

# MASS MEDIA IN POST-SOVIET KYRGYZSTAN AND KAZAKHSTAN: THE VIEW FROM BELOW

*An NCEEER Working Paper by*

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## **Executive Summary**

In this paper we draw on original, nationally representative public opinion surveys conducted in 2012 in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan to describe patterns of media consumption in the two countries. We aim to shed light on two basic questions: (1) “Where do people go for information?” and (2) “Which sources of information are the most/least trusted?” We compare and contrast the results from two societies with drastically different post-Soviet economic and political trajectories.

## **I. The Media as Political Intermediary: Potential and Constraints**

For most people, mass media serve as the primary means for experiencing and interpreting the increasingly complex world around us. This is particularly true of the political world, since rarely do we have direct access to the leaders or defining moments of our time, even at the local level. More often than not, it is via the mass media writ large—through television, the internet, radio, print media, and social media—that we have an opportunity to “get to know” government officials, “walk” the corridors of power, and “take part” in major political events. While the media’s role in maintaining or usurping political power has been widely debated, one thing seems clear: For ordinary citizens, the media serve as a necessary linkage to otherwise remote political elites, parties, and the broader political system of which we are a part. In fact, the media have been described not only as *intermediaries* filtering cues up and down and back and forth along the chain of public opinion (Ansolabehere, Behr, and Iyengar 1992; Beck 1991; Beck et al., 2002; Bennett and Entman 2001; Iyengar and Kinder 1987; McCombs and Shaw 1972; Patterson 1980; Wong and McDonough 2001), but also as self-interested political *actors* in their own right, complete with goals, biases, and policy preferences (Bennett 1996; Curran 2002; Page 1996; Robinson and Sheehan 1983; Rubin 1981; Shaw 1967).

Underlying most studies linking the mass media, societal preferences, and political outcomes is the assumption that media, irrespective of regime type, can and should contribute to—if not ensure—quality governance, government accountability, and policy responsiveness. For some scholars, the future of established democracies is at stake; without an independent media acting as watchdog and channeling preferences from

citizens to government and back again, liberal democracies cannot properly function (Burstein 2003; Caplan 2007; Curran 2002; Howard 2010; McChesney 1999; Shapiro 2011). For others, the central concern is not the health of existing democracies, but the potential democratization of as-of-yet-closed societies, as well as the factors that hinder its emergence (Dyczok 2006; Loveless 2010; McGlinchey and Johnson 2007; Pearce and Kendzior 2012). In both cases, as Shafer and Freedman (2009) point out, the media can only carry out their prescribed functions under particular conditions. In their words:

The existence of [media] freedom is essential for the dissemination of news, information, and varying viewpoints and perspectives on events and ... policy to the public, Predictability of the degree of [media] freedom is important for human rights and [media] rights advocates as they shape strategies to soften or overcome governmental constraints... (866).

Whereas research on the link between media freedoms and governance issues in the advanced industrial world (and especially the United States) can be traced as far back as the immediate post-WWII era (Klapper 1948), research on the media's place in nondemocratic regimes has gained prominence only over the past two decades. A major impetus for the initial shift in geographic scope was, understandably, the collapse of the Soviet Union and the subsequent "transition" to a "normal" (i.e., democratic and capitalist) society, as based on expectations among prominent Western scholars and policymakers of the region's eventual political and economic liberalization (Diamond 1992). Pioneering works closely detailing the relative strengths and weaknesses of post-Soviet and post-communist media include Androunas (1993), Benn (1996), Brown (1995), Foster (1996), Loś (1995), Rogerson (1997), Sajo (1995), and Wilson (1995). Thereafter, it took another decade or so for studies on the mass media-political nexus to

gain momentum, as researchers sought to explain the diffusion of democratic ideas and protest repertoires that were part of the Colored Revolutions in Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan in the early-to-mid-2000s. These were then followed by a third wave of studies documenting the official and *de facto* clamp-down on media by authoritarian leaders in response to threats from political challengers (deSmaele 2007; Gelbach 2010; Junisbai 2010; Kendzior 2010; Oates 2007; Ryabinskaya 2014; White and McAllister 2014; Yablokov 2014).

As this overview suggests, much of the existing literature acknowledges the *potential* of media actors in fulfilling their democratic function (Kulikova and Perlmutter 2007; McGlinchey and Johnson 2007; Wilkinson and Jetpysbayeva 2012). At the same time, scholars realistically assess the significant *limitations* that persist on the ground (Allison 2006; Becker 2004; Gross and Kenney 2008; Kenny and Gross 2008; Shafer and Freedman 2009; Tussupova 2010). Collectively, such studies recount the ongoing struggle of post-Soviet media operating within a difficult—and sometimes impossible—political, economic, and social landscape. Scholars do so from the perspectives of a wide range of actors, including that of Western practitioners and educators, independent journalists, post-Soviet and Western human rights activists, international organizations, and donor organizations.

While certainly a valuable contribution to our understanding of the resilience of nondemocratic regimes and their prospects for political change, it is curious that very few studies to date, if any, raise basic questions about media use from the ground up—that is, from the consumers' point of view. In fact, we know very little about how ordinary people—as opposed to experts and practitioners—utilize and assess the information

resources and media options that are available to them. To address this gap, we draw on original, nationally representative public opinion surveys conducted in 2012 in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, two “soft” post-Soviet authoritarian regimes (Schatz 2009). Using data from the surveys, we compare and contrast patterns of media consumption and the reported level of trust associated with each type of media in the two societies.

Responses to widely used and pre-tested questions about media consumption provide a rare glimpse into the kinds of media that are commonly used, what sources people trust, and patterns of relative use (i.e., comparing Internet, television, and print sources). In addition, this study compares results across the two countries; although neither can be considered a liberal democracy and both share important Soviet and pre-Soviet sociopolitical histories, differences in their post-Soviet trajectories, it turns out, matter a great deal. In particular, variation in overarching economic and political structure differentially patterns of media use. These results indicate that recent history and current contexts have a strong impact on individual perceptions and decision-making and that these, in turn, translate into clear behavioral patterns in the aggregate.

## **II. A Post-Soviet Media Landscape: The Two Country Contexts Compared**

Despite their shared Soviet past, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan have since independence followed divergent economic and political trajectories. This is in large part the result of very different natural resource endowments: Whereas Kyrgyzstan’s small, mountainous territory contains few resources for export and trade (apart from gold and hydroelectric power), Kazakhstan is well-known for its oil, natural gas, and mineral resources, the revenues from which distinguish it as an economic powerhouse among the former Soviet republics. According to the World Bank, in 2013 Kyrgyzstan’s per capita

GDP was \$1263.45. That same year, Kazakhstanis on average earned more than ten times that figure, with a per capita GDP of \$13,171.81. To characterize the two countries within a regional context, Kyrgyzstan finds itself among the poorest of the post-Soviet states, along with Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, while Kazakhstan's earnings place it among the wealthiest countries in Eurasia, following the Baltic states and Russia (see Figure 1). The contrast between the two could not be greater, for, from a purely economic standpoint, Kyrgyzstan appears to have "lost" in the transition from Soviet rule, and Kazakhstan appears to have "won"--even when severe economic inequality in the latter is taken into account.

If we shift our focus to the political context, however, the image of Kazakhstan's success becomes less clear-cut. Thanks to high oil and gas prices, the Kazakh government and long-standing president, Nursultan Nazarbaev, have managed to weather--without inciting widespread public outrage--intermittent periods of political crisis, inter-ethnic clashes, public protest, and state-sponsored repression (Junisbai 2010b; Kilner 2011; Kucera 2011; Lillis 2006; Lillis 2011; Roberts 2006; Tussupova 2010). The government's longevity appears to be the result of a combination of selective coercion and the general legitimacy it enjoys (Weber 1947). Public legitimacy is constructed via tightly controlled media and few independent or opposition outlets (Demitrye 2013; Freedom House 2014a), but also through relatively high rates of elite cohesion, which create an image of intra-elite stability and presidential strength (Hale 2005; Isaacs 2011; Junisbai 2010a), increased investment in the public sector, and massive government-sponsored construction projects, especially in the capital, Astana.



In sharp contrast to the staying power of the Nazarbaev regime, politics in Kyrgyzstan have been punctuated by high levels of intra-elite contestation, public protest, and political violence, including ethnic violence (Cummings 2012; McGlinchey 2011; Radnitz 2010; Reeves 2010). The country's first two presidents both fled after having alienated the domestic political and business elite and after having angered the masses as a result of rising prices, declining standards of living, and extensive political corruption. High levels of political competition following the demise of second president Kurmanbek Bakiev led to the creation of a qualitatively different political regime through the introduction of a presidential-parliamentary system. Freedom House (2014b) has since labeled Kyrgyzstan "the most dynamic political system in post-Soviet Central Asia," despite lingering issues, such as "endemic institutional weaknesses of national and local government agencies, the unreformed judicial sector, and the intermittent rule of law."

Naturally, these differences in the political climate are reflected in the two countries' media environments. While the overarching context remains nondemocratic in both, throughout the past two decades it is clear that Kyrgyzstan's media has--with a few exceptions--enjoyed greater freedom and played a larger role in political life in comparison to the media in Kazakhstan. The relatively better-off situation in Kyrgyzstan for the media becomes clear if we look at trends of over time. Table 1 summarizes the results of Reporters Without Borders's Media Freedom Index for both countries since 2002, when the index was initiated. The average score for Kyrgyzstan is about 15 points lower than that for Kazakhstan; this signifies that although neither can be considered to

have a “free” media, the situation facing the Kyrgyzstani media is relatively closer to the ideal than that facing their Kazakhstani counterparts.

-- Insert Table 1 about here. --

Moreover, if we look at how sustainable independent media is as a business model, a similar trend is evident (Table 2). Although there have been serious concerns about the media’s long-term sustainability in both countries, Kyrgyzstan’s average score during the period covered indicates that the media has over time consistently been closer to “near sustainability” than the media in Kazakhstan. There have been undeniable constraints on Kyrgyz media freedom, but these take place alongside some progress toward “free-press advocacy [and] increased professionalism” (IREX 2014). In fact, if we compare Kyrgyzstan’s 2001 and 2014 scores, the media’s notable progress in a little over a decade is undeniable: In 2001, media was characterized as at the beginning stages of “unsustained, mixed system,” but by 2014, the media as a whole had reached “near sustainability.” For the same years, Kazakhstan’s scores have fluctuated, but nonetheless remain within the “unsustainable, mixed system” category, indicating little substantive change over time. It is only by understanding these overarching economic, political, and media contexts that we can understand citizens’ media consumption and preferences. Before turning to our findings, however, we first describe the research design and methodology behind the study.

-- Insert Table 2 about here. --

### **III. Methodology**

#### *Data*

In fall 2012, the authors organized and oversaw nationally representative public opinion surveys in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan. The questionnaire covers a broad range of socio-political and economic topics; thus, in addition to our interest in media consumption, we incorporated questions of theoretical import in sociology, political science, and area studies. These include questions that tap into citizens' democratic (and "authoritarian") attitudes, perceptions of social and economic inequality, ideas about the role of government in the economy, attitudes toward religion and the role of religion in government, trust in institutions, and inter-generational social mobility. Notably, all questions were drawn from widely known and well-established surveys, including the International Social Justice Project (ISJP), the International Social Survey Program (ISSP),<sup>1</sup> the World Values Survey, and Afrobarometer. The use of pre-tested and commonly used questions was an intentional component of the study's design, as it both helps ensure reliable and valid measurement and enables theoretically intriguing comparisons of data collected in Central Asia to that collected elsewhere. Details of the research design and respondent selection follow below.

It is important to note that efforts to organize nationally representative surveys in Central Asia must overcome formidable obstacles. Telephone-based surveys are not feasible because telephone coverage in most rural areas is scarce. As a result, face-to-face interviews must be conducted. However, the existing lists of residents, such as voter lists and address books, are outdated and incomplete. Thus, a sample of households, rather

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<sup>1</sup> Along with his keen encouragement, Dr. David Mason, who directed the ISJP effort in 13 countries during the 1990s, generously provided us with the English and Russian language questionnaires.

than a sample of individuals, is normally used. Yet, a comprehensive national list of households is not available in either country. Due to these constraints, the most widely used method for obtaining nationally representative data in both countries is a multistage stratified probability sample of households. This is the method utilized in the current study.

The first stage involved selection of cities, towns and villages from the existing list of settlements available from the State Statistical Agencies (*Goskomstat*) of both countries. To make the selection, all settlements were first classified into groups (strata) defined by region and population size. Both Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan are typically divided into five geographic regions: north, west, south, east and central. Within each region, all settlements are classified into large urban (*oblast* capitals), other urban (other towns), and rural. This means that each one of the five regions is further divided into three sub-strata. Within each region, a number of settlements from each sub-stratum were randomly selected. And within each settlement, the total number of interviews required was determined by the settlement's population size. Following the selection of settlements and the determination of the number of interviews to be conducted, households were chosen using the random route sample method. Using this method, postal codes were first randomly chosen; similarly, streets within postal code areas were randomly selected; and, finally, actual households from each street were randomly selected. After a household was identified, respondents were chosen using the most recent/next birthday method. All adults aged 18 and older were eligible for participation.

Interviews in Kazakhstan were carried out by the Almaty-based BRIF Research Group. In Kyrgyzstan, the survey was conducted by the Bishkek-based El-Pikir Center

for Public Opinion Research. Both organizations are recognized leaders in survey research in their respective countries and have extensive experience in conducting nationally representative surveys for domestic and foreign clients from the academic, government and private sectors. In addition, both have cultivated a network of trained interviewers for its data collection and employ comprehensive quality-control procedures to ensure valid responses.

A total of 3,000 face-to-face interviews were conducted with 1,500 interviews completed in each country. In Kazakhstan, 97 BRIF interviewers conducted the interviews in 150 sampling points covering all 14 oblasts. Average interview duration was about 45 minutes. Response rate for the Kazakhstan portion of the study equaled 60.1%. In Kyrgyzstan, 77 El-Pikir interviewers conducted the interviews in 153 sampling points covering all seven oblasts of the country. Average interview duration was about 50 minutes. Response rate for the Kyrgyzstan portion of the study equaled 89.6%.

### *Measurement*

We measure patterns of **media consumption** with the following question:

*People learn what is going on in this country and the world from various sources. for each of the following sources, please indicate whether you use it to obtain information daily, several times per week, several times per month, monthly, less than monthly or never...*

The list of sources included newspapers, magazines, television, radio, and the internet. This question was followed by a second item asking respondents to indicate their **level of**

**trust** for each of these sources on a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 stands for “completely mistrust” and 5 stands for “completely trust.”

#### **IV. Results**

##### *Media Consumption*

We present the results regarding the patterns of media consumption by moving from the least to the most commonly used sources of news and information.

Figure 2 shows the distribution of responses about use of internet as a source of information about current events.

**Insert Figure 2:** Using *internet* to learn about current events..

With possible responses ranging from “every day” to “never,” *internet* is the only type of media for which clear majorities of people in both countries selected the option “never” (53.3% in Kazakhstan and 64.4% in Kyrgyzstan). While it is safe to assume that rates of computer ownership and internet penetration in both societies are growing, this growth does not automatically translate into high levels of internet use to obtain news and information. Instead, people could be using internet connectivity for games and entertainment. While approximately 34% of Kazakhstani respondents reported using internet for news and information several times per week or more, this figure was considerably lower at about 22% in Kyrgyzstan. While Kazakhstan appears to have progressed further, usage of internet as a source of information about current events has yet to gain widespread acceptance in either society.

Figure 3 shows the distribution of responses about use of magazines as a source of information about current events.

**Insert Figure 3:** Using *magazines* to learn about current events..

It appears that magazines are not a widely used source of information in Kazakhstan or Kyrgyzstan. “Never” was a modal response option in both countries at 39.4% and 47.9% percent, respectively.

Figure 4 shows the distribution of responses about use of radio as a source of information about current events.

**Insert Figure 4:** Using *radio* to learn about current events..

Reliance on radio as a source of news and information appears to differ significantly between Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. Over a third of Kyrgyzstani respondents reports daily use of radio, while the corresponding percentage in Kazakhstan stands at 16.5%. On the other end of spectrum, 37.1% of Kazakhstani respondents reported never using radio to learn about current events, while in Kyrgyzstan this response category was selected by 26.1%.

Figure 5 shows the distribution of responses about use of newspapers as a source of information about current events.

**Insert Figure 5:** Using *newspapers* to learn about current events..

Patterns of newspaper use in the two societies appear to be largely similar. The only notable exception is the “every day” response category. In Kazakhstan, this response was

chosen by 6.5% of respondents, while in Kyrgyzstan the share of daily newspaper readers jumps to 13.3%.

Finally, Figure 6 shows the distribution of responses about use of TV as a source of information about current events.

**Insert Figure 6:** Using *television* to learn about current events..

As Figure 6 demonstrates, the dominance of television in both countries' media markets is hard to overstate. In Kazakhstan, 96.7% of respondents reported turning to television for news and information several times per week or more; in Kyrgyzstan the corresponding figure stands at 91%.

#### *In Media We Trust?*

We present the results regarding trust in different types of media by moving from the least to the most commonly trusted sources of news and information. Table 3 shows mean levels of trust in each source of media in the two societies (measured on a 5-point scale where 1 = “completely mistrust” to 5 = “completely trust”).

**Insert Table 3:** “How much do you personally trust...”

As Table 3 demonstrates, magazines, newspapers, and television enjoy higher levels of trust in Kazakhstan than in Kyrgyzstan, while trust levels for radio and internet are essentially tied. Respondents in Kyrgyzstan appear to be especially skeptical about newspapers and magazines.



## V. Discussion and Conclusion

Our analysis shows that TV remains the dominant source of information about current events in both Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. Radio and newspapers also play important roles with a particularly prominent presence of the former in Kyrgyzstan. In Kazakhstan, proportions of regular users of newspapers and internet (several times per week or more) are essentially tied at about 35%. In Kyrgyzstan, internet has yet to achieve parity with newspapers as over 40% of Kyrgyz respondents report using newspapers to learn about current events several times per week or more, while the corresponding number for internet use stands at about 22%.

As Table 3 shows, respondents generally trust all media about equally. Curiously, this is true even in the case of media that they rarely, if ever, use. For example although the majority of respondents indicate that they never make use of the internet as an information resource, they nonetheless place about as much trust in it as they do radio—a form of media that most people make use of on a regular basis. That people trust the Internet—something with which most of them have little practical experience—as much as they trust their two go-to sources, radio and television, may signal a lack of differentiation between information resources. Consistently high levels of trust in the media across the board could suggest lingering obstacles to the development of democracy and democratic culture, which, ideally, require its citizens to be vigilant, informed, and savvy consumers of information.

Despite these overall patterns of trust in the media, the results indicate interesting differences between how citizens perceive print versus electronic media. People generally trust radio and television at higher rates than they do traditional print media

(e.g., newspapers and magazines). The higher level of trust in electronic media is at first blush unexpected and counterintuitive: Limited airtime for news programming and the probability of bias, which are both associated with less in-depth analysis when compared to that found in print media, might cause people to have perceive of television and radio as less trustworthy sources. On the other hand, given the tight connection between politics and media in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, it makes sense that print media would be viewed with some skepticism. In other words, the reason for lower trust in newspapers is likely due to the fact that their ownership patterns, political agendas, and party affiliations are widely known realities on the ground. Television and radio, on the other hand, are more complex because these tend to be based in Russia or are state-owned. Moreover, in the case of Kazakhstan, the true owners behind particular media outlets are not immediately transparent. Ironically, these nuances may make it harder for average citizens to gauge bias in electronic media, and higher levels of trust in television and radio may reflect this more complex picture.

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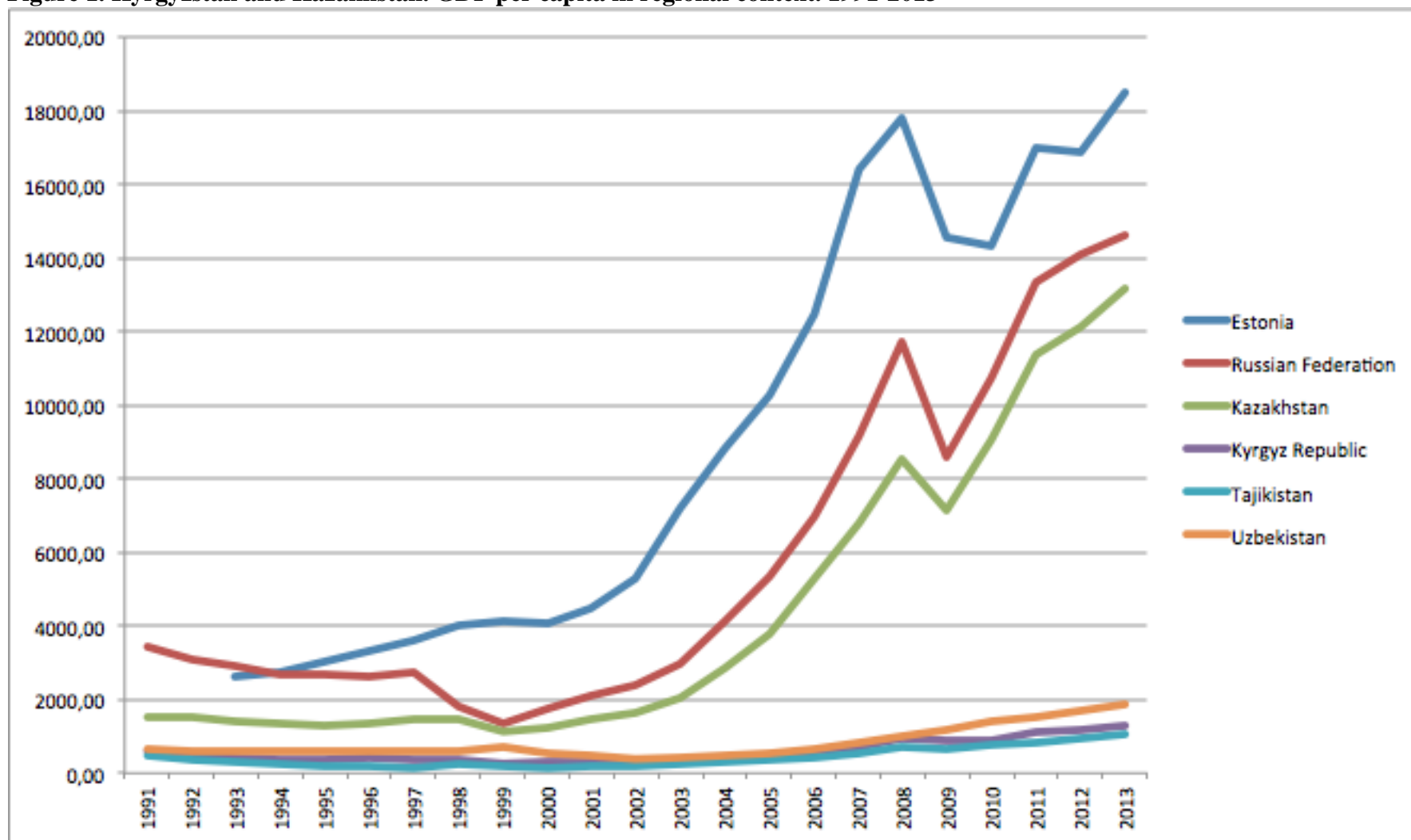
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## Tables and Figures

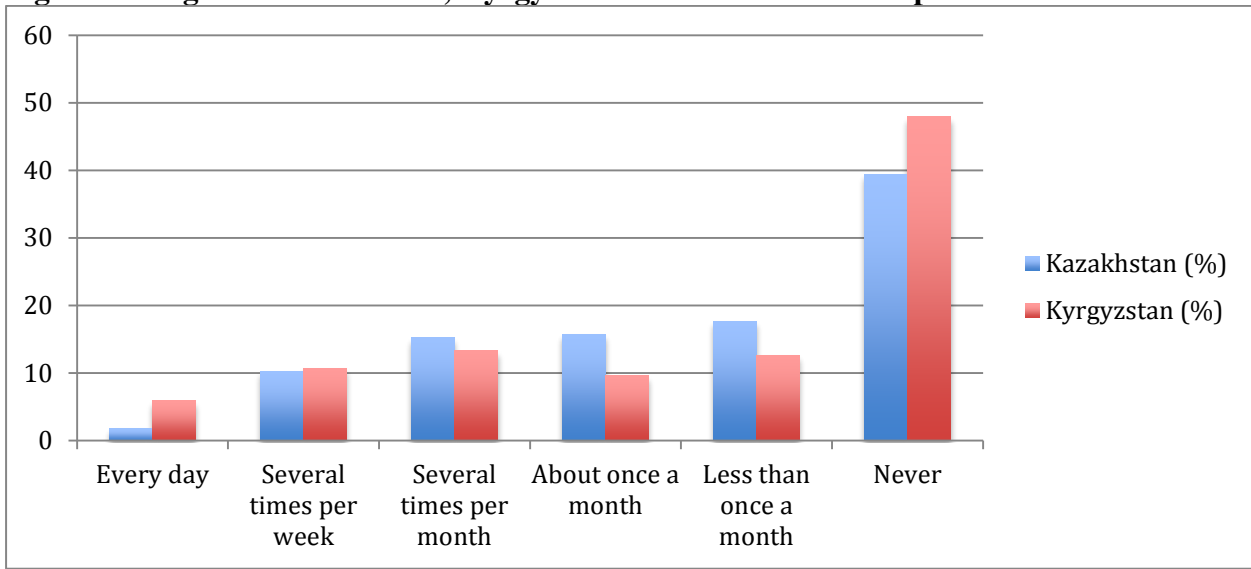
Figure 1. Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan. GDP per capita in regional context. 1991-2013



Source: World Bank. <http://data.worldbank.org/topic/economy-and-growth>

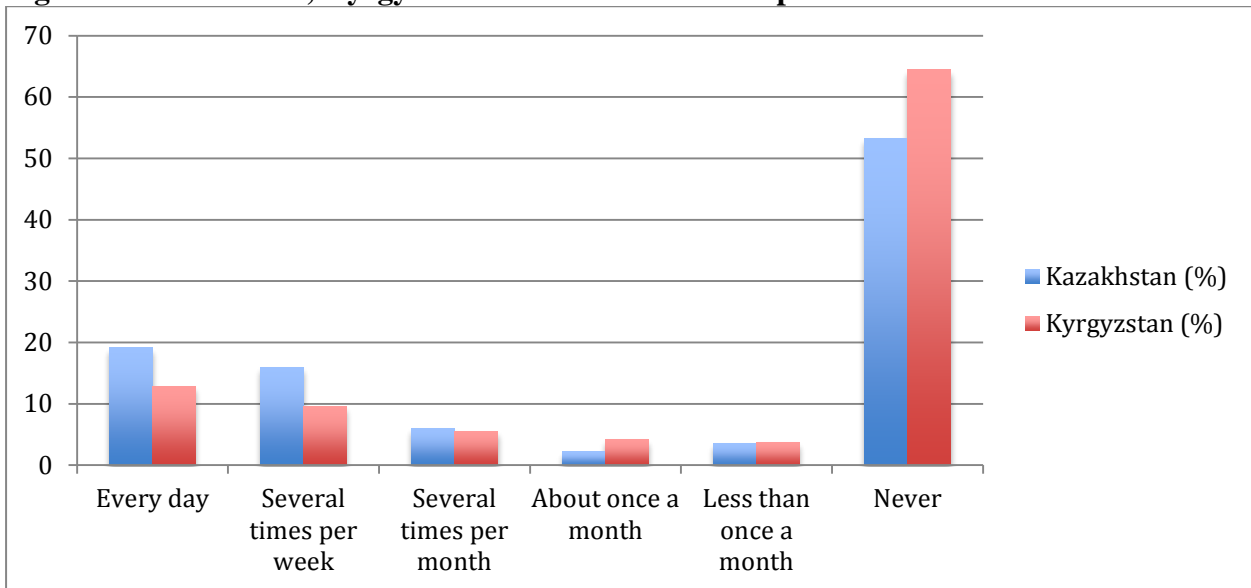


**Figure 2. Magazine/Journal Use, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan compared**



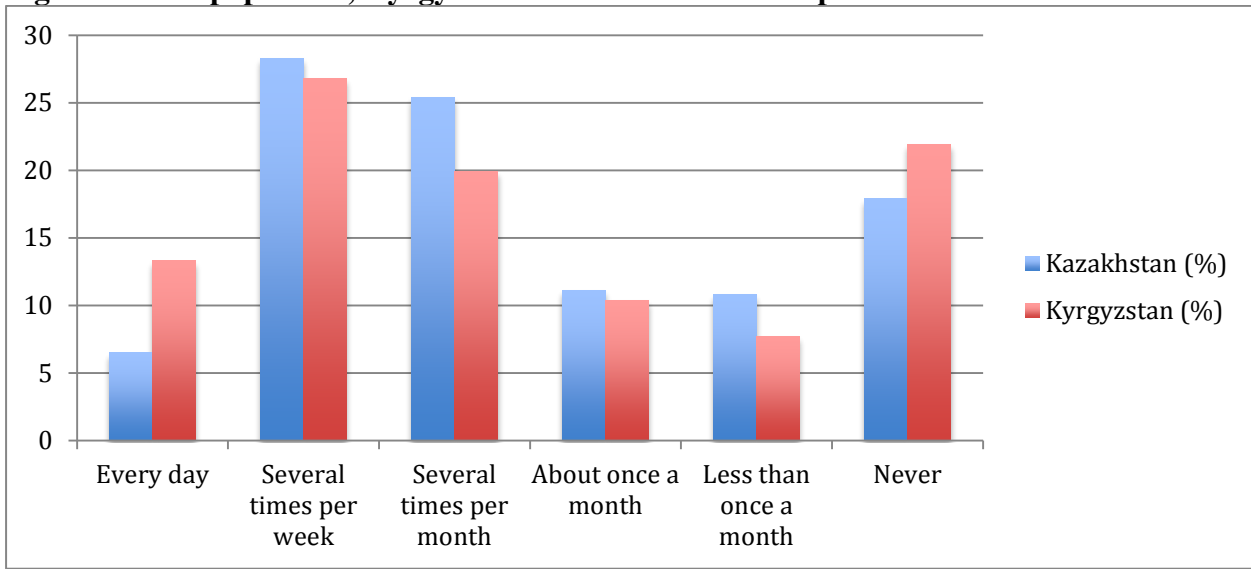
Source: Authors' data, 2012 Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan Survey

**Figure 3. Internet Use, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan compared**



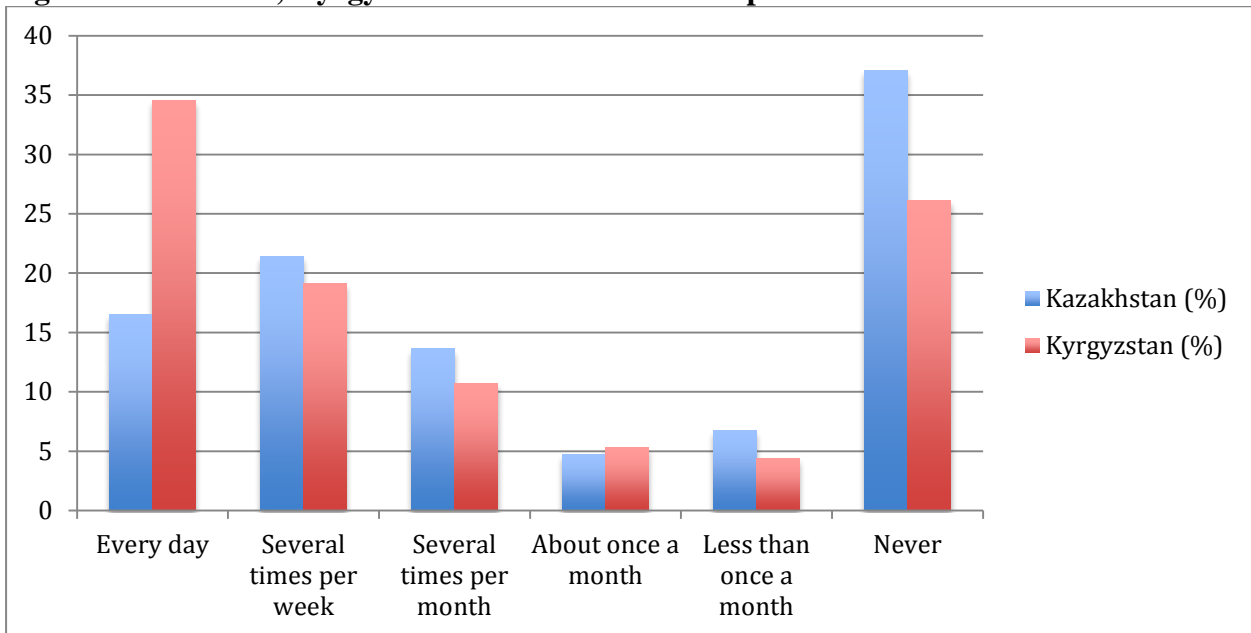
Source: Authors' data, 2012 Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan Survey

**Figure 4. Newspaper Use, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan compared**



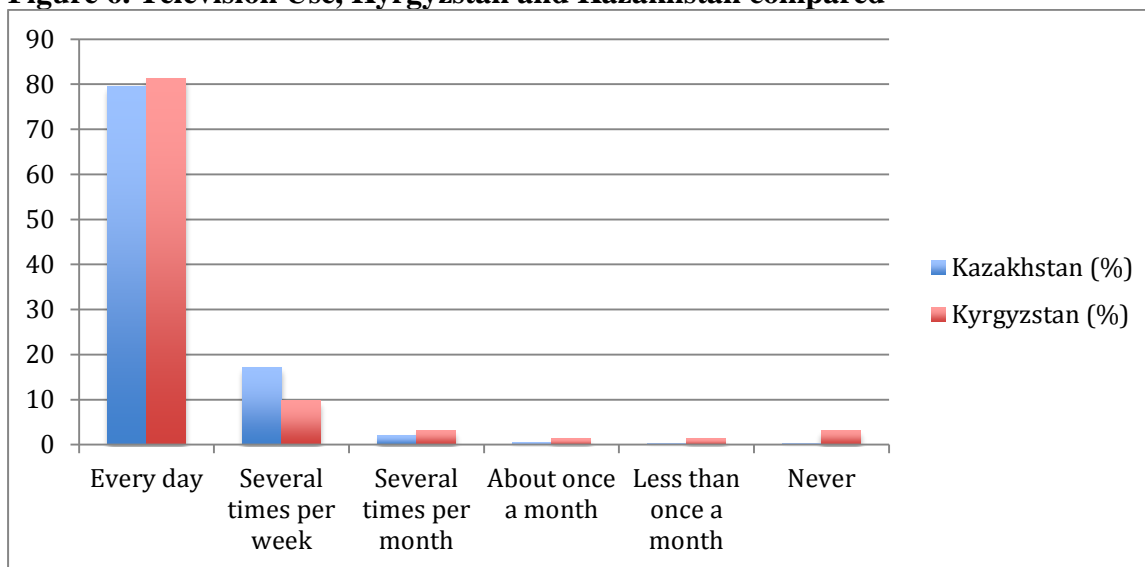
Source: Authors' data, 2012 Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan Survey

**Figure 5. Radio Use, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan compared**



Source: Authors' data, 2012 Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan Survey

**Figure 6. Television Use, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan compared**



Source: Authors' data, 2012 Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan Survey

**Table 3. Rates of Trust in Media Formats, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan compared**

Source	Kazakhstan	Kyrgyzstan
Magazines	3.19	2.83
Newspapers	3.35	2.88
Radio	3.41	3.38
Internet	3.42	3.42
Television	3.73	3.45

Note: "How much do you personally trust the following sources of information..."

Source: Authors' data, 2012 Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan Survey

**Table 1. Media Freedom Scores. Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan compared**

	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011-12	2013	2014	Average
Kyrgyzstan	31.75	32	35.25	32	34	33.6	27	40	--	40	32.2	31.24	<b>33.55</b>
Kazakhstan	42	42.5	44.17	36.17	41	41.63	35.33	49.67	--	77.5	55.08	54.94	<b>47.27</b>

Source: Reporters without Borders. World Press Freedom Index. available at: <http://rsf.org>

Note: RSF scores countries on a scale of 0-100; scores closer to 0 indicate greater press freedom. Country scores are a composite of six indicators, including pluralism, media independence, environment and self-censorship, legislative framework, transparency, and infrastructure

**Table 2. Media Sustainability Index (MSI). Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan compared**

	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006-07	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	Average
Kyrgyzstan	1.29	1.62	1.84	2.08	1.78	1.97	1.78	1.93	1.92	1.62	1.89	1.78	2.11	<b>1.82</b>
Kazakhstan	1.42	1.54	1.32	1.42	1.39	1.27	1.33	1.68	1.44	1.68	1.68	1.82	1.77	<b>1.52</b>

Source: IREX, Media Sustainability Index (MSI), available at: <http://www.irex.org>

Notes: IREX divides country scores as follows:

- Unsustainable, Anti-Free Press (0-1): Country does not meet or only minimally meets objectives. Government and laws actively hinder free media development, professionalism is low, and media-industry activity is minimal.
- Near sustainability (2-3): Country has progressed in meeting multiple objectives, with legal norms, professionalism and the business environment supportive of independent media. Advances have survived changes in government and have been codified in law and practice. However, more time may be needed to ensure that change is enduring and that increased professionalism and the media business environment are sustainable.
- Sustainable (3-4): Country has media that are considered generally professional, free, and sustainable, or to be approaching these objectives. Systems supporting independent media have survived multiple governments, economic fluctuations, and changes in public opinion or social conventions.