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TURKMENISTAN

An eccentric dictator who had increasingly implemented a cult of personality, Saparmurat Niyazov led Turkmenistan for more than 20 years, first while it was a part of the Soviet Union and then after it gained independence in 1991. International human-rights groups condemned Niyazov for making Turkmenistan one of the world's most isolated, repressive, and censored societies. But even during Niyazov's reign, there were three sources of independent information from abroad available to citizens: satellite television, a few Internet connections, and Turkmen-language radio broadcasts by the US government-funded Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL).

When Niyazov died—reportedly of a heart attack—health minister Gurbanguly Berdymuhamedov took over through inside political maneuvering and an election on February 11, 2007, which observers cited as neither free nor fair. In his first year, he made significant improvements to the country's pension, education, and health-care systems and lifted some restrictions on freedom of movement. In 2008, he pursued greater cooperation with the international community, ordered Turkmenistan's constitution and legal codes rewritten to meet international standards, pleased the International Monetary Fund (IMF) by taking steps to introduce more market mechanisms into the economy, and announced a four-year, \$4 billion rural development program.

All the while, though, Berdymuhamedov's government maintained total control of domestic media and clamped down on the flow of free information available to citizens from abroad. He continued a drive to remove privately owned satellite dishes. While he increased the number of people who have access to the Internet, his government also increased monitoring and filtering of the Web. And his security services used harassment, intimidation, and violence to deter journalists and others from providing information to RFE/RL's radio broadcasts.

In 2008, Reporters sans Frontiers named Berdymuhamedov a "Predator of Media Freedom" and an "Internet Enemy." Freedom House named Turkmenistan to its "Worst of the Worst" list of the world's most repressive societies. And the Economist Intelligence Unit reported in July that "the new president's governing style differs little from that of Mr. Niyazov, and prospects for a fundamental shift toward a more liberal political system seem remote." Still, Berdymuhamedov is much more adept at public relations than his predecessor was, and he controls vast reserves of natural gas and significant reserves of oil. So in 2008 his openings to foreign leaders and diplomats focused on social and economic reforms, and he was able to avoid raising the issue of freedom of expression or political dissent.

Turkmenistan scored 0.32 overall, down 0.10 from last year, reflecting an "unsustainable, anti-free press" situation. While all objectives scored less at least slightly, the two biggest drops were in Objective 3, Plurality of News, and Objective 4, Business Management.

TURKMENISTAN AT A GLANCE

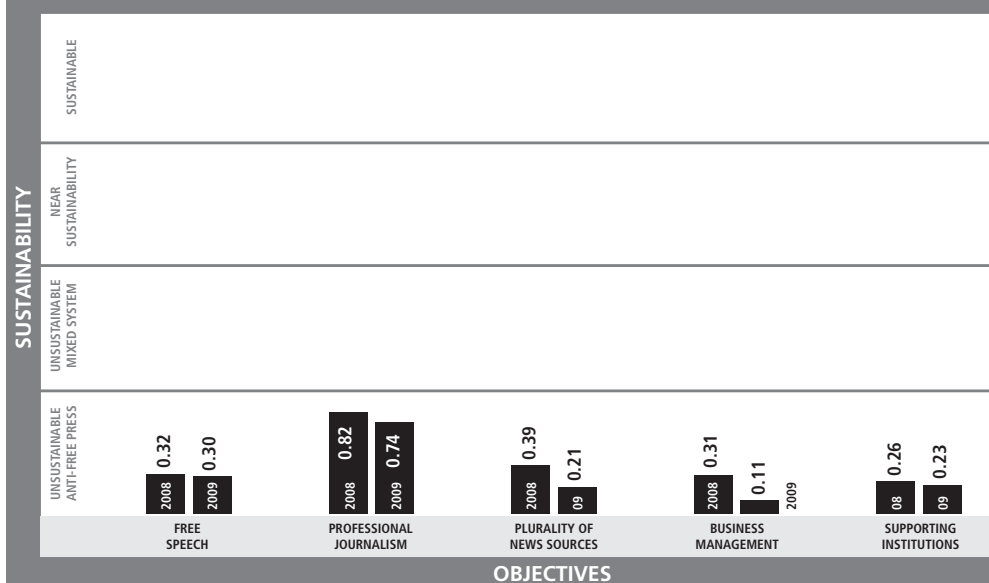
GENERAL

- > **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 (2007-Atlas):** N/A (World Bank Development Indicators, 2008)
- > **GNI per capita (2007-PPP):** \$4,350 (World Bank Development Indicators, 2008)
- > **Literacy rate:** 98.8% (male 99.3%, female 98.3%) (1999 est., *CIA World Factbook*)
- > **President or top authority:** President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow (since February 14, 2007)

MEDIA-SPECIFIC

- > **Number of active print outlets, radio stations, television stations:** Print: 24 national and local newspapers, 15 magazines; Radio: 5; Television Stations: 5
- > **Newspaper circulation statistics:** Top two by circulation: *Netralniy Turkmenistan* (Russian language state-owned daily), *Turkmenistan* (Turkmen language state-owned daily)
- > **Broadcast ratings:** N/A
- > **News agencies:** Turkmendovlethabarlary (state-owned)
- > **Annual advertising revenue in media sector:** N/A
- > **Internet usage:** 70,000 (2007 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 political environment in Turkmenistan, IREX did not conduct an in-country panel for Turkmenistan. This chapter represents desk research conducted on the situation, interviews, and the results of questionnaires filled out by several people familiar with situation of media in the country.

OBJECTIVE 1: FREEDOM OF SPEECH

Turkmenistan Objective Score: 0.30

Turkmenistan's score of 0.30 for Objective 1, essentially unchanged from last year, represents active opposition by the government to freedom of speech. Among individual indicator scores there are no bright spots: the only indicator last year to attain a score of 1.00 or more, Indicator 8 (media access to, and use of, foreign news sources) fell to well below 1.00 this year. All others remained more or less unchanged and scored relatively close to the overall score.

Since independence, Turkmenistan's laws, on paper, have provided comprehensive protection for freedom of expression and of the press. In 2008, the government adopted a new constitution that reaffirms these rights and announced plans to reform its media-related laws, too. However, few think this will lead to any substantial change. The laws are not the problem in Turkmenistan, but rather the government, which ignores its own laws, controlling and censoring virtually all media and using other means such as blacklisting, harassment, and physical violence to control those journalists who do persist in working independently and voicing dissenting views. "There are laws that guarantee free speech and access to public info, but they don't work," one panelist said.

The new constitution, like the old constitution, "proclaims the right to freedom of conviction and of expression and freedom of information where that information is not a state secret," Shirin Akhmedova, director of the Turkmen government's Institute for Human Rights and Democracy, told a United Nations Human Rights Council working group in December. The existing law, "On the Press and Other Mass Media in Turkmenistan," protects the freedom of the mass media and also contains guarantees of freedom of information.

Under Turkmen law, both libel and invasion of privacy are criminal offenses. The libel law gives special protections to government officials, public figures, the state, and state symbols, according to a 2005 report by the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). The burden of proof is on the accused, and convictions can lead to as many as five years in prison and a fine of up to "30 average monthly wages." According to a 2008 analysis of Turkmen media laws by the US-based nongovernmental organization

(NGO) Internews, gathering information in a way that invades someone's privacy can bring a year of "correctional labor" or a fine of 5 to 10 months' wages; disseminating such information through the media doubles the possible penalties.

All print and broadcast media require government licenses, according to the 2008 Internews report. Licensing fees differ, depending on the applicant. Government entities, for example, do not have to pay a licensing fee to launch a newspaper in Turkmenistan. Turkmen individuals or corporations, on the other hand, must pay "100 times the size of the estimated average [monthly] wage." Licenses are issued by the State Publishing Association, Turkmenmetbugat, with approval from the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the Cabinet of Ministers. Applications can be rejected for a variety of reasons, including a "negative" conclusion of the expert committee of Turkmenmetbugat.

The Turkmen government "has started to review and rewrite its legislation with the stated goal of meeting international standards," according to a July "background note" on the country by the US Department of State. In December, Akhmedova told the UN Human Rights Council working group that her government was working with USAID and Internews on "improving legislation governing the media."

As a September report on the state of the media by the Vienna-based NGO Turkmen Initiative for Human Rights (TIHR) put it, "'Verbal legislation,' represented by the utterances of the first and second presidents of Turkmenistan, has virtually replaced all norms of the constitutional law." The legislative and judicial branches of government are subordinate to the executive, so the power flows from the executive and, in particular, the president. Although some reports indicate that the new constitution strengthened the power of the Mejlis (the parliament), the president maintains the authority to appoint and dismiss judges at will.

Virtually all newspapers, magazines, television stations, and radio stations in Turkmenistan are owned and tightly controlled by the government. The only news agency in the country is the government's Turkmendovlethabarlary (TDH). All of these media organizations are officially censored, and journalists working for these organizations self-censor as a matter of professional survival. Upper-level editors are appointed and dismissed by the president.

Furthermore, the president has shown a willingness to publicly tell the media what they should print and broadcast. In January, according to a TDH report, he told a group of "cultural workers," including journalists, that the role of the mass media is "to propagate and popularize the new national foreign and domestic policies" and that "the mass media should reflect the stability reigning in all spheres of political

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and social life.” The editors-in-chief of two publications rose to assure the president that his remarks “would be a guide for action.”

The vast majority of Turkmen journalists work for government media. Those few who decide to remain independent must become contributors to foreign media, since there are no independent media outlets in Turkmenistan. This is a difficult and dangerous career path. “Entry into the independent journalism profession is almost impossible,” one panelist said. As TIHR’s September report put it: “Independent journalists (freelancers) are considered outlaws.”

Independent journalists in Turkmenistan face difficulties accessing government information, getting interviews, and getting their reports out of the country. The government controls and monitors the postal service, the Internet, the telephones, and the borders. Despite these obstacles, a

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.

number of journalists/dissidents/human-rights activists (many journalists play all three roles) manage to sneak out reports on a fairly regular basis.

In the middle of 2008, the government launched a major crackdown on these activists. In a June 16, 2008, article from the *Kronika Turkmenistan* website, which is maintained by TIHR, one of the officers involved in the crackdown was quoted as saying that the president “is outraged by the negative coverage of the situation in Turkmenistan, which is posted on the Internet. He ordered to find [sic] the journalists working for foreign Internet editions at all costs and apply retaliatory measures toward them.” A June 19 Institute for War and Peace Reporting (IWPR) article said that the country’s Security Council had issued a special directive to clamp down on people considered “politically unreliable,” including journalists.

On June 20, Sazak Durdymuradov, a 59-year-old RFE/RL contributor who was due to appear on an RFE/RL discussion program about the new constitution, was detained by agents of the security service (the MNB). A June 27 article on the website of the Bulgaria-based Turkmen Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights alleged he had been “severely beaten with a pipe, tortured with electroshock, and pressured to sign a letter saying that he agreed to stop reporting for RFE/RL.” An IWPR article also said Durdymuradov had been beaten. On July 4, after his case was publicized and the international community protested, Durdymuradov was released. He told RFE/RL that he had been fired from his job as a history teacher, confined to a psychiatric institution, and pressured not to contribute to RFE/RL—but that he had not been tortured. In the end, he was just warned to provide “correct information” in his radio interviews, he said.

Gurbanguly Durdygulyev, who was supposed to appear on the same radio discussion program as Durdymuradov, was also visited by the police on June 20. He was told he should undergo psychiatric testing, according to an IWPR article. He had been previously confined from 2004 to 2006 to a psychiatric hospital and released only after he had been adopted as a “prisoner of conscience” by Amnesty International and a letter by 54 US senators protesting his detention had been sent to the Turkmen government. Earlier in the year, someone had written graffiti on his house, branding him a traitor; someone had also thrown “burning bottles” onto the porch of his house, according to a TIHR report. During 2008, Gurbansultan Achilova and Osmankuly Khallyev also reported being pressured to stop contributing to RFE/RL.

Amnesty International reported to the UN Human Rights Council working group’s December meeting that “the authorities have in many cases attempted to silence

correspondents of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, which has often been critical of the authorities in its reporting and has broadcast human-rights concerns." Government techniques, according to Amnesty, included frequently summoning RFE/RL contributors to MNB offices "to question them about their cooperation with the Radio and to 'recommend' ending their activities; preventing correspondents from traveling abroad; cutting off correspondents' phone lines; ...and harassing and intimidating correspondents' relatives."

Those harassed, or worse, have no recourse to the courts. A case in point is the death of Ogulsapar Muradova, a 58-year-old RFE/RL correspondent who was harassed, threatened, and then imprisoned in June 2006 on firearms charges that Amnesty International characterized as "fabricated." Her body was returned to her family in September with a large head wound and bruises around her neck, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists. Reporters sans Frontiers judged that she had been tortured to death. To date, the government of Turkmenistan has yet to "open a thorough, impartial, independent investigation" into her death, according to Amnesty. The government maintains that she was neither a journalist nor a human-rights defender and that she died of natural causes.

Foreign journalists face significant obstacles to reporting in Turkmenistan. Akhmedova told the U.N. Human Rights Council's working group in December that "Turkmenistan has accredited more than 20 representatives of foreign agencies and the list continues to expand." However, government accreditation does not allow journalists to effectively and accurately report on events in Turkmenistan.

In the past, the Turkmen government has used the threat of withdrawing accreditation to keep foreign journalists from covering events it found distasteful. Government agencies often ask foreign journalists to submit their articles "prior to publication to be reviewed and amended," according to TIHR's September report. "These requests are always accompanied by threats of recall (cease) accreditation," the report continued. When the OSCE's Representative on Freedom of the Media, Miklos Haraszati, visited Ashgabat in September 2008, one of the issues he focused on in his public statements was "the need for a transparent and uncomplicated system of accreditation."

Another problem for foreign journalists is gathering information. It is extremely difficult to find people in Turkmenistan who are willing to speak honestly on the record with foreign journalists. And those Turkmen citizens who are willing to speak to foreign journalists are often harassed and threatened. In his December 10, 2008, article on *Kronika Turkmenistan*, Alty Begmuradov recounted his efforts to meet foreign journalists, which had been interrupted by pairs

of pushy young men in suits with hand-held radios. After Begmuradov delivered a package to a foreign journalist, he was questioned by officers from the security service who warned that they would "carefully follow all publications in the western media after this conference." "If we understand that the negative information in their articles was provided by you," they said, "you will suffer the consequences."

OBJECTIVE 2: PROFESSIONAL JOURNALISM

Turkmenistan Objective Score: 0.74

This year's score for professional journalism fell slightly compared with last year, primarily due to lower scores for Indicators 1 and 8 (journalists follow accepted practices and niche reporting). Only Indicator 7 returned a score well above the average thanks to government efforts to equip its media with the latest technology. On the other hand, as low as the overall score is, two indicators managed to score far lower: Indicator 1 and Indicator 3 (self-censorship).

Journalism in Turkmenistan cannot be considered fair, objective, or well-sourced. Information is tightly controlled by the government. Journalists who work in the state media produce pro-government reports under the pressures of official censorship and fear. Journalists who contribute to foreign media often play multiple roles as journalists, dissidents, and human-rights activists; many of them suffer under government repression and may be inclined to produce articles that are anti-government. Neither group of journalists is in a position to produce fair, balanced, high-quality journalism.

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).

The vast majority of journalists in Turkmenistan work for state media. Their fear of losing their jobs “or being arrested for making anti-government statements has taught [them] to be circumspect in preparing material, and to report only good news about Turkmenistan,” according to a January 20, 2008, IWPR article.

The vast majority of journalists in Turkmenistan work for state media. Their fear of losing their jobs “or being arrested for making anti-government statements has taught [them] to be circumspect in preparing material, and to report only good news about Turkmenistan,” according to a January 20, 2008, IWPR article. “Any material that the chief editors are doubtful about is thrown away or sent to the presidential administration for approval and ‘harmonization,’” a staff member at the government newspaper *Neytralniy Turkmenistan* told IWPR. “Today every media organization is monitored by a designated supervisor from the state security services, who visits the editorial office as if it were his home,” another journalist told IWPR. According to one panelist, “Senior journalists often tell entry-level journalists not to write about controversial topics in case [they] want to continue working for the Turkmen media.”

In addition to self-censorship by journalists and editors, there is official censorship. “All journalists of the official mass media are required to approve their materials with TDH, the presidential administration, or specially assigned persons in various ministries and agencies,” TIHR found in its September 2008 report. Also, all media materials are subject to the “external censorship of a special government committee that is supposed to ensure that no state secrets are divulged,” according to a January 20, 2008, article by IWPR. In October, the government established a state commission to evaluate “all literature, theater scripts, and screen plays and license them for production,” according to a November 2008 report by Human Rights Watch.

The reports that make it through this system of censorship fail to cover many of the key issues facing Turkmen society. “Journalism in Turkmenistan doesn’t meet professional standards of quality at all. It is used for propaganda of government policy,” one panelist said. Another panelist said that the media only “cover national topics, ignoring the importance of international news. It is quite often that the media re-run the programs over and over.”

Virtually all news in Turkmen media is good news. Information about natural disasters, epidemic hazards, animal diseases, and other problems are “considered classified” and are “subject to no coverage or discussion,” according to TIHR’s September report. A retired Russian teacher told an IWPR reporter for a January 20, 2008, article that “the newspapers and the TV screens all show the same thing—praise for the president. We have a great many problems, but you won’t find any crucial articles or interviews about them in the newspapers.”

A resident of the Turkmen city of Dashagouz told *Kronika Turkmenistan* journalist Nazar Saparov for a May 5, 2008, article that, “contrary to the expectations of many people, the content of the newspapers has not in fact changed [since Berdymuhamedov took power]...No articles with suggestions on how to decide local and state problems are being published. Moreover, the very word ‘problem’ has been virtually eliminated in the press. We still have only endless successes and achievements.”

No new data was available this year on Turkmen journalists’ salaries and whether they were high enough to discourage corruption. One MSI panelist in 2007 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 was 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 2008 Corruption Perceptions Index report, Transparency International ranked Turkmenistan as one of the world’s most corrupt countries, tied with Zimbabwe in 166th place (out of 180).

Panelists gave Turkmen media relatively high scores for providing a good mix of news and entertainment and not allowing entertainment programming to overshadow information, even if that information is tightly controlled. One panelist this year said many families in Turkmenistan buy satellite dishes because they are bored with all the informational programming on state television and want more entertainment programming.

Although most Turkmen live in poverty, the government does not lack spending money for the media and communications. A July 3, 2008, Economist Intelligence Unit report found that the government had a current account surplus of 33.8 percent of the GDP. On March 3, 2008, TDH announced that the president had authorized \$2.7 million for the purchase of “next-generation computers, spare parts ... video facilities, radio relay and direct broadcast receiving and transmission equipment.” In September 2008, a TDH article detailed

plans—which had been announced the previous year—for the construction of a 211-meter-tall television tower in Ashgabat. The first seven floors will house “the Turkmen TV and Radio Centre, about 100 editing rooms, and 10 on-air booths.” There will also be offices for television and radio journalists in the tower’s 54,000 square meters of floor space. And there will be restaurants, conference rooms, and exhibition halls.

OBJECTIVE 3: PLURALITY OF NEWS

Turkmenistan Objective Score: 0.21

Plurality of news sources suffered a drop of 0.18 from last year. As with last year, no indicator scored much better than the overall score, and some did score worse. The difference in score is due chiefly to drops in Indicators 6 and 7, which deal with transparency of ownership (due to firm monopoly by the state) and coverage of a wide range of social and minority issues.

Virtually all media outlets in Turkmenistan are owned, operated, and censored by the government. They present only one point of view and often even only one set of information. “All our newspapers are alike because they just republish official material from the state-run [TDH] news agency,” one Ashgabat resident told an IWPR reporter for a January 20, 2008, article. The three major exceptions are satellite television, RFE/RL radio broadcasts, and the Internet. In 2008, Berdymuhamedov’s government moved to tighten its grip on all three.

There are two Turkish-owned papers in Turkmenistan: a weekly advertising paper called *Reklama i Bizness (Advertising & Business)* and a newspaper called *Zaman*, which comes out three times a week. Both are sanctioned by (and friendly to) the government. All other media outlets in Turkmenistan are owned by the government. In 2008, that included four television channels, five radio stations, 22 newspapers, and 15 magazines, according to TIHR’s September report. A fifth television channel, broadcasting music and known as *Turkmen Ovazy*, was scheduled to go on the air in 2009.

Nearly all media in Turkmenistan are in the Turkmen language. The only minority-language publications available are the national, general-interest, Russian-language daily newspaper *Neytralniy Turkmenistan* and the advertising paper *Habarlar*, which is published in both Russian and Turkmen, according to a July 16, 2008, article from *Kronika Turkmenistan*. Publications in the languages of Turkmenistan’s other minorities, such as Uzbeks, Baloch, and Koreans, are not available. About 15 percent of the people living in Turkmenistan are not ethnic Turkmen.

Even though Internet access is now available to more people, the service is still slow and expensive. One Internet user interviewed by RFEIRL remarked, “The Internet speed is so slow that it takes an hour just to check e-mail and send three or four letters.”

Foreign newspapers and magazines, which were banned under Niyazov, are still not available to the general public. TIHR found in its September report that foreign publications were regularly confiscated at the borders. However, government officials say foreign publications are widely available. “There are no prohibitions to accessing foreign press,” Akhmedova told the UN Human Rights Council’s working group in December. “Since 2008, it has been possible to subscribe to and obtain periodicals from foreign countries, notably the Russian Federation, anywhere in Turkmenistan.”

Government agencies, in fact, are “obliged to subscribe to foreign media outlets,” according to Akhmedova. This statement probably refers to a program created in June 2007 by Berdymuhamedov that was designed “to provide ministries, organizations, and scientific institutions of Turkmenistan with foreign publications,” according to the semi-official, pro-government website *Turkmenistan.ru*. At the beginning of 2008, one panelist noted that some organizations were receiving foreign periodicals. TIHR’s September report,

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.

“All our newspapers are alike because they just republish official material from the state-run [TDH] news agency,” one Ashgabat resident told an IWPR reporter for a January 20, 2008, article.

though, called this program a “PR initiative,” noting that “the set of foreign periodicals is determined exclusively by the government authorities, funded by the state budget, and is not available to a broad audience.”

Foreign broadcast media are more accessible for the general population than foreign print media. The government television station TV-4 retransmits Russia’s Channel 1 for about two hours a day—about 20 minutes of which is devoted to news, according to TIHR’s September report. Foreign television programs are also widely available via private satellite dishes, which are extremely common in both urban and rural areas all over Turkmenistan. Since the 1990s, satellite television has been the primary source of uncensored information for people living in Turkmenistan. Many families have two dishes—one to catch signals from Russia and one to receive programs from Turkey and Europe. These dishes receive hundreds of television and radio channels, including Euronews, BBC, CNN, and RFE/RL’s Turkmen-language radio broadcast.

In 2002, Niyazov ordered the dishes torn down, but he backed off the following year, according to the US Department of State’s 2003 *Human Rights Practices* report. In 2007, Berdymuhamedov tried the same thing, ordering the removal of satellite dishes in Ashgabat. By early 2008, the government had begun tearing down satellite dishes, offering “a set of fixed programs from satellite television broadcast by cable networks as an alternative,” according to a January 27, 2008, article from *Kronika Turkmenistan*. “This does not include Radio Liberty [RFE/RL], 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.”

Berdymuhamedov’s government abandoned this effort soon after it began, probably due to discontent at home and pressure from abroad. However, in October, the authorities went back to dismantling dishes, working in the residential district of Ashgabat known as Mir-4, according to a November 13, 2008, article from the *Kronika Turkmenistan*. If this program to eliminate private satellite dishes in favor of government-controlled access to satellite television succeeds,

it will mean that most people in Turkmenistan will have virtually no access to independent media.

RFE/RL’s Turkmen-language broadcast, known as Azatlyk Radio, is the second major independent source of information in Turkmenistan and perhaps the best source of independent information on domestic affairs in Turkmenistan. In 2008, RFE/RL correspondents came under severe pressure from the government, as detailed under Objective 1, above. Even if RFE/RL is able to continue broadcasting Azatlyk Radio programs, the audience’s ability to hear them is also under threat, since most people listen to RFE/RL radio broadcasts through their satellite television dishes.

The Internet is the third major source of independent information in Turkmenistan, but because of practical, technological, and financial barriers, it is available only to a small minority of people in Turkmenistan. A March report from Reporters sans Frontiers, which named Berdymuhamedov an “Internet Enemy,” found that out of Turkmenistan’s 5.2 million residents, there were only about 64,800 Internet users, about 1.3 percent of the population. According to World Bank figures, in 2007, Turkmenistan had one of the lowest Internet access rates in the world. Only about 0.8 percent of Turkmen citizens had access to the Internet, compared with about 3.4 percent in Uzbekistan and 15.2 percent in Russia.

One of Berdymuhamedov’s early and ongoing initiatives, however, has been to increase access to the Internet. In late September 2008, he said he wanted to make “the Internet and modern communications technologies available to everyone in Turkmenistan,” according to a September 26 IWPR article. It is certainly true that he has expanded access. Under Niyazov there were only one or two Internet cafés and a handful of Internet resource centers run by international organizations. Since 2007, there have been 15–20 Internet cafés (plus the Internet resource centers) scattered around the country.

In 2008, two events increased the number of people with access to the Internet even further. First, the government Internet service provider, Turkmentelekom, began to install more Internet connections in the homes of private individuals. In the past, only companies, NGOs, government agencies, and a few individuals were allowed Internet connections at home. Turkmentelekom told the *Moscow Times* for a June 6 article that it was connecting up to 20 homes a day and had a waiting list of 2,000 people.

Second, the government gave permission for a second Internet service provider to operate in Turkmenistan, breaking Turkmentelekom’s monopoly. Now the Russian company Mobile TeleSystems (MTS), which had been previously offering only cell phone service in Turkmenistan, also offers

Internet service. For the first half of the year, MTS Web access was available only to about 750 corporate and government organizations, according to a June 10 article on Turkmenistan.ru. But in the middle of the year, it started offering Web access to private users, too, Turkmenistan.ru reported.

Even though Internet access is now available to more people, the service is still slow and expensive. One Internet user interviewed by RFE/RL remarked, "The Internet speed is so slow that it takes an hour just to check e-mail and send three or four letters." It costs \$2.50 an hour to use a computer at an Internet café, where users must present identification and register before accessing the Web. Turkmentelekom's home users must pay "\$1 per hour, on top of a monthly charge of \$8 and a one-time hook-up fee of \$42," according to a *Moscow Times* report. The average monthly salary in Turkmenistan is about \$200. The cost of MTS's service is reported to be even higher than Turkmentelekom's.

Even while expanding the number of people with access to the Internet, the Turkmen government has been tightening its control over the range of content users can view. According to an IWPR article, by April 28, users found they were unable to access any of "the popular Central Asian or foreign websites." TIHF's September report found that about 50 sites had been blocked. A July 6, 2008, report from Human Rights Watch found that a new filtering system had been put into place in 2008 and suggested that that might explain the government's willingness to allow more people to access the Web. In 2006, before Berdymuhamedov took office, fewer people had access to the Web, but most sites were not blocked and there was no requirement for users to present identification to use the Internet.

OBJECTIVE 4: BUSINESS MANAGEMENT

Turkmenistan Objective Score: 0.11

There are virtually no private media outlets in Turkmenistan. The state-run media that dominate the market are run as government agencies, rather than as businesses. They are supported by a combination of government funds, mandatory subscriptions, and a small amount of advertising. As a result, Objective 4 received the worst score of the five objectives. The drop in score is a result of all indicators either falling somewhat or, in two cases, remaining exactly the same.

Turkmenistan's economy, like all other aspects of its society, is dominated by its government. Its economy is one of the least free in the world, ranking 152nd on a list of 158 nations in a 2008 Heritage Foundation report on economic freedom. "The overall freedom to start, operate, and close a business

"With a general economy still so dominated by the state, there's not much use in determining rates from market forces. Most everything is priced low compared to other countries," one panelist wrote.

is very limited ... The system is non-transparent, enforcement is inconsistent, and businesses have difficulty getting copies of laws and regulations. Personal relations with government officials often determine how and when regulations are applied," the report found. The government provides the majority of jobs. All this may be changing, though. Berdymuhamedov has worked on "developing the private sector and a more market-oriented economy," according to a July 31, 2008, report from the IMF.

Media outlets, as government agencies, are primarily funded from the state budget. "The advertising market in Turkmenistan is undeveloped, to say the least," one panelist noted. There is a small amount of advertising in state newspapers and "occasional" ads on television and the radio, he continued. Another panelist noted that "media managers do not feel pressed to use more ads in their programs or paper pages ... since the government is covering all the expenses."

Most ads that run in the Turkmen media are produced in-house by advertisers who then contact media outlets and place the ads themselves. "The advertising industry is not well developed in Turkmenistan and lacks professional skills,"

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.

There is no civil society to speak of in Turkmenistan. Workers in the NGO sector are subjected to the same kind of pressure as independent journalists. In 2003, the Turkmen government criminalized unregistered NGOs.

one panelist wrote. According to a 2008 Internews report on media law in Turkmenistan, there is no special legislation regulating the content of advertising, but it is clear that some norms exist. There are no alcohol or tobacco advertisements in Turkmen media, for example.

While advertisers presumably pay media outlets to run their ads, it is unclear what the rates are or how they are set. There is no ratings system for broadcast media. The government provides circulation figures for some of its print media, but there are no independently generated circulation figures. "With a general economy still so dominated by the state, there's not much use in determining rates from market forces. Most everything is priced low compared to other countries," one panelist wrote.

The circulation figures that the government maintains for its print publications are inflated by a system of mandatory subscriptions. Government employees, who represent the majority of employed people in the country, have long been forced to subscribe to government publications. This includes teachers, health-care workers, police, members of the military, and workers in cultural and sports organizations. "The paradox is that all newspapers and magazines in Turkmenistan are alike and nobody reads them; yet, the subscription plan is fulfilled by all," Nazar Saparov wrote on *Kronika Turkmenistan* on May 7, 2008. Subscriptions range in price from about \$0.30 for a six-month subscription to the weekly teachers' newspaper *Mugallymlar Gazeti* to about \$6 per six months for the major daily newspapers *Turkmenistan* and *Neytralniy Turkmenistan*, according to data from TIHR's September report.

OBJECTIVE 5: SUPPORTING INSTITUTIONS

Turkmenistan Objective Score: 0.23

Supporting institutions in Turkmenistan are weak to non-existent. There are no useful trade unions for journalists, and there is no need for an association of media owners, since the government is virtually the only owner. Most nominal NGOs are actually controlled by the government,

and independent NGOs or informal organizations face government persecution. All printing, production, and distribution facilities are owned by the government. Journalism education is in its infancy, and short-term trainings are scarce. The score in this objective remained essentially the same as last year, and all indicators performed similarly poorly. The only indicator to change much was Indicator 5 (mid-career training opportunities).

The law does not protect the rights of workers in Turkmenistan to form unions. No new information available on unions was available in 2008, but there were at least two unions for journalists operating in 2007. 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 2007 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 in 2007. "They got a grant and worked with volunteers from an international organization. The guys [journalists who attended] can't say what the training did for them."

There is no civil society to speak of in Turkmenistan. Workers in the NGO sector are subjected to the same kind of pressure as independent journalists. In 2003, the Turkmen government criminalized unregistered NGOs. Under international pressure, it reversed this decision the next year, creating a situation in which operating an unregistered NGO is illegal but does not

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.

carry criminal penalties. There are 90 NGOs operating in the country, but according to the US Department of State's 2007 report on *Human Rights Practices*, international organizations considered only seven of them to be independent—the rest are government-controlled. Since Berdymuhamedov took office, only one NGO has succeeded in winning registration: the Union of Manufacturers and Entrepreneurs, according to an October 19, 2008, article from *Kronika Turkmenistan*. The campaign to create it was started by Berdymuhamedov.

When the UN Human Rights Council working group met in December, the representative from Canada called on Turkmenistan to “abolish the system of registration for NGOs working in the country.” Akhmadova, Turkmenistan's representative at the meeting, suggested that this might happen, noting that “the government is working to reform legislation, aiming at eliminating bureaucratic problems involving their registration.” She said the government was working with USAID and the International Center for Non-Profit Law (ICNL) on the issue.

For now, though, the authorities interrogate, harass, and arbitrarily detain civil-society activists, just as they do journalists, according to Amnesty International. For example, Valery Pal, a civil-society activist who used his computer skills to help activists get information about Turkmenistan out of the country, was arrested on February 21, 2008, according to Human Rights Watch. He was charged in connection with a 2004 embezzlement case and sentenced to 12 years in prison. Human Rights Watch and other NGOs declared the case politically motivated and, under pressure, the Turkmen government freed Pal on December 6, 2008.

In 2007, after criticizing his nation's journalists for the low level of their skills, Berdymuhamedov ordered the Turkmen State Makhtumkuli University to introduce a journalism program. It was the first journalism program in the country; until then, media organizations mostly hired graduates with degrees in Turkmen language or literature. In 2008, Berdymuhamedov approved the creation of the Institute of International Affairs, which was to include a program in international journalism, according to an August 22 report from TDH.

A few short-term trainings were available to working journalists in Turkmenistan in 2008. For example, the EU's Central Asia Drug Action Program offered a training, which was attended by some journalists, that was aimed at raising awareness of drug use and HIV/AIDS issues, according to a UNDP press release. More trainings are planned, according to Akhmadova's December testimony: “Experts of the British Broadcasting Corporation visited Turkmenistan and met with representatives of the Ministry of Culture and Telecommunications. They

worked with mass-media representatives to plan seminars, training groups, and roundtables.”

The government controls all printing facilities and all systems for producing and broadcasting television and radio programs. “All business logistics of the media (printing, enterprise, broadcast, etc.) are ... owned by and under strict control of the state,” the 2008 Internews report found. The printing of everything from newspapers to calendars is supervised by the State Publishing Service to “ensure the production of high-quality printed products,” according to Internews. The government has, for years, controlled even photocopiers through a system of registration.

Most of the primary channels for distributing media are also controlled by the government. Magazines and newspapers are mostly sold and distributed through the government postal system, though some are also sold at bazaars. All television and radio programs are broadcast on government-owned transmitters. Internet access is provided by the government's Turkmentelekom and by Russian-owned MTS.

List of Panel Participants

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