Introduction

The Mobilizing Potential of Communication Networks in Central Asia

Accepted version of an article published in Central Asian Affairs: Jasmin Dall' Agnola and Coleen Wood. "The Mobilizing Potential of Communication Networks in Central Asia ", Central Asian Affairs 9, 1 (2022): 1-15.

What is the mobilizing and meaning-making potential of information and communication technologies (ICTs) in non-democratic regimes? This question has been studied globally, with the Arab Spring heightening the urgency and the stakes for social science theories of digital mobilization. In the semi-authoritarian regimes of Central Asia, where access to the internet has risen dramatically in the last decade, various online platforms have served as stages for state-sponsored identity construction and grassroots debates about memory and belonging. The central aim of this special issue is to advance the region-specific debate about the mobilizing potential of ICTs through detailed case studies and thick descriptions of how these technologies are used by state and non-state actors alike.

In this introductory article, the editorial team provides a brief analysis of the existing social science literature on the internet's role in state–society relations in Central Asia since the collapse of the Soviet Union. This essay has two goals: to define the scope of the special issue and to lay out the three key contributions/themes that emerged from the collection of papers in this special issue.

1 Cyber-Optimists versus Cyber-Pessimists

Information and communication technologies (hereafter, ICT s), which include broadband internet, mobile phones, and social media platforms, have become an indispensable part of everyday life for people all over the world. Social scientists have sought to describe and understand how ICTs shape state–society relations around the globe. In the last decade, a rich literature has emerged that explores how authorities in non-democratic states manage dissent online and the mechanisms by which the internet and social media facilitate collective organization and the spread of dissident information. The use of social media to organize protests and document revolutions, especially during the Arab Spring in 2011, inspired a broad body of socio-political research on the internet's role in state–society relations and governance. Within this literature, scholars and practitioners alike debate the feasibility, impact, and mobilizing potential of social media. On the one hand, optimists argue that social media

enables collective organization (Earl and Kimport 2011) by lowering the costs for organizing, information sharing, and participation (Carr and Hayes 2015). On the other, skeptics have claimed that any benefits to collective action are overstated (Morozov 2011) and that digital movements rarely translate into change that transpires through formal political institutions (Beissinger 2017).

A microcosm of this debate has unfolded among Central Asian experts. According to cyber-pessimists (Anceschi 2015; Isaacs 2020; Lewis 2016; Swerdlow 2019), the internet gives Central Asian regimes another tool to manipulate, regulate, and monitor dissent. Strategies vary, including the use of state-sponsored bloggers and influencers to push positive messages and topple dissent (Lewis 2016); legislation that restricts internet freedom (Reyaz 2019); and temporarily blocking websites and online messaging services in an ad-hoc manner, as in December 2012 when the Tajik government asked all internet providers to block social networks (Shafiev and Miles 2015) or as in January 2022 when the Kazakh government shut down the internet in an attempt to control mass protests across the country (Keegan 2022). According to cyber-skeptics, strategies of internet containment devised by the five Central Asian regimes under the pretext of national security increasingly resemble China's model of digital media censorship, also known as "networked authoritarianism" (MacKinnon 2011: 33) or "digital Leninism" (Lee 2019: 955). For example, Kazakhstani authorities were found to use Pegasus, a cutting-edge spyware made by the Israeli company NSO Group that infects iPhones and Android devices to extract messages, photos, and emails, record calls, and secretly activate microphones to track human rights activists, journalists, and political opponents (Kumenov 2021). The Turkmen government is known for using the UK FinFisher spyware, which is capable of remotely taking control of a computer or mobile phone and logging users' activities (Nazar 2018; Radio Free Europe 2019).

Despite the prevalence of hacking and digital surveillance, cyber-optimists (Bekmagambetov et al. 2018; Dall'Agnola 2021; Kudaibergenova 2019; Nikolayenko 2015; Nurmakov 2017) emphasize the potential of ICTs to circulate political criticism and foment resistance. The region's governments are acutely aware of the power of ICTs. In using even more expensive strategies to restrict access to and hinder the flow of free information and communication online, Central Asian authorities reveal an understanding that information and communication networks are conduits of power, disseminating alternative and critical voices (Bekmagambetov et al. 2018; Nurmakov 2017). Given the dispersed and unstructured nature of digital networks, cyber-optimists hold that digital censorship can only be effective to a certain degree because social media and the internet are often difficult to control (Bekmagambetov et al.

2018). A peaceful demonstration in Tashkent in June 2017, protests for fair and open presidential elections in Kazakhstan's largest cities in June 2019, massive crowds in Bishkek that contested parliamentary elections and demanded the resignation of high-ranking officials in October 2020, and the nationwide protests over gas prices in Kazakhstan in January 2022 were all organized digitally and played out via hybrid online/offline activities. These instances of contentious politics reflect the mobilizing potential of ICTs, which facilitate the dissemination of dissident voices and articulations of alternative political futures in Central Asia.

The speed at which telecommunications infrastructure and internet penetration have expanded in Central Asia in recent years presents empirical and theoretical obstacles in adjudicating the regional debate between cyber-pessimists and optimists. Some articles published within the last five years frame social media as an apolitical sphere, citing low usage (Anceschi 2015), but the internet has become much cheaper and more widely accessed across the region. For more details, see Figure 1 below.

Internet access in Kazakhstan – which leads the region – rose from 3 percent of the population in 2005 to 31 percent in 2010 and climbed to almost 86 percent of the country in 2022 (World Bank 2019; We Are Social 2022). This phenomenon is not unique to Kazakhstan, and other countries in the region have seen internet access jump sharply as well. For example, the World Bank's most recent data on Kyrgyzstan suggests that the percentage of internet users among the population has increased from 10 percent in 2005 to 38.2 percent in 2017 (World Bank 2019). During the COVID-19 pandemic, the number

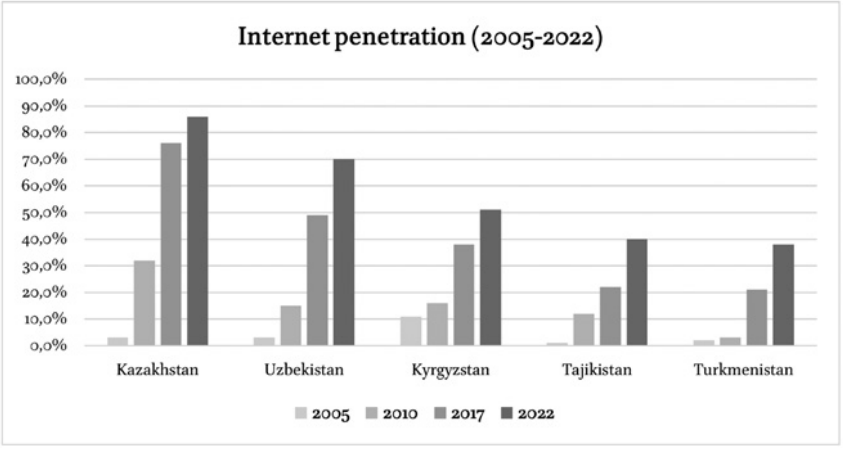

Figure 1 Internet penetration in Central Asia, 2005–2022
Sources: World Bank (2019) and We Are Social (2022)

of internet users has again increased, so that by January 2022 more than 50 percent of Kyrgyzstan's population enjoyed access to the internet (We Are Social 2022). Internet access is more widespread in Uzbekistan than it is in Kyrgyzstan, with more than 45 percent of the population being online in 2017 and more than and 65 percent using the internet in 2022 (World Bank 2019; We Are Social 2022). Even in Turkmenistan, where the dominant narrative is of complete internet repression (BBC 2018), the number of internet users has skyrocketed from 1 percent in 2005 to more than 35 percent in 2022 (World Bank 2019; We Are Social 2022). Tajikistan, the poorest state in Central Asia, reports similarly low internet penetration rates, with less than 25 percent in 2017 and 40 percent of the population having access to the internet in 2022 (World Bank 2019; We Are Social 2022). In sum, discourses of Central Asia's isolation and underdeveloped telecommunications infrastructure do not reflect data on internet use.

2 Introducing the Case Studies

As editors, we agree with cyber-optimists who hold that previous hybrid protests and dramatic changes in access to the internet in Central Asia provide sufficient reason to move past debates that focus solely on the regime's internet policies and the efficacy of ICTs for social movements. It is important to conduct research that examines the creativity and agency with which a range of political actors – civil society organizations and government officials alike – use the internet to communicate their goals, build an audience, and coordinate large-scale mobilization.

This set of articles therefore seeks to bring the Central-Asia-specific debate between cyber-pessimists and -optimists up to date by offering new insights about the mobilizing potential of ICT s in Central Asia. The idea for this special issue emerged from a desire to showcase women's scholarship on social media as a key site of political engagement, after the postponement of the Central Eurasia Studies Society (CESS) regional and annual conferences in 2020. As editors, we have actively sought contributions from young female scholars from both Central Asian and Western countries. The contributions in this special issue were chosen specifically to balance country-specific expertise in each of the Central Asian states alongside an in-depth theoretical and conceptual understanding of the social science debate on the internet's role in state–society relations and governance.

Contributors draw on multiple methods of data collection and analysis to address a wide range of questions, including: How has expanded access to the internet shaped authorities' digital containment strategies of internet on the

one hand, and facilitated collective action on the other? How do distinct features of different social media platforms affect the potential to shape memory and identity? What types of identities are mobilized online in Central Asia, and by whom? How does social media use affect trust across different authoritarian regimes in Central Asia? To answer these questions, contributions in this issue offer empirically rich case studies that cover a variety of topics (e.g., activism, nationalism, sexual harassment, and terrorism) and social media platforms.

Dr. Rano Turaeva explores the methods and principles that state and non-state actors use to construct and transmit discourses of threat and danger about the Islamic State (ISIS) on social media and the internet in Turkmenistan. She finds that, in particular, Russian language ICTs are used by state officials as a tool to control and promote their preferred security discourse about the presence of Turkmenistani nationals in ISIS.

Continuing the conceptual thread of comparing top-down and bottom-up digital efforts to shape public narratives, Cordelia Buchanan Ponczek compares the ways in which the presidents of Uzbekistan and Tajikistan use Instagram to construct their public image and project a vision of national identity. Her study demonstrates that some authoritarian leaders are using social media channels to communicate their own narrative about what it means to be a citizen, especially to the country's tech-savvy youth.

Marina Zhir-Lebed considers how Russian youth in Almaty and Nur-Sultan use Instagram to strengthen their attachment to the Kazakhstani state. In contrast to conventional wisdom about competing ethnonational loyalties, Zhir-Lebed finds that social media offers urban Russian youth a virtual space to discuss Kazakhstan's socio-political affairs; this serves to create a unique vision of "Kazakhstaniness," rather than enhancing their relationship to "mother Russia."

Colleen Wood asks how civil society can make use of social media platforms to facilitate formal and informal engagement with the government. She analyzes videos from the Kazakhstan NGO Atajurt Eriktileri's YouTube channel and finds that the group draws from a reservoir of local identity paradigms to accomplish different organizational goals. Kazakhs who gained citizenship through the government's repatriation program emphasize the documentation of their citizenship to legitimate their petitions as members of the polity. Dr. Jasmin Dall'Agnola pushes the discussion about the success of digital activism further by analyzing if Tajik women's exposure to information on social networks influences their awareness of sexual harassment and violence. She finds Instagram to be a valuable tool for women activists to raise the awareness of and educate the female populace about gender-based violence in Tajikistan. Despite the growing authoritarian grip on online media, digital

Central Asian women activists and groups, such as the Instagram collective @tellme_sister, seem to be somewhat successful in countering the pernicious narrative that blames victims of sexual harassment and violence for speaking out against their harassers and abusers.

In the subsequent sections, we present three umbrella themes that emerged from the various contributions in this special issue.

3 Identity Mobilizing Actors in Central Asia's Digital World

The papers in this special issue demonstrate the range of actors involved in digital mobilization and activism. Through detailed case studies, the authors demonstrate the mechanisms by which different actors build identities.

Ponczek builds on literature that emphasizes the role of political leaders in the top-down discursive construction of national identity. Some scholarship in this field is less specific about the technologies used by elites for identity-building, taking instead a broad comparative look at how political elites oversee "nationalizing states" (Brubaker 2011; Lane 2011). Other studies identify the contexts where this discursive construction happens, including print media (Hutcheson, Domke, Billeaudeaux, and Garland 2004), television, and even presidents' New Year's speeches (Wu, Thomas, and Yu 2021; Van Noije and Hijmans 2005). By examining a unique platform – presidential Instagram accounts in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan – Ponczek makes both a methodological and a theoretical contribution to the study of elite construction of identities. She finds that leaders use social media to project a narrative of national identity to both domestic and international audiences. Elite identity construction is not always performed "on stage," however. Turaeva's article looks at government authorities' role in managing identity and securitization narratives online in Turkmenistan. She finds that the Russian government is working behind the scenes to manipulate and control Turkmenistanis' understanding of the threat of the Islamic State and Turkmenistani nationals' participation in the group through Russian-language internet and social media.

Other contributors take a bottom-up perspective to study digital mobilization, extending previous regional scholarship (Blackburn 2019; Isaacs and Polese 2016) that has shown that large gaps may exist between how national identities are imagined and mobilized by a state's elites and how they are perceived by its citizens. Zhir-Lebed considers how ethnic minorities use social media to construct new identities. Focusing on ethnic Russian Kazakhstanis, she challenges dominant frameworks for thinking about this particular group's sense of belonging and identity in Central Asia (Laruelle 2018). She draws on

interviews with young ethnic Russians in Nur-Sultan and Almaty to show how this generation of Kazakhstanis curates their social media feeds as a form of civic engagement and identity-building. Dall'Agnola's article focuses on women activists in Tajikistan who post on Instagram to shift the public's perception of sexual harassment. She contextualizes access to social media in Tajikistan within research on the Muslim Arab world (Beninger et al. 2016; Tahmasebi-Birgani 2017; Thorsen and Sreedharan 2019) and Muslim Central Asia (Udod 2018), where women have built gender-based solidarity. She shows how Instagram stories and posts serve as a space to reinforce but also to challenge patriarchal norms and gender identities in Tajikistan. Finally, Wood's study focuses on civil society, examining how the Almaty-based NGO Atajurt Eriktileri uses YouTube to advocate for ethnic Kazakhs detained in Xinjiang, China. Wood's article explores the dynamics of civic identity by examining the discursive patterns of video appeals and tracing the contours of collective action both online and offline.

4 Digital Activism among Central Asian Youth

Several of the contributions challenge a dominant scholarly discourse that Central Asian youth are politically disengaged (Burkhanov 2019; Junisbai and Junisbai 2019; Laruelle 2019; Friedrich Ebert Foundation 2017). The authors illustrate how ICTs can help tech-savvy Central Asian youth become politically active.

Zhir-Lebed's contribution shows how urban Russian youth actively debate Kazakhstan's socio-political affairs on Instagram. They are invested in the coverage of urban life in Almaty and Nur-Sultan, and Zhir-Lebed argues that Russian Kazakhstanis develop their own vision of national belonging through their social media feeds.

Other articles look at youth involvement in high politics. Dall'Agnola illustrates how the young Tajik women behind the collective @tellme_sister collaborate with local authorities and international organizations to make their Instagram awareness-raising campaigns count in the political realm. Ponczek's article discusses how Uzbekistan's president tailored his social media campaign to attract support from Uzbek youth. The president hired his social-media-savvy daughter Saida Mirziyoyeva to handle his social media strategy and to post about political events and her father's personal life on her private Instagram account, strategies not pursued by Tajikistan's president. Tagging her father's official Instagram account in her Instagram posts has helped Mirziyoyev to rebrand himself as "modern" and to gain access to young voters.

By presenting data on previously unexplored spaces of political participation, the authors contribute to and challenge a literature that has framed Central Asian youth as apolitical.

5 Central Asia's Changing Digital Landscape

Articles in this special issue approach the study of ICTs in Central Asia with an ethnographic sensibility and demonstrate how the digital infrastructure of different platforms shapes the process of identity mobilization. This is an important intervention that challenges scholarly and journalistic assumptions about where politics "happens" online in Central Asia and worldwide. Dall'Agnola, Ponzcek, and Zhir-Lebed study Instagram; Wood examines YouTube videos; and Turaeva stretches her analysis across several websites and social networks popular in Turkmenistan, including YouTube, MoyMir, Odnoklassnikia, Ertir.com, and Facebook, as well as individual conversations via messaging applications such as Line (2016–2020).

Contributors' collective emphasis on these social media platforms might seem puzzling given the persistent narrative that Russian social media networks – including VKontakte, Odnoklassniki, and Moi Mir – are the dominant platforms where Central Asian netizens gather (Reyaz 2019). But recent research by Kudaibergenova (2019), as well as the Central Asia Barometer Wave 4 survey data (Central Asia Barometer 2018), suggests that apps such as Instagram, Facebook, WhatsApp, and Telegram have risen in popularity and user counts (We Are Social 2022), especially among Central Asian youth. The Central Asia Barometer asked respondents in the five Central Asian states to name the social media site that they used most often. In contrast to Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, where Instagram and WhatsApp were increasingly popular among people and sometimes even toppled Russian social networks, the same platforms seemed to be less popular among citizens in Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan in 2018 (see Figure 2 below).

While Western online platforms such as Google and YouTube top the list in Turkmenistan, people in Uzbekistan preferred Russian instant messaging apps and social networks such as Telegram and Odnoklassniki over Western networks in 2018. Viber, an instant messaging software application operated by the Japanese multinational company Rakuten, ranked first among Tajikistanis before the Russian social media platform Odnoklassniki in the same period. Similar findings regarding the increasing popularity of Instagram and other Western social media platforms were reported by We Are Social (2022). For more details, see Figure 3 below.

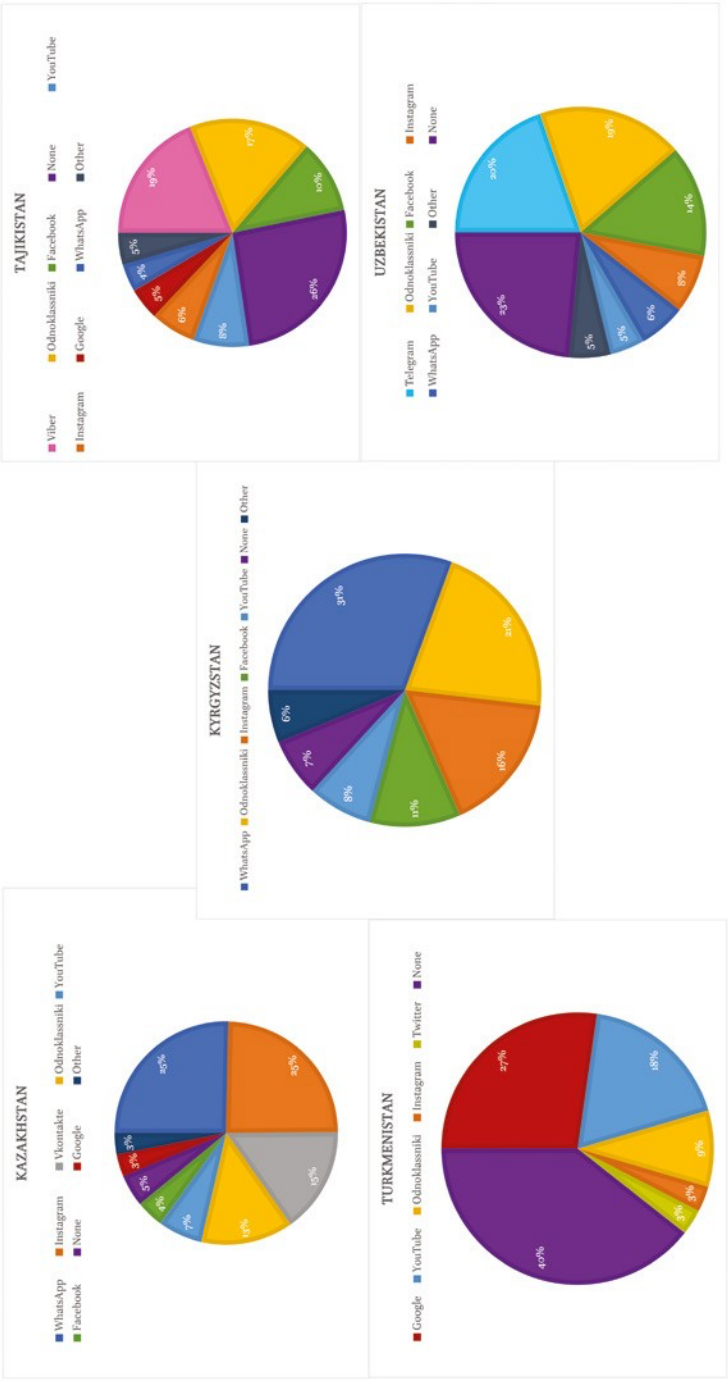

Figure 2 Social media preferences in Central Asia
source: Central Asia Barometer (2018)

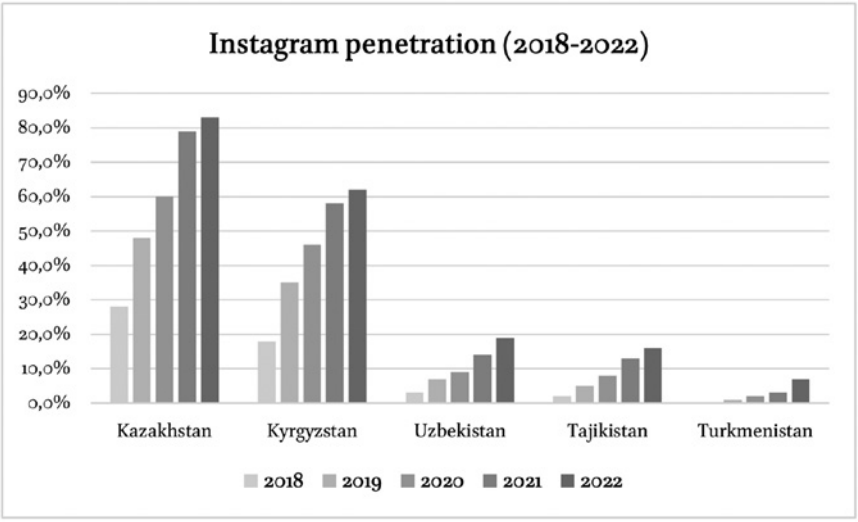

Figure 3 Active Instagram users in Central Asia 2018–2021
source: We Are Social (2022)

As of January 2022, some 11,75 million Kazakhstanis (82.7 percent of the population aged 13 and above) were registered on Instagram, making it the most popular social media platform in the country.[1] Instagram penetration in neighboring Kyrgyzstan has more than doubled from 18 percent in 2018 to almost 63 percent of the 'eligible' population in 2022. Instagram's popularity is not persistent across the region, and it has seen relatively low usage in Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. Whereas Turkmenistan registers the lowest number of active Instagram users in the region (7 percent in 2022), Instagram penetration in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan has risen from almost no users in 2018 to more than 15 percent of both countries' populations in 2022.

In short, as access to the web has become cheaper and more common, Central Asians' social media and messaging apps preferences have changed, too. The contributions in this special issue support this narrative in as much as they illustrate that Central Asia's social media and online messaging landscape is much more diverse than previously assumed.

1 11.75 million Instagram users suggest that Instagram's ad reach in Kazakhstan was equivalent to 61.5 percent of the total population in January 2022. However, since Instagram restricts the use of its platform to people aged 13 and above, 82.7 percent of the 'eligible' audience (Kazakhstanis aged 13 and older) were on Instagram at the start of 2022.

6 Implications and Opportunities to Advance the Research Agenda

The articles in this collection highlight different ways that the internet and social media contribute to the formation of identity as well as social mobilization. They show variation between digital platforms, across countries, and among actors with different socio-political goals. This special issue, as well as the research agenda it advances, has important implications for both academic and practitioner communities in Central Asia. The contributions touch on many topics that demand further academic attention. Most contributors agree with cyber-optimists' argument that Central Asia's cyberspace has become wider and more diverse. Yet they also acknowledge cyber-skeptics' point that access to social media platforms still remains poor, especially in rural areas. Another issue is that the majority of Central Asian users – more than 90 percent – continue to access social media platforms via their mobile phones (We Are Social 2022). This is due to the economic restrictions (e.g., people cannot afford computers or there is no cable internet connection in rural areas) and because mobile internet in the region is often more accessible to users than home lines. Mobile internet also allows for quicker access to constantly changing virtual private networks (VPN s) in countries where certain social media platforms are restricted. For instance, demand for VPN services increased by 3,405 percent in Kazakhstan on January 5 2022 compared to the daily average over the previous 30 days, as anti-government protests erupted in the whole country (Migliano 2022). Moreover, even in Turkmenistan, where people are being forced to swear on the Koran to not use VPN s services and are jailed if they are caught using it, VPN s are widely used to circumvent government restrictions on the Internet (Radio Free Europe 2021). The articles in this special issue therefore ask future scholarship to pay more attention to how social and political identities – including gender and class, but also whether someone is a labor migrant, whether they live in a city or a village, whether they support the regime – map onto patterns of activity online in Central Asia.

The contributions call for deeper study of not only how policy debates about language and national identity can play out online, but also the impact of these digital narratives on political outcomes. This collection of scholarship also sparks a methodological question about how to accurately measure internet access and social media usage; the authors' qualitative analysis informed by extensive field experience suggests that quantitative data about internet penetration may underreport access in Central Asia.

Importantly, the findings contribute to our understanding of changing patterns of social media use and their consequences for social, political, and economic life in other regions. In Kazakhstan, more than 45 percent of the

country's 19 million citizens use social media at least once a week for news and information – a rate on par with Ukraine and Peru, and well above Germany and South Korea, according to the seventh wave of the World Values Survey (Haerpfer et al. 2020). This dependence on social media platforms for information is both a blessing and a curse because social media is a notorious hotbed of misinformation, especially during the pandemic. Global reliance on social media was further highlighted in October 2021, when Facebook's services – including WhatsApp and Instagram – went offline for six hours, bringing commerce to a standstill, disrupting humanitarian work, and shuttering communication in countries across the Global South (Froio 2021). Studies like those presented in this special issue, which qualitatively engage the changing digital landscape, point to the need for a research agenda that allows for diverse dialogues and comparisons across regions and platforms alike.

Jasmin Dall' Agnola | ORCID: 0000-0002-7938-3985
Dr., Associated Research Fellow, OSCE Academy, Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan
jasmindallagnola@gmail.com

Colleen Wood | ORCID: 0000-0002-7158-9647
PhD Candidate, Columbia University, New York, USA
c.wood@columbia.edu

Bibliography

Anceschi, Luca. "The Persistence of Media Control Under Consolidated Authoritarianism: Containing Kazakhstan's Digital Media." *Demokratizatsiya: The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization*. 23, No. 3 (2015): 277–295.

Beissinger, Mark. "'Conventional' and 'Virtual' Civil Societies in Autocratic Regimes." *Comparative Politics*. 49, No. 3 (2017): 351–371.

Bekmagambetov, Amanzhol, Kevin Wagner, Jason Gainous, Zhaxylyk Sabitov, Adil Rodionov, and Bagysh Gabdulina. "Critical Social Media Information Flows: Political Trust and Protest Behaviour Among Kazakhstani College Students." *Central Asian Survey*. 37, No. 4 (2018): 526–545.

Beninger, Stefanie, Ajjan Haya, Mostafa Rania, and Crittenden Victoria. "A Road to Empowerment: Social Media Use by Women Entrepreneurs in Egypt." *Int. J. Entrepreneurship and Small Business*. 27, No. 2/3 (January 2016): 308–332.

Blackburn, Matthew. "Discourses of Russian-Speaking Youth in Nazarbayev's Kazakhstan: Soviet Legacies and Responses to Nation-Building." *Central Asian Survey*. 38, No. 2 (2019): 217–236.

Brubaker, Rogers. "Nationalizing States Revisited: Projects and Processes of Nationalization in Post-Soviet States." *Ethnic and Racial Studies*. 34, No. 11 (2011): 1785–1814.

Buchanan Ponczek, Cordelia. "The Optics of Leadership: A Comparative Exploration of Uzbek and Tajik Presidential Posting on Instagram." *Central Asian Affairs* (2021).

Burkhanov, Aziz. "Youth and National Identity: Then and Now." In *The Nazarbayev Generation: Youth in Kazakhstan*, edited by Marlene Laruelle, 49–68. New York: Lexington Books, 2019.

Carr, Caleb and Rebecca Hayes. "Social Media: Defining, Developing, and Divining." *Atlantic Journal of Communication*. 23, No. 1 (2015): 46–65.

Central Asia Barometer Data, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, Wave 4, 2018, available at http://www.ca-barometer.org.

Dall'Agnola, Jasmin. *The Impact of Globalization on National Identities in Post-Soviet Societies*. Ph.D. dissertation, Oxford Brookes University, 2021.

Dall'Agnola, Jasmin. "'Tell Me Sister' – Social Media, a Tool for Women Activists in Tajikistan." *Central Asian Affairs* (2022).

Earl, Jennifer and Katrina Kimport. *Digitally Enabled Social Change: Activism In The Internet Age*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011.

Friedrich Ebert Foundation. *Molodezh' Zentral'noĭ azii. Sprovnitel'nyĭ obzor*. Almaty: Deluxe Printery, 2017.

Froio, Nicole. "When WhatsApp Went Down, Brazilian Workers' Jobs Went with It." *The Verge*, October 19, 2021. https://www.theverge.com/22734705/facebook-whatsapp-outage-brazil-informal-workers-economy.

Haerpfer, Christian, Ronald Inglehart, Alejandro Moreno, Christian Welzel, Kseniya Kizilova, Jaime Diez-Medrano, Marta Lagos, Pippa Norris, Eduard Ponarin, Bi Puranen. World Values Survey, 2020. "Round Seven – Country-Pooled Datafile." Madrid and Vienna: JD Systems Institute and World Values Survey Association Secretariat. doi.org/10.14281/18241.13.

Hutcheson, John, David Domke, Andre Billeaudeaux, and Philip Garland. "US National Identity, Political Elites, and a Patriotic Press Following September 11." *Political Communication*. 21, No. 1 (2004): 27–50.

Isaacs, Rico and Abel Polese. "Conclusions: (Re)imagining or Imagined Nation-Building." In *Nation-Building and Identity in the Post-Soviet Space*, edited by Rico Isaacs and Abel Polese, 250–254. London and New York: Routledge, 2016.

Isaacs, Rico. "Russia-Kazakhstan Relations and the Tokayev-Nazarbayev Tandem." *Russian Analytical Digest*. 248, No. 1 (2020): 2–5.

Junisbai, Barbara and Azamat Junisbai. "Comparing Political and Economic Attitudes: A Generational Analysis." In *Kazakhstan and the Soviet Legacy: Between Continuity and Rupture*, edited by Jean-François Caron, 101–138. Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019.

Keegan, Katrina. "Information Chaos in Kazakhstan." *The Diplomat*, January 10, 2022. https://thediplomat.com/2022/01/information-chaos-in-kazakhstan/.

Kudaibergenova, Diana. "The Body Global and The Body Traditional: A Digital Ethnography of Instagram and Nationalism in Kazakhstan And Russia." *Central Asian Survey*. 38, No. 3 (2019): 363–380.

Kumenov, Almaz. "Kazakhstan: Activists Tracked by Pegasus Angered but not Surprised." *Eurasianet*, July 21, 2021. https://eurasianet.org/kazakhstan-activists-tracked-by-pegasus-angered-but-not-surprised.

Lane, David. "Identity Formation and Political Elites in the Post-Socialist States." *Europe-Asia Studies*. 63, No. 6 (2011): 925–934.

Laruelle, Marlene. "Why No Kazakh Novorossiya? Kazakhstan's Russian Minority in a Post-Crimea World." *Problems of Post-Communism*. 65, No. 1 (2018): 65–78.

Laruelle, Marlene. "Nazarbayev Generation. Kazakhstan's Youth, National Identity Transformations and their Political Consequences." *Voices on Central Asia* (2019).

Lee, Claire. "Datafication, Dataveillance, and the Social Credit System as China's New Normal." *Online Information Review*. 43, No. 6 (2019): 952–970.

Lewis, David. "Blogging Zhanaozen: Hegemonic Discourse and Authoritarian Resilience in Kazakhstan." *Central Asian Survey*. 35, No. 3 (2016): 421–438.

MacKinnon, Rebecca. "China's 'Networked Authoritarianism'." *Journal of Democracy*. 22, No. 2 (April 2011): 32–46.

Migliano, Simon. "VPN Demand Surges Around the World." *Top10VPN*, January 6, 2022. https://www.top10vpn.com/research/vpn-demand-statistics/.

Morozov, Evgeny. *The Net Delusion: How Not to Liberate the World*. London: Penguin Books, 2011.

Nazar, Naz. "How Turkmenistan Spies on its Citizens at Home and Abroad." *openDemocracy*, August 16, 2018. https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/how-turkmenistan-spies-on-its-citizens/.

Nikolayenko, Olena. "Youth Media Consumption and Perceptions of Electoral Integrity in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan." *Demokratizatsiya: The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization*. 23, No. 3 (2015): 257–276.

Nurmakov, Adil. "Social Media in Central Asia." In *Central Asia at 25: Looking Back, Moving Forward*, edited by Marlene Laruelle and Aitolkyn Kourmanova, 74–76. Central Asia Program, the George Washington University (2017).

Radio Free Europe. "German Tech Firm's Turkmen Ties Trigger Surveillance Concerns." *Radio Free Europe*, February 8, 2019. https://www.rferl.org/a/german-tech-firm-s-turkmen-ties-trigger-surveillance-concerns/29759911.html.

Radio Free Europe. "VPNs Are Not A-OK: Turkmen Internet Users Forced To Swear On Koran They Won't Use Them." *Radio Free Europe*, August 10, 2021. https://www.rferl.org/a/turkmenistan-vpn-koran-ban/31402718.html.

Reyaz, Mohammad. "Cyberspace in the Post-Soviet States: Assessing the Role of New Media in Central Asia." *Jadavpur Journal of International Relations*. 24, No. 1 (December 2019): 7–27.

Shafiev, Abdulfattoh and Miles Marintha. "Friends, Foes, and Facebook: Blocking the Internet in Tajikistan." *Demokratizatsiya: The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization*. 23, No. 3 (2015): 297–319.

Swerdlow, Steve. "Charting Progress in Mirziyoyev's Uzbekistan." *The Diplomat*, September 1, 2019. https://thediplomat.com/2019/08/charting-progress-in-mirziyoyevs-uzbekistan.

Tahmasebi-Birgani, Victoria. "Social Media as a Site of Transformative Politics: Iranian Women's Online Contestations." In *Iran's Struggles for Social Justice: Economics, Agency, Justice, Activism*, edited by Peyman Vahabzadeh, 181–198. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016.

Thorsen, Einar and Sreedharan, Chindu. "#EndMaleGuardianship: Women's Rights, Social Media and the Arab Public Sphere." *New Media & Society*. 21, No. 5 (May 2019): 1121–1140.

Turaeva, Rano. "Online Discourses in Post-Soviet Media: The Threat of the Islamic State in Central Asia." *Central Asian Affairs* (2022).

Udod, Xeniya. *Feminisms in Kazakhstan: On the Intersection of Global Influences and Local Contexts*. M.A. dissertation, Nazarbayev University, 2018.

UNDP. "Internet users, total (% of population)." 2020. http://hdr.undp.org/en/indicators/43606 (accessed March 29, 2021).

Van Noije, Lonneke and Ellen Hijmans. "National Identity and Nationalism in New Year's Speeches of French Presidents." *Communication*. 30, No. 1 (2005): 23–54.

We Are Social. "Digital in 2022." https://wearesocial.com/uk/blog/2022/01/digital-2022/ (accessed February 22, 2022).

Wood, Colleen. "Keeping Receipts: Lessons on Civic Engagement in Autocratic States from Kazakh Advocacy for Xinjiang." *Central Asian Affairs* (2022).

World Bank. "Individuals Using the Internet (% of Population) – Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan." 2019. https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/IT.NET.USER.ZS?locations=KZ-UZ-KG-TJ-TM (accessed August 16, 2021).

Wu, Yan, Richard Thomas, and Yakun Yu. "From External Propaganda to Mediated Public Diplomacy: The Construction of the Chinese Dream in President Xi Jinping's New Year Speeches." In *Public Diplomacy and the Politics of Uncertainty*, edited by Pawel Surowiec and Ilan Manor, 29–55. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham, 2021.

Zhir-Lebed, Marina. "Rising Civic Awareness Through Local Instagram: Young Kazakhstani Russians and their Belongingness to Kazakhstan." *Central Asian Affairs* (2022).