

# TURKMENISTAN



**MEDIA  
SUSTAINABILITY  
INDEX**

**2018**

Tracking Development  
of Sustainable  
Independent Media  
Around the World



# TURKMENISTAN

## AT A GLANCE

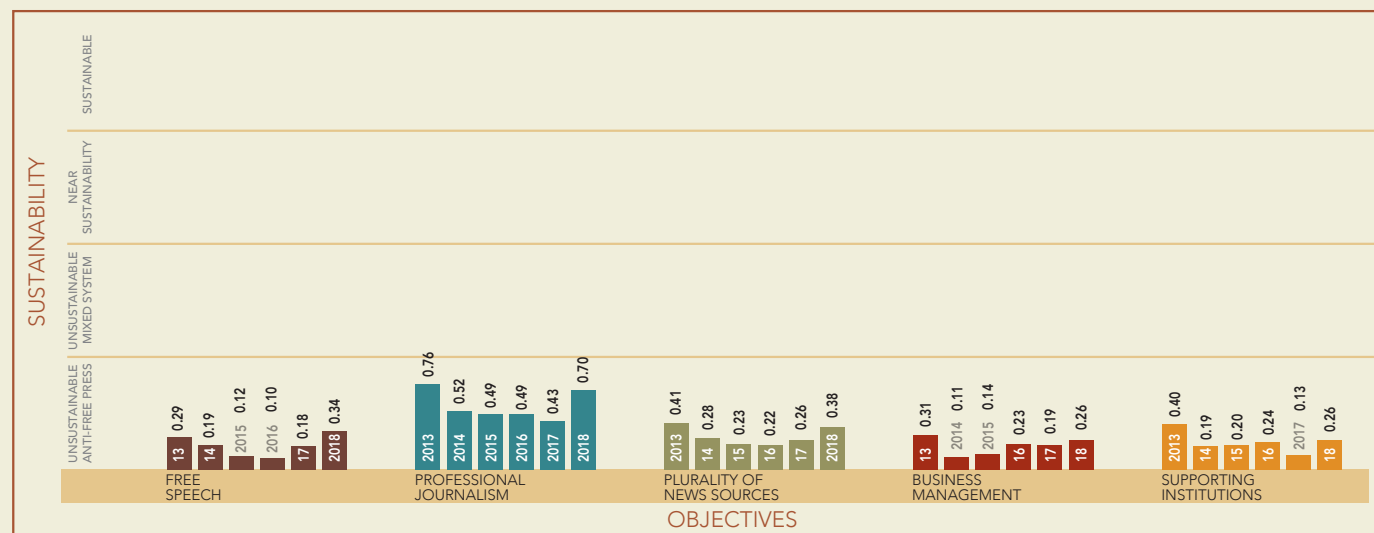
### GENERAL

- **Population:** 5,351,277 (July 2017 est. *CIA World Factbook*)
- **Capital city:** Ashgabat
- **Ethnic groups (% of population):** Turkmen 85%, Uzbek 5%, Russian 4%, other 6% (*CIA World Factbook*, 2003 est.)
- **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 (2016 - Atlas):** \$36.18 billion (World Bank Development Indicators, 2016)
- **GNI per capita (2016 - PPP):** \$6,670 (World Bank Development Indicators, 2016)
- **Literacy rate:** 99.7% (male 99.8%, female 99.6%) (*CIA World Factbook*, 2015 est.)
- **President or top authority:** President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow (since February 14, 2007)

### MEDIA-SPECIFIC

- **Number of active print outlets, radio stations, television stations, Internet news portals:** The exact numbers are unknown, but there are believed to be seven state-owned television stations; at least one state-owned radio station; as many as 28 national and local newspapers and magazines, including two “private” print outlets, at least one of which is widely considered implicitly state-controlled; and an undetermined number of Internet-based news entities, several of which are state-controlled. (*CIA World Factbook*, International Telecommunication Union, NewEurasia Citizen Media, SalamTurkmen, World Telecommunication/ICT Development, World Bank)
- **Newspaper circulation statistics:** There are no clear statistics. According to anecdotal data, the three main print publications by circulation may be *Neutrally Turkmenistan* (Russian- and English-language state-owned daily), *Turkmenistan* (Turkmen-language state-owned daily), and *Rysgal* (Turkmen-language, published irregularly, owned by the Union of Industrialists and Entrepreneurs).
- **Broadcast ratings:** N/A
- **News agencies:** Turkmen Dowlet Habarlary (Turkmen State News Agency, state-owned)
- **Annual advertising revenue in media sector:** N/A
- **Internet usage:** 785,000 users (15% of population) (2015 est., *CIA World Factbook*)

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### SCORE KEY

**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>





Turkmenistan's dire situation is reflected in the MSI scores for 2018. The overall score of 0.39 exceeds Turkmenistan's average and median since surveying of the country started in 2008—0.34 and 0.33, respectively—but remains deep in the “unsustainable/anti-free press” category. On the one hand, the panelists noted a modicum of general improvement continuing from last year. On the other, they confirmed the perverse condition of media in the country. As one said, “The weakness and failures of the government are being portrayed as its success. The less information, the better, so as to keep the people asleep.”

The desert of the real” is Jean Baudrillard's notorious description of contemporary media and the quality of psychology it engenders. Although written in 1981, it could very well be a description of Turkmenistan today. A level of information control that could fairly be called totalitarian has resulted in a media landscape utterly detached from reality, even as this desert republic of 5.6 million people undergoes an economic meltdown that some observers fear could lead to a humanitarian catastrophe.

Turkmenistan's authorities dominate every level of media, from telecommunications satellites all the way down to the smartphones of Ashgabat's wealthy socialites and even the gossip of pensioners in remote rural villages. Television satellite dishes—the population's only true lifeline to outside information—are being systematically destroyed under the pretext of “urban beautification.” Fear and self-censorship rule the nascent “Turkmenet” (Turkmen-language websites and Internet services). Authorities have been slowly mastering sophisticated Internet surveillance technology believed to have been imported from the West in recent years, according to the watchdog group Privacy International. The country's few Web users exhibit behaviors that indicate a sense of being watched by an omnipresent eye.

Meanwhile, a macroeconomic sandstorm has hit Turkmenistan. For years, the government has maintained

a monopoly over key goods and services, relied upon natural gas as its sole strategic revenue source, invested in grandiose prestige construction projects, and operated a vast social-welfare system to keep the population relatively inured from hardship. However, an ongoing dispute with neighboring Iran over gas prices, the loss of the Russian export market, and gross inefficiencies in the construction industry (long suspected of really serving as a massive money-laundering machine for the ruling elite) have combined with a persistent downward trend in gas prices to disturb the mirage. Citizen journalists on the inside and news agencies on the outside describe an economic collapse: mass layoffs, unemployment topping 50 percent, cessation of fuel subsidies, rationing of basic goods and services, long food queues.

State media are effectively the only media in Turkmenistan, and they acknowledge none of these problems. The official press glories in a “Golden Age” (the words appear in the name of the official government news service), shepherded by President Gurbanguly Berdymukhammedov, who was re-elected in a February 2017 vote universally viewed as a sham (he defeated eight government-chosen challengers with 98 percent of the vote). “Even if a deadly earthquake strikes, it won't be in the media,” one panelist said. “Nor will it be mentioned tomorrow or even a year from now, as this is ‘negative news.’”

**OBJECTIVE 1:  
FREEDOM OF  
SPEECH**

0.34

**From an all-time low of 0.10 in 2016, Turkmenistan continues to see marginal improvement in this objective, from 0.18 last year to 0.34. The uptick reflects improved, if wholly cosmetic, legislation on freedom of expression and the tentative advent of (necessarily anonymous) citizen journalism. However, it hardly masks the reality of the government's total control over information and absolute suppression of free speech. The consequence for society, as one panelist put it, is that "self-censorship is an everyday practice."**

The main legislation pertaining to freedom of speech and, more broadly, the flow of information is the Law on Mass Media, passed in 2013. The measure is in line with international standards in word but ignored in practice—openly by law-enforcement and security agencies and quietly through untraceable and unprovable acts of intimidation against everyday people and journalists alike. Amid seemingly omnipresent censorship, "people rely on what their relatives, friends, or neighbors say is happening," one panelist said. "There is no real media, so lies and fake news are making the rounds among the population."

Citizen journalists and civic activists have been able to provide the outside world with glimpses of what this disjunction is like. Using a pseudonym to express opinions online, even positive ones, is ubiquitous. Citizen journalists have recounted numerous anecdotes about young male practitioners of Islam being pulled aside or detained by authorities and having their phones examined, often on no other basis than having discussed their religious beliefs online. Gossip and rumor spread by the so-called village women's newswire (*obaryn*

*ayallary novosti*) takes the place of real information and is duly compiled by police and security forces into extensive dossiers. Citizen journalists report that everyday citizens can receive rewards for spying on their friends and neighbors on behalf of authorities and for purposefully feeding false information into the rumor mill.

Professional journalists' freedom of speech, and their personal rights in general, are more openly transgressed. According to one panelist, the state has at times tolerated independent reporting, provided it does not touch on domestic political issues, especially corruption in government. Even critical content could be published, especially by young citizen journalists, "so long as it was from a 'Turkmen perspective' and not seen as foreign interference and subversion," this panelist said. For instance, it was possible in 2014 for Soltan Achilova—a contributor to Azatlyk Radiosy, the Turkmen-language service of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL)—to report on long lines for bus and train tickets. This tolerance, already vague and erratic, appears to have disappeared along with Turkmenistan's natural-gas profits. When Achilova attempted to report in 2016 about similar problems at state-operated stores, she was detained. Since being released later that year, she has been assaulted numerous times by unknown assailants, most recently last summer. No one has ever been charged.

Attacks by strangers who promptly escape, never to be apprehended and prosecuted, is a favorite intimidation tactic of Turkmenistan's authorities. The danger extends to journalists' families. When another RFE/RL contributor, Khudayberdy Allashov, was arrested in December 2016 for allegedly possessing chewing tobacco, which is illegal in the country, his mother was taken into custody as well. They served two-and-a-half months in prison before being convicted in February

2017 and given three-year suspended sentences. There has been no news about Allashov and his mother since their release; presumably, they have since been living under police surveillance and are banned from using any communication tools.

Turkmenistan's laws do not explicitly deny citizens the right to access and comment upon information from foreign news sources, and the country is not as hermetically sealed from external media as government critics and opponents sometimes portray. One panelist said that, per a special presidential decree, ministries and state media are permitted to consume select foreign news

**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.

publications, typically from Russia. State journalists have limited permission to browse external news websites, but only for content that is both related to Turkmenistan and positive in nature.

For the rest of the population, the rules of the game are clear: There is effectively a ban on the import of newsletters, journals (even scientific ones), magazines, and newspapers produced abroad. Suitcases, computers, phones, and flash drives are checked at the airport, and the trunks, cabs, and cargos of cars and trucks are checked at highway border crossings. If a person is caught importing any such material, he or she faces punishment.

**The consequence for society, as one panelist put it, is that “self-censorship is an everyday practice.”**

For many years, Turkmenistanis have relied upon a workaround for the foreign-media barrier: television receive-only satellite dishes (TVROs), which beam external content—principally from Russia, but also from Europe and Iran—directly into their homes. Exactly how many TVROs are in use in Turkmenistan has long been debated, but observers have regularly used terms like “ubiquitous” and “everywhere.”

It is unclear how technology that poses such an obvious and direct challenge to the regime’s absolute control over information has been entering the country; it is an issue badly in need of study by analysts. What is clearer is that citizens are deeply protective of their dishes. As TVROs tend to be large and must be placed in prominent locations, they have proven to be an easy target for government raids in the name of “urban beautification.” These raids have been met with scuffles and even organized protests, according to numerous reports

by citizen journalists, provoking intensified efforts by authorities in what might very well be a slowly growing vicious circle.

Meanwhile, a small but increasing number of Turkmenetizens are finding ways around technical bans imposed upon VPN and proxy servers. This holds some promise for gouging chinks out of the country’s armor of media control, but care must be taken in attempting to assess the long-term prospects of the Internet for cracking open this society.

The underlying infrastructure of the Turkmenet is unknown, but various clues over the years create an interesting, if still daunting, picture. It is believed that by ITU that 18% of individual Turkmenistani citizens and 13.6 percent of Turkmenistani households have some form of Internet access. Anecdotally speaking, most of those with access are either living abroad or clustered around Ashgabat, the country’s capital and telecommunications hub.

Internet access is extremely expensive. Chronicles of Turkmenistan, a multilingual news site operated by the Vienna-based Turkmen Initiative for Human Rights, reported that Turkmentelecom, the sole provider, charges TMT 950 (\$264) a month for unlimited Internet service with a connection speed of 1 Mbit/s. For those priced out of regular access, surfing the Web can still be done at Internet cafés, but these, unsurprisingly, are heavily controlled by the state. Users must register with a valid official ID, and the authorities track every online move they make, from visiting websites to writing emails.

The demographics of the Turkmenet are similarly fuzzy, though a rough sketch does exist. According to a 2016 analysis by George Washington University’s Central Asia Program, the online community, such as it is, appears to be made up largely of well-to-do youth in urban areas, including children of the ruling elite, although there is a significant component of students and labor

migrants living, studying, and working abroad. “The social-media environment is considerably smaller and more cloistered” than its counterparts in other Central Asian societies, according to the report, and the prevalence of elites renders the Turkmenet “a particularly limited representation of public opinion in one of the world’s most isolated societies.”

There appears to be a rise in use of Internet-based chat services and mobile messaging apps, such as WhatsApp and Line, to spread information about events or aspects of Turkmenistani law and bureaucracy. But, as one panelist noted, “chat rooms between people cannot replace the job that the press does. The information is not very reliable, and the secret police are regularly checking chat rooms, trying to track and identify the people who are active there.” Indeed, in 2016, airport authorities prevented a young Twitter user from boarding a plane. The individual was never provided an explanation but, according to one panel member, had likely been the victim of one of the regime’s many secret blacklists related to online activity.

**Even critical content could be published, especially by young citizen journalists, “so long as it was from a ‘Turkmen perspective’ and not seen as foreign interference and subversion,” this panelist said.**

Internet surveillance is readily facilitated by the Telecommunications Ministry’s effective monopoly over all forms of communications, maintained through formal and informal structures, including various state-owned enterprises and a shadowy 2012 agreement with Russian mobile-service provider MTS, the dominant force in the Turkmenistani mobile market. Even that dominance comes with

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the tolerance of the all-powerful ministry, with which MTS has had a fraught relationship. The company entered the Turkmenistani market in 2005, had its operations suspended in 2010, resumed operations in 2012, and was cut off again in September 2017. This last move came as a blow to MTS, as just one month earlier it had expanded its 3G network throughout the country. According to the telecommunications research company Telecompaper, as of January 2018, MTS Turkmenistan was in the process of refunding its former subscribers.

The cash-strapped regime seems to be sparing no expense in its pursuit of total control over the Turkmenet. Alternative Turkmenistan News (ATN) reported that in 2016, capping a years-long effort, the regime successfully launched a telecommunications satellite into orbit, with the sole purpose of monitoring mobile-phone activity in the country.

### OBJECTIVE 2: PROFESSIONAL JOURNALISM

0.70

**The 2017 MSI's historically low mark of 0.43 for Objective 2 was the result of a deeper reassessment of what Turkmenistan's stagnation in all aspects of media sustainability signified about the mentality of the country's state journalists themselves. The diagnosis was not positive. Whether state journalists do have some grasp of what their craft really should be like, and have made their peace with the situation as it is, are matters of speculation. Regardless, the structure is too formidable for them to oppose it.**

This year our panelists remain pessimistic. "It is difficult to talk about 'journalism' in Turkmenistan," one said. "Fundamentally, there isn't any, except for

a few daring 'underground' writers for exile media." Nevertheless, the score rose to 0.70, more in line with Turkmenistan's median performance in this area. There is some more insight this year into exactly how authorities monitor and exert what is often a tacit form of control over state journalists, as well as a sense of just how orchestrated Turkmenistan's entire public sphere has become.

As with higher past ratings for this objective, the score for this year is inflated by the quality of technical facilities and equipment for gathering, producing, and distributing news. This reflects the quality of the technology as such, not whether media professionals use it optimally—and they do not. Video and screen captures provided by citizen journalists demonstrate the inconsistent and often poor aesthetic quality of media content—from image resolution to the typography of newspapers—and belie the regime's ostensible efforts at technological modernization. Berdymukhammedov himself has often and openly criticized the low aesthetic quality of media products, but there is no genuine political will for change.

As for the content itself, the story remains the same as in previous years. Screens, pages, and airwaves are dominated by the president's exploits in all sectors of life and governance; entertainment, especially traditional music; and grossly exaggerated economic statistics. In general, the tone of reporting is emotionally ecstatic and very nationalist. State media are wildly inaccurate, to an extent that their reporting "borders on pure fabrication," as one panelist put it. Events warranting coverage are tightly orchestrated. "Nothing is left to chance," another panelist said. "When you see people attending a parade, they have been trained how to dress and what to say, and everything is according to a protocol."

What, then, is the goal of journalism for the

### 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).

authorities? As a panelist summed up last year, the Turkmenistani government does not consider journalism a tool of socialization, as do many authoritarian states, or a tool of education and oversight, as in democratic countries. Rather, it is considered a means to ensure a malleable population.

The government formally accredits only its own state-media employees, who do not dare question the government in their reporting. These state journalists are not wholly ignorant of international standards and forms of professional reporting. Some have taken part in state-organized visits with counterparts abroad in the name of media development, and many are able legally to access external news as part of their content-gathering routines. They could be considered complacent—or even complicit—in the deplorable condition of media in Turkmenistan, but that is a tough charge to make

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stick, given the conditions under which they work. Newsroom protocols are set by high-level officials according to the whims, real or perceived, of the president. Editors—who, like all other key state officials, are appointed by Berdymukhammedov—actively avoid topics that might attract negative attention from above.

One panelist noted the ubiquitous presence of the authorities in the form of “supervisors” from national-security bodies who are physically stationed inside media offices. These are essentially government minders akin to the Soviet-era commissar, and according to this panelist, they “literally check every single word before it is published or aired. That’s why there is hardly any live streaming, live talk shows.” The state is even believed to exercise control over journalists’ social benefits and housing.

**“It is difficult to talk about ‘journalism’ in Turkmenistan,” one said. “Fundamentally, there isn’t any, except for a few daring ‘underground’ writers for exile media.”**

There remains uncertainty about the pay levels of state journalists. Some panelists said it is low; others considered it adequate for living standards in Turkmenistan. “Reporters earn higher than teachers but lower than the police,” one asserted. In 2015, a panelist said salaries for journalists had been increasing by 10 percent annually for at least four years, but it is impossible to verify this, much less confirm whether the practice has continued during the economic downturn.

Even if hard numbers on media salaries were accessible, it would be difficult to compare them to compensation in other fields, as there are no reliable data on average monthly salaries in

Turkmenistan (some analysts believe them to be as low as \$150) or cost-of-living expenses. Whereas last year’s panel said pay levels were sufficient to discourage corruption, this year one member said corruption among journalists is “widespread” and “often endorsed by state officials as a ‘thank you’ for a good story.”

### OBJECTIVE 3: PLURALITY OF NEWS

0.38

**Turkmenistan’s score for Objective 3 is 0.38, following several years in the 0.25 range. One explanation for this fluctuation is the challenge panelists face in weighing the quality of “internal” (i.e., state) media vs. “external” (nonstate) media. Nonstate media are subdivided into “exile media” (operated by dissidents or former political insiders), “surrogate media” (such as RFE/RL’s Azatlyk Radiosy), and a scant few genuinely independent entities (such as ATN; the now-defunct, social-media-based SalamTurkmen; and NewEurasia Citizen Media, which is also dormant at present).**

The main external media are Azatlyk Radiosy, Chronicles of Turkmenistan, ATN, EurasiaNet.org, and Global Voices Online. *The Diplomat*, an online magazine covering the Asia-Pacific region, is also important, and there are several Twitter feeds and blogs by experts and journalists from Turkmen, Russian, and Western backgrounds.

The following are confirmed internal or state media outlets in Russian, Turkmen, and English:

Major print publications and websites include *Neutrally Turkmenistan* (*Neutral Turkmenistan*, the main newspaper, named for the state’s official

foreign policy of “positive neutrality”); Altyn Asyr (Golden Age, the main website, named for the state’s official slogan); *Turkmenistan* (a large-scale national newspaper); *Nebit-Gaz* (official publication and website of the state-run oil and natural-gas industry); *Bneshnyaya Politika i Diplomatiya Turkmenistana* (*Foreign Policy and Diplomacy of Turkmenistan*, mouthpiece of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs).

The state also publishes *Diyar* (*Home*), a lifestyle journal, and a number of English-language circulars, including *World Literature, Standard, Quality and Security, Democracy and Law*, and *Culture and Tourism*.

There are several news websites believed to be run or otherwise affiliated with the government, including Turkmenistan.ru (oddly, a Russian government-owned site), Turkmenportal.com, Turkmeninform.com, Ashgabad.net, Infoabad.com, Arzuw.tm, and Gundogar-news.com (not to be confused with the exile-media website Gundogar.org). The default language of several of these outlets is Russian, not Turkmen. Before recently going defunct, websites such as Murgap.net and Krasnovodsk.net were also suspected of being government-affiliated.

It should be noted that the preceding is not a full taxonomy of all the print publications and websites, as the full extent of the state’s rather prodigious output remains unknown. In this respect, the words of the panelist who compiled this list are especially apt: “Such a visible abundance of media nevertheless does not lead to an improvement in the reliability and versatile delivery of information.” All media outlets in Turkmenistan continue to present only one point of view—quite literally. As revealed to the outside world in a 2007 blog post by American journalist Joshua Kucera, content produced by the Turkmen Dowlet Habarlary (Turkmen State News Agency) is recycled and repeated with conveyor



belt-like monotony across multiple platforms.

It remains unclear whether this peculiarity is a product of formal policy, especially considering Berdymukhammedov's complaints about this very phenomenon. Some critics of the regime try to cast it as a relic from the Soviet era, but this is debatable. According to a 2010 article on the Central Asian citizen-journalism network NewEurasia, the media landscape may have been more diverse in 1991, at the dawn of independence—in part because, like the rest of the former Soviet republics, Turkmenistan came into nationhood fresh off the *perestroika* and *glasnost* era. At the time, NewEurasia reported, 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 newspaper *Turkmen Ili* (*Turkmen Nation*). Unfortunately, these publications proved to be canaries in a coal mine. Muhammetmurat Salamatov, the publisher of *Dayanch*, was beaten by unknown assailants and then charged with using money from criminal activities to fund the magazine. Print runs of both publications were routinely confiscated, and their editors were constantly harassed. Eventually, they quietly faded away.

There are no laws in Turkmenistan that prohibit private, nonstate media. However, creating and operating a conventional outlet requires overcoming numerous bureaucratic and logistical obstacles that authorities exploit to stop anything but state media in its tracks. The very attempt to establish and register a private entity could invite suspicion and intimidation. In a surprising sign of potential progress, one panelist said an Ashgabat-based businessman managed in 2017 to secure a media license. However, the authorities have apparently prevented him from doing anything with it. (The identity of this individual, much less the conditions of his successful application, have not been shared with IREX.)

There are only two ostensibly private newspapers: *Rysgal* (*Welfare*, supposedly a publication for businessmen) and *Zaman Turkmenistan* (*Times of Turkmenistan*, purportedly a general newspaper). *Rysgal* is the more questionable of the two. It was launched in 2010 on instruction from Berdymukhammedov himself and trumpeted by the Turkmen State News Agency (in English, no less). 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 regime. "If there is a question about ownership, it is always safe to say one of the

president's relatives runs the business," one panelist said of putatively private enterprises. "It is very obvious, even if not transparent."

The Turkmen-language *Zaman Turkmenistan* is obscure. According to a 2009 article by RFE/RL's Central Newsroom—one of the only online references to it in English and the only to mention its ownership—it is "Turkish-owned." One panelist specified that it may have been owned by *Zaman*, a widely read Turkish newspaper that was affiliated with Hizmet, the Muslim spiritual movement led

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by Fethullah Gülen, but was seized by the Turkish government in March 2016 and shut down four months later. Whether *Zaman Turkmenistan* has ever been affiliated with Hizmet is unknown (and it should be noted that the Gülen movement, especially its schools, was subject to crackdowns by Turkmenistani authorities in 2011 and 2017). Weirdly, according to *Zaman Turkmenistan's* website, the newspaper is headquartered in the same building as the country's postal service, Türkmenpoçta.

Tracking down the history of *Zaman Turkmenistan* is like sifting clues in a detective story. It appears to have been registered with the Library of Congress as far back as 2000, with a physical description added in 2015. One would expect a Turkmen-language circular with a once-powerful Turkish pedigree to figure prominently within the Turkmenet, yet as of this writing a chronological Google query unearths a single 2011 reference in an online social forum post about jobs. Since the 2009 RFE/RL article, only one

## 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.
- ▶ 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.
- ▶ Citizens' access to domestic or international media is not restricted.
- ▶ A broad spectrum of social interests are reflected and represented in the media, including minority-language information sources.
- ▶ State or public media reflect the views of the entire political spectrum, are nonpartisan, and serve the public interest.
- ▶ Broadcast ratings, circulation figures, and Internet statistics are reliable.
- ▶ Independent news agencies gather and distribute news for print and broadcast media.



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other English reference turns up: In 2013, AzerTas, the state news agency of Azerbaijan, reported that *Zaman Turkmenistan* had posted an article on Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev's re-election. A Whois query reveals that *Zaman Turkmenistan* created its website in April 2016, a month after the Turkish *Zaman* was nationalized. In late 2016, the website became password-protected, but in early 2017 it became accessible again to the public.

Publishing general content, *Zaman Turkmenistan* claims to be a subscription-based print and online newspaper. However, the whole notion of subscriptions in Turkmenistan is a perverse one, as the government continues to enforce a genuinely Soviet-era practice of producing newspapers for specific ministries and industries and requiring their respective employees to purchase this content. For instance, those who work in the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the Ministry of Defense are required to subscribe to *Adalat (Justice)* and *Esger (Military)*, respectively, while those in the medical profession must purchase *Saglyk (Health)*. If a field does not have its own publication, those working in it must subscribe to one from another sector. In all cases, workers are required to pay the full cost of subscriptions out of pocket.

Russian is frequently the language of written news, often edging out Turkmen. Examples abound, including silly ones, such as Turkmeninform.com, which publishes in Russian and English but not Turkmen, despite having a Turkmen-language icon. When content is published in the Turkmen language, it is written in either the Soviet-era Cyrillic or independence-era Latin alphabets, but never in the Arabic alphabet used by Turkmen in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Iran. Although nearly 10 percent of the country's population are ethnic Uzbeks, since the late 1990s there has been no confirmed official press in their language.

The story is not entirely woeful. One promising development reported last year seems to be holding steady: State journalists appear to still be permitted by the regime to blog as a kind of hobby or exercise. They must stick to apolitical topics, such as music, football, cooking, recreational activities, or official news. State media have remained responsive to, and seem to share, grassroots interest in news regarding the Ahal-Teke, the famed Turkmen horse breed, and the government's attempts to promote it abroad.

It also bears repeating that there may be some hope in the Turkmenet, highly policed as it is. There is an encouraging amount of volunteerism among Turkmenetizens to gather and share information—whether about the weather, bureaucratic procedures, or how to go abroad for medical care—and indications that a growing number of everyday citizens working in low-skilled jobs abroad may also be feeding information back to their compatriots inside Turkmenistan. A wide gamut of internally suppressed content—such as Western and Russian films, user-generated news and commentary, and hip-hop music videos (the genre is officially considered “immoral” by Turkmenistani authorities)—is trickling into the country.

### OBJECTIVE 4: BUSINESS MANAGEMENT

0.26

**The history of bottom-of-the-barrel scores for this objective reflects the massively corrosive effects of absolute state control upon management culture.**

Last year, the existing advertising market was the best factor for business management due to the rare appearance on some websites, and even on

**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.

television, of private advertisements for nonstate goods and services. This year's bright spot is the existence of journalism degree programs, thanks to the incremental growth of training opportunities for state journalists under the auspices of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). The rest of the indicators that contribute to business management, as in previous years, dangle close to zero. Simply put, there is not much of a story to tell about management in Turkmenistani media beyond the Orwellian picture of journalists minded by commissars who vet every word of content.

The smidgens of hope in 2015 for the barest degree of liberalization—including a market for advertisements and classifieds and the possibility of foreign investment—became mirage-like in 2016 and may have been proven entirely illusory in 2017. There

is no independent financing of media. Whispers of foreign financial interest in the ad industry went silent.

“All media in Turkmenistan would not be able to sustain themselves should the state decide it no longer is going to finance them and if there were no more forced subscriptions,” one panelist explained. Several said that without compulsory subscriptions, no one would willingly consume the state’s monotonous media products.

With respect to management practices, there are none. State media do not appear to recognize the existence of, let alone engage in, common practices like developing business plans, conducting market research, or establishing personnel policies. Editors are appointed or dismissed by the president, who rewards loyalty over skill. The broadcasting sector has no ratings system, and there are no data on websites’ traffic. Newspapers proudly tout circulation assessments that are nothing more than the number of copies printed.

**“All media in Turkmenistan would not be able to sustain themselves should the state decide it no longer is going to finance them and if there were no more forced subscriptions,” one panelist explained.**

Interestingly, one panelist noticed a decline in stated circulation—that is, print run—for major publications. Figures reported by *Neutrally Turkmenistan*, arguably the flagship publication of state media, dropped from 49,140 copies in April 2012 to 38,642 in June 2017. Another significant publication, the monthly magazine *Diyar*, has seen circulation drop from 8,650 copies in 2014 to 7,430 copies in 2017. The panelist speculated that this could indicate the extent of layoffs, as the state does not compel those no longer employed by it to

continue their subscriptions.

Turkmenistani academic and media institutions do not offer classes to help strengthen research skills or even provide instruction in proper use of the news-gathering and production equipment, some of it state-of-the-art, provided by the state. Training, such as it is, is provided entirely by outsiders, whether Westerners or fellow post-Soviets.

## OBJECTIVE 5: SUPPORTING INSTITUTIONS

0.26

**Turkmenistan’s score for Objective 5 is 0.26, up from 2017’s all-time low of 0.13 and roughly matching the median and average in this category. Scores for most indicators in this objective dropped; the overall number was pulled up by sizable (for Turkmenistan) improvements in measuring formal opportunities for journalism education and technology. Still, giving credit for or credence to such specific changes misses the forest for the trees on a grand scale.**

Objective 5 concerns two key and often little-understood aspects of media development: the extent to which nongovernmental organizations (NGOs)—trade associations, activist and advocacy groups—either help or hinder journalists; and the resources available to any given media outlet—equipment, paper, printing facilities, physical and virtual distribution channels. 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 citizens’ computers, televisions, and phones. As with the other four objectives, the problem in Turkmenistan is that total government control

distorts every aspect of Objective 5.

Civil society simply does not exist in Turkmenistan. The freedom of assembly crucial for the formation of trade associations and other NGOs is not illegal, but the government restricts this right in practice. The law requires of a would-be NGO that its founder be a citizen and that it register with the Ministry of Justice and the Ministry of Economics and Development. To do so, the organization must prove, by way of a list of names and addresses, that it has 500 members, a bar no group is likely to reach in a surveillance state. Even if an organization secures registration, its leaders are legally bound to notify the government of all planned activities and regularly to permit Justice Ministry representatives to “attend” events and meetings. Any activity by an unregistered NGO is punishable by fines, short-term detention, and confiscation of property. The scant few efforts by Turkmenistani citizens to jump these hurdles and register NGOs have been rebuffed by authorities, often using subjective criteria.

There are some pro forma structures established by the government for various industries, but apparently none that specifically represent media interests. There is no need for an association of media owners; the government is the only media owner. Two labor unions for journalists are known to have once operated, but it is unclear if they still do so. One, the Soviet-era Union of Journalists of Turkmenistan, was 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 Shamshyrak Association of Journalists of Turkmenistan; its last known activities (two US-funded seminars for journalists and a public presentation about its membership’s activities) were held in Moscow in 2001.

Journalism training was reintroduced into

## 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.
- ▶ Short-term training and in-service training programs allow journalists to upgrade skills or acquire new skills.
- ▶ Sources of newsprint NGOs support free speech and independent media.
- ▶ Quality journalism degree programs that provide substantial practical experience exist.
- ▶ Printing facilities are in private hands, apolitical, and unrestricted.
- ▶ Channels of media distribution (kiosks, transmitters, Internet) are private, apolitical, and unrestricted.
- ▶ Information and communication technology infrastructure sufficiently meets the needs of media and citizens.

university curricula in 2008 after a long prohibition. In 2014, Berdymukhammedov opened a new International University of the Humanities and Development in Ashgabat. Little is known about this institution beyond official Turkmenistani press releases. In the 2015-2016 academic year, it hosted two Fulbright Scholars from the United States, and in 2016 it sought to establish a relationship with South Korea's prestigious Sungkyunkwan University (whether such a relationship was ever formally established has yet to be confirmed). Courses are believed to be taught in English and a journalism degree is offered, but according to one panelist, the quality of the program is low: "Students spend most of their time at mandatory state events, like

preparations for the celebration of Independence Day. Rare foreign lecturers talk about Western standards of journalism, but the students cannot apply these skills in practice."

One positive development noted by panelists is the state's occasional willingness to permit students, instructors, and professionals to pursue training abroad, although the selection and vetting process for participants is unknown. In recent years, Turkmenistani representatives have taken part in at least two OSCE-sponsored media-training events in other post-Soviet states: a 2016 seminar in Belarus with Western and Russian experts, attended by faculty members from the International University and other institutions of higher learning; and a four-day "study visit" to Lithuania in 2014, where Turkmenistani state journalists met with Baltic counterparts. According to *Chronicles of Turkmenistan*, this latter trip was especially notable because it included a training in how to conduct live broadcasts and a lively debate about the difference between propaganda and journalism. Rita Milute, a Lithuanian broadcast journalist who conducted one of the training sessions, said the Turkmenistani participants agreed that propaganda and journalism are not the same but insisted that propaganda is a key feature of every media system.

The acquisition and operation of equipment for media is tightly controlled, and all known distribution tools are owned by the state. When the government wants to get its message out, the sheer power with which it can do so is breathtaking. Turkmenistan is immense but largely empty (70 percent of the country is desert); radio transmitters reach all its far-flung inhabited areas, while a vast kiosk network is on constant standby to disseminate whatever material the government desires.

Still, 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. "Channels of distribution are outdated," one panelist said. "Kiosks are plentiful throughout the country, but modern ways of distribution, such as via mobile platforms or social media, even websites, do not exist."

**"Kiosks are plentiful throughout the country, but modern ways of distribution, such as via mobile platforms or social media, even websites, do not exist."**

Observers say this may be exactly what the regime wants. Limited modernization, or none at all, strengthens rather than weakens control, precisely because it reinforces dependence upon the state and discourages the independent pursuit of information.

## 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.*