

Uzbekistan

Among the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) countries, Uzbekistan is the undisputed leader in applying Internet controls. Filtering is comprehensive and, until 2006, largely undeclared with the government denying the existence of these practices. At present, the government employs sophisticated multi-layered mechanisms to exercise control over the Internet, including adopting restrictive policies, applying technological measures, and compelling self-censorship on the media.



Background

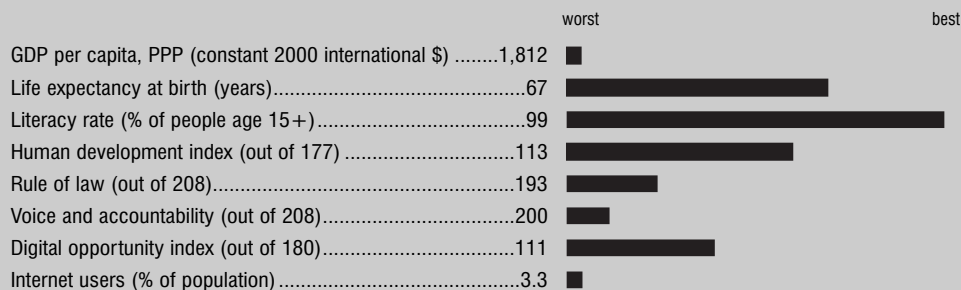
At present, and in spite of the formal separation of powers enshrined in the Constitution of the Republic of Uzbekistan, virtually all power is invested in President Islam Karimov. During his extended authoritarian rule the president has demonstrated an active commitment to controlling the information environment in the country and constraining the expression of dissident viewpoints. The active opposition has been forced to leave the country. For them, the Internet often remains the only way to communicate with Uzbek society. The complex series of laws and

regulations have resulted in self-censorship of online publishers, independent journalists, and bloggers. This, complemented with a restrictive Internet filtering regime, significantly stifles public discourse on political and human rights topics.

Uzbekistan's control of the Internet embodies the most pervasive regime of filtering and censorship in the CIS. It stands in stark contrast to the government's official enthusiasm for information and communications technology (ICT) development and the Internet. Until 2001 Uzbekistan was a regional leader in the adoption of the Internet and the prioritization of ICTs as a mechanism for national development. Uzbekistan was among the first of the post-Soviet

RESULTS AT A GLANCE

Filtering	No evidence of filtering	Suspected filtering	Selective filtering	Substantial filtering	Pervasive filtering
Political				●	
Social			●		
Conflict/security	●				
Internet tools			●		
Other factors	Low	Medium	High	Not applicable	
Transparency	●				
Consistency			●		

KEY INDICATORS

Source (by indicator): World Bank 2005, 2006a, 2006b; UNDP 2006; World Bank 2006c, 2006c; ITU 2006, 2004

republics to establish a national agency responsible for ICT development (UzInfoCom), to contribute state resources to building a sizable academic and research network (UzSCINET), and to launch an ambitious project to provide Internet to the main government institutions (Cabinet of Ministers and Presidency). After 2001 Uzbekistan continued to receive sizable foreign support aimed at developing its ICT infrastructure, including a large network of Internet access points in the regions. Uzbek government officials at all levels were sent abroad to study e-government systems, and ICT was prioritized as a means for national development. Until 2001–02 the Internet remained open and free from filtering with the exception of some limited filters for pornography that were implemented on the academic and research network (UzSCINET).

The turning point in the state's relationship to Internet freedom began following a series of attacks in Tashkent in 2004 blamed on the Hizbut-Tahrir (Hit) and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan. These attacks have been generally associated with a deepening crackdown in Uzbek society and encompass all forms and channels of dissent, including the Internet.

Internet in Uzbekistan

In 2004 the International Telecommunication Union estimated some 880,000 regular Internet users in Uzbekistan, or a 3 percent Internet penetration rate.¹ According to local surveys the total Internet audience is approximately 1,820,000 as of June 2006. In contrast to neighboring countries, Uzbek women use Internet at an almost equal rate to their male counterparts, with a difference of only 3 percent.² About 41.3 percent of Internet users are sixteen to twenty years old.³ Access is most common from homes (42.7 percent) and work (44.6 percent). Approximately 30 percent of Internet users also visit cybercafés.⁴ As of January 2005 there were 463 Internet access centers in Uzbekistan; in January 2006 the number dropped to 344.⁵

Residential Internet services are unaffordable for the majority of the population. The cost of dialup services is USD0.37 per hour and unlimited access is USD67.14 per month. The cost of ADSL access is significantly lower: on average, it does not exceed USD15 per month and offers speed of 128 Kbit/second. The quality of Internet access and communications services in Uzbekistan is rapidly improving.⁶ The bandwidth capacity of external channels has shown steady

growth: as of June 2006 it totaled 160.2 Mb/s, up from 44 Mb/s in July 2004.

The number of Internet service providers (ISPs) in Uzbekistan has grown considerably, from 25 in 1999 to 539 in 2005. Because of increased licensing requirements the number of ISPs dropped to 430 in 2006. There are seven top-tier ISPs with connections to China, Russia, Italy, Germany, and the Netherlands. The country also has a network of microwave radio relay lines that provide for high-speed data transmission. The sole Internet exchange point, used by the seventeen aggregator ISPs, is located in Uzbek Central Telegraph's premises.⁷

The domain registration of the national ".uz" zone was decentralized in December 2005 when five operators were granted the status of registrars. Created with foreign organizations' support, the Computerization and Information Technology Developing Center (UzInfoCom) is a quasi-nongovernmental organization⁸ that develops computer and information technologies and administers the country code top-level domain name (".uz").⁹ According to the data of UzInfoCom, as of October 2005 there were 2,704 second-level domains.

Russian is the most popular language among Internet users (up to 70 percent), followed by Uzbek and English. The most visited Web sites in Uzbekistan are media sites and search engines located in the Russian Internet zone (".ru").

Legal and regulatory frameworks

Although the constitution of Uzbekistan guarantees freedom of expression and prohibits censorship,¹⁰ the Central Inspection on Protecting State Secrets in the Press officially censored media until 2002. Since then the government has increasingly compelled self-censorship on online media publishers, bloggers, and opposition leaders through a variety of means.¹¹ A recent example is the newly adopted Mass Media Law.¹² Discussions of its drafts were closed to the pub-

lic to minimize media criticism of restrictive provisions. The Law holds media owners, editors, and staff members responsible for the "objectivity" of the published materials.¹³ Independent and foreign media, including online publishers, need to register with the Cabinet of Ministers in Uzbekistan. In addition, the Law forbids entities with 30 percent or more foreign participation to establish their own media outlets in the country. Online versions of newspapers also fall within the Law's scope, and as such are subject to registration if their content differs from the printed publication. In order to gain more control over Internet content, the government has stated that subsequent regulations will specify the type of Web sites that need to be registered.¹⁴

The formal regulation of the Internet and electronic mass media commenced with the adoption of regulation no. 52 by the Cabinet of Ministers,¹⁵ which established a National Network of Information Transmission (UzPAK) and ensured its monopoly on international Internet connectivity for the purposes of preserving the national information security. The government's strict enforcement of this regulation resulted in several Web sites becoming temporarily inaccessible.¹⁶ Regulation no. 352 abolished UzPAK's monopoly on the international connections and fostered a decentralization process in the field of Internet providers.¹⁷ However, more than 80 percent of ISPs still run their connection through UzPAK despite the high tariffs. A few ISPs have their own international satellite connections, which provide better service than UzPAK, for lower fees. A growing trend among ISPs is to use UzPAK's lines to send messages and satellite networks to view or download information. This solution allows the providers to circumvent UzPAK's monitoring network and the channels' low capacities.

UzPAK was set up within the Communications and Information Agency (UzACI),¹⁸ which is the principal state agency regulating services in the area of communications, including the

Internet.¹⁹ Under Resolution of the Cabinet of Ministers No. 232 of 2002, UzACI provides information security and coordinates providers' activities in this field. All Internet service providers and operators must obtain a license from UzACI.²⁰ Under order no. 216 Internet providers and operators cannot disseminate information that *inter alia* calls for the violent overthrowing of the constitutional order of Uzbekistan, instigates war and violence, contains pornography, or degrades and defames human dignity.²¹ UzbekTelecom, the national telecommunications operator, has discretionary power to oversee the ISPs' observance of this order.²² In 2005 the ISPs in Uzbekistan faced another regulatory hindrance in the form of resolution no. 155 (Cabinet of Ministers), which stipulated that only legal entities should be entitled to provide licensed telecommunication services. Individuals have to register as legal entities and obtain new licenses before continuing to provide Internet services.

In 2004 the Cabinet of Ministers adopted regulation no. 555, establishing a Center for Mass Media Monitoring within UzACI. The Center's key objectives are to analyze the content of information disseminated through the Internet and ensure its compliance with existing laws and regulations.²³ Another regulatory body, the Uzbek Agency for Press and Information (UzPIA), monitors the observance of media law, issues registrations and licenses for media outlets.²⁴ This agency has the power to suspend media licenses for "systematic" breaches of Uzbekistan's restrictive media and information laws.

The 2002 Law on Principles and Guarantees on Access to Information reserves the government's right to restrict access to information when necessary to protect the individual "from negative informational psychological influence."²⁵ The government further controls information streams by authorizing the use of political, economic, or other measures when necessary to counteract "threats in the sphere of infor-

mation security" or "ideas of terrorism and religious extremism."²⁶

Uzbekistan's principal intelligence agency, the National Security Service (SNB), monitors the Uzbek sector of the Internet and thereby compels ISPs, including cybercafés, to self-censor. Soviet-style censorship structures were replaced by "monitoring sections" that basically work under the SNB's guidance. There is no mandatory government pre-publication review, but the ISPs risk having their licenses revoked if they post "inappropriate" information. On some occasions, the SNB has ordered ISPs to block access to opposition or religious Web sites.²⁷ The SNB's censorship is selective and often targets articles on government corruption, violations of human rights, and organized crime. Usually this censorship affects specific pages instead of top-level domain names. The SNB regularly exchanges data with Russian intelligence sources and allegedly collaborates with the Russian Foreign Intelligence Academy.

Paradoxically, Internet filtering in Uzbekistan did not begin with the security forces but rather with the academic and research network, whose existence was funded with foreign development assistance.²⁸ UzSCINET was the first Uzbek ISP to implement a filtering policy, using an open source filtering product (Squid Guard) and publicly available list of pornographic sites. UzSCINET justified its position of filtering pornography on the basis of being a provider to schools and universities, as well as the need to conserve bandwidth. However, UzSCINET lacked formal legal status in Uzbekistan and as a result was dependent on UzInfoCom, a quasi-government agency for maintaining its license as a service provider. As it happened, the formal "head" of UzSCINET was also the director of UzInfoCom and a deputy director of UzASCI, the government communications agency and regulator. Simultaneously, he was also acting as an adviser to the presidential Security Council. As a result pressure was exerted on UzSCINET to cooperate with

authorities, and over time the network became a “testing ground” that security forces used to develop a system for selecting and blocking unwanted Web sites. As late as 2005 the system was far from comprehensive, with previous ONI research showing a great deal of divergence among the access available on various ISPs, where some comprehensively blocked content while others allowed unfettered access. The suspicion is that some commercial ISPs had close connections with Karimov’s inner circle and hence were able to withstand pressure to implement filtering, which gave them a commercial advantage (as users who wished to access such content would pay to access the Internet through these ISPs).

ONI testing results

Testing was conducted on five of the largest ISPs in Uzbekistan: ROL, Sarkor, SHARQ, TPS, and UzPAK. ONI detected a consistent and substantial filtering system that re-directs users to another Web site (www.live.com). Blocked sites included numerous political sites and a wide range of sites with human rights contents from both the local and regional list. In general, online publications tackling political issues deemed subversive or sensitive to the government were heavily filtered. These Web sites are hosted outside of Uzbekistan (www.ferghana.ru) because the ones based in the country have been already forced to shut down (www.uznews.net). Selective filtering of Web sites displaying social topics was also detected, including sites with religious, extremist, porn, gay, and lesbian content. U.S. military Web sites were largely inaccessible on some of the ISPs, although this appears to be the rest of “supply-side” blocking by U.S. authorities. Several anonymizers, a few host URLs, and one e-mail site were also within the list of blocked Web sites.

Most of the cybercafés surveyed by ONI researchers have announcements cautioning users against visiting Web sites containing

extremist, obscene, sexually explicit, or pornographic content, and some cybercafé administrators do carry out surveillance on a regular basis. However, observations demonstrate that this is unevenly applied. In some cases, users enjoy relatively unfettered Internet access. In others, notably during two visits by ONI researchers, accessing an “unauthorized site” led to a swift arrest by security forces who were summoned by the Internet café owner. Regular visits by SNB officers are reported at cybercafés in the Fergana valley where they are said to manually check to see if certain sites are accessible. Most cybercafés use commercially available software that allows them to manage and bill clients remotely for time spent online. This software is easily adapted to warn administrators when unauthorized content is being accessed, and also to block access.

Conclusion

Uzbekistan maintains the most extensive and pervasive filtering system among tested CIS countries. Although expressly banned in Uzbek law, filtering is widespread and apparently growing. A large number of sites with political and human rights content sensitive to the government remain inaccessible to Internet users. The security forces in Uzbekistan manually check Internet access at “edge locations” (such as cybercafés) and monitor users’ activities. The regulatory framework is so intricately woven that, in most cases, ISPs and Internet publishers are unaware of the governing law. To avoid inflicting the wrath of authorities, Internet actors frequently undertake self-censorship.

NOTES

1. See International Telecommunication Union, *World Telecommunication Indicators 2006*.

2. U.N. Development Programme and Agency for Communication and Information of Uzbekistan (2005), Review of Information and Communication Technologies Development in Uzbekistan, http://ru.ictp.uz/downloads/annual_review_2005eng.pdf (accessed March 15, 2007).
3. Survey conducted by U.N. Development Programme (UNDP) Digital Development Initiative, a joint project between the UNDP and the government of Uzbekistan (UzASCI) (2004).
4. Opinion poll conducted by the joint UNDP, UzASCI, Information and Communication Policy project (ICTP) (see information about this project at <http://en.ictp.uz>). The total percentage exceeds 100 percent because respondents provided more than one answer.
5. See UNDP and Agency for Communication and Information of Uzbekistan (2005), Review of Information and Communication Technologies Development in Uzbekistan, http://ru.ictp.uz/downloads/annual_review_2005eng.pdf (accessed March 15, 2007).
6. According to UzACI's data, the total modems' capacity in 2006 reached 17,000, which is twice that of the analogous indicators of 2004.
7. For more information on the amount of traffic run through the IXP, see Infocom, Results of Tashkent Internet Exchange in 2006, January 13, 2007, http://ru.infocom.uz/more.php?id=A2109_0_1_0_M (accessed February 25, 2007).
8. In reality, UzInfcom is effectively part of the Uzbek Communications and Information Agency (UzASCI); its director is a deputy director of UzASCI and it possesses no formal autonomy or independent decision-making capacity. UzASCI, while having the status of a government agency, is chaired by a deputy prime minister who acts as the de facto minister of communication.
9. Internet Assigned Numbers Authority, Agreement Between Communications and Information Agency of Uzbekistan and UzInfoCom, October 12, 2002, <http://www.iana.org/cctld/uz/govt-UzInfoCom-agmt-18oct02.htm> (accessed January 16, 2007).
10. Article 29 and 67 of the Constitution of the Republic of Uzbekistan.
11. Alisher Taksanov, Between Scylla and Charybdis: Uzbek Press in Recent Years in OSCE, Sixth Central Asian Media Conference, September 23–24, 2004, *21st Century Challenges for the Media in Central Asia: Dealing with Libel and Freedom of Information* 47 (2005), http://www.osce.org/publications/rfm/2005/10/18583_576_en.pdf.
12. The new Mass Media Law entered into force on January 15, 2007.
13. Institute for War and Peace Reporting, "Internet hit by media law change," January 30, 2007, http://www.iwpr.net/?p=buz&s=b&o=328926&apc_state=henh (accessed January 30, 2007).
14. See the statement of Utkir Zakirov, Head of the Coordination of Media Activities and Publishing Houses Department within the Uzbek Agency for Press and Information, <http://www.cctld.uz/news/?detail=92> (in Russian).
15. Paragraph 1, regulation no. 52, On the Establishment of the National Network of Information Transmission and Streamlining the Access to the World Information Networks, adopted on February 5, 1999.
16. David Stubbs, "American aid could worsen Internet restrictions in Uzbekistan," March 30, 2002, <http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/rights/articles/eav033002.shtml> (accessed January 16, 2007).
17. Paragraph 1, regulation no. 352, On the Decentralization of Access to the World Computer Networks, adopted by the Cabinet of Ministers of Uzbekistan on October 10, 2002.
18. The UzACI was established under regulation no. 215, On the Measures of Improving the Activity of the Uzbek Agency for Communications and Information of 2004.
19. RESEA Republic of Uzbekistan Portal of the State Authority, Communication and Information Agency of Uzbekistan, <http://www.gov.uz/en/section.scm?sectionId=2762> (accessed January 18, 2007).
20. Order no. 285, approved by the Head of the Uzbek Agency for Communications and Information on August 25, 2004.
21. Provision 12, paragraph 2, order no. 216, approved by the Head of the Uzbek Agency for Communications and Information on July 23, 2004.
22. Regulation no. 221, adopted by the Cabinet of Ministers of Uzbekistan on October 6, 2005.
23. Paragraph 1, regulation no. 555, On the Measures of Improving the Organizational Structures in the Sphere of Mass Telecommunications, adopted by the Cabinet of Ministers of Uzbekistan on November 24, 2004.
24. Uzbekistan Agency for Press and Information, Republic of Uzbekistan Portal of the State Authority, <http://www.gov.uz/en/section.scm?sectionId=2759>.
25. Inera Safargaliev, Uzbek Media and the Authorities: A Strange Relationship in OSCE, Fifth Central Asian Media Conference, September 17–18, 2003, Central Asia: In Defense of the Future: Media in Multi-Cultural and Multi-Lingual Societies, p. 263 (2003), http://www.osce.org/publications/rfm/2004/02/12243_101_en.pdf.
26. See Article 15 of the 2002 Law on Principles and Guarantees on Access to Information, Information Security of the State.

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27. Omar Sharifov, "Review of 30 Uzbekistan-related Websites," Committee for Freedom of Speech and Expression, June 3, 2005, <http://www.freeuz.org/eng/analysis/?id1=298> (accessed January 16, 2007).
 28. Significant donors included the U.S. government (IREX), Soros foundation, NATO, and UNDP.