

Codebook for the Project

Critically Commenting Publics as Authoritarian Input Institutions: How Citizens Comment Beneath their News in Azerbaijan, Russia, and Turkmenistan

By

Florian Toepfl, University of Passau

& Anna Litvinenko, Free University of Berlin

A **comprehensive data set** that makes the key variables, as they were coded according to the procedure described in the following pages, accessible for quantitative comparative analysis is permanently available at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.17169/refubium-27365>

Grounded in this data set, the authors drafted and submitted an **academic article** for peer-review. This article should be published soon under the title *Critically Commenting Publics as Authoritarian Input Institutions: How Citizens Comment Beneath their News in Azerbaijan, Russia, and Turkmenistan*. For further information, please do not hesitate to contact the authors of the data set at any time.

Corresponding Author

Florian Toepfl, Centre for Media and Communication, University of Passau, Dr.-Hans-Kapfinger-Straße 14c, 94032 Passau, Germany. Email: florian.toepfl@uni-passau.de

Acknowledgements

This research was supported by an Emmy Noether Fellowship, sponsored by the German Research Foundation DFG (awarded to Florian Toepfl). We owe deep thanks to Daria Kravets and to four country experts for their invaluable help in collecting the data for this project.

1. Research goals and general approach

The coding procedure described in this codebook aims at identifying the types of publics that the leading news organizations in three authoritarian regimes facilitate in the comment sections beneath their news items on seven platforms. With reference to a recent theory of the multiple authoritarian public sphere (Toepfl, 2020), we distinguish three types of commenting publics that can form in these environments: (1) uncritical, (2) policy-critical, and (3) leadership-critical publics. We make this key coding decision based on a close reading of all comments posted to at least thirty news items published on each platform immediately prior to the coding sessions, which we conducted in the course of August and September 2018 (for more details on how we implemented the coding procedure, please see below).

All members of our research team were fluent in Russian but did not master the Azerbaijani and Turkmen languages. Against this backdrop, we decided to conduct the empirical analysis for Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan in teams of two coders: a primary coder (a member of our research team, closely familiar with the theoretical framework) and an expert coder (a media expert or experienced journalist native from the country under investigation, closely familiar with the local media landscape). In these cases, the coding was conducted during a personal meeting of several hours on a “coding day”.

In order to test for intercoder reliability, we double-coded our entire data set, i.e. all publics facilitated by all 46 news organizations across all seven environments. For Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan, we thus worked in two teams of two coders. With regard to coding the type of commenting public facilitated across the seven platforms, we achieved percentage agreement rates of at least 80% for Russia, 85% for Azerbaijan, and 83% for Turkmenistan.

The following sections contain the instructions as we handed them out to our (teams of) coders.

2. Coding procedure

2.1. For primary coders: Preparing the coding day by selecting the leading news websites

Please access the list of the country’s 500 most visited websites according to Alexa.com (for Russia and Azerbaijan) and Similarweb.com for Turkmenistan. Go through this list from the top to the bottom and try to identify the 20 leading “political news websites”. In doing so, please proceed as follows:

Please exclude

- explicitly regional news sites,
- search engines,
- social networks,
- sites that do not report political news;

Please include sites of news agencies

From this list of 20 news websites that are highly frequented from within this country, please delete the sites whose editorial offices are located outside the country (for instance, lenta.ru or rt.com for Azerbaijan). This may result in a list of significantly less than 20 outlets.

Several days before the coding day, please send this preliminary list of the leading national news websites to the expert coder. Ask him/her to check the list and to approve it, or object to some of the outlets included, via an email response.

2.2. On the coding day: Documenting the coding process

During the coding of each of the websites (potentially assisted by the expert coder), please document your coding decisions as follows:

- (1) Create a Scrapbook folder for the website.
- (2) In order to code some of the items, secondary information about the website will have to be collected via search engines searches and/or sources known by the expert coder. This may concern, for instance, information about the ownership of the website. Save this relevant documentation in a Scrapbook subfolder “backdrop information”.
- (3) For some other items, you will need to check if the website has a Facebook, Vkontakte, Twitter, Odnoklassniki, Instagram and YouTube account. Please save screenshots of these accounts to a subfolder “SNS feeds”.

3. Coder Data

3.1. Date of coding

Please state the date when the coding was conducted (dd.mm.yyyy).

3.2. Primary coder

Please state the name of the Primary coder.

3.3. Assistant Coder

Please provide the name of the assistant coder.

4. Website data

4.1. Ownership: News outlet (or the majority of its stocks) are owned by

- (1) The state
- (2) A state-owned company
- (3) Domestic capital (includes oligarchs, friends of ruling elites, opposition politicians, etc.)
- (4) Foreign capital
- (5) Public (broadcasting)

In case of multiple ownership please consider who holds the majority of shares: who has the controlling share in the enterprise? For instance, more than 60 percent of Echo Moscow belongs to Gazprom Media, so please code 2.

4.2. Type of Parent Medium

- (1) TV
- (2) Radio
- (3) Print
- (4) News Agency
- (5) Online Medium

If several types of media were founded simultaneously, please code the most important medium associated with this brand.

5. The key coding decision: Distinguishing three types of publics

The key coding decision with regard to the commenting publics on all seven platforms (see sections 6-13) concerns the type of public that operates in the environment under investigation. Toepfl (2020) distinguishes three types of publics, with reference to the highest level of criticism that circulates in these publics: (1) uncritical publics, (2) policy-critical publics, (3) and leadership-critical publics.

If you work with an assistant coder, please instruct the coder beforehand on the project's approach to distinguishing the three types of publics and discuss with her/him the examples for the three discursive practices (characterizing the three types of publics) described below. In the following, this codebook provides additional information about how to differentiate between the three types of discursive practices.

5.1. Identifying uncritical discursive practices

In uncritical publics, virtually no criticism circulates at all, unless it echoes criticism previously voiced by the leadership. That is, only uncritical discursive practices can be observed. Most crucially, in these publics, you will come across no negative statements about the highest leadership of the country (e.g., in Russia, about President Vladimir Putin and his closest allies). You might observe criticism of lower-level officials and institutions, but only if this critique had been previously expressed by the autocrat.

Uncritical publics, within the Russian context, are constituted for instance in the journalistic environments of *Vremya* (the leading TV news broadcast of Russia's state-owned *Channel One*) or *Rossiyskaya Gazeta* (a newspaper sponsored by the Russian government).

Examples of uncritical comments in comment sections include:

- Well done by Putin, he raised and rearmed the army and the navy after the communists, Gorbachev and the democrats

- Echo Moscow - your hatred of Putin is yet another proof that he is the best. Thank you for reminding us of this every day.
- Our country is in safe hands! [at the bottom of an article about the country's leader]
- I support the reform [ushered in by the country's leader]!
- Well-said! [about a statement of the leader]

5.2. Identifying policy-critical discursive practices

In policy-critical publics, criticism is common of all types of acts and policies, accounted for by lower-level officials or institutions of the authoritarian regime (policy-critical discursive practices).

Policy-critical publics, within the Russian context, are constituted for instance in the journalistic environments of *Kp.ru* (the website of the newspaper *Komsomolskaya Pravda*), *Kommersant.ru* (the website of the newspaper *Kommersant*), and *Mk.ru* (the website of the newspaper *Moskovskiy Komsomolets*). In these publics, you will not be able to identify criticism of the president Vladimir Putin or his close allies. By contrast, criticism of lower-level officials, policies, and institutions of the country is very common in the journalistic coverage of these outlets.

Examples of policy-critical comments posted to commenting environments:

- Controlled courts, which are simply ordered whose side to take, and cops, who do not care who is right and who is guilty, these are the realities of our country for the people.
- I have an impression that the Russian constitution, in which freedom of speech is proclaimed, does not exist.
- And who will take responsibility for gray wages? Certainly not Medvedev and not "United Russia"?
- I am strongly against it. This is not reform, but just another robbery.
- We pay 32,000 rubles a year in taxes. This state will pay us 3,000 rubles per year back and the remaining 29,000 will disappear in an unknown direction.
- The authorities will not allow a referendum [on reform]. For them, such a decision would be equal to a death sentence.
- Where are the arrests of the guilty officials? [at the bottom of an article about a local calamity]

5.3. Identifying leadership-critical discursive practices

In leadership-critical publics, criticism regularly lashes out even at the country's highest-ranking political leadership.

By leadership criticism, we understand direct criticism of the country's leader and/or the regime as a whole, or implied criticism of the leader, for example, if the commenter criticizes acts/proposals made by the leader.

Within the Russian context, for instance, leadership-critical publics form around the journalistic coverage of the following outlets on a range of platforms: *Echo Moscow*, *TV*

Dozhd', and *Novaya Gazeta*. In these publics, explicit criticism of all members of the ruling elite, including the President Vladimir Putin, is published on regular basis.

Examples of leadership-critical comments include:

- The country is ruled by a bunch of oligarchs with Putin at the head of them
- I am bored with his [that of the leader] senseless speeches, it is obvious that there is no development in the country.
- The people have already received from your tandem [meaning the tandem of Putin and Medvedev] a lot - stupidity, arrogance, ruined destinies, futility and poverty, we wish your children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren the same.
- And what about the increase of VAT, not a word? And about the raising of the retirement age? We are so bored by this circus with the main clown! [‘the main clown’ here is clearly refers to Putin]

5.4. General remarks on distinguishing the three types of publics

The Role of Context

Please consider the **context of the statement** in order to categorize it correctly.

- “Putin is so far from communism like the drunk Yeltsin was from being a band-master”

-> From the context of this comment it is clear that the author is an adherent of communism, so his statement is leadership critical.
- “In Russia there are no and there have never been free elections and democracy”

-> This phrase can be interpreted in several ways, e.g. also as defense of Putin, but from the context of the comment it is clear that the author has democratic views. Therefore, her comment is considered leadership-critical.

The distinction between explicit vs. encoded forms of criticism

All types of criticism have to be **explicitly articulated** in order to be considered in the coding. Alongside such *explicitly articulated* critique, *encoded* forms of criticism may – or may not – occur. Yet, it is important to understand that, following the logic of this approach, participants in critical authoritarian publics will consider explicit criticism a legitimate path of discursive action. This notwithstanding, it will depend on the cultural context how frankly such “explicit” criticism is worded (Toepfl, 2020). In some cultures, participants may choose delicate phrasing to express explicit critique. However, by definition, explicit criticism has to be easily, and univocally, recognized as such by the political authorities, by ordinary citizens, and thus also by researchers who are broadly familiar with the socio-political context under investigation (Toepfl, 2020). That means that in case of use of **satire and irony**, the coder as an expert on the coded country should be sure that the target audience of the media outlet easily recognizes the critical sense of the comment. Consider, for instance, the following comments:

- 'he [Putin] is obviously laughing about the complaints of his slaves together with Dimon'
-> Shortly before this comment was posted, an anti-corruption video had gone viral that referred to Prime Minister Medvedev as “Dimon”. It is thus obvious to all readers that the author of the comment refers to Medvedev here as “Dimon”.
- An example of euphemism and irony that is easily understood by citizens as leadership-criticism is the well-spread naming of Putin as ‘the slave on a galley’, as reference to one of his well-known speeches.
- Another example of irony that contains explicit leadership criticism is this comment on unpopular reforms: “These are the "gifts" that shower on Russians after elections. And how happy should the 76.6 percent be who voted on March 18 for the victory of their Leader! In Russia, nine pre-trial detention centers were built this year. And you say Putin does not think about his people!”

5.5. Identifying critical discursive practices across platforms

Coding commenting publics on the websites own platform

Begin with coding the comments on the website’s own platform. Start with accessing specific articles as they are posted on the title page from top down. If you have checked 30 articles without seeing a comment section, please code as “99” (no environment, no public). As soon as you find an article that invites comments, please continue as follows.

Please code the comments on the default website. For instance, if the default language is Russian, please code the Russian version, if it is Azerbaijan, then please code Azerbaijan version of the website.

Please read carefully the comments under 20 articles from the politics section (the name of the section that contain articles on political issues may vary) and 10 from other sections (culture, sport etc.). In order to search specifically for leadership-criticism, search e.g. for articles mentioning the political leader. Please make your decision about the type of discourse on the basis of at least 30 articles under which sufficient debate is available.

Coding commenting publics on SNS

If you can identify an account linked to the website on a social network (Facebook, VK, Twitter, OK, YouTube, Instagram), begin with reading carefully at least 30 posts to the newsfeed, as well as all comments under these posts.

If the amount of comments and their content is not enough to make a judgment about the type of discourse, consider the next post, until you have considered at least 30 posts that have attracted extensive audience comment. Please consider only posts posted during the previous three months.

Decisions concerning the extent of criticism

Any of the three discursive patterns should be easily identifiable as such from the comments under the 30 articles accessed in the way described above.

- a. Uncritical publics: you observe neither policy- nor leadership-criticism (except in very few cases [1-2 are okay] that may have been missed out by the moderator).
- b. Policy-critical publics: You have no difficulties to identify policy-critical comments, but you observe no leadership-criticism (except in very few [1-2 are okay] cases that may have been missed out by the moderator).
- c. Leadership-critical publics: You have no difficulties to find and identify leadership-critical comments.

Inactive publics

If you cannot identify any comments posted to the 30 articles you access as described above, or if you can identify only 1-2 comments, we code this public as ‘environment available, but no public’, i.e. as an inactive public.

6. The Publics forming in journalistic coverage

6.1. Type of publics created by the editorial content of the website (journalistic public)

Please code as:

- (1) uncritical public
- (2) policy-critical public
- (3) leadership-critical public

In making the coding decision, please consult the previous studies by the authors (Toepfl, 2020; Toepfl & Litvinenko, 2018; Litvinenko & Toepfl, 2019) and use your and your expert’s expertise to assess the type of journalistic publics.

6.2. Example of an article with the highest possible level of criticism.

Please give at least three examples of articles featuring the highest level of criticism coded in 6.1. Please give the title and the link. Please save the article to scrapbook. If you do not give an example for a certain media outlet, please code 99.

7. Public in comment sections

7.1. Commenting news articles on the website is possible

- (0) No
- (1) Yes
- (2) Yes, but only for some posts

If you code (0), please code 99 for 7.2. – 7.4 and proceed to 8.

7.2. Amount of comments

Please evaluate the average amount of comments under articles, based on analysis of comments under at least 30 articles as they can be identified top down on the title page, posted in during the last month:

- (0) No comments: The first 30 articles as they can be accessed have no comments or only 1-2 can be found.
- (1) In this case please code 7.3. as 0.
- (2) Small: The first 30 articles as they can be accessed have more than 3 comments but less than 30.
- (3) Large: At least one of the first 30 articles has more than 30 comments.

7.3. Type of public in comment section:

- (0) No public [inactive]
- (1) Uncritical
- (2) Policy-critical
- (3) Leadership-critical
- (99) No environment

Please code “no public” if you coded (0) in 7.2 (amount of comments).

7.4. Please give examples of criticism observed in the comments.

Please give at least three examples for the coded country. If you do not give an example for a certain media outlet, please code 99.

8. Public in Facebook comment sections

8.1. The website has a Facebook page

- (0) No
- (1) Yes

If you code (0), please code 99 for 8.2. – 8.7 and proceed to 9.

8.2. Facebook page's likes

Please state the number of Facebook users that like the news website's most popular news feed on Facebook. Enter 0 if the website does not operate a Facebook page.

8.3. On Facebook: Commenting feature enabled?

Please check if the commenting feature is enabled on Facebook feeds of the news websites.

- (0) No
- (1) Yes

8.4. Is the account active?

- (0) No, there were no postings during the last month
- (1) Yes, you can observe at least one posting made during the last month.

If you code (0) please code 99 from 8.5. to 8.7.

8.5. Amount of comments

Please evaluate the overage amount of comments under articles, based on analysis of comments under postings during the last month, as they can be identified top down in the news feed:

- (0) No comments: The first 30 articles as they can be accessed have no comments or only 1-2 can be found. In this case please code 8.6.. as 0.
- (1) Small: The first 30 articles as they can be accessed have more than 3 comments but less than 30.
- (2) Large: At least one of the first 30 articles has more than 30 comments.

8.6. Type of public in FB comments

- (0) No public [inactive]
- (1) Uncritical
- (2) Policy-critical

- (3) Leadership-critical
- (99) No environment

8.7. Please give examples of criticism observed in the FB comments.

Please give at least three examples for the coded country. If you do not give an example for a certain media outlet, please code 99.

9. Public in Vkontakte comments

9.1. The website has a Vkontakte page

- (0) No
- (1) Yes

If you code (0), please code 99 for 9.2. – 9.7 and proceed to 10.

9.2. Vkontakte followers

Please note the number of followers of the most popular news feed of the website on Vkontakte. Enter 0 if the website does not operate a Vkontakte account.

9.3. On Vkontakte, is the commenting feature enabled?

- (0) No
- (1) For some posts.
- (2) For all posts.

For instance, Gazeta.ru has the commenting feature disabled. NTV.ru has it enabled.

9.4. Is the account active?

- (0) No, there were not postings during the last month
- (1) Yes, you can observe at least one posting made during the last month.

If you code (0) please code 99 from 9.5. to 9.7.

9.5. Amount of comments

Please evaluate the overage amount of comments under articles, based on analysis of comments under postings during the last month, as they can be identified top down in the news feed:

- (0) No comments: The first 30 articles as they can be accessed have no comments or only 1-2 can be found. In this case please code 7.3. as 0.
- (1) Small: The first 30 articles as they can be accessed have more than 3 comments but less than 30.
- (2) Large: At least one of the first 20 articles has more than 30 comments.

9.6. Type of public in VK comments

- (0) No public (inactive)
- (1) Uncritical
- (2) Policy-critical
- (3) Leadership-critical
- (99) No environment

9.7. Please give examples of criticism observed in the VK comments.

Please give at least three examples for the coded country. If you do not give an example for a certain media outlet, please code 99.

10. Public in OK comments

10.1. The website has an OK page

- (0) No
- (1) Yes

If you code (0), please code 99 for 10.2. – 10.7 and proceed to 11.

10.2. OK followers

Please note the number of followers of the most popular news feed of the website on Odnoklassniki. Enter 0 if the website does not operate an OK account.

10.3. On OK, is the commenting feature enabled?

- (0) No
- (1) For some posts.
- (2) For all posts.

10.4. Is the account active?

- (0) No, there were not postings during the last month
- (1) Yes, you can observe at least one posting made during the last month.

If you code (0) please code 99 from 10.5. to 10.7.

10.5. Amount of comments

Please evaluate the average amount of comments under articles, based on analysis of comments under postings during the last month, as they can be identified top down in the news feed:

- (0) No comments: The first 30 articles as they can be accessed have no comments or only 1-2 can be found. In this case please code 8.3. as 0.
- (1) Small: The first 30 articles as they can be accessed have more than 3 comments but less than 30.
- (2) Large: At least one of the first 20 articles has more than 30 comments.

10.6. Type of public in OK comments

- (0) No public (inactive)
- (1) Uncritical
- (2) Policy-critical
- (3) Leadership-critical
- (99) No environment

10.7. Please give examples of criticism observed in the OK comments.

Please give at least three examples for the coded country. If you do not give an example for a certain media outlet, please code 99.

11. Public in Twitter comments

11.1. The website has a Twitter account

- (0) No
- (1) Yes

If you code (0), please code 99 for 11.2. – 11.5 and proceed to 12.

11.2. Twitter followers

Please evaluate the average amount of comments under articles, based on analysis of comments under postings during the last month, as they can be identified top down in the news feed:

- (0) No comments: The first 30 articles as they can be accessed have no comments or only 1-2 can be found. In this case please code 9.3. as 0.

- (1) Small: The first 30 articles as they can be accessed have more than 3 comments but less than 30.
- (2) Large: At least one of the first 30 articles has more than 30 comments.

11.3. *Is the account active?*

- (0) No, there were not postings during the last month
- (1) Yes, you can observe at least one posting made during the last month.

If you code (0) please code 99 from 11.4. to 11.5.

11.4. *Type of public in Twitter comments*

- (0) No public
- (1) Uncritical
- (2) Policy-critical
- (3) Leadership-critical
- (99) No environment

11.5. *Please give an example of the highest level of criticism observed in the Twitter comments.*

Please give at least three examples for the coded country. If you do not give an example for a certain media outlet, please code 99.

12. Public in YouTube comments

12.1. *The website has an YouTube channel*

- (0) No
- (1) Yes

If you code (0), please code 99 for 12.2. – 12.7 and proceed to 11.

12.2. *YouTube followers*

Please note the number of followers of the most popular news feed of the website on YouTube.

12.3. *On YouTube, is the commenting feature enabled?*

- (0) No
- (1) For some posts.
- (2) For all posts.

12.4. *Is the account active?*

- (0) No, there were not postings during the last month
- (1) Yes, you can observe at least one posting made during the last month.

If you code (0) please code 99 from 12.5. to 12.7.

12.5. *Amount of comments*

Please evaluate the average amount of comments under articles, based on analysis of comments under postings during the last month, as they can be identified top down in the news feed:

- (0) No comments: The first 30 articles as they can be accessed have no comments or only 1-2 can be found. In this case please code 10.3. as 0.
- (1) Small: The first 30 articles as they can be accessed have more than 3 comments but less than 30.
- (2) Large: At least one of the first 30 articles has more than 30 comments.

12.6. *Type of public in OK comments*

- (0) No public
- (1) Uncritical
- (2) Policy-critical
- (3) Leadership-critical
- (99) No environment

12.7. *Please give examples of criticism observed in the YouTube comments.*

Please give at least three examples for the coded country. If you do not give an example for a certain media outlet, please code 99.

13. Public in Instagram comments

13.1. The website has an Instagram account

- (0) No
- (1) Yes

If you code (0), please code 99 for 13.1. – 13.7 and proceed to 14.

13.2. Instagram followers

Please note the number of followers of the most popular news feed of the website on Instagram. Enter 0 if the website does not operate an Instagram account.

13.3. On Instagram, is the commenting feature enabled?

- (0) No
- (1) For some posts.
- (2) For all posts.

13.4. Is the account active?

- (0) No, there were not postings during the last month
- (1) Yes, you can observe at least one posting made during the last month.

If you code (0) please code 99 from 11.5. to 11.8.

13.5. Amount of comments

Please evaluate the average amount of comments under articles, based on analysis of comments under postings during the last month, as they can be identified top down in the news feed:

- (0) No comments: The first 30 articles as they can be accessed have no comments or only 1-2 can be found. In this case please code 11.3. as 0.
- (1) Small: The first 30 articles as they can be accessed have more than 3 comments but less than 30.
- (2) Large: At least one of the first 30 articles has more than 30 comments.

13.6. Type of public in Instagram comments

- (0) No public
- (1) Uncritical
- (2) Policy-critical

- (3) Leadership-critical
- (99) No environment

13.7. Please give examples of criticism observed in the Instagram comments.

Please give at least three examples for the coded country. If you do not give an example for a certain media outlet, please code 99.

14. Comments of the coder

14.1. If you have any comments/ideas concerning the coding of the website, please make a note here.

If you do not have a comment, please code 99.

15. References

- Toepfl, F. (2020). Comparing Authoritarian Publics: The Benefits and Risks of Three Types of Publics for Autocrats. *Communication Theory*, 30(2), 105–125.
<https://doi.org/10.1093/ct/qtz015>
- Toepfl, F., & Litvinenko, A. (2018). Transferring control from the backend to the frontend: A comparison of the discourse architectures of comment sections on news websites across the post-Soviet world. *New Media & Society*, 20(8), 2844–2861.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444817733710>
- Litvinenko, A., & Toepfl, F. (2019). The “Gardening” of an Authoritarian Public at Large: How Russia’s Ruling Elites Transformed the Country’s Media Landscape After the 2011/12 Protests “For Fair Elections”. *Publizistik*, 64(2), 225–240.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11616-019-00486-2>