NEW MEDIA AND DIGITAL ACTIVISM
Comparing Armenia and Chechnya

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Introduction
The Arab uprisings of 2011 reinvigorated debates on the role of information and communication technologies (ICTs) and social media in political processes, and in challenging non-democratic regimes in particular. Popular opinions on this topic, however, have largely tended towards the simple association of cause and effect. For example, a common view portrays ICTs as creating political opportunities for challengers in and of themselves, without taking into account other factors that could influence the dynamics and likelihood of protest mobilisation. Although some scholars have focused on addressing this gap, there has been a tendency to ignore why some authoritarian regimes banned, or were indifferent to, ICTs while others actively embraced them. Rød and Weidmann (2015) successfully addressed this second ambiguity – distinguishing ICTs as either ‘liberation technology’ when utilised by the public to create opportunities for political challenge, or as ‘repression technology’ when in the hands of autocrats, imposing additional restrictions on political and social liberties.

Alongside more recent debates about the growing capacity of authoritarian states to exploit the Internet, there is increasing anxiety about the challenges that ICTs present to democratic polities (Bennett and Livingston 2018; Howard, Woolley and Calo 2018; Tufekci 2014). In liberal democratic contexts, the gradually declining authority of democratic institutions, together with the growth of alternative information channels provided by ICTs, have been mobilising citizens to join and support movements and parties outside the political centre, and particularly on the authoritarian right (Bennett and Livingston 2018). While such work is relatively new and more is needed to better understand the ways ICTs impact political processes in different contexts, what is clear is that social networks are a key element. As Castells says, ‘Power does not reside in institutions, not even the state or large corporations. It is located in the networks that structure society. Thus, whoever controls these structured networks holds the power’ (Castells 2002), in both democratic and authoritarian polities alike.

With Internet freedom declining worldwide in every consecutive year since 2010 (Freedom House 2018), it is important to understand how ICT dynamics operate in regions with different regime types and contentious politics. Applied to a peripheral, contested region like the Caucasus where, more often than not, polities are illiberal, these scholarly debates highlight ICTs as
a powerful tool in societies that are relatively more repressive and that lack media freedoms. When neglected by governments and taken up by regime challengers, ICTs allow challengers to appeal to broader constituencies and foster broader social support, thereby equalising the power imbalance between themselves and the elite. In the hands of autocrats, however, ICTs can further socially isolate and disempower publics by making online social connections and interaction potentially illicit and subject to scrutiny.

The Internet has made significant inroads into the Caucasus. In the South Caucasus, Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia have Internet penetration rates of 65 per cent, 80 per cent and 64 per cent, respectively (World Bank 2018). By way of comparison, in the West, 95 per cent of the United Kingdom, 75 per cent of the United States, and 81 per cent of France use the Internet (World Bank 2018). Overall Internet penetration rates for Russia – at 76 per cent as of 2018 (Freedom House 2018), cannot give a reliable picture of connectivity rates in the North Caucasus, as Russian regions are generally much lower in terms of their respective population’s penetration rates. The aim of this chapter, however, is not to provide an in-depth survey of ICT use across the whole Caucasus region. Rather, the chapter isolates the differential impact of ICTs in two Caucasian settings, Armenia and Chechnya, where the structure of social networks and political hierarchy are quite distinct.

The comparison juxtaposes contrasting dynamics of increasing and decreasing political opportunities: Armenia represents a case with an increase in political opportunities and decreasing state control. Internet penetration numbers in Armenia have been steadily growing (World Bank 2018), and the free use of ICTs and social media by the public and activist networks made it a liberation technology. This was demonstrated in the peaceful power transition enacted in April 2018 that has come to be known as the ‘Velvet Revolution’ (see Chapter 12). Conversely, Chechnya represents a case in which there is a decrease in political opportunities and increase in state control. ICTs and social media are controlled by the regime for propaganda and surveillance purposes, and they serve as a repression technology. Internet penetration numbers for Chechnya are unknown. The attention the Chechen authorities give to Chechen WhatsApp users, however – from scolding users for ‘spreading propaganda’ on the platform, to proposing a ban on housewives from the application, suggest that Internet use is widespread and popular in the Republic.

ICTs are important as they facilitate the interpersonal networks, communication, and negotiation central to contention and which ultimately create political opportunities to challenge governments. In non-democratic and authoritarian contexts, the spaces which contain these social networks and communication processes are more likely to be constrained. ICTs as liberation technology are not enough on their own to create political opportunities that may then lead to successful regime change. The socio-structural factor of oppositional sites for transmitting ideas and coordinating activities must be present as well. The Armenia-Chechnya comparison, contrasting two geographically proximate theatres with comparable historical legacies and which not that long ago were part of the same state, illustrates these points.

**ICTs and political opportunities**

Theoretical debates surrounding the capacity of ICTs and social media to shape political opportunities persist in challenging scholars. While it is obvious that much of political contestation is directly incited and directed on ICTs and social media, the scholarship has already moved beyond the simple assertion that ICTs influence political opportunities to address the deeper question of how, when, and why (Garrett and Edwards 2007). At the same time, there has been inadequate attention to the influence of the domestic
configuration of politics that shapes socio-structural factors which could answer the question of how, when, and why political opportunities are created or not. These factors are now considered in turn for Armenia and Chechnya.

In Armenia, the networked communications environment was instrumental in disrupting existing structures of power. By the time Armenia’s so-called Velvet Revolution took place, ICTs had been opening up political opportunities for pro-democracy and anti-government challengers by providing a foundation for organising, fostering and sustaining social-structural spaces for sharing information, building solidarity, and nurturing shared identities. ICTs provided expanded access to relevant oppositional information, increasing the number of people that could be recruited, and decreasing obstacles to mobilisation. ICTs were used to speedily inform the public about relevant protest information, such as the tactics and meeting points to be used that day, but also about detentions and other state responses. This represented a shift away from more centralised structures of discussion, allowing the movement to widely disseminate information about the protests, giving a large number of people ‘who would otherwise have no connection at all’ (Oliver and Myers 2003) the opportunity to be united in their reaction to the news (Avedissian 2015). Expanded networks of people who do not know each other personally, which grow out of the strong ties represented by the close relationships of activists, lead to more pluralistic action (Bimber 1998).

In contrast, in Chechnya, ICTs are the prerogative of the state, representing tools of control, and increasing opportunities to censor and influence public opinion, and to track members of the opposition (Rod and Weidmann 2015). Given this state domination, political opportunities to mount a challenge are minimal. There are no free spaces or forums away from the state where people can transmit ideas, coordinate activities, and draw in supporters, let alone extend their discursive spaces to broader publics. Given the repressive environment, any type of oppositional sentiment, if communicated at all, will be done so through personal, direct contacts. While this type of communication – characterised by high trust between individuals that know each other personally, is important in a repressive environment, it does not embody the necessary freedom to create more broadly resonant ideas and opposition identities that could later be broadcast out through ICTs. Dependence on information from close and trusted individuals keeps information redundant, closed off from innovation outside the network, and limits the information to a smaller group, inhibiting the broader information flows necessary for self-led networking and interaction. This underlines the high cost of action for individuals, exemplified by the lack of political opportunities.

Armenia: domestic politics and ICTs

At the time of the ‘Velvet Revolution’, Armenia’s government was a semi-consolidated authoritarian state (Nations in Transit 2018). At the time of the collapse of the Soviet Union, Armenia had been a promising candidate for democratic consolidation. But by the early 2000s, privatisation and the widespread corruption of the 1990s had enriched the political class (Welt and Bremmer 1997), while mass impoverishment and enormous socio-economic difficulties sidelined democratisation as a political priority, making political institutions and economic spheres hotbeds for patronage and clientelism. The nationalist and militaristic discourse borne out of the Nagorno-Karabakh war increased the salience of the politics of security and stability. Such discourse did not result in sound state-building policies, but rather became tools for post-Soviet Armenian elites to advance their power consolidation (Ghaplanyan 2018). This security need also facilitated deeper political and economic ties with Russia, which had been seen as Armenia’s security guarantor.
Yet Armenia had a very robust civil society. Public protests had been a mainstay of Armenian political life since the late 1980s, and a new wave of grassroots citizens’ movements, well documented by Ishkanian (2008, 2015), locally known as ‘civic initiatives’, began to take on a more prominent role throughout the 2010s, outperforming formal NGOs in terms of generating greater civic activism (Transparency International 2011; see also Chapter 12 in this volume). As Ishkanian (2015) argues, civic initiative activists espoused more political understandings of civil society and they introduced new ways of expressing citizenship. They created the space for public discourse about rule of law and corruption, and ICTs were crucial in their ability to grow, organise, and mobilise.

The political debates that dominated social media in Armenia predominantly aligned with and occurred simultaneous to the various social movement mobilisations in the country. The growing popularity of social media in Armenia, and particularly Facebook, as well as the increasing availability and affordability of broadband technology, allowed activists to more easily access information, organise, and mobilise (Ishkanian 2015). These mobilisations were in many ways advocacy coalitions in the absence of formal advocacy groups, that served the purpose of raising awareness among the public about the political and social issues they mobilised around through social media.

The protest issues driving successive waves of mobilisation became the main topics of public debate on the Armenian Internet and particularly on Facebook. Consequently, the fact that Armenian social movements have tended to focus on single issues, all while using discourse about broader and more political issues of transparency and accountability (Avedisian 2015; Paturyan and Gevorgyan 2015), brought that same discourse to ICTs. For example, the Mashtots Park movement of 2012 emerged to obstruct the privatisation of a Yerevan public park, while the 100 Dram movement of 2013 was aimed at stopping public transportation fare rises to 150 drams, and the ‘Electric Yerevan’ movement was focused on preventing electricity tariff hikes. At the same time, the subtext of all of these movements, despite their single-issue nature, was broad discontent with the prevailing political order in Armenia, and in particular lack of accountability and rule of law.

Due to the fact that President Sargsyan had been taking over mainstream news outlets over the decade of 2008–2018, social media became the source for information that was not found in mainstream media. According to investigative news outlet Hetq (‘Trace’), most television media sources were either owned by members of the Republican Party of Armenia (RPA), businessmen affiliated with them, or Sargsyan’s son-in-law (Ghaplanyan 2018). Exemplifying the political imperceptiveness of Armenia’s previous ruling regime, their domination over traditional news media, and television in particular, made ICTs apparently unnecessary for them, even as the Armenian public had been gradually migrating from television to the Internet for their news during 2008–2018. This resulted to some extent in two separate informational spaces in Armenia, with younger, urban Armenians finding their information from the Internet while older generations and rural communities still favoured television.

**Chechnya: domestic politics and ICTs**

ICT use in domestic politics in Chechnya has been dominated almost totally by Ramzan Kadyrov. A native of the rural town of Tsentoroi (Akhmat-Yurt), Kadyrov has ruled Chechnya since 2007 (see Chapters 13 and 15). During the First Chechen War, he fought against Russian federal forces, but defected to the pro-Kremlin camp together with his father Akhmat and clan during the Second Chechen War. He took over governorship of Chechnya after his father’s assassination in 2004. Kadyrov’s regular expressions of devotion
to President Putin as well as statements of geopolitical alignment with him – for example in his anti-Western, illiberal disposition – serve as ways to show his reliability to Putin. This loyalty has awarded Kadyrov a hands-off approach from Moscow, which has never been concerned with how Kadyrov keeps the peace in Chechnya as long as Chechnya stays within the Russian Federation – even as Kadyrov’s actions have at times threatened stability in other parts of Russia.

Kadyrov’s use of digital and social media to project his power is done through a sophisticated public relations system. Kadyrov himself has been remarkably savvy in his understanding of the nexus of celebrity and power and has used this to his advantage by projecting his cult of personality online, thereby strengthening his power offline. The Chechen leader’s Instagram account became his primary platform; he had 3 million followers, essentially making him a social media celebrity, before it was shut down in late 2017 as a result of US sanctions. The substantial influence Kadyrov wielded, demonstrated by the popularity of his Instagram account, created power for the regime and necessarily constrained political opportunities for anti-government challengers. Instagram became a powerful tool for Kadyrov to project his power and promote a prosperous image of Chechnya both domestically as well as abroad. On Instagram, Kadyrov featured construction projects, celebrated Chechen culture and sport, and promoted government enterprises (Avedissian 2016). He also used the platform to exhibit his strength as leader by regularly displaying his workouts and his personal army, the ‘Kadyrovtsy’. Most importantly, Kadyrov used Instagram to display his loyalty to Vladimir Putin as a way to remind the public of his legitimacy as leader. The content of the account was curated both for a domestic, Chechen audience, evidenced by the appearance of Chechen-language videos, and for a broader Russian and international audience, illustrated by the predominant use of the Russian language, particularly in its text and its articulation of messages directed to Muslims and others across Russia and around the world.

Kadyrov is very contemporary in this way; he developed a parasocial relationship with his audience by posting personal content, enabling a ‘face-to-face relationship’ (Wohl and Wohl 1956), and a sense of familiarity that is not normally experienced with traditional political leaders (Avedissian 2016). While Kadyrov maintained accounts on other platforms such as Facebook and VKontakte after his Instagram account was disabled, none came close to the influence he had on Instagram. This may be because Instagram allows more than just status updates, as is typical of Facebook. Rather, users can share a snapshot of their lives with a mass audience; it is a window into what they are doing (Ward 2016). Moreover, recent research shows that while Facebook still dominates in terms of reach, Instagram comes first in terms of ‘engagement’, or the degree to which users interact with content – liking and commenting (Bakhshi, Shamma and Gilbert 2014). The fact that Instagram is more popular among younger people than Facebook (Anderson and Jiang 2018), also represents Kadyrov’s astute discernment about the importance of the direction in which these technologies were going, establishing Kadyrov’s dominance on a platform that was only growing in popularity.

While parasocial relationships are the dominion of cognitive-based studies and not a concern of this chapter, the phenomenon permeated Kadyrov’s political activity with a sense of emotional involvement and cultural weight (Avedissian 2016). It gave a false sense of a two-way communication – although users could comment on his posts, he never engaged with them, and critical comments were deleted. The parasocial aspect is also significant in a Russia that lacks the institutional mechanisms for managing power relationships, and where much of the contestation for control and influence is informal, including through
the media, where Kadyrov is able to define and project his power. Moreover, the use of
digital and social media for public relations purposes is a response to the global influence of
global technologies. It represents a remarkable media savviness that is not often attributed to
authoritarian leaders.

The importance of Instagram for Kadyrov cannot be underestimated. A founder of
Memorial, which was subject to what experts believe were revenge attacks after Kadyrov’s
Instagram was shut down, called the closure ‘a matter of Kadyrov’s image, of his prestige’
(Bennetts 2018). Although Kadyrov migrated to the platform Telegram for his political
communication (Morton 2017), Telegram does not have the same influence as Instagram.6
Still, Instagram accounts belonging to Kadyrov’s inner circle which had been using the same
formulaic publishing style as Kadyrov, and often feature Kadyrov as a central figure, con-
tinue to operate.

In summary, Armenia’s domestic politics from 2008 to 2018 were characterised by
a slow decline into authoritarianism up until the revolution of April-May 2018, with
President Sargsyan and the power of the ruling Republican Party of Armenia increasing
and spinning off into greater exclusivity from the public. While relative freedoms existed
in Armenia, including freedom of speech online, mainstream media was becoming
increasingly restricted. Civic initiatives were the main form of political activity outside
the formal halls of power – their networks were strong, but they did not succeed in
opening political opportunities enough for a major challenge7 until April-May 2018.
Sargsyan’s attempt to remain in power beyond his term limit was a trigger event for an
Armenian movement to create the political opportunities to mobilise and peacefully
topple the government.

In Chechnya, the autocratic power of Kadyrov draws on three sources of power: a close
relationship with Putin within the framework of Chechenisation, the culturally and socially
significant Sufi communities of Chechnya, as well as a remarkably repressive environment
in which dissent is not tolerated. Kadyrov uses ICTs and social media in order to project his
authority and maximise these sources of power, thereby strengthening his regime and closing
political opportunities for potential challengers.

ICTs and social media in Armenia – freedom of
communication flow

In Armenia, ICTs and social media were a liberation technology. Access to ICTs and social
media has been unrestricted and relatively free from government interference. Furthermore,
while television is still the most popular source for news, social media, Facebook in particular,
has been growing in popularity, and Armenian activists have been increasingly using it as a tool
for organising (Martirosyan 2018). Because Armenian civic initiatives were more open to
experimentation than the regime and were thus more ‘permeable’ to technological advances,
they could enact a more innovative and dynamic use of the Internet. As mentioned, ICTs on
their own could not have created the political opportunities necessary to mount a real challenge
to Sargsyan’s regime; rather they facilitate the broadcasting of the ideas, ideologies, and imagin-
ations about greater possibilities that emerging epistemic communities and advocacy networks
have been developing. These social networks eluded censorship and government control, and
ICTs became, outside of real-life interaction, the main channel for expressing political attitudes
and critiquing the government. Moreover, ICTs did not displace face-to-face social relations
among Armenian activists, but rather augmented them, thereby promoting new modes of soci-
ality that developed in the dynamic environment of ICTs.
ICTs created a place for mutual interactions connecting people in various ways with various interests, making the digital world merely an extension of real life. In this way, ICTs must be seen as an extension of the real world, and not as a separate existence. Even the new forms of socialisation and communication that emerged came from real life and values, sociocultural factors, symbols, and dominant values of Armenian society. Moreover, ICTs and social media facilitated the ‘Velvet Revolution’, not just through fostering the development of activist networks which made mobilisation possible in the first place, but also allowing all supporters to also engage. ICTs and social media made possible the rapid dissemination of information which allowed the public at large to signal to their networks their support of the protests. They also provided information to the public in real time about the protest actions, thus enabling the public to overcome the collective action problem by lowering the cost of participation for all. A result of this the use of ICT and social media in Armenia intensified even after the revolution concluded.\(^8\)

The case of Armenia supports the literature indicating that through increased information dissemination, it becomes more likely that domestic dissidents will recruit supporters and overcome the collective action problem (see, for example, Diamond 2010, Pierskalla and Hollenbach 2013). Increased information dissemination can bypass traditional media censorship, and can provide, for instance, visual confirmation of large numbers of demonstrators which lends a movement legitimacy and decreases the illicitness of protest. For example, the large volume of protesters which was broken down into groups often as small as three individuals and spread across the junctions of Yerevan and around the country increased the possible volume of information about the protests and served to increase ICT engagement. In this way, ICTs in Armenia became a powerful tool for opposition leaders like Nikol Pashinyan seeking to spread their political agenda. Pashinyan himself said ‘information technology enables us to have means of communication that cannot be controlled [by governments] … Through social media the Armenian people closed the ranks to say no to the former ruling elite which did not enjoy the people’s trust’ (Aslanian 2019).

The fact that state-controlled mainstream media was largely silent about the events made Nikol Pashinyan’s Facebook livestreaming one of the primary sources of information (Martirosyan 2018). Users would share these daily livestream videos, becoming an important source of support. Other social media platforms were used to spread information, such as Instagram, where people posted images and videos from rallies, marches, and encounters with police; Twitter was used to share the most up-to-date information, and Telegram became very popular. These channels also became ways for the public to verify information; social media accounts of movement leaders and activists became tools to prevent the spread of misinformation and disinformation. During the ‘100 Dram’ and ‘Electric Yerevan’ civic initiatives of previous years, for example, protesters also relied heavily on social media for garnering support, countering disinformation, and spreading verified information (Aghajanian 2013; Avedissian 2015). Thus these previous movements created learning opportunities – a space to try out tactics and strategies, which were drawn from during the so-called Velvet Revolution.

On the other side of the political divide, apart from a few individual officials, the Armenian government and the RPA relied predominantly on traditional media for communication. Given the lengths to which the Armenian authorities associated with Sargsyan’s regime went to build up and control a media empire, with, for example, Serzh Sargsyan himself and his son-in-law Mikael Minasyan buying up a large number of TV stations and news outlets, it is clear they understood the importance of communication for political power. Their apparent underestimation of the power of digital media, and in particular social
media, however, suggests that they just did not understand ICT’s utility within a political context. Given the fact that such a major event as the Armenian revolution was not even covered by these media outlets meant that the regime lost the information war. Without credibility or any means of stopping the counterhegemonic discourse happening in social media, their power was significantly depleted.

**ICTs and social media in Chechnya – the prerogative of autocracy**

In Chechnya, in sharp contrast to Armenia, ICTs and social media are the dominion of the regime. Kadyrov is an autocrat who has been keenly aware of the tremendous potential that the Internet has for creating and maintaining a rigidly controlled realm of public opinion, first by eliminating unwanted content and persecuting creators of that content, and then by actively providing regime-friendly propaganda. There is scholarly consensus that when a regime is willing to exercise control and information outlets are used to cultivate regime-friendly articulation, those in power tend to deflect potential opposition (Rød and Weidmann 2015).

In terms of monitoring, the fact that Internet services are provided by government agencies in Russia and Chechnya gives Kadyrov’s regime even better information about opposition dynamics than he had before the spread of the Internet. Any criticism or expression that contradicts the official line – said openly, in private social media groups, or even in conversation – can invite harsh consequences. It has been well documented that people in Chechnya are punished for posting commentary critical of the regime online. In a 2018 interview, an anonymous Chechen source told a Russian journalist, ‘now, not only abusive texts and comments are considered “seditions”, but also “likes”, reposts, or even a subscription to certain bloggers. The goal is to punish resisting the authorities … to make it as sensitive and painful as possible’ (Ignatyev 2018). Since collective punishment is fairly common in Chechnya, getting in trouble with the regime for content posted online does not just limit consequences to the perpetrator, but also to family. Often the punishment is public – a highly effective form of discipline in a cultural context where shame or dishonour can be a more socially costly form of retribution than formal punishment by any central authority.

In one case, a Chechen social worker who criticised Kadyrov on WhatsApp for ignoring the problems of poor people while showering ‘artists’ with expensive gifts found herself and her husband publicly humiliated on live television (Shamanska 2015). This behaviour simultaneously indicates the regime’s understanding of the persisting power of television and traditional media, even while focused on the digital world, signifying a more total control of media in the republic overall. Such actions also send a strong signal of government presence and monitoring of online activity, designed to deter similar activity in the future. This encourages self-censorship in Chechen society, both by discouraging anti-regime sentiment as well as by compelling moderators of newspapers, forums, and blogs to remove content posted by users that could result in censorship of the website or even persecution of the website administration. Thus, even if complete control over the online sphere is impossible to establish, the pervasive climate of fear and uncertainty further entrenches the power of the regime in a situation reminiscent of Bentham’s panopticon (Morozov 2011).

Given Chechnya’s context, ICTs as repression technology, and the lack of spaces away from the state for participants to communicate and frame their issues, political opportunities
remain minimal. Opposition-minded individuals cannot extend their discursive spaces to broader publics, underlining the lack of capacity to coordinate enough joint action around a shared agenda, resulting in a lack of counterweight to Kadyrov’s communications. The closed media factor of political opportunities confines the information flow to the individual’s narrow social networks, and even then, people are not free to talk. Furthermore, while it may be tempting to assume that political opportunities must be closed off to challengers in any dictatorship, this is not a given.

**Conclusion**

This research confirms that social networks are of enormous significance in both authoritarian and semi-authoritarian settings alike. In all settings, including democratic ones, such networks may tip power balances creating unexpected outcomes by building up autonomous networks as alternatives to state institutions. In this manner, digital spaces are best seen as structures that link core activists in social networks with more peripheral supporters and the broader public, which allow for coordination and coherence, and they help movements persist through periods of inactivity. In both Armenia and Chechnya, mainstream media from 2008–18 was largely closed to alternative political discourse while social media was open to both publics. The difference was that in Armenia, there existed ‘oppositional networks … to successfully [challenge] the state and [develop] civil society and democratic relations’ (Schock 2005: 29). These free spaces for information flows were needed in order to construct resonant frames that were then broadcast to the broader public, creating political opportunities.

In Armenia, ICTs provided various opportunities to inform, organise, mobilise, and lead a revolution, showing just how political technologies can be used with information technologies to open political opportunities and change government. The ICT-influenced broadcast flow of Armenian opposition networks made their information widely available to the public, increasing and encouraging individual participation. It also enabled pro-democracy actors previously limited in political activity to activist networks to expand, recruit broad support, and peacefully topple the incumbent regime. In part because incumbent elites were detached from the citizenry, ICTs allowed activist networks to fill the information vacuum, allowing for the development of broader solidarities that began to tackle movement issues on a more expanded front. This arrangement then became more difficult to attack with repression because where one group or individual is suppressed, another can emerge, as there is no single head to the hydra (Avedissian 2015).

In Armenia, people online, especially activists, were one step ahead of public officials in terms of understanding the power of new technology for political influence, exemplified by the lack of online activity among Sargsyan’s government or its officials. The ability to update old methods with modernity and globalisation developed new understandings of ‘opposition’ to match activists’ own socio-political contexts. All this made its engagement with broader Armenian political culture possible, allowed it to tap into democratic ideologies and permitted a democratic revolution. This adaptation was facilitated in large part by the social networks of activists and their associated spaces. The tactical flexibility demonstrated during the protests emerged from the Armenian activist networks, which accommodated divergent ideas and individual initiatives. They allowed for innovation, which likely contributed to the momentum of the protest mobilisation in April and May 2018. ICTs facilitated information flows in the movement’s network, allowing for the establishment of a sparser ‘meso-level’ network of individuals which provides for new forms of action and more decentralised decision-making (Avedissian 2015). This flexible organising indicates the ability of its actors to take ideas and diffuse them throughout the network’s communications.
In Chechnya, however, the innovative use of and experimentation with new technology was done by an autocratic leader. Kadyrov extended his coercive power to online spaces, ridding them of their ‘away from the state’ nature. The digital world became just another political space to closely control and monitor, like the public one. The findings suggest that in order for challengers in Chechnya to even begin tipping the balance of power in their favour, they would need to breach media censorship or somehow otherwise reach broader audiences. Even if this happens, other Caucasus scenarios do not offer much hope for political opportunities to open up. For example, the Azerbaijani government’s adoption of ‘networked authoritarianism’ which involves government monitoring and persecution of online dissent, even while allowing it to exist, has been shown to demoralise dissident Azerbaijani bloggers and not increase the public’s support (Pearce and Kendzior 2012). This aligns with the findings of this chapter that mere communication with the public is not enough to open political opportunities.

For Chechnya, because ICTs are totally state-dominated they are not, on their own, enough to tip the balance of power in favour of challengers. If the connective social networks and face-to-face solidarity necessary for mobilising were not also subject to monitoring by the regime, political opportunities may have had the chance to emerge. But in the Chechen context, both the networks of personal contacts and ICTs are thoroughly understood by the authorities, who have built up the institutional mechanisms to deal with dissent in both spaces. It would take a new way of structuring challenge to the regime, of creating social networks of ties and structuring activity that the regime is not prepared to respond to, to open up political opportunities in Chechnya.

Notes

1 WhatsApp is a messaging service that supports text messages and voice calls as well as voice and video calls, and other media.
2 These civic initiatives covered issue like the environment, human rights, consumer rights, as well as labour issues.
3 Kadyrov has called himself ‘a soldier of Vladimir Putin’ (Markedonov 2006).
4 For example, Kadyrov openly declared that if Russia decided to support the Buddhist regime in Myanmar against the Rohingya, he would go against the official position (Balmforth 2017). Moreover, men associated with Kadyrov’s inner circle have pursued and kidnapped critics in the neighbouring republic of Dagestan and Moscow and are implicated in the murder of Russian opposition figure Boris Nemtsov. Kadyrov himself has pursued a destabilising land swap with neighbouring Ingushetia. As expert Ekaterina Sokirianskaia says, ‘when [tensions] have spilled over, the Kremlin has frowned but guaranteed impunity’ (Sokirianskaia 2017).
5 Instagram, launched in 2010, is a popular photo and video sharing mobile application, which has 1 billion users worldwide (Carman 2018). Kadyrov also has accounts on Telegram, Twitter, and Vkontakte.
6 As of February 2019, Kadyrov has 34,577 Telegram subscribers.
7 An obvious exception to this is the mobilisation that took place during the 2015 ‘Electric Yerevan’ protests.
8 For example, Telegram, which was hardly used before the ‘Velvet Revolution’, has become popular in Armenia because of the uprising. Samvel Martirosyan (2018) argues that due to the fact that Internet speeds were slow during the protests, given the unprecedented overload from Facebook and YouTube – Telegram, which does not need a stable Internet connection, worked well (Martirosyan 2018). New ‘channels’ were created during and after the uprising and the platform continues to grow in popularity (Martirosyan 2018).
9 It is why Morozov (2011) said, ‘Databases are better than Stasi officers’.

References


New media and digital activism


