

Uzbekistan: shrinking civil society threatens project outcomes



Uzbekistan, cotton harvest in a field. Angela Meier via Adobe stock

In 2021, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) invested a record USD 690 million in 22 projects in Uzbekistan. Indorama Agro received significant funding for its cotton project and Samarkand joined the EBRD Green Cities programme, with investments going to support women-led businesses in Uzbekistan including the development of waste and water management in the country.

The EBRD recognises stakeholder engagement as ‘central to building strong, constructive, and responsive relationships which are essential for the successful management of a project's environmental and social risks and impacts.’ It also requires clients to ensure information disclosure and meaningful public participation. In Uzbekistan, a country with a serious democratic deficit, public participation is extremely [challenging](#) or even impossible, considering the lack of independent media and the shrinking space for civil society.

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No CSOs to engage with

Despite the reforms of President Shavkat Mirziyoyev, Uzbek civil society remains marginalised with very few officially registered independent civil society organisations (CSOs). There are also ongoing barriers that discourage these organisations' attempts to register and operate with legitimacy. For example, in August 2021, Agzam Turgunov, a human rights defender and former political prisoner, received a refusal to [register](#) a civil society organisation for the eighth time. Similarly, the formal registration of the Humanitarian Legal Center, which deals with the rights of vulnerable groups, was [rejected](#) seven times. Since 2019, Azimbay Atanyazov has been trying to register the civil society organisation Akbaskur, but [unsuccessfully](#). The police [summoned](#) the activists of 'Akbaskur' multiple times and interfered in the general meetings to approve the charter. Atanyazov and Akbaskur became victims of a slander campaign against them. In February 2022, Atanyazov was fined USD 740 for operating the web page of a non-registered CSO. Many other civil initiatives on animal rights, volunteers and youth issues have been [rejected](#) from registration, as well. Officially, there are over 10,000 non-governmental organisations registered in Uzbekistan, but in reality, many of these organisations are in some sense [controlled](#) by the state.

In 2021, President Shavkat Mirziyoyev [approved](#) the 'Concept for the Development of Civil Society for 2021-2025' and the roadmap for its implementation, which defines measures to address various issues important to civil society. However, it does not address an issue of major importance to independent civil society groups in Uzbekistan, namely, the clarification of the procedures and the criteria used for the registration of CSOs.

Bankwatch [reviewed](#) the EBRD's investments in financial intermediaries and municipal environmental infrastructure in Uzbekistan that claimed to promote gender measures and benefits for women. A general observation regarding all the projects is that no meaningful engagement on project design and risk assessment with women as right holders has been ensured, neither directly nor via the representing CSOs.

Limited opportunities for information disclosure

Despite some level of liberalisation and an abundance of online platforms, Uzbek media is under constant threat of reprisals and censorship. Recently, the Uzbek authorities decided to restrict the use of social networks, including Twitter and TikTok. Moreover, in 2021, online public insult or slander against the country's president was [criminalised](#) and became punishable by way of correctional labor of up to three years, restriction of freedom or imprisonment of up to five years.

Within the last year, a number of bloggers have found themselves guilty of criminal offences for expressing their opinions online. For example, in May 2021, [blogger](#) Otabek Sattoriy was sentenced to six and a half years in prison on fabricated charges after reporting on the involvement of officials in forced evictions. In December 2021, social media activist Valijon Kalonov was sentenced to compulsory treatment in a closed psychiatric clinic for speaking up about corruption in Uzbekistan. In January 2022, another blogger, Miraziz Bazarov, was sentenced to three years of restriction of liberty for [speaking](#) up on the authorities' alleged misuse of multilateral development banks' COVID-19 funds. In February 2022, local blogger Sobirjon Babaniyazov was

sentenced to three years of imprisonment to be served in a labor colony for insulting President Shavkat Mirziyoyev on social media.

In June 2021, Samarkand became the first Uzbek city to join the EBRD's Green Cities programme. However, the environmental journalists and activists there remain under [pressure](#) for raising the alarm about numerous problems, such as the reduction of green spaces in cities, the mass demolition of houses and forced evictions.

Extremely high retaliation risks

In addition, human rights defenders in Uzbekistan are under regular physical attacks. For example, Fatima Juraeva from Andijan was [beaten](#) by an employee of a state-owned company after questioning financial irregularities at the company. The prominent activist Tatiana Dovlatova was [beaten](#) for raising concerns about corruption in the city of Tashkent. The blogger Miraziz Bazarov was severely [beaten](#) before being sentenced to house arrest. Moreover, there have been several [reports](#) of instances where human rights defenders have been forcibly committed to psychiatric institutions, including Elena Urlaeva, Nafosat Ollashukurova, David Bagmanyanyan and Khudoyar Matyakubov.

The employees of Indorama Agro have been facing [retaliation](#) for speaking out about labour rights violations since the beginning of the project. Some of them have been fired or received threats for [initiating](#) a trade union or mobilising workers to protect their rights.

Conclusions

Civil society and the media in Uzbekistan continue to suffer from restrictions to freedom of speech and barriers to legal registration. Retaliation against activists and human rights defenders remains a widespread instrument to silence any critique of the government and human rights violations happening in the country. In such a setting, it becomes impossible for the EBRD and its clients to ensure the meaningful stakeholder engagement required by its safeguard policies. This fallibility may result in non-compliance with the EBRD performance standards and, most importantly, in the failure of human rights due diligence as well as a drastic increase of the project risks for people on the ground. In non-democratic countries like Uzbekistan, participatory due diligence and monitoring can be the only way to ensure public investments work for people. The EBRD has an obligation to ensure respect for human rights through its operations in Uzbekistan; however, time and again investments are made without sufficient transparency, stakeholder engagement and accountability.

Recommendations

The EBRD should intensify policy dialogue efforts with the government of Uzbekistan and act in line with the international human rights law in all of its operations in the country.

- Reiterate to the Uzbek government and the Bank's clients in the country its zero tolerance for retaliation and reprisal against the bloggers, activists and human rights defenders in Uzbekistan.

- Ensure Uzbekistan makes improvements and strengthens the national laws on the protection of human rights defenders, ensuring that indirect threats and intimidation against these defenders are unlawful. Uzbekistan should prohibit torture in all settings, including psychiatric hospitals.
- Ensure the laws that protect the rights of human rights defenders in Uzbekistan are strengthened in line with EU guidelines.
- Communicate to the Uzbek government the urgent need to register independent CSOs by easing the regulation and preventing further barriers to the registration.
- Conduct, prior to project risk categorisation, a thorough and participatory Bank-commissioned analysis of human rights risks, including as they relate to the client.
- Ensure ongoing and meaningful rights-holder engagement throughout the project's lifecycle, especially with vulnerable groups, such as women and gender minorities.
- Establish minimum requirements regarding the number of independent organisations, civil initiatives and representatives of the target audiences (i.e. women employees, women entrepreneurs, local women, etc.) that should be engaged in consultations on project design and monitoring.
- Publicly disclose the findings of environmental and social due diligence conducted for category B projects, as well as implementation monitoring reports. Require its financial intermediary clients to disclose the Bank's involvement in sub-projects and to disclose information about their complaints mechanisms, ensuring that it is clearly visible and accessible for the final beneficiaries and affected communities.
- Ensure ongoing and transparent monitoring of human rights protection throughout the project's lifecycle and operate a response mechanism in case of violation that includes provisions for remedy.