

**MEDIA**

**SUSTAINABILITY**

**INDEX**

**2005**



**IREX**

ON MULTIPLE FRONTS, THE UZBEK GOVERNMENT ATTEMPTED TO SILENCE INDEPENDENT VOICES THAT TRIED TO PROVIDE DETAILS ABOUT THE ANDIJAN EVENTS. IN THIS WAY, WHATEVER MODICUM OF HOPE THE MEDIA SECTOR IN UZBEKISTAN MIGHT HAVE HAD FOR GROWTH LARGELY DISAPPEARED WITH THE EVENTS OF MAY 13.

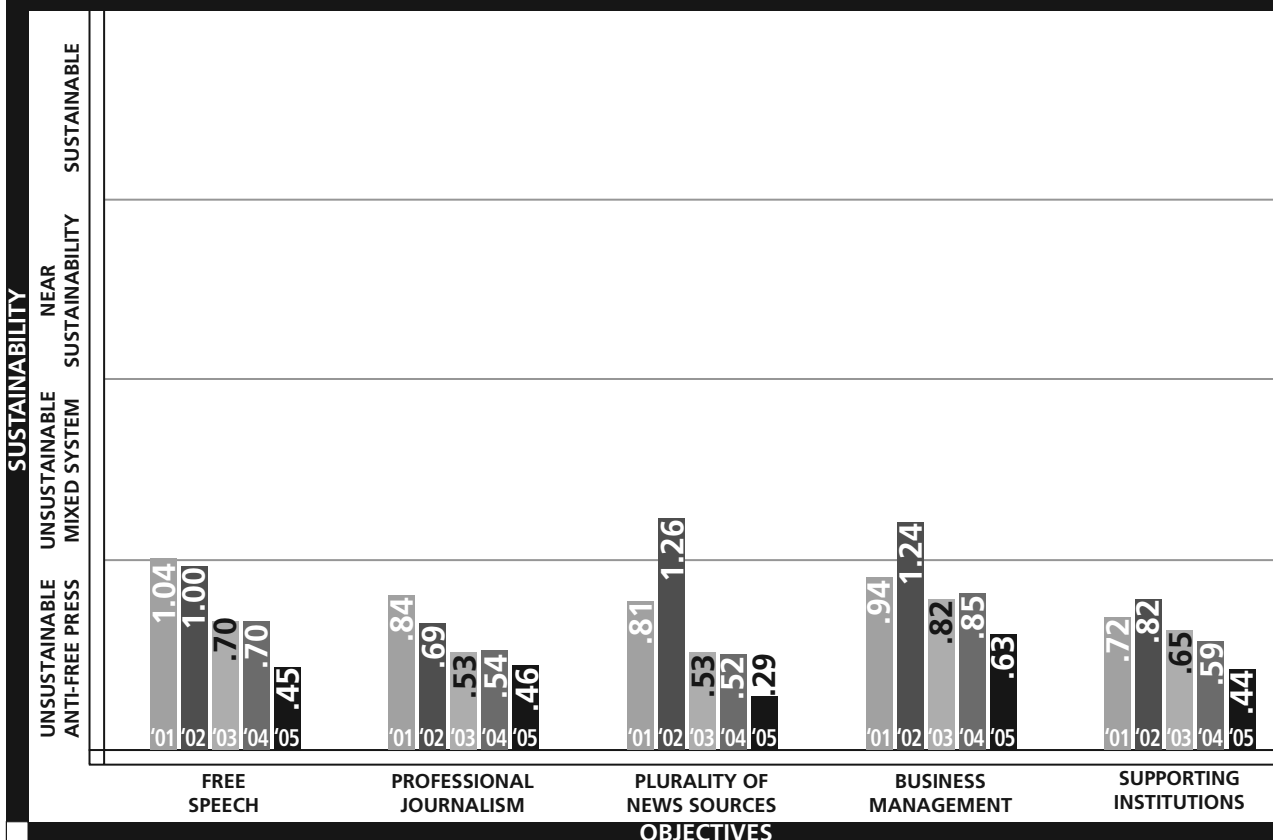


The defining moment for the state of democracy in Uzbekistan during 2005 took place in the city of Andijan on May 13. On that day, Uzbek military and security forces fired on thousands of civilians who had gathered to protest poverty, unemployment, and political repression as well as the trial of 23 local businessmen who had been arrested in 2004 for “religious extremism.” According to government estimates, a maximum of 175 people died. However, other reports from eyewitnesses placed the number at about 750. The incident further isolated the government of President Islam Karimov from the West and further curtailed the already limited freedoms of Uzbek citizens, businesses, and media.

The shootings in Andijan escalated the repression that has characterized Karimov’s consolidation of power for more than a decade. Although Uzbekistan joined international organizations such as the United Nations and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) following independence in 1991, the Karimov regime began cracking down on civil freedoms in 1992 after a conflict with Tajikistan. The government justified this and subsequent actions as being in the interests of national security. For example, after bombings in 1999 in Tashkent, Karimov’s administration jailed thousands suspected of religious extremism. After September 11, 2001, Karimov gained the favor of the United States by pledging to join the fight against international terrorism and tried to use this relationship to justify his own repressive policies.

The Uzbek government refused an international investigation into the Andijan incident, despite widespread condemnation from Western countries and international organizations. For media, the killings meant a news blockade erected by a government that had accused the foreign media of “informational attacks” against Uzbekistan. Local journalists were threatened and attacked, and foreign correspondents were denied accreditation and forced to leave the country. International news channels were cancelled on cable television, and Internet sites were blocked. On multiple fronts, the Uzbek government attempted to silence independent

# MEDIA SUSTAINABILITY INDEX: UZBEKISTAN



**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.

voices that tried to provide details about the Andijan events. In this way, whatever modicum of hope the media sector in Uzbekistan might have had for growth largely disappeared with the events of May 13.

*Due to the repressive environment created by the Andijan incident, the Media Sustainability Index (MSI) panelists were unable to meet to discuss the state of media in Uzbekistan in 2005. Information for this chapter was collected from media professionals inside and outside of Uzbekistan through an e-mail survey, interviews, and extensive research. The names of those participating will not be published to protect their personal security. This chapter therefore provides a summary of the state of media in Uzbekistan.*

**OBJECTIVE 1: FREE SPEECH**

**Uzbekistan Objective Score: 0.45 / 4.00**

In some respects, legal norms governing the journalism profession in Uzbekistan seem to meet international standards. For example, the constitution guarantees freedom of speech and access to information. Additionally, several articles of the Uzbek Law on Defending the Professional Work of Journalists prohibit censorship, the confiscation of equipment, and the detention of journalists. However, before and after the Andijan incident in mid-2005, these laws were openly violated by the Uzbek government. Implementation of these laws failed at all levels, and the post-Andijan era left even less room for maneuvering for journalists seeking to report independently from the country.

Before May 13, 2005, foreign media such as the BBC and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty were among the few sources of information not controlled by the state. Local media were almost entirely controlled or directly influenced by the government. However, following Andijan, the Karimov administration accused foreign media of “informational attacks” and otherwise inciting the violence that took place. Whereas pressure and intimidation of journalists before the May shootings often went on behind the scenes, the Andijan events brought repressive currents to the surface. The list of freedom-of-speech offenses reads like a catalog of acts against the majority of foreign media operating in Uzbekistan. The OSCE documented many of these offenses, including the cancellation of CNN, BBC, and Deutsche Welle programming on cable television, the detention of Russian television channel REN-TV and Ukraine’s Fifth Channel reporters trying to enter Andijan, and an attack on a cameraman from Russia’s TVT at the Uzbek-Krygyz border, among many others.

The Committee to Protect Journalists noted the assault on Moscow-based Ferghana.ru website journalist Aleksei Volosevich. Volosevich, who witnessed and reported on the Andijan shootings, said he was knocked down and kicked by five men and then doused in paint. Meanwhile, anti-Semitic slogans were written on the walls near his apartment. An Uzbek media professional interviewed for this study described the government reaction as directing blame against the journalist. “The government reacted only to the anti-Semitism and not to the beating of the journalist. They declared that Uzbekistan is an inter-ethnic community and tried to avoid the topic of the beating. They even blamed Volosevich and said nobody beat him.”

Meanwhile, the court system continued to offer no respite for journalists. By law, freedom-of-speech violations can be appealed to the constitutional court, but judges are appointed by the president and corruption hinders appeals procedures. In the case of Nosir Zokirov, an RFE/RL journalist who was sentenced to six months in prison for insulting a representative of the Uzbek security service, the original proceedings

**Legal and social norms protect and promote free speech and access to public information.**

**FREE-SPEECH INDICATORS:**

- > Legal/social protections of free speech exist and are enforced.
- > Licensing of broadcast media is fair, competitive, and apolitical.
- > Market entry and tax structure for media are fair and comparable to other industries.
- > Crimes against journalists or media outlets are prosecuted vigorously, but occurrences of such crimes are rare.
- > State or public media do not receive preferential legal treatment, and law guarantees editorial independence.
- > Libel is a civil law issue; public officials are held to higher standards, and the offended party must prove falsity and malice.
- > Public information is easily accessible; right of access to information is equally enforced for all media and journalists.
- > Media outlets have unrestricted access to information; this is equally enforced for all media and journalists.
- > Entry into the journalism profession is free, and government imposes no licensing, restrictions, or special rights for journalists.

***“The government reacted only to the anti-Semitism and not to the beating of the journalist. They declared that Uzbekistan is an inter-ethnic community and tried to avoid the topic of the beating. They even blamed Volosevich and said nobody beat him,” said an Uzbek media professional.***

in August and the subsequent unsuccessful appeal were condemned by the international community as unfair show trials. According to RFE/RL, Zokirov was sentenced under Article 140 of the criminal code that criminalizes the slander of security forces. During the

Zokirov trial, prosecutors also threatened to charge the journalist with “insulting the president,” an offense also punishable under the criminal code in Uzbekistan.

Following the Andijan shootings, the judicial system became a forum for government attempts to brand the incident as an event engineered by the West with the direct assistance of the international media. During the trial of 15 people arrested for allegedly inciting the events that led to the shootings, the prosecutor’s office accused RFE/RL and other foreign media of “continuing (an) information war against Uzbekistan which was launched in connection with the Andijan events.” This announcement was accompanied by many articles in national and local papers that demonized the foreign press.

The media licensing process in Uzbekistan is completely controlled by the state. Beginning in 2004, the government required all media outlets to register or re-register each year to obtain a license. Many failed to gain or renew a license, as the authorities were able to weed out any station or publication that had opposed the state for any reason. Also in 2004, the National Association of Electronic Media (NAESMI) was founded by the government to regulate broadcast media. Membership in the association was required, or the local station risked political pressure and possible closure. The authorities were able to exploit these tactics in controlling the media largely because of the lack of democratic traditions and impulses among the Uzbekistani citizens. There was simply no established civil society that could advocate for free speech and no local nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to lobby for such causes, according to those surveyed. In many respects, the leftover Soviet-era ethos of prioritizing the group over the individual continued to hinder effective public mobilization for freedom of speech.

Media continue to have difficulty obtaining information from government sources. According to another Uzbek media professional, “It is very difficult to get information from the authorities. Forget about it. They never respond to your calls. They say it is not their responsibility to talk to media. They don’t know how to work with media.” This interviewee also pointed to a government initiative in which state journalists are presented to the public as “experts” on issues such as US-Uzbekistan relations. In this way, longtime state reporters can represent the interests of the government when other journalists are prevented from obtaining even the most basic information.

For those with access to the Internet, which is not many in Uzbekistan (about 492,000 out of nearly 27 million people), websites such as Arena ([www.freeuz.org](http://www.freeuz.org)) and Ferghana.ru are some of the very few nongovernment sources of information. Uzbekistanis are generally aware of their choices regarding these sources. For example, the OSCE noted that Ferghana.ru received about 45,000 hits on its website on May 13 alone. However, this site and other websites were blocked or experienced other technical difficulties following the Andijan incident.

Journalists are not restricted in studying journalism at universities or in applying for media jobs. Whereas accreditation was used as a tool to keep local journalists in line prior to Andijan, the government is currently using the visa accreditation process to prohibit foreign journalists from entering the country. The OSCE noted in its Report of Events in Andijan on June 15, 2005, that more than 30 journalists were waiting for accreditation from the Uzbekistani government.

## **OBJECTIVE 2: PROFESSIONAL JOURNALISM**

**Uzbekistan Objective Score: 0.46 / 4.00**

Even before the events of May 13, 2005, professional journalism in Uzbekistan suffered from the government control of information and the lack of skilled local reporters and managers. As a result, reporting produced by local media outlets regularly lacked balance and proper attributions. Alternative viewpoints were rare, mostly attempted by foreign-based media. Following Andijan, professional reporting practices slid even further as those attempting more professional and probing reporting were harassed, had to engage in self-censorship, or found their reporting hindered by their media outlets. State and local media became increasingly active as mouthpieces for government rhetoric. For example, these media were tools in the Karimov administration’s campaign to blame Western

## 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.
- > 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 exists (investigative, economics/business, local, political).

media for inciting violence and threatening the national security of the country. RFE/RL documents several examples, including UT-1, the main television channel, broadcasting a program blaming foreign media for biased and incomplete coverage of Andijan. Tashkent-based *Hurriyat* newspaper published an article reiterating the “informational attacks” by the international media following the “terrorist acts in Andijan.” Meanwhile, the Uzbek-language *Namangan Haqiqati* paper in Namangan printed articles directly questioning the validity of reporting by the BBC and RFE/RL. Journalists and media outlets were at risk if they did not toe the government line. For example, the OSCE noted that local journalist Dzhamil Karimov was fired for his coverage of Andijan, and local radio station Didor was shut down on the day of the violence.

Ethical codes devised by organizations such as NAESMI and the Samarkand Press Center were largely ignored before and after Andijan. In recent years, many journalists accepted bribes and gifts in exchange for favorable coverage or made-to-order reporting. After the Andijan killings, however, the government exploited such practices to support their campaign. For example, reports indicate that local journalists were offered money to gather information about foreign media correspondents.

Despite the legal prohibition of censorship, it still pervades the media sector in Uzbekistan. In addition

to an unofficial ban on specific topics and words (for example, those relating to corruption and poverty in Uzbekistan), any account of Andijan is closely scrutinized, particularly since no official account of the incident has been published or broadcast. Self-censorship, previously a way of life and means of self-preservation for journalists and editors, manifested itself differently following Andijan. While local media simply avoided all alternative coverage of political issues, even correspondents of international outlets have been cowed by relentless threats, intimidation, and attacks. An Uzbek media professional working for an international media outlet indicated in an interview that she has instructed her correspondents in Uzbekistan to avoid coverage of issues they feel might put them in danger, such as those related to Andijan.

Working under these pressures, journalists frequently do not properly cover key events and issues. In fact, political news that is not entirely flattering or at least nonthreatening to President Karimov is omitted. An interviewee noted that news coverage amounts to “10 minutes every hour that covers social issues, never politics or corruption. News starts with agricultural information or if Karimov is going somewhere. Potatoes are more important than Andijan or actual events.” Similarly, another respondent said that “there is no reporting on poverty because state-controlled media think that it has no news value to Uzbekistanis. They think it’s not important. They find no news value in unemployment, for example. And there has been very little coverage of the Asian bird flu, which is strange for an agrarian republic.”

Entertainment programming largely dominates news and information reporting. For this reason, Russian channels are popular. Other broadcasters focus entirely on sports or on selling airtime for advertising. Print media find it much more comfortable to print gossip about celebrities gathered from the Internet, along with fictional stories and parables. People are not accustomed to getting important information through the mainstream media. This creates a negative cycle that allows increasingly more entertainment programming on the airwaves.

Niche journalism is largely impossible in Uzbekistan, as it would strain already limited resources at outlets, require far more training than the media sector can provide, and risk treading on topics that the regime would oppose. Similarly, the technical facilities at most outlets are sadly outdated and in various stages of disrepair. Even at state media, equipment generally is of poor quality and seemingly ignored when government subsidies are distributed.

### OBJECTIVE 3: PLURALITY OF NEWS SOURCES

Uzbekistan Objective Score: 0.29 / 4.00

Although the number of “news” sources has increased significantly since independence in 1991, that does not mean that Uzbekistani citizens have access to more and better-quality information. In fact, the combination of government control of information and the overall poverty of the people limit access to even the filtered news offered on state television and radio. Furthermore, with more than 60 percent of the population concentrated in rural areas, distribution does not reach many of those outside of city centers. Most rural Uzbekistanis collect their only information via the radio, and any connection with the international media is attained via shortwave radio.

Even relatively credible news sources such as the Internet and cable television have their limitations. Reputable websites such as Arena and Ferghana.ru are popular among the estimated 2 percent of the population that use the Internet. Yet such sites can be blocked by the telecommunications carriers, as was the case following the Andijan crisis. Meanwhile, cable television is relatively inexpensive for some urban residents and provided by

private companies such as Kamalak. Through cable, people have access to 25 channels, including many Russian channels. Nevertheless, following Andijan, the government was able to pull foreign media such as the BBC off the cable network. In October 2005, after continued harassment by the authorities, the BBC announced the closure of its office in Tashkent and withdrew its staff from the country. This is one example of how citizens’ access to both domestic and international news is clearly more limited than in previous years.

State media are completely partisan and offer no alternative viewpoints. Exiled opposition parties such as Erk do produce their own newspapers abroad but can only smuggle small quantities into the country. Although these papers are not banned by law, people reading them could face punitive measures. One account provided by an Uzbek media professional interviewed for this study reveals how a man who was caught with banned local music and Erk newspapers was thrown in prison by the authorities. Since Andijan, private media outlets have been increasingly co-opted by the government, and if the outlets resist, they risk license suspension or closure.

The four news agencies in Uzbekistan remain under the direct control of the state.

#### Multiple news sources provide citizens with reliable and objective news.

##### PLURALITY OF NEWS SOURCES INDICATORS:

- > A plurality of affordable public and private news sources (e.g., print, broadcast, Internet) exists.
- > Citizens’ access to domestic or international media is not restricted.
- > State or public media reflect the views of the entire political spectrum, are nonpartisan, and serve the public interest.
- > Independent news agencies gather and distribute news for print and broadcast media.
- > Independent broadcast media produce their own news programs.
- > Transparency of media ownership allows consumers to judge 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.

### OBJECTIVE 4: BUSINESS MANAGEMENT

Uzbekistan Objective Score: 0.63 / 4.00

The business environment in Uzbekistan cannot support a private-sector news media, even if the government would allow independent private media. In fact, without government subsidies, most news media in the country would not survive. Even the tabloids, previously the only profitable media, are now falling on hard times. *Darakchi*, for example, was a sensationalist paper that had relatively high circulation numbers in 2004. In 2005, however, the owner was forced to flee to the United States due to government pressure and threats from organized crime groups. Chirchik TV, the leading non-Uzbek-language television station, had its license revoked because the owner refused to join the government-sponsored industry association, NAEMSI.

Some media outlets derive income from international organizations and corporate sponsors as well as advertising. However, the pool of available funds from international donors continued to shrink rapidly as organizations such as Internews were forced to close their Uzbekistan offices. The Institute for War and Peace Reporting also had to withdraw its local representatives.