

SOFT REGULATION IN PRACTICE – UZBEKISTAN’S EXPERIENCE AND COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVES ON INFORMATION RESILIENCE

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Abstract

This article examines Uzbekistan’s transition from hard informational control toward softer, cooperative regulatory strategies aimed at enhancing public stability. It analyzes key reforms since 2016, including the development of a National Information Security Concept, the drafting of a new Information Code, and partnerships with international organizations in promoting media literacy and countering online extremism. Through a comparative and political-cultural lens, the study argues that soft regulation—when implemented alongside legal and institutional reforms—can strengthen information resilience and foster greater trust in institutions. Particular attention is given to the role of a relatively freer media environment in enabling constructive expression of public dissent, thereby preventing instability during periods of major socio-economic transformation.

Keywords: Uzbekistan; information security; soft regulation; freedom of expression; media literacy; political culture; public trust; reforms; censorship; pluralism.

Introduction

The Republic of Uzbekistan provides a compelling case study in the shift from hard informational controls to softer, more constructive regulatory approaches. Over the past several years, Uzbekistan has embarked on a series of reforms aimed at liberalizing its media environment and updating its information security policies, all under the banner of strengthening public stability and trust. This evolution is particularly striking given Uzbekistan’s history: under its previous leadership, the country was known for heavy censorship, state dominance of media, and an iron grip on information – classic hard manipulative technologies used to enforce stability. Since 2016, however, the government under President Shavkat Mirziyoyev has publicly committed to greater openness, “freedom of speech,” and modernization of the information sphere.¹ The result has been a cautious yet notable move toward soft regulation: unblocking news websites, encouraging a vibrant blogging community, and engaging international best practices, all while attempting to maintain social harmony. This article examines Uzbekistan’s policy choices in detail.

In focusing on Uzbekistan, we consider both the progress and the remaining challenges. The goal is to illustrate how soft regulation strategies – when implemented as part of broader political reforms – can enhance information resilience (the capacity of society to handle information

¹ Stronski, P. Uzbekistan: Reform and Reality. – Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP), 2021. – URL: <https://www.swp-berlin.org/en/publication/uzbekistan-reform-and-reality> (дата обращения: 16.05.2025).



threats) and societal trust, thereby bolstering public stability in a sustainable manner.

Methods

This article utilizes a case study and comparative analysis methodology. First, an in-depth case study of Uzbekistan's recent information governance reforms is presented, drawing on official policy documents, statements by leadership, and evaluations by international observers (UN, OSCE, UNESCO, etc.). Key sources include Uzbekistan's draft Information Code (an effort to consolidate and modernize media laws), the government's Development Strategy 2017–2021 and subsequent policy programs, and expert analyses (for example, OSCE and Freedom House reports). We also incorporate perspectives from Uzbek media professionals and civil society where available, to gauge on-the-ground effects (via secondary reporting).

Secondly, a comparative lens is applied. Uzbekistan's approach is compared with: (a) practices in other Central Asian states or post-Soviet countries (some of which have maintained stricter controls, others which have also reformed); (b) exemplary international practices (such as European co-regulation models or regional initiatives in information literacy). The comparison aims to identify how Uzbekistan's balance of soft vs. hard measures stacks up against others in terms of outcomes like public trust, misinformation resilience, and stability.

The evaluation criteria revolve around information resilience and societal trust. These somewhat abstract concepts are operationalized as follows: information resilience refers to the ability of a society to absorb and mitigate the impact of misinformation, hate speech, or destabilizing propaganda without descending into panic or conflict. Societal trust refers to public confidence in institutions (government, media) and in the veracity of information circulating in the public sphere. We use indicators such as media freedom rankings, public statements about trust (where survey data available), and incidence of information-related unrest or scandals as proxies. By synthesizing these qualitative and quantitative indicators, the analysis remains academically rigorous and rooted in evidence. All claims are supported with references to credible sources, including international organizations (UNESCO, OSCE, UN), Uzbekistan's own policy texts (doctrines and laws), and scholarly commentary.

Results

After decades of strict information control, Uzbekistan has made incremental but meaningful reforms in its information policy. A landmark initiative was the development of a National Information Security Concept around 2018.² According to Uzbek news reports, this Concept was designed with broad input from multiple ministries and stakeholders, and crucially, it emphasized both countering cyber threats and protecting citizens' rights and freedoms in the information space. In other words, the strategy explicitly sought a balance: ensuring national information security while safeguarding free use of the internet by citizens. The draft Concept set out principles such as protecting the "national interests in the information space" on the basis of citizens' rights and freedoms online, and it aimed to create a "secure environment for information cooperation" that would enable stable operation of information systems for the benefit of individuals, society, and the state. Notably, it called for active participation not just of

² Xabar.uz. O'zbekiston axborot xavfsizligi konsepsiyasi loyihasi e'lon qilindi. – 22 iyun 2018. – URL: <https://xabar.uz/uz/tehnologiya/ozbekiston-axborot-xavfsizligi-konsepsiyasi> (дата обращения: 16.05.2025).



state organs but also civil society, academia, and the private sector in building this security system. This multi-party approach is a hallmark of soft regulation, recognizing that information stability is a shared responsibility.

Legal reforms followed suit. The draft Information Code of the Republic of Uzbekistan (publicly unveiled in recent years) consolidates various media and information laws. International experts from OSCE and ODIHR reviewed this draft and found several positive features aligned with soft governance: it guarantees the right of everyone to “search for, receive, examine, distribute, use and store information” without discrimination, and it prohibits censorship and media monopolization.³ These provisions signal a departure from the earlier era where censorship was pervasive (despite a constitutional ban in theory). Additionally, the draft Code proposes that international agreements on freedom of information will have precedence over national law – a strong commitment to meet global human rights standards. An OSCE joint legal opinion praised these signals as “welcome” steps in human rights protection. However, the review also noted areas needing improvement (e.g., avoiding overbroad content restrictions and ensuring independent regulation). The very fact that Uzbekistan invited an international review and is working to align with OSCE recommendations reflects a soft regulatory mindset: openness to external best practices and willingness to adjust laws in dialogue with civil society and experts, rather than imposing insular, draconian controls.

One of the most visible changes was by 2019, news outlets that had been blocked since the 2005 Andijan events were accessible again in Uzbekistan, including foreign services like Deutsche Welle and critical regional portals.⁴ Human Rights Watch observed in 2020 that freedom of speech and media had “improved under Mirziyoyev” (though with remaining limits).⁵ The government also simplified accreditation for foreign journalists. Equally significant was the rise of a “lively blogging scene” in Uzbekistan. The president’s own openness to hearing problems – a break from the past – encouraged citizens and journalists to voice issues. By reducing fear of reprisal (at least initially), self-censorship eased somewhat. This points to a virtuous cycle: when authorities step back from hard censorship, media actors gain confidence to report more freely, which can help expose and resolve societal issues, potentially preventing instability (since problems are aired and addressed, not bottled up).

One symbolic and practical initiative was the engagement of influencers and bloggers in 2019 to promote Uzbekistan’s image. In August 2019, Uzbekistan hosted over a hundred popular bloggers and social-media influencers from around the world, in an event partly aimed at boosting tourism. President Mirziyoyev personally met with these bloggers, championing a narrative of “openness” and even encouraging them to portray his reforms positively. While this can be seen as a public relations move, it also reflects a new style of soft power: instead of suppressing all critical voices, the state tried to partner with the new information actors (bloggers) to build a positive discourse.

³ OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR); OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media. Joint Opinion on the Draft Information Code of the Republic of Uzbekistan. – Warsaw/Vienna: OSCE, 2023. – URL: <https://www.osce.org/fom/546652> (дата обращения: 16.05.2025).

⁴ Stronski, P. Uzbekistan: Reform and Reality. – Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP), 2021. – URL: <https://www.swp-berlin.org/en/publication/uzbekistan-reform-and-reality> (дата обращения: 16.05.2025).

⁵ Human Rights Watch. World Report 2020: Uzbekistan. – New York: HRW, 2020. – URL: <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2020/country-chapters/uzbekistan> (дата обращения: 16.05.2025).



The reforms in Uzbekistan have had mixed but overall positive implications for information resilience and societal trust. On the one hand, opening up the media and online space has created channels for grievances and diverse viewpoints to be expressed, which can increase stability by providing a safety valve for public sentiment. For example, Uzbek social media and blogs began covering local problems and corruption more boldly around 2017–2019, sometimes prompting officials to take corrective action. President Mirziyoyev’s establishment of a Virtual Reception for citizens’ complaints (an online platform) is another soft governance tool that increased trust – citizens saw that they could raise issues directly and be heard, reducing frustration. A Bertelsmann Transformation Index report noted that while Uzbekistan’s government remained strong-handed in some areas, it increasingly allowed discussion of social issues and even criticism in media as part of a controlled reform process.⁶ (Mirziyoyev himself often publicly scolded underperforming officials, signaling tolerance for highlighting problems). From an information resilience perspective, Uzbekistan has undertaken measures to educate and involve the public in defending against harmful content. A notable example is the collaboration with OSCE on Media and Information Literacy (MIL) and counter-extremism. In December 2024, the OSCE organized training in Tashkent on MIL for preventing violent extremism, which included Uzbek policymakers, security officials, educators, journalists, and civil society – a truly multi-stakeholder approach.⁷ Participants addressed the “digital information disorder” (misinformation and malign content online) while upholding fundamental human rights like freedom of expression. The head of the OSCE project in Uzbekistan highlighted that “to make a real difference, we need everyone on board... from government agencies and law enforcement to educators, civil society, media and the private sector”, noting this inclusive approach is “at the core of Uzbekistan’s Counter Terrorism and Extremism Strategy”. This indicates that Uzbek authorities recognize security cannot be achieved by government efforts alone or by mere suppression; it requires community resilience, education, and partnership – all elements of soft regulation. By centering efforts on awareness and early prevention (rather than just reactive crackdowns), Uzbekistan aims to build immunity within society against radical propaganda, thus maintaining stability without heavy censorship. This approach also likely enhances trust among those stakeholders, as they feel like co-owners of the strategy.

Internationally, Uzbekistan’s reforms earned cautious praise. The OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media frequently engaged with Uzbekistan. In 2019 and 2020, OSCE noted improvements such as the unblocking of news sites and urged further steps to foster media pluralism. UNESCO, through its Tashkent office, supported journalism trainings and the celebration of World Press Freedom Day in Uzbekistan – events that would have been symbolic at best previously, but now had official backing. These interactions have the effect of legitimizing Uzbekistan’s information space in the eyes of its citizens and the world, thereby increasing trust. When people see that their country is adhering to international norms (e.g., allowing more press freedom, partnering with UNESCO on journalism standards), they may trust

⁶ Bertelsmann Stiftung. BTI 2022 Country Report — Uzbekistan. – Gütersloh: Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2022. – Цит. по: Stronski, P. Uzbekistan: Reform and Reality. – Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP), 2021. – URL: <https://www.swp-berlin.org/en/publication/uzbekistan-reform-and-reality> (дата обращения: 16.05.2025).

⁷ OSCE. OSCE Holds Training on Media and Information Literacy to Prevent Violent Extremism in Uzbekistan. – Tashkent: OSCE Programme Office in Uzbekistan, December 2024. – URL: <https://www.osce.org/programme-office-in-uzbekistan/563219> (дата обращения: 16.05.2025).



that information is less likely to be arbitrarily controlled or that there are avenues to challenge falsehoods.

However, challenges and setbacks remain, which the soft approach must continually navigate. Despite the opening, there have been instances where old habits resurface: journalists and bloggers have faced intimidation or legal threats when delving into sensitive issues like government corruption or high-level misconduct. For example, the case of Tashkent's former mayor verbally threatening reporters in 2019 highlighted that some officials still react in "hard" ways to negative press.⁸ The government's Agency of Information and Mass Communication (AIMC) intervened in that case not by jailing the reporters, but by appealing to them not to overdramatize the issue— a softer approach, though one critics saw as urging self-censorship. Moreover, since 2020, there have been arrests of some bloggers on various charges (extortion, "public order" offenses), which human rights groups viewed as a crackdown after an initial liberalization. Freedom House's Freedom on the Net 2022 report still classifies Uzbekistan as "Not Free," albeit with a modest score increase from the past.⁹ It notes that while overt censorship has lessened, informal pressures (like security services warning bloggers to be "neutral" on politically sensitive topics such as the war in Ukraine) continue to foster self-censorship. This indicates that building true information resilience is a work in progress – legal changes and public rhetoric alone are not enough if ingrained practices of control persist at various levels of government.

Conclusion

Nonetheless, the trend is that Uzbekistan has more information pluralism now than a decade ago, and society is arguably more stable for it. One telling comparison: in the early 2000s, tightly controlled information arguably contributed to explosive outcomes like the Andijan unrest (where grievances had no outlet until they burst). In the late 2010s and early 2020s, Uzbekistan faced no such large-scale instability, even as it undertook major economic and social reforms. While many factors are at play (including political will and security measures), the presence of a somewhat freer media likely helped voice dissent in constructive ways and allowed the government to adjust policies in response to criticism, thereby preventing instability.

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⁸ Stronski, P. Uzbekistan: Reform and Reality. – Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP), 2021. – URL: <https://www.swp-berlin.org/en/publication/uzbekistan-reform-and-reality> (дата обращения: 16.05.2025).

⁹ Freedom House. Freedom on the Net 2022: Uzbekistan. – Washington, D.C.: Freedom House, 2022. – URL: <https://freedomhouse.org/country/uzbekistan/freedom-net/2022> (дата обращения: 16.05.2025).



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