

# UZBEKISTAN



## Vibrant Information Barometer

2 0 2 4





**Not Vibrant (0-10):** Quality information is extremely limited in this country. The vast majority of it is not editorially independent, not based on facts, or it is intended to harm. People do not have the rights, means, or capacity to access a wide range of information; they do not recognize or reject misinformation; and they cannot or do not make choices on what types of information they want to engage with.

**Slightly Vibrant (11-20):** Quality information is available on a few topics or geographies in this country, but not all. While some information is editorially independent, there is still a significant amount of misinformation, malinformation, and hate speech in circulation, and it does influence public discourse. Most people do not recognize or reject misinformation.

**Somewhat Vibrant (21-30):** Quality information is available in this country and most of it is editorially independent, based on facts, and not intended to harm. Most people have the rights, means, and capacity to access a wide range of information, although some do not. Most people recognize and reject misinformation, although some do not.

**Highly Vibrant (31-40):** Quality information is widely available in this country. People have the rights, means, and capacity to access a wide range of information; they recognize and reject misinformation.

Highly Vibrant

Somewhat Vibrant

Slightly Vibrant

Not Vibrant

OVERALL SCORE

19

In 2023, significant sociopolitical and media developments shaped the flow of information as Uzbekistan continues to come to grips with what it might mean to have a truly free press. The year began with the detentions of several journalists and one civilian, accused of defamation, extortion, and tax evasion, involving alleged threats to post compromising material about government officials on social media unless the officials paid up. The case, which ended in [convictions](#) and was closed to the public, was a fitting lesson on the state of press freedom and standards in Uzbekistan: some saw it as an illustration of the limits of the state’s tolerance for a free press while others saw in it the natural consequences of many Uzbekistani journalists’ loose grasp of professional ethics.

More broadly, 40 Uzbekistani journalists publicly complained to President Shavkat Mirziyoyev in March that an unnamed “state body responsible for controlling information continues to apply pressure on editorial staff and bloggers, so they have to change the tone, format, and nature of information or they do not publish that information at all.” Mirziyoyev, who has publicly supported media freedom, did not respond, but the state-backed Union of Journalists dismissed the complaint and said the real problem was journalists’ ethical lapses.

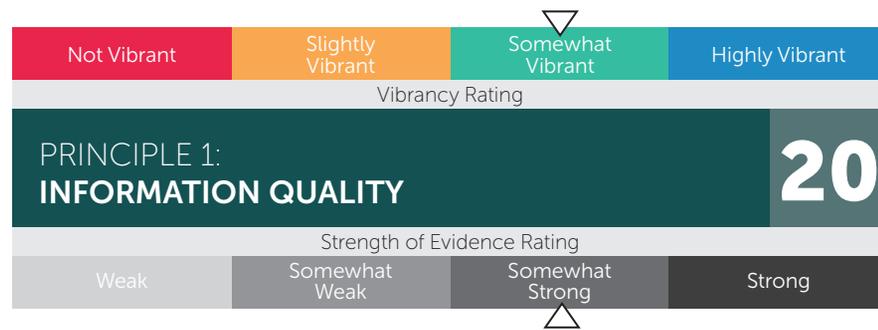
The president initiated constitutional amendments in 2022, which voters approved in an April 2023 referendum that was deemed flawed by international observers. In addition to adding more terms to a president’s possible time in office, the new constitution introduces the vague

concept of “social morality” among the reasons the rights to speak out or obtain information can be infringed.

The new constitution guarantees freedom of the press yet makes the mass media responsible for the reliability of information they provide, essentially transforming journalism ethics to an issue that the government can pursue legally. It also bans censorship, although the country has no law stipulating penalties for obstructing media activity.

Shortly after winning a snap election in the summer, Mirziyoyev elevated two top aides, including his elder daughter. Both had worked credibly on the regulation and development of the country’s mass media, and content producers had high hopes for their appointments. Even so, last year saw a resurgence of persecutions of journalists and bloggers, and suspensions of online media and blogs.

Uzbekistan’s overall score slightly improved, thanks to minor improvements in Principle 1 (Information Quality), Principle 3 (Information Consumption and Engagement), and Principle 4 (Transformative Action), as people closely watched environmental and health news on air quality and the trial of 23 defendants over the deaths of 68 children linked to contaminated cough syrup. The score for Principle 2 (Multiple Channels) dropped a bit from the 2023 VIBE study. Panelists said the new constitution could encourage more self-censorship, influence editorial content, and restrain people’s right to seek and engage with information.



The country's developing information infrastructure and improved mobile connectivity enabled journalists and bloggers to produce diverse content of varying quality. Video and audio podcasts multiplied, as did online hate speech in response to the conflicts in the Middle East. A lack of quality national content and news analysis made Uzbekistanis vulnerable to foreign propaganda and disinformation. Indicator 5, which assesses resources for content production, scored the lowest in this principle, with panelists noting the media's financial challenges strained operating environment. Despite an increase in online hate speech in comments sections and on social media networks, Indicator 3, which examines harmful information, received the highest score of this principle, reflecting that the government and content producers do not create or disseminate content that is intended to harm, for fear of legal repercussions and loss of credibility.

### Indicator 1: There is quality information on a variety of topics available.

According to [official data](#) from the Agency for Information and Mass Communications, Uzbekistan has 2,000-plus media outlets: 623 magazines; 745 online publications, mostly in the capital, Tashkent; 631 print newspapers, a drop from previous years; and 84 TV channels. These outlets produce varied, but not always quality content.

Uzbekistan's media cover local, national, regional, and international news. Some online outlets publish lengthy interviews with one or several

experts, allowing consumers to form their own views on the topics discussed. Among them, Kun.uz, Daryo.uz, and Gazeta.uz stand out for their analyses and investigations.

The Creative Union of Journalists of Uzbekistan is a state-backed entity that has more than 2,000 members and commits to protect the rights and legal interests of media workers. However, it selectively addresses some of the many cases of pressure and physical harassment against journalists and never follows up on unanswered appeals by state entities. In one notable incident, when more than 40 journalists and activists appealed to the president about "hidden but severe censorship," the Union, commenting on the journalists' appeal, noted that it "did not observe any pressure on editorial offices and independent journalists and bloggers." Instead, it reported cases of abuse of freedom of speech by content producers. As a result, the union has not built trust with journalists.

There are no legal repercussions for obstructing journalists' activities, even though journalists are constantly under threat. Journalists do not feel empowered, supported, or protected by law to call out official misbehavior. Moreover, media coverage of alleged official misdeeds varies depending on the power an official holds and exercises to pursue a journalist for what they write.

The most popular content in Uzbekistan is entertainment and hard news coverage is generally identical across online media and devoid of coherent research, data-driven analysis, and ethical and balanced reporting. The quality of media content suffers from editorial dependence on owners and advertisers and unethical practices. Some content producers lack skills to identify conflicts of interest in the topics and to distinguish among news, opinion, and analysis. Poorly resourced newsrooms give priority to commercial or political considerations over professional ones.

With such poor content on offer and with investigative and thematic journalism beyond the country's mostly unprepared and underfunded journalists, consumers turn to Russian news sources for analytical reporting. Although a handful of online media outlets in Uzbekistan—

such as Kun.uz, Daryo.uz and Gazeta.uz--stand out in investigative and analytical reporting, in January 2024 Mirziyoyev called for more domestic content to minimize the influence of foreign news sources. “If we don’t meet our people’s needs for news and analysis, outsiders will. This is unacceptable,” he said.

The halting reform of journalism education has been hampered by a restricted media environment, poorly resourced news labs, a scarcity of teaching materials, and a shortage of qualified instructors. As a result, journalism schools lag behind modern journalistic standards. Non-governmental media organizations retrain journalists and bloggers through foreign-funded projects. In 2023, UNESCO supported content producers to develop new formats for quality non-news programming. OSCE and the National Media Public Fund conducted a roundtable for journalists, civil society, IT specialists, and officials on the use of artificial intelligence in journalism and its implications for media freedom, and major trends in regulating harmful content. The Ministry of Ecology taught journalists about climate change, water, desertification, and drought issues. However, only a limited number of content producers have the time or inclination to take part.

### **Indicator 2: The norm for information is that it is based on facts.**

Professional content producers strive to produce and deliver fact-based news and information. They do not intentionally create or disseminate false information, which became a crime in 2018.

Media outlets moderate content on digital platforms to stem the spread of manipulated information, and panelists said online media with thousands of subscribers struggle to rein in comments. The Kun.uz and Daryo.uz Telegram channels, for instance, have disabled their comments sections; Gazeta.uz has disabled comments on Telegram platforms but allows users to post reaction emojis; and Effect.uz allows its 17,000-plus followers to both comment and use emojis on Telegram. Online media enable users

**Some content producers sensationalize content, neglect to check facts, or even extort money from people and businesses.**

to post comments on Facebook pages, which they regularly clean up to avoid liability.

Some content producers sensationalize content, neglect to check facts, or even extort money from people and businesses. There were conflicting reports in 2023 of journalists and bloggers demanding money and threatening to publish damaging information about their subjects. Sof.uz had to pay Anorbank \$324,000 in compensation for publishing a video that allegedly damaged the bank’s reputation. A court sentenced Abduqodir Muminov, who blogged on the justice system, to seven years and three months in prison on charges of fraud and extortion, although the blogger’s supporters said the sentence was really retaliation for his critical reporting.

Among the reliable fact-checking websites in Russian and Uzbek administered by journalists and experts is [Factchecking.uz](https://factchecking.uz/), which has limited original content and republishes fact-checking tips and articles from Russian and foreign sources. In 2023, the Modern Journalism Development Center, a domestic non-governmental organization (NGO), launched the bilingual <https://factchecknet.uz/> platform with support from the Equal Rights and Independent Media (ERIM) NGO and funding from the European Union. The center trains fact-checkers and encourages content producers to receive training.

Generally, the government neither intentionally creates nor spreads false information. Rather, government officials or agencies withhold important information or delay releasing it to avoid public outcry.

Journalists hold government officials accountable by publicly calling out instances of manipulated information. In one notable example from September 2023, online media reported on the emergency hospitalization of more than 400 children in the Andijan and Namangan regions.

Doctors and parents linked the children’s illness to the consumption of Antistrumin, a domestically produced potassium iodide, following the launch of the government’s iodization campaign. Media investigations

revealed that the Health Ministry had signed a no-bid, \$2 million contract with domestic company Samo to supply Antistrumin to schools and kindergartens. Bloggers and media reported that one of the founders of Samo, Nodir Yunusov, was wanted by the US and Interpol in connection with human trafficking, forced labor, fraud, racketeering, and other corruption.

The public learned about the children's poisoning from the social media channels of online media and not from the Ministry of Health, which tried to deny and obscure the facts. At a press conference, Deputy Health Minister Elmira Basitkhanova misleadingly suggested the children might have contracted acute respiratory viral infections, although Radio Ozodlik, the Uzbek service of RFE/RL, published a letter from Basitkhanova to the heads of local health departments ordering a ban on the drug. Social media users appealed to the ministry to reveal how many children had been affected by the iodization campaign, but it never did.

At a meeting with journalists, Health Minister Amrillo Inoyatov advised journalists "to the extent possible not to delve into this topic," and added, "There are organizations that deal with it."

### **Indicator 3: The norm for information is that it is not intended to harm.**

The government and content producers do not create or disseminate content that is intended to harm, for fear of legal repercussions and loss of credibility, but Uzbekistan recorded an increase in online hate speech in comments sections and on social networks in 2023.

Hate speech narratives targeting citizens from outside Tashkent who have moved there or do business in the city have been rampant online and offline since Mirziyoyev lifted a ban on them purchasing apartments or taking jobs in Tashkent. People have posted online rants blaming the newcomers for rising housing prices, litter, and traffic congestion, fueling verbal confrontations between them and residents of Tashkent. Drivers with license plates from elsewhere complain of harassment on the streets of Tashkent.

Social media users posted hate comments in reaction to news stories on the war in Gaza and denounced the US and Israel for killing Palestinian women and children. Antisemitic messages surged online, sometimes from public figures, bloggers, journalists, and religious leaders. Singer Yulduz Usmonova's video call to boycott Israeli products exceeded 1 million views on social networks, and it received the blessing of popular religious scholar Mubashshir Ahmad on Telegram. Online hate speech spilled over to two incidents in Tashkent. Radio Ozodlik reported on an attack on two members of the Jewish movement Habad in October. A month later, pro-Palestinian slogans, "Free Gaza" and "Free Palestine," appeared on the walls of a synagogue. Other media did not cover the incidents, which were not reported by the Jewish community.

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken highlighted the need for strong, vibrant, and well-resourced domestic media. Speaking at a March press conference in Tashkent, Blinken urged "governments to create the right environment in which media can grow, flourish, and bring a diversity of voices and views to the public."

### **Indicator 4: The body of content overall is inclusive and diverse.**

Content producers create information in various languages and formats to satisfy the needs of their audiences. People commonly use smartphones to get news and entertainment, mainly from Telegram and YouTube. Online media Kun.uz, Daryo.uz, and Gazeta.uz deliver high-quality and engaging content and lead in Telegram followers. They have a presence on several social networks and distribute news in Uzbek Cyrillic, Uzbek Latin, Russian, and English. Gazeta.uz is the most popular Russian-language media. Daryo.uz disseminates information and news on lifestyle, sports, Central Asia, and the world through separate Telegram channels. Telegram-based online media deliver news in the form of a lead sentence with a photo or a photo collage and a link to the full story.

Uzbek-language online media cover diverse topics and tend not to specialize in thematic reporting. Uzbek-language content includes a lot of international news translated from foreign news sources. Russian-

language media primarily cover domestic news and rarely publish international news. Some Russian-language online media, such as Spot.uz and PR.uz, specialize in business, technology, public relations, or communications.

Even though national media expose most citizens to a variety of viewpoints, the perspectives and experiences of marginalized groups rarely appear in the mainstream media. The country's [estimated 845,300](#) people with disabilities are socially isolated and receive poor and biased coverage in national media. Discrimination and a lack of assistive mobility devices and accessible public infrastructure hinder their access to information, political participation, and use of public services. The mainstream media do not sufficiently reflect their rights, needs, or lived experiences, rarely showing them as successful individuals integrated into society.

In 2023, online media reported on videos of disabled children being abused by adults, but the coverage lacked important details and never received follow up or analysis. In June, the National Agency of Social Protection began operations to support underserved audiences, including people with disabilities. Additionally, under public pressure, the government discussed a bill that defines six types of child abuse; however, at the end of 2023 the draft law had not moved forward.

Social media were flooded with videos and media accounts of domestic violence cases in 2023, with comments sections rife with misogyny and victim-blaming. Of 363 murders committed in Uzbekistan in 2023, 141, or nearly 40 percent, were rooted in family disputes.

In Uzbekistan, women have to compete for jobs in both state and private media, both of which are dominated by men, and content is shaped in accordance with men's priorities. During a November meeting with Uzbek media officials, the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media Teresa Ribeiro discussed gender balance in the country's media industry

and the safety of female journalists. In 2023, several content producers, including female journalists, received anonymous blackmail threats in March ahead of the referendum. Additionally, the editor of Rost24.uz had to quit the publication after numerous threats that put her marriage at stake.

### **Indicator 5: Content production is sufficiently resourced.**

The state owns the most popular print, broadcast, and online media outlets and indirectly controls many others via their owners, often government officials or businesses with links to the government.

Larger private media are in a stronger financial position, buoyed by their popularity, credibility, and their subscriber base. However, small to medium-sized media outlets struggle for financial stability. Notably, after a century of operations, the venerable satirical magazine *Mushtum* (Fist) suspended its print version due to money woes. The magazine was able to secure funding to reinstate its print version in 2024.

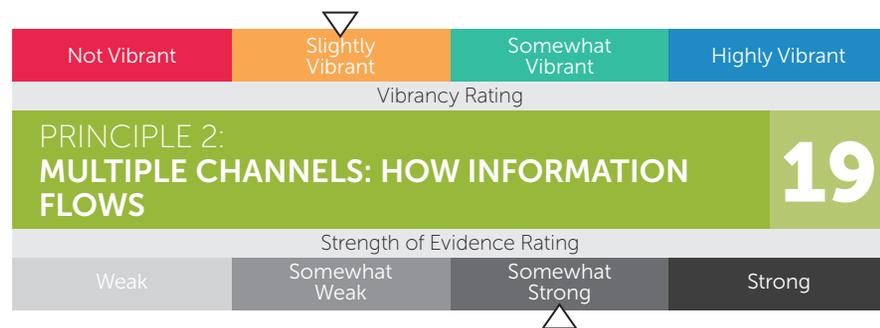
The lack of funding forces media outlets to turn to government, businesses, and political parties for support, undermining editorial independence and leading to an opaque allocation of government subsidies and advertising. Cash-strapped media are

seeking new ways to maintain their audiences and attract new ones. The *New Uzbekistan* newspaper, for example, has started putting audio recordings of selected print articles on its website and social media pages. Owned by the government, the newspaper has more than 166,000 subscribers.

On Press and Media Workers Day in Uzbekistan, June 27, Mirziyoyev said he envisioned creating a “new journalism in New Uzbekistan . . . to study the experiences of developed countries, strengthen cooperation with leading foreign universities in the field of media, international media organizations, and media industries.”

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In July 2023, the Union of Journalists published its [first report](#) on a strategy for advancing journalism in Uzbekistan to 2030, which it prepared at the behest of the president. This report calls for higher salaries for media professionals, a media development strategy, innovations in reporting, and training for 60 journalists abroad, among other recommendations.



Authorities took steps to improve information and communications technologies in 2023, including hiring foreign companies for technical work and discussing giving private internet providers direct access to the international network in the hopes of increasing mobile speed and cutting connectivity fees. As a result, panelists scored the related indicators highly, noting improvements in access to diverse channels of government information. The indicators on the independence of information channels and the rights to produce content received the lowest scores of this principle. In 2023, the government persecuted journalists and bloggers, resulting in increased self-censorship and suspension of media outlets and blogs.

**Indicator 6: People have rights to create, share, and consume information.**

In August 2023 Mirziyoyev once again declared his support for free speech and free media, but added, “At the same time, honesty and impartiality should be the main criteria in the information space.” The president also insisted that Uzbekistan guarantees unconditionally the

freedom of conscience and belief, even as officials continue to persecute religious activists, journalists, and bloggers.

Courts in Uzbekistan are not independent and have largely failed to protect individuals, including journalists, against government retaliation for exercising free speech. Courts also operate without transparency, depriving the public of access to legal decisions, although a 2020 Supreme Court resolution clarified the media’s right to attend and report on legal proceedings. Rampant corruption, particularly within law enforcement agencies and courts, as well as weak legislative and judicial bodies, continue to threaten these rights, online and offline.

Early in 2023, journalist and lawyer Dauletmurat Tadjimuratov was sentenced to 16 years in prison for allegedly organizing riots and seeking to overthrow the local government. His was the longest of dozens of sentences handed down in connection with protests in the northwestern region of Karakalpakstan in 2022, spurred by an official proposal to end the region’s autonomous status.

The government of Uzbekistan continues to see the growing presence of religious online content as a threat, instead of addressing the relative scarcity of other types of content in the Uzbek language. In May 2023, authorities published a list of approximately 500 websites, books, social media channels, and social media accounts it deemed radical. In separate cases, courts convicted two people of distributing material that posed a threat to public security and order for sharing a religious song with friends on Telegram. Jahongir Ulugmurodov was sentenced to three years in prison and Sardor Rakhmonkulov to five, but the sentences were reduced to probation for three and two years, respectively, after a domestic and international outcry.

In April, a Tashkent court sentenced blogger and activist Hojiakbar Nosirov to 15 days in jail after he warned that several brands of yogurt contain an ingredient that he said is forbidden to eat in Islam. Authorities, who disputed his conclusion, said he had violated the rights of the stores selling the yogurt and that he had failed, as required by law, to have his conclusion validated by the country’s religious authorities. With more than 880,000 subscribers on YouTube, Nosirov monitors the

quality of food products in stores and exposes examples of expired goods that he says could harm consumers.

A month later, a court fined activist and former imam Shavkat Hasan for speaking about family matters on social networks without obtaining permission from the Religious Affairs Committee. Hasan, who has served on various commissions on family matters, addressed issues on reforming marital relations, raising the status of women, and preserving families. In an [interview](#) with Kun.uz, Hasan said, “I think it wouldn’t have hurt this much if the expert commission found my videos to be an incitement to some kind of evil, but they decided to fine me just for not consulting them before publishing. It is unfair,” Hasan said.

In May, Umid Karimov and fellow blogger Maksud Muzaffarov were convicted of insulting two police officers and were jailed for five days. In an [interview](#) with Kun.uz, the bloggers complained that the judge had refused to hear their evidence. The following month, Karimov [suspended the Nasafnews.uz website](#), which covered news from the southeastern Kashkadarya region and of which he was editor-in-chief, and ended his “Kapitan Karimov” blog on Telegram. Additionally, three other bloggers--Otabek Artikov, Azizbek Yazdurdiyev, and Uroljon Kamolov--ended their blogs after witnessing the case of Karimov and Muzaffarov. “I felt in danger,” Artikov [said](#), “It’s clear that I’ll end up playing with fire in a society where courts act blindly in matters affecting the lives of citizens.”

Kun.uz published a series of analytical articles in 2023 on incompetence and instances of apparent corruption in the Foreign Labor Migration Agency, which sends labor migrants to South Korea, Russia, and other countries. Instead of addressing these issues, the newly appointed head of the agency, Jakhongir Khudoykhodjaev, filed a complaint against Kun.uz to the Agency for Information and Mass Communications, which did not respond.

In 2023, the government continued to work on a draft information code governing the management and release of information to align it with international legal standards, in concert with the [OSCE](#).

### **Indicator 7: People have adequate access to channels of information.**

Of Uzbekistan’s nearly 35.43 million people, 80 percent, or about 29.52 million, used the internet in 2023. Only about a quarter of the population, 8.7 million people, used social media, according to [Datareportal](#), a project of the Kepios digital advisory firm. However, according to [Admixer Advertising](#), an official Meta vendor in Uzbekistan, the total number of Meta users is actually 9.1 million, and the total number of Instagram users is 7.9 million people.

Internet connectivity and mobile coverage in Uzbekistan are patchy. In 2023, the government continued efforts to improve the telecommunications infrastructure and expand mobile coverage as part of a 10-year strategy launched in 2020. In part to help close the urban-rural digital divide, the state-owned Uztelecom monopoly contracted with four Japanese companies to provide telecommunications equipment and services for new data centers. The government also plans to work with US officials to engage young people and women in technology and link US and Uzbekistani universities on IT initiatives.

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The government plans to end Uztelecom’s monopoly on access to the international internet channel, which experts have blamed for slow speeds and high prices, and to set up an independent telecommunications regulator.

In 2023, Uzbekistan increased mobile internet speed by expanding the information infrastructure and [amplifying the total bandwidth](#) of the international internet network by 260% to 3,200 Gbit/s. In 2023, the country climbed to the 131st place, marking a significant improvement

of 24 points compared to the 2022 year's rating (155th) in wired internet speed.

However, this improvement in mobile and fixed internet connection speed did not widen access to information for marginalized groups, including people with limited digital skills such as women, seniors, and people with disabilities. According to the [UNDP gender digital divide assessment](#) published in March 2023, women lag behind in digital skills by 24 percent compared to men. Additionally, people with disabilities experience a greater-than-average digital divide in the population. Their basic digital skills gap stands at 32 percent. Internet coverage, relevant national content, device ownership, affordability, digital literacy, and social norms hinder their access to information and civic participation.

Despite the [reduction in mass media registration from 15 to 10 days](#) with a law in December 2023, content producers are wary of having a blog or streaming content on social, political and religious issues.

### **Indicator 8: There are appropriate channels for government information.**

Uzbekistan's laws provide for access to government information, and, from the top-down, the government has made technical strides toward openness.

Despite the regulations requiring government agencies to regularly update online information, publish reports on past activities and expenditures and facilitate press-conferences, most government offices fail to comply. Moreover, while government agencies do not openly refuse to provide government information to journalists, they use various excuses to delay providing requested information or they provide raw data, which may confuse journalists or require additional time for analysis. Bloggers and journalists reported on incidents when government agencies and local governments intentionally concealed public information concerning procurements or expenditures.

In April 2023, Gazeta.uz conducted an analysis of data appearing on the E-Qaror (E-Decision) portal, which publishes decisions made

by governors. The [media outlet learned](#) that the acting mayor of Tashkent Shavkat Umurzakov signed 35 decisions, with nearly 50% of them concealed from the public. Additionally, four of the 14 decrees that were adopted remained inaccessible online. Gazeta.uz sent an enquiry about the missing decrees and decisions to the press services of the Ministry of Justice and the Tashkent city administration. The Justice Ministry noted that mayors/governors had the discretion to determine which documents should be made public and which should remain undisclosed. The city administration occasionally refrains from disclosing certain economic decisions to the public.

As the country worked to bring its economy, public administration, and educational systems online nationwide, authorities made improvements to the portal for interactive government services and introduced the Face ID payment system in 2023. It now offers voice-enabled assistance, biometric identification, feedback and comments sections and help for visually impaired users. Access to government information remains impeded, however, by the public's wariness of digital technologies and online services, the digital exclusion of marginalized groups, unstable internet connectivity, frequent power outages, and people's limited awareness of services and digital literacy skills.

Another important step toward reform is a [three-year project](#) launched in 2023 with UNESCO and the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation to refine a draft law on information, study internet use and access to information, and help ministries better manage public communication. It will also identify gaps in media and information literacy and develop a national strategy, as well as mount a media campaign to educate citizens on accessing government information on various platforms.

### **Indicator 9: There are diverse channels for information flow.**

Uzbekistan's domestic media ownership environment is characterized by the concentration of media ownership in the hands of political and business elites. The state directly owns major television and radio channels that provide service to the entire country. State-backed local officials and businesses own private TV and radio channels that

broadcast to local markets. Television continues to attract the highest audiences, with Channel One and Uzbekistan 24 being the main sources of government news.

Online media outlets have more diverse ownership than traditional media outlets, but they still experience some level of independence of government influence. The state uses informal levers of control to exert pressure on editors who have the potential to influence editorial content.

Even though a mass media law prohibits media monopoly and requires that media owners are disclosed publicly, shareholder information is not public. In August 2023, the government [cancelled](#) the popular “Minbar” program, the only critical and analytical show on Uzbek television that had been on-air for almost three years. This program, which covered societal issues, was cancelled following criticisms of how the government managed social service funds. When commenting on cancelling the show, former deputy of Uzbekistan’s parliament, Rasul Kuserbaev, [noted](#), “As a result, there are no critical programs left on state television that are far from praiseworthy and do not work with state order, one might even say: everything is beautiful and clean.”

In 2023, the government established rules for obtaining broadcasting licenses, which are granted jointly by the Ministry of Digital Technologies, the Defense Ministry and the State Security Service. However, licensing procedures lack transparent rules in how frequencies are allocated, and the allocation of broadcasting frequencies is subject to political influence.

State-owned Uzbektelecom holds a monopoly on internet access and sells internet traffic to domestic internet service providers, which are prohibited from connecting to the international internet and maintaining satellites. Like Uzbektelecom, private internet service providers can filter

and block websites.

In 2022, the government granted the right to distribute television and radio products of foreign media in Uzbekistan. However, since July 2023 foreign advertising on these television and radio channels has been restricted.

### **Indicator 10: Information channels are independent.**

The government’s ownership of the most popular broadcast, print, and online media leaves little room for independent information channels. In addition to the nine major outlets it owns, the state indirectly controls private media owned by officials and businesses with close ties to the government. For instance, the state owns the second-most popular online media outlet, Daryo.uz, through Uztelecom, and in 2023 ownership of Gazeta.uz was reportedly transferred to Komil Allamjonov, the head of the president’s Information Policy Department.

Several private TV and radio channels experience indirect government influence, through calls from government officials questioning certain stories.

🗣️ **While government agencies do not openly refuse to provide government information to journalists, they use various excuses to delay providing requested information or they provide raw data, which may confuse journalists or require additional time for analysis.**

Online media remain relatively independent of direct government ownership, highlighting their role in promoting diverse content. However, they remain vulnerable to indirect government influence when government officials pressure owners to delete or scrub unfavorable content and force journalists to write neutral content. In 2023, four prominent journalists, including Ilyos Safarov, who is known for asking top officials tough questions, left Kun.uz, a major online news outlet.

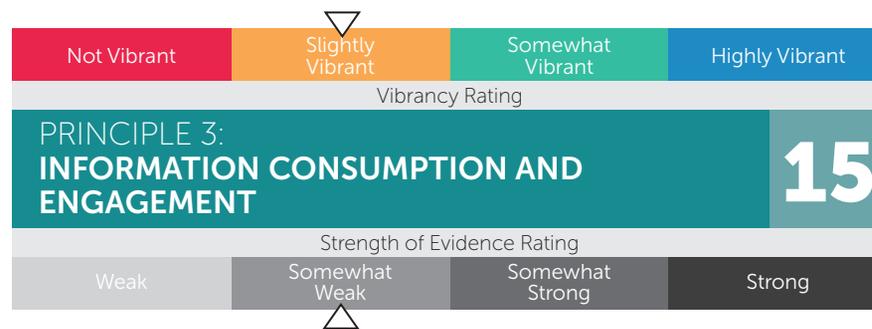
A [2022 study by USAID](#) found that independent media are stymied by regulations that compel them to register with the authorities, restrict funding sources, limit data privacy protections, and vaguely define illegal

content, leaving them open to legal action. The government can block information sources with content deemed illegal without a court order. In 2023, the Senate moved to speed up the registration process for new media.

The National Television and Radio Company, which operates multiple national and regional broadcast networks, is the largest mass media conglomerate. In early 2024, it welcomed a new boss from the prime minister’s office, replacing the longtime former director, but panelists predicted the leadership change would not eliminate the state monopoly and free up TV and radio channels.

In a [commentary for Kun.uz](#) on the state of television in Uzbekistan over the past two decades, political analyst Kamoliddin Rabbimov wrote that the government perceives a free and vibrant television scene as destabilizing. “There are engaging talk shows, debates, analytical programs on TV channels [worldwide]. But Uzbekistan is not able to implement this process yet. We cannot imagine free and vibrant TV channels because we [lack the] imagination. We cannot even imagine what we are missing,” he wrote.

Daily broadcasts of major Russian state-owned media in Uzbekistan augment propaganda from the government of Uzbekistan. Online media indirectly amplify Russian propaganda and information manipulation by translating and republishing news stories from Russian media. The lack of independent information channels and the state’s control of the media and information open a door for Russian influence over Uzbekistan’s mass media and journalists.



Principle 3 received the lowest average score of all VIBE principles in this year’s Uzbekistan study, due to the public’s limited media and information literacy and the absence of community media in Uzbekistan. Panelists gave high marks to the indicator on digital privacy protections and security, even as government agencies had frequent online security lapses. Panelists also credited media efforts to engage with their audiences’ needs despite a restrictive media environment.

**Indicator 11: People can safely use the internet due to privacy protections and security tools.**

The public has little grasp of personal data rights and protections, cybersecurity threats, online safety, and information manipulation. The government, media, and civil society offer training in digital and media literacy through schools and regional IT Parks, set up to foster IT entrepreneurship. Further, USAID has supported several digital literacy and IT courses for women and girls to help them overcome gender-based barriers to entry into the field.

In 2023, the government established security and encryption requirements for those who hold people’s personal information or biometric or genetic data.

Commercial banks registered several incidents of personal data theft, which the central bank initially denied, that revealed security lapses and unaccountable and opaque banking practices.

While the central bank concealed information about cyberattacks on payment systems and argued that banks met all security requirements, [Gazeta.uz interviewed](#) at least 16 people who had had money drained from their accounts via a mobile app owned by Universal Bank. The central bank chairman then confirmed hacks and data breaches at two banks due to faults in their mobile apps. Fraudsters managed to withdraw about \$24,000 in local currency from bank cards during [2 a.m.-6 a.m.](#), when the victims were asleep.

Of the [5,500 cybercrimes committed](#) in Uzbekistan through November 2023, 70 percent involved fraud and theft associated with people's bank cards. Most of the country's 50 payment systems did not meet cybersecurity requirements. Online media also experienced numerous denial-of-service attacks. Even though the state lifted taxes on imported media equipment, media outlets struggled to import and upgrade their security systems.

The Interior Ministry's Cybersecurity Center reported more than 11.2 million cyberattacks on national web resources, traced mainly to IP addresses in the Netherlands, the US, and Russia. Attempted breaches of government web resources were caused by the lack of verification and filtering of user content, faulty coding, and weak password protection, among other deficiencies.

### **Indicator 12: People have the necessary skills and tools to be media literate.**

The government took steps in 2023 to promote media and information literacy, including a setting up a media and information literacy department in the presidential administration and starting a multiyear project with UNESCO to develop a national strategy on the issue.

State- and donor-funded projects continued engaging groups of citizens in media literacy. Among those efforts, the OSCE, government agencies, and national and international NGOs held sessions for educators,

seniors, prosecutors, young people with disabilities, and medical and other professionals on cybersecurity issues, social networking algorithms, the use of fact-checking platforms to counter fakes, and critical-thinking skills for assessing the reliability of information.

A 2023 Internews [study](#) found that Uzbekistanis consume less news and political content than their counterparts elsewhere in Central Asia. Government information dominates television, as there is little other content available in the Uzbek language. Television enjoys only moderate public trust. Private television is underdeveloped, and blogs are most people's preferred news sources. About half of Uzbekistan's people live in the countryside, and they get their domestic news in their local language from television. For entertainment or sports content,

they turn to smartphones. Better-educated, better-off city dwellers tend to consume all sorts of media and more frequently get their news in Russian through paid network providers. Even though citizens widely speak Uzbek at home and work, they prefer Russian-language media, which offers more diverse and more in-depth content.

**“ The public has little grasp of personal data rights and protections, cybersecurity threats, online safety, and information manipulation. ”**

The study found that people of various ages are generally aware of fake news on politics and the economy, though particularly old or young, less-educated, or rural residents are more likely to lack the critical-thinking skills or know-how to verify information.

In 2023, the Cybersecurity Center registered a rise in photos, videos, and voices falsified using artificial intelligence programs. Scammers circulated videos of Mirziyoyev, businessman Alisher Usmanov, and Prime Minister Abdulla Aripov with falsified audio tracks on major social networks, aiming to influence public opinion, spread false content, and steal people's money. The Cybersecurity Center asked users to consult official sources to verify what they see online.

### Indicator 13: People engage productively with the information that is available to them.

People exercise caution about issues they engage with, prioritizing topics that will not raise issues with the government. Sensitive topics include the president and his family, security services and other top-level officials, religious topics. Moreover, there is a thin line between what religious content people are allowed to share/like/comment on.

Political and social debates get mired in hate speech. These debates cover topics on religious garb, and target people from the provinces who have come to work in Tashkent. Population growth in the capital city has led to heavy traffic on roads, crowding in public places and transportation, and higher prices for rent and purchase of apartments in Tashkent.

Common topics widely debated in 2023 were traffic accidents, especially those leading to death of children; growing suicide rates among women and youth; and domestic violence cases leading to deaths of women and children often committed by spouses or in-laws. Individuals whose video posts involved hatred toward provincial residents, which sparked widespread public outrage on social media, prompted police to take legal action.

Throughout 2023, most people in Uzbekistan were intensely interested in information on health issues. Air pollution, which caused respiratory distress nationwide, was a huge topic. There was a run, and price hikes, on air purifiers and humidifiers, which people rated and reviewed on the 294,000-member Potrebiteli.uz (Consumers.uz) group on Facebook. Podrobno.uz and other online media gave daily updates on the increase in harmful inhalable particles outdoors. People blamed frequent dust storms and air pollution on ongoing construction, tree cutting by developers, and car and industry emissions. Authorities responded with proposals to abandon low-quality gasoline, install dust and gas cleaning

equipment in industries that pollute the environment, limit operations of heavy polluters and move them to less-populated areas, and inspect thermal power plants. Other measures included purchasing air pollution monitors, holding monthly “Car-Free Day” events, and restricting the movement of heavy trucks in Tashkent.

Bloggers spurred public discussion on road safety and public transport, leading to a lower speed limit in Uzbekistan’s cities, installation of traffic lights at many unregulated crosswalks, and the purchase of 1,000 natural-gas-powered and electric buses. The media and bloggers also addressed cases of animal abuse and violence against women and children. Distressing videos on social media and lenient penalties

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sparked public outrage and calls for stricter laws and punishments for animal abusers. The government vowed to open animal shelters around the country by September 2024.

Facebook and Telegram remain popular platforms for public debate and collective action. People use both social media for news, marketing, serious political discussion, activism, and community organizing. In 2023, for example, people, organizations, and businesses went online to organize humanitarian aid to victims

of the earthquake in Turkey; sent clothing and school supplies to displaced people in Ukraine; and collected donations of money, blood, medications, and household items for poor, disabled, or sick people in Uzbekistan. After a massive warehouse explosion killed one person and injured 162 in September, people shared photos and videos of their shattered windows, flames, and smoke in the night sky on social media. Support groups sprung up on Telegram and elsewhere, where people donated money and goods and volunteered to help renovate damaged apartments.

**Indicator 14: Media and information producers engage with their audiences’ needs.**

Community events, transparency in authorship, and publishing corrections are not established practices of Uzbekistan’s media community. Rather, media seeks to build trust with audiences through fair and analytical reporting and by receiving letters to the editor. While media monitors online comments sections for posts critical of the president and his policies, they do not respond to individual posts in the comments sections.

In 2023, there was marked engagement and productive information sharing among media, content producers, civil society, and government agencies on the long-overdue law on criminalization of domestic violence. Productive information sharing on air quality and child abuse cases forced the government to draft legislation and take action.

Efforts to measure audience size and engagement have become more sophisticated and effective in Uzbekistan.

The nonprofit Uzbekistan Association of Information Technology Enterprises and Organizations, which includes 11 domestic IT companies, initiated studies to measure the TV and radio audiences. With support from International Media Service (IMS), a California-based ad agency that has been working in Uzbekistan since 2017, Kantar Media conducted a survey in 2023 that found that radio broadcasts from 12 stations in and around Tashkent reached 63 percent of those aged 15 to 64. [This study’s information](#) highlighted the potential market for radio advertisers, which helped develop the wider advertising market.

According to IMS, more people trust advertising on the more-established media of television and radio than on social networks. In any event, digital advertising’s reach is limited, as many people do not use social media. Most advertisers with sufficient budgets buy spots on television, which enjoys the largest share of the advertising market.

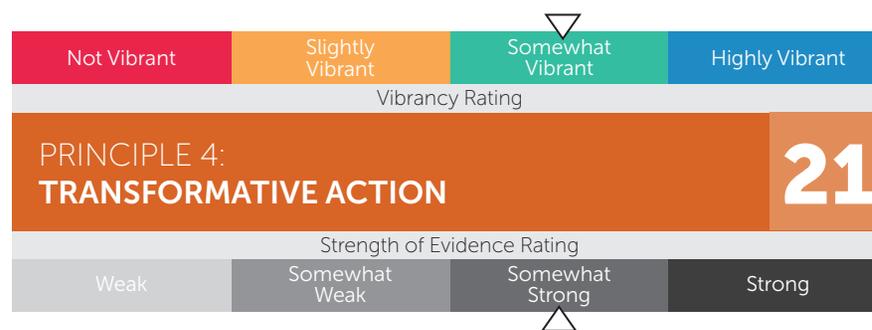
The [2023 survey](#) by IMS of Uzbekistanis aged 6 to 54 found that they spent an average of four hours daily watching television, slightly more than in 2022. Most viewers were women, who favored soap operas and

films, which made up 39 percent of all content. Music, entertainment, educational, and news programs were also popular. IMS concluded that a rise in quality and diversity in Uzbekistani television is spurring the development of new broadcast formats, audience growth, increased demand for advertising, and general advancement of the TV industry.

ITCOMMS, a public relations agency that opened an office in Uzbekistan in 2022, works closely with specialized media to develop analytics, audience segmentation, and tailored communications. In 2023 it launched a service for generating instant press releases, now in Russian and English, using artificial intelligence.

**Indicator 15: Community media provides information relevant for community engagement.**

There is no community media in Uzbekistan.



Principle 4 scored the highest of all the principles, as the government, civil society, and the media share information that leads to reforms and roots out corruption; while this cooperation is still imperfect, it shows marked improvement from previous years. As a result, the VIBE indicator examining civil society’s use of quality information received the highest score in this principle.

In 2023, media and other content producers uncovered corruption in government agencies, especially in health and education. The public and media held government officials accountable for the deaths of 68 children and for shortcomings in public education. Media accounts

and public outrage over abuse cases prompted the government to criminalize violence against women and children, improving Uzbekistan's score in the World Bank's gender index.

**Indicator 16: Information producers and distribution channels enable or encourage information sharing across ideological lines.**

Uzbekistan has the [largest number of information consumers in the region](#) who read and watch multiple types of media. The advances in information technologies and social networks have allowed people to share information, learn about diverse topics, and form opinions. At least one prominent political analyst lamented in 2023 that these technological changes have not replaced authoritarian thinking across state and political institutions. Writing for Kun.uz in March, [Kamoliddin Rabbimov](#) called for new parties and space in parliament for parties and lawmakers free of government control.

People in Uzbekistan struggle to engage in constructive discussions or dialogues about social issues that affect their lives due to fear of reprisals, limited critical thinking skills, and an inability to take these issues to leaders and advocate for positive change.

There is general distrust in the government and media, while consumption of entertainment content outpaces quality news and information.

The country's new constitution decrees that "public life shall develop on the basis of a diversity of political institutions, ideologies, and opinions. No ideology shall be established as the state ideology." But most citizens see no difference among the country's five political parties. All keep a low profile and promote political agendas that align with the government's. Observers from the OSCE deemed the April constitutional referendum "short of genuine

political pluralism and competition." Based on an [OSCE report](#), monitors also found that "the media did not provide impartial and balanced information, undermining voters' ability to make an informed choice." Panelists noted cases of harassment of content producers in the run-up to the referendum. Some journalists reported receiving threats and phone calls about what they could and could not publish regarding the amendments and referendum. Others were summoned by the police and threatened with prosecution.

In the July presidential elections, no candidate challenged the incumbent's stances or meaningfully engaged with voters.

Town hall-style meetings are rare. Instead, people hold discussions and air their differences on social media, mainly Facebook, where exchanges often degenerate into personal attacks, insults, and stereotypes that moderators are compelled to cut off and clean up.

**Indicator 17: Individuals use quality information to inform their actions.**

Throughout 2023, most people did not engage with quality information because there was relatively little to be had.

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Heading into the constitutional referendum and presidential elections, most Uzbekistanis viewed the results as a foregone conclusion. Media were full of aggressive propaganda but no in-depth analysis that would have helped the public make informed decisions. Except for a few that ventured modest criticism, news outlets did not discuss the amendments to the constitution. Television aired propaganda videos and reports from outdoor campaigns calling for "yes" votes.

The stars of popular arts and talk shows said the constitutional reforms would help the country move on from the injustices of the previous regime.

People's trust in health authorities was severely shaken by the deaths of 68 children and serious illness of 18 others linked to contaminated cough syrup from India. The resulting trial of approximately 20 Uzbekistanis and one Indian revealed a network of individuals and entities involved in bribery, negligence, and dangerous medical practices within Uzbekistan's pharmaceutical industry, Daryo.uz reported.

Evidence suggests health authorities were not forthcoming about [measles outbreaks linked to migration flows](#) and vaccine skepticism. In April 2023, the Health Ministry responded to social media posts about measles by confirming 37 cases in the first quarter and calling the situation "under control." But in November, the ministry confirmed 735 cases of measles among children younger than 3 in the Namangan region alone during the first 10 months of the year.

### **Indicator 18: Civil society uses quality information to improve communities.**

The constitution safeguards media freedoms and the rights and interests of NGOs. The country's Uzbekistan-2030 development strategy, adopted in February 2024, includes plans for "developing a civil society, with an active role for mahallas, non-governmental organizations, and free and impartial mass media." In practice, however, authorities rarely engage with civil society and media in making laws and policies.

CSOs rely on donor support and funding for building capacity, along with conducting assessments and research studies. In 2023, Nemoichi.uz, an independent online project, continued sharing stories of gender-based violence and drawing public attention to cases of violence against women and youth. The media subsequently picked up those stories, conducting their own investigations and producing news stories.

CSOs invite media outlets to cover major events such as project launches or end of program roundtables as part of their project activities. Similar to the media, CSOs also struggle to operate in a restrictive environment. Collaboration between the media and CSOs is limited to covering major activities involving public officials and donor representatives.

Authorities simplified procedures for civil society organizations to register foreign grants with the Ministry of Justice in 2023, but they did not include those groups in their discussions. In May, the president emphasized the need to build capacity and guarantee the rights of civil society, while July saw the government committed to double state subsidies and grants for civil society groups.

Despite these steps forward, stringent requirements on non-profits remain. Civil society must notify the ministry of planned events, obtain concurrence on grants, and register foreign staff. Foreign non-profits must have "partnerships" with state agencies to implement donor-funded projects.

Further, a government reshuffle in December 2022 complicated life for non-profits in ways that are still being felt. Ministries were consolidated and officials moved around. Two key agencies for civil society, the Committee on Women and Family and the Youth Affairs Agency, moved from one government entity to another a few times. With new officials in place throughout government, CSOs needed to obtain concurrence on grants from the new leaders who were often reluctant to commit. Organizations had to postpone some activities while they worked to build trust with the new officials.

One panelist said the shakeup was launched without a thorough analysis or strategic vision about the intended goals. Reforms lagged due to the changes in staff, an unstable operating environment, and inconsistencies in direction. Panelists said civil society organizations still compete over

**“ The government's limited engagement with the media and civil society makes for opaque law-making and unaccountable agencies, often feeding corruption and hampering reforms. However, 2023 was notable due to more engagement between the government and civil society, showing improvement from previous years.**

funding and they lack the capacity to implement projects and do not seek to form coalitions with other non-profits. Limited coordination among the government, civil society, mass media, and donors makes it challenging to advocate and seek solutions for thorny social issues.

### **Indicator 19: Government uses quality information to make public policy decisions.**

The government's limited engagement with the media and civil society makes for opaque law-making and unaccountable agencies, often feeding corruption and hampering reforms. However, 2023 was notable due to more engagement between the government and civil society, showing improvement from previous years.

Officials use traditional and social media as well as online new media to keep abreast of people's concerns. They also use online platforms for state services and social networks to engage and solicit feedback.

In 2023, Mirziyoyev lamented his predecessor's hostility to the media. He said he consumes media every day, including online, and vowed to let outlets operate freely, even though some of his allies urge otherwise. "Let them speak but speak fairly. Let them criticize, but criticize fairly. If they help a village, a school and education, then it will be even better," the president said.

Bloggers have been at the forefront of raising people's voices and facilitating important public discussions. Typically, they spot social issues first and bring them to the public's attention, at which point mainstream media pick them up and give them more analytical treatment. The media, civil society, and bloggers exchange information by republishing and commenting on one another's posts.

In 2023, after years of foot-dragging, Uzbekistan criminalized domestic violence and strengthened protections for women and children, capping a collaborative effort among government officials, gender-focused NGOs, journalists, bloggers, and other activists. International observers, including Amnesty International and the [World Bank](#), applauded the efforts and the resulting law.

The law's adoption came at a time of public outrage over the prolonged sexual abuse of three teenage girls at an orphanage—revealed by the Nemolchi.uz (Speak Up) project, which focuses on gender issues—and the light sentences meted out to two perpetrators who were high-ranking local officials.

### **Indicator 20: Information supports good governance and democratic rights**

The new constitution safeguards the freedom of speech and the right to access and distribute information, with some limits to protect, for instance, national security, the constitutional order, social morality, and public order.

That has not prevented many human rights violations and the persecution of journalists and bloggers. In its [annual report for 2024](#) (which covered calendar year 2023), Human Rights Watch decried a deteriorating human rights situation in Uzbekistan. In separate trials, courts gave sentences of up to 16 years in prison to 61 people who had taken part in protests over the sovereign status of the western Karakalpakstan region, although some of the sentences were later reduced to probation. Authorities did not hold law enforcement accountable for 21 deaths and more than 200 injuries during the protests.

The constitution also guarantees the right to form political parties and "other public associations," and to participate in mass movements, but in practice, authorities restrict the right to form independent political parties and an organized political opposition. In 2023, the Justice Ministry refused to register the Haqiqat, Taraqqiyot va Birdamlik (Truth, Development, and Unity) democratic party for the third time, saying it had not gathered the required number of signatures, even as unidentified people repeatedly disrupted the nascent party's signature drives.

The media reported on a dozen cases of torture and death in penal institutions. In the first half of 2023, the Ombudsman received 125 complaints about psychological, physical, or other coercion of people

detained in prisons. In June, a 36-year-old man died after being beaten and strangled by police officers in the Tashkent region. The same month, a court gave 12 police officers three- and four-year prison sentences for beating a prisoner to death in the Andijan region.

In November, as part of a periodic review, the UN Human Rights Council made 244 [recommendations](#) to Uzbekistan, including ending impunity for perpetrators of torture and working to protect journalists and activists from harassment and intimidation.

*This chapter represents desk research, interviews, and the results from questionnaires filled out by people familiar with the state of media and information in the country. Participants will remain anonymous because of Uzbekistan's evolving environment.*

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