

## Media independence is the key to creating a strong civil society in Uzbekistan

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In the modern world, few people would argue with the thesis that for the sustainable development of both the country and society, the media must play a special role. What is this role? It is an important function of a connecting bridge between society and the authorities. The media raise problematic issues, focusing the attention of the government and society on the need to find ways to solve them. Achieving such a high position for the media in our republic is not an immediate task. It is a long, labor-intensive process.

Our society is like a marathon runner in the middle of the race. However, what instills confidence in reaching the finish line – positive results in building independent and strong media – is the authorities' firm decision to see the matter through to the end, to create a modern information sphere, competitive media, to provide broad opportunities for freedom of speech and pluralism of

opinions. These are priority tasks in building the New Uzbekistan.

At the same time, it should be noted that much has already been achieved along this path. The participation, role and place of mass media representatives in the socio-political processes of the country was impossible to imagine a couple of years ago. Since 2017, the mass media of Uzbekistan have been experiencing a period of rapid development.

What made this state of affairs in the information sphere possible? It is the result of a combination of a number of factors.

Firstly, the systematic work of the authorities to improve the legislative framework regulating the activities of the media. A solid legal framework has been created in Uzbekistan to ensure freedom of speech and information. More than 10 laws have been adopted in the country in order to strengthen the legal framework for ensuring freedom of speech and effective media activity.

Certainly, the most important step towards ensuring freedom of speech was the new Constitution. It firmly guarantees the freedom of media activity, the exercise of their right to receive, use and disseminate information.

It should be noted separately that the Strategy “Uzbekistan-2030” provides for the improvement of the system of protection of the rights of the media, strengthening of responsibility for obstructing their professional activities. It is planned to consistently continue the policy of

openness, guaranteed provision of the implementation of the rights of citizens to receive, use and disseminate information.

In pursuance of the priority goals of the Strategy, a draft law has been developed to establish administrative liability for interference or obstruction of the lawful activities of the media. The law is expected to be adopted in 2025.

Secondly, the implementation of legislative initiatives has created favorable conditions for ensuring freedom of speech and developing the media. Uzbekistan has done a lot of work in this area recently. The procedure for state registration of media has been simplified, tax benefits and concessions have been provided, and much more.

Today, state registration of media is carried out only through government service centers or the Unified State Register of Public Services, its term has been reduced from 15 to 10 days. Moreover, from July 1, 2022 to July 1, 2025, media pay income tax at a tax rate reduced by 50%. From May 2023, the amount of state duty for the design, construction, use of television and radio broadcasting networks and the issuance of a license for the provision of television and radio broadcasting services has been reduced by 50%.

The support provided by the state to media workers deserves special attention. Thus, journalists and editorial staff who work in the media as their main place of work for more than one year are

compensated for 50% of the costs of learning foreign languages. Dozens of journalists were sent to foreign countries at the expense of the state to improve their qualifications and participate in prestigious media events. An important function is performed by the “Dialogue Platforms” created at the AIMC and its regional branches with the aim of protecting and ensuring the rights of media representatives and providing them with legal assistance.

Thirdly, systematic work to ensure openness of the activities of state authorities and administration. A mechanism for reporting by heads of state bodies to the media and the public has been established, regular briefings, press conferences, and explanations on various issues, including high-profile ones, are held.

The activities of press services have been radically reformed, the status of press secretaries has been raised and they are equal to the deputy head of the department. Currently, more than 1,400 employees work in the press services of ministries and departments, as well as state organizations of Uzbekistan. Press secretaries are advisers to heads on information policy, their status is also equal to the deputy head.

Also, together with the Ministry of Justice, criteria for assessing press secretaries have been approved, on the basis of which the AIMC coordinates their activities and determines the degree of effectiveness of government agencies’ openness to society, and also compiles a corresponding

rating of the effectiveness of press services.

The measures taken have allowed the information field of Uzbekistan to be saturated with information about the reforms being carried out and the work of government agencies, and thereby contributed to the further growth of openness in the information field. Thus, today more than half of the news information flow on the Internet is formed through the activities of press services of government agencies, as well as thematic press tours, meetings, briefings, etc.

In 2022, administrative liability was established for violating the legislation on the openness of the activities of state authorities and administration. All this created additional opportunities for the media. Journalists send requests to government agencies, conduct journalistic investigations, and raise socially significant issues that affect the interests of the entire people.

Fourth, a systematic increase in the effectiveness of “feedback” channels between government agencies and society. In particular, the AIMC, together with the press secretaries of government agencies, created a mechanism for promptly responding to citizens’ requests, as well as critical and widely discussed news items.

At the same time, the analysis shows that the number of critical materials is growing. If in 2020 about 9.4 thousand materials were identified, then in 2023 – 21.5 thousand. It is also necessary to note the dynamics of the growth of responses to critical materials. Thus, if in 2020 about 7.1

thousand responses and expert opinions were published, then in 2023 – more than 20 thousand.

In this regard, it is worth emphasizing that such a trend of growth in the number of critical materials and response publications reflects a stable process of democratization and broad liberalization of socio-political life in Uzbekistan and the establishment of a genuine dialogue between the state and society. Here, a fundamental difference in the perception and reaction of the authorities to criticism is clearly visible, unlike in previous years: a) repressive measures are not applied to media outlets and bloggers raising problems; b) there is an open dialogue between the state and society, including the recognition of miscalculations on the part of the authorities and the readiness of the government to protect the interests of the people; c) preventing the blocking of media resources and mass media, maintaining their normal functioning.

Fifth, a system for training highly qualified journalistic personnel has been established.

Journalism specialists are trained at the University of Journalism and Mass Communications, the National University of Uzbekistan, the State University of World Languages, the Tashkent State University of Oriental Studies, the Karakalpak State University and the Bukhara State University.

They train in more than 20 areas, such as print media and publishing, audiovisual journalism, online journalism and management, media theory and practice, military and sports journalism, digital media, and international relations.

Sixth, productive cooperation has been established with authoritative international organizations. Uzbekistan is developing close contacts with the relevant departments of the OSCE and UNESCO in order to interact in the field of further strengthening freedom of speech and media activities, improving national legislation in this area. A number of events have been held with the office of the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media. With the direct assistance of UNESCO specialists, a national Code of Professional Ethics for Journalists was developed and adopted in 2019.

Currently, work is being organized jointly with UNESCO and the OSCE/ODIHR to finalize the draft Information Code; in cooperation with foreign experts, the draft document is being brought into line with generally accepted requirements for freedom of speech. It should be emphasized that the adoption of this document will allow the domestic legislative framework to be systematized and will give new impetus to the development of the media in the country.

The above-mentioned systemic measures to liberalize the information environment have led to the rapid development of non-state media. Against the backdrop of the process of transformation of the national media market, the highest growth rates are demonstrated by the private sector – TV channels, electronic media, and blogging. According to the Union of Journalists of Uzbekistan, in recent years the number of media in the country has increased from 1,514 to more than 2,300,

with 65% of them being private. The indicators in the field of electronic media are noteworthy, where the number of Internet publications increased from 395 in 2016 to 745 in 2023 (growth +88%). The number of active bloggers showed explosive growth over the same period – from 50 to more than 1.2 thousand (+2,400%).

Today, domestic electronic media and bloggers have become the driving force of critical discussion, and the popularity of social networks and bloggers in the country has blossomed.

Thanks to the coverage of resonant news items and problems, in particular, shortcomings in the field of construction, ecology and environmental protection, road safety, as well as in the social and economic spheres, bloggers and Internet media have earned a high reputation and trust.

Currently, Internet media are able to most effectively and promptly satisfy the information needs of citizens, raise pressing issues of concern to people, and coordinate the interests of society and the state. More and more often, Internet media are becoming sources of information that attract the attention of government agencies: digital media are becoming an important feedback channel and contribute to the prompt resolution of critical issues raised by them.

In general, thanks to the work done by the state in recent years, the current state of both the national media and the media environment as a whole can be characterized in two words – rapid development. The country has created broad opportunities for freedom of speech and pluralism of

opinions, which contribute to further strengthening the participation, role and place of representatives of the mass media in socio-political processes.

The movement forward continues. The country is taking consistent measures to ensure that domestic media truly become the “fourth branch of power”. The chosen path is not easy, the finish line in this marathon is still far away, and many problems will need to be solved in the process of reform. But it inspires confidence that the political course towards achieving these lofty goals is stable and decisive.

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