

SECTION 3

HISTORY OF DEVELOPMENT OF A SOVEREIGN MEDIA SYSTEM IN KYRGYZSTAN

Kyrgyz perestroika meant a new radical reform of the political system, which brought with it a drastic change in various spheres of life. State and society were facing the most difficult task: To develop from a monistic structure of domination into a system of pluralism and to convert from a planned economy to a market-oriented one. The radical changes in journalism were no less important and the process itself turned out to be extremely difficult. We will consider the main factors, which laid the foundations for a new era of the media:

1. Degree of government control over media:

Up to 1988 the government totally controlled the media. Perestroika and glasnost brought democratic changes in the condition and status of mass media in society. An incredible rise of journalism started in the entire Soviet region. This process was accompanied by the appearance of new subjects in the field of politics, for example, science, having gained relative autonomy, became a topic in the field of politics (this process predetermined the rise of scientific publications). People in Kyrgyzstan at that time had great hopes for positive changes. This was the peak period of fame for journalism.

2. Absence of tradition of professional freedom for journalists:

Available was a broad hierarchical network of print media, from the central level to the lowest one of rayon, which unified journalists of the Soviet breed, who were capable of serving the party and were not accustomed to professional freedom. There existed a multi-decade tradition in the relations between the media and government, where the government communicated with the media in a monologue-style.

3. Communication gaps between official and unofficial channels of information:

For the media, the main characteristic was a tradition (inherited from the Soviet times) of communicating with the people in a totalitarian, antidemocratic mode where a gap and contradiction between official and non-official communication was inevitable. In the Soviet period, mass dissatisfaction and social discontent did not exceed quiet grumbles on the street and "intellectual criticism" in the home. The official channels of communication were full of optimism and placation:

great construction was carried out, five-year plans were achieved in three years, the workers and the party were united... However, outright disinformation and lies affected destructively both the population and the journalists, corroding the psyche and developing "strabismus of mind."

4. Absence of orientation towards commercial journalism:

The trade qualities and economic nature of the media had not been practically developed yet. The media was mostly working in the ideological space of political socialization and communication. The process of commercialization of journalism was just starting.

5. Resource poverty of journalism and institutionalization:

Both the print and electronic media suffered from poorly developed material and a weak technical base. The poverty in resources was enforcing another grave problem – the phenomenon of the peripheral consciousness of journalism. The roots of this consciousness went deep into Soviet history, when among the fifteen brotherly republics Kyrgyzstan was at the end of the line – unlike the "favorites" of the center – owner of the "white gold," Uzbekistan, and producer of golden wheat, Kazakhstan. This second-rate-ness was noticeable in everything – in the level of training of professional journalists, in the development of printing capacities and other professional and technical bases. It was evident that, despite indications of institutional training, (under the Kyrgyz State University there was a faculty of journalism), the quality was such that it was considered prestigious and even necessary for success to seek higher education in Russia or at the neighboring Tashkent State University.

6. Absence of analytical systems in the society and state:

Expectations from liberalization of the regime and in relations with the government were unjustifiably high in the people's consciousness. Naively, however, this seemed to be the only condition for the rise of truly free and highly professional journalism. A precondition of these high expectations became a good start for the democratic change that the young sovereign Kyrgyz Republic took.

The government itself also had illusions about the opportunity for quick development of the country under a liberal regime, and it was not by chance that Switzerland was taken as a role model. The system of the country's governance lacked the elements of analysis as well as social and political projection of development, which resulted in non-conceptuality of the internal and external policy of the young state.

3.1 Historical phases of media development in independent Kyrgyzstan

The media landscape in Kyrgyzstan has significantly changed, starting from the very moment the country obtained the sovereign status. But the rapid media growth in terms of figures during the post-perestroika period did not guarantee media stability or longevity. A large number of media outlets terminated their existence after only a brief period of operations.

The period of 1990-2001 was quite unequal and heterogeneous for the media. It included several mutually related and conditioned but different phases of Kyrgyz journalism activity. On the whole, up to the second half of the 1990s, the processes taking place in Russian journalism directly predetermined the information processes in Kyrgyzstan. Even today the phenomena and events in Russia in the information field influence Kyrgyzstan's experiences to a large extent. As researchers and analysts of journalism point out, Kyrgyzstan, as well as Kazakhstan, reflect mostly the Russian model in the information field, which is characterized by broad privatization of media and pluralism in the political sphere.

The first signal of change in the relations between the government and media in the entire Soviet region was the conflict between Mikhail Gorbachev, who was ruling the country, and the newspaper "Argumenty i Fакты" at the end of the 1980s. The conflict was initiated by the newspaper staff's desire to be rid of the government's surveillance and take the management of the newspaper into their own hands. For the first time in the history of the Soviet Union the government was unable to suppress media resistance and the newspaper staff managed to protect their interests. The newspaper practically opened an effective mechanism of protection – privatization through a joint-stock company. It is understandable that for all other regions this example was like a starting signal. In Kyrgyzstan, approximately the same scenario was used for the beginning of the "divorce" of the local daily newspaper "Vecherny Bishkek" with the local party committee at the end of the 80s. And although during this period there was no judicial opportunity to open new newspapers, the newspapers' staff obtained some freedom and started to change the style and format of their journals. But even these changes were only achieved with incredible difficulty and effort: for example, the staff of "Leninchil Jash" newspaper fought a six-month battle for the right to change from a four page format, published three times a week, to a two-color 16-page weekly. The system was resisting even the smallest challenge to its totalitarian rights. It was under these circumstances that the transformation of the media landscape started to take place.

On the whole, relations between the government and the media were often subject to change and determined the essence and character of media processes in different phases of development. Below are the main historical phases of transformation of the media landscape in Kyrgyzstan.

3.1.1 Phase 1 / 1991-1992 : Declaration and institutionalization of freedom of press

Kyrgyzstan's Law on Mass Media, which was adopted in 1992, was to a great extent oriented toward the liberalist Atlantic model of journalism. Despite a number of "threats of limiting activities" that are contained in the law, vagueness of implementation mechanisms and ambiguity of wording allowed the media outlets to develop relatively freely during that period.¹

A very important precondition during that period was the fact that there were still enough material resources left over from the Soviet period – for example, supply of paper – and the editorial portfolios were full of material now allowed for publication that previously had been written only "into the table". The media structures started to organize from the beginning, and access to the profession and functioning in it started to change their rules, in many ways the demographic structures of the profession were modified.

Shifts in the social positions of journalists started to take shape and from the real socialist journalism a democratic tradition started to develop. However, democratic pluralism was not present in all political spheres. After the coup of 1991 a new phase started (which in principle continues now) – the pendulum moved to the other side and the communist media outlets were practically ousted. For quite a long period of time the atmosphere in most media outlets of the country was of a transitional character. The "renewed" press was an alternative to the press of stagnation only in terms of external attributes and conscientious intentions, but not radically different in essence. The media was going through a striking metamorphosis: from the recent communist stereotypes – to anti-stereotypes of democratic coloring, i.e. in essence only the evaluation baselines changed, but the same political and ideological clichés of the Soviet journalism were reproduced – no matter how hard the journalists tried to deviate from them.

On the whole, the first wave of the new media that appeared during this time was represented mostly by politicized newspapers (*Res Publica, Aalam, Manas-Ata, Muras, Maidan, Erkin Too, Ene Til* and others).

On the wave of discrediting everything Soviet and communist, a campaign for media self-identification started. For the first time journalists had an opportunity to be directly involved in everything relating to the functioning of their media. A certain denationalization of the information sphere started. Very indicative of this period was the experience of the "peaceful divorce" of "Komsomolets Kirgizii" with its founder, the Central Committee of the Lenin Young Communist League of Kirgizia, at the beginning of 1991 when the founder did not care about the newspaper, when the highest party and the youth committee (komsomol) were going through a scary experience of disorientation and uncertainty and tried to save or acquire at least some valuables. Here there was no space or time for the newspaper management to think about their influence on the people.²

¹ For more details, see Section «Legislative and legal environment for media activities in Kyrgyzstan»

² See Zamira Sydykova, "Behind the curtains of Kyrgyz democracy," Bishkek, 1997

True intentions of the authorities in relation to the media were confirmed by the frequency of their change. During this period at the beginning of sovereignty, the press and the power elite tried to build the relations of partnership and constructive opposition, under the flag of ideal principles of democracy and propagandist clichés from American history of journalism and power. The lower layer – the population – was actively using the media, believing in their power as a mechanism of feedback and fed the media illusions about their power abilities (as the fourth estate). At that time media were surrounded by a special environment – intelligentsia that became the vanguard of perestroika and democratization, was coming out from the narrow kitchens, took its ideas and considerations out of the underground handwritten journals and was actively involved in legal information systems. Many of the intelligentsia came to the new joint stock and private media. Non-professionals started to become seriously involved in journalism and brought with them into the sphere not only the spirit of citizenry, (which partly explains the surprisingly large growth in politicized media), but also a stable spirit of commerce. This had been the domain of party ideology since the birth of Kyrgyzstan.

This paved the way for a short era of stars, revelations and disclosures, an era of remarkable cooperation between media and audiences. It was also the period in which the struggle for spheres of informational influence started, when many media outlets changed their status, defined and redefined their role in the information market and tried to capture and shape available advertising niches.

With this wave of denationalization and commercialization of the information sphere, journalism was flooded with various “alien” types of pulp, yellow journalism. Most of the newly appearing media was based on the exploitation of interest in destructive feelings such as criminality, pornography, and erotica. Together with yellow journalism itself, the stereotype of the professional consciousness that was very actively indoctrinated into the mass consciousness, was that the public is always interested in murder with bloody details, depraved and low passions and drama with broken hearts. The reality of such a construction was confirmed by an increase in the number of media with such topics and stability or growth in circulation of many of them. During the post-perestroika time there appeared the phenomenon of soap operas, mostly Latin American dramas, on local TV.

The researchers of Russian journalism, talking about such “preferences” of readers and viewers, believed that such a taste and structure of consumption was characteristic for the whole former Soviet Union. The decades of lifeless virtual information and the production of “inhuman” themes, when the television broadcasts or newspaper pages contained mostly happy citizens of the Soviet country, and reported great achievements and victorious prospects³, plus the subsequent collapse of this system, discouraged

3 *It seems to be very important here that ideologies that used to dominate in the minds of Soviet people oriented them into the future. This way, the tension created by the dissonance between the informational and real pictures was removed. That is, people knew for sure that their self-sacrificing work would be beneficial for future generations. The full results of such work could be seen, felt and utilized only from afar, which could be seen only by very few. But the motivation for creation and further work, built into the great machinery of the human system, was very high, despite empty shops and a lack of consumer goods. Today the picture is totally different. Many ideologies are either oriented towards the archaic past and aimed at the titular nation, (the idea of the Great Silk Road, the Seven Commandments of Manas or common house), creating the effect of a secondary experience of history, or are not clearly defined in the time dimension. Therefore the disoriented consciousness of the majority, having no sufficient substitute ideologies, regresses to nostalgia for the habitual old ideological constructs, or ideologies.*

and bored all those living in post-soviet societies. However, it seems that the roots of this "phenomenon" go deeper and they may be explained with the help of the "Maslow pyramid", performing in this various functions, such as compensatory, overcoming of fear, etc. But not everyone was able to write and live in a "free mode". For the largest part of the rayon and city newspapers, this period was in itself the beginning of the end as the historical window of opportunity for free self-definition and self-identification in life and death turned out to be quite small.

During this period, the seeds of new democratic virtuality were planted. Prior to dissolution of the legendary first Parliament in 1994, politics "spilled over" into the media, particularly television. The people could watch live broadcasts of parliamentary sessions where decisions on the most urgent and important issues of current life in the country were made. This was the era of emergence of public politicians, the birth of stars of political discussion such as Akimaliev, Akmatov, Baijiev, Usubaliev, Idinov, Sherimkulov, Amatov, Tekebaev and Masaliev. For the first time, politics in Kyrgyzstan had become clear and transparent. The Parliament, having swallowed independence and power, started to rule the country seriously, and the media started to think of themselves as opponents and disclosers of power. Even during the conflict between the Parliament and President Akaev over the "gold case", and others that became notorious "red folder" issues, television broadcast the President's explanations virtually unedited. The country was facing a situation where the Parliament could initiate the impeachment of the President. Full transparency of politics seemed to have been achieved, and democratic freedoms irreversible.

3.1.2 Phase 2/ 1993-95: Turning point in relations with the government and own roles and functions.

Shock therapy put many media outlets to the edge of closure. In the political sphere, the first thunderstorm for the media roared and the first heavy showers fell with the official demand by the President in his speech at the first congress of judges in August 1994 to shut down the newspaper "Svobodnye Gory" - and the obedient implementation of this order by the end of the year. During the same period the newspaper "Politika" appeared and was quickly shut down. The editor of "Politika" was the former Minister of Education, Chinara Jakypova, who today runs the IWPR office in Bishkek. Very likely, already at that time it became clear for the leadership of the country that democracy means dispersal of power, creation of many various centers of decision making, which inevitably makes power itself unstable. The more there were bright individual stars on the team, the more likely was the violation of the status quo and subsequent changes in the power structures.

In the struggle for real political power, the President's force deviated from the proper democratic image. It was in this historical period when the governance of the country and politics separated entirely and as a result of a quiet "revolution", the country turned from a parliamentary into a presidential one. Having mobilized his governors'

forces, the President, with the help of intrigues of regional authorities, then also sabotaged the Parliament's initiative from inside. The non-consolidated character of the Parliament, headed by deputies incapable of organizing and directing the political process, predetermined the outcome – Parliament was dissolved. The media was also hit in this opposition by a returning boomerang – the newspaper "Svobodnye Gory"⁴ was shut down in relation with this case. And it was at that time when the era of public television policy ended. Decision-making again disappeared behind the screens, into the quiet of the White House. On the screen only a few public politicians remained, and those in a reduced mode, and their numbers and quality declined dramatically.

However, the group of de-politicized managers, those people who established the dictatorship of the management team, who in reality do the routine managerial work in the "corridors of power", was growing. Their names only rarely "emerge" in the media. In one of her books, the editor of "Res Publica", Zamira Sydykova, mentions this in the following way: "I am absolutely sure that the opposition that later rose between our newspaper and the president is exclusively the deed of L. Levitin. As well

Case Study: Kamil Marklenovich Bayalinov

Born in 1959. Higher education: graduated from the Kyrgyz State University, history faculty. Key phases of activity:

Up to 1995 –	Correspondent for "Komsomolskaya Pravda" and "Moscow News" newspapers
1995-1996 –	Press Secretary of the KR President
1996-2000 –	Ambassador of the KR in Austria
2000-2001 –	KR President's Advisor for Public Relations
April 2001 –	KR Ambassador to the UN.

During the period of glasnost the articles of a young and then unknown research assistant of the Institute of CPSU History produced an effect similar to a bomb explosion. In essence they marked the coming of the perestroika era to the media of Kyrgyzstan. The audacity of the author struck the imagination of provincial (or "Kyrgyz") readers – to write so honestly about the first persons in the Politbureau of the CPSU, some of whom were still alive and well – such boldness was unknown to domestic journalism. Everyone remembered the articles about Andropov, Chernenko and the KGB, which were written by Bayalinov. Having rapidly exchanged scientific prospects for a journalistic career, Bayalinov became correspondent for the legendary newspaper "Komsomolskaya Pravda" which was in the vanguard of perestroika in the entire Soviet Union.

Later he changed the focus of his career towards politics, first by becoming presidential Press Secretary (his name is associated with the "rotation" of personnel in the state media in 1996, which prevented the "divorce" of "Slovo Kyrgyzstana" newspaper from its founder – the government), and then diplomat.

as (...) shutting down the newspaper "Svobodnye Gory" in 1994 (...) is also on his consciousness."⁵ The former editor of "Asaba", Melis Eshimkanov, also mentioned in an interview with the researchers "one evil genius," one of the main apparatchik-ideologists of the late Soviet times, Mr Soodanbekov. Eshimkanov recalled the causes and the beginning of the conflict between his newspaper and the Akaev family. In his opinion, the scenario was skillfully developed and professionally played out. As a result of this "court" intrigue, the general atmosphere for the media in the country changed dramatically.

It was the beginning of the era of cooperation with the representatives of Akaev's "team" in the persons of his Press Secretaries. This period demonstrated how changeable the moods and intentions of the power holders really were. The feeling of power instability was enforced by the personnel movements at the political Olympus. Gradually, power stops being

4 The processes of virtual democracy in Kyrgyzstan overlap with and repeat the phases of historical development of the media. See Section 3.2.

5 Zamira Sydykova, "Behind the curtains of Kyrgyz democracy", Bishkek, 1997, page 35.

perceived as a universal equivalent, this is why the emphasis in the semantics if “freedom” with journalists is shifted toward the notion of “ownership.” Journalists grew to understand that the obtained political freedoms mean nothing when there exists economic non-freedom. During this period, discussions on the role of journalism in society and state developed frequently, as well as those on the degree of interested support of the media by the state.

The economic difficulties during this period were speeding up the process of division in the advertising market, and on the whole the commercial essence of the information field started to develop impetuously. The Law on Mass Media, adopted in 1992, gave a powerful impetus for the process of commercialization of mass communications. The economic preconditions for this were created by the permissive and favorable legislation existing at that time – mass media did not pay 20% VAT (value added tax), and profit tax was at 15%. Many media outlets and newspapers appeared with a purely advertising character, others covered crime and erotica. The total number of media outlets grew constantly.

In Russia, this period (1994) was marked by the First Chechen War, which caused a storm of sharp criticism of the government. But here the government developed a certain immunity for criticism. Relations between the Kyrgyz government and the media gradually developed in the same direction.

On the one hand, during this period there were very few real limits and zones closed for criticism and the government tried not to react to “bites” coming from the media. Freedom of expression turned into freedom of empty talking, without the hope of being listened to or heard. Not only the journalists acquired an opportunity to write about what they wanted, but also the government acquired an opportunity not to read the media publications, and even if to read, then not to respond.

Case Study: *Kabai Jabaevich Karabekov*

Born in 1965. Higher Education: in 1987 graduated from Tomsk University, journalism faculty; in 1990 from Kyrgyz State University, philological faculty, department of journalism. Key phases of activity:

- 1989-1992 – correspondent and political columnist, «*Vecherny Frunze*» newspaper;
- 1992-1993 – press secretary of the KR President;
- 1993-1999 – political columnist, «*Vecherny Bishkek*»;
- 1999-2000 – chief editor, *Komsomolskaya Pravda in Kyrgyzstan*;
- March 2000 – elected a deputy of the Legislative Assembly of Parliament, Chair of the Parliamentary Committee on issues of state and media.

A young graduate of KNSU journalism faculty, having just started working at the newspaper, began to criticize vigorously inconsistency of the state policy. His articles were distinct in their criticism, irony and absence of fear. Scandalous stories about the parliamentarians, highest officials from the government, about the President himself – it seems that for the young talented journalist there are no zones closed for criticism. At the peak of his popularity, the journalist leaves for politics and becomes the head of the President’s press service. However soon he leaves this position and returns to Vecherny Bishkek. In the newspaper he becomes a leading columnist heading one of the key departments – political information – and continuing to write sharp criticizing articles. Critics in the journalism sphere were bewildered: why, they said, the journalist is not afraid of anything and, which is more important, has access to top secret information that is supported with documents and explained such access by the loyalty of Karabekov to the President. However, the journalist went through the period of “divorce”, when he cast the power of his talent not only on the second and tenth, but also on the first person of the country.

The second coming into power of journalist Karabekov happened after his resignation from *Vecherny Bishkek*: as a result of 2000 elections he became a deputy of the Legislative Assembly of the same Parliament heading the commission on the media issues.

It is not by chance that in this period a discussion on the effectiveness of the media started in the journalistic professional environment. In this discussion, the journalists split into two camps: one stated that the main task of journalists is to highlight a problem, attract public attention to it, and the task of the government is to resolve the problem. The representatives of the second camp believed that journalism should not only uncover the problems of society, but also actively seek their solution. The same moods were developing with the readers as well – «Previously, if some official had been “given a going over” by a newspaper, he would be fired the next day. Now, no matter how much they write about bribery and misuse of power, there is no point – they all safe are in their seats anyway» is just one of the many comments made by readers during that time.

On the other hand, the Kyrgyz government had extremely effective mechanisms for “curbing” the media – subsidies. These subsidies took various forms: for example, the government media was provided with direct monetary subsidies necessary to cover the operational expenses or targeted means to cover the printing costs or salaries and honoraria to journalists and other employees. Non-state media loyal to the government was given “presents” for anniversaries and holidays that in terms of amounts were comparable to significant monetary subsidies.⁶ The government proffered the subsidizing hand and state subsidies became a tool with which to engage the media. The media outlets that received subsidies from the state did not have another alternative except for becoming loyal to the government, and thus there appeared the phenomenon of selling loyalty.

Case Study: Oksana Alexandrovna Malevanaya

Born in 1968. Education – higher: in 1992 graduated from Moscow State University, Russian philology faculty. Specialty – teacher of Russian and literature. Main phases of activity:

- 1993-1995 – editor of «Pyramid» television;
- 1995-2000 – chief editor of «Pyramid» television;
- March 2000 – elected deputy into the Legislative Assembly of the Parliament.

The daughter of a well-known journalist and editor (currently chief editor of “Slovo Kyrgyzstana”) after graduating from MSU came to TV channel “Pyramid” among the first, from the very beginning of the station. She started as the host of a music program, was one of the initiators of a special news program. Worked as a reporter and anchor of the news program, chief editor of «Pyramid» television. Her first major professional success was the Presidential award “Altyn Kelem” received for coverage of the first Balken campaign in 1999.

In 1999 Malevanaya started her own program – the talkshow “Our Time,” which rapidly gained both reputation and popularity in the country and with the government. To the obvious professional success and popularity of a journalist, Malevanaya preferred a political career: in 2000 she was elected the deputy of the Legislative Assembly on the “My Country” party list.

However, subsidies were not the only tool used by the government. The most “fruitful” and popular journalists were “processed” to accept the fate of becoming confidants of the first person, the President. In a practical sense, for the owners of “gold pens”, it meant trips abroad in the President’s entourage, allocation of an apartment or promotion into the government ranks. Striking examples of such journalists are Kabai Karabekov, Kamil Bayalinov (see boxes with case studies) and Kanybek Imanaliev (“Asaba” journalist who became the presidential Press Secretary after he left the newspaper and later appointed the head of the printing plant “Uchkun”). It was clearly during this period when the tendency to change from journalism to

⁶ On modern practice of subsidies, see chapter “Problems of functioning of the media system.”

politics became popular, although such a shift in the journalists' careers was not always perceived adequately. For example, one of the participants of the focus group for media users in Naryn stated the following: «Previously, I trusted such journalists as Zamira Sydykova, Kabai Karabekov and Kamil Bayalinov. But life has proven that they all have their own price, there is no media and no journalist with solid beliefs and principles, unshakeable positions.» Another participant of a similar focus group in Osh said: "Many journalists that I liked went into politics, for example – Bayalinov, Karabekov. It's a pity because they were good journalists and since they became politicians we hear nothing about them. And now there are no good journalists at all." Another, later example of a journalist who left for politics at the peak of her professional popularity is Oksana Malevanaya (see box with case study). Her career shift, however, is not assessed negatively. One of the participants of the focus group for media users in Osh said: "I liked Oksana Malevanaya, especially when she hosted the talk-show "Nashe Vremya" ("Our Time") – sharp, criticizing, interesting. I hope that as a deputy she will be acting the same way, protecting the interests of ordinary people."

It was during this period that President Akaev paid more and more attention to the media, since the flow of foreign investments comes with the image of a democratic Kyrgyzstan and a progressive, liberal President – guarantor of irreversible democratic changes. He regularly met with journalists, both in private and at press-conferences, on all urgent problems of the country, obviously demonstrating the desire to make these processes transparent. These simple methods turned out to be safe – many journalists and media outlets became very loyal as a result of this strategy used by President Akaev (see Annexe B1 "Asaba"). Thanks to the success of this strategy, the image of the head of the state in some media outlets was very positive – smart, honest and open, a President of principle and democratic spirit.

However, the main bulk of the media still wrote critically about the country's No 1. As early as the end of January of 1993, at a national student ball meeting, Akaev, made his usual declaration of commitment to the manifesto of freedom in the spirit of Franklin Roosevelt. He listed the four human freedoms in the country – freedom of expression, freedom of religion, freedom from poverty and freedom from fear. Citing an example of existing freedom of expression he said: "If you open the newspapers each morning, everything starts with criticism of the President of the republic."⁷ But in the information field, members of his team played out scenarios against selected newspapers. They were selected on purpose, and an old strategy of "divide and rule" was used against them. The era of competition in the establishing information market, the fight for resources – printing, information resources, and the pluralization of media positions – all these factors did not consolidate, but on the contrary alienated the journalistic corps. It was not by chance that at the beginning of this repressive time in state policy towards the media, different Kyrgyz editors perceived and identified different periods of time. For example, for Zamira Sydykova this period is dated by the middle of 1993–1994, while for Viktor Zapolski – only by 1996, despite the fact that two years

7 «Askar Akaev. A man without a middle point». Editors: M.Eshimkanov and K.Imanaliev. Bishkek, 1993.

earlier "Politika," a supplement to the Delo Nomer newspaper, was shut down. To implement this repressive policy, various methods were used to separate journalists and different scenarios were developed to set various media to fight. For example, thanks to such a policy of disintegration of the journalistic environment over many years, malicious enemies were formed. Such irreconcilable political opponents to each other were the early pro-presidential "Asaba" and the opposing "Res Publica," presidential "Kyrgyz Tuusu" and "Asaba," State TV under Director Karypkulov and late "Asaba".

However, at the beginning of this phase a very important tendency was the division of the media on an ethnic basis. The politicized media of this period for the most part represented two fighting camps – Russian-language and pro-Russian media outlets and the nationalist Kyrgyz-language media. The opposition was carried out under the slogan, "The climate is bad for provincial Russians" – the problem of self-identification of the Russian ethnos in this changed historical situation was extremely painful and the media of one camp channeled the respective interests and moods. "Kyrgyzstan for the Kyrgyz people" – the ideas of national renaissance and the prospects of national prosperity overwhelmed the radicals of journalism. It seemed that the birthmark of opportunism was able to last much longer than the old journalistic cadres, because in their majority the militant nationalistic media outlets were represented by a younger generation, often with no professional education.⁸

The pages of these newspapers reflected the real problems of the population less and less. Life was becoming more and more detached from the politicized pages of militant journalism. Despite the orientation towards free access to information that was already rooted in people's minds, accompanied by the cognitive right to criticize own positions, three fifths of the population, as noted by public opinion researchers⁹, were growing socially apathetic and tired of the perestroika phraseology of this period. The general criticism of the economic situation subsequently grew stronger than ever. Specifically, high government officials were adhering to the nationalist side, vaguely rationalizing the necessity of national renaissance, return of the history to the people, etc. The matter was not the mistakes of governance – behind this opposition in the information sphere there was, most probably, one goal – definition of own position in the systems of political interest groups.

At that stage the President had no support from the strongly pronounced traditional institutions (clans/tribes). He had been nominated by the representatives of the intelligentsia, which never had a great weight in society and for these reasons the President was perceived by the greatest part of the rural population as a russified person without support who had lost his original roots. This is why the strategy of the President's policy included the creation of an image of a truly Kyrgyz president. To serve this purpose, a number of newspapers started a tactic of "closing blank spots," publishing mythical stories (sanjyra) about the Akaev clan. Particularly zealous and

⁸ See also the Chapter "Journalism functions and paradigms of activities"

⁹ Ä. Verkhovskiy, "Central Asia and Kazakhstan: Political Spectrum", Moscow, 1992, page 32

successful in this was the "Ala-Too" journal". According to these stories, the President was not a man without roots in the nation, but a direct descendent of a famous khan's clan. The culmination of this acquisition of genealogy was when during the first visit of Kazakhstan's President Nursultan Nazarbaev, the fact of blood relation between Akaev and the high guest was established. That is to say, the media directly participated in a public relations campaign aimed at reanimating elements of archaic mentality with the purpose of enforcing a steady perception of traditional legitimization of the current President's authority. This campaign in fact meant a turn towards traditional management techniques in the cadre policy of the country.

3.1.3 Phase 3 / 1996-1999: Final "divorce" with the government

The relatively favorable and peaceful era for the media finally finished in 1996. By this time it had become clear that the positive news coming from third countries was uninteresting in principle, i.e. the international community was not ready to provide significant financial support for a long time for positive relations between government and media in Kyrgyzstan.

Together with the advance payment for the democratic image, the tolerance of the government that had been putting up with the attacks of media has dried up as well. Logically, a new phase had started. The media had been cut off from the higher power and many journalists, either having fallen into a rush of disclosures and criticism or having become loyal in fear of prosecution, stopped writing and reporting about the real world in which the people, their audiences, lived and about their needs and demands. It is interesting, that the President's team, understanding and valuing the high educational and propaganda potential of media, tried to use the media for their purposes and resorted to the old methods. It is obvious that a non-critical, toothless media is doomed to die, and the audiences responded in the same manner that they had responded to the authorities – with distrust and loss of interest.

In such a situation the media becomes self-referent, or influential and reputable only for itself. The population withdraws to their own living rooms, only fragmentally and for a short period of time being integrated into the national community thanks to Latin American soap operas and the life dramas of all sorts of Marias, Joses and Pedros. The power holders, of course, could not dare to cut all connections with the people that are reached by the media, because no governance system is capable of functioning without input data from the outside environment.¹⁰ This is why they helped the media to create "virtual freedom of opposition" to the power, having targeted the arrows of criticism and fired them at journalists at the Parliament, which lost practically all its power. We have obtained remarkable virtual democracy, where the Parliament, de-jure ensuring all legislative environments in the country, was constantly under attack from the press and television. Besides, the "critical level" authorized by the leaders is in the interests of the President and those who surround him. Whenever the parliamentarians stop playing the roles given to them, loyal journalists are let loose at

¹⁰ See, for example, the cybernetic model of K. Deuch.

them¹¹. And vice versa: "break-away" journalists may be "fed" to the Parliament – this was the case with "Asaba", which was led to bankruptcy by Deputy Usualiev.¹²

The media that did not want to become politically loyal set new goals and developed a new game strategy: international organizations provided a lot more money for the image of media prosecuted by the government. There appeared opportunities to become famous in the world community not thanks to a high degree of professionalism, but due to the "brave fight" for democracy and professional principles. The media started to vigorously create the virtual reality of fighting for democratic achievements. Nevertheless, the period of total opposition between the government and the media was short-lived. Too great was the media potential in conducting political PR-strategies and forming the necessary public opinion through the start of virtual war between various positions and persons.

In Russia in 1996-97 for the first time during the presidential election campaign the media was being pumped up with money, a total "PR-ing" of media outlets took place and at the same time media holdings were being formed. A new form of media support was created – political loyalty. In Kazakhstan during this period the process of redistribution of property in the media sphere started in favor of the family clan of the country's President Nursultan Nazarbaev. IWPR regional director for Kazakhstan Rozlana Taukina says: "The process of absorption of independent media is carried out through the creation of a media holding headed by the President's daughter. Under these conditions, only the strikebreakers survive. The newspapers change their owner and consequently lose their popularity, turning into recycled paper and garbage. Instead of independent media outlets there appear "ersatz-television" and "ersatz-newspapers" whose journalists were forced to sign contracts on loyalty and non-participation in mass political actions."¹³

Although these tendencies usually reach Kyrgyzstan with a delay of three to four years, the Kyrgyz government undoubtedly added this media potential to its arsenal and started the preparatory work. Thus, after 1996 the media were equalized to industrial enterprises through heavy taxation: they had to pay value added tax of 20%, a 30% profit tax and other direct and indirect taxes of 8%. Besides that, a new wave of court cases, hearings and prosecutions of journalists swept the country. The government started to advance along the entire front with the purpose of curbing the media.

In this respect, very indicative is the conflict between the Naryn Oblast newspaper "Tenir Too" with its own founder – the Oblast state administration. The staff, which grew bold and forgot off whose hand it fed and survived, started to criticize (very moderately, though) the local authorities on the basis of information received from a meeting of the Oblast council. As a result, the Oblast administration turned off the

¹¹ For example, in 1999 the media basically "jailed" the former deputy, the director of Kara-Balta mining enterprise T. Kazakbaev. They were regularly criticizing and harassing the deputies Tekebaev and Masaliev and in 2001 the media was involved in the harassment of Deputy Tashtanvekov and Deputy Omurkulov. Particularly active in this were "Vecherny Bishkek" and KOORT.

¹² See B1 "Asaba."

¹³ Igor Grebenshikov. «Media: between engagement and information security.» www.burana.by.ru

financial tap to the newspaper and stopped the material support because of the publication "contradicting the views of the akimiat." The incident was exhausted according to the scenario of the authorities: the "gone-too-far" editor Rakim Asylbaev who had dared to oppose the authorities was forced to resign. His position was taken by another editor, who now denies existence of any censorship, or any forms of pressure on media and tries not to get into conflicts with the local authorities.¹⁴

3.1.4. Phase 4 / 1999 - present: Redistribution and concentration of media ownership through creation of media holdings

No political system can function effectively without sufficient information supply. Any power tries to usurp the information field, because this can ensure the smooth working of mechanisms for the processing of demands and turn the requirements of society into a ready-made public product for use in the decision-making system. "The leaders of democracy, no less than doctors, shamans, kings and dictators... control information with the same vigor with which they control armed forces."¹⁵ – writes Bagdikian. Since the field of politics in Kyrgyzstan suffers from a deficit of ideas - both in political parties, associations and from individual politicians, i.e. the field of politics itself is virtual in principle, then the external, formal elements of political institutions are very conveniently transferred into the virtual media field.

The first tests of wide utilization of PR-strategies were made during the pre-election parliamentary campaign of 2000. It was at that time when the techniques of creating heroes and antiheroes were developed. Television, radio and press in one powerful front developed long before the elections a campaign of bias coverage of history, "blackening" candidates for the President, especially the opposition candidate Felix Kulov. The response of spectators-voters was the mirror image: the "black PR" backfired. The population of the country and especially in the election district in Talas from which the harassed general was nominated, were determined to protect "the adversary" of the regime. The logical continuation, but on a new information phase, was the presidential election campaign the same year. The methods and mechanisms of curbing disobedient media that had been tested earlier were used quite effectively this time as well. An example is access to media during the election campaigns: in the course of the 2000 presidential race the current President Akaev, according to the media monitoring conducted by the Union of Journalists,¹⁶ received 90% of the air time on "independent stations", while at the state stations – 100%. The tactics of fighting the candidates in opposition to the current president was changed and this topic became either suppressed or hardly covered through feeding various contradicting facts, dosing and filtering the news on the presidential candidates. The technique of dosing and

¹⁴ It cannot be said that the newspaper became entirely "toothless" with the coming of a new editor. Rather, through trial and error the staff established the "zones and limits" for criticism. According to an unwritten law, it was possible to criticize anyone except for the highest Oblast level – the governor and the Oblast kenesha chairperson were beyond criticism. However, the leaders of rayon levels desperately wanted to join this "sinless" cohort. In March 1997, the newspaper staff had to fight for the right to criticize this level through court (there was a court action by a rayon head K. Kulenbejev against the chief editor of "Tenir Too" Taalai Duishenaliev and journalist K. Ismailova, the author of a criticizing article). The outcome was negative for the newspaper – it had to pay a fine and journalist Ismailova had to resign from "Tenir Too."

¹⁵ B. Bagdikian, "Monopoly of media", Moscow, 1987, page 39.

¹⁶ For more detail, see http://www.ifescentralasia.kg/Kyrgyzstan/ENG/jr_en/jr0_en.htm

concealing the facts was as usual quite effective: the newly grown hero Kulov disappeared; swallowed by the sea of flowing media virtuality. Although for the government such methods were associated with high 'moral costs,' nevertheless, the government assessed the media potential and started the process of concentration of information property in its hands. There were more than enough examples of techniques and methods to privatize and obtain current media into the private ownership of a limited circle of people. For example, in neighboring Kazakhstan the first family of the country slowly but quite openly obtained ownership of many popular media, both electronic and print. Today much is written about Nazarbaevs' media empire.

It turned out that media outlets are enterprises, which are profitable not only in terms of political strategy but also in terms of economics – they can produce quite significant profits and possess high profit-making potential. For example, according to some specialists' assessments, two years ago "Vecherny Bishkek" newspaper was relatively independent in terms of both finance and editorial policy. The newspaper's own advertising agency "Rubikon" ensured quite a significant inflow of advertising and the tax payments of the newspaper to the state budget sometimes superceded tax allocations from the gold-mining plant "Kyrgyz Altyn." The government didn't want to leave such a large sum in the hands of the growing "newspaper tycoons." A group of businessmen connected with the government started to make attempts of repartition of the Kyrgyz media market. Through financial inspections and accusations of violation of the tax legislation, the government managed to redistribute the shares of "Vecherny Bishkek." The former employees of the newspapers believe that they were simply robbed of their shares. Formally, the government through the Joint Stock Company "Kyrgyzzalko", manages the shares. However, opposition politicians claim that the true owners of the newspaper are the President's daughter Bermet Akaeva and her Kazakh husband Adil Toigonbaev. Parliament deputy Adakhan Madumarov confirms: "Now the President's family is behind this newspaper. No article is now published on the pages of the newspaper without prior approval by the Family."¹⁷ The Family's media empire is believed to include also KOORT and NBT.¹⁸

It is impossible to talk about large profits and ownership facts, especially when it involves the property of first people in the country. The economic side of activities of informational press and channels is in the area hidden from the public eye. Even newspaper circulation data during the post-perestroika period has become secret information. For example, according to Osh Times data, in 1997 the leaders among the national newspapers were Vecherny Bishkek (100,000 copies), Delo Nomer (60,000-70,000), Paishamba (45,000), Asaba (30,000) KTR-OBO (130,000), Pyramid Plus (50,000) and Aalam (30,000). According to Asaba, the circulation of the same leaders of the print market of the country were split in a slightly different way: Vecherny Bishkek 40-80,000, Delo Nomer - 75,000, Paishamba - 55,000, Asaba - 50,000, Aalam - 25,000. Undoubtedly, these and other differences relate to the existence of a double accounting system and the hiding of real profits from the tax system.¹⁹

¹⁷ Igor Grebenshchikov. «New repartition of the Kyrgyz media market.» www.burana.by.ru

¹⁸ See Section "Structural context of journalism in Kyrgyzstan."

¹⁹ See Section "Media as a social system (functional framework)"

Rumors – informal channels of information – persistently grow around the process of the formation of a media holding by the First Family of the country and discuss the schemes of connection of the Akaev family with unknown people, who have suddenly emerged in journalism as editors and founders of media. Indirect evidence that the Akaev family in fact owns various media and makes further efforts to expand its media company is the publication of a number of newspapers, which wrote about ownership by the first family of various media (on acquisition of stock of Vecherny Bishkek and KOORT, NBT). In these cases, usually very sensitive about its honor and reputation, the family did not demand any rejections of publications and still keeps silent, despite all the attempts by the journalists to highlight the owners of major media by connecting them with the Akaevs' name.

Other non-governmental media have quickly realized the dangers of the current situation. A threat to lose their media business forced the owners to change their political orientation. Thus, the television and radio company "Pyramid", following the last presidential election, became surprisingly loyal to the existing government and tried not to be "defiled by connections with the opposition." In response to statements by NDI and OSCE delegations, which pointed out insufficient coverage of candidates competing with Akaev, the TRK "Pyramid" President A. Biynazarov explained, "there were objective reasons, one of which was the lack of technical, material and human resources for the coverage of the campaign of each candidate. At the same time, the candidates themselves, despite our numerous requests, offered us no video materials or information on their meetings with the electorate. The refusal to air the ads of presidential candidates is explained by the fact that during the election campaign some candidates actively used improper information techniques of propaganda which contained unethical and sometimes illegal materials. Although the company's top management made a decision to air such ads, literally the next day after the first broadcast there followed a sharp negative reaction from the viewers who expressed their concern with the overly aggressive character of the ads capable of creating interethnic and social disturbances. In response to this, the council of the company's founders made a decision to stop broadcasting the ads in order to keep the channel's audience."²⁰

According to our observer interning at "Pyramid", the channel's editorial unwritten editorial policy can be described as following: "Do not tease the government, but do not please it either, try to balance carefully; if you criticize do it so that there is nothing to blame for." During the last six months the "Pyramid" journalists have been practicing a new strategy: under the slogan of objectivity, they demonstratively avoid analytical comments, strive only for stating the facts, allowing the viewers to make conclusions independently. A very important factor for explanation of "Pyramid" policy is the fact that the term of its broadcasting license expires in 2003. And if the company does not approach this deadline with a "good" reputation, the government may start seriously thinking if the company is indeed capable of continuing its information activity. Even in the case of a positive answer – it is indeed necessary to

20 See Statement by TRK "Pyramid," http://www.pyramid.elcat.kg/news/statement_r.html

issue a license for broadcasting in the meter range. Realizing these options, not only the founders and owners but also individual employees are naturally interested in survival, and consequently, in loyalty to the government.

Very important for the relations between the media and the government seems the decision on de-registration of 16 new media.²¹ According to Rina Prizhvoit, a journalist from one of the deregistered newspapers "Moya Stolitsa" ("My capital city"), this decision was predetermined by the government's desire not to give media outlets, "dangerous in terms of expected information policy", any chances of influencing the masses. If re-registration of the existing media continues till October 1st, 2001 and only then the documents of new media are considered for registration, it is obvious that these media outlets will not be able to "participate" in discussion of the issue of prolongation of the President's term of office up to seven years. It is suspected, that in the fall there will be a referendum on this issue. Someone is greatly interested in holding back the media that are capable of influencing public opinion."^{22 23}

On the whole, the ten years of existence of the mass media system in independent Kyrgyzstan were marked by frequent changes of character of relations between the media and the central power: the period of love and mutual adoration was replaced by the period of coolness and even opposition. In the end, having realized the uselessness of open repressive actions and measures against media and the danger of such actions in terms of undermining an already shaken and fading image of a democratic state, the government decided that it was much easier to control the media by subordinating it "from inside," with the help of the economic mechanism of ownership. Understanding the importance of mass media not only as the "carrier of messages for the masses" but also as a potentially profit-making business and having taken a number of actions and steps for redistribution of ownership of the major media for its own benefit, the government now possesses effective economic instruments for controlling the flow of information. Under the conditions where economic restraint multiplies political restraint similarly to a geometric progression, this may result in the final devaluation of all democratic achievements of Kyrgyzstan during the last 10 years and lead the country to an authoritarian regime.

3.2 Development of information supply and demand

The changes that took place in the relations between the media and the government during the last decade predetermined the changes in relations between the media and the audiences. The latter, as well as the former, by no means developed consistently and gradually.

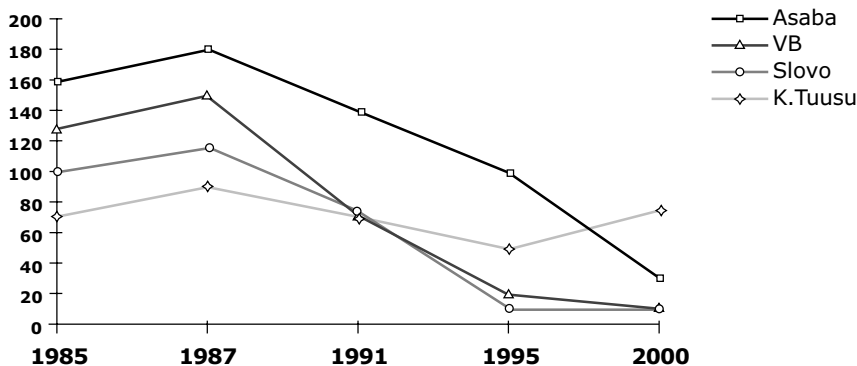
²¹ See Section «Legislative and legal environment for media activities in the Kyrgyz Republic.»

²² I. Grebenshikov. «New repartition of the Kyrgyz media market.» www.burana.by.ru

²³ From the time this report was written, some changes took place: the President officially declared that there would be no referendum on extension of his term, and the newspapers "Moya Stolitsa – novosti" and "Agym" started to come out after the deadline for media re-registration expired.

It is possible to single out several specific benchmarks in media use by the audiences and tendencies of interaction with the government. "Perestroika" and "glasnost" (1985-1987) marked the period of triumph for journalism, including that of Kyrgyzstan. Despite countless obstacles put up by the antagonistic state system, the editorial staffs of newspapers and magazines were able to breathe life and fresh air into their pages. This was the period when not only substantial, quality journals from faraway Moscow were changing hands, but each issue of the local *Literaturny Kyrgyzstan* also became a bestseller. *Molodezhnaya Gazeta* literally "reached out to the people" by opening public debate clubs on its pages, organizing a youth theater and going to remote villages with the political theater performance "Manekeny". Criticism became the "honorary guest" on the pages of any print medium. "Blank spaces" in history are discovered; bungling and embezzlement of officials are disclosed and real problems in the party and the youth communist organizations are discussed. Circulation of practically all capital newspapers and magazines sharply increase, and this happens when no coercive methods of subscription were practiced yet (see Graph 1 below). Subscriptions to a number of Russian newspapers and magazines become as problematic (and prestigious) as buying original Lancôme cosmetics or a Pierre Cardin suit.

Graph 1. Circulation of major newspapers in (thousand copies)



At the highest state and party level, the issue of press effectiveness is raised as never before. Officials of all ranks and types are afraid of the close attention from journalists. In the professional world of journalists (in the magazine "Journalist" and in discussions with journalists), demands to continue the movement towards the true democratization of the information sphere are frequently heard. Journalists in this period carefully watched their audiences, their needs and demands. For the first time in the Soviet practice of journalism, the reader becomes the main actor in the information process.

Growth in circulation of newspapers and the political press and an increase in a variety of publicist information happened due to well-known reasons but brought less obvious consequences. These reasons included an increase in the free time of the population (due to unemployment growth, increases in part-time working and other changes in

the workforce structure), and the era of universal politicization as a determinant of an intensive interest in important events (when an ordinary citizen realizes his/her ability to become a full-fledged actor in the political processes. eg – mass forms of protest as a popular and effective solution of problems). But the most important reason was that during the previous Soviet period behind the concept of controlled media there hid the essence of the relation of the power to its people – an attitude of distrust and a wish to impose strict control. In their turn, the people paid the media by the same token. And when finally during the perestroika period the media turned to the real world, the problems and needs of real people, the people answered with a high level of trust and affection to journalism.

During this period, journalism had a chance to understand and realize the real power of the media: the more people followed the important events through media coverage, the more significant became the media as a foundation to form political opinion. This also relates to those parts of the population that were following the coverage earlier but now they receive information more frequently and from a larger number of sources. This is true even more concerning those parts of the population that had previously not followed the political information provided by any media.

Television political information programs reached more and more people who were not interested in politics in principle. It was exactly at that time that television became a key to success for politicians and parties alike. One of the “driving forces” behind this was Mikhail Gorbachev who made his information image the key element of state policy. Akaev had such a period as well, when he was meeting with the people frequently and making speeches at various meetings and gatherings at different levels.²⁴

Broadening the target groups covered by important information, the growth of information taken in by the citizens, as well as the growing number of events important for the formation of political opinion moved the media from the periphery into the center of events. Thanks to this the media occupied a key position: their coverage became a determining factor for politics, economy and culture. It is exactly because of this that in the mid-90s the public discourse on degrees of media freedom, their power, influence, etc. reached its height. And the subjects, the makers of journalism, become more popular than the politicians themselves – and journalism becomes a starting field for a jump into big politics.

From the beginning and till the middle of the 1990s journalism in Kyrgyzstan was characterized by extreme instability: the popular sphere of journalism was flooded with non-professionals whose aim was to make name and money using the newly discovered potential of media as good producers. The movement in the media market was constant and headlong: many newspapers appeared, others died but on the whole the total number of media grew steadily. At the same time, the “giant mania” of the Soviet times in terms of circulations died: the real demand, the level of information

²⁴ Later, however, Akaev stopped appearing in the media so often. Now we witness Akaev's return to the media: he is a frequent guest on television and in the press. But this is a different return in terms of quality, because the quality of media themselves and the President's image have changed dramatically. For more detail, see Section “Role of media in construction of reality”.

consumption, predetermined the decline of the cumulative single-time circulation of newspapers (see Table 3). The tendency of declining circulation was also characteristic of individual newspapers, especially those with national coverage (see Graph 1 above).

Table 3. *Changes in Kyrgyzstan's press in the 1990s*²⁵

	1990	1996	2000
Number of newspapers	148	149	184
Total single-time circulation (thousand copies)	1622,0	1314,8	1122,1

Source: "Kyrgyzstan in Numbers", 2001

The structure of media use had changed significantly by the second half of the 1990s. The popularity of substantial journals among readers started to decline. Commercialization of media activity and media products changed the social composition of the users – the intelligentsia, and the targeting of it withdraws from the foreground. Pluralism of the users' taste starts to shift toward utilitarian journalism (advertising and reference press) and entertaining reading, including criminal and erotic newspapers. On the whole, television is dominant in the media-use structure. In major cities, however, the population preferred Russian television, which itself was going through a rapid professional growth from the period of perestroika. Domestic television, on the contrary, was going through the changes at a rather slow pace. (Changes on KTR related mostly to primitive commercialization due to the opening of advertising opportunities and an increase in entertainment programming in the form of concerts, congratulations by request and the growth of the number of pirated films shown).

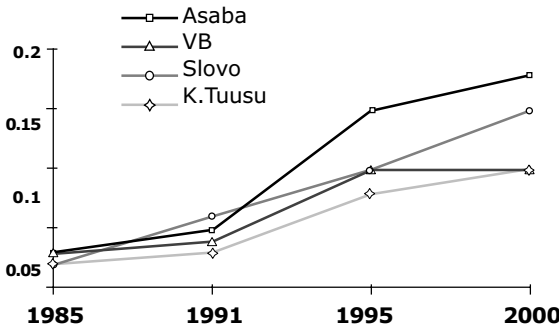
Particularly significant changes in media use structure took place in radio journalism. The radio programs of Soviet times sank rapidly into oblivion. Changes in this field started with the expansion at the beginning of the 1990s of new Russian (for the most part private) radio channels into Kyrgyzstan: Europa Plus, Russian Radio, etc. By the beginning of 2000, there were already more than 20 competing radio channels of national and regional scope on the Kyrgyz market. However, radio journalism per se, as it was understood during the Soviet times, with specific radio genres, does not exist any more. Modern radio, densely populated with DJs using slang and accommodating the tastes of the crowds, is a totally different phenomenon. Despite the fact that none of the radio channels or stations claim to have national coverage, it is possible to talk about certain groups of constant users that radio is acquiring. This type of communication media experiences the competitive struggle of various studios, stations and channels. However, in essence this competitive struggle is built not on the differences in approaches to broadcasting policy and concept, since most of the radio channels sound like twin brothers, but rather on differences in resources (including the ability to attract rich sponsors, possess a richer record library, etc.).

²⁵ 1990 is taken for comparison as the last year of the Soviet era.

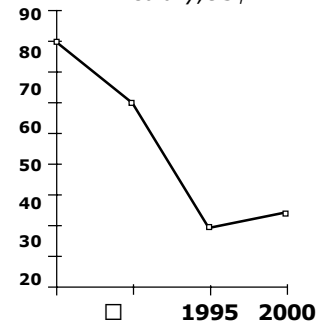
The landscape of the regional – that is Oblast, rayon, city – newspapers in Kyrgyzstan remain very homogeneous – these are the same, as in the old socialist times, driving forces, but now of local authorities with a different name. They maintain the same level of printing quality – very obsolete - but the main reason for the death of newspapers in the regions is the fact that the readers reject the “official” information, which seems to be strikingly “fallen out” of time and therefore particularly virtual. Very important in this respect is the initial competitive advantage of the renewed and upgraded national media compared to the smaller local ones.

And, perhaps, the decisive factor in the whole issue is the change of information use structure, due to a number of economic reasons the print media became unaffordable for most of the population (see Graphs 2 and 3 showing the growth of the price of newspapers copy and the changes of the average salary level in Kyrgyzstan).

Graph 2. Changes in prices perCopy, US\$



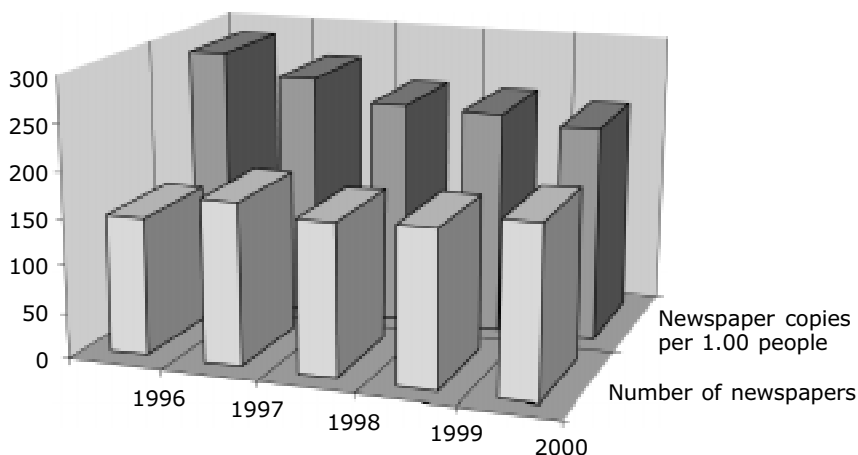
Graph 3. Average monthly salary, US\$



Source: National Statistic Committee

In general, by the middle of the 90s the number of people who watched more television and read fewer newspapers grew significantly. Such tendencies were behind hardly noticeable changes observed by state statistics in media use patterns in terms of the number of newspaper copies per capita (see the diagram below).

By the second half of the 90s, the quality Russian press practically disappeared from the newspaper market of Kyrgyzstan. If in the capital newspapers such as “Komsomolskaya Pravda” (there is even a Kyrgyz correspondent and respectively the supplement “KP in Kyrgyzstan”), “AiF” and others are still quite popular, they could not practically reach the Rayon and Oblast centers. The population, which had a tradition of reading the “central” press for many decades, now rejects it. The matter is not only in the purchasing power of the population that is going down, the problem is also that in their drive for sovereignty the Russian media themselves withdrew from the region more and more. And at this time there was practically no news from Kyrgyzstan in the leading Russian newspapers.

Graph 4. Newspaper copy/person from 1996 - 2000

Starting from the late 1990s, however, there was a tendency of "reverse movement" in the structure of consumption – decrease of interest of highly educated people who now watch less television and read fewer newspapers. Consequently, the difference in the information behavior of high and low educated people decreases.

By the end of the 1990s, Russian print media hardly played a role in the regions of Kyrgyzstan. For example, in the Kochkor rayon only four copies of "AiF" and 18 of "Komsomolskaya Pravda" were subscribed to in the second half of 2000, while the subscription leader – the newspaper "KTR-Obo" was subscribed to by 2101 readers, "Kyrgyz Karavan" had 695 subscribers, "Kyrgyz Tuusu" – 323, "Tagdyr" – 254, and "Aalam" – 168. The oblast newspaper "Tenir Too" is read by 148 subscribers in the rayon, although the pro-government newspapers ("Kyrgyz Tuusu", "Tenir-Too," "Aidenek," "Asylzat") use repressive methods and the akimiat's assistance in the subscription drives as they always did. However, the subscription list also includes newspapers that are chosen undoubtedly voluntarily, such as "Kyrgyz Karavan," "Tagdyr," and "KTR-Obo".

In the same rayon, in August 2000 only a little over 1,000 copies of newspapers were sold in kiosks and by private salespeople. And here again the leader is KTR-Obo with 300 copies. People's love for this newspaper can be among other reasons explained by the fact that it provides the full TV guide; it has a monopoly on national TV in this respect. "Asaba" sold about 80 copies, "Delo Nomer" and "Urkor" sold 60 copies each, and 50 copies of each of the newspapers "Zaman", "Tagdyr" and "Ukmushtu okuyalar" were sold. Thus, both the tastes and preferences of the population confirm, at first glance, the concepts of dominant mass consciousness that exist in socio-psychological studies.

According to our observers interning with the media, the only capital media that are constantly trying to trace the interests and needs of their audiences are "KOORT" and "Pyramida". Its management and editorial staff, as the intern reported, always orders sociological polls of the audience and analyzes telephone calls from the viewers. "TRC Pyramida", according to our intern, also frequently turns to various sociological research reports.

The *regional media* and journalists, as a rule, do not study this issue and point to blurred boundaries of the target groups of their media, providing quite contradictory pictures of the collective image of their reader or viewer. Half of the respondents (participants of focus groups for media leaders and participants of mail survey and interviews, for a total of 114 editors), said that they have a quite approximate, vague understanding of their audiences based on common notions of an average statistical resident of our country and their own life experiences and observations.

An exception to this rule is the new independent radio "Salam" in Batken oblast, the director of which said the following during a focus group for media managers: "We conducted a monitoring and studied the interests of the audiences. We serve the youth of 17-25. When we started our new radio station from zero, we did not know what this age category preferred. At the beginning we thought that we would be very different from the Bishkek stations because these people would listen to the hits of 1980s. However our survey showed that the youth in Batken is the same as in Bishkek. The only difference is that they know a little less. But they order the same songs and the programs they would like to have on the radio are the same as in Bishkek. Then we were lucky to participate in a workshop on branding. If other radio stations had to change a lot, shift their policies or re-create their image, we in contrast were fortunate to know from the beginning how to do it professionally. And what we have that you will not find here in Bishkek – we have huge support from the youth. We receive 100 letters a day on average, and from those letters we know what they would like to listen to and at what time. We have an opportunity to do audience analysis and using the results of such analysis we get to the proper level of programming quality."

About one third of all the respondents stated that their understanding of their target groups was verified during various research studies and through the process of feedback. However, the sincerity of these answers causes doubt. None of the editors and journalists responding perceived the issue of defining the specific needs of their target audiences as an actual problem of their media and only one respondent believed that the readers can really define the newspaper's policy. None of the focus group participants saw the connection between the demand, high sales rates or "non-liquidity" of media products and the consideration of target groups' needs. The only common feature was the complaint of journalists and editors of all regions and media types about the limited purchasing power of the population and therefore the potential audience. In the opinions of respondents-specialists, the solution of problems of material supply and technical equipment would result in automatic increases in popularity and circulation or coverage of the medium.

The answers to the questions of the mail questionnaire for editors do not show good knowledge of the target audience. Out of 35 respondents only three editors indicated specific groups in answering the question "Which audience is your newspaper oriented to first of all?" Responses included "imprisoned criminals" – the newspaper "Umut-Nadezhda" of the Ministry of Internal Affairs; "people who realise the value of their health and wish to eat healthy food" – the newspaper "Dastorkhan" and "disabled children, their parents and family members" – the magazine "Doroga Zhizni". Other newspapers, even such narrowly specialized as "Fermer," "Kyrgyz Tamekisi," "Science and New Technology" checked all categories of audiences except for children, and as a region of coverage named "the entire country" or even the territories of neighboring countries.

In Russia, with the formation of media holdings, the information tycoons such as Berezovsky started fully utilizing the new potential of the mechanism of media influence on government structures, demonstrating the symbolic capital and effectiveness of media power. In the media environment itself, there appeared the slogan undermining and threatening leadership: "We are closer to the people." Approximately the same process was taking place in Kyrgyzstan's mass media. The media were trying out "the power of public opinion." For example, during the election campaign for the position of Bishkek mayor, the newspaper "Delo Nomer" demonstrated media power at the fullest: After the publication of an article entitled "Who lives in the teremok?" candidate Kenenbaev, who had been leading in the election race, dropped out entirely.²⁶

As for the preferences of the people, more and more information opportunities lead to the preference of non-political programming in the end. Changes in media supply were determined not in the last turn by the development of a media use character. In the Soviet period, for decades the media were covering larger and larger parts of the population so that more people were close to the actual events. Print media and television covered almost all of the population. The single-day total circulation of newspapers in 1996 was about 1,5 million copies, and there was a broad network of both public-political and special print media – for women, children and youth.

Differentiation and an increase in media styles (diversity of specialized media for special target groups), was taking place against the background of a growing differentiation of lifestyles of the population. A special position was occupied for a long time by "Vecherny Bishkek," "Res Publica," "Asaba" and "Delo Nomer." From the time of political scandals during the era of the dying system, "Vecherny Bishkek" became a symbol of freedom of the press and it started to develop as an influential force in Kyrgyz journalism. The newspaper then initiated a new phenomenon – sensational journalism which is often not compatible with factuality and does not shrink from falsification and distortion of the facts.

²⁶ "Teremok" is a wooden tower-type house. In a famous Russian tale symbolizes a beautiful but modest house with not enough space for all inhabitants willing to leave in it. In a "Delo Nomer" publication, the notion is used in the ironic meaning since Kenenbaev's newly constructed house looked more like a palace. The newspaper questioned his ability to construct such a luxurious house on a government employee's salary (prior to nomination, he was the head of the state administration of Sverdlovsky district of Bishkek).

The flow of yellow, pulp press literally swept over the country (see the box with a case study below). Specialists believe that the appearance of such mass press is connected with the rehabilitation of “repressed” forms of feelings and world views that for decades had been pushed into the area of disdain and shame. Perhaps, this phenomenon is due to changes in chronology and the politics of work and leisure. After many years of political atrophy regarding leisure and the domination of economic, professional and production interests in the media under the implementation of technocratic policy, the holders of the information space realized that leisure was not only equal to work time in terms of the share, but may be more important than work in terms of social significance.

These and other changes in the media supply determined radical shifts in media demand as well. A number of researchers describe a new tendency, which started at the end of the 1990s – a “reverse” movement in the structure of consumption and a decline in interest of highly educated people who now watch less television and read fewer newspapers (the middle and poorer classes were always less active in media use). As a result, the differences in information behavior between highly educated

Case Study: Yellow, pulp press

In Kubat Sharshkeev’s enterprise, eight periodicals are issued by 19 employees. In the periodicals there is practically no journalism work per se. Journalists use as the main sources of information for their criminal newspapers “Prestuplenie i Nakazanie,” “Kylmysh Jana Jaza” (Crime and Punishment), “Prigovor” (Sentence) the criminal cases on which investigation is finished and which are submitted for court hearings. The information is bought “whole-sale” by the owner of the newspapers from constant “informants” from the law enforcement agencies. For other newspapers of the erotic, entertaining character factuality has no significance at all. The journalists use materials of other (as a rule, Russian) media, web-resources and resort to fiction. The phenomenon of demand for such newspapers requires deep analysis of changes in the tastes and needs of information users. Preliminary, it is possible only to state the shift of the structure of use of information products toward hedonism and gratification.

and less educated people faded away. This also shows that use of political information supply loses its differentiated character specific for various social strata (as it used to be initially).

Thus, the process of determination of information needs, the demand and supply is always mutual. Often the needs form a specific market supply, but no less frequently the media supply forms stable preferences in the population. And in any model or concept of media, relations between the people and the government are reflected, where the media play the role of an intermediary link (mediator).

3.3 External and internal assessments of democracy and freedom of expression in Kyrgyzstan

There are many various organizations tracing status and development of democracy in the world and in the post-socialist countries in particular. The richest and most influential research in this area has been accumulated by the international non-profit organization “Freedom House,” whose assessments for Kyrgyzstan are presented below. For comparison, development of democracy in Kyrgyzstan is considered against the

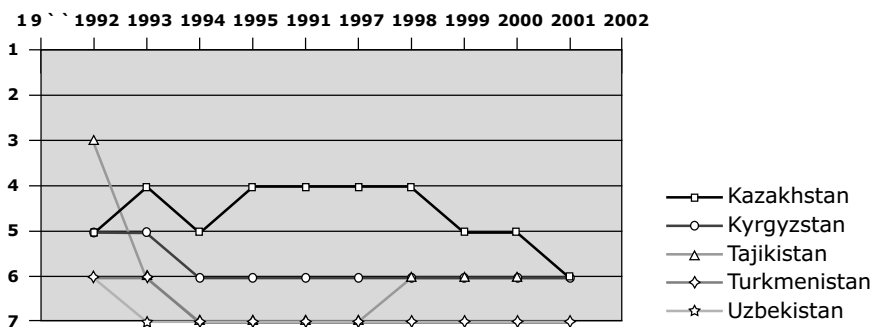
background of other Central Asian countries. Such a comparison helps to understand why Kyrgyzstan is often referred to as the "island of democracy", in Central Asia.

3.3.1 Assessment of freedom in the countries of Central Asia (by "Freedom House")

Starting from 1972, Freedom House publishes annual reports on the status of freedom, evaluating each country on two dimensions – the political rights and the civil freedoms. The average score on these two dimensions determines the country's status: countries that receive the score of 1-2,5 are considered to be free, the score of 3-5,5 corresponds to the status of a partly free country and countries with a score of 5,5-7 are defined as not free. The dividing line between the "partly free" and the "free" zone usually falls in the group of countries where the average score of which is 5,5. For example, the countries which receive a score of 6 for political rights and a 5 for civil liberties, or the countries with a score of 5 for political rights and a 6 for civil liberties may be either "partly free" or "non free."²⁷

Below are presented the results of the Freedom House evaluation of all Central Asian republics during the ten years after they obtained independence. All the five countries are shown in comparison to trace the tendencies of development and to demonstrate why during a number of years Kyrgyzstan was considered to be the "island of democracy", in Central Asia. Graph 5 shows the scores of the republics on the "political rights" dimension:

Graph 5. Political rights in Central Asian countries



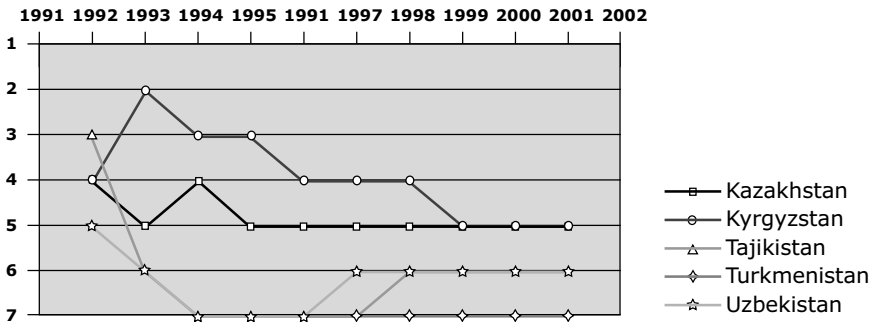
As it is seen from the chart, none of the countries of Central Asia during the ten years has been able to come out of the "partly free" and "not free" area. Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan started at the same level (5), but later Kazakhstan came one level down where it remains till present. Kyrgyzstan, in contrast, went one level up, where it remained till 1998 (the temporary "fall" in 1994 related to shutting down the newspapers

²⁷ For more details on methodology and sources see one of the annual Freedom House reports (for example, *Freedom In the World: The Annual Survey of Political Rights and Civil Liberties (2000-01)*, (Freedom House, 2001)), or visit the web-site of the organization: www.freedomhouse.org

“Svobodnye Gory” and “Politika” and some other actions by the government that were limiting political rights). However, starting from 1998, the country started to lose again in terms of the evaluation of political rights, having reached in 2001 the mark of 6 (“not free” area). In 1992, Tajikistan was closer than the others to the “free” area, but then the civil war of 1992-1997 threw the country back to the mark of 7-6, i.e. into the “not free” zone where it remains till present. Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan demonstrate approximately the same pattern of movement in the “not free” area – from 6 to 7, with a difference of one year. On the whole, none of the countries has made true progress on the political rights dimension during the ten years considered, although Kyrgyzstan was maintaining a higher level than its remaining neighbors in the region for a considerably long period of time.

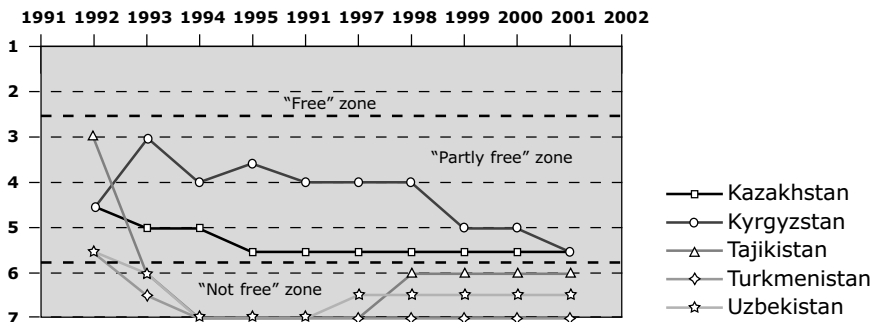
The following chart demonstrates the scores of the countries of the region on the second component of freedom according to Freedom House – civil liberties.

Graph 6. Civil liberties in Central Asian countries



In most of the reports by Freedom House on Central Asia, civil liberties are evaluated higher overall than political rights. But here the tendencies are approximately the same – all countries started out in the “partly free” area, and then practically all, with the exclusion of Kyrgyzstan, immediately gave in their positions, although Tajikistan and Uzbekistan were able to go one level up in 1998 and 1997 respectively. Kyrgyzstan, having reached quite a high level of 2 scores in 1993, in the subsequent years went down to the score of 5, where it steadily remains together with Kazakhstan. Similarly to the political rights, in civil liberties Turkmenistan is the most “not free” country in the region, steadily receiving the score of 7 starting from 1994. The general tendency, again as in the sphere of political rights, is that of decline, i.e. no country achieved real progress in development of civil liberties in the ten years after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Graph 7 below shows the total average score on political rights and civil liberties for all the five Central Asian republics, allowing determination of their status in terms of freedom.

Graph 7. Status of freedom in Central Asia

Again, here we can clearly see the general tendency of “sliding down” (or sharp fall, as in case with Tajikistan) from the “partly free” into “not free” zone. As of 2001, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan are still balancing at the last mark of “partly free” zone, but if the pattern of movements remains the same, in the future Kyrgyzstan will inevitably find itself in the “not free” zone together with Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan.

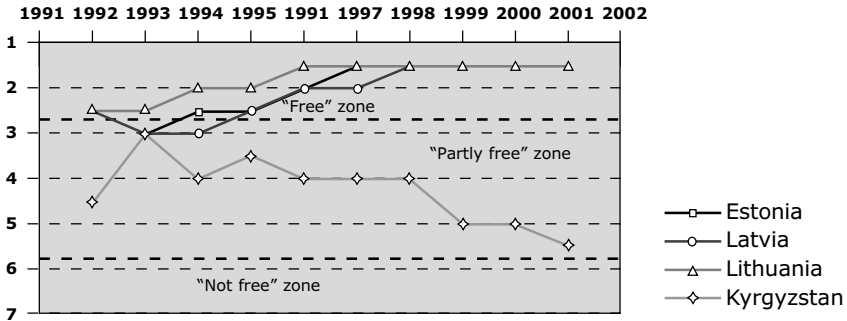
And still, the graph shows that after independence Kyrgyzstan earned quite a high mark and maintained it for seven years, which allowed it to define the country as an “island” of freedom and democracy in the region. Indeed, against the background of the other Central Asian republics, Kyrgyzstan had an obvious comparative advantage, which, although starting to decline, still by inertia presents Kyrgyzstan as a freer country. This is why the following statements have been made by many media experts, formulated during focus groups, interviews and personal conversations: “In Kyrgyzstan there is more freedom than in Uzbekistan or Tajikistan and Turkmenistan,” “Press in Kyrgyzstan has more freedom than in other Central Asian republics,” “Our system is more democratic if compared to our neighbors;” etc. This is explained by the fact, that these countries are located in the “closest consideration zone” and it is easier and more convenient to compare Kyrgyzstan with them.²⁸

On the whole, what is taking place is “convenient” in terms of the government substitution of notions. Instead of the diachronic relativity, the synchronous one is taken for the co-ordinates system, when we compare the evolution of democratic reforms not in the time perspective, but in comparison to other countries at each given moment of time. At the same time, the horizons of comparison are changing drastically. If earlier we “measured,” and oriented our democracy and freedom of expression with the Atlantic and continental school and achievements, at present we compare ourselves more and more with Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan. Obviously, if democratic movements are compared with the nearest country surroundings, the overall picture for Kyrgyzstan will look if not favorable, then in any case more successful.

²⁸ See also Section “Causes and Nature of Information Gaps in Kyrgyzstan.”

However, if another base for comparison is taken, the conclusions made will be different as well. For example, if we examine Freedom House’s assessment of freedom in the Baltic Republics, which also used to be a part of the Soviet Union (therefore, similarly not free till 1991), and compare their movement with the pattern for Kyrgyzstan, the chart will look as follows:

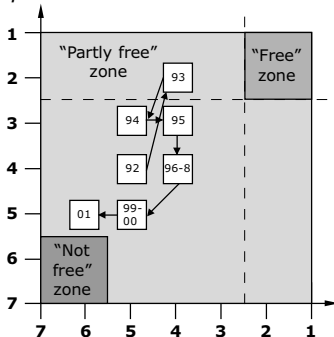
Graph 8. Status of freedom in the Baltic Republics and Kyrgyzstan



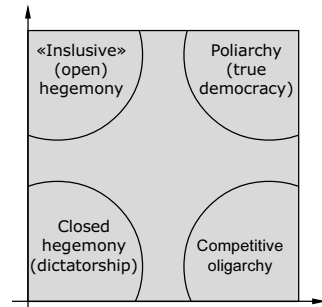
The trajectory of movement here is absolutely different – all Baltic Republics entered the “free” zone as early as in 1994-95 and kept in it steadily, reinforcing their positions, which is demonstrated by the movement up from a score of 2 to 1,5 in 1995-98. However, Kyrgyzstan, on the contrary, gradually loses its position, sliding down from a score of 3 in 1993 to 5,5 in 2001. It is obvious that such a comparison is absolutely unbeneficial for the Central Asian “island” of democracy and freedom.

For consideration of changes in the status of freedom in Kyrgyzstan in terms of democratic theory (see graph 10), it will be interesting to “match” the country’s movement with the theory of poliarchy, or true democracy, developed by a leading and influential political scientist Robert Dahl (Graph 10):²⁹

Graph 9. Kyrgyzstan’s movement in development of democracy during independence



Graph 10. Dahl’s Poliarchy Theory



²⁹ Dahl, Robert A. *Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition* (Yale University Press: 1971)

The graphs show that in 1993 Kyrgyzstan was at its all-time closest to poliarchy (4 on political rights and 2 on civil liberties), but then started to move first down and to the left (closer to open hegemony) in 1994, and then to the right and down, i.e. toward a competitive oligarchy, in 1995-98. Starting from 1998, the movement again changed its direction to the left, toward hegemony, and down. Any further movement down in the future (i.e. loss of positions on civil liberties at least by 0,5 points) will lead Kyrgyzstan into the "not free" zone, having turned it into a closed hegemony, or dictatorship.

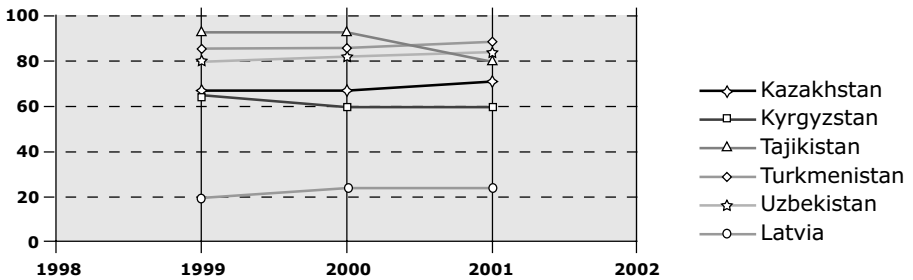
Since freedom of expression and freedom of mass media is a necessary precondition of democracy, it would be reasonable to present the data on freedom of media in Kyrgyzstan, both in the regional breakdown and individually. Below are the most influential and significant assessments of freedom of expression conducted in various years by both international and domestic organizations and experts.

3.3.2 External assessments of status of freedom of expression in Kyrgyzstan: Freedom House

Freedom House conducts separate studies of freedom of mass media (Press Freedom Survey) in all countries of the world. Assessing the status of press freedom in 2000, for example, Freedom House concludes, that the situation in the world on the whole improved compared to 1999 and the number of free countries reached 72 (38.5% of the countries or 21% of the whole world population) – the highest indicator for the last ten years. The number of countries where there is no press freedom, decreased to 62 (33.2% of the countries, or 36% of the world's population) – the smallest number from 1997. Mass media in 53 countries at present is partly free. (23.8%).

For Kyrgyzstan, the report gives the following evaluation: "the 1992 law on the mass media prohibits the disclosure of government and commercial secrets; promoting war, violence or ethnic intolerance; desecration of national norms, ethics, and symbols; pornography; and insulting the honor and dignity of a person. All media must be registered, and libel is a criminal offense. CPJ reported widespread intimidation of the media, including threats, tax audits, and lawsuits, prior to the October presidential elections. There are some 40 to 50 independent local and national newspapers and magazines. There are also independent television and radio broadcasts for several hours a day. The state's printing house, Uchkun, is the only newspaper publisher in the country. In 2000 it shut down three newspapers by refusing to print them."³⁰

Evaluations of press freedom conducted by Freedom House during the last three years (1999-2001) show that, like in the democratic transformation evaluations, Kyrgyzstan has an advantage compared to other countries of the Central Asian region:

Graph 11. Press freedom in Central Asia

As it is seen in the chart, all Central Asian countries are in the “not free” area (the score of 61 or higher), although Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan show the tendency of moving down, i.e. into the “partly free” zone (31-60 points). Kyrgyzstan is included in the first group of “not free” countries (i.e. the closest to the partly free countries), which also includes Kazakhstan. Again, for comparison the data for Latvia is provided, which is located in the “free” zone (0-30 points), although it lost several points (on the chart – movement upwards from 21 points in 1999 to 24 in 2000) after the country introduced responsibility for libel and incitement of ethnic hatred into the criminal legislation.

3.3.3 Other external assessments of media freedom in Kyrgyzstan

Up to the middle of the 90s, the assessments of press freedom in Kyrgyzstan by various international organizations were either mainly positive or optimistically restrained – this was generally in line with the campaign for creating an image of Kyrgyzstan as the “island of democracy” in Central Asia and corresponded to the policy of donor countries and organizations providing grants and credits for democratic transformation. Despite the single negative assessment of shutting down the newspapers “Svobodnye Gory” and “Politika” in 1994 (as a “diplomatic” response to these events in December 1994 OSCE organized in Bishkek a seminar on press freedom and freedom of association), on the whole the international society still had hopes for improvement of the situation with press freedom. The first truly alarmed assessments appeared in 1996 (in relation with the presidential elections that year and more frequent cases of pressure of authorities on media), especially as a protest to “rotation” of heads of government media.³¹ At the same time there appeared the first negative assessments of the general situation, not just responses to certain events. For example, in relation to the “rotation” of heads of the state media, the Russian Foundation for Protection of Glasnost sent an address to President Akaev where it was stated that “multiple facts of violation in the republic of laws regulating legal relations between journalists and government are the evidence that the democratic process in the republic has been stopped - if not begun to reverse».³²

³¹ For more details see, for example, the letter-protest of the organization “Reporteurs Sans Frontiers” in relation to the events in “Slovo Kyrgyzstana” newspaper addressed to President Akaev and published in newsletter “Media: Legislation and Practice” of the Kyrgyzstan’s Bureau on human rights and in compliance with the law, Issue 2, July 1996.

³² *Ibid.*

Against this background of prosecution, the newspapers "Asaba", and "Res Publica," starting from spring 1999, international evaluations of press freedom started to acquire a more critical character. In April 1999 Kyrgyzstan was visited by F. Duve, representative of the OSCE Bureau on media freedom, who emphasized that the situation with freedom of speech in the country reminded him of the situation in Saudi Arabia. He also stated that he had seen that in the republic "there are forces that put pressure on press freedom."³³

In May 1999, representatives of the International Helsinki Federation (IHF) expressed their concern about the media situation, emphasizing that the actions of A. Karypkulov, head of the state television and radio company, aimed at firing journalists, created an impression of restoration of strict censorship, and they evaluated as unlawful his actions against the newspaper "Res Publica" « The decision imposing a fine of more than 200,000 som on the newspaper threatens its closure», the IHF reported.³⁴

With the conflict in "Vecherny Bishkek" in the summer of 1999 and the subsequent measures to "curb" the media in the republic ahead of the parliamentary and presidential elections of 2000, external assessments of the status of press freedom became more and more critical. Following in chronological order are some examples of such assessments:

- *September 1999* – Russian Foundation for Protection of Glasnost sends an address to President Akaev, where a supposition was expressed that actions of the authorities in relation to the newspaper "Vecherny Bishkek" were, "a response inadequate to the scale of the conflict" to the publication of materials by opposition politicians.³⁵
- *December 1999* – the international organization "Human Rights Watch" publishes its annual report which says the following about Kyrgyzstan: «in its attempts to shut down those who think differently, the government continued its attacks on independent mass media and used such methods as forced intrusions, libel claims and tax inspections»³⁶ It gave numerous examples of each of the listed techniques.
- *February 2000* – head of the OSCE mission on monitoring elections Mark Stevens states that despite "some freedom of media in the Kyrgyz Republic" the authorities were exerting pressure on the media and an atmosphere of self-censorship was created during the parliamentary elections of 2000.³⁷
- *September 2000* – International pre-election delegation, organized by the National Democratic Institution of international relations (NDI), following its visit on September 4-8, 2000, publishes a report, where the following was

³³ Cited in Internews newsletter «Communication», Issue 14, May 1999.

³⁴ Ibid, Issue 15, May 1999.

³⁵ See Internews newsletter «Communication», Issue 24, September 1999.

³⁶ For more detail, see http://eurasia.org.ru/2000/news/03_30_03NEWS5_rus/htm or Human Rights Watch web-site.

³⁷ Press release of OSCE Elections Monitoring Mission of February 21, 2000.

said: «On the eve of the presidential elections in Kyrgyzstan, some independent media were involved in court hearings or found themselves under pressure from the state officials in response to articles containing election material. Several journalists reported pressure exerted upon them by officials, which took the form of either an order, or a prohibition to cover certain topics relating to elections. *Recommendation*: State officials should postpone the court hearings against journalists and media till the end of the elections and call upon the state media to comply with the requirements of the election laws on equal distribution of time and newspaper space among all candidates.»³⁸

- *November 2000* – Delegation of NDI international observers on elections of the Kyrgyz Republic's president on October 29, 2000 publishes a statement, where, among other things, the following was said: «The months preceding the presidential elections were marked by a significant decrease in the number of political statements in the print and electronic media. The pressure on the part of state bodies in relation to public and private media was significant [and] forced a number of television and radio companies to reject the broadcasting of political advertising of the opponents of the current President. The budget television, radio companies and press were extremely well-disposed to the current President and offered limited information on his opponents...»³⁹
- *November 2000* – the CPJ annual report «Attacks on Press in 1999» says the following about Kyrgyzstan: «In 1999, expensive civil suits on libel and bureaucratic pressure were applied to two weeklies – “Asaba” and “Res Publica” – and a daily “Vecherny Bishkek.” Local journalists believe that these suits were a part of the government's strategy to weaken media opposition before the parliamentary elections in February 2000.»⁴⁰
- *December 2000* – international organization Human Rights Watch publishes its annual report which says the following about Kyrgyzstan: «actions of President Askar Akaev in 2000 destroyed illusions about Kyrgyzstan as an “island of democracy” in a repressive region. During the parliamentary elections in February-March and Presidential elections on October 29 the government violated the rights of citizens. The impudence with which the Kyrgyz government persecuted Akaev's potential competitors in the elections shocked seasoned observers... Brave messages of independent mass media caused bursts of anger from the government, ... which resorted to Internet censorship, closing the site “Politika.kg” up to the presidential election on October 29».⁴¹
- *January 2001* – The OSCE organization issues its final report on the 2000 presidential election which, among other things, says: “A distinct feature of mass media is an overwhelming tendency by the government-controlled public

³⁸ See the statement of the NDI International Elections Delegation in Kyrgyzstan “Press freedom and media access,” <http://www.ndi.org/>

³⁹ See Statement of the delegation of International Observers for the presidential elections, <http://www.ndi.org/>

⁴⁰ Full text of the report in English is available on the CPJ web site: <http://www.cpj.org/attacks99/europe99/Kyrgyzstan.html>

⁴¹ Cited in Internews newsletter “Communication” (Issue 63, December 2000 ã.), by information of Radio Free Europe – Radio Liberty.

media and pro-government private media to show a blunt bias in favor of the current president. The opposition candidates, when mentioned, were pictured mostly negatively. The media owned by the government did not manage to fulfill its legal duty in ensuring the balanced and objective presentation of candidates. Starting with the parliamentary elections, persecution and harassment of private media ended with self-censorship and notable decrease in the number of media issues capable or willing to offer an independent or critical editorial line. In the message issued on October 30, the European Institute of Mass Media (EIMM) which monitored media coverage of the election campaign, expressed its serious concern "in relation to the future of freedom of expression and independence of mass media in Kyrgyzstan".⁴²

- *February 2001* – US State Department issues the report on international human rights in 2000. In the part on Kyrgyzstan, in the section "Freedom of speech and media" it stated that legislation provides freedom of speech and the media, however the state limits these rights and gave numerous cases of media persecution and limitation of freedom of speech.⁴³
- *March 2001* – Internews Kyrgyzstan publishes an address describing harassment of the media across the country and expressing concern about "attacks on freedom of speech and rights of journalists in the Kyrgyz Republic." The address contained a call to foreign representatives, international human rights organizations, Kyrgyz deputies and local NGOs to provide support to Kyrgyz journalists and to bring these issues to the attention of the highest level of the Kyrgyz government."⁴⁴
- *March 2001* – CPJ report «Attacks on Press in 2000» says about Kyrgyzstan: "Although Kyrgyzstan enjoyed a reputation of the country where more press freedom is provided than in other Central Asian countries, starting from the middle of 1990s such freedom was to reduced. In 2000, the pressure on independent press significantly increased, especially before the parliamentary and presidential elections. The CPJ mission visited Kyrgyzstan before the presidential election conducted on October 29, and noted wide-scale intimidation of independent journalists and media with the use of official threats, tax audits, law suits and very high fines."⁴⁵

The events of June-July 2001 around the decision of the Ministry of Justice to re-register all media⁴⁶ allowed many international organizations and experts to conclude, that this requirement was one more form of large-scale attack on the freedom of expression, which resulted in a "paralysis" of media development in the country.⁴⁷ On

⁴² The report is provided by OSCE office, Bishkek city, 139 Toktogula St.

⁴³ For full version in English, see <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rs/hrrpt/2000>

⁴⁴ For more details see Internews newsletter «Communication», Issue 70, March 2000.

⁴⁵ See report in English at <http://www.cpj.org/attacks00/europe00/Kyrgyzstan.html>

⁴⁶ See also Chapter "Media Registration" in Section "Legislative and legal environment for media activity in the Kyrgyz Republic."

⁴⁷ For more detail, see Chris Schuepp "Paralysis of Kyrgyz Media," Internews newsletter «Communication», Issue 83, July 2001.

the whole, starting from March 2001 and till present, concern and anxiety about the worsening situation with freedom of expression in Kyrgyzstan has been repeatedly expressed by such influential and established organizations as the Organization on Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), the World Association of Newspapers (WAN) and World Editors' Forum (WEF), the Committee for Protection of Journalists (CPJ), the US State Department, "Reporteurs Sans Frontiers," the Russian Foundation for Glasnost Protection, as well as other foreign democratic institutions. The main message of their statements is that particularly after the elections of 2000, the situation regarding freedom of expression and media in Kyrgyzstan has sharply worsened, which can threaten further democratic transformation in the country.

3.3.4 Internal assessments of press freedom in Kyrgyzstan

As for the assessment of media freedom in Kyrgyzstan by the domestic organizations, they have always been more realistic and less optimistic than the evaluations from outside. Among the organizations that constantly monitor the status of freedom in the republic, the following ones may be highlighted:

- *Kyrgyzstan's Bureau on Human Rights and Compliance with the law* headed by N.Ablova, a well-known human rights activist, who monitors the processes and events in the area of human rights. Starting from 1996, the Bureau issues a specialized newsletter "Media: Legislation and Practice" which is distributed among specialists and human rights activists of the republic, as well as placed on the Russian web-site "Law and mass media" of the Journalism Faculty of Moscow State University. The editors justified the necessity to issue this newsletter by the fact that freedom of expression takes a very important position among human rights and it was from 1996 that violations of and infringements upon the freedom of speech in Kyrgyzstan became more frequent. The quarterly newsletter provides the results of media monitoring and at the end of each year presents a cumulative report on freedom of press in the republic for the entire year. Violations of freedom of expression and media harassment are supported by facts that are classified into several categories: murders, arrests, attacks and threats to journalists; various forms of administrative, legal and economic pressure on media and their employees.
- Another active organization protecting the freedom of expression in Kyrgyzstan is the public *Foundation "Glasnost Protection,"* which from April 2001 has been headed by an opposition leader, M.Eshinkanov (before that, the foundation was directed by R.Prizhivoit, a "Vecherny Bishkek" journalist and one of the initiators of the newspaper "Moya Stolitsa"). The Foundation was established in October 1999 for the protection of glasnost and the rights of journalists and press. It monitors the status of press freedom and media situation by regions and maintains an extensive database on violations of freedom of expression and media. The foundation cooperates actively with various international

organisations, including those in neighbouring countries, working in the area of protection of media and journalists.

- Very active in the protection of the rights of media and journalists is *Public Union "Journalists"*, headed by the well-known publicist and lawyer K.Mambetaliev. One of the tasks of the association is to react immediately to the government's repressive actions in relation to media. It also brings to public attention violations of freedom of expression and organizes training programs (seminars, training courses, conferences, etc.) in this area.
- *The Coalition of NGOs, "For democracy and civil society"*, conducts monitoring of freedom of expression and media access during election campaigns and elections. In particular, by the results of monitoring of the last presidential elections, the Coalition prepared a report, which stated that "state mass media did not comply with the principles of unbiased coverage of the election campaign and provided the electorate with tone-sided information only about the current president. The government exerted pressure on the independent mass media and used various methods to force most of them to follow the policy of an information boycott of the opposition candidates' campaigns. Government interference with media activities during the elections took place on a national scale. In Kyrgyzstan, where freedom of press continues to depend on the state monopoly for printing and distribution, during elections the government in fact introduced censorship. Strict censorship also took place when campaign materials were placed on television."⁴⁸ It was the principles and steady position of the Coalitions' observers during the presidential and parliamentary elections in 2000, that most likely ignited the development of a draft law (submitted to the Parliament for consideration) on changes to the current Elections Code, one of which prohibits "international observers and civil NGOs receiving grants from foreign donors to comment on the processes of elections. Thus, the elections will turn from open and transparent into secret and private ones, the truth about which will never be known either in the wider world or by the population of the country."⁴⁹
- Particularly active in 2000-01 in evaluating media status and freedom became the *Bishkek office of the British organization, "Institute for War and Peace Reporting,"* headed by the former Minister of Education and chief editor of the newspaper "Politika", which was shut down in 1994, and later the executive director of Soros Foundation/Kyrgyzstan Chinara Jakypova. The office provides an opportunity for leading journalists of the republic to publish on its web-site analytical materials on the most urgent and acute problems of today's Kyrgyzstan that are connected, in one way or another, with the security of the state. Most of these articles cannot be published in the print media. Lately, publications on

⁴⁸ See Conclusion of the Coalition of NGOs, "For Democracy and Civil Society" on the elections of the President of the Kyrgyz Republic published on October 29, 2000.

⁴⁹ See article by R.Prizhvoit "Kill all birds with one stone" in the newspaper "Advokat" of August 4, 2001.

freedom of press and the media situation in Kyrgyzstan appear in the IWPR web newsletter more and more frequently.⁵⁰ The organization also sponsors various conferences and round tables on problems of the media and protection of journalists. At the initiative of the organization in 2001, a regional Central Asian association was established to protect the rights of journalists working under conditions of limited freedom of expression in the media.

On the whole, the analysis of reports on media freedom monitoring conducted by local organizations, as well as of their analytical materials, shows that most of the repressive actions taken by the government in relation to the media took place in 1999-2001. This reinforces the conclusion that in the last 2-3 years freedom of expression in the media has been purposefully limited. Although these conclusions in general coincide with the assessments of external observers, they are expressed in a more open and critical form, most likely because the local specialists have always been quite sceptical about the idea of Kyrgyzstan as "an island of democracy" and a "second Switzerland" in Central Asia.

⁵⁰ See, for example, articles by I.Grebenschikov "Media: Between engagement and information security" (May 2001) and "New repartition of the Kyrgyz market" (July 2001) at www.burana.by.ru