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# Kyrgyzstan: e-Revolution

July 20, 2005 - 7:00pm, by [Claire Wilkinson](#) [1]

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July 20, 2005 - 8:00pm

Over the last decade, the Internet has increasingly developed into a rich source of information about all aspects of Central Asia, especially for people without physical access to the region, but also to varying degrees for the inhabitants of the five former Soviet Central Asian republics. In addition to the strong web presence maintained by numerous non-governmental organizations and international agencies working in the region, such as Radio Free Europe's Central Asia service, the Institute for War and Peace Reporting, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), the UN, and the U.S.-based democracy and civil society support organization IFES, the Internet has increasingly provided an outlet for non-official and opposition points of view. This has been particularly important as regimes, even the more liberal such as that of Kyrgyzstan's ex-president Askar Akaev, have sought to extend their control over the media and suppress dissenting voices: unlike other forms of media, the Internet remains virtually impossible to regulate, short of directly limiting physical access.

In Kyrgyzstan, despite low levels of internet usage, particularly outside of the capital, the significance and potential of this electronic medium had not gone unnoticed. The official presidential web site provided much information about Akaev's regime, including transcripts of speeches in Russian, Kyrgyz, and English, and a dedicated press service complete with an email subscription option. Similarly, the Kyrgyz parliament, the Jogorku Kenesh, maintains its own site with electronic links to legislation including the Constitution. Opposition parties also established sites, such as Ar-Namys' site, which served to highlight the imprisonment of the party's leader, Feliks Kulov. Independent publications such as ResPublica and Moya Stolitsa Novosti (MSN) have increasingly resorted to e-publishing as print versions of the newspapers become increasingly difficult to produce.

Even so, due to the limited reach of the Internet (research indicates that only about 200,000 people use the Internet in Kyrgyzstan, or 3.8 percent of the population), the main beneficiaries of the wealth of information available have been people outside the republic and a young and well-educated few in Bishkek, the capital. However, during the period leading up to the parliamentary elections at the end of February and then on throughout March as protests escalated, the domestic political significance of the Internet became more fully apparent. While there is still debate about the name and nature of Kyrgyzstan's "revolution," events in the Internet domain can rightly be considered an "e-revolution," representing the culmination of a lengthy period of electronic information warfare. The end result of this revolution has been the explosive development of a medium that all sides have been quick to utilize to express their points of view, and which allowed events in Kyrgyzstan to be broadcast and discussed in real time on a scale never previously seen in Central Asia.

## VIRTUAL BARRICADES

In tandem with the political and social unrest that culminated in the rapid and largely unexpected overthrow of the Akaev regime, a political e-revolution took shape and

contributed to the consolidation of Kyrgyzstan's Internet community.

The first signs of the Internet's new strategic importance appeared as the first major controversy of the pre-election period occurred, involving the Central Election Commission's refusal to allow well-known opposition figure Roza Otunbaeva (now foreign minister) to register as a candidate on the grounds that she could not meet the stipulated residency requirements. As Otunbaeva's supporters took to Bishkek's streets with yellow banners, where they were soon joined by supporters of another opposition movement, the People's Movement of Kyrgyzstan and their pink banners, a "black PR" e-mail campaign got underway, with messages aimed at discrediting the opposition being sent from "spoofed," or falsified, e-mail addresses supposedly belonging to legitimate independent Internet domains such as Gazeta.kg and CentrAsia.ru. The e-mails were written mainly in Russian, although several were sent out in English as well, and had headings ranging from the banal ("Pleasant details") to the bizarre ("Election Commissions

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