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THE e-REVOLUTION IN KYRGYZSTAN
by Claire Wilkison

This article aims to briefly outline some of the key aspects of Kyrgyzstan's political e-Revolution leading up to March 24 and the rapid and largely unexpected overthrow of the Akaev regime, and how they have contributed to the consolidation of Kyrgyzstan's internet community. An additional aim is to highlight some of the most interesting sites and e-lists from the point of view of people, who are not resident in the country.

OVER THE LAST DECADES, 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 republics (1). In addition to the strong web-presence maintained by numerous NGOs and international agencies working in the region such as Radio Free Europe's Central Asia service, the Institute for War and Peace Reporting Central Asia service, and the respective programmes of the OSCE, the UN and IFES (2), the internet has increasingly provided an outlet for non-official and opposition points of view. This has been particularly important as even more liberal regimes, such as that of Kyrgyzstani 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 relatively low levels of internet usage, particularly outside of the capital (3), 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 Kyrgyzstani parliament, the Zhogorku Kenesh, maintains its own site with electronic links to legislation, including the Constitution (5). Opposition parties have also established sites, such as Ar-Namys' site, which served to highlight the imprisonment of the party's leader, Feliks Kulov (6), whilst independent publications such as ResPublica and Moya Stolitsa Novosti (MSN) have increasingly resorted to e-publishing, as print versions of the newspapers became increasingly difficult produce (7).

Even so, due to the limited reach of the internet, the main beneficiaries of the wealth of information available have been the people outside of the republic and a young and well-educated few in Bishkek. 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 (8). 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 utilise 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.

This article aims to briefly outline some of the key aspects of Kyrgyzstan's political e-Revolution leading up to March 24 and the rapid and largely unexpected overthrow of the Akaev regime, and how they have contributed to the consolidation of Kyrgyzstan's internet community. An additional aim is to highlight some of the most interesting sites and e-lists from the point of view of people who, are not resident in the country, although this article makes no claim to provide an objective evaluation of the information provided (10).

Kyrgyzstan and the Kyrgyz

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 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 in early January 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 emails aimed at discrediting the opposition being sent from "spoofed", or falsified, email addresses supposedly belonging to legitimate independent internet domains such as Gazeta.kg and CentrAsia.ru. The emails were written mainly in Russian, although several were sent out in English as well, and had headings ranging from the banal - "Pleasant details" (11) – to the bizarre – "Election Commissions 'The Wolf and Seven Goats'" (12),   and an accompanying range of accusations.

It is difficult to gauge the scale of such email campaigns due to the individualised nature of email – I am still, for example, unaware of how my email address came to be included on these mail lists, other than the fact I subscribe to a number of Kyrgyzstan-based or -themed e-lists. However, the sheer number of emails received in a relatively short period (more than 25 between January 9 and 18) and the range of topics covered suggests that the authors considered it a potentially significant way to discredit the opposition and quash talk of a "colour revolution" in Kyrgyzstan.

Many of the emails launched personal attacks on opposition leaders, especially Roza Otunbaeva and Kurmanbek Bakiev, who were variously portrayed as Western-funded agents (13), self-interested money-grabbers (14), printers of false money (15), and communist-era politicians intent of deceiving people for their own gain (16). Bakiev was also targeted on the basis of events while he was Prime Minister in 2001 (17). In addition, reports of opposition splits were circulated, as were a number of anti-

Western texts seeking to associate any possible revolution with anti-Kyrgyz attitudes and beliefs (18).

This political spam, as Internews.kg called it, was perhaps the most delicate tactic used in the battle for control over the internet, with there being little people could do to identify the authors of the propaganda beyond publicising the phenomenon (19). In February, political spamming gave way to direct attempts to limit access to the internet. This was taken by many to be a direct attempt to silence the opposition. These efforts were less subtle and precise, involving direct attacks on major internet service providers (ISPs) such as Elcat and AsiaInfo to block access, as well as flooding email accounts with spam to overload. The result of these attacks, known technically as Distributed Denial of Service Attacks (DDOS), was to make many sites, regardless of affiliation or ownership, inaccessible for a period of several weeks both inside the republic and abroad, further curtailing already limited coverage of events in Kyrgyzstan (20).

In the case of these attacks there was greater scope for investigation, with the Open Net Initiative (ONI) filing reports on the attacks and their causes (21). Their conclusions reports cited the role of a group known as "Shadow Team", who claimed to be behind the DDOS attacks on ISPs, demanding that certain websites be removed if the attacks were to be halted. Under pressure to keep web traffic flowing, Elcat complied with this demand in cooperation with the owners of the targeted sites, which included those of the independent newspapers ResPublica and MSN, resulting, as ONI noted in their interim report, in de facto censorship (22).

Despite the fact that the opposition was inevitably quick to blame the authorities, it is not clear that they were behind such attacks, or indeed if they had much motivation to do so: blocking access in such a clumsy manner played directly into the hands of their opponents, further fuelling discontent with the regime, that had already been inflamed by government interference during electoral campaigning. Indeed, it was in no-one's real interest in Kyrgyzstan that

access be blocked or even limited. ONI's interim findings support this view, noting that both sides in the republic were in a position to benefit from the surrounding publicity. Interestingly, though not necessarily significantly, ONI's investigations indicated that Kiev-based hackers may well have been responsible for the attacks, thus casting further doubt of Kyrgyzstan's "colour credentials" as the recipient of support from revolutionary groups in Ukraine, Georgia, and Serbia.
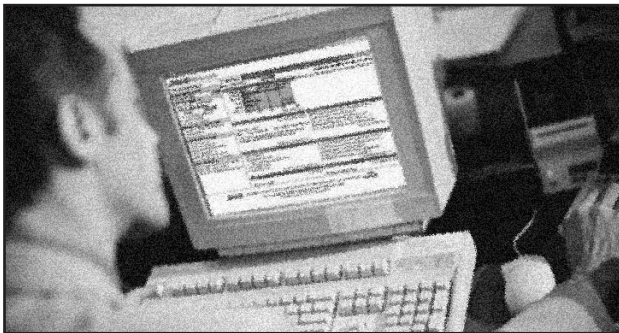
One case that does appear to have been a direct attack instigated by the authorities involved a youth group, KelKel (meaning "renaissance" in Kyrgyz) that was formed early in the election campaign. The incident began with the deregistration of the domain name Kelkel.kg that had been bought by a member of this youth organisation. This domain name was then used as the site of a KelKel "clone" that was pro-government and non-political, announcing "We are for stability in the country and do not want young people to be used as "pioneers" for an imported revolution or for personal interests. We think that young people should get on with their own business, and they are more suited to studying and going on dates." (24) Their anti-political attitude was made even clearer by the slogan they added to the original KelKel logo, which translates as "Have fun while you're still young!"

Significantly, in this case the people behind this clone site, widely thought to be the government, did not stop at the creation of a cyber-GONGO. They posted photographs of KelKel (clone) members on a trip to a local ski resort, smiling and holding a banner with the slogan "down with demonstrations! down with the revolution!" and went so far as to stage their own political events and press conferences (25).

In a further effort to usurp the original movement, they also subverted the lemon theme of an earlier KelKel action (26), holding an event called "Dobryi limonnik" on February 24 that involved handing out tea with lemon to passers-by under the slogan "They scare us with lemons, but we crush them!" The original KelKel was quick to move to a new domain (27), and posted a warning on the new site about the clone.

As with previous internet attacks, it had the effect of strengthening opposition to the regime by showing how far it was prepared to go to hold onto power. As KelKel announced on its new site, "From today, the civil campaign KelKel announces that it will be a civil campaign of peaceful resistance fighting for free and fair elections."

The mood of protest amongst young people was reflected in the founding of a second youth group, Birge! (Together!) in March. Unfortunately they also became a target of "provocation by the authorities" (28), with a "letter of happiness from Birge!" sent out from a spoofed version of their email address (29). The letter claimed to advocate free sex and the legalisation of narcotics, and that they were paid $10,000 by Bolotbek Maripov (a candidate against Bermet Akaeva in the Universitskii constituency) to protest, but had decided to spend the money on distributing this "letter of happiness". As an additional attempt to discredit the group, the hyperlink to their website had been redirected to a porn-site doctored to include the group's logo.

The direct responses of KelKel and Birge! reflect a wider trend of pro-active internet usage amongst opposition activists, particularly to mobilise supporters and communicate with other pro-democracy and youth movements abroad. In this respect the opening of the site Akaevu.net on March 23 can be seen as the direct outcome of the heightened profile and power of the internet in the election campaign (30). In contrast to other opposition sites, Akaevu.net did not represent a particular organisation, simply reporting on events from an openly anti-Akaev stance and calling for his

resignation. Unfortunately, it appears this site has not been able to maintain the momentum of its launch, particularly once access for more established sites was re-established.

In the immediate aftermath of the revolution, the internet has remained an important source of information and a way for civil society groups including the youth groups mentioned above. In particular, email groups run by Yahoo! have proved themselves a popular way for groups to disseminate information about events in Kyrgyzstan, as well as on more universal themes such as human rights. Even the interim government appears aware of the importance of having a suitable internet presence, announcing the launch of a new site for the Acting President, Kurmanbek Bakiev on June 7, whilst Askar Akaev has also opened a new "official" site. This increased utilisation and awareness of the internet to support political change and a forum for debate and mobilisation, arguably, is as much a revolution in Kyrgyzstan as the events of March 24.

A web site with the original text of all emails received and links to all sources cited is available at http://cxw.narod.ru/kyrgyz-erev-links.html

Claire Wilkinson is a PhD student at the Centre for Russian and East European Studies, European Research Institute, University of Birmingham, UK, and a guest student at the Department of Political Science, Copenhagen University, from May until August 2005.
Further details can be found at www.crees.bham.ac.uk/study/postgraduate/wilkinson.htm

NOTES.
1) For the purposes of this article, the name Central Asia refers to the republics of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan.
2) IFES merits particular mention due to the extensive elections coverage maintained by the organisation's Bishkek office in the form of a series of news and information digests that could be subscribed to by email. The archive can be found at: http://groups.yahoo.com/group/Kyrgyz-elections/ [last accessed 24/06/2005]
3) Statistics suggest that there are approximately 200,000 internet users in Kyrgyzstan, or 3.8% of the population. This figure, however, does not allow for the fact that information gained via the internet may subsequently be widely disseminated in print form, for example. (Internet Usage in Asia report: http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats3.htm [last accessed 24/06/2005])
4) The website was at www.president.kg until March 24, 2005. It has been unavailable since that date.
5) www.kenesh.kg [last accessed 24/06/2005]
6) www.ar-namys.org [last accessed 24/06/2005]
7) www.respublica.kg/gazeta and www.msn.kg [last accessed 24/06/2005]
8) As International Crisis Group noted in their report, "Kyrgyzstan: After the Revolution" Crisis Group Asia Report No. 97, 4 May 2005, available from www.crisisgroup.org
9) Burke, J. "Kyrgyz Opposition Takes its Battle to the Internet" Eurasianet.org Kyrgyzstan Daily Digest, February 13, 2003 (http://www.eurasianet.org/resource/kyrgyzstan/hypermail/200302/0030.shtml) and Internews article by Petrov, A. "SMI: Elektronnaya voina", January 24, 2005 (www.internews.kg/modules.php?op=modload&name=News&file=article&sid=1497&mode=thread&order=0&thold=0) [both last accessed 24/06/2005]
10) The majority of the links indicated in this article lead to the Russian version of sites. However, many of the sites have English and Kyrgyz versions as well that are often quite extensive. Links to all of the sites cited and the texts of emails referred to can be found at http://cxw.narod.ru/kyrgyz-erev-links.html [last accessed 24/06/2005]
11) Email 12, received from hottnews@mail.ru, supposedly from CentrAsia, 11/01/2005
12) Email 13, received from admin@centrasia.ru, supposedly from CentrAsia, 11/01/2005
13) Email 2, received from digest@ngss.com, supposedly from CentrAsia, 08/01/2005
14) Email 7, received from kyrgyzby@narod.ru, signed from "Rumours of Kyrgyzstan", 09/01/2005
15) Email 28, received from gazetakg@mail.ru, supposedly from Gazeta.kg, 23/02/2005
16) Email 27, received from gazetakg@mail.ru, supposedly from Gazeta.kg, 10/02/2005
17) Email 5, received from indnews@mail.ru, supposedly from the Independent News Agency of Kyrgyzstan, 09/01/2005. See also emails 14 & 20.Bakiev was Prime Minister from 21 December 2000 until 22 May 2002, when he and his government resigned following the Aksy tragedy that resulted in the deaths of four protestors who were shot by police during a demonstration in support of imprisoned opposition figure Azimbek Beknaz-

arov.

18) Emails 1, 12, 19 and 25 all had anti-Western themes.

19) Personal communication with David Mikosz, IFES Kyrgyzstan, 10/02/2005 and 16/02/2005, and Nicholas Ebnother, Internews Network in the Kyrgyz Republic, 17/02/2005. Internews published the above-cited article "SMI: Elektronnaya voina" in response. KG Election Blog also reported on the phenomenon late in February – http://kg.civiblog.org/blog/Incidents

20) See "Special Coverage: Kyrgyz websites subject to unexplained failure and hacking during the parliamentary elections" on Gazeta.kg, published 28/02/2005. www.gazeta.kg/view.php?i=12 [last accessed 16/06/2005].

21) ONI's monitoring reports can be found at www.opennetinitiative.net/special/kg [last accessed 24/06/2005]

22) Op. cit. section 4.

23) KG Election Blog Feb 19, 2005 "Incident – kelkel.kg domain took away from owner (RUS)"

24) www.kelkel.kg [last accessed 23/06/2005]

25) http://www.kelkel.kg/photo/ [last accessed 24/06/2005]

26) The replacement (genuine) KelKel site explained that "yellow lemons are a symbol of young people". In early January KelKel activists had handed out lemons to people picketing the White House in Bishkek.

27) www.kelkel-kg.org [last accessed 24/06/2005]

28) Personal email from Birge!, received 14/03/2005

29) Email 30, received from birge_kg@yahoo.com, supposedly from Birge!, 10/03/2005

30) www.akaevu.net. The site also has the publicity advantage of the URL being a pun, meaning "No to Akaev" in Russian. At the time of writing it had not been updated since April 15, 2005.

31) Yahoo Groups include Birge! Info, Kyrgyz HR,

32) www.i.o.president.kg. Whilst the launch of the site was widely reported in Kyrgyzstani electronic media sources, the site does not appear to be accessible.

33) www.askarakaev.kg, launched June 23, 2005. [last accessed 24/06/2005].

RESUMÉ

Claire Wilkinson beskriver i sin artikel "e-Revolution in Kyrgyzstan" hvordan Internet spillede en rolle i det oprør, der i marts 2005 førte til, at Akaev måtte træde af som præsident. Wilkinson forklarer, at brug af Internet i Kirgisistan, trods adskillige NGOer og internationale organisationers arbejde i området, stadig er relativt begrænset, men at e-mail og hjemmesider op til og under oprøret blev brugt som politiske redskaber. Dermed fik Internet en indenrigspolitisk betydning under marts oprøret, og begivenhederne på nettet beskrives af Wilkinson som en "e-revolution".
Med analyser af diverse kilder beskriver artiklen hvordan e-mail rygter og propaganda samt brug og misbrug af oppositionens hjemmesider bidrog til Akaev-regimets pludselige fald, og hvordan disse begivenheder har været med til at konsolidere Internettets betydning i Kirgisistan.