

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

by

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Open Access

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

Abstract

Little is known presently about how, why, and with what consequences audiences comment on their news in contemporary authoritarian regimes. In order to address this gap, this study leverages recent theorizing about the multiple public sphere under non-democratic rule. Accordingly, critically commenting publics are theorized as “input institutions” that not only create risks but also offer important benefits for autocrats. Grounded in this approach, the study develops a series of hypotheses about the extent of political criticism that should be visible beneath the news in three purposefully selected authoritarian contexts: Azerbaijan, Russia, and Turkmenistan. In order to test these hypotheses, commenting environments facilitated (or not) by 46 leading news organizations on seven platforms were considered (N=322). For each environment, coders established whether comments were published that were (1) critical of the autocrat himself, (2) critical only of lower-level policies or officials of the regime, or (3) entirely uncritical. As the findings show, the extent of readers’ criticism differed systematically between the three contexts, broadly following the patterns hypothesized. Moreover, in line with this study’s key assumptions, critically commenting publics were facilitated not only by opposition media but also by substantial numbers of state-controlled news organizations.

Keywords: political communication, authoritarianism, authoritarian institutions, comment sections, participatory journalism, audience participation

Comment sections beneath journalistic articles are currently one of the participatory features most widely adopted by news organizations around the globe (Toepfl & Litvinenko, 2018; Domingo et al., 2008; Singer, 2014). Extant research of this highly popular phenomenon has deployed a wide variety of theoretical perspectives and methodological approaches. Previous studies have examined, for instance: the attitudes of journalists and audiences towards user comments (Heise et al., 2014); the degree to which discussions in comment sections correspond to deliberative norms (Ruiz et al., 2011); how journalists moderate deviant comments (Frischlich, Boberg & Quandt, 2019); and why and how news organizations implement comment sections (Toepfl & Litvinenko, 2018; Singer, 2014). What the majority of these studies have in common, however, is that they develop their arguments against a backdrop of empirical observation of democratic contexts (for exceptions, consider El Gody, 2015; Toepfl & Litvinenko, 2018; Tong, 2015). By contrast, very little is known about how, why, and with what consequences audiences are invited to comment on news in contemporary authoritarian regimes, and about how journalists in repressive contexts evaluate and moderate audience participation.

The lack of such research is unfortunate for two reasons in particular. First, for more than a decade now, democratic forms of government have been on the decline across the globe. In its 2020 report, Freedom House (2020) identified the “14th consecutive year of decline in global freedom” (p. 1), with approximately 57% of countries being evaluated as “partly free” or “unfree”. Second, parallel to this trend, political scientists have increasingly highlighted how so-called “input institutions” (Nathan, 2003, p. 13), facilitating semi-controlled modes of citizen participation, contribute to the surprising resilience of novel types of “responsive” or “consultative” authoritarian rule (Lagacé & Gandhi, 2015; Nathan, 2003; Schedler, 2013; Stockmann, 2013). Authoritarian input institutions widely discussed in this literature include public hearings, online votes, local elections, online and offline petitions,

complaint offices, deliberative public meetings, semi-independent courts, semi-competitively elected parliamentary assemblies, and semi-controlled mass media (Lagacé & Gandhi, 2015; Nathan, 2003; Repnikova, 2017; Stockmann, 2013). Drawing on recent theories of the multiple public sphere (Asen, 2000; Breese, 2011; Fraser, 1992), Toepfl (2020) has argued that “publics” likewise can be conceptualized as authoritarian input institutions serving similar functions. By publics, Toepfl (2020) understands constellations of three elements: *participants*, *environments*, and *discursive practices*. Put differently, publics can be productively imagined as constellations of speakers and their (active) audiences (*participants*), who communicate in patterned ways (*discursive practices*) in venues ranging from traditional offline (such as printed newspapers or TV) to novel, digitally-enabled *environments* (such as social network accounts). Within this framework of thinking, comment fields beneath the news, too, can be considered as hosting important publics. In essence, comment fields are highly visible online *environments*, where journalists and active audiences (as *participants*) interact to co-produce (critical) discourses on matters of public interest (*discursive practices*). By adopting this theoretical lens, that is, by conceiving of “commenting publics” as semi-controlled authoritarian input institutions (Lagacé & Gandhi, 2015; Nathan, 2003; Toepfl, 2020), this article seeks to advance our understanding of reader comments published beneath the news in authoritarian regimes.

In his theoretical intervention, Toepfl (2020) has posited that the overarching, multiple public sphere of contemporary authoritarian regimes, just like that of democratic contexts, can be imagined as being comprised of a myriad of unequal and competing partial publics. For the sake of terminological parsimony, in the following, we refer to the overarching multiple public sphere of an authoritarian regime as its “public-at-large”, while we use the term “public” to signify one of the myriad of partial publics that comprise any public-at-large.

According to Toepfl (2020), three types of authoritarian media system models (or publics-at-large) can be distinguished (see Figure 1):

- (1) In the *uncritical* model (or public-at-large), exclusively uncritical partial publics participate in political life. In *uncritical* partial publics, no criticism of political matters is voiced at all, unless this criticism has been previously formulated by the autocrat. The authoritarian regimes of Turkmenistan and North Korea, for instance, are grounded in this model.
- (2) In *policy-critical* authoritarian publics-at-large (which operate, for instance, in Azerbaijan, Iran, and China), in addition to uncritical publics, a second type of so-called policy-critical publics exist. By policy-critical publics, Toepfl (2020) understands publics in which criticisms of lower-level institutions and officials of the regime can circulate widely – while, at the same time, the autocrat and their closest allies remain rigorously excluded from the critique.
- (3) In *leadership-critical* publics-at-large (e.g., in Russia and Belarus), finally, uncritical publics, policy-critical publics, and a third type of leadership-critical publics participate in authoritarian political life. In the third type of leadership-critical publics, critics regularly lash out even at the country’s autocrat and his closest allies. In Russia, for instance, highly visible leadership-critical publics engage in a variety of offline and online environments operated by mass media organizations such as Echo Moscow or TV Rain (Litvinenko & Toepfl, 2019). However, these leadership-critical publics typically involve only a small segment of the total audience. As a rule of thumb, Toepfl (2020) suggests considering publics-at-large as falling into the leadership-critical category “if more than 5–10% of the population regularly participate (as audiences) in leadership-critical partial publics” (p. 117).

Figure 1 visualizes these three models of authoritarian publics-at-large. The sizes of the rectangles represent the approximate sizes of the audiences involved in the three types of partial publics. Based on secondary analysis of prior research into authoritarian media landscapes and expert interviews, Toepfl (2020) has tentatively provided several regimes as illustrative examples of each of the three models (see Figure 1). As he argued in this theoretical account, further “empirical research is required in order to describe, and juxtapose, the publics-at large of the authoritarian regimes mentioned” (Toepfl, 2020, p. 117).

Figure 1 near here.

This study aims to contribute to this endeavor. In order to do so, it scrutinizes commenting (partial) publics as they form beneath the news in three authoritarian regimes, which, according to Toepfl (2020), operate three distinct types of public-at-large: Turkmenistan (the uncritical model), Azerbaijan (the policy-critical model), and Russia (the leadership-critical model; see Figure 1). The three country cases selected for analysis can thus be considered as three “critical cases” (Yin, 2014, p. 51) with regard to substantiating Toepfl’s (2020) theoretical claims. Grounded in the latter, this study develops a series of hypotheses concerning the type of discursive activities that we expect to emerge in commenting fields beneath journalistic articles. In order to test these hypotheses, we have systematically collected data on whether (or not) 46 leading news organizations from the three countries invited their readers to comment on seven platforms (the news organizations’ own websites and the six most popular social networking sites [SNS]). In total, our analysis thus considered N=322 potential commenting environments (46 organizations x 7 platforms). In order to code these commenting environments, a team of two coders first established whether a news organization operated a commenting environment on a platform at all. If this was the case, the coders read all comments posted beneath at least 30 purposefully selected news items published in summer 2018. Carefully reading all comments, the coders sought to

identify the highest level of criticism, as it was persistently voiced by commenters and not deleted by the news organization's moderators (for details on the coding procedure, see the Method section and the study's codebook, provided as an online supplementary file). In the terminology of Toepfl's (2020) theory, the researchers thus coded the "commenting publics" that formed in these environments as either: (1) *uncritical*, (2) *policy-critical*, or (3) *leadership-critical* commenting publics.

The remainder of this article is organized as follows. The next section reviews the existing literature about audience comments beneath authoritarian news. It is followed by a section that details Toepfl's (2020) theory of publics as authoritarian institutions. A further section provides contextual information about the media and politics in the three countries, and justifies the categorization of the three countries as three distinct types of public-at-large. The subsequent section specifies the research design and develops ten hypotheses. The methods section follows and is succeeded by a section presenting the empirical findings. The final section discusses how this study advances research into authoritarian input institutions and readers' comments beneath authoritarian news, as well as our understanding of the role and functions of commenting beneath the news as a form of "participatory journalism" (Domingo et al., 2008, p. 331) within distinct types of authoritarian publics-at-large.

Commenting Beneath the News under Authoritarian Rule

In the past decade, very few studies have been dedicated to scrutinizing audience comments beneath the news under authoritarian rule. These studies can be divided into three types. The first type (Tong, 2015; El Gody, 2015) has investigated how journalists under authoritarian rule make sense of audience participation. Tong (2015), for instance, conducted 51 interviews with Chinese journalists. Adopting the theoretical perspective of boundary work, she argued that those journalists strived to defend the boundaries of their profession in response to the challenges posed by user-generated content. As she has shown, Chinese

journalists use their social identity as “people of work units” (p. 600) to mark the boundaries between journalists and lay producers. The second type of study has analyzed the content on specific political issues published in the comment sections of news outlets based in authoritarian contexts (Al-Saggaf, 2006; Douai & Nofal, 2012; Koltsova & Nagornyy, 2019). Douai and Nofal (2012), for instance, analyzed the online comments that readers of *Al Arabiya.net* and *Al Jazeera.net* posted beneath news articles related to the so-called “Swiss minaret ban”. They concluded that this new “online public sphere” enabled “Arab citizens to circumvent and challenge traditional authoritarian controls” (p. 311). Along similar lines, Al-Saggaf (2006) concluded that comments on the *Al Arabiya* website about the Iraq War “challenged the views of the Al Arabiya site” and “offered their own versions of the truth” (p. 311).

The third type of study has been dedicated to the architectures of news websites in authoritarian contexts, focusing on the affordances and constraints that these websites feature for audience participation, that is, on what types of user-interaction these platforms enable or preclude (Bachmann & Harlow, 2012; Suau & Masip, 2014; Toepfl & Litvinenko, 2018). Within this strand of research, Toepfl & Litvinenko (2018), for instance, have presented a comparative analysis of the “discourse architectures” of the comment sections on the websites of 179 opinion-leading news outlets from 15 post-Soviet countries. Importantly, Toepfl & Litvinenko (2018) as well as the other studies within this strand of research have been limited to an investigation of the architecture or technical implementation of participatory features. None of these cross-nationally comparative studies has considered the actual content posted by commenters. As this brief review of the literature indicates, commenting environments operated by news organizations in authoritarian contexts are a phenomenon that has been scarcely researched to date. Most importantly, we currently do not have answers to the questions (1) why user comments beneath the news are common in some authoritarian

regimes and less common (or absent) in others and (2) what type of discursive activities can be observed within these communicative spaces in different authoritarian contexts. By viewing comment sections through the lens of Toepfl's (2020) theory of the authoritarian public-at-large, this article aims to fill in the gap. It demonstrates how Toepfl's (2020) theory can be deployed to develop propositions about what discursive practices emerge in comments beneath the news under distinct types of authoritarian rule, and illustrates the validity of these propositions in three critical country cases.

Publics as Input Institutions: Three Models of the Authoritarian Public-at-Large

Most extant research in communications has interpreted critical mass media content published in non-democratic contexts as unambiguously detrimental to authoritarian rule (for notable exceptions proposing alternative accounts, consider Gunitsky, 2015; Pearce, 2014, 2015; Stockmann, 2013). From this traditional perspective, if political criticism becomes public in authoritarian contexts, its authors have inevitably succeeded in “circumvent[ing] and challeng[ing] traditional authoritarian controls” (Douai and Noufal, 2012, 311; see also Al-Saggaf, 2006; El Gody, 2015). However, as Toepfl (2020) has argued, a multitude of features of, and phenomena observed in, contemporary authoritarian media landscapes are difficult to explain by drawing on this binary narrative, which juxtaposes the communicative freedom (of citizens) and authoritarian control (exercised by elites). A case in point is the coverage of the radio channel Echo Moscow, one of Russia's leading opposition outlets. As such, Echo Moscow disseminates, on a regular basis, fierce criticism of Russia's autocratic leader, Vladimir Putin. Yet, somewhat surprisingly, the majority of Echo Moscow's shares are owned by the state gas monopolist Gazprom. Russia's ruling elites could thus close the station down, or change out its editorial team, at any point in time by simply drawing on their property rights. However, at the time of this writing, they had not decided to pursue this option. The reason offered by Toepfl (2020) is that leadership-critical “publics”, such as those facilitated

by Echo Moscow across several platforms, not only create risks but also offer important benefits to authoritarian elites.

Toepfl (2020) has fleshed out this argument with reference to the political science literature on semi-independent authoritarian input institutions (Lagacé & Gandhi, 2015; Nathan, 2003; Stockmann, 2013). Within this literature, institutions are understood as sets of rules that “affect behavior which, in turn, determines outcomes” (Lagacé & Gandhi, 2015, p. 278; see also Nathan, 2003; Schedler, 2009). As proponents of the approach argue, authoritarian institutions are best analyzed from the perspective of the “instrumental value” (Schedler, 2009, p. 325) they offer to authoritarian elites. Along similar lines, Toepfl (2020) has argued that critical publics – just like semi-independent courts, parliamentary assemblies, or public hearings – can serve authoritarian leaders as pseudo-democratic input institutions. For instance, autocrats may benefit from leadership-critical publics because the latter provide nuanced information about the distribution of power within the opposition. Moreover, without leadership-critical niche publics, semi-competitive elections (an important source of legitimacy for many contemporary authoritarian regimes) could not be credibly staged. In a similar vein, policy-critical publics, by definition, serve authoritarian leaders by facilitating the monitoring of lower-level bureaucracy or deflecting responsibility from the autocrat to lower-level officials. As critical publics have important benefits for autocrats, it follows that rather than seeking to entirely eradicate critical publics, some autocrats will aim at establishing, and cultivating, a carefully balanced mixture of critical and uncritical publics within their country’s public-at-large (for a full elaboration of this argument, consider Toepfl, 2020).

In addition to traditional mass media environments, commenting fields beneath online news can also be viewed as hosting slightly differently organized but still highly visible authoritarian publics. As extant research has shown (Al-Saggaf, 2006; El Gody, 2015), user

comments posted beneath the news under authoritarian rule are usually closely monitored by journalists working for the news organizations. Thus, it can be assumed that readers' criticism will only be published in comments to an extent that is considered appropriate by professional moderators. By contrast, criticisms considered inappropriate in the sociopolitical context will be deleted. Against this backdrop, the discourses published in these comment sections can be considered a form of "participatory journalism" (Domingo et al., 2008, p. 331), as they are coproduced by media professionals and their audiences (see also Heise et al., 2014; Singer, 2014). On the Facebook account of Russia's state-controlled *Channel One*, for instance, moderators have obviously allowed for policy-critical content to be posted by citizens, but have not tolerated criticism of President Vladimir Putin (leadership-criticism). Not a single statement of this type could be identified in several hundred comments.

Background on Media and Politics in Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan and Russia

The goal of this study is to compare patterns of commenting publics across three authoritarian publics-at-large, those of Azerbaijan, Russia, and Turkmenistan. Historically, these three countries have emerged as independent states relatively recently, that is, only in the wake of the breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991. In the three decades that have passed since, political scientists have continuously assessed the three political systems as authoritarian regimes and, more specifically, as civilian dictatorships (Bjørnskov & Rode, 2020). In leading media and Internet freedom rankings, the three contexts have ranked similarly low. In the 2019 World Press Freedom Index (Reporters without Borders, 2019), for instance, all three countries appeared in the last quartile of the list. Among the 180 countries included, Russia ranked 148, Azerbaijan 166, and Turkmenistan 180. Freedom House's (2019) Freedom of the Net report, by contrast, evaluated Azerbaijan as slightly freer (39 of 100 points) than Russia (31 of 100 points). Turkmenistan was not included in this analysis.

Among the three countries, at the time of analysis, Turkmenistan was governed by clearly the most repressive political regime. From its independence until 2006, the country was ruled by the former Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Turkmenistan, Saparmurat Niyazov. Niyazov, who became widely known as Türkmenbaşy (Head of the Turkmens), encouraged an elaborate personality cult, which was “further implemented and developed by [his successor] Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov” (Yazlieva, 2020, p. 92). As of 2018, the Turkmen state owned all domestic media (IREX, 2019). Even coverage of sports, health programs, and cultural events had to continuously “include the name of the president and underscore his ‘tremendous’ leadership skills” (Yazlieva, 2020, p. 105). Moreover, Berdimuhamedov introduced a system of “cross censorship” (Yazlieva, 2020, p. 104), according to which at least two government bodies had to check, independently of each other, any news item prior to its publication. Leadership-critical content and its authors were brutally repressed (IREX, 2019). It is against this backdrop that Turkmenistan’s public-at-large can be considered a prime instance of the uncritical model.

In Azerbaijan, by contrast, the authoritarian leadership around President Ilham Aliyev did not enforce similarly rigorous forms of censorship. Still, opposition websites were frequently blocked, independent journalists were repeatedly imprisoned, and the mainstream media overall remained under “strict control of the ruling elites” (IREX, 2019, p. 138). However, at the same time, the country’s leadership understood “that allowing some independence [online] can provide benefits” (Pearce, 2014, p. 41). As Pearce (2014) has convincingly argued, a small number of independent media served the Azerbaijani leadership to “verify that the bureaucrats are doing their jobs” (p. 41), to provide insight into what the opposition elite were thinking, and to allow the regime to appear democratic. In accordance with these observations, we categorize Azerbaijan’s public-at-large as a political-critical type.

In Russia, finally, while the main federal TV channels were still under tight control of the country's ruling elites, even criticism of President Vladimir Putin circulated in a range of niche mass media outlets. Among them were the radio channel Echo Moscow and TV Rain, as well as the accounts of leading opposition activists on social networks like YouTube, Facebook, and Telegram. While the audience reach of such leadership-critical publics decreased significantly in the wake of the massive street protests for fair elections in the years 2011 and 2012, Russia could still be considered as operating a leadership-critical media system model in 2018 (for an in-depth analysis of the developments within Russia's public-at-large in the years between 2011 and 2018, see Litvinenko & Toepfl, 2019).

Developing Hypotheses

In the uncritical model, only uncritical publics exist (see Figure 1; Toepfl, 2020). In such contexts, neither policy- nor leadership-critical publics serve as input institutions for the authoritarian regime. By contrast, uncritical publics-at-large exclusively function as a channel to transmit information and persuasive messages from the leadership to the masses, and as a tool to showcase the population's unconditional support of the regime. Within this model, we thus expect to find a substantial number of uncritically commenting publics forming in the commenting environments. Moreover, we assume that policy-critical and leadership-critical discursive practices will be meticulously censored by moderators. Accordingly, we hypothesize:

H1: Within Turkmenistan's uncritical public-at-large, we will observe...

...actively commenting publics in a substantial proportion (>10%) of environments

(H1a).

... policy- or leadership-critical discursive practices in virtually none (<5%) of the actively commenting publics (H1b).

By contrast, in policy-critical models of the public-at-large, policy-critical partial publics fulfill a range of important tasks for political elites. Most importantly, by collecting genuine citizen feedback on specific policies, policy-critical publics can serve to deflect responsibility from the leadership to lower-level authorities, as well as to “[c]reate an image of responsive and transparent governance” (Toepfl, 2020, p. 119). However, criticism of the autocrat himself is still considered inappropriate. In this model, we thus expect that citizens’ comments beneath the news will be encouraged and welcomed, under the condition that any critique of the autocrat himself – which some users may post – will be identified and consistently deleted by moderators. Accordingly, we hypothesize with regard to the second critical country case, which represents this model:

H2: Within Azerbaijan’s policy-critical public-at-large, we will observe ...

... actively commenting publics in a substantial proportion (>10%) of all environments (H2a);

... policy-critical discursive practices in a substantial proportion (>10%) of the actively commenting publics (H2b);

... leadership-critical discursive practices in virtually none (<5%) of the actively commenting publics (H2c).

Furthermore, if critically commenting publics indeed serve authoritarian elites as input institutions, such critical publics should be cultivated and supported not only by opposition but also by pro-regime actors. Following this rationale, we expect to find critically commenting publics not only on platforms hosted by private or opposition news organizations, but also in commenting environments overseen by state-owned outlets:

H2d: Within Azerbaijan’s policy-critical public-at-large, state-owned news organizations will host a substantial proportion (>10%) of all critically commenting publics.

Finally, within the third leadership-critical model, publics fulfil an even broader range of tasks for the authoritarian leadership. They not only provide “nuanced information about [...] current sentiments within the opposition” but also serve to “[f]oster the perceived legitimacy of semi-competitive elections” (Toepfl, 2020, p. 119). Within this model, explicit criticism of the autocrat himself is considered appropriate in a small number of marginalized publics that involve limited segments of the national audience. Leadership-critical discursive practices are not consistently punished or suppressed in all publics. Accordingly, we hypothesize with regard to our third critical country case:

H3: Within Russia’s leadership-critical public-at-large, we will identify ...

- ... actively commenting publics in a substantial proportion (>10%) of all environments (H3a);
- ... policy-critical discursive practices in a substantial proportion (>10%) of all actively commenting publics (H3b);
- ... leadership-critical discursive practices in a substantial proportion (>10%) of all commenting publics (H3c).

Moreover, in the leadership-critical model as well, critical publics should be cultivated not only by opposition actors but also by actors with close ties to authoritarian political elites (see also H2d):

H3d: Within Russia’s leadership-critical public-at-large, state-owned news organizations will host a substantial proportion (>10%) of critically commenting publics.

Method

Selection of Country Cases and Coding Procedure

In order to test the hypotheses formulated above, we have selected for analysis three “critical” (Yin, 2014, p. 51) country cases: three authoritarian regimes that operate three distinct types of public-at-large: (1) Russia (the leadership-critical model), (2) Azerbaijan (the policy-critical model), and (3) Turkmenistan (the uncritical model). In selecting these three case studies, we follow a “theoretical replication” logic by predicting, for each of the three case studies, “contrasting results but for anticipatable reasons” (Yin, 2014, p. 57). From here, it follows that the stronger the empirical support for the ten hypotheses formulated in the previous section, the more valid Toepfl’s (2020) theoretical propositions can be considered with regard to explaining the phenomenon under investigation: commenting beneath the news within and across authoritarian contexts.

Selection of News Organizations and Platforms

In order to identify what we considered the leading news websites across the three country contexts, we proceeded as follows. As all members of our research team were fluent in Russian but none had command of the Azerbaijani or Turkmen languages, we conducted the empirical analysis for Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan with teams of two coders. These teams consisted of a primary coder (a member of our research team familiar with the theoretical framework) and an expert coder (a media expert or experienced journalist from the

country under investigation). Working in these teams, we began by obtaining rankings of websites that were most visited from within the three countries, as provided for Russia and Azerbaijan by the company Alexa.com, and for Turkmenistan (where Alexa data was not available) by the company Similarweb.com. In close coordination with the expert coders, we then went through those lists from top to bottom, identifying the 20 most visited “news” websites for each country as of July 2018 (including news agencies). We did not include in our sample explicitly regional news sites, search engines, or social networks. From this list of the 20 most visited news websites, we then deleted all foreign websites, that is, those not based in the respective country. While we did not have to delete any foreign websites from the lists for Russia or Azerbaijan, we had to remove 14 websites for Turkmenistan, where we could identify no more than six leading national news websites. Furthermore, after consultation with our media-expert coders, we established the following as the most popular platforms for commenting on the news across the three countries: (1) the news organizations’ own websites, (2) Facebook, (3) Twitter, (4) Instagram, and (5) YouTube, as well as (6) Vkontakte and (7) Odnoklassniki (the latter two being SNS of Russian origin). As a result, we obtained $N = 322$ environments where news organizations could potentially facilitate commenting publics (46 news organizations x 7 platforms).

Data Collection and Analysis

For each of these 322 environments, we coded (if required, in an in-person meeting between the primary coder with the expert coder) the types of commenting publics that we could – or could not – observe. The meetings with the expert coders typically lasted several hours and took place in August and September 2018. While we are fully aware that publics-at-large change over time, and that our research design should be replicated over time, we designed this specific analysis as a snapshot of the most recent state of affairs immediately prior to the time of data collection, that is, as of summer 2018. During the coding, the coding

teams first established on how many of the seven chosen platforms each news organization allowed comments. If comments were allowed on a given platform, the coders considered at least the 30 most recent political news items on which a substantial number of comments had been posted and read all the comments posted beneath those items, seeking to identify either policy-critical or leadership-critical statements. If leadership-critical statements were circulating widely and could be easily identified, the commenting public was coded as a leadership-critical one. We coded, for instance, the following comments as leadership-critical discursive statements (for further examples of typical comments posted across the three country contexts, please see our Codebook, uploaded as an online supplementary file):

This country is ruled by a bunch of oligarchs with Putin at the head of them.

I am bored with his [Putin's] senseless speeches. It is obvious that there is no development in the country.

In the coding effort, we also searched for policy-critical statements, giving particular attention to comments beneath news items that reported on issues accounted for by lower-level authorities, such as instances of police corruption. If only policy-critical or uncritical statements could be observed in a commenting environment, we coded the public as policy-critical. Two examples illustrating our understanding of policy-critical discursive practices read as follows:

Cops do not care who is innocent and who is guilty. These are the realities for the people in our country.

I am strongly against it. This is not a reform, but just another robbery.

As these statements illustrate, in leadership- or policy-critical publics, the respective types of criticism are part of what Scott (1990) has classically referred to as the “public transcript” (p. 2). Commenters in these publics do not encode their critique, for instance, by relying on irony or code words. By contrast, policy and/or leadership criticism is explicitly worded and can be easily understood as such by any ordinary reader – as well as by our trained coders. As a consequence, our coding decisions were typically rather clear-cut. The task was relatively simple: coders had to identify explicitly worded criticisms targeted at neatly defined political objects, circulating widely within the environment under scrutiny.

Following these instructions, finally, we coded as uncritical publics only those that featured no policy- or leadership-critical discursive practices at all. Examples of typical political comments posted to this last type of public are:

Well done, Putin. He raised and re-armed the army and the navy after the communists, Gorbachev, and the democrats.

Our country is in safe hands!

We coded a platform as providing “no environment” if the news organizations did not host an account on this SNS, or if the commenting feature was not enabled beneath any of the 30 articles considered in the analysis. By contrast, we coded a public as “inactive” if we could identify articles that seemed to invite comments, but where not more than two comments had been left beneath the 30 articles. For each of the websites, we also established the ownership type as one of two categories: (1) state or state-owned company, or (2) other. While category

1 news websites were explicitly and transparently controlled by the state, control of category 2 websites was still opaque. Category 2 could include, for instance, ownership by actors with close ties to the ruling elites, opposition politicians, or foreign capital. As a result of this coding effort, we obtained a data set that includes a coding of all commenting publics facilitated by all 46 websites from the three countries across the seven commenting platforms (N = 322). This data set is permanently available in an online repository, as is our codebook (Toepfl & Litvinenko, 2020).

Intercoder Reliability

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

Findings

Figure 2 provides an overview of the commenting publics facilitated by the 46 news organizations across the seven platforms, aggregated at the country level.

Figure 2 near here.

H1: Commenting Publics in Turkmenistan

H1a hypothesized that, within Turkmenistan's uncritical public-at-large, actively commenting publics would be observed in a substantial proportion (>10%) of environments. As is visible in Figure 2, in Turkmenistan, our coding effort did not identify a single actively commenting public in any of the environments. In total, we considered N=42 environments where such publics could potentially emerge (6 news organizations x 7 platforms). The

proportion of actively commenting publics identified in Turkmenistan (0%) was thus substantially lower than our threshold, set at 10%.

At this point, it is important to explicate that there are two perspectives from which the data collected in the three country case studies can be viewed. On the one hand, our data set can be considered as representing a census of all potential commenting spaces operated by leading news outlets in the three countries. From this first perspective, it is neither required nor appropriate to report statistical tests and p-values. For instance, we can reject H1a without further ado, because the observed proportion of 0% commenting publics is smaller than the hypothesized 10%. From a second perspective, by contrast, our data set of 42 commenting environments in Turkmenistan represents only an “apparent population” (p. 423), that is, only one random “‘realization’ of some set of social process that could have in principle produced a very large number of other realizations” (Berk et al., 1995, p. 423). This assumption makes sense if we imagine, for instance, that some of the news websites may have, simply by chance, not invited their readers to comment. Consequently, from this second perspective, inferential statistics can and should be reported. We have adopted this second perspective throughout the following analysis. With regard to H1a, for instance, a non-parametric binomial test indicated that the observed proportion of 0% was significantly lower than 10%, $p=.012$ (one-sided). We thus reject H1a. Contrary to our expectations, no substantial number of uncritically commenting publics operated within Turkmenistan’s uncritical public-at-large.

H1b posited that we would find critical discursive statements in virtually none (<5%) of the actively commenting publics in Turkmenistan. However, as we could not identify a single actively commenting public in this country in the first place, our data does not facilitate a test of H1b.

H2a-d: Commenting Publics in Azerbaijan

H2a predicts that commenting publics will be active in a substantial proportion (>10%) of the environments in Azerbaijan. Of the 140 Azerbaijani environments coded, 25 (18%, see Figure 1) hosted actively commenting publics. This observed proportion of 18% is significantly higher than the hypothesized 10%, $p=.003$ (one-sided). H2a is confirmed.

H2b subsequently posits that, in Azerbaijan, a substantial proportion (>10%) of the actively commenting publics will circulate policy-critical discursive statements. Of the 25 actively commenting publics, we coded 12 (48%) as policy-critical. According to a binomial test, this observed proportion of 48% is significantly higher than our 10% threshold, $p < .001$ (one-sided). H2b finds support.

H2c hypothesizes that less than 5% of the actively commenting publics in Azerbaijan are of the leadership-critical type. Among the 25 actively commenting publics, we coded 4 (16%) as circulating leadership-critical statements. Sixteen per cent is significantly higher than the threshold of 5% formulated in our hypothesis ($p = .03$, one-sided). H2c is rejected. Contrary to our expectations, we observed leadership-critical commenting publics in Azerbaijan.

Finally, H2d posited that, within Azerbaijan's policy-critical public-at-large, not only independent but also state-owned news organizations would host critically commenting publics. According to our data set, 14 of the 25 actively commenting publics in Azerbaijan were hosted by state-owned news organizations. Among the 14 commenting publics overseen by state-owned organizations, 9 (64%) allowed for either policy- or leadership-critical discourses to circulate. As a binomial test indicates, the observed proportion of 64% critical publics is significantly higher than 10%, $p < .001$ (one-sided). Thus, H2d is confirmed. In Azerbaijan, not only opposition but also state-controlled news organizations facilitate critical reader commenting.

H3a-d: Commenting Publics in Russia

In the third country context under scrutiny, in Russia, we identified actively commenting publics in 97 (69%) of the 140 coded commenting environments. This proportion is significantly higher than the threshold set by H3a, at 10%. H3a is thus confirmed, $p < .001$ (one-sided). Of these 97 actively commenting publics, 74 (76%) circulated at least policy-critical discursive statements. This proportion of 76%, too, is significantly larger than the 10% hypothesized in H3b ($p < .001$, one-sided). Hence, H3b is confirmed. Finally, H3c posited that we would observe a substantial proportion of more than 10% of leadership-critical commenting publics. Of the 96 actively commenting publics, we identified 45 (46%) as leadership-critical. This proportion of 46% is significantly higher than 10%, $p < .001$ (one-sided).

Finally, we also assumed that in Russia, too, not only private but also state-controlled news organizations host a substantial proportion ($>10\%$) of critically commenting publics. Altogether, we identified 74 commenting publics in Russia that circulated at least policy-critical discourses. Of these, 27 (36%) publics were hosted by state-owned news outlets (see Figure 3). This proportion of 36% is significantly larger than the hypothesized 10%, $p < .001$. H3d is supported.

Discussion

Critically Commenting Publics as Input Institutions: Substantiating Recent Theorizing

In this article, we argue that critically commenting publics, in many non-democratic contexts, can be productively analyzed as “input institutions” (Nathan, 2003, p. 13) that facilitate citizen feedback in “responsive” or “consultative” forms of authoritarian governance (Lagacé & Gandhi, 2015; Repnikova, 2017; Stockmann, 2013; Toepfl, 2020). Just like other input institutions (such as online petitioning platforms or semi-competitive elections),

critically commenting publics can thus be assumed to be associated not only with risks but also with benefits for authoritarian leaders. This line of argument is substantiated, in at least two respects, by the empirical results presented in this article. First, as our findings demonstrate, in two of the three authoritarian contexts under scrutiny, a large number of critically commenting publics indeed participated energetically in authoritarian political life (H2a-c, H3a-c; see also Figure 2). Second, a substantial proportion of the critically commenting publics identified were hosted, and thus cultivated, by news organizations with very close ties to the countries' ruling elites (H2d, H3d; see also Figure 3). By drawing on property rights, authoritarian political elites could easily have shut down or pushed for stricter moderation of the critically commenting publics that were engaging on the state-controlled platforms. Yet, political elites across the two countries that operated critical publics-at-large had obviously decided not to pursue this option in a substantial number of cases. The most likely explanation for this empirical observation is that the benefits of the critically commenting publics, from the perspective of authoritarian elites, outweighed their risks.

While our empirical results are thus broadly in line with many of the hypotheses we derived from recent theorizing on authoritarian publics-at-large (Toepfl, 2020; see also Gunitsky, 2015; Pearce, 2014, 2015), we found two notable deviations. First, we expected to find a substantial number of uncritically commenting publics beneath the news in countries that operate an uncritical public-at-large, that is, in Turkmenistan (H1a, H1b). H1 was grounded in the argument that the existence of uncritically commenting publics would be beneficial to Turkmenistan's authoritarian leadership, for instance, by fostering the "personality cult" (Yazlieva, 2020, p. 92) around the country's leader. However, contrary to these expectations, we could not identify a single uncritically commenting public in Turkmenistan. Overall, only approximately 20 percent of commenting environments appeared to offer readers – at least technically – the opportunity to leave comments (see the category

“inactive publics”, Figure 2). Moreover, even in those technically open comment sections, virtually no citizen comments (less than two beneath a minimum of thirty articles considered) were published according to our coding effort. This – somewhat surprising – absence of uncritically commenting publics in Turkmenistan may be due to the risks that are undoubtedly associated with uncritical commenting publics beneath mass-mediated news. For instance, if large numbers of commenters notice that not even slight traces of genuine feedback or critique are published, these commenters not only may lose their motivation to participate but may also experience feelings of political frustration and disillusionment with the regime. In addition, cultivating uncritical commenting publics is also associated with considerable costs for news organizations, as moderators must read every single comment posted prior to publication closely. For explorative purposes, our coders tried to submit comments to some of these inactive environments. Most frequently, technical errors occurred or the comment posted simply remained unpublished. Future research could investigate the reasons for the absence of uncritical commenting publics in Turkmenistan, as well as whether they function in other authoritarian regimes that operate uncritical models of the public-at-large.

Second, our findings deviate from the deductively hypothesized patterns with regard to H2c as well. In H2c, we expected to find no leadership-critical commenting publics in Azerbaijan, that is, in countries that operate policy-critical models of the public-at-large. However, in the coding effort, we observed a small but still statistically significant number of four leadership-critical commenting publics in Azerbaijan. Why did these four leadership-critical commenting environments exist? The most plausible explanation for this finding, in our view, are the massive resources that are required to persistently identify (and rigorously censor) leadership-critical comments, given the massive numbers of comments posted daily beneath news items, while, at the same time, making sure that all comments are published that contain merely criticism of lower-level authorities or policies. If resources were scarce at the

time of research in the teams of moderators that attended to the four environments, leadership-critical statements may have easily slipped through. This explanation appears all the more plausible if one considers that the absolute number of leadership-critical commenting publics in Azerbaijan was strikingly low: only 4 of 140 potential commenting environments hosted leadership-critical publics. While the number of leadership-critical publics may thus be statistically significant, the political importance of these four publics can be considered negligible. By comparison, in the leadership-critical public-at-large under scrutiny (Russia), we observed leadership-critical commenting publics in ten times more environments, that is, in 45 of 140 (for a visualization of these differences, see Figure 2). A further finding that renders the resources argument plausible is the overall relatively low number of actively commenting publics that were facilitated by Azerbaijani news organizations. In total, we observed actively commenting publics in only 25 (16%) of the 140 environments. By comparison, within Russia's leadership-critical model, commenting publics were active in 97 (69%) of the 140 coded environments. In line with this argument, furthermore, is the observation that, in Azerbaijan, 17 of the 25 actively commenting publics were hosted on only one platform, Facebook. On Facebook, commenters have to comment with an SNS account that is typically closely interwoven with their real-life personalities. This characteristic of Facebook can be expected to be associated with a high level of self-censorship among commenters, because it makes commenters more easily identifiable to authorities, by comparison with commenters who need not register or can register an account created specifically for commenting on the website of a news organization. According to our data, not a single news website in Azerbaijan invited users to comment on their own websites. Future research is needed, however, to systematically interrogate these claims and investigate specifically what platforms are particularly conducive to the emergence of critically

commenting publics (for one potential explanation, consider Litvinenko & Toepfl, unpublished manuscript).

Commenting on the News under Authoritarian Rule: Environments as Units of Analysis

In addition to contributing to the theoretical literature on authoritarian input institutions, this study aims at pushing forward the communications literature on audience comments beneath the news in non-democratic contexts. A first strand of research in this area has content-analyzed the comments posted beneath news articles about key political events (Al-Saggaf, 2006; Douai & Nofal, 2012; Koltsova & Nagornyy, 2019). In the context of such work, the present study can be considered innovative because, while still attending to the meaning of the texts published, it uses as the smallest unit of analysis not the single comment, but the comment section as a whole. Specifically, this study categorizes comment sections in terms of three distinct types of criticism (“discursive practices”; Toepfl, 2020) that have persistently reoccurred within these communicative spaces. Going beyond prior research (Douai & Nofal, 2012; Al-Saggaf, 2006), this study has thus been able to draw a much more abstract picture of the extent of the political criticism that circulates in commenting environments, across seven platforms and across three authoritarian regimes.

A second strand of research has investigated how news organizations across democratic and authoritarian contexts implement participatory features (Bachmann & Harlow, 2012; Domingo et al., 2008; Suau & Masip, 2014; Toepfl & Litvinenko, 2018). These cross-national studies, however, have not attended to the actual content published in the comment sections, but have only considered the presence or absence – and, in some cases, the design (see Toepfl & Litvinenko, 2018) – of specific participatory features. Moreover, this strand of research has not yet been able to identify “clear national idiosyncrasies” (Domingo et al., 2008, p. 335) in patterns of audience participation that might exist across countries and political contexts. Neither has it generated theoretical claims about why characteristic patterns of audience

participation might occur across contexts. Advancing extant knowledge in this area, this study has provided convincing evidence for the existence of well-defined national patterns in how journalists and media organizations deal with readers' comments across the three authoritarian contexts, as well as a meaningful interpretation and explanation of these cross-national differences. As our findings indicate, the type of political discourses published in comment sections under authoritarian rule crucially depends on the model of the wider public-at-large that an authoritarian regime operates (Toepfl, 2020).

Risks and Benefits of Commenting Publics in Comparison with Other Institutions

As argued above, commenting publics can serve, for authoritarian elites, purposes that are broadly similar to those of more traditional input institutions, like semi-independent elections, parliaments, or mass media (Lagacé & Gandhi, 2015; Nathan, 2003; Gunitsky, 2015; Stockmann, 2013). At the same time, however, the specific set of benefits and risks associated with commenting publics appears to be different from those associated with other input institutions. Unlike rigged elections or co-opted parliaments, for instance, critically commenting publics are certainly not able to “reveal the ability of local officials to mobilize votes” or to “create new lines of patronage” (Gunitsky, 2015, p. 43). By contrast, other – and in some respects, unique – benefits of commenting publics may be connected to at least five of their key characteristics: Firstly, commenting publics involve not only opposition elites but also large numbers of ordinary citizens. Second, changes in the sentiment of these commenting citizens can be monitored in real time. Third, the discourses published in commenting publics are typically archived on the online platforms. Structural changes in their content can thus be easily traced over extended periods of time. Fourth, the comments archived lend themselves easily to new types of automated data analysis. The latter can precisely reveal information about how important issues, policies, and officials have been debated in these communicative spaces over time. Finally, from the perspective of

authoritarian elites, commenting publics are a relatively safe participatory venue for citizens to vent their anger and voice their preferences, as they are not explicitly tied to the process of political decision-making.

Promising Avenues for Future Research

This study has many limitations, which, however, open up a series of promising avenues for future research. First, methodologically, this study is grounded in the observation of discursive practices only. To supplement its conclusions, further research is needed that deploys interview-based and ethnographic approaches (El Gody, 2015; Tong, 2015). Follow-up studies could investigate, for instance, how journalists, community managers, commenters, or followers make sense of, and shape, audience participation in news-making under authoritarian rule. By adopting the theoretical lens proposed in this study, research along these lines could significantly advance our understanding of “participatory journalism” (Domingo et al., 2008, p. 331) and “secondary gatekeeping” (Singer, 2014, p. 55) in non-democratic contexts – a phenomenon about which we have hardly any academic knowledge so far.

Second, in order to corroborate and add detail to the conclusions of this study, future research needs to scrutinize new modes of participatory journalism in other country contexts beyond the post-Soviet region. Third, this study has focused on one point in time (summer 2018). In contrast, it has not attended to the historical trajectories of audience participation in the three authoritarian regimes. That said, it would be intriguing to reflect upon the commonalities between commenting on the news online in summer 2018 and classic forms of audience participation practiced in the pre-Internet age. In the Soviet Union, for instance, letters to the editors of newspapers were a widely common (and subtly controlled) form of citizen participation. According to the official ideology, they were part of a practice referred to as *Samokritika* (“self-criticism”, that is, criticism of the shortcomings of socialist society voiced by ordinary citizens). As Inkeles’ (1950) argued in his classic account of public opinion in the

Soviet Union, *Samokritika* was officially “expected to serve as an instrument for controlling the activities of the party and government bureaucracy” (p. 215). Specific forms of *Samokritika* might thus well qualify as policy-criticism, as conceptualized in this article. Likewise, some texts published within the so-called *Samizdat* literature (see Skilling, 1989) might be analyzed as leadership-criticism. Future research could tease out the commonalities and differences between these critical publics, forming offline and online, respectively, and raise the question of their role in authoritarian governance in their times. By pursuing at least these three types of research, scholars could – and certainly should – venture further into the presently largely uncharted terrain of audience participation in the news under distinct types of authoritarian rule.

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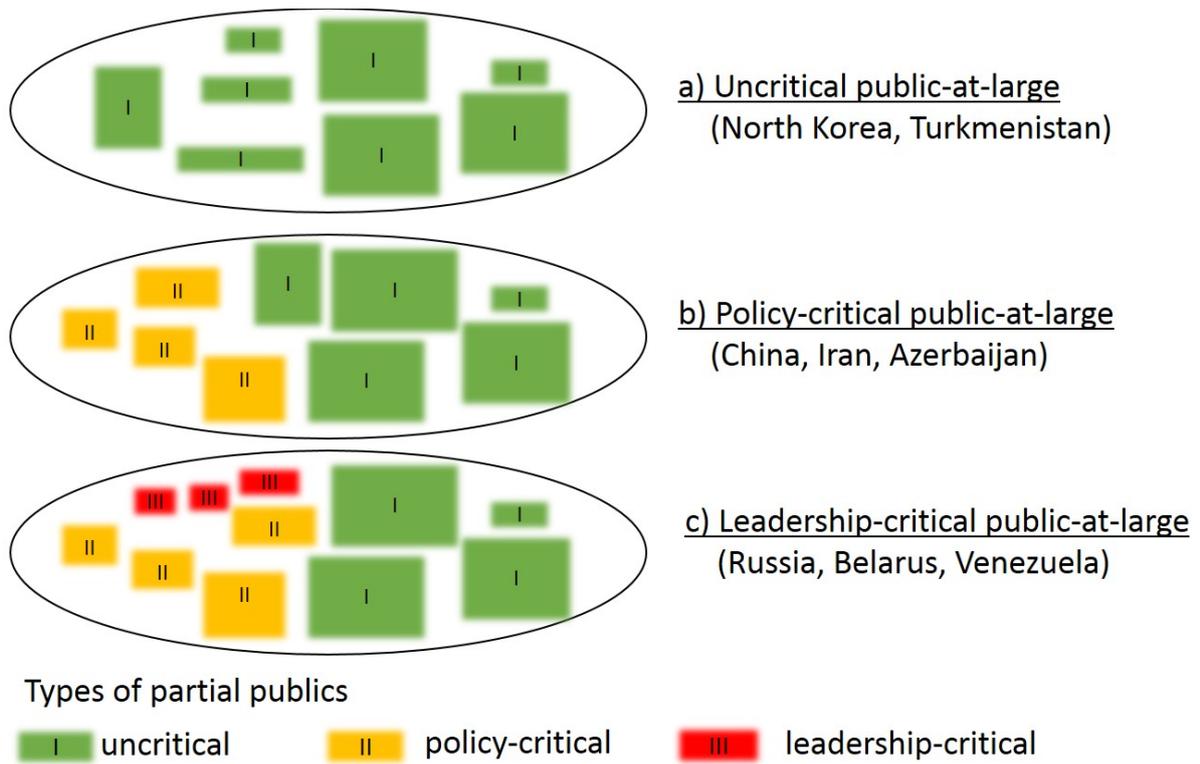
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Figures

Figure 1

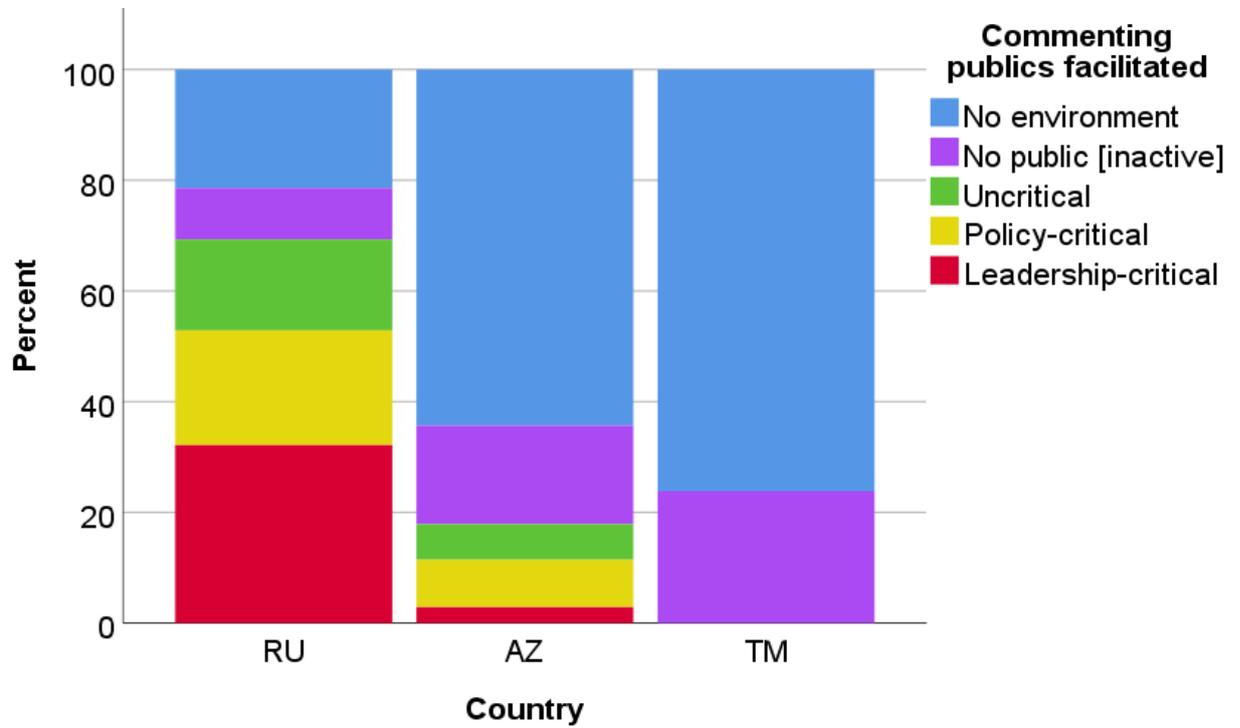
Three types of authoritarian publics-at-large



(Source: Toepfl, 2020)

Figure 2

Commenting publics facilitated by country



Note: RU = Russia, AZ = Azerbaijan, TM = Turkmenistan;
N=140 for RU and AZ, N=42 for TM

Figure 3

Commenting publics (N=322) facilitated by ownership type of news organization

