

# Uzbekistan: Profile of Media Ownership and Potential Foreign Influence Channels

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# Introduction

What are the entry points for foreign actors to shape and influence the narrative in the Uzbek media market? This profile seeks to address some of the entry points related to media ownership and Russian state-owned media. AidData recognizes that malign influence may affect narrative creation in other ways, including the republishing of foreign content in domestic media outlets, interactions on social media, and through journalist biases. However, this project focuses solely on direct and indirect ownership of traditional domestic media outlets to identify potential entry points for Russian influence through elites and media owners. By better understanding Uzbekistan's domestic media ownership environment, including what media outlets citizens consume and who the owners of those outlets are, we can anticipate entry points where malign actors may try to influence domestic narratives.

The Uzbek government either directly owns or indirectly influences nearly every top media outlet in Uzbekistan.<sup>1</sup> However, under President Shavkat Mirziyoyev's reforms, some media ownership has become independent of government influence, particularly online outlets.<sup>2</sup> Since owners of top media houses have the potential to influence the content and tone of topics covered by journalists in their employ, understanding who owns the media is crucial to identifying avenues for influence and potential bias in reporting. In this profile, we begin to close this gap with an in-depth look at domestic media ownership in Uzbekistan.

This media ownership profile and the supporting data were prepared by AidData, a research lab at William & Mary's Global Research Institute.<sup>3</sup> The data for this profile was collected manually by AidData staff and student research assistants. We began by conducting web searches to identify a list of media in Uzbekistan, and then identified a list of the top-ranked outlets in terms of overall consumption. We then used this information to gather the ownership data. We used cross-country sources when

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<sup>1</sup> "Freedom on the Net 2021 - Uzbekistan." Freedom House. Published May 31, 2021.

<https://freedomhouse.org/country/uzbekistan/freedom-net/2021>.

<sup>2</sup> "Freedom on the Net 2021 - Uzbekistan." Freedom House. Published May 31, 2021.

<sup>3</sup> This profile is part of a collaboration with the USAID E&E Bureau made possible through a buy-in to a Higher Education Solutions Network cooperative agreement (AID-A-12-00096) in place between USAID/LAB/HESN, AidData, and William & Mary.

available (e.g., Alexa<sup>4</sup>), as well as public opinion survey data, media watchdog sources, and other open source data.

In the following sections, we provide summary data on the presence of Russian state-owned media, top outlets, and media ownership in Uzbekistan as of 2021 (or the most contemporary data available). This profile focuses on the ownership of traditional broadcast, print, and online media outlets. Social media is not included in this analysis. By mapping out the ownership and influence of traditional forms of media, these profiles lend insights into potential channels for foreign influence in the most consumed outlets.

## Russian Media Footprints

The most direct form of Kremlin influence in Uzbekistan's media landscape is via Russian state-owned media (see Table 1). Six of the eleven Russian state-owned media outlets we tracked have a physical presence in Uzbekistan, which provides the Kremlin with some channels to directly communicate with, and ultimately influence, Uzbek citizens. Physical presence includes physical infrastructure, such as cable packages, physical office space or local bureaus, and radio broadcasters, but excludes satellite broadcasting and online or streaming availability. Table 1 provides a footprint of Russian state-owned media presence in Uzbekistan, but does not speak to how well-consumed each outlet is by Uzbek citizens.

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<sup>4</sup> Alexa is an online analysis tool. AidData staff used Alexa's API to gauge website traffic. <https://www.alexa.com/siteinfo>.

Table 1: Russian state-owned media in Uzbekistan, 2021

Television		Print		Radio		News Agency	
Russia I	✓	Rossiyskaya Gazeta	✗	Sputnik	✓	TASS	✗
Russia 24	✓					Sputnik	✓
Russia K	✓						
RTR-Planeta	✗						
TV Centre	✗						
Channel One	✓						
RT	✗						

Other indirect forms of Russian influence are possible, including domestic outlets republishing narratives and pro-Russian journalists in-country. In this profile, AidData has captured direct Russian channels of influence through state-owned media infrastructure.

## Top Media Outlets

Table 2 identifies the top five most-consumed media outlets in Uzbekistan by medium (e.g., television, print, radio, online) based on cross-sectional indicators such as viewership share and circulation. Television is the most-consumed medium and is therefore likely more influential than other information sources.<sup>5</sup> While we cannot know the exact influence of each individual outlet, we can assume that outlets that reach higher numbers of consumers have greater potential to influence more citizens. While Russian state-owned media outlets are popular in Uzbekistan,<sup>6</sup> none of the tracked Russian state media appears in the top five outlets for any medium.

<sup>5</sup> "Uzbekistan profile - Media." BBC News. Published November 20, 2018. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-16218808>.

<sup>6</sup> "Uzbekistan profile - Media." BBC News. Published November 20, 2018.

AidData used a weighted average of media consumption survey rankings from 2017 to present to determine the top media outlets in Uzbekistan. This strategy offers a more long-term perspective of top media outlets, rather than a snapshot of the top media outlets right now. As such, the top outlets may not exactly reflect the current order of most-consumed outlets, but do show a solid picture of the media landscape over the past five years. Recent rankings are weighted more heavily to adjust for new changes.<sup>7</sup>

Table 2: Top Uzbek media outlets ranked by overall consumption

Rank	Television	Print	Radio	Online
1	Zo'r TV	Narodnoye Slovo	Vodiy Sadosi	Daryo.uz
2	Mening Yurtim (MY5)	Argumenty i Fakty	Yoshlar Ovozi Radio	Gazeta.uz
3	Sevimli	Pravda Vostoka	Radio Grand	Kun.uz
4	Milliy TV	Khalq Sozi	ORIAT FM	Qalampir.uz
5	Yoshlar	Bisnis Vestnik Vostoka	Radio Toshkent	Xabar.uz

According to findings from an AidData survey of regional and local media experts in 2021, the majority of top Uzbek outlets mirror the results of open-source data collection by AidData researchers. However, additional outlets excluded from this top outlet list but ranked highly by local experts include television channels Channel One and Uzbekistan 24, and online outlet UZreport.uz.

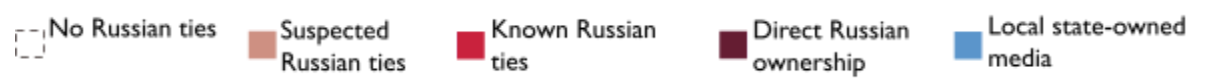
<sup>7</sup> Television, Print and Radio: Television, radio and print rankings were calculated using multiple publicly available surveys and circulation data, including an AidData survey of country and regional experts conducted in summer 2021. Additional survey data came from: IREX's Media Sustainability Index (2019), "Yuksalish" Nation-wide Movement's national survey (2020), ICT News' online survey (2017), and Internews' "2019 Media Consumption and Media and Information Literacy Survey in the Countries of Central Asia" Report (2019). Online: Alexa (April 2021) and Centralasia.media's analysis of the National Search System of Uzbekistan (2019) were used in conjunction with the aforementioned surveys.

# Media Ownership

The Uzbek government prohibits media monopolies through its Law on Mass Media, which requires reporting on media outlet shareholder information. However, this shareholder information is not public, making the law less effective than it could be in combating media monopolies.<sup>8</sup> As a result, media ownership in Uzbekistan is concentrated in the hands of Uzbek and Russian political elites. Further examples of ownership ties and relationships are discussed in the following section.

Table 3 lists the ownership information of top Uzbek media outlets by medium (e.g., television, newspaper, radio, online). The nine Uzbek state-owned media outlets are color-coded blue. AidData staff categorized the remaining privately held media outlets based upon the level of Russian ownership that might increase their susceptibility to Kremlin influence. These categories are denoted by an increasing saturation of red—no known Russian ties (no color), suspected Russian ties, known Russian ties, and direct Russian ownership. In Uzbekistan, one outlet had direct Russian ownership.

Table 3: Ownership of top Uzbek media outlets by share



Medium	Rank	Outlet	Owner, Company	Owner, Individuals	Owner (%)
Television	1	Zo'r TV	Zo'r Teleradiokompaniya LLC	Shukhrat Akhmetov	50
				Ismail Israilov	50
	2	Mening Yurtim (MY5)	Ozod Yurt Tolqinlari LLC	Government of Uzbekistan	61
				Firdavs Abdukhalikov	39
				Firuza Sharapova	70
3	Sevimli	Master Media Production and Broadcast LLC			

<sup>8</sup> Uzbekistan: Law on Mass Media." Article 19. Published February 2019.

[https://www.article19.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/A19\\_Mass-Media-Law-UZ-Analysis-Feb-2019\\_Eng\\_Web.pdf](https://www.article19.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/A19_Mass-Media-Law-UZ-Analysis-Feb-2019_Eng_Web.pdf)

			Amira Rashidova	20	
			Abdullajon Abdukhalikov	10	
	4	Milliy TV	Milliy Telekanali	Komil Allamjonov	100
	5	Yoshlar	Government of Uzbekistan		100
Print	1	Narodnoye Slovo	Government of Uzbekistan		100
	2	Argumenty i Fakty	Argumenty i Fakty Uzbekistana LLC	Government of Moscow	100
	3	Pravda Vostoka	Government of Uzbekistan		100
	4	Khalq Sozi	Government of Uzbekistan		100
	5	Bisnis Vestnik Vostoka	Information-Rating Agency Saipro LLC	Unknown	Unknown
Radio	1	Vodiy sadosi	Vodiy Sadosi Yoshlar TV and Radio Company LLC	Shukhrat Akhmetov	100
	2	Yoshlar Ovozi Radio	Yoshlar Ovozi LLC	Unknown	51
				Government of Uzbekistan	49
	3	Radio Grand	Edel Veys-Ali LLC	Svetlana Khan	74
				Government of Uzbekistan	26
ORLAT	4	ORLAT FM Teleradiokompaniya LLC	Bahtier Usmanov	100	

5	Radio Toshkent	Government of Uzbekistan		100	
1	Daryo.uz	Uztelecom JSC	Government of Uzbekistan	94.09	
			Unknown	5.91	
Online					
	2	Gazeta.uz	Afisha Media Holding	Suren Sapov	100
	3	Kun.uz	Web Expert LLC	Makhsud Askarov	Unknown
				Umid Shermukhammedov	Unknown
Abdugani	4	Qalampir.uz	Qalampir LLC	Qamariddin Shaykhov	100
5	Xabar.uz	Xabar.uz LLC			100

Abdurahmanov

## Results

### Television

Television is the most-consumed medium in Uzbekistan<sup>9</sup> and is largely controlled by a few politically connected elites. The Uzbek government fully owns the fifth most-consumed channel, Yoshlar, and partially owns Mening Yurtim (MY5), the second most-consumed channel.

Zo'r TV, the most-consumed channel in Uzbekistan, is jointly owned by Ismail Israilov and Shukhrat Akhmetov. Both men control other media outlets as well, with Israilov owning shares in Pro FM and Akhmetov controlling top radio outlet Vodiy Sadosi and

<sup>9</sup> "Uzbekistan profile - Media." BBC News. Published November 20, 2018.



the Tasvir publishing house.<sup>10</sup> Notably, both Israilov and Akhmetov are business partners with the influential Mayor of Tashkent, Jahongir Artykhodzhaev, who likely influences the outlet.<sup>11</sup>

Firdavs Abdukhalikov is the owner of both the second and third most-consumed television channels, MY5 and Sevimli, respectively. Formerly the sole owner of MY5, Abdukhalikov ceded majority ownership to the government of Uzbekistan. However, his role as a media mogul remains intact. The sole owner of Darakchi newspaper, Abdukhalikov also controls Sevimli through the ownership of his family members and he is the chairman of “Uzbekkino” National Agency (now the Cinema Agency of the Republic of Uzbekistan). Abdukhalikov founded and ran the National Association of Electronic Mass Media of

Uzbekistan (NAESMI) for nearly two decades until February 2022.<sup>12</sup> This impressive resume gives Abdukhalikov significant influence over shaping narratives through Sevimli, MY5, and Darakchi, as well as through creating state-funded films through Uzbekkino. Additionally, Abdukhalikov is connected with former President Islam Karimov’s daughter, Gulnara Karimova.<sup>13</sup>

The fourth most-consumed outlet is Milliy TV, founded and owned by Komil Allamjonov, who is connected politically with current President Shavkat Mirziyoyev. Allamjonov served as the Press Secretary to Mirziyoyev<sup>15</sup> and Director of the Agency for Information and Mass Communications.<sup>14</sup> Currently, Allamjonov is Chairman of the

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<sup>10</sup> “Kazakhstani media publishes material about Uzbekistan’s media magnates.” Kun.uz. Published September 28, 2021.

<https://kun.uz/en/news/2021/09/28/kazakhstan-publishes-material-about-uzbekistans-media-magnates>.

<sup>11</sup> “Tashkent city mayor’s office awards contracts to entity owned by the mayor’s business partners.” The Tashkent Times. Published November, 2020.

<http://tashkenttimes.uz/national/5948-tashkent-city-mayor-s-office-awards-contracts-to-entity-owned-by-the-mayor-s-business-partners>

<sup>12</sup> Zohidov, Abror. “What is NAESMI and why did Firdavs Abdukholiqov leave the 19-year-old organization he founded?” Kun.uz. Published February 2, 2022.

<https://kun.uz/uz/news/2022/02/02/naesmi-oz-i-nima-va-firdavs-abduxoliqov-oz-i-ochgan-19-yillik-tashkilotdan-nega-ketdi>.

<sup>13</sup> “«Вести из рая» – 2: Госучреждения и коммерческие банки обязали перечислить миллиарды сумов для пропаганды реформ Мирзиязева.” Radio Ozodlik. Published June 20, 2021.

<https://rus.ozodlik.org/a/31315308.html>.<sup>15</sup> “Uzbek leader establishes Administration of the President of Uzbekistan.” UzDaily.uz. Published August 28, 2018. <https://www.uzdaily.uz/en/post/45466>.

<sup>14</sup> “Komil Allamjonov becomes Acting Director of the Agency for Information and Mass Communications.” UzDaily.uz. Published February 8, 2019. <https://www.uzdaily.uz/en/post/47764>.

Public Fund for Support and Development of National Mass Media, a non-governmental organization.<sup>15</sup>

In sum, television ownership in Uzbekistan runs primarily through the government. Firdavs Abdukhalikov and Komil Allamjonov are both connected to the current Mirziyoyev administration and served in senior positions within the government. The Mayor of Tashkent likely controls Zo'r TV, and the government of Uzbekistan itself owns the remaining shares. Every top television channel is directly connected to the incumbent administration and powerful elites within the government.

## Print

Like television, the Uzbek government owns the majority of top print outlets, including the first, third, and fourth most-consumed newspapers Narodnoye Slovo, Pravda Vostoka, and Khalq Sozi, respectively.

The second most-consumed print outlet is Argumenty i Fakty, a Russian outlet owned by the Government of Moscow. Russian-owned media outlets are popular in Uzbekistan,<sup>18</sup> giving the Russian government some channels to directly influence Uzbek citizens.

The ownership of Bisnis Vestik Vostoka, the fifth most-consumed print outlet, is opaque. The outlet is owned by SAIPRO Information-Rating Agency, which also owns UzReport.uz, an influential online outlet. However, since the ownership structure of SAIPRO is unknown, this in turn conceals the ultimate beneficial owners of Bisnis Vestik Vostoka.

In sum, the Uzbek government dominates top print media ownership. Of the top print outlets, only two newspapers are not owned by the government: Argumenty i Fakty, owned by the Moscow government, and Bisnis Vestik Vostoka, which has unknown ownership. Media centralization, particularly around the state, creates significant

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<sup>15</sup> "Kazakhstani media publishes material about Uzbekistan's media magnates." Kun.uz. Published September 28, 2021. <sup>18</sup> Davletova, Nozima. "Perspectives | Uzbekistan: For Russia, soft power is just business." Eurasianet. Published June 19, 2019. <https://eurasianet.org/perspectives-uzbekistan-for-russia-soft-power-is-just-business>.

vulnerabilities to foreign malign influence, as a lack of diverse narratives amongst top media outlets can be easily subjected to foreign manipulation.

## Radio

Government influence and media centralization continue in top radio stations in Uzbekistan. The government of Uzbekistan fully owns the fifth most-consumed radio station, Radio Toshkent.

Additionally, due to a seizure of Radio Grand and an acquisition of 49% of shares in Yoshlar Ovozi Radio, the government owns shares in two other top radio outlets as well.

The most-consumed radio station in Uzbekistan is Vodiy Sadosi, owned by the aforementioned co-owner of Zo’r TV, Shukhrat Akhmetov. As noted previously, Akhmetov is a business partner of the Mayor of Tashkent, highlighting more ties between the current government and the top radio stations.

Yoshlar Ovozi Radio is the second most-consumed radio station in Uzbekistan. In September 2020, the government of Uzbekistan created the “Youth Media Holding” under the Agency for Youth Affairs. This media holding now controls the state-owned Yoshlar TV channel and Yoshlar Publishing House, and acquired 61% of MY5 from Firdavs Abdukhalikov and 49% of Yoshlar Ovozi Radio from Yoshlar Ovozi LLC.<sup>16</sup> The original owners of Yoshlar Ovozi LLC are unknown, as the ownership structure is opaque. Currently, the Uzbek government holds a minority share in Yoshlar Ovozi Radio through the Youth Media Holding.

The Uzbek government has employed various means to take effective control of Radio Grand, the third most-consumed radio station. In 2015, an Uzbek court order stated that Radio Grand was an asset of Rustam Madumarov, the imprisoned ex-husband of

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<sup>16</sup> “Yoshlar ishlari agentligiga ayrim OAVning ulushlari beriladi, «Yoshlar media xoldingi» tashkil etiladi.” Kun.uz. Published September 16, 2020. <https://m.kun.uz/uz/news/2020/09/16/yoshlar-ishlari-agentligiga-ayrim-oavning-ulushlari-beriladi-yoshlar-media-xoldingi-tashkil-etiladi>.

Gulnara Karimova, and his assets were forfeited to the state, including Radio Grand.<sup>17</sup> However, Svetlana Khan, the owner of Radio Grand, was the sole owner of the outlet and had no clear ties to Madumarov when the outlet was seized.<sup>18</sup> In May 2019, Radio Grand reportedly went up for auction, as the Uzbek government dropped the price of Radio Grand dramatically to sell off the outlet. However, the case gained national attention, and the Uzbek government eventually returned 74% of Svetlana Khan's assets, keeping 26% of Radio Grand.<sup>19</sup>

Oriat FM, the fourth most-consumed radio station, is owned by Director-General Bahtier Usmanov, who keeps a lower public profile than most other media owners of top Uzbek outlets. AidData staff were unable to find any connections between Usmanov and Russian actors or the Uzbek government.

Like the television and print sectors, the Uzbek government has a strong presence among the top radio outlets in Uzbekistan. The government acquired shares in Radio Grand and Yoshlar Ovozi Radio and wholly owns Radio Tashkent. Additionally, Shukhrat Akhmetov, owner of the top radio station Vodiy

Sadosi, has ties to the government as well, further highlighting media concentration around the state.

## Online

Online outlets have more diverse ownership than traditional media outlets in Uzbekistan. The Uzbek government only controls the most-consumed online outlet, Daryo.uz, through Uztelecom JSC, the largest telecommunications provider in the country. The remaining top online outlets are privately owned.

Gazeta.uz, the second most-consumed online outlet, is owned by Suren Sapov, the son-in-law of Sodiq

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<sup>17</sup> "«Grand» radiosi Rustam Madumarov bilan aloqalarni rad etdi." Kun.uz. Published May 3, 2019. <https://m.kun.uz/uz/news/2019/05/03/grand-radiosi-rustam-madumarov-bilan-alloqalarni-rad-etdi>.

<sup>18</sup> "The founder of Radio Grand denied that its owner was Gulnara Karimova's ex-husband." Ozodlik Radiosy. Published May 3, 2019. <https://www.ozodlik.org/a/29919340.html>.

<sup>19</sup> "How the trial ended in relation to the raider seizure of the radio station "Grand" by Gulnara Karimova - all the details." Podrobno.uz. Published September 16, 2019. <https://podrobno.uz/cat/obchestvo/chem-zakonchilsya-sud-v-otnoshenii-reyderskogo/>.

Safoyev, the first deputy chairman of the Senate of Uzbekistan's Parliament.<sup>20</sup> Sapov founded Afisha Media Holding, the parent company of Gazeta.uz, though his father-in-law likely holds influence over the content of the outlet.

All remaining top online outlets are owned by journalists that founded their respective outlets. Makhsud Askarov and Umid Shermukhammedov are both journalists who founded Kun.uz, the third most-consumed online outlet. Journalist Qamariddin Shaykhov founded and owns Qalampir.uz, and journalist Abdugani Abdurahmanov founded and owns Xabar.uz. All three outlets are fairly independent of state influence, though government harassment and censorship of these outlets does occur.<sup>21</sup>

In sum, despite some government ownership of top online outlets, independent journalism and media outlets are present online in Uzbekistan. Kun.uz, Qalampir.uz, and Xabar.uz all report on government corruption and add critical voices to the Uzbek media space that were not present during the Karimov administration.<sup>22</sup> However, state harassment and censorship of these outlets highlight that the Uzbek government is still willing to exert control over online media.

## Conclusion

In this brief, we have presented an overview of the domestic media ownership environment of Uzbekistan. The collected data highlight two trends in Uzbek media ownership. First, the Uzbek government fully controls the top traditional media outlets, though independent media exists online.

Second, Uzbek media outlets are vulnerable to direct and indirect channels of Russian influence.

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<sup>20</sup> "Kazakhstani media publishes material about Uzbekistan's media magnates." Kun.uz. Published September 28, 2021.

<sup>21</sup> "Uzbek Journalists Push Back Against Media Regulator." Voice of America. Published December 2, 2020.

[https://www.voanews.com/a/press-freedom\\_uzbek-journalists-push-back-against-media-regulator/6199088.html](https://www.voanews.com/a/press-freedom_uzbek-journalists-push-back-against-media-regulator/6199088.html).

<sup>22</sup> "Uzbekistan 2019: Media Sustainability Index." International Research and Exchanges Board. Published 2019.

<https://www.irex.org/sites/default/files/pdf/media-sustainability-index-europe-eurasia-2019-uzbekistan.pdf>.

The Uzbek government directly owns nine of the country's top media outlets, and most privately held outlets are owned by political elites with connections to the government. Media moguls such as Shukhrat Akhmetov, Firdavs Abdukhalikov, and Komil Allamjonov all have ties to the incumbent administration, furthering centralized media control by the government. Additionally, the Uzbek government appears willing to take control of private outlets, such as Yoshlar Ovozi Radio and Radio Grand, through seizures or legislation. The only outlets independent of direct government ownership or indirect control were online outlets, highlighting the importance of online media in promoting diverse narratives in Uzbekistan.

The dynamics of heavy state control over traditional media create an opening for external actors such as the Kremlin to co-opt and exert influence over Uzbek news outlets by cultivating closer ties with the government. In addition, the Kremlin can more directly influence the country's media space via its Russian state-owned media. Six of the eleven tracked Russian state-owned media outlets are present in Uzbekistan, and Moscow government-owned Argumenty i Fakty is the second most-consumed print outlet in the country.

In sum, the Russian government has a number of potential channels to directly communicate with the Uzbek public via its own state-owned media, as well as indirectly influence citizens via efforts to co-opt Uzbek state-owned outlets or privately owned outlets controlled by political elites.