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Freedom House

Freedom on the Net 2018 - Uzbekistan

Key Developments:

June 1, 2017 - May 31, 2018

- Skype, WhatsApp, and Viber became available in May 2018, despite some users still reporting difficulty accessing the services (see Restrictions on Connectivity).
- The online media environment experienced a slight opening, as online outlets started to cover more politically and socially sensitive topics (see Media, Diversity, and Content Manipulation).
- The state-owned telecommunications and internet provider Uztelecom announced its new “Transformation-2020” project to expand and improve internet access (see Availability and Ease of Access).
- There were new arrests and prosecutions for critical online content, with at least one case of alleged torture while in detention, while some online journalists serving lengthy sentences were released from prison (see Prosecutions and Detentions for Online Activities and Intimidation and Violence).

Introduction:

The internet freedom environment in Uzbekistan remains repressive, though there has been a slight opening of the online media environment and some Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) platforms became available in May 2018.

Following the death of authoritarian President Islam Karimov in September 2016, Shavkat Mirziyoyev took over the presidency in December 2016. Mirziyoyev promised to honor Karimov’s legacy, and human rights remain severely restricted. However, there are some indications that the government may be willing to promote citizen engagement using online tools. Some registered online media outlets have started to cover more politically and socially sensitive topics, although the environment remains severely restricted. The establishment of the government’s “virtual office” initiative, an online platform allowing citizens to voice criticism directly to government bodies, launched hundreds of thousands of complaints, and many were successfully resolved. Several independent journalists have also been released from detention under the Mirziyoyev administration, though many had already served long sentences and the government continues to arrest and prosecute its critics, independent journalists, and human rights activists.

The government has signaled that it is prioritizing expanding and improving internet access for its citizens. In May 2018, state-owned telecommunications and internet provider Uztelecom shared its “Transformation-2020” project to improve access and connectivity issues. Also in May, some VoIP calls, including services offered by Skype, WhatsApp, and Viber, became available. However, websites of independent news outlets, international civil society organizations, and other online content related to political and social topics remain blocked.

Obstacles to Access:

Nearly half of the population had internet access in 2018, with growing mobile penetration playing a critical role in improving access. However, expensive service, low broadband speeds, and limits on data continue to curb internet use. The state controls the country’s international internet gateways through the state-owned telecommunications operator Uztelecom. Some VoIP services such as Skype, WhatsApp, and Viber were unblocked in May 2018, after being inaccessible during the majority of the reporting period.

Availability and Ease of Access

Internet penetration continues to rise in Uzbekistan. Internet access is based primarily on ADSL technology, which the government estimates is available to 68 percent of subscribers as of 2016.1 (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/uzbekistan#sdfnote1sym>) The remaining 32 percent use connections via fiber-optic networks. Users increasingly access the internet through their mobile devices, with the number of mobile internet users reaching 14.7 million in April 20172 (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/uzbekistan#sdfnote2sym>) and 20 million in April 2018.3 (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/uzbekistan#sdfnote3sym>)

Internet connection speeds remain relatively low. Subscribers experience poor connection quality and frequent disconnections. “Unlimited” fixed-line subscriptions, advertised by all internet service providers, actually entail quotas on traffic. If the quota is exceeded, connection speeds decrease to almost zero. Mobile providers continued to invest into 4G LTE broadband connectivity, with speeds

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of up to 70 Mbps offered by provider UMS.⁴ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/uzbekistan#sdfootnote4sym>) In general, access to the internet remains prohibitively expensive in comparison to the average household income in Uzbekistan.⁵ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/uzbekistan#sdfootnote5sym>)

The capital Tashkent has the highest rates of internet penetration and fiber-to-the-building (FTTB) broadband connectivity compared to the country's 12 regions (*viloyati*) and the autonomous Republic of Karakalpakstan.⁶ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/uzbekistan#sdfootnote6sym>) Uztelecom's FTTB broadband service reaches 4,500 buildings in Tashkent, compared to just four in Termez city in the remote Surkhandariya region on the border of Afghanistan, with a population of 136,000.⁷ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/uzbekistan#sdfootnote7sym>) The government plans to further develop broadband infrastructure, aiming to construct over 277,000 km of fiber-optic networks across the country by 2021.⁸ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/uzbekistan#sdfootnote8sym>) ICT facilities also depend on a stable electricity supply to the telecommunications infrastructure, which has been less reliable in rural areas.⁹ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/uzbekistan#sdfootnote9sym>)

Some mobile operators are working to expand mobile internet coverage and increase speeds in Uzbekistan. Ucell, for example, reported in May 2018 that it had begun testing new segments of frequencies that are planned to improve existing 3G and more quickly develop LTE services.¹⁰ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/uzbekistan#sdfootnote10sym>)

Uztelecom, the state-owned telecommunications and internet access provider, announced in May 2018 the new “Transformation-2020” project,¹¹ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/uzbekistan#sdfootnote11sym>) which aims to expand and improve internet access in the country, making it faster and cheaper. The project also plans to develop local cache servers to store international internet traffic and revise legislative and policy directives relating to the internet and digital communication.

Uztelecom and at least two private mobile operators offer public Wi-Fi hotspots in limited locations. As of 2016, Uztelecom operated 67 hotspots across Samarkand, Bukhara, and four regions, including 14 in Tashkent.¹² (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/uzbekistan#sdfootnote12sym>) In February 2016, the government set a goal of extending public Wi-Fi coverage to the remaining eight regions and the Republic of Karakalpakstan. The private mobile operator Beeline launched its first public Wi-Fi network in August 2015 and currently operates 28 Wi-Fi hotspots in seven cities.¹³ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/uzbekistan#sdfootnote13sym>) In February 2018, it was reported that free Wi-Fi would be available in the historical area of Bukhara.¹⁴ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/uzbekistan#sdfootnote14sym>)

Public access points such as internet cafes remain popular, particularly among young internet users. However, minors are officially prohibited from visiting internet cafes unsupervised between 10:00 p.m. and 6:00 a.m.¹⁵ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/uzbekistan#sdfootnote15sym>)

Since September 2005, public spaces such as educational institutions, youth organizations, libraries, and museums must connect to the wider internet exclusively via Ziyonet,¹⁶ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/uzbekistan#sdfootnote16sym>) a nationwide information network that enables a greater degree of government monitoring and filtering.

Restrictions on Connectivity

The government exercises significant control over ICT infrastructure and continued to block access to some VoIP services during part of the coverage period. In a positive development, Skype, Viber, and WhatsApp, among other messaging apps, reportedly became available within the country in May 2018.¹⁷ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/uzbekistan#sdfootnote17sym>) Some users, however, still experience difficulties while using these platforms.¹⁸ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/uzbekistan#sdfootnote18sym>)

By concentrating the telecommunications market in a state-owned company and centralizing international connections into one “chokepoint,” the government can more easily shut down the internet and engage in censorship and surveillance. Uztelecom runs the International Center for Packet Switching to aggregate international internet traffic at a single node within its infrastructure. Uztelecom is an upstream ISP and sells international internet traffic to domestic ISPs at a wholesale price. Private ISPs are prohibited by law from bypassing Uztelecom's infrastructure to connect to the internet, and from installing and maintaining their own satellite stations in order to establish internet connectivity.

The TAS-IX peering center and content delivery network, established in February 2004, interconnects the networks of private ISPs to enable traffic conveyance and exchange at no mutual charge and without the need to establish international internet connections via Uztelecom.¹⁹ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/uzbekistan#sdfootnote19sym>) Private ISPs provide no traffic limitations to websites hosted within the TAS-IX networks but filter and block other websites to the same extent as Uztelecom.²⁰ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/uzbekistan#sdfootnote20sym>)

The authorities have been known to periodically impose temporary shutdowns. Most recently, internet users in Tashkent reported an interruption in connectivity in January 2016, after Uztelecom warned of disruptions for maintenance purposes; observers speculated the disturbance was related to the installation of surveillance equipment.²¹ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/uzbekistan#sdfootnote21sym>)

net/2018/uzbekistan#sdfootnote21sym) The authorities also periodically order mobile operators to shut down internet and text message services nationwide to avoid cheating during university entrance exams held in August.22 (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/uzbekistan#sdfootnote22sym>)

Several services offering free VoIP calls through the internet, including Skype, WhatsApp, and Viber, had been unavailable to users in Uzbekistan since at least July 2015, with some reports of disruptions from as early as October 2014. However, in May 2018, these apps including Skype, WhatsApp, and Viber were reported to be available.23 (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/uzbekistan#sdfootnote23sym>) Prior to this unblocking, Uztelecom announced plans to launch its own alternative to Telegram, Skype, Viber, and WhatsApp. Experts linked the previous restrictions to the threat these free services pose to Uztelecom's revenue.24 (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/uzbekistan#sdfootnote24sym>) Uztelecom and the Ministry for the Development of Information Technologies and Communications, which regulates ICTs, both denied responsibility for the block. In May 2016, in an official response to a user complaint posted on an e-government website, a director of Uztelecom's information security department said the company was "not responsible for the due or proper operability of third-party resources." The ministry said that "servers of multimedia services like Skype, WhatsApp, Viber, and others are located in foreign states. National ISPs (operators and providers) in the Republic of Uzbekistan might be held responsible by the law for the functioning and accessibility of segments of the internet network, however, they cannot influence the quality of the aforesaid service."

The use of mobile technology is formally restricted in schools and universities, except in "justified and urgent" cases, in order to prevent cheating and access to banned content.25 (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/uzbekistan#sdfootnote25sym>)

ICT Market

There are numerous legal, regulatory, and economic obstacles to competitive business in the ICT sector. As of January 2017, 654 companies were classified as providing data or telecommunications services including the internet, down from 854 in 2016.26 (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/uzbekistan#sdfootnote26sym>) This figure includes internet cafes and does not indicate the number of private ISPs.

The state controls much of the telecommunications market. Five mobile phone operators share the market in Uzbekistan, including Uzmobil, a brand of Uztelecom, and three privately owned operators: Perfectum Mobile (owned by the Uzbek company Rubicon Wireless Communication), Beeline (owned by the Amsterdam-based VimpelCom), and Ucell (under the part-Swedish government owned Telia Company AB, formerly TeliaSonera). Beeline and Ucell operate 2G, 3G, and 4G mobile networks and currently lead in terms of subscribers. A fifth operator, UMS (Universal Mobile Services), was controlled by Russian telecom giant Mobile TeleSystems OJSC (MTS) until August 2016, when it sold its share of the market to the Uzbek government. In September 2015, Telia announced that it was preparing to exit the Uzbek market,27 (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/uzbekistan#sdfootnote27sym>) but as of March 2018 the company still had operations in the country.28 (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/uzbekistan#sdfootnote28sym>) However, competition is expected to increase following a May 2017 decision by the National Council for Radio Frequencies to implement a more equitable redistribution of frequencies among the four remaining mobile providers.29 (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/uzbekistan#sdfootnote29sym>)

Service providers are required to have a license to operate, and in 2005, the Cabinet of Ministers adopted Resolution No. 155, which stipulates that telecommunications providers must register as a legal entity before being issued a license. Licensing is often encumbered by political interests.30 (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/uzbekistan#sdfootnote30sym>)

Other factors impeding telecommunications company operations include an unstable regulatory environment, intricate customs procedures for the import of ICT equipment, and rules limiting currency conversion. Local authorities have also required international telecommunications companies to contribute to the cotton harvest, which watchdog groups say involves forced labor, as a condition of doing business.31 (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/uzbekistan#sdfootnote31sym>) Telia declined to comply in 2015.32 (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/uzbekistan#sdfootnote32sym>)

Regulatory Bodies

The telecommunications market does not have an independent regulator. Since February 2015, the Ministry for the Development of Information Technologies and Communications (MININFOCOM) regulates telecommunications services related to the internet.

The ministry combines the functions of a policymaker, regulator, and content provider, with no separation of regulatory and commercial functions. It is responsible for licensing ISPs and mobile phone operators, promoting technical standards for telecommunications technologies such as 4G (LTE), and providing e-governance services.

The Computerization and Information Technologies Developing Center (Uzinfocom) under the ministry administers the ".uz" top-level domain. Fourteen private ISPs were authorized to provide registry services in the ".uz" domain zone as of July 2018.33 (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/uzbekistan#sdfootnote33sym>)

The ministry is responsible for internet content regulation in order to prevent, among other things, the internet's “negative influence on the public consciousness of citizens, in particular of young people.” To do so, the ministry promotes the development of locally hosted websites “to satisfy [the] informational and intellectual needs of the population, particularly of the youth.”³⁴ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/uzbekistan#sdfootnote34sym>) Uzinfocom remains the largest provider of web hosting services, including for the e-government project, as well as for the government-backed *intranet*, national search engine, and social-networking sites.³⁵ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/uzbekistan#sdfootnote35sym>)

In January 2018, President Shavkat Mirziyoyev shared his concern that despite investments reaching \$260 million, ICT development only covered 2.2 percent of GDP and that the internet remains slow and inaccessible to many.³⁶ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/uzbekistan#sdfootnote36sym>) In February, the president appointed Azim Ahmedhajayev, who was formerly responsible for investments, as Minister of Information Technologies and Communication Development.³⁷ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/uzbekistan#sdfootnote37sym>) and Farhod Ruziev as General Director of Uztelekom.³⁸ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/uzbekistan#sdfootnote38sym>)

Limits on Content:

The government of Uzbekistan monitors and controls online communications, and engages in pervasive and systematic blocking of independent news and any content that is critical of the regime, particularly related to human rights abuses. The opaque system offers few details on how decisions are made or what websites are blocked at any given time. While the online media landscape remains severely restricted, some online outlets have started reporting on politically and socially sensitive topics.

Blocking and Filtering

Significant blocking and filtering limits access to online content related to political and social topics, particularly those related to human rights abuses in Uzbekistan. Other measures like a state-run search engine have been introduced over the years to limit access to information by allowing the state greater ability to censor certain search results, as opposed to an international search engine.³⁹ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/uzbekistan#sdfootnote39sym>) Decisions to block content are non-transparent. State officials have denied that the government is involved in blocking content online.⁴⁰ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/uzbekistan#sdfootnote40sym>)

The websites of the international broadcasters Deutsche Welle, *Fergana News*, *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, and the Uzbek services of the BBC and Voice of America have been inaccessible in Uzbekistan since 2005.⁴¹ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/uzbekistan#sdfootnote41sym>) following a violent government crackdown on peaceful anti-government protests in Andijan.⁴² (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/uzbekistan#sdfootnote42sym>) On February 12, 2018, Uzbek users reported to have access to blocked independent resources such as *Fergana News*, *BBC Uzbek Service*, and *Ozodlik Radio*.⁴³ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/uzbekistan#sdfootnote43sym>) However, the webpages were unavailable again by the evening.

Websites of Uzbek human rights and opposition groups in exile are also blocked. Websites of international human rights and democracy organizations, including Amnesty International, Freedom House, and Human Rights Watch, among others, are blocked. Many users access blocked websites using proxies or VPNs. In August 2015, the UN Human Rights Committee expressed concern that websites with content on “controversial and politically sensitive issues” are blocked in Uzbekistan.⁴⁴ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/uzbekistan#sdfootnote44sym>)

Several government-linked entities monitor and control online communications, though the opaque system offers few details on how decisions are made or what websites are blocked at any given time. The Center for the Monitoring of the Mass Communications Sphere takes various measures to maintain compliance with national legislation that restricts free expression.⁴⁵ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/uzbekistan#sdfootnote45sym>) Among its key objectives are “to analyze the content of information disseminated online and ensure its consistency with existing laws and regulations.”⁴⁶ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/uzbekistan#sdfootnote46sym>) The center has contributed to the takedown of independent websites.⁴⁷ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/uzbekistan#sdfootnote47sym>) The Expert Commission on Information and Mass Communications, a secretive body established in August 2011, oversees the monitoring center.⁴⁸ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/uzbekistan#sdfootnote48sym>) The commission is not independent and must submit quarterly reports to the Cabinet of Ministers.⁴⁹ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/uzbekistan#sdfootnote49sym>) Its membership is not public.⁵⁰ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/uzbekistan#sdfootnote50sym>) and it is reportedly comprised exclusively of government employees. The commission is mandated to evaluate online publications for content with a “destructive and negative informational-psychological influence on the public consciousness of citizens;” content which fails to “maintain and ensure continuity of national and cultural traditions and heritage;” or aims to “destabilize the public and political situation,” or commit other potential content violations.⁵¹ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/uzbekistan#sdfootnote51sym>)

The commission also assesses publications referred to it by the monitoring center or other state bodies, including the courts and law enforcement, drawing on a designated pool of government-approved experts.⁵² (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/uzbekistan#sdfootnote52sym>) Commission members vote on whether or not a violation has been committed based on reports from those experts. State bodies act on the commission's

decision, including courts and “other organizations,” presumably private ISPs.⁵³ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/uzbekistan#sdfootnote53sym>) There are no procedures in place to notify those whose content is blocked, and no clear avenue for appeal.

Content Removal

Intermediaries can be held liable for third-party content hosted on their platforms and can be forced to remove such content. Under the 1999 Law on Telecommunications and several other government resolutions, the licenses of lower-tier ISPs may be withheld or denied if the company fails to take measures to prevent their computer networks from being used for exchanging information deemed to violate national laws, including ones that restrict political speech. Under Order No. 216 passed in 2004, ISPs and operators “cannot disseminate information that, *inter alia*, calls for the violent overthrow of the constitutional order of Uzbekistan, instigates war and violence, contains pornography, or degrades and defames human dignity.”⁵⁴ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/uzbekistan#sdfootnote54sym>) Given these broad restrictions, many individuals and organizations prefer to host their websites outside the country.⁵⁵ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/uzbekistan#sdfootnote55sym>)

September 2014 amendments to the Law on Informatization brought bloggers and online news providers, including freelance citizen journalists, under state regulation subject to content removal requirements. By the law's broad definition, any person may qualify as a blogger by disseminating information “of socio-political, socio-economic and other character” to the public through a website.⁵⁶ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/uzbekistan#sdfootnote56sym>) The law requires bloggers to substantiate the credibility (*dostovernost*) of “generally accessible information” prior to publishing or even reposting it, and obliges them to “immediately remove” information if it is not considered credible. The law entitles a special governmental body to limit access to websites that do not comply.

Media, Diversity, and Content Manipulation

Though the online media environment remains severely restricted, some registered media outlets have started to cover more politically and socially sensitive topics. Additionally, citizens continue to utilize the government’s “virtual office” initiative to directly speak with government representatives.

In September 2016, the government introduced a new online portal system or “virtual offices” through which citizens could air their grievances and make suggestions directly to government representatives. According to official data, over 1.4 million complaints have been registered through the portal thus far, many of which the government has claimed to have addressed.⁵⁷ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/uzbekistan#sdfootnote57sym>) Observers have noted that the virtual offices are helping to create a more permissive environment with respect to criticism of authorities, with some news outlets even publishing select complaints submitted through the portal.⁵⁸ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/uzbekistan#sdfootnote58sym>) Reportedly, the online portal website is either unavailable or only partially accessible from IP addresses outside of Uzbekistan, thus limiting access for citizens traveling, working, or studying abroad.⁵⁹ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/uzbekistan#sdfootnote59sym>)

Recently, there has been a slight opening in the online media environment. Since Mirziyoyev became president, there is evidence that some registered media outlets have started to cover more politically and socially sensitive topics.⁶⁰ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/uzbekistan#sdfootnote60sym>) For example, a popular edition of *Kun.uz* criticized the government for failing to stop forced labor for picking cotton.⁶¹ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/uzbekistan#sdfootnote61sym>) However, the online media environment remains severely restricted and self-censorship is still pervasive, given the government’s tight controls over the media. Those who report on topics deemed “taboo,” including criticism of the president, revelations about corruption, or health education, can still face harsh punishment.⁶² (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/uzbekistan#sdfootnote62sym>) As a result of the government’s history of harassing traditional journalists, as well as their families, many online writers are cautious about what they post. The editorial direction of the online versions of state-run news outlets is often determined by both official and unofficial guidelines from the government.

Under 2007 amendments to the 1997 law “On Mass Media,”⁶³ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/uzbekistan#sdfootnote63sym>) any website engaged in the dissemination of mass information periodically (at least once every six months) is considered “mass media” and is subject to official press registration.⁶⁴ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/uzbekistan#sdfootnote64sym>) This procedure is generally known to be content-based and arbitrary, and inhibits editors and readers from exercising their freedom of expression and right to access information.⁶⁵ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/uzbekistan#sdfootnote65sym>) As of January 2017, 395 news-oriented websites, including online versions of traditional news media outlets, were registered as mass media in Uzbekistan.⁶⁶ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/uzbekistan#sdfootnote66sym>)

The financial sustainability of independent online media outlets largely depends on diminishing foreign funding that is subject to vigorous state control. The parliamentary “Public Fund for Support and Development of Independent Print Media and News Agencies of Uzbekistan” allocates state subsidies. It primarily grants the subsidies to the state-owned and pro-government mass media, which publish state propaganda.

Independent news websites have been subject to arbitrary closure or retroactively being unregistered.⁶⁷ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/uzbekistan#sdfootnote67sym>) *Olam*, once Uzbekistan's second most-visited news site, was permanently closed in January 2013 after the authorities opened criminal proceedings against its editor-in-chief and the website owner.⁶⁸ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/uzbekistan#sdfootnote68sym>) At the time of its closure, *Olam* was reporting on state appropriation in the telecommunications sector. In May 2015, a court ordered the closure of the news media website *Noviyvek*, a weekly newspaper established in January 1992 and known for its balanced news reporting. Independent online media outlets are often forced to operate overseas to escape government repression, including *Centre1*, which is based in Germany.

Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, and the Russian social networks Odnoklassniki and V Kontakte are available and widely used. As of January 2018, about 1.6 million people in Uzbekistan used Facebook and Instagram.⁶⁹ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/uzbekistan#sdfootnote69sym>)

Digital Activism

The stringent ideological policies of the government regarding the use of the internet and social media by Uzbek youth discourage digital activism as a significant form of political engagement. However, a handful of political activists and regime critics actively use the internet and social media as channels to reach supporters in and outside of Uzbekistan. Their efforts may raise awareness, but their actual impact on social mobilization is limited, largely due to the repressive environment for freedom of speech and assembly. Political Twitter and Facebook accounts are generally administered by Uzbek dissidents living abroad, rather than activists on the ground.

In June 2017, the death of Jasurbek Ibragimov, a young medical student, sparked a wave of anger among social media users in Tashkent.⁷⁰ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/uzbekistan#sdfootnote70sym>) A letter that Ibragimov's mother wrote to the president asking for justice was shared widely across social media. Those moved by the letter and case held a peaceful protest and circulated a petition⁷¹ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/uzbekistan#sdfootnote71sym>) demanding accountability for Ibragimov's murder. According to reports, the public's response forced those investigating the murder to release information to the public.⁷² (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/uzbekistan#sdfootnote72sym>) In November 2017, two organizers of the rally, Irina Zaydman and Maria Legler, were detained and charged with organizing unauthorized rallies. They were sentenced to 10 and 15 days of administrative arrest respectively.⁷³ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/uzbekistan#sdfootnote73sym>)

Violations of User Rights:

State measures to silence dissent include persecution and criminal prosecution of regime critics and independent journalists, often on fabricated charges. The government has broad powers to punish expression online, and the 2016 amended criminal code increased penalties for threatening security and order through telecommunications networks or mass media. The security services systematically eavesdrop on citizens' communications over email, mobile phone and Skype, in online forums, and social networks.

Legal Environment

Uzbekistan's constitution protects the rights to freedom of expression and of the mass media, and prohibits censorship. Article 29 of the constitution guarantees the right to gather and disseminate information. However, the implementation of these protections remains minimal. National courts have generally failed to protect individuals, including professional journalists, against government retaliation for exercising their free expression rights. Rampant corruption, particularly within law enforcement bodies, as well as weak legislative and judicial bodies, continue to have a deleterious impact on freedom of expression. Courts and executive agencies also operate without transparency, depriving the public of access to legal decisions and opportunities for appeal.

The Uzbek Criminal Code contains several provisions that have been used extensively to prosecute reporters and internet users: threatening constitutional order (Article 159); the prohibition of propaganda for national, racial, ethnic, and religious hatred (Article 156); the production and dissemination of materials containing a threat to public security and order with foreign financial help (Article 244); slander (Article 139); insult (Article 140); and insult of the president (Article 158). Both slander and insult are punishable with fines ranging from 50 to 100 times the minimum monthly wage, and with correctional labor of two to three years, detention for up to six months, or prison sentences of up to six years.⁷⁴ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/uzbekistan#sdfootnote74sym>) Further restrictions typically placed on journalists and internet users are based on vague information security rules.⁷⁵ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/uzbekistan#sdfootnote75sym>)

In April 2016, amendments to Article 244(1) of the criminal code increased the penalty for the "manufacture, storage, distribution or display of materials containing a threat to public security and public order" committed using mass media or telecommunication networks from five to eight years imprisonment.⁷⁶ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/uzbekistan#sdfootnote76sym>) The vaguely formulated offense prohibits "any form of dissemination of information and materials containing ideas of religious extremism, separatism and fundamentalism, calls for pogroms or violent eviction, or aimed at spreading panic among the population, as well as the use of religion to violate civil concord, dissemination of defamatory fabrications, and committing other acts against the established rules of behavior in society and public safety, as well as dissemination or demonstration of paraphernalia or symbols of religious-

extremist, terrorist organizations." Observers, including the OSCE, regarded this as a further move to suppress freedom of expression online.⁷⁷ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/uzbekistan#sdfootnote77sym>)

Prosecutions and Detentions for Online Activities

The regime's hostility toward its critics, including independent journalists, human rights activists, and critically-minded internet users, is notorious.⁷⁸ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/uzbekistan#sdfootnote78sym>) New arrests were reported under President Shavkat Mirziyoyev, though some long-serving detainees were also released.

In a positive development, several independent journalists were released from detention under the Mirziyoyev administration, though many had already served long sentences and the releases did not appear to signal a change of policy regarding politically-motivated prosecutions. In October 2017, the government released Solidzhon Abdurakhmanov, a journalist who had reported for independent news website *Uznews*, which was forced to shut down in December 2014. Abdurakhmanov had served nine years of a ten-year sentence for allegedly selling drugs, though he consistently maintained his innocence.⁷⁹ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/uzbekistan#sdfootnote79sym>) Prior to his arrest, he had reported on human rights and economic and social issues, including corruption in the Nukus traffic police office.⁸⁰ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/uzbekistan#sdfootnote80sym>) In another case, freelance reporter Dilmurod Saiid was released in February 2018 after being sentenced to 12.5 years in prison in 2009 for extortion.⁸¹ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/uzbekistan#sdfootnote81sym>) Before his detention, he had reported on issues such as government corruption in Uzbekistan's agricultural sector for local media and independent news websites, including *Uznews*.⁸² (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/uzbekistan#sdfootnote82sym>) Additionally, independent journalist Jamshid Karimov—who had written for *Fergana News*, *Uznews*, and the Institute of War and Peace Reporting (IWPR)—was released from forced detention in a psychiatric hospital in February 2017.⁸³ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/uzbekistan#sdfootnote83sym>) Well-known as a fierce critic of Uzbek authorities, Karimov had been detained in the institution since 2005, apart from a brief release in late 2011.⁸⁴ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/uzbekistan#sdfootnote84sym>)

Numerous individuals were arrested and convicted for their online activities over the coverage period. In May 2018, freelance journalist Bobomurod Abdullayev was sentenced to one-and-a-half years of forced labor along with the state withholding 20 percent of his earned wages.⁸⁵ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/uzbekistan#sdfootnote85sym>) Abdullayev was first detained in September 2017 and charged with allegedly authoring and disseminating "tendentious and slanderous materials" on the internet under the pseudonym "Usman Haknazar" and recruiting individuals to overthrow Uzbekistan's constitutional order. He has contributed to outlets such as *Ozodlik*, *Fergana News*, and the IWPR, and he is a vocal critic of the Uzbek government. Abdullayev also alleged that he was tortured in detention (see Intimidation and Violence).⁸⁶ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/uzbekistan#sdfootnote86sym>)

Akrom Malikov, a blogger and employee of the Institute of Manuscripts of the Academic of Sciences, was sentenced to six years in prison in January 2018. According to reports, he was found guilty of "infringements on the constitutional system," threatening public order, and creating or participating in banned organizations. The charges were apparently linked to his writings on the website of the opposition People's Movement of Uzbekistan. Authorities allege Malikov also wrote under the pseudonym of Abdulloh Nusrat. He had been detained since July 2016.⁸⁷ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/uzbekistan#sdfootnote87sym>)

Abbas Nasretidinov was charged with libel and insult in February 2018 due to Facebook posts criticizing former president Karimov, his family, and current prime minister Aripov.⁸⁸ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/uzbekistan#sdfootnote88sym>) The charges carry a fine of about \$1,260.

Local human rights defender Musadjon Babadjanov was charged in February 2018 under Uzbekistan's Criminal Code with "formation of or participating in a religious-extremist, separatist, fundamentalist or other banned organization," a charge which imposes a sentence of up to ten years.⁸⁹ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/uzbekistan#sdfootnote89sym>) In October, police reportedly found chapters of the Koran while searching Babadjanov's computer that the court labelled as "extremist."

Sid Yanyshv, a freelance journalist and contributor to *Fergana News*, was detained for six hours in December by police in Tashkent. He was reportedly asked to voluntarily remove files from his camera and voice recorder as a condition of his release. He had been interviewing residents of a street in the Shaykhantohur district of Tashkent who had just received word that their homes were set to be demolished in ten days.⁹⁰ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/uzbekistan#sdfootnote90sym>)

Surveillance, Privacy, and Anonymity

Government surveillance of ICTs is extensive. Although Article 27 of the constitution guarantees the privacy of "written communications and telephone conversations," there is no data protection legislation in Uzbekistan. Article 27 further guarantees respect for human rights and the rule of law, though these are frequently violated in surveillance operations.

Since 2006, the national security service (SNB) has conducted electronic surveillance of the national telecommunications network by employing the “system for operational investigative measures” (SORM), supposedly for the purposes of preventing terrorism and extremism.⁹¹ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/uzbekistan#sdfootnote91sym>) ISPs and mobile phone companies must install SORM and other surveillance equipment on their networks in order to obtain a license.⁹² (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/uzbekistan#sdfootnote92sym>) Telecommunications providers are prohibited by law from disclosing details on surveillance methods and face possible financial sanctions or license revocation if they fail to design their networks to accommodate electronic interception.⁹³ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/uzbekistan#sdfootnote93sym>)

Human rights defenders and online journalists frequently report attempts to compromise their online accounts. Dmitry Tikhonov, an Uzbek human rights defender who had worked on a project documenting forced labor during the cotton harvest, found that private information from his email account and personal Google Drive had been published online. Authorities subsequently initiated administrative proceedings against Tikhonov based on the leaked information, forcing him to flee the country in early 2016.⁹⁴ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/uzbekistan#sdfootnote94sym>)

The Israeli branch of the U.S. Verint technology company and the Israel-based NICE systems supply the Uzbeki security services with monitoring centers allowing them direct access to citizens’ telephone calls and internet activity, according to UK-based Privacy International. Privacy International reported that Verint Israel has also carried out tests on behalf of the SNB to gain access to SSL-encrypted communications, such as those now offered by default by Gmail, Facebook, and other service providers, by replacing security certificates with fake ones using technology supplied by the U.S.-based company Netronome.⁹⁵ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/uzbekistan#sdfootnote95sym>) In July 2015, documents leaked from the Milan-based surveillance software company “Hacking Team” revealed that NICE systems was supplying Hacking Team’s Remote Control System (RCS) spyware to Uzbekistan.⁹⁶ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/uzbekistan#sdfootnote96sym>) RCS offers the ability to intercept user communications, remotely activate a device’s microphone and camera, and access all of the phone’s content including contacts and messages without the user’s knowledge.

There is no independent oversight to guard against abusive surveillance, leaving the security service wide discretion in its activities.⁹⁷ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/uzbekistan#sdfootnote97sym>) If surveillance is part of a civil or criminal investigation, content intercepted on telecommunications networks is admissible as court evidence.⁹⁸ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/uzbekistan#sdfootnote98sym>) Opposition activist Kudratbek Rasulov was sentenced to eight years in prison on charges of extremism in 2013, based on intercepted digital communications with an exiled opposition group.⁹⁹ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/uzbekistan#sdfootnote99sym>) The law requires a prosecutor’s warrant for the interception of telecommunication traffic by law enforcement bodies; however, in urgent cases, the authorities may initiate surveillance and subsequently inform the prosecutor’s office within 24 hours.¹⁰⁰ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/uzbekistan#sdfootnote100sym>)

There is limited scope for anonymous digital communication, and the government strictly regulates the use of encryption.¹⁰¹ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/uzbekistan#sdfootnote101sym>) Proxy servers and anonymizers are important tools for protecting privacy and accessing blocked content, although they require computer skills beyond the capacity of many ordinary users in Uzbekistan. In September 2012, Uztelecom started blocking websites offering proxy servers, including websites listing free proxies that operate without a web interface.

There are few options for posting anonymous comments online, as individuals are increasingly encouraged to register with their real names to participate in discussions forums such as Uforum.¹⁰² (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/uzbekistan#sdfootnote102sym>) which is administered by the state-run Uzinfocom.¹⁰³ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/uzbekistan#sdfootnote103sym>) Individuals must also provide passport information to buy a SIM card.¹⁰⁴ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/uzbekistan#sdfootnote104sym>)

ISPs and mobile operators are required to store user data for three months. Since July 2004, operators of internet cafes and other public internet access points are required to monitor their users and cooperate with state bodies. Under regulatory amendments introduced in March 2014, operators of internet cafes and public access points must install surveillance cameras on their premises to “ensure [the] safety of visitors.” Additionally, they are required to retain a “registry of internet web-resources (logfiles)” used by customers for three months.¹⁰⁵ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/uzbekistan#sdfootnote105sym>)

Intimidation and Violence

Online journalists and bloggers continue to face violence and retaliation for their work. Freelance journalist Bobomurod Abdullayev claimed that he was tortured and subjected to ill-treatment during his detention, which began on September 21, 2017.¹⁰⁶ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/uzbekistan#sdfootnote106sym>) Abdullayev reported that he was subjected to sleep deprivation and forced to stand for six days, forced to remain naked in his cold cell for three days, was not fed for extended periods of time, and was beaten by those also incarcerated at the behest of SNB officers.¹⁰⁷ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/uzbekistan#sdfootnote107sym>)

net/2018/uzbekistan#sdfootnote107sym) In February, twelve human rights groups called for his immediate release, which later occurred in May 2018.¹⁰⁸ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/uzbekistan#sdfootnote108sym>)

In April 2017, artist and blogger Alexander Barkovskii was beaten by unknown assailants as he photographed a street artist in Tashkent. The attackers accused Barkovskii of publishing photos on the internet and spying.¹⁰⁹ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/uzbekistan#sdfootnote109sym>) In October 2016, photojournalist Timur Karpov working for *Fergana News* was apprehended and detained by police. Karpov was working in eastern Uzbekistan when he was placed in custody for ten hours and beaten by police officers. Karpov said police erased all photos and videos from his mobile phone.¹¹⁰ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/uzbekistan#sdfootnote110sym>)

In the past, SNB officers were reported confiscating electronic media devices at the Ferghana airport, checking browsing histories on travelers' laptops, and interrogating individuals with a record of visiting websites critical of the government.¹¹¹ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/uzbekistan#sdfootnote111sym>) Law enforcement officials invite journalists and human rights activists and ordinary citizens to "prophylactic talks" which often include warnings and threats.¹¹² (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/uzbekistan#sdfootnote112sym>)

Technical Attacks

Distributed denial-of-service (DDoS) attacks on independent news media websites reporting on Uzbekistan, including *Centrasia*, *UzMentronom*, *Fergana News*, and *Ozodlik*, the Uzbek service of *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, have been frequent in the past, though there were no prominent examples in the past year.

The state-run Information Security Center, established in September 2013, ensures the security of “the national segment of the internet” and state information networks, including the e-governance infrastructure.¹¹³ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/uzbekistan#sdfootnote113sym>) The Center took over most of the functions of the Uzbekistan Computer Emergency Readiness Team (UZ-CERT), established in 2005.¹¹⁴ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/uzbekistan#sdfootnote114sym>) The Center collects and analyzes information on computer incidents, including DDoS attacks, and alerts internet users to security threats. Moreover, the Center interacts with domestic ISPs, mobile phone operators, and state bodies—including law enforcement agencies—on the prevention and investigation of “unsanctioned or destructive actions in information space.”¹¹⁵ (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/uzbekistan#sdfootnote115sym>)

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115 (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/uzbekistan#sdfootnote115anc>) See Criminal Code Article 278-1 "Violation of the Rules of Informatization"; Article 278-2 "Illegal (Unsanctioned) Access to Computer Information"; Article 278-3 "Production and Dissemination of Special Tools for Illegal (Unsanctioned) Access to Computer Information"; Article 278-4 "Modification of Computer Information"; and Article 278-5 "Computer Sabotage."

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