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# Aiding the Internet in Central Asia

ERIC MCGLINCHEY and ERICA JOHNSON

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This article asks why Central Asian governments, although equally repressive of their traditional media, pursue diverging policies toward the Internet. Ultimately we find Internet regulatory policy in the Central Asian states varies according to who provides financial capital for information communication technologies (ICTs). Where international aid organizations and non-governmental organizations provide capital and assistance for ICT infrastructure, such as in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan and, to a lesser extent, in Uzbekistan, the formal regulatory environment is more open, clearly articulated, and permissive of electronic media. In contrast, where domestic actors fund the development of ICT infrastructure, as in Kazakhstan, regulation is vague and government control and interference more extensive. While a more liberal ICT regulatory regime does not ensure more momentum for democratization, the freedom to use and actively participate in the ICT sector has important implications for society's ability to enact political change in ICT regulation and social mobilization on a wider scale as demonstrated in Kyrgyzstan's political events of March 2005.

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Key words: Internet; media regulation; Central Asia; international support

## Introduction

Central Asian leaders mix patronage politics and coercion in their efforts to perpetuate authoritarian control. Domestic reformers, with the assistance of multilateral and bilateral aid organizations, for their part, have worked to limit authoritarianism and to move Central Asian governments beyond the inherited pathologies of the Soviet rule. By their own admission, these domestic and international reformers have had limited success. The World Bank, for example, readily acknowledges that authoritarian incumbents often redirect foreign aid away from reform and toward patronage politics.<sup>1</sup>

Encouragingly, however, not all aid programmes fail. In one sphere in particular – the electronic media and new information communication technologies (ICTs) – international aid does appear to have liberalizing effects. As is demonstrated in this article, some, but not all of Central Asia's authoritarian regimes are willing to adopt permissive electronic media regulations in order to obtain aid for developing ICT infrastructure. We argue that this variation, this unanticipated willingness of some Central Asian governments to adopt permissive electronic media regulations, is the product of two interrelated causalities: First, regional governments perceive ICTs as a marker of status and development and, as such, autocratic leaders in

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poor Central Asian states are willing to make concessions in order to obtain donor aid. Second, businesses, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and individuals active in the ICT sector defend newly gained freedoms and rights thereby limiting government attempts to reverse permissive ICT regulatory environments. In short, opposite what modernization perspectives typically instruct, ICT is one realm where poverty rather than wealth produces liberal reform. By the same token, however, the findings here do not suggest that a more benign ICT regulatory environment necessarily ensures more momentum for democratization. In some cases, the regional regimes allow more freedom in the ICT sphere because they believe that government control can be asserted in other ways that will prevent new electronic media from increasing the capacity of citizens to fight repression. Nevertheless, the case of Kyrgyzstan, presented below, demonstrates how the freedom to use and actively participate in the ICT sector has important implications for society's ability to enact political change in ICT regulation and wider-scale social mobilization.

### **One Media, Many Regulatory Regimes**

Authoritarian governments devote considerable resources to controlling the media. Although critical to the smooth functioning of democracies, free information flows can also lead to instability, protest, and even revolution in authoritarian settings. Rustavi-2's widely watched television reports of Georgia's November 2003 sham parliamentary elections, for example, emboldened thousands to take to the streets in Georgia's Rose Revolution.<sup>2</sup> One year later, in the Ukraine, journalists from the 1+1 television station declared in an evening broadcast that they would no longer report 'distorted information...under the direction of various political forces', indicating to the hundreds of thousands of protestors in Kyiv's Independence Square that President Leonid Kuchma's authoritarian powers had crumbled.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, 1+1 confirmed what some Ukrainians had learned the previous night when the sign linguist for the state-run UT1 news signed, 'Don't believe this. It's all lies. Yushchenko is our president.'<sup>4</sup> And during the March 2005 political upheaval in Kyrgyzstan, the Internet and other media played an instrumental role in the organization of protests that led to the ousting of President Askar Akayev.

As recent clampdowns on media freedoms in Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan demonstrate, though, Central Asian presidents well understand the lessons of their fallen authoritarian colleagues – information outlets must be managed lest small protests expand into country-wide oppositionist mobilization. Moreover, in contrast to their deposed Ukrainian, Georgian and Kyrgyz counterparts, Central Asia's remaining autocrats have been more successful in controlling their domestic media.<sup>5</sup> All five Central Asian states have consistently ranked among the most oppressive of all media environments in Freedom House's annual *Freedom of the Press* surveys. Indeed, in recent years, Central Asia's presidents have pursued similar strategies in controlling traditional media, nationalizing printing presses and radio and television broadcast channels, and hamstringing the few independent media outlets that do exist with endless court cases.

Oddly, however, Central Asian leaders have differed in their policies towards what are potentially the most politically destabilizing of all media outlets – the Internet and mobile telephone technology. For example, while they regularly padlocked the offices of independent print newspapers, the Tajik and Kyrgyz regimes maintained an open regulatory environment for Internet-based media and mobile telephony networks. In neighbouring Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, in contrast, the state closely controls both the traditional and electronic media. Why should these governments, equally repressive of their traditional media, pursue diverging policies towards the Internet? We argue in this paper that Internet regulatory policy in the Central Asian states varies according to who provides the financial capital for new information and communications technology and infrastructure. Where international NGOs and bilateral and multilateral donors provide capital and assistance in drafting legislation, such as in Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and, to a lesser extent, Uzbekistan, the formal regulatory environment is more open, clearly articulated and permissive of electronic media. In contrast, where domestic actors fund the development of ICT infrastructure, as in Kazakhstan, regulation is vague and government control and interference more extensive.

This finding, we should emphasize, differs markedly from the post-Soviet literature on foreign aid and political reform. Although studies investigating causal links between foreign aid and political reform, as Sarah Mendelson notes, are surprisingly few, those analyses that do exist typically find that foreign aid has little if any influence on democratization.<sup>6</sup> Rather, most studies of post-Soviet transition emphasize how structural variables overwhelm foreign-aided democratization efforts. Thus, for example, Chip Gagnon finds that Serbia's 'Pandora's Box of repressed hatreds' trumped Western efforts at democracy assistance.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, Jeffrey Kopstein and David Reilly conclude that, regardless of how intensive Western assistance programmes may be, ultimately it is a country's 'distance from the West' that will determine the success of political reform.<sup>8</sup> That is, absent the enticement of European Union membership, post-Soviet leaders such as those in Central Asia will perceive no benefit to democratization. Still others find that foreign aid programmes are woefully ignorant of local culture and political traditions and, thus, are destined to fail. Thomas Carothers, for example, writes that 'many state institutions in democratizing countries remain repositories of corruption, inefficiency, and fecklessness', and to expect that democratization assistance could suddenly transform these institutions is naïve.<sup>9</sup>

This article does not deny that these geographic and cultural variables shape the fortunes of political reform. Rather, we argue that ICT development, in contrast to political party assistance or civil society programmes, is something autocratic elites keenly desire. Like the presidential Boeing aircraft, modern glass buildings in the country capital, and official state visits to London, Tokyo and Paris, a modern ICT infrastructure is an indicator of success. Unlike these other markers of prestige, though, ICT is constantly changing. Rather than one-off investments or visits, ICT development demands ongoing negotiations with and aid from willing foreign partners. And it is the iterative nature of this relationship that provides Western donors the ability to ensure conditionality – that is substantive reform – in return for ICT aid. In short, in contrast to other studies that find democratization aid produces, at

best, mixed outcomes in political reform, this study of ICT suggests that carefully selected aid programmes that provide 'status' goods can lead to islands of openness in otherwise authoritarian states.

The discussion below proceeds in three parts. First, it reviews the literature on ICT in developing countries. This literature is comparatively new and, while scholars have studied the links between economics and ICT development, less understood are the political factors that shape ICT growth and the potentially regime-liberalizing consequences that emerge as a result of variations in ICT development. Section two turns to the political causes behind varying outcomes in ICT policy in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. In contrast to what is often the case with other forms of international aid, the account here demonstrates how international partnerships in ICT development can produce more liberal regulatory regimes. The conclusion explores the potential consequences of these variations. Ultimately, seemingly inconsequential policy variations today may have profound effects on authoritarian stability and political reform in the future.

### **ICT Regulation and Authoritarian Regimes**

Although several studies investigate the diffusion and adoption of Internet capabilities in developing countries, scholars have devoted little attention to the regulatory environment in which these new ICTs function. For example, in contrast to the growing literature which addresses questions of e-readiness and efforts to bridge the international digital divide between developed and developing countries,<sup>10</sup> there is as of yet little investigation into the laws and formal and informal institutions regulating new ICTs in developing countries. Some scholars have, helpfully, studied the political effects of new ICTs in transitional settings. Problematically though, these analyses focus on the successes while ignoring the many failures of ICT introduction. This selection bias has resulted in overly optimistic hypotheses linking new ICTs to authoritarian regime breakdown. ICT introduction analyses, in short, share much in common with earlier modernization theory studies: they assume that the Internet, like modernization, allows increased communication among the political opposition and thus limits an autocratic leader's ability to maintain uncontested rule.<sup>11</sup>

Critics of technological determinism note, however, that governments – indeed authoritarian governments – are often the main proponents of technological advancement in developing countries.<sup>12</sup> These scholars provide a helpful corrective in that they demonstrate that ICT advancement and political liberalization need not proceed simultaneously and that new ICTs, as witnessed in Singapore, China, Cuba and throughout much of the Middle East, may be used to reinforce rather than weaken authoritarian rule.<sup>13</sup> This study builds on these findings and argues that regulatory regimes, not technology itself, shape the effects new ICTs have on political change.

Curiously, as the Central Asian cases demonstrate, not all authoritarian states adopt restrictive regulatory policies toward new ICTs. Even when traditional media – print, television, radio – are heavily censored, new ICTs may operate with few restrictions. Central to this variation, we argue, are economic and human resource capacity. While government elites may see ICT as a marker of modernity

and as critical to economic growth, not all states have the financial and intellectual capital necessary to develop and use these modern technologies. In several post-Soviet Central Asian successor states, for example, governments have had to turn to outside actors for ICT equipment and know-how. And, as the Central Asia cases demonstrate, it matters *how* state leaders engage the international community in their pursuit of ICT technology. Where states purchase ICT hardware outright and thus require little interaction with foreign donors, authoritarian regimes have succeeded in maintaining control over new electronic media. In contrast, where governments must rely on foreign aid or foreign investment to purchase new technologies, states have markedly less authority over the use and application of ICTs. Lastly, in addition to the international pressure to develop clear and open regulatory environments, governments might also become subject to pressures from domestic ICT operators and civil society activists.

This variation in ICT regulatory framework has important political implications. As recent mass uprisings in Ukraine, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan suggest, new communication technologies, if not wholly controlled by governments, can markedly shape the likelihood of mass mobilization. That is, although many students of social mobilization emphasize how rational choice calculations and structural constraints make uprisings rare events,<sup>14</sup> other scholars underscore how a sense of belonging to broader networks of protest, an understanding which can be aided by new ICTs, markedly increase the likelihood of mobilization.<sup>15</sup> Until recently, however, activists in Central Asia could see protest leading only to anonymous suffering at the hands of an authoritarian state. By rigidly controlling information networks and repressing activists, Central Asian states could deprive protest of any meaningful social content. Today, however, even the Uzbekistan regime – among the world's most authoritarian – cannot hide its repression. As such, investigating how differing forms of foreign investment shape variations in the openness of ICT regulatory frameworks is all the more critical to our understanding of political change in authoritarian settings.

### Overview of the Cases

Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan illustrate this causal link between the role of foreign aid, the development of ICT regulatory regimes, and the emergence of social mobilization. With the assistance of foreign donors, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan drafted liberal policies for Internet use and regulation. Although the existence of formal written laws may not always reflect practice, these two cases demonstrate how Internet and mobile service providers and consumers apply formal legislation to defend newly acquired ICT rights. Likewise, although Uzbekistan is one of the region's more closed states and the international community condemns the Karimov regime as an 'enemy of the Internet',<sup>16</sup> in 2002 foreign donors induced Uzbekistan to change its rigid control of the ISP (Internet service provider) market as a condition for the future provision of technology and equipment. By contrast, Kazakhstan, which has benefited from direct foreign investment in oil and natural gas, has been able to purchase ICT equipment outright and, as a result,

has seen markedly less interference from foreign donors in the formation and implementation of ICT policies. In sum, as the following case studies demonstrate, states that depend on international donors to fund ICTs have more permissive ICT regulatory regimes. These permissive regulatory environments, in turn, encourage the rise of a new cadre of social actors prepared to defend their ICT rights. In contrast, economically self-sufficient states control the Internet much as they do other media.

### *Kyrgyzstan*

Starting in 1993–4, international donor and development organizations made significant contributions to the development of ICT in Kyrgyzstan. International organizations supplied the Kyrgyz government with software and extensive computer and network equipment.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, the international community was active not only in building ICT infrastructure, but also in the development and implementation of an open ICT regulatory environment.<sup>18</sup>

In 1995, President Askar Akayev approved Kyrgyzstan's first national ICT plan. A shortage of funds, however, delayed the ICT development and the plan's implementation.<sup>19</sup> Hoping to overcome financial constraints, Akayev turned to the international community for aid in developing Kyrgyzstan's ICT infrastructure. USAID, UNDP and the Soros Foundation responded to Kyrgyzstan's petition, supplying experts and hardware as well as considerable advice on how to draft, design and implement an ICT regulatory regime. And, as a recent United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) report concludes, foreign aid has had a liberalizing effect, making Kyrgyzstan an example of 'best practice' for other countries in the developing world.<sup>20</sup>

ICT statutes in Kyrgyzstan are more straightforward than in other Central Asian countries. Three laws – the Law on Communications, the Law on Licensing and the Law on Informatization – regulate activities of ICT companies. One agency, the Ministry of Transport and Communications, is responsible for the management and regulation of new ICTs. Ultimately, however, it has been the foreign aid community and, more recently, local ICT advocacy groups, that have ensured the clear regulation and openness of Kyrgyzstan's ICT industry.

As part of the first telecommunication project funded by the World Bank and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD), Kyrgyztelecom, a joint-stock company, received exclusive control of long-distance and international telephone service. Importantly, though, within the framework of this project, the World Bank required the non-participation of Kyrgyztelecom in communication sectors other than telephony.<sup>21</sup> Thus, Kyrgyztelecom was to provide network infrastructure for private operators and, in turn, inter-operator tariff agreements were to be concluded on a competitive basis, subject to antimonopoly regulation. It should be noted that in 2002 Kyrgyztelecom did receive a nationwide license to offer Internet access. The number of private ISPs, however, continues to grow.

Moreover, these private ISPs have begun to challenge Kyrgyztelecom's presence in the market. For example, through the industry group, the Internet Club Public Union, private ISPs charged that Kyrgyztelecom violated antimonopoly practices

by not charging long-distance fees to customers using dial-up access.<sup>22</sup> Kyrgyztelecom and the government structures that control it have responded to these arguments from other ICT industry representatives and civil society actors, and Kyrgyztelecom has joined with private, competitor ICT providers as a member of the Association of Communications Operators, a non-governmental body that lobbies for an open ICT regulatory framework. Kyrgyztelecom, moreover, now presents all planned changes in its tariffs and services for approval to the Association's membership.<sup>23</sup> In short, ICT unions and associations, emboldened by Kyrgyzstan's donor-designed permissive regulatory framework, have not only challenged the state-owned Kyrgyztelecom, they have ensured that the state phone company does not interfere with open ICT provision.

Kyrgyzstan is officially host to 38 ISPs. Of these, ten – an admirably large number as anyone familiar with the travails of dealing with monopolistic ISP providers in the United States can attest – are active in the market.<sup>24</sup> Access to the Internet is further aided by the proliferation of private and non-governmental Internet centres and cafes. Moreover, a NATO-funded connectivity project provides educational institutions, libraries and hospitals with ICT and satellite equipment so as to ensure free Internet access to Kyrgyz citizens throughout the country.<sup>25</sup>

Encouraged by its international donors, the Kyrgyz state has itself assumed a leading role in furthering public access to new ICTs. Internet access, for example, is provided to prisoners in Kyrgyzstan's prisons.<sup>26</sup> The state, moreover, has opened free Internet centres in rural areas, a critical step in advancing connectivity given that more than half of the population of Kyrgyzstan lives outside major cities. Other indicators of Kyrgyzstan's progressive approach to new ICTs include e-governance projects to further state transparency and the decentralization of licensing for Kyrgyz domains. Thus, the private ISP, Asia-Info, registers all 'dot-KG' domains in the country.<sup>27</sup>

This comparatively liberal ICT regulatory framework stands in marked contrast to the Kyrgyz government's policy towards traditional media. As is the case elsewhere in Central Asia, the print, radio and television media in Kyrgyzstan have faced considerable constraints in what they can and cannot report, and these restrictions have increased after the political upheaval of March 2005. Until *Freedom House* opened its own press in 2004, for example, the government controlled the only operating press in the country. Self-censorship, not surprisingly, was common as were sudden 'breakdowns' of the government press when opposition papers attempted to print articles critical of the central administration. Revealingly, however, whereas the government cancelled newspaper runs and muted criticism on television and radio programmes, Internet-based media reporting has continued relatively unhampered by state intervention.

As the February 2005 parliamentary elections approached, concern over media freedom increased. Opposition groups cited restrictions on the Internet as a factor in disapproving of the inconclusive election results.<sup>28</sup> During the unrest that preceded the ousting of President Akayev on 24 March, Kyrgyzstan's Internet was described as a 'battleground' as two leading ISPs suffered an alleged hacker attack and were pressured into removing information reporting on the growing instability in the



country. Some opposition leaders seized on the attacks, claiming that the government had launched an online censorship campaign. Ultimately, however, ICT regulatory retrenchment proved short lived. Following Akayev's departure in March 2005, Kyrgyzstan has returned to its donor-crafted and permissive ICT environment.

### *Tajikistan*

Similar to Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan enjoys a comparatively open ICT market. Although the four-year civil war from 1993–7 significantly impeded the development of Tajikistan's ICT sector and deterred early foreign involvement, the Internet and mobile communications market in Tajikistan today is now among the most vibrant in Central Asia. With the assistance of a \$13 million credit from the EBRD, the Tajikistan government has significantly upgraded fibre optics and digital channels throughout the country, improving both landline access and Internet connectivity for the population. This improved infrastructure has enabled Tajikistan's 14 ISPs to extend connectivity to remote regions and has encouraged the proliferation of hundreds of Internet cafes across the country.<sup>29</sup> Tajikistan's mobile telephony infrastructure is similarly booming with ten different companies competing in the market.

Given that civil war delayed ICT development, the government of Imomali Rakhmonov eagerly sought out foreign aid and investment following the cessation of hostilities so as to quickly modernize Tajikistan's communication infrastructure. Like Kyrgyzstan, and in contrast to oil-rich Kazakhstan, Tajikistan lacks resource wealth and, as such, remains dependent on foreign donors for the development, modernization and maintenance of its ICT networks. And, as is the case in Kyrgyzstan, in Tajikistan too this foreign dependency has produced an open ICT regulatory environment. Leading donors, including the Soros and Eurasia Foundations, United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the US State Department and North Atlantic Treaty Organizations's (NATO) Partnership for Peace, have all pressed the Tajik government to ensure an open and standardized regulatory environment for new ICTs.

Donor influence thus far has helped ensure a liberal ICT environment. Whereas Tajikistan's print media faces growing government restrictions, the country's electronic communications have become increasingly open. Over the past two years, for example, Tajikistan has adopted a transparent process of ISP licensing which eliminated complicated documentation procedures. Moreover, in 2004, the Rakhmonov government ceased blocking opposition websites and lifted all government control over Internet content. This change in policy, Tajik experts report, is the product of the Rakhmonov government's desire to secure additional funding for ICT development from the United Nations, Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), EBRD and other existing and potential donors.<sup>30</sup> In a region where government censorship of Internet content is common, Tajikistan's policies are refreshingly open.

Equally refreshing is society's response to the Rakhmonov government's occasional attempts to reassert control over Tajikistan's otherwise open ICT regulatory environment. In April 2002, for example, a coalition of ICT business representatives and civil society actors, in cooperation with the foreign-led Global Internet

Policy Initiative (GIPI) issued an appeal protesting against government plans to meter and track communications through domestic ISPs. Within days of the appeal, the Rakhmonov government abandoned its ICT monitoring plans. Critically, Tajik experts stress, it was the advocacy of local activists in collaboration with GIPI that compelled the Ministry of Communications to revoke its plans.<sup>31</sup>

In early 2006, Tajikistan's Ministry of Communication once again attempted to consolidate state control over ICT. Even bolder than its 2002 attempt to monitor ISP traffic, this time the Ministry proposed a draft law which would have led to the creation of a state communication centre that would act as a gatekeeper for all international traffic to and from the country. The proposal met with wide support throughout the central administration and, anticipating President Rakhmonov would approve the draft law, the Ministry began procuring new ICT monitoring equipment for the communications centre. Revealingly, when the draft law was leaked to ICT community, ICT business representatives and civil society activists once again issued a united challenge to central government interference. Once again this challenge proved effective in blocking government attempts to increase ICT control.

The Association of Mobile Operators of Tajikistan (a coalition of Tajikistan's independent ISPs, mobile phone companies and civil society activists) successfully lobbied Tajikistan's anti-monopoly committee and the Ministry of Justice, arguing that the proposed consolidation was illegal because it would preclude any and all competition in the ICT industry, weaken Tajikistan's ICT market position, and make all ICT connections dependent on one Chinese company. In June 2006, President Rakhmonov broke with his Communications Ministry and announced the proposed centre was unconstitutional. Four years following their first successful mobilization against government retrenchment, Tajikistan's coalition of ICT and civil society representatives once again applied donor-designed legislation to limit government attempts at control and censorship. This success suggests that, as long as foreign donors maintain aid for ICT development, training and legislative support, we can expect Tajikistan's electronic communications sector to remain open.

### *Uzbekistan*

Well known for oppression of opposition groups, President Islam Karimov's authoritarian regime exercises tight control over the flow of both traditional and new ICT media in Uzbekistan. To a limited degree, the international community has influenced Uzbekistan's ICT policies through the conditional provision of equipment. Nevertheless, ICT regulation remains vague. Instead of a coherent ICT regulatory framework, the same restrictive laws that control the traditional media are applied to the Internet. Importantly, although, state control is not complete. Freedom House has found, for example, that government attempts to control Uzbekistan's Internet content are less effective than those used to control traditional print and broadcast media.<sup>32</sup>

Contributing to this opening in the electronic media is the complex and confused network of the regulatory bodies tasked with governing Uzbekistan's ICT market. More than 15 laws, including Uzbekistan's constitution, the muddled Civil and Taxation Codes, and the state's Administrative Liability Code regulate the ICT sector.<sup>33</sup> An equally complex array of regulatory bodies is responsible for enforcing these

codes – the National Security Service, the Ministry of Defence, the Uzbek Agency of Communications and Informatization, and the Cabinet of Ministers. And it is through these many agencies that the Uzbek government has periodically attempted to exert influence over the Internet, moves that have been strongly opposed by the donor community.

In 1996 a concert of aid organizations including UNDP, USAID and the Open Society Institute began providing Uzbekistan with ICT equipment and technical support. Wary of Islam Karimov's autocratic government, though, donors extended considerably less ICT aid to Uzbekistan than they did to Kyrgyzstan. The Karimov government, for its part, did not actively seek aid from donors and, instead, pursued a policy of ICT self-sufficiency. As a result, the Karimov leadership remains less beholden to donors and better able to control the Internet than the Kyrgyzstan government. Until recently, for example, the state-controlled UzPak group maintained exclusive monopoly rights as Uzbekistan's sole ISP, thereby providing the Karimov government full control over information channels linking Uzbekistan with the outside world.<sup>34</sup> Other companies could lease bandwidth from UzPak; nevertheless these private ISPs remained prisoner to the UzPak filter, which, according to government statements, was implemented to combat terrorism.

Not convinced by this antiterrorism explanation, USAID and the Open Society Institute withdrew ICT support to Uzbekistan in the late 1990s. At first, this withdrawal of aid had little effect on the Karimov leadership. In 2001, however, a UNDP e-readiness assessment of Uzbekistan demonstrated that the country had dramatically fallen behind countries with which it had once maintained ICT parity.<sup>35</sup> Shortly after these findings became public, a chagrined Uzbekistan government liberalized its ICT regulatory regime in the hopes of securing foreign aid. To a limited degree Uzbekistan's new ICT policies have yielded results. Uzbekistan's ICT development is now proceeding with bilateral support from Great Britain, Germany, the United States, Switzerland, Japan and Spain, and with multilateral aid from the UNDP, World Bank, EBRD, Asian Development Bank (ASB), the European Union, and USAID.

Despite limited reform, however, the development of the ICT sector in Uzbekistan remains a mixed story. Observers suggest that Uzbekistan now has as many as 263 registered ISPs, but only 35–40 of these ISPs are actually operating. Moreover, the majority of Uzbekistan's ISPs are in the capital city Tashkent and only a handful of these providers access international communication channels independent of the UzPAK network and filter.<sup>36</sup> In reality, Uzbekistan's ISP market is divided between UzPAK and the private company Naitov, which together control approximately 80–85 per cent of the market.<sup>37</sup> In short, although the international community's provision of ICT equipment has created some openings for Uzbekistan's Internet users, foreign donors' comparatively limited role has not encouraged the extent of liberalization seen in the Kyrgyzstan. Moreover, as Karimov's newly initiated campaign against Western aid organizations and international and domestic NGOs deepens, it is unlikely that independent ICT representatives and civil society activists will be able to mobilize to demand greater ICT liberalization.

*Kazakhstan*

In contrast to the governments of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan and paralleling what we now see in Uzbekistan, the Nursultan Nazarbaev regime in Kazakhstan has maintained strict authority over the Internet. Here, the government's desire for monopoly power is matched by real state capacity to ensure unrivalled control. The Nazarbaev government, awash in oil money, is the richest in Central Asia. During its first decade of post-Soviet independence, Kazakhstan received as much foreign direct investment as Russia, a country with a population ten times the size.<sup>38</sup> And, unlike his Kyrgyz and Tajik counterparts' dependence on international aid and grants, President Nazarbaev effectively applies oil revenues to dictate the course of ICT development in Kazakhstan.

Whereas Kyrgyzstan's international dependence constrained the central government, Kazakhstan's oil wealth affords the Nazarbaev government influence over both the principals and the policies of ICT infrastructure. Two government-owned telecommunications companies, Kazakhtelecom and Nursat, control the Internet market in Kazakhstan. Throughout the 1990s, these government monopolies were sufficient to ensure that the new ICT media did not threaten Kazakhstan's authoritarian government. Kazakhtelecom, for example, controls approximately 70 per cent of the Internet access market.<sup>39</sup> Importantly, although the Kazakhtelecom and Nursat monopolies persist today, the Nazarbaev government has also begun to develop alternative regulatory strategies. The Kazakhstan government, like many post-Soviet regimes, covets membership in international organizations such as the World Trade Organization (WTO). President Nazarbaev, moreover, is personally keen to see Kazakhstan receive chairmanship of the OSCE. Should admission into the WTO and OSCE chairmanship prove conditional on breaking the Kazakhtelecom and Nursat monopolies, Kazakhstan's new ICT regulations will likely prove sufficient for ensuring continued government control over electronic communications.

That the Kazakhstan government maintains monopoly control over ISPs does not mean that it has entirely eschewed foreign ICT investment. As in other Central Asian states, Kazakhstan's ICT industry is in its infancy and, as a result, Kazakhtelecom and Nursat have had to contract with outside companies such as Seimens, WorldCom, Nortel, Cisco and Lucent Technologies to provide fibre optics and digital switching equipment. Most international companies have been content simply to provide hardware and leave the drafting of ICT policy and Internet and telecommunications provision to the Kazakhstani monopolies. A few, however, have attempted to enter Kazakhstan's ICT provider market. The ease with which the Nazarbaev government has thus far dismissed these attempts demonstrates the advantages oil wealth conveys to authoritarian governments confronted with potentially destabilizing new technologies.

The Nazarbaev regime has employed multiple strategies to limit foreign acquisitions of and influence over Kazakhstan's ICT market. One effective policy has been to stall negotiations and to refuse contract guarantees to foreign investors. In 1996, for example, Deutsche Telekom sought to acquire a 49 per cent stake in Kazakhtelecom. In return for capital investment, the German company would gain

control of the Kazakh monopoly for six years. Deutsche Telekom was ultimately scared away, however, when the Nazarbaev government refused to commit to new tariff hikes and to a clearly defined foreign operator license.<sup>40</sup>

Another strategy has been simply to deny foreign companies the chance to acquire shares in Kazakhstan's ICT majors. In September 2000, for example, the Kazakh government denied Moscow-based Golden Telecom's attempt to buy a 10 per cent stake in Nursat. Kazakhstan's Transport and Communications Minister, Karim Masimov, justified his government's rejection of the Russian company's bid by appealing to national defence: 'I think it would be wrong if a company which provides the government with communications was controlled by a private company. . . We are talking about national security.'<sup>41</sup>

Security, indeed, is an overriding concern of Kazakhstan's political elite. It is likely their own security, however, more than that of the nation, about which they are most worried. The Kazakh opposition has attempted and occasionally succeeded in using the Internet as a tool to mobilize opposition against the Nazarbaev regime. Thus, through websites such as Eurasia.org.ru and the online newspapers *Navigator* and *Assandi-Times* Kazakhstan's opposition has repeatedly exposed corruption and graft in the presidential administration. Such exposés have unnerved the governing elite. Information, Culture and Public Consent Minister Altynbek Sarsenbayev, for example, fretted that some of these new websites have a readership that 'outstripped Kazakh media in terms of the daily readers'.<sup>42</sup>

Monopoly control, importantly, allows the Nazarbaev government to block citizens' access to what is deemed offensive online papers. Initially, Kazakhtelecom and Nursat officials denied that the government had instructed them to block oppositionist websites, claiming instead that access problems were due to 'technical' problems with the sites themselves. More recently, however, the Kazakh government has hobbled opposition websites by subjecting them to the same draconian media laws it had long been applying to newspapers and broadcast journalism.<sup>43</sup> The popular Internet paper, *Navigator*, to take one prominent example, was fined \$32,000 in January 2003 for allegedly libelling President Nazarbaev's son-in-law in 2003.<sup>44</sup> And, further tightening the screws on the electronic media, in July 2003 the Nazarbaev government created a new policing body, the Kazakh Agency for Information Technology and Communications, 'to implement state policy on information technology and communications'.<sup>45</sup>

Throughout spring and summer 2005, Nazarbayev limited Internet, television and radio coverage of the uprisings in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. Moreover, since these uprisings the Nazarbayev government drafted new laws introducing greater restrictions on the Internet.<sup>46</sup> In short, Kazakhstan's government has built an ICT regulatory regime that effectively stifles free press in the electronic media. And this regime will likely persist even if WTO and OSCE Chairmanship require the dissolution of the Kazakhtelecom and Nursat ISP monopolies.

Nursultan Nazarbaev is the envy of Central Asia's other authoritarian leaders. He enjoys the best of both worlds – in the space of 15 years he has built a modern ICT infrastructure while, at the same time, through his regime's monopoly control over ISP providers and restrictive regulations, has limited the regime-destabilizing

effects that often accompany ICT modernization. Whereas the Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan governments were forced to concede a significant degree of control over electronic media in return for international aid in developing the ICT sector, the Kazakhstan state was able to apply its oil wealth to buy a modern telecommunications infrastructure outright. Paradoxically, at least in the Central Asia cases, it is poverty rather than wealth that leads to a more competitive, vibrant, and free telecommunications and electronic media environment.

## Conclusion

The research documented here demonstrates that the relationship between new ICTs and politics need not be a liberalizing one. President Reagan's prediction, alas, has not proven true: 'the Goliath of totalitarianism' has not succumbed so easily to 'the David of the microchip'.<sup>47</sup> Indeed, the spread of new ICT, rather than encouraging democratization, can have decidedly illiberal effects on governance. When authoritarian governments have the economic wherewithal to purchase ICT hardware, as the oil-rich Kazakhstan government does, new technologies further autocratic control. Importantly, though, where governments are forced to turn to international donors and businesses to fund ICT acquisition and policy formation, as has been the case in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, authoritarian control is less assured, independent pockets of social action emerge, and electronic media can have dramatic political effects.

Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan have flourishing ICT markets. Here donor aid and investment have strengthened not only the local regulatory environment but also the capacity of citizen initiatives to fight against repression and government retrenchment. Uzbekistan, by contrast, remains an intermediary case: although limited foreign aid and the embarrassment of being publicly shamed by the UN as an ICT laggard did compel some degree of ICT openness, Uzbekistan's overriding policy of self-financing its ICT infrastructure has resulted in increased government control over electronic communication while, at the same time, this control has curtailed the effectiveness of social mobilization against autocratic rule.

In short, the story of Central Asian ICT development is mixed. Encouragingly, our four-country comparison demonstrates that foreign aid and conditionality, while it often fails to promote political reform and democratization writ large, can lead to more open ICT regulatory environments. Although the downstream liberalizing effects of these more open ICT environments is by no means certain, recent uprisings in Central Asia suggest that open ICT environment does assist in the building of national and transnational activist networks and does encourage social mobilization. If the continuing inclination of post-Soviet elites to maintain autocratic rule is any indication, political change will come to the region only through broad social mobilization. As such, the role of foreign aid and its liberalizing effects on ICT regulation remains critical. We would be remiss, though, if we did not conclude with a warning: as the recent uprisings in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan demonstrate, social mobilization and even the overthrow of one authoritarian regime does not preclude the rise of new forms of illiberal rule. New communication technology aids proponents of political reform; however ICT alone cannot guarantee future democratization.

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