

## Media Pluralism in the Media Landscape of Uzbekistan: New Trends and Peculiarities

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### ABSTRACT

This research aims to identify the dominant discourse of the Iranian state's approach to marine environmental protection. The study tries to explore the Iranian discourse's Central Signifier, components, a chain of equivalence and alienation. Laclau and Mouffe's critical discourse analysis method has been used based on the Caspian Sea upstream documents in the period of 1921-2022. The results of the study showed that the main discourse during this period was environmental protection which seems different from the (Othering) discourse as all stakeholders have not been considered. The discursive elements of this discourse are the discursive hegemony of the protection of the marine environment of the Caspian Sea, attention to the legal regime of the Caspian Sea in the framework of cooperation, attention to non-pollution, control, and monitoring of the environment, evaluation Environmental effects, attention to education, public awareness, research, and continuous reports. The results also showed the supporting evidence of the Central Signifier (environmental discourse) are: minimizing the risks of oil pollution accidents, adopting the best environmental practices, comprehensive reporting on the status of plant species, the priority protecting the living aquatic resources of the Caspian Sea over their commercial use, combating illegal, unreported, irregular fishing and illegal trading of living aquatic resources, designing and compiling monitoring databases and using the Caspian Sea for peaceful purposes. The results of the study suggested policymakers should provide the necessary opportunities for the participation of all stakeholders.

**Keywords:** Iran marine environment, Caspian Sea, Conservation Discourse, Discourse of Environmental-Centered, Responsible Participation.

### INTRODUCTION

The emerging transformation of societies paves the way toward the globalization of human and political rights. The flash development of information and communication technologies has changed people's attitude toward human rights, especially the right to freedom of speech, and diversity. Considering that the information age, which we live in, is reshaping the global media landscape and its paradigms, it will be more evident that press freedom is

advancing with modern trends, such as media freedom, media pluralism, transparency, journalists' safety, gender equality, etc.

The national media landscape and the government of Uzbekistan are actively integrating these new trends to provide citizens with the right to freedom of speech and access to information. After the coming of a new government headed by Shavkat Mirziyoev, the media policy of the state has been turning into reformation and began supporting the activity of not only national but also the services of international and foreign media outlets in the country. On May 15, 2019, "Asia Terra," "Uzmetronom," "Fergana Agency," "Eurasia.net," "Center 1", "Deutsche Welle," "Voice of America," and the "BBC" began their translation in Uzbekistan.

As the advancement of digital technologies and the globalization of information have changed the consuming culture of media consumers worldwide, the importance of online media is growing in Uzbekistan. To date, to meet the audience's demand for information, the government pays special attention to ensuring media pluralism and strengthening its legal framework. Beta Klimkiewicz (2017) noted that pluralism is no longer (and should not be) a policy issue due to the development of digital technological infrastructures, which solve the problems of content and distribution. The concept of media pluralism is often viewed as an essential condition for a well-functioning and democratic public sphere and media while also incorporating political, economic, and cultural value dimensions.

Uzbekistan, a representative of the international organizations, which deal with protecting and providing human rights as the United Nations (Uzbekistan joined in 1992) and UN Human Rights Council (2021), takes an important responsibility to increase the level of diversity and pluralism of mass media. Also, as a democratic country trying to cooperate with other countries to develop its economic, social, and political strategies, it has begun to re-estimate its approach to press freedom and media pluralism, which "measures the degree of representation of different opinions in news reporting. The more the news media report about different ideas, beliefs, and stances, the more a country is considered pluralistic and democratic" (Kerric, 2013). Media pluralism is not only an indicator of democracy but also an "overarching criterion from which all components of freedom of mass media depend. Without pluralism, it is impossible to present not a single positive quality of the independent press. When there is pluralism, i.e., numerous publications in the hands of numerous owners who provide diverse sources of information, we should not worry too much about the quality of each edition" (Haraszty, 2006).

During the past five years (2016-2021) of the first mandate of the second President of Uzbekistan, we see that the legislation on mass media and protection of journalistic affairs has developed. As the leader of the state himself claimed during his welcome speech on press and media workers' day – June 27 that over the past years, to strengthen the relevant regulatory and legal framework, 12 acts of legislation were adopted; the media sphere and the system of information services are being radically updated. The impact of these reformations serves primarily to increase the amount and type of mass media in the country, investigated as "external pluralism" by several media scientists of the world. P. Valcke, R. Picard, and M. Sükösd (2015) proposed that external pluralism, in any case, will also be driven by the business logic (product differentiation, market segmentation, addressing different target audiences, exploitation of niche markets, etc.) of commercial media actors. The growth of the mass media and widening of its types (print, TV, radio, and online media) ownership methods (public, private, and cross-ownership) show that external pluralism helps to enhance the shape of the national media landscape. But, "internal pluralism, meaning that within a single broadcaster or publisher a variety of content and perspectives is provided" (Valcke, Picard & Sükösd, 2015), is an argued issue in the media environment of Uzbekistan. However, in short, content variety, and several changes in the themes, ideas, and approaches are expanding.

This research aims to analyze the current reality of media pluralism in Uzbekistan and investigate the media landscape's internal and external pluralism. Besides, the attitude of the local audience to the current media pluralism level in the country is learned. To reach our goal, we gathered statistical information on the general and separate number of media outlets (press, TV, radio, information agency, and online media) in 1991, 2016, and 2021; made a content analysis of several media producers' content according to their coverage themes to learn the level of internal media pluralism. A questionnaire is a helpful tool for collecting the audience's ideas, whose results are analyzed and used to investigate internal pluralism in the media landscape. Before conducting our survey, we did a literature review to learn the theory and the origin of media pluralism in its historical background globally and nationally.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The importance of media pluralism in a democratic society is indicated by its ability to provide a wide range of thoughts and information. At the same time, "democracy requires a society to think consistently and make informed decisions. To do this, society must be aware of objective and truthful information. Citizens need accurate information about events and happenings, not ready-made decisions and feedback. A single-minded or one-sided

media cannot communicate with an audience. Therefore, the media should try to expose a wide range of opinions” (Nurmatov, Dustkorayev, Muminov, Saidov, Toshpulatova & Makhsumova, 2019). For many years, mainstream media (press, TV, and radio) monopolized information for audiences. However, digitization has increased the number of sources of information, both in number and in variety, which is considered the main feature of pluralism.

“The term is derived from ‘plural,’ an indistinct quantitative concept indicating the existence of more than a single thing, and plurality itself merely indicates a state of being numerous. This is indicated by having multiple types of media and multiple media units, and the existence of a range of print, broadcast, satellite, and Internet content providers can represent pluralism (Valcke, Picard & Sükösd, 2015). Karol Jakubowicz proposes that ‘media pluralism,’ ‘media diversity,’ and ‘media plurality’ – these and other terms often interchangeably but sometimes are also used to mean different aspects of the issue. While Klimkiewicz (2010) argues ‘media pluralism’ stands for structural pluralism of the media, Gibbons (2004) suggests using ‘pluralism’ in the generic sense and for ‘diversity’ to indicate the more specific components of the concept. Karppinen (2010) explains that media diversity can be accepted in a neutral, descriptive sense, and ‘media pluralism’ can be interpreted as a broader, socio-cultural and evaluative principle, referring more explicitly to a value orientation. A group of Uzbek researchers explained this notion in the relationship between the founder and the editor of a newspaper or magazine. “The government cannot be the founder of any media outlet in the country because it portrays its activities in the media as it wishes. Information policy plays a vital role in editorial work. The collaboration of the founder and editor will be effective, leading to pluralism. But if the founder stays firm in his position, the diversity of opinions will suffer” (Dustmukhammad, Toshpulatova, Bakhriyev & Saidov, 2019). Plurality in ownership and the existence of public service can be the indicator of “media pluralism, which has often been regarded as a supplement to protecting the right of freedom of expression, it has long been associated with the promotion of democratic values” (Barnett & Townend, 2015). Salla Nazarenko’s (2006) definition of media pluralism can also prove the approaches of other researchers’ ideas. He argued that pluralism is usually understood as avoiding conflict, which naturally arises between people whose opinions do not match. This means that a person is ready to listen to the point of view of others. People ignore major differences of opinion and approach to achieve “harmony” and expand the “market of ideas.”

The components of media pluralism are also controversial among scientists, while Napoli (1999) divides them into source pluralism, content pluralism, and exposure pluralism. Although Cuilenburg (2007) agrees with the idea of Napoli, Valcke, Picard, and Sükösd (2015) claim more than three categories as supply, distribution, and use (about ownership and control; media types and genres; political viewpoints; cultural expressions; and local and regional interests). ‘Supply’ appears to combine ‘source’ (i.e., structural) and ‘content’ pluralism, as identified by Napoli (Jakubowicz 2015). Another element of ‘supply’ that deserves closer attention in the new media ecology is what Gibbons (2004) calls ‘diversity of outlet,’ referring to ‘the variety of delivery services that select and present material directly to the audience. It is more significant these days of converging media platforms; formerly, sector-specific material sources would typically control the outlets (Jakubowicz 2015).

In digital societies, “access to information” is often a synonym for “access to the internet.” In the last decade, the Internet and new media, which have led to the financial crisis of traditional media, have become the most sought-after source of information for audiences. For instance, “blogs (short for Weblogs, personal logs on the World Wide Web) are online personal diaries, edited in reverse chronological order, usually authored by a single individual. They have strongly contributed to enhancing media pluralism and cultural diversity worldwide. Bloggers deprived of liberty or life for their online communications, supported by human rights organizations, are considered defenders of free speech in the modern information society, a role once played solely by print and radio or television journalists” (Kerric, 2014). Digital evolution in the world’s media landscape has taken away all “limitations on producing content, expressing divergent ideas and opinions, or access to distribution systems” (Valcke, Picard & Sükösd, 2015). Still, we cannot say that our mass media can achieve the absolute pluralism while “the primary challenge in the digital age is the ability to reach audiences effectively. In this environment, promoting pluralism focuses on reducing control over what flows through new digital distribution systems, so owners of dominant production and distribution systems cannot marginalize alternative perspectives and make them difficult to locate. However, this does not solve the problem because the actual content and attention problem remains. Although digital media provide many more opportunities to be heard, the issue today is not ‘share of voice,’ but ‘share of ear’” (Valcke, Picard & Sükösd, 2015).

Concerns about media pluralism disturb us in the digital age and the centuries when there was no idea about online media. Valcke, Picard, and Sükösd (2015) wrote that some threats over pluralism in the media began to arise in the United States (US) during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as press barons such as William Randolph Hearst, Joseph Pulitzer, and E.W. Scripps began creating newspaper groups that wielded significant political influence. This led to criticisms and debates that owners of large press enterprises had undue influence over public discourse and could limit the range of ideas and opinions expressed by other citizens. According to

Napoli (1999), policymakers in the U.S. have emphasized various dimensions of diversity, ranging from the variety of sources and viewpoints to the diversity of program types to the demographic variables of the employees within media organizations. From the First Amendment to the U.S. Federal Communications Commission's (FCC) controversial Diversity Index, which was developed and implemented in 2003 in connection with the FCC's biennial (now quadrennial) media ownership proceeding, can show the way of media pluralism in the United States.

While Americans worried about the activities of press barons, which were considered the limitation of media pluralism, "the East India Company and the British Crown tightly regulated, controlled, and penalized newspaper speech threatening ruling dispensations" (Sonwalkar, 2015). In sharp contrast, the newspaper business was administered like any other trade, leading scholars to assert that the press as a commercial institution was cradled in British India in traditions of *laissez-faire* (Ryan, 1990). There were no restrictions on sources of capital financing the press; neither were there caps on market-share cornered by more prominent newspapers, nor subsidies to those relatively modest in operation, local in circulation, or published by marginal interests. Thus, for nearly 150 years, a free-market approach to the business of newspapers got to prevail. By the mid-20th century, two developments in India, now a constitutional republic, changed the milieu drastically from the newspaper business in the 19th century. First, as a form of speech, the normative moorings of the press as a modern institution now doubly recognized media pluralism, as a mediator of diverse viewpoints in the polity, and as a protector of the diversity of citizens. Second, as a form of business, the press came to be marked by a noticeable degree of concentration and the prominence of 'big business' owned newspapers (Parthasarathi, 2021).

The approach of post-Soviet countries in Central Asia toward media pluralism is very close to each other that Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan used mass media to unite the nation build their democratic society, and strengthen their independence. Most newsrooms were controlled and financed by the government, and foreign democratic communities criticized this condition of the media landscape of these neighboring countries. After the nearly first decade of independence, the countries of Central Asia started to reform their information policy and news regulation. The establishment and activities of all types of media, both national and international (press, TV, radio, news websites, blogging, and vlogging) in the Republic of Uzbekistan, are controlled by the Republic of Uzbekistan (Article 29, Article 67). "The Law on Mass Media (Mass Media Law), adopted by the Uzbekistan Government in January 2007, and subsequently amended in April 2018, for its compliance with international freedom of expression standards." Laws "on publishing activities" of 30.08.1996, "on the protection of professional occupation of journalists" of 24.04.1997, and "on guaranties and free access to information" is exercised by government and citizens to act free and legally in investigating, acquiring, analyzing, transferring and disseminating any kinds of information. These norms forbid the harassment of journalists who publish critical and analytical articles. In addition, "journalists must comply with laws "on advertising" and "on copyright and allied rights." Article 20 of a newly passed law "on anti-terrorist effort" regulates the activities of journalists reporting from the sites of armed conflicts."

The dynamic changes in the global and local media landscape call for political actors to be more careful with legislation and improve or edit laws of the state that regulate information and the mass media sector. In this regard, the government of Uzbekistan is strengthening the legal protection of its information policy with new laws and editing old ones. Law "on the protection of the professional occupation of journalists" was adopted by the Government of the Republic of Uzbekistan in April 1997 and amended in April 2018. It is reshaped with new additions that make obvious some issues of professional activities of journalists in the digitalizing age. The law "on advertising" is followed as a main regulating document for creating and announcing all kinds of advertisements in the country on broadcasting, via the Internet, or in the press, edited 15 times (see <https://lex.uz/docs/-25458>) from December 1998 until April 2021.

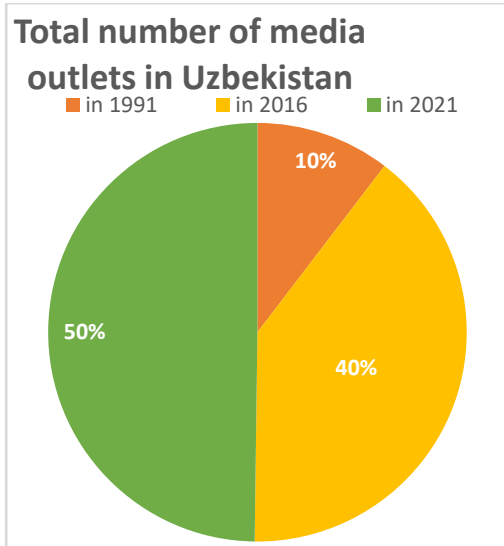
## METHODOLOGY

The empirical research methodology was chosen as an appropriate and effective tool to investigate media pluralism in the country's media landscape. All our results rely on our observations, which help us portray the condition of external and internal pluralism in Uzbekistan. We use a quantitative research method to analyze the number and forms of ownership of mass media while assessing internal pluralism requires both quantitative and qualitative methods. The number of media outlets acting in the country during 1991, 2016, and 2021 is diagrammed. Besides, each component of the media landscape, such as press, television, radio, online media, blogs, and news agencies, is compared according to their increasing numbers in these three periods. Content analysis of some news outlets such as TV channels – "Uzbekistan 24", "MY5", online news website - "Gazeta. uz" (Newspaper. uz), newspapers - "Khurriyat" (Freedom), "Yangi Uzbekiston" (New Uzbekistan) and "Zarafshan" (Zarafshon), private blogs – "Khushnudbek. uz" and "davlatevuz" are selected to observe internal pluralism.

**RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS**

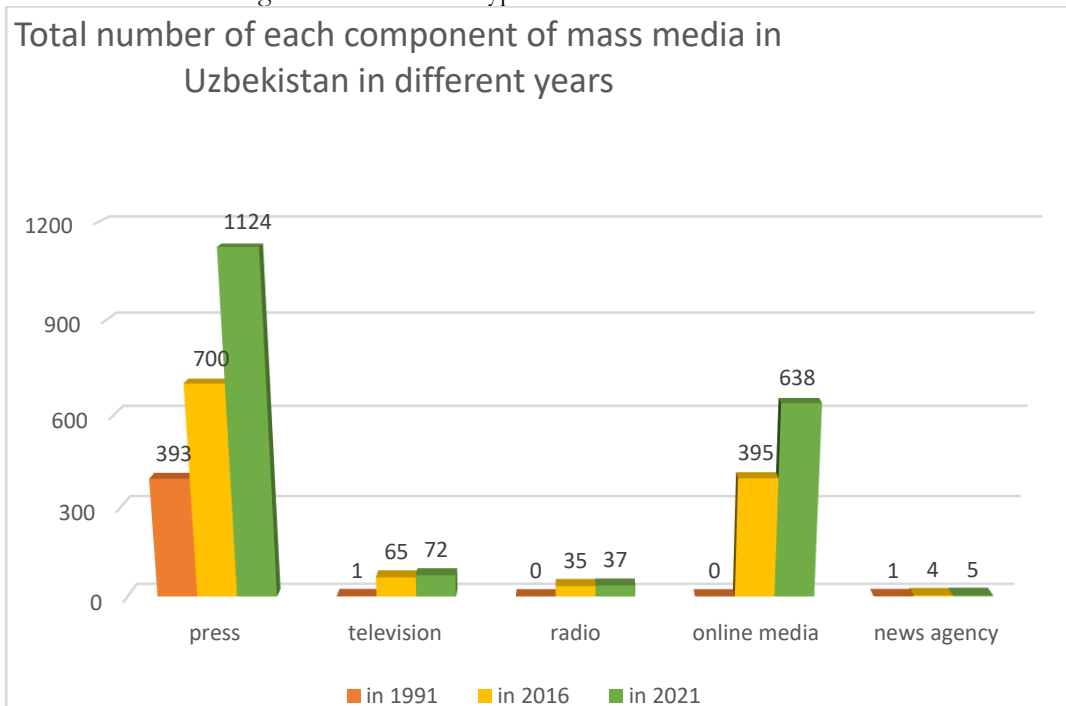
According to the report of the first mandate of the second president of Uzbekistan, the country has increased media pluralism. However, it is unknown what the status of the diversity of media is and whether there is equal development of external and internal pluralism in the country's media landscape. Our first part of the research demonstrates the contemporary condition of external media pluralism by comparing the number of media outlets in different years and forms of ownership of mass media in the country.

**External Pluralism in Uzbekistan**



**Diagram - 1**

The first pie chart shows the increasing number of mass media that the government registers. At the beginning of the years of state independence, it was a downturn situation for all newsrooms to work independently without the censorship of the old government. During two decades of national sovereignty, the government owned and financed national media, and it was an obstacle to its improvement. The integration of digital technologies into the Uzbek media landscape opens a window to private media holders, and this process goes on slowly until 2016. But several reforms in the legislation of mass media and the government’s support and the changing habits of media consumers caused to enlarge the number and type of mass media in 2016 and 2021.



**Diagram – 2**

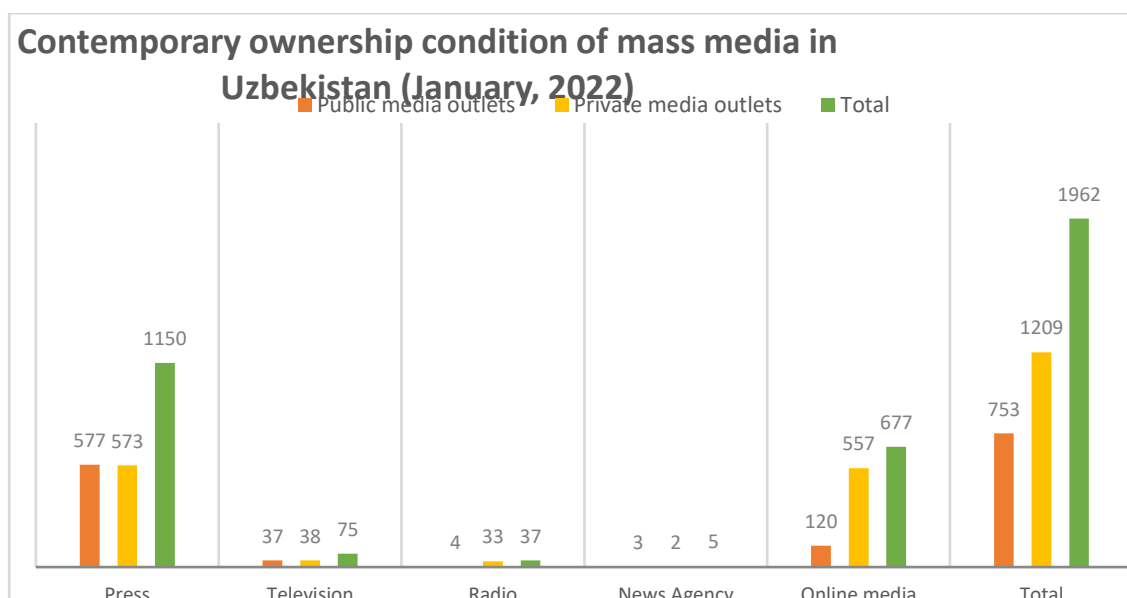


Diagram- 3

These three diagrams above show that the country's media production and consumption infrastructure rely on mainstream media mostly. Many of the audience live in regions of the country where there are some problems and lack of Internet connection barriers to using online media. While it is said repeatedly that old media is losing its value because of the new trends of digital technologies in the world's media landscape and Uzbekistan, Uzbek people continue to get information from TV and radio. The most characteristic features of the national media space are that print media cannot save its place and audience, for not only financial problems or the change of media consumption habits but less variety of themes and ideas and infrastructural problems of distribution is also the wound in this issue.

In Uzbekistan, 2 forms of media ownership, i.e., state media and private media, are widespread, and as of January 2022, the indicators between both forms of ownership are almost equal. Even the fact that the majority of radio channels and internet publications belong to the private sector is a sign that media pluralism is given a wide place in the Uzbek media landscape. New media ownership trends are rapidly developing worldwide, as can be seen from the emergence of new forms in this regard. In the history of media, the state, organizations, individuals, and partnerships have owned it. However, in 2008, Amazon founder Jeff Bezos' purchase of the "Washington Post" created a new trend in media ownership. If until Bezos, the form of "cross-ownership" meant ownership of only a few types of mass media, since 2008, it has also started to express the ownership of mass media by a person or organization engaged in a type of business that is completely unrelated to the media sector. It can be proved by several examples that such a new approach in the world media landscape is being integrated into the Uzbek media segment as well. The traditional view of the form of "cross-ownership" can be seen in the activities of Firdavs Abdukholikov, the former director of the Cinematography Agency of Uzbekistan. In the analytical material prepared by "Kun.uz" (online media outlet) about the affairs of this person, information is given about his ownership of "Darakchi" newspaper, "STV" and "Sevimli" TV channels. When talking about the modern form of "cross-ownership", i.e. the ownership of the mass media by persons who manage fields unrelated to the media, the chairman of the Board of Trustees of the Public Fund for Supporting and Developing National Mass Media, Komil Allamjonov, can be cited as an example. According to "Gazeta. uz" (online media outlet), in addition to being the founder of "Avtotest" driving school and "Autodriver study" driver examination center, "BEM" accounting automation program, and many other projects, he also owns "Solikinfo" newspaper. "Daryo. uz" news website confirms that Komil Allamjonov is the founder of the "Milliy" TV channel. In August 2022, President Sh. Mirziyoyev visited Saudi Arabia and performed Umrah. Komil Allamjonov, the deputy head of the Presidential Administration, was among the officials who accompanied the head of state during the trip. A documentary film about this trip was broadcast on "Milliy" TV channel on August 20 at 19:30. The question arises: Why is the documentary about the Umrah pilgrimage of the President presented first, not on "Uzbekistan24" TV channel or other TV channels, but on a private channel owned by Komil Allamjonov? In the article titled "Komil Allamjonov's First Mistake - He Allowed a Conflict of Interests" published by "Rost24.uz" online media outlet, it was noted by the editors that "...other private TV channels were not given the opportunity to fully film the President's Umrah visit, and the finished full film was not presented to them." It was mentioned that it was found in the inquiry. In addition, the press secretary of the President, Sh. Asadov, announced on his official telegram channel that the

documentary film will be broadcast on “Milliy” TV channel. In this case, you can witness monopoly, which is one of the main obstacles of media pluralism. In this case, you can witness monopoly, which is one of the main obstacles of media pluralism. Such officials, who use the position given to them for the development of their own personal interests and business, and leave no room for pluralism, are actually nothing but a big hole in front of not only pluralism, but also freedom of speech.

These facts show that the new trends of external media pluralism are actively integrated into the Uzbek media landscape. But it is so urgent not to forget that if the state owns a large part of the mass media, it will harm transparency, and the media will become a tool of propaganda and agitation. The leadership of the private sector leads to an increase in the information generated based on marketing principles, as well as opening a wide path to pluralism. “And owning multiple types of media allows one corporation to build a single walled garden. The competitive environment is lost” (<https://cmpf.eui.eu/media-pluralism-monitor/>).

### Internal Pluralism

The degree to which internal media pluralism is developing in Uzbekistan can be analyzed on the example of the Uzbek blog sphere. Because diversity of topics and genres, appeal to different sources, diversity of opinions and attitudes can be found more in the activities of bloggers than in official and unofficial mass media. For example, among our TV and radio channels, there are none that specialize in covering religious topics, but religious bloggers - Abror Mukhtar Ali, Mubashir Ahmad, Abo Muslim, Shukrullah Domla and others are very active in covering and commenting on these issues in various social networks. “Asanov formati” blog, described as “a scientific and popular resource in Uzbek”, is distinguished by its analytical approach to socio-political events in society, especially spiritual and educational issues, which is lacking in many mass media. This blog can provide quality content for an audience interested in science, history and politics.

On November 15, 2022, the Minister of Justice of the Republic of Uzbekistan, Rustam Davletov, was appointed to the position of "Advisor to the President on the issues of coordinating the activities of law enforcement and control bodies." This was reported by the press secretary of the President, Sherzod Asadov", the message based on this source was published in almost all mass media. However, none of them have an analysis of the former minister's activities prior to his appointment, or what his new position includes, and for which sector of our country this appointment may be beneficial or vice versa. You can read such analyzes from the “Alimoff” blog, known for its unusual style. “The system was completely digitized, and his employees received large salaries. A good IT team formed. Not once he did any hype interfere with the topic. There was no sign of corruption or nepotism during his working period. Davletov was the top staff that Uzbekistan got by some kind of miracle”. The blogger's other posts written after this news show that internal pluralism in the blogosphere is developing well in the national media landscape.

As a result of the rapid integration of such trends in the international media landscape into the national mass media system, one can see types of media pluralism based on both the public service approach and the free market approach.

### CONCLUSION

In this proposal, by investigating the concept of media pluralism as a separate indicator of freedom of speech and the press, we were able to determine that trends related to external pluralism are increasingly integrated in the Uzbek media landscape. Because in the country, the number of media financed by the state, private and various business circles is increasing. But this does not mean that there is also diversity in internal pluralism. Media pluralism can be achieved in our national journalism only if there is a diverse approach to each issue and the topics covered by the mass media.

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