

Document #2060948

Freedom House

Freedom on the Net 2021 - Uzbekistan

Not Free

28

/ 100

A [Obstacles to Access](#) 9 / 25B [Limits on Content](#) 12 / 35C [Violations of User Rights](#) 7 / 40

Last Year's Score & Status

27 / 100 Not Free

Scores are based on a scale of 0 (least free) to 100 (most free)

Overview

Uzbekistan registered another incremental increase in internet freedom, primarily due to improved internet access across the country. However, authorities have not loosened their grip over the online environment. The government continues to block websites and arrest critics, handing out three multiyear prison sentences during the coverage period. Some of the arrests coincided with amendments to the administrative and criminal codes that introduced heightened penalties for insulting the president or threatening the public order, particularly when those offenses are committed online. The government also amended Uzbekistan's data protection law to require the localization of user data, which authorities used to justify the blocking of prominent social media platforms after the coverage period.

While ongoing reforms under President Shavkat Mirziyoyev have led to improvements on some issues, including a modest reduction in media repression and reforms that mandated more female legislative candidates, Uzbekistan remains an authoritarian regime with little movement toward democratization. The media are tightly controlled by the authorities, and reports of torture and other ill-treatment by security forces persist.

Key Developments, June 1, 2020 - May 31, 2021

- Internet access rates improved across the country and the cost of mobile broadband decreased (see A1 and A2).
- President Mirziyoyev signed new amendments to the administrative and criminal codes during the coverage period that introduce new penalties for insulting the president and threatening the public order; the provisions stipulate additional penalties when the offenses are committed online (see C2).
- In May 2021, blogger Otabek Sattoriy, who has regularly criticized the government and reported on corruption, was sentenced to six and a half years in prison for allegedly extorting the head of a local bazaar (see C3).
- The government amended the Law on Personal Data to require websites—including social media platforms—to store user data in Uzbekistan and register local servers with the telecommunications regulator (see C6).
- In March 2021, Miraziz Bazarov, a prominent blogger who has advocated for the decriminalization of sexual conduct between men, was attacked while hosting an event for fans of anime and K-pop (see C7).

A Obstacles to Access

A1 0-6 pts

Do infrastructural limitations restrict access to the internet or the speed and quality of internet connections? 4 / 6

Score Change: The score improved from 3 to 4 because more people have access to the internet in Uzbekistan, according to some measurement sources.

Internet penetration rates continued to rise across Uzbekistan. Internet access is based primarily on asymmetric digital subscriber line (ADSL) technology. According to the 2021 Inclusive Internet Index from the Economist Intelligence Unit, 80 percent of households in Uzbekistan have access to the internet,¹ while the International Telecommunications Union (ITU), reports an internet penetration rate of 70.4 percent as of 2020. The country’s fixed-line internet subscription rate was estimated at 14.4 percent, while its mobile broadband penetration rate was 65.6 percent.² The Ministry for Development of Information Technologies and Communications (MiTC) claimed there were 22 million internet users (in a country of roughly 33 million people), including 19 million mobile internet users, in December 2020.³

Internet connection speeds remain relatively slow but are improving. Subscribers experience poor connection quality and frequent disconnections. According to Ookla’s Speedtest Global Index, as of May 2021, the average fixed broadband download speed was 39.20 Megabits per second (Mbps) (placing Uzbekistan 94th globally), while the average mobile broadband download speed was 17.28 Mbps (124th place globally).⁴ Uztelecom, the state-run telecommunications monopoly, upgraded the bandwidth of Uzbekistan’s international internet channels to 1.2 Terabits per second (Tbps) in 2019.⁵ In April 2020, responding to complaints about slow speeds,⁶ the MiTC explained that networks were congested due to increased usage during the COVID-19 pandemic, which confined many citizens to their homes.⁷

Mobile service providers deliver second-generation (2G), 3G, and 4G services, with most of the population covered by 2G (98 percent) and 3G (75 percent) networks. Only in large towns, which account for 43 percent of the population, is 4G technology available.⁸ Two state-owned mobile service providers, Ucell and UzMobile, began testing 5G services in September 2019,¹⁰ but no updates on the tests were reported by the end of the coverage period.

Uztelecom and several mobile service providers offer public Wi-Fi hotspots in limited locations. In February 2018, President Shavkat Mirziyoyev signed a decree that introduced tax relief and advertisement rights for businesses investing in Wi-Fi hotspots.¹¹ In December 2018, SOLA, a private company working in partnership with state authorities, reported that 1,200 hotspots were available in Tashkent, with another 3,800 on the way.¹² SOLA also outlined its plans to set up 45,000 Wi-Fi hotspots across the country, to boost international tourism. However, in December 2019, SOLA wrote that its services were available at “more than 270” locations in Tashkent.¹³ In addition, the State Committee for Tourism Development announced that only 1,925 public Wi-Fi hotspots had been installed in 2019.¹⁴ The Ministry of Education also reported that fiber optic broadband had been installed in 7,155 schools.¹⁵

Since 2005, public institutions such as schools, youth organizations, libraries, and museums must connect to the wider internet via Ziyonet.¹⁶ a nationwide information network that enables a greater degree of government monitoring and filtering (see C5).

A2 0-3 pts

Is access to the internet prohibitively expensive or beyond the reach of certain segments of the 1 / population for geographical, social, or other reasons? 3

Score Change: The score improved from 0 to 1 to reflect more affordable mobile broadband prices during the coverage period.

In general, access to the internet remains expensive relative to household income in Uzbekistan. The price of mobile broadband has continued to decrease in recent years.

The government reported in late 2019 that the average nominal monthly wage was about 2.2 million soms (\$210).¹⁷ Meanwhile, the ITU reported that a 5 GB fixed broadband connection cost \$2.96, or 2.3 percent of gross national income (GNI) per capita, while a 1.5 GB mobile broadband subscription cost \$2.95, or 2.3 percent GNI per capita.¹⁸ The Economist Intelligence Unit ranked Uzbekistan 81st out of 100 countries in terms of the affordability of internet connections. According to the World Bank, Uzbekistan’s GNI per capita was \$1,800 in 2019.¹⁹

In November 2019, the government began to obligate consumers to pay a fee to register their mobile devices’ international mobile equipment identity (IMEI) codes (see C4), introducing another cost to getting online. An online petition to abolish this fee on the government’s petition platform gathered 24,715 signatures,²⁰ but there has been no information about official engagement with this appeal, even though it exceeded the 10,000-signature threshold required for parliamentary consideration. In December 2020, the government changed the IMEI registration procedure, obliging retail sellers to take responsibility for registering IMEI devices.²¹

During the COVID-19 pandemic, mobile service provider Beeline allowed customers to access certain online resources without using up their prepaid data allowances,²² as did state-owned mobile service providers Ucell, UMS, and UzMobile.²³ Moreover, in March 2020, the MiTC decreed that telecommunications companies must abstain from cutting off their customers from internet and telephone services for two months after the month that a customer fails to pay.²⁴

Internet penetration rates are significantly lower outside of Tashkent, the capital. Tashkent has the highest rate of internet penetration and fiber-to-the-building (FTTB) broadband connectivity in Uzbekistan, significantly higher than the country’s 12 administrative regions and the autonomous Republic of Karakalpakstan.²⁵ Through investments like the massive Tashkent City redevelopment project²⁶ and Tashkent’s IT Park campus (inaugurated in 2019),²⁷ the capital enjoys a marked advantage over the rest of the country in terms of ICT development. Indeed,

the government’s focus on Tashkent as the proving ground for the country’s economic liberalization drive, along with multimillionaire Mayor Jahongir Ortiqkhojaev’s beneficial ownership of a number of contracting firms, indicate that the capital is deliberately advantaged. Furthermore, ICT infrastructure depends on a stable electricity supply, which is lacking in some rural areas.²⁸

Residential areas outside Tashkent still have far fewer high-speed FTTB connections, as shown by national ISPs’ coverage maps.²⁹ In April 2020, president Mirziyoyev issued a decree stating that all settlements would have high-speed internet by 2021,³⁰ which had not come into fruition at the end of the coverage period.

Individuals who are not of legal majority are officially prohibited from visiting internet cafés unsupervised between 10:00 p.m. and 6:00 a.m.³¹

A3 0-6 pts

Does the government exercise technical or legal control over internet infrastructure for the purposes of 3 / restricting connectivity? 6

The government exercises significant control over ICT infrastructure.³²

In June 2020, users experienced issues accessing Facebook, though the government denied imposing restrictions to the platforms (see B1).³³ Additionally, in July 2021, after the coverage period, the State Inspectorate for Control in the Sphere of Informatization and Telecommunications in Uzbekistan (Uzkomnazorat) restricted access to Skype, Twitter, TikTok, VKontakte, and WeChat for violating new amendments to the personal data law (see B1 and C6).³⁴

State-owned Uztelecom runs the International Packet Switching Center, which aggregates international internet traffic at a single point within its infrastructure. By centralizing international connections into one “choke point” (and concentrating the ICT sector in a state-owned company), the government can more easily shut down the internet and engage in surveillance. Uztelecom is also an upstream internet service provider (ISP) and sells internet traffic to domestic ISPs at wholesale prices. Private ISPs are prohibited by law from bypassing Uztelecom’s infrastructure to connect to the international internet, and from installing and maintaining their own satellite stations to establish internet connectivity. The government had planned to permit private ISPs to establish their own connections to the international internet in 2020.³⁵ This goal had not been realized by June 2021, and the lack of efficient channels to the international internet remains a chief complaint of local entrepreneurs.³⁶

The TAS-IX peering center and content delivery network, established in 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.³⁷ 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.³⁸

The authorities have been known to periodically impose temporary internet shutdowns. The most notable recent case occurred in Tashkent circa 2016 after Uztelecom warned of disruptions for maintenance purposes; observers speculated at the time that the disturbance was related to the installation of surveillance equipment.³⁹ The authorities also order mobile service providers to shut down internet and text message services nationwide to prevent cheating during university entrance exams held every August.⁴⁰

When users do have problems accessing the internet, the government antitrust agency has advised people who have these problems to demand better connectivity from service providers or to complain to the agency.⁴¹

Several Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) services, including Skype, WhatsApp, and Viber, had been persistently unavailable to users in Uzbekistan since 2015. However, in May 2018, access to these services was reportedly restored,⁴² though Skype was blocked again after the coverage period. That month, the CEO of Uztelecom, speaking at an event hosted by the MiTC, blamed the VoIP blocks on a technical bug.⁴³ Certain services are sometimes unavailable via broadband or mobile internet connections. For example, in June 2019, Uztelecom customers complained that they could only access WhatsApp through a virtual private network (VPN).⁴⁴ Customers made similar complaints about Skype in April 2020 and Facebook in June 2020.⁴⁵ The web browser Opera has been persistently blocked,⁴⁶ although Uztelecom insists that there are “no restrictions on equipment to which the company’s specialists have access.”⁴⁷

In November 2018, the president signed a decree reorganizing the country’s internet governance apparatus, creating Uzkomnazorat to oversee compliance with ICT-related legislation; the Technical Assistance Center, in order to collect, retain, and analyze data from ISPs and law enforcement bodies on “threats to information security”; and a third entity to help implement the government’s Safe City surveillance system (see C5).⁴⁸

A4 0-6 pts

Are there legal, regulatory, or economic obstacles that restrict the diversity of service providers? 1 / 6

There are numerous legal, regulatory, and economic obstacles that restrict the diversity of Uzbekistan’s ICT sector. Officially, hundreds of companies provide telecommunications services,⁴⁹ and as of April 2020, there were some 8,200 telecommunications businesses.⁵⁰

However, the state dominates the ICT sector. State-owned Uztelecom enjoys a monopoly in the fixed broadband market. Five mobile service providers operate in the mobile market, including three state-owned firms: Ucell, UMS (Mobiuz), and UzMobile, as well as two privately owned operators: Perfectum Mobile (owned by the Uzbek

company Rubicon Wireless Communication) and Beeline (Unitel), which is owned by Netherlands-based VEON. Ucell, the second-largest mobile service provider (after Beeline),⁵¹ was acquired by the government in November 2018 after its former owner, Sweden’s Telia Company, announced in 2015 that it would exit Uzbekistan.⁵² Beeline’s subscriber base reportedly shrunk by one million in 2019, while its total revenue fell by over 8 percent, largely to increased excise duties on mobile services.⁵³

Service providers are required to have licenses to operate, and in 2005, the Cabinet of Ministers adopted Resolution No. 155, which stipulates that providers must register as a legal entity before being issued a license.⁵⁴ Licensing is often encumbered by political interests and has historically been marred by bribery.⁵⁵

Other factors impeding telecommunications companies’ operations include an unstable regulatory environment and complicated customs procedures for the import of ICT equipment.

A5 0-4 pts

Do national regulatory bodies that oversee service providers and digital technology fail to operate in a 0 / free, fair, and independent manner? 4

The MiTC regulates telecommunications services related to the internet, while Uzkomnazorat monitors compliance with ICT-related legislation. The ministry takes on the role of policymaker, regulator, and content provider, and thus is responsible for, inter alia, licensing ISPs and mobile service providers (see A4), promoting technical standards for telecommunications technologies, and providing e-governance services. The MiTC is not independent and operates opaquely.

The state-owned Uzinfocom administers the “.uz” top-level domain. 25 private companies were authorized to provide registry services in the “.uz” domain zone as of May 2021.⁵⁶

B Limits on Content

B1 0-6 pts

Does the state block or filter, or compel service providers to block or filter, internet content, 3 / particularly material that is protected by international human rights standards? 6

Significant blocking and filtering limit access to online content related to political and social topics, particularly to sites and platforms that discuss human rights abuses in Uzbekistan. However, some websites of independent media outlets and human rights groups have been restored in recent years.

In July 2021, after the coverage period, Uzkomnazorat, blocked Twitter, TikTok, VK, and Skype for refusing to comply with April 2021 amendments to the Law on Personal Data,⁵⁷ which requires personal data to be processed in Uzbekistan and on databases that are registered with Uzkomnazorat (see C6).⁵⁸ Later in the month, the regulator blocked WeChat for the same reason.⁵⁹

Between June and August 2020, users had trouble accessing Facebook products.⁶⁰ After conducting an Open Observatory for Network Interference (OONI) probe, online news site AsiaTerra reported that Facebook and Facebook Messenger were blocked for Sharq Telecom users, allegedly at the behest of the government, but concluded that WhatsApp and Telegram remained accessible.⁶¹ The government repeatedly denied playing a role in blocking the platforms. For example, the MiTC claimed that it did not restrict access to these platforms and encouraged users to voice their complaints to internet services providers.⁶² Likewise, Azamat Akirov, the head of Uzkomnazorat, blamed the issues on “equipment modernization.”⁶³ In August 2020, UZ Report, a news site, also noted that users had issues accessing Instagram. DownDetector, a site that monitors website outages, confirmed that there were issues with access to the platform.⁶⁴

In July 2020, the MiTC blocked the satirical website Durakchi (“Fool”),⁶⁵ run by journalist Vasily Markov, because it allegedly violated Resolution No. 707 (see B3).⁶⁶

In December 2019, journalist Katy Putz and human rights researcher Steve Swerdlow reported that they could not access the websites of the Association for Human Rights in Central Asia, the International Partnership for Human Rights, the Norwegian Helsinki Committee, and the Uzbek-German Forum for Human Rights (since renamed the Uzbek Forum for Human Rights) while in Uzbekistan.⁶⁷ Shortly thereafter, the Agency for Information and Mass Communications (AIMK), a relatively new government agency which serves as a media regulator, announced that the websites were not, in fact, blocked, claiming it “conducted a study and found that there are no restrictions on access to the above web resources.”⁶⁸ Putz and Swerdlow subsequently reported that they were then able to access the websites.⁶⁹ Commentators speculated that the decision to unblock these websites was related to parliamentary elections held on December 22, 2019, which attracted global attention.⁷⁰

That same month, domestic news outlet Spot.uz reported that a number of websites hosting user-generated content, including BuzzFeed, Lurkmore, the Internet Archive, SoundCloud, and WordPress were unblocked, as was independent Russian news service TV Rain.⁷¹ According to a user who had complained about the blocks, these websites were initially restricted because they allegedly hosted extremist or pornographic content.⁷²

In September 2019, users complained that several VPN services, including CyberGhost VPN, Express VPN, and NordVPN were blocked by Uztelecom.⁷³ Similarly, the Opera web browser reportedly remained blocked (see A3) as of May 2020 because it features a built-in proxy service.⁷⁴ These services allow users to access web resources that remain censored in Uzbekistan (meanwhile, Uztelecom provides its own VPN⁷⁵).

In May 2019, Komil Allamjonov, the former director of the AIMK, announced in a post on social media that access to certain online media outlets and human rights organizations would be restored.⁷⁶ following a statement from the OSCE.⁷⁷ The websites of many independent online media outlets had been largely inaccessible since 2005.⁷⁸ after a violent government crackdown on peaceful antigovernment protests in Andijan.⁷⁹ Access was restored to a variety of international and domestic news sites, including Voice of America (VoA), Amerika Ovozi (VoA’s Uzbek service), BBC Uzbek, the English-language service of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL), Deutsche Welle (DW), AsiaTerra, Eurasianet, Fergana News, UzMetronom, and Centre1.⁸⁰ Additionally, the websites of Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, Reporters without Borders (RSF), and other online media outlets and human rights organizations were unblocked. Allamjonov did not say that the government had blocked these websites, blaming “certain technical problems” for their long-term unavailability.⁸¹

Other websites hosting political, social, and religious content, including the Uzbek news service Eltuz,⁸² the religious freedom organization Forum 18,⁸³ RFE/RL’s Russian and Uzbek services (Radio Svoboda and Radio Ozodlik), Open Society Foundations, and the public opinion platforms Avaaz and Change.org,⁸⁴ remained inaccessible during the coverage period. Allamjonov explained the continued blocking of the RFE/RL websites by pointing to their alleged neglect for “ethical principles.”⁸⁵ Additionally, days after Allamjonov’s May 2019 announcement, access to UzMetronom was again restricted (though later reinstated). In August 2019, the AIMK lashed out at RFE/RL after Radio Ozodlik published segments of a blogger’s interview with Allamjonov, calling it “a supporter of dishonest methods of information work.” The agency also accused RFE/RL of working with a network of fake accounts on social media to smear former director Allamjonov.⁸⁶

Officials and Uztelecom representatives continued to insist that they were not responsible for any currently blocked websites and that those responsible for censorship in the past had been punished.⁸⁷ However, users continued to have difficulty accessing certain websites without the use of proxy or VPN services.

B2 0-4 pts

Do state or nonstate actors employ legal, administrative, or other means to force publishers, content hosts, or digital platforms to delete content, particularly material that is protected by international human rights standards? 1 / 4

There is extensive nontechnical censorship of online content in Uzbekistan, including amongst the country’s most popular news sites, although it is not always widely reported.

In October 2020, Gazeta.uz deleted a report about the lack of competition in the election for the chair of the Supreme Council of Karakalpakstan, an autonomous republic in Uzbekistan, which was won by Murat Kallibekovich Kamalov.⁸⁸ Previously, in July 2020, the chief editors of Mekan.uz, Kruz.uz, and Kar24.uz, were summoned by the prosecutor’s office after sharing a report on the death of Musa Yerniyazov, Kamalov’s predecessor, which had not yet been officially confirmed. The outlets deleted their stories about his death shortly after. In the same month, a blogger in Karakalpakstan was also summoned by the local police station in Nukus, the capital of Karakalpakstan; he later deleted his story about Yerniyazov’s death. Another Tashkent-based online media outlet that reported the story later claimed they had been hacked.⁸⁹

In September 2020, Kun.uz, a popular online media outlet, deleted an article about the distribution of land to people who did not formally qualify for financial assistance or support from the state.⁹⁰

At the beginning of June 2020, eight online media outlets, including popular news sites Kun.uz and Daryo.uz, deleted articles detailing how residents of Sokh, a Tajik-majority enclave surrounded by Kyrgyzstan, were outraged with Shuhrat Ganiev, the governor of the Fergana province. In an interview with the BBC, the editor of Daryo claimed the removal was “as always, a technical glitch,” while local media outlets alluded to receiving calls from law enforcement officials.⁹¹

In the wake of the collapse of a dam near the town of Sardoba in May 2020, officials pressured journalists who work online and ordinary users to delete footage of and commentary on the disaster. In one case, a recording of two journalists criticizing state media’s coverage of the incident was scrubbed from the internet.⁹² The journalists were subsequently fired. In another, a reporter for the state-run Uzbek National News Agency deleted a Facebook post in which she revealed that Sardoba resident had been told not to talk about the incident.⁹³ She later resigned under duress. Meanwhile the administrator of a popular Telegram channel TROLL.UZ received a call from the AIMK asking him to remove a post about the disaster or face a fine for spreading false information.⁹⁴

In March 2020, the AIMK ordered activist Irina Matviyenko to remove “immoral content” that violated the Law on Information from her website NeMolchi.uz, which publishes stories by survivors of gender-based violence and domestic abuse.⁹⁵ Matviyenko refused to comply with the order and instead publicized her case. The ensuing outcry forced the AIMK to backtrack, and in April 2020, it revoked the takedown order, pledging to “revise the criteria for analyzing the content of publications on these issues in the media.”⁹⁶

During the period between July and December 2020, in response to three content removal requests from the government, Facebook removed three posts for violating Uzbekistan’s laws on extremism.⁹⁷ The government did not make any content removal requests to Google or Twitter during this same period.

B3 0-4 pts

Do restrictions on the internet and digital content lack transparency, proportionality to the stated aims, 0 / or an independent appeals process? 4

The AIMK and the MITC are responsible for regulating online content—particularly, content deemed harmful to the government. Decisions to block or remove content are nontransparent

In April 2021, the government amended the Law on Personal Data, which now requires website owners to store their data in Uzbekistan and ensure that their servers are registered with Uzkomnazorat (see C6). The law gives the regulator the authority to block websites that do not comply with the amendments, which it did in July 2021 (see B1).⁹⁸

In December 2020, the government amended Resolution No. 707 on “measures to improve information security in the global information network the internet,” which was originally passed in 2018. The new amendment gives AIMK’s Center of Mass Communication the authority to order bloggers, website owners, social media companies, and messaging applications to remove “prohibited” content (see below) within 24 hours. If the prohibited content—which can include comments on social media posts—is not removed, the Center of Mass Communication can take the website owner or company to court.⁹⁹ The sanctions in the law resemble the draft law on informatization, which was not approved by the president after being introduced in October 2019 and passed by the parliament.¹⁰⁰

In September 2019, President Mirziyoyev signed a decree requiring the Ministry of Justice and the Supreme Court to publish an up-to-date list of “organizations, websites, social networks and mobile messengers recognized... as extremist or terrorist and banned in the territory of the Republic of Uzbekistan.”¹⁰¹ The Ministry of Justice and the Supreme Court do publish this information on their websites,¹⁰² but, according to reporting from RFE/RL, it is outdated.¹⁰³ Reportedly, the most up-to-date list includes social media “accounts and videos of several imams and religious preachers” along with a *Vice News* video featuring Uzbek-speaking Islamic State (IS) fighters.

In September 2018, the government introduced guidelines on blocking websites. These guidelines marked the government’s first attempt to legitimize blocking, a practice it had long engaged in informally. According to the guidelines, the Center for Mass Communications now engages in “round-the-clock tracking of the dissemination of information prohibited by Uzbek law on the internet,” forwarding any illegal content to two state bodies, the Public Monitoring Center and the Expert Commission on Information and Mass Communications. These two administrative bodies then place any flagged content on a confidential blacklist that the MITC uses as the basis for imposing restrictions.¹⁰⁴ The expansive category of “prohibited” information, which is defined under the Law on Informatization, includes “calls for a forced change of the existing constitutional order” and material that threatens the territorial integrity of Uzbekistan; “propaganda of war, violence, and terrorism,” as well as sites that promote religious extremism, separatism, and fundamentalism; state secrets; incitements to “national, racial, ethnic, or religious hatred;” defamation; material that violates the right to privacy; content pertaining to illegal drugs; and pornography.¹⁰⁵

Under these guidelines, owners of blocked websites have the right to issue a complaint in court. Further, the authorities have pledged to unblock any blocked sites that voluntarily remove illegal content.¹⁰⁶

Whether the government’s longstanding informal website-blocking regime remains in place is unclear. Under this regime, several security bodies monitored and controlled online communications, though the opaque system offers few details on how decisions are made or what websites are blocked at any given time.

Amendments from 2014 to the Law on Informatization brought bloggers and other online news providers, including citizen journalists, under state regulation and subjects them to content removal requirements. The law’s broad definition could qualify any person who disseminated information “of sociopolitical, socioeconomic, and other character” to the public through a website as a blogger.¹⁰⁷ The law requires bloggers to substantiate the credibility of “generally accessible information” prior to publishing or even reposting content, and obliges them to “immediately remove” information if it is not considered credible.

This law entitles the Center for Mass Communications to limit access to websites that do not comply with its provisions. It also bans, among other things, “information inciting national, racial, ethnic, or religious hatred, as well as denigrating the honor and dignity of citizens.”¹⁰⁸

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 subsequent government resolutions, the licenses of downstream ISPs may be withheld or denied for failing to take measures to prevent their computer networks from being used to exchange information deemed to violate national laws. 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.”¹⁰⁹

B4 0-4 pts

Do online journalists, commentators, and ordinary users practice self-censorship? 1 / 4

The slight opening of the online environment since President Mirziyoyev took office in 2016 has had a positive impact on self-censorship, although it remains pervasive, given the government’s tight control over the media (particularly state media). Those commenting or reporting on topics deemed taboo, including criticism of the president or revelations about corruption, can still face harsh punishment. As a result of the government’s history of harassing journalists as well as their families, many online writers are cautious about what they post. Although some domestic news outlets continue to shine a light on abuses of power, other outlets refrain from tackling sensitive issues.

After the well-publicized arrest of blogger Bobomurod Abdullayev in 2017, some social media users have abstained from aggressive criticism of the government while in Uzbekistan, with only foreign-based Uzbeks sharing their opinions freely.¹¹⁰

During the coverage period, online media outlets removed content in response to pressure from the government (see B2). In April 2021, online news outlet Kun.uz expressed concern over the pressure to remove content critical of the government and acknowledged that it is regularly contacted by “the information division of the National Security Service.”¹¹¹ In the same month, the online media outlet OKUN claimed that it constantly deals with “groundless interference” from government authorities in the mundane activities of its editorial office. For years, the outlet has received orders to edit or delete its published materials or “to reveal a source” on a weekly basis.¹¹²

The government also relies on other tactics to foster an environment of self-censorship. For instance, a reporter from independent outlet Hook.report was summoned to the Ministry of Internal Affairs for an “informal conversation” prior to publishing an online story about religious refugees from Uzbekistan. He was detained for five hours and threatened with prosecution “for promoting and abetting terrorism.”¹¹³ In November 2019, a leaked audio recording documented Tashkent mayor Jahongir Ortiqhojaev berating journalists from Kun.uz, threatening to have them kidnapped and to claim they are gay in a context where LGBT+ people are subject to physical violence. The recording sparked immediate domestic and international outrage. Kun.uz then published a complete version of the recording (which contextualized Ortiqhojaev’s remarks somewhat)¹¹⁴ and urged its readers “not to discuss this issue anymore.”¹¹⁵ An investigation subsequently criticized Ortiqhojaev, but cleared him of wrongdoing.¹¹⁶ Meanwhile, two Kun.uz journalists resigned in the scandal’s aftermath.¹¹⁷

B5 0-4 pts

Are online sources of information controlled or manipulated by the government or other powerful 2 / actors to advance a particular political interest? 4

The editorial direction of online versions of state-run news outlets is determined by both official and unofficial directives. This has remained the case under President Mirziyoyev. In April 2019, during the previous coverage period, Saida Mirziyoyeva, president Mirziyoyev’s daughter, was appointed deputy head of the AIMK. In her new role, Mirziyoyeva promoted “Uzbekistan’s positive image abroad” and coordinated the press offices of various state agencies.¹¹⁸ Mirziyoyeva and the AIMK’s inaugural director, Komil Allamjonov, resigned in January 2020.¹¹⁹ and current director Asadjok Khodaev assumed the role in July 2020.¹²⁰

In November 2020, the AIMK disseminated a statement detailing the warnings it had issued to media organizations, online news outlets, and social media channels to demand they abstain from the “publication of false information.”¹²¹ The AIMK issued complaints to a number of media companies concerning the incitement of “interfaith hatred,” and delivered specific complaints to Effect.uz and Hordiq.uz about the “dissemination of pornography and violence.” Likewise, it issued complaints to Nova 24 about “abuse” and to Daryo.uz, Podrobno.uz, and Repost.uz for raising “doubts about coronavirus infection statistics.” In the wake of this statement, the editor in chief of Nova 24, Janona Ahmedova, denied that the outlet had been officially approached by AIMK.¹²² Komil Jalilov, a columnist at Gazeta.uz, criticized the AIMK for its statement.¹²³ Relatedly, Kun.uz reported that it had been reprimanded for covering poor electricity and gas supply in the provinces.¹²⁴

In December 2020, just a week after the initial statement, Khodaev walked back the AIMK’s statement claiming that media organizations are not to blame for the dissemination of “false information.” Khodaev also said that the authorities “will start working better in a new reality,” emphasizing the importance of dialogue between the government’s press services and media companies.¹²⁵

The case of Said-Adbulaziz Yusupov, a journalist who was arrested and charged with fraud in May 2019, further illustrates the extent to which the government directs Uzbekistan’s media. According to state prosecutors, Yusupov misrepresented himself as a National Security Service (SGB) officer to extort money.¹²⁶ Komil Allamjonov, then head of the AIMK, prohibited state-run outlets from covering Yusupov’s case, saying, “Once the SGB arrested him, it means he is guilty.”¹²⁷ Allamjonov’s statement surprised some analysts, in light of the mass restoration of online access to human rights organizations and independent media. Yusupov was released from prison in July 2020.¹²⁸

The government has sought to tightly control the narrative around the COVID-19 outbreak in the country by using state-run outlets to amplify positive stories and forbidding doctors to speak to independent journalists, among other tactics.¹²⁹ In addition, independent news outlets and administrators of prominent Telegram channels were warned not to share “fake news” related to the pandemic under penalty of prosecution (see C3).

The Union of Youth of Uzbekistan, a government-affiliated youth organization, has recruited social media trolls from its ranks. These trolls smear government critics and spread disinformation, including false claims about the illegality of VPN usage in Uzbekistan. According to Hook.report, union members have been encouraged to set up five Facebook profiles per person.¹³⁰ According to researchers at Oxford University, progovernment commentators

are also active on Twitter.¹³¹ In April 2020, the Ministry of Internal Affairs proposed the creation of “a virtual group of patriotic bloggers with the participation of members of the Youth Union of Uzbekistan, students of the Tashkent University of Information Technologies, and volunteer youth” to “identify negative opinions on social networks and create an atmosphere of intolerance to negative comments.”¹³²

B6 0-3 pts

Are there economic or regulatory constraints that negatively affect users’ ability to publish content online? 0 / 3

The economic and regulatory environment for online publishers is heavily constrained. The financial sustainability of independent online media outlets largely depends on foreign funding that remains 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,¹³³ which are primarily granted to state-owned and progovernment outlets.

Under 2007 amendments to the Law on Mass Media,¹³⁴ any website engaged in the dissemination of information at least once every six months is considered “mass media” and is subject to official press registration.¹³⁵ This registration process can be arbitrary, inhibiting journalists and readers from exercising their rights to free expression and access to information. A December 2019 regulation requires new mass media, including mass media whose work is distributed online, to register—for a fee—with the AIMK.¹³⁶ The regulation simplifies the registration process (it can now be done online and takes half the time it used to).¹³⁷

According to former AIMK head Komil Allamjonov, there were 200 active bloggers and 1,765 mass media outlets (of which 562 were online) in 2019.¹³⁸ Journalists who work online are subject to extensive regulation (see B3). As the International Research and Exchanges Board (IREX) 2019 Media Sustainability Index reports, “only the state can decide who is permitted to practice journalism” in Uzbekistan.¹³⁹ However, unregistered bloggers have taken an increasingly prominent place in the country’s media landscape, with the tacit approval of the government.

B7 0-4 pts

Does the online information landscape lack diversity and reliability? 2 / 4

Though the online media environment in Uzbekistan has remained severely restricted since President Mirziyoyev took office, there is evidence that some registered media outlets have begun to cover more politically and socially sensitive topics.¹⁴⁰ For example, Kun.uz, the fourth most popular website in the country as of May 2020,¹⁴¹ has criticized the government for failing to stop forced labor in the cotton industry.¹⁴² Relative to previous years, more internet users are reading and engaging with news from independent news websites. Historically, these websites had been subject to arbitrary closure or retroactive deregistration.¹⁴³

Many people access blocked websites or messaging apps like Viber or WhatsApp through proxies or VPNs.¹⁴⁴

Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, and the Russian social networks Odnoklassniki and Vkontakte are available and widely used. According to a 2019 survey conducted by the Institute for War and Peace Reporting, 87 percent of internet users in Uzbekistan get their news from social networks.¹⁴⁵ However, trust in social networks as news sources is low (11 percent), especially compared to news websites (32 percent) and official, state-run websites (30 percent). Telegram channels are a popular source of relatively unfiltered information (see B8) and cater to underserved audiences. For instance, IREX notes, “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.”¹⁴⁶ Government officials have not taken steps to block Telegram, and many use the platform themselves.¹⁴⁷

B8 0-6 pts

Do conditions impede users’ ability to mobilize, form communities, and campaign, particularly on political and social issues? 3 / 6

The government’s stringent policies regarding use of the internet and social media, by youth in particular, discourage online mobilization as a significant form of political engagement, as do technical restrictions on communications platforms and petition websites (see A3 and B1). However, political activists and regime critics actively use social media to reach supporters in and outside of Uzbekistan. For example, there are social media pages for political movements like Erkin O‘zbekiston (“Free Uzbekistan”)¹⁴⁸ or Alga Karakalpakstan (which seeks independence for the autonomous Republic of Karakalpakstan),¹⁴⁹ which are led by exiles. That said, the mobilizing potential of social media is limited, in part due to restrictive laws governing freedom of assembly.

However, the internet has increasingly become a space for activism, if not mobilization. Facebook and Telegram users are able to follow daily discussions about political, economic, and social issues in groups like “Reforms in the Republic of Uzbekistan: Problems with no Solutions.”¹⁵⁰ In some cases, online activism can lead to real-world change. For example, residents of Tashkent used Facebook groups to ask the government to stop constructing high-rise buildings in the historical part of the city. In October 2020, a local court ordered the stoppage of construction; the plaintiffs in the case specifically thanked the Facebook pages and online news site AsiaTerra for helping raise awareness.¹⁵¹ Additionally, in February 2021, Tashkent residents used Facebook to campaign for the preservation of the central park, which was supposed to undergo construction.¹⁵² More than 6,000 people also signed an online petition. Though the campaign was aimed at the president, the mayor of Tashkent met with the concerned residents and promised not to cut down any trees.¹⁵³ In June 2019, citizens, outraged over plans to bulldoze trees along the main boulevard in the city of Samarkand,¹⁵⁴ launched a Change.org petition that successfully convinced the

authorities not to proceed (even though Change.org is a blocked site).¹⁵⁵ In October 2018, an image of farmers and local administrators being forced by a government official to stand in a ditch full of water made the rounds on social media,¹⁵⁶ eventually leading the president to fire the responsible official.¹⁵⁷

Citizens continue to utilize the government’s “virtual office” initiative, to speak directly with government representatives, as well as Mening Fikrim (“My Opinion”), the government’s official petition platform.

C Violations of User Rights

C1 0-6 pts

Do the constitution or other laws fail to protect rights such as freedom of expression, access to information, and press freedom, including on the internet, and are they enforced by a judiciary that lacks independence? 0 / 6

Uzbekistan’s constitution protects the rights to freedom of expression and of mass media, and it prohibits censorship. Article 29 of the constitution guarantees the right to gather and disseminate information.¹⁵⁸ However, in practice, these rights are not respected, as evidenced by the blocking websites critical of the government and the subjection of media workers to political persecution. Courts in Uzbekistan, not being independent, have largely failed to protect individuals, including journalists, against government retaliation for exercising their rights to freedom of expression. Courts also operate without transparency, depriving the public of access to legal decisions, although recent changes have clarified the media’s right to attend and report on legal proceedings.¹⁵⁹ Rampant corruption, particularly within law enforcement agencies, as well as weak legislative and judicial bodies, continue to have a deleterious impact on these rights, online and offline.

Media workers are nominally provided strong protections under the Law on the Protection of Professional Activity of Journalists. However, these protections are not fully respected in practice.¹⁶⁰ In August 2019, the government introduced an amendment to the Law on Informatization that would grant bloggers the right to “conduct journalistic investigations,” among other things, although this proposal was stalled as of May 2021.¹⁶¹ Another proposal that would criminalize interfering in journalists’ work was floated by the AIMK, but this too had not yet been codified in law.¹⁶²

C2 0-4 pts

Are there laws that assign criminal penalties or civil liability for online activities, particularly those that are protected under international human rights standards? 1 / 4

The criminal code contains several provisions that have been used extensively to prosecute reporters and ordinary internet users, including prohibitions on threatening the constitutional order (Article 159); inciting ethnic, national, racial, or religious hatred (Article 156); producing and disseminating of materials that contain threats to public security and order (Article 244-1); slander (Article 139); insult (Article 140); and insult of the president (Article 158).¹⁶³ These offenses are variously punishable by fines, community service, and, imprisonment. Further prohibitions typically placed on both journalists who work online and ordinary internet users are based on vague information security rules.¹⁶⁴

The government enacted amendments to the administrative code and criminal code during the coverage period that enforce harsh penalties for online speech, including up to five years of imprisonment for insulting the president. In December 2020, amendments to the administrative and criminal codes introduced fines and prison time for a range of offenses. Publishing information that contains false allegations or threatens public order or security is now punishable with two years of imprisonment in ordinary cases. Violators can face up to three years of imprisonment in cases where the offense is “repeated,” “causes major damage,” occurs “during mass events or in case of emergency,” inflicts “especially large damage,” or results “in other grave consequences.” Violators can also face up to three years of imprisonment if the offense is committed by “an organized group or in its interests.”¹⁶⁵

The March 2021 amendments to the administrative and criminal codes stipulate that insulting or slandering the president online or in the press is punishable with up to five years imprisonment. ¹⁶⁶ Additionally, “public calls for riots and violence against citizens” are punishable by five years of imprisonment, or up to ten years in cases where the offense is made online or as part of a conspiracy with a large group.¹⁶⁷

While the December 2020 amendments included harsh penalties for insult and slander in certain instances, they also reduced the penalties for defamation and insult, generally. In January 2020, the AIMK, acting on the instructions of the president,¹⁶⁸ drafted amendments that would decriminalize defamation and insult, replacing currently prescribed prison terms with penalties such as forced labor or fines.¹⁶⁹ In March 2020, the government met with representatives from the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) to discuss the amendments.¹⁷⁰ In December 2020, the government amended articles 139 and 140 of the criminal code, which still criminalize defamation and insult, but with reduced maximum penalties. In defamation cases, violators now face up to three years of “restrained liberty,” which could include house arrest, or two to three years of correctional labor instead of a three-year imprisonment. Likewise, those who are guilty of insult now face up to one year of limited freedom or two to three years of correctional labor or one year of “restrained liberty.”¹⁷¹

In March 2020,¹⁷² President Mirziyoyev enacted amendments to Article 244.5 of the criminal code which penalize the dissemination of “false information” regarding the spread of infectious diseases or quarantine via mass media or the internet with up to three years of imprisonment.¹⁷³

In 2016, amendments to the criminal code increased the penalty (under Article 244.1) for the dissemination through “mass media or telecommunications networks” of “information or materials” that threaten public security and order (including by containing “ideas of religious extremism, separatism, or fundamentalism”) to up to eight years imprisonment.¹⁷⁴ Observers, including the OSCE, regarded this as a move to further suppress freedom of expression online.¹⁷⁵

C3 0-6 pts

Are individuals penalized for online activities, particularly those that are protected under international human rights standards? **1 / 6**

Score Change: The score declined from 2 to 1 because at least three people were sentenced to multiple years of imprisonment for their online activities, including prominent blogger Otabek Sattoriy, who was sentenced to six and a half years in prison in May 2021.

The government is known for its hostility toward its critics, including journalists who work online, human rights activists, and ordinary internet users.¹⁷⁶ Numerous individuals have been arrested and convicted for their online activities.

In January 2021, Uzbek police detained Otabek Sattoriy, a blogger who writes about corruption and farmer’s rights. The authorities accused Sattoriy of extortion, claiming that he threatened to publish an article on unfair prices in the Dekhkanskii bazaar unless he received a gift. Sattoriy’s father denied this claim. In February, the prosecutor general’s office claimed seven complaints had been reported against Sattoriy, stating that he was “guilty of administrative offenses of slander, insult, and disseminating false information.”¹⁷⁷ Sattoriy was sentenced to six years and six months imprisonment for money extortion and aggravated slander in May.¹⁷⁸

During the Sattoriy trial in April 2021, the prosecutor general’s office charged three Effect.uz correspondents—Khamid Ahmedov, Akbar Nurimbetov, and Elyor Tadjibayev.¹⁷⁹ The first trial was held in May 2021; the three face various charges, including resistance to authority and interference with a trial.¹⁸⁰ The journalists, who requested access to the trial prior to the hearing, deny the charges and state that a National Guard Officer admitted them to the court and accompanied them once they entered.

In November 2020, authorities detained blogger Tulkin Astanov for violating his terms of probation and sentenced him to five years in prison. He was previously sentenced to two years in prison in October 2019. Police claimed that he violated his probation by encouraging others to defame law enforcement online and by leaving Tashkent. After his arrest, he started a hunger strike to protest unjust conditions in detention.¹⁸¹

In October 2020, the Bulungur District Court sentenced a blogger, whose name was withheld, in the Samarqand Province to four years of imprisonment for attempting to write negative articles about two companies, unless they paid him.¹⁸²

Other users faced less severe charges and sentences during the coverage period. For example, Inomjon Pardaev, a TikTok user in Samarkand, was sentenced to 15 days in prison for taking a video in front of a monument to the poet Alisher Navoi, who is commemorated in Uzbekistan as the founder of Uzbek literature. Pardaev later posted a video apologizing for “disgracing the country.”¹⁸³

In April 2021, activist Miraziz Bazarov was detained and charged with insult for an October 2020 TikTok video in which he said that “school is a place where old slaves and losers teach children to be slaves and losers.”¹⁸⁴ Bazarov has criticized the government on Telegram and called for the decriminalization of sexual conduct between men, which is barred under the criminal code. Officials detained Bazarov the day after he was discharged from a hospital where he was recovering from being physically attacked, likely in retaliation for his activism (see C7).¹⁸⁵ Previously, in July 2020, Bazarov was summoned by the SGB after he published Facebook posts in which he criticized the government for corruption and accused officials of misusing COVID-19 funds. Ultimately, he refused to enter the police station for questioning. Bazarov claims that he was subsequently targeted with cyberattacks and online harassment.¹⁸⁶

In April 2021, Tashkent-based journalist Said Yanyshv was fined 1,225,000 soms (\$117) on charges of spreading false information. The charges related to Yanyshv’s reports about high-rise building construction near schools, which were published online. The accusations against Yanyshv were filed by the school’s director and the company constructing the high-rise buildings.¹⁸⁷

In January 2021, Tashkent police questioned blogger Amir Sharifullin the day after he posted a picture on Facebook in which he held a poster reading “Stop Corruption, Freedom to Navalny.” Sharifullin deleted the photo after the police released him.¹⁸⁸

In December 2020, the prosecutor general’s office opened a case against blogger Abdufatto Nuritdinov, who is also known by his pseudonym Otabek Nuritdinov, on charges of insult. Prosecutors dropped the charges three days later, citing procedural irregularities. Nuritdinov was charged in relation to his criticism of school administrators who announced that several students were gay; sex between men is criminalized in Uzbekistan and same-sex activity is highly stigmatized.¹⁸⁹

In October 2020, an unnamed man was detained after he posted a TikTok video in which he ripped up the Koran.¹⁹⁰

In August 2020, Kyrgyz authorities detained journalist Bobomurod Abdullayev in Kyrgyzstan, where he lived in exile, at the behest of Uzbekistan’s government. The Uzbek authorities found him in violation of the criminal code, charging him with “encroachment on the president of the republic of Uzbekistan.”¹⁹¹ They also accused him of “disseminating materials that target the constitutional order of Uzbekistan via social media.” Abdullayev had been accused of running the anonymous Facebook account Qora Mergan (“Black Sniper”), which details purported incidents of government corruption; he denies the allegation.¹⁹² Abdullayev was tortured in detention in Kyrgyzstan and extradited to Uzbekistan, despite his application for asylum in Kyrgyzstan and intense international pressure to free Abdullayev.¹⁹³ In October, he was released and the charges were dropped.¹⁹⁴ Abdullayev was previously arrested in 2017 and sentenced to forced labor on charges of “calls to unlawful changes of the constitutional form of government”; he alleged he was tortured in detention.¹⁹⁵

In August 2020, police arrested Dadakhon Haydarov, a popular YouTube commentator,¹⁹⁶ after he criticized the leadership of the Fergana province and calling for them to be replaced. His father reported that Haydarov was taken to Fergana city by helicopter and held there for 10 days due to his speech at a rally in the Sokh exclave of Fergana.¹⁹⁷ Haydarov was released in September, and the criminal charges against him were dropped.¹⁹⁸

In August 2020, former blogger Akrom Malik was granted clemency by the president of Uzbekistan. He was released after serving more than half of a six-year sentence.¹⁹⁹ Malik had been accused of affiliation with exiled opposition leader Muhammad Salih and convicted of attempting to violate the constitutional order in Uzbekistan.²⁰⁰ He denied any mistreatment during serving his time in prison and urged people “not to politicize his activity.”²⁰¹

In July 2020, the editors of three online news outlets in Karakalpakstan—Makan.uz, Kruz.uz, and Kar24.uz—and a blogger were summoned by authorities for reporting on the death of Musa Yerniyazov, the former chair of the Supreme Council of Karakalpakstan, before it was officially confirmed (see B2).²⁰² The officials also confiscated their electronic devices.²⁰³

During the previous coverage period, internet users in Uzbekistan faced penalties for online activities in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, in March 2020, a user was jailed for 30 days for allegedly falsely claiming on social media platforms that his neighbor had died of COVID-19. As of March 2020, the Ministry of Interior had investigated 33 social media accounts for “incorrectly interpreting the situation in the country” prior to the amendment of Article 244.5 of the criminal code (see C2), identifying 13 citizens who shared “false and baseless information” on social media platforms, 9 of whom received “preventive explanatory conversations,” while the remaining 4 were to be prosecuted “according to the current legislation.” The AIMK warned Telegram channel administrators to delete “false information” or face charges under Article 244.1 of the criminal code, and in at least one case, a Telegram user was fined for posting “false information.”

C4 0-4 pts

Does the government place restrictions on anonymous communication or encryption? 1 / 4

There is limited space for anonymous digital communication, and the government strictly regulates the use of encryption.²⁰⁴ Proxy servers and anonymizers are important tools for protecting privacy and accessing blocked content, although they require skills beyond what many ordinary users in Uzbekistan possess.

There are few options for posting anonymous comments online. Individuals are increasingly encouraged to register with their real names to participate in discussion forums such as the state-run Uforum.²⁰⁵ Individuals must also provide their internal passport information to buy a SIM card.²⁰⁶ In addition, as of September 2019, individuals must register their mobile devices’ international mobile equipment information (IMEI) codes with the state.²⁰⁷ Service providers must block unregistered devices.

Amendments introduced in August 2018²⁰⁸ and adopted in December 2019,²⁰⁹ which crack down on illegal VoIP services and the unauthorized use of protected Wi-Fi hotspots, led to rumors that using VPNs was being criminalized.²¹⁰ The MiTC vehemently denied the rumors, asserting that they stemmed from a misunderstanding of the amendments’ language.²¹¹ However, certain VPN services are apparently blocked (see B1).

C5 0-6 pts

Does state surveillance of internet activities infringe on users’ right to privacy? 1 / 6

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.²¹² Article 27 also guarantees respect for human rights and the rule of law, though these rights are frequently violated during surveillance operations.

In November 2020, the president signed amendments to the Law on Guarantees for Legal Advocacy and Social Protection of Lawyers, the Law on Operational-Search Activities, and the criminal code. The amendments were passed by the upper chamber of parliament in March 2020.²¹³ The changes expand law enforcement agencies’ ability to wiretap lawyers and enhance the surveillance powers of the National Guard, a body that has grown to prominence under President Mirziyoyev.²¹⁴ The amendments were met by criticism from the local legal community.²¹⁵

In July 2019, President Mirziyoyev enacted the Law on Personal Data,²¹⁶ unifying several regulations concerning the collection and processing of personal data, including by ISPs and mobile service providers. The law enumerates a number of privacy rights but carves out several exceptions “in order to ensure state security” and does not apply to personal data obtained by law enforcement authorities.²¹⁷

Police in Uzbekistan frequently confiscate computers, phones, and other internet-enabled devices when conducting arrests (see C3).²¹⁸

Since 2006, the SGB has conducted electronic surveillance of the national telecommunications network by employing the Russia-designed System for Operational Investigative Measures (SORM), ostensibly to prevent terrorism and extremism.²¹⁹

The Israeli branch of the American company Verint and the Israeli company NICE both supply Uzbekistan’s security services with monitoring centers, allowing them direct access to residents’ telephone calls and internet activity, according to the UK-based nongovernmental organization Privacy International. Privacy International reported that Verint has also carried out tests on behalf of the SGB 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 false ones using technology supplied by the US company Netronome.²²⁰ In 2015, documents leaked from the Italy-based surveillance software company Hacking Team revealed that NICE was supplying Hacking Team’s Remote Control System (RCS) spyware to Uzbekistan.²²¹ RCS can intercept user communications, remotely activate a phone’s microphone and camera, and access all content on a phone (including contacts and messages) without the user’s knowledge. Researchers from Kaspersky, a Russian-based cybersecurity firm, claimed that the security services have also used software from the German company FinFisher, which has exported spyware to authoritarian countries around the world.²²²

In addition to purchasing spyware from foreign technology companies, the government is developing its own interception tools. Kaspersky identified one protocol for hacking into phones and computers called “Sharpa” in October 2018.²²³ The protocol was reportedly created by an entity linked to the SGB known as “Military Unit 02616.”

The government continues to work with Huawei on a country-wide Safe City project, which currently features networked CCTV surveillance in Tashkent.²²⁴ In June 2019, the government formally contracted several Chinese companies to implement the project in Tashkent.²²⁵ As of July 2020, the government had installed 898 video surveillance systems in the Shaikhantahur district of Tashkent and 500 systems in the Bostanlyk district, as well as 175 cameras in Andijan province, 128 in Kashkadarya, and 169 in Surkhandarya.²²⁶ Additionally, mobile complexes for camera-equipped Nexia 3 vehicles were installed in Fergana. PWC, the international consulting firm, helped develop the plan for the technical implementation of the project in cooperation with the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the Ministry of Emergency Situations, the Ministry of Healthcare, the Tashkent City administration, and the MiTC.²²⁷ The project aims to create a unified smart city system across Uzbekistan by 2023.²²⁸ Generally, Uzbekistan’s ICT sector is heavily reliant on Huawei.²²⁹

C6 0-6 pts

Does monitoring and collection of user data by service providers and other technology companies 0 / infringe on users’ right to privacy? 6

ISPs and mobile service providers must install SORM-compliant surveillance equipment on their networks in order to obtain an operating license.²³⁰ Telecommunications providers are prohibited by law from disclosing details on surveillance methods and face possible financial sanctions in addition to license revocation if they fail to design their networks to accommodate electronic interception.²³¹

In April 2021, the Law on Personal Data, which requires companies to store the personal data of Uzbek citizens on servers in Uzbekistan, came into effect. Additionally, these servers must be registered with Uzkomnazorat. The MiTC initially introduced these plans in early 2020²³² and the president signed it into law in January 2021.²³³ According to the law, violators can face fines of up to \$2,115 and up to three years imprisonment. The law also allows Uzkomnazorat to block access to websites that do not comply with the new regulations.²³⁴ In July 2021, after the coverage period, the law was used as a justification to block several social media platforms, including Skype, TikTok, Twitter, V Kontakte, and WeChat (see B1).

ISPs and mobile service providers are required to store user data for three months.²³⁵ Since 2004, operators of public internet access points are required to monitor their users and cooperate with state bodies. Under regulatory amendments introduced in 2014, operators of 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” used by customers for three months.²³⁶

The law requires a prosecutor’s warrant for the interception of internet traffic by law enforcement bodies. However, in cases deemed urgent, the authorities may initiate surveillance and subsequently inform the prosecutor’s office within 24 hours.²³⁷

C7 0-5 pts

Are individuals subject to extralegal intimidation or physical violence by state authorities or any other 2 / actor in relation to their online activities? 5

Activists, journalists, and ordinary internet users continued to face extralegal intimidation and violence in retribution

for their online activities.

In March 2021, activist Miraziz Bazarov was attacked at the weekly event he hosts for fans of anime and K-pop, likely in relation to his work, and subsequently hospitalized. Before the attack, he said that men who attended earlier meetups had aggressively chanted “Allahu Akbar.” Bazarov regularly criticizes the Uzbek government on Telegram and has called for the decriminalization of sexual conduct between men.²³⁸ He was arrested in April 2021, the day after he was discharged from the hospital, and had previously been summoned by SGB officials in July 2020 (see C3).

In February 2021, Polish journalist Agnieszka Pikulicka Wilczewska reported that she was subjected to sexual harassment, including online harassment, when she filed for an extension of her press accreditation at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Wilczewska was also told that extension of her accreditation would be conditioned on positive coverage of the government. After the incident prompted widespread criticism, the ministry apologized to the journalist fired the official involved, and approved Wilczewska’s accreditation.²³⁹ However, in June 2021, after the coverage period, the ministry refused to extend her accreditation.²⁴⁰

In January 2021, blogger Aziza Umarova experienced a wave of targeted harassment from social media accounts that accused her of bias against Russia. Umarova believes she was targeted in retaliation for Facebook posts criticizing the economic links between Central Asian countries and Russia, and attributes the activity to bots.²⁴¹

In August 2020, journalist Nigora Alimova, who also moderated the popular Facebook group “A Ship of Fools,” was summoned to the Ministry of Internal Affairs. After she was released, she posted on Facebook in support of government officials.²⁴² Blogger Alisher Ilkhamov expressed concern that she was forced to make the statement.²⁴³

Critics who live abroad have also faced online harassment. In April 2021, social media accounts harassed Nadejda Atayeva, a frequent critic of the government, accusing her of supporting slavery in Moldova.²⁴⁴ In February 2021, Alisher Ilkhamov, a prominent social scientist residing in the UK, said he was threatened by Uzbek security services after he posted comments critical of Uzbek government policies on social media.²⁴⁵

In November 2019, journalist Davlatnazar Ruzmetov, also known under his alias Davlat Nazar, was killed in a hit-and-run incident in Khorezm province.²⁴⁶ Ruzmetov had been a contributor to *Radio Ozodlik*, where he reported on forced labor in the cotton industry. He actively commented on political and social affairs on Facebook. The authorities denied any foul play in Ruzmetov’s death,²⁴⁷ but human rights defenders say he had been under state surveillance. The man who struck and killed Ruzmetov was released after just three months of detention, prompting speculation that the killing was politically motivated.²⁴⁸

LGBT+ individuals who are active online brave hate speech, intimidation, and offline violence. In September 2019, a 25-year-old resident of Tashkent was murdered days after coming out as gay in an Instagram post.²⁴⁹ In August 2019, exiled LGBT+ activist Shohrukh Salimov asked President Mirziyoyev to decriminalize homosexuality in a video message; his parents, who still live in Uzbekistan, were subsequently harassed the police.²⁵⁰

C8 0-3 pts

Are websites, governmental and private entities, service providers, or individual users subject to 1 / widespread hacking and other forms of cyberattack? **3**

Human rights defenders, bloggers, and online journalists regularly report attempts to compromise their online accounts. For example, in August 2020, unknown attackers attempted to access the Telegram accounts of bloggers and several Telegram channel administrators. A group of bloggers and journalists—including Anora Sodiqova,²⁵¹ Eldor Asanov,²⁵² Zafarbek Solijonov, Feruzkhan Yakubkhodzhev, Sasha Ivanyuzhenko, Zafarbek Solizhonov,²⁵³ Shukhrat Kurbanov, Daniil Kislov²⁵⁴ and Rada Abdullayeva²⁵⁵—reported attempts to seize their Telegram accounts. All of the attempts were initiated on August 6, indicating that the attack was coordinated. The group included the administrators of several Telegram channels, including @nobody_cares_but, @insider_uz, and @kurbanoffnet, all of which have thousands of subscribers.²⁵⁶

Between May and September 2019, activists and journalists in Uzbekistan were beset by a wave of sophisticated phishing attempts, according to Amnesty International. Using fake Google and Mail.ru emails, the attackers sought to break into the accounts of at least 170 targets in and outside of the country.²⁵⁷ In addition, the cyber-security company eQualit.ie reported that three websites it protects—Centre1, Eltuz, and Fergana News—sustained distributed denial-of-service (DDoS) attacks in 2018 and 2019.²⁵⁸ eQualit.ie could not establish that the government of Uzbekistan was behind these incidents.

Footnotes

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