
UZBEKISTAN UNBLOCKS BANNED WEBSITES

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From around lunchtime on February 12, internet users in Uzbekistan have been reporting being able to visit websites that have for many years been blocked.

Among the news websites once again made available were those of the BBC, Voice of America, Moscow-based Ferghana news agency and Eurasianet. The websites for Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International have also been unblocked. Perhaps most remarkably, the website run by the foreign-based Peoples Movement of Uzbekistan opposition group, uzxalqharakati.com, can also now be viewed inside the country without a proxy.

The spigot to international media was tightly closed after the events of May 2005 in Andijan, when an uprising in the Ferghana Valley city was crushed by government troops.

President Shavkat Mirziyoyev's ascent to power after September 2016 hinted at a gentle opening-up to alternative viewpoints. Some local outlets have tested the water with some circumspect coverage of local issues that might once have been considered off-limits, such as electricity shortages. Things may be picking up pace again since last month's dismissal of National Security Service, or SNB, chief Rustam Inoyatov.

It is evident that [the SNB] no longer have control over the websites of international media and rights groups, Abdurahmon Tashanov, a representative of the Ezgulik rights group, told Eurasianet.

Mirziyoyev signaled his notional intent in a speech on August 10 to officials with the SNB, Interior Ministry, General Prosecutors Office and Foreign Ministry. He argued that there was a need for the government to radically change its stance on critical, opposition and even foreign media.

Time will tell if the journalists have written the truth or not. But I have to admit that foreign and opposition media often write the truth and raise the alarm on real problems, Mirziyoyev said at the time.

For safe measure, he called on the SNB to cease its practice of maintaining blacklists of undesirable media.

It is not really clear yet that any of this has had any effect beyond the cosmetic. While the chill is theoretically lifting, it remains to be seen whether foreign reporters, for example, can expect to receive authorization to work in Uzbekistan simply by asking.

Much more gravely, two recently detained journalists Hayot Nasreddinov and Bobomurod Abdullayev still remain in SNB custody, where they face spurious charges.

Kaynak/Source: