

In Uzbekistan, the share of non-state media exceeds 60%



In the modern world, freedom of speech and information is a key element of a democratic society.

Uzbekistan is actively moving towards strengthening the constitutional rights of citizens in this important area, striving to create favorable conditions for the free exchange of information and development of the information society.

The country remains firmly committed to further improving the system of ensuring human rights, freedoms and legitimate interests. The efforts made by the country's leadership in this direction are holistic, sustainable and irreversible.

The following key aspects of state policy in areas of obtaining and disseminating information:

Firstly, creating conditions for free expression of opinions, independent and safe work of the media. Freedom of speech and press are fundamental principles of a democratic society. Uzbekistan strives to ensure pluralism of opinions and prevent any form of censorship, which contributes to the development of an open and informed society.

For this purpose, the necessary legal frameworks have been formed and are being improved in accordance with international standards and recommendations. To date, the country has adopted more than 10 relevant laws, among them - "On guarantees and freedom of access to information", "On the openness of the activities of public authorities and management", "On the media", "On the principles and guarantees of freedom of information" , "On the protection of the professional activities of a journalist", "On informatization", etc.

Under Uzbek legislation, journalists are guaranteed personal inviolability in the performance of their professional duties and may not be prosecuted for publishing critical material.

In addition, to further liberalise media activities and ensure the rights of journalists, in 2018, the legislation clarified the legal status of journalists and guarantees of freedom of journalistic activity, as well as the procedure for accreditation of foreign media representatives in the country in accordance with modern requirements.

Mechanisms have also been established for government support of the mass media (provision of privileges on taxes, other compulsory payments and tariffs, preferences, provision of government subsidies, grants and social orders, as well as social support for editorial staff).

The consistent expansion of conditions and opportunities for media outlets is also reflected in their quantitative characteristics. From 2016 to date, their total number has increased by 49 per cent, reaching 2,200. At the same time, the total share of non-state media in the country is over 60%. Alongside traditional media, online publications are also developing rapidly, the number of which has reached 716, and their audience is steadily growing.

It is important to note that in 2023, a number of issues of ensuring freedom of information were enshrined at the level of the country's Basic Law. Thus, the new version of the Constitution of the Republic of Uzbekistan, adopted at a national referendum, outlines guarantees for the state to ensure free activity of the media, as well as responsibility for interference in the work of the media.

Another main difference of the new version of the Constitution in terms of freedom of information is the specification of the legal conditions under which restrictions on the search, receipt, use and dissemination of information can be introduced.

Similar provisions were identified in the Basic Law earlier, but were not detailed, which could lead to ambiguous interpretation and be used to unjustifiably restrict the rights of citizens.

The 2023 amendments establish that restrictions can only be imposed on certain grounds and only to the extent necessary. This represents a significant step forward in ensuring that restrictions on the right to seek, receive and disseminate information are transparent, legal and proportionate. These measures help strengthen the rule of law, protect the rights and freedoms of citizens and increase public confidence in government institutions.

A new provision has also been introduced into the country's Constitution guaranteeing free access to the Internet. Thus, the state at the constitutional level confirms its obligations to create all the necessary conditions for this, including in the context of supporting the processes of active digital transformation of the country and expanding the range of online services provided to the population.

Secondly, ensuring unhindered and equal access to information, including strengthening the accountability of government bodies to society. This includes expanding access to data on the work of government agencies and socially significant information in general. Availability of information allows citizens to be better informed, make informed decisions and actively participate in public life.

Openness and transparency in the activities of government agencies remain one of the key indicators of the effectiveness of the system of public control, ensuring continuous dialogue between the state and citizens, minimizing bureaucracy and combating corruption. It is the full implementation of this aspect that will reflect the principle laid down by the Head of State: "It is not the people who serve the state bodies, but the state bodies should serve the people".

The work carried out by the Republic of Uzbekistan in this regard is becoming increasingly systematic. Thus, in addition to the current Law on Openness in the Activities of State Authorities and Government Bodies, a number of normative acts have been adopted since 2018 and up to the present time aimed at radically improving the work of the press services of State bodies and raising the status of press secretaries to the level of deputy head of department.

Increased requirements were set for the heads and employees of information services of state bodies, including timely and comprehensive coverage of key events and decisions within the work of their departments, as well as prompt response to requests from journalists and the public.

At present, the combined staff of the press services of ministries and departments includes 778 press secretaries and more than 500 employees.

In addition, the Agency of Information and Mass Communications, together with the press secretaries of government agencies, has created a mechanism for promptly responding to citizens' appeals, as well as critical and widely discussed news items in the media. As part of this work, more than 10,000 responses and expert opinions on the identified materials were published in the media, social networks and messengers.

The new version of the Constitution also obliges public bodies to act in a transparent and open manner. This means that all significant decisions and actions of public institutions must be publicly justified and documented. Authorities are obliged to publish regular reports on their activities and inform the public about important initiatives and programmes.

In 2021, in accordance with the Presidential decree, the possibilities of public control over the activities of government agencies were expanded. A list of socially significant information to be published as open data was approved, government bodies and organizations developing data, as well as the procedure for their publication were clearly defined.

The practice of determining indicators of openness and assessing it based on advanced international standards has been successfully introduced. The corresponding national Openness Indexes were published for 2022 and 2023.

At the same time, in 2022, liability was established for violating the legislation on the openness of the activities of public authorities and management, including for non-disclosure of socially significant information, failure to comply with the deadline and procedure for publication, or falsification of information.

Thirdly, protecting the rights of citizens to privacy and personal data. In the era of digital technology and big data, government policy is aimed at ensuring the security of citizens' personal information and preventing its misuse. This includes the development and implementation of legal regulations and technical solutions to protect personal data.

These issues are regulated by the relevant Law of the Republic of Uzbekistan "On Personal Data" dated July 2, 2019. In particular, it regulates the need to ensure the collection, systematization and storage of personal data of citizens of the Republic of Uzbekistan in the country in order to suppress the risks and threats of their leakage and misuse.

At the same time, it should be noted that the new version of the Constitution also enshrines the right to protection of personal data as a personal right of the individual. Consequently, their processing is allowed only with the consent of the individual. From now on, the Basic Law creates a direct possibility for citizens to demand correction of inaccurate data and destruction of data collected illegally or no longer having legal grounds, i.e. to realise the established international practice of the so-called 'right to be forgotten'.

Such amendments are designed to promote the protection of privacy, increase trust in data processing systems, reduce risks and abuse, develop the digital economy and comply with international standards. Together, these measures create the conditions for a more transparent, secure and sustainable society in the digital age.

At the same time, the development of the population's information literacy remains an important factor in the formation of an effective and self-regulated national media environment against the background of

various global challenges. The need to meet the needs of citizens for quality content and improve critical thinking skills has been repeatedly emphasised by the President of Uzbekistan.

The relevance of this task is confirmed by the fact that disinformation is recognised as one of the main short-term global threats, according to an expert report by the World Economic Forum. In addition, a long-term study of media consumption in Central Asia, conducted by the United States Agency for International Development and the non-governmental organisation Internews, shows an increase in the share of citizens in Uzbekistan who lack basic skills in working with information on the Internet (from 3% in 2021 to 25% in 2023).

Uzbekistan continue the country's course of strengthening openness and to develop fruitful and constructive international co-operation in the area of freedom of speech and the press with a view to turning the media into a real 'fourth estate'. This will certainly create the necessary conditions for the creation of an informed, safe and progressive society ready to meet the challenges and opportunities of the digital age.

Aziz Yengalychev,

Chief Researcher at the Institute for Strategic and Regional studies under the President of the Republic of
Uzbekistan.

Source