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MEDIA INFLUENCE MATRIX: KYRGYZSTAN

Funding Journalism

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Promotank Research Institute is an independent think-tank in Kyrgyzstan focusing on research, policy and implementation of projects in the areas of economic development, sustainability and media and information.

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SOURCES OF FUNDING

Shifts in Journalism Funding

The media sector in Kyrgyzstan is heavily dominated by the government through both ownership and funding. The government funds a large pool of state-owned media companies, including newspapers, radio broadcasters and the public service operator KTRK. According to our estimates, the government spent some US\$ 7.6m in the media in 2018, more than 75% of which was accounted for by the state budget allocation for KTRK.

On top of that, in a move aimed at gaining loyalty of media outlets, it is believed that the government is using state-owned companies, mainly banks and mining firms, or other public institutions, to fund more media. The value of these contributions is not publicly available. According to our calculations, and interviews with experts and journalists carried out for this report, we estimate the value of government funding in the media to be upwards of US\$ 10m, which is equivalent to roughly half the value of the advertising market in Kyrgyzstan.

Such an overly dominant position of the government in the media harms the country's journalism in many ways.

First, most of the media that relies on government cash is biased in its reporting. KTRK, one of the most influential broadcasters in Kyrgyzstan thanks partly to its nationwide coverage, is a devoted promoter of state policies and rarely provides alternative points of view. More than a third of KTRK's airtime is filled with state propaganda, recent studies showed.

Second, the government's intervention in the media has a distorting effect on the market, discouraging investments and stymieing innovation and experimentation. Besides government funding, a major source of

revenue for the media is the informal financing, comprising ad hoc contributions made by people or companies to media outlets as a way to buy their allegiance. Such support further cripples competition, scaring off investors and preventing independent news media from becoming sustainable. Kloop, one of the few independent outlets in Kyrgyzstan, relies mostly on funding from foreign donors to operate. In spite of its attempts to diversify the sources of funding (by pulling in ad money and charging for training workshops), Kloop is far from becoming a self-sustainable outlet in a country where the culture to pay for news is inexistent and profits in the news media market are wafer thin.

Finally, in spite of the government's dominance, the state subsidies to the media are still insufficient for the state media to properly operate, raising serious questions about the longer-term viability of the bloated state-owned media sector. In a move aimed at wringing more efficiency and improved performance from the sector, the government began in 2017 to merge some of the state media operations, slashing jobs and funds.

However, that is hardly a solution to the major problems that independent journalism is grappling with in Kyrgyzstan. Most of the funding for the Kyrgyz media comes with strings attached, turning journalists into weapons used to attack the foes of their media's owners or funders. The influence of the media is thus judged by how successfully they play that role.

Philanthropy remains the sole source of support for independent media. However, its contribution is a pittance compared to the other sources of media funding. The philanthropy funding in the Kyrgyz media during the past decade, some US\$ 6.1m, is less than two-thirds of the state spending in one year alone.

Some Western governments-funded broadcasters, such as BBC or Azattyk, the local service of U.S.-supported Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, bring good journalism to Kyrgyzstan. But even those broadcasters have tempered their criticism in recent years to avoid clashes with the authorities.

In such a toxic reality, young generations might deliver the solution as they seek fresh, true, engaging content. Although television remains the main source of news and information in Kyrgyzstan (almost 88% of the Kyrgyz citizens watch national news), young people are moving away from the screens. Only 65% of Kyrgyz people aged up to 24 years of age watch television. In contrast, roughly 89% of those older than 52 do so. Already news is the most consumed form of content on the internet, as 47% of people said in a recent survey.

With the internet growth, the popularity of social media is also increasing. Facebook-owned WhatsApp is the most popular platform, used by almost all the country's internet users.

The rise of the internet is signally changing media consumption habits and is likely to trigger significant shifts in the media sector. For example, print media outlets that have not invested in digital products are in a fix. In 2018, three print publications that didn't have a website folded. That is likely to continue.

Regrettably though, politicians are also making inroads in online media. The current president Sooronbai Zheenbekov and two former presidents, Almazbek Atambaev and Kurmanbek Bakiev, among many other politicians, are known to regularly fund internet media.

Given all these trends, it becomes clearer that the biggest challenge for Kyrgyzstan's independent media in the near future will be to build a business model that would allow them to operate independently, grow their audience and compete in an overly politicized market.

Popular News Media

Consumption Trends

Television remains the main source of news and information for the Kyrgyz. Some 93% of the Kyrgyz population receive political and economic news and information on television, according to data from November 2017 from a survey carried out by the International Republican Institute (IRI), a Washington, D.C.-headquartered NGO.[1] Almost 88% of the Kyrgyz citizens watch national news. Religious shows are also popular, being watched by 12% of the viewers.

In contrast, consumption of radio programs and newspapers as key news and information sources has declined considerably in the country. During the period 2015-2017, their audience went down from 27% to 16% for radio and from 35% to 19% for newspapers. 73% of the people in the country did not listen to radio and 59% did not read newspapers in 2016, according to the IRI's survey.

But although television remains the leader in terms of news consumption, it is constantly losing traction among young people. Some 65% of Kyrgyz citizens aged up to 24 years watch television. In contrast, 89% of people over 52 years of age do so. The internet has played a major role in these media consumption changes in Kyrgyzstan. Between 2015 and 2017, the share of people with access to internet (those who access the internet every day) more than doubled from 11% to some 25%.

Increasingly, the Kyrgyz go online to communicate and access content. News is the most consumed type of online content, as indicated by 47% of respondents, according to data from IRI. At the same time, people in Kyrgyzstan are becoming increasingly mobile. An annual survey conducted by IRI and Gallup found that 62% of internet users used smartphones in 2017, a significant increase from 48% in the previous year. Generally, 89% of internet users accessed the internet through mobile phone in 2017, a 4 percentage point increase compared to 2016. In rural areas, mobile phone is the main device used to visit the internet. 94% of users in village go online through a mobile whereas 83% of people in urban areas do that.

As more people go online, the popularity of social networks is also growing fast. People in Kyrgyzstan are increasingly moving from news websites to social networks where they subscribe or follow the pages of their preferred online publications. Messenger platforms are the most visited online service (54%) followed by news portals with 29%. However, many people use a combination of the two as people often receive news mainly through messenger platforms.

Among messenger services, Facebook-owned WhatsApp has quasi-monopoly, 96% of internet users accessing the platform. Overall, 84% of users get their news through WhatsApp.

People generally prefer to access news through messengers mostly because these platforms are concise and simple, according to 51% of the respondents in a survey conducted by Media Policy Institute, a Kyrgyzstan-based NGO, but also because information is presented in more attractive formats, including images and video clips (according to 45% of the respondents in the same

[1] Public Opinion Survey Residents of Kyrgyzstan, 19 November 2017-2 December 2017, available online at http://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/2018-2-5_iri_poll_presentation_kyrgyzstan.pdf (accessed on 15 July 2019).

survey). Others indicated that they use messengers because their friends do (42%) and because it is easy to search for information on these platforms (37%).^[2]

As to social networks, almost half of the population uses them (46%). Three quarters of youth aged 14 to 24 have social media accounts in Kyrgyzstan. Russian-owned Odnoklassniki.ru dominates with 53% of the Kyrgyz users followed by Facebook (35%) and Vkontakte.ru (another Russian owned network) with 14%, according to 2016 data from IRI Gallup. (See a detailed analysis of the role of technology companies in the media in *Technology, Public Sphere and Journalism: Kyrgyzstan, Media Influence Matrix*)

While the use of social media to communicate decreased from 83% in 2016 to 70% in 2017, the use of the platforms to read news increased from 34% to 41% during the same two years. In terms of engagement on social networks, likes and reposts are the most frequent (54%) followed by comments (38%) and writing posts/posting images and video (18%).

One major change noticed in media consumption in the country was the growing use of Kyrgyz language, particularly online. According to the Media Policy Institute, 78% and 65% of people watch television and consume online content in Kyrgyz language, respectively. In 2017, users of social networks accessed mainly Russian-language content; back then, better access to internet was available only in big cities. With expansion of mobile internet in the regions, primarily in small towns and villages, the number of users of Kyrgyz-language content has hiked.

Key Players

Television

In May 2017, Kyrgyzstan completed the transition to digital broadcasting, a major technological shift from analog that made space for more broadcast operators. Part of the process was the donation of two digital multiplexes^[3] to the private operator Digital Technologies whose owner is Kim Aleksandr Isaevich, a local businessman. A total of 21 private television and radio companies joined Digital Technologies' transmission platform.

Thanks to the digital switchover, citizens have gained access to a higher number of free-to-air television channels than before.

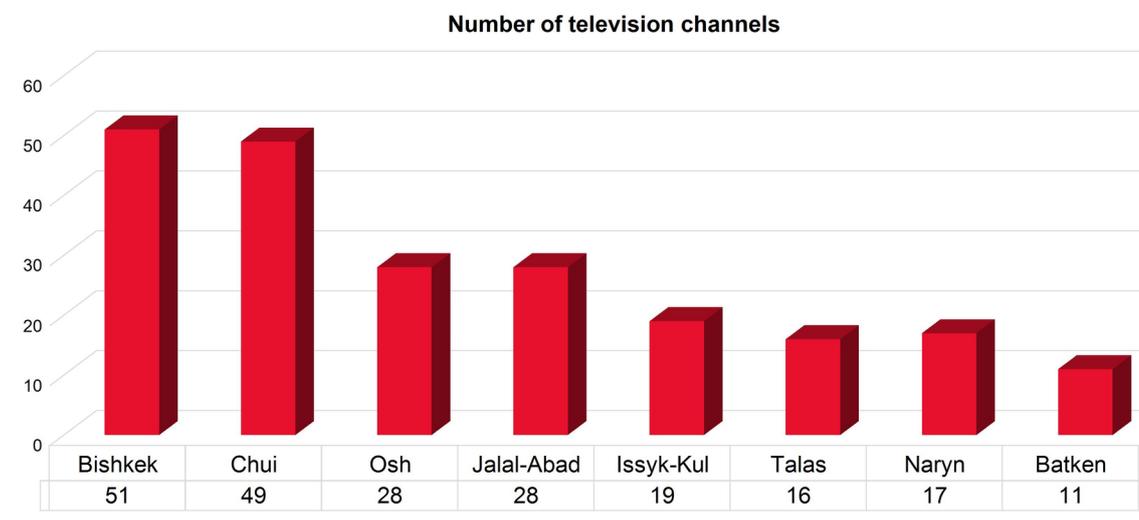


[2] “Отчет по итогам исследования уровня медиаграмотности в Кыргызской Республике” (Report of the research on media literacy in Kyrgyz Republic), Media Policy Institute, 2018, available online at <http://prevention.kg/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/Уровень-медиаграмотности-населения-в-КР.pdf> (accessed on 15 July 2019).

[3] The multiplex is a bundle of digital services that have been digitized, compressed and combined to be delivered to users. Industry experts also use the term when they refer to the actual digital transmission operation.

Digital geographies

Availability of television channels in the main regions of Kyrgyzstan, 2019



Source: Ministry of Culture, Information and Tourism

To ensure that the population has access to a minimum number of television and radio channels, the Kyrgyz Government approved in 2014 a set of regulations that establish what is known as the social package of television and radio channels, a list of channels that must be carried free-to-air by all transmission companies.[4] The social package consists of television and radio channels run by companies funded from the state budget or founded by public institutions. The social package is free of charge and available unscrambled[5] for the entire population.

List of television operators included in the social package, 2019

- Kyrgyz Television and Radio Broadcasting Corporation of the Kyrgyz Republic (KTRK)
- Public Television ElTR
- MIR (national branch)
- CJSC Channel 5
- KTRK Balastan (children-youth television channel)
- KTRK Madaniyat (cultural-educational television channel)
- Media holding Pyramid
- Batken regional public broadcaster
- Jalal-Abad regional public broadcaster
- Issyk-Kul regional public broadcaster
- Naryn regional public broadcaster
- Talas regional public broadcaster
- Chui regional public broadcaster (Sary-Ozon)
- Regional public broadcaster Yntymak

[4] The Regulation on the introduction of the social package of television channels as of 23 June 2014, №349, available online at <http://cbd.minjust.gov.kg/act/view/ru-ru/96595/30?cl=kg-kg> (accessed on 10 June 2019).

[5] The Regulation on the introduction of the social package, cit., p.2.

The public media corporation KTRK airs daily an average volume of 123 hours of television broadcasting and 75 hours of radio broadcasting.[6] The corporation now runs six television channels: the Public First Channel, Sport, Music, Balastan (focused on children programming), Ala-Too 24 (specialized in news and current affairs), Madaniyat. Tarykh. Til (focused on culture and education).

KTRK has the highest signal coverage in Kyrgyzstan, close to 95% of the population. It broadcasts in the Kyrgyz (state) and Russian (official) languages. In addition, KTRK television channels stream their programs online.

On average, 15% of all citizens aged 14+ watch KTRK daily. KTRK Music comes second followed on the third place by Channel One Russia, the largest television channel in Russia. Four television channels operated by KTRK appear among the top 10 most viewed channels in Kyrgyzstan.[7]

The state also owns some other television and radio companies. One of them, ElTR, which provides nationwide broadcasting, has more than one million viewers, a record only achieved by KTRK.[8] In 2010, the government nationalized two private broadcasters through a decree: Pyatyi (Fifth) Channel and Pyramid. At the time, Channel 5 and Pyramid had healthy ratings, but following the takeover by the government, they lost almost all their influence.

Pyatyi (Fifth) Channel used to be owned by Kurmanbek Bakiev, a former president. Following the collapse of his regime, the channel was taken over by the government. However, attempts to adopt legal provisions that would clarify the legal status of the Pyatyi failed. Pyramid used to have various owners. During the presidency of Askar Akaev, it was technically owned by his son-in-law. After Mr Akaev was exiled, the broadcaster was bought by Invest-Media, a company whose owners included an individual who had the same name as a relative of Mairam Akayeva, wife of the ousted president. Pyramid was also nationalized after the April 2010 revolution that led to the ousting of Mr Bakiev. Today the channel is owned by a state-controlled property management fund.

At the moment, there are discussions both in the local media community and in Jogorku Kenesh (the Kyrgyz Parliament) about the need to reduce the number of state-owned broadcasters as many experts and civil society groups question the state budget spent on these operations. Thus, proposals to denationalize these channels have been circulated by civil society members and activists.

[6] The Strategy of KTRC Development for 2017-2019, p. 13, available online at <http://www.ktrk.kg/static/files/strategy2017-2019.pdf> (accessed on 15 June 2019).

[7] “Медиа предпочтения населения Кыргызстана” (Media preferences of people in Kyrgyzstan), M-Vector, 2017, available online at <http://soros.kg/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/Otchet-Mediapredpochteniya-naseleniya-KR-8-volna.pdf> (accessed on 15 July 2019).

[8] See more about ElTR Kyrgyzstan on the station’s website at <http://eltr.kg/ru/o-nas-2/> (accessed on 10 June 2019).

The television players

Most popular TV stations in Kyrgyzstan, by daily audience share (%), 2012-2017

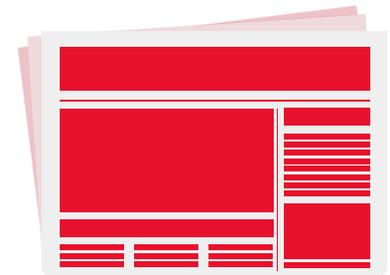
Channel	2012	2014	2015	2016	2017	Operating company	Majority owner
Public First Channel	20.3	48	n/a	n/a	15	Public media corporation KTRK	Government
Russian First Channel	19.7	9.2	n/a	n/a	10	JSC First Channel	Russian government
NTS	4.8	n/a	n/a	n/a	9	n/a	n/a
EITR	11.2	10,4	n/a	n/a	7	n/a	Government

n/a: not available
Source: M-Vector, CMDS

In 2013, Public First Channel of KTRK had the highest ratings in the Kyrgyz television market, even more popular than the Russian First Channel (ORT).[9] In 2017, the situation changed, but only slightly. KTRK's flagship channel was still in the first place in Kyrgyzstan. However, in the Bishkek market it was only the sixth most watched broadcaster. Residents of the capital city preferred Russian television channels, the Russian First Channel[10] being the most watched in the city.

Print

Paper versions of print media are read by 42% of people, 54.5% of whom share the newspapers with others to read, usually three or more people, according to data from M-Vector, a local market research company. Russian-language publications are read by 23.9% of the print media consumers.



The newspaper Super Info, in Kyrgyz language, is considered to be the most circulated publication in print, with a third of the population reading it, according to local surveys. Vecherny Bishkek (Evening Bishkek), published in Russian, is the second most popular newspaper. Super Info and Vecherny Bishkek are also the most preferred newspapers in urban areas whereas in villages Super Info and Daryger are the most popular.

[9] Svetlana Moiseeva. "Общественный первый канал стал самым рейтинговым в Кыргызстане" (The Public first channel has become the top rating one in Kyrgyzstan), Vecherny Bishkek, 13 December 2013, available online at https://www.vb.kg/doc/255038_obshestvennyy_pervyy_kanal_stal_samym_reytingovym_v_kyrgyzstane.html (accessed on 22 July 2019).

[10] Aidai Erkebaeva. "КТРК возглавил рейтинг телеканалов в Кыргызстане, но проиграл в Бишкеке" (KTRK was the leader of rating of television channels in Kyrgyzstan, but it lost in Bishkek), Kloop, 13 December 2017, available online at <https://kloop.kg/blog/2017/12/13/ktrk-vozglavil-rejting-telekanalov-v-kyrgyzstane-no-proigral-v-bishkeke/> (accessed on 22 July 2019).

Daily readings

Most popular daily newspapers in Kyrgyzstan, by 2018 circulation, 2013-2018

	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2017	Operating company	Majority owner
	Sales (no of copies)							
Super Info	98,919	n/a	98,000	96,000	n/a	84,000	Super Media	Nasirdinov Ikrמידdin
Vecherny Bishkek	51,500	n/a	52,000	n/a	50,000	48,000	Rubikon	Alexander Kim
Delo №	16,000	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a*
De-Fakto	8,000	n/a	7,500	7,000	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a**

n/a: not available;

*Founders are Viktor Zapolskiy and Svetlana Krasilnikova;

**It was earlier reported that owner was Ilim Karypbekov, followed later by Omurbek Babanov and the Social Democratic Party of Kyrgyzstan (SDPK).

Source: CMDS based on data from publishers

Radio

Radio has been steadily losing its popularity as a source of news and information. According to research on media preferences, the number of listeners declined by 16 percentage point between 2015 and 2017 to 76%. More recent data from the Media Policy Institute indicated that only 46% of the Kyrgyz listened to radio in 2018. The decline is connected to the increasing popularity of television channels that offer music content as well as the shift to the internet of the audiences interested in listening to music.



Online News

News portals have been slow in developing a strong presence online. Only three of the 20 most popular websites in Kyrgyzstan are news portals. One of those is Sputnik, the online portal of the Russian state-sponsored news operation in charge of serving foreign audiences. Only eight of these 20 websites are Kyrgyz-born; among the top 10, only one is local. The most popular websites are search engines and social networks followed by video-sharing platforms.



Top portals

Most popular websites in Kyrgyzstan, 2019

News sites	Type of news	Link to traditional media	Ownership
Super.kg	Mostly entertainment and political news	News agency (with a website and weekly newspaper)	Nasirdinov Ikramiddin Islamidinovich*
Azattyk	Political, economic and social news	Only website (several of its television programs are aired on EITR)	U.S. Department of State
Kaktus media	Political, economic and social news	Only website	Dina Maslova
Akipress.org	Political, economic and social news	Only website	Marat Tazabekov**
Turmush.kg	Only regional news	Only website	Marat Tazabekov***
Sputnik.kg	Political, economic and social news	Only website	Rossiya Segodnya

*the channel was owned by Kylych Sultan until 24 May 2019, according to data from the Ministry of Justice;

**he is also one of the founders;

***it is part of Akipress

Source: Alexa, Ministry of Justice, CMDS, company data

Funding Trends

Media in Kyrgyzstan are funded from three main sources: the state budget, informal payments (people or companies who directly bankroll media outlets) and advertising revenues. However, the state and informal contributions account by far for the largest part of the funding in the media sector.

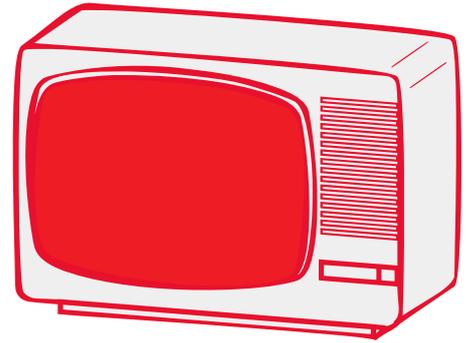
Funding is one of the biggest problems of media in Kyrgyzstan. Finding a business model that allows media outlets to both preserve the quality of journalism and the freedom of their editorial coverage is extremely difficult because of a combination of factors including the disproportionate intervention of the government in media financing, the weak advertising market and the instrumentalization of the media (where entrepreneurs and politicians fund media from their own pockets as they see media channels as a tool rather than a public service or a market player).

Cases of media outlets able to generate sufficient cash flow on their own to assure their independence are rare. They are privately owned companies that secure financing through grants and ads: Kloop.kg (which finances itself mostly through grants and income generated from paid trainings for journalists), Kaktus.kg (surviving thanks to grants and advertisements), and 24.kg and Super.kg (that both base their business model fully on advertising). By not taking money from politicians or authorities, these media are free to define their own editorial policy and can afford to critically cover the political power.

The tone and angle of the news coverage by most of the other news portals show that they are financially supported by certain politicians.

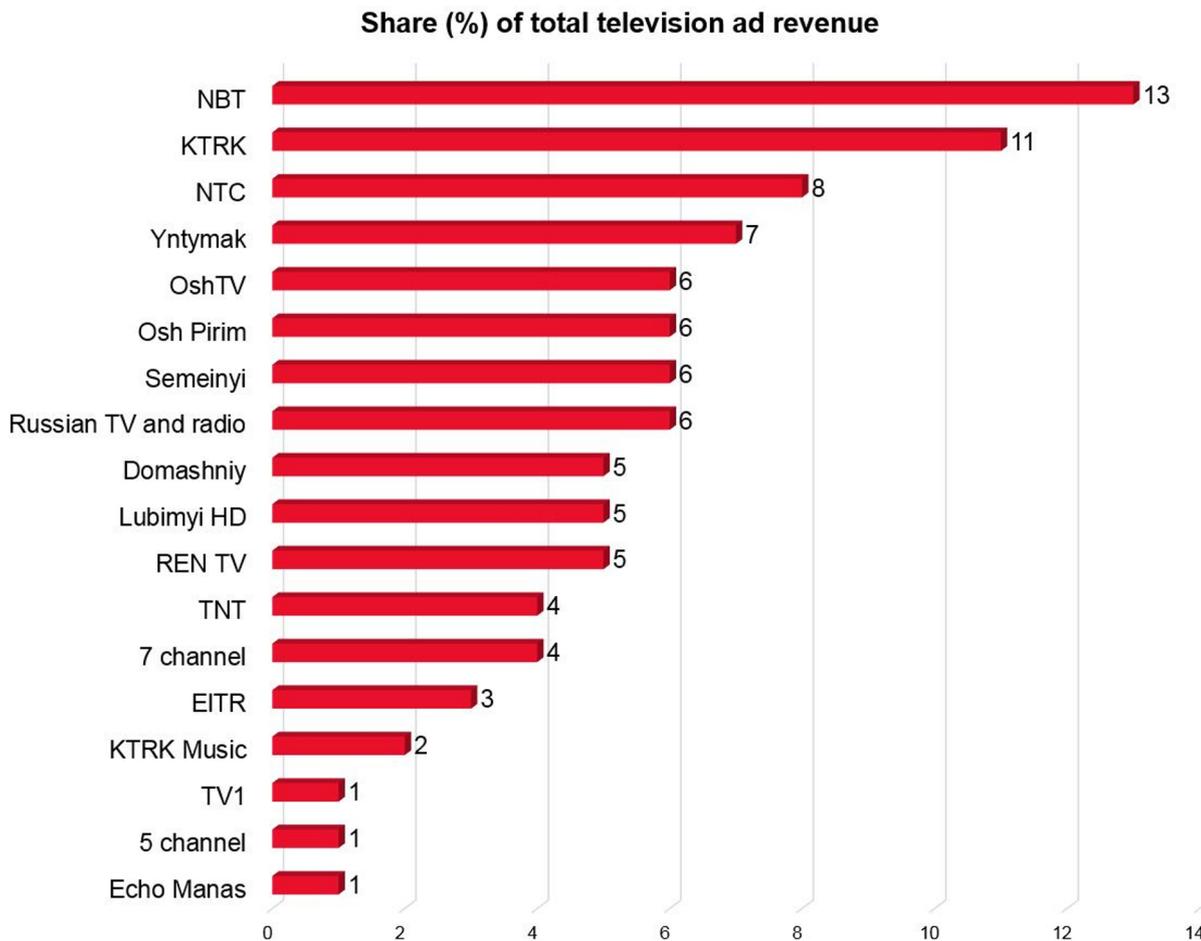
Television

Most of the television stations in Kyrgyzstan survive thanks to informal payments or state subsidies. The share of advertising in their annual budgets is very low. In Q1 2018, NBT, KTR and NTS were the largest recipients of ad dollars in Kyrgyzstan, accounting together for nearly a third of the total television ad spend, according to data from Expert Consulting Agency, a local consultancy.[11]



Television ads

Key television players by share of advertising revenue, 2018



Source: Expert Consulting Agency

[11] Рынок теле – и радиорекламы Кыргызстана январь – март 2018 г (Market of television and radio advertising in Kyrgyzstan, January-March 2018), Expert, 2018 available online at <http://www.expert.kg/ru/monitoring/186> (accessed on 22 July 2019).

Informal sponsors

Key funders of television stations in Kyrgyzstan

Television channel	Sponsor	Position
Aprel Sedmoy Kanal	Almazbek Atambayev	Former President
Sentyuabr	Omurbek Tekebaev	Former Speaker of Parliament, now serving an eight-year jail sentence for corruption
Prime TV	Ulan Primov	MP
Next TV	Ravshan Zheenbekov	Formerly high level official
NTS	Omurbek Babanov	Former Prime Minister

Source: Focus group discussions and interviews with experts in Kyrgyzstan

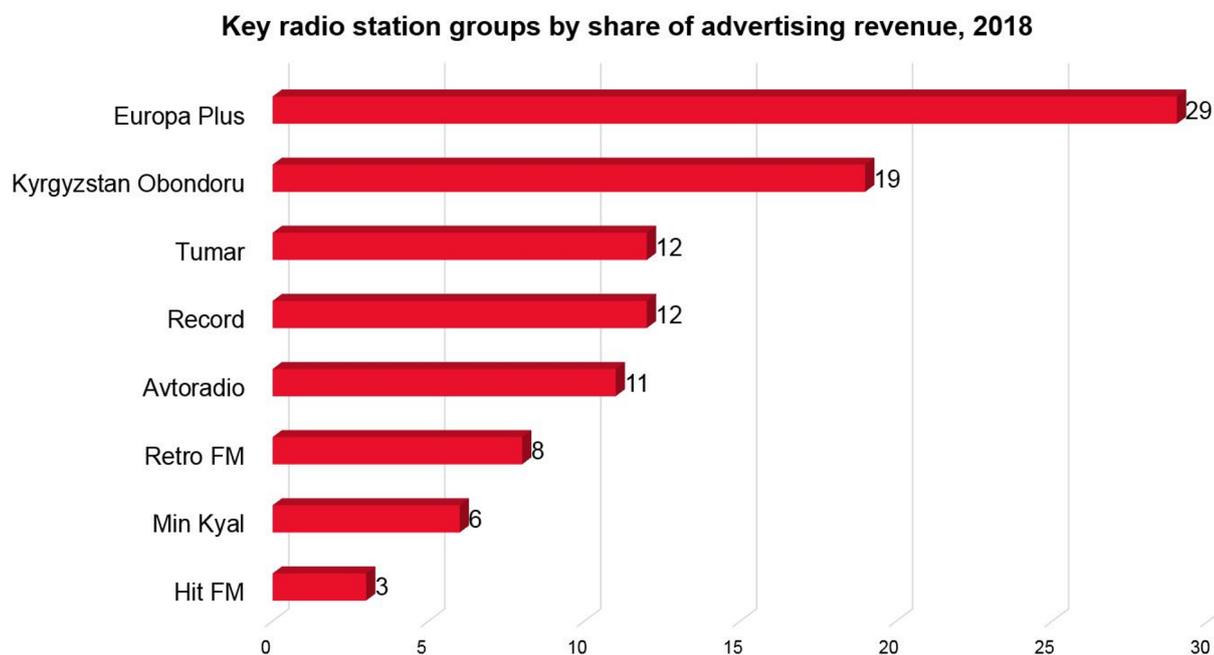
No institution publishes financial data of media companies in Kyrgyzstan. Generally, the monthly budget of a television broadcaster ranges between KGS 2m (US\$ 28,700) and KGS 3m (US\$ 43,000) for an organization with a team of 40 to 50 people. Larger broadcast groups operate with higher budgets. These figures include expenditure and rent.

Radio

In Q1 2018, three radio stations, Evropa Plus, Kyrgyzstan Obondory and Tumar, led on the radio ad market with a combined share of the total radio ad spending close to 60%.

Radio ad revenues

Key radio station groups by share of advertising revenue, 2018



Source: Expert Consulting Agency

Print and Online

The three nationwide newspapers in operation in Kyrgyzstan generate revenues on their own, without getting financial support from the state budget. With internet penetration growing fast in the country, the printed publications have been experiencing difficult times as people have been increasingly turning to the internet for the kind of information that newspapers offer in print. A 2018 survey from Media Policy Institute found that television remained the main source of news and information (94% of respondents) whereas newspapers in print format were preferred by 63.7% of adults above 40.[12] Data from M-Vector show that mainly people living in rural areas read newspapers.

In search of a new business model, many newspapers have expanded online either through their websites, or pages on social media (Facebook, Twitter and Instagram). Growing their digital footprint helped print media remain popular and attractive to advertisers.

In the digital space, Super Info is the most popular news portal among the news suppliers that also produce print newspapers. According to Shaista Shatmanova, the newspaper's manager, Super Info has on average 100,000 visitors on its website every day.

Politicians oftentimes sponsor content in their own media (if they have one) or finance publications and pay journalists working for other media to attack their opponents. They are known of bankrolling media that publish fake news, according to experts and journalists interviewed for this report. Some of these informal sponsors of print media include the Temir Sariev, a former Prime Minister, Naryman Tyuleev, former mayor of Bishkek, Akhmatbek Keldibekov, the former Speaker of Parliament, Kurmanbek Bakyiev, ex-President of the country who fled Kyrgyzstan, and Abdel Segizbaev, former Chairman of the State Committee for National Security (SCNS), Kyrgyzstan's intelligence service.

Internet publications are financed by the ex-president Kurmanbek Bakiev, the present president Sooronbai Zheenbekov and the previous president Almazbek Atambaev. Other sponsors of online media (openly or secretly) include the opposition politicians Omurbek Tekebaev and Ravshan Zheenbekov, the former mayor of Bishkek, the Kyrgyz capital city, Nariman Tyuleev, and the former MPs Akhmatbek Keldibekov and Osmonbek Artykbaev.

According to editors of internet publications interviewed for this report, online media operate with a monthly average budget ranging between KGS 500,000 (US\$ 7,200) for outlets employing up to five people, and KGS 1.5m (US\$ 21,500) for outlets with a staff of eight to 20 people.

The biggest challenge for news media is to successfully migrate to a new, online-based business model, which seems to be the only way for older print publications to survive. The printed newspapers that launched their own websites and invested in digital are still in operation. Those who didn't do that succumbed in the end. In 2018 alone, three print newspapers without a website folded.[13] At the same time, several new journalistic projects were launched in Kyrgyzstan in recent years, all online portals. They have financed themselves to date mainly from grants from donors and advertising. The most entrepreneurial of these portals is Kloop.kg, which, in its attempt to become less reliant on donors, has been actively looking for new sources of revenues.

[12] The Report on results of the survey on media literacy in the Kyrgyz Republic, Media Policy Institute, Bishkek, 2018, p. 20, available online at <http://soros.kg/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/Otchet-po-itogam-issledovaniya-mediagramotnosti-v-KR.pdf> (accessed on 10 June 2019).

[13] "С начала месяца в Кыргызстане закрылись три газеты" (Since the beginning of the month three newspapers shut down in Kyrgyzstan), KNews, 15 November 2018, available online at <https://knews.kg/2018/11/15/s-nachala-mesyatsa-v-kyrgyzstane-zakrylis-tri-gazety/> (accessed on 28 July 2019).

The new digital generation

Prominent news portals operating in Kyrgyzstan, 2019

News site	Source of finance	Owner
Kloop.kg	Grants, paid trainings on journalism	Independent media organization that has several founders, one of them being Bektur Iskender
Kaktus.media	Grants, advertisements	Independent media organization that has several founders, one of them being Dina Maslova
24.kg	Advertisements	Independent media organization whose formal owner is Asel Otorbaeva
Economist.kg	n/a	Independent media project founded by a group of journalists

Source: CMDS

Influential News Media

The public media corporation KTRK is one of the most influential broadcasters in Kyrgyzstan thanks partly to its footprint (the largest in the country), which gives it access to most of the country's households. It is also known as a key player with a significant role in shaping public opinion at the regional level.

State media, consisting of 34 district newspapers, 12 regional newspapers, six regional television and radio broadcasters and three nationwide newspapers, have a small audience and hence are less influential. However, that is not the case for KTRK. Although officially KTRK is a public service broadcaster, its programs only promote the state policies without providing alternative points of view, according to the results of a content analysis research project, carried out as part of the work on this report. The research consisted of an analysis of more than 60 television programs that were aired between December 2018 and February 2019. The analysis showed that more than a third of KTRK's airtime is devoted to state propaganda. Political leaders use KTRK as a platform for their public speeches whereas opinions of competent experts are rarely aired, especially if they are not coming from the public sector and express points of view unfavorable for authorities. Overall, KTRK only airs information that is approved by the authorities although its mission is to provide objective and unbiased reporting to its viewers whose taxes are used to fund the broadcaster. (*See more about the financial model of the KTRK in the Government Funding section of the report*)

As the majority of the private media are funded by politicians, the influence of the media in Kyrgyzstan is judged by how successfully they attack the opponents of their funders and how well they promote their sponsors. The media, especially online media, funded by politicians often disseminate unreliable information, mostly in the Kyrgyz language.

The manipulation of media partly explains why people's trust in journalists has been dwindling in recent years. According to M-Vector, the public trust in information and news seen, read and heard in the media sits at 6 on a 10-point scale (where 1 indicates lack of trust and 10 the highest level of trust).

A notable level of influence in the Kyrgyz media is exerted by foreign outlets. In the past, the Russian media had significant influence in Kyrgyzstan, a legacy mostly of the Soviet era. But with the rise of online media, the situation has dramatically changed. Today, media outlets such as

Azattyk (meaning “freedom” in Kyrgyz), the Kyrgyz service of the U.S. Congress-funded Radio Free Europe–Radio Liberty, and British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) Kyrgyz language service as well as the Turkish and Chinese media operate in Kyrgyzstan. Moreover, local television channels increasingly embed in their schedules programs aired by international media including BBC and EuroNews, a Lyon-headquartered pan-European channel. For example, KTRK devotes big chunks of its airtime to rebroadcast BBC World News programs.

Special attention has been paid by the government to Azattyk radio, which has been operating in the country since Kyrgyzstan gained independence in 1991. The relations between the political power and Azattyk have been strained for many years because of Azattyk’s objective coverage, revealing wrongdoings by authorities, taking measures to make its work difficult. For example, the government in the past routinely pressured broadcasters to stop carrying Azattyk programs.[14]

BBC started broadcasting in Kyrgyz language in 1996. At the beginning, it was only airing five minutes a day, but its programming lengthened to 30 minutes today. Azattyk and BBC programs are considered by local experts a model that Kyrgyz journalists should follow to be able to apply international standards of journalism in their coverage.

However, a few media experts interviewed for this report noted that both Azattyk and BBC took a softer approach in their coverage of the political power in recent years, criticizing authorities less than in the past. One likely reason is a decision in the past made by the Prosecutor General’s Office to lodge a lawsuit attempting to protect the honor and dignity of the President Almazbek Atambaev. Following a visit to Kyrgyzstan made by Thomas Kent, the head of Radio Free Europe–Radio Liberty, the Prosecutor General’s Office dropped the lawsuit.[15] Following this incident, local media experts say that the station tempered its coverage to avoid tensions with the authorities.

Besides the Russian, international and American media, Kazakh, Uzbek and Tajik channels broadcast in Kyrgyzstan have significant influence in the country’s border areas. Kazakh television channels such as Elarna, Khabar and KTK are rebroadcast in the Chui region, in northern Kyrgyzstan, and in Bishkek. However, they meet competition from a high number of Kyrgyz television channels available in these areas. In other regions, especially in the southern part of the country, the situation is more problematic. People living in Tajikistan bordering area of the Zhanyzher aiyl okmotu often prefer programs aired from neighboring Tajikistan and Uzbekistan rather than locally produced content.

The Russian television channels are also very popular in Kyrgyzstan, with First Channel leading the pack. Some six years ago, First Channel was even more popular in Kyrgyzstan than KTRK. The situation has changed since, several Kyrgyz stations having now more viewers than First Channel.

The most influential religious media is the YouTube channel of a former mufti of Kyrgyzstan, Chubak ajy Zhalilov, who has gained massive popularity recently. His channel, Nasaat Media has some 440,000 subscribers. On YouTube, Zhalilov’s channel is less followed than the channels run by Azattyk and Super Info, but more popular than other key players including AKIpress, Sputnik and Kaktus. *(See more about Zhalilov in the Influencers section of the report Government, Politics and Regulation: Kyrgyzstan published as part of the Media Influence Matrix)*

[14] “Under pressure, Kyrgyz stations halt RFE/RL programming,” CPJ, 16 March 2010, available online at <https://cpj.org/2010/03/under-pressure-kyrgyz-stations-halt-rferl-programm.php> (accessed on 12 October 2019).

[15] “Kyrgyz President Asks Prosecutors To Drop Lawsuits Against RFE/RL,” RFE, 12 May 2017, available online at <https://www.rferl.org/a/kyrgyzstan-president-atambaev-drops-lawsuits-against-rferl/28482331.html> (accessed on 10 June 2019).

The business media segment is not yet developed. Only a few media outlets catering to the business community are in operation, the most read and influential being Tazabek.kg, Akchabar.kg, and Economist.kg.

Key Funders

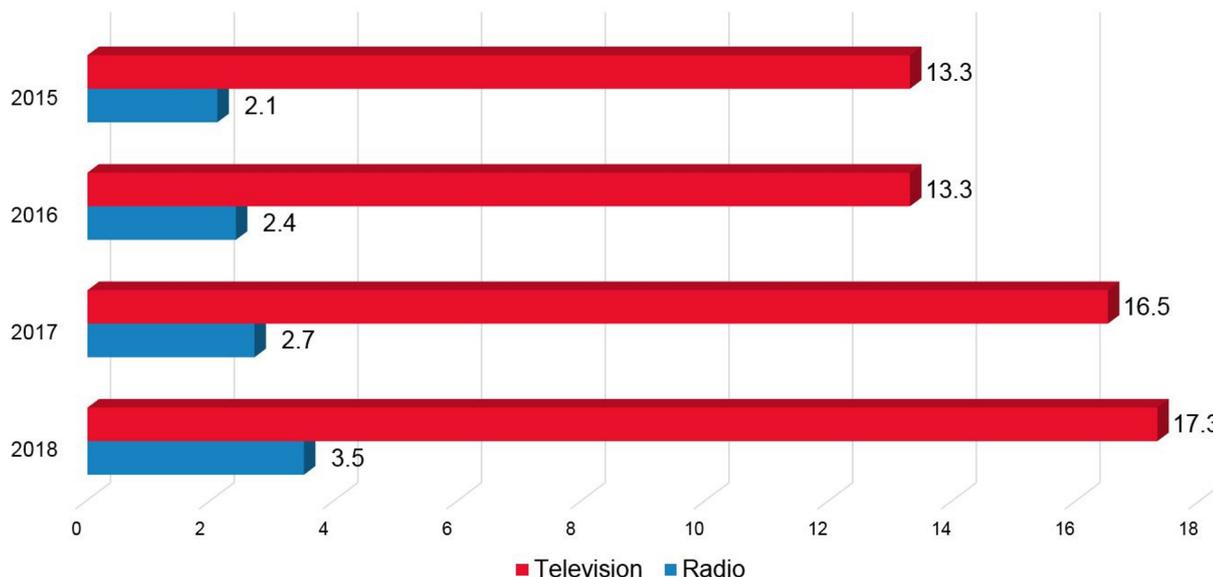
Non-Governmental Funders

Advertising

The advertising market in Kyrgyzstan was estimated by industry experts at roughly US\$19m in 2017. The following year, it increased by more than 8% year on year to nearly US\$ 21. Most of the ad spend is attracted by television, which in 2018 accounted for more than 83% of the total ad spend in the country's broadcast sector.

Commercial break

Kyrgyzstan's advertising market, in US\$m, 2015-2018



In recent years, the Kyrgyz advertising market has experienced considerable changes. One of the key shifts in the market was the growth of the internet ad spending: between 2002 and 2012, it leapt from almost zero to some US\$ 500,000. The sector's share in the total ad market, however, remains small, representing less than 3% in 2012, which shows immense potential for growth in this area.

In the last years, a major change on the Kyrgyz market was the increase of the number of mass media, which leads to more competition as the ad spend has grown at a much slower speed. Most advertisers prefer working with private media. A common habit among advertisers that affects the quality of journalism and information in the country is the purchase of space in the media to post PR materials, which are then shared by advertisers on their own social media accounts.

Some of the large advertisers such as mining companies, mobile operators, banks, state-controlled companies and private universities regularly conclude partnerships with media companies, which involve content-related deals, for periods ranging between several months and a year. The advertising peak though for media companies is the electoral years when media outlets generate the largest amount of revenue.

When it comes to media segments, pharmaceutical companies and wholesalers prefer television, radio and outdoor ads. In contrast, small-size companies promote their products independently through social media. Generally, there is an upward tendency for greater demand of internet advertisements, which prompts media outlets to increasingly focus on improving their work online.

The ad spend on television increased in Q1 2018 by 28% year on year, according to Expert Consulting Agency.[16] Ad spend on radio, in contrast, only grew by 4.1% in the same period, which shows the still high appetite for television among advertisers.

The 10 most advertised product and service categories in Kyrgyzstan accounted in 2017 for some 82% of the total television ad spend. In radio, that figure is 7 percentage point higher. On television, the largest ad category is pharmaceuticals followed by telecommunications and non-alcoholic drinks, according to 2017 data from Expert Consulting Agency.[17]

Advertising leaders

The largest ad spenders on television, 2017

Advertiser	Sector
Nurtelekom	Telecoms
Sky Mobile	Telecoms
Coca-Cola	Drink manufacturing
Medical center Hong Kong	Medicine and pharmaceuticals
Alfatelekom	Telecoms
RG Brands	Drink manufacturing
Berlin-Chemie MP	Medicine and pharmaceuticals
Wimm-Bill-Dann	Food manufacturing
Aknet	Telecoms
GMP	Medicine and pharmaceuticals

Source: Expert Consulting Agency

[16] Market of television and radio advertising..., Expert, cit.

[17] Рейтинг 10 наиболее крупных рекламодателей и рекламируемых товарных категорий на радио и телевидении за 2017 год (Top 10 largest advertisers and advertised product categories on radio and TV in 2017), Expert, 2017, available online at <http://www.expert.kg/ru/component/content/article/2-monitoring/179--10-2017-> (accessed on 20 July 2019).

Philanthropy

Since 2009, some US\$ 6.1m in philanthropy funding from foreign countries has been spent on media in Kyrgyzstan, according to data from Media Impact Funders (MIF), one of the few sources of financial data in this area.

According to local experts interviewed for this report, however, the overall figure of the financing invested by philanthropies in the Kyrgyz media is much higher. For example, the figure from MIF doesn't include financing from Internews Kyrgyzstan, a media development agency using United States Agency for International Development (USAID) money to invest in media outlets in Kyrgyzstan.[18]

The Foundation to Promote Open Society[19], the philanthropy vehicle of the investor George Soros, and National Endowment for Democracy (NED), a soft-power donor using cash from the U.S. government, led the philanthropy pack, their grants in the media accounting for nearly three quarters of the total philanthropy money pumped into the Kyrgyz media, according to data from MIF. In 2018, the Soros Foundation-Kyrgyzstan had its own budget of over US\$ 523,000 for media development.[20] According to NED's own figures, in 2018, the endowment spent over US\$ 1.36m in media development in Kyrgyzstan.

However, philanthropy funding doesn't have any tangible impact on the overall market for various reasons. First of all, it is a very small amount of financing compared to money coming from other sources, especially government. For example, in 2018-2019, Internews supported 12 media outlets in Kyrgyzstan, but the size of the grants, ranging between US\$ 25,000 and US\$ 50,000, can hardly tip the balance in the Kyrgyz media.[21]

Moreover, only part of the financial support from philanthropic organizations goes into financing the core operations of media outlets, some of it supporting activists and NGOs that work for and with the media. According to MIF, the largest recipient of philanthropy funding in the Kyrgyz media is the Taalim Forum, which is a local NGO focused on educational activities. It received much of its grant money from the Christensen Fund, a San Francisco-headquartered private foundation. Various UN agencies, the German media development center DW Akademie as well as the US Embassy and several European Union embassies in Kyrgyzstan regularly support media in Kyrgyzstan. However, they mostly fund training, media engagement or media literacy projects (which are all useful and important), and only rarely media production as such.

But although philanthropy funding can't change the power dynamics in the Kyrgyz media, it is the only source of funding that helps the independent media sector in Kyrgyzstan, however small, to survive. For example, Kloop, a news media outlet (which was awarded grants by Soros Foundation-Kyrgyzstan, NED, the Christensen Fund and Hivos, a Dutch development aid organization, among others), wouldn't be here today without the donors' intervention.

[18] Internews, "Содействие стабильности и миру в Центральной Азии" (Promoting stability and peace in Central Asia), available online at <http://internews.kg/category/proekty/sodejstvie-stabilnosti-i-miru-v-tsentralnoj-azii/> (accessed on 12 August 2019).

[19] For full disclosure: this report is edited by Center for Media, Data & Society (CMDS), a research center belonging to Central European University (CEU), a private school founded by Mr Soros. CMDS has not received any funding from Soros-funded organizations to carry out work on this report.

[20] Soros Foundation-Kyrgyzstan, "Annual Report 2018," available online at <http://soros.kg/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/SFKAnnualReportEnglish2018.pdf> (accessed on 1 August 2019).

[21] Internews, "Конкурс заявок на институциональную поддержку Интерьюс для СМИ в 2020 году" (Internews media support call for proposal in 2020), available online at <http://internews.kg/glavnye-novosti/konkurs-zayavok-na-institutsionalnuyu-podderzhku-internyus-dlya-smi-v-2020-godu/> (accessed on 1 August 2019).

Government Funding

Total amount of state financing in the media in 2018 was KGS 135.2m (US\$ 1.9m). On top of that, the government uses state budget money to finance KTRK, the country's public service broadcaster. In 2016, a total of KGS 400m (US\$ 5.7m) was allocated to KTRK from the state budget, which represented 70% of the channel's budget, according to the latest data available. The rest of 30% was generated by KTRK through advertising, grants and sponsorship.[22]

According to the KTRK's former director general, Ilim Karypbekov, the amount of financing that KTRK received from the state budget has not changed during the past eight to nine years. He added that the claim made by state officials that the KTRK's state allocation has increased in the past three years was a lie.[23] Advertising carried by KTRK can't exceed 10% of the broadcaster's daily airtime.

State media[24] receive financing mainly from the state budget. However, government subsidies aren't sufficient for them to properly operate, which has prompted debates both in the media community and among MPs about the viability of the large state mass media sector.[25] As a result, the state has gradually cut the budget funds allocated for the state media, which led to a reduction of their overall operations. In December 2017, the Ministry of Culture, Information and Tourism (MoCIT) reorganized all state media through a series of mergers and slashed 64 jobs in these institutions, creating seven regional media outlets.[26] The newly created media centers are there to serve as a platform for the development of various media channels and formats, and as training units.[27] At the time of writing, these media did not start operating.

On top of the state budget allocations, the government allegedly uses state institutions or state-owned companies such as banks or mining companies to fund media outlets as a way to gain their loyalty.

[22] "В 2016 году ОТРК выделено порядка 400 млн сомов из госбюджета, - ОНС" (In 2016, PTRK allocated some KGS 400m from the state budget- PSC), For.kg, 12 April 2017, available online at <http://www.for.kg/news-420085-ru.html> (accessed on 10 June 2019).

[23] Глава КТРК назвал ложью информацию замглавы Минфина о финансировании ОТРК (The Head of KTRK said that information of the Deputy Minister of Finance on financing of KTRK was a lie), Media.kg, 6 June 2018, available online at <http://www.media.kg/news/glava-ktrk-nazval-lozhyu-informaciyu-zamglavy-minfina-o-finansirovaniya-otrk/> (accessed on 28 July 2019).

[24] Consisting of 34 district newspapers, 12 regional newspapers, six regional television and radio broadcasters and three nationwide newspapers.

[25] "Государственные телеканалы - обуза для бюджета?" (State TV channels – a burden for the budget?), Radio Azzatyk, 14 February 2017, available online at <https://rus.azattyk.org/a/28308524.html> (accessed on 10 June 2019).

[26] "The Resolution of the Government of the Kyrgyz Republic 'On optimization of staff number of the public executive bodies of the Kyrgyz Republic' as of 7 May 2018, №227, p. 3, available online at <http://cbd.minjust.gov.kg/act/view/ru-ru/11855> (accessed on 10 June 2019).

[27] Daria Podolskaya, "Региональные государственные СМИ в Кыргызстане ожидает реформа" (The regional state mass media in Kyrgyzstan expects a reform), 24.kg, 15 December 2017, available online at https://24.kg/obschestvo/71123_regionalnyie_gosudarstvennyie_smi_vkyrgyzystane_ojidaet_reforma/ (accessed on 12 June 2019).



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