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Struggling Across Screens: Production and Consumption, Threats and Opportunities in Central Asia's Mediasphere

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Executive Summary

In the past several years, Central Asia has begun to see new horizons both for the states that call this region home, and for external actors who seek to partner with them. China's increasing investment and engagement with the region, Russia's 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine, and normalization in the relations between several of Central Asia's member states have ushered in a sense of flux and change in the region. The Central Asian states are looking for new partners in trade, security, and education and technology. Likewise, actors in both the West and further afield are seeking further engagement with Central Asia.

These broad political changes are also indicative of the evolving media landscape of Central Asia. This report succinctly analyzes who produces media in Central Asia, what political media is produced and consumed, and how external actors and threats are conceptualized to domestic Central Asia audiences. While considering the growing consumption of digital media in Central Asia, the report also dissects the roles that social media, media literacy education, and political opposition groups' online presence play in political discourse in Central Asia.

While traditional forms of media remain more or less stagnant under the control of the Central Asian states, digital media (both on social media and independent online journalism) have opened up new spaces for alternative voices and free political discussion to flourish. However, the respective states of Central Asia have also sought to curtail the freedom of the spaces through censorship, surveillance, and disinformation. Of the external actors, Russia and the US have had the strongest most overt means for influencing Central Asia's media space, while China (though more effective in pressuring Central Asian government to censor certain information), the EU, and other external actors have played a more secondary role in producing and distributing information in Central Asia.

While concerns of foreign threats are present in Central Asian political discourse, the primary focus of Central Asian media on security-related topics are domestic sources of instability (namely extremism and separatism). Russia and China remain Central Asia's most significant partners in a number of areas, and this is broadly reflected in Central Asia political discourse in the media (though Russia has become increasingly scrutinized in online discourse since February 2022, and hesitations remain concerning China's ambitions). Though appreciated as partners in technology, development, and trade, but met with reluctance regarding human rights and transparency issues, the US and EU are met with the same pragmatism in Central Asian media as Moscow and Beijing are. The EU does have a larger role to play in Central Asian media, but domestic censorship poses a challenge.

The emergence and growth of social and digital media has created a space in which dissent and opposition groups have a greater capacity to engage and coordinate the populations of Central Asia. However, with the proliferation of disinformation in Central Asia's online spaces, digital literacy will become increasingly important for empowering democratic development in Central Asia.

1. Brief updates on external competition and cooperation in Central Asia (Russia, China, Turkey, the US and EU, Korea, Japan) + CA5+1 formats (2004-2024)

The Central Asian states, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, are located at the heart of Eurasia with vast natural resources and have become an arena for both competition and cooperation among global and regional powers. Table 1 shows the primary interests and main tools/methods of such global and regional powers in Central Asia (Table 1).

Table 1. Global and Regional Powers in Central Asia

Powers	Primary Interests	Main Tools / Methods
Russia	Ensuring regional stability and preventing Western military presence as well as maintaining historical and geopolitical influence in its 'near abroad'.	Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) as well as cultural and linguistic ties.
China	Expanding the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), accessing energy resources as well as security of its Xinjiang border.	Trade, Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), large infrastructure loans and investments.
United States	Limiting Russian/Chinese dominance, counterterrorism and supporting human rights and regional cooperation.	C5+1 formats, security assistance (e.g., border management), and targeted development aid.
European Union	Diversifying energy routes through the Middle Corridor, promoting rule of law and encouraging regional connectivity.	Soft-power tools (e.g., development programmes), trade agreements and investments.
Turkey	Enhancing regional leadership and strategic presence through strengthening Turkic solidarity and expanding trade and defence partnerships.	Organisation of Turkic States (OTS), cultural diplomacy, language, education, and military cooperation plan with Kazakhstan and military-technical cooperation agreement with Uzbekistan.
Gulf states (e.g., UAE, Qatar)	Diversifying economic and geopolitical opportunities, food and water security.	Investments and projects.
South Korea	Growth in trade volumes and investments, collaboration in economy, logistics, and cultural exchange	C5+K formats (summits, forum); infrastructure, energy, and other strategic investments; customs agreements; people-to people ties (substantial diasporas)

Sources: (e.g., Sahakyan, 2021; Mahmud & Hossain, 2025; Jardine & Lemon, 2025, 73-87; Ekstorm, 2025; Jalolova, 2025, Lee, 2025).

The Central Asia countries are not just passive aid receivers; they actively navigate and shape their external relations to advance their own interests. Kazakhstan can be described as the most diversified among all five states in the region, while similar patterns of reforms are visible in post-2016 Uzbekistan (Jardine & Lemon 2025, 74). While Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan still seek to broaden their partnerships, Turkmenistan upholds official neutrality yet relies heavily on China in terms of energy cooperation (Jardine & Lemon, 2025).

Over the past two decades (2004-2024), Central Asia's five republics have engaged in 'C5+1' cooperation formats with external partners such as Japan (2004, 2025), South Korea (2007), the U.S. (2015; 2023; 2025), India (2022), China

(2023; 2025), Saudi Arabia (2023), Germany (2024-2025), and the EU (2025). Key areas of cooperation included regional cooperation, security, governance, connectivity, trade, counterterrorism, border management, human rights, infrastructure development, (green) energy, climate resilience, education, and digital connectivity (Kakenova, 2024; Tolipov, 2024; Khakimov, 2025). Such cooperation, however, is also marked by strategic competition for geopolitical positioning, influence, resources, and market access. What we see is that Central Asian countries seek to balance these relationships through 'multi-vector' diplomacy in an era of great-power competition. Although 'C5+1' formats have been evolving from donor dialogues into strategic platforms and summits, they still face challenges such as conflicting priorities, limited institutional capacity, and competing interests of great powers.

Since the Russo-Ukrainian full-scale war and shifts in US policy under the 2025 Trump administration, the external environment of Central Asia has become more competitive. These developments have even led to increased cooperation among the states of the region. At the same time, Central Asia has attracted the EU, Turkey, India, Pakistan, and the Gulf states for transport corridors, energy, and critical minerals, while China has become its dominant economic actor. All these trends have shifted the five states from a relatively Russia-centred geopolitical space to a more fluid landscape of competition and selective cooperation.

2. Local information landscape, platforms, tools, and agents

Summary and Key Findings

Across Central Asia, traditional forms of media (e.g. TV, newspapers, radio) remain mostly under the control of the state of state-aligned business elites, and thus leaves little room for deviation from official state narratives, empowerment of oppositional political forces, or criticism of that state. Since the 2010s, the increased consumption and production of online news sources (be they through social media or net-based news portals) has increased the abilities of local populations to both produce and consume a wider variety of political content. Both state and state-aligned elites have also begun producing content for digital spaces. This digital composition has remained mostly stable, with some changes in Uzbekistan (where there has been a modest at best liberalization of media since 2016) and Kyrgyzstan (which has seen a number of critical web-based news portals suppressed by the government).

Russian remains the lingua franca of Central Asia, thus conferring a significant advantage to Russia in influencing Central Asia's information space. Russia, by virtue of the consumption of its widely-available domestic TV channels by the populations of Central Asia, exercises the broadest capabilities for producing and influencing political discourse of an external power in the region (though these are also met with a degree of scepticism by Central Asian audiences). Additionally, a number of Russian state and non-state digital news and social media platforms are consumed by Central Asian audiences (though less so than Russian TV channels).

The US has historically been the strongest counterweight to Russian-produced media. The US government's Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty has had a strong online presence with extensive critical coverage in both Russian and local languages. However, with the Trump administration's drastic reduction of funding for these efforts, the US government's influence in the Central Asian media space is likely to diminish. In addition to the numerous US state-backed media production efforts, US-based social media platforms (most notably those of Meta) are extensively used across Central Asia.

The capabilities of other external actors to influence the information environment remain quite limited compared to the US and Russia. While the EU has supported media literacy and local journalism, the consumption of EU-produced media in Central Asia is limited at best. Chinese-produced media also remains minimal, though Tik-Tok is widely used, and the governments of Central Asia often work as proxies for suppressing narratives that run counter to the Chinese state narrative. Turkey, Iran, and others have a limited reach in terms of media production or digital infrastructure control.

2.1 What is the composition of the domestic ownership and production of media covering politics in the five Central Asian states? Which platforms are used? How does the composition differ across these states?

Table 2. Media Composition, Ownership, and State Control

Country	Ownership & production of political media	Key platforms used for politics	Repression tools & controls (notable 2025–26 features)
Kazakhstan	Dominant political media are state-owned or owned by government-friendly business elites; independent outlets operate but face periodic raids, prosecutions, and economic/technical pressure.	TV remains influential; digital news sites + Telegram/Instagram/YouTube for political content; major platforms affected by compliance rules.	Law on Online Platforms and Advertising (2023) requires major platforms to appoint local reps and remove "false info" or risk blocking; ongoing legal/administrative pressure on journalists; new 2025 draft regulation seeks stronger online-platform controls.
Kyrgyzstan	Historically more plural, but 2025–26 saw sharper consolidation: independent investigative production reduced via court cases/closures; ownership pressures plus legal gatekeeping over outlet registration.	Highly digital/mobile: Telegram, YouTube, Facebook/Instagram central for political news/leaks; online-native investigative channels important but vulnerable.	2025 Mass Media law: mandatory registration for all media (incl. online), foreign ownership cap; "false info" penalties; additional internet controls incl. blocking mandates and a state monopoly trial over international internet traffic via ElCat (Aug 2025).
Uzbekistan	Political media production remains tightly managed; state-aligned outlets dominate, while independent journalists/bloggers face prosecution—especially for online criticism; domestic political pluralism limited.	Strong use of Telegram, plus YouTube/Instagram; routine site blocking and surveillance shape what's reachable domestically.	Arrests for online speech, prosecutions of bloggers, routine website blocking, and extensive surveillance; continued targeting linked to Karakalpakstan-related content and broader dissent.

Tajikistan	Overwhelmingly state-dominated; independent political journalism is minimal and often forced into exile; licensing/accreditation pressures narrow domestic production.	TV and official outlets remain core; online access constrained; politics often migrates to Telegram and diaspora/exile channels due to blocking.	Quasi-permanent blocking of major news/social sites; "extremism/terrorism" legal framing used against journalists and outlets; 2025 reform decriminalized "liking" extremist content, but broader repression and surveillance remain.
Turkmenistan	Near-total state monopoly: TV, radio, print and most online outlets are state-controlled; independent/critical media largely operate from abroad.	Official channels + limited domestic internet; political information often accessed via VPNs and diaspora outlets when possible.	Extreme censorship and access control: blocking of global sources; penalties/harassment linked to VPN use; reports of intensified VPN crackdowns/market capture to restrict circumvention.

Kazakhstan

In Kazakhstan, the domestic ownership and production of media covering politics are heavily skewed toward state and state-affiliated entities. State-run newspapers such as Yegemen Qazaqstan and Kazakhstanskaya Pravda and state-owned TV channels and radio such as Qazaqstan, Khabar TV, and Qazaq Radiosy remain key sources for political coverage. Since 2024, foreign ownership of mass media (other than online resources) in Kazakhstan is legally capped at 20% (adilet.zan.kz, 2024), and transparency of ownership is very limited.

The production of political content in traditional, stated-funded news mediums mainly aligns with government narratives and seldom challenges official viewpoints. Truly independent and critical coverage is limited and mostly online. Through financial support and regulatory oversight, government authorities also exercise both direct and indirect influences. Kazakhstan, like other Central Asian countries, shares the legacy of the Soviet media system and the significant dominance of Russian-language content in political media. While Kazakh-language news and analysis are growing across media platforms, they still fall short of Russian-language content in production quality, reach, and depth of reporting. Recent research shows that 'the overwhelming consumption of media and information in Russian by both Kazakhs and other ethnic groups' remains the case and 'Kazakh-language content is either insufficient in volume or fails to attract the interest of the population' (Shakenov et al., 2024, 112).

While TV and press continue to shape Kazakhstan's official political narratives, online platforms and social media are gradually emerging as key spaces for alternative and critical discourse. Online platforms such as Azattyq, Vlast.kz, and Orda.kz are increasingly providing spaces for investigative reporting and political commentary, offering perspectives frequently missing from state-controlled media. Factcheck.kz also contributes to a more informed public by promoting evidence-based discourse. A comprehensive, but non-exhaustive list of domestic and foreign based digital media producers covering Kazakhstan can be found here.

Kyrgyzstan

Kyrgyzstan has historically had the most diverse domestic political media environment in Central Asia, but this plurality has narrowed significantly since 2020 and deteriorated further in 2025–2026 through legislation, court rulings, and regulatory pressure (Freedom House 2024a; CPJ 2025). Legacy broadcast media remains influential, anchored by the state/public broadcaster KTRK and several private television channels. However, ownership of private outlets is frequently linked to political or business elites, shaping editorial agendas through informal patronage networks and access politics rather than transparent market competition (Global Media Ownership Monitor 2025).

A substantial share of political news production occurs online, particularly through Russian-language digital outlets and news agencies such as 24.kg, AKIpress, and Kaktus. These platforms compete primarily on speed and volume, relying heavily on official statements, parliamentary proceedings, and elite commentary for political content (Freedom House 2024b). Kyrgyzstan previously stood out for its investigative and watchdog journalism, but this segment has been sharply curtailed. Raids, prosecutions, and court actions against investigative outlets - including the liquidation of April TV and criminal cases against journalists affiliated with Kloop and Temirov Live - have produced a strong chilling effect on independent reporting (Associated Press 2024; AFP 2025; HRW 2025a).

Digital platforms remain central to political communication. Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and especially Telegram are key channels for political messaging, leaks, and investigative distribution, while short-video platforms have become sufficiently politically salient to trigger direct state intervention, including restrictions on TikTok access (Freedom House 2024a). Structural regulation has intensified: a 2024 "foreign representatives" law expanded monitoring and labeling requirements, and a new media law adopted in 2025 introduced mandatory registration and licensing of all media outlets, substantially increasing executive control over market entry and editorial survival (Reuters 2025a; Reuters 2025b; IDEA 2025).

Overall, Kyrgyzstan retains more media diversity than its neighbors, but domestic political coverage is increasingly shaped by legal risk, self-censorship, and the relocation of sensitive reporting to exile-based outlets and semi-closed messaging groups that are difficult to systematically observe (RSF 2025).

Uzbekistan

While President Mirziyoyev's promises of liberalization have resulted in a modest increase in the number of non-state news sources, the state still maintains a tight grip on the media sphere, where (self-)censorship abounds. The government of Uzbekistan has largely monopolized traditional forms of media, as TV and radio stations are mostly state owned (RSF, 2025b). The Uzbekistani government's Public Fund for Support and Development of Independent Print Media and News Agencies is a government body that subsidizes a range of state as well as private, pro-government media producers (Freedom House, 2024c). Private ownership of media is mostly, though not entirely, held by local elites whose coverage mimics that of state-owned TV (Dumont et al., 2022).

There has been a noticeable decrease in the consumption of newspapers and radio in recent years, while the number of magazines (which contribute little to political discourse), TV, and internet media producers (both outlets and popular bloggers) have significantly increased (uz24.uz, 2024). While TV still dominates media consumption in Uzbekistan, internet usage has continued to increase (especially among the youth). A comprehensive, but non-exhaustive list of domestic and foreign based digital media producers covering Uzbekistan can be found here.

Social media remains an important source for digitally disseminating news coverage by domestic news outlets as well as bloggers/influencers. Domestic media production is shared on foreign-owned platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, LinkedIn, X, Vkontakte, Telegram (which is the primary platform for domestic discourse), WeChat, and TikTok (Makarenko, 2020). The state-owned Uztelecom periodically blocks these platforms, and is able to effectively due to its monopoly on digital infrastructure in the country. Roughly 75% of the population of

Uzbekistan uses the internet in some capacity, with the best quality/highest levels of internet penetration in Tashkent and other major cities (BBC, 2024). The mobile service provider landscape of Uzbekistan is dominated by state providers who make up 75% of the market, with the only major private provider being Beeline, which is owned by Netherlands-based VEON (Freedom House, 2024).

Tajikistan

Tajikistan's political media landscape is overwhelmingly state-dominated, with domestic ownership concentrated around government-aligned broadcasters, official newspapers, and licensed outlets operating under restrictive accreditation and content regulations (Freedom House 2024d; Freedom House 2025). Independent political journalism exists only in a highly constrained form and is shaped by pervasive surveillance, security-service oversight, and the credible threat of prosecution, fostering deep self-censorship across the sector (Freedom House 2024d; CPJ 2024b). Repression has been especially severe in Gorno-Badakhshan, where journalists and bloggers - many from the Pamiri minority - have received long prison sentences linked to coverage of protests and civic unrest (CIVICUS Monitor 2025a; HRW 2025b).

With a near monopoly on domestic media production and internet infrastructure, and a relatively low level of Internet usage, the government of Tajikistan faces minimal domestic competition when controlling its media space. TV is the most popular media platform in Tajikistan, with 87% of Tajikistan's population aged 18 or over regularly watching TV according to a survey conducted in 2024 (Ikromzoda 2025). In 2024, there were 15 state-owned TV channels, 16 cable channels, 18 private TV channels, 10 state-owned radio channels, and 24 private radio channels operating in Tajikistan (Kaomzoda 2024). TB Safina and Televizioni Tojikiston had the highest viewership among domestic television channels in 2022 (Yusufi and Yusufi 2022).

However, domestic Tajik television channels have struggled to compete in popularity with foreign, such as Russian and Iranian television channels, which offer more entertainment-related content. This failure to dominate the domestic information space has been perceived as a cultural and security threat by Tajik officials in the 2020s. (Asia-Plus 2021) According to an analysis conducted in 2023, the share of Tajik television channels stood only at 40% (Ikromzoda 2025). Tajik state-run television channels, as well as state-operated radio channels, advance pro-government narratives (Dragomir 2025; State Media Monitor 2025). The role of printed media is marginal in Tajik society (Institute for War & Peace Reporting 2018).

About half or less than half of the population of Tajikistan uses the Internet (Kemp 2025; Norov 2025). Instagram is the most popular social media platform in Tajikistan, followed by Facebook, Youtube and Twitter (Statcounter Global Stats 2025). In November 2025, Tajikistan launched its domestic Messenger, named Oriz (Asia-Plus 2025). Although most domestic Internet sites and media platforms on the Internet covering politics are aligned with the agenda of the Tajik government, opposition outlets also exist, such as Ozodandeshon, and Guruhi24. A comprehensive, but non-exhaustive list of domestic and foreign based digital media producers covering Tajikistan can be found here.

Asia-Plus is a private news agency in Dushanbe that has received funds from the US and maintains an independent approach. The most notable pro-government Internet platforms include Khovar (National Information Agency of Tajikistan) and Jumhuriyat. Youtube and Facebook have been used both by pro-government outlets, but also by oppositional bloggers and figures. Liking and reposting posts or messages that carry an oppositional meaning was decriminalised in May 2025 (Pannier 2025).

Turkmenistan

Turkmenistan's domestic media, both media infrastructure and outlets, is entirely state-owned as run by the State News Agency of Turkmenistan and the Turkmenistan Television Broadcasting Center. TV remains the most popular medium of news, and coverage of politics is mostly limited to presenting the government of Turkmenistan in a positive to neutral light.

Turkmenistan's digital infrastructure is fully controlled by the Ministry of Communications, which heavily censors and monitors internet usage, which is used by roughly a third of the population (IREX, 2024). The state hosts a number of online news portals which produce the same content as its print and TV outlets. There are a few independent websites dedicated exclusively to covering Turkmenistan which are run by members of the Turkmen diaspora abroad. These websites provide much more critical coverage of the Turkmenistani state. A comprehensive, but non-exhaustive list of domestic and foreign based digital media producers covering Turkmenistan can be found here.

Effectively almost every foreign social media platform is blocked, with the state produced Bizbarde (a messaging app) and Belet (a video hosting platform) being the only accessible alternatives (Agence France-Presse, 2024). Nonetheless, platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, etc., are accessed via VPNs, but this account for a minority of media consumption in Turkmenistan. Encrypted messenger apps such as IMO and Link Messenger are more widely used, but are still limited by internet shutdowns and poor digital infrastructure. Users of these platforms who are located in Turkmenistan usually self-censor themselves, as the state monitors and punishes those who post anything that runs contrary to the desired portrayal of the state.

2.2 Which international actors (e.g., Russia, China, the EU, Turkey) have the greatest influence on the information environment in Central Asia, and how do they exercise it?

Russia

Russian information activities in CA are based on several Russian and pro-Russian media outlets and TV channels (e.g. First Channel Eurasia [Первый канал Евразия], NTV [НТВ], Russia [Россия], Russia 24 [Россия 24], etc.), but also country-specific radio and online media portals such as Sputnik (Sputnik Uzbekiston, Sputnik Kazakhstan, etc.), newspapers (e.g. Komsomolskahya Pravda)). More digitally-savvy youth are targeted through social media by pro-Kremlin outlets, be it either international platforms such as X, Facebook, TikTok, YouTube, or also Russia-based/founded social media platforms such as Telegram, VKontakte, Odnoklassniki, etc. Russia is particularly very active in the information environment of Kazakhstan (Olzhabayev 2025) as Kazakhstan has the largest Russian-speaking minority in the region and is the only Central Asian country that shares a border with Russia. Russian speakers make up the largest minority group in Kazakhstan, accounting for around 16.8% of the population. In Kyrgyzstan, the Russian ethnic minority accounts for around 4% of the population. Around 2% of Uzbekistan's population use Russian for judicial and administrative purposes. In Tajikistan, 0.5% of the population have designated Russian as the 'language of inter-ethnic communication'. In Turkmenistan, 2% of the population speaks Russian, which has no official status (Sazonov 2026). It is the only CA country that does not use Russian to some extent in an official capacity.

Kazakhstan has become the target of intensive information attacks by Russian media and social media platforms. Pro-Kremlin TV channels, news websites and political talk shows are present in the Kazakhstani media landscape and with the goal of influencing the local information environment. They are broadcasting Russian laws, political assessments and foreign policy conflicts through the prism of the official position of Moscow. Russian programmes broadcast ready-made scenarios and evaluative judgements that can reinforce pro-Russian positions. Commentary by Russian politicians and 'experts' often accentuates weaknesses or threats from Kazakhstan (e.g. accusations of 'nationalism' or a pro-Western orientation) (Alimova 2024).

Russia's information campaigns in Kazakhstan but also in other CA countries often utilize hate speech aimed at dehumanising Ukrainians, showing Ukraine in a negative light, and creating a narrative about Ukraine as a 'failed state'. A significant issue for Kazakhstan is the impact of Russia's militaristic propaganda on the collective consciousness of inhabitants in border regions, given the shared information spaces

(Mirmanova 2024). Russian discourse on Central Asia often refers to the 'common historical brotherhood' and 'Soviet legacy' of the peoples, emphasising cultural and linguistic unity and the legacy of the USSR. This narrative is popular with Russian-speaking residents of the CA. The result is a reduction in political distance from Russia, and the formation of a sense of 'common interests' and 'historical justice'. This blurs the dividing line between nation states and the post-Soviet space (Lytvynenko 2025).

China

China's influence on Central Asia's information environment is expanding but operates differently from Russia's linguistic and broadcast dominance. Rather than shaping everyday media consumption, Beijing's influence is primarily structural and elite-mediated, exercised through digital infrastructure, security cooperation, and governance norms embedded in long-term partnerships (Stronski and Ng 2018; Hillman 2021).

A core mechanism is the Digital Silk Road (DSR). Since 2020, Chinese firms have supplied telecommunications equipment, fiber-optic networks, data centers, and "Safe City" surveillance systems across Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan (CSIS 2021; Freedom House 2024e). By 2025–2026, this technological engagement became more explicitly tied to security frameworks. At the Second China - Central Asia Summit in June 2025, Xi Jinping linked connectivity to expanded law enforcement cooperation, counterterrorism coordination, and cybersecurity training, signaling deeper integration of digital infrastructure with internal security priorities (State Council of the PRC 2025; Reuters 2025d). Other analysis likewise shows intensified Chinese security cooperation with Tajikistan, including capacity-building and joint counter-extremism initiatives (Carnegie Endowment 2025).

China's influence also operates through elite information diplomacy. Journalist exchange programs, Confucius Institutes, and party-to-party training cultivate governance narratives centered on modernization, development, and 'digital sovereignty' (Brady 2017; Kaczmarski 2019). These narratives resonate with regional governments' emphasis on stability and counter-extremism. While Central Asian states adopt platform regulation and information control primarily for domestic reasons, the language of cyber sovereignty and state-managed digital order increasingly mirrors Chinese framings (Creemers 2020; Freedom House 2024e).

Public perceptions, however, are mixed. In Tajikistan and Turkmenistan, state-controlled media portray China overwhelmingly positively as a reliable investor. In Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, social media discourse reveals ambivalence, including concerns about debt sustainability, land use, environmental impact, and dependency (International Crisis Group 2021). Unlike Russian media, Chinese outlets have limited direct audience penetration; influence flows less through content than through infrastructure, standards, and institutional alignment.

In sum, China's influence in Central Asia is deep but indirect: strongest where media systems are centralized, increasingly embedded in security cooperation, and reinforced by digital governance models that privilege state control over open information flows.

EU

In the *Council Conclusions on the New EU Strategy on Central Asia* (2019), it is stated that "freedom of expression and association, an enabling environment for civil society and independent media commitments to democratic values (…) remain at the core of EU–Central Asia relations". Although EU partnership with Central Asia has strengthened since the adoption of the EU Central Asia Strategy in 2019, much of the action prioritises energy security and transition, as well as transport and digitalisation, while human connectivity, democratisation, and civil society engagement have proportionally received less attention (Boonstra, 2024). Moreover, the EU's actions in Central Asia have been criticised as exceedingly concentrated on the senior officials and local elites, and thus having little tangible impact 'on the ground' (Boonstra & Smagulova, European development cooperation with Central Asia: From abstract to

concrete, 2024), (Boonstra, EU-Central Asia connectivity: Using all the pieces, 2024).

Although EU programs such as ERASMUS+, NGOs receiving funding from the EU (e.g. under the funding schemes of Equal Rights & Independent Media), and independent institutions based in EU member states (e.g. Europe-Central Asia Monitoring, The Centre for European Security Studies) are working towards greater presence in the CA information environment, the Joint Roadmap for Deepening Ties between the EU and Central Asia (2023) still highlights the need to make EU projects and opportunities for vocational training and educational exchange more visible.

A study on the impact of Russian propaganda in Kyrgyzstan also highlights the fact that many Central Asians regard European (or largely, Western) media as a tool for spreading Western values which themselves are seen as incompatible with Central Asian societies and opposed to Islamic principles. European countries are still associated with colonial exploitation while the Central Asian own Soviet past is seen as lending credibility to Russian media, making it better accessible and more closely aligned with the region's own interests (Gabdulhakov, 2023).

Some Europe-based media outlets accessible in English, CA local languages or Russian, with focuses on the CA region:

- Euronews, Headquarters in Lyon, France, services accessible in Russian
- BBC, services accessible in Kyrgyz, Uzbek, Russian, news also in Persian
- Deutsche Welle (DW) German state-funded TV network, also available in Russian
- Open Democracy, non-profit based in London, UK, coverage in English.
- Agence France-Presse, French government media outlet, some coverage of Central Asia in French and English

USA

The United States has exercised a considerable amount of influence on Central Asia in the past three decades. Besides the US being a global hegemonic source for English language media, the US government has shaped the Central Asian media sphere through two of its agencies: USAID and the United States Agency for Global Media (USAGM).

USAGM supervises two media outlets which produce content both for Central Asian audiences as well as about Central Asia: Voice of America (VOA) and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL). Both outlets combined have a significant viewership, which spans across a variety of platforms, mediums, different editorial units, and languages (each Central Asia state is covered by its own editorial office producing media both in Russian and local languages). In reporting in local languages about both domestic and international news, USAGM has arguably the most significant online footprint of any single state funded news outlet. However, President Trump's March 2025 executive order has drastically reduced the funding and scale of all of USAGM's supported outlets, including VOA and RFE/RL (Wardwell, 2025) (Reuters, 2025c). While the Central Asian coverage of USAGM's services have continued reporting as of the time of this report, the long-term survival and scope of coverage of VOA and RFE/RL remain in question.

Besides funding a host of economic, healthcare, and governance projects, USAID shaped Central Asia's media landscape by providing funding to independent media outlets as well as training to local journalists and media specialists. While USAID invested a considerable amount of funds for media development across the Central Asian states, measuring its impact is now made much more difficult due to the absence of publicly available data since the agency's closure in 2025 (The Times of Central Asia, 2025). With no anticipated plans to reopen USAID or replace the role it played in Central Asia, the Trump administration has closed off this avenue for the US to shape Central Asia's information environment.

Also worthy of note is the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), a quasi-NGO funded by the US Congress, has also funded Central Asian independent media and media capacity development initiatives, but at a significantly smaller scale than USAID and USAGM. While also a target of the Trump administration's budget cuts, NED has thus held onto its funding (AP, 2025).

Besides US government funded media efforts, there are several independent online news portals of note covering Central Asia which are either entirely or partly based in the US. CABAR, eurasianet, The Diplomat, and the Jamestown Foundation all provide news coverage and analysis of Central Asian politics (mostly in English, sometimes in Russian). The primary audience for these portals is policymakers and scholars, and (while difficult to measure) likely have a minimal footprint in the Central Asia media sphere.

Privately-owned US social media platforms are widely used in Central Asia, even more so than their Russian competitors. Meta's platforms (in particular Instagram, Facebook, and Whatsapp) are commonly used in Central Asia while X, Threads, and other microblogging sites are less commonly used.

Turkey

Turkey's influence on the information environment in Central Asia operates primarily through cultural diplomacy, educational networks, institutional cooperation, and expanding economic engagement, rather than through digital infrastructure dominance. Compared to Russia and China, Ankara's influence is softer and identity-driven, though increasingly structured through regional organizations and formal cooperation frameworks (Balci 2020; OTS 2023).

A central mechanism is cultural and linguistic proximity, particularly in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan. Turkish television series, news programming, and entertainment content circulate widely, contributing to favorable public perceptions of Turkey as both culturally familiar and economically modern (Yorulmazlar 2019). State-linked outlets such as TRT Avaz broadcast Turkic-oriented programming that reinforces narratives of shared heritage and cooperation (TRT World 2024). This symbolic and narrative visibility differentiates Turkey's influence from China's infrastructure-based approach.

Education remains another key vector. Since the 1990s, Turkish-funded schools and universities have shaped elite networks across the region. Following the 2016 attempted coup in Turkey, Ankara intensified diplomatic efforts to close or transfer institutions linked to the Gülen movement, illustrating how educational diplomacy became tied to national security objectives (Coşkun 2018). This recalibration affected Kyrgyzstan most visibly, where debates over Turkish-linked institutions intersected with sovereignty concerns (Freedom House 2024f).

Recent 2025–2026 developments highlight growing economic and institutional engagement. Policy analysis notes a new phase of Turkish outreach emphasizing connectivity, trade corridors, and strategic coordination under the Organization of Turkic States (SWP 2025; GK 2026). Bilateral trade volumes - particularly with Kazakhstan - have continued to expand, reinforcing Turkey's economic footprint and visibility in public discourse (ORF 2025). Ankara's participation in high-profile regional events, including diplomatic engagements in Turkmenistan in late 2025, further signals sustained political presence (Reuters 2025).

However, Turkey's leverage remains uneven. It is strongest in Turkic-speaking states, marginal in Tajikistan, and limited in Turkmenistan's tightly controlled information space. Overall, Turkey shapes the Central Asian information environment through identity-based soft power, education networks, media exports, and growing economic interdependence, rather than through structural control of digital infrastructure or mass-language media dominance.

Iran

Iran is a totalitarian state which fully controls its own madia landscape. Within Central Asia's media sphere, Iran is trying to strengthen its regional presence by using ideological weapons and by disseminating messages and strategic narratives (Roselle et al 2013) by promoting pro-Iranian topics, Islamic ideas, particularly also using a kind of soft power (Nye 2004). Tehran is spreading messages by disseminating pro-Iranian narratives through several propaganda channels which target every Central Asian country. However, the main focus of Iran's media efforts is Tajikistan, as Iran and Tajikistan share a common language (Tajik language which is linguistically close to Persian language) as well as a shared cultural and historical past.

Therefore Tajikistan is a key target of Iranian influence activities and soft power.

Strategic narratives which Iran disseminates in Central Asia (and particularly in Tajikistan) include the following: 1) Ideas about strengthening a common Iran-Central Asia identity, 2) The idea of 'Iranzamin' (historic Persia, or Greater Iran) is also actively promoted, emphasizing the historical, cultural and linguistic commonality and closeness of the Iran and Central Asian countries (especially with Tajikistan) (Mankoff 2022). Iran is also promoting other topics and narratives oriented towards local audiences in Central Asian region: 1) Counter-hegemonic rhetoric (against West, but also sometimes China) 2) Economic partnership and cooperation with Iran 3) Regional security cooperation between Iran and Central Asian countries 4) Diplomatic/multilateral positioning and agreements 5) Cultural diplomacy 6) Shared Persian identity (e.g. via Iran's Mehr News Agency and other channels).

Another important issue is religion. Although Iran is a Shiite country, it emphasizes common Islamic values in the Central Asian region rather than strictly Shiite doctrines so as not to alienate the Sunni majority in Central Asian countries. These Islamic ideas and narratives were also often disseminated through social media platforms and via regular media as well. Tehran is trying to create a positive image of Iran as a cultural and spiritual center for Persian-speaking and also Turkic-speaking peoples (see Umarova 2025; Sazonov 2026).

3. Perceptions, Discourses, and Opportunities in the Central Asian Mediasphere

Summary and Key Findings

In the last decade, domestic and geopolitical shifts along with the rise of social media usage have changed how politics and international relations are discussed in Central Asia. While traditional forms of media remain tightly controlled by the state, social media has democratized the means for producing media to allow (a degree) of independent journalism and discussion. While alternative views and information are able to become more widely disseminated across social media, these same platforms just as well become sources for propaganda and misinformation as well as state surveillance. As Internet usage continues to grow in Central Asia, so will its importance grow and the number of competing narratives expand while shaping local understandings of politics and international relations.

Across the five Central Asian states, there are broad and consistent priorities when discursively framing threats to the state, but also some nuances. All five states prioritize the prevention of extremist Islamistic ideologies and frequently rely on state-mandated notions of 'tradition' (religious beliefs/norms, linguistic and cultural standards, etc.) as a counternarrative to bodies of beliefs which threaten the state's control of the population. While notions of 'tradition' are used to address genuine ideological threats in the form of militant Islam, they are also employed to suppress political and cultural dissent (e.g. as a counterweight to liberal-democratic discourse originating from the West). Suppressing separatism is another priority for a number of Central Asian states, as a number of them host ethnic minorities who resist the cultural/linguistic homogenization of state building (e.g. the Karakalpakstan Autonomous Oblast in Uzbekistan, Badakhshan Mountainous Autonomous Oblast in Tajikistan, etc.). While internal ideological threats are prioritized by the Central Asian states, external threats remain a concern (e.g. Russia's capacity to influence domestic discourse).

Like the conceptualization of threats, there are similar broad trends in the depictions of external entities. Russia's role as a necessary/inevitable partner in economic and security matters remains the official narrative for all of the Central Asian states, although Russian's invasion of Ukraine has had a somewhat chilling effect on Russian-Central Asian relations (and has been met with much more criticism on social media). China is comparatively seen as a less complicated partner who promises innovation and economic growth, through grassroots skepticism and fears (particularly in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan) of Chinese hegemony remain constant. Turkey enjoys relatively warm relations across the member states, due to the combination that Ankara's actions in the region

are usually not characterized by geopolitical intrigue, and that Turkish soft power has been particularly well-received. While seen as sources of technological and economic opportunity (and by some layers of society as sources of good governance), the US and EU are received with a degree of skepticism resulting from differences in the prioritization of human rights.

Unfortunately, due to the varying levels of authoritarianism across the Central Asian states, opportunities for EU engagement remain limited. Nonetheless, the EU's support for civil society, particularly with media literacy and professional journalism training, are valuable for maintaining the benefits that quality independent journalism brings to Central Asian society (government and elite transparency and accountability, among others). To the degree that it is possible, the EU should continue these programs and expand opportunities for media training and funding (particularly for Russian/local languages for the region). Estonia, in particular, would be a valuable source regarding preventing and combating the Russian Federation's disinformation efforts.

3.1 What roles do social media play in shaping public attitudes and discourses?

In Central Asia, social media play a growing and multifaceted role in shaping public attitudes and discourses: they are used in disseminating news and (dis/mis)-information, mobilisation and political activism, and as platforms for alternative narratives as well as for surveillance and propaganda. Thus, social media in Central Asia both empower civic engagement and alternative voices as well as sometimes political participation, but also expose users to manipulation, surveillance, and state repression. The influence of social media will likely grow as Internet penetration expands, particularly after the COVID-19 pandemic (Sairambay 2025a), and as more and more Central Asian netizens are becoming digitally literate.

According to ENC research, a majority of people in Central Asia 'get the news online every day or several times a week. Younger generations predominantly use the internet for the news, while older respondents use the internet substantially less for news' (Vesterbye et al. 2023, 34). While 'Central Asians predominantly use WhatsApp (58%), Telegram (39%), IMO (10%), and Viber (4%) as messengers', these scholars found that YouTube and Instagram are the most popular social media, followed by Facebook and TikTok (Vesterbye et al. 2023, 35-36). Media literacy initiatives (e.g., training programmes on disinformation and misinformation) are also being implemented across Central Asia, reflecting a growing recognition of the risks within the digital information ecosystem (Sairambay 2025b).

While media freedom is restricted across all of the Central Asian states to varying degrees, social media are the most dynamic arena for media liberty and suppression. Recent research (e.g., Dmitiryeva et al. 2023; Sairambay 2023) shows that in Kazakhstan, social media influences young people's political leanings and increases their engagement in political life. Similarly, in Uzbekistan, social media improves the transparency of government policies and fosters positive changes in the mindset of young people (Otakuziyev 2025). According to Vibrant Information Barometer (2022, 14), aside from social media, there are very limited spaces online for public debate. While freedom of expression is limited and Internet blockages are widespread in Tajikistan (Al-Rawi et al. 2023, 288), Turkmenistan is the most repressive country when it comes to digital freedoms, with the government censoring content and monitoring online activity, whereas social media is tightly controlled by its regulations.

As traditional media are more tightly controlled by the states than social media in the region, the latter often become a contested arena. Central Asian regimes employ fake profiles, controlled 'fakeness', and novel forms of censorship via social media to manipulate and constrain public discourse (Bowe et al. 2012; Schwartz and Overdorf 2019). For instance, Kazakhstan 'purchased a $4.3 million automated monitoring tool[s] to track signs of political discontent on social media' in 2018 (Shahbaz and Funk 2019).

Social media-driven public outcries, 'cancel culture', and online civic engagement are becoming gradually more common (e.g. the Bishimbayev case, Bolot Temirov in Kyrgyzstan), especially in the context of the semantic web,

where digital platforms are interconnected, allowing users to share content across multiple tools with ease. These kinds of actions by citizens are more observed in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan, whereas Tajikistan and Turkmenistan remain more restricted. 'In authoritarian and hybrid regimes, such as Kazakhstan […] new-media-led political participation sometimes can be the only way that citizens can influence the outcomes of political institutions' and 'in most cases social media and the Internet are the only tools they can use in dealing with civic problems, injustice, or corruption' (Sairambay 2022, 156, 182).

Overall, social media serves multiple functions in shaping public attitudes and discourses in Central Asia. They enable diverse voices and engagement, shape individual and collective identities, are contested by the states and societies of the region, and also represent certain risks such as manipulation and surveillance.

3.2 What internal and external security threats are prioritised by Central Asian states in relation to information and ideological influence?

Kazakhstan

One of the key external threats to Kazakhstan's information security is foreign information aggression, resulting in the dominance of foreign media resources in the domestic information space. This is particularly evident in the persistent presence and influence of pro-Kremlin media in the region, which can lead to the formation of a distorted perception of foreign and domestic political affairs among the local population.

The events of 2022, particularly Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, led to significant polarisation of Kazakhstani society (Kalmurat, 2025), effectively dividing it into two groups: one oriented primarily toward pro-Kremlin media, and the other receiving information from more independent sources. As a result of this polarisation, mutual distrust between different social groups has intensified, emotional tension in public debate has increased, and the quality of public dialogue has deteriorated.

Internal threats manifest themselves in the activities of pronounced nationalist media outlets, which exacerbate existing social polarisation and stimulate the emergence of local conflicts. One of the most illustrative examples is the presence of nationalist groups, which, exploiting the current geopolitical situation, are fueling discontent by provoking ethnic tensions between Kazakhs and Russians. This is also accompanied by a long-standing trend of so-called 'language patrols', in which more nationalist-minded individuals conduct raids on establishments to test knowledge of the Kazakh language. These local incidents are often picked up by pro-Kremlin media (Mendkovich, 2021), leading to the escalation of conflicts and their transformation into political scandals at the interstate level (Kalmurat, 2021). As a result, the Kazakhstani government is compelled to take measures to curb radical manifestations on both sides (Baynazarov, 2024).

Beyond domestic factors, a significant threat comes from growing xenophobic sentiments fueled by media outlets within Russia and exerting influence far beyond its borders. For example, the terrorist attack at Crocus City Hall in the Russian Federation, allegedly orchestrated by ISIS-Khorasan, provoked a sharp surge in xenophobic sentiments within Russia (Human Rights Watch, 2025c). This, in turn, led to an even more negative perception of citizens of Central Asia, including Kazakhstan. Pro-nationalist media outlets in Russia actively exploited the situation to advance their own narratives in public discourse, which contributed to the escalation of tensions and became a significant cause of local conflicts. This, in turn, is reflected in the fact that migrants from Central Asia, including citizens of Kazakhstan (Zhursin, 2024), are often forced to participate in Russia's war against Ukraine (Sever Realii, 2025).

Furthermore, local activists speaking out against persecution in Xinjiang are also under attack. For example, in January 2026, Kazakh authorities opened a criminal case against 18 Kazakh activists from the 'Нағыз Атажұрт' movement, who were peacefully protesting the repression

carried out by the Chinese authorities in Xinjiang (Human Rights Watch, 2026). Several sources also indicate that these actions by the Kazakh authorities may have been motivated by pressure from the Chinese government, which has influenced the persecution of activists in Kazakhstan (Mukankyzy et al., 2026). Specifically, the Chinese Consulate in Almaty sent a diplomatic note to the Kazakh Ministry of Foreign Affairs, characterising the protest as a 'deliberately planned and open provocation' and demanding that it 'take appropriate measures'. This case is not unprecedented in terms of pressure on human rights activities, but it is the first time that Kazakh authorities have prosecuted such a significant group of activists demanding respect for human rights in Xinjiang in a single criminal case (Steenberg, 2025).

Kyrgyzstan

In Kyrgyzstan since 2020, state narratives about 'information security' and 'ideological influence' increasingly prioritize three threat clusters: (1) extremism/terrorism and 'radical' content, (2) foreign-backed civic influence framed as political destabilization, and (3) 'harmful' or 'false' information portrayed as undermining social order and elections. The first cluster is operationalized through broad anti-extremism frameworks that enable rapid designation of materials - and, increasingly, organizations - as 'extremist,' creating a powerful tool to remove content and constrain dissent under a security rationale (HRW 2024a; IPHR 2025). Concerns about this trajectory intensified in 2025 with legal changes that observers argue facilitate the misuse of extremism charges and expand penalties related to possession/distribution of 'extremist' materials (IPHR 2025).

The second cluster has been institutionalized through the 2024 'foreign representatives' law, which authorities justify as transparency and security protection but critics describe as a mechanism to stigmatize foreign-funded NGOs and limit their role in shaping public opinion and political discourse (OHCHR 2024; Reuters 2024a; Reuters 2024b). In practice, this reframes civic advocacy, independent monitoring, and parts of the media-adjacent NGO ecosystem as potential conduits of external ideological influence.

The third cluster - information disorder - has become central in 2025–2026. The 2025 media law mandates registration for all media, including online platforms, and restricts foreign ownership, while new penalties for disseminating 'false information' expand administrative leverage over outlets (Reuters 2025a; Reuters 2025b). These measures are increasingly discussed in connection with electoral cycles and state stability narratives (Reuters 2025a). Parallel 'values-based' controls - such as new blocking mandates justified by protecting 'moral and ethical values' and a state-led restructuring of international internet traffic during a 2025 trial - signal a shift toward infrastructural governance of the information space (Reuters 2025d). Together, these policies treat ideological influence less as plural debate and more as a security domain managed through registration, designation, and network control.

Uzbekistan

Internally, Uzbekistan's chief concerns are censoring meaningful criticism of the state at the national level, as well as preventing the spread of Islamism (of any form, be it moderate or radical). Both journalists and average citizens of Uzbekistan have been arrested and harassed for publishing and posting content which criticizes corruption and patronage networks within the government (while initially more tolerated at the beginning of Mirziyoyev's rule, this has become less tolerated the authorities), Any form of dissent which either criticises the ruling elite (Mirziyoyev, his family, and their political allies), or even remotely challenges the ideological foundations of the state (i.e. Islamism) is vigorously suppressed by state security services.

Anything which can be construed as an endorsement of any form of Islam besides the state-approved version is suppressed by the state's security services (Kashimov & Kerimov 2024). Islamic terrorism (with its many manifestations, in particular ISIS-K) is a particular concern of the state, which closely monitors all religious activities and communications. As a result of the 2022 Karakalpakstan protests, the Uzbekistan security services has worked diligently to suppress any protestors or activists who

express concern for the autonomous republic's right to secede (IPHR & AHRCA, 2025). While Karakalpakstan's right to secede via referendum is guaranteed in Uzbekistan's constitution, Tashkent will likely never allow this to take place (Putz, 2023).

Externally, Uzbekistan's multi-vector foreign policy seeks to have good relations with every possible partner, while not overcommitting to any one bloc or partner. Thus, no state actors are designated as security threats (Tashkent has begun to gradually build its relations with Taliban-ruled Afghanistan, giving the regime de facto recognition) (Putz, 2024). Nonetheless, the government of Uzbekistan's periodic censorship of foreign news outlets and various minor rebuffs against Russian and US organisations and figures show Uzbekistan's wariness to let foreign actors shape the country's domestic political discourse (Imamova, 2024).

Tajikistan

Domestically, President Emomali Rahmon strives to maintain a firm control over regional, political and ethnic minorities within the country. Tajik national identity (language, culture, etc. as dictated by the state) is encouraged, whereas non-Tajik identities are discouraged. The practice and promotion of alternative ideologies (for example, religious ideologies, as is the case with Pamiri Ismailis) by minorities is often suppressed by the state. In addition, political opposition is neutralised by the current government. Presidential elections are a formality and are engineered to marginalise any opponents. IRPT (Islamic Renaissance Party) is the most notable oppositional party that is viewed as a security threat by the Tajik government. The party holds no leverage to disseminate its ideology in Tajikistan as it has been officially banned since 2015. Political dissidents often face persecution from the government. Moreover, 'immoral' conduct on social media and blogs is shamed, as it is perceived as a threat to cultural integrity. (Bertelsmann Stiftung 2024)

External security threats are also clearly articulated by the Tajik government. Islamicist groups from Afghanistan that try to propagate their views and ideology in Tajikistan are viewed as the foremost foreign threat by the Tajik government (Shay 2024). The Tajik government continues to securitize the Taliban to a much greater degree than the other Central Asia states, and still views it as a principal threat to Tajik sovereignty. In addition, Western ideas of societal diversity and civil liberties are criticised, sometimes with the help of Russian media (Bertelsmann Stiftung 2024). In 2024, Tajikistan signed an agreement with the Russian Federation on *Co-operation in Ensuring International Information Security,* which reflects the Tajik government's willingness to rely on foreign intelligence sharing to staunch both domestic and foreign religious extremism. (CIVICUS Monitor 2024). Critics of the Tajik government outside Tajikistan have also faced repressions, as well as independent media both inside and outside of Tajikistan.

Turkmenistan

As a result of its totalitarian nature, Turkmenistan's security services and state news outlets work strenuously to erase and prevent any critical or negative depictions of the state or life in Turkmenistan to enter public discourse (Gamba, 2025). In Turkmenistan state media there are little-to-no mentions of arrests or crimes, natural disasters, or crises. The Berdymukhamedov regime wants to prevent any depiction or speculation of a reality different to the status quo, hence Turkmenistan's extreme censorship in its domestic and foreign media. Internally, any efforts or malign influences to present the president and the state as less than perfect are censored. Externally, any attempt to suggest a paradigm that isn't Turkmen nationalism (that all things done in Turkmenistan should conform to notions of Turkmen traditions) or any interference with Turkmenistan's prized neutrality (enshrined in its constitution and promoted as an achievement of global peace by Turkmenistan's foreign policy) are rebuffed. In sum, anything that would suggest that there is any genuine threat to Turkmenistan is scrubbed from Turkmenistan's media sphere.

3.3 How are external entities (Russia, China, Turkey, EU, US, etc.) portrayed in popular discourse and media?

Table 3. Portrayals of External Actors in Central Asia National Medias

External actor	Kazakhstan	Kyrgyzstan	Uzbekistan	Tajikistan	Turkmenistan
Russia	Strategic partner but ambivalent: framed as key security/economic actor (CSTO, EAEU), with growing elite and public unease after 2022; criticism appears mainly online.	Highly visible and contested: portrayed as security guarantor and migration hub in TV/Russian-language media, but increasingly debated and criticized on social media.	Cautious partner: framed as important but not dominant; state media avoid overt dependency narratives; criticism limited.	Primary guarantor: overwhelmingly positive framing as security and migration partner; dependence largely unquestioned.	Neutral-to-positive: framed as pragmatic partner; discourse tightly controlled, little public debate.
China	Economic partner with latent anxiety: official positivity around investment; online discourse raises debt, transparency, and sovereignty concerns.	Ambivalent/securitized: official development narrative vs. popular fears over debt, land, environment; criticism sometimes framed as misinformation.	Mostly positive but opaque: investment and infrastructure highlighted; limited open debate on risks.	Strongly positive: framed as reliable investor and development partner; critical views largely absent domestically.	Quietly positive: portrayed as economic partner; no public debate permitted.
Turkey	Cultural partner: Turkic identity and education emphasized; political influence discussed cautiously.	Soft-power positive: cultural/educational affinity strong, but discourse cooled after pressure on Gülen-linked institutions.	Symbolic and pragmatic: cultural resonance without major political salience.	Marginal: limited cultural or political relevance in media narratives.	Marginal/neutral: occasional diplomatic coverage only.
European Union	Selective partner: framed as economic and regulatory partner; human-rights criticism downplayed in state media.	Polarized: independent media depict EU as reform supporter; state discourse increasingly frames EU as ideological interferer.	Technocratic partner: cooperation emphasized, political conditionality muted.	Securitized critic: portrayed as intrusive and politically biased when raising rights concerns.	Minimal presence: limited, non-political coverage.

External actor	Kazakhstan	Kyrgyzstan	Uzbekistan	Tajikistan	Turkmenistan
United States	Strategic but sensitive: security cooperation acknowledged; democracy discourse treated cautiously post-2022.	Highly polarized: civil society frames the US as a human rights supporter; authorities frame it as destabilizing influence.	Low-key engagement: framed pragmatically, limited ideological emphasis.	Negative/defensive: often portrayed as destabilizing and critical of sovereignty.	Marginal and abstract: framed vaguely, often negatively, with little detail.
International NGOs / media (e.g. RFE/RL)	Tolerated but constrained: legal pressure and delegitimization rhetoric present.	Increasingly securitized: framed as foreign influence after 2024 NGO/media laws.	Restricted but present: access uneven; criticism managed case by case.	Openly hostile: labeled extremist or destabilizing; frequent blocking.	Effectively absent: blocked or inaccessible.

Kazakhstan

The events of 2022, particularly the January mass protests in the Republic of Kazakhstan and Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, have radically altered media perceptions of Russia and triggered several successive phases of transformation in Russia's image. Before 2022, Russia was generally viewed positively, as a reliable economic and political partner with significant cultural influence and historical ties. However, the rise to power of Kassym-Jomart Tokayev and the subsequent geopolitical upheavals have catalysed a shift in Russia's image toward a more critical and often negative perception.

In official state media, Russia's image is generally presented in a cautious and neutral tone, driven by Kazakhstan's multi-vector foreign policy and a desire to avoid unnecessary tension in bilateral relations. However, in unofficial media spaces, primarily Telegram channels and more independent media sources, a steady increase in negative narratives has been observed. A particularly noticeable increase in negative materials was recorded in 2022, during a period of geopolitical escalation, as well as against the backdrop of a large-scale migration flow from the Russian Federation to Kazakhstan (Chernichkin & Krivenko, 2023). Moreover, the criticism is targeted in certain social media channels (namely Telegram), as the negative attitude is directed not so much at Russians as citizens of the Russian Federation as a whole, but at ethnic Russians, who are often attributed "responsibility" for current foreign policy developments in public discourse.

Moreover, in Kazakhstani discourse there is the fear that a military conflict could also engulf Kazakhstan if it attempts to break free from Russia's influence, similar to the Ukrainian case. In a particular segment of Kazakhstani society, Russia is perceived as a dangerous aggressor, whose influence poses a significant threat, yet remains a factor from which it is impossible to completely distance itself. At the same time, amid growing nationalist sentiment within Kazakhstan, Russia-based media are increasingly portraying the country as an 'apostate' that has turned its back on its former 'patron'.

Against the backdrop of Russia's weakening image, China is increasingly prominent, mainly due to the extensive economic cooperation

between the two countries (Slamgazhy et al., 2024). In Kazakhstani media, China is often portrayed as a reliable partner, an initiator of joint projects, and a driving force behind mutually beneficial cooperation (Oshanova, 2024). An additional factor reinforcing this trend is Kassym-Jomart Tokayev's clear political orientation toward Beijing. Critical portrayals of China remain peripheral in Kazakhstani media due to government censorship.

Unlike other external actors, Turkey is viewed in Kazakhstan as a close cultural and historical ally and a reliable strategic partner, not only actively participating in trade and investment but also perceived as a model of successful development and modernisation. Its image combines emotional Turkic affinity with pragmatic economic value (Dzhursunbek, 2025). Additionally, it serves as a 'bridge' to Western markets and technologies, thereby enhancing Kazakhstan's opportunities for diversification and geopolitical balance (Bekrine, 2022).

A mixed and pragmatically positive lens shapes the image of Western countries in Kazakhstan's media landscape. The United States and European countries are often presented as sources of advanced technology, innovation, high living standards, and significant investment. At the same time, politically oriented pro-Russian segments of the media maintain a critical attitude toward the West, emphasising issues of external interference, double standards, and cultural and value differences. Meanwhile, educational, cultural, and youth-oriented content predominantly portrays the West as a space of opportunity, modernisation, and professional growth.

Kyrgyzstan

In Kyrgyzstan, portrayals of external actors in popular discourse and media are notably plural and contested, reflecting the country's historically open mediasphere and competing elite orientations. Russia remains the most visible external actor in mainstream television and Russian-language online media, where it is often framed as a strategic partner, labor-market anchor, and security guarantor through the CSTO and EAEU. Pro-government outlets and Russian retransmitted content emphasize stability, shared history, and economic interdependence, particularly after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, while downplaying geopolitical risks (Freedom House, 2024a; RSF, 2025). At the same time, social media - especially Telegram and YouTube - hosts more critical narratives, including debates over migration dependence, information dominance, and Kyrgyzstan's vulnerability to Russian political pressure.

China is portrayed in a more ambivalent and often securitized manner. Official discourse stresses infrastructure investment, trade, and development cooperation under the Belt and Road Initiative, while popular online discussions frequently raise concerns about debt, land use, environmental damage, and opacity (International Crisis Group, 2024a). These concerns circulate widely on social media and are periodically reframed by authorities as misinformation or externally induced destabilization, especially after 2024–2025 legislative tightening on 'false information' (Reuters, 2025a).

Turkey occupies a comparatively positive symbolic position, particularly in Kyrgyz-language media and cultural discourse, where it is associated with shared Turkic identity, education, and soft power cooperation. However, coverage has become more cautious since Ankara's pressure on Gülen-linked institutions and media, with some civil society actors framing Turkish influence as selective and interest-driven (Freedom House, 2024b).

Portrayals of the EU and United States are polarized. Independent and civil society–adjacent media depict them as supporters of governance reform, media freedom, and development assistance, while pro-government narratives increasingly frame Western actors as sources of ideological interference, NGO-driven destabilization, or 'foreign influence,' especially following the 2024 foreign representatives law (OHCHR 2024; Reuters 2024a). Overall, Kyrgyzstan's discourse reflects pluralism under pressure, with external actors filtered through rising securitization of information space.

Uzbekistan

In transitioning from Karimov's paranoid autarky to Mirziyoyev's outward-facing liberal embrace,

discussions of foreign states in Uzbekistan are shaped by the current government's pragmatic approach to foreign policy. Tashkent's multi-vector approach looks to find as many willing partners as possible, and deemphasis the construction of external threats.

Russia remains one of Uzbekistan's most essential partners in nearly every facet of government. Even since February 2022, the continuation and expansion (though somewhat hesitantly in certain sectors due to fear of secondary sanctions) of bilateral ties between both states has entrenched Russia's image as a source of trade, education, etc. Though this has been tempered by increased harassment of Central Asian migrants in Russia (of whom Uzbekistan citizens constitute the majority) and firm assertions of Uzbekistan's sovereignty in its partnership with Russia (Maracchione, 2025).

China is typically highlighted as an effective economic and logistics partner, which tracks with notable upticks in bilateral trade between the two states, as well as regional Chinese infrastructure projects. China's role in education, technology, and security is also found in local discourse, but is of secondary nature to its economic and infrastructure reputation.

While Turkey-Uzbekistan relations were particularly icy under Karimov, relations between Ankara and Tashkent have improved notably since 2016. Aside from already strong and growing trade ties, Turkey's image in Uzbekistan is greatly enhanced by notions of linguistic and religious kinship, as well as being a common holiday destination and source of TV shows and movies. Turkey also plays a minor, but not insignificant role in Uzbekistan's security and education.

The US's increasing interest in the region has been welcomed by Uzbekistan. The EU's role as a development and trade partner is frequently highlighted in local discourse in a positive light. The EU's role in democracy promotion and human rights has been met with more skepticism by various actors in Uzbekistan's media landscape (Mukasheva, et al., 2024). Nonetheless, the multilateral nature of the EU ensures that it doesn't have the same geopolitical associations attached to it as other large external actors (e.g. China, USA, and Russia).

The US has also been generally viewed in a positive light in Uzbekistan in recent years, viewed as a valuable partner for both trade (in particular technology) and security. While Washington's role as a security partner has been reduced since the US withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021, its role as an economic partner seems to have blossomed in recent meetings (Fouda, 2025). While the US's promotion of democratic and human rights (in particular LGBTQ+ rights) has been met with mixed if not negative feedback in Uzbekistan, this aspect of US foreign policy has receded under the current Trump administration, likely creating less road bumps for the US's public image in Uzbekistan.

Tajikistan

In Tajikistan, portrayals of external actors in media and popular discourse are highly centralized and state-curated, closely aligned with regime security priorities. Russia is consistently framed as Tajikistan's primary strategic partner and security guarantor, particularly in relation to labor migration, military cooperation, and regional stability. State media emphasize Russia's role in protecting Tajik migrants and supporting counterterrorism, while avoiding discussion of power asymmetries or dependence (Freedom House, 2025; RSF, 2025c). Russian media content is widely accessible and reinforces these narratives, contributing to Russia's dominant informational presence.

China is portrayed almost exclusively in positive terms in domestic media, presented as a reliable development partner, investor, and infrastructure provider. Official narratives highlight Chinese-funded roads, energy projects, and industrial zones, while omitting public debate on debt sustainability, security cooperation, or surveillance technologies (International Crisis Group, 2024b). Critical discussion of China-related risks largely occurs in exile media and diaspora social networks, which are frequently blocked or labeled as extremist by authorities.

The United States and European Union are framed far more cautiously and often negatively. State discourse emphasizes Western criticism of Tajikistan's human rights record as politically motivated interference, while portraying democracy promotion and civil society support as vehicles for ideological destabilization (CIVICUS Monitor, 2025b). Western-funded media, particularly Radio Ozodi, are regularly accused of spreading disinformation or inciting unrest, especially regarding coverage of Gorno-Badakhshan (CPJ, 2024b; HRW, 2024b).

Turkey plays a marginal role in Tajik media discourse, largely limited to diplomatic formalities and economic cooperation, without the cultural resonance it enjoys in Turkic-speaking states.
Overall, Tajikistan's portrayal of external actors reflects a binary security lens: partners that reinforce regime stability (Russia, China) are legitimized, while actors associated with pluralism, rights advocacy, or alternative narratives (EU, US) are securitized. This framing reinforces a closed information environment in which external influence is assessed primarily by its perceived impact on regime control rather than public debate.

Turkmenistan

With its heavy state censorship and hyper-focus on neutrality, it is difficult to measure how (and if, to any meaningful degree) external entities are portrayed in popular discourse in Turkmenistan beyond everyone being active partners working towards each other's mutual benefit. Browsing the media produced in Turkmenistan and by its diaspora, the discourse surrounding any one particular country almost exclusively evolves around meetings, trade, and deepening bilateral relations.

From what little meaningful discourse can be gleaned from available online materials, China and Turkey are portrayed as Ashgabat's main partners for trade and education (Llyod's Bank, 2025). The availability of Russian and Turkish satellite TV in Turkmenistan provides grassroots exposure of Turkmenistan's population to each country's respective media spheres. Both countries host the two largest diasporas of Turkmenistani citizens, which shapes popular conceptions of Russia and Turkey as destinations for work and residency.

3.4 What role do EU/Estonian media play in Central Asia? What are potential avenues for further engagement and cooperation?

While the EU is Central Asia's second largest trading partner and the largest foreign investor, and initiatives such as the EU's Global Gateway and the Green Deal provide a framework for increasing trade, investment and connectivity, EU media plays a comparatively insignificant role in Central Asia (see section 2.2 for a brief overview of the limited scope and consumption of EU based media in CA). EU actions in CA have largely remained at the government level and most investments are made in the transport, energy and security sectors (Boonstra, EU-Central Asia connectivity: Using all the pieces, 2024), although freedom of expression and association, as well as enabling an environment for independent media is stated to be at the core of EU-CA relations (General Secretariat of the Council, Council Conclusions on the New Strategy on Central Asia, 2019).

However, due to the rise in authoritarian tendencies in CA during the past 5 years, it is increasingly difficult to take meaningful action in the region. The European Parliament's fact sheet on Central Asia also highlights the discrepancy between the EU's foreign policy goals and real opportunities for their implementation: "The scope of the EU's relations is linked to the readiness of individual Central Asian countries to undertake reforms and strengthen democracy, human rights, the rule of law and the independence of the judiciary" (Soutullo & Rinaldi, 2025). Moreover, the EU does not have as close ties with the local ruling elite as Russia does, and insofar as the EU holds by its commitment to democratic values, supporting the local, mainly government owned media, comes with significant strategic risks.

As for further EU action, supporting civil society initiatives, education and vocational training should be at the forefront of critical action in the region. Given the region's governments' authoritarian tendencies and legislature, explicit action on official levels is difficult, however, EU

programs and funding could be directed towards engaging with civil society organisations and other local actors in equal partnerships as exchange of skills and knowledge, rather than offering 'developmental aid'. In equal partnerships, the EU side will also have the opportunity to learn from locals about their real-life concerns. Being open and flexible in its initiatives and programs is also crucial for meaningful action. (ERIM, 2024)

Opportunities for Estonia

Russian propaganda and consumption of Russian media are a problem Estonia shares with the CA. Both historical and geographic factors have made Estonia susceptible to Russian propaganda, especially the Russophone part of the Estonian population, who for a long time had no real alternatives to Russian Federation TV channels and radio for the consumption of high-quality media in their mother tongue. In Central Asia, Russian media is often seen as a better alternative to local media, which is underfunded and of relatively low quality (Gabdulhakov, 2023). Most media in CA have concentrated into the hands of governing elites with strong connections to Russia.

A potential cooperation project between CA countries and Estonia could be the production of Russian language programs and news to provide a high-quality alternative to Russian state media. Given our shared Soviet past, Estonia's cooperation with local Central Asian experts and organisations could also help counter the narrative of Western news as an agent of colonialism and spreading of western values.

However, more public, visible cooperation could be rather complicated, given the current media environment and legislature in Central Asia. Notably, various 'foreign agents' laws could pose a problem, as well as other legislation which subjects publications to mandatory registration, and/or bars foreign participation in founding media outlets. Flexibility, cooperating with and supporting already existing local civil society organisations can help overcome some of these hurdles. Another potential area for cooperation is education and vocational training. Estonia could open internship or mentoring positions for CA students in the Russian (or English) departments of Estonian media outlets.

4. Civil Society in the Central Asia Mediasphere

Summary and Key Findings

As the situation of civil society organisations in Central Asia becomes more precarious amidst deepening authoritarianism, people-to-people connections stand out as the most effective tool in strengthening pluralism and independent thought in the region. Increasingly, official engagements with the Central Asian countries have the effect of strengthening the current elite and remain inaccessible for any true opposition or simply those not affiliated with the (urban) elite, universities or other similar institutions. Independent actors in the region see projects aimed at achieving specific objectives during a limited time period as most fruitful both in on-the-ground impact and lasting people-to-people connections between partner organisations. Moreover, as many civil society organisations and opposition groups are excluded from official spaces in media and governance, flexible solutions and readiness to use alternative communication channels and media spaces is paramount.

In all five Central Asian states, traditional media is largely under state control, so opposition groups make use of social media, encrypted messengers, and VPN services for communicating alternative viewpoints and challenging state narratives. From notable online platforms, YouTube is popular for longer commentaries and investigations, Telegram groups for often anonymous citizen journalism and real-time reporting. As for younger groups, particularly urban youth, TikTok has emerged as a new sphere for news and discussions. In TikTok and to a lesser extent across all online platforms, memes and satire have become popular instruments for communicating government critical and alternative viewpoints.

4.1 What roles do international educational, cultural, and media projects play in supporting pluralism and critical thinking in Central Asian societies?

International educational, cultural, and media projects have real impact on the Central Asian civil societies, as people-to-people actions tend to be most effective in strengthening independent media, civil society, and critical thinking skills in general. Strengthening people-to-people contacts and mobility is also included in the 2023 *Joint Roadmap for Deepening Ties between the EU and Central Asia* as one of the 5 key areas for future cooperation. The EU focuses on further developing ongoing programmes like Horizon Europe and Erasmus+, including improving their visibility in Central Asia. Another official, EU funded platform for civil society engagement is The EU-Central Asia Civil Society Forum, last held in January 2025, in Almaty, Kazakhstan.

However, as such official engagements are often inaccessible to genuine political opposition and government-critical organisations in the region, independent institutions play a crucial role in furthering civil and media freedoms, democracy, and human rights in Central Asia.

The shift towards a more authoritarian media landscape has been most drastic in Kyrgyzstan, until recently an island of democracy in the region, has now seen many civil rights and liberties erode. In June 2025, the parliament adopted a new mass media law that will subject all publications, both on- and offline, to mandatory registration, and bar foreign participation in founding media outlets; president Japarov signed the law into action in August. In October, The Kyrgyz district court banned three independent media outlets (Kloop, Temirov Live, and Ayt Ayt Dese) after labelling them "extremist", but refused to specify the exact content designated to fall under the 'extremism' category. (Putz, 2025 & Article 19, 2025) Under the new law, The Cabinet of Ministers essentially has exclusive powers to decide who in Kyrgyzstan can publish information and who cannot.

The erosion of democracy, pluralism, and critical thinking is not only the result of government oppression and censorship, but also that of uninformed engagement by outside actors and systematic exclusion on digital platforms due to algorithmic curation. As a result, urban, well-networked NGOs have relatively better access to funding, while complex application processes and donor organisations' risk-averse attitudes leave youth-led collectives, Indigenous groups, and rural organizers on the sidelines. (DDI, 2025) Larger programs, and many EU initiatives (e.g. ERASMUS+) often expect institutional affiliations from their applicants and/or have rather technical application processes which can be difficult to get through for rural groups with less technical experiences.

Well-informed actions and equal partnerships with local organisations and other actors are therefore crucial for any real change. More specialised, smaller independent institutions can be more flexible in their activities and partnerships, engaging with local actors on their terms and responding to the real needs of their target groups. Smaller, targeted initiatives can also prioritise reaching groups that are otherwise less visible.

Independent actors in the region regard civil society projects to be most fruitful in EU development cooperation, followed by companies, universities and schools, and lastly governments and local authorities. **The best results are seen in non-region-specific thematic programmes, where civil society actors in Europe and Central Asia work together on specific objectives for a limited period**. Such cooperation is also most visible to Central Asians on the ground. (Boonstra & Smagulova, 2024)

Some current international initiatives and projects in Central Asia:

- Equal Rights and Independent Media (ERIM), founded in 2004 Lyon, France is a non-profit NGO with a mission to promote human rights, strengthen civil society and independent media, and empower individuals through the strengthening of critical thinking skills. ERIM's approach emphasises cooperation founded on equal partnership and flexibility to ensure real impact on their target groups' specific

situation and needs. ERIM also supports grassroots and unregistered initiatives and those out of urban centres.
    - QLEVER+ is one of ERIM's finished projects, aimed at promoting critical thinking and strengthening the resilience of vulnerable youth in Central Asia to misinformation, propaganda, violent radicalism and hate speech online. It also provided support to local media for the production of quality content to domestic audiences. The Qlever online platform offers interactive educational games that engage young people through a reward-based system.
- Brave Media project, CA branch CARE concentrates on locally lead solutions and aims to strengthen the capacities and resilience of independent media and supporting journalists and media outlets as credible sources of information in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. It is co-funded by the European Commission.
- An e-governance Academy (eGA) project "Team Europe Initiative on Digital Connectivity in Central Asia" aims to support digitally driven socio-economic inclusion in particular for women, youth, and further vulnerable groups through facilitating safe and inclusive satellite connectivity access and use across Central Asian countries.

4.2 In what ways do opposition groups use information tools and social media to promote alternative ideologies or political visions?

The five Central Asian states present an interesting case of how opposition groups adapt to restrictive political environments and use new media to promote alternative voices. Social media (e.g., YouTube, Facebook, Instagram), messengers (e.g., Telegram, WhatsApp), and virtual private networks (VPNs) are used by such groups to challenge state-controlled narratives. They produce posts, blogs and vlogs, videos and infographics, memes, stories, and other similar online materials that criticise government actions, inequalities, corruption, and other abuses of power. For instance, activists like Zhanbolat Mamay have used Telegram and YouTube to disseminate alternative narratives (demqaz, 2020).

One way of using new media tools by opposition groups is via employing VPNs, mirror websites, 'alternative' methods (e.g., memes, satire), and publishing anonymously. For example, Turkmen and Uzbek dissidents living abroad operate various media platforms that disseminate information anonymously provided by individuals residing in Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. Turkmen.news (an independent news and human rights organisation for Turkmenistan) states explicitly that it 'in no circumstances will […] reveal the identity of its sources' and invites anonymous contributions by those living inside Turkmenistan, providing Telegram, Signal, and WhatsApp numbers and one email address (en.turkmen.news, 2025). 'VPNs are illegal in Turkmenistan but are widely used to circumvent government restrictions on the Internet' (Türkmen gullugy, 2021). Regarding 'alternative' methods in the region, TikTok is emerging as a new political arena for humour and memes, especially among Kazakhstani and Uzbekistani youth.

Another way of using information tools and social media is through mobilising support and engagement. Since offline protests are often restricted or suppressed in Central Asia, opposition groups use digital tools and new media for networked organisation and coordination. Encrypted apps such as WhatsApp and Telegram provide more windows for such actions. For example, during the 2022 *Qandy Qantar* (Bloody January) protests in Kazakhstan, mainly Telegram channels acted as real-time information providers and platforms for citizen journalism (Bisenov, 2022). Such mobilisation and engagement can especially be observed more in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, with rapid growth in Uzbekistan. In recent years, Telegram has become one of the most significant political communication tools in Central Asia for its instantaneous updates, anonymous political discussions, and channels that facilitate coordinating collective action.

Opposition groups use social media and other online platforms also for building international networks and engaging with domestic

audiences. Many of them operate in exile (e.g., in Europe). Bolot Temirov runs Temirov Live (a YouTube-based investigative media outlet that investigates corruption in Kyrgyzstan) in exile in Russian and Kyrgyz languages. Some operate through partnerships with global or regional media. The *Erk* movement in Uzbekistan, though long prohibited domestically, for example, maintains online presences that keep their political ideas alive (Putz, 2021). The Democratic Choice of Kazakhstan led by Mukhtar Ablyazov, exiled oligarch-turned-opposition figure, operates on YouTube, Telegram, TikTok, and Instagram, producing anti-corruption investigations, calls for demonstrations, criticism of the Nazarbayev/Tokayev power and uses short-video content to reach younger urban Kazakhstanis. In Central Asia, YouTube can be named as the leading online platform for lengthy political content, ranging from investigative reports to ideological discussions and videos that challenge government narratives. It is, especially, a preferred social media for exiled opposition groups seeking to avoid state censorship.

Moreover, Central Asian opposition groups are constantly adapting their new media use and strategies to overcome censorship and repression (see more in Kurmanov 2024), which can be characterised as a *digital arms race* between states in the region and opposition groups. The analysis of Kurmanov and Knox (2024) suggest that authoritarian regimes in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan use mechanisms like limited participation, outputs legitimation, regime discourse, and targeted repression in dealing with digital activists. After the Kazakh Spring, for instance, feminist and civil activism more broadly has 'migrated' to Instagram and Telegram (Azizi 2022, 222). In 2019, Kyrgyzstan launched a new police command centre in Bishkek that uses a facial-recognition camera network, which was provided at no cost by the China National Electronics Import and Export Corporation (Jardine, 2019). In 2021, four 'Oyan, Qazaqstan' (Wake Up, Kazakhstan) activists' mobile devices were infected with the Pegasus spyware by the Kazakhstani government seeking to silence political dissent (Amnesty International 2021). Amnesty International (2020) also identified a campaign of phishing and Android/Windows spyware attacks targeting Human Rights Defenders (HRDs) from Uzbekistan. These are prime examples of how the states in the region are using advanced cyber tools to monitor, intimidate, and potentially silence opponents.

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