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### Table of Contents

◄ Previous Issue     Volume 24 Issue 1, June 2020     Next Issue ►

📄 Table of Contents (PDF)

All Issues
Current Issue
OnlineFirst

Contents

Articles
Book Review

#### Articles

**Cyberspace in the Post-Soviet States: Assessing the Role of New Media in Central Asia**
Mohammad Reyaz
First Published December 17, 2019; pp. 7–27
Abstract
› Preview

**Understanding Japan–South Korea Cooperation and Friction Through Neoclassical Realist Theory**
Anna Kim
First Published February 11, 2020; pp. 29–62
Abstract
› Preview

**Korea's 'New Southern Policy' Towards India: An Analysis**
Ranjit Kumar Dhawan
First Published February 23, 2020; pp. 63–72
Abstract
› Preview

**China's Revisionism Versus India's Status Quoism: Strategies and Counter-strategies of Rivals in Doklam Standoff**
Suneel Kumar
First Published March 12, 2020; pp. 73–100
Abstract
› Preview

**The Look East Policy/Act East Policy-driven Development Model in Northeast India**
Taz (Tonmoy) Barua
First Published March 12, 2020; pp. 101–120
Abstract
› Preview

#### Book Review

**Alexei D. Voskressenski, ed., Is *Non-Western Democracy Possible***
Anirban Chatterjee
First Published April 8, 2020; pp. 121–125
Abstract

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Article

# Cyberspace in the Post-Soviet States: Assessing the Role of New Media in Central Asia

## Mohammad Reyaz[1]

### Abstract

Since independence, the five post-Soviet States of Central Asia have taken divergent trajectories of economic growth as well as civil and political liberties. Respective regimes still try to regulate information flow in a continuation of the Soviet era, with the possible exception of Kyrgyzstan. Nonetheless, the overall regulations on media are certainly much more pluralistic now than they were in the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). Internet and social media, in particular, have emerged as an important platform for communication. But our knowledge about Central Asia in general and the digital space of the region, in particular, is still limited. This article makes a comprehensive country-wise assessment of the cyberspace of the five Central Asian countries to understand better the role and impact of the information and communication technologies in these post-Soviet states.

### Keywords

Central Asia, Internet, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, social media, Uzbekistan

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## Introduction

In November 2018, a man in Kazakhstan, Aset Abishev, was sentenced for four years for a post on Facebook, which, according to prosecutors, 'discredited the head of state, members of his family and the ruling power of the Republic of Kazakhstan', besides inciting a 'mood of protest among the population' (Lillis 2018). A few months earlier, in a similar case, a man in Tajikistan was sentenced for five years for 'regularly' writing on Russian social networking site *Odnoklassniki*, 'insulting the president' and calling for the 'overthrow of the government'. The man in question, 30-year-old Umar Murodov, a migrant labourer in Russia, accepted during the trial that he 'liked' and shared several videos online, but insisted that he never had the intention of either slandering the president or overthrowing the government (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty [RFE/RL] 2018, August 16). These two instances from two Central Asian countries are manifestations of how semi-authoritarian rulers of these countries have increasingly become cautious of their images online, although the penetration of Internet is still not very high in the region.

The Internet has emerged as an important platform for communication as well as creative works worldwide. Central Asia, comprising the five post-Soviet states of Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, has made great strides since the disintegration of the Soviet Union in December 1991 (McNair 1991). Although respective regimes try to regulate information flow and attempt to control the media, with the possible exception of Kyrgyzstan, it is certainly much more plural now than it was three decades ago when it was still part of the Soviet Union (for details, see Reyaz 2014; also Freedman 2005; Kenny and Gross 2008). Like other countries, several grassroots activists, artists, and journalists in Central Asia use it for mobilization and for spreading information related to their causes (Junisbai et al. 2015). Even here, social media often leads the mainstream media and shapes editorial decisions on news coverage. This article makes a comprehensive country-wise assessment of the Internet-scape of the five Central Asian countries to understand the role and impact of the information and communication technology (ICT) in these post-Soviet states.