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TURKMENISTAN

Turkmenistan could become a major global energy supplier if it indeed holds the world's second largest gas field. British independent auditor Gaffney, Cline & Associates reported Southern Yolotan-Osman and Yashlar gas deposits might be a "super giant," as the field is 75 kilometers long and 35 kilometers wide. The Associated Press and Reuters reported that it is more than enough for any potential demand over the foreseeable future, whether from China, Russia, Iran or Europe. Turkmenistan is determined to become one of the world's key natural gas sources; President Gurbanguly Berdymukhammedov stated that energy exports to Europe are "the most important aspect of Turkmenistan's foreign policy."

Although Turkmenistan's constitution declares the country a secular democracy, it is an authoritarian nation. President-for-Life Saparmyrat Niyazov ruled until his sudden death in December 2006. During his presidency, he named cities, airports, and streets after himself and members of his family. People were required to know his book "Ruhnama" by heart; mandatory exams to prove this were administered as part of applications for jobs, university admission, even to get a driver's license.

The former health minister, Berdymukhammedov was elected as president in 2007 in an election that observers deemed neither free nor fair. Berdymukhammedov made some improvement to the country's pension system, education, and healthcare system and ordered Turkmenistan's constitution and legal code rewritten to meet international standards, however, some critics say the changes are only "cosmetic."

In 2010 Berdymukhammedov suggested the establishment of another political party. In 2011 he said he was ready for a dialogue with groups that call themselves "the opposition," while the ambassador of Turkmenistan to the OSCE has reportedly stated that the opposition would be denied access to upcoming presidential election in 2012.

Being recognized as an "enemy of the Internet" by Reporters Without Borders, the Turkmen government continues to control mass media outlets in the country, exercising strict censorship and pressure to control those who persist in working independently. For example, Berdymukhammedov once again tasked editors on July 22 to exercise effective control over print media. Previously, he called on the Ministry of National Security to fight those who "defame our democratic, law-based secular state and try to destroy the unity and solidarity of our society."

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.

TURKMENISTAN AT A GLANCE

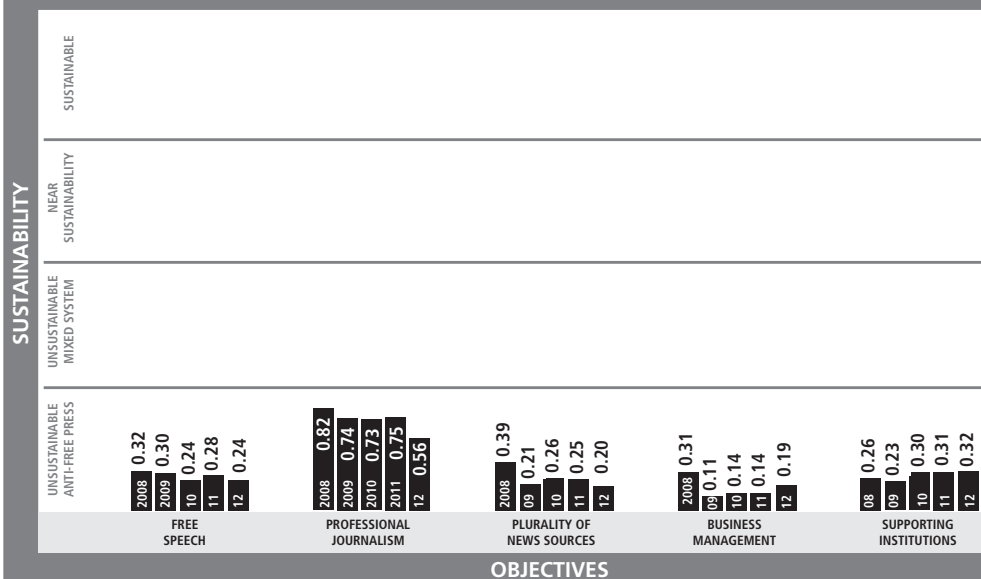
GENERAL

- > **Population:** 5,054,828 (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 (2010-Atlas):** \$19.159 billion (World Bank Development Indicators, 2011)
- > **GNI per capita (2010-PPP):** \$7,160 (World Bank Development Indicators, 2011)
- > **Literacy rate:** 98.8% (male 99.3%, female 98.3%) (1999 est., *CIA World Factbook*)
- > **President or top authority:** President Gurbanguly Berdymukhammedov (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_msiscores.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.

OBJECTIVE 1: FREEDOM OF SPEECH

Turkmenistan Objective Score: 0.24

Turkmenistan's score for Objective 1, 0.24, remained almost the same as last year's 0.28, reflecting a dangerous country for freedom of speech.

Turkmenistan's laws provide comprehensive protection for freedom of expression and of the press; however, the consistent practices of the authorities reveal such laws are not honored. The new constitution, adopted in 2008 by President Berdymukhammedov, reaffirmed such rights and the government has announced plans to reform its media related laws. In 2011, Turkmen government websites reported holding roundtables with international legal experts (such as BBC World Service consultant Mark Becherman, an expert from UNESCO, and Russian and German academics) to discuss mass media regulation systems, the legal aspects of the establishing commercial television stations, and allowing private print media. However, any concrete outcome of such roundtables has yet to be witnessed.

The new constitution, adopted on September 26, 2008, gives Turkmen the right to freedom of conviction and expression as well as freedom of information, barring state secrets. The existing law "On the Press and Other Mass Media in

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 of public media.
- > Libel is a civil law issue; public officials are held to higher standards, and offended parties 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.

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.

The spirit behind these laws is certainly not observed in practice. "All journalists have the 'duty' to refer to the president in the first paragraph of each article and to praise his policies," one source familiar with the situation in Turkmenistan reported. This person added that journalists are routinely punished arbitrarily, or the severity of punishments is often out of proportion with events. For example, "One such case is when a printing mistake happens the entire newspaper staff is forced to pay for the cost of reprinting. Such a case was when *Turkmenistan* newspaper once reported 'Turkmenistan sells its daughter (*gyz*) instead of saying its gas (*gaz*)," said the source.

E-mail correspondence is monitored and censored, and phone conversations of "black-listed" individuals are tapped, according to a briefing paper issued by the International Partnership for Human Rights, a coalition of European and Central Asian human rights groups. One contributor to the MSI study said, "According to remarks...by Turkmen reporters with contacts inside the national telecom, Altyn Asyr, intelligence services are keenly monitoring all voice and ordinary SMS traffic. They are also actively trying to figure out how to more effectively filter mobile phone access to banned websites." Especially after the Abadan explosion, the MSI respondents report an uptick in the authorities' efforts to monitor and obstruct Internet and other alternative media channels.

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 a newspaper in Turkmenistan. Turkmen individuals or corporations, on other hand, must pay 100 times the size of the estimated monthly wage, which is almost \$30,000. 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. Due to the secretive environment of Turkmenistan, it is difficult to know whether any outlets applied for a license in the past year.

Turkmenistan is a dangerous place to be an independent journalist. Turkmen authorities regularly detain, harass, and intimidate independent journalists and their families. The president issued a severe reprimand and warning in 2011 against Yusup Bayramov, the director of the television channel Turkmen Ovazy (Turkmen Melodies) and against Amanmuhamet Repov, editor of *Turkmenistan*, for

“All journalists have the ‘duty’ to refer to the president in the first paragraph of each article and to praise his policies,” one source familiar with the situation in Turkmenistan reported.

“unsatisfactory performance of duties.” A Turkmenistan government news agency reported the reprimand and warning, however, it did not mention any specifics other than general deficiencies in the organization and leadership of these media. Furthermore, the president directed editors on July 22 to exercise more control over publications, while criticizing Yazmuhammet Yazlyev, the chairman of the Committee for the Protection of State Secrets in Press and Other Media, for “shortcomings” in his work. This committee is the government agency responsible for censorship in Turkmen mass media outlets.

In 2011, Turkmen journalist Dovletmurad Yazguliev was imprisoned for five years over allegedly inciting a relative’s suicide attempt. It is believed, however, he was imprisoned for his independent reporting of the deadly explosion in Abadan, near Ashgabat, in July, which official media initially reported as a minor incident. He was later amnestied by presidential decree apparently due to international outcry, including from United States Senators.

Another Turkmen activist, Amangelen Shapudakov, 80, was confined to a psychiatric hospital after accusing a local government official of corruption in an interview with Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. Posters accusing him of being a criminal were put up in public places according to Reporters Without Borders.¹

Annamamed Myatiyev, a former correspondent for the state-run newspaper *Neitralniy Turkmenistan*, suffered an attack on November 11, 2011 when vandals threw rocks into his home, breaking a window and a mirror in his bedroom, the Chronicle of Turkmenistan reported. Earlier in 2011, an unknown young man in sunglasses came up behind Myatiev on the street, punched him in the face, and ran away. He suffered a split lip, but did not go to the police at the time, EurasiaNet.org reported. In June 2010, Myatiyev was supposed to fly to the Netherlands for an eye operation, but he and his wife were not permitted to leave the country. At that time, human rights defenders, including the late Russian human rights leader Elena Bonner, protested and he was finally allowed to leave. He later returned home

¹ “Confined To A Psychiatric Hospital For Talking to a Radio Station.” Reporters Without Borders. April 5, 2011. See <http://en.rsf.org/turkmenistan-confined-to-a-psychiatric-hospital-05-04-2011,39955.html> (Available as of December 12, 2011).

to Turkmenistan, but there are signs that the authorities continue to target him on suspicions that he collaborates with foreign mass media outlets. Myatiev worked for 30 years as a journalist, and was dismissed from the state newspaper in 2009 ostensibly for health reasons, although he had not submitted a resignation.

“You cannot predict what will happen to you for reporting or taking a picture. The authorities may fabricate any accusation and open a criminal case against you. They may interfere into your private life and use your family problems against you,” Oguljamal Yazlyeva, director of Radio Azatlyk was quoted as saying.² Previous MSI studies detailed how editors and media directors deemed a threat have been fired or otherwise harassed by the authorities, but there were no public dismissals along those lines in 2011.

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 the media are so strict; journalists have little chance to publish or air critical content. No sources mentioned any libel cases against journalists in 2011.

“All media is devoted to one mission: glorifying the government. Television and radio are devoted to the exploits of the presidents or mythological heroes from the past, and newspapers, despite their different titles, routinely run the same content verbatim—a veritable echo chamber. State-sanctioned journalists are the only ones tolerated in the country, but they must undergo a rigorous training in state ideology,” said the editor of a website that covers Central Asian news.

In terms of access to official information, government officials control the release of all information. The presidential administration or specially designed officials from the regions must approve in advance all interviews with government officials. Mass media outlets do not have Internet access in Turkmenistan and thus do not use the Internet as part of their reporting. Mass media outlets are not allowed generally to reprint or rebroadcast foreign news programming, but will to do so only if the news is favorable to Turkmen government ideology.

² “Turkmenistan: Citizen Journalism Emerges in a Silence Country.” Sampsonia Way, October 27, 2011. See <http://www.sampsoniaway.org/blog/2011/10/27/turkmenistan-citizen-journalism-emerges-in-a-silenced-country/> (Available as of December 12, 2011).

Turkmenistan does not have a consistent, well-defined standard for fair use that protects intellectual property.

The Turkmen government does consider journalists as only those working for state owned news outlets in the country. The government holds exclusive oversight of press accreditation. It grants visas to foreign journalists only to cover specific events, such as international oil and gas conferences and other summits, where authorities can monitor their activities.

Theoretically, people are free to choose their profession, however, many obstacles exist in Turkmenistan to prevent people from choosing a profession, such as requiring bribery and/or a connection with high-ranking officials to get accepted into the relevant academic program. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs has overall control over who gets selected into its international journalism program.

OBJECTIVE 2: PROFESSIONAL JOURNALISM

Turkmenistan Objective Score: 0.56

Turkmenistan's score for Objective 2 fell moderately from last year's 0.75. Most indicators scored just as poorly as the objective score would suggest, however indicator 7 (facilities and equipment) scored nearly a full point higher.

Journalism in Turkmenistan is highly manipulated and cannot be considered fair, objective, or well sourced. Working journalists do not conduct background research to a story, as that might reveal a potential conflict in what a government official is saying now and what was said in

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.
- > Technical facilities and equipment for gathering, producing, and distributing news are modern and efficient.
- > Quality niche reporting and programming exist (investigative, economics/business, local, political).

"Take for example the mysterious armory explosion in Abadan on 7–8 July, 2011, which, according to many eyewitnesses and YouTube video posts, produced significant tremors throughout the Ashgabat area... Yet, the cataclysm went completely unreported by the Turkmen mass media until well afterward," said one of the MSI's contributors.

the past. Journalists working for the state media produce pro-government reports highlighting the president's accomplishments and success stories, barely quoting anyone except the president.

"The purpose of journalism in Turkmenistan is to affirm, defend, and promote the government, particularly the person of the President, who is often identified as the source of all the country's achievements (the outside world, by contrast, is often identified as the source of all the country's difficulties, and it is not uncommon for Turkmen officials who have fallen out of favor with the president to be vilified by the press, as well)," said a contributor to this year's MSI research.

Journalists can and are imprisoned for their independent reporting. "I was given an official warning and told that If I did anything similar again, I would be prosecuted under articles 132 and 177 of the criminal code: for dissemination of defamatory information in the media, and 'incitement on social religious or ethnic grounds,' and sent to prison for five years," freelance journalist Dovletmyrat Yazgulyev said, referring to his questioning at the regional police department a week after his independent reporting on the explosion in Abadan.³

Turkmen journalists have no opportunities to improve their professional skills, as neither government agencies nor NGOs offer many training opportunities. However, there were several professional trainings held in Ashgabat in 2011 for working Turkmen journalists organized by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) and the European Union. OSCE has conducted training for spokespersons and press officers of government agencies. In addition, Turkish experts trained directors, sound engineers, operators, designers, and working journalists, Turkmenistan.ru reported on December 2. The Turkish International Cooperation Agency organized the weeklong training.

³ "Internet Paranoia in Turkmenistan." Institute for War and Peace Reporting, July 29, 2011. See <http://iwpr.net/report-news/Internet-paranoia-turkmenistan> (Available as of December 12, 2011).

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 decree of the president. None of the state-run media outlets offer quality niche reporting or investigative reporting. “Investigative reporting is banned,” said one contributor to the MSI study. However, Turkmenistan is starting to see blogs run from abroad offering insights on Turkmenistan, with few such blogs inside the country.

Journalists limit their coverage to issues that please government ears. In 2011, Turkmen mass media outlets picked up that Turkmenistan has one of the world’s largest gas fields and reported about it for almost a week. Similar coverage was given to the world’s largest carpet made in Turkmenistan or Ashgabat’s new television tower being included in Guinness World Records. Local mass media outlets continue to ignore covering such issues as the government’s refusal to let some Turkmen students continue their studies in Tajikistan in summer of 2011, or the report by the United Nations Committee Against Torture calling on Ashgabat to address systematic human rights abuses, or Turkmen doctors being barred from leaving the country to visit the United States on an U.S.-government-sponsored exchange program. Turkmen media outlets failed to report about 50 demonstrators in Ashgabat by citizens complaining about, for example, their homes being destroyed to make way for new government buildings, among numerous other reasons.

“Take for example the mysterious armory explosion in Abadan on 7–8 July, 2011, which, according to many eyewitnesses and YouTube video posts, produced significant tremors throughout the Ashgabat area, a massive plume of smoke visible for miles around, and some sources say even a hail of munitions upon the capital. Yet, the cataclysm went completely unreported by the Turkmen mass media until well afterward; indeed, it is my understanding that as the event unfolded, in a twist on the Soviet-era tradition of playing Tchaikovsky’s ‘Swan Lake’ during a crisis, Turkmen television and radio blared pop music instead of their regularly scheduled programming,” said one of the MSI’s contributors.

There was a mixed perspective on pay levels for Turkmen journalists among sources who contributed to the MSI study. Some stated that the salary rate is low and thus Turkmen journalists work in multiple jobs to meet the basic costs of

living while others stated that salary rates for journalists are relatively high compared to other professions.

Since coming to power in 2007, President Berdymukhammedov has instructed media outlets to purchase the latest technologies such as printing facilities, cameras, and editing equipment. In 2011 the president opened a new television tower in Ashgabat. The 31-store tower includes more than 100 editing rooms, 10 on-air booths, and other facilities for journalists.

Entertainment programming dominates local media, and in particular Turkmen television programs are filled with entertainment. If President Berdymukhammedov 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.

Journalism is not a popular profession in Turkmenistan, because it does not allow coverage of international news and critical analysis of any situation. There is also a high risk of losing one’s job due to the system of patronage and promotion of relatives. Though, skilled journalists, with long working experience, are in better positions than newcomers, as they are seen as more reliable and skilled in proper techniques of news writing. Serious beats as such politics and economics are mostly assigned to experienced journalists, while social issues and culture go to newly hired college graduates. “The major criteria for [a journalist] are to be fluent in Turkmen and/or to have connections to high ranking officials,” another contributor stated.

OBJECTIVE 3: PLURALITY OF NEWS

Turkmenistan Objective Score: 0.20

Turkmenistan’s score for Objective 3 remained essentially unchanged compared with last year. No indicator scored much different than the objective score.

The Turkmen government funds all media outlets in the country, and controls newspapers, magazines, radio, and television stations tightly. “There are no independent media in the country. All TV stations and papers are under the authorities’ control. Internet access is a luxury for a few,” said Daniel Kislov, editor-in-chief of Ferghana Information Agency in an interview to *Sampsonia Way*, a U.S.-based online magazine.⁴

⁴ Turkmenistan: Citizen Journalism Emerges in a Silence Country.” *Sampsonia Way*, October 27, 2011. See <http://www.sampsoniaway.org/blog/2011/10/27/turkmenistan-citizen-journalism-emerges-in-a-silenced-country/> (Available as of December 12, 2011).

People are less aware about what is happening around them. Because information is power, by lacking information the people can be manipulated easily, which affects the people's ability to think, predict, and make decisions for themselves. On top of it, the country's isolation is breeding intolerance, nationalism, and religious extremism," said Anna Soltan in an interview to *Sampsonia Way*.⁵

"Citizens have no opportunity to check sources against each other, as all media outlets in Turkmenistan present only one point of view: that of the government. SMS news alerts or similar news sources do not exist in this highly oppressive country. Word of mouth is considered one of the means of getting information," Oguljamal Yazlyeva, director of Radio Azatlyk said.⁶ People get most of their information through television and satellite television. In August the president ordered the removal of satellite dishes from apartment blocks in Ashgabat in a move that could restrict access to foreign television channels. Satellite television is one of the few means by which residents of Turkmenistan can access independent channels in a country dominated by state media. "The government is seeking to curtail the consumption of satellite broadcast television by clearing satellite dishes from apartment blocks, ostensibly to 'beautify' the Ashgabat skyline," said one contributor to this study.

Currently, Turkmenistan has seven state television channels, one national radio service, 26 national and local newspapers,

⁵ Ibid

⁶ Ibid

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) exist 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 nonpartisan, 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.

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and 16 magazines. The government will launch two new television channels, Ashgabat and Sport, in January. Sport will reportedly broadcast 24 hours per day. The president also instructed the establishment of a new weekly *Oil and Gas* newspaper intended to cover various aspects of energy policy and related accomplishments in Turkmenistan.

All official information is disseminated through the state's only news agency, Turkmen Dovlet Habarlary. Neither newspapers nor other media outlets struggle to win readers, as the government compels government employees to subscribe. Those working in the state prosecutor's office, the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the Ministry of Defense are required to subscribe to the newspaper *Adalat (Justice)* and *Esger (Military)*, respectively. Those working in the medical profession must subscribe to *Saglik (Health)*, etc.

"My journalism colleagues in Turkmenistan agree that newspapers are basically there not to inform but to propagate or to misinform, because negative news are never reported. Statistics are treated as state secrets and independent research by scholars is discouraged. Access to YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter is blocked. Recently, in some Internet cafés in the cities Mary and Lebap the number of computers have been reduced under the explanation that if there are many users the speed of the Internet slows down," one contributor stated.

Turkmenistan has the slowest Internet in Central Asia, Ferghana Information Agency reported, citing Pando Network, a company specializing in delivering large quantities of online information to other companies. The Pando Network reports Turkmenistan's Internet speed is at 72 KBps.⁷ It is difficult to know the exact number of Internet users in Turkmenistan due to a lack of accurate information, however, reports range between 80,400 to 127,000 users, roughly 1.5 to 2 percent of the population. The Vienna-based Turkmen Initiative for Human Rights (TIHR) reports that the Turkmen authorities employ a variety of means to prevent its citizens

⁷ "Turkmenistan has got the slowest Internet in Central Asia" Ferghana Information Agency. November 18, 2011. See <http://enews.ferghananews.com/news.php?id=2149> (Available as of December 12, 2011).

from using the Internet freely to obtain information, interact with other users, and communicate with the outside world. French news agency Agence France-Presse (AFP) reported in 2011 that unlimited Turkmen Internet access costs nearly \$7000 per month, making it one of the most expensive in the world.

Two students were evicted from the Transportation Institute in 2011 because of their critical remarks in one of the Turkmen language chat forums. The authorities use IP tracking to locate Turkmen students abroad, Anna Soltan said in an interview.⁸

On July 18, TIHR's website was attacked and disabled by hackers. The hackers also made public information about website users including individuals inside Turkmenistan who could be in danger for having read and commented on material posted on a dissident website. The website could not be restored but was later re-launched in a new format, with archive materials gradually being added. While the hacker's identity is unknown, there is reason to believe that Turkmen security services may have been behind the attack given the fact that it came at a time when TIHR had just published a series of reports challenging the official account of the Abadan events. In connection with the Abadan events, TIHR head Farid Tukhbatullin's mother, who resides in Dashoguz city, also received visits by representatives of local authorities and noticed signs of being under surveillance.⁹

Turkmen blogs, especially within the country, are not yet common, but awareness of blogging is growing. A citizen journalist's footage of a female teacher beating a student in a Turkmen school with the heel of her shoe received many views on YouTube. In 2011 Turkmenistan experienced the emergence of citizen journalism, an unprecedented instance for the world's most isolated country. Numerous citizens dared to film the massive explosions at the military munitions depot in Abadan on July 7 and upload them to the Internet despite heavily-restricted access. A Facebook group, "The Green Revival" ("Yashyl Galkynysh"), called for a revolution in Turkmenistan, stating, "The group was created in hope that Turkmen people will someday be free from the endless dictatorship... I am calling all Turkmen students around the world to stand up against these endless rules of reckless dictators..." This Facebook page was shut down mysteriously at a later time. The *Washington Times* reported the Turkmen

⁸ Turkmenistan: Citizen Journalism Emerges in a Silence Country." Sampsonia Way, October 27, 2011. See <http://www.sampsoniaway.org/blog/2011/10/27/turkmenistan-citizen-journalism-emerges-in-a-silenced-country/> (Available as of December 12, 2011).

⁹ "Central Asia: Censorship and Control of the Internet and Other New Media" Chronicles of Turkmenistan. Turkmen Initiative for Human Rights. November 2011. See <http://www.chrono-tm.org/en/wp-content/uploads/ENG-Internet-briefing-paper-Nov-2011.pdf> (Available as of December 12, 2011).

government's crackdown social networking websites, as such Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and other regional sites as Vkontante.ru, etc.¹⁰

Nearly all mass media coverage is in the official Turkmen language. *Neutral Turkmenistan* and one magazine, *Revival*, are in Russian. *Economic News* is published in three languages (Turkmen, Russian and English). No other newspaper is published in any other minority language.

OBJECTIVE 4: BUSINESS MANAGEMENT

Turkmenistan Objective Score: 0.19

Turkmenistan's score for Objective 4 remained unchanged compared with last year's 0.14. No indicators scored particularly different from the objective score.

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. Circulation figures 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 guidelines to determine whether

¹⁰ Soltan, Anna. "Turkmen chat sites worry parents, teachers." *Washington Times*: October 21, 2011. Available at: <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2011/oct/21/turkmen-chat-sites-worry-parents-teachers/?page=all>

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.

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 reportedly developing due to an increasing number of international oil and gas companies entering the market, but specific figures are not available. If a foreign advertiser intends to access the Turkmen market, it needs to be approved by the Turkmen government. In many cases the work is done slowly and requires a 50 percent pre-payment. Sometimes it looks like Turkmen agencies are not interested in letting foreign advertisements in. Therefore, those foreign agencies that are patient enough to go through all the bureaucratic procedures get benefits from placing their advertisements on local television channels, as they are broadcast in every region of the county. Anyone can advertise in newspapers, but citizens are limited to advertising on state-run television stations. Reportedly, some international organizations have had difficulties airing some 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. Transparency International, the global civil society organization leading the fight against corruption, placed Turkmenistan in 177th place among 182 countries in the global index measuring corruption. "The really, I would say, dark situation [is] in countries like Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, where there is hardly any accountability whatsoever. The governing elites have practically no accountability," Miklos Marschall, the deputy managing director, said. "There is no political opposition. There is no civil society. There is no free press. So these are basically almost closed societies, and that's why there is no improvement."¹¹

Heritage Foundation stated that "[Turkmenistan's] government restricts foreign investment to a few handpicked partners, while the state-controlled financial system limits credit access to political favorites. Burdensome and opaque regulatory systems, the nearly complete absence of property rights, pervasive corruption, and rigid labor regulations further limit private-sector activity."¹²

¹¹ "Survey Finds Corruption Becoming Increasingly Entrenched." Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. December 1, 2011. See http://www.rferl.org/content/corruption_index_transparency_international_/24407918.html (Available as of December 12, 2011).

¹² 2011 Index of Economic Freedom (Turkmenistan). Heritage Foundation. See <http://www.heritage.org/index/country/turkmenistan> (Available as of December 12, 2011).

As the state guarantees their budgets, media outlets do not feel pressure to use more advertisements to generate revenue.

The broadcast media sector has no ratings system, and market research is non-existent.

OBJECTIVE 5: SUPPORTING INSTITUTIONS

Turkmenistan Objective Score: 0.32

Turkmenistan's score for Objective 5 did not change compared with last year. Rights to free association are restricted to the same degree as press freedoms; starting and operating an independent association is out of the question.

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 Turkmen National Institute for Democracy and Human Rights functions on paper only, with a mission of playing an ombudsman's role in resolving petitions on human rights related issues and supporting democratization. Opened in 2011, this center, funded by the European Union and the UNDP, is open to the public to support research on human rights.

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 (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.

The media sector has no need for an association of media owners, since the government is 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 media sector has no need for an association of media owners, since the government is 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. In any case, these unions would be unable to offer any kind of protection to journalists working inside the country.

Although the constitution and law provide freedom to form associations, the government restricts this right in practice. Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty reported that Lithuanian Foreign Minister Audronius Azbulis, whose country currently holds the rotating OSCE chairmanship, visited Turkmenistan in July of 2011 and urged Turkmen officials to lift restrictions for registering NGOs. The source reported quoting Azbulis as saying “There is no prospect of building democracy in Turkmenistan unless there is cooperation between the state and activists.”¹³ The law requires all NGOs 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.

¹³ “OSCE Calls On Turkmenistan To Lift Barriers For NGOs,” Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. June 02, 2011. See http://www.rferl.org/content/turkmenistan_osce_ngos/24213793.html (Available as of December 12, 2011).

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. One of the faculty members of the International Journalism program stated at the Central Asian Media Conference, held in 2009 in Bishkek, that this international journalism program offers an internship opportunity either in Russian mass media outlets or in Turkish news outlets during the summer. Yet, the MSI respondents feel it is mostly about covering international affairs through the government’s lens. The program does include foreign language training.

The government does not necessarily limit its citizens to study abroad, including getting journalism degrees; however, the last several years revealed that the authorities increased restrictions on those intending to study abroad, including those planning to study in journalism. For example, the authorities prevented citizens from studying abroad, including at the American University of Central Asia in Bishkek in 2009, at Tajikistan’s higher educational institutions in 2011, U.S.-sponsored academic exchange program participants, and other instances. “Officials from the MOE and provincial authorities sought to prevent students who were not ethnic Turkmen from entering exchange programs,” according findings in a report by the U.S. State Department.¹⁴

“Many...[Turkmen journalists] received their initial training in Turkmen institutions, either during the late Soviet period or after independence. There is much to be desired in terms of the quality of education, much to their own admission. Nevertheless, their academic programs did at least instill a certain idealism in them concerning the power of information, as well as a spirit of patriotism,” said one contributor to the MSI.

Short-term training opportunities exist, but are possible only with the support of international organizations, such as OSCE and UNDP. Some of the trainings entirely or partially focus on digital media technologies, international experience in election coverage, and human rights issues. However, it is difficult to know whether these short-term trainings involve working journalists from outside of capital city.

The Russian cell phone operator MTS was forced to leave the country in December 2010 as the Turkmen government declined to renew its license, leaving almost 2.5 million subscribers without service. Since then, state-owned Altyn Asyr (Golden Age) Turkmen Telecom remains the only cell phone service provider. “The sudden influx of a large number

¹⁴ “2010 Human Rights Report: Turkmenistan,” U.S. Department of State April 8, 2011. See <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2010/sca/154488.htm> (Available as of December 12, 2011).

of migrating MTS subscribers strained the limited capacities of Altyn Asyr. As a result, the sale of SIM cards was temporarily suspended and law enforcement troops were brought in to maintain order in the lines that formed outside the company's office."¹⁵ Later, the government reportedly signed network expansion contracts with both Huawei and Nokia Siemens Networks for an urgent upgrade of the Altyn Asyr network. Details about the network contract for Altyn Asyr have not been released.

The government owns all printing production facilities, print distribution facilities, and media distribution channels. Only some kiosks are in private hands.

List of Panel Participants

Note: Due to the repressive environment in Turkmenistan, IREX did not conduct an in-country panel. This chapter represents desk research conducted on the situation, interviews, and the results of questionnaires filled out by several people familiar with the state of media in the country.

¹⁵ "Central Asia: Censorship and Control of the Internet and Other New Media" Chronicles of Turkmenistan. Turkmen Initiative for Human Rights. November 2011. See <http://www.chrono-tm.org/en/wp-content/uploads/ENG-Internet-briefing-paper-Nov-2011.pdf> (Available as of December 12, 2011).