# FROM SLACKTIVISM TO REAL CONSEQUENCES: THE OFFLINE REPRESSIONS OF ONLINE POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN KYRGYZSTAN

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# AUTHOR'S DECLARATION

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# ABSTRACT

This study explores how the Kyrgyz government represses online political participation (OPP), challenging the idea that "slacktivism" is merely superficial and ineffective. Using a case study approach, I examine how the government employs tactics such as surveillance, censorship, and legal coercion to suppress digital activism. Based on the findings of case studies, the research shows that even small digital actions, like sharing or commenting on political content, can have serious offline consequences in authoritarian regimes. A key limitation in existing literature is the focus on OPP in Western democracies, overlooking how digital forms of political participation function in authoritarian contexts, where it may be the only available form of dissent. This study addresses that gap by highlighting the offline consequences of online political engagement in the context of Kyrgyzstan. By incorporating Weidmann and Rød's theory on the Internet's dual role in autocracies, the thesis illustrates how the Kyrgyz government uses a mix of traditional and digital repression to control political discourse. Ultimately, the research argues that OPP in non-democratic states should be recognized as a legitimate form of political participation, offering new insights into the significance of digital activism and challenging the conventional critique of slacktivism.

Key Words: Online Political Participation, Slacktivism, Repression, Authoritarian states, censorship, Central Asia, Kyrgyzstan

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## 1. Introduction

In the contemporary political landscape, the role of digital technologies in shaping political participation has sparked significant academic discourse. This is particularly evident in regions where traditional political engagement is constrained, such as in authoritarian regimes. Central Asia, a region often characterized by its repressive governments and limited channels for civic engagement, provides a compelling case study for understanding how digital platforms serve as a vital space for political expression. Contrary to views that Central Asian youth are politically disengaged, findings show they are increasingly using digital platforms for political participation (Dallagnola and Wood 2022). Kyrgyzstan, labeled as elective authoritarianism by the V-dem, in comparison to its more tightly controlled neighbors, has experienced a marked increase in the use of social media and other online platforms for political participation. For example, international organizations noted that young people responded to governmental mismanagement of the COVID-19 epidemic, with many local and migrant young activists mobilized in collecting and distributing financial and medical aid (Wood, 2020). This trend challenges conventional notions of political disengagement, particularly among youth populations, as digital participation provides an alternative avenue for expressing dissent and mobilizing opposition to state policies.

Despite the growing relevance of online political participation (OPP) in non-democratic settings, the academic literature on this topic has been largely dominated by research conducted in Western democracies. Scholars in this field have traditionally focused on the dichotomy between 'cyber-optimists,' who view online activism as a meaningful extension of offline political action, and 'cyber-pessimists,' who argue that digital activism is superficial and disconnected from real-world consequences. However, this binary fails to account for the complexities of OPP in authoritarian regimes, where online spaces often represent the only available forum for political engagement. In these settings, the state's responses to online

activism—ranging from surveillance and censorship to legal persecution—reveal the extent to which digital participation poses a threat to authoritarian stability. The repression of online political actors, including ordinary citizens who express dissent through social media, demonstrates the high stakes of digital activism in such regimes, and highlights the need for a more nuanced understanding of OPP beyond the democratic contexts that have historically dominated the literature.

This thesis aims to fill this gap by examining the case of Kyrgyzstan, a country where online political participation has become an increasingly important tool for political expression and mobilization. The central question guiding this research is how the repression of OPP in Kyrgyzstan challenges the notion of 'slacktivism'—a term often used to describe low-effort digital activism that lacks real-world impact. Drawing on the works of key scholars in the field of political participation, such as Jan W. van Deth (2016), as well as Halupka's (2014) framework for legitimizing clicktivism, this thesis argues that OPP in Kyrgyzstan is not merely a superficial form of engagement, but rather a critical and impactful mode of resistance against the authoritarian state.

The research aims to demonstrate that in Kyrgyzstan, where traditional avenues for political participation are heavily restricted. Following the election of Sadyr Japarov, the current president of Kyrgyzstan, a ban on peaceful protests in Bishkek, the capital was introduced in 2022. According the local news outlets this restriction, initially prompted by protests concerning various social and political issues has been repeatedly extended  by the authorities and remains in effect until the end of 2024. The ban specifically prohibits gatherings in key areas, such as Ala-Too Square and Erkindik Boulevard, near government buildings. Efforts by activists and lawyers to challenge this restriction, citing constitutional violations of the right to peaceful assembly, have been consistently rejected by Kyrgyz courts, which argue that the measures are necessary to maintain public order during politically volatile times.

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Despite mounting criticism from domestic and international actors, the ban persists as part of broader state efforts to control civic mobilization under Japarov's administration. Moreover, most recent research on Kyrgyz political engagement demonstrates a general disconnect and distrust among the population towards politicians and the state apparatus- from mistrust in local state employees through to central state agencies, and legislative chambers (Möller-Slawinski 2015); a predominant importance of kinship over political values (Ismailbekova 2017), and a general profound corruption (Gullette 2010). Marat (2010) uses such nouns as nepotism, clientelism, and corruption to describe politics in Kyrgyzstan.

Digital platforms, on the other hand, offer one of the few viable spaces for dissent. Through a detailed analysis of six case studies involving individuals who faced repression for their online political activities, this study shows how seemingly low-cost digital actions such as posting, or commenting on Facebook or creating videos to YouTube carry significant risks, including imprisonment, fines, and legal persecution. Furthermore, this thesis situates the repression of OPP in Kyrgyzstan within a broader theoretical framework, drawing on the work of Weidmann and Rød (2019) to explore how authoritarian regimes utilize the internet for both surveillance and control. The discussion also incorporates insights from Levitsky and Way (2006), Rogov (2018), and Silitski (2006), who have examined the coercive strategies employed by authoritarian states to stifle political opposition. By combining these theoretical perspectives with empirical evidence from Kyrgyzstan, this research provides a comprehensive analysis of the state's approach to repressing online political activism and sheds light on the broader dynamics of digital participation in non-democratic settings.

In addition to addressing the repression of OPP, this thesis challenges the prevailing critiques of digital activism—namely, the concepts of slacktivism and clicktivism. Critics such as Morozov (2011) and Gladwell (2010) have argued that online political participation is a superficial form of engagement, lacking the depth and commitment required for meaningful

political change. However, the experiences of online activists in Kyrgyzstan suggest otherwise. The severe consequences faced by individuals who engage in OPP, including long-term imprisonment and fines, underscore the significant political impact of these activities. In authoritarian regimes, where traditional forms of protest and participation are often met with violent repression, digital platforms offer a critical space for resistance. The harsh responses from the state to even the smallest acts of digital dissent indicate that OPP is far from trivial, but rather a legitimate and impactful form of political participation.

Ultimately, this thesis argues that in the context of authoritarian states like Kyrgyzstan, OPP should be recognized as a legitimate form of political participation with real-world consequences. The government's repression of online activists, both within the country and abroad, demonstrates the significant threat that digital participation poses to authoritarian regimes. By challenging the concept of slacktivism and highlighting the risks and impacts of OPP in Kyrgyzstan, this research contributes to a broader understanding of the role of digital activism in shaping political resistance in repressive environments.

Literature on online political participation shows that scholars are divided into 'cyber optimists,' those who believe in the meaningful impact of online activity on the real world, and 'cyber pessimists,' the direct opposite of the former. However, I intentionally do not use this classification as I believe that many external factors add up to influence whether online to offline realities. This kind of debate is somewhat similar to the debate and the possibility of predicting a revolution. It would be more accurate to divide the discussion of online political participation and its opportunities in democratic and economically developed countries versus developing authoritarian countries. In the latter, online political participation often represents the only available means for engaging in discussions and expressing dissatisfaction with government actions. Moreover, it is evident that the state not only monitors online spaces but also reacts harshly to sensitive topics such as corruption, criticism, and calls for offline protests.

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Such a repressive and controlling reaction from authorities to online discussions clearly adds weight to online political participation as a legitimate form of engagement in political life and democratization.

## 2. Conceptualization and Theoretical Framework

### 2.1 Conceptualization of Political Participation

Online Political Participation (OPP) is the central concept in this work. Many scholars have acknowledged that the Internet expanded the range of political participation by enabling new types of mediated political engagement (Kim and Hoewe 2020). As early as 2013, Harvard University Institute of Politics established that many citizens experience disillusionment with the political system. Furthermore, Zuckerman (2014) claims that the growing dissatisfaction with current government structures, a shift toward post-representative democracy, and the increasing influence of participatory media leading to new types of civic involvement. Due to the decline in formal political participation in Western democracies (Hooghe and Kern 2017), new online forms of participation have sparked hopes for greater involvement from under-represented groups such as women, ethnic minorities, young people, the less educated, and those with low incomes (Correa and Jeong 2010; Hirzalla and van Zoonen 2010).

Before discussing online political participation, it's important to first explore the definitions of political participation since it is first of all political participation then it is online as a form. It is true that the concept of political participation has constantly evolved over the years. The concept of political participation, originally limited to election-related behavior (Berelson et al., 1954), evolved with Verba and Nie (1972) defining it as actions aimed at influencing government personnel and/ or decisions. Studies have since expanded this definition to include unconventional political acts like protesting and non-political activities like volunteering (Theocharis and van Deth, 2018). The concept of political participation needed to be redefined to accommodate the rapid changes in how individuals engage politically, particularly through non-traditional and individualized modes of participation (van Deth 2014). Almost ten years ago, scholars started to emphasize that traditional definitions of political participation are insufficient to capture the complexity and diversity of participation,

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especially as non-traditional and individualized forms of engagement become more prevalent (van Deth, 2014) .

A shared definition of political participation is crucial for meaningful discussions on the topic and, more importantly, for any conversation about the value and future of democracy. Within the framework of this thesis, I use Jan W. van Deth's conceptualization of political participation as a multifaceted activity that encompasses a wide range of voluntary actions by citizens concerning government, politics, or the state. Van Deth (2016) states that the concept of political participation must evolve alongside democratic changes to effectively capture the expanding ways democracy functions.

Furthermore, to secure analytical clarity and empirical feasibility, van Deth (2016) outlines clear-cut modes of political participation based on eight defining rules for an action to qualify as political participation. According to van Deth (2016), *the first rule* establishes that participation must involve an activity or action, excluding mere political interest or passive media consumption. *The second rule* emphasizes voluntariness, asserting that participation in a democracy should be free from coercion, though this is empirically assessed by the absence of observable pressure. *The third rule* distinguishes political participation as an activity conducted by nonprofessionals, specifically citizens, thereby excluding the actions of politicians, civil servants, and other professionals. *The fourth rule* insists that the activity must occur within the sphere of government, state, or politics, as the political context is crucial to defining participation. For activities outside this sphere, *the fifth rule* extends the definition to those targeted at the government or political arena. The *sixth rule* includes voluntary, nonprofessional activities aimed at solving collective or community problems as forms of political participation. If an activity does not meet these criteria but occurs within a political context, it may still be considered political participation, as stated in the seventh rule. Finally, the eighth rule allows for the inclusion of activities used to express political aims and intentions,

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even if they do not fit the previous criteria, provided they involve voluntary, nonprofessional action. The above-mentioned defining rules developed by van Deth (2016) will be used as a comprehensive framework to identify the political participation cases as such.

## 2.2  Conceptualization of Online Political Participation (OPP)

Compared to the political participation concept, "online political participation" (OPP) is relatively new. It gained scholarly attention in the late 1990s and early 2000s, coinciding with the rise of the internet as a significant platform for political engagement. The increasing number of studies since 2005 can be attributed to the advent of Web 2.0, which coincided with the introduction of widely used social media platforms such as Facebook (established in 2004) and Twitter (launched in 2006) (Earl and Kenski 2022). When scholars just started the research on patterns of internet usage, their research mainly focused on who had internet access, what kind of online activities compared to offline activities people were involved in (DiMaggio et al., 2001). Early research on internet usage revealed both optimistic and pessimistic views regarding its impact on political engagement. The utopian perspective emphasized the internet's potential to build communities and enhance political participation (Rheingold 2008). In contrast, the dystopian perspective raised concerns that differences between online and offline interactions could lead to harm or social fragmentation (Clarke 1994). However, the rapid evolving of internet speed, penetration and emergence of digital platforms enabled new digital forms of political participation by enabling new ways of participating in mediated (Harris and Gillion 2010)

The evolution of digital political participation has been significantly shaped by emerging forms of digital campaigning, with pivotal examples such as Obama's 2008 presidential campaign demonstrating the transformative role of social media in modern elections. Most scholars mention Obama's presidential campaign in 2008 as the groundbreaking case of social media campaign for innovative use of digital media and

dissemination of information through Facebook (Stromer-Galley 2014). The success of this campaign has skyrocketed the research on the utilization of social media and online platforms to reach voters and mobilize support (Steger 2013). Moreover, Marco Giugni and Maria Grasso (2022) state that this integration blurred the borders between online and offline campaigning because from that election on all candidates employed digital tools to enhance their outreach and engagement with the electorate. The other socially and politically significant phenomenon is the "Arab Spring" (2010) which is renowned as a showcase for mobilization and overthrow of the ruling system through social media (Wolfsfeld et al., 2013), more specifically Syria case is referred as "YouTube Uprising" (Khamis, Gold and Vaughn, 2012). Third most studied and thus cited case is the Cambridge Analytica and the US elections of 2016. Fulgoni et al. (2016) claim that in the 2016 presidential elections utilized the techniques used by Obama 12 2012 but enhanced them further by micro-targeting and audience segmentation techniques.

### 2.2.1 Online Political Participation: toward narrowing down the conceptualization.

One of the foundational works in the OPP studies was written by Gibson and Cantijoch (2013) who developed a typology that differentiates various forms of political participation, dividing them into active and passive categories. Gibson and Cantijoch (2013) are the first to argue that the Internet allowed not only to replicate the traditional forms of political engagement but also to foster new modes of involvement, particularly through social media. They identify six active modes, including voting, participation in campaigns or party activities, and engagement in protests, as well as three passive modes, such as news consumption, discussion, and expressive participation (Gibson and Cantijoch 2013). This framework helps to clarify the diverse ways individuals engage politically online. They suggested that traditionally passive activities, like consuming news, are becoming more active and participatory online contributing to political discourse and mobilization. Starting from the research by Gibson and Cantijoch (2013), the scholarly discourse argues for a hybrid media

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system where traditional and new media continually intersect, leading to a fundamental blurring of the lines between online and offline political participation (Maher and Earl 2019; Gibson and Cantijoch 2013).

Beyond theoretical discussions over how online political participation (OPP) should be or could be conceptualized, some scholars have applied systematic approaches to provide a comprehensive overview in the literature. Ruess and her colleagues (2021) have conducted the international interdisciplinary systematic literature review of peer-reviewed English-language empirical studies which used quantitative surveys and experimental studies to provide conceptual understanding of OPP. The authors have chosen 289 relevant publications and analyzed the definitions and measurements of OPP in these works.  Ruess and her colleagues (2021) highlight that nearly 90% of studies include some form of online political activities in their measurements whereas only about 30% of the provided definitions and measurements adequately address the online sphere of political participation. In other words, the large number of studies measure online activities but only few conceptualize and define them in a way to fir digital environment. According to Ruess et al (2021), this discrepancy is because the scholars in the field continue to depend heavily on conceptualization of political participation definition formulated in the pre-digital era. Although research on OPP is largely focused on expressive online behavior in social media, for example sharing opinions and engaging in discussions on political matters, these activities are barely reflected in traditional definitions of political participation. This finding suggests that OPP is not simply an online version of offline participation but is heavily influenced by the unique characteristics of digital platforms, which elevate the importance of expressive forms of engagement. Despite this, current definitions often fail to capture these nuances, instead clinging to outdated concepts from as far back as the 1970s. Therefore, when online activities are significant enough to be included in measures

of political participation, this evolved understanding should be explicitly acknowledged in the conceptual framework.

In the most recent volume of Oxford Handbook of Political Participation, Jennifer Earl and Kate Kenski (2022) discuss that some developed democracies such as Estonia or Switzerland and the United Kingdom have allowed electronic voting which can be considered as the indicators of digitalization of political participation. Furthermore, Earl and Kenscki (2022) highlight that Estonia likewise Switzerland increased participation among young voters thanks to introduction of online voting systems. Although e-voting is an ideal representation of online political participation, it is quite uncommon in the other democratic and non-democratic countries around the world.

Earl and Kenscki (2022) argue that nowadays political participation can be effectively researched when scholars consider the hybrid nature of digital and social media since online dynamics are intertwined with formation of offline political engagement. Having in mind that people read news, engage in discussions and disputes through various social networks and political parties recruit followers through social media networks, it is hard to track down when online engagement can lead to offline consequences. Moreover, Earl and Kenski (2022) criticize early scholarship that disentangled online political activities from the offline ones. Authors claim that studying online participation as something entirely distinct from these studies overlooked the results and important insights from existing research on social movements, social mobilization, and voting behavior. In other words, poor integration circumscribed usefulness and applicability of early research on online political participation. Therefore, the key argument from this piece is that online actions do not exist in isolation from offline activities and an integrated approach to research of political participation would reveal the reinforcement effect between the two realms.

The search of literature on online political participation showed most studies focus on Western countries, or well-established democracy (Ruess et al, 2021). The Western focus in research also reflects a culturally specific perspective on political participation, which may limit the applicability of findings to non-Western or authoritarian settings. This state of affairs creates a significant gap in understanding how OPP functions in non-democratic states, where conventional forms of participation may be limited. Furthermore, this gap can be observed in literature related to Central Asian region, particularly in Kyrgyzstan. The role of digital participation and online platforms is essential space for civic engagement, as the traditional modes of political participation are often constrained by the authoritarian regimes. Therefore, there is the need for deeper exploration of how online political participation functions under such restrictive environment.

## 2.3 Critique to Online Political Participation: Slacktivism and Clicktivism

In the academic literature, all authors mention one of these terms or another as a criticism of online political participation. In general, three concepts challenge the concept of digital participation on the grounds of superficiality, in the pursuit of digital metrics rather than deeper engagement, or lack of real-world impact. The concepts of slacktivism, clicktivism emerged one after another and the chronological evolution of these concepts reflects the emergence of a diversity of forms and functions in social networks. However, in more recent literature clicktivism and slacktivism are used interchangeably (Kristofferson, White and Peloza 2014). The term clicktivism is commonly understood to refer to similar to slacktivism behavior. Further down there is a discussion of slacktivism and clicktivism.

While some scholars embraced the mobilization potential of social networks, such as Facebook and Twitter, others viewed it as harming democracy. One of the most prominent and most cited is Evgeny Morozov, who devoted a chapter in his book "The Net Delusion: The

Dark Side of Internet Freedom" (2011). Morozov (2011) claims that even though social networks are useful for offline mobilization, the cases are rather statistical accidents than deliberate achievements. The concept of slacktivists is to be applied to Internet users who engage in minimal-effort online activities, i.e. such as liking a post, sharing it. Morozov (2011) highlights that the danger for democracy is in the belief that these actions trick people into perceiving them as meaningful engagement, or as a substantial effort. The other explanation provided by the author was that just like online presence is not equal to actual influence, the leaders who use the social networks for immediate mobilization disregard more important issues of sustained actions, long term commitment and other challenging tasks of organization (Morozov 2011). Regardless of the popularity of digital engagement through photoshopped political cartoons, angry tweets erode the effectiveness of traditional activism through physical demonstrations which threatens the fight for democracy and human rights.

Alongside Morozov, Shulman (2012) and Gladwell (2010) are critical about online activism. Shulman conducted analysis of a large-scale email campaign (536 967 individual text files), which were used to mobilize support and influence policy by the Environmental Protection Agency. The results of the analysis showed that about 95% of emails were identical, or low-quality responses. Based on the outcome of the study, Shulman (2009) concluded that engagement of citizens via e-mails is a superficial form of political participation and undermines the potential for deliberate engagement with politics. The other and most prominent is a journal article criticizing activism through social media written by Malcolm Gladwell (2010) published in The New Yorker. Gladwell discusses how social media driven activism facilitates weak tie connections. Similar to Morozov, Gladwell (2010) highlights that social media platform like Facebook weaken deep and personal connections necessary for activism. Mainly since he referred to activism during the Civil Rights Movement, he claims

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"liking" on Facebook lacking strong organizational structures, strategic planning, and personal commitment (Gladwell 2010).

### 2.3.1 Response to Criticism

In response to criticism toward token digital political participation, many scholars have argued that activism through posts, hashtags and likes in social media networks represent a legitimate form of political participation (Uwaka 2020, Halupka 2014) or as a 'micro-political action (Vroment 2017). Halupka (2014) was among the first scholars to argue against negative perception of clicktivism in academic discourse. According to Halupka (2014) clicktivism is a meaningful and valid form of political engagement. Even though the actions such as clicking the "like" button to a post in social media networks, sharing content, or signing online petition in a response to a political cause are spontaneous and do not require long- term commitment, they reflect engagement with political content (Halupka 2014). Furthermore, Halupka (2014) emphasizes that clicktivism is a reaction to existing political issues, which serves as a focal point for political engagement. In contrast to his colleagues, Halupka argues that clicktivism represents a streamlined, accessible, and more viral form of engagement unlike the engaging in protests, or organized campaigns which are more resource demanding. He offers "Cause" and "Object" conceptions to understand clicktivism as a political act where "Cause" includes personal beliefs, political ideologies, and social contexts. These are the motivations of people to engage in online actions. "Object" stands for the content created as a result of the motivation, i.e. tweets, posts, or petitions. In other words, when an individual engages with a political "Object", he/she is not consuming content but is actively participating in a political process influenced by their "Cause". Clicking the "like" button rooted in a broader political context is the engagement and a legitimate form of political participation, which reflects how individuals express their stands on political issues in the digital age (Halupka, 2014). Therefore, Halupka

(2014) legitimized clicktivism as a responsive, context-dependent, and reflexive mode of political engagement.

The other distinctive feature of Halupka's work is the systematic heuristic to identify and analyze clicktivism as a legitimate form of political participation. The heuristic consists of seven dimensions such as 1) situated online, 2) impulsive gesture, 3) noncommittal, 4) does not draw upon specialized knowledge, 5) easily replicated and 6) engages in a political object and number seven is a performed action (Halupka 2014). The first dimension is the most basic requirement that the action needs to be conducted in a digital environment. Second, impulsive gesture stands for an impromptu response to existing political "object" Halupka (2014). Third, the act needs no commitment and is disposable. Fourth, clicktivism is based on basic digital skills that most people already have and does not require specialized knowledge for example navigating within online environments. Fifth feature represents the key feature of all social networks, i.e. is easily reproduced by the general population. Sixth feature differentiates online *political* engagement from all other forms since it *must engage in political "Object"* and is the *"Cause"* for engagement. Seventh, the action is conducted by the individual independently from the political campaigns and / or political ideology. In other words, clicktivism is mediated by user - friendly design of online social networks which enable people to involve themselves in political actions swiftly and with minimal effort. Developing this idea further, Halupka (2018) published an article on legitimization of clicktivism based on the fact that it reflects widespread societal engagement, intentionality, and the ability to contribute meaningfully to political discourse offering an alternative way to participate in various democratic processes.

I find this systematic heuristic functional since it provides a structured way to identify and analyze clicktivism as a distinct form of political participation through social networks. While this approach allows more nuanced discussion on the significance of online political

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participation, there are two limitations of the approach: 1) does not include educational functions of OPP and 2) does not specify if there are differences in democratic and non-democratic states. It is true that most political science scholars have identified and studied the mobilizational features of social networks (Theocharis et al 2015, Weidmann and Rød 2019). In contrast, many civil society organizations, international organizations and even journalists use social media networks to educate young people on the importance of democratic process and various democratic values in general. Therefore, young people might not even click the "like" button and engage with the information, yet they learn about these from the social networks. The other major limitation of the article is no distinction between clicktivism in democratic and non-democratic regimes. In other words, democratic states do provide its citizens various forms of engagement with politics, whereas people in autocratic states do not have many options for engagement. Online political participation has more value and provides more (in autocratic states only) opportunity to engage with politics in states where elections are considered to be a facade of democracy.

Scholars who have conducted meta-analysis or systematic literature review identified weak to moderately positive association between Internet use and offline on political participation across various measures in cross-sectional observational studies (Theocharis and Lowe 2016 , Boulianne 2009) Although with more than 80% of the coefficients indicating a positive association, Boulianne (2015) indicated social media use leads to political participation, she also warns that only half of the coefficients reached the statistical significance. In addition, Boulianne (2015) highlights the key limitation is the lack of causality pointing out that only few studies utilize panel data and none of the studies use experimental design essential for determining causal relations. Theocharis and Lowe (2015) conducted an experiment with young Greek participants divided into treatment and control groups. The findings of the study show negative consequences of maintaining a Facebook account on

diverse modes of online and offline forms of both political and civic participation. Authors explain the findings based on entertaining and recreation content distract from daily challenges (Theocharis and Lowe 2015). Another study conducted by Ferrucci and his colleagues shows that self-reported levels of online political engagement were positively and significantly associated with observed political expression on Facebook (Ferrucci, Hopp and Vargo 2020). Their study combines self-reporting and data tracing methods to assess online political behavior and it established that political content creation on Facebook is closely related to behaviors involving political messages centered around self-expression (Ferrucci, Hopp and Vargo 2020). Regardless of the results of quantitative and qualitative research, the role of social media in creating new possibilities for forms of participation and different platforms for the expression of I opinions in the political process cannot be overstated today.

The most important critique toward both bodies of scholarship is written by Earl and Kensky (2022) states that nowadays political participation should be studied considering the interplay between online and offline dynamics. Authors highlight that due to blending and interdependence between the traditional and new media, it is challenging to differentiate online from offline forms of engagement (Earl and Kensky 2022). In other words, the term "hybrid media system" is referred to the complex form of information creation and dissemination where official or traditional media i.e. TV channels and digital media are interdependent. Authors underline that hybridization of online and offline political actions has made traditional distinction between these two types irrelevant (Earl and Kensky 2022). One of the examples brought by authors is sometimes learning about a political event through social media, then discussing it in person with friends or families and then deciding to protest offline or use a hashtag to express disapproval or vice versa. Therefore, the research suggests researchers acknowledge interdependence of online and offline political engagement. While social media

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has increased the level of political participation, new methods of internet-enabled repression have emerged.

The goal of literature review was to review the evolution of conceptualization of online political participation and emphasize how digital platforms reshaped the modes of political engagement. On one hand, the review showed that the critique of OPP is based on the premise that it is superficial (Morozov 2011, Gladwell 2010). On the other, other scholars argue that this perspective overlooks the significant impact of OPP and dismiss their ability to foster political discourse, mobilization and societal engagement (Halupka 2014). The newest publications stress the hybrid nature and blurring the borders between the online and offline political actions and suggest an integrated research approach (Earl and Kenski 2022). More importantly, these scholars studied the forms of OPP and their functions based on Western democracies, leaving out the non-democratic states (Ruess et al 2021).

## 2.4 Theoretical Framework

This theoretical framework is to provide a lens to interpret the repressive strategies employed by the Kyrgyz government against online political participation. While the literature showed the gap in studies focusing on online political participation in nondemocratic states, this framework draws from the existing theories of repression to explain how authoritarian regimes, based on the case of Kyrgyzstan, manage the internet's double-edged function of OPP as a platform for political engagement and state control. The discussion is based on Weidmann and Rød (2019) framework of government's utilization of the Internet for surveillance and censorship and propaganda, while highlighting the mobilization potential of online social networks for dissent. As Weidmann and Rød (2019) acknowledge the limitation of their framework in forms of offline repression, the discussions is complemented by theories of Levistky and Way (2006), Rogov (2018) and Silitski (2006) to provide more comprehensive overview on how the autocratic regimes employ to stifle opposition both online and offline.

As it has been highlighted above political engagement can be clustered into offline and online political participation, or as some scholars prefer to divide into conventional and non-conventional forms of political participation. In democratic states, people have various engagement options of both conventional and non-conventional participation. Whereas, in non-democratic states any form of engagement is rather undesirable. It was expected for scholars when autocracies moved repressing conventional forms of participation to digital forms engagement. As early as 1965, Friedriz and Brzezinski noted that it is very important for autocrats to regulate the flow of public and private information. Keremoglu and Weidmann (2020) state that the digital age provided a great opportunity for autocrats to exercise oppression through censoring online content, Internet shutdown or simply spying on the population. Tucker et al. (2017) state that the question is not about if the Internet is good or bad, it is a tool which some use as "liberation technology" while others utilize it as "repression technology". One of the puzzles highlighted by scholars is the political impact of information technology when it aids protesters for example mobilization information and when it is used by the government to repress. Moreover, Weidmann and Rød (2019) have identified the gap in literature on traditional means of control in autocratic regimes. It is known that autocratic states are not constrained by political institutions, instead the power over legislative and judicial institutions is consolidated and utilized to oppress opposition . This subchapter is devoted to discussing the theoretical framework and how the theory can be applied to understand repressive strategies of online political activists.

Weidmann and Rød (2019) wrote a book on Internet technologies and political unrest in autocracies. Their theoretical framework is built on the analysis of the Mass Mobilization in Autocracies Database (MMAD) which included information for over 14 000 incidents of protests from over 60 autocratic countries  covering the period from 2003 to 2012. Central argument of the book is that the Internet serves as a catalyst of political unrest but also as a

suppressing tool for autocratic regimes. This framework complies with Tucker et al (2017) in understanding the Internet and digital technologies as a tool which is used by both sides. According to Weidmann and Rød (2019), as soon as the protests begin, it is nearly impossible to stop it due to rapidly increasing information flow and reducing the organizational costs of demonstration for participants. Yet, high quality Internet penetration reduces the possibility of protest appearance but it also fuels ongoing unrest once it starts. Therefore, autocrats also use the Internet and Communication Technologies to monitor and foresee upcoming unrest. More specifically, nowadays autocrats adapt and combine the traditional repression tactics and newer digital tactics. The methods of the latter are censorship, surveillance, propaganda and Internet shutdowns (Weidmann and Rød 2019). While traditional repressions tactics used by autocrats are the violent government response and restrictions of association freedom. Weidmann and Rød (2019) highlight that these traditional methods are the integral to maintain power even though digital technologies are also being used but rather as a supplement.

Weidmann and Rød (2019) argue that autocratic governments benefit from high levels of Internet penetration at the local level to reduce likelihood of protests from happening. Authors differentiate between long-term and short term strategies to maintain control. Moreover, autocrats decide on which of these strategies to use based on the stage of dissent (Weidmann and Rød 2019). For example, long term tactics are the preemptive measures which control information flows, monitoring opposition and limiting the ability to organize through restrictions on Freedom of Association. Nevertheless if protests start, the autocrats often utilize short-term tactics which include violent repression and Internet shutdowns. Moreover, Weidmann and Rød (2019) empirically show that autocratic states use the Internet to spread information about government actions as a deterrent once the protests start. Authors also highlight that not all autocracies are the same and thus the preferred tools also vary. For example, more liberal autocracies are more likely to rely on digital tools to control the moods

in the population. Whereas, there are stronger autocracies which use both digital and traditional methods. To illustrate this point, Saudi Arabia set severe restrictions on creating political parties and political organization, whereas Venezuela allows more political organization and competition although it is also a constrained environment. Therefore, the institutional context of the autocratic regime determines if Internet technologies strengthen the opposition movement or nip the protest in the bud.

There are several limitations of this framework. First is related to the methodology of the research. Authors underline that the impact of Internet technologies on political protest varies across different phases of the protest, which may be due to suppression of initial protest but reinforcing ongoing ones (Weidmann and Rød 2019). Subsequently, generalization of the overall impact of digital communication should be applied conscientiously to the specific phase of the protest. Second limitation, according to Weidmann and Rød (2019), is also related to the data collection process. Although the Mass Mobilization in Autocracies Database was built on over 26000 media reports and covers over 14000 incidents of the dissent, there might be biases in reporting. For example, the protests involving high profile politicians are more likely to be covered, or the other case is related to countries where Internet penetration is high, the protests are more and better reported compared to autocratic countries with low Internet penetration. Third limitation, most related to this research, is related to traditional means of oppression. In the book, authors also acknowledge this limitation and urge following scholars to research more about traditional repression tactics. In other words, even though Weidman and Rød (2019) studied the impact of Internet technology on political protests in autocratic states, it cannot be fully understood without various repressive tactics. Authors discuss the digital forms of repression in a greater detail whereas traditional coercive strategies are limited to two such as violent forms of repression (i.e. military crackdowns on protests) and legal restrictions on civil liberties, for example freedom of association (Weidman and Rød 2019). Yet, traditional

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forms of repression are central, favored and perfectly functioning measures for autocrats to maintain their power. In conclusion, authors state that there is a need to further explore how autocrats combine traditional and digital methods.

Therefore, within the framework of this thesis I am attempting to address two limitations: first, I would like to research a combination of traditional and digital methods of repression under the current autocratic regime in Kyrgyzstan. The other one is not a limitation per se, but it is supplementary to the work of Weidman and Rød (2019), as they suggest that further research should take an in-depth, context-specific approach to understanding the interaction between digital and traditional methods of suppression. However, before stating a research question, I wanted to research more about 'traditional' coercive strategies in authoritarian states not related to Internet technologies. The following couple pages are to discuss works of other renowned political scientists such as Levitsky and Way (2006), Rogov (2018) and Silitski (2020).

In "The Dynamics of Autocratic Coercion" Steven Levitsky and Lucan A Way underline the role of a state's coercive capacities in sustaining power in authoritarian regimes. They distinguish between high and low intensity coercion (Levitsky and Way 2006). High intensity coercion can be observed through the acts of violence, abuse, or violent suppression of protests involving prominent opposition leaders or large groups, therefore it is likely to attract international condemnation and be risky for the regime. In comparison, low intensity coercion consists of less visible methods such as surveillance, harassment and intimidation. Low intensity coercion is more preferred by autocrats since it attracts much less attention. Levitsky and Way (2006) highlight the extent of state penetration in society and the loyalty within the state apparatus, also these are referred as state's scope and cohesion respectively. Authors also argue that autocracies with strong low intensity maintain control over fragmented

opposition whereas the autocracies utilizing high intensity coercion may face backlash and risk regime change. Compared to earlier mentioned traditional methods of repression in Weidman and Rød (2019), Levitsky and Way (2006) discuss more variations of repression. Maybe due to the time of publication, in 2006 the Internet was not as developed as it is nowadays and autocrats did not have such a wide range of online repressive methods. Thus what Weidman and Rød (2019) classify as a traditional repressive tool kit can be classified as high and low intensity coercion based on Levitsky and Way (2006). According to Levitsky and Way (2006), high intensity coercion consists of mass killings of demonstrators (example of Uzbekistan in May 2005), violent suppression of democratic institutions (case of Boris Yeltsin violent suppression of parliament, Russia 1993), targeted assassinations of opposition leaders, and the outright theft of elections (cases of Georgia in 2003 and Ukraine in 2004).

Low intensity coercive strategies are more preferred by autocrats due to bare visibility therefore autocrats create and modernize a greater variety of coercive tactics compared to high intensity coercion. Levitsky and Way (2006) offer a list of low intensity coercion types. These can also be subdivided into official and non-official types of low intensity coercion based on whether they involve legal state institutions. For example, short-term detainment of potential dissenters, harassment by regulatory agencies (targeting dissents with tax police) and other regulatory bodies, libel and legal suits against opposition. The other non-official types of low intensity coercion include surveillance of opposition, beatings by informal thugs, restriction of employment opportunities and targeted intimidation of allies and subordinates. Levitsky and Way (2006) highlight that authoritarian regimes skillfully maneuver between the types of coercion and sometimes they combine several strategies or adapt based on the context.

Kirill Rogov (2018) provides a comprehensive understanding of the coercive practices and its functions in non-ideological authoritarian regimes exemplifying contemporary Russia.

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Rogov analyzed the repressive practices of Putin's third presidential term (2012–2018). The analysis showed that the regime switched from cooptation to repression and punishment, which reflects a broader trend among "harder" forms of authoritarianism featured by arbitrary and climate of fear that discourages civic participation. Similar to Levitsky and Way (2006), Rogov (2018) highlights the necessity to study not only direct actions against dissenters but also the manipulation of legal frameworks and use of anti-corruption campaigns as tools of control. In fact, there are several types of coercion strategies where Levitsky and Way (2006) would agree with Rogov (2018) such as surveillance of opposition, short-term detainment, harassment by regulatory agencies, and libel and legal suits to silence criticism. Rogov (2018) showcases that autocrats create and abuse the legal ambiguity and arbitrary law enforcement to intimidate activists. Distinctive difference between the last two works is that he also emphasizes the repression of the elite and fellow party members, preference for ambiguous and selective repression instead of direct violence. The shift in treatment from cooptation to punishment of the elites was crucial to maintain cohesion and deter potential defections. However, what is more interesting Rogov (2018) argues this measure is a part of a bigger strategy "repressive populism". Repressive populism is best observed in cases when the regime justifies repressions as necessary response to a wide range of perceived threats such ad Islamic radicalism to Western-driven conspiracies (Rogov 2018). Under the perspective of repressive populism the autocratic regimes frame the repressions as protective measures and allow to intimidate not only civil activists, or regime loyalists but also society at large. In other words, the regime deliberately employs arbitrary selection of victims since it creates an atmosphere of uncertainty which doubles the intimidating effect of coercion.

The other important work which provides a framework to better understand repressive strategies in the former Soviet Union countries is offered by Vitali Silitski. Silitski (2006) shows that post-Soviet autocratic regimes employ preemptive authoritarianism to counter

democratization prospects and preserve power. Although the main focus was on the case of Belarus, the author also discusses other countries within post - Communist Eurasia such as Russia, Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan. Silitski (2006) highlights the emergence of "authoritarian international" - a network of countries collaborating to counteract democratic forces. Moreover, the author states that the network was extending beyond Eurasian region and was extending to other authoritarian states globally (Silitski 2006). The illustration for such a collaboration is the Belarus and Russia, where Russia supports Belarussian counterpart through international legitimacy and economic support. These two countries benefit from such a collaboration through strategic suppression of opposition forces within both countries (Silitski 2006). Silitski highlighted three main strategies of preemption, or repressions, such as tactical, institutional and cultural propaganda. Tactical preemption refers to arrests of opposition leaders, dismantling civil society organizations before they can threaten the regime. Institutional preemption can be observed through undermining fundamental democratic institutions; for example rewriting the constitution or adjusting electoral laws ensure victory of loyal  political parties. Cultural propaganda, more classic one, is observed through manipulation of collective memory or public consciousness to inspire fear and distrust democracy and the "West". In his conclusion Silitski (2006) states that preemptive authoritarianism is strong due to sufficient funding and intellectual resilience and suggests that these regimes are unlikely to lose their power.

It has been almost two decades since Silitski wrote about preemptive authoritarianism yet it can still be applied to discuss what is going on in the world today. Tactical preemption proved its means. Probably because it worked so successfully, autocrats still use it for their benefit even today and destroy any glimmer of opposition before they can mount a meaningful challenge. Moreover, as the review of theory on repressions showed the tool kit available for autocrats has been improving and diversifying. Before the Internet technologies improved,

autocrats had had a rather meager selection of traditional reprisals which were visible and traceable on the outside. It is also important to acknowledge that autocrats have been very proactive in learning from each other, adopting and adapting to challenges of opposition, rapidly changing Internet and technical technologies. The repressive tools diversified greatly classic ones as detainment to legalistic, digital and hybrid types, and even the types of traditional repressions developed. At the same time the challenges for autocrats have increased as Internet penetration improved globally. As Weidmann and Rød show, once the political protests emerge, it is nearly impossible to stop it and it needs twice as much effort and resources to suppress it, which does not go unattended by the public eye. One can imply that autocrats are therefore even more cautious and resort to preventive measures more often and more desperately.

Within the framework of the thesis, I want to explore online political participation in Kyrgyzstan. Although the literature does not provide a clear answer on whether online political participation can be considered as an equal form of participation in democratic processes such as voting, it can be considered as such in the context of Kyrgyzstan for several reasons. Firstly, the majority of the population refrains from any form of formal participation, e.g. the last election turnout was a record low number of voters, or 34% in 2021 Parliamentary Elections. Secondly, participation in politics is perceived as something dirty and corrupt. It is not only negative perceptions about politics but also political institutions in Kyrgyzstan are extractive and based on tribal and kinship ties (Collins 2006, Marat 2010). Aggravating factors on top of this are high levels of corruption, low levels of education and high levels of poverty - participation in politics and decision-making is largely inaccessible to the vast majority of the population.

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Based on the combination of political, social and economic circumstances, it can be argued that political participation through social media has enabled ordinary citizens not only to consume news passively, but also to create a public discourse on various socially and politically important topics. When quantitative studies lack respondents from a certain group, the responses of those who participated are artificially given more weight so that their answers are not overshadowed by those from the groups that are in the overwhelming majority. Based on the exact same principle, I believe that online political participation is necessary and important in the realities of authoritarian countries. Perhaps the most important argument in favor of considering online political participation as a form of political participation is the sensitive reaction of authoritarian rulers to the manifestation of such participation. There are cases when, in response to a post criticizing the government on Facebook, a person receives a summons from the state security authorities.

This argumentation requires a detailed and coherent discussion in the following chapters. I will review the literature on the topics of online activism with a focus on the Central Asian region, as well as more narrowly on the situation in Kyrgyzstan. This literature discussion provides the background for the online political participation in the non-democratic states and helps to understand the puzzle of OPP in Kyrgyzstan. Understanding the dynamics of online communication and authoritarian politics is crucial as the reality is more complicated than it might seem from the first sight. Factors such as the widespread availability of the internet, particularly mobile access, and varying levels of authoritarianism—ranging from countries like Kazakhstan to Turkmenistan—add layers of complexity to the issue. I will then explain the choice of methodology as well as the limitations of this research based on how it has been addressed so far. This will be followed by a description of the cases chosen for analysis and the analysis itself, but it is important to remember that this is a complex topic, and it is better to go through it all in order.

## 3. Central Asia: Political and Social Landscape

Internet technologies are neither good nor bad; as Tucker et al (2017) argue they are a tool which various groups use for their own purposes. As a tool, the Internet gained more power over time. According to data from the report *We are social* , a global social media agency, internet penetration across the region has reached a significant rise. To illustrate, Internet access in Kazakhstan was equal to 31% in 2010 which increased to 86 percent by 2022. The data for Kyrgyzstan is based on slightly different years but also shows a similar rise 10% in 2005 to 38.2% in 2017 and in the beginning of 2024, internet penetration has reached 79.8 %. In Uzbekistan, internet access rose from 45% in 2017 to over 65% in 2022. Tajikistan also improved the availability of Internet throughout the country, which boosted from 25% in 2017 to 40% in 2022. Further improvement of the Internet access is included into the development strategies since economists have proved that high Internet penetration has political impact on economic growth in both the short and long run (Pradhan et al 2016) In terms of political regime, the report published by V-dem institute classifies Kazakhstan Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan as electoral autocracy, whereas Uzbekistan is recognized as closed autocracy (V-dem Institute 2021). Therefore Internet technologies are important tools for both groups of autocrats and citizens. Based on the discussion of the theoretical framework, it can be seen that autocrats use various forms of repression to maintain their power within respective countries. Below are several articles highlighting some common practices in the region. Similarly, citizens have seen opportunities to fight for democratization through the Internet, and articles on this topic will also be provided below.

The Central Asian autocrats utilize digital technologies to maintain power through controlled digital participation, reinforcing regime discourse through regime-friendly activists and targeted repression. Bakhytzhan Kurmanov and Colin Knox (2024) examined cases of Tajikistan and Uzbekistan and in their research they conducted qualitative in-depth interviews

with digital activists and state officials. The authors identified three common forms of repressions such as targeted repression, legal and punitive measures and blocking internet access and restricting media (Kurmanov and Knox 2024). In terms of targeted repression, authors state that there are some "unspoken boundaries" crossing which insite state aggression through arrests and legal consequences. Unsurprisingly, the most sensitive topics are corruption, elite interests and inciting offline protests while digital activists and influencers promoting a positive image of the state are allowed to exist (Kurmanov and Knox 2024). Such an approach from the state allows to create an illusion of participation and openness. The other article to discuss the potential of information and communication technologies in non-democratic Central Asian states is written by Dallagnola and Wood (2022). Dallagnola and Wood (2022) also mention internet shutdowns and content manipulations and restrictive laws as common forms of oppression of online activism. The distinguishing detail is that authors bring attention to the use of digital surveillance tools such as Pegasus, an Israeli spyware which allows remote access to personal data, and FinFisher, a British spyware capable of taking remote control of computer and mobile phones (Dallagnola and Wood 2022). Pegasus is utilized in Kazakhstan whereas FinFisher is utilized by Turkmen government. Such attention and monitoring efforts by the regimes to maintain social cohesion on the digital platforms can be viewed as indicative of preemptive repression.

Search of literature on online political participation showed a plethora of studies on how digital media and the Internet facilitates activism and challenges regime power. Although in various Central Asian states the success of such matters varies depending on political openness and repression, the civil societies and activists also use the Internet as a key tool to raise awareness and combat corruption and other injustices. One of these authors is Kurambaev who discusses examples of successful resistance. Kurambaev (2020) conducted a comparative study of policy shifts and recent events in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Similar to

his colleagues, he identified three forms of repression such as internet censorship through website blocking, digital surveillance and monitoring and legal punishment (Kurambaev 2020). However, he also discusses the notable instances of online activism. The cases of protest mobilization in Kyrgyzstan which led to ousting of two presidents in 2005 and 2010. Kurambaev(2020) states that social media enabled activists to mobilize, share information and coordination despite the attempts to control traditional media. The other case is Zhanaozen protests that took place in 2011 when online activists used Facebook and Twitter to organize and raise awareness over wage issues despite governmental internet blackouts. More recent examples of online political engagement are discussed by Daniyar Kosnazarov. In the paper, Kosnazarov (2019) discusses prominents digital content creators who use social media platforms like Instagram and YouTube to create political content and to raise political awareness. The online movement #SaveKokZhailau with the goal to stop construction in a protected area mobilized strong offline public support and stopped the construction. Using the criteria for recognizing online political participation by Halupka (2014), these online activities as young people presented by Kosnazarov as such. Such cases can be interpreted as showcases of potential of online engagement and offline challenges for autocratic states of Central Asia.

Before moving further, it is important to take a step back and recall van Deth's broader approach to understand political participation as it lies in the center of criticism. Jan W, van Deth's (2016) states that the scope of political participation must adapt alongside the changing nature of democracy. His conceptualization of political participation is as a multifaceted activity encompassing a wide range of voluntary actions by citizens concerning government, politics and the state (van Deth, 2016). This framework is particularly relevant in authoritarian regimes where the traditional avenues of participation are often restricted. Within such environments, citizens increasingly rely on digital platforms as a means of engaging with politics. Moreover, the stories told by the authors are about citizens voluntarily engaging with

the government (Kurmanov and Knox 2024, Dallagnola and Wood 2022), politics and state (Kosnazarov 2019). Despite discussing repressive responses from the government, the articles fail to explicitly recognize these online actions as a legitimate form of political participation. Repressive response itself can be understood as a potential threat these activities pose to the regime. By not framing these acts as political participation, the scholars downplay the significant political consequences people endure offline. Proper recognition as a form of political participation, rather than dismissing individuals based on voter turnout, would both give dur credit to activists but also reflect the broader shift in democratization prospect within authoritarian regimes.

### 3.1 Kyrgyzstan: An Overview of Politics, Society and Internet

Some scholars discuss 2005, 2010 and 2020 revolutions in Kyrgyzstan as successful cases of mobilization through digital means but each of these revolutions are rather a combination of economic instability, clan-based politics, weak state institutions and external influences. Yevgeny Ivanov (2022) applied a detailed historical- sociological analysis to investigate causes and dynamics of each of these revolutions. In 2005, there was the first Tulip revolution, which was triggered by the rigged elections. Ever since Akaev became a president in 1991, he conducted popular referendums to extend his term in office and ruled for 14 years. The causes for the Tulip revolution were economic difficulties, clan based politics and promotion of his children to high positions added to electoral fraud. According to Ivanov, although revolution was largely locally organized, Western NGOs played an important role through financing opposition media and providing training for activists. The Revolution of 2010 , also called Melon Revolution, was incited by monopolization of power by Bakiev, successor of Akayev. Bakiev's concentration of power in hands of his family clan, economic hardships and inability to maintain equilibrium between northern and southern political parties are mentioned to be the causes for exacerbation of discontent which lead to violent overthrow.

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Analyzing the Melon Revolutions, Ivanov (2022) states that the political leaders, Otynbaeva and Atambaev, were supported by Russia, allowing it to increase its influence in the country. The most recent October revolution was also triggered by presumably rigged elections during parliamentary election results and ongoing economic difficulties worsened by the COVID pandemic. The distinctive point of the October revolution, as highlighted by Ivanov (2022), is the public demand for a more authoritarian form of leadership which contrasted the democratization goals of the earlier revolutions. Also, it is noted that the increasing influence of right wing populism and local clan based politics gained prominence by appealing to the segment of the population favoring strong and authoritarian leaders. This rather short covering of revolutions in Kyrgyzstan is important to understand the contextual difference in comparison to neighboring countries.

The use of the internet during the COVID-19 pandemic in Kyrgyzstan set a precedent for how online participation can translate into impactful offline actions, as seen through the collective self-organization of young people who addressed gaps left by the government in crisis response. The COVID-19 pandemic has placed a tremendous strain on health systems and economies around the world, but developing countries even more so as their existing economic and health systems have been exacerbated (Rodela et al 2020). However the pandemic crisis in Kyrgyzstan brought light on a new phenomenon - online collective self-organization of young people. They volunteered at the frontlines of the fight with the pandemic, helping with delivery of food to doctors, first- aid, delivery of infected patients to the hospitals and self-organized rescue centers. Many international organizations pointed out that Kyrgyz youth replaced the government in taking responsibility to care for the people in the July 2021 COVID-19 crisis (BBC 2020). International organizations noted that young people responded to governmental mismanagement of the COVID-19 epidemic, with many local and migrant young activists mobilized through social networks in collecting and distributing

financial and medical aid (Wood 2020). Digitally self-organized collectives also mobilized defense groups against potential riots and robbery in the aftermath of the contested October revolution 2020. Research among these volunteers (aged 18-34) noted that 68% of respondents stated that voluntary participation influenced their willingness to participate in direct action and 86% stated their readiness to vote (de Gouvello 2021). Kloop, a local media organization, recruited around 3,000 observers for the October 2020 elections, 90% of which were aged 20-30. Two-thirds noted they took the role owing to their civic values. The internet and social media have also facilitated more political comment (Wood 2019), with Kyrgyz youth seemingly more vocal in criticizing their government than their regional neighbors.

It has been noted that the critique of online political participation, such as slacktivism, is based on the premise that digital actions are superficial, lacking real-world impact and long-term commitment (Morozov 2011; Gladwell 2010). The recent events in Kyrgyzstan challenge this notion. Moreover, the case of Kyrgyzstan shows that the online form of engagement serves as critical tool for mobilization when institutional channels are ineffective. In other words, people in Kyrgyzstan used social media and translated to tangible impactful actions during the time of governmental failure. Beyond the case of Kyrgyzstan, the literature on social media use in Central Asian states shows that the digital platforms are used to mobilize resources and build networks for addressing political and social challenges. Moreover, the response of Kyrgyz government further complicates the critique of slacktivism. Based on framework on digital repression, it can be observed that authoritarian states such as Kyrgyzstan actively monitor and suppress online political engagement recognizing its potential to spark broader political dissent. Therefore, by examining repressive response of Kyrgyz government to digital engagement, this study challenges the critique of slacktivism. This discussion leads to research questions:

1. How does the repression of online political participation in Kyrgyzstan challenge the notion of 'slacktivism' as a superficial form of activism?

2. What strategies does the Kyrgyz government employ to suppress online political participation?

## 4. Methodology

To answer these research questions, I applied a qualitative research method through case study of Kyrgyzstan. The rationale behind the choice of this methodology was that it would allow for an in-depth exploration of how state's repression strategies of online political participation challenges the notion of "slacktivism". Dumez (2015) states that case study is the most applicable approach to study complex phenomena in real life settings where the boundaries between the phenomenon and its context are not clearly defined. As it was in the case of my research question, case study allowed the investigation of specific strategies utilized by the Kyrgyz government to repress online political participation along with the consideration of a broader social and political environment. In addition, Dumez (2015) states that case studies facilitate and allow to trace how empirical observations and categories comply or vice versa contradict to grand and middle level theories. By applying case study, I intended to bridge theory and empirical evidence.

The advantage of this approach to studying online political participation in the context of authoritarian countries was that it would provide new insights and illustrate the extent to which autocrats are threatened by the mobilizing power of online political participation. Just like any other methodological approach, case study also has limitations. On the one hand, Crasnow (2012) emphasizes that due to the focus on a single or few cases, the findings are not generalizable. On the other hand, Dumez (2015) claims that case studies are valuable in that this methodology requires the researcher to scrutinize the empirical categorization of theories and thereby refine the theoretical framework and redefine concepts if necessary. I collected data using a combination of primary and secondary sources. This included analyzing press releases and official statements from the Kyrgyz government regarding their policies and actions to control online political participation. Additionally, I reviewed news articles and reports from international organizations and NGOs documenting instances of online repression

in Kyrgyzstan. Such approach in cross-referencing multiple sources of information was used to ensure accuracy.

These outlets included:

- **24.kg** – A local news platform (https://24.kg/proisshestvija/273273_jurnalista_oljobaya_shakira_dostavili_nadopros_vgknb/)
- **Current Time** – An international news platform (https://www.currenttime.tv/a/33041471.html).
- **Kaktus Media** – A local outlet (https://kaktus.media/doc/495371_gorodskoy_syd_ostavil_v_sile_prigovor_yrysy_jekshenalievy.html).
- **Radio Azattyk** – Part of Radio Free Europe (https://rus.azattyk.org/a/32802546.html).
- **Media.kg** – A regional news platform (https://media.kg/news/gebeshnyj-diktant-eks-sotrudnik-nan-razoblachal-svoih-kolleg-sudekspertov-teper-sudyat-ego-samogo/).
- **Cabar.asia** – A Central Asian news platform (https://cabar.asia/en/media-policy-institute).

For this research, I intentionally decided to avoid persecutions of political leaders, journalists and famous civil society activists. First of all, it is clear that these groups of people pose a threat to the government and usually they are number one targets for any authoritarian regime. Second, these people have many followers both online and offline therefore they do have mobilization power, which can bring undesired consequences for the current regime. My interest is cases when a regular citizen was detained for online activity. I use Stoker (2006) definition of the term citizen participation to underline the nonprofessional, nonpaid, amateur nature of activities.

Therefore, the selection criterion for the case was non- professional engagement in political matters. This choice highlights the study's emphasis on how state repression targets broader segment of population, not just prominent politicians, activists, and journalists. The citizens often express dissatisfaction or complaints through social media platforms, and their persecution demonstrates the pervasive nature of state control over political expression. The six cases included in this study were randomly selected from a list compiled by Radio Liberty/Radio Free Europe Kyrgyz Service, which documented 29 individuals in Kyrgyzstan who faced legal persecution for online political participation over the last three years. The cases

mentioned in the article include stories of ordinary citizens, journalists and activists charged under laws such as "Public Calls for Violent Overthrow of the Government" and "Incitement of Ethnic, National, Religious, or Regional Hatred" for various posts, shares and other forms of engagement via social networks (Kutmanbekov et al., 2023). Of these 29 individuals, **20 were men and 9 were women**, reflecting an approximate 2:1 ratio. The key criteria for selection were the **nonprofessional, nonpaid, and amateur nature** of the individuals' political activities, ensuring that the study focused on regular citizens engaging in online political participation, rather than prominent figures.

From the **9 women**, **5 were excluded** from further analysis because:

- **4** were either members of political parties at the local or state level, and
- **1** was a journalist and owner of a news website.

Similarly, from the **20 men**, **2 were excluded** because:

- **1** was a deputy, and
- **1** was a journalist and civil activist.

The number of cases, which resulted in a total of 6 cases , selected was based on an **inductive approach**, where I stopped collecting data once I noticed repetitive patterns in the Kyrgyz government's repressive strategies. This method allowed a more thorough investigation of recurring patterns, ensuring that broader trends were prioritized over individual cases or isolated incidents. Although this is study applies qualitative approach, the findings of the research may provide a foundation for hypothesis in quantitative research, to test the patterns more systematically across other authoritarian contexts.

I drew on the repression theories for online strategies to suppress protests (Weidmann and Rød 2019), as well as the offline coercion of opposition and civil activists (Levitsky and Way 2006; Rogov 2022) to compare Kyrgyzstan's coercive strategies and analyzed how they align with or diverge from established models.

### 5. Findings and Discussion

**Case 1: Olzhobai Shakir**

In 2017, Olzhobai Shakir, known in creative circles as a writer, poet, and publicist, established his own educational website, *RukhEsh*. The website organizes competitions and awards well-known public figures, who raise significant societal issues, with the *Ulut Ülgüsü* and *Ulut Abiyiri* prizes. Shakir is famous for the historical novel *Kuyun Door*, which explores the history and life of the Kyrgyz people at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries. In 2021, he published the novella *Adam+*, which depicts the difficult fate of representatives of the LGBT community.

Olzhobai Shakir has been in the detention center of the State Committee for National Security (SCNS) since August 23, 2023. The reason for his detention by the SCNS remains unknown. However, two days prior to his detention the activist announced on his YouTube channel that he intended to organize a rally in response to the news about transfer of four Issyk-Kul resorts to Uzbekistan. Nine months later Olzhobai Shakir had his first court hearings. In May, 2024, the Alamudun District Court of the Chüy Region found him guilty under Article 278, Part 3 of the Criminal Code of the Kyrgyz Republic ("Calls for active disobedience to lawful demands of authorities and for mass unrest") and he was sentenced to five years of imprisonment .

During the trial, Shakir's lawyer claimed the results of the linguistic expertise videos as unsubstantiated. The lawyer requested the annulment of the results of the state political examiner, on whose judgment the prosecution was based. Moreover, the lawyer pointed out that the state linguistic examiner was not registered as an expert and it took him slightly two hours to conduct the examination and write the report. The defense side also hired local independent political examiner, Nurzhan Narynbaeva, who concluded that there were no signs

of calls for a coup or incitement to unrest in Shakir's materials. Regardless of the submitted evidence, two months later during appeal hearings the Chüy Regional Court upheld the verdict of the Alamudun District Court, confirming Olzhobai Shakir's guilt in inciting mass unrest. According to media reports, lawyer Baktybek Avtandil Uulu announced that an appeal had been filed with the Supreme Court.

Analysis: The case of Olzhobai Shakir clearly shows several types of state oppression. First of all, the fact that he was detained just two days after his YouTube video shows that he was being monitored. Also, he was taken to the detention center of the State Committee for National Security, which during Soviet Union times was famous for the Committee for State Security (Komitet Gosudarstvennoy Bezopasnosti—KGB) wielded enormous power and influence. It is quite common in the post-Soviet countries to use the State Security Services to surveil and threaten the opposition. For example, Darden (2001) studied how Kuchma, a Ukrainian president, collaborated  or rather used State Security Services to blackmail his political rivals and secure compliance. The other post-Soviet example from Central Asia is Uzbekistan, under president Karimov, two agencies the Interior Ministry and the National Security Service wielding almost unchecked coercive power for keeping the opposition and competitors on a leash threatening them with the use of compromising files compiled by tracing their corrupt deeds (Ilkhamov 2007). In the case of Shakir, the state used the entire apparatus for repression, and the sequence of stories in news portals suggests at least three: the State Security Committee for surveillance and detention, the State Academy of Sciences for writing expertise, and the judicial system to maintain a semblance of legality.

However, There are two distinctive details: 1) Olzhobai Shakir is neither a politician nor he is in any political party and 2) he made an announcement online through a YouTube channel. Because now his account is blocked it is not clear how many followers he had and

how many people he could mobilize. Nevertheless, the news about Olzhobai Shakir's detainment on the basis of his YouTube call has been widely covered by the news outlets, which also reinforces the message of the state's repressive tactics. Although Wiedmann and Rød theorized about long term repression to control and monitor internet content by blocking dissenting voices, this case shows that the state did not want to risk allowing mobilization and took preemptive measures, discussed by Silitki (2006).

**Case 2: Askat Jetigen**

Askat Jetigen is a well-known *akyn* (improvising poet) and composer in Kyrgyzstan, who performs songs on current issues in society and plays the komuz (a traditional Kyrgyz musical instrument). At the age of 18, he became the leader of the folk-ethnographic ensemble *Ordo Sakhna*, with which he toured over 20 countries.

Since 2021, Jetigen has occasionally posted various video messages on his personal social media pages, criticizing the actions of the current government. Specifically, he called for reforms in the cultural sector and voiced opposition to the legalization of gambling, the alteration of the Kyrgyz national flag, and the detention of activists.On March 16, Jetigen was detained by officers of the State Committee for National Security (SCNS) in the Kochkor district of the Naryn region. He was transported to Bishkek and placed in a temporary detention facility for 48 hours. A day earlier, Jetigen had published a video criticizing an interview given by President Sadyr Japarov on March 14. On March 18, a Pervomaisky District Court judge in Bishkek released Jetigen on bail, prohibiting him from leaving the city. However, on March 20, he was re-arrested and placed in pre-trial detention for two months. The court found Jetigen guilty under Article 278 ("Calls for mass unrest and violence against citizens") of the Criminal Code of the Kyrgyz Republic, sentencing him to three years of imprisonment. However, he

was acquitted on the charge of "Calls for the violent overthrow of power" due to the lack of criminal elements in the case.

Analysis: The case of Askat Jetigen is similar to the case of Olzhobai Shakir in several respects. First and foremost, he went live on his page in social media networks and expressed his dissatisfaction with the state of political affairs in society. The swift response indicates that the state was monitoring the online space, and once he was identified, it decided to act at the opportune moment. As with Shakir, the repressive state apparatus was fully deployed. The distinction, however, lies in the known location of Askat Jetigen's detention. While in the case of the writer from the first example, the location of his detention is not specified, Askat Jetigen was detained by officers of the State Committee for National Security (SCNS) in the Kochkor district of the Naryn region. The Kochkor district has a population of approximately 70,000 people and is served by 38 schools. In terms of healthcare, the district has one regional hospital, while the remaining 10 medical institutions consist of primary healthcare centers and smaller facilities, such as outpatient clinics and feldsher-midwife posts. In other words, in the Kochkor district, there is roughly one medical institution per 17,000 people. Although publicly available sources do not provide precise information on the number of SCNS offices or personnel in the Kochkor district of the Naryn region, it is known that SCNS officers are actively engaged in operations there, including searches and operational activities. This case was widely covered because Askat Jetigen is a renowned musician and the fact that he was detained by local Officers of National Security can be interpreted as a sign that the state can easily reach out to the dissent in the region. The next case is the message that it can reach out to people beyond the country.

**Case 3: Kanykei Aranova**

Kanykei Aranova, a 37-year-old doctor, lived and worked in Moscow, Russia. She had an 11-year-old daughter who attended a school in Moscow. Although Kanykei was a labor migrant, she actively participated in events in her home country, often sharing her views on social media. One day, Kanykei disappeared on her way to work. A few days later, her sister informed journalists that on January 30, Kanykei was detained in Moscow in the metro station by local police. Her daughter was left home alone that day, and the next day, the police took her away from school. On February 1st, Kanykei Aranova, together with her daughter, was forcibly brought to Kyrgyzstan accompanied by officers from the State Committee of National Security (SCNS). Kanykey Aranova was detained during the investigation, and in late April 2024, the Pervomaisky District Court of Bishkek found her guilty under two charges: "Public calls for a violent seizure of power" and "Incitement of racial, ethnic, national, or religious hostility." The court sentenced her to a 120,000 soms (approximately $1,416) fine and released her from custody. However, the State prosecutor appealed this decision to the Bishkek City Court. On June 28, the Bishkek City Court also found her guilty but changed the initial verdict, sentencing Kanykei Aranova to 3 years and 6 months in prison. Despite the fact that Kanykei is a single mother with a minor child under her care, which, according to Kyrgyzstan's Criminal Code (a minor child's age is under 14) should allow for a delay or mitigation of her sentence, the court did not take this into account. On August 21, 2024, the Supreme Court of Kyrgyzstan reviewed the appeal from Kanykei's lawyers but upheld the Bishkek City Court's decision.

Aranova is known as an active social media user. In the fall of 2022, she was already held accountable by authorities. The police referred to her as a blogger at the time. During that period, she expressed her views on the issue of transferring land from the Kempir-Abad Reservoir .

Kyrgyz investigative journalist Bolot Temirov, in collaboration with the international investigative project OCCRP, conducted an investigation into Aranova's Facebook account,

where provocative posts had been published. Based on his findings, he believes that the activist fell victim to a provocation. The profile was quickly blocked after Aranova's arrest. However, while it was still accessible, journalists saved screenshots of the posts. By digging into the history of the publications, Temirov discovered that the fake author changed the account name to the activist's name in a single day and edited all of their old posts. This was done on January 13, 18 days before Aranova's arrest.

Analysis: The first issue that immediately stands out is the lawfulness of the force used by the authorities. Aranova was apprehended on her way to work in Russia and escorted under the supervision of the national security service. International law experts could assess the appropriateness of such a method of detaining a labor migrant in Russia, especially given that she is a single mother. This approach might be more justified in cases involving internationally recognized criminals or members of organized crime groups, rather than an individual migrant. Moreover, the actions of Kyrgyzstan's security service in Russia should have raised questions regarding a different type of legality. It is important to note, however, the cooperation between authoritarian states identified by Silitski (2006), which he refers to as the "authoritarian international" to combat the political opponents. In addition, cases 2 and case 3 are happening approximately at the same time - Spring 2024, which sends the message that the state can reach the dissent from abroad too.

The other distinctive measure is the utilization of digital space and fake accounts by the state. Bradshaw and Howard (2018) analyzed cyber troop activity in 48 countries across various political regimes, including both authoritarian and democratic contexts. They reported that government cyber troops often operate fake social media accounts to spread pro-government or pro-party messages, attack opposition figures, and manipulate public discourse. These fake accounts can be automated (political bots), manually operated by humans, or hybrid accounts

that combine both human and automated elements (Bradshaw and Howard, 2018). The other scholar, Bakhytzhan (2024) studied how Central Asian autocrats adopt various strategies to ensure regime survival by curbing dissent online. It is stated that the Tajik government uses various tactics to control online dissent, including the use of fake accounts and pro-government volunteers. These volunteers, sometimes students, are compelled to create social media profiles with false identities to promote government narratives and attack independent digital activists ( Bakhytzhan). Aranova's case shows that the state employed hybrid methods of repression in this case as she was detained and then the attacks turned into online space. First two cases were the coercion of famous people in the society, a writer and a musician, the third one was on a labor migrant single parting woman who actively used her social network to express her position on government matters.

**Case 4: Saliya Tashtanova**

Saliya Tashtanova, a 70-year-old pensioner, was detained on October 6, 2023, by officers of the State Committee for National Security (SCNS) for a social media post. On her Facebook page, she made a post  addressing the president and the head of the SCNS, stating that prices in the country had risen and that there was no justice. According to her lawyer, Toktosun Zhorobekov, who assisted Tashtanova, she was charged under Article 327 of the Criminal Code ("Public calls for the violent seizure of power"). Eleven days later, the Jalal-Abad City Court placed her under house arrest. As reported by the Supreme Court, the investigator from the SCNS had filed the special requests for this change in custody.

It is known that in November 2022, Saliya Tashtanova spoke at a *kurultai* (people's assembly) against the transfer of the Kempir-Abad Reservoir to Uzbekistan, demanding that the president and the head of the SCNS resign if they could not resolve the border issues between Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. Autumn 2024, the Jalal-Abad Regional Court issued a

ruling in the case of the 70-year-old resident of Tash-Kumyr, Saliya Tashtanova, sentencing her to a fine of 50,000 som (approximately 562 $; the average pension for 2024 is approximately 9,063 soms, or 103.52 USD ). As reported by the court's press secretary, Mirlan Toromamatov, the pensioner was found guilty under point 1, part 2 of Article 327 ("Public calls for the violent seizure of power") of the Criminal Code of the Kyrgyz Republic.

Analysis: This is now the fourth consecutive case where it can be observed that the State Committee for National Security makes decisions regarding the detention of activists very quickly. However, this is not new for authoritarian rulers. One of the most renowned experiments by Harvard scholars, King, Pan, and Roberts (2013), studied the censorship criteria applied by the Chinese government, which focuses more on suppressing content that may lead to collective action rather than merely censoring criticism. Their findings reveal the government's particular sensitivity to posts that could incite or encourage any form of public mobilization (King, Pan, and Roberts 2013). It shows that Kyrgyz state practices somewhat similar internet content surveillance strategies. King, Pan, and Roberts (2013) Chinese censorship system is highly sophisticated and consists of automated methods like keyword blocking and human moderators manually reviewing posts to suppress collective action-related content. In Kyrgyzstan, the oppression takes offline through detainment.

I googled Saliya Tashtanova through my personal Facebook page, and there was only one person with this name and last name. The profile picture was similar to those posted in news channels, so it was most probably her. The profile indicated 9 friends, and the last shared video was an interview with the leader of the opposition political party. This post had one like but 48 shares. The repression of a 70-year-old pensioner with 9 friends on her Facebook page is meant to send a message to the wider population that the state is watching everyone and has a full capacity to repress if necessary. The state broadcasts twofold message on the one hand

observes tightly online discussions but also reacts to the online criticism of its decision. The public reaction to imprisonment of Saliya Tashtanova was harsh criticism which prompted the authorities to change the measure of restraint to house arrest.

**Case 5: Tariel Botbaev**

The Alamudun District Court is currently reviewing the case of Tariel Botbaev, a resident of the Chüy region, who was detained by the police on May 17 due to his Facebook posts. The relatives and lawyer of the 55-year-old man, who has been in pre-trial detention for four months, deny the charges brought against him. Tariel Botbaev, who worked at a tire repair shop in the village of Novopokrovka, Issyk-Ata district, has been charged under Articles 326 ("Preparation for the violent seizure of power") and 330 ("Incitement of racial, ethnic, national, religious, or interregional hatred") of the Criminal Code of the Kyrgyz Republic. The case was investigated by the Alamudun District Department of Internal Affairs and has been transferred to the local court. Law enforcement agencies have not yet commented on Tariel Botbaev's case. The press office of the Supreme Court of the Kyrgyz Republic confirmed that the trial has been delayed, as the defendant was not brought to court. According to the lawyer, Botbaev was not transported to the hearings in August because "he did not fit into the police van."

The defendant's lawyer, Nurlan Toktaliev, expressed shock upon learning of the charges brought against a simple tire repairman like Botbaev. He found it surprising that such accusations were being investigated by the police rather than the SCNS. Toktaliev explained that the linguistic experts who analyzed Botbaev's Facebook posts claimed the writings showed signs of violent seizure or retention of power in violation of the Kyrgyz Constitution, as well as actions aimed at violently changing the constitutional order. Additionally, they allegedly identified content inciting racial, ethnic, national, religious, or interregional hatred, the humiliation of national dignity, and the promotion of the superiority or inferiority of citizens

based on their religious, national, or racial affiliation, committed publicly or through mass media, including the Internet. However, Toktaliev was astonished when he reviewed the posts, as they merely consisted of aphorisms or quotes from philosophers and well-known figures such as Friedrich Nietzsche, Abraham Lincoln, and Roosevelt. He noted that Botbaev had only nine years of formal education, was a simple laborer, and had no connection to politicians or activists. According to Toktaliev, Botbaev did not even understand what he had been made to sign.

Analysis: This case, similar to the first four cases, demonstrates a form of ongoing surveillance, where the government monitors social media activity, in this case, Facebook posts. As Weidmann and Rød (2019) argued, autocratic regimes frequently employ ongoing surveillance to identify potential dissent or opposition, which supports their long-term strategy of controlling information and communication channels. Also, Weidmann and Rød theorize that the government utilized short-term repression such as violent crackdown and mass detention once the protest started. In this case, these coercive strategies of the state rather represent a preemptive short-term repression tactic aimed at stopping potential dissent before it escalates into a protest or mass mobilization. The authorities responded to what they see as a precursor to organized dissent, using swift legal and coercive measures to neutralize it before it takes shape.

The case of Tariel Botbaev and the other four cases align well with the notion "Politics of Fear" discussed by Gel'man (2020). In his analysis of how the Russian regime confronts its opponents Gel'man presents several strategies: elective persecution, open harassment of activists, and ambiguous laws, coupled with arbitrary law enforcement, are central to creating fear. Tariel Botbaev's case shows the lack of clarity in the investigation, the questionable expertise of the linguistic analysis, and Botbaev's apparent misunderstanding of what he signed

all point to a broader strategy of repression where the primary goal is the demonstration of control. The articles used in the paper mostly discuss repressions of activists, political opposition members and civil society organizations, and these actors are engaged in the political issues on a professional or semi-professional basis. The cases discussed within the paper show the citizens of various professional education and even regional backgrounds who were detained for expressing their concerns and resentment online. Four out of five individuals were found guilty for "Public calls for a violent seizure of power".

**Case 6: Yrys Zhekshenaliev**

At the time of his arrest, 19-year-old Yrys Zhekshenaliev was a student at Law Department at the Kyrgyz National University. In addition to his studies, Zhekshenaliev was the administrator of the Facebook page "PolitUznik," (short for "political prisoner" in Russian) which had been active since May 2020. The page primarily posted critical commentary on government actions and shared information about arrested politicians. For the past two to three years, Zhekshenaliev had been actively engaged in social activities, using social media to express his criticism of the authorities. Zhekshenaliev was arrested in August 2022 after posting an old video of a speech by the former chairman of the State Committee for National Security (SCNS), Abdil Segizbaev, regarding Jetim-Too on the "PolitUznik" Facebook page.

Criminal charges were brought against him under the articles "Mass Riots" and "Calls for active disobedience to lawful demands of authorities and for mass unrest, as well as calls for violence against citizens" of the Criminal Code of the Kyrgyz Republic. He spent two months in pre-trial detention and was released under house arrest on October 26. On December 4, 2023, Zhekshenaliev was acquitted of all charges by the Pervomaisky District Court of Bishkek, despite the prosecutor's request for a seven-year prison sentence. In January 2024, it

was reported that the prosecutor's office had appealed the decision, but on February 7, the Bishkek City Court upheld the acquittal.

Analysis: The case of Yrys Zhekshenaliev is yet another case of the state's use of digital surveillance and monitoring to repress the dissent. According to Weidmann and Rød, the arrest could be explained through asymmetrical control of the internet in authoritarian regimes and represent the long-term suppression strategy. Since the state perceives the Internet and its mobilization, the Kyrgyz government aims to control and prevent protest occurrence by targeting key individuals involved in creation and sharing the critical information online. Again, because the state blocked the page immediately it is not possible to see the number of subscribers thus it is impossible to estimate or presume the mobilization potential of this group on Facebook.

The allegations against him are illustrative of what Rogov calls repressive populism. In other words, by choosing to arrest and prosecute him under serious charges like "Mass Riots," the Kyrgyz government essentially demonstrated its willingness to use repressive laws against those who engage in even online non-violent criticism. Rogov (2018) emphasizes how Putin's regime in Russia amplifies fear by criminalizing political opposition, civic activists, and any form of dissent that threatens the status quo. On the other hand, the charges as "calls for active disobedience" are vague and broad legal provisions to criminalize dissent as the Case 5 also shows the the posts and shares of Friedrich Nietzsche, Abraham Lincoln could be interpreted as call for take over. The state is actively using the legal process to perpetuate uncertainty.

The discussion of these cases of repressive strategies of Kyrgyz government to online political participation reveals common patterns of surveillance, preemptive repression and the use of ambiguous laws to suppress the dissent. The state ongoing surveillance of online space can be observed in all cases. Moreover, the rapid response of video content, as in the cases of

Shakir and Jetigen, and posts, as in the other cases is consistent with Weidmann and Rød (2019) theory of long-term repressive strategy to manage online content and cut off the reports of dissatisfaction with the state actions. The other identified similarity between the cases was preemptive repression. Preemptive strategies were applied not only to the calls for the mobilization but also to the statements of disagreement and criticism toward the state. Such strategy aligns with Silitski's theory of precautionary repression in post-Soviet space, when the regimes intervenes before the dissent can escalate or even organize to strong opposition. The third similarity between the cases is the use of ambiguous legal provisions which allow for criminalization of the dissent in vague terms. The individuals were charged under the laws like "calls for violent seizure of power" while others were charged by this one and "calls for mass unrest". These ambiguous laws allow the state to interpret dissenting online statements as threat to national peace or security. Such perspective complies with Gel'man's (2020) concept "politics of fear", as the government utilizes such laws to create the environment of uncertainty and fear among the citizens, or active users of social media networks.

It is also important to highlight the differences within the cases. First, the state does not differentiate between the profiles of the individuals in repressive strategies. If the writer and musician (first and second cases respectively) were well-known figures in their respective fields, the other victims of repression were the tire repairman, pensioner, and a migrant worker. These cases show the state's broad target range. The second distinction between the cases is the geographic or transnational reach. In other words, the state clearly demonstrates the ability to suppress the dissent across the regions within the country but also beyond the national borders. For example, the migrant worker was detained in Moscow and brought back to homeland for trial. Third difference is the state intervention and digital manipulation. As it can be observed from the case of labor migrant, the state fabricated the evidence and used cyber trolls to undermine and incriminate her activities. This online tactic shows that state is engaging

in hybrid forms of repressions by utilizing both offline and online repression tactics. Overall, the cases illustrate how OPP typically viewed in Western literature as low-cost and lacking real world impact can carry severe offline consequences in non-democratic states. All six individuals faced imprisonment and legal penalties for their activities through various social media networks, which also demonstrates the high stakes for engaging with political issues online, based on the case of Kyrgyzstan.

The last but most importantly on the discussion of criteria for online political participation to be considered on a legitimate form of political action. In the literature review, I have mentioned Halupka (2014) and his criteria for legitimization as follows: 1) an action must be situated in online context, 2) the action is engaged with political issue or stance, 3) the action is impulsive and reactive, yet reflective of the individual's stance on the political matter, 4) the action contributes to visibility and engagement with political causes, 5) action's replication and accessibility, 6) it should be engaged with broader social and political causes for example raise awareness, or show solidarity and 7) the political context of the online act depending on the environment or setting in which it takes place. As I have highlighted since the very beginning the conditions for political engagement in the non-democratic states differ from the ones in the democratic countries. In other words, online political participation is in the different political context. The cases discussed above have all the features presented by Halupka in as much as all of them took place online, engaged with political issue, reflected reactive dissatisfaction and disillusionment with the state's actions. Even though it is difficult to argue about the reach of the activities based on the number of followers and subscribers, the posts on social media networks were easily replicated and accessible before the state blocked them. Thus, the actions of these individuals contribute to the visibility and engagement with political issues, which in authoritarian setting is a form of political expression to challenge the state's political discourse.

I would like to end discussion with Jan W. van Deth's conceptualization of political participation as a broader framework not limited to online form of engagement. According to van Deth (2016), the political participation ought to encompass a wide range of voluntary citizen actions related to government, politics, or the state. Van Deth (2016) argues that the concept must evolve to capture the expanding ways democracy functions. He outlines eight defining rules to clarify what qualifies as political participation, such as requiring an activity or action that is voluntary and conducted by nonprofessionals. Participation must occur within the political sphere or target the government to count as political. These rules provide a framework for identifying political participation in my analysis. The cases mentioned above comply with such understanding of political involvement since the posts in social networks were voluntary, non-paid, and conducted by nonprofessionals. Since the individuals were expressing the dissatisfaction with the state's decisions on political matters, they can be considered as political engagement without further classification to online or offline forms of participation.

## 6. Conclusion

The key research question of this thesis was how the repression of online political participation (OPP) in Kyrgyzstan challenges the notion of "slacktivism" as a superficial form of political participation. I used Jan W. van Deth's conceptualization of political participation and Halupka's framework on the legitimization of clicktivism, the study argues that digital forms of engagement with politics in repressive environments should be considered legitimate forms of political engagement. The literature review revealed that the contemporary conceptualization of online political participation is based on pre-digital era theorists of conventional forms of political participation. In addition, the scholars focusing on OPP identified that these studies are predominantly based on Western democracies, thus highlighting the lack of studies on forms of digital engagement in non-democratic states. Therefore, this study is to contribute to the role of online political engagement in authoritarian states. The findings of research have demonstrated that in authoritarian regimes such as Kyrgyzstan, where traditional forms of political participation are not used due to disillusionment Online political engagement serves as one of the few viable channels for dissent. Through a detailed analysis of six case studies, this thesis has shown that even low-cost digital actions, such as creating posts on Facebook or criticizing the government on YouTube carry substantial risks and provoke harsh offline consequences, including arrests, imprisonment, and legal persecution. The Kyrgyz government's systematic repression of online dissent indicates that OPP has high stakes in authoritarian stakes. Moreover, the research indicated that repression of individuals involved in OPP extends beyond Kyrgyzstan's borders, as the government targeting activists abroad.

The discussion of traditional and digital forms of repression was built on key theorists such as Weidmann and Rød(2019) which are complemented by Levistky and Way (2006), Rogov (2018) and Silitski (2006) to provide more comprehensive overview on how the

autocratic regimes employ to stifle opposition both online and offline. While the Weidmann and Rød's theory on the Internet repressive strategies in autocratic regimes was crucial for understanding the rationale of fear of mobilization power of social networks and use of digital censorship and surveillance of online dissent as a long-term strategy. However, having in mind the political and historical background of the country, it was also important to discuss repressive strategies in the post -Soviet context. Although the theories by Rogov (2018) and Silitski (2006) do not discuss the repressive strategies of the post-Soviet authoritarian states, they help to understand the real-world repressive strategies of OPP. The hybrid tactics of preemptive repression and the politics of fear, coupled with selective enforcement of ambiguous laws, reveal how authoritarian regimes are adapting to the challenges posed by digital participation.

The analysis of the cases on repressive strategies of online political participation showcasing Kyrgyz government revealed the recurring patterns and combinations to various degrees each of the following: state surveillance, preemptive repression, and the use of legal frameworks. Moreover, similar patterns include swift government response by detainment to the online content of dissatisfaction or criticism. The state is highly sensitive to any mentioning of the mobilization through video and textual content. The politics of fear mentioned by Rogov (2018) is reinforced due to significant differences in the profiles of the targeted. The research shows that the subjects of coercion are not only popular figures such as writers and musicians but also ordinary citizens such as students, labor migrants and pensioners. In addition, the discussion of the cases showed the government demonstrates its citizens the capability to suppress dissent not only locally but also internationally, for example transnational detention of labor migrant from Russia. Finally, hybrid forms of repressions are visible not only through surveillance and blocking the content or profiles in the social media networks but also through use of digital technology to fabricate evidence and control online narratives. These cases

collectively underscore the heightened risks of digital activism in authoritarian regimes, reinforcing the need to reconceptualize online political participation as a legitimate and impactful form of resistance in such contexts.

In conclusion, this thesis challenges the critique of slacktivism by illustrating that in authoritarian regimes, OPP is not only impactful but is perceived by the state as a genuine threat. The repression of digital forms of political engagement in Kyrgyzstan underscores the need to reassess how online political participation is conceptualized in non-democratic settings. Far from being a trivial or passive form of engagement, OPP in authoritarian states represents a significant mode of political expression that has real-world consequences for both activists and governments. These findings contribute to a broader understanding of how digital political participation functions in repressive contexts and call for a more nuanced evaluation of online activism's role in shaping political resistance in the digital age.

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