Social media, online activism & government control in Kazakhstan

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Panel: Post-Socialists & Post-Authoritarian Societies
Research overview

- Preliminary findings from an on-going research project on: *the role of online social media and activism in political processes and political participation in Kazakhstan*

- Case study: the 2011 Zhanaozen city events

- Methodology:
  - Content analysis: ‘Mapping’ of the content of the Kazakh blogosphere
  - Discourse analysis Framing theory
Media & Censorship in Kazakhstan

The state
• Kazakhstan declared independence from USSR in December 1991
• Despite the high hopes after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Kazakhstan is still viewed as an authoritarian state
• President Nazarbayev retains tight control of the state and media
• Nazarbayev’s government ‘moved closer to the ultra-authoritarian model of Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan’ (Reporters Without Borders)

The media
• 2,500 regularly published newspapers and magazines – 80% of which are private
• 238 representatives of online media, as well as 100 TV and radio stations
• In 2012, 40 opposition media outlet were banned
• Kazakhstan ranks 182nd out of 196 countries and 26th out of the 29 former Soviet states for press freedom
Internet & Censorship in Kazakhstan

- In 2012, Kazakhstan ranked top in terms of ICT & digital uptake amongst the CIS states.
- The government considered the internet as a new source of strengthening its economic position in Central Asia by becoming the region’s information-technology hub.
- However, the democratising power of the internet did not escape the attention of authorities.
- Kazakhstan is now looking at mechanisms to control social networking sites in order to prevent ‘extremist’ actions – like those seen in Tunisia and Egypt.
Internet censorship techniques

- **1st generation**: ‘Chinese-style’ Internet filtering & Internet-café surveillance.

- **2nd generation**: construction of legal environments legitimising information control, authorities’ informal request to companies for removal of information, technical shutdowns of websites, & computer-network attacks.

- **3rd generation**: warrantless surveillance, the creation of ‘national cyber-zones’, state-sponsored information campaigns & direct physical action to silence individuals or groups.

  *(Deibert and Rohozinski in MacKinnon, 2011)*
Background to Zhanaozen events

- 16th of December, 2011 – the worst civic conflict in the post-soviet history of Kazakhstan during the celebrations of the 20th anniversary of Kazakhstan’s independence in Zhanaozen
- 16 people killed and over 100 injured
- President Nazarbayev imposes state of emergency in the town of Zhanaozen, and all forms of communication with the rest of the country were cut off, including mobile and internet services
‘That YouTube video’ that started it all..

- A video demonstrating the police marching towards the civilians and then opening fire is uploaded to YouTube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gX8I2JzFfpo which led to the opening of the criminal investigation by the Prosecutor General’s office

- The Prime Minister of Kazakhstan at the time – Massimov, invited country’s popular bloggers to Zhanaozen

- This triggered an opposition group of bloggers to form their own team to visit the town
Methodology

• Exploratory research
  – Stage one:
    • ‘mapping’ of the blogging sites content and participation to identify netizens’ activities in Kazakhstan’s blogosphere
    • Qualitative thematic content analysis based on the following questions:
      – How was the conflict in Zhanaozen framed?
      – Who was the voice of the events?
      – What is the story subject of the news reports/blogs?
      – What story sources are used?
      – What is the main language of blogging?
  – Stage two:
    • discourse analysis/framing theory
Data collection

• Time frame: 16 December 2011 (when the events started) - 27 March 2012 (when the trials of the 37 oil workers began)

• Blogging websites Yvision and LiveJournal primary focus of analysis due to their popularity in the Kazakhstan’s blogosphere

• Two national newspapers – Kazakhstanskaya Pravda and Respublika (including its online version) included providing a comparative context against which the blogging sites are positioned in terms of context
Some Findings from mapping

Sadenva’s (bloody blogger) twitter which is protected

Three emerging groups of bloggers:

– The ‘bloody bloggers’: ethnic Kazakhs selected by the government

– The ‘free bloggers’: ethnic Russians & Kazakhs who went on a trip to Zhanaozen independently

– The rest of the bloggers who either supported the first of the second group or remained neutral
• How were the events in Zhanaozen framed?
  – law and (dis)order; socio-economic issues; political instability caused by the opposition in exile; political instability caused by internal force; conspiracy focus

• Who was the voice of the events?
  – national government; army; police; Kazakhstan Prosecutor General’s office; the oil company – KazMunaiGaz; protesters; and political opposition both inside and outside of Kazakhstan.

• What is the story subject of the news reports/ blogs?
  – discussions about social networking websites; socio-economic issues; the role of print media and TV in covering the events of Zhanaozen.

• What is the main language of blogging?
  – Mostly Russian
" [...] the reasons which led to the events of the 16th of December are buried very deep. And not only are they related to the economic disputes between two parties, but are also connected to the social and demographic problems of the entire region" – Baglan Aidashov, the bloody blogger

"For those who don't know what happened in Zhanaozen - long story short - the oil workers realised they were lied to - in reality their salaries were two-three times less than stated in the official papers in the head office...they went out to protest asking for money and did so for 7(!) months” – Kromanionez, one of the third-party bloggers
Framing of the events – mainstream media

- Socio-economic issues: 18%
- Law and (dis)order: 23%
- Political instability caused by the opposition in exile: 9%
- Political instability caused by the internal force: 45%
- Conspiracy: 5%
- Other: 0%

Kaz Pravda newspaper – main heading: “the situation is under control, the responsible ones will be prosecuted’.

“Will Zhanaozen become a zone of social disaster? Perhaps the bloody events in Zhanaozen on December 16th should be the first wake up call as the city of 120,000 people is solely living off the development of the Uzen [oil] fields” - Respublika
"I HAVE SEEN THAT VIDEO. I HAVE ALSO SEEN OTHERS. DON'T EITHER WANT TO DEFEND NOR DISCUSS THEM. I HAVE SEEN OTHER MATERIAL. HOWEVER, IF ONE COMPARES THEM - ONE CAN SEE THAT THAT VIDEO IS RATHER TAKEN OUT OF THE CONTEXT OF WHAT WAS GOING ON ON THE SQUARE” - NEW MAYOR IN SADENOVA’S BLOG (‘BLOODY BLOGGER’)

"IN COMPARISON TO WHAT THE POLICEMEN DID (SHOOTING PEOPLE), MY HUSBAND MUST BE JUSTIFIED” – IN AN INTERVIEW WITH THE ‘FREE BLOGGERS’ - WIFE OF AN OIL WORKER WHO WAS PROTESTING FOR 7 MONTHS AND WHO WAS INJURED BY THE POLICE ON THE SQUARE

Shyolokov’s (‘free’ blogger) blog on YVision
“The situation is now under the control of the law enforcement. Perpetrators will be punished to the fullest extent of the law” - President Nazarbayev in KazPravda

“Civilians who had gathered on the central square to celebrate the 20th Anniversary of Independence have been attacked by a group of hooligans” - Prosecutor General Daulbayev in KazPravda
"After the events in Zhanaozen, I was contacted by the oil workers asking me to stop sending Twitter updates. As the security forces were checking out everyone who uses Twitter and Facebook in Zhanaozen“ - Murat, the ‘Free’ blogger

Dina Baidildayeva’s YouTube page, one of the ‘free bloggers’. This is one of the video interviews in Zhanaozen.
tensions

“We find it harder than those who wrote nasty things to us. We have names, jobs and a political position which was established long time ago. However, what we had in return was only anonymous messages such as ‘Pro-governmental’, ‘Bloody’, ‘Official’. I offered to meet everyone who had Mnaghistau region written in their accounts and who accused us of selling out but no one responded”

Alisher Elikbayev (a ‘bloody blogger’)
“Today Internet gives an opportunity for the society to have an opinion different to the state ideology translated through TV. And this the confrontation will only grow if the authorities don't change their policies” - Subject, a third-party blogger

Where to from here?

- What do online social media activism and the emerging public sphere tell us about the changing nature of the Kazakh society?
- Netizens and political activists mobilised online social media to inform the country and the world of the events in Zhanaozen
- The old authoritarian method dealing with social and political unrest by cutting the place off from the outside world no longer works in Kazakhstan
- Kazakhstan’s government mobilisation in finding effective ways to control online social media to transmit the official message and state ideology
- The impact of blogosphere on mainstream media