SHARE   MENU

Kyrgyzstan
● PARTLY FREE

38/100

Internet Freedom Score
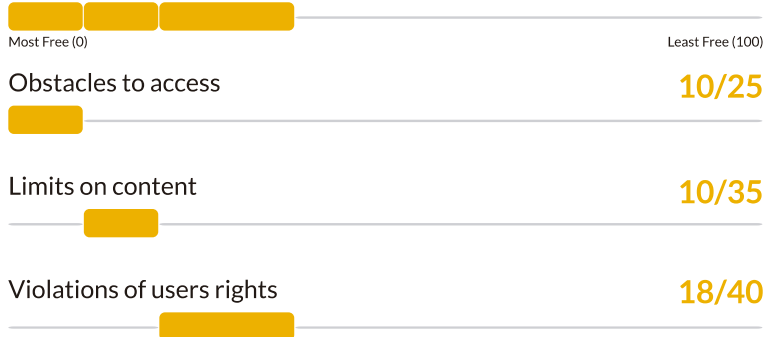
Most Free (0)   Least Free (100)

| Obstacles to access | 10/25 |

| Limits on content | 10/35 |

| Violations of users rights | 18/40 |

On this Page

Quick Facts

Population:	6,201,500
Internet Penetration:	34.5%
Social Media/ICT Apps Blocked:	No
Political/Social Content Blocked:	Yes
Bloggers/ICT Users Arrested:	No

🌐 View on Map

Key Developments:

JUNE 1, 2017 - MAY 31, 2018

- Court orders blocked several websites, including an archiving platform, blog-hosting sites, and even a music streaming service, under anti-extremism laws (see Blocking and Filtering).

- The independent news website *Zanoza* was forced to remove articles that criticized then-president Almazbek Atambayev (see Content Removal).

- At least two criminal charges regarding online content were filed for inciting hatred under Article 200 of the Criminal Code (see Prosecutions and Detentions for Online Activities).

- Online news outlets and journalists faced legal sanctions, including fines, for criticizing state officials (see Prosecutions and Detentions for Online Activities).

Introduction:

Internet freedom in Kyrgyzstan declined in 2018, driven by the government's arbitrary blocking of an increasing number of websites under anti-extremism rules.

In October 2017, after winning the country's presidential election, former prime minister Sooronbai Jeenbekov peacefully transitioned to power as Kyrgyzstan's fifth president.[1] The election was not entirely free and fair, as the government worked to stifle opposition, increase censorship, and target media outlets with fines and investigations.[2] Additionally, over 800,000 citizens were denied their right to vote because they had not complied with the legal requirement to register biometric data with the government.[3]

The internet has remained "Partly Free" in recent years, with fewer restrictions since the overthrow of President Kurmanbek Bakiev's regime in 2010. Despite some improvements, a rural-urban divide in internet access persists, and internet penetration rates lag behind those of neighboring countries. The Digital CASA – Kyrgyz Republic project, which plans to expand internet access by providing 60 percent of the population with broadband internet, went into effect during the coverage period.

Increased censorship during the reporting period affected the internet and its users, as a number of websites fell victim to the government's efforts against "extremism." The government also utilized "inciting hatred" as a justification to crack down on online content, including filing a criminal case against the editor-in-chief of the independent outlet *Ferghana News*. *Ferghana News* was also blocked during the coverage period, while online media outlet *Zanoza* was forced to remove several articles critical of then-president Almazbek Atambayev.

Like many states in the former Soviet Union, Kyrgyzstan uses system for operational investigative activities (SORM) technology for surveillance purposes, and recently required all internet service providers (ISPs) and mobile providers to install the latest version of SORM to facilitate government surveillance. Evidence continues to emerge indicating that the government is abusing this technology to monitor the political opposition.

Obstacles to Access:

Internet access in Kyrgyzstan is relatively limited, though internet penetration rates continue to increase, with the introduction of unlimited plans by mobile operators and the development of 4G services helping to improve access. There is still a digital divide between urban and rural areas, as telecommunication companies have fewer incentives to expand services and infrastructure outside major cities. The state-owned telecommunications company, KyrgyzTelecom, controls the majority of the market for fixed internet access, with a market share of about 70 percent.

Availability and Ease of Access

Access to the internet in Kyrgyzstan continues to expand, though the percentage of the population with internet access is still low by global standards.

Fixed-broadband access, via either fiber-optic cables or DSL, is accessible mainly in the capital, Bishkek, with broadband in the

broadband networks expand telecom infrastructure into more rural areas. CDMA Voice phones have become popular in rural areas, with more than 30,000 subscribers as of October 2016.[4]

On January 18, 2018, the Digital CASA – Kyrgyz Republic project came into effect.[5] The project, funded by the World Bank, will develop digital infrastructure and public electronic services. It also seeks to improve broadband internet access networks between Central Asian and a few South Asian countries and create a Regional Digital Platform and a Regional Center for Excellence in Digital Development. The project hopes to provide 60 percent of the Kyrgyzstan population with broadband internet via nearly 400 miles of fiber-optic links.

Mobile phone penetration is significantly higher than internet penetration. Beeline, one of the largest mobile phone carriers, launched a 3G network in 2010 that covers the entire country. Another large firm, Megacom, launched its own 3G network in 2012, covering more than 50 percent of populated territory by 2013.[6] Megacom and Beeline announced the launch of 4G LTE networks in major cities in March and May 2016, respectively, with plans for expansion across the entire country.[7] NurTelecom (under the brand O!) launched a 4G LTE network covering Bishkek and surrounding areas in 2014.[8]

In recent years, the price for the internet has decreased, becoming more affordable for much of the population, though primarily in the capital, where the infrastructure is well-developed and there is greater competition among providers. The average monthly price for a fixed-line broadband subscription offering one mbps was KGS 576 (US$8.40) in 2018, which is affordable for much of the population.[9] The average cost for a mobile broadband package was approximately KGS 511 (US$7.40) in 2018.[10] Rates in rural areas served mainly by KyrgyzTelecom are significantly higher than in urban areas. The development of mobile networks provides an alternative to fixed broadband access.

Restrictions on Connectivity

ISPs are not required to use government-owned channels to connect to the international internet and can establish their own. Kyrgyzstan's six ISPs have international internet connections via Kazakhstan. In the past, the blogging platform LiveJournal, which was blocked in Kazakhstan, was also accidentally blocked for some internet users in Kyrgyzstan, though this problem appears to have been resolved. In 2010, the state-owned ISP KyrgyzTelecom said it had completed the construction of a fiber-optic cable connection to China.[11]

Kyrgyzstan's dependence on Kazakhstan's upstream providers became particularly problematic when ISPs in Kyrgyzstan more than doubled the price of traffic in August 2016. Following negotiations between the two countries, the ISPs agreed to return to the previous prices.[12]

Internet connections in rural areas rely on infrastructure from KyrgyzTelecom, so vulnerabilities can have a significant impact. In April 2017, three regions in Kyrgyzstan lost access to the internet for approximately three hours after KyrgyzTelecom's fiber-optic cables were damaged during construction work.[13]

Fixed-line ISPs no longer charge differently for domestic versus international content. However, since the introduction of unlimited data plans, providers offer different bandwidths for domestic compared to international traffic. Mobile phone operators do not make this distinction in their data plans and provide the same bandwidth for accessing information, regardless of where it is hosted.

ICT Market

Kyrgyzstan's telecommunications sector is relatively liberalized and competitive compared to that of other countries in the region; however, the state-owned KyrgyzTelecom is still the largest ISP, with a market share of about 70 percent that reaches about 95 percent of subscribers.[14] The other six first-tier ISPs (Elcat, Megaline, Saima Telecom, Beeline, NurTelecom, and RTC) are privately owned.

There are three mobile phone operators providing voice and data services under brands Megacom (32 percent of the market), Beeline (41 percent), and O! (27 percent). Mobile operator O! has experienced market growth in the past two years due to its launch of 4G services. Megacom was nationalized in 2010 amid the political upheaval.

Regulatory Bodies

The State Committee of Information Technologies and Communication was created in July 2016, taking on many of the regulatory functions previously performed by the State Communication Agency (SCA). The SCA was absorbed as a department under the Committee, removing its independence.

The Committee's responsibilities include developing information communication technology (ICT) policy, facilitating the development of the ICT sector, as well as governing the ICT sector. The Committee also issues licenses for ISPs, sets standards, and ensures the standards are followed. Since its inception two years ago, it has become clear that the Committee's activities greatly

some foreign government push them back war. There is also very limited institutional memory, as incoming Committee heads detain, change all key staff.

Limits on Content:

An increasing number of webpages were blocked this year in the government's efforts to limit "extremist" content online. One independent news outlet was also blocked for unknown reasons, while another independent outlet was forced to remove articles criticizing the president. Despite these negative developments, the government does not systematically block or filter content.

Blocking and Filtering

After several years without major censorship issues, authorities in Kyrgyzstan once again engaged in disproportionate and arbitrary blocking. This uptick mirrors growing government concerns over extremism. An archiving platform, blog-hosting sites, and even a music and podcast streaming service have become collateral damage in the government's broad application of anti-extremism laws. Social media platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter are freely available, although authorities are examining appropriate methods for censoring individual pages on these platforms.

In July 2017, courts ordered the blocking of Internet Archive and JustPaste.it in their entirety under the anti-extremism law. Internet Archive, which offers access to billions of deleted webpages, was apparently blocked for allowing local users to bypass restrictions on "extremist" content normally inaccessible in the country. Some users speculated that the decision was related to a deleted article available on the archive that depicted a Czech company—recently awarded a government contract—in a bad light.[15] JustPaste.it is a widely used text-publishing tool that, like several other major platforms, had inadvertently become popular with extremist movements to spread propaganda.[16]

In October 2017, a district court ordered that a number of webpages, including the music and podcast streaming platform SoundCloud, be blocked for housing extremist content. The order meant that SoundCloud files can no longer be distributed or stored, which seemingly would apply to all updated music including popular songs by famous artists.[17] A request to the district court submitted by the local news outlet Kloop.kg revealed that the blocking request came from the Prosecutor General's Office. Since the court order, the government has reportedly experienced technical issues in its attempts to block SoundCloud.

In addition, because the court order blocked several subdomains of blogspot.com and wordpress.com, some operators not utilizing deep packet inspection technologies had to block all subdomains that share the same IP address.[18] Also included in the court order were URLs of some YouTube videos and Facebook pages, though these have not been blocked due to the technical difficulty of blocking single pages in social networks using HTTPS.

In June 2017, a court ordered the blocking of the website of the independent regional news agency *Ferghana News*. Daniil Kislov, its editor-in-chief, said the site was not informed about the order and the reason was unclear. That same month, authorities opened a criminal investigation against *Ferghana News* reporter Ulugbek Babakulov on charges of inciting interethnic hatred for publishing an article about hate speech directed at Kyrgyzstan's Uzbek minority (see Prosecutions and Detentions for Online Activities).[19] *Ferghana News* had been blocked for a number of years in the past,[20] along with several[21] other websites.[22]

The Law on Counteracting Extremist Activities allows the government to order the blocking of websites hosted outside the country for "extremist" content as well.[23] It was amended in May 2016 to include within its scope expressions of approval or justifications of extremism or terrorism online, employing very broad definitions of extremism and terrorism.[24] Under the law,[25] the Ministry of Justice must publish a list of blocked resources on its website to increase transparency.[26] In 2017, the Office of the General Prosecutor reportedly submitted 15 claims to the court, which ordered a total of 159 "extremist" websites and pages to be blocked.[27]

Content Removal

The government does not often force outlets to remove content, though journalists have occasionally removed political content under threat of violence from unknown actors (see Intimidation and Violence).

In August 2017, after the General Prosecutor filed a lawsuit, a court fined the online media outlet *Zanoza* KGS 12 million (US$175,000) for defaming President Almazbek Atambayev and ordered it to remove several articles critical of him. According to Article 19, the original lawsuit stemmed from an article that criticized the arrest of opposition leader Omurbek Tekebaev and compared Atambayev to "well-known authoritarian rulers" without mentioning the Kyrgyz president by name, while other articles cited pronouncements made by Tekebaev that implied that Atambayev engaged in corrupt practices.[28] Human rights organizations said the trial was politically motivated and unjustified.[29] The Public Prosecutor filed a total of five defamation lawsuits against *Zanoza* under Article 4 of Kyrgyzstan's civil code, which deals with defamation of the president's "honor and dignity."

the LimeZzing domain. PS-KR.kg changed its name to Kaktus one month later and moved its publication from LimeZzing to kaktus.media.[30]

Media, Diversity, and Content Manipulation

There are no specific economic restrictions imposed by the government that negatively impact users' ability to publish content online or that restrict online media outlets' ability to remain financially sustainable. There are several popular blog-hosting platforms in Kyrgyzstan (such as Namba.kg, Kloop.kg, Diesel.elcat.kg, and Taboo.kg), but most blogs focus on entertainment or reprint reports from other news agencies.

There are no particularly popular blogs specifically devoted to political or social issues. Most blogs are in Russian, though some less popular ones are in the Kyrgyz language. The internet in general has become an important source of alternative information for users, but the main participants in online communities are primarily the wealthier segments of the population who can afford consistent internet access.

Self-censorship exists online to a certain degree, primarily as a result of government restrictions on inciting national hatred. All posts on forums are strictly moderated to limit this type of content, and online journalists and bloggers generally try to avoid issues concerning ethnic relations. Other laws may increase self-censorship, such as Article 4 of the Civil Code, which establishes steep fines for defaming the president's "honor and dignity," and 2014 amendments to the Criminal Code, which introduced criminal penalties of up to three years in prison for disseminating false accusations regarding the commission of crimes (see Legal Environment).

Online platforms such as forums and social networks have also been used for manipulating public opinion, usually by trolls hired by different political actors to influence discussions and express favorable views.

Digital Activism

Digital activism efforts remain limited in Kyrgyzstan. However, in October 2015, social media users launched a campaign against the government's plan to spend US$40,000 on 120 chairs to be used in Kyrgyzstan's parliament, replacing chairs purchased as recently as 2010. The #120Кресел (#120Chairs) campaign received extensive coverage on Twitter and news outlets, and the government abandoned the plan.[31]

Violations of User Rights:

While internet users are not generally imprisoned for their expression, a few criminal charges were filed during the reporting period for inciting hatred under Article 299 of the Criminal Code, and a growing number of users faced civil sanctions for critical expression online. Those critiquing the government online have also been the target of intimidation and harassment. In addition, the government's capacity for surveillance of ICTs increased in recent years. A regulation requiring upgrades to SORM-3 technology also instructed service providers to install black boxes on their networks that allow intelligence agencies unfettered access without a court order.

Legal Environment

Kyrgyzstan's constitution, last amended in 2010, contains several legal protections applicable to online activities. Article 31 guarantees the right to freedom of thought, expression, speech, and press. Article 29 protects privacy, including private communications shared by phone or electronic methods, and forbids the collection or dissemination of confidential information without the subject's consent.

However, these constitutional protections are limited in practice by a judiciary that lacks independence from the executive branch. Corruption among judges, who are generally underpaid, is also widespread, hindering the fairness of decisions in freedom of expression cases and others. In March 2018, a group of activists, lawyers, and human rights defenders held a rally and revealed their plans to compile a blacklist of judges they believe to be corrupt or, at the very least, biased. Several people who claim to have experienced biased rulings and corruption joined the activists in their calls.[32]

In July 2011, the government decriminalized libel to bring legislation in line with the new constitution. Nevertheless, "insult" remains a criminal offense and is punishable by a fine. The Criminal Code contains several provisions (Articles 299 and 299-1) that prohibit "inciting national, racial, religious or interregional hostility." In some cases, the government has sought to apply these provisions to restrict nonviolent political speech. In December 2017, Deputy of the Parliament Dastan Bekeshev introduced amendments to the Civil Code on procedures for refuting information that damages honor and dignity online. The amendments would have set a minimum fine of no less than KGS 20,000 (US$300).[33] In April 2018, however, Bekeshev withdrew the amendments after negative feedback from the media.[34]

Several laws impose disproportionate restrictions on freedom of expression. Under a 2014 amendment to the criminal code, those

sentences of up to three years.[35] After an association of domestic nongovernmental and noncommercial organizations challenged the amendment in May 2014, the Constitutional Chamber of the Supreme Court upheld it as constitutional in January 2015.[36] The Law on Counteracting Extremist Activities, last amended in 2016, criminalizes public expressions of approval and justification of extremism or terrorism, raising concerns about possible restrictions on legitimate expression online.[37]

In 2014, parliamentarians submitted draft legislation to introduce criminal and administrative penalties for disseminating "propaganda of nontraditional sexual relationships" in line with a similar law passed in Russia. However, after substantial criticism, the legislation has not progressed.[38]

Prosecutions and Detentions for Online Activities

During the reporting period, there were arrests for inciting hatred online under Article 299 of the Criminal Code (see Legal Environment). Additionally, government officials, including the president, have demonstrated a low tolerance for personal criticism and have sought to discourage and discredit online critics by pursuing civil suits.

Ulugbek Babakulov, a Kyrgyz journalist who contributes to the news website *Zanoza*, was charged in June 2017 for inciting ethnic, racial, religious, or interregional hatred under Part 1 of Article 299 of the Criminal Code.[39] In May 2017, Babakulov published an article in *Ferghana News* that included examples of social media posts inciting hatred against the Uzbek minority in Kyrgyzstan. Babakulov received a number of death threats and criticism (see Intimidation and Violence), and *Ferghana News* was blocked in the country (see Blocking and Filtering).

In February 2018, Temir Bolotbek, a Bishkek university professor, was also arrested under Part 1 of Article 299 of the Criminal Code.[40] Bolotbek had made a combative critique of Soviet architecture and those who enjoy the style in a comment to a Facebook post of the chief editor of Kaktus.media. If convicted, Bolotbek faces four to seven years' imprisonment.

Zanoza and its cofounders and journalists Dina Maslova and Narynbek Idinov were sued by the General Prosecutor after they published several articles accusing the president of corruption. In July 2017, the court found that *Zanoza* had defamed the president's honor and dignity, ordering *Zanoza* to pay KGS 12 million (US$175,000), and Maslova and Idinov to pay KGS 3 million (US$43,000).[41] On November 30, 2017, the Supreme Court upheld the lower court's decisions.[42] International civil society organizations have pointed to the political motivation of the processes and mentioned increasing pressure on freedom of expression.[43]

In September 2017, presidential candidate Sooronbay Jeenbekov, who was elected one month later, filed a suit of KGS 5 million (US$73,500) against journalist Kabay Karabekov and news agency 24.kg for an article accusing Jeenbekov's brothers of ties with radical organizations. District and city courts ruled in favor of Jeenbekov, who withdrew his case against 24.kg but not against Karabekov. After the journalist was ordered to pay a fine of KGS 5 million in February 2018,[44] Jeenbekov withdrew his case against Karabekov in April.[45]

Surveillance, Privacy, and Anonymity

Like many former Soviet states, Kyrgyzstan maintains and updates its surveillance technology in line with Russia's. Kyrgyzstan's surveillance network is modeled after Russia's SORM technology, and in August 2012, Kyrgyzstan updated its surveillance network to match current Russian interception systems.[46]

In June 2014, the government adopted a resolution with new instructions for ISPs and mobile service providers to update their systems to the latest version of SORM technology. These instructions included requirements for service providers to store the data of their subscribers for up to three years, and to allow the authorities direct, real-time access to communications networks.[47] Service providers are also required to purchase and update equipment at their own expense to ensure compliance.

These new regulations effectively introduced the potential for mass surveillance without judicial oversight, and there have been signs of possible abuse since they were implemented. In March 2016, a recording of telephone communications between opposition figures discussing a potential political upheaval were leaked to the public. Those involved were accused of attempting to forcibly seize power.[48] In May 2016, telephone conversations between leaders of the People's Parliament opposition group were also leaked online, and appeared to show them planning to seize power; they were also arrested.[49] It is not clear how these recordings were obtained, but the pattern of targeting opposition leaders suggests abuse of SORM equipment by the government.

Since February 2012, the Civil Initiative on Internet Policy, together with the Kyrgyz State Committee on National Security and several human rights organizations, has been working on amendments to the Statute on the Conduct of Investigations—the body responsible for regulating these issues—that would clarify the circumstances surrounding the use of interception technology and provide a more adequate legal framework. The bill is yet to reach parliament for consideration.

law were passed that were intended to more effectively protect personal data.[50] A proposed data protection authority is yet to be established.

The government stores biometric data of its citizens. In 2015, the government first mandated that citizens register their biometric data in order to vote, arguing that it was necessary to combat voter fraud like repeat voting.[51] During the October 2017 presidential elections, voters were identified using their data like fingerprints or facial recognition.[52] However, over 800,000[53] citizens were denied their right to vote because they had not registered with the government.

There are currently no strict restrictions on anonymous communication on the internet in Kyrgyzstan. Websites do not need to register, encryption software is freely available, and real-name registration is not required to post content online. However, in February 2014, the government issued a new regulation requiring mobile operators to sell new SIM cards only after they have been registered (previously, SIM cards could be registered within one year of purchase). This new regulation, which came into force in March 2014, makes it more difficult for individuals to use ICT tools anonymously.[54]

Intimidation and Violence

In general, there is not a significant level of violence or harassment against ICT users in Kyrgyzstan, though some isolated incidents relate to online activities.

Journalist Ulugbek Babakulov was the target of death threats and other intense criticism from government officials and progovernment media after publishing an article in May 2017 (see Prosecutions and Detentions for Online Activities). On June 1, 2017, lawmakers went as far as to urge parliament to remove Babakulov's citizenship status. Progovernment media labelled him an "enemy" of the state and a "separatist."[55]

In April 2017, independent journalist Ernis Kiyazov stated in a Facebook post that two strangers appeared at his address, called him outside, and threatened him with violence if he continued posting criticism of the president. Kiyazov had been writing for online outlet *Kalempir*. Shortly after publishing the Facebook post, Kiyazov removed it and deactivated his Facebook account.[56]

Some individuals have alleged they were tortured while in detention. Abdullo Nurmatov stated he had been tortured to provide login credentials to allow law enforcement agents to access his Odnoklassniki and email accounts. In May 2016, he was given a one-year suspended sentence for "storing and disseminating extremist content" after "liking" photos posted by the controversial religious leader Imam Rashod Kamalov on the Odnoklassniki social network. He was detained for 48 hours by the State Committee of National Security and placed under house arrest during the investigation.

Technical Attacks

Instances of politically motivated cyberattacks are rare, though government web resources are occasionally targeted. Hackers targeted the website of the State Committee on Defense Affairs in June 2016[57] and the website of the State Committee of National Security in July 2016,[58] demonstrating that state websites continue to operate with some security weaknesses.

Notes:

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