

# KYRGYZSTAN

## Vibrant Information Barometer

2 0 2 2



Highly Vibrant

Somewhat Vibrant

Slightly Vibrant

Not Vibrant

OVERALL SCORE  
**22**

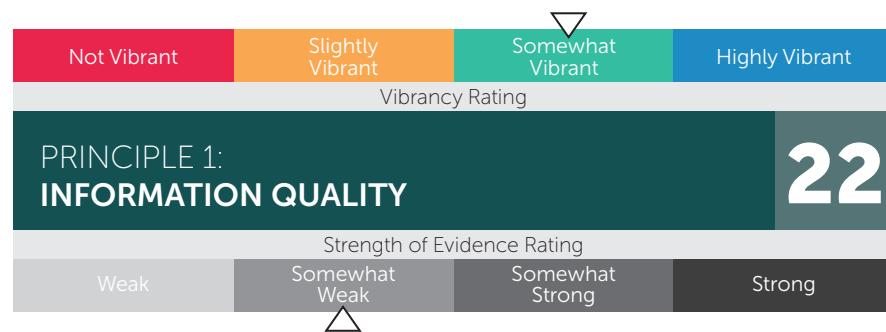
In 2021, Kyrgyzstan held many political events: two referendums regarding the form of government; parliamentary elections and local elections; and the adoption of a new constitution, among other events. Foreign policy also deteriorated as there were repeated armed clashes at the border of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Domestically, despite very modest growth after the economic shock from the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic, inflation has grown three times faster than the economy.

These trends have had a negative impact on the country’s information space. In Freedom House’s *Freedom in the World 2021* report, Kyrgyzstan is included in the “not free” category of countries after 11 years of being defined as “partly free.” While Reporters Without Borders’ *2021 World Press Freedom Index* shows that the Kyrgyzstan’s rating has improved (ranking 79 out of 180 countries), Kyrgyzstan remains a “problem country.”

VIBE panelists noted that freedom of speech and other civil liberties have been overshadowed by the Parliament’s adoption of the law “On Protection from Inaccurate (False) Information,” signed by the president despite public protests. A detailed analysis provided by the Media Policy Institute indicates that this law’s provisions contradict the constitution and international treaties to which Kyrgyzstan is a signatory, as well as restrict human rights and freedom. The nongovernmental organization “Journalists” monitors rights violations against journalists and media, including attacks on journalists; the obstruction of professional activities;

threats and harassment; and numerous spurious lawsuits demanding the protection of honor, dignity, and business reputation for investigative pieces on corruption.

Despite many criticisms about the country and its development in the past year, the overall country score places Kyrgyzstan in the Somewhat Vibrant classification, indicating a stable information system. Principle 3 (Information Consumption and Engagement) received the lowest overall score for this year’s study, largely due to panelist assessments of the level of media literacy throughout the country. Principles 1 (Information Quality), 2 (Multiple Channels), and 4 (Transformative Action) all received average scores of 22, which are reflective of factors including affordable internet costs, weak adherence to journalism ethics, declining advertising revenue for independent media, continually rising levels of misinformation and fake news.



In Principle 1, panelists gave their lowest average scores to the indicator examining sufficient resources. For independent media, traditional sources of income have dried up, as advertising money migrates to social networks. As with much of the rest of the world, print media is fading; however, television remains the dominant medium in Kyrgyzstan. Regardless of whether they are print or broadcast, however, newsrooms throughout the country suffer from lack of resources, leading to low-quality news coverage as well as weak adherence to professional journalism ethics. Russia’s influence is felt throughout Kyrgyzstan as Russian broadcasters are active in the country and press a pro-Kremlin agenda.

**Indicator 1: There is quality information on a variety of topics available.**

The accessibility of high-quality information for the population in Kyrgyzstan is variable and determined by several factors: finance, technology, information, and working conditions.

Regional and local media have fewer opportunities to purchase the necessary equipment and software to produce quality content, and there is often inequality among regions (e.g., in the Naryn and Issyk-Kul regions, there are no independent television outlets). Print media are in a more difficult situation due to the high cost of production of newspapers and magazines. Advertisers are concentrated in Bishkek and do not allocate money to regional and local media. In general, the

under-resourced newsrooms and the advertising market means that the news media tends to offer a news feed with a lot of low-quality news. Moreover, it is rare to have access to high-quality regional, local, and international news; in general, the media, regardless of their status, focus on national news.

Access to high-quality, non-monopolized printing services is limited for regional print media. All technical support and communication centers, media distribution, and advertising agencies are concentrated in Bishkek, and interaction with these centers from the regions is difficult. Additionally, access to broadband internet varies geographically..

Regional media have less access to professional development since such training is held mainly in Bishkek. For example, since the Internews office in Osh closed, local media in the country’s regions have fewer opportunities to receive professional developmental assistance, so finding professional personnel is difficult. Due to the limited staffing resources in nonstate media editorial offices, the opportunities for mastering new technologies and participation in training programs outside of editorial activities are limited.

Low wages force journalists—especially regional ones—to work simultaneously for several publications, leading to work overload, the inability to prepare quality material, and the need to maneuver among different editorial ethical guidelines.

The main news subjects in Kyrgyzstan are still (and have always been) the president, the government, and the parliament. Access restrictions for independent media regarding governmental activities (in the form of media selection for accreditation in elections or in parliament, the possibility of obtaining interviews or comments, and so on) reduce the ability of the media to provide consumers with high-quality and diverse political reporting.

**Indicator 2: The norm for information is that content is based on facts.**

In the information space, news primarily focuses on politics and



subtopics about politics; specialized and niche media are very rare. As Almaz Ismanov, founder of Prevention Media, said, among print media, the only niche publication is *Autoguide*; TV and radio niche markets do not exist. There are specialized online publications that are not classified as mass media under the law.

The editor-in-chief of 24.kg, Makhinur Niyazova, said, “The topics that are most often covered in the media are politics, economics, and incidents. [There is] less content about social policy and more generally about the lives of socially vulnerable segments of the population. There is little regional news (in the capital’s media); [the capital-based media] mainly cover what is happening in Bishkek and, to a lesser extent, in Osh and some other large cities. International news is updated only during major events.”

The underrepresentation of wide-ranging international news in the media is “compensated” by a significant share of unrestricted Russian media broadcasting. Accordingly, being under the informational influence of official Russian media, citizens share the “picture of the world” as promoted by Russian media. As the chairperson of the Investigative Journalism Foundation, Adel Laisheva, said, “Our country is under a great informational influence from Russia; therefore, Ukraine is our number one enemy.” Bektur Iskander, the founder of Kloop Media, concurred: “The main instigators of hate from the outside are the Russian media operating in Kyrgyzstan. Few people have been able to kindle [such] hatred, for example, toward Ukraine.”

At certain moments in recent history—for example, during the Kyrgyz-Tajik conflict in the summer of 2021—some Russian media have provided biased coverage. The amount of fake information produced in the media of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan during the conflict at the border was so significant that fact-checking teams in both countries simply did not have time to check and refute false information.<sup>1</sup>

1 CABAR.asia, “How Did the Media and Social Media Cover the Conflict on the Kyrgyz-Tajik Border?” Central Asian Bureau for Analytical Reporting, August 5, 2021, <https://cabar.asia/ru/kak-smi-i-sotsseti-osveshchali-konflikt-na-granitse-kyrgyzstana-i-tadzhikistana>.

Professional content producers value their reputations and strive to provide truthful information by double-checking the information they receive. However, for many journalists, fact-checking methods are unknown, and they often cannot double-check information due to a lack of knowledge and skills<sup>2</sup>. There are also serious problems that are often beyond the control of journalists, making it difficult even for professionals to verify information. High-ranking officials have been engaging in misinformation and often spread outright lies. For example, in 2021, the Minister of Health announced on national TV that aconite—a toxin—is a “folk remedy” for the treatment of COVID-19. The president’s personal page on social networks has also become a source of fake information.

It is important to note that fact-checking practices are actively spreading:

In 2020, only a few Russian-language publications engaged in fact-checking, while in 2021 a significant number of Kyrgyz-speaking professional and nonprofessional content producers have already begun to practice fact-checking. Iskender, said, “There are very few media

outlets in Kyrgyzstan that would carefully check published information for accuracy, although in recent years there have been more publications that work according to higher standards of fact-checking.”

Journalists rarely disseminate deliberately false information. “The most common problem is the manipulation of facts by state bodies in order to appear in a more favorable perspective,” said Dina Maslova, founder and editor-in-chief of Kaktus.media. An example of this approach is the statement made in March 2021 by the president’s press secretary, Galina Baiterek, following negotiations between the presidents of Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan on disputed border territories. The official press release stated that “the Uzbek side is ready to give the Ungar-Too area to Kyrgyzstan,” although Unkur-Too (as it is spelled in Kyrgyz)

2 <https://journalist.kg/ru/news/okutuular-zhmk-kyzmatkerlerininkesipk%D3%A9jl%D2%AFg%D2%AFn-arttyrat/>

already belongs to Kyrgyzstan.<sup>3</sup> Fact-checking allowed the population to learn about this manipulation, and the press secretary had to explain and clarify that Uzbekistan no longer claims this area. Ismanov said, “All these reservations occurred against the backdrop of confident statements by the country’s top officials that they have completely resolved all border issues with neighboring countries that have not been resolved for years.” Fact-checking tools do have an impact: in this example, the president’s press secretary had to delete previously published information.

Compliance with ethical standards is one of the most problematic areas in producing quality information. The founder of T-Media Group, Daniyar Sadiyev, believes that the most malicious violators of journalistic ethics are mainly content producers in social networks. However, Semetei Karypkulov, the editor-in-chief of Bulak.kg, asserted that “Kyrgyz-language media often violate ethical standards by disseminating unreliable information, which sometimes defames the honor and dignity of a person.” Laisheva and Almaz Ismanov, founder of Prevention Media, believe that “ethical norms are violated everywhere,” and in traditional media, the main news is often publications of social networks that do not follow any kind of ethics.

### **Indicator 3: The norm for information is that content is not intended to harm.**

The consequences of violating ethical standards are quite serious. For journalists and the media, there are risks of growing consumer distrust. The population does not distinguish between professional and nonprofessional content producers, and bloggers and YouTubers often present themselves as journalists. Professional media are losing

<sup>3</sup> В. Кудайаров, “Заявление пресс-секретаря Жапарова вызвало негодование. Она внесла разъяснение,” Kaktus.media, March 13, 2021, [https://kaktus.media/doc/433603\\_zaiavlenie\\_press\\_sekretaria\\_japarova\\_vyzvalo\\_negodovanie\\_ona\\_vnesla\\_raziasnenie.html](https://kaktus.media/doc/433603_zaiavlenie_press_sekretaria_japarova_vyzvalo_negodovanie_ona_vnesla_raziasnenie.html).

**“All civic activists, nongovernmental organizations, and media who disagree with the authorities’ point of view are stigmatized as defenders of LGBTQ rights,” explained Karypkulov.**

audiences and risking closure. Critical discussion in a professional environment needs to take place within the framework of the Media Complaints Commission. For individual nonprofessional content producers, there may be drastic consequences, including criminal charges, as was the case with Instagram blogger Elmir Sydyman whose trial for inciting interregional discord lasted more than a year. The decision – acquittal - was made in March 2021.

The reason for noncompliance with ethical standards may be due to the low quality of professional training and the inaccessibility of modern training on journalistic ethics. Only a few media outlets base their editorial policies on ethical principles and monitor the ethical practices in their activities. Such independent media includes factcheck.kg, 24.kg, Temirov Live,

T-Media Group, bulak.kg, and Azattyk.

Often, the media violate ethics in publications about gender-based violence and religious views regarding gender. Usually, such publications present the position of some side without an editorial comment or explanation attached to a video containing scenes of violence or violent speeches.

### **Indicator 4: The body of content overall is inclusive and diverse.**

According to Karypkulov, government officials use controlled media to disseminate information that sows enmity and hatred toward certain groups of citizens who disagree with the policies and practices of the ruling elites. “All civic activists, nongovernmental organizations, and media who disagree with the authorities’ point of view are stigmatized as defenders of LGBTQ rights,” Karypkulov explained. Iskender added the state and government officials have a role in inciting hatred. “Hatred toward the [LGBTQ] community, women, or certain ethnic minorities (in the case of Kyrgyzstan, mostly Uzbeks) has inflamed the state, part of the

media, and nonprofessional media,” he said, “There is a lot of hatred in Kyrgyzstan, and no one bears any responsibility for it.”

### Indicator 5: Content production is sufficiently resourced.

Limited financial resources are especially characteristic of independent media since traditional sources of funding for media activities no longer allow them to survive. Subscriptions for print media have practically disappeared and paying for online publication has not yet become standard practice.

Advertising revenues for all traditional media have decreased significantly as advertisers have shifted their focus to social networks, wanting to reach the audiences of Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook. Grant opportunities for the media are limited in terms of the amount of funding, the time frame for the implementation of grant projects, and the skills of media staff in developing grant applications. They may also be limited by the specific target group for which grant programs are opened: For example, grants can be directed only to local community media or, conversely, to national media; they can only be open to independent media but not to state ones, even if these state media do not actually receive funding from the state budget.

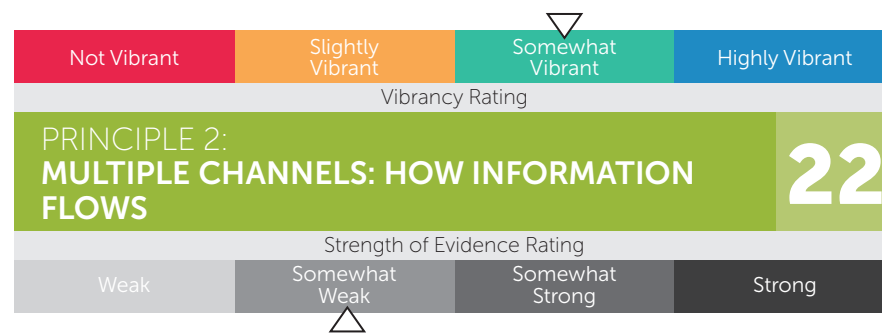
This lack of financial resources prevents many editorial offices from developing content in the Kyrgyz language, despite legislative requirements mandating the share of content in the state language<sup>4</sup> and in the language of national minorities. The law also mandates allocating funds to make content available for persons with disabilities (closed captioning, sign language interpretation, etc.). Representatives from the media say, “The media do not have enough qualified personnel and funding to create high-quality content in the Kyrgyz language or to translate existing foreign programs.”

The level of income for journalists and other media professionals is generally low, and the lowest salaries are among employees of state-owned media. Even taking into account the high costs of professional

4 [https://kaktus.media/doc/449957\\_tv\\_kompanii\\_ispolniat\\_zakon\\_o\\_gosiazyke\\_kachestvennoe\\_polychitsia\\_net\\_deneg\\_i\\_sil.html](https://kaktus.media/doc/449957_tv_kompanii_ispolniat_zakon_o_gosiazyke_kachestvennoe_polychitsia_net_deneg_i_sil.html)

activity in the form of risks of pressure from government or other interest groups, the lack of prestige of the profession, and low public confidence, the low income for journalists has resulted in larger numbers of women as professional journalists as well as the depletion of human resources for media in the languages of national minorities.

Ismanov said, “All the heads of leading media are men, with the exception of Kaktus.media, Azattyk, 24.kg, and a few Kyrgyz-language newspapers. Among the heads of regional media centers, only the head of the Naryn Oblast Media Center is a woman—Kanykei Junusova.” Laisheva clarified the consequences of the depletion of journalistic personnel in minority languages: “The multilingual radio Dostuk disappeared from the state air, but broadcasting in Uzbek has remained on Yntymak. City FM radio broadcasts religious programs every day for two to three hours. But I don’t think that all religious movements are represented.”



While freedom of speech and freedom of the press are protected in Kyrgyzstan’s constitution and buttressed by specific media legislation, the government took steps in 2021 to undermine those protections by passing a law that ostensibly is meant to curb false information, but in practice opens the door to censorship. It is increasingly difficult for journalists to collect and disseminate information, and despite Kyrgyzstan signing the Open Government Partnership, in the late 2010s government departments have been less and less forthcoming with public information and data.

## Indicator 6: People have rights to create, share, and consume information

The Constitution of Kyrgyzstan, adopted by a referendum in April 2021 and replacing the 2010 Constitution, contains provisions guaranteeing freedom of speech, freedom of expression, and freedom of the press. Moreover, the constitution guarantees the right to receive information from state bodies and local self-government entities. The constitution further prohibits censorship and forbids passing laws that restrict the freedom of speech, the press, and mass media.

In addition to the constitution, a number of laws form the basis of media legislation: two specialized laws, “On Mass Media” (adopted in 1992) and “On Television and Radio Broadcasting” (adopted in 2008); relevant articles of the Criminal Code of the Kyrgyz Republic (for example, “Obstruction of the legitimate professional activities of a journalist by forcing him to disseminate or to refuse to disseminate information, committed by a person using his official position” or “Incitement of national, religious, interethnic hatred”); relevant articles of the Civil Code of the Kyrgyz Republic (e.g., Article 18); and the Law of the Kyrgyz Republic, “On access to information held by state bodies and local self-government bodies of the Kyrgyz Republic.”

Despite these protections, there have been repeated attempts in years past by authorities to revise media legislation, the media community and human rights advocates managed to defend it until 2021. However, in 2021, Parliament, in violation of regulations, adopted the Law of the Kyrgyz Republic “On protection from inaccurate (false) information,”<sup>5</sup> commonly known as the “Law on Fakes,” which provides authorities with the opportunity to censor the media. There were other attempts by authorities to introduce other legislative regulations and censorship;

5 <http://cbd.minjust.gov.kg/act/view/ru-ru/112282?cl=ru-ru>

for example, the Criminal Code of the Kyrgyz Republic initiated the introduction of the concept of “political hostility” and provides punishment for such activities<sup>6</sup>.

Commenting on the adoption of the fake news law, Makhinur Niyazova wrote, referencing an article by the 24.kg portal, “To justify their initiatives, the authorities often use data of a manipulative nature. In particular, examples of countries or states where there is a proposed rule are given, but specificity and other factors are not considered.”

In describing media legislation, Iskander explained, “...One of the laws passed in the first year of [Sadyr Japarov’s] presidency was the controversial anti-fake law, which will actually be used to combat the truth. There is no reason to hope that this attempt to silence the free media will end with the current government.”

“...One of the laws passed in the first year of [Sadyr Japarov’s] presidency was the controversial anti-fake law, which will actually be used to combat the truth. There is no reason to hope that this attempt to silence the free media will end with the current government,” explained Iskander.

Journalists working in state or pro-government media have significant advantages in their professional activities compared to journalists working in independent media. Despite democratic legislation, in practice, there are many examples of law enforcement opposing the activities of independent journalists, only selectively protecting the media and

journalists. For independent journalists and nonprofessional content producers, there are a number of challenges in their daily professional activities.

Other difficulties for journalists include the obstruction of legitimate professional activities and persecution as producers of news content. Increasingly, employees of independent media are faced with an official ban on access to the collection and dissemination of information. For example, journalists from local and independent media, as well as

6 [https://kaktus.media/doc/436543\\_v\\_yk\\_hotiat\\_vnesti\\_nakazanie\\_za\\_politicheskyu\\_vrajdy\\_urist\\_y\\_prosiat\\_otklonit\\_proekt.html](https://kaktus.media/doc/436543_v_yk_hotiat_vnesti_nakazanie_za_politicheskyu_vrajdy_urist_y_prosiat_otklonit_proekt.html)



local residents, were barred from taking photos and videos during the meeting of the president of the country with local residents of the Batken region<sup>7</sup>. Additionally, journalist Zulfiya Turgunova was attacked at an official event - a meeting of the head of the State Committee for National Security with the residents of Batken. Numerous law enforcement officers and high-ranking politicians present did not stop the violence against the journalist, who was carrying out her professional activities.

In 2021, there were several cases of journalists and bloggers persecuted for their professional activities, including bloggers and civil activists Ulan Usoyun, Meerim Asanova, Nurzada Toktogulova, Yulia Barabina, Tilekmat Kurenov (Kudaibergen uulu), Orozaiym Narmatova and journalists - Kanat Kanimetov<sup>8</sup>, Ali Toktakunov<sup>9</sup>, Aslanbek Sartbaev<sup>10</sup>, and Ydyrys Isakov<sup>11</sup>.

According to Kyrgyzstan's Prosecutor's Office, over the span of five-and-a-half years - from January 2015 to July 2021, 42 cases of illegal actions against journalists were officially recorded. To date, only five reached court, and 28 cases were dismissed because "no corpus delicti found."<sup>12</sup> Countering the law enforcement statistics, Kloop's data department collected news reports about attacks, threats, pressure and obstruction of journalistic activities and found there were at least 75 such incidents. Representatives of the international nongovernmental organization

7 <https://kloop.kg/blog/2021/05/07/ne-hochet-piara-i-lichnaya-vstrecha-press-sluzhba-zhaparova-obyasnila-pochemu-on-poehal-v-batken-bez-smi/>

8 <https://kloop.kg/blog/2021/05/07/na-zhurnalista-kanata-kanimetov-zavedeno-ugolovnoe-delo-zamelkoe-huliganstvo/> ; <https://kloop.kg/blog/2021/05/05/vlasti-kyrgyzstana-dolzhen-prekratit-presledovanie-kanata-kanimetova-komitet-zashchity-zhurnalistov/>

9 [https://24.kg/obschestvo/198614\\_besporyadki\\_vbishkeke\\_jurnalist\\_ali\\_toktakunov\\_rasskazal\\_odoprose\\_vmvd/](https://24.kg/obschestvo/198614_besporyadki_vbishkeke_jurnalist_ali_toktakunov_rasskazal_odoprose_vmvd/)

10 <https://rus.azattyk.org/a/31402138.html>

11 <https://kloop.kg/blog/2021/01/28/zhurnalista-rassledovatelya-ydyrysa-isakova-vyzvali-na-dopros-v-gknb>

12 <https://kloop.kg/blog/2022/02/19/zhurnalistov-v-kyrgyzstane-postoyanno-izbivayut-presleduyut-i-sudyat-data-analiz-kloopa/> ; Допросы и задержания активистов: зачем власть опять наступает на грабли » Власть » www.24.kg - КЫРГЫЗСТАН; <https://kloop.kg/blog/2021/05/03/zhurnalisty-v-kyrgyzstane-stalkivayutsya-s-bespretsedentnymurovnenm-zapugivaniya-i-presledovaniya-obrashhenie-mediasoobs>

Reporters Without Borders expressed concern about the deterioration of the situation in the field of freedom of speech and the safety of journalists in the country.

### Indicator 7: People have adequate access to channels of information.

As reported in [24.kg](https://www.24.kg) which referenced a study from the British portal cable.co.uk, Kyrgyzstan became one of the top three countries with the cheapest internet. The affordable price of the internet connection contributes to the increase in the number of users of online platforms. The high level of labor migration in the country also contributes to an increase in the number of users of social networks; the internet allows families to keep in touch with each other through instant messengers. However, it should be noted that in terms of mobile internet speed, Kyrgyzstan places 96th in the world ranking, and in a number of hard-to-reach, high-mountainous areas in the country, the internet is not available at all<sup>13</sup>.

Media legislation in Kyrgyzstan has been relatively liberal and democratic, and it allows the population to have adequate access to information dissemination channels. First, every citizen can become a producer and distributor of information content --it is easy for citizens to open their own media because online publications are not subject to mandatory licensing. As panelist Daniyar Sadiyev clarified, "In the country as a whole, there are no problems with creating your own media; after switching to digital broadcasting, you must obtain permission to broadcast from the Ministry of Culture and Information. The permission is declarative in nature, and there are no artificial barriers to obtaining it."

Second, in the process of transitioning to digital broadcasting, the media community and the public managed to achieve access for non-state television and radio companies to national broadcasting. In other countries of Central Asia, the state has a monopoly ownership

13 [https://kaktus.media/doc/442616\\_vne\\_zony\\_dostypa\\_v\\_kakih\\_regionah\\_kyrgyzstana\\_plohoj\\_internet\\_i\\_kak\\_jivyt\\_ludi\\_bez\\_nego.html](https://kaktus.media/doc/442616_vne_zony_dostypa_v_kakih_regionah_kyrgyzstana_plohoj_internet_i_kak_jivyt_ludi_bez_nego.html)



of the multiplex (multiplexes). In the Kyrgyz Republic, along with the state communications operator Kyrgyztelecom OJSC, there is Digital Technologies LLC, the operator of the so-called social digital package of TV channels for private broadcasters. Despite the high cost of digital broadcasting services, the social package (now multiplex 1 and multiplex 2) is available to the country's population free of charge. This is all the more valuable because, according to the Media Policy Institute, television remains the leading medium for disseminating information to the population, despite the growing role of internet information channels. This view of media consumption is also supported by the findings of a study on media consumption<sup>14</sup> in the Kyrgyz Republic among children and adolescents from 7 to 17 years old, conducted in 2021.

#### **Indicator 8: There are appropriate channels for government information.**

Although the Law “On Access to Information held by State Bodies and Local Self-Government Bodies” protects the right to access publicly significant information about the activities of state bodies and local self-government bodies on paper, in practice<sup>15</sup>, the processes for providing information are used by authorities extremely rarely.

In her comments, panelist Dilbar Alimova shared her experience of working with state bodies and noted the difficulty of working with them. “According to the law, authorities must provide a response to a request within 14 working days. They do not fit into this timeline and are often

14 Children and media consumption in Kyrgyzstan. Republican Library named after K. Bayalinov, Public Fund “Door” and Public Association “Information Resource Centers, 2021 [https://edu.gov.kg/media/ДЕТИ\\_И\\_МЕДИАПОТРЕБЛЕНИЕ\\_FINAL.pdf](https://edu.gov.kg/media/ДЕТИ_И_МЕДИАПОТРЕБЛЕНИЕ_FINAL.pdf)

15 Закон КР от 28 декабря 2006 года № 213 “О доступе к информации, находящейся в ведении государственных органов и органов местного самоуправления Кыргызской Республики” (minjust.gov.kg)

late with the answer, or they keep this letter for 14 days and then write two useless sentences in response.”

“According to the law, authorities must provide a response to a request within 14 working days. They do not fit into this timeline and are often late with the answer, or they keep this letter for 14 days and then write two useless sentences in response,” shared Alimova.

At the same time, it is important to note that in certain cases, media representatives are able to use the law to access and disseminate information. An example is the legal proceedings between the Ministry of Justice and Kloop Media. In this case, department officials refused to provide the publication's journalists with data on legal business entities that the highest officials of the country are involved in. The department's refusal was justified by the provisions of the Law “On Personal Information.” Representatives of Kloop Media went through a long procedural path

for the claim - from the administrative court and the Bishkek City Court to the Supreme Court, where in May 2021 “a judicial panel decided that it was necessary to uphold the decision of the Bishkek Administrative Court, which invalidated the order of the Ministry of Justice to restrict access to information.”<sup>16</sup>

In 2017 and 2019, Kyrgyzstan joined the Open Governance Partnership (OGP), with the goal of increasing the transparency of government activities and actively promoting the availability of data to the public. However, the situation with access to publicly significant data held by state bodies began to worsen in 2020, intensifying in 2021. Unfortunately, the OGP secretariat no longer functions in Kyrgyzstan, and government policies have tacitly changed. Government departments have again ceased to provide open data. For example, in the database on the website of the Ministry of Justice, the texts of newly adopted laws are no longer published in a timely manner, the parliamentary website does not even publish bills put up for discussion, and the website of the Supreme Court, now only uses initials to identify people involved in trials, making

16 Минюст против «Клоопа»: Верховный суд оставил за журналистами право на доступ к информации (kloop.kg)

it difficult for investigative journalists and other citizens to find the right court verdicts<sup>17</sup>.

In more rural areas, access to information is even more difficult. “Now the press services have become PR departments in a bad sense of the word,” Sadiev said, “They are only engaged in promotion and laudatory posts and content their leaders force them to post. This is especially true of local authorities. The press services for the mayors of Osh Sarbashev, Mambetov, and Jalalabad do not provide two-way communication, but simply promote the media image of their leaders.”

### **Indicator 9: There are diverse channels for information flow.**

The lack of open data on the affiliation of certain media to political groups makes their audience vulnerable, because it does not allow them to know what interests these media serve.

As evidence of the violation by the authorities of the right of journalists to access information, panelists cited the case of authorities misleading journalists with information about the property of the convicted ex-customs officer Raim Matraimov, which the Kloop publishing house encountered when developing a study.

### **Indicator 10: Information channels are independent.**

One of the concerns that all panelists named was the information broadcast by the public broadcasting corporation of Kyrgyzstan, KTRK. This information is politicized and broadcasts the interests of the ruling elites, not the public interest; for example, in January 2021, it held a debate among presidential candidates and confused the public with questions that had notes of propaganda regarding the introduction of a presidential form of government in the country<sup>18</sup>.

The financing of state-owned media from the state budget leads to control by the government. This funding has a number of negative

consequences: it creates unequal conditions in the market and thereby distorts the media market of the country; it turns state-owned media into instruments of political struggle, depriving them of the ability to compete and create high-quality information content propagating the perception of journalists as unscrupulous and corrupt; and it hinders technological development and the introduction of innovative approaches in media activities due to the lack of competition within the state media, limited resources, and fixed earnings of information content producers.

Factcheck.kg journalists, under the heading “Media Criticism,” also found that KTRK uses such manipulation, misinformation, and mislabeling in its investigations. Authorities have currently developed a new draft law “On the Kyrgyz Broadcasting Corporation,” which plans to return the status of a National State Institution to the public TV channel, abolish the Public Supervisory Board of KTRK, and allow the president of the country to appoint the broadcaster’s general director, essentially institutionalizing unlimited political interference in the activities of the TV channel and depriving the public of the possibility of nonstate control. The Committee to Protect Journalists called on authorities to withdraw the bill on strengthening state control over the broadcaster<sup>19</sup>. Panelist Daniyar Sadiev explained the reason for this systematic control, “The only public channel directly depends financially on the state budget, and people in power use it.”

Speaking about nonstate media, panelists observed that a media outlet’s level of independence is determined by the political interests of the owners. There is a widespread model in the country in which well-known politicians seek to create or buy existing media in order to use them for their political influence.

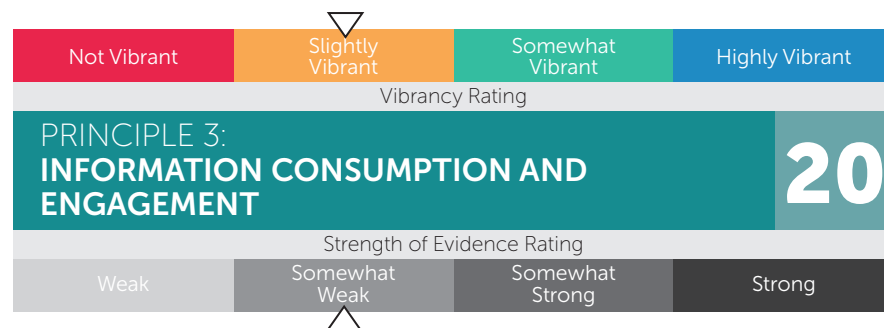
Among the politicians who have in the past, and continue to own the media, are Almazbek Atambaev--former president of Kyrgyzstan (he is credited with owning a TV channel, now an online Aprel news agency)--and Omurbek Tekebaev the leader of the ATa-Meken political party,

17 [https://m.facebook.com/story.php?story\\_fbid=1898515256999048&id=100005217763129](https://m.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=1898515256999048&id=100005217763129)

18 [https://kaktus.media/doc/429355\\_eto\\_ne\\_obshestvennyy\\_kanal\\_socseti\\_otreagirovali\\_na\\_voprosy\\_vedyshiv\\_ktrk\\_na\\_debatah.html](https://kaktus.media/doc/429355_eto_ne_obshestvennyy_kanal_socseti_otreagirovali_na_voprosy_vedyshiv_ktrk_na_debatah.html)

19 [https://24.kg/obschestvo/213068\\_CPJ\\_prizyivaet\\_otozvat\\_zakonoproekt\\_ovozyraschenii\\_otrk\\_statusa\\_gosudarstvennogo/](https://24.kg/obschestvo/213068_CPJ_prizyivaet_otozvat_zakonoproekt_ovozyraschenii_otrk_statusa_gosudarstvennogo/) ; <https://cpj.org/2021/11/kyrgyzstan-drafts-law-to-bring-state-funded-broadcaster-under-closer-presidential-control/>

deputy of the 6th Parliamentary convocation, and now Kyrgyzstan's ambassador to Germany. There are also several media platforms owned by people close to the key leaders of the country. Among such "affiliated" media is Channel 7, which, according to the electronic database of the Ministry of Justice, belongs to Kazybek Tashiev, the brother of the current head of the State Committee for National Security, Kamchybek Tashiev.



Principle 3 received the lowest average score of all the principles in the Kyrgyzstan study, with the indicator on media literacy receiving the lowest scores. While the country has passed laws geared toward protecting personal data and enacted a strategy to build its digital security capacity, enforcement of these laws has been weak, leaving citizen data vulnerable and independent media open to cyberattacks. While journalists, activists, and civil society try to exercise their right to freedom of speech, ordinary citizens are not well-versed in their human and civil rights and do not know how to protect them. For the most part, media in the country do not study the needs and interests of their audience.

### Indicator 11: People can safely use the internet due to privacy protections and security tools.

The rapid development of internet communications and the promotion of the digital economy in Kyrgyzstan require the development of mechanisms for protecting the personal information of citizens and ensuring cybersecurity. To solve these problems, in 2008 the government

passed a law on personal information aimed at protecting human rights and freedoms related to the collection, processing and use of personal data; it was the first country in the region to adopt this kind of law<sup>20</sup>. The Law was updated in 2017, and a number of legal acts were adopted to ensure implementation of the law. The government also adopted the "Cybersecurity Strategy of the Kyrgyz Republic for 2019-2023," aimed at "forming a domestic cybersecurity system and policy to ensure an appropriate level of security for citizens, businesses and the state, allowing them to protect their vital interests in cyberspace."<sup>21</sup>

Unfortunately, enforcement of these laws on cybersecurity and protection of digital rights of citizens is still weak due to a number of factors:

- 1) Until 2021, the country did not have an authorized body responsible for monitoring the use of personal data and taking preventive measures to prevent violation of the law<sup>22</sup>. In December 2021, the State Agency for the Protection of Personal Data was established under the Cabinet of Ministers of the Kyrgyz Republic<sup>23</sup>, which is currently working on the development of "rules, instructions and requirements for the protection of personal data before direct supervision and inspection of holders of an array of personal data."<sup>24</sup>

Meanwhile, research on personal data in the commercial sector, conducted in 2021 by the Kyrgyzstan Chapter of the Internet Society (supported by the Soros Foundation of Kyrgyzstan)

<sup>20</sup> [Закон КР от 14 апреля 2008 года № 58 "Об информации персонального характера" \(minjust.gov.kg\)](http://minjust.gov.kg)

<sup>21</sup> [СТРАТЕГИЯ кибербезопасности Кыргызской Республики на 2019-2023 годы \(к постановлению Правительства Кыргызской Республики от 24 июля 2019 года N 369\) \(minjust.gov.kg\)](http://minjust.gov.kg)

<sup>22</sup> N. Arzymbaev, T. Sultanov, A. Bozoeva, J. Zuridinova, Research on personal data in the commercial sector of the Kyrgyz Republic, [Microsoft Word - Personal Data Protection KR Final.docx \(isoc.kg\)](http://isoc.kg)

<sup>23</sup> [В Кыргызстане создали Государственное агентство по защите персональных данных \(kaktus.media\)](http://kaktus.media)

<sup>24</sup> <https://dpa.gov.kg/>

revealed that “the vast majority of the studied commercial companies illegally collect personal data, do not familiarize users with the list of personal data collected, the purposes of their collection and processing, rights, storage periods and their protection. Among other things, researchers have recorded cases of the collection of personal data in a variety of categories, including ethnic origin, political views, religious or philosophical beliefs, as well as data relating to health and sexual inclinations, and the collection of personal data that does not correspond to the text of the consents received.”<sup>25</sup>

- 2) At the regulatory level, sufficient mechanisms for guaranteeing the protection of personal data have not been developed. For example, there are no regulations on the notification of leaks, resulting in no confidence among citizens in the security of their personal data. According to a survey conducted by Kloop in the cities of Bishkek and Osh, almost 80 percent of citizens are afraid that their data could be stolen and used by third parties.<sup>26</sup> Panelist Akmat Alagushev stated, “Issues regarding digital rights are not regulated and are not supported by additional rules.”
- 3) The low level of digital literacy among the population and producers of information content limits citizens’ abilities to protect themselves and their data on the internet, as well as to exercise their rights to freedom of speech.

From the point of view of the panelists, all these aspects indicate a

<sup>25</sup> <https://prevention.kg/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/Personal-Data-Protection-KR-correct-v-2022.pdf> The study was conducted by the public foundation “Kyrgyz branch of the Internet society ISOC Kyrgyzstan Chapter” with the support of the Soros Foundation Kyrgyzstan within the framework of the project “My digital rights,” 2021

<sup>26</sup> [Почти 80% опрошенных в Бишкеке и Оше опасаются утечки персональных данных — отчет проекта «Безопасного города» \(kloop.kg\)](#)

weak interest from the state in ensuring the digital rights of citizens and cybersecurity. “Cyber security is very poorly provided in Kyrgyzstan. In 2019-2020, a number of media outlets, including Factchek.kg, 24.kg, economist.kg, Kaktus, Kloop Media, Politklinika, Speak-TV, April TV, and medialaw.kg, were subjected to DDOS attacks. Most of these attacks were related to the coverage of investigations into customs corruption,” said panelist Sanjar Eraliev. “The media community then expressed serious concern about the inaction on the part of state bodies, which, in accordance with the law, should have taken an active position in ensuring the constitutional right of citizens to freedom of speech.”

Panelist Makhinur Niyazova also noted, “The law on the protection of personal data is mainly declarative in nature, but in a selective way it can become an obstacle in the access of publicly significant information for investigative journalists.”

**“The law on the protection of personal data is mainly declarative in nature, but in a selective way it can become an obstacle in the access of publicly significant information for investigative journalists,” noted Niyazova.**

According to the panelists, the state is not just demonstrating inaction, but a number of key state leaders “with their posts on social networks, contribute to the dissemination of low-quality information.”

For example, fact checkers have established several cases when the president of the country produced or distributed unverified, false information in his account. Numerous dedicated social media and troll groups spread these fake messages further on social media.

Sadiev believed that most media outlets function without tools and mechanisms for protecting themselves against DDOS attacks. In assessing the unprecedented number of social media hacks of public figures and activists, as well as online publications in 2021, panelist Almaz Ismanov explained the vulnerability of the media and other professional content producers. Because not only do they have limited access to educational programs on digital security, but also to the necessary digital security tools. Expensive cyber-attack protection programs are out of reach for many media organizations. Not all media even have a licensed base package from Microsoft or other professional



licensed programs.

Panelist Gulbarchyn Amirova believes that not only the media, but also government agencies themselves need to ensure digital hygiene and cybersecurity. “Everyone knows about the attacks on the websites of state bodies, the failures of the CEC information system during the last parliamentary elections,” Amirova specified.

### **Indicator 12: People have the necessary skills and tools to be media literate.**

The monitoring of social networks during the 2021 pre-election period (local and presidential elections), conducted by the Center for Media Development Public Foundation together with the NGO MEMO 98, revealed manipulations and misinformation in the campaign activities of key candidates and their supporters<sup>27</sup> and demonstrated how the “troll factories” of criminal and corrupt clans worked for an individual candidate for president. In such a campaign environment, a population that does not have critical thinking and lacks media literacy skills easily becomes a victim of false information.

Panelist Kubanych Zhusanov said, “Many yellow presses have a factory of trolls and fakes. And with their help, they artificially create false public opinion. And ordinary users willingly believe them. They don’t know how to double-check information.”

The population’s low level of media literacy is due to the lack of systematic education and development of critical thinking. In discussing this indicator, panelists noted that the state is not taking any significant

27 <https://medialaw.kg/2021/02/08/monitoring-socialnyh-setej-v-predvybornyj-period-2021-60-tysyach-postov-v-podderzhku-zhaparova-tolko-v-odnoj-gruppe-facebook/>

**Panelist Akmat Alagushev said, “The authorities do not need a media literate citizen, and they do not even need a literate person at all. Media literacy issues are dealt with only by NGOs and the media, funded by grants from Western countries. People in our country are media illiterate to a large extent. Even educated people are not all media literate,” said Alagushev.**

steps to improve the media literacy of the population. The school curriculum and the system of vocational education does not provide for courses to increase the media awareness of students. Because of this lack of media literacy and critical thinking skills, young people and adults are often victims of fake information. An illustrative example of this is how the population, guided by misinformation about the dangers of vaccination from social networks, avoid vaccination: Factcheck.kg published an article refuting the claim that a computer chip is inserted into the human body along with the COVID-19 vaccine. Despite attempts to disseminate material about the benefits of vaccination as a protection against contracting the virus, the percentage of vaccinated citizens in the country does not exceed 50 percent. According to the statistics from the E-Health Center under the Ministry of Health of the Kyrgyz Republic, only 40 percent of Kyrgyz are vaccinated with one dose of the vaccine, and only 17 percent of citizens received two doses of the vaccine.<sup>28</sup>

Panelist Akmat Alagushev said, “The authorities do not need a media literate citizen, and they do not even need a literate person at all. Media literacy issues are dealt with only by NGOs and the media, funded by grants from Western countries. People in our country are media illiterate to a large extent. Even educated people are not all media literate.”

Citizens with low media literacy are susceptible to fake information in the field of politics, and many have suffered economically by trusting fraudulent information on social networks, like citizens who shared their personal data in response to a fake mailing list about a raffle in honor of the 29th anniversary of the National Bank of Kyrgyzstan<sup>29</sup>.

28 [Главная страница - Vaccine \(emed.gov.kg\)](#)

29 [https://24.kg/ekonomika/217696\\_rozyigryish\\_vchest\\_29-letiya\\_natsbanka\\_moshennichestvo/](https://24.kg/ekonomika/217696_rozyigryish_vchest_29-letiya_natsbanka_moshennichestvo/)

“There is a stereotypical opinion that media literacy is exclusively within the competence of media organizations and journalists.” observed Ismanov. International organizations primarily carry out efforts to improve media literacy, generally as part of the implementation of short-term projects. For example, helping journalists protect themselves from cyberattacks is part of the Media-K project to develop independent media in Kyrgyzstan.

### **Indicator 13: People engage productively with the information that is available to them.**

Journalists, activists, and NGO representatives actively use information available to them, and they exercise their rights to freedom of speech. However, ordinary citizens do not know about their human and civil rights and do not know how to protect them. Residents of remote villages are especially vulnerable in terms of protecting their rights: They have fewer chances to receive legal training and fewer opportunities to participate in civil public hearings and discussion platforms, since these activities are mainly concentrated in big cities. They also have fewer resources to speak up publicly for their rights in a way that could influence decision-making.

Digitization of governance could expand the ability of the country’s citizens to participate in governance and increase public oversight in decision-making. The state has created special public online platforms for discussing bills or government initiatives, for example, the Koom Talkuu portal. However, the algorithm for expressing citizens’ opinions and the lack of explanatory documents--plus the need to be familiar with legal language and poor information about the existence of such platforms--make this opportunity for involvement in civic participation impossible for most citizens.

In this context, journalists and other professional content producers are the only alternatives who could objectively and promptly inform the population about important events taking place in the country. However, even professional content producers are increasingly deprived of access to information sources. Niyazova said, “Only accredited journalists or pre-registered activists and citizens can get into the parliament for

discussion. There is no free access.” Maslova added that the initiators of the bills conduct public discussions, they only invite participants loyal to them so that there is less criticism. Representatives don’t want to actually listen to citizens, just promoted the appearance civic dialogue.

Alternative public platforms are social networks or political protests and rallies. However, the level of discussion often consists of hateful language and enmity; furthermore, public discussions are often poorly moderated and do not allow people to effectively participate in discussions on socially significant issues. Moreover, researchers of political mobilization in Kyrgyzstan have noted a deterioration in the quality of mass actions in recent years<sup>30</sup>. Most citizens, especially from rural areas, cannot exercise their digital rights or the rights to freedom of opinion. “Most people in Batken Oblast prefer to remain silent about their problems. People have a deep-rooted belief that the problem will not be solved anyway,” Amirova said.

### **Indicator 14: Media and information producers engage with their audience’s needs.**

Most of the media have no idea about their audience and its information needs, and media professionals do not often have the opportunity to study their audience. The country’s online publications are in a better position because they can track statistics about their audience and their preferences through Google Analytics. However, Bektur Iskender noted, “Online publications, as a rule, do not have the resources for qualitative research of the audience and are limited to quantitative data.”

For traditional media, the situation regarding the study of consumers is difficult. For more than four years, no research has been conducted on media consumption in Kyrgyzstan, with the exception of a study on the consumption of information by children and adolescents from 7 to 17 years old<sup>31</sup>.

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30 <https://www.caa-network.org/archives/8823>

31 Conducted in 2021 under the auspices of the K. Bayalinov Republic Library by Public Fund “Door” and Public Association “Information Resource Centers.”

Internews in Kyrgyzstan, together with USAID and the Industrial Media Committee Association, has been working to introduce permanent measurements of television audiences using people meters<sup>32</sup>. A pilot study was launched in 2019 to implement people meters in 250 households across three cities: Bishkek, Osh, and Jalalabad<sup>33</sup>. Despite the limited sampling of the measurement, covering only urban populations and only measuring television, as well as the desire and ability of television companies to buy audience measurement results, there is a lot of hope associated with this program. In the meantime, in the absence of access to objective information about the consumers of content produced, television and radio companies have to conduct their analyses based on comments and support on social media pages for the channels. Even small media outlets are trying to understand the media preferences of their audience, each using different strategies. “We conducted a Google survey among radio listeners. Every day, we track the statistics on the consumption of the YouTube version - which videos were viewed more, what is the reach, etc,” explained Amirova.

The distrust of the population towards the authorities, as well as towards professional content producers, is due to several factors, the most important of which is the lack of effort from media to actively engage with their audience. The most successful example of audience interaction is from Kloop Media. Ismanov explained that representatives of this publishing house are trying to earn the trust of their audience by openly talking about their authors and methods of preparing materials, including publishing corrections.

Sadiev said, “There is no work to organize feedback from audiences, especially among regional media. Currently, T-Media, with the support of the US Embassy, has started a project to provide feedback to the audience through the production of user-generated content (UGC). Other media, in addition to comments on social networks, do not have much feedback and do not analyze what they do have. Moreover, they don’t

hold meetings or events with the audience to strengthen communication with them.”

### **Indicator 15: Community media provides information relevant for community engagement.**

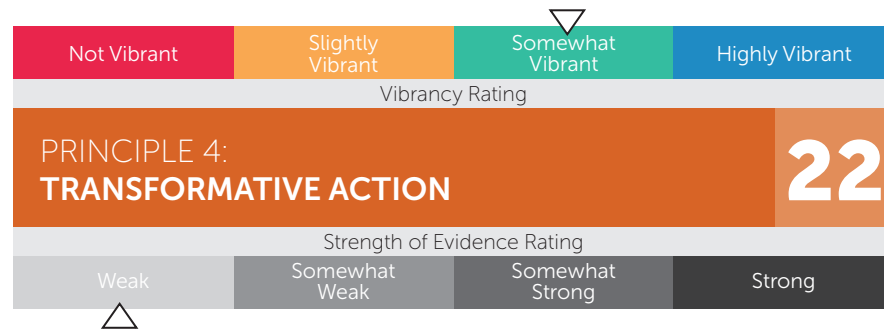
The indicator on the functioning of the media in local communities and the information needs of local communities turned out to be the most difficult for many panelists. Leading media managers, journalists, bloggers, media NGO employees, and journalism teachers, with rare exceptions, did not have sufficient information about the state of community media in the country. While community media do exist, colleagues from regional and national media know little about their activities.

Content produced by community media is available on the website of the Community Media Association, which unites four community radio stations and 21 community multimedia centers<sup>34</sup>. According to the panelists who are familiar with the activities of community media, the site rarely contains targeted news that could not be found on regional or national outlets. Adela Laisheva said content for these outlets is compiled by high school students from local schools, noting also that the amount of donations to sustain community media is decreasing every year, making it difficult for these outlets to compete.

32 [USAID и Интерньюс поддержали первый этап внедрения пиплметрии в Кыргызстане : Internews in Kyrgyz Republic](#)

33 <https://internews.kg/glavnye-novosti/proekt-po-izmereniyu-televizionnoj-auditorii-startuet-v-kyrgyzstane/>

34 <https://ru.kyrgyzmedia.kg/ob-assotsiatsii/>



While analytical and niche media is limited in Kyrgyzstan, the country's media landscape does enjoy varied media content ranging from economic to educational, with political coverage popular. Fake news and misinformation about the COVID-19 pandemic ran rampant, including promotion of home remedies and amplification of conspiracy theories about vaccines containing computer chips. As a result, Kyrgyzstan's vaccination rate has remained low. While there is some cooperation between media outlets and civil society, it is still an area with untapped potential. There are few methods or platforms through which the government interacts with citizens, and the government largely ignores instances of corruption, human rights violations, and elections irregularities.

### Indicator 16: Information producers and distribution channels enable or encourage information sharing across ideological lines.

There is a variety of media with a range of content: political, economic, educational and entertainment. Niyazova noted that due to the politicization of society, content on political topics is considered popular and in demand. Participants in the expert discussion unanimously agreed that there is practically no nonpoliticized news in Kyrgyzstan.

Among information agencies (Akipress, 24.kg, K-News, Kaktus Media, etc.), only Kaktus.media gives an opportunity to post comments. Most users comment on their position on the social media pages of the above media.

In general, while recognizing that the media landscape in Kyrgyzstan is diverse in terms of ownership and political ideologies represented, panelists noted the limited ability of the population to access analytical information flows and specialized niche media. Moreover, panelists observed that the presence of a pluralistic ideological media environment does not mean that different political positions can be held on the same platform and presented on equal footing. As a rule, supporters of a certain ideology cannot present it on a media outlet if the owners of said outlet hold different political views.

"In the entire country, there is a media that reflects different political views and positions, although at the moment pro-government media dominate quantitatively," Sadiev said. He further explained that this can largely be attributed to the number of media funded by pro-government politicians, as well as state-owned media that traditionally cover the perspective of officials and people in power.

While there are not many independent media, they try to objectively cover and produce nonpoliticized, high-quality information. Their audience is comparable to the audience of state channels and politicized media, despite the smaller number. Unfortunately, access to politicized and state media is limited for dissidents and people who have different opinions, and their positions are not reflected. At the same time, government officials do not always cooperate with politically neutral media.

Representatives of various ideological views use social networks as platforms for collecting information, because people share their opinions through posts, comments, or their own content. Instagram and Facebook are particularly popular. "People with different political views actively participate in discussions on social networks, especially on Facebook," Semetey Karypkulov said. But often the culture of these discussions leaves much to be desired. Eraliev explained, "Any political event gives rise to wide circles of discussion on Facebook. But these discussions cannot be described as constructive. Most of the political discussions on Facebook are hostile groups of users who represent irreconcilable poles of opinion."



### Indicator 17: Individuals use quality information to inform their actions.

Individuals are influenced by mis- and disinformation. Iskander explained, “The role of fakes and trolls in shaping the agenda can be quite high. Fake news played a particularly large role in 2021 in the continued stigmatization of the LGBT community, as well as human rights organizations.” Sadiev added that during elections and political campaign seasons, voters do not receive quality and reliable information; it is either embellished or uncomfortable facts about the candidates are buried. He also noted one example of fake information that was circulated on social media platforms about members of the opposition political party Ata-Meken. In order for the information to appear reliable, posts were accompanied by the logos of popular publications such as Kloop, Azattyk, and Next TV.

A large number of citizens were also influenced by all sorts of fake mailings on social networks and instant messengers, which promoted “treatment protocols” for COVID-19. Despite public health information content discouraging citizens from self-medicating to treat the virus, the situation has worsened. The World Health Organization expressed concern the situation could result in increasing antibiotic resistance: “There is an unfavorable situation in Kyrgyzstan due to the excessive use of antibiotics, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic.”<sup>35</sup>

Commenting on these and other patterns of citizen behavior, Alimova doubted that high-quality, factual information could prevent the negative impact of fake news streams. “Even when we presented materials based on flashy facts, there were many people who did not accept this information,” she explained, “We saw this at the beginning

of the coronavirus pandemic. No matter how we provide reliable information, there were those who fell for the misleading messages distributed via messengers and followed their recipes: they treated the virus by gargling soda, they used aconite tinctures, etc.”

Moreover, according to some panelists, such false information continues to flow. Fake messages on platforms report “miraculous” folk remedies for the treatment of COVID-19, or they “reveal secrets” about vaccinations as a campaign to exterminate or zombify people. A significant proportion of citizens accept such information as objective and follow its recommendations, rather than receiving the vaccine. According to the Ministry of Health, at the end of December 2021, just 15 percent of the adult population of the country were vaccinated<sup>36</sup>.

“Any political event gives rise to wide circles of discussion on Facebook. But these discussions cannot be described as constructive. Most of the political discussions on Facebook are hostile groups of users who represent irreconcilable poles of opinion,” explained Eraliev.

### Indicator 18: Civil society uses quality information to improve their communities.

Panelists were divided in their assessments of the role of civil society in Kyrgyz life —some asserted that the NGO sector in the county is very influential and progressive, while others believe that the civil society sector is significantly fragmented, and the proportion of truly influential and active organizations is very small. Some panelists also observed there are pro-government NGOs (state NGOs) that only imitate civic activity. However, most panelists admitted that were it not for civil society activists and a number of NGOs, tendencies towards authoritarianism and the power grabs by key politicians would be much more frightening.

Although Iskender gave an example of his own cooperation with NGOs to monitor the situation of Kyrgyz people detained by Tajikistan during

35 [Кыргызстан и Дания договорились о совместных исследованиях по устойчивости к антибиотикам \(kaktus.media\)](#)

36 <https://kloop.kg/blog/2021/12/27/respublikanskij-shtab-polnyj-kurs-vaktsinatsii-ot-covid-19-proshli-bolee-1-mln-kyrgyzstantsev/>

the border conflict, the collaboration between NGOs and the media is mostly fragmented, and in general, there are still problems with high-quality interaction between the two. NGOs are interested in cooperation with the media only at the beginning of the project--to disseminate information and start work--or at the end to announce the results achieved. Sadiev commented that media do not seek out partnerships with NGOs, and they are not aware that NGOs have expert information on social issues. The mechanisms for building effective communication between representatives of civil society and the media industry remain a problem area that requires efforts from both sides.

The manipulation of public opinion and disinformation from authorities in order to hide corruption and abuse of power limits civil society's access to quality information. Because of their corruption, authorities seek to hide information and restrict access to avoid accountability and transparency. State bodies rarely practice information campaigns to clarify the essence of ongoing or upcoming political, socio-economic or cultural events.

NGOs are actively involved in discussions of legislative initiatives and prepare high-quality analytical content. Sadiev cited the Media Policy Institute as an example, which “prepared a legal analysis of the most important issues related to the activities of the media, holding public debates and campaigning within the framework of the electoral legislation.” However, in her assessment, Niyzaova argued that the quality of content produced by representatives of NGOs and civil society groups leaves much to be desired. Moreover, their efforts remain unsuccessful. As an example, she cited the introduction of amendments to the law “On nonprofit organizations.”<sup>37</sup> These amendments caused a storm of public outcry among representatives of civil society, because they obligate all NGOs to make details of their work public, including accounting documents and property records, as well as personal data of

employees. “This step was perceived by civil society as a retreat from the principles of democracy<sup>38</sup>,” the analytical portal CABAR.asia reported. Despite protests and rallies, amendments to the law were nevertheless adopted in 2021.

### **Indicator 19: Government uses quality information to make public policy decisions.**

For the most part, the government of Kyrgyzstan does not seem interested in communicating with the population or explaining the policies and decisions being made. As a rule, the authorities use only a few methods or formats to interact with citizens. “In general, the country has mechanisms for the interaction of representatives of state bodies with representatives of civil society and the media. But, unfortunately, things like press conference, briefings, press cafes, and press tours are used less and less by government agencies to interact with the media and journalists,” Ismanov said.

Due to the low levels of media literacy in the country, the presence of fake and misinformation had dramatic consequences for the life and health of people during the pandemic, with even senior government officials such as the president and minister of health advising people to drink a tincture of the poisonous aconite plant to treat COVID-19. As a result, the media received isolated reports of fatal poisoning of individual citizens with aconite.

### **Indicator 20: Information supports good governance and democratic rights**

The ability of citizens to effectively communicate with politicians, deputies and other officials is often limited to short periods of pre-

**“The role of fakes and trolls in shaping the agenda can be quite high. Fake news played a particularly large role in 2021 in the continued stigmatization of the LGBT community, as well as human rights organizations,” explained Iskander.**

37 [Закон КР от 15 октября 1999 года № 111 “О некоммерческих организациях” \(minjust.gov.kg\)](#)

38 [Поправки в закон об НКО: В Кыргызстане сужают гражданское пространство - CABAR.asia](#)

election campaign meetings and discussions on media platforms. However, it is during the pre-election periods that the volume and frequency of unscrupulous and unreliable information increases, and the population is bombarded with fake information produced by special troll farms.

Kloop Media journalists and specialists from the Media Policy Institute investigated how politicians and political parties used trolls and fake information on the eve of the Parliamentary elections on October 4, 2020, and the presidential elections on January 10, 2021. This study resulted in a database of 425 accounts, which the researchers provided to Facebook, where they were subsequently removed from the social network<sup>39</sup>.

Some organizations and individuals, using fake accounts and troll groups on social networks and false information and manipulation techniques, are trying to discredit democratic institutions, including the Parliament, public organizations, and independent media. In 2021 and 2020, these efforts were particularly impactful. As a result, value orientations have changed among a certain part of the population: an opinion is being formed that NGOs = LGBT, and this is a threat to national identity and values.

Analyzing the impact of unreliable, and sometimes blatantly false, information on the population and their behavior in the election processes of 2021, Ismanov came to the same conclusion. “Disinformation practically discredited the idea of parliamentary governance and democratic institutions,” he said. “Due to the bias and inability of individual politicians, there was a strong discrediting of parliament as an institution of power.”

When assessing how the government handles corruption and other legal infractions, Iskander said, “The state most often covers up corruption, human rights violations, and election violations. While media pressure has made officials generally more fearful of corruption, it has not gone

<sup>39</sup> <https://kloop.kg/blog/2021/01/14/kyrgyzskaya-fejk-ferma-fejsbuk-i-instagram-udalili-sotni-akkauntov-za-manipulyatsii-na-vyborah/>; <https://kloop.kg/blog/2020/12/31/pozharnaya-komanda-vlasti-kak-legko-sozdat-fabriku-fejkov-v-kyrgyzstane/>; <https://kloop.kg/blog/2020/02/12/ferma-trollej-po-kyrgyzski-kak-fejki-pytayutsya-vliyat-na-vashe-mnenie/>

away, and there are indications that newly elected officials have used 2021 to plot their own enrichment schemes. There is less bribery in the elections, as a result of pressure from the media and civil society. However, authorities are simply trying to find new ways to manipulate the results that will be less visible to society.”

While acknowledging the low impact of quality journalism on power, panelists remain convinced of the importance of providing and scaling up quality content. As Niyazova said, “The availability of quality information contributes to a better understanding of the processes of society... In some areas, repeat elections are scheduled due to the announced information. Quality content needs to be produced. People need it, and it will gradually develop media literacy and critical thinking.”

## LIST OF PANEL PARTICIPANTS

**Akmat Alagushev**, media ombudsman, Institute of Media Policy, Bishkek

**Dilbar Alimova**, editor-in-chief, PolitClinic (PolitKlinika), Bishkek

**Gulbarchyn Amirova**, deputy director, Radio Salam, Batken

**Sanjar Eraliev**, journalist, Azattyk Media, Bishkek

**Bektur Iskender**, founder, Kloop Media, Bishkek

**Almaz Ismanov**, founder, Prevention Media, Bishkek

**Semetey Karypkulov**, editor-in-chief, Bulak.kg, Bishkek

**Adelya Laisheva**, chairperson, Investigative Journalism Foundation, Bishkek

**Zarina Mamatzhanova**, instructor, Department of Journalism, Osh State University, Osh

**Dina Maslova**, founder and editor-in-chief, Kaktus.media, Bishkek

**Makhinur Niyazova**, editor-in-chief, 24.kg, Bishkek

**Daniyar Sadiyev**, founder, T-Media Group, Osh

**Bolot Temirov**, journalist, Temirov Live (YouTube channel), Bishkek

**Marat Tokoev**, deputy director, Journalists (public association), Bishkek

**Kubanychbek Zhusanov**, freelance journalist, Osh

#### **MODERATOR AND AUTHOR**

**Gulnara Ibraeva**, cofounder, PIL Research Company, Bishkek

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