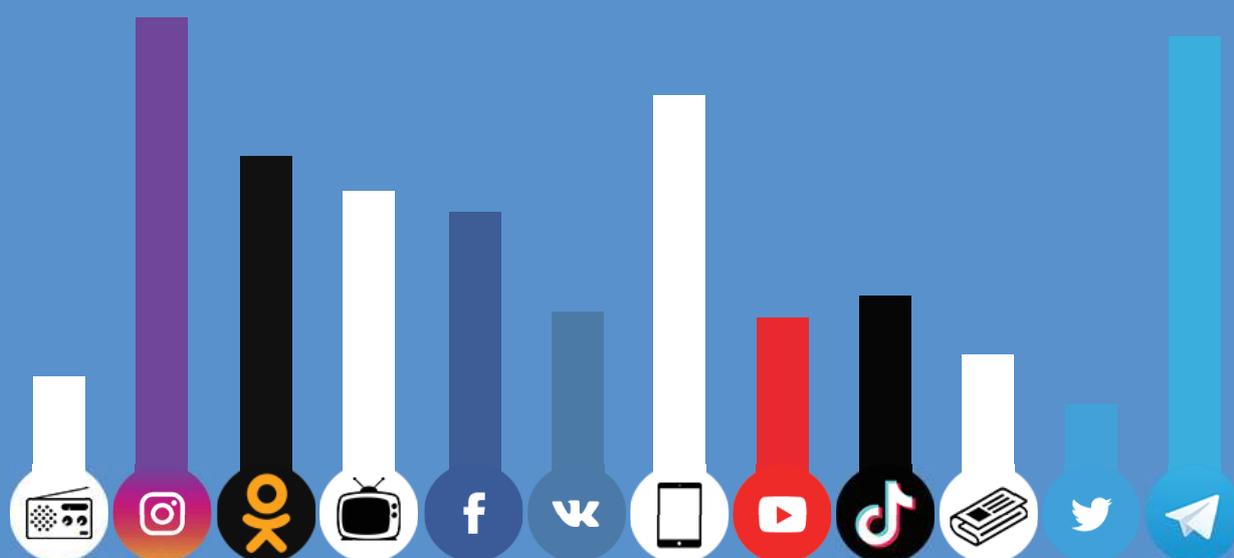# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Socio-economic Impact of COVID-19 and Media Consumption among Vulnerable Communities in Central Asia

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Socio-economic Impact of COVID-19 and Media Consumption among Vulnerable Communities in Central Asia: Executive Summary

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| Executive Summary |

The European Neighbourhood Council provided a European Union (EU)-funded[1] rapid analysis of dynamic information eco-systems and needs among target communities (labour migrants, refugees and stateless persons and ethnic minorities). This study was based on a quantitative data survey of approximately 2,000 respondents across vulnerable communities in Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. The second part of the study looks at 500 qualitative semi-structured in-depth interviews with all three vulnerable communities and 120 interviews with content producers (e.g. journalists and bloggers) across Central Asia.

The study provides a mapping of media and information consumption among each vulnerable community (labour migrants, refugees and stateless persons and ethnic minorities) during the COVID-19 pandemic, while identifying their vulnerabilities and risks of social exclusion.

Based on the qualitative and quantitative research, the ENC concluded the following findings:

FINDING: SOCIO-ECONOMIC IMPACT

- Both domestic violence and gender inequality were reported across all vulnerable communities in Central Asia. In general, 20% more women reported unemployment compared to men, particularly the number of female labour migrants with uncertain work status increased by 12% during COVID-19. In Tajikistan, only 25% of female labour migrants reported being employed.

- The economic impact of COVID-19 was most acutely felt by labour migrants (unemployment and border closure), followed by ethnic minorities who face extremely high levels of labour uncertainty. The socio-economic roots of the protests in Kyrgyzstan were clearly identified in the ENC data, as reports from labour migrants and ethnic minorities indicate the highest levels of labour uncertainty across the region. Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and Tajikistan also report high figures, which is likely to lead to further unrest, crime, vulnerability and fundamental socio-economic change or exclusion.

- Refugees and stateless persons remain the poorest, least educated and most vulnerable, as 63% report having low income and only 1% report undergoing university education.

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1   EU-funded project "Strengthening Resilience to Radicalisation and Disinformation in Central Asia through Independent Media".

FINDING: MEDIA TRENDS

- Social media (Instagram, Facebook, Telegram followed by Twitter) are the biggest information channels in general, but especially for youth, with preference for visual content (short videos, reels, pictures with quotes, little text). For example, in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan between 50% and 63% of labour migrants and ethnic minorities report Instagram as their preferred information source.

- Labour migrants were the most covered vulnerable community among the three target groups of this study in all media across Central Asia during COVID-19. Only local media is reported to have, occasionally, addressed refugee and stateless persons and ethnic or other minority groups.

- High levels of Internet restrictions on information access are reported among vulnerable communities. At times, this correlates with Internet access, depending on connection strength. In many other cases, it however refers to blocked websites and censorship directly imposed by governments. Thirty-six percent of refugees and stateless persons reported Internet restrictions, while the figure for ethnic minorities in Tajikistan is 50% and 56% in Kazakhstan.

FINDING: COVID-19 IMPACT ON MEDIA CONSUMPTION AND COMBATING DISINFORMATION

- A general increase in news consumption across Central Asia, followed by disengagement and mental stress.

- There is a strong tendency among media consumers to consider online media as a source of fake news. The survey data as well as in-depth interviews suggest that the trust in traditional media, such as television and radio, correlates with distrust in online media. On the other side, it is clear that a similarly large group of respondents distrust television and radio, primarily because these two types of media are associated with government control.

- International media is cited as more reliable and accurate for COVID-19-related news compared to local news, as there is a lack of credible, independent and financially sustainable local media, particularly targeting vulnerable communities.

- Debunking disinformation became a priority as journalists and editors consolidated their sources and exposed fake news weekly on their websites/social media platforms.

- Journalists reached out to experts and specialists in different areas to educate audiences, enabling Q&A in live programmes and closer interaction in different social media platforms.

- A general awareness about fake news exists, yet serious differences regarding "what exactly fake news is" remains. Consensus about what qualifies as "fake news" is scarce (e.g. many report scepticism about COVID-19 statistics, whereas others consider the pandemic "fake").

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the qualitative and quantitative findings, the ENC recommends the EU[1] to:

- Support and develop programmes and funding instruments which increase interdisciplinary training programmes for journalists across Central Asia, namely on social media content production. This is vital to support inter-regional media cooperation, high quality journalism and credible reporting institutions with stronger financial capabilities.

- Support and develop targeted media programmes that grant vulnerable communities (refugees and stateless persons, ethnic minorities and labour migrants) better access to media, including women, low income family households, and urban vulnerable communities.

- Support training for journalists on: a) COVID-19 related fact-checking, media-literacy and disinformation (incl. deliberative democracy), b) fundraising, application writing and accountancy, c) reporting on Preventing Violent Extremism (PVE) and other sensitive topics, and d) reporting on women and urban vulnerable communities, including in minority languages (Urdu, Pashto, Dari etc.)

- Support and develop programmes that promote Internet privacy, protection for journalists/civil society and secure VPN access/monitoring of Internet restrictions, advocacy and citizen's feedback. Propose temporary economic incentives to all Internet providing companies to maximize the access of population to quality Internet connection, both for education and news awareness purposes during COVID-19.

- Support and develop programmes to support refugees and stateless persons, labour migrants and ethnic minorities, increase EU monitoring and civil society/people-to-people/academic exchange. This can also include further research and projects to increase awareness and support all forms of public discussion forums and deliberation with citizens (including visits by OSCE working committees and other deliberation groups).

- Support and develop programmes that directly target females among refugees and stateless persons, labour migrants and ethnic minorities. In brief, a far more stratified and targeted selection among vulnerable communities is necessary during the aftermath of COVID-19.

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1 When referring to the EU, within the context of EU-Central Asia relations, it is intended to include relevant EU institutions, including the European Action Service (EEAS), Directorate-General International Cooperation (DEVCO), other relevant EU DGs, and agencies like Foreign Policy Instruments (FPI).