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FREEDOM OF THE PRESS

Kyrgyzstan

[Kyrgyzstan](#) | [Freedom of the Press 2013](#)

In 2012, the Kyrgyz media environment featured both positive developments and setbacks as the country continued to recover from the violent overthrow of President Kurmanbek Bakiyev and ethnic clashes in the southern region of Osh in 2010. 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. Although libel was decriminalized in 2011, insult of public officials remains a criminal offense. In March 2012, legislator Irina Karamushkina used the insult law to file a case against journalist Makhinur Niyazova of the 24.kg news agency. The case was pending as of the end of the year.

In February 2012, ethnic Russian blogger and independent journalist Vladimir Farafonov was charged with inciting ethnic hatred through the media—an offense that carries up to three years in jail. In his articles, Farafonov had criticized the state of Kyrgyz politics and the spread of ethnic nationalism in the Kyrgyz-language media. He was convicted in July of “humiliation” of the Kyrgyz nation and spreading propaganda for ethnic discord, though the penalty was limited to a fine of 50,000 som (\$1,050). There have been allegations that prosecutions on charges such as inciting hatred have focused almost exclusively on ethnic minority writers, despite the widespread appearance of inflammatory articles in Kyrgyz-language media.

Access to public information is guaranteed by law. In 2012, Access Info Europe and the Centre for Law and Democracy rated Kyrgyzstan's access to information law as relatively strong. According to the organizations, the law's weaknesses include overly broad exceptions to the access regime and the lack of a public-interest override.

In September 2012, a draft bill was introduced in the parliament that proposed restricting access to certain “offensive content” online, ostensibly to protect children. According to the legislation, images promoting violence as well as other “unhealthy lifestyles” and “nonstandard moral values” could be targeted. Critics warned that the overly broad wording of the bill could lead to widespread censorship and closing of websites. However, lawmakers were said to be working with members of civil society to revise the measure.

All media outlets must register with the Ministry of Justice to operate. The approval process entails background checks on outlets' owners and funding sources, including whether they receive funding from international donor organizations. In September 2012, Kyrgyzstan began a program to transition to digital broadcasting, and it stopped issuing licenses for analog television stations.

A law passed by the parliament under Bakiyev and implemented by the interim 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 empowered itself to dissolve the independent board and name new board members. Nevertheless, the broadcaster was reported to have aired some politically sensitive content during 2012. Separately, in September 2011 the parliament voted to override a presidential veto on legislation that converted

2013 SCORES

PRESS STATUS

Not Free

PRESS FREEDOM SCORE

69

LEGAL ENVIRONMENT

20

POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT

29

ECONOMIC ENVIRONMENT

20

Channel Five into a parliamentary television channel. The channel had previously been controlled by Maksim Bakiyev, son of the former president.

Access to a diversity of news sources, and particularly to minority-language media, continues to be a challenge in Kyrgyzstan, although there were openings in 2012. According to a June report by the Bishkek-based Association of Journalists, before the 2010 violence there were three Uzbek television stations and two Uzbek newspapers in the south, all owned by ethnic Uzbeks. One station never reopened, while ethnic Kyrgyz took over the other four outlets. In 2012, two government-owned Uzbek-language newspapers, *Alam* and *Osh Shami*, began publishing. In June, an ethnic Uzbek journalist started the Uzbek-language weekly *Digest*, which primarily published news articles translated from Kyrgyz, Russian, and English sources. In August, Yntymak Public Radio, started by the American nongovernmental organization Internews with U.S. government funding, began full-time broadcasts in Kyrgyz, Russian, and Uzbek—the three main languages in the south. Finding qualified Uzbek-speaking journalists remains a challenge for the station, however, as many Uzbeks fled the region after the 2010 violence. Employees of Yntymak and the newspapers reportedly received threats during the year.

Some cases of government censorship and interference in the media were reported in 2012. Most significantly, state-controlled Kyrgyztelecom, the main internet service provider (ISP) in the country, blocked access to the popular Russian-language news website Ferghana in February, acting on an earlier resolution from the parliament aimed at censoring allegedly critical accounts of the 2010 violence. Despite appeals by the site, Ferghana remained blocked by the ISP at year's end, though it was still accessible through other providers.

In April 2012, the State Committee of National Security (GKNB) announced that it planned to launch a new system in spring 2013 to monitor websites in the Kyrgyz language or with the .kg country code for “hate speech.” Observers expressed concern that the measure would lead to increased internet censorship and questioned the GKNB's neutrality and suitability to the task, given its reputation for muzzling government critics.

No journalists were killed in 2012. However, as in previous years, some cases of intimidation, harassment, and assault were reported. Supporters of the opposition Ata-Jurt party attacked journalists on several occasions during protests in September and October. In a number of cases, police failed to intervene. Also in October, reporter Meerim Mambetova and a cameraman from the NBT television channel were assaulted by GKNB personnel while filming other officers storming a government building; their camera was destroyed. A brutal 2011 assault on Shokhrukh Saipov—a well-known ethnic Uzbek journalist, editor of the UzPress news website, and brother of slain journalist Alisher Saipov—remains unsolved. Journalists reported receiving threats for covering sensitive topics such as ethnic tensions and the June 2010 violence in the south. Many also admitted practicing self-censorship on these issues.

In a positive step, Kyrgyzstan's highest court overturned what was widely regarded as a wrongful murder conviction in the case of Alisher Saipov, who was shot to death outside his office in 2007. In 2009, authorities announced that they had caught Saipov's killer, but a local court dismissed the evidence as insubstantial, and the alleged culprit insisted that he did not know Saipov and had no reason to kill him. The victim's father conducted his own investigation and told the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) that the imprisoned man was innocent. Many activists and analysts believe that Saipov, an ethnic Uzbek who was critical of Uzbekistan's authoritarian government, was killed by that country's security services.

Azimjon Askarov, an ethnic Uzbek independent journalist and human rights defender, remained in prison serving a life sentence on charges of inciting ethnic hatred and complicity in the murder of an ethnic Kyrgyz police officer during the June 2010 violence. Askarov's investigative reports had overturned convictions and cost several officials their jobs, and he was widely believed to have been prosecuted in retribution for his reporting. Among those challenging his imprisonment was Kyrgyzstan's human rights ombudsman. In June 2012, the Kyrgyz ambassador to the United States agreed to present evidence of Askarov's innocence compiled by CPJ to the Kyrgyz government, with no apparent result by

year's end.

Nearly 50 newspapers and magazines publish regularly with varying degrees of independence. Approximately 50 state-owned and private television stations and 50 radio stations operate in the country, with two television stations run by state-owned KTRK broadcasting nationwide. An 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 22 percent of the population accessed the internet in 2012. 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 reached 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 telephones, and the new outlet Kush Kabar provides free news via short-message service (SMS) on mobile phones.

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