

# YOUTH MEDIA CONSUMPTION AND PERCEPTIONS OF ELECTORAL INTEGRITY IN KAZAKHSTAN AND KYRGYZSTAN

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**Abstract:** A large number of citizens in Central Asian societies have recently gained access to the Internet, which provides an excellent opportunity for examining political consequences of the spread of digital technology in non-democracies. This article analyzes the relationship between youth media consumption and confidence in the electoral process in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. This study finds that exposure to web-based news produces a significant negative impact on youth's confidence in electoral institutions in Kazakhstan, while online news consumption is weakly associated with young people's confidence in the integrity of the electoral process in Kyrgyzstan. These findings suggest that the impact of online media might be stronger in political regimes with lower levels of press freedom.

Central Asian societies have recently experienced spectacular growth in Internet use.<sup>1</sup> The share of Internet users soared from 1 percent in 2001 to 50.6 percent in 2011 in Kazakhstan.<sup>2</sup> The proportion of Internet

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<sup>1</sup> An earlier version of this article was presented at the workshop "Youth in Kazakhstan: Societal Changes, Challenges, and Opportunities," Central Asia Program, George Washington University, April 21, 2014. I thank workshop participants and *Demokratizatsiya's* anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments. I am also thankful to the World Values Survey research team for generously providing public access to survey data.

<sup>2</sup> The World Telecommunication/ICT Indicators Database, [http://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Cybersecurity/Documents/Country\\_Profiles/Kazakhstan.pdf](http://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Cybersecurity/Documents/Country_Profiles/Kazakhstan.pdf), accessed July 2, 2015.

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users also grew, albeit at a slower pace, in Kyrgyzstan, increasing from 3 percent in 2001 to 20 percent in 2011. A related phenomenon was a surge in secure Internet servers, defined as servers using encryption technology in Netcraft. The number of secure Internet servers climbed from 8 (2001) to 105 (2011) in Kazakhstan and from 1 (2001) to 14 (2011) in Kyrgyzstan.<sup>3</sup> By the same token, there occurred a dramatic growth in online content. According to the Internet Domain Survey semi-annually conducted by the Internet Systems Consortium, the number of Internet hosts with the country domain name *kz* skyrocketed from 4,404 in January 2001 to 61,205 in July 2011.<sup>4</sup> Likewise, the number of Internet hosts with the country domain name *kg* exponentially increased from 1,873 in January 2001 to 111,930 in July 2011. Yet, it is unclear whether this rapid spread of digital technology poses a formidable threat to political stability in the non-democratic regimes that have been installed in the former Soviet republics since the collapse of communism.

Scholars disagree over the political implications of rapidly increasing Internet use in non-democracies. Internet optimists argue that the Internet has the potential to instantly connect a large number of citizens, swiftly disseminate information, and eventually facilitate mass mobilization against the incumbent government.<sup>5</sup> Larry Diamond, for example, uses the term “liberation technology” to denote “any form of information and communication technology (ICT) that can expand political, social, and economic freedom.”<sup>6</sup> Emphasizing the power of social media, some journalists and analysts described post-election protests held in Moldova in spring 2009 as the Twitter Revolution,<sup>7</sup> while a popular uprising that brought down the long-serving president of Egypt Hosni Mubarak was nicknamed the Facebook Revolution.<sup>8</sup> Other observers of world poli-

<sup>3</sup> World Development Indicators Database, <http://data.worldbank.org/data-catalog/world-development-indicators>.

<sup>4</sup> Internet Systems Consortium’s Internet Domain Survey, “Distribution by Top-Level Domain Name by Host Count,” <https://www.isc.org/services/survey>.

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Cass Sunstein. 2008. *Infotopia: How Many Minds Produce Knowledge*. New York: Oxford University Press; Clay Shirky. 2011. “The Political Power of Social Media.” *Foreign Affairs* 90(1): 28–41.

<sup>6</sup> Larry Diamond. 2010. “Liberation Technology.” *Journal of Democracy* 21(3): 69–83, p. 70.

<sup>7</sup> Ellen Barry. 2009. “Protests in Moldova Explode, with the Help of Twitter.” *New York Times*, April 7, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/04/08/world/europe/08moldova.html?pagewanted=all&r=0>; Nathan Hodge. 2009. “Inside Moldova’s Twitter Revolution.” *Wired.Com* April 8, <http://www.wired.com/2009/04/inside-moldovas/>; Alina Mungiu-Pippidi and Igor Munteanu. 2009. “Moldova’s ‘Twitter Revolution.’” *Journal of Democracy* 20(3): 137–142. For an alternative perspective, see Henry E. Hale, “Did the Internet Break the Political Machine? Moldova’s ‘Twitter Revolution that Wasn’t,” *Demokratizatsiya: The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization* 21 (4): 481-505.

<sup>8</sup> Nahed Eltantawy and Julie Wiest. 2011. “Social Media in the Egyptian Revolution: Reconsidering Resource Mobilization Theory.” *International Journal of Communication* 5: 1207–1224; Catharine Smith. 2011. “Egypt’s Facebook Revolution: Wael Ghonim

tics, however, question the crucial role of web-based communication in sustaining mass protests. In particular, internet pessimists contend that the Internet might undercut citizens' drive for democratic change because it can create an illusion of vibrant civil society in the absence of viable offline social networks.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, autocrats might devise a wide arsenal of repressive methods to harness the power of digital technology. Recent empirical research, for example, shows how the Russian government seeks to subvert the use of the Internet for regime-threatening political action.<sup>10</sup> The dramatic spread of digital technology in Central Asia provides an excellent opportunity for further analysis of the political consequences of Internet growth in non-democracies.

This article examines the linkage between young people's media consumption and confidence in the electoral process in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. Specifically, the analysis compares the effects of television and the Internet on young people's perceptions of electoral integrity. The study hypothesizes that consumption of TV news boosts citizens' confidence in having free and fair elections in the country, whereas exposure to web-based news negatively affects the level of public confidence in the electoral process. The underlying assumption is that the Internet is subject to less state censorship than television and thus supplies more opportunities for learning about politics from different perspectives, which facilitates a more critical assessment of the quality of national elections.

The article focuses on public confidence in the electoral process because these political attitudes have a significant impact on political behavior. The concept of electoral integrity here refers to "international conventions and global norms, applying universally to all countries worldwide throughout the electoral cycle, including during the pre-electoral period, the campaign, on polling day, and its aftermath."<sup>11</sup> Recent empirical work clearly demonstrates that public confidence in the electoral process

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Thanks the Social Network." *The Huffington Post* February 11, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/02/11/egypt-facebook-revolution-wael-ghonim\\_n\\_822078.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/02/11/egypt-facebook-revolution-wael-ghonim_n_822078.html); Jose Antonio Vargas. 2012. "Spring Awakening: How an Egyptian Revolution Began on Facebook." *New York Times*, February 17, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/19/books/review/how-an-egyptian-revolution-began-on-facebook.html?pagewanted=all>.

<sup>9</sup> For a critical assessment of the role of the Internet, see Evgeny Morozov. 2011. *The Net Delusion: The Dark Side of Internet Freedom*. New York: Public Affairs.

<sup>10</sup> Sarah Oates. 2013. *Revolution Stalled: The Political Limits of the Internet in the Post-Soviet Sphere*. New York: Oxford University Press; Andrei Soldatov and Irina Borogan. 2013. "Russia's Surveillance State." *World Policy Journal* 30(3): 23–30; Florian Toepfl. 2011. "Managing Public Outrage: Power, Scandal, and New Media in Contemporary Russia." *New Media and Society* 13(8): 1301–1319.

<sup>11</sup> Pippa Norris. 2013. "The New Research Agenda Studying Electoral Integrity." *Electoral Studies* 32(4): 563–575, p. 564.

affects the likelihood of voting.<sup>12</sup> Birch, for example, finds a positive relationship between perceptions of electoral fairness and the propensity to vote.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, public outrage over electoral fraud might trigger backlash against the incumbent. For example, vote rigging fomented post-election protests, culminating in the resignation of the incumbent governments in Georgia (2003), Ukraine (2004), and Kyrgyzstan (2005).<sup>14</sup> In light of previous research on behavioral consequences of mass perceptions of electoral integrity, it is important to uncover sources of public confidence in the electoral process.

This study uses the cases of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan to investigate media effects on mass perceptions of electoral integrity in two countries with different levels of press freedom. Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan are similar in many ways.<sup>15</sup> These Central Asian states share common cultural heritage. The titular nations trace their origins to Turkic-speaking tribes pursuing a nomadic lifestyle. Most of their land was colonized by the Russian empire in the nineteenth century and subsequently incorporated into the Soviet Union. The former Soviet republics gained national independence and embarked upon transition from communism in 1991. Despite these historical legacies, the political trajectories of the two post-Soviet states diverged. Kyrgyzstan of the early 1990s was often hailed as “Central Asia’s island of democracy,” surrounded by more authoritarian neighbors.<sup>16</sup> Compared to most rulers in the former Soviet republics, the first president of Kyrgyzstan, Askar Akayev, had less political experience in the ranks of the Communist Party and introduced more economic liberalization reforms in the early 1990s. Akayev’s popularity, however, plummeted due to the bleak performance of the national economy, high incidence of poverty, and rising corruption within the ruling elite. Scattered mass protests against deteriorating living standards broke out in 2000 and 2001.<sup>17</sup> Growing

<sup>12</sup> Miguel Carreras and Yasemin Irepoglu. 2013. “Trust in Elections, Vote Buying, and Turnout in Latin America.” *Electoral Studies* 32(4): 609–619; Olena Nikolayenko. 2015. “Do Contentious Elections Depress Turnout?” In *Contentious Elections: From Ballots to Barricades*, eds. Pippa Norris, Richard W. Frank, and Ferran Martinez i Coma. New York: Routledge, pp. 25–44; Pippa Norris. 2014. *Why Electoral Integrity Matters*. New York: Cambridge University Press; Alberto Simpser. 2012. “Does Electoral Manipulation Discourage Voter Turnout? Evidence from Mexico.” *Journal of Politics* 74(3): 782–795.

<sup>13</sup> Sarah Birch. 2010. “Perceptions of Electoral Fairness and Voter Turnout.” *Comparative Political Studies* 43(12): 1601–1622.

<sup>14</sup> On the mobilizing effects of electoral fraud, see Joshua Tucker. 2007. “Enough! Electoral Fraud, Collective Action Problems, and the 2nd Wave of Post-Communist Democratic Revolutions.” *Perspectives on Politics* 5(3): 537–553.

<sup>15</sup> For an overview, see Sally Cummings. 2012. *Understanding Central Asia: Politics and Contested Transformations*. London: Routledge.

<sup>16</sup> John Anderson. 1999. *Kyrgyzstan: Central Asia’s Island of Democracy?* Amsterdam: Harwood Academic Publishers.

<sup>17</sup> International Crisis Group. 2001. *Kyrgyzstan at Ten: Trouble in the “Island of Democracy”*

public discontent with the incumbent government, along with increasing elite divisions, engendered larger mass protests, known as the Tulip Revolution, in March 2005 and resulted in Akayev's removal from office.<sup>18</sup> Another series of protest events held in April 2010 led to the resignation of Kyrgyzstan's second president Kurmanbek Bakiyev. As a result of the 2011 election, Almazbek Atambayev was elected as president with 63.2 percent of the popular vote.<sup>19</sup> In contrast, there has been little turnover of power in Kazakhstan, where authoritarian practices are more firmly entrenched. President Nursultan Nazarbayev has held the post from 1991 to the present day. According to the official results of the 2011 presidential election, Nazarbayev received 95.5 percent of the popular vote.<sup>20</sup> In addition, the political party Nur Otan (Radiant Fatherland), which is closely associated with the incumbent president, secured the majority of seats in the national parliament.

Given the cross-country differences in the degree of authoritarianism, media outlets in Kyrgyzstan enjoy a higher level of press freedom than their counterparts in Kazakhstan. According to the U.S.-based non-governmental organization Freedom House, the 2011 score for press freedom in Kazakhstan was 81, compared to 69 for Kyrgyzstan, on a scale from 0 to 100, with a higher score signifying a lower level of press freedom.<sup>21</sup> Similarly, Freedom House's score for Internet freedom is higher in Kazakhstan (58 vs. 35 in 2011), indicating that there is more state control over the Internet in the country.<sup>22</sup>

The present study focuses on Central Asian youth. Opinion polls consistently show that young people are the most active Internet users. The data from the sixth wave of the World Values Survey, for example, indicate that 38.7 percent of 18-29 year old respondents in Kazakhstan obtain political news daily on the net, compared to only 5.3 percent of those over 55.<sup>23</sup> Similarly, 32.7 percent of 18-29 year old respondents reported daily

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Asia Report N 22, pp. 15–16, <http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/asia/central-asia/kyrgyzstan/022-kyrgyzstan-at-ten-trouble-in-the-island-of-democracy.aspx>.

<sup>18</sup> For an analysis of Akayev's downfall, see Scott Radnitz. 2006. "What Really Happened in Kyrgyzstan?" *Journal of Democracy* 17 (2): 132–146.

<sup>19</sup> OSCE. 2012. *The Kyrgyz Republic Presidential Elections 30 October 2011: OSCE/ODIHR Election Observation Mission Final Report*. Warsaw, Poland: Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), p. 24.

<sup>20</sup> OSCE. 2011. *Republic of Kazakhstan Early Presidential Election 3 April 2011: OSCE/ODIHR Election Observation Mission Final Report*. Warsaw, Poland: ODIHR, p. 29.

<sup>21</sup> For more information, visit <http://www.freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-press/freedom-press-2012#.U58sISho7l8>.

<sup>22</sup> For details, see Freedom House. 2012. *Freedom on the Net*, <http://www.freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/freedom-net-2012#.U58sqSho7l8>.

<sup>23</sup> The reported statistics are based upon the author's calculations. For detailed information about the World Values Survey and access to the data files for Wave 6, 2010–2014, see <http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/wvs.jsp>.

consumption of online political news in Kyrgyzstan in 2011, compared to 7.1 percent of those over 55. Recent ethnographic work traces how Internet use affects the cultural identity of urban youth in Central Asia.<sup>24</sup> In addition, Internet use is likely to influence the development of youth's political identity. For example, the blog *Akaevu.net* provided an important platform for dissemination of information about anti-government protests in Kyrgyzstan in spring 2005.<sup>25</sup> The patterns of youth's media habits and political behavior merit further academic attention because the young generation growing up in the post-Soviet period has the potential to act as an agent of social change and bring about dramatic political transformations in the region.

The remainder of the article proceeds as follows. Section 2 discusses the media environment in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. Section 3 describes the survey methodology. The next section presents findings from public opinion polls conducted in 2011. That year, both countries held presidential elections amidst concerns about the integrity of electoral procedures. The concluding section lays out implications of these findings for prospects for democracy in Central Asia.

### Media Environment in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan

There are numerous media outlets in Kazakhstan. According to the 2013 data released by the Kazakhstan Ministry of Communication and Information, there were 1,357 newspapers, 48 radio stations, and 51 TV companies in the country, which had a population of 17.5 million people in 2013.<sup>26</sup> Only one-fourth of newspapers and one-fifth of TV companies were state-owned that year.<sup>27</sup> An abundance of private media, however, does not translate into a high degree of pluralism in the public sphere because a sizeable share of private media outlets are controlled by individuals closely associated with the incumbent president.<sup>28</sup> The president's

<sup>24</sup> Douglas Blum. 2011. *National Identity and Globalization: Youth, State, and Society in Post-Soviet Eurasia*. New York: Cambridge University Press; Hans Ibold. 2010. "Disjuncture 2.0: Youth, Internet Use and Cultural Identity in Bishkek." *Central Asian Survey* 29(4): 521–535; Stefan Kirmse. 2013. *Youth and Globalization in Central Asia: Everyday Life between Religion, Media, and International Donors*. Frankfurt-on-Main, Germany: Campus Verlag.

<sup>25</sup> Svetlana Kulikova and David Perlmutter. 2007. "Blogging down the Dictator? The Kyrgyz Revolution and Samizdat Websites." *The International Communication Gazette* 69(1): 29–50.

<sup>26</sup> Ministry of Information and Communication of Kazakhstan. 2013. *Statistics on the Mass Media in Kazakhstan as of 15 March 2013*, [http://mki.gov.kz/rus/komitety/komitet\\_informacii\\_arxivov/upravlenie\\_pechatnyh\\_smi/statistika\\_otrasli/](http://mki.gov.kz/rus/komitety/komitet_informacii_arxivov/upravlenie_pechatnyh_smi/statistika_otrasli/).

<sup>27</sup> Ministry of Information and Communication of Kazakhstan. 2013. *Statistics on the Mass Media in Kazakhstan as of 15 March 2013*.

<sup>28</sup> Bruce Pannier. 2007. "Kazakhstan: Media Ownership Leaves Little Room for Independence." *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, May 25, <http://www.rferl.org/content/article/1076718.html>.

daughter, Dariga Nazarbayeva, founded the news agency Khabar and captured a large segment of the media market.

Numerous reports indicate that press freedom is systematically violated in Kazakhstan.<sup>29</sup> According to the International Foundation for the Protection of Freedom of Speech *Adil Soz*, there were 13 physical attacks on media professionals and 19 libel suits against journalists in 2011, while the government denied access to public information in 325 cases and denied public access to certain web sites in more than 200 cases.<sup>30</sup> Political pressures on the mass media escalated during the national elections. For example, the web site of the weekly *Respublika*, known for its critical coverage of domestic politics, was blocked during the 2011 presidential election.<sup>31</sup> Another major assault on the freedom of expression occurred during a strike of oil workers in the city of Zhanaozen.<sup>32</sup> Several web sites, including Twitter, were blocked during the government's crackdown on outspoken labor union members in December 2011.<sup>33</sup> A team of researchers affiliated with the OpenNet Initiative (ONI) estimated that Kazakh authorities widely used selective online filtering, defined as "narrowly targeted filtering that blocks a small number of specific sites across a few categories or filtering that targets a single category or issue."<sup>34</sup>

Moreover, amendments to the Law on Media that went into effect on July 11, 2009 ratcheted up the level of Internet censorship in Kazakhstan.<sup>35</sup> In accordance with the law, all forms of online content, including blogs, personal web pages, and chat rooms, are legally defined as mass media. This legal definition makes the Internet resources liable to the same regulations as traditional media outlets. Under the amendments, the government is authorized to suspend or block any web resource that propagates ethnic strife, terrorism, war, or violent overthrow of the constitutional order. Acting upon these legal provisions, state authorities blocked public access to the blog-hosting platform LiveJournal in 2011 in an alleged attempt

<sup>29</sup> For example, see Committee to Protect Journalists. 2013. *Attacks on the Press*, <http://www.cpj.org/attacks/>; Reporters without Borders. 2012. *Press Freedom Index 2011/2012*, <http://en.rsf.org/press-freedom-index-2011-2012,1043.html>.

<sup>30</sup> Adil Soz. 2012. *Statistics on Press Freedom Violations in Kazakhstan in 2011*, <http://www.adilsoz.kz/programms/statistika/ctatistika-narushenij-prav-smi-i-zhurnalistov-v-kazaxstane-v-2011-godu/>.

<sup>31</sup> Joanna Lillis. 2011. "Kazakhstan: The News Weekly that Won't Be Silenced." *Eurasianet.org*, March 29, <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/63176>.

<sup>32</sup> Committee to Protect Journalists. 2011. "Kazakh Authorities Censor News on Deadly Clashes," December 20, <http://cpj.org/2011/12/kazakh-authorities-censor-news-on-deadly-clashes.php>.

<sup>33</sup> Human Rights Watch. 2012. *Striking Oil, Striking Workers: Violations of Labor Rights in Kazakhstan's Oil Sector*, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2012/09/10/striking-oil-striking-workers/violations-labor-rights-kazakhstan-oil-sector>, p.101.

<sup>34</sup> On the ONI methodology and findings, see <https://opennet.net/country-profiles>.

<sup>35</sup> For a full text of the law, visit [http://adilet.zan.kz/rus/docs/Z090000178\\_](http://adilet.zan.kz/rus/docs/Z090000178_).



to prevent the propaganda of terrorism and religious extremism.<sup>36</sup> The government's ban ostensibly came after Rakhat Aliyev, Nazarbayev's former son-in-law and author of the provocative book *Godfather-in-Law*, posted compromising material about the Kazakh elite on his LiveJournal blog.

Despite the government's infringements on the freedom of expression, the volume of online content has grown at a staggering pace in Kazakhstan. In particular, efforts are underway to expand the scope of Kazakh-language content and divert domestic users from the consumption of Russian-language resources. A group of like-minded individuals, for example, spearheaded the production of the Kazakh-language content for the web-based encyclopedia *Wikipedia*. As a result of this initiative, the number of the Kazakh-language *Wikipedia* articles skyrocketed from merely 1 in January 2005 to 212,000 in January 2015.<sup>37</sup> For comparison, the number of Kyrgyz-language *Wikipedia* articles increased from 2 in January 2005 to 29,000 in January 2015.<sup>38</sup>

Compared to Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan has a less saturated media market. There were 159 newspapers, 26 radio stations, and 25 TV channels in the country with a population of 5.5 million people in 2013.<sup>39</sup> Since Akayev's ouster, the government of Kyrgyzstan continued to curtail press freedom. Most analysts concur that the media situation worsened with the start of Bakiyev's presidency.<sup>40</sup> Bakiyev seized control over the local broadcasting media and banned transmission of the international radio stations *Radio Free Europe* and *BBC Radio* in the winter of 2008. As in the early 2000s, the mass media were threatened with legal suits and hefty fines for investigative journalism. Furthermore, there were at least 83 threats and attacks on media professionals between 2007 and 2011.<sup>41</sup> For example, the office of the newspaper *Kyrgyz Rukhu* was burned down by unidentified assailants after the paper criticized presidential administration

<sup>36</sup> Reporters without Borders. 2011. "Mounting Concern about Kazakhstan's Use of Cyber-Censorship." August 26, <http://en.rsf.org/kazakhstan-mounting-concern-about-kazakhstan-26-08-2011,40858.html>.

<sup>37</sup> Wikipedia Statistics: Kazakh, <http://stats.wikimedia.org/EN/TablesWikipediaKK.htm>.

<sup>38</sup> Wikipedia Statistics: Kirghiz, <http://stats.wikimedia.org/EN/TablesWikipediaKY.htm>.

<sup>39</sup> Freedom House. 2014. *Freedom of the Press 2014*, <http://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-press/2014/kyrgyzstan#.U7mWDbFI6So>.

<sup>40</sup> Erica Marat. 2008. "Bakiyev Anticipates a Harsh Winter and an Energy Crisis, Further Restricts Free Speech." *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, December 12, <http://www.jamestown.org/programs/edm/archives/edm2008/>

?tx\_publicationstnews\_pi2[issue]=237; Muzaffar Suleymanov. 2010. "Kyrgyzstan's Familiar Path: Press Repression, Ousted Leaders." *Committee to Protect Journalists Blog*, April 8, <https://cpj.org/blog/2010/04/kyrgyzstan-media-crackdown-bakiyev-ousted.php>.

<sup>41</sup> B. D. Usenova, ed. 2012. *Is Journalist Work Safe in Kyrgyzstan?* Bishkek: Institute of Media Policy of the Kyrgyz Republic, p. 7, <http://www.media.kg/category/publications>.



head Kurmanbek Temirbaev in February 2007.<sup>42</sup> The murders of investigative journalists Alisher Saipov (2007), Almaz Tashiev (2009), and Gennady Pavlyuk (2009) were also seen as attacks on press freedom.<sup>43</sup>

A steep decline in the number of registered media outlets took place in recent years. The number of newspapers per 1,000 people dropped from 193 in 2008 and 179 in 2011 to 143 in 2012.<sup>44</sup> In particular, Uzbek-language media took a big hit in the aftermath of ethnic violence in the south of the country in June 2010. According to a Bishkek-based NGO spokesperson interviewed by Eric Freedman in May 2012, “Uzbek-language media were completely wiped out of the media landscape, with only one 1,000-circulation newspaper left in the South, but it is state-funded and on the brink of survival.”<sup>45</sup> Some ethnic Uzbek journalists fled the region, while others fell victim to physical attacks. Owners of two local TV channels providing Uzbek-language programming – Khalil Khudaiberdiyev of *Osh TV* and Dzhablon Mirzakhodzhayev of *Mezon TV* – fled the country under threat of imprisonment.<sup>46</sup> In another widely publicized case, members of the Asaba Party broke into the office of the news agency *24kg* in the city of Osh and threatened the agency’s ethnically diverse staff using ethnic slurs.<sup>47</sup> Another alarming development in 2011 was the parliament’s move to nationalize the privately-owned *Channel 5* and transform it into a state parliamentary TV channel.<sup>48</sup> Despite the precarious media environment, the level of press freedom is usually estimated to be higher in Kyrgyzstan than in Kazakhstan.

<sup>42</sup> Public Association Journalists, Kyrgyzstan and International Media Support, Denmark. 2008. Research Report “Political Extremism, Terrorism and Media in Central Asia,” p. 31, <http://www.mediasupport.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/11/ims-political-extremism-central-asia-2008.pdf>.

<sup>43</sup> Farangis Najibullah. 2009. “Violent Death of Kyrgyz Journalist Follows a Disturbing Pattern.” *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, December 22, [http://www.rferl.org/content/Violent\\_Death\\_Of\\_Kyrgyz\\_Journalist\\_Follows\\_A\\_Disturbing\\_Pattern/1910726.html](http://www.rferl.org/content/Violent_Death_Of_Kyrgyz_Journalist_Follows_A_Disturbing_Pattern/1910726.html).

<sup>44</sup> National Statistics Committee of the Kyrgyz Republic. 2013. *Annual Statistics Report of the Kyrgyz Republic, 2008-2012*. Bishkek, Kyrgyz Republic, p. 159.

<sup>45</sup> Eric Freedman. 2013. “Press Rights and Constraints in Kyrgyzstan: The First Year of President Atambaev.” *Central Asia and the Caucasus: Journal of Social and Political Studies* 14(1).

<sup>46</sup> Muzaffar Suleymanov. 2011. “Kyrgyzstan No ‘Island of Democracy’ as It Censors the Press.” *Committee to Protect Journalists Blog*, <http://www.cpj.org/blog/2011/06/an-island-of-democracy-where-freedom-of-speech-is.php>.

<sup>47</sup> Tolgonai Osmongazieva. 2011. “Kyrgyzstan: Playing Nationalist Card?” *24kg News Agency*, August 1, <http://info.24.kg/community/2011/08/01/19482.html>; Reporters without Borders. 2011. “Disturbing Spate of Physical Attacks on Journalists.” May 20, <http://en.rsf.org/kirghizistan-disturbing-spate-of-physical-20-05-2011,40326.html>.

<sup>48</sup> *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*. 2011. “Kyrgyz Parliament Gets Own TV Channels despite President’s Veto.” September 23, [http://www.rferl.org/content/kyrgyz\\_parliament\\_gets\\_own\\_tv\\_channel\\_despite\\_presidents\\_veto/24338296.html](http://www.rferl.org/content/kyrgyz_parliament_gets_own_tv_channel_despite_presidents_veto/24338296.html).

Another prominent feature of Kyrgyzstan's media landscape is the growth of online media. Several popular Russian-language newspapers, including the weekly *MSN* (<http://www.msn.kg>), launched their online versions in the mid-2000s.<sup>49</sup> In addition, there was a boom in Kyrgyz-language news content. The largest Kyrgyz-language news portal *Barakelde*, for example, saw a significant increase in Internet traffic during the 2011 election.<sup>50</sup> The political implications of this online content growth have yet to be analyzed.

## Methodology

This study uses data from the sixth wave of the World Values Survey conducted in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan in 2011. A total of 1,500 respondents per country participated in the survey based upon a national representative sample. Respondents aged 18-29 comprised approximately one-third of the sample (N=475 in Kazakhstan and N=495 in Kyrgyzstan). These age boundaries closely correspond to the legal definition of youth in each country. According to state laws on youth policy, youth is legally defined as 14-29 year old persons in Kazakhstan and 14-28 year old persons in Kyrgyzstan.<sup>51</sup>

The survey gauges the frequency of news consumption from different sources, including newspapers, TV channels, radio stations, the Internet, and discussions with friends and colleagues. The question wording is, "People learn what is going on in this country and the world from various sources. For each of the following sources, please indicate whether you use it to obtain information daily, weekly, monthly, less than monthly, or never."

An advantage of using the WVS data is that the survey includes multiple measures of public confidence in the electoral process. These measures tap into citizens' evaluations of the country's compliance with such international electoral standards for democratic elections as the right to freedom of expression and freedom of association; a fair, honest and transparent vote count; and the independence and impartiality of electoral

<sup>49</sup> Claire Wilkinson. 2012. "Kyrgyzstan: E-Revolution." *EurasiaNet*, July 20, <http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insight/articles/pp072105.shtml>; Public Association Journalists, Kyrgyzstan and International Media Support, Denmark. 2008. Research Report "Political Extremism, Terrorism and Media in Central Asia," p. 30.

<sup>50</sup> IREX. 2012. *Media Sustainability Index 2012*. Washington, DC: IREX, p. 304.

<sup>51</sup> *The Law on State Youth Policy in the Republic of Kazakhstan*, 7 July 2004, [http://www.youthpolicy.org/national/Kazakhstan\\_2004\\_National\\_Youth\\_Policy.pdf](http://www.youthpolicy.org/national/Kazakhstan_2004_National_Youth_Policy.pdf); *The Law on Principles of State Youth Policy in the Kyrgyz Republic*, 31 July 2009, [http://www.youthpolicy.org/national/Kyrgyzstan\\_2009\\_Youth\\_Policy\\_Law.pdf](http://www.youthpolicy.org/national/Kyrgyzstan_2009_Youth_Policy_Law.pdf).

management bodies (EMBs).<sup>52</sup> Respondents were asked to report how often the following electoral (mal)practices occur during the country's national elections:

- (1) Votes are counted fairly.
- (2) Opposition candidates are prevented from running.
- (3) TV news favors the governing party.
- (4) Journalists provide fair coverage of elections.
- (5) Election officials are fair.
- (6) Voters are bribed.
- (7) Rich people buy elections.
- (8) Voters are threatened with violence at the polls.
- (9) Voters are offered a genuine choice in the elections.

Using these survey items, this study computes nine variables: (1) fair vote count, (2) low likelihood (LL) of obstacles to the opposition's campaigning, (3) LL of media bias in favor of the ruling party, (4) fair media coverage, (5) EMB competence, (6) LL of voter bribery, (7) LL of vote buying by the rich, (8) LL of violence at the polls, and (9) genuine choice. The five variables referring to electoral malpractices are recoded so that a higher value corresponds to a higher level of electoral integrity. It must also be noted that the "don't know/difficult to answer" response option is recoded into the middle category so each variable ranges from 1, the lowest level of perceived electoral integrity to 5, the highest. Based upon the principal component analysis,<sup>53</sup> this study distinguishes two dimensions of perceived electoral integrity and constructs two indices. The first index, labeled index of youth's confidence in politicians' compliance with electoral procedures, is made up of five variables: LL of vote bribery, LL of vote buying by the rich, LL of violence at the polls, LL of media bias in favor of the ruling party, and LL of obstacles to the opposition's campaigning (Cronbach's alpha=.679). The second index, labeled index of youth's confidence in electoral institutions, includes the remaining four variables: EMB competence, fair vote count, fair media coverage, and genuine choice (Cronbach's alpha=.643).

Additional attitudinal variables included in the multivariate statistical analysis are interest in politics, party identification, interpersonal trust,

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<sup>52</sup> For a full list of international election standards, see International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance. 2002. *International Electoral Standards: Guidelines for Reviewing the Legal Framework of Elections*. Stockholm, Sweden: IDEA.

<sup>53</sup> Principal component analysis is a statistical technique used to reduce the number of variables in a data set into a smaller number of components or dimensions. For an overview, see Ian Jolliffe. 2006. *Principal Component Analysis*, 2nd ed. New York: Springer-Verlag New York.

and satisfaction with the family financial situation. Interest in politics is coded as a dichotomous variable, with 1 for those interested in politics and 0 for those disinterested in politics. Citizens with high levels of interest in politics are likely to evaluate the quality of elections more critically due to greater awareness of political developments in the country. Furthermore, those who identify with the ruling party are likely to place a larger amount of confidence in the electoral process than supporters of opposition political parties or non-partisans. Party identification is coded as a dichotomous variable, with 1 signifying electoral support for the political party closely associated with the incumbent president (Nur Otan Party in Kazakhstan and Social Democratic Party in Kyrgyzstan). Perceptions of electoral integrity might be further affected by the individual's propensity to trust others. The level of interpersonal trust is measured with the help of the following survey item, "Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted or that you need to be very careful in dealing with people?" Moreover, citizens' satisfaction with the family financial situation, measured on a ten-point scale, is likely to influence their evaluation of electoral procedures in the country.

Such socio-demographic variables as education, employment status, gender, ethnicity, and urban residence are also included in the multivariate analysis. Better-educated individuals are likely to report less confidence in having free and fair elections in the country due to a greater amount of political knowledge. Loss of employment might also lower youth's trust in government. University education is a dichotomous variable, with 1 for university students and those with a university degree. Employment status is another dichotomous variable, with 1 signifying part-time or full-time employment. In addition, given dominant gender norms,<sup>54</sup> it is hypothesized that men are more likely to place confidence in the electoral process than women. Ethnicity is also included as a control variable in multivariate analysis. Members of the titular nation might be more inclined to report confidence in the electoral process than ethnic minorities. In particular, interethnic violence in southern Kyrgyzstan is likely to have alienated the majority of ethnic Uzbeks from the incumbent government.<sup>55</sup> Finally, urbanites are likely to differ from rural residents in their perceptions of electoral integrity. The degree of urbanization ranges from 1, settlement of less than 2,000 people, to 7, a city with more than 500,000 people.

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<sup>54</sup> Lori Handrahan. 2001. "Gender and Ethnicity in the 'Transitional Democracy' of Kyrgyzstan." *Central Asian Survey* 20(4): 467–496.

<sup>55</sup> On ethnic tensions in Kyrgyzstan, see Vicken Cheterian. 2010. "Kyrgyzstan: Central Asia's Island of Instability." *Survival* 52(5): 21–27; International Crisis Group. 2012. *Kyrgyzstan: Widening Ethnic Tensions in the South*, Asia Report No. 222, <http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/asia/central-asia/kyrgyzstan/222-kyrgyzstan-widening-ethnic-divisions-in-the-south.aspx>.

## Findings

### *Sources of Political News*

Table 1 reports the percentage of young people who learn daily about politics from various sources. Television is the main source of political news for nearly 80 percent of youth in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. The second most popular source of political news is an informal social network. Almost two-thirds of young people report having a daily discussion of politics with their friends and colleagues. In contrast, newspapers are the least frequently used source of political news among youth. Approximately one-tenth of Kazakh youth and one-fifth of Kyrgyz youth report daily newspaper readership. The findings also show that 38.7 percent of Kazakh youth and 32.7 percent of Kyrgyz youth are daily exposed to political news on the net. To date, a higher percentage of Kyrgyz youth (52.7 percent) obtain political news via the radio than the Internet. Nonetheless, a sizable proportion of youth in both countries regularly consumes political news online.

**Table 1. Sources of Political News**

	Country	
	Kazakhstan	Kyrgyzstan
TV	80.6	78.1
Radio	28.6	52.7
Newspapers	11.2	20.0
Internet	38.7	32.7
Friends and Colleagues	71.4	62.8

Note: The column entries are percentages of 18-29 year old respondents who report daily consumption of political news from the above-mentioned sources.

Source: World Values Survey, 2011.

Additional statistical analysis investigates how different sources of political news are related to each other. As shown in Table 2, online news consumption in both countries is positively correlated with newspaper readership and political discussions with friends and colleagues. These findings suggest that citizens with a high level of interest in politics tend to consume news from multiple sources. Another noteworthy finding is that the correlation between Internet news consumption and TV news consumption is negative and statistically significant in Kazakhstan, but

it is positive and statistically insignificant in Kyrgyzstan. These results suggest that some youth in Kazakhstan choose not to consume news on state-controlled TV channels and turn to the Internet in their search for alternative information.

**Table 2. Correlation Matrix for News Consumption**

News Source	TV	Radio	Newspapers	Friends and Colleagues
<i>Kazakhstan</i>				
Internet	-.140**	.251**	.158**	.256**
TV		.025	.169**	.180**
Radio			.213**	.082
Newspapers				-.017
<i>Kyrgyzstan</i>				
Internet	.059	.033	.149**	.233**
TV		.294**	.161**	.230**
Radio			.199**	.128**
Newspapers				.083

Note: The column entries are Pearson's correlation coefficients, \*\*p<.01.

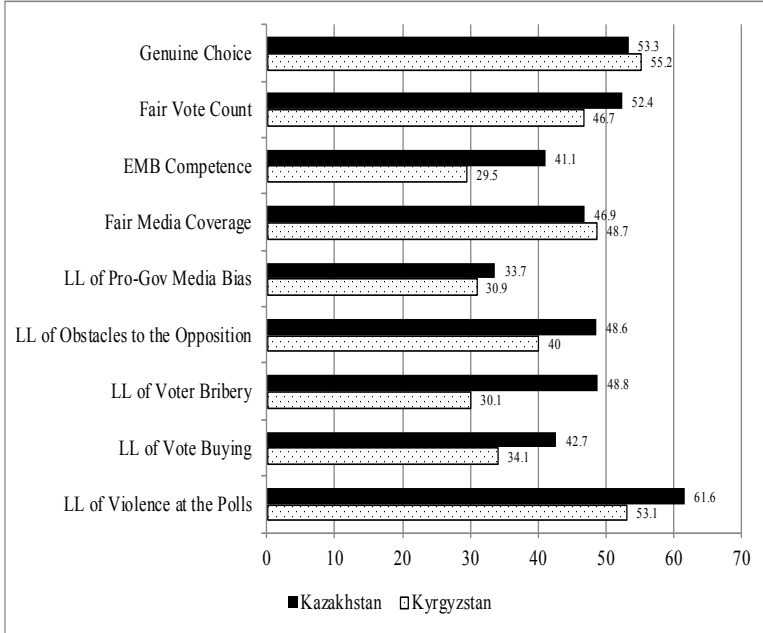
Source: World Values Survey, 2011.

### *Youth's Confidence in the Electoral Process*

Figure 1 displays the level of youth's confidence in having free and fair elections in the country. Youth's opinions in both countries converge regarding their assessment of media performance. Notwithstanding cross-country differences in Freedom House scores, approximately two-thirds of young people in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan feel that TV news is frequently biased in favor of the ruling party during national elections. Remarkably, however, Kazakhstani youth tend to place more confidence in various dimensions of the electoral process than Kyrgyz youth. For example, 41.1 percent of Kazakhstani youth, compared to 29.5 percent of Kyrgyz youth, agree with the statement that election officials in their home country are fair. A higher percentage of Kazakhstani youth also report that candidates affiliated with opposition political parties are rarely prevented from running for office (48.6 percent vs. 40 percent). In light of violent post-election protests in Kyrgyzstan, it is not surprising that Kyrgyz youth exhibit lower levels of confidence in having violence-free elections than their peers in Kazakhstan (53.1 percent vs. 61.6 percent). In addition, Kyrgyz youth are less likely to believe that vote buying is absent during an election campaign. Specifically, only 30.1 percent of Kyrgyz youth, compared to 48.8 percent of Kazakh youth, report that voters are

rarely bribed in their home country. Overall, the results suggest that young people differ in the extent to which they perceive the country’s elections as free and fair.

**Figure 1. Youth’s Perceptions of Electoral Integrity**



*Correlates of Youth’s Confidence in the Electoral Process*

Table 3 presents the results of ordinary least squares (OLS) regression analysis, with the index of youth’s confidence in politicians’ compliance with electoral procedures as the dependent variable. Model 1 includes data for both countries, with the dummy variable “country” and the interaction term “news source: Internet\*country.” The analysis finds that youth’s confidence in politicians’ compliance with electoral procedures is weakly related to their consumption of political news on the Internet and radio. In contrast, the analysis registers a statistically significant negative correlation between trust in politicians and TV news consumption, while newspaper readership is positively associated with trust in politicians. The divergent effects of TV channels and newspapers might arise from differences in media ownership structure and state censorship. As seen in Model 1, the regression coefficient for the dummy variable “country” is statistically significant, indicating that there are cross-country differences in the level of youth’s confidence in politicians’ compliance with electoral procedures. The next model estimates the effects of media consumption



**Table 3. Results of OLS Regression Analysis for the Index of Youth's Confidence in Politicians' Compliance with Electoral Procedures**

Variables	Model 1		Model 2a (Kazakhstan)		Model 2b (Kyrgyzstan)	
	B (St. Error)	Beta	B (St. Error)	Beta	B (St. Error)	Beta
News Source: Internet	.031 (.116)	.013	.087 (.111)	.041	-.014 (.127)	-.006
News Source: Internet*Country	.027 (.153)	.013				
News Source: TV	-.300† (.170)	-.057	.010 (.249)	.002	-.587* (.242)	-.120
News Source: Radio	.053 (.094)	.019	.155 (.117)	.064	.006 (.159)	.002
News Source: Newspapers	.191† (.108)	.059	.250† (.146)	.086	.100 (.163)	.030
Interest in Politics	-.406 (.265)	-.049	-.008 (.355)	-.001	-.553 (.408)	-.066
Identification with the Ruling Party	.883*** (.277)	.105	1.040** (.400)	.121	.717† (.392)	.087
Interpersonal Trust	-.348 (.266)	-.041	-.224 (.361)	-.029	-.506 (.401)	-.059
Satisfaction with the Family Financial Situation	-.002 (.055)	-.001	.128† (.075)	.080	-.113 (.081)	-.065
University Education	-.665** (.276)	-.081	-.972** (.364)	-.130	-.247 (.434)	-.030
Employment Status (employed=1)	-.442 (.273)	-.053	-.625† (.377)	-.080	-.183 (.396)	-.022
Gender (male=1)	-.192 (.265)	-.023	-.258 (.360)	-.035	-.196 (.393)	-.024
Ethnicity (titular nation=1)			-.136 (.356)	-.018	-.816† (.453)	-.090
Urban	.111* (.051)	.073	.019 (.071)	.013	.206** (.074)	.141
Country (Kazakhstan=1)	2.199*** (.576)	.267				
Intercept	10.877*** (.984)		10.726*** (1.439)		13.684*** (1.344)	
R-Square	13.0		5.04		3.3	

Note: Cell entries are regression coefficients (b) with standard errors in parenthesis and standardized regression coefficients (beta). Significance levels: \*\*\*p<.001; \*\*p<.01; \*p<.05; †p<.10.

**Table 4. Results of OLS Regression Analysis for the Index of Youth's Confidence in Electoral Institutions**

Variables	Model 1		Model 2a (Kazakhstan)		Model 2b (Kyrgyzstan)	
	B (St. Error)	Beta	B (St. Error)	Beta	B (St. Error)	Beta
News Source: Internet	.099 (.100)	.049	-.211* (.102)	-.105	.131 (.103)	.066
News Source: Internet*Country	-.316* (.132)	-.187				
News Source: TV	.311* (.147)	.070	.420† (.230)	.085	.168 (.196)	.043
News Source: Radio	-.096 (.082)	-.041	-.251* (.108)	-.111	.168 (.128)	.065
News Source: Newspapers	.095 (.093)	.035	-.030 (.134)	-.011	.228† (.132)	.085
Interest in Politics	.026 (.229)	.004	-.053 (.326)	-.007	.119 (.330)	.018
Identification with the Ruling Party	.978*** (.239)	.140	1.291*** (.369)	.160	.773* (.318)	.116
Interpersonal Trust	.449* (.229)	.063	.115 (.332)	.016	.733* (.325)	.106
Satisfaction with the Family Financial Situation	.032 (.047)	.022	.073 (.069)	.048	-.010 (.066)	-.007
University Education	-.278 (.238)	-.041	.067 (.335)	.010	-.441 (.352)	-.067
Employment Status (employed=1)	-.463* (.235)	-.067	-.839* (.347)	-.115	-.052 (.321)	-.008
Gender (male=1)	.077 (.229)	.011	-.054 (.332)	-.008	.154 (.318)	.023
Ethnicity (titular nation=1)			-.009 (.328)	-.001	-.082 (.367)	-.011
Urban	-.066 (.044)	-.053	.005 (.066)	.004	-.113† (.060)	-.096
Country (Kazakhstan=1)	1.653*** (.497)	.241				
Intercept	7.163*** (.849)		8.672*** (1.325)		6.493*** (1.089)	
R-Square	6.7		8.9		5.4	

Note: Cell entries are regression coefficients (b) with standard errors in parenthesis and standardized regression coefficients (beta). Significance levels: \*\*\*p<.001; \*\*p<.01; \*p<.05; †p<.10.

on trust in politicians separately for each country. The regression coefficient for “news source: TV” is negative and statistically significant in Model 2b (Kyrgyzstan), while the regression coefficient for “news source: newspaper” is positive and statistically significant at .10 level in Model 2a (Kazakhstan). The impact of online news consumption on trust in politicians appears to be negligible in both countries.

Table 4 reports the results of OLS regression analysis, with the index of youth’s confidence in electoral institutions as the dependent variable. The empirical strategy adopted here is the same as in the previous analysis. Model 1 includes the dummy variable “country” and the interaction term “news source: Internet\*country,” while Models 2a and 2b estimate the effects of media consumption on confidence in electoral institutions separately for each country.

As shown in Table 4, news consumption produces divergent effects on youth’s confidence in electoral institutions in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. The regression coefficient for the interaction term “news source: Internet\*country” is statically significant, indicating that the impact of web-based news consumption on confidence in electoral institutions varies across the two countries. As reported in the table, Internet news consumption is negatively correlated with confidence in electoral institutions in Kazakhstan (Model 2a), but it has negligible effects on confidence in electoral institutions in Kyrgyzstan (Model 2b). Furthermore, the results suggest that TV news consumption boosts public confidence in electoral institutions in Kazakhstan, but it exerts weak effects on confidence in electoral institutions in Kyrgyzstan. The regression coefficient for “news source: radio” is negative and statistically significant in Model 2a, indicating that radio station listeners are less likely to report confidence in electoral institutions in Kazakhstan. Newspaper readership, on the contrary, is positively associated with confidence in electoral institutions in Kyrgyzstan.

As seen in Table 3 and Table 4, party identification is a strong determinant of youth’s confidence in the integrity of the electoral process. Consistent with previous research on winners and losers in elections,<sup>56</sup> young people who identify with the ruling party are more likely to report confidence in the electoral process.

Another noteworthy finding is that ethnicity affects the level of youth’s confidence in politicians’ compliance with electoral procedures in Kyrgyzstan. The regression coefficient for “ethnicity” is negative and

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<sup>56</sup> Christopher J. Anderson, Andre Blais, Shaun Bowler and Ola Listhaug. 2005. *Losers’ Consent: Elections and Democratic Legitimacy*. New York: Oxford University Press; Emily Beaulieu. 2014. “From Voter ID to Party ID: How Political Parties Affect Perceptions of Election Fraud in the U.S.” *Electoral Studies* 35(1): 24–32.

statistically significant at the .10 level, indicating that ethnic minorities are less likely to place trust in politicians than the titular nation. In particular, Uzbek youth in Kyrgyzstan might be less inclined to trust the incumbent government in the aftermath of violence against the minority group. The regression coefficient for “ethnicity” is statistically insignificant in the case of Kazakhstan, suggesting that ethnic origin has weaker effects on youth’s trust in politicians in the country. Furthermore, the impact of ethnicity on confidence in electoral institutions is insignificant in both countries, suggesting similar levels of dissatisfaction with the performance of electoral institutions across ethnic lines.

The results also suggest that socioeconomic status has stronger effects on youth’s confidence in the electoral process in Kazakhstan. As seen in Table 3 and Table 4, employment status has a significant impact on youth’s confidence in the electoral process in the country. Unemployed youth are less prone to report confidence in the electoral process. In addition, youth dissatisfied with the family financial situation are significantly less likely to believe that politicians comply with electoral procedures in Kazakhstan. The level of trust in politicians also tends to be lower among college-educated youth in Kazakhstan. The regression coefficients for employment status, education, and satisfaction with the family financial situation are statistically insignificant in the case of Kyrgyzstan. Instead, urban residence affects the level of youth’s confidence in the electoral process in Kyrgyzstan. Interestingly, Kyrgyz youth in large cities are more likely to report confidence in politicians’ compliance with electoral procedures, but they are less likely to place confidence in electoral institutions.

## **Conclusion**

This study provides partial support for the argument that consumption of online news erodes public confidence in the electoral process in a repressive political regime. Internet news consumption is negatively associated with youth’s confidence in electoral institutions in Kazakhstan, but it is weakly related to youth’s confidence in the electoral process in Kyrgyzstan. The results suggest that the impact of exposure to web-based news might be stronger in a country with a lower level of press freedom. An implication of these findings is that increasing access to the Internet might eventually undermine the political legitimacy of the ruling elite in a non-democratic regime. But the impact of online news consumption on youth’s political attitudes currently remains rather modest.

A limitation of this study is that it uses cross-sectional data to examine the relationship between media consumption and confidence in the electoral process. The use of panel data is necessary to arrive at stronger conclusions regarding media effects on political trust. Furthermore,

an oversample of ethnic minority youth can help us better understand the effects of digital technology on the political outlook of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Another limitation of this research is that it analyzes the frequency of news consumption across different types of mass media. Further research needs to be done to determine how news content influences citizens' confidence in the electoral process. As Ronald Deibert *et al* point out, the most recent forms of state control over the Internet focus "less on *denying* access than successfully *competing* with potential threats through effective counter-information campaigns that overwhelm, discredit, or demoralize opponents."<sup>57</sup> As a result, web-based publications in repressive political regimes are becoming replete with news content that essentially supports state-sanctioned interpretations of current events in mainstream media, rather than challenging state propaganda. Compared to television, however, there remains a greater amount of political pluralism on the net. Do Internet users actively seek out uncensored news or devour a web-based portion of state propaganda? Under which conditions does consumption of online news lead to a substantial change in citizens' political outlook? Answering these questions will shed additional light on the transformative power of online media in repressive political regimes.

Obviously, economic obstacles hinder greater use of Internet resources in low-income countries. Unlimited access to the Internet is out of reach for a large segment of the local population in Central Asia, especially in poverty-stricken Kyrgyzstan. Citizens of Kazakhstan, where the 2011 gross domestic product (GDP) per capita based on purchasing power parity (ppp) was \$20,772,<sup>58</sup> paid \$17.20 for a monthly broadband subscription.<sup>59</sup> In contrast, the monthly broadband subscription tariff was 2.7 times higher (\$48.10) and GDP per capita, ppp, was seven times lower (\$2,920) in Kyrgyzstan in 2011, making Internet access prohibitively expensive for most citizens. As the living standards improve in these Central Asian states, online media is bound to reach a wider audience and exercise greater influence in the public sphere.

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<sup>57</sup> Ronald Deibert, John Palfrey, Rafal Rohozinski, Jonathan Zittrain, and Miklos Haraszti, eds. 2010. *Access Controlled: The Shaping of Power, Rights, and Rule in Cyberspace*. Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, p. 27.

<sup>58</sup> World Development Indicators Database, <http://data.worldbank.org/data-catalog/world-development-indicators>.

<sup>59</sup> Barney Warf. 2013. "The Central Asian Digital Divide." In *The Digital Divide: The Internet and Social Inequality in International Perspective*, eds. Massimo Ragnedda and Glenn Muschert. London: Routledge, pp. 268–282, p. 275.