
THE POSSIBLE DEVELOPMENT OF MEDIA-HOLDINGS IN KIRGIZSTAN

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Some experts fear the development of media-holdings in Kirgizstan, which could appear like pure propaganda machines to the public, as it already happened during last year presidential elections.

In April 2001, Kazakhstan journalists warned their Kyrgyz fellow-journalists that the Kyrgyz media market might follow the same path than the Kazakh one. In April 2001 in Bishkek, during the journalists conference on "Caught in the crossfire: media, conflict and security laws", a Kazakh journalist, Mrs. Rozlana Taukina, stated: "The Process of Kazakhstan's independent mass media merger is accomplished by a media-holding headed by President Nazarbaev's daughter. In the process, in which the independent mass media "are devoured," the only to survive are collaborating with the powers. Those newspapers change owners and content and loose their popularity. Independent media are then replaced by some ersatz loyal to authorities." In Kyrgyzstan, the newspaper *Vecherny Bishkek* can be considered a vivid example of such "ersatz".

CREATING THE BASES FOR A MEDIA-HOLDING

The appearance of media-holding in the country was for the first time publicly addressed in Bishkek in July 2001 during the conference on "The Press of Kyrgyzstan in the New Century". In the opinion of the known journalist, Mr. Alexander Knyazev, a basis for the emerging media-monopoly may be the newspaper *Vecherny Bishkek*, and the TV-broadcasting companies *KOORT* and *Ala-TV*. Journalists of those media are convinced that their true owner is in fact the Kazakhstan businessman Adil Toigonbaev, son-in-law of Askar Akaev, the Kyrgyz President. Even if he does not own personally any shares in those companies, he would nevertheless control them through some front men. The process of the Kyrgyz media-market re-sharing was launched two years ago with the loss of independence of the newspaper *Vecherny Bishkek* belonging to the OJSC Publishing House *Vecherny Bishkek*. Put under pressure by financial controls, and accused of tax laws infringements, the OJSC management was forced to redistribute its shares. The change of the journalists' financial share entailed a change of the newspaper's political orientation. The Member of Parliament and former journalist Mr. Adakham Madumarov, confirms: "Before that, *Vecherny Bishkek* was completely different. Now its information policy is more pro-governmental. Behind the editorial board, there is clearly a new owner – it is the President's family. Not a single information can be published in the newspaper without their consent." However, after this change of ownership, and despite a drop of quality in its content, *Vecherny Bishkek*, nevertheless still remains the most important Kyrgyz newspaper, coming out five times a week with a circulation of 80,000 copies. This successful experience with *Vecherny Bishkek* encouraged the "family" to repeat the trick with another popular opposition Kyrgyz language newspaper, *Asaba*. "During two months 'the White House' (the House of Government, ed.) has been negotiating with me," former *Asaba* Chief Editor, Melis Eshimkanov, told. "They asked me to relinquish my share in the newspaper, and I think it was done in favour of the "family". However, I made clear to them that there would be no difference for me in giving up my shares or closing the newspaper. As a result, the newspaper went

bankrupt. Now the power is preparing to issue a new *Asaba* under the aegis of the Government. However, people won't be deceived. They understood what happened with *Vecherny Bishkek*, therefore the new *Asaba* has no chance of being of any profit."

WHETHER THERE ARE INDEPENDENT MASS MEDIAS?

In the opinion of various analysts, those political moves to control media do presently contribute in destroying the trust of the readers in journalism and independence of the press. To illustrate that process, many mention the use of what they call "dirty political techniques" in the *Vecherny Bishkek's* pages during the President Akaev's election PR-campaign in 2000. The newspaper conducted then an obviously pro-Akaev coverage of the campaign, with the help, as it is largely believed, of some specialists in public relations. In an interview with an IWPR's (Institute for War & Peace Report) correspondent, the former executive editor, Rina Prizhivoit confessed: "For the newspaper, it was an infamous campaign that has buried the trust of the readers." Such events do raise in a spectacular way the question of mass media independence in Kyrgyzstan, which has been long questioned, and not only by experts. "Can any edition really be independent?" asks the Head of the World Cultures and Religions of the Slavic university and former journalist, Alexander Alyanchikov. "If we consider a private newspaper, then we have to speak honestly: this mass media is a private property and belongs to Mr. so-and-so. Then we shall know the holder of the mass media, and whose position the given mass media reflects. However, I consider the mass media privatisation a dangerous process. Everything that is presently happening in the information sphere favours not the state, but individual governmental officers. We can easily distinguish them, as the republic is rather small and everything is in sight." Many experts and journalists are convinced that a particular group of person or a clan stands behind each newspaper and TV-channel in Kyrgyzstan. Despite the label "independent" there is a comprehensive mass media political engagement. Until recently, in the republic there were no media-magnates, but numerous attempts by the power to take this role. Now newspapers and TV-channels having no high-rank patrons are doomed to die. However it is indicative that, having political support of the powers, the new pro-governmental editions have little chances to become popular and profitable. This is because the high-rank officers, mass media holders, try to use them, first of all, as the tool of struggle with competitors and advance of their interests in the powers. The "independent" newspaper *My i vremya* ('We and the Time') launched by the powers in March, 1999 did not survive more than half a year. Readers simply ignored it. Owner of the newspaper is Mr. Misir Ashirkulov, the Security Council Secretary, who tried to reanimate the newspaper, using his position to impose obligatory purchase by the regional governors. The attempt of some officials from the Akaev's Administration to start a "centrist" *Liberalnaya gazeta* in June 2000 also resulted in no success. The newspaper's owner, Mr. Askar Aitmatov, also holds the office of the Head of the International Policy Department under the President's Administration. With its very limited coverage of different events and opinions, the newspaper could also survive only six months. According to some observers, the two newspapers which used to print President Akaev's portrait on their front-page had to steadily reduce their circulation after a short period of time, and, being unprofitable, eventually died.

MEDIA-HOLDING MEANS MONOPOLY...

Nowadays, the mass media market in Kyrgyzstan is developing not only in accordance with the principle of protectorate and search of the 'roof' in the powers, but rather by means of absorption of successfully existing media by the emerging media-holding. "The holding is a monopoly, but whose?" – asks Alexander Alyanchikov. "Who is behind the newspaper *Vecherny Bishkek*? This is Adil Toigonbaev. We know, whose son-in-law is Adil Toigonbaev. Therefore, if *Vecherny Bishkek*

undertakes any investigation, we know, whose 'investigation' it is and whose interests it pursues. However, we should recognise that, despite the change of political orientation, *Vecherny Bishkek* still has the highest circulation in the republic." In opinion of the Chairman of Committee for Information Policy of the Legislative Assembly and former journalist, Mr. Kabai Karabekov, "Media-holdings reflect the information point of view of their owners and lobby their economic and political interests in the information market. Media-holdings never take a centrist position. However, if a holding is formed by independent media, it could be a protection against the wheels of state. But at the moment I do not see such prospects." Parallel to the pressure exerted from power, the attitude of the private media themselves contribute in maintaining their influence at an insignificant level. Even the relatively independent newspapers easily enter into polemic with each other. Chief Editors of non-governmental newspapers are always under the burden of unfriendly personal relations to each other and are involved in inter-newspaper squabbles. As if an eternal opponent complex was forcing the 'free' newspapers to wage simultaneous information wars against each other and against the powers on and without any occasion. The impression of western observers of the post-Soviet journalism in Kyrgyzstan is adverse as well. "People do not trust neither the power, nor mass media," Alen Davis, English journalist, commented. "Mass media is engaged in policy, when it should be outside of it. It is either 'for,' or 'against' the power and, thereby, participates in conflicts. As a result people do not receive objective information." The Kyrgyz experts are not sure, in what measure a monopoly media-holding having no real competitors and serving an information policy which would depend on commercial and ideological interests would still preserve some kind of pluralism. The Kazakhstan experience and the political situation in Kyrgyzstan suggest that this media-monopoly would become if not a mass media misinforming the population, then a media for suggestion of power orientated interpretation of occurring events. Kyrgyzstan's specificity is such that more and more fragments of media-business are transferred to Adil Toigonbaev, who acts under the protection of his father-in-law, President Akaev. Therefore, the information policy of mass media belonging to him can not contradict the interests of the powers.