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## Freedom Of The Press - Kyrgyzstan (2011)

**Status: Not Free**  
**Legal Environment: 21**  
**Political Environment: 29**  
**Economic Environment: 20**  
**Total Score: 70**

Media freedom in Kyrgyzstan faced tremendous challenges in 2010, a year that featured the violent overthrow of President Kurmanbek Bakiyev in April; ethnic unrest in the south in June that led to the deaths of at least 400 people, the displacement of hundreds of thousands, and the arrest of two ethnic Uzbek journalists; a referendum on a new constitution later in June; and parliamentary elections in October. The uprising against Bakiyev was fueled by public discontent with his authoritarian rule, which included the suppression of press freedom.

Despite the country's relatively progressive media laws, libel remains a criminal offense that can be punished with up to three years in prison. The authorities have ignored repeated calls to decriminalize libel, though no cases were reported in 2010. There is a law that guarantees access to public information, but a 2010 study by the Open Society Institute found that it was 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.

Media freedom was tested by political and social conflict during 2010. A crackdown on the media preceded the April revolution that overthrew Bakiyev. In March, authorities forced several private broadcasters to stop carrying the programming of Radio Azattyk, the Kyrgyz service of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL), after it reported on money laundering charges against a businessman who was close to the government and the Bakiyev family. In the month before the revolution, a Bishkek court suspended three independent newspapers, *Achyk Sayasat*, *Nazar*, and *Forum*, for allegedly insulting Bakiyev and inciting disorder.

Following the April events, an interim government headed by Roza Otunbayeva resumed the Kyrgyz broadcasts of RFE/RL on state radio and reopened the suspended newspapers. Otunbayeva also oversaw the conversion of the state television outlet into a public-service broadcaster under a law that the parliament had passed but Bakiyev had failed to implement; independent journalists and civil society representatives were appointed to a supervisory board for the station. Elvira Sariyeva, former managing director of Internews in Kyrgyzstan and currently the president of the public relations firm I-Media, was made the chairperson. Kubat Otorbayev, who had served as acting director since April, was elected as director general by the board members.

Ethnic clashes in the southern region of Osh in June 2010 led to intimidation of domestic and foreign reporters and some temporary restrictions on print and broadcast media, though online media continued to function throughout the crisis. The Osh mayor forced the closure of an Uzbek-language newspaper and halted Uzbek-language television broadcasts, including rebroadcasts of programming from neighboring Uzbekistan. Research by the Committee to Protect Journalists indicated that while the Uzbek-language media had covered rallies by ethnic Uzbeks, it had not orchestrated calls for violence. Nevertheless, regional authorities also ordered Osh TV and Mezon TV, independent stations with ethnic Uzbek owners, to stop broadcasting. Both stations suffered heavy damage by unidentified vandals shortly after the orders. Mezon did not return to the air. In the aftermath of the disturbances, Azimjon Askarov, a contributor to the regional news site *Voice of Freedom* who documented the violence on video, and Ulugbek Abdusalomov, editor of the independent weekly *Diydor*, were arrested in June on charges of extremism and inciting ethnic hatred. Askarov was also charged with complicity in the murder of a police officer and was reportedly tortured in custody. He was sentenced to life in prison despite appeals by local, regional, and international human rights advocates, who argued that he was targeted for retaliation because of his critical coverage of police abuses. Abdusalomov, who was ill with a heart condition, remained in detention at year's end.

Foreign reporters attempting to cover the unrest in April and June faced intimidation and lack of access to relevant officials and areas, particularly in the south. Several were pressured to leave Kyrgyzstan but chose not to publicize their cases in an effort to regain access. In October, friends and relatives of a murdered Kyrgyz policeman attacked a EurasiaNet reporter who was attempting to cover the trial of several Uzbeks accused of the murder.

Nearly 50 newspapers and magazines print regularly with varying degrees of freedom. 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 (which Freedom House helped establish in 2003) 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.

Internet news sites such as 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—approximately 20 percent of the population in 2010. Internet access outside towns and cities remains limited. The Bakiyev regime blocked access to online media, particularly in the tense period before the revolution. In April, for example, police conducted a warrantless raid on Stan TV, a web-based television outlet that reported on the unrest. The outlet was accused of using illegal copies of Microsoft software, according to Reuters. When independent media reported on corruption and public protests over a sudden sharp increase in electricity prices, Bakiyev ordered the main

telecommunications provider, Kyrgyztelekom, to block access to critical and independent regional websites such as Centrasia.ru and Fergananews.com. The interim government that replaced Bakiyev restored access to these sites.