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UZBEKISTAN

The government of Uzbekistan continues exerting rigid control on the information space within the country. Despite apparent diversity within the media sector, all print and broadcast companies produce content in line with the official stance of the Tashkent authorities. Independent journalists, rights activists, and opposition members that criticize policies of President Islam Karimov, who is expected to win presidential elections in March 2015, are either forced to flee or kept in prisons. Many independent media organizations also were required to leave the country for reporting on the 2005 Andijan massacre, when government troops killed hundreds of civilians. However, these outlets continue their operations from abroad.

Over the course of 2014, repression of the media continued. In June, a Tashkent court ordered investigative journalist and rights activist Sid Yanyshv to pay a heavy fine, and authorities confiscated his camera. The case was brought following an article he wrote about violations of property rights of Tashkent residents whose houses were demolished by the government. In November, prominent independent news website Uznews.net stopped its activities after cyber-attackers hacked Chief Editor Galima Bukharbaeva's computer. The hackers publicized her e-mails that contained confidential information on anonymous contributing authors residing in Uzbekistan. Founded in 2005, the website had been one of the few sources of independent information on the situation in Uzbekistan. Bukharbaeva has blamed the Uzbek authorities for the attack.

Uzbek authorities also block websites and radio frequencies. To bypass the censorship, media organizations such as Radio Ozodlik (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty's Uzbek station) and BBC Uzbek have been using new online tools and platforms, such as social networks and mobile apps. In September 2014, the government amended the Law on Information to address blogging, which has become increasingly popular among Uzbeks over the past several years. The law officially equates bloggers with journalists and categorizes blogs as media outlets, so Uzbek bloggers now bear the same responsibility for accuracy of information as professional journalists.

The election of a new parliament in December 2014 was fraught with violations, including ballot stuffing and fabrication of results, according to observers. Yet only independent media operating from outside the country reported on the fraudulent activity. Presidential elections are set for March 29, 2015. Karimov, the 77-year-old incumbent, has continuously ignored or revised limits on presidential terms and is once again running. Despite clear violation of the constitution, local media organizations, which authorities often boast are free and independent, never question Karimov's legal status as a candidate.

IREX did not conduct an in-country panel discussion because of Uzbekistan's repressive environment. This chapter represents desk research, interviews, and the results from questionnaires filled out by several people familiar with the state of media in the country.

UZBEKISTAN at a glance

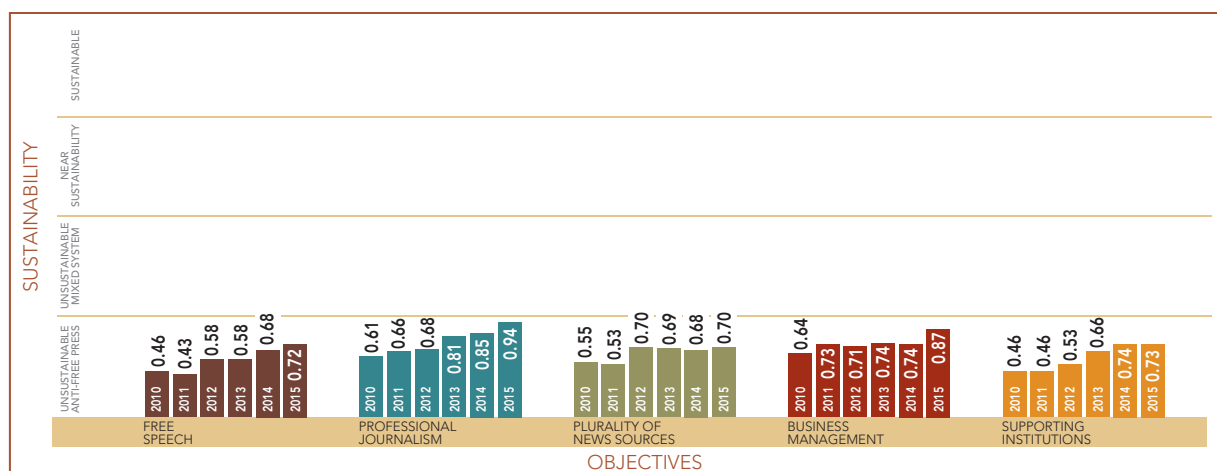
GENERAL

- > Population: 28,929,716 (July 2014 est., *CIA World Factbook*)
- > Capital city: Tashkent
- > Ethnic groups (% of population): Uzbek 80%, Russian 5.5%, Tajik 5%, Kazakh 3%, Karakalpak 2.5%, Tatar 1.5%, other 2.5% (1996 est., *CIA World Factbook*)
- > Religions (% of population): Muslim 88% (mostly Sunni), Eastern Orthodox 9%, other 3% (*CIA World Factbook*)
- > Languages: Uzbek (official) 74.3%, Russian 14.2%, Tajik 4.4%, other 7.1% (*CIA World Factbook*)
- > GNI (2013-Atlas): \$56.86 billion (World Bank Development Indicators, 2014)
- > GNI per capita (2013-PPP): \$5,290 (World Bank Development Indicators, 2014)
- > Literacy rate: 99.4%; male 99.6%, female 99.2% (2011 est., *CIA World Factbook*)
- > President or top authority: President Islam Karimov (since March 24, 1990)

MEDIA-SPECIFIC

- > Number of active print outlets, radio stations, television stations, and Internet portals: Print media: 1,015; Radio Stations: 35; Television Stations: 63; Internet: 300 websites registered as media (Uzbek government)
- > Newspaper circulation statistics: Total newspaper readership is estimated at 500,000; top publications include *Khalk Sozi* (state-run daily, reached 130,000 circulation in 2013), *Narodnye Slovo* (state-run, Russian-language version of *Khalk Sozi*), *O'zbekistan Ozovi* (published by ruling party) (Library of Congress, Federal Research Division)
- > Broadcast ratings: N/A
- > News agencies: Uzbekistan National News Agency (state-owned), Jahon, Turkiston Press, Uzbekistan Today
- > Annual advertising revenue in media sector: N/A
- > Internet usage: 4.689 million (2009 est., *CIA World Factbook*)

MEDIA SUSTAINABILITY INDEX: UZBEKISTAN



MEDIA SUSTAINABILITY INDEX 2015: OVERALL AVERAGE SCORES



CHANGE SINCE 2014

▲ (increase greater than .10) □ (little or no change) ▼ (decrease greater than .10)

Unsustainable, Anti-Free Press (0-1): Country does not meet or only minimally meets objectives. Government and laws actively hinder free media development, professionalism is low, and media-industry activity is minimal.

Unsustainable Mixed System (1-2): Country minimally meets objectives, with segments of the legal system and government opposed to a free media system. Evident progress in free-press advocacy, increased professionalism, and new media businesses may be too recent to judge sustainability.

Near Sustainability (2-3): Country has progressed in meeting multiple objectives, with legal norms, professionalism, and the business environment supportive of independent media. Advances have survived changes in government and have been codified in law and practice. However, more time may be needed to ensure that change is enduring and that increased professionalism and the media business environment are sustainable.

Sustainable (3-4): Country has media that are considered generally professional, free, and sustainable, or to be approaching these objectives. Systems supporting independent media have survived multiple governments, economic fluctuations, and changes in public opinion or social conventions.

Scores for all years may be found online at http://www.irex.org/system/files/EE_msiscores.xls

OBJECTIVE 1: FREEDOM OF SPEECH

Uzbekistan Objective Score: 0.72

The ruling regime often touts Uzbekistan's liberal legal framework, but progressive laws are rarely put into practice. Despite the number of laws guaranteeing freedom of speech and access to information, any information interpreted as critical of the regime or that differs from the party line is still censored. This state of affairs has characterized Uzbekistan's legal environment for media for many years now, and as a result this objective's score has for more than 10 years fluctuated only slightly from one year to the next. This year, the score remained nearly unchanged from 2014.

This may change for the worse in the near future. On September 5, 2014 President Karimov signed a law that obliges bloggers to check the accuracy of information before publishing and to remove it if proven unreliable. In addition, under the amended Law on Informatization, bloggers are now considered journalists, with the intrinsic professional obligation to provide accurate information.

According to many local journalists and bloggers, changes in the legal framework have had a negative impact on the development of the blogosphere, which spreads information that officially registered media ignore and allows exchange of ideas among netizens. Some Internet activists have noted a significant decrease in blogging, while others have said

LEGAL AND SOCIAL NORMS PROTECT AND PROMOTE FREE SPEECH AND ACCESS TO PUBLIC INFORMATION.

FREE-SPEECH INDICATORS:

- > Legal and social protections of free speech exist and are enforced.
- > Licensing or registration of media protects a public interest and is fair, competitive, and apolitical.
- > Market entry and tax structure for media are fair and comparable to other industries.
- > Crimes against media professionals, citizen reporters, and media outlets are prosecuted vigorously, but occurrences of such crimes are rare.
- > The law protects the editorial independence of state of public media.
- > Libel is a civil law issue; public officials are held to higher standards, and offended parties must prove falsity and malice.
- > Public information is easily available; right of access to information is equally enforced for all media, journalists, and citizens.
- > Media outlets' access to and use of local and international news and news sources is not restricted by law.
- > Entry into the journalism profession is free and government imposes no licensing, restrictions, or special rights for journalists.

that amendments to the Law on Informatization have not changed anything on the ground, as Uzbek bloggers have always been self-censoring given the regime's repressiveness.

Government bodies continue to be difficult for journalists to access. The established practice for government agency officials at all levels is to arbitrarily decide which media outlets may obtain information. However, the publications, TV channels, and radio stations that receive government agency information cannot rely on its accuracy. Refusals to give information are usually justified by the need to protect state secrets or the inappropriateness of publication of the requested information. The latter reason is being used increasingly in recent years.

Uzbekistan has mechanisms for protection of the freedom of speech indicated in laws on Principles and Guarantees of Freedom of Information, on Guarantees and Freedom of Access to Information, and on the Protection of Journalists' Professional Activities, but they are rarely enforced.

Few independent journalists are left in Uzbekistan today. The ones who remain in the country are often persecuted by the government. On June 28, 2014, investigative journalist and rights activist Sid Yanyshv was brought before a Tashkent court and ordered to pay a fine of UZS 9,610,500 (approximately \$3000). The charges stemmed from his May 2014 article in which he reported that several citizens had seen the government demolish their houses without offering adequate compensation, which is contrary to Article 17 of the Uzbek Law on protection of private property and of owners' rights. Yanyshv was found guilty of violating criminal code Article 165 (Engagement in activities without a license and other permits) and Article 184 (Production or storage, for the purpose of distribution, of materials which represent a threat to public safety and to social order).

Online and print media are required to register with the Uzbek Agency for Press and Information (UzAPI). Legislation does not call for a complicated procedure or burdensome conditions for media registration. But UzAPI officials, guided by the recommendations of the National Security Service, may refuse registration without substantiated reasons. The actual process of obtaining registration also applies to broadcast media outlets, which must pass a licensing procedure at the State Committee of Communication, Information, and Telecommunication Technologies. In February 2015, the committee transitioned into a separate Ministry for Development of Information Technologies and Communications—a move seen by local rights activists and journalists as an attempt to tighten media control and strengthen the government propaganda machine.

There are no economic barriers to registering as a media outlet; in fact, the government offers significant tax benefits

to media organizations. Also, in 2012 lawmakers reduced by 50 percent the registration fee for all media outlets in the country. Despite this simplification of the registration system, the procedure for obtaining a media license remains murky.

Uzbekistan officially banned censorship in 2002. However, censorship is imposed unofficially by the National Security Service and is still practiced widely. Editorial self-censorship has emerged since the media law revisions of 2007, two years after bloody events in eastern Andijan city. The revised law assigns media outlets a higher level of responsibility to ensure the objectivity of the content produced.

The government's foreign affairs, socio-economic policy, and President Karimov's personality and his family are still among topics considered taboo. Throughout 2014, foreign media reported actively on the conflict involving the president's daughters, grandchildren, and wife, but the issue was never discussed publicly in Uzbekistan.

In December 2013, authorities suspended activities of two popular entertainment-oriented tabloids, *Darakchi* and *Sogdiana*. They are owned by Firdavs Abduholikov, a media mogul from Samarkand. He is also the former advisor to President Karimov on mass media and has close ties to Karimov's eldest daughter, Gulnara Karimova. The official reason for the tabloid suspensions was financial fraud that Abduholikov allegedly committed. But many observers claimed that the closures were part of a clamp down on associates of Karimova, who many saw as a potential successor to her father. However, she is now kept under house arrest for allegations of corruption.

Shortly following those suspensions, authorities shut down several television channels that Karimova and Abduholikov controlled, and the National Association of Electronic Media (NAESMI), headed by Abduholikov, stopped functioning. In January 2014, after charges against Abduholikov were partly dismissed, *Darakchi* and *Sogdiana* resumed their activities. The former still remains the most circulated weekly in Uzbekistan, with about 40,000 copies in Russian and about 120,000 copies in the Uzbek language.

Although the two tabloids are back in print, shutdowns have continued. In late December 2013, the Uzbek government terminated the analytical website Mezon.uz, due to allegations of tax fraud. Launched in 2012 with United Nations grant funds, Mezon.uz became quite popular in a short period of time, as it often covered vital social and economic problems. Several months before the closure, in September 2013, Mezon.uz received an award for the "Best Media Website of the Year." It was given the honor at the annual .Uz Domain Internet Festival, organized with support

of the State Committee of Communication, Information, and Telecommunication Technologies.

Olam.uz, a once-popular news site, was taken offline by authorities in 2013 and remains closed. It had been one of the top-visited news websites in Uzbekistan, actively working with its audiences by crowd-sourcing and interactively engaging readers. Its reports often criticized the work of Tashkent municipal services. No official statements were made in connection with the closure. But according to Radio Ozodlik, the Uzbek service of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL, which is also blocked in Uzbekistan), the website could have been closed in connection with the criminal cases that authorities have opened against its publishers. The Olam.uz domain name is still active, but the website only has a short notice stating that it is undergoing technical maintenance.

Founded in January 2005, uznews.net was an Uzbekistan-focused news website and one of a few outlets to carry articles and reports critical of the Uzbek government in three languages—Uzbek, Russian, and English. In November 2014, unidentified hackers attacked the computer and e-mail account of Galima Bukharbaeva, a prominent Uzbek journalist and uznews.net chief editor. The hackers publicized names of the website's anonymous contributing authors in Central Asia and circulated internal financial documents. Bukharbaeva, who has been in exile for years, has accused Uzbek security agents of the hacking and said it was directly related to the critical posts that the website has been providing. Local journalists and experts have speculated that the attack on the independent site was part of the government's plan to prepare a favorable media landscape for the presidential elections in March 2015. On December 20, 2014, after a month of suspension for "technical reasons," Uznews.net's editorial staff chose to take down the website permanently, in order to protect the dozens of writers whose identities were disclosed.

The Uzbek government reportedly has the most sophisticated censorship technology in the region, and that enables it to not only block entire websites, but also restrict access to individual pages while retaining access to other parts of a website. Internet censorship in Uzbekistan takes place mainly through the country's international Internet connection, which is administered by Uztelecom. This national communication company distributes international traffic to local private ISPs.

In 2014, media organizations whose websites are blocked in Uzbekistan continued to actively promote their content in new media platforms. Radio Ozodlik, for example, has been successful. Its social network Odnoklassniki.ru is the most popular in Uzbekistan and many other former Soviet countries, and has close to 300,000 members and at

least 100,000 monthly active users. According to Ozodlik Director Alisher Sidikov, its group on WhatsApp, the hugely popular mobile messaging app in Uzbekistan, has more than 15,000 users.

International media watchdogs, such as the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) and Reporters without Borders (RSF), include Uzbekistan in its list of the worst jailers of journalists in the world. According to RSF, at least 10 journalists were imprisoned in Uzbekistan in 2014. Six of the journalists were punished for human rights activism, and four were imprisoned for journalistic activities. The latter group includes Muhammad Bekjanov and Yusuf Ruzimuradov, both reporters of the opposition newspaper *Erk*, which Uzbek authorities closed. According to CPJ, Bekjanov and Ruzimuradov have been in prison since 1999—longer than any other reporters in the world. Bekjanov, brother of prominent exiled Uzbek opposition leader Muhammad Salih, was scheduled to be released in January 2012, but authorities sentenced him to an additional five years in prison for “violation of unspecified prison rules.” Last year, RSF awarded Bekjanov the annual Press Freedom Prize for 2013. The award was given to his family members, who are also in exile. In April 2014, in its annual Free the Press Campaign, the U.S. State Department voiced concern over the deteriorating health of Muhammad Bekjanov, and called upon the Uzbek government to provide him with urgent medical help.

Salijan Abdurakhmanov, known for his articles about corruption in law enforcement agencies, including traffic police, was imprisoned in June 2008 and given a 10-year sentence. The charge was drug possession, a popular method that the government uses to imprison opponents. The journalist denied possessing narcotics and said the police had planted them in his car. According to his defense lawyer Rustam Tulyaganov, the prosecution and trial process was marred with irregularities, and investigators failed to prove that the narcotics belonged to his client.

In 2013, Abdurakhmanov, who suffers from stomach ulcers, had to spend several weeks in prison hospital 64/18 (colloquially called Sangorod) in Tashkent. In April 2014, he was not allowed to see his son, who came to visit him in a prison in the southern city of Karshi. In May 2014, Abdurakhmanov’s family wrote a public letter to President Karimov to pardon the journalist due to his deteriorating health. The letter went unanswered. Later, in August 2014, the German Palm Foundation honored Salijan Abdurakhmanov with its press freedom award. The journalist was unable to attend the ceremony due to his imprisonment.

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Dilmurod Sayyid, the fourth journalist in prison for reporting, is serving a 12.5-year sentence after being jailed in 2009 for allegedly forging court papers and extorting \$10,000 from a local business owner. Even though a witness later withdrew her accusation, saying she had been coerced, the journalist was not released. Before the arrest and imprisonment, Sayyid reported for independent publications on officials’ abuses of farmers. As with other jailed journalists, Sayyid’s trial process was full of irregularities. He was convicted and sentenced in a closed-door proceeding in which his lawyer and family were not present.

In November 2009, Sayyid’s wife and 6-year-old daughter died in a car accident on their way to visit him in colony for prisoners with tuberculosis, a disease he contracted in jail. He also lost a third close family member—his mother, who had long been sick—while imprisoned. Administrators did not inform him of his mother’s death until a month later. According to his brother, Obidzhon Saidov, who visited him in prison in October 2014, Sayyid was given yet another official reprimand and his health condition has not improved. Each year, the journalist is deprived of the right for an annual amnesty due to penalties and reprimands from the prison administration. The Washington-based advocacy group Freedom Now introduced a complaint to the UN Human Rights Committee in March 2012, contesting Sayyid’s imprisonment and calling for his release. The complaint is still pending.

On November 24, 2014, eight U.S. senators sent a public letter to President Karimov, calling on him to release all the imprisoned journalists on humanitarian grounds. However, the senators’ letter remains unanswered.

In 2014, no violent crimes were committed against media members related to their professional activities. Usually,

authorities influence journalists using other measures, such as administrative and criminal prosecution.

The trend of posting critical pieces, which online outlets started several years ago, continued in 2014 despite widespread censorship and rigid governmental control. Internet outlets have become comparatively free in posting materials critical of the Uzbekistan authorities, albeit the municipal, ministry, and departmental levels. However, some local journalists have said that they consider this “an appearance of improvement of freedom of speech, controlled by the government.” All of the so-called revelations and open online media were established by direct orders from the National Security Service.

According to Uzbek law, defamation is a criminal offense, and the corresponding article in the criminal code has been used repeatedly against journalists in the past. The law was not invoked in any 2014 journalist prosecutions, however.

Access to information of public importance is still very limited. Such information is not even published on the National Security Service website or any other sites under control of government agencies. For example, Uzbekistan’s cross-border issues involving the National Security Service are often ignored by Uzbek media, while they are covered widely by neighboring countries. Uzbek media do not cover the skirmishes and shootouts that often happen on the Uzbek-Kyrgyz border when border guards from both sides shoot people for trespassing.

Government bodies at lower levels refuse to provide information deemed important to the public, due to orders from higher authorities. Upper-level government agencies consider most information to be state secrets or “inappropriate for disclosure.”

On paper, there are no legal restrictions on the use of various sources of information. But in practice, media outlets are forced not to use alternative sources. State-owned media in particular face these restrictions. However, several online media, such as Kun.uz, Daryo.uz, and Podrobno.uz, actively use popular social networks as sources of information, publishing critical posts authored by netizens from Uzbekistan.

Uzbek laws do not restrict entry into the journalism profession. University-level journalism education is only required for chief editors and deputy editors. Journalism practice is protected legally by the state, but in reality, the government controls journalists: given its heavy-handedness, sanctioned media will only employ those journalists who understand the limits of the practice in the Uzbekistan context.

OBJECTIVE 2: PROFESSIONAL JOURNALISM

Uzbekistan Objective Score: 0.94

On June 27, 2014, during a mass media day in Uzbekistan, President Karimov gave his annual greeting to journalists. He boasted about the growing quality of media and professionalism of journalists, especially among Internet media, saying that more than 600 media workers from Uzbekistan improved their skills in foreign countries in recent years. However, local independent journalists have noted that professional incompetence among media workers, especially young journalists, is still high. The score in this objective is slightly higher this year compared with last year; overall this objective’s score is buoyed by indicator 7, which covers employment of modern equipment by the media (although it should be noted that even this indicator scores only moderately higher than a 1.00).

The ruling regime heavily scrutinizes the media, which prevents the Uzbek journalism sphere from achieving professional standards of quality. In addition, media schools in the country still offer outdated programs that have not changed much since the fall of the Soviet Union.

Uzbekistan’s local online media outlets, registered with the government-controlled national domain .uz, widely use social networking websites such as Facebook and Twitter as a sources of information. This has allowed them to expand scope and post material consisting mainly of critiques of local governments, administrations, and municipal organizations. However, if critical posts affect higher authorities, the mainstream media, at best, limit themselves

JOURNALISM MEETS PROFESSIONAL STANDARDS OF QUALITY.

PROFESSIONAL JOURNALISM INDICATORS:

- > Reporting is fair, objective, and well-sourced.
- > Journalists follow recognized and accepted ethical standards.
- > Journalists and editors do not practice self-censorship.
- > Journalists cover key events and issues.
- > Pay levels for journalists and other media professionals are sufficiently high to discourage corruption and retain qualified personnel within the media profession.
- > Entertainment programming does not eclipse news and information programming.
- > Technical facilities and equipment for gathering, producing, and distributing news are modern and efficient.
- > Quality niche reporting and programming exist (investigative, economics/business, local, political).

to reprinting these posts. In many cases, the mainstream media question the veracity of posts in social networks, taking the side of the government agencies and officials.

Uzbek media outlets rarely have their own codes of ethics. Even the exception outlets that have codes violate generally accepted standards. The most common violations among Uzbek journalists are favoritism, plagiarism, and the use of a single source of information. The blogging community, which is still small in a nation of 30 million, does not have a specialized code of ethics. Rather, bloggers are driven by a general understanding of what authorities do and do not allow.

Uzbek media do not yet make distinctions between news reporting and advertorials, so readers may not know that certain material is paid content. Often online media publish press releases of business companies, especially leading mobile communication operators, without changing a single word, yet editors do not label this content as advertising.

In addition, authorities use the local media regularly to publish obviously false information and to slander foreign journalists and independent media. In one example from August 2013, Fergana-area station Ruhsor TV aired a show entitled *Rotten Person* two days in a row. The program criticized Prague-based Radio Ozodlik journalist and editor Farruh Yusupov, who was born in Fergana. Experts assessed the move as psychological pressure exerted on his relatives living in Uzbekistan.

Mass media in Uzbekistan, regardless of ownership, are still very prone to self-censorship. The motives are the same as always—prosecution, deprivation of registration or license, or termination of the outlet under different pretexts. The government abolished state censorship in 2002, but at the same time made editors responsible for published information. Editors, fearing the prospect of being persecuted or prosecuted, endorse and sometimes force journalist self-censoring.

Protests against the government happen only rarely in Uzbekistan and are never mentioned in local media. In November 2014, several dozen women in the Bogot district of the Khorezm region organized a small rally in front of the local administration building to express their disagreement with the cuts in gas and electricity supply. Foreign media organizations that focus on Uzbekistan reported on the story, but local media ignored it.

Almost without exception, Uzbek media pay very little attention to or totally disregard news about protests in other countries. Developments in Ukraine, especially the culmination of anti-government protests in Kiev, have been a top international story since 2013, but the Uzbek media do

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not discuss the topic. Uzbek media consumers learn about the Ukraine situation mainly from Russian-government-controlled news channels, such as Channel One (Perviy Kanal). This channel is the Kremlin's main propaganda machine in Russia and all former Soviet countries.

On the other hand, 2014 saw the continuation of local media's desire to cover social problems, such as bad roads and poor municipal services. The reporting did not fundamentally change the situation, however, as it remains taboo to criticize top-level authorities or discuss the state of the economy, unemployment, or rising prices.

Usually, journalists at government-owned television channels earn more than their colleagues in the private media sector. Especially in the regions, reporters and editors are not remunerated sufficiently to meet their living expenses. As a result, many journalists from privately owned media often have to work for several organizations. Poor pay is also a main reason that many journalists accept bribes eagerly for positive coverage of the activities of NGOs or businesses. Bribery is particularly common among journalists at popular newspapers such as *Pravda Vostoka* and *Narodnoe Slovo/ Xalq So'zi* and at television channels.

Given the monotony of news programming on television and radio channels, which always cast the activities of the government in a positive light, entertainment content is very popular among Uzbeks and given more air time.

The technical equipment of most media outlets does not meet modern standards. As noted in the previous year's report, only state-owned media, and private media in the capital or large cities, have decent facilities and technical equipment for production. Most media organizations in the regions use obsolete technology and lack modern tools for multimedia production. Although poor technical equipment hinders media efficiency and quality journalism, it is much less an impediment than the numerous administrative restrictions that the government places on media.

Uzbekistan does not have many specialized publications. As noted previously, Mezon.uz, which published news and

analytical articles on the economic sector, was closed by the authorities in January 2014 after being in operation less than a year. Just before the shutdown, the website was given the “Best Media Website of Year 2013” award at the annual .UZ Domain Internet Festival.

In the view of local journalists, Mezon.uz practiced less self-censorship and its materials were higher quality than other Uzbek media. Formally, the government closed the website due to tax fraud, but experts noted that real reason was its liberal interpretation of the socio-economic changes in the country.

Uzbekistan has several sports newspapers and websites that mostly report on football and are hugely popular among Uzbeks. In 2014, stadion.uz reported that the Uzbek football league is rampant with fraudulent activity, including match fixing. The charges were supported by statements of international bookmakers, but the Uzbekistan Professional Football League, which regulates the domestic championship among football clubs, ignored the allegations. Stadion.uz publicly announced its boycott of Uzbek football and posted information on it on September 27. But the notice was taken down the next day, without any explanation.

OBJECTIVE 3: PLURALITY OF NEWS

Uzbekistan Objective Score: 0.70

In June 2014, as part of a national media day, President Karimov presented official statistics on the number of registered media outlets in the country. Those statistics showed that Uzbekistan has more than 1,400 print and electronic media, about 80 percent of which are non-governmental. While the emergence of new online media sources is seen as a positive development, the plurality of information they deliver is questionable. Reflecting this situation, the score for Objective 3 remains largely unchanged from 2014.

Only a few dozen Internet outlets can be classified as serious media focused on covering the socio-political and economic issues of the country. The vast majority of registered outlets produce entertainment or propaganda. Increasingly, social media such as Facebook and Twitter are gaining ground as a source of aggregated information shared by users. For example, traffic accidents in Tashkent were reported quite often in 2014, via the 20,000-member “Drivers of Tashkent” Facebook group.

In November 2014, NAESMI launched the television channel MY5 (*Mening Yurtim*, or My Country). Reportedly, NAESMI started the channel in response to the closing of channels

NTT and TV-Markaz, which had been controlled by Gulnara Karimova. MY5 offers mostly entertainment programming and broadcasts popular films, youth programs, and Uzbek pop music. As NAESMI regulates free exchange of content between its members, it transmits the media content that MY5 produces to several regional television channels.

Despite the large number of media sources, many Uzbeks—especially residents of the capital and major cities—prefer Russian television channels and websites as main sources of information. Partly due to this, the government has been trying to restrict access to external Russian news sources, which the Kremlin often uses to force its agenda. Karimov’s government has long banned importation of some Russian print media, such as *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*. In October 2014, cable companies in Tashkent stopped transmission of the Russian-language MIR TV. The channel operates in the territories of the Commonwealth of Independent States, an association of sovereign countries formed after the collapse of the Soviet Union. As independent experts have noted, MIR has become increasingly pro-Kremlin and nostalgic of the Soviet period. On several occasions in 2014, President Karimov declared publicly that Uzbekistan will not be part of any coalitions resembling the Soviet Union.

Uzbek-language websites of international broadcasters became permanently inaccessible in Uzbekistan in 2005. The broadcasters include BBC (bbc.co.uk/uzbek), RFE/RL (Ozodlik.org), and Voice of America (amerikaovozi.com). The authorities have also blacklisted websites with Uzbek-related content on socio-political and human rights. Among those sites are Fegananews.com, CA-News (Centrasia.ru), Harakat.net,

MULTIPLE NEWS SOURCES PROVIDE CITIZENS WITH RELIABLE, OBJECTIVE NEWS.

PLURALITY OF NEWS SOURCES INDICATORS:

- > Plurality of public and private news sources (e.g., print, broadcast, Internet, mobile) exist and offer multiple viewpoints.
- > Citizens’ access to domestic or international media is not restricted by law, economics, or other means.
- > State or public media reflect the views of the political spectrum, are nonpartisan, and serve the public interest.
- > Independent news agencies gather and distribute news for media outlets.
- > Private media produce their own news.
- > Transparency of media ownership allows consumers to judge the objectivity of news; media ownership is not concentrated in a few conglomerates.
- > A broad spectrum of social interests are reflected and represented in the media, including minority-language information sources
- > The media provide news coverage and information about local, national, and international issues.

and UzMetronom.com. The government also blocks Internet pages of opposition groups in exile and major international human rights organizations.

Authorities have yet to ban satellite television antennas, but they do prohibit access to foreign Internet service providers via satellite. Starting in October 2014, the government-controlled Uztelecom blocked VoIP traffic in the country for several weeks. As a result, mobile communication apps such as Skype, WhatsApp, Telegram, Viber, and Mail.ru Agent became partially non-functional. Users could exchange only text messages, while voice and multimedia content was impossible to send or receive.

Unidentified hackers frequently attack websites that publish what Uzbek authorities consider undesirable information. On the other hand, news website Uz24.uz, largely believed to be run by the National Security Service of Uzbekistan, published all the confidential information that hackers retrieved in the November 2014 cyber-attack on Uznews.net editor Galima Bukharbaeva. Moreover, the website called for prosecution of Uznews.net's anonymous journalists for not paying taxes on their salaries.

Local journalists noted that the financial position of the only non-governmental news agency, Turkistan Press, deteriorated in the last year, on the eve of parliamentary and presidential elections. As online media became more critical in 2014, and television and press outlets were subjected to even stronger control and censorship, the range of themes for Turkistan Press narrowed and made its products less marketable.

Private media do produce their own news, but the only difference from the official news media is their less formal language. In many cases, private outlets such as Daryo.uz and Kun.uz translate content from popular Russian websites but sometimes fail to give any credit to the original source.

Most media organizations that publish information of public interest are state-owned. However, consumers care little about media ownership, given that private and state-owned media alike reflect one point of view. Online media, as in case of Uz24.uz, often do not publish information about their owners, which is a violation of media law.

All state media are disseminated in Uzbek and Russian languages. Uzbekistan has different print media in minority languages, such as Korean, Tajik, and Karakalpak. These publications are focused on their specific audiences. Although the authorities continually violate the rights of some minority groups, especially ethnic Tajiks, these newspapers never reflect on such issues.

Socio-political media devote their content primarily to the country as a whole, but they also publish information from the regions. Regional media also pay more attention to events of national importance, based on materials that the state news agency Uza provides. This is partly due to a deficit of journalists in the field to create original, regional content.

OBJECTIVE 4: BUSINESS MANAGEMENT

Uzbekistan Objective Score: 0.87

Despite the large number of registered media, only a few media companies in Uzbekistan can be self-sustainable. Most media are totally dependent either on state subsidies or funding from private owners. This objective scored slightly higher this year compared with 2014 mostly thanks to a better evaluation of indicator 7 (audience measurement).

Among print socio-political media, only state-owned newspapers such as *Nardonoe Slovo/Halk Suzi* and *Pravda Vostoka* earn enough to fully support operations. They achieve sustainability largely due to the fact that public institution employees at all levels and people receiving state benefits (pensioners, disabled persons) compulsorily subscribe to these newspapers. In addition, given their high profiles and large circulations, these papers have always enjoyed an abundance of advertising.

For several years, *Novosti Uzbekistana* was the country's only private, self-sustainable socio-political weekly. It was suspended for several months beginning in 2013, allegedly for promoting terrorism. Authorities revoked the

MEDIA ARE WELL-MANAGED ENTERPRISES, ALLOWING EDITORIAL INDEPENDENCE.

BUSINESS MANAGEMENT INDICATORS:

- > Media outlets operate as efficient and self-sustaining enterprises.
- > Media receive revenue from a multitude of sources.
- > Advertising agencies and related industries support an advertising market.
- > Advertising revenue as a percentage of total revenue is in line with accepted standards.
- > Government subsidies and advertising are distributed fairly, governed by law, and neither subvert editorial independence nor distort the market.
- > Market research is used to formulate strategic plans, enhance advertising revenue, and tailor the product to the needs and interests of the audience.
- > Broadcast ratings, circulation figures, and Internet statistics are reliably and independently produced.

newspaper's license after it published a photo showing the Andijan city administration building and several armed men. The photo was taken during the bloody events of May 2005, when the Karimov government shot dead hundreds of demonstrators. The newspaper received its license back after Chief Editor Bakhodir Yuldashev left. In November 2014 it ceased publishing its print edition, most likely due to economic constraints. The news outlet now functions only online as Nuz.uz; once known for its mildly critical stance, *Novosoti Uzbekistana* is now posting content that does not pose a serious challenge to the ruling regime.

Online advertising in Uzbekistan is still developing. Only a few news websites in the .uz domain zone, such as sports media Uff.uz and Stadion.uz (one of the most visited websites in Uzbekistan), are self-sustaining. Entertainment print and broadcast media, such as the newspaper *Darakchi* and regional radio station Vodiy Sadosi, have sizable audiences and are mostly self-sustaining.

Despite the relatively large amount of ads in media, advertisers cannot in any way affect editorial policy, which is under tight governmental control. Even newspapers *Narodnoe Slovo/Halk Suzi* and *Pravda Vostoka*, which are fully self-supporting and financially independent mainly through advertising, are not editorially independent.

The advertising market outside of the Internet sector is well developed. According to official numbers, Uzbekistan has more than 500 advertising agencies, half of which are based in Tashkent. Television is still the leading medium, representing at least 50 percent of the market, with print, radio, and outdoor advertising trailing behind. The capital has a multitude of advertising agencies, although television's market share is comparatively lower than in other cities. In the regions, the advertising market is less developed than the capital, as companies seek to advertise in the central press and on national television channels, which have larger audiences.

Large businesses, especially mobile communication operators, regularly advertise in state media, thus achieving two goals—reaching big audiences and showing loyalty to the regime. Private media that have sizable audiences also receive advertising from large companies, but their main clientele are small and medium businesses since they have much cheaper rates than state media.

In April 2014, authorities launched an investigation into allegations of corruption at the National Television and Radio Company of Uzbekistan. As reported by Radio Ozodlik, several company employees, including top management, were involved in cases of bribery when accepting advertising. According to the report, one minute of airtime in state television channels ranged between

\$2000 and \$6000, depending on channel and time. The state received only half of this money, with the other half going into the pockets of corrupt company officials.

Media market research on audience demographics and preferences is conducted in Uzbekistan, but media organizations do not finance the research. The only local, non-governmental professional research company is Ijtimoiy Fikr (Social Opinion), which reportedly conducted six surveys during 2014. The surveys analyzed media coverage of the issues of human trafficking, judicial reform, and implementation of the state program "Year of the Healthy Child." Usually, international organizations and the government sponsor this type of media research. Increasingly, online media have been researching their audiences using free methods, mainly Google Analytics and Yandex Metrica.

Uzbek authorities do not exert overt financial pressure on the media; rather, media organizations are usually controlled through administrative measures. Media that carry out the government's information campaigns enjoy subsidies more than other, less loyal media.

Media experts have argued that most new online media outlets were opened with government grants, in order to artificially diversify the media landscape before the presidential elections in March 2015.

OBJECTIVE 5: SUPPORTING INSTITUTIONS

Uzbekistan Objective Score: 0.73

Since all independent media support groups were forced to leave Uzbekistan starting in 2005, today the country has only few local organizations that represent the interests of media organizations, owners, and editors. Little has changed in this regard and the score remains nearly identical to last year.

As mentioned previously, the support group NAESMI was suspended for several months in 2013 but resumed its activities after charges against its founder Firdavs Abduholikov were partly dismissed in early 2014. NAESMI's main function is to provide grants for renewing technical equipment, and to organize free information exchanges and news reporting between member broadcast companies. Given its close ties with the government, NAESMI also controls and even determines the editorial policy of its member outlets.

All media company staff members belong to the Creative Union of Journalists. However, the union does not promote its members' legal interests or offer protection from

media owners or government agencies. The union's Oltin Kalam (Golden Pen), awarded annually to journalists in the country, also does not promote independent or critically minded journalism. The union gives the awards to journalists and media outlets that are extremely loyal to the current government.

According to local independent journalists, the Tashkent-based International In-service Journalists Training Center is the only NGO in Uzbekistan that provides services to journalists. However, the center does not defend free speech and is absolutely loyal to the government, due to fears that any violation of the state's policies would result in closure of the center.

The Public Fund for the Support and Development of Print Media and News Agencies periodically organizes seminars and master classes for journalists from the capital and the regions. In July 2014, the organization held a training workshop for employees of central and regional media outlets on electoral law and reporting, ahead of the 2015 parliamentary and presidential elections. Despite the training, only independent media from outside Uzbekistan reported on the gross violations of law, electoral fraud, and fabrication of results that occurred in the December 2014 parliamentary elections.

Journalism schools within the country's universities include the Uzbek State World Languages University and the National University of Uzbekistan. Both schools are in crisis due to a shortage of qualified professors. Their training programs are outdated and, as in Soviet times, are aimed at preparing propagandists rather than journalists. At the

SUPPORTING INSTITUTIONS FUNCTION IN THE PROFESSIONAL INTERESTS OF INDEPENDENT MEDIA.

SUPPORTING INSTITUTIONS INDICATORS:

- > Trade associations represent the interests of media owners and managers and provide member services.
- > Professional associations work to protect journalists' rights and promote quality journalism.
- > NGOs support free speech and independent media.
- > Quality journalism degree programs exist providing substantial practical experience.
- > Short-term training and in-service training institutions and programs allow journalists to upgrade skills or acquire new skills.
- > Sources of media equipment, newsprint, and printing facilities are apolitical, not monopolized, and not restricted.
- > Channels of media distribution (kiosks, transmitters, cable, Internet, mobile) are apolitical, not monopolized, and not restricted.
- > Information and communication technology infrastructure sufficiently meets the needs of media and citizens.

university level, students are taught to self-censor, so as graduates they are not equipped with the modern skills and techniques of qualified journalists.

The newsprint market is monopolized and divided among several players, with one of them a state-owned business. The same companies have a monopoly on print product imports. Owners of independent radio and television stations can acquire their own equipment freely.

All means of mass information—radio frequency transmitters and Internet and cellular communications—are either owned or tightly controlled by the state. This additional lever of influence makes the media even more dependent on the government and does not promote freedom of expression or opinion.

According to official statistics, the number of Internet users in Uzbekistan has passed 10 million, while 20 million people in the country (2 out of 3 people) use mobile phones. In December 2014, Uztelecom, which has a monopoly on communication, reported its fourth price drop for the year. It cut prices for international bandwidth for Internet service providers to a new rate of \$276.27 per Mbps. Moreover, according to the company, total international bandwidth in 2014 reached 11.8 Gb/s—a 34 percent increase since 2013.

Despite the officially stated increase in international bandwidth, actual Internet speed in Uzbekistan still remains the lowest in Central Asia. According to Netindex.com, an organization that anonymously collects broadband speed and quality test results from all over the world, Uzbekistan is placed 175 among 196 countries checked for Internet download speeds. (Netindex ranked neighboring Kazakhstan 58, Tajikistan 61, and Kyrgyzstan 82; it collected no data on Turkmenistan.)

Russian communications operator MTS returned to the Uzbekistan mobile market in December 2014, but did not significantly change mobile Internet quality. The Uzbek branch of MTS, which reportedly had more than 9 million subscribers at the time, was closed in July 2012 after allegations of massive financial fraud.

List of Panel Participants

IREX did not conduct an in-country panel discussion because of Uzbekistan's repressive environment. This chapter represents desk research, interviews, and the results from questionnaires filled out by several people familiar with the state of media in the country.