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TURKMENISTAN

Turkmenistan attracted some international news coverage in 2013. After years of consultations with experts representing the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), United Nations, and European Union, Turkmenistan promised absolute freedom of the media in 2013 by passing its first media law since its independence. It has brought, however, nothing resembling press freedom to fruition.

President Gurbanguly Berdymukhammedov stepped down as leader of the ruling party in 2013 to promote a “multiparty system.” Turkmenistan also held its parliamentary election, contested by more than one party for the first time in the country’s history. It was a meaningless exercise because both parties are loyal to the president. Analysts describe the changes as cosmetic that will bring little or no improvement to people’s lives; Turkmenistan remains one of the world’s most closed and repressive countries. People still live in poverty and suffer high unemployment, despite the president calling his current term “an era of power and happiness.”

Turkmenistan has been labeled “the most corrupt nation” by Transparency International. Turkmenistan is also known as an “enemy of the Internet” by Reporters Without Borders. Human Rights Watch labels it as a “most repressive country.” Amnesty International reported that people in Turkmenistan are expected to report any criticism of the state to the authorities and people expressing views that differ from the government’s are treated as enemies of the state. The government reportedly purchased FinFisher software to spy on the Internet activity of its citizens, including Skype conversations and chats. Social network tools such as Facebook and Twitter remained blocked in 2013, as did Gmail.

Turkmenistan’s government continues to have total control over mass media outlets in the country. Such media serve solely as a mouthpiece for the regime, with zero tolerance by authorities for information that even implies a less-than-stellar performance by the government.

In terms of its MSI scores, Turkmenistan falls solidly among the worst of the worst in terms of the media’s ability to sustainably inform the public with useful, relevant news and information. Four of the five objective scores do not exceed three-tenths of a point on a scale of 0 to 4. The exception, Objective 2, Professional Journalism, scores 0.52 thanks only to the fact that one indicator judging the quality and modernness of equipment and facilities received a halfway decent score; without that one indicator Objective 2 would have a score of 0.29. Turkmenistan is indeed one of the bleakest places on the planet when it comes to considering media as the “fourth estate.”

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

TURKMENISTAN at a glance

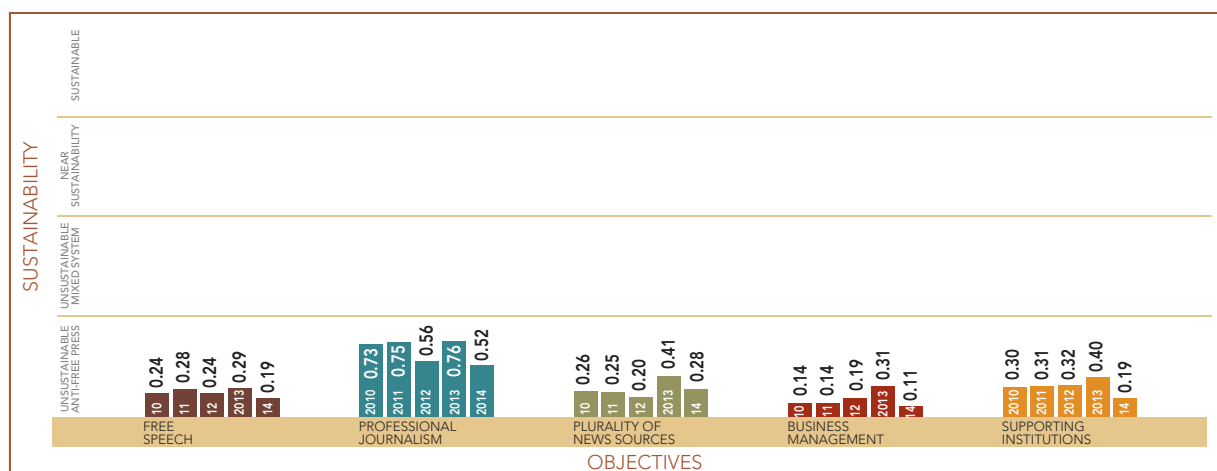
GENERAL

- > Population: 3,011,405 (July 2013 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 (official) 72%, Russian 12%, Uzbek 9%, other 7% (*CIA World Factbook*)
- > GNI (2012-Atlas): \$27.99 billion (World Bank Development Indicators, 2013)
- > GNI per capita (2012-PPP): \$9,070 (World Bank Development Indicators, 2013)
- > Literacy rate: 99.6% (male 99.7%, female 99.5%) (2011 est., *CIA World Factbook*)
- > President or top authority: President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow (since February 14, 2007)

MEDIA-SPECIFIC

- > Number of active media outlets: Print: 26 national and local newspapers, 17 magazines; Radio Stations: 5; Television Stations: 7
- > Newspaper circulation statistics: The top two newspapers by circulation are *Neutrals Turkmenistan* (Russian- and English-language state owned daily), *Turkmenistan* (Turkmen language daily)
- > Broadcast ratings: N/A
- > News agencies: Turkmen dovlet habarlary (state owned)
- > Annual advertising revenue in media sector: N/A
- > Internet usage: 80,400 (2009 *CIA World Factbook*)

MEDIA SUSTAINABILITY INDEX: TURKMENISTAN



MEDIA SUSTAINABILITY INDEX 2014: OVERALL AVERAGE SCORES



CHANGE SINCE 2013

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

Unsustainable, Anti-Free Press (0-1): Country does not meet or only minimally meets objectives. Government and laws actively hinder free media development, professionalism is low, and media-industry activity is minimal.

Unsustainable Mixed System (1-2): Country minimally meets objectives, with segments of the legal system and government opposed to a free media system. Evident progress in free-press advocacy, increased professionalism, and new media businesses may be too recent to judge sustainability.

Near Sustainability (2-3): Country has progressed in meeting multiple objectives, with legal norms, professionalism, and the business environment supportive of independent media. Advances have survived changes in government and have been codified in law and practice. However, more time may be needed to ensure that change is enduring and that increased professionalism and the media business environment are sustainable.

Sustainable (3-4): Country has media that are considered generally professional, free, and sustainable, or to be approaching these objectives. Systems supporting independent media have survived multiple governments, economic fluctuations, and changes in public opinion or social conventions.

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

OBJECTIVE 1: FREEDOM OF SPEECH

Turkmenistan Objective Score: 0.19

Turkmenistan's score for Objective 1 reflects the government's unabated absolute control over the freedom of speech and the press. It scored 0.19, slightly lower from the last year's score, signaling a worsening environment despite the promises of the new mass media law.

President Berdymukhammedov adopted a new constitution on September 28, 2008. The constitutional provisions support the freedom of speech and freedom of expression. However, in reality these constitutional rights are violated systematically. Often, the stunning government control over all types of information explains why people are not fully aware of their rights—there is no accountability or transparency. The fact that the results of the 2012 census, Turkmenistan's first in 17 years, have not yet been reported demonstrates the lack of accountability in the country. The national news outlets report on new laws passed by the parliament, but only in vague terms. For example, they might report just the headline, "Turkmen parliament passes important new law," without providing any specifics. No literature is easily available for the general public about any of Turkmenistan's laws. "Given the intense secrecy that surrounds the process, one cannot be certain that any real

LEGAL AND SOCIAL NORMS PROTECT AND PROMOTE FREE SPEECH AND ACCESS TO PUBLIC INFORMATION.

FREE-SPEECH INDICATORS:

- > Legal and social protections of free speech exist and are enforced.
- > Licensing or registration of media protects a public interest and is fair, competitive, and apolitical.
- > Market entry and tax structure for media are fair and comparable to other industries.
- > Crimes against media professionals, citizen reporters, and media outlets are prosecuted vigorously, but occurrences of such crimes are rare.
- > The law protects the editorial independence of state of public media.
- > Libel is a civil law issue; public officials are held to higher standards, and offended parties must prove falsity and malice.
- > Public information is easily available; right of access to information is equally enforced for all media, journalists, and citizens.
- > Media outlets' access to and use of local and international news and news sources is not restricted by law.
- > Entry into the journalism profession is free and government imposes no licensing, restrictions, or special rights for journalists.

"The Turkmen Constitution seemingly enshrines all of the major freedoms that are now widely considered necessary in a fair and democratic modern nation-state. But upon closer analysis, the Constitution reveals itself to have built-in caveats that undermine these core principles," said one of the panelists.

legislation is occurring behind closed doors, or if what passes for legislating is merely the result of the capricious whims of members of the ruling class, whose full identities are also hidden," said one panelist.

Even those people in Turkmenistan with some knowledge about their rights generally keep silent to avoid punishment for exercising their constitutional rights, which include the freedom of speech and the freedom of expression—especially on political and other sensitive matters. Knowledgeable individuals report that from the perspective of government officials, defending one's rights in Turkmenistan is considered a crime. People understand the potential risks involved, and no legal protection or assistance is available for freedom of speech violations. "The Turkmen Constitution seemingly enshrines all of the major freedoms that are now widely considered necessary in a fair and democratic modern nation-state. But upon closer analysis, the Constitution reveals itself to have built-in caveats that undermine these core principles," said one of the panelists.

For instance, "In article 40, 'The exercise of the rights and freedoms is inseparable from the performance by the individual and citizen their responsibilities toward the society and the state,' the problem lies in the interpretation of this relationship. Another issue is who has the authority to interpret the law," said an editor of a news website that covers Central Asia. The National Institute of Democracy and Human Rights under the President of Turkmenistan is reportedly established to promote human rights and democratic principles, but it appears it was established to convince the international community of Turkmenistan's pursuit of democracy, another panelist noted.

Furthermore, the country's judicial system never acts in the public interest, but rather serves the government interests. The rights protected by the constitution and mass media

laws of Turkmenistan are dismissed in practice, because the government does not allow people to exercise their rights.

The new law, which came into effect on January 4, 2013, promised full commitment to freedom of speech and freedom of expression and an end to all forms of censorship. The new law said it allows Turkmen citizens "...the right to use all forms of media to express their opinions and beliefs, and to seek, receive and impart information." However, one panelist said that since the new law passed, "Nothing has changed in terms of restrictions against freedom of speech, nor has it eased the problems of independent journalists on the ground."

Mass media outlets are required to obtain a government license. The law allows anyone at least 18 years old to establish mass media in the country, including local authorities, political parties, public associations, government organizations, other legal entities and citizens. Licensing fees differ, depending on the applicant. Government entities, for example, do not have to pay a licensing fee to launch a newspaper in Turkmenistan.

Turkmen citizens or corporations, on the other hand, must pay 100 times the amount of the estimated monthly wage. The State Publishing Association, Turkmenmetbugat, issues licenses with the approval of the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the Cabinet of Ministers. The ministries can reject applicants for a variety of reasons. The whole process of licensing is subjective, and is not transparent. Due to the secretive environment in Turkmenistan, it is not possible to even know whether any news outlet applied for a license in 2013. Licensing is generally used to silence any potential independent news outlet in the country. For example, the Turkmen Service of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty has applied for a license for many years now, without success. Mass media outlets in the country are registered as institutions, because the government fully funds all expenses.

The Turkmen president regularly reprimands editors-in-chief of news outlets in the country for poor performance. On January 12, 2013, Turkmenistan.ru reported that the Turkmen president fired Shadurdy Alovov, the chair of the State Committee for Television, Radio and Cinematography, "for shortcomings in his work." Alovov was reportedly denied future employment in positions involving financial authority, which is normally a restriction applied to officials found guilty of bribery, according to the Turkmenistan Human Rights Initiative. Maksat Altayev, the former director of the television channel Altyn Asyr: Turkmenistan replaced Alovov. In March 2013, the president fired Gyzylgul Nurgeldyeva, the chair of the Turkmen State Publishing

Service, for "shortcomings" in her responsibilities, as well. Akmurat Hudaýberdiyev was appointed the chair of the State Publishing Service in her place. No details were reported about Nurgeldyeva's supposed lapses in performance.

Crimes against independent journalists and citizen journalists in Turkmenistan are not rare. In May, 2013 local police detained an RFE/RL correspondent based in Turkmenabat city, Rovshen Yazmuhamedov. Numerous international organizations, including Amnesty International, Reporters Without Borders (RSF), Human Rights Watch (HRW) and the European Union pressured the Turkmen government to release the Turkmen journalist. Yazmuhamedov was released after spending two weeks in custody. In 2013, two Turkmen human rights activists were also freed after they served their prison terms based on charges that were widely believed to be politically motivated. The New York-based Human Rights Watch says Sapardurdy Khadzhiyev and Annakurban Amanklychev were wrongfully imprisoned since their arrest in June 2006, and suffered numerous health problems from their incarceration.

Khajiev, Amanklychev, and Khadzhiyev's sister, Ogulsapar Muradova, were associated with the Turkmenistan Helsinki Foundation, a Turkmen human rights group in exile. They were detained in June 2006, just after they helped a French journalist with a documentary film about the dire state of human rights in Turkmenistan. In August 2006, all three were convicted of illegal weapons possession after a closed trial. Muradova died under suspicious circumstances several weeks later. Turkmenistan is being called to account before the UN Human Rights Committee over her death in police custody, according to Open Society Justice Initiative report. A complaint filed on behalf of her brother, Khadzhiyev, by the Open Society Justice Initiative, asked the UN Human Rights Committee to push for a proper investigation into Muradova's death and mistreatment.

In addition, an explosion in Abadan in 2012 demonstrated that Turkmen government also targets citizen journalists. A British newspaper, *The Telegraph*, reported that some citizen journalists who had posted videos of the Abadan incident were detained and interrogated by secret services. One Turkmen blogger, according to British newspaper, ended up in jail.

All mass media outlets are funded and operated by Turkmenistan's government except one, *Rysgal*, which self-identifies as independent. In reality, however, panelists noted that mass media outlets in Turkmenistan have no editorial independence. The Union of Industrialists and Entrepreneurs launched *Rysgal*, which the president himself

publicized heavily. The president himself also founded many newspapers and periodicals in the Turkmenistan. Then, in 2013, he ordered all news outlets to designate new “founders.” For example, the Cabinet of Ministers became the founder of the governmental papers *Turkmenistan* and *Neutral Turkmenistan*, while the Ministry of Education became the founder of *Mugallymlar (Teacher’s Newspaper)*.

Turkmen law deems libel and the invasion of privacy as criminal offenses. The libel law grants special protection to government officials, public figures, the state, and state symbols. The burden of proof is on the accused, and convictions can lead to as many as five years in prison and a fine up to 30 months’ pay. But again, in practice, journalists in Turkmenistan are not terribly concerned about being charged with libel or invasion of privacy, because controls on the media are so strict that journalists have little chance to publish or air critical content.

In terms of access to official information, government officials control the release of all information. There is only one government-owned state news agency, Turkmen Dowllet Habarlary (State News), which releases much of that information. The presidential administration or specially designated officials from the regions must approve, in advance, all interviews with government officials.

The Turkmen government only considers journalists working for state-owned news outlets in the country as journalists. The government holds exclusive oversight over press accreditation. The government does not recognize independent journalists, bloggers and other citizen journalists as such and therefore such individuals fulfill their tasks secretly and cooperate with foreign news outlets covertly. The government grants visas to foreign journalists to visit Turkmenistan only to cover specific events, such as international oil and gas conferences and other summits where officials can closely monitor foreign journalists’ activities. “The oppressive regime rarely permits journalists to enter,” according to a *Washington Post* photo essay on December 9, 2013 dedicated to Turkmenistan. Specific examples from 2013 included Ashgabat’s first international sports media forum, which foreign journalists attended. The government also allowed a research team and television crew from the U.S. National Geographic Society in the country to shoot a documentary film about Turkmenistan. The Turkmen government also arranged a special tour for journalists from Chinese Jinjiang Television and the Central National Radio in December.

Turkmen mass media outlets are rarely allowed to use international news sources, although the law does not explicitly restrict such sources. The news outlets only use

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international stories that are not on a political or sensitive topic. Permissible topics include animals, garden openings, or cultural events in foreign countries. Only news stories focusing on achievements of Turkmenistan are permitted.

Theoretically, people are free to choose their profession; however, many practical obstacles exist in Turkmenistan to prevent people from choosing a profession such as journalism. “Entrance to local universities can be facilitated through bribes to officials, ranging from a relatively modest \$7,000 for physical education to as much as \$100,000 for admissions to the Turkmen International University. Realistically, though, only the sons and daughters of upper-level officials can access such sums of money,” said John Richardson, a professor with the University of California at Los Angeles, in a scholarly article dedicated to Turkmenistan published in the journal of the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions. Richardson visited Turkmenistan multiple times by invitation from the Turkmen government.

OBJECTIVE 2: PROFESSIONAL JOURNALISM

Turkmenistan Objective Score: 0.52

Turkmenistan’s score for Objective 2 is 0.52 out of 4.00, down from last year’s 0.76, indicating worsening professional standards. Indicator 7 (modern facilities and equipment) received the highest score out of all indicators in this year’s MSI, owing to the state’s spending on new technology, printing, and editing for the state-owned mass media outlets. However, indicator 1 (objective, well sourced reporting), indicator 3 (self-censorship) and indicator 8 (niche and investigative reporting) all received zeroes, the lowest possible score.

Journalism is still a highly manipulated profession, because journalists are tasked to produce only pro-government news stories. Anything else is not allowed. Reporters keep quiet about issues that are sensitive or that may provoke different thinking in the public from official government positions.

For example, the government is building strikingly expensive tourism facilities in Avaza resort, but they are sitting empty. And yet, Turkmen journalists do not report on the emptiness or about the waste of useless, expensive buildings. Richard Orange, a correspondent from the British *Telegraph*, called Avaza “the most ill-conceived resort ever built” after visiting it. According to the latest official report, “Statistical Year of Turkmenistan,” (posted on the stat.gov.tm website), 8,697 foreigners visited Turkmenistan during 2012 (on average, 24 foreign citizens arrive every day in Turkmenistan). Statistical reports for 2013 are unavailable. Some analysts question whether it is worthwhile to spend billions of dollars to construct such expensive facilities in a place that allows very few visitors, while the majority of Turkmen live in poverty.

Public interest news stories are never reported. Turkmen journalists also avoid reporting about human rights problems in the country, such as restrictions on citizens’ movement both within the country and in travel to foreign countries, and restrictions on religion and other civil liberties. “The government is repressive—one cannot travel freely internally or abroad,” Richardson wrote in his research article. Journalists do not consult a wide variety of relevant sources, because all sources would offer pro-government comments. Thus, they see little point in consulting multiple sources for their reporting. Typically, they do not conduct the necessary background research, either. It is difficult to assess whether reporters from specific media (television, radio or newspapers) do a better or worse job, because they all cover the same type of news stories distributed by the only state news agency.

JOURNALISM MEETS PROFESSIONAL STANDARDS OF QUALITY.

PROFESSIONAL JOURNALISM INDICATORS:

- > Reporting is fair, objective, and well-sourced.
- > Journalists follow recognized and accepted ethical standards.
- > Journalists and editors do not practice self-censorship.
- > Journalists cover key events and issues.
- > Pay levels for journalists and other media professionals are sufficiently high to discourage corruption and retain qualified personnel within the media profession.
- > Entertainment programming does not eclipse news and information programming.
- > Technical facilities and equipment for gathering, producing, and distributing news are modern and efficient.
- > Quality niche reporting and programming exist (investigative, economics/business, local, political).

Journalists in Turkmenistan do not have ethical standards, because there is no accountability about what and how journalists cover news stories; there are no functioning professional organization/associations to help guide or enforce standards. They do not follow ethical guidelines commonly honored in the West, such as not distorting the content of the news, or misrepresenting context, among many others. “Sourcing, ethical practices, even reporting on major events—the official press does not honor any of these elements of journalism, nor does the majority of the audience even realize what is missing,” said one of the panelists.

Turkmen journalists are also known to accept gifts in exchange for coverage, and they make no distinction between news reporting versus opinion pieces or advertorial placements. Ethical violations do not prompt any reaction or rebuke.

Turkmen journalists resort to self-censorship as a professional survival tool. They are fully aware of what stories might attract negative attention from government officials. Editors only assign news stories that they expect will be approved by officials specially designated by the president.

“Journalists face dual censorship, imposed by their own managers and by a Soviet-style censorship agency, the State Committee for Protection of State Secrets in Print Publications,” said Inga Sikorskaya, a senior editor for Turkmenistan at the Institute for War and Peace Reporting, in a January 18, 2013 article. “Even the most innocuous piece has to go to senior editorial staff and then to the state secrecy committee for approval,” she added. According to the opposition website *Chronicles of Turkmenistan* (Chrono-tm.org), new rules of censorship were introduced in 2013. An article has to be reviewed first by the relevant Ministry, which oversees the issues covered in the article before it gets into print. For instance, if a journalist has written an article about a school, the Ministry of Education must approve the article; an article about livestock farmers needs to be approved (or rejected) by the Ministry of Agriculture, etc.

Journalists cover all the key positive events and pro-government issues in the country. What journalists avoid covering are the key events and issues that are in the public interest, but problematic from the government’s point of view. It is an important distinction.

Pay levels for journalists and other media professionals are sufficiently high to discourage corruption, because

the government has regularly increased salaries. The government increased salaries 10 percent in January 2013, and Turkmenistan.ru reported that salaries would be increased again by 10 percent in January 2014. Journalists work for the government-controlled mass media outlets, and thus receive standard salaries and do not need to work at multiple places to meet their living expenses. Freelance journalists writing for the state-controlled news outlets receive small payments for each publication.

President Berdymukhammedov instructed the government to improve facilities in Turkmen news outlets by purchasing advanced printing equipment, editing systems and television studios. A notable example is a brand new 212-meter television tower equipped by Turkish and Western companies. In 2013, the president signed another decree permitting the Turkmen State Publishing Service to build a modern printing house in Ashgabat with Turkish and Austrian firms, including the purchase of modern equipment. It is expected to be fully functional in April 2015. The new Printing House is meant to develop the printing industry, increase circulation of newspapers, magazines and books, and improve the quality of publications and quality of services. "State-owned media is equipped with modern technology, but those modern technologies do not contribute anything to make local media more diverse or to represent the views of all sides," one of the panelists commented.

Turkmen journalists are not trained to specialize in covering specific kinds of issues, such as health, business, or education. Instead, they are assigned to cover certain beats despite their qualification and/or background. In fact, the university curriculum trains Turkmen journalists to be loyal, rather than professionally competent.

Entertainment programming dominates the mass media outlets, with programming heavy on concerts and talk shows dedicated to praising the president and his era of "happiness."

OBJECTIVE 3: PLURALITY OF NEWS

Turkmenistan Objective Score: 0.28

Turkmenistan's score for Objective 3, 0.28, fell slightly from last year's 0.41. The current status still indicates the mass media environment is completely dominated by state control. Indicator 2 (citizens' access to media is not restricted by law) received the highest score, although not significantly higher than the objective score, but indicators 3 (state news

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outlets serve the public interest) and indicator of 7 (minority language information sources) received the lowest possible scores—demonstrating complete dismissal of any public interest focus in news reports.

Turkmenistan has multiple news outlets, but they all present a singular (state-sanctioned) point of view, and their content differs little. Thus, citizens still have no opportunity to check sources against each other. Turkmenistan has stunning control over all the mass media in rendering pro-government messages and news stories. The only "private" weekly, *Rysgal*, opened in 2010, on the instruction of the president himself. The paper is officially owned by the Union of Industrialists and Entrepreneurs, a pro-government business association. Turkmenistan policies mandate that its

MULTIPLE NEWS SOURCES PROVIDE CITIZENS WITH RELIABLE, OBJECTIVE NEWS.

PLURALITY OF NEWS SOURCES INDICATORS:

- > Plurality of public and private news sources (e.g., print, broadcast, Internet, mobile) exist and offer multiple viewpoints.
- > Citizens' access to domestic or international media is not restricted by law, economics, or other means.
- > State or public media reflect the views of the political spectrum, are nonpartisan, and serve the public interest.
- > Independent news agencies gather and distribute news for media outlets.
- > Private media produce their own news.
- > Transparency of media ownership allows consumers to judge the objectivity of news; media ownership is not concentrated in a few conglomerates.
- > A broad spectrum of social interests are reflected and represented in the media, including minority-language information sources
- > The media provide news coverage and information about local, national, and international issues.

citizens consume pro-government news stories, especially for college students and state employees. For example, students of Pedagogical Institute in Turkmenabad city and Institute of Agriculture in Dashoguz are urged to watch the news program *Vatan* every evening, according to Chronicles of Turkmenistan, a news website operated by members of Turkmenistan's opposition-in-exile. "State media absolutely fails to reflect the views of the political spectrum, much less serve the public interest; indeed, if all one consumed was state media, one would be forgiven for thinking that the whole world agrees with the president, and that the president's interest is the public interest," said one of the panelists.

The flow of information is still extremely slow in this country. "It is an oral culture, because word of mouth is still an important channel," Richardson said, following his trip to Turkmenistan to study how people access and pass on information. "It is difficult to find something as simple as a bus map," the *Daily Bruin*, the newspaper of the University of California in Los Angeles quoted Richardson.

The number of mobile phone users is growing, but there are no media yet that use mobile capabilities to distribute news. Mobile phones are reportedly used by some 63 percent of the population, according to a SevDev Group report of Turkmenistan in 2013. And yet, obtaining a SIM card is a demanding task in Turkmenistan, said Richardson. Calling rates may have dropped, but a nominally priced \$30 SIM card may go for \$300 in the provinces due to their scarcity, he added.

Internet penetration is extremely low in Turkmenistan, and the Turkmen government has consistently blocked social networking websites (e.g., Twitter, YouTube, Facebook). The registration of domain names in the ".tm" zone remains very low because it costs \$1000, according to the Internet researcher for Security Index: Russian Journal on International Security Galiya Ibragimova.

There are seven state television channels, one national radio service, 26 national and local newspapers, and 17 magazines, all owned by the state. "It is public knowledge who owns all of the local media, and which are state-owned, but nothing is to be questioned about its policies, practices, etc.," said one panelist. The government news website Turkmenistan.gov.tm reported that the magazine *Foreign Policy and Diplomacy of Turkmenistan*, established by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Turkmenistan in 2011, opened its first office in a foreign country: Russia. This is the first foreign office for any mass media outlets of Turkmenistan. The office is located in Moscow, and is intended to offer new

updates about Turkmenistan in three languages (Turkmen, Russian and English).

In 2013, Turkmenistan also launched a new project allowing people all over the world to watch Turkmenistan's state television channels online through the website of the Turkmen State News Agency at <http://tdh.gov.tm/en/>. Russia's Channel One is re-broadcast by Turkmen television for two hours a day, never live; often dated entertainment programs are shown. Before releasing Russian television programs on air, the Turkmen government thoroughly reviews the content.

People get most of their information through domestic television and satellite television. Satellite television is one of the few ways for people in a country dominated by state-controlled media to access independent channels. Most households have satellite dishes, providing access to Russian and Turkish television, as well as foreign broadcasters such as CNN, BBC, and Al Jazeera. Due to language barriers, older and urban citizens rely on Russian satellite television for news, while younger and rural citizens with satellite access may turn to Turkish channels for entertainment. People in villages and smaller towns have fewer means of information. Television and radio are often the only sources of information—when the power is not out—because newspapers are not delivered to villages far from cities.

Official information is disseminated through the state's only news agency, Turkmen Dovlet Habarlary. Newspapers are printed, but not widely read, because all newspapers print identical information coming straight from the state's only news agency. The state media outlets do not compete to win readers. Those working in the state's prosecutor's office, the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the Ministry of Defense, and others are required to subscribe to *Adalat (Justice)* and *Esger (Military)*. Those working in the medical profession are required to subscribe to *Saglyk (Health)*. Those working for the Ministry of Culture have to subscribe to the president's newly established *Medeniyet (Culture)* magazine, printed in Turkmen, Russian, and English. The State Committee of Turkmenistan for Tourism and Sport launched a new weekly newspaper *Turkmen Sporty*, and new magazines *Bedenterbiye we Sport (Physical Culture and Sports)* and *Siyahat (Tourism)*, for which they also have a captive customer base of state employees.

Turkmenistan actively restricts Internet access, blocks content, and monitors activities online. Turkmenistan's extremely high-cost Internet presents practical barriers for Turkmenistan residents to go online at home. Bandwidth is abysmal; roughly 10 percent of the speed of a typical

Internet connection. Turkmenistan.ru reported on April 10, 2013, that the Turkmen specialists installed fiber optic communication lines in the largest bazaar of the country, Altyn Asyr (Golden Age) in Ashgabat, potentially allowing 128 Internet users to connect to the Internet from the bazaar. Slow and filtered Internet is also available through cellular subscriptions with the state provider and the Russian branch of MTS, though at speeds that make streaming video impossible.

Turkmenistan also heavily filters Internet content and blocks numerous websites and social networks, opposition websites, general news websites in Russian about the region, and some useful tools such as Gmail. Most popular Internet sites and services, such as Facebook, Google, or YouTube, are still blocked. Panelists reported that no screen appears saying “blocked by Turkmen government.” Instead, the blocking appears like a technical error, such as “site not found” or a timeout, “the page was reset while loading.” It is difficult for the user to know whether the problem is in fact censorship or technical difficulties. “Opposition websites and major news websites do periodically make it through onto computer screens within Turkmenistan, but users are fearful that the government is potentially watching every online move. Thus, it becomes safer for them to simply limit their activities and views,” said another panelist.

The non-profit organization CorpWatch reported that Turkmenistan has purchased “FinFisher” electronic eavesdropping software to spy on phone calls and Internet activity from British, German and Swiss companies. It can track locations of cell phones, break encryption to steal social media passwords, record calls including Skype chats, remotely operate built-in web cams and microphones on computers and even log every keystroke made by a user. CorpWatch also cited the US Department of State annual, which said that “servers ... registered to the Ministry of Communications operated software that allowed the government to record Voice over Internet Protocol conversations, turn on cameras and microphones, and log keystrokes.

In terms of coverage of social and minority issues, mass media outlets do not report anything concerning the lack of gender equality, or about minority groups such as Kazakhs, Uzbeks, and others and there is strong resistance coming from the government side to Turkmen journalists reporting about other religions and sexual orientations. However, mostly international news outlets such as RFE/RL, EurasiaNet, Ferghana, BBC, and Chronicles of Turkmenistan, among others covering Central Asia in general, would report about issues that Turkmen domestic news outlets would ignore.

There are a growing number of Turkmen bloggers and users of online social networks, but they mostly use it for fun and for keeping in touch with friends; they share only very general information, said one of the panelists.

Panelists observed that those working for the state media outlets consist primarily of Turkmen nationalities, especially the younger staff members.

OBJECTIVE 4: BUSINESS MANAGEMENT

Turkmenistan Objective Score: 0.11

Turkmenistan’s score for Objective is 0.11, the lowest among the five objectives, and down from last year’s 0.31. Four out of seven indicators received the lowest possible scores in this objective, indicative that there is neither incentive nor intent to run media outlets efficiently.

All mass media in Turkmenistan are under strict government control, and financed fully by the state budget. Sales derive almost entirely from mandatory subscriptions by state employees.

Aside from scattered advertising by some international companies, donors, and a very few domestic services providers, mass media outlets are not involved in commercial activities. The state determines the budget for each outlet, and the president appoints and dismisses editors-in-chiefs. These budgets are unknown to the public; mass media outlets serve the government rather than the public. The government provides no transparent guidelines to mass

MEDIA ARE WELL-MANAGED ENTERPRISES, ALLOWING EDITORIAL INDEPENDENCE.

BUSINESS MANAGEMENT INDICATORS:

- > Media outlets operate as efficient and self-sustaining enterprises.
- > Media receive revenue from a multitude of sources.
- > Advertising agencies and related industries support an advertising market.
- > Advertising revenue as a percentage of total revenue is in line with accepted standards.
- > Government subsidies and advertising are distributed fairly, governed by law, and neither subvert editorial independence nor distort the market.
- > Market research is used to formulate strategic plans, enhance advertising revenue, and tailor the product to the needs and interests of the audience.
- > Broadcast ratings, circulation figures, and Internet statistics are reliably and independently produced.

If a foreign organization wishes to place an advertisement, it needs government approval. The approval process takes up to a month, and requires 50 percent pre-payment.

media for them to determine their personnel policies. Turkmenistan is in fact considered one of the most corrupt countries in the world, according to 2013 report of Transparency International. The organization ranked Turkmenistan at 168 out of 177 countries, reflecting the widespread of abuse of power, secret dealings, and bribery. Personnel policies are not in place to allocate the right people to perform tasks and determine the proper amount of human resources. Individuals are appointed based on their loyalty, among other factors such as ethnicity, rather than their skills and experience.

One panelist mentioned the Ertir.com website, noting that it appears to be independent from the Turkmen government, perhaps by offering advertising for second-hand goods trading. "They are having some authentic financial success," the panelist noted. For government news outlets, there are three sources of revenue for the mass media outlets: mandatory subscriptions for state employees, limited advertisements, and guaranteed state funding. Mandatory subscriptions and limited advertisements are not considered revenue for any mass media outlets in the country, because the government fully covers the expenses of state-owned and state-operated mass media outlets despite the lack of advertisements and/or mandatory subscriptions. The mass media outlets do not compete for the readership or viewership. It is even pointless to discuss editorial independence, because of the strict government control. "It's impossible to talk about an equal and fair system of subsidizing the media because all newspapers, television, and radio are controlled and subsidized," said one panelist.

All panelists agreed that Turkmenistan's advertising industry appears to be slowly developing, though no data is available yet due to a recent influx of oil and gas companies and international companies entering the market, in the construction industry for example. It appears that government agencies are urged to advertise their products and services on outdoor billboards in all towns, explaining the growth in outdoor advertisement. State construction companies and government tourism agencies are two prominent examples. These advertisements are not based on marketing principles that take into account demographics,

nor are they produced professionally—especially outside of the capital city. A typical outdoor billboard provides a brief history of the company, the services it provides, and, of course, praises the president. Internet and mobile advertising are not developed yet in Turkmenistan.

There have been unconfirmed reports that city officials banned western images of people on outdoor posters and billboards, and have encouraged companies to use traditional Turkmen images instead. If a foreign organization wishes to place an advertisement, it needs government approval. The approval process takes up to a month, and requires 50 percent pre-payment.

Classified ads, holiday greetings, and congratulatory messages also appear in print media, but very few individuals spend money for such advertisements due to the low actual readership; the news outlets are dull, and full of praise for the president. One common advertisement from the public is the lost and found type.

Media managers do not feel pressed to use more and more ads to generate income, as the state budget fully covers the expenses of running the outlet. In fact, advertisement departments of news outlets just wait passively for any potential advertisers to come and seek ad placement.

Market research is not used to formulate strategic plans and tailor the product to the needs and interests of the audience. Turkmenistan's institutions do not offer research skills classes or degrees, and therefore lack specialists in undertaking market research. In fact, such research is prohibited. The United Nations, however, was able to get the government's permission to conduct research on the views of almost 2,000 Turkmen people on the future they hope to see after 2015. The carefully worded report, available on the website of United Nations Development Program in Turkmenistan, revealed little, according to the panelists.

The government provides the majority of jobs and dominates the economy, which continues to be one of the least free in the world. The US-based Heritage Foundation, in its annual *Index of Economic Freedom*, placed Turkmenistan at 39 out of 41 countries in Asia-Pacific, and it ranked at 169 out of 185 countries globally. The foundation said that Turkmenistan is repressed, and the report also said corruption continues to erode the business environment, severely undermining the rule of law and encouraging cronyism. The regulatory system is highly arbitrary, and enforcement is inconsistent. Personal relations with government officials are often required. Rankings are based on four main criteria: trade freedom, business freedom, investment freedom, and property rights.

The broadcast media sector has no ratings system. “There is neither concern for ratings nor is there any other type of research to find out the popularity of certain local media,” said one panelist. The panelists said, however, that anecdotal evidence suggests that most people in Turkmenistan prefer Russian television programming to their own.

OBJECTIVE 5: SUPPORTING INSTITUTIONS

Turkmenistan Objective Score: 0.19

Turkmenistan’s score for Objective 5 fell to 0.19, with the panelists concluding that no supporting institutions exist in Turkmenistan, and thus giving the lowest possible scores to many indicators of the objective.

Turkmenistan has no trade associations or professional associations that could represent the interests of the media, provide member services, or work to protect journalists’ rights. The government-run Institute for Democracy and Human Rights under the President of Turkmenistan plays its ombudsman role on paper only. No report could cite the accomplishments of this institute, which serves as the partner for many donor-financed events.

The media sector has no need for an association of media owners, the panelists pointed out, because the government is the only owner. Two unions for journalists used to operate in Turkmenistan, but it is difficult to know whether they

SUPPORTING INSTITUTIONS FUNCTION IN THE PROFESSIONAL INTERESTS OF INDEPENDENT MEDIA.

SUPPORTING INSTITUTIONS INDICATORS:

- > Trade associations represent the interests of media owners and managers and provide member services.
- > Professional associations work to protect journalists’ rights and promote quality journalism.
- > NGOs support free speech and independent media.
- > Quality journalism degree programs exist providing substantial practical experience.
- > Short-term training and in-service training institutions and programs allow journalists to upgrade skills or acquire new skills.
- > Sources of media equipment, newsprint, and printing facilities are apolitical, not monopolized, and not restricted.
- > Channels of media distribution (kiosks, transmitters, cable, Internet, mobile) are apolitical, not monopolized, and not restricted.
- > Information and communication technology infrastructure sufficiently meets the needs of media and citizens.

“Despite the excellent equipment in universities, these facilities are almost not in use for journalism students. Journalism courses in the universities mostly consist of ideological and philological disciplines,” the panelist added.

function or what specific activities they undertake these days, if any. The Union of Journalists in Turkmenistan was founded in 1992 with a charter that claims to uphold “The protection of journalists’ interests against state and public organizations, founders, and publishers of the media.” The other is the Shamshirag Association of Journalists of Turkmenistan. Whether either exists on paper makes little difference, as they would be unable to offer any real protection to journalists working inside of the country. Recent incidents demonstrate this, including the detention by police for two weeks of a local correspondent of RFE/RL based in Turkmenabat city, Rovshen Yazmuhamedov, who covers social issues. No explanation was given. In another incident, another REF/RL reporter—Dovletmyrat Yazgulyev—was arrested and convicted in 2011 of influencing in the attempted suicide of a family member. He later received a presidential pardon, in October 2011, after the international community subjected the government to withering criticism. Examples like this, drawing no reaction from the professional associations, demonstrate that these associations are non-existent in either practical or legal terms. In 2012, Yazgulyev received the Human Rights Watch Hellman/Hammett Award for his reporting on sensitive issues in Turkmenistan. The award is given annually to writers who have been targets of political persecution or human rights abuses in their home countries.

The country’s laws provide freedom to form associations, but in practice the government restricts this right, making it difficult for NGOs to function and support the media or civil society. The law requires all NGOs to register with the Ministry of Justice and the Ministry of Economics and Development, coordinated through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Unregistered NGO activity is punishable by fines, short-term detentions, and confiscation. The government continues to deny registration to NGOs and private organizations, using subjective criteria.

According to EurasiaNet.org, Berdymukhammedov reportedly ordered the creation of a state commission to supervise all foreign-funded “projects and programs,” as

well as place strict controls on outside money granted to legal and physical entities in Turkmenistan. Reportedly, the president is concerned that foreign money could be used to weaken his authoritarian grip on Turkmenistan. A provision in the addendum effectively prohibits outside funding for any type of activity deemed political. "All types of foreign assistance, as well as goods, property, cash and other funds received for its implementation, cannot be used to prepare and conduct elections, referenda, recall of a deputy, organizing and conducting assemblies, street marches, demonstrations, protests, sabotage (the cessation of work), training, dissemination of propaganda, for purposes related to political parties, or for conducting training sessions for the public and other types of political and advocacy activities," EurasiaNet.org reports, citing an English translation of the Turkmen text.

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

Journalism education is in its infancy. A journalism program has been offered since 2008, at the Institute of International Relations of Turkmenistan—granting the Ministry of Foreign Affairs control over the selection criteria for students in its international journalism program. On July 16, 2013, *Nesil (Generation)* newspaper listed a journalism program under the Turkmen State University. The newspaper did not describe how journalism majors might obtain places in the program.

"The quality of journalism education is very poor, and there are no modern manuals and textbooks; university teachers are using Russian manuals and adapting them to Turkmen," said one panelist knowledgeable about journalism education in Turkmenistan. "Despite the excellent equipment in universities, these facilities are almost not in use for journalism students. Journalism courses in the universities mostly consist of ideological and philological disciplines," the panelist added.

There are no legal restrictions barring students from earning journalism degrees abroad. However, those who study journalism in foreign countries do not return to Turkmenistan to use their skills and knowledge. Those who manage to get accepted into foreign programs are usually fired under suspicion of foreign influence or for their intent to use actual journalistic skills. For example, past MSI studies reported that Turkmen journalist Elena Myatdiyeva was fired

for attending a training seminar for journalists in Sweden. In fact, such students typically do not even attempt to get a job even if they do return to Turkmenistan. They will face rejection in their job search, and they will also be suspected of cooperating with foreign news outlets.

In 2012, the president issued instructions to build a new university in Ashgabat to prepare highly qualified specialists, including in international journalism. The president directed that instruction be in English, and should meet the international standard of separate bachelor's and master's degree programs. In the meantime, Turkmenistan's government remains suspicious of foreign-educated students, especially in fields that may be critical of the government, such as political science, journalism, and sociology, among others.

Turkmen journalists have few opportunities to improve their professional skills, as neither government agencies nor NGOs offer many training opportunities. Some short-term training opportunities exist, but are possible only with the support of international organizations such as the OSCE, UN, EU, and some foreign embassies in Turkmenistan. These NGOs work with the Turkmen government, and officials control who participates in the trainings. The organizations hold trainings only in the capital city, and they are not open for citizen journalists and/or the general public.

There were several professional trainings held in the Turkmen capital in 2013 for working journalists organized by various NGOs functioning in the country. For instance, the OSCE organized training about Internet freedom and freedom of expression for media professionals, representatives of the Mejlis (Parliament), ministries and institutional dealing with media and Internet issues. Also, the OSCE office in Ashgabat organized a study trip to Estonia in July of 2013 for Turkmen officials to facilitate the exchange of practices in Internet development and media legislation. The OSCE organized another online journalism training in November 2013 for 25 journalism students. The same training also covered ethics and professional standards in the online sphere, as well as practical exercises on writing headlines, working with sources, and the effective use of online search tools. The OSCE center in Turkmenistan also sponsored a study trip for a small group of journalism students to Ukraine to attend a new media workshop.

The Turkmen government also hosted several media forums in 2013, including an international sports media forum to discuss Turkmenistan's hosting of its first major international sporting event, the Asian Indoor and Martial Arts Games 2017.

The government owns all printing production facilities, print distribution facilities, and media distribution channels. Only some small kiosks are in private hands. Some of these will distribute Russian newspapers, often well after their issue dates. The president allowed the Ministry of Communication to sign contracts with the Russian printing agency Rospechat and the publishing house Informnauka (Informational Science) to subscribe to their periodicals.

Berdymukhammedov has vowed to modernize the country by introducing new communication technology and joining the global Internet. Yet the infrastructure is still primitive. Slow speeds, exorbitant pricing, and technological illiteracy all constitute major hurdles, according to a report released in 2-13 by SecDev Group. The report examined Internet censorship and surveillance in Turkmenistan. The report also highlights that officials are increasingly wary of its potential as an outlet for dissent. Official estimates state that 2.2 percent of population has Internet access, according to report. That is roughly 100,000 Internet users. However,

it is difficult to know to what extent this small portion of Turkmenistan's population uses the Internet to become better-informed citizens, and to participate in public life. It is also unclear how much accurate information these users have access to, especially in an environment where many websites are regularly blocked and filtered. "Wi-Fi is only available at the few expensive hotels that usually cater to foreigners," said one panelist. Mobile phones, used by some 63 percent of the population, are important points of access, but uptake has been stymied. Unofficial estimates place mobile Internet penetration at 14 percent (700,000 users).

List of Panel Participants

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