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Framing the Digital Silk Road: Media Portrayals of China's Digital Engagement in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan

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Abstract

The study investigates how state-affiliated and independent media outlets in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan frame China's Digital Silk Road (DSR) from 2020 to 2026. By combining qualitative content analysis with critical framing analysis, the research analyzes a corpus of articles from seven outlets that are selected purposively: *Kazakhstanskaya Pravda*, *Kazinform*, *Azattyq* (RFE/RL Kazakhstan), and *Orda.kz* in Kazakhstan; and *Kabar*, *24.kg*, and *Azattyk* (RFE/RL Kyrgyzstan) in Kyrgyzstan. The study is guided by mainly three research questions that addresses the overall tone and dominant frames of DSR coverage. According to the findings of this research, there is a systematic divergence between state and independent media outlets in both countries. State-affiliated media consistently portray the DSR as an impetus for national development and progress. More precisely, the narratives such as 'presidential endorsement', 'modernisation-through-emulation', 'sovereignty-assured partnership', 'exemplar-emulation' are actively employed. Conversely, independent outlets frame the DSR through the critical lenses, and foregrounded concerns on civil liberties and data sovereignty. Chinese digital engagement is delivered as a catalyst for the increasing scope of authoritarian control. Critically, these variations are determined to be structural and institutional factors rather than purely editorial. The study also contributes to scholarship on Chinese influence in BRI partner states, diffusion of digital authoritarianism in post-Soviet contexts and the politics of constrained media framing.

Keywords: Digital Silk Road, media framing, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Chinese digital engagement, Critical Discourse Analysis

Introduction

The Digital Silk Road (DSR) is the digital dimension of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). It was formally launched in 2015 within China's Action Plan on the Belt and Road Initiative. Later, the action plan expanded through 2017 Digital Silk Road policy. The DSR operates through Chinese investments in broadband infrastructure, including surveillance systems, e-commerce platforms, and AI (Hillman, 2021; Thorne & Spevack, 2017). The label "Silk Road" itself has deliberate discursive meaning of reviving the ancient transcontinental trade network which connected China to Central Asia and Europe. By doing so, Beijing incorporates a geopolitical project in a narrative of shared civilizational heritage and mutual benefit as well as naturalizing what are in practice asymmetrical infrastructure relationships (Van Noort, 2021; Ferdinand, 2016). Most of the existing literature engages with the BRI through geopolitical or economic lenses. In other words, themes such as investment flows, debt exposure, and great-power competition has been the dominant narratives. And there is a question of how target-country media frame and interpret Chinese digital engagement received less systematic attention (Rühlig, 2020; Sacks & Triolo, 2020).

Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan are instructive cases due to their geography, as they are located central to the BRI corridor. The structural similarity and significant differences of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan have made them a paired comparative case. Both are post-Soviet countries within the BRI corridor, which have experienced massive inflows of digital investments from China, with Huawei's

5G and smart city infrastructure, Alibaba's e-commerce platforms and the deployment of surveillance technology in their capital cities. Both have been working in the constrained media context with an imprint of the post-Soviet pattern relations between the state and the press. Meanwhile, there are important differences between the two states: in their state capacity, in how deeply they are institutionalized with Chinese media organizations. Throughout 2020-2026, Kazakhstan's independent media was relatively stable but under pressure, and in Kyrgyzstan, the independent media landscape was displaced in a series of institutional crises (blocking of Azattyk in 2022; dissolution of Kloop.kg in 2024; and 'extremist' designation of Kloop and Temirov Live in October 2025).

The 2020-2026 window was chosen for a variety of factors. It covers the period of the COVID-19 pandemic when China's digital infrastructure was quickly expanded and reframed under the Health Silk Road framework. Moreover, this time period saw the highest point of digital investment in both countries, such as the key agreement on 5G, the deployment of Smart City and Safe City, and the First China-Central Asia Summit in Xi'an held in May 2023. It also encompasses the BRI's 10th Anniversary (October 2023), which experienced the greatest single-event surge in state media DSR coverage in both corpora. It also spans the most consequential shifts in both countries' media environments: the January 2022 (*Qandy Qantar*) uprising and internet shutdown in Kazakhstan, the blocking of Azattyk and the dissolution of Kloop.kg in Kyrgyzstan, and the dramatic acceleration of surveillance camera procurement documented in both countries in 2023-2025.

The present research studies significant lacunae among existing scholarship. Most literature about BRI and DSR has revolved around major-power media environments, for instance Western outlets such as The Wall Street Journal, The Economist, and The Guardian, Chinese state media such as Xinhua and Global Times, or among the presses of emerging powers in India and Pakistan (Bahoo & Alon, 2020; Yuhan, 2021; Chu et al., 2025). So far little scholarly attention has been given to the BRI recipient countries. Within this underexplored category, especially Central Asian media remains neglected. Media framing theory (Entman, 1993; Scheufele, 1999; Gitlin, 1980), authoritarian media theory (George, 2012; Levitsky & Way, 2010), and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) (Fairclough, 1995; van Dijk, 1988) serve as theoretical basis for this study. These theories help to analyze not just simply what frames are produced, but what kind of specific discursive strategies are used at the lexical and rhetorical level, and why particular frames are institutionally possible or foreclosed. Methodologically, the study applies to purposively selected seventeen articles from seven outlets in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan over the 2020-2026 period.

Literature Review

Bahoo and Alon (2020) conducted a media framing analysis of 100 articles from two major international business journals: The Wall Street Journal (USA), and The Economist (UK). The study found that Western news outlets often use conflict-oriented frames mainly by focusing on ideas like 'debt-traps' (using examples, such as Sri-Lanka and Pakistan) or geopolitical ambitions of China. In contrast, Chinese state media deploy the cooperation frames, where the terms like partnership, shared benefits, and 'win-win' outcomes are more stressed. However, despite the prevalence of negative geopolitical reporting, the study concluded that the overall tone of the coverage from The Economist and The Wall Street Journal was neutral.

Complementing this, another research done by Yuhan (2021) on the media discourse of The Guardian (UK) and Xinhua Daily (China) found that the UK maintains a "suspicious and hostile attitude" towards BRI. This was shown in the usage of linguistic devices like word choice, where British media employed aggressive terms, such as 'geopolitical gambit', 'crusade', or 'Cheesy

imperialist propaganda' to imply that China is seeking hegemony. Conversely, Chinese media Xinhua Daily employed positive terms, such as 'cooperation' and 'common prosperity' in a spirit of equality and openness. The analysis confirms that news reports are vehicles for conveying the hidden ideologies of the writers. Furthermore, Chu et al. (2025) conducted computational framing tools in their research to examine and compare the representation of the BRI in Indo-Pakistani outlets. The research found different framing strategies, where Pakistani media often emphasized the development and China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) opportunities, whereas Indian media framed China mainly as a geostrategic threat seeking to extend its global power.

Heidbrink and Becker (2022) analyzed the DSR through the lenses of securitization concept of the Copenhagen School, as defined by Buzan et al. (1998). Securitization is fundamentally defined as a process, where an issue is elevated to the security agenda as an existential threat, which then mobilizes state resources to avert danger and intensifies enemy images. Contrary, de-securitization undermines the sense of emergency whereby political processes are treated as a normal process rather than something extreme. The analysis demonstrates that discussions about the DSR swing between poles. On one hand, the initiative is framed as a major security threat (securitization), which is a dominant view among the US actors. The study identified four main negative threat frames which are articulated by the US state authorities and think tanks: 1) normative (where China is seen as spreading its own authoritarian tech standards), 2) political (where the digital projects shift regional power more toward Beijing), 3) economic (where the DSR creates new trade barriers to US firms), 4) military (where digital ties could strengthen China's cyber-warfare abilities). By stating so, strong protective measures are required within this securitized view. On the other hand, the DSR is represented in de-securitized frames as an opportunity of digital growth and modernization. These positive frames acknowledge that the DSR meets development needs by offering infrastructural upgrades to host countries. Under authoritarian settings, for independent media these competing frames are especially challenging. In other words, media plays dual roles as platforms for entrepreneurial and political purposes, while also functioning as active commentators in shaping discourses about it through 'agenda-setting' and 'priming'.

One of the main areas of study now is the diffusion of digital authoritarian practices from China to its partners. Bashirov et al. (2025) offers a structural analytical framework where three major mechanisms of diffusion are identified: learning (governments tend to adapt strategies based on experiences with observation of Chinese models and protest movements), emulation (where governments tend to adopt legal norms and surveillance settings based on cultural-political alignment with China), and cooperative interdependence (technology transfers are mostly enabled through BRI trade relationships and loan agreements within this setting). Their research on Iran and Pakistan revealed some patterns that learning is the most leading diffusion. Both countries are attempting to adapt surveillance practices of China following domestic upheavals. This framework allows us to contextualize DSR surveillance technologies and how they are depicted in the media of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, as either threats from external forces, or as resources the government can use to consolidate internal power.

Feldstein (2021) introduced the concept of "data-centric authoritarianism" to describe how authoritarian governments are increasingly building political control, around the systematic gathering and exploiting of citizen data with China as the leading case. In Feldstein's work, the shift in Chinese surveillance, from the 'Golden Shield' to AI-enabled big scale social control systems is described in detail. It also suggests that even less wealthy authoritarian regimes, they still make quite a strong attempt to pick up Chinese surveillance technology in order to intensify control and hold on to political legitimacy. What feels especially important in Feldstein's argument is that the Chinese digital

authoritarian toolkits are not only a matter of hardware technologies like cameras, sensors and data processing. To be more precise, it also includes a set of institutional components, like legal frameworks, operational training, and models of governance, and together these elements make up one functioning system. Because of this, analyzing media framing should take a holistic view on the system, rather than just focusing on the tangible surveillance technologies. So, in the author's terms, the DSR is also about spreading specific rules and practices regarding how data and societies ought to be governed.

In order to understand the DSR media representations, it is necessary to contextualize independent journalism in authoritarian media landscapes. As George (2012) theory of 'calibrated coercion' provides the important implications for the control of media. In particular he argues that the repressive regimes practice censorship in a strategic way that forces media journalists to carry out preemptive self-censorship to keep themselves out of trouble, rather than impose always vague 'red lines'. Such strategy involves the 'light-touch' manipulation by the state that they are pretending to have media pluralism while constraining critical reporting of contentious issues. And it can be found in the internal politics of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan as well as of China.

Levitsky and Way (2010) offer a typological clarity between two types of authoritarian systems in comparative media analysis. In competitive authoritarian regimes, opposition parties compete on the basis of elections and independent media still have some room to operate in spite of harassment; hegemonic authoritarian regimes have democratic institutions on the surface and ruling parties are not facing serious electoral challenges and independent media are being eliminated in systematic ways. The example of Kyrgyzstan under President Japarov (2020-present). The path of hegemonic authoritarianism, which has culminated in October 2025 with the designations of the leading independent outlets Kloop and Temirov Live, is quite representative. Kazakhstan has slightly more competitive authoritarian features, though Radio Azattyq and other local independent outlets are still functioning on the basis of strong restrictions.

Recent scholarship argues that it is misleading to interpret DSR in a very simplistic way that it is a clear, coherent grand strategy. According to Cheng and Zeng (2023) the DSR is a less detailed master plan, but more of a broader and flexible political slogan. In his view, it is an evolving extension of the BRI which represents the interests of China's digital industries. Instead of being centrally planned, it emerges in a piece-meal manner, with disproportionate priorities and *ad hoc* implementation. Oreglia and Zheng (2024) also arrive at the same conclusion. Their work shows that there is a high bureaucratic competition over the meaning, narrative control and direction of the DSR, in other words, different agencies push their own interpretations, and the Cyberspace Administration of China has been especially active in attempting to dominate the narrative and maneuver the initiative in their preferred direction. Media coverage should not portray the DSR as a tightly controlled geopolitical project, but rather focus on dynamic ideas and initiatives which reflect the internal politics of China.

The existing literature establishes a sophisticated understanding about BRI/DSR framing at the great-power discourse level, showing how journalism is shaped under authoritarian constraint, and how digital authoritarianism manufactures the structural conditions in the media environment. However, a significant gap remains, i.e. Chinese digital engagement in the region, specifically, the media portrayal of DSR is not investigated yet. By integrating media framing, CDA, and authoritarian media theory, this compound gap is addressed through comparative empirical study of seven media outlets in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan.

Theoretical Framework

Media framing theory is the main tool and provides the foundational lens for understanding how the DSR is presented in the news. The roots of the idea traces back to Walter Lippmann (1922). In his pioneering work, he posits that the media construct the ‘picture in our heads’ through shaping how people perceive and make sense of the world. The theory says that the media influence public perception not only by determining what issues to highlight, but also by defining how audiences interpret that information. In this way, the theory serves as the primary coding grid of this study, and enables to formulate the systematic comparison of how each outlet constructs the DSR. Another contribution done by Entman (1993) where framing puts selective emphasis of certain aspects of reality, simultaneously obscuring others. In this way, it guides audiences toward particular problem definitions, diagnose causes, make moral judgments and suggest remedies. In this further development, Scheufele (1999) identifies two major dimensions in the framing process: frame-building (how frames are produced through the interactions of journalists, political actors, and social groups) and frame-setting (how these media frames interact with the audience’s existing beliefs and shape their interpretations). Together, these mechanisms describe how media discourses are created regarding the DSR and how it shapes perceptions among people.

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is essential in this study, demonstrating the relationship between discourse, power, and social structure. According to Fairclough’s (1995) three-dimensional model, any communicative event (a news article, an official press, or a diplomatic reportage) must be analyzed simultaneously at three levels: the text level (the specific linguistic choices, grammatical structures, lexical selections, and rhetorical devices employed), the level of discursive practice (how the text is produced, circulated, and consumed within specific institutional contexts, including sourcing practices, editorial routines, and distribution logics), and the level of social practice (how the text reproduces or potentially challenges broader structures of power, ideology, and institutional authority). Fairclough argues that discourse is not just a reflection of power relations, but an integral part of it. In other words, power is exercised through discourse, so far it is actively constructed through ideological conditions rather than simply describing the existing reality. Furthermore, van Dijk’s (1998) concept of the “reproduction of elite discourse” is also central to this study. He argues that news media frequently reinforce the perspectives of top elites. This process occurs through three interrelated practices: the selection of elite sources as the primary voices of authority, adopting their categorizations and interpretive frames when reporting events, and the systematic exclusion of counter narratives and alternative viewpoints. It is necessary to combine several theoretical traditions, such as framing theory (Entman, 1993; Scheufele & Iyengar, 2012), the authoritarian media control theory (George, 2019; Levitsky & Way, 2010), and critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough, 1995; van Dijk, 1988).

These theoretical frameworks are not applied sequentially but in integration. In other words, each addresses the distinct part of the analysis in which the others cannot fully account for alone. Framing theory (Entman, 1993; Scheufele, 1999; Gitlin, 1980) provides the primary analytical vocabulary for systematically identifying and categorizing the DSR representations. While authoritarian media theory (George, 2012; Levitsky & Way, 2010) provides the explanatory framework of why specific frames are institutionally possible or foreclosed in some outlets, and shows the structural and political conditions that shape the frame-building process. CDA (Fairclough, 1995; van Dijk, 1988) provides the theoretical tools for illuminating how the frames are constructed within a specific power discourse, such as lexical choice, selection logic of sources and narrative structures, rhetorical strategies employed. Together these frameworks enable us to produce theoretically multi-

layered research on how Central Asian media construct the meaning in terms of China's digital presence in the region.

Methodology

This section presents the methodological part that governs the overall design of this study. The research is aimed to investigate how the DSR of China is depicted in both independent and state-affiliated media outlets in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan between the period of 2020-2026. Given the interpretive and constructivist ontological position that this study is grounded in, comparative case study through qualitative content analysis emerged as the necessary approach. The closeness of structural features enabled the analysis methodologically appropriate. As both states share post-Soviet political governance and economies, significant flow of Chinese investments through the Belt and Road Initiative, relatively constrained media environments, and historical Silk Road legacy. Within each country, the study further distinguishes between state-affiliated and independent media outlets as the primary actor-level unit of analysis. This heterogeneity allows us to identify the cross-national patterns and shared trends. The core methodological questions of this study are:

- What is the overall tone of coverage of China's Digital Silk Road in state-affiliated and independent media outlets in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan between 2020 and 2026?
- What dominant frames are employed by these outlets in their coverage of Chinese digital engagement?
- What narrative patterns and discursive strategies characterize coverage in each outlet category, and how do these vary by country and outlet type?

Table 1. *Outlet Selection*

Country and type of media	Outlet name	Languages	Justification for inclusion
Kazakhstan, state media	Kazakhstanskaya Pravda	KZ, RU	Long-established state newspaper of record; publishes presidential and diplomatic editorials including Xi Jinping signed articles
Kazakhstan, state media	Kazinform	KZ, RU, EN, CHI, UZ	Official state news agency operating under presidential oversight; Publishes government communications, diplomatic news, and policy announcements in seven languages
Kazakhstan, independent media	Orda.kz	KZ, RU, EN	Critical online news portal; published Pandora Papers investigation; exemplar of constrained independent journalism under state pressure
Kazakhstan, independent media	Azattyq (RFE/RL Kazakh Service)	KZ, RU	Most prominent foreign-funded independent broadcaster; investigative coverage of surveillance, digital rights,

			and Chinese technology
Kyrgyzstan, state media	Kabar National News Agency	KG, RU, EN	State wire service; member of Belt and Road News Alliance; documented institutional alignment with Chinese media narratives
Kyrgyzstan, independent media	Azattyk (RFE/RL Kyrgyz Service)	KG, RU	Independent foreign-funded broadcaster; blocked Oct 2022; sustained reporting on Chinese surveillance, BRI, and civil liberties
Kyrgyzstan, independent media	24.kg	KG, RU	Independent private news agency; covers economic and digital dimensions with moderate critical framing; more neutral than Kloop

Note. The table is prepared via Claude AI

Articles were retrieved from each outlet's publicly accessible digital archives according to a systematic keyword search protocol. The following search terms were used (which were entered into the search engines in Russian with equivalent Kazakh and Kyrgyz terms where possible):

Primary keyword cluster (DSR-specific):

- Цифровой Шёлковый путь/ Digital Silk Road/ DSR
- Цифровая инициатива пояса и пути / Digital BRI
- Цифровая экономика Китая / Chinese digital economy
- Хуавэй / Huawei (telecommunications, 5G, Smart City, Safe City)
- Алибаба/ AliExpress / Alibaba (e-commerce, digital trade)
- Умный город / Smart City / Safe City (Bishkek, Almaty, Astana)

Secondary keyword cluster (DSR-related broader BRI digital dimension):

- Цифровой Казахстан / Digital Kazakhstan (state program)
- Цифровая трансформация Кыргызстана/ Digital Transformation of Kyrgyzstan
- Электронная коммерция Китай / e-commerce China
- 5G Китай Казахстан/Кыргызстан
- Шёлковый путь e-коммерция/ Silk Road e-commerce
- Китайские технологии слежки / Chinese surveillance technology
- КНР инвестиции цифровые / PRC digital investment

Google Site Search operators were used for outlets without search functions or with incomplete archive materials. Archives for Azattyq and Azattyq were retrieved through the RFE/RL digital archive. Each search cluster was run at least three times to avoid retrieval gaps.

Following the systematic keyword search, 17 articles were retained across seven outlets. Articles were included only if they (a) contained substantive treatment of China's digital engagement rather than accidental references, (b) articles that were published within the 2020-2026 timeframe, and (c) were publicly accessible articles that can be retrieved in full-text. The final corpus is distributed as follows: five articles from Kazakhstan state media (three from *Kazakhstanskaya Pravda* and two from *Kazinform*), five articles from Kazakhstan's independent media (two from *Azattyq* and three from *Orda.kz*), three articles from Kyrgyzstan state media (*Kabar*), and four articles from Kyrgyzstan independent media (three from *24.kg* and one 2019 article from *Azattyk*). As previously stated, it must be acknowledged that the small size of the corpus is not solely the author's choice, but also it is part of

a structural constraint. Starting from 2023, the media environment in Kyrgyzstan faced progressive suspension of independent outlets, including the blockage of Azattyk, the dissolution of Kloop.kg, and the GKNB raid on 24.kg.

Russian language was selected as the main working language for corpus construction in both states as it still remains as *lingua franca* for public affair journalism and commentary in both states. The 2020-2026 timeframe was selected due to several reasons: it captures the most significant period of China's digital expansion in Central Asia starting from COVID-19 pandemic period when digital infrastructure were advanced around the world. Moreover, this period simultaneously witnessed the most significant shifts of media environments in both countries.

As this is a single-researcher qualitative study, formal intercoder reliability testing was not conducted. Instead, analytical transparency was maintained through two measures. First, there is explicit textual evidence in all frame attributions. Each frame identified in the Results section. The analysis links each frame to observable linguistic elements, including lexical choices, source selection patterns and rhetorical structures. Second, Entman's (1993) four function model is applied across all articles and outlet categories. This consistent application enables the readers to evaluate the plausibility of the frame classifications based on the presented evidence. The author acknowledges that the absence of intercoder reliability verification is one of the methodological limitations of this study. By employing the codebook-driven, multi-coder design, this methodological rigor could be figured out in future research.

In the preparation of this manuscript, Claude AI (claude.ai, developed by Anthropic) was used in a limited and specifically circumscribed way. The rationale for this use was practical rather than analytical: to organize the pre-existing analytical content into publication-ready tables. Claude AI was selected due to its accessibility and text-formatting capabilities. More importantly, all data and analysis reflected in those tables were produced by the author independently and prior to the table formatting step. The author takes full intellectual responsibility for all content in this work. This statement is included to ensure transparency and in accordance with emerging best practices for AI tool declaration in academic publishing.

Results

This section introduces the empirical results from systematic media content and frame analyses of Chinese Digital Silk Road (DSR) in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan from 2020 to 2026. Based on the content from a dataset of articles and news stories, opinion pieces, and analysis collected from both state-controlled and independent news agencies of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, this paper offers an examination of how China's digital footprint in the region is framed. In the reporting, it provides an analysis of reporting tonality, dominant frames, and important stories about China's engagement with the two countries. During the observed time frame there were a number of significant conjunctures which were reflected in the digital practices: the COVID-19 pandemic and the deepening of digitalization dependence, unrest in January 2022 in Kazakhstan, Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and the aftermath restructuring of the digital markets, intensification of the Sino-Central Asian diplomacy with the first ever China-Central Asia Summit in Xi'an in May 2023, development and rapid implementation of technologies in the AI field and surveillance technologies by the governments.

Kazakhstan: State Media Coverage of China's DSR

In the context of Kazakhstan five articles were chosen from two news agencies (Kazakhstanskaya Pravda and Kazinform) over the span from 2022-2026. The data was then examined

using qualitative framing analysis using a four function model derived from Entman (1993) (defining a problem, diagnosing a cause, promoting a moral evaluation, and suggesting a solution), supplemented with the methods of Critical Discourse Analysis. These sources are characterized by the institutional affiliation with the executive branch and their role as official government communicators. China and the DSR in these sources is then considered from the perspective of the Kazakh government itself and its positioning in relation to China.

Kazakhstanskaya Pravda

Kazakhstanskaya Pravda (KazPravda) is Kazakhstan's oldest newspaper, founded in 1920, and today appears as an official, government-affiliated newspaper under the state-run media holding company TOO 'Qazaq Gazetteri'. It acts as the most direct channel for official government discourse. The newspaper regularly publishes decrees by the president, state reports of diplomatic visits and official statements from the government. Its close ties with the presidential administration makes this outlet a key channel for the framing of Kazakhstan's foreign policy relationships, including that with China. The three articles, "Meeting of Tokayev with Huawei board chairman" (September 2, 2025), "Visit of Deputy Prime Minister Zhumangarin to Shenzhen" (August 15, 2023), and "Testing 10G internet in Astana" (June 17, 2025) reflect KazPravda's general framing of the Huawei-Kazakhstan relations. Across all three KazPravda articles, the perspective is positive and can be defined within the context of framing studies as 'unambiguously promotional' (de Vreese, 2005). No critical modulation, no voices from above or below are invited and no room has been made for alternative viewpoints. Overall the reports appear much like a press release, reshaped into a news article and consistent with what van Dijk's (1988) identifies as 'reproduction of elite discourse'.

Frame 1: The Presidential Endorsement Frame. The article "Tokayev received the Chairman of the Board of Directors of Huawei Technologies Co. LTD" (September 2, 2025) employs the authority of the president as the main framing mechanism. The logic is simple and straightforward: meeting with the president gives institutional legitimacy to Huawei's activities in Kazakhstan. The article emphasizes within the context of presidential meeting, the strategic agreement between Samuryk-Kazyna and Huawei on 'innovative telecommunications technologies and modernization of server infrastructure'. It states that Tokayev 'welcomed the signing of a Strategic Agreement on the implementation of innovative telecommunications technologies', which frames the business agreement as an initiative supported at the national level. At the end of the article, Huawei is positioned with its classification as a Fortune Global 500 company with operations in over 170 countries, and to be serving in excess of 3 billion consumers globally. It could be seen as 'authority anchoring', as identified by Van Noort (2021) through impressive stats reinforces the company's legitimacy and credibility. Nonetheless, the article also remained silent on Huawei's contentious position on many Western markets, sanctions by the US on Huawei and potential concerns surrounding dual-use capabilities.

Frame 2: The Modernization-through-Emulation Frame. The article on Zhumangarin's visit to Shenzhen (August 15, 2023) is one of the most elaborated texts on the KazPravda corpus, and presents Chinese digital technology through the logic of emulation. Deputy Prime Minister Zhumangarin compares Huawei with Nokia in his statements: "In its time I visited Nokia, now I'm at Huawei. The enormous leap that Huawei made in recent years is a reflection of the enormous leap that China itself has made." By this comparison, several framing discourses are identified. It portrays Huawei's growth as remarkable and worth following, simultaneously, presents Kazakhstan as a country who is willing to learn from China's technological success. Furthermore, it suggests that Kazakhstan is closely linked to cooperation with China in terms of digital development rather than Western partners. These statements

are further intensified in the article that Kazakhstan ‘sees great potential in cooperation for the development of our digital ecosystem’ and is ‘open to any proposals from Huawei.’ These are clear messages, and shows a high degree of openness to work with Huawei, which the article reports without any critical discussion. Last, an explicit reference is made to the fact that Huawei “has been successfully working in Kazakhstan for 25 years,” highlighting its role as ‘reliable and proven long-term partner.’

Frame 3: The Technological Milestone Frame. According to the article on the 10G internet pilot project (June 17, 2025), the memorandum was signed between Huawei Technologies Kazakhstan and Astana Innovations at the Second China-Central Asia Industrial Investment Cooperation Forum. In the article, the signing of agreement became the main news event, however the actual content or implication of the agreement received little attention. The 10G network is presented as a major technological achievement. In this way, it was spotlighted that the joint action plan can provide speeds ‘up to 10 gigabits per second’ and create ‘competitive advantages for Kazakhstan on the international stage’. However, these claims are reported without independent verification and were based on statements made by Huawei’s General Director. This article also uses a framing strategy at the regional level, linking the agreement to the China-Central Asia Industrial Investment Cooperation Forum. The multilateral nature of this forum gives extra credibility to the project and frames the scope of Huawei’s infrastructure growth within the narrative of Kazakhstan’s regional leadership and modernization, instead of highlighting it as an example of China’s technological expansion within the country.

Discursive Strategies. Three discursive techniques consistently appear throughout the KazPravda corpus. First, the strategy of testimonial authority by institutional elevation: each article derives its framing power mainly from the prestige of the speaker (the President, a Deputy Prime Minister, a CEO), not from expert analysis. By this strategy, it is demonstrated that digital engagement of China as state-endorsed national policy rather than contested geopolitical choice. Second, superlative accumulation: the descriptions of deals or profiles of corporates are constructed through emphasizing the impressive metrics and stats (120,000 patents, 700 smart city projects, 267 Fortune Global 500 clients) to prevent the potential public skepticism. Third, deliberate omission (Entman, 1993): there is no evidence of critical frames such as data sovereignty concerns, or Huawei’s contested geopolitical status.

Kazinform

Kazinform is the state news agency of Kazakhstan, established in 1920 and managed as a division of the NAO ‘Teleradiocomplex of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan’ (PTRK). As a primary wire service for official government and diplomatic news, Kazinform’s multilingual publishing (Kazakh, Russian, English, Chinese, Arabic, Uzbek and Latin-script Kazakh) underscores its two key purposes as a domestic reporter of state events and an international ‘image’ management tool. It has established formal cooperation with Chinese state media through the Silk Road Newspaper Cooperation Alliance, and distributes international news through Xinhua. Kazinform’s coverage about China’s digital engagement is uniformly positive. Compared with KazPravda’s direct promotional tone, Kazinform shows more editorial sophistication. The outlet demonstrates more analytical approach in their issues, presenting data, citing international experts, and referencing policy documents. Though it creates the appearance of media independence, it consistently pushes toward pro-partnership conclusions. The article from January 2026 on China’s AI transformation is the most detailed sample of this register. It is a long, analytical article that refers to Stanford’s DigiChina, SCMP, PwC and the Chinese government in order to depict China as an credible and exemplary model to be followed by Kazakhstan in its digital development path.

Frame 1: The Sovereign Partnership Frame. According to the article “Almaty will create a ‘digital twin’ with China's support” (November 10, 2025), state media framing demonstrated in an unusual way. In other words, it represents positive messaging blended with explicit references to digital sovereignty. The article focuses on the joint effort to create a digital twin of the city with the assistance of the Chinese company Shenzhen Smart City Group, using a grant provided by the state-owned Chinese International Development Cooperation Agency (CIDCA). While overall tone is optimistic, concerns surrounding data governance and technological reliance are openly addressed: ‘All project data will be stored and processed in Kazakhstan, and the software will be deployed and administered by domestic specialists. This fully complies with the principles of digital sovereignty and contributes to the development of national expertise in the field of artificial intelligence.’ Unlike the KazPravda coverage of Huawei, digital sovereignty is included in the explicit reasoning behind the project. There are two reasons this emphasis on sovereignty is crucial. The first is that digital sovereignty is being presented as a “real and legitimate issue which demands reassurance.” Through promises of local data hosting and local administration, the article subtly acknowledges the possibility of data governance concerns that a partnership with a Chinese provider might elicit, and addresses it directly. Second, the fact that assurances regarding this issue are being included in a state-controlled media outlet signals that public concerns surrounding Chinese influence over technology have reached a critical level of salience that demand they be actively preempted. As a result, the article has moved beyond simply a positive portrayal of the project to become what this study labels the ‘sovereignty-assured partnership frame’. In this framing, technology provided by the Chinese is both desirable and accepted because concerns about sovereignty risks are presented as already managed through institutional arrangements. The article does not assess whether these institutional arrangements are technically effective, rather the narrative of having resolved the sovereignty issue does not leave room for deeper analysis.

Frame 2: The Exemplar-Emulation Frame. The most analytically relevant article in the Kazinform sample is “Between Algorithms and the Human: How China Transforms the Economy through AI” (January 30, 2026). From the very beginning, China is portrayed as an exceptionally valuable model to learn from, stating that ‘Among the world leaders [for Kazakhstan to study], China occupies a special place.’ The article supports this argument that several China’s achievements in AI sector has been documented such as \$170 billion AI industry, 6000 AI companies, and 60% global AI patent applications. Additionally, these claims are supported by both official Chinese sources (China Daily, Global Times, government policy docs) and international institutions (PwC, Stanford DigiChina). In the end of the article, there is a clear policy recommendation: “For Kazakhstan, the Chinese experience serves as an important benchmark: the success of digital transformation is determined not by the import of technologies, but by their deep integration into the real sector of the economy with the leading role of the state.” This is an especially relevant quote as it emphasizes not only technological gains but China's state-led approach as an example. Notably, this is what critics often associate with concerns about surveillance. Consequently, the article extends beyond promoting partnership with China and positions the Chinese model of development as a normative guide for Kazakhstan, demonstrating the ‘exemplar framing’ identified in this study, where China emerges as a model not just of technological advancement but of the state’s central role in effective digital transformation.

Discursive Strategies. Kazinform uses three dominant discursive strategies in its narrative about China’s digital transformation. The first is an authority laundering strategy. Sensitive issues surrounding China’s digital governance, such as AI governance, labor displacement, and data ethics are mentioned in the article, but these issues are immediately presented as examples of effective

governance. For example, the article mentioned that China's AI ethics regulations which forbid 'the use of covert emotional influence over users' and protect children's excessive interactions with AI, was presented not as a response to identified problems and harms, but as proof that Beijing has been actively monitoring China's digital activities and is a responsible governing power. The second is an internationalization of endorsement strategy. Besides Chinese government sources, the article cited international authorities such as Stanford, PwC, and New York University professor Winston Ma, as well as the Atlantic Council analyst Ryan Pan. By combining Chinese and Western authors, the legitimacy of China's technological achievements is bolstered. This has fostered a discursive space where skepticism to China's digital paradigm would require rejection of multiple respected international knowledge sources simultaneously. Thirdly, there is a national interest alignment strategy. All throughout the article, China's digital transformation is linked to Kazakhstan's own agenda such as the 'three-year digital transformation' agenda proposed by President Tokayev. China's successful achievements serve as valuable models for Kazakhstan, forging a close connection between China's narrative and Kazakhstan's national interests. Together these three discursive strategies create a limiting environment for critical discussion of the Chinese model. China's regulations are framed as sensible measures of governing. China's achievements are confirmed by internationally recognized institutions and China's technological development narrative is intertwined with Kazakhstan's own national interests, leaving less space for any structural critique on the Chinese model. In this context China's digital model appears both credible and beneficial.

Kazakhstan: Independent Media Coverage of China's DSR

This section presents the systematic analysis of independent media coverages in Kazakhstan. Five articles were selected from two news agencies (Azattyq: RFE/RL and Orda) over the span from 2020-2026. The corpus consists of articles from the period of 2023-2025 about Chinese digital technologies including monitoring technologies, internet surveillance tools, face recognition systems driven by AI, online trading websites in the context of Kazakhstan's digital transformation.

Azattyq (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty – Kazakh Service)

The institutional identity of Azattyq as a US Agency for Global Media (USAGM)-funded outlet managed by Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty is inseparable from the frames of interpretation it constructs. The outlet's editorial agenda is directed to support press freedom, democracy and civil liberties in limited environments. Azattyq's discourse of Chinese digital engagement in Kazakhstan presents a uniformly and unambiguously critical tone. Among all the materials studied, none exhibit a promotional, neutral or ambivalent tone toward Chinese digital technology. The articles display critical tone from alarmist-investigative to rights-based warning, with highly emotional tone from pieces featuring views of civil society organizations in the foreground. Headlines such as "*Пугающее значение «слушающего государства»: Казахстан приобрел китайский инструмент интернет-цензуры?*" ("The Frightening Meaning of the 'Listening State': Did Kazakhstan Acquire a Chinese Internet Censorship Tool?"), and "*Kazakhstan Is Building a Surveillance State. Will China Be Its Model?*" immediately convey a critical discourse. The interrogative syntax of many headlines represents the technique of inferred accusation rather than explicit statement. It raises alarm and preserves journalistic immunity.

The report also situates China-sourced digital infrastructure in Kazakhstan in an international setting by asking whether Kazakhstan could or should replicate and import parts of China's internet governance model. This comparison is especially important as it invokes 'The Great Firewall', which brings the ideas of internet censorship, control and lack of access to information, hence it is

predominantly used as a negative frame to question the impact of Chinese digital involvement and present this as a discussion about governance, sovereignty and rights.

Frame 1: The Surveillance Threat Frame. The dominant frame within Azattyq's coverage portrays China's digital activities as a threat to civil liberties and human rights. The RFE/RL English-language report by Zholdas Orisbayev and Reid Standish demonstrates this frame through the example of a political blogger named Sanzhar Bokayev. As the report explains, Bokayev's face was scanned and flagged by an AI facial recognition program at Almaty International Airport. The report employs humanization strategy to discuss a complex topic, and the individual story of Bokayev provides the reader with a personal reference for a more abstract phenomenon. The story contributes to the frame by contending that Kazakhstan is increasingly using 'Chinese hardware', therefore linking the procurement of technology with the expansion of civil rights issues. By associating the technology with monitoring and political oppression, it is framed as a tool for monitoring individual freedoms. This frames the procurement of the technology as morally evaluative, as demonstrated through Entman's work. The article indirectly condemns China's procurement of the technology because of its capacity to monitor political bloggers and other activists. For these reasons, readers are encouraged to consider the report through a human rights perspective rather than just a technological modernization or economic development perspective.

Frame 2: The Trustworthiness Deficit Frame. In the article "Казахстан для видеонаблюдения использует китайские камеры. Можно ли им доверять?" ("Kazakhstan Uses Chinese Cameras for Surveillance. Can They Be Trusted?"), a different kind of epistemic frame is constructed around skepticism and the branding of Chinese technology as inherently suspect. This article allows the audience to make use of logic of technological suspicion rooted in national security considerations, a logic popularized across Western media narratives on the issue since the ban of Hikvision and Dahua devices by the US and UK officials. Explicitly referencing these Western practices as context for Kazakhstan's decision, Azattyq frames international standards of security with western democratic practices as the normative reference points.

Discursive Strategies. Several discursive strategies can be observed in Azattyq's reporting. The first is lexical alarm by using words such as, 'frightening', 'listening state', 'surveillance state', and discussing the 'Great Firewall', the outlet creates a sense of threat, prompting to feel negatively toward Chinese digital technology. Second, emotional anchoring is incorporated into the report in the form of individual stories, especially with Sanzhar Bokayev's case in which the general issue of surveillance is framed in a relatable human experience. Third, the selection of sources is used to strengthen the frame. The overwhelming reliance on reports from civil society members, human rights organizations and independent digital security analysts implies that its argument should be based on critical assessments by experts. And it positions the government officials as objects of observation rather than reliable authorities. Fourth, translocal legitimation is established by citing international research projects and organizations (e.g. Wired, InterSecLab, Amnesty International) which suggest that Azattyq's argument is grounded on evidence from worldwide studies.

Orda.kz

Orda.kz presents itself as an independent digital outlet oriented toward domestic Kazakhstani audiences. Its autonomy from government as well as foreign funding providers allows it more freedom to build an explicitly sovereignty-based critique than either a state-linked or a foreign-funded outlets. Its discourse on China's digital involvements in Kazakhstan is mixed in terms of orientation, but mostly critical in emphasis, especially on issues concerning security and surveillance. In comparison with Azattyq, Orda's analytical perspectives are significantly broader. Beyond civil liberties issues, it

covers concerns over geopolitical dependence, economic competition and institutional governance. While it is varied in its tones and perspective, it often oscillates between state-concerned, analytically neutral, and alarmist discourse, depending on the area of concern. While discourse on issues such as e-commerce and bilateral digital partnership are more moderate and informed by an expert discourse, security related issues seem to lean towards Azattyq's critical register, yet with an undeniable domestic political agenda.

Frame 1: The Digital Sovereignty / Digital Vassalage Frame. The phrase “цифровой вассалитет” (digital vassalage) is the most unique and politicized element in Orda's framing landscape. The article of the same title (“*Цифровой вассалитет: Китай и Россия бьются за контроль над казахстанской Сетью*”, June 23, 2025) is the most explicitly geopolitical text in the entire corpus. Orda's use of the term vassalage: political hierarchy, as it is used in feudalism, is not just a procurement or security matter, but also a political one related to the country's national sovereignty. The framing suggests a structural subordinate role played by Kazakhstan in an imbalanced digital power regime vis-à-vis its larger neighbors. This frame strongly aligns with current debates in Kazakhstani public discourse over multi-vector foreign policy, and the concerns of a middle power in competing for great powers.

Frame 2: The Market Capture Frame. Orda's coverage of the economy is a part that is frequently missing from the other outlets. The piece “Как иностранные маркетплейсы захватывают казахстанский рынок” (“How foreign marketplaces capture Kazakhstani market” published on 4 March 2025) uses very aggressive terminology for describing Chinese (and other foreign) e-commerce platforms Temu and PinDuoDuo as “predatory economic actors” seizing/capturing (“захватывают”) or fattening themselves (“жируют”). The article refers to the concerns of a member of the parliament regarding unfair tax benefits and harm to local businesses. This economic nationalism framework re-contextualizes the presence of China in the digital world as a threat to not only political freedoms, but also economic sovereignty and the viability of domestic entrepreneurship.

Frame 3: The Pragmatic Risk-Opportunity Frame. “Грозит ли Казахстану цифровая зависимость от Китая?” (“Is Kazakhstan facing the risk of digital dependence on China?” from June 16, 2025) represents the balanced and analytically nuanced piece among the entire corpus. The article quotes an extended interview with KISI (Kazakhstan Institute for Strategic Studies) analyst Aidar Kurmashev as stating China is “one of the few players ready to offer turnkey solutions, from data centers to supply chains”, also mentions that “both sides act in a pragmatic way: one offers technology and other being platform for pilot projects”. Furthermore, according to him, cooperation may lead to ‘black box managed from outside’, in other words, partnership needs ‘institutional maturity and legal transparency’. From these statements, he delivers a nuanced cost-benefit assessment without rejecting Chinese digital engagement. Instead of radical critical statements, he places emphasis on strengthening governance frameworks.

Discursive Strategies. Orda uses a wide range of discursive strategies. Perhaps most prominently, charge is thrown at the beginning of important headlines with lexicon such as ‘vassalage’, ‘capture’, ‘battle for control’, which creates an antagonistic geopolitical semantic landscape. Unlike the rights-centered vocabulary used by Azattyq, Orda puts emphasis on geopolitical and economic aspects which encompasses the broader context. Second, rhetorical questions such as the headlines (“Is Kazakhstan facing the risk of digital dependence on China?”) engage the reader with editorial interest, but do not state hard conclusions. This is a way to maintain analytical credibility while stating a problem that needs urgent attention. Third, the multi-actor perspective on source balancing. In other words, Orda stands out in its comprehensive integration of both domestic experts in the fields of academia and policy, as well as international institutions and governments, which creates

a richer polyphony of perspectives. Fourth, intertextual sovereignty linkage: issues such as the use of surveillance technologies, digital market places, and the internet's infrastructure are not covered as isolated phenomena. Instead they are linked together within an intertextual discourse around digital sovereignty. Linking these different aspects together provides a coherence framework for interpretation in which the debate on the role of Chinese technology is viewed as one part of a larger, more significant story concerning state control, technological dependency, and sovereignty. Fifth, strategic citation of Western expertise. As with Azattyq, Orda legitimizes his critical interventions with references to the German Marshall Fund, Wired and InterSecLab, but frames such references in an analytical context of Kazakhstan, not democracy promotion.

Kyrgyzstan: State Media Coverage of China's DSR

This section presents a framing analysis of state media coverage of Chinese digital engagement in Kyrgyzstan, based on articles from Kabar (the Kyrgyz National Information Agency).

Kabar (Kyrgyz National Information Agency)

Kabar is the state news agency of the Kyrgyz Republic, and is supervised by the government. In all the reviewed articles, Kabar's presentation of the Chinese cooperation through digitalization is only positive. Only technological advancement, investment, modernization and bilateral partnership is covered. Articles are not linked to the issues of digital dependency, threats to sovereignty or civil rights.

Frame 1: The Technology Transfer and Capacity Building Frame. The article “*Кыргызстан и Китай обсудили перспективы сотрудничества в области ИИ*” (Deputy Minister Nurlanbek Omurov met with the representative of iFLYTEK Han Mingze on August 28, 2025) is firmly grounded in a developmentalist perspective on digital engagement with China. The article emphasizes on iFLYTEK's desire to invest in Kyrgyz universities, conduct joint research projects, and implement AI-based educational technologies. Of particular importance is the company's database for recognition of the Kyrgyz language, which it planned to further develop. The article details how the partnership is aimed at supporting the development of the national language. It positions Chinese investment in AI as a means of fostering national cultural development. The article also focuses on the comments of Deputy Minister Omurov on the creation of innovation centers in the universities.

Frame 2: Assistance-to-Autonomy Frame. The article “*Китайская компания поможет Кыргызстану производить свои ИТ-устройства*” (“A Chinese Company Will Help Kyrgyzstan Produce Its Own IT Devices”) presents one of the most distinctive frames in Kabar's coverage. The headline itself highlights the fact that the cooperation will help to develop Kyrgyzstan's technological independence. Chinese investment, expertise, and technology transfer are seen as a means to strengthen Kyrgyzstan's local technology industry. Through this, China's involvement is portrayed as a way to achieve national self-sufficiency rather than dependency. Rather than presenting Kyrgyzstan as depending on Chinese technology, it portrays the cooperation as being mutually beneficial to Kyrgyzstan's own technological and industrial development.

Discursive Strategies. Kabar's discursive strategies are very consistent and closely follow the conventions of official government communication. Firstly, it is based on *passive institutional attribution*. Texts often start with references to official entities: ‘the Cabinet of Ministers’, ‘the Ministry of Digital Development’, etc., which make the outlet appear as an official information source. Secondly, Kabar uses a meeting-centered narrative structure. The coverage is focused on the official

meetings, forums, visits and panel discussions, and that cooperation is occurring, but is not discussed in detail the implications or potential consequences of cooperation. Thirdly, the agency adopts positive bilateral action verbs like ‘strengthen’, ‘discussed’, ‘expressed interest’, or ‘outlined prospects’, which convey a sense of ongoing action and collaboration, rather than the mention of risk, obligation, or unequal power dynamics. Lastly, the coverage always features national-benefit-anchoring. Every article points to a specific advantage for Kyrgyzstan, including language, technology, industry, connectivity, economy, and so on. Consequently, Chinese digital engagement is discussed in the context of its apparent benefits to Kyrgyzstan, not in terms of China’s strategic interests.

Kyrgyzstan: Independent Media Coverage of China’s DSR

In this section, four key media texts are analyzed from the independent and investigative media space in Kyrgyzstan: three articles from 24.kg (July 2022 and August 2023), one article from Azattyk (November, 2019). Although it falls outside the study’s time frame, this article on Chinese surveillance technology and human rights is featured as a foundational article, as many of the themes are repeated throughout coverage. The collection of data in this part of the study was much more difficult than in the Kazakhstani study. Several leading Kyrgyz news outlets did not provide any articles relevant to this issue on dedicated web searches. This challenge is not because of a lack of reporting on the subjects, but a structural problem in the broader system. Since the closure of the outlet in February 2024, many Kloop.kg articles have been inaccessible and between October 2022 and June 2023 the visibility of Radio Azattyk’s content in standard search indexes was limited due to its blocking. Likewise, in January of 2024, the State Committee for National Security (GKNB) raided 24.kg and the website was subsequently disrupted, impacting editorial continuity and online access.

Concurrently, the small number of articles which are directly relevant suggests a substantive conclusion. Independent Kyrgyz media do not generally refer to the Digital Silk Road, or official labels. Rather, when they speak of Chinese digital engagement, they often discuss the issues of sovereignty, dependency, debt, surveillance, media influence and political control in the larger context. This implies that the Digital Silk Road is not very resonant as a local interpretive framework. Independent Kyrgyz media, rather than using the terms of connectivity and digital development, interpret the Chinese engagement as an issue of autonomy, control, and influence. This pattern forms the basis of the framing analysis.

24.KG

24.kg is a Bishkek-based private news agency classified as independent by the BBC Media Guide Kyrgyzstan (2023) and RSF, offering Russian-language political, economic, and social news.

Framing 1: The Sovereign Partnership Frame. The article “Kyrgyzstan Proposes Opening An Alibaba Group Branch In Our Country” (27 July 2022) was published in the “Vlast” (Power/Politics) section and authored by Tatiana Kudryavtseva, a regular contributor to official government and diplomatic coverage. This is a report from a videoconference meeting of the Kyrgyz-Chinese Intergovernmental Commission on Trade and Economic Cooperation. The dominant frame is that of intergovernmental economic partnership. Both delegations are presented as having made ‘positive results’ in a wide range of areas of cooperation from economy to trade, standardization, agriculture, transport, healthcare, intellectual property, culture, and inter-regional cooperation. This is the most comprehensive listing that is typical of official diplomatic registers of post-Soviet countries, which as such serves an ideological purpose: it creates the image of bilateral relations as complete and

congruous, eliminating any hint of asymmetry or conflict. The most obvious reference to the Digital Silk Road that the article makes is within a short passage describing digital commerce. It describes how the government of Kyrgyzstan suggested the opening of a “local branch of the Alibaba Group... in the aim to support economic growth, e-commerce, increased trade turnover with mutual visits”. This development is presented not as an offer of Chinese business but as a demand from the Kyrgyz government. The attribution of the idea to Kyrgyzstan, not China, allows for the re-invention of a standard story: active promotion and participation by the state rather than external pressure.

Framing 2: The Market Access Opportunity Frame. The article by Tatiana Kudryavtseva, titled “Alibaba Will Help Kyrgyzstan’s Entrepreneurs Access Its Platform” (August 15, 2023) reported about a meeting. This event was between Kyrgyzstan’s Chamber of Commerce and Industry (led by former Prime Minister Temir Sariyev), and representatives from Alibaba Group. The article got its information from the Chamber’s press service, which shows it relied on official sources. The main focus of the article was market access and economic chances. It presented Alibaba as a partner helping Kyrgyz businesses get into global markets and supporting the country’s economy. Furthermore, the article highlighted benefits like free training, trips to Alibaba’s main office, and a discount linked to the World Bank. It laid out these opportunities without questioning them. The language used throughout was very positive. Alibaba ‘expressed readiness’, ‘expressed interest’, and ‘plans to actively invest’ in Kyrgyzstan were actively delivered in the article. These verbs made the company look like an active and supportive partner in development.

Discursive Strategies. This article possesses the most overtly promotional tone of all 24.kg articles reviewed here. The final phrase used in its conclusion is ‘mutually beneficial terms’ (взаимовыгодные условия). This is a direct echo of the language used to frame win-win outcomes in Chinese foreign policy rhetoric, which has been singled out as defining characteristics of BRI discourse by Van Noort (2021). However, there is no mention of the market concentration effects from Alibaba which may outcompete the local businesses. Overall, China is presented as a constructive partner. The equal attribution of positive actions to both sides is reflected in sentences like the Kyrgyz side ‘proposed’ and the Chinese side ‘is making efforts’.

Azattyk

Framing: The Human Rights Risk Frame. While the article titled “Chinese Video Surveillance Technologies Prompted Debate on Human Rights Compliance?” (November 2019) is outside the 2020-2026 study range, it gives a useful baseline for the surveillance framing that would become a major focus after this time period. Radio Azattyk’s reporting on the Bishkek Safe City included the installation of Chinese surveillance cameras at the Bishkek police command center, the provision of these cameras by the China National Electronics Import and Export Corporation, and the installation of facial recognition systems. This reporting helped establish early linkages of surveillance and human rights in independent media framing in Kyrgyzstan. The title of this article explicitly includes human rights. Thus, in order to understand the context of this article, Chinese surveillance technologies must be evaluated within the context of human rights, in contrast to the modernization of smart cities framing of state media. This article locates Chinese surveillance cameras not as infrastructure for safety, but as a risk to civil liberties, a frame that would be reactivated during the 2022 *Qandy Qantar* period in Kazakhstan. Combined with Azattyk’s investigative sourcing and rights-based reporting, and the independence of RFE/RL’s overall reporting, Azattyk has consistently been, and continues to be, a critical counter voice to the dominating reporting in both countries.

Discussion

The findings of this study show that media coverage of China's DSR is not simply a question of journalistic opinion or editorial choice. It is a structurally shaped outcome by institutional alignment, political constraints, and the progressive dismantlement of independent journalism. Across both countries, state-affiliated media consistently adopts promotional tone, and depicts China positively, specifically by using narratives as a source of modernization, development partner, or mutual benefit. Conversely, independent media frame the same developments in a way more critical tone. The discourse are centered around the narratives such as surveillance control, market domination, and human rights concerns.

The divergence of state and independent media in both countries aligns with and extends Entman's (1993) four function framing model. Despite having distinct institutional histories, the DSR is defined as a response for technological underdevelopment across KazPravda, Kazinform, and Kabar (problem definition), the insufficient integration identified as the central cause (causal diagnosis), China is portrayed positively as reliable and developmental partner (moral evaluation), deeper cooperation is presented as a practical solution (remedy). The near-identical four-function structure in all three outlets suggests that the promotional tone is not individually authored by each outlet, vice versa it shows its embeddedness of their structural position vis-a-vis the state and confirms Gitlin's (1980) argument that the dominant frames reflect "persistent patterns of cognition, interpretation, and presentation" that are institutionally produced, not individually. In other words, the frame is the result of the outlet's institutional position rather than independent choices of journalists.

Conversely, independent media systematically activate the securitization frames as proposed by Heidbrink and Becker (2022). The expressions such as 'listening states,' 'surveillance state,' and 'digital vassalage' are precise examples of rhetorical escalation that Buzan et al. (1998) identify as the transformation of ordinary political issues into the urgent threat requiring immediate protective action.

This dynamic also extends Levitsky and Way's (2010) the typology of competitive and hegemonic authoritarianism. The elements of competitive authoritarianism are more seen in Kazakhstan's case, demonstrating critical frames under pressure. Outlets cover the critical frames, but they are increasingly self-modulated and navigate the red lines with greater caution. Kyrgyzstan under Japarov is decisively turning towards hegemonic authoritarianism. Independent corpus became sparse and fragmented which is itself an empirical finding about the relationship between regime type and the diversity of available interpretive frames.

The findings also contribute to digital authoritarianism diffusion (Bashirov et al., 2025; Feldstein, 2021). Bashirov et al. identify three diffusion mechanisms: learning, emulation, and cooperative independence, and all three are legible at the media framing level. For example, Kazinform's Exemplar-Emulation Frame explicitly positions China's AI governance as normative standard for Kazakhstan's own digital transformation. In other words, media framing plays a constitutive part in legitimizing the state actions. Through normalizing specific interpretations, media framing creates such an environment that makes further technology transfer politically acceptable domestically. Feldstein (2021) argues that the toolkits of digital authoritarianism are diffused through several institutional components, including legal frameworks, governance models, and operational training. Surprisingly, findings correlate with Feldsten's argument. One of Kazinform's coverages, China's regulatory framework for AI is presented as an evidence for effective digital governance, while the potential role of these technologies for political control is largely absent. In this way, the outlet carries out an ideological work in the diffusion process. What this study adds to Feldstein's framework is to demonstrate how legitimacy is constructed discursively.

Furthermore, major finding of the study is that between 2020-2026 time period, a series of significant occasions took place in media environment. In Kyrgyzstan, Sadyr Japarov's rise to the presidency led to the shift toward authoritarian governance. In April 2021, the voters approved a new Constitution which significantly expanded the power of the president. In this way, the apparatus of Japarov systematically went against independent media (Freedom House, 2023). The argument can be supported by several cases. For example, in 2022 the Kyrgyz government blocked Azattyk's website and froze its bank accounts. Later in October, 2025 the Oktyabrsky District Court in Bishkek designated the independent media Kloop and Temirov Live (and its affiliated channel Ait Ait Dese) as 'extremist organizations'. More interestingly, this ruling is the first time the Kyrgyz Republic declared the media to be 'extremist'. This ruling has banned Kloop and Temirov Live from publishing their works on the internet and prohibits their distribution in any form, and authorities stated that "liking and sharing the media outlets' posts may now be considered as evidence of support to extremist organizations". In their ruling the court declared the actions of Kloop founder Rinat Tukhvatshin and Temirov Live founder Bolot Temirov as 'extremists'. These designations are the culmination of years of systematic persecution that began in 2022 (American Bar Association, 2024; Jamestown Foundation, 2025). In addition to this, Freedom House (2023) designated Kyrgyzstan 'consolidated authoritarian regime', simultaneously Reporters Without Borders recorded dramatic fall of press freedom in the country (94-> 144). In Kazakhstan, 2022 January unrest indicated the similar patterns, but in different directions. Moreover, during the January 2022 unrest, "the independent media outlets were the first ones to get cut off", according to TODA Institute research. Zhandayeva and Rosenberg (2022) investigated that the government used the event to justify wide-spreading digital repression. In February 2023, President Tokayev explicitly called for the expansion of cameras throughout the country for security measures. And this directly accelerates the Sino-Kazakh digital cooperation (Orisbayev & Standish, 2023). According to a May 2024 RFE/RL article, cameras from China's Hikvision and Dahua were imported to Kazakhstan worth \$117 million over six years. These indicators show the media is systematically being harassed and retributed in several ways both in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. After these occasions, Kyrgyzstan's media landscape became dominated by state-run outlets, while Kazakhstan's independent media still existed but learned to deliver the critics in a more careful manner.

Conclusion

Most of the existing literature of China's DSR in Central Asia is produced through geopolitical or economic lenses. The majority of BRI framing studies has been concentrated on major powers such as the US, China, India, Pakistan. Despite having the frontline role in BRI's implementation, major gaps are still remaining within Central Asian scholarship in relation to China's digital engagement. This study exactly set out to address this underexplored dimension. Although the studies about digital authoritarianism mostly analyze the mechanisms of technological diffusion, how the media interpret and frame this whole process under authoritarian pressure are neglected. As media narratives play a central role in shaping public opinion, the results of the research clearly show that state-affiliated and independent media outlets in both countries have differing representations of the DSR. The mainstream state-controlled media frame the DSR as an instrument for economic development, technological progress and modernization of the nation. Independent media, on the other hand, tend to take a critical perspective on the DSR, raising questions about surveillance, data management, and civil liberties. The study also finds that the differences in media portrayals of these two types of characters are not solely a result of editorial stance but largely a result of structural and institutional factors.

The study has several methodological limitations that should be acknowledged. First, it analyzes the constrained corpus, including the blocking of Azattyk, the dissolution of Kloop, and the GKNB raid on 24.kg. The reason is that it has produced incomplete archives and an uneven evidential base for Kyrgyzstan. Throughout the research period, even several articles became inaccessible, and technically could not have opened. Second, the small number of articles limited the generalizability of frame-level conclusions and made the quantitative claims about frame frequency exceedingly difficult. Third, while the qualitative approach of the study gives analytical insights for capturing discursive complexity, it does not demonstrate the systematic measurement of how specific frames appear across the outlet. While these constraints delimit the claims of the study, but do not necessarily undermine its core findings. For future studies, several productive research trajectories may arise from this study. First, the extension of this comparative framing analysis to the remaining Central Asian states would give deeper analytical scholarship for the region. As these countries are also part of China's BRI, it would be interesting how media outlets operate and react to the ongoing digital engagement of China. Similarly, the systematic comparative study should be extended to non-Central Asian BRI recipients such as Southeast Asia, or Sub-Saharan Africa. In other words, testing this practice beyond the post-Soviet institutional context would contribute to broader comparative theory of DSR. Second, audience reception would also add a crucial dimension for the overall frame-production analysis. Investigation of how these frames are processed, modified, and perceived by readers would deepen our understanding of the DSR's discursive politics.

The core logic of this study is to demonstrate the institutional structure of permissible speech rather than tangible technologies of the DSR. Therefore, it is not about China's communication strategy, nor about the specific frames, but to show the relationship between media freedom and interpretive diversity. Discourses and coverages of outlets are not just editorial autonomy, rather it is a political one, shaped by structural complexity.

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Қытайдың Цифрлық Жібек жолын фреймдеу: Қытайдың Қазақстан мен Қырғызстандағы цифрлық қатысуының медиадағы көрінісі

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Аңдатпа

Зерттеу 2020-2026 жылдар аралығында Қазақстан мен Қырғызстандағы мемлекеттік және тәуелсіз бұқаралық ақпарат құралдарының Қытайдың Цифрлық Жібек жолын (ЦЖЖ) қалай фреймдейтінін талдайды. Сапалық контент-талдау мен сыни фреймдік талдауды ұштастыра отырып, зерттеу мақсатты іріктеу арқылы тандалған жеті медиа басылымның материалдарын қамтиды: Қазақстаннан *Kazakhstanskaya Pravda*, *Kazinform*, *Azattyq* (Азаттық радиосының Қазақ қызметі) және *Orda.kz*; Қырғызстаннан *Kabar*, *24.kg* және *Azattyk* (Азаттық радиосының Қырғыз қызметі). Зерттеу негізінен Цифрлық Жібек жолы туралы жарияланымдардың жалпы реңкі мен басым фреймдерін анықтауға бағытталған үш зерттеу сұрағына сүйенеді. Зерттеу нәтижелері Қазақстан мен Қырғызстандағы мемлекеттік және тәуелсіз БАҚ арасында жүйелі айырмашылықтардың бар екенін көрсетті. Мемлекеттік ақпарат құралдары Цифрлық Жібек жол бастамасын ұлттық даму мен технологиялық прогрестің қозғаушы күші ретінде тұрақты түрде сипаттайды. Бұл ретте «президенттік қолдау», «эмуляция арқылы модернизация», және «егемендігі қамтамасыз етілген серіктестік» сияқты нарративтер кеңінен қолданылады. Ал тәуелсіз БАҚ ЦЖЖ-ны сыни тұрғыдан қарастырып, азаматтық бостандықтар мен деректер егемендігіне қатысты қауіптерге назар аударады. Қытайдың цифрлық ықпалы авторитарлық бақылаудың кеңеюіне ықпал ететін фактор ретінде ұсынылады. Зерттеу бұл айырмашылықтардың редакциялық ұстанымнан гөрі институционалдық және құрылымдық факторлармен түсіндірілетінін көрсетеді. Сонымен қатар, зерттеу «Бір белдеу, бір жол» бастамасына қатысушы елдердегі Қытай ықпалы, посткеңестік кеңістіктегі цифрлық авторитаризмнің таралуы және шектеулі медиа жағдайындағы фреймдеу саясаты туралы ғылыми әдебиетке үлес қосады.

Кілт сөздер: Цифрлық Жібек жолы, медиа фреймдеу, Қазақстан, Қырғызстан, Қытайдың цифрлық қатысуы, сыни дискурс талдауы

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Фрейминг Цифрового шелкового пути: Медийные репрезентации цифрового присутствия Китая в Казахстане и Кыргызстане

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Аннотация

В рамках данного исследования изучается, как государственные и независимые СМИ Казахстана и Кыргызстана освещают китайскую инициативу «Цифровой Шелковый путь» (ЦШП) в период с 2020 по 2026 год. Сочетая качественный контент-анализ с критическим анализом фреймирования, в рамках исследования проанализирован корпус статей из семи целенаправленно отобранных СМИ: «Казахстанская правда», «Казинформ», «Азаттык» (Казахская служба Радио Свобода) и Orda.kz в Казахстане, а также «Кабар», 24.kg и «Азаттык» (Кыргызская служба Радио Свобода) в Кыргызстане. Исследование ориентируется в основном на три исследовательских вопроса, касающихся общего тона и доминирующих фреймов освещения ЦШП. Согласно результатам данного исследования, в обеих странах наблюдается систематическое расхождение между государственными и независимыми СМИ. Государственные СМИ последовательно представляют ЦШП как движущую силу национального развития и прогресса. Активно используются такие нарративы, как «поддержка со стороны президента», «модернизация через подражание», «партнерство, гарантирующее суверенитет», «подражание образцу». Между тем независимые СМИ рассматривают инициативу «Один пояс, один путь» через призму критики и выдвигают на первый план опасения относительно гражданских свобод и суверенитета данных. Китайское цифровое взаимодействие представляется как катализатор расширения масштабов авторитарного контроля. Важно отметить, что эти различия обусловлены скорее структурными и институциональными факторами, чем чисто редакционными соображениями. Исследование также вносит вклад в научные исследования, посвященные китайскому влиянию в странах-партнёрах инициативы «Один пояс, один путь» и распространению цифровых технологий в постсоветском пространстве.

Ключевые слова: Цифровой шелковый путь, медийный фрейминг, Казахстан, Кыргызстан, цифровое присутствие Китая, критический дискурс-анализ

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