

## PREFACE

Kyrgyzstan is known in Central Asia as an oasis of democracy. Its reputation comes from a genuine attempt to change and reform in the economic as well as political domain, in the early years of independence, but also from its geopolitical context, being surrounded by other Central Asian nations that are particularly hostile to democratisation. Unfortunately, during in the last years all the vectors show in the opposite direction, and the democratic image of the country seems to be rather a pale reflection from the past than reality.

Kyrgyzstan has a population of roughly five million people representing different ethnic backgrounds such as Kyrgyz, Russian, Uzbek, Uighur, Korean, and other. Most of its territory is mountainous (94%), which effectively isolate the country's northern and southern population from one another. A rough road over two 3000-metre-plus passes links the Chuy valley in the North, with the capital city Bishkek, to the Ferghana valley in the South, with the remarkable Uzbek influence.

For a newly independent, ethnically and culturally diverse, mountainous country, the media and communication is of utmost importance. The media have a crucial role to play in the building of a nation and the functioning of a democratic system. The access to and quality of public information and debates is crucial to the development of a sense a national belonging and participation.

Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, Kyrgyzstan, like other Central Asian states, underwent over the last ten years political, economic and social changes that shaped the media landscape, moulded its ambivalent relationship with the political power, and led to the poor material conditions and limited professional freedom of journalism in today's Kyrgyzstan. However, for the two years of independence through late 1993, Kyrgyzstan's newspapers enjoyed the greatest freedom of publication in any of the Central Asian nations. Newspapers were able to discuss issues of public interest closely, in spite of the power of a state secrecy committee to require submission of materials in advance of publication. But since 1993, the government has moved increasingly to impose control over the access to news and production resources.

Moreover, one can observe a strong discrepancy in number and quality of newspapers and a lack of information exchange between the media of the capital city and the other regions within the country. The result is, that on the one hand, populations of far-remote regions receive only limited information from major media institutions based in the capital. On the other hand, events and developments in the regions are under-represented in the mainstream media in the capital city. But also the electronic media are unevenly developed in the republic, both because of the physical con-

straints imposed by the country's mountainous terrain and because of financial difficulties. Resources are concentrated in Bishkek, which is well supplied with television and with radio. But the penetration of more remote areas, however, is incomplete. These regional cleavages as regards the access and quality of public information can exacerbate already existing tensions between the capital and the South, where the inter-ethnic clashes in the early 90's still haunts the memories.

In order to identify the mechanisms limiting the information flow between the capital city and the regions and to gain a deeper understanding of the evolution since independence and the current underlying structures of the mass media in Kyrgyzstan, CIMERA<sup>1</sup> organised in the summer 2000 a joint open tender with the financial and logistical support of the Swiss Coordination Office in the Bishkek. The tender was open to public and private Kyrgyz research institutions and NGO's. In autumn 2000, an international ad-hoc committee<sup>2</sup> selected a joint research proposal from the American University in Kyrgyzstan and the Bishkek Humanities University. The research team started their work in November 2000, and completed it one year later, in November 2001. We are pleased to publish with this Occasional Paper the results of the first Kyrgyz large-scale research project on the Kyrgyz media. While the research report may not always satisfy "academic" criteria, especially regarding the use of quotations and the presentation of survey results, it gives a detailed and rich insight to the recent history and actual conditions of the media in Kyrgyzstan. Moreover, through the interpretative work of the researchers, **the way the (????)** discuss the identified problems of the media, the normative basis of their discourses, one learns a lot about the struggles and debates surrounding the role of the media from a Kyrgyz perspective. And this is, in our opinion, a major force of this work.

With this project, we pursue three objectives: to gain a deeper understanding of the current state and role of Kyrgyzstan's print and electronic media, with a special emphasis on the growing news gap between the south and the capital; to support and strengthen local capacities in the field of media research; to stimulate in a follow-up phase the debate in Kyrgyzstan about the role of the media amongst the media community and political actors.

The fact that this research has been carried out by a competent team of researchers from Kyrgyzstan and not by foreign experts is of importance for several reasons. First, in Kyrgyzstan, like in other post-soviet countries, the state budget for research, especially for social science research, is negligible or non-existing. The production of knowledge about the social and political realities these "countries in transition" is mainly determined by the agendas of international organisations and foreign NGO's

<sup>1</sup> CIMERA is active in the field of media development in Central Asia since 1998, and implements the regional Central Asia Media Project (CA Media) funded by the Swiss Agency of Development and Cooperation. In the framework of the CA Media project, CIMERA organises thematic conferences in which experts, public figures and academics discuss with selected journalists on current regional concerns such as the status of minorities in Central Asia, the regional distribution of natural resources, or the place of religion in society. Besides those conferences, the project also provides journalists from Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan with vocational training, supports professional media structures and conducts research on the media in the region.

<sup>2</sup> The selection committee was composed by journalism professor Jean Widmer (University of Fribourg), Chris Schüpp (at that time director of Internews Kyrgyzstan), Esther Schaufelberger, (at that time responsible for Peace Promotion Program of the Swiss government in Kyrgyzstan), and Vicken Cheterian (Co-Director of Cimera)

who need to satisfy their information needs to set up and monitor their programs. These organisations frequently out-source very focused, short-term, and empirical research mandates to mostly private Kyrgyz research organisations. By launching an open tender, we tried to develop a complementary approach. First, with the organisation of an open tender, we wanted to stimulate the Kyrgyz research community to define themselves, by submitting a research proposal, the scope and methods of the research, as well as its organisational set-up. The call for proposal identified several general research topics<sup>3</sup>, but left it up to researchers how to address these topics. During the research process, the researchers had the freedom to develop their own interests and analysis in the course of one year. Second, the fact that this research was carried out by a Kyrgyz research team was also significant for the participants, especially in the far-remote regions of Kyrgyzstan. Journalists, chief-editors and owners of media outlets in the South were eventually expecting foreign or international organisations to be interested in their fate, if the question of regional media is part of their agenda, but were not prepared to be a subject of research for a Kyrgyz research team. The interviews and survey conducted in the framework of this research, and the expression of interest in the problems media are facing far away from the capital has been an encouragement for these participants. And third, the results of the research, also published in Russian<sup>4</sup>, are received differently by the Kyrgyz media community if they are produced by a Kyrgyz team. The report is certainly more subject to critical scrutiny and criticism than a report of an "outsider", but in the same time also more likely to provoke debates about the state and role of the media in Kyrgyzstan. And this is, besides the new insights, one of the major objectives of this project.

We would like to thank the authors of the research report for their commitment, the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation for their financial and administrative support and all members of the selection committee for their participation.

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**3** The call for proposal specified the following topics of research:

- a) Development of the media (newspapers and TV channels) in Kyrgyzstan over the last decade and panorama of the existing institutions today, with a special attention on the following categories: capital vs regions, linguistic and ethnic minority media, pro-governmental vs opposition media, private vs state-funded media.
- b) Analysis of the structures of the major media, including ownership and loyalty of media outlets, internal organisation, audience, financial resources.
- c) Analysis of the major problems of the media as financial resources, censorship, legislation etc..

Based on the results of the overview, the researcher were asked to address the following topics from the perspectives of the regions:

- d) What kind of media are available for populations of the regions, especially in Southern Kyrgyzstan? And what kind of information do they provide?
- e) Which are the mechanism used to transfer information from the capital to the South and vice versa?

**4** To order the Russian version of the publication, contact the CIMERA office in Geneva or order through our website [www.cimera.org](http://www.cimera.org).