

# SECTION 1

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Kyrgyzstan's information networks in the era of globalization

Globalization is more and more becoming the determining factor of international development. Scientists are talking about perspectives for the development of a new type of statehood – networked and cosmopolitan<sup>1</sup> – which will replace the nation-states based on the industrial type of economy. New computer technologies and especially the Internet have become the “conductive” system for this globalization and the entire world is gradually turning into a “global village.” However, due to a number of objective and subjective reasons, both cultural and geopolitical, not all countries have so far been able to utilize these opportunities fully and now face these historical challenges.

Provincialism is a real fact of existence for Kyrgyzstan in terms of the technical development of its information networks. Although “in the number of computers, Internet users and telephone lines, a breakthrough was achieved that has not been matched by other CIS countries,”<sup>2</sup> it is impossible to suggest that the country's rural communities (which account for more than 70% of the population) have access to computer technologies today. Technical underdevelopment of computer networks may become a serious impediment to the general development of Kyrgyzstan. According to Ivan Zasursky, a leading journalism theorist from Russia, it is the criterion of development of the information networks which determines the status of various states since the information-poor countries are primarily economically backward ones.

The global world, consisting of individual nation states, is connected by an effectively functioning system of mass communications, which is included into the world information network. This is constantly receiving information on the most important events in the world and presenting information on domestic processes to the outer world.

The entry of Kyrgyzstan into international - or at least into regional - politics in the 1990s and its admittance as a member into a number of international communities fostered hope that coverage of external relations would gain space in the coming decades. In a practical sense, the domestic media were about to change their approach to coverage of Kyrgyzstan and the “world horizons”<sup>3</sup>. Based on this it is possible to single out several stages in development of international coverage during

<sup>1</sup> See P. Schedrovitskiy, “Who and what stands behind the doctrine of the Russian world. Thinking is a profession.” Mocsow, 2000, pages 80- 87.

<sup>2</sup> Askar Akaev. “The Memorable Decade.” Bishkek, 2001, page15.

<sup>3</sup> Meaning which countries are included in the zone of closest (geopolitical and economic) consideration, how these countries build relations and how a country defines its own place in today's world.

the time of independence. Dragging out the existence of only a depressive periphery, a provincial appendage during its entire history, Kyrgyzstan at the dawn of sovereignty was trying to find new factors to increase its status in the world using the strategic geopolitical significance of the region. Openness and orientation to democratic development of the state in external politics at the beginning of the 1990s gave Kyrgyzstan an opportunity to enter the globalizing world community. The president of the country, Askar Akaev, was actively involved in world activities: tours of countries in Europe, Asia and the Atlantic and Arab regions – it seemed that the whole world welcomed the arrival of the country on the scene of international politics as a significant center in its region.

The national media of Kyrgyzstan during this period “opened up” the world, wrote articles “without bias” covering the life of faraway and unknown countries and people and explaining how Kyrgyzstan is perceived and accepted in the world community. As a rule, journalists who had been included in the President’s entourage did most of the coverage from distant countries. However, such dazzling opportunities lasted only until the mid-1990s.

By the end of the 1990s, the historical opportunities were lost (mostly due to the actions of the national elites), and the entry of Kyrgyzstan into the world community became indeed no more than political phraseology for domestic use.

Today it is possible to state with assurance that the circle of significant political actors of the region does not include Kyrgyzstan any more, and the center of struggle for supremacy in regional policy-making has shifted towards such countries as Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. Presidential visits abroad became rare, and consequently there are fewer reasons and opportunities for Kyrgyz journalists to cover the country’s image from different states. With the President and other officials not going abroad as often as they did, the circle of journalists who are given the honor of joining governmental delegations has become smaller. The general lack of financial resources does not allow them to purchase and use large volumes of information from foreign reporting agencies, and none of the existing media outlets, irrespective of the type of media and ownership, has its own foreign correspondents. Even the national news agency Kabar today has no network of correspondents in the neighboring countries of the region and is not a reliable source in terms of international information.

Due to this, coverage of external political topics, international relations and events has shrunk in terms of its absolute share in the media during ten years of independence. The analysis of the texts of modern media shows that today the share of international or foreign information is not large and comprises an average of 10-12% in each newspaper. (For example, in a 32-page (A3 format) Friday “Vecherny Bishkek” issue, international information takes a spread of two pages – “Kaleidoscope” and “Planet: events, facts,” and news pieces in the columns “Central Asia” and “In the world.”<sup>4</sup>) The obvious reason for such a small interest is the absence of their own

<sup>4</sup> For comparison: purely advertising pages in the same Friday VB issue take 12 out of 32. About the same proportion (1:3) is characteristic for the regular daily issues of the paper.

channels to receive information: most of the messages on international topics are borrowed from Russian media or, to an even smaller degree, are received from the world information agencies.

Under these limited opportunities to receive constant information on world events, the media outlets have to select from the international news services the materials that, in the opinion of media heads, reflect Kyrgyzstan's interests. In this context it is worth noting how the journalists see today's geopolitical borders of Kyrgyzstan. Within the international topics, it is possible to identify absolutely clear orientations and self-identification of Kyrgyzstan in the world (and in this case, differences in the newspaper characteristics play practically no role). Some of the largest sections of the publications are devoted to features and events in American society – celebrities, both in politics and entertainment, political decisions, technical and economic innovations, education and show business. Despite the fact that in the diachronic perspective it is possible to note an obvious tendency towards some reduction of messages from America,<sup>5</sup> in international coverage the events from this country remain the leading information reaching Kyrgyz media consumers.

There is a simultaneous reverse tendency – increase of information from China: cultural and economic news, political – especially in relation to the deepening US-China opposition and the shaping of the Russia-China alliance – the partnership intentions in the area of economic cooperation with the Central Asian region, etc.

Russia and other CIS countries, first of all from the Central Asian region, take up about 20% of information space, (in the regional aspect the absolute majority of information comes from Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan). European countries and in particular Germany have the least coverage and less stable weight (about 5% of all international reports).

One of the most popular orientations in Kyrgyzstan's media of the post-perestroika times and the beginning of sovereign existence was connected with Turkey and the Arab world. This has now weakened. Information from these regions is quite fragmented and irregular. On the whole, there is now an opposite tendency to that of the period of the beginning of the 1990s, when the head of the state was leading quite an active external political life – going on visits all over the world, participating in both conferences and meetings. By the end of the first decade of sovereignty, the circle of countries regularly covered by the domestic media had significantly narrowed and the world seemingly became smaller and more tightly knit again.

During the last year (especially after the Shanghai Five Summit) this close circle, or if it can be called so, the zone of the closest geopolitical consideration, has included China, Russia, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and Tajikistan. Due to possible investments, great attention is still being paid to the European Union and Germany in particular. The external factors threatening state security and regional stability have forced the

---

<sup>5</sup> Due to the events of September 11, 2001, there is a sharp increase in articles concerning US topics. Because of the same events, the flow of information about Afghanistan and Pakistan and some other Arab countries has dramatically increased as well.

country to focus its information interest also on Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iran. The coverage of the events in the "Fatherland of Democracy" naturally takes the largest share of all the messages for the time being.

Analyzing the reasons for the change in approach to coverage of Kyrgyzstan and international events, it is possible to state with certainty that the reason for decreasing coverage of international issues was not the low interest of readers to external political issues. Media users from various regions of the country who participated in focus group discussions in the course of our research repeatedly expressed high interest in international and foreign information. That is to say, the true reason for the reduction of amounts of information from abroad is the resource poverty of the domestic media. As for the position of the state on this issue, there are two levels of attitude towards the problem. At the highest level of the government, the country's commitment and course to globalization is declared, in reality though one can see an absence of protection and favorable policies in relation to both government and independent media. Whatever the reason is, in this era of globalization, Kyrgyzstan's journalism today is in reality going through the process of provincialization (in contrast to internationalization) of media interests, which will lead to greater information isolation of the state.

## 1.2 Research context and objectives

---

This report is the result of a nine-month project, "Mass Media Research in Kyrgyzstan", funded by the Swiss government and administrated by CIMERA, a Swiss organization working in the fields of civic development, media support, research and analysis<sup>6</sup>. A team of researchers from the American University in Kyrgyzstan and the Bishkek Humanitarian University won the opening tender and developed a project guided by general directions and goals set by the Swiss side. The researchers designed the project and, using both qualitative and quantitative methods,<sup>7</sup> have collected an enormous amount of material, the analysis of which is presented in this publication. It should be noted from the outset that a considerable amount of material is not covered by this report, because the volume and scale of data collected in the field research would facilitate the writing of separate significant works. For example, on audience research, the study of professional consciousness and socialization of journalists and on the realization of the reasons for the existing information gap between the regions of Kyrgyzstan.

The subject matter of this research includes the study of the following aspects of mass media functioning in Kyrgyzstan:

- Preconditions and factors, as well as the main historical phases of mass media development in independent Kyrgyzstan,

---

<sup>6</sup> For more information about the organization, see [www.cimera.org](http://www.cimera.org)

<sup>7</sup> See Section "Methodology and methods of research."

- Distinctive characteristics and features of the modern condition of the media system (analysis of structures, mechanisms and the problems of functioning in the system and some aspects of professional consciousness of journalists),
- Media effects and the character of interaction with the media consumers, techniques of formation of information supply and demand,
- Degree of development of information networks in the regional aspect and information interaction and exchange among the regions, (causes and nature of information gaps and images of regions in the media).

### **1.3 Structure of the report**

---

This report consists of seven sections, the first of which is this introduction. It also includes a chapter on "Kyrgyzstan's information networks in the era of globalization" which, in our opinion, sets the tone for the whole work and allows definition of the general geopolitical context in which the media of Kyrgyzstan operate at present. In the same chapter, some processes are described, which define the current conditions and developments of media in Kyrgyzstan, namely the orientation towards the closest surrounding countries and the "provincialization" of media.

Section 2, "Methodology and methods of research", presents the most important aspects of the research situation, which influenced the choice of methods and tools for the research. It also provides a detailed description of the approaches, methods, instruments and the step-by-step procedure of the research.

Section 3, "History of development of a sovereign mass media system in Kyrgyzstan", consists of three chapters considering various areas of media activities through a historical perspective. Chapter 3.1, "Historical phases of development of mass media in the independent Kyrgyzstan", looks into the history and preconditions for development of the media system in the country over the last 10 years through the prism of four main stages, singled out on the basis of the changing relations between the government and the media. Chapter 3.2, "Development of the information supply and demand", analyzes the development of relations between the media and their audiences in terms of defining the needs and use of feedback mechanisms for adjustment of supply. And finally, chapter 3.3, "External and internal assessments of democracy and freedom of expression in Kyrgyzstan", presents assessments of the state of democracy and freedom of expression in Kyrgyzstan by both international organizations and domestic NGOs as well as experts, most of whom express their concern with the recent events and tendencies in this area.

Section 4, "Legislative and legal environment for media activities in the Kyrgyz Republic", provides an analysis of the legislative and legal context for media activities in

Kyrgyzstan through looking at both passed and failed legislative initiatives.

Section 5, "Modern state of media in Kyrgyzstan", also consists of three chapters analyzing various aspects of media activities under modern conditions. Chapter 5.1, "Structural context of modern journalism", is devoted to various types of existing media structures with the help of a created typology. The functional framework of media activities is the subject of chapter 5.2, "Mass media as a social system", which looks into the main problems of a media system functioning through the concept of "structural censorship", the attributes of which, in the authors' opinion, are clearly visible in Kyrgyzstan. Chapter 5.3, "Professional consciousness and professional socialization in Kyrgyzstan", covers professional issues such as qualitative and quantitative composition of media outlets, sources of information, relations with the power structures, objectivity, news values and political orientation of journalists.

Section 6, "Causes and nature of information gaps in Kyrgyzstan", is based on the results of the project subcomponent studying the information gap between the northern and southern parts of Kyrgyzstan. Although the problem of a lacking information-exchange between the South and the North indeed exists, in the course of the research we found out that it is much deeper and that it is even possible to talk about insufficient information-exchange among all regions and subjects of the country. This section is divided into several chapters that look separately into the issues of state regional policy, lines of division between the regions, reflection and images of regions in the national press and coverage of regions by each other. For the purposes of this report, the section presents only the most important developments and conclusions, because the material collected on this issue during the research is so vast and significant that it may become the basis for a separate thesis or a book.

And finally, Section 8, "Conclusions and Recommendations", presents the main conclusions made by the researchers on the basis of the gathered data. This section also presents the recommendations formulated by the researchers based on advice by experts given during personal interviews and focus groups, as well as our own recommendations prompted by the research results.