to obtain high quality technological equipment to produce media products. This is why "Uchkun's" monopoly for printing services will be an impediment for development for a long time ahead. Although in the regions the process of privatization of state printing facilities has begun, their obsolete technologies and equipment will be a serious obstacle for their competitive ability as private enterprises. The problem of distribution is solved by private media with the help of individual salespeople who were able to undermine the monopoly of the state post service. However there are political nuances in the distribution of media products: local regional authorities have a capacity to block sales in their territories. These political techniques were repeatedly used in various regions, especially during elections.

#### **7.1.4 Discrepancies in information supply and demand**

In the chain of information exchange and interaction (government-media-population) the population is not a link determining media activities. Therefore journalists and editors usually do not pay due attention to studying the real needs of the audiences, being guided instead by stereotypes. These stereotypes, as a rule, portray an average statistical consumer with lowered intellectual abilities and cultural needs. Although the audiences are a lot more sophisticated and complicated than the typical understanding (which was obvious in focus groups with audiences), the low information consumption standards imposed by the media do influence the reality constructing the needs of tomorrow. The journalists, however, kept repeating during the focus groups and interviews, widely spread myths about insolvency of the population as one of the main reasons for the poor media financial situation and about the perverse, unsophisticated taste of the audience leading to the poor quality of media content. Most of the editors

and journalists cannot admit that by failing to consume certain media products, audiences are make a conscious choice rejecting the low quality and virtual content of the media products.

Today the media consumption structure is dominated by television and print media use has a tendency to shift toward entertainment, advertising and commercial content. Most radio stations are located in cities and their broadcasts cover only the limited neighboring area. Most radio stations are concentrated in the capital and its localities. In the regions, radio channels are practically inaccessible. The exceptions are the powerful radio stations of the neighboring countries (Uzbekistan) that have the capacity to cover the whole southern region of Kyrgyzstan.

No nation can live in a social, cultural and informational isolation. With inadequate development of own information networks the media reproduce reality in a reduced way, reflecting only a small part of the real information interests and needs of consumers. That is, the information supply does not cover or saturate the information demand in the market. In such an informational situation the urge of the information needs is directed outward, into the zones of abundant information supply. In their turn, the zones of more developed information networks expand their information flows into the zones of low information supply or specific information vacuum. Therefore, not only the cultural colonization by alien models and standards is taking place, but another threat is the "migration" from the national spiritual environment into a foreign one, with gradual loss of national identifications. It is exactly this process that is taking place today in the south of Kyrgyzstan, where many television transmitters in remote rural areas are either out of operation or close to breakdown. This is why KTR, which is a national television network by definition, has long seized coming to certain villages and even rayons. Instead, six television channels and numerous radio stations from Uzbekistan cover the entire Osh, Batken and Jalal-Abad oblasts. In Bishkek, there has been the forming of a zone of "refuge" for the citizens as well – the television "window" into Europe and Russia provided by the cable company "AlaTV". As a rule, the subscribers of this company do no longer watch national television and do not read the national press since they live in a totally different reality and satisfy their information needs through foreign broadcasting. Those people who have no opportunity to subscribe to cable TV watch national television only in between the Russian and private Kyrgyzstan channels.

Inaccessibility or low demand for the national media, caused by gaps with the real life, gradually result into denationalization of mass consciousness, denationalization of information interests and denationalization of the media.

Therefore the information potential acquires a growing significance in the national defense system. Here we mean first of all the information that fills people's leisure time, forms the moods of the nations, forms the directions for its younger generation. The "breakthrough" in national defense depends in many ways on the status of journalists and other professional groups employed in the information industry. If they enjoy enough freedom, are used to the cultural traditions under democratic conditions they

will produce authentic ideas, ideas that are taken seriously and inspire people. If, however, the regime demands compliance, conformism and working for the power and authorities the social and cultural field of the society is filled with the surplus non-demanded information (when the media broadcast optimistic trivia) or disinformation (when the media lie through the mouths of the nation's leaders). Both variants inevitably lead to breakdown of the population in accordance with the status in the system of the spiritual production – into the groups that are actively involved in the process or are passive in terms of information. The former direct their information needs outward, into the foreign information channels. The latter, not consuming enough information, lock themselves in their own little worlds alienated from the bigger social world.

### **7.1.5 Inadequacy of information exchange within the country and information gaps between the regions**

In the course of research it was established, that the division of the country into South and North is an artificial political move; a PR-technique utilized by various political groups in Kyrgyzstan. In reality, the dividing line determines the following levels and types of splits: center-region-remote areas and south-center-north. It is obvious that the division between the South and the North is not in the interests of the state, but the government, having no clear regional policy, does not pay proper attention to the regional information policy. As a result of self-removal of government, there is a tendency toward denationalization of the media space. The centralized vertical system of state management and control does not facilitate any development of horizontal connections or interregional information exchange. The interrelation and communication among the regions is done through the center. Coverage of the regions is done mostly by the national media. Due to a number of professional, political and economic circumstances, the national media cannot create an adequate image of the regions and there appears a substitute in the form of the schematic, most frequently negative, image of the regions. As a result, the disintegrating processes are gathering their potential and this is why the information image of the division into South and North has a chance of becoming a fact of real life.

Interaction between the regions and the center are characterized by a hierarchical structure: with some regions significant than others. The special status of the Osh region in this sense facilitated better and more rapid development of media in the south. Only in Osh are the number of regional media comparable and proportional with those in the Capital. However, a poorer resource base limits the quantity and quality of the southern media.

On the whole, the development of the media system in independent Kyrgyzstan is determined by changes in the system of relations between the media and the state. The stages of evolution of these interrelations resemble a pendulum. In the foundation of these relations, under a more detailed analysis, it is possible to see the underlying

economic interests. The disproportion between the created democratic image of Kyrgyzstan and the social practice leaning towards the authoritarian model of state governance predetermines the formation of virtual information reality. There are threats and risks for the state connected with this formation of such a virtual reality. On the one hand, the withdrawal of citizens from state interests into their own little worlds (total distrust in authorities and all subjects of politics, depolitization, social apathy, etc.) as a consequence of ignoring the real interests and needs of the population; on the other hand the state, through facilitation of simulation of democratic information activity, stops receiving the real information from the society, which predetermines the taking of wrong state decisions. Thus, the media in Kyrgyzstan – represented by the government media, politically loyal ones or oppositional media – performs the system-destructive function to the same degree as the system-supporting one.

## 7.2 Recommendations

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The following recommendations were developed by the researchers on the basis of their results and findings:

1. The changing context of the functioning of Kyrgyzstan's media requires an urgent reform of the legislation in the information sphere. It is important to note here that there is a need for a system of measures and mechanisms, not individual and occasional changes to improve the legislation. This is why this report summarizes the opinions of specialists and media law experts which are presented in the form of recommendations to improve the legislative foundation for media activities (see Annexe A).
2. The researchers believe that real democratic changes may be achieved through a number of special measures and activities such as: creation of a special beneficial credit system for the regional media; creation of media support resource centers in each oblast.
  - The existing and future resource centers shall become the locations for continuous education programs that will be developed to educate and train journalists, not only in professional skills and techniques (reporting, advertising, etc.), but also in understanding basic values and categories of a democratic public development. They will also provide training in management skills and social dialogue between the press-services of state institutions and journalists.
  - The main tasks of such media support resource centers could be information exchange among the regions, provision of a technical base and resources for the

regional media, organization of round tables and focus groups to facilitate the exchange of ideas among journalists on the most urgent and important professional issues.

3. To create a foundation for real independence and sustainable development of media in Kyrgyzstan, it is necessary to provide the regional journalism structures with non-state printing facilities, which will break down the state monopoly in this sphere. The project to create printing facilities could be carried out, with the help of international organizations, by local non-governmental organizations such as the existing media support resource centers. Today, the capacities to implement such a project are there at the resource centers in Osh and Kara-Balta.
4. To enforce the information networks in the regions and re-establish information exchange it would be advisable to create a national newspaper that would be produced by regions on a rotation basis. Such a newspaper could be managed as a corporate structure, with membership of all regions as main founders.