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KYRGYZSTAN'S DIGITAL POPULISTS: HOW SOCIAL MEDIA IS RESHAPING POLITICAL DISCOURSE IN CENTRAL ASIA

GULZAT BAIALIEVA AND JOLDON KUTMANALIEV

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INTRODUCTION

Populism is a relatively new political phenomenon in Central Asia. The region has long been dominated by traditional post-Soviet “soft” autocrats and heavy-handed dictators who mostly relied, to varying degrees, on the combination of traditional tools of state-sponsored official channels of propaganda, administrative resources and the security services to suppress dissent and consolidate power (see [Schatz 2009](#) for a comparison between Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan). One could also observe variations between different leaders in a country. In Kyrgyzstan, for example, Bakiev’s regime relied on repression and violence - including extrajudicial killings - differing markedly from those that came before and after.

However, President Sadyr Japarov and the populist wave that brought him to power opens a new chapter in Central Asia’s political evolution with rightist ([Mudde & Kaltwasser 2013](#)), nativist ([Art 2020](#)), paternalistic ([Enyedi 2020](#)), ethnonationalist ([Bonikowski 2017](#)) and ethno populist ([Jenne 2018](#)) dimensions. Many analysts have been caught off guard by this novel, grassroots approach to power politics in the region. While political populism is a well-documented phenomenon outside the post-Soviet space, within the region, with the exception of Georgian - which experienced populism under first president Zviad Gamsakhurdia and then later, with Mikheil Saakashvili - it has been absent from political life.



The populist turn in politics is flourishing, in part, thanks to the rise of the internet and social media platforms which have challenged the normative roles of traditional media ([Postill 2018](#)). This paper offers a first step toward understanding populist mobilization in Kyrgyzstan and the new modes of political communication under Japarov. This study seeks to illuminate the ways in which nationalist politicians exploit national narratives and divisive rhetoric to mobilize their base. We explore these things using visual analysis of Kyrgyz social networks. We pursue this research agenda in order to better understand the impact of social media on political and social power configurations in Central Asia. This theme is widely discussed in studies of advanced democracies, which are vulnerable to the spread of conspiracy theories and electoral lies. In the United States and Europe, populist politicians have exploited political polarization in order to mobilize around an anti-establishment worldview. But outside of Western democracies, these techniques of statecraft and campaigning are less well understood. Our study asks the following questions:

1. In what context are social media users exposed to hate speech?
2. What are the main channels for disseminating such messages?
3. Who are the agents/content-makers/moderators/online group moderators and what are their roles in the spread of information?
4. What is the tendency for the horizontal and vertical spread of information?
5. How is [social media extremism](#) perceived, adapted and



METHODOLOGY

The time-frame of this project includes the turbulent political period under Japarov since the regime change in October 2020 to the present day. The importance of this research project can be emphasized by the fact that this is one of the first attempts to study Kyrgyz-speaking social media and new forms of political mobilization through the analysis of digital spaces. We use mixed methods, including quantitative and qualitative content analysis of social media in Kyrgyzstan. Qualitative methods, such as participant observation and textual analysis including image analysis, provide in-depth, localized knowledge of social processes that are difficult to capture by quantitative methods. Data collection and analysis also contains a descriptive text analysis, along with a daily digital ethnographic immersion into Kyrgyzstan's online media space. Thus, we propose the following basic methods of analysis:

1. Digital ethnography through analysis of online groups containing the name of Japarov to monitor and contextualize the hate speech and political discourses that affected online and offline populist mobilization: For this, we studied largest social media groups created or organized by Japarov and his supporters. The most active and biggest groups with pro-government content is on Facebook which alone contains 39 private and public groups (*personalized accounts and pages are not taken into account*).



Illustration 1. Pro-Japarov Facebook social media groups.

- 1 Sadyr Japarov
- 2 Let's not upset hearts! (Juroluchu jurok oorutpai!!!)
- 3 Kamchybek Tashiev
- 4 Friendship of 7 Oblasts (Jeti Oblus Yntymagy)
- 5 National leader! Sadyr Japarov! Ismat Begjanov
- 6 News TV (Kabarlar TV)
- 7 Hope (Umut). formerly known as newspapers Asaba. Kyrgyz Tuusu
- 8 Sadyr Japarov
- 9 Forward Sadyr Japarov!
- 10 KR President Japarov Sadyr Nurkojoevichkg
- 11 Sadyr Japarov True People's (Eldik) Leader 🇰🇬 🇰🇬 🇰🇬
- 12 Sadyr Japarov and Kamchybek Tashiev Support Group
- 13 PRESIDENT OF KYRGYZSTAN
- 14 SADYR JAPAROV!KAMCYBEK TASHIEV!
- 15 JAPAROV SADYR NURGOJEOVICH ✓
- 16 Sadyr Japarov!
- 17 PEOPLE'S PRESIDENT SADYR JAPAROV NURKOJEOVICH
- 18 Our president Sadyr Japarov
- 19 Supporting Sadyr Japarov and lustration movement necessary for the society
- 20 Sadyr Japarov And Us.
- 21 Ysyk-Kol is with Sadyr!!!
- 22 FOR SADYR JAPAROV!
- 23 Actual News ("Dakansalar")
- 24 Sadyr Japarov Nurgojoevich
- 25 We support Sadyr Japarov!!
- 26 Sadyr Japarov
- 27 Sadyr Japarov - president (formerly Kyrgyzstan today-tomorrow)
- 28 Sadyr_ Japarov.KG
- 29 Sadyr Japarov
- 30 Sadyr Japarov. Kamchybek Tashiev.
- 31 Sadyr Japarov for people!
- 32 Support to the president Sadyr Japarov
- 33 Group of Sadyr Japarov
- 34 Sadyr Japarov and the truth!
- 35 We support Sadyr Japarov
- 36 Sadyr Japarov (PATRIOT KG)
- 37 Sadyr Japarov The Youth of Osh is with me
- 38 Sadyr Japarov
- 39 Sadyr Japarov

(The full dataset with the number of posts per month, plus the increase in the number of subscribers can be accessed [here](#)).



2. Descriptive text analysis of President Japarov’s interviews, personal publications and social media groups: For this, we analyzed Japarov’s three interviews with mass media outlets to illustrate how and which phrases and expressions he uses for his political communication with his constituencies.

THE POPULIST PERSUASION: “OLD” AND “NEW”

Populism throughout history has shared common elements such as building on a charismatic leader, holding an “us”/“them” dichotomy, anti-elite messaging, and the exploitation of contentious issues in society. Populism is thought to have emerged in Russia and the United States in the 19th century (Roberts 2006). The populist movements in both cases mobilized the wider public against a small elite. If the American People’s Party struggled against capitalism, the Russian “narodniki” (agrarian populists) were demanding rights for the peasantry. The concept further evolved in the 19th century with the emergence of Latin American populist movements in the 1940s and 1950s. In this latter context, authoritarian leaders were mobilizing a grassroots base against perceived enemies of the state directed by hostile external forces. The third wave of populism emerged in Europe in the 1990s and is known in the literature as the “new populism” ([Woods and Wejnert 2014](#)). The main issues this new strain of populism rallies around are immigration, tax, and matters of national security. A well-established body of literature has theoretically and empirically classified types and characteristics of contemporary populism in Latin America, the U.S., and Western Europe ([Kriesi et al. 2006](#); [2014](#); [Mudde 2004](#)). Analyzing new strains of populism, Zaslove (2008) focuses on the opportunity structures which are potential causal factors for the rise of populism in addition to the challenges of post-industrialism, the erosion of traditional party politics, the rise of authoritarianism, and the consolidation of



of democracies. Therefore, the seizure of power by authoritarian populists, and the new populist nature of many political parties puts democracies at risk ([Mounk 2018](#)). In this new era of technological development, the creation of “virtual” online civil society has also injected volatility into politics ([Beissinger 2017](#)). The rising illiberalism that imperils established and electoral democracies including the U.S., Brazil, the UK, and many European countries, has become a favorite political tool for many autocratically inclined politicians. Until recently, countries of the post-Soviet region, where local authoritarian leaders prefer to rule with the help of traditional administrative methods of suppression, had been mostly spared from this phenomenon. However, the political dynamics in Kyrgyzstan shows that leading political actors increasingly adopt populist language, nationalist discourses and polarizing communication strategies to gain political power.

The phenomenon of populism can be treated as an ideology, communication style and as a political strategy. As an ideology, populism is shallow and lacks philosophical coherence ([Deegan-Krause and Haughton, 2009](#)). As a communicative and discursive style, it is a political expression of dichotomies such as good and evil, friend and enemy, and elites versus the people ([Jansen 2011](#)). Populism is also a political strategy enabling grassroots mobilization to produce certain forms of political organization. Today’s global populism is associated with the power of social media platforms. Skillfully promoted through the Kyrgyz-speaking social media channels, Japarov’s movement gained political momentum in the aftermath of a popular uprising against the then-President Sooronbay Jeenbekov.



THE RISE OF POPULISM IN KYRGYZSTAN

The rise of populism in Kyrgyzstan is clearly linked to Japarov's sudden and unexpected [meteoric rise to power](#). However, the words "sudden" and "unexpected" are relative terms here. The emergence of Japarov as a popular leader was unexpected only to those who did not follow kyrgyz-speaking social media groups and/or did not socialize with the rural Kyrgyz population. Local political experts had analytical bias by analyzing information that mostly appeared in Russian-language media, completely overlooking what was going on in Kyrgyz social media. Meanwhile, on Kyrgyz-speaking social media, Japarov was gradually gaining a reputation as a "real patriot." In the eyes of ordinary people he became an iconic figure. His popular image that developed over time presented him as a victim of injustice from political elites, who fought against a corrupt and inefficient establishment. The events that happened after the popular uprising against rigged elections on October 5, 2020 illustrates how two social spaces in Kyrgyzstan's society existed in parallel.

The period after the October 5, 2020 parliamentary elections and subsequent violent street protests that toppled President Sooronbai Jeenbekov's regime was a dynamic and politically volatile time. Online mobilization impacted real-world mobilization, turning it into a crucial arena for Japarov's strategy that de facto secured him a strategic advantage (winning the street during the initial protests and then the presidency). Sadyr Japarov – a former MP and prisoner – emerged as the most powerful political figure combining the posts of president and prime minister. In the pre-October period, the influence of Japarov's social groups on public opinion was rather limited.

Before 2020, Kyrgyz nationalist groups were not highly visible online, mostly



appearing to the public during controversial events such as anti-corruption demonstrations, the ReAction 1.0 and 2.0, the feminist march, and the Femminale art exhibition organized by local liberal and intellectual groups. These events were used as focal points and windows of opportunity for nationalist groups to showcase their strength and public presence. The strong connection between these high-publicity events and the emergence of nationalist groups signaled the first signs of social media for the goal of nationalist mobilization.

However, when a power vacuum and uncertainty emerged after President Jeenbekov fled from the Kyrgyz White House, supporters of Japarov won a tense stand-off against the coalition of liberal groups and traditional political elites, including former President Atambaev, in the central square by physically attacking the latter. Many urban protesters and experts condemned the pro-Japarov mobilization for being “uneducated” and for supporting “a criminal.” In Russian-speaking social media, it was assumed that Japarov’s supporters were hired for money rather than authentically aligned. However, our observations of Kyrgyz social media, including Whatsapp groups and conversations with pro-Japarov rural supporters, suggest that many of his supporters genuinely joined the protests on Japarov’s side out of personal ideological convictions.

Kyrgyz social media served as a key factor in [Japarov’s rise](#). His Facebook groups rapidly mushroomed in the immediate aftermath of protests with his largest group quickly reaching from 35,000 to 117,000 members, in the period of several days becoming the largest Facebook politics page in Kyrgyzstan ([Baialieva and Kutmanaliev 2020a](#)).

These numbers show that Japarov indeed enjoyed mass support that he carefully cultivated over the years by investing his time and engaging Kyrgyz



audiences on Kyrgyz social media groups, otherwise mostly ignored by liberal activists. The failure of pro-democracy activists to engage with the Kyrgyz-speaking population at the grass-roots level is due to their weak knowledge of the Kyrgyz language. Many urban intellectuals and social activists cannot freely express their ideas in Kyrgyz. Another important reason is that many liberal activists did not bother to engage the Kyrgyz-speaking population due to their urban bias, reflected in their detached and patronizing attitudes towards the interests and views of rural communities. This social and linguistic divide produced different political perceptions and perspectives between mostly urban liberal groups and ordinary people from rural areas.

Since becoming president, Japarov has shaken the political order by forcing through a new constitution that the opposition leaders and civil society activists view as a tool to undermine fragile democratic institutions and establish a full-scale authoritarian regime. The key populist elements (discourses about the popular will and a corrupt elite) and the direct appeal via social media were activated in their context. Our observations of political views were extensively expressed in social media, and also in conversations with us, by people who voted for Japarov, including concerns about the country's growing economic inequality, corrupt judicial system, and real or alleged foreign influence. The difference was the ways in which Japarov communicated about these issues. His anti-establishment rhetoric, provocative statements, divisive language and social media trolling increased in intensity and polarized society in the aftermath of the 2020 unrest.

The new case of populism in Kyrgyzstan in Japarov's political strategy and communication highlights widely acknowledged features of populism: political cleavages, a charismatic leader, and promises to resolve long-standing social issues. His populism as a political movement turned into a formal organization and continued as a political party, for instance "Mekenchil" (and other new



allegedly president-led parties “Umut”, “Bagyt”). Japarov believes that he represents the true will of the Kyrgyz people. His posts, which he regularly publishes on Facebook, employ absolutist and categorical language making broad claims and promises. The administrators of pro-Japarov Facebook groups openly incited hatred against their political opponents and liberal groups through hate speech.

INTERNET ACCESS AND LINGUISTIC DIVIDES

With increased internet access and the availability of smartphones in recent years, the Kyrgyz-speaking population is widely exposed to a variety of news content on digital social networks. There are 3.6 million social media users in Kyrgyzstan, according to data for February 2022 published by Datareportal. The number of social media users at the start of 2022 was equivalent to 53.9 percent of the total population (6.68 million) and increased by 400,000 between 2021 and 2022. However, it is important to note that individual social

media users may not represent unique individuals (i.e., individual users may use multiple accounts).

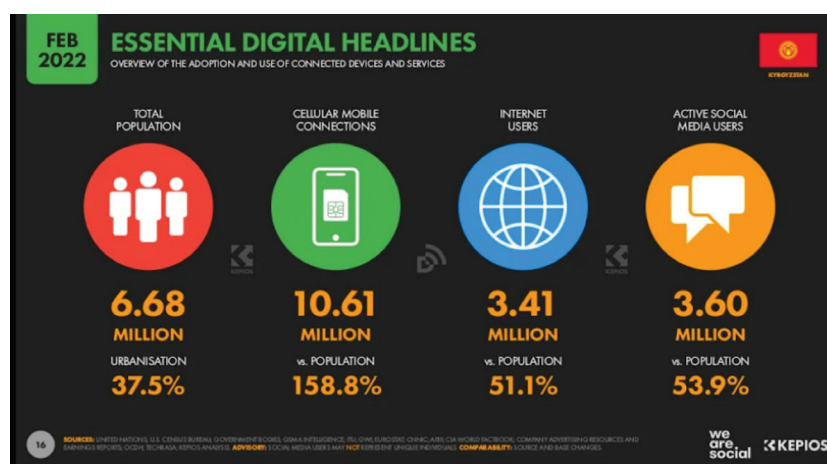


Figure 1. Essential digital data on Kyrgyzstan 2022 (Source: [KEPIOS](#)).



As shown in Figure 1, the cellular mobile connections exceed the total population. Local mobile Internet provides great opportunities for rural residents to expand communication networks through social media platforms. The main digital media networks in the Kyrgyz language are YouTube, WhatsApp, Instagram, Facebook, and, to a lesser degree, Twitter and Telegram. In Kyrgyzstan, the latter are predominantly used by Russian-speaking residents of cities. The linguistic divide in Kyrgyzstan's digital space separates information channels between Russophone and Kyrgyzophone people. Generally, Russian-language social media tends to target the middle class and urban dwellers. Kyrgyz-language media platforms, meanwhile, tend to be popular among residents from the regions or rural areas. As of today, the content from the Kyrgyz-speaking segments of social media networks remains understudied. For many, news disseminated in and through social media replaced traditional newspapers and TV shows as the main source of information and entertainment. Before the spread of the Internet, residents of rural areas tended to trust traditional media such as newspapers and TV, however, when news disseminated through social networking sites came to replace them people readily took for granted the reliability of online content - especially if it is spread through trusted networks in the context of a fragmented media environment ([Arceneaux et al. 2012](#)).

FRAMING POPULIST LANGUAGE

On January 10, the early presidential election was held in Kyrgyzstan and the next day the Russian edition of Komsomol published a detailed interview with the leading presidential candidate and favorite of the people, Sadyr Japarov. In his extensive interview Japarov openly stressed that he orchestrated the revolution from prison. He confessed that he didn't just sit in jail, but through



social networks he worked with the people and created groups in Odnoklassniki, Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp where he controlled more than 50 groups. According to him, through these platforms he spread information about the nationalization of the Kumtor Gold Company, and thus “reached” the Kyrgyz people. “In prison you are a free man for 24 hours per day: there is free time. That’s how I led a revolution from prison,” Japarov told Kommersant. This interview became a kind of tribute, after which Sadyr Japarov revealed himself to many as an active social media user. He was popularly nicknamed “the blogger” (more often in jocular or critical form), who “never parted with his tablet and smartphone.” Besides using his own personal platform for expressing his opinions, President Japarov gives interviews to media outlets¹ loyal to his persona. To analyze Japarov’s statements and populist linguistics, we chose two controversial interviews given to Russian and Kyrgyz state media agencies. One, from 2021 to the Russian edition of [Kommersant](#) at the very beginning of his presidency, and the other, a recent long-awaited interview with a Kyrgyz online media outlet.

Case 1. Text analysis of Japarov’s interview from 10.01.2021 to [Kommersant](#)

Sadyr Japarov said in his interview to “Kommersant” that he had “led a revolution from prison.” He explained that by creating groups on social networks and messenger apps he “reached the whole population in three and a half years” ([ibid](#)). We conducted a textual analysis of the entire interview, excluding the journalist’s questions. Although we admit that the questions and answers may interrelate, in our text-based analysis, the framing of answers and use of language by Japarov plays a central role. In total we analyzed 1,956 words that belong to Japarov in the interview. The main task of the analysis is to identify the dichotomous and absolutist terminology, which are inherent

¹More about news outlets to which the president and politicians willingly give interviews can be found here <https://factcheck.kg/komu-politiki-dayut-eksklyuzivnoe-intervyu-mediakritika-na-sajt-aryba-kq/>



to populist discourse. We conducted a statistical descriptive analysis on the most frequently used words in the text. To identify dichotomies, we excluded stop-words like prepositions, adjectives, verbs and hold constant only nouns and pronouns. As shown in Figure 2, the most frequent words used by Sadyr Japarov are “us,” “people” and “them.”

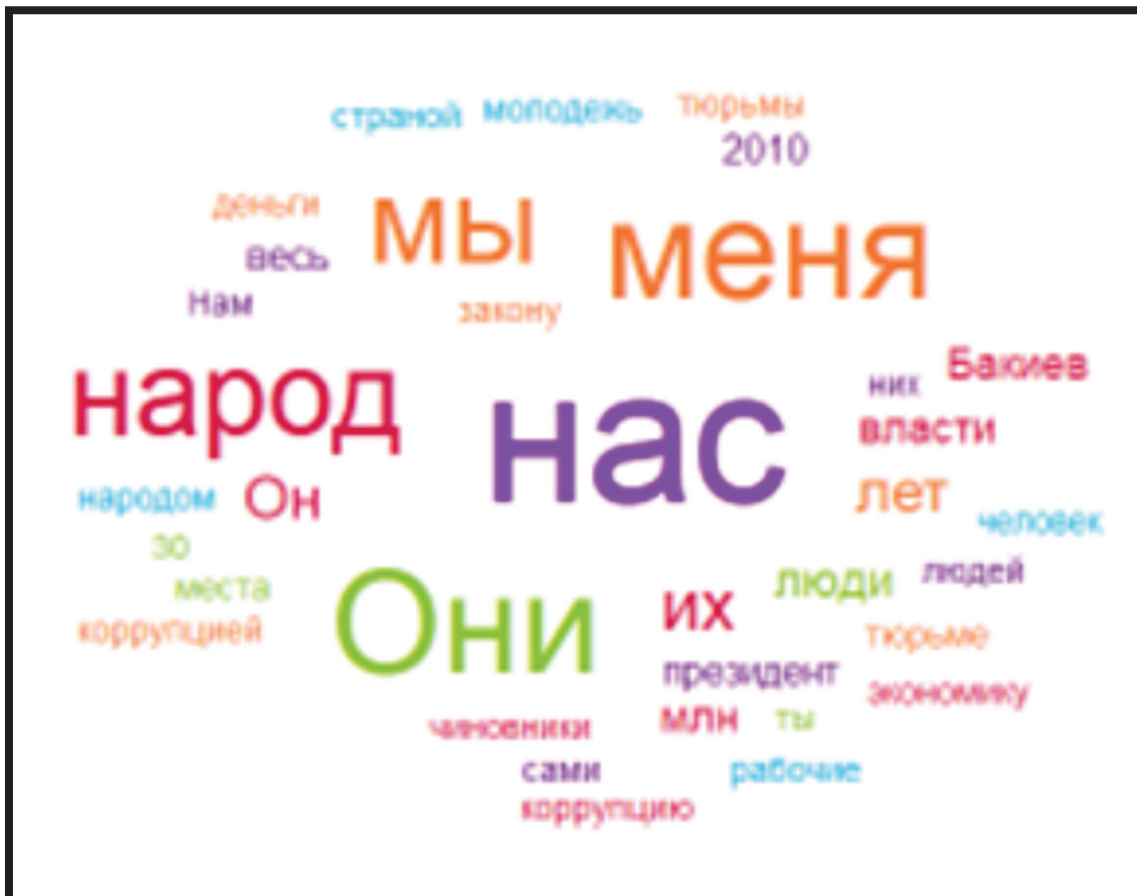


Figure 2. Word cloud of the top 35 words used by Japarov in an interview to “Kommersant,” Russia’s media outlet on 10.01.2021.

As presented in Table 1, the “us” category includes himself (menia) and the people (narod, ludi). In total, he makes 70 references in this category. The context these words have been used in shows that Japarov puts his own persona close to the “people’s will” and that he struggles for a brighter future



for his people. The “other/them” category indicates the exclusion of certain groups. According to the semantic meaning of these words in the interview, this excluded group includes “old politicians,” who have been in power for 30 years, elite parliamentarians, and oppositional leaders.

Table 1. The most frequent words in Japarov’s interview on 11.01.2021.

Category	Original in Russian	Total count
‘Us’ and ‘people’	nas (15), menia (13), my(12), nam (4), ludi (11), narod (15)	70
‘Them’	ih (9), oni (13), nih (3)	25

Case 2. Text analysis of Japarov’s interview from 24.04.2022 to Kabar.kg.

For the textual analysis we selected another long interview given by Sadyr Japarov a year into his presidency. This was given to the pro-presidential Kabar News Agency. After heated discussions on social media about the construction of the new Kyrgyz White House, Sadyr Japarov promised on his Facebook page that he would soon give an exclusive interview. Many active bloggers and journalists posted on their social media accounts expressing that they are ready to offer their media outlets for the interview. After a few days, his interview was published on the loyal news agency - Kabar (originally it was published in Kyrgyz but the next day it was replaced by its [Russian translation](#)). We analyzed its original version in Kyrgyz. In the interview, which was distributed in text form, President Japarov reflected on the major socioeconomic and political issues discussed in the country. This interview is twice as long as the previous interview presented in case 1. The text analysis of the current interview counts 3,799 words in total, excluding the journalist’s



questions. As in the previous textual analysis, we limited the word cloud to the top 35 most-used words and focused on nouns and pronouns to examine their frequency and context.



Figure 3. Word cloud of the top 35 words used by Japarov in an interview to “Kabar Agency” (Kyrgyz language) on 24.04.2022.

As the word cloud in Figure 3 shows the most frequent words used by the president are “I” (men), “we” (biz), “other” (bashka) and the negative particle “not” (ech), which could be rendered into English in the meaning of even, yet, merely, just, never.



Table 2. The most frequent words in Japarov's interview on 24.04.2022.

Category	Original in Kyrgyz	Total count
'I, we', 'people'	men (19), biz (16), el, el uchun, elim, eldiki, elge (25)	60
'Not'	ech (18)	18
'Other'	bashka (12), alar (11)	23

As the context of Japarov's interview indicates, he mainly stresses his own persona united with the plural "us" and "people." Another discursive element in Japarov's communication is his excessive use of the Kyrgyz particle 'ech'/эч (used 18 times), which acts as a categorical form and gives a categorical form to the word. This particle in Kyrgyz intensifies the meaning of a corresponding word or emphasizes its importance or absolutism. This "ech" particle (close to the Russian chastitsa "ni") is an auxiliary part of speech, which gives words additional shades of meaning, strengthens, or limits them. In Table 3, we can read the sentences with categorical statements used by Japarov in the interview.

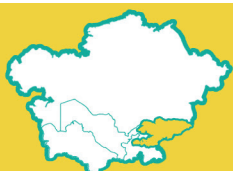


Table 3. Absolutism and use of categorical statements with Kyrgyz particle ‘ech’ in Japarov’s interview 24.04.2022.

English translation	Original statement in Kyrgyz
...It has nothing to do with it	Эч кандай байланышы жок.
... No one gives land to anyone for free	Эч ким эч кимге бекер жер бербейт.
... None of us argued with them on this issue	Бул маселеде алар менен эч кимибиз талашкан жокпуз.
... Don't worry at all	... эч кам санабаңыздар.
There will be no double standards at all	Эч кандай кош стандарттуулук болбойт.
...The White House has no objections at all	...ак үйдүн эч тоскоолу жок.
...In no way the lake will be harmed	Көлгө эч бир зыяны тийбегидей кылып.
... There is no pressure at all	... Эч кандай басым-кысым жок.

Here, it is translated into English mainly as “...at all,” the Kyrgyz use of “ech” has a function close to affixes, it is always placed before the word to which it refers, and therefore with a noun, “ech” indicates complete negation, absence of a thing or phenomenon, and in some places intensifies the meaning. Forming negative pronouns as well such as “no one,” “never,” “nowhere,” it is used with generally emotional categorical content. Besides, the populist language of Japarov is rich in using Kyrgyz proverbs mainly in their negated and archaic meaning. His simplified and absolutist explanation for social and political problems is easily perceived by ordinary people. Most of the words he uses in



his speeches and posts are used by the moderators and administrators of his social media groups.

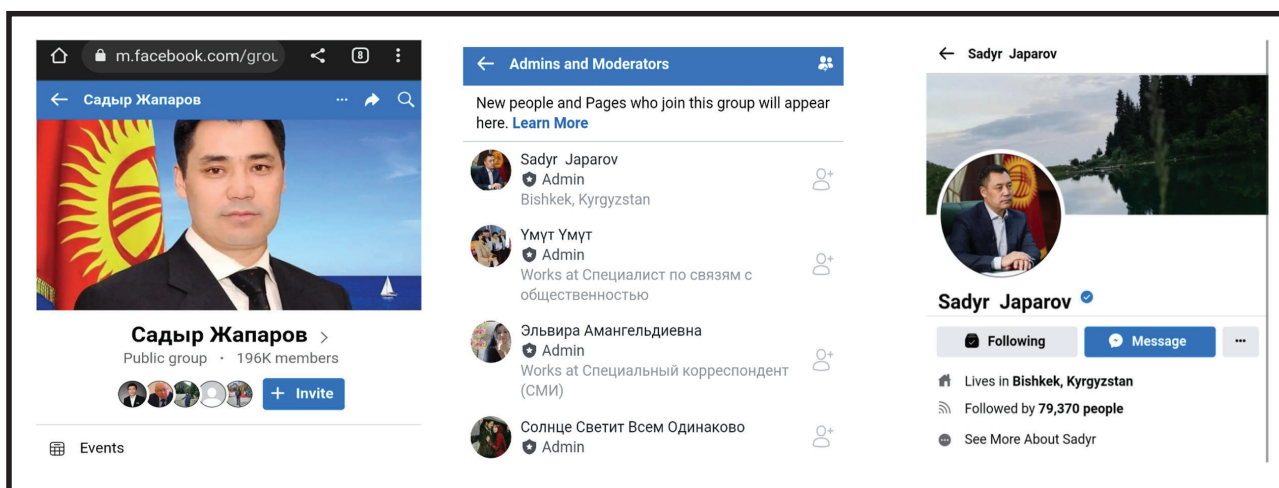
Thus, we can observe Japarov's populist language and social media activity not only as political communication but also as a method and strategy in politics. His discourse promotes anti-establishment rhetoric and expressions of progress by common claims normalized among Kyrgyz Internet users such as "never happened in 30 years," "first time in 30 years," (30 jylda myndai bolgon emes, 30 jylda birinchi jolu), and "speaking on behalf of people" (elim, elim uchun, elim menen, eldin talaby). In addition, these discourses are fuelled with the scapegoating of those who have different views as "pro-Westerners" (batyshchyl), supporters of opponents (ASHAchy, Madumarchy, makul emester) and "people's enemies" (ichki dushman, buzukular). Such divisive statements on a semantic level are likely to provoke an emotional response which is driven by feelings of anger, rather than fear.

PRO-JAPAROV ONLINE PLATFORMS

Japarov successfully employs populist behavior by producing divisive and hostile language. Having a direct appeal to his supporters, Japarov personally administers [his public group](#) on Facebook.



Figure 4. The public group “Sadyr Japarov” on Facebook is administered by President Japarov.



As shown in Figure 4, the public group on Facebook called Sadyr Japarov has 196,000 subscribers and is moderated by four people (Elvira Amangeldieva and Umut Umut are the same person). One of the moderators from this group created on February 26, 2014 is Sadyr Japarov. Clicking on his name in the list of “admins and moderators” will direct to his personal verified account. The blue verification badge is given by Meta (Facebook) to let people know that a Page or profile is authentic.

As he admitted in his interview to Kommersant (analyzed in case 1 earlier), he used all kinds of social media networks and created 50 groups on WhatsApp which he managed while in prison. The membership significantly multiplied and the number of groups supporting Japarov mushroomed since he claimed political power in the “October revolution” of 2020. Realizing the potential of social networks for political mobilization, Japarov actively worked from prison to create his support base online. His overwhelming dominance in Kyrgyz social media became obvious thanks to the work of hundreds of aggressive trolls who attacked not only Japarov’s political opponents, but also ordinary people with dissident and opposition views. Their favorite target was liberal



or [opposition female activists](#) such as the former female candidate to the presidency, Klara Sooronkulova, whom trolls and then-ordinary users threatened with sexual violence. The hate speech incited by online trolls created an atmosphere of impunity exacerbated by the inaction of state authorities and online group moderators affiliated with Japarov and his close associates. Such impunity further emboldened or incited ordinary users to make attacks and open death threats against the opponents of their leader. Japarov's divisive language sent clear signals to his supporters designating "enemies of the people" (eldin dushman, ichki dushman). Typically, active users who support Japarov would label prominent activists, sexual minorities, and opposition leaders, as "anti-Kyrgyz betrayers" (chykynchylar), or "Western agents and spies."

When analyzing social networks, we found 39 groups on Facebook alone engaged in the promotion of Sadyr Japarov. YouTube, Tiktok and Whatsapp have a different specificity of social networks, which is designed more for the distribution of messages and media files. Tiktok and YouTube have their own media personalities, whose agenda includes praise for live broadcasts and publications about the president's activities. For example, these are the so-called "people's bloggers," satirists and active users, as well as popular comedians and showmen ([Talant Anarbayev](#), [Chypalak Baatyr](#)).

In the interview with Elnura (name changed on request), one of the former moderators of pro-Japarov Facebook group "Sadyr Japarov - Bizdin Prezident" (Sadyr Japarov - Our President) who left his team as she lost her hopes on the promised reforms by Japarov, she claimed that the president's wife Aigul Japarova coordinates the social media teams with her two trusted friends Nazira and Ainura (names changed by request). They have WhatsApp groups loyal to Japarov's family where they share information from YouTube, Facebook, Instagram and profiles highlighting which should be discredited



and which one should be promoted.

According to Elnura, “There are mainly middle-aged women who try too hard to please the Japarov family. They leave comments under different political posts to defend Japarov. When I was moderating two of his Facebook groups we were not paid and did it with passion. I work at a bazaar and live in Russia. I believed his promises that he would improve the economy and return migrants from Russia” (Interview with Elnura, 10.04.2022).

Elnura continued sharing her disappointment and also pointed out the “dirty” (yplas) games on social media, stating that now the moderators and commentators are highly paid and brainwash the population. She added that the showman Chypalak Baatyr (Baby Finger Hero), whose real name is Zarylbek Alikenov, might be their project. His pseudonym is also in tune with the character Chypalak Bala (Baby Finger) from Kyrgyz folklore. Chypalak Baatyr, or Zarylbek Alikenov, is a showman and stunt performer who became popular by demonstrating his strength - in particular, the strength of his little finger. On his social networks on Facebook, Instagram and Tiktok, he writes laudatory pro-government posts, denigrating oppositional leaders and free journalists. His posts attract particular attention with their illiterate spelling and grammatical errors (misspelling of letters, endings, and omission of vowels). In an interview with Saadat (name changed), an independent Kyrgyz journalist, she said that his online activities are a project by the authorities and his posts are composed by a special team.





Figure 5. “We should shoot those who blight/destroy people” reads Chypalak Baatyr’s [repost](#) of a collage-illustration of female civil activists² who were [detained](#) on October 23, 2022.³ Under the collage is the inscription “Traitors of the Kyrgyz State! (bigger script) Having fallen for Western money, they have not noticed how they were turned into the enemies of the people. (They) are lovers of chaos.” Source: Facebook

Ostensibly disguised as experts, they express their opinions about the activities and positive role of President Japarov, while pointing out those who hinder him and are the “enemy of the people.” More about such personalities, bloggers and even production studios can be found in the investigation from factcheck.kg. In our current paper, in addition to studying interviews with the

² From left: Gulnara Djurabaeva, Klara Sooronkulova, Perizat Suranova, Asiya Sasykbaeva, Kanyshai Mamyrkulova (an independent Kyrgyz journalist who was also interrogated the same day but not detained), Rita Karasartova.

³ More than 20 civil activists, including opposition politicians, were detained on October 23 over their opposition to handing over the territory of the Kempir-Abad water reservoir in Kyrgyzstan to Uzbekistan.



president himself, we analyzed four main platforms which are used to promote the president: Telegram, Odnoklassniki, Instagram and Facebook. In each of them, we identified several groups, and membership which reaches up to hundreds of thousands of users, totaling more than a million members. For example, the groups called “Sadyr Japarov” have a total of almost a million and a half users. However, it is important to note that one social media follower does not necessarily mean one individual. We accept the fact that an organized social media user may have multiple accounts. As shown in Table 4, the highest number of subscribers belongs to Facebook and reaches 1.4 million users. The largest Facebook group called “Sadyr Japarov” is administered by a verified account of the president. This number has been fixed by screenshots and a manual collection recorded in the excel file. It is possible that given to the dynamics of social media that the number may get higher or lower. According to our observation, Facebook is also the most politically active and coordinated platform promoting President Japarov.

Table 4. Social media platforms promoting president Japarov

<i>Social media</i>	<i>Number of subscribers in the most active account</i>	<i>Number of groups</i>	<i>Total number of users</i>
<i>Facebook</i>	190.025	39	1.410.318
<i>Instagram</i>	304.182	72	1.250.430
<i>Odnoklassniki</i>	2.006	4	3.609
<i>Telegram</i>	934	9	2.387



HATE SPEECH

In our earlier analysis in 2020 we discussed pro-Japarov mobilization, hate speech and nationalist populism in contexts where activists and opponents faced threats. The hateful verbal attacks were fueled by pro-government online social trolls and President Japarov's supporters. Extremist hate speech and violent language became a norm in comments on social media and indicated increasing polarization and dangerous radicalization of the tensions between traditional/conservative and urban/liberal segments of society. Japarov's verbal attacks on his opponents through media channels give clear signals to his supporters and media trolls to openly harass and threaten his opponents and independent media outlets such as Azattyk and Kloop. The most vulnerable are female social activists, who receive explicit threats of sexual violence as shown in the text of the post in Figure 6. Facebook does little to regulate hate speech on its social media platform.



Figure 6. This poster singles out female activists - Japarov's prominent opponents. The poster is entitled "The list of b*hes who stand against Sadyr [Japarov]" and then lists the names and professional affiliations of these activists. The poster was widely circulated in pro-Japarov Facebook groups and generated thousands of comments in Facebook comment sections left by pro-Japarov supporters. Many of those comments had threatening content and threats of rape and sexual violence directed against these female activists. Source: taken from Facebook posts.**



A former constitutional chamber judge and a presidential candidate, now a leader of the “Reforma” opposition party Klara Sooronkulova is one of the female activists targeted by pro-Japarov online trolls and supporters and features in the hateful poster in figure 6. In an interview with us, she told us, “[u]sually threats come in relation to my critical opinion and comments regarding Sadyr Japarov.” Social media users, mostly males, on Facebook and Instagram openly threatened her with death and rape. According to her, media trolls are very well organized in their targeting of political opponents. The accounts of those users are usually linked to pro-Japarov groups and supporters. For example, in one of videos hosted on a youtube independent channel where Sooronkulova critically discussed Japarov’s “gangster-style methods” in politics, we counted eight open death threats and more than 1000 hateful comments ([Baialieva and Kutmanaliev 2020b](#)). In his own speeches and social media posts, Japarov often labeled his opponents as “enemies of people,” a favorite term used by populist leaders and politicians around the world.

Another female activist, whose photo appears in the poster from figure 5 and one of the most frequent targets of online hate, has been Rita Karasartova, a human rights activist. In our interview with her, she argued that divisive language and polarizing strategies first became prominent during the regime of a former president Atambaev, who used anti-Western divisive language against Kyrgyz civil society and NGOs. He regularly incited Kyrgyz society against independent mass media and civic opponents, labeling them traitors and spies, reproducing the Kremlin-backed conspiracy theories against liberal opposition figures in Russia, and thus, preparing favorable ground for the future populist discourse of Japarov.

The intensity of online aggression increases during power struggles. After Japarov came to power, he employed polarizing strategies to get support from



his powerbase and incited online trolls against civic activists ([Baialieva and Kutmanaliev 2020b](#)). According to Karasartova, she got used to receiving threats from anonymous accounts but since Japarov and his social media group administrators encouraged hate speech against opponents, she started receiving threats, including death threats, from real users. We identified at least one user who made a death threat against Karasartova in 2020 under his real account.

The observation of Kyrgyz social media shows that administrators of pro-Japarov Facebook groups – with Japarov himself being one of the administrators – continue to turn a blind eye to hate instigation and intimidation of opponents. Instead, they seem to tacitly encourage social intimidation by media users, exemplified in figure 6 and displayed in thousands of extremist comments to actively promote social polarization. This sets a dangerous dynamic that can potentially lead to the scenario where extremist social media users fueled by populist instigative language and a feeling of impunity are emboldened to physically attack people offline.

According to our monitoring of social media, after Japarov consolidated his political power with no one who could potentially challenge his dominance, the amount of populist and divisive language in Japarov's speeches as well as the intensity of online hate attacks by his supporters against political opponents visibly decreased. However, recently on October 23 2022, more than a dozen of opposition activists and politicians were [arrested](#), including at least two female activists from figure 6, on the accusation of preparing mass unrest and attempted regime change in relation to a controversial border demarcation agreement with Uzbekistan. We have detected an increase in online activities and hateful speech in pro-Japarov social media groups against the opposition and the anti-agreement activists. This clearly indicates that Japarov and his supporters are ready to reactivate powerful strategic tools, at



any moment, against their competitors and civic activists who could threaten their dominance.

CONCLUSION

Mobile internet and smartphones provide people with great opportunities for increasing the breadth of their social interactions. For many, news circulated in and through social media channels has replaced traditional newspapers and TV programmes as their primary source of information. People readily took for granted the reliability of online content, especially if it is spread through trusted networks. In our opinion, the weak media literacy and inexperience in dealing with fake news played a crucial role in the rapid spread of populist messaging and the manipulation of public opinion. Virtually all nationalist groups and social media trolls rely on anti-Western and anti-liberal discourse as ready-to-use templates for nationalist actors to manipulate public opinion.

Japarov fully employed this strategy against his political opponents. What Japarov added to existing discourse frames is an anti-establishment discourse and claims to represent the will of the people. It emerged at a time when people were exhausted by a corrupted system and such polarized rhetoric spoke to their dissatisfaction.

Liberal groups did not manage to effectively neutralize or counteract the populist message promoted by Japarov. Nor had they an effective plan to counteract his aggressive strategy. Their main weakness is a lack of grassroots connections between the predominantly Russophone liberal groups in large cities and the broader Kyrgyz-speaking population largely located in rural areas. They tend to adapt norms from Western liberal discourse with little



attempt to convert it into plain language that could be acceptable and comprehensible to the most traditional and rural segments of society. Abstract ideas about liberal values or a rule-of-law that have little to do with the prosaic reality of the everyday lives of ordinary rural citizens strongly contradicts their traditional views and life experiences.

Japarov's anti-establishment and anti-liberal rhetoric has been framed as "the people's voice." He skillfully manipulates rising inequality in Kyrgyz society to shift blame on old elites, liberal activists, independent media – whom he calls as "enemies of the people" and "traitors." Sensing his power and popularity, Japarov has taken a successful gamble on changing the constitution to dismantle democratic institutions and grant the presidency unprecedented new powers.



NOTES

Cover Photo Source

V. Pirogov (2020), Kyrgyzstan annuls election after protests, Reuters, <https://www.dw.com/en/kyrgyzstan-annuls-parliamentary-election-results-after-protests/a-55171052>

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