

UZBEKISTAN



MEDIA SUSTAINABILITY INDEX 2019

Tracking Development
of Sustainable
Independent Media
Around the World



UZBEKISTAN

AT A GLANCE

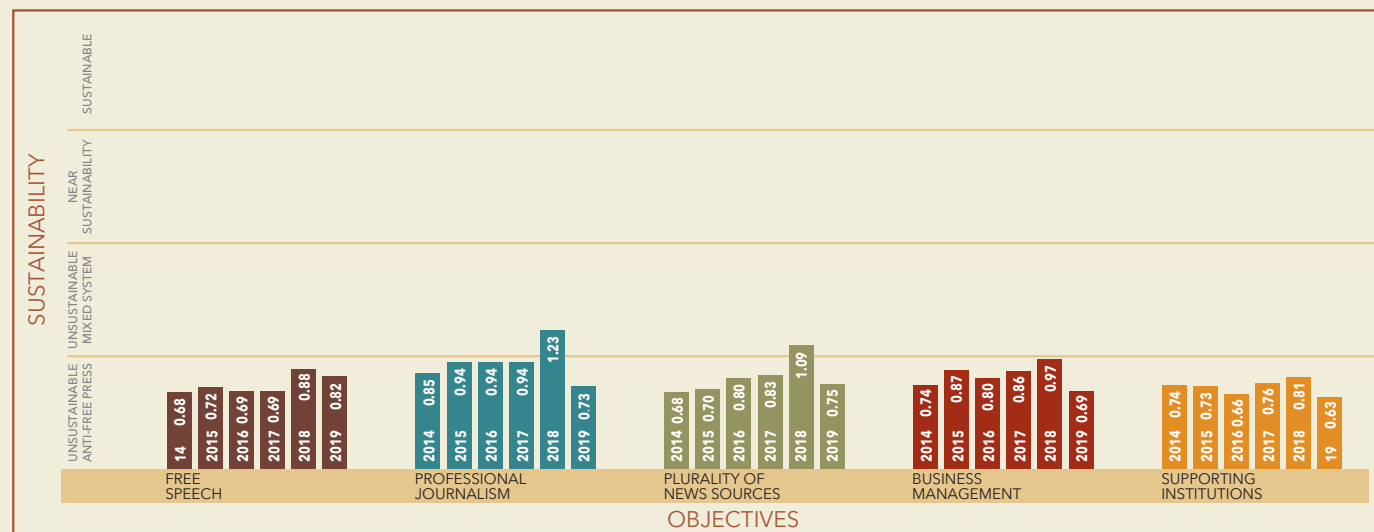
GENERAL

- **Population:** 30,023,709 (July 2018 est., CIA World Factbook)
- **Capital city:** Tashkent
- **Ethnic groups (% of population):** Uzbek 83.8%, Tajik 4.8%, Kazakh 2.5%, Russian 2.3%, Karakalpak 2.2%, Tatar 1.5%, other 4.4% (2017 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 (2017-Atlas):** \$64.83 billion (World Bank Development Indicators, 2017)
- **GNI per capita (2017-PPP):** \$7,140 (World Bank Development Indicators, 2017)
- **Literacy rate:** 100% (2016 est., CIA World Factbook)
- **President or top authority:** President Shavkat Mirziyoyev (since Sept. 8, 2016)

MEDIA-SPECIFIC

- **Number of active print outlets, radio stations, television stations, Internet news portals:** Print media: 1,015; Radio Stations: 35; Television Stations: 65; Internet: 395 websites registered as media (Government of Uzbekistan, 2017).
- **Newspaper circulation statistics:** Total newspaper readership is unofficially estimated at between 500,000 and 1 million; top publications are believed to include *Halk Suzi* and its Russian-language edition *Narodnoye Slovo* (state-run daily) and *Pravda Vostoka*.
- **Broadcast ratings:** N/A
- **News agencies:** UzA (state-owned), Jahon (state-owned), Turkiston-Press (ostensibly private but effectively state-owned), and UzTAG (owner unknown).
- **Annual advertising revenue in media sector:** N/A
- **Internet usage:** Between 28% and 50% of the population (estimates from International Telecommunication Union and Freedom House). Based on the July 2018 population estimate from the CIA World Factbook, the total range is approximately 8.4 million to 15 million.

MEDIA SUSTAINABILITY INDEX: UZBEKISTAN



SCORE KEY

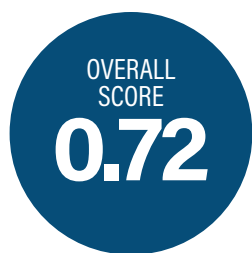
Unsustainable, Anti-Free Press (0-1): Country does not meet or only minimally meets objectives. Government and laws actively hinder free media development, professionalism is low, and media-industry activity is minimal.

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.

Scores for all years may be found online at <https://www.irex.org/msi>



Uzbekistan's scores all declined this year, with the largest drops in Objective 2 (Professional Journalism), Objective 3 (Plurality), and Objective 4 (Business Management). Despite the country's tentative thaw under President Shavkat Mirziyoyev, overall reform efforts and their impact on the media sector has been uneven, with panelists noting that the relative freedom the media has gained in the post-Karimov era highlights deficiencies and problems in the journalism sector. As a result, Uzbekistan remains in the "unsustainable/anti-free press" MSI classification.

Since succeeding the late, long-ruling autocrat Islam Karimov in 2016, President Shavkat Mirziyoyev has pursued a path of cautious reforms. Indeed, Reporters Without Borders applauded his efforts by moving Uzbekistan up four notches to 165th out of 180 countries in its 2018 World Press Freedom Index. However, the ultimate extent of these reforms is not yet clear. For now, Uzbekistan continues to be an authoritarian regime where, according to Freedom House's 2018 Freedom in the World report, press independence "remains severely restricted."

The first two-and-a-half years of Mirziyoyev's presidency have witnessed media outlets covering previously sensitive subjects, such as forced labor, police torture, and corruption within local government. At the same time, censorship is still alive and well. The government continues to restrict the media sector through a combination of formal procedures and incarcerations as well as informal clientelism and leverage. For example, according to the 2018 Human Rights Watch (HRW) report *You Can't See Them, but They're Always There: Censorship and Freedom of the Media in Uzbekistan*, several high-profile journalists and human rights activists have been released from prison, including Solijon Abdurakhmanov, Muhammad Bekjanov, Yusuf Ruzimuradov, and Dilmurod Saidov. However, new politically-motivated criminal charges were filed against the author Nurullo Otakhanov, the journalist Bobomurod Abdullaev, and the blogger Hayot Nasreddinov.

Very often, journalists themselves aid and abet these problems by practicing self-censorship or shoddy reporting. The media sector in Uzbekistan "is slowly waking up to its function of a check on the executive," one of the panelists remarked, "[But] many journalists have been trained to serve the government, and that's a hard habit to get rid of."

With an average age of 28.5 years as of 2017 according to official statistics – constituting as much as 58.5 percent of the total population by the calculation of the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) – and the numbers of mobile Internet users rapidly increasing according to the World Bank, Uzbek- and Russian-language media are both experiencing a period of growth and change. Authorities are beginning to unblock critical news websites, and journalists are being allowed to access and make use of overseas information sources. Finally, citizen journalism appears to be steadily on the rise. The most notable – even heroic – instance was when citizen reporters brought to light the tragic murder of a school student.

In general, the panelists held that media members have reason to remain hopeful, if still cautious. In the words of one panelist, "The media in Uzbekistan have a long way to go before they would be at a level necessary to fully adhere to international standards, but they have also come a long way from where they were only three years ago."

**OBJECTIVE 1:
FREEDOM OF
SPEECH**

0.82

While Uzbekistan's constitution and laws on the freedoms of speech and press have always had very problematic aspects, they have also not been wholly repressive. Free speech is singled out as one of several protected intellectual freedoms in Chapter 7, Article 29 of the constitution. The Law on Media declares that all media shall be free, while the Law on Protection of the Professional Activities of Journalists prohibits authorities from interfering in journalists' work.

The real problem lies in how the effectiveness of these laws is undermined by numerous formal exceptions and loopholes, the most notorious being Article 46/1 of the Law Code on Administrative Liability. The article prohibits "illegal collection or dissemination of information about a person's private life, constituting his personal or family secret, without his consent." Violations can lead to a substantial administrative fine for the first offense and to jail time for the second. Uzbekistan's journalism community, including those working for the state and for private and independent organizations, have feared that the article's true purpose has been to deter reporters from disclosing information about the income streams and luxuries of the families of the country's ruling elite. "Insulting" or "slandering" either the "honor of the president" or the "honor of the Uzbek people" — offenses that are unclear, legally speaking — are other punishable offenses for journalists that can result in jail time.

However, the ultimate freedom-of-speech problem is informal state practice. For example, the Agency of Press and Information (UzAPI) is responsible for licensing media outlets, as well

as overseeing them for any violations of rules or laws via its Center for Monitoring of Mass Communications. Although the licensing procedure is rather simple, UzAPI is infamous for rejecting licensing applications without explanation — or approving them in exchange for bribes. In general, UzAPI's fusion of registration and monitoring powers "strengthens the leverage of the government of freedom of speech," assessed one panelist.

Private-media content is also subject to indirect state vetting via the National Association of Electronic Media (NAESMI). Nominally a professional association of private broadcasters founded in 2004, it unites more than 50 private broadcast media outlets. NAESMI states that its purpose is to establish an equal market for broadcasters and support regional broadcasters, yet panelists cited its nebulous presence as a means to enforce self-censorship on non-state journalists. Indeed, despite the supposed voluntary nature of membership, NAESMI's members are reportedly compelled to join the association under the threat of losing their licenses, according to the panelists.

"Usually, journalists and human rights activists are perceived as reckless people fighting against the government and rarely get popular support."

Accreditation seems tailor-made to quash independent journalism. Per a 2006 law signed by then-Prime Minister Mirziyoyev, only the state can decide who is permitted to practice journalism. Defying this law results in severe punishments for locals and foreigners alike, as German journalist Edda Schalger learned in 2016. She was detained and then deported for reporting on Karimov's death from inside Uzbekistan while on a tourism visa.

The accreditation process itself is said to be tortuously long and lacking formal criteria for assessment. "Getting an accreditation is virtually impossible, especially if the trip has not been agreed [to] by the highest political elite," Schlager remarked, following her deportation.¹

Indeed, the state continues to deny accreditation to locals as well as foreigners who were affiliated with any of the Western press agencies expelled from Uzbekistan following the 2005 Andijan massacre. These agencies include Reuters, the Associated Press, Agence France-Presse, BBC Uzbek, Deutsche Welle, the Fergana News Agency, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL), and Voice of America (VOA).

That said, in 2017 and again in 2018 authorities permitted BBC Uzbek to base a correspondent in Tashkent.² And in 2018, reporters from *The Wall Street Journal*, the *Financial Times*, *The New York Times*, and *The Diplomat* were allowed to enter Uzbekistan for short reporting trips. According to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' website, as of January 2018 Uzbekistan had 41 foreign correspondents from non-Western press agencies. At least 10 of the agencies were pro-government or government-affiliated Russian, Chinese, and Turkish media outlets.

Even if an applicant is successful in attaining state accreditation, obstacles continue to appear. Individual government agencies manage their own accreditation procedures, so journalists with state accreditation may be unable to obtain approval

1 Volosevich, Alexey. "German Journalist Deported from Uzbekistan." *Uzbek-German Forum for Human Rights*. November 16, 2016. <http://uzbekgermanforum.org/german-journalist-edda-schlager-deported-from-uzbekistan/>.

2 Safo, I. "Президент Мирзиёев Ўзбекистонда Би-би-сига рухсат берилишини айтди." *BBC.com*. October 8, 2018. <https://www.bbc.com/uzbek/uzbekistan-45787208>.

for press conferences or for interviews with officials. The state also reserves the right to revoke an accreditation at a moment's notice without explanation.

The issues around licensing have seen some positive developments. For example, the online news agency Hook Report received its license as well as approval for its online domain, even though it regularly reports on sensitive issues, including corruption, monopolistic practices within the economy, and gender issues.

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.

Meanwhile, in something of a new routine, state media outlets are reporting on corruption among lower-level officials. Also, state media have occasionally reported accusations of police using torture on suspects to obtain confessions.

Uzbekistan has seen an apparent increase in citizen journalism, which has been instrumental in reining in abuse by local officials. Videos taken by mobile phones and sent to local and foreign media outlets have led to reprimands and even dismissals of dozens of village, town, district, and regional officials as well as school teachers and police officers. Another important incident occurred in the 2017 case of Jasurbek Ibragimov, a lyceum student who was beaten to death by his classmates. Citizen journalists revealed the incident to the public and organized a petition online that eventually led to the trial and conviction of those involved.

However, the panelists pointed out important caveats to the new openness. "Media outlets refrain from reporting on any suspicious or questionable activities by top officials," one panelist explained. Another concurred: "Obviously, they never discuss the very high echelons of the government, including the president, but seem to have a fair coverage of everything else." Moreover, Mirzoyoyev has made his own publicly critical comments, which cover a number of issues in governance, social well-being, education, and healthcare. Journalists use such comments as a weather vane to determine what they can and cannot report.

In November 2017, HRW was permitted to resume its work in Uzbekistan. Its staff interviewed 22 journalists, editors, and media owners from 17 individual domestic and international media outlets or publications operating inside Uzbekistan. Of the domestic outlets, some had been officially registered by the state, while others operated illegally without registration. HRW also interviewed

political observers, human rights activists, lawyers, and the relatives of journalists working abroad. The interviewees described a period of positive change under Mirziyoyev, but all pointed to censorship and fear of repression by security services as continuing major factors in how they conduct their work.

A giant leap toward freedom of speech occurred during the trial of journalist Bobomurod Abdullaev, blogger Hayot Nasriddinov, and business owners Ravshan Salaev and Shavkat Olloyorov. They were accused of "conspiracy to overthrow the constitutional regime" for articles they had written under the collective pseudonym Usman Khaknazarov about the Karimov era. The defendants were given diminished sentences in March after Mirziyoyev directly intervened. One of the most notable features of the trial was when the judge granted Abdullaev permission to be examined for signs of torture. While the examination did not lead to the case's dismissal, it was nonetheless a dramatic departure from the established norm in Uzbekistan, where courts invariably ignore all allegations of torture against authorities.

Impressive as the Abdullaev case was, only a few months later in September, four bloggers were arrested for posts they had written calling for a greater role for Islam in Uzbekistan — an extremely sensitive subject for authorities, who have been anxious to maintain the country's secular character.

Another important change has been authorities' diminished wariness with respect to media outlets accessing and relaying information from the outside world. Media can now and often do use foreign sources for information, although they must adhere to "a list of foreign resources that is available in the country," said one panelist. It is unclear whether this list is an official document or something informal that authorities have communicated to editors.

Finally, the panelists also drew attention to the

general population's antagonism toward journalists as another remaining obstacle to freedom of speech in Uzbekistan. "The country and society have not fully grasped the idea of free speech," one panelist said. The widespread cultural principle of *uyat* (shame) often makes audiences, especially in rural areas, resistant to the occasional critical news reports that circulate through society. "Obviously, what constitutes offensive material is a matter of subjective values, thus severely limiting what many would find to be free speech," one panelist explained, also noting that violations of journalists' human rights rarely provoke public outcry, "Usually, journalists and human rights activists are perceived as reckless people fighting against the government and rarely get popular support."

OBJECTIVE 2: PROFESSIONAL JOURNALISM

0.73

"Generally speaking, journalists in Uzbekistan are in a similar situation as Snow White waking up from a very long and deep sleep," remarked one panelist. Uzbekistan's score for professional journalism declined significantly in this year's study. Another panelist explained that the decline reflects how "the relative freedom of the media gained after 2017 has revealed many problems in media standards and the level of professionals in the field of journalism."

Journalistic professionalism in Uzbekistan has long been noted as weak, with the causes attributed primarily to the state. But internal conditions also play a key role, and according to our panelists, the rabbit hole goes deep. Reporting in Uzbekistan is "far from fair [or] objective and not well sourced,"

said one panelist, adding that reporters frequently fail to verify sources or conduct basic background research and fact-checking. Very often journalists even use the same single source of information. Plagiarism of each other, and occasionally of foreign press agencies; advertorials; active misquoting and manufacturing of quotes; and manipulation of photographs all remain persistent problems. International standards of journalism are either not known or are disregarded. "The world has moved on, and there is much catching up to do," one panelist lamented.

One way the situation could be addressed would be for Uzbekistan's expatriate journalist community to return and share their training and experiences from abroad; interest in returning is growing within this community, if measured. The vast majority of Uzbek journalists living abroad left due to persecution in the Karimov era, and they are waiting to see whether Mirziyoyev makes good on his promises of a less hostile regime. In 2018, VOA correspondent Navbahor Imamova dipped her toes in the water when she was permitted by authorities to conduct some lectures and workshops with journalism students as well as meet with colleagues in state media outlets.

"Generally speaking, journalists in Uzbekistan are in a similar situation as Snow White waking up from a very long and deep sleep," remarked one panelist.

The Uzbek media sector is crippled by a major knowledge dearth not just in terms of basic journalistic skills, but also news beats. The panelists said that Uzbekistan's journalistic community is being confronted with the need to cover topics that were off limits during the many decades of the

Karimov era. Some journalists and news agencies, especially those based on social media platforms, do attempt to cultivate beats or niche reporting. They regularly focus on specific issues of interest either to themselves or their communities, but usually lack the expertise to cover their own topics.

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).

Transparency International ranked Uzbekistan 158th out of 180 countries for its 2018 *Corruption Perceptions Index*, indicating that corruption is rampant. Yet, two of the panelists sharply disagreed with each other regarding whether corruption is a regular practice among journalists in Uzbekistan — and if so, to what extent. According to one panelist, who is based overseas, the type of control the government exerts over the media sector means journalists have little opportunity and little need for

bribery. If the state wants the media to report — or not to report — on something, it can simply use sheer coercion to do so, rather than money or gifts. The other panelist, who is based within Uzbekistan, argued that this ignores bribes coming from other parts of society. “The profession is not prestigious at all,” the panelist said, “[The lack of status] leads to corruption, hidden advertisement, and lobbying.” To this, the first panelist remarked that “hypothetically” such lobbying could indeed occur but only “as long as the policy does not contradict that of the state.”

Journalists on the panel reported that the average salary of a media professional in Tashkent is between USD \$150 and \$200 per month, with state journalists on the low end of the average and private journalists on the high end. Moreover, journalists are in the middle of the spectrum for professional wages — paid less than lawyers but more than teachers and physicians. “Journalism appears to represent a steady job, which is an important benefit in a country where between two to four million citizens annually seek work outside the country,” commented one panelist.

Journalistic equipment and facilities are assigned via state organizations and are more or less adequate, depending on the institution. For instance, the National Television and Radio Company of Uzbekistan controls fairly advanced equipment and is capable of producing polished programming, whereas most rural print media remain chronically ill-equipped. InHowever, an urban-rural divide also pervades, with urban journalists being both more exposed and better trained to use technology than their rural counterparts.

OBJECTIVE 3: PLURALITY OF NEWS

0.75

As of 2017, according to Mirziyoyev himself Uzbekistan has more than 1,500 registered media outlets. Other statistics indicate that this includes 65 television channels, about 1,000 print media, and nearly 400 websites. To outward appearances, Uzbekistan’s media sector under the new regime has become more diverse “than any time in the past except for a brief period in the early 1990s,” in the words of one panelist. Yet, on close examination, media outlets are actually “rather homogeneous,” said another panelist, “What differentiates between the media outlets and their content is the quality of their materials.” Private and state media alike, and in particular television channels, focus on entertainment content rather than news. “Today, the news and materials on politics, economic reforms, and social issues are in high demand, but qualified journalists remain absent in almost all specialties,” remarked the same panelist.

Another panelist specifically noted the purveyance of official statistics by journalists in lieu of independent investigation and analysis. Worse yet, said the panelist, official statistics are typically manipulated if not altogether fabricated.

Much of the shallow content is a legacy of the Soviet era. For example, nearly all trades and professional spheres in Uzbekistan, ranging from education, health care, and journalism to law enforcement and military, have their own specialized journals.

According to one panelist, 40 percent, state media is a nominal part the media landscape in Uzbekistan. But in fact, it dominates both

directly and indirectly. In terms of sheer reach, the country has four top news agencies: the Uzbek National News Agency (UzA), the Jahon News Agency, the Uzbek Telegraph Agency (UzTAG), and Turkiston-Press. Jahon (a branch of the MFA) and UzA are directly owned and controlled by the state. UzTAG and Turkiston-Press exclusively run content produced by authorities — the very same content run by UzA and Jahon.

According to the International Trade Administration (ITA), the most widely read economic and business journals are *Bisnis Vestnik Vostoka* (BVV; Eastern Business Review), *Darakchi* (Herald), *Prestizh* (Prestige), *Argumenty i Fakty* (Argument and Fact) and *Ekonomicheskoe Obozrenie* (Economic Review). ITA claims that television channels such as *Yoshlar* (Youth), *Kino* (Cinema), and *Sports* tend to have relatively small audiences, but this was disputed by the panelists.³

“Today, the news and materials on politics, economic reforms, and social issues are in high demand, but qualified journalists remain absent in almost all specialties,” remarked a panelist.

Uzbekistan does have a number of media outlets centered on minorities, representing the country’s Russian, Tajik, Karakalpak, Kazakh, and Korean communities. The circulations are quite limited, despite some of the communities being spread across the country. Moreover, they rarely bring up the most pressing issues for their people, as the government is exceedingly sensitive about

³ <https://www.export.gov/article?id=Uzbekistan-Trade-Promotion-and-Advertising>

U Z B E K I S T A N

ethnic and inter-ethnic issues. This is especially the case for Karakalpak-language media, as the autonomous Republic of Karakalpakstan constitutes the northwestern half of Uzbekistan and has several, if small, independence movements.

Programming from Russia is periodically rebroadcast but quite noticeably delayed, due to authorities' review. In general, whether local or foreign, "any content Uzbek censors deem undesirable is removed before airing," one panelist noted.

Uzbekistan has a relatively well-developed printing and distribution industry, but the government controls it via UzAPI. Print media are distributed via subscriptions or kiosks by the companies Matbuot Tarqatuvchi and Matbuot Uyushmasi.

The Internet remains a beacon of genuine diversity for those who know how to use it. According to the BBC, 50 percent of Uzbekistan had access to the Internet in 2018. Critical but local websites, such as the Hook Report, Gazeta.uz, and Sreda.uz, can be accessed from within the country. However, blocking of foreign human rights and news websites continues unabated, notwithstanding denials by the state provider monopoly, Uzbektelecom.

Ozodlik Radiosi, the Prague-based Uzbek-language branch of RFE/RL, was banned from the country in 2006. However, it still commands a primarily in-country audience of approximately one million followers across Facebook, Twitter, and the Russia-based Odnoklassniki. (For context, Uzbekistan's total population is approximately 32 million.)

Journalists from Uzbekistan have long noted the use of virtual private networks, proxy servers, and Tor by everyday users. The Russian-based Vkontatke is popular among labor migrants working in Russia.

Meanwhile, WhatsApp and especially Telegram have grown enormous and serve as channels to the outside world and forums for social and political discussion. For example, Zhenskiy Uzbekistan is a private channel on Telegram dedicated to feminism and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender affairs — topics so taboo that even most liberal and critical independent media outlets dare not tackle them.

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.

In mid-2018, Uzbekistan led the world in the number of Telegram users, with 300,000 subscribers to the Kun.uz channel alone.⁴ The popularity of

the app has even spawned a phrase in Uzbek — *Telegramlashamiz*⁵ ("Call you soon")—and prompted Uzbektelecom to launch its own rival service, Uzphone⁶. Unsurprisingly, app download figures from Uzbekistan⁷ show that Uzphone has been a flop, while Telegram has remained in the top three servers.

Facebook came in from the cold in 2017, when Mirziyoyev himself launched a Facebook page and urged other officials in the country to do the same. Since then, many critical media outlets have moved onto that platform, as well as onto YouTube. However, both services experienced periods of blocking for long periods of time during 2018, without explanation.

Internet connection quality remains stubbornly low while prices continue to rise, in part because Internet service providers have no alternative to Uzbektelecom, an administrative relic from the Soviet era. For several years, including 2018, Uzbekistan has ranked 127th out of 130 countries in the Speedtest Global Index report, conducted by the Seattle-based Ookla, a data testing and analysis company.⁸ In 2017, Mirziyoyev promised that Internet speed in Uzbekistan would become 2.5 times faster by the end of 2018. As of February 2019, the government claimed to have succeeded by a whopping 88 percent and stated that Uzbekistan's continued low rank was actually the result of "dozens of new

5 <https://decryptmedia.com/6632/telegram-fever-crypto-messenger-app-russia-iran-popularity>

6 <https://www.spot.uz/ru/2018/01/17/uzphone/>

7 <https://www.similarweb.com/apps/top/google/store-rank/uz/all/top-free>

8 Ookla. "Uzbekistan: March 2019." *Speedtest Global Index*. March 2019. <https://www.speedtest.net/global-index/uzbekistan>.

4 Yeniseyev, M. "Telegram, stifled in Russian and Iran, gains popularity in Central Asia." *Caravanserai*. May 25, 2018. http://central.asia-news.com/en_GB/articles/cnmi_ca/features/2018/05/25/feature-01.

countries" being added to Speedtest's index as well.⁹ (Ookla could not be reached for comment.)

The inadequacy of Internet access is primarily felt among low-income citizens and among those who live in rural areas, where electricity and telecommunications infrastructure are patchy. Despite this, the authorities have spent more resources on surveilling the Internet than expanding it. In 2015, the Milan-based Hacking Team, a company that sells online surveillance tools to governments around the world, confirmed that Uzbekistan spent more than €500,000 (\$560,000) on its proprietary software. An Uzbek Internet security expert, speaking anonymously on the Russian-language television channel Nastoyashee Vremya in 2016, said that Uzbekistan's security services began using Italian-made spy software in June 2015. In July, the quality of Skype calls, file exchanges in messengers Viber and WhatsApp, and other Internet services deteriorated in the country.

According to the panel, such control and surveillance practices continued right through 2018. For example, mobile phone operators are required to check the content of SMS communications, and they are even empowered to switch off services at a moment's notice from authorities. In addition to Uzphone, the government has established its own social media networks in an attempt to supplant Vkontakte, Odnoklassniki, and Facebook. But just as with UzPhone, such efforts so far appear to have failed.

9 Redaktsiia zhurnala. "Скорость фиксированного интернета в Узбекистане, согласно рейтингу Speedtest Global Index, увеличилась за год на 88%." *InfoCom.uz*. February 19, 2019. <http://infocom.uz/2019/02/19/skorost-fiksirovannogo-interneta-v-uzbekistane-soglasno-rejtinga-speedtest-global-index-uvelichilas-za-god-na-88/>

OBJECTIVE 4: BUSINESS MANAGEMENT

0.69

The media industry in Uzbekistan is unsustainable, both in terms of its liquidity and its business management, according to this year's panelists.

The spectrum of potential revenue streams remains severely constrained, despite Mirziyoyev's moves to loosen the economy after decades of state control. State media, and private media even more, have been impacted by the depreciation of the som (Uzbekistan's currency, or UZS) and soaring inflation, which rose to 14.4 percent in 2017 and fell to a still quite painful 10.5 percent in 2018. With the advertising market in its infancy, the media sector continues to be reliant on either subsidies from the government or cash infusions from owners. Government subsidies, however, are not distributed systematically; rather, said one panelist, "only loyal media receive support."

Meanwhile, corruption scandals involving the media sector periodically erupt into public view, exposing the decrepit management behind the scenes. For example, in 2014 an independent media source revealed that officials at the National Television and Radio Company embezzled almost half of all its advertising revenue. In 2017, the former head of the UzAPI was accused of misappropriating USD \$60,000.

According to UzAPI, 60 percent of licensed media are privately owned. However, "due to Uzbekistan's authoritarian political environment, very little information is known about the true ownership identities of [these] entities," one panelist lamented. Hence, there is skepticism as to whether many of the country's private media outlets are genuinely

private or are actually fronts for national security services and the ruling elite.

Turkiston-Press is a good example of how ownership structures can obfuscate the real dynamics of Uzbekistan's media landscape. The entity describes itself as a "nongovernmental information agency" and a closed joint-stock company whose mission is to "to deepen democratic processes, expand media freedom and strengthen [Uzbekistan's] market-based economy and democratic principles."¹⁰ However, it was founded in 1998 by a consortium of government-affiliated entities, including the oil and gas national holding company Uzbekneftegaz and the state-run airline Uzbekistan Airways. It claims that its target audience is international diplomatic missions and foreign corporations operating in Uzbekistan, but it provides no statistics regarding either its website's traffic or its bulletin's circulation.

According to UzAPI, 60 percent of licensed media are privately owned. However, "due to Uzbekistan's authoritarian political environment, very little information is known about the true ownership identities of [these] entities," one panelist lamented.

As for the other major and ostensibly private news agency, UzTAG, questions surround its independence and even its purpose. It is the Uzbek branch of a network spanning Central Asia that was founded in 2014 whose websites, according to the Afilias database, are registered in Almaty, Kazakhstan. This network includes KazTAG (Kazakhstan), KyrTAG (Kyrgyzstan), TajikTA

10 Wikipedia. "O'zbekneftgaz." *Howling Pixel*. n.d. <https://howlingpixel.com/i-uz/O'zbekneftgaz>

(Tajikistan), AfTAG (Afghanistan), and IrTAG (Iran), as well as the Silk Road News Information Agency, which provides content in Russian and Chinese. All of the branches are seemingly specialized in running government press releases, producing none of their own content. A whois query does not reveal any information regarding the network's owner, and the network's financing is obscure.

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

BUSINESS MANAGEMENT INDICATORS

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

Uzbekistan's Soviet-era system of trade and professional journals survive entirely from state subsidies and sheer coercion, as state workers, tradespeople, and professionals are forced by their superiors to pay for subscriptions. In previous years, it has been reported that citizens receiving state benefits, such as pensioners and disabled people, have also been compelled to pay for subscriptions. Yet, there are no reliable circulation statistics beyond raw figures of the number of subscribers. Moreover,

"editorial independence is still a distant dream" for these journals, as "censorship is very much alive," one panelist explained.

According to analysis by Nordea Trade, Mirziyoyev's attempts to slightly liberalize the economy dramatically increased purchasing power and personal shipments into Uzbekistan in 2018. The goods come either directly from neighboring countries or via e-commerce purchases from China and Turkey¹¹ — a change that bodes well for the advertising market.

At the same time, the average Uzbek consumer is not particularly wealthy. According to the Asian Development Bank, 11.4 percent of the population live below the poverty line, while according to Trading Economics, it is 62.1 percent. According to the World Bank, over 63 percent of the overall population resides in rural areas, constituting 75 percent of the total low-income demographic of Uzbekistan according to the UNDP. Hence, the advertising market will remain dependent on the urban middle class for some time to come.

Local and foreign brands are advertised in Uzbekistan. The automotive industry appears to be a particularly active player in the market, with advertisements for GM Uzbekistan's Ravon brand appearing in Tashkent and other urban centers. Several Western and local advertising firms are based in Tashkent, the most notable being Avesta. Print and television are the most popular means of advertising, according to ITA. Radio, billboards, and the panels of taxis, trains, and buses are also common venues for advertising. Interestingly, advertisers prefer to place their content with cable

television providers that offer access to Russian and the occasional American program, possibly because of the likely middle-income profile of these channels' average viewer. However, one panelist asserted that such decisions are more the result of guesswork than real market research and planning.

Advertorials have long been on the rise within Uzbekistan's media sector, and increasingly they come at the expense of reporting. According to the panelists, it appears to be a quite lucrative practice: the average price for a business or product promotional article in a newspaper or journal in 2018 was between USD \$150 and \$200. For context, Uzbekistan's official statistics committee reports that the average monthly salary in 2017 was USD \$125.

General statistics are not available on the popularity of websites in Uzbekistan, as the country has no real reliable statistical agency that systematically examines Internet readership or other relevant figures. Nevertheless, the panel claimed that bloggers could earn additional money by acting as "influencers" and essentially leasing their public image to promote products.

In the view of the panelists, the entertainment industry has actually been a relatively well-run corner of Uzbekistan's media sector — to the point that it has generated some legitimate revenue. The newspaper *Halk Suzi* and its Russian-language edition *Narodnoye Slovo* (*The People's Word*), the newspaper *Pravda Vostoka* (*True East*), and the television channel UzReport earn enough to support their operations fully. The panel singled out UzReport in particular as more or less a success story, given that it can hire qualified experts plus invest in new talent. However, one panelist noted that UzReport's head, Ravshanbek Juraev, is believed to have connections with national security services — thereby suggesting the channel may not be entirely what it seems.

11 Export Enterprises. "Advertising and marketing in Uzbekistan." *Nordea Trade Portal*. March 2019. <https://www.nordeatrade.com/en/explore-new-market/uzbekistan/marketing>.

**OBJECTIVE 5:
SUPPORTING
INSTITUTIONS**

0.63

The story of Uzbek civil society organizations and other institutions specifically supporting journalism remained just as dismal in 2018 as in previous years. Although such organizations exist, they are at best ineffectual and at worst complicit in the repression of journalists.

According to the panel members, journalists' ire is particularly directed against the Union of Journalists and NAESMI. One panelist angrily dismissed the union as "useless," even though journalists are obliged to pay it monthly dues that are deducted automatically from their salaries. Another concurred: "To date, there is no publicly available evidence that the union has ever attempted to intervene with authorities in defense of an embattled media outlet or individual journalist." Meanwhile, NAESMI occupies a central role in Uzbekistan's media landscape, as non-state private media outlets are required to conduct and coordinate their activities within its aegis. But "de facto, the organization is another monitoring body of the online media," one panelist explained.

The notorious 2013 arrest of the organization's head, Firdavs Abduholikov, also revealed that NAESMI is deeply enmeshed with the upper echelons of power. Following Abduholikov's incarceration, it emerged that he was potentially connected to Karimov's eldest daughter, Gulnara Karimova, who has been accused by Western governments of extorting nearly \$1 billion from Western telecommunication companies. NAESMI shut down all operations until one year later, when the charges against Abduholikov were dropped. (Karimova was placed under house arrest, from

which she has yet to be released.)

It is widely believed among Uzbekistan's journalism community that the union and NAESMI serve not only as window dressing but as additional state mechanisms of reward and punishment. For example, the union organizes an annual professional competition called Oltin Qalam (Golden Pen), and only the most loyal reporters win.

One of NAESMI's many functions is to provide grants for upgrading technical equipment. Yet, independent journalists have accused the association of directly controlling the editorial policies of its member outlets, in part by using its grants as leverage.

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.

Prior to 2005, the situation was not so severe, as Uzbekistan had greater international presence in support of independent journalism. However, following the intense international outcry following the Andijan massacre, the Uzbek government shut down nearly all foreign-sponsored non-governmental organizations working in the country. Organizations that offered support to media and journalists were also forced to cease operations. The situation began to reverse in 2017, when HRW and other international organizations were permitted to return. For example, UNESCO conducted a workshop in November 2018 in Tashkent that provided joint training to representatives of law enforcement and state media outlets.

A potentially seismic change may be coming in 2019, with the intended establishment of a press ombudsman. According to the Tashkent Times, a private English-language news website, the new office will "prevent groundless interference of government bodies into the activities of media outlets and mediate in disputes between the media and government bodies, individuals, and legal entities."¹² Yet, dark clouds remain on the horizon, for the press ombudsman's remit will also include monitoring "compliance by the media with legislation and handle individuals and legal entities' complaints on 'any controversial' news."¹³

Journalism education does exist, and panelists said that students do not appear to face any ethnic, religious, or gender barriers to enrollment. However, pedagogical quality is extremely poor. Training

12 *The Tashkent Times*. "Press Ombudsman set to be established in Uzbekistan." TashkentTimes.uz. February 8, 2019. <http://tashkenttimes.uz/national/3505-press-ombudsman-set-to-be-established-in-uzbekistan>.

13 *The Tashkent Times*. "Press Ombudsman set to be established in Uzbekistan." TashkentTimes.uz. February 8, 2019. <http://tashkenttimes.uz/national/3505-press-ombudsman-set-to-be-established-in-uzbekistan>.

materials are scarce and extremely outdated, internship opportunities are dependent on informal contacts, and instructors often lack practical experience. Media ethics, or any sense of professional identity, are simply not taught. According to one panelist, journalism students only learn “the implied understanding of topics that can be covered, and those authorities consider off-limits,” and learn that to succeed in their future careers, “they need only adhere to state policies on coverage.”

“To date, there is no publicly available evidence that the union has ever attempted to intervene with authorities in defense of an embattled media outlet or individual journalist.”

One of the more serious challenges in journalism education is a paucity of instructors with either international standard training or overseas professional experience. Uzbekistan has virtually no trainers that could potentially address the knowledge and skills gaps wrought by so many years of isolation. Such journalists tend to be clustered in the nearby cities of Almaty, Kazakhstan and Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan and further afield in Prague, Brussels, New York City, and Washington, DC. Bishkek in particular has served as a training hub due to the activities of the OSCE Academy and, to a lesser extent, the American University of Central Asia and Deutsche Welle Akademie.

Still, anyone who wants to teach journalism in Uzbekistan would be faced with depressed wages and under-prioritization by school administrations. In a remnant of Soviet-era practice, journalism is typically taught within linguistics and philology departments and not as a subject in its own right. Good news in this respect finally came in September

2018, when the government established the University of Journalism and Mass Communication in Tashkent. Unfortunately, its rector — Sherzod Kudratkhodjayev, a former Karimov-era presidential spokesperson —almost immediately became embroiled in controversy among independent and private journalists. Kudratkhodjayev produced a television documentary that criticized female school students and teachers for wearing short skirts and in general being “too Western.” At the height of the controversy, a video of Kudratkhodjayev speaking pejoratively about ethnic Russian women appeared online. “Right now he is a person [no one] respect[s],” one panelist remarked.

List of Panel Participants

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