

Civil Society Reforms in Uzbekistan: A Catalyst for Shaping Foreign Policy

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Introduction

Under the transformative leadership of President Shavkat Mirziyoyev, Uzbekistan has embarked on a journey to reform civil society. These reforms, aimed at enhancing public participation, accountability, and transparency, are more than domestic. They are reshaping the very fabric of the country's foreign policy. By integrating civil society into the core of governance, Uzbekistan is redefining its role on the international stage, striving for greater global engagement and cooperation. This article delves into the profound impact of Uzbekistan's civil society reforms on its foreign policy, examining the interplay between domestic changes and international diplomacy.

Historical Context and the Need for Reform

Uzbekistan's historically tightly regulated civil society has seen a shift under President Mirziyoyev's administration. Emerging from the Soviet era, the country maintained a centralised governance model where civil society organisations (CSOs) had minimal influence over policy decisions. However, the transition to President Mirziyoyev's administration departed from this norm. Recognising the need for a more open and participatory governance model, President Mirziyoyev initiated a series of reforms designed to empower civil society and enhance public involvement in domestic and foreign policy. This empowerment is a beacon of hope for a more open and participatory future in Uzbekistan's foreign policy.

These reforms were driven by the recognition that a robust civil society is essential for sustainable development and effective diplomacy. As Uzbekistan sought to integrate more deeply into the global economy and increase its regional influence, the government understood that domestic stability, transparency, and public engagement were critical components of its foreign policy strategy.

The Role of Civil Society in Governance

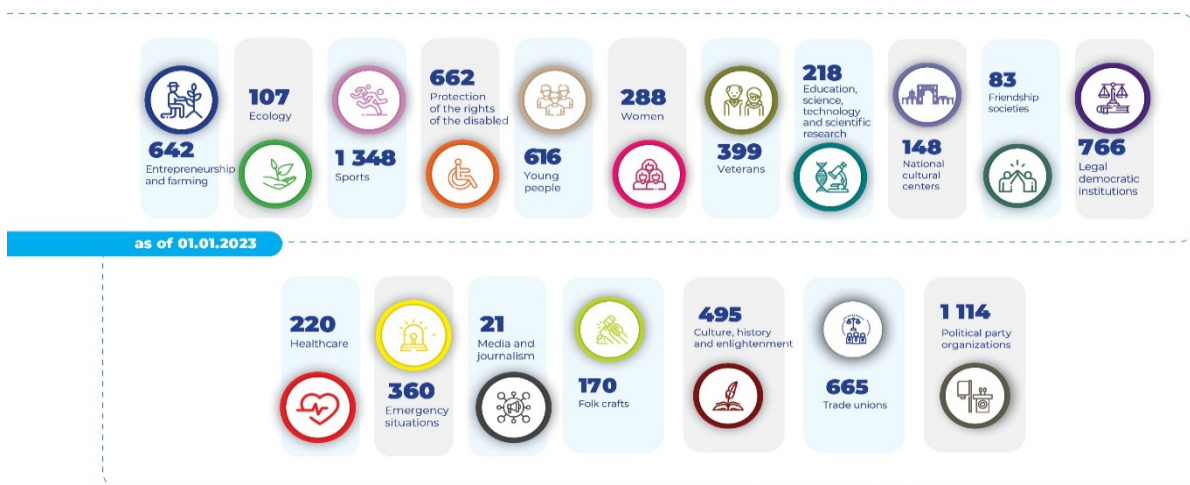
A cornerstone of Uzbekistan’s civil society reforms is the enhanced and integral role of CSOs in governance. The revised Constitution, adopted with significant public input, formally acknowledges the status of civil society institutions, replacing the outdated concept of “public associations” with “civil society institutions”. This legal framework gives CSOs a stronger foundation on which to operate and mandates their involvement in legislative processes.¹

CSOs in Uzbekistan now play an active role in drafting and amending legislation, ensuring that policies are more inclusive and reflect diverse societal interests. This involvement extends to critical areas such as human rights, environmental protection, and economic reforms, all of which have international dimensions. By embedding civil society in the policymaking process, Uzbekistan is fostering a governance model that is more transparent, accountable, and responsive to both domestic and international challenges. This active role of civil society ensures that the public's voice is heard and influences policy decisions.²

¹ The Constitution of the Republic of Uzbekistan. (1992). <https://lex.uz/docs/6451070>

² Tulyakov, E. (2021). Civil Society Reforms in Uzbekistan. *Ukrainian Policymaker*, 8(8), 121–126.

Analysis of non-governmental non-profit organizations by sectors



Source: Ministry of Justice of the Republic of Uzbekistan

3

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Channels for Public Engagement and Communication

President Mirziyoyev’s administration has made significant strides in enhancing public engagement and communication, underscoring a solid commitment to transparency and accountability. A pivotal development in this area is the establishment of People’s Reception Offices in 2017. These offices offer citizens a direct and accessible way to voice their concerns and seek resolutions from government officials. To further expand accessibility, the administration launched the Virtual Reception Office, an online platform where citizens can submit complaints, make inquiries, and provide feedback on various issues. This platform is bolstered by the “1000 – Trust Hotline” and the unified platform murojaat.gov.uz, providing multiple avenues for citizen-government interaction. This initiative represents a significant leap toward bridging the gap between the government and the public, fostering a more inclusive and responsive governance model.

Similar platforms have been established across various branches of government, including the executive and legislative branches, in addition to the Virtual Reception Office. These platforms facilitate ongoing dialogue

between public officials and citizens, enabling electronic communication and real-time feedback, which ensures that governance remains responsive to public needs.

These initiatives demonstrate the administration's dedication to creating a transparent, accountable, citizen-centric government. By making public engagement a cornerstone of its governance strategy, Uzbekistan is fostering a more participatory and democratic society.

In addition, platforms like regulation.gov.uz and 2030.strategy.uz have been established to enable public discussions on national strategies such as the "Uzbekistan—2030" Strategy. These platforms have democratised policymaking, allowing citizens to actively shape the country's future.³

The media landscape in Uzbekistan has also undergone significant transformation. The number of registered media outlets has grown substantially, from 1,514 in 2016 to 2,257 in 2024, reflecting a more diverse and vibrant media environment.⁴ The government has lifted bans on several media outlets, expanded internet access, and encouraged disseminating information in multiple languages. This media pluralism is crucial in shaping public opinion, which influences the country's foreign policy decisions and makes them more reflective of the public's concerns and aspirations. The growth of media outlets signifies the vibrancy and diversity of the media landscape in Uzbekistan.

Strengthening Accountability and Transparency

Uzbekistan's civil society reforms have strongly emphasised accountability and transparency, essential for building trust in governance. Public officials must publish detailed reports on their activities and expenditures, which are available on official websites. This transparency extends to decision-making processes, with public officials required to consult

³ Uzdaily. (2023, August 1). *Discussion of the draft strategy "Uzbekistan - 2030" starts*. <https://www.uzdaily.uz/en/post/82361>

⁴ The Agency of Information and Mass Communications under the Administration of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan. (2024). *Telekanallar ro'yxati [List of TV channels]*. <https://aoka.uz/category/32>

and report to public councils composed of deputies and civil society representatives.

These measures are essential in foreign policy, where transparency and accountability can enhance the credibility of a country's international commitments. By ensuring that foreign policy decisions are informed by public input and are subject to scrutiny, Uzbekistan is positioning itself as a more reliable and trustworthy partner on the global stage.

Systemic Reforms Under President Mirziyoyev

Since President Mirziyoyev took office in 2016, developing a robust civil society has been a central pillar of his reform agenda. The Strategy of Actions,⁵ which outlined five priority areas for mid-term development, emphasised the critical role of civil society in achieving national development goals. These priority areas included economic liberalisation, social development, judicial reform, and enhancing Uzbekistan's global integration. These initiatives were further reinforced in subsequent national frameworks, such as the Development Strategy for 2022-2026⁶ and the forward-looking "Uzbekistan – 2030" Strategy,⁷ which continue to build on the foundation of empowering civil society to drive the nation's progress.

The systemic reforms have led to a significant increase in the activities of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and other civil society institutions. These organisations now play a crucial role in monitoring government activities, advocating for policy changes, and ensuring that the government remains responsive to public needs. This active civil society engagement is essential for maintaining domestic stability, a prerequisite for pursuing an ambitious foreign policy.

⁵ The Decree of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan "On the Strategy of Action for the further development of the Republic of Uzbekistan", PF-4947 (2017). <https://lex.uz/ru/docs/-3107036>

⁶ The Decree of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan "On the development strategy of the New Uzbekistan for 2022 – 2026", PF-60 (2022). <https://lex.uz/docs/-5841063>

⁷ The Decree of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan "On the "Uzbekistan – 2030" Strategy", PF-158 (2023). <https://lex.uz/ru/docs/6600413>

Financing of non-governmental non-profit organizations (bn soums)



Source: Public fund for the support of nongovernmental organizations and other institutions of civil society under the Oliy Majlis of the Republic of Uzbekistan

4

Civil Society and Foreign Policy: A Symbiotic Relationship

The relationship between civil society reforms and foreign policy in Uzbekistan is symbiotic. As the government engages more with its citizens, it also becomes more attuned to their concerns and aspirations, which can shape the country's international relations. For example, public sentiment regarding human rights, environmental issues, and economic policies can influence how Uzbekistan negotiates with international partners and positions itself in global forums.

Moreover, the international community has positively received Uzbekistan's efforts to involve civil society in governance. These reforms have significantly improved the country's image abroad, making it a more attractive partner for diplomatic and economic relations. By showcasing its commitment to democratic principles and human rights, Uzbekistan has enhanced its standing with Western nations and international organisations and paved the way for a more promising future.

Practical Implementation and Impact of Reforms

The practical implementation of civil society reforms in Uzbekistan has yielded tangible results. The increased activity of NGOs and other civil society institutions has led to more robust public discussions on draft laws and policies. This public engagement has helped identify potential issues early in the legislative process, leading to more effective and inclusive policies.

Social media and traditional media have become powerful tools for public criticism, holding government agencies accountable and ensuring they act in the public's best interest. This practice heightened public scrutiny and led to a more responsive government better equipped to address domestic and international challenges.

The impact of these reforms is also evident in Uzbekistan's foreign policy. The country has taken a more active role in regional diplomacy, particularly in Central Asia, where it has sought to mediate conflicts and promote regional cooperation. Uzbekistan's enhanced civil society has given the government the insights and public support needed to pursue these diplomatic initiatives effectively.

Conclusion

Uzbekistan's civil society reforms under President Shavkat Mirziyoyev have transformed its governance and profoundly impacted its foreign policy. Uzbekistan has strengthened its domestic stability and enhanced its international standing by fostering a more engaged, informed, and active civil society. These reforms demonstrate that a robust civil society is essential for effective governance and diplomacy, providing the foundation for a more transparent, accountable, and globally integrated Uzbekistan.

As Uzbekistan evolves, civil society and foreign policy interplay will become increasingly important. The reforms initiated under President Mirziyoyev have laid the groundwork for a more open, democratic, and globally engaged Uzbekistan, setting a precedent for other countries in the region and beyond.