

Central Asia's "Troll Wars"

Author: [Almaz Rysaliev](#)
[Dina Tokbaeva](#)
[Lola Olimova](#)

Anonymous web postings used to counter online dissent through argument, distraction or abusive comments.

It's a common pattern on Central Asian internet forums. Members are discussing subversive opinions they would not dare express elsewhere when a new arrival pops up and enthusiastically proclaims the government's virtues or lambasts its critics.

This is the world of Central Asia's pro-government "internet trolls" –anonymous commentators who mysteriously appear to defend the authorities whenever they are criticised on social networking or news websites.

Governments in the region have long exerted tight controls on dissenting opinions, but as more and more young people access the internet, holding the lid down is getting harder.

Many suspect that the authorities' response has been to recruit and pay tech-savvy citizens to defend the government's position, bully critics, and attempt to rewrite history online.

Tactics include crude abuse from online troublemakers in Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan to more sophisticated spoiling attempts in Kazakhstan, and online campaigns in Kyrgyzstan that are more like professional public relations exercises.

The unifying feature is anonymity, preserved behind internet pseudonyms, and a desire to establish a pro-government narrative.

VIRTUAL ARM OF UZBEK STATE

In Uzbekistan, the trolling phenomenon is closely linked to the National Security Service, which entered the fray online after the 2005 Andijan violence in which government forces gunned down hundreds of protestors.

"After Andijan, when... liberal thought and ideas were harshly suppressed, the secret service strengthened its trolling effort," a software programmer in the capital Tashkent said.

With the international community pressuring the government to provide answers, the trolls attempted to repair the reputational damage, albeit mainly by abusing critics and trying to dilute and confuse the debate.

Bahodir, an internet user in Uzbekistan, says that even today, whenever the Andijan killings are mentioned online, a barrage of comments appears blaming the bloodshed on Islamic terrorists.

According to Bahodir, "They become particularly active during important political events or upheavals. They pretend to be ordinary people telling the public that things are completely different from how journalists have reported them."

Amongst a population of 28 million, some 27 per cent of Uzbeks have access to the internet, according to the United States-based internetworldstats.com.

When upheavals in North Africa and the Middle East last spring provoked debate among Uzbekistan's cyber-community, anonymous pro-government comments also appeared on the web. Similar postings appeared in defence of President Islam Karimov's daughter Lola Karimova-Tillaeva, when she lost a libel suit in Paris last year over an article describing her as a dictator's daughter.

Bahodir said the similar language and arguments coming from ostensibly separate posters suggested they were either centrally organised, or in fact person.

A freelance reporter in Tashkent said the security service sometimes hired journalists in the state media to pose as anonymous commentators.

News sites covering Uzbekistan from abroad, such as uznews.net, centrasia.ru, ca-news.org and RFE/RL's Uzbek-language ozodlik.org are often targeted.

"If a mass of critical comments is on the rise, there will always be several people who start hurling insults

at participants in the discussion... and calling our radio journalists traitors," Alisher Siddikov, editor-in-chief of the Uzbek service at RFE/RL in Prague, said. "The trolls stand out for being very rude in their comments and for presenting the same kinds of arguments."

The trolls are gradually evolving more sophisticated ways of waging online war. According to one user who goes by the name Mega, angry, foul language aimed at derailing discussions used to be a clear giveaway, but since websites introduced tougher moderation, the focus has shifted to undermining the reputations of journalists or their news organisations.

According to one Tashkent-based media expert, the latest method is not to simply deny that problems exist in Uzbekistan, but to argue that the government is working to overcome difficulties.

In a typical recent posting on a news website, a user identifying himself as "Nazar" defended President Islam Karimov on January 30 this year, his 74th birthday. Responding to complaints about electricity and gas shortages, Nazar wrote, "Who can replace [Karimov]? No one, practically. Who is to blame for what is happening in Uzbekistan? We are all to blame. Karimov is not an angel, that's for sure. But who else can protect the country... from collapse and civil war?"

STIFLING LIMITED DEBATE ON TURKMENISTAN

In neighbouring Turkmenistan, fewer people have access to the internet – only 1.6 per cent of a population of five million are online, according to internetworldstats.com.

But trolls still operate, congregating especially around Russian-language social networking sites. One of the most popular of these is Odnoklassniki, based in Russia but popular in many of the former Soviet states.

An internet user in Turkmenistan said the site was popular in the country, but it is impossible to holding a discussion on domestic issues. If Turkmen nationals living in Russia even try to discuss the difficulty of getting a visa to return home, they find themselves bombarded with abuse.

Foreign bloggers on Turkmenistan have also been targeted. Bektour Iskender, a well-known journalist in Kyrgyzstan, has received intimidating messages from one frequent visitor to his blog, demanding that he stop writing about Turkmenistan.

POSITIVE PR PREFERRED TO AGGRESSION IN KAZAKSTAN

In Kazakstan, the authorities exert control over conventional broadcast and print media and have blocked opposition websites, but have found it more difficult to stop young people from airing their grievances online.

Nearly 35 per cent of the country's 16 million people access the internet, making it one of the most connected countries in the region. There are 362,000 registered Facebook users in the country, and the social networking site is often used to criticise the government.

Rather than simply denouncing critics, the authorities have recognised the importance of promoting their own views online.

"The state views the internet as an additional platform where it needs to bolster its positive image," civil society activist Alexander Danilov said.

In early January, a blogger posted what he claimed was an internet conversation in which the editor of a government news agency asked him to post pro-government comments on websites. The editor allegedly offered him about 170 US dollars for one month's work writing about the January 15 parliamentary election, and about the December bloodshed in the western town of Janaozen.

Sixteen demonstrators were killed and more than 100 were injured in Janaozen on December 16, when police opened fire on protesting oil industry workers.

The blogger declined the editor's offer, noting that he had already written in defence of the protestors.

Banu Nurgazieva, head of public affairs at Kazakstan's culture and information ministry, denied that the authorities were behind such campaigns, a suggestion she dismissed as "nonsense."

"I would know about the existence of such a practice if it were true. Where would the money come from? Every expense needs to be allocated in the budget," Nurgazieva said.

She said supporters of the government were fully entitled to post their views online.

"These days everyone has a computer, and everyone can write whatever comes to mind on their own initiative. That cannot be prohibited," she said.

In an RFE/RL interview on February 6, Alexander Lyakhov, deputy head of the Internet Association of

Kazakistan, argued that opposition groups also used trolling techniques.

Zhanna Prashkevich, a PR consultant, says only a tiny percentage of postings are the work of trolls out to make trouble. Very often the posters are employed by businesses or politicians to praise them online and attempt to shape public opinion in their favour.

CALLS FOR RESTRAINT IN TAJIKISTAN

Although under ten per cent of Tajikistan's population has internet access, social networking sites are snowballing in popularity. Russian-language websites attract many young Tajiks, and 2011 saw the number of Facebook users go from under 10,000 to over 27,000, according to internetworldstats.com.

Facebook pages sometimes host heated debates on Tajik politics, but the response of government supporters is often to call for moderation, according to Fazliddin Nasreddinov, who uses the site.

Nasreddinov says the moment anyone calls for radical political change in Tajikistan, "there are always several people out there who start saying that we don't need things like that, that we need to be able to reach a consensus, that we need to take an evolutionary approach".

Mahmudjon Saraev of the Tajik presidential office's information unit, said government officials do not initiate online debates themselves and did not participate in them.

At the same time, he said, "I'm not saying we're unaware of what topics are being discussed in such groups. We do know and we do see."

Saraev suggested that contentious issues were often raised by people posting from outside Tajikistan.

Some are concerned that users are being subtly manipulated through Facebook pages. Parvina Ibodova, chair of the Association of Internet Providers in Tajikistan, recalled how subscribers to a 1,500-strong Facebook page suggested staging an anti-Moscow demonstration, following news reports about the murder of Tajiks by skinheads in Russia.

"Ten or 15 people went to stage the protest, but they discovered that those who had suggested it were not among them," she said.

The protestors believed they were being used by agents provocateurs, although it was unclear who might have been pulling the strings, Ibodova said.

PLURALIST TROLLING IN KYRGYZSTAN

In Kyrgyzstan, where freedom of expression is generally greater than in other Central Asian states, there have also been attempts to control internet use, but to a lesser extent. The country has the highest level of internet access in Central Asia, with nearly 40 per cent of its 5.5 million people online.

Anonymous, foul-mouthed abuse of government opponents is largely a thing of the past, and pro-government internet users tend to be sophisticated and tech-savvy, and combine PR skills with a genuine interest in politics.

Media analysts believe there are probably only 25 to 30 people acting as trolls for the government, and they tend to operate in groups. According to Sergei Makarov, founder of the New Media Institute, many work on a freelance basis, are in their late twenties, and have jobs as journalists, lawyers, economists or businessmen. They tend to be educated and politically aware, albeit with no particular political allegiance, and can charge between 200 and 700 dollars for an internet campaign.

"The trolls are a very closed group. They don't talk about their work," Makarov said, though he added that the Kyrgyz blogosphere was so small that "everyone knows everyone else".

Sultan Kanazarov, head of the government's information policy unit, notes that many politicians have a fully transparent internet presence, where they or their assistants engage with the public and promote their policies.

In Kyrgyzstan, anonymous posters do not just respond to existing news, they also help set the agenda, leaking stories that the media then follow.

Yulia Barabina, who heads the press office of former presidential candidate Jenishbek Nazaraliev, said any political event could trigger a surge in anonymous posts, including elections, government appointments and political disputes. These internet campaigns are used by all political parties, not just the government.

"During the 2010 [parliamentary] election, trolls for virtually all the main players were visible on many Russian- and Kyrgyz-language websites," she said. "Sometimes they engaged in open confrontation with each other, leading to real 'troll wars'."

These exchanges threw up allegations about candidates, some of which might have been fabricated, others perhaps true.

“For voters and [internet] users who followed the debates and watched the process, it was an opportunity to find out things about candidates that they might not have known before,” Barabina said.

However, one “professional poster” acknowledged that some of the false information about politicians did spread uncertainty and confusion.

During the 2010 parliamentary election, an apparently leaked phone conversation showed one politician in an unflattering light. While it was fairly obvious that the conversation had at least been edited and may even have been a hoax, it was still damaging because it planted seeds of doubt about him, this source said.

More experienced internet users have learned to identify trolls and ignore them, but they are not always easy for everyone to spot if they are able to craft a sophisticated argument designed to derail a sensitive political debate.

One expert on the subject said that while politicians found internet activism alluring, it might have less of an effect on public opinion than they believed, since at best they could only hope that trolls would “control the flow of gossip and rumour” in their favour.

Anonymous posting is also getting more difficult. Many new websites have introduced safeguards preventing one person from holding a host of different online identities. This prevents would-be trolls from creating the illusion of a popular, public pro-government response. One of Kyrgyzstan’s most popular web forums, Diesel, now has a month-long waiting period for each new registered user.

While the trolls may be here to stay, they are no deterrent to young Central Asians seeking a more democratic community online.

Cholponbek, a resident of Kyrgyzstan’s capital Bishkek, said he expresses himself on the internet rather than joining street protests.

“I can say what I think, find like-minded people, engage in discussions with them, and also debate with people who hold different views,” he said, adding that anonymous postings did not influence his opinions.

“What’s really important to me is that this freedom exists, at least on the internet.... It’s a place where people can let off steam,” he said. “If this opportunity ceased to exist, I don’t know what would happen.”

(Some names of interviewees have been changed to protect their identities.)

Yulia Goryaynova is an IWPR editor based in Bishkek and covering Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan; Lola Olimova is IWPR editor in Tajikistan; Bakhtiyor Rasulov is the pseudonym of an IWPR contributor in Uzbekistan; Almaz Rysaliev is IWPR editor in Kazakstan; Dina Tokbaeva is IWPR regional editor based in Kyrgyzstan.

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