



Roundtable

“Reporting on political conflicts in KR: how to keep the balance of opinion?”

Roundtable

On October 14 the Bishkek Press Club held a roundtable on “Reporting on political conflicts in KR: how to keep the balance of opinion?” Public figures, political scientists, media experts and journalists participated in the roundtable.

List of participants:

Moderator: Erlan Abdyldaev, director of the Institute for War and Peace Reporting

Aida Kasymalieva, editor for Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, project “Reporting Central Asia” of the Institute for War and Peace Reporting

Jennifer Croft, consultant of the project “Human Rights Protection and human rights education through the media in Central Asia”, Institute for War and Peace Reporting

Alexander Kulinskii, chairman of the commission dealing with complaints against the mass media;

Grigory Mikhailov, correspondent of the newspaper “Nezavisimaya Gazeta”

Naryn Ayip, director of KNIA Kabar

Nur Omarov, political scientist

Dmitry Orlov, correspondent of the newspaper *MSN*

Kubat Otorbaev, director of Radio Azattyk

Temir Sariyev, leader of the Ak Shumkar political party

Ksenia Tolkaneva, correspondent of 24.kg

Begaim Usenova, director of the Media Representative Institute

And participants of the project “Enhancing the capacity of journalists in covering political conflicts”.

Erlan Abdyldaev: Dear friends, first of all, I would like to welcome you all to the Bishkek Press Club and express my gratitude to you for accepting the invitation to participate in our roundtable. The topic of the roundtable is “Reporting on political conflicts in Kyrgyzstan: how to keep the balance of opinion?”.

This problem is very topical. Experts on this issue are taking part in our roundtable today. There will be three speakers. The first speaker is Kubat Otorbaev, head of Radio Azattyk. The topic of his report is “International standards of journalism - the key to keeping the balance in coverage of political conflicts. The experience of Radio Azattyk. Our second speaker is Alexander Kulinskii, the chairman of the commission dealing with complaints against the mass media. The topic of his speech is “Ethical code for journalists in covering political conflicts.” The third speaker is Mr. Nur Omarov. He will announce the topic of his report later.

If you have no objection, we can proceed. I give the floor to Mr. Otorbaev.

Kubat Otorbaev: Free press is now experiencing hard times. Self-censorship has become the main determining component in the work of the media. Journalists in most cases avoid controversial subjects, as the number of attacks on journalists has increased today. Some media workers have been forced to leave the country after facing legal prosecutions and receiving direct threats to their lives. Legislation does not protect the rights of journalists either. If someone sues a journalist, defending his honor and dignity, the journalist, not the plaintiff, will have to prove that the opponent's honor is unharmed.

The political situation appears stable, but this quiet period came after several arrests of opposition activists. You know that now there are several trials taking place. I think that in such difficult moments, certain journalists and the media are protected only by international standards, where the

author acts as an arbitrator. As our colleague Alexander Kulinskii once correctly noted, an arbitrator is in a minefield. And pray to God that the journalist himself does not step on a mine, which is set to "blow up" not only opponents but also those who dare to criticize the tactics of one of the parties. Sometimes journalists unwittingly are the only witnesses who saw with their own eyes (or filmed and recorded on the tape recorder) some illegal actions. In this case, the information of journalists is the only evidence with which one can change the course of a trial and seek justice. But it is unclear why such valuable information is not included in criminal cases. Almaz Tashiyev, a journalist killed by a policeman, when still alive, lying on a hospital bed, told our correspondent that he had been beaten. To obtain corroborating information, we contacted the police, and only then our law enforcement authorities drew their attention to this glaring fact.

I would like to note that Radio Azattyk is one of the radio services of Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty, which have been operating for fifty years; thus, our radio is working according to the standards that have stood the test of time. Ideally, any information should be unbiased and communicated in an impartial manner, and the authors must accurately provide diverse views. To cover rapidly changing situations, the Radio Azattyk uses different sources of the conflicting parties. As a rule, in such cases it is most difficult to obtain information from representatives of the government, not from civil society and the opposition. Sometimes state officials ask us to give them more time to reflect on all the nuances of their answer. Some officials request permission from their bosses before giving an interview.

I agree that there must be the opposition. But different people represent the opposition at different times, and, like government structures, it is always subject to rotation.

On March 24, 2005, when Askar Akayev was criticized, the Radio Azattyk interviewed Osmonokun Ibraimov, who was then an ardent supporter of Askar Akayev. Once, one of the President's former spokesmen told me that Radio Azattyk paid too much attention to the legal proceedings against Ishenbai Kadyrbekov. I replied that when Felix Kulov, Topchubek Turgunaliyev, Tursunbek Akun, Omurbek Suvanaliyev, Beknazarov and others were in police detention, we also covered all these legal processes.

Before the events of March 24 there had been attempts to arrest the current President. This topic was also covered by Radio Azattyk. After the March events, Topchubek Turgunaliyev said that Radio Azattyk paid more attention to the supporters of the opposition. A year later, the picture radically changed. Today, as never before, Topchubek Turgunaliyev is grateful to Radio Azattyk...

When political passions run high in the country, when remarkable events such as elections, referendums or mass protests take place, "Azattyk" receives much criticism from all sides. Often, different parties wish to make their voices sound louder and more efficient.

International and local organizations commended our work during the last presidential election. For example, according to the OSCE, only Radio Azattyk provided more or less objective information. According to the estimates of the Media Representative Institute and the Public Association of Journalists, Radio Azattyk allotted almost proportionate airtime to the two top candidates for the presidency. At the same time, according to Begaim Usenova, the Director of the Media Representative Institute, other media allotted most of the airtime to only one candidate. As you know, today there is a trial in Balykchy, where 19 people are accused of an attempted coup d'etat during the presidential election. The Radio Azattyk also pays much attention to this, because it is about the fate of people. Like other listeners, civil servants also express their gratitude, as only through Radio Azattyk can they receive information on the Balykchy trial. However, our correspondent tries to maintain balance, giving the views not only of prosecutors and policemen but also providing the arguments of the accused.

Summing up, I wanted to note that when monopolization affects all structures of the state, it is very difficult to be balanced. When lies and misinformation prevail in society, it is very difficult to be a source of alternative information. In such a situation, our job, which is based on various views, is often perceived as the voice of the opposition. But before accusing journalists of one-sidedness, participants themselves must be tolerant, open, patient and objective. Thank you for your attention.

Erlan Abdylidaev: Thank you, Mr. Otorbaev, for your interesting and informative presentation. It touched many important aspects of the media activities in Kyrgyzstan at the present stage, including the issues, which cause a great resonance in society.

Let's listen to the second report. The topic is "An ethical code for journalists in covering political conflicts."

Alexander Kulinskii: Hello, dear colleagues, both current and future colleagues in political, journalistic and NGO areas, as now I am working in all those areas.

Today I would like to draw your attention to what I am working on quite a lot recently - the introduction of an ethical code for the journalistic community, which the journalistic community so zealously resists. It should be noted that, unfortunately, the years of independence brought a short period of rise for journalism in Kyrgyzstan and an endless period of decline. We continue to be in this state of endless decline. And the problem is not how professional (or unprofessional) the journalists themselves are, the problem is that the political environment, in which we are living, is changing.

When the time of independence began, there was one country; but today, it is another country - the country of the winning revolution, and now it enters the third stage of the revolution – the chronic stage, when the winners begin to dominate and suppress all the others. This is a rather hard historical period. But we are not the first. Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, as well as Russia and Azerbaijan, have already experienced it. If you look at the media in these countries, you will find mostly entertainment media. If you pay attention to what is happening today in the media market in Kyrgyzstan, you can notice that there is the process of transition to the entertainment media; it is especially evident in the Kyrgyz-language media; this process is less evident in the Russian-language media. Russian-language media has become extinct, and there are different historical reasons for that.

I must say that journalists also suffered a number of transformations during this period. Previously, in the Soviet Union, the journalist was a kind of king and god. The older generation remembers this time –journalists served as the highest instance, and people turned to them to solve their problems. Today the journalist is a kind of negative character, somebody who can be beaten and harmed. People treat journalists as the ones to whom one should not speak because there is no guarantee that journalists will not write something wrong. This reflects the problem of not only our society but also of the journalistic community. We must pay “tribute” to all of us. We have done everything possible to contribute to the situation where society does not like us. So we’ve got the answer.

Why did this happen? Because during this period, unfortunately, little emphasis was made on professional norms, standards and professional ethics of journalists. All perceive such ethics as a way to restrict the activities of journalists. But I have always said and keep on saying that the ethics in journalism are what help us, journalists in the minefield, to live. Journalists actually walk through a minefield, as our’ society today is a real minefield. This minefield, at any moment, may deprive us of health, life, and job opportunities, because the historical situation is like that. We must protect ourselves.

I have given this example many times, but since there are many young people here today, I will bring it up again. In Finland, my colleagues from a similar self-regulation committee, when explaining to journalists why it is necessary to use the ethics of journalism, ask: “You guys, are you modern people? ” They get an answer: “Yes, we are modern.” They ask further: “Do you have a condom with you? ” They get an answer: “Yes, we do because we are modern guys.” “So such a code of ethics is a kind of protection, a kind of condom for a journalist.” This is how they explain it there. There they have a completely different level of understanding. Maybe it's not the most proper example for us, but in general, if we take a deep look at the situation, we really need some protective means to continue working.

In fact, the risk to journalists is increasing every year. The Ethical Code, which has passed the test of time, was changed a little in April this year; new articles were added, and some new aspects were added in old articles. Ten articles (of 23) are about the coverage of political conflicts. I would say that, actually, the Ethical Code was designed for a professional journalist. If a journalist finds it necessary to be a serious professional, he certainly adheres to ethical standards. If he does not want to be an up-to-date professional journalist, he will ignore this code and each time will violate it. Ten articles of the Code, as I have said, directly address political conflicts reporting, and I will tell you why. We are all humans and try to adapt to any situation that arises. We all come over to somebody's side. While somebody starts to serve someone, the other continues to resist.

But today, the camp of pro-presidential and pro-governmental media, or the people associated with the government, is much larger than the opposition camp. If you recall the circulation of opposition newspapers on the eve of the March revolution and compare it with what is available today, you will see a great difference. Today, the opposition media, with regard to their circulation, are at the bottom. Today there is no TV channel that could adequately, objectively and with some degree of criticism cover the situation in our country, including political conflicts. We all must continue to work in these circumstances, regardless of the kind of camp we are in, and abide by certain principles, in order to not be ashamed to go outside and look into people's eyes.

Now I will speak about those ten articles. First, as I said, journalists adapt to any situation quickly enough; our profession somehow contributes to this. Often some words appear in reports or newspaper articles not because a journalist was forced to write them, but because the journalist wishes to settle scores with somebody whom he reports about, or he simply expresses his opinion, or he immediately realizes that it would be better to write like that, in order to have no problems in future.

In this regard, the Code has several articles that deal with that. First, journalists cannot use their official positions for profit. Unfortunately, it has become a common practice lately: journalists use their official position to reach some sort of economic, social, and sometimes political benefits. For a person it is not bad, but for a professional journalist it is unacceptable.

Article 22 says that a journalist has no right to settle scores with somebody through the media. I could give many examples, as I have seen myself how journalists settle their scores with politicians, just because once those politicians did not answer their questions. Such a situation happened to a well-known politician three years ago. He refused to answer the questions of a local TV journalist. This journalist has never been balanced. He said loudly (so that almost everybody in the studio heard) that he would make a terrible report about that politician on TV. And he really made a terrible report some time later, so that the politician was insulted. Unfortunately, such situations occur quite often.

Kubat Otorbaev talked about the standards; he said that a journalist should be impartial, objective and accurate – those are the three basic parameters that apply to modern journalism. But the word "objectivity" is so vague today, and the government has really contributed to this "vagueness", in order to beat on journalists. I handed out an article by the Russian journalist Andrew Archangelskii to the students who are present here. In his article Archangelskii speaks on the topic of objectivity. A journalist cannot be objective because he is a human too, he also sees and hears something, and something goes through his heart. And he should seek this objectivity. As Posner said when he visited us last year: a journalist cannot be objective and impartial; a journalist may seek to be objective and impartial as much as it is possible. But, unfortunately, our journalists do not manifest the desire to be objective and impartial as much as it is possible.

I have been working as a journalist for many years, and I can compare what was going on ten years ago and what is going on today. In many ways, we remain where we were. But the methods for the destruction of politicians and opponents have become more sophisticated, while journalists themselves and the quality of their work remain the same as they were ten years ago. The principles and covert methods of influence and suppression also remained the same. In fact, all remained in the same condition.

I am one of the supporters of the idea that journalism goes through three stages. First - the lowest stage - is propaganda journalism, when a journalist does not care whether someone will read his articles or not. He writes just because he was told and ordered so, because it is propaganda. The second stage is business journalism. It is more developed. Journalists write in order to earn money. In our country an example of such journalism is the newspaper "Super info." Its circulation is more than 90,000; this newspaper is fully based on the principles of business journalism. The third stage is interlocutor journalism, when a journalist does not impose his view of what is right and what is wrong. He simply gives the facts and offers the reader, viewer or listener to reflect together on how a problem can be solved.

Neither Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, nor other countries, even well-developed, for example, Italy, Spain and Portugal, have such journalism. This is the highest level, which we all should seek. Our journalism remains at the stage of propaganda. When our media covered the conflict in Petrovka, our low professionalism could be seen very clearly. None of the journalists made an attempt to learn the opinion of the Kurdish minority. Nobody talked to them, nobody even tried to come up and ask: guys, how and why did it happen? Miserable Abdullah, who was accused of raping the little girl, will be sentenced to fifteen years of imprisonment, I can assure you. Just because there is no other choice. No one will investigate if he is guilty or not.

It is a big question whether he is guilty or not. But no one today tries to understand it, because no one, including journalists, is interested in it. Journalists did not try to talk to him, did not try to talk with representatives of the national minority. They (representatives of the Kurdish minority) had to arrange a press conference themselves and express their opinion on this. Here is your "objectivity." Journalists simply did not want any objectivity, because many people were motivated by their personal beliefs. This is our personal attitude to the Kurdish minority. Especially if you look at some of our Russian-language newspapers. They very clearly stick to that line. There is no objectivity in our media, and I don't think it will appear in the near future. There is no aspiration to achieve this objectivity among journalists themselves.

Today, unfortunately, we must note that the professional level of journalism is falling quite rapidly. The quality of journalism school graduates is getting worse every year. I'm not talking about some professional qualities; they don't even know how to spell the words correctly. It is a big problem for our modern journalism. Journalists need to be trained, and the Code offers a sufficient number of methods, teaching how to be as objective and impartial in any situation as possible. What prevents a journalist from coming up and asking someone simple questions, which are not based on his personal sympathies or antipathies, questions that aim at understanding the situation and allowing other people to understand what actually is happening?

Did we understand what happened in the village of Iskra in 2005? No, we didn't, because journalists did not try to investigate the matter. Will we understand what happened in the village of Petrovka? I doubt it. Do we know what happened in Balykchi? If I had not witnessed all those events, I would probably have believed our media. Today few people are interested in why these people were on the square in front of the Balykchi City Hall on that day, how they came there, and their physical condition. If you noticed, today there are two trends in the media: the first one says that they are bad, the other says that they are good. No real investigation has been conducted of how it happened and what are the true reasons for it. And our society does not understand what happened there. You see how we cover these conflicts!

Journalism, unfortunately, has lost its professionalism; it has become of increasingly poor quality. Therefore, people use the media less and less if they want to understand what actually is happening. It is clear that there is political pressure. It is clear that it will continue in the coming ten or fifteen years. But the essence of the journalism profession is that it must resist it and in all possible ways communicate what is actually happening in any given situation.

I handed the Ethical Code to the students who are present here and talked a lot about it. Read it carefully. Some points are well-defined there, and that will allow you to go through the "minefield" with minimal losses. The Ethical Code says much about whom, when and what question may be asked, and what to do in various situations. You just need to read it. And not one or two times, you should read it every time you have to make a moral choice. We possess a sufficiently strong weapon called "the word." Just one article can make a person's life better or can ruin it forever. I brought many such examples. In our history a vivid example is the Aksy events, which were partly provoked by the governmental media that were biased when covering those events, and the price of this provocation was six human lives.

Erlan Abdylidaev: Thank you, Alexander, for your interesting speech.

After the speech of Nur Omarov, we will begin the questions/answers part and then move to the general discussion.

Now let's listen to the speech of Mr. Omarov. The topic is "The media in political conflicts. Do they act as a prosecutor or an arbitrator? "

Nur Omarov: The topic of my speech is a bit provocative. I have a good opportunity today to express my opinion, in particular, as a consumer of the press. We have just heard two representatives of the journalistic community, so I will speak as a consumer of this very information.

I am sure that we should start with the fact that the topic of political conflict is diverse and endless. The topic of the relations, cooperation and the role of the media in political conflicts is no less diverse and endless. Given the current situation not only in Kyrgyzstan but also in other countries, I think it is necessary to look at the problem at a wider level - on a Central Asian level. This problem is growing and raises many questions. Let's take the definition of a political conflict. Political conflict is a clash between competing, alternative political programs and political forces, or between some oligarchic groups, defending falsely debated issues for the population. For example, when some say that they want a presidential form of government, the others say that they want a parliamentary form. The question is who stands behind this. Accordingly, the position of the mass media is being formed, and they start to express the views of politicians.

What is the nature of these political conflicts? These political conflicts may have the nature of a latent bargain between different political groups or of an open conflict. As for the media, without thinking – political conflicts have the nature of public debates in newspapers or the nature of vilifying, i.e. what Alexander was talking about: doing black PR.

In my opinion, everything that happened in the 1990s and the year 2000 in Central Asia has nothing in common with political conflicts (if we take their classical definition), I would rather say that it was a

fight between oligarchic groups, and it still continues today in some of the republics of Central Asia, including, to some extent, Kyrgyzstan. Here one can talk about not only economic oligarchies, but also about political oligarchies. My personal opinion is that our opposition is being "oligarchized" in the sense that the relations between opposition leaders and the opposition are not quite adequate.

It is difficult to say that all that was happening during this period of time was a specific political conflict; it was rather a struggle for the redistribution of influence in political space. Since the power in our country is associated with the possession of resources and property, possession of different kinds of people in the country - all this resembles fights without rules. The role of journalists was estimated in two ways. On the one hand, journalists were used as a kind of tool or, roughly speaking, as a hammer for breaking in. On the other hand, sometimes journalists understood their role in this situation quite clearly and were ready for a certain consensus with such politicians. But, at the same time, it must be said that a number of journalists with active citizenship followed their own way through the media, despite the pressure from the state authorities, which can be seen in a number of lawsuits against journalists taking place since the mid-1990s.

Of course, any consumer is interested primarily in obtaining accurate and adequate information. I am not interested in the opinion of journalists, and I do not like it when somebody tries to impose his/her opinion. I just need reliable information. In a sense, I agree with Alexander that not only Kyrgyz but also Tajik and Uzbek journalists lack professionalism. But maybe somebody forcibly deprives journalists of that professionalism? It is enough to deprive a journalist of professional promotion and growth, in order to prevent a journalist from adequate performance of his function. And also, as I have already said, journalists will never be free and objective. This is obvious because they work either for the government, or for a particular editor and entrepreneur, who somehow influence journalists, paying them a salary. The same happens in a political conflict.

Therefore, coming to a logical conclusion, I would like to mention four defining points, which I have just drafted. They should, in some sense, contribute to the optimization of journalists' understanding of their place in political conflict.

The first point is the government's position on the media. A clear legal framework for the implementation of professional activities is established, or restrictions are imposed; the latter happened not only in sunny Uzbekistan, but also in no less sunny Kyrgyzstan. Journalists are largely unable to give objective information. If we make a brief content analysis of the press in Kyrgyzstan, we might have an impression that all Russian-language publications are working for the government and a small part of our Kyrgyz-language newspapers are defending the interests of the opposition. Besides, all TV channels are closed to the opposition or to those who are associated with it.

The second point is even more important, and it is merged with the first point: the position of a politician in relation to the media. Does a politician perceive the media as a partner or just as a servant? We talked about the rapidly increasing editions of newspapers in periods of political instability. I saw it with my own eyes when some little known sheet with an edition of five thousand copies suddenly began to publish seventy thousand copies during a protest rally. As soon as the rally ended, everything resumed its natural course. As a political scientist I can say that very often this kind of situation happens to political scientists, too. Politicians try to use them for their own selfish purposes. Of course, this situation must be radically changed, although it will be difficult, especially for politicians and the media.

The third point is the position of the media themselves, whether they see themselves in this political conflict as outside observers, as active participants or as moderators of this dialogue between conflicting political parties.

The fourth point is the image of the media in the eyes of consumers, ordinary citizens of Kyrgyzstan, and of other Central Asian republics. In Kyrgyzstan there is a variety of newspapers, and even certain brands have been formed. In general, a person knows what he can find in some newspaper before reading it. Today there is a kind of deformation with respect to those newspapers that have positioned themselves as the opposition ones. Titles are big, but the content is weak. In this sense, the situation is absolutely vague.

Summing up, I would like to explain the topic of my speech: "a prosecutor or an arbitrator?" It would be better if the media played the role of an arbitrator, a moderator, or a bridge between different structures: the state-opposition politicians, the state-civil society, civil society-opposition politicians, i.e. if the media shaped the various circles of communication, which would ultimately fuse and form the very field of tolerance and understanding, which would prevent civil conflicts.

With regard to the current situation, I think that political conflict is still there in a latent form, and only

some effort or certain factors will be sufficient to bring it into the open form after a certain period of time. In my opinion, this will not happen soon, but it is inevitable, because the development model, which is now being imposed in Kyrgyzstan, is mentally not suitable for the country, and eventually it will lead to an explosion. Here, dear journalists, you have the final say. Thank you for your attention.

Erlan Abdyldaev: Thank you, Nur Melsovich, for your report. Now it is the time for questions and answers. If you have any questions, please ask.

Dmitry Orlov: I have a question for Mr. Otorbaev. You say that you are working in accordance with international standards. These standards showed themselves “very well” on August 8 last year, when covering the conflict in Tskhinvali. What would you say?

Kubat Otorbaev: Remind me, please, what happened on August 8.

Dmitry Orlov: On August 8 last year Georgia attacked South Ossetia. CNN, which had been considered the most objective and impartial, reported that, on the contrary, Russia attacked Georgia.

Kubat Otorbaev: I do not remember the coverage of those events. It is difficult to answer. But we always give different views.

Alexander Kulinskii: Can the media be independent from external political forces and be objective? In general, they cannot. Let us recall the British press after the death of the Princess Diana, and what the British royal family had to go through. Let us remember the conflict of 2003-2004, when a phrase said by a BBC radio journalist caused a conflict with a fatal end, when Tony Blair was almost dismissed, other officials were punished and so on. Let's remember how the American press reacted to the invasion of Iraq. There was no objectivity, because there were political circumstances that contributed to this kind of the events reporting. Therefore we cannot say that all media comply with international standards—this will never be so, because people work everywhere, there are different political situations. All the international standards are to some extent idealized. In part, they are enforceable, but when we speak of objectivity and impartiality—there are no impartial journalists, because they are human beings, not robots.

Of course, in August last year, there was real anti-Russian propaganda, but let's see what conclusions the media themselves have drawn from that situation. BBC is persistently working on the quality of their production. If they made a mistake in 2003, they changed administration, changed the journalistic staff, changed their code of ethics, changed their internal rules and began to work again. If they make a mistake, they try to correct it and move forward.

One of the most respected newspapers in the United States of America, the *New-York Times*, in 2006 published in large letters on the front page its apology to the readers. All editorial staff apologized for the fact that they had been too biased when covering the period before the invasion of Iraq and in the beginning of the invasion of Iraq. Once it became clear that there was no chemical, bacteriological and nuclear weapon in Iraq, the newspaper had to apologize and make certain conclusions.

However, we always need to keep in mind that in the United States and Great Britain, where these standards are more or less valid, there exists a clear connection between those standards and financial benefits. If the reader (or viewer) understands that a mass medium is biased, the reader ceases to consume it. This has its immediate impact on the budget. In our country there is no such direct connection, and apparently such connection will not be established soon.

Naryn Ayiyp: I do not think it was propaganda against Russia. CNN conveyed the information which they had obtained. Don't you think that we may consider the fact that during twenty years Russia had been issuing Russian passports to residents of Georgia, who are residents of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, Russia's attack on Georgia? Two years before the conflict, Russia in its military schools taught South Ossetians how to act in this conflict. Also it is known that on the evening of August 7 Russian soldiers, colonels and people of higher military ranks reported from the territory of Georgia.

Erlan Abdyldaev: Dear colleagues, I would like to bring you back to the topic of today's roundtable and return to the realities of Kyrgyzstan.

Roundtable participant: I have a question for Kulinskii. Alexander, you spoke a lot of objectivity. Now let's take another example: twelve members of Hizb ut-Tahrir with the relevant literature have been detained. We give the opinion of official bodies, for example, the National Security Council, the Interior Ministry. Even if I want to interview a detained member of Hizb ut-Tahrir, I will not be allowed to do so. Or even if I manage to interview him and publish the interview in a newspaper, this newspaper will have problems.

Alexander Kulinskii: Yes, this is true. Our legislation, unfortunately, works like this. It is not applied regularly and equally to all; it is used only when necessary and applied selectively. I would say in addition: if you now write that women have no right to be parliamentary deputies, you also will be detained, because, in accordance with Article 5 of the Law on Equal Opportunities for Men and Women adopted in 2007, you break the law.

We must know all these nuances. Unfortunately, Ilim Karypbekov could not come today; he could tell very much about this. The Criminal Code has articles that had never been applied to journalists, but today they are widely applied. False denunciation, the failure to abide by a judicial decision – these articles had never been applied to journalists. Journalists should progress and understand that now the situation is different from that in 1991. Then a journalist could say anything about anyone. Today the situation is different. Journalists must understand that every word can cause punishment, not only moral but also administrative and criminal. These nuances should be considered, and we still need to continue working under the existing conditions. After all, our predecessors, who worked in the 1970s and 1980s, worked under much more stressful conditions. I mean they did not have what we have today. But they could work. They worked; they even could solve some problems.

Ksenia Tolkaneva: You say that our journalists are unprofessional and do not seek objectivity. How can we change this situation? Maybe, international workshops and special courses on professional skills improvement will help? The second question. I think it's a political conflict, too. Land lots are being illegally sold in Bishkek today; many buildings are being illegally constructed. Journalists do not know what to do, because they experience great pressure. They are not allowed to write about it.

Alexander Kulinskii: I have no recipes for teaching professional journalists. Tomorrow and the day after tomorrow there will be an OSCE conference on the problems of education in the field of journalism. Unfortunately, our higher education in journalism is utterly worthless. A graduate of a journalism school cannot just come and start working professionally. Thirteen universities in Kyrgyzstan graduate journalists, some of them have faculties, and some have departments of journalism. Three universities are located in the regions: Karakol, Jalalabat and Osh. All the others are located in Bishkek and graduate every year about six hundred "professionals." But any editor in chief will tell you: in the best case, out of ten graduates you can choose one. Because there is the following tendency: the first two and a half years, students are really devoted to journalism and willing to know something, they are still interested in journalism. Beginning with the third year, they realize that journalism is not for them; they'd better do something else. The best graduates work at advertising or PR agencies, many of them even leave the country. The mediocre, as a rule, work at "Dordoi" market, and those, who did not find their place, work as journalists. That is why we have such journalism.

Objectivity cannot be taught. We can teach the technical way of conveying information. In this regard, workshops proved to be futile. They did not help cultivate the culture of proper journalistic behavior.

Temir Sariev: We should not speak so disrespectfully.

Alexander Kulinskii: Do you want me to tell you the truth, or should I say that all our graduates are good? I am telling you how it is in reality. Of the ten graduates only one is more or less ready to work in the media. And, if it comes to TV, the media invest huge money in retraining, because nobody teaches how to work on TV. They do not know how to work when they come to television. Therefore, they are taught again from scratch.

Temir Sariev: The problem of low quality of education is topical not only for journalists. It is a big problem for all areas. Today, during a TV program I said that the situation in rural schools is terrible. There is no education there.

I have listened to two speakers and I largely agree with you. But I would like to say that a journalist is not a judge. He cannot say who is right and who is guilty. A journalist must disclose the problem, give the word to both parties and then draw his own conclusions. Moreover, not all have the opportunity to draw conclusions. Journalists should give the facts. Sometimes journalists' conclusions are necessary because they shape public opinion.

Second question. It is impossible to do without comparisons. How are developments in the foreign media reported? What do we take for standards? Sometimes they can fail as well. We understand this. In Georgia last year it was a deliberate information attack against Russia. They knew it. They did not repent for giving untruthful information. The mass media is a kind of business, which includes political motives. Therefore, it is not always easy to cover a conflict adequately and with good quality. Governmental media and private media report on the situation in Afghanistan in different ways. Everyone pursues his own political objectives. I think that political motivation wins in many ways,

because there are more levers in politics. Therefore, we should not expect complete objectivity from journalists; besides, they are humans just like us.

Yesterday we visited the school of the Olympic reserve, a former boarding school. I myself studied there when I was a child. It was painful for me when the media began an information war against this boarding school. According to the media, all its students are criminals. We are also graduates of that boarding school, are we criminals? I agree with Alexander, we must listen to all parties and try to find the causes of any conflict. Yesterday we heard what really had happened. On the one hand, it was a conflict, the guys were fighting. But they are athletes, they are the elite of the youth, they were specially selected. They are taught to fight. It is their position. They entered this elite school not to receive a quality education. They entered this sports school to learn the sport, to learn fighting and winning. Therefore, when there is any conflict, they are more aggressive. But we must prevent the development of such conflicts.

I will bring up an example. When a mass brawl started and the police arrested one student of this boarding school near School 38, six other students of the boarding school, not afraid of gunshots, ran up to the policemen to free their friend. This is solidarity. They are brought up in the spirit of solidarity. We cannot condemn them and say that they are bad. The government does not help them financially. We cover the conflict at this school but we do not disclose the problem. Journalists should pay more attention to this.

Sometimes we can read a quality article, and we read it as a textbook, where a journalist discloses the problem itself. That's good. That shows the professionalism of this journalist. Or, for example, a good journalist can interview somebody and reveal the personality of the interviewee. I think it is wrong when journalists just vilify somebody or some event. I experienced it myself during the election campaign. Opposition newspapers vilified me, they were completely biased. Newspapers, which were financed by one group, wrote nonsense. And I could not do anything. I did not sue and defend. As a public figure, I just endured it to the end. But the media also form the public opinion; they give incorrect information. There should be a journalist association in our Republic, which would criticize such actions. There must be some regulatory organization of journalists, which could solve such problems.

Erlan Abdylidaev: Thank you, Temir Argembaevich.

Alexander Kulinskii: Journalism is, unfortunately, a heroic profession. No one ever said that we would be beaten, but it is implied. Journalists initially bore some social burden, when it was necessary to sacrifice something for the sake of certain truth. In the period from 1998 to 2003, journalists had enough heroism to bring the truth to the people.

I will cite the example of the Aksy events. When finally there was a videotape of the shooting, the Parliament was divided into two parts. One part remained in the hall, while the other part, the opposition, went to another room, where the videotape was played. The television station Pyramid, which sought to cover the Aksy events objectively, was not satisfied with this recording from the monitor. We asked for the tape itself in order to show it to the public.

Actually, in order to show thirty seconds of this video, the whole staff of the television channel had to demonstrate a certain heroism. As we had known all the basic methods of influence, we disabled all our phones. At that time, thank God, there were not so many cellular phones. We turned off all major telephones and turned off the light. We did everything in the darkness to create the illusion that nobody was there. During this time we were doing our work. We did all that just to show thirty seconds of the video. Later, many people shook our hands and said that we were heroes. But no one knew that the employees of the Security Council came that evening and turned off the electricity throughout the district, they did everything they could to prevent us from showing this video. All the journalists of the "Pyramid" had been very jittery. Today's journalists should act in the same way; they should demonstrate a certain heroism to show what actually happened. Today's risk in covering events cannot be compared to what was in the past. I think everyone knows why. It is necessary to display heroism. The system is constructed in such a way that we must fight against it. This is our functional task.

Nur Omarov: Information wars are really a very effective method, which is often used to settle political conflicts for the benefit of some party. Last year we saw with our own eyes (with all my respect to the U.S. and Western press): ABC and CNN are under the control of the state, so they passed on the information, which they were ordered to pass. As for the journalists, in a sense, there is a transformation of journalists' consciousness. If in the 1990s many journalists believed in good ideas and ideals, now these ideals turn into material forms.

There are different methods of conveying information. I want to bring a historical example. In 1912 a Russian spy of high rank was exposed in Vienna. The Prussian monarchy did everything possible to avoid the information leakage. Having learned that scandalous information, a daily newspaper in Prague published a little note: "Rumors of a Russian spy are wandering about Prague." They presented this information as a rumor that was spread among the people. But they gave accurate information, which blew up the empire and the society itself. The most accurate information may be communicated in different ways.

Begaim Usenova: What a pity representatives of the state structures do not participate in our roundtable today, because we are talking about political conflicts and the balance of opinion in reporting. It is very important for them to hear how this balance is observed in our country, if pluralism is present in our society.

I would like to speak about the problems that exist in the area of reporting political conflicts. Kubat and Alexander talked about the incompetence of journalists. But we also have a problem with access to information. I do not fully trust the media. If I watch television, I try to filter all their information. I do not believe all newspapers. Information agencies are worth trusting, because they are more objective, but they are also prone to information wars. We are restricted in the right of access to alternative quality sources of information.

Another problem is security. Young journalists have not yet experienced it, but I want you to know what to expect. If you have no idea what to expect, don't follow this way. Money can be earned elsewhere. Our journalists are not safe today, especially those who write about topical political problems. This affects self-censorship. Now the flow of information that we receive does not contain any analysis; information is not collected from multiple sources, and the sources are not checked for reliability.

We monitored the mass media during the elections. The National Television and Radio Committee, referring to one newspaper, made a report about a candidate. This report did not meet any international standards of journalism or code of ethics. They referred to a Kyrgyz-language newspaper, assuming that their hands remained clean. They quoted a source. In fact, journalists should have verified the sources in this newspaper. A similar example is when one of the candidates was accused of meeting voters in a state of alcoholic intoxication. No medical evidence was provided. He was a candidate. Information about him should have been given without any comments. Voters themselves should have made conclusions.

Apathy in the society and the lack of media-consumers' confidence has led to the situation in Petrovka: no one listened to the Kurdish minority. Some Russian-language newspapers were guided by some principles but, in general, indifference, laziness and a lack of journalist culture were greatly demonstrated during this conflict. This problem really does exist.

Kubat Otorbaev: I want to clarify about the events in Petrovka. Our correspondents went to the village and interviewed the representatives of the Kurdish nationality.

Alexander Kulinskii: The first interviews came after those people had spoken at the press conference.

Kubat Otorbaev: We provided this information.

Alexander Kulinskii: I was talking about the Russian-language press, not about the Kyrgyz-language press.

Erlan Abdylidaev: Thank you for your remarks. I would like to comment on the words of Ms. Usenova about the absence of representatives of the state structures today. We, as the organizers, regret that they did not come. We hope that it is not the topic of today's roundtable but busyness that prevented the representatives of the state bodies from attending this roundtable. We hope that in future they will come.

Now I want to give the floor to Naryn Ayyp, and then to the representative of *MSN*. Mr. Narin Ayyp is the head of the Kyrgyz National Information Agency, Kabar.

Naryn Ayyp: Our topic today is the coverage of political conflicts. In any conflict which journalists report, the main thing is to be as impartial as possible. If you support someone, it will be propaganda of one party, not reporting the conflict. It is important for a journalist to follow the rule "do no harm." If you got some information (even very accurate), which can only aggravate the conflict, it is better not to write about it at all. The most important thing is to understand this conflict. If you believe every

word you hear from the parties to the conflict, if you have not understood it, then you are just being used.

I was very surprised today that all support Russia in the South Ossetian conflict. And even Kulinskii – a journalist, who must be objective. Georgia attacked its own territory, not the territory of Russia. I do not want to go further and shy away from today's topic. But what did Russia do when it invaded Chechnya? It is absolutely the same case. It was a Russia's autonomy, which declared independence. Russia attacks it, and this is called the restoration of constitutional order. If Georgia attacks its own autonomy, you, being under the influence of Russian propaganda, perceive it differently. Therefore, we can talk about informational pressure. We are all located in Russia's information field. No one understands English, no one reads other media. The CNN provided the information which they could find at that time. Then they began to give other information.

Pressure exists everywhere, not only in Kyrgyzstan. Speaking of this pressure or of some other things, we require ideal journalism. Ideal journalism exists nowhere. Pressure is in Russia and in the West. Take the example of the CNN news service chief Eason Jordan. In 2005, he was forced to resign from CNN because of just one phrase he said at the Davos forum. It was a closed discussion, just a few billionaires were sitting there, and this discussion was not broadcast or written anywhere. He said: "Our journalists are killed in Iraq not by random bullets, someone shoots them." Two or three months later he was no longer working at CNN.

Remember Don Rather, a famous CBS TV announcer. He showed a paper, which certified that George W. Bush, although being mobilized at his time, did not go to the war in Vietnam, because his father worked in the court at that time. Six months later Don Rather was no longer working for CBS. And he is a famous and great man. Pressure is everywhere, and it is always very strong. Perhaps, in the West it is stronger than here. Because there are also market laws. For example, Eason Jordan was fired not because he said something, but because rich corporations said they would not issue advertisements. This pressure is much stronger than that in Kyrgyzstan.

But the art of the journalist is that he must do something even under such circumstances. For example, a business produces shoes. Competitors press him. Is he going to cease to produce shoes because of the competitors? If you, journalists, cry that you're under pressure, do not undertake these activities.

Dmitry Orlov: I absolutely agree with the second part of the speech of Naryn Ayiyp. Let us not delude our youth and ourselves. There is no freedom of speech, and it will never be. As long as there is power and money and the desire to have all this, it will continue like this. I think we should have, at least, a little bit of conscience.

The second point about the candidates, who drink alcohol, etc. Here we have Temir Sariev. He was a candidate for the presidency and had equal rights with all candidates, but when an opposition newspaper (I stress – an opposition newspaper) wrote that Temir Sariev was a Trojan horse of the "White House"... Even my knowledge of Kyrgyz was enough to astonish me. You, Mr. Kulinskii, commented on the Russian-language press. The Russian-language press is only child's play compared to the Kyrgyz-language press.

Alexander Kulinskii: Actually, I did not talk about who works better and who works worse. This is a standard situation, when rumors, gossip, etc. are encouraged by consumers. This is how money is earned. Some articles about the candidate Atambayev were literally translated for me. About his personal life, about his wife, about some Moscow stories. I have a literal translation of some articles.

The commission dealing with the complaints against the media receives a lot of complaints from politicians who have been vilified. The most famous is the case of a woman deputy of the Parliament who traveled abroad and brought a lot of problems. There were three people in the parliamentary delegation – she and two other Parliament deputies. A few days after their return to Kyrgyzstan, a little note was published on the second page of a newspaper, which normally published rumors. It was written that this deputy, while in the trip to Malaysia, asked her colleague to bring a charging device for her mobile phone. He brought the charging device, and she allegedly told him that she did not need the charging device, she needed him as a charging device.

This was described in the traditional Kyrgyz fairytale style. They wrote that it was a rumor, which was brought by the birds from afar. They wrote it in such a way that it was impossible to sue them. And she had just become a widow at that time. Such an ugly situation. The ethical committee was trying to settle this conflict, but the newspaper only exacerbated it.

I want to say that the Kyrgyz-language press, unfortunately, cultivates such "journalism."

Unfortunately, there are no newspapers in the Kyrgyz-language press today, which can be classified as serious, except governmental newspapers. The latter have a restricted format. Let us recall the newspaper *Alas*, which claimed to have become a good social-political newspaper in Kyrgyz. This newspaper went bankrupt four months later. It was not consumed in this format. But all other newspapers that cultivate it, earn money. In this sense, we follow the format of Russian press. In Russia the situation is the same. Political conflicts are not analyzed so that one could read a newspaper and understand the situation. *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, *Moscowskii Komsomolets*, *Argumenty i Facty* are all tabloids. There is a great tabloidization of the Russian press. And we're following the Russian experience.

As for the Russian-language press in Kyrgyzstan - yes, it tries to provide another point of view, it does not cultivate rumors. But there are enough problems as well. One can take any newspaper and vilify one after another. I have experienced it myself. The same principle works here: journalists do not want to understand what's going on or do not consider it necessary to understand it.

Grigory Mikhailov: Returning to the main topic, I would say that political conflicts have always been, are and will always be there, as long as there is political power. Accordingly, we should accept it. The balance of opinion, as well as objectivity and truth, is unattainable. Another point is that we should strive for it. But let's imagine that a journalist who submits one-sided information has a kind of a bad habit. Let's compare it to another situation. How did people try to combat smoking? They were told many times that it was not good. Such a method did not work. They said that it was ugly. This method did not work either. But when they started to publish the image of the lungs affected by cancer on every pack of cigarettes, it worked.

No, we do not need to publish photos of a shot journalist. But if journalists have no specific motivation to work, they will keep on writing as they see fit. How can this motivation appear? You are talking about conscience, but it won't really help. There is a leadership policy – the policy of the editor and the owner of the newspaper. Today in Kyrgyzstan there is no serious demand for public newspapers. Those media that provide two or more points of view usually work in the non-profit manner. They exist thanks to grants, they do not depend on advertising and circulation. It is a problem. Currently journalists meet consumers' demands. Demand creates supply. As soon as the demand for rumors, "hot charges" ceases and people require something more serious, the editors will require quality from their staff. Conscience is a topic for another discussion.

Roundtable participant: It would be great if people, working for the governmental media, had similar courage and talked openly about it. Not everyone strives for that.

Naryn Ayiyp: It's difficult, but I think it is achievable gradually.

Grigory Mikhailov: I would like to add one point. Meeting young journalists who are still studying or just graduated, I have found a very interesting thing. Not all of them understand that the reality is different from what they hear from the governmental media. People do not try to look at the situation from a different angle, because they do not think it is necessary, nobody teaches them so. Their level of consciousness, perhaps, does not help them understand that other people may lie, and it is necessary to know another opinion. People are willing to accept the truth in any form.

We talked about South Ossetia today, who was right and who was to blame. But no one suggested looking at the conflict from three angles. There are no absolutely right people in any conflict, be it a political or economic conflict. This should be taken as the truth. But, unfortunately, nobody explains it in universities.

Temir Sariev: it turns out that journalists are doomed for eternal persecution, and the state will always be able to control them. I think it is not so. Journalists and editors have the courage and bravery not to surrender. Political parties have to struggle for the right to obtain independent and timely information.

Erlan Abdylbaev: I would like to support Temir Argembaevich. I have an impression that the whole problem of our journalism lies in journalists themselves: they are bad, and higher educational schools train bad journalists. I think it is not so. Besides the level of education, which is low, there are the circumstances in which we are living. It was said today that those circumstances are changing, and not for the better, unfortunately. No matter how good journalists are, under such circumstances they cannot work, and nothing will change. Therefore, here we have a complex task and a complex issue of reporting these conflicts.

As Mr. Omarov said, political conflicts will always exist in any society. The point is that there must be a political environment where people are not afraid to express their opinion. There must be also

journalists who could adequately convey different views. There must be the media, which could do all this. I want to express the hope that not everything is so bad in our country, although there are problems. Young journalists who are present here must know that there should be an idea, which should be followed.

Thanks to all the participants of the roundtable.