

# Chapter 9

## Digital Citizen Activism in Central Asia: Beyond Contestation and Cooperation



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### 9.1 Introduction

The emergence of new technologies and the availability of smartphones with social media applications led to the rise of digital citizen activism. The rise of digital activism that was present in the Arab Spring and the Euromaidan demonstrated the significance of social media and new technologies in mobilizing civil society activists and led to the attention given by scholars to the role of digital civil society in authoritarian regimes (Arafa & Amrstrong, 2015; Wilson, 2017; Pospieszna & Galus, 2019). Notably, the adoption of Web 2.0 technologies and its social media applications has increased the participation and collaboration of citizens in and with their governments (Gunawong, 2015). Some scholars have argued that the rise of digital civil society could serve broader democratization goals in authoritarian regimes (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Gil-Garcia et al. (2018) noted that the use of information and communication technologies (ICT) in government, and the explosion of digital information throughout society, offers the possibility of a more efficient, transparent, and effective government responsive to citizen activists.

The literature on digital activism in autocracies concentrates on the role of authoritarian controlling, co-opting, censoring, and repressing digital activists to achieve regime consolidation. For instance, MacKinnon (2011) discussed how autocracies adopt ICT and social media in their survival strategies. Linde and Karlsson (2013) found that the increased use of e-participation in non-democracies did not form more responsive and accountable states. Guriev and Treisman (2019) noted that information autocracies needed to control the information space and create government messaging to distort reality and make its citizens genuinely believe in the legitimacy of such an authoritarian regime. Hence, digital activism is challenged by increased

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155

pressure from authoritarian regimes that have learned how to use technologies to ensure its survival.

The current literature focuses on a binary approach to digital activism, examining whether it encourages democratization or how it is controlled and co-opted by information autocracies. However, we need a better understanding of how this activism operates in non-democratic regimes and the roles of digital activism in dictatorships. This chapter fills this gap by analyzing cases of digital citizen activism in three hardline autocracies such as Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan, in post-Soviet Central Asia, aiming to understand what roles are undertaken by digital activists. Though some works have analyzed the development of civil society in Kazakhstan (Knox & Yessimova, 2015), the oppression of activists in Uzbekistan (Lewis, 2015), and broader transformations of civil society in the region (Ziegler, 2010), the research on digital activism in the Central Asian region is nascent. Looking at activists deepens our understanding of digital activism's roles and functions in autocracies. Using as case studies Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan, this chapter aims to answer the following research questions, namely what are the roles of digital activism in authoritarian countries?; and, does the rise of digital activism result in increased democratization of autocracies?

This chapter investigates the digital activism in post-Soviet Central Asia that has significantly manifested across the region. Digital activism on social media hugely influenced the 2020 October revolution that resulted in the ousting of Kyrgyz President Sooronbay Jeenbekov. Sadyr Japarov, an opposition leader serving sentences in prison at that time, shortly after resumed power (Gabdulhakov, 2020). Likewise, the January 2022 riots in Kazakhstan (Kudaibergenova & Laruelle, 2022) were fueled by the increased mobilization of online activists who unleashed the citizen's frustration with the economic and political reforms of the first president Nursultan Nazarbayev and his successor Kassym-Jomart Tokayev. All five Central Asian states have pursued varied economic and political trajectories since their independence from the Soviet Union in 1991. This makes this region particularly interesting for comparative analysis of digital activism, such as in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan (BTI, 2022). The countries allow, nevertheless, social media and digital platforms use, albeit heavily censored (see Table 9.1).

Empirically, this chapter is based on analyzing cases of digital activism in post-Soviet Central Asia. This primary data was based on 27 semi-structured in-depth interviews conducted through purposive sampling (see Appendix A for a detailed list of interviews in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan). The selected interviewees were citizen activists directly involved in the activities of selected cases of digital citizen activism explained above. Interviews were conducted per the approval of the ethics committee of Nazarbayev University. All respondents provided explicit consent, though some refused to allow recording. Most respondents were in urban centers (Almaty and Astana in Kazakhstan, Tashkent in Uzbekistan, and Dushanbe and Khujand in Uzbekistan). Additional demographic information is provided in Appendix A.

This chapter aims to contribute to the broader research on digital activism in the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) region. The OSCE,

**Table 9.1** Citizen digital activism. Selected V-Dem indicators for Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan. Digital Society. 2021. (V-Dem, 2022)

Indicator	Kazakhstan	Uzbekistan	Tajikistan	Description (question and scale)
Average use of social media to organize offline action	2.15	1.69	0.09	How often do average people use social media to organize offline political action of any kind? Scale: 0 = Never or almost never to 4 = Regularly
Existence of online media	2	2.27	1.63	Do people consume domestic online media? Scale: 0 = Not at all. No one consumes domestic online media. to 3 = Extensive. Almost everyone consumes domestic online media

particularly the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), welcomed the post-Soviet region’s democratization and the flourishing of citizen activism (Galbreath, 2009). But thus far, most studies on civil society, digital activism, and broader democratization in the OSCE region are limited to the Western Balkans (Mastorocco, 2020) and hybrid regimes in the post-Soviet Caucasus region. Digital activism in post-soviet Central Asia still needs to be researched, and this is where I aim to add to the discourse in this chapter. Hence, in this chapter, I argue that digital activism in authoritarian Central Asia seeks cooperation rather than contestation in its engagement process with the state. Secondly, in this region, online activists often undertake the legitimation discourse role imposed on them by autocratic states.

## 9.2 Roles of Digital Activism in Autocracies

This chapter identifies three significant strands in the roles of digital activism in authoritarian states based on Lewis’s (2013) and Diamond’s and Plattner (2012) frameworks. These authors argue that digital media can unite and organize various individuals to pursue their collective goals and engage with the state (Diamond & Plattner 2012). The explosion of ICT and social media allowed for resource mobilization by activists to form independent groups and associations that started challenging the rule of authoritarian regimes during the Arab Spring (Arafa & Armstrong, 2015). In Tunisia, online activism on social media facilitated resource mobilization that led to a change in the regime (Breuer et al., 2015). Digital activism is also pivotal, for example, in citizen mobilization in Ukraine, leading to Euromaidan in 2014 (Bohdanova, 2014). As such, it has started to actively oppose or contest the policies of autocracies.

Digital activism in autocracies also acts through the co-option and mobilization of supportive citizens and activists. Non-democracies need to gather support and assistance from society to achieve development goals, for instance, the delivery of

social services. Authoritarian regimes do not rely simply on oppression; the co-option of elites and civil society plays an essential role in regime stability (Przeworski & Gandhi, 2006). Such “involuntary” or “induced” participation is imposed by state bodies to force citizens to participate in various forms of cooperation (Mansuri & Rao, 2013). Fu and Distelhorst (2020) found that the Chinese regime under President Xi has adopted a “flexible repression” approach based on two key ingredients: harsh crackdowns on non-state narratives and co-optation and mobilization of supporting civil society organizations.

Recent research also shows how activists are not just co-opted or forced by the state to cooperate in such scenarios but genuinely believe in the benefits of such cooperation (Urinbojev & Eraliev, 2022). McCarthy et al. (2020), in their study of the public councils created at regional police offices in Russia, found that state-dominated civil activist associations could help bring influential critical voices and criticisms. Hence, civil society and digital activism can actively cooperate in non-western settings. In such environments, online activists who do not oppose the state can become an essential mechanism for regime survival through constructive cooperation. However, the risk for an authoritarian regime is that civil society organizations and citizen associations might develop an independent discourse that would endanger the regime’s survival. Autocratic regimes strongly resist creating autonomous spaces where civil society can develop. Therefore, an authoritarian government is interested in controlled cooperation with civil society activists that could serve the legitimization goal.

Against this backdrop, digital activism can fulfill the legitimization goals of authoritarian regimes. Autocratic rulers have realized that social media can be used to maintain coordination with their supporters disseminate propaganda and influence online discourse, i.e., to seek legitimization (Gunitsky, 2015). The existence of relative freedom on social media could serve as a feedback mechanism for the government to adapt its policies and understand its citizens’ political opinions and preferences (Gerschewski, 2013). In such systems, the authoritarian regime would remain in full power while allowing a wide range of online conversations and controlled digital activism (Guriev & Treisman, 2019). Gobel (2013) has highlighted how authoritarian regimes could use ICT, online participation tools, and social media activism to achieve autocratic consolidation by enhancing a regime’s capabilities of governing society. Thus, this new networked authoritarianism can use digital activism for legitimization purposes.

Various authoritarian countries worldwide have used digital activism to legitimize and promote their discourse on the internet. Chinese authorities have created a set of elaborate strategies to promote the ruling regime’s legitimacy by controlling the social media space and crafting a government message (King et al., 2013; Zeng et al., 2019). Han (2015) has demonstrated how the Chinese authorities have used various online users to eliminate alternative discourse and promote government legitimacy in the internet space. A more detailed study by Zeng et al. (2019) explained how the Chinese authorities have managed to defuse urban protests by using the mechanism of co-optation through normative (prescriptive rules), cognitive (shared conceptions), and regulatory (established rules) control over media. Ultimately, the government

has imposed its “interpretation” and “message”. Kurmanov and Knox (2022) have similarly shown how hybrid regimes in Central Asia inherently achieved legitimation rather than collaboration with citizens in policy-making. Therefore, digital activism can legitimize authoritarian regimes through the enhanced capacity of such regimes to forge and disseminate the state discourse.

### 9.3 Networked Authoritarianism and Control of Digital Space

Though the selected three countries have experienced a variety of trajectories in political development, specific common trends can be observed in the development of digital space for activism. First, as the background showed, all three countries have imposed significant control over civil society and activism. The V-Dem (2022) database and other secondary sources indicate that such state control mechanisms extend to the digital space. Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan governments are significantly engaged in the control of the internet and in punishing online activism (see Table 9.2). All three countries arrest citizens for political content when it opposes the government’s opinion in the digital space. Central Asian states actively filter and control internet and digital media content. In Kazakhstan, during the January riots of 2022, the government shut down the internet for several days in the country. Similarly, internet access was blocked in the restive GBAO region of Tajikistan amidst the protests in June 2022, and several activists who posted critical posts were imprisoned (Putz, 2022). In Uzbekistan, during the unrest in Karakalpakstan, the authorities blocked the internet to stop the protests (Najibullah & Babadjanov, 2022). This shows that Central Asian autocracies employ tools of oppression when facing digital dissent.

V-Dem data shows that the authorities allow relative freedom on social media. Though governments in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan use social media censorship, this effect is limited (see Table 9.3). Overall, the online media space is relatively relaxed for hard-line autocracies, reflecting the potential for online activism in the country. One can argue that autocratic governments are more interested in learning from social media activism, which indicates the regime’s somewhat limited cooperative nature. However, the fact that the Central Asian governments preferred to monitor social media activism also reveals the limited capacity of the states to control the social media space. For instance, Tajikistan blocked Facebook for some time, but the country could not remove all politically sensitive content (Shafiev & Miles, 2015).

The states in Central Asia widely promote government messages and discourse on social media through networked authoritarianism. The Kazakh regime actively used TikTok to persuade Kazakh citizens to vote on the Constitutional referendum, revealing how the state aims to maintain its discourse on the internet (Kurmanov, 2022). Shafiev and Miles (2015) found that the Tajik state actively used pro-state

**Table 9.2** V-Dem indicators. Government control of digital space. Selected V-Dem indicators for Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan. Digital Society. 2021. (V-Dem, 2022)

Indicator	Kazakhstan	Uzbekistan	Tajikistan	Description (Question & Scale)
Arrests for political content	1.14	0.86	0.55	If a citizen posts political content online that would run counter to the government and its policies, what is the likelihood that the citizen is arrested? <i>Scale: 0 = Extremely Likely to 3 = Extremely Unlikely</i>
Government internet filtering in practice	1.42	1.1	0.96	How frequently does the government censor political information (text, audio, images, or video) on the Internet by filtering (blocking access to certain websites)? <i>Scale: 0 = Extremely often (It is a regular practice for the government to remove political content, except to sites that are pro-government) to 4 = Never, or almost never</i>
Government capacity to regulate online content	2.65	3.44	2.27	Does the government have sufficient staff and resources to regulate Internet content in accordance with existing law? <i>Scale: 0 = No, almost all online activity happens outside of reach of the state, where it lacks the capacity to remove illegal content to 4 = Yes, the government has sufficient capacity to regulate all online content</i>

volunteers on social media to support government policy and oppose critics. This reveals that though Central Asian governments permit digital activism to a certain extent, the regimes aim to control internet content and to promote government discourses to strengthen their rule. This finding indicates the nature of transforming networked authoritarianism in the Central Asian region, as revealed in the literature by Kurmanov and Knox (2022). In the next section, the chapter investigates three specific cases of digital activism, one each in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan, respectively, to explore what roles such activism plays in the evolving autocracies of the region.

#### 9.4 Digital Activism to Initiate Police Reform in Kazakhstan: Legitimation Instead of Cooperation

Kazakhstan has been a stable yet autocratic regime for the past 30 years. Under the rule of the first president, Nursultan Nazarbayev (1991–2019), the country experienced significant autocratization. Though Nazarbayev introduced attempted public

**Table 9.3** V-Dem indicators. Government control of social media. Selected V-Dem indicators for Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan. Digital Society. 2021. (V-Dem, 2022)

Indicator	Kazakhstan	Uzbekistan	Tajikistan	Description (question and scale)
Government social media censorship in practice	2.31	2.54	2.03	To what degree does the government censor political content (i.e., deleting or filtering specific posts for political reasons) on social media in practice? <i>Scale:</i> 0 = The government simply blocks all social media platforms to 4 = The government does not censor political social media content, with the exceptions mentioned in the clarifications section
Government social media monitoring	1.82	1.28	1.53	How comprehensive is the surveillance of political content in social media by the government or its agents? <i>Scale:</i> 0 = Extremely comprehensive (the government surveils virtually all content on social media) to 4 = Not at all, or almost not at all (The government does not surveil political content on social media, with the exceptions mentioned in the clarifications section.)

sector reforms, their impacts were not realized in strengthening democratic institutions and broader civil society (Knox, 2008). On paper, the civil society sector in Kazakhstan has significantly grown and developed over the years since the country’s independence in 1991. Even though the civil society in Kazakhstan partners with the government in public service provision and is actively growing, this sector remains almost entirely controlled and regulated by the state (Knox & Yessimova, 2015). This authoritarian control has led to a controlled and subdued Kazakh civil society while the internet and online activism have grown in importance. Digital activism in Kazakhstan has grown since the second President, Tokayev, came to power in 2019 with a program of political reforms that were ostensibly aimed at increasing openness, transparency, and responsiveness. Tokayev announced the concept of a Listening State and embarked on creating open government institutions in the country. However, as Kurmanov and Knox (2022) demonstrate, the open government in Kazakhstan has not resulted in the empowerment of citizens but has led to the co-optation and legitimization of the regime.

In Kazakhstan, digital activism has been on the rise due to the relative freedoms of the internet. The case of activism by Kazakh citizens devoted to initiating police reform serves as an elaborate example of the interaction between digital activism

and the state. It started on 19 July 2018 when Kazakh citizens were shocked to learn about the tragic murder of a famous Kazakh figure skater in Almaty who was stabbed in broad daylight in the center of Almaty (Satubaldina, 2018). This critical incident caused massive citizen participation on social media and sparked a public outcry over public safety. On the day of the funeral, the activists gathered to discuss police reform and started preparing a clear policy document with demands for policy reform. As a result, the digital activists formed a group on Facebook called *Trebuyem Reformu MVD* (Demanding the Reform of the Ministry of Interior Affairs), and the citizen-initiated project for the reform of the Kazakhstani police was initiated (Mashayev, 2019). The Facebook group membership increased to 15,000 people within two days. The group's activists genuinely believed that, through minor yet effective changes, the political system in Kazakhstan could be changed, even the notorious police of Kazakhstan. The activists saw their role as moderators between citizens, the state, and experts in the reform of Kazakhstani police and chose to cooperate to trigger change and legal reforms.

Initially, the Kazakh government resisted the activists' demands to reform, for example, concerning the power of the Kazakhstani police. President Nazarbayev claimed that 'General Kassymov, the Minister of Internal Affairs, is the most experienced policeman in our country, an honest, decent man... he will suggest what we should do with the police' (Trotsenko, 2019). The Minister did not react but then supported citizen input in the reform by providing more information related to the incident and the work of the police (Mashayev, 2019). Instead, in February 2019, Kassymov was replaced as the head of the Kazakh police by Yerlan Turgumbayev, who introduced a Roadmap for the Reform of the Police that incorporated some of the digital activists' recommendations related to the introduction of service police in Kazakhstan (Service Police in Kazakhstan, 2019). The head of the Agency for Civil Service arrived in Almaty in Spring 2019 and supported the work of the activists. During the meeting, a three-sided plan was developed to create a "service police", a pilot project was supposed to be launched in Almaty.

As the reform proceeded, it succumbed to slow implementation and superficial changes. More than 112 recommendations were suggested by the concise policy document prepared by the activists' coalition. However, only 12% of all recommendations were fully implemented, 10% were partially implemented, and 78% were ignored (Kazakh Activist #4, 26.11.2019). Hence, the outcome of the reform still needs to be achieved; the state bodies would not engage in reform but would prefer the appearance of such. The police reform focuses shifted from the concept of service police toward a focus on technologies and inter-agency cooperation between state bodies in public safety. The Kazakh president, Tokayev, focused the police reform on local police services rather than introducing systematic changes (Kazakh Activist #3, 25.11.2019). The main suggestion was to create police stations within walking distance and to strengthen the reform of local police services. Interviews with the key informants on both state and civil society sides revealed that the reform needed to be top-down with little consideration for citizen input (Kazakh Activist#4, 26.11.2019).

Overall, the visible government drive for police reform transformed into a mimicry of cooperation with the activists of *Trebuyem Reformu MVD*. Furthermore, the



use of information manipulation and information overload by the Kazakh government was noted by some activists (Kazakh Activist #4, 26.11.2019). Activists were invited to numerous meetings with the officials in Almaty and Nur-Sultan/Astana and needed a feasible results plan (Kazakh Activist #2, 24.11.2019). Other activists noted that only some reforms were implemented (Kazakh Activist #4, 26.11.2019). For instance, superficial reforms were implemented (change of training, renaming of police academies, and mandatory bodycams for police officers) while structural and systematic changes were missed (Kazakh Activist #3, 25.11.2019). The group *Trebuyem Reformu MVD* cooperated with state officials, generally avoided contestation, and generated a specific proposal of recommendations. However, the Kazakh State disengaged and initiated a facsimile of police reform while maintaining superficial cooperation with the activists. This example illustrates how digital activism can legitimize an autocratic regime, although the government does not collaborate.

## 9.5 Urban Activism in Uzbekistan: Constrained Cooperation

Under the first Uzbek president, Karimov (1991–2016), the country became a hard-line autocratic state following his “Uzbek Way” ideology. President Karimov imposed stringent conditions on the country’s civil society development (Khamidova, 2018). Even though the number of NGOs is considerable (around 9,200 are registered in Uzbekistan), most are conservative religious and secular organizations (Khamidova, 2018). The second President, Mirziyoyev, announced political reforms aimed at democratic reforms and increased responsiveness of state officials to citizens. Mirziyoyev has actively promoted the liberalization of the Internet and social media space as a part of the reforms. The President’s efforts to promote free and critical thinking have led to the development of an active virtual civic space that has started to act autonomously. Moreover, Saida Mirziyoyeva, the President’s daughter, was appointed Deputy Chairwoman of the Board of Trustees of the Public Foundation for Support and Development of National Mass Media in Uzbekistan, tasked with the provision of support and protection for bloggers and online activists in Uzbekistan. Uzbekistan has experienced the emergence of many Facebook groups and virtual civil communities (Murtazashvili & Mirakilov, 2020).

As Uzbekistan under President Mirziyoyev has pursued liberalization reform, the country’s rising influence of virtual civil society groups has been observed. If a specific incident happens and the bloggers start to write about it in their groups, the government can listen and respond accordingly with a decision (Uzbek Activist #5, 22.12.2020). Several influential online groups dedicated to specific issues have been created. This chapter concentrates on a case of digital activism related to citizens’ fight against housing demolition in Tashkent City. From 2017–2019 the city government of Tashkent (khokimiyat) embarked on massive construction projects by private developers that involved demolishing people’s homes in the city. Massive

evictions occurred, and thousands of citizens were neither properly informed nor compensated (Bennetts, 2019).

The *Tashkent Snos* (Tashkent Demolition) is a Facebook-based group that was created to discuss and protest the decisions of local authorities (*khokimiyat*) to demolish homes of citizens and historic buildings/areas in the capital Tashkent. The group has acquired approximately 23,600 members, and their posts led to the suspension of the demolition of old buildings in Tashkent and other Uzbek cities (Uzbek Activist #5, 22.12.2020). The posts of activists in the group present an example of the work of online communities in Uzbekistan. The group is an example of digital citizen activism aimed at protecting citizens' rights.

Local state bodies [*khokimiyat*] violate the vital rights of citizens by allocating land to private companies who simply demolish houses. And it turned out that in such a situation, no one protects citizens. At first, we turned to lawyers, and they answered: "What can you do now? This is a wave; you must adapt and do as the state says." So, we organized ourselves quite spontaneously on Facebook. I opened the Tashkent Snos.uz group so that people could help each other, for example, with advice, exchange legal information.

(Uzbek Activist #8, 11.03.2021).

The *Tashkent Snos* group achieved some notable success in defense of the rights of citizens concerning the protection of their houses against demolition. In 2017 the group sent a letter to the Ministry of Justice of Uzbekistan questioning the legal status of the guarantee letters [*garantiynnye spravki*] given to the residents whose houses were to be demolished (Uzbek Activist #8, 11.03.2021). The Ministry of Justice stated that the guarantee letters were illegal and that proper compensation should be provided in demolition cases. Another example is that the group managed to prevent the destruction of a grove of trees in Tashkent (Uzbek Activist #7, 10.03.2021). The developer received a huge fine, and the construction project was canceled. Hence, the digital activists cooperated with the Ministry of Justice of Uzbekistan to protect citizen interests.

However, the group's cooperation on some major issues could have been more fruitful. The members of the *Tashkent Snos* group participated in a discussion of the Cabinet of Ministers Resolution No. 911, a cornerstone legal act that defined rules for demolition. They opposed the introduction of a legal norm allowing the state to seize land for investment projects in addition to state needs. State bodies should have considered the group's suggestions and allowed private companies to acquire land in such a fashion (Uzbek Activist #8, 11.03.2021).

Instead, the group started to face growing reluctance from state bodies (especially the local executive office of Tashkent—*khokimiyat*) to acknowledge citizen requests. Private construction companies have acquired land in central Tashkent and park areas to construct a planned commercial development. According to activists, this was doubtless motivated by the rent-seeking interests of the officials of local executive bodies (*khokimiyat*) (Uzbek Activist #7, 10.03.2021). Digital activists noted that the state bodies (such as the prosecutor's office and courts) were on the side of the local executive office (*khokimiyat*) and private developers (Uzbek Activist #8, 11.03.2021). The developers were large firms owned by officials or their relatives.

Thus, digital activism faces limits even when it chooses cooperation if the activists contest the vested interests of an autocratic state.

As this case illustrates, the digital activists chose cooperation rather than contestation in their fight against private developers' housing demolition in Tashkent. The Uzbek state organized meetings with the activists of the *Tashkent Snos* group. However, the group still failed to achieve its goals, and the Uzbek state seems to imitate cooperation with activists while maintaining a legitimization discourse. Overall, the group had limited success in cooperating with the authoritarian state. Meanwhile, the Uzbek state attempted to control the information space and create a government message to distort reality and enforce its legitimization. To promote state discourse, the Uzbek authorities claimed that the demolition was legal and that citizens received the necessary compensation and information (Letters, 2019).

## 9.6 Digital Activism in Tajikistan: Arrested Cooperation

The Civil War in Tajikistan (1992–1997) substantially impacted the institutions and development of the regime and the country, let alone the civil society. Instead, state authorities face significant erosion and dysfunctionality (Markowitz, 2012). The Tajik president, Rahmon, managed to take power in the peace negotiations of 1997 and later mobilized external support and aid to cement his power (Marat, 2016). Scholars have noted that, in the 2000s, President Rahmon established a “soft authoritarian” state that focused on creating a political narrative and used a co-optation strategy to increase its supporters (Marat, 2016; Markowitz, 2012). However, from 2010–2021 Rahmon consolidated his political power and established a stronger authoritarian state (Marat, 2016). Lemon and Thibault (2018) have argued that the Tajik regime used the counter-insurgency threat to justify its oppressive regime and crack down on civil society, political opposition, and activists.

In Tajikistan, there has been growing digital activism related to the political transformation in the country and the shift from a soft-line authoritarian regime into a strong autocracy. Considering the high number of Tajik migrant workers in Russia, Tajikistan has witnessed a significant rise in digital activism on social media platforms such as V Kontakte, a Russia-based analog of Facebook, and Odnoklassniki Platform, a Russia-based social media platform created early in the 2000s. Marat (2016) observed that the vast diaspora of Tajiks working abroad, mainly in Russia, using these platforms, including Facebook, pose a threat to the authoritarian regime in Dushanbe through the internet and social media channels.

A study of the *Mometavonem* platform initiated by foreign donors and local civil society organizations provides substantial insight into digital activism in the country. The *Mometavonem* platform was created in 2012 by a push from civil society and the Soros Foundation in cooperation with the mayor's office of Dushanbe city. The platform was intended to encourage inhabitants' participation in reporting and mapping municipal service problems and monitoring their improvement through an online interactive platform. This site allowed any user to register their request on one of

the priority issues quickly, indicate the problem's location, and provide a telephone number for communication. Hence, the platform became autonomous for digital activism in municipal services. More than 6,000 citizen complaints were sent to the platform, and 4,000 were registered as unique (South-South World, 2015).

Initially, *Mometavonem* was planned to focus on socioeconomic issues covering 16 types of services, including water supply, heating, gas, electricity, and maintenance of sanitation conditions, roads, and public transportation (South-South World, 2015). However, the platform quickly transformed from an online platform to record problems with city utilities and services to inform and participate in solving Dushanbe city problems. According to a decision by the mayor of Dushanbe, special offices of *Mometavonem* were created at the district level of local government (*khukumat*), and responsible state officials were assigned. The platform allowed digital activists to cooperate with city authorities to resolve and improve city service delivery.

As the interviewees noted, two significant forces drove the creation of the *Mometavonem* portal. The first was support from international organizations to bring new collaborative and participatory mechanisms based on applying new technologies to Tajikistan (Tajik Activist #2, 22.05.2020). The enthusiasm of local civil society and activists triggered the realization of the platform. They sparked an impulse for enhanced collaboration with civil society organizations in Dushanbe (Tajik Activist #3, 04.06.2020). The second driving force was the deliberate decision by the then-Mayor of Dushanbe, Ubaydullov, an influential and experienced politician in Tajikistan who supported Dushanbe's development after the civil war (Tajik Activist #7, 13.11.2020). The mayor provided the office, necessary funding, and resources to realize this platform (Tajik Activist #2, 22.05.2020).

*Mometavonem* quickly became popular, and Dushanbe residents endorsed the platform's interactivity, which enhanced the responsiveness of the city officials. The platform sparked digital activism by citizens in a way that was directed at cooperation with authorities rather than contestation. The site, which existed in working mode for five years, ceased to be updated at the end of January 2017 after Ubaydullov was dismissed and Rustami Emomali (the Tajik President's son) took his place. The new mayor shut down the platform immediately without explanation (Tajik Activist #3, 04.06.2020). It was revealed that the decision to close the online platform was driven by middle-level officials of the city government (*khukumat*) who resisted responding to citizens' complaints and requests. Rustami Emomali reportedly stated that Dushanbe city officials did not like the platform because it generated criticism of officials' work (Tajik Activist #7, 13.11.2020). The transformation to deeper autocracy in Tajikistan has suspended this effective form of cooperation. The mayor of Dushanbe worried about the potential for contestation that could come out of the platform.

As a result of rising contestation in the digital arena, the Tajik government has focused on blocking and maintaining control over social media and the internet. The presence of "networked authoritarianism" was revealed as it manifested through the attempts by the Tajik authorities to curtail citizen activism and discussion using more sophisticated means. The government started to rely on so-called "pro-state volunteers" who created online profiles with fake names and pictures and defended

pro-government narratives in critical online groups and communities (Shafiev & Miles, 2015). The government regularly forces students to become “volunteers” who create accounts on Facebook and disseminate government-influenced messages. The Tajik state created a youth group called *Avangard* (“Vanguard”) to protect the regime by posting pro-government content and attacking independent digital activists (Tajik Activist #7, 13.11.2020).

The Tajikistan case reveals several essential features of digital citizen activism in the country. First, digital activists initially chose a cooperative role in improving the provision of utility services in Dushanbe city. However, as the Tajik regime transformed into a hardline autocracy, the state opposed and limited such activism. Second, the Tajik government started actively disseminating and enforcing its message in digital space. Hence, a legitimization discourse was imposed by the state on digital activists.

### 9.7 Digital Activism in Central Asia

Although the civil society sector and digital activism have been well controlled and “managed” by hard-line autocracies in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan, the countries have experienced a rise in digital activism that has enjoyed the relative freedoms of internet space. This chapter has examined the development of the roles of digital citizen activism in post-Soviet Central Asia. This work reveals that digital activists in Central Asia mainly seek cooperation with the authoritarian state to resolve citizen issues. However, once activists face resistance from state bodies in responsiveness to their needs, they use digital media to articulate their concerns about their cause.

Table 9.4 summarizes the digital activism strategies and how authoritarian states respond.

Three major findings can be generated based on investigating these digital activism cases. First, digital citizen activists mainly organized to pursue their groups’ interests

**Table 9.4** Contestation, cooperation, and legitimization discourses in Central Asia

	Contestation	Cooperation	Legitimation discourse
Digital activism	Activists contests and opposes state officials on various policies that infringe on or violate citizens’ rights	Activists pursue cooperation with state officials to achieve their collective interests	Activists promote and support state policies
Authoritarian state	State faces contestation and aims to disengage activists (through legitimization or oppression)	State officials seek to employ activists in the delivery of public services and to tweak policies to their preferences	Government aims to disseminate its message and impose its discourse on activists

in cooperation with the authoritarian state. As the cases of police reform in Kazakhstan, prevention of demolition of historical buildings in Tashkent, and the digital platform for city utility services in Dushanbe demonstrate, the activists used the technologies and social media to aggregate the interests of concerned citizens and to articulate a list of proposals/recommendations for state officials. Activists sought cooperation and collaboration with various state agencies to resolve their grievances. This work uncovered that activists were not necessarily co-opted or forced to collaborate and work together with state structures. The activists had an agency of their own in their activities and attempted to shape and modify state policies and the delivery of public services. This finding provides a relatively novel understanding of the cooperation role of activism and broader civil society in autocracies and is more expansive than the notion of “involuntary participation” (Mansuri & Rao, 2013) or co-optation (Gerschewski, 2013; Przeworski & Gandhi, 2006).

The cases of digital citizen activism illustrate that contestation was pursued more nuancedly by online communities in Central Asia. Contrary to Diamond and Plattner (2012), Arafa and Armstrong (2015), and other scholars, this work finds that the contestation role of activists does not necessarily oppose the regimes’ autocratic nature. The digital activists did not seek democratization but sought to overhaul policies that infringed on or violated the rights of citizens. This finding is counter-intuitive to the Western concept of civil society and civic activism, understood as the force for contestation and democratism. Furthermore, this finding contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the role of digital activism and broader civil society in non-Western settings.

The third finding is that Central Asian autocracies have learned to use social media and online spaces to promote their strategic narratives and pursue their legitimization. Confirming the authoritarian regime legitimization literature (Gerschewski, 2013), this work argues that autocracies in Central Asia aim to consolidate their rule in their engagement with digital activism. As the case of police reform in Kazakhstan illustrated, the state took control of the reform through meaningless engagement. In the case of the fight against demolition in Tashkent city, the state actively proceeded with the destruction of commercial projects by pushing its narrative while imitating the process of cooperation with activists. Hence, an autocratic state imposes a legitimization discursive role on digital activists.

## 9.8 Conclusion

This chapter provides the first scholarly glimpse into the interaction between digital activism and authoritarian states in post-Soviet Central Asia. This chapter aimed to tackle questions on the role and the possible impact of digital activism in authoritarian countries in Central Asia; and whether and to what extent digital activism results from increased demand for democratic reforms or the desire for the legitimacy of autocratic regimes. Both are valid assumptions.

This analysis of three cases from post-Soviet Central Asia has revealed that digital activism can play many roles in authoritarian settings. However, this work uncovers that activists seek to engage in cooperation rather than contestation with the authoritarian state. Digital activism aspires to redress the rights of citizens infringed on by the state through productive interaction, such as by providing suggestions on legislative changes and participating in meetings with state officials. However, when an authoritarian state faces cooperation, the state officials aim to employ digital activists in public service delivery and tweak policies. This resistance to becoming responsive to articulated citizens' needs in the form of digital activism curtails the ability of such activism to become genuinely effective. The state is unwilling to change its policies based on the demands of digital activists. Critically, when an autocratic state identifies the potential for contestation in collective and collaborative digital activism, the non-democratic regime oppresses or channels such activism toward legitimization discourses. Therefore, the role of digital activism is limited to legitimization discourse in authoritarian settings where potential criticism is not tolerated and cooperation is unwanted.

Consequently, this chapter concludes that the rise of digital activism has a limited impact on increased democratization in evolving autocracies. Non-democratic states have learned to use the tools of networked authoritarianism to eliminate any potential threats from emerging virtual civil society. Ultimately, the authoritarian state manages to control and channel digital activism into legitimization roles that prop up its long-term durability. The investigation of cases in this chapter shows that, although Central Asian regimes have experienced significant political transformation in the past 30 years, they have managed to construct resilient autocratic states with a capacity for network authoritarianism. However, there are some notable differences among the autocracies of post-Soviet Central Asia: Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan have declared that they are reforming toward increased responsiveness, openness, and liberalization of the media space, while Tajikistan has transitioned from a soft to a hard-line autocratic regime. The officially proclaimed policies of transparency and responsiveness in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan have resulted in the arguably higher acceptance of potential contestation from activists. However, as the cases of Mometavonem in Tajikistan demonstrated, authoritarian states in Central Asia cannot allow the formation of autonomous spaces that could generate alternative viewpoints. This work supports Lewis' (2013) point that autocracies benefit from the self-organization power of civil society but tend to dismiss its potentially dangerous liberating power. However, further research on how Central Asian autocracies can use digital activism for authoritarian legitimization is warranted.

**Table 9.5** Interviews conducted in Kazakhstan. (\* = conducted virtually)

#	Profile/ affiliation	Code	Sex	Age	Date	Place
1	Civil society activist/ private sector think tank	Kazakh Activist #1	Male	35–45	30.10.2019	Nur-Sultan
2	Civil society activist/ non-governmental organization	Kazakh Activist #2	Female	25–35	24.11.2019	Almaty
3	Civil society activist/ think tank	Kazakh Activist #3	Male	35–45	25.11.2019	Almaty
4	Civil society activist/ private sector	Kazakh Activist #4	Male	35–45	26.11.2019	Almaty
5	Civil society activist/ non-governmental organization	Kazakh Activist #5	Female	35–45	26.11.2019	Almaty
6	Civil society activist / think tank	Kazakh Activist #6	Female	45–55	27.11.2019	Almaty
7	Civil society activist/ private sector	Kazakh Activist #7	Male	45–55	12.03.2020	Almaty*
8	Civil society activist/ think tank	Kazakh Activist #8	Male	35–45	28.06.2020	Nur-Sultan*
9	Civil society activist/ think-tank	Kazakh Activist #9	Female	45–55	20.10.2020	Nur-Sultan*
10	Civil society activist/ non-governmental organization	Kazakh Activist #10	Female	45–55	20.12.2020	Almaty*

## Appendix A. Detailed List of Interviews Conducted

The institutional affiliation of the interviewees was clarified and added to the column profile. The authors provided respondent organizations' names only where the interviewees explicitly allowed for this disclosure and when it did not pose risks to our interviewees (Tables 9.5, 9.6 and 9.7).



**Table 9.6** Interviews conducted in Uzbekistan. (\* = interviews conducted virtually)

#	Profile/ affiliation	Code	Sex	Age	Date	Place
1	Civil society activist / private sector consultancy	Uzbek Activist #1	Male	35–45	05.02.2020	Tashkent
2	Civil society activist/ non-governmental organization	Uzbek Activist #2	Male	35–45	07.02.2020	Tashkent
3	Civil society activist/ private sector think tank	Uzbek Activist #3	Male	45–55	06.02.2020	Tashkent
4	Civil society activist/ higher education institution	Uzbek Activist #4	Male	35–45	10.08.2020	Tashkent*
5	Civil society activist/ journalist	Uzbek Activist #5	Female	35–45	22.12.2020	Tashkent*
6	Civil society activist/ non-governmental organization	Uzbek Activist #6	Female	25–35	23.12.2020	Tashkent*
7	Civil society activist/ private sector think tank	Uzbek Activist #7	Male	35–45	10.03.2021	Tashkent*
8	Civil society activist/ non-governmental organization	Uzbek Activist #8	Female	45–55	11.03.2021	Tashkent*
9	Civil society activist/ private sector think tank	Uzbek Activist #9	Male	35–45	16.07.2022	Tashkent*
10	Civil society activist/ non-governmental organization	Uzbek Activist #10	Male	25–35	16.07.2022	Tashkent*

**Table 9.7** Interviews conducted in Tajikistan. (\* = interviews conducted virtually)

#	Profile/affiliation	Code	Sex	Age	Date	Place
1	Civil society activist/ non-governmental organization	Tajik Activist #1	Female	25–35	20.05.2020	Dushanbe*
2	Civil society activist/ international organization	Tajik Activist #2	Male	55–65	22.05.2020	Dushanbe*
3	Civil society activist/ non-governmental organization	Tajik Activist #3	Female	35–45	04.06.2020	Dushanbe*
4	Civil society activist/ private consultancy	Tajik Activist #4	Male	45–55	12.06.2020	Dushanbe*
5	Civil society activist/ think tank	Tajik Activist #5	Male	35–45	06.11.2020	Dushanbe*
6	Civil society activist/ private consultancy	Tajik Activist #6	Male	35–45	09.11.2020	Khujand/ Dushanbe*
7	Civil society activist/ non-governmental organization	Tajik Activist #7	Male	55–65	13.11.2020	Khujand/ Dushanbe*

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