

## A CATALYST FOR CHANGE IN New Democracies

A Central Asian journalist advocates a program of civic journalism that will explain and promote democratic development in her home country of Kyrgyzstan.

by Yulia Savchenko

With the end of the Soviet Union in 1991, newly independent Kyrgyzstan chose the path towards democratic development. More than a decade later, we are still very far from our goal. Instead, we have a “super-president,” who dominates the political arena, and a parliament and judicial system dependent on the executive branch. We face human rights abuses, governmental corruption and desperate poverty as a result of the unfair political tactics of our officials. Very few people in Kyrgyzstan have a clear sense of their rights or possess the motivation to exercise those rights in their daily lives. In response to this situation, journalists in Kyrgyzstan are increasingly trying to educate the population about democratic values, the rights of citizens and the problems we face in securing these rights and values. Journalists must encourage public involvement in political life through a new philosophy of the press: civic journalism.

At the beginning of Kyrgyzstan’s transition, journalists played a vital role in communicating the expectations of ordinary citizens to the government. At that time, this

for several years was transformed into a fiction: it is still professed as a value but rarely permitted. The more the press confirmed and condemned larceny and corruption among ministers, deputies, and state and local authorities, the more seriously those authorities took aim at independent mass media, using tactics such as filing libel suits and rescinding broadcasting licenses. Even liberal legislators have not been able to protect journalists in the face of heavy government pressure and Soviet-era censorship.

Kyrgyzstan has over 300 registered non-state TV and radio stations and newspapers, 70% of which are located in the capital, Bishkek. Having tasted true freedom, these media professionals will not give it up easily. But neither will the government concede without a fight. Kyrgyz society is split, with government supporters on one side and promoters of free speech on the other. Officials spearhead legislation restricting all journalistic attempts to uncover and spread information while journalists and opposition members respond with evidence of abuses of power and proof of emerging totalitarian features in our young democracy. The battle between these two

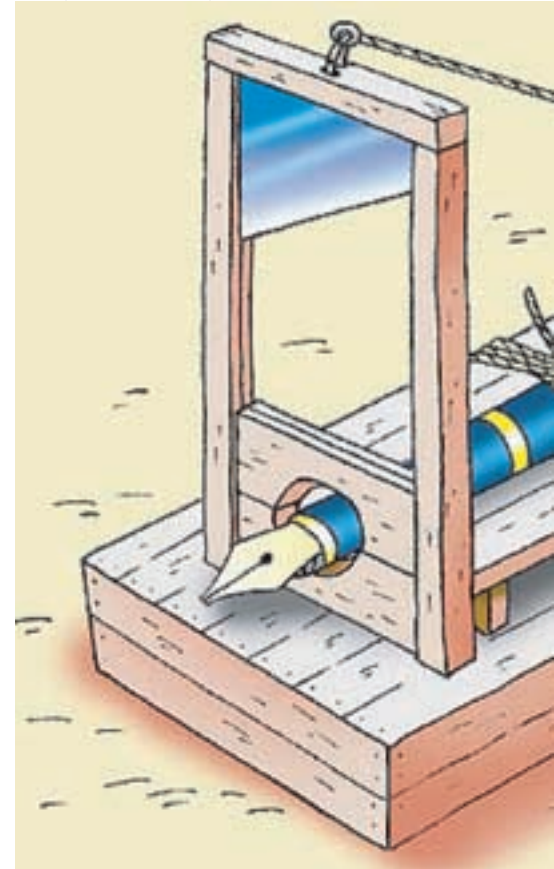
praisal from officials. The first step towards creating such an environment is instituting the practices of civic journalism.

Civic (or public) journalism positions the independent press as both a “watchdog” and a “guide dog.” That is, journalists not only expose and describe democratic (or undemocratic) processes but also educate the public to participate actively in those processes important to all citizens, regardless of their political ties. Civic journalists aspire to perform their work in a way that helps people overcome feelings of powerlessness and alienation with respect to their government. To fulfill this goal, news organizations purposefully

“Civic journalists aspire to perform their work in a way that helps people overcome feelings of powerlessness and alienation with respect to their government.”

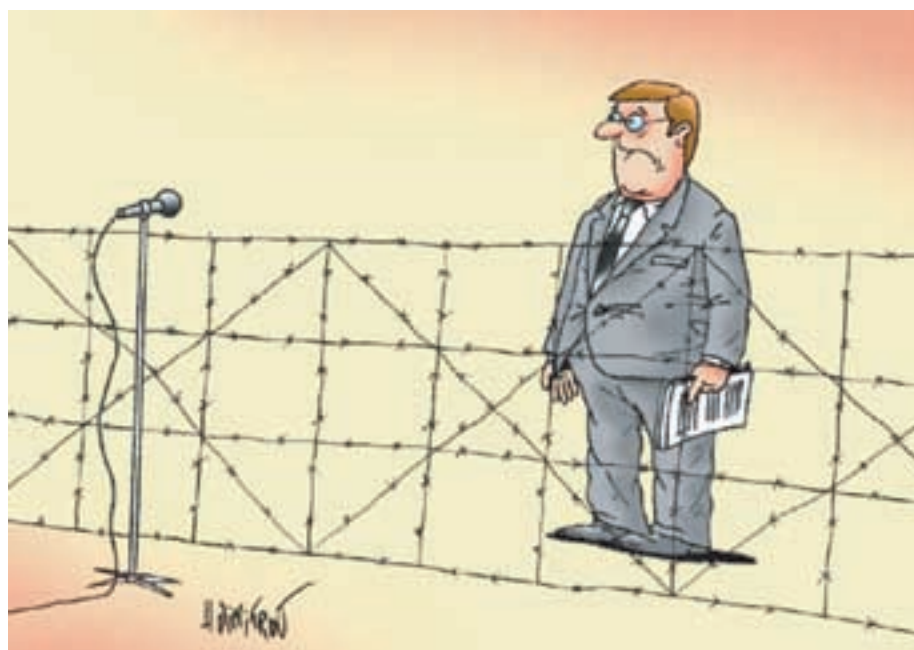
contribution was warmly received, and an independent press—allowed to criticize, investigate and expose—became a basic outlet for progressive ideas. However, the democratic honeymoon between the media and the Kyrgyz government did not last. Dark clouds gathered when newspaper criticism of official misconduct began to offend government ministers, deputies and officials of all ranks. Shortly thereafter, the freedom of speech that had flourished

groups endangers the country. In order not to imperil either the media or the democratic achievements of the past decade, we must create an environment in which the government and the press can peacefully coexist and work together for democracy, which is still valued in Kyrgyzstan. While the government and the press should not have an overly friendly relationship, they should be civil adversaries, and the press should be able to guard the public interest (and need to know) as the core ethic of their work without fearing re-



use their resources to interest people in becoming more active citizens and to educate them in how to do so. In their work, they raise fundamental questions about power, social justice and culture. This effort requires that, whenever appropriate, journalists take a stand, actively interpret “facts,” let ordinary people speak about their experiences, and make moral and ethical judgments about the nature of their country’s democracy. I believe this approach makes possible a journalistic product that induces people to think and act rather than one that merely titillates people with sensational material.

Currently, the relationship between the press and civil society in Kyrgyzstan is a difficult one. On the one hand, civil society can be unhealthily dependent upon the press, relying too much on it to promote positive ideas about democracy and help people introduce democratic practices into their daily lives. For the Everyman and Everywoman, it is extremely difficult to move from the role of voiceless extra on the political stage to that of active participant who helps shape the drama. On the other hand, citizens are becoming increasingly irritated with a press that too often fills the papers with a numbing array of stories about political scandals, celebrity divorces, natural disasters, “horse race” reporting of politics, polemics against the government, official pronouncements, and so on. Perhaps the problem here is that mass media—considered by itself



and others as the main promoter of democracy in the country—prefers to fight political battles alone and treat citizens as spectators to a civic show rather than as effective partners in the democratic process. This type of journalism does not report on the activities of civil society, does not help people to participate in democratic society, and does not provide citizens with the information they need to make the political decisions that impact their lives. With an emphasis on civic journalism—on informing, educating and motivating citizens—this situation can change.

The relationship between democratization and a free media is like that between the chicken and the egg. On the one hand, the extent to which a society is democratized determines the nature of media activities and the level of governmental control over the press. On the other hand, the media can play an instrumental role in creating the conditions for promoting democratization (or impeding it, as the case may be). A free media and the process of democratization are mutually reinforcing, as each can advance the development of the other.

Essentially, the media represents a resource for democracy building. Media professionals are uniquely placed to help spread the democratic ideals of deliberation and participation; to notify readers about services, opportunities and problems that need attention; to give voice to the views of contending parties; to provide the public with reliable, relevant information that will enable them to make socially

significant decisions; to articulate the social and political choices facing the public; to facilitate public deliberation about the best course of action; and to encourage social action for political reform. Civic journalists can also encourage reform by keeping problems related to development (economic and political) on the agendas of policymakers, so that they may be forced to take action that leads directly to social change.

**“Perhaps the problem here is that the mass media—considered by itself and others as the main promoter of democracy in the country—prefers to fight political battles alone and treat citizens as spectators to a civic show rather than as effective partners in the democratic process.”**

Promoting the ideals of civic journalism is crucially important for the political and social future of Kyrgyzstan, or any other newly democratic country that is delicately balanced between increased democratization and totalitarianism. While the prevailing model of journalism advocates the objective reporting of facts perceived to be true, civic journalism supports explicit efforts to promote democratic reform and encourage social action. Because civic journalism promotes a broad democratic dialogue among ordinary people, it helps citizens develop an understanding of the contradictions of modern democratic development in post-communist Central Asia and gives them the tools to propose alternatives. 

*Yulia Savchenko is a television anchor and journalist who hosts a talk show in Kyrgyzstan. She is also a 2004-2005 Reagan-Fascell fellow at the National Endowment for Democracy in Washington, D.C.*

