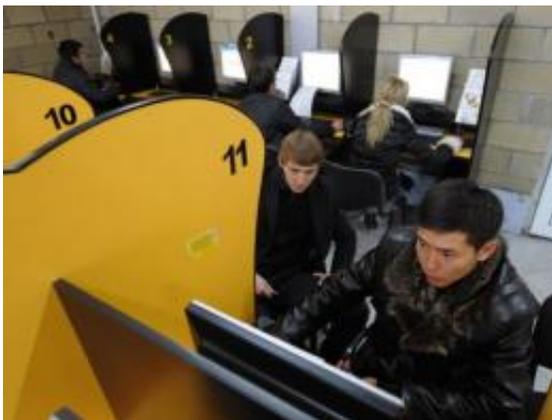


No Twitter revolt for Central Asia's closed regimes

February 24 2011, by Antoine Lambroschini



A Kyrgyz man surfs the internet at a cyber cafe in Bishkek, the capital of the Central Asian state of Kyrgyzstan, on February 18. Internet censorship strategies vary across the former Soviet republics of the region, whose regimes are largely authoritarian and where voicing dissent online can result in persecution.

High fees, spying, and outright blockage -- Central Asia's regimes are not short of ways to control Internet blogs and social networks which have mobilised the recent protests in the Middle East.

Strategies vary across the former Soviet republics of the region, whose regimes are largely authoritarian and where voicing dissent online can result in persecution.

In some countries, even getting online is an insurmountable challenge.

Internet access at home became available in Turkmenistan only in 2008, and state provider charges \$7,000 dollars per month for unlimited high speed access.

That is beyond reach for the vast majority of people in a country where monthly per capita GDP is just over 600 dollars. But even at that price, only the so-called "Turkmenet" is available: access to YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, and popular blogging platforms like LiveJournal are blocked.

Internet cafes have existed in the isolated energy-rich state since 2007, but customers have to show their passports to use them.

Media in Turkmenistan or neighbouring Uzbekistan have not highlighted the revolutions in Egypt and Tunisia, where mobilisation was largely possible due to the Internet.

US Assistant Secretary Robert Blake issued a soft warning last week during a visit to the region, marking the "importance of free media and other such mechanisms" in letting young people express themselves.

"It's important for leaders in relatively closed societies to heed the lessons, to listen to the lessons of what's happened in Tunisia and in Egypt," he said in Ashgabat.

That message has been ignored in Uzbekistan, ruled for more than two decades by President Islam Karimov, where tight control over the Internet was imposed after regime changes in Ukraine and Georgia in mid-2000s.

Any [Internet user](#) can be disconnected the moment his activities are deemed dangerous for the state. But disconnection is not the worst outcome for independent thinkers in Central Asia's most populous

country.

A moderator of popular forum arbuz.com, which was created abroad and is critical of the regime, recently urged visitors to be careful after "some forum participants got arrested by the security forces in Uzbekistan for participating in this forum."

"You should NEVER under ANY circumstances attempt to open the forum when you are in Uzbekistan... I want you guys all to be safe and take my message very seriously," the message stated.

Warning signs at Internet cafes in the country openly say that "Visiting websites that contain anti-constitutional, religious extremist and pornographic contents are prohibited," and independent news websites are blocked.

"Despite the existence of new communication technologies, Uzbekistan remains largely isolated from the rest of the world," said rights activist Surat Ikhamov.

Rights watchdog Reporters Without Borders has named Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan among the 12 countries that are "enemies of the Internet," along with North Korea.

In Kazakhstan, the region's most prosperous country, where Nursultan Nazarbayev has ruled since 1989, Internet control has tightened with a 2009 bill naming every website a media outlet.

"The situation with the freedom of expression has worsened since 2009, and in 2010 there was the biggest degradation," said Irina Mednikova, coordinator of Kazakh movement "For Free Internet".

"Every website automatically becomes a media outlet, even blogs that

don't require any registration," she said.

"Very often the government uses a standard method, where media criticizing the government are accused of absurd things, and after a series of court cases, fines, and arrests they simply close."

Kazakhstan's oppositional news website Respublika, the online TV channel KPlus-TV.net, and Internet radio Inkar, have been blocked, along with blogging platforms Kub.info and [Livejournal](#).

"We constantly observe continued pressure on independent publications, of which there are no more than ten in the whole country," Mednikova said.

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