

A 50,000-strong troll army in Azerbaijan

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In an interview conducted by journalist and political prisoner Ulviyya Ali, political prisoner and politician Akif Gurbanov emphasized the importance of removing public opinion from the control of the authorities in order to establish democratic values in the country.[\[1\]](#) What is public opinion, and why and how does the government keep it under control? In seeking answers to these questions, one recalls the political scandal that began after the 2016 presidential election in the United States. That year, allegations were raised against Russia's Internet Research Agency, hereafter IRA, concerning attempts to interfere in the elections and to incite national discord in the United States. Two years later, a report by Special Counsel Robert Mueller, appointed by the United States Congress to investigate the matter, confirmed that these allegations were true. It was established that the IRA, widely known in the press as "Kremlin bots", the "troll factory", and "Prigozhin's trolls", was engaged in anti-Western propaganda, the formation and management of public opinion on the basis of disinformation, and the discrediting of the opposition.

The Azerbaijani government also makes use of trolls. This fact raises a number of questions regarding how their activities are organized. Is any specific institution in Azerbaijan responsible for internet manipulation, and who oversees the organization of this work? How does one obtain employment at Azerbaijan's troll factory, and where are vacancies for such positions advertised? How much does a person engaged in trolling earn in return for this work? Of course, finding answers to all these questions is not an easy task, but let us attempt to address at least some of them by drawing on open internet sources and reports by organizations engaged in internet research.

The Troll Factory: A Brief Historical Overview

The word “troll” originates from Scandinavian mythology and denotes a legendary humanoid creature. They avoid contact with humans and live in the mountains. Modern trolls do not live in the mountains but on the internet, in online social networks. They typically use vulgar language on social media platforms, harassing and threatening individuals through racist, sexist, ultra-nationalist, and other derogatory rhetoric.[\[2\]](#) Internet trolls inflame the emotional responses of users on social networks and often do so not under their own names, but anonymously or under the names of others.

In September 2013, the Russian publication Novaya Gazeta published the first article about Russia’s troll factory. The article reported that internet trolls were working in specially equipped offices in St Petersburg and Moscow, and that these trolls praised Sergey Sobyenin, the Mayor of Moscow, and Vladimir Putin, while insulting Alexei Navalny and the United States, and defending Syria. It was later established that these offices were affiliated with Russia’s Internet Research Agency.[\[3\]](#) The article indicated that job advertisements for positions in these offices announced vacancies for internet operators, who were required to write comments, thematic posts and blogs on websites and social networks. For this work, each operator was offered a monthly salary of 25,960 rubles, equivalent to 778 US dollars at the 2013 exchange rate. The daily workload of each operator consisted of approximately 100 comments. The article also noted the connection between these offices and the Concord company of Yevgeny Prigozhin, a close associate of Putin. The principal clients of the Concord company, which included enterprises in public catering, construction, media organizations and a Private Military Company known as the Wagner Group, were major state institutions such as the Administration of the President of the Russian Federation, the apparatus of the State Duma of the Russian Federation and the Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation. In 2017, after

the United States Department of the Treasury imposed sanctions on the Concord company, Prigozhin denied the allegations that he was the founder of the Internet Research Agency; however, he later admitted that he was its founder and principal financier.[\[4\]](#)

The organization of coordinated propaganda campaigns by Russian state structures against both their domestic and foreign political opponents has attracted the attention of Western institutions researching the internet since the early 2000s. According to the Oxford Internet Institute, which operates under University of Oxford and specializes in the study of internet propaganda, the first propaganda activities by Russian state structures on social networks date back to 2011. There is extensive information regarding the political online propaganda and disinformation activities of the Internet Research Agency directed not only within Russia but also internationally against states it considers unfriendly.[\[5\]](#) However, considerably less information is available about another country with at least as much experience in this field as Russia, namely Azerbaijan. The principal reason for this is that the Azerbaijani government's internet propaganda and political disinformation are directed primarily at a domestic audience.

Research conducted by the Oxford Internet Institute indicates that since 2011, coinciding with developments in the United States and the Russian Federation, the Azerbaijani government has established cyber groups engaged in politically motivated online propaganda, the shaping of public opinion and its manipulation. Funded by the ruling authorities, the military and the government, and created by public organizations, these groups are described in reports and studies as a cyber army.[\[6\]](#) Cyber armies are regarded as a third-generation strategy of media control used by governments to manipulate public opinion.[\[7\]](#) The first-generation control strategy consists of filtering information disseminated to the public and imposing de facto censorship, while the second-generation

strategy involves the development of legislation that restricts or prohibits society's access to information. The third-generation strategy of internet control includes the use of social media accounts belonging to state institutions and organizations to support government policies and discredit the opposition, the promotion of pro-government policies through fake accounts, the individual targeting of opposition-minded persons, the dissemination of false information damaging to reputations, and the interpretation of socially sensitive issues from the standpoint of the authorities, among other measures.

Some of the cyber armies established by governments consist of civil servants who work in small departments within state administrations and institutions and operate on social media in order to influence public opinion. These bodies may include ministries, institutions related to education and science, departments under state security and law enforcement agencies, and even private companies.[\[8\]](#) In Azerbaijan, the largest cyber armies are created by state-funded institutions and volunteer organizations that primarily hire young people. Notable examples include the IT Academy, the İRƏLİ Public Union,[\[9\]](#) the New Azerbaijan Party Youth Union,[\[10\]](#) and the Strategic Communications Centre.[\[11\]](#)

According to a report published in 2017 by the Oxford Internet Institute, among the states of the region the largest cyber army, numbering close to 50,000 people, was established in Azerbaijan. This figure was cited in 2011 by Rauf Mardiyev, who served as chairman of the İRƏLİ movement between 2012 and 2014, in an interview with the now defunct News.az International. Mardiyev stated that nearly 50,000 young people had been involved in specialized training at the movement's centers operating in 52 cities and districts across Azerbaijan, and that the purpose of this training was to defend Azerbaijan's interests in the virtual sphere.[\[12\]](#) By way of comparison, it should be noted that cyber armies operating in Russia since 2011 comprised a total of 400

individuals, those organized in Iran since 2012 involved 20.000 individuals, and those established in Turkey since 2013 encompassed 6.000 individuals.[\[13\]](#)

Scientific studies analyze five instruments involved in online propaganda and the manipulation of public opinion. These include (1) the state, (2) political parties and politicians, (3) non-governmental organizations, (4) citizens, and (5) private companies. In the United States and the United Kingdom, all of these instruments are employed in internet propaganda and public opinion manipulation. This reflects the presence of a liberal political system and political competition. In such countries, political parties and independent politicians exist and use a variety of propaganda tools to influence public opinion and gain the support of voters. Despite maintaining a large cyber army, in Azerbaijan the manipulation of public opinion remains a monopoly of the state. For this reason, it can be assumed that the targets of cyber army attacks and the content of the comments they post are coordinated by the Presidential Administration, as is the case in Russia. Several factors support this assumption. The most compelling reason is the absence of independent public organizations and associations in Azerbaijan, as all civic and volunteer organizations are state-affiliated and funded from the state budget. Since 2007, such organizations have been financed by the Council for State Support to Non-Governmental Organizations under the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, and since 2021 by the Agency for State Support to Non-Governmental Organizations of the Republic of Azerbaijan. Another reason is the Presidential Administration's establishment of an organization with significant influence in manipulating public opinion, formerly known as the Strategic Studies Centre (SSC) and currently known as the Strategic Communications Centre (SCC).

Among the factors that make it possible for the formation of public opinion in Azerbaijan to remain a state monopoly are the lack of a developed political culture, the absence of free

and competitive elections, state control over the media, restrictive and prohibitive legislation limiting access to information, the exclusive possession by the state of technologies capable of controlling social networks, the operation of private companies under state supervision or their affiliation with high-ranking state officials, and the absence of a competitive market, among others. The 2017 report of the Oxford Internet Institute likewise noted that internet control and the manipulation of public opinion in Azerbaijan were carried out solely by state structures and public organizations affiliated with the government. Research conducted over the past few years indicates that changes have occurred in this regard, with political parties describing themselves as opposition forces, individuals presenting themselves as independent experts and specialists, and socially influential figures also becoming involved in this process.[\[14\]](#) Examples include posts on the Facebook page of Natig Jafarli,[\[15\]](#) chairman of the REAL Partiyası, appearances by writer Keramet Najafov,[\[16\]](#) known as Boyukchol, on the social network TikTok, and posts on the Facebook page of philosopher and writer Mushvig Shukurov.[\[17\]](#) It is, of course, difficult to determine whether pro-government posts by well-known public figures and their targeting of specific social groups are carried out in coordination with the authorities or on the basis of their own personal initiatives. However, the fact that an opposition party leader, when discussing the country's problems, fails to identify their causes accurately, that a philosopher attributes the causes of social problems to individual fate, and that a writer blames the people for these causes, raises serious questions.

Manipulation of Public Opinion

Public opinion is defined as the general view of society on a specific issue within a particular time frame. General opinion refers to the explicit attitudes of individual members of society towards issues that affect or may affect their lives. Various factors have influenced the formation of public

opinion in different historical periods. Among these, religion has held particular significance. Those who have historically influenced public opinion include religious leaders, tribal chiefs, and heads of state. The alteration of public opinion constitutes its manipulation. To manipulate public opinion is to control, change, or influence it for the benefit of a particular party.

In the contemporary period, the strongest influence on the formation of public opinion is exerted by the media (newspapers, radio, television, the Internet). The increasing role of public opinion in the digital world is explained by its power and scale of influence.[\[18\]](#) Public opinion affects the actions of both individual members of society and entire institutions.[\[19\]](#) Public opinion formed on the basis of accurate and necessary information enables people to make thoughtful and rational decisions, as well as allows state and social organizations to justify their social and political decisions and enhance their effectiveness. With the emergence and development of digital media, it has become possible for falsified, untruthful, and conspiratorial information to spread rapidly among large audiences. Public opinion formed on the basis of such information hinders societies from making correct decisions grounded in facts.

The dissemination of false information that influences the formation of public opinion serves the manipulation of public opinion, the determination of its content, and its management. The manipulation of public opinion is carried out with the aim of obtaining or consolidating power. To this end, the objectives and interests of specific social groups, the daily problems that concern them, and the obstacles preventing their resolution are examined.[\[20\]](#) Once the general principles that concern public opinion are identified, developing mechanisms to influence it is not difficult. In the contemporary period, one such technology is the activity of cyber armies.

Cyber armies operating through digital media employ various

methods to shape, alter, and influence public opinion. The creation of social media accounts (profiles) is among the most widely used methods of manipulation. In Azerbaijan, cyber armies make extensive use of automated accounts (bots), accounts under human supervision, and stolen or fake accounts to manipulate public opinion.[\[21\]](#)

The content disseminated from these accounts to alter and control public opinion may be classified as follows: 1) messages, comments, and posts that are pro-government and support the policies of the ruling party; 2) attacks on opposition parties and organizations; 3) the targeting of individuals holding opposition views, the initiation of humiliating, threatening, and insulting campaigns against them, and the removal of socially active individuals from political discussions through such campaigns; 4) the dissemination of messages, comments, and posts that create division within society and incite hatred and hostility among different groups. According to the 2020 report of the Oxford Internet Institute, the first three types of comments and messages are widely used in Azerbaijan, accounting for 70 to 90% of comments written by cyber armies, while the fourth type constitutes 48% of the comments produced.[\[22\]](#) Research examining the Azerbaijani social media space demonstrates that attacks, targeting, threats, and rhetoric degrading personal dignity directed by the authorities' cyber armies against individuals with opposition views are effective, and that this tactic results in a significant proportion of socially active users being removed from political discourse on social networks.[\[23\]](#)

Researchers emphasize the existence of a strict hierarchical structure within cyber armies; they note that all activities are managed from a single center. This resembles typical corporate management or the bureaucratic apparatus of the state. In authoritarian states such as Russia and China, cyber armies are provided the issues to be discussed on a daily basis.[\[24\]](#) Pro-government media outlets in Russia receive

specific instructions, known as *metodichka*, from the Kremlin. At times, governments recruit socially active individuals or persons with public influence as cyber warriors and pay them salaries. They are valuable to the authorities because they possess the capacity to influence society. As such individuals do not hold any official state position, they are perceived by society as independent voices, and a significant proportion of the public trusts their statements.

Cyber armies disseminate false information through comments, messages, blogs, and posts, engage in political advertising directed at specific segments of the population, conduct online harassment, also referred to as trolling, and report accounts and pages that share opposition messages and comments.[\[25\]](#) The owners and administrators of social networks identify and close fake accounts in order to prevent such attacks by cyber armies. The report of the Oxford Internet Institute indicates that, in the effort to combat internet manipulation, more than 10.000 accounts and more than 12.000 pages were closed on Facebook between January 2019 and November 2020. As the highest number of manipulation activities was observed on Twitter, currently known as X, nearly 300.000 accounts were closed on this platform during the specified period.[\[26\]](#)

Internet Manipulators in Azerbaijan

In 2025 the number of internet users in Azerbaijan reached 9,23 million, equivalent to 89% of the population.[\[27\]](#) In Azerbaijan the most popular social network is TikTok, with its user base reaching 6,73 million. Facebook is the second most popular social network in terms of popularity.[\[28\]](#) Although the Azerbaijani government once attempted to block the free mobile Facebook application, it was unable to do so, and after this application became accessible the number of Facebook users in Azerbaijan rose from 3% of the population in December 2010 to 7% by December 2011.[\[29\]](#) At present the number of users of this platform in Azerbaijan has reached 5,38 million,

representing 50,7% of the republic's population.

In order to determine how cyber armies operate in Azerbaijan, what type of comments they produce, and what messages they convey to society, posts published in December 2025 on the Facebook page of Abzas Media, hereafter FB, concerning Azerbaijan's political life, as well as the comments written in response to these posts, were analyzed. The selection of Abzas Media is because of its status as an independent media outlet and its publication of articles critical of the Azerbaijani authorities.

The analysis demonstrates that, during the first ten days of December, 30 out of a total of 49 posts published on the FB page of Abzas Media concerned political processes in Azerbaijan.[\[30\]](#) The posts that received the highest number of comments out of these 49 posts, specifically those with more than 500 comments, may be divided into two groups: 1) comments written in response to news concerning the activities of individuals holding opposition views and representatives of the opposition; 2) comments written in response to news concerning the activities of LGBT and queer groups. This article will analyze the content of the comments written in relation to posts belonging to the first group. It should be noted in advance that the greater the public influence of opposition-minded individuals, the higher the number of comments written. For example, posts concerning the arrest of Ali Karimli, Chairman of the Popular Front Party of Azerbaijan, political activist Bahruz Samadov, lawyer Alasgar Mammadli, founder of Toplum TV, and Anar Mammadli, Chairman of the Election Monitoring and Democracy Studies Centre, each received approximately 1.000 comments.[\[31\]](#)

Number of comments written on news posts on the FB page of Abzas Media between 1–10 December 2025

Domestic Politics [32]	Social Issues
Ali Karimli's court hearing – 3.582	Education-2

Hafiz Babali's health condition – 1.416	State Budget-92
Alasgar Mammadli's court hearing – 1.100	Protection of cultural heritage (Bayirshahar – 154
Mammad Ibrahim's court hearing – 1.100	Army – 2
Bahrüz Samadov's case – 1.000	
Meydan TV case – 1.000	
Anar Mammadli – 990	
Toplum TV case – 938	
Article by Ulviyya Ali – 732	
Journalists' trial – 714	
Arrest of Ahmad Mammadli – 612	
Total: 13.409	Total: 250

The comments written in response to the news concerning the arrest of Ali Karimli may be divided into three groups. In the first group of comments, statements were made describing Karimli as a “traitor to the homeland”, as having “become Armenian”, and as possessing no “public influence” within society. In the second group of messages, posters asserted that Azerbaijan is a democratic state governed by the rule of law, that the rule of law is upheld in the country, that Karimli's arrest was not biased, and that he was detained for unlawful acts. In the third group of comments, the message conveyed was that the people support the authorities, whereas Karimli was attempting to overthrow a government supported by the people.

Who are those writing these comments? The analysis of the comments indicates that attacks against opposition voices were organized by members affiliated with three FB pages. These are Beauty, Cosmetic and Personal Care, Social Media Agency, and Medical and Health. The FB accounts of those posting comments indicate that ratings and recommendations are not visible; they are marked as “not yet rated.” This suggests that these

individuals are not active users, do not post content on their own accounts, do not write comments publicly or engage in broader interaction, but instead write comments under selected news items.

The owners of accounts presenting themselves as members of these pages and targeting opposition voices typically have between 0 and 10 friends. At the same time, they may also be connected as friends with one another. The analysis of the comments shows that approximately half of the account holders are male and half female. For example, of the first 450 comments written in response to the news concerning Ali Karimli's arrest published on 1 December, 224 were written under female names and 226 under male names. Only four of these comments expressed support for Ali Karimli.

On 2 December, 1.000 comments were written in response to Abzas Media's post concerning Bahruz Samadov, who had been arrested on charges of treason. The comments may be divided into three groups according to their content. In the first group, Samadov was described as a traitor to the homeland, dishonorable, and treacherous, including expressions degrading his personal dignity. In the second group, it was stated that the rule of law is upheld in Azerbaijan, that Azerbaijan is a democratic country, that no one is subject to biased arrest, and that those detained are criminals, thus expressing support for the authorities. In the third group of comments, it was claimed that the Penitentiary Service in Azerbaijan is organized at a high level and that regular reforms are being carried out in this field.

When attempting to determine who authored the comments in each group concerning Bahruz Samadov, it may be observed that they were primarily represented across four FB pages. Of the first 100 comments written, 19 were affiliated with Beauty, Cosmetic and Personal Care, 5 with Social Media Agency, 17 with Medical and Health, and 6 with Design and Fashion. This constitutes 47% of the first 100 comments.

Content of the comments written in response to Abzas Media's FB post concerning Bahruz Samadov on 2 December 2025. [33]

	Personal Targeting / Degradation of Dignity	Azerbaijan is a democratic state.	The Ministry of Internal Affairs upholds the rule of law.	Total
B, C&PC	51	31	14	96
M&H	30	24	11	65
SMA	12	15	4	31
D&F	17	9	3	29
Total	110	79	32	221

The quality of the comments posted does not indicate that their authors have undergone any formal training. These comments do not provide justification for the alignment of government policy with the interests of the public; rather, they assert that it is democratic, and they reiterate the official charges issued by the state concerning Samedov. The following comments on the news item regarding Samedov may serve as an example to substantiate this argument (the style has been preserved):

In Azerbaijan, prisoners encounter no difficulties in accessing the penitentiary system. Reforms are implemented annually within the penitentiary service.

Reforms concerning the penitentiary service are carried out in our country. These include the organization of medical services, the protection of prisoners' rights, and other related measures.

The prison administration has undertaken all necessary measures to ensure the protection of prisoners' rights.

Conclusion

Since the late twentieth century, the rapid development of information technologies led scholars to anticipate that these tools might support the promotion of democratic values and the dissemination of democratic principles worldwide. Over the first fifteen years of the twenty-first century, however, developments in both the real and virtual worlds have demonstrated that these expectations were largely misplaced. Advanced technologies have been utilized not by societies at large, but by authoritarian regimes. Possessing substantial financial resources and the capacity to alter legislation at will, authoritarian authorities exploit technological capabilities to silence opposition voices and to remove them from the political arena through intimidation and persecution. This phenomenon, referred to in the scholarly literature as authoritarian networking, enables authoritarian leaders not only to manage public opinion within their own countries and to rig elections, but also to support other authoritarian regimes and to generate political chaos and confusion within liberal democracies.

Admittedly, there are global examples such as the 2011 Arab Spring and the uprisings in Bangladesh in 2024 and Nepal in 2025, often described as the digital revolts of Generation Z. Unfortunately, in Azerbaijan, digital opportunities have produced the opposite effect. There is an inverse relationship between the number of social media users and their level of political engagement. Institutions and organizations established by the Azerbaijani government under the guise of cybersecurity, as well as cyber units operating within civil society organizations and movements, serve the security of the regime rather than that of society and are capable of maintaining control over public opinion. Among the reasons for the government's success in this sphere are its technological capabilities and the necessity imposed upon unemployed young people to participate in the proposed trolling activities.

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