

FREEDOM OF THE PRESS

Kyrgyzstan

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In 2011, media freedom in Kyrgyzstan continued to face challenges in the wake of the violent overthrow of President Kurmanbek Bakiyev and ethnic unrest in the south in 2010. A transitional government oversaw the adoption of a new constitution and parliamentary elections in October 2010, and interim president Roza Otunbayeva was replaced as head of state by former prime minister Almazbek Atambayev in an October 2011 presidential election. Conditions improved slightly for the Kyrgyz-language media during 2011, while ethnic Uzbek journalists were beaten and arrested, and the Uzbek population continued to be denied access to broadcasting in their own language.

Freedoms of speech and of the press are guaranteed in the Kyrgyz constitution and in the nation's laws, but observance of those rights is inconsistent. Kyrgyzstan decriminalized libel in 2011, bringing its laws into line with the constitution approved in 2010; however, insult of public officials remains a criminal offense. Access to public information is guaranteed by law, but a 2010 study by the Open Society Institute found that the law is little known and seldom used, and that information is often designated "secret" with little justification. All media outlets must register to operate, and while a number of broadcasters have applied for permission, authorities have not approved any new licenses since 2006. Independent journalists reporting on politically sensitive issues like government corruption and the improper privatization of state companies have faced aggressive harassment from tax inspectors, security officers, and the state antimonopoly committee.

A law passed by the parliament under Bakiyev and implemented by the transitional government in 2010 converted the state television channel into a public-service broadcaster. Independent journalists and civil society representatives were appointed to a supervisory board for the station. However, in June 2011 the parliament passed a law allowing it to dissolve the independent board and name new board members itself. Separately, in September 2011 the parliament voted to override a presidential veto on legislation that converted Channel Five into a state parliamentary television channel. The move came after a dispute between the parliament and Channel Five, in which the legislative body attempted to withdraw the channel's accreditation and it responded with negative coverage of lawmakers.

In the month leading up to the October 2011 presidential election, Kyrgyzstan's television stations and cable operators were banned from rebroadcasting foreign news programming that could affect the election's outcome, with violators facing a \$100,000 fine. Broadcasters were given the option of editing out segments pertaining to Kyrgyz politics, but given the high cost of doing so, most simply cut out foreign programming altogether. The move was intended to limit the Russian media's ability to influence Kyrgyz voters.

Ethnic clashes in the southern region of Osh in June 2010 resulted in restrictions on Uzbek-language media, including an order by regional authorities for two independent stations with ethnic Uzbek owners—Osh TV and Mezon

2012 SCORES

PRESS STATUS

Not Free

PRESS FREEDOM SCORE

69

LEGAL ENVIRONMENT

20

POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT

29

ECONOMIC ENVIRONMENT

20

TV—to stop broadcasting. Mezon TV remained closed in 2011, while Osh TV came under the control of new owners who no longer carried Uzbek-language programming or coverage that was critical of regional officials. In October, a court in southern Kyrgyzstan convicted the two stations' former owners, Mezon's Dzhavlon Mirzakhodzhayev and Osh's Khalil Khudaiberdiyev, and handed them lengthy prison sentences. Both men, who had fled the country, were found guilty in absentia of inciting ethnic hatred during the 2010 ethnic unrest. Azimzhan Askarov, a contributor to the regional news website *Voice of Freedom* who documented the 2010 ethnic violence on video, was arrested in June 2010 on charges of extremism, inciting ethnic hatred, and complicity in the murder of an ethnic Kyrgyz police officer. In December 2011, the Supreme Court upheld a life sentence imposed on Askarov by a lower court in September 2010, despite appeals by local, regional, and international human rights activists who argued that he was targeted for his coverage of police abuses.

No journalists were killed in 2011. However, as in previous years, several assaults were reported. In August, Shokhrukh Saipov, the ethnic Uzbek editor and publisher of the news website *UzPress*, was attacked by unidentified assailants in Osh. He is the brother of Alisher Saipov, a prominent journalist from southern Kyrgyzstan whose 2007 murder remains unsolved. *UzPress* had published commentary on ethnic tensions between Kyrgyz and Uzbeks. Among other cases during the year, supporters of the nationalist organization Asaba threatened non-ethnic Kyrgyz reporters employed by the Bishkek-based 24.kg news agency in May 2011. In June, journalists Chinara Sydykova and Vladimir Bezborodov of the Bishkek-based NTS television station were hospitalized after suffering injuries while covering a protest organized by the Ata Jurt party in Osh.

A May 2011 parliamentary resolution banned Kimmo Kiljunen, head of an international commission of inquiry into the June 2010 ethnic violence, from entering the country. The resolution was based on claims that Kiljunen had published biased information concerning the Kyrgyz government's response to the violence. Another parliamentary resolution attempted to censor accounts of the 2010 violence by ordering government agencies to block the independent news site Ferghana.ru. However, the site remained accessible as of the end of 2011.

Nearly 50 newspapers and magazines publish regularly with varying degrees of independence. Approximately 50 state-owned and private television and radio stations operate in the country, with two television stations, both state owned, broadcasting nationwide. The independent printing press run by the local nongovernmental organization Media Support Center 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 become available.

Approximately 20 percent of the population had access to the internet in 2011, and there was a significant increase in Kyrgyz-language news content on the web during the year. 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 accessed the internet through the state-controlled Kyrgyztelecom, creating the potential for government influence over the medium. A growing number of Kyrgyz citizens access the internet through their mobile phones; the new outlet Kush Kabar provides free news via short-message service (SMS) on mobile phones.

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