

Statement on the Media Situation in the Kyrgyz Republic

International media development, freedom of expression, democracy and Human Rights organisations note the historic opportunity for building a strong and vibrant media environment in the Kyrgyz Republic, whilst also expressing concerns about the unstable situation for journalists and media outlets.

Members of the international media development, freedom of expression, democracy and Human Rights community (as listed at the end of this statement) have expressed their concern about press freedoms in the Kyrgyz Republic, and the need to ensure that all media, including print, broadcast and online outlets, are not restricted in providing coverage of events in the country.

Over the last three years, the situation for the media has steadily worsened, characterised by censorship, blocking of websites, forced take-overs of media outlets, and legal and physical threats against journalists, including the murders of Kyrgyz journalists, Alisher Saipov in October 2007 and Gennady Pavlyuk in December 2009, as well as Kazakh journalist Sayat Shulembaev in December 2009, who had been reporting on the murder of Pavlyuk for a Kyrgyz media.

Since the events of 6-7 April, the Interim Government has taken a number of positive steps, including:

1. The re-starting of broadcasts of the Kyrgyz services of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty on state radio;
2. The appointment of journalists who are known to be qualified and independent to the management of NTRK (KTR) state television and radio;
3. Taking serious steps to investigate the attempted take-over of www.24.kg and publicly recognising the illegality of this attemptⁱ;
4. Removing arrest orders on newspapers that were closed in March based on libel charges against the former Presidentⁱⁱ.

However, despite these positive steps, several negative occurrences have also taken place. Amongst others, these have included:

1. Takeover attempts, like the effort to take control of the online media, www.24.kg, on 15 April by armed National Security Council (SNB) representatives;
2. Announcements of nationalisation plans of privately owned media, including Channel 5 and Piramidaⁱⁱⁱ;
3. Journalists and their defenders receiving threatening phone calls about the publication of articles criticizing the Interim Government;
4. Access to information being limited for journalists, particularly in the regions^{iv};
5. Lack of transparency and information about decision making of the Interim Government^v.

The concern remains that these 'positive' steps are primarily aimed against the control of the media by the former Government, whilst the 'negative' steps, as described above, are aimed at consolidating control by the Interim Government. To demonstrate

the Interim Governments commitment to a strong press freedom environment, the undersigned organisations urge the authorities to:

1. Ensure that the independence, freedom and safety of all journalists and media outlets are respected, and any violations of press freedoms are investigated quickly and transparently, including independent investigations into all attacks and murders and ensuring an end to impunity;
2. Where mechanisms for ensuring freedom of expression and press freedoms already exist under national Kyrgyz legislation in accordance with international standards, to ensure their swift and proper implementation, such as the 2006 Right to Information law;
3. Ensure that the new Constitution enshrines freedom of expression, press freedoms and the right to information;
4. Pledge support for the democratic changes in media-related legislation to be put to the new Parliament, including the abolishment of criminal liability for defamation and insult of public officials; provision of democratic status for public service broadcasting and for an independence licensing body; abolishment of premissory registration of print media; abolishment of media restrictions in the 2005 statute 'On Counteraction to Extremist Activity'; provision of uniform economic support to the mass media; and abolishment of restrictions on the language of the mass media;
5. Establish and publicise clear procedures for the timely, transparent and equal provision of information from the authorities to all media;
6. Move forward and transform state TV and radio broadcaster TRK into a public broadcaster allowing for pluralistic and independent coverage of news and information;
7. Where media outlets have been nationalized, open and fair judicial processes should be undertaken to determine the legitimacy of these steps, followed by a swift process of returning ownership or undertaking a transparent de-politicized tender to put the media into private sector hands;
8. Recognise and respect the important role an independent and unobstructed media will play in ensuring that the Parliamentary elections scheduled for 10 October 2010 is free and fair.

In addition, the undersigned organisations express their concern that the proposed date for the referendum on the new Constitution, scheduled for 27 June 2010, allows insufficient time for the extensive public consultation and discussion that such a fundamental document requires.

Following up on this statement, a number of the undersigned organisations will be producing a report providing further details and analysis on the media situation in the Kyrgyz Republic, including recommendations for actions. It is foreseen that this report will be published in the coming fortnight.

For further information about this statement, please contact any of the organisations listed below. To contact International Media Support, please write or call Lotte Dahlman: ld@i-m-s.dk / +45 88 32 70 00

The international media development, freedom of expression, democracy and Human Rights organisations joining this statement are:

1. ARTICLE 19
2. BTC ProMedia - Bulgaria
3. Centre for Law and Democracy (CLD)
4. Civil Rights Defenders (CRD)
5. Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ)
6. Finnish Foundation for Media and Development (VIKES)
7. Fojo Media Institute
8. Freedom House
9. Hivos
10. Institute for War and Peace Reporting (IWPR)
11. International Federation of Journalists (IFJ)
12. International Media Support (IMS)
13. International News Safety Institute (INSI)
14. International Press Institute (IPI)
15. Internews Europe
16. Internews Network
17. IREX
18. IREX Europe
19. Press Now
20. Reporters sans frontières (RSF)
21. Springboard - Sweden
22. United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)
23. World Association of Community Radio Broadcasters (AMARC) - Regional Office in Kathmandu
24. World Association of Newspapers and News Publishers (WAN-IFRA)
25. World Press Freedom Committee (WPFC)

Endnotes

ⁱ As the Deputy Chairman of the Cabinet of Ministers, Azimbek Beknazarov, stated in an interview on 19 April, "On behalf of the interim government of Kyrgyzstan I make sincere apologies to the news agency 24.kg for illegal actions of secret service employees"

ⁱⁱ These newspapers include "Nazar" («Назар») and "Achyk Sayasat" («Ачык Саясат»).

ⁱⁱⁱ In an interview on 16 April, the head of the Secretariat of the Interim Government, Edil Baisalov, stated that the Interim Government had taken control of Channel 5 and Piramida, and that all companies belonging to the former Presidents family will be nationalised. These takeovers have prompted the NTS television station (based in Bishkek) to ask for assistance from media NGOs and international community to prevent similar action being taken against them.

^{iv} Especially worrying is the decision of 15 April by the Coordination Committee of the Interim Government in Osh to censor all media in the oblast, requiring prior approval by the Committee of Information about unsanctioned meetings, political news and the views of certain persons. Concerns connected to reporting, even if considered biased, must be handled in a manner respecting press freedoms.

^v An example of the lack of transparency and information about decision includes the late publication of adopted decrees, changes in the decrees and confusion about the correct versions (e.g. Decree No 1 is available in at least 2 versions)