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# TURKMENISTAN

"Turkmenistan is one of the world's least free countries. Its political system of governance has often been compared to North Korea. There is no independent media in Turkmenistan and a total absence of media freedom in the country."

Such is the harsh assessment by one of this year's panelists—and with good reason. In a meta-analysis conducted of all MSI scores since surveying began in 2008, Turkmenistan averages a horrific 0.32, at the very barrel-bottom of the Unsustainable/Anti-Free Press category.

The country's score for Objective 2—traditionally its strongest area, with an average since 2008 of 0.63 out of 4—is 0.43 this year. Meanwhile, other objectives have floundered in score ranges that are unimaginably low, ranging from 0.10 to 0.30. The average score for 2017, 0.24, is lower than the average of the entirety of Turkmenistan's MSI scores since 2008, 0.32. It is within this abysmal range that the country, often called Central Asia's "hermit kingdom," may be set to remain for a while to come.

"Hermit dictatorship" may be more accurate. Turkmenistan's authorities continue to control every level of media, from the phones in citizens' pockets to the television sets in every home. Satellite dishes—the population's main lifeline to outside information—have been systematically removed not just in Ashgabat but even in faraway Dashoguz. Fear persists about the extent to which authorities are using sophisticated Western surveillance technology, first reported in 2014 by the London-based watchdog Privacy International, to monitor the scant few online activities of the still-nascent "Turkmenet" (Turkmen-language Internet), with brutal attention paid to those of civic activists and journalists.

Adding to the woes, Turkmenistan celebrated its 25th anniversary of independence in 2016 by plunging into economic crisis. The origins of the situation lie in 2011, when Turkmenistan opened a new pipeline to China and the ruling regime of President Gurbanguly Berdymukhammedov chose to make natural gas its sole strategic revenue source. Gas prices are less than half what they were in 2011, with little hope for a rebound. Citizen journalists report mass layoffs, unemployment above 50 percent, and rationing of basic goods. Astonishingly, the regime appears to have responded to the crisis by garnishing paychecks of the employed to finance prestige construction projects that do nothing for the population.

State media are effectively the only media that exist in Turkmenistan, and they acknowledge none of these dire problems. Instead, almost as if trapped in a delusion, the official press glories in a new "Golden Age." Though this gulf between reality and image still shocks even experienced observers, it has grown numbing for the citizens of Turkmenistan themselves—which may be exactly what the regime wants.

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

# TURKMENISTAN at a glance

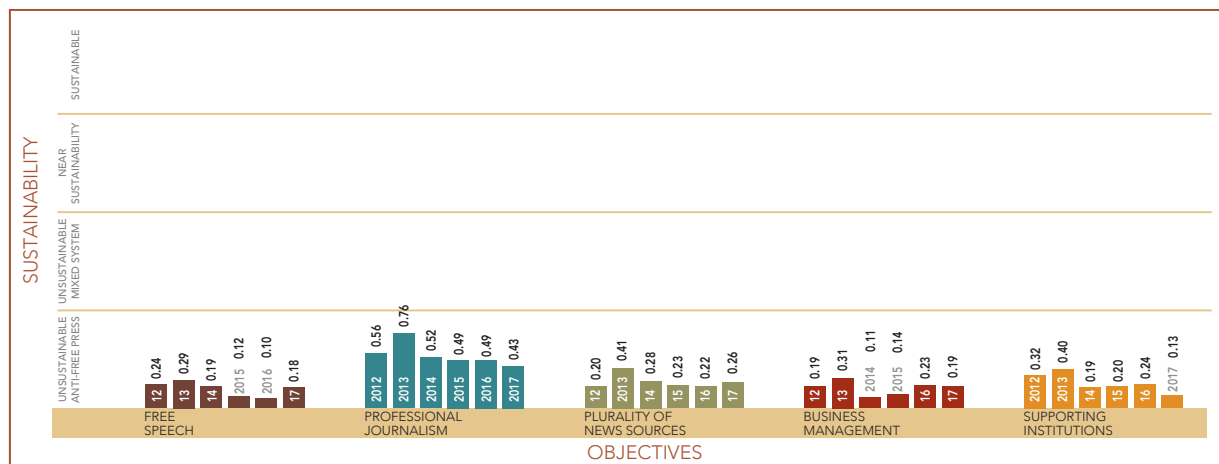
## GENERAL

- > **Population:** 5,291,317 (July 2016 est., CIA World Factbook)
- > **Capital City:** Ashgabat
- > **Ethnic groups:** Turkmen 85%, Uzbek 5%, Russian 4%, other 6% (2003 est., CIA World Factbook)
- > **Religions:** Muslim 89%, Eastern Orthodox 9%, unknown 2% (CIA World Factbook)
- > **Languages:** Turkmen (official) 72%, Russian 12%, Uzbek 9%, other 7% (CIA World Factbook)
- > **GNI (2015-Atlas):** \$39.66 billion (World Bank Development Indicators, 2017)
- > **GNI per capita (2015-PPP):** \$15,760 (World Bank Development Indicators, 2017)
- > **Literacy rate:** 99.7%; male 99.8%, female 99.6% (2015 est., CIA World Factbook)
- > **President or top authority:** President Gurbanguly Berdimukhammedov (since February 14, 2007)

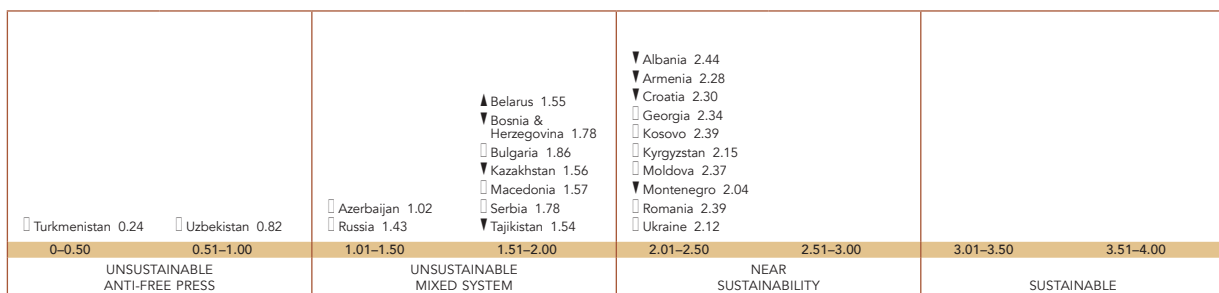
## MEDIA-SPECIFIC

- > **Number of active media outlets:** Exact number unknown but there are believed to be 7 state-owned television stations; at least 1 state-owned radio network; as many as 28 national and local newspapers and magazines, including 2 private print outlets that are considered implicitly state-controlled; and an undetermined number of Internet-based news entities, at least one of which is state-controlled (sources: CIA World Factbook, International Telecommunication Union, *NewEurasia Citizen Media*, *SalamTurkmen*, World Telecommunication/ICT Development, World Bank).
- > **Newspaper circulation statistics:** According to anecdotal data, the three main print publications by circulation may be "Neutrally Turkmenistan" (Russian-, English-language state-owned daily), "Turkmenistan" (Turkmen-language state-owned daily) and "Rysgal" (Turkmen-language irregular owned by the Union of Industrialists and Entrepreneurs).
- > **Broadcast ratings:** N/A
- > **News agencies:** Turkmen Dowlet Habarlary (state-owned)
- > **Annual advertising revenue in media sector:** N/A
- > **Internet usage:** 785,000 (2015 est., CIA World Factbook)

## MEDIA SUSTAINABILITY INDEX: TURKMENISTAN



## MEDIA SUSTAINABILITY INDEX 2017: OVERALL AVERAGE SCORES



### CHANGE SINCE 2016

▲ (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 <https://www.irex.org/msi>

## OBJECTIVE 1: FREEDOM OF SPEECH

### Turkmenistan Objective Score: 0.18

Turkmenistan's score for Objective 1, 0.18, may seem a notable, if still incremental, improvement over 2016's all-time low of 0.10. However, it still reflects the government's continuous and total control over—and absolute suppression of—the freedom of speech. What has changed is continued improvement in Turkmenistan's laws concerning media, although this improvement has existed solely on paper.

In the estimation of one Turkmenistani journalist, the main legislation pertaining to freedom of speech, 2014's much-touted "On Mass Media," is "moderately acceptable" and in line with the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE)'s rules and regulations. In fact, Turkmenistani officials assert that this law and subsequent others like it were drafted with the OSCE's consultation. Nonetheless, in practice, freedom of speech is habitually violated, both openly by law enforcement and security agencies and quietly through untraceable and unprovable acts of intimidation. "Turkmenistan is not a rule-of-law-based country, so what the laws say has little effect on *reality*," a Western analyst said.

The extent to which ordinary citizens experience the brunt of this disjunction is unclear—in no small part because many citizens remain ignorant of their formal rights and hence may consider the severe behaviors of Turkmenistan's authorities normal. Nonetheless, there are troubling signs. For instance, using a pseudonym to express opinions, even positive ones, on

#### 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.

websites appears to be as routine for ordinary citizens as for civic activists and journalists. Meanwhile, in what suggests an active targeting of a specific demographic, citizen journalists have provided numerous anecdotes of young practicing Muslim men being pulled aside or detained by authorities and having their phones examined, often on no other basis than having discussed their religious beliefs online. In general, surveillance of society runs deep. Citizen journalists lament the "village women's newswire" (*obanyň ayallary novosti*)—the gossip of housewives, pensioners, and the unemployed documented and collected by police and national security into extensive dossiers. There are also anecdotal reports of people receiving rewards for spying on their own friends and neighbors on behalf of authorities.

Violations of journalists' free speech tend to be more blatant. Journalists have been attacked in supermarkets by strangers or imprisoned on bizarre charges, including supposedly violating a new nationwide anti-smoking campaign. The government has at times tolerated independent reporting so long as domestic political issues, especially corruption in government, were not touched upon. This tolerance, already vague and erratic, appears to have disappeared alongside Turkmenistan's natural gas profits during the past year. For instance, it was possible in 2014 for Azatlyk Radiosy contributor Soltan Achilova to report on long lines for bus and train tickets. However, when she attempted to make a similar report in 2016 about state-operated stores, she was detained. Later, after being released, she was assaulted by unknown individuals who then immediately vanished.

Attacks by strangers who promptly escape, never to be apprehended and prosecuted, is a favorite intimidation tactic of Turkmenistani authorities. Even worse, journalists' family members are just as in danger as the journalists themselves. For example, Human Rights Watch reported in September that the brother of Chary Annamuradov, a journalist living in exile in Sweden, died four days after he was kidnapped and beaten by unknown assailants in Turkmenistan. Annamuradov was being held by authorities in Belarus at the time under an extradition request from Turkmenistan that was filed in 2000 for what Human Rights Watch has described as "politically motivated" fraud charges.

Trumped-up charges and a secret prison system are favorite tools of the regime. For instance, another Azatlyk Radiosy contributor, Saparmamed Nepeskuliev, went missing in July 2015 while visiting the Caspian coast. His relatives later tracked him down to a detention center near Avaza, the lavish government-constructed resort, where he was being held before receiving a three-year prison sentence on the charge of possessing narcotics. Nepeskuliev subsequently disappeared. He resurfaced briefly in June 2016, when the Netherlands-based Alternative Turkmenistan News (ATN) interviewed a Kazakh man who claimed to have shared a jail cell with the journalist.

What can still sometimes shock even hardened observers is the seeming refusal of state news agencies to disclose domestic news, even that of enormous public concern, such as earthquakes.

No laws in Turkmenistan prohibit the establishment of private, non-state media, but creating and operating a traditional media outlet involves prevailing against many bureaucratic and logistical “stop points” that authorities use to prevent anything but state media from existing; even the very attempt to establish and register a private entity could invite suspicion and intimidation. Consequently, among the estimated 15 percent of the population with Internet access, there has been a cautious move toward the nontraditional media of online social networks and publishing platforms. However, even this can invite repression. One Turkmenistani journalist recounts the story of a young Twitter user who was prevented from boarding a plane by airport authorities. The individual was never provided an explanation but had likely been the victim of one of the regime’s many secret blacklists.

Turkmenistan’s laws do not deny its citizens the right to access information from outside the country. Again, though, as a matter of practice, restriction is extensive. There is an unofficial ban on the import of newsletters, journals (even scientific ones), magazines, and newspapers produced abroad: suitcases, computers, phones, and thumb drives are checked at the airport, and the cabs, trunks, and cargo areas of cars and trucks are checked along the country’s highway border crossings. Those caught importing any such material face punishment. Meanwhile, the Ministry of Telecommunications maintains an effective monopoly over all forms of communications through formal and informal structures, including various state-owned enterprises and a shadowy 2012 agreement that made the Russia-based MTS mobile service provider a dominant force on the Turkmenistani market.

Citizen journalists recount numerous suggestive and frightening incidents of what appears to be advanced surveillance technology being deployed against ordinary citizens, civic activists, and journalists. It is no surprise, then, that the use of surveillance- and censorship-circumvention programs, such as Tor, Psiphon, and virtual private networks, is also prohibited, especially in Internet cafés—which citizens need an official form of identification to enter. The cash-strapped regime seems to be sparing no expense in its pursuit of total control: ATN reported that in 2016, Turkmenistan, anxious about Internet penetration through mobile platforms, put into orbit a new satellite, the

sole purpose of which is to monitor mobile phone activity in the country.

State news agencies provide scant information from the outside world. The rare article by Reuters, the Associated Press, and Agence France-Presse is cited, but only if it is an extremely positive report about Turkmenistan, especially its economic performance. What can still sometimes shock even hardened observers is the seeming refusal of state news agencies to disclose domestic news, even that of enormous public concern, such as earthquakes. On such critical issues as health, education, public expenditures, budgets, and state procurement, state news agencies prefer hyperbole over numbers, even fake ones, often describing a fictitious economic prosperity in grandiose and inexact terms. Otherwise, airtime and print copy is devoted to entertainment programming and exhaustive coverage of Berdymukhammedov’s activities—and the coverage is invariably hysterically positive and uncritical.

## OBJECTIVE 2: PROFESSIONAL JOURNALISM

Turkmenistan Objective Score: 0.43

Turkmenistan’s score for Objective 2, 0.43, down from 0.82 eight years ago, represents a historical low for the country’s MSI, as this had traditionally been its strongest area. However, it must be said that this objective has always been somewhat artificially inflated by good marks for Indicator 7, which measures the adequacy of facilities and equipment for gathering, producing, and distributing news. To its credit, the Turkmenistani government invests in rather cutting-edge news technology. The problem is, it has done so primarily for reasons of prestige and not for actual use. Through video and screen captures provided by citizen journalists, the frequently inconsistent to poor aesthetic quality of media content—from image resolution to the typography of newspapers—frequently belies the regime’s ostensible efforts at technological modernization, at least where news is concerned.

“Access to Turkmenistani information plays little or no role in the regular, daily life of Turkmenistanis,” the Western analyst explained. “The government’s policy is, effectively, to maximally limit the amount of information Turkmenistanis have about goings-on inside the country. So, journalism is not considered a tool of education or progress; it is a means to ensure a pliant population. And because the goal is minimalist, the resources made available to journalism are also minimal.”

Investment in media reached a peak in 2011 with the successful construction of the 211-meter Turkmenistan Tower near Ashgabat. At the time of the impressive tower’s opening, there was some confusion surrounding its exact function. Observers originally believed it was a media production facility. In fact,

it is merely an enormous antenna with viewing platforms and a rotating restaurant for tourists. Despite this, Indicator 7 continues to get the highest score, not just among the indicators for Objective 2, but among all the indicators of the MSI. Nevertheless, not even it can resist the gravitational pull of the other indicators, which, as in previous years, are a veritable black hole.

The government formally recognizes only its own state media employees as journalists, and these journalists, in turn, do not dare question the government in their reporting. The extent to which Turkmenistan's state journalists are secretly engaging in self-censorship or are simply unaware of what professional journalism truly looks like thus becomes an important question.

Turkmenistani journalists in the West argue that their counterparts back home are generally aware of objective journalism and basic professional standards. They point to a 2014 four-day "study visit" to Lithuania specifically for five state journalists as an example. Conducted by the OSCE, an official press release said the trip was intended to "facilitate the exchange of experiences in the area of media development and expose journalists from Turkmenistan to the work of print and online media outlets in Lithuania." More important, say observers, the fact that state journalists can access external news about Turkmenistan at all, even if only to twist and pervert it into propaganda, means they are inevitably exposed to international-standard reporting.

The ultimate problem, then, may not be that Turkmenistan's state journalists are ignorant of their craft. Rather, the far more crucial issue is that standards are set by high-level officials according to the wishes and wants, real or perceived, of the president. Editors avoid topics that government officials might frown upon, and hence strive to assign only those news stories that the regime would approve.

Whatever may or may not be happening within the minds of Turkmenistan's state journalists, indisputable is the fact that their journalistic ethics are horrendous, perhaps most bizarrely where truth in quoting is concerned. For example, one panelist recalled expressing a passing interest in visiting Turkmenistan one day, during a brief conversation with the Turkmenistani president's press secretary in a third country. Those remarks, the panelist said, somehow turned into a lengthy quotation of fulsome praise for the country, printed on the front page of the state newspaper *Neutrally Turkmenistan*. In another example, part of a Western academic's presentation at a conference in Ashgabat was aired on state television—dubbed to appear as if the academic were lavishing praise upon the president.

Oddly, Berdymukhammedov himself has frequently evinced dissatisfaction with the quality of Turkmenistani state journalism. For example, in an undated state press release on the website *TurkmenPortal.com*, the president is reported as

## 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).

extolling the importance of media in "preserving the spiritual values of the nation, further raising the cultural level of the country's citizens and the promotion of modern achievements of Turkmenistan." He then complained about state journalists being "cut off from life," exhibiting "obvious omissions" and a "low creative level"; he even criticized newspapers' habit of reprinting news verbatim. True to form, this same press release then explained how the media industry was subsequently revolutionized after this criticism, such that "today, reporters face broad prospects for professional growth and creative self-realization."

If being a state journalist does not actually provide very good prospects for creative self-realization, it does seem to offer stability. Pay levels are said to be sufficient to discourage corruption, and in a country where the average monthly salary is believed to be as low as \$150, this could be an indicator of the importance the regime attaches to media. Indeed, in late 2015, one panelist noted that salaries had been increasing by 10 percent since January of that year, and further noted that it had been at least the fourth consecutive year in which salaries had grown by that amount. It is unknown whether this practice continued during 2016, although a well-connected panelist this year reported not hearing a single complaint of salaries being delayed or garnished, as has been the case with employees of many other state institutions. In general, the picture that emerges is of state journalists regularly receiving decent standard salaries, and hence not needing to work multiple jobs to meet their living expenses, unlike, say, their counterparts in the Kyrgyz Republic. Yet, even here there is a sinister subtext: The state implicitly controls key aspects of state journalists' lives—not only their salaries, but also their housing and other social benefits.

Despite all the bad news about news in Turkmenistan, there may be some hope in the highly policed Turkmenet. One panelist this year strongly advised differentiating between professionals and *non*-professionals: “official ‘journalists,’ who are actually government propagandists” and “those who are sharing news on social media platforms for fun or for helping each other,” typically ordinary citizens who are working low-skilled jobs abroad and hence have greater access to new and different information. The Western analyst agreed: “Turkmenistan is too small to afford to produce high-production-quality entertainment, so it generally depends on imports” of the suppressed variety represented by online content, including Western films, hip-hop music videos (an old target of Turkmenistani authorities, who deem the music form “immoral”), and user-generated news and commentary. One experiment in independent Turkmen-language news, the Facebook- and V Kontakte-based SalamTurkmen, has hosted numerous discussions about infrastructural decay, police violence, and faulty health care inside Turkmenistan—the kinds of topics about which state media are deathly mute. These discussions have all been catalyzed by the reports of citizen journalists, often photographs taken and texts written by Turkmenistanis visiting home from work overseas.

Nonetheless, even the remarkable example of SalamTurkmen is a cautionary tale of the long road ahead for citizen journalism. The operation was one of a small group of Turkmenistan-focused news agencies funded by the Open Society Foundations. During the summer, this group was exposed by hackers who had broken into the donor’s databases and published copies of its funding spreadsheets on Twitter and the DCLeaks website. For many of SalamTurkmen’s users, who have spent a lifetime learning to shun foreign-funded news either for reasons of distrust or fear for their personal safety, this may have taken the shine off the “non-professional” alternative.

### OBJECTIVE 3: PLURALITY OF NEWS

#### Turkmenistan Objective Score: 0.26

Turkmenistan’s score for Objective 3 is 0.26, essentially unchanged compared with recent years. Of all the MSI objectives, Objective 3 has fluctuated the most since 2008, bouncing between an “optimistic” scores as high as 0.41 (2008, 2012, and 2013) and “pessimistic” scores hovering around 0.25 (2009, 2010, 2011, 2014 - 2017). One explanation for this fluctuation is the challenge in determining what information about their country and the wider world most Turkmenistanis have access to and of what quality it is.

All media outlets in Turkmenistan continue to present only one point of view—quite literally. Media content produced by the Turkmen Dowlet Habarlary (Turkmen State News Agency)

is recycled and repeated with a conveyor belt-like monotony across multiple platforms. Ever since American journalist Joshua Kucera’s notorious 2007 blog post revealed to the outside world that Turkmenistani newspapers across the country literally publish the same content verbatim, citizen journalists have continued to document this strange practice. It is not entirely clear if this is the result of a formal policy, especially considering the president’s complaints about the practice. Some critics of the regime cast it as a holdover from the Soviet era, but this is debatable. According to a 2010 article by NewEurasia Citizen Media, the country’s media landscape actually may have been more diverse in 1991 at the moment of independence, in part because, like the rest of the former Soviet republics, Turkmenistan had come into its independence fresh off the heels of the *perestroika* and *glasnost* era. Twenty-five years ago, NewEurasia reports that there were at least two independent print publications owned and managed by members of the Turkmenistani intelligentsia: *Dayanch (Support)*, a Russian- and Turkmen-language magazine, and the *Turkmen Ili (Turkmen Nation)* newspaper. Unfortunately, these publications proved to be canaries in a coalmine. Muhammetmurat Salamatov, the publisher of *Dayanch*, was beaten by unknown assailants and then charged with using money from criminal activities to fund the newspaper. Both publications had their copies routinely confiscated, and their editors were constantly harassed. Eventually, they quietly faded away.

Today, there are officially two private newspapers, *Rysgal (Welfare)* and *Zaman Turkmenistan (Times of Turkmenistan)*. Of the two, *Rysgal* is better known, having opened in 2010 on the instruction of Berdymukhammedov himself. It is officially owned by the Union of Industrialists and Entrepreneurs, a pro-government business association that is widely seen as another tool of the government. Little is yet known about *Zaman Turkmenistan*, which appeared on the scene in 2016. Claiming to be a subscription-based print and online newspaper, its website is password-protected and closed to the public both inside and outside of the country. However, the whole notion of subscriptions in Turkmenistan is perverse, as the government continues to enforce a genuinely Soviet-era practice of producing newspapers for specific ministries and industries, and then requiring their respective employees to purchase and consume this content. For instance, workers at the state Prosecutor’s Office and the Interior and Defense ministries are required to subscribe to *Adalat (Justice)* and *Esger (Military)*, while those in the medical profession must subscribe to *Saglyk (Health)*. If an industry does not offer a magazine subscription and/or newspapers, its employees are still required to subscribe to a publication from another industry. In all cases, workers are required to pay for the subscriptions from their own salaries.

Government media outlets produce their own programs and news content, but there is little creativity. If the various exploits

of the president are not being praised, then the content concerns the regime's version of traditional Turkmen culture, music, dancing, performance art, etc. It remains unclear whether differences among the Turkmen tribes are acknowledged and celebrated, a potential area of concern. Berdymukhammedov belongs to the Teke tribe, which benefited from the Soviets' strategy of elevating certain tribes over others in the Central Asian republics, not only to positions of power but also as the cultural ideal of each nationality. Two other important but politically marginalized tribes are the Yomud in the west, in areas close to the Caspian Sea, and the Ersari, who live in eastern areas adjoining Uzbekistan. According to a 2010 report by the Institute of War and Peace Reporting, the Teke may be consolidating their position—and one way to do this would be to downplay, delegitimize, or even erase intra-Turkmen differences.

There are some green shoots. Government websites seem to be slowly developing, even doing such previously unimaginable things as posting the addresses of their offices in the regions and in the capital. Turkmen Dowlet Habarlary is occasionally publishing stories set in neither Ashgabat nor Avaza, but in other municipalities—although these will usually focus on a presidential visit or a new prestige project. The audience seems genuinely interested in news regarding the Ahal-Teke, the famed Turkmen horse breed, and the prospects of developing an equestrian industry of some sort. State journalists seem to be responding to this grassroots interest with increased coverage of the government's attempts to promote the horse breed abroad. Meanwhile, in the tiny world of the Turkmenet, there is some creativity allowed for those publishing on the Internet from within Turkmenistan. A veteran Turkmenistani journalist said state journalists are sometimes allowed by their editors to blog as a kind of hobby or exercise. However, they must blog either

#### 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.

According to a 2010 article by NewEurasia Citizen Media, the country's media landscape actually may have been more diverse in 1991 at the moment of independence, in part because, like the rest of the former Soviet republics, Turkmenistan had come into its independence fresh off the heels of the *perestroika* and *glasnost* era.

about the official news, or about music, football, cooking, and other hobbies—essentially, only apolitical topics.

Although last year there were some signs of foreign investment in the advertising industry (see below), there is no evidence of any into media, state-owned or otherwise, at least within the country (i.e., not counting foreign governmental and donor support for external news agencies like Azatlyk Radiosy or ATN).

Turkmenistan heavily restricts Internet access and blocks content from numerous websites and online social networks, opposition websites, general news websites in Russian, websites about religion (especially Islam), and email services such as Gmail. The most popular Internet services, such as Facebook, Google, and YouTube, appear to be blocked, although there are conflicting anecdotal reports about this. The spread of mobile Internet has brought some modicum of increased access to the outside world, especially in those urban areas with relatively decent telecommunications infrastructure. However, all activity is monitored, and users must take great care. For example, observers have noted that periodically opposition news websites suddenly become accessible, which some suspect is a ploy to ferret out malcontents within the population.

Previous MSIs have asserted that ordinary citizens know that the government owns and controls all media outlets and hence do not know what it really means to have independent media. This is debatable, especially considering the many young people going abroad for work, not only to Russia but also to Ukraine and Turkey, which have a comparatively robust and diverse media landscape. For those inside the country who find ways to access the Turkmenet, there is a small universe of high-quality, Turkmen-language independent news, such as Azatlyk Radiosy, ATN, Fergana.ru, Khronika Turkmenistana (Chronicles of Turkmenistan), and SalamTurkmen. Nonetheless, information habits appear to be rapidly deteriorating. "People today not only do not read the Turkmen newspapers, but are also losing the habit to read in general, including reading books, which is a



clear difference from the Soviet period, when there were many publications,” the veteran Turkmenistani journalist lamented.

## OBJECTIVE 4: BUSINESS MANAGEMENT

### Turkmenistan Objective Score: 0.19

Turkmenistan’s score for Objective 4 is 0.19, reflecting the massively corrosive effects of absolute state control upon management culture. It is possible that in the years when they gave relatively higher ratings, panelists were simply being charitable in light of the stifling and sometimes terrifying conditions faced by Turkmenistan’s media managers.

Last year, Indicator 3 (the existence of an advertising market) received the highest score of all indicators in this objective because of an advertising market that appeared to have been growing due to increased investments from international companies and the appearance of a few private advertisements selling non-state goods and services on some websites. The rest of the indicators, however, all scored terribly, with indicators 1 (media outlets operate efficiently), 5 (editorial independence), and 7 (there are attempts to measure and understand audiences) at the bottom. This year, Indicator 3 again scored highest—one Turkmenistani journalist claims that the rare private advertisement has appeared on television. Nearly all other indicators dangle close to zero.

In general, the lesson drawn from this year’s panel is that the smidgen of hope for advertising may have been illusory. “The advertising market is stagnant,” the Western analyst said. There has been no indication whether promising new practices from 2015, such as the use of “classifieds” and banner advertisements on websites to generate additional income, have increased. No

information regarding media finances, whether from government subsidies or other sources, has ever been made public.

With respect to management practices, state media do not appear to engage in anything recognizable as such, whether developing business plans, conducting market research, or elaborating personnel policies. The broadcast media sector has no ratings system, and in any event, citizen journalists report that most Turkmenistanis prefer Russian television programming, if they can access it (typically through satellite television). Newspapers proudly boast circulation assessments, but with data calculated from the number of copies printed. Crucially, personnel choices are highly centralized: the president appoints and dismisses editors-in-chief, and individuals are appointed based on their loyalty instead of their skills and experience. Turkmenistani institutions do not offer classes to help strengthen research skills—the very type of thing that observers expect would be prohibited anyway.

## OBJECTIVE 5: SUPPORTING INSTITUTIONS

### Turkmenistan Objective Score: 0.13

Turkmenistan’s score for Objective 5 is 0.13, a decline from last year when it scored 0.24. Additionally, it is the only objective that exhibits a steady statistical pattern throughout all the MSIs: rising from 0.26 in 2008 to 0.30 in 2010, where it more or less remained until spiking to 0.40 in 2013 and then beginning its decline in 2014, when it abruptly plummeted to 0.19. One possible explanation for the recent slide is a growing impatience or exhaustion among panelists regarding the situation for Objective 5 in Turkmenistan.

Objective 5 concerns two key, if often-overlooked or ill-understood, aspects of any media landscape: (1) the extent to which NGOs, such as advocacy groups, civic organizations, and trade associations, either help or hinder journalists and (2) the resources (equipment, paper, printing facilities, etc.) and distribution channels, such as kiosks, transmitters, cable, Internet, and mobile, that are available to media outlets. This objective also covers the enormous role played by telecommunications infrastructure at all levels, from the country as a whole down through the newsroom and into the computers, televisions, and phones of citizens. In Turkmenistan, every aspect of Objective 5 is distorted by government control.

Civil society simply does not exist in Turkmenistan. The reason, again, is not because the freedom of assembly—crucial for the formation of NGOs like trade associations—is illegal. Technically, Turkmenistan’s constitution and laws permit the formation of associations, but the government restricts this right in practice. The law requires that an NGO’s founder be a citizen and that the organization be registered with the Ministry of Justice and

### 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.

the Ministry of Economics and Development. To do so, however, the would-be NGO must be able to prove it has 500 members. "This is the real killer for civil society," one observer said. Once registered, other hurdles include obeying regulations that permit the Ministry of Justice to send representatives to events and meetings held by the NGO, a regulation that also requires the group's leaders to notify the government about its planned activities. An unregistered NGO's activities are punishable by fines, short-term detentions, and confiscation of property.

Unsurprisingly, authorities reject all attempts to register NGOs, often using subjective criteria. At best, there are a few pro forma structures established by the government for various industries, but apparently none that specifically represents media interests. There is no need for an association of media owners since the government is the only owner. As noted in last year's MSI, two unions for journalists once operated in Turkmenistan, but it is not clear they continue to function. One was the Union of Journalists of Turkmenistan, established in 1958 and re-registered in 1992 with a charter that included "the protection of journalists' interests against state and public organizations, founders, and publishers of the media." The other was the Shamsyrag Association of Journalists of Turkmenistan, whose last round of activities—two seminars for journalists, funded by the U.S. Embassy in Ashgabat, and one public presentation about its membership's activities funded by USAID, all of which were held in Moscow—was recorded in 2001.

Journalism training has existed in the country since 2008, when it was reintroduced into university curricula after a long prohibition. In 2014, Berdymukhammedov opened a new International University of the Humanities and Development in Ashgabat. Courses are taught in English, and a degree is offered in journalism. Additionally, both students and established professionals are officially permitted to pursue journalism training abroad, but it is unknown how many pursue this clearly risky option. For instance, since 2010, Deutsche Welle and the OSCE Academy in Bishkek, the Kyrgyz Republic, have conducted a 10-week journalism school for the Central Asian republics. According to a source inside the Academy, there has yet to be enrolled a student from Turkmenistan.

In terms of administrative resources, the acquisition and operation of media equipment is tightly controlled, and the state owns all distribution tools, except for the occasional kiosk. Sometimes, the sheer power of the regime to put out its message can be breathtaking, as transmitters reach all of this immense but empty country's far-flung inhabited areas (70 percent of Turkmenistan is desert) and kiosks churn out the echo chamber of official newspapers. Yet, by nearly all accounts, Turkmenistan's telecommunications and information distribution infrastructure is antiquated, crumbling, and concentrated in a few pockets of development, such as Ashgabat—but, say observers, this may be exactly what the regime wants.

## 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.

Although Berdymukhammedov has long extolled the virtues of technological modernization, and advances such as the introduction of 3G into the country have been hailed by state media, every time a mobile signal is abruptly dropped or an Internet connection is suddenly cut, the regime scores a tiny victory in its war on independent thought.

Turkmenistanis have long attempted to circumvent both the tedium of the official press and the lack of decent infrastructure by using television receive-only satellite dishes, or TVROs, which beam directly into their living rooms foreign media content (principally from Russia, but also from Europe and Iran). Exactly how many TVROs there are in Turkmenistan is unknown, but observers have used adjectives like "ubiquitous" and "everywhere." As this technology poses such an obvious and direct challenge to the regime's absolute control over information, how exactly TVROs are entering the country remains something in dire need of study by analysts. One thing is for sure, though: if ever the grassroots of Turkmenistan has shown any sign of genuine resistance to power, it has been to protect its access to satellite television. These large, prominent devices have proved an easy target for government raids—usually called "beautification drives" by the authorities. There have been numerous reports by citizen journalists of scuffles and even organized protests. Perhaps poet and music pioneer Gil Scott-Heron may one day be proven right in Turkmenistan: the revolution may not be televised; instead, it may be about television.

## List of Panel Participants

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