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# Internet and New Media Use by Central Asian Citizens Before and Towards the End of the COVID-19 Pandemic

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**Abstract**

This research examines the differences and similarities in the Internet, chat room, messenger, and social media use by citizens in Central Asia before and towards the end of the COVID-19 pandemic. Five stans – Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan – have varying levels of authoritarianism and media usage, especially new media use, might differ among these countries. Drawing on Central Asia Barometer, I demonstrate such comparisons over three years using data collected in 2019 and 2022. In addition to this, I also analyse the frequencies of Internet use by Central Asian people and which chat rooms, messengers, and social media were used most often in the region. The results and analysis show that by the end of the pandemic, citizens of all five republics began to use the Internet more, albeit in different volumes, compared to 2019. Accordingly, the frequency of use of new media (chat rooms, messengers, and social media) was also positive with varying degrees of difference. Possible explanations for these results and the usefulness of this study are discussed.

**Keywords**: Internet, chat rooms, messengers, social media, Central Asia, the COVID-19 pandemic.

## Introduction

The COronaVIrus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic has had a huge impact on how people work, study, shop, date, and use new media (e.g., social media, the Internet, digital tools), among other activities. It has dramatically increased the use of Zoom and other online platforms in people's daily lives. Research around the world has been shifting from offline to online modes in parallel with the developments in technology, the Internet, social media, the spread of smartphones, and the COVID-19 pandemic (Sairambay, 2022a).

Drawing on data collected by Central Asia Barometer (Waves 6 and 12), this study examines differences and similarities in the use of the Internet, chats, messengers and social media by Central Asian citizens before and towards the end of the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition to the differences and similarities before/after the COVID-19 pandemic, another goal of the study was to examine how often Central Asians used the Internet and which chats, messengers and social media they used most often each year.

'Central Asia remains one of the world's least-understood regions' (Central Asia Program 2025). This research contributes to the growing body of literature on new media studies in Central Asia (e.g., Reyaz, 2020; Sairambay, 2022b, 2022c; Beimenbetov, 2023; Dzutsati & Rakhmatullayeva, 2024) by

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analysing the usage of the Internet, chat rooms, messengers, and social media during the COVID-19 pandemic. The potential benefits of my study may be its contribution to scientific knowledge that can contribute to online research topics based on the data presented in the tables. Central Asian scholars and anyone interested in this area of research may also benefit from the analysis presented in this study.

I hypothesise that the COVID-19 pandemic has led to an increase in the use of the Internet, chat rooms, messengers, and social media in Central Asia. I test my hypothesis using data from the Central Asia Barometer surveys. Central Asia Barometer was chosen because it 'is a regional, independent, non-profit institution for applied social research and analytics on topics of public interest' (Central Asia Barometer, 2025a). Its surveys cover all five stans before, during, and towards the end of the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, the Central Asian Barometer databases are freely available for download in Excel, Stata and SPSS formats, which made this research financially easier to conduct since I did not receive any funding for this study.

## Literature Review

The lockdowns and quarantines imposed around the world due to COVID-19 have contributed to global changes. According to Reed Standish (2021), the Covid-19 pandemic dramatically changed people's behaviour in using technology, and things were happening that people would not have expected to happen in a few years. Based on 81 'peer-reviewed empirical studies relating to COVID-19 and social media during the first outbreak from November, 2019, to November, 2020', Tsao et al. (2021, p. e175) found that social media became 'a crucial communication tool for information generation, dissemination, and consumption'. It was reported that Internet 'traffic volume increased by 15-20% almost within a week' as many governments imposed lockdowns (Feldmann et al., 2020). A cross-national comparative study of Australia, Norway, the UK, and the USA found that social media use several times a day increased in all four countries (by 17.1%, 10.7%, 17.1%, and 17.9% points respectively) (Thygesen et al., 2021). This study by Thygesen and colleagues (2021) titled *Use and perceived effects of social media before and after the COVID-19 outbreak: A cross-national study* also found that a) young adults aged 18–29 showed the highest increase in daily social media use and b) people with higher levels of education were more likely to use social media several times a day than people with lower levels of education.

In 2021, 81% of Swiss residents aged 50 and over regularly accessed the Internet, spending an average of 161 minutes per day online, with men (68%) using it more often than women (56%) (König & Seifert, 2023). Some studies, such as Poole et al. (2024, 548) – 'by distinguishing between passive (e.g., browsing) and active (e.g., reacting, commenting and sharing) engagement' – found that despite increased social media use during the pandemic, there was a decrease in active engagement.

During the pandemic, Internet penetration in Central Asian countries in 2021 was as follows: 81.9% in Kazakhstan, 50.4% in Kyrgyzstan, 34.9% in Tajikistan, 33.2% in Turkmenistan, and 55.2% Uzbekistan (Bestbroadbanddeals cited in Atoev & Kurbonshoev, 2022). Among Central Asian countries, Kazakhstan was noted as the most prepared to transition to online services during the pandemic, thanks to the country's previous investments in digital infrastructure (Muratbekova, 2020).

While some studies on new media and the COVID-19 pandemic in Central Asia have focused on the general public (e.g., IWPR CA, 2021; Beimenbetov, 2023), other works have analysed scholars (e.g., Gaur & Gupta, 2021) and young people (e.g., Sairambay, 2022a, 2022b, 2022c, 2023). A report by Internews and the European Neighbourhood Council found that social media such as Instagram, Facebook, Telegram, and Twitter (now X) were the main information channels of news and information during the COVID-19 pandemic in Central Asia, particularly for vulnerable younger people, 'with preference for visual content (short videos, reels, pictures with quotes, little text)' (Vesterbye et al., 2020, p. 2).

However, existing research lacks a comparative study of the use of new media – the Internet, chats, messengers, and other social media tools – in Central Asia during the COVID-19 pandemic over time. This study fills this gap using data from the Central Asia Barometer, as future research on the region may benefit from the comparative perspective offered in this article, especially when examining pre- and post-COVID-19 issues.

## Methods

Central Asia Barometer 'is a regional, independent, non-profit institution for applied social research and analytics on topics of public interest' (Central Asia Barometer, 2025). Its databases are free online for public to use and analyse. Its databases are freely available for use and analysis online. I chose two datasets – Wave 6 (10.2019 - 12.2019) and Wave 12 (11.2022 - 12.2022) – that show the use of chats, messengers, and social media just before and towards the end of the COVID-19 pandemic. In doing so, I analysed the following three questions: 1) In the last 6 months, please tell me how often you accessed the Internet via a phone. 2) Out of the following chat rooms or messengers, could you please tell me the one you use most often? and 3) Out of the following social media sites, could you please tell me the one you use most often? The first question included the following frequencies of the Internet use via a phone: 1. Daily; 2. Several times a week; 3. Several times a month; 4. Rarely; and 5. Never. While the second question included WhatsApp, Viber, Telegram, and IMO, the last question consisted of Facebook, Odnoklassniki, VKontakte, Instagram, Google, Twitter, TikTok, YouTube, Mail.ru, and Moi Mir.

Central Asia Barometer has made a distinction between social media and chat rooms/messengers since the beginning of its surveys in 2017, although it does not explain why it does so in its questionnaires and method reports (Central Asia Barometer, 2025b). The explanation may be that chat rooms and messengers are limited to certain functions compared to social media, where users can perform more complex and various actions. In scholarly works, the term 'new media' is used as an umbrella term that encompasses social media, the Internet, chats and messengers, as well as blogs/vlogs and other online platforms and tools. I did not choose the term 'new media' for the title for several reasons: 1) for readers, "new media" may mostly mean social media; 2) specific names such as Internet, chat rooms, messengers, and social media attract readers' attention from the very beginning when they read the title; and 3) "Internet usage" is used in more research papers to characterise the level of online penetration, and therefore it is useful to include and cite for more readers in their potential works.

Table 1 shows the number of interviewers, sample sizes, and fieldwork dates for Waves 6 and 12 of the Central Asia Barometer surveys.

**Table 1.** *Sample sizes, field dates, and number of interviewers, 2019 and 2022*

| **Central Asia Barometer Survey Wave 6** | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| № | Country | Sample size | Field dates | Number of interviewers |
| 1 | Kazakhstan | n=1500 | 30.10.19 – 08.12.19 | 68 |
| 2 | Kyrgyzstan | n=1500 | 02.11.19 – 24.11.19 | 51 |
| 3 | Tajikistan | n=1500 | 06.11.19 – 27.11.19 | 66 |
| 4 | Turkmenistan | n=1500 | 05.11.19 – 05.12.19 | 53 |
| 5 | Uzbekistan | n=1500 | 12.11.19 – 18.12.19 | 59 |
| **Central Asia Barometer Survey Wave 12** | | | | |
| № | Country | Sample size | Field dates | Number of interviewers |
| 1 | Kazakhstan | n=1520 | 03.11.2022 – 10.12.2022 | 40 |
| 2 | Kyrgyzstan | n=1518 | 01.11.2022 – 01.12.2022 | 52 |

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 3 | Tajikistan | n=1500 | 03.11.2022 – 01.12.2022 | 42 |
| 4 | Turkmenistan | n=1621 | 03.11.2022 – 25.11.2022 | 24 |
| 5 | Uzbekistan | n=1500 | 03.11.2022 – 18.11.2022 | 23 |

*Note*: own design based on Central Asia Barometer, Waves 6 (2019) and 12 (2022).

In 2019, interviews lasted between 21 and 27 minutes, while in 2022 they lasted between 15 and 25 minutes. One difference between Waves 6 and 12 was the sampling methods: stratified, multi-stage, and random sampling was used in 2019, whereas simple random sampling of mobile phones was used in 2022. Whilst Wave 6 surveys were conducted in person, the surveys in Wave 12 were completed using telephones.

With the sample sizes of 1,500 per country and p=0.5 at the 95% CI level, the margins of error were 2.53% in each country in 2019 (Wave 6). Similarly, these indicators were between 2.52% and 2.44% in 2022 (Wave 12). If in 2019 the target population was the adult population of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan aged 18 years and older, then this was the mobile phone-owning population of these countries aged 18 years and older in 2022.

## Research Findings and Analysis

Based on an analysis of data from the Central Asia Barometer surveys conducted in 2019 and 2022, it can be said that Central Asian citizens began to use the Internet more towards the end of the pandemic than before it began. Table 2 illustrates this trend by frequency of Internet use: from daily and several times a week to several times a month and rarely and never. The number of daily internet users in Uzbekistan has grown significantly from 21.7% in 2019 to 77.7% in 2022, while in Tajikistan this growth was 30.1%. The percentages of citizens who use the Internet several times a week were more or less similar in both years. The largest changes between 2019 and 2022 occurred among those who never use the Internet, in the following order: Uzbekistan (61.3% change), Tajikistan (55.37% change), Kyrgyzstan (23.5% change), Kazakhstan (17% change), and Turkmenistan (9.1% change).

**Table 2.** *Internet use by citizens of Central Asia before and after the COVID-19 pandemic*

| **2019 and 2022** | **Internet use frequency** | **Kazakhstan** | | **Kyrgyzstan** | | **Tajikistan** | | **Turkmenistan** | | **Uzbekistan** | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 2019 | Daily | 1113 | 74.2% | 937 | 62.5% | 289 | 19.3% | 650 | 43.3% | 325 | 21.7% |
| 2022 | | 1328 | 87.9% | 1324 | 87.2% | 888 | 59.2% | 560 | 34.5% | 1165 | 77.7% |
| 2019 | Several times a week | 84 | 5.6% | 168 | 11.2% | 121 | 8.1% | 207 | 13.8% | 138 | 9.2% |
| 2022 | | 88 | 5.8% | 108 | 7.1% | 157 | 10.5% | 169 | 10.4% | 161 | 10.7% |
| 2019 | Several times a month | 16 | 1.1% | 19 | 1.3% | 43 | 2.9% | 83 | 5.5% | 28 | 1.9% |
| 2022 | | 24 | 1.6% | 33 | 2.2% | 73 | 4.9% | 87 | 5.4% | 37 | 2.5% |
| 2019 | Rarely | 25 | 1.7% | 7 | 0.5% | 99 | 6.6% | 9 | 0.6% | 38 | 2.5% |
| 2022 | | 59 | 3.9% | 39 | 2.6% | 268 | 17.9% | 343 | 21.2% | 91 | 6.1% |
| 2019 | Never | 262 | 17.5% | 365 | 24.3% | 938 | 62.5% | 551 | 36.7% | 963 | 64.2% |
| 2022 | | 8 | 0.5% | 12 | 0.8% | 107 | 7.13% | 448 | 27.6% | 43 | 2.9% |
| 2019 | Not Asked | 0 | 0% | 0 | 0% | 0 | 0% | 0 | 0% | 0 | 0% |
| 2022 | | 0 | 0% | 0 | 0% | 0 | 0% | 0 | 0% | 0 | 0% |
| 2019 | Refused | 0 | 0% | 3 | 0.2% | 0 | 0% | 0 | 0% | 5 | 0.3% |
| 2022 | | 0 | 0% | 0 | 0% | 3 | 0.2% | 3 | 0.2% | 1 | 0.07% |
| 2019 | Don't Know | 0 | 0% | 1 | 0.07% | 10 | 0.7% | 0 | 0% | 3 | 0.2% |
| 2022 | | 4 | 0.3% | 2 | 0.13% | 4 | 0.3% | 11 | 0.7% | 2 | 0.13% |
| 2019 | Total | 1500 | 1000% | 1500 | 100% | 1500 | 100% | 1500 | 100% | 1500 | 100% |

| | | | | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 2022 | Total | 1511 | 100% | 1518 | 100% | 1500 | 100% | 1621 | 100% | 1500 | 100% |

*Note*: own design based on Central Asia Barometer, Waves 6 (2019) and 12 (2022).

The cases of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan show that in these countries Internet users make up almost 100% of the population (Table 2). For instance, 'the percentage of the [Kazakhstani] population using online banking has risen from a quarter of the population in 2018 to nearly 100 percent in 2024; digital transactions have increased from 7 percent of all transactions in 2014 to 89 percent in 2024; and public services and government transfers and transactions are nearly fully digitized, in part thanks to the government's partnerships with banks (Suominen, 2024). The Internet penetration of Central Asian countries also increased during the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2019, the Internet penetration rates were 81.9% in Kazakhstan (Data Commons, 2025a), 70.4% in Uzbekistan (Data Commons, 2025b), 64.1% in Kyrgyzstan (Data Commons, 2025c), and 21.25% in Turkmenistan (Trading Economics, 2025), whereas in January 2020 it was 27.5% in Tajikistan (Data Commons 2025d). We can see an increase in Internet penetration rates in all five stans in 2022: 92.3% in Kazakhstan (Data Commons, 2025e), 83.9% in Uzbekistan (Data Commons, 2025f), 79.8% in Kyrgyzstan (Data Commons, 2025g), 38.1% in Turkmenistan (Trading Economics, 2025), and 36.1% in Tajikistan (Datareportal, 2025).

Table 3 below shows the use of chat rooms and messengers by citizens of Central Asia before and after the COVID-19 pandemic. WhatsApp, Viber, Telegram, and IMO were used by Central Asian Barometer. We can observe that the most popular chat room or messenger in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan in 2019 was WhatsApp, while in Turkmenistan and Tajikistan it was IMO and Telegram in Uzbekistan. It should be noted here that the question about chat rooms and messengers was not asked in Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan. This usage has changed in three years. In the fall of 2022, the most used chat room or messenger was WhatsApp in three countries (Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, and Tajikistan), Telegram in Uzbekistan (72.7%), and IMO in Turkmenistan (66.1%).

**Table 3.** *Chat room and messenger use by citizens of Central Asia before and after the COVID-19 pandemic*

| **2019 and 2022** | **Chat Rooms and Messengers** | **Kazakhstan** | | **Kyrgyzstan** | | **Tajikistan** | | **Turkmenistan** | | **Uzbekistan** | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 2019 | WhatsApp | 1137 | 75.8% | 1024 | 68.3% | 17 | 1.1% | 0 | 0% | 23 | 1.5% |
| 2022 | | 1302 | 86.2% | 1375 | 90.6% | 997 | 66.5% | 27 | 1.7% | 243 | 16.2% |
| 2019 | Viber | 5 | 0.3% | 1 | 0.07% | 34 | 2.3% | 0 | 0% | 0 | 0% |
| 2022 | | 5 | 0.3% | 1 | 0.07% | 37 | 2.5% | 2 | 0.13% | 2 | 0.13% |
| 2019 | Telegram | 21 | 1.4% | 14 | 0.9% | 5 | 0.3% | 2 | 0.13% | 327 | 21.8% |
| 2022 | | 145 | 9.6% | 93 | 6.1% | 75 | 5% | 30 | 1.9% | 1144 | 76.3% |
| 2019 | IMO | 0 | 0% | 5 | 0.3% | 160 | 10.7% | 934 | 62.3% | 59 | 3.9% |
| 2022 | | 2 | 0.13% | 0 | 0% | 290 | 19.3% | 1071 | 66.1% | 47 | 3.1% |
| 2019 | Not Asked | 328 | 21.9% | 455 | 30.3% | 1282 | 85.5% | 563 | 37.5% | 1091 | 72.7% |
| 2022 | / Don't use | 44 | 2.9% | 38 | 2.5% | 92 | 6.13% | 471 | 29.1% | 61 | 4.1% |
| 2019 | Other | 7 | 0.5% | 0 | 0% | 0 | 0% | 1 | 0.07% | 0 | 0% |
| 2022 | | 5 | 0.3% | 8 | 0.5% | 6 | 0.4% | 13 | 0.8% | 1 | 0.07% |
| 2019 | Refused | 2 | 0.13% | 0 | 0% | 0 | 0% | 0 | 0% | 0 | 0% |
| 2022 | | 1 | 0.07% | 0 | 0% | 1 | 0.07% | 0 | 0% | 0 | 0% |
| 2019 | Don't | 0 | 0% | 1 | 0.07% | 2 | 0.13% | 0 | 0% | 0 | 0% |
| 2022 | Know | 7 | 0.5% | 3 | 0.2% | 2 | 0.13% | 7 | 0.4% | 2 | 0.13% |
| 2019 | Total | 1500 | 1000% | 1500 | 100% | 1500 | 100% | 1500 | 100% | 1500 | 100% |
| 2022 | Total | 1511 | 100% | 1518 | 100% | 1500 | 100% | 1621 | 100% | 1500 | 100% |

*Note*: own design based on Central Asia Barometer, Waves 6 (2019) and 12 (2022).

As can be seen from Table 3, there were more people who used chat rooms and messengers towards the end of 2022 than before the COVID-19 pandemic started. Viber was the only least popular

messenger, and its usage level did not change over time. WhatsApp had the largest changes in all countries, but Turkmenistan, in three years between 2019 and 2022. Over the three years from 2019 to 2022, WhatsApp saw bigger changes in all countries except Turkmenistan. A sharp increase was observed in the use of WhatsApp in Tajikistan (from 1.1% to 66.5%) and Telegram in Uzbekistan (from 21.8% to 76.3%).

Table 4 below demonstrates social media use by citizens of Central Asia before and after the COVID-19 pandemic. It includes the following social media: Facebook, Odnoklassniki, VKontakte, Instagram, Google, Twitter, TikTok, YouTube, Mail.ru, and Moi Mir. Some of them were asked together by Central Asia Barometer: Google, Twitter, and TikTok together and Mail.ru and Moi Mir together.

**Table 4.** *Social media use by citizens of Central Asia before and after the COVID-19 pandemic*

| 2019 and 2022 | Social Media | Kazakhstan | | Kyrgyzstan | | Tajikistan | | Turkmenistan | | Uzbekistan | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 2019 | Facebook | 77 | 5.1% | 125 | 8.3% | 54 | 3.6% | 0 | 0% | 32 | 2.13% |
| 2022 | | 116 | 7.7% | 233 | 15.3% | 239 | 15.9% | 17 | 1.05% | 103 | 6.9% |
| 2019 | Odnoklassniki | 174 | 11.6% | 155 | 10.3% | 47 | 3.13% | 6 | 0.4% | 40 | 2.7% |
| 2022 | | 84 | 5.6% | 83 | 5.5% | 64 | 4.3% | 44 | 2.7% | 78 | 5.2% |
| 2019 | VKontakte | 117 | 7.8% | 13 | 0.9% | 4 | 0.3% | 1 | 0.07% | 5 | 0.33% |
| 2022 | | 68 | 4.5% | 17 | 1.1% | 8 | 0.5% | 11 | 0.7% | 6 | 0.4% |
| 2019 | Instagram | 442 | 29.5% | 271 | 18.1% | 26 | 1.7% | 2 | 0.13% | 29 | 1.9% |
| 2022 | | 741 | 49.04% | 611 | 40.3% | 354 | 23.6% | 254 | 15.7% | 426 | 28.4% |
| 2019 | Google, Twitter, TikTok | 62 | 4.13% | 37 | 2.5% | 18 | 1.2% | 1 | 0.07% | 13 | 0.9% |
| 2022 | | 301 | 19.9% | 336 | 22.1% | 126 | 8.4% | 271 | 16.7% | 162 | 10.8% |
| 2019 | YouTube | 146 | 9.7% | 203 | 13.5% | 44 | 2.9% | 3 | 0.2% | 27 | 1.8 |
| 2022 | | 9 | 0.6% | 42 | 2.8% | 41 | 2.7% | 0 | 0% | 0 | 0% |
| 2019 | Mail.ru and Moi Mir | 17 | 1.13% | 0 | 0% | 5 | 0.33% | 0 | 0% | 1 | 0.07% |
| 2022 | | 14 | 0.9% | 5 | 0.3% | 2 | 0.13% | 22 | 1.4% | 2 | 0.13% |
| 2019 | Not Asked / Don't use | 452 | 30.1% | 690 | 46% | 1273 | 84.9% | 1487 | 99.1% | 1348 | 89.9% |
| 2022 | | 172 | 11.4% | 182 | 12% | 649 | 43.3% | 985 | 61% | 712 | 47.5% |
| 2019 | Other | 5 | 0.33% | 0 | 0% | 21 | 1.4% | 0 | 0% | 2 | 0.13% |
| 2022 | | 0 | 0% | 1 | 0.07% | 3 | 0.2% | 0 | 0% | 0 | 0% |
| 2019 | Refused | 1 | 0.07% | 2 | 0.13% | 2 | 0.13% | 0 | 0% | 2 | 0.13% |
| 2022 | | 0 | 0% | 2 | 0.13% | 4 | 0.3% | 1 | 0.07% | 0 | 0% |
| 2019 | Don't Know | 0 | 0% | 0 | 0% | 0 | 0% | 0 | 0% | 0 | 0% |
| 2022 | | 6 | 0.4% | 6 | 0.4% | 10 | 0.7% | 9 | 0.6% | 11 | 0.7% |
| 2019 | Total | 1500 | 1000% | 1500 | 100% | 1500 | 100% | 1500 | 100% | 1500 | 100% |
| 2022 | Total | 1511 | 100% | 1518 | 100% | 1500 | 100% | 1621 | 100% | 1500 | 100% |

*Note*: own design based on Central Asia Barometer, Waves 6 (2019) and 12 (2022).

Looking at Table 4, it is apparent that social media usage was so fragmented in both years. It is also quite clear that the number of social media users increased in 2022 compared to 2019. While Instagram was the most popular social media in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan in 2019, the most used social media were Facebook in Tajikistan, YouTube in Turkmenistan, and Odnoklassniki in Uzbekistan. However, in 2022, the picture changed: Instagram became the most popular social media in four countries, excluding Turkmenistan. It should be noted here that Instagram (15.7%) may also be the most popular social network in Turkmenistan, as Google, Twitter, and TikTok (16.7%) were surveyed in the same category.

As for the least popular social media, before the pandemic these were Mail.ru and Moi Mir in

Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Turkmenistan, VKontakte in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, and Facebook in Turkmenistan. The only country with equally low popularity of social media (Mail.ru and Moi Mir) in both years was Kyrgyzstan. At the end of 2022, the cases were changed in all four other countries: YouTube in Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Mail.ru and Moi Mir in Tajikistan.

The number of users of Instagram, Facebook, Google, Twitter, and TikTok increased in all Central Asian countries in the three years from 2019 to 2022. VKontakte users also grew in all countries except Kazakhstan. In contrast, YouTube users declined in all five countries, while Odnoklassniki users halved in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, and Mail.ru and Moi Mir users fell almost threefold in Kazakhstan and Tajikistan.

## Discussions and Conclusions

The present study was designed to determine the usage of new media such as chat rooms, messengers, and social media by citizens of Central Asia before and after the COVID-19 pandemic. The results show that such media use and frequency increased during the outbreak, making the Central Asian region more online than before. My data analysis confirms my hypothesis: *the COVID-19 pandemic has led to an increase in the use of the Internet, chat rooms, messengers, and social media in Central Asia*. According to the Central Asia Barometer (2019 and 2022), although the number of Internet users grew in all countries, the highest growth rates were observed in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. I argue that the higher rates of Internet, chat room/messenger and social media usage in 2022 mean that such changes are not due to the pandemic itself, but to the measures taken by central and local governments and citizens to combat the outbreak and the new demands of life aimed at meeting the requirements and realities of the online space.

Digitalisation programmes in Central Asian countries could also play an important infrastructural role in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic: while 'Digital Kazakhstan' programme was approved in December 2017 (Yensebayev, 2018), 'Digital Kyrgyzstan 2019-2023' programme (dig.watch, 2019) was adopted in 2019 and 'Digital Uzbekistan-2030' programme (Alimova and Nurmatova, 2025) was approved in 2020. Tajikistan and Turkmenistan also had similar programmes: the former introduced the 'Concept for the Formation of Electronic Government in the Republic of Tajikistan (2012-2020)' in 2011, and the latter adopted the 'Concept of the Development of Digital Economy until 2025' in 2020 (Muratbekova, 2020). All of these programmes and concepts in Central Asia were discussed, introduced, and adopted before the COVID-19 pandemic or in 2020. Thus, the COVID-19 pandemic has played a stimulating role in the digitalisation of Central Asian countries.

It is important to study the levels of digitalisation in Central Asia in different ways, and this study provides key data for studying people's use of the Internet and online platforms such as messengers, chat rooms, and social media. These results enable scholars and students, planners and policymakers as well as businessmen to see a more complete picture for individual countries and for the Central Asian region as a whole. They are especially useful for those analysing such trends in parallel with the COVID-19 pandemic.

One of the strengths of this study is that it covers all five Central Asian states, thanks to data from the Central Asia Barometer. Because '[w]hile Uzbekistan has somewhat softened its stance on opinion polling over the last five years, inquiries into public opinion in Turkmenistan are even more difficult for survey companies and foreign researchers' (Ysmanova, 2024).

Future research may examine the frequency of new media use in the post-pandemic era, as this study only covered the beginning and the time when the COVID-19 pandemic was close to being officially ended by the World Health Organization on May 5, 2023 (UN News, 2023). Central Asian Barometer provides its data for free, except for the last two or three years. That is why I was able to

analyse the latest data from autumn/winter 2022 together with the data collected in autumn/winter 2019. However, it will be possible to compare the Central Asian barometer data regarding the end of the COVID-19 pandemic as early as 2026.

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Dr **Yerkebulan Sairambay** is currently a senior research fellow and associate professor at SDU University (Kaskelen, Kazakhstan). Dr Sairambay performed superbly in his PhD studies at the University of Cambridge (2018-2022), passing his oral examination with 'no revisions' to the text, a strong signal of the strength of his research and capabilities. He has already developed a strong publication profile, not least in the publication of his book with Lexington Press, in the well-regarded Contemporary Central Asia series edited by Professor Marlene Laruelle from the George Washington University, but also in the publication of 11 peer-reviewed articles in very good, well-respected journals, not least Central Asian Survey. Dr Sairambay received an MSc in Russian, Central and East European Studies from the University of Glasgow and an MA in Political Science from the Corvinus University of Budapest (a joint degree under the IMRCEES Erasmus Mundus programme, 2016-2018). His research interests involve, but are not limited to, the following areas of expertise: political participation, new media, civil society, climate change, clan politics, democratisation, transitional justice, and nation- and state- building with a particular focus on the countries of postcommunist Europe and former Soviet Union. The results of Dr Sairambay's research have been published in *Human Affairs*, *Laboratorium: Russian Review of Social Research*, *Central Asian Survey*, *Media Asia*, *Slavonica*, *Studies of Transition States and Societies*, *Slovak Journal of Political Sciences*, *Politics in Central Europe*, and *Lexington Books* (Rowman & Littlefield).

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ҒТАМР: 19.31

# Орталық Азия азаматтарының COVID-19 пандемиясына дейін және одан кейінгі Интернет пен жаңа медианы пайдалануы

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**Аңдатпа**

Бұл зерттеу Орталық Азиядағы азаматтардың Интернет, чат, мессенджер және әлеуметтік желілерді COVID-19 пандемиясына дейін және оның соңына қарай пайдалануындағы айырмашылықтар мен ұқсастықтарды зерттейді. Бес ел – Қазақстан, Қырғызстан, Тәжікстан, Түркіменстан және Өзбекстан – авторитаризмнің әртүрлі деңгейлеріне ие және медианы пайдалану, әсіресе жаңа медианы пайдалану осы елдер арасында әр түрлі болуы мүмкін. Орталық Азия Барометріне сүйене отырып, мен 2019 және 2022 жылдары жиналған деректерді пайдаланып, үш жыл ішіндегі осындай салыстыруларды көрсетемін. Бұған қоса, мен Орталық Азия тұрғындарының Интернетті пайдалану жиілігін және аймақта қай чаттарды, мессенджерлерді және әлеуметтік желілерді жиі пайдаланғанын талдаймын. Нәтижелер мен талдаулар пандемияның соңына қарай барлық бес республиканың азаматтары 2019 жылмен салыстырғанда әртүрлі көлемде болса да, Интернетті көбірек пайдалана бастағанын көрсетеді. Сәйкесінше, жаңа медианы (чаттар, мессенджерлер және әлеуметтік желілер) пайдалану жиілігі де әртүрлі дәрежедегі айырмашылықтармен оң болды. Бұл нәтижелер үшін мүмкін түсініктемелер және осы зерттеудің пайдалылығы да талқыланады.

**Кілт сөздер**: Интернет, чаттар, мессенджерлер, әлеуметтік медиа, Орталық Азия, COVID-19 пандемиясы.

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# Использование Интернета и новых медиа гражданами Центральной Азии до и после пандемии COVID-19

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**Аннотация**

В этом исследовании изучаются различия и сходства в использовании Интернета, чатов, мессенджеров и социальных сетей гражданами в Центральной Азии до и к концу пандемии COVID-19. Пять стран — Казахстан, Кыргызстан, Таджикистан, Туркменистан и Узбекистан — имеют разные уровни авторитаризма, и использование медиа, особенно новых медиа, может различаться в этих странах. Опираясь на Центральноазиатский Барометр, я демонстрирую такие сравнения за три года, используя данные, собранные в 2019 и 2022 годах. В дополнение к этому я также анализирую частоту использования Интернета жителями Центральной Азии и какие чаты, мессенджеры и социальные сети использовались чаще всего в регионе. Результаты и анализ показывают, что к концу пандемии граждане всех пяти республик стали больше пользоваться Интернетом, хотя и в разных объемах, по сравнению с 2019 годом. Соответственно, частота использования новых медиа (чатов, мессенджеров и социальных сетей) также была положительной с разной степенью разницы. В этой статье обсуждаются возможные объяснения этих результатов и полезность этого исследования.

**Ключевые слова**: Интернет, чаты, мессенджеры, социальные сети, Центральная Азия, пандемия COVID-19.