



## Roundtable

### "How does self-censorship affect the coverage of political conflicts?"

#### *Roundtable*

On December 3, the Bishkek Press Club held a Roundtable on "How does self-censorship affect the coverage of political conflicts?" within the framework of the project "Enhancing the capacity of journalists in covering political conflicts" with the support of the National Endowment for Democracy (NED). Representatives from state bodies, non-governmental and international organizations, as well as political analysts and journalists, participated in the Roundtable.

#### List of participants:

**Moderator: Muratbek Imanaliev, President of the Institute for Public Policy**

**Samat Abdumomunov**, the radio "Azattyk"

**Melis Aydarkulov**, Head of the Information Policy Department of the State Agency of Culture

**Nurlan Akmatov**, lawyer of the public foundation "Media Representative Institute"

**Ulugbek Babakulov**, the editor in chief of the newspaper "Moskovsky Komsomolets" in Kyrgyzstan

**Nasira Baratbaeva**, the editor in chief of the website "Open Kyrgyzstan"

**Irina Dudka**, the newspaper "Slovo Kyrgyzstana"

**Ayzat Zhakyalieva**, radio «BBC»

**Kabai Karabekov**, deputy of the Jogorku Kenesh

**Ernis Mamyrganov**, expert of the Information Policy Department of the State Agency of Culture

**Asel Omurkanova**, news agency "AKIpress "

**Irina Pavlova**, Information Agency «24.kg»

**Temir Sariev**, leader of the "Ak Shumkar" party

**Azamat Tynaev**, "KP-Kyrgyzstan" newspaper

Also, participants from the project "Enhancing the capacity of journalists in covering political conflicts" were in attendance.

**Muratbek Imanaliev:** Good morning, dear friends, dear colleagues. I am very glad to welcome you and announce the topic of our Roundtable - "How does self-censorship affect the coverage of political conflicts?"

I want to give the floor to our first speaker, Kabai Karabekov.

**Kabai Karabekov:** The topic is complicated and, in some sense, philosophical. I, myself, do not understand what self-censorship is, in legal terms, but I hope to understand it by the end of the Roundtable. In my opinion, self-censorship is the professionalism of a person who works in the media. There are the journalistic ethics and professional training; if a person does not does not mistake the wish for the reality, this is his self-censorship. That is, when highlighting a conflict or an event, he must rely on facts only. In our national school of journalism, there are quite a few teachers, and this is a sign of unprofessional approach to the issue.

Only readers, viewers and listeners can be censors (i.e., assess information). Journalists should not be teachers. Journalists have a goal - they should provide full information about an event or a conflict, and people will draw their own conclusion (i.e., which of the parties in the conflict was right or wrong). And this also applies to self-censorship.

If your material is not properly prepared, readers will not accept it. Besides that, you may encounter legal problems. The party, which considers itself insulted or offended, will try to sue you. And, this is one of the working criterias that must be taken into account.

Hopefully, there are experienced journalists here today, so they know very well. Now, a law on mass media, television and broadcasting is being developed. It is very poorly developed so far.. Therefore,



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we want to conduct public hearings and involve current journalists. I would like them to take an active part in developing this bill, because it affects the journalist community. Many journalists know how to protect the rights of others but they also must be able to defend themselves. This is also an aspect of censorship and self-censorship.

There is, of course, state censorship, when everything is kept in secret; even the number of earthquakes. In this case, self-censorship applies to those people who are trying to make such amendments, i.e., they must evaluate the impact of their amendments. If we keep strictly confident the number of earthquakes, seismic activity, it could lead to panic. It is very easy to propose stupid things, but it is very difficult to cope with panic. So, I think those public figures who have the opportunity to amend the existing legislation, should have some ethics, professional training and self-censorship.

**Muratbek Imanaliev:** Thank you very much. I think that, from this point of view, it is quite difficult to work today. I remember well the Soviet times, when everything was quite simple. There was a special service, which crossed out everything that should not have been published, i.e., taking all the responsibility. That was very convenient...

Let's continue, now I give the word to Ulugbek Babakulov.

**Ulugbek Babakulov:** Journalism by its nature is an activity full of conflicts due to its dependence on social institutions with which it interacts. Interference with editorial activities by public bodies and individual persons, economic and administrative pressure on the media, which affects external and internal censorship, happen quite often. But apart from external censorship, there is internal censorship - editorial censorship or self-censorship for a journalist. The first one is dictated by the so-called editorial policy: allowed and forbidden topics, opinion of authors, intonation of articles, etc.

Self-censorship is when a journalist deliberately removes the moments from his text, which he, for some reason, considers unacceptable for publication. Self-censorship may be moral, when a journalist is aware that some phrases and descriptions are inappropriate or immoral. You, probably remember an article in a Kyrgyz newspaper which described detailed erotic adventures of a well-known deputy, demonstrating erotic scenes, violence and so on. This is the level of self-censorship.

But most often, self-censorship is a result of external constraints on journalists' freedom, i.e., certain sanctions. In a civilized country (democratic and free) it is difficult to introduce direct censorship. There is no state system which would not want to totally suppress the freedom of creativity. Nevertheless, as an alternative to censorship, there are created the conditions when coverage of certain topics, certain attitudes, the use of certain words and phrases are considered undesirable. Authors, who violate these restrictions, are sometimes openly punished, but most often, the state uses methods of indirect pressure against them: the state creates obstacles to publishing such materials. Subconscious self-censorship is also possible; when a journalist avoids disapproved elements subconsciously. He follows the outside limits, believing that only his own internal artistic taste and moral considerations restrict his activities.

Of course, criminal attacks against editors or individual journalists (encroachment on property, psychological violence, threats, unlawful detention or imprisonment, etc.) lead to self-censorship as well. For example, journalists from my organization have said that they received telephone calls with the words: "Behave yourselves, or it will be worse for you." When such things happen, we look through our newspaper to see who could pose such a threat.

Self-censorship also happens because of the fear of prosecution for libeling or for violation of privacy. After such cases, many journalists prefer not to touch polemical themes or to cover them in an extremely superficial manner. The report of the international human rights organization Freedom House, dedicated to the freedom of the press, said that the situation of press freedom deteriorated throughout the world due to the increasing number of political and military conflicts and the tightening of governmental policy on the media. The level of freedom was estimated in accordance with three criteria: the legislative environment, in which the media operate, the level of influence of the press in society and the level of economic pressure on the press. These criteria have demonstrated that free press does not exist in Kyrgyzstan, and "self-censorship is thriving."

Coverage of political conflicts in virtually all mass media of Kyrgyzstan "obeys" the political orientation



of these media - pro-governmental or opposition. Corresponding orientation is the main point of self-censorship by editors and journalists: no criticism of those from "our" camp is allowed. This leads to very biased coverage of the situation where the state authorities are definitely bad, while the opposition is obviously good, and vice versa. As a result, independent media, allowing for critical remarks against those who deserve them, are virtually eliminated.

**Muratbek Imanaliev:** Thank you very much. It has been a very interesting and useful presentation. Now I give the floor to Melis Aydarkulov.

**Melis Aydarkulov:** While preparing this speech, I carefully read the Journalist Code of Ethics of the Kyrgyz Republic, which was adopted at the Republican convention of journalists in 2008, and the amendments, which were made at the Republican convention of journalists this year. I must confess that I do not support the adoption of such kind of document at the level of the republic; at the national level. I have always thought that norms of social and political behavior, sacred to every journalist, must be developed and adopted in every single newspaper or journal. And the strictness of the implementation of these rules or guidelines should become the main working requirement of any periodical. But in general, this document contains professional and moral categories, which provide a journalist with the system of basic psychological norms, determine the position of the journalist under any circumstances, including the coverage of political conflicts, they define the universal rules of conduct for the profession. We can say that they determine the conditions, under which a journalist can be at his best without compromising with his own conscience.

The Code of Ethics, as far as I understood, says that the relationship with recipients of information (i.e., readers, listeners or viewers) is dominant in the professional ethics of journalists. They are principal consumers of what we, journalists, produce (I also consider myself a journalist). Our work is aimed at them, and we monitor recent developments to announce important news in a timely manner. An analysis of this professional ethical document suggests that today the following requirements exist: "Journalist must facilitate the process of democratization, consolidation of the multinational people of Kyrgyzstan, etc. Freedom of speech and expression is an integral part of the journalist's activities. In any situation, the journalist should strive to protect the freedom of speech and oppose the attempts to distort information or introduce censorship. The journalist must not use the media to break the interests of the society, violate human and civil rights in order to advocate war and violence, nor racial, national, regional, sexual, religious and social intolerance".

These requirements certainly do not involve all the nuances of professional journalistic consciousness, regarding the optimization of the interaction with the audience. I have quoted only those of them, which serve as a direct instrument for the implementation of professional skills and moral principles of a journalist. They help journalists in situations of moral choice to focus on those actions that will not cause any significant harm to the recipients of journalist production.

We always say: "Do No Harm". This principle is very important in our profession as well. The consequence of this principle is a steady tradition for the mass media around the world. Demonstrating rare solidarity, journalists of different countries see their noble task - to prevent censorship. By the way, many of the requirements-guidelines, outlined in the Code of Ethics, at first glance look like censorship. But we must recognize that not everything that seems to be censorship is, in fact, censorship. This is not censorship; it is quite a reasonable guideline for self-censorship, dictated by the objective realities of public life. Internal censor, as we often dub self-censorship, is not an enemy of artistic freedom. I would say, it is a good advisor to a journalist who sincerely cares for him and for journalism, for the society and for each person. Any journalist should always have a clear purpose (i.e., self-censorship), especially if he/she covers some political conflict, or when he/she writes about a politician or the Head of the country.

We are all well aware that, even in the countries with democratic governments, there is no such thing as absolute freedom of the press, because the notion of "absolute freedom" in relation to social institutions and to man as a social being is nonsense. In connection with this, I would like to quote an interesting expression, made by one well-known American professor in order to prove the allegation that in the U.S. there is freedom of the press: "The word "Freedom" does not mean that a person is free from everything. It is impossible to be free from all, from other people, from the laws of morality, thoughts and emotions. And no sane person would wish such freedom. The truth is that any freedom should be restricted. Real freedom should be meaningful, an example of such foundation of freedom can be found in the Confucian ethics – here, the basis for restrictions on freedom is the good. Man



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must choose the good, not evil; if evil triumphs, freedom is likely to be abolished. Thus, if we follow this ethic, we should allow freedom only for the sake of good, but not for the sake of evil."

Don't you think those are very wise words? However, in reality, the situation is different, and sometimes the good does not immediately reveal its face; while the evil likes to dress up in the clothes of good. So we, journalists, often make mistakes.

To foresee possible errors, the professional community of Kyrgyzstan is developing and adopting such professional and ethical documents, as the Code of Ethics for the Journalists of KR. 10 provisions of this Code directly or indirectly touch the problems of conduct for journalists in the frequent cases of political conflicts. Alexander Kulinskii, the initiator of the document, is right: if a journalist considers himself a professional journalist, he would certainly follow these ethical standards.

As for the governmental policy in this sphere, in Kyrgyzstan, the Constitution prohibits censorship, especially political censorship. State interests in the information field are to create conditions for the development of information structures; for the realization of the rights and freedoms of citizens in obtaining information; and, using it to ensure the inviolability of the constitutional order, sovereignty, territorial integrity, political, economic and social integrity of the country.

In Kyrgyzstan, as of 1 May 2009, 1,331 media organizations were registered, and almost 80% of them are non-governmental media. In comparison, in Uzbekistan non-governmental media constitute 20%, and in Russia - about 70%.

The state policy is not aimed at restricting freedom of speech; it is aimed at the creation of information structures that could withstand the increasing external information expansion. In Kyrgyzstan today, one could feel the strong influence of Russian, Kazakh, Uzbek, Tajik and Chinese media. The Internet is developing fast. For example, the following Tajik media freely broadcast in Kyrgyzstan: State Channel of Tajikistan, "Sughd-TV," "Ustrushona-TV," "Asia-Sport TV," "Kanibodom TV, radio" Tyros" and "SM-1." The following media, from Uzbekistan, broadcast in the entire southern region of our country around the clock: Republican channels "Uz-TV1" (channel Uzbekistan), "Uz-TV3" (channel Tashkent), "UzTV - 4" (Sport), a youth channel "Yoshlar" (Tashkent), a regional channel "Yoshlar teleradiokampaniyasy" (ETRK, Andijan), "Taraqiyot-TV," "Margilon-TV," "Mulokot-TV," "Shark-TV," "DIYDOR-TV" the regional government channels, "Andijan-TV," "Namangan-TV," "Ferghana-TV," and radio station "Echo Dolina," "Uzbegim Taronasi," "DIYDOR," etc. Uzbek media attract the attention of our citizens because of their simplicity, better quality of programs, greater variety of broadcast programs and the lack of sufficient local alternatives.

Currently, I think, 99.5% of the republic population receives television programs of the National Television and Radio Channel (NTRC). The company itself is responsible for 60%, ORT – 88.9%, RTR - 70%, EITV - about 60%. In 86 remote settlements of the republic, the population cannot watch the programs of NTRC. 182 villages do not receive the programs of the Kyrgyz radio. In regional centers and in some towns, the programs of the Kyrgyz TV and radio are time-limited. If anyone is interested, I can provide some calculations and information on this.

At the same time, a preliminary study done by the former Ministry of culture showed that only in the south of Kyrgyzstan, 69 villages cannot receive TV and radio signals of the NTRC, and they are actively exposed to the expansion of the border states. In total, currently in Kyrgyzstan, 98 settlements with the population of 100,000 people are not covered by the broadcast of NTRC, of which 6 settlements have not even electricity. However, according to some information, there are much more such settlements. Besides, there are settlements where the signals of NTRC are of very bad quality; which is why people refuse to watch its programs.

There is also a problem of uneven distribution of information. For example, the greatest number of newspapers is published in the capital. At the same time, in the regions, there is real "hunger" for information. The greatest number of TV stations is also located in the capital; about 10 TV stations and 10 radio stations are constantly broadcasting here. In the republic, the index of "saturation" of television and radio-space lags far behind the indices of neighboring Kazakhstan and Russia. Information saturation is considered optimal if citizens in large cities have the opportunity to watch up to 10 live channels, while in the regional centers - 6-8 channels, and in rural areas - 4-6. It remains a dream for us.



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Concluding, I want to say that censorship in the Soviet countries, as Muratbek Sansyzbayevich said, was perceived like this: there is a government official, who receives a text or a film, and he cuts or adds something in the text or film. Today, such censorship is unacceptable and meaningless. But I am convinced that there must be, at least, some restrictions concerning what can be shown on television and published. However, those restrictions should be based not on governmental bans, but on corporate ethics and moral rules, adopted by the society.

In this sense, the Ethical code of the journalist in Kyrgyzstan is a tool that will resolve disputes between journalists and the government, and within the media community. I would not call its provisions "censorship," as a large portion of my colleagues-journalists believe. I would rather say that those provisions are rules and concepts. Chief censor must be a journalist himself.

**Muratbek Imanaliev:** Thank you very much.

**Temir Sariev:** Hello again. It is an interesting topic. I am not a journalist. Rather, I'm a consumer, and I can speak only as a consumer: what is allowed, what is not allowed, what we do not like, what insults us, etc. In fact, the topic is: "How does self-censorship affect the coverage of political conflicts?" Conflicts are covered in different ways, depending which newspaper covers a conflict, and what its goals are. In general, the press should, first of all, inform, and we have already spoken about it in detail. Today, we have a little different topic. Man is subjective: he has an education, a certain level of understanding, knowledge, and all those factors influence the way he reports a particular situation. Before I came here today, I looked at an online poll "What is self-censorship?" 26% responded that it is a sense of self-control; 12% answered that it is moral etiquette, 12% said that it is the professionalism of a journalist, and the rest are in descending order. Kabai Karabekov said, and he is absolutely right, that it is an inner world of a man, which he reveals. He, primarily, must inform. His second task is to shape public opinion, and this is how we judge whether he (or she) is a strong journalist. Does he have some qualities, or is he simply from a "yellow" press, which writes for fun?

There are many who "fall" even below the level of "yellow" press. Naturally, they are also people. But why, in their case, doesn't the principle of self-control work? Because they want to earn more money and think that if they write something "hot," their newspaper will become popular and people will buy it. Or, maybe they believe that the person, about whom they have written, will rush to the office of the newspaper and pay much money, so they would not write anything about him again or give a refutation. Journalists are sometimes also involved in this racket. There have been cases when a newspaper reported that in its next issue it would publish something "hot" about a person, - it is a signal to that person that he (or she) should come to the newspaper and pay off. People bought the next issue of this newspaper, but there was nothing "interesting." Here, we again speak about an element of ethics, which affects the coverage of any event. Sometimes, the fear, as it turns out, works as self-censorship. I would like to hear about it from reporters, especially from professional journalists, or media managers, how they solve this problem.

I would like to remind you of a vivid example. You all remember the April meeting in 2007. It was a political conflict. It was a confrontation, which reached the last point: a large number of people, led by their leaders, demanded reforms, changes, while representatives of the state power, armed, were sitting in the White House, trying to decide what to do next. You remember, on April 16, in the afternoon, there was a very strong conflict, when about 20 athletes, specially trained, entered the crowd and provoked a fight. We managed to stop the fight with great difficulty; only the great patience of some people helped us. Some of the provocateurs ran away, but some of them were caught, tied up and brought to the rostrum. All of this was filmed and shown on "Topsy Turvily." They showed it as if people were beating the people from another region of Kyrgyzstan, thus they presented it as not a political conflict but as a regional conflict. Later, I was told that the people who had been involved in this, had an intention to make special CDs with commentaries and distribute them in the South, thus raising the population of one region against the population of another region; although in the meeting there were people from all over Kyrgyzstan. However, the record was not shown in full on the Kyrgyz TV.

And you call it the coverage of a political conflict? Having obtained some details, I believe now that it was a sort of self-censorship, which prevented some journalists from showing such a distorted image, realizing that it might cause a more serious conflict.

Sometimes self-censorship is rejected intentionally to cause frustration with a party to a conflict. This



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is done, as Ulugbek said, in accordance with the decision of the editorial board, which supports a particular party. Sometimes they do deliberately provoke, and the state authorities also do this.

And, summing up, I would like to say: after all, censorship is the body, which allows one to write and not to write. There is a law that allows a journalist to write, to report, to receive information, to disclose it, but there is also self-censorship. Self-censorship is the ethics, culture, and the professionalism of the journalist. I think that every journalist should follow these three aspects. Today, fear very often acts as censorship. Journalists have been beaten and even killed; Ulugbek is an example of this. Such censorship exists, unfortunately. It is the reality of our society, I think that, with time, it will be over, and we will adhere to universal rules for all.

**Muratbek Imanaliev:** Thank you very much. Very interesting speech. We proceed to the second part of our roundtable – questions and comments ... But I would like to make a kind of conclusion on the topic. First of all, a question: what is self-censorship? In what manifestations does it exist in personal, social and political life? Self-censorship – is it an advantage or is it a disadvantage?

We all understand that self-censorship exists in the work and life of any individual; whether he is a politician, economist, diplomat, businessman, or a cobbler. But, of course, self-censorship finds its more profound expression in such a complex human profession as journalism. What is censorship based on? All the speakers today attempted to answer this question, but the most impressive answer was given by Temir Sariev – it is fear, morality; or rather, conscience and integrity; and thirdly, it is a material concern ...

I think it would be very interesting to hear the opinion of all participants of today's roundtable on this subject; how they understand it. How does self-censorship appear, and on what basis? I would like, in this sense, to add my own understanding of this problem because self-censorship is not a manifestation of individual capacities or characteristics of a person, based on fear, curiosity, honesty, education and so on. I think that, besides all, self-censorship is also a public phenomenon. In this sense, if we give some assessment of our society today, the community in its different typologies - political community, economic community, humanitarian community, etc. - I do not think it is good when there is no public self-censorship. But our country is not exclusive in this sense; there are many countries of the former Soviet Union, and also in other regions of the world, including the countries with developed democracy.

I think, self-censorship in the public level is the most important thing. The activities of certain institutions of public life should be subject to strict censorship in order to prevent the spread of immorality, lies, etc.

If the participants of today's Roundtable have questions or comments to the speakers, go ahead.

**Azamat Tynaev:** Speaking of self-censorship, we must first of all, understand who the censor is. Censor implies limitation, self-censorship implies self-limitation. It is necessary for all. Not only journalists use self-censorship, or self-restraint. We should accept the idea that self-censorship among journalists should be treated calmly; it is not a dirty word.

Self-censorship has several states. There is an objective self-censorship, which is defined by the basic professional rules. Let me bring an example. Several years ago, terrorists seized the theater on Dubrovka during the musical "Nord Ost." and the special operation of governmental armed forces ended tragically, when several hundred people were killed. Why? During the live broadcasting, a NTV correspondent described all what was happening around the theater and said the following phrase in the air: "I see a group of special forces sneaking up to the theater."

From the one hand, he was implementing his professional duty, he informed. But, on the other hand, terrorists also viewed his reportage; they realized that the Special Forces were preparing to storm the building. And the whole building of the theater, especially the auditorium, where the hostages were kept, had been mined. Special forces realized that they had only a couple of seconds before the terrorists clicked on the detonator button. So the Special Forces began an unprepared assault. They have not yet calculated how much soporific gas should be spread, and its concentration was very high; that's why many hostages died from the gas, which was supposed to save them. Special forces had no time to consult with biomedical specialists; they did not prepare the sufficient amount of antidotes to save the people from the state of artificial sleep.



This example shows that self-censorship is necessary in our work. Because we do not write for ourselves, we write for the society, and in this sense, each journalist should be a censor for himself. Or let's take a simple example, when we have an interview with someone. You know, very often an interview takes place in a good emotional atmosphere; when you have established full contact and mutual understanding with the one who is being interviewed. The interviewee can open his soul to the desired extent, and 2-3 days later, when you have already prepared the material, he (or she) can suddenly remember that he/she told something, which he/she shouldn't have told, and asks to omit those undesirable remarks. You have the record of the interview in full, you have the right to publish the material without changes. Of course, this will bring you popularity, fame, circulation of your newspaper would probably grow, you can even win a prize; but you will also violate some ethical standards, stepping over the wish of the interviewee, who trusted you.

For a journalist, like for a doctor, one of the main rules is "do no harm." We all must seek a middle ground, and, in this sense, you will always have to use self-censorship. It is not a bad thing. We could have explained here what self-censorship is and leave that room. But we all understand why the topic of today's Roundtable sounds that way, because there is another state of self-censorship, which is imposed, and my colleagues Ulugbek Babakulov and Temir Sariev have told about it. This, of course, cannot be ignored.

Yes, there is confrontation between a certain part of the media and the state in its various manifestations, which is due to their different views. And when we talk about political conflicts, it is the clash of different points of view. Therefore, in this respect, everyone has the right to express his/her opinion. Furthermore, he has a right to be heard by everyone else. A viewer, a listener, or a reader of a magazine or newspaper or an Internet user should decide for himself whether to agree with that or not.

And here is our weak point: Melis Aydarkulov gave a very good statistics, but I think the problem is not caused by the fact that NTRK does not broadcast everywhere in the republic. The main problem is that even if the programs of NTRK are broadcasted in excellent quality, with excellent image and sound, people do not watch it. I think the state should think about this. Why is it happening? Because NTRK has a monopoly; an ideological monopoly. Very often, when preparing some material with the opposition leaders, or, for example, when I explain my point of view, the power bodies complain: "Azamat, you're a journalist. You must observe the principles of objectivity. Why do you give the floor only to the opposition?" Usually, such remarks are absolutely correct. If we look at what's going on the public media, the same criticism can be addressed to them, and it is under state control. Where can we see the opposition leaders? Many TV channels exhibit opposition figures in a grotesque form, using a copy-paste technique. Chekhov said that a person of high culture is not the one, who avoids pouring off the sauce on a white tablecloth, but the one who does not notice how the other did it. In life, we often face up to humiliating attitude, sarcastic remarks ...

The way of mentoring, some accusations and recriminations is a wrong way, like this we will never come to understanding. Yes, we need to negotiate and come to a consensus. And, in this respect, the journalistic community makes a lot of attempts, but, unfortunately, there is no result so far. Even if the authorities hold some round tables (some activities with the aim to find common ground with the opposition) for some reason, it turns out that this "ground" meet only the interests of the state. But we must realize that this situation will not always continue like that, because we all know the law of physics: force is equal to counterforce. It is only the matter of time. And I think that we should not waste time. We must take our steps.

I will cite an example from my personal experience. We all know that it is much easier to write a "cheap" sensation than a thoughtful and well-analyzed article. It is easy to write accusations: "He is a corrupt official," etc. Of course, it is unprofessional. And in this respect, we shouldn't treat the state power as a "monster." It would be great injustice to dub it like this; there is a great number of enlightened, highly-educated and understanding people, working for the government, and it is a great pleasure to work and cooperate with them. The most important thing is: we must not look for something, which makes us different; we must look for the moments, which unite us. If suddenly, tomorrow, there is an external threat to our country, I am sure that everybody will instantly forget who supports the opposition, and who is pro-governmental - all will defend the homeland.

Journalists must tackle this issue - how to come to this unity. At the same time, the authorities should



also be controlled.

**Melis Aydarkulov:** Azamat, you, as a professional journalist, understand very well that when covering political conflict, it is impossible to be 100% objective and impartial. But we should, at least, strive to be objective and unbiased.

**Azamat Tynaev:** I agree, therefore I want to tell young people: you should not make for yourself an idol. Appearance is often deceptive. When you begin your career, there will be so many disappointments in your life...

**Ulugbek Babakulov:** Sorry for my interruption. Here, much depends on whether a journalist belongs to himself. Of course, a journalist belongs to his employer. The employer pays him salary, and on the basis of this, the journalist does his work. The question is whether to use internal self-censorship here. I think it is an individual matter of a journalist. For example, the journalist does not agree with editorial principles of his journal, but he has to make a report, saying that the opposition is bad, and the power is good, and he does make it. Why does he not use self-censorship? Because he will lose his job if he does. Let's not forget about this.

A good journalist, who believes he has reached a certain professional level, always follows objective criteria.

Owners and heads of periodicals, not only journalists, should also observe the ethical code. Journalists always spring from what their manager has asked them to do. Any journalist follows the instructions received from his manager. If he does not follow them, his manager can say: "Sorry, man, but I'll find another one who will do this and get money for it."

**Ernis Mamyrganov:** I am a media expert in this area. We often speak about some individual journalist. In fact, this is a systemic problem. Because we have many good laws that could create a platform to ensure that the journalist could realize his potential and limit it only by using the ethical censorship, which Azamat mentioned today. If we talk about political conflicts, our media does not act as a socially meaningful institute of our society. In the West, this system works. But in Kyrgyzstan, it doesn't. This is because our media belong either to the opposition camp or to the governmental one. Unfortunately, there are very few media that really serve the interests of the society.

The problem is that neither the state, nor the public have considered the information sphere as a significant area of regulation of public order and morality. Since gaining sovereignty, we have adopted such codes of ethics at least 4 times, if I'm not mistaken. The Journalists Union has also adopted such codes, although it is a purely nominal organization. Kuban Mambetaliev also developed his own Code of Ethics for the Public Association "Journalists." Then, a trade union of journalists was formed. And they all gradually disappeared. The trade union of journalists was an independent organization, but it existed only during one year.

Why does self-censorship exist in the political arena? Because journalists are not sure of their protection. Because, as Ulugbek said, journalists have their own employers. That's why the situation with our journalism is like that. I remember when Ulugbek was young, when he just began his career, he embarked on such adventures that we were all surprised. We are all obsessed with our profession, when we are young. With age, we begin to understand that we can lose, and no one will protect us - and that is the time when self-censorship begins to work.

Two years ago, a department for information policy was formed at the Ministry of Culture and Information. Many people had a hope that there appeared a linking institution between journalists and governmental structures; a lot of joint documents have been developed, which arranged both sides. But after the recent reforms, it turns out that the information sphere is ownerless. I am skeptical about the fact that self-censorship will soon disappear. In the West, journalists describe themselves as "watchdogs of society." And we should strive for this.

**Azamat Tynaev:** I would like to clarify. I've heard today the word "employers" several times; it is treated as something terrible. Boys, after all, everything depends on you, on your competence, on your authority, on your dedication and your usefulness to your journal or newspaper. If you are a strong professional, no chief-editor or his deputy can make you dance after their pipe. You will be allowed to do anything if your articles bring the newspaper popularity. If you help raise the popularity



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and prestige, you will be forgiven for many things.

**Seyil Chyngyshbaeva:** I would like to ask all the speakers on behalf of the students. Ulugbek Babakulov argues that all these codes do not work, and in general, they are not meaningless. Meanwhile, Melis Aydarkulov said the opposite - it is necessary to study those codes and try to follow them. So what advise would you give us, what shall we do in the future: shall we follow these codes or not?

**Ulugbek Babakulov:** First, remember that I was speaking, as a journalist. I don't need this code. I did not sign it. And my journalists will not sign it because it's nonsense. Melis Aydarkulov is a government official. Do government officials themselves follow the rules of the Code of Ethics? Do the Parliament deputies follow the rules of the Code of Ethics?

**Melis Aydarkulov:** Ulugbek, I can say that I was speaking not as a governmental official, but as a journalist. I had worked as an editor-in-chief for 20 years. In the late 1980's - early 1990's, when the political conflict between the leadership of the Communist Party and democratic movement had exacerbated, Kabai and I were at the epicenter of this battle. And among Kyrgyz-language newspapers, only the "Bishkek Shamy" newspaper, where I was editor in chief, relentlessly criticized the leadership of the Communist Party, although it was still within the system of the Communist Party.

The situation was very complicated for me, because I personally knew the Head of the Party Masaliev Absamat Masalievich, as I was working in the Central Committee under his leadership. In my heart, I felt very sorry for him because I knew only the good side of him, I knew him as a very honest man. But as a leader of the country, he could no longer cope with the situation. And every time I signed an article, which criticized him, I had to face this choice.

When Akayev had become the President, corruption began to flourish, and I got very disappointed. And still there is a pain in my heart...

There should be an internal censor; self-censorship. Be it through the Code of Ethics, through the Constitution of Kyrgyzstan, or through some other document - it does not matter. The main thing is a personal censor; we must listen to our inner voice, and then make conclusions and undertake some steps.

I do not consider myself an ardent supporter of the code of ethics, but the current Code has rules, with which I agree. For example, very often, our journalists abuse their situation. Especially young journalists abuse it very often. They insult other people and write unproven materials. Lots of noise, but little help. That is what I would like to draw your attention to.

**Ulugbek Babakulov:** Melis Aydarkulovich, those are different things. The Ethics Code, which limits and restricts is one thing, while a good counselor inside is another thing which shows the level of professionalism.

**Kabai Karabekov:** Can I add? The fact is, words themselves, contained or embodied in some documents, do not mean anything. If you are a professional, doing your job when covering a conflict, and if you give the word to both parties - you follow the ethical norms. You do your job professionally. And there is no need to look in the code, if you have done an ethical thing or not every time you write an article. That is what professional ethics means.

But if you write in the spirit of the slogan "If you are not with us, you are against us," you violate the first law of journalism - professionalism. You provide one-sided interpretation of events. After all, no matter how well you write, there is a society's need for information. We repudiate the word "Conjuncture," but political conjuncture and public conjuncture do exist. If you don't understand this, you cannot work in a newspaper.

I always cite one example. In 1990, I visited the office of "The New York Times", and they were writing about the conflict in Yugoslavia at that time. But before that, the conflict in Tajikistan had started. Hundreds of people died there. But they did not write a word on this. I told them: "Here we have the newspaper 'Komsomolskaya Pravda,' with 23 million in circulation. Everyday, one page of this newspaper was dedicated to the coverage of these conflicts. Both conflicts - in Yugoslavia and in Tajikistan." They answered: "We cannot do this because our readers spent vacations in the Balkans,



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and nobody has ever visited your Tajikistan. They are interested in what happens in Yugoslavia; if they can go there for vacation next year." This is the political conjuncture, which you will follow even if you don't want it. Society will not read what it is not interested in. And if we talk about individual freedom, the freedom of the journalist, the right of the journalist - I always say one thing: freedom and rights of every individual end if his freedom and right begin to violate the freedom and rights of another individual. You should develop the code of ethics, having this in mind.

**Temir Sariev:** The law does not depend on us. It is passed, it works, and we all must implement it. While a code, as far as I understand, is a voluntary document, which the journalist association, a group of journalists, signs and commits itself to implement this code. They deliberately decide to abide by certain rules. In general, nothing exists without rules. A Code is the rules of conduct. It is not the law. Therefore, probably, it is called a code of honor, because if a man promises, he sticks with it. We are people of one profession, doing similar work, and we must adhere to certain rules. If there are no rules, there will be chaos. So I think a Code of journalistic ethics should exist.

Here a question arises. Often journalists say: we do write, but the society is not ready. What should come first: a highly developed society, which accepts the production of highly professional journalists, or, on the contrary - the journalists will educate the society, and it will become developed? Here the is question. Because not all that we write is in demand. Many newspapers use unverified facts, they just want to write something, in order to maintain some sort of polemics. And, of course, politicians also have their aims, they "order" articles to their own taste, thus they also violate the ethics. Here, many examples have been cited. On the one hand, journalists must give information - it is their professional duty. For example, some election is coming up; people want to know about the candidates in order to make a right choice. What is the role of journalists in this situation? If you know some negative information about a candidate, should you write about this, or should you remain silent because of self-censorship? And it is a very crucial moment for the country!

Today, Aydarkulov Melis said that he was very sorry about the fact that he criticized Masaliev at his time. Don't you regret about the time when Akayev was severely criticized, and all newspapers wrote that after his dismissal the country would thrive? Journalists have a dual responsibility, because they form public opinion and inform the population. Therefore, the moral requirements of journalists should be higher than that of the common people. Politicians should also be more responsible. After all, their decisions affect the lives of people. We do need the Code. Stick to the Code.

**Samat Abdumomunov:** During the discussion, you mentioned political censorship. What can be the consequences of political censorship in our country?

**Temir Sariev:** The theme of this Roundtable is not political censorship, it is self-censorship or internal self-censorship when covering political conflicts. We simply cited some examples of political censorship in our speeches today.

**Samat Abdumomunov:** But the topic is - self-censorship in the coverage of political conflicts.

**Temir Sariev:** What do you mean by political conflicts?

**Samat Abdumomunov:** I mean that we do not always have the opportunity to provide full information about political developments in the country.

**Temir Sariev:** The current situation is deplorable. Every day, censorship is getting stronger. And it's not the law that enforces it. Censorship is imposed. For example, how did they limit "Azattyk?" They did not allow its broadcasting via Kyrgyz Television and Radio, and they closed the channel. Now, if you produce neutral, or "good" things, your production will be broadcasted. Every day, we listen to the radio "Azattyk." As soon as you begin to cover some sharp political problems, then, immediately interference begins. This is what I call political censorship.

Now about political conflicts: "Nord Ost" is a political conflict, because the main purpose of the attack was political. They demanded to withdraw the troops from Chechnya. This is a political conflict that was developed by journalists.

Perhaps, we have some disagreement. Today at this round table, we presented different views on this problem.



**Melis Aydarkulov:** I think Temir Sariev is right. The essence of this Roundtable is to set boundaries for ourselves. In my opinion, political censorship, at this time, does not exist in Kyrgyzstan; at least, in formal terms. Editorial policy of each medium is adopted by its chief editor or owner. In Kyrgyzstan, nobody talked about the termination of the activities of the radio "Azattyk." You are free to broadcast in Kyrgyzstan. No one impedes your work. The conflict between you and the Kyrgyz Radio and Television is quite a different matter. As far as I know, from the talk with your administration, this issue is being solved – of course, with delay but the process goes on.

"Azattyk" has never harmed Kyrgyzstan. And now it doesn't do any harm either. It always offers balanced information from all sides; provides impartial information; and adheres to international standards of journalism.

**Samat Abdumomunov:** I did not ask about "Azattyk," although we can broadcast now only for 1 hour. I wanted to ask about other political moments in the country.

**Temir Sariev:** You wanted to hear: "Yes, we have political censorship."

**Samat Abdumomunov:** Many of my colleagues in Kyrgyzstan have to adhere to self-censorship; they have to face political censorship.

**Kabai Karabekov:** There is one aspect in today's discussion which I would like to stress. It is the weak point of many journalists. Before asking a question, many journalists have already developed a desired response in their minds, and if the respondent's answer does not match their own anticipated answer, they consider the answer of the respondent wrong. This is again our revolutionary spirit: those, who are not with us, are against us.

You understand this. Political self-censorship exists, and many public officials like it. When a public official says that we have the cheapest electricity in the CIS and in the world, he is right. But, he deliberately fails to mention the fact that we have the lowest salary in the world. Can people pay for the electricity? Such "self-censorship" does exist, but it is not a real self-censorship to which we should aspire to.

**Nurlan Akmatov:** You said that the censor should be inside of each journalist. Do you not think that in this case, the society would not receive objective information, if a journalist initially decides himself what information should be provided and what information should be omitted?

**Azamat Tynayev:** The risk of loss of information is exaggerated. We have many different sources of information. And when I talk about self-censorship, I mean the ethical or cultural meaning of it. I do not say how it should work. Otherwise, I myself would become the object of this censorship, if I spoke about how a man must censor himself. This is nonsense. So I brought a little bit primitive examples, in order to make it more understandable. If we figuratively say: we all love chocolate, but why do we eat it rarely? Because we know what consequences this may cause. Because we all need a good stomach, good digestion, etc.

Or let's take another example: a short dress is a wonderful invention. We know that young girls like to wear short dresses and mini-skirts. Yes, it's beautiful. The world fashion industry encourages it. But how short can this skirt be? It's easy to pass the threshold between modernity and pornography.

So what about journalism? There are the same rules. We should always seek a middle ground. The best is the enemy of good. Look at the folk sayings and proverbs, and you will find much about the need to keep a balance. In order to prevent conflict, we must keep a balance.

I was lucky to visit the United States and China this year. Living standard is high both in the United States and in China. The people feel safe and free; they live prosperously. China is a 100% controlled country, and nobody raises the question if they need self-censorship or not. The United States is a country of freedom. It is impossible to imagine that a journalist is sued. There are rare cases, but they only confirm the general rule. Freedom is the religion of Americans. Even if an American is wrong, no one would prevent him from expressing his point of view. Both of these countries - U.S. and China - have reached the same goal. People live well, no one fears for tomorrow, and both peoples are proud of their state and nation.



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**Melis Aydarkulov:** Temir Sariev in his speech cited figures: to the question “what is self-censorship?” 26% of respondents answered that it is objectivity, 12% - something else, and a certain percentage of the respondents named professionalism. Do you remember the central tenet of journalists: objectivity, credibility, professionalism? If we seek objectivity, credibility and professionalism, I think everything will be fine.

**Ernis Mamyrganov:** Personally, I believe that self-censorship is bad. This is purely my personal opinion. It's better when it's all regulated by such documents as the code of ethics. What is the result of internal restrictions? I cannot realize my potential as a professional. But if I follow a conventional document, I will not do anything wrong.

**Azamat Tynaev:** I witnessed the signing of the code of ethics. I was the only journalist who did not sign it because there is a paragraph that reads as follows: a journalist in some cases has the right to interfere in personal, intimate life of people. I said: guys, what are you doing? You violate the Constitution, the Basic Law, according to which the invasion of privacy is unacceptable.

Listen only to your heart and your conscience. No document will be perfect.

**Ulugbek Babakulov:** For example, imagine that our society is a small child. Offer him a lollipop or buckwheat porridge. What will he choose? A lollipop. But a child cannot eat only lollipops. Our journalism is “eating” only lollipops now. A child should eat buckwheat, which is useful for him. Similarly, journalism should catch up to a certain level. And here, as Muratbek Sansyrbayevich said, public self-censorship should exist when people will choose the best, not the “lollipop.”

**Muratbek Imanaliev:** I would like to finish our roundtable, which was both useful and interesting, and, my opinion, it raised even more questions. I want to thank all the speakers. They are respected people in our country. They made very interesting presentations. I would also like to thank everyone who made comments and all the participants of the Roundtable and to wish all the best, good health and prosperity.