

NOVEMBER  
2025

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ADVANCING MEDIA RESILIENCE

## Information Environment Mapping in **Central Asia:**

Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan,  
and Tajikistan



Co-funded by  
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MEDIA  
DEVELOPMENT



## **AGILE Project**

*Information Environment Mapping in Central Asia: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan*

Prepared by: ACT Global

Published by: CFI

Date: November 2025

**Note:** This report draws on publicly available secondary data and insights from civil society, media, and marginalized communities in Central Asia. ACT Global expresses its sincere gratitude to all research participants who generously shared their experiences, observations, and recommendations regarding the information environment in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan.

**Citation:** Canal France International - CFI. Information Environment Mapping in Central Asia. November 2025.

This report has been produced with the financial assistance of the European Union. The contents of this report are the sole responsibility of CFI and can under no circumstances be regarded as reflecting the position of the European Union.

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# Information Environment Mapping in Central Asia: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan

## Executive Summary

Minority rights in Central Asia—especially in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan—are severely limited by authoritarian regimes and nation-building policies that marginalize religious, ethnic, linguistic, and sexual minorities. Religious freedoms are tightly controlled, minority languages and cultures are suppressed, and incidents of ethnic violence and repression persist, such as in **Kyrgyzstan** (2010), **Kazakhstan** (2020 Dungan attacks), and **Tajikistan** (Pamiri crackdowns). Sexual minorities face criminalization and widespread societal prejudice, with **Uzbekistan** explicitly criminalizing same-sex relations. Despite leadership changes in some countries, genuine legal protections and political pluralism remain absent.

Under the aforementioned conditions, vulnerable communities confront systemic barriers to accessing diverse and reliable information due to state media control, restrictive laws, internet censorship, and digital divides, exacerbated by ethnicity, language, gender, and sexual orientation. Internet restrictions, media suppression, and targeted harassment of independent journalists and activists are common across the region, undermining minority participation and trust. These challenges fuel the spread of misinformation, disinformation, and hate speech, which threaten social cohesion and democratic processes. For example, **Kazakhstan** faces periodic surges of disinformation linked to nationalist and conspiratorial narratives and may pass a Russian-style law against "LGBT propaganda" this year; **Kyrgyzstan** increasingly cracks down on independent media, jails women activists, and has a history of politicians using nationalist political rhetoric with impunity; **Uzbekistan** strongly restricts the freedom of speech of all citizens but especially that of political activists, sexual minorities and religious minorities; and **Tajikistan** systematically imposes information blackouts during political crises, including during military crackdowns in the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Oblast (GBAO) region populated by ethnic and religious minority groups.

Journalists increasingly use digital and social media platforms, but they face political interference, limited resources, and a lack of investigative support, which restricts their impact on political change. Audience fragmentation, such as ethnic minorities favoring Telegram over Facebook, further complicates access to information. In this restrictive environment, civil society organizations play a crucial role in bridging information gaps for vulnerable communities by promoting media literacy, human rights awareness, and digital inclusion through innovative digital platforms, grassroots outreach, and multilingual resources.

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## Key Findings

Information Environment Mapping in Central Asia:  
Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan



## Key Findings

### Information Supply

- State media control, restrictive laws, surveillance, and periodic internet blackouts limit access to diverse and reliable information in the region.
- Civil society fills crucial information gaps in the region via media literacy, legal aid, open data, and localized multilingual outreach despite a shrinking civic space.
- Trusted regional intermediaries (Akimats in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan; Khokimiyats and Mahallas in Uzbekistan; Rais and elder councils in Tajikistan) are essential last-mile distributors of information in hard-to-reach areas but can also unintentionally amplify misinformation.
- Bloggers often out-reach official channels but lack standards and are increasingly targeted by the same repressive tools as journalists.
- Regional disinformation flows, including those linked to Russia and China, mix with domestic politics and take advantage of social divisions.
- Some media sector representatives in all four countries consider that the government is the main creator and distributor of disinformation.
- Infrastructure projects (e.g., DARE in Kazakhstan, Digital Foundations in Tajikistan) target rural broadband but face affordability and capacity constraints.
- Government e-service portals (e.g., Tunduk in Kyrgyzstan, MyGov in Uzbekistan) have expanded, but awareness, usability, language coverage, and rural access lag.

### Information Demand

- Vulnerable groups in all four countries rely most on social media and television; interpersonal networks remain influential but can accelerate rumor spread.
- Short, visually engaging videos are the most preferred and trusted information format across audiences in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan.
- The most sought information domains are public services, healthcare (especially for women), and jobs (especially for men) in the region.
- Women face cultural and logistical barriers to health information; preventive care knowledge is low, and campaigns are often short-lived in Central Asia.
- Employment information flows are highly informal, with personal networks gatekeeping access and undermining equity in all four countries.



## Information Demand

- Audience fragmentation is pronounced in the region: ethnic minorities gravitate to Telegram, while many journalists still publish primarily via Facebook.
- Digital divides—especially rural connectivity gaps—compound exclusion despite rising internet penetration and smartphone use in Central Asia.
- Traditional gathering practices (Aitys; Gap/Tashkil/Chayhana) remain powerful channels for community information exchange in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan.

## Challenges

- Minority rights in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan are systematically constrained by authoritarian governance, nation-building policies, and societal intolerance.
- Religious freedom is tightly controlled across the region, with state oversight of worship, education, and literature disproportionately affecting non-dominant groups.
- Ethnic and linguistic minorities in all four countries face exclusion through education policies, media restrictions, and periodic crackdowns (e.g., Uzbeks in Kyrgyzstan; Pamiris in Tajikistan and Karakalpaks in Uzbekistan).
- LGBTQI+ communities remain highly vulnerable—criminalized in Uzbekistan and stigmatized and unprotected elsewhere—with coordinated disinformation targeting them.
- In Kazakhstan, rising online hate speech and new “false information” penalties risk chilling legitimate expression.
- In Uzbekistan, political disinformation and cyber-fraud thrive amid uneven digital literacy and persistent surveillance and funding controls.
- Tajikistan exhibits the harshest media controls, centralized internet-gateway surveillance, high data costs, and frequent outages.
- Repression of journalists has intensified in recent years with arrests, lawsuits, raids, and site blocking creating a climate of fear.
- Journalistic practice in all four countries is constrained by political interference, concentrated ownership, limited resources, and pervasive self-censorship.

## Opportunities

- Digital-literacy efforts exist in the region but often emphasize safety and compliance over critical analysis, missing the most vulnerable.
- Inclusion gaps persist in the region: disability-accessible formats, minority-language content, and plain-language service guides are scarce.
- Trust is fragile; corrections policies, transparent sourcing, and routine “myth vs. fact” outputs are limited and inconsistently adopted in all four countries.
- Donor programming in the region skews toward short campaigns; always-on, KPI-driven information services are needed to build durable resilience.
- Expanding connectivity alone does not ensure inclusion; rights protections, multilingual access, and sustained, community-anchored information services are decisive in the region.

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## Recommendations

Information Environment Mapping in Central Asia:  
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## Recommendations on Improving the Information Environment in Central Asia

These recommendations provide actionable, scalable solutions to Central Asia's mutual information challenges across Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan. They focus on practical ways to address restricted civic space, uneven digital access, low digital and media literacy, minority language exclusion, and persistent disinformation, using existing state, community, CSO, and media structures to protect vulnerable groups.

### Recommendations

- Prioritize minority-language content across state and independent channels, with quotas for TV, radio, and digital platforms.
- Fund community translators and local editors to adapt service, health, and legal information into Uzbek, Tajik, Pamiri, Karakalpak, Kyrgyz, Kazakh, Russian, and regional dialects.
- Mandate plain-language, one-page service guides (how/where/what docs/costs) for the top 20 public services per country.
- Co-produce 60–90-second videos (TikTok/Instagram/Telegram) for every public announcement, pairing text summaries with captions.
- Cooperate with trusted intermediaries (Akimats/Khokimiyats/Mahallas/elders) as last-mile distributors by asking them to help connect with remote audiences, and require rumor-control steps: pre-briefs, fact cards, and hotline scripts.
- Establish rapid rumor-response cells that publish 24-hour myth-versus-fact cards in Kazakh, Kyrgyz, Uzbek, Tajik, and minority languages.
- Shift donor funding from one-off campaigns to 12-month, always-on information services with monthly KPI reviews.
- Embed disability-inclusive formats (audio, large print, sign-language insets, screen-reader PDFs) as a procurement requirement.
- In rural areas, pair every digital push with offline mirrors: posters, market-day booths, radio PSAs, and SMS micro-bursts.
- Build “health navigation” mini-curricula for women (checkups, vaccines, referral steps) delivered via clinics, markets, and Telegram mothers’ groups.
- Train school social workers and Mahalla staff as Health and Rights Navigators with referral checklists and consent scripts.
- Publish weekly geo-targeted job bulletins on Telegram/WhatsApp and notice boards at Mardikor centers and mosques/teahouses.



## Recommendations

- Incentivize employers to post vacancies publicly (tax credits/visibility badges) and require salary ranges to curb gatekeeping.
- Expand e-service literacy through pop-up “digital help desks” at banks, post offices, and clinics with step-by-step screens.
- Negotiate zero-rating for priority portals (MyGov, Tunduk, health, legal aid) and offer “data vouchers” for vulnerable users.
- In Kazakhstan, expand rural broadband via DARE with community Wi-Fi hubs anchored in schools, clinics, and women’s centers.
- In Kyrgyzstan, bundle media and information literacy (MIL) with legal awareness so “false information” rules don’t chill speech.
- In Uzbekistan, align the AIM Program outputs with minority outreach—Karakalpak/Tajik content and rural radio explainers.
- In Tajikistan, subsidize devices/connectivity for girls and ethnic minorities, and seed localized curricula in Pamiri and Tajik.
- Create a regional fact-checking alliance to share keywords, debunks, and influencer toolkits across Telegram and YouTube.
- Require all grantees to publish a “disinformation risk register” per campaign and pre-test messages with vulnerable groups.
- Protect journalists by funding legal-defense pools, digital-security audits, and emergency relocation routes.
- Diversify outreach by partnering with credible bloggers and training them on verification, corrections, and disclosures.
- Reanimate Aitys/Gap/Chayhana traditions as civics forums—moderated sessions that translate policies into community actions.
- Formalize CSO–ministry MOUs so NGOs can mirror official information, co-own dashboards, and escalate frontline feedback.
- Publish monthly service-delivery scorecards (requests, processing times, resolution rates) to rebuild trust.
- Deploy hotline/Telegram bots with human take-over for health, jobs, and legal aid, logging unresolved cases for follow-up.
- Track inclusion with disaggregated KPIs (language, gender, disability, minority status, rural/urban) and publish quarterly.



## Recommendations

- Establish “pre-bunking” micro-series on typical scams (banking, migration, health) using story-based 30–45-second clips.
- Translate key laws into citizen guides with examples, appeal steps, and printable checklists in minority languages.
- Require every Mahalla/Akimat/Rais outreach plan to name target groups (women, persons with disabilities—PwDs, migrants), channels, and post-event follow-ups.
- Build a cross-border “Info First Responders” roster (journalists, CSOs, doctors, lawyers) for synchronized crisis messaging.
- Fund local radio revamps (short shows + call-ins) where electricity/internet are unreliable, and archive clips to Telegram.
- Create a shared creative library (icons, templates, voice-over scripts) so small outlets can produce high-quality, on-brand videos quickly.
- Reward transparency with small grants for outlets publishing corrections policies, source labeling, and data notes.
- Close the loop: after every session, escort beneficiaries to enroll or apply on the spot and log completion in a shared tracker.

## Local Insights from Subject-Matter Experts, Civil Society, Media Sector and Members of Marginalized Communities in Central Asia

During the research, participants from civil society, academia, media, and marginalized communities in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan shared their insights on how to improve their countries' information environments. Their recommendations address challenges such as censorship, limited access to reliable information, digital divides, and language barriers, offering a roadmap to strengthen media systems, foster inclusivity, and build public trust.

### Kazakhstan

- Promote accountability through cancel culture: audiences should call out media mistakes, demand corrections, and stop supporting unreliable outlets.
- Systemize laws to avoid arbitrary blocking of social media platforms like Facebook or TikTok, ensuring regulations are clear and fair.
- Focus on technical capacity to limit harmful content such as pornography and violence, without over-regulating other online spaces.
- Reform the constitution and laws so they are based on universal human rights principles, rather than presidential decrees or political party interests.
- Create a legal framework to protect human rights defenders, journalists, and activists.
- Increase production of independent and diverse content, reducing over-reliance on state-funded media that discourages citizens from demanding their rights.

### Kyrgyzstan

- Introduce fake news detection courses in schools to teach young people how to identify misinformation.
- Develop manuals and specialists for both schools and government agencies on how to work effectively with social networks.
- Expand media outlets targeted at youth, as current information flows are dominated by bloggers and influencers.
- Create a methodology to identify hate speech and verbal harassment online, making it easier for media and organizations to regulate content.
- Improve the quality of government chatbots and online services, ensuring they provide clear and helpful information.
- Ensure information is adapted for people with disabilities, including those with hearing or visual impairments.



## Kyrgyzstan

- Address language complexity barriers, simplifying official information so it's understandable to broader audiences.
- Support local journalists and regional coverage so rural areas are better represented in mainstream media.
- Combat misinformation by promoting the “two-source rule” for verifying information before publication.
- Provide accessible, simplified information for people without smartphones or digital skills, including women and low-income households.
- Improve digital literacy among older generations and those under 55 who lack access to brochures and online guides.
- Address gender barriers by increasing women's access to phones and independent sources of information.
- Strengthen community-based verification networks to filter WhatsApp and Telegram group misinformation.
- Raise awareness about phishing and online fraud, giving people practical tools to protect themselves.
- Restore open governance practices, reversing the shrinking information space of the past five years.

## Uzbekistan

- Implement training of trainers programs to teach communities how to identify trustworthy sources and recognize disinformation.
- Involve Mahalla committees, schools, and mosques in outreach and education on digital literacy and information verification.
- Introduce gender-sensitive education and early digital literacy programs in schools to prevent involvement in criminal activities and reduce misinformation spread.
- Ensure information accessibility for people with disabilities, including deaf individuals, through sign language interpreters and adapted content.
- Disseminate illustrated materials and brochures for women and others with limited time or literacy to quickly access key information.
- Expand internet education programs to reach people online, emphasizing peer-to-peer learning and digital responsibility.



## Uzbekistan

- Improve media and digital literacy through TV and internet campaigns, ensuring equal internet connectivity across all regions.
- Provide visual, simplified content for populations with low literacy, especially in rural areas, to replace overly text-heavy information.
- Address urban-rural divides by ensuring rural communities receive equal access to information and quality internet services.

## Tajikistan

- Stop pressuring media outlets and punish officials who suppress information or intimidate journalists.
- Release jailed journalists, bloggers, and activists to create a freer and safer media environment.
- Improve transparency and governance by addressing corruption and incompetence in public institutions.
- Provide information in all languages, including Tajik, Russian, Uzbek, and the Pamiri and Afghan languages.
- Use subtitles and multilingual materials for videos and broadcasts to reach diverse audiences.
- Simplify messages for social media: focus on short, clear content instead of long reports or complex narratives.
- Collaborate with government, international donors, and local NGOs to improve the information environment collectively.
- Develop media literacy programs, but adapt them for rural populations since many live outside urban centers.
- Increase internet access in rural areas to reduce the digital divide.

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## Introduction

Information Environment Mapping in Central Asia:  
Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan



## Introduction

Minority rights in Central Asia—particularly in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan—remain severely constrained due to entrenched authoritarian governance and nation-building agendas that marginalize non-dominant groups. Despite leadership changes in the region that have sparked cautious optimism for reform in the past, the realities on the ground reveal persistent patterns of discrimination, repression, and exclusion across religious, ethnic, linguistic, and sexual identity lines.

Religious freedoms are among the most heavily curtailed rights in the region. In **Kazakhstan**, legal amendments introduced in 2011 imposed strict government control over places of worship and religious literature, with members of minority faiths routinely prosecuted for minor infractions such as possessing unauthorized religious texts.<sup>1</sup> Similar patterns exist in **Kyrgyzstan**, where the state recognizes only the Hanafi school of Sunni Islam and exercises direct control over Islamic institutions, appointing clerics and policing doctrinal expression. This control has disproportionately affected ethnic Uzbek communities in southern Kyrgyzstan, where independent Muslim leaders face ongoing persecution.<sup>2</sup> In **Uzbekistan**, violations of religious freedom remain acute, with thousands imprisoned under charges of extremism, often based on tenuous or fabricated evidence. Although President Mirziyoyev has enacted modest reforms, including the release of some human rights defenders and the closure of the notorious Jaslyk prison, these gestures have not extended to the majority of religious prisoners, and the government continues to exert tight control over religious life. In **Tajikistan**, although the constitution guarantees freedom of religion, in practice, the government maintains tight control over religious life.<sup>3</sup> For example, laws prohibit minors from attending mosques and restrict religious education. The government also passed a law banning "alien garments," which is widely understood to include Islamic attire such as the hijab.<sup>4</sup>

The suppression of religious freedom is mirrored in the treatment of ethnic and linguistic minorities, who have faced systemic exclusion since the collapse of the Soviet Union. All countries have pursued nation-state consolidation strategies that favor titular ethnic groups while sidelining minority populations. In **Kyrgyzstan**, interethnic tensions culminated in the violent 2010 clashes in the southern cities of Osh and Jalalabad, where hundreds of ethnic Uzbeks were killed, wounded, or arbitrarily detained. A decade later, these communities continue to face discrimination, particularly in accessing justice, as authorities have failed to revisit convictions obtained through torture and other abuses.<sup>5</sup>

In **Kazakhstan**, the state's efforts to solidify national identity through a policy of "Kazakhization" have contributed to the marginalization of non-Kazakh communities. Incidents such as the 2020 attacks on Dungan villages underscore the precarious position of minority groups, who often lack genuine political representation and face institutional bias.<sup>6</sup> **Uzbekistan**, has traditionally maintained tight control over minority organizations through state-sponsored cultural centers led by regime-loyal figures and the state violently repressed pro-autonomy protests in Karakalpakstan in 2022, causing more than 20 deaths according to an official toll and many more than that according to Karakalpak activists. Expressions of ethnic

<sup>1</sup> Open Doors Us (2025). Country Profile: Kazakhstan.

<sup>2</sup> Ashiraliev, E. (2019). Kyrgyzstan Attempts To Isolate Local Islam. *The Diplomat*

<sup>3</sup> Human Rights Watch (2023). Uzbekistan: Backsliding On Religious Freedom Promises.

<sup>4</sup> Library Of The U.S Congress (2024). Tajikistan: New Law Bans Muslim Clothing And Limits Religious Celebrations.

<sup>5</sup> Baialieva, G., & Kutmanaliev, J. (2020). A Decade On, What Has Been Learnt From Kyrgyzstan's 2010 Clashes? *Opendemocracy*

<sup>6</sup> Anti-Discrimination Centre (2020). The Korday Pogrom: The Dungan People Of Kazakhstan Seek Justice.

identity remain subject to state approval, and perceived disloyalty can carry social and political consequences. In **Tajikistan**, ethnic minorities are officially protected under the constitution; however, some groups, such as the Pamiri minority, face systemic discrimination. The government has been accused of suppressing their cultural and religious institutions and using excessive force against protesters in the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Oblast (GBAO), with dozens reportedly killed in crackdowns between 2021 and 2022.<sup>7</sup>

Language rights are a further area of concern, deeply intertwined with ethnic discrimination. Educational systems across the region have steadily shifted toward promoting titular languages at the expense of minority tongues. In **Kazakhstan**, the expansion of Kazakh-language schooling has coincided with a reduction in schools teaching in minority languages, limiting access to education for non-Kazakh communities.<sup>8</sup> In **Kyrgyzstan**, the post-2010 period saw the closure of Uzbek-language media and schools, contributing to the erosion of linguistic diversity.<sup>9</sup> **“We have a sizable Uzbek community, but after the Osh events, channels broadcasting in Uzbek were shut down,”** - confirmed a research participant from Kyrgyzstan. Similarly, in **Uzbekistan**, the Tajik language faces media restrictions, and the gradual replacement of Karakalpak names with Uzbek ones in the autonomous Karakalpakstan region reflects a broader trend of cultural assimilation.<sup>10</sup> In **Tajikistan**, although the constitution designates Tajik as the state language and Russian as the language of inter-ethnic communication, the use of other minority languages, such as the Pamir languages, is suppressed in public life, the media, and education.<sup>11</sup>



„The Pamir region [Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Region - GBAO] is really far—like a 12-hour drive by car—and there’s no internet there at all. Some villages, like Murghab, have maybe a hundred families and have never even had electricity. The only way to share any information is to actually go there in person or hand out leaflets.

Pamiris are Tajiks, but they speak different languages and dialects. Even within the Pamir region, people from different areas sometimes can’t understand each other. Tajik isn’t their native language, and schools don’t really teach it well. A lot of young people don’t see any reason to learn it. They watch movies and shows in Russian, and sometimes cartoons in Pamiri languages, but there’s nothing interesting in Tajik for them. Most don’t even plan to study in Tajikistan—they’re thinking about going to Russia instead. English is also very popular now, especially in the villages.

Tajik used to have some influence there because many Ismaili prayers and songs were in Tajik, so educated Pamiris would know it. But that was never the case for most people. Now it’s even worse—without good education or interesting content, the language just feels distant.

If the government really wants to change that, they need to improve how Tajik is taught and give people a reason to learn it. If the language doesn’t bring you anything—no opportunities, no benefits—why would anyone bother learning it?!” - **a Pamiri immigrant from Tajikistan**

<sup>7</sup> Amnesty International (2024). Tajikistan: Pamiri Minority Facing Systemic Discrimination In ‘Overlooked Human Rights Crisis’.

<sup>8</sup> Yedgina, G. et al (2023). Language Policy In Kazakhstan In The Context Of World Practice. Journal Of Nationalism, Memory & Language Politics Volume 17, Issue 1

<sup>9</sup> The Times Of Central Asia (2025). Experts Warn Of Rights Violations In Kyrgyzstan’s Language Reform Push.

<sup>10</sup> Saligman, L. (2024). International Law As A Tool For Reviving, Preserving, And Protecting The Tajik Language In Uzbekistan.

<sup>11</sup> Amnesty International (2024). Tajikistan: Reprisals Against Pamiri Minority: Suppression Of Local Identity, Clampdown On All Dissent.

The patterns of exclusion extend to sexual minorities, who remain among the most vulnerable populations in the region. In **Uzbekistan**, same-sex relations between men are criminalized, with penalties of up to three years in prison. The government has repeatedly dismissed international recommendations to decriminalize homosexuality, framing LGBTQI+ rights as culturally irrelevant.<sup>12</sup> In **Kyrgyzstan** and **Kazakhstan**, where homosexuality is not illegal, the situation remains dire due to widespread societal prejudice, lack of legal protections, and frequent hate crimes. Authorities in both countries have failed to address violence against LGBTQI+ individuals, reinforcing a climate of impunity and fear, while lawmakers regularly propose homophobic laws and policies.<sup>13</sup> LGBTQI+ individuals in **Tajikistan** also face widespread harassment, extortion, and violence from both the public and law enforcement, with no legal protections against discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity.<sup>14</sup>



„Very often, journalists raid clubs together with the police. They record the faces of those present and call for action to close such clubs. Because of that, the LGBTQI+ community sometimes thinks that we are collecting surveillance information about them or that we are foreign agents, so they don't trust us. However, once some level of trust is established, they gradually become more open. They also often believe that NGOs are only there to get money rather than to genuinely help.“ - a journalist from Central Asia

While certain leadership transitions have brought rhetorical commitments to reform, these have not translated into substantial protections for minority groups. In **Kazakhstan**, President Tokayev has positioned himself as a reformer, open to dialogue with civil society and legal liberalization. However, mass arrests of peaceful protesters, the continued restriction of the right to assembly, and de facto impunity for the family of former President Nazarbayev and his family illustrate the limits of these reforms.<sup>15</sup> In **Uzbekistan**, President Mirziyoyev's efforts to improve the country's international image have included symbolic steps such as releasing journalists and activists, yet deep structural reforms—particularly regarding political pluralism and minority rights—remain absent. **Kyrgyzstan**, long regarded as the region's most democratic state, continues to struggle with political instability and a legacy of ethnic repression, particularly in the south. In **Tajikistan**, President Emomali Rahmon has been in power since 1992 and has systematically eliminated political opposition, including the banning of the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (IRPT) in 2015. His rule has been marked by a consolidation of power, with no elections deemed free and fair by international observers. The lack of political pluralism directly contributes to the repression and marginalization of minority groups.<sup>16</sup>

Across the region, the picture is clear: minority groups continue to navigate repressive environments in which legal guarantees are routinely undermined by state control, ethno-nationalist policies, and societal intolerance. While international scrutiny and domestic pressure have led to modest changes in rhetoric and policy, genuine progress will require a fundamental rethinking of how rights, identity, and citizenship are defined and protected in Central Asia.

<sup>12</sup> Human Rights Watch (2021). Uzbekistan: Gay Men Face Abuse, Prison.

<sup>13</sup> Equaldex (N.D). LGBT Rights In Kazakhstan & Kyrgyzstan.

<sup>14</sup> Talant, B. (2022). Life As An Lgbt Person In Central Asia. Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty (RFE/RL)

<sup>15</sup> Voice Of America (2024). New Kazakhstan, Old Methods: Civil Society Laments Stalled Political Reforms.

<sup>16</sup> Schmitz, A. (2019). Tajikistan On The Road To Totalitarianism

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## Methodology

Information Environment Mapping in Central Asia:  
Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan



## Methodology

This study maps how marginalized groups in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan access, trust, and use information in restrictive media environments. Using a mixed-methods design, the research followed three stages: structured desk review with secondary data analysis, qualitative fieldwork, and integrated analysis and reporting. All activities followed do-no-harm principles and ensured informed consent, anonymity, and secure data handling. Online modalities were used to maximize safety and reach.

### Desk Review and Secondary Data Analysis

Peer-reviewed literature, national laws and policies, NGO/IO reporting, and official and industry statistics on connectivity, media use, and digital skills were synthesized. A review matrix indexed evidence by country, population group, information type (e.g., health, legal, social services, education, livelihoods), channel, and barrier. Secondary quantitative indicators were used to benchmark access and to frame hypotheses and purposive sampling for the qualitative phase. Gaps, identified during the review, guided instrument design.

### Instrument Development and Piloting

Semi-structured guides were developed for key informant workshops (KIWs), focus group discussions (FGDs), and in-depth interviews (IDIs). Core modules covered information needs; preferred channels and formats; financial, legal, linguistic, disability-related, and digital barriers; trust in sources; exposure to misinformation/disinformation; and risks associated with producing or sharing information. Local researchers pre-tested all tools for linguistic clarity and cultural fit; revisions were translated into relevant languages. Facilitators received training on safeguarding, consent, and secure data management.

### Qualitative Fieldwork

Purposive and snowball recruitment through civil society and community networks was applied to reach content-rich participants while protecting those at risk.

- KIWs: One per country (four total), involving media practitioners, thematic experts, CSO staff, and community leaders.
- FGDs: One per country (four total), 6–8 participants, including members of minority communities and professionals who work with them.
- IDIs: Four per country (16 total), conducted to capture individual experiences where group discussion posed safety or confidentiality concerns.

In total, the research brings together qualitative insights from 18 representatives of the media sector (journalists, reporters, analysts), 23 members of civil society organizations (activists, human rights defenders), 3 persons with disabilities, and 20 members of vulnerable and marginalized communities across Central Asia, including religious, ethnic, and sexual minorities, as well as rural residents and individuals from low-income households.

All sessions were conducted in the preferred languages, with interpretation available, and were recorded with consent. The recordings were transcribed in a summarized, anonymized form.

## Confidentiality and Respondent Safety

Given the sensitivity of media and civic environments across Central Asia, the study placed paramount importance on safeguarding participants' identities. While demographic context normally strengthens analysis, in these settings, characteristics such as gender, age bracket, community, or employer can enable re-identification when combined with stakeholder role and country context. The media and civic spheres are relatively small and tightly networked. Outspoken journalists, activists, and minority representatives are few and often known to authorities or peers, so even minimal details (for example, "a 30-year-old female journalist from Uzbekistan") can be sufficient to single out an individual or a small group. During fieldwork, respondents were open in sharing perspectives but extremely cautious about the risk of being recognized; given documented instances where identification has led to professional reprisals, harassment, or legal exposure, the research team deliberately prioritized participant safety over maximal attributional specificity. Accordingly, qualitative excerpts were attributed in a deliberately general manner (for example, "a journalist in Kazakhstan") to preserve analytical value without compromising confidentiality. Where additional descriptors posed no realistic risk of identification, limited safe characteristics were retained (for example, "a single mother from Kazakhstan"); all such choices were guided by the research team's risk assessment and participant consent.

## Analysis and Quality Assurance

Rapid thematic coding was applied across transcripts, followed by triangulation with desk findings and secondary indicators to validate patterns in availability, accessibility, relevance, and credibility of information. Country analysts completed first-pass coding; cross-country calibration by a senior reviewer ensured consistency of codes, claims, and comparative judgments. Evidence was then synthesized into country findings and cross-cutting implications.

## Limitations and Mitigation

Online-only data collection may have skewed participation toward more connected populations and under-represented marginalized groups (e.g., rural women, older adults, persons with disabilities). The research team has mitigated this by conducting targeted outreach through trusted intermediaries, enabling phone-based or offline enrollment with flexible scheduling, providing language/assistive support, and substituting FGDs with IDIs for sensitive segments; nonetheless, some bias may remain. Respondents may also have self-censored on politically sensitive topics despite confidentiality assurances and neutral phrasing. Sample composition should not be assumed to represent all marginalized groups; findings are indicative rather than population-level. Given variable years and methods across secondary datasets, the document reports trends cautiously, prioritizes convergence across sources, and notes where qualitative insights could not be fully triangulated with media or community data.

# AGILE

ADVANCING MEDIA RESILIENCE

## CHAPTER 1

Patterns of Information Consumption and Overview  
of the Digital Landscape in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan,  
Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan



## Patterns of Information Consumption and Overview of the Digital Landscape in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan

The persistent marginalization of minority groups in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan does not occur in a vacuum; it is deeply intertwined with the broader information environment shaping public perceptions, access to rights, and avenues for civic participation. Understanding how information is produced, disseminated, and consumed across these countries is essential to grasping the conditions under which exclusion, discrimination, and state control are maintained—or, in some cases, challenged. Rapid digitalization, uneven media access, and evolving disinformation tactics are all reshaping the region’s information landscape, with profound implications for vulnerable communities.

### 1.1. The Most Needed Information in Central Asia: Public Services, Healthcare, Jobs

Although up-to-date quantitative data on information needs are not currently available, this chapter draws on insights from participants of focus group discussions (FGDs), key informant workshops (KIWs), and in-depth interviews (IDIs) conducted across Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan. Participants consistently highlighted three priority areas where access to accurate and timely information is essential: public services, healthcare—particularly for women, and employment opportunities, especially for men. These domains directly affect the quality of life and social stability in the region, yet information flows are uneven, with gaps in accessibility, digital literacy, and trust.

#### 1.1.1. Digitization of Information about Public Services in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan

Across all four countries, public services were identified as a universal need. Reliable, transparent information about public services is crucial for citizens to access education, healthcare, social assistance, and other vital benefits. Over the past decade, Central Asian governments have invested in digital transformation strategies to modernize service delivery. However, while progress has been notable, particularly in urban centers, access remains inconsistent in rural areas, leaving many communities dependent on personal networks or intermediaries.

In **Kazakhstan**, digital tools have been developed to improve access to legal and administrative information. Platforms like ADILET and Paragraph provide citizens with up-to-date legal texts and regulatory information, creating a more transparent framework for understanding government policies. Yet these services are often paywalled, and some professionals continue to rely on printed codices for accuracy and archiving purposes. This highlights a trust issue, where digital platforms are valued but not fully relied upon.



„We have systems like ADILET and Paragraph where you pay to get information about the laws. But I still buy the printed codex every year when they are updated. It’s part of our archive, cheaper, and we trust it for better accuracy.” – **a lawyer from Kazakhstan**

## ■ ADVANCING MEDIA RESILIENCE

In **Kyrgyzstan**, the Tunduk app (under the Ministry of Digital Development) has been a significant step forward in bringing public services online. Through Tunduk, citizens can register their children for school, pay taxes, and even manage business registrations. Importantly, the digital system has curbed corruption by eliminating informal payments that were once necessary to secure limited spots in schools or public programs. However, awareness of the app remains limited outside major cities, and some populations lack the digital skills to use it efficiently.



“Tunduk is an app that provides information about public services. It’s easily accessible and completely free, but some people don’t even know it exists or for some it’s difficult to use. In the past, some parents paid money to get their children into already full schools. Now, the process is completely online: if you register, your child is enrolled; if not, you have to wait until next year. It really makes the process much fairer.” – **a parent from Kyrgyzstan**

“I can only use Tunduk for certain things. For example, to get a paid maternity leave, I need to submit the application through Tunduk, but I don’t know where to click.” – **a single mother from Kyrgyzstan**

**Uzbekistan** has made some of the most significant progress in digital service delivery with its Digital Uzbekistan 2030 strategy. The national online portal MyGov was described by participants as a “super app” hosting hundreds of services, ranging from kindergarten and school enrollment to employment applications. This transformation has reduced bureaucracy and drastically cut waiting times for everyday services.



“From 2017, we started having a digitalization strategy, and now we have the online portal MyGov. It is a very good portal that lets you use services online. For example, you can enroll your children in kindergarten or school, apply for vacancies—anything. It’s a super app, with hundreds of services. You don’t need to wait in line anymore.” – **a former public sector employee from Uzbekistan**

In **Tajikistan**, progress has been more gradual. While major government agencies now have websites and even Telegram bots, access to these services remains concentrated in urban areas. Rural populations, particularly those living in mountainous regions, continue to face major barriers due to weak internet connectivity and limited infrastructure. This creates a stark divide, where citizens in remote areas must still rely on outdated, in-person processes.



“Five years ago, the public sector struggled with giving information about their services, but now they have their own websites. For example, in migration they even have Telegram bots. Big agencies have good internet now, but sometimes the people don’t, especially in the mountainous regions. For example, if someone needs an INN [taxpayer identification number], they can apply online—but in rural areas, it’s still not accessible.” – **a civil society representative who works with rural population in Tajikistan**

Overall, digitalization has significantly improved access to information about public services across the region. However, unequal distribution of digital tools and a lack of awareness about available platforms continue to limit their impact, especially among vulnerable groups. Efforts to bridge these gaps will require both infrastructure investments and targeted outreach campaigns to ensure inclusivity.

### 1.1.2. Healthcare Information: A Necessity for Rural Women in Central Asia

Healthcare information, particularly concerning women's health, was consistently highlighted by participants as a top priority in all four countries. While new policies and technologies have improved access in some areas, significant gaps remain in awareness, outreach, and cultural acceptance. Across Central Asia, women face systemic barriers to receiving timely and accurate health information, ranging from patriarchal norms to low health literacy.



„Women in Central Asia, particularly in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan, have very low awareness of their sexual and reproductive rights. While information on these topics is available, it is often met with stigma and resistance, especially in rural areas, where publishers and organizations sharing such content are frequently shamed for discussing issues considered taboo or inappropriate“ – **a women's rights activist from Uzbekistan**

In **Kazakhstan**, healthcare was discussed primarily in connection with broader social service systems, where digital platforms provide access to information about clinics, doctors, and health regulations. However, rural areas remain underserved, with respondents noting that physical access to healthcare facilities is still a challenge, despite improvements in information dissemination.

In **Kyrgyzstan**, healthcare access has improved due to recent legal reforms. According to participants in the research, new laws now allow citizens to receive medical care anywhere in the country, addressing challenges faced by migrant families who frequently move between cities and regions. Despite this progress, participants highlighted that women still struggle to find trustworthy information about health services and preventive care. **“Women are usually interested in health information, such as how to find good doctors and how to access vaccination services. Previously, there was a problem where migrants moving between cities couldn't get medical help. Now, a new law has been introduced that allows anyone to receive medical care anywhere. Despite this, women still know very little about preventive healthcare, such as regular medical check-ups..”** – a civil society representative from Kyrgyzstan.

In the wake of low health awareness amongst women, the research participants claimed that thematic information campaigns remain fragmented and short-lived in Kyrgyzstan. According to them, during the COVID-19 pandemic, effective campaigns were launched to inform women about vaccination and domestic violence resources, sometimes even displayed in supermarkets. Yet these efforts ended abruptly once donor funding stopped, leaving women without sustained access to vital information. Interestingly, social media, especially Instagram, has emerged as a key channel for younger women who seek information about health.



“There are organizations in the country that talk about domestic violence and women’s health—some have only 5,000 followers—but they still play an important role. During COVID-19, there were good campaigns, even in supermarkets, about where to call for help. However, these efforts are neither structured nor sustained; they stop as soon as the funding ends.” – **a middle-aged woman from Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan**

In **Uzbekistan**, rural women often lack even the most basic health knowledge. Participants emphasized that many women do not understand the importance of annual check-ups or the early detection of conditions such as breast cancer. As a result, they often seek medical care only when symptoms become severe, leading to irreversible complications.



“They have no information about medical check-ups. For example, they know nothing about breast cancer. Even when they have money, they don’t know that after the first childbirth, a woman should have a yearly check-up or how to recognize early symptoms. They only go to large cities when they are physically sick or bleeding. Many of these women married very young and have little education.” – **a thematic expert on women’s rights from Uzbekistan**

According to research participants from Tajikistan, patriarchal norms severely restrict women’s autonomy in healthcare decision-making. Many women are not allowed to visit medical facilities without their husband’s permission or the accompaniment of a male relative. Financial dependence further compounds these barriers, leaving women vulnerable and isolated.



„A woman won’t go to the hospital without her husband’s permission. He must either accompany her or give his permission remotely (via phone) if he is abroad. Financial dependence is another barrier—she cannot travel to the city alone unless she is accompanied by her son, husband, or brother.” – **a young woman from Tajikistan**

These patterns contribute to late diagnoses and poor health outcomes for women across the region. While digital platforms and outreach campaigns have shown promise, long-term solutions will require consistent, culturally sensitive efforts to increase health literacy and empower women to make informed decisions about their own care.

### 1.1.3. Job Postings: Most Sought-After Information for Men in Central Asia

Employment information was highlighted as especially crucial for men, who are traditionally considered the primary providers in Central Asian households. In many families, a man's ability to find steady work determines not only the family's income but also their access to education, healthcare, and social mobility. When information about job opportunities is incomplete or inaccessible, it directly impacts household stability and fuels broader social and economic inequalities. Across the region, the systems for sharing employment information are largely informal, with personal networks, friends, and family members acting as the main gatekeepers. This heavy reliance on word-of-mouth communication means that individuals with fewer social connections—such as migrants, rural residents, or marginalized groups—are often excluded from higher-paying or more secure employment.

In **Kazakhstan**, participants noted that while there are official job portals and online platforms available, these are mostly used for public sector positions with modest pay. Many men continue to rely on traditional networks to access better-paying opportunities, especially those in construction, trade, or administrative work. Urban residents, who generally have higher digital literacy and better internet access, tend to benefit more from online job listings. Meanwhile, rural populations remain heavily dependent on community ties, personal referrals, and local leaders to find work. This digital divide reinforces existing inequalities between urban and rural communities, as city dwellers are better positioned to take advantage of new technologies and opportunities, while rural workers face barriers both in access and skills.

In **Kyrgyzstan**, similar dynamics were observed, with participants expressing limited trust in online job postings. Many workers view digital platforms as unreliable or incomplete, preferring to rely on direct recommendations from acquaintances or community elders. Informal labor markets dominate the landscape, and internal migration is common, with individuals moving seasonally between rural villages and urban centers in search of work. In addition, a significant portion of the male workforce migrates abroad, particularly to Russia and Kazakhstan, where wages are higher. While mobile apps and social media platforms are gradually becoming part of the job-seeking process, they are not yet central to it. Instead, traditional structures and interpersonal trust remain the foundation for finding employment, especially for low-skilled or temporary jobs.

In **Uzbekistan**, the divide between formal and informal job information is particularly stark. While digital platforms such as Ish-Bor.uz and various Telegram channels are popular for sharing vacancies, these are usually limited to lower- and medium-paying positions. The most desirable and lucrative jobs rarely appear on public platforms, instead being distributed through private networks of family, friends, and trusted acquaintances. This practice reflects deeply entrenched nepotism and reinforces social hierarchies, as access to better jobs is determined not by merit or open competition but by personal relationships. As a result, those outside these networks—especially young people or migrants—face systemic disadvantages in the labor market.



“Sometimes people get job information from friends. Websites like Ish-Bor are popular, and there are Telegram channels too. But the biggest, best-paying jobs are never online—they are shared through personal networks. That’s how Uzbeks are. We give the best jobs to our relatives and friends, so we don’t publish them on the internet.” – a labour migrant from Uzbekistan

For daily and short-term labor, Uzbekistan also relies heavily on physical gathering points known as *Mardikor* centers. These informal marketplaces serve as hubs where workers and employers connect directly, particularly for construction, household repairs, and other temporary jobs. They play a crucial role for low-skilled workers who lack access to online resources or formal employment systems. „**There are places called *Mardikor* Centers, where people gather to find work. For example, if you need someone to fix a sink or work in construction, you go there to hire them..**” – says a participant from Uzbekistan.

In rapidly developing cities such as Tashkent, the booming construction and infrastructure sectors have generated a high demand for workers. While this has increased the number of available jobs, the process for finding these opportunities remains rooted in informal networks. Families often have a designated male figure who takes responsibility for securing employment, acting as a bridge between employers and other family members. Even when online channels like Telegram are used, they are typically combined with personal referrals to ensure trust and reliability.



“I always find what I need in Telegram chats or channels about jobs. In Tashkent, the city is developing fast, so it’s not hard to find work. My uncle has 20 years of experience in construction and can find jobs very quickly. Every family has someone like that—a leader man who finds jobs and takes care of the family’s needs.” – **a construction worker from Uzbekistan**

In **Tajikistan**, the lack of digital infrastructure and limited internet access make online job searching virtually impossible for many rural residents. Information about employment opportunities is almost entirely transmitted through family ties, village elders, or local leaders. This deeply localized system leaves men in remote areas with few options beyond seasonal migration or working abroad. Consequently, many households are dependent on remittances, while women and children are left behind with limited access to services and information. The absence of formal, transparent channels for job information perpetuates cycles of poverty and migration, as families remain disconnected from economic opportunities within their own country.

## 1.2. Comparative Analysis of Media Consumption in Central Asia and Vulnerable Communities’ Use of Information Sources

The Central Asian region presents a diverse and evolving media landscape shaped by varying degrees of digital adoption, traditional media persistence, and differing socio-political contexts. Understanding how populations in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan consume, trust, and interact with information is crucial for assessing the broader information environment and identifying opportunities for improving media literacy, access, and inclusivity. This comparative overview synthesizes available empirical data to highlight distinctive patterns and challenges within each country’s media consumption habits and use of information sources.

**Kazakhstan** features a hybrid media landscape where both traditional and digital platforms play pivotal roles in information dissemination. The Internet is the leading source, used by 93%

of the population (including social networks, 72%, and messenger applications like WhatsApp, 83%), closely followed by television at 64%.<sup>17</sup> Younger Kazakhs (18–29) heavily rely on the internet (85%) and social media (82%),<sup>18</sup> while older adults (55+) continue to prefer television (22% of all people who watch TV daily), whereas people aged 35-54 display the highest share in radio listening (50%).<sup>19</sup> Notably, ethnic minorities in Kazakhstan mirror the youth’s preference for social media as a source of information, with 69% using it, the highest rate among ethnic minorities across Central Asia.<sup>20</sup> Urban residents show higher digital engagement (94% internet access in cities, 90% in rural areas), while more economically vulnerable rural populations rely more on television (76%) and interpersonal exchange (32%).<sup>21</sup> Language preference is split between Kazakh (58%) and Russian (41%), with Russian dominating urban centers.<sup>22</sup>

In **Kyrgyzstan**, the internet is the primary source of new information, with TV still being significant (51%), followed by interpersonal channels like relatives and friends (13%). Youth (18-34) rely on the internet at 93%, while those over 55 prefer TV (49%).<sup>23</sup> The Kyrgyz language predominates (75%) the information environment, especially in rural areas, with Russian being more common in cities.<sup>24</sup> Importantly, the Kyrgyz language serves as the primary medium for receiving news among surveyed labour migrants in Kyrgyzstan with reported low-income levels. In this group, 57% prefer to watch news in Kyrgyz, 58% listen to news in Kyrgyz, and 60% read news in Kyrgyz. When examining gender and language proficiency more broadly, the share of women who know English is 15% higher than that of men.<sup>25</sup> State broadcaster is the most trusted TV source (overall trust in TV channels = 7,2/10) in older population with lower ICT skills, whereas internet media like YouTube (6.0 out 10) and Instagram (6.0 out of 10) are prominent, particularly among younger users. Daily internet usage in Kyrgyzstan is 83%, with WhatsApp (87%) and Telegram (43%) leading in social media use. Though terrestrial TV penetration has declined from 88% (2017) to 65% (2024) in the country, internet TV usage has increased from 5% to 17%, reflecting shifting consumption habits. Moreover, Radio listenership has halved to 34% in previous years.<sup>26</sup>

Turning to **Uzbekistan**, people aged 18-24 and 25-34 comprise the absolute majority of social media users (31% and 65.2% respectively).<sup>27</sup> Notably, Telegram (94%) and Youtube (66%) are the most popular social media platforms in the country.<sup>28</sup> Most Uzbek youth do not watch TV daily, while radio and print media are nearly obsolete for them.<sup>29</sup> „I don’t watch TV because every channel shows that everything is good in the country, which it isn’t. When I have free time, I prefer to go online instead“ – claims a research participant student from Uzbekistan. Telegram leads messaging apps with over 18 million users, alongside Odnoklassniki and Facebook.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Statista (2025). TV, Radio & Multimedia – Kazakhstan.

<sup>18</sup> Sairambay, Y. (2022). Internet and Social Media Use by Young People for Information about (Inter)National News and Politics in Russia and Kazakhstan.

<sup>19</sup> RMAA Consulting (2025). Exploring the Power of Kazakhstan TV Market.

<sup>20</sup> Internews (2020). Socio-economic Impact of COVID-19 and Media Consumption among Vulnerable Communities in Central Asia.

<sup>21</sup> ibid (19).

<sup>22</sup> Central Asia Barometer (2023). What Language Do The Kazakhs Speak At Home?

<sup>23</sup> M-Vector (2023). Media Consumption in Kyrgyzstan

<sup>24</sup> OSCE Academy in Bishkek (n.d). Language Use and Language Policy in Central Asia

<sup>25</sup> ibid (20).

<sup>26</sup> ibid (20).

<sup>27</sup> Start.io (2025). Social Media Users in Uzbekistan

<sup>28</sup> RMAA Consulting (2025). Overview of Uzbekistan Social Networks with SMM Tips for Brands

<sup>29</sup> IREX (2023). Vibrant Barometer Information: Uzbekistan.

<sup>30</sup> Bright Uzbekistan (2025). Most Prevalent Social Sites in Uzbekistan

Interestingly, instant messaging apps are quite popular among labor migrants (33%) and very popular among ethnic minorities (55%).<sup>31</sup> Notably, television and radio continue to serve as significant sources of information in the country. TV channels such as Sevimli TV, Zo'r TV, My5, and Milliy TV reach, on average, 73–84% of the population each month. Furthermore, 72% of residents in Tashkent city and the surrounding region listen to the radio at least once a month, while 63% do so on a weekly basis.<sup>32</sup>

Although **Tajikistan's** media environment remains predominantly traditional, channels in Russian language are slowly losing their audience, along with TV channels like Safina (13% weekly reach), Tojikiston (12% weekly reach) and Sinamo (11% weekly reach).<sup>33</sup> Research participants from Tajikistan attributed the decline in television's popularity to irrelevant content and frequent electricity blackouts:



„I think TV, especially Tajik channels, is becoming less popular because of frequent electricity problems. Tajik TV channels are also very irrelevant. For example, people might be experiencing a flood or losing relatives to COVID, and when they turn on Tajik TV, the programs are about completely different, unrelated topics. On top of that, the content isn't entertaining. For instance, Uzbek TV has its own shows that people actually enjoy watching, but in Tajikistan, we don't even have that. People still watch those Uzbek shows because they are fun and engaging. Tajik TV can't produce anything like that, so instead, they mostly broadcast Turkish TV shows, which are very high quality — and that's the only entertainment we've got.“ – **a middle-aged woman from Tajikistan**

Tajik is the dominant language, especially in rural areas (89%), while Russian persists in urban centers. Notably, interviewed ethnic minority women in Tajikistan predominantly prefer to read news in Tajik (42%), whereas men in the same group show a strong preference for reading news in Russian (40%).<sup>34</sup> Interestingly, although more than 90 percent of the population in Tajikistan follows Islam, the media often cover various religious denominations, such as Orthodox Christians, Jehovah's Witnesses, Baha'is, Adventists, and Hare Krishnas.<sup>35</sup> Internet penetration is relatively low in the country at 57%, limited by infrastructure and cost.<sup>36</sup> Among youth, internet usage surpasses TV, but older adults and rural populations largely depend on television.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>31</sup> ibid (20).

<sup>32</sup> RMMA Consulting (2025). Market Overview of Uzbekistan's Advertising Industry

<sup>33</sup> RMMA Consulting (2025). Tajikistan Media Market Overview.

<sup>34</sup> ibid (20).

<sup>35</sup> IREX (2024). Vibrant Information Barometer: Tajikistan.

<sup>36</sup> The World Bank (2023). Tajikistan - Individuals Using The Internet (% Of Population).

<sup>37</sup> Bobokhonov, S. et al. (2025). Digital Technology Usage in Tajikistan: The Qualitative Report. TQR Volume 30, Issue 6

### 1.2.1. Short, Visually Engaging Video Content as the Most Preferred Format of Information in Central Asia

Qualitative fieldwork across Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan revealed a clear trend in how people prefer to receive information. While traditional channels such as printed materials, radio, or lengthy articles are still used by certain groups — particularly older generations or professionals — there is a strong and growing preference for short, visually engaging video content. Participants across the region consistently highlighted that formats like TikTok-style clips, Instagram reels, and other short videos are the most accessible, memorable, and trusted ways to receive information. These formats have gained traction because they align with busy lifestyles, limited attention spans, and the increasing dominance of mobile devices as the primary medium for communication.

The preference for videos over text or audio was linked to perceptions of credibility. Seeing a speaker in a video helps audiences evaluate their authenticity and intent, creating a sense of direct connection. Written content or audio recordings alone were often described as less trustworthy, especially in contexts where misinformation is common. **“I think if we are talking about the format of information, every type is acceptable, but if it’s video information, it’s better than audio. It’s the 21st century, and if I see someone in the video, I trust the source more”** – focus group discussion participant from Kyrgyzstan.

For many rural and working populations, time constraints are a major factor shaping how they consume information. Short videos allow people to quickly absorb key messages without needing to dedicate time to reading or listening to long explanations. Participants suggested that involving influential figures or respected local personalities in these videos could further increase their reach and impact.



**„The people I work with don’t have a lot of time because they work in rural regions. I think we can produce shorter audio recordings or videos with influential people. There are also people who do social videos and information like that.” – a journalist from Uzbekistan**

The simplicity and accessibility of short videos were repeatedly emphasized. Participants explained that while people in leadership or professional positions might still engage with more detailed written reports, everyday audiences overwhelmingly favor quick, easily digestible formats. This preference is not just about convenience — it also enhances retention. Short, visual content is easier to remember and share, making it ideal for spreading important messages widely. **„I think for simple people, small, short videos would be better. People in positions can have information in written form, but for us, shorter videos are more accessible. We save time, and it’s easier to remember.”** – said a participant from Kazakhstan.

While short videos dominate in terms of preference, the qualitative findings also revealed clear patterns in least preferred formats. Long reads, such as detailed reports, multi-page articles, or lengthy text messages, were described as overwhelming and impractical for most people. Participants explained that they simply do not have the time or patience to engage with long-form materials, especially when the same information can be summarized visually. For many, extensive text-based communication feels inaccessible, particularly for those with lower literacy or limited digital skills. Long reads were also associated with a lack of immediacy: by the

time a person finishes reading, the information may already feel outdated. This makes them less appealing for audiences seeking quick, actionable updates.



“People don’t really read long texts anymore. If you send someone a five-page article or a long message, they will just scroll past it. Most don’t have the time or patience, especially those working long hours or living in rural areas. A short video is easier to watch and remember.” –  
**a young man from Tajikistan**

Overall, the qualitative findings from across Central Asia highlight a significant shift in information consumption patterns. Short videos and reels have become the most effective and trusted way to reach broad audiences in Central Asia, combining speed, visual engagement, and accessibility. They are particularly well-suited for public awareness campaigns on government services, healthcare, and employment, where messages must be both memorable and shareable. In contrast, long reads and text-heavy formats are increasingly seen as outdated and impractical for the general population, reinforcing the need for organizations and governments to adapt their communication strategies to modern, video-driven platforms.

### 1.3. Comparative Analysis of the Internet Infrastructure and Connectivity in Central Asia

The information environment in Central Asia - particularly in **Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan** - is undergoing a complex and uneven transformation process. Although these countries were relatively late entrants into the global digital landscape, they have made significant strides in expanding internet access. By 2025, regional internet penetration had reached 82%, surpassing the global average of 69%.<sup>38</sup> Moreover, mobile devices have become the principal gateway to news across the region. Smartphones are used by 74% of the population in the region to access news, with the highest uptake among youth (90%) and urban residents (81%).<sup>39</sup> The growing popularization of the internet is evident among minority groups as well. 56% of interviewed refugees and stateless persons in the region use mobile internet. Among ethnic minorities, 71% in Kazakhstan and 75% in Uzbekistan use both mobile and fixed internet, while 60% in Kyrgyzstan and 83% in Tajikistan primarily rely on mobile internet. Among labour migrants, 53% in Kazakhstan and 50% in Uzbekistan use both types of internet to access information, whereas 95% of Tajik and 73% of Kyrgyz labour migrants predominantly use mobile internet.<sup>40</sup> However, this headline figure conceals substantial disparities, especially between urban and rural areas. In many locations, digital infrastructure remains inadequate, and geographic barriers continue to restrict access to essential information. When focusing exclusively on rural migrants across the region, the preference for traditional media becomes more pronounced, with combined radio and television use exceeding 60%. In rural areas, 49% of ethnic minorities and 41% of migrants identify television as their main source of information. Overall, while rural-urban differences

<sup>38</sup> Zehir, B., & Odabasi, F. (2025). Digital Transformation In Central Asia: Opportunities And Risks In A Late Start. Digital Security & Media Volume 2, Issue 1

<sup>39</sup> European Neighborhood Council (2023). Central Asian Media Consumption And Disinformation: A Quantitative And Qualitative Assessment In The Context Of Geo-Politics.

<sup>40</sup> *ibid* (20).

remain, vulnerable groups throughout Central Asia are increasingly reliant on social media and television, far surpassing their use of interpersonal communication, newspapers, or radio. Among ethnic minorities, social media is the most common source (46%), followed by online news outlets and blogs (34%) and television (33%). Similarly, 57% of stateless individuals in the region rely primarily on television, with ethnic minorities in Tajikistan showing the highest reliance (52%). For stateless individuals, social media ranks second (43%), followed by online news and blogs (20%) and instant messaging applications (18%). In contrast, only 5% obtain information from family members, religious leaders, or friends, while 4% listen to the radio and just 1% read newspapers — underscoring a rapidly evolving information landscape increasingly shaped by the Internet platforms.<sup>41</sup>

**Kazakhstan** stands out in Central Asia for its relatively advanced digital landscape and high connectivity rates. As of January 2025, the country reported 19.2 million internet users, translating to an impressive internet penetration rate of 93% of the total population. This figure is comparable to digitally developed nations like Germany and Russia.<sup>42</sup> The benefits of Kazakhstan's more advanced digital landscape become evident when comparing minority groups across Central Asia. While labour migrants region-wide, report similar rates of accessing information via social media (46%), online news and blogs (31%), and television (35%), a higher proportion in Kazakhstan (71%), uses social media compared to much lower rates in Tajikistan (15%) and Uzbekistan (28%).<sup>43</sup> Mobile connectivity is particularly widespread, with 26.6 million active cellular mobile connections, which is equivalent to 128% of the total population, indicating that many individuals use multiple devices or subscriptions. A significant 96% of these mobile connections are considered "broadband," utilizing 3G, 4G, or 5G networks. In terms of speed, Kazakhstan also demonstrates robust performance, with a median mobile internet download speed of 53.69 Mbps and a median fixed internet download speed of 66.38 Mbps as of early 2025.<sup>44</sup> Despite these high penetration figures, a significant disparity exists between urban centers and rural or remote areas. The digitalization process in Kazakhstan, like much of Central Asia, faces infrastructure and access challenges in these underserved regions, driven by economic conditions and difficult geographical terrain. This creates a notable digital divide where connection quality remains a major issue, even with high overall penetration. The World Bank is actively addressing this disparity through its \$92.43 million Digital Acceleration for an Inclusive Economy (DARE) Project. This initiative, part of Kazakhstan's "Digital Kazakhstan" State Program, aims to provide high-quality and climate-resilient broadband access to selected underserved rural regions, with the ambitious goal of benefiting over one million people and ensuring that remote, vulnerable communities have comparable access to digital services as urban centers. The project seeks to attract private capital for deploying last-mile broadband networks to households, businesses, and public institutions, thereby extending coverage, enhancing speeds, and improving service quality.<sup>45</sup>

**Kyrgyzstan**, despite its mountainous terrain, has made steady progress in expanding its internet infrastructure. By early 2024, internet usage reached approximately 89% of the population. However, a significant digital divide persists between urban and rural areas. Urban centers, home to roughly 35% of the population, enjoy dense coverage and widespread high-speed access. In stark contrast, rural areas, where about 65% of the population resides, experience much lower connectivity rates.<sup>46</sup>

<sup>41</sup> *ibid* (20).

<sup>42</sup> *ibid* (17).

<sup>43</sup> *ibid* (20).

<sup>44</sup> DataRePortal (2025). Digital Kazakhstan.

<sup>45</sup> Ministry of Digital Development, Innovations and Aerospace Industry of the Republic of Kazakhstan (2023). Kazakhstan Digital Acceleration for an Inclusive Economy (DARE) Project (P179204)

<sup>46</sup> DataRePortal (2025). Digital Kyrgyzstan.

**Uzbekistan** has made significant strides in expanding its digital infrastructure, with a substantial increase in internet users. At the beginning of 2025, there were 32.7 million internet users, representing an online penetration of 92% of the total population. This marks a 3% increase in internet users between January 2024 and January 2025. Despite the documented growth, approximately 4.03 million people, or 11% of the population, remained offline at the start of 2025, highlighting persistent access gaps. Interestingly, 94% of mobile connections are considered "broadband," connecting via 3G, 4G, or 5G networks. Internet access, however, still primarily relies on asymmetric digital subscriber line (ADSL) technology. Connection speeds have improved notably, with median mobile internet download speed reaching 37.82 Mbps and fixed internet download speed at 79.06 Mbps in January 2025, both showing significant increases over the preceding year. While Uztelecom, the state-run telecommunications monopoly, upgraded the bandwidth of Uzbekistan's international internet channels to 3.2 terabits per second (Tbps) in 2022, users in rural areas frequently report experiencing slower speeds and disruptions. A critical geographical disparity exists: internet penetration rates are significantly lower outside the capital, Tashkent, which boasts the highest internet penetration and fiber-to-the-building (FTTB) broadband connectivity.<sup>47</sup>



"The problem with the internet is that we don't have Wi-Fi. We buy mobile internet packages, but even though we purchase them for a month, they usually only last about 15 days. I want to read international politics news, but I can't access it myself, so I have to ask my grandsons and sons to help me. If we had more money, it wouldn't be a problem, but the packages are very expensive. I simply can't afford it. The connection isn't very good either. For example, if you want to download a video, it takes about 10 minutes." – **a research participant from Fergana Region, Uzbekistan**

Notably, a presidential order issued in June 2024, effective January 2025, allows internet service providers (ISPs) and mobile operators to directly connect to the international internet without first connecting to Uztelecom. However, this is explicitly conditioned on full compliance with the security and cybersecurity requirements, which facilitate state surveillance.<sup>48</sup>

**Tajikistan's** internet infrastructure remains significantly underdeveloped, presenting the most challenging digital landscape among the four Central Asian countries with the official Internet penetration rate at 57%.<sup>49</sup> In practice, home internet via DSL, cable, or fiber is extremely limited, primarily confined to major urban areas. Instead, mobile broadband dominates the connectivity landscape. As of early 2025, Tajikistan had 10.8 million mobile cellular connections, constituting 101% of total population. However, despite such high mobile connection rate, the number of internet users stands at only 6.07 million, suggesting 43% still remained offline in January 2025.<sup>50</sup> According to research participants from Tajikistan, the gap between the cellular connection rate and the number of internet users can be explained by the fact that some people in remote regions use two or three SIM cards to increase their chances of getting a stable connection.

<sup>47</sup> DataRePortal (2025). Digital Uzbekistan.

<sup>48</sup> Freedom House (2024). Uzbekistan: Key Developments, June 1, 2023 – May 31, 2024.

<sup>49</sup> Note: Number of experts during focus group discussions have contested this number, arguing that the internet is only available to approximately 30% of the total population.

<sup>50</sup> DataRePortal (2025). Digital Tajikistan.



„In many places, there is no stable mobile connection. People often have two or three SIM cards so they can get a signal with one provider in a certain location and switch to another in a different area. Internet service is the most expensive in Central Asia, yet the speed is very poor. While it is possible to purchase higher-speed packages, most people cannot afford them.“ – a **middle-aged woman from Tajikistan**

The situation is further exacerbated by the fact that Mobile network quality in Tajikistan ranks low globally; in February 2025, the country was placed 139th out of 143 countries for mobile internet speed and 118th out of 154 for fixed broadband speed. The average mobile download speed was reported under 10 Mbps, and fixed broadband averaged approximately 33–34 Mbps, both far below global averages. This poor quality is attributed to limited investment, challenging mountainous geography, and an impoverished economic environment, all of which constrain infrastructure development. Compounding these issues, Tajikistan has the highest mobile data costs among the four countries, at \$1.65 per GB. The high cost of mobile internet significantly contributes to the digital divide, particularly impacting economically challenged vulnerable populations in remote areas. „...**A large portion of the population in Tajikistan either has no access to the internet in rural regions or does not know Russian or English. Since most available information in Tajik is limited to government sources, many people are unable to access diverse or independent information on the Internet.**...“ – explains a research participant from rural Tajikistan. A stark illustration of this is the fact that rural residents represents the majority (≈72%) of the total population and the “internet access is mainly restricted to urban areas because of poor infrastructure and low affordability”.<sup>51</sup>



“There is a significant difference in how people access information in the Rasht Valley region due to poor electricity supply and weak internet connectivity. In the past, we had better internet access, but now the situation has worsened. The area experiences six months of winter because it is located in the mountains, and electricity is provided only on a strict schedule. For example, power is available from 6:00 to 8:00 in the morning and then for another two to three hours in the evening.

To stay informed, we rely on a weekly printed magazine and a local radio station in the center of the area, which plays a crucial role in disseminating information. There is no local television channel, so we watch central TV broadcasts instead.

Once, I needed to send information and used the American Corner, which offers free internet access. I asked the staff there for help, and they assisted me in sending an email.” – a **research participant from Rasht Valley, Tajikistan**

In an effort to address these profound disparities, the World Bank has approved the Tajikistan Digital Foundations Project, with \$39 million in funding. This initiative aims to enhance digital services, improve digital skills, and extend resilient broadband connectivity to at least 100

■ <sup>51</sup> TS2 Tech (2025). Inside Tajikistan’s Internet: Connectivity Challenges, Costs, and the Satellite Solution.

schools and public entities in their vicinity, specifically targeting vulnerable communities in rural areas to narrow the digital divide. The project is expected to benefit over 28,000 individuals with digital skills training, including advanced courses for 2,000 individuals to improve job prospects.<sup>52</sup>

The regional picture makes clear that while connectivity has expanded rapidly in Central Asia, access alone does not guarantee meaningful participation in the digital space. Persistent disparities in infrastructure, affordability, and connection quality—particularly in rural and marginalized communities—continue to limit how efficiently people can use online resources. Moreover, as more populations turn to social media, online news outlets, and instant messaging platforms for information, the need for skills to critically navigate and verify digital content has become increasingly urgent. Addressing these gaps requires more than technical upgrades; it calls for targeted efforts to strengthen digital literacy across all segments of society, ensuring that the benefits of digital transformation are both inclusive and sustainable.

### 1.3.1. Efforts Targeted at Digital Literacy

Recognizing the crucial role of digital skills in enabling citizens to fully participate in the modern information environment, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan have undertaken a range of initiatives to promote digital literacy. These efforts include national strategies, school-based curricula, community training programs, and targeted outreach to vulnerable groups such as rural residents, ethnic minorities, and migrants. As of today, in **Kazakhstan**, media literacy is moderate (16.2 points out of 35). While traditional TV and radio are slowly declining as digital TV and online platforms grow, government and NGO-led literacy programs remain limited. In **Kyrgyzstan**, trust in TV and radio exceeds that in messaging apps, with an average media trust score of 7,2/10. **Uzbekistan** presents a mixed picture: most people find online information useful, yet many struggle to detect misinformation or verify sources, and have faced cyber fraud attempts. Independent media and NGOs lead fact-checking initiatives, such as the ERIM project Mahalla – Strengthening the Media Community. **Tajikistan** faces the steepest challenges, with most people not being able to identify fake news.<sup>55</sup>

These figures have underscored the critical need for strengthened and expanded digital literacy initiatives, prompting governments and partners to increasingly prioritize targeted programs aimed at building the skills necessary for safe, informed, and effective participation in the digital age (see Table 1).

<sup>52</sup> The World Bank (2024). Tajikistan Digital Foundations Project (P506611)

<sup>53</sup> *ibid* (39).

<sup>54</sup> *ibid* (39).

<sup>55</sup> *ibid* (39).

**Table 1.** Key Digital Literacy Initiatives in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan.

Country	Initiative	Partners/ Implementing Bodies	Primary Focus
<b>Kazakhstan</b>	Kazakhstan Kids Online Study/ Protecting Children from Online Violence, Abuse, and Exploitation Program	UNICEF, Ministry of Education, Ministry of Internal Affairs, Ministry of Culture and Information	Internet safety skills, parental awareness, support mechanisms for children
	Small-Scale Media Literacy Education	UNESCO	Critical evaluation of media, safe online behavior
	MediaCAMP Eduthon	USAID, Internews	Creative media literacy (e.g., through art), project development
	Ozim Platform	UNICEF, Nazarbayev University graduates	Digital educational resources, child development tracking, early intervention.
	Digital Family Card Project	Ministry of Labor and Social Protection, UNDP	Streamlining access to government services (health, education, social support) via digital platform
<b>Kyrgyzstan</b>	Digital Kyrgyzstan 2019–2023	Ministry of Digital Development	Improvement digital infrastructure, expand online services, and increase digital literacy across the population
	Strengthening National Capacity in Peacebuilding and Engagement of Civil Society	UNESCO, UNDP, the Ministry of Culture, Information, Sports, and Youth Policy	Incorporation of Media and Information Literacy (MIL) into the national Action Plan for 2025
	Support to the Reform of the Education Sector in the Kyrgyz Republic	European Union, Government of Kyrgyzstan	Improve the overall Performance of the Ministry of Education and Science in Kyrgyz Republic



Country	Initiative	Partners/ Implementing Bodies	Primary Focus
Uzbekistan	"EMPOWERING THE GOVERNMENT AND CITIZENS OF UZBEKISTAN BY STRENGTHENING ACCESS TO INFORMATION, ACCOUNTABILITY OF INSTITUTIONS, AND MEDIA COMPETENCE" (AIM) Program	Government of Uzbekistan, UNESCO	[1] The launch of a Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) in Uzbek on Access to Information Laws and Policies, [2] Legal assistance to new laws (e.g. draft Information Code), [3] Assist the government of Uzbekistan to National Media and Information Literacy (MIL) Strategy
	Provision of localized resources to law enforcement agents for protecting and investigating crimes against journalists	UNESCO, Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Republic of Uzbekistan	Development of the training modules and organization of training for legal professionals on freedom of expression, digital literacy and journalist safety.
	Small-scale projects aiming to increase young people's access to education, especially in rural areas, by expanding internet access and developing digital learning platforms (EDUTEN)	UNICEF, International Telecommunication Union (ITU) and local institutions	Improvement of the children's digital skills and online safety, including translating online safety guidelines into Uzbek and developing free online training modules on cyber hygiene for teachers.
Tajikistan	Concept of the Transition to Digital Education / National Strategy for Education Development 2020-2030.	Ministry of Education and Science of Republic of Tajikistan	Integration of digital technologies and tools into all aspects of the education system, from teaching and learning to administration.
	Tajikistan Digital Foundations Project	The World Bank, International Development Association (IDA), the Government of Switzerland	[1] Provide 28,000 individuals with digital skills training, including advanced courses for 2,000 individuals to improve job prospects. [2] Extending resilient broadband connectivity to at least 100 schools and public entities in their vicinity, improving learning environments and narrowing the digital divide in rural areas.

**Kazakhstan** regards digital literacy as vital for social participation, yet many — particularly young people and rural residents — struggle to critically assess information from varied sources, making them susceptible to misinformation. To address this, multiple initiatives are underway. The Kazakhstan Kids Online study and the subsequent Protecting Children from Online Violence, Abuse, and Exploitation Program, led by UNICEF and the Ministry of Education, work to enhance children’s internet safety skills, raise parental awareness of online risks, and provide support mechanisms in the digital environment.<sup>56</sup> UNESCO’s Media Literacy Education Programs in cities like Almaty aim to improve access to accurate information, promote critical media evaluation, and encourage safe online behavior among teachers, students, and parents.<sup>57</sup> Regionally, USAID’s Central Asia Media Program hosts the annual MediaCAMP Edathon, fostering creative approaches to media literacy — such as through art — among educators, trainers, and experts, and offering financial support for promising projects.<sup>58</sup> The Ozim Platform, developed by Nazarbayev University graduates with UNICEF backing, delivers digital educational resources and tracks child development, especially for children with disabilities, earning recognition as a “Digital Public Good.”<sup>59</sup> For broader service delivery, the Digital Family Card Project, a collaboration between the Ministry of Labor and Social Protection and UNDP, streamlines digital skills for family access to health, education, and social services via a unified automated platform.<sup>60</sup> Despite these efforts, critical thinking deficits persist, suggesting that the most vulnerable segments may not be effectively reached. The focus on internet safety and service access — while important — may also align with broader state control priorities, potentially emphasizing compliance over independent analysis. Without more robust, inclusive, and analytically focused programs, vulnerable communities remain at risk of propaganda and misinformation, limiting their ability to engage meaningfully in the digital sphere.

**Kyrgyzstan** has prioritized digital development through the establishment of the Ministry of Digital Development in 2021 and the Digital Kyrgyzstan 2019–2023 strategy to enhance infrastructure, expand online services, and raise digital literacy. Media and Information Literacy (MIL) has been integrated into the national Action Plan for 2025, supported by UNESCO and UNDP’s Strengthening National Capacity in Peacebuilding and Engagement of Civil Society project, with the Ministry of Culture, Information, Sports, and Youth Policy producing a nine-module MIL Manual for public servants covering critical thinking, information analysis, digital engagement, cybersecurity, AI interaction, and emotional intelligence to strengthen resilience against hate speech and polarization. An EU-backed education sector reform aims to improve quality education for all, including children with disabilities, by advancing teaching methods, gender equality, and ICT infrastructure, aiming to help students (especially from rural areas) in achieving basic or higher digital/media literacy by 2027.<sup>61</sup> Additionally, UNESCO and UNDP’s Combating Hate Speech and Information Pollution for Social Cohesion in Kyrgyzstan project researches online harms, engaging ethnic minorities and persons with disabilities. While these efforts promote digital skills and social cohesion, the concurrent enforcement of restrictive “false information” laws risks aligning MIL with state narratives, discouraging critical

<sup>56</sup> UNICEF (2025). Protecting Children from Online Violence, Abuse and Exploitation in Kazakhstan.

<sup>57</sup> UNESCO (2024). Regional Media Partnerships on Media and Information Literacy to be Strengthened in Central Asian Level

<sup>58</sup> U.S Embassy & Consulate in Kazakhstan (2022). Press Release: The USAID-Funded Central Asia Media Program Holds an International Conference on Media Literacy

<sup>59</sup> UNICEF (2024). Kazakhstan Digital Public Good Start-Up Ozim Platform Supports Childhood Upbringing And Development

<sup>60</sup> UNDP Kazakhstan (n.d). Digital Family Card: A Society Transformed Through Technology

<sup>61</sup> Dadakhonov, A.O (2024). Main Issues of Implementing Media and Information Literacy in School Education in Central Asian Countries The Case of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan. Media Literacy and Academic Research (MLAR) Volume 7, Issue 1.

examination of official information, and—given the challenges of defining hate speech without marginalizing minority groups—may lead to self-censorship, limiting the empowerment of vulnerable communities in civic engagement and open discourse.<sup>62</sup>

**Uzbekistan** has advanced its digital transformation through both government-led programs — promoting coding, STEM education, and mobile access — and dynamic grassroots initiatives, such as student-led innovation clubs, peer-to-peer online mentoring, and educators creating TikTok lessons in native languages to foster inclusive information environment and creativity. A flagship effort is UNESCO’s 2022–2026 “Empowering the Government and Citizens of Uzbekistan by Strengthening Access to Information, Accountability of Institutions, and Media Competence” (AIM) Program, which seeks to improve access to information, media freedom, and digital literacy. It has launched a MOOC in Uzbek on access-to-information laws for officials, journalists, and citizens; provided legal input on a draft Information Code to meet human rights standards; and is conducting research using UNESCO’s Internet Universality Indicators. The AIM Program also supports the development of a National Media and Information Literacy Strategy, localized resources for law enforcement to protect journalists, training modules for legal professionals on freedom of expression, and updated journalism education materials emphasizing fact-checking, legal literacy, and critical thinking. Complementing these efforts, UNICEF-backed small-scale projects in the country aim to expand internet connectivity and digital learning in rural areas, with targeted programs for disadvantaged groups such as girls with disabilities, and to strengthen online safety in cooperation with the ITU through Uzbek-language safety guidelines and cyber hygiene training for teachers.<sup>63</sup> In 2023, UNICEF also piloted Eduten, an AI-based gamified math learning platform offering personalized instruction to children (including children with disabilities).<sup>64</sup> While these initiatives broaden digital inclusion, promote transparency, and enhance professional capacity, their long-term impact will depend on how effectively they reach and empower marginalized groups to critically navigate digital spaces and participate fully in civic life.

**Tajikistan’s** digital education agenda, outlined in the Concept of the Transition to Digital Education and the National Strategy for Education Development 2020–2030, aims to expand access and modernize learning, yet limited investment and high connectivity costs have hindered implementation, evident during the COVID-19 pandemic when distance learning was scarcely used. A core obstacle is low teacher digital literacy: while 56% of teachers in Dushanbe have internet access at school, the rate drops to 9–25% in other regions, and even where digital tools exist, poor maintenance and insufficient training limit their impact.<sup>65</sup> Technology can also mitigate gender norms and domestic workloads restricting girls’ education, while strengthening parental digital literacy and community involvement is key to creating supportive learning environments. The World Bank’s Tajikistan Digital Foundations Project seeks to improve digital literacy and close the rural digital divide, targeting over 28,000 individuals with skills training — 2,000 of them in advanced courses — while extending resilient broadband to at least 100 schools and nearby public entities and mobilizing private investment for unconnected areas. Drawing on research from initiatives like GPE KIX, the government is integrating digital tools into curricula, enhancing teacher training, and improving rural connectivity.<sup>66</sup> However, persistent gaps in human capacity, affordability, and localized resources mean that even with infrastructure gains, vulnerable groups — especially girls and ethnic minorities — risk

<sup>62</sup> UNESCO (2023). Combating Hate Speech On Kyrgyzstan's Social Media Is A Complex Process

<sup>63</sup> UNESCO (2024). AIM Program: Enhancing Access To Information, Media Freedom And Digital Literacy In Uzbekistan

<sup>64</sup> UNICEF (2024). EdTech for Good: Transforming Math into an Exciting Learning Adventure

<sup>65</sup> Doolbekova, J. & Osmanova, A. (2025). Digital Education Transformation In Tajikistan

<sup>66</sup> *ibid* (39).

continued exclusion from the benefits of digitalization, reinforcing educational and informational inequality. According to one of the research participants, who has worked with various marginalized communities in Tajikistan, addressing these disparities requires targeted measures for vulnerable populations, including girls, ethnic minorities, and students in remote areas. Such measures should include subsidized internet access, the provision of digital devices, and the creation of localized content to overcome language barriers.



“When I worked in different regions, I visited ethnic minorities in Khatlon, such as Uzbeks and Turks. The situation there is very difficult. All Uzbek schools have been transformed into Tajik schools, but many people don’t speak Tajik, which leaves them marginalized. They don’t have teachers for their own language, and when we implemented projects, they were usually carried out in Tajik. As a result, the communities couldn’t understand the information. They often told us that they didn’t benefit from village or agricultural projects because, even though the projects were provided, everything was in Tajik and they couldn’t understand anything.

We also work with the Yaghnobi people in Sughd region. They don’t have access to the internet or even electricity. They can’t join Telegram groups or use mobile connections because there’s no signal at all. They are extremely isolated and don’t even have TVs. Most of their information comes directly from each other through word of mouth.” - **a civil rights activist from Tajikistan**

While Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan have made notable strides in developing digital literacy programs tailored to diverse populations, significant challenges remain in ensuring these initiatives effectively reach and empower vulnerable groups. Persistent gaps in infrastructure, resource allocation, inclusivity, and critical thinking capacities continue to limit the potential of digital skills development to bridge information divides. As these countries advance their digital agendas, understanding the specific barriers faced by marginalized communities—rural residents, ethnic minorities, migrants, and persons with disabilities—becomes essential. The following chapter delves into these obstacles, exploring the multifaceted factors that hinder equitable access to information and digital participation across Central Asia.

# AGILE

ADVANCING MEDIA RESILIENCE

## CHAPTER 2

Barriers to Information Access for Vulnerable  
Communities in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan  
and Tajikistan



## Barriers to Information Access for Vulnerable Communities in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan

Across Central Asia, vulnerable communities, minorities, and marginalized groups continue to face persistent and often systemic barriers to accessing independent, diverse, and reliable sources of information. These challenges stem from a complex interplay of restrictive legal frameworks, pervasive state control over media outlets, and deliberate efforts to suppress dissenting voices and alternative narratives. Beyond institutional constraints, long-standing social and political inequalities—rooted in ethnicity, language, gender, and sexual orientation—further marginalize these groups. Many ethnic and linguistic minorities encounter discriminatory laws and censorship that restrict their cultural expression and access to information in their native languages. Similarly, gender and sexual minorities often face societal stigma, legal discrimination, and limited opportunities for participation in public and digital spaces. These combined factors severely curtail their ability to organize, advocate for their rights, and engage freely in civic discourse. Consequently, vulnerable populations are disproportionately excluded from balanced and critical information flows, impeding their capacity to make informed decisions and participate fully in society. For example, 36% of interviewed refugees and stateless persons in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan reported experiencing internet restrictions in their country of residence. Additionally, 56% of ethnic minorities in Kazakhstan and 50% of ethnic minorities in Tajikistan indicated encountering restrictions when searching for information online.<sup>67</sup> Table 2 was developed by triangulating secondary data with insights from key-informant workshops, in-depth interviews, and focus group discussions on barriers to information access in Central Asia. Challenges described by participants and corroborated by secondary sources (and vice versa) were provisionally grouped into categories. To deepen understanding, the team asked participants to explain the specific impacts of each barrier and provide concrete examples. These challenges were then mapped onto a Venn diagram of the target countries to identify where they are most prevalent.

**Table 2.** Barriers to Information Access, their Impact and Specific Examples in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan.

Barrier Type	Countries Affected	Specific Impact/Mechanism	Examples
<b>Digital Divide /Connectivity</b>	Kazakhstan, Tajikistan	Uneven access and poor connection quality, especially in rural/remote areas	<b>Kazakhstan:</b> Limits access to basic services like education, health, finance. <b>Tajikistan:</b> more than 70 in remote (non-capital) areas lack stable internet connections.
<b>State Media Control</b>	Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan	Media functions as a propaganda outlet; unfair competition for independent media	<b>Kazakhstan:</b> Government financial/political support for pro-regime outlets. <b>Uzbekistan:</b> Tight government control over media; restrictions on independent outlets

■ <sup>67</sup> ibid (20).

Barrier Type	Countries Affected	Specific Impact/ Mechanism	Examples
Suppression of Journalists	Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan	Arrests, assaults, harassment, detentions, telecommunications blackouts	<p><b>Kazakhstan:</b> Duman Mukhammedkarim and Asylbek Zhamuratov sentenced to 7 years for online activities.</p> <p><b>Uzbekistan:</b> Several journalists still in detention; attacks on reporters covering Karakalpakstan.</p> <p><b>Tajikistan:</b> several journalists in detention; harassment and imprisonment for criticism of authorities.</p>
Online Monitoring / Surveillance	Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan	State monitoring of internet/social media; pervasive surveillance	<p><b>Kazakhstan:</b> Monitoring justified under national security and counter-terrorism.</p> <p><b>Uzbekistan:</b> Routine website blocking and surveillance.</p> <p><b>Tajikistan:</b> Centralized state gateway for all traffic enabling censorship and surveillance</p>
Restrictive Laws	Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan	Vague terms used to limit freedom of expression	<p><b>Kazakhstan:</b> “Law on the Protection of Children” used to block LGBTQI+ content (e.g., Selftanu.kz).</p> <p><b>Uzbekistan:</b> Criminal libel and insult laws with prison penalties.</p> <p><b>Tajikistan:</b> Constitutional clauses allowing restriction of minority rights to protect territorial integrity</p>
Political Restrictions	Kazakhstan	Ban on political parties based on ethnicity, religion, gender	Restricts independent organization and advocacy for women and minority groups
Language Barriers / Education & Language	Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan	Policies excluding minority languages from education; limited native language resources	<p><b>Kyrgyzstan:</b> Uzbek removed from National Literacy Test (2014); Uzbek schools declined from 141 (2002) to 91 (2017).</p> <p><b>Tajikistan:</b> Minority students don't have access to educational content in their native language</p>
Digital Repression Tactics	Kazakhstan	Technical removals, blocking accounts	Blocking/deleting YouTube, Instagram, Facebook accounts of investigative journalists (Luqpan Akhmediyarov, Vadim Boreiko)



Barrier Type	Countries Affected	Specific Impact/Mechanism	Examples
Accreditation Issues	Kazakhstan	Refusal to issue accreditation to journalists	RFE/RL correspondents denied accreditation on vague national security grounds; linked to 2021 media law amendments
Media Operation	Kyrgyzstan	Suppression of minority-language media	Ethnic Uzbek TV (e.g Mezon TV) channels unable to operate post-2010 conflict
Trust in State	Kyrgyzstan	Lack of confidence among minorities due to discrimination	NGOs report impunity for violence against ethnic minorities
Legal Prosecution	Kyrgyzstan	Disproportionate targeting of minority writers for “inciting hatred”	Despite prevalence of racist content in Kyrgyz-language media, prosecutions focus on minority authors
Economic Pressure on Media	Uzbekistan	Restrictions on independent media funding, especially foreign	Laws limit growth and operations of independent outlets; restrictions on foreign funding
Civil Society Restrictions	Uzbekistan	Laws on NGO registration, financing, and events limit work on minority issues	Limits advocacy on sexual minorities, former prisoners, and human rights violations
Gender Disparities	Tajikistan	Domestic workloads limiting access to information/resources	Rural areas don’t have access undisrupted access to the internet
Teacher Capacity	Tajikistan	Low digital literacy among educators	Only 56% of teachers in Dushanbe have internet at school; 9–25% in other regions

In **Kazakhstan**, significant barriers prevent vulnerable communities from accessing equitable information despite digital advancements. The primary issue is a digital divide, marked by poor connectivity in rural areas. This is compounded by a state-controlled media environment that acts as a government propaganda outlet, suppressing independent journalism through arrests,

assaults, and internet shutdowns. A new media law and the government's use of broad charges like "extremism" and "harmful information" for online criticism, as seen in the sentencing of activists Duman Mukhammedkarim and Asylbek Zhamuratov, further restrict free expression.<sup>68</sup> The government actively monitors digital spaces, including social media platforms like TikTok, to maintain control over the information narrative. These systemic controls mean that vulnerable communities struggle to access diverse and critical information, hindering their political participation and ability to form independent opinions.

Despite advances in connectivity, **Kyrgyzstan** faces significant barriers to information access, particularly for vulnerable communities. The country's mountainous terrain creates a digital divide, with rural areas having poor internet infrastructure and relying on less stable mobile networks. This is exacerbated by the government's systematic efforts to control the media. New laws, including a potential "foreign agents" law, aim to restrict press freedom and stigmatize independent outlets. Journalists from investigative groups like Temirov Live and Kloop Media have faced raids and prosecution, with some being imprisoned or their outlets forcibly closed. A "false information law" allows for the non-judicial removal of online content, and recent amendments impose penalties for spreading "unreliable" information, reinforcing state control.<sup>69</sup> Furthermore, lingering ethnic tensions since the 2010 conflict create a difficult environment for ethnic minorities. Ethnic Uzbek television channels are reportedly unable to operate<sup>70</sup>, and a decline in Uzbek-language schools has led to linguistic marginalization.<sup>71</sup> Minority authors have also been disproportionately targeted for prosecution on "hate speech" charges, suppressing their voices and contributing to a lack of trust in state institutions.<sup>72</sup>

**Uzbekistan's** environment for internet freedom is highly restrictive. A primary barrier to information access is the government's practice of arresting and imprisoning online critics, such as blogger Otabek Sattoriy, who was sentenced to six and a half years in prison, which deters free expression.<sup>73</sup> Pervasive surveillance and website blocking further restrict access to information. The government also maintains tight control over the media through economic pressure and laws that restrict foreign funding, hindering the growth of independent outlets. Journalists covering sensitive topics, like Karakalpakstan, face severe repression, including physical attacks and detention. Repressive criminal libel laws, which include imprisonment for defamation (as in the case of Olimjon Khaidarov)<sup>74</sup> and insulting the president, create an environment of self-censorship. The capacity of civil society to address critical issues being severely limited by restrictive laws on NGO registration, financing, and events, complicates the situation even further.<sup>75</sup>

In **Tajikistan**, the government's restrictive policies and economic barriers severely hinder information access for vulnerable communities. The primary concern is the legal requirement for all internet traffic to be routed through a single state-controlled gateway, which enables widespread surveillance and censorship. This has led to frequent blocking of critical news

<sup>68</sup> Human Rights Watch (2025). Central Asia: Worsening Human Rights Records Growing Number of Activists, Journalists Imprisoned Across the Region.

<sup>69</sup> Committee to Protect Journalists (2024). Kyrgyzstan Authorities Raid News Outlets 24.Kg And Temirov Live, Arrest Journalists.

<sup>70</sup> Committee to Protect Journalists (2010). Kyrgyz Stations Shut Down, Only State TV Broadcasting.

<sup>71</sup> Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) (2014). Kyrgyz Abandon Uzbek For Secondary-School Graduation Test.

<sup>72</sup> UNHCR (2013). Freedom of the Press – Kyrgyzstan.

<sup>73</sup> Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) (2024). Uzbek Court Grants Early Release To Blogger Otabek Sattoriy

<sup>74</sup> Human Rights Watch (2023). Uzbekistan: Blogger Sentenced to 8 Years in Prison.

<sup>75</sup> Human Rights Watch (2021). Uzbekistan: Registration Barriers for Independent Groups

websites and social media platforms. The government's tight control is reflected in press freedom rankings, with Tajikistan placed 153th out of 180 countries in 2025.<sup>76</sup> Journalists and bloggers face harassment and arrests for online criticism, leading to widespread self-censorship. Several journalists have been detained.<sup>77</sup> Authorities also use "periodic wholesale blackouts" of internet and messaging services to suppress dissent.<sup>78</sup>

These multifaceted barriers profoundly restrict vulnerable communities' access to diverse and independent information across Central Asia, reinforcing patterns of exclusion and undermining their ability to participate meaningfully in public discourse. Compounded by state control, legal restrictions, and socio-political marginalization, these obstacles create fertile ground for the spread of misinformation and disinformation, which disproportionately affects those already marginalized. Understanding the nature and impact of these barriers is essential to developing effective responses. The following chapter examines how misinformation and disinformation manifest in the region's complex information landscape and explores the strategies and countermeasures being employed to combat their harmful effects and protect vulnerable populations' right to accurate information.

<sup>76</sup> Reporters without Borders (2025). Tajikistan.

<sup>77</sup> European Parliament (2024). European Parliament Resolution Of 18 January 2024 On Tajikistan: State Repression Against The Independent Media.

<sup>78</sup> *ibid* (51).

# AGILE

ADVANCING MEDIA RESILIENCE

## CHAPTER 3

Misinformation, Disinformation and Countermeasures  
in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan



## Misinformation, Disinformation and Countermeasures in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan

Misinformation, disinformation, and information pollution present significant challenges across Central Asia, undermining social cohesion, eroding public trust, and weakening the functioning of democratic institutions. While Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan each face these issues in different ways — shaped by their unique media environments, levels of digital literacy, and political contexts—the underlying dynamics share commonalities. During qualitative fieldwork, participants across all four countries emphasized that disinformation persists primarily because it is more effective at meeting the needs and expectations of audiences. In other words, false or misleading information often resonates more strongly, offering narratives that feel relevant, accessible, and emotionally compelling, whereas accurate information is often perceived as less engaging or harder to access.



„I think disinformation spreads because the truth is not always exciting and can sometimes even be boring. Fake news is usually simple, and its creators may not put much thought into it, but there is a strong psychological aspect at play. It taps into people’s emotions and satisfies their immediate needs and beliefs. For example, if I believe in something—like ‘Elon Musk is poisoning the world’—and everyone around me is saying the same thing, while one person disagrees and tries to tell me the truth, I will simply ignore that person. It’s easier and more comforting to listen to what aligns with my existing beliefs.” – **a journalist from Tajikistan**

Vulnerable groups such as young people, rural residents, and ethnic minorities are often the most affected. Despite ongoing efforts by governments and civil society, addressing these challenges requires comprehensive, coordinated strategies that enhance media literacy, support independent journalism, and safeguard freedom of expression.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, **Kazakhstan** experienced a significant increase in disinformation related to vaccination, primarily spread through social media, which undermined public trust, increased hesitancy, and complicated efforts by health authorities. More than half of the anti-vaccine disinformation in the Kazakh-language segment originated from a small group of no more than two dozen accounts that strategically used emotionally charged language, hate rhetoric, and conspiracy theories, portraying vaccination efforts as authoritarian projects and often combining anti-vaccine content with radical right-wing messaging and conspiracy claims. These disinformation creators depicted vaccinated individuals, healthcare workers, government officials, and international organizations such as the WHO and UN as victims or perpetrators of a large-scale malign scheme, borrowing language from anti-globalist, nationalist, and anti-elitist discourses, often intertwined with religious, pseudoscientific, or esoteric worldviews. Anti-vaccine narratives commonly appeared in memes, videos, edited screenshots, and religious sermons, built around claims that vaccines cause infertility, alter DNA, or are part of a depopulation agenda, while exploiting public fears about the speed of vaccine development and emergency authorizations. Misinformation about domestic vaccines, particularly QazVac, was also widespread, questioning their safety, composition, and effectiveness, and framing Kazakhstan as a testing ground for unproven vaccines. Russian-language content played a substantial role, amplified through local resharing and informal translation into Kazakh. The most influential disinformation accounts exhibited

and informal translation into Kazakh. The most influential disinformation accounts exhibited coordinated networked behavior, sharing each other's posts and amplifying common themes, often emerging from critics of the government or alternative medicine and esoteric communities. Key dissemination channels included Telegram (the most prominent), YouTube, Facebook, TikTok, and WhatsApp, with offline effects observed in increased vaccine hesitancy (particularly among vulnerable communities) and public protests citing online claims. Disinformation campaigns often included pro-Kremlin narratives alleging that the West is waging a "hybrid war" in Central Asia to destabilize the region or promote Russophobia. The same or similar accounts portray reporting on China's mass repressions of ethnic minorities, including Kazakhs, in Xinjiang, as false and dismiss Soviet crimes against Kazakhs and other ethnic groups during the 1920s and 1930s. These campaigns have contributed to reduced public resilience and weakened crisis response, as seen during the pandemic and the January 2022 unrest, disproportionately affecting vulnerable groups, especially those with lower digital literacy. Efforts to counter disinformation have been fragmented, with government initiatives focusing mainly on monitoring and content removal, while civil society fact-checking projects operate with limited reach and resources.<sup>79</sup>

However, according to participants of qualitative fieldwork, disinformation in Kazakhstan is not limited to conspiracy theories about vaccines or global plots. It also takes highly targeted forms, designed to exploit social divisions, undermine trust between communities, and manipulate public opinion. These campaigns are especially dangerous because they directly affect social cohesion, often sparking real-world tensions or even violence.

One area of growing concern is disinformation that aims to instigate ethnic conflicts. Respondents described how false reports about clashes between ethnic groups—particularly Kazakhs, Chechens, and Dungans—have circulated widely on social media. These fabricated stories often go viral before authorities intervene, leading to confusion, anger, and, in some cases, organized attacks by groups who believe the misinformation to be true. While fact-checking efforts have improved in recent years, delays in debunking such rumors foster mistrust in both the media and the government.



„There are lots of fake news about ethnic conflicts, about Kazakh-Chechen fights, fights with Dungans. Kazakhs were reacting very caustically—they used to get together, go to these criminal beat-ups, and then it turned out to be fake. The government didn't use to do anything. But now, before we share information, we check first, and only if it's not fake do we share it. But if it's fake and the government is not doing anything, then people suspect it's the government who is spreading the false information.” – **a journalist from Kazakhstan**

Disinformation also targets marginalized groups, particularly feminists, and the LGBTQI+ community. Participants described Kazakhstan as a deeply conservative society where technological and economic modernization has not been accompanied by social reforms. Politicians frequently exploit this conservatism, spreading false narratives to gain political capital by vilifying minorities and activists. For example, feminists advocating for issues such as equal pay are deliberately misrepresented as promoting LGBTQI+ rights, a tactic that links economic or social equality campaigns to stigmatized identities in the public mind.

■ <sup>79</sup> *ibid* (20).



„I used to work with people who were charged and the LGBTQI+ community. I write a lot about the rights of women, activists, and feminists. We have a lot of misunderstanding and misrepresenting information about these people. Kazakhstan is a very religious and conservative community. They want all the technical and economic goods, but they don't care about social reforms, like rights of minorities. That's why, when the deputies want to get political points, they usually spread information against these minorities. For example, if a woman advocates for equal pay, the counter narrative is that this leads to advocating LGBTQI+ rights.” – **a civil rights activist from Kazakhstan**

The deliberate framing of feminists and activists as enemies of traditional values erodes public support for progressive causes and isolates those fighting for reform. According to participants, even those who work closely with minority communities often struggle to keep up with the shifting landscape of disinformation, as many activist groups must operate discreetly to avoid harassment. In this information war, the government and its allies maintain a dominant position by consistently framing dissenting voices as threats to stability.



“The public is losing the war of information with the government. Even I, who works with the LGBTQI+ community, don't know about the channels they use, because they are very careful. When they talk to journalists, they don't mention individual cases, they speak generally. There are very few people who talk openly about their rights, and the government fights them by disinforming the population and setting them against the public. In the misinformation war, the ultimate narrative is that the opposition doesn't like peaceful times and wants to descend Kazakhstan into chaos.” – **a civil society representative from Kazakhstan**

While these disinformation narratives spread organically through communities, there are also structured efforts to counter them, though their reach is limited. Participants described fact-checking initiatives supported by international partnerships, such as META, which monitor misinformation trends using keywords and track how widely false stories are shared. These organizations prioritize platforms like TikTok, where content can quickly reach millions of viewers, making it both a powerful tool for spreading misinformation and a key battleground for combating it.



“I know the official partners of META in Kazakhstan, and for them, fact-checking is easier. They use keywords to see how often certain information is shared. They usually spread their findings through social media. TikTok would be better though, because the coverage is large—3 to 5 million people can view it.” – **a participant from Kazakhstan**

Facebook headquarters have also introduced mechanisms to flag and restrict harmful content, such as blurring misleading posts and penalizing repeat offenders. When accounts repeatedly spread disinformation, they can eventually be blocked altogether.



“The Facebook platform has the blur feature so people are not exposed to fake information. If META gives five penalties to someone, then their account is sanctioned and eventually blocked. For example, META partners in Kazakhstan penalized an account that was spreading misinformation about LGBTQI+, and their audience decreased. Not everyone likes what they do, but if a person spreads misinformation, there must be consequences.” – **a participant from Kazakhstan**

In addition to domestic challenges, Russian propaganda plays a significant role in shaping narratives within Kazakhstan. Older generations, particularly those aged 40 and above, are more susceptible to this influence, which draws on nostalgia for the Soviet past and promotes anti-Western sentiment. Participants noted that such narratives are so deeply embedded that they appear even in cultural folklore, framing the West as alien, immoral, or destructive. These long-standing discourses create fertile ground for newer misinformation campaigns.



“We also have Russian propaganda here. They use the Soviet past, Soviet books, and other materials to stir conflict. Their message is that the West is bad or evil. People over 40 or 50 mostly believe it. Russian propaganda is so deep that it’s even in the folklore, describing the West as untraditional.” – **a civil society representative from Kazakhstan**

This combination of domestic disinformation and foreign propaganda has created a complex information environment in Kazakhstan. False narratives exploit ethnic, cultural, and generational divides, while fragmented counter-efforts struggle to keep pace. As a result, vulnerable communities are left exposed to manipulation, and public trust continues to erode, making it difficult for fact-checkers, civil society organizations, and independent journalists to establish a strong and credible alternative narrative.

**Kyrgyzstan** faces significant challenges from information pollution, which includes disinformation, misinformation, and malinformation, alongside the growth of hate speech and propaganda against minorities, particularly online. These factors incite social divisions and foster mistrust in public institutions. There are numerous instances of life-threatening messages disseminated through social media, as well as discrimination against people based on gender, ethnicity, and religion. Observations indicate that the increase in hate speech against minorities and discord often depends on the socio-political situation in the country, with 40 cases of ethnic hatred recorded in 2023 alone. The "false information law" introduced in July 2025, which imposes administrative penalties for spreading "false or unreliable" information, is seen by critics as another attempt to pressure freedom of speech and can lead to swift fines against media outlets without thorough judicial review (see Table 3).

**Table 3.** Information Related Incidents and Countermeasures from 2023 in Kyrgyzstan. Sources: UNESCO and CPJ<sup>81</sup>

Type of Incident	Frequency/Impact
Ethnic Hatred Cases	40 cases recorded in 2023
Life-threatening Messages	Numerous instances disseminated via social media
False Information Law	Administrative penalties - fines of 20,000 soms (\$230 USD) for individuals, 65,000 soms for outlets (\$750 USD)

Combating hate speech and misinformation on Kyrgyzstan’s social media is a complex challenge that demands coordinated efforts from all stakeholders in the media and information ecosystem. While necessary, excessive measures to regulate hate speech and disinformation pose serious risks to freedom of expression, and government initiatives are often perceived as attempts to suppress free speech. To address these challenges, the UNESCO/UNDP has conducted comprehensive research—“Combating Hate Speech and Information Pollution for Social Cohesion in Kyrgyzstan”—involving diverse participants, including ethnic minorities, women and people with disabilities (pwd), with the goal of fostering societal resilience against hate speech and polarization. Notably, research participants from Kyrgyzstan identified women and people with disabilities as the groups most vulnerable to misinformation. They explained that this vulnerability stems from a combination of restrictive social norms and slow progress toward building an inclusive society.



„The most vulnerable groups to misinformation are women, persons with disabilities (PwDs), and, in particular, individuals who belong to both categories - women with disabilities. These groups are often isolated, living in closed environments with limited access to diverse information sources. The ongoing process of Islamization across the region also influences media demand and patterns of information consumption. In some cases, this process further excludes women from the information environment altogether.

Imagine a woman with a disability who comes from a rural, conservative family with radical Islamist beliefs. In certain parts of Kyrgyzstan, there are families that do not allow their daughters to attend regular schools, viewing it as prohibited. Instead, the girls are sent to madrasas to study the Quran and, after completing their religious studies, are married off.

There are also individuals with disabilities who are bedridden and rely entirely on social media platforms like Instagram for information. While there have been efforts to promote inclusive education, progress has been slow. Kyrgyzstan only ratified the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in 2019, as prior to that, the country lacked the necessary framework and resources to do so.” – **a participant from Kyrgyzstan, working with women with disabilities**

<sup>80</sup> *ibid* (62).

<sup>81</sup> Committee to Protect Journalists (2025). Kyrgyzstan Government Recriminalizes Libel And Insult Laws.

On government level, the formal inclusion of Media and Information Literacy (MIL) into the national Action Plan for 2025—supported by UNESCO and UNDP—features the development of a MIL Manual aimed at government counterparts, covering critical thinking, information analysis, digital engagement, cybersecurity, and emotional intelligence in digital communication to equip public servants with skills for informed and responsible communication. There is a widely recognized need to enhance media and information literacy, support fact-checking initiatives, ensure transparent government policies on media freedom, strengthen quality journalism, establish independent media regulators, and promote media pluralism that amplifies diverse voices, including those of women journalists.

In **Uzbekistan**, similar problems significantly impair citizens' ability to make informed decisions, as they deepen social divisions and undermine trust in public institutions. The growth of hate speech and propaganda, especially online, exacerbates these challenges. While internet and social media usage have expanded access to alternative news sources, manipulation of public opinion through these platforms is increasing, with election campaigns serving as major flashpoints for disinformation targeting political opponents, journalists, and civil society leaders. Political disinformation is a growing concern as governments, politicians, and foreign powers increasingly weaponize narratives and technology to influence politics.<sup>82</sup> Notably, significant portions of the minority groups struggle to distinguish objective from subjective information, critically evaluate content, or verify its validity, which has led to incidents of online fraud, blackmail, and fake news with severe consequences such as suicide, loss of savings, and human trafficking.<sup>83</sup> Recognizing disinformation as a serious threat to social, political, and economic stability, both government and independent actors have launched responses, with civil society and independent media actively monitoring, fact-checking, and promoting ethical reporting and self-regulation. **“Recently, several schools were gathered together, and we were taught about cyberattacks—how to protect our bank credentials and how to identify and address fake news.”** – a participant from Kyrgyzstan recalled during the focus group discussion. The UNESCO AIM Program (2022–2026) supports these efforts by improving access to information for vulnerable communities, promoting media freedom, enhancing digital literacy, and assisting the Uzbek government in developing a National Media and Information Literacy (MIL) Strategy. This includes publishing a handbook on “Fake news: Disinformation in Media” in Karakalpak, Russian, and Uzbek for journalism students and media professionals, alongside training on combating fake news, developing digital research skills, and teaching cybersecurity and fact-checking.

The ERIM project “Mahalla – Strengthening the Media Community” supports regional independent media to increase demand for objective information through media literacy tools and strengthens vulnerable youth’s resistance to online hate speech and propaganda via the “QLEVER” educational game.<sup>84</sup> Additionally, the European Union has provided training across Central Asia, including Uzbekistan, focused on risk communication, media engagement, and countering disinformation during mass gatherings, emphasizing debunking tactics, information verification, and public awareness campaigns.<sup>85</sup>

In **Tajikistan**, disinformation has become a destabilizing force, undermining state credibility, perpetuating divisive narratives about national identity and values, and eroding public trust in democratic institutions. One of the respondents from Tajikistan, shared their observations regarding the popularization of ultranationalist narratives on the Internet.

<sup>82</sup> *ibid* (29).

<sup>83</sup> Kun.uz (2025). Over 12 million cyberattacks recorded in Uzbekistan in 2024.

<sup>84</sup> MediaNet – International Centre for Journalist (n.d). QLEVER online game launch for more resilient youth.

<sup>85</sup> European Union (2024). Central Asia Strengthens Capacities On Risk Communication, Media Engagement And Tackling Disinformation During Mass Gatherings Through EU-Supported Training.



“I’ve noticed a lot of strange news channels where they read the news out loud but misinterpret it, so I try to be careful with those channels. There are many types of channels—ultranationalist, extremist, and those promoting a kind of cultural singularity, pushing certain ideologies tied to nationality. Most of these are Tajik channels, and they often promote ethnic divisions.

There are also many bots. These bots like and share content, creating the illusion of popularity and shaping public opinion. For example, UNICEF Tajikistan made a video about Tajik girls who wanted to study, but the footage they used was actually of Kazakh girls, which seemed strange. Because of that, the video received a huge number of negative comments. Later, it turned out that these comments weren’t even from Tajikistan—they were from foreign accounts trying to spark ethnic conflict.” – **a participant from Tajikistan**

During crises, the spread of false information can intensify panic, hinder effective responses, and jeopardize public health and safety, especially in vulnerable communities. Much of the misinformation reflects longstanding social tensions among ethnic, religious, and national groups. The lack of alternative news sources in conflict-affected areas drives reliance on social media, where misinformation and fake news spread rapidly and unchecked, often amplified by inauthentic accounts used by political actors.<sup>86</sup> Combating these threats requires strengthening media literacy through investments in childhood education and digital literacy programs, as well as supporting independent and local journalism, which plays a crucial role in verifying and fact-checking information where alternatives are scarce. The European Union has supported comprehensive training in Central Asia, including Tajikistan, on risk communication, media engagement, and countering disinformation during mass gatherings, equipping participants with skills in response planning, information verification, public awareness campaigns, and stakeholder collaboration.<sup>87</sup> Additionally, the “English for Journalists Program” enhances Tajik journalists’ English proficiency to access reliable international sources, strengthening their capacity to recognize and combat disinformation, misinformation, and propaganda in the news and online.<sup>88</sup>

Taken together, these country-specific dynamics illustrate how misinformation and disinformation in Central Asia are shaped by a complex interplay of political systems, media structures, societal vulnerabilities, and digital behaviors. While each state confronts its own unique constellation of challenges—from pandemic-related conspiracy theories in Kazakhstan to hate speech-driven polarization in Kyrgyzstan, politicized narratives in Uzbekistan, and trust-eroding disinformation in Tajikistan—the underlying threats to information integrity are regionally interconnected. The persistence of these problems underscores the critical role of journalism in shaping public discourse, holding power to account, and fostering societal resilience. Understanding how journalists operate, adapt, and maintain professional standards in such environments is essential for assessing both the vulnerabilities and the opportunities within the media landscapes of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan. The following chapter examines these issues in comparative perspective, exploring how structural conditions, professional norms, and external pressures influence the practice of journalism across the four countries.

<sup>86</sup> *ibid* (35).

<sup>87</sup> *ibid* (85).

<sup>88</sup> U.S. Embassy in Tajikistan (2025). English for Journalists Program

# AGILE

ADVANCING MEDIA RESILIENCE

## CHAPTER 4

Comparative Analysis of Journalism in Kazakhstan,  
Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan



## Comparative Analysis of Journalism in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan

This section provides a comparative overview of the journalist practices across four Central Asian countries: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan. Each country exhibits distinct patterns in media ownership, journalistic practices, and the role of digital platforms, alongside shared challenges such as limited investigative journalism, financial constraints, censorship, and varying degrees of government influence. While journalists in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan increasingly rely on online news and social media for both information sourcing and dissemination, Tajikistan's media remains tightly controlled by the state, facing significant legal, economic, and political barriers. Across the region, journalists navigate complex dynamics involving media freedom, public trust, and evolving digital ecosystems, with emerging efforts to develop data journalism and enhance media literacy despite persistent obstacles.

In **Kazakhstan**, nearly half of the journalists (49%) work in private media, while 28% are employed by governmental outlets.<sup>89</sup> Interestingly, according to a journalist from Kazakhstan, people tend to trust journalists not based on the quality or objectivity of their work, but rather on the outlet they represent. The research participant illustrated this by giving the example of journalists from RFE/RL, noting that public trust is shaped more by the organization's reputation than by individual reporting.



"RFE/RL is funded by the U.S. Congress, and they never hide that fact. However, many people in Kazakhstan believe that 'whoever pays for the music chooses the tune.' Because of this, they think that if the U.S. Congress is funding RFE/RL, they must be lobbying for them. Our community still doesn't fully understand that when a journalist covers a topic, they present different perspectives—for example, those of the opposition and the authorities. They often misinterpret this balance as taking sides.

The government was very effective at misleading people by claiming that Azattyk (RFE/RL) is funded by the U.S. and, therefore, is lobbying for anti-national, for example LGBTQI+ issues. They use this narrative to provoke fear, asking the public, 'Do you want your children to become LGBT soon? Then you shouldn't listen to Azattyk.' Sometimes people call their journalists 'Americans' or 'sellouts.'" — **a journalist from Kazakhstan**

Other research participants from Kazakhstan who work in the media explained that such public attitudes toward journalism have significantly undermined the quality of information being produced. Because audiences are quick to accuse journalists of bias or of serving foreign interests, many reporters have become extremely cautious in their work. As a result, they often restrict themselves to presenting only raw facts, avoiding interpretation, context, or analysis. While this approach helps them avoid direct criticism, it leaves the public with an incomplete understanding of events. Complex issues are reduced to oversimplified statements, with no room for deeper explanations, ultimately hindering informed public debate and weakening the overall role of journalism in society. „When we publish, we are very careful to avoid being sued by the government. We don't add any of our own opinions or analysis — we simply report what others have said,“ – shared a journalist from Kazakhstan. Notably, according to

<sup>89</sup> Central Asian Bureau of Analytical Reporting (2018). The status of media and the role of social media in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan

by the government. We don't add any of our own opinions or analysis — we simply report what others have said.” – shared a journalist from Kazakhstan. Notably, according to the journalists, even though they refrain from adding interpretations, publishers often filter factual information as well, sometimes discarding submissions that are critical of the government.



“I wrote about labor migrants from Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan who are jailed in Kazakhstan, with no one visiting or taking care of them. I sent this information to several media outlets, but they told me they couldn't publish it, because it would reflect poorly on Kazakhstan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs. But here's the thing: those same outlets wrote about the arrests within the ministry itself, portraying it as a positive example of the government's fight against corruption.” – **an investigative journalist from Kazakhstan**

“Because we can't publish about our own problems, we publish about Tajik problems. Tajik journalists can't publish about their problems, so they cover Kazakh problems. The approach is basically, 'it's worse there.' Journalists in Central Asia can't speak openly about what's wrong in their own country, so they frame the issues as problems happening elsewhere.” – **a freelancer journalist from Kazakhstan**

Journalists actively use social networking sites, with Facebook (94%) being the most popular, followed by Twitter (39%) and Instagram (35%).<sup>90</sup> Although it is the least popular platform among journalists, Instagram is highly popular among ethnic minorities (60% usage) and labour migrants (63%).<sup>91</sup> For reporting, the journalists primarily rely on press releases (75%) and news reports from websites (54%), while news conferences (44%) and direct communication with people (33%) also serve as important sources, with Facebook as the most frequent social platform for information.<sup>92</sup> Notably, participants of focus group discussions from media sector emphasized that, while the aforementioned sources of information are effective, it is very hard for journalists to get information from the public sector representatives.



„We no longer have open communication with government officials (so called 'chinovniks'). Instead, they hold quarterly meetings where they invite us, but these are highly formalized events and do not allow for meaningful dialogue. As journalists, we cannot reach out to them whenever we need information. Many times, journalists have written that these conferences exist primarily for the officials' reporting purposes: deputies arrive, read a brief statement, and leave. Often, they do not answer questions at all, and when they do, their responses are purely formal and uninformative.

The situation has worsened to the point where we often do not even understand what certain ministries are doing — and sometimes it feels as though they are not doing anything at all. This lack of transparency creates enormous challenges. For example, ministries such as the Ministry of Energy receive vast resources, including significant funding from institutions like the World



<sup>90</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>91</sup> *ibid* (20).

<sup>92</sup> *ibid* (20).



Bank, yet they never provide full information about how this money is used. It's not only an issue of transparency but also of accountability; for years, starting in the early 2000s, we wrote about the indifference of these officials, noting that they were never punished for their lack of engagement. Over time, we grew tired and eventually gave up pressing the issue.

Today, officials refuse to speak by phone, insisting instead on formal written requests. In the past, when we sent such requests, they were required by law to respond within a month — and they usually did. Now, even that process has broken down, as many ministries simply ignore requests altogether. Officially, they say they will provide answers within five days, but often they do not respond at all. In many cases, our media outlet is told that officials “don't have time” to provide the information, and when they finally do, it is usually outdated or already publicly known, rendering it useless for reporting. This makes the work extremely difficult and frustrating. The responsiveness also depends on who is requesting the information and what type of information is being asked for.

Currently, while we have accreditation that allows us to attend different workshops, observe proceedings, and speak with deputies, we are still denied access to interview representatives of ministries and government agencies. This further limits our ability to conduct thorough reporting and hold authorities accountable.” – **a media representative from Kazakhstan**

When fact-checking, most journalists in Kazakhstan verify content through press releases, websites, and news conferences. Motivations for choosing journalism include the desire to help people in their daily lives, the appeal of diverse and dynamic work, and the opportunity to influence public affairs.

Journalists consider media coverage more effective at resolving social issues at the community and family levels, but less impactful in driving legislative or political change. They prioritize advocating for social change and encouraging tolerance and cultural diversity, while portraying political leadership positively or opposing the government are considered less important roles. Key barriers to quality journalism include insufficient financial resources, state intervention, censorship, and media ownership concentration. Nearly half of journalists remain neutral about the future of quality journalism but anticipate a shift toward multimedia and online content within the next three to five years, with increased social network presence seen as a key adaptation strategy.<sup>93</sup>

In **Kyrgyzstan**, over one-third of journalists (40%) work for online news websites, followed by newspapers (24%) and TV/news agencies (12% each), with the majority (65%) employed in private media. Journalists actively use social networks, with Facebook (84%) as the most popular platform, followed by Twitter and Instagram (both 33%).<sup>94</sup> Like in Kazakhstan, Instagram is also very popular among ethnic minorities and labour migrants in Kyrgyzstan, with 50% and 61% respectively using it to access information.<sup>95</sup> Despite this, the journalists primarily issue information via websites (40%), and news conferences (40%). For fact-checking, journalists rely mostly on people, media publications, and the internet. Motivations for choosing

<sup>93</sup> *ibid* (89).

<sup>94</sup> *ibid* (89).

<sup>95</sup> *ibid* (20).

journalism include the opportunity to help people in their daily lives and the financial rewards it can offer. While journalists believe their media effectively covers human rights and environmental issues and helps mobilize public pressure on the government, investigative journalism remains rare, often hindered by a lack of editorial support and NGOs' dissatisfaction with superficial reporting. The most valued journalistic functions are encouraging tolerance, cultural diversity, and influencing public opinion, whereas opposing the government is considered the least important. Key barriers to quality journalism include insufficient financial resources, weak professional ethics, and limited vocational training.



“Journalists in Kyrgyzstan have become lazier; they want to get information with just one click, immediately. For example, we have a journalist group where people often ask if anyone has the phone number of a public employee. The information is publicly available — they could easily Google it — but they are too lazy to do so, even though it would take the same amount of time. Journalists have gotten used to having information handed to them, and this has become a huge problem.” – **a journalist from Kyrgyzstan**

Less than half of journalists are optimistic about the future of quality journalism in the country, with about one-third being pessimistic. They expect the media landscape to shift toward multimedia and online platforms in the next three to five years, with increased social network presence as a key adaptation strategy. Meanwhile, TV journalism is perceived to be in crisis due to censorship and declining public trust.<sup>96</sup>

In **Uzbekistan**, surveyed journalists primarily work for online newspapers (23%), followed by traditional newspapers (21%), TV (16%), and news agencies (16%), with nearly half (49%) employed in private media and 41% in governmental outlets. Journalists actively engage with social networks, with Facebook (87%) being the most popular platform, followed by Instagram (33%) and Twitter (28%). Their reports mainly rely on press releases (58%), websites (38%), and direct communication with people (26%), with Facebook as the most frequently used source for disseminating information.<sup>97</sup> Notably, among ethnic minorities and labour migrants—who prefer Telegram as their main source of information (50% and 29%, respectively) and Kun.uz as the second most popular news source (26%)—using Facebook as the primary platform for dissemination would likely be less effective.<sup>98</sup> For fact-checking, they predominantly rely on people (especially when covering minority groups), the internet, and media publications. Motivations for pursuing journalism include the appeal of diverse and lively work and the opportunity to assist people in their daily lives. While journalists believe their media effectively covers human rights and environmental issues, most do not engage in investigative journalism, primarily due to limited staffing and a lack of support from the publishers.



“When the constitutional amendments regarding Karakalpakstan were being discussed, I reached out to 30 media outlets with my materials, urging them to pay attention to the issue, but no one published anything.” – **a journalist from Uzbekistan**

<sup>96</sup> *ibid* (89).

<sup>97</sup> *ibid* (89).

<sup>98</sup> *ibid* (20).

The publishers perceive media coverage as more influential in resolving social issues at the community and family levels, but less so in driving legislative or political change. The most valued journalistic functions are giving people the opportunity to express their views and reporting facts as they are, whereas opposing the government and motivating political participation are deemed less important. Journalists report low professional status and diminished public trust in the media. Major barriers to quality journalism include insufficient vocational training, inadequate financial resources, and self-censorship. Nearly half of journalists remain optimistic about the future of quality journalism, anticipating a shift toward online and multimedia content within the next three to five years, with a focus on increasing presence on social networks.<sup>99</sup>

Interestingly, the largest share of journalists (40%) in **Tajikistan** work for newspapers, followed by news agencies (15%), online news websites (13%), and television (13%). Nearly 40% of journalists are employed in private media, 30% in governmental outlets, and 27% in international media. Social networks are widely used, with Facebook being the most popular platform (98%), followed by Odnoklassniki.ru (70%), YouTube (45%), Twitter (33%), and Instagram (25%). Press releases remain the main source of information for news reports (75%), ahead of people (58%), websites (53%) and news conferences (50%). In-depth interviews indicate that journalists frequently depend on official government sources, state agencies, and official websites, with editorial boards generally selecting topics based on societal relevance and audience interest. For fact-checking, they most often consult people (90%), publications in other media (55%), and the internet (53%). Motivations for entering journalism include fighting injustice, using personal talents, meeting diverse people, working for freedom and democracy, and holding those in power accountable. The journalists report regular collaboration with experts, government bodies, and civil activists, although cooperation with NGOs and minority groups is limited due to mutual reluctance. While ecology and human rights receive regular coverage, investigative journalism remains rare because of political constraints, high costs, and the difficulty of publishing sensitive material domestically—prompting some journalists to publish on foreign platforms such as Fergana.ru and Cabar.asia. The most valued journalistic functions are considered providing a platform for public expression, influencing opinion, reporting facts accurately, promoting tolerance and cultural diversity, and attracting a large audience, while opposing the government or promoting political leadership are seen as least important. Barriers to quality journalism include inadequate vocational training, self-censorship, weak ethics, scarce financial resources, and state interference. Most journalists rate private media positively and state media poorly, with ethical boundaries including refusing to pressure unwilling informants, violating source confidentiality, using personal documents without consent, accepting money from sources, or publishing unchecked information. Looking ahead, 48% of journalists are neither optimistic nor pessimistic about the quality of journalism, 25% are pessimistic, and only 18% are optimistic; in the next three to five years, 40% expect a shift toward online content, 32% toward multimedia formats, and over one-third foresee no major change, with increasing social media presence and developing multimedia capabilities identified as key adaptation strategies. Despite these challenges, Tajikistan’s media community is gradually expanding, especially in Dushanbe, with a diverse range of outlets including newspapers, journals, TV, radio, and growing online portals. However, print circulation is declining, and data journalism remains underdeveloped due to limited resources, lack of trained staff, and insufficient understanding of data’s storytelling potential. Access to reliable data is hindered by inconsistent government responsiveness, frequent removal or withholding of public datasets, and understandability issues.

■ <sup>99</sup> *ibid* (89).



"I'm not Tajik myself, and I may not know Tajik very well, but my colleagues often say that the current form of Tajik used today is difficult for an ordinary person to understand, especially because of the many official terms and bureaucratic language. Tajik-language journalists often get their information from Russian websites. For example, when I forward materials and ask them to translate, they usually ask me to send Russian-language materials if we have them, because it's easier for them.

We were sitting and having dinner once, and people were watching Russian-language news instead of Tajik channels. They said it was because they couldn't understand the Tajik broadcasts. The official Tajik language is very different from everyday conversation, so people tend to avoid it because it's difficult, and this pushes them toward Russian content instead. This issue is especially common in materials issued by government agencies. The words themselves are clear, but their meaning is often confusing." – **a journalist from Tajikistan**

„Government press content feels lifeless. They used to make some effort before 2010, but now they don't even try. I sometimes watch Tajik TV to see how they cover the news, and the way they explain things is terrible. There are also many press terms borrowed from Iranian media, which makes it even more confusing for some people. On top of that, some people don't know any single language well. They might know a bit of Russian, English, and Tajik, but only partially. As a result, they end up in a very difficult situation where they can't fully understand or express themselves in any one language." - **a reporter from Tajikistan**

Additionally, deteriorating media freedom, legal risks, and data securitization—where public information is classified as state secrets—further restrict journalists' ability to investigate and report effectively. These interconnected challenges continue to impede the growth of investigative and data-driven journalism in Tajikistan.<sup>101</sup>

In the wake of local publishers becoming overly cautious, practicing self-censorship, and filtering content, some media employees emphasized that one potential solution is reaching out to international publishers with strong reputations. However, they noted that while this approach can provide greater visibility and protection, the lack of understanding of local context among international outlets often affects the quality and accuracy of the published content. This disconnect sometimes results in misinterpretations or oversimplifications, which, in turn, can reinforce public mistrust and weaken the very impact such collaborations are meant to achieve.



„Back in 2014, I reached out to the The Guardian to draw attention to the situation in Karakalpakstan. I offered to share anonymous material. With the help of an assistant journalist, I prepared a neutral text — not opposition-driven — explaining that there were growing calls for independence in Karakalpakstan, and I argued that this was dangerous populism.



<sup>100</sup> ibid (89).

<sup>101</sup> ibid (89).



I had extensive materials and sent them to several editors. They accepted the content but published it under a sensational, clickbait headline - ‘Uzbekistan Separatist Movement Threatens Ancient Culture\*.’ When people from my region saw this, they didn’t read the full article — they only saw the headline. This completely misrepresented my work and turned my own community against me. It was nothing more than clickbait, and it damaged my reputation.”  
 – an immigrant reporter from Karakalpakstan region in Uzbekistan

\* The Guardian (2015). Uzbekistan Separatist Movement Threatens Ancient Culture.

The journalistic practices in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan reveal both common struggles and unique national dynamics, underscoring the region’s complex information environment. While the shift toward online and multimedia platforms is a shared trend, investigative and data-driven journalism remain constrained by political pressures, limited resources, and varying levels of state control.

#### 4.1. Repressions against Journalists in Central Asia

Abundant evidence on the internet highlights the widespread repression of journalists across Central Asia, with participants in the qualitative fieldwork emphasizing that such repression is not merely an occasional occurrence but rather an inseparable and defining feature of the region’s information environment. Since 2010, journalists in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan have faced intimidation, censorship, legal persecution, and even violence for their work, albeit to varying degrees in each country. Common tactics include criminal prosecutions on dubious charges, defamation lawsuits, website blocking, and occasional physical attacks, all of which contribute to a climate of fear and self-censorship. While Kyrgyzstan was long considered the region’s relative safe haven for independent media, recent years have seen a sharp decline in its media freedom. Uzbekistan experienced a modest thaw after 2016 but continues to impose heavy restrictions on journalists, while Tajikistan’s media has faced especially severe crackdowns since the mid-2010s. Kazakhstan’s press remains tightly controlled through subtler means such as harassment and financial pressure, despite having a nominally more open environment compared to some of its neighbors. These dynamics are reflected in the World Press Freedom Index rankings for 2025, where Kazakhstan (141st) marginally leads the region, followed by Kyrgyzstan (144th), Uzbekistan (148th), and Tajikistan (153rd), placing all four countries firmly in the bottom tier globally.<sup>102</sup>

In **Kazakhstan**, journalists operate under constant pressure from authorities and media owners, facing both legal and extralegal impediments to their work. Defamation was a criminal offense until 2020, and in the decade prior courts convicted journalists 88 times under “slander” statutes. Even after defamation was moved to an administrative offense, the legacy of these cases contributes to widespread self-censorship. Reporters who probe sensitive topics – especially corruption or the business interests of the elite – risk harassment, surveillance, or arrest on spurious charges. For example, in 2019 RFE/RL correspondent Sania Toiken was detained and fined by police simply for covering an oil workers’ protest in Zhanaozen.<sup>103</sup>

<sup>102</sup> Reporters without Borders (2025). Press Freedom Index.

<sup>103</sup> U.S. Agency for Global Media (2019). Kazakhstan Detains Two RFE/RL Journalists.

Physical attacks, while less frequent, have sent a chilling message. In a notorious 2012 incident, independent journalist Lukpan Akhmedyarov narrowly survived a brutal assassination attempt after reporting critically on local authorities.<sup>104</sup> Such episodes, combined with routine smear campaigns and office raids, leave Kazakhstani journalists feeling unprotected in their professional duties.



„There was a case involving Dinara Smailova\*, the director of ‘Ne Molchi’ (eng. Don’t Stay Silent), an organization that fights for the rights of victims of domestic violence. She is currently wanted by the police but does not know the exact reason why. Officially, the accusation is that she published unverified information. However, this same information had already been published earlier by a government agency, and she merely paraphrased it.” – **a journalist from Kazakhstan**

\* On September 12, 2025, the Supreme Court of Montenegro ultimately denied the request to extradite Dinara Smailova, the founder of the „Ne Molchi“ foundation, to the authorities in Kazakhstan.

Kazakh Telegraph Agency (KazTag) (2025). Montenegro refused to extradite the founder of the "Ne Molchi" foundation to Kazakhstan

Although President Tokayev’s government occasionally signals reform – as with decriminalizing libel – it also tightens control through new laws (e.g. on “false information” and cybercrime) that enable blocking websites or penalizing social media content. By 2025, Kazakhstan had inched up in press freedom rankings, yet independent journalism remains constrained by ownership concentration, financial dependence, and the ever-present threat of state interference.

In **Kyrgyzstan**, once celebrated as Central Asia’s leader in press freedom, the media landscape has deteriorated alarmingly in recent years. During the 2010s, Kyrgyz journalists experienced a period of relative openness: criminal defamation was abolished in 2011, and independent outlets flourished, fostering vibrant public debate. However, recent administrations have increasingly embraced authoritarian tactics, reversing many of these earlier gains. By 2025, the country’s press freedom ranking had plummeted 24 places to 144th, now falling below Kazakhstan and only slightly above Uzbekistan.<sup>105</sup> Under President Sadyr Japarov, the authorities have introduced broadly worded laws designed to suppress critical speech, including a highly controversial 2023 law against “false information,” which directly violates constitutional guarantees of free expression. Independent media outlets have been systematically targeted through raids, prosecutions, and forced closures: the investigative website Kloop was shut down and its legal entity dissolved in 2024, while the local bureau of RFE/RL (Radio Azattyk) was blocked after it refused to remove reporting deemed unfavorable by the government.<sup>106</sup> Criminal cases against journalists and bloggers on trumped-up charges have increasingly been used as a “tool of retaliation,” often based on social media posts critical of officials. In an unprecedented crackdown, eleven investigative journalists associated with the Temirov Live media project were detained in a single morning in early 2024; two were later

<sup>104</sup> Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) (2014). Organizer Of Attempted Murder Of Prominent Kazakh Journalist Sentenced

<sup>105</sup> Reporters without Borders (2025). Kyrgyzstan.

<sup>106</sup> Note: In July 2023, Kyrgyz court reversed the block, following international outcry. [Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) (2022). Kyrgyz Service]

sentenced to prison terms of five to six years.<sup>107</sup> Another prominent example was the case against Kloop media: in 2025, at least 8 individuals (including Kloop journalists and editorial staff) were questioned by the police.<sup>108</sup> These actions mark a dramatic reversal for Kyrgyzstan's media community. This escalating climate of fear has forced many journalists and outlets to practice self-censorship or flee into exile, eroding the hard-won progress achieved over the previous decade.

In **Uzbekistan**, repression of journalists was severe at the start of the 2010s and, despite some improvements, continues to cast a long shadow. Under the late President Islam Karimov (who ruled until 2016), Uzbekistan was one of the world's most censored environments – ranked 165th of 180 countries in press freedom in 2017 – with many journalists jailed or in exile. Several reporters arrested in the 1990s and 2000s endured extraordinarily long imprisonments: for instance, Muhammad Bekjanov served 18 years behind bars, for his criticism of the Karimov regime. Following Karimov's death, his successor President Shavkat Mirziyoyev took steps that slightly opened the media space. Dozens of political prisoners, including at least 10 journalists, were released by 2018 as part of reforms. New independent media outlets and bloggers emerged, testing boundaries by reporting on previously taboo issues like corruption. However, experienced Uzbek journalists caution that these changes are largely superficial. Indeed, key levers of control remain firmly in place. Censorship and surveillance of online content persist (many rely on proxy or exiled news sources for uncensored information), and “old guard” officials from the Karimov era still dominate media oversight bodies. Authorities continue to harass and detain critical voices: in recent years several bloggers have been arrested for posts on social media, and journalists know certain topics – especially anything implicating the security services or the president's family – are effectively off-limits.<sup>109</sup> Uzbekistan did decriminalize libel in 2019, aligning with Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan on that reform, but reporters often face civil lawsuits or charges of extremism if they cross implicit red lines. While open violence against journalists is less common in Uzbekistan today than a decade ago, the constant threat of prosecution or intimidation continues to severely restrict investigative reporting. With Uzbekistan still ranking in the bottom quintile worldwide for press freedom, most journalists exercise caution, aware that the modest media liberalization could be reversed if they overstep, and that true independence remains a distant goal.

In **Tajikistan**, the repression of journalists has escalated to an extreme level, especially since the mid-2010s. Although Tajikistan's media was never free in the post-Soviet era, a small independent press corps did exist through the early 2010s, covering social issues and occasionally criticizing local officials. This space has progressively shrunk as President Emomali Rahmon's government tightened its grip.



„It started around 2010–2015. The first issue is pressure: there is widespread self-censorship, as journalists are afraid to publish certain things, so they end up censoring themselves. The second issue is economic pressure — it is very difficult for journalists to earn a living because media outlets are not commercially viable. The third problem is the lack of access to sources, which severely limits journalists' ability to gather accurate and reliable information.“ – a **journalist from Tajikistan**

<sup>107</sup> Amnesty International (2025). Kyrgyzstan: Detention of Media Staff Intensifies Crackdown on Independent Journalism.

<sup>108</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>109</sup> Reporters without Borders (n.d). US, Uzbekistan - RSF welcomes Muhammad Bekjanov, once the world's longest-detained journalist, to Washington.

A turning point came in 2015 when the regime banned the main opposition party and began dismantling remaining independent institutions. Dozens of journalists subsequently fled into exile, and virtually no new independent media outlets have been able to register in the country since then. Those who stayed faced rising threats: harassment by security services, smear campaigns painting them as “extremists,” and growing interference in editorial decisions. By 2020, Tajikistan’s few critical outlets (such as Asia-Plus and RFE/RL’s Radio Ozodi) were under immense pressure, subject to periodic website blockages and official warnings to tow the line. The crackdown reached an alarming peak in 2022, a year Tajik journalists describe as “devastating”. In the aftermath of local unrest in the Gorno-Badakhshan region, authorities jailed at least seven journalists and bloggers on trumped-up charges, sentencing them to extraordinarily harsh prison terms: several received 7 to 10 years, and one veteran journalist, Ulfatkhonim Mamadshoeva, was given 20 years in a secret trial. “2022 silenced all of us, not just those who were arrested,” one Tajik journalist told CPJ, “We don’t know who might be next... Journalists fear saying anything.” This climate of pervasive fear and self-censorship has been called “the collapse of independent Tajik journalism”. Even the appearance of critical reporting has been virtually extinguished: nearly every remaining media voice avoids politics entirely or echoes the state line. Authorities employ indirect methods of repression that are difficult to trace – for instance, tax audits or “visits” from law enforcement to remind editors they are being watched. Each outlet is said to have an informal government “curator” monitoring its content. Such tactics, combined with draconian anti-extremism laws, allow officials to portray independent journalists as traitors or radicals, further turning the public against them. The few journalists who continue to push boundaries do so at great personal risk, often publishing sensitive investigations on foreign platforms to avoid local retribution. Tajikistan’s press freedom ranking remains among the worst in the world, and its media operates in an atmosphere of intimidation comparable to wartime conditions.<sup>110</sup>

Apart from the internal pressures on the media in each country, participants of the qualitative fieldwork unanimously confirmed China’s growing influence on the information landscape in Central Asia. According to insights shared during interviews, focus group discussions, and key informant workshops, this influence is becoming increasingly evident, as criticism of China in the media has noticeably declined and is now far less common across the region.



„Recently, I have noticed some changes, particularly regarding the coverage of world news in local media outlets. It has become increasingly clear that China is exerting influence over Tajikistan’s information environment, possibly through financial leverage such as loans or financial incentives. Tajik journalists are now more frequently invited to participate in press tours to China, which further strengthens China’s influence over local media narratives. When I speak with editors from different outlets, it is clear that certain topics related to China have become taboo. In the past, we used to publish articles critically examining China’s role, and local media would repost them, creating strong public resonance. However, this no longer happens, which shows how significantly the environment has shifted. You can sense it even when speaking with people — the atmosphere has changed, and China’s influence over information flows now feels even greater than that of the Tajik government itself.

The broader geopolitical context has also contributed to this imbalance. In Tajikistan, the situation is worsening because Trump’s policies severely undermined American soft power in



<sup>110</sup> Committee to Protect Journalists (2024). In Tajikistan, Independent Media Throttled by State Repression.



the region, while Europe has remained traditionally passive and disengaged. With little expectation of support or counterbalance from the United States or Europe, China's role in shaping Tajikistan's information environment is only set to grow stronger." – **a journalist from Tajikistan**

Same in Kazakhstan: „In the past, we could freely share our opinions about China, but now, if you post something on Facebook, for example, it gets immediately reported. The Kazakhstani government does not want to acknowledge the problems faced by Kazakh people who go to China, get arrested, or face other issues. They actively try to block this information. In Kazakhstan, there are now signs of a system similar to Xinjiang's. For example, there is increasing total control, and people who have lived in Xinjiang say that the same patterns are beginning to appear here in Kazakhstan.“ – **a media expert from Central Asia**

In summary, Central Asian journalists have faced relentless repression in recent years, ranging from subtle coercion to outright brutality. Across Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan, journalists have been detained, imprisoned, or silenced for their work. Governments use broad anti-extremism and misinformation laws to criminalize critical reporting, while censorship and state dominance of the media remain pervasive. Self-censorship has become deeply entrenched, particularly in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, where crossing “red lines” can lead to swift and severe punishment. Even in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, where independent outlets are somewhat more visible, authorities increasingly target dissenting voices by shutting down media organizations, prosecuting journalists, and applying pressure through loyal media owners and security services. The toll of these repressive tactics is reflected not only in international rankings but also in the voices of journalists themselves, many of whom describe their work as a constant struggle for survival. „**In five years, I think the situation for free media will worsen in Central Asia. We once had a strong foundation, with many journalists and independent outlets, but the politicians have suppressed them. Over time, I believe the situation will continue to deteriorate.**“ - says a journalist from Central Asia.

Yet, despite these risks, courageous reporters continues to expose corruption, injustice, and abuse of power. Their resilience — from those risking harassment and assault inside their countries to those operating in exile — highlights both the urgent need for stronger protections and the enduring hope that journalists, when united, can persevere even under the most oppressive conditions.



"In this kind of work, empathy really matters. When colleagues support each other and try to understand what the other person is going through, it makes the job a little easier. Alone, it's hard to cope, but when we stick together, it feels more manageable." – **a journalist from Central Asia**

## 4.2. Who Speaks Matters More Than What They Speak - Media Representatives' Reflections on Bloggers in Central Asia

Against the backdrop of growing repression against journalists across Central Asia, the project explored whether bloggers could emerge as alternative voices for independent information. During fieldwork discussions, media sector participants were asked to reflect on bloggers as a form of individual journalism and to assess whether they could “pick up the torch” from traditional journalists in environments where press freedom is shrinking. Their responses revealed a complex mix of recognition, criticism, and concern, highlighting the shifting dynamics between professional media and the rapidly expanding influence of bloggers.

Participants consistently emphasized that in today's information environment, the identity and popularity of the messenger often outweigh the accuracy or depth of their message. In several countries, people tend to follow personalities rather than facts, leading to a situation where public opinion is shaped by a few high-profile voices, regardless of their credibility.



“People don't care about what is being said, only about who is saying it. The more followers a blogger has, the more people will listen to them—and even the government tries to work with them. But bloggers are not professionals. They rarely double-check their information and often speak without fully understanding the issues.” – **a journalist from Kazakhstan**

This dynamic was described as particularly troubling in countries like Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, where political populism thrives online. An activist from Uzbekistan reflected on how emotional appeals often overshadow factual reporting: „-Why do people care more about who talks than what they say? There are many populist activists in Uzbekistan who start their YouTube videos with insults instead of facts. They speak only from emotion, yet people trust them more than those of us who provide verified information. During periods of political instability in Central Asia, people rely on them rather than me. Interestingly, before recording their videos, they usually ask me questions about the situation.”

Across the region, bloggers have developed massive audiences, often surpassing government communication channels in reach and influence. In **Uzbekistan**, for example, bloggers play a particularly important role in disseminating information to rural and remote populations. Government agencies maintain Telegram channels, yet many people are unaware of them or find them less engaging. „In my opinion, more information is shared by bloggers than by the public sector,” one participant explained. „Even though every government agency has a Telegram channel, most people in remote areas don't know about them. If you compare a healthcare blogger's channel to the Ministry of Health's channel, the blogger usually has more followers and much higher reach.”

However, such influence also creates significant risks. Many bloggers prioritize attention and clicks over accuracy, spreading rumors and misinformation that can have real-world consequences. As one Kyrgyz participant explained, “Very often, bloggers build huge audiences by sending misinformation because they want more attention—and some people believe them. For instance, a blogger might claim that Akimats are handing out money, and people rush to act on it. When a blogger spreads misinformation, special government

structures investigate and punish them, but regular people don't have the capacity to fight false information themselves."

Media representatives also stressed that, despite their visibility, bloggers cannot fully replace traditional media. In **Tajikistan**, several respondents argued that bloggers fundamentally differ from journalists in their approach and accountability. „Bloggers will never be able to replace the media," one Tajik journalist explained. „They are sharing their opinions and worldview, but many don't understand the responsibility that comes with that. They need to double-check their information and apologize immediately if they make mistakes. Too often, their content is shaped by habits or by sponsors, since most bloggers rely on two or three major sponsors and end up promoting their views rather than independent reporting."

While bloggers are not bound by the same professional standards as journalists, they face many of the same risks. Participants noted that bloggers are increasingly subjected to state pressure, harassment, and even imprisonment. „Bloggers are also pressured—they are jailed, almost in equal numbers to journalists," explained one Tajik respondent. „Even when they speak about problems in the community, they can be punished." This blurring of lines between journalism and blogging means that both groups are vulnerable in environments where critical voices are systematically suppressed.

# AGILE

ADVANCING MEDIA RESILIENCE

## CHAPTER 5

Role of Civil Society in Improving Information Environment in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan



## Role of Civil Society in Improving Information Environment in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan

Civil society organizations (CSOs) in Central Asia have been pivotal in enhancing the information environment for vulnerable groups—such as ethnic minorities, sexual and gender minorities, and marginalized populations—by facilitating access to reliable information, advocating for rights, and creating platforms for dialogue. Despite often facing restrictive political and legal contexts, these organizations deploy targeted programs, digital tools, and community engagement initiatives tailored to overcome barriers in information flow and inclusivity. The following chapter presents country-specific examples illustrating the concrete roles and impacts of CSOs in this regard.

In **Kazakhstan**, CSOs focus on bridging information gaps, especially in urban centers, where most NGOs operate. For instance, the NGO "Education Community" provided vital online resources on sexual and gender diversity through Seltanu.kz, becoming a crucial platform for LGBTQI+ individuals facing societal stigma and limited access to support. Despite legal challenges and government attempts to limit such content under broad "morality" laws by blocking the website, this NGO persisted with digital advocacy and social media campaigns aimed at raising awareness and combating misinformation.<sup>111</sup> Meanwhile, organizations like "ARU Foundation" extend their reach to rural ethnic minorities by providing them with information on education opportunities in the country.<sup>112</sup> Beyond direct services, Kazakh NGOs participate in formal channels such as the advisory Commission on Access to Information (CATI), pushing for legislative reforms and greater transparency in public data access. Fact-checking initiatives in the country, backed by the Open Society Foundations, further strengthen the reliability of information reaching marginalized groups by training journalists and civil activists in identifying misinformation.<sup>113</sup>

Across the border, in **Kyrgyzstan**, civil society organizations have taken up the mantle of addressing the information needs related to inter-ethnic relations and human rights, stepping in where official institutions fall short. NGOs like "Spravedlivost" (Justice) meticulously document human rights abuses against minorities and circulate reports through community radio and online channels tailored for minority population.<sup>114</sup> The media literacy programs led by Interbilim target young people in ethnically diverse southern regions, empowering them to critically analyze digital content and resist extremist messaging.<sup>115</sup> Gender-based violence, another critical area, is tackled by organizations such as Crisis Center „Sezim“, which provides confidential hotlines and online counseling, offering vulnerable survivors access to essential information that may be otherwise unavailable through state services.<sup>116</sup> Notably, according to CSO representatives from Kyrgyzstan who participated in the qualitative fieldwork, gender-related topics are among the most difficult to communicate, especially in the regions.

<sup>111</sup> ILGA Europe (2024). Annual Review Of The Human Rights Situation Of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, And Intersex People: Kazakhstan.

<sup>112</sup> The ARU Foundation (n.d). Purpose of the Foundation.

<sup>113</sup> MediaNet – International Center for Journalism (n.d). Factcheck.Kz Becomes The First Kazakhstani Partner Of Meta As Part Of The Global Fact-Checking Program

<sup>114</sup> OSCE (2014). Kyrgyzstan-based NGO Spravedlivost named winner of 2014 Max van der Stoel Award. / Frontline Defenders (n.d). Spravedlivost ("Justice").

<sup>115</sup> Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) (2013). Impact Evaluation Of Peacebuilding In Kyrgyzstan

<sup>116</sup> Forum of Women’s NGOs of Kyrgyzstan (2023). Coordination Of Gender-Based And Domestic Violence Protection Services In Existing Shelters And Crisis Centers In The Kyrgyz Republic



„Our work is usually not very welcome in the regions. Gender is often perceived as a foreign concept, something culturally inappropriate that could destroy families. That is why we usually focus on spreading information about education rather than directly addressing gender issues. For example, we explain that if a woman receives an education, she can earn more money. When you frame the conversation in this economic way, men are more receptive and can be convinced.

We use specific tools, such as the Gender Action Learning System (GALS), where participants draw their life plans. We ask them to outline the steps they need to take to achieve their goals. When these paths are visualized, men often see that women have many more tasks and responsibilities, while they themselves have fewer. This realization often prompts men to say, ‘Let me help her too, so that she can contribute financially.’ When everything is explained from an economic perspective, people are much more likely to understand and accept the message.”  
**– a non-profit organization representative from Kyrgyzstan**

Faced with increasing legislative restrictions like the “foreign representatives” law, civil society groups continue to organize legal awareness workshops, keeping the community informed about their rights in a shrinking civic space. In addition, initiatives such as “Taza Koom” curate localized, multilingual content, ensuring that ethnic minorities can access culturally relevant information in their native languages, which is key in a country marked by rich ethnolinguistic diversity.<sup>117</sup>

Turning to **Uzbekistan**, independent NGOs such as “Ezgulik” consistently report on human rights concerns and distribute uncensored information via both print and digital channels, providing marginalized groups—including religious minorities and former prisoners—with vital news otherwise restricted in mainstream media. Moreover, grassroots civil society increasingly uses social media platforms to crowdsource data community needs and transform complex government policies into user-friendly formats, improving information flow for groups facing formal barriers to engagement. Though government-run “public help desks” aim to centralize citizen feedback, civil society continues to fill critical gaps by offering legal counseling and awareness campaigns in underserved regions, maintaining an essential channel for vulnerable communities to access information and support.<sup>118</sup>



„They [ethnic minorities in regions] need all kinds of information and try to keep up with the news. For example, we are often asked questions about laws, such as: ‘If we do this, will we be violating any laws?’ In rural areas, there are communities that need information about their rights so they can be aware of their options and protections in different situations. However, in some regions, it is very difficult for information to reach people.”  
**– a non-profit organization representative from Uzbekistan**

<sup>117</sup> European Union External Action (2017). European Commission President's Remarks About Kyrgyz Project Taza Koom

<sup>118</sup> Human Rights Society of Uzbekistan – Ezgulik (2023). Annual Report 2023: A Comprehensive Review Of Human Rights In Uzbekistan

In **Tajikistan**, even as the number of active CSOs declines, remaining organizations play a vital role in supporting vulnerable populations with reliable information and advocacy. The association “Zerkalo” has pioneered open data archiving projects, preserving crucial datasets that are otherwise removed from official sources, ensuring journalists and civil society who work with marginalized communities retain access to key information. Data journalism initiatives, such as the Internews Data Journalism Project, have trained local reporters in analyzing and visualizing complex information, resulting in more detailed and accessible coverage of public budgets, social programs, and services directly affecting marginalized groups.<sup>119</sup> Additionally, humanitarian organizations extend their outreach in isolated areas like the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Region (GBAO) and Khatlon, connecting remote populations with vital health, education, and legal information. **„We are in the cities and have access to so much information, but in Khatlon and GBAO, the flow of information is almost nonexistent, especially during the winter months. People there can’t access many services. We are currently working with the ministries to deliver information to these regions, but it is very difficult.“** - explains a civil society representative from Tajikistan

Overall, CSOs across Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan implement diverse, targeted interventions—from digital platforms and media literacy programs to open data preservation and grassroots outreach—that concretely improve the availability, reliability, and accessibility of information for vulnerable populations. Despite facing significant legal and resource constraints, these organizations remain indispensable actors in fostering more inclusive and transparent information ecosystems throughout Central Asia.

■ <sup>119</sup> Internews (2022). Mapping Open Data in Tajikistan

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## CHAPTER 6

Role of Regional Entities in Delivering the Information  
to Vulnerable and Hard-to-Reach Communities



## Role of Regional Entities in Delivering the Information to Vulnerable and Hard-to-Reach Communities

Secondary literature on Central Asia’s information environment tends to focus on legislation, media markets, platforms, and censorship, yet it often overlooks the human infrastructure that ultimately determines whether messages actually reach households in distant or hard-to-access regions. Insights gathered through key informant workshops, interviews, and focus group discussions across Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan highlight a consistent operational reality: effective public outreach in hard-to-reach areas begins by informing the local or regional executive authority, followed by engagement with the neighborhood-level self-governing body that mobilizes residents. While the institutional labels differ, the sequence remains remarkably consistent across countries. In Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, the executive tier is the Akimat; in Uzbekistan, it is the Khokimiyat; and in Tajikistan, a Rais (chair) heads the executive structures at the provincial, city, and district levels. Beneath these authorities, neighborhood-level structures play a parallel role in carrying messages the “last mile” and convening local residents. This layer is most formalized in Uzbekistan through Mahalla Committees, which also exist widely in Tajikistan, while Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan rely on functional equivalents such as village councils, community elders, or house committees. Regardless of the name or form, these community bodies are central to local governance and information flow, taking on responsibilities such as organizing meetings, distributing materials, and supporting social welfare, community development, and public order, thereby bridging formal institutions and everyday life and turning official guidance into practical, actionable steps that reach people at the grassroots level.



„Without the Akimat’s early briefing, you can print banners and schedule speakers, but you’ll still end up talking to just a few people in the regions. If you send them a short concept note and get their support, by the next day you’ll have a full room. The Akimat helps with everything—venues, mobilizing people, and more. It’s not just bureaucracy; it’s what makes people actually show up.” – **a civil society representative from Kazakhstan**

Although Mahallas (and their counterparts in other countries) can be very efficient, because these structures are ultimately human constructs, they are not immune to distortion. Sometimes, they can unintentionally spread misinformation, reinforce existing biases or be under the government influence. As one journalist from Uzbekistan explained, „**if a respected local leader repeats something—even if it’s wrong—people will believe it immediately. It’s harder to correct false information once it spreads this way than to fight a fake post online.**” This dynamic shows how trusted intermediaries can amplify both accurate and inaccurate messages, making them powerful but also risky channels for outreach.

Interestingly, fieldwork participants noted that improving the quality of work done by Mahallas in Uzbekistan—and their counterparts in other countries—requires greater inclusivity. While these entities have strong mobilization capacity, they do not always engage all segments of the population equally. Certain groups, such as persons with disabilities (PwDs) and women, are often excluded from decision-making and community activities.



„When it comes to inclusivity, Mahalla Committees primarily work with men, and women are often overlooked. I always tell them to invite women to these activities. For example, there was a project on planting saplings, and they only gathered men. After some time, the saplings died because women had more knowledge about how to care for them, while the men knew less. This mistake led to poor results.“ – **a civil society representative from Uzbekistan**

Ultimately, while Mahallas and similar community bodies are vital for bridging the gap between national policies and local realities, their effectiveness depends on trust, accuracy, and inclusivity. Strengthening these structures requires not only logistical support and resources but also deliberate efforts to prevent the spread of misinformation and ensure that all community members—especially women and persons with disabilities—are meaningfully involved. By addressing these challenges, these institutions can fully realize their potential as reliable, equitable channels for delivering information and services to even the most remote and vulnerable populations.

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## CHAPTER 7

Traditions of Informal Information Exchange in  
**Central Asia**



## Traditions of Informal Information Exchange in Central Asia

The information landscape of Central Asia extends far beyond formal media channels, government announcements, or digital platforms. In this region, information flows not only through newspapers, television, and social media, but also through deeply rooted traditions of interpersonal exchange. Central Asia is a land of immersive conversations, where face-to-face dialogue often matter more than written statements or online posts. These informal systems play a particularly important role in rural areas, where physical gatherings and communal trust form the backbone of the information environment. People meet regularly in social spaces to share news, advice, and even rumors, creating parallel networks of information that can both support and compete with formal communication efforts. While the specific customs vary across countries, every nation in the region has its own version of these gatherings, shaped by history, culture, and geography. In **Kazakhstan** and **Kyrgyzstan**, one of the most unique and deeply rooted forms of informal information exchange is Aitys/Aytish, a traditional form of improvised poetic dialogue and debate between two akhyns (folk poets). Historically, Aitys was more than just entertainment—it functioned as a dynamic information-sharing tool within Kazakh and Kyrgyz societies, a way to deliver news, shape public opinion, and preserve collective memory. These contests took place during festivals, weddings, and community gatherings, where large audiences would gather to listen as akhyns exchanged verses about current events, social issues, and community disputes. As one of the research participant explained: **„When we hear the akhyns debate, we don’t just listen to poetry—we learn about what is happening in the country. They speak about politics, family issues, even local scandals, and people trust them because their words come from tradition.”** The very format of Aitys encourages dialogue and the free exchange of ideas, as performers use wit and eloquence to challenge one another’s narratives. This tradition continues today, often broadcast on television or shared through social media, blending ancient cultural practices with modern platforms. However, even in its modern form, the essence of Aitys remains the same: a trusted and participatory space where information flows in real time, with the audience actively engaging by supporting their favored akhyn. **Uzbekistan** and **Tajikistan** have many rich traditions of interpersonal information exchange. One of the most prominent is called Gap, which literally translates to “conversation.” Depending on the region, similar gatherings are also referred to as Tashkil (organizing) or Chayhana (tea house). These are trusted social spaces where communities come together to celebrate milestones, share meals, and exchange advice or news. Christopher Aslan Alexander, in his book *A Carpet Ride to Khiva*, vividly describes a Tashkil gathering: „It was the souvenir-sellers who invited me to join a tashkil. At first, I wasn't too keen on this specialized collective party, remembering my first experience of revelry with Zafar and his friends during my early months in Khiva. The party had been held in the guestroom of one of the local tourist guides. The floor was covered with a long plastic tablecloth, plastered with food that had obviously once been laid out in an orderly fashion. Now it was covered in dismembered bones, corks, crumbs, and stray pieces of salad. Around the tablecloth, sitting cross-legged on corpuches or lolling on the lap of a friend, were the other guests—about ten of them and all male.“<sup>120</sup>

Across Central Asia, these traditions of interpersonal communication form a crucial, if often overlooked, part of the region’s information environment. They connect formal institutions to everyday life, allowing policies and announcements to reach people in ways that digital platforms alone cannot achieve. However, they also carry risks. The same trust that gives these gatherings their power makes them highly susceptible to misinformation. Understanding and engaging with these informal systems is therefore essential for any effort to improve access to accurate, reliable information in Central Asia.

<sup>120</sup> C.A. Alexander (2010). *A Carpet Ride to Khiva: Seven Years on the Silk Road*.

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## Conclusion

Information Environment Mapping in Central Asia:  
Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan

Submitted to Canal France International (CFI) by ACT Global



## Conclusion

The information environment in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan is a complex and contradictory space. While the region has embraced a rapid digital transformation, with high rates of internet and social media usage, this has not been accompanied by a parallel increase in freedom of information or protection for minority groups. Instead, a persistent tension exists between the democratizing potential of digital tools and the reality of entrenched authoritarian control.

Minority groups—be they ethnic, religious, linguistic, or sexual—remain systematically marginalized. State-driven nation-building policies, restrictive legal frameworks, and societal intolerance combine to create an environment where these communities are routinely denied their rights. This repression is directly reflected in the media landscape, where state-controlled outlets dominate, and independent journalism is suppressed through censorship, legal pressure, and surveillance. As a result, vulnerable populations often lack access to reliable, unbiased information and struggle to participate meaningfully in public discourse.

Despite these challenges, there are signs of resilience. The shift to online platforms has, in some ways, created new avenues for communication and activism. However, these digital spaces are not free from control; they are fertile ground for misinformation, disinformation, and hate speech, which disproportionately affect those with lower digital literacy. This report makes clear that while technology can offer new opportunities for engagement, it cannot, on its own, overcome deep-seated political and social barriers. The future of the information environment in Central Asia will depend on whether the region's growing digital connectivity can be leveraged to foster a more inclusive and open society or if it will be co-opted to reinforce existing patterns of control and exclusion.

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