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UZBEKISTAN

Having the largest population and armed forces in the region, for more than two decades Uzbekistan has been ruled by president Islam Karimov, whose regime is often referred as “dictatorial.” Even though President Karimov is known for his public calls against censorship and for freedom of speech, the Uzbek authorities are known for their intolerance to political competition and criticism, clamping down on everyone who dares to speak against them.

For the past several years, Uzbekistan has had neither political nor media plurality, due to increasing pressures on freedom speech and expression and the escalation of such repressions since 2005, when Uzbek security forces opened fire on demonstrators, killing and injuring hundreds.

Following the Andijan massacre, independent media organizations, such as the Uzbek services of RFE/RL and BBC that criticized the government’s actions, were forced to close their bureaus in Uzbekistan. In 2011, the government shut down the Tashkent office of Human Rights Watch, which had been the only remaining major international human rights group and supporter of free speech in the country.

In 2012, the Uzbek government continued its systematic pressure on independent journalists, human rights activists, and opposition members. In July, independent journalists Sid Yanyshv and Pavel Kravets were detained by police and questioned for several hours for taking photos in one of the central markets of Tashkent. As a result of being harassed by authorities for two years, independent journalist Elena Bondar, alumni of the OSCE Academy’s journalism summer school in Bishkek, had to leave Uzbekistan and seek asylum in neighboring Kyrgyzstan.

At least two foreign journalists were not allowed to enter the country in 2012. Natalia Antelava, correspondent with the BBC, and Viktoriya Ivleva, a journalist with the independent Russian newspaper *Novaya Gazeta*, were denied entry into Uzbekistan upon arrival at the Tashkent airport.

The Internet, long the least-controlled media domain in Uzbekistan, has come under tighter control by the government. Because of their systematic use of online filtering and censorship, the Government of Uzbekistan has taken a regrettably strong leadership position in the annual “Enemies of the Internet” report issued by Reporters Without Borders, along with other repressive countries such as China, Iran, and North Korea.

Note: Due to the repressive environment in Uzbekistan, IREX did not conduct an in-country panel. This chapter represents desk research conducted on the situation, interviews, and the results of questionnaires filled out by several people familiar with the state of media in the country.

UZBEKISTAN at a glance

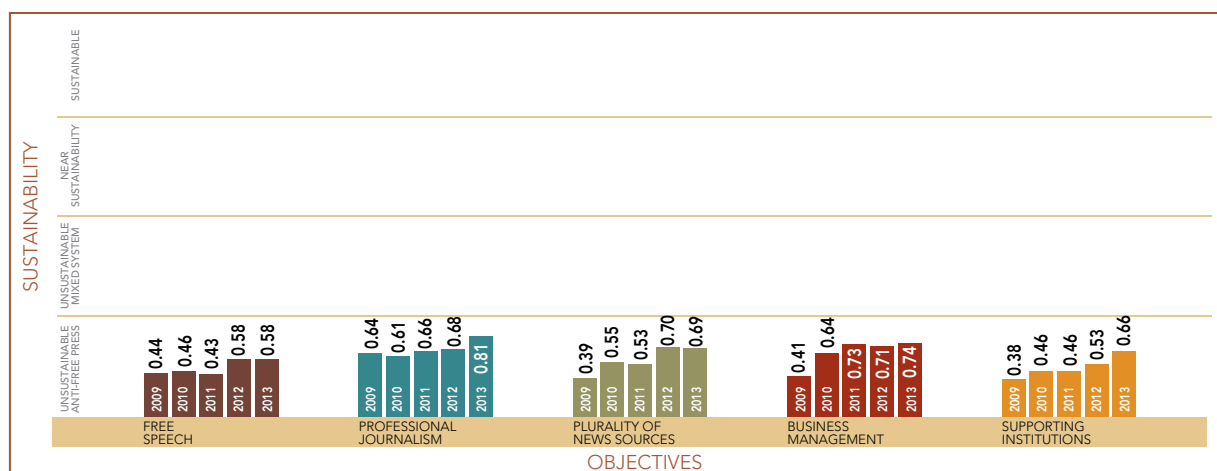
GENERAL

- > Population: 28,661,637 (July 2013 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 Sunnis), Eastern Orthodox 9%, other 3% (*CIA World Factbook*)
- > Languages (% of population): Uzbek 74.3%, Russian 14.2%, Tajik 4.4%, other 7.1% (*CIA World Factbook*)
- > GNI (2011-Atlas): \$44.23 billion (World Bank Development Indicators)
- > GNI per capita (2011-PPP): \$3,420 (World Bank Development Indicators)
- > Literacy Rate: 99.3% (male 99.6%, female 99%) (2003 est., *CIA World Factbook*)
- > President or top authority: President Islam Karimov (since March 24, 1990)

MEDIA-SPECIFIC

- > Number of active print outlets, radio stations, television stations: Print—663 newspapers, 195 magazines, 13 periodical bulletins; Radio Stations—35; Television Stations—53 (Uzbek government)
- > Newspaper circulation statistics: Total newspaper readership is estimated at only 50,000; top publications include *Khalk Sozi* (state-run daily), *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: 4.689 million (2009 est., *CIA World Factbook*)

MEDIA SUSTAINABILITY INDEX: UZBEKISTAN



MEDIA SUSTAINABILITY INDEX 2013: OVERALL AVERAGE SCORES



CHANGE SINCE 2012

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

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

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

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

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

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

OBJECTIVE 1: FREEDOM OF SPEECH

Uzbekistan Objective Score: 0.58

Despite the fact that a number of laws in the country are dedicated to the freedom of speech, media production and protection of journalists, the media industry in Uzbekistan still does not enjoy all of the freedoms such laws allow. Even the article of the Uzbekistan Constitution concerning the inadmissibility of censorship in the country does not protect the media from such repressions. Government authorities tightly control information produced within the country, and journalists working for independent media outlets are often subject to pressure and persecution.

Uzbekistan's political regime under President Karimov is commonly seen as a 'throwback' to the days of the Soviet Union, where the media was kept under tight control. Today, authorities exert rigid control over the editorial policies of both state and independent media outlets. Censorship was officially banned in Uzbekistan in 2002, which was relatively later than in other post-Soviet countries. Article 67 to the Constitution bans censorship explicitly, but still far too many subjects considered as taboo, and the media will not cover them. These mainly include remarks that are critical of any political, social or economic policies of the state, but also include any personal criticisms lodged against President Karimov or his family.

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

FREE-SPEECH INDICATORS:

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

Provisions of laws aimed at protecting freedom of speech, the media, and journalists (such as the Law on the Media, the Law on Protection of Professional Activities of Journalists, and the Law on the Principles and Guarantees of Freedom of Information) are systematically ignored by government officials. Often violations of media laws are justified with references to provisions containing vague definitions and convoluted language, which can be twisted to impede free speech and access to information. As a result, these laws are never enforced with the intention to protect media and journalists in Uzbekistan, but rather create the basis by which authorities are able to exert rigid control over the editorial policies of mass media and to censor any information interpreted as being critical of the regime.

All media activities in Uzbekistan are subject to state licensing. Broadcast media—radio and television—have to get permission to use a particular frequency in order to broadcast. Media outlets must pass this redundant process to be considered legal media entities. One can create informational websites without being licensed by the Uzbek Press and Information Agency (UPIA), but in such cases they will not be considered as a legally registered media outlet and their requests to public authorities are therefore ignored on legal grounds. In addition, representatives of websites not licensed by UPIA may be denied admission to events open to the media.

Starting in January 2012, the media in general, and print media in particular, received fairly significant tax benefits. As a result, distributors of media products such as books are exempt from VAT and social taxes. For small media firms, publishing, and printing have been reduced by 1 percent. Producers of social and political news media, as well as literature for children and persons with disabilities, are exempt from income taxes for five years. In addition, starting in November of 2012, the government reduced the registration fee for all media outlets in the country by half. Mass media organizations, publishing and printing houses received other tax benefits in 2012 as well. However, despite tax privileges and the simplification of the registration process, the procedure for obtaining a media license remains murky and officials can arbitrarily refuse to register virtually any media outlet they choose.

The legislation explicitly declares the independence of the media, including government outlets. However, in practice, the state media are more susceptible to control especially censorship. This is not a function of the degree to which they are or are not fully funded by the state, but rather because they serve as a propaganda mouthpiece for the state. Because they cover state affairs more than other media, they are particularly vulnerable to censorship.

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The Committee to Protect Journalists counts five journalists imprisoned for their work in Uzbekistan. Few are willing to risk challenging the regime in any way, for fear of winding up in prison. As such, crimes against journalists directly related to their work may be more rare than other countries in the region, such as Azerbaijan and Russia. However, government officials and law enforcement agencies routinely violate journalists' rights, particularly the right to information. In July 2012, police detained independent journalists Sid Yanyshv and Pavel Kravets for several hours for taking photos and videos of a central market in Tashkent. In September, the prosecutor's office in Tashkent demanded an official investigation into the circumstances and the grounds for which Yanyshv and Kravets were detained. The result of this investigation, and whether it is still being pursued, is still unknown.

In Uzbek legislation, libel is both an administrative and criminal offense. Articles on libel in the administrative and criminal codes do not provide any clarification for cases of defamation of public officials. However, according to the Criminal Code, the libel by the media is recognized as an aggravated offense, and may lead to six months in prison.

As in previous years, 2012 saw several cases where independent journalists were charged with libel and fined. In March, Viktor Krymzalov, a journalist at *Uznews.net* (an independent media website in Uzbekistan), was found guilty of libel against two citizens in his story about an elderly homeless man, whose home was taken away by his relatives. Court proceedings on Krymzalov's case were held, and after a one-hour hearing that was full of procedural violations, the judge found Krymzalov guilty of libel and fined him with \$1350. An elderly man, who was the subject of the story, was also fined with \$450.

In June 2012, the independent newspaper *Novosti Uzbekistana* was found guilty by a Tashkent Commercial court in "damaging the image" of the political party

Ecological Movement of Uzbekistan (EMU), which held 15 seats in the legislative chamber of the Oliy Majlis, the national parliament. The newspaper questioned the movement's professionalism in tackling ecological problems in the country in its article published in late December 2011. The Court ordered *Novosti Uzbekistana* to cover the procedural fees and publish a repudiation of its article about EMU.

Libel and defamation are not the only articles that independent journalists and media outlets are charged with. In April 2012, journalist Yelena Bondar, who in 2011 was detained in the Tashkent airport and interrogated for several hours about her undeclared CDs and flash drives, was found guilty of incitement of ethnic hatred and overthrow of Constitutional order on trumped-up charges. She was fined with \$2,450 for an unpublished article that allegedly was about discrimination of ethnic Russians in Uzbekistan. As of the writing of this report, Yelena Bondar was in Kyrgyzstan seeking asylum from persecution by Uzbek authorities.

Not only journalists, but also political activists continue to leave Uzbekistan due to systemic pressures by the Karimov regime. In July 2012, Nigora Hidoyatova, one of Uzbekistan's few remaining opposition leaders and head of the unregistered political party Ozod Dehqonlar (Free Peasants), fled the country escaping possible imprisonment. In an interview with the Uzbek service of RFE/RL, Hidoyatova alleged that Uzbek authorities had been preparing charges against her for illegally organizing and seeking to overthrow the government by force.

While clamping down on independent journalists within the country, the authorities are not allowing foreign journalists in. In February 2012, BBC correspondent Natalya Antelava came to Uzbekistan to research an alleged story about the government's secret program to sterilize women. She was stopped in the Tashkent airport and not allowed to enter the country even though she did not need a visa. She was eventually deported from the country, simply on the grounds of "being banned from entering Uzbekistan."

A month later in March, Viktoriya Ivleva, correspondent with the Russian *Novaya Gazeta*, was deported from the Tashkent airport. She reportedly came to Uzbekistan just to hold photojournalism courses for local journalists. Experts, however, link Ivleva's denial of entry into Uzbekistan with her 2006 article that severely criticized President Karimov's regime.

According to the law, everyone must be allowed to seek any information other than that which aims to change Constitutional order, using any legally allowable methods,

including the Internet. Nonetheless, access to many independent information sources that are not influenced by the state is systematically blocked in Uzbekistan. The Centre for Monitoring Mass Communications (commonly known by its acronym, CMMC) is responsible for monitoring the content of Internet websites. It reports its findings to the State Committee for Communications, Information and Communication Technologies, which is authorized to block the IP addresses of sites or articles.

Authorities have long blocked the websites of Ozodlik Radiosi (the Uzbek service of RFE\RL), BBC Uzbekistan, Amerika Ovozi (Voice of America in Uzbekistan), *Uznews.net*, *Ferghana.ru*, and other independent media based outside the country. In February 2012, for unknown reasons, the Uzbek authorities blocked the Uzbek-language Wikipedia site, which has no essentially critical information about Uzbekistan. Some media experts have linked it with an illustrated entry about sexual intercourse, traditionally a taboo subject in the Uzbek media. It is possible that it may have attracted the attention of the expert committee created by the Cabinet of Ministers resolution in 2011, banning such information, and which gave them overall responsibility for monitoring all mass media, including satellite systems and the Internet.

Internet is still not available to the majority of the population, but its audience is rapidly growing each year. According to recent official statistics, the number of Internet users in Uzbekistan exceeded 9 million people in 2012, though state statistics are impossible to verify independently. As noted in earlier MSI studies, the Internet is the least-controlled media format in Uzbekistan. Nevertheless, as the Law on Mass Media clearly indicates, all mass media Internet websites with the .uz domain, or websites of organizations registered in Uzbekistan, are all still subject to tight government regulations. The Uzbek government uses complex measures to control online information and blocks the websites of independent media organizations that provide what is considered “undesirable information.”

Online censorship in Uzbekistan has several levels. While most of the blocked websites are completely inaccessible, some are only partially censored or only have some selected links that are blocked. As the editor of CA-news.org reported in March 2012, that several articles criticizing the Uzbek government were made inaccessible in the country at the site. In April 2012, bloggers from Tashkent reported that all links to the popular Russian news website *Lenta.ru* were filtered by a government agency. Visitors were greeted by the word “Stop!” as they met blocks imposed by Uzbek Internet providers. Wordpress.com, widely used by Uzbek

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dissidents in exile, is also not available for Internet users in Uzbekistan.

The social network Facebook, which was temporarily blocked in the past, is now open but has not gained popularity among Uzbek users. The Russian online services Odnoklassniki (Classmates) and Moy Mir (My World) are the most commonly used social networks in Uzbekistan with at least 2-3 million active users each. Given this, opposition groups in exile and independent media, whose websites are blocked in Uzbekistan, became quite active on these Russian social networks in 2012. They created groups, posted content banned by the authorities and engaged in discussions with users. The People’s Movement of Uzbekistan, the united opposition group headed by Muhammad Solikh, and the Uzbek service of RFE/RL, both have groups on Odnoklassniki that have become quite popular.

In response to the rising popularity of critical voices on social networks, in July 2012 the popular government TV program “Yoshlar” aired a primetime documentary that equated the Internet with the atomic bomb, and argued that foreign social networks were being used as a “modern weapon by enemies from outside.” Authors of the documentary called on Uzbek Internet users to use domestic social networks, such as *Muloqot.uz* and *Sinfdosh.uz*, both of which are affiliated with the government.

The documentary did not mention Twitter, which is becoming more and more popular in Uzbekistan. The most famous Twitter user in the country is Gulnara Karimova, President Karimov’s eldest daughter. With more than 20,000 “followers” and a verified account, she connects from time to time with representatives of human rights organizations and independent media outlets. Her online discussions with Andrew Stroehlein, communications director at the International Crisis Group, and BBC journalist Natalia Antelava in December 2012 about the political regime in

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the country caught the attention of some international media outlets.

Websites registered in Uzbekistan tend to self-censor in order to avoid pressure from the government, especially in the wake of the December 2011 closure of Arbutz.com, one of the few websites to host a discussion forum that contained actual debate.

The cost of subscribing to some foreign publications in Uzbekistan is exorbitantly expensive. The cost can reach several thousands of dollars, making them unaffordable for the vast majority of the population.

The Media Law defines the terms “journalist” and “media worker.” They are employees of media outlets that are registered in Uzbekistan or foreign media outlets that are accredited by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Thus, by extension, an employee of a non-accredited foreign media outlet, an unregistered independent online media outlet, or bloggers are not recognized as journalists according to the law. Therefore, they cannot claim the rights and protections granted to journalists in Uzbekistan, for what they are worth.

OBJECTIVE 2: PROFESSIONAL JOURNALISM

Uzbekistan Objective Score: 0.81

The coverage of events in Uzbekistan by the mass media is most often done from the standpoint of official Tashkent. Due to tight government control and self-censorship, editors have limited independence over the topics they choose to cover. Information concerning any significant change in the political, social and economic life of the country is reprinted, in some cases with minor changes, from perspective of state run media outlets, such as UzA, *Narodnoye Slovo/Khalk Suzi* (The People’s Voice), and *Pravda Vostoka* (Truth of the East).

Some observers suggest dividing journalists working in Uzbekistan into two categories. Those that work for local media outlets and are subject to control and self-censorship and those reporting with foreign media outlets that are more objective but under constant scrutiny by the authorities. While the former enjoy access to state resources and pro-government experts, the latter often have difficulty in gaining access to government agencies. As in most cases, government officials do not wish to speak to the media outlet that may criticize the regime. Journalists working for foreign media outlets within Uzbekistan, who usually unaccredited, are often persecuted by the government.

There have been some gains in professional quality journalism on non-political topics. Unfortunately, the trend can only be seen in a few online newspapers, such as Gazeta.uz and Olam.uz. The editors of Gazeta.uz have been more active in involving experts when covering specific topics, such as social issues specific to housing and communal services, urban planning or the fight against public smoking. They often use non-traditional sources both inside and outside traditional Uzbek media outlets. These editors have greatly improved the quality of material concerning issues such as these. One of the more interesting projects, which Gazeta.uz launched in 2012, was a crowd-sourced map of broken traffic lights in Tashkent. However, their stories on political and economic issues are no different than the issues covered by the state media. They are only slightly “modernized” in terms of their style and structure.

JOURNALISM MEETS PROFESSIONAL STANDARDS OF QUALITY.

PROFESSIONAL JOURNALISM INDICATORS:

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

The editors of Olam.uz have been actively been working with their audiences by crowd-sourcing and working interactively to engage readers. In February 2012, Olam.uz launched a project called “Interactive Power,” in which they asked readers to choose certain government institutions from which they would like to ask questions. The editors chose the most frequently asked questions and sent a written request to the relevant government institution in order to get an answer. By the end of 2012, readers had asked questions of at least eight government institutions, including the State Tax Committee and the Ministry of Education. Unfortunately, the editors only received three responses—from TashTeploEnergo (the state-run company that provides hot water and heating to Tashkent), the Ministry of Labor and Social Security, and the Ministry of Public Health. Despite this positive effort to help citizens engage more with the public sector, most information concerning politics and the economy are posted on the websites by the authorities, reflecting only their official position.

This positive movement by the editors of online news agencies in Uzbekistan can be explained by the plurality of news websites in the country. Even though they refrain from tackling political and economic issues, and their professionalism is below international standards, they still fight for audiences that want reporting on social issues.

Usually, media companies in Uzbekistan do not have their own code of ethics. A code of ethics has, however, been adopted by the National Association of Electronic Mass Media of Uzbekistan (commonly known by its acronym, NAESMI). It essentially echoes internationally accepted standards of professional conduct in the media. However, no regulatory or enforcement agency in the country is tasked with overseeing the actual implementation of the code.

According to most observers, internationally accepted ethical standards in journalism are violated in nearly every media outlet in the country. It is only a question about the degree to which these standards are violated. The most frequent ethics violations that occur in Uzbekistan include the use of single information sources, the violation of the presumption of innocence, plagiarism and accepting gifts from subjects of a story.

Low wages in the media industry largely explain the problem of journalists accepting bribes. According to most journalists, the average salary of a media professional in Tashkent is about \$150–200 per month. Journalists in private sector print media earn more than their colleagues working for state-owned companies. In radio and television, state media workers make comparatively more. In general

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journalists always aspire to more income, but it is often not consistent with ethical standards.

Self-censorship is common throughout all media outlets in Uzbekistan to a greater or lesser degree. State publications and broadcast media outlets are the most susceptible however to self-censorship. This is due largely to the fear of losing a media license, a broadcast network or channel, or even a domain name. Any of these can be taken away by various authorities and is the primary reason behind self-censorship. Editors and journalists of state media outlets can be fired for publishing content that is critical of official state policy and often have great difficulty in finding new jobs.

Uzbek media still cannot cover any expressions of dissatisfaction with the central or local governments. The mass protests happening around the world are taboo in Uzbekistan. Thus, in 2012 the Uzbek media failed to cover the bloody suppression of the oil worker’s strike in Zhanaozen Kazakhstan and the mass protests in Russia that were held as a reaction to the re-election of Vladimir Putin.

Another subject journalists cannot cover is the energy crisis that swept Uzbekistan in the winter of 2012/2013. Not a single media outlet covered the issue even though the entire nation experienced severe shortages of electricity and gas.

As in previous years, entertainment programming prevailed over news and information in the broadcast media market. Private radio stations broadcast nearly constant content filled with music and entertainment programming.

Not all media organizations have modern equipment or facilities. Most print, online, and broadcast media outlets use outdated or obsolete equipment. State television channels have relatively modern equipment. Private broadcast media regularly receives new equipment as well. However these private media outlets do so under the auspices of NAESMI, which in turn makes them indebted to the organization and pressures them to adhere to its absolute, pro-government orientation.

While 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.

There are a few specialized publications in Uzbekistan, but most of them are of fairly poor quality. The only specialized publication that does stand out is the UNDP-funded magazine *Economic Review*. The once-respected, private economic weekly *Business Journal of the East* today is unable to retain quality journalists due to financial constraints. There are magazines dedicated to the aviation industry as well as the mining, oil, and natural gas industries but their audiences are very small.

OBJECTIVE 3: PLURALITY OF NEWS

Uzbekistan Objective Score: 0.69

Uzbekistan boasts a large number of information sources in the country. According to official statistics, there are more than 1,280 print and broadcast media outlets registered in Uzbekistan, more than 60% of which are private. Most of the information products are produced and consumed in capital city, Tashkent.

MULTIPLE NEWS SOURCES PROVIDE CITIZENS WITH RELIABLE, OBJECTIVE NEWS.

PLURALITY OF NEWS SOURCES INDICATORS:

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

However, the quantity of media outlets does not necessarily mean a wide variety of information is available in the country. While 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.

According to official statistics, there are more than 9 million Internet users in Uzbekistan. Those who have Internet access prefer to get their news online, and the number of options for doing so is growing each year. In 2012, at least two news websites (Daryo.uz and Kun.uz) were launched. However, the most popular websites in Uzbekistan are generally entertainment-oriented (Uz-kino.uz, Mytube.uz, Torg.uz, Lyrics.uz). The most visited news websites are Olam.uz, Gazeta.uz, Afisha.uz, and the state-run Mtrk.uz, all of which are heavily subject to self-censorship.

Websites hosted within Uzbekistan have an advantage over foreign websites, because the connectivity is faster and cheaper. This is due to the Internet exchange point Tas-IX (Tashkent Internet Exchange), a network that enables member ISPs to route data among their networks without applying mutual charges. Tas-IX was established in 2004 and today has 26 ISP members.

Given the rise in the number of Internet users in the country, and the significant popularity in social networking sites and blogging platforms, the government has started implementing a new tactic to control the online content of social media sites. In 2011, an Uzbek social network site Muloqot.uz ("dialogue") was launched with support from Uzbektelecom, the state owned telecommunications company. The site is open to any user, but when registering it requires an active mobile phone number in Uzbekistan in order to activate the account. This required feature raised privacy concerns, given that mobile phone numbers in Uzbekistan are registered to individual passports. Moreover, administrators of Muloqot.uz censor all "critical" information in the network, as happened with the account of the Uzbek service of RFE/RL. Given social networking's role in the Arab Spring, some experts speculate that president Karimov's government has launched this "Uzbek" social network to counter any influence from uncensored discussion Facebook.

Despite this, the most popular social networks in the country, Odnoklassniki.ru and MoyMir.ru, are based in Russia, are focused mostly on entertainment features. There are not many users of Facebook and Twitter in Uzbekistan, but the latter is gaining in popularity each year. Generally, the public does not rely on social networking for news sources. However, independent news agencies that are

banned in Uzbekistan are able to post their articles on social networking sites.

Blogging, unlike social networking, is not widespread in Uzbekistan and serves more as an entertainment source. Uzbek bloggers refrain from discussing political matters, and mostly write about their everyday life. The blogging platform Wordpress.com, widely used by dissident Uzbeks in exile, is blocked in Uzbekistan. In the spring of 2012, the Uzbek government twice blocked Livejournal.com, the leading blogging platform in Russia, for a short period of time.

The legal status of blogging still remains unclear in Uzbekistan. Amendments to the Law on Mass Media in 2007 extended the definition of “the press” to apply to websites as well, on the condition that websites receive government-issued certificates. However, the law fails to identify whether bloggers that are not affiliated with traditional media can be considered journalists and therefore protected by the Law on Protection of the Professional Activities of Journalists.

Despite the developed mobile market, with 25 million mobile phones registered to a population of 30 million people, SMS is not used to deliver news in Uzbekistan. Bulk text messaging is rarely used and typically only for advertising if it is used. However, starting in 2011, Uzbekistan suspended mobile text messaging and mobile Internet access (though voice calls not affected) for several hours on the national university entrance exam day. Traditionally held each August, it is part of the government’s effort to prevent cheating on entrance exams. The blackout affected all mobile phone users and demonstrates, yet again, that the authorities have firm control over mobile operators.

In December 2012, the state-owned Uzbek National TV Company launched two new digital television channels, Madaniyat va Marifat (Culture and Enlightenment) and Dunyo bo’ylab (Around the world). The launch followed a decree from President Karimov from July 2012, ordering the development of digital television throughout the country. Uzdigital, a leading digital television company with over 1 million viewers, included the new channels in its package. However, it stopped broadcasting Russian channels NTV and Russia-1, which offer comparatively better information on global events, and covering Uzbekistan when it relates to Russia. Stoppages in the retransmission of Russian television in Uzbekistan have happened from time to time for years.

According to the law, people’s access to domestic and foreign media in Uzbekistan is not restricted. Moreover, in

Given social networking’s role in the Arab Spring, some experts speculate that president Karimov’s government has launched this “Uzbek” social network to counter any influence from uncensored discussion on Facebook.

his annual speech during the celebration of the Soviet-era holdover, Media Worker’s Day, President Karimov repeated his rhetoric that censorship was unacceptable and that everyone should have access to information from all over the world. This is in absurd contrast to the above-recounted blockages of news websites, radio, and television broadcasts.

Unlike in big cities, media outlets in rural areas are limited to only a few entertainment magazines, local newspapers, and local and national television channels. Because of the low connectivity of landline based Internet, residents of rural areas do not enjoy the plurality of news sources that the Internet can offer. However, this is changing, given that mobile Internet is becoming more and more available in rural areas each year.

While the state media only reflects the position of the government, sometimes state media does report on the “opposition” in parliament. This “opposition” is represented by the People’s Democratic Party of Uzbekistan, with the second-largest number of deputies in the lower house of parliament. The party exists only for the appearance of plurality, and just like all other registered political parties, it is controlled by the president’s office.

There are two state news agencies in Uzbekistan: Jahon (which is under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs) and UzA. The only non-governmental news agency is Turkistan Press, but it has no real independence, as it had been created by a presidential decree. The largest state owned dailies are *Narodnoe Slovo/Khalk Suzi* (The People’s Voice) and *Pravda Vostoka* (The Truth of the East). The print media of the various political parties use the services of state information agencies. Foreign embassies and representative offices of international organizations usually use Turkiston Press.

In Uzbekistan, information consumers rarely know the owners of other media outlets apart from state media. According to the observers interviewed, the public is not interested in knowing about the ownership of the media, because the information they all provide is nearly identical.

State-owned press outlets are self-sustainable largely because of required subscriptions throughout various government organizations.

The largest ethnic minorities in the country have their own newspapers in their native languages. For example, newspapers are available in Tajik (*Ovozi Tojik*), Kazakh (*Nurly Jo!*), and Karakalpak, Tatar, and Russian media outlets, which are widely available. All minority media outlets, however, are subject to governmental control. The national news media, generally, covers minority stories only rarely, and on a politically motivated basis.

Uzbek media does not cover stories on sexual minorities, as it is considered to be a taboo subject. Moreover, homosexuality is a criminal offence in Uzbekistan and is punishable by Article 120 (Sodomy) of the country's Criminal Code, with up to three years in prison. Over the history of independence in Uzbekistan, the only person convicted of sodomy was independent journalist Ruslan Sharipov, in 2003. Rights activists are convinced that reprisals against Sharipov, who later received political asylum in United States, were linked to his journalistic activities.

The media industry's approach to foreign and domestic events is highly selective. International events, such as clashes in Syrian or anti-Putin mass demonstrations in Russia, were not fully covered by the media in Uzbekistan. Ongoing investigations into the Swedish company TeliaSonera, the biggest shareholder of the Uzbek mobile operator UCell, concerning whether it is involved in corruption in Uzbekistan, are not discussed by the Uzbek media. An explanation for this may be the fact that Gulnara Karimova, president Karimov's daughter, is a key figure in the investigation.

OBJECTIVE 4: BUSINESS MANAGEMENT

Uzbekistan Objective Score: 0.74

The mass media market in Uzbekistan is still developing and therefore, media organizations in the country are rarely self-sustainable. Among socio-political press outlets, only the state-owned *Narodnoe Slovo/Khalk Suzi* and *Pravda Vostoka*, and the private newspaper *Novosti Uzbeksitana* earn enough revenue to be self sustainable.

State-owned press outlets are self-sustainable largely because of required subscriptions throughout various government organizations. It is a common occurrence in the country for employees of government institutions to have to purchase state owned publications against their will. These outlets are popular among advertisers due to their large, guaranteed circulation.

Novosti Uzbekistana earns most of its revenue from its large circulation and advertising. The newspaper has a large readership due to interesting stories, unrelated to politics or economics in Uzbekistan.

Private television and radio stations, both with entertainment and news/documentary content, have large audiences, thus providing enough revenue to allow them to survive on advertising. Much of their content is translated foreign entertainment material, and it is assumed that proper royalties are not paid for their use. Uzbekistan has a comparatively large population and potential television audience. Furthermore, politically connected ownership of private television stations manage to avoid some taxes on advertising revenues, which are much larger than the newspaper or online markets. The online advertising market is, however, slowly becoming more developed.

Most of the media outlets in the country have more than one advertiser, but none of them can influence editorial policy as strongly or effectively as the state. Even the primary state newspapers *Narodnoe Slovo/Khalk Suzi* and *Pravda Vostoka*, which are financially self-sustainable, have no editorial independence from the government.

MEDIA ARE WELL-MANAGED ENTERPRISES, ALLOWING EDITORIAL INDEPENDENCE.

BUSINESS MANAGEMENT INDICATORS:

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

In Uzbekistan, the choice of advertising platform for most media outlets is not always based on the principles of a market economy. Quite often the big companies prefer to advertise in the state media to make sure that the authorities see their ads. Companies advertise in popular print and broadcast media when looking for a large target audience.

All media organizations, except for a few-state owned newspapers and television channels, are interested in increasing the amount of advertising and its costs. Advertising in the press usually takes 10% to 30% of the content area. On television, it is from 20% to 30% of the airtime, and on the radio it is from 30% to 40% of the airtime. In online media, which is just emerging as an advertisement platform, banner ads usually cover no more than 10% of the area.

Since the Uzbek authorities mostly use administrative leverage to influence the editors of mass media outlets, economic pressure is not typically needed to control the media. Nevertheless, many media organizations, especially in the regions, often get state subsidies and grants.

The government's tight control over the economic sector in Uzbekistan often has bad consequences for the media advertising market. In 2012, the Government of Uzbekistan decided to close Uzdunrobita, the largest mobile operator in the country, reportedly serving more than 9 million of 25 million mobile customers. The Russian company MTS owned Uzdunrobita, and its closure was believed to be connected to an internal dispute with Gulnara Karimova. Some of MTS's top managers were given prison sentences, and the courts seized the company's assets. Given the fact that mobile operators are the biggest advertisers, media companies in Uzbekistan lost one of their largest clients.

Many observers have confirmed that market research in mass media is not conducted in the country. One of the main reasons for this is still the lack of healthy competition among media organizations. Big media organizations are not interested in satisfying the need of the audience, as they mostly operate to further the government's propaganda interests.

As reported in previous MSI studies, in 2009 SIAR-Uzbekistan, a research and consulting group, won a tender from the Tashkent Advertising Association to undertake the country's first significant media marketing research project. SIAR-Uzbekistan's 2009 research consisted of a People Meter analysis of Uzbekistan television channels. According to its findings, the most popular television channels among Tashkent residents were the state program

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

"O'zbekiston" and the public program "Yoshlar." The company also identified the 20 biggest television advertisers, most of which were mobile network operators and manufacturing companies.

There are several online services in Uzbekistan that offer Internet-based statistical data analysis. However, since 2012 the country's leading online media organizations (Gazeta.uz, Afisha.uz, and Olam.uz), began using data provided by Google Analytics, which uses sophisticated tools to count visitors and their background.

OBJECTIVE 5: SUPPORTING INSTITUTIONS

Uzbekistan Objective Score: 0.66

In Uzbekistan there are only two organizations that are, to a certain extent, unions that represent media organizations, owners or editors. NAESMI and the Public Fund for the Support and Development of Print Media and News Agencies. However, both organizations are not independent and have very close ties to the government.

One of NAESMI's main functions is to provide grants to purchase equipment and organize information exchanges and news reporting between broadcast outlets in the country. In addition, NAESMI tightly controls and even determines the editorial policy of all its members.

The Public Fund for Support and Development of Print Media and News Agencies, which is also subject to government control, similarly provides assistance for the purchase of equipment but on a lesser scale. It sometimes organizes short-term (1-2 day) seminars for journalists in the country.

Uzbekistan has Union of Journalists, which automatically includes all state media journalists. But its role in the life of most journalists is limited to the collection of membership

Virtually all means of media distribution—Internet, radio and television networks, transmitters, and especially cellular phone frequencies—are owned or tightly controlled by the government or circles close to President Karimov.

fees. However, independent journalists, who work for foreign media companies and often criticize the regime in their content, are not invited to any media related events and typically are not allowed to become members of journalist's union.

There are no foreign organizations operating in the country to support journalists. After the massacre in Andijan in 2005, when foreign mass media reported on severe human rights violations, the Uzbek authorities adopted a very harsh approach to independent journalists as well as the foreign organizations that use them as stringers or support them financially. Gradually over the past few years, the presence of international organizations and NGOs that support journalists has dwindled. As noted in previous year's report, in 2011 the government shut down the Tashkent office of Human Rights Watch, the only major international human rights watchdog and supporter of free speech left in Uzbekistan.

SUPPORTING INSTITUTIONS FUNCTION IN THE PROFESSIONAL INTERESTS OF INDEPENDENT MEDIA.

SUPPORTING INSTITUTIONS INDICATORS:

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

The only non-government organization that offers professional training to journalists in Uzbekistan is the International Center for Journalist's Training. Despite its name, it is a local NGO and is completely loyal to the government. It does not represent the interests of the media, journalists and freedom of speech, and sometime even tracks journalists who cooperate with foreign and independent media outlets.

Journalism programs at universities in Uzbekistan do not meet modern requirements, and are aimed more at educating propaganda activists rather than journalists. Universities have not changed their curriculum in the past 20 years, providing Soviet-style rote learning and politicized instruction.

The shortage of qualified teachers is another reason for the low quality of journalism education. Due to insufficient funding and the poor technical equipment of journalism schools, students are often not able to publish newspapers or organize educational television or radio stations.

Both NAESMI and the Public Fund organize short-term journalism courses, but they are usually on technical skills. International organizations, such as Internews in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan and the OSCE Academy in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, often organize journalism courses and invite independent journalists from Uzbekistan. Journalists participating in these courses are often subject to harassment and are closely watched by the government.

Virtually all means of media distribution—Internet, radio and television networks, transmitters, and especially cellular phone frequencies—are owned or tightly controlled by the government or circles close to President Karimov. As mentioned earlier, the Swedish company TeliaSonera, the biggest shareholder of Uzbek mobile operator UCell, allegedly paid about US \$330 million to a shady offshore company for the rights to operate in Uzbekistan. Swedish journalists, who investigated the issue, discovered that Takilant LTD, the offshore company that received the funds, had close links with Gulnara Karimova, President Karimov's eldest daughter.

Private companies hold sources of media equipment and newsprint. Access to multiple printing houses is open, except for state-owned media outlets. News stands and kiosks are under the state monopoly Matbuot Tarkatuvchi, a major media distribution outlet that is 26 owned by the government. The company has branches in all regions of the country and circulates only domestic print media, such as *Narodnoe Slovo/Khalk Suzi* and *Pravda Vostoka*,

seen by many as the main propaganda mouthpieces of the government.

Access to the media dissemination market is not restricted. One private media dissemination company, Inter Press, offers subscriptions to more than 3,000 newspapers and magazines both local and foreign. However Inter Press, which disseminates almost every newspaper published in Russia, refrains from disseminating its opposition or independent newspapers such as the Russian *Novaya Gazeta* and *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*. Both papers occasionally publish stories that criticize Central Asian regimes, including Karimov's in Uzbekistan.

Even though the number of Internet users is rising, Uzbekistan is still behind many countries in the region on the quality of broadband Internet speed. According to 2012 statistics compiled by Ookla, leading broadband testing company, Uzbekistan ranks 165th in download speed and 105th in upload speed. This places Uzbekistan behind all Central Asian countries (with the probable exception of Turkmenistan, which has no data available at all). As reported by the Uzbek service of RFE/RL, the slow Internet speed in Uzbekistan may be a result of government's filtering and monitoring of Internet traffic.

List of Panel Participants

Note: Due to the repressive environment in Uzbekistan, IREX did not conduct an in-country panel. This chapter represents desk research conducted on the situation, interviews, and the results of questionnaires filled out by several people familiar with the state of media in the country.