

### **The Electronic Mass Media of southern Kyrgyzstan**

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Sociologists and political scientists insist that today, on the ninth year of independence, the mass media actively forms public opinion in the country. But this is mostly true for the capital Bishkek, and the capital is not all of the country. The situation in the regions is different.

The role of media in the regions is insignificant despite the existence of all the conditions - freedom of speech is guaranteed by the constitution, a whole set of laws and rules also support the media.

The situation with the regional media can be explained on the example of Osh.

Osh is the second biggest city of Kyrgyzstan. For a long time it was a large center comprising of the present Osh, Jalal-Abad and Batken oblasts representing the south of Kyrgyzstan.

Up till now there is no single independent, mass publication in Russian language, covering the issues of social and political life of the region. There were attempts to create such publications, but they disappeared owing to the economic problems.

The situation with the electronic mass media requires a special attention as only the radio and TV represent the really mass media. Print publications have small circulation and are unaffordable for the poor.

From a number of independent TV stations opening in Kyrgyzstan in the last decade, only a handful survived remaining independent and stable. All of them are situated in Osh – Osh TV Company, Mezon, Osh branch of Pyramid TV and Radio Company.

All of them have their own broadcast channels, enabling them to resist outside pressure. The volume of their own programming varies from two to six hours a day.

As for other companies like Keremet, Erkin-Ala-Too, Nur, Mars, DDD, Altyn-Beshik and some others, they rent state channels for several hours a week, mostly at inconvenient times for the viewers, and therefore, they very susceptible to outside factors.

According to a similar, small company - LifeTV, they had to stop broadcasting at the beginning of the year because the National TV and Radio Company demanded them to submit documents describing all the future programming LifeTV intended to broadcast. And the broadcast channels do not even belong to the National TV, but to a different structure subordinated to the Ministry of Transport and Communications.

TV companies who actually have a license for a separate frequency and their own channel, are dealt with differently. Prices charged for the use of these frequencies have gone up dramatically, and are fixed in US dollars ignoring the Kyrgyz national currency – som.

Another method of dealing with them is forcing them out of the UHF, and to VHF. Small companies simply disappear unable to buy new transmitters, but even if they could afford one, they would have had a much smaller audience- Soviet made TV sets cannot receive VHF signals.

There are five radio stations on the air in our region. Only one, Radio Almaz is fully local. Two are re-broadcasting programs of Evropa Plyus and Kyrgyzstan Obondoru radio stations from Bishkek, and two others, Pyramid and Sodrujestvo, have a partially local programming.

Advertising is the only source of revenues for the mass media, but situation in this field remains difficult. The poorly developed region minimizes the advertising market, and those who do advertise - branches or representatives of international organizations, prefer to do so on the central TV channels. The pricing also varies greatly, with 22 USD on Evropa Plyus Radio and 1.48 USD-15 times less- on Radio Almaz.

Grants of international organizations remain the only source of development of the regional media. Otherwise, journalists are forced to combine writing with working as advertising agents, which badly effects the journalism itself.

In an interesting development, the Beta Tea Company came under attack by the retailers of its production for a sharp increase in wholesale prices. Retailers gathered to protest in front of the company headquarters in Osh. But Osh TV did not cover the event - Beta is one of the biggest advertisers and clients of Osh TV. Asked to comment on the refusal to cover the protest, Director of the TV station replied: " I would have liked to see how would you behave in this situation if you had invested 50,000 USD into this TV station like me."

Another problem is the lack of professional journalists. The structure and scheme of journalism in the region is similar to that at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, where reporting was preferred over the analysis. The training is as simple as "do as I do."

The main criteria for an employer is the ability of a candidate to decently and attractively present an event. Factors like a knowledge of sociology, political science, economy, psychology, law and even ethics of journalism are often neglected. As a result a journalist prefers to say nothing rather than to say something wrong. The best way out is just to report.

Owing to technical limitations, independent electronic media cannot cover some districts of the country, and the vacuum is filled by the Russian TV and radio.

As a result the audience is much more aware of the Russian politics, than of our own one. This is also a food for thought.

Often it is said that people are tired of politics. It is more likely that they are rather tired of politics made without their participation. If media manages to get citizens involved in the process of building of the civic society, the politics will cease being an alien element for the society and journalists will be able to fulfill their mission.

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