Uzbekistan

Uzbekistan's tight control of the Internet has resulted in the most pervasive regime of filtering and censorship in the CIS. Filtering is comprehensive and, until 2006, largely undeclared, with the government denying the existence of these practices. At present, the government employs sophisticated multilayered mechanisms to exercise control over the Internet, including adopting restrictive policies, applying technological measures, and compelling self-censorship of 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. A former first secretary of the Uzbek Communist Party (UCP) during the Soviet period, Islam Karimov started his current term of office in January 2000. A referendum in January 2002 extended the presidential term of office from five to seven years. The president has almost complete control over the parliament, which supports

RESULTS AT A GLANCE					
Filtering	No Evidence of Filtering	Suspected Filtering	Selective Filtering	Substantial Filtering	Pervasive Filtering
Political					●
Social			●		
Conflict and security			●		
Internet tools			●		

Other Factors	Low	Medium	High	Not Applicable
Transparency	●			
Consistency			●	

KEY INDICATORS	
GDP per capita, PPP (constant 2005 international dollars)	2,290
Life expectancy at birth (years)	67
Literacy rate (percent of people age 15+)	97
Human development index (out of 179)	119
Rule of law (out of 211)	182
Voice and accountability (out of 209)	202
Democracy index (out of 167)	164 (Authoritarian regime)
Digital opportunity index (out of 181)	123
Internet users (percent of population)	8.8

Source by indicator: World Bank 2009a, World Bank 2009a, World Bank 2009a, UNDP 2008, World Bank 2009b, World Bank 2009b, Economist Intelligence Unit 2008, ITU 2007, Miniwatts Marketing Group 2009.

him overwhelmingly. On a few occasions, the government has resorted to the use of force in order to maintain its control over the country. One such occasion were the events in Andijan in 2005 when hundreds of civilians were killed.[1] During the clampdown that followed the public demonstrations, most of the foreign media were expelled from the country. The majority of human rights organizations were ousted and their activities banned.[2]

During his extended authoritarian rule, President Karimov 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 Uzbekistan and has been banned.[3] The Internet often remains the only way for the opposition to communicate with Uzbek society. In 2004, Internews International—a nonprofit organization that supports open media and Internet development worldwide—was banned from Uzbekistan.[4]

In the beginning of October 2008, an unprecedented two-day media seminar in Tashkent focused on freedom of speech in the country. The government did not allow foreign media and independent Uzbek journalists to cover this seminar. The only media admitted were representatives of the state-controlled electronic and print media.

The complex laws and regulations in Uzbekistan have resulted in self-censorship of online publishers, independent journalists, and bloggers. This self-censorship, coupled with a highly sophisticated Internet filtering regime, significantly stifles public discourse on political and human-rights topics.

State control of the Internet stands in stark contrast to the government's official enthusiasm for promoting ICTs. Until 2001, Uzbekistan was a regional leader in the adoption of the Internet and the prioritization of ICT as a mechanism for national development. Uzbekistan was among the first of the post-Soviet 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. Until 2001–2002, the Internet remained open and free from filtering, with the exception of some limited filters for pornography that were implemented on 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 Hizb-ut-Tahrir (Hit) and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan. These attacks have been generally associated with a deepening crackdown on Uzbek society that encompasses all forms and channels of dissent, including the Internet.

Internet in Uzbekistan

Uzbektelecom JSC has retained the status of a legal monopoly on services of access to international telecommunication networks, including the use of VoIP technologies. According to the government resolution, monopoly status will be retained after privatization of Uzbektelecom JSC (at present the state owns 94 percent of Uzbektelecom). As a result, operators and providers are entitled to access international telecommunication networks exclusively through the infrastructure of Uzbektelecom JSC, which facilitates control over Internet content and hinders active competition on the communications market. Uzbektelecom dominates around 90 percent of the fixed market and owns 14 regional and five specialist subsidiaries, which include the national Internet (UzPAK) and a mobile operator.[5]

The legal regime permits competition of the services providing Internet access. The number of ISPs in Uzbekistan has grown considerably: from 25 in 1999 to 539 in 2005. Because of increased legal requirements for operation, the number of ISPs dropped to 430 in 2006 but subsequently increased to 859 as of April 2009.[6] There are seven top-tier ISPs with connections to China, Russia, Italy, Germany, and the Netherlands. Uzbekistan's telecommunications infrastructure supporting Internet access is quite robust compared to neighboring countries. The backbone is connected to the Trans-Asia-Europe Fiber-Optic Communications Line (TAE FOCL), which links China and Europe and has several offshoots. The country also has a network of microwave radio relay lines that provide high-speed data transmission.[7] The sole Internet exchange point, Tas-IX, used by 26 ISPs,[8] is located in Uzbek Central Telegraph's premises.[9]

As of January 2007, the digital communication network in Uzbekistan covered 100 percent of cities, towns, and regional centers.[10] Telecommunication networks (including 89 percent of digital ones) covered 93 percent of rural settlements.[11] The number

of Internet users as of 2008 was 2.4 million—approximately 8.8 percent of the country's population.[12] According to local surveys, in contrast to neighboring countries, Uzbek women use the Internet at a rate almost equal to that of their male counterparts, with a difference of 3 percent.[13] About 41.3 percent of Internet users are in the 16 to 20 age range.[14] Uzbek users most commonly access the Internet from their home (42.73 percent) and work (44.60 percent), and over 70 percent of Internet users are in the capital Tashkent. Approximately 30 percent of the Internet users visit Internet cafés.[15] According to official data as of April 2009, there were 873 Internet access centers in Uzbekistan.[16]

Residential Internet services are unaffordable for the majority of the population. The average cost of dial-up services is USD 0.37 per hour, and unlimited access is USD 67.14 per month. The cost of ADSL access is significantly lower: on average, it does not exceed USD 15 per month and offers a speed of 128 Kbps. The quality of Internet access and communication services in Uzbekistan is rapidly improving. The bandwidth capacity of the external channels of Internet access has shown steady growth.[17] As of 2009, it totaled 825 Mbps, up from 44 Mbps in July 2004.[18]

The domain registration of the national ".uz" zone has been decentralized since December 2005 when five operators (now seven)[19] were granted the status of registrars. Created with the support of foreign organizations, the Computerization and Information Technology Developing Center (UzInfoCom) is a NGO that develops computer and information technologies and administers the country-code top-level domain name ".uz."[20] According to UzInfoCom, as of April 2009 the number of domains registered in the ".uz" zone was 8,298.[21]

The most popular language among Uzbek Internet users is Russian (up to 70 percent), followed by Uzbek (25 percent), and English (just about 1 percent). The most visited Web sites in Uzbekistan are media sites and search engines located in the Russian Internet zone (".ru").

According to information published by the State Committee on Radio Frequencies of the Republic of Uzbekistan, the number of cellular phone customers in Uzbekistan has nearly doubled during the last year, and as of November 1, 2008, it had reached the level of 12.5 million.[22] There are five cellular operators currently active on the market of Uzbekistan: MTS-Uzbekistan (GSM), Unitel or Beeline (GSM), Coscom (GSM), Rubicon Wireless Communication–Perfectum Mobile (CDMA), and Uzmobile (CDMA).

Legal and Regulatory Frameworks

The Uzbekistan government has approved the Program for Development of Computerization and Information and Communication Technologies for 2002–2010.[23] This program envisions the establishment of a national segment of the Internet and aims to cover all cities and settlements in the country with ICT services by the end of 2010.

The Internet is legally considered mass media in Uzbekistan. Article 29 of the Uzbek Constitution guarantees freedom of expression, and Article 67 bans censorship. Freedom of information, however, can be legally restricted to protect the moral values of society, national security, and Uzbekistan's spiritual, cultural, and scientific potential. The Central Inspection on Protecting State Secrets in the Press officially censored media until 2002. Since then, the government increasingly imposes self-censorship on online media publishers, bloggers, and opposition leaders.[24] A recent example is the Mass Media Law.[25] Discussions on texts of this law were closed to the public to minimize media criticism against restrictive provisions. The law holds media owners, editors, and staff members responsible for the objectivity of published materials.[26] 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 from establishing their own media outlets in the country. Online versions of newspapers are within the scope of the law and as such are subject to registration if their content differs from the printed publication. In order to gain more control over the Internet, the government has stated that subsequent regulations would specify the type of Web sites that would need to be registered.[27]

Formal regulation of the Internet and electronic mass media commenced with the adoption of Regulation No. 52 by the Cabinet of Ministers of Uzbekistan.[28] In particular, Regulation No. 52 established the National Network of Information Transmission (UzPAK) and ensured its monopoly on international Internet connectivity for purposes of preserving national information security. The government forced ISPs to route their traffic through the state network to access international traffic.[29] Thus, Internet cafés and other clients were subjected to UzPAK's filtering system, and a number of Web sites were temporarily inaccessible. In July 2002, the Communications and Information Agency of Uzbekistan (UzCIA) suspended the work of EastLink, one of the major Uzbekistan-based ISPs, because the ISP had connected to international networks circumventing the national data-transmission network run by UzPAK.[30] Regulation No. 352[31] attempted to abolish UzPAK's monopoly on international connections and foster a decentralization process in the field of Internet providers. However, more than 80 percent of the ISPs still run their connection through UzPAK despite the high tariffs. Only a few ISPs have their own international satellite connections that provide better service than UzPAK, for lower fees.[32] A growing trend among ISPs is using 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 channels' low capacities.

UzPAK was established within the UzCIA.[33] Under Resolution of the Cabinet of Ministers No. 232 of 2002, UzCIA is responsible for providing information security and regulating providers' activities in the area of communications, including the Internet.[34] The director general of the agency is also the deputy prime minister responsible for

telecommunications, and also acts as chairman of the board of Uzbektelecom and as chairman of the State Commission on Radio Frequencies.[35] Since most of the key regulatory functions in the sector are concentrated in the hands of the deputy minister, regulatory independence is practically nonexistent. All ISPs and operators must obtain a license from UzCIA.[36] The licenses are usually very specific, with a typical duration of ten years. Under Order No. 216, Internet providers and operators cannot disseminate information that, inter alia, calls for violent overthrow of the constitutional order of Uzbekistan, instigates war and violence, contains pornography, or degrades and defames human dignity.[37] Uzbektelecom, the national telecommunication operator, has discretionary power to oversee the ISPs' observance of this order.[38] In 2005, the ISPs in Uzbekistan faced another regulatory hindrance to their operation. The new Resolution No. 155 of the Cabinet of Ministers 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 the Center for Mass Media Monitoring within UzCIA. The center's key objectives are to analyze the contents of information disseminated online and ensure its consistency with existing laws and regulations.[39] Another regulatory body, the Uzbek Agency for Press and Information (UzPIA), monitors the observance of media law and issues registrations and licenses for media outlets.[40] 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.''[41] 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 information security'' or ''ideas of terrorism and religious extremism.''[42]

Surveillance

Internet filtering in Uzbekistan did not begin with the security forces, but rather with the academic and research network, which was funded with foreign development assistance. The first Uzbek ISP to implement a filtering policy was UzSCINET, which used an open-source filtering product (SquidGuard) and a publicly available list of pornographic sites. The network justified its position favoring the filtering of pornography on the basis that it was 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 for maintaining its license as a service provider. The formal head of UzSCINET was also the director of UzInfoCom and a deputy director of UzCIA. Simultaneously, he was also acting as an adviser to the presiden-

tial 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 various ISPs—some comprehensively blocked content, while others allowed unfettered access. The suspicion is that some commercial ISPs had close connections with President 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).

Uzbekistan's principal intelligence agency, the National Security Service (SNB), monitors the Uzbek sector of the Internet and "stimulates" ISPs and Internet cafés to practice self-censorship. Soviet-style censorship structures were replaced by "monitoring sections" that work under SNB's guidance. There is no mandatory government prepublication review, but ISPs risk having their licenses revoked if they post "inappropriate" information. Occasionally, the SNB orders ISPs to block access to opposition or religious Web sites.[43] A survey of internet filtering practices among Uzbek ISPs was conducted by ONI in January 2007. Respondents confirmed that they use filtering applications including SquidGuard and FortiGuard. The SNB's censorship is selective and often targets articles on government corruption, violations of human rights, and organized crime. Usually, it affects URL-specific pages instead of top-level domain names. Uzbek ISPs block entire Web sites or individual pages upon SNB's unofficial requests. Accessing a blocked page redirects the user to a search engine or to an error message such as "You are not authorized to view this page." The retransmission of blocked channels is also prohibited.

The SNB regularly exchanges data with Russian intelligence sources and allegedly collaborates with the Russian Foreign Intelligence Academy. The SNB also utilizes a blacklist and keyword approach. The SNB practice of active surveillance contributes to self-censorship among Internet operators and the Internet community as a whole. Most users will not engage in topics that touch on unpopular government policies relating to human rights in the country out of fear of arbitrary prosecution by the authorities.

ONI Testing Results

In 2007 and 2008, the OpenNet Initiative conducted testing on five main ISPs in the country: ArsInform, Buzton, Sharq Telecom, Sarkor Telecom, and Uzbektelecom. The test results show pervasive blocking of different categories of Internet content, including local and international human rights sites (inter alia, content promoting the rights of journalists working in repressive regimes), local and regional media sites, opposition

sites (inter alia, content criticizing the president), local NGOs, sites of religious organizations, and terrorist groups. Interestingly, a large number of sites (including forum sites, media sites, and others) remain inaccessible for the user even though they are not blocked outright.

Conclusion

Through investment and legal mechanisms, the government has demonstrated its willingness to promote ICT in Uzbekistan. At the same time, Uzbekistan maintains the most extensive and pervasive filtering system among the 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 Internet cafés) 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 sanctions from the authorities, Internet users frequently commit themselves to self-censorship.

Notes

1. During the most robust of such actions in 2005, hundreds of people were killed. (Government statistics mention 190 people, while unofficial sources suggest that as many as 750 people—the majority of them civilians—lost their lives in the clash with the police forces.)

2. Among those expelled from Uzbekistan in 2006 was the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, which had helped to relocate refugees from the Andijan events.

3. Two liberal oppositional parties remain banned in the country: Unity (Birlik) and Uzbekistan Liberty Democratic Party (O'zbekistan Erk Demokratik Partiyasi).

4. In 2004, Internews Network Uzbekistan was accused of failing to register a logo and forced on these grounds to suspend its operations, halt its training of media lawyers, close its media resource center in the Ferghana Valley, and take its two highly popular TV news programs off air.

5. European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, *Legal Transition Program: Comparative Assessment of the Telecommunications Sector in the Transition Countries: Assessment Report Uzbekistan*, December 2008, http://ebrd.com/country/sector/law/telecoms/assess/uzbek.pdf.

6. *Infocom.uz*, ''Informationno-communicationnie Technologii Uzbekistana'' [Information and Communication Technologies of Uzbekistan], April 27, 2009, http://www.infocom.uz/post/?id=4391.

7. Uzbekistan has over 1,900 km of trunk fiber-optic line and over 1,000 km of trunk radio relay line.

8. Tashkent Internet Exchange, http://www.tas-ix.uz/ptspt.php.

9. For more information on the amount of traffic through the IXP, *Infocom.uz*, http://ru.infocom .uz/.

10. *Infocom.uz*, ''Informationno-communicationnie Technologii Uzbekistana'' [Information and Communication Technologies of Uzbekistan], April 27, 2009, http://www.infocom.uz/post/ ?id=4391.

11. Ibid.

12. Miniwatts Marketing Group, ''Internet World Statistics: Uzbekistan'', 2009, http://www .internetworldstats.com/asia.htm#uz.

13. United Nations Development Program (UNDP) and Communications and Information Agency of Uzbekistan, *Review of Information and Communication Technology in Uzbekistan, 2005*, http://ru.ictp.uz/downloads/annual_review_2005eng.pdf.

14. United Nations Development Program (UNDP), *Uzbekistan, Digital Development Initiative*, 2004, http://www.undp.uz/projects/project.php?id=78.

15. The total percentage exceeds 100 percent because respondents provided more than one answer. UNDP and Communications and Information and Agency of Uzbekistan, *Review of Information and Communications Technology in Uzbekistan*, 2005, http://en.ictp.uz.

16. *Infocom.uz*, ''Informationno-communicationnie Technologii Uzbekistana'' [Information and Communication Technologies of Uzbekistan], April 27, 2009, http://www.infocom.uz/post/ ?id=4391.

17. According to UzCIA's data, the total modems' capacity in 2006 reached 17,000 Mbps, which is twice as much as the analogous indicators of 2004.

18. *Infocom.uz*, ''Informationno-communicationnie Technologii Uzbekistana'' [Information and Communication Technologies of Uzbekistan], April 27, 2009, http://www.infocom.uz/post/ ?id=4391.

19. *Info.nic.ru*, ''V Domienie Uzbekstana Uzhe Siem Ofitsialnikh Registratorov'' [Uzbekistan Has Seven Official Domain Registrars], February 10, 2008, http://info.nic.ru/st/25/out_1827.shtml.

20. UzInfoCom, http://www.cctld.uz.

21. *Infocom.uz*, ''Informationno-communicationnie Technologii Uzbekistana'' [Information and Communication Technologies of Uzbekistan], April 27, 2009, http://www.infocom.uz/post/ ?id=4391.

22. *Gazeta.uz*, ''100% Proniknovenie Sotovoy Svyazi Otkladvaytsya'' [100% Penetration of Cellular Communication Is Delayed], February 18, 2009, http://www.gazeta.uz/2009/02/18/mobile/.

23. The program was approved by the Resolution of the Cabinet of Ministers of the Republic of Uzbekistan No. 200 of June 6, 2002.

24. Alisher Taksanov, ''Between Scylla and Charybdis: Uzbek Press in Recent Years,'' in *21st Century Challenges for the Media in Central Asia: Dealing with Libel and Freedom of Information*, (Vienna: Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, 2005), 45–86, http://www.osce .org/publications/rfm/2005/07/15670_430_en.pdf.

25. The new Mass Media Law entered into force on January 15, 2007.

26. Institute for War and Peace Reporting, *Internet Hit by Media Law Change*, http://www.iwpr.net/ ?p=buz&s=b&o=328926&apc_state=henh.

27. *ccTLD.uz*, Administration of the ''UZ'' Domain, ''UzNet Websites Will not need a Total Registration'' [Totalnaya Registratsiya sitam UzNet ne grozit], January 18, 2007, http://www.cctld.uz/ news/?detail=92.

28. 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.

29. David Stubbs, ''American Aid Could Worsen Internet Restrictions in Uzbekistan,'' *EurasiaNet*, March 30, 2002, http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/rights/articles/eav033002.shtml.

30. *Internews Russia*, ''EIM Media Report from the CIS,'' July 2002.

31. 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.

32. Forty satellites are accessible in Uzbekistan, while about 15 of them cover the country. The majority of them belong to INTELSAT, INMARSAT, CCCASIASAT, TURKSAT, and the Russian Federation.

33. UzCIA was established under Regulation No. 215, On the Measures of Improving the Activity of the Uzbek Agency for Communications and Information of 2004.

34. RESEA Republic of Uzbekistan Portal of the State Authority, Communication and Information Agency of Uzbekistan, http://www.gov.uz/en/section.scm?sectionId=2762.

35. European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, *Legal Transition Program: Comparative Assessment of the Telecommunications Sector in the Transition Countries: Assessment Report Uzbekistan*, December 2008, http://ebrd.com/country/sector/law/telecoms/assess/uzbek.pdf.

36. Order No. 285, approved by the Head of the Uzbek Agency for Communications and Information on August 25, 2004.

37. Provision 12, Paragraph 2, Order No. 216, approved by the Head of the Uzbek Agency for Communications and Information on July 23, 2004.

38. Regulation No. 221, adopted by the Cabinet of Ministers of Uzbekistan on October 6, 2005.

39. 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.

40. Republic of Uzbekistan Portal of the State Authority, Uzbekistan Agency for Press and Information, http://www.gov.uz/en/section.scm?sectionId=2759.

41. Inera Safargalieva, ''Uzbek Media and the Authorities—A Strange Relationship,'' in *Central Asia—In Defense of the Future: Media in Multi-Cultural and Multi-Lingual Societies*, (Vienna: Organization on Security and Co-operation in Europe, 2003), 259–264, http://www.osce.org/publications/rfm/2004/02/12243_101_en.pdf.

42. See Article 15, Information Security of the State.

43. Reporters Without Borders, *Internet Under Surveillance 2004—Uzbekistan*, 2004, http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/publisher,RSF,,UZB,46e6919ac,0.html.