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UZBEKISTAN

The sudden death of Islam Karimov in September 2016, who had ruled Uzbekistan with his “iron fist” for more than a quarter of a century, threw the country into uncertainty. However, Karimov’s successor, 59-year-old Shavkat Mirziyoyev, pledged to continue his legacy; there is little doubt that the freedom of expression remains threatened.

There has not been any significant change regarding the freedom of expression and media in Uzbekistan for the past year. The ruling regime continues to control the information channels, blocking access to the few independent websites that are largely run from outside. Only a few independent journalists remain free in Uzbekistan today, but they are under the close watch of state security agencies. Many reporters who dared to criticize the actions of the government are either in prison or must live and work in exile. The authorities continue rejecting accreditation to foreign reporters—only loyal media are allowed to work in the country.

In February 2017, Uzbek journalist Muhammad Bekjon was released after nearly 18 years of imprisonment—the longest term served by any journalist. The brother of a prominent opposition member in exile, Bekjon was jailed in 1999 for attempting to overthrow the government—a charge he says was fabricated. Following Bekjon’s release, Uzbek authorities freed journalist Jamshid Karimov, the late president Islam Karimov’s nephew, who had been forcefully hospitalized at a psychiatric facility in 2012. Although release of media workers raises hopes, rights activists believe that until all prisoners of conscious are free, it is too early to speak about positive political changes in Uzbekistan.

Domestic media, still tightly controlled by the state, continue to practice self-censorship. There is zero coverage of corruption in government circles, human rights violations, gay rights abuses or forced labor in cotton plantations. The state company Uztelecom, which holds a monopoly over international Internet traffic, blocks all independent websites that are mostly run from abroad. Censored media are forced to reach their audience through social networks or messaging apps.

Due to rampant corruption in Uzbek media business and total state control, the country does not have an economic environment capable of fostering the development of independent media businesses.

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

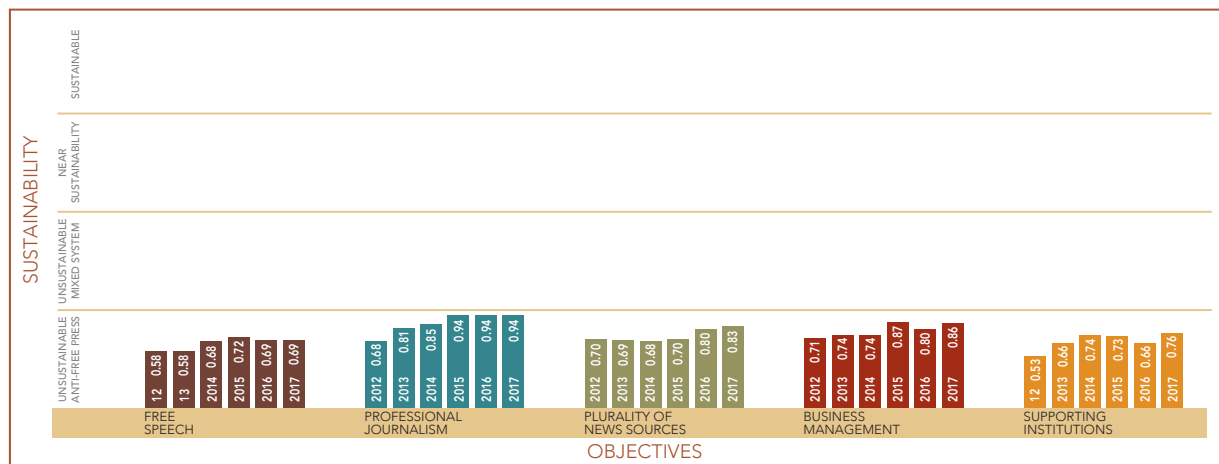
GENERAL

- > **Population:** 29,473,614 (July 2016 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 (2015-Atlas):** \$67.51 billion (World Bank Development Indicators, 2017)
- > **GNI per capita (2015-PPP):** \$6,200 (World Bank Development Indicators, 2017)
- > **Literacy rate:** 99.6%; male 99.7%, female 99.5% (2015 est., CIA World Factbook)
- > **President or top authority:** President Shavkat Mirziyoyev (since Sept. 8, 2016)

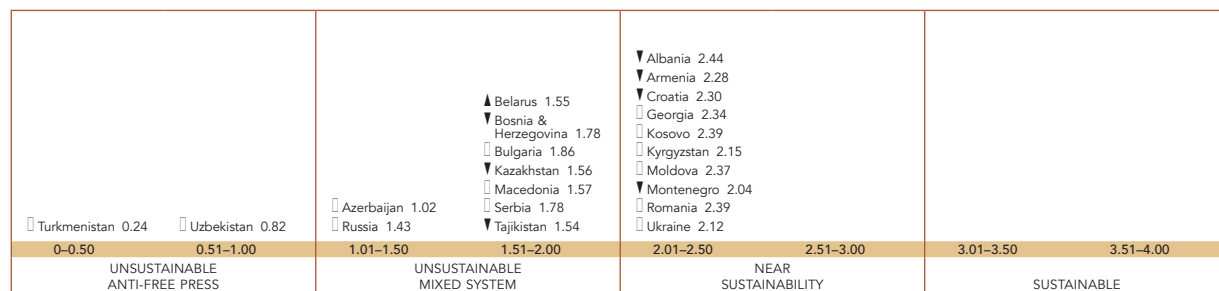
MEDIA-SPECIFIC

- > **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:** 12.498 million users (2015 est., CIA World Factbook)

MEDIA SUSTAINABILITY INDEX: UZBEKISTAN



MEDIA SUSTAINABILITY INDEX 2017: OVERALL AVERAGE SCORES



CHANGE SINCE 2016

▲ (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 <https://www.irex.org/msi>

OBJECTIVE 1: FREEDOM OF SPEECH

Uzbekistan Objective Score: 0.69

Uzbekistan's legislative framework regulating the media is broad, but not in line with international standards. In practice, the framework is either used ineffectively, or due to a few loopholes, manipulated to suppress the freedom of speech.

Article 67 of the Constitution of Uzbekistan has enshrined the inadmissibility of censorship since 2002, guaranteeing equal access to information for all citizens. Its Article 29 guarantees freedom of thought, speech, and convictions for everyone. At the same time, it 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." Yet, no legislative document explains what "other restrictions provided by law" and "state or other secret" means. These "exceptions" make it possible for officials to exert rigid control over the editorial policies of mass media and censor any information interpreted as critical of the regime.

In addition to the Constitution, Uzbekistan's legislative framework contains a set of regulations (the Law on the Mass Media, the Law on Protection of the Professional Activities of Journalists, and the Law on Principles and Guarantees of Freedom of Information) aimed at protecting the freedom of

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 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 offended parties 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.

speech, media, and journalists. The third law, which replaced the Law on Guarantees and Freedom of Access to Information, was adopted in the same year that censorship was banned. As in the Constitution of the country, these documents guarantee, and at the same time put restrictions on freedom of information.

For instance, Article 6 of the Law on Mass Media, entitled "Impermissibility of Mass Media Abuse," 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 the honor and dignity of individuals," despite international organizations' assertion that such a clause has no place in a law specifically regulating the mass media.

Another provision of the same article prohibits "preced[ing] results of a specific case before adoption of the decision by court or other ways to affect the court's introduction of its decision in the legal force."

Along with the Article 9 of the same law, which prohibits journalistic investigation to "influence the course of the investigative and judicial process," these clauses make it impossible for media to report on violations during the investigation of politically charged cases, where convictions are often based on fabricated evidence.

Law on Mass media also puts restrictions on the establishment of media organizations. Article 11 denies "persons who have a criminal record for an intentional crime" from founding a media outlet, despite the constitutional guarantee that all citizens of the country enjoy the same rights. Article 15 of the law bans registration of media if one of more of the founders are located outside of Uzbekistan. Many experts believe that this provision was specifically designed to deprive political opposition members, almost all of whom have found asylum abroad, of the right to start a media outlet in Uzbekistan.

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.

Uzbek journalists, interviewed by authors of this report, also feel intimidated by Article 46/1 added to the Code on Administrative Liability in September 2016, which prohibits "illegal collection or dissemination of information about a person's private life, constituting his personal or family secret, without his consent." It can lead to a substantial administrative fine or, for the second

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offense, jail up to six months. According to journalists, this new provision is directed against reporters who could disclose information about family of the Uzbek president and his allies, or on the sources of their earnings, their spending, and luxuries.

Journalists in Uzbekistan, who have been covertly working for foreign organizations for more than 10 years, doubt that country’s newly elected President Mirziyoyev will ease control over mass media. As prime minister, he signed a decree in February 2006 that prohibits the professional activities of foreign correspondents, as well as citizens of Uzbekistan and representatives of foreign media, who have not received accreditation in the Uzbek Foreign Ministry. This happened several months after the bloody Andijan events, when government troops gunned down hundreds of unarmed protestors. The events received wide international coverage due to foreign media organizations that operated in Uzbekistan until 2005.

In 2007, the same provision was introduced in the Law on Mass Media. This decision put an end to the careers of many journalists who worked for foreign media organizations—such as Reuters, Associated Press, France Press, Deutsche Welle, BBC, RFE/RL, Voice of America and others—forced to close their operations in Uzbekistan after reporting on the events in Andijan city. Since then, only reporters uncritical of the Uzbek government have received accreditation.

Today, in a country with a population of 31 million people there are only 31 accredited reporters, mainly from Russian, Chinese,

and Turkish media. Most of them are not based in Uzbekistan, and use their accreditation during trips to the Uzbek capital Tashkent accompanying political leaders of their countries.

Foreign journalists who do not have accreditation from the state are not allowed into the country, or they are soon expelled from Uzbekistan. In November 2016, authorities in Tashkent arrested and deported German reporter Edda Schlager, who traveled to Uzbekistan on a tourist visa to report on the situation in the country after Islam Karimov’s death. Later in November, correspondent of the Russian *Moskovsky Komsomolets*, Ekaterina Sazhneva, was deported from Uzbekistan for collecting information for future reports.

In addition, there have been reports about a “black list” for use by Uzbek officials with the names of foreign reporters who must not be allowed into the country. Since 2006, the authorities have deported at least eight journalists from the country.

Article 10 of the Law “on Mass Media” protects journalists’ sources of information. It states clearly that the media “have the right to disclose neither the name of the source who provided information, data, facts or evidence, nor an author’s name signed under a pseudonym, without their written consent.” However, there have been instances in which independent Uzbek journalists have been called to criminal cases as witnesses, and, under the threat of prosecution for refusing to testify, were forced to disclose their sources of information.

The provision of the Law on Protection of the Professional Activities of Journalists that ensures journalists’ right to be received by officials and be present in court hearings is constantly violated. Officials usually speak to reporters from state media, and journalists are rarely allowed inside courtrooms.

It must be noted that all legislative documents regulating media in Uzbekistan have a provision that if an international treaty signed by Uzbekistan stipulates rules that differ from those provided by any domestic laws, the rules of the international agreement take precedence. There are at least two agreements as such: the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (joined in 1991), and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (joined in 1995). Both documents ensure that everyone has the right to freedom of expression, which includes freedom to seek and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.

Registration and licensing is required for all media in Uzbekistan and is generally completed on an annual basis. Registering media organizations, publishing, and graphic design activity, as well as advertising agencies is carried out by the Uzbekistan Agency for Press and Information (UzAPI), which has a reputation of being corrupt. In August 2016, the National Security Service detained director of UzAPI Omonullo Yunusov

on suspicion of embezzlement. Appointed in 2013, he still heads the organization.

Television and radio entities, including cable television, are also required to be licensed by the Ministry for the Development of Information Technologies and Communications, which transitioned from a state committee into a separate ministry in February 2015.

Despite legal provisions that guarantee fairness and openness, the registration and licensing process of media are non-transparent and fully controlled by the state. As noted in the previous MSI studies, preference is generally given to state broadcasters for political reasons, and the private broadcasters that do receive licenses and operate freely often have ties to the government, the president's family, or political parties. Private broadcasters usually keep their political reporting within acceptable parameters, practice self-censorship, and focus on entertainment, social, and cultural news in an effort to keep their licenses.

The media registration authority is legally obliged to consider recommendations by the Center for Monitoring Mass Communications (CMMC), created under the Ministry of Development of Information Technologies and Communications, when deciding on the state registration and re-registration of mass media. According to some Uzbek journalists, CMMC is also in charge of making decision on blocking certain online media, as their findings are also submitted to the Communications and Information Agency of Uzbekistan, which is authorized to block webpages.

However, so far no media outlets have been officially closed due to losing their registration or license. Owners of media that have been shut down usually stay silent, hoping to re-open their entities again. They keep a low profile knowing that disclosing the reasons for closure may irrevocably ruin their relationship with authorities. Economic reasons, such as tax evasion or financial mishandling, are often cited as the reasons when media activities are terminated. For instance, in 2013 the news site *mezon.uz* and two popular entertainment-oriented tabloids (*Darakchi* and *Sogdiana*; both later re-opened) were closed, ostensibly for these reasons.

In 2016, the authorities closed the popular *12news.uz*, but as in the case of *Olam.uz*, which was terminated in 2013, no official reasons were given. As these websites never criticized the Uzbekistan government, rumors swirled around the journalism community that the owners of these websites could not pay the bribe demanded to extend their registration.

There is direct evidence of corruption surrounding entry into Uzbekistan's telecommunication market. Journalistic investigations carried out in Europe and the United States showed that Gulnara Karimova, eldest daughter of the late

Uzbek president, Islam Karimov, extorted several hundred million dollars from foreign telecommunication companies for permission to operate in Uzbekistan.

The media in general and print media in particular received significant tax breaks in 2012, including exemption from income tax and other mandatory payments. Printing and broadcast companies, operating as small businesses, were exempted from income tax and other mandatory payments for the next five years, and their single tax rate was reduced from six to five percent. The same year, registration fees for media organizations were cut in half.

As of February 2017, initial registration and re-registration fees for media organizations are \$300 for television, radio and news agencies, \$250 for print, and \$10 for online media. Blogs have been defined as media outlets since the amended media law in 2007, but so far there is no information as to whether or not Uzbek bloggers, who are heavily self-censored, have been asked to register.

Today most of the independent Uzbek media outlets that provide in-depth and impartial analysis of events in Uzbekistan are run from abroad. They include Information Agency Fergana, Uzbek services of BBC and RFE/RL, and *Eltuz*; they are all blocked in Uzbekistan, and cannot be accessed without anonymizers or proxy servers. Except *AsiaTerra* and *Uzmetronom*, all local online media are subject to self-censorship to due to heavy government control.

2016 was not marked by crimes against journalists in Uzbekistan. However, as in previous years, the authorities continued to exert pressure on reporters and force them to remain silent. In September 2016, two Uzbek journalists who freelanced for the independent news website *Uznews.net*, which closed in 2014 after an attack by unknown hackers, were interrogated at police station for several hours. Police forced them to sign a written consent not to cooperate with foreign media organizations.

The next month, police detained photographer Timur Karpov for documenting forced labor at state cotton plantations in the Buka district of Tashkent region. He was taken to the local police department and beaten by at least five officers. According to Karpov, they forced him to reveal the passcode for his smartphone. The police then deleted all the data in his phone, including contact details. There is no law in Uzbekistan that prohibits taking photos or videos in public places. Yet, many Uzbek journalists interviewed for the MSI complained of being constantly detained by police for taking photos or recording video on the streets.

Legislation guarantees the protection of editorial independence of all media, including those funded by the government. However, in practice it is exactly the opposite. State media cannot express an independent opinion and produce materials

that may challenge the government. Moreover, government funding is completely opaque; there is no comprehensive information on how much state money is allocated to media, and how it is spent.

Management in government-funded media organizations have always been loyal to the ruling regime. Chief editors of popular state newspapers *Pravda Vostoka* and *Xalq so'zi/Narodnoe Slovo*, and of the national news agency UzA, are appointed upon approval of the National Security Council under the president of Uzbekistan.

Libel and insult are not decriminalized in Uzbekistan, and criminal responsibility for these acts still poses a potential threat to journalists. The Uzbek authorities often use the Criminal Code's article 139 on libel against independent journalists who report on taboo social issues or criticize the government. In the past few years, several journalists were charged with libel and slander: Vladimir Berezovsky from Russia's *Parlamentskaya Gazeta*, Abdumalik Boboyev, a stringer for Voice of America, and freelance journalists Yelena Bondar and Viktor Krymzalov. Later, Boboyev and Bondar were forced to leave Uzbekistan.

Photojournalist Umida Akhmedova, accused of slander in 2009 and charged with "damaging the country's image," in May 2016, received the prestigious Vaclav Havel International Prize for Creative Dissent awarded annually by Human Rights Foundation. Akhmedova, who is the first female documentary filmmaker in Uzbekistan, specializes in subjects historically regarded as taboo in the country: gender, poverty, and ethnic issues. Uzbek media, except for a few independent news websites, did not report Akhmedova's decoration.

Many Uzbek rights activists, opposition members and independent journalists—including Dmitriy Tikhonov, a prominent reporter of rights violations—had to leave their homes and find asylum abroad due to persecution by the government. The escalating pressure pushed Tikhonov to flee Uzbekistan in February 2016. In April 2015, unknown attackers in Angren city, not far from Tashkent, beat him. The assailants were never apprehended. The same year, the police detained him briefly for documenting forced labor in state cotton plantations. Later, a criminal case of hooliganism was opened against him. In late 2015, 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.

The Committee to Protect Journalists again named Uzbekistan one of the worst jailers of journalists in the world. At least five Uzbek journalists were deprived of freedom during the past year. In February 2017, the longest imprisoned Uzbek journalist, Muhammad Bekjon, was released after nearly 18 years of imprisonment. This happened several months following the release of Samandar Kukonov, a former MP and entrepreneur,

who had spent 24 years in an Uzbek prison for opposing the president. Bekjon is the brother of prominent opposition member in exile, Muhammad Salih. He was jailed in 1999 on charges of attempting to overthrow the government—charges that he claims were fabricated.

Following Bekjon's release, the Uzbek authorities freed journalist Jamshid Karimov, late president Islam Karimov's nephew and member of a rights activist group, who had been forcefully hospitalized at a psychiatric facility in 2012.

Despite laws in place guaranteeing the free access to information, journalists cannot gain access to public documents. Details of the state budget, consumer data, the general plan of Tashkent, data on state subsidies of various industries, information about high-ranking officials' salary and whether they pay taxes—all of this information is kept away from public eye.

In June 2016, authorities took down one of the most visited websites in Uzbekistan—sports site Uff.uz. According to the Uzbek service of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL), locally known as Ozodlik Radiosi, the website was blocked following an article that criticized country's National Football Association, which is headed by a senate member, the former deputy prime minister of Uzbekistan. Access to Uff.uz was restored in a week, and the critical article was deleted.

In December 2016, Ilkhom Abdullayev, chair of the Committee on Information and Communication Technologies of Parliament of Uzbekistan, denied during an OSCE conference in Vienna, Austria, accusations that the Uzbek government engages in online censorship. According to the official, court orders are required to block Internet websites. Yet, so far none of the online media blocked in Uzbekistan were presented with such an order.

Since February 2015, the Ministry for the Development of Information Technologies and Communications is in charge of regulating telecommunications services related to the Internet. Online content is monitored by the expert commission of the ministry, a secretive body established in August 2011 and operates under the Center for Monitoring Mass Communications. The Commission ensures "information security" and makes recommendations for blocking websites

The government continued disrupting Voice-over-Internet-Protocol (VoIP) services in 2016, including Skype, WhatsApp, and Viber. Connection to these services has been hindered since July 2015, but both the authorities and Internet service providers denied blocking these services. State-owned Uztelecom, which holds a monopoly on services with access to international telecommunication networks—including the use of VoIP technologies—explained this away as ongoing "maintenance works on some channels of communication."

Uztelecom's monopoly over international traffic has another huge disadvantage, according to experts of Qrator Labs, a Russian company specializing in DDoS-attack mitigation. In June 2016, the company published an investigation evaluating the vulnerability of national segments of Internet across the globe against possible network collapse. The findings showed that in case of network failure at Uztelecom, 97 percent of Internet users in Uzbekistan would be left offline from international traffic.

In 2015, the Milan-based Hacking Team, a company that sells online spying tools to governments worldwide, confirmed that Uzbekistan spent more than €500,000 over recent years to buy its remote-control software. According to an Uzbek online security expert, who talked anonymously to the Russian language television channel Nastoyashee Vremya (Current Time) in January 2016, Uzbek security services started employing Italian-made spy software in June 2015, a month before the quality of Skype-calls, file exchanges in messengers Viber and WhatsApp, and other Internet services deteriorated in the country.

Most media consumers do not know how to bypass online censorship. However, according to journalists, the number of advanced users, using VPNs, proxy servers or sophisticated anonymity software, such as TOR on a daily basis, is increasing.

In 2014, the government amended the Law on Information to address blogging, which has become increasingly popular among Uzbeks over the past several years. Now 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 journalism profession is accessible to anyone, in theory—although hiring decisions are made overwhelmingly by managers who owe their positions to the state or whose license can be pulled without reason. The state does not interfere in the admission process, nor does it prohibit students from entering journalism universities.

OBJECTIVE 2: PROFESSIONAL JOURNALISM

Uzbekistan Objective Score: 0.94

Media in Uzbekistan are not capable of promoting public discussion or assessing the policies and actions of the government. The poor professionalism among journalists results from both the lack of opportunity for journalists to gain and practice skills and the government's control over information, according to past MSI panelists. There is no widely accepted ethics code, and media are filled with paid-for news articles and programming. On television, entertainment programs overshadow news programs, which must be cleared by the

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).

government. The lack of specialized skills among reporters, the list of prohibited topics, and the out-of-date equipment at media outlets further limits the ability of journalists to inform citizens.

With the over-arching control of media in Uzbekistan by the government, when the media, especially state-funded media, report on political events, they largely express the official view, as their materials are mostly based on official information provided by state agencies.

This is not, however, a reflection on the professionalism of journalists employed at state-funded media, suggest some journalists interviewed for the MSI. According to them, the journalism community in Uzbekistan still has many well-trained reporters, especially at the state-run television channels. However, due to censorship and pressure from chief editors, they are not allowed to display their skills.

At the same time, independent media cannot get first-hand access to official information, and are often forced to report on issues concerning political or economic developments without official input or by referring to state-funded media.

Interesting professional interviews in Uzbekistan that give in-depth analysis on certain issues are rare. Journalists, especially in state media, do not use multiple sources of information or expert opinions that are contrary to the official view. There are only few economists in the country who can openly give professional independent analysis of Tashkent's economic policies, such as excessive state control over currency exchange, but they are interviewed only by foreign media.

The Union of Journalists of Uzbekistan and the National Association of Electronic Media (NAESMI) have their own codes of ethics that reflect international standards, but there are

still no mechanisms to enforce their application in practice. Journalists regularly violate or are forced to violate certain standards, most often related to objectivity and unbiased coverage. Generally accepted ethical standards are followed mostly in reporting on social issues. Reporting on the country's economy and government policy remain the same as before: one-sided, reflecting only the official point of view.

Violations of ethical norms are widespread. Journalists, especially in state print media and television, eagerly accept bribes in the form of cash and gifts in exchange for favorable coverage. This happens largely due to low wages. At Tashkent media, salaries average \$200-\$300 per month, which is barely enough to make ends meet. Entry-level salaries are even lower, making journalism unattractive for young people. This forces most journalists to work for several media outlets at the same time, or work for bribes. Some government agencies use their own tools to keep journalists loyal, including financial awards and opportunities to travel abroad.

Plagiarism is still very common in Uzbekistan media. Popular Uzbek-language news websites, such as Kun.uz and Daryo.uz, as in previous years, continue translate news from Russian websites and publish it as their own.

Censorship was officially banned in Uzbekistan in 2002, but five years later the government amended the Mass Media Law, making owners, editors, and journalists from both state-supported and private media responsible for the content of what is printed and broadcast. Today, journalists, editors and bloggers alike are constantly forced to self-censor due to real or perceived threats of losing their jobs or prosecution. Accredited reporters of foreign media also must censor themselves, although to a much lesser degree, because of the threat of losing accreditation.

Thus, Uzbek media refrain from commenting on many socially significant events. A striking example of this in 2016 was the media reaction to first reports on the death of the president. Before it was officially confirmed, many international media reported about his passing citing anonymous sources within the government and high-ranking diplomats. Local media, however, kept silence, waiting for official information from government. Uzbek media did not report even on Turkish Prime Minister's statement about Uzbek president's death, as it came several hours before the official confirmation.

Nor did the local media report on his eldest daughter, Karimova, throughout 2016. Once a singer and fashion-queen of Uzbekistan, Karimova is today kept under house arrest in Tashkent due to multi-million dollar corruption charges from Europe and the United States. In November 2016, her son Islam Karimov (named after his grandfather) gave an interview to BBC, where he stated that following regime change in

Uzbekistan his mother's life was threatened. Uzbek media, except independent ones, ignored this.

State media and formally independent news websites never report about corruption in the government. Journalists have to keep a blind eye on the transparency of the state budget, condition of military, detentions for political reasons, and forced labor by government. Monetary policy of the government is also among taboo subjects. Uzbek media never report about what locals call the "black market" of currency exchange, even though in 2016 the rate of the national currency kept falling, causing intense discussions on social networks. These topics are mostly only covered by independent Uzbek media based out of the country.

Taking photos of forced cotton-picking, buildings of law enforcement agencies, checkpoints between the regions of Uzbekistan, and the so-called "presidential route" in Tashkent (used by the presidential motorcade) is still strictly forbidden.

As stated in previous MSI reports, the problem of independent Uzbek journalism is that very few young journalists are joining their ranks, largely due to the fear of state persecution. For the past two years, at least three well-known reporters under 40 were forced to leave the country because of constant pressure from National Security Service.

Entertainment articles and programming continue dominating over news and information programming in the media market. As local journalists say, it is the most secure way of doing business in media. Moreover, there is no high demand for news content among media consumers in Uzbekistan, as all news reporting is biased and sides with the government.

Given the widespread penetration of mobile phones, almost all journalists working for print media and radio are equipped with basic necessary equipment—tape recorders and cameras. However, in most cases they must buy such smartphones at their own expense. Television media companies in big cities, especially state-funded ones, are well equipped.

Almost all journalists interviewed for this year's MSI report noted that the quality of equipment does not affect the quality of journalism in Uzbekistan. What affects it is the political situation, the pervasive atmosphere of censorship, and the low level of education of many journalists.

Regarding the coverage of niche topics, almost all professional spheres in Uzbekistan, including education, health care and military, have their own specialized publication, which survive only due to forced subscription and state subsidies. *Economic Review* is considered to be a relatively independent magazine. Yet, it cannot publish objective articles on various aspects of economic issues. Journalist Natalia Shulepina continues writing in her blog *Sreda.uz*, which specializes on environmental issues. There is also *Uzinfocom*, a magazine devoted to computer

technologies and communications issued by the Ministry for the Development of Information Technologies and Communications.

Investigative journalism is not a very popular genre in Uzbekistan. Investigative materials on state media mostly focus on criminal cases, and they are solely based on evidence presented by the authorities. It is journalists of independent media, such as the Uzbek services of BBC or RFE/RL—which operate out of London and Prague respectively—that usually carry out quality investigative reporting. They produced in-depth reports about the shady businesses of the late Uzbek president’s daughters, for example.

OBJECTIVE 3: PLURALITY OF NEWS

Uzbekistan Objective Score: 0.83

Despite having over 1,500 registered media outlets, including 65 television channels, over 1,000 print media and nearly 400 websites, Uzbekistan’s population does not enjoy a plurality of media sources from which to gather information.

According to Uzbekistan’s Agency for Press and Information, the majority of registered media are privately owned, hence independent. However, in reality they are under the constant radar of state security agencies. Most of the media outlets can be categorized as entertainment. Those that market themselves as social and political media report only merely based on official government talking points.

Coverage of digital television continues increasing. By the end of 2016, 80 percent of the population of Uzbekistan had access to digital television, a 16 percent increase from the previous year. The government is planning to install more transmitters in coming years. The free package of digital television includes 12 television and two radio stations of the state-owned National Television and Radio Company, and two private television channels (four in certain regions).

At first glance, consumers enjoy diversity in the Uzbek television market, the technical quality of which is getting better each year. Nevertheless, most television channels in Uzbekistan are entertainment-oriented, and the news and information they provide is always one-sided.

As noted in previous MSI studies, the Internet remains the least-controlled media format in the country. Nonetheless, as the Law on Mass Media clearly indicates, all Internet websites with the .uz domain, or websites of organizations registered in Uzbekistan, are all still subject to tight government regulations. Termination of licenses remains a serious threat to media, forcing them to be extremely cautious in publishing new and presenting analysis.

Those online media not under the government’s control are simply blocked in the country, which limits Uzbek Internet users’ access to independent online content. For its wide-scale online censorship, international media watchdogs annually assess Uzbekistan’s Internet freedom as “not free.” Access to hundreds of websites of opposition groups, human rights organizations, and media entities is limited.

In February 2016, then-President Karimov again argued about the uselessness of blocking it. “If someone is trying to block Internet, being Twitter or anything else—it is silly,” he said during his speech aired on prime-time news on all state television channels. 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.

Yet, Uzbekistan’s Internet users are increasing, reaching 13 million in 2017, according to official figures. 11 million of them use mobile Internet and actively use social networks. The most popular is Odnoklassniki.ru, owned by Russian Mail.Ru Group, with at least three million active users from Uzbekistan. Facebook is used to a much lesser degree. However, Facebook is the favored platform of most of the popular Uzbek socio-political groups. Members of these groups can indirectly criticize the government by, for example, posting photos of bad roads, but they never openly challenge state agencies or call for action.

The independent Uzbek media, blocked in Uzbekistan, continue actively using social networks and messenger apps to reach out to their main audience. The Uzbek service of RFE/RL has its group in Odnoklassniki.ru with nearly half a million members. It also runs several channels in Telegram, a messaging app

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.

Many young Uzbeks are unable to differentiate objective news from state propaganda. They see independent Uzbek news websites, such as Radio Ozodlik and BBC, as enemies of Uzbekistan—a result of the government’s efforts to label them as such since 2005.

that became quite popular in Uzbekistan after authorities started blocking its rival, WhatsApp. The Facebook audience of independent Uzbek media also increased significantly in 2016, mostly due to detailed reporting about Karimov’s death.

Many Internet users in Uzbekistan are afraid of surfing blocked websites using anonymizers, as the government keeps track of traffic. When buying a SIM card or connecting to Internet via ISP, consumers are required to give their personal information, including a copy of their passports.

Uzbeks living in cities enjoy more information diversity than their fellow citizens in smaller towns or rural areas. By virtue of understanding Russian, many city residents prefer to watch Russian television channels via satellite antennas. In December 2016, private provider of access to digital television UZDIGITAL TV included nearly 10 Russian television channels to its free package list. In previous years, the Uzbek government deliberately used to cut signals of Russian television channels.

Power outages, especially in remote regions, have become one of the main obstacles to using electronic media. In many rural districts, electricity is given only two or three times a day for several hours. With no cable Internet and low-quality mobile networks, people in rural areas receive information mostly from government-controlled radio and television channels. During winter, power outages become common even in big cities, like Samarkand, Jizzakh, and Khorezm.

Illiteracy per se is not an obstacle for media consumers, as officially Uzbekistan has almost 100 percent literacy. However, the population’s media literacy is quite poor. Many young Uzbeks are unable to differentiate objective news from state propaganda. They see independent Uzbek news websites, such as Radio Ozodlik and BBC, as enemies of Uzbekistan—a result of the government’s efforts to label them as such since 2005.

There are four news agencies in the country: Uzbekistan National News Agency (UzA, state-run), news agency Jahon (run by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs), the independent news agency Turkiston-Press, and Uzbek Telegraph Agency. Foreign embassies and offices of international NGOs continue

receiving information from Turkiston-Press, mainly because it contains economic information that is not provided by state news agencies or other media. When covering issues related to high-ranking government officials or taboo subjects, all media completely rely on the information provided by state news agencies, in order to avoid possible conflicts.

Uzbek state media, as well as positioning themselves as independent but completely loyal to the state news media, almost never cite international news agencies (eg, Reuters, AP, AFP), because they are critical of the ruling regime.

Private print and online media produce their own news content, but it usually reflects state news media. Their own reporting is usually on matters that do not directly concern the central government. Many Uzbek journalists complain that they are not allowed to diversify their sources; almost all news media are provided with a list of approved experts by the authorities. Loyal to state media almost never cite international news agencies, because of their critical information about Uzbekistan.

In rare cases bloggers create their own materials. For instance, in December 2016 a blogger from Samarkand, Toshpulat Rakhmatullaev, made a series of reports about a mass grave of donkeys in the outskirts of the city. His investigation led to the launch of a criminal case against individuals, who illegally sold donkey meat—supposedly to the zoo.

Uzbek media tend to avoid covering gender equality and ethnicity issues. Problems of sexual minorities are never mentioned; Uzbekistan is the only country in the post-Soviet region where sodomy is a criminal offence. At the same time, talk-shows about traditional values and “alien Western ideology” that threaten them are quite common on Uzbek television.

In Uzbekistan, there are several print media published in the languages of ethnic minorities. Two newspapers are in Tajik: the national *Ovozi Tojik* and the weekly *Sadoi Sokh*, published in the Sokh district of Ferghana region, populated mainly by ethnic Tajiks. The Korean diaspora’s *Koryo Sinmun* is published both in Russian and in Korean, and there is *Nurly Zhol* in Kazakh. There are also Kazakh language shows broadcast on state radio and television. The Republic of Karakalpakstan, an autonomous republic within Uzbekistan, has its own socio-political newspaper, *Erkin Karakalpakstan*.

All of these newspapers are loyal to the government and never publish materials concerning real problems of ethnic minorities. For instance, *Ovozi Tojik* does not cover the lack of Tajik language schools in areas where mostly ethnic Tajiks live.

OBJECTIVE 4: BUSINESS MANAGEMENT

Uzbekistan Objective Score: 0.86

As revenue sources are limited, media outlets in Uzbekistan continue struggling to cover operational costs. Total government control and a struggling economy, together with an absence of healthy competition, make it nearly impossible for media to run efficiently or profitably. Most are still heavily dependent on subsidies from government or private owners. As private media rarely disclose information about the owners, in most cases the public is not aware of the source of their funding.

Almost all Uzbek journalists interviewed for the MSI agree that most media organizations' budgets are not transparent, and their managements are corrupt. In 2016, Transparency International ranked Uzbekistan as the most corrupt country in the Central Asian region, coming in at 156th place in the world—a three-point drop from the previous year.

Only a few print media, such as the state-owned *Nardnoe Slovo/Halk Suzi* and *Pravda Vostoka*, earn enough to fully support operations. This is achieved largely due to compulsory subscriptions for public institution employees across the country and people receiving state benefits (pensioners, disabled persons). Moreover, given their high profiles and large circulations, these papers have always enjoyed an abundance of advertising.

Involuntary subscriptions remained an issue in 2016 as well. In January, Radio Ozodlik reported that first-grade schoolchildren in the Bustonlik district of Tashkent region, who just enrolled in elementary school, were forced to buy the child-oriented newspaper *Yosh Kuch* (*Young Power*). College and university students, who receive stipends from the state, are also asked to subscribe to government-funded newspapers.

There are only a handful of private media outlets that have relatively effective business models, such as Russian language news websites *Gazeta.uz* and *Novosti Uzbekistana*. The latter had to leave print and go online in 2014, reportedly due to financial constraints. Uzbek language news websites, such as *Daryo.uz* and *Kun.uz*, and sports oriented websites such as *Stadion.uz* and *Uff.uz*, have grown in popularity in recent years, boosting their revenues from advertisement. Yet, even the most popular websites in the country are far from self-sustainable, heavily relying on public funds, grants from international organizations or direct subsidies from owners.

Government subsidies to private media (which are not frequent) are usually funneled through the National Association of Electronic Mass Media and the Public Fund for Support and Development of Independent Print Media and News Agencies, in the form of grants or other awards. The greater its loyalty

INDEPENDENT MEDIA ARE WELL-MANAGED BUSINESSES, ALLOWING EDITORIAL INDEPENDENCE.

BUSINESS MANAGEMENT INDICATORS:

- > Media outlets and supporting firms operate as efficient, professional, and profit-generating businesses.
- > 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 at commercial outlets.
- > Independent media do not receive government subsidies.
- > Market research is used to formulate strategic plans, enhance advertising revenue, and tailor products to the needs and interests of audiences.
- > Broadcast ratings and circulation figures are reliably and independently produced.

to authorities, the more likely a media outlet receives state support. However, subsidies are not used as leverage to control media. It is the fear of being persecuted that forces all media outlets to self-censor.

Advertising may not be enough to cover all costs, but it is still the largest source of revenue for media in Uzbekistan. The online advertising market is underdeveloped. Most advertisers prefer television, radio and print media, where there is an established advertising market. Mobile operators, car-manufacturing company GM-Uzbekistan, producers of soft beverages and pharmaceutical companies are among the biggest advertisers. They continue placing advertisements in state newspapers and television channels, which may not always be rational in terms of marketing, but demonstrates their loyalty to the government.

State television channels *Yoshlar* (Youth) and Uzbekistan still have the highest geographical coverage and the top prices for advertisements. For example, one minute of primetime on *Yoshlar* can cost \$4,900, according to a pricelist provided by advertisement agencies. In 2014, the independent Uzbek media reported on a wide-scale corruption scheme at the National Television and Radio Company, showing almost half of revenue from advertisement going to into the pockets of company officials.

Advertising is well-developed in Tashkent and a few other big cities. Almost every large-scale newspaper has its own advertising agencies. In remote or rural areas, it almost does not exist.

Uzbekistan's Law on Advertising, amended several times since its adoption in 1998, states that advertising for television and radio should not exceed 10 percent for each hour of broadcast, a norm, according to some local journalists, often violated by

television channels. Broadcasting of state events and ceremonies (celebrations of Independence Day or Nowruz) cannot be interrupted with advertisements. Print media advertisements cannot exceed 40 percent of its volume. The law does not have any regulations concerning online advertisement.

There are only two independent news websites operated by journalists located in Uzbekistan: AsiaTerra and Uzmtronom, both blocked by the Internet-monopolizing Uztelecom for their often-critical content. Despite being relatively popular, they do not receive any advertising. According to reporters working for these websites, advertisers are afraid to appear on “unfriendly” websites.

Market research is very limited. It happens rarely, and media organizations usually do not finance the research. The only openly conducted research on the media market in 2016 was done by the Tashkent Advertising Association, which unites almost all big advertising agencies in the capital city. The survey was aimed at comparing the popularity of three media—television, radio and Internet. It reportedly involved more than 1,700 people (geography not disclosed), most of the respondents between ages of 20-45 years. The survey showed more than 95 percent of respondents used the Internet every day, whereas 53 percent watched television at least once a day. Many journalists were doubtful of the accuracy of these results.

As reported in previous MSI studies, the last People Meter analysis of Uzbekistan television channels was conducted in 2009 by SIAR, a joint Uzbek-Turkish research and consulting group. Its results stated the obvious: the popularity of channels Uzbekistan and Yoshlar, which, according to local journalists, has not changed since.

All popular news websites Kun.uz, Gazeta.uz, Daryo.uz, Stadion.uz that attract advertisements usually state their daily or monthly unique visitors stats, but do not publicly display any data from credible stat counters, such as Google Analytics or Yandex Metrika.

OBJECTIVE 5: SUPPORTING INSTITUTIONS

Uzbekistan Objective Score: 0.76

After the fall of the Soviet Union, Uzbekistan hosted several independent NGOs that supported mass media, funded mostly by international organizations. However, their status was always uncertain and they were under close control of the government. After the violent suppression of the Andijan demonstrations in 2005, all foreign media assisting NGOs had been kicked out of the country. Since then, the government of Uzbekistan has not eased its control over indigenous organizations that support mass media.

Today, professional organizations that were created “to support the media” merely promote government propaganda. NAESMI was founded in 2004 and unites dozens of non-governmental television and radio stations. Its head, Firdavs Abduholikov, was detained briefly by state security agencies in 2013. The independent media linked his arrest to charges against his close ally, Gulnara Karimova.

Uzbek journalists interviewed for the MSI believe that one cannot be just released from detention by security services unless they promise to cooperate. Abduhalikov continues to head NAESMI and run the most-circulated entertainment newspaper, *Darakchi*.

There is only one professional union, the Creative Union of Journalists, created the same year as NAESMI. All journalists working in Uzbek media organizations are members of this union, and pay monthly contributions automatically deducted from their salaries. The union organizes an annual professional competition called Oltin Qalam (Golden Pen) to award the most loyal journalists. The organization is considered corrupt, and does not provide real support to its members.

In December 2016, the chair of the Creative Union of Journalists, Ibrohim Khalimbekov, was sentenced to a heavy fine on charges of embezzlement of state property and abuse of authority during his work at the state film studio Uzbektelefilm in 2012-2014. The court also deprived him of the right to hold managing positions for the next three years.

The Public Fund for Support and Development of Print Media and News Agencies, another government-controlled organization, claims to offer grants, training, and other activities to its members, but the quality and effectiveness of these services is unclear.

The Real Union of Journalists of Uzbekistan, founded in 2007 by émigré Uzbek journalists residing mainly in European countries, stopped its operation for unknown reasons. It was headed by Galima Buharbaeva, editor-in-chief of Uznews.net, the popular news website that had to close in 2015 after being hacked. Buharbaeva launched a new information website called Centre1.com in September 2016.

There are legal constraints to the registration of trade unions. Article 34 of the Constitution guarantees citizens the right “to form trade unions, political parties and other public associations.” However, journalists interviewed for the MSI believe that any independent professional association would not be registered, for political reasons. In addition, participating in any unregistered, hence illegal, public association in Uzbekistan is punishable with imprisonment up to five years.

There are two main schools of journalism in Uzbekistan: the Faculty of Journalism at the Mirzo Ulugbek National University, and the Faculty of International Journalism at the State

SUPPORTING INSTITUTIONS FUNCTION IN THE PROFESSIONAL INTERESTS OF INDEPENDENT MEDIA.

SUPPORTING INSTITUTIONS INDICATORS:

- > Trade associations represent the interests of private media owners and provide member services.
- > Professional associations work to protect journalists' rights.
- > NGOs support free speech and independent media.
- > Quality journalism degree programs that provide substantial practical experience exist.
- > Short-term training and in-service training programs allow journalists to upgrade skills or acquire new skills.
- > Sources of newsprint and printing facilities are in private hands, apolitical, and unrestricted.
- > Channels of media distribution (kiosks, transmitters, Internet) are private, apolitical, and unrestricted.

University of World Languages. According to local journalists interviewed for the MSI, the mere fact that students of these schools are forced to study the books of the late president showcases poor quality of education. Both schools offer classes in Uzbek and Russian languages. Students complain about lack of qualified professors and outdated curricula.

It is quite hard for young journalists to start their professional career given the low wages and healthy competition in media market. Young Uzbeks studying journalism abroad, for instance in United States and Europe, rarely return to Uzbekistan.

Those few independent journalists working in Uzbekistan are sometimes invited to professional training courses organized by media development NGOs in neighboring countries, such as Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. Organizations like the U.S. State Department, the Open Society Foundation, Internews, and the OSCE Academy in Bishkek usually sponsor them. Uzbek journalists working for officially-registered media rarely attend such courses, fearing possible problems at work. They are trained by short-term courses offered by NAESMI and other state-controlled organizations.

The printing market is under the government's control, and considered corrupt. In June 2016, the National Security Service arrested the head of Uzbekistan, one of the largest printing companies in the country; he was charged with embezzlement. There have not been any updates on this case since then. The printing house publishes, among other products, propaganda books such as those by Karimov and his successor, Mirziyoyev.

Matbuot Tarqatuvchi is the main company that distributes print media via subscriptions or kiosks. It has branches in all regions of Uzbekistan and offers online subscriptions to nearly 250 print media.

In 2016, government of Uzbekistan increased its control over mobile telecommunication market. In August, Uzbek state agency Center for Radio Communication, Broadcasting and Television became the full owner of mobile operator UMS after acquiring a 50 percent share in the Russian communications giant MTS.

Development during recent years showed the extent of corruption in Uzbek's mobile communication market. In early 2016, the Dutch communication company VimpelCom, which works under the brand Beeline, was fined \$835 million by United States and Dutch authorities for involvement in large-scale corruption in Uzbekistan.

Internet connection speeds remain relatively low: subscribers experience poor connection quality and frequent disconnections. None of the ADSL/FTTB subscriptions from private ISPs enable Internet download speeds faster than 8 Mbps, according to Freedom House's "Freedom on the Net 2016" report.

The state-owned Uztelecom, gatekeeper of all international Internet traffic in the country, reportedly decreased its prices to domestic ISPs from \$156 to \$91 for 1 Mbit/sec of traffic. However, tariffs for subscribers both from private and state ISPs were not reduced.

Due to high prices and low speed for international Internet traffic, local private ISPs established the peering center and content delivery network Tas-IX in 2004, which today has nearly 30 members. It enables traffic conveyance and exchange at no mutual charge and without the need to establish international Internet connections via Uztelecom. The National Television and Radio Company actively depends upon this peering network to deliver its content to online consumers.

Penetration of mobile communication is quite high in Uzbekistan. For many, Uzbek smartphones became a main point of access to information. Advanced consumers use VPNs or special apps like Psiphon to bypass government censorship. Mobile providers continue investing in 4G LTE broadband connectivity. However, its geographical penetration is limited to several big cities. The cost of a monthly subscription for 4G LTE connection is \$40 for 12 GB traffic on average.

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.