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Central Asian Bureau for Analytical Reporting

INSTITUTE FOR
WAR & PEACE REPORTING



THE INFLUENCE OF BIG POWERS PROPAGANDA ON CENTRAL ASIA SECURITY (ON THE EXAMPLE OF TAJIKISTAN)

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1. INTRODUCTION

Topic: “The Influence of Big Powers Propaganda on Central Asia security (on the example of Tajikistan)” has been and remains a very relevant topic for a long time in the context of the “Great Game”. After the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, the study of this topic becomes especially acute. But at the same time, the question of the level of influence of propaganda on the security of Tajikistan remains little studied.

It is very important to explore how the propaganda of the big powers, influencing the way of thinking of the population in Tajikistan, destabilizes society and poses a security threat to the entire Central Asian region.

Propaganda is the dissemination of views, facts, arguments, rumors, information or deliberately false information in order to form the desired public opinion and manipulate public consciousness. Propaganda can be used as a means to achieve political, economic, ideological or military goals. Propaganda can be divided into two main types: propaganda of war and hatred, which is intended to incite violence, discrimination or genocide; and propaganda that does not violate international law, but may be contrary to professional standards of journalism.


Big Powers often use propaganda as a tool to promote their interests, values, and ideologies, and to weaken or discredit their competitors or adversaries. Big Power propaganda can be directed at both domestic and foreign audiences, and can use various channels and formats, such as the media, the Internet, social networks, culture or education. Tajikistan is also the target of propaganda from great powers who are trying to influence its domestic and foreign policies.

This study, while small in scale, has the potential to serve as a stepping stone for a more comprehensive and detailed investigation into this issue. The qualitative data collection methods will be employed for general analysis. This study could provide a solid foundation for a more extensive regional study in Central Asia.

1.1 Survey methods

To survey on this kind topics, qualitative and quantitative methods are most often used. A larger sample size could provide more detailed data for in-depth analysis. In conditions of a limited budget, the most appropriate method is to use the qualitative method of **individual “face-to-face” interviews** with specialists in the field of media and propaganda, because they are the most informed and qualified on the topics « The Influence of Big Powers Propaganda on Central Asia security (on the example of Tajikistan). They are the ones who can give an **expert assessment of the level of influence of great powers’ propaganda on the domestic and foreign policy of Tajikistan.**

It is also acceptable to conduct a **focus group survey** among young people (students). Because youth is one of the most important and influential social groups that determines the future of society. The “youth” category includes persons from 14 to 30 years old. According to the Statistics Agency under the President of the Republic of Tajikistan for 2020, youth comprised 30% of the total population of the country.



At the same time, youth are one of the most vulnerable groups, which are exposed to various forms of propaganda. Propaganda can be used to manipulate the opinions, emotions and behavior of young people, and to lure them into violent extremism and terrorism. It is therefore necessary to **explore how young people perceive the effects of propaganda, how they critically evaluate the information they receive from different sources, and how they defend their rights and values.**

Desk research was an integral part of the study: study and analysis of scientific articles and research reports. Here I would like to note that analyses based on the research “Media preferences of the population of the Republic of Tajikistan: TV, radio, print media, websites, social networks and messengers” carried out in 2022 by the Public Organization “Media Consulting”, U.S. Embassy in the Republic of Tajikistan, Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Tajikistan and PO Center of Sociological Research “Zerkalo” played a huge role.

1.2 Survey objectives

The aim of this study is to investigate the impact of Big Powers propaganda on Central Asia security (on the example of Tajikistan), through its influence on the way the population thinks

1.3 Survey tasks

The following tasks were set in order to realize the objective of the survey:

- Assess the extent to which the population is exposed to Big Powers information and how this exposure affects their perception of propaganda.
- Evaluate the threat posed by security propaganda in Central Asia, with a particular focus on Tajikistan.
- Explore the correlation between the perception of propaganda by experts and young people.

1.4 Survey subject

The survey on topic «The Influence of Big Powers Propaganda on Central Asia security (on the example of Tajikistan)» will focus on the following:

1. Expert assessment of the level of influence of great powers’ propaganda on the domestic and foreign policy of Tajikistan
2. Youth’s level of awareness of the effects of propaganda

1.5 Survey sampling

Country experts on media and propaganda issues. Experts were selected who have different profiles and competencies in the field of the influence of great power propaganda on the politics of Tajikistan in order to avoid one-sided information and distortion of research results. The final analysis will not focus solely on their expert assessments. This is why different stakeholders and research methods will be used.

Students speaking Tajik and Russian, as well as students from different universities, regions and areas of study will be selected as participants: a) students who have little connection with this topic; b) students of the Faculty of International Relations who are close to political processes. This will ensure diversity and representativeness of the youth sample for the research. Since most of them come to study from different regions, they provided information about the situation in different regions of the country. Materials and results of focus groups among students were also very important.

1.6 Survey tools

The interview and focus group was conducted on the basis of a standardized questionnaire developed with consideration to the goals and objectives of the survey.

The interview questionnaire consisted of 6 sections (23 questions):

- 1) The nature of big powers propaganda in Central Asia.
- 2) Propaganda tools used by superpowers.
- 3) Perception and influence of propaganda in Central Asia.
- 4) Methods and ways of combating propaganda are used in Central Asia.
- 5) Media and propaganda.
- 6) Positive and negative consequences of propaganda.

The focus group questionnaire consisted of 4 sections (27 questions):

- 1) The ability of youth to analyze sources of information, check their reliability, identify and criticize propaganda messages and techniques.
- 2) The ability of young people to form and argue their position in relation to propaganda, taking into account different points of view and interests.
- 3) Young people's knowledge of basic concepts and facts related to propaganda, its types, goals, methods and consequences.
- 4) The attitude of young people to propaganda, its influence on society, politics, culture and personality, as well as to their own role in countering propaganda.

2. RESULTS

2.1 In-depth interviews “face to face” with media and propaganda experts

The Nature of Big Powers Propaganda in Central Asia (Tajikistan)

The great powers are aware of the geopolitical and geo-economic importance of the Central Asia and focusing on this region. The nature of Propaganda in Tajikistan is specific for each of them. Respondents noted that propaganda methods and channels directly depend on the goals pursued by the great powers. Big powers use absolutely every known and unknown propaganda tool to influence the perception of an entire category of the population.

Not only big powers, but also a variety of countries are trying to influence people's perceptions through propaganda and promote their agenda within Tajikistan. Moreover, when they promote this agenda, they do it in manipulative ways. That is, they do not openly talk about their politics, but present this information in such a way that people think that they are their personal thoughts, and not inspired from the outside. This is precisely the deception and the trick of propaganda.

With the development of technology and the Internet, the scale of propaganda has become enormous and unmanageable. Each person is either a propaganda tool, or he is an initiator and uses others as a propaganda tools.

According to experts, the main countries, that promote their agenda through propaganda in Tajikistan and influence public opinion, according to experts: Russia, USA, China, Iran, Turkey, India, Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan and Afghanistan.

Propaganda tools used by big powers

Russia. Russian propaganda is the most aggressive. Experts say that she has never previously given as much money as she is now pouring into promoting propaganda through the media. They finance certain local media, order publications, but recently Russia has also begun to invest in unofficial channels - Instagram, TikTok, Facebook. Both entire large channels and small channels are created and purchased. To attract journalists and influencers, they use not only financial incentives, but also certain goodies in the form of registration without a queue to obtain citizenship, and journalists are ready to write well about Russia for these goodies. This can be seen in how those who until recently were against Russian policies are now actively seeking to support them. The main goal is to conduct justification propaganda for the war.

China. The use of soft power and soft propaganda is quite specific for China. Chinese propaganda is aimed more at domestic audiences than external ones. Periodically, the question is raised regarding Central Asia, where it brings out more information that historically its territories were larger, including the Central Asian lands that belonged to it. For external propaganda, it uses a wide range of activities aimed at shaping public opinion in favor of China and its government. The goal of propaganda is to create such a positive image about China itself. They are not trying to make excuses about the Uyghurs in anyone's eyes. And they create a vision of how China and the ruling party there are all-powerful.

In Central Asia, they do not contact the media or journalists; they promote their agenda through officials loyal to China.

Turkey. Does not communicate directly with the media or journalists. The main tool is the supply of equipment through its support organizations. No one will speak or write badly about the one who provided them with all the equipment. This is how they minimize negative content that may appear in the media. Turkish propaganda is mainly aimed at ensuring that the media does not raise the issue of how harshly they deal with the opposition. Everything else is indifferent: questions of double standards - how they participate in grain transactions, or how they support Muslims with one hand, and supply fuel to Israel with the other. This does not concern them; they have one problem - the opposition.

West (America and the EU). They have soft propaganda, almost imperceptible. It manifests itself in such areas as cinema, music, literature, social networks, where the use of patriotic symbols, the creation of heroic images, the demonization of enemies and the use of stereotypes can be traced. But when they give grants, equipment, help in development, then how can you write badly about them? No way. The only thing that is so ambiguous for Americans is that many media outlets continue to receive grants and at the same time continue to write that the West is so bad.

Iran. Understands what it has in common with Tajikistan. These are history, culture and language. Therefore, it is important for Iran to maintain influence in Tajikistan, through culture, language and community. Accordingly, it promotes its propaganda through those who support these foundations - the intelligentsia. Iranian propaganda contains a message of anti-Semitism and de-legitimization of the West, represented by the United States. The main goal is to increase influence and image abroad, and at the same time delegitimize other countries and their values.

India. The main method of promoting propaganda is through film, theater, and music, as well as cultural and professional exchange programs for government officials. The goal is to enhance the image and loyalty to India. Experts say that sometimes there are attempts through the media to promote the issue of territorial disputes in their favor. And here the role of loyal journalists plays.

Uzbekistan. Not a big power. But since it was mentioned by experts, I cannot help but note the role of Uzbek propaganda. He does not purposefully promote propaganda to an external audience, rather it is aimed at an internal one. In recent years, there has been an increase in the image of the current government of Uzbekistan among residents of Tajikistan. The commonality of history, culture, and traditions plays a role here. Certain reforms taking place in Uzbekistan arouse admiration, and the people themselves become instruments of propaganda for the Uzbek authorities. Even though it is not a big power, it has a lot of influence.

Perception and influence of propaganda in Central Asia

All experts noted that the scale of the influence of propaganda is very large, they are sure that absolutely every person is a victim of propaganda, and the level of those who critically perceive the information is negligible. The main reasons to put forward are:

1. The low level of education of the population.
2. Lack of critical thinking.
3. Lack of journalistic ethics in processing and presenting information.
4. People don't have the skills to use Internet resources and social networks.
5. Language barriers to obtaining alternative sources of information.
6. Poor economic condition.
7. Religious factor.

Due to all the factors listed above, we can conclude that the public's perception of propaganda is limitless; all information is consumed without exception.

Methods and ways of combating propaganda are used in Central Asia

None of the experts could name effective methods used against propaganda in Central Asia at the moment. No work is being done in this direction at all. And if there is, then it is not enough.

Media and propaganda

The media are one of the most important channels for disseminating propaganda and play an important role in the political life of the country. All propaganda begins with the media, and only then is spread by opinion leaders, influencers, bloggers and every person. In this way, ideological postulates are broadcast, public opinion is formed, as well as disinformation and manipulation of people's consciousness.

But experts noted that the reason for the spread of propaganda through the media is not always money. They named the reasons why the media spread propaganda:

- Journalists are not used to using content in foreign languages. By using only Russian content, they themselves, without realizing it, become victims of propaganda.
- They do not have fact-checking skills, or do not have time to check the accuracy of information in the flow of information.
- The media use unverified information and publish the weather according to subscribers.
- Leakage of a journalist's personal position in publications.
- Lack of editorial policy.

Positive and negative consequences of propaganda

Since propaganda influences public opinion, manipulates its consciousness and misinforms, it leads to such negative consequences as:

- Polarization of society, creating division of people, which leads to conflicts and tension in society, subsequently to destabilization of the situation within

the country. Hate propaganda cultivates hatred not only against the country to which the propaganda is directed, but also against those who do not agree with you.

- The propaganda of hatred that spreads become absolute, universal. Then it doesn't matter who the person hates. Propagandists will simply use this hatred in the direction where it is beneficial to them.
- Making rash decisions that people, societies or governments would not make under normal conditions, which can also lead to conflicts, and sometimes even wars.
- The danger of propaganda is that justifying murder will lead to the establishment among the population of the idea that it is normal to kill.
- Violating democratic principles, propaganda can be used to suppress freedom of speech, freedom of assembly and other rights that are important to a democratic society.

2.2 Youth's level of awareness of the effects of propaganda

The ability of youth to analyze sources of information, check their reliability, identify and criticize propaganda messages and techniques.

The main source of information for young people is social networks in first place, automatically pop-up messages in 2nd place, and television in 3rd place. During the focus group, it turned out that the vast majority do not analyze the information they receive from the media in any way. Most news is read only by the headlines of the articles. Almost no one goes to an information site to study detailed information.

There is also a misunderstanding of the very concept of the Internet. More than half of the respondents associate the Internet with social networks and instant messengers, that is, in their perception, Instagram and TikTok are the entire Internet.

The main preference is for content in Tajik and Russian. Viewing of content in English, Persian or Chinese is almost zero. That is, all information, be it propaganda or anything else, is consumed by young people without alternatives.

The ability of young people to form and argue their position in relation to propaganda, taking into account different points of view and interests.

Based on the results of the focus group, it was revealed that the majority, when discussing news, consider the opinion of teachers to be authoritative, followed by the opinion of parents, and in third place is the position of friends.

The most common topic of discussion for young people is the agenda promoted on social networks, which is scrolled the most in the feed and in the reposts of friends. They argue their position on such events based on feelings, religious or national community. There is no deep and detailed study of the issue.

Young people's knowledge of basic concepts and facts related to propaganda, its types, goals, methods and consequences.

Young people studying in a specialty close to politics have general ideas about propaganda, but there is no precise understanding of its types, goals and methods. And among non-political students, there is practically no understanding of propaganda. The only thing that was mentioned in this group was Russian propaganda in the war between Russia and Ukraine, and even then it was more about conscription for service in the Russian army.

The attitude of young people to propaganda, its influence on society, politics, culture and personality, as well as to their own role in countering propaganda.

There is no understanding that young people play an important role in society and their attitude to propaganda can have a significant impact on society, politics, and culture.

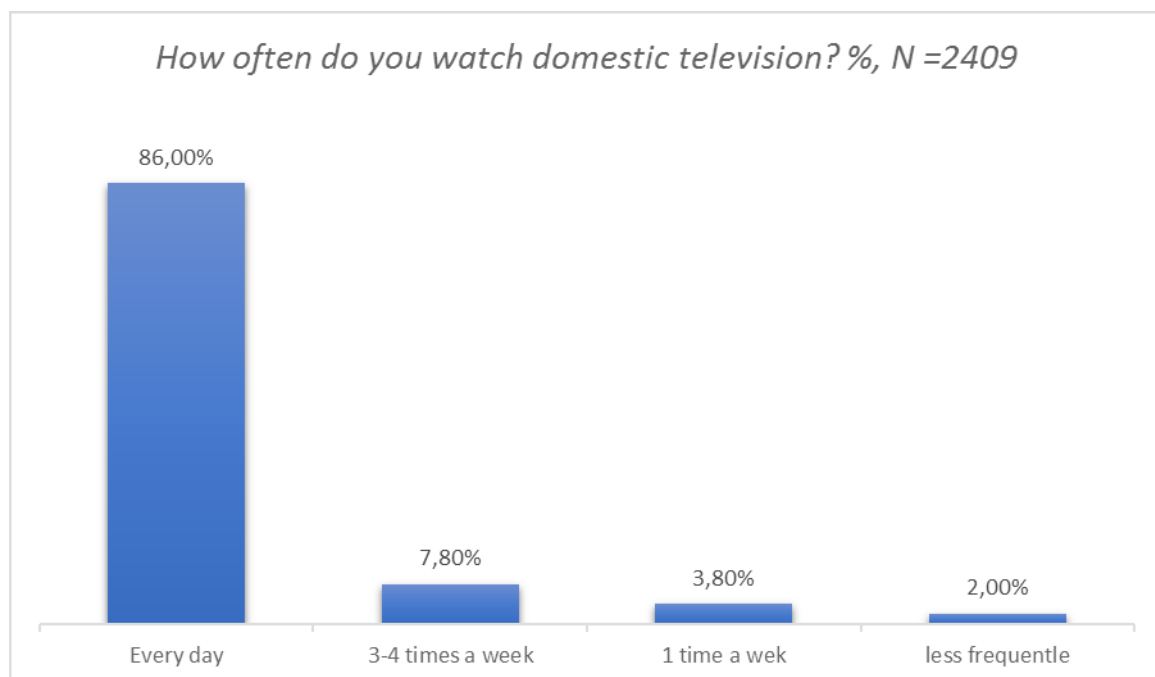
The majority say that they do not trust propaganda and consider it a negative phenomenon, but at the same time, the messages of Russian propaganda can be traced in their answers. From this we can conclude that propaganda has become so permeated into everyday life that respondents did not even notice how they were repeating the same sayings that come with the media.

There is a lack of awareness of how propaganda works, how propaganda can influence their opinions and behavior, and therefore a lack of understanding of how they could counter it and protect themselves.

2.3 Content analysis

The research "Media preferences of the population of the Republic of Tajikistan: TV, radio, print media, websites, social networks and instant messengers", conducted by the public organization "Media Consulting" in 2022 with U.S. Embassy in the Republic of Tajikistan, Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Tajikistan and PO Center of Sociological Research "Zerkalo". According this researches, it was revealed that the most popular media in Tajikistan is TV - 96% respondents. And 86% of respondents answered that they watch TV daily (*for more details see the link below¹*).

1 Visit the following page for further details: https://pozerkalo-my.sharepoint.com/personal/iskandar_rajabov_z-analytics_tj/_layouts/15/onedrive.aspx?id=%2Fpersonal%2Fiskandar%5Frajabov%5Fz%2Danalytics%5Ftj%2FDocuments%2FMediaPreff%5FTJ%2D2022%5FEng%5FFinal%2Epdf&parent=%2Fpersonal%2Fiskandar%5Frajabov%5Fz%2Danalytics%5Ftj%2FDocuments&ga=1

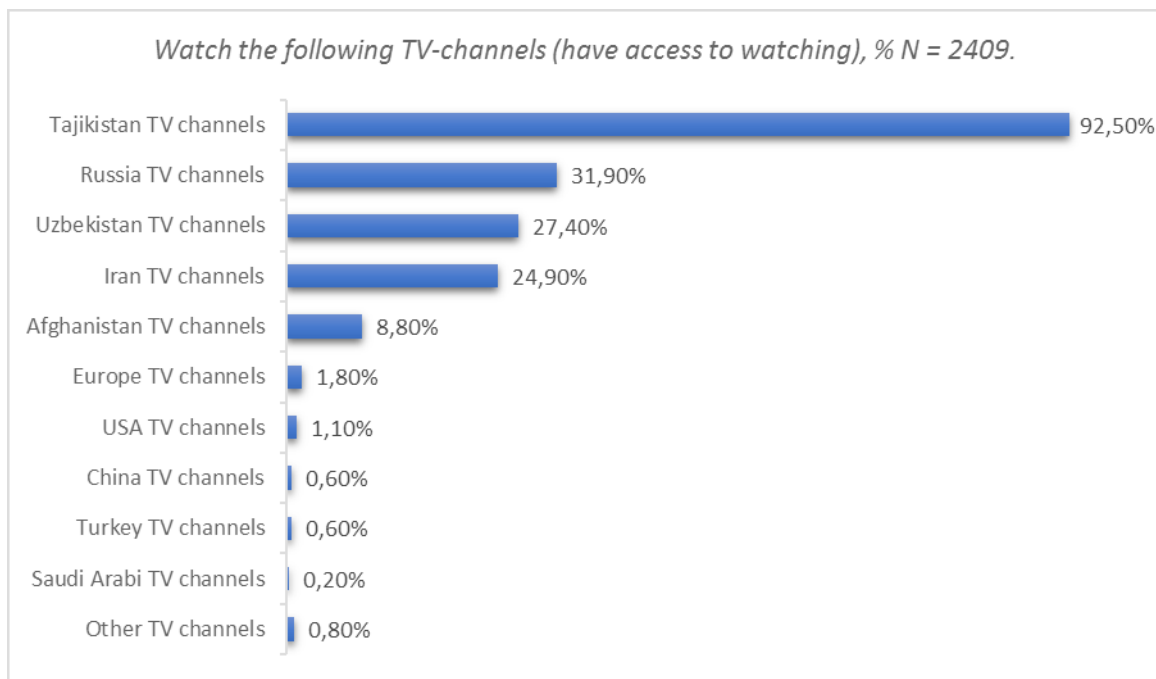


Source: [Media preferences of the population of the Republic of Tajikistan: TV, radio, print media, websites, social networks and messengers](#)

Here, it's critical to take into account their preferred channels and content types. The overwhelming majority of respondents—93%—found out through the survey that they watch Tajik TV. 32% of respondents said they preferred Russian TV stations, followed by Uzbek (27%), Iranian-language (25%), and Afghan (12%).

The primary reason for this is that the vast majority of people speak Tajik, the official language of the country; as a result, Russian content is preferred second to Tajik. Additionally, Russian has the status of an interethnic language. Because there are a lot of ethnic Uzbeks living in the border regions with Uzbekistan, Uzbek channels are more popular there. Then there are the Iranian and Afghan channels; these are easily viewed because Tajik is a language belonging to the Persian family.

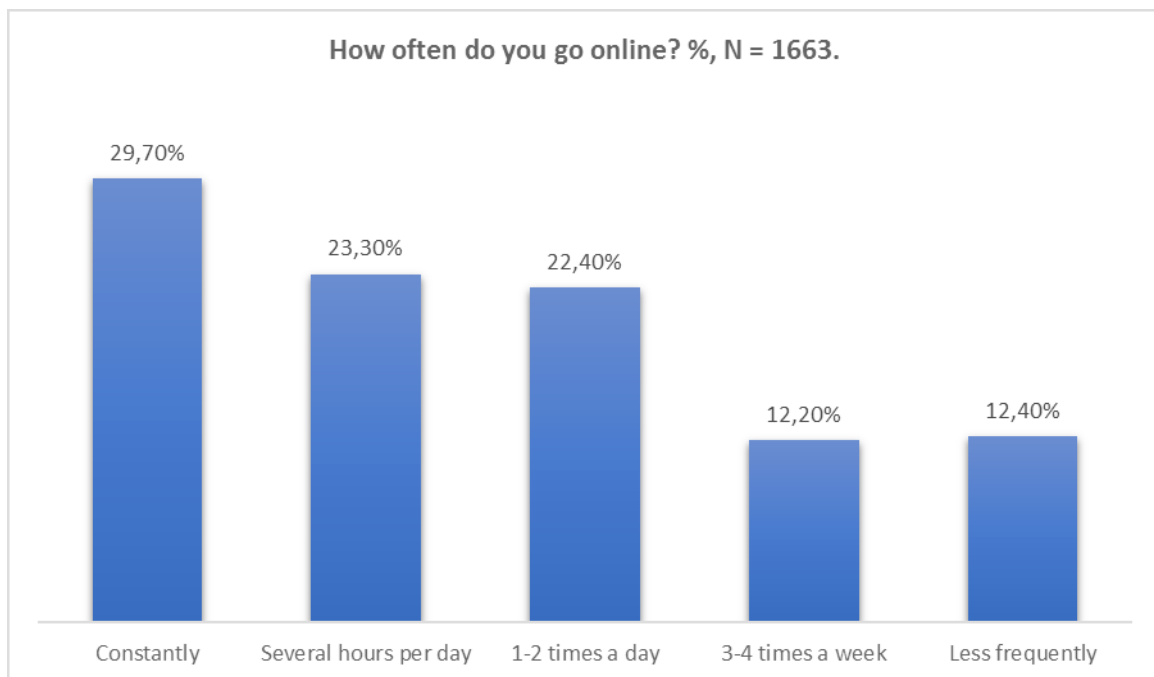
All of the aforementioned elements directly contribute to how these nations' propaganda shapes public opinion and support professional assessments of the significance of the foreign language that the majority of the people speaks. It can be inferred that the reason why Chinese channels and Western (American or European) programming are not as popular is because learning languages like English or Chinese is not as popular. Consequently, the populace becomes vulnerable to propaganda emanating from countries where the language is recognizable and the information is easily assimilated.



Source: [Media preferences of the population of the Republic of Tajikistan: TV, radio, print media, websites, social networks and messengers](#)

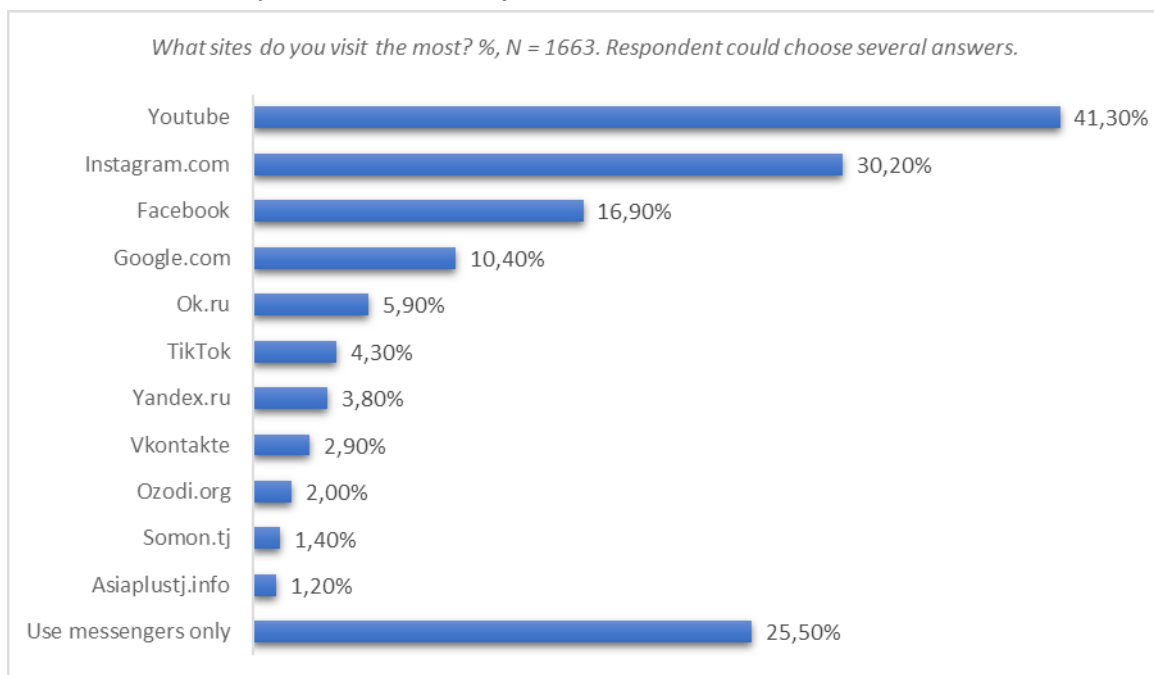
Regarding printed media, the Republic of Tajikistan’s Ministry of Culture reports that 376 newspaper titles—112 state-owned and 264 independent—are registered in the nation. Every year, printed publications become less and less popular and readable. A third of the respondents overall identified as magazine readers. This is 11% less than the 43% found in the 2019 research. Given that newspapers are released once a week whereas information is available online almost instantly, it is reasonable to expect that as online platforms grow, the necessity for printed media will continue to decline.

“Internet speed has increased more than ten times in the last five years, from 10 Gbit/s to 120 Gbit/s. The profitability of Internet traffic has also increased. About \$202 million in 2019 and \$242 million (+40 million) in the 2020 covid year. Of the total respondents, 1663 out of 2497 hours or 66% of the respondents were Internet users. Consumer growth is roughly 20% higher than in 2019. Also rising is the percentage of people who use the Internet regularly. Of these, 29% use the Internet “constantly,” while 45% use it “several hours a day” or “1-2 times a day.” Thus, 65% of people utilize the Internet every day. This supports professional judgments that the majority of superpowers have started using the Internet for their propaganda.



Source: [Media preferences of the population of the Republic of Tajikistan: TV, radio, print media, websites, social networks and messengers](#)

The amazing thing is that news may now be found on social media. According to the study's findings, social networks account for 42% of Internet usage, while information websites account for 16%. YouTube, the most popular video hosting website in the world, is ranked #1 with 41% of the total votes. Facebook (16%) and Instagram (30%) are just behind it. Instagram is used for reading news, watching videos, chatting, and making calls; YouTube is utilized for watching videos. 97% of respondents said they use mobile Internet.

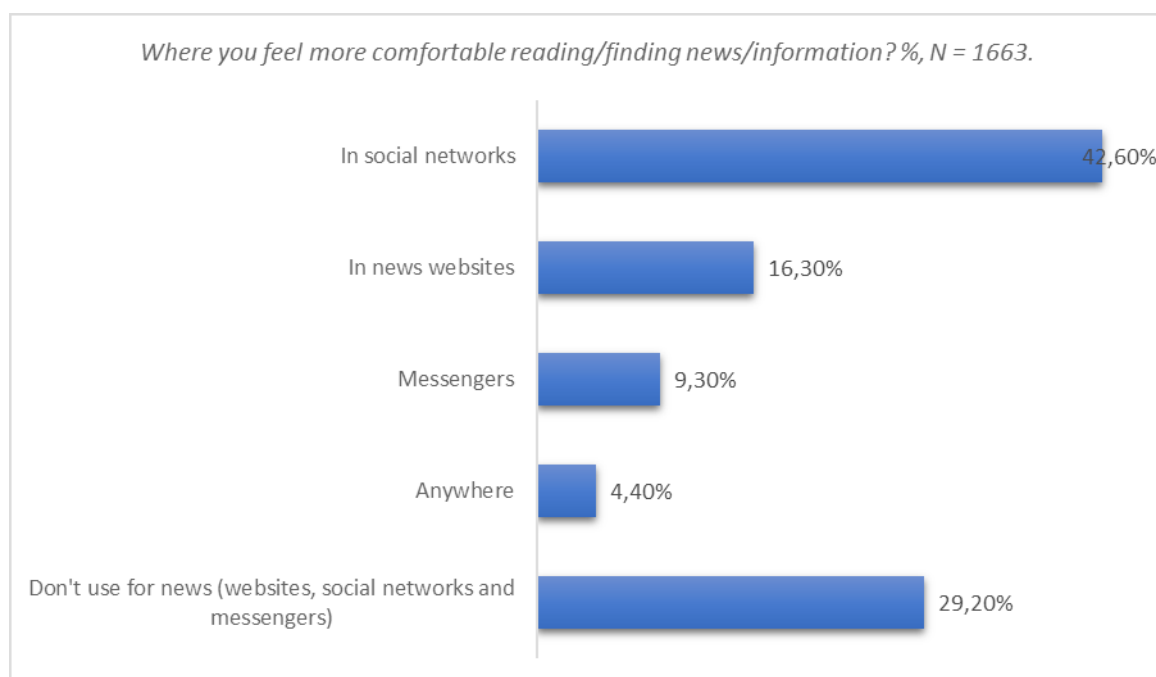


Source: [Media preferences of the population of the Republic of Tajikistan: TV, radio, print media, websites, social networks and messengers](#)

Taking into account that during focus groups, participants stated they do not visit the information portal website and instead learn about news via social networks, relying solely on headlines. In addition to the previously mentioned outcomes, it is likely that the final customer is misled as well as does not receive trustworthy information.

Big powers are taking advantage of this opportunity to further their agendas, and extensive disinformation campaigns are being run on social media. Additionally, the media has moved to social networks and now operates there. However, in an attempt to provide stories with “loud, attractive titles,” the public may be misled because the contents of the article frequently do not match the title.

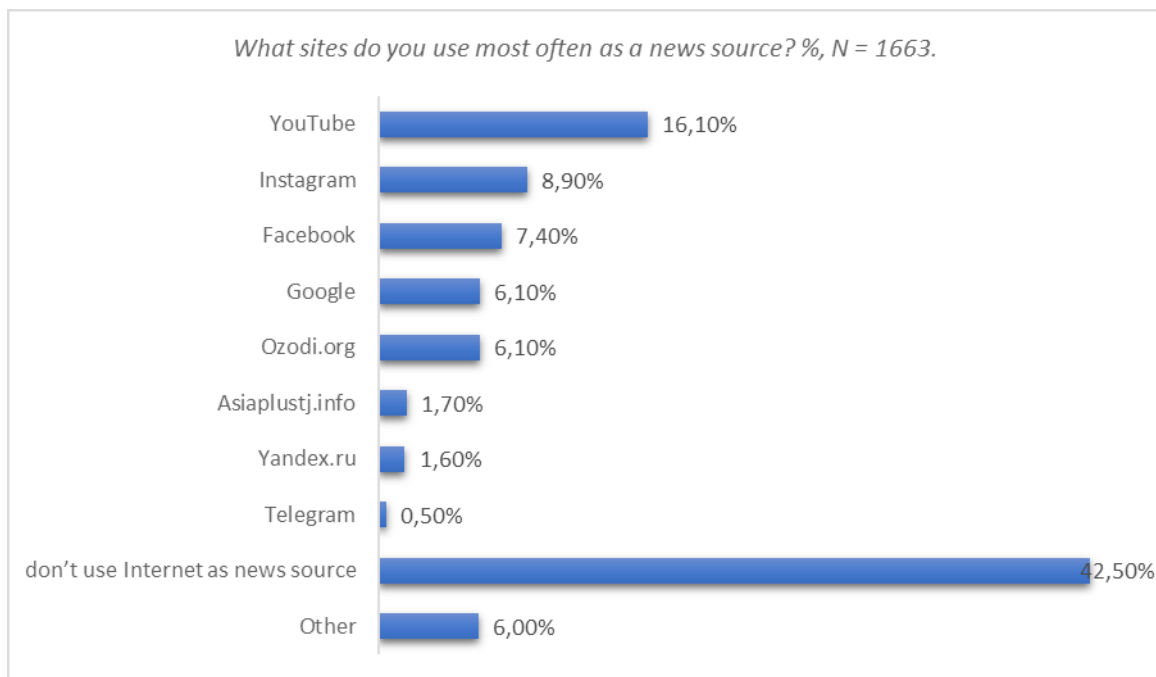
The following graphic, which 42.6% of respondents indicated was through social networks, is highly suggestive of people’s choices regarding where it is easy for them to obtain news:



Source: [Media preferences of the population of the Republic of Tajikistan: TV, radio, print media, websites, social networks and messengers](#)

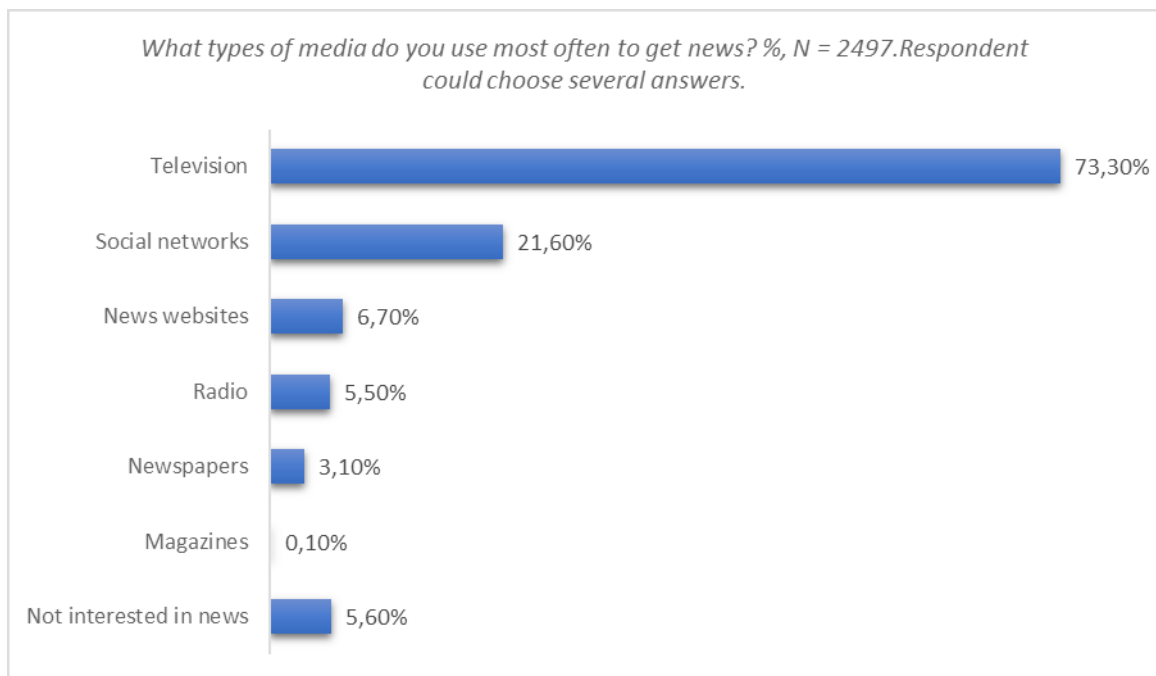
Instant messenger users are increasing at a similar rate: over 63% of respondents said they use instant messengers. This percentage was 41% in 2019. Over 71% of messenger users log in many times a day or are online all the time. WhatsApp is the most widely used instant messaging app (74%), followed by IMO (69%). The goal of using instant messengers is the most intriguing aspect of this situation. “The majority of respondents—71% and 67%, respectively—use the IMO and WhatsApp applications for private messaging and phone conversations. In contrast to WhatsApp and IMO, Viber and Telegram have a higher percentage of users that read news in groups, channels, and publics (1.4% for Viber and 4.3% for Telegram).

In light of the study’s findings, the final point I would want to make is the query of which websites people visit to get news. Non-news content makes up 32.4% of the top three (YouTube: 16.1%, Instagram: 8.9%, Facebook: 7.4%).



Source: [Media preferences of the population of the Republic of Tajikistan: TV, radio, print media, websites, social networks and messengers](#)

In spite of all this, 73% of people say that television is their preferred source for news information. News websites (6%), and social networks (21%), follow.



Source: [Media preferences of the population of the Republic of Tajikistan: TV, radio, print media, websites, social networks and messengers](#)

3. CONCLUSION

As I mentioned earlier, the scale of propaganda influence is very large, and every person is a victim of propaganda. The main reasons why people do not critically perceive the information they receive from the media include low levels of education, lack of critical thinking, lack of journalistic ethics in processing and presenting information, lack of skills in using Internet resources and social networks, language barriers to obtaining alternative sources of information, poor economic conditions, and religious factors.

In addition, during the focus group, it was found that the overwhelming majority do not analyze the information they receive from the media. Most news is read only by article headlines, and almost no one goes to an information site to study detailed information.

This can lead to people perceiving the information they receive without proper analysis and critical thinking, which can affect the safety in Central Asia.

Thus, not only big powers, but also any interested countries, groups, and even one extremist-minded person can influence security in the countries of Central Asia using modern propaganda tools. In this, a special role can be given to social networks and instant messengers, which are becoming practically uncontrollable.



4. RECOMENDATION

To prevent propaganda from influencing the security of Central Asia, the following recommendations can be taken into account:

For the Government and its relevant structures: Ministry of Education, Communication Service, Ministry of Culture.

Increasing the level of education and awareness of the population in terms of developing critical thinking can help people analyze the information they consume from the media. Therefore, for this it is recommended:

1. Introduce into the educational program in all, without exception, both in specialized and non-core secondary and higher educational institutions, the subject of analysis and critical thinking, media literacy, the culture of media consumption, including maintaining one's social networks. This will help them distinguish truth from lies and more effectively combat propaganda, which in turn will help protect against attraction to various extremist groups.
2. Since ignorance of the law does not exempt from punishment, it is recommended to introduce a course in the study of digital law and obligations into the curriculum. It is also recommended in this course to pay special attention to social networks and instant messengers. This will help them understand how media works and how it can be used for propaganda; where rights end and obligations begin.
3. Check existing and newly developed educational materials supplied by foreign donors for hidden propaganda. This can help avoid the influence of propaganda on young people.
4. Actively collaborate with civil society who can provide other information and resources to combat propaganda. Working together can become more effective tools for combating propaganda.
5. Open online platforms, including pages on social networks in several languages, to improve media literacy among teachers, students and anyone interested. Creating high-quality and attractive content in the Tajik language is very important here.
6. Use online platforms, social networks and instant messengers to disseminate reliable information and combat propaganda. Here it is very important to use the state language, but also other languages spoken by minorities.
7. Create information campaigns that will be aimed at combating propaganda. This could be, for example, a campaign to disseminate information on how to recognize propaganda and how to combat it. Cooperation with civil society can also play a special role in this matter.
8. Support freedom of speech. Freedom of speech and free access to information can help people gain information from a variety of sources and develop critical thinking.

9. Support for international initiatives. International initiatives aimed at combating propaganda can help prevent propaganda from influencing security in Central Asia.

10. Coordinate compliance with ethical standards by all media representatives, including bloggers and influencers, in the production of content.

For publishers and media representatives, including influencers:

11. Create a staff or division of fact-checkers in each publishing house to avoid the publication of unverified information. This will help double-check facts and promptly publish information.

12. Encourage and provide continuing education courses in critical thinking, media literacy, and anti-propaganda for all staff and part-time professionals.

13. Develop new ethical standards, as well as monitor compliance with already implemented and existing ethical standards.

14. Creation of high-quality and attractive content in the national language in online platforms, including social networks and instant messengers.

15. Learn foreign languages to be able to use different sources. This will facilitate the publishing of reliable information and protect journalists from being a victim of propaganda.

For civil society:

16. Check sources of information, especially online, before drawing conclusions. Use multiple sources of information in different languages to get the full picture.

17. Turn to authoritative opinions of various specialists. This will help you get a more complete picture and understand why people have different opinions. But at the same time, do not rely heavily on them and draw your own conclusions.

18. Be active on social media to disseminate accurate information and combat propaganda. Tell other people what is happening if you know the truth.

19. Contact official sources of information, cooperate with government departments.

20. Contact organizations that fight propaganda. They can provide you with information and resources to help you combat propaganda. This will be even more effective if done together with government agencies.



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