THE PERSISTENCE OF MEDIA CONTROL UNDER CONSOLIDATED AUTHORITARIANISM: CONTAINING KAZAKHSTAN'S DIGITAL MEDIA

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Abstract: Citizens of Kazakhstan have greater access to the Internet now than at any time in the past. However, the Nazarbaev regime has systematically cut off the supply of political analysis on the country's web sites while simultaneously shifting popular on-line consumption habits in non-political directions. The result is that the presence of the Internet in Kazakhstan is helping the authoritarian regime remain in power.

On 5 February, 2014, Nurali Aytelenov, Rinat Kibrayev, and Dmitriy Shelokov – three bloggers operating in Kazakhstan – received 10-day sentences for hooliganism charges after being arrested for publicly protesting their exclusion from a meeting between selected bloggers and Akhmetzhan S. Yesimov – the *akim* of the Almaty *oblast'*.[1] A fourth blogger, Dina Baidildayeva, was briefly detained on 8 February, after she had staged a one-woman demonstration in central Almaty to express solidarity with her imprisoned colleagues. On both occasions,[2] police interrogators reportedly demanded lengthy explanations – in some cases provided by the detainees themselves – of the nature and scope of Internet blogging. Almaty authorities (or at least the police personnel tasked to conduct interrogations in these two cases) had apparently never heard of – let alone read – an online blog.

This account of the repressive wave of February 2014 in many ways represents a microcosm of the politics of digital media in post-Soviet Kazakhstan. Despite their niche status within the Kazakhstani socio-political landscape, new media – and blogging in particular – have not escaped the repressive attention of the regime headed by Nursultan A. Nazarbaev. The enforcement of government control over the media landscape and, more generally, the limitation of freedom of expression are standard power technologies in authoritarian Kazakhstan.[3] Containing digital media, in this sense, does not represent an instance of discontinuity in the evolution of Kazakhstani authoritarianism.

In early 2014, repressive measures were enforced with the deliberate intention of blocking relatively prominent Internet activists from gaining access to Kazakhstan's limited public sphere.[4] In so doing, Nazarbaev and his associates demonstrated that they had rapidly

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[1] TengriNews. 2014. *Arest blogerov v Almaty prokommentirovali v sude* [The court commented on the arrest of bloggers in Almaty]. At http://tengrinews.kz/events/arest-blogerov-v-almatyi-prokommentirovali-v-sude-250053/, accessed November 15, 2014. Joanna Lillis. 2014. *Kazakhstan arrests four bloggers in a week*. At http://www.eurasianet.org/node/68027, accessed November 15, 2014.

[2] Anonymous. 2014. Interviewed by Luca Anceschi. Almaty, March 31. The author has respected the wishes of the interviewees who asked to remain anonymous.

[3] In 2015, Reporters without Borders ranked Kazakhstan in 160th place in its Global Press Freedom index. For more on media freedom in Kazakhstan, see: Barbara Junisbai. 2012. "Oligarchs and ownership: The role of financial-industrial groups in financing Kazakhstan's 'independent' media". In: Eric Freeman & Richard Shafer, eds., *After the Czars and Commissars – Journalism in Authoritarian post-Soviet Central Asia*. East Lansing: Michigan State University Press.

[4] Peter Dahlgren. 2005. "The Internet, Public Spheres, and Political Communication: Dispersion and Deliberation". *Political Communication* 22: 2: 147-62; Peter Van Aelst & Stefaan Walgrave. 2002. "New media, new movements? The role of the internet in shaping the 'anti-globalization' movement". *Information, Communication & Society* 5: 4: 465-93.

assimilated the many lessons of Egypt and Tunisia, where digital media were instrumental in "spreading protest messages, [while] connecting frustrated citizens with one another."[5] It was the translation of on-line activity into political activism, and not the publication of controversial or subversive posts, that led the regime to detain the Almaty bloggers.

The visibly exaggerated response to the minor protests of 2014 might suggest that the élite in Astana had ultimately concluded that new media had come to represent a potentially destabilizing force within the Kazakhstani domestic landscape. The government's preoccupation with containing digital media, however, featured heavily in pre-2014 political developments and, in December 2011, characterized decisively the regime's posture throughout one of the most dramatic political crises that erupted in post-Soviet Kazakhstan. In the aftermath of the brutal repression of a workers' strike in Zhanaozen (Mangystau *oblast'*, Western Kazakhstan), the Nazarbaev regime imposed a strict block on phone and Internet services over a radius of 65 km around the city center in order to avoid the diffusion of independent accounts of the government-sanctioned violence through social media.[6] Through the establishment of a suffocating legislative framework and the consolidation of adversarial relations between government and independent digital media, post-Zhanaozen Kazakhstan evolved into an inhospitable milieu for new media.[7] It was against this authoritarian backdrop that the multiple arrests of February 2014 took place.

The logic of regime control, therefore, offers an appropriate lens to analyze the numerous regulatory linkages connecting government policies and digital media in Kazakhstan. The Nazarbaev regime endeavored to control new media by applying the same combination of persuasive tactics and intensively restrictive methods[8] by which it had constrained broadcast and print media since the achievement of independence. Unlike more traditional outlets, however, digital media came to prominence at a time when local authoritarianism had already reached a position of monopolistic control over domestic political dynamics. This article argues that there is a strong link between the progressive de-politicization of Kazakhstan's cyberspace and the consolidation of non-political Internet consumption patterns across the Kazakhstani users' community. In other words, the regime's desire to stay in power decisively shaped the outlook of Kazakhstani cyberspace, while influencing directly the consumption habits of those segments of the local population that access the Internet regularly.

To unveil the multiple impacts of this dual policy of containment, our analysis will go beyond Kazakhstan's cyberspace, which will be predominantly discussed through an investigation of the population's Internet consumption habits. The second segment of the article, in turn, will shift its attention onto the containment of Kazakhstan's new media landscape, with the ultimate goal of describing both the restrictive legislative frameworks and the coercive processes through which virtually every pocket of the Kazakhstani cyberspace ended up under the suffocating control of the Nazarbaev regime.

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[5] Philip N. Howard & Muzammil M. Hussain. 2011. "The role of digital media". *Journal of Democracy* 22:3 (July): 41.

[6] Wefightcensorhip.org – a subsidiary project of Reporters without Borders – has prepared an exhaustive page of resources on Zhanaozen, including a list of censored news outlets that offered alternative coverage of the events in Western Kazakhstan, https://www.wefightcensorship.org/censored/kazakhstan-zhanaozen-city-cut-rest-world-year-agohtml.html - forbidden-content; accessed November 18, 2014.

[7] Since 2012, Reporters without Borders has included Kazakhstan within the list of countries that practice systematic censure of the Internet.

[8] On the alternation of repression and more persuasive methods in the advancement of Kazakhstani authoritarianism, see: Edward Schatz & Elena Maltseva. (2012). "Kazakhstan's Authoritarian 'Persuasion'". *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 28:1: 45-65; International Crisis Group. (2013). *Kazakhstan: Waiting for Change*, Asia Report No. 250, 30 September, pp. 11-5.

Internet Consumption Habits in Kazakhstan

The proliferation of access options has complicated the identification of reliable data on Kazakhstan's total Internet users. At the end of 2014, official statistics reported that 2.1 million Kazakhstani citizens had subscribed to a fixed Internet connection.[9] Approximately 41.6 percent of this category of users was reportedly located in Almaty and Astana: the concentration of fixed accesses in selected urban settings is therefore a defining trait of Kazakhstan's Internet consumption patterns. Regional distribution of fixed connections is an area where the Kazakhstani government has failed to improve its performance, as at the end of 2004, Kazakhstan's two main cities accounted for 44 percent of fixed subscriptions.

However, urban concentration notwithstanding, access patterns have noticeably changed since the emergence of GSM technology and the progressive diffusion of 3G and 4G connectivity, launched in 2010 and 2013 respectively. The ratio of fixed connections over total accesses decreased by 40 percent between 2007 and 2012, when, according to *Kazaktelekom* data, fixed subscriptions represented only 34 percent of total accesses.[10] The majority of Kazakhstani users access the Internet through mobile connections, which have more than tripled in number since 2006,[11] reaching a remarkable 59 percent penetration rate in 2012.[12]

The government is boasting about a relatively unrealistic overall Internet penetration rate of over 70 percent,[13] claiming that, in October 2014, 12 million Kazakhstani citizens had stable access to the Internet.[14] Inflating data on total accesses is integral to a central regime narrative, namely one which sought to portray, both domestically and internationally, Kazakhstan as a rapidly developing country. A closer look at wider policy frameworks – including *Nurly Zhol*, which Astana is currently presenting as Kazakhstan's key document defining economic development – does, on the other hand, indicate that the achievement of universal Internet access normally is not included among the regime's long-term development targets.[15] Moving away from the government's fabricated data, and combining all the available statistics on different connection typologies, it might be therefore reasonable to estimate a nominal 53-54 percent total penetration rate for late 2014, when approximately 40 percent[16] of the Kazakhstani population is thought to be using the Internet on a regular basis.

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[9] *Chislo abonentov fiksirovanogo Interneta* [The number of fixed Internet connections]. At http://www.stat.gov.kz/faces/wcnav_externalId/homeNumbersCommunication?_afrLoop=533188689158354#%40%3F_afrLoop%3D533188689158354%26_adf.ctrl-state%3D19yionbrr_158; accessed November 19, 2014.

[10] Data extracted from *Kazaktelekom*'s official site, at http://www.telecom.kz/page/single/strategija-kompanii?lang=ru; accessed November 19, 2014.

[11] Frederick Emrich, Yevgeniya Plakhina & Dariya Tsyrenzhapova. (2013). *Mapping Digital Media*: *Kazakhstan*. Almaty: Open Society Foundation, p. 7.

[12] "Kazakhstan". 2014. In *Freedom of the Net 2013 – A Global Assessment of Internet and Digital media*. Washington, DC: Freedom House, p. 439.

[13] *V Kazakhstane proniknovenie internet dostiglo bolee 70% - A. Zhumagaliev* [In Kazakhstan Internet penetration reached more than 70% - A. Zhumagaliev]. At http://www.zakon.kz/4639322-v-kazakhstane-proniknovenie-interneta.html, accessed November 21, 2014.

[14] *A. Isekeshev: V Kazakhstane chislo internet-pol'zovatelei dostiglo 12 mln. chelovek* [A. Isekeshev: In Kazakhstan the number of Internet users reached 12 million people]. At http://strategy2050.kz/ru/news/13777, accessed November 22, 2014.

[15] For the full draft of the presidential speech underpinning the *Nurly Zhol* programme, see: *Poslanie Glavy gosudarstva N. Nazarbaeva narodu Kazakstana. 11 noyabria 2014 g.* [Address of Head of State N. Nazarbaev to the people of Kazakhstan. 11 November 2014] At http://strategy2050.kz/ru/page/message_text2014/, accessed November 22, 2014.

[16] This figure has been also confirmed in numerous interviews conducted with bloggers and communication experts in Kazakhstan, throughout March and April 2014.

Katy Pearce observed that trying to develop a true picture of what is happening based on penetration rate statistics is ultimately "futile."[17] Her argument can be appropriately extended to Kazakhstan, where state-run operator *Kazaktelekom* controlled approximately 80 percent of fixed internet connections at the end of 2013.[18] Kazakhstan's mobile Internet market, although visibly more fragmented, is far from being thoroughly competitive. At the end of 2012, KCell's market share of 47 percent was almost as large as the combined shares of its three main competitors, namely Beeline (32 percent), Tele2 (12 percent), and Altai (5 percent).[19] Kcell had been operating under *Kazaktelekom*'s control until 2012, when it was acquired by Swedish company Teliasonera[20] through a series of not entirely uncontroversial[21] transactions.

The political implications of a non-competitive Internet market are evident:[22] the state owns 51 percent of *Kazaktelekom*, which controls, in turn, 70 percent of Kazakhstan's Internet accesses. Regime hegemony over network infrastructure places the issue of physical control at the epicenter of every strategy of Internet censorship put into practice in Kazakhstan.[23] A similar infrastructural context, when imposed in non-democratic political landscapes, usually leads to the consolidation of a networked form of authoritarianism, in which dissuading[24] politicized Internet consumption patterns goes hand in hand with the creation of a false sense of freedom associated with widely available Internet access.[25] A dual core of *de*-politicization (of established consumption habits) and *non*-politicization (of the emerging usership) underpins the Kazakhstani version of networked authoritarianism. Higher penetration rates – like those that Kazakhstan is reportedly achieving – hold the key to the crystallization of similar authoritarian dynamics, which are sustained, most crucially, by the systematic application of more or less invisible censorship strategies.

In Kazakhstan, the providers[26] allowed to connect to the international Internet are thus compelled to use infrastructure and technology controlled by the state-run company, reinforcing *Kazaktelekom*'s unfettered dominance over data transfer and, ultimately, enhancing the regime's filtering potential.[27] This context, in turn, facilitates the introduction of specific policies designed to restrict the content of websites and blogs and, more notably, has supported the regime through the adoption of targeted strategies of censorship. In Kazakhstan, a relatively restricted number of websites is permanently blocked, while, in other instances, the regime intervened with temporary *ad hoc* outages to block the population's access to normally available websites.

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[17] Katy Pearce. 2012. "Why Technology-Penetration Rates Are Worthless". *RFE/RL Feature Article*, 21 December.

[18] Data extracted from *Kazaktelekom*'s official site, at http://www.telecom.kz/page/single/strategija-kompanii?lang=ru, accessed November 19, 2014.

[19] Data retrieved by the author from the annual reports of the four companies in question.

[20] Isabel Gorst. 2012. *KCell IPO priced at up to $650m*. At http://blogs.ft.com/beyond-brics/2012/11/29/kcell-ipo-priced-at-up-to-650m/, accessed November 21, 2014.

[21] Joanna Lillis. 2014. *In Kazakhstan, What Did Embattled TeliaSonera Learn From Uzbekistan?* At http://www.eurasianet.org/node/68233, accessed November 25, 2014.

[22] John L. Couper, Adil Nurmakov & Tyrone Adams. 2014. "Political uses of social media in Kazakhstan". In: Cui Litang & Michael H. Prosser, eds., *Social Media in Asia*, Doerzbach: Dignity Press.

[23] Eric Harwit & Duncan Clark. 2001. "Shaping the Internet in China. Evolution of Political Control over Network Infrastructure and Content". *Asian Survey* 41: 3 (May/June): 381.

[24] Katy E. Pearce & Sarah Kendzior. 2012. "Networked Authoritarianism and Social Media in Azerbaijan". *Journal of Communication* 62: 2 (April): 288.

[25] Rebecca MacKinnon. 2011. "China's 'Networked Authoritarianism'". *Journal of Democracy* 22: 2 (April): 33.

[26] In late 2014, the government listed 11 companies as Internet providers authorized to operate within Kazakhstan.

[27] "Kazakhstan". 2014, op. cit., p. 440.

The relatively mild intensity of the regime's censorship drive – which will be analyzed in greater detail in the article's second segment – sets Kazakhstan apart from the inflexible praxis of Internet control that has crystallized throughout post-Soviet Central Asia in the last two decades. However inflated official data might ultimately be, the statistical reality of Internet penetration in Kazakhstan points to wide access – a contextual framework that departs from the norm established in Turkmenistan, where Internet access options have been severely limited by the government, both prior to the leadership change of 2006-2007 and following it.[28] Kazakhstan's choice to allow its population relatively open access to the international Internet [29] differs, in turn, from the strategy implemented in neighboring Uzbekistan, where the regime headed by Islam A. Karimov endeavored to create a set of "homegrown" social networks – strikingly similar to Facebook and Twitter – with the view to insulate local users from exogenous (and hence destabilizing) influences. [30] Finally, Kazakhstan's censorship practice does not appear to be as extensive and erratic as that put into place in Tajikistan, where local authorities have regularly blocked social media outlets and popular websites, without offering any explanation as to the rationale for such blatant mass censorship acts.[31]

On the one hand, this regional contextualization highlights the relative freedom enjoyed by Kazakhstan's Internet users. On the other, Central Asia's low standards prevent the formulation of positive assessments for the Kazakhstani digital media policy. As suggested by a closer look at domestic social media consumption patterns and, most importantly, the progressive de-politicization of Kazakhstan's blogosphere, the Nazarbaev regime managed with some success to monitor and regulate the Kazakhstani cyberspace, and social media in particular.

Social media are an emerging influence within the Kazakhstani socio-political landscape but, quantitatively, have to be seen as peripheral features within the Internet consumption habits emerging in Kazakhstan. Vkontakte.ru and Odnoklassniki.ru remain the most popular social networks to operate in the Kazakhstani cyberspace, with a combined total of more than 4.5 million registered users.[32] "Western" social networks are numerically more marginal but seem to feature a more active community of users. Only 14 percent of Kazakhstan's Internet users have a Facebook account,[33] while an even smaller percentage of users (7.37 percent) micro-blogs through Twitter.[34] This limited number of users, moreover, has to date engaged in mostly non-political discussions,[35] as the content of Kazakhstan's social media pages remains essentially lowbrow. There is perhaps no better way to capture the essence of this latter proposition than by examining Kazakhstan's most-followed Twitter accounts.

Sport personalities, celebrities, and pop-stars are currently topping Kazakhstan's Twitter rankings,[36] while major companies – including Air Astana, KCell, and Beeline –

[28] Luca Anceschi. 2012. "Reinforcing authoritarianism through media control: The case of post-Soviet Turkmenistan" In: Freeman & Shafer (eds.), op. cit., pp. 63-4.

[29] On the (allegedly negative) economic impacts of the internationalization of the Kazakhstani cyberspace, see: B. Kisikov. 2012. *Ne kazakhstanskii Kaznet* [Not Kazakhstani Kaznet]. At http://vlast.kz/?art=407, accessed November 22, 2014.

[30] Murat Sadykov. 2014. *After Cloning Facebook, Uzbekistan Launches Twitter Imitation*. At http://www.eurasianet.org/node/68043, accessed November 22, 2014.

[31] Casey Michel. 2014. "Tajikistan Cracks Down on Internet… Again." *The Diplomat*, October 8; Chris Rickleton. 2014. *Tajikistan: Can Dushanbe Keep the Lid on the Internet?* At http://www.eurasianet.org/node/69481, accessed November 22, 2014.

[32] Emrich, Plakhina & Tsyrenzhapova, op. cit., p. 48.

[33] Anonymous. 2014. Interviewed by Luca Anceschi. Almaty, April 5.

[34] Emrich, Plakhina & Tsyrenzhapova, op. cit., p. 48.

[35] Couper, Nurmakov & Adams, op. cit.

[36] Available at http://kaznet.me/rating/, accessed November 22, 2014.

usually manage accounts with substantive numbers of followers (more than 50,000), suggesting that Twitter, within Kazakhstan, is seen as a PR tool rather than a medium for more meaningful exchanges.[37] Government personalities, including President Nazarbaev, are generally alien to micro-blogging. However, a Klout-index analysis of the Kazakhstani Twitter-sphere reveals that the presidential party *Nur Otan*, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Press Service of the Presidential Administration – which, in spite of its information remit, joined Twitter only in June 2012 – are amongst the ten top performers. At the top of the list was Prime Minister Karim Masimov,[38] who is generally regarded as a smooth social media operator: his Twitter activity, rather interestingly, has been often openly discussed on national media.[39] Nevertheless, Masimov's two accounts were largely inactive during 2013 and 2014, revealing the PM's progressive detachment from micro-blogging and, more widely, the fundamentally non-political nature of Kazakhstan's Twitter-sphere.

The engagement potential of social networking, at least initially, was not recognized by the Kazakhstani élite.[40] In more recent times, however, Facebook seems to have emerged as a viable avenue to express both aligned and, more interestingly, dissenting opinions. The non-free elections of 2011 and 2012 featured a significant social network dimension, with several candidates setting up Facebook pages for their campaigns and updating them on a regular basis.[41] Mid-way through the campaign for the snap presidential election held on 26 April 2015, only one of the two[42] candidates registered to run against Nazarbaev had an active Facebook page on which he published campaign updates and posted information on his political platform.

In contrast, the opposition forces currently allowed to operate at the margins of the political arena within Kazakhstan have a visible Facebook presence. Most prominent is the page devoted to the unstructured and numerically small anti-Eurasianist movement that emerged throughout Kazakhstan in the lead-up to the signing of the treaty that established the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU). Prominent Eurasian-sceptics – including Marat Tazhin, Rasul Zhumaly, and Serikzhan Mambetalin – engaged in articulate Facebook campaigns to disseminate their criticism of the regime's foreign policy.[43] Following the violent repression that crushed the anti-devaluation protests of February 2014, Eurasia-sceptics opted to maintain a low profile in their activities, relying on word-of-mouth and, to a lesser extent, social networking to inform the Kazakhstani population about the inaugural anti-EEU forum, held in Almaty on 12 April 2014.[44]

Kazakhstan's tiny blogosphere ultimately has adopted a de-politicized outlook. At the end of 2014, there was no established blogging tradition in Kazakhstan: whereas the absence of political blogs has to be seen as the net effect of the authoritarian context that encapsulates the wider Kazakhstani cyberspace, the lack of more mundane forms of blogging – including

[37] Anonymous. 2014. Interviewed by Luca Anceschi. Almaty, April 2.

[38] Local media also monitored quite closely the social media activity of Kazakhstani politicians, as in: TengriNews. 2011. *Rating of the most popular blogs of Kazakhstan politicians*. At http://en.tengrinews.kz/internet/Rating-of-the-most-popular-blogs-of-Kazakhstan-politicians-5886/, accessed November 30, 2014.

[39] See, for instance, TengriNews. 2011. *Medvedev is now following Massimov on Twitter*. At http://en.tengrinews.kz/kazakhstan_news/Medvedev-is-now-following-Massimov-on-Twitter--1722/, accessed November 22, 2014.

[40] Couper, Nurmakov & Adams, op. cit.

[41] "Kazakhstan". 2013. In *Freedom of the Net 2013 – A Global Assessment of Internet and Digital media*. At https://www.freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/Kazakhstan%202012.pdf, accessed November 25, 2014.

[42] Data as per 21 March 2015.

[43] Luca Anceschi & Paolo Sorbello. (2014). "Kazakhstan and the EEU: The rise of Eurasian scepticism". *Open Democracy Russia*, May 15.

[44] The author was in Almaty during the lead-up to this meeting, researching the politics of anti-Eurasianism in Kazakhstan.

gastronomy or travel – points to the crystallization of disengaged Internet consumption patterns among Kazakhstani users.[45] A relatively small number of Western expats living in Kazakhstan blog about their local experiences; local users, on the other hand, "do not write blogs […] and do not read blogs."[46] At the end of 2014, approximately 80,000 local bloggers kept journals at Yvision.kz, which, due to the closure or the intermittent availability of other major platforms, has become Kazakhstan's most popular blogging website.[47] The potential of such a numerically small blogosphere, however, has not failed to attract the attention of the Kazakhstani government, which, following a well-established regional praxis, proceeded to manipulate new media with propagandistic aims in mind. For example, several new blogs related essentially pro-government accounts of the court trials for the Zhanaozen events throughout 2012 and 2013.[48]

The exception to this norm of de-politicization is represented by *Blogbasta.kz*, a niche website that publishes blog entries on politics, arts, and urban development. [49] By targeting Kazakhstan's "creative urban youth," [50] the blog's underpinning ambition is to challenge the "profound apathy"[51] that is engulfing the Kazakhstani polity and that allegedly is the by-product of the government's restrictive media policies. To date, however, *Blogbasta* remains a peripheral outlet in Kazakhstani cyberspace: peak access on the blog's website has been quantified at no more than 1,000 hits per day.[52] While *Blogbasta*'s entries – which are increasingly featuring an international authorship – are published mostly in Russian, a timidly growing segment of the Kazakhstani blogosphere has begun to operate in Kazakh. *Urimtal*, more specifically, constitutes the most visible web-publication in this restricted context. The team at *Urimtal* – which is blogging through the international platform Wordpress – has devoted substantial energies to training Kazakh-language bloggers, holding a series of workshops across Kazakhstan's expansive territory. [53] The blog's diverse content is, however, not political and certainly does not aspire to challenge the Kazakhstani establishment. Overall, *Urimtal*'s readership continues to be limited: peak access, in April 2014, had been estimated at only 300 hits per day.[54]

Given the marginal influence that social media and blogs have been allowed to wield upon the local population, continuing to contain Kazakhstan's restricted new media landscape should not represent a challenging undertaking for Nazarbaev and his associates. The Kazakhstani regime, in the words of one of the digital media operators interviewed while researching this article, "should not be afraid of the bloggers, but [it] is."[55] Kazakhstan's digital media, ultimately, "remains constrained and state interference remains prominent."[56] This statement identifies the paradoxical outlook of Kazakhstan's new media policy. Containing Kazakhstan's essentially de-politicized cyberspace suggests, on one hand, that the regime – rhetoric notwithstanding – continued to regard its own stability as a critical driver for its digital media policy. On the other, the persistent repression of local new media reveals

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[45] Anonymous. 2014. Interviewed by Luca Anceschi. Almaty, April 7.

[46] Anonymous. 2014. Interviewed by Luca Anceschi. Almaty, March 29.

[47] "Kazakhstan". 2014, op. cit., p. 446.

[48] Kaznis Toguzbaev. 2012. *Usililis' postzhanaozenskie batlii blogerov* [Post-Zhanaozen Blogger Battle Intensifies]. At http://rus.azattyq.org/content/twitter-bloggers-battle-about-zhanaozen-trial/24680408.html, accessed November 26, 2014.

[49] Anonymous. 2014. Interviewed by Luca Anceschi. Almaty, April 7.

[50] "Kazakhstan". 2013, op. cit.

[51] Anonymous. 2014. Interviewed by Luca Anceschi. Almaty, April 7.

[52] Anonymous. 2014. Interviewed by Luca Anceschi. Almaty, April 7.

[53] Anonymous. 2014. Interviewed by Luca Anceschi. Almaty, April 9.

[54] Anonymous. 2014. Interviewed by Luca Anceschi. Almaty, April 9.

[55] Anonymous. 2014. Interviewed by Luca Anceschi. Almaty, March 31.

[56] Emrich, Plakhina & Tsyrenzhapova, op. cit., p. 8.

the profound disconnect that has come to characterize the interplay between the élite's authoritarian outlook and the population's political behavior. Repression, in this sense, emerges as the connecting link between progressive Internet de-politicization and the consolidation of non-political consumption habits across Kazakhstan. There is no better way to capture the essence of this interrelated dynamic than by illustrating the strategy of systematic control through which the Kazakhstani government attempted to "regulate" the social media landscape illustrated above. It is precisely to the analysis of these repressive processes that our attention now turns.

Containing Kazakhstan's Digital Media

Kazakhstan's digital media policy has had, since its very onset, a profoundly repressive disposition. Its initial formulation related directly – albeit not openly – to the resolution of intra-élite conflicts that emerged within Kazakhstan's first family. International observers[57] as well as local media operators[58] agreed in linking the containment of the "subversive" activities of the late Rakhat Aliyev[59] to the imposition of an access ban on the Russian blogging platform LiveJournal (*Zhivoi Zhurnal* or *ZheZhe*) and, eventually, the enactment of draconian legislative measures to regulate the emergence of a new media landscape in Kazakhstan. Containing Aliyev's blog was the key political imperative that led to Internet censorship in Kazakhstan: pre-2008 policies, albeit equally repressive, operated through more discrete strategies.[60]

The insulation of Kazakhstani cyberspace from the supposedly destabilizing information contained in Aliyev's blog entries was the key objective pursued by the earliest iteration of the regime's new media policy, which was implemented through a combination of pre-emptive censorship and restrictive law-making. Interestingly, this repressive mix has continued to characterize the interplay between regime and digital media until the time of writing.

An in-depth look at the access ban imposed on LiveJournal unveils a clear connection between Aliyev's anti-regime campaign and the establishment of a durable practice of Internet censorship in Kazakhstan. The platform was initially blocked in October 2008 and the ban was strictly enforced until 13 November 2010.[61] Throughout this period, the government provided no official explanation for the access ban, while *Kazaktelekom* denied any involvement in censoring *ZheZhe*.[62] The ban was significant because, at the time it was

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[57] Martha Brill Olcott. 2010. *Kazakhstan: Unfulfilled promise?* Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, pp. 260-1; Carl Schreck. 2009. "Kazakhstan puts pressure on bloggers". *The National*. August 25; "Kazakhstan". 2014, op. cit., p. 442; Polit.ru. 2009. *V Kazakhstane vse saity stali SMI* [In Kazakhstan all sites are now media]. At http://polit.ru/news/2009/07/11/00/, accessed November 28, 2014.

[58] This connection emerged clearly during several of the interviews conducted throughout 2014 in preparation for this article, particularly those held in Almaty by the author on March 29, March 31, April 5, April 7, and April 10.

[59] For intra-elite conflict in Kazakhstan, and the Nazarbaev-Aliyev rivalry in particular, see: Sébastien Peyrouse. 2012. "The Kazakh neopatrimonial regime: balancing uncertainties among the 'family', oligarchs and technocrats". *Demokratizatsiya* 20: 4 (Fall): 354-6; Schatz & Maltseva, op. cit., pp. 57-9; Erica Marat. 2007. "Nazarbayev prevails over political competitors, family members." *The Central Asia-Caucasus Institute Analyst*, May 30.

[60] Eric Mcglinchey & Erica Johnson. 2007. "Aiding the Internet in Central Asia". *Democratization* 14: 2: 283-5.

[61] On the regime's treatment of LiveJournal, see Adil Nurmakov's numerous reports for *Global Voices Online*, including: *Kazakhstan: LiveJournal Still Blocked*, posted on 5 January 2009 and *Kazakhstan: LiveJournal unblocked after two years of filtering*, published on 17 November 2010.

[62] Zakon.kz. 2008. *V "Kazakhtelekome utverzhdaiut, chto ne imeiut otnosheniia k blokirovke blog-portal LiveJournal* ["Kazakhtelekom" confirms that it has no relation to blocking the blog-portal Live Journal]. At http://www.zakon.kz/123296-v-kazakhtelekome-utverzhdajut-chto-ne.html, accessed November 30, 2014.

imposed, LiveJournal was hosting "32 percent of all active Russian-language blogs in Kazakhstan, or nearly 230,000 users." [63] Two events catalyzed the suspension of this restrictive measure. First, the LiveJournal team – in a decision that was to be eventually reversed [64] – announced the cancellation of Rakhat Aliyev's account. [65] Second, the organization of the OSCE summit in Astana (1-2 December 2010) led the regime to relax temporarily its suffocating control of the Kazakhstani blogosphere. In this sense, the suspension of the Livejournal access ban represented a cosmetic measure. The platform's operations in Kazakhstan, as a consequence, were destined to be short-lived: in late 2011 – in a move that local bloggers connected with the Aliyev case – the Saryarkinskii District Court in Astana decreed its definitive closure. [66]

The simultaneous introduction of a new legislative framework meant to deter the proliferation of anti-regime views across the wider Kazakhstani cyberspace. In the first half of 2009, the Kazakhstani Parliament discussed a bill that intended to subject all forms of Internet content to Kazakhstan's restrictive media code. The outlook of such legislative reform was repressive by design, as it applied Kazakhstan's draconian anti-defamation measures – which had severely curtailed the freedom of traditional media operators – to bloggers in particular and, more widely, every Internet user operating from within Kazakhstan. Throughout 2009, local [67] and international [68] outrage accompanied the enactment of this legislation. The then OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media Miklos Haraszti asked Nazarbaev to veto the law[69] since the restriction of Internet freedom violated Kazakhstan's 2007 Madrid commitment. [70] The Kazakhstani president ignored Haraszti's request and proceeded to sign the bill into law on July 10, 2009.[71]

The strategies of Internet containment devised by the government in 2008-2009 aligned Kazakhstan to the wider authoritarian practice then consolidating throughout Eurasia. More specifically, the censorship strategy introduced by blocking LiveJournal imported to Kazakhstan the model of digital media containment that had crystallized in China, where preemptive censorship and large-scale access bans represented standard regime practices.[72] At the same time, the 2009 legislative reforms pushed Kazakhstan beyond repressive norms then

[63] "Kazakhstan". 2011. In *Freedom of the Net 2013 – A Global Assessment of Internet and Digital media*. At http://www.justice.gov/eoir/vll/country/freedom_house/2011_free_net/Kazakhstan.pdf, accessed November 30, 2014.

[64] In late 2014, when Rakhat Aliyev was facing a sentence for murder in an Austrian jail, the blog operating under his LiveJournal account was fully accessible at http://rakhataliev.livejournal.com. Pre-2011 blog-entries, however, had been cancelled by the platform's administrators.

[65] Ferghana.ru. 2010. *LiveJournal blocked the blog of the former son-in-law of Kazakh President*. At http://enews.fergananews.com/news.php?id=1910, accessed November 28, 2014.

[66] GlobalVoices. 2011. *Kazakhstan: Bloggers Denounce Repeated Blockage of LiveJournal*. At http://globalvoicesonline.org/2011/09/03/kazakhstan-bloggers-denounce-repeated-blockage-of-livejournal/, accessed November 30, 2014.

[67] A concise list of Kazakhstan's protests against the introduction of the 2009 legislation is included in: IREX. *2010 Media Sustainability Index - The Development of Sustainable Independent Media in Europe and Eurasia*. Washington, DC: IREX, p. 217.

[68] Human Rights Watch. 2009. "Kazakhstan: Rescind New Media Restrictions". HRW Press Release. July 14.

[69] "OSCE media freedom representative urges Kazakh President to veto new Internet law". 2009. OSCE Press Release. June 25.

[70] RC.GAL/6/10. 2010. *Kazakhstan and the so-called «Madrid Commitments»*. October 1.

[71] For the full text of the law, see: Zakon Respubliki Kazakhstan ot 10 Iulia 2009 goda No 179-IV 'O vnesenii izmenenii i dopolnenii v nekotorye zakonodatel'nye akty Respubliki Kazkhstan po voprosam intellektual'noi sobstvennosti'." [Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan from 10 July 2009 No. 179-IV "On introducing changes and amendments to several legal acts of the Republic of Kazakhstan on question of intellectual property."] *Kazakhstanskaya Pravda*. 28 July 2009. p. 2.

[72] Rebecca MacKinnon. 2008. "Flatter world and thicker walls? Blogs, censorship and civic discourse in China". *Public Choice*. 134: 1-2 (January): 31-46.

prevalent in neighboring Russia, where digital media have been predominantly contained through extensive law-making efforts, but actual bans on content were not widely enforced until 2012, after the prominent protests of 2011.[73]

The measures of 2008-2009, furthermore, exerted both immediate and, crucially, long-lasting influences on the politics of new media in Kazakhstan. Containing LiveJournal – a popular blogging platform that was started in the United States and later purchased by Russian owners – was primarily intended to address short-term matters of regime preservation related to the Nazarbaev-Aliyev rivalry. The new media legislation enacted in 2009 meant to set, in the medium term, the tone for future debates to be held across the Kazakhstani blogosphere. The most durable imprint that these measures left upon Kazakhstan's new media panorama, nevertheless, is connected to the consolidation of unencumbered regime authority over the Kazakhstani cyberspace, and the amalgamation of the Internet to the authoritarian norm of media control established by Nazarbaev and his associates in the mid- and late-1990s.

As the government's new media policy became integral to the regime's power technologies, control over the Kazakhstani cyberspace had to remain strict. Throughout 2010, when Kazakhstan held the OSCE Chairmanship, the regime restrained from adopting excessively repressive strategies vis-à-vis the regulation of local digital media, failing, however, to liberalize Kazakhstan's cyberspace in any significant way. Astana's attention, most specifically, focused at the time on filtering the website of the opposition newspaper *Respublika*. In this context, the country's largest Internet provider contributed in decisive fashion to the successful application of the repressive measures dictated by Nazarbaev and his associates: the Committee to Protect Journalists, reporting to the OSCE, noted that *Respublika* "readers served by Kazakhtelecom […] could not load the [newspaper's] site, while readers served by other providers were able to access it." [74] The restriction of *Respublika* and 125 other websites found to host illegal information in 2010 was not regulated through court cases based on the 2009 legislation, but was enforced unilaterally by the Kazakhstani regime.[75]

The combination of restrictive law-making and repressive methods resurfaced yet again in late 2011 to shape decisively the Kazakhstani new media landscape and, ultimately, determine its transition to today's status of nearly total de-politicization. In November 2011, as previously mentioned, the Saryarkinskii Court imposed a permanent access ban on LiveJournal and twelve other websites, dealing a nearly fatal blow to the freedom of the Kazakhstani blogosphere. It is in the aftermath of the Zhanaozen crisis, however, that the containment of social media emerged as a crucial element in Kazakhstan's technologies of power, confirming that Nazarbaev and his associates had come to regard digital media as a severely destabilizing influence at times of regime vulnerability. This proposition is better appreciated by observing the quasi-total isolation imposed on Zhanaozen and its surroundings immediately after the brutal repression of workers' demonstrations in the city's main square: Twitter, YouTube, and other key websites – including *Novosti Kazakhstana,* RIA Novosti's local partner – were inaccessible throughout 16-17 December 2011. [76] Yet again, *Kazaktelekom* publicly denied that it extended any technological support to the isolation of

[73] Sarah Oates. 2013. *Revolution Stalled: The Political Limits of the Internet in the post-Soviet Sphere*. New York-Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 94-7.

[74] RC.NGO/59/10. 2010. *Disdaining press freedom, Kazakhstan undermines OSCE*. October 4.

[75] Tamara Kaleeva. 2010. *Situatsiia so svobodoi slova v Kazakhstane v 2010 godu (Analiticheskii doklad)* [The situation with freedom of speech in Kazakhstan in 2010 (Analytical document)]. At http://www.adilsoz.kz/politcor/show/id/20, accessed November 30, 2014.

[76] Tamara Kaleeva. 2011. *Situatsiia so svobodoi slova v Kazakhstane v 2011 godu (Analiticheskii doklad)* [The situation with freedom of speech in Kazakhstan in 2011 (Analytical document)]. At http://www.adilsoz.kz/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/Analitical-report-20111.pdf, accessed November 30, 2014.

the city, while the Kazakhstani Ministry of Communication and Information explained the interruption of Internet services through electricity shortages and damaged connection lines.[77] As the disruption was imposed on a large scale, it brought significant economic losses for the population of the Mangystau *oblast'*.[78] While it is difficult to quantify the financial loss incurred by the population during the Zhanaozen outage, the economic impact of network disruptions in Kazakhstan certainly represents a further facet of the regime's instrumental use of communication infrastructure across the Kazakhstani territory.

After the intransigence of December 2011, the Kazakhstani government returned to approach the management of the Zhanaozen crisis through traditionally milder authoritarian tones. In the final week of 2011, the government – through the office of Twitter-savvy PM Masimov[79] – invited a delegation of selected bloggers to visit the Mangystau *oblast'*, in order to grant new media operators the first hand access that was denied in late December. This group of bloggers ended up producing an account of the events that closely matched[80] the official version disseminated by the government immediately after the Zhanaozen riots. This group – soon to be known as the *Krovavye Blogery* (bloody bloggers) – was rapidly discredited by Kazakhstan's independent blogging community, which, to re-establish some equilibrium, proceeded to organize its own fact-finding mission to the Mangystau *oblast'*. This second delegation, perhaps not unsurprisingly, produced a critical account of the government's responsibilities in the Zhazaozen events, calling for the resignation of the region's *akim*.[81]

The information war fought over the Zhanaozen crisis captures two critically important issues that, while holding the key to this article's core argument, encapsulate the essence of Kazakhstan's post-2011 media policy. To begin with, the information war confirmed that social media manipulation in late 2011 was contributing directly to the strategies through which the Nazarbaev regime sought the consolidation of its domestic power. It also revealed the regime's deliberate intention to split Kazakhstan's blogging community. Both issues re-emerged at regular intervals to characterize Kazakhstan's digital media policy in the post-Zhanaozen years – a policy that has been in turn underpinned by an apparently paradoxical correlation. On the one hand, the access options available to local Internet users became more stable while staying relatively inexpensive:[82] such circumstances, ultimately, led to a substantive rise in the Internet penetration rate. On the other, the regime continued in its persistent strategy of containment, endeavoring to restrict even further the opportunities for politicized Internet use. Kazakhstan's cyberspace, in other words, had become wider, but remained strictly controlled. This latter proposition aligns the argument advanced in this paper with the recent findings of Rød and Weidmann, who concluded that Internet expansion might indeed play some positive roles vis-à-vis the solidification of authoritarian stability.[83]

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[77] TengriNews. 2011. *MSI raz"iasnilo situatsiiu so sviaz'iu v Zhanaozene* [MCI explained the situation in Zhanaozen] At http://tengrinews.kz/kazakhstan_news/msi-razyyasnilo-situatsiyu-so-svyazyu-v-janaozene-204082/, accessed November 30, 2014.

[78] See, on this point: Anita R. Gohdes. 2015. "Pulling the plug: Network disruptions and violence in civil conflict". *Journal of Peace Research*. [Online First].

[79] Makpal Mukankyzy. 2012. "Sobyiia v Zhanaozene raskololi internet-auditoriiu" [Events in Zhanaozen divided the internet audience]. *Radio Azattyk Feature Article*. January 9.

[80] *Kazakhstan's Zhanaozen Information Confrontation*. At http://cybernautika.com/2012/01/02/kazakhstans-zhanaozen-information-confrontation/, accessed December 1, 2014.

[81] For a first-hand account of this second mission to Zhanaozen, see Dmitriy Shelokov's blog at http://yvision.kz/post/217205, accessed December 1, 2014.

[82] "Kazakhstan". 2014, op. cit., p. 439.

[83] Espen Geelmuyden Rød & Nils B. Weidmann. 2015. "Empowering activists or autocrats? The Internet in authoritarian regimes". *Journal of Peace Research*. [Online First].

An unrelenting strategy of repression continued to underpin the regime's approach to social media. The most visible manifestation of this crackdown was certainly the multiple arrests of bloggers in February 2014. The protests that led to the 2014 arrests erupted in relation to the regime's attempt to split the blogging community.[84] A.S. Yesimov's dinner with selected Almaty bloggers represented a deliberate attempt to co-opt a segment of the blogging community active in Kazakhstan's cultural capital.[85] The split in the Kazakhstani blogosphere became more evident in the lead-up to the 2015 snap presidential election. In mid-February 2015, as the Kazakhstani political landscape was abuzz with rumors about the imminent decision to call a presidential vote, the Alliance of Bloggers in Kazakhstan (ABK) suggested skipping the election and requested instead the organization of a referendum that would confirm Nazarbaev until 2022.[86] The more independent segment of the Kazakhstani blogosphere expressed vocal criticism of ABK's political stand and questioned its legitimacy with vehemence.[87] Both the establishment and public advocacy of the ABK, ultimately, confirmed that digital media are currently playing an integral role in the power technologies of the Kazakhstani regime.

Post-Zhanaozen containment of new media did not exclude the implementation of legislative reforms. While international pressure targeted the 2009 media law and called for the de-penalization of defamation in Kazakhstan,[88] the regime proceeded to increase the government's discretionary powers in relation to new media control. In April 2014, an amendment to Article 41.1 of Kazakhstan's media legislation conferred on the Attorney General extrajudicial blocking power vis-à-vis websites that host information deemed to be causing damage to Kazakhstani society at large.[89] The amendment allowed the regime to block websites or wider networks – including WhatsApp and Skype – without waiting for a court decision. The rationale for this legislative amendment is entrenched in the turbulent days that followed the tenge devaluation of February 2014, when, after a viral WhatsApp message falsely announced the imminent collapse of the national banking system, residents of Almaty and Astana crowded into local bank branches to withdraw their savings.[90]

The Kazakhstani regime did not have to wait long for the application of this controversial amendment. On 29 May 2014, during the signing of the controversial EEU treaty, the website of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty's Kazakhstani service – locally known as *Radio Azattyk* – was partially blocked: the government specifically targeted

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[84] Anonymous. 2014. Interviewed by Luca Anceschi. Almaty, March 31.

[85] GlobalVoices. 2014. *Some Kazakh bloggers dine with Mayor, some get jail terms.* At http://advocacy.globalvoicesonline.org/2014/02/08/some-kazakh-bloggers-dine-with-mayor-some-get-jail-terms/, accessed December 2, 2014.

[86] Asemgul' Kasenova. 2015. *Al'ians blogerov predlagaet prodlit' polnomochiia Nazarbaeva do 2022 goda* [Alliance of bloggers propose extending Nazarbaev's authority until 2022]. At: http://tengrinews.kz/kazakhstan_news/alyans-blogerov-predlagaet-prodlit-polnomochiya-nazarbaeva-270308/, accessed March 21, 2015.

[87] Criticism of ABK, more precisely, pre-dated the 2015 campaign. To question the credentials of the pro-government blogging association, the collective blog community *Ostrosotsialnnye razmyshleniya* published a complete list of ABK members, alluding to their scarce familiarity with blogging and social media in general. [Participants in the Alliance of Bloggers of Kazakhstan. At http://yvision.kz/post/433209, accessed 22 March 2015].

[88] TengriNews. 2014. *Defamation to remain criminal charge in Kazakhstan and 27 European countries: no freedom of speech for Kazakhstan only?* At http://en.tengrinews.kz/laws_initiatives/Defamation-to-remain-criminal-charge-in-Kazakhstan-and-27-European-countries-no-25286/, accessed December 1, 2014.

[89] Asemgul' Kasenova. 2014. Sotsseti v Kazakhstane smogut blokirovatm bez resheniia suda [Social Networks in Kazakhstan can be blocked without a court decision]. At http://m.tengrinews.kz/ru/kazakhstan_news/253345, accessed December 1, 2014.

[90] Anonymous. 2014. Interviewed by Luca Anceschi. Almaty, April 9. On this, also see: Charles Recknagel. 2014. "Kazakh bank run apparently latest to be fueled by social media". *RFE/RL Feature Article*. February 18.

Azattyk's EEU-related content, which remained inaccessible inside Kazakhstan until the signature ceremony had concluded.[91]

Equating the dissemination of false information to a violation of national security brings Kazakhstan's censorship practices closer to those established in Uzbekistan, where the concept of information security is normally manipulated to restrict freedom of expression.[92] Security considerations were certainly central to the regime's decision to block online material featuring Islamic State propaganda,[93] but were also more loosely applied to justify the numerous bans imposed upon different websites throughout 2013 and 2014.[94] Imposing systematic censorship under the rubric of national security[95] allows the regime to limit even further the freedom of Kazakhstan's new media: in a move that is reminiscent of China's large-scale blocking strategy, prominent élite members have called for the imposition of targeted access bans to several Facebook and Twitter pages that are reportedly hosting "messages of general and religious terrorism."[96] The forced de-politicization of Kazakhstan's social media landscape is another step in the persistently repressive new media policy implemented in Kazakhstan from 2008 onwards.

Conclusion

The stability of contemporary Eurasian authoritarianism is often attributed to the leaderships' ability to contain digital media. The rise of Internet penetration rates throughout much of the region forced the Eurasian élites to rethink their approaches to the containment of cyberspace. In this sense, a new set of repressive strategies came to be implemented across the region, with the ultimate view to mould the Internet consumption habits of Eurasian users. Locating Kazakhstan's place vis-à-vis the regional praxis of new media repression constituted the core objective of this article, which concluded that Kazakhstan's digital media policy is fully consistent with the authoritarian norm crystallizing throughout the post-Soviet space and wider Eurasia.

In Kazakhstan, the rapid diffusion of 3G and 4G connectivity led to the emergence of a new category of users, able to access the Internet more often, more quickly, and at relatively low cost. Promoting non-political consumption habits among this specific – and rapidly expanding – category of users represents a critically important end for the Nazarbaev regime, particularly throughout the 2010-2014 quadrennium, when the number of total mobile accesses rose rather sharply. The regime, in early 2015, might be said to have achieved this objective in full, as the great majority of local users came to see the Internet as

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[91] Partial blocking was not the only means through which the Kazakhstani government attempted to silence *Radio Azattyk* while the EEU treaty was signed in Astana. Journalist Orken Bisenov was arrested on 27 May, while covering a meeting of EEU-sceptics in the nation's capital. On this see: *Narusheniia svobody slova v Kazakhstane, mai 2014 goda* [Violations of the Freedom of Speech in Kazakhstan, May 2014]. At http://www.adilsoz.kz/monitoring/show/id/68, accessed on November 21, 2014.

[92] Zhanna Kozhamberdiyeva. 2008. "Freedom of expression on the Internet: A case study of Uzbekistan". *Review of Central and East European Law* 33: 1: 116-22.

[93] Joanna Lillis. 2014. *Kazakhstan: Children Star in Islamic State Propaganda Video*. At http://www.eurasianet.org/node/71071, accessed December 2, 2014.

[94] Tamara Kaleeva. 2014. *Situatsiia so svobodoi slova v Kazakhstane v pervom polugodii 2014 goda* [Situation with freedom of speech in Kazakhstan in first half of 2014]. At http://www.adilsoz.kz/news/show/id/1557, accessed December 2, 2014.

[95] See, on this: Philip N. Howard, Sheetal D. Agarwal & Muzammil M. Hussain. 2011. "When do states disconnect their digital networks? Regime responses to the political uses of Social Media". *The Communication Review*, 14:3: 226-9.

[96] Renat Tashkinbayev. 2013. *Kazakhstan authorities unable to block Facebook and Twitter*. At http://en.tengrinews.kz/internet/Kazakhstan-authorities-unable-to-block-Facebook-and-Twitter-23079/, accessed December 2, 2014.

an essentially lowbrow medium, and approached social media – and Twitter in particular – as PR instruments rather than avenues for intellectual engagement or more meaningful exchanges. The rise of new media in Kazakhstan occurred under conditions of consolidated authoritarianism: this milieu profoundly influenced the outlook of the great majority of new Internet users, while the cyberspace segments that did not automatically align to the regime's outlook clashed in turn with the élite's repressive ambitions. A combination of occasional censorship and systematically restrictive law-making supported the Kazakhstani leadership in its attempts to influence the popular perception of the political undertone of social media, promoting the de-politicization of consumption habits amongst the most recalcitrant segment(s) of Kazakhstan's cyberspace. This mix, ultimately, replicated closely the methods of media control adopted in neighboring Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and the more distant China.

The adjustment of Kazakhstan's more established power technologies to the emergence of social media was not, however, limited to the promotion of de-politicized and non-political consumption patterns. Indeed, the regime manifested a growing understanding of the propagandistic potential held by digital media. The incorporation of social media manipulation within the élite's strategies of power preservation became particularly visible at times of crisis, including the 2011 Zhanaozen riots and, more recently, the devaluation protests of early 2014. In these contexts, the Kazakhstani élite made a deliberate attempt to split the local blogging community, to ultimately transform the country's small blogosphere into another vehicle for the official propaganda.

It is by focusing on the small size of Kazakhstan's blogosphere that we, however, might draw some more specific conclusions about the nexus between regime stability and digital media in Kazakhstan. The persistent control of Internet blogging – which remains an overall marginal and essentially non-political medium – captures the government's methodically authoritarian outlook. It also highlights the profound disconnect between the élite and the wider population: this divide, in the ultimate analysis, represents a further indicator of the slow, yet inexorable decline currently experienced by the Nazarbaev regime.