



THE IMPORTANCE OF JOURNALISM IN THE SOCIOCULTURAL CONTEXT

The cornerstones of any successful society are the media and the press. They are the “Fourth Estate of the realm” – a crucial supporting pillar of statehood to legislature, judiciary and executive to impose and ensure people’s control over other institutions. Independent press has the potential to expose both deliberate and accidental deficiencies of the judicial, executive, and legislative branches of the government; objectively display societal, ecological, political, and other issues; and form helpful narratives within the society that support and reinforce positive changes. However, the work of the press in society should be adequately compensated, respected, and most importantly – it should be safe for society to reap the aforementioned benefits. A society that provides such conditions for its media and press can expect to enjoy higher democracy and government control levels. One of the most globally respected studies within this framework is the World Press Freedom Index (WPI) by Reporters Without Borders (RWB). The Index has been published since 2002, it ranks 180 countries and regions, measuring the level of freedom that journalists enjoy in these places. The Index combines qualitative and quantitative approaches, conducting interviews with experts and gathering data regarding violence towards journalists. Unlike in many global reports, all of the Central Asian countries are included in the Index, which provides a rare opportunity to comprehensively observe the whole region and compare the countries with each other and with their past selves.

In 2022 Central Asian countries jumped up in the Index by a significant margin. For instance, Kazakhstan moved up 33 positions in the ranking (from 155th to 122nd), and Uzbekistan ended up 133rd, 24 positions higher in the rating from its previous 157th place. Tajikistan was placed 10 positions higher than previously (from 162nd to 152nd), while Kyrgyzstan advanced from 79th to 72nd place. Finally, Turkmenistan ended up higher than it had been before (177th instead of 178th). Some of the countries of the region immediately celebrated such a success. For instance, The Press Secretary of the President of Uzbekistan, Sherzod Asadov, congratulated the representatives of the Uzbek press and emphasized the role of the President of Uzbekistan, while some of the local pro-governmental media shared the news actively. In Kazakhstan, many media outlets mentioned the news without much analysis; thus, creating a rather positive picture. The same happened in Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan, while in Tajikistan, pro-governmental sources supported the spread of the story.

Some researchers state that it is necessary to use more comprehensive tables, including other factors, in order to understand this rise more clearly. One of the main twists regarding the 2022 WPI perfectly explains the sudden score boost of the region – RWB changed the methodology of the Index for the 2022 and ex-

PLICITLY warned against direct comparisons between 2021 and 2022 results in terms of ranks. The new methodology implies the replacement of previous indicators with five new ones: the political context, legal framework, economic context, socio-cultural context, and security. Each indicator is assessed as good, satisfactory, problematic, difficult, or very serious. Moreover, the definition of press freedom has also changed in accordance, now it is defined as “the effective possibility for journalists, as individuals and as groups, to select, produce and disseminate news and information in the public interest, independently from political, economic, legal and social interference, and without endangering their physical and mental safety”. There were seven indicators during the previous years: pluralism, media independence, environment and self-censorship, legislative framework, transparency, infrastructure, and abuses. Such a shift from arguably more technical to more generalist indicators has also altered the focus of the study to some degree. Therefore, direct cross-time comparisons in rankings need to be understood carefully, as they only demonstrate the relative success of the country within the system of new indicators, but they do not display the country’s success in handling its media over time.

On the contrary, the actual aggregate scores of all countries in the region, except Turkmenistan, demonstrated a decline. Kazakhstan’s score fell from 49.72 to 48.28, Kyrgyzstan declined from 69.63 to 64.25, Tajikistan – from 44.48 to 40.26, Uzbekistan – from 49.26 to 45.74, and Turkmenistan was the only country in the region that demonstrated a score increase from 19.97 to 25.01. At the same time, many countries across the world demonstrated a further decline in their scores, which also helped the Central Asian region maintain and reinforce its position in the list. One of the regions that have demonstrated the biggest decline overall was the region of South Asia – India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Afghanistan demonstrated a substantial fall in terms of both their scores and their places in the Index. Therefore, it can be concluded that such a rapid growth of the Central Asian region in the Index happened mainly due to external factors, such as the methodology change and further worsening of the situation regarding the freedom of the press in many other countries of the world. Moreover, numerous insightful conclusions can still be drawn from the Index. First of all, it still provides a useful internal hierarchy of the countries of the region in terms of the freedom of the press.

Kyrgyzstan is leading the list in that regard; according to the authors of the research, the country “is an exception in Central Asia, as it enjoys relative freedom of expression and the press and despite the allegedly claims about unstable economy and rampant official corruption”. In the short fact file, the Reporters Without Borders make notes of some of the positive aspects

of the situation in the country, such as Kyrgyzstan’s growing media sector, presence of some level of pluralism, public interest in the topic of corruption, and some allegedly claims about the unstable political climate, new attempts of the government to censor the press, distorted competition between outlets are considered as the negative aspects.

Kazakhstan has the second-best situation in the region regarding press freedom, and Reporters Without Borders emphasizes the importance of the increased number of online media projects that remain independent. However, there are a number of factors that hinders the competition between independent media outlets and government-supported ones such as the financial support that the latter receives gives them an advantage to grow faster as media outlets.

Experts report that the situation in Uzbekistan has achieved some improvements in terms of press freedom since the death of Islam Karimov in 2016. Also the situation with the safety of journalists and access to independent news sources through social media has improved. However, it is been allegedly claimed that it is still difficult to operate as an independent media outlet without some government control over their news.

In contrast to its previously mentioned neighbors, it is been reported that the situation in Tajikistan can be described as gradually deteriorating in terms of the freedom of the press. Pressure over some local media outlets is still continuing and many journalists left the country, and it is been allegedly claimed that most of the population does not have direct and stable access to the Internet. Moreover, Reporters Without Borders mention that there are “supported trolling activities, limiting laws, showing low level of importance to journalism at the societal level and potential risks of arrests, imprisonment, and physical assault”.

Finally, in the report Turkmenistan fully corresponds to its status as one of the most closed states in the world, as there are no independent media outlets in the country. Some that try to cover the situation in the republic do so from abroad.

In conclusion, there are several outcomes could be drawn from the report. Firstly, it is vital to carefully analyze even the most reputable sources of information. Secondly it would be healthier to conduct cross time comparisons under the new developed methodology. On the other hand when we look at the big picture it is important to mention that there are positive developments as well where we see a gradual improvement in different parts of the index for three countries in the region. Also, it is essential to note that majority of the progress comes from the efforts of local activists and journalists, who explore new platforms and means of sharing their truth. Societies and governments in the region needs to continuously work and strengthen the idea of media and press is a vital part of the healthy development of societies and governments.

Politics, Foreign Affairs, and Security

- The President of Kazakhstan Kassym-Jomart Tokayev listed the planned amendments to the Constitution. They include the creation of a Constitutional Court, the establishment of the status of the Human Rights Commissioner at the constitutional level and unconditional prohibition of the death penalty. Moreover, it is planned to enshrine the status of the President equidistant from all political parties and movements. The upcoming constitutional reform will mark a new stage of Kazakhstan's development (Kazinform, 05.05.2022).
- Minister of Foreign Economic Relations and Foreign Affairs of Hungary, Peter Szijarto made an official visit to Kyrgyzstan, where he had meetings with the President of Kyrgyzstan Sadyr Zhaparov, Minister of Foreign Affairs Jeenbek Kulubaev, Minister of Economy and Commerce Daniyar Amangeldiev. During the visit, the 2nd meeting of the Kyrgyz-Hungarian Strategic Council was held on issues of bilateral political, trade, economic, cultural and humanitarian cooperation. The parties discussed the work of the Hungarian-Kyrgyz Development Fund (Kabar, 04.05.2022).
- The President of Uzbekistan Shavkat Mirziyoyev had a telephone conversation with the President of Tajikistan Emomali Rahmon. The leaders exchanged warm congratulations on the holy holiday of Ramadan Hayit and considered topical issues of further strengthening the Uzbek-Tajik relations of friendship, good neighborliness and strategic partnership. Particular attention was paid to expanding practical cooperation, including increasing the volume of mutual trade and promoting priority cooperation projects in the fields of industry, energy, agriculture, transport and other areas (Kun.uz, 04.05.2022).
- The President of the European Council Charles Michel paid a visit to Moldova where he met with the President of Moldova Maia Sandu. During the meeting, Charles Michel pointed out the EU pledged to raise the European Union's military aid to Moldova. President Sandu said that Moldova had chosen European integration as a development model and reaffirmed Moldova's intention to become a member of the EU (Aljazeera.com, 04.05.2022).
- Armenia and Türkiye confirmed the joint goal to reach a full-fledged regulation of relations between the two nations. The information was confirmed by the envoys of both countries, Ruben Rubinian and Serdar Kılıc. According to the statement, the sides are in process of discussing possible steps to reach tangible results in normalizing the bilateral relations (Rferl.org, 03.05.2022).
- The U.S. Embassy in Dushanbe provided eight IVECO trucks, tires, and spare parts for IVECOs to Tajikistan's Ministry of Defense to help Tajikistan secure its borders. The donation is worth \$2.3 million and will be used to improve Tajikistan's defense mobility in the uneven terrain across Tajikistan. Since 1992, the U.S. government has provided over \$330 million in security-sector assistance to Tajikistan (ASIA-Plus, 05.05.2022).

Economy, Finance, and Energy

- Uzbekistan made changes to its tax policy toward food products. On May 5, the President signed a law "On making additions and changes to the Tax Code of the Republic of Uzbekistan", according to which turnover on the sale of chicken, frozen fish and poultry in live form, meat, live animals, and potatoes are exempt from value-added tax. At the same time, the government will tax certain activities, including the export of dyed fabric, finished garments and knitwear (Kun.uz, 06.05.2022).
- Senior officials of the ministries of economy and finance and other relevant institutions of the member states of the Organization of Turkic States held a meeting on the creation of the Turkic Investment Fund in Istanbul. At the meeting, the details of the framework agreement were discussed and the main elements of the Fund were agreed upon, including issues related to functions, powers, and financial resources. It is expected that the Fund will start functioning before the end of the year (Kun.uz, 03.05.2022).
- The European Bank for Reconstruction and Development continues to provide Tajikistan with financial assistance. Recently, the bank offered a financial package of \$7 million to one of the country's largest lenders, Bank Arvand. This will allow Tajikistan lenders to provide much-needed loans to SMEs in rural and remote parts of the country. Moreover, the package will help promote women's entrepreneurship and business activity by assisting with access to finance, know-how and technical advice (ASIA-Plus, 06.05.2022).
- The World Bank continues to provide financial assistance to Kyrgyzstan. Recently, the institution's Board of Executive Directors approved \$50 million in additional financing for the Emergency Support for Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises Project. Micro, small and medium enterprises contribute 42% of Kyrgyzstan's GDP and play a key role in job creation and poverty reduction. The Emergency Support for Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises Project and its Additional Financing Project will be implemented through June 2027 (24.kg, 06.05.2022).
- Japan's Ambassador to Ukraine Matsuda Kuninori participated in the High-Level International Donors' Conference in Support of Ukraine, where he mentioned that Japan would provide \$300 million in financial assistance to Ukraine. The Ambassador noted that Japan had started providing \$200 million in humanitarian aid. The Japanese ambassador added that Tokyo called on all countries to join the restoration of Ukraine when it becomes possible. Japan also calls on Asian governments to join support for Ukraine (Ukrinform, 05.05.2022).
- Azerbaijani and Romanian Energy Ministers Parviz Shahbazov and Virgil Daniel Popescu had a meeting within the "South-eastern Energy Transition: Regional Cooperation on Energy Security, Diversification and Green Transition" and discussed the opportunities for green energy production and its export to Romania. The ministers also exchanged views on energy volumes to be transmitted through Georgia and the Black Sea via a submarine power cable (AzerNews, 06.05.2022).

Society and Culture

- Akhmet Yassawi International Kazakh-Turkish University hosted the Festival of Turkic-speaking Peoples. The event was attended by members of the People's Assembly of the Turkestan region, representatives of the Municipal State Institution "Kogamydyk Kelisim" of the Social Development Department of the Turkestan region, heads of ethnocultural societies, Youth Assembly, youth, and students of the University. The national cuisine exhibition and concert of Turkic-speaking peoples were held as part of the festival (Kazinform, 07.05.2022).
- The Secretary-General of TURKSOY Sultan Raev met with representatives of handcrafts' and ethno-folklore groups of Kyrgyzstan to discuss opportunities for cooperation between TURKSOY and crafts' organizations. The participants exchanged their views and ideas concerning the development of traditional handcrafts of Turkic peoples. They also decided upon the organization of Culture Days of Kyrgyzstan in Turkey. Among other issues discussed in the meeting were the organization of forums, seminars, exhibitions and masterclasses to take place under the motto "Contemporary Heirs of the Great Heritage" (Turksoy.org, 06.05.2022).
- The signing of an additional agreement on the registration of a gratuitous quota for Uzbekistan to train citizens in Hungarian universities was held as part of the high-level intergovernmental commission on cooperation between Uzbekistan and Hungary in Tashkent. The commission was headed by the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Uzbekistan Sardor Umurzakov and the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Hungary Peter Szijarto. The participants also discussed the opening of a branch of the University of Debrecen in Uzbekistan, and the introduction of partly the Hungarian educational system in local universities (Centralasia.news, 05.05.2022).
- In a recent article entitled "Russia - Central Asia. 30 years on the path of friendship and cooperation" the Foreign Minister of Russia Sergey Lavrov mentioned about the construction of five Russian-language schools continues in Tajikistan and it is expected that they will start its activities on September 1 of this year. Studying in Russian-language schools enables citizens of Central Asian countries to enter Russian universities on equal terms. About 160,000 citizens of the Central Asian states study in Russia annually, of which 60,000 are funded by the federal budget (ASIA-Plus, 06.05.2022).
- The city of Turkistan hosted an international scientific-practical conference on the theme "The contribution of the Turkic people to Islamic civilization". The event was attended by the heads of religious administrations of the member countries of the Organization of Turkic States (OTG) and the Chairman of the Caucasus Muslim Board (CMD) sheikh-al-Islam Pashazade. The participants of the meeting discussed the implementation of joint projects in the field of religious education, strengthening the solidarity of the Muslim ummah to respond to global challenges (Azertag.az, 06.05.2022).
- TURKSOY organized exhibitions called "Colours of the Turkic World" and "Handcrafts of the Turkic World". The event was organized within the framework of the International Yuruk Turkmen Festival of Antalya, which lasted three days. The exhibitions showcased traditional handcrafts of the Turkic World offering the opportunity to citizens of Antalya to get acquainted with the culture and art of Turkic peoples. The festival took place with the participation of 29 countries (Turksoy.org, 06.05.2022).