The Unfreedom Monitor

A Methodology for Tracking Digital Authoritarianism Around the World

KYRGYZSTAN
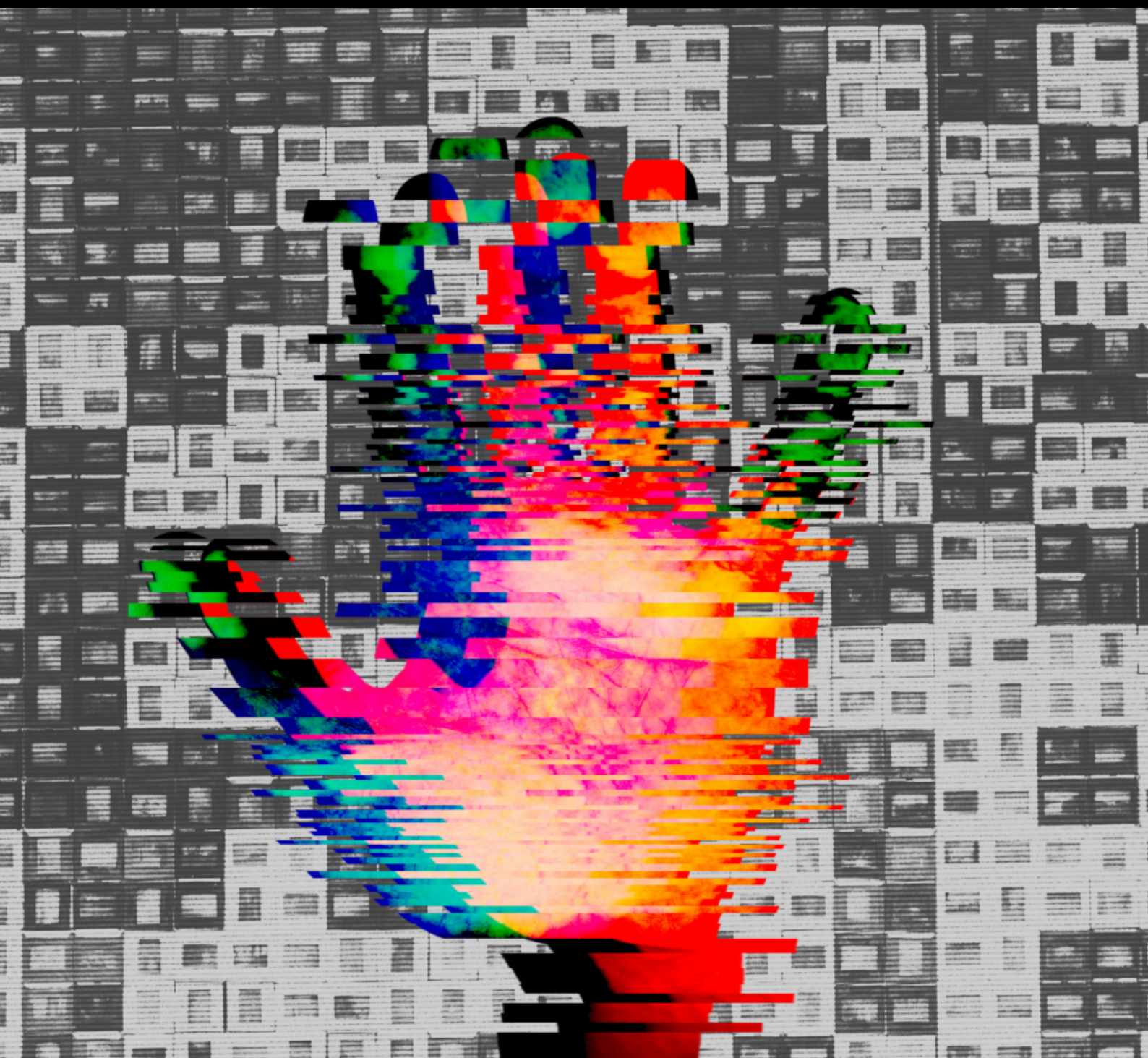COUNTRY REPORT

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Acknowledgements

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Kyrgyzstan, famously the only "island of democracy" in Central Asia, has fallen to the rise of the nationalist and populist regime of Sadyr Zhaparov following the mass protests in October 2020. Since the adoption of the Law on Protection from False Information (aka the law against the spread of fake news) in Kyrgyzstan in August 2021, the legal persecution and detention of critics and bloggers because of their posts on social media has become possible. The number of Facebook or other social media users censored and interrogated by the Kyrgyz security services for their criticism towards the president and the incumbent government is skyrocketing. Seven bloggers, including those related to media channels critical of the state, were censored and interrogated by the security services just between January and June 2022 (Kadyrov). More than 30 critics of the regime — civil society activists, opposition politicians, independent journalists, bloggers and human rights activists — were detained between October and December 2022 for their social media criticism (mainly on Facebook) of the government's decision to transfer the Kempir-Abad water reservoir to Uzbekistan in a border deal. The detainees were accused of an attempt to overthrow the government after the security services released audio recordings of conversations between opposition politicians and civil society activists. Very soon, the authorities also shut down the website of Radio Free Europe affiliate Azattyk in Kyrgyzstan for two months for "biased reporting"; in December 2022 the term was extended indefinitely. Prominent investigative journalist Bolot Temirov was expelled from Kyrgyzstan to Russia by a judicial decision in November 2022. The Kyrgyz authorities intend to adopt a law on non-commercial non-state organisations (aka law on foreign agents) which is currently under public consideration. Finally, in January 2023, the Apparatus of the President of the Kyrgyz Republic released a draft Law on Mass Media according to which the state will oversee bloggers, internet outlets and social media accounts with more than 5,000 followers. The state intends to register them in a unified system in order to track and to monitor their activity.

BACKGROUND

In Kyrgyzstan, information technologies, internet, digital media and social media began to spread from the 2000s. Mass penetration peaked between 2017 and 2018, rising from 38 to 63 percent, and by 2020 it reached 72 percent (World Bank). Since its independence, the Kyrgyz government relied heavily on international aid in exchange for its democratisation efforts, in particular under the presidency of Askar Akaev (1991–2005) (Sheranova, 2022). New information technologies and digital transformation challenges had allowed the Kyrgyz government to continue to get large-scale international aid and grants from various donors and agencies,

Citizens without biometric data could not access some state services and were unable to vote during the parliamentary election in autumn of 2015.

such as the United Nations agencies (UN), the European Union (EU), the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and others, to continue its democratisation in the digital era. Since 2018, this foreign assistance allowed the Kyrgyz government to successfully introduce and implement several major reforms within the state services delivery aimed at transparent and good governance, such as e-governance through the portals Tunduk and Sanarip Aimak, which provide various e-services such as the issue of e-certificates, e-passports and e-visas, the payment of taxes and many others. Other reforms were aimed at advancing electoral integrity by introducing the e-voting system in Kyrgyzstan which included voter registration and identification based on biometric data, and computer-based vote counting (Sheranova, 2020). In addition, most of the state-led digital governance initiatives were declared anti-corruption measures. For instance, CCTV cameras were installed on key roads in big cities and major customs posts in the regions, in order to prevent corruption within law-enforcement bodies and the central customs office. Some examples include public access to online monitoring of the process of a driving licence examination at the state examination centres nationwide.

The country overall took a step towards digitalization in 2015 (Kabar). In September 2015 the Kyrgyz authorities started to collect the biometric data of its citizens. Citizens without biometric data could not access some state services and were unable to vote during the parliamentary election in autumn of 2015. In 2019, the former President Sooronbai Zheenbekov (2017–2020) declared 2019 a year of regional development and digitalization. The project to install CCTV cameras in the capital Bishkek (known as Bezopasnyi Gorod or "safe city" in English) was launched that year. In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic further pushed the Kyrgyz authorities towards digital governance. In particular, the state had realised the pitfalls of arranging online teaching for children and students who lacked access to stable internet and electricity, and needed equipment (computers or laptops). The situation was more or less resolved due to the nation-wide broadcast of a timely prepared package of school subject-based video courses in Kyrgyz language through the national TV channel. University level educational facilities managed teaching through WhatsApp and other social platforms.

Social media had played a key role in protest mobilizations in Kyrgyzstan. In 2019, Attayk published an impactful investigation into corruption in the Kyrgyz Customs Department. In response, a network of progressive-minded youth, civil society activists, human rights

lawyers, independent journalists and bloggers united under the name "Bashtan-Bashta" (Kyrgyz for "start from the beginning"). The movement rose to prominence after they held a series of five rallies called the "ReAction" rallies in Bishkek from December 2019 through 2020 (Li and Dzhumagulov), which had such an impact that they resulted in a change of power in October 2020.

A BRIEF POLITICAL HISTORY

Kyrgyzstan is a presidential republic with direct elections every six years. Kyrgyzstan has a vibrant post-independence state-building history because the country experienced three political unrests. In 2005, 2010, and 2020, repeated mass protests led to the violent fall of the political regimes of Askar Akaev (1991–2005), Kurmanbek Bakiev (2005–2010) and Sooronbai Zheenbekov (2017–2020). Two out of three power overthrows occurred after falsified parliamentary elections.

Askar Akaev ruled the country between 1991 and 2005. His later attempts to involve his children in politics through participation in the parliamentary elections in 2005 and alleged rumours about his plans to run for another presidential term increased public anger (McGlinchey). In the broader continental political context, the former USSR saw several revolutions over the first decade of the 21st century, beginning with the Rose Revolution in Georgia in 2003, and followed by the Orange Revolution in Ukraine in 2004. It would be a mistake not to admit that Kyrgyzstan's Tulip Revolution in 2005 was inspired by revolutions against dictators in Georgia and Ukraine (Beissinger), nevertheless, it is fair to state that domestic political factors were stronger. In early March 2005, several local protests were held in the Jalalabad, Osh, Naryn and Talas oblasts (regions) before they turned into a nationwide movement. During the protest in Jalalabad, protestors seized police and oblast administration buildings. In a similar way, on March 21, at the main square in Osh, the protesters, led by Kurmanbek Bakiev, seized the oblast administration and declared the establishment of the People's Authority (eldik biylik). A few days later, on March 24, thousands of protestors from the regions under the leadership of Kurmanbek Bakiev stormed the presidential seat, "Ak Ui" (White House) and announced the fall of the Askar Akaev regime.

Kurman Bakiev's rule, begun in popular protest, followed the same path as the one it replaced. By the end of its first term, the Bakiev administration exhibited the same corruption, usurpation of power, family-based rule, and political pressure against critics of the regime, which led to public discontent and put an end to Bakiev's rule. By 2008 none among Bakiev's former allies who helped him to remove Akaev remained in power, because they were all removed from their posts or prosecuted.

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In 2008, a new opposition movement called Birikken Eldik Kyimyl (The United People's Movement) or the BEK was established under the leadership of Almazbek Atambaev. The BEK movement included 13 opposition political parties that were not allowed into parliament during the 2007 parliamentary elections when the pro-Bakiev party Ak-Jol won an absolute majority of seats. The establishment of the BEK was important not only as a response to the parliamentary elections in 2007, but also because of the upcoming presidential elections on July 23, 2009. The opposition, following the lessons of the 2007 parliamentary elections, understood that the opposition could compete with Bakiev only in unity and in cooperation. Therefore, the opposition had united around the political figure of Almazbek Atambaev, who ran for president on behalf of the BEK movement in 2009. However, Bakiev was re-elected in likely falsified elections, and people protested his family-based rule.

Starting on March 17, 2010, in Talas where around 4000–5000 people came to support the opposition, a series of Kurultais (public councils) were held. At the first Kurultai in Bishkek, the movement publicly announced several demands to the government, among which were the freedom of the press, the end of political pressure, and the dismissal of Bakiev's son Maxim from the post of the head of the agency of investments, innovation and development. The BEK movement also planned to hold a similar Kurultai in Naryn on April 7; however the kurultai chaotically led into a violent mass protest in the capital and the overthrow of the government. During the April Revolution, 77 people were killed and around 1,000 were injured. Bakiev was found guilty by the Bishkek Military Court of the use of weapons against civilians; however he fled the country and is currently residing in Minsk under the protection of Belarusian President Lukashenka.

The political transition following the April Revolution in 2010 was troublesome as it led to a violent conflict in June between ethnic Kyrgyz and Uzbeks in the south of the country. The interim government led by Roza Otunbaeva, the first female president, sought assistance from the Kremlin but was refused. The inter-ethnic conflict lasted for more than a week and left around 2,000 people injured and 450 people dead. The interim government, following peace-building efforts and the resolution of conflict in Osh and Jalalabad, organised a referendum to present a revised version of the constitution. The new constitution was adopted by majority vote and included significant changes, such as the election of a president for a single, non-renewable term of six years, the establishment of a parliamentary republic where members of parliament can remove the president from office, and a ten-year prohibition on any amendments to the constitution to prevent attempts at taking power by force. In 2011, Almazbek Atambaev was elected president. Following the election of a new parliament and president, the interim government was dissolved.

In 2017, President Atambaev handed over power to the newly elected president Sooronbai Zheenbekov. However, in 2020, Zheenbekov was forced to resign due to political turmoil. Zheenbekov's anti-corruption initiatives, which he implemented at the start of his presidency, failed to produce significant results as they overlooked major corruption cases. Independent journalists uncovered a corruption scheme in the Kyrgyz State Customs Service involving senior officials. Journalists revealed that the former Deputy Head of the State Customs Service, Raimbek Matraimov, who was part of Zheenbekov's inner circle, was responsible for money laundering from Kyrgyzstan (OCCRP). This led to a series of youth-led protests, known as Re-Action, in the capital city of Bishkek, calling for the president to take action and for the former Deputy Head of the Customs Service to be arrested.

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However, the main catalyst for the third revolution in Kyrgyzstan was the fraudulent outcome of the parliamentary elections held on October 4, 2020. A political party called Mekenim Kyrgyzstan (roughly translating to "Motherland Kyrgyzstan"), funded by the notorious former Deputy Head of the Customs Service, along with the pro-government party Birimdik ("Unity"), won a majority of seats in the unicameral Kyrgyz parliament, called the Jogorku Kenesh ("Supreme Council"). The election was marked by unprecedented vote buying and fraud (OCCRP). The following day, political parties and youth dissatisfied with the results began to protest in the main square of Bishkek, demanding the annulment of the election results and calling for new elections. That same evening, the protesters seized key government buildings, including the White House. The protesters freed former president Atambaev who had been jailed by Zheenbekov, as well as other political opponents of President Zheenbekov, including Sadyr Zhaparov, a former member of the Kyrgyz parliament. On October 15, 2020, Zheenbekov was forced to voluntarily resign and Zhaparov stepped in as the acting president and the acting prime minister following the October 2020 mass protest. On January 10, 2021, Sadyr Zhaparov was elected president, the sixth since the independence of the country in 1991.

A few months after his election, Sadyr Zhaparov initiated the adoption of a new constitution according to which Kyrgyzstan returned to the presidential system of governance, which gave a rise to the populist authoritarian Zhaparov regime. According to Freedom House country reports, Kyrgyzstan was ranked 65/100 in 2016 and 61/100 in 2019; however, under Zhaparov in 2021 its ranking had dropped to 53/100 (Freedom House). Increasing authoritarian and repressive rule can be explained by the fear of being overthrown like the previous regimes. President Zhaparov had realised that the robust civil society institutions in Kyrgyzstan that had been consolidating for decades through the activity of various NGOs, human rights activists, lawyers, reform monitoring groups, civil society activists and networks, civic unions, independent journalists, media outlets, and bloggers could pose a threat to his political tenure. Therefore, he quickly undertook legislative measures to oppress civic activism and the freedom of the media by adopting laws that aim to limit the activity of media outlets, bloggers, NGOs and civil society in Kyrgyzstan.

Kyrgyzstan has a multi-polar foreign policy and, as a small economy, it supports all forms of bilateral relations. It is a member of the Russia-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and the Eurasian Economic Union (EaEU). It is also a member of the China-led Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). Kyrgyzstan received large-scale infrastructural loans from China under its Belt and Road Initiative project and also from other multilateral financial institutions, such as the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) and the World Bank. Kyrgyzstan's foreign affairs on the regional and global arena are mainly "orchestrated" by big regional players, like China and Russia.

After the fall of Soviet rule, the tensions on the border between Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan became a recurrent issue. Despite the efforts to peacefully define the border, there have been provocations fueling localised conflicts between Tajiks and Kyrgyz. However, in the last few

years the escalations on the border have become more violent. The confrontation in April 2021 resulted in 55 deaths and 205 injuries on both sides. The most violent escalation was in September 2022, when authorities in Kyrgyzstan reported that 59 people died and 144 were injured as a result of the conflict in the Batken border area. Additionally, 137,000 residents were evacuated from the Kyrgyz border regions. Kyrgyz officials accused Dushanbe of military aggression and occupation of its territory, as Kyrgyz villages and Batken city came under attack from rockets, and several villages fell into Tajik military control for a while. The military aggression from Tajikistan in September 2022 shattered the legitimacy of the Zhaparov government, as Kyrgyz security services had failed to prevent the invasion and protect civilians. According to Azattyk's reporting from Batken, there had been rumours about the planned invasion from the Tajik side and the locals had reported it to the Kyrgyz security services. However, the security services ignored the public's fears (Kaktus Media). This was especially worrying because, following Zhaparov's rise, his ally Tashiev had become the head of the Kyrgyz security services and opened numerous brand new offices for the intelligence services in all major regions before the events of September 2022.

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Very soon, the populist regime used the incident of the recent Tajik military intervention as an example of non-peaceful means of border resolution in order to promote its controversial border deal agreement with neighbouring Uzbekistan. The Kyrgyz authorities argued that, in contrast, the Uzbek–Kyrgyz border disputes are being resolved on the table through negotiations in a peaceful way. The outcome of these negotiations was the decision of the Kyrgyz authorities in November 2022 to hand the Kempir-Abad water reservoir over to Uzbekistan. In 1983 the Soviets built the reservoir on Kyrgyz territory to irrigate Uzbek cotton fields. In exchange, the Uzbek Soviet republic had to build one irrigation channel and a water reservoir for the Kyrgyz Soviet republic — however, the Uzbek side did not. After the fall of the Soviet Union, Uzbekistan continued using the water in the Kempir-Abad reservoir. Eventually, a lot of questions remained unanswered for Kyrgyzs. The border deal protocols were kept secret from public eyes. The Kyrgyz parliament held two closed hearings on the matter (which also means that media was not allowed in). This led to public uncertainty and resulted in a public Kurultai in Özgön led by civil activists and opposition leaders. The latter were detained by law-enforcement bodies, accused of attempting a power overthrow because of their posts and videos on social media (mainly on Facebook), as well as alleged intercepted conversations, where they had criticised the Kyrgyz authorities and discussed their plans to overthrow the government.

Between 1991 and 2010 Kyrgyzstan was a presidential republic and the presidents in office enjoyed an impressive list of mandates. However, following the April Revolution in 2010, Kyrgyzstan declared itself the first parliamentary republic in the former Soviet space. The parliamentary form of governance in Kyrgyzstan was perceived as a direct threat to other long-lasting Central Asian dictators, as well as Russian interests. Kyrgyzstan's pro-liberal policies and its international standing as a regional "island of democracy" since 1991 had resulted in a strong and robust civil society, which reacted to the state's oppressive policies

and unfair elections, and subsequently led to three mass uprisings and power changes. The neighbouring Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, in particular, have been very reactive to domestic political turmoil in Kyrgyzstan by shutting down borders with Kyrgyzstan in order to prevent political instability inside their own borders.

INTERNET PENETRATION IN THE COUNTRY

Today, 72 percent of the Kyrgyz population has access to the internet. Internet penetration in Kyrgyzstan spiked in 2017–2018 from 38 to 63 percent (World Bank). According to a UNDP report, a large proportion (80 percent) of users access the internet through mobile devices, with only a small percentage (less than 20 percent) using tablets and computers (Soltobaev, 2020). In January 2021, 10.23 million mobile connections were made in Kyrgyzstan, which is 155.6 percent of the entire population (Kemp). Computers with Windows operating systems are used by 95 percent of citizens. Additionally, the majority of smartphones in use (85 percent) operate on Android, while the rest (15 percent) use iOS (Soltobaev, 2020). January 2021 data shows around 3.2 million social media users were registered in Kyrgyzstan, which is almost 49 percent of the total population (Kemp).

Due to a relatively free media environment in the country (Reporters Without Borders) and free internet (Freedom House), Kyrgyz citizens are able to access diverse and unrestricted sources of information from their mobile phones. There are more than 50 television companies, including private ones, and a number of non-government news sites (Reporters Without Borders). Likewise, Kyrgyz citizens enjoy a more privileged freedom of expression and opinion in the country than their Central Asian compatriots. While there have been legal cases against independent media outlets such as Kaktus.media and Kloop.kg, they were later withdrawn. Vigorous domestic investigative journalistic products shedding light on huge corruption schemes in the Customs Service during the Zheenbekov presidency largely contributed to the rise of an anti-establishment mood among the public, contributing to the October protest in 2020. There are several critical bloggers and investigative media hubs, such as Temirov Live and Ali Toktakunov's investigative channel, operating through social media platforms Facebook, Instagram and YouTube.

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, in order 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 Kyrgyzstan, 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.

This study focused on Kyrgyzstan has defined two main incidents related to digital authoritarianism that happened in the country in the last two years (2020–2022), 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 YouTube, Instagram, Facebook and Twitter.

The first incident is related to the mass arrest of around 30 civil activists and opposition politicians who expressed their criticism of the state's decision on the transfer of the Kempir-Abad water reservoir to Uzbekistan as a border deal agreement between the countries in October 2022. Most of the detained activists are members of the Committee to Save Kempir-Abad established following the Kurultai in Özgön. The authorities accused them of attempting to overthrow the government and several audio recordings were disseminated publicly where the detained leaders allegedly discussed these plans. Other activists who do not have any ties with the Committee to Save Kempir-Abad were also detained for their critical posts and videos on social media.

The second incident is about the blocking of the website of Radio Free Europe affiliated media outlet Azattyk by the Kyrgyz government in October 2022. During the airing of reporting from Nastoyashee Vremya, another outlet affiliated to Radio Free Europe, their Tajik colleagues said that the conflict was launched by the Kyrgyz side. Officially both Bishkek and Dushanbe accuse each other of opening fire. As a consequence, Azattyk's website was initially shut down for two months only, however it is still blocked because Azattyk did not delete the controversial material on the Kyrgyz-Tajik border incident that occurred in September 2022. The Kyrgyz authorities also froze Azattyk's bank account. In the selection process the researcher looked for media items by Kyrgyz 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 Kyrgyzstan 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 Kyrgyzstan 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 Kyrgyzstan, where the Kyrgyz government seems to copy other mechanisms and methods used by authoritarian governments, like the Russian government. 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

Governance and control over the internet space are relatively new practices in Kyrgyzstan, which the country began to face after Zhaparov came to power in 2020. The rise of a detained former member of the Kyrgyz Parliament as a revolutionary leader in 2020 itself was unexpected, as it was pro-democratic and progressive youth who initially launched the protest. Some claimed that Zhaparov was able to rally support around him immediately after his release from prison because of his resonating persona as a fellow sufferer, since his father and son both passed away while he was imprisoned (Ismailbekova). However, his unexpected rise could be better explained through various social media support groups on Facebook, WhatsApp and Instagram as well as pro-Zhaparov YouTube channels that he operated from prison (Baialieva and Kutmanaliev). President Zhaparov, unlike previous presidents, is very attentive to social media; he posts often on Facebook and he actively reads and responds to comments. In other words, he is aware of the political support and mobilisation potential of social media, and, therefore, he misuses social media platforms for own political gains — information manipulation, coordinated inauthentic behaviour and influence campaigns. His office initiated several anti-democratic laws aimed at the control and regulation of social media users, civil society and free media.

INFORMATION MANIPULATION, COORDINATED INAUTHENTIC BEHAVIOUR AND INFLUENCE CAMPAIGNS

Pro-Zhaparov social media support groups shape a domestic public discourse predominantly among the rural Kyrgyz-speaking majority through propaganda, the manipulation of information, trolling and the use of fake accounts against any critics of the regime (Factcheck.kg, Abduvaitova). There are several pro-Zhaparov pages/groups on Instagram, Telegram, Facebook, YouTube and WhatsApp which aim to rally support around the president during critical times or during elections. The groups are similar to troll farms and are funded by unknown pro-president interest groups or individuals. Despite the absence of a direct official link between these groups and the president, it is widely known that they are administered by people from the president's informal circle. The membership of these groups varies from several hundred to several thousand followers. For instance, the za_sadyr_zhaparov Instagram page has 330,000 followers. Overall, these represent an attempt to create influence campaigns through public disinformation, misinformation and malinformation. These "hired" support pages/groups create content that praises the current regime's decisions and policies and further spread them through various social media channels. The hired troll farms also write comments under controversial pieces of news posted by various critical media channels. Negative comments are usually predominant under the news posts of Azattyk's Facebook, YouTube and Instagram pages, where the users also blame Azattyk for their alleged "anti-leadership campaign" against the Kyrgyz leadership. In addition to pro-Zhaparov social media groups, there are plenty of pro-Tashiev (the head of the

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State Committee on National Security) or joint Zhaparov & Tashiev social media groups, such as a Facebook group called "Садыр Жапаров жана Камчыбек Ташиевди колдоо тайпасы" ("The group in support of Sadyr Zhaparov and Kamchybek Tashiev") with 37,000 members.

One example of pro-regime support group activity included propaganda, information manipulation and trolling, after the announcement of the controversial Kyrgyz–Uzbek border deal agreement involving the Kempir-Abad reservoir, which led to public Kurultai, online criticism and mass arrest of activists and opposition politicians. Between October 23 and 27, 2022, 30 people were arrested for two months before their trial, including six women. The activists demanded public access to the protocols on the border deal and criticised the deal through their social media channels and during the Kurultai. Most of the detained activists were members of the Committee to save Kempir-Abad which was formed after the public assembly. The members of the committee declared their intention to hold another nationwide public meeting on October 26 in the capital Bishkek, but they were detained on allegations of attempting to organise a mass riot after the security services released three audio recordings of conversations between some of the politicians and civic activists. Others were detained for their posts and videos on social media, mainly on Facebook, where they had criticised the Kyrgyz authorities. The detainees were charged with an attempt to overthrow power, the punishment for which can be up to 10 years of imprisonment. The incumbent power also used the excuse of the Kempir-Abad issue to get rid of other critics of the regime who had no relationship to the incident (Uraliev).

Afterwards there were several influence campaigns through small staged public assemblies or mini-meetings in support of President Zhaparov, arranged by various interest groups nationwide.[1] The mini-meetings held in Özgön, Tokmok, Alai, Bazar-Korgon, Kara-Suu, Talas, Yssykköl, Batken and Bishkek were recorded by the organisers and were spread through pro-regime social media accounts. In these videos the assembled men and women criticised the detained opposition politicians and civil activists, they expressed their support for Zhaparov and Tashiev, and they positioned themselves against any kind of protests and power overthrows attempts in the country. The people in these videos are widely known in Kyrgyzstan and referred to as "dokoncashniki." "Do konca!" (Russian for "until the end") was the slogan of the people who supported Zhaparov when he came to power. Back then dokoncashniki said that they would stay until the end, in other words that they will support Zhaparov until he fully takes the power. The minivans used to transport people to these assemblies can be seen in some of the shared videos analysed in the public Airtable for the Unfreedom Monitor. Usually the participants are paid for their protesting (Szymanek) and they are transported to and back from the main squares or maidans. The targets of these videos are usually uneducated Kyrgyz-speaking men and women who do not double-check information and trust unconfirmed sources. These videos carry unconfirmed information, they misinform or intentionally exaggerate facts.

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1. See for example on TikTok: https://www.tiktok.com/@za.sadyr.zhaparov_/video/7160217151717133570

NEW LEGISLATION AIMED AT CONTROLLING AND REGULATING BLOGGERS, SOCIAL MEDIA USERS AND CIVIL SOCIETY

The Kyrgyz government shifted to regulate the online sphere by introducing a new Law on Protection from False Information (known also as the Law against Fakes) in August 2021. Using the pretext of this law, the authorities had targeted critical bloggers and in general Facebook and other social media users. The Kyrgyz security services had censored and interrogated dozens of regime critics for posting and reposting information, mainly on Facebook. It was only at the beginning of 2022 that seven bloggers, including those related to critical media channels, were censored and interrogated by the security services (Kadyrov). For instance, a 19-year-old blogger was detained in August 2022 for sharing a post on a Facebook page he administers. The information he shared was related to the iron deposits in the Zhetim-Too mine, the development of which by a Chinese mining company had been opposed by locals. Another blogger, Emil Bekiev, who criticised the incumbent regime was detained in Moscow by the Russian security service (FSB) in September 2022; later Bekiev was deprived of Russian citizenship and was extradited to the Kyrgyz security services. He is currently under arrest in Bishkek, charged for numerous Facebook posts and YouTube videos that were found to be provocative and extremist (instilling inter-ethnic, inter-regional, inter-religious and racial hatred). The Kyrgyz government has become increasingly engaged in the censorship of its population's social media posts, thereby undermining the right to free expression. In autumn 2022, the President's Administration had issued for a public discussion the draft law on "Non-commercial non-state organisations." The aim of the law is to protect state interests against illegal activity of non-state institutions. According to this law all non-commercial and non-state organisations (NGOs) have to register with the Ministry of Justice. If the law is adopted, the state prosecution body and the Ministry of Justice will gain access to internal documents related to the sources of financing, expenses and other information. This will allow the state to control and to limit the activity of NGOs. This initiative on the adoption of a law on foreign agents to restrict the activity of NGOs and foreign media in Kyrgyzstan was largely inspired by the Russian model.

Finally, in January 2023, the Office of the President of Kyrgyz Republic proposed a bill related to mass media, which would give the government an opportunity to control bloggers, social media pages and social media accounts with more than 5,000 followers (Abdinabi uulu). The state will register them in a centralised registry and track their activity. These steps put at risk freedom of press and opinion and limit the activity of civil society and non-state organisations in Kyrgyzstan.

ATTACKS ON FREE MEDIA AND INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALISM

The Kyrgyz authorities suspended the activity of the Azattyk website because they published "controversial" material related to the Kyrgyz–Tajik conflict in Batken in September 2022. In October 2022 the outlet's website was blocked for two months and its bank account was frozen following a decree by the Ministry of Culture, Information, Sport and Youth of the Kyrgyz Republic

> *The Kyrgyz government has become increasingly engaged in the censorship of its population's social media posts*

(the Ministry of Culture). The ministry stated that the channel Nastoyashee Vremya (Current Time), fellow Radio Free Europe affiliate that shares an office with Azattyk, disseminated unconfirmed information related to the Kyrgyz and Tajik clashes in Batken oblast in September 2022, which is code for saying it was not impartial and took the Tajik side in reporting the news. Most believe that the real reason for the closure was an investigation by Azattyk into the controversial Kempir-Abad water reservoir issue. The investigation was timely and critical because it shared detailed information about the reservoir and local concerns about the decision's impact on people's everyday lives.

Shortly before the announcement of the government's decision to close the website, a pro-government group of "activists" held a protest near the Azattyk's office in Bishkek on October 13, 2022. The protesters, with covered faces, held banners calling for the closure of the offices of Azattyk and other critical media such as Kloop.kg and Kaktus.media. They blamed Azattyk, Kloop.kg and Kaktus.media for disinformation during the Tajik invasion to Kyrgyzstan and the June clashes in the south of Kyrgyzstan in 2010, and for promoting political instability and non-traditional values, such as supporting LGBTQ+ rights. The leader of the protest, Ilimbek Israilov, threatened to burn down the Azattyk building if the Kyrgyz parliament did not adopt the law on foreign agents proposed by MP Narmatova Nadira. Currently, the state is attempting to oust Azattyk from Kyrgyzstan.

In August 2022, the authorities also tried to block for two months the website of media agency 24.kg. In their letter to the internet providers the authorities did not specify the material that triggered the suspension. When the agency realised it was blocked and turned to the Ministry of Culture for official commentary, they were informed that they were no longer blocked.

The closure of Azattyk's website is an effort to take control of media space and attack independent journalism (in particular, investigative journalism) in Kyrgyzstan. In the past, Azattyk's investigative stories (conducted together with OCCRP and Kloop) on state corruption and money laundering schemes — namely related to the deputy chief of the Kyrgyz Customs Matraimov — created a huge resonance within communities and contributed to the October protest in 2020 that resulted in a change of power (OCCRP).

> **The investigation [by Azattyk] was timely and critical because it shared detailed information about the [Kempir-Abad water] reservoir and local concerns about the decision's impact on people's everyday lives.**

Likewise, investigative journalists in Kyrgyzstan faced numerous accusations, assaults or legal proceedings. A prominent case was when Bolot Temirov, the head of the Temirov Live investigative media channel, was accused of drug possession, and of illegally acquiring a Kyrgyz passport and crossing the border. Due to public pressure, Bolot Temirov was found innocent in trial and was released in September 2022. However, the state prosecutor made an appeal against the court's decision at the beginning of November. The persecution of Temirov started after his channel published the results of its investigation into the head of the State Committee on National Security Tashiev and his family, which addresses their state corruption scheme, state bidding with Tashiev's company in state procurements, and others. On November 23, Bolot Temirov was rudely expelled from Kyrgyzstan to Russia right from the courthouse without the opportunity to say goodbye to his family or appeal the court's decision.

THE MAIN CONTOURS OF DIGITAL AUTHORITARIANISM

Motives

Bearing in mind a volatile political context in the country with three overthrows of power since 1991, the incumbent government was afraid that the Kempir-Abad water reservoir border deal could lead to mass riots and put an end to the rule of Zhaparov and Tashiev. There was potential for mass riots on the ground also due to the state's failure to protect citizens during the violent Tajik military aggression in Batken in September 2022. The political opposition and a robust network of civil society organisations managed to easily mobilise nationwide and succeeded in establishing the Committee to save Kempir-Abad, and held a Kurultai to discuss and criticise the border deal. The Committee on Kempir-Abad could become a challenging political force with major public support, so the authorities undertook extreme detention measures. There were several narratives the Kyrgyz authorities used to justify their authoritarian responses.

The Kyrgyz authorities interpreted their pressure or limitation on the freedom of expression and the freedom of opinion as a necessary and legitimate crime-preventive measure, i.e. a measure to prevent another revolution. The Kyrgyz authorities used both formal state media such as the National Television and Radio Corporation of the Kyrgyz Republic (KTRK) and informal channels, namely pro-Zhaparov or pro-Tashiev groups on Instagram, Telegram, Facebook, YouTube and WhatsApp, in order to disinform people about the supposed Kempir-Abad plot and the plants by detained activists to overthrow the government. Pro-regime groups arranged small pro-president gatherings of around 30–50 or more young, middle aged and elderly people who allegedly represented local voices on the Kempir-Abad border deal agreement. The participants of the gatherings were predominantly the so-called "budget workers" or state employees, such as local government body employees, teachers, doctors and other people referred as "aktiv" or "dezhurnye" which mean "people on duty," i.e. the same people who are involved in various state-led activities.

KTRK and pro-Zhaparov social media channels reported that the detained activists were pseudo-activists who used the pretext of the Kempir-Abad case for their own political gains, in particular "to make" another revolution with support from abroad. They stressed that the fourth revolution would lead to a total collapse of the Kyrgyz state and the disintegration of the country into several parts. According to pro-state narratives, revolutions are "bad" and they are funded by the West, in particular the USA, through the activity of non-government organisations and foreign media outlets, such as Azattyk and Kloop. They underlined that foreign media outlets and NGOs instigate and provoke conflict and instability and are destructive to the country's development and prosperity.

> *The Kyrgyz authorities interpreted their pressure or limitation on the freedom of expression and the freedom of opinion as a necessary and legitimate crime-preventive measure, i.e. a measure to prevent another revolution.*

The Kyrgyz authorities also used similar narratives on the external threat and the instability factor to justify the closure of Azattyk's website. The officials noted that its closure was a measure necessary to prevent the spread of unconfirmed information. Azattyk, as stated earlier,

was accused by the Kyrgyz authorities of the breach of the impartial reporting principle during the broadcasting of the Kyrgyz–Tajik border conflict while airing reportinge from Nastoyashee Vremya. In a similar way, both formal and informal channels were used to misinform the population about the supposed threat foreign-funded media pose to the country's stability, since both Azattyk and Nastoyashee Vremya are affiliated with Radio Free Europe. Posts from state officials and pro-state people and groups on social media stressed that foreign media and NGOs funded from abroad should be controlled by the state for the future of the country and for the unity of its population. They noted that the suspension of the activity of Azattyk's website was a legal measure that the state undertook to prevent the spread of unconfirmed information. Their claim was that Kyrgyzstan was a free, independent and sovereign state that was entitled to the right to say "no" to foreign outlets if they did not follow the state's requirements.

Civil society activists, NGOs, opposition politicians, critical bloggers and foreign-funded media outlets were referred to in pro-state narratives as "el buzarlar" meaning nation-spoilers or nation-destabilisers. Pro-state media items, in particular in pro-president social media support pages/groups included the following popular hashtags: #элбиримдиги (the unity of people); #садыржапаровдуколдоо (support for Sadyr Zhaparov); #туурабагыт (the right direction/policies); #элбузарларжокболсун (no place for nation-spoilers or nation-destabilizers).

On the other hand, state authorities also tried to assert that Kyrgyzstan is a fully democratic country and they urged that the latest developments not be considered democratic backslides. On the contrary, they argued that these measures were necessary steps "to protect" the majority-elected democratic government from attempts to overthrow it. Several state officials commented on the closure of the Azattyk and the mass detention of the civil activists in October 2022 as crucial state measures in the name of the Kyrgyz nation's future, national security and the state's territorial integrity and they asserted that there was no repression in the country.

Methods

Widespread methods of digital authoritarianism in Kyrgyzstan include the following: disinformation, misinformation, information manipulation, social media censorship, legislating censorship and blocking the websites of critical media.

The state is misusing social media platforms. On the one hand, it is involved in the censorship of social media users and has been punishing them for posting or reposting any information critical of the state, based on the law against the spread of fake news. Social media accounts of bloggers have reportedly also been hacked. On the other hand, the state uses social media platforms to create an impression of public support and to discredit non-state media, NGOs, and opposition politicians. The Kyrgyz authorities are amending existing laws and introducing new ones to limit and to control the activity of non-state media, bloggers and civil society. Finally, the state applies the method of blocking the websites of media that criticises it. There is no openly available information on the grounds upon which the authorities blocked the Azattyk media's website; however, DNS blocking and IP blocking of websites is common in Kyrgyzstan and Central Asia (OSCE).

There are no reported cases of state surveillance in Kyrgyzstan, although some studies (Uraimov: 95) noted that China had provided the government with "surveillance systems" such as facial recognition cameras, and "anti-protest police vehicles and ammunition" in order to help the incumbent regime to "undermine individual rights and freedoms" as some Chinese police vehicles were used to oppress protests in Kyrgyzstan.

Domestic and international responses

On October 24, 2022 in Bishkek and Osh oblasts protests were held against the transfer of the Kempir-Abad reservoir and political pressure against activists (journalists, bloggers and politicians). The participants called for a stop to the prosecution of detained civic activists and demanded their release. Three hundred participants took part in the protest in Bishkek, 10 in Osh and around a hundred in the protest in Uzgen (a location at Kempir-Abad reservoir). Atyr Abdrahmatova, the leader of the Ombudsman Institute of the Kyrgyz Republic publicly expressed her concern regarding the mass detention of activists and called on the government to ensure the safeguarding of internationally recognised human rights and ensure the independence of the Ombudsman Institute. Some members of the parliament also publicly demanded the release of detained activists during the meeting of the Kyrgyz parliament.

On October 27, the Media Policy Institute, an NGO working for press freedom in Kyrgyzstan, published a letter calling on the government to stop attacking the freedom of the media and expression in the country, to stop pressuring journalists and media outlets, and to reconsider the adopted law on spread of false information. The letter was signed by representatives of independent media outlets, bloggers, independent journalists and activists. Another letter was published by representatives of independent media and civil activists calling on President Zhaparov, the Kyrgyz Parliament, and the government to stop blocking Azattyk and other media outlets, to stop prosecution against journalists, to withdraw a new project of a law on media in Kyrgyzstan, to establish a working group to participate in discussions on legislative amendments concerning media, and to cancel the law on false information. The undersigned also requested a personal meeting with President Zhaparov.

On October 28, a solidarity protest against state censorship and pressure on media was held by independent media, journalists and activists in Kyrgyzstan by posting a dark page on their websites or social media with the words: "No News Today. Media Under Pressure in Kyrgyzstan." Independent media outlets such as Kaktus.media, Kloop.kg, 24.kg, T-Media, TV1, NEXT TV, 3rd channel, April TV, Bulak.kg, Politklinika.kg, TemirovLive, and media MediaHub did not cover any news for three hours on that day as a sign of protest.

On November 7, in Bishkek, on the occasion of the Day of Information and Press, representatives of the media held an event called "Plant trees, don't arrest journalists." Journalists and activists planted trees in the city park.

More than 80 representatives of civil society and human rights activists in Kyrgyzstan, including the Legal Clinic Adilet appealed to the government to release female activists, but they received no official response.

International organisations such as Human Rights Watch, the International Partnership for Human Rights (IPHR), Civil Rights Defenders (CRD), Norwegian Helsinki Committee, and the International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH) expressed their concerns in relation to

mass detentions, called the Kyrgyz government to release detained activists and to observe international Human Rights regulations. Several embassies in Kyrgyzstan (the US, the UK, Germany, France and the EU representative office) also released a joint statement on the International Day to End Impunity for Crimes against Journalists. In their joint statement they called on the Kyrgyz government to ensure freedom of media and freedom of expression.

ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSION

In Kyrgyzstan, internet governance and control became a more prevalent practice following the power change in 2020, when President Zhaparov came to power. Unlike previous presidents, Zhaparov is highly attuned to the influence of social media, is known to actively engage with it and informally runs multiple fan or support pages/groups on popular social media channels Instagram, Facebook, Telegram, YouTube and WhatsApp. Though these pages/groups might look harmless, they are heavily misused in order to increase authoritarianism and illiberal practices in the country (as documented in the public Airtable). Pro-president social networks misinform, disinform and manipulate information, create artificial support for the president and legitimise the authorities' attacks on non-state media, civil society, bloggers and social media users. In other words, Kyrgyz authorities are worried about too much "digital freedom" on the internet and thought of legislative measures to limit it.

The research has revealed that the incumbent Kyrgyz government is actively suppressing dissent by engaging in information manipulation, passing restrictive laws and attacking free media and investigative journalism. The Kyrgyz government has introduced new laws to regulate online activity, and is proposing additional legislation on foreign agents to control and to limit the activity of NGOs and foreign media, and on mass media to gain greater control over bloggers and social media accounts with more than 5,000 followers. The government has been using the "Law on Protection from False Information," also known as the fake news law, to silence its critics. This has included shutting down the website of Azattyk, a foreign-funded media outlet critical of the state, and detaining and censoring individuals who share or repost information critical of the government on social media. Similarly, investigative reporters in Kyrgyzstan have had to deal with multiple accusations, various attacks, or legal action taken against them. One of them, Temirov Bolot, was forced to leave Kyrgyzstan and move to Russia in November 2022.

Furthermore, the research has examined how the Kyrgyz leadership is exploiting social media platforms to launch influence campaigns and boost the president's popularity. Pages and groups supportive of Zhaparov on various social media platforms, including Instagram, Telegram, Facebook, YouTube, and WhatsApp, have emerged with the aim of garnering backing for the president during critical moments, and are run by individuals associated with his informal network, while receiving funding from unknown pro-president groups or individuals. The support pages promote the current regime's decisions and policies by creating pro-regime content (usually videos) that is disseminated through multiple social media platforms, while also commenting on contentious news items published by critical media channels. These videos are directed towards under-educated Kyrgyz-speaking people who tend to trust unverified sources, conveying unconfirmed and intentionally exaggerated information. Overall, the situation with media freedom and freedom of opinion in Kyrgyzstan is worsening and these developments are worrying because the country has been a champion of

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democratic reforms in the region since 1991. At the same time, the Kyrgyz authorities are very optimistic about advanced technologies and digitisation initiatives. Most of these innovative digitisation projects are funded by international organisations and agencies, such as the UN, the EU and the OSCE, which aim to build a more democratic, transparent, inclusive and effective governance. To draw the attention of international donors, the government of Kyrgyzstan had indicated digital transformation and e-commerce as a priority in its National Development Strategy (Vision 2040) and the corresponding five-year development plan called "Digital Kyrgyzstan 2019–2023" aimed to modernise and to develop the national economy. In 2021, the Ministry of Digital Development and the State Agency on Protection of Personal Data were established in order to ensure digital transformation and e-governance in the country. On January 19, 2023, the Ministry of Digital Development of the Kyrgyz Republic presented a conceptual project of the Digital Code of the Kyrgyz Republic, a document aimed at the regulation of public relations in the digital environment. The authorities, in particular, are working hard to boost the e-economy through e-commerce, technical innovations, digital entrepreneurship and techno-parks with international donors and investors (ITC News).

Thus, the Kyrgyz authorities tend to play between these two conflicting digital poles on domestic and international levels: one aimed at restricting "digital freedom," another one aimed at transparent democratic governance through digitisation and building an e-economy.

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