Digital Activism and *Authoritarian Legitimation* in Post-Soviet Central Asia

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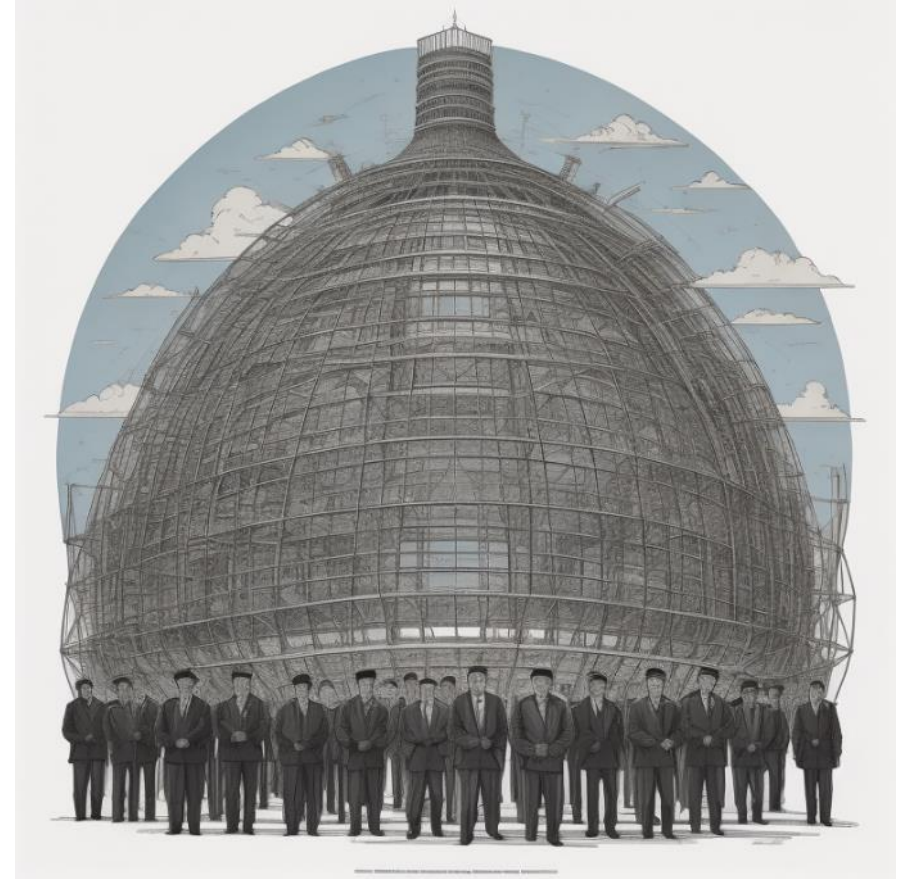
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Can digital activism be used for legitimization purposes?

Co-authored with Dr. Colin Knox.

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RQ: How do autocracies respond to digital activism?

(Based on the case of Central Asia)

Digital activism and authoritarian legitimation in post-Soviet Central Asia

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ABSTRACT

Scholarly research on the role of digital activism in authoritarian settings has largely centered around debates on "liberation technology" versus "networked authoritarianism". In this article we aim to extend existing research by linking authoritarian legitimation theories with emerging scholarship on digital activism. We examine Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, two autocracies in post-Soviet Central Asia, and show how non-democratic regimes use digital activism for legitimation purposes. Our study draws on 33 qualitative in-depth interviews with digital activists and state officials in both countries to generate critical comparative insights into how modern autocracies function in the digital age. Our analysis suggests that autocracies use four mutually inclusive and escalating legitimation mechanisms (limited participation, outputs legitimation, regime discourse, and targeted repression) in their interactions with digital activists to become more resilient.
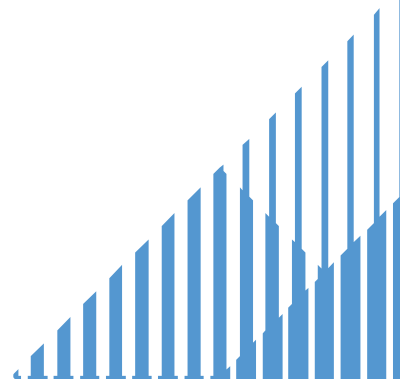
https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/01972243.2024.2374714

What is Digital Activism?

Digital activism is built on the notion of connective action which is realized through the ability of activists to communicate a message to a large audience at **low transaction costs** to achieve **common goals** (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012).

Digital Activism is a Virtual Civil Society…

The ceremony of award giving to the best bloggers in Uzbekistan in 2022.

Source: https://uznews.uz/posts/60458

Two camps in Central Asia

Cyber Optimists

Tajik Women and Sexual Harassment (Dall'Agnola, 2022).

Cyber Pessimists

Digital consumption does not lead to increased political activity (Bekmagambetov et al, 2023)

Fail to make meaningful reforms such as police reform in KZ and stop demolition of historical buildings in Tashkent. (Kurmanov, 2024)

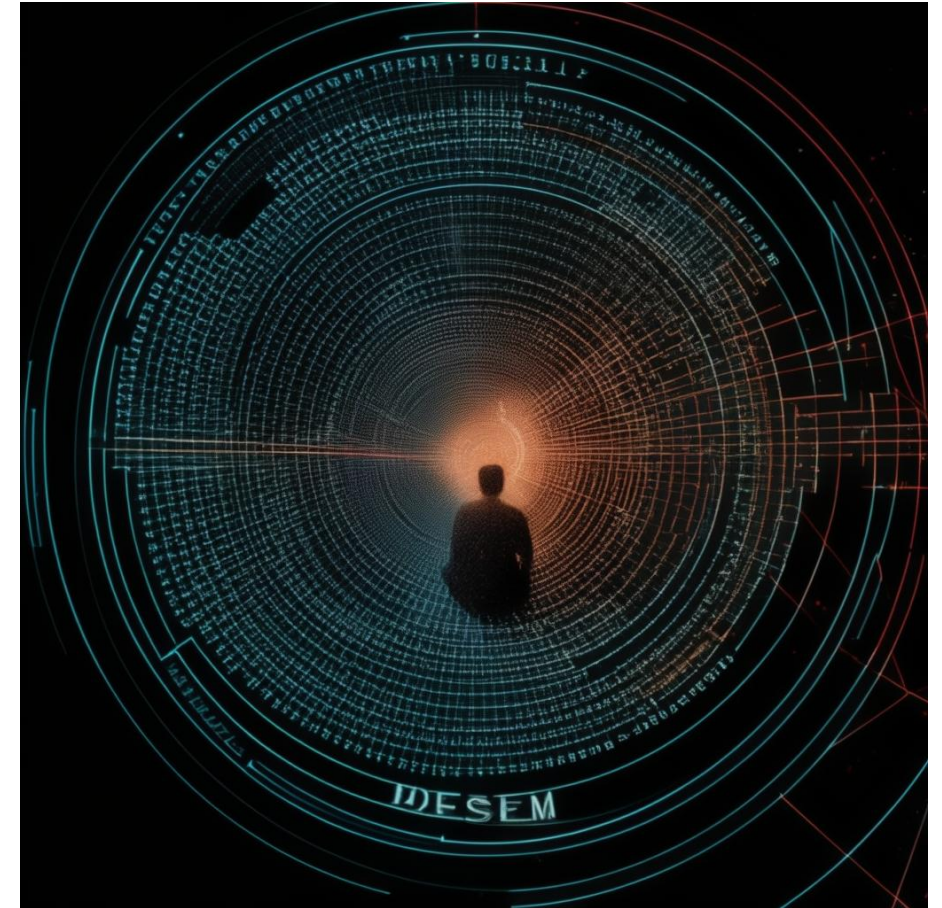** Image created by the Artificial intelligence MidJourney*

Net Delusion? Or Informational Autocracies?

Morozov (2011) coined the term 'net delusion' referring to the ability of autocracies to use technologies to oppress and control internet activism.

Monitoring opposition (MacKinnon 2011).

Social media co-option (Gunitsky 2015).

Informational autocracies (Guriev and Treisman 2019).

* Image created by the Artificial intelligence MidJourney

Authoritarian Legitimation

Successful legitimation as "a form of rule that **is seen in the eyes of the observer as fair and good**" (Dukalskis and Gerschewski, 2017: 2).

Authoritarian legitimation is based on a mix of trust and belief.

Autocratic regimes need citizens or 'true believers' who have trust in their government (Gerschewski 2018).

** Image created by the Artificial intelligence MidJourney*

Consultative Authoritarianism

In this sense, 'although China remains authoritarian, it is nevertheless responsive to the increasingly diverse demands of Chinese society' (Mertha, 2009: 995).

Part of this engagement with its citizens has been through a variety of consultative and deliberative practices (e.g. deliberative polling and township elections) aimed at stabilising and strengthening authoritarian rule (He & Thøgersen, 2010).

Emergence in Central Asia. (read the paper by Knox & Sharipova (2024). "Authoritarianism and civil society in Central Asia: Shifting boundaries").
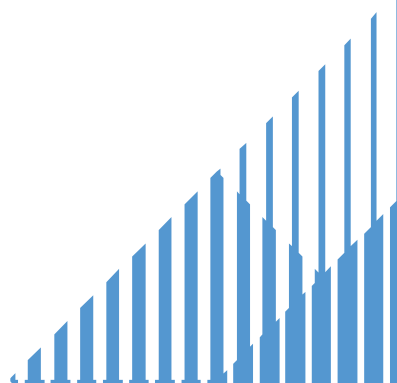
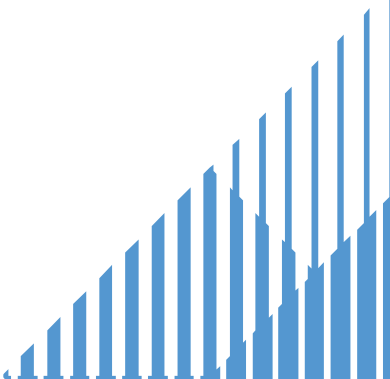# Four mechanisms of authoritarian legitimation
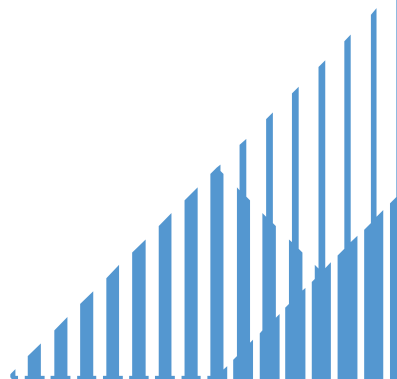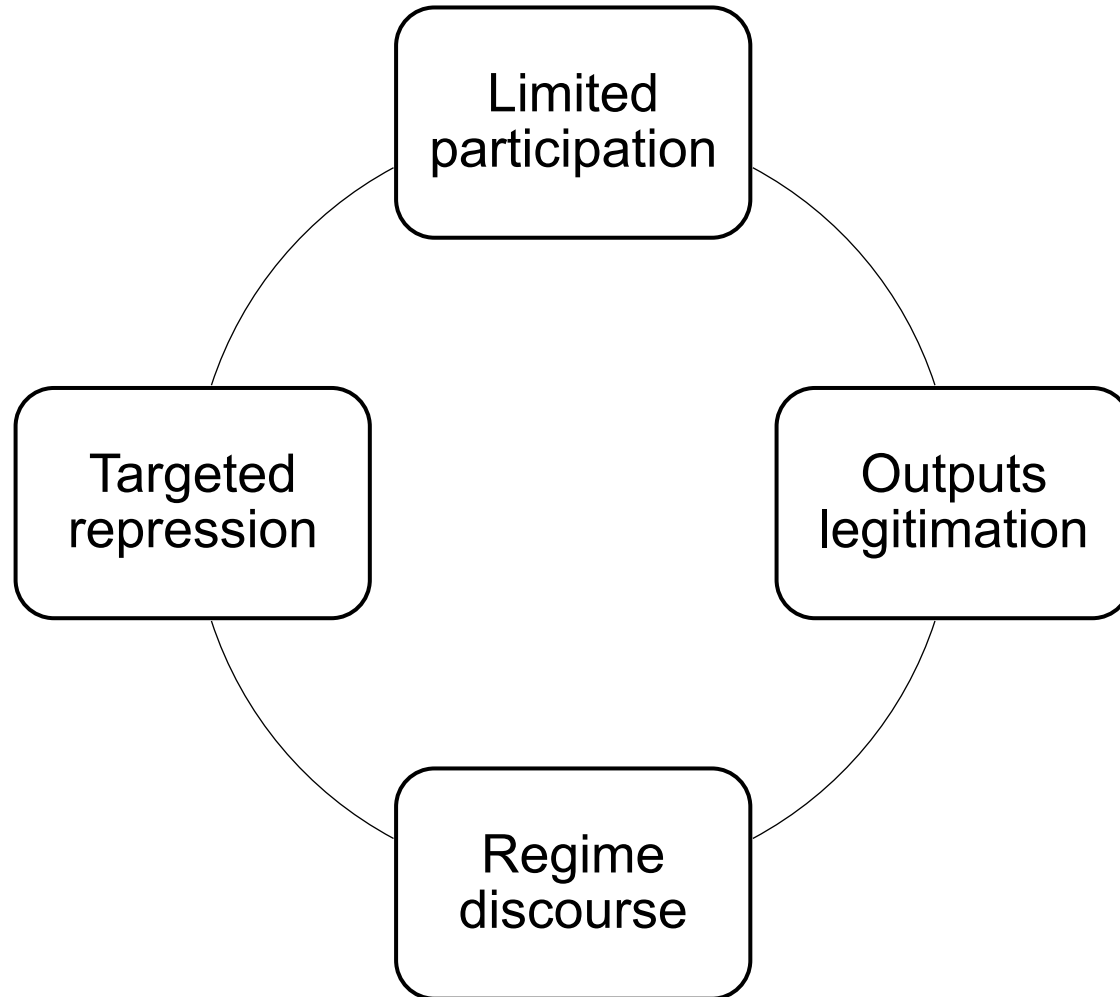
Primary Data/Methodology

	Digital Activists	State Officials	Total
Uzbekistan	12	5	17
Tajikistan	12	4	16
Totals	24	9	33

Uzbekistan

Liberalization under Mirziyoyev (Zakirov 2021).

Failure of Virtual Receptions and the Open Government to promote citizen empowerment (Kurmanov & Knox 2022).

Attempts to build charismatic legitimacy through social media (Ponczek 2021).

Mass protests in Nukus in 2022.

"Now every executive body, before making any decision, will think ten times: how will this decision of mine be assessed in the media, what will bloggers say? The only thing I ask is that the media and bloggers be fair and tell the truth. And then this will have a positive impact on our reforms."

Mirziyoyev, July 2023 (Ferghana 2023).
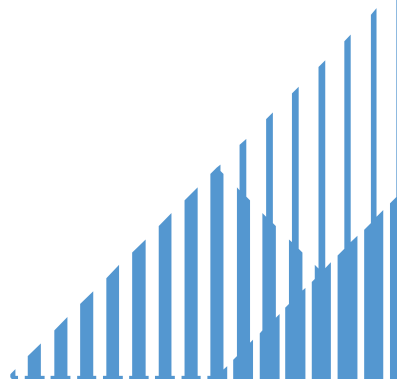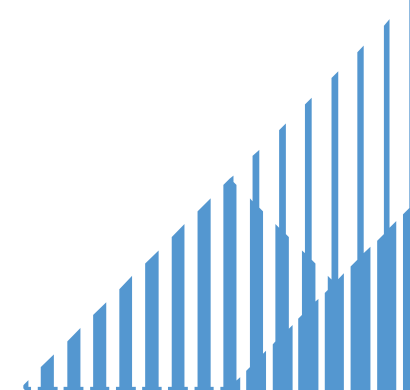
Limited participation in UZB

"The Government continues to keep a tight control over the registration and functioning of civil society organizations through a rigorous registration procedures…Citizens cannot register their civil associations…Hence, they attempt to use digital tools to influence government decisions" (Uzbek activist #3 06.02.2020).

Control over society

"The first president [Karimov], in his authoritarian rule, relied on law enforcement to take control of everything. The second president [Mirziyoyev] does not want to rely on the security forces knowing how badly it could end. …This led to the growth of digital activism, and the Uzbek citizens began to influence the decisions made by the state executive bodies." (Uzbek Activist #7 10.03.2021)

Apparent change

Outputs legitimation in UZB

"Usually, when I was invited to meet with a state official during Karimov times, I expected to be punished in some ways for my criticism. However, when the state officials asked me to come and participate in meetings during the rule of Mirziyoyev, I was surprised that they listened to my opinion. Later I learned that my proposal was incorporated, and a minor government regulation was abolished because of that." (Uzbek activist #3 06.02.2020)

Economics advise/expertise

"The deputy khokim [mayor] of the city issued a protocol decision on the transfer of the Private Homeowners Associations to the Management Companies, which contradicts all laws, but it was carried out, and I complained to the prosecutor's office and state bodies. No one replied. Then I was invited to an open meeting by the city's deputy khokim [mayor]. I asked him to cancel this illegal decision. In the end, he didn't reply." (Uzbek Activist #11 16.07.2022).

Vested Interests
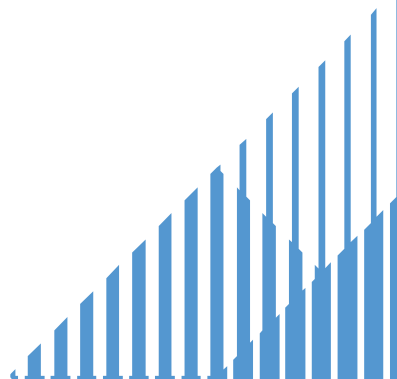
Regime Discourse and Targeted Repression

The cornerstone of the regime's legitimacy is the construction of a 'New Uzbekistan' which is a modern democratic country built on the use of new technologies and where citizens actively collaborate with the state to build a new society

Most activists **praised the Mirziyoyev reforms** and affirmed the legitimacy of his rule.

Targeted Repression.

New Uzbekistan National Monument Opening in 2021

Source: https://kun.uz/en/news/2021/08/31/new-uzbekistan-complex-and-independence-monument-open-in-tashkent
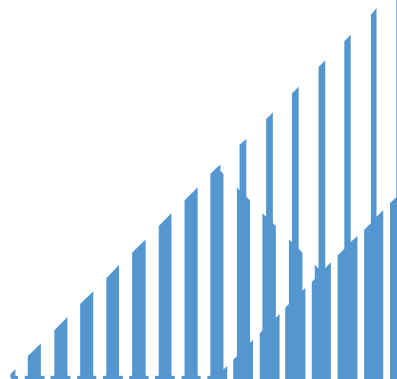
Tajikistan

"Soft authoritarian state" in 2000s (Markowtiz 2012)

Authoritarian consolidation (Marat 2016; Lemon and Thibault 2018).

The unrest in GBAO in 2022.

The bill to regulate activity of digital activists in 2023 (Bekmurzaev 2023).

Very limited participation in TJK

"Activism in social networks grew in the country. For a while, the government considered social media activists' views. Indeed, the government looked at these groups with apprehension. The opinions of digital activists had some influence on decision making". (Tajik Activist #7 13.11.2020).

Reluctant cooperation with activists

The popular Facebook groups *My-tadzhikistantsy!* and *Khujand – moi gorod* have existed for more than seven years and became important forums for discussion of various public policies and citizens' needs (Tajik Activist #5, 0611.2020). I
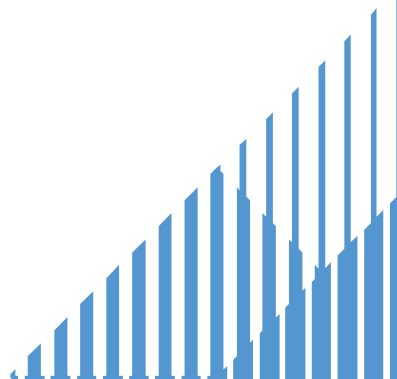
Mobilization of citizens bottom-up
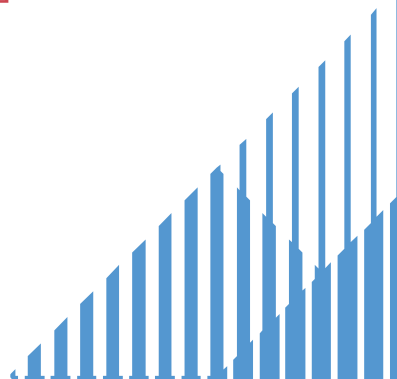
Outputs legitimization in TJK

The government relies on the expertise of digital activists. However, it does not necessarily produce results.

"We have developed an elaborate concept of e-government. But the state officials used only a small part of our concept. The Tajik Government simply took the Russian document [E-Government concept developed in Russia] and used it as the basis for development." (Tajik Activist #3 04.06.2020)

# Regime Discourse and Targeted Repression in TJK

From the early 2000s until 2010, the Tajik state and activists established civil society and openness in covering issues. Independent media emerged in 2004, and the government encouraged active discussions of policies. In 2006-07, Transparency International launched openness projects in Tajikistan. However, in the 2010s, the government closed down the only political force - the Islamic Renaissance Party. After that, the government of Tajikistan felt free from any obligations to its people. There is no one to criticize the government except for a couple of media outlets.

Reluctant cooperation with activists

"Previously, the state bodies [of Tajikistan] defended their positions in social media, but now they go on the offensive. They try to create opinion [narrative] around particular issues. Government uses students with fake profiles to write posts on social media. As soon as the opposition forces write something, the attack of our trolls begins." (Tajik Activist #7 13.11.2020)

Social media co-potation

Stories of repression of digital activists
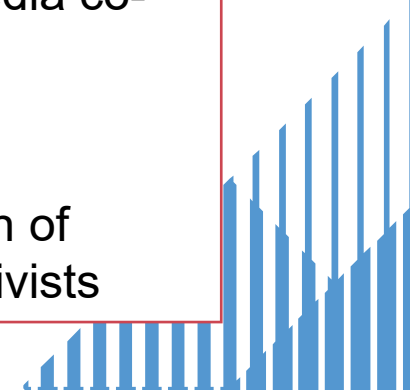
# Conclusion – use of activists for the benefit of autocrats

Uzbek and Tajik regimes have attempted to use digital activism to inform and respond to social pressures and citizens' demands.

Both regimes tried to use digital activists to implement various economic reforms and to **depoliticize** social media movements (Owen 2021).

Regime Discourse: Utilizing New Uzbekistan and the Memory of Civil War in Tajikistan (Gershewscki 2018).

Construction of consultative authoritarianism (Metha 2009)…
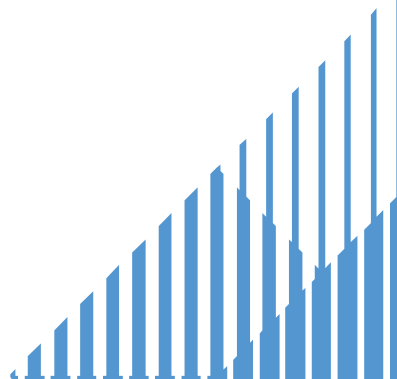
Conclusion (2) – Repression and support of true believers

The Uzbek and Tajik regimes selectively oppressed activists to set the limits of possible criticism and support the '**true believers**' in the digital community (Gerschewski 2018).

Initiating Society Support of Autocracy! Expanding the theory of "bystander repression" (Lachapelle 2022).

Ultimately, the autocracies applied targeted repression on activists to **control and subvert the 'autonomous' digital space** of such communities.
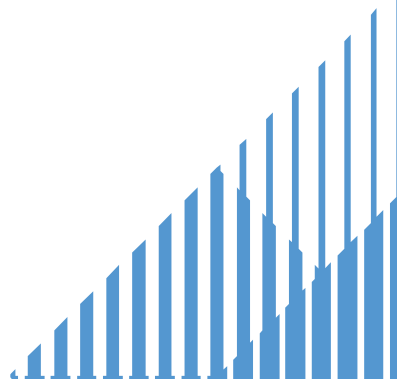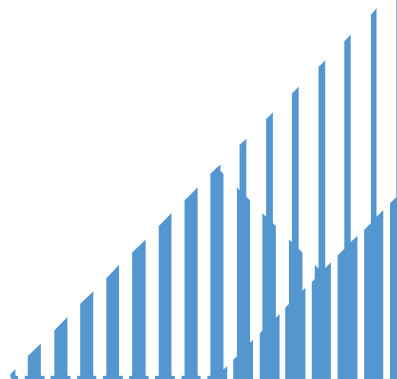
Conclusion (3) - Stages of Digital Activisms in autocracies

First stage – regimes open up and encourage digital activism. This results in digital activists **eventually** challenging the regime.
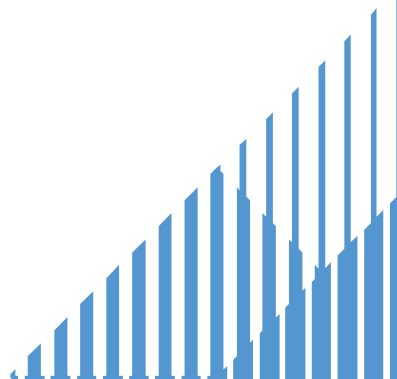
Second stage - autocracies utilize mechanisms that **ensure** activists disseminate regime discourse or risk repression.

The functioning of authoritarianism was built on legitimation mechanisms employed on digital activists who were **simultaneously** incentivized, persuaded, and oppressed to participate.

Conclusion (4) – Limitations of digital activism in the region

Eventually, our paper shows the limits digital activism's democratization function in post-Soviet authoritarian settings

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Thank You

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