



# Freedom of the Press 2015 - Uzbekistan

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## 2015 Scores

Press Status: Not Free

Press Freedom Score (0 = best, 100 = worst): 95

Legal Environment (0 = best, 30 = worst): 30

Political Environment (0 = best, 40 = worst): 37

Economic Environment (0 = best, 30 = worst): 28

Uzbekistan's legal framework ostensibly prohibits censorship and guarantees freedom of speech and the right to information. In practice, however, such protections are systematically ignored by President Islam Karimov's autocratic government, which in 2014 implemented new restrictions on online content that further limited space for the free flow of information.

## Legal Environment

Convictions for libel and defamation can result in fines and jail time, and publicly insulting the president is punishable by up to five years in prison. Journalists can also face legal penalties for "interference in internal affairs" and "insulting the dignity of citizens." Although a law granting access to information exists, it is not enforced. Journalists working for unaccredited foreign outlets or unregistered domestic outlets are not legally recognized as journalists and risk persecution by the government.

Virtually all local media outlets are linked directly or indirectly to the state, and the National Security Service actively manipulates press reports to present a carefully constructed image of the country, occasionally allowing limited criticism of local corruption. Widespread self-censorship is a serious problem, as investigative journalists fear reprisals in the form of harassment, loss of employment, or jail time. In September 2014, the government passed a law banning online content that is extremist, inaccurate, separatist, pornographic, or untrue, among other things. Several important provisions of the law are loosely worded, allowing for broad and arbitrary interpretations. Observers believed the law to be a reaction to the growing popularity of social-networking websites and blogs as platforms for free discussion.

## Political Environment

Both government censorship and self-censorship are pervasive. State-owned telecommunications carrier Uztelecom maintains control over internet services in Uzbekistan, blocking access to the websites of foreign news organizations, human rights groups, and exile publications. Uznews.net, a

Germany-based independent news portal that regularly published content critical of the Karimov government, announced its closure in December 2014. The website had suspended operations for "technical reasons" a month before the announcement, following the reported hacking of chief editor Galima Bukharaeva's computer and email account. Information acquired through the attack, including the names of Uznews contributors working inside Uzbekistan, was subsequently posted on various social-media websites. Bukharaeva attributed the attack to the Uzbek National Security Service.

In August 2014, a Facebook campaign emerged urging Uzbeks to send a message to the Karimov government by posting "Qorqmayman!" ("I am not afraid!"). The campaign page gained thousands of members, including former government officials, professors, and students, with one-third of the posts originating from within the country.

The few remaining independent journalists in Uzbekistan – most of whom contribute to foreign media outlets because local independent outlets are virtually nonexistent – continue to face pressure from Karimov's regime, including harassment, intimidation, assault, and detention. In June 2014, independent journalist Said Abdurakhimov (known under the pseudonym Sid Yanyshv) was convicted of the charges of working without accreditation and threatening social order, and fined 9.6 million soms (\$4,000). The charges followed an article Abdurakhimov published on Fergana, a Moscow-based news portal, about displaced residents of Tashkent who had not been compensated for the demolition of their homes by the government. Media watchdogs noted several irregularities in the trial. Abdurakhimov's two court-appointed lawyers made no attempts to provide defense, and he was not permitted to present video evidence to contest incriminating witness testimonies. Following the trial, two of the five witnesses for the prosecution admitted to receiving scripted testimony.

Throughout 2014, the government targeted journalists and activists who covered or brought attention to taboo subjects. These topics include the ongoing feud between President Karimov and his daughter, Gulnara Karimova (under house arrest as of year's end), low living conditions and the lack of basic necessities, and international protest movements. In January, photographer Umida Akhmedova and eight others, including one journalist, staged a peaceful protest outside the Ukrainian Embassy in Tashkent in solidarity with the Euromaidan protest movement. Three days later, the participants were detained and questioned by the National Security Service without access to lawyers, and fined approximately \$2,000. Three of the participants were sentenced to 15 days in jail.

Uzbekistan remains among the world's most notorious jailers of journalists and free expression activists. According to Human Rights Watch, at least three-dozen journalists, activists, writers, and intellectuals are being held in Uzbek jails and penal colonies as a result of their work. Muhammad Bekjanov and Yusuf Ruzimuradov of the opposition newspaper *Erk* have been imprisoned since March 1999, which makes them the longest-jailed reporters in the world, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists.

## **Economic Environment**

The state dominates the media industry. Most broadcasting comes from four state-run television channels. Ownership of non-state media outlets is opaque, though journalists report that there is low public demand to make ownership structures transparent, as outlets generally report the same

version of the news. The government controls most publishing houses and printing presses. A number of regional and local television and radio stations are privately owned, and a few private printing presses produce independent publications that avoid politically sensitive topics and have limited circulation. Low pay within Uzbekistan's media industry encourages journalists to accept bribes.

Approximately 43 percent of the population used the internet in 2014. The small minority of citizens who access foreign news outlets curtail state restrictions by using proxy servers. In spite of the relatively small internet penetration, social-media platforms and blogs have increasingly become spaces to critically discuss issues with state-provided services and to disseminate independent reporting. Uzbek state-owned media continue to warn audiences against the dangers of the internet, although authorities have simultaneously attempted to use alternative social-networking websites – such as Bamboo.uz, a platform similar to Twitter that was launched in Uzbekistan in February 2014 – to combat the popularity of foreign platforms.

The country's leading mobile phone operator, Uzdunrobita, filed for bankruptcy in 2013 after a prolonged and unsuccessful bid to defend itself against tax evasion and antitrust charges. The case against Uzdunrobita – a subsidiary of the Russian telecommunications company Mobile TeleSystems (MTS) – highlights the hostile environment for foreign investors in the sector.

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