

TURKMENISTAN

Vibrant Information Barometer

2 0 2 2



Photo: Turkmen Service RFE/RL.



Highly Vibrant

Somewhat Vibrant

Slightly Vibrant

Not Vibrant

OVERALL SCORE
3

The pandemic thrust new hardships on Turkmenistan’s people in 2021. No media employees inside the country were in a position to report to the citizens about the global pandemic, nor the toll COVID was taking on Turkmenistan’s population, nor the reasons for the nation’s prolonged economic crisis, ongoing for some six years now. The isolated country’s state media avoids any mention of problems, and the Ministry for National Security (MNB) works to block all websites that might provide people with information that counters the state narrative.

The country’s president continues to dominate state media coverage, the panelists noted—something that has held true since the early days after the country secured independence in 1991. “In all the (official) sources of information in Turkmenistan, the only topic is the president of the country,” one panelist said.

The bizarre cult of personality developed by the first president of Turkmenistan, Saparmurat Niyazov, has continued and become even more peculiar under his successor, Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov. State media refers to Berdymukammedov as “Arkadag” (the Protector)—and according to reports on Turkmen television, radio, print media, and state websites, he is infallible.

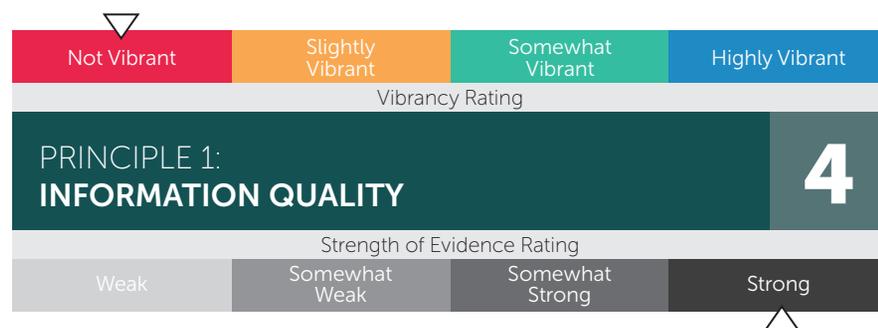
The panelists all agreed the state of media in Turkmenistan remains dismal. Several mentioned the Turkmen government’s inexplicable insistence that the country never had even one case of COVID-19 and state media’s

refusal to even use the words “coronavirus” or “COVID” in reports.

The pandemic allowed the government to seal off the country from outside influences or information even further. International flights were canceled in 2020 as the pandemic spread, without any official explanation from Turkmen authorities.

However, while Turkmenistan’s internet access is among the worst in the world, many people have been downloading virtual private networks (VPNs) on their mobile phones in recent years to connect with websites outside the country. Panelists noted that some people inside Turkmenistan were accessing Turkmen opposition websites, mainly based in Europe, and reading or watching opposition programming on YouTube. Turkmen authorities responded by purchasing equipment to block VPNs to the greatest extent possible, and police reportedly were checking people’s phones. A “like” on a Turkmen opposition YouTube channel is enough to be accused of treason.

All of Turkmenistan’s principle-level scores were in the “not vibrant” VIBE scoring classification, signifying a failing information system, due to the government’s stranglehold on media and coverage within the country.



The quality of information inside Turkmenistan remains low due to the state media’s commitment to disseminate distorted views of events inside and outside the country. The state media did not cover major topics of interest to the public, such as the spread of the COVID-19 or the Taliban returning to power in neighboring Afghanistan. Instead, coverage of the president and the country’s alleged achievements under his rule continues to dominate state media. Turkmen opposition groups outside the country ramped up their activities on the internet and offered alternative views of events in Turkmenistan that conflicted with state media’s coverage. However, Turkmenistan’s Ministry of National Security continued to block websites from outside the country, leaving only people with VPNs able to access information from foreign sources. In response, Turkmen authorities reinvigorated their campaign to eliminate the use of VPNs.

Indicator 1: There is quality information on a variety of topics available.

The panelists agreed that the infrastructure to produce varied content exists. Television and radio broadcasting stations and publishing houses are supplied with needed material, and state media has websites. In addition, there are journalism schools. Some journalists have been able to attend seminars on journalism and media given inside Turkmenistan by organizations such as the OSCE or USAID. One panelist said many of those who receive this training are employed at Turkmen state websites designed for an audience outside Turkmenistan, such as Turkmenistan.

ru, Orient.tm, Turkmenportal.com—which all offer information in Turkmen, Russian, and English. Another, Arzuw.news, is Russian-language only.

All the panelists emphasized that neither equipment nor training is the primary stumbling block to providing coverage. Rather, as one panelist stated, “Only those facts that are permitted by the security service and censors are used.”

An article by the Central Asian Bureau for Analytical Reporting about Turkmenistan’s media offers a telling example: “According to journalists with experience in the Turkmen state media, this censorship committee decides everything from the size of photos to the names of fruits. It can also ban the use of certain words, photos, or entire topics.” The article also noted that, while no detailed information exists about the committee’s makeup, documents available on the finance ministry’s website show that the state budget covers its expenses.¹

Content producers are not able to act in an ethical and accountable manner, because the information they are responsible for disseminating is propaganda. A law on radio and television broadcasting passed in January 2018 obliges stations to report on Turkmenistan’s advances and show programs that create a positive image of the country.²

State media did not report on the recent COVID-19 pandemic, which, according to anecdotal evidence, took a severe toll on the country. Media reports, as a rule, avoid using the words “coronavirus” and “COVID.”

The only way for media employees to keep their jobs is to participate in the embellishment, manipulation, or falsification of facts. They only face any ramifications if they fail to fabricate information to the satisfaction of the MNB or president.

Most of the information disseminated by Turkmen media centers on

1 Jomartov, Derya. “How Turkmenistan’s Media Works (or Doesn’t),” Central Asian Bureau for Analytical Reporting. December 7, 2021. <https://cabar.asia/en/how-turkmenistan-s-media-works-or-doesn-t>

2 Yusufi, Farruh. “Turkmenistan Bans Sex and Bad Habits on TV,” RFERL Turkmen Service. January 16, 2018. <https://rus.azathabar.com/a/28978583.html>

the president, though in 2021, the president's son, Serdar, received increasing attention as the time approached for him to take over as president from his father.

Turkmen state media slavishly covers President Berdymukhammedov's activities, whether he's speaking to ministers via videoconference, inspecting stores of farmlands, engaging in recreational pursuits such as playing musical instruments—often accompanied by his grandson Kerim—or driving through the desert in an off-road vehicle, lifting weights, shooting guns, or his favorite pastimes, riding a bicycle or a horse.

Crowds are organized for all Berdymukhammedov's carefully staged public appearances, usually chanting words of praise for “Arkadag.”

The large portion of coverage focusing on the president leaves little time to cover other topics. State media reports about the successes and achievements of Turkmenistan, such as abundant harvests, happy workers, and the rapid pace of economic growth. None of it is true, the panelists  noted.

Media present no programs on political or social issues except those highlighting the president's views on these topics. There are no programs on the different ethnic groups or different Turkmen tribes living in Turkmenistan. There are no reports on international or domestic politics, or science, or travel, or history.

It is impossible for journalists to challenge or contradict the actions of officials. The degree of censorship exercised over media ensures that no negative reporting of the government will ever be disseminated. Even when journalists understand that the economic situation in the country, for example, is dismal, they still report verbatim the glowing assessments and forecasts offered by the president or ministers.

News content is not editorially independent. As one panelist said, at every newspaper, there is a “curator” who works with journalists to ensure their articles and reports conform with state narratives. This is

true also for state television and radio, and for state news websites.

The importance of news and events covered is not contextualized for audiences, and given the content of news reports, there is no need. The message is simple: Turkmenistan has a great president who cares for his people and the country is doing well, constantly reaching new heights, and is the envy of the world outside Turkmenistan. There is no attempt to compare Turkmenistan to other countries or systems of government to support state media's assertions of the greatness of the Turkmen president and the country.

Indicator 2: The norm for information is that content is based on facts.

Misinformation is the norm for Turkmen state media.

Information presented by state media is not fact-based, well-sourced, or objective. Often, state media presents information that is pure fiction or, at best, a highly distorted version of events with government officials or state agencies as the only sources used for information.

As an example, after the global outbreak of COVID-19, Turkmen media—without mentioning the words “coronavirus” or “COVID”—actively promoted burning harmala (wild rue) to ward off infectious diseases based on information found in a book on herbal medicines written by Berdymukhammedov.

In a rare use of the word “coronavirus,” Turkmen media reported on Berdymukhammedov's assertion in December 2020 that licorice root “stops the coronavirus from developing” and that “even weak concentrations of the water-based extract has a neutralizing effect.”³ Foreign media reports about the president's recommended remedies for COVID-19 regularly noted the lack of scientific evidence to support the claims that wild rue or licorice could effectively prevent or treat

“Only those facts that are permitted by the security service and censors are used,” stated one panelist.

³ Kirapoidze, Mariam. “Turkmenistan Looks to Squeeze a Covid-19 Cure from Licorice,” Coda Story. January 21, 2021. https://www.codastory.com/waronscience/turkmenistan_licorice/

COVID-19, but Turkmen state media did not share such reports.

The Turkmen government's primary news agency, Turkmenistanyň Dowlet Habarlar (Turkmen State News), distorted comments by the World Health Organization's regional director for Europe, Hans Kluge, during his October 2021 visit to Turkmenistan. The report claimed that Kluge expressed his thanks to Turkmenistan's president "for the proactive approach to building a multilateral partnership and great contribution to the common efforts to combat the spread of a new type of coronavirus infection" and said Turkmenistan occupied a "leading position" in the world in combating COVID-19.⁴ Questioned later about this assessment by the U.S.-based media outlet Eurasianet, the WHO said Turkmen media had misquoted Kluge,⁵ but Turkmen state media never issued a correction or retraction.

Professional content producers regularly disseminate news about ample supplies of food or gross domestic product (GDP) growth that they must be aware are false. However, this reporting has nothing to do with low capacity: They are following orders and working within the guidelines dictated to them by the MNB and its censors.

It is difficult to be a nonprofessional content producer in Turkmenistan. Turkmen authorities would consider anything posted, printed, or broadcast that criticized the government to be false or misleading information, and those responsible would face legal consequences. Therefore, Turkmenistan citizens who use social networks--such as Telegram, Instagram, or the domestic social network BizBarda--are cautious about what they say or write. In any case, these social network chat groups are not large.

4 "The President of Turkmenistan received the Director of the WHO Regional Office for Europe," Turkmenistanyň Dowlet Habarlar. October 8, 2021. <https://tdh.gov.tm/ru/post/28991/prezident-turkmenistana-prinyal-direktora-evropejskogo-regionalnogo-byuro-voz>

5 "Turkmenistan: Good for Some," Eurasianet. October 19, 2021. <https://eurasianet.org/turkmenistan-good-for-some>

The restrictions on nonprofessional content producers are particularly unfortunate since the government knowingly creates and disseminates false or misleading information constantly.

The denial that the country has ever registered any COVID-19 cases is one example of the Turkmen authorities deliberately falsifying information. The misleading economic growth figures the government releases are another.

Despite overwhelming evidence of economic problems inside Turkmenistan, the government continues to report GDP growth while preventing any independent verification of these claims. In 2020, the World Bank "discontinued inclusion of (Turkmenistan's) GDP data in its global and regional analytical reports, due to lack of reliable official statistics on national accounts," and the International Monetary Fund did the same in 2021 after years of Turkmenistan reporting suspect GDP growth figures.⁶

State media face no professional ramifications for creating or spreading false information about the government; creating or spreading true information that would expose the government's fictitious portrayal of Turkmenistan would lead to consequences.

Journalists have no opportunity to hold the government accountable by identifying misinformation when it is disseminated by government actors. On the contrary, journalists are forced to report misinformation about government actors as fact. MNB censors would notice any attempt to do otherwise, leading to the report's cancellation and repercussions for the journalist. Such actions range from lecturing the journalist about their responsibility to the state, dismissal, or, if the information were deemed sufficiently damaging to a member of the government, the journalist could face trumped-up charges.

6 Leonard, Peter. "Turkmenistan: End of the Road for the Roaring Growth Myth?," Eurasianet. April 7, 2021. <https://eurasianet.org/turkmenistan-end-of-the-road-for-the-roaring-growth-myth>

State media reports about the successes and achievements of Turkmenistan, such as abundant harvests, happy workers, and the rapid pace of economic growth. None of it is true, noted the panelists.

There are no reliable fact-checking resources, such as websites, that are widely available and current. Turkmen authorities do not permit such domestic websites and block foreign-based fact-checking websites.

Media outlets and digital platforms do not have mechanisms or processes in place for moderating content in order to reduce misinformation. State media is usually the source of misinformation. The MNB monitors social media channels available in Turkmenistan, and the MNB is only concerned with locating any hints of anti-government sentiment.

Indicator 3: The norm for information is that content is not intended to harm.

The restrictions on foreign media presence inside Turkmenistan and blocking foreign-based websites mitigates the ability of any foreign government to create or disseminate content that is intended to harm. It would be difficult to do so given the close watch the MNB keeps over information. It should be noted that foreign governments and their proxies do not seem to have any reason to disseminate content that includes mal-information or hate speech inside Turkmenistan.

The government does not create or disseminate content that could be termed hate speech, though it does vaguely target traitors to the state. State media vilifies such people, not only for their alleged misdeeds but usually for their alleged low moral character—for example, those caught embezzling from the state are also accused of being addicted to drugs or having, in the case of male officials, more than one wife. However, the government does not target ethnic groups, religious groups, tribes, or other states with hate speech.

The government did, however, disseminate mal-information by denying the presence of COVID-19 in Turkmenistan, which they must have known would harm people and lead to needless contagion and deaths. It seems there will be no ramifications for this since authorities continue to claim there is no COVID-19 in Turkmenistan.

Professional content producers only disseminate information cleared

by the MNB and its censors. Content producers are not sufficiently independent to create or disseminate anything on their own, and so there are no ramifications for the content they disseminate so long as their content complies with the orders of the authorities.

Nonprofessional content producers do not have access to television, radio, or print media. They are active on social networks, which are monitored by the MNB. The MNB looks for anti-government content, but it also has an interest in preventing the spread of mal-information or hate speech that could spark unrest. Since it is widely known inside Turkmenistan that social networks are monitored, users exercise self-censorship in their comments.

Non-government actors have no means to spread mal-information or hate speech inside Turkmenistan. The internet is sufficiently monitored to prevent such content from remaining available to the public for long should it manage to penetrate through the state's mechanisms for blocking websites.

Indicator 4: The body of content overall is inclusive and diverse.

Turkmen language is used by the majority of state media outlets, but there are some print media, including state websites, that use Russian. Other languages are not used by domestic media, and state media does not report on the situations of ethnic minorities. However, Turkmenistan started international broadcasts in English, Russian, French, Chinese, Arabic, and Persian (Farsi) after launching its first satellite in 2015.

As the panelists said, information in Turkmenistan is all propaganda. No alternative opinions or points of view are presented by state media. Information conforms to the state narrative without questioning the wisdom or logic of decisions.

Information does not expose citizens to the experiences or viewpoints of all genders. Information is presented from the traditional patriarchal point of view, and there is no attempt to explore the unique characteristics, challenges, or problems of other genders.

Information from state media in Turkmenistan does not include reporting on ethnic, racial, and/or religious backgrounds. The media portrays the country as a homogenous society with an accent on ethnic Turkmen and their traditions, so-called *turkmencilik*, which roughly translates to “Turkmenness.” The majority of the population, some 85 percent, is ethnic Turkmen. Other Central Asian groups living in Turkmenistan, mainly Uzbeks and Kazakhs, are made to dress in Turkmen traditional garb and study in the Turkmen language in schools, though the small population of ethnic Russians remaining in the country seems to be excluded from *turkmencilik* policies.

The viewpoints of all non-Turkmen communities are excluded from media coverage, and there are no alternative methods or special platforms for them, save for small social networks that can discuss nonpolitical issues of minority communities.

There is no data on the ethnicity of owners, management, editorial staff, journalists, or other content producers involved in media, but they seem to be nearly all ethnic Turkmen. There are no special efforts to include employees from other ethnic groups. Women are employed in the media, though there is no data to say whether there is a gender quota.

Indicator 5: Content production is sufficiently resourced.

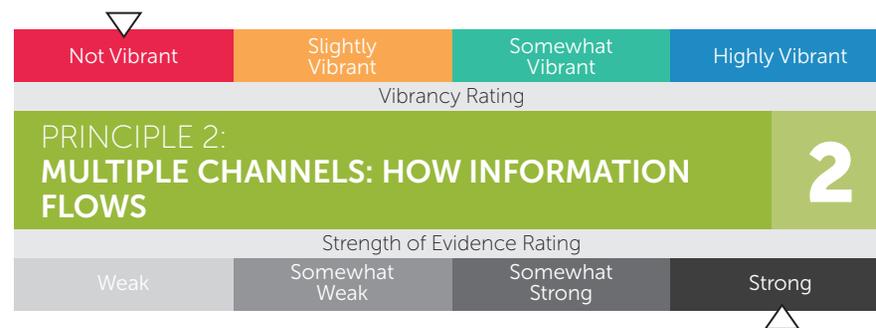
Professional content producers have sufficient financial resources to operate. Television and radio are state funded. Print media also receive funding from the state budget, but newspapers and magazines additionally receive some revenue from subscriptions—though it is unclear if they receive this money directly or whether, as is more likely, the funds go to the state budget and are distributed among all media outlets. Some citizens complain of being forced to subscribe to newspapers and magazines, and that managers often simply withhold money from paychecks as money toward subscriptions.

The problem for professional content producers is the restrictions they work under in trying to produce quality information. The resources are available, but the information must promote a positive image of the government.

With the exception of subscriptions garnished from state employees for newspapers and magazines, the government provides all funding for media outlets. There is no possibility for private funding. Professional content producers have nowhere else to turn for funding apart from the government.

There is advertising on Turkmen television, all for domestically produced household products, but it is unclear if the advertiser pays money to the television station or to the state, or if the state selects which products to advertise and orders channels to run the spots. It is certainly not possible for media outlets to solicit money from nongovernment parties. There does not appear to be any politicization of advertising, but merely an effort to promote domestically made goods, which jibes with the government’s import substitution policies.

None of the panelists could say whether journalists are sufficiently paid, but since unofficial estimates put the unemployment rate at more than 60 percent (Turkmen authorities do not provide unemployment figures), simply having a steady job might be sufficient for media employees. Many people in Turkmenistan do try to find outside work to augment their income, usually by driving a taxi, though in these hard times, there are already many taxi drivers.



There is only state media in Turkmenistan. Reporting by television, radio, print media, and state websites is coordinated and harmonized to consistently support government narratives of the country’s alleged successes and progress. Citizens are afraid to share any information that authorities could perceive as criticism of the state, as the

consequences for doing so are often severe. Citizens are also wary of accessing or sharing information from sources outside the country, as everyone knows internet use is closely monitored by the MNB. Domestic information sources are not accountable to anyone but the authorities.

Indicator 6: People have rights to create, share, and consume information.

The legal basis exists for citizens to create, share, and consume information. Article 42, paragraph 3, of the constitution reads, “[E]veryone shall have the right to free search of information and to receive and disseminate information in ways not prohibited by law, if it is not a state or secret protected by law.”

Moreover, the law on media adopted in 2013 says, “No one may ban or prevent the media from disseminating information of public interest except under the provisions of this law (...) citizens have the right to use all media forms to express their opinions and beliefs, and to seek, receive and impart information.” The article also forbids “media censorship,” “interfering in the activities of the media,” and “monopolization of the media by persons or entities.”

Panelists noted that these laws are completely ignored; even Reporters Without Borders called the 2013 media law a “dead letter.”⁷ MNB censors continue to pour over domestically produced content before it is disseminated to filter anything that hints at straying from the government narrative of a prosperous country inhabited by happy people. Authorities do not respect freedom of speech, and people who openly challenge the government narrative or criticize the state risk losing their jobs or being fined or imprisoned.

All the panelists agreed the government overtly censors media. “All information is subjected to strict censorship,” one panelist said. In any case, 30 years of watching over the media to ensure state-approved

7 “Country’s First Media Law Starts Life as Dead Letter,” Reporters Without Borders. January 9, 2013. <https://rsf.org/en/countrys-first-media-law-starts-life-dead-letter>

messages are being broadcast have accustomed journalists to self-censorship. Media workers know what the government expects and what will not be tolerated. Journalists work within those guidelines, knowing that any attempt to stray from reporting state propaganda would mean, at the least, dismissal.

The few journalists who work for foreign-based information websites have faced retribution. For example, in the past Correspondent Saparmamed Nepeskuliev—who worked for RFERL’s Turkmen service, Azatlyk and Alternative Turkmenistan News (now called Turkmen.news)—was detained in the Caspian resort area of Avaza in July 2015 as he was taking photographs as part of preparations for a report on luxury homes owned by government officials. Nepeskuliev’s family was not informed of his detention and had to make inquiries at police stations around the country before finding him at the end of the month. Nepeskuliev was charged with illegal narcotics possession, convicted in a closed-door

trial, and sentenced to three years in prison. Nepeskuliev was released after he served his sentence and later left the country.⁸ Additionally, Ogulsapar Muradova worked for Azatlyk reporting about rights abuses

until she was imprisoned in August 2006 after damaging Turkmenistan’s reputation. Muradova was 58 years old at the time. She died from torture less than a month after being imprisoned.⁹

Other journalists working for foreign-based outlets have also been fined and/or imprisoned. Their family members are sometimes unexplainably dismissed from their jobs as well.

Additionally, authorities regularly hunt down these journalists’ sources of information. A few Turkmen citizens occasionally do speak to journalists working for foreign-based media. The more damaging the information is to the Turkmen government, the more intense the hunt

8 “Saparmamed Nepeskuliev Released,” RFERL Turkmen Service. May 16, 2018. <https://rus.azathabar.com/a/29252031.html>

9 “Ogulsapar Muradova: After 15 Years, Still No Probe of Turkmen Journalist’s Death in Custody,” RFERL Turkmen Service. June 27, 2021. <https://www.rferl.org/a/turkmenistan-muradova-death-15-years-unexplained-rferl-hrw/31328294.html>

for the sources of the information. People who are caught providing such information can be charged with treason.

Indicator 7: People have adequate access to channels of information.

While state television, radio, and print media are widely available throughout Turkmenistan, the number of people with access to the internet remains low—possibly less than one-third of the population.¹⁰

Those who do have internet access still face challenges, as internet speeds rank among the world’s slowest, and many websites outside the country remain blocked in Turkmenistan.

There is no information available that would suggest any special measures taken to ensure information and technology infrastructure meets the needs of people with disabilities or to make any information in languages other than Turkmen, and to a lesser extent Russian, available. Rural areas in general are poorly connected to the telecommunications and internet infrastructure, and with salaries generally lower in the hinterland, the costs of internet access, or even cable television, are more than most families can afford—especially given the increasing cost of basic goods in recent years.

Finances are generally a problem. Cable packages are offered, and citizens can receive television programming in Russian and sometimes Turkish. Censors first review the material before releasing it for viewing. Internet cafes exist in the cities, but the cost is prohibitively high for most people; users must show their documents, and all sites they access during the sessions are monitored and recorded.

While there are no diverse channels for information flow inside

¹⁰ World Bank, “Individuals Using the Internet (% of Population)—Turkmenistan,” Accessed on June 24, 2022, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/IT.NET.USER.ZS?locations=TM>; Zhyrmon, Anastasiya. “What Turkmenistan Internet Shutdowns Tell Us about Digital Repression in Central Asia,” accessnow. December 7, 2021. <https://www.accessnow.org/turkmenistan-internet-shutdowns/>

Turkmenistan, there are a growing number of opposition outlets outside Turkmenistan that try to get their information into the country. Several YouTube channels run by Turkmenistani exiles—such as Erkin Turkmenistan, TurkmenYurt, and the Democratic Movement of Turkmenistan—are banned in Turkmenistan, and those accessing these programs using VPNs are subject to threats and harassment. For example, in February 2021, police in Lebap arrested dozens of people for watching the YouTube channel of the Democratic Choice of Turkmenistan. Radio Azatlyk reported those who “like” any of the videos

are accused of supporting the opposition and charged with violating Article 171 of the Criminal Code—treason.¹¹

Evidence would suggest that people do not have access to another information system or device in the event there is a disruption to the telecommunications infrastructure. People were not warned ahead of time

about the heavy winds and rain that caused extensive damage in Lebap Province in March 2021 and had difficulties establishing contact with the capital for several days after that.

Indicator 8: There are appropriate channels for government information.

The right to information exists in Turkmenistan’s constitution and in the media law, which, on paper, conform to international standards and norms. However, these rights are not respected.

Citizens can visit state websites to learn about government policy, but with the slow speed of the internet and the high costs at internet cafes, few seem willing to spend the time and money necessary to access them. The decision-making process for government policies is not transparent, and there are no means for the public to question authorities about decisions. One panelist said, “There are no mechanisms in place to

¹¹ “Authorities Concerned about Opposition Speeches on YouTube,” RFERL Turkmen Service. February 24, 2021. <https://rus.azathabar.com/a/31118229.html>

challenge or access further information than [that] fed by the state media.”

Turkmenistan’s citizens generally fear any dealings with the authorities, and asking questions or seeking answers or clarifications about government decisions would accomplish nothing except draw the attention of the authorities toward any citizen bold enough to approach officials.

Government officials do not hold press conferences, although occasionally if there is a head of state or other high-level dignitary visiting, the president will hold carefully scripted press conferences. Government officials do not always tell the truth to the press and public, and few in Turkmenistan trust any information from government sources.

Indicator 9: There are diverse channels for information flow.

There are 27 newspapers, only one of which, the weekly *Zaman*, is registered as a private company. The other 26 newspapers are state entities, including 15 founded by the cabinet of ministers and the rest connected to unions or ministries. There are three state websites, two founded by the State News Agency and the third by the State Publishing Service. There are seven television channels and four radio stations that are all overseen by the State Committee of Turkmenistan for Television, Radio Broadcasting and Cinematography. The state company Turkmen Telecom is the sole provider of the internet for Turkmenistan.

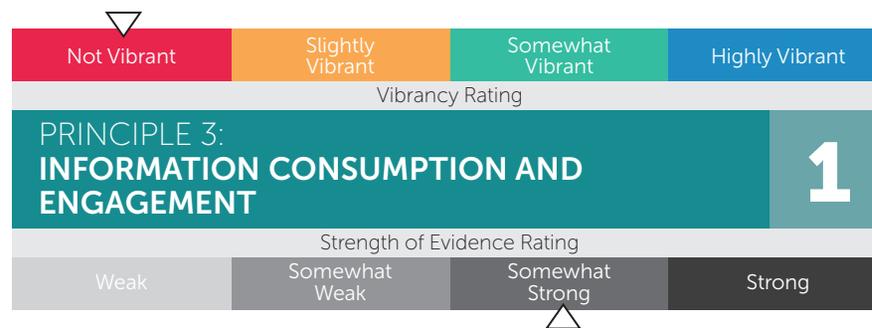
There is no possibility for domestic or foreign ownership of media outlets or media-related industries. “All media outlets inside the country are controlled by the state,” one panelist said. Another added, “There is no possibility for anyone to establish an independent media; there is also no transparency in the process of giving licenses.”

There is no public service media as such. State media does inform the public of new rules, such as the obligation to wear masks in public during the COVID-19 pandemic, though without mentioning there was a pandemic.

Indicator 10: Information channels are independent.

Virtually all media outlets are state-owned, and all decisions on content are made by the MNB and the ministry’s censors. One panelist summed up the situation, saying, “All media outlets are funded by the state and for the state.”

Political interference in media management and editorial content is pervasive and constant.



Article 37 of Turkmenistan’s constitution states, “Everyone shall have the right to private liberty, personal and family secrets and their protection from arbitrary interference in the privacy, as well as infringement of the rules of secrecy of correspondence, telephone and other means of communication.” The responses of the participants showed that privacy is not protected, and Turkmenistan’s citizens expect the security service will likely track any communications made through electronic devices. In the meantime, few believe the information they receive from state media sources.

Indicator 11: People can safely use the internet due to privacy protections and security tools.

A panelist said laws on privacy exist but are ignored.

Some 70 percent of Turkmen citizens are not connected to the internet. For those who are, the selection of available websites is limited, as the authorities block many foreign websites. Security services monitor the

internet use of those with connections at work or home and of people who visit internet cafes in the cities.

VPNs have become popular in Turkmenistan, but along with hunting for people who have downloaded VPNs on their computers or mobile phones, the government has been purchasing technology to block VPNs.

Turkmenistan's citizens using the internet enjoy no legal protection. One panelist emphasized that the "internet in Turkmenistan is under the control of the special services (MNB)." Another panelist said, "Individuals have no privacy rights, with authorities even known for going through citizens' mobile phones and also for monitoring their conversations, text messages, and browser history."

It is unclear if media outlets and other professional content producers have access to digital security training and tools. The responsibility for digital security seems to lie with the MNB, and digital tools to prevent distributed denial-of-service or other attacks would be part of their responsibility. Despite Turkmenistan being incredibly secretive about most of what happens inside the country, it is significant that no individual or group has ever claimed to have carried out an attack on websites inside Turkmenistan. The country's authorities have purchased advanced technology from China to block websites and prevent hacker attacks.

The level of digital literacy of Turkmen citizens is unknown. Since 70 percent of the population does not have access to the internet, there is no need for education on digital security. Most of the panelists believed people in Turkmenistan do not receive instruction in the use of digital technology.

“Individuals have no privacy rights, with authorities even known for going through citizens' mobile phones and also for monitoring their conversations, text messages, and browser history,” said a panelist.

Indicator 12: People have the necessary skills and tools to be media literate.

Government leadership does not promote media literacy at all levels. Authorities seem to prefer that all citizens be satisfied with the distorted versions of events offered by state media and not make any attempt to seek information to balance what they have seen or heard from state media sources.

School systems do not include civics and media and information literacy in the curricula. Instead, some of Berdymukhammedov's books are included in course materials. The president has presented laptop computers as gifts to first-grade students at the start of school years in the past. These computers have educational programs installed on them already but do not connect to the internet, so while children learn how to use computers and access data from available programs already installed on these computers, they do not know how to search

the World Wide Web for information or learn how to avoid the numerous scams and false information on the internet.

Few people have access to the internet, and so many websites are blocked that it would be very difficult for the average citizen to use tools or websites for fact-checking, debunking, or exposing disinformation. Furthermore, given the MNB's prevalent monitoring of internet use, it would also be potentially dangerous to do so.

People who have VPNs downloaded on their phones can access information from outside the country to check on facts, but they could face severe consequences if they are caught with VPNs on their phones. Even without access to VPNs, the country's citizens are aware that most of the information they receive from government sources is not entirely true and, in many cases, outright false. State tales of bountiful harvests are difficult to believe when there is rationing for bread and long lines outside state stores where basic goods are subsidized, and so cheaper to

purchase, but often unavailable because of widespread shortages.

Indicator 13: People engage productively with the information that is available to them.

Panelist responses to the activities of journalists and civil society activists varied, but they make a clear distinction between journalists and activists inside and outside Turkmenistan. Turkmen journalists and activists outside Turkmenistan have increased their presence on the internet, and more of their information is making its way into Turkmenistan than ever before.

Inside Turkmenistan, the situation for journalists and activists is different. One panelist said, “There is no freedom of speech and rights to information in the country. If those rights are exercised, there are severe consequences...from harassment and fines to imprisonment.”

Citizens of Turkmenistan are accustomed to the consequences of speaking freely. Authorities do not tolerate complaints and criticisms.

There are no platforms for public debate in Turkmenistan. The authorities quickly break up any public assembly not organized by the government and detain the organizers and participants. Open digital communications take place under the watchful eye of the MNB, and so the topics of discussion are usually innocuous, although one panelist noted there are sometimes misogynistic comments that authorities do nothing to curb.

The average Turkmen citizen has no figure or organization to turn to for assistance with any matters of concern. In desperate circumstances, people do resort to visiting local officials to air concerns, but this is a risky venture and requires great diplomacy so as not to incur consequences.

“There is no freedom of speech and rights to information in the country. If those rights are exercised, there are severe consequences...from harassment and fines to imprisonment,” said a panelist.

Indicator 14: Media and information producers engage with their audience’s needs

Turkmen state media make almost no attempt to connect with its audience or meet their needs. The security service selects the topics to be reported—and rarely are these issues helpful for Turkmenistan’s citizens trying to understand the situation in their country and make informed choices about their futures. One panelist said, “There is no free press, and there is no need to engage with the public.”

Since all media is state media and its purpose is propaganda, there is also no need to have data about the audience. The audience, fearing possible retribution from the authorities, does not provide feedback, and media does not solicit it.

Media and content producers are completely disconnected from their audience, save only connections to the president and his family members.

The extent to which journalistic media, content producers, and government institutions collaborate and network together is unclear, but they work together to produce reporting that conforms with the government’s wishes.

Indicator 15: Community media provides information relevant for community engagement.

There is no community media in Turkmenistan. State newspapers have correspondents in all five of the country’s provinces, but their coverage is dictated by managers in the capital and confined usually to reports on planting and harvest, celebrations of national holidays, and the occasional visits by the president. Local issues are not covered.

One survey participant said there are Telegram and Instagram groups that formed primarily to exchange information about local matters, again, avoiding any political topics in their discussions.



Since state media has a monopoly on the dissemination of information inside Turkmenistan and the main topic is the president, the information presented offers no hint of disagreement or alternative points of view. Information supports government policies, which, under the state media's definitions, constitutes good governance. People are told their system is democratic, and they have no alternative domestic sources of information that would suggest a different view. Only state-sponsored civil societies organizations exist inside Turkmenistan, and they do not lend themselves to sparking or promoting debate on any issues.

“People are subject to misinformation from the authorities...(and) therefore, rumors spread widely, and it is unclear for many what actions they should take,” said a panelist.

Indicator 16: Information producers and distribution channels enable or encourage information sharing across ideological lines.

In terms of state media, there are no sources of nonpartisan news and information. One panelist said many people in Turkmenistan get their information from Russian or Turkish channels that are available as part of cable packages offered by state companies, but these, as noted earlier, are subject to prior review by state censors who remove any material deemed harmful or in conflict with the state narrative, so most of the content is entertainment.

There is no evidence to suggest that the majority of the population read

or view any types of media with varied ideological leanings, and it is the MNB's job to ensure no such opportunities exist.

While some light debate and disagreement on nonpolitical topics take place on social networks, such debate is absent from state television, radio, and newspapers. There is no evidence that individuals can engage in open and constructive discussions, nor that they can access quality news and information.

Indicator 17: Individuals use quality information to inform their actions.

The information officials and state media provide to people about political or social issues is nothing more than propaganda. One panelist said, “People are subject to misinformation from the authorities...(and) therefore, rumors spread widely, and it is unclear for many what actions they should take.”

The public has no say in government policy and learns of government decisions only after these decisions have been made. The public is not privy to how these decisions are reached and has no means to voice

concerns to government officials.

Elections, particularly presidential elections, are perfunctory events. When Berdymukhammedov sought a third term in office in 2017, state media did not cover his opponents' campaigns. Similarly, with parliamentary elections, nearly all constituents do not know of—and probably have never even heard of—candidates contesting seats.

The COVID-19 pandemic illustrated how hapless Turkmen authorities can be. Authorities promoted local remedies with no scientifically proven value in preventing or curing COVID-19. Some people and state facilities, such as medical clinics, were forced to heed state advice to burn rue, purportedly to sterilize the air of diseases. During the first months when COVID-19 began spreading, Turkmenistan's people were discouraged

from wearing masks and could even be fined for wearing masks in public if spotted by police. Authorities said it could create a panic. Later, people were forced to wear masks and fined if they failed to, but not told exactly the reason beyond authorities' claims that dust from neighboring countries could carry contagions.

Indicator 18: Civil society uses quality information to improve their communities.

Civil society organizations (CSO) do not exist in Turkmenistan. There are government-sponsored organizations, such as women's or youth groups, but there are no independent CSOs. Without such organizations, there is no forum for engaging with the public to discuss or debate policy decisions. One panelist said informal CSOs do exist on social networks such as Instagram and Telegram, and they do post or cite information from recognized authoritative sources, such as United Nations agencies.

Indicator 19: Government uses quality information to make public policy decisions.

There is no civil society in Turkmenistan. Government actors only engage with the media to parrot state policies. The only time press conferences take place is when top foreign officials or business executives make state visits and meet with the president, and this does not always happen. Such press conferences are characterized by questions that only address positive aspects of foreign relations or trade.

Misinformation abounds from government actors, and there is no need for them to include any evidence or facts to support their claims. Government actors bear responsibility, for example, for disseminating dubious or false information about the spread of COVID-19, but they face no consequences, as they were conforming to the state narrative.

Indicator 20: Information supports good governance and democratic rights.

One panelist commented, "As there are no independent media, there are no corruption or human rights violation cases uncovered by media." Another panelist added that there are "no tools to measure the level of widespread corruption."

“As there are no independent media, there are no corruption or human rights violation cases uncovered by media,” commented a panelist.

State propaganda has provided fertile soil for rights violations and ensured the electorate is uninformed, but after years of the same propaganda, the electorate is now generally apathetic to the political process as it exists in Turkmenistan.

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.

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