

# UZBEKISTAN



**MEDIA  
SUSTAINABILITY  
INDEX**

**2018**

Tracking Development  
of Sustainable  
Independent Media  
Around the World



# UZBEKISTAN

## AT A GLANCE

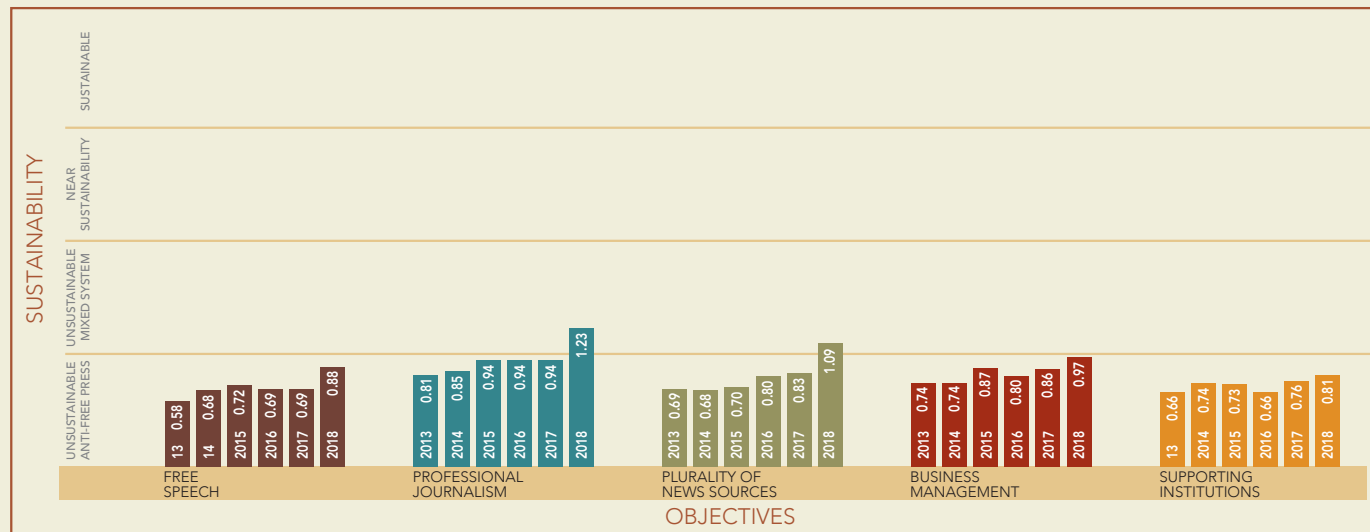
### GENERAL

- ▶ **Population:** 32,653,000 (December 2017 est., Uzbek government)
- ▶ **Capital city:** Tashkent
- ▶ **Ethnic groups (% of population):** Uzbek 80%, Russian 5.5%, Tajik 5%, Kazakh 3%, Karakalpak 2.5%, Tatar 1.5%, other 2.5% (1996 est., CIA World Factbook)
- ▶ **Religions (% of population):** Muslim 88% (mostly Sunni), Eastern Orthodox 9%, other 3% (CIA World Factbook)
- ▶ **Languages:** Uzbek (official) 74.3%, Russian 14.2%, Tajik 4.4%, other 7.1% (CIA World Factbook)
- ▶ **GNI (2015-Atlas):** \$67.51 billion (World Bank Development Indicators, 2017)
- ▶ **GNI per capita (2015-PPP):** \$6,200 (World Bank Development Indicators, 2017)
- ▶ **Literacy rate:** 99.6%; male 99.7%, female 99.5% (2015 est., CIA World Factbook)
- ▶ **President or top authority:** President Shavkat Mirziyoyev (since Sept. 8, 2016)

### MEDIA-SPECIFIC

- ▶ **Number of active media outlets:** Print media: 1,015; Radio Stations: 35; Television Stations: 65; Internet: 395 websites registered as media (Uzbek government, 2017)
- ▶ **Newspaper circulation statistics:** Total newspaper readership is estimated at 500,000; top publications include Khalk Sozi (state-run daily, reached 130,000 circulation in 2013), Narodnoye Slovo (state-run, Russian-language version of Khalk Sozi), O'zbekiston Ozovi (published by ruling party) (Library of Congress, Federal Research Division)
- ▶ **Broadcast ratings:** N/A
- ▶ **News agencies:** UzA National News Agency (state-owned), Jahon, Turkiston Press, Uzbek Telegraph Agency
- ▶ **Annual advertising revenue in media sector:** N/A
- ▶ **Internet usage:** 14.7 million users (2017 est., Freedom House)

### MEDIA SUSTAINABILITY INDEX: UZBEKISTAN



### SCORE KEY

**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.



**Uzbekistan's MSI scores saw improvement this year, with increases throughout all objectives and with the largest gains in the scores for professional journalism and business management (Objectives One and Two, respectively). Despite these increases, Uzbekistan's overall country score leaves it at the low end of the MSI scale and far below internationally accepted standards for a sustainable media system.**

Once-Repressive Uzbekistan Begins a Post-Karimov Opening," announced the headline of one of many articles published during the past year by Western media assessing changes brought to this Central Asian country after the death of its long-ruling leader, Islam Karimov. Indeed, Uzbekistan's new president, Shavkat Mirziyoyev, who came to power in December 2016 after serving more than 13 years as prime minister, has been steadily transforming the country.

In general, there has been a positive shift in Uzbek media during the past year. In October 2017, the capital city, Tashkent, hosted the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE)-sponsored international media conference titled Open Journalism in Central Asia for the first time in many years in Uzbekistan. About 100 journalists, experts, and officials from all over Central Asia gathered to discuss pressing issues in local media markets. Television channels have made numerous attempts to openly discuss pressing problems in the country. Cautiously, online media have begun reporting on various topics once considered taboo. Social media users feel less intimidated expressing opinions on politically sensitive issues online as the use of Facebook and the messaging app Telegram as information sources grows.

Throughout the year, the government released several long-imprisoned dissidents and journalists, including

Muhammad Bekjon and Yusuf Ruzimuradov, who had spent a long 19 years behind bars for working on the opposition group's newspaper. Human Rights Watch, which resumed its work with Uzbek authorities in 2017, had long been calling for their release.

Yet many journalists and media experts interviewed for this year's MSI report believe that the media sphere, despite seeing some positive changes, is far from free.

Two journalists were arrested in the past year: along with a journalist arrested in 2016, they stand accused of writing articles for a website run by exiled opposition politicians and plotting to overthrow the government. One of the detainees reported that he was tortured during interrogations.

Furthermore, independent Uzbek media websites remain blocked. The state-owned communications company Uzbektelecom maintains a monopoly on Internet provision, while its connection speed remains one of the slowest in the post-Soviet region.

The authorities allowed the Uzbek service of BBC to post a reporter in Uzbekistan. However, other Uzbek media and supporting nongovernmental organizations that left the country after covering the bloody events of 2005 in the city of Andijan, when government troops killed scores of civilian protestors, have not been allowed to return.

**OBJECTIVE 1:  
FREEDOM OF  
SPEECH**

0.88

**Uzbekistan has a number of regulatory documents governing the journalism profession that profess to protect free speech and access to information. The country's constitution bans censorship, while its Law on Media declares that all media shall be free and its Law on Defending the Professional Work of Journalists has provisions aimed at protecting journalists. However, the Uzbek authorities often openly flout these laws. "The problem is not in the insufficiency of laws, but in the failure of their implementation," said one local journalist.**

Several contradictory provisions in the media legislation persist and may facilitate media censorship. While the constitution guarantees freedom of speech, it also states that freedom to collect and disseminate information may be limited if it is "directed against the existing constitutional system" and "in some other instances specified by law." Such vague, poorly explained terms appear in other laws regulating Uzbek media as well.

The Law on Mass Media allows for the prosecution of media for publishing and disseminating materials that appeal to "violent change of the existing constitutional order"—a stipulation used by Uzbek authorities against opposition members, independent journalists, and rights activists. It also prohibits publishing information "assaulting the honor and dignity of individuals, as well as the invasion of their privacy." Rights activists note that the latter has no place in a law specifically regulating the mass media, but it could fit in a narrowly drawn civil law relating to defamation.

The law also prohibits journalistic investigation

to "influence the course of the investigative and judicial process," making it impossible for media to report on violations during the investigation of politically charged cases, where convictions are often based on fabricated evidence.

In addition, while the constitution guarantees all citizens enjoy the same rights, the Law on Mass Media directly contradicts that, denying "persons who have a criminal record for an intentional crime" from founding a media outlet. The law further restricts the establishment of media organizations, banning registration of media if any of the founders live outside Uzbekistan. Many experts believe that this provision was specifically designed to deprive political opposition members, most of whom found asylum abroad, of the right to start a media outlet in Uzbekistan.

Journalists still feel intimidated by Article 46/1, added to the Code on Administrative Liability in 2016, which prohibits "illegal collection or dissemination of information about a person's private life, constituting his personal or family secret, without his consent." It can lead to a substantial administrative fine or, for the second offense, jail time up to six months. Journalists fear that this new provision aims to deter reporters from disclosing information about the family of the Uzbek president and his allies, or about the sources of their earnings and their spending on luxuries.

Authorities constantly violate a provision of the Law on Protection of the Professional Activities of Journalists that prohibits them from interfering in journalists' work. In December 2017, police detained reporter Sid Yanyshhev for talking to Tashkent residents whose property was being demolished by the government. Yanyshhev says he was taken to a police department and questioned aggressively for six hours and then released after being fingerprinted.

It must be noted that all media laws in

Uzbekistan include a provision stipulating that if rules in an international treaty signed by Uzbekistan differ from domestic laws, then the international agreement takes precedence. There are at least two such agreements: The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (joined in 1991) and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (joined in 1995). Both documents ensure the right to freedom of expression, including freedom to seek and impart information and ideas through any media—regardless of frontiers. Yet there has not been a single case involving journalists when these provisions were enforced.

In August 2017, Mirziyoyev suggested a number of changes to the Law on Mass Media and the Law on Protection of the Professional Activities of Journalists; parliament is currently discussing the drafts. According to media experts, while these suggested amendments offer several improvements, they fail to address the controversial provisions mentioned earlier.

One of the main proposed additions is a clause to Article 5 of the Law on Mass Media, which states, "The state guarantees freedom of activity, access to information, property rights, protection of the mass media from unlawful decisions of government bodies, actions (inactions) of their officials." It also prohibits obstruction of mass media activities. One Tashkent-based independent journalist interviewed for this study expressed cautious hope, commenting, "This is definitely important. It should strengthen media organizations. However, it will not make much difference if it stays on paper and is never implemented."

Other media law amendments suggested by the president include a definition of online media, reduction of the registration period for media from one month to 15 days, and a seven-day limit for government organizations to respond to journalists' requests.

## U Z B E K I S T A N

A draft Law on Protection of the Professional Activities of Journalists does not abolish mandatory accreditation for journalists, but it details the process of accreditation and the rights granted to accredited journalists. Since 2006, a year after government troops gunned down scores of civilian protestors in the city of Andijan, the government has barred journalists without a Foreign Ministry license from professional activity. The corresponding decree was signed in 2006 by then prime minister Mirziyoyev, ending the careers of many journalists who worked for foreign media organizations such as Reuters, Associated Press, France Press, Deutsche Welle,

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

#### FREE-SPEECH INDICATORS

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

BBC, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL), Voice of America, and others forced to close their operations in Uzbekistan after reporting on the events in Andijan. Since then, only reporters uncritical of the Uzbek government have received accreditation. That is one of the main reasons journalists in Uzbekistan who have been covertly working for foreign organizations for more than a decade doubt that Mirziyoyev will ease control over mass media as president. “I find it hard to believe that a person who tossed all independent media out of the country will tolerate freedom of speech,” said an Uzbek media expert interviewed for this MSI study.

However, there are signs that this may change soon. In May 2017, Minister of Foreign Affairs Abdulaziz Komilov announced that the government had accepted the BBC’s request for accreditation. Later, the Uzbek BBC service posted a job opening for a reporter in Tashkent, although as of March 2018, there was no official word on whether the journalist would receive accreditation to work in Uzbekistan.

Other forms of censorship persist as well. In April 2017, journalist and former spokesperson for the president Sherzod Kudrathodzhayev launched a series of live television talk shows. Part of the newly established International Press Club (IPC), these shows discussed issues that included the forced labor of teachers and doctors. For his sharp questions to government officials, Kudrathodzhayev quickly gained fame—especially in social networks where IPC broadcasted its shows live.

However, in August 2017, IPC announced plans to suspend live broadcast of its talk shows. This decision, according to several independent media, came after a meeting between Uzbek Prime Minister Abdulla Aripov and television journalists. Reportedly, the prime minister criticized IPC’s work and personally scolded Kudrathodzhayev for “having gone too far.” The journalist later refuted these

reports though his Facebook profile.

Registration and licensing is required for all media in Uzbekistan. Suggested amendments to the Law on Mass Media include reducing the media registration period from 30 to 15 days. The Uzbekistan Agency for Press and Information (UzAPI), which has a reputation for corruption, oversees the registration of media organizations, publishing, graphic design, and advertising activity. The former director of UzAPI, Omonullo Yunusov, was detained in 2016 and accused of misappropriating \$60,000. His court hearing started in June 2017.

Uzbek journalists also raised concerns over controversial statements by the new head of UzAPI, Laziz Tangriyev. In an interview with Sputnik in August 2017, he spoke about the need to test individuals hoping to launch a media organization: “In Italy, for example, the editor in chief of a new newspaper, no matter it is private or state-owned, must undergo an 18-month training, then pass a state examination, and only then proceeds to work.”

In 2012, the government offered substantial tax benefits to media in general and decreased registration fees by half. (As of February 2018, initial registration and re-registration fees for media organizations stood at \$320 for television, radio, and news outlets, and \$266 for print and online media.) Blogs have been defined as media outlets since the amended media law in 2007, but so far, there is no information as to whether Uzbek bloggers, who are heavily self-censored, have been asked to register.

In 2017, Uzbek authorities arrested two journalists: Bobomurod Abdullayev, a sports reporter, and Hayot Nasreddinov, a well-known economist and blogger. Along with Akrom Malikov, arrested in 2016, they stand accused of plotting to overthrow the government and writing articles under aliases criticizing the government on a website run by exiled opposition politicians. If they are found guilty, they

## U Z B E K I S T A N

face up to 20 years of imprisonment.

Abdullayev's relatives told Human Rights Watch that since his arrest in September, security services have repeatedly tortured him, denied him his right to legal counsel of his choosing, and restricted visits with family members.

Malikov, a researcher at Uzbekistan's Institute of Manuscripts of the Academy of Sciences, had been detained in mid-2016, but information about his arrest came out only in 2017, when he was questioned in connection with Abdullayev's case. He was charged with extremism for allegedly writing stories under a pseudonym for the opposition People's Movement of Uzbekistan. In January 2017, he was found guilty and handed a six-year sentence.

However, the government also released several long-imprisoned reporters in 2017. Muhammad Bekjon, reporter of the opposition newspaper *Erk* (Freedom), was released in February after nearly 18 years of imprisonment. Bekjon, the brother of a prominent exiled opposition member, was jailed in 1999 for attempting to overthrow the government—charges that he claims were fabricated. In 2013, Reporters Without Borders awarded Bekjon its annual Press Freedom Prize.

After Bekjon's release, Uzbek authorities also freed journalist Jamshid Karimov, the late president Karimov's nephew and member of a rights activist group, who had been forcefully hospitalized at a psychiatric facility in 2012. Then in October 2017, they released the independent journalist Solijon Abdurakhmanov, who had served nearly his entire sentence of 10 years behind bars. Abdurakhmanov, known for his articles about law enforcement corruption, was imprisoned in June 2008 on drug possession charges—accusations often used against critics of the regime. His trial did not meet fair trial standards. In 2014, Abdurakhmanov's family wrote a public letter to then president Karimov to pardon

the journalist because of his deteriorating health; the letter went unanswered.

On the sidelines of the OSCE media conference in Tashkent in October 2017, the OSCE representative of Freedom of the Media Harlem Désir met with Uzbek officials and called for the release of all imprisoned journalists in Uzbekistan.

According to the law, everyone must be allowed to seek any information—using any legally allowable methods, including the Internet—unless they aim to undermine constitutional order. Nonetheless, Uzbekistan still blocks access to many independent

**While the constitution guarantees freedom of speech, it also states that freedom to collect and disseminate information may be limited if it is “directed against the existing constitutional system” and “in some other instances specified by law.”**

information sources. The Center for Monitoring Mass Communications, responsible for monitoring the content of Internet websites, 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.

Every year, global media watchdogs name Uzbekistan an “enemy of the Internet,” alongside the likes of China and Iran, for its tight control over the Internet. Uzbek authorities have long blocked the websites of the Uzbek service of RFE\RL (locally known as Ozodlik), BBC Uzbekistan, Amerika Ovozi (Voice of America in Uzbekistan), the information outlet Fergana, and other independent media based outside the country. However, Uzbek journalists note that in 2017, the authorities lifted blocks on certain

media websites for short periods of time.

In 2015, the Milan-based Hacking Team, a company that sells online spying tools to governments worldwide, confirmed that Uzbekistan spent more than €500,000 in recent years on remote control software. According to a Uzbek online security expert who talked anonymously to the Russian-language television channel *Nastoyashee Vremya* (Current Time) in 2016, Uzbek security services began using Italian-made spy software in June 2015—a month before the quality of Skype calls, file exchanges in messengers Viber and WhatsApp, and other Internet services deteriorated in the country. Most media consumers do not know how to bypass online censorship. However, according to journalists, the number of advanced users using VPNs, proxy servers, or sophisticated anonymity software such as TOR on a daily basis is increasing.

Media organizations with blocked websites have turned to social networks and messaging apps to disseminate and crowd source information instead. For example, *Ozodlik's* Facebook page, which has more than 400,000 followers, sees on average 3.5 million interactions monthly.

In 2017, no violent crimes were committed against media members that were related to their professional activities. Usually, the authorities depend on other measures, such as administrative and criminal prosecution, to control journalists. For example, in November 2017, local police of the Buka district (70 kilometers from Tashkent) detained rights activist Yelena Urayeva and two reporters: journalist Bettina Sengling from *Stern* (a German magazine) and Uzbek freelance photographer Timur Karpov who were monitoring forced labor in state-owned cotton plantations. They were released after several hours of questioning.

Legislation declares the protection of editorial independence, including from media owners.

However, in practice, this is never enforced. Therefore, most media, especially state-owned, cannot express independent opinions: they depend completely on the ruling regime. Over the past year, the new president publicly slammed state television channels on numerous occasions. At one point, in June 2017, he criticized the head of the National TV and Radio Company Khurshid Mirzohidov for poor work (he was later fired) and appointed popular singer Ozodbek Nazarbekov as a director of Yoshlar TV—one of the biggest television channels in Uzbekistan.

There are no official restrictions on entry to the journalism profession on the basis of gender, ethnicity, or religion—only on the basis of loyalty to the authorities, which remains one of the main conditions for journalists to work in state-controlled media. However, concern over Islamic extremism can lead to religious bias, according to a Tashkent-based reporter interviewed for this report: “It is almost impossible for a man with a beard or a woman in a hijab to get a job in a media organization.”

It is difficult, though, for foreign journalists to obtain accreditation. According to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the government accredited just 41 foreign journalists in 2017, mostly from progovernment Russian, Chinese, and Turkish media (31 in 2016). Today, the country hosts bureaus of six foreign media organizations: Arezu Radio TV (Afghanistan), Agency Khabar (Kazakhstan), Jingji Ribao (China), Agency Xinhua (China), TRT (Turkey), and BBC Monitoring (United Kingdom). The latter is not involved in reporting but monitors Uzbek media and translates selected materials.

The government does not control entrance to journalism schools.

**OBJECTIVE 2:  
PROFESSIONAL  
JOURNALISM**

1.23

**Although the media gained a little more freedom in 2017, professional journalism standards in Uzbekistan remain poor—far below international standards. Experts interviewed for this year’s MSI report indicated numerous reasons for this, including the lack of full editorial freedom, fear of persecution, poor journalism schools, and low wages.**

However, as pointed out by a local journalist, this does not mean that the country lacks professional journalists. “Qualified [journalists] have to self-censor. This is the only way to survive. You either leave the country, and try to work from exile, or stay at home and be part of the system,” says the journalist.

Self-censorship has grown more serious since 2007, when the government revised the Mass Media Law. The new regulations make owners, editors, and journalists from both state-supported and private media responsible for the content of print and broadcast media.

Since media companies are under the government’s watch, and independent journalists are often persecuted, many professional journalists have had to flee Uzbekistan over the years. Some are able to continue their work from foreign countries, and are heavily dependent on donors. Others had to change their profession. Those who remain in Uzbekistan are too afraid of the repercussions to practice fair and balanced reporting.

Alternative viewpoints are still rare in the media, especially on political and economic issues, which is why the live talk shows organized by IPC were seen as a major breakthrough in Uzbekistan’s media freedom in the past year. However, optimism

quickly faded after IPC suspended its live shows and changed their format following critiques by government officials.

As in previous years, the Uzbek RFE/RL and BBC services are the only major media offering balanced reporting on political topics, and they are not based in Uzbekistan. For instance, during the past year, local media did not cover the story on Mirziyoyev’s family members appointed to high-ranking government posts. Nor did they report on Mirziyoyev’s close ties with the Russian business tycoon Alisher Usmanov and the potential conflict of interest, even after he used the businessman’s personal plane for numerous official visits abroad.

At the same time, some local media cautiously started covering certain issues previously considered too sensitive. For instance, Kun.uz published a number of articles on the forced labor of budget workers, mostly teachers and doctors, in cotton plantations (in 2017, the government decided not to send university students to harvest cotton).

Entertainment content still dominates both state and private television. However, in mid-2017, the state-owned National TV and Radio Company, with Mirziyoyev’s support, launched a new 24-hour news channel, Uzbekistan 24—a move some officials said was the best thing to happen in Uzbek media in 2017. Blogger Yevgeniy Sklyarevsky, who participated in the opening ceremony of the channel, later wrote, quoting unnamed officials, that the new television channel would be free of censorship. Nevertheless, independent media connect the dismissal of Khurshid Mirzohidov, head of the National TV and Radio Company, with a documentary broadcast on Uzbekistan 24 that criticized the late president Karimov, who is still revered in Uzbekistan.

The blogging community in Uzbekistan is still small and does not have a specialized code of ethics. Rather, a general understanding of what

**Journalism meets professional standards of quality.**

**PROFESSIONAL JOURNALISM INDICATORS**

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

authorities will and will not allow drives bloggers. However, several bloggers, especially those on Troll.uz, which is run by a Tashkent-based online activist, have initiated heated discussions on Facebook over some pressing issues in the country (mostly not political) over the past year. "Social media users are acting more freely than before. People are less afraid to criticize the authorities, at least online. And some local media have started quoting critical remarks by bloggers and social media users, which is a good sign," said a Tashkent-based independent journalist.

Journalism schools in Uzbekistan offer old programs that have changed little since the fall of the Soviet Union. Uzbek journalists have few opportunities to receive quality training or improve basic skills and are unable to use internationally accepted standards in their day-to-day reporting.

Uzbek media outlets rarely have their own codes of ethics, and the ones that do have codes violate

generally accepted standards. The most common violations among Uzbek journalists are favoritism and plagiarism, as well as the use of a single source of information. In 2017, the Prague-based, Russian language television channel Current Time published two reports showcasing systematic plagiarism and photo manipulation by the Uzbek state news outlet Uzbekistan National News Agency (UzA). The outlet neither responded to Current Time's inquiries, nor commented on its reports.

However, it must be noted that UzA, which has long been one of the main propaganda channels of the Uzbek government, produced a series of articles over the past year criticizing the current state of media in the country. In addition, it published critical op-eds by BBC and Voice of America reporters on its website. This, along with other improvements in freedom of speech, has boosted the media community's hopes. "I would describe this as cautious hope. The new president is trying to change some things in the country for better. Yet it is still one person deciding, not by popular vote," said one of the media experts interviewed for this year's report.

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 (in other cities, it is less). Journalists in the private-sector print media earn more than their colleagues working for state-owned companies.

The National Television and Radio Company of Uzbekistan owns fairly advanced equipment and is capable of producing polished programs. Most local print media are still poorly equipped for the job, however, and most journalists are not trained in how to use new equipment. Journalists interviewed for this report note, though, that the lack of professional skills and fear of persecution affects the quality of journalism in Uzbekistan far more than the state of

the equipment.

There is very little investigative reporting, since most forms are deemed a threat to the government. There are independent media working on investigative reports, but they have to operate from outside of Uzbekistan. Local private media rarely work on this genre, and state-run investigations often toe the line with government propaganda.

Regarding the coverage of niche topics, almost all professional spheres in Uzbekistan, including education, health care, and military have their own specialized publications, which survive only because of forced subscription and state subsidies. *Economic Review* is considered a relatively independent magazine, yet it cannot publish objective articles on various economic issues.

Journalist Natalia Shulepina's blog Sreda.

**"Social media users are acting more freely than before. People are less afraid to criticize the authorities, at least online. And some local media have started quoting critical remarks by bloggers and social media users, which is a good sign," said a Tashkent-based independent journalist.**

uz specializes in environmental issues. There is also *Uzinfocom*, a magazine devoted to computer technology and communication issued by the Ministry for the Development of Information Technologies and Communications.

Specialized groups in popular social networks, such as Facebook, Odnoklassniki, and Telegram partially fill the need for information on niche topics. Popular groups include Poterebileti Uz, where users discuss consumer rights, and Voditeli Tashkenta, a community of drivers.



**OBJECTIVE 3:  
PLURALITY  
OF NEWS**

1.09

**Most journalists and experts interviewed for this year’s report agreed that while the plurality of media sources has increased in Uzbekistan, there is a lot to improve in this field.**

There are more than 1,500 registered media outlets, including 65 television channels, over 1,000 print media, and nearly 400 websites. According to Uzbekistan’s Agency for Press and Information, the majority of registered media are privately owned, hence independent. However, in reality, they remain under the close watch of the authorities.

The government continues to block the websites of numerous independent media covering Uzbekistan. However, these media have been successfully bypassing online censorship with the help of social networks and messaging apps. For instance, the Uzbek service of RFE/RL’s bureau in Tashkent was closed in 2006, but it currently has 400,000 Facebook followers and more than half a million followers in Odnoklassniki, a popular Russian social network. Both platforms report high engagement rates.

In general, Facebook became quite popular as an information source in Uzbekistan during the past year. Mirziyoyev launched a Facebook page and urged other officials in the country to do the same.

Online media in Uzbekistan, especially the top-visited Kun.uz and Daryo.uz, actively use Telegram, which gained popularity in the country after authorities partly blocked WhatsApp in 2014. The Telegram channel, run by Kun.uz, has nearly 300,000 subscribers.

In September 2017, Uzbektelecom, which has a monopoly on providing Internet to the country,

announced it was beta testing a new messaging app, Uzphone, aimed at competing with popular apps on the market. Some media experts see this as yet another government attempt to control the country’s communications.

Internet penetration continues to expand. Uzbektelecom still has a monopoly on Internet provision; it acts as a gateway for all Internet traffic—distributing it among privately owned (yet government-controlled) Internet service providers. As in previous years, users increasingly access the Internet through mobile devices. In April 2017, the number of mobile Internet users reached a record high of 14.7 million.

Accessing the Internet requires registration with a provider that retains a scanned copy of the client’s passport. The same is required to buy a SIM card for a mobile phone. Registration for the purchase of a satellite antenna is not required.

More than half of the country’s 32 million people have access to digital television. Last year, the government announced that by the end of 2018, digital television will cover the whole country, and the analog signal will be disconnected. At the moment, the public’s free digital package includes seven private and 13 state-run television channels.

Content is exchanged freely between private television and radio channels, regulated by the National Association of Electronic Media (NAESMI), a professional association of private Uzbek broadcasters founded in 2004. Today, it unites more than 50 private broadcast media. According to Firdavs Abduholikov, head of NAESMI, the association’s goal is to establish an equal market for broadcasters and support regional broadcasters. However, media experts believe that NAESMI’s true goal is to control the activities and content of broadcast media. Despite the stated voluntary nature of membership, NAESMI’s members were reportedly

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

**PLURALITY OF NEWS SOURCES INDICATORS**

- ▶ A plurality of affordable public and private news sources (e.g., print, broadcast, Internet) exists.
- ▶ Independent broadcast media produce their own news programs.
- ▶ Citizens’ access to domestic or international media is not restricted.
- ▶ Transparency of media ownership allows consumers to judge objectivity of news; media ownership is not concentrated in a few conglomerates.
- ▶ State or public media reflect the views of the entire political spectrum, are nonpartisan, and serve the public interest.
- ▶ A broad spectrum of social interests are reflected and represented in the media, including minority-language information sources.
- ▶ Independent news agencies gather and distribute news for print and broadcast media.
- ▶ Broadcast ratings, circulation figures, and Internet statistics are reliable.

forced to join the association under the threat of losing their licenses.

Urban Uzbeks continue to enjoy more information diversity than their rural counterparts. By virtue of understanding Russian, many city residents watch Russian television channels via satellite antennas or through digital television. Russian television, such as Russia 24 and Perviy Kanal, which have become main propaganda channels for the Kremlin in recent years, are still quite popular in Uzbekistan. Both channels are included in packages of all private providers of access to digital television in the country.

In many regions, power outages remain a major obstacle to electronic and broadcast media access.

## UZBEKISTAN

The problem is particularly acute in winter, when some regions receive electricity for only four to five hours a day. With no cable Internet and low-quality mobile networks, people in rural areas receive their information mostly from government-controlled radio and television channels.

Officially, illiteracy is not an obstacle for media consumers in Uzbekistan, with near 100 percent literacy. However, the population's media literacy is quite poor. Many young Uzbeks are unable to differentiate objective reporting from state propaganda or fake news. They see independent Uzbek news websites, such as Ozodlik and BBC, as enemies of Uzbekistan—a result of the government's efforts to label them as such since 2005.

Ownership of private media is still not completely transparent. Media experts believe that it is not uncommon for government or security services officials to establish front companies to hide the true ownership of a media outlet. State media, on the other hand, tend to be more transparent.

**Media experts believe that it is not uncommon for government or security services officials to establish front companies to hide the true ownership of a media outlet. State media, on the other hand, tend to be more transparent.**

Four news outlets operate in Uzbekistan: UzA (state run), Jahon News Agency (run by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs), the independent news outlet Turkiston-Press, and Uzbek Telegraph Agency. All offer strictly official information that is never critical of the government.

Ethnic minority groups—such as Russians, Tajik, Kazakhs, and Koreans—have a small number of print media in their own languages, but their circulations

are quite limited. Moreover, such newspapers rarely bring up the most pressing issues of minority communities, as the government heavily controls ethnic and interethnic issues.

### OBJECTIVE 4: BUSINESS MANAGEMENT

0.97

**Media in Uzbekistan are rarely sustainable. With a severely limited spectrum of revenue sources, media outlets struggle to cover operational costs. Economic conditions within the country make it nearly impossible for media outlets to run efficiently or profitably. As the advertising market is still developing, private companies survive mainly on subsidies from their owners or grants.**

Several journalists interviewed for this year's MSI study argue that corruption is also a major reason that media organizations fail to operate as efficient businesses. Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index 2017 placed Uzbekistan at 157 among 180 countries, scoring only 22 out of 100—meaning corruption is rampant in the country's public sector.

Corruption scandals involving media are not rare. In 2014, the independent Uzbek media reported on a wide-scale corruption scheme at the National Television and Radio Company, showing that almost half of its advertising revenue goes into the pockets of company officials. In 2017, the former head of the UzAPI, a government body in charge of registration and licensing media, was accused of misappropriating \$60,000.

Only a few entertainment print media and state-owned newspapers, such as *Nardonoye Slovo/Halk Suzi* and *Pravda Vostoka*, earn enough

to support their operations fully. A large portion of income for state-owned print media, which usually publishes official, often boring, information, comes from compulsory subscriptions by public institution employees across the country and people receiving state benefits such as pensioners and disabled people.

College and university students who receive state scholarships are also forced to subscribe to government-funded newspapers. There are only a handful of news-oriented private media outlets with relatively effective business models, such as the Russian-language news websites Gazeta.uz and Novosti Uzbekistana. However, the latter was forced to close its print version and go online in 2014, reportedly because of financial constraints.

In one new development, though, the problem of involuntary subscriptions to print outlets are now

### Independent media are well-managed businesses, allowing editorial independence.

#### BUSINESS MANAGEMENT INDICATORS

- ▶ Media outlets and supporting firms operate as efficient, professional, and profit-generating businesses.
- ▶ Independent media do not receive government subsidies.
- ▶ Media receive revenue from a multitude of sources.
- ▶ Market research is used to formulate strategic plans, enhance advertising revenue, and tailor products to the needs and interests of audiences.
- ▶ Advertising agencies and related industries support an advertising market.
- ▶ Broadcast ratings and circulation figures are reliably and independently produced.
- ▶ Advertising revenue as a percentage of total revenue is in line with accepted standards at commercial outlets.

## U Z B E K I S T A N

being openly discussed in Uzbek media. On the talk program *Munosabat*, aired on the O'zbekiston television channel in June 2017, Karimberdi Turamurod, a journalist with the entertainment-oriented *Bekajon*, accused *Halq Suzi* of forceful subscriptions. The newspaper's deputy editor in chief Shuhrat Jabborov, also a guest on the show, refuted the journalists' accusations. "A newspaper, by its nature, is propaganda. It should propagate good things to people. And we do promote our newspaper in places. Do not confuse that with forced subscription," he said. The show initiated heated discussions on social networks, with many users confirming the existence of involuntary subscriptions to various state-owned print media.

**The newspaper's deputy editor in chief Shuhrat Jabborov, also a guest on the show, refuted the journalists' accusations. "A newspaper, by its nature, is propaganda. It should propagate good things to people. And we do promote our newspaper in places. Do not confuse that with forced subscription," he said.**

Uzbek language news websites, such as Daryo.uz and Kun.uz, and sports-oriented websites such as Stadion.uz and Uff.uz, have grown in popularity in recent years, boosting their revenue from advertising. Yet even the most popular websites in the country are far from self-sustaining, heavily relying on public funds, grants from international organizations, or direct subsidies from owners.

It is hard to tell if bloggers draw stable income from their activities in Uzbekistan. Popular blogs, such as Troll.uz, engaged in both commercial and state-sponsored activities in 2017. However, they do not disclose their income sources or levels.

The state-owned television channels Yoshlar (Youth) and O'zbekiston still have the most geographical coverage and draw top prices for advertisements. For example, one minute of prime time on Yoshlar can cost \$4,900, according to a pricelist provided by advertisement outlets.

Marketing research on the media is extremely rare. State media does not feel the need for it, since they are funded and controlled by the government, and it is often too costly for private print media. Their editors and founders struggle constantly to meet market needs. Nevertheless, experts express hope that with the expansion of Internet penetration and digital television, marketing research will become more affordable and easier to conduct.

In 2016, Tashkent Advertising Association, which unites almost all big advertising outlets in the capital city, undertook the only openly conducted research on the media market in recent years. The survey compared the popularity of three media platforms: television, radio, and Internet. It reportedly polled more than 1,700 people, mostly between the ages of 20–45 years; their locations were undisclosed. The survey showed more than 95 percent of respondents used the Internet every day, while 53 percent watched television at least once a day. Many journalists doubt the accuracy of these results.

In May 2017, the newly founded National Media Council of Uzbekistan, which includes major broadcasters, providers of digital television services, and advertising outlets, announced that beginning in 2018, the London-based consultancy group Kantar would measure television audiences in the country. The joint Uzbek-Turkish research and consulting group SIAR conducted the last such metrics in 2009.

### OBJECTIVE 5: SUPPORTING INSTITUTIONS

0.81

**Despite the relative easing of control over mass media during the past year, truly independent media support groups still do not exist in Uzbekistan. Currently, there are only a few local organizations that represent the interests of media organizations, owners, and editors, and all depend heavily on the government.**

One, NAESMI, was founded in 2004 and unites dozens of nongovernmental television and radio stations. According to the Uzbek service RFE/RL, the group, run by government loyalist Firdavs Abduholikov, maintains near-total control over private broadcasting media.

In 2013, NAESMI suspended its activities for several months following the arrest of Abduholikov, allegedly in connection with then president Islam Karimov's eldest daughter Gulnara Karimova, who was accused of extorting nearly \$1 billion from telecommunication companies. A year later, after charges against Abduholikov were reportedly dropped, the group resumed its work.

NAESMI's main functions include providing grants for upgrading technical equipment and organizing free information exchanges and news reporting between member broadcast companies. Given its close ties with the government, NAESMI also controls and even determines the editorial policy of its member outlets.

All media company staff members belong to the Creative Union of Journalists. Even though the union does not promote its members' legal interests, journalists are obliged to pay monthly dues, deducted automatically from their salaries. The union organizes an annual professional

## U Z B E K I S T A N

competition called Oltin Qalam (Golden Pen) to reward the most loyal journalists.

After the Andijan tragedy, the Uzbek government closed down nearly all foreign-sponsored nongovernmental organizations working in the country. Organizations that offered support to media and journalists were also forced to cease operations. Since then, Uzbek reporters could only receive professional training that meets international standards abroad. The Open Society Institute, the US Department of State, Internews, the OSCE Academy in Bishkek, and other major donor organizations frequently fund these courses. Dozens of independent journalists underwent such trainings in neighboring Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, risking

### Supporting institutions function in the professional interests of independent media.

#### SUPPORTING INSTITUTIONS INDICATORS:

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

persecution upon their return.

However, local journalists interviewed for this report hope that change will come soon. They have reason to believe so: In July 2017, Komilov announced the government was open to resuming cooperation with Human Rights Watch, which had been forced to close its Tashkent office in 2010. Following the government's statement, Steve Swerdlow, a Central Asia researcher at Human Rights Watch, visited Uzbekistan several times, each time openly calling on the authorities to release imprisoned dissidents and journalists.

The quality of journalism education in Uzbekistan remains poor. The Uzbekistan National University and the State University of World Languages both offer journalism training, but in general, their curricula are heavily theoretical, and they lack practical experiences for students.

Uzbekistan has a relatively well-developed printing and distribution industry, but the government, through the Uzbekistan Press and Information Agency, controls much of it. Print media are distributed through the companies Matbuot Tarqatuvchi and Matbuot Uyushmasi via subscriptions or kiosks. "There are many printing houses, but since there is no independent print media in the country, their presence does not in any way affect the situation with freedom of speech, which today exists exclusively on the Internet," said one Tashkent-based journalist.

Internet service providers have no alternative to Uzbektelecom, which has blocked dozens of websites critical of the government, to obtain Internet access.

Internet connections in Uzbekistan are among the slowest in the former Soviet Union. In November 2017, the Speedtest Global Index report, conducted by the Seattle-based Ookla, ranked Uzbekistan 127 out of 130 countries based on speed of fixed

broadband Internet (5.81 Mbps) and 119 based on mobile Internet speed (6.47 Mbps).

In his address to the parliament in December 2017, Mirziyoyev promised that Internet speed in Uzbekistan would become 2.5 times faster by the end of 2018. For that, he said 2,000 kilometers of fiber optic communication lines would be placed and more than 4,000 new mobile communication support stations would be built, although he didn't provide additional details on the scope of the effort.

**"There are many printing houses, but since there is no independent print media in the country, their presence does not in any way affect the situation with freedom of speech, which today exists exclusively on the Internet," said one Tashkent-based journalist.**

All journalists and media experts interviewed for this year's MSI agree that for the foreseeable future, the Internet, as the country's least-controlled media platform, will remain a crucial tool for ensuring freedom of speech in Uzbekistan. Young people in the country have been increasingly turning to mobile messaging apps, especially Telegram, for consuming and disseminating information.

### List of Panel Participants

*IREX did not conduct an in-country panel discussion because of Uzbekistan's repressive environment. This chapter represents desk research, interviews, and the results from questionnaires filled out by several people familiar with the state of media in the country.*