

# **MEDIA SUSTAINABILITY INDEX**

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**2008**

**The Development  
of Sustainable  
Independent Media  
in Europe and Eurasia**



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## MEDIA SUSTAINABILITY INDEX 2008

The Development of Sustainable Independent Media in Europe and Eurasia

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TURKMENISTAN

The definitive event in Turkmenistan in 2007 was the death of Saparmurat Niyazov, the eccentric authoritarian ruler who had led the country for more than 20 years. Under Niyazov's leadership, Turkmenistan had become one of the most isolated and repressive countries in the world. After he died, many in Turkmenistan and in the international community hoped for positive change. Niyazov's successor, Gurbanguly Berdymuhamedov, has made some encouraging speeches and a few important reforms. He has even taken steps to improve the quality of journalism in Turkmenistan. At the same time, though, he has maintained tight control of the content of the media, which are state-owned and heavily censored. He has also ordered the removal of private satellite dishes in the capital, Ashgabat; since the 1990s, satellite television has been the primary source of uncensored information in Turkmenistan.

Niyazov became the head of the Communist Party in the Turkmen Soviet Socialist Republic in 1985. When the Soviet Union fell in 1991, he ran for president and won with 99.5 percent of the vote. The Turkmen parliament made him president for life in 1999. He built a personality cult, erecting golden statues of himself and forcing Turkmen citizens to read his book, the *Rukhnama*, of Turkmen history and philosophical musings. He also crushed all political dissent and denied Turkmen citizens the freedoms of expression, movement, religion, and assembly, among others. Under Niyazov's leadership, the amount of freedom granted the Turkmen media slowly declined from a very low level to an even lower level.

As Niyazov's reign neared its end in 2006, Turkmenistan was named the third most censored country in the world by the U.S.-based NGO Committee to Protect Journalists; the third worst violator of press freedom in the world by the France-based NGO Reporters sans Frontiers; and one of the 10 most repressive societies in the world by the U.S.-based NGO Freedom House. Niyazov died unexpectedly on Dec. 21, 2006, reportedly due to heart failure.

Berdymuhamedov, who had served as deputy prime minister and health minister under Niyazov, won the presidency on Feb. 11, 2007, with 89 percent of the vote. However, the U.S. Department of State found that the election "did not meet international standards."

The new president has made positive changes in the education and pension systems, and has lifted some restrictions on freedom of movement. But the media's situation in Turkmenistan has not improved appreciably since his assumption of power. In November 2007, the NGO Amnesty International released a report that found that, "the new government of Turkmenistan has retained nearly all the draconian restrictions on freedom of expression that marked the Niyazov period."

The MSI was used to study Turkmenistan for the first time this year. Panelists' scores returned an overall average score of 0.42, reflecting an "unsustainable, anti-free press" as a baseline. All objectives scored low, and only Objective 2, professional journalism, scored above a 0.50.

# TURKMENISTAN AT A GLANCE

## GENERAL

Population: 5,179,571 (July 2008 est., *CIA World Factbook*)

> **Capital city:** Ashgabat

> **Ethnic groups (% of population):** Turkmen 85%, Uzbek 5%, Russian 4%, other 6% (2003 est., *CIA World Factbook*)

> **Religions (% of population):** Muslim 89%, Eastern Orthodox 9%, unknown 2% (*CIA World Factbook*)

> **Languages (% of population):** Turkmen 72%, Russian 12%, Uzbek 9%, other 7% (*CIA World Factbook*)

> **GNI (2006-Atlas):** N/A (World Bank Development Indicators, 2007)

> **GNI per capita (2006-PPP):** \$3,990 (World Bank Development Indicators, 2007)

> **Literacy rate:** 98.8% (male 99.3%, female 98.3%) (1999 est., *CIA World Factbook*)

> **President or top authority:** President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow (since February 14, 2007)

## MEDIA-SPECIFIC

> **Number of active print outlets, radio stations, television stations:** Print: 24 national and local newspapers, 16 magazines; Radio: 5; Television stations: 4

> **Newspaper circulation statistics:** Top two by circulation: *Netralniy Turkmenistan* (Russian language state-owned daily), *Turkmenistan* (Turkmen language state-owned daily)

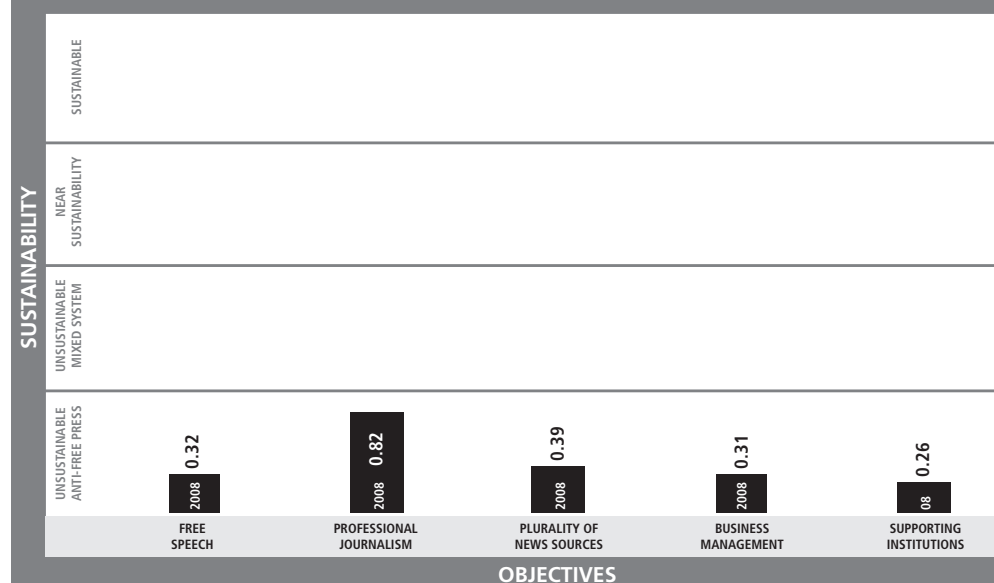
> **Broadcast ratings:** N/A

> **News agencies:** Turkmendovlethabarlary (state-owned)

> **Annual advertising revenue in media sector:** N/A

> **Internet usage:** 64,800 (2006 est., *CIA World Factbook*)

## MEDIA SUSTAINABILITY INDEX: TURKMENISTAN



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

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

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

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

### Near Sustainability (2-3):

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

### Sustainable (3-4):

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

*Due to the repressive political environment in Turkmenistan, IREX did not conduct a full panel for Turkmenistan. This chapter represents research conducted on the situation and the results of questionnaires filled out by a "mini-panel" of several people familiar with situation of media in the country. The names of those who provided information will not be published in order to protect their personal security.*

## OBJECTIVE 1: FREEDOM OF SPEECH

### Turkmenistan Objective Score: 0.32

Turkmenistan has no history of press freedom or freedom of expression. As stated in the NGO Human Rights Watch 2004 annual report, "The regime of president-for-life Saparmurat Niyazov...crushes independent thought, controls virtually all aspects of civic life, and actively isolates the country from the outside world...Turkmen law bans criticism of any policies initiated by President Niyazov and equates it with treason."

Those who dared to defy the Niyazov regime often paid a heavy price. "There were credible reports that security officials tortured, routinely beat, and used excessive force against criminal suspects, prisoners, and individuals critical of the government," according to the U.S. Department of State's 2004 *Human Rights Practices* report for Turkmenistan. The United Nations adopted resolutions expressing concern about human rights violations in Turkmenistan in 2003, 2004, 2005, and 2006.

Indeed, the scores for Objective 1's individual indicators corroborate these observations. Only Indicator 8, media access to international news sources, scored higher than 0.50.

On paper, Turkmenistan's laws categorically protect freedom of expression and of the press. In reality, there is no freedom of speech and the Turkmen press is comprehensively censored. Journalists and regular citizens are afraid to criticize the government in even mild ways, fearing that they and their family members could lose their government jobs—a serious threat, given that unemployment in Turkmenistan is as high as 60 percent by some accounts. Those journalists and human rights activists who do speak up can face intimidation, imprisonment, assault, and even death, as in one case late in 2006 (detailed on page 3). "Self-censorship in Turkmen mass media is a synonym for 'self-preservation,'" one panelist wrote.

Article 26 of Turkmenistan's constitution gives all Turkmen citizens the rights to freedom of opinion and expression. Article 1 of the law "on the press and other mass media in Turkmenistan" guarantees the freedom of the press and the other mass media. According to a June 21, 2007 report on

access to information by the media, from the Ashgabat office of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), journalists have the legal right to "search, select, receive, and disseminate information and ideas in any form... censorship of the mass media is not allowed."

These laws notwithstanding, if the Turkmen government needed a legal justification to punish dissenters or independent-minded journalists, it could find one in a vague law passed in 2003. According to Human Rights Watch's November 2007 report, under that law, a person who "attempts to harm the country politically or economically" or "attempts to sow doubts about the domestic and international policies of the president of Turkmenistan" can face up to life in prison. One panelist noted that there is no legal recourse in these matters, as the judiciary depends upon "instruction from the government" in human rights and freedom of expression cases.

Berdymuhamedov denies, however, that this or any other law would ever be used to intimidate the Turkmen press. "There was never in Turkmenistan any pressure on the press," he told an audience when he visited Columbia University in 2007, according to a September 24, 2007 report by Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL).

This statement completely ignores the ongoing harassment of independent journalists in Turkmenistan, the most egregious case of which was what Reporters sans Frontiers has called "the torture death" of journalist Ogulsapar Muradova while in government custody in September 2006. Muradova, 58,

## 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 of broadcast media is fair, competitive, and apolitical.
- > Market entry and tax structure for media are fair and comparable to other industries.
- > Crimes against journalists or media outlets are prosecuted vigorously, but occurrences of such crimes are rare.
- > State or public media do not receive preferential legal treatment, and law guarantees editorial independence.
- > 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 accessible; right of access to information is equally enforced for all media and journalists.
- > Media outlets have unrestricted access to information; this is equally enforced for all media and journalists.
- > Entry into the journalism profession is free, and government imposes no licensing, restrictions, or special rights for journalists.

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*A positive result of this strict censorship is that journalists virtually never face libel suits, since they produce only innocuous, government-approved reports. In Turkmenistan, libel is a criminal offense, punishable by up to two years in prison. The burden of proof is on the accused.*

was a correspondent for the Turkmen Service of the U.S. government-funded RFE/RL. According to a compilation of reports from international organizations, in the early months of 2006, state security agents followed her, harassed her, and threatened to imprison her children. In April, her cell phone and home phone were cut off. On June 18, she was arrested. The day after Muradova's arrest, Niyazov denounced her on national television as a traitor. Her three adult children were arrested and held for two weeks.

Muradova was not charged until July 12, 2006, "... considerably later than the three-day limit prescribed by the Turkmen Code of Criminal Procedures requires," a March 27, 2007 UN report noted. The charge was "illegal acquisition, possession, or sale of ammunition or firearms," and it "appears to be fabricated," according to Amnesty International. She was convicted on August 25 "after a closed-door trial that lasted only a few minutes," Reporters sans Frontiers found. She was sentenced to six years in prison.

Both the UN and the OSCE protested her conviction. OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media Miklos Haraszti took the case up with the Turkmen government and was told that Muradova had been "involved in criminal activities related to organization of subversive acts and collection of defamatory information in Turkmenistan in order to create public dissatisfaction," according to an August 28, 2006 OSCE press release. During her detention, Muradova was given "psychotropic drugs" in an attempt to extract a confession, Amnesty International reported.

When Muradova's body was returned to her family on September 14, 2006, "it had a large head wound and bruises around the neck, according to the Bulgaria-based Turkmenistan Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights, which spoke to the journalist's adult children before the family's phone lines were cut," the Committee to Project Journalists reported in a Sept. 21, 2006 press release.

Muradova died under the Niyazov regime. During 2007, Berdymuhamedov ignored calls to initiate a government

investigation. He also did not put an end to harassment of journalists working in Turkmenistan. As RFE/RL reported on April 27, 2007, "At least seven RFE/RL correspondents in the country have had their land lines and mobile telephones blocked in recent weeks...Reporters in the country say state security officials are following them daily and interfering in their private lives." In one incident, state security officials detained and questioned an RFE/RL correspondent's son for eight hours in Ashgabat and threatened his girlfriend, "telling her she would face trouble if she married into the correspondent's family."

On a slightly more positive note, Human Rights Watch reported that in June 2007, after years of trying, journalist Nina Startseva was finally allowed to leave the country to seek asylum abroad. She had to "sign away her property and promise never to return to Turkmenistan."

Like Muradova, the majority of journalists who are intimidated, followed, or threatened by the government are Turkmen citizens who cooperate with or work for international media organizations. Reporters who write for RFE/RL are often targeted, but they are not the only ones. A local correspondent for the Institute for War and Peace Reporting (IWPR) was recently called into the office of the state security agency and questioned about the subject of one of his e-mails. Even when independent local journalists are not being actively harassed, the government listens to their phone calls and reads their emails, one panelist wrote.

These independent local journalists are the international community's most important uncensored source of information about what goes on inside Turkmenistan, since international journalists are seldom permitted to visit the country. Even when international journalists are allowed to enter, they generally operate under tight Turkmen government monitoring and control.

Accounts vary regarding which foreign news organizations have managed to get accreditation to work in Turkmenistan. Some sources say none have been accredited. A November 7, 2007 IWPR article found that Reuters, AFP, and a Pakistani news agency had received accreditation. Rules on accrediting journalists are used to keep international media representatives from covering events that are distasteful to the Turkmen government. For example, in 2006 the government refused to accredit international journalists who wanted to cover an OSCE conference on sustainable tourism development, according to the OSCE.

Even if international journalists can surmount the obstacles set up by the Turkmen government, they face another problem: Turkmen citizens are usually afraid to talk to them



because, in the past, those who cooperated with the foreign press were later been questioned, threatened, and punished. "The Ministry of National Security summoned for questioning virtually all those who met journalists of the BBC and the French media production company Galaxie-Pressé who visited Turkmenistan and subsequently criticized the government's policies. Those questioned were barred from leaving Turkmenistan, and some were put under house arrest," Amnesty International reported.

Journalists who work for domestic media organizations—essentially all of which are owned and operated by the government—face a different set of challenges. Just as Niyazov did, Berdymuhamedov appoints the top editors of all the countries' mass media organizations. Furthermore, "...all printed, audio, and video material is censored by the Committee for the Protection of State Secrets in the Press, which comes under the government," according to a November 7, 2007 IWPR article. Journalists who produce reports that portray the government in an unfavorable light risk having their work trashed, losing their jobs, or worse.

A positive result of this strict censorship is that journalists virtually never face libel suits, since they produce only innocuous, government-approved reports. In Turkmenistan, libel is a criminal offense, punishable by up to two years in prison. The burden of proof is on the accused.

Journalists in Turkmenistan have limited access to foreign media. According to one panelist, journalists often have Internet access in their offices (and some even have it at home, although one panelist noted that this requires "official registration"), but the range of sites they can visit is limited. Some websites—such as those maintained by BBC, RFE/RL, and IWPR—often are not accessible. The Turkmen print media occasionally reprint edited versions of stories from international news sources. These usually deal with scientific discoveries and similar nonpolitical topics.

Under Niyazov, foreign periodicals were banned. In June 2007, Berdymuhamedov signed a decree saying that Turkmenpochta (the postal service) should conclude a contract with Russian Rospechat "to provide ministries, organizations, and scientific institutions of Turkmenistan with foreign periodicals for the first half of 2008," according to the semi-official, pro-government website Turkmenistan.ru. It is not clear which publications will be provided (some reports suggest that scientific rather than news publications will be provided) and to which organizations. At the beginning of 2008, one panelist reported that some (though few) organizations were receiving foreign periodicals.

## OBJECTIVE 2: PROFESSIONAL JOURNALISM

### Turkmenistan Objective Score: 0.82

Journalism in Turkmenistan does not meet international standards. News in Turkmenistan is not objective, well sourced, or fair: it is propaganda for the government. Journalists are forced constantly to exercise self-censorship and to submit to government censorship. They cannot cover many key events and issues because stories that portray the government or the nation in a negative light are taboo.

However, panelists found at least one bright point within this objective: the Turkmen media have good equipment with which to work. Therefore, Indicator 7 scored rather well, definitively bringing up the average. Indicator 6, entertainment/news balance, also scored noticeably above the average. All other indicators scored at or below the average, notably Indicator 3, state media reflect the political spectrum. This indicator scored near 0.

Although some of Berdymuhamedov's public comments suggest that he would like the Turkmen media to adopt Western journalistic principles, others suggest that he believes the fundamental role of the media should be to support government policy. In a speech in early 2008, he "called upon [the media] to propagate and popularize Turkmenistan's new national foreign and domestic policies," according to Turkmendovlethabarlary, the government news agency.

Though it is unclear exactly what kind of journalism Berdymuhamedov expects from the Turkmen media, it is

### 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.
- > 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 exists (investigative, economics/business, local, political).

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very clear that he is not pleased with their current products. He has harshly criticized Turkmen journalists for their lack of professionalism. He has condemned Turkmen radio and television for using unverified information. He has said that journalists "lack basic skills such as conducting interviews, including expert opinions, and doing research for television reports and newspaper outlets," according to Chemen Durdiyeva's January 23, 2008 article in the *CACI Analyst*, the journal of Johns Hopkins University's Central Asian and Caucasus Institute. Since his election, he has fired two ministers of culture and replaced the chief editors of all the newspapers, according to the *Times of Central Asia*, a regional newspaper based in the Kyrgyz Republic.

Panelists made clear the challenges of working for a state-run media organization: "Reporting in Turkmenistan is not objective and not well-sourced...journalists cannot get all sides to a story even if they want...because [if] the story is not [favorable] to the current government, then journalists' work may not be published," one said.

"Reporting is always subjective and mostly focused on state policies," another said. "No investigative programming exists...I don't think that journalist[s] apply any critical thinking to their work...[the] main concern of the journalists working on television, etc., is to publish information that can be approved by state officials and for which they will not be punished."

Specifically regarding media covering key events, one panelist wrote, "In case of disasters or critical events (crashes, etc.) almost never does [the] media cover these events. People [get] information about such events through their relatives or friends."

While Turkmenistan suffers from an oppressive political atmosphere, its government does not suffer from a lack of funds. The country has some of the largest natural gas reserves in the world and small but significant reserves of oil. Its per capita gross domestic product is \$1,669, the second highest in Central Asia (after Kazakhstan), roughly three times as high as neighboring Uzbekistan and comparable to China, according to the most recent UNDP statistics.

Although this wealth generally does not reach the average Turkmen family, it does provide the government with funds to spend on projects that it deems important. For example, Niyazov spent tens of millions of dollars rebuilding central Ashgabat in white marble and gleaming reflective glass. Also, the media have been relatively well provided with technical equipment. In October, Berdymuhamedov allocated \$9 million to improve the "material and technical resources" of state television and radio stations, according to the Central Asia Newswire. He also commissioned one of the tallest television towers in the world, according to IWPR.

"Due to [the] recent modernization of [the] media industry in Turkmenistan, media have [the] latest facilities, and equipment for gathering and producing news. However, it is slightly better in [the] capital city than other regions and cities of the country," one panelist wrote. "Recently, authorities are concerned with modernization of state television channels, building new television towers, [and] arranging film editing rooms and studios with the most modern technologies," another panelist wrote.

One panelist believed that journalists' salaries were high enough to prevent corruption; another wrote that they are comparable to average civil servant salaries, with recently announced plans for the government to increase them. Another panelist, however, complained that the average salary of a journalist in Turkmenistan is only \$20 to \$30 per month, so low that "many journalists have retrained themselves in other professions." To put corruption generally into context: In its 2007 Corruption Perceptions Index report, Transparency International ranked Turkmenistan as one of the world's most corrupt countries, number 162 of 179.

Panelists gave Turkmenistan relatively high scores for its ratio of news to entertainment programming. They said that news is available and affordable for citizens to consume if they wish. The problem is that this news is of low quality and has a strong pro-government bias.

One panelist, who rated the indicator below the average, however, justified the low score by writing "Reporting is not balanced and [is] single-sided, reflecting [the] official state position. Media is not diverse, having similar format. TV channels broadcast national holidays' celebration (dances,

songs—only national), cartoons, and fiction movies (which are censored, no kisses or bed scenes). News blocks usually start usually start with [the] president [opening] a new factory, hospital, visiting newly built sports complexes. [The] president issued a new law, which was fully supported by the ministers and “Medjilis” (parliament). President firing another minister, and no interviews of [the fired] ministers is shown to announce [their] opinion. After most important events, some cultural news is reported (celebration of national dances), sport, and weather.”

However, reports from inside Turkmenistan indicate that the quality and timeliness of news in the country has been improving since Berdymuhamedov took office.

A housewife in Ashgabat told an IWPR correspondent that she was “pleasantly surprised to discover that she was eligible for a maternity payment under the new welfare package announced at the same time as the restitution of pensions. ‘It was the first time I have ever found out anything useful and relevant to my life from the television news, rather than from neighbors or acquaintances,’ she said,” according to a November 7, 2007 IWPR article.

### OBJECTIVE 3: PLURALITY OF NEWS SOURCES

#### Turkmenistan Objective Score: 0.39

Government-produced television, radio, newspapers, and magazines are affordable and relatively plentiful, but they all offer the same set of centrally approved information. During 2007, Berdymuhamedov increased access to censored, government-monitored Internet, which many saw as a positive step. However, he also started bringing satellite television—until now the primary source of uncensored information in Turkmenistan—under government control.

Individual indicator scores did not vary much from the objective score. The lowest, Indicators 4 and 5 (independent news agencies and private broadcast media produce their own news), barely broke 0. Indicators 1 and 2, plurality of sources and citizen access to news, finished somewhat ahead of the others.

Turkmenistan has four television channels, five radio stations, 24 national and local newspapers, and 16 magazines. There are two general-interest national daily newspapers. Most issues of these two major papers are only four or eight pages long. One weekly newspaper, *Reklami i Bizness (Advertising & Business)*, is privately owned by a Turkish businessperson; it has a circulation of 5,000. All other media in Turkmenistan are owned and operated by the government. “In Turkmenistan there is a big newspaper for youth,” Berdymuhamedov

*For years, the primary source for alternative viewpoints has been satellite television. Satellite dishes became popular in the early 1990s, when Niyazov tightened control of other media. In the mid-1990s, there were about 1,000 satellite dishes in the capital and perhaps 250 more in each of the countries other four major cities, according to a 1996 Internews article by Eric Johnson.*

said during his speech at Columbia University. “I appointed as editor in chief a student, a student from a Turkmen university... a senior; editor-in-chief of the newspaper for youth, a member of government already.”

Given this ownership structure, it is perhaps not surprising that all of the country’s newspapers present a single view: that of the government. They present this perspective mostly in Turkmen language, although some materials are presented in Russian, including one of the two main national newspapers. The media largely ignore the country’s Uzbek and other minorities, which include Koreans, Baloch, and various groups from the Caucasus. “Journalists do not write about minority issues because they can be easily punished for it,” one panelist said.

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

#### PLURALITY OF NEWS SOURCES INDICATORS:

- > A plurality of affordable public and private news sources (e.g., print, broadcast, Internet) exists.
- > Citizens’ access to domestic or international media is not restricted.
- > State or public media reflect the views of the entire political spectrum, are nonpartisan, and serve the public interest.
- > Independent news agencies gather and distribute news for print and broadcast media.
- > Independent broadcast media produce their own news programs.
- > Transparency of media ownership allows consumers to judge 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.

*Under Berdymuhamedov, as under Niyazov, there was only one Internet service provider: government-owned Turkmentelekom. Software at Turkmentelekom allows the government to decide which sites Turkmen citizens are allowed to view.*

For years, the primary source for alternative viewpoints has been satellite television. Satellite dishes became popular in the early 1990s, when Niyazov tightened control of other media. In the mid-1990s, there were about 1,000 satellite dishes in the capital and perhaps 250 more in each of the countries other four major cities, according to a 1996 Internews article by Eric Johnson.

By 2007, dishes were so common that one journalist counted 48 on a 60-unit apartment building in Ashgabat. Most families in Ashgabat, which has a population of about 500,000, have at least one dish. Many families have two: one to pick up Russian channels and another for channels from Turkey and Europe. Even in rural areas, satellite dishes are quite common. They cost about \$50; a complete package including a tuner and some cable costs around \$100. They can receive hundreds of television and radio channels.

Russian channels are perhaps the most watched. Turkish and Iranian channels are also popular. Families watch a variety of programming, including the Moscow evening news, Russian MTV, mainstream American movies dubbed into Russian, and Iranian and Turkish music videos. Some also watch news reports from Euronews, CNN, or the BBC. All this provides them with a wealth of uncensored information about the outside world that is not available through the domestic media.

However, none of these satellite channels covers domestic Turkmen events on an even slightly regular basis. For uncensored information on domestic events, practically the only place to turn is Radio Liberty's Turkmen Service, Azatlyk Radio, which is available through regular television satellite dishes. A broad cross-section of Turkmen citizens listens to Azatlyk Radio: rich and poor, urban and rural, opposition and pro-government. Perhaps this explains why the government is so hard on RFE/RL correspondents.

This also explains why it was so troubling that Berdymuhamedov announced in November that he had ordered the removal of satellite dishes from apartment buildings in Ashgabat. He cast the move as part of a

beautification plan for the capital. As reported the pro-government website Turkmenistan.ru, "We shall work consistently and systematically to get rid of everything that makes our capital untidy, slovenly, and tasteless," said Gurbanguly Berdymuhamedov. According to the head of state, the old apartment houses, cars parked on the sidewalks, and television satellite antennas make the city look ugly. "It is enough to fix one powerful antenna for the whole apartment house."

By the beginning of 2008, the government had begun tearing down satellite dishes in the capital. "A 'set of fixed programs from satellite television broadcast by cable networks is offered by the authorities as an alternative,'" according to a Jan. 27, 2008 article from the *Kronika Turkmenistan* website, which is maintained by the nongovernmental Turkmen Initiative for Human Rights. "This includes no news, only entertainment. It does not include Radio Liberty, Voice of America, BBC, Deutsche Welle, Mayak Radio, etc. Individual satellite aerials offer an average of 300-350 tele[vision] and radio channels. The package of programs broadcast by cable networks which is offered by the authorities includes 20-30 programs."

In July 2002, Niyazov tried something similar. He declared that the satellite dishes on buildings in Ashgabat looked ugly and ordered them removed (he also complained that Russian programs had a "biased opinion of life in Turkmenistan and misrepresented reality," according to ITAR-TASS). However, Niyazov's ban did not last. According the U.S. Department of State's 2003 *Human Rights Practices* report, the government backed off the following year.

One of Berdymuhamedov's public relations coups has been his expansion of Internet access, which he began almost immediately after taking office. He was elected February 11 and on February 16 RFE/RL quoted him as saying that "Internet cafés are starting to open in Ashgabat and other cities. At this moment, we are working on a program to extend Internet access to every school." Turkmen and international media alike lauded him for this initiative. Reports on how many cafés had opened before the end of 2008 vary widely, but the number is probably below a dozen, including two to five in the capital.

All this good publicity glossed over the fact that the Internet was available in Turkmenistan before Berdymuhamedov was elected. In 2006, there was already one Internet café, and possibly two, in Ashgabat. It was located in a building on the capital's main plaza under the towering Arch of Neutrality monument. It was usually empty, which is perhaps not surprising, since it charged about \$2 per hour for access. Also in 2006, some people had Internet service in their private homes, although the access

was unbearably slow, sometimes taking 10 minutes to load a page. One panelist wrote, "The average Internet speed is very low and unstable, and [does] not allow watching video or listening [to] VOIP materials." Some businesses and international organizations had Internet access. U.S.-government-sponsored "American Corners" in all the regional capitals also provided access.

This is not to say that Internet access in Turkmenistan was widespread under the Niyazov regime. Turkmenistan had—and still has—one of the lowest rates of Internet access per capita in the world. Just 0.8 percent of people in Turkmenistan are Internet users, compared to 3.4 percent in Uzbekistan, and 15.2 percent in Russia, according to the World Bank. "I would say that the society is Internet-illiterate," one panelist wrote.

Despite expanding Internet access, Berdymuhamedov has apparently tightened control of Internet cafés slightly. In 2006, patrons could simply use a computer, pay, and leave. Internet cafés now require users to leave their names—and according to some reports, show their identification—when they pay.

Under Berdymuhamedov, as under Niyazov, there was only one Internet service provider: government-owned Turkmentelekom. Software at Turkmentelekom allows the government to decide which sites Turkmen citizens are allowed to view. "Most web sites that contain information perceived to be critical of the government are blocked. Security services reportedly visit Internet cafés and intimidate customers," according to UNHCR's *2008 World Report*.

In the first half of 2007, security services sometimes visited Internet cafés "with copies of messages sent from specific computers and specific information about their authors," a Human Rights Watch report found. "Security agents warned the authors about possible negative consequences of their being linked by e-mail to 'organized networks distributing false information and defamation.'" According to a Turkmentelekom employee who wished to remain anonymous, every computer in each Internet café has been assigned an identification number in addition to its Internet IP address. Special software and equipment were installed that allows the state to identify computers (both private and in public cafés) operating through the network that connect to specific websites."

Regarding transparency of media ownership, panelists noted that ownership is clear as the state ultimately owns or controls all media. However, this does effectively create a conglomerate intent on monopolizing the news and information that is available.

## OBJECTIVE 4: BUSINESS MANAGEMENT

### Turkmenistan Objective Score: 0.31

Media organizations are not managed as businesses in Turkmenistan, because they are government agencies, not businesses. There are no significant private media organizations in the country. This reflects the leadership's wish to control information within Turkmenistan's borders, but it also reflects the larger economic situation in the country. The government controls most of the economy. Turkmenistan has one of the least free economies in the world, according to a 2008 Heritage Foundation study, which ranked it 152nd of 158 countries.

All indicators scored poorly, even worse than the objective score, with the exception of Indicators 3 and 4, advertising agencies and the advertising market and balance of advertising and other revenue. These two indicators scored somewhat higher, raising the average.

"It would not be relevant to talk about whether media organizations are profit-generating businesses," one panelist wrote. "Media managers do not feel pressed to use more ads in their programs or newspaper pages, since the government is covering all their expenses."

The government does not use market research to decide what its media organizations should present to the public. It presents what it thinks is politically expedient and then forces people to buy it. Subscribing to regional or national newspapers is mandatory for government employees. "Our director informed us that 10 per cent of our salary would be deducted for newspapers and journals," a math teacher

## INDEPENDENT MEDIA ARE WELL-MANAGED BUSINESSES, ALLOWING EDITORIAL INDEPENDENCE.

### BUSINESS MANAGEMENT INDICATORS:

- > Media outlets and supporting firms operate as efficient, professional, and profit-generating businesses.
- > 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 at commercial outlets.
- > Independent media do not receive government subsidies.
- > Market research is used to formulate strategic plans, enhance advertising revenue, and tailor products to the needs and interests of audiences.
- > Broadcast ratings and circulation figures are reliably and independently produced.

*After criticizing the nation's journalists for poor skills, Berdymuhamedov ordered the Turkmen State Makhtumkuli University to introduce a major in journalism. "We opened the journalism department at the state university this year. If necessary, we will open post-graduate courses for journalists and other media staff," the president said in October, according to the Central Asia Newswire.*

from a Dashagouz school said, according to an April 14, 2007 article from the *Kronika Turkmenistana* website.

A former journalist with 35 years of experience explained the situation well in another article on the same website: "If the newspaper were self-sustained financially, the editorial board would make an effort to make the newspaper content more readable, increase its circulation, and attract the readers' attention. In the meantime, there is no need for this. They will face no constraints in attracting subscribers since the subscription to several newspapers is mandatory for every employed country's resident. There is no competition and no single independent print media...our press is more committed to ideological upbringing and propaganda than generating profit."

Information on print media circulation is incomplete and distorted by government-coerced subscription sales. Broadcast media ratings are not available.

According to panelists, the advertising sector is not well developed and lacks workers with professional skills. A few advertising agencies exist, but their role is minor. Almost no advertisements are placed on television, but some are placed in the newspapers.

## OBJECTIVE 5: SUPPORTING INSTITUTIONS

### Turkmenistan Objective Score: 0.26

Supporting institutions do little to assist or improve the media in Turkmenistan. The government dominates almost every other sector of Turkmen society just as it dominates politics, economics, and the mass media. Trade associations and NGOs do not play significant roles in the country. However, to his credit, since taking office, Berdymuhamedov has initiated the creation of the country's only university-level journalism program.

As a result of the overall situation, this objective received the lowest score of the five objectives. While Indicators 4 and 5 (academic journalism programs and short-term training opportunities) scored well above the average—although not above 1—all others scored either a flat 0 or barely above 0.

After criticizing the nation's journalists for poor skills, Berdymuhamedov ordered the Turkmen State Makhtumkuli University to introduce a major in journalism. "We opened the journalism department at the state university this year. If necessary, we will open post-graduate courses for journalists and other media staff," the president said in October, according to the Central Asia Newswire. Until 2007, there was no journalism program in the country; the media mainly hired graduates with degrees in Turkmen language or literature.

Berdymuhamedov also suggested that journalists should also take courses abroad. "We will even open short-term skills-improvement courses for journalists and other media workers, if necessary," the president said.

This represents a major shift in policy for the country, according to one panelist who said that attending such courses abroad was frowned upon in the past. "I have a friend who attended a highly professional training abroad and then lost his job in Turkmenistan," the panelist said.

NGOs face nearly as much persecution as independent journalists in Turkmenistan. In 2003, the government passed a law effectively criminalizing NGOs that were not registered with the Ministry of Justice. The staff of these NGOs faced penalties ranging from fines to imprisonment. A new law was adopted the next year that abolished these criminal penalties, according to Freedom House. Unregistered NGOs remain illegal, however; they just do not face *criminal* penalties. Since 2004, no new NGOs have been registered. However,

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

### SUPPORTING INSTITUTIONS INDICATORS:

- > Trade associations represent the interests of private media owners and provide member services.
- > Professional associations work to protect journalists' rights.
- > NGOs support free speech and independent media.
- > Quality journalism degree programs that provide substantial practical experience exist.
- > Short-term training and in-service training programs allow journalists to upgrade skills or acquire new skills.
- > Sources of newsprint and printing facilities are in private hands, apolitical, and unrestricted.
- > Channels of media distribution (kiosks, transmitters, Internet) are private, apolitical, and unrestricted.

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existing NGOs have had to renew their registrations during that time. This requirement has been used by the government as a tool for coercion.

NGOs that do manage to register and stay registered with the government deal with heavy interference from the government. They must register with the Ministry of Justice every grant that they are awarded before they can receive the funds—a process that can take months. They must inform the Ministry of all their events. Ministry representatives have the right to participate in NGOs' internal meetings. Given this situation, NGOs are unable to effectively support the media.

“What distinguishes the Turkmen environment is the comprehensive government harassment and intimidation of independent actors that has made it virtually impossible for civil society organizations to function. In this regard, the Niazov [sic] and post-Niazov [sic] periods so far are indistinguishable,” according to Human Rights Watch.

Turkmen law provides no guarantees to allow workers to form unions or to strike, according to Freedom House. However, two associations of media workers exist. The Union of Journalists of Turkmenistan was founded in 1992 with a charter that included “the protection of [journalists'] interests against state and public organizations, founders, and publishers of the media,” according to a 2001 IWPR article by Nazik Ataeva. A quasi-governmental organization that represents government workers to the government, it is ineffective according to a panelist familiar with its operations.

The nongovernmental Shamchirag Association of Journalists of Turkmenistan, which has existed for at least six years, is apparently little better. “One time they conducted a ‘training,’ but it’s funny to even call it a training,” wrote one journalist. “They got a grant and worked with volunteers from Counterpart [Consortium]. The guys [journalists who attended] can’t say what the training did for them.”

Turkmenistan’s printing and distribution facilities, television transmitters, and Internet service provider are all owned by the government. Newspapers are largely distributed through the government postal service, though they are sometimes sold in bazaars as well.

*Due to the repressive political environment in Turkmenistan, IREX did not conduct a full panel for Turkmenistan. This chapter represents research conducted on the situation and the results of questionnaires filled out by a ‘mini-panel’ of several people familiar with situation of media in the country. The names of those who provided information will not be published to protect their personal security.*