

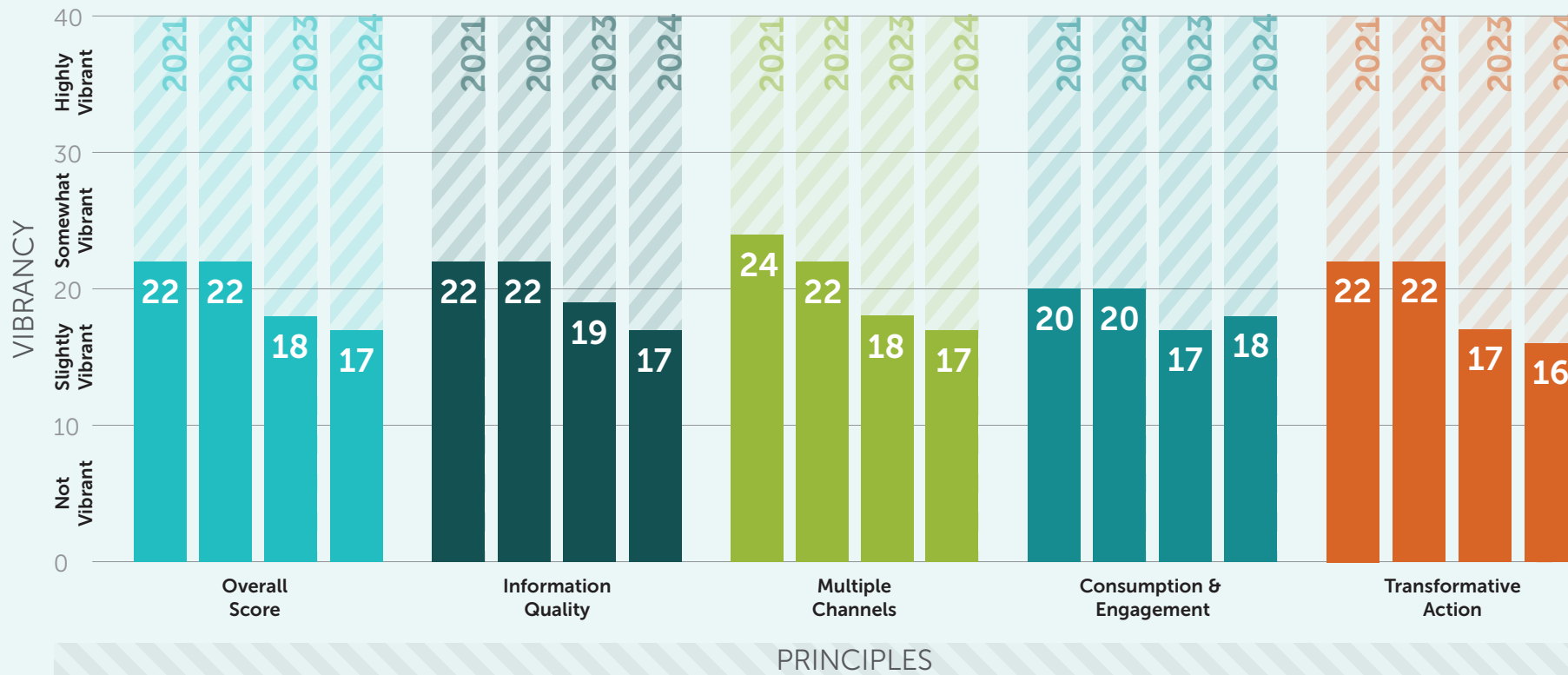
# KYRGYZSTAN



## Vibrant Information Barometer

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**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.

**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.

**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.

**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.

Highly Vibrant

Somewhat Vibrant

Slightly Vibrant

Not Vibrant

OVERALL SCORE  
**17**

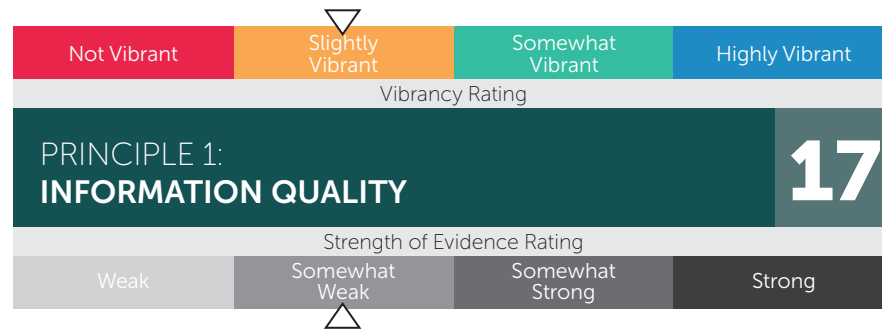
In 2023, Kyrgyzstan media professionals experienced an overall decline in political freedoms, while authorities curtailed the rights of ordinary citizens. Intense political events included legislation and other prohibitions aimed at stripping political freedoms and citizen rights such as freedom of speech, assembly, and civil participation.

New legislation was key to the erosion of democracy in the Kyrgyz Republic, including bills “On Mass Media” (presented to parliament in December 2023) and “On NGOs” (presented in May and passed in the first reading in October 2023). Media members, civil society, activists, and human rights groups resisted these efforts, but parliamentarians gave citizens little opportunity to participate in discussions of the draft laws. The shift towards authoritarianism can also be seen in the passage of the law “On the Constitutional Court,” which undermines the rule of law and guarantees of justice. Additionally, law enforcement practices in 2023 normalized persecutions of “inconvenient” citizens, disregarding all procedural aspects and applying punishment without trial or investigation.

As one panelist noted, the country has entered an “era of half-truths in action,” as journalists and media increasingly self-censor under the threat of repression. Journalists either refrain from raising urgent issues or are forced to toe the government line. Pro-government media outlets also propagandize rather than inform, disregarding professional and ethical standards. Through this diminishing of the value of facts, social values erode and trust declines in media and all authority figures.

Panelists captured these circumstances in their VIBE assessments, with the overall score for Kyrgyzstan falling by one point from last year’s study. Principle 1 (Information Quality) decreased by two points, reflecting the increased flow of false and misleading information from propaganda sources, while independent media are hampered by economic limitations due to government pressure. Principle 2 (Multiple Channels) fell by one point due to increased censorship of media, both through overt blocking of popular outlets like Kloop and through lawsuits against media outlets filed by the government over allegations such as “moral damages.” The risks of repression are worsening, with journalists investigating corruption imprisoned or driven abroad, while fewer and fewer are willing to cover acute problems.

Principle 3 (Information Consumption and Engagement) increased by one point and scored the highest within the study, largely thanks to Kyrgyzstan’s strong community media. However, audiences also showed decreased demand for high quality content, with the majority getting information from Kremlin, pro-government, and/or state TV, radio, news agencies, and print media. Principle 4 (Transformative Action) decreased by one point and scored the lowest within the study, with the government practicing selective interaction with journalists and media and repressing or ignoring investigations of corruption and violations of human rights and civil liberties.



Recent media trends in Kyrgyzstan demonstrate increasing restrictions on freedom of expression as well as lacking financial resources. More and more topics are considered unsafe to discuss for both online and traditional media, reducing ideological diversity and promoting self-censorship. Non-state media have lost more revenue as state-owned companies are now banned from advertising with them. As a result, Principle 1 decreased by two points from last year's study, with the indicator on sufficient resourcing of content production scoring the lowest. These scores emphasize how revenue shortfalls are limiting editorial independence and driving journalists out of the profession. Risks to personal freedom are high while resources and salaries remain low.

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

In early 2023, the print version of *Evening Bishkek*, one of the country's oldest newspapers, ceased publication. The closure epitomizes the decline of Kyrgyz print media, with newspaper circulations exceeding [100,000 copies](#) now a thing of the past. According to a [2023 M-Vector study](#) on media consumption research in Kyrgyzstan, no more than 2% of respondents use print media as information sources. The crisis in print media has affected infrastructure for producing print content. According to one panelist, the publishing house Media Support Center is on the verge of closure after two decades of active operation.

"In 2023, society underwent complete polarization," said another panelist. "Each faction [pro-government and independent media] uses only those facts that are convenient to them to prove their righteousness." Coverage of international politics reflects the stance of the Russian government, while state media focus on propagandistic attacks against independent media and civil society organizations (CSOs). This includes more than a year of pro-government coverage denigrating civil society as part of discussions on the repressive draft law "On NGOs" (informally dubbed the "foreign agents" law) and "On Mass Media."

Media organizations from Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Mongolia, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan responded to the negative trends in the media sphere by initiating MediaNetwork CA. Members met in Bishkek to sign [a memorandum](#), which states the organization's goal "to uphold compliance with journalistic standards and professional ethical norms in the profession and contribute to the formation of competent media organizations." As of the end of 2023, panelists were unable to say whether MediaNetwork CA has achieved its goals.

Journalism education has remained largely unchanged, despite media stakeholders' history of calling for schools to adapt to media industry changes. Though organizations offer short-term professional training, few of these programs are taught by Kyrgyz speakers, and they provide no coherent system for professional development. Various organizations hold a diversity of seminars and training sessions for journalists, bloggers, and other media producers, but panelists identified a greater need to address the basics and realities of the media sphere. Seminars are mostly specialized and do not include key skills required for newcomers to the profession, given the high rate of turnover in the field, panelists observed.

According to the panelists, state officials and key politicians have been the main newsmakers for decades, so political topics dominate the media space. Outlets offer limited international news and occasional stories on social, cultural, and economic topics, and there are few specialized or niche media. To a greater extent, social networks and the blogosphere present information on these subjects. Overall, national-

level news makes up the information flow; only select outlets report local news. One panelist said that journalists often present news without reference to context in pursuit of efficiency. Readers cannot understand the meaning of this news without contextualization, she concluded.

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

In 2023, state bodies and key state policymakers often knowingly provided false and misleading views in the media. Notable examples include Kyrgyz Republic President Sadyr Japarov [accusing NGOs of tax evasion](#) and Deputy Prime Minister Edil Baisalov on more than one occasion [manipulating data](#) on national salaries and [claiming](#) that only children from affluent families attend kindergarten while nationwide taxes subsidize their school lunches.

Another problem is that state bodies and officials increasingly avoid supplying information. Representatives of the Kyrgyz Republic Government have reduced their public appearances in the media and restricted access to information from their departments. Thus, journalists often cannot objectively judge whether the information they receive and disseminate from government officials is true or false.

Panelists noted the impact of the 2023 law “On Access to Information Under the Jurisdiction of State Bodies and Local Self-Governments.” Citizens cannot easily verify the data received from politicians and officials, as the law has closed public access to a range of state sources of information. A panelist provided examples of the increasing opacity of public information: “There is no data on who was the director and founder of a legal entity—the Ministry of Justice website only lists current directors and owners. It has become more difficult to find tax payment data. The Ministry of Finance website was redesigned in 2023, but much information was not uploaded there. The financial reporting of

the mayor’s office has not been updated since 2022.”

State-owned media outlets praise the current authorities and key politicians while engaging in open criticism of independent media and civil activists. Often, their own violations of ethical and professional standards are driven not by political motives but by an absence of ethical norms and professional expectations. For example, in one of the broadcasts of the news channel Ala-Too 24, [footage from a movie](#) was passed off as “consequences” of an earthquake in Turkey. Even journalists in independent media, despite meticulous fact-checking work, sometimes provide inaccurate information. When this occurs, political authorities [often argue](#) that it demonstrates how independent journalists are unreliable.

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Regional media have an even greater problem ensuring accuracy of information. Local officials often cite the need to obtain permission from the capital to communicate with the press. Publications are also unchecked and inaccurate due to the shallow pool of experts. In the capital as well as in the regions, producers cannot easily find professionals to provide expert opinions on current events. Since 2022, only a few self-identifying experts sometimes dare to comment on political events. At the same time, unprofessional content producers with a pro-government stance, as well as numerous troll factories, circulate manipulative information. Most members of the population have limited ability to distinguish between manipulative information and reliable sources.

The Kyrgyz Republic has some online tools for checking the accuracy and reliability of information, such as Factcheck.kg and 24.kg’s regular section #JustFacts. In addition, in 2023, the professional media community, represented by seven founding groups ([April](#), [Bulak](#), [Mediahub](#), [PolitClinic](#), [Tmedia](#), [BashtanBashta](#), [Factcheck](#)), created the platform [Checkit Media](#) to counter manipulative information. The editors

of these resources (Factcheck and Checkit) organize training programs on media literacy. According to the panelists, however, only a small number of citizens know about the presence of these resources and even fewer make requests to verify information.

Content moderation on social platforms is not keeping pace with demand, due to the large flow of information products and the number of users becoming content creators. According to panelists, the opinion among experts is that moderation of Kyrgyz-language content is especially weak, although hate-speech researchers and fact checkers find just as much false information on Russian-language resources.

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

According to a Checkit Media [investigation](#), authorities rely on troll factories and adhere to a language of enmity and hatred. Politicians, including President Japarov, use hate speech on their own social media pages, and disseminate their comments on state-owned and state-affiliated media. Meanwhile, a government-funded troll factory [operates](#) on the country's main television channel.

Authorities work not only to damage independent media but also to suppress dissent and civic activity. Channel One Russia (ORT) and Russian Television and Radio Broadcasting Company (RTR), popular channels in the Kyrgyz Republic, take stances that echo Russian government positions and are supported by pro-Russian amateur content producers. Websites such as Two Points of View, Tentek Kyz, Salam Kyrgyzstan, and PolitLombard stand out in denigrating NGOs and independent media. “Pro-Russian representatives strongly adhere to the policy of Kremlin propaganda, engaging in disinformation, manipulation, and criticism of independent media and journalists,” emphasized one panelist.

The Kyrgyz Republic has no regulatory framework nor effective mechanisms to combat information manipulation and hate speech. For its part, the media community has no self-regulation system for content producers. The Commission for Complaints against Media did

not consider any cases of ethical norms violations in 2023, while media professionals characterized the situation in the media community as an information war between state/pro-government media and independent media.

Attacks on independent journalists have profoundly negative consequences in their personal and professional lives. One panelist faced a massive online attack—with threats and hate speech from individual users, including anonymous trolls—after speaking at an OSCE event on issues of freedom of expression, media freedom, and journalist safety. In another case, a Kyrgyz athlete whose Facebook post criticizing the government's decision to change the country's flag was picked up by the media [faced backlash](#) from a government official.

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

For the first time in post-Soviet history, Kyrgyz-language content [has become dominant](#) for consumers in all regions except the capital, Bishkek. The production of quality Kyrgyz-language content is therefore an especially acute problem. Viewers of entertainment programs, series, and international news have [practically no alternatives](#) to Russian content, while the government pays Russian TV channels over \$1 million each year to broadcast their content.

While Kyrgyz-language media consumption is expanding, media outlets are further reducing production of media content in minority languages. The Uzbek-language media segment, already limited, continues to diminish. One panelist affirmed that the state neglects the Uzbek-speaking population, which in the absence of alternatives “listens to the information agenda of neighboring countries.”

Throughout the year, publications critical of the government on any topic intensified political and legal pressure on journalists and editors. In August 2023, the Bishkek prosecutor [filed a lawsuit](#) in court to liquidate the publicly funded Kloop Media, accusing the outlet of “negative character” and “hidden manipulations.” This lawsuit followed the publication of [a journalistic investigation](#) into the involvement

of relatives of the president and the head of the State Committee for National Security in the construction of the Barcelona Football Academy in Kyrgyzstan, which the president [responded](#) to by saying that websites like Kloop “bring harm rather than benefit to Kyrgyzstanis.” In September, after publishing [an article](#) on the alleged torture of opposition politician Ravshan Dzhenbekov, the editorial office received a letter from the Ministry of Culture and Information demanding that Kloop remove the article within 48 hours. Within two days, several internet providers [blocked users](#) from the Kloop website.

Every year, the thematic diversity and representation of various social groups in media are narrowing. Government officials directly state that it is time to stop presenting negative information, and they reproach independent media for an ostensibly negative focus. Representatives of the president’s administration even commented on publications about domestic violence, [asserting](#) that those who write about the increase in violence are interested in “constantly repeating such negative cases, bringing them up for discussion and propagating them as general statistics” while claiming that instances of violence are extremely rare. State media have shifted to a monotonous practice of praising the current government and its imagined successes.

These repressive conditions explain why media mostly prefer not to cover issues concerning marginalized groups such as the LGBTQ+ community, people with disabilities, and those living with HIV/AIDS or tuberculosis. After a journalist from IA 24.kg came out in a personal blog, a year-long reaction followed, with pro-government and pro-Russian public pages [unleashing a barrage of criticism](#). The topic of sex education is also considered taboo.

The majority of journalists in the Kyrgyz Republic are women, partly due to low wages. According to a [2013 study](#), women are predominant in television and radio, as well as in online news publications. Male

journalists are significantly represented only in investigative journalism and in international media. As media ownership is rarely transparent, it is difficult to know whether gender representation is balanced among owners.

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

The distribution of state subsidies and advertising contracts became a political matter in 2023. Traditional advertisers are forced to refuse cooperation with independent media, under pressure from the authorities. “I stopped this [access to advertising] because people’s state money must work for the people,” [said](#) President Japarov in an August 2023 interview.

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Advertising practices are also changing for non-political reasons. One panelist noted that advertisers are now working directly with social media platforms because it is more profitable, as well as working with influencers. “Traditional media outlets have not learned to earn money from advertisers in the new changed conditions, and most importantly, have not learned to produce content according to the changed consumption habits of the audience,” said another panelist. “In this regard, bloggers and non-professional content makers have proven to be more flexible and are capturing the advertising market.”

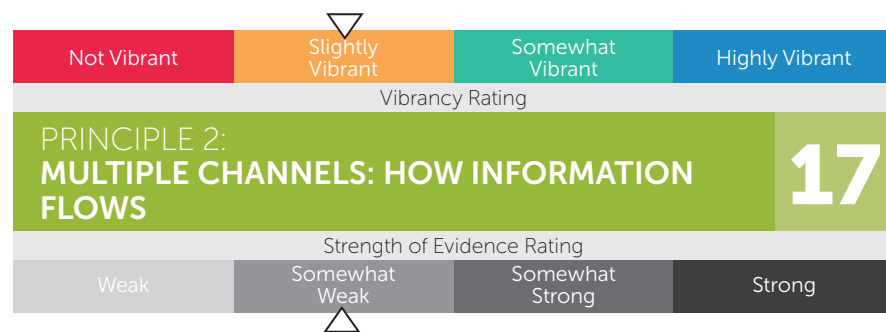
Another panelist observed that editorial offices put little effort into engaging with audiences’ needs. Alternative sources of funding such as crowdfunding are therefore limited practices for independent media, with only Kloop, MediaHub, and Temirov Live raising small amounts. Independent media are heavily reliant on grants, which would become virtually inaccessible under the “foreign agents” law.

Independent media are also subject to lawsuits and bank freezes which affect their financial standing. Kaktus Media, for example, was [ordered to pay](#) KGS 600,000 (\$6,700) to the editorial office of *Evening Bishkek*

for “moral damages.” Authorities also froze the bank accounts of Radio Azattyk (the Kyrgyz service of RFE/RL) and blocked its website in Kyrgyzstan for nine months [until a settlement was reached](#) in July 2023. In addition, throughout the year, the accounts of Bolot Temirov (editor of Temirov Live and “Ayt ayt dese”) were [repeatedly blocked](#) in the payment system Mbank.

Media employees are frequently forced to work multiple jobs, and editorial offices also function as outsourced production studios. One panelist noted that talented journalists often leave either for higher-paying, pro-government media, switch to blogging, or leave the profession altogether. Another panelist observed that regional journalists in state media have significantly lower salaries than journalists in Bishkek, amounting to KGS 15,000-17,000 (less than \$200). Regional journalists in non-state media have relatively higher salaries due to participation in grant projects, but their incomes are not stable.

Overall, the economy of the media sector remains opaque and it is impossible to accurately evaluate market distortions due to political factors. One panelist did note that the official government budget allocated KGS 1.1 billion (\$12 million) for state radio and TV broadcasting and publishing, while the Ministry of Culture and Information [provided](#) KGS 490.6 million (\$5.5 million) to newspapers and KGS 625.6 million (\$6.9 million) to state TV, but highlighted that these subsidies are not transparent.



In 2023, pressure on freedom of speech intensified, with numerous civil activists, public figures, politicians, journalists, and bloggers detained

and charged with crimes. Panelists characterized the past year as one of authorities gaslighting and intensifying censorship in society. The score for Principle 2 fell by one point from last year’s study, with the lowest scores given to people’s rights to produce, distribute, and consume information and to the independence of information channels. The VIBE indicator on adequate access to information scored the highest in this principle: Kyrgyzstan has Central Asia’s second-highest internet speed (Kazakhstan was in first place) and has affordable mobile data.

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

Kyrgyzstan dropped 50 positions in the [2023 World Press Freedom Index](#) from the previous year, losing points in all five categories: political context, legal framework, economic context, socio-cultural context, and security. Although legal mechanisms for protecting freedom of speech nominally exist, enforcement of laws [is selective](#) and court decisions frequently indicate the decline of the judicial system and the rule of law. One panelist cited the *Evening Bishkek* case against Kaktus Media, explaining that it is an example of a Strategic Lawsuit Against Public Participation (SLAPP) case designed for “censorship, intimidation, and abuse of the judicial process.”

2023 also saw the continued effects of the 2021 law “On Protection from Inaccurate (False) Information”—as predicted by the media community, it serves as a means for censorship rather than combatting manipulative information—which was used as a basis for blocking the Kloop website in August and the Radio Azattyk (the Kyrgyz service of RFE/RL) website for nine months. According to [analysis](#) from the Adilet Legal Clinic, the law contains provisions that grossly violate fundamental principles of equality of parties and proportionality of punishment.

Citizens are afraid to speak out against specific government decisions. Users cannot express their opinions on social media or even repost information about current political events without [risk of being arrested or fined](#), as was the case for bloggers Irys Zhekshenaliyev and Adilet Baltabaev and journalist/writer Olzhobay Shakir, among others. Meanwhile, [50 media workers](#) faced various attacks in 2023, including



judicial summons for interrogation, police arrests, pretrial detentions, threats, and blocks.

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

In the Kyrgyz Republic, the telecommunications sector is non-competitive in terms of fixed broadband access but relatively competitive with regards to wireless access. In the retail market for fixed broadband access, the Kyrgyztelecom company dominates, accounting for approximately 65% of the market share, and it owns the largest fiber-optic network in the country.

Regarding the speed of mobile internet, Kyrgyzstan ranks [88th out of 141 countries worldwide](#) in mobile internet speed and is among the [top ten countries](#) for most affordable mobile data. At the same time, internet access varies across the country, with residents in some villages having only low-speed internet or no access at all. There is limited access to alternative information sources if the internet goes down.

According to [M-Vector research](#), people are increasingly relying on internet TV (increasing from 5% to 17% since 2017) and cable TV (increasing from 2% to 8%). The penetration rate of over-the-air TV has fallen from 88% to 65%, while satellite TV is rarely used.

Kyrgyz culture generally has no social norms that restrict access to media for any social groups, but one panelist noted the situation in regions outside the capital, where women and girls are restricted in their rights to access the internet. No data is available on access to information or on digital technologies among vulnerable groups. However, another panelist noted an apparent “lack of special news and information resources in sign language and other languages used by people with disabilities; [or] special technical devices to enable people with special

needs to access information, such as sign language computers and screen-reading programs.”

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

In 2023, amendments to the law “On measures to prevent harm to the health, physical, intellectual, mental, spiritual, and moral development of children” were adopted, along with subsequent amendments to several legal acts, including the law “On Mass Media.” The purported purpose of the amendments is to protect children from “harmful” information and to regulate the obligations of entities involved in

the production and dissemination of information. However, according to [legal analysis](#) published by Kaktus Media, these changes “pose risks to democratic values of the rule of law, including issues related to the proper observance of the right to freedom of beliefs and their free expression,” with internet operators required to bear the economic costs of implementation.

In addition, amendments to the law “On access to information held by state bodies and local self-government bodies” came into effect in 2023. The previous version of the law, adopted in 2006, fully complied with international standards for government transparency and rights to information. The current amendments appeared without prior discussions in the media community.

These legislative changes allow state bodies to officially block access to socially significant information. In 2022, authorities closed public access to declarations of officials and canceled the tender mechanism for government procurement, which previously facilitated citizen monitoring. In 2023, the state classified as secret the presidential decrees on granting Kyrgyz citizenship, the expenses for maintaining the country’s leadership, information about sponsors and investors, and many other topics. The government also classified data on high-profile

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criminal cases, including 22 activists who protested demarcation of the Kempir-Abad reservoir and politician Adakhan Madumarov.

In addition, journalists have a more difficult time obtaining interviews or comments from government officials. This issue is most evident with President Japarov, who has not held a traditional end-of-year press conference in more than two years. In 2023, the president [said](#) that he would answer all questions at the meeting of the second People’s Kurultai—a new state assembly gathering hundreds of people selected by local authorities—in December, but authorities [were selective](#) in accrediting journalists and media for this event, as well as in choosing participants.

The press services of state and municipal authorities provide limited information. State officials are difficult to contact, do not respond to inquiries, and provide press releases on events without guaranteeing the accuracy and completeness of the provided information. One panelist noted that Govori TV made more than 20 requests to the State Committee for National Security (GKNB) and the presidential administration regarding the criminal case of the Aurora + sanatorium but did not receive an official response to any of these.

The case involved the illegal privatization of expensive real estate in the Issyk-Kul region belonging to administrative members and associates of ex-President Kurmanbek Bakiyev, who fled the country in 2010. According to information leaked to the media, in May 2010, a 10-hectare land plot on the territory of the Aurora sanatorium was nationalized but only one-fifth of property built on the site was taken into state ownership. Among those whom the State Committee for National Security arrested on charges of organizing a [corruption scheme](#) was Aleksei Shirshov—a former partner of Maxim Bakiyev, the son of the ex-president—but he was released and corruption charges dropped after President Japarov spoke in his defense. Panelists said that statements by high-level politicians now need particular scrutiny.

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

Kyrgyz legislation is designed to guarantee free enterprise and media competition, but state monopolies continue to grow. In 2022, all seven regional TV channels became part of the structure of KTRK—a digital family of five channels, previously called the Public National Television and Radio Channel. With the most [significant audience](#) for media consumption, KTRK has traditionally remained a [powerful tool](#) for the authorities to combat any political opponents; broadcast content has never been independent or balanced.

In recent years, the private multiplex Digital Technologies LLC—the primary alternative to Kyrgyztelecom, which is majority state-owned—has experienced significant difficulties. Some TV channel owners are unable to pay contributions for signal distribution, leading to legal disputes, and future prospects for the multiplex are unclear. “One channel has already dropped out of the package a year ago,” explained a panelist. “If Next TV, APRIL TV channels are ‘nationalized,’ i.e., the number of social multiplex channels continues to decrease, the remaining channels will not be able to finance the functioning of the multiplex. The end of the [multiplex] will come, and complete monopoly of pro-government media will set in.”

According to Article 5 of the current law “On Mass Media,” foreign shares in broadcasting enterprises cannot exceed 35% of the authorized capital of a media outlet’s founding legal entity. Kyrgyzstan has no laws that require full information disclosure on media holdings and owner identities.

Management of broadcasting frequencies [is not transparent](#), but since 2020, there have been no scandals regarding allocation. In 2023, [the website of the licensing authority](#), the State Communications Agency, announced three auctions and three sessions of the State Radio Frequency Commission.

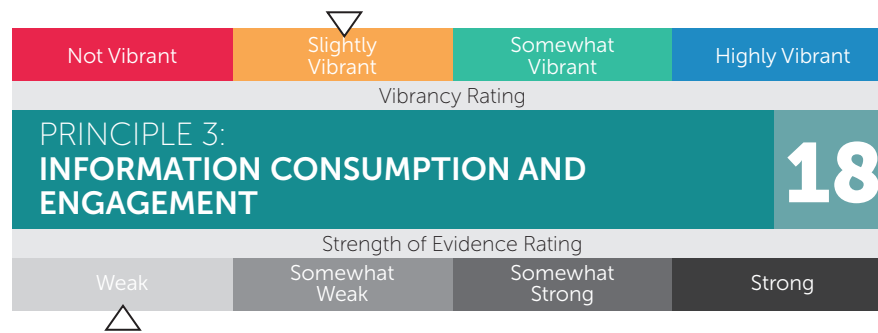
**Indicator 10: Information channels are independent.**

State-owned media and media affiliated with the authorities have undeniable preferences. Access to information and to top officials for interviews are the prerogative of KTRK and state information agency Kabar. These main state-owned media outlets have become exclusive information platforms for the president. For example, KTRK has a special weekly program, “President Japarov,” which is a local equivalent of the Russian TV show “Moscow. Kremlin. Putin.” Kamchybek Tashiev—the head of the GKNB and arguably the second-most influential figure in Kyrgyzstan—has his own channel, Region TV, where he and his family members are widely covered.

State-owned media also have the advantage of receiving funding from the state budget. In addition, political pressure forces major advertisers to only place ads in state-owned media and some media affiliated with the top political leadership. Beyond these informational advantages for state media, laws and government decrees are exclusively published in state newspapers. The media market is thus rife with unequal conditions and distortion.

Nonstate media outlets, which are dismissed for being “independent” and/or “oppositional,” have limited revenue opportunities, and these sources significantly dwindled in 2023. Advertisers undoubtedly deprive media of their editorial independence, with journalists on the panel noting that working with advertisers is becoming more problematic. Conflicts often arise within the editorial team when the commercial department attracts advertisers and then journalists publish investigations or critical material about this enterprise. The advertiser in turn terminates the contract.

State media in the regions are very poorly equipped in comparison to some independent outlets, which purchase equipment for their editorial offices through grants from foreign donors. Likewise, salaries for regional state journalists are usually lower because independent editorial offices often work on grant-funded projects and can pay their journalists more. Not all independent media are successful in securing grants, however.



Principle 3 improved by one point from last year’s study, largely due to strengthening cooperation between media and NGOs, with the work of community media scoring the highest in this principle. Although community media is a small component of Kyrgyzstan’s media ecosystem, these outlets have a strong audience, provide information on topics such as ecology and migration, and adhere to professional standards. However, most panelists are only vaguely aware or are uninformed about media activity in local communities. The indicator on media literacy scored the lowest, highlighting problems among the general population and even professional content producers with digital hygiene, digital security, and data protection.

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

Kyrgyz legislation guarantees the right to privacy, protection of honor and dignity, and protection of personal data, and the State Agency for Personal Data Protection oversees issues related to privacy and safeguarding personal data. Despite these institutional mechanisms, citizens rarely seek protection of their personal data. “In 2022, the Agency considered 20 citizens’ appeals on issues of personal information protection, and in the first nine months of 2023, the number of appeals reached 130,” explained one panelist. “Such a negligible number of appeals indicates that society lacks information about data leaks, as well as a general understanding of their rights related to personal data and the risks of unauthorized use of personal data by third parties for their interests.”

According to another panelist, training in media literacy and digital security does not often result in practicing these skills—whether among consumers or even media professionals. “Unfortunately, the situation is dire even in the journalistic community, although many colleagues regularly undergo training in digital security,” she said.

Some donors provide financial support for software products related to digital security after training sessions on the topic. However, as one panelist noted, many outlets outsource IT to specialists who may not have expertise in digital security. Only a few media, with the support of grants, have been able to bring digital security specialists on board.

In 2023, authorities rarely resorted to DDoS attacks against unfavorable media outlets and attempts to hack journalists’ personal correspondence were relatively rare. Authorities consider website blocking to be a more convenient tool, panelists observed. The majority of the population has poor knowledge of VPN services and cannot bypass these blocks.

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

The State Agency for Personal Data Protection has a training center that offers programs on personal data protection and cybersecurity for government officials and business representatives. In addition, several other entities, mostly NGOs and media organizations, conduct media literacy trainings for journalists and citizens. One panelist highlighted examples such as the media and digital literacy schools run by the Media Development Center and Factcheck.kg; the national media literacy campaign “Teksherdim” (I Checked) run by Internews; and the first European Summer Festival in Bishkek, which included events on media literacy.

However, the government does not promote these trainings, media literacy courses are not integrated with the education system, and

non-systemic efforts to promote digital security technologies are insufficient. According to a 2023 European Neighbourhood Council [report](#), the level of media literacy among citizens in Central Asia is low, particularly among the elderly, youth, people with low education, and people who live in rural areas. Older people do not have the technical skills to verify information, youth simply do not bother to do so, and rural groups are particularly vulnerable to disinformation. The research found that awareness of fake news is very high across all age groups, and media consumers in general know that fact-checking is the only way to determine whether or not news is accurate. However, the comprehension of fact-checking varies widely, and almost no one is aware of Kyrgyzstan’s specialized websites or fact-checking services.

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

Exercising the right to freedom of speech and access to information has become increasingly unsafe for civil activists and casual social media users. Law enforcement agencies target activists and closely monitor opinion leaders, although ordinary users have also been persecuted for their statements. The Kyrgyz criminal code includes vague concepts subject to excessively broad interpretation and serves as a useful tool for pressuring citizens; anyone criticizing state authorities can, for example,

be accused of inciting mass riots. Expertise for [verifying and assessing statements](#) also tends to have a bias toward the prosecution.

An episode involving two-time world Greco-Roman wrestling champion Zholaman Sharshenbekov exemplifies recent trends.

In an Instagram post, he spoke out against

changing the state flag and declared his intention to compete under the old flag, drawing immediate backlash from several prominent officials. A few days later, Sharshenbekov [clarified](#) that he does not mix politics with professional sports and simply believes that all citizens have the right to express their opinion.

**Law enforcement agencies target activists and closely monitor opinion leaders, although ordinary users have also been persecuted for their statements.**

The ruling elite rejects the very idea of civic participation and accountability. “In theory, citizens have access to various platforms to express their opinions and information,” said one panelist. “But in practice, the consequences of such open statements—faced not only by journalists but also by all citizens today—have led to self-censorship and further withdrawal from public life.”

Existing platforms for public discussions have become less powerful, as evidenced by the formal parliamentary hearings on relevant draft laws on foreign agents and media. Government representatives [openly declared](#) to the public that, despite mass objections and disagreements, the draft laws would be adopted. The People’s Kurultai also did not become a platform for public discussions. In 2023, authorities [abolished](#) the public councils of state agencies, which previously provided a channel of communication between citizens and top state officials.

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

For several years, the United (Industrial) Media Committee, established with the support of international organizations, has focused on organizing media owners to systematically commission studies on media consumption and audience needs. The committee hopes to base its strategic planning for the media sector on such information. However, media owners have never acknowledged the need for research on media consumption or implemented studies. In 2023, after a six-year hiatus, Internews and USAID also funded research on media consumption in Kyrgyzstan.

Media structures traditionally use consumer statistics programs, most often Google Analytics or Yandex Metrica, building KPIs of employees on the basis of statistical data and forming an understanding of the demand and needs of audiences. However, as one panelist observed, “Literal adherence to analytical systems brings the risk that media outlets will focus on audience demand rather than public interest.”

**Local community media outlets reached 141,000 residents in 2023, increasing the diversity of information sources for 27 rural communities in Kyrgyzstan.**

Another panelist explained that the precarious environment of media enterprises does not allow them to strategize based on data. With the constant pressure on media, it is too great a risk to invest financial and staff resources into new developments. “If the site could be blocked tomorrow, why invest in it?” she said.

Formally, media outlets provide opportunities for audiences to reach out through online letters, questions, and calls. However, journalists do not use this mechanism as a source for understanding audience needs. In addition, most editors have closed comment sections on their publications because they are afraid that

authorities could use responses which have hate speech or political opinions as pretext to block or close the outlet.

In 2023, there was an increase in collaboration between media and NGOs amid government pressure and threats of repressive laws, with one example the [Media Action Platform](#). In addition, civil society organizations are [actively advocating](#) for journalists and help them develop strategies for further work.

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

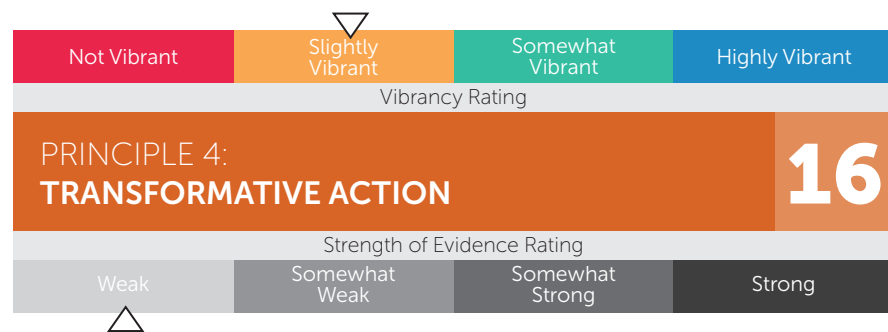
Not all panelists, especially those from independent national media, are aware of the influence of local community media, and cannot say whether these media raise serious issues to positively impact local development. The work of community media is not widely known, except when journalists have prior history collaborating with the Association of Community Media. Nevertheless, according to statistics from the Association of Community Media—which hosts material produced by 20 community multimedia centers and five community radio stations—these local community media outlets [reached](#) 141,000 residents in 2023, increasing the diversity of information sources for 27 rural communities in Kyrgyzstan.

Community media rely on grants from international organizations and local volunteers. Non-professional content producers from local communities cover important community topics such as ecology and migration, food prices, and issues affecting vulnerable groups. Thanks to systematic training, community media adhere to professional standards. The efforts of the Association of Community Media in 2023 were recognized by the media community and its director [awarded a special prize](#) in a professional competition.

topping the consumption agenda, while TV, radio, and the internet are dominated by movies, series, news, and music.

The Kyrgyzstan media space has non-politicized content producers with their own audiences, mostly on blogs and social media. These producers often cover topics such as ecology, tourism, and travel. Media also present non-politicized content by opinion leaders from social networks, with artists and athletes among the contributors. In a country with increasing authoritarian rule, however, any topic risks becoming political.

Due to low demand, access to analytical and niche media remains limited. Kyrgyzstan still has specialized media on economics, such as Economist.kg and Akchabar. Many public and online platforms with religious orientation (for example, Nasaat media) have extensive audiences. The country has regional variation: with reduced use of the Russian language in the southern regions, domestic TV in the Kyrgyz language is now dominating, along with the Kyrgyz blogosphere. In contrast, in the capital and some northern regions, consumers still primarily watch Kremlin channels and read media in Russian.



The score for Principle 4 fell by one point from last year’s study. Panelists struggled to assess how information influences people’s behavior in the absence of reliable studies on this topic. The indicator on how civil society uses quality information to improve communities scored the highest within this principle, showing the solidarity of journalists with civil activists and NGOs, which is a relatively new trend. Conversely, the indicators on how the government uses information and how information supports good governance and democratic rights scored the lowest.

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

According to the results of the [2023 M-Vector](#) survey, 79% of respondents were interested in news, with politics, weather, the economy, and crime

Kyrgyz society has a high level of intolerance towards differing opinions, which contributes to reduced information diversity. “Due to aggression, the media try not to speak out on religious, national, or language-related topics,” said one panelist. “Previously, there was more diversity; for example, they discussed the loud *azan* [Islamic call to prayer] in mosques, but now they are afraid to discuss such topics because there will be hate, and people will receive threats in private messages. Similarly, if the issue of the quality of teaching the Kyrgyz language or problems with dictionaries, teacher training, etc., is raised, such content is perceived as attacks on the Kyrgyz language itself and a reluctance to learn it.”

Another panelist observed that the media sphere is less diverse now, with fewer open discussions featuring people with varied viewpoints. Open platforms with talk shows are limited to Azattyk Media and Govori TV, along with T-Media in the regions, while state channels do not invite people whose opinions differ from the government’s line. “In November

2023, I asked to broadcast a video about the contribution of NGOs to solving social problems in the region on regional Osh TV and Intymak TV,” the panelist said. “They refused and said there would be negative consequences for their leaders.”

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

There is very little research or data on how information influences the behavior of Kyrgyz citizens in various spheres. The journalists on the panel reported that citizens are guided by unreliable, poor-quality information regarding electoral processes, health and safety issues, and current social and political problems. A striking example of this is the question of vaccinating children. In 2023, [more than 17,000](#) Kyrgyzstanis refused routine vaccinations, and the end of the year was marked by [a measles outbreak](#). Almost half of those who [refused to vaccinate their children](#) are guided by “religious” considerations, while another 40% do not trust the effectiveness and safety of vaccines.

Social media platforms play significant roles in electoral processes. By using administrative resources and employing troll factories, the authorities discredit unwanted candidates. “Given that the authorities systematically and massively use troll factories to shape public opinion on various political events or to deliberately influence individuals to damage their public image, people’s opinions on political and social issues are formed based on unreliable information,” observed a panelist.

Audio and video recordings of election procedures can be effective only if the authorities are not interested in “pushing through” a specific candidate. For example, in 2023, the election results in a single-member district in the capital were [declared invalid](#), largely due to recordings circulating on social media about voter bribery and vote falsification.

**“ Social media platforms play significant roles in electoral processes. By using administrative resources and employing troll factories, the authorities discredit unwanted candidates.**

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

As of June 2023, the Unified Database of Legal Entities of the Ministry of Justice had registered [29,130 NGOs](#) in the Kyrgyz Republic. Among them, some do not function, and various organizations pursue different goals and have diverse values and missions. For example, according to one panelist, the government uses some NGOs for manipulation and to support repressive legislative initiatives. However, these organizations are a distinct minority, as most NGOs provide fact-based and expert opinions.

NGOs founded on values of human rights and democratic principles typically strive to provide Kyrgyz society and their target groups with high quality and reliable information. For instance, the NGO [MoveGreen](#) engages in civic monitoring of air quality, offers expertise and analysis, promotes measures to reduce pollution levels in Bishkek, and provides environmental education for citizens and decision-makers. The legal

clinic Adilet provides legal expertise on legislative drafts. A significant number of gender-focused NGOs provide expertise on gender equality issues, combating violence, and engaging in advocacy activities.

Government agencies often lack the capacity to provide expertise, and NGOs are reliable partners in this aspect. Media outlets also actively collaborate with NGOs, especially on issues requiring specialized knowledge.

However, in 2023, the relationship between NGOs and government bodies deteriorated. “During the reform of the media law, the Media Initiative Group prepared five comments on five versions of the draft law presented by the Administration of the President of the Kyrgyz Republic,” said one panelist. “However, all suggestions and remarks provided by representatives of the media community regarding provisions that create unreasonable, excessive risks for the activities of independent media outlets were [not taken into account](#) by the initiators.”

According to the panelists, the NGO sector continues to perform effectively in the face of government pressure. For example, despite political manipulation by certain parliamentarians, civil society activists worked to submit a funding application for the fight against tuberculosis and HIV/AIDS in the Kyrgyz Republic. The UN Global Fund [approved the application](#).

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

The quality of information at state press conferences has significantly deteriorated. “Speakers are poorly prepared to answer questions,” said a panelist, while also acknowledging that “journalists themselves are not practically prepared for press conferences, often writing from the office, listening to speakers online.”

Government officials have a limited understanding of the role of journalists and the media. Prime Minister Akylbek Japarov, for instance, [urged](#) bloggers and journalists to “contribute to the development of the republic” by highlighting the achievements of the current administration. Officials at all levels do not shy away from unreliable information to present their “achievements,” sometimes resorting to deliberately false information. For example, the Kyrgyz White House claimed that replacing the national flag would [cost nothing](#) to the state budget. Journalists and citizens were unaware of the reasons behind the flag replacement, leading to the proliferation of rumors.

President Japarov and his team, while showing disdain for civil activists and NGOs, nonetheless try to strengthen the public perception that he is supported by the majority of citizens and that he is guided by their advice. To achieve this, “dutiful delegates” were carefully selected for the second People’s Kurultai, and the president held secret meetings with activists, bloggers, and journalists selected by his press service based

on unclear criteria. Panelists noted that [the meeting](#) with bloggers and journalists was not officially covered; only leaked information from the meeting participants revealed that this was not the first closed meeting with the president.

Despite the deteriorating interactions between NGOs and the government, the panelists cited examples of effective and productive cooperation. One panelist explained how the Constitutional Court responded to a complaint from the non-profit Media Policy Institute regarding Article 167 of the criminal code, which relates to non-disclosure agreements. The court agreed that the article in question had legal uncertainty and the Cabinet of Ministers ultimately amended it.

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

**“The authorities seem immune to criticism regarding public information about human rights violations, and any criticism of the activities of government agencies is used as a pretext for persecuting them as political opponents.”**

According to Transparency International’s [2023 Corruption Perceptions Index](#), Kyrgyzstan scored 26 out of 100 points and dropped one position compared to the previous year, now ranking 141st out of 180 countries. While the head of the State Committee for National Security [claimed](#) Kyrgyzstan has entered the “second stage” of the fight against corruption, the report noted “a significant decrease in the transparency of government activities and an increase in corruption risks.”

One panelist described the attempts of independent outlets to affect change through quality reporting. “Independent media help the leadership of national security agencies with journalistic investigations, identify shortcomings in transparency and accountability mechanisms, leadership and management systems, and provide their platforms for information exchange and discussion of security issues involving all parties,” she said. “Unfortunately, instead of adequately responding to investigations and publications on corruption, the authorities do everything to destroy independent media and restrict freedom of



speech. Moreover, the authorities do not acknowledge these violations, calling for punishment of content producers for expressing their opinions.”

The authorities seem immune to criticism regarding public information about human rights violations, and any criticism of the activities of government agencies is used as a pretext for persecuting them as political opponents. For example, the media extensively covered [the story](#) of a criminal case against a 72-year-old pensioner who used social media to address the president and the head of the State Committee for National Security. The woman complained about rising prices and the unfair arrest of the leader of the Butun Kyrgyzstan party and parliament deputy Adakhan Madumarov. As a result, authorities charged her under the criminal code statute “public calls for violent seizure of power,” fining and detaining her for one month.

Panelists pointed to another dismissive state response, when public accusations arose against the head of the State Intelligence Service and their use of torture on detainees in the Kempir-Abad case. The department [denied the allegations of torture](#) and reminded the detainees that knowingly false reporting of a crime carries criminal liability.

*Because of the restrictive media environment, panelists in the Kyrgyzstan study will remain anonymous.*

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