

2017 KYRGYZ PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS IN DOMESTIC MEDIA: AN ANALYSIS OF THE CONTENTS OF 24.KG KIRGIZ MEDYASINDA 2017 KIRGIZ CUMHURBAŞKANLIĞI SEÇİMLERİ: 24.KG SİTESİNİN İÇERİK ANALİZİ

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DOI: doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.11103639

MAKALE BİLGİLERİ
Araştırma Makalesi
Research Article

Cilt:2-Sayı:1 Vol:2-Issue:1

Makale / Info

Send / Gönderim Tarihi: 03.04.2024

Appraisal / Ön Değerlendirme:
08.04.2024

Accept / Kabul Tarihi: 02.05.2024

Sayfa: 4-36 Page:4-36

Anahtar Kelimeler:

Orta Asya, Kırgızistan, Seçim, Medya,
24.kg, Eleştirel Yaklaşım

Key Words:

Central Asia, Kyrgyzstan, Election,
Media, 24.kg, Critical Discourse

ABSTRACT

The Central Asian republic of Kyrgyzstan has, for long, been regarded as an ‘island of democracy’. Compared to neighbouring countries, civil society and media are more plural here and has relatively more freedom. It is also the only country from the region to be considered ‘partly free’ by the Freedom House. In October 2017, Kyrgyz Republic witnessed an unprecedented Presidential election for a peaceful transition. Elections can be a good time to not only assess the democratic institutions of any country but also study the status and functions of the media. This paper analyzes the coverage of the 2017 presidential elections of Kyrgyzstan in a domestic news agency (24.kg) to empirically and qualitatively understand the state of the mediascape there. Using critical discourse analysis, I studied the election coverage to understand the larger context of news, and the role media played in the public sphere of the Kyrgyz Republic and concluded that media industry suffered from economic dependence as well as the lack of culture of plural polity. Even private media helped in agenda-setting through ‘dominant reading’ of texts. Paid news was rampant while, at the same time, they self-censored themselves, consciously avoiding critical articles or any investigative pieces, particularly against the government for fear of attracting title suits and persecutions, and more importantly losing sponsors.

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INTRODUCTION

The post-Soviet republic of Kyrgyzstan has for long projected itself as an ‘island of democracy’ in the region otherwise known for hostile authoritarian rulers of Central Asia. It is the only country in the region that witnessed five heads of states since the disintegration of the Soviet Union in December 1991. First two presidents were forced out of their offices by ‘mass movements’ in 2005 and 2010 while the last two successive heads of states willingly relinquished their chairs with due processes of elections, most recently in 2017. Compared to neighbouring countries, media is more plural here, and has relatively more freedom. It is also the only country from the region to be considered ‘partly free’ by the Freedom House (2017).

Table 1. Freedom Indices of Central Asian Countries and Their Neighbours

Country	Political Rights	Civil Liberties	Aggregate Score	Freedom Status	Freedom on the Net 2016
Afghanistan	6	6	24	Not Free	
Armenia	5	4	45	Partly Free	Free
Azerbaijan	7	6	14	Not Free	Partly Free
China	7	6	15	Not Free	Not Free
Georgia	3	3	64	Partly Free	Free
India	2	3	77	Free	Partly Free
Iran	6	6	17	Not Free	Not Free
Kazakhstan	7	5	22	Not Free	Not Free
Kosovo	3	4	52	Partly Free	
Kyrgyzstan	5	5	37	Partly Free	Partly Free
Pakistan	4	5	43	Partly Free	Not Free
Russia	7	6	20	Not Free	Not Free
Tajikistan	7	6	11	Not Free	
Turkey	4	5	38	Partly Free	Not Free
Turkmenistan	7	7	04	Not Free	
Ukraine	3	3	61	Partly Free	Partly
Uzbekistan	7	7	3	Not Free	Not Free

“Freedom in the World 2017,” *Freedom House*, accessed February 13, 2017,

<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/freedom-world-2017> .

Freedom House prepares the annual report of political rights and civil liberties, where 1 reflects the most free and 7 the least free rating, while larger aggregate score indicates a greater level of freedom. Also, *Freedom on the Net 2016* report of the same organisation.

Elections can be a good time to not only assess the democratic institutions of any country, but also study the status and functions of the media. In this paper, I analyzed the coverage of the 2017 presidential elections of Kyrgyzstan in a domestic news agency to empirically and qualitatively understand the state of the mediascape there.

Background

Soviet press had ‘ideological filters’ and was supposed to be the ‘collective propagandist and agitator’ (McNair, 1991, p. 12). While the enthusiasm for free press in Central Asia during Gorbachev’s *glasnost* and *perestroika* was not as much as in Russia, countries like Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan still had relative freedom. However, gains of late 1980s’ *demokratizatsiya* were soon lost after independence as their respective governments became apprehensive of critical media (Haghayeghi, 1995). In Kyrgyzstan, many newspapers succumbed to economic pressure as their circulation had dropped sharply, and regulations had become very restrictive. Only two newspapers out of 114 published in 1990 could survive by 1994 (Haghayeghi, 1995). Although all five Central Asian countries claimed to be democratic republics, on international parameters they were quite below in ranking (Table 1).

Media of the region were divided into three categories by senior Uzbek Journalist and scholar Alisher Juraev: Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan being ‘authoritarian democratic’, Tajikistan with ‘post conflict’, and ‘total control’ in Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan (Juraev, 2002). Using the classical four models of media, Peter Rollberg and Marlene Laruelle (2015, p. 230) classify the Kyrgyz media as social responsibility, Turkmen media as authoritarian, while putting those in Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kazakhstan as different variations of the latter. Gross and Kenny (2011) listed seven ‘paralyzing problems’ about Tajik media, which, to a large degree, hold true for the entire region. These are: no independent news distribution, poor financial market conditions, high taxes, unprofessional journalism, unwilling to produce stories based on facts, censorship and self-censorship. They cite ‘fear of authority’ and ‘forced patriotism’ imposed on journalists as the main reason behind self-censorship. However, it is not just the authoritarian politics, but also social norms and culture, or family/clan traditions that often hold them back as journalists are discouraged from questioning traditions or to be critical to them (Kenny & Gross, 2008). Besides draconian anti-defamation, contempt, libel and secrecy laws and hostile conditions; journalists also have to cope with financial pressure as remuneration for reporters is very low, and often they have to look for ‘other means’ – *Kompromat*. Hence the safest way out in most cases for those barely trained reporters is self-censorship to avoid harassment, physical intimidation or murder. Barbara Junisbai chronicled the dubious ownership of ‘independent’ media organisations in Kazakhstan where oligarchs with ‘close ties to the President have purchased or gained control over much of the country’s print and electronic media... (and hence) for most part the media avoid subjects that could get them in trouble with government officials’ (Junisbai, 2011).

Turkmenistan, meanwhile, hardly has any private independent media, and hence it would thus not be wrong in claiming that in Turkmenistan, the government is the ‘only editor, broadcaster and publisher recognised by the law’ (Anceschi, 2011). Freedman studied the ‘Coverage of Central Asian political Press, and Speech Rights Issues by Independent Websites’ and observed: ‘Western-based Web news sites provide alternative venues for some Central Asian journalists to independently cover such issues’, but cautioned that ‘even journalists reporting on issues for Western-based media operate under tight constraints, including risk of official retaliation’ (Freedman, 2005, p. 71).

Notwithstanding the democratic upheavals, Kyrgyzstan came under the ‘hybrid regime’ category with rank 95 in the 2017 Democracy Index. According to Charles Ziegler, all five Central Asian countries are non-democratic and Kyrgyzstan is ‘alternating between soft authoritarianism and anarchic democracy’ (Ziegler, 2015). Legacies of the Soviet-era are very strong as the same *apparatchiks*, trained in centralized system, were still in positions of power and policy making. Nonetheless, in the initial years of post-independence, Kyrgyzstan experienced relative freedom, and several papers, started during *glasnost*, continued although their distributions were often restricted to urban areas. The government mouthpiece, Russian language *Slovo Kyrgyzstana* (The Word of Kyrgyzstan) that was established in 1925 continues to be published. However, from a daily it has now become biweekly and circulation dropped to 6000 by 2000 from 132,000 in 1975 (*Slovo.kg*, n.d.). A number of other private media have also mushroomed. Although there appeared to be a number of private media houses in Kyrgyzstan, by an estimate, first President Askar Akaev’s family or those close to him were controlling almost 80 per cent of the media in the first decade (Kulikova & Perlmutter, 2011). On a whole, media always had considerable liberty since independence – at least in comparison to its neighbours – and on many occasions took critical stance against the authority. *AkiPress* and *Moya Stolista* (My Capital), started with generous US funding that highlighted corruptions within the inner circle of the President, including his family. These opposition media, along with the new-media, played a critical role during the much hailed spring of hope in Kyrgyzstan - Tulip Revolution in 2005 (Buxton, 2011, p. 75). The ownership patterns then changed with the change in ruling establishments. It is often difficult to know the real owners of several private media, although from their coverage the audience can guess their allegiance (Media Sustainability Index [MSI] 2017, p. 247). For example, the fate of the leading Russian language newspaper *Vecherniy Bishkek* keeps changing with the change in the government. It once belonged to Alexander Kim who was seen as close to President Kurmanbek Bakiyev and critical of Almazbek Atambayev. In a politicised court order in 2015, he was asked to relinquish his ownership of the media house to his partner Alexander Ryabushkin, seen closer to Atambayev. In a replay of the drama in 2018, since the fallout between Atambayev and his successor Sooronbay Jeenbekov, the court has ordered that

the earlier judgement was illegal, and froze the assets of Ryabushkin (*Eurasianet.org*, 2018, October 31).

There are conflicting views on the inspiration for the 2005 Tulip Revolution and its April 2010 replication, and many believe it to be sponsored (Lewis, 2008; Juraev, 2008; Herd & Ryabkov, 2015). However, one cannot deny the fact that it gave the civil society – particularly the media – considerable leverage and freedom to express and report more freely. With the 2005 revolution there appeared some hope, at least in the first few months. The enthusiasm of the revolution was clearly visible in the press; when plurality of voices flooded the information stage (Buxton, 2011, p. 84). While the events of 2005 were followed with euphoria, and relative freedom of press and political activities, high casualties during the 2010 movement and consequent ethnic riots have had sombre effects on people (Buxton, 2015). As Roza Otunbayeva became interim President, the panel for the Media Sustainability Index (MSI) of IREX had observed that the ‘legal framework was liberalized’ that guaranteed freedom of speech and freedom of media (MSI 2011, p. 263). Post April Revolution, Kyrgyz language press in particular witnessed a considerable boom. Seemingly free Kyrgyzstan too has its share of problems, where often ‘political diktats’ pose a barrier to free market regulation (MSI 2012, p. 294).

Soon after independence, Kyrgyzstan had adopted new law on media in 1993 that allowed free independent media. Kyrgyz Constitution and laws gives freedom of speech and press, and in 2011, after the second revolution, libel was also decriminalised. A new article on ‘Insult to Personal Dignity and Honour,’ however, practically recriminalized libel and has created a window for prosecutors. In 2016 alone, several journalists were prosecuted under this new law. Social activists too have been under scrutiny under this law, and many opposition activists have been prosecuted. No doubt, ‘in a rough neighbourhood for journalists, Kyrgyzstan is a relative safe haven,’ and journalists from neighbouring countries, as also several international researchers and journalists covering the region make Bishkek their abodes (Iakupbaeva, 2017). There is also plurality of opinions with multiple media sources available. For example, together *Kloop*, the September channel, *Yntymak* and *Azattyk* Radio give audience several alternative perspectives on a subject (MSI 2017, p. 246). Open contestation among political elites, two uprisings, political instability, etc. create negative impression about the role of the media (Junisbai, Junisba, & Fry, 2015, p. 241). According to the data of the 2017 Media Sustainability Index (MSI) prepared by IREX, Kyrgyzstan had shown some improvements in last couple of years. It had ‘near sustainability’ media in 2017, compared to 2012 when it was in the ‘unsustainable mixed system’ category, though with higher score than others in the region (MSI, 2017, pp. 239-2). According to the Freedom House, it was ‘partly free’ in 2017, and had relatively more freedom compared to other former Soviet republics of Central Asia.

Table 2. Coverage of 2018 Presidential Election in 24.kg (Russian)

Date	Total Reports on Elections	Reports Related to Elections (Minus PR)	Articles with Disclaimers of Being Paid	Other Reports	Total
Oct 1	6	3	3	7	13
Oct 2	31	16	15	60	91
Oct 3	17	10	7	61	78
Oct 4	34	26	8	52	86
Oct 5	19	10	9	52	71
Oct 6	13	4	9	54	67
Oct 7	14	12	2	19	33
Oct 8	7	0	7	7	14
Oct 9	22	9	13	49	71
Oct 10	30	21	9	54	84
Oct 11	34	20	14	67	101
Oct 12	35	17	18	54	89
Oct 13	50	28	22	49	99
Oct 14	12	12	-	18	30
Oct 15	98	98	-	10	108
Oct 16	51	51	-	28	79
Oct 17	10	10	-	62	72
Oct 18	12	12	-	59	71
Oct 19	12	12	-	54	66
Oct 20	05	5	-	65	70
Total	512	376	136	881	1393

As of 2017, Kyrgyzstan had a total of 159 publications, including 3 main dailies and 4 other major papers (MSI, 2017). The top three newspapers by circulation were *Super Info* (private Kyrgyz-language daily), *Vecherniy Bishkek* (private Russian-language daily) and *Delo No.* (Russian-language private weekly). The current avatar of erstwhile *Komsomol* paper of Kyrgyzstan, *Molodyozhnaya Gazeta* was another important newspaper (Doraiswamy, 2019). *Kyrgyzstag* was an important pro-opposition media. Other newspapers included *AiF*, *Rossiskaya Gazeta*, *Moslovskij Komsomolets*, *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, etc. Leading news agencies included *Kabar* (state-owned), *AKIpress* (private), *24.kg* (private), *www.tushtuk.kg* (private), *K-News* (private), *www.kyrtag.kg* (private), *Sputnic.kg* (private). A total of 25

terrestrial TV channels, 3 local cable networks, 3 IPTV, and 26 radio Stations: 26 were there. Top 3 TV channels include OTRK, EITR (state-owned), and 7th Channel (private).

Scope of Research and Methodology

In October 2017, Kyrgyz Republic witnessed an unprecedented Presidential election for first peaceful transition – second, if the 2010-11 transition government of Roza Otunbaeva was also counted - after an incumbent completed his single full term in office. This was a rare feat in itself for the entire post-Soviet space. I hence chose to study the media coverage of the presidential elections of Kyrgyzstan to analyze the state of the media and freedom of expression there. I focussed on domestic media, and selected one of the leading open-access private news agencies of Kyrgyzstan, *24.kg* that produced contents in Kyrgyz, Russian and English languages. I picked the Russian language contents, and used a combination of content analysis and critical discourse analysis (CDA) to assess how they covered the 2017 presidential elections. While content analysis is often used in quantitative analysis of media contents, increasingly it is found lacking in qualitative analysis of media discourse. CDA, on the other hand, is a multi-modal analysis at micro-level that helps in bringing social and political implications at the macro level. It goes beyond the on-surface quantitative analysis (which is nonetheless very important), and considers a discourse as ‘socially constitutive as well as socially conditioned’ (Blommaert & Bulcaen, 2000). Norman Fairclough has put forward the ‘three-dimensional framework’ for analyzing any discourse: discourse as text, discourse as discursive practice, and discourse as social practice (Fairclough, 2006, p. 4). CDA is thus useful in understanding ‘structural relationships of dominance, discrimination, power and control as manifested in language’ (Wodak, 2011).

I used CDA for systematic qualitative analysis of media texts to discuss the micro-level cognitive process of production of news and debates. Different parameters, on which media contents were tested in present study, during the election campaign, included textual, linguistic, use of multimedia technologies, ground reportage, independent opinion, etc. for better understanding of how media fared as an institution in Kyrgyzstan. Based on this analysis, the macro-level study deliberated on the larger context of news, and the role media played in the public sphere of the Kyrgyz Republic.

The Presidential elections in Kyrgyzstan took place on October 15, 2017. I hence chose a period of 20 days from October 1 to 20, that is, two weeks before the elections when the campaign was at its peak and got maximum coverage in different media; and next five days after voting when gradually the number of news on elections began to decline. There were some reports that might have had indirect influences on elections, like improvement in bilateral relations with Uzbekistan could clearly influence the voting pattern in south that borders with it, besides its own sizeable ethnic Uzbek population. Some of these have been mentioned in the following study, but those were not counted as election related stories. Similarly, diplomatic spat with Kazakhstan, after a photograph of the Kazakh President’s

meeting with main rival candidate Omurbek Babanov went viral in September, was clearly in the context of the election. But unless those reports mentioned about it or had any bearing on bilateral relations, those were not considered. Thus several smaller updates of 100 words or less on situations at border check-points and the difficulties that the people were facing were left out. During the period under review, elections were also held for the post of mayor of Bishkek. Reports on the local elections too were not considered for the present study to keep focus on the presidential elections. Before proceeding further on the analysis of the election coverage, a brief update on the election itself is imperative at this point.

2017 Presidential Elections in Kyrgyzstan

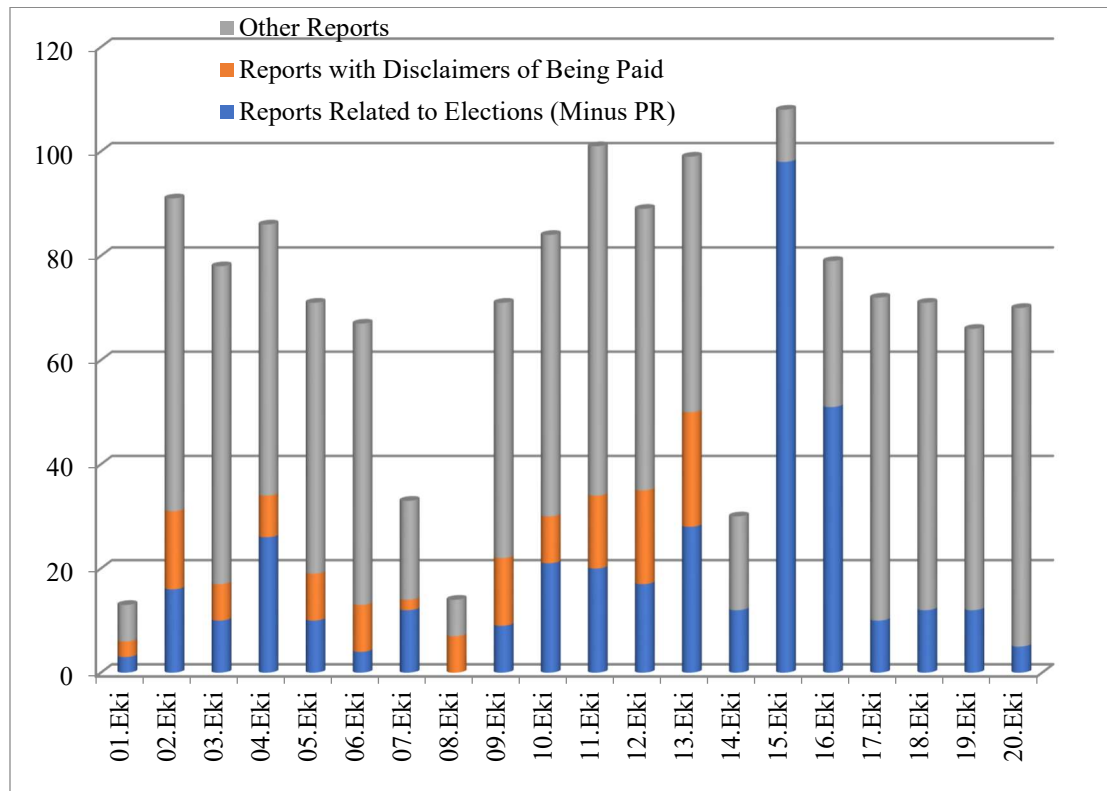
Out of 59 candidates, who filed applications to contest the presidential elections, only 13, including one woman, were shortlisted by the Central Election Commission (CEC), and others were rejected on several grounds. The 13 lucky ones who made the cut were: Adakhan Madumarov, Arstanbek Abdyldaev, Arslanbek Maliyev, Azimbek Beknazarov, Bakyt Torobayev, Ernis Zarlykov, Kamchybek Tashiev, Sooronbay Jeenbekov, Temir Sariyev, Taalatbek Masadykov, Toktaiym Umetalieva, Omurbek Babanov, and Ulukbek Kochkorov. Two of them, however, later withdrew from the race in support of leading candidates: Tashiev extended his support to Jeenbekov while Torobayev supported Babanov. The main fight from beginning appeared to be between 58 year old Jeenbekov of the Social Democrat Party (SDPK), and 47 year old business tycoon, Babanov, contesting as independent. Jeenbekov, who for long served as the governor of Osh Oblast, was the incumbent President, Almazbek Atambayev's nominee, and was contesting from his party, SDPK. It should be mentioned here that the present Kyrgyz Constitution permits single term for the office of the President. Babanov was earlier the chairman of the now defunct Respublika party that had formed an alliance with Ata-Zhurt in the run up to the Parliamentary elections of 2015 to form Respublika–Ata Zhurt. The alliance since broke and Babanov nominated himself as an independent for the post. In fact, co-chairman of the alliance, who earlier headed the Ata-Zhurt faction, Tashiev had also nominated himself for the post, but later withdrew in support of Jeenbekov. Others, most prominently Sariyev of Akshumar party and Madumarov of Butun Kyrgyzstan, were believed to be spoilers from the beginning. Three of the leading candidates Jeenbekov, Babanov and Sariyev had all briefly served as prime ministers under Atambayev.

Analysis of Coverage of Elections in Russian Version of 24.kg

The contents on 24.kg were almost equally high in Kyrgyz and Russian languages while only a selection of those articles were translated in English, in general. A total of 1393 articles were published in Russian language on 24.kg between October 1 and 20. These were scanned to assort them into two broad categories: related to elections or not related to elections. Out of 1393 articles, 512 were related to the Presidential elections. Russian version of the 24.kg thus published an average of 69-70 stories in a day

from October 1 to 20, and about 25-26 of them each day were on elections (see Table 2 and Figure 1). Though not taken into consideration for this research, in Kyrgyz language as well, the number of stories was almost equal to the Russian language. In comparison, the English section published a total of only 363 articles during this period which were direct translations of a selection of articles in Russian language. Only 166 of these 363 were on elections.

Figure 1. Percentage of Election Related Reports Compared to Rest of Reports in 24.kg (Russian)

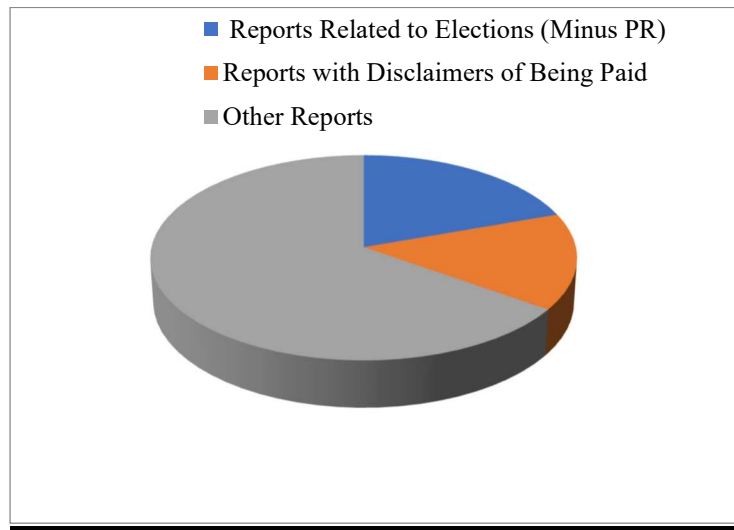


Except *ofitsioz*, that is, updates on new developments or official communications, and allegations and counter-allegations by politicians, overall the election coverage failed to add to the knowledge, or give new insights on the election. Being mere *ofitsioz* updates, most of the stories were of 100-200 words or even smaller, except some paid contents promoted as analytical pieces. Like 2011, there was hardly any ground reportage, that is, journalists of the organization going to field and filing reports based on his/her observations and conversations with local voters about their expectations. There was one rare exhaustive ground report on October 12 based on conversation with one family of peasants at village Yuryevka in the Issyk-Ata district on difficulties farmers faced.¹

END NOTE

¹ Токоева, Н. (Октябрь 12, 2017). Жизнь крестьянская не сахар. 24.kg. <https://24.kg/obschestvo/65308/>.

Figure 2. Proportion of Election Related Reports Compared to Rest of Reports in 24.kg (Russian)



Otherwise, poverty, low wages, lack of opportunities, unemployment, corruptions, environment, and other important concerns of people were hardly reported. Unsubstantiated campaign rhetoric, accusing one-another of corruptions, and impractical and hollowed promises of politicians were reported during the campaign. Almost all articles appeared to have been prepared by the news-desk, based on what politicians said during campaigns, in TV debates or press conferences, bites of civil society activists or experts, and information shared on social media that can be termed as the ‘arm chair journalism’ (Reyaz, 2014). These all point to the downward slide of the media although on international indices, Kyrgyzstan continue to hover around the ‘partly free’ zone, and appeared relatively pluralistic compared to other countries in the region where the situation remained even worse.

Paid Contents

A troubling phenomenon observed during elections was paid-contents passed off as news items, albeit with disclaimers at the end. These sponsored articles appeared during the campaign period, that is, till October 13 as October 14 was the ‘Day of Silence’. In 13 days, that is, during the review period beginning October 1 to 13, out of total 897 articles published, 312 were on elections in the Russian section of 24.kg. However, 136 out of these 312 elections related articles (43.58 percent) were directly paid by either of the presidential candidates (see Table 3 & Figure 2).

These paid contents were listed along with other news items; and only at the end gave disclaimers saying paid by the office of one of the presidential candidates. For example, on October 1, three of the six articles on elections clearly mentioned at the end: ‘produced by the PR-service of the candidate for the post of the President of the Kyrgyz Republic T. Sariyev’, and was ‘paid from the electoral fund’ of

the candidate.² Six-seven articles on an average in a day, but on some days as high as 22 articles

Date	T. Sariyev	O. Babanov	S. Jeenbekov	Others	Total
Oct 1	3	0	0	0	3
Oct 2	6	2	6	1	15
Oct 3	6	1	0	0	7
Oct 4	6	1	0	1	8
Oct 5	6	1	2	0	9
Oct 6	8	1	0	0	9
Oct 7	0	1	1	0	2
Oct 8	6	0	1	0	7
Oct 9	7	5	1	0	13
Oct 10	7	2	0	0	9
Oct 11	6	4	4	0	14
Oct 12	12	1	5	0	18
Oct 13	15	4	3	0	22
Oct 14	0	0	0	0	0
Oct 15	0	0	0	0	0
Total	88	23	23	2	136

were sponsored contents listed along with other news items (Table 3). As the election approached, the number of paid contents too increased. 14, 18 and 22 paid stories were published on October 11, 12 and 13, respectively, the last three days of the campaign. For example, through his PR, Babanov camp claimed on October 2 that Kamila Sharshkeeva, former minister who was herself contesting elections, withdrew from the campaign in his support.³ In yet another statement, Babanov stressed that he would never seize the power illegally after allegations of riot plotting surfaced.⁴ Through a PR on October 3, based on his election rally, Sariyev invited the two leading candidates – Jeenbekov and Babanov – to

² 24.kg (Октябрь 1, 2017). Темир Сариев: Вместе мы победим и избавим страну от коррупции и несправедливости. <https://24.kg/vybory/64199/>.

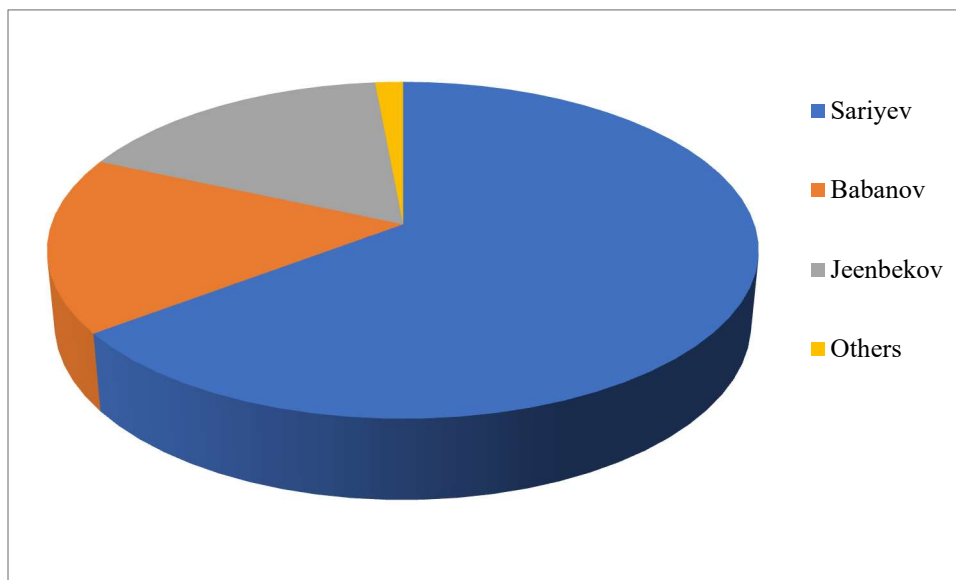
³ 24.kg (Октябрь 2, 2017). Камила Шаршекеева поддержала кандидата в президенты КР Омурбека Бабанова.” <https://24.kg/vybory/64288/>.

⁴ Шамшиев, С. (Октябрь 11, 2017). Омурбек Бабанов: Ни одни выборы, ни одна должность не стоят захвата власти. 24.kg. <https://24.kg/vybory/65238/>.

have ‘two-hour public discussion at any convenient platform’ with him.⁵ Jeenbekov camp, on the other hand, boasted of how he resigned from the post of Prime Minister to provide ‘equal opportunities’ to all.⁶

These sponsored articles with high quality photographs, were often based on campaign speeches, press conferences, and in some instances presumably analytical pieces were also pushed as *advertorials*. For example, on October 3, there was an interesting, analytical article by politician Almaz Isanov that claimed to assess the electoral agenda of leading candidates, but it cherry picked on the achievements of Sariyev and his vision. Only at the end, it declared that it’s another paid content from Sariyev’s campaign office.⁷ On October 11, there was another detailed advertorial, stressing on Jeenbekov being a ‘portrait of an ideal president of Kyrgyzstan’ who enticed ‘sympathy’ among people.⁸

Figure 3. Proportion of Sponsored Contents in 24.kg (Russian)



Sariyev, paid for the maximum number of contents on 24.kg (in the Russian language) during the period under review (see Figure 3 & Table 3). However, in no way, it should imply that others were less enthusiastic about sponsored articles. In fact, with 175.5 million soms as campaign fund, Babanov

⁵ 24.kg (Октябрь 3, 2017). Темир Сариев вызвал Жээнбекова и Бабанова на публичные дебаты.” <https://24.kg/vybory/64390/>.

⁶ 24.kg (Октябрь 2, 2017). Жээнбеков: Я ушел в отставку, чтобы обеспечить всем кандидатам равные условия. <https://24.kg/vybory/64340/>.

⁷ 24.kg (Октябрь 3, 2017). Алмаз Исанов: Удивительное — рядом! <https://24.kg/vybory/64410/>.

⁸ 24.kg (Октябрь 11, 2017). Сооронбай Жээнбеков и портрет идеального президента кыргызстанцев. <https://24.kg/vybory/65171/>.

surpassed everyone in expenditure on elections, followed by Jeenbekov (93.4 million soms) and Sariyev (37.9 million soms).⁹ On October 17, *24.kg* carried a brief but important news item on earnings of the Public Television and Radio Corporation (OTRK) during the 2017 election campaign from various presidential candidates. They earned a total of 47 million 411 thousand 895 soms during the presidential election.¹⁰ Babanov had paid highest for air times to OTRK with 20.7 million soms, followed by Jeenbekov (14.2 million soms) and Sariyev (8.02 million soms).

This finding on paid-news was crucial as several international reports did mention in general about paid contents in media. But except sweeping statements on the malaise of paid news in Kyrgyzstan, or other Central Asian country, so far little direct empirical evidences have been made in any academic work. Observers of the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), the principal institution of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), monitored four TV stations and found out that ‘68 hours of paid political advertising were broadcast...compared to only 19 hours of campaign coverage...Within the limited amount of campaign coverage TV stations were clearly biased’.¹¹

This finding also matched with what some of the experts acknowledged during my field work in Bishkek in 2016. Sulman Abdykadyr Dardanovich, Chairman of the Union of Journalists of Kyrgyz Republic, had accepted that a lot of content in media was indeed paid by some stake holders, lamenting that it had become a norm. While he acknowledged that low salary and lack of professional training had resulted in such rampant paid contents, he also pointed to the political nexus: ‘Every political party is looking for favourable coverage and they are willing to pay and coerce you for the same’ (Personal Interview in May 2016). Elections are considered good time for media industry, when they get sponsorships from different political parties. It needs to be pointed here that on the home page of *24.kg* (irrespective of any language) as well as on inside pages of the website, advertisements of two leading candidates – Jeenbekov and Babanov – were prominently displayed in the last week of the election campaign (see Figure 4).

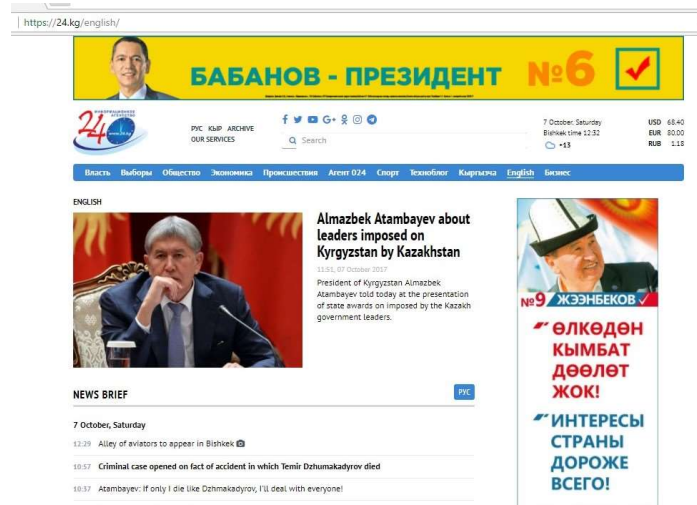
⁹ Костенко, Ю.(Октября 6, 2017). Сколько кандидаты в президенты Кыргызстана потратили на выборы. *24.kg*. <https://24.kg/vybory/64806/>.

¹⁰ Костенко, Ю. (Октября 17, 2017). Сколько заработала ОТРК на кандидатах в президенты. *24.kg*. <https://24.kg/vybory/65941/>.

¹¹ *Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe* (October 16, 2017). International Election Observation Mission: Statement of Preliminary Findings and Conclusions. <https://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/kyrgyzstan/350001>.

What also needs to be emphasized here is that only those news items for which certain patron paid to media organizations were duly marked. But a large number of what passed as news might also be contents produced under some kind of influences, like the reporter was (unethically) paid directly by the campaign office, or she/he favoured a particular candidate due to clique/clan/regional affinity or some personal interests. Based on his experience at the Election Commission during the 2011 Presidential elections and 2015 Parliamentary elections, a senior bureaucrat Kanatbek Aziz had claimed during my field work that media content is ‘one hundred percent paid’ (Personal Interview in May 2016).

Figure 4. Screenshot of 24.kg (English) on October 7 with Advertisements of both Sooronbay Jeenbekov and Omurbek Babanov



Electoral Updates

Other news reports were on campaign updates, electoral preparations by the CEC, allocations of free time on TV, debates among different presidential candidates, etc. In a televised debate on October 4, four presidential candidates, including two leading candidates, Jeenbekov and Babanov participated. Nine reports related to this debate were published, including one that mentioned about veiled threat of Jeenbekov to Babanov. Jeenbekov said that after winning, he would begin his fight against corruption from Babanov, otherwise a leading businessman of the country.¹² Babanov, however, rubbished such claims, reminding that he earned his wealth in business and not through corrupt means, and was hence not scared.¹³ There was a small report based on warning of the State Commission for Religious Affairs

¹² Масалиева, Ж. (Октябрь 4, 2017). Сооронбай Жээнбеков пообещал начать борьбу с коррупцией с Омурбека Бабанова. *24.kg*. <https://24.kg/vyborny/64588/>.

¹³ Шамшиев, С. (Октябрь 4, 2017). Омурбек Бабанов пояснил, что торговый центр «Азия Молл» построен не на взятках. *24.kg*. <https://24.kg/vyborny/64587/>.

of Kyrgyzstan to religious leaders from participating in any kind of electoral campaign, reminding them that according to the paragraph 15 of Article 22 of the Law ‘On Elections in the KR’, representatives of religious organizations were not allowed to engage in campaigns.¹⁴

50 elections related stories in Russian (out of 99) were published on October 13, the last day of the campaign. Out of these 50 reports, however, only 28 updates were produced by the staff of *24.kg*. At least three reports¹⁵ talked of how Kazakh observers would not come¹⁶ this time due to Atambayev’s strong exception to Nazarbayev’s purported words of support favouring Babanov.¹⁷ President Nursultan Nazarbayev of Kazakhstan, meanwhile, termed the allegation a ‘lie’ during a press conference in Sochi.¹⁸

The Day of Voting

On the big day of the election on October 15, *24.kg* published a total of 98 small and big reports related to elections, out of a total 108 stories, in Russian language. There were regular updates from CEC, reports of minor glitches, security situations, allegations by politicians and counter-allegations. Reports also focussed on leading political figures casting their votes. *24.kg* had made a dedicated page giving updates on election and counting of votes.¹⁹ This page was updated throughout the day. It did not just collate brief reports filed, but had social media updates, videos, and photos embedded besides other news briefs. Overall, 55.93 percent had voted, that is, out of total 3 million 25 thousand registered voters, 1 million 692 people had cast their votes, according to the CEC.²⁰ At least four more reports were based on the press conference of the CEC head. In the evening, CEC head Nurzhan Shayldabekova told journalists that the presidential election passed off peacefully although there were several reported cases

¹⁴ Шамшиев, С. (Октябрь 2, 2017). Религиозного деятеля предупредили за предвыборную агитацию. *24.kg*. <https://24.kg/vybory/64324/>.

¹⁵ Мамытова, А. (Октябрь 13, 2017). Член ЦИК Казахстана отказался наблюдать за выборами в Кыргызстане. *24.kg*. <https://24.kg/vybory/65451/>.

¹⁶ Подольская, Д. (Октябрь 13, 2017). Наблюдатели Казахстана все-таки будут отслеживать выборы президента Кыргызстана. *24.kg*. <https://24.kg/vybory/65498/>.

¹⁷ Мамытова, А. (Октябрь 13, 2017). Зампредседателю Центризбиркома понятна позиция казахских коллег. *24.kg*. <https://24.kg/vybory/65510/>.

¹⁸ Костенко, Ю. (Октябрь 13, 2017). Нурсултан Назарбаев назвал враньем его влияние на выборы в Кыргызстане. *24.kg*. <https://24.kg/vybory/65391/>.

¹⁹ *24.kg* (Октябрь 15, 2017). Как проходят выборы президента Кыргызстана. <https://24.kg/vybory/65575/>.

²⁰ Подольская, Д. (Октябрь 15, 2017). На выборах президента Кыргызстана проголосовали 55,93 процента избирателей. *24.kg*. <https://24.kg/vybory/65727/>.

of electoral violations, adding that they would probe these in due course.²¹ She also said that none of the reported cases of violations was serious enough to affect the election outcome.²²

As the counting began, soon it became clear that Jeenbekov had an edge.²³ Within few hours it was announced that he had secured 55% of votes while his closest rival Babanov could garner only 34% of votes.²⁴ What was surprising was that despite spending third highest amount of money and being very visible during the campaign, Sariyev ended up as distant fourth with less than three percent of votes, while Madumarov was the second runner up, with nearly six-and-half percent votes.²⁵ Although Kyrgyzstan used ballot papers, electronic ballot boxes were employed so all votes were scanned and automatically counted. Thus preliminary results were declared within few hours of the voting. However, each polling station was also tasked with manual counting of votes. According to a report, the CEC declared that the difference between manual and electronic vote counting was negligible.²⁶

Generally once election is over and the result is announced, winning candidates take a conciliatory position. Jeenbekov instead made it clear in his first media interaction after the election outcome, he would not spare Babanov.²⁷ By October 16, Babanov had conceded defeat, but wanted to take a moral high ground, making it clear that he never had any intention of seizing power illegally.²⁸ There were

²¹ Подольская, Д. (Октября 15, 2017). Глава ЦИК: Выборы президента проходят спокойно, но нарушения есть. *24.kg*. <https://24.kg/vybory/65669/>.

²² Подольская, Д. (Октября 15, 2017). Глава ЦИК: Нарушения на процесс голосования не повлияли. *24.kg*. <https://24.kg/vybory/65711/>.

²³ Кудрявцева, Т. (Октября 15, 2017). Первые подсчеты голосов говорят о лидерстве Сооронбая Жээнбекова. *24.kg*. <https://24.kg/vybory/65710/>.

²⁴ Кудрявцева, Т. (Октября 15, 2017). За Сооронбая Жээнбекова проголосовали около 55 процентов избирателей. *24.kg*. <https://24.kg/vybory/65720/>.

²⁵ *24.kg* (Октября 15, 2017). Пятерка лидеров на выборах президента Кыргызстана. <https://24.kg/vybory/65725/>.

²⁶ Бенгард, А. (Октября 16, 2017). Выборы-2017. Разница между ручным и электронным подсчетом голосов незначительна. *24.kg*. <https://24.kg/vybory/65743/>.

²⁷ Шамшиев, С. (Октября 15, 2017). Сооронбай Жээнбеков: Я лично скажу Бабанову, что предприму против него. *24.kg*. <https://24.kg/vybory/65733/>.

²⁸ Костенко, Ю. (Октября 16, 2017). Омурбек Бабанов не намерен захватывать власть. *24.kg*. <https://24.kg/vybory/65804/>.

Quote in Russian language: ‘Мы показали, что в Кыргызстане можно выходить на выборы, нужно говорить о своей программе, представлять народу альтернативное видение. Время нас рассудит. Мы однозначно победили.’

reports that fearing arrest, he might leave the country soon, although he denied all ‘rumours’.²⁹ But the political environment of the region is such that according to media reports, he soon fled from the country, first for Czech Republic and in January 2018, he was reported to be in Moscow.³⁰ On October 20, there was a detailed article on Jeenbekov and his brothers and how much they earned in last four years.³¹ The article not only gave details of assets of the President-elect who had served as the Governor of Osh, as minister and briefly as Prime Minister, but also had brief profiles of his brothers - former speaker of the Parliament Asylbek Jeenbekov, and diplomat Zhusupbek Sharipov.

Congratulatory Messages

As soon as the result of the election was out, congratulatory messages began coming. A report on October 16 pointed out that the Russian President Vladimir Putin was the first foreign head of state to congratulate the President-elect. The report noted, ‘Vladimir Putin also noted that Russia highly appreciates personal contribution of Sooronbai Jeenbekov in strengthening the strategic partnership and alliance between Russia and Kyrgyzstan.’³² By evening, even Kazakh President sent a telegram, congratulating Jeenbekov for the victory, and expressing confidence that under his leadership, Kyrgyzstan would ‘achieve new successes on the path of its dynamic development’.³³ There was also a

²⁹ Костенко, Ю. (Октябрь 16, 2017). Омурбек Бабанов рассказал о своем возможном отъезде из Кыргызстана. *24.kg*. <https://24.kg/vyborny/65808/>.

Quote in Russian language: ‘Я не собираюсь никуда уезжать. Я хочу отдохнуть. Четыре месяца предвыборной борьбы прошли напряженно. Но в ближайшее время я никуда не собираюсь.’

³⁰ Podolskaya, D. (January 19, 2018). Omurbek Babanov deprived of deputy seat. *24.kg*, <https://24.kg/english/73778/>.

³¹ Кудрявцева, Т. (Октябрь 20, 2017). Сколько заработали братья Жээнбековы за четыре года. *24.kg*. <https://24.kg/vlast/66244/>.

³² *24.kg* (Октябрь 16, 2017). Владимир Путин первым поздравил Сооронбая Жээнбекова с победой на выборах. <https://24.kg/vlast/65834/>.

Quote in Russian language: ‘Владимир Путин также отметил, что в России высоко ценят личный вклад Сооронбая Жээнбекова в укрепление стратегического партнерства и союзничества между Россией и Кыргызстаном.’

³³ *24.kg* (Октябрь 16, 2017). Нурсултан Назарбаев поздравил Сооронбая Жээнбекова с победой на выборах. <https://24.kg/vyborny/65869/>.

Quote in Russian language: ‘Я верю, что основанные на взаимовыгодном сотрудничестве отношения между Казахстаном и Кыргызстаном будут развиваться и дальше на благо наших стран.’

report of Uzbek President Shavkat Mirziyoyev congratulating the winner of the election and expressing a desire at 'building mutually beneficial bilateral cooperation'.³⁴

Abuse of State Resources/Power

There were several reported cases of harassments of opposition politicians, the case of Parliament deputy Kanatbek Isaev and civil rights activist Melis Aspekov on charges of organizing riots and seizing power being most prominent.³⁵ I pointed earlier that CDA takes three-dimensional approach in analysis of a media discourse - discourse as text, discourse as discursive practice, and discourse as social practice. *24.kg* reported on October 1 that Isaev, a vocal supporter of Babanov was arrested on charge of conspiring to usurp power.³⁶ This report in itself was the text of a discourse, but both usurpation of power and riot created certain reverberations in minds of readers in a country that has seen two 'revolutions' resulting in forcible removable of heads of the state and instability (Reyaz, 2014). Moreover, ethnic tension between Kyrgyz and Uzbek minorities remained fragile. In this context, the news thus also referred to a certain 'discursive practice' that would help in dominant reading of the text by readers. This news was meticulously followed up in the days to come giving regular updates on trials and charges against Isaev and his alleged co-conspirators.³⁷ One statement from the Office of the President on October 2, warned against any attempt at destabilising the country and of strict actions in the backdrop of Isaev's arrest.³⁸ On October 5, *24.kg* published a rare exhaustive article that listed some of the famous and critical cases in country's history when oppositions tried to organize mass protests and caused rioting to 'seize power', punishable by imprisonment for up to 25 years under Article 295 of the Criminal Code of the Kyrgyz Republic.³⁹

³⁴ Масалиева, Ж. (Октябрь 17, 2017). Шавкат Мирзиёев поздравил Сооронбая Жээнбекова с победой на выборах. *24.kg*. <https://24.kg/obschestvo/65911/>.

³⁵ Подольская, Д. (Октябрь 9, 2017). Задержан гражданский активист Мелис Аспеков. *24.kg*. <https://24.kg/obschestvo/64976/>.

³⁶ *24.kg* (Октябрь 1, 2017). Канатбек Исаев, подозреваемый в попытке захвата власти, задержан на 48 часов. <https://24.kg/vybory/64194/>.

³⁷ Костенко, Ю. (Октябрь 5, 2017). ГКНБ: Адвокат Канатбека Исаева не подала ордер на встречу с обвиняемым. *24.kg*. <https://24.kg/obschestvo/64617/>.

³⁸ Мокренко, А. (Октябрь 2, 2017). Попытки дестабилизировать ситуацию в период выборов будут жестко пресечены. *24.kg*. <https://24.kg/vybory/64244/>.

³⁹ Подольская, Д., и Масалиева, Ж. (Октябрь 5, 2017). Кто пытался захватить власть в Кыргызстане и сел за это. *24.kg*. <https://24.kg/vlast/64641/>.

Those allegations were lapped up by both Atambayev and Jeenbekov who continued with their scathing attacks on Babanov for trying to use his money and allegedly conspiring with foreign forces to destabilise the country.⁴⁰ Note that since a photograph of Babanov meeting Kazakh President Nazarbayev was circulated in September 2017, Atambayev had accused Kazakhstan of interfering in election, leading to diplomatic spat. The electoral plank of Jeenbekov, as one supported by outgoing President, was to continue with the social and economic stability achieved by Atambayev. Such reports naturally helped build a consensus against any attempt at creating instability in the country. At the macro-level, articles on arrest and trial of Isaev thus became ‘discourse as social practice’ and helped in setting up of agenda. What appeared to be normal reportage and not any opinion based analysis consequently helped in ‘manufacturing consent’ subtly against instabilities and in favour of creating and maintaining Gramscian ‘hegemony’ thus helping in the agenda of the ruling establishment. Although not connected with elections, but the timing of conviction of former Minister of Justice and a Parliament deputy Aida Salyanova⁴¹ and leader of Ata-Meken socialist party Omurbek Tekebayev⁴² in separate cases of corruption and abuse of power too had raised eyebrows. One of the candidates Azimbek Beknazarov withdrew from race alleging use of ‘unfair’ means in elections,⁴³ and his disappointment with the way politics had evolved in Kyrgyzstan.⁴⁴

When Babanov claimed, apparently based on a survey, that he would get 65% of votes, none less than the office of the President refuted his claims. Atambayev’s office instead issued a detailed survey, conducted by ‘leading sociological services in Kyrgyzstan from March to October 2017’.⁴⁵ According to this survey, the graph in favour of Jeenbekov consistently increased from March 2017 when it was only 4.8% to October when it had reached over 40%, although it was still short of the majority mark.

⁴⁰ Бенгард, А. (Октябрь 7, 2017). Алмазбек Атамбаев рассказал о навязываемых Кыргызстану Казахстаном руководителях. *24.kg*. <https://24.kg/vlast/64839/>.

⁴¹ Darya Podolskaya, “Aida Salyanova Sentenced to Five Years in Prison,” *24.kg*, October 10, 2017, <https://24.kg/english/65063/>.

⁴² Podolskaya, D. (October 3, 2017). CEC Plans to Deprive Omurbek Tekebayev of his Deputy Seat. *24.kg*. <https://24.kg/english/64359/>.

⁴³ Шамшиев, С. (Октябрь 13, 2017). Почему Азимбек Бекназаров снял свою кандидатуру с выборов президента. *24.kg*. <https://24.kg/vybory/65469/>.

⁴⁴ Шамшиев, С. (Октябрь 13, 2017). Азимбек Бекназаров пока из большой политики не уходит. *24.kg*. <https://24.kg/vybory/65482/>.

⁴⁵ Кудрявцева, Т. (Октябрь 4, 2017). Аппарат президента распространил итоги соцопроса: Жээнбеков опережает Бабанова. *24.kg*. <https://24.kg/vybory/64512/>.

Even State Committee for National Security of Kyrgyzstan (SCNS or GKNB) had issued a statement terming Babanov's purported survey a tactic 'to divert public opinion and the investigation into organization of mass riots with the following attempt to seize power with the participation of his active supporter and members of the organized criminal group into the political mainstream.'⁴⁶ It was rather surprising that the security agency needed to make statement on survey polls and rubbish claims made by a presidential candidate although it also emphasized to be neutral. Note that GKNB had earlier denied Babanov's allegations on political motive behind the arrest of Isaev.⁴⁷

The CEC anyway was weak, and acknowledged that the president had 'immunity under law'.⁴⁸ Although the Vice PM was 'reprimanded' for trying to influence electoral outcome,⁴⁹ but CEC did not take any action against him either as demanded by one of the presidential candidates.⁵⁰ It appeared even more reluctant in acting against Jeenbekov's camp and stricter with the opposition candidates, most notably against Babanov. Thus rarely any concrete action was reported on complaints of the civil society or opposition candidates on allegations of abuse of power. They did not take any action against Jeenbekov even when his campaign advertisement was shown in cinema hall in Bishkek on the Day of Silence.⁵¹ CEC did not really act even when at least three reports of provocations per hour were recorded against supporters of Jeenbekov on the day of the polling.⁵² The CEC and security agencies, on the other hand, dealt with complaints against Babanov and his supporters sternly. 13 complaints were filed against one

⁴⁶ 24.kg (October 2, 2017). SCNS calls Omurbek Babanov's Statement Not True. <https://24.kg/english/64262/>.

⁴⁷ 24.kg (Октябрь 2, 2017). В ГКНБ заявление Омурбека Бабанова назвали не соответствующим действительности. <https://24.kg/vybory/64253/>.

⁴⁸ Бенгард, А. (Октябрь 14, 2017). "ЦИК ответил активисту по жалобе на действия президента Кыргызстана. 24.kg. <https://24.kg/vybory/65556/>.

⁴⁹ Костенко, Ю. (Октябрь 4, 2017). Вице-премьер-министр Кыргызстана получил строгий выговор за агитацию. 24.kg. <https://24.kg/vybory/64524/>.

⁵⁰ Подольская, Д. (Октябрь 4, 2017). Генпрокуратура не будет возбуждать уголовное дело по жалобе Адила Турдукулова, 24.kg. <https://24.kg/vybory/64465/>.

⁵¹ 24.kg (Октябрь 15, 2017). В день тишины в Бишкеке крутили ролики в пользу одного из кандидатов. https://24.kg/agent_024/65582/.

⁵² 24.kg (Октябрь 15, 2017). Количество провокаций со стороны оппонентов Жээнбекова растет. <https://24.kg/vybory/65668/>.

speech of Babanov in Osh, and he was even reprimanded.⁵³ He was accused of inciting the Uzbek minority population although his office denied such allegations, adding that his statement was being quoted selectively and out of context. The CEC, meanwhile, warned that if electoral violations continued, they would withdraw candidates from participating in the poll.⁵⁴ Nonetheless, shunning all allegations of favouring any candidate, First Vice Prime Minister of the Kyrgyz Republic Tolkunbek Abdysgulov, said on behalf of the government that the presidential elections would be completely ‘transparent’.⁵⁵

Even on the Election Day, there were reports of abuses of power by authorities. According to a news report that also featured a video, a woman in Osh oblast was detained as she had taken the ballot out of the booth instead of casting her vote in the electronic ballot box, allegedly because she was not allowed to vote.⁵⁶ In another report, a voter in Jalal-Abad oblast accused the Minister of Agriculture and Food Industry, Nurbek Murashev of beating him outside a polling booth allegedly after a verbal argument.⁵⁷ Some instances of election officials standing when voters went to cast their votes were also reported.⁵⁸ A similar report of election member ‘spying’ on voters’ also came up from Osh.⁵⁹

Ghosts of Bakiyev

As the 2011 Presidential election was held just a year and half after the second President Kurmanbek Bakiyev was ousted by a mass movement, his and his youngest son Maxim Bakiyev’s ghosts were important factors in that election. There were updates on trails of several cases against them regularly, and their names often cropped up during the campaign. Bakiyevs were not really a major electoral factor

⁵³ 24.kg (Октября 2, 2017). Антирекорд. Более десяти жалоб поступило в ЦИК на Омурбека Бабанова за один день. <https://24.kg/vybory/64294/>.

⁵⁴ Бенгард, А. (Октября 10, 2017). Выборы-2017. Центризбирком предупредил, что еще может снять кандидатов с гонки. 24.kg. <https://24.kg/vybory/65098/>.

⁵⁵ Бенгард, А. (Октября 13, 2017). Правительство КР: Выборы президента пройдут прозрачно и на высоком уровне. 24.kg. <https://24.kg/vybory/65473/>.

⁵⁶ Костенко, Ю. (Октября 15, 2017). Задержана женщина, вынесшая бюллетень за пределы участка. 24.kg. <https://24.kg/vybory/65663/>.

⁵⁷ Кудрявцева, Т. (Октября 15, 2017). Избиратель пожаловался, что его избил министр сельского хозяйства Нурбек Мурашев. 24.kg. <https://24.kg/vybory/65670/>.

⁵⁸ Кудрявцева, Т. (Октября 15, 2017). Избиратели жалуются: члены УИК в Бишкеке следят, за кого они голосуют. 24.kg. <https://24.kg/vybory/65703/>.

⁵⁹ Шамшиев, С. (Октября 15, 2017). На одном из УИК на юге ее члены якобы подглядывают в бюллетени избирателей. 24.kg. <https://24.kg/vybory/65702/>.

in 2017, but their ghosts had ceased to die, especially that of Maxim Bakiyev, whose name had become synonymous with corruptions. There was an ‘investigative’ report on the alleged corruption in a real estate company associated with Maxim Bakiyev.⁶⁰ A report on October 7 was based on the angry retort of President Atambayev during the presentation of state awards. He said:

I will deal with anyone who tries to return to the days of Bakiyev. In the future, we need to figure out who is our friend and who is the enemy. Do we need people who want to destabilise the country? We have suffered enough; we already sacrificed several excellent citizens.⁶¹

Atambayev camp often associated their rivals with Bakiyevs in an attempt to discredit them. But even Babanov camp did not shy away from accusing his rival of proximity with Junior Bakiyev. A report on October 4 pointed out how both candidates accused each other of corruption and ‘being friends with Maxim Bakiyev’.⁶² In using Bakiyev’s name, however, Atambayev camp very smartly scuttled whatever anti-incumbency factors they might have had that would have affected Jeenbekov’s prospects. The politically astute move of accusing Babanov to be an agent of Kazakhstan at the cost of diplomatic deadlock, and creating nationalistic fervour too might have helped counter the anti-incumbency. Comparing Bakiyevs with corruption and instability thus helped in the dominant reading of ‘discursive practice’ and went in favour of the Jeenbekov camp.

No Model Code of Conduct?

In most countries, once election dates are announced and nominations begin, a ‘model code of conduct’ becomes applicable. During this period, the incumbent government is permitted to carry out only routine work, but are barred from inaugurating new projects or announcing any new package or making appointments that may influence the electoral behaviour. Kyrgyz law is not discreet on the subject, and consequently the incumbent government appeared to have upper hands. Although not all reports were taken into consideration as election related stories for this research, but almost on daily basis there were reports of President Atambayev inaugurating some projects, and speaking openly about his choice; or

⁶⁰ 24.kg (Октябрь 2, 2017). Кому достались коттеджи Максима Бакиева? Журналисты провели расследование. <https://24.kg/obschestvo/64337/>.

⁶¹ Бенгард, А. (Октябрь 7, 2017). Алмазбек Атамбаев рассказал о тех, кого надо выжигать каленым железом. 24.kg. <https://24.kg/vlast/64843/>.

Quote in Russian language: ‘Я разберусь с каждым, кто хочет вернуть времена Бакиева. В будущем нам надо разобраться, кто нам друг, а кто враг. Нужны ли нам люди, которые хотят раскачать страну. Мы достаточно пострадали, у нас и так достаточно погибло прекрасных наших граждан.’

⁶² Шамшиев, С. (Октябрь 4, 2017). Омурбек Бабанов и Сооронбай Жээнбеков обвинили друг друга в дружбе с Бакиевым. 24.kg. <https://24.kg/vybory/64593/>.

the cabinet announcing fund or aid for projects. For example, President handing ‘keys to the apartments to the employees of the General Prosecutor's Office’ (October 3),⁶³ or while inaugurating a football academy in Osh on October 12, President Atambayev spoke, referring to the Gallup Poll that described Kyrgyzstan as the ‘most promising country’.⁶⁴ These further illustrated the fact that domination of the ruling class and their ideas was widespread ‘discourse at work’ through construction of ‘preferred’ or ‘dominant’ reading. There was thus constant attempt at exploiting all possible state apparatus to suit their agenda, while at the same time crushing any alternative reading/interpretation even during the election campaign.

Harassment of Media Personnel and Self-Censorship

Ground reports were missing from *24.kg* in 2011 as well, but ‘commentaries and opinion columns on *24.kg* were intensely critical of government policies, and were often interesting to read, although not always well organized’ (Reyaz, 2014). Unlike 2011 Presidential elections, however, this time analyses and opinion based articles were largely missing during the electoral campaign except few advertorials. There was one article on October 4 that analyzed the electoral promises and past achievements of leading candidates, but refrained from criticising anyone.⁶⁵ It is interesting to note that while no independent opinions or analytical pieces were published during campaign, but immediately after the result was declared, opinion pieces, many of them based on conversations with experts were published. In fact, although hardly any voter was quoted in reports during the campaign, on October 16 itself, *24.kg* posted a short video vox-pop. Shot in the capital Bishkek, common citizens were heard saying in the video that they expected little to change with the victory of new President, although some did express hope that Jeenbekov would maintain stability and ‘continue the good work’ of his predecessor.⁶⁶ These clearly pointed to self-censorship by media organizations amidst defamation cases filed against them, including

⁶³ Шамшиев, С. (Октябрь 3, 2017). Алмазбек Атамбаев передал сотрудникам Генпрокуратуры ключи от квартир. *24.kg*. <https://24.kg/vlast/64422/>.

⁶⁴ Мокренко, Н. (Октябрь 12, 2017). Алмазбек Атамбаев: Кыргызстан — самая перспективная страна в СНГ. *24.kg*. <https://24.kg/obshchestvo/65344/>.

⁶⁵ Подольская, Д. (Октябрь 4, 2017). Сравним? Что обещали и обещают нам кандидаты в президенты Кыргызстана. *24.kg*. <https://24.kg/vybory/64529/>.

⁶⁶ *RFE/RL* (October 16, 2017). After Kyrgyz Election, Citizens Expect Little to Change. <https://www.rferl.org/a/kyrgyzstan-election/28798186.html>.

on *24.kg* by Jeenbekov. In fact, on the Election Day, there was a report of attack on a journalist of *Kloop* media, noting that his phone was snatched in Osh.⁶⁷

On the state of media, it needs to be further highlighted that the complaint filed by Jeenbekov against *24.kg* and journalist Kabay Karabekov for an article was upheld by the court.⁶⁸ The article that was later withdrawn after the complaint was filed had alluded that Jeenbekov had gone to Sochi for some secret meeting with Russian authorities in connection with the election. Both *24.kg* and the writer were ordered to pay a high penalty of five million soms (\$ 73,000) each. It was only later as President that Jeenbekov decided to drop charges against *24.kg*.⁶⁹ Karabekov was also summoned by the GKNB for his article in *Kommersant* newspaper where he suggested that security agencies were meddling in elections with the detention of Isaev.⁷⁰

A similar complaint by Babanov against *Vecherniy Bishkek*, on the other hand, was let off without any action.⁷¹ Babanov had hence alleged that not only the CEC was favouring single candidate, but entire government resources, including GKNB, the prosecutor's office and TV channels, in particular the state run KTRK had 'become advocates and agitators' of Jeenbekeov.⁷² The prosecution of news portal *Zanoza* that was shut down in July 2017 after a number of law suits were filed by the Public Prosecutor in 'defence of dignity and honour of President Atambayev' was not directly connected with election. But the court verdict in one of the cases against the media house came on October 4.⁷³ Defamation cases against media by the President and Jeenbekov clearly had adverse effects, and self-censorship was

⁶⁷ Кудрявцева, Т. (Октябрь 15, 2017). На журналиста Клоор напали на избирательном участке в Оше и отобрали телефон. *24.kg*. <https://24.kg/vybory/65698/>.

⁶⁸ *24.kg* (October 6, 2017). *24.kg* News Agency Must Pay 5 Million Soms to Jeenbekov by Court Order. <https://24.kg/english/64713/>.

⁶⁹ *Ferghana News* (February 8, 2018). Kyrgyz President Doubles Down in Slander Lawsuit Against Journalist. <http://enews.ferghananews.com/news.php?id=3783&mode=snews>.

⁷⁰ Подольская, Д. (Октябрь 2, 2017). Журналиста Кабая Карабекова вызвали на допрос в ГКНБ. *24.kg*. <https://24.kg/vlast/64264/>.

⁷¹ Кудрявцева, Т. (Октябрь 2, 2017). В ЦИК спорят — штрафовать или нет «Вечерний Бишкек» за нарушение агитации. *24.kg*. <https://24.kg/vybory/64334/>.

⁷² *24.kg* (Октябрь 10, 2017). Заявление штаба кандидата в президенты Омурбека Бабанова. <https://24.kg/vybory/65096/>.

⁷³ Мамытова, А. (Октябрь 4, 2017). *Zanoza* должна 27 миллионов сомов. Бишкекский городской суд вынес решение. *24.kg*. <https://24.kg/obschestvo/64563/>.

rampant as was clear from the coverage in *24.kg* which avoided any editorial position and refrained from publishing opinion based articles.

Security agencies, election commission as also other state institutions and their resources thus acted as Ideological State Apparatus (Althusser, 2006) in not only promoting the dominant hegemonic reading of media texts, but they tried their best in curbing any alternative oppositional messaging or even negotiated positions by effective abuse of power to favour one candidate. If some articles tried to take a more negotiated or critical positions, they were threatened with defamation suits. This finding too matched with the Election Observation Mission of the OSCE/ODIHR. In the statement after the elections, they said:

The observers received reports of undue restrictions on media freedom. Defamation claims against media outlets by the incumbent president and some candidates had an adverse effect on public debate and resulted in self-censorship...Television outlets, including public broadcasters, failed to provide sufficient and unbiased news coverage of the campaign, in sharp contrast to the high volume of paid political advertising. In their editorial coverage, both public broadcasters monitored were clearly biased.⁷⁴

Role of Civil Society

Civil society was an important stakeholder in the 2017 Presidential elections. A number of election monitoring committees appeared very active during the campaign and appealed for 'free and fair' elections. According to one report, about 12,000 'volunteers' were on ground to help conduct elections smoothly and in fair manner. Besides, over thousand independent observers of the 'Coalition for Democracy and Civil Society' claimed to be keeping watch on over 500 polling booths.⁷⁵ Civil society representatives were also critical of attempts at silencing media and deteriorating human rights records.⁷⁶ From October 15 onwards, stories based on what local civil society groups grabbed headlines. The preliminary report of the OSCE/ODIHR succinctly noted: 'Civil society played an important role in civic and voter education and also undertook comprehensive long-term and short-term observation, contributing to increased transparency in the electoral process.'⁷⁷

⁷⁴ Press Release of the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, issued on October 16 2017, <http://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/350016>.

⁷⁵ Костенко, Ю. (Октябрь 13, 2017). Независимые наблюдатели будут работать на 500 избирательных участках. *24.kg*. <https://24.kg/vyborny/65471/>.

⁷⁶ Asanov, D. (October 3, 2017). Human Rights Defenders: It is Inadmissible to Silence the Media. *24.kg*. <https://24.kg/english/64403/>.

⁷⁷ OSCE Statement, October 16, 2017.

As domestic media in Kyrgyzstan was severally under-staffed and lacked trained ground reporters, they often relied on NGOs for news. General surveys, reports prepared by NGOs on human rights track record, environment hazards, economic surveys, corruption, education, etc. besides election mood surveys provided media with relevant information that were packaged and produced as news. One such report on October 6 was based on a telephonic survey by the Coalition for Democracy and Civil Society that claimed that ‘voters do not have enough information about presidential candidates’.⁷⁸ According to the survey, 99.5 percent of respondents knew about the forthcoming presidential elections, 92.5 percent intended to vote; and every fourth person surveyed was not satisfied with the work of the CEC.

Media thus played the crucial role in advocacy. Without media, civil society groups, particularly the capital based NGOs, would have had their influence severally cut short. Although state machineries tried their best to suppress different point of views, media still gave spaces to opposition candidates and published their statements, even though many of them were sponsored. For example, when Isaev was arrested and his trial was going on, *24.kg* also published clarifications given by Babanov (mostly as sponsored articles), but also in news reports. Besides statements by supporters of Isaev, who came together to form a forum to work for his release, were also published in *24.kg*.⁷⁹ This showed that although the state machinery did try to curb articles critical of them, or articles that were speculative, but the mediascape was not completely blanked out.

International Observers

The question of transparency, credibility and approval of international observers remained important part of news. According to a report, the CEC had accredited more than 765 international observers, representing 58 countries and 56 organizations, to monitor the October 15 elections.⁸⁰ Besides, journalist from ‘35 foreign media and 67 foreign correspondents...Seven foreign television channels, seven radio stations, five printed and fifteen Internet publications’ were also given accretions for election coverage.⁸¹ By the evening of October 15 itself, and several reports on following days, were on observations made by various international observer groups, including representatives of the Commonwealth of

⁷⁸ Костенко, Ю. (Октябрь 6, 2017). Избирателям Кыргызстана недостаточно информации о кандидатах в президенты. *24.kg*. <https://24.kg/vybory/64739/>.

⁷⁹ Подольская, Р. (Октябрь 4, 2017). Дело Канатбека Исаева сфабриковано по инициативе провокаторов. *24.kg*. <https://24.kg/obschestvo/64503/>.

⁸⁰ Podolskaya, D. (October 13, 2017). CEC Accredits More Than 700 International Observers for Presidential Elections. *24.kg*. <https://24.kg/english/65386/>.

⁸¹ Подольская, Д. (Октябрь 13, 2017). Выборы-2017. Освещать процесс голосования будут журналисты 35 иностранных СМИ. *24.kg*. <https://24.kg/vybory/65411/>.

Independent States (CIS), the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), OSCE, China, and other countries. On the evening of October 15, observers from the CIS appreciated the ‘calm atmosphere’ in which voting was conducted.⁸² Secretary General of the SCO, Rashid Alimov told journalists that the election was quite competitive, adding that observers did not receive any report of ‘interference in the electoral process’ or any kind of pressure on independent observers.⁸³ On October 16, there was another report that noted that the observer mission of the SCO recognized the elections of Kyrgyzstan as ‘open, free and democratic’.⁸⁴ There were at least three reports based on what observers from the CIS mission said. They, overall ‘positively assessed the election’,⁸⁵ terming it, ‘organized and peaceful’,⁸⁶ according to Sergei Lebedev, Chairman of the Executive Committee of the CIS. They, however, also acknowledged the shortcomings in the voters’ list.⁸⁷

International observers did not register any major violation, according to one report in *24.kg*. The member of the Central Election Commission of Azerbaijan, Rauma Aliyev said, ‘The elections were generally democratic and calm, but if there are any failures, they are inevitable...’⁸⁸ OSCE/ODIHR observers also presented journalists with an interim report where they criticised the CEC members for their ‘bias’ against presidential candidates.⁸⁹ They, however, termed the elections in general as ‘democratic, competitive and well-organized’ although some ‘violations were noted’. Positive statements from international observers clearly give legitimacy to the electoral process and the outcome.

⁸² Костенко, Ю. (Октябрь 15, 2017). Наблюдатели от миссии СНГ отмечают спокойную обстановку на участках. *24.kg*. <https://24.kg/vybory/65616/>.

⁸³ Подольская, Д. (Октябрь 15, 2017). Наблюдатели ШОС: Выборы президента Кыргызстана проходят на высоком уровне. *24.kg*. <https://24.kg/vybory/65695/>.

⁸⁴ Кудрявцева, Т. (Октябрь 16, 2017). Миссия ШОС признала выборы в Кыргызстане открытыми, свободными и демократичными. *24.kg*. <https://24.kg/vybory/65809/>.

⁸⁵ Костенко, Ю. (Октябрь 16, 2017). Наблюдатели миссии СНГ положительно оценили выборы президента Кыргызстана. *24.kg*. <https://24.kg/vybory/65753/>.

⁸⁶ Костенко, Ю. (Октябрь 16, 2017). Сергей Лебедев: Выборы президента Кыргызстана прошли организованно и спокойно. *24.kg*. <https://24.kg/vybory/65759/>.

⁸⁷ Костенко, Ю. (Октябрь 16, 2017). Наблюдатели от СНГ: Списки избирателей сформированы тщательно, но были проблемы. *24.kg*. <https://24.kg/vybory/65757/>.

⁸⁸ Подольская, Д. (Октябрь 15, 2017). Выборы-2017. Международные наблюдатели никаких серьезных нарушений не отмечают. *24.kg*. <https://24.kg/vybory/65685/>.

⁸⁹ Подольская, Д. (Октябрь 16, 2017). Наблюдатели БДИПЧ/ОБСЕ упрекают членов ЦИК в предвзятости в отношении кандидатов. *24.kg*. <https://24.kg/vybory/65826/>.

Experts Speaking

As pointed earlier although rarely any expert opinion was published in the run-up to the elections, as soon as it was over, *24.kg* published several reports based on what experts felt on the outcome of the elections. *24.kg* spoke to Stanislav Pritchkin, an analyst with London-based reputed think-tank Chatham House. According to him, the victory of Jeenbkov was only ‘first stage in the transition of power’.⁹⁰ He suggested that an immediate task for the President-elect and his foreign ministry would be to restore ties with Kazakhstan. Another analytical piece, published on October 16, was not an original copy, but based on an article in *Forbes Kazakhstan* by Political scientist Dosym Satpayev.⁹¹ The *Forbes* article had positively assessed the presidential election that was hailed for first peaceful transition and offering an alternative model in the region⁹². Yet another article was based on the opinion of Andrei Grozin, Head of the Central Asia Department of the CIS Institute, published in *Russia Today*.⁹³ It talked of Jeenbekov’s base in Osh in south where he served as governor before moving to Bishkek, his business-like attitude, his limited circle of acquaintances – which would be a boon – and his short stint as the Prime Minister.⁹⁴ It did mention about his lack of experience in foreign relations, but noted that it was the work of the foreign ministry and he would have advisers, adding that he would soon pick up. Overall, instead of critically looking at his leadership, the tone of the article was adulatory.

Considering the high voltage attack against Kazakhstan’s President’s purported words of support to Babanov that led to the deadlock in the bilateral relations between two neighbours, *24.kg* spoke to a Kazakh political scientist on how Kazakhstan would see the election outcome. Kazakhstani political scientist Erlan Karin noted that his country would be equally comfortable with anyone who holds the

⁹⁰ Подольская, Д. (Октябрь 16, 2017). Победа Сооронбая Жээнбекова — первый этап транзита власти. *24.kg*. <https://24.kg/vlast/65805/>.

⁹¹ Бенгард, А. (Октябрь 16, 2017). Досым Сатпаев: Зря ЦИК Казахстана не послал наблюдателей на выборы в Кыргызстан. *24.kg*. <https://24.kg/vyboru/65754/>.

⁹² Сатпаев, Д. (Октябрь 16, 2017). Что думают политологи о выборах в Кыргызстане и новом президенте. *Forbes.kz*. https://forbes.kz/process/expertise/что_думают_политологи_о_выборах_в_кыргызстане_и_новом_президенте.

⁹³ *RT.com* (Октябрь 15, 2017). Эксперт объяснил лидерство Жээнбекова на выборах президента Киргизии. <https://ru.rt.com/9few>.

⁹⁴ *24.kg* (Октябрь 16, 2017). Эксперт объяснил лидерство Сооронбая Жээнбекова на выборах президента. <https://24.kg/vyboru/65735/>.

high office and they never had any preference in particular.⁹⁵ He reminded that none of the presidential candidates ever advocated for estranged relations with Kyrgyzstan's northern neighbour.

Infographics and Multimedia

Other than promotional articles, info-graphics were sparsely used, except in presenting election outcome. There was one rare truly multimedia and detailed feature on October 11, but it was a sponsored article by Jeenbekov on his campaign and how his electoral agenda was 'well thought out (and) logical (that would lead to) a national revival'.⁹⁶ There was also one interactive story on October 13 on different heads of states elected in Kyrgyzstan since 1990.⁹⁷ A photo slideshow captured the moments of voting on October 15.⁹⁸ There was another interesting info-graphic based story on October 16 that divided the data on total election fund of each candidate with the number of votes they got to find out how much did a vote cost.⁹⁹ The price of one vote varied from 12 soms to almost 5 thousand soms.

Although many of the reports were limited to texts, there were also some reports that had photographs (few even had slideshows) as well as videos in few cases. As is happening across the world, many stories were sourced from social media, and video and photographs were taken from social sites. Multimedia tools were used to the extent of loose assortments of text, photographs and video, instead of a comprehensive packaging of the content with the help of easily available advance technologies. These illustrated that media professionals lacked required skill and training as well as resources to produce such new-age multimedia packages.

Conclusion

Micro level analysis of coverage of the Kyrgyz presidential election in *24.kg* showed that qualitatively contents were not very rich. Instead of improving on its content and presentations in six years, when I

⁹⁵ Бенгард, А. (Октябрь 16, 2017). Ерлан Карин о победе Жээнбекова: Для Казахстана удобен любой вариант. *24.kg*. <https://24.kg/vybory/65752/>.

Quote in Russian language: Лидеры Кыргызстана всегда понимали, что необходимо не только поддерживать дружественные, но и строить более активные отношения с Казахстаном.

⁹⁶ *24.kg* (Октябрь 11, 2017). Народная платформа сооронбая жээнбекова. <https://24.kg/vybory/65197>.

⁹⁷ Подольская, Д. (Октябрь 13, 2017). Как выбирали президентов Кыргызстана. Timeline. *24.kg*. <https://24.kg/vybory/65310/>.

⁹⁸ Асанов, Д. (Октябрь 15, 2017). Жители новостроек в Бишкеке выбирают нового президента. Фоторепортаж. *24.kg*. <https://24.kg/vybory/65649/>.

⁹⁹ Кудрявцева, Т. (Октябрь 16, 2017). От 12 до 5 тысяч сомов. Сколько стоили кандидатам голоса избирателей. *24.kg*. <https://24.kg/vybory/65761/>.

first observed the coverage of presidential elections in *24.kg* in 2011, the contents had, on the contrary, gone downhill. News reports were presented in such a way that it helped interpellate a certain discursive practice that would help ruling elites. Domestic media thus largely failed in its responsibility of acting as watchdog and in objective and unbiased reporting during elections. Media was reduced to act as a trumpet for one or the other candidate during elections. Media contents helped in agenda-setting by the 'dominant reading' of texts intended for readers for the construction of 'hegemony' of 'ideas of the ruling class'. They at the same time self-censored themselves, and were conscious to avoid critical articles or any investigative pieces, particularly against the government for fear of attracting title suits and persecutions, and more importantly losing sponsors. While the state run media toed government lines, independent private media, like *24.kg*, busied themselves in extracting maximum revenues from elections through advertisements and sponsored articles.

Weak media structure, allowing paid contents, however, often came to the rescue of opposition candidates in spreading their messages. Realising that their campaigns would otherwise not get adequate media coverage, opposition candidates spent a lot of their campaign money on advertisements as well as sponsored articles. According to a PR in *24.kg* on October 13, the last day of the campaign, Babanov was 'live across the country on all leading TV channels, radio stations as well as online on YouTube and Facebook, simultaneously' and also answered questions from the audience.¹⁰⁰ Owing to financial dependencies, news media were unable to evolve and mature in Kyrgyzstan and other Central Asian republics to be able to play the critical role of a watchdog. Lack of training and hence professionalism too can be attributed to the weak foundations of the mediascape.

Although Kyrgyzstan was the only country from the region to fall under the 'partly free' category in the 2017 annual report of the Freedom House (others were still in 'not free' zone), it suffered from economic dependence of media industry and lack of political culture of plural polity. Politicians were still not used to taking up criticisms and preferred a more docile media that toe their lines. Most of the private media are owned either by politicians themselves or oligarchs considered close to them. Kyrgyz Constitution and laws gave freedom of speech and press, but it was not uncommon to detain or arrest journalists for his/her articles. 2016-2017 was not particularly a good year for freedom due to the presidential elections

¹⁰⁰ *24.kg* (Октябрь 13, 2017). Прямая линия с Бабановым: сегодня на НТС и всех независимых телеканалах страны. <https://24.kg/vybory/65450/>.

as the incumbent President went on an overdrive to make sure that his chosen candidate succeeded him. It should be noted though that even if the domestic media might not be as critical, but it served an important function of documenting events and keeping regular updates for others – particularly international media - to analyze and critique.

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http://demokratizatsiya.pub/archives/03-2_Haghighayeghi.PDF.
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