



The Unfreedom Monitor

A Methodology for Tracking Digital
Authoritarianism Around the World

KAZAKHSTAN COUNTRY REPORT

Sofya du Boulay

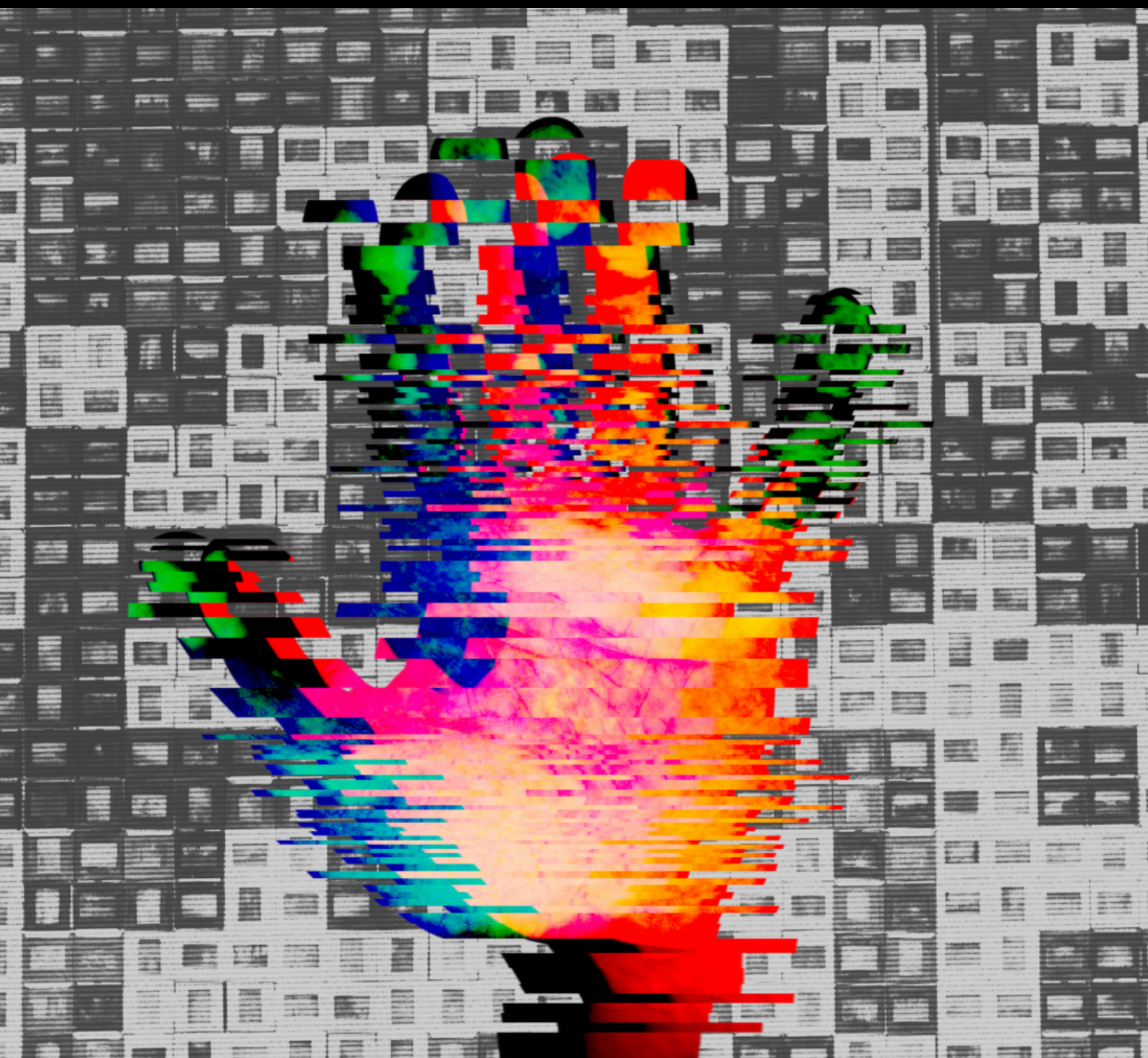


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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Kazakhstan's ruling regime surveils and monitors the activities of dissidents and critics ("[Kazakhstan: Four Activists' Mobile Devices Infected with Pegasus Spyware](#)"). President Tokayev continues the repressive politics of his predecessor in controlling information and cyberspace by applying technological solutions — targeted monitoring, internet shutdowns and coordinated inauthentic behaviour on social media. The press is saturated with pro-regime propaganda, although critical reporting is tolerated, provided certain lines are not crossed. Outspoken reporters and media outlets are targeted with spurious criminal cases, and sometimes with violence and intimidation. Kazakhstan ranks among the world's worst countries for press freedom: 158th out of 180 ([Reporters Sans Frontières](#)). This report analyses the dominant motives, methods, and responses to digital authoritarianism in Kazakhstan, relying on existing advocacy materials, legal regulations, and media coverage on internet governance in the country. It briefly discusses Kazakhstan's political system and the trajectory of digital authoritarianism before reviewing incidents of networked authoritarianism in 2022, mapping the evolution and transformation of digital space securitisation in Central Asia. The overarching tactic of the state is to censor information that does not synchronise with regime values and aspirations.

BACKGROUND

COUNTRY POLITICAL HISTORY

Kazakhstan is a post-Soviet oil-rich authoritarian state in Central Asia. For three decades (1990–2019), former Communist Party leader President Nursultan Nazarbayev ran the country, casually winning unfair elections, and earning the title of first president.

Kazakhstan gained independence by default after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Nazarbayev promised to liberate the country from the Soviet-era past and institutions and build a new democratic state. Kazakhstan had no written constitution or political independence from the Kremlin before 1991. In 1993, the government adopted the first constitution, proclaiming Kazakhstan a “democratic, secular, rule of law and social state” with the equal division of power between the executive, the judiciary and the legislature ([Mallison](#)).

“ For almost 30 years, Nazarbayev adopted autocratic measures to secure his position in power, while in office and after the resignation. ”

1995 marked the beginning of the authoritarian era in Kazakhstan. It started with the dissolution of parliament and the weakening role of legislative and judicial powers in favour of executive governance. A referendum in 1995 adopted the second constitution, which prolonged the rule of President Nazarbayev and centralised his power. This represented a rupture from his initial democratic commitments.

Interethnic peace, economic growth and nuclear disarmament contributed to Nazarbayev’s generally positive domestic and international reputation. For almost 30 years, Nazarbayev adopted autocratic measures to secure his position in power, while in office and after his resignation. He amended the constitution and eliminated opposition to his rule starting in the mid-2000s. His leadership is also associated with corruption, authoritarian consolidation, and media co-optation. President Nazarbayev stepped down the presidency in 2019 while maintaining significant powers. He appointed his loyal successor Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, a career diplomat. The election campaign generated limited public interest since the political space was systematically cleansed from competition. The coordinated power transition was formally validated by nominal elections in June 2019.

Parliamentary and presidential elections are neither free nor fair in Kazakhstan, and authorities have consistently marginalised or imprisoned genuine opposition figures. This well-choreographed transition left President Tokayev in a difficult situation, being overshadowed by a powerful patron. Tokayev was aware of the inevitable need for structural changes to gain independent authority and social trust.

After years of economic chaos and the post-Soviet transition to a market economy, Kazakhstan achieved prosperity and rapid economic development due to innovative reforms in banking and privatisation and the high oil prices in the 2000s. The economy of Kazakhstan remains dependent on oil resources. Though national GDP growth has been slowing down since 2015, Kazakhstan remains the Central Asian economic leader.

In January 2022, widespread popular demonstrations erupted in Kazakhstan. Protesters demanded socio-economic changes and the dismantling of systemic inequality enabled by Nazarbayev's regime, and voiced grievances about the incomplete power transition. The increase in gas prices unleashed social grievances. Popular protests coincided with inter-elite struggles. The first president's inner circle monopolised the country's most profitable economic enterprises and abused the state budget to expand the network of affiliated companies, ignoring the population's needs. The socio-economic and regional disparity growing for decades exploded as people found it hard to survive in the post-pandemic economy, taking loans from banks controlled by Nazarbayev's allies. The dominant media outlets are either in state hands or owned by government-friendly businessmen. Freedoms of speech and assembly remain restricted and punished. President Tokayev announced a state of emergency and asked the Russia-led military alliance, the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO), to assist in combating external terrorist threats. The Kazakh security crisis received immediate support, signalling protection to Moscow's client states. The troop deployment was short and effective, pacifying the situation on the ground, but did not solve the question of Tokayev's long-term domestic political legitimacy, though it eased the removal of Nazarbayev from Kazakhstan's political scene.

The Kazakhstani government actively promotes "cyber security" and "digital hygiene" as part of a wider strategy on national modernisation and securitisation. In November 2015, the Kazakhstani parliament discussed revisions to the communications law, validating a "national security certificate" with the intent to access and decode internet communication. This first attempt failed as various international mobile providers, including Mozilla Firefox, expressed complaints over content monitoring and blockage. In 2017, the discourse on the need to defend the country's information space from online fraud, hacking and cyber re-emerged, transforming into the fully fledged state programs Digital Kazakhstan (2017) and Qaznet Trust Network (2019). In his interview to *Kazakhstanskaya Pravda*, the Minister of Digital Development, Innovation and Aerospace Industry Askar Zhumagaliyev highlighted the importance of data protection in the digital space, advocating for voluntary security certificates on mobile phones that presumably diminish the circulation of pornography, and extremist and terrorist materials.

President Tokayev explained that digital precautionary measures are required to protect the country exclusively from external threats, in case of outside invasion ([Valentinov](#)). The detailed investigation on the adoption of security certificates in Kazakhstan demonstrated the regime's motivation to monitor user communications and centralise censorship and surveillance efforts, reducing the security and privacy of internet users in Kazakhstan. Those who do not wish to install the certificate could encounter "technical" constraints accessing certain websites ([Freedom House](#)).

INTERNET PENETRATION

In Kazakhstan, 35 percent of the population are regular internet users, though 88.2 percent have access to the internet ([Junisbai et al.](#)). The State Statistics agency reports a 4.1 percent increase in the number of internet subscriptions in 2020. National operators and mobile service providers offer access to social media platforms (Facebook, Instagram, Telegram, etc.) and messaging apps without disruption. The rapid spread of 3G and 4G

connectivity enabled the emergence of a new category of regular users. The rise of the internet in Kazakhstan occurred under conditions of consolidated authoritarianism. The State Technical Service has the capacity to distort and totally disrupt internet access, and the right to suspend websites it deems suspicious without a judicial process. The Law on Communication (Article 41-1) permits the Ministry of Information to suspend access to websites and communication networks on its discretion in case of extremist or terrorist activity. If the content on a website is identified as illegal in broad terms, that website would be automatically suspended. The government uses this to restrict access to the internet during protests and social movements.

Kazakhstan is the top-ranked country among the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) in information and communication technologies. The development of information technologies became a national priority in 2012. Artificial intelligence, smart technologies and modernisation grew out of the leadership's ambition to belong to the club of the world's most developed countries. Two state programs — "Information Kazakhstan 2020" and "Digital Kazakhstan" — promised technological advancement, aiming for 100 percent of households to have access to ICT infrastructure, 75 percent of the population to use the internet and 95 percent of the territory to receive digital broadcast signals by 2020 ([Emrich et al.](#)). There is no clear data that can confirm whether the Information Kazakhstan 2020 program has met its targets, but the level of internet penetration and infrastructure in Kazakhstan is the highest in Central Asia and is closer to Russian indicators. Major media outlets operate online and have their own web portals and social networks. Censorship and network interference became the principal method to coordinate information flow during politically sensitive moments. Dominant media outlets are owned by the state. The authorities imposed targeted blocks on regime critics and imposed internet blackouts because of supposed security concerns during the January protests. This helped the Tokayev regime to restrain protesters and regulate information that spread inside the country.

METHODOLOGY

The Unfreedom Monitor combines the methodology used in Global Voices' previous work on media observatories with an in-depth analysis of the contextual issues around digital authoritarianism. The Civic Media Observatory (CMO) approach is primarily qualitative and looks beyond socio-technical causes to consider power analysis, offer a way to discuss effects, and emphasise what works as well as what is negative. It is a framework that can be consistently applied across a range of settings, to identify and contextualise both positive and disruptive developments, to explain the forces and motives underlying them, as well as the narrative framing devices that often require local knowledge to interpret and weigh. This method is particularly helpful in the case of countries like Kazakhstan, where authoritarian trends are less direct and require contextual information.

This method allows us to compare, draw lessons, and consolidate learning about the trends, systems and rules that influence what we know, and how we know it. The observatory includes datasets of media items, structured analysis of context and subtext, and a civic impact score that rates media items for positive or negative impact on civic discourse. The coding process was done on a collaborative and relational database on the platform Airtable, and the coding was revised and discussed with editors of the project, which ensured clarity and consistency among all the researchers participating on this project.

This study focused on Kazakhstan has defined two main incidents related to digital authoritarianism that happened in the country in the last two years (2021–2023), and then a group of 15 media items related to each of the incidents were collected and analysed. The qualitative analysis of these 30 items in total was predefined for all the countries participating in this project, in this way a framework can be consistently applied across different national, political and technological contexts. The items included publications by local and international news media, reports by independent organisations, and social media posts, particularly from Facebook, Twitter and Instagram.

In the case of the first incident, the political opposition leader Zhanbolat Mamay was accused of spreading disinformation during January 2022 protests. The second incident analyses allegations of Pro-Tokayev coordinated inauthentic behaviour in the lead-up to the 2022 Presidential elections.

In the selection process the researcher looked for media items by Kazakhstan government officials, public media, journalists and civil society leaders. These items were analysed by the researcher in terms of sources, narrative frames, subtext, context, reactions, popularity, and a civic impact score that categorised the media items for positive or negative impact on civic discourse and society at large. The coding process was done on a collaborative and relational database on the platform Airtable, and the coding was revised and discussed with editors of the project, which ensured clarity and consistency among all the researchers participating on this project.

The crucial research questions were: how does digital authoritarianism in Kazakhstan work and how are digital technologies being used by the government to advance its political interests while harming citizens' rights, like privacy or freedom of expression? To answer this question, four critical dimensions were considered: data governance, speech, access, and information. Another question was: what are the main contours of digital authoritarianism in

Kazakhstan and what are the pro- and anti-state media narratives? To evaluate this aspect, three important elements were included: motives, methods, and responses to digital authoritarianism.

The study was limited by a few factors. To begin with, while qualitative case studies have their value, it is not always straightforward to generalise from them to the populace at large. Time frame and capacity issues means that we did not manage to access all of the narrative frames available. Sometimes, civic discourse happens in closed spaces like Telegram channels and private groups, which are difficult to access.

This study constitutes a significant step for analysing the characteristics of digital authoritarianism in Kazakhstan, where the government seems to purchase surveillance technologies from its powerful neighbours, Russia and China. Even though this study has limitations, it provides a framework and key aspects for future research that can include some statistical analyses of social media narratives, the use of commercial surveillance, and the use of law to undermine freedom of expression. This dataset can also be used as the basis for policy recommendations, awareness campaigns and cross-border consultations.

MAPPING THE COUNTRY CHALLENGE WITH DIGITAL AUTHORITARIANISM

While Kazakhstan experienced a brief political liberalisation after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the country has developed increasingly in an authoritarian manner, especially in the past decade ([Freedom House](#)). Media and the internet have been affected and shaped by a non-democratic political environment. The stability of 30 years of Nazarbayev's regime (1991–2019) is partially attributed to his ability to maintain control over the digital space, among other legitimising factors. The discursive hegemony in Kazakhstan could be explained by two reasons: a non-competitive internet infrastructure and rigorous monitoring tools that identify political discontent on social media and detect materials that “discredit the state” ([Shahbaz and Funk](#)). Majority state ownership of mobile and telecom services (accounting for 70 percent) allows the Kazakh government to exercise control over internet access and censorship ([Anceschi](#): 280). Despite structural repression, new media in Kazakhstan allows the spread of political criticism and encourages resistance, raising higher political awareness among internet users. The rise of internet penetration to 94 percent in Kazakhstan, compared to 80 percent in Russia, enabled young people to express anti-regime sentiments and communicate their grievances online despite the restricted information control policy ([Sairambay](#)). The contrasting dynamics between the ruling regime trying to contain cyberspace and the pushback from independent media sources define the contours and functioning of contemporary digital authoritarianism in Kazakhstan.

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KEY INCIDENTS OF DIGITAL AUTHORITARIANISM IN KAZAKHSTAN IN 2022

Digital authoritarianism in Kazakhstan is not a new phenomenon. The government has exercised a centralised control over internet infrastructure, facilitating its ability to monitor the content since the mid-2000s. State-owned company Kazakhtelecom has the monopoly on the country's data transfer, ultimately facilitating authoritarian control and repression. A series of restrictive policies have been adopted since 2016 that limit the content of and access to certain websites, enabling targeted censorship. In 2017, legislative measures in the name of national security allowed the Kazakh government to manage cross-border Internet Exchange Points ([Freedom House](#)). Also, networks that present a danger to regime stability are framed as extremist and terrorist. The revised law on national security enables the government to suspend telecommunications during unrest or operations to suppress protests. These legal mechanisms give state officials permission to control information and manipulate networks in emergency situations. This section analyses two major incidents of digital authoritarianism in Kazakhstan in 2022: 1) the arrest of opposition leader Zhanbolat Mamay for spreading disinformation after the January protests 2) coordinated inauthentic behaviour in social media during snap presidential elections.

The January 2022 protests known as Qandy Qantar (Bloody January in Kazakh) revealed the deep crisis within the regime exacerbated by failed economic growth and corrupt governance. Unprecedented in scale, protests took place in major cities of Kazakhstan when increased gas prices aggravated the socio-economic grievances of the pandemic. The official narrative framed the January protests as a failed coup, claiming that 20,000 terrorist and bandits, “trained, organised, and commanded from a special centre,” carried out attacks in Almaty, the former capital of Kazakhstan ([TASS](#)). A state of emergency was declared. Tokayev requested the intervention of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation, the Russian-led military alliance, to contain the riots and eliminate the supposed threat to national security. The internet was shut down during the protests, and the state-owned media monopolised the coverage, spreading disinformation and propaganda.

“ The case of Mamay is important to explain how digital authoritarianism functions in Kazakhstan. It demonstrates that social media empowers the voices of regime opponents, while simultaneously making them more vulnerable to state surveillance and repression. ”

One noticeable incident exemplified state disinformation. The Kyrgyz jazz musician Vikram Ruzakhunov was tortured by the Kazakh military forces to publicly confess that he committed “terrorist activities” ([Irgebaeva](#)). The state channel Khabar 24 broadcasted the video of his forced confession as the triumph of state authorities in fighting foreign terrorists. In his native Kyrgyzstan, the musician was recognised, and his relatives demanded the release of an illegally detained citizen of a neighbouring Central Asian state. Ruzakhunov became an embodiment of regime disinformation and the symbolic victim of repression during the January protests. Ruzakhov’s case is unique from a legal point of view since this is the first time the Kyrgyz government has accused Kazakh authorities of human rights abuses.

The January protests in Almaty were led by the unregistered Democratic Party of Kazakhstan (DPK), headed by a young opposition leader Zhanbolat Mamay, who only began to rise to prominence in 2019. The Democratic Party of Kazakhstan itself was formed in 2019 during the political transition from Nazarbayev to Tokayev. The party had several attempts to obtain formal party registration that were unsuccessful. In February 2020, police arrested leaders of the DPK for unsanctioned gathering ahead of the 2021 parliamentary elections (“[Kazakhstan: Release Opposition Party Leader: Zhanbolat Mamay](#)”).

Mamay asked his supporters on social media to gather for a peaceful rally in the First President’s Park and the Almaty Arena. The activist was quickly identified and detained by the police, which aimed to stop his group from fully participating in the later days of the protest. Mamay was arrested under criminal charges of spreading disinformation, organising mass protests that contributed to the growth of protest activism, and insulting a state authority.

The authoritarian state of Kazakhstan has a selective way of targeting dissent on social media to maximise its opportunities for promoting itself while discouraging criticism. From 2017 to the present, Kazakh authorities have used Pegasus software (called Tulpar in Kazakhstan) to target the opposition ([Marczak et al.](#)). The case of Mamay is important to explain how digital authoritarianism functions in Kazakhstan. It demonstrates that social

media empowers the voices of regime opponents, while simultaneously making them more vulnerable to state surveillance and repression.

In the aftermath of the January protests, Tokayev decided to announce snap presidential elections in November 2022. Some critics and activists have alleged that President Tokayev was borrowing from his predecessor's playbook, with paid users posting favourable content on online platforms. This was characterised by a rising amount of content that praised Tokayev and presented him as the only true leader for the country. Some have shared screenshots of private communication indicating that users have been given pre-approved content to spread en masse, with anecdotal evidence that social media campaigns were ramped up by the pro-state apparatus in the build-up to the elections, indicating the presence of trolls.

The phenomenon of internet trolls known as “Nurbots” (though not technically bots) was identified during the Nazarbayev presidency ([Galkina](#)). Nurbots were fake social media accounts that generated comments favourable to Nazabayev's personality driven regime. Nurbots fulfilled the orders of regime information channels administered by the Ministry of Information and the President's Administration.

These inauthentic accounts in Kazakhstan are aimed at polluting online discourse and providing thousands of comments praising the ruling regime on social media. The main motive of this tactic was to increase the media visibility of the president, generate support for his reforms and provide the basis for Tokayev's personal legitimacy. Agencies that administer this service in Kazakhstan are normally registered in suburban areas of southern Kazakhstan and use fake accounts ([Kozhanova](#)). They manipulate social apathy in an autocratic state, filling the void of the engagement between the state and its citizens. They imitate social consent to claim the president's rule is based on people's will. They ignore and substitute genuine public opinion. They are an aggressive propaganda mechanism to produce and replicate the hegemonic narrative of the ruling power in cyberspace. The allegation that he used an inauthentic social campaign during the November 2022 presidential elections indicates Tokayev's attempt to manipulate the public discourse on the internet.

ACCESS

During the January protests, internet service disappeared altogether from January 5 to 11, 2022. The entire country's internet infrastructure was blocked. State officials explained the shutdown of communication channels by citing security concerns that terrorists could spread disinformation. State-run media became the only source of information during the protests, which allowed the political regime to fully dominate narrative at the time. Mobile connections were also interrupted, leaving landlines and state TV the sole connections to the outside world.

DATA GOVERNANCE

The National Security Certificate, a Man in the Middle (MITM) technology that monitors users' online activities, in Kazakhstan targeted activists who protested during the January protests and presidential elections. Data protection and privacy remain problematic. The so-called anti-terrorist amendments of 2018 enabled personalised surveillance, linking individual ID numbers with SIM cards for compulsory number verification ([Freedom House](#)). Data governance is primarily focused on regime critics; other internet users can enjoy relative freedom online.

SPEECH

Freedom of expression is guaranteed by the constitution of the Republic of Kazakhstan. Despite the general clause for human rights, there are a few provisions that are not compatible with the country's formal commitment to the freedom of speech. There are administrative and criminal charges for spreading "disinformation" or "hate speech" that can instigate social, national, and religious violence and destabilise the public order. Any action that is capable of disrupting the well-celebrated interethnic harmony of the country is considered as illegitimate and unconstitutional ([Zhussupova](#)).

The presidential elections in November 2022 that followed the January protests lacked genuine competition, limiting voters' choices. Tokayev's messages calling for people to restore "Fair Kazakhstan" dominated the online campaign discourse on social networks. According to the team of OSCE election observers, access to information guaranteed by the constitution was limited by the restrictive legal framework and uneven implementation of laws, as the system was overloaded with cases of intimidation of journalists and self-censorship ([OSCE](#)). There was a lack of critical analysis of the candidates on media platforms, restricting the voters from making an informed choice.

“ Social disorder and the danger to national security are defined in a broad narrow manner and accommodate any critical expression that endangers the status quo of public authorities in Kazakhstan. ”

Zhanbolat Mamay's political activism during the January protests in 2022 was criminalised as a public act aimed at "mass riots" and the spread of "disinformation". The punishment could be up to 10 years of imprisonment. The law on media uses a vague interpretation of disinformation as "dissemination of deliberately false information that creates a danger of violating public order or causing significant harm to the rights and legitimate interests of citizens or organisations or the legally protected interests of society or the state" ([Article 19](#)). Social disorder and the danger to national security are defined in a broad manner and accommodate any critical expression that endangers the status quo of public authorities in Kazakhstan. The problematic formulation of hate speech and disinformation impose penalties on political opposition, journalists, and civil society activists. Mamay's political party, Democratic Choice of Kazakhstan, was convicted of activities that "created a negative perception of the authorities" and triggered social strife. Disinformation and the freedom of expression became two dominant frames in the analysis on Kazakhstan

(See Chart 1). Violation of these prohibitions can lead to the suspension or permanent loss of a media outlet's registration. A combination of selective censorship and systematically restrictive legislation empowered the ruling regime, promoting depoliticisation and the criminalisation of free speech.

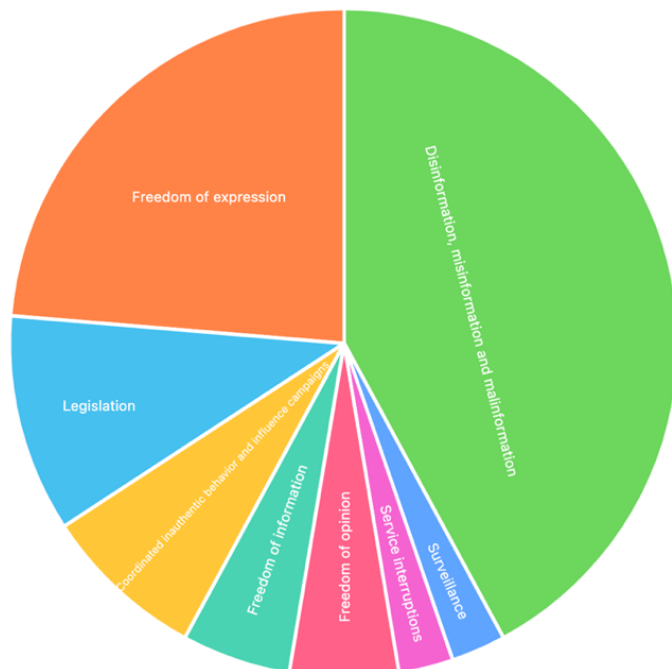


Chart 1: Parent narrative frames digital authoritarian in Kazakhstan

INFORMATION

Tokayev's regime manifests a growing understanding of the potential for propaganda and political image-making that digital media and communication technologies have. Coordinated inauthentic behaviour in social media during presidential election campaigns in 2019 and 2022 demonstrates the instrumentalisation of influence campaigns to manipulate public opinion and the strategy to preserve power. Automatically generated social media bots simulate political participation and discussion online, copying human behaviour and reactions. Bots are fake autonomous accounts that spread opinions on social networks and promote the pro-regime political candidate and his political agenda. The state utilises bots for marketing purposes to encourage people to vote for Tokayev, representing the hegemonic narrative and imitating democratic discussion in cyberspace. The primary focus of regime bots lies in national politics, the image of the president and external threats to the domestic stability and legitimacy of the incumbent leadership. Bots and trolls pollute the media space with disinformation and propaganda.

During the presidential election campaign, the Kazakh government threatened criminal charges for spreading false information. Censorship intensified after January protests, leading to multiple arrests of independent journalists and political activists. The restrictive legislative framework allows state information control and censorship, suppressing alternative political opinions.

DIGITAL AUTHORITARIANISM IN ACTION

Tokayev's regime justifies the use of authoritarian tactics in the digital space by citing the need for "cybersecurity" and "digital hygiene" as a part of a wider strategy on national security. Digital technologies in Kazakhstan help the authorities to meticulously document and measure the success of criminal investigations and law enforcement, the common commitment of smart cities' policing and accountability in Eurasia ([Marat and Sutton](#)). Modern surveillance has transformed the ways in which criminal and disorderly behaviour online is detected, investigated, and punished. Technological modernisation substitutes the regime's desire for deeper political transformations. Virtual authoritarianism in Kazakhstan puts at risk political dissent and further marginalises the disadvantaged and disempowered groups of independent journalists and opposition.

President Tokayev has claimed in his official addresses to the nation that the January protests should be seen as an "armed aggression" instigated by "20,000 trained foreign terrorists" that plotted a coup ([TASS](#)). This became the official political justification for mass arrests and shootings by security services and police, as well as the reason for inviting the Kremlin-led Collective Security Treaty Organisation to pacify the situation. The narrative of foreign intruders who undermine national security became the dominant legitimising narrative in the official media.

Peaceful protesters were labelled as hooligans, terrorists, and bandits who called the armed crackdown and state brutality upon themselves. President Tokayev imposed a state of emergency, allowing security forces to "shoot to kill" protesters, which led to almost 255 fatalities. The state authority justified his repressive order by asserting the need for immediate stabilisation and securitisation, claiming that the dissent was organised by foreign agents. Any social media post or article that questioned or opposed the official interpretation of the protests was subject to severe scrutiny and criminal charges for spreading disinformation. The rule of law in Kazakhstan protects the rights of those in power and can neglect an individual's freedom of expression, especially as the government is trying to censor information related to the January protests and suppress the sensitive anti-regime discourse. A citizen of Kostanay in Northern Kazakhstan was accused of spreading false information about the protests on the Telegram channel "Protesting Kostanay," where he claimed that police joined the protestors. The prosecutors claimed that his statement was dangerous and increased the unrest. This case demonstrates the trend of the oppression of dissent and the tendency to defend only the single pro-government narrative about the social and political tragedy. The official narrative excludes the failures of governance and inter-regime dynamics that led to the major protest ([Kudaibergenova and Laruelle](#)). The main motive of the Tokayev regime after the January protests is to prove that "Tokayev is the best leader in Kazakhstan right now" and "National security triumphs human rights" (see Table 1).

“ Virtual authoritarianism in Kazakhstan puts at risk political dissent and further marginalises the disadvantaged and disempowered groups of independent journalists and opposition.

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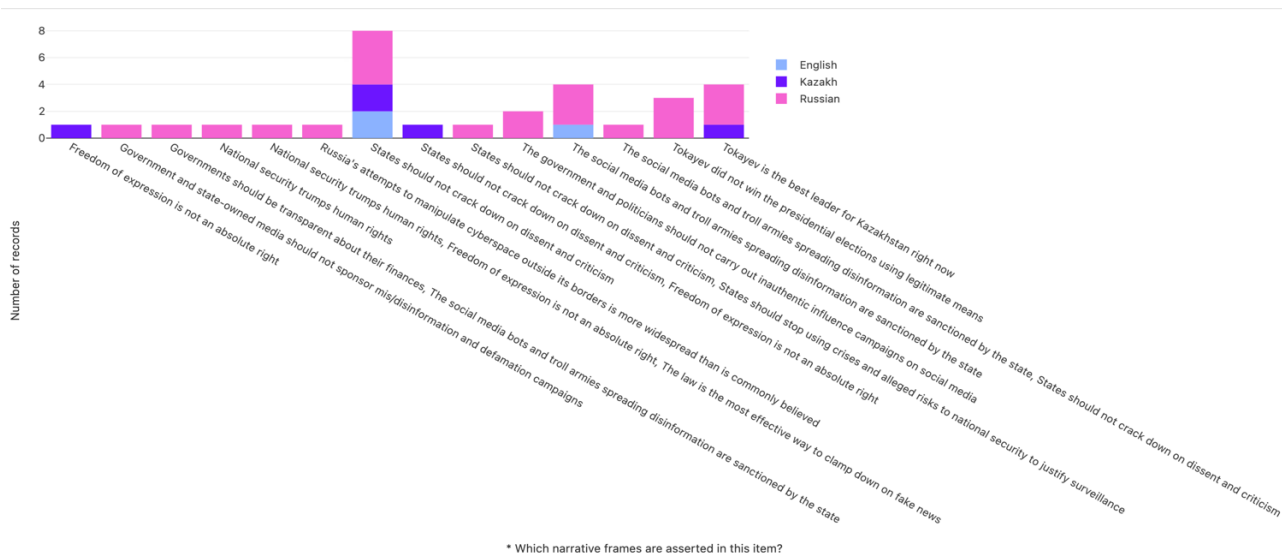


Table 1: Narrative frames in Kazakhstan

In December 2018, the Kazakh government reportedly purchased USD 4.3 million of automated surveillance technology to identify signs of political discontent on social media from a software company associated with the Russian Security Service ([Shahbaz and Funk](#)). The technology detects materials that may discredit the state or the president. This tool is used for online surveillance and information control in Kazakhstan.

In 2020, the government enabled the National Security Certificate, a Man in the Middle (MITM) technology that monitors user's online activities, in the capital Astana. The new Rules of Registration say that websites that do not host their hardware and software on the territory of Kazakhstan could have access to them restricted. The Ministry of Information and Social Development is responsible for controlling information in mass media and the internet. The State Technical Service is the public body that has the technical capacity to disrupt the internet and suspend networks. It can act without a court order but must inform the Presidential Administration within 24 hours. This public institution oversees the procedures for restricting access to illegal content. The National Security Committee monitors governmental and military communications. Eighty percent of NGOs that have ".kz" as their domain are state-owned. In 2019, Kazakhstan began intercepting HTTPS connections using a fake root CA to increase control over internet data and its accessibility within the country ([Raman et al.](#)). This approach significantly weakens the internet for Kazakhstani users by blocking affected websites and slowing down Kazakhtelecom connections. The National Security Certificate acts as a transparent proxy (Qaznet Trust Network), and the censor decrypts the traffic before sending it to the destination. For propaganda campaigns and state PR, the Kazakh government uses internet bots and trolls. Fake social media accounts generate comments favourable to the incumbent elites. Bots and trolls fulfil the order of information manipulation, designed to imitate public support via comments on the official agenda. Bots and trolls manipulate the attention of internet users in Kazakhstan from pressing issues to a positive outlook on the current political course, including the presidential elections on November 20, 2022.

Since the traditional media was occupied by the state in Kazakhstan in the late 90s, the opposition turned to the internet. Social media and social networking are important for social movements, both the opposition and individuals. Young people use new media for their political participation. The persistent control of the internet in Kazakhstan captures the government's methodically authoritarian outlook ([Anceschi](#)). However, social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter became the media of dissent in Kazakhstan. For example, after his arrest, Zhanbolat Mamay, opposition member and internet celebrity, wrote a Facebook post about the banality and normalisation of violence by President Tokayev after the "January massacre." In his post Mamay calls for political awakening and a revision of the existing social and political injustices. His online activism should be seen as a reaction to the hegemonic narrative of those in power. International and domestic independent journalists and human rights activists in Kazakhstan routinely disclose regime activities in social media and protest against autocratic politics.

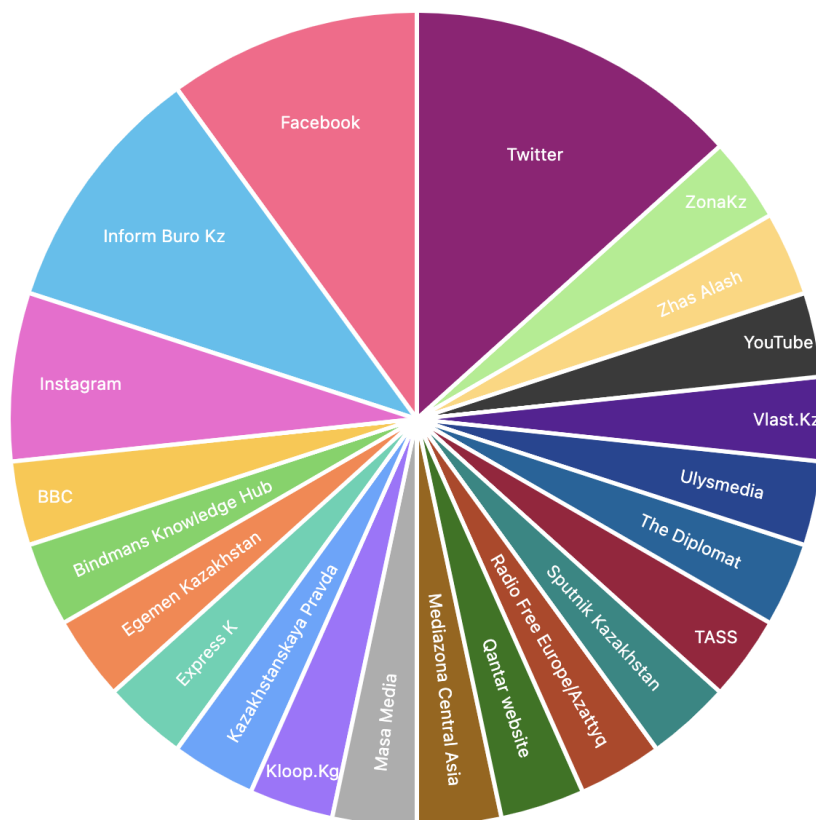


Chart 2: Media platforms for analysis in Kazakhstan

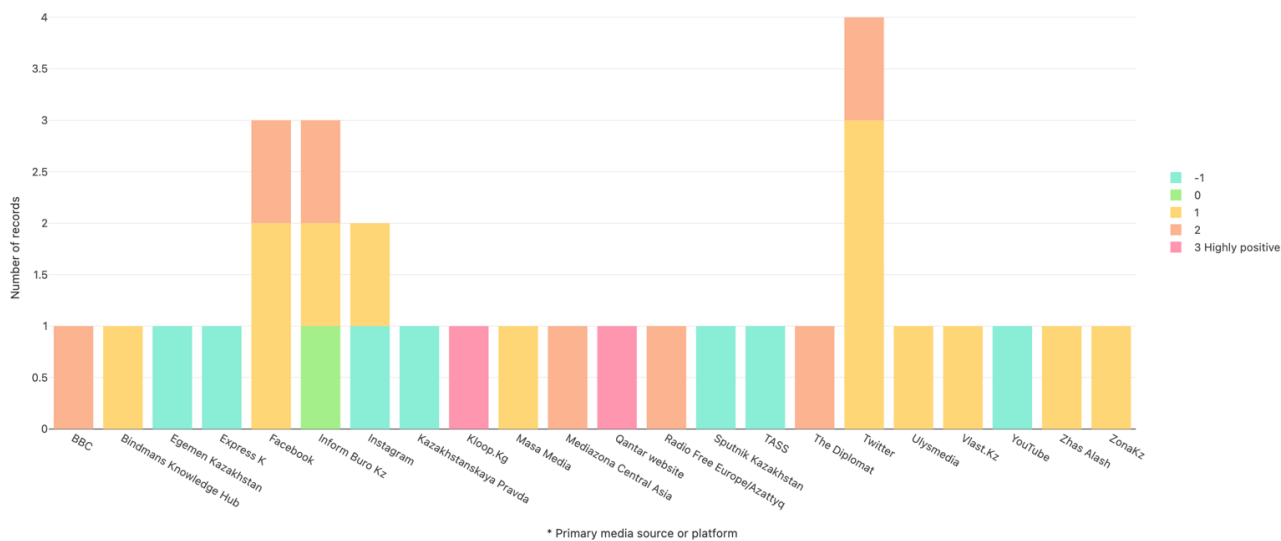


Chart 3: Narrative frames: dissident arrest for disinformation after January protests

ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSION

This report focuses on the main trends in digital authoritarian technologies used in Kazakhstan from 2017 to 2022. It contextualises the repressive online mechanisms within the changing political landscape. The January 2022 protests tested the grounds of social and political liberties — the seeming political stability failed. The Tokayev government closely monitored attempts to delegitimise his governance and the right to rule. The regime is sending mixed signals of future transition: promising liberal reforms and imposing further restrictions on political liberties. Post-January Kazakhstan fails on the experience of repression and increased securitisation, including in cyberspace.

Two case studies — the arrest of opposition leader Zhanbolat Mamay for disinformation and coordinated inauthentic behaviour in social media during the presidential campaign — illustrate the culture of digital authoritarianism in Kazakhstan. Zhanbolat Mamay was accused of spreading disinformation and insulting a state authority. Human rights organisations and independent journalists believe his detention and trial are politically motivated. The court ruled to jail him for two months as a suspect under two articles of the Criminal Code: on the dissemination of deliberately false information and on insulting government officials. Later, additional charges were included for “organising mass riots” and “spreading false information.” International human rights organisations protested his persecution and demanded his release. Mamay was named the main organiser of illegal mass riots in January 2022. He was selected as a symbolic victim of the regime to demonstrate that any dissent online or offline would be punished.

Tokayev claimed that the early presidential elections were necessary as they ensured the “radical reboot of the entire political system” after the January protests ([Kazpravda.Kz](https://kazpravda.kz)). The government’s justification for unscheduled elections is the urgent necessity of smooth political changes. The information policy, which is being handled by the Ministry of Information and the Presidential Administration in Kazakhstan, uses digital tools for disinformation and

“The regime is sending mixed signals of future transition: promising liberal reforms and imposing further restrictions on political liberties. Post-January Kazakhstan fails on the experience of repression and increased securitisation, including in cyberspace.”

promotion of favourable regime data, especially during election campaigns. Internet bots and trolls provide the official opinion of Astana and ensure positive state PR in various social media platforms and regime-affiliated media platforms.

The political regime in Kazakhstan is promoting two dominant narratives in social media and media platforms: “Tokayev is the best leader for Kazakhstan right now” and “National security trumps human rights.” The first narrative allows the current leadership to claim the political legitimacy of acting president despite protests and social discontent. The second narrative justifies the increased securitisation of the digital space and censorship of local media. This indicates the fear and insecurities of ruling elites about the freedom of speech and political competition, leading to the heightened need for democratic reforms and regime change.

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