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TURKMENISTAN

Turkmenistan President Gurbanguly Berdymukhammedov sent mixed messages to the international community in 2014 about his country's pursuit of democratic governance. Specifically, Berdymukhammedov stated that he wanted the Turkmen constitution to be revised to meet international standards, with the creation of a human-rights ombudsman post that would provide better legal protection for citizens. He also promised absolute media freedom in 2013 by passing the country's first media law since it gained independence in 1991. However, the Turkmen government continued to restrict its citizens' freedom of movement, expression, and belief. Various international watchdog organizations continue to label Turkmenistan as "the most corrupt nation" (Transparency International), "the most repressed" (Heritage Foundation), and "the least free" (Reporters without Borders). In 2014, the U.S. State Department listed Turkmenistan among the countries of particular concern due to its egregious human-rights record, particularly with regard to religious freedom.

President Berdymukhammedov is currently serving his second five-year term after being re-elected in February 2012. Since becoming president, he has purportedly improved the living standard of some Turkmenistan citizens and has worked to modernize the country. Despite the country's substantial wealth due to gas and oil reserves, it continues to face high unemployment. Turkmenistan currently sells gas to China and Iran and is part of the proposed Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India natural gas pipeline (TAPI) project, funded by the Asian Development Bank and set to be completed in 2017.

Turkmenistan's authorities continue to maintain absolute control over mass media outlets throughout the country. In 2014, London-based Privacy International reported that Turkmenistan and other Central Asian governments had purchased sophisticated Western surveillance technology to monitor the work of activists and journalists living both inside the country and abroad. As discussed in previous MSI reports, Turkmenistan continues to monitor Internet activity, including Skype conversations and chats. Social networking tools, such as Facebook and Twitter, remained blocked in 2014, as did Gmail.

In terms of MSI scores, Turkmenistan remains among the worst as far as the media's ability to inform the public with useful and relevant information. Four of the five objective scores do not exceed three-tenths of a point (0.30) on a scale of 0 to 4. The exception, Objective 2, scored 0.49 because of the quality and modernity of Turkmenistan's media equipment and facilities.

IREX did not conduct an in-country panel discussion because of Turkmenistan's repressive environment. This chapter represents desk research, interviews, and the result of questionnaires filled out by several people familiar with the state of media in the country.

TURKMENISTAN at a glance

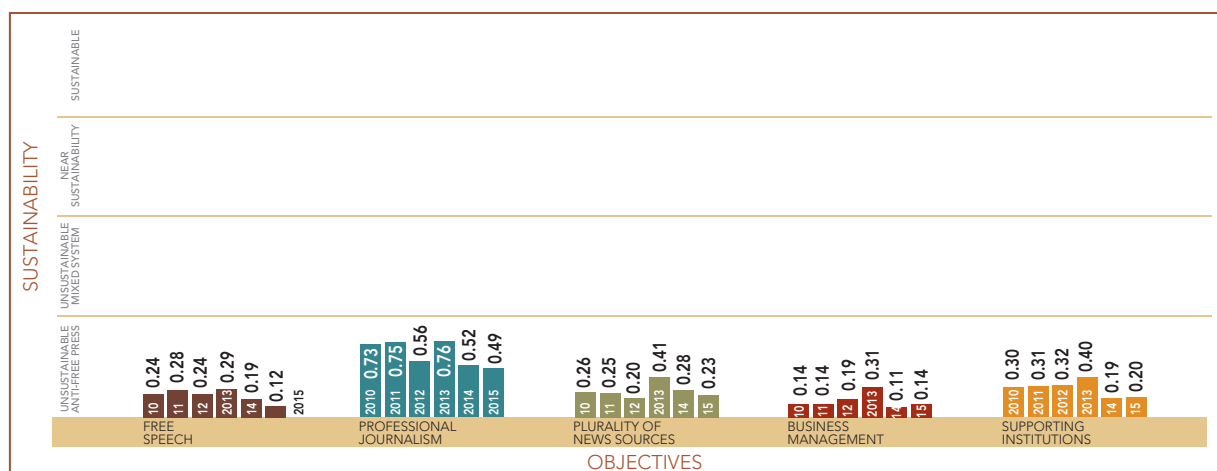
GENERAL

- > Population: 5,171,943 (July 2014 est. *CIA World Factbook*)
- > Capital City: Ashgabat
- > Ethnic groups: Turkmen 85%, Uzbek 5%, Russian 4%, other 6% (2003 est. *CIA World Factbook*)
- > Religions: (% of population) Muslim 89%, Eastern Orthodox 9%, unknown 2% (*CIA World Factbook*)
- > Languages: Turkmen (official) 72%, Russian 12%, Uzbek 9%, other 7% (*CIA World Factbook*)
- > GNI (2013-Atlas): \$36.05 billion (World Bank Development Indicators, 2014)
- > GNI per capita (2013-PPP): \$12,920 (World Bank Development Indicators, 2014)
- > President or top authority: President Gurbanguly Berdimukhammedov (since February 14, 2007)

MEDIA-SPECIFIC

- > Number of active media outlets: Print: 26 national and local newspapers, 17 magazines, Radio Stations 5; Television Stations; 7
- > Newspaper circulation statistics: The top two newspapers by circulation are *Neutral Turkmenistan* (Russian, English language state owned daily), *Turkmenistan* (Turkmen language daily)
- > Broadcast ratings: N/A
- > News agencies: Turkmen Dowlet Habarlary (state owned)
- > Annual advertising revenue in media sector: N/A
- > Internet usage: 2% (80,000–100,000 users) according to 2010 International Telecommunications Union estimates

MEDIA SUSTAINABILITY INDEX: TURKMENISTAN



MEDIA SUSTAINABILITY INDEX 2015: OVERALL AVERAGE SCORES



CHANGE SINCE 2014

▲ (increase greater than .10) □ (little or no change) ▼ (decrease greater than .10)

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.

Scores for all years may be found online at http://www.irex.org/system/files/EE_msiscores.xls

OBJECTIVE 1: FREEDOM OF SPEECH

Turkmenistan Objective Score: 0.12

Turkmenistan's score for Objective 1, 0.12, reflects the government's continuous control over the freedom of speech and the press. It scored slightly lower than last year, an indication of the country's deteriorating media environment despite a promising new mass media law.

Turkmenistan's current constitution was adopted on September 28, 2008, and on paper fully protects the freedom of speech and expression. In 2014, the country's president once again tasked Speaker of the Mejlis (Parliament) Akja Nurberdieva with conducting constitutional reforms to align Turkmen legislation with international standards. He previously altered the country's constitution in 2007. President Berdymukhammedov noted that Turkmenistan must establish a human-rights ombudsman post and expand the powers of self-governing bodies in the region. Specifically, he noted that particular attention should be paid to strengthening judicial protection of citizens' rights and freedoms and increasing mutual responsibility of individuals and the state. These overtures have been met with skepticism, as many citizens remain unaware of their constitutional rights. The government has never conducted public-awareness campaigns, either via

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.

media outlets or through other means, to educate citizens about legal changes that affect them on a daily basis. It is widely believed that the Turkmen government controls citizens by deliberately withholding information from them. "People in Turkmenistan may lack not just the information but the very cognitive tools to think," said one panelist.

In his December 2014 article, the BBC's Abduljalil Abdurasulov quoted Rachel Denber, deputy director of the Central Asia Division of Human Rights Watch: "There is no freedom of expression, no freedom of association, and no freedom of religion." Denber added that "[Turkmenistan] is a country where people live in fear of the authorities at every level...even if it is something as simple as getting an air conditioner in the summertime."

Even Turkmenistan citizens who have some knowledge of their constitutional rights generally keep silent to avoid punishment for attempting to exercise their freedom of speech and expression, even on non-sensitive matters. In 2014, there were several documented attempts of citizens asserting their rights. For example, residents in one village in the suburbs of Ashgabat demanded the reopening of an access road from the village to the capital. According to Chromo-tm.org, the government tried to combat growing crime by using concrete blocks and digging trenches to block the road into the capital. Radio Free Europe (RFE)/Radio Liberty (RL) also reported a similar incident in which dozens of Turkmens took part in a rare street protest in November against the removal of air conditioners from their apartment windows in Ashgabat's Parahat-7 neighborhood. The citizens protested because Ashgabat's summer temperatures can often reach 50 degrees Celsius. City officials provided no reason for removing the air conditioners.

No legal protection or assistance is available when free-speech violations occur. The National Institute of Democracy and Human Rights reportedly has been established under Turkmenistan's president to demonstrate to the international community that Turkmenistan is committed to its "pursuit of democracy." International organizations regularly sponsor trips for Turkmen specialists to foreign countries to provide them with the tools and international standards for protecting human rights. In November 2014, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) sent representatives of the National Institute of Democracy and Human Rights to Brussels to introduce international practices in protecting human rights. It is unclear if these trips have rendered positive results, as Turkmenistan's judicial system continues to circumvent the public interest and serve only government

“Access to public information in Turkmenistan is impossible for both media and the people,” said one panelist, adding that there is limited information on health, education, public expenditures, budgets, and state procurements.

interests. The rights protected by Turkmenistan’s constitution and mass media laws are dismissed in practice.

“Authorities detain anyone they desire, assigning their own lawyers to protect the interests of both parties,” said one panelist. He added that there is a government judge and a show trial, which culminates in the imprisonment of the journalist without due process.

The recent media law, which came into effect on January 4, 2013, promised a full commitment to freedom of speech and expression and an end to any form of censorship. The law states that Turkmen citizens have the right to use all forms of media to express their opinions and beliefs, and to seek, receive, and impart information. On December 29, 2014, a new Internet law also came into effect. It was “intended to ensure free access to the World Wide Web for the country’s Internet users” but also makes it illegal for citizens to insult or slander the president. “It is conceptually unclear if this is restricted to the sitting president, Berdymukhammedov, or to the presidency as a whole,” said one panelist. The law also restricts access to information containing material that encourages minors to use narcotics, alcohol, and tobacco products or to view sites that reject family values, foment disrespect for parents, and condone illegal behavior. It also bans access to pornographic sites. More details are still emerging about Turkmenistan’s new Internet law. In early January, the OSCE press release raised some concerns about the law’s restrictions; for example, users are liable for the truthfulness of all information they post and for imprecisely defined propaganda of violence and cruelty. “These restrictions are vaguely defined [and] can have a negative effect on the free flow of information and free expression on the Internet,” noted OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media Dunja Mijatović. Despite the increased use of mobile Internet and technologies, Internet activity remains heavily monitored.

As in past years, mass media outlets are required to obtain a government license to function in Turkmenistan. The law allows any local authority, political party, public association, government association, or legal entity that has been

in existence for at least 18 years—or citizen 18 years old or older—to establish an outlet in the country. 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 citizens or corporations, on the other hand, must pay 100 times the amount of the estimated monthly wage.

The State Publishing Association, Turkmenmetbugat, issues licenses approved by the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the Cabinet of Ministers. The ministries can reject applicants for a variety of reasons. The licensing process is subjective and not transparent. Due to Turkmenistan’s secretive environment, it was not possible to determine whether any news outlet applied for a license in 2014. Licensing is generally used to silence any potential independent news outlet in the country. Previous MSIs have reported that RFE/RL’s Turkmen Service has applied for a license for many years but has never been able to obtain one. It is difficult to know if any other news outlets have attempted to register in the country.

All of the country’s mass media outlets are registered as institutions rather than businesses because the government fully funds all expenses. Turkmenistan’s president regularly reprimands chief editors of news outlets for poor performance. On January 11, 2014, he criticized Turkmen television, magazine, newspaper, and radio outlet editors, saying, “You work in isolation from real life.” The president added that the press “fails to widely promote and popularize the great achievements of Turkmenistan.” During the same meeting, he criticized the performance of Maksat Altayev, chairman of the State Committee for Television, Radio, and Cinematography. The president often points out poor performance without providing details. For example, Turkmenistan.ru reported that he dismissed several officials on January 10, 2015, because of “serious shortcomings in their work” without providing any further details. It is clear that the president continues his 2014 practice of removing media outlet editors without due diligence or explanation. The president also fired Begench Abayev, director of the Altyn Asyr television channel, in November 2014 for his alleged “poor performance.”

Turkmenistan remains a dangerous country for independent journalists, and crimes against them are not rare. In 2014, they faced many challenges while reporting in Turkmenistan. “No one is sure where the link is between the acceptable and unacceptable when it comes to reporting in Turkmenistan. And most times, the only way to find out is to try to do a report and see if the police or security forces arrive,” wrote Bruce Pannier, an RFE/RL correspondent who covers events in Central Asia.

Soltan Achilova, a correspondent for RFE/RL (locally known as Azatlyk), was taken to the Kopet Dag District police station for questioning. On December 13, she attempted to shoot several photographs and report on long lines of people waiting to buy fresh meat in Ashgabat because of an alleged public conversation that fresh meat was scarce at most places in Turkmenistan. Achilova was released an hour or so later after her photographs were deleted. In 2014, RFE/RL reported on at least four similar incidences in which Azatlyk correspondents were questioned but did not reveal the correspondents' names and other details. "Turkmenistan does not receive as much attention as many of these other places, but the commitment and hardship of Azatlyk correspondents is not less than that of their colleagues in Eastern Europe, the Caucasus, Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan," wrote RFE/RL.

Any criticism of the government is absolutely not allowed. "The government makes it absolutely impossible to have any kind of alternative. And the price of pursuing those alternatives is long prison sentences and possibly worse," said Denber in a BBC news story. In December 2014, Turkmen journalist Gulshen Ashirova was reportedly attacked and killed in her apartment in the capital city of Ashgabat, according to several news outlets. Ashirova collaborated with numerous international news outlets, including *The Times of Central Asia*, BBC, Associated Press, and many others. The details of her death are unknown; as such crimes are always unreported in Turkmenistan media outlets.

The Turkmen government funds and operates all media outlets except for *Rysgal* newspaper, which is identified as nongovernmental. It was launched by the Union of Industrialists and Entrepreneurs and is highly publicized by the president himself. In October 2014, he gave *Rysgal's* editor, Guljemal Gurbanova, the state award "Garashsyzlyk" (Independence), according to the InfoAbad.com website. The official government website, turkmenistan.gov.tm, states that this award honors individuals who significantly contribute to the successful implementation of state development programs and who demonstrate creativity, organizational skills, and high professionalism. In the past, the Turkmen president himself was the founder of all newspapers and periodicals in the country. In 2013, it was reported that he ordered all news outlets to seek new founders. For example, the Cabinet of Ministers was designated as the founder of the governmental newspaper *Turkmenistan* and national daily newspaper *Neutral Turkmenistan* while the Ministry of Education became the founder of *Mugallym (Teachers)* newspaper.

As in past years, 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 up to 30 months' pay. In practice, libel and invasion of privacy are not concerns among journalists in Turkmenistan, because controls on media are so strict that journalists have no chance to publish or air critical or invasive content.

Government officials control the release of all information. There is only one government-owned state news agency, Turkmen Dowlet Habarlary (Turkmen State News Agency). "Access to public information in Turkmenistan is impossible for both media and the people," said one panelist, adding that there is limited information on health, education, public expenditures, budgets, and state procurements. The government "justifies" its behavior, according to one panelist, by saying that the Turkmen people are not "ready" to receive information. The presidential administration or specially designated officials from the regions must approve in advance all interviews with government officials. The government also holds exclusive oversight on press accreditation. The government grants visas to foreign journalists to visit Turkmenistan to cover only specific events, such as international oil and gas conferences and other summits where officials can closely monitor the activities of foreign journalists. For example, the BBC's Abdurasulov was granted rare access to Turkmenistan to attend the international oil and gas conference, held in Ashgabat in November 2014, alongside EuroNews TV, which the Turkmen government also invited.

As in past years, Turkmenistan's mass media outlets are rarely allowed to use international news sources, despite the fact that there is no such restriction by law. The outlets use international stories only if they cover non-sensitive issues or Turkmenistan's achievements. For example, Turkmen news outlets widely reported on Turkmenistan's initiative at the UN General Assembly in 2014 concerning international cooperation on transport/transit corridors and energy security. Sometimes the country's mass media outlets reprint or rebroadcast general-interest stories from Internet sites and other foreign news outlets but do not provide any credit.

The Turkmen government considers journalists to be only those who work for the country's state-owned news outlets. It does not recognize independent journalists, bloggers, and other citizen journalists; therefore, such individuals fulfill their tasks secretly and cooperate with foreign news outlets in clandestine ways. Government regulations do not prevent the practice of journalism by those of a certain gender or ethnic, religious, or other demographic group. However,

ethnic minorities are discriminated in practice—not only in journalism but also in all other elements of life.

“Journalists who are critical of the government are blacklisted and prevented from traveling within the country or abroad. They also face very real challenges in finding alternative employment. There have also been cases of police harassment and imprisonment in psychiatric hospitals,” said one panelist. Theoretically, Turkmen citizens are free to choose their profession, including journalism; however, many practical obstacles exist to prevent people from choosing such a profession. For example, anyone who wants to enter an academic journalism program must have some connection with high-ranking officials to be able to gain entrance. A panelist noted that one must be an “ethical Turkmen”—that is, connected to a high-ranking official and able to present a large sum of cash to bribe the decision-makers. In the past, the president would instruct universities to place cameras in examination rooms to combat corruption. In July 2014, a Russian-language newspaper described the use of cameras to record exams; however, cameras offer little, if any, help in combatting corruption during the university acceptance process. A panelist noted that the president once dismissed an entire class of first-year students at Turkmen State University because they consisted only of ministers’ sons and daughters.

OBJECTIVE 2: PROFESSIONAL JOURNALISM

Turkmenistan Objective Score: 0.49

Turkmenistan’s score for Objective 2 is 0.49 out of 4.00, about the same as last year’s 0.52, indicating the country’s lack of progress in improving professional standards. Indicator 7 (facilities and equipment for gathering, producing, and distributing news are modern and efficient) received the highest score among all 40 indicators among the five objectives due to government expenditure on modern equipment, including that for printing and editing, for the state-owned mass media outlets. However, indicator 1 (objective, well-sourced reporting exists), indicator 2 (professional journalists follow ethical standards), indicator 3 (media serve the public interest), and indicator 8 (quality niche reporting and programming exist) received the lowest possible score.

As in past years, the journalism profession remains highly controlled by the state, as journalists are tasked to produce only pro-government news stories. “Unfortunately, it is hard to say whether the people working for Turkmen TV channels and press could be defined as journalists. Most of

them identify themselves as ‘servants of government’ and ‘promoters of state policy’ who promote the president’s agenda and ideas,” said one panelist. The panelist added that many of these journalists are “relatively well paid” and are “provided with free housing and other social benefits.”

Objective reporting is unheard of in Turkmenistan. According to one panelist, the “professional skills of journalists are extremely poor,” particularly with regard to the “correct use of modern technologies” for gathering and reporting news. “Most reporters in print media and TV have neither knowledge nor skills in using the Internet for journalism, including searching the news, aggregating, or verifying. A lot of journalists have no idea how to use e-mail,” said another panelist.

Turkmen journalists who work for the state media outlets conduct no background research for stories, as doing so may reveal information that they may not be allowed to print or air. Certain topics, such as human rights, minority issues, gender equality, and restrictions on religion and other civil liberties, are prohibited. The panelists stated that it is difficult to judge whether specific mediums, such as television, are better or worse than print at following professional standards, as virtually all media outlets distribute the same set of stories authorized and released by Turkmen Dowlet Habarlary (Turkmen State News Agency). Technical experts, such as economists and health professionals, are not consulted for stories. Instead, they are regularly asked to praise the president for his “accomplishments” in their areas of expertise. As in past years, public-interest stories are never reported.

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).

There are no organizations or associations in Turkmenistan that develop or regulate ethical standards. One panelist noted that there are ethical standards developed within the Turkmen press; however, they do not meet international standards and focus on promoting government rhetoric. Therefore, there is no accountability with regard to how journalists cover news stories. Journalists tend to receive special treatment for their reporting and accept gifts (such as Turkmen carpets) in recognition of their coverage. Journalists in Turkmenistan do not distinguish between news reporting and opinion pieces, thus making it difficult for the average reader/viewer to differentiate between fact and opinion. One panelist noted that “all reports are commentary.” As in past years, plagiarism has become a common practice for Turkmen media outlets, and it is unclear whether Turkmen journalists are taught the concept of plagiarism as part of their university education.

Turkmenistan’s restrictive media environment encourages journalists and editors to practice self-censorship rather than risk losing their jobs and well-being. Editors are fully aware of what topics might attract negative attention from government officials and therefore assign journalists only with news stories that would be approved by the president. “In a lot of cases, reporters just rewrite official releases, and these rewritten pieces also are subject to further approval,” one panelist stated. The State Committee for Protection of State Secrets oversees the release of information to news outlets.

Pay levels for journalists and other media professionals are sufficient to discourage corruption because the government has regularly increased salaries. One panelist noted that there is no bribery among Turkmen journalists and that salaries have increased by 10 percent since January 1, 2015—at least the fourth consecutive year in which salaries have grown by that amount. On the other hand, the state in fact controls journalists’ salary, official gifts, and benefits such as housing.

All journalists work for the government-controlled media outlets and receive standard salaries; thus, they do not need to work multiple jobs to meet their living expenses. Freelance journalists who write for the state-controlled news outlets receive small payments for each publication. Journalists generally tend to get paid more than other professionals in Turkmenistan, such as teachers and civil servants. However, one panelist disagreed, saying that journalists’ salaries are average.

Turkmenistan citizens are not in a position to access information at their leisure. They typically obtain the daily news by watching the 15- to 20-minute “Watan” news program. If the president gives a speech or attends an event,

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this program can last up to several hours, depending on the event. “Watan” airs at 9 am, 12 pm, and 3 pm, and these three broadcasts are usually reruns of the previous day’s news stories. The latest news is presented only at 9 pm in Turkmenistan.

President Berdymukhammedov has been instructing the government to improve Turkmen news outlet facilities by purchasing advanced technologies, including printing equipment, editing systems, and television studios. Recently, Turkmen State Publishing Services procured a new, modern printing house in Ashgabat, which is scheduled to formally open in 2015. This new printing house is meant to help develop the printing industry, increase circulation of newspapers, magazines, and books, and improve the quality of publications and services. “Media production facilities are top-notch and reaching Western levels of sophistication,” said one panelist. Despite the increased use of modern technologies to help improve the production and distribution of news, the quality of journalism in Turkmenistan has not improved.

Turkmen journalists are not trained to cover niche issues, such as education, culture, and politics. Instead, they are assigned to cover certain beats despite their qualifications and/or background. In fact, Turkmen journalists are trained to be loyal rather than learn professional skills as part of the university curriculum. Entertainment programming dominates the media outlets by running concerts and talk shows dedicated to praising the president. In 2014, Turkmen news outlets highlighted the president’s transportation agenda and his attempts to link the country with neighboring/regional countries via railways, sea and air routes, and motorways, in addition to providing coverage of the gas pipelines. For example, Turkmenistan opened railways linking Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, and Iran that give these countries access to the Persian Gulf. Turkmenistan also has been involved in ongoing discussions about the Turkmenistan-Azerbaijan-Georgia-Turkey transport project that would connect these countries. According to several news outlets citing the Turkmen Dowlet Habarlary (Turkmen State News Agency), Turkmenistan opened sea routes

to Russia and Azerbaijan, along with new air routes to several foreign countries, including Germany, Saudi Arabia, Italy, Malaysia, Vietnam, and Canada via Latvia (pending). Another major story that the Turkmen press reported in 2014 was the country's preparation for the Asian Indoor and Martial Arts Games, which it will host in 2017. The games are widely covered by Turkmen mass media outlets. Turkmenistan will introduce MasterCard banking services and is planning to open Wi-Fi spots, a new international airport, and a new Olympic village. It will provide live television coverage of these sporting events.

OBJECTIVE 3: PLURALITY OF NEWS

Turkmenistan Objective Score: 0.23

Turkmenistan's score for Objective 3 is 0.23, roughly the same as last year's 0.28. This low score highlights that, as in past years, the media sector remains under the state's control. Indicator 3 (media serve the public interest) received the lowest possible score, reflecting the total control placed over media by the government and its use as a tool to serve government ends.

All media outlets in Turkmenistan continue to present only one point of view. According to a RIA Novosti article in January 2014, the Turkmen president is unhappy with the quality of news in his country, as all Turkmen media outlets reprint Turkmen Dowlet Habarlary (Turkmen State News Agency) releases rather than produce content from

their own authors. Turkmenistan citizens are not able to check sources against each other, nor do they have access to (sanctioned) alternative sources of information. Media outlets are not allowed to have multiple points of view and absolutely disregard public interests. The only so-called private newspaper, *Rysgal*, opened in 2010 on the instruction of the president himself. The paper is officially owned by the Union of Industrialists and Entrepreneurs, a pro-government business association. Turkmenistan has mandatory policies that require its citizens, especially college students and state employees, to consume pro-government news stories.

Although the number of mobile phone users is increasing, media outlets do not possess mobile capabilities to distribute news. According to the panelists, it is difficult to determine the exact number of mobile phone users in Turkmenistan due to a lack of information, but there are approximately 3.5 million to 4.3 million users. This signifies a high mobile penetration rate for a population roughly estimated at 5 million.

There are seven state television channels, one national radio station, 26 national and local newspapers, and 17 magazines, all owned by the state. Russia's Perviy Kanal (Channel One) is re-broadcast by Turkmen television for two hours a day, though only recorded; often dated entertainment programs are shown. Before releasing Russian television programs on air, the Turkmen government thoroughly reviews their content. It broadcasts outdated and mostly entertainment programs from Russian television channels. For example, reports covering the Ukraine crisis and western sanctions against Russia were removed. In 2013, Turkmenistan launched a website of the Turkmen Dowlet Habarlary (Turkmen State News Agency) for people around the world to access online. However, the website has been experiencing technical issues, and these channels are unavailable.

People obtain most of their information through domestic and satellite television. Satellite television is one of the few means by which Turkmenistan residents can access independent channels in a country dominated by state-controlled media. Rich households have satellite dishes and access to Russian and Turkish television, as well as foreign broadcasters, such as BBC, CNN, and Al Jazeera. Despite the availability of these programs, access requires a special device. The panelists could not present evidence to support whether these channels are blocked. However, access to these channels remains available mostly to wealthy Turkmens and/or government officials in their private apartments. Also, U.S. Embassy-sponsored "American Corners" (educational centers) around the country have television sets available for the public. These centers broadcast foreign news channels and appear not

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.

to be censored by Turkmen officials. However, because of language barriers, older and urban residents rely on Russian television for news, while younger and rural citizens with satellite access may turn to Turkish channels for entertainment. As reported in previous years, television and radio are often the only sources of information (when the power is not out) because newspapers are not delivered to villages that are too far from cities.

Media outlets are not open to alternative views and comments by non-approved individuals, including citizens and even government officials. Editors and journalists see their roles as serving state goals and policies rather than public interests. All media outlets spend a predominant amount of time/space reporting only on the president and his policies.

Official information is disseminated through the state's only news agency, Turkmen Dowlet Habarlary (Turkmen State News Agency). "All traditional media in the country are integrated into the state propaganda machine," said one panelist, and all news stories in Turkmen media are subject to approval processes that result in publication delays. For example, if an event takes place on a Monday morning and is submitted to the state news agency the next day, the piece is picked up by Turkmenistan.gov.tm and then finally republished by other media on Wednesday or Thursday. One panelist reinforced that the selection of topics focuses on government interests and not "on the people's needs."

As reported in previous years, state media outlets do not compete to win readers. Turkmens who work at the state prosecutor's office, the Ministry of Internal Affairs, and the Ministry of Defense, for example, are required to subscribe to the newspapers *Adalat (Justice)* and *Esger (Military)*. Those in the medical profession must subscribe to *Saglyk (Health)*. Interestingly, staff at the Ministry of Culture must subscribe to *Medeniyet (Culture)* magazine, which is printed in Turkmen, English, and Russian. The State Committee of Turkmenistan for Tourism and Sport publishes *Turkmen Sporty* newspaper and *Siyahat (Tourism)*, whose customers are also primarily government employees. If an industry does not offer a magazine subscription and/or newspapers, state employees are still required to subscribe to a publication from the available selection. For example, construction industry workers are forced to select two or three newspaper titles from those available and pay for the subscriptions out of their monthly salaries. One panelist noted that the "system" of "forced subscriptions" is a "flourishing" enterprise.

Government media outlets do produce their own programs and news content because there does not seem to be a shortage of funding from the state budget. However, there

Satellite television is one of the few means by which Turkmenistan residents can access independent channels in a country dominated by state-controlled media.

is little creativity from television channels and radio stations. Most of the content on television channels appears to be traditional Turkmen culture, music, dancing, performance art, etc.

Turkmenistan citizens know that the Turkmen government owns and controls the media outlets and do not know what it means to have independent media. There is no foreign investment in media in the country. Turkmenistan heavily restricts Internet access and blocks content from numerous websites and social networks, opposition websites, general news websites in Russian, sites about religion, and e-mail services such as Gmail. The most popular Internet sites and services, such as Facebook, Google, and YouTube, remain blocked. "The spread of mobile Internet has brought some changes, allowing Turkmen citizens to interact with the outside world. But all Internet activity is monitored. You need to register and present your passport when buying a Sim card or going to an Internet café. And most social media and opposition websites are blocked," said BBC correspondent Abdurasulov.

One panelist noted that "opposition websites and major news websites" are periodically accessible in the country, but "users fear that the government is potentially watching every online move." Another panelist stated that "citizens' access to domestic or international media, although not exactly restricted in principle under the law, is restricted in practice by social-economic conditions, forms of censorship—up to and including a nighttime knock on the door—and self-regulation." With regard to the blogosphere, the Turkmen editor of the new website NewEurasia.Net, Anna Soltan, said that Turkmen journalists have two options. The first is to work for Turkmen media outlets, and the second is to blog about music, football, cooking, and other hobbies for fun—in other words, all non-political topics.

Generally, Turkmen citizens are able to get news and information about their hometown and other regions of the country, but it depends on what is released by the Turkmen Dowlet Habarlary (Turkmen State News Agency). "Government websites are slowly developing; for example, only this year the Ministry of Justice started a website with a database of the addresses of the offices in the regions and in the capital. Most of the ministries' websites just have

If a foreign organization wishes to place an advertisement, it must gain government approval. In many cases, it could take up to a month or so before the advertisement is approved, and 50 percent of the payment is required upfront.

quotes of the Turkmen president and in some cases don't have even contact info and information about the minister. The legislative (parliament) and judiciary (courts) branches of power are not present online at all," said one panelist. International news is nonexistent in Turkmen media outlets, and therefore the average Turkmen citizen is ignorant about international news. "Foreign news topics usually cover international initiatives of President Berdymukhammedov or his visits abroad," noted one panelist.

OBJECTIVE 4: BUSINESS MANAGEMENT

Turkmenistan Objective Score: 0.14

Turkmenistan's score for Objective 4 is 0.14, about the same as last year's 0.11. Indicator 3 (advertising market) received the highest of all because of an advertising market that is growing due to increased investments from international companies. However, indicators 1 (media outlets operate efficiently), 5 (editorial independence), and 7 (audience measurement) all received the lowest possible score.

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.

As discussed previously, Turkmenistan's mass media outlets are under strict government control and fully financed by the state budget. Print sales are garnered almost entirely through mandatory subscriptions for state employees. Aside from advertising by some international companies, donors, and a very few domestic services providers, media outlets are not involved in commercial activities. They do not have business plans that help them to secure independent funding, make decisions on expenditures and personnel, or plan for capital expenditures. The reason is simple: the state determines each outlet's budget, and the president appoints and dismisses editors-in-chief. These budgets are not known to the public. The government provides no transparency guidelines to mass media outlets to help them determine their personnel policies. Personnel policies are not in place to appoint the right people to perform tasks and determine the proper amount of human resources. It is widely known that individuals are appointed based on their loyalty rather than their skills and experience.

Turkmenistan's advertising industry appears to be slowly developing due to an increasing number of oil and gas companies and international companies entering the market, as well as international companies in the construction industry. According to Trend.az, the Turkmen president stated in October that Turkmenistan was implementing about two thousand construction projects totaling over \$45 billion, including oil and gas fields, multinational gas pipelines, a new airport, highways, and a brand-new Olympic complex with 40 new facilities in preparation for hosting the 2017 Asian Indoor and Martial Arts Games. "Classified ads" are becoming a possible source of revenue for online media, according to one panelist. Banner ads have also started to appear on online news sites, such as Ashgabad.net. However, no advertising-industry data are available. Advertising through the Internet and mobile devices has yet to be seen in Turkmenistan. If a foreign organization wishes to place an advertisement, it must gain government approval. In many cases, it could take up to a month or so before the advertisement is approved, and 50 percent of the payment is required upfront.

Most people do not buy newspapers and/or magazines because their content is dull and full of praise for the president, according to the panelists. One common form of content from public consumers is lost-and-found advertisements. Even an innocuous ad for a lost university diploma in a particular part of town must be carefully worded, as it can be seen as political. Instead of saying that someone has lost a diploma and is asking for it to be returned if found, the ad gets printed as saying that someone has lost a diploma and that the document is no longer valid and must be replaced.

Media managers do not feel pressured to use advertisements. In fact, media outlets' advertising departments often wait passively for potential advertisers to seek ad placements, reflecting the fact that media outlets rely on the state budget as their primary source of funding.

Market research is not used to formulate strategic plans and tailor products to the needs and interests of the audience. Turkmen institutions do not offer classes to help strengthen research skills and therefore seriously lack specialists to undertake market research. The panelists simply stated that research is prohibited.

The broadcast media sector has no ratings system. Observational evidence suggests that most Turkmen prefer Russian television programming to their own, if they can access it. Each print publication reports circulation assessments. However, these data indicate only the number of copies printed.

OBJECTIVE 5: SUPPORTING INSTITUTIONS

Turkmenistan Objective Score: 0.20

Turkmenistan's score for Objective 5 is 0.20, nearly identical to last year's 0.19. Indicator 3 (NGOs support free speech and independent media) received the highest score among Objective 5 indicators. This is apparently due to OSCE's ongoing trainings to educate Turkmen journalists. However, indicators 1 (associations representing media interests exist),

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.

2 (professional associations protect journalists' rights), and 6 (sources of media facilities are not politicized and monopolized) received the lowest possible scores.

Turkmenistan still has no trade or professional associations that represent media interests, provide member services, or work to protect journalists' rights. The government-run National Institute of Democracy and Human Rights under the President of Turkmenistan plays its ombudsman role on paper only, and there are no reports that can describe the institute's accomplishments.

The media sector has no need for an association of media owners because the government is the only owner. Two unions for journalists used to operate in Turkmenistan, but it is difficult to know whether they function or what specific activities, if any, they undertake these days. The Union of Journalists of Turkmenistan was initially established in 1958 to unite professional journalists and provide various social, professional, and educational benefits, including internships for younger journalists. The union had several sections, including one for translators and photographers, and branches in major cities. However, the union was re-registered in 1992 with a charter that included "the protection of journalists' interests against state and public organizations, founders, and publishers of the media." The other union that used to operate in Turkmenistan was the Shamsyrag Association of Journalists of Turkmenistan. According to the USAID website, it appeared to have its last activity in 2001. At that time, it conducted two seminars for journalists, funded by the U.S. Embassy in Ashgabat, and one public presentation about its members' participation in a Moscow seminar on new technology, among other smaller projects. The fact that these exist only on paper makes little difference, as they would be unable to offer any real protection to journalists working inside the country. Recent incidents, such as those involving Achilova and other unnamed journalists of Azatlyk (discussed in Objective 1) demonstrate that these associations are either practically or legally non-existent.

As in past years, Turkmenistan's constitution and laws provide freedom to form associations, but the government restricts this right in practice. 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 NGOs' activity is punishable by fines, short-term detentions, and confiscation. The Turkmen government continues to deny registrations to NGOs and private organizations, using subjective criteria. Several years ago, the government even responded to a

“The overall situation is getting darker,” said another panelist, referring to the international community’s declining support for the promotion of independent media in Turkmenistan and overall in Central Asia.

foreign NGO’s attempt to register by stating that it “will not tolerate” the organization’s “activities in this country.”

In 2013, Turkmenistan’s president instructed the creation of a state commission to supervise all foreign-funded projects and programs functioning in the country. However, no update was provided in 2014 about whether the commission has accomplished anything. Activity is anticipated in 2015, as neighboring countries (e.g., Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan) have already debated publicly—and are set to adopt—laws modeled after Russia’s that formally restrict NGO funding and labels those receiving foreign funding as “foreign agents.”

The Turkmen government requires that founders of associations be citizens of Turkmenistan and that associations operating domestically have at least 500 members to be registered. Other barriers include regulations that permit the Ministry of Justice to send representatives to association events and meetings, as well as regulations that require associations to notify the government about their planned activities.

After gaining independence, the government closed journalism programs and re-introduced them in 2008. Since then, coursework and programs have been offered at the Institute of International Relations of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Turkmenistan. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs controls who gets accepted into its international journalism program. In 2014, the president opened a new International University of the Humanities and Development in Ashgabat, which enrolls two thousand students. The university teaches exclusively in English and offers degrees in journalism, information and communications technologies, and other subjects.

There are no legal restrictions for students who wish to earn journalism degrees abroad. Those who study journalism in foreign countries typically do not return to Turkmenistan to use their skills and knowledge. In fact, most of these students do not even attempt to get a job even if they are in Turkmenistan. Not only will they be rejected for job

opportunities, but they also will be suspected of cooperating with foreign news outlets.

Short-term training opportunities exist, but they are possible only with the support of international organizations, such as the OSCE, UN, EU, and some foreign embassies in Turkmenistan. In 2014, the OSCE organized numerous trainings for experts within the Turkmen parliament, working journalists, journalism lecturers, and specialists at the State Committee for Television, Radio, and Cinematography. In February 2014, for example, the OSCE conducted trainings in journalism curriculum development for instructors at the Institute of International Relations of Turkmenistan’s Foreign Ministry and the Turkmen State University. It also conducted trainings for lawmakers on how to draft media [Internet] legislation and for working journalists on how to use new communications technologies. The OSCE also convened a roundtable on broadcasting regulations with experts from the Turkmen parliament. In October 2014, it sponsored a trip to Lithuania for a group of Turkmen journalists. Despite the government’s willingness to improve the quality of journalism in Turkmenistan, Turkmen officials maintain control over who can attend trainings organized and funded by international organizations. According to the panelists, the OSCE is a diplomatic mission working under special regulations and must confer with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Turkmenistan about every planned event. The Turkmenistan government’s cooperation with the OSCE creates the illusion of its commitment to international standards. The trainings were held only in the capital city of Turkmenistan and were not open to citizen journalists or the general public.

“There is not enough money from [international] funders to run [independent media],” said a panelist. “There has been continued downsizing and restructuring in several major funding agencies, most notably the Open Society Foundations, which shut down its Central Eurasia Program... Other funders, such as HIVOS, which had been active in Central Asia for 19 years, have withdrawn most of their involvement from the region as a whole and Turkmenistan in particular,” noted a panelist. “The overall situation is getting darker,” said another panelist, referring to the international community’s declining support for the promotion of independent media in Turkmenistan and overall in Central Asia.

The government owns all printing production facilities, print distribution facilities, and media distribution channels. Only some small kiosks are in private hands. Some of these distribute Russian newspapers, often well after their issue dates.

On December 28, Turkmenistan.ru reported that the Turkmen president allowed the Ministry of Communications to sign contracts with the Russian printing agency Rospechat and publishing house Informnauka (Informational Science) to subscribe to their periodicals for the first half of 2015. “It is possible that Turkmenistan is inching toward 2 percent penetration on the Internet. Mobile phone penetration is promising, but without an effective strategy to circumvent the government’s monopoly—and hence, surveillance—of this arena, it will be difficult to leverage it for the purpose of increasing information access,” said one panelist.

One notable development in information and communications technology infrastructure is Turkmenistan’s plan to launch its first artificial telecommunications satellite in 2015. “Turkmen Alem520” will occupy an orbital slot controlled by Monaco’s government. Constructed by French

Thales Alenia Space, the satellite will reportedly be placed in orbit for at least 15 years. Turkmen media outlets have reported that the satellite accelerates the development of communications, television, and Internet services. The Ministry of Communications is reportedly working to provide Wi-Fi connections in Ashgabat and proper Internet communications as part of broader preparations for hosting the fifth Asian Indoor and Martial Arts Games in Ashgabat in 2017.

List of Panel Participants

IREX did not conduct an in-country panel discussion because of Turkmenistan’s repressive environment. This chapter represents desk research, interviews, and the result of questionnaires filled out by several people familiar with the state of media in the country.