

MEDIA TRIBUNE

GETTING INFORMATION AND ENSURING FREEDOM OF SPEECH ARE ESSENTIAL TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE COUNTRY**Asadjon KHOJAEV ***

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Today in Uzbekistan, the criteria of openness and transparency in all spheres has become a unique tradition. The purpose of this phenomenon is also clear - to prevent and eliminate various corruption crimes by ensuring openness and transparency. Of course, it isn't easy to completely eliminate such cases, entrenched over many years, in a single day, a year, or a short period of time. But the process is firmly in place in the country. First of all, its legal framework, widely implemented in practice in all spheres, has been created and today it works.

With the help of comparative analysis, it is easier to find an answer to the questions about which legislative acts were adopted, what effect the planned activities had, what results were achieved, in general, whether changes have occurred.

It would be appropriate to analyze the previous results and draw conclusions using the example of reforms implemented in recent years to ensure freedom of speech, openness and transparency in the activities of the media and government agencies, which are also the main source of public control, strengthening the prestige and status of the profession of journalism.

Above all, the policy of freedom of speech and the press and openness has been shaped by the political will of the head of state, Shavkat Mirziyoyev. Shavkat Mirziyoyev, who was elected President of the Republic of Uzbekistan in 2016, identified as a priority the fundamental reform and development of the information sphere as an essential condition for the country's transition to a new level of development.

Over the past five years, our Republic has adopted more than 20 laws and regulations aimed at strengthening the legal framework and ensuring access to information for the population, freedom of speech and practical media activities, as well as the establishment of an open and transparent dialogue between the state and society.

During this period, the establishment of an independent University of Journalism and Mass Communication, providing professional personnel and the Agency of Information and Mass Communication as the competent body for developing and implementing an unified state information policy were necessary for the comprehensive development of the sphere. The activities of press services were established to improve the transparency of state and local government bodies.

The number of sources of information has also dramatically increased over the past period. For example, not so long ago, 6-7 years ago, access to data from ministries and agencies were a big problem for the media and journalists, but today press services have become one of the primary resources of information. While the number of sources of information of state bodies and organizations in 2019 was 559, as of September 2021, their number was about 3,000.

Since 2020, the Agency for Information and Mass Communications has created a system of developing quarterly media plans together with ministries, departments, and local government bodies.

These measures are yielding results. On the basis of these media plans, briefings, press conferences and media tours are regularly held at the Agency of Information and Mass Communications, the National Press Center of Uzbekistan, the Republic of Karakalpakstan and regions with the participation of heads and press secretaries of government agencies and organizations. In 9 months of 2021 alone, 937 press events were held.

What does it give? *First*, it ensures the openness of ministries, agencies and local state authorities. *Secondly*, thanks to the participation of the media and journalists, their relations with the public are established. *Third*,

a mechanism is being created in the center and locally to respond to the problems of the population and find solutions. *Fourth and most importantly*, the ministries, departments, and local government bodies become closer to the people.

This contributes to openness, publicity, transparency and the establishment of public control through the media and social networks and the formation of an anti-corruption environment.

Proceeding from the tasks mentioned above, the Agency of Information and Mass Communications launched the Call Center on the short number 1213. The Call-center allows individuals and legal entities to contact the Agency on issues of licensing certain types of media, private publications, printing services; counterfeit stationery or books and printed publications; activities of the media, press services, electronic and printed publications, television and radio companies; ensuring freedom of access to information, actions of journalists and bloggers and many other issues related to this sphere.

At the same time, a "Dialogue platform" was created in the regional offices of the Agency for the rapid identification of the facts of obstruction of the activities of the media, journalists and bloggers, discussions with the participation of relevant agencies and organizations, finding solutions to problems. During the past period of 2021, about 70 appeals related to the professional activities of the media were studied and positively resolved through the Call Center and the Dialogue Platform.

In this connection, I would like to pay special attention to another issue. Based on the experience of international organizations and developed countries, the situation dictates the need to take appropriate measures to establish settling disputes in the information sphere, any conflict situations arising between the parties, within the framework of the current legislation through judicial bodies. The Agency constantly expresses its official position on this matter.

As a result of the reforms carried out in the country to support and develop the media, the information space in Uzbekistan is rapidly expanding. In particular, over the last 5 years, the number of registered media outlets has increased by 29% (448) and reached 1,962, of which 677 are Internet media widely used by the population. More than 1,300 citizens as bloggers in social networks have also become active participants in the information space today.

Of course, the development of the information space depends mainly on how effectively media workers, information services, journalists and bloggers work in compliance with current legislation. With this in mind, the Agency also pays special attention to improving its qualifications and legal knowledge.

In particular, in January-February of 2021 year, in cooperation with the Supreme Council of Judges, two-week training sessions were held both offline and online for media representatives and bloggers specializing in legal issues. In March-April, together with the Centre for the Further Training of Lawyers in the Republic of Karakalpakstan, the regions and the city of Tashkent, advanced training courses were held on the rights and obligations of journalists in obtaining, processing and disseminating information. Approximately 600 journalists, bloggers and press secretaries upgraded their qualifications at these courses.

In addition, in March 2021, in cooperation with the Academy of Public Administration, a separate training seminar was held with the participation of 220 employees of information services of the Council of Ministers of the Republic of Karakalpakstan, regional and Tashkent city hokimiyats, and district and city hokimiyats. There are many more such examples.

We have identified additional measures for further consistent and large-scale continuation of work in this direction. The main goal is to improve the professional and legal literacy of artists, journalists and bloggers working in the information space. After all, it is well-known that a competent journalist and blogger with perfect knowledge of the law and regulations in this area will not make mistakes or commit violations.

I want to pay your attention to one of the aspects mentioned by President Shavkat Mirziyoyev in his book "The Strategy of New Uzbekistan": "Freedom of information and the press, freedom of speech of citizens, openness and transparency of the activities of state bodies have become one of the quality indicators of the new Uzbekistan. We consider this way one of the most important directions of state policy, and we will resolutely continue it".

Based on the above, I believe that we should further intensify our work to develop the activities of the media further, improve the professional qualifications of journalists and bloggers, strengthen the dialogue between the state and society and establish public control.