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# UZBEKISTAN

In 2015, Uzbekistan held its fourth presidential election since the collapse of the Soviet Union. The election was won by 77-year-old iron-fist President Islam Karimov, by overwhelming margins—as high as 90 percent of the popular vote. This election process yet again showed the extent to which freedom of speech is repressed and media organizations are censored in Uzbekistan. The government continues to suppress voices of independent journalists and exiled opposition groups.

Authorities keep denying constant criticism by international human rights organizations and media watchdogs, which were forced to leave Uzbekistan following the Andijan massacre in 2005. Yet local rights activists and independent journalists, facing systematic persecution, bravely report about gross rights violations, including the government’s forced labor policies and ongoing attack on all kinds of dissent.

Media laws are vague and have loopholes used against journalists—any reporter or editor can be held accountable for something that is not legally banned or restricted. Therefore, Uzbek media continue to avoid investigating the international large-scale corruption scandals involving president Karimov’s family.

More independent journalists and rights activists are leaving Uzbekistan for political reasons and finding asylum in Western countries. One of those journalists is Dmitriy Tikhonov, who was persecuted by the government for reporting on forced labor in state cotton plantations. In 2015, the Uzbek government released famous sports journalist Khairullo Khamidov, who was imprisoned for six years on religious extremism charges. Khamidov is attempting to return to sports journalism, but is no longer practicing the religious poetry that made him popular.

The government blocks many news websites. Although the Internet remains the least-controlled medium, in the past year authorities reportedly started employing sophisticated technologies for online surveillance.

Social media keep changing the way people access and discuss information. Independent media organizations, such as RFE/RL and BBC, continue using new Internet technologies, such as social networks and mobile messaging apps, to disseminate news to Uzbek audiences and crowdsource information.

*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

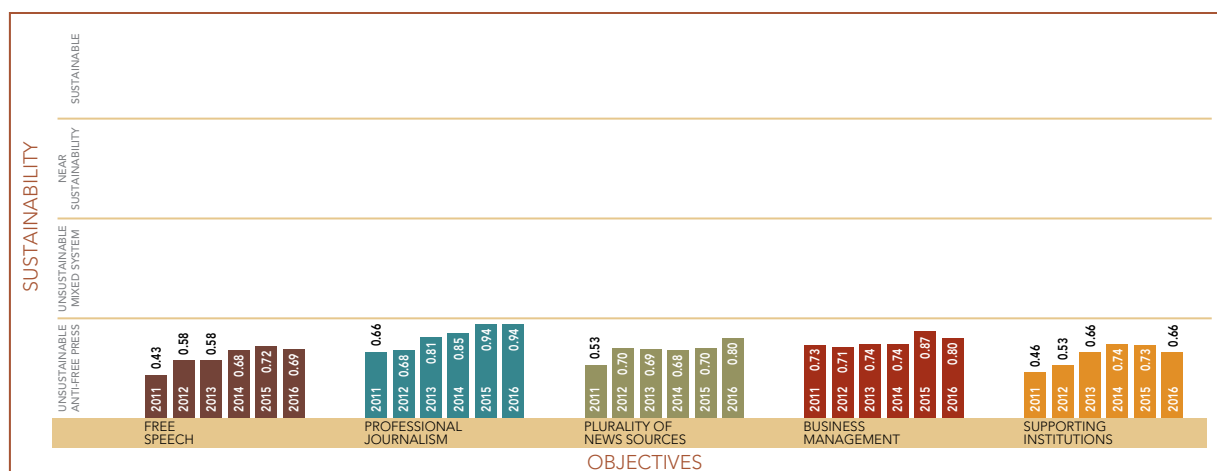
## GENERAL

- > Population: 29,199,942 (July 2015 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 (2014-Atlas): \$64.27 billion (World Bank Development Indicators, 2016)
- > GNI per capita (2014-PPP): \$5,830 (World Bank Development Indicators, 2016)
- > Literacy rate: 99.8%; male 99.8%, female 99.7% (2015 est., *CIA World Factbook*)
- > President or top authority: President Islam Karimov (since March 24, 1990)

## MEDIA-SPECIFIC

- > Number of active media outlets: Print media: 1,015; Radio Stations: 35; Television Stations: 66; 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
- > Annual advertising revenue in media sector: N/A
- > Internet usage: 11.8 million users (2014 est., *CIA World Factbook*)

## MEDIA SUSTAINABILITY INDEX: UZBEKISTAN



## MEDIA SUSTAINABILITY INDEX 2016: OVERALL AVERAGE SCORES



### CHANGE SINCE 2015

▲ (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\\_msiscorers.xls](http://www.irex.org/system/files/EE_msiscorers.xls)

## OBJECTIVE 1: FREEDOM OF SPEECH

Uzbekistan Objective Score: 0.69

President Karimov's policy against freedom of speech and pluralism has remained unchanged for the past several years, including 2015. The country still has a wide range of legal and social protections of free speech, but they are rarely or selectively enforced. Speaking at the annual media day on June 27, Karimov once again boasted about improving the legal system and adopting more laws that support freedom of expression in recent years. In practice, usually these norms are ignored.

Two articles in the Constitution of Uzbekistan protect freedom of speech. Article 67 is about inadmissibility of censorship, which was officially banned in 2002. Article 29 is about freedom of expression and information, and clearly states, "Everyone has the right to seek, receive, and disseminate any information." Freedom of media and expression are also guaranteed by laws "on mass media," "on principles and guarantees of freedom of information," and "on protection of professional activity of journalists."

Despite an abundance of laws governing media or ensuring its freedom, the legal system has loopholes that the regime uses often to suppress free speech. For instance, Article

### 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.

According to an Uzbek online security expert, who talked anonymously to [currenttime.tv](http://currenttime.tv) in January 2016, Uzbek security services started employing Italian-made spy software in June 2015.

29 of the constitution imposes restrictions on freedom of information. In accordance with this article, freedom of research and dissemination of information may be limited, if it is "directed against the existing constitutional system" and "in some other instances specified by law." The same article also states that "freedom of opinion and expression may be restricted by law on grounds of state or other secret," not explaining what is meant by "other secret." Thus, the main law of the country gives the authorities legal power to restrict or even prohibit expressing opinions and retrieving or disseminating information.

Freedom of information is also limited in Article 6 of the Law "on Mass Media." Using vague terms that could be interpreted broadly, the article allows for prosecution of media organizations for publishing and dissemination of materials that appeal to "violent change of the existing constitutional order" and "disclosure of state or other secrets protected by law." Article 6 also prohibits publishing information "assaulting honor and dignity of individuals," despite international organizations' assertion that such a clause has no place in a law specifically regulating the mass media.

The law "on Principles and Guarantees of Freedom of Information" repeats the provisions of the constitution and Law on Mass Media, but also introduces new restrictions. Article 4 allows freedom to information to be limited on the grounds of "protecting human rights and freedoms, the constitutional order, the moral values of society, spiritual, cultural, and scientific potential, the country's security." No other legal act specifies the criteria for determining when information is detrimental to these values.

Article 10 of the Law "on Mass Media" protects journalists' sources of information. It states explicitly that the media "have no right to disclose the name of the source who provided information, data, facts or evidence, as well as the author's name is signed under a pseudonym, without their written consent." In reality, this article only applies to the media as legal entities that are registered in Uzbekistan, not to individual journalists. There have been instances in which independent Uzbek journalists have been called to criminal cases as witnesses, and, under the threat of prosecution for

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refusing to testify, were forced to disclose their sources of information.

All media in Uzbekistan, which includes those described by the vague term “electronic information communication,” must register with the government. The Uzbek Agency for Press and Information manages licensing for print media and news agencies. Television and radio entities, including cable television, are required to register with the Ministry for the Development of Information Technologies and Communications, which transitioned from a state committee into a separate ministry in February 2015.

Legal provisions guarantee fairness and transparency of the licensing process, but reality contradicts the law. Registration may be rejected for numerous reasons, including political. Licensing can also be denied if the founder or one of the founders of the outlet is a foreign resident. Rejection causes are not made public and no data is released on the number of rejections.

Usually, authorities will explain a media organization closure by stating economic or administrative reasons. For instance, in late 2013, the Uzbek government terminated popular analytical website mezon.uz, due to allegations of tax fraud. A year before the closure, the website was named the “Best Media Website of the Year,” an honor given at the annual state-funded .Uz Domain Internet Festival.

According to local journalists, corruption is a constituent factor in registration and licensing of media in Uzbekistan. Bribes vary depending on the type of media. Television or radio registration might “cost” from \$5,000 to \$10,000, while a license for socio-political or economic print media ranges from \$500 to \$5,000. The costs are the same for advertisement or entertainment media.

All Uzbek media organizations are still subject to tight government control and can lose their licenses if their content “conflicts” with legislation. Media are monitored by the Expert Commission of the Center for Monitoring Mass Communications (CMMC), created under the Ministry of Development of Information Technologies and Communications. CMMC submits quarterly reports to the Cabinet of Ministers of Uzbekistan. The media registration authority is legally obliged to take into account CMMC recommendations when making a decision on the state registration and re-registration of mass media. Monitoring experts’ findings are also submitted to the Communications and Information Agency of Uzbekistan (UzACI), which is authorized to block the IP addresses of sites or individual pages.

International media watchdogs continued to criticize Uzbekistan in 2015 for its large-scale online censorship and tight control over the Internet. In January 2011, four months after its creation, CMMC took down the popular Internet forum arbuz.com, the only place where mostly western educated Uzbek youth could have actual debate on political matters. Active for more than 10 years, arbuz.com attracted the government’s attention first in 2005, when forum users discussed the government atrocities during the Andijan massacre. Five years later, several arbuz.com users in the capital, Tashkent, were arrested after using the site to organize internationally funded humanitarian aid to refugees in eastern Uzbekistan, who fled from neighboring Kyrgyzstan amid inter-ethnic clashes. They were accused of “extremism.” Following this incident, the forum’s U.S.-based administrator and owner warned users not to post on political or religious topics “for their own security.” Several months later, the administrator took down the forum for the same reason.

Due to extensive government control, all media types operating within Uzbekistan tend to self-censor. Among taboo topics is coverage of the president’s family. Uzbek media have never reported about the international corruption case involving the president’s estranged daughter Gulnara. She is under house arrest in Tashkent after being accused of accepting about \$1 billion as a bribe from Scandinavian and Russian telecommunications companies operating in Uzbekistan. Uzbek media are also silent about the multi-million-dollar assets in the U.S. allegedly belonging to Lola Karimova-Tillayeva, the president’s younger daughter and Uzbekistan’s Permanent Delegate to UNESCO. These and other controversial topics are usually covered by the Uzbek services of BBC and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, and other independent Uzbek websites that operate from abroad.

One of the bodies that oversees the Internet is the Ministry for the Development of Information Technologies and Communications. Established in February 2015, the ministry’s mandate is “to counteract the negative influence of Internet to worldview and of the population, especially young people.”

Rumors that Karimov’s regime is employing advanced technologies for monitoring and surveillance of Internet proved true in 2015. In early July, the Milan-based Hacking Team (HT), a company that sells online spying tools to governments worldwide, confirmed that Uzbekistan spent more than half a million euro over recent years to buy its remote control software (RCS). According to findings of Kaspersky Lab, RCS allows government security agencies to

secretly capture data stored on computers and smartphones even if it has never been digitally communicated. Moreover, the system can record Skype calls and intercept audio/video streams, emails, instant messages, and passwords typed into a web browser.

Furthermore, HT's 400GB internal data leaked online shows that in 2014, Uzbek security services trained its four IT officers in HT's Milan headquarters. Hackers published their names and email exchanges with HT and even passport details.

According to an Uzbek online security expert, who talked anonymously to currenttime.tv in January 2016, Uzbek security services started employing Italian-made spy software in June 2015. Suddenly at that time, the quality of Skype-calls, file exchanges in messengers Viber and Telegram, and other Internet services deteriorated in the country. This was discussed widely in public group chats on WhatsApp, Telegram, and all social networks popular in Uzbekistan. The government-run company Uztelecom, which has a monopoly in providing digital connection, stated its first response two months later. It explained that the slow Internet was due to "maintenance works on some channels of communication" and promised to fix the issue in one month. Since then Uztelecom has made three such promises, the last being in early January 2016, when it informed Uzbek Internet users that the connection would remain weak for another two months. Uztelecom never explained what type of maintenance is being carried out.

The tax structure for media companies is quite fair. In 2012, media in general, and print media in particular, received rather significant tax benefits. Their single tax rate was reduced from 6 to 5 percent. Media organizations were exempted from income tax and several other mandatory payments for the following five years. Distributors of other media products, such as books, are exempt from VAT and social taxes.

In addition, in November 2012, the government reduced by half the registration fee for all media outlets. The highest registration fee is \$700, for television, radio, and news agencies. Registration for print media is about \$575; for print media intended mainly for children, adolescents, persons with disabilities, or educational, cultural and educational purposes, the fee is \$115. The fee is \$25 for informational websites.

Independent journalists are always leaving Uzbekistan to find asylum in Western countries, and 2015 was not an exception. With few independent reporters left and many of their foreign colleagues not allowed to enter the country, media workers in Uzbekistan are commonly victims of crimes. Authorities usually suppress them with threats of criminal prosecution for libel. If crimes against journalists

happen, law enforcement agencies do not investigate them. Local independent journalists expressed the belief that crimes against them are likely organized by the state.

As noted previously, Dmitriy Tikhonov is one of the journalists and rights activists that recently had to leave Uzbekistan due to pressures. In April 2015, he was beaten by unknown attackers in Angren city, not far from Tashkent. Tikhonov immediately reported the incident to local police officers, but assailants were not found. He later insisted that it was not a robbery; attackers did not take his two smartphones or his money.

In September, police detained Tikhonov for several hours for documenting teachers and other state employees in Angren being sent to the cotton fields. In October, police opened a criminal case against him, accusing him of "hooliganism." Several days later, while he was away, his house burned down. After the fire was extinguished, he could not find his computer hard drives—not even their remains. In February 2016, he contacted his colleagues in Europe to inform them that he left Uzbekistan.

International media watchdogs, such as the Committee to Protect Journalists and Reporters without Borders (RSF), include Uzbekistan on their lists of the world's worst jailers of journalists. RSF reported in 2014 that at least 10 journalists are kept in prisons of Uzbekistan. One of them, described above, is famous Uzbek sports journalist Khairullo Khamidov, who was freed in February 2015. He was jailed in 2010 on religious extremism charges. He is well known across Uzbekistan for his religious poems and extremely popular Islamic radio program *Kholislik Sari (Voice of Impartiality)*, aired on the semi-privately owned Radio Navruz, in addition to his work as a sports commentator.

Media legislation does not give specific preferences to public media. Private media *de jure* have the same rights and opportunities to cover the work of government agencies as state or government media. However, in practice, private media have difficulty obtaining accreditation with government bodies, especially parliament.

Chief editors of state print media, such as newspapers *Pravda Vostoka* and *Khalk Suzi*, and the state news agency Uza are appointed through the approval of the National Security Council under the president. The same council performs the functions of a censor for these media.

Media that carry out the government's information campaigns enjoy state subsidies more than other media. Moreover, state media receive additional support in distribution of advertising. Authorities encourage major advertisers to place advertisements in state media.

The existing criminal responsibility for libel and insult remains a potential threat to journalists. The CMMC Expert Commission, the authority on mass communication, enlists Criminal Code Article 139 on libel to charge independent journalists that report on taboo social issues or criticize the government. The article defines libel as “dissemination of false, defamatory fabrications against another person,” which means that libel is only possible against a specific individual, rather than a group. Despite this, CMMC often accuses Uzbek journalists of defaming the people of Uzbekistan. In such cases, it does not name victims, but vaguely explains that the nation suffers. Over the past few years, CMMC has charged several journalists, including prominent photojournalist Umida Akhmedova and independent reporters Vladimir Berezovsky and Abdumalk Boboev.

Although Uzbek legislation declares the freedom and accessibility of information and legally bounds state agencies to be transparent, authorities strictly limit access to information of public importance. Journalists cannot access information on state budget development, government spending, or other taboo subjects.

State agencies’ refusal to provide information is often based on the grounds of “protecting human rights and freedoms, the constitutional order, moral values of society, spiritual, cultural and scientific potential, [and] ensuring security of the country,” as provided in Article 4 of the law “on Principles and Freedom of Information.” According to local independent journalists, access is also difficult because officials usually fear issuing information to media without the permission of their superiors, even if the requested information is not above their levels of responsibility.

Uzbek journalists are also restricted from obtaining and disseminating information via international sources. The country has blocked a number of foreign news websites, which has earned Uzbekistan the label of “Enemy of the Internet” by RSF. The government also applies restrictions to some Russian state television channels. Their retransmission is prohibited in Uzbekistan, and some experts see this as a counteraction to Russian propaganda.

Journalists have to be very careful when getting information from even available foreign sources. At the same time, state television channels, when using foreign media footage, often do not comply with copyright and fail to mention the source of the information.

No license is required to practice journalism. Laws do not stipulate that a journalist has an appropriate professional education. Restrictions apply solely to the positions of chief

editors —only a person with higher journalistic education can be appointed to these positions. However, in practice, this rule is often disregarded.

In 2014, the government amended the Law on Information, and officially equated bloggers with journalists and categorized blogs as media outlets. Now Uzbek bloggers bear the same responsibility for accuracy of information as professional journalists. However, they do not enjoy the same media rights, such as the accreditation with state authorities that is required in order to cover government events.

## OBJECTIVE 2: PROFESSIONAL JOURNALISM

Uzbekistan Objective Score: 0.94

Amid the government’s total control over media, the practice of professional journalism remains poor in Uzbekistan. The majority of skilled and independent journalists have left the country. Those who have replaced them have little to no real knowledge of reporting. In recent years, the Tashkent government has closed western-funded NGOs that offered professional training programs on international standards to local reporters. Together with declining quality of state-funded journalism schools, these changes have worsened reporting in Uzbekistan.

Some local journalists had another viewpoint on this. They said that the journalistic community in Uzbekistan still has many well-trained journalists, especially at the state-run television channels. However, due to censorship and

### 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).

pressure from chief editors, they are not allowed to display their skills.

The most notable difference between Uzbek journalists at public and private media and their colleagues that write for Western and independent media is the variety and type of sources they use in reporting. Journalists at state media have better access to government sources than journalists of private or Western outlets. However, the editorial style of state media, mostly resembling Soviet-era reporting, does not allow them to use multiple or opposing sources. Reporters for private media have less access to official information, but they are not so constrained in the choice of sources. Still, though, they cannot give voice to civil society, opposition groups, or human rights defenders.

Independent and Western media reporters, accredited by the Foreign Ministry in Uzbekistan, also have limited access to the government, but enjoy the most freedom in choice of information sources and have more opportunities to strike a balance. However, they also tend to be careful when reporting on pressing topics in order not to lose their accreditation.

The Union of Journalists of Uzbekistan and the National Association of Electronic Media (NAESMI) have their own codes of ethics that reflect international standards. However, they exist only formally and do not have much effect on the work of Uzbek mass media.

Journalists eagerly accept bribes (cash and gifts) in exchange for favorable coverage, but only when reporting on individuals, smaller government agencies, private businesses, or farms. Bribes are not the reason for the positive stories of the government or the lack of coverage of controversial issues.

Plagiarism is very common in Uzbekistan media. The vast majority of local media do not refer to original sources, especially if they are located outside the country. Many popular Uzbek-language news websites, such as Kun.uz and Daryo.uz, rarely create their own material when reporting about world news. They translate text from Russian websites and publish it as their own.

Self-censorship has become rampant since 2007, when the government revised the Mass Media Law. The new regulations make owners, editors, and journalists from both state-supported and private media responsible for the content of what is printed and broadcast. Media members self-censor out of fear of pressure, persecution, or losing a job. Accredited reporters of foreign media also have to censor themselves, although to a much lesser degree,

In July 2015, Olim Toshboyev, director of the television channel Uzbekistan, was reportedly fired for not covering the president's visits to regions on time.

because of the threat of losing accreditation. Thus, Uzbek media keep silent on many socially significant events.

A striking example of this in 2015 was the media reaction to the demolition of the monument in Angren city commemorating soldiers that died in World War II. The act caused fierce debate in social networks, but only a few independent media, such as the Uzbek service of RFE/RL, fergananeews.com, and asiaterre.info (all blocked in Uzbekistan), reported the incident.

Local media also did not report on demonstrations against the electricity and gas outages in several parts of the country. And no outlets reported on the court trial of an Uzbek national in Sweden, who was sentenced to 18 years and later to life in prison for the assassination attempt of an Uzbek *imam* living as a political refugee in Scandinavia. Uzbek opposition groups, whose members now reside in different parts of the Western world, recently attempted to organize their own "alternative" presidential elections on the Internet—but this story also went unnoticed by the media in country.

Journalist wages remain low, which forces most journalists to work for several media outlets at the same time, and accept gifts from individuals and organizations interested in buying coverage. Employees of the main state television channel Uzbekistan have slightly higher wages than average, but still not enough to prevent corruption.

At Tashkent media, salaries average \$200-\$300 per month, which is barely enough to make ends meet. Journalists get paid bonuses if they also work as advertising agents. Entry-level salaries are even lower, so young promising journalists do not stay long in the profession and seek other sources of income.

The state-owned daily *Khalk Suzi/Narodnoe Slovo* also offers above-average wages to its employees. The staff of its Russian-language edition receive even higher salaries, given its higher circulation and expensive advertising. The magazine *Economic Review*, which sheds light on economic issues under less censorship, is published with support from the UN Development Program in Uzbekistan and pays higher-than-average wages to its staff.



State media cannot always report quickly on government activities. State agencies, including the Security Council, require following a long process of agreeing with the supplied information. In July 2015, Olim Toshboyev, director of the television channel Uzbekistan, was reportedly fired for not covering the president's visits to regions on time.

Private media respond quicker, but to events of national importance. Events such as elections (at any level); large-scale natural disasters, especially those with the loss of life; and negotiations between country leaders and foreign partners are covered in private media only after the main state mass media publish or broadcast the official position of authorities.

Entertainment content continues to dominate news and information programming on public and private television channels. Although there is a visible downward trend in entertainment programs, information content is not increasing; propagandistic programs are replacing the entertainment shows.

The state print media usually do not publish entertainment content. They mostly cover similar official information: stories about successful farmers and private entrepreneurs, and discussions on morality and love of country. Private print media, in contrast, focus more on entertainment topics.

Most public and private media in Uzbekistan have outdated equipment, but that does not significantly affect the quality of their productions. For example, most photographers use their own professional cameras since their organizations cannot afford to buy high-quality equipment.

Local journalists note that the main obstacle to the qualitative development of mass media is not technical equipment, but political conditions.

The Uzbek media sphere has only a few examples of niche journalism. They include *Economic Review*; the magazine UzInfoCOM, published by the Ministry for the Development of Information and Communication Technologies; and the environmental blog *sreda.uz*, which publishes investigative reports on ecological issues.

The genre of investigative journalism has practically ceased to exist in Uzbekistan, due to the media's inability to publish investigation results under the current political regime. Only foreign and independent media report their investigations on topics such as institutional corruption or persecution of devout Muslims and representatives of opposition movements. What state television channels try to portray as investigative reporting on those topics is just propaganda prepared with the help of government security agencies.

Some local journalists noted that development of investigative journalism in Uzbekistan is hindered not only by the political regime, but by journalists' lack of professionalism and by the excessive time and resources it requires.

### OBJECTIVE 3: PLURALITY OF NEWS

Uzbekistan Objective Score: 0.80

Uzbekistan has a variety of public sources of information—a fact that authorities like to push when speaking about media diversity in the country. According to President Karimov, in 2015 Uzbekistan had more than 1400 media outlets—3.6 times more than when the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991. Among them are 66 television channels and 34 radio stations, and more than 1,000 print and 300 online media, which the government claims are mostly privately owned.

Official figures indicate that currently 54 percent of the population of Uzbekistan has access to digital television. Last year the government announced its plans to install 84 new high-power transmitters to increase the digital television signal across the country.

NAESMI unites 24 private television and radio channels and regulates free exchange of content between them. Most stations offer entertainment programming, with their

### 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.

geographical coverage limited to one region. The members' audiences usually do not overlap.

Despite the increasing number of public information sources, plurality of news in the country remains poor. Almost all news outlets express the official view and never challenge the government's actions. The presidential elections of 2015 showed that even print media published by political parties do not represent different, conflicting standpoints. During the entire campaign, they all promoted views very similar to the president's Liberal Democratic Party. The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe's post-election report confirmed this and stated that the Uzbek poll lacked genuine opposition.

Last year saw a big increase in the use of mobile technologies, by both active and blocked websites, in disseminating information. Since many Uzbek netizens are using the messaging app Telegram, popular information websites have created Telegram bots and channels to spread their information among mobile users.

In his February 2016 speech on Uzbek youth, aired on prime-time news in all state television channels, President Karimov again argued about the uselessness of blocking the Internet. However, websites offering content critical of the government, such as People's Movement of Uzbekistan, Voice of America, Eurasianet, Ferghana News, Centrasia, AsiaTerra, and the Uzbek language services of RFE/RL and BBC continue to be blocked in the country.

To make online censorship easier, the government banned independent sources of Internet traffic coming to the country, including satellite in 2011. The ban made Uztelecom into a monopoly in Internet service provision. Yet, the Internet remains the only place where information consumers in Uzbekistan can enjoy variety of content. This is largely because news websites blocked in Uzbekistan continue using online technologies to curb censorship and reach their target audience. Uzbek services of RFE/RL (known locally as Ozodlik) and BBC are active on all popular social networks, including Facebook, Twitter and Odnoklassniki. For instance, Ozodlik has more than 200,000 "likes" on its Facebook page, and more than 400,000 members in its Odnoklassniki group—record numbers for Uzbek media. Ozodlik also uses the mobile messaging apps Telegram and WhatsApp for crowdsourcing and feedback.

Continuous blocking of websites has made many Uzbek Internet users knowledgeable in configuring VPN channels and suing proxy-servers and anonymizers that help bypass censorship. Uzbek media experts say there is an unofficial ban on retransmission of a number of foreign television

There were reports in 2015 that local authorities in Tashkent forced residents to dismantle satellite dishes from walls and roofs of apartment blocks. This move was explained as returning a cleaner aesthetic view to the buildings in the capital city.

channels, including BBC, CNN, Deutsche Welle, Al Jazeera, Russia's NTV, Ren, and others. Their websites are also inaccessible in Uzbekistan.

To access foreign (especially Russian) television channels, many people in Uzbekistan use satellite dishes. There were reports in 2015 that local authorities in Tashkent forced residents to dismantle satellite dishes from walls and roofs of apartment blocks. This move was explained as returning a cleaner aesthetic view to the buildings in the capital city.

The quality of Skype calls in Uzbekistan remains very low since June 2015, which is widely believed to be caused by government efforts to control the Internet. However, some media experts suggest that Uztelecom does this intentionally to boost its declining revenue from international calls.

Power outages are very frequent outside Tashkent, even in regional centers. The situation gets even worse in rural areas, where electricity is available only for few hours a day. With no cable Internet and low-quality mobile networks, people in rural areas receive information mostly from government-controlled radio and television channels.

Regarding programming by state media, the authorities determine the editorial policy of state media, including those founded by the Parliament. Despite legal guarantees that mass media have editorial independence, state media cannot express a real independent opinion. Therefore, their materials on socially important topics are always biased, presenting no alternative viewpoints. By their nature, these materials are state-funded propaganda and cannot be called journalism. This can also be applied to private media. The only difference—independent media sometimes offer materials that raise particular problems at the level of city or region.

The political regime is hostile to any opposition, and actively fights any attempts by opposition groups that fled the country to reach an Uzbek audience. Currently, four political parties have representatives in the Parliament, but this

does not equal a pluralism of political views. The role of parliamentary opposition is given to the People's Democratic Party, which does not challenge positions of the ruling party of liberal democrats.

Uzbekistan has three news agencies: The National News Agency (UzA), under the Cabinet of Ministers; Jahon, under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs; and the private information agency Turkistan Press. None of them have an independent information policy. UzA and Turkistan Press offer paid services that are used mostly by foreign diplomatic services. When covering government-related issues, private media (especially news websites) rely almost entirely on information provided by the public media and state press agencies.

Consumers are poorly informed about media ownership. There is a stereotype in Uzbekistan that all non-entertainment media are state-owned, primarily due to the identical information that most media outlets present.

Uzbekistan is the only country in the post-Soviet region that has kept criminal prosecution for homosexuality. This topic is considered taboo, and media avoid covering issues of sexual minorities. For instance, Uzbek media did not report on a transvestite being beaten by police in Tashkent, a video of which was widely spread on the Internet in December 2015.

Uzbekistan has several print media in languages of ethnic minorities, but their numbers have been decreasing steadily, mostly due to funding difficulties. One of the most popular is *Ovozi Tojik (Voice of Tajiks)*, founded in 1924 and supported by the Parliament and the Cabinet of Ministers. The paper is also subject to tight control and never covers the problems ethnic groups face, such as closure of schools and under-representation both at local and central authorities.

Overall, mass media in Uzbekistan have a very selective approach in covering events of domestic or international significance. For example, national media outlets barely covered the unrest in Ukraine, the Arab Spring, or the ethnic conflict in Kyrgyzstan in 2010.

#### OBJECTIVE 4: BUSINESS MANAGEMENT

Uzbekistan Objective Score: 0.80

All kinds of media in Uzbekistan are in constant search for cost-effectiveness and greater profits. However, given the wide-scale corruption, outdated management styles, economic crisis, and political situation, only a few media organizations manage to be self-sustainable. Most media depend completely on subsidies from either the government or private owners, which renders media editorially dependent on the interests of their sponsors.

Financial problems are also causing private socio-political outlets (like the weekly *Novosti Uzbekistana* or *News of Uzbekistan*) to leave print and go online, as it requires fewer expenses. Nevertheless, this is not a viable solution yet, since the online advertising market in Uzbekistan is just emerging. The majority of advertisers still prefer television, radio, and print media. Therefore, even the most popular news websites in Uzbekistan are not fully self-sustainable and survive on government funding, grants from international organizations, or direct subsidies from their owners.

Blogging in Uzbekistan is not so much of a commercial venture as a voluntary activity. The Uzbek blogosphere has several interesting blogs, but they have very narrow followings. Some Uzbek bloggers receive small grants from local funds or foreign embassies in the country. Bloggers are careful when choosing topics.

The advertising market in a country of 30 million enjoys diversity of clients. The largest advertisers are gas and oil production companies, GM-Uzbekistan motor company, mobile communication companies, and Uzbek airlines and banks. They often buy advertising in state-owned newspapers and television channels, which is not always prudent in terms of marketing, but shows their loyalty to the government.

Most of the media in Uzbekistan have more than one advertiser, and none of them can influence editorial policy as strongly or effectively as the state. Even the primary state newspapers *Narodnoe Slovo/Khalk Suzi* and *Pravda Vostoka*, which are financially self-sustainable, are not editorially independent from the government.

#### 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.

Local media are in a much worse situation, because they rarely receive funding from the central government, and the financial capacities of local authorities are severely limited. The advertising market is booming in Tashkent; in the regions it is developed to a lesser degree.

State-owned regional media largely survive due to forced subscriptions by employees of subsidized organizations, such as government agencies and educational institutions. As one independent Uzbek media outlet reported in 2015, schoolchildren and especially pensioners are required to subscribe to local newspapers.

The law regulating advertising puts clear limits on the print space and airtime allocated to advertising: not more than 10 percent of broadcast time, and not more than 40 percent of column space. Media are also obliged to allocate 5 percent of advertising space or airtime for public service announcements.

Currently the most expensive advertising is on state television channels Uzbekistan and Yoshlar, which have the highest geographical coverage in the country. For example, one minute of primetime on Yoshlar can cost \$4,400. However, as local journalists have indicated, it is impossible to trace where this money is going, as these media are not financially transparent.

In 2014, authorities launched an investigation into allegations of corruption at the National Television and Radio Company of Uzbekistan. As reported by broadcaster Ozodlik, several company employees, including top management, were involved in cases of bribery when accepting advertising. According to the report, the state received only half of the revenue from advertisements, with the other half going into the pockets of company officials.

Authorities do not need to use any financial means of pressure on media, as administrative resources are usually enough. Private media can be easily closed for criticizing the government, which has already happened several times in the past. In case of state media, authorities change management teams.

In the past, international organizations, such as Internews, offered business management training for Uzbek media and supported market research studies. However, NGOs were forced to leave the country after criticizing the government's actions during the Andijan events of 2005, when state forces gunned down hundreds of unarmed demonstrators.

Media market research on audience demographics and preferences is rarely conducted in Uzbekistan, and media organizations usually do not finance the research. The only local, non-governmental professional research company

is Ijtimoiy Fikr (Social Opinion), which did no public media analysis in 2015. With regard to metrics, popular local online media refer to Google Analytics and Yandex Metrika. They often showcase their statistics to attract advertisers.

## OBJECTIVE 5: SUPPORTING INSTITUTIONS

Uzbekistan Objective Score: 0.66

Uzbekistan does not have many institutions that support professional interests of media or journalists. All journalists working in Uzbek media organizations are members of the Union of Journalists, and pay monthly contributions automatically deducted from their salaries. However, the union does not offer its members any form of protection or support, besides organizing an annual professional competition called *Oltin Qalam* (Golden Pen) to award the most loyal journalists.

Moreover, union members are often part of expert groups that are formed to consider court charges against journalists. In the past few years, these groups' decisions led to the conviction of journalists Umida Akhmedova, Vladimir Berezovsky, Elena Bondar, Victor Krymzalov, and others.

In 2005, following the Andijan events, the government cracked down on all organizations that support independent journalism. The country is now left with no NGOs that truly represent interest of media and journalists or defend freedom of speech.

### 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.

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Journalism school programs in Uzbekistan are outdated and do not teach students how to write unbiased reports. Moreover, they do not offer sufficient practical journalistic experience. Even leading journalism schools do not have their own student newspapers, mostly due to financial issues. Part of the problem is solved by the enthusiasm of some teachers, who organize extracurricular workshops to give students more information about modern journalism.

Several groups offer short-term professional journalism training programs that are more technical in character. The groups include the National Television and Radio Company, NAESMI, Union of Journalists, and Public Fund for Support and Development of Print Media and News Agencies.

Independent journalists are invited to attend training courses on international standards that media development NGOs organize in neighboring countries such as Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. The U.S. Department of State, the Open Society Foundations, Internews, and the OSCE Academy in Bishkek usually sponsor the classes. However, participating journalists are often subject to harassment and are closely watched by the government. As a result, Uzbek journalists working for media registered in Uzbekistan, fearing persecution and problems at work, usually do not attend such courses.

There are no administrative restrictions on the import of equipment for printing and media. But several companies have monopolized the newsprint market, leading to high prices for paper. According to local journalists, the cost of paper rose after the state publishing and printing company stopped supplying paper.

Print media are distributed via subscriptions or kiosks and through companies such as Matbuot Tarqatuvchi that are loyal to the government. That company has branches in all regions of Uzbekistan and recently started offering online subscriptions to nearly 250 print media.

The government or members of circles close to President Karimov own all means of electronic media distribution—Internet, radio and television networks, transmitters, and cellular phone frequencies. In early 2016, Dutch mobile

communication company VimpelCom, which works under the brand Beeline in Uzbekistan, confirmed its involvement in large-scale corruption in the country. The world's sixth largest telecommunications company, VimpelCom is believed to have transferred millions of dollars to an offshore company belonging to president Karimov's daughter. The company had to pay a \$835 million settlement to U.S. and Dutch authorities.

Official statistics indicate that the number of Internet users in Uzbekistan passed 12 million in 2015, while 22 million people (out of a population of 30 million) use mobile phones. In the past year, the monopoly Uztelecom dropped prices for international bandwidth for Internet service providers. The new rate is \$157 per Mbps, compared to \$276 in 2014.

Broadband Internet plans with unlimited service are still expensive for the majority of Uzbeks. On the other hand, TAS-IX peering center that interconnects networks of private ISPs allows many Uzbek netizens cheap and fast access to locally hosted online resources. The National Television and Radio Company actively uses this peering network to deliver its content to online consumers.

Smartphones are now widespread. The number of mobile Internet users is also rising from year to year. Mobile communication companies operating in Uzbekistan have started offering 4G Internet connections, but only in big cities and for expensive prices. Most rural areas still do not have access to 3G networks.

Most of the traffic coming to online media in Uzbekistan is via mobile. Therefore, some market-oriented private news websites, such as gazeta.uz and kun.uz, have mobile-friendly designs and even mobile apps.

## 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.*