

Improving the Institution of The Bar in The Republic of Uzbekistan Through the Digitalization of Its Activities

Zaytov S.J.

Karakalpak State University Named After Berdakh, Department of Human Rights, Public Law, And Administration
Trainee Teacher, Uzbekistan

Received: 26 Mar 2026 | Received Revised Version: 22 April 2026 | Accepted: 04 May 2026 | Published: 31 May 2026

Volume 08 Issue 05 2026 | Crossref DOI: 10.37547/tajpslc/Volume08Issue05-13

Abstract

The article examines the legal and organizational foundations of digitalizing the legal profession in the Republic of Uzbekistan as an important direction for increasing the accessibility, quality, and independence of legal aid. The necessity of further developing electronic document management, online legal assistance, and the digital interaction of lawyers with courts and state bodies while simultaneously ensuring attorney-client privilege and information security is substantiated.

Keywords: Advocacy, digitalization, legal aid, Uzbekistan, lawyer, online consultation, electronic document management, attorney-client privilege, justice, independence.

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Cite This Article: Zaytov S.J. (2026). Improving the Institution of The Bar in The Republic of Uzbekistan Through the Digitalization of Its Activities. The American Journal of Political Science Law and Criminology, 8(05), 81–85. <https://doi.org/10.37547/tajpslc/Volume08Issue05-13>

1. Introduction

First of all, it should be noted that in the modern conditions of building a legal, social, and democratic state, improving the institution of advocacy is of particular importance, as it is advocacy that is one of the key mechanisms for the practical realization of a person's right to qualified legal assistance. In the Republic of Uzbekistan, this institution has been constitutionally enshrined: Chapter XXIV of the Constitution of the Republic of Uzbekistan stipulates that to provide professional legal assistance to individuals and legal entities, a bar association operates, and its activities are based on the principles of legality, independence, and self-governance [1]. This means that the bar is regarded not only as a professional association of lawyers but also as an independent human rights institution that ensures a

balance between the individual, society, and the state.

The current stage of advocacy development in Uzbekistan is characterized by increased requirements for the efficiency, accessibility, and quality of legal assistance. Traditional forms of the lawyer's activity, based primarily on paperwork, the principal's personal appeal, and direct visits to state bodies, no longer fully meet the needs of society. The development of information and communication technologies, electronic government, digital justice, and remote services objectively requires a revision of the organizational forms of legal practice.

The relevance of the topic is due to the fact that the digitalization of advocacy is not merely a technical process. It addresses the foundations of the lawyer's independence, guarantees of the lawyer's secret, and the

procedure for interaction with courts, investigative bodies, prosecution authorities, justice authorities, and other state structures. Therefore, improving the institution of advocacy based on digitalization must be carried out comprehensively: through the development of legislation, the introduction of protected information systems, increasing the digital competence of lawyers, and creating effective guarantees for the confidentiality of legal aid.

In turn, reforms in this direction require taking into account the specifics of the legal nature of digitalizing the legal profession. Thus, according to the Law of the Republic of Uzbekistan "On Advocacy" [2], the legal profession is a legal institution that includes independent, voluntary, professional associations of persons engaged in legal practice, as well as persons engaged in private legal practice. The law directly links the activities of the bar to providing legal assistance to citizens of the Republic of Uzbekistan, foreign citizens, stateless persons, enterprises, institutions, and organizations.

From this definition, it follows that the bar performs a publicly significant function, although it is not a state body. This is precisely why the digitalization of the legal profession should be viewed not as the simple implementation of computer programs, but as a legal mechanism for increasing the effectiveness of implementing the constitutional right to legal assistance. If digital tools are used only to accelerate document flow but do not ensure equal access for citizens to a lawyer, their significance will be limited. On the contrary, if digitalization is aimed at empowering citizens, reducing bureaucratic barriers, and strengthening the independence of the lawyer, it becomes an important element of legal reform.

The nationwide foundation of digital transformation is enshrined in the "Digital Uzbekistan - 2030" Strategy, approved by the Decree of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan dated October 5, 2020, No. UP-6079 [3]. The document emphasizes the need for the widespread implementation of modern information and communication technologies in various sectors and spheres, primarily in public administration and socially significant areas. Consequently, the digitalization of the legal profession must be aligned with the general logic of the state's digital development, while taking into account the specific nature of the legal profession.

The resolution of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan dated May 30, 2022, "On measures for the

widespread introduction of modern information and communication technologies into the activities of the legal profession" [4] is of particular importance for the topic under consideration. It directly indicates the need to elevate the provision of legal assistance to individuals and legal entities to a new level through the implementation of ICT in the activities of the legal profession. The document provides for increasing the independence of the legal profession from state bodies and other structures through the introduction of modern technologies and the elimination of the human factor, organizing electronic data exchange between the legal profession, courts, law enforcement agencies, and other state bodies, as well as expanding opportunities for providing legal assistance online.

Thus, the digitalization of the legal profession in Uzbekistan has a regulatory framework and is part of a broader process of modernizing the legal system. However, its success depends on how well digital solutions align with the principles of independence, self-governance, professional secrecy, and the adversarial nature of judicial proceedings.

In this regard, it is necessary to determine the possible main directions for digitalizing legal practice. Thus, the first direction is the digitalization of admission to the legal profession and the maintenance of an electronic register of lawyers. Starting January 1, 2023, the issuance of a license for the right to engage in legal practice shall be carried out and formalized through the "License" information system, while maintaining the current procedure for passing the qualification exam. Furthermore, the decision on the successful completion of the exam and the relevant documents are entered into the electronic register of lawyers. This is of great importance, as it reduces administrative barriers, increases the transparency of procedures, and creates conditions for the objective accounting of the legal profession.

The second direction is the electronic interaction of the lawyer with courts, law enforcement agencies, and other state structures. For an attorney, prompt access to procedural information is of fundamental importance. The delay in receiving documents, the inability to review materials on time, and the need to visit various departments personally complicate the protection of the principal's rights. Therefore, electronic data exchange is capable of increasing the efficiency of advocacy activities, especially in criminal, administrative, civil, and economic cases.

The third direction is the development of online legal aid. In modern conditions, a significant portion of the population requires initial consultation, as well as the preparation of applications, complaints, petitions, and other documents without the need to physically visit the bar association. The online format is particularly important for citizens living in remote areas, persons with disabilities, labor migrants, entrepreneurs, and socially vulnerable categories of the population. Digital counseling should not replace full-fledged legal protection in complex cases, but it can become an effective way for citizens to receive primary legal guidance.

The fourth direction is the development of digital document management within legal formations. Law offices, firms, collegiums, and legal consultations need secure systems for storing contracts, orders, procedural documents, correspondence with attorneys, court notices, and financial documents. At the same time, the digital archive of an attorney must be structured in such a way as to exclude unauthorized access, loss of information, and violation of attorney-client privilege.

The fifth direction should be considered the digitalization of legal aid at the expense of the state. The Law of the Republic of Uzbekistan No. ZRU-848 dated June 16, 2023, "On the Provision of Legal Aid at the Expense of the State," has designated the Ministry of Justice as the specially authorized body in this field, as well as established the categories of cases, principles, grounds, and sources of financing for such assistance [5]. In the context of digitalization, it is important to ensure the transparent distribution of cases among lawyers, the electronic recording of assistance provided, and the timely payment of wages to lawyers involved in providing state-funded legal assistance.

At the same time, it is important to pay special attention to the importance of digitalization for the independence of the legal profession. Thus, one of the most important advantages of digitalization is the possibility of reducing the bureaucratic dependence of a lawyer on individual officials. If requests, notifications, documents, and procedural information are transmitted through transparent electronic systems, the risk of artificial delays, subjective approach, and informal pressure is reduced. In this sense, digitalization can serve not only as a convenience tool but also as a tool for strengthening the institutional independence of the legal profession.

At the same time, digitalization should not lead to excessive control over advocacy activities. The danger lies in the fact that electronic systems created to simplify interaction can be used to monitor defense strategies, the content of defense requests, the circle of attorneys, or the nature of the lawyer's legal positions. Therefore, when developing digital platforms, it is necessary to clearly distinguish between the technical registration of legally significant actions and unacceptable interference in the professional activities of a lawyer.

Special attention must be paid to the protection of the lawyer's secret. Under conditions of paper documentation, its protection was ensured by the physical storage of documents, the professional responsibility of the lawyer, and the guarantees established by law. New risks are emerging in the digital environment: cyberattacks, personal data leakage, unauthorized access to electronic correspondence, storing information on unsafe servers, and using third-party messengers and cloud services. Consequently, the digitalization of the legal profession must be accompanied by the implementation of special information security standards.

In our view, it is advisable to legally establish minimum requirements for digital advocacy systems: data encryption, two-factor authentication, access logging, backup, prohibition of third-party access to advocacy materials without a court decision, as well as a special procedure for processing the personal data of attorneys. At the same time, the Chamber of Advocates must participate in the development, expertise, and control of such systems, as the legal profession is based on the principles of self-governance and non-interference in the professional activities of lawyers. The Law "On Advocacy" establishes the Chamber of Advocates as a non-profit organization based on the mandatory membership of all lawyers and as a unified system of self-governance for the bar.

At the same time, there are certain challenges and risks associated with the digitalization of the legal profession. In particular, despite the obvious advantages, the digitalization of advocacy creates a number of challenges. The first problem is related to digital inequality. Not all citizens have equal access to the internet, digital devices, and electronic services. This is especially true for the elderly, residents of remote areas, socially vulnerable groups, and individuals without sufficient digital skills. Therefore, the introduction of online services should not lead to the abandonment of

traditional forms of providing legal assistance.

The second problem is the lack of digital training for the lawyers themselves. Effective digitalization is impossible without training lawyers in working with electronic platforms, digital signature, electronic document management, databases, information protection tools, and cybersecurity rules. In this regard, it is necessary to develop regular professional development courses dedicated not only to legal novices but also to the digital skills of the legal profession.

The third problem is related to the protection of personal data and legal secrets. Electronic correspondence, online consultations, audio and video communication, and the transmission of documents through digital platforms require a special confidentiality regime. It is impermissible for the principal to refuse to consult an attorney due to fear of information leakage. Trust in the legal profession is possible only when a citizen is confident that their appeal, documents, and position on the case are protected from unauthorized access.

The fourth problem is the need to ensure the equality of parties in digital justice. If courts, investigative bodies, and the prosecutor's office have broader technical capabilities than lawyers, digitalization may disrupt the balance of procedural capabilities. Therefore, lawyers must have full and timely access to electronic case materials, court notices, protocols, decisions, and other procedural documents.

The fifth problem concerns the legal regulation of artificial intelligence in advocacy. Today, digital technologies allow for the automation of searching for judicial practice, document analysis, preparation of standard statements, and forecasting of legal risks. However, artificial intelligence cannot replace a lawyer's professional judgment, ethical responsibility, or an individual approach to the principal. Therefore, the use of such tools should be auxiliary, and the responsibility for the legal position and quality of legal assistance should remain with the lawyer.

At the same time, it is necessary to outline possible promising measures for improving the institution of the bar. Thus, to further improve advocacy based on digitalization in Uzbekistan, it seems appropriate to implement several interconnected measures.

First, it is necessary to develop a unified protected digital platform for the legal profession, integrated with judicial and other state information systems but managed with

the mandatory participation of the Chamber of Advocates. Such a platform could include an electronic lawyer's office, a registry of lawyers, a system for sending lawyer inquiries, electronic document management, an online consultation module, and a system for lawyers to participate in providing legal assistance at the state's expense.

Second, it is necessary to establish procedural guarantees for the electronic participation of an advocate in cases. Specifically, an advocate must be able to receive electronic copies of procedural documents in a timely manner, file motions and complaints electronically, and participate in specific procedural actions remotely, provided this does not violate the rights of the principal or the requirements of a fair trial.

Third, it is necessary to establish special rules for protecting advocate information in the digital environment. These should include a ban on unjustified access to the lawyer's digital archives, protection of online correspondence with the principal, a special procedure for storing case materials, and liability for the illegal acquisition or dissemination of information constituting a lawyer's secret.

Fourth, it is important to implement a system of continuous digital training for lawyers. Such training should cover issues of electronic justice, cybersecurity, personal data protection, digital ethics, the use of legal databases, and the permissible limits of artificial intelligence application.

Fifth, it is necessary to ensure the accessibility of digital legal assistance for the population. To achieve this, it is necessary to develop public online services for primary legal information, expand opportunities for remote advocacy appointments, create online mechanisms for obtaining legal assistance at the state's expense, and maintain offline assistance channels for individuals without access to digital technologies.

Sixth, it is necessary to develop scientific and expert support for the digitalization of the legal profession. Digital reforms should be evaluated not only by the number of implemented platforms but also by their impact on the accessibility of legal assistance, the independence of lawyers, the quality of protection, and the level of public trust in the legal profession.

In conclusion, it can be concluded that the digitalization of the legal profession in the Republic of Uzbekistan is a natural stage in the development of the legal system and

an important condition for increasing the accessibility of qualified legal assistance. It allows for the reduction of bureaucratic barriers, the acceleration of document exchange, the expansion of online consulting opportunities, increased transparency in admission to the profession, and ensured more effective interaction between lawyers and courts and government agencies.

At the same time, digitalization should not be viewed as an end in itself. Its true significance lies in strengthening the independence of the bar, improving the quality of citizens' rights protection, and ensuring the real equality of parties in the legal process. Any digital solutions in the field of advocacy must comply with the principles of legality, self-governance, confidentiality, and professional independence of the advocate.

The most promising areas for further improvement are the creation of a protected digital platform for the legal profession, the development of electronic document management, the provision of digital guarantees for attorney-client privilege, the introduction of online legal aid, the enhancement of lawyers' digital qualifications, and the improvement of mechanisms for providing state-funded legal aid. With such an approach, digitalization will become not just a technical modernization, but an important factor in forming a strong, independent, and modern legal profession in Uzbekistan.

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