

Civil Society

Planned Voa Cuts Would Reinforce Dictatorship In Uzbekistan

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President George W. Bush will ensure that the beleaguered and news-starved people of Uzbekistan will be even more isolated if his administration's proposal to eliminate the Voice of America's Uzbek language service is approved by the US Congress. At a time when the Bush administration says it is actively pursuing a policy of democratization in the Muslim world, the cancellation of the Uzbek radio service would constitute a significant blow to the dissemination of news and views from the West to the people of Central Asia.

The Bush administration budget for the 2008 fiscal year allocates \$668 million for broadcast operations run by the Broadcasting Board of Governors, including the Voice of America, which broadcasts radio and TV shows in dozens of languages around the world. The budget request is a 3.8 percent increase over the previous year, and a large amount of resources and personnel would be devoted to expanding the VOA Arabic, Persian and Pashto language services for countries in the Middle East, along with Iran, Pakistan and Afghanistan.

To meet its goals, the Bush administration is requesting the cutbacks in several languages now featured on VOA and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, including the elimination of the VOA Uzbek, Georgian and Cantonese language services, and significant reductions to the Kazakh, Ukrainian, and Romanian language services on both VOA and RFE/RL. Arguably the most nonsensical cut concerns Uzbekistan, which has emerged in the last few years as one of the world's most repressive states. [For background see the Eurasia insight archive]. Uzbekistan thus should be a prime target of US broadcasts, instead of being thought of as an area where cuts can be made. Besides, the Uzbek service costs just a tiny fraction of the overall VOA budget, roughly \$600,000, and it employs only four full-time broadcasters.

A significant number of Uzbeks rely on a handful of foreign radio Uzbek-language broadcasts for news about what is really happening in Uzbekistan. Ironically, just as the Bush administration is proposing a cutback in Uzbek-language broadcasting, both the European Parliament and the OSCE are urging greater media projection into Uzbekistan and the training of Uzbek journalists in exile.

VOA's Uzbek service broadcasts not only to Uzbekistan, the most populous country in Central Asia, but also to Uzbek minorities in the other four Central Asian Republics and Afghanistan. It is heard throughout the Ferghana Valley, a hotbed of Islamic radicalism. [For background see the Eurasia Insight archive].

Moreover, the Uzbek service is also listened to by the wider Uzbek diaspora in Pakistan, Iran, Saudi Arabia and Turkey. In Afghanistan, Gen. Rashid Dostum, the powerful Uzbek warlord and former presidential candidate, listens to VOA Uzbek regularly. Given a general lack of Uzbek-language media outlets, broadcasts by the VOA, RFE/RL and British Broadcasting Corp. services are essential listening for the Uzbek population in northern Afghanistan.

Pressure is building in Uzbekistan, fueled by widespread frustration with the Karimov administration's repressive policies. It is not beyond the realm of possibility that the country could be engulfed by social and political strife in the coming years. Cutting back Uzbek-language broadcasts at this time, then, would undermine Washington's ability to influence events in the region during a potential crisis.