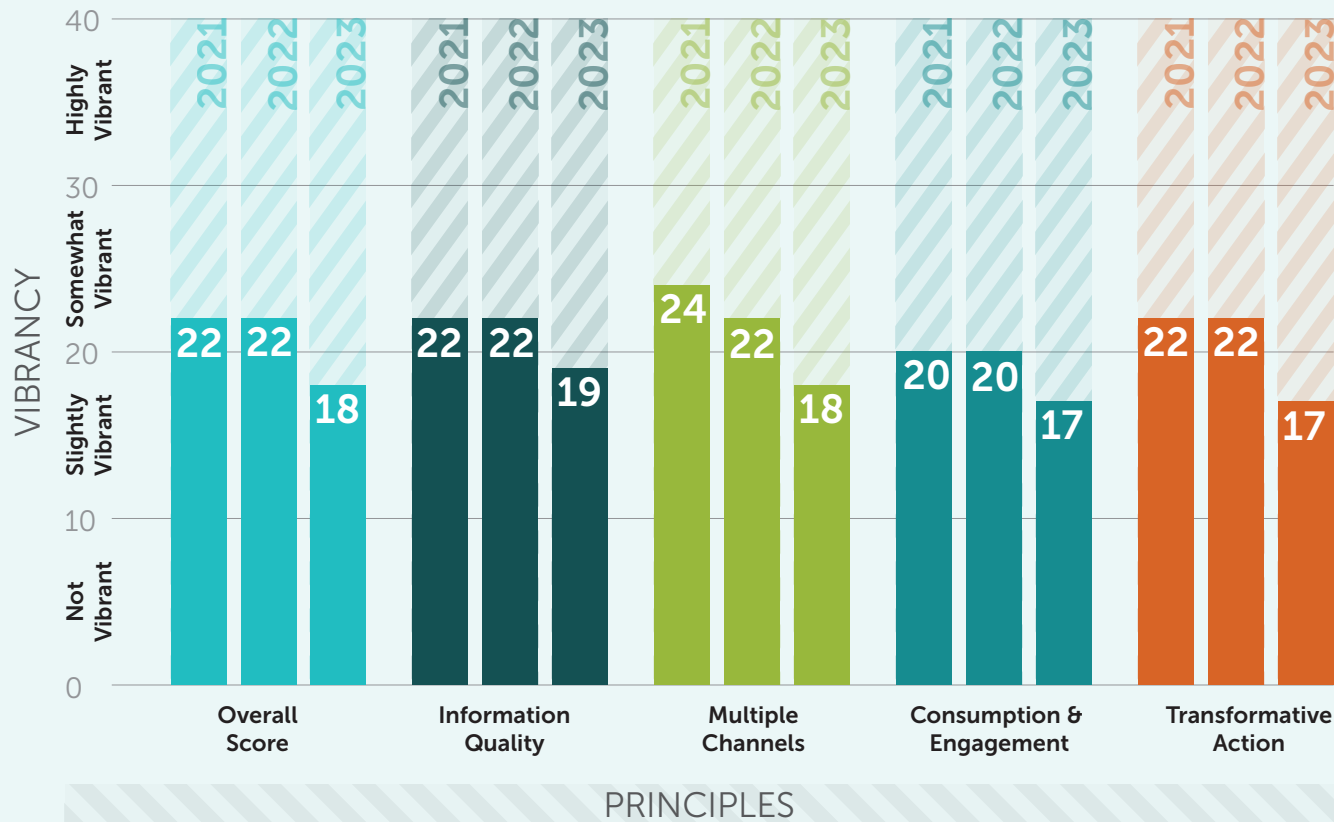


# KYRGYZSTAN

## Vibrant Information Barometer

2 0 2 3





**Highly Vibrant (31-40):** Quality information is widely available in this country. People have the rights, means, and capacity to access a wide range of information; they recognize and reject misinformation.

**Somewhat Vibrant (21-30):** Quality information is available in this country and most of it is editorially independent, based on facts, and not intended to harm. Most people have the rights, means, and capacity to access a wide range of information, although some do not. Most people recognize and reject misinformation, although some do not.

**Slightly Vibrant (11-20):** Quality information is available on a few topics or geographies in this country, but not all. While some information is editorially independent, there is still a significant amount of misinformation, malinformation, and hate speech in circulation, and it does influence public discourse. Most people do not recognize or reject misinformation.

**Not Vibrant (0-10):** Quality information is extremely limited in this country. The vast majority of it is not editorially independent, not based on facts, or it is intended to harm. People do not have the rights, means, or capacity to access a wide range of information; they do not recognize or reject misinformation; and they cannot or do not make choices on what types of information they want to engage with.

Highly Vibrant

Somewhat Vibrant

Slightly Vibrant

Not Vibrant

OVERALL SCORE  
**18**

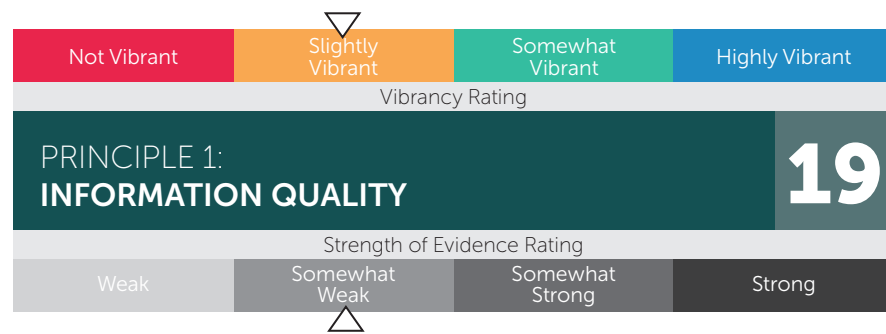
In 2022, Kyrgyzstan dropped eight positions in the democracy rating of the British Research Center’s Economist Intelligence Unit. Kyrgyzstan now ranks 115th among 167 countries in the world. The research center report shows the country also lost its status as a “hybrid regime” and is now considered an “authoritarian regime.”

Kyrgyzstan saw many political developments in 2022. Major rollbacks in democratic gains and freedoms coincided with the tightening of Kyrgyzstan’s domestic policy. A scandal arose surrounding gold production at the nationalized Kumtor mine and the securitization of national gold production and sales. The border delimitation process with Uzbekistan presented problems, with the subsequent repression, arrest, and prosecution of 26 civil-rights activists who protested moving the Kempir-Abad reservoir to Uzbekistan. Also, this year, authorities fabricated a criminal case against the akyn (folk)-improviser/singer/poet Bolot Nazarov and investigative journalist Bolot Temirov, which resulted in the government stripping Temirov’s citizenship and expelling him from the country. Periodic armed clashes broke out on the Tajikistan border due to rapid inflation, rising poverty, declining remittances from migrant workers, and the influx of Russian citizens fleeing the war in Ukraine.

Throughout the second half of 2022, officials in President Sadyr Nurgojoyevich Japarov’s administration promoted a draft media law that significantly restricted the rights to freedom of speech, information, and the media,

according to the Media Policy Institute and the Adilet Legal Clinic. Freedom of speech and other civil liberties suffered under the law, called “On Protection Against the Dissemination of Inaccurate (False) Information.” The law was adopted originally in 2021 to repress independent media. As a result, the government blocked the ResPublica newspaper’s website, Azattyk Media. These trends led to *Freedom House’s Freedom in the World 2022* ranking report to list Kyrgyzstan in the “not free” category, and one of 30 countries experiencing a sharp decline in freedom over the past 10 years, dropping 14 positions.

These trends have negatively impacted the country’s information space, as reflected in the VIBE index score declining from 22 in 2022 to 18 in 2023. Panelists noted widespread and direct suppression of freedom of speech and freedom of assembly throughout the year. They agreed that if these trends continue, soon Kyrgyzstan will have no independent media, and criticizing authorities will be impossible. The nation’s very weak media literacy also poses particular risks.



In 2022, media polarization in Kyrgyzstan intensified. Independent media engaged in an open information war with state-controlled media and their affiliated political factions. Political groups without professional media standards actively defamed journalists in the independent media, accusing them of advocating pro-Western ideology and serving the interests of the US and Europe.

For Principle 1, panelists gave the highest score to the indicator examining the quality of information. This result suggests that the majority of citizens have access to the internet, which helps meet information needs. The panelists gave the lowest score to the indicator examining sufficient resources. Independent media are especially vulnerable: These outlets cannot produce diverse or reliable information in the face of the government legislating against freedom of the press and deliberately spreading false information.

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

Panelists agreed that local journalism outlets increased their capacity to produce quality stories, now that citizens have broader access to digital technologies. However, the overall media sphere has a dearth of quality stories and covers a narrow range of topics. International organizations and donors--including Internews, the Soros Foundation, and the Democracy Commission of the US Embassy--provide the main support for media that do report on a variety of topics. These subjects range from

ecology and urbanization to corruption investigations and gender issues.

In general, newsrooms concentrate resources on creating news content to drive traffic, and mainly focus on national political news. The majority of consumers are traditionally committed to television viewing, and their “window” to international information is still the propaganda-driven journalism of Russian television channels. Local news covers a limited range of topics and is available only the Turmush website (Akipress) and state TV, which encompasses National Television and Radio Corporation of Kyrgyzstan (NTRK) and ElTR, a national television channel whose title means People’s TV in English. With the exception of Osh oblast, outer regions have virtually no functioning independent regional media.

Kyrgyzstan media lack professional staff, which significantly limits capacity to produce high-quality content. Most editorial offices have a shortage of media specialists such as investigative reporters, graphic designers, copywriters, editors, videographers, or even translators. The country has more than 10 universities with journalism programs, but the vast majority of graduates do not enter the profession, according to an October 17, 2022, Internews article. Many media workers become journalists without professional training. Gladys Temirchieva, editor-in-chief of news site Vesti.kg, pointed out that universities train staff without considering the needs of the media market.

International organizations and funders in Kyrgyzstan have non-formal training opportunities for bloggers that work in editorial offices. However, panelists noted that these courses are predominantly specialized in narrow topics, such as data journalism, infographics, and data visualization. Trainers generally do not offer courses on basic media knowledge and skills because of the high turnover in journalism. Instruction is normally taught in Kyrgyz, which automatically excludes journalists working in other languages. Media workers have limited access to foreign, high-quality educational resources, even on the internet, since the majority of content producers are not fluent in enough other languages aside from Kyrgyz.

Nurbek Sydykov, a lawyer at the non-government organization (NGO) Media Policy Institute, confirmed that state and pro-government media

often disseminate false information and misinformation out of selfish motives, often after receiving a written order from an interested party.<sup>1</sup> In 2022, the Media Complaints Commission received nine complaints, including charges of insulting individuals' honor and dignity; one-sided submission of material; and organization of information harassment in social networks. The commission is a media self-regulatory body founded in 2008 to provide an alternative to court procedures. However, panelists noted that often the commission is ineffective in its decisions and recommendations. Some media outlets do not recognize its authority to regulate the professional media community.

Regional print media have limited access to high-quality, non-monopolized printing services. Independent journalist Almaz Ismanov noted the decline and reported that the Public Foundation's American Printing House on the verge of closing.

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

Panelists agreed that journalists have challenges in complying with this standard. Limited human resources in editorial offices and time pressures mean that journalists cannot always double-check the accuracy of data they receive. Journalists also spend considerable time following the legal procedures for obtaining information from relevant state authorities.

The country saw cases where responsible state bodies and politicians disseminated inaccurate information or even disinformation, according to the news site Factcheck.kg and an October 25, 2022, article on news outlet Kloop. Disinformation and fake news comes from all government bodies, notably from the Ministry of Internal Affairs, as well as from the

State Committee for National Security and the Ministry of Education. Often President Japarov disseminates unreliable information, strongly exaggerating government successes. For example, during clashes on the Kyrgyz-Tajik border in 2022, the government's Border Guard Service stated that the Batken International Airport was shelled. But a few hours later, Manas International Airport open joint-stock company (OJSC) officials refuted this information, Kloop reported on September 16, 2022.

**“ The majority of consumers are traditionally committed to television viewing, and their “window” to international information is still the propaganda-driven journalism of Russian television channels.**

According to the panelists, many journalists and bloggers had difficulty distinguishing facts from truth when covering the 2022 Kyrgyz-Tajikistan armed conflicts in September 2022. For example, a number of independent media published an investigation that revealed Tajikistan attacked Kyrgyzstan first, which contradicted the government's information. The pro-government media

not only published materials based on conjectures and assumptions, in violation of professional ethics, but also accused independent media of inciting ethnic conflict.

A group of Kyrgyzstani media--including Azattyk, Kloop, Cactus, Factchek, and T-Media--have united to fight against misinformation and fake news, practicing fact-checking as a mandatory procedure while producing information.

The government's secrecy about the most important socio-political events prevents citizens from learning facts, creates vulnerability to rumors, and contributes to the development of false ideas about news events. For example, consumers still have trouble finding reliable information in the Kempir-Abad reservoir case over disputed territories between Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. Kyrgyzstan authorities classified the agreement, and media information on the case differs greatly in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan.

<sup>1</sup> [https://docs.google.com/document/d/1vqbV6USmMLavY3pMSQJ4\\_04gPLSNWiDAVJBn4YFPaaU/edit](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1vqbV6USmMLavY3pMSQJ4_04gPLSNWiDAVJBn4YFPaaU/edit)

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

Anna Kapushenko, editor-in-chief of Kloop Media, expressed her belief that Kyrgyzstan's professional journalists have no desire to harm anyone by spreading misinformation. "Many newsrooms do this unintentionally due to [limited] human resources," she said. "However, the feeling of a deliberate hatred towards certain groups does appear when analyzing messages broadcast by [government] authorities. President Sadyr Japarov's team is constantly using manipulation and gaslighting to mislead the public," she continued.

Journalist Sanjar Eraliev, with Azattyk Media, pointed out that professional ethics are a significant problem for journalists in the Kyrgyz Republic. "The more opportunities for dissemination of information content, the more violations of ethical standards, and the less the ability of the journalistic community to effectively respond to such violations," he said. At the "Media in Kyrgyzstan: Steps into the Future" forum in March 2022, the media community wrote changes to the country's Journalists Code of Ethics for the fourth time since its passage in 2007.

President Japarov, as a key newsmaker, often makes hostile and hate-filled speeches, stigmatizing dissenting activists and politicians opposed to his policy decisions. In an interview with online outlet Kabar News, Japarov called protesters who rallied against the transfer of the Kempir-Abad reservoir to Uzbekistan "liars" and "false patriots," and even accused them of attempting a coup d'état, in violation of the country's main principle of justice—the presumption of innocence.

Key officials and politicians from the president's administration also often abuse their powers. A December 30, 2022 Kloop article gave the example of Edil Baisalov, Kyrgyzstan's deputy prime minister who is responsible for social issues. The article reported that Baisalov constantly uses manipulation and gaslighting to protect the actions of President Japarov's team, claiming independent media are enemies of the people.

Anyone who criticizes dubious initiatives and decisions of the authorities

is attacked by troll factories, which have become especially widespread since the 2020 parliamentary elections, according to Factcheck.kg. Investigative journalists with the news outlet 24.kg found a connection between Daiyrbek Orunbekov, head of the government's Information Policy Department, with the organization of troll factories. Kloop Media, which monitors Kyrgyzstan's trolls, reported in June 2022 that they uncovered fake online posts promoting individual bills and politicians that protect corrupt officials, harass journalists, and spread propaganda and anti-Ukrainian sentiments.

Several pro-government media outlets instill hatred for NGOs and independent media—claiming that these entities are agents of American or other Western intelligence services that promote values alien to Kyrgyzstan. They tell the public that these so-called agents aim to destroy traditional institutions and culture, and to destabilize Kyrgyzstan's political standing.

In 2022, government officials made yet more attempts to approve a draft law targeting supposed "foreign agents," a tactic borrowed from Russian legislation to control critics. These attempts were accompanied by rallies and public speeches, with pro-government protesters demanding the closure of three independent media outlets, Azattyk, Kloop, and Kaktus Media.

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

Government officials use controlled media to disseminate information that sows enmity and hatred toward certain groups of citizens that disagree with the policies and practices of the ruling elites. Professional media do not fully cover the life and views of all societal groups, least of all ethnic groups. For example, the lives of the largest ethnic groups in the Chuy Valley, the Uyghur and Dungan communities, garner little coverage. Professional media only minimally produce content in the Uzbek language. However, these populations that are underrepresented in key media do have social media alternatives, with thousands of consumers participating in Facebook groups. Ethnically Kyrgyz people are represented in 80 to 90 percent of the country's main media

channels and small media enterprises, Eraliev noted, reducing ethnic minorities' trust in the media.

Given the government's repressive approach to independent media, the journalists and editors from these outlets often cannot produce content on relevant topics: LGBT rights, women's issues, and ethnic minorities such as Uzbeks. "On certain topics, for example, religion and ethnicity, the media try not to prepare materials, fearing [accusations of] inciting hatred," noted Dina Maslova, editor-in-chief of online news site Kaktus Media.

The ruling elites demand that journalists focus more on President Japarov's positive improvements for citizens rather than on negative news that reflects badly on the government. For example, Deputy Head of the Cabinet of Ministers Baysalov, who is active in social networks, directly demanded journalists stop "multiplying pain" in response to media coverage of a rape case involving police officers and a 13-year-old girl.<sup>2</sup>

In August 2022, the Media Policy Institute issued a statement in response to a government attempt to block the 24.kg news outlet, noting that authorities continually accused journalists of being more dangerous for the country than the real enemies of society: corruption and nepotism in power. "The further the authorities move away from the truth, the more they will hate those who speak it," the statement read. The law "On Protection from False Information" now is used for illegitimate purposes to persecute independent media. This is the new face of censorship in Kyrgyzstan, according to Media Policy Institute's statement, and seems to indicate an intention to establish state control over independent news.

Gender representation in the journalism is disproportionate. Because of low salaries and the low status of Kyrgyzstan's journalism profession, state media outlets overwhelmingly appoint men as managers, while

core staff are largely women. At independent media, women dominate among the leaders and founders.

### Indicator 5: Content production is sufficiently resourced

Independent media have especially limited financial resources, as traditional funding sources for media activities are no longer enough for survival. Advertising revenues for all independent media have decreased significantly as advertisers have shifted their focus to social networks. Advertising placement by key state-owned and affiliated companies is very politicized. The State Property Management Fund (SPMF) and President Japarov's press service decide on the outlets and the types of advertising placements.

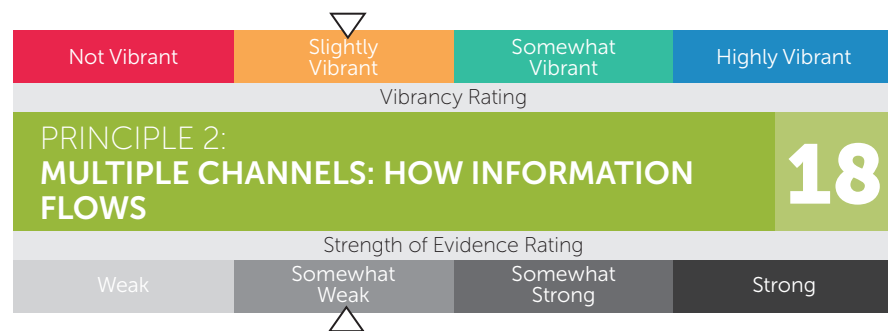
Independent media survive on grants from foreign donors and organizations, which are limited and do not give journalists long-term or stable employment. Many newsrooms have reduced their already meager staff and implemented salary freezes in an attempt to lower costs, despite rising inflation. Editors are constantly faced with high

turnover as trained personnel leave newsrooms for higher wages. "The editorial offices that have financial resources hunt for promising or experienced employees from other editorial offices, offering them higher salaries," according to Vesti.kg's Temirchieva. Alarming, [media monitoring](#) conducted by the NGO Journalists in 2022 show that regional media in Kyrgyzstan are on the verge of collapse due to lack of financing. In contrast to independent media's declining financial situation, a number of state media are in a privileged position. Year after year, funding for state-owned media has grown. The majority (64 percent) of the state's total media budget goes to the country's main TV channel, NTRK, which in 2022 lost its public status and became a national channel and TV family. NTRK has not published reports on its income and expenses since 2014. In general, the public cannot access information about state-run media outlets' finances or sources of money. State funding does not go to all state-owned media. For example, the state

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2 [https://24.kg/vlast/239039\\_vinovaty\\_i\\_smi\\_edil\\_baysalov\\_otkazalsya\\_komentirovat\\_iznasilovanie\\_devochki/](https://24.kg/vlast/239039_vinovaty_i_smi_edil_baysalov_otkazalsya_komentirovat_iznasilovanie_devochki/)

regional website Kyrgyz.media closed in August 2022 due to lack of funding.



In Principle 2, panelists gave their lowest average scores to the indicator looking at citizens’ rights to produce, distribute, and consume information and to the indicator concerning the independence of information channels. Kyrgyzstan has increasingly lowered its legal protections for freedom of speech, and key government officials have created an environment in which citizens have no possible way to criticize the regime. Officials also use state media as political tools to manipulate public opinion. The highest scores in this Principle went to the indicator examining access to channels of information, buoyed by affordable internet and widespread access to digital broadcasting.

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

The Constitution of Kyrgyzstan contains provisions guaranteeing freedom of speech, freedom of expression, and freedom of the press. Despite these protections, in years past authorities have attempted to revise media legislation. In 2022, the Kyrgyz government developed a new draft law, amending the 2021 legislation on mass media. A legal analysis of the revised law showed that it gives the state unreasonably wide opportunities to regulate and interfere in the activities of the media. According to an October 27, 2022 Kloop Media report, journalists believe authorities are again attempting to introduce censorship with the draft law.

Panelists noted that despite the relatively liberal nature of media legislation, the government continually suppresses freedom of speech. Journalists and civil rights activists who criticize corrupt authorities are criminally prosecuted on various pretexts. They also receive threats and are preemptively interrogated by law enforcement agencies. For example, media outlets Kaktus, Kloop, and Azattyk’s editorial offices experienced attacks and physical threats in February of 2022.

“There are big questions about the lack of rule of law now,” according to Temirchiyeva, “Laws are interpreted and applied to please the authorities. Despite the declared freedom of speech and freedom of the press, there is tremendous pressure on the media community.”

The panelists pointed to the scandalous case in 2022 of Bolot Temirov, investigative journalist and the well-known founder of the YouTube channel Temirov Live. The Bishkek City Court expelled Temirov from Kyrgyzstan, banishing him to Russia on trumped-up charges for his criticism of the government. This represents the first time in Kyrgyzstan history that a Kyrgyz citizen was expelled with a five-year ban on entry. Panelists also reported that the government is persecuting media associated with opposition politicians. For example, Ravshan Jeenbekov, the director and owner of opposition outlet Next.TV, was arrested during the Kempir-Abad reservoir protest and found guilty of inciting ethnic hatred.

In August 2022, authorities arrested 19-year-old blogger Yrys Zhekshenaliyev, who posted an archived video message on the Polit Uznik website from former State Committee on National Security Chairman Abdil Segizbayev. Human-rights activists called the arrest a persecution of dissent and called on authorities to stop repressions of dissidents. Nurbek Sydykov, a lawyer with the Media Policy Institute, explained that persecuted journalists are mainly subject to Article 330 of the Criminal Code of the Kyrgyz Republic, incitement of hatred, and Part 3 of Article 278, inciting mass riots. It became possible to prosecute citizens who protested the delimitation of Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan’s borders because of the broad and vague wording in those articles, and the fact that these articles contradict the norms of Articles 19 and 20 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.



In 2022, the government repeatedly applied the law “On Protection from Inaccurate (False) Information,” commonly known as the “Law on Fakes.” Media lawyers and experts decried the legislation as an unconstitutional act establishing censorship in the country. But officials used the rule to block the Azattyk news website for two months, after it posted a video called “Heavy fighting on the border of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan.”

Panelists agreed that authorities are using courts to fight independent media and NGOs, and attacking internet sites to remove materials. For example, the editorial office of Kaktus.media saw more than 20 attempts in 2022 to hack its social networks and instant messaging. Most panelists agreed that independent media coverage of potentially controversial and sensitive topics often results in state harassment, cyber attacks, protests, hate speech, direct threats, inspections, and hints of criminal prosecution. Government authorities also restrict internet connections but have yet to restrict information channels.

“From a source in the tax service, we learned in November that [government] inspectors had obtained a list of more than 100 NGOs and media outlets that ‘need to be checked,’” according to Maslova.

Sources also reported that in February, March, October, and November of 2022, the State Financial Intelligence Service was instructed to check the bank accounts of the Soros-Kyrgyzstan Foundation, Internews, and other independent publications and media heads, Maslova added.

Panelists noted that the state actively used censorship during the Batken border conflict with Tajikistan. Officials called media outlets and requested that they not publish certain information while ordering them to publish other information. For example, officials told Kaktus.media not to publish a statement from Tajikistan’s Foreign Ministry and not to post a video of an accident involving a Kyrgyz tank that accidentally hit a car and killed 12 people.

Officials began debating changing the law related to covering armed conflicts, seeking to impose restrictions on coverage so the media are

obliged to cover the government’s point of view. Panelists observed that this law leaves the media in an uncomfortable position: Act within the framework of journalistic ethics, and cover events as reliably as possible; or refrain from covering military conflicts, to avoid compromised information.

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

Internet services are affordable and have contributed to the increase of online platform users. According to the National Statistical Committee of the Kyrgyz Republic, 99 percent of Kyrgyzstan’s citizens are covered by mobile networks, and 70 percent of them have access to high-quality 4G internet. In 2022, Saima Telecom, which provides internet and TV services, began to expand and build networks in Kyrgyzstan’s rural regions. Saima Telecom is also increasing consumer access

to information and communications technology (ICT). At the Fourth Industrial Forum “Media Toptoo 2022,” speakers noted that since 2019, Kyrgyzstan has gained 1.1 million social network users, now totaling 3.6 million.

OJSC Kyrgyztelecom covers 95 percent of the country with digital broadcasting—as a private multiplex, it covers only large cities with its television broadcasting. Independent media broadcast via private multiplex Digital Technologies LLC. In 2022, Digital Technologies turned off transmitters in the Naryn region due to a lack of funding. In addition, this company is suing several TV broadcasters that have fallen into debt.

Panelists also pointed to Islamic leaders’ growing influence, which has created a barrier for girls and young women in accessing the internet. Many religious leaders have proclaimed digital technologies a source of temptation and defilement for women.

The panelists noted that more educated and nonconformist consumers have begun to watch Ukrainian politicians, bloggers, and journalists on websites, as a result of the Ukraine war and Russian TV broadcasting

**Journalists and civil rights activists who criticize corrupt authorities are criminally prosecuted on various pretexts.**

propaganda of hatred and aggression. Internet resources have provided citizens with alternative information about military events and world powers' positions on the war.

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

In September 2022, Kyrgyzstan approved the Open Data Concept and Action Plan, which committed the government to creating a sustainable open-data system accessible to citizens. However, current political practices are counteractive to the plan. When Japarov took office, *Jogorku Kenesh* (the Supreme Council) adopted many new laws, including more tax and criminal codes. These regulations are disallowing journalists and the public to access data on officials' statements. As a result, state and municipal employees are able to ignore the plan without any consequences.

“Government agencies often do not comply with the two-week deadlines for providing information,” noted Mahinur Niyazova, editor-in-chief of news outlet 24.kg. Before Japarov’s administration, journalists could ask for comments and information from agency specialists; now they must go through press secretaries for information.

The panelists said that the public has no access to information on the most pressing issues of Kyrgyzstan’s policies, economics, and society. Neither the media nor the public are permitted information access on important parliamentary meetings or government expenditures, such as the defense budget and funding for fighting corruption. According to the panelists, journalists saw a rise in the number of government documents receiving the status of “for official use only.” Journalists also have no access to courts for covering high-profile cases. Even obtaining reliable and complete information to help citizens fulfill their duties is difficult. For example, the panelists pointed out that citizens have had to go to the media to clarify details of the new tax code after the Ministry of Finance conducted a poor public information campaign. As a result, journalists had to spend a great deal of time finding the necessary information.

“Many religious leaders have proclaimed digital technologies a source of temptation and defilement for women.”

On October 28, the mass media of Kyrgyzstan refused to publish news and official information from state bodies for three hours, protesting restrictions on freedom of speech in the country. Instead of news, outlets presented a black banner with the text “No news. There is pressure on the media.” In addition, editorial boards refused to publish state press releases the entire day.

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

Kyrgyzstan had 130 TV and radio channels at the end of 2021. State-owned and privately owned companies all provide terrestrial television services across the country. Panelists observed, however, that the competition between independent and state-owned media is unfair, because state-owned media have better access to funding and sources of information. For example, NTRK employs 760 people, while the private E1TR has just 260. Even the most popular independent media have just seven to 10 employees (with the exceptions of Azattyk and Kloop). The state budget allots approximately \$9 million to maintain state-owned media.

NTRK receives more than half of that allocation. In 2021, the station received KGS 400 million (\$4.6 million), but after its 2022 transition from a public to a national television and radio channel, KGS 13 million (\$149,000) was allotted to increase employee salaries.<sup>3</sup>

Kyrgyzstan’s government does not provide private media with the subsidies that would allow them to produce socially significant content. Independent media rarely create educational programs, given the constant time pressures of the news cycle and the emphasis on building politically oriented programs and entertainment content. “There are different channels for disseminating information in Kyrgyzstan. But, in essence, the state TV conglomerate is silencing other voices,” noted Kapushenko, “Independent media do not have enough resources to interrupt the propaganda materials of state television channels.”

<sup>3</sup> [https://24.kg/vlast/226003\\_9millionov\\_ejegodno\\_tratit\\_byudjet\\_nasoderjanie\\_gosudarstvennyih\\_smi/](https://24.kg/vlast/226003_9millionov_ejegodno_tratit_byudjet_nasoderjanie_gosudarstvennyih_smi/)

Panelists agreed that independent media outlets turn to foreign website hosting services out of security considerations and given the high service costs in Kyrgyzstan. According to Ismanov, in 2022, a number of Kyrgyz websites hosted in Russia were on the verge of closing as fallout from the Ukraine war. The website of the Association of Community Media was not working for a certain time; and Journalist.kg, a website of the country's oldest media NGO, was blocked by a Russian hosting company. The EU MediaDialog project's site on hate speech in Kyrgyzstan also stopped working last year.

The lack of open data on affiliations of certain media outlets with political groups makes their audiences vulnerable, because it does not allow them to know what special interests these media serve. While Kyrgyzstan does have a law that regulates the concentration of domestic and foreign ownership of media, it is functionally toothless since the Ministry of Justice, which registers media outlets, does not keep records of foreign capital investments in media ownership. To date, no media company has been subject to any penalties for violating the share of foreign participation in media financing outlined in law.

Broadcast signal distribution channels are monopolized and are in the hands of the state through the Republican Production Association of Radio Relay Trunks of Television and Radio Broadcasting. The state fully controls the lists of TV and radio companies, which are included in two (social and commercial multiplex packages).

A new law adopted in April 2022 “On the National Television and Radio Broadcasting Corporation of the Kyrgyz Republic” provides the legal foundation to create a state media corporation that includes NTRK, along with regional state television and radio companies. This corporation could potentially join state television and radio broadcasting organizations, companies, studios, and creative production associations. However, there are currently limited concerns that this corporation could evolve into a production and distribution monopoly, since the government cannot currently provide minimum financial resources for the state media included in the corporation.

It is difficult to assess the fairness and transparency of the process of

allocating the spectrum for broadcast frequencies due to the lack of information; however, criminal cases appear go before the judiciary that highlight unfair and opaque frequency distribution.

Kyrgyzstan law mandates that TV and radio companies, regardless of the form of ownership, broadcast more than half of their programs in the Kyrgyz language. In reality, however, even the relatively well-resourced NTRK is unable to comply with the law.

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

The panelists all agreed that financing state-owned media from the government budget has a number of negative consequences. It creates unequal conditions in the media sphere, thereby distorting the country's market. It also turns state-owned media into instruments of political struggle, prohibiting them from competing and creating high-quality information content. All of these effects propagate the image of journalists as unscrupulous and corrupt. Government subsidies also hinders technological development and introduction of innovative media approaches by reducing competition among the state media, limiting resources, and fixing incomes of content producers.

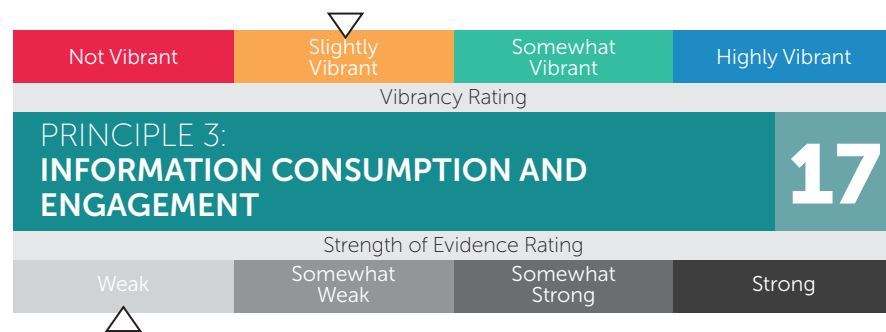
Panelists pointed out that state-owned media have exclusive access to certain sources of information. For example, presidential interviews appear only in state media. State-owned outlet Kabar was able to conduct a series of exclusive interviews with the president. NTRK staff also can more easily invite a minister or deputy for an interview than any independent media journalist can. Only state media are permitted to cover such news stories as parliamentary sessions or to attend events held in residences.

Journalist Eraliev noted that bloggers offer the public access to a variety of media, and despite the advantages of state media, bloggers' channels are often more popular and attract large audiences.

The Bulak.kg media website pointed to the ways in which state-run media are controlled by the government. Journalists at the site collected and analyzed posts that promoted pro-government viewpoints regarding

the border dispute between Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. The data revealed that NTRK employees participated in this discourse. Bulak.kg also analyzed posts on social networks, and results showed that state channels and Region.kg disseminated hate speech, threats of violence, and manipulation through videos related to the Kempir-Abad reservoir protest. The posts condemned activists' actions and their demand to release state documents on the case. Meanwhile, privately owned outlet Vesti.kg published a video that showed the local population's support for the Kempir Abad issue in a rally sponsored by the government.<sup>4</sup>

“The editorial policy of many media outlets may depend on the conditions and values of the founders, on the financial stability of the resource, and on the values of employees,” Temirchieva noted. She called out the government's intense pressure on the media, and the arrests, persecution, and detentions of Kyrgyzstan journalists, as causing self-censorship. For example, she said that her outlet, Vesti.kg, disabled comments on its website to avoid provocations from some authorities, creation of fake accounts that support the government, and possible application of the law on false information.



Principle 3 received a relatively low score. The indicator on media literacy garnered the lowest scores, due to a lack of critical thinking among consumers and the population's generally low level of media literacy. The indicator covering personal data protection and digital

4 <https://vesti.kg/politika/item/104972-batken-by-tak-okhranyali-ubegaete-pozor-vozmushchennye-uzgentsy-provozhayut-sadyra-zhaparova-posle-vstrechi-video.html>

security received the highest score, as media workers and consumers had many training opportunities in 2022 on digital practices and security in working with data. The indicator might have also scored highly because some panelists are unfamiliar with the mechanisms of personal data protection and digital security, which limited their discussions on these topics during the expert meeting.

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

In 2008, the government passed a law on personal information. The law focused on protecting human rights and freedoms related to the collection, processing, and use of personal data. The law was amended in 2022 and now contradicts the previous legislation. When the 2022 draft law was discussed in parliament, some MPs assessed it as unconstitutional given that it had no checks and balances for the National Security Committee and put citizens' personal information protections at risk.<sup>5</sup>

Media company staff, journalists, and state employees have inadequate levels of digital security knowledge. International organizations provide training on protecting personal and digital data for Kyrgyzstan's activists and media community, but it is impossible to completely eliminate user-error weakness in information security.

Cyber attacks on government websites are an ongoing phenomenon. In the summer of 2022, for example, hackers entered the government's Ministry of Finance website. However, hackers target journalists' personal accounts, independent media's editorial offices, and journalist's Telegram social media channels more than they do government sites. As Kapushenko explained, “Attackers first targeted accounts linked to the nationalized mobile operator MegaCom's phone numbers, illegally obtaining access codes to log into accounts.” Journalists found out from international security experts that media opponents were creating duplicate MegaCom SIM cards to gather data from journalists' phones.

5 [https://24.kg/vlast/227046\\_zakonoproekt\\_oproslyushke\\_pod\\_kolpak\\_mogut\\_vzyat\\_lyubogo/](https://24.kg/vlast/227046_zakonoproekt_oproslyushke_pod_kolpak_mogut_vzyat_lyubogo/)

But independent news site Akchabar.kg reported that the state-owned company denied any involvement. To combat government access to personal data, security specialists recommended using two-factor authentication for all platforms and to unlink accounts from Kyrgyz mobile operators.

Panelists pointed to a significant hacking case that occurred on October 6, 2022, involving Kloop media. Kloop and T-Media journalists were covering a *kurultai* (a regional political and military council) in Uzgen on the issue of transferring the Kempir-Abad reservoir to Uzbekistan. While broadcasting live on Facebook, suddenly the journalists lost their internet connection, according to a Kloop article. Later it was revealed that the broadcasts for both media outlets were removed from Facebook as a result of an attack on the Facebook page of the Kloop journalist. The new Kloop journalist, who previously worked at T-Media, neglected digital security requirements and did not use two-factor authentication procedures. Her Facebook account was linked to the MegaCom mobile operator, and attackers easily obtained an access code to the accounts of both publications and deleted the broadcast. Immediately afterwards, Kloop changed its security protocols and introduced stricter liability for non-compliance with digital protections.

Most independent media and bloggers do not practice security measures. According to the panelists, Bolot Temirov's harassment and expulsion could have been avoided if the Temirov Live YouTube channel had better digital protections of sensitive data. (None of the digital equipment in the channel's editorial office had protections in use.) Panelists held that funding is a serious barrier to installing digital protections—the cost can be prohibitive to transfer server maintenance abroad and create mirror sites to ensure safety.

Niyazov noted that hackers began using media site templates to write fake news articles, which misled even the most loyal readers. The average consumer has very little digital literacy. Only a few citizens, who work in digital technology fields, have some level of knowledge.

**Media company staff, journalists, and state employees have inadequate levels of digital security knowledge.**

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

Panelists agreed that the level of media literacy in Kyrgyzstan is very low. The country offers no courses on media literacy in its education curricula. The Ministry of Education does plan to introduce them in secondary schools during the 2023-2024 academic year, according to news site Bulak.kg. Additionally, many websites have courses on critical thinking and information literacy skills. However, the vast majority of consumers do not seek out these resources due to language barriers or unawareness of the need for such training.

Panelists expressed the belief that the population's attitude on the Ukraine war serves as a litmus test of its media literacy levels. Many citizens mindlessly repeat pro-Russian propaganda they see on Russian TV programs, which suggest that the Russian government had no choice but to invade and justify President Putin's aggressive policies toward invading Ukraine.

In addition, many citizens obtain political news from instant messenger apps such as Telecom or SnapChat. When they see news sent in a chat room or to an acquaintance or a newsletter, it has the potential to become "truth" in a consumer's mind. The majority of Kyrgyzstan's citizens have family members or friends that are laborers in Russia, and they actively distribute video and audio podcasts from Russian social networks via instant messenger apps. This transmits a two-tiered system of Russian propaganda and helps explain how misinformation in Kyrgyzstan continues to spread.

Temirchieva expressed the view that the nation's media literacy level does not depend on the level of education. For example, parliamentarians with high education and business credentials do not have high media literacy, she said. These deputies lobby for bills restricting freedom of speech and assembly; defame NGOs, independent journalists, and bloggers; and advocate blocking social networks such

as TikTok. Many users confuse social media platforms (Facebook, Instagram, Telegram) with news and informational websites--or are not aware of news websites' existence at all. Thus, citizens' consumption of news content can be very superficial.

### **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, most ordinary citizens do not know about their human and civil rights, and those who are aware cannot adequately protect them. The panelists explained that some of their viewers and readers are afraid to contact government agencies for information on activities and services, often turning to journalists to find this information. Citizens who testify about violations in agencies and with officials do so anonymously.

Panelists noted that the public hearings and discussions that public authorities had previously enlisted widely are gradually being phased out, or only conducted formally. Most bills are not publicly examined, as required by law. As Ismanov pointed out, parliament held no public hearings on socially relevant issues during 2022. Moreover, the Adilet legal clinic criticized parliamentarians for reducing the time period for public discussions from one month to 15 days. Kapushenko said that in 2022, authorities introduced a new way of dealing with journalists and the public by banning the use of recording devices at events that should be in the public domain.

Media experts and some MPs have repeatedly stated that government authorities use bot factories to spread disinformation. Specially hired people open hundreds of fake online accounts and through them denigrate people and organizations—most often independent journalists

and civic activists. These social media bullies also use hate speech. Some citizens become tools in the hands of manipulators: unscrupulous politicians and their trolls that advocate for closing media and arresting journalists and human-rights activists.

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

Kyrgyzstan has not had any large-scale measurements of media consumption since 2018. Most media companies have no understanding about their audiences or information needs. In this situation, each media format, and each individual edition, finds its own strategies. For example, online media constantly monitor statistics on content consumption, most often using the free Google Analytics website visitor statistics service. Internews announced a people meter initiative to measure viewing habits, but at the end of 2022 it had not launched.

Niyazova pointed to a study of current media consumption in Kyrgyzstan by the regional Internews REVIVE project. According to Niyazova, 72 percent of respondents consume news from social networks; while

28 percent had the greatest trust in information from NTRK—in particular, its information program “Ala-Too.” According to Maslova, Kaktus’s editor-in-chief, this year the media began to more actively challenge state pressures. They reprinted materials on freedom of speech, covered cases against the media, and promptly organized joint statements and appeals concerning these cases.

Independent media and civil society organizations receive feedback from each other on work issues. At the same time, relations between independent media and press services are much more tense, and feedback is often not constructive. Staff at pro-government media or state-owned media tend to ignore critiques by citizens and fellow media professionals.

**Some citizens become tools in the hands of manipulators: unscrupulous politicians and their trolls that advocate for closing media and arresting journalists and human-rights activists.**

Panelists noted, and research data show, that Kyrgyzstan has a generally low level of public confidence in the media. Some journalists seem unaware of their moral responsibility for disseminating inaccurate information and do not often seek to gain their audiences' trust. To avoid apologizing for publishing unverified and fake information, the media usually try to deflect audiences from identifying the unreliable information they disseminate. The media outlet Kloop is the only exception, panelists said. Its editorial board publishes refutations, apologizes for the publication of unverified information, and explains in detail how and why such an error occurred. Moreover, these retractions are highlighted on the site's home page.<sup>6</sup>

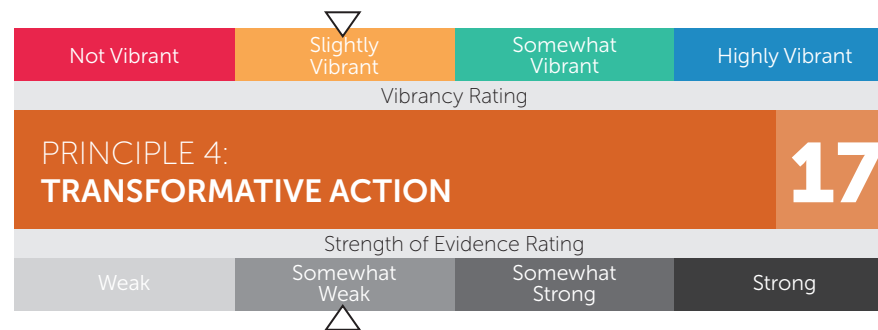
### Indicator 15: Community media provides information relevant for community engagement.

The Association of Community Media is registered in Kyrgyzstan, and the group's website, [kyrgyzmedia.kg](http://kyrgyzmedia.kg), hosts material produced by 20 community multimedia centers and five community radio stations. The association is a partner a supporter of freedom of expression, but despite its 10-year history, community media have not become professionalized. Most community journalists work on an amateur level, and regional governments offer little or no support for community media outlets.

The overwhelming majority of panelists did not have sufficient information about the state of community media in the country. Marat Tokoev, head of the Public Association of Journalists, pointed out that the biggest problem of community media is sustainability, due to frequent employee turnover.

According to Ismanov, "Local community media are unevenly represented in regions. They are more popular in the Naryn and Chui regions but are rarely represented in the most densely populated regions, like Osh." He noted that community media are non-politicized and, as a result, they rarely spread misinformation.

<sup>6</sup> <https://kloop.kg/blog/2022/11/13/issledovanie-kyrgyzskogo-matematika-priznali-nauchnym-otkrytiem/>



Panelists had a difficult time assessing the indicator concerning people's actions based on quality information. They had no knowledge of research or data on the impact of information on citizens and said that journalists have little awareness of such issues. The lowest average score in this principle went to the indicator discussing government bodies using high-quality information to make public policy decisions. They gave the highest average score to the indicator on civil society using high-quality information to improve their communities. To a certain extent, this score reflects the panelists' positive professional interactions with civil society institutions.

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

Kyrgyzstan has a variety of media, offering a range of content: political, economic, educational, and entertainment. Niche media especially has grown. State-owned television outlets, such as the NTRK television family, launched specialized channels on culture, science, and sports. Private media, including Akipress with 12 specialized sites, have followed suit. Temirchieva noted that the NTRK Culture Channel is very popular with older citizens in rural and urban areas. Elima Dzhaparova, a journalist with Internews, said that #Akyrkysabak, the Kyrgyz YouTube series about youth, garnered millions of viewers in the first days after posting.

Many new media formats have appeared over the past year, especially

TikTok videos and podcasts, according to Eraliev. Producers have released a range of podcasts including “Eki Daryger,” “Isyk Nan,” “Kishi,” “Media Kyzdar,” “More than sex,” and others, he added. The podcast series, “Ysyk Nan,” by KTRC radio journalist S. Kaldybayeva, represents the first podcast produced in the Kyrgyz language. The series examines the Pamir Kyrgyz people, who have resettled in their historical homeland in Afghanistan and are trying to adapt to their new life.

Religious and Islamic media in Kyrgyzstan are widespread, and the exact number is unknown. As of five years ago, researchers indicated that the country had 56 mainly internet channels. Other outlets, including Radio Maral, Ayan TV, and state TV and radio companies, have a significant number of religious programs in their broadcast schedule. The vast majority of the nation’s media, as well as society as a whole, are politicized. “Often the audience gets tired of political news, but many citizens do discuss political issues,” journalist Niyazova said. Independent journalist Bakyt Orunbekov noted that the country has a wide range of political party press, but these media mainly “come to life” during pre-election periods.

Panelists said that they believe independent media try to maintain standards and provide platforms for discussion and dialogue between supporters of different ideological views. State and pro-government media are biased when selecting speakers for public dialogue programs and don’t provide opportunities to voice opinions that differ from the government line. Ismanov maintained that “each media outlet has its own ‘list’ of [speakers] they prefer. But no media outlet will ever admit to having such a list.”

Panelists noted that no media outlet is capable of organizing constructive dialogues on certain controversial topics, including the Ukraine war and the armed clashes with Tajikistan, Participants’ extreme emotions surrounding these issues preempt such discussions.

“State and pro-government media are biased when selecting speakers for public dialogue programs and don’t provide opportunities to voice opinions that differ from the government line.”

Representatives of various ideological views use social networks and some media sites for open dialogue and discussions in the comments sections. Eraliev emphasized that sometimes digital platform discussions can be very constructive, and lead to solutions to problems that mainly concern individuals. For example, people on digital platforms often provide financial assistance to citizens in need. Kyrgyz users have active discussions on current events on Facebook and Twitter.

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

Even without reliable studies on the impact of media consumption habits on citizens, panelists agreed that consumers are easily influenced by misinformation and disinformation. Most consumers do not have access to media literacy training on critical thinking and can be easily manipulated. Kloop’s Kapushenko noted this was especially problematic during the Covid-19 pandemic, when citizens sought out chat groups and obtained misinformation about virus cures and protections,

instead of looking to official medical recommendations about the importance of masks and vaccinations. She said that many people still believe conspiracy theories and health misinformation even after the pandemic eased.

“Often, people’s behavior does not depend on high-quality, analytical information, but on the recommendations of relatives and friends,” said Vesti.kg’s Temirchieva.

Ismanov noted that misinformation has a major impact during pre-election periods, and often, unreliable information determines the outcome of elections. “False information spreads quickly and is manipulative,” he said. “Because of this manipulation, people form a negative attitude towards democratic values, freedom of speech, and maintaining a civil society.”

WhatsApp messenger promotes a heavy amount of unverified



information on political, social, and religious issues, and government officials often use this tool during election campaigns.

According to 24.kg's Niyazova, different population groups rely on their own "trusted" media sources. Kyrgyzstan's rural population in the north form their views from national television, while the south has widespread pro-government media outlets that are very influential, he said.

Sydykov with the Media Policy Institute observed that misinformation leads people to act against public interest, particularly with regard to environmental issues. For example, the air quality in Bishkek is highly polluted and poses a health risk. Yet, he pointed out, many citizens do not know that they should use catalytic converters to reduce car emissions.

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

Panelists recognized the Kyrgyzstan NGO sector for its key contributions to developing democracy, freedom of speech, and other human rights and freedoms, including the upholding of justice and the rule of law. Panelists also said that a large number of nonprofit groups significantly improve life of the local community. For example, NGOs raised public awareness about the causes of smog in Bishkek, and taught consumers how to monitor the level of air pollution in the capital daily. Meanwhile, authorities don't act to save the environment.

However, NGOs have limited ways to spread their information in a publicly accessible form, and their collaboration with the media is fragmented. "Civil society is more responsible in how they present information, but NGOs are far removed from their beneficiaries," said Kapushenko. "The information they disseminate is often difficult to understand. NGOs' production of up-to-date research and information often attracts the media to make interesting content based on the work. But the problem is how NGOs collaborate with the media."

**Panelists agreed that state authorities not only fail to respond appropriately to information on human rights violations, but they commit violations as well.**

Until recently, NGOs did give journalists exclusive information and only asked them to write news stories based on their reports, according to Semetey Amanbekov, editor-in-chief of independent news outlet Elgezit.kg. Niyazova agreed and noted that communication between and among NGOs and the media is broken, without adequate information about each sector's activities. For example, the government is developing a law against NGOs, and during public discussions, NGO representatives could not provide information about their activities in order to campaign against the law, Niyazova said.

Panelists agreed that 2022 marked a turning point when Kyrgyzstan media signed a symbolic partnership with NGOs to counteract the negative government trend of restricting freedom of speech and violating citizen rights. The memorandum specifies that the parties will exchange information, hold consultations, plan joint events, develop and implement projects, and create expert platforms for the exchange of views. This agreement has resulted in many successful programs on social issues, ranging from the cost of school lunches to environmental issues and public health.

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

Generally, the Kyrgyzstan government does not seem interested in communicating with the population or explaining its policies or decisions, according to the panelists. Officials might convene occasional meetings with civil society groups or the media, but these meetings do not often yield quality information, and participating in the meetings requires significant effort for activists.

State agencies usually have institutionalized mechanisms of interaction with the media, including press conferences, briefings, and press services, and offer information on department websites. But in 2022, state bodies held press conferences less often. For example, the chairman of the National Bank of Kyrgyzstan did not hold a single press

conference in all of 2022.

“Press conferences have practically become obsolete as a way of presenting information,” Amanbekov said. Most government officials use social media platforms to disseminate information and often they use misleading information to cover up corrupt practices by the authorities, according to Amanbekov. “They do not refer to specific factual and empirical data,” he said, “They are using more and more methods of manipulation, disinformation, and the use of hate speech.”

Even if government agencies organize press conferences or briefings, officials avoid journalists’ questions and often do not give answers. Agency representatives frequently manipulate facts and only voice information that benefits the government. For example, on October 4, 2022, during the Batken and Tajikistan border clashes, presidential adviser Cholponbek Abykeev published a Facebook post about the situation. Bulak.kg journalists discovered that Abykeev’s post contained false data and manipulated information. Temirchieva agreed that Abykeev has repeatedly used false information.

The content of most government agencies’ websites has deteriorated, and the Kyrgyz parliament’s once-exemplary website is a prime example. The website often excludes information on pending bills, draft law texts, and even the text of documents that parliament has approved. Panelists noted that journalists are more likely to learn information about the parliament’s laws from the personal online pages of deputies, in particular MP Dastan Bekeshev. Panelists noted that journalists also have difficulties interacting with department press secretaries; everything depends on the personality of the secretary.

Kyrgyzstan media’s ineffective reporting has become a general trend. Usually, government agencies pay no attention to journalists’ investigations or critical materials—for example, the December 2022 exposé on the president’s plans to lease a private aircraft for official business, costing millions of dollars. State media repeatedly published fake stories throughout 2022 that sometimes breached the rule of law in government decision-making. Concerning some of these reports, Kapushenko recalled, “If authorities made decisions based on data

and analysis, they would not have spent so much money to build the presidential building.<sup>7</sup> They wouldn’t have bought an expensive business jet but would have spent the money on coal instead of taking out a loan.”

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

Legislation aimed at combating corruption has radically changed under President Japarov’s administration. His government revised nine articles of the nation’s criminal code, including those providing for criminal liability for illegally enriching oneself through corruption. Now anyone committing this type of crime can pay compensation for harm caused and avoid criminal liability and punishment. The law “On Amendments to Legislative Acts on Economic Amnesty,” which panelists called “Japarov’s bill on amnesty for corrupt officials,” effectively puts an end to implementing anti-corruption measures in the country, they noted.

These legal changes show the government’s inadequate response to the media’s corruption investigations, panelists said. Generally, officials accused of corruption deny everything and launch harassment campaigns and pressure investigative journalists that reveal their crimes. Sometimes, even after investigative media reports, corrupt officials have been released without punishment. The panelists referred to Bolot Temirov’s high-profile expulsion to Russia as how authorities respond to investigations of officials’ corrupt family businesses: crackdowns and prosecution of journalists and their teams. As Niyazova further explained, “The reaction of the authorities is the opposite—those who talk about corruption are brought to criminal responsibility” instead of the criminals themselves.

Panelists agreed that state authorities not only fail to respond appropriately to information on human rights violations, but they commit violations as well. Dzhaparova did note that the Interior Ministry has become more responsive to certain problems, such as press reports of bride theft, the rape of minors, and other instances of gender-based violence. She said that perhaps the ministry provided a more effective

<sup>7</sup> <https://rus.azattyk.org/a/31914528.html>

and rapid responses due to several high-profile criminal cases involving the deaths of young girls. Those cases caused major protests and unrest in the country. However, as Niyazova pointed out, “The activity of citizens in response to obvious human rights violations is decreasing. There is less and less resistance in society—marches, rallies, and protests no longer gather a large number of people.”

As mentioned earlier, Kyrgyzstan has no reliable research showing how citizens are impacted by information quality. But the panelists held that availability of quality information does not guarantee the preservation of democratic values.

#### LIST OF PANEL PARTICIPANTS

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This study is made possible by the support of the American People through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). The opinions expressed herein are those of the panelists and other project researchers and do not necessarily reflect the views of USAID, the United States Government, or IREX.