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# TURKMENISTAN

Energy-rich Turkmenistan has strengthened its position as a key player in Central Asia by opening up its lucrative oil and gas reserves after years of isolation under the dictatorship of its former leader Saparmurat Niyazov. Turkmenistan could hold the third-largest gas reserves in the world, trailing only Russia and Iran. As Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) reported, this huge gas reserve would meet the EU's energy needs for about 50 years. In 2010, the former Soviet republic signed numerous international, multibillion-dollar energy projects, including a new multibillion-dollar gas pipeline project to neighboring Iran, and it negotiated to increase gas supplied to China. Turkmenistan also pledged gas commitments to Western projects, including Nabucco and the Trans-Caspian Gas Pipeline, and signed an agreement in December to build a gas pipeline to India via Pakistan and neighboring Afghanistan—known as the Trans-Afghanistan pipeline, or TAPI link.

After Niyazov's death in 2006, former health minister Gurbanguly Berdymukhammedov was elected president on February 11, 2007—in an election that observers deemed neither free nor fair. However, President Berdymukhammedov has made some improvements to the country's pension, education, and health-care systems, and ordered Turkmenistan's constitution and legal code rewritten to meet international standards. In May, the parliament approved new criminal codes that reduced the maximum term of imprisonment for violent crimes from 25 years to 15 years, and introduced a system of fines as an alternative to prison.

Turkmenistan has not had a single opposition party or a private media outlet during its nearly two decades of independence, or during the 70-some years of Soviet rule before that. But in 2010, President Berdymukhammedov suggested setting up opposition parties and private media in his country—unprecedented steps for one of the most politically restricted countries of the world.

However, many see through these efforts as attempts to burnish Turkemistan's image internationally and profit from the country's vast natural gas reserves. The government enjoys absolute power in controlling the mass media outlets in the country, exercising strict censorship and harassment to control those journalists who persist in working independently, and to ensure that the media focus primarily on extolling the virtues of the country's leadership. With Turkmen officials apparently afraid of letting dissenting opinions air, the country has no independent media outlets.

Although the government controls new media as well, restricting online access, posting soldiers at the doors of Internet cafés, and blocking content, awareness of the Internet is growing steadily among the population. More citizens are taking advantage of social networking websites to discuss issues that matter to them, and a few brave journalists are writing blogs that provide citizens and foreigners alike deeper insights about the true state of affairs—including media developments and access to media technology.

# TURKMENISTAN AT A GLANCE

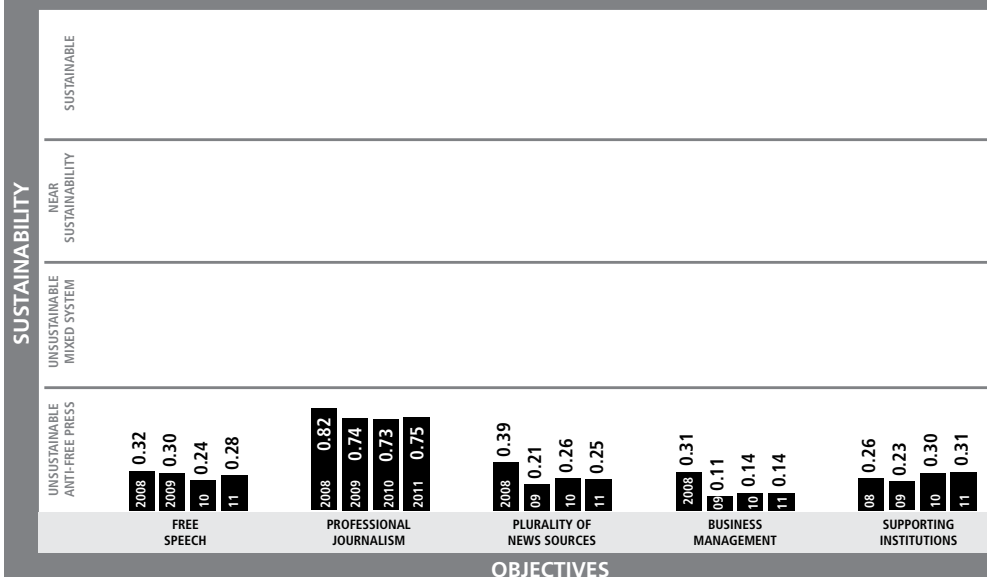
## GENERAL

- > **Population:** 4,997,503 (July 2011 est., *CIA World Factbook*)
- > **Capital city:** Ashgabat
- > **Ethnic groups (% of population):** Turkmen 85%, Uzbek 5%, Russian 4%, other 6% (2003 est., *CIA World Factbook*)
- > **Religions (% of population):** Muslim 89%, Eastern Orthodox 9%, unknown 2%
- > **Languages (% of population):** Turkmen (official) 72%, Russian 12%, Uzbek 9%, other 7%
- > **GNI (2009-Atlas):** \$17.50 billion (World Bank Development Indicators, 2010)
- > **GNI per capita (2009-PPP):** \$6,980 (World Bank Development Indicators, 2010)
- > **Literacy rate:** 98.8% (male 99.3%, female 98.3%) (1999 est., *CIA World Factbook*)
- > **President or top authority:** President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow (since February 14, 2007)

## MEDIA-SPECIFIC

- > **Number of active print outlets, radio stations, television stations:** Print: 24 national and local newspapers, 15 magazines; Radio Stations: 5; Television Stations: 5
- > **Newspaper circulation statistics:** Top two by circulation: *Netralniy Turkmenistan* (Russian language state-owned daily), *Turkmenistan* (Turkmen language state-owned daily).
- > **Broadcast ratings:** N/A
- > **News agencies:** Turkmendovlethabarlary (state-owned)
- > **Annual advertising revenue in media sector:** N/A
- > **Internet usage:** 80,400 (2009 est., *CIA World Factbook*)

## MEDIA SUSTAINABILITY INDEX: TURKMENISTAN



Scores for all years may be found online at [http://www.irex.org/system/files/EE\\_msiscor.xls](http://www.irex.org/system/files/EE_msiscor.xls)

### Unsustainable, Anti-Free Press (0-1):

Country does not meet or only minimally meets objectives. Government and laws actively hinder free media development, professionalism is low, and media-industry activity is minimal.

### Unsustainable Mixed System (1-2):

Country minimally meets objectives, with segments of the legal system and government opposed to a free media system. Evident progress in free-press advocacy, increased professionalism, and new media businesses may be too recent to judge sustainability.

### Near Sustainability (2-3):

Country has progressed in meeting multiple objectives, with legal norms, professionalism, and the business environment supportive of independent media. Advances have survived changes in government and have been codified in law and practice. However, more time may be needed to ensure that change is enduring and that increased professionalism and the media business environment are sustainable.

### Sustainable (3-4):

Country has media that are considered generally professional, free, and sustainable, or to be approaching these objectives. Systems supporting independent media have survived multiple governments, economic fluctuations, and changes in public opinion or social conventions.

Due to the political environment in Turkmenistan, IREX did not conduct an in-country panel for Turkmenistan. This chapter was produced using desk research, interviews, and the results of questionnaires filled out by several people familiar with the media situation in the country.

## OBJECTIVE 1: FREEDOM OF SPEECH

### Turkmenistan Objective Score: 0.28

Most Turkmen citizens have not heard of phrases such as “freedom of speech” or “freedom of the press.” On paper, Turkmenistan’s laws provide comprehensive protection for freedom of expression and of the press. The new constitution, adopted in 2008 by President Berdymukhammedov, reaffirmed these rights—and the government has announced plans to reform its media-related laws, too. The new constitution gives Turkmen the right to freedom of conviction and the expression and freedom of information, barring state secrets. The existing law “On the Press and Other Mass Media in Turkmenistan” protects the freedom of the mass media and also guarantees freedom of information. In addition, Article 43 of the new constitution guarantees judicial protection of citizens’ dignity and their private and political rights and freedoms.

However, in practice, such protections have not been implemented or respected. Government officials are either unaware of, or simply ignore, the laws. As one writer summed up the situation, “The only decision-maker is the President, who seeks to get rid of untrustworthy citizens and make the entire country stand in line as a frightened crowd.”<sup>1</sup>

Freedom House, an independent international organization monitoring democracy and human rights, regularly ranks Turkmenistan as one of the “worst of the worst” repressive countries, along with Burma, North Korea, and Somalia. The organization’s director of advocacy, Paul Schriefer, said that these are “countries where individuals have almost no opportunity to enjoy the most fundamental rights; regimes whose people experience heavy penalties for independent thought or action, and where little or no opposition activity is permitted to exist.” In this climate, Turkmen journalists dare not work for or contribute to foreign media outlets.

To operate in Turkmenistan, mass media outlets are required to obtain a government license. Licensing fees differ, depending on the applicant. Government entities, for example, do not have to pay a licensing fee to launch

<sup>1</sup> Shabunts, Natalya. “Imitation.” *Chronicles of Turkmenistan*. Turkmen Initiative for Human Rights, January 26, 2011. <http://www.chrono-tm.org/en/?id=1591> (Available as of March 5, 2011.)

*Addressing cabinet meetings, the president regularly criticizes mass media officials for the low ideological and artistic standards of Turkmen television programs and other media outlets.*

a newspaper in Turkmenistan. Turkmen individuals or corporations, on other hand, must pay 100 times the size of the estimated monthly wage. The State Publishing Association, Turkmenmetbugat, issues licenses with approval of the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the Cabinet of Ministers. The ministries can reject applicants for a variety of reasons.

Turkmen authorities regularly detain, harass, and intimidate journalists and their families. In July 2010, officials refused to let husband-and-wife journalists Annamamed Myatiyev and Elena Myatiyeva travel to the Netherlands, and gave no clear reason for the ban. Myatiyev needed to undergo an operation for a detached retina, according to Reporters sans Frontières (RSF). Both Myatiyev and his wife worked for several years for the government daily *Neutralniy Turkmenistan* before being fired. Myatiyeva was fired in 2002 for attending a training seminar for journalists in Sweden,

#### LEGAL AND SOCIAL NORMS PROTECT AND PROMOTE FREE SPEECH AND ACCESS TO PUBLIC INFORMATION.

##### FREE-SPEECH INDICATORS:

- > Legal and social protections of free speech exist and are enforced.
- > Licensing or registration of media protects a public interest and is fair, competitive, and apolitical.
- > Market entry and tax structure for media are fair and comparable to other industries.
- > Crimes against media professionals, citizen reporters, and media outlets are prosecuted vigorously, but occurrences of such crimes are rare.
- > The law protects the editorial independence of state or public media.
- > Libel is a civil law issue, public officials are held to higher standards, offended party must prove falsity and malice.
- > Public information is easily available; right of access to information is equally enforced for all media, journalists, and citizens.
- > Media outlets’ access to and use of local and international news and news sources is not restricted by law.
- > Entry into the journalism profession is free and government imposes no licensing, restrictions, or special rights for journalists.

RSF reported. When Myatiyev was fired in July of 2009, he was told it was because of the detached retina from which he had been suffering for the previous few months. Following an international outcry over the case, the authorities later allowed the Turkmen journalists to travel to the Netherlands.

In August 2010, Turkmen officials banned RFE/RL's Allamourad Rakhimov, a Prague-based broadcaster and native of Turkmenistan, from entering the country, although he held a valid visa. RFE/RL reported also that unidentified young men attacked its reporter Gurbansoltan Achilova's home on New Year's Eve. She found all her windows knocked out by stones. Earlier, RFE/RL's Gurbandurdy Durdykuliev was harassed in the same way.

Furthermore, the president regularly—and publicly—tells the media what they should print and broadcast. Addressing cabinet meetings, the president regularly criticizes mass media officials for the low ideological and artistic standards of Turkmen television programs and other media outlets. For that reason, and because of officials' "unsatisfactory performance [and] shortcomings in the work," the president issued warnings to media officials numerous times in 2010. For example, in January, the president gave a warning to Begench Abaev, the director of Yashlyk channel of the General Directorate of Turkmen TV, and he reprimanded Minister of Culture and Television and Radio Broadcasting Gulmurad Muradov.

Two weeks later, President Berdymukhammedov fired Annamyrat Annaev, the director of the television channel Turkmenistan, for losing control over the quality of television programs. On August 20, the president dismissed Deputy Culture and Broadcasting Minister Aymuhammet Orazmukhammedov for failing to cope with his assigned responsibilities. The president added that television programming was not conforming to the required quality and artistic level to meet the spiritual and cultural needs of society. The same day, he dismissed Mekan Komekov, the director of Turkmen Ovazy channel, for similar reasons.

In November, the president issued a final warning to Maksat Altaev, director of Altyn Asyr ("Golden Age"), the Turkmenistan television channel of the General Directorate of Turkmen TV. In a November 23 report of the semi-state news website Turkmenistan.ru, Berdymukhammedov was quoted through the press service of the president: "Altaev has got the last warning that he will be relieved of his position in case of recurrence of such shortcomings."

During a meeting of the Cabinet of Ministers on September 25, President Berdymukhammedov severely reprimanded his press secretary Kakageldi Chariyardurdiev "for shortcomings in preparation of official reports and for failing to highlight these materials in mass media on time and in high quality."

Turkmen law deems libel and invasion of privacy as criminal offenses. The libel law grants special protection to government officials, public figures, the state, and state symbols. The burden of proof is on the accused, and convictions can lead to as many as five years in prison and a fine of up to 30 months' pay. But in practice, libel and invasion of privacy are not issues because controls on media are so strict—journalists have little chance to publish or air critical content.

In terms of access to official information, government officials control the release of all information. The presidential administration or specially designated officials from the regions must approve in advance all interviews with government officials.

The Turkmen Initiative for Human Rights, an independent public organization registered in Austria, reports that Turkmen authorities do not consider independent or freelance journalists to be journalists. They only count employees of the official Turkmen media or representatives of foreign news agencies that have obtained official accreditation from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Turkmenistan.

The government holds exclusive oversight of press accreditation. It grants visas to journalists only to cover specific events, such as international oil and gas conferences and other summits, where authorities can monitor their activities. Reportedly, in August 2010, the president signed a decree to explicitly bar almost 40,000 individuals from leaving Turkmenistan—a move that affects journalists and academics in the country greatly, as well as foreign journalists interested in covering Turkmenistan. EurasiaNet.org reported that Najot, a human rights group in Uzbekistan, obtained a copy of the secret blacklist, which states that the individuals barred from entry are employees of various government agencies or are the subject of intelligence surveillance. The second part of the document lists foreign nationals barred from entry into Turkmenistan, including representatives of international organizations (Amnesty International, the Soros Foundation, and the Memorial Human Rights Center), political refugees, and 73 journalists.<sup>2</sup> One of Turkmenistan's only bloggers, who writes under the pen name Annasoltan, commented that with so few journalists allowed in to the country, the information available to the international media is, in her words, clichéd and reductionist.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup>Fitzpatrick, Catherine. "Blacklist Reportedly Circulated of Undesirables in Turkmenistan." Eurasianet.org, July 31, 2010. <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/61649> (Available as of March 5, 2011.)

<sup>3</sup>Annasoltan, "State of Ambivalence: Turkmenistan in the Digital Age." *Digital Icons: Studies in Russian, Eurasian and Central European New Media*, No. 3 (2010); page 2. Available at: <http://www.digitalicons.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/07/Annasoltan-3.1.pdf> as of March 5, 2011.

## OBJECTIVE 2: PROFESSIONAL JOURNALISM

### Turkmenistan Objective Score: 0.75

Journalism in Turkmenistan cannot be considered fair, objective, or well sourced. Journalists working for the state media produce pro-government reports highlighting the president's accomplishments and success stories, barely quoting anyone except the president. Turkmen journalists have few, if any, opportunities to improve their professional skills, as neither government agencies nor NGOs offer many training opportunities.

Turkmen media have no formal ethical guidelines for journalists; editors do not distribute or mention to newly hired journalists any type of professional standards to follow. Working journalists are treated in a "special" way whenever they approach government officials for information or for quotes. Most of the time, journalists are given gifts for their favorable coverage.

Officials censor all of Turkmenistan's media organizations, and journalists self-censor as a matter of professional survival. Editors-in-chief are appointed and dismissed by the decrees of the president. Annasoltan reported that Turkmenistan citizens even self-censor their consumption of media content: "There seems to be an unwritten rule about 'politically correct' and 'socially accepted' behavior on the Internet, by which almost all net users abide. In Turkmenistan, people police their own actions and thoughts."<sup>4</sup> "The real news is circulated in whispers," commented another writer.<sup>5</sup>

Journalists limit their coverage to issues that please government ears. For example, Turkmen mass media outlets picked up on the Romanian Institute of International Relations and Economic Cooperation's selection of President Berdymukhammedov as "Man of the Year." State media also highlighted extensively the curious Gallup World Poll's report on Turkmenistan, which claimed that Turkmenistan's people are among the world's top 20 happiest. The Turkmen government seized immediately upon the widely publicized survey as a propaganda mechanism, and the president claimed that it is proof that Turkmenistan enjoys a high standard of living.

"The Turkmen mass media focus exclusively on achievements, accomplishments, the 'great reforms' which are underway in the country where poor, beggars, unemployed, infectious diseases, and other problems of real life are non-existent. Health care practitioners are forbidden to diagnose and

<sup>4</sup>Ibid, Annasoltan, p. 9.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid, Shabunts.

## JOURNALISM MEETS PROFESSIONAL STANDARDS OF QUALITY.

### PROFESSIONAL JOURNALISM INDICATORS:

- > Reporting is fair, objective, and well-sourced.
- > Journalists follow recognized and accepted ethical standards.
- > Journalists and editors do not practice self-censorship.
- > Journalists cover key events and issues.
- > Pay levels for journalists and other media professionals are sufficiently high to discourage corruption and retain qualified personnel within the media profession.
- > Entertainment programming does not eclipse news and information programming.
- > Facilities and equipment for gathering, producing, and distributing news are modern and efficient.
- > Quality niche reporting and programming exist (investigative, economics/business, local, political).

record infectious diseases such as hepatitis, flu, measles, scarlet fever, and others. Before they made records referring to 'acute respiratory disease' but it turned out that it has recently been banned. Now only 'season cold' can be used in medical records," noted one commentator.<sup>6</sup>

Local mass media outlets are failing to cover such issues as the government's refusal to allow hundreds of students to go abroad to continue their studies, or even problems that Russian-Turkmen citizens face, such as the government's practice of blocking citizens with dual citizenship from leaving Turkmenistan. EurasiaNet.org has reported on that story, however. According to the website, in some cases officials ask that Russians apply for new Turkmen passports; in other cases, migration officials have stated that in order to leave the country, Russians must either renounce their Russian citizenship and apply for Turkmen citizenship or renounce their Turkmen citizenship and obtain an exit visa to depart permanently from Turkmenistan.

In terms of pay levels, the Institute for War and Peace Reporting (IWPR) quoted a commentator from Ashgabat: "The state is spending millions of dollars on improving the way television works. Staff are on high salaries by local standards and enjoy good working conditions—high-end equipment, and separate studios and rooms." Yet, despite all this, the programs shown on television are dull and mediocre."<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup>Ibid, Shabunts.

<sup>7</sup>"Turkmen Viewers Skeptical of TV Reforms," IWPR. July 23, 2010. <http://iwpr.net/report-news/turkmen-viewers-sceptical-tv-reforms> (Available as of March 5, 2011.)



Since coming to power in 2007, President Berdimukhammedov has pressured the broadcast media frequently. Observers say that the administration has made real attempts to improve quality, with government funding for new television stations and technical equipment. The president even signed a decree to build a new television tower in the capital city of Ashgabat. The nearly €140 million project would include more than 100 editing rooms and 10 on-air booths. Polimeks, a Turkish construction company, is reported to be constructing the 24-floor, 211-meter television tower. The facility is slated to open in October 2011, according to the semi-state Turkmenistan.ru website.

Entertainment programming dominates among local media, and Turkmen television programs are filled with entertainment. The news program *Vatan* runs four times per day, each broadcast lasting 13 to 17 minutes—without a single segment of foreign news, unless the president travels abroad. “I never watch the Turkmen [television] channels,” as IWPR quoted one Ashgabat resident. “Local television shows only folk dancing and talking heads who repeat phrases like ‘our esteemed president’ and ‘dear president’ all the time.”<sup>8</sup>

If President Berdimukhammedov takes part in a festive event that ends with a concert, all other programs are cancelled and the entire concert is shown, focusing on images of the president and his entourage. Furthermore, IWPR reported that the differences between various channels are minimal, with only the presenters’ clothing setting the shows apart. The male announcers on the *Altyn Asyr* channel all wear identical suits and ties, while the *Miras* channel features women in Turkmen national costumes.

None of the state-run media outlets offer quality niche reporting or investigative reporting. However, Turkmenistan is starting to see blogs offering insights into Turkmenistan’s “restrictive policies, its urban spaces, its health infrastructure, and also new media in Turkmenistan.”<sup>9</sup>

### OBJECTIVE 3: PLURALITY OF NEWS

#### Turkmenistan Objective Score: 0.25

The Turkmen government funds all media outlets in the country, and controls newspapers, magazines, radio, and television stations tightly. Citizens have no opportunity to

<sup>8</sup>Ibid, IWPR.

<sup>9</sup>“Between Big Brother and the Digital Utopia: e-Governance in Post-Totalitarian Space.” Digital Icons: Studies in Russian, Eurasian and Central European New Media website; <http://www.digitalicons.org/issue03/annasoltan-3-1/> (Available as of March 5, 2011.) Annasoltan’s neweurasianet Turkmenistan blog is available, as of March 5, 2011, at: <http://www.neweurasia.net/category/turkmenistan/>

check sources against each other, as all media outlets in Turkmenistan present only one point of view—that of the government. Few Turkmen are aware of the potential to receive news through handheld devices such as smartphones and/or by SMS news alerts.

People get most of their information through television and satellite television. News programs are available according to a regular schedule. Currently, Turkmenistan has five state television channels, one national radio service, 25 national and local newspapers, and 16 magazines. All newspapers are alike, as they are all stocked with information on government activities from the presidential press services or other authorized state bodies. All official information is disseminated through the state’s only news agency, Turkmen dovlet habarlary. Newspapers are printed and circulated but not read. Neither newspapers nor other media outlets struggle to win readers, as the government compels government employees—including teachers, doctors, military personnel, and others—to subscribe.

Materials broadcast on the national television and radio channels differ very little, but they all heap praise on the leadership—emphasizing in particular the success of President Berdimukhammedov’s Era of New Revival. State television channels offer in-depth reporting only on topics favorable to the government, which are really just longer-form, more detailed propaganda. Noted one analyst, “The news coverage from the sessions of the Cabinet of Ministers or the State Security Council stands out. These sessions are covered

#### MULTIPLE NEWS SOURCES PROVIDE CITIZENS WITH RELIABLE, OBJECTIVE NEWS.

##### PLURALITY OF NEWS SOURCES INDICATORS:

- > Plurality of public and private news sources (e.g., print, broadcast, internet, mobile) exists and offer multiple viewpoints.
- > Citizens’ access to domestic or international media is not restricted by law, economics, or other means.
- > State or public media reflect the views of the political spectrum, are non-partisan, and serve the public interest.
- > Independent news agencies gather and distribute news for media outlets.
- > Private media produce their own news.
- > Transparency of media ownership allows consumers to judge the objectivity of news; media ownership is not concentrated in a few conglomerates.
- > A broad spectrum of social interests are reflected and represented in the media, including minority-language information sources.
- > The media provide news coverage and information about local, national, and international issues.

by gifted story writers. Exuberant in words, these articles lack informational content and are abundant in general wordings, phrases, conventional texts, boring-to-death clichés, inspired by Hitler-Stalin pompous rhetoric. They imitate the transparent performance of top echelons of power.”<sup>10</sup>

However, in 2010 Turkmenistan announced the publication of its first private newspaper, *Rysgal* (Welfare). A commercial publication about business affairs, the paper is not truly independent, as the president ordered the state-controlled Union of Entrepreneurs to establish it. The private newspaper “...may publish articles about the successes and positive experiences in the field of entrepreneurship,” the president said ahead of the first issue of the paper. The first issue of *Rysgal* appeared on September 17. Soon after, IWPR reported that local Turkmen media experts were not impressed, and that *Rysgal* is not really any more interesting than the existing newspapers. Like others, it features a large front-page portrait of President Berdymukhammedov. The only difference is that it is printed on glossier paper. A local journalist dismissed *Rysgal*, comparing it to a student newspaper—lacking original material, with no analytical articles and no views from the entrepreneurs that are the target readership, according to IWPR.<sup>11</sup>

Turkmen blogs, especially within the country, are not yet common, but awareness of blogging is growing quietly. The main Turkmen blogger for [www.neweurasia.net](http://www.neweurasia.net), Annasoltan, is a Turkmen-born, Western-educated journalist, working under a pseudonym to promote awareness of free media to Turkmen.<sup>12</sup> A report she authored on the status of the digital media in Turkmenistan underlined the government’s announcement of the availability of the 3G mobile spectrum as “holding out the promise of widespread and continuous web connectivity” and noted, “The state’s ambivalent policies notwithstanding, there is evidence of vibrant chat rooms and sustained efforts by Turkmen to utilize the full potential of the Internet.”<sup>13</sup>

President Berdymukhammedov won credit years ago for lifting a longstanding ban on imported foreign newspapers, allowing citizens and government institutions to subscribe to Russian newspapers, with some newspapers and magazines, mostly from Russia and Uzbekistan, sold at local markets. However, according to IWPR, the president clamped down again in August 2010, declaring his unhappiness with the

*Materials broadcast on the national television and radio channels differ very little, but they all heap praise on the leadership—emphasizing in particular the success of President Berdymukhammedov’s Era of New Revival.*

quality of imported newspapers and directing cultural officials to “take care of this matter.” He said that Turkmenistan produces enough newspapers, magazines, and books to keep everyone happy. IWPR confirmed that Turkmenistan is trying to stem the trickle of imported newspapers, “...probably to stop people reading too much about the ethnic clashes that shook southern Kyrgyzstan in June.”<sup>14</sup>

To access foreign television programming, citizens use satellite dishes also—a practice widespread throughout the country. Turkmen television re-transmits Russian Channel One broadcasts for about 10 minutes each day. The satellite information channel TV-4 broadcasts in several languages, including Russian, English, Farsi, French, Arabic, and Chinese. Print periodicals and television and radio broadcasting in languages of other ethnic minorities are not available in Turkmenistan.

Generally, newspapers cost next to nothing, but few people can afford to own a satellite dish or have access to cable television. During the presidential election campaign, the president promised to create the right conditions to develop the communications network, saying: “I will pay a great deal of attention to this sphere. The latest technology—for example, the Internet—should be available to every person in the country.”

He kept his promise partially, lifting some of the restrictions on the Internet, opening up several Internet cafés in the capital city and in other regions, and allowing some Turkmen citizens to express themselves in an open forum online. Yet the government controls the Internet strictly, filtering its content and blocking many sites, according to a 2010 report by RSF, which lists Turkmenistan among the worst enemies of the Internet.<sup>15</sup> According to Annasoltan, “In February 2007, RFE/RL reported that Turkmen authorities had allowed the

<sup>10</sup>Ibid, Shabunts.

<sup>11</sup>“Turkmenistan’s First Private Newspaper Disappoints.” News Briefing Central Asia, Institute for War and Peace Reporting, October 6, 2010. <http://iwpr.net/report-news/turkmenistan-s-first-private-paper-disappoints> (Available as of March 5, 2011.)

<sup>12</sup>Ibid, “Between Big Brother and the Digital Utopia: e-Governance in Post-Totalitarian Space.”

<sup>13</sup>Ibid, Annasoltan, p. 1.

<sup>14</sup>“Further Restrictions on Foreign Press in Turkmenistan.” News Briefing Central Asia, Institute for War and Peace Reporting, September 3, 2010. Available at: <http://iwpr.net/report-news/further-restrictions-foreign-press-turkmenistan> (Available as of March 5, 2011.)

<sup>15</sup>“Web 2.0 versus Control 2.0.” Reporters sans Frontières, March 18, 2010. <http://en.rsf.org/web-2-0-versus-control-2-0-18-03-2010,36697.html> (Available as of March 5, 2011.) See also RSF’s website profile Internet Enemies: Turkmenistan. <http://en.rsf.org/internet-enemie-turkmenistan,36692.html> (Available as of March 5, 2011.)



*According to Annasoltan, "In February 2007, RFE/RL reported that Turkmen authorities had allowed the public to post comments on the official Altyn Asyr website. However, a mere four days later when critical comments were posted related to government policies, interactive communication with the online community was aborted and no further comments were posted..."*

public to post comments on the official Altyn Asyr website. However, a mere four days later when critical comments were posted related to government policies, interactive communication with the online community was aborted and no further comments were posted... Such half-hearted and stillborn attempts at openness are common practice; the promise of digital access is frequently undermined by technical difficulties, red tape, and prohibitive costs."<sup>16</sup>

The law requires registration for Internet users, both at Internet cafés and at home. Internet users must also leave their passport information in records as part of registration. Annasoltan reported that sometimes, soldiers are even posted at café doors.<sup>17</sup>

Citizens are also using talyplar.com, the social networking website designed for students, to express criticism of the government. The Turkmen-language site was set up outside of Turkmenistan in the United States. Others like it are growing in popularity among Turkmen youth—both inside and outside the country. Some website visitors are taking advantage of the luxury of anonymity to criticize government activities and discuss other socially important matters. RFE/RL quoted one poster, "Why there is so much corruption around? If you are pregnant, you have to pay a bribe... If you want to study in a good school, you need to pay a bribe. To get any document, you have to give bribes. Bribery is in our blood now. Why? Because salaries are low, prices are high. There is only one employed person in most families. Many families survive on pensions." Another subscriber wrote, "There is no rule of law."<sup>18</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, Annasoltan, p. 5.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, Annasoltan, p.8.

<sup>18</sup> Najibullah, Farangis. "Turkmen Dipping Their Toes Into Online Forums." Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty website, September 30, 2010. Available at: [http://www.rferl.org/content/Turkmen\\_Dipping\\_Their\\_Toos\\_Into\\_Online\\_Forums/2172821.html](http://www.rferl.org/content/Turkmen_Dipping_Their_Toos_Into_Online_Forums/2172821.html) as of March 5, 2011.

People in major cities, especially in Ashgabat, have greater access to the Internet and other media sources than people living outside of Ashgabat. Annasoltan wrote, "This state of affairs changes abruptly from bad to worse just a few kilometers outside the capital, where computers and the Internet are scarce and remain alien concepts to many Turkmen citizens. Here, beyond Ashgabat's megalopolis panorama, the ICT situation remains mostly unchanged from earlier times. In Turkmenistan, 60 to 70 percent of the population live in rural areas, and the gulf between urban and rural population is growing."<sup>19</sup>

In another example of the geographic divide, after the government announced availability of the 3G spectrum, Annasoltan noted, "Turkmens from large towns are also routinely disappointed to find that what they covet is not within their reach. In March, a resident of Abadan, a town located near Ashgabat, rushed to a Turkmen Telecom centre to obtain 3G for his mobile phone when he heard the news that 3G is now available in Turkmenistan. However, he returned disappointed, having learned that 3G availability was confined to Ashgabat alone."<sup>20</sup>

Pricing limits Internet availability as well. According to RFE/RL, "Access to the net also comes at a high cost, placing the Internet beyond the reach of ordinary Turkmen citizens. An hour of surfing the net at an Internet café costs about \$2.10, while surfing at home costs \$0.42 per hour in addition to a monthly subscription fee of \$4.20. Such prices are prohibitive in a country where, despite vast energy wealth, some 30 percent of the population lives in poverty, and the average monthly salary is about \$200."<sup>21</sup>

Commenting on Turkmenistan Online's posted official rates, one perplexed resident said, "I do not understand who these rates are designed for and how these tariffs have been calculated. For instance, fines are calculated based on the minimum wage, which is now rated at TMT 50 (equivalent of \$17). In Turkmenistan, the cheapest fee for low-speed but unlimited Internet access is \$213! I think that Turkmenistan has the most expensive Internet rates in the world."<sup>22</sup>

Thus, many opt for Internet cafés, demonstrated by long lines at the popular Parakhat Internet café in Ashgabat. Most cafés charge around TMT 3 per hour (slightly more than a dollar).<sup>23</sup> "Some Ashgabat residents use Internet in the offices of foreign and international agencies; for instance,

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, Annasoltan, p. 7.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, Annasoltan, p. 7.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, Najibullah, Farangis.

<sup>22</sup> "Turkmen Style Internet." Chronicles of Turkmenistan. Turkmen Initiative for Human Rights, February 7, 2011. See <http://www.chrono-tm.org/en/?id=1602> (Available as of March 5, 2011.)

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, Turkmen Style Internet."

in ‘American corners’ or the UNDP office. For a long time, nobody visited the OSCE office, which has Internet access and three old computers that were installed for civil society activists. According to one of the public activists, the ‘reason is that the control over Internet users here is more rigid than in Internet cafes.’”<sup>24</sup>

Turkmen students abroad use online message boards to ask people in Turkmenistan about job opportunities and salaries at home. School graduates in Turkmenistan post questions asking about university entrance exams, education fees, and living costs abroad. The important thing, advised a user named Vladimir Torin on talyplar.com, is expressing and sharing ideas. RFE/RL quoted the user as saying, “Do not keep your ideas inside your head. If an idea comes to your head, implement. If you have no plans to implement, then share it with the world and put your signature underneath.”<sup>25</sup>

No cases have been reported of people running afoul of the government due to their critical comments, and there are no indications that government officials monitor the posts. Yet the government regularly blocks certain websites, including opposition sites and news sites critical of the government. From time to time, the government blocks certain social networking websites, such as Facebook, Russian Odnoclassniki (“Classmates”), and YouTube, but as of December, these websites were accessible to the public. At the time of Annasoltan’s *Digital Icons* report on Turkmenistan’s new media situation, Facebook was only available on mobile phones with the Russian MTS service provider.<sup>26</sup>

Lucie Morillon, co-author of RSF’s “Enemies of the Internet” report, wrote that autocratic regimes such as Turkmenistan’s are suspicious of social networking sites “because it could be a tool for the mobilization of civil society,” RFE/RL reports. “Given the state of media in Turkmenistan, the Internet is basically the only space where alternative views—however limited—can be expressed.”<sup>27</sup>

No laws or regulations exist to govern disclosure of media ownership. All newspapers have a quote of the president on the front page, indicating the president’s stamp of approval, and television stations mention the president’s support regularly. But since the government acts as a media conglomerate and owns and operates nearly every media outlet, such statements are unnecessary.

Turkmen mass media outlets do not cover social issues, such as those concerning gender, ethnicity, social conventions,

<sup>24</sup>Ibid, “Turkmen Style Internet.”

<sup>25</sup>Ibid, Najibullah, Farangis.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid, Annasoltan, p. 9.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid, Najibullah, Farangis.

religion, and sexual orientation. The mass media outlets function as if such issues do not exist or are unimportant.

Nearly all media in Turkmenistan are in Turkmen language. The minority-language publications available are the national, general interest, Russian-language daily *Neytralniy Turkmenistan* and the advertising paper *Habarlar*, which is published both in Russian and Turkmen. The eight-page *Rysgal* is published in Turkmen and Russian.

Turkmenistan has regional newspapers, with one newspaper per region. They focus on local news while devoting significant space to national news, particularly the president’s acts, decrees, and trips at home and abroad. The local news outlets do not include a sentence of news about foreign countries. There are no regional television channels.

## OBJECTIVE 4: BUSINESS MANAGEMENT

### Turkmenistan Objective Score: 0.14

All domestic mass media are under strict government control and financed fully by the government of Turkmenistan through subsidies and mandatory subscriptions. Aside from a small amount of advertising, mass media outlets are not involved in commercial activities. The circulation figures that the government maintains for its print publications are inflated, given the mandatory subscriptions. The state determines the budget for each media outlet and the president appoints and dismisses editors-in-chief. The government provides no transparency guidelines to citizens

## MEDIA ARE WELL-MANAGED ENTERPRISES, ALLOWING EDITORIAL INDEPENDENCE.

### BUSINESS MANAGEMENT INDICATORS:

- > Media outlets operate as efficient and self-sustaining enterprises.
- > Media receive revenue from a multitude of sources.
- > Advertising agencies and related industries support an advertising market.
- > Advertising revenue as a percentage of total revenue is in line with accepted standards.
- > Government subsidies and advertising are distributed fairly, governed by law, and neither subvert editorial independence nor distort the market.
- > Market research is used to formulate strategic plans, enhance advertising revenue, and tailor the product to the needs and interests of the audience.
- > Broadcast ratings, circulation figures, and internet statistics are reliably and independently produced.

for them to determine whether personnel policies are in place to allocate the right people to certain tasks.

As the state guarantees their budgets, media outlets do not feel pressure to use more advertisements to generate revenue. The Turkmenistan advertising industry is developing—albeit slowly—due to an increasing number of international oil and gas companies entering the market, but specific figures are not available. Anyone can advertise in newspapers, but citizens are limited to advertising on state-run television stations. Reportedly, some international organizations have had difficulties airing advertisements on national television stations.

Almost no private sector exists in Turkmenistan. The government provides the majority of jobs and dominates the economy, which continues to be one of the least free in the world. Turkmenistan ranks 169th in the Heritage Foundation's 2011 Index of Economic Freedom, keeping company with Iran, Eritrea, and the very lowest-scoring North Korea at 179.<sup>28</sup> "Corruption remains widespread," the report stated. "Foreign investors face a highly politicized and corrupt system... Laws are poorly developed, and judicial employees and judges are poorly trained and open to bribery," the report stated.<sup>29</sup>

RFE/RL is reported to be conducting research in the country to obtain information on audience demographics and preferences. However, media experts note that such organizations have limited possibilities for market research, given government restrictions.

The broadcast media sector has no ratings system. According to U.S.-based Pyramid Research, the number of individual pay-television subscriptions in Turkmenistan at the end of 2009 was just 13,200 and the estimated total number of Internet users was about 127,000.<sup>30</sup>

## OBJECTIVE 5: SUPPORTING INSTITUTIONS

### Turkmenistan Objective Score: 0.31

Turkmenistan has no trade associations or professional associations that could represent the interests of media, provide member services, or work to protect journalists' rights. The government-run Institute for Democracy and Human Rights lives on paper only, with a mission of playing an ombudsman's role in resolving petitions on human rights-related issues and supporting democratization.

<sup>28</sup> 2011 Index of Economic Freedom, the Heritage Foundation. Available at [http://www.heritage.org/index/PDF/2011/Index2011\\_highlights.pdf](http://www.heritage.org/index/PDF/2011/Index2011_highlights.pdf) (Available as of March 5, 2011.)

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, Index of Economic Freedom.

<sup>30</sup> "Internet in Turkmenistan: The Barrier Raises, but Outlook Remains Hazy." Pyramid Research, July 21, 2009. <http://www.pyr.com/points/item/090721.htm> (Available as of March 5, 2011.)

The media sector has no need for an association of media owners, since the government is virtually the only owner. Numerous international reports state that at least two unions for journalists operate in the country. Indeed, it is difficult to truly know whether they function, or what specific activities they promote. The Union of Journalists of Turkmenistan was founded in 1992 with a charter that includes "the protection of [journalists'] interests against state and public organizations, founders, and publishers of the media." The other, the Shamshirag Association of Journalists of Turkmenistan, is described as non-governmental—but essentially, it is state-controlled, and its impact is minimal. Journalists are aware of these unions, but many do not see the value of joining, as journalists work for government-owned media outlets, have reasonable salaries, and do not report on controversial or critical issues that might lead to a need for union support.

These associations would be unable to offer any kind of protection to journalists working inside the country, since Turkmenistan poses a strong challenge to working journalists—particularly representatives of RFE/RL. The Turkmen government keeps ignoring RFE/RL's requests to establish a bureau in capital city of Ashgabat, despite formal permission from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Turkmenistan in 1995, according to an RFE/RL statement issued in Astana, Kazakhstan in November 2010.<sup>31</sup>

## SUPPORTING INSTITUTIONS FUNCTION IN THE PROFESSIONAL INTERESTS OF INDEPENDENT MEDIA.

### SUPPORTING INSTITUTIONS INDICATORS:

- > Trade associations represent the interests of media owners and managers and provide member services.
- > Professional associations work to protect journalists' rights and promote quality journalism.
- > NGOs support free speech and independent media.
- > Quality journalism degree programs exist providing substantial practical experience.
- > Short-term training and in-service training institutions and programs allow journalists to upgrade skills or acquire new skills.
- > Sources of media equipment, newsprint, and printing facilities are apolitical, not monopolized, and not restricted.
- > Channels of media distribution (e.g., kiosks, transmitters, cable, internet, mobile) are apolitical, not monopolized, and not restricted.
- > Information and communication technology infrastructure sufficiently meets the needs of media and citizens.

<sup>31</sup> Radio Free Europe Statement to the OSCE Review Conference, Astana, November 26 2010. November 25, 2010. Available at: <http://www.osce.org/home/73779> as of March 5, 2011.

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Although the constitution and law provide freedom to form associations, the government restricts this right in practice. The law requires all NGOs to register with the Ministry of Justice and all foreign assistance groups to register with the Ministry of Justice and the Ministry of Economics and Development, coordinated through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Unregistered NGO activity is punishable by fines, short-term detention, and confiscation of property. The government continues to deny registration to NGOs and private organizations, using subjective criteria.

Journalism education is in its infancy, and short-term training programs are scarce. The Institute of International Relations under the Foreign Ministry of Turkmenistan offers an international journalism degree. Short-term training opportunities exist, but are possible only with the support of international organizations, such as OSCE and UNDP. OSCE has offered at least one course for second-year and third-year journalism students at the Institute of International Relations. The course aims to enhance students' skills with practical, hands-on assignments.

No recent reports are available of journalists being punished for training abroad; however, cases have been reported of journalists being barred from leaving Turkmenistan for journalism conferences.

The government owns all printing production facilities, print distribution facilities, and media distribution channels. Only some kiosks are in private hands. In a prominent example of the government's attempt to hang on to control of the ICT sector, in December 2010 officials suspended the license held by Russian mobile telephone service provider MTS, which began offering Internet service to mobile phone subscribers in 2008. State-owned TurkmenTelecom began to offer Internet connectivity to citizens in 2008 as well. Although one of its subsidiaries, TM Cell or Altyn Asyr, launched 3G service in March 2010, customers have been frustrated by the low speed and inability to watch videos on their devices. Furthermore, Internet users of popular chat rooms often complain about the poor quality of service and low connection speed.<sup>32</sup>

## List of Panel Participants

*Due to the political environment in Turkmenistan, IREX did not conduct an in-country panel for Turkmenistan. This chapter was produced using desk research, interviews, and the results of questionnaires filled out by several people familiar with the media situation in the country.*

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid, Annasoltan, p. 5.