IWPR Presents Studies on Media and Civil Society Issues in Central Asia

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Experts emphasise the need for close cooperation between media and non-governmental sector for effective resolution of social problems.

[**На русском**](https://cabar.asia/ru/iwpr-prezentoval-issledovaniya-o-problemah-smi-i-grazhdanskogo-obshhestva-tsentralnoj-azii/)

This February and March researchers surveyed 251 journalists and 235 representatives of civil society organisations from the four countries in the region, and held in-depth interviews with 35 representatives of media outlets. The research was held in the framework of two studies: “The status of media and the role of social media in CA states” and “The situation of the civil society in CA states”. The third research was dedicated to the representation of Central Asia, Caucasus, Ukraine and Moldova in the media of Kyrgyzstan in 2017.

*Abakhon Sultonazarov. Photo: CABAR.asia*

According to the IWPR’s regional director for Central Asia **Abakhon Sultonazarov**, the media and civil society in the region undergo constant changes, accumulate positive and negative experiences, have outstanding problems.

“IWPR has carried out three researches to gain an insight into what happens in the media and civil society in Kazakstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan.  It was a hard and time-consuming work. Unfortunately, we have failed to carry out the research in Turkmenistan for reasons beyond our control,” Abakhon Sultonazarov said at the presentation.

The research was developed within the framework of Giving Voice, Driving Change – from the Borderland to the Steppes Project with the financial support of the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Its purpose was to analyse the development of media and NGOs in the four countries: how they adapt to new changes in communication technology, how the agenda is being developed, the importance of their role and efficiency of their performance, and also how they cooperate with each other.

*Photo: CABAR.asia*

As part of content analysis of the media of Kyrgyzstan in 2017, 2,886 news reports were collected from 14 media outlets both private and governmental. According to its results, the media space of Kyrgyzstan is rather limited. The agenda contains topics that refer only to border neighbouring countries and to the official cooperation between the republic and other countries in the framework of international unions.

However, the tone of materials differs based on the form of ownership. Governmental media cover international agenda positively, while private media stay neutral or negative.

Download “The status of media and the role of social media in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan” ([**ENG**](http://cabar.asia/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Status_of_media.pdf)**/**[**RUS**](http://cabar.asia/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Sostoyanie_SMI.pdf))

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**Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan: similarities and differences in media sphere**

**Elira Turdubaeva**, Associate Professor of Journalism and Mass Communications Department at AUCA, who has carried out studies in Kyrgyzstan, said that all four countries have similar characteristics. For example, the agenda in the media of all republics is formed mainly from press releases. As for the fact checking, journalists check information from public authorities, people and publications in other media. However, there are slight differences.

“In Kyrgyzstan, Facebook is not a source of information because it provides too much information, a part of which can be unreliable. Strangely enough, in Uzbekistan journalists choose news topics mainly from Telegram and Facebook, but despite the digitisation, people remain the main sources of information and fact checking for media,” said Turdubaeva.

*Nargis Kosimova. Photo: CABAR.asia*

However, the situation of social media can be explained by the fact that all governmental and non-governmental organisations of Uzbekistan have their own accounts on Facebook as ordered by the Uzbek government, as the author of research **Nargis Kosimova**, Associate Professor of the Department of International Journalism and Mass Communication, Faculty of International Journalism, Uzbek State University of World Languages, explained.

The media in regional states has no wide influence; its impact is restricted to particular communities, while in Uzbekistan it’s restricted to a household level.

“Public bodies often don’t respond to the criticism in media, although sometimes they publish very critical reports. Members of parliament are also aware of this fact. However, the civil sector is more active; media is under pressure, but not to a 100 per cent. The main problem is self-censorship.  We don’t have violence, I haven’t heard about it, yet journalists are afraid of open criticism,” Kosimova said.

As for Kazakstan, researchers said that even if journalists carry out investigations, they cannot publish them. So they mainly cover social topics, not political.

“Journalists see the purpose of media in covering events for a large audience. Central Asian media outlets don’t want to be the opponents of the government, so no one has specified this function. Besides, only journalists from Kyrgyzstan have not stated the state intervention in the media and self-censorship as the main barrier to their activities,” said **Meerim Shamudinova**, IWPR Central Asia Programme Manager.

*Photo: CABAR.asia*

“The results of the research, in my opinion, would be interesting for both civil sector and media outlets, including communicators because they contain interesting recommendations, findings about the current agenda in media, whether some tools are effective or not. Since it was a regional study, I would also like to see the tendencies in other countries.  Then we would gain the insight into the actual topics for Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Kazakstan,” said **Tynymgul Eshieva**, director of Soros Foundation Kyrgyzstan’s Media Development Programme.

**Role of civil society**

Non-governmental organisations of Uzbekistan and Tajikistan see their main function as the development of patriotism and support of national policy, the research found. Kyrgyzstan and Kazakstan have the integral development of society. Moreover, non-governmental organisations of Kazakstan are more open to online interaction, but the quality of information is a problem.

In Tajikistan, the civil sector and media prefer to collaborate with local government bodies, while in other countries they prefer to collaborate with narrowly-specialised experts.

*Lola Olimova. Photo: CABAR.asia*

“Journalists collaborate with experienced experts in local government bodies because they think they are more competent in some issues. It mainly concerns regions because they lack experts. NGOs collaborate with state bodies because they are not allowed to do anything without their approval,” said **Lola Olimova**, IWPR Tajikistan Programme Manager.

NGOs in Central Asia have called the insufficient financial resources as a main barrier. Besides, Kazakstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan have been noted for rigid legal regulation that influences their activities. The civil sector of Kazakstan and Uzbekistan has said about the state intervention in their activities. In Kyrgyzstan, reduction of public confidence has been called a main barrier, but Tajik NGOs and human rights organisations have called physical threats as a main barrier.

Moreover, if in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakstan the civil sector collaborates with journalists, in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan media and NGOs have reciprocal claims. The civil sector has said that journalists have created a negative image of grant-eaters for it, while media representatives have complained that information provided by non-governmental organisations is not interesting and doesn’t contain full expert opinion, Lola Olimova said.

*Photo: CABAR.asia*

“However, representatives of NGOs said that collaboration with the media leads to good results. There are certainly ways to resolve reciprocal claims. They need to build good communication relations between each other, invite journalists. Representatives of NGOs should speak not only of their projects, but also about the results, impact of their projects on people’s lives,” Olimova emphasised.

“The results of the research were expected, yet they confirmed many guesses about the collaboration between NGOs and media: in many countries they do not collaborate, or collaborate at the improper level. Moreover, this research can be used in practice because it contains recommendations on how civil sector and the media should work together, how to improve their relations,” **Aigerim Chalbaeva**, research officer of NISS, said.

*Elira Turdubaeva. Photo: CABAR.asia*

Experts have developed recommendations both for media outlets, and for civil society organisations, including communications with each other, diversification of sources of information for news reports, development of investigative journalism, decrease of self-censorship, active participation in debates on corruption and promotion of public discussion. A list of recommendations for governments of each country has been developed as well.

“We recommend that the government should be transparent, responsible, open, publish all information on their websites, including incomes of office holders and budget allocations of state agencies. In other words, they should provide access to information to people and journalists and always quickly respond to journalists’ requests. If the authorities are not transparent, they will always cause doubts and questions,” Elira Turdubaeva said.

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