



BRIDGEWAY ADVOCACY

Creating a More open Society in Uzbekistan

Since 2016 and President Shavkat Mirziyoyev's election, the Government of the Republic of Uzbekistan, working in close cooperation with the Agency for Information and Mass Communications, and various civil society representatives and non-governmental organizations, has made important efforts to support the creation of a more open society in Uzbekistan. At the beginning of this year, a newly formed NGO, the Public Fund for Support and Development of National Mass Media of Uzbekistan, whose Founders are considered experts in these fields, also joined in these important efforts. This combined work is having a real impact on how the media operates in Uzbekistan. There are more live broadcasts now. There are no journalists in prison. Previous "no-go" issues like forced and child labor and corruption are now frequently covered, and bloggers are being acknowledged by the Government as legitimate journalists. Moreover, five draft laws have been developed, and one decree and three resolutions of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan have been adopted in the spheres of media, journalism and free speech and include:

- **The development of a draft Presidential resolution unifying state information policy in Uzbekistan.** The draft resolution seeks to ensure the constitutional right of citizens to freedom of speech and access to information and encourages a more open dialogue between the state and civil society in this area. The draft provides for the creation of a media ombudsman position, resolves pre-trial disputes between the media and state agencies, protects the legal rights and freedoms of citizens/groups and seeks to promote and enhance sustainable development in media and journalism in Uzbekistan.
- **The development of draft laws and amendments to existing legislation that increase security for journalists.** The laws and amendments decriminalize free speech, abolish current rules regarding sentences for defamation and insult, giving bloggers the same rights as journalists and work to bring about an end to intimidation and violence toward journalists and bloggers.
- **The development of draft laws over broadcasting in Uzbekistan.** The draft laws establish stronger legal foundations and protections for the distribution of television and radio products to consumers in the country; promote respect for the legal rights and freedom of individuals in this arena as well as sustainable development for domestic broadcasters; ensures stable and sustainable development for information infrastructure/resources/technology; increases the share of domestic production of information and communication products and increases the level of innovative and high-tech activity in the information sphere.

These materials are distributed by Bridgeway Advocacy on behalf of the Public Fund for Support and Development of National Mass Media. Bridgeway Advocacy is registered under the Foreign Agents Registration Act as a foreign agent of the Public Fund for Support and Development of National Mass Media. Additional information is on file with the U.S. Department of Justice, Washington, DC."

- **The development of draft laws governing freedom of access to information, promoting more openness for public bodies and ensuring that citizen's rights are protected in this area.** The drafts seek to define the powers and responsibilities of the heads of state bodies and other organizations and define a citizen's right to receive and distribute information about and question the activities of public bodies and government organizations.
- **The development of draft laws that seek to improve the existing laws governing regulation of the media and more clearly define the rights and responsibilities of media and journalists.** The draft legislation focuses on protecting the media and ensuring their rights to access information, while also addressing new, more transparent, procedures for media registration.
- **The development of draft resolutions that seek to improve information security and address internet access-related issues in Uzbekistan.** Current drafts seek to improve dialogue between the government and website owners, website pages and bloggers in this area.
- **A plenum ruling by the Supreme Court of Uzbekistan on ensuring the right to public trials and the right of the public to receive objective information about the activities of the courts in a timely manner.** The draft ruling establishes norms for interactions between the judiciary and the media and seeks to protect the rights of citizens in this area.
- **The passage of a Presidential Decree ensuring the professionalization of the press services of state bodies and organizations.** The decree increases transparency and ensures that information is provided to the public in a prompt and thorough manner and increases the status of press secretaries (by making their positions equivalent to Deputy Heads of state agencies).
- **The development of a national "Code of Professional Ethics of Journalists."** This code defines the ethical aspects of journalists and ensures that journalists uphold and comply with the code.

A Snapshot of Progress:

- Closed foreign web sites (such as Voice of America, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, Eurasianet.org, Deutsche Welle, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, Reporters Sans Frontieres, Asia Terra and Fergana Agency) have been opened.
- 28 new media outlets have been opened.
- More than 10 national and international events focusing on free speech and journalist rights have been held.
- Uzbekistan rose nine places in freedom of speech rating.
- More than 400 employees in the field of information services improved their qualifications.
- Press secretaries have been appointed in 114 agencies, and new media plans have been developed.
- 400 press conferences have been held and more than 300 information services introduced.
- A Memorandum of Understanding signed with a UK government agency.
- A meeting was held with representatives of a U.S. Global Media Agency.
- Exchanges were held on the topic of ensuring information security with the UAE.
- Ongoing and close coordination has taken place with the OSCE and an international roundtable was held with OSCE Ambassadors in Samarkand.
- A book caravan was organized, and 1.5 million books were distributed across the country.
- 186 libraries are being created and Librarian's Day was established.
- A media center has been organized to create electronic audio books and media content and a methodology promoting reading across Uzbekistan has been deployed.
- An international book fair was held in Tashkent.
- Special efforts for the blind have been undertaken, such as creating a printing company that prints in Braille and a special innovative computer center has opened in a boarding school for the blind.
- The Professional College of Printing has been renovated and a new teaching methodology has been created.
- Over 50 million copies of various printed materials have been published and over 26 million textbooks published.
- The licensing process for printing has been simplified.

Actions Taken:

- On September 14, 2019, the Parliament of the country formed the “Public Council for the Development of Information and Mass Communications.” This entity underscores the importance of public organizations in shaping public opinion on current issues in the information sphere and on current issues affecting civil society institutions.
- On November 12, 2019, the Agency for Information and Mass Communications organized a press conference on the death of a journalist as well as the placement in a psychiatric hospital of a blogger. During the event, law enforcement agencies provided additional the details of the accident in which the journalist died. In the case of the blogger, medical evidence was provided describing her diagnosis and subsequent actions taken. The conference was attended by representatives of the media, bloggers, lawyers and relatives of both individuals.
- On January 29, 2020, the “Public Fund for Support and Development of National Media” was created, which will contribute to creating a level playing field for the media, contribute to their development, as well as work to advance the rights of journalists and bloggers.
- On March 5-6, 2020, the Second Dialogue of Central Asian Judges was organized in Samarkand. The event was a collaboration between the OSCE, the Mass Communications Agency and the Public Fund for the Support and Development of National Media. The theme of this event was “protecting freedom of expression and freedom of the media in the context of countering illegal content.” Participants included lawyers, legal scholars, judges from, the OSCE region and Central Asian countries. Participants discussed the world trends in freedom of speech, issues related to the prevention of restrictions and the unhindered work of the media.
- The State Testing Center had filed a lawsuit to the court for damages regarding articles published by the Gazeta.uz website. At the court hearings in defense of Gazeta.uz, the director of the Public Fund for the Support and Development of National Media explained to the court the way the media works and pointed to the innocence of the publication and the author, explained why the claim of the SCT was legally unfounded, and underscored that the actions of the center could be considered as persecution of journalists. As a result of this testimony and judicial examination, the court refused to satisfy the claims of the state body.
- The former head of the Information and Mass Communications Agency, K Allamjonov, spoke in defense of a blogger whose phone was confiscated by tax authorities and whose access to Instagram was blocked. The State Tax Committee investigated the matter, and as a result, some staff members were relieved of their positions. The State Tax Committee is now considering the introduction of a mechanism to resolve similar disputes.

- Assistance was provided to a well-known photographer from Uzbekistan, Timur Karpov, who faced problems with obtaining a passport. A joint meeting between government officials, K. Allamjonov and Timur Karpov was held, and steps were taken to resolve the problem with the relevant state authorities. Subsequently, the photographer was issued a passport.
- The Kun.uz website published a story detailing how government officials put pressure on the media during their professional activities, accompanied by text and video evidence of the same. The Information and Mass Communications Agency issued an outcry against these acts, called for laws to be followed, and called on law enforcement agencies to give a legal assessment of how officials would be sanctioned in this regard.