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Blogging Down the Dictator? The Kyrgyz Revolution and Samizdat Web Sites

Swellana V. Kulikova and David D. Perlmutter

KYRGYZSTAN, a small Central Asian country of five million people, made the front pages of print and Web newspapers and the broadcast leads of the world media on March 24, 2005. On that day, President Askar Akayev, who had ruled the former Soviet republic for fourteen years, fled the country after a series of large public protests, including one in which demonstrators seized the government building in the capital of Bishkek. As in many such events, narrative and causality were in the eye of the beholder. Western media, drawing parallels with earlier uprisings in the Republic of Georgia and Ukraine, initially described the events as a Tulip Revolution (referring to the flower held up by protesters as a symbol of spring renewal) enacted via "people power" (*Christian Science Monitor* 2005; *Herald Sun* 2005; *Houston Chronicle* 2005). Other characterizations abounded. The fall of the Kyrgyz leader was deemed a "garden-variety" coup (Smith 2005; Burkett 2005), a "scary democratic rebellion" (Sullivan 2005), and even a CIA black-op (Spencer 2005; Laughland 2005).

Russian pro-government media labeled the events in Kyrgyzstan a U.S.-backed coup, "sandpaper revolution" (Yuferova 2005), and unconstitutional ouster of Askar Akayev, creator of "the most liberal regime in Central Asia" (Leontiev 2005). Russian independent media portrayed the leader's departure as a case of "democratic barbarism against civilized authoritarianism" (Panfilova, Sas, and Gordienko, 2005). The media in the neighboring Central Asian republics of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan—ruled by similar oppressive regimes—either ignored the fall of the long-term ruler or condemned it, putting the main emphasis on

the night of looting following the revolution. The message delivered to their populations was: "Don't try this here!" Most of the domestic media in Kyrgyzstan were in a difficult position when reporting the events of March 24, as no one knew where President Akayev was. State-controlled media, confused as to who was in charge, produced unreliable and erroneous accounts, which forced many people to search for alternative sources of information, often Internet-based.²

The motivations behind the downfall of the president, who styled himself a "true democrat," will probably not be sorted out for years. After gaining independence in 1991, Kyrgyzstan faced a number of historical challenges to becoming anything approximating a democracy: a weak tradition of free elections and civil society; a population long reared in either Soviet totalitarianism or tribal paternalism; regional divisions and unrest; a possible Islamic insurgency that reflects more frustrations with secular political alternatives than any true turn to fundamentalism; huge gaps between the super wealthy (often members of a few families like the Akayevs) and the impoverished multitudes; and a growing division between a rising urban middle class and a countryside still dominated by clans and populated by peasants.

Among many challenges, the ruling elite largely controlled Kyrgyzstan's mass media. Anti-government voices could be found in only two opposition newspapers, *Moya Stoiitsa-Novosti* and *Res Publica*. It was widely suspected that these tribunes of anti-Akayev sentiment were allowed to exist so that the regime could point them out to Westerners as examples of press "freedom." The other avenue of opposition expression—until the street protests—was the Internet. Those with Web access could obtain information from the oppositional sites at newspapers *MSN* (www.msn.kg), *Res Publica* (www.respublica.kg), and those of NGOs and political movements, such as the Coalition of NGOs for Democracy and Civil Society and the youth movement Birge, the popular online newspaper *Gazeta.kg* (www.gazeta.kg), and the Web site *Kyrgyzus* (www.kyrgyzus.com), targeted Kyrgyzstanis abroad. However, after the controversial parliamentary elections in February 2005, a team of hackers hired by pro-government interests regularly blocked access to and hacked into the content of these sites (Kyrgyzinfo 2005).

In a land where almost all information is controlled by the government or its allies, sources such as *Gazeta.kg* and *Kyrgyzus* present a sort of virtual *samizdat*, the name given to the Soviet-era unofficial, self-published opposition writings. The term is comprised of two Russian words—*sam* (meaning "self") and *izdat* ("publishing"), and Western audiences perhaps know it best for the contribution of *samizdat* dissident literature to the Polish Solidarnost movement in the 1970s–80s. Then, however, *samizdat* spread via mimeograph machines and

briefcases. Today oppositional literature is largely an incarnation of the Internet, a venue where dissent can be open and clear or camouflaged in metaphors and allusions, depending on the effectiveness of online censorship (Zha and Perlmutter 2008). The "how" and "why" and "with what effect" of such a phenomenon is of great interest. As Barber, Mattson, and Peterson argue, the convergence of democracy and technology is the most important question facing society (1997, 17). It is also an applied question: how we as individuals, students of neither the political order nor of new media, can understand what people are actually doing with technology to push political transformation. The issue is complicated because repressive governments are quite aware of bloggers: they employ their own technology (filters, hacking) as well as old-fashioned strong-arm tactics to silence blogs. China, for example, is increasingly sophisticated in blocking and filtering objectionable content, often with the assistance of Western software providers (Fallows 2008; Open Initiative 2005; Perlmutter and Hamilton 2007; Chinese Human Rights Defenders 2007; Zha and Perlmutter 2008).

This chapter evaluates the impact and significance of *Akaevu.net* (www.akaevu.net), an advocacy blog created by the author of *Gazeta.kg* and *Kyrgyzus* as a temporary solution to deliver information to people who could not access the blocked and hacked sites.³ It addresses these questions:

- To what extent do *samizdat* blogs serve as legitimate sources for oppositional information for citizens and international observers?
- What content in *samizdat* blogs differentiates them from oral, written, or other sources of unofficial information?
- What content in *samizdat* blogs differentiates them from what readers may learn from traditional outsider media, such as international newspapers or television news?
- What evidence is available to evaluate the effects of *samizdat* blogs on the political events, in this case the revolution itself?
- To what extent can *samizdat* blogs serve to incite or sustain democratization in Third World countries? If so, must the democracy model follow Western patterns?

At first glance, the weblog would seem to be the loneliest form of opposition in a country where computer access and Internet use can be counted in the single digits among a poor rural population (Dimitrova and Bellock 2005). But in revolutions, sheer numbers are not the main guarantor of success or failure. A few thousand Bolsheviks, for example, seized Russia in 1917, while millions of

protesters could not move the Chinese government in 1989 (Zha and Perlmutter 2008). Indeed, only about a thousand demonstrators in Kyrgyzstan actually took over the government building and sent the president packing (British Broadcasting Corporation 2005).

While no direct link exists between blogs and the fall of authoritarianism, this study explores the Akavevnet blog's role in the Kyrgyz opposition and, more specifically, in covering the revolution itself. It argues that Third World blogs can be a significant producer, collector, sifter, distributor, and exhibitor of information. In addition, for fast-moving events occurring in a world news economy that increasingly precludes staffing correspondents in "out-of-the-way" nations, the blog can also "scoop" international media, because the "citizen journalist" is literally on the scene with cell-phone camera and laptop (Perlmutter and Hamilton 2007; Perlmutter 2008).

Can Democracy Be Transferred—by Blog?

This section speculates on whether the blog may serve as a training ground or mechanism in creating alternative communities of opposition. Blogs may be online journals, but in terms of participative association they are equivalent to tavern meeting groups of pre-revolutionary America and reading clubs and salons of pre-revolutionary France. Individuals who tend to participate in revolutions, ranging from students to technicians to intellectuals, not only can communicate with and mobilize one another but also get to a vast realm of information outside official content. In numbers, the rise of blogs is impressive: there are now hundreds of millions of bloggers, who post reports and opinions on subjects as wide-ranging as pets to plumbing and food to politics (Perlmutter 2008). Many international nongovernmental organizations have tried to raise the profile of the voices of the developing world. Harvard's Global Voices Project, for example surveys blogs around the world.⁴

In nations where blogs are actively politically repressed, they can constitute a political factor. Farsi (Persian), for example, is the third most represented language among blogs. Many blogs reflect deep antipathy to the mullah and conservative regime, and they were invaluable, along with updates on Twitter, in uncovering the truth about the flawed 2009 presidential election in Iran. In response, the Iranian government has hacked, blocked, and filtered many blogs and arrested a number of prominent bloggers.

What role do blogs play in struggles over democratic transformation? The

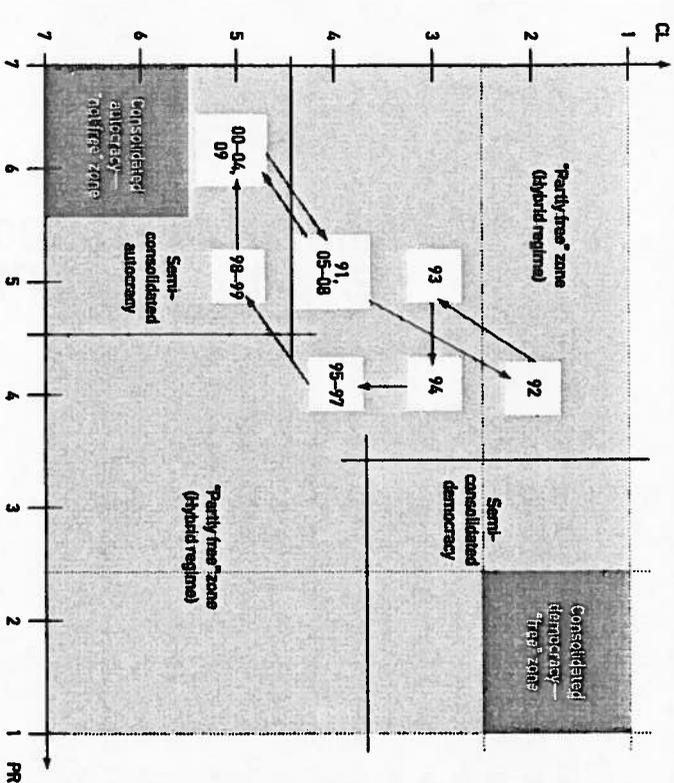
status of the blog, whatever its origin or purpose as an expression of individuality, is significant. As Oravec noted, "The weblog is a malleable and fluid medium through which individuals can develop an individualized voice that can reflect facets of their personal style and idiosyncratic intellectual approaches" (2002, 614). But do ordinary people in developing (or undeveloping) countries have time for idiosyncratic intellectuality and its expression? International surveys of bloggers find that they almost always come from middle and educated classes, so, as a rule, "peasants don't blog" (Perlmutter 2008). As Hurwitz argued, "The Internet's diffusion has increased the opportunities for political action among those who are already the most politically active and informed" (1999, 656). Does this cohort, however, constitute a potential source of oppositional leadership and the development of collective associations of democracy building? Blogs are for people with something to say to the world and the means to say it through a new medium. In countries like Kyrgyzstan, only a few thousand people make up such a "guild"—but that was enough for a revolution.

Background: "What'sistan?"

Kyrgyzstan gained independence in 1991 as a result of the breakdown of the Warsaw Pact and collapse of the Soviet Union. Similar to the other Central and Eastern European countries and former Soviet republics, Kyrgyzstan declared democracy as its final goal in development by defining itself as "a sovereign, unitary, democratic republic constructed on the basis of a legal secular state." Outcomes for these new nations, however, have been quite different. According to a *Nations in Transit* report about countries in transition (Freedom House 2008), only the three Baltic states among the fifteen former Soviet republics achieved that goal and joined the European Union. Others lag considerably behind, either recovering from having shaken off newer authoritarian regimes (the Ukraine and Georgia) or sliding deeper into autocracy (Azerbaijan, Russia), if not already there (Belarus, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan).

To evaluate the state of freedom in these countries, Freedom House uses a typology ranging from a consolidated democracy to a consolidated authoritarian regime (see figure 1). Country assessments are based on the state of political rights and civil liberties during the year assessed. Most countries in transit fall into the big "partly free" zone that encompasses semi-consolidated democracies, hybrid regimes, and semi-consolidated autocracies, all of which combine the elements of both democratic and authoritarian forms of governance at varying degrees

FIGURE 1. KYRGYZSTAN'S DEMOCRACY RECORD BASED ON FREEDOM HOUSE ASSESSMENTS



Independent since 1991, Kyrgyzstan started with the score of 5 for political rights and 4 for civil liberties. In 1992, it shot to 4 and 2, the closest to the "free zone" the country has ever reached. Starting from 1993, the movement reversed. In the following three years, Kyrgyzstan improved in political rights, but it worsened again in 1998-99 with rigged parliamentary and presidential elections. In 2000 the country was downgraded to 6 on political rights and 5 on civil liberties and remained there until 2005. After the 2005 uprising, Kyrgyzstan gained 1 point on each dimension and returned to the degree of political rights and civil liberties where it started in 1991. In 2009 the country moved deeper into the semi-consolidated autocracy zone again, similar to the 2000-04 period.

NOTE: CL = civil liberties; PR = political rights
 source: Freedom House, 1992-2010, *Freedom in the World: The Annual Survey of Political Rights and Civil Liberties*. Graph design by Svetlana Kulikova.

and levels. The ideal movement is toward a consolidated democracy, which Linz and Stepan define as having attitudinal, behavioral, and constitutional aspects of governance and requiring at least three prerequisites: (1) "stateness," that is, a strong, confident government resting on the majority's support and rule of law; (2) a "completed democratic transition" that has produced fair and contested elections and efficient and separated executive, judicial, and legislative powers;

and (3) a "culture of democratic governance" where rulers observe the constitution and rights of individuals and minorities, respect the legislature, and tolerate criticism and pluralism of opinions (2001, 94-95).

Before the March 2005 revolution, Kyrgyzstan was still considered to be in transition, although the pattern of the previous five years showed the country sliding toward a consolidated authoritarian regime, the exact opposite of a consolidated democracy. In 2000, *Freedom in the World* categorized Kyrgyzstan in the "not free" zone (Freedom House 2001). This downgraded assessment was based on several important events and processes: (1) highly controversial 1999 parliamentary elections, in which numerous frauds were reported; (2) the presidential election of 2000, when Akayev ran for an unconstitutional third term after having the Constitutional Court invalidate his first term of 1990-95 because he had been appointed by the parliament and approved by a national referendum instead of elected by a popular vote; (3) a highly manipulated 2003 national referendum that approved constitutional amendments to provide immunity to the president and his family and a new parliamentary reform (Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe 2003); (4) high rate of corruption at all levels of government described in the special Freedom House report "Countries at the Crossroads" (2004); and (5) the Akayevs' successful acquisition of most media assets between 1991 and 2004. By some estimates, the family owned or controlled up to 80 percent of all media outlets and production facilities such as printing houses and distribution services (Kulikova and Ibraeva 2002, 15-17).

In short, Kyrgyzstan's political leadership adopted the philosophy of *managed democracy*. Managed democracy can be described as a regime with formal democratic institutions such as regular contested elections and other forms of popular participation like referenda, diverse and private press, and developed civil liberties such as freedom to travel. At the same time, this type of regime is authoritarian in essence, as it allows limited autonomy for democratic institutions (Pribylovsky 2005). Akayev's government embraced the concept after it was revived by Russia with Putin's rise to power in the early 2000s. One of the main ideologists of the managed (later rebranded as "sovereign") democracy in Russia and chair of Effective Politics Foundation Gleb Pavlovsky, labeled the March 2005 events in Kyrgyzstan "a grave political catastrophe" that threatened the "entire architecture of security in the region" (Interfax 2005).

Kyrgyzstan in the latter years of Akayev's presidency typified the managed democracy model: elections were regular and contested but manipulated so skillfully that even outside observers could not confirm fraud; political parties existed but had little influence on the actual legislative process, because candidates

preferred to run on an individual ticket rather than a party list; more than 500 media outlets were registered with the Ministry of Justice, but only about 150–180 operated at any given point; and there were more than three thousand registered NGOs, many of them quasi-NGOs created by pro-government circles to channel grant money. At the same time, citizens were free in their consciousness (religion), thinking, expression, and travel in and outside the country.

According to classical democratic theory, such an obvious discrepancy between abridged political rights and what is allowed to individual citizens in terms of civil liberties should inevitably result in a tension between the two (Dahl 1971). To establish balance the government can either loosen up political rights or put more controls on civil liberties. The Akayev government cherished Kyrgyzstan's image as the most democratic society in Central Asia and could not afford to curtail civil liberties, the only true and tangible features of democracy in the country. However, the worsening economic situation and Akayev's low popularity widened the gap. The disparity became even more pronounced when the government devised an elaborate scheme of maintaining power within the family based on the 2003 constitutional amendments that called for a new one-chamber parliament. The plan included:

1. creating a new broad-based party, *Alga, Kyrgyzstan* (Go forward, Kyrgyzstan) to provide the base for loyal nominees to the 2005 parliament;
2. electing a new one-chamber parliament in February 2005 that would include *Alga*, Kyrgyzstan members and other family-trusted people, including the president's son, Aldar Akayev, and daughter and party leader, Bermet Akayeva;
3. collecting three hundred thousand citizens' signatures for "the people's legislative initiative," a national referendum to extend Akayev's term until at least 2008;
4. conducting the referendum, manipulating its results if necessary, and
5. prolonging the president's term by parliamentary validation of the referendum "decision."

The plan was followed through only to the second step. When *Alga, Kyrgyzstan* was being formed, oppositional media reported on the aggressive methods of recruiting, including bribery and threats against potential constituents. At the second step, however, this became even more obvious, and numerous violations in the registration process for parliamentary candidates could not be ignored. Prior to the elections, citizens in the northern region of Naryn and southern regions of Jalal-Abad and Osh organized protests against the rejection of registration

of candidates whom they wanted in the parliament. However, the government insisted that the rejections were justified.

After the first round of elections on February 27, 2005, opposition parties and election-monitoring organizations such as Interbilib and the Coalition of NGOs reported numerous violations and fraud. In several contested constituencies it was decided to conduct the repeated elections at the time of runoffs, March 13, 2005. When the repeated elections revealed the same fraud and pressure on voters, people in the most impoverished areas of the Osh region organized protests and demonstrations. Government attempts to suppress the protests inflamed them into popular uprisings and what is referred to as "exercising the people power"—ousting local state administrations and exercising direct decision making through people's councils while involving more citizens in the opposition movement.

By March 21 the opposition controlled the southern regions of Osh and Jalal-Abad and a substantial part of Naryn in the north, with some organized protests in other northern regions, excluding Bishkek (Kimmage 2005). Opposition demands soon included not only invalidation of the parliamentary elections but also Akayev's resignation. Organized groups started to move from Osh and Jalal-Abad to Bishkek, and on March 23 the capital saw its first large protest. The government used police forces against the demonstrators, and about five hundred participants were taken to jail, including activists of the *Kel-Kel* and *BiRge* youth movements, journalists, and political leaders. The next day, a larger peaceful demonstration of about ten thousand people gathered in Bishkek's central square. The protest culminated in the government building takeover and Akayev fleeing to Moscow. He ultimately resigned on April 4, 2005, and a revolution leader, Kurmanbek Bakiyev, was elected the new president on July 10, 2005.

Analyzing the causes of Kyrgyzstan's revolution, Kimmage (2005) points to the following: "a widespread perception that the Akayev government was massively corrupt, that the distribution of whatever economic benefits had accrued to Kyrgyzstan in the post-Soviet period was grossly inequitable, that the Akayev-led ruling elite was actively manipulating the mechanisms of democracy in order to prolong its rule, and that the state-controlled media were distorting the real situation in the country." State-controlled media's distortion of events was a particularly important development, because a key feature of managed democracy is control over information. In Kyrgyzstan the president's family tightly controlled ownership of mainstream media and production facilities. The first breakthrough happened when the Media Support Center, sponsored by the U.S. and Norwegian governments, opened a printing house in November 2003

to print opposition newspapers. By March 2004 the center was printing more than ninety papers, about thirty of them in opposition to the government. Earlier such periodicals either did not exist or had been printed at the state printing house, Uchkun, which could and often did refuse services under various pretexts (for examples, see Kulikova and Ibraeva 2002). After independent newspapers acquired this new venue of production, their circulation shot up, as did their influence. In the aftermath, Akayev made a direct connection between the printing house and the coup. Western media also assessed the printing house and independent newspapers as instrumental for the revolution (Associated Press 2005; Spencer 2005).

Although newspapers presented a challenge for the family-run political regime, the Internet posed an even greater danger. Akayev, a trained scientist, always pointed out the importance of quality education and modern information technologies, which resulted in a mushrooming of universities and a quickly developing Internet. Indeed, Kyrgyzstan led other Central Asian republics in development of the Internet, which lagged tremendously behind the Eastern European countries (Dimitrova and Bellock 2005, 175-76). According to the UN International Telecommunications Union data, the number of users in the other four Central Asian republics in 2005 varied from a low of 0.3 percent of the population in Tajikistan to a high of 3.3 percent in Uzbekistan, while in Kyrgyzstan it was 10.53 percent.⁹ Most users in Kyrgyzstan were state and private company employees or students with Internet access at work or school, which explains why the number of visits to popular Web sites dropped on weekends.

Despite official statements on the necessity to develop the Internet as a way to achieve openness and prosperity, the government attempted to control it, especially during the 2005 parliamentary elections. Understanding that Internet content cannot be restricted, the government tried to control access by blocking or hacking opposition sites, such as the newspapers *Moya Stoitisa-Novosti*, *Ras Publica*, and the online newspaper *Gazetaki.g*, all hosted by Asialinfo (Kyrgyzinfo 2005). The administrators of *Gazetaki.g* in 2005 the second-most popular site in Kyrgyzstan after the commercial news agency Akipress (www.akipress.org), developed a creative way to solve that problem: starting the advocacy blog *Akaevunet* (Introweb 2005).

Akaevunet as an Advocacy Blog

Akaevunet was created as a temporary stopgap to fill in for the blocked sites *Gazetaki.g* and *Kyrgyzus*. Its name reflected the blog's advocacy character—"Akaevunet" in Russian means "Down with Akayev"—and explicitly stated its mission in a passionate and aggressive opening editorial by its author, Ulan Melisbek, a Kyrgyz citizen who was then residing in the United States:

As a result of the foul order by the Akayev-Toigonbaev gang, the most popular sites of Kyrgyzstan, *Gazetaki.g* and *Kyrgyzus*, have been blocked. Access is also blocked to the popular regional resource *Centrasia.ru*, which is also covering the events in our country. Our response to Chamberlains-Akayevs will be the creation of innumerable sites on various servers, so that they shake up the financial position of Toigonbaev [Akayev's son-in-law]. Hackers are people who value their time and skills, and sooner or later Toigonbaev will become weary of paying for blockage of numerous sites.

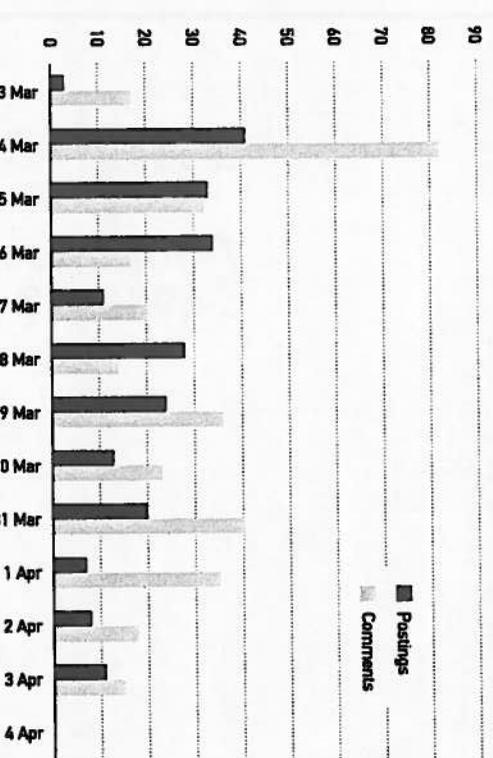
Akaevunet was hosted in and administered from the United States. However, since content was mostly in Russian, it targeted users of the Russian segment of the Internet. The placement proved to be in the blog's favor for two reasons: (1) in terms of audiences, the Russian Internet is much smaller than that of the United States or European countries, which allowed the blog to quickly occupy the highest-ranking positions among political sites in Russian cyberspace; and (2) hosting in the United States significantly reduced opportunities to hack the blog from Kyrgyzstan.

Akaevunet started to operate on March 23, just one day before the revolution. From the outset it positioned itself as "a trumpet of the Kyrgyz revolution," whose mission was to provide up-to-the-minute information on the current political situation.

CONTENT AND VISIBILITY

On its first day the blog carried three stories: advocacy materials generated by the bloggers and news on protests organized by Kyrgyzstanis in other countries. Starting from the day of the revolution, the blog reoriented itself to carrying stories from other mainstream media and Web sites, often just as they had been published or with a short comment by the bloggers. To understand the nature of the posts and readers' comments, a simple content analysis was done

FIGURE 2. NUMBER OF POSTINGS AND COMMENTSON AKAEVUNET, MARCH 23–APRIL 4, 2005



Source: Blog Akayevunet, graph by Svetlana Kulikova.

for the period March 23 to April 4, 2005 (the date of the official announcement of Akayev's resignation). The number of stories in the period shows that they generally declined from the highest of forty-one on the day of the revolution, March 24, to zero on April 4, when the blog announced that its mission had been accomplished (see figure 2).

As figure 2 illustrates, there is no direct correlation between the number of posts and the number of comments to the posts. In fact, on some dates the total number of comments was two to three times higher than the number of posts; the reverse was true on other dates. The number of comments per post varied from zero to twenty-two, with no distinguishable pattern. The only predictable indicator of the number of comments per post seems to be whether the post focused on Akayev or his family. Such posts generally provoked heated reader discussions. For example, the post of March 31, which provided Bernet Akayeva's interview to the Russian newspaper *Komsomolskaya Pravda* titled "I left Bishkek in what I was wearing—jeans and sweater," had the highest number of comments (twenty-two) for the study period. All of the comments were highly negative about Akayeva and her attempts to present her father and her family as victims. Another example was Askar Akayev's interview with Russian radio Ekho Moskvy on March 30, which provoked one neutral and eleven highly negative comments.

Most stories in the sample are materials from other media and Web sites. Some appeared within thirty minutes after being published by the original source, which suggests that several bloggers were monitoring the net at the same time and immediately posted what they could find. The bloggers must have had direct access to one of Akayev's longest-standing political opponents, Felix Kulov, who had been in jail before the revolution for five years. On March 24, when Kulov was released, Akayevunet was the only site that carried an exclusive thirty-minute advance announcement about his first appearance on television. This resulted in a higher visibility of the site, as the announcement was picked up and carried further by other major domestic and Russian media and Web sites that cited Akayevunet as a source.

Another factor that increased the blog's visibility on the net was an erroneous March 24 report on Akayev's resignation attributed to Euronews TV. That one-line announcement, which read, "Euronews has just reported that Akayev resigned," was picked up by so many sites and online media in Russia and near abroad (e.g., news sites Utro.ru, Polit.ru, Sistema.ru, Russian newspaper *Novye Izvestiya*, Ukrainian newspaper *Tribuna*) that Euronews had to officially retract the information. The story was repeated almost identically on April 2, however, when Akayev indeed resigned and Euronews reported on it. This interaction with the mainstream media is in line with the phenomenon that Fortunati (2005) calls "mediatization of the Internet and internetization of the media"—mutual sharing of information among traditional media and their online versions and other Internet sites, and popular blogs in particular.

The original source determined characterization of stories. When placing posts, bloggers categorized and labeled them in four groups:

1. *Foreign media covering Kyrgyzstan* (e.g., CNN, BBC, Reuters). Most stories in this category were in English or in both English and Russian.
2. *Kyrgyz media covering local events and providing local experts' analysis.* Posts in this category were drawn from both mainstream and oppositional newspapers, *Moya Stolitsa-Novosti* and *Res Publica* in particular, and major news agencies Akipress, Kabar, and Kyrgyzinfo.
3. *Russian media carrying stories on the revolution and its implications for Russian politics and policies in the region.* The spectrum of media in this category is impressive: news agencies ITAR-TASS, Interfax, RIA-Novosti and online Lenta.ru; newspapers *Kommersant*, *Novaya Gazeta*, *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, *Moskovsky Komsomolets*, *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, *Vremya Novostei*; Moscow-based radio station Ekho Moskvy; and news and political analysis

sites such as Polit.ru, Uro.ru, Krem.ru, Dni.ru, Ferghana.ru, Strana.ru, and Gazeta.ru.

4. *Proprietary materials*—posts generated by the advocacy group itself, mostly petitions or analysis and alternative interpretations of other media stories.

A clear evidence of the blog's anti-Akayev stance is that of all 143 posts in the sample mentioning Akayev and his family, almost half—60—are negative, 66 have a neutral tone, 8 are mixed, and only 9 are positive. Moreover, the 9 posts that tried to present Akayev positively were either interviews with him and his daughter, Bernet, or stories written by their political consultants and by Russian or Uzbek political analysts who claimed Akayev to be democratic. Bloggers provided many of these posts with a sarcastic subhead, such as "Akayev wants to return home clean and rosy" or "Akayev is searching for scapegoats to blame." Most such "positive" stories also provoked a high number of comments, between nine and twenty-two, of a highly negative tone, and sometimes direct threats.

On April 4 the only post was the message announcing that the blog's advocacy goals had been fulfilled:

www.akaevunet has accomplished its mission. Today we can say with certainty that there is no more place for Akayev in the political life of Kyrgyzstan. We are happy that we were able to deliver for you the needed, interesting and updated information at the most difficult times for all of us. We are glad that we made our contribution into the coverage of events in Kyrgyzstan during these days. We were carrying out our civic duty. Stay tuned! Signed! Kyrgyzus, Gazeta.kg, Kyrgyzcha.org—team of Akaevunet.

On April 5 the blog resumed placement of posts, but their number never reached the same level. The total number of stories between April 6 and 15 was twenty-one, and on April 13–14 and April 16–24 no new posts were placed in the "news" section, although visitors still could participate in the interactive poll and leave comments on old posts. On April 25 the blog was redirected to Gazeta.kg, marking the end of the Akaevunet era in the blogosphere.

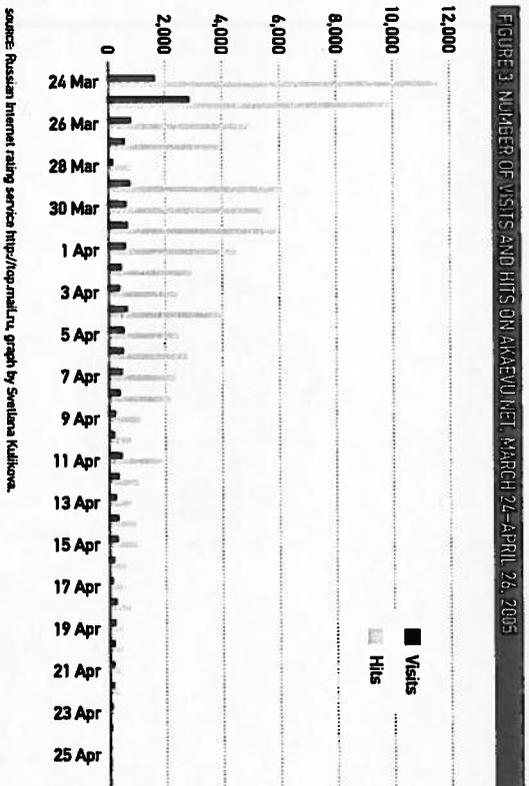
DESIGN AND NAVIGATION

When the blog first appeared, it received praise for its design innovation, collection of photos and interactive polls. The site was indeed easy to navigate, well-organized, and provided numerous opportunities for feedback. The home page carried a selection of key stories starting March 25, 2005. The rest of the

stories were catalogued by date and could be accessed through the archive calendar in the upper-right corner of the screen. The blog had a counter of visitors and counter of hits for each story. Some stories were complemented with downloadable video and audio materials.

These opportunities for feedback and involvement were available to the site visitors:

- *Comments on stories.* Each story had a window for comment with the default identification as "guest" and default subject matter as the story title. That made commenting easier for those who wanted to do so without disclosing their identity. This feature later sparked a debate on the blog about whether people should be allowed to comment without identification, because many commentators abused their anonymity and resorted to rough language and sometimes direct threats to authors and other commentators. However, no general agreement was reached on the identity issue among those who participated in this debate.
- *Comments on the blog.* A separate section for general comments on the entire blog, titled "Testimonials of our visitors" was listed in the left-bar menu of the home page.
- *Forum participation or observation.* The forum had three main sections: "News," "Politics," and "Looting," with several subcategories in each. The forum did not require those who wanted to leave comments to register or provide their identity. This option, again, resulted in numerous anonymous and "guest" comments, which sparked controversy among forum participants even though it made participation easier and safer.
- *Voting in the blog's public opinion poll.* There were four interactive polls: "Should Akayev be impeached or given the status of First President with all privileges?" "Who should be the next president of the Kyrgyz Republic?" "What should we do with the Akayevs?" and "Should force be used to calm down Osh and Jalal-Abad?" Visitors could vote and view the results, with statistics and graphs immediately displayed on the site. The second poll was the most popular, collecting almost 1,000 votes and more than 250 comments.
- *Subscription to the Listserv that provided alerts on newly released stories.* According to the blog, the Listserv had more than four thousand subscribers.
- *Viewing, contribution to, and evaluation of photographs of events.* Albums were labeled Bishkek, Osh, Looting, and Occasional. The gallery had a meter for the most frequently viewed photographs and a star rating system for their evaluation.



source: Russian Internet rating service <http://top.mail.ru>, graph by Svetlana Kulikova.

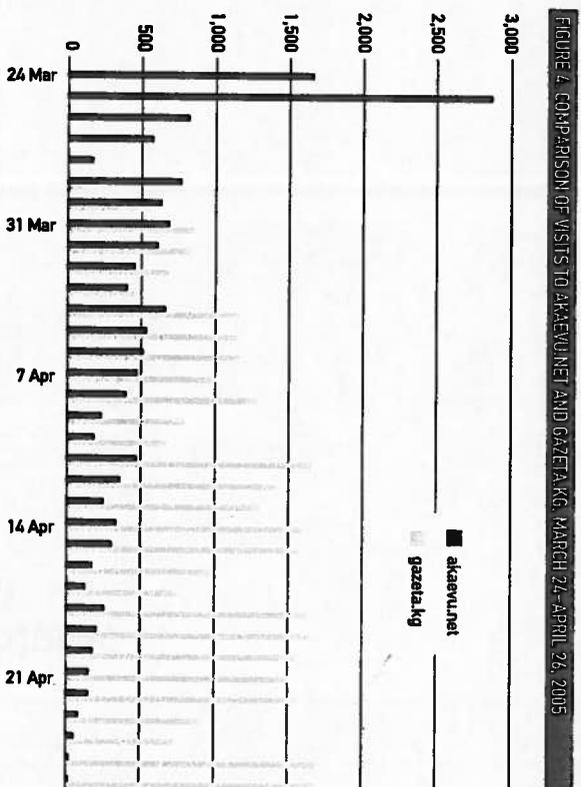
▪ *E-mail contact* for contribution of stories, photographs, comments, signing petitions, and providing suggestions. The e-mail address was indicated on the home page.

▪ *Searching additional information* from the recommended sites: *Moya Stoitisa-Novosti*, *Res Publica*, political party Ar-Namys, youth movement Kel-Kel, Birge's Citizen Campaign, Youth Movement for Democracy, and Kyrgyzus.

AUDIENCES AND IMPACT

From the rating tables and visit dynamic analysis available through [www.top](http://www.top.mail.ru), when the blog was active, some patterns could be derived and accurate assumptions made about its audiences. First, figure 3 presents the dynamic of visits and hits for the life of the blog.

As the graph shows, the largest number of hits—more than 11,500—fell on the day of the revolution, when the blog also had the largest number of posts. During the revolution, cell phones in Kyrgyzstan experienced transmission problems, and many young people used the Internet to send messages to friends and to exchange news. They spontaneously formed three forums that posted the most current information: one on Diesel, a forum platform of the second-biggest Internet provider, Elcat; one on Akaevunet; and one on the Birge youth movement site. Akaevunet had a clear advantage of being hosted in the United States when the overload occurred and sites in Kyrgyzstan were inaccessible.



source: Russian Internet rating service <http://top.mail.ru>, graph by Svetlana Kulikova.

The high number of visits and hits on March 24–25 can be explained by several factors: (1) novelty of the blog and the news about its appearance on major Russian news sources; (2) a catchy Web address that created interest; (3) links from other major sites that picked up the Euronews-attributed erroneous story on Akayev's resignation and provided the link or the name of the blog as a reference; (4) interaction with the other two forums, Diesel and Birge; (5) absence of coverage of the night of looting, when the only way to find out what was going on was to follow one of the three forums. The extreme popularity of the blog and demand for its information propelled it to the thirty-first, eighteenth and fourth place among the most popular political blogs on the Russian Internet on the first day, first night (looting), and second day, respectively, of its existence.

However, after the first two days, interest in events in Kyrgyzstan decreased and a significant part of the audience, especially from Russia and other neighboring countries, stopped visiting the site. The number of visitors dropped continuously after April 5, when news of Akayev's resignation became universally known. Some visitors may have switched to Gazetka.kg and Kyrgyzus after the April 4 "mission accomplished" announcement, which explains the slight increase of visits on Gazetka.kg during the week of April 4 and on April 25, when the remaining fifty faithful visitors on Akaevunet were redirected to Gazetka.kg (figure 4).

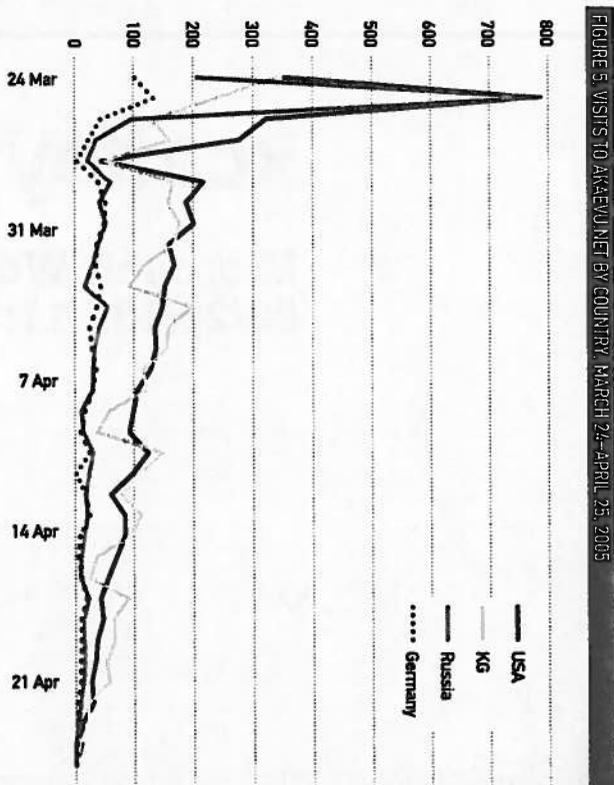


Figure 5 demonstrates the geographic dynamic of visits. Only four countries were selected, because they represent the highest concentrated numbers. The other twenty-eight countries on the list represented a handful, sometimes only one visitor; they include Great Britain, Kazakhstan, Turkey, China, Belgium, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Italy, Australia, Ukraine, Georgia, Iran, Belarus, South Korea, Norway, Spain, and Japan (see table 1 for data from March 25).

Both the array and the number of visitors suggest that the site was highly popular among Kyrgyzstanis abroad, especially students. This conclusion is also supported by the comments identification, whenever the comments were signed, the name indicated either a "student" or "graduate student."

The second-largest category consisted of media professionals, political scientists, and other experts who expected to find the most up-to-date information from the original source. The multiplication of the exclusive announcement on Kulov's television interview and the hoax about Akayev's resignation attributed to Euroneews supports this idea. Finally, there were a number of comments on anti-Akayev stories in particular, suggesting that they were planted to disseminate disdainful comments on the revolution, looting, Kyrgyzstan without Akayev, and

TABLE 1. NUMBER OF VISITS ON AKAEVUNET BY COUNTRY, MARCH 25, 2005

Russia	788	South Korea	14	Belarus	14
Ukraine	127	Europe	314	Lithuania	12
Canada	25	Turkey	43	Germany	133
Uzbekistan	20	France	21	Hungary	31
Italy	14	Norway	15	Japan	20
United States	777	Finland	13	Georgia	14
Kazakhstan	79	Kyrgyzstan	239	Others	20
Poland	22	Great Britain	41		
Latvia	17	United Arab Emirates	20		

source: Russian Internet rating service <http://topmail.ru>.

other issues. The nature and style of these comments suggest that they were the work of a large group of people rather than one or two activists.

The bilingual setup of the blog also allows some inferences about the audiences. The total number of posts in English (52) and the total number of comments to them (27)—significantly lower than for the stories in Russian—suggests that the blog attracted mainly a Russian-speaking audience. This assumption is also supported by the fact that the highest number of hits for a story in English is 167, compared to 485 in the Russian-language sample, as well as by several irritated comments to English posts asking why they were in English; most of the comments to English posts were in Russian.

Along with the obvious measurements of visits, hits, and comments as well as geographic locations of the visitors, the blog's impact can be evaluated with these indicators:

- *Cross-referencing among blogs of a similar theme.* Several stories from Akaevunet appeared at other blogs relating to Central Asia, such as Registan.net and the blog by Ben Paarman, "Thinking-East," at <http://www.thinking-east.net>.
- *References and stories in the Internet-based media.* A Rambler.ru search on April 29, 2005, yielded eighteen stories in which Akaevunet was presented as a new blog, "the trumpet of the Kyrgyz revolution," by online newspapers and news agencies in Russia and Ukraine.
- *Advertising and exchange of banners with other information resources.* During the process of this research, the Akaevunet banner was spotted on eleven major Kyrgyz media and NGO sites.

- *Mentioning in traditional print media.* Tatiana Orlova (2005) of *Moya Stoliisa-Novosti* referred to Akaevunet in the context of Internet discussions of the Kyrgyz revolution.
- *Regular contributors* such as Tengis Gudava, a Georgian-American political analyst specializing in the Caucasus and Central Asia.
- *Feedback* from first-time visitors praising the site for the amount and quality of information.
- *Hate mail and threats to the bloggers.* One message, allegedly from "Kyrgyzstanis abroad supporting Akayev," was placed in the comments section for three postings. It used obscene language and threats of "getting to" Ulan Melispek, the blog creator, for "filtering information and suppressing freedom of expression" on the site.

Conclusion

At present, it is still difficult to assess whether any of the "stans" of the former Soviet Union will become a successful democracy in the foreseeable future. The 2005 Kyrgyz revolution raised hopes that democratic developments could be brought into the region, but after Uzbekistan president Islam Karimov used deadly force against demonstrators in Andijan in May 2005, such hopes were put to rest. In Kyrgyzstan, President Bakiyev, who came to power on the 2005 revolutionary wave, led the country into even a deeper economic crisis with higher levels of poverty and corruption and lower levels of political rights and civil liberties, according to such human rights reports as *Freedom in the World* (Freedom House 2010). On April 7, 2010, Bakiyev was ousted by a second wave of people power and fled into exile. Disillusioned with the presidential model of democracy that had turned into an untamed rule of the first family and clan, the citizens voted to establish a parliamentary republic in a June 2010 constitutional referendum. It is yet to be seen whether the parliamentary elections under the new structure of governance will indeed bring meaningful change and return Kyrgyzstan onto a path to democracy.

A more hopeful question is whether new technology might bring about a more prosperous information environment in countries like Kyrgyzstan. In this light, Akaevunet demonstrated several features of illicit, informal, unofficial literature—that is, the samizdat, which sustained dissidence in a previous era. First, there was little original content; most content was generated by other sources, such as more traditional media, outside reports from NGOs, and expatriates. The

material was republished on the blog, making it more accessible for users, who otherwise would have to visit twenty to thirty sources, many physically outside the nation, to collect all the information. In addition, the content circulated among a limited group of users who understood the goal and advocacy character of the data. In turn, the content recirculated on other sites, with multiple references and hyperlinks in other sources. Content was also highly partisan, burning with fierce opposition to the ruling regime. And in a parallel to the hunting down of samizdat creators in the Soviet Union, the Web site was constantly hacked, allegedly by government agents.

At this point the similarity ends between past and present. In technical terms, Internet interactivity and pervasiveness added two additional features to blogs that were not available for printed samizdat: physical security for bloggers, who cannot be reached (and are almost impossible to trace) by the government to be put in jail; and dialogue with users through the comments section that allows the bloggers to know exactly what their readers say about the content and the situation it covers. In political terms, as one of the authors of this chapter can attest from personal experience with the circulation of samizdat in Russia of the 1980s, the KGB was much more efficient and frightening in its anti-subversion efforts than the worst of the Akayev regime. Likewise, it was (and is) much easier to be an oppositional blogger in Kyrgyzstan than, say, in today's Iran or People's Republic of China.

From this analysis, then, it is possible to conclude that the blog Akaevunet, although existing for only one month, contributed meaningfully to coverage of the Tulip Revolution on the Internet. Thus it fulfilled its mission as a temporary solution to the attempt by pro-government forces to quash the flow of information from opposition sites. Such a case suggests that managed democracy may be unable to control the only truly free medium—the Internet, at least with available means. If a weakest link exists in antidemocratic tightening of controls over the public sphere and freedom of speech, it is the Internet. And when that link breaks, the information flow is impossible to stop.

Depending on which course postrevolutionary governments decide to take, the role of such blogs may be that of the constructive criticism facilitating public debate or that of a lonely opposition voice cornered on the Internet for several thousand readers. The world does not yet have an example, to paraphrase Joe Trippi's (2004) famous metaphor, of a "revolution [that] will be blogged," but in revolutions to come, blogs will play some role, even if the role is restricted to the enrichment of an information-poor environment.

NOTES

An earlier version of this article appeared in February 2007 issue of *The International Communication Gazette* 69(1): 29-50.

1. President Karimov of Uzbekistan delivered on this threat when he ordered the use of firearms on a peaceful demonstration in Andijan in May 2005.
2. For example, during the day the national news agency Kabar reported or cited other sources that Akayev was in the country at his residence, then later allegedly went to Kazakhstan, then to Russia, and finally admitted not knowing the president's whereabouts.
3. The blog was available for viewing but inactive until April 2008 and currently is inaccessible. CACHED April 5, 2005, issue can be found through the Internet archive Wayback Machine at <http://web.archive.org/web/20050405014137/http://akaevu.net>.
4. For more on the Global Voices Project, see <http://globalvoicesonline.org>.
5. Constitution of the Kyrgyz Republic (adopted in 1993, last amended in 2010), Art. 1(1).
6. All Central Asian countries, except Turkmenistan, significantly increased their Internet penetration rates by 2010, but Kyrgyzstan is still in the lead with 40 percent of the population having access, Kazakhstan at 34 percent (from 2.96 percent in 2005); Uzbekistan at 17 percent (from 3.3 percent in 2005); Tajikistan at 10 percent (from 0.3 percent in 2005); and Turkmenistan at 1.5 percent (from 1.0 percent in 2005). Key Internet usage and penetration statistics from ITU are available at www.itu.int/ITU-D/ict/ey/Indicators/Indicators.aspx#.

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CONCLUSION

Through the Crystal Ball

Richard Shaler

The end of the Cold War represented an apparent victory for by NATO, capitalism, free enterprise, and democracy over Marxism-Leninist communism, the Warsaw Pact, and the Russian-Soviet empire. With that watershed event, the five newly independent states of Central Asia emerged from the wreckage of the Soviet Union as potentially committed to free enterprise economic systems and democratic governance. At least that was the hope of Western democracies and human rights advocates. Unfortunately, we have documented a long list of obstacles to the development of functional and effective Central Asian press systems that could serve as public advocates and independent analysts while sufficiently profitable to maintain their economic and political autonomy from governments, political parties, and powerful policy shapers.

This book presents detailed evidence that the obstacles to the establishment and sustainability of free and effective press systems in Central Asia are complex, diverse, and profound. As our introductory chapter observes, "constitutional promises of democracy, including an independent press—a keystone for civil society—remain unfulfilled," and "nowhere is the stillborn nature of democracy building in Central Asia clearer than in the state of press constraints." It is a grim portrait that offers little reasonable grounds to expect substantive, meaningful improvements in the near future. Even the façade of autonomy within journalism distorts reality and provides grotesque caricatures of independence, professional ethics, and professional standards.

As a foundation to our examination of the state of the press in post-Soviet