

# TURKMENISTAN



**MEDIA  
SUSTAINABILITY  
INDEX**

**2019**

Tracking Development  
of Sustainable  
Independent Media  
Around the World



# TURKMENISTAN

## AT A GLANCE

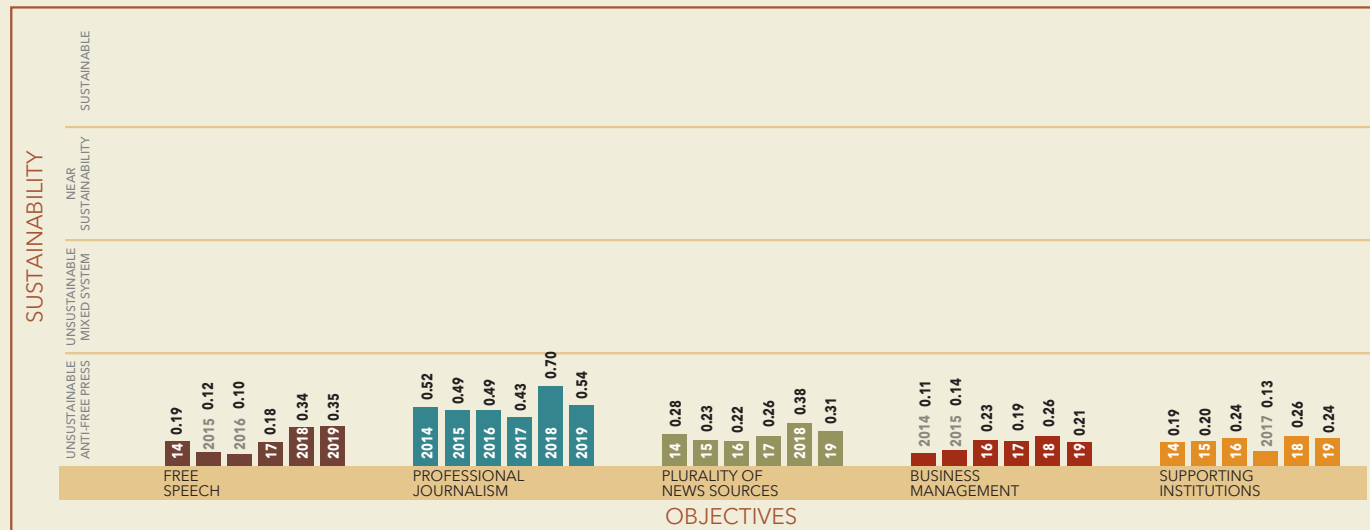
### GENERAL

- **Population:** 5,411,012 (July 2018 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 (2017 - Atlas):** \$36.75 billion (World Bank Development Indicators, 2017)
- **GNI per capita (2017 - PPP):** \$17,250 (World Bank Development Indicators, 2017)
- **Literacy rate:** 99.7% (male 99.8%, female 99.6%) (*CIA World Factbook*, 2015 est.)
- **President or top authority:** President Gurbanguly Berdimukhammedov (since February 14, 2007)

### MEDIA-SPECIFIC

- **Number of active print outlets, radio stations, television stations, Internet news portals:** Exact numbers are unknown but Turkmenistan appears to have seven state-owned television stations; four state-owned radio stations; 20 to 40 national and local newspapers and magazines, including one "private" print outlet that is widely considered state-controlled, and 1 genuinely private print outlet affiliated with the controversial Turkish spiritual movement of Fethullah Gülen; at least 13 Internet-based news entities, including the official government press release service, and at least one news website dedicated to countering the news reports of an independent outfit.
- **Newspaper circulation statistics:** No clear statistics are available. The main print publications by official circulation figures are *Neutralny Turkmenistan* (Russian- and English-language state-owned daily), *Turkmenistan* (Turkmen-language state-owned daily), *Watan* (Turkmen-language state-owned thrice-weekly), *Habarlar* (Turkmen-language state-owned three times weekly), and *Rysgal* (Turkmen-language weekly ostensibly owned by the Union of Industrialists and Entrepreneurs).
- **Broadcast ratings:** Not available.
- **News agencies:** Turkmen Dowllet Habarlary (Turkmen State News Agency, state-owned).
- **Annual advertising revenue in media sector:** Not available.
- **Internet usage:** 951,925 users (16% of population) (2016 est., source: *CIA World Factbook*, January 2019).

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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.



Turkmenistan's overall score shows a drop from the 2018 MSI score of .39, placing it even further down the scale in the unsustainable classification. There was a small improvement in this year's Objective 1 (freedom of speech) score, reflecting recent changes to the law on mass media that brought small parts of it more in line with international standards. Objective 2 (professional journalism) is Turkmenistan's only strong performer, thanks to the government's investment in media technology; however, despite these investments the technical quality of media output remains low, and journalists are expected to support the government without question.

Turkmenistan remains one of the world's most secretive countries. "Publication of any information deemed against the state view is severely punished, and even data and most official statistics remain a state secret," said an MSI panelist. (For security reasons, IREX does not disclose names of any Turkmenistan panelists.) The last known census was conducted in 2012, but the state has never revealed its results. National budgets lack details and common-sense line items, forcing observers to engage in numerical tea-leaf reading to decipher the government's spending priorities.

The conditions in Turkmenistan are dire by multiple measures. The government depends increasingly on China for its gas sales and struggles to hide the security situation along its troubled border with Afghanistan, while its population of approximately 5.8 million people is squeezed financially. Citizen journalists have managed to sneak out footage of food shortages at government retail outlets. Private stores and bazaars remain relatively well stocked, but their prices have doubled or tripled.

Turkmenistan's citizens are force-fed a media diet of prosperity, bliss, and international renown rather than the poverty, misery, and international obscurity that actually plague their country.

Newspapers across the country publish verbatim the same "news" reports, one after another, all celebrating the nation's glory and prosperity. Meanwhile, television is filled with Berdymukhammedov's staged exploits: race car driving, horseback riding, competitive cycling,

weightlifting, and even a New Year's discotheque jam performed on live television and co-starring his grandson.

Nonetheless, 2018 saw cracks in the monolithic media façade. For instance, television anchors have acknowledged so-called "claims" of food shortages, while trying to deflect by showing stores bursting with goods but devoid of customers. The reports have been in conjunction with authorities announcing the end of subsidies of basic goods, rent, and utilities in 2019. Officials insist that the de-subsidization is a sign of prosperity and liberalization. Observers, however, see the move as an austerity measure to shore up the national budget.

The totalitarian nightmare is reflected in the MSI's overall score for 2018 of 0.33, down from last year's 0.39 and well below 2008's 0.42. "The media are far from their purpose of informing the citizenry or providing public discussion on issues that matter in the country," one panelist said. "Their only function is to serve the government and hail its policies."

Technological advances are offering some flickers of hope. Turkmenistan has better mobile phone penetration than other totalitarian states, although service quality is certain to decline with the December 2018 departure of Russian telecom company MTS, due to an ongoing dispute with the government over profit-sharing. Some information, such as YouTube tourist videos, still leaks out — and authorities indirectly confirm the bad news by attempting to neutralize it. Some ordinary people are growing restive and beginning to bravely speak out.

**OBJECTIVE 1:  
FREEDOM OF  
SPEECH**

0.35

**Eking up to 0.35 from 0.34 in last year's MSI study, Objective 1's slight increase may be attributed to the 2018 changes to the law on mass media, which was ratified in 2014. The changes preserved most of the text of the original law, while bringing bits and pieces more in line with international standards.**

Yet, as panelists repeatedly pointed out, the Berdymukhammedov regime has made an art of empty legislative gestures. On paper, freedom of the press and speech are protected. In practice, however, those guarantees are violated daily. The ban on private media in Turkmenistan is not *de jure*, but *de facto*, one panelist explained. "Similarly, the constraints on state media doing their job are complete, but they're also all *de facto*," the panelist said.

Panelists said that the rules in state media are enforced indirectly, through incentives and the unspoken threat of dismissal. "It's not clear how much Turkmenistan's journalists are paid, but with unemployment estimated to be more than 60 percent of the eligible workforce, it's unlikely anyone with a job would complain," another panelist said. The regime also flagrantly uses blackmail, intimidation, abuse of power, and violence against the handful of independent journalists and their sources that do operate in the country.

Personnel of the Prague-based Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty's Turkmen Service (known inside Turkmenistan as Azatlyk Radiosy and AzatHabar.com) have been the targets of violence so often that the news agency keeps a tally on its website. For instance, Saparmamed Nepeskuliev,

a stringer with Azatlyk as well as with ANT, disappeared into the prison system in 2015 for reporting on Awaza, an enormous government-built resort complex on the Caspian Sea. *The Telegraph* once described the facility as "the most ill-conceived resort ever built." Nepeskuliev resurfaced briefly in June 2016, when ANT interviewed a Kazakh man who claimed to have shared a jail cell with the journalist. It was eventually learned that he had been convicted for possession of narcotics, which the international community has denounced as false charges. Released from prison in May 2018, he has suffered harassment from unknown assailants, including having rocks thrown at his home in Balkanabat in October. Another example is Omurzak Omarkuliyev, a 20-year-old student activist who vanished in March 2018 after an interview with Azatlyk. In June, he was discovered inside the notorious Ovadan-Depe prison serving a 20-year sentence.

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Nepeskuliev and Omarkuliyev's cases are reminders of the ever-present danger of disappearance within Turkmenistan — a terrifying problem that was forcefully brought to international attention this year when Human Rights Committee (HRC) finally ruled on Ogulsapar Muradova's death, holding the government responsible.

Muradova's tragic story bears repeating in detail. In June 2006, following a documentary she had helped produce about human rights in Turkmenistan, police in Ashgabat arrested her. They also took into

custody two other activists, her brother Sapardurdy Khajiev and Annakurban Amanklychev, and her three adult children. (Her children were released a few weeks later.) In August 2006, a secret trial convicted Murdova, Khajiev, and Annakurban on fake charges alleging possession of bullets and spying for Western intelligence agencies. The court sentenced Muradova to six years in prison and Amanklychev and Khajiev to seven. Only a few weeks later, in September 2006, Muradova's family was informed that she had died in prison. Turkmenistan's authorities have variously attributed her death to natural causes or suicide, but her family-members — who were permitted to see her body shortly after her death only after a major diplomatic intervention — have testified that her neck showed signs of strangulation by a cord of some kind, suggesting murder.

Professional journalists are not the only reporters in danger. In previous years, news sources and citizen journalists in touch with the outside world have proven savvy enough to report using pseudonyms and other counter-surveillance tactics on the Internet. However, during 2018, many fell silent. The panelists, along with other observers and experts consulted for this year's MSI, attributed the frightening drop-off to various issues. One is a slowdown in Internet connections, which are already among the slowest in the world.

Some say the decline in connectivity is due to the withdrawal of MTS, the Russian telecommunications corporation, which had previously been Turkmenistan's largest service provider with an estimated 1.7 million subscribers. Forced by authorities to discontinue its services in 2017, MTS began dismantling its infrastructure in the country in December 2018 (while suing the Turkmenistan government for \$750 million in lost profits). Others say the slowdown is a purposeful action taken by the state telecom, TMCCell.



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### 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.

Meanwhile, online surveillance, already intensive, is said to have markedly increased. Reporters Without Borders has listed Turkmenistan as an “Enemy of the Internet” every year since the organization introduced that dubious distinction in 2006. In June 2018, Human Rights Watch (HRW) called upon German technology companies to publicly disclose their sales to Turkmenistan, after state media reported that Berdymukhammedov held a meeting with a senior vice president of Rohde and Schwarz, a German cybersecurity firm. Citing a knowledgeable source, HRW said Berdymukhammedov had inquired about technology for monitoring and blocking mobile

and satellite communications.

The regime has been pursuing other means to cut off its citizens from the outside world. Consumers use television receive-only satellite dishes, or TVROs, to circumvent censorship, in what has become a tradition in the country. These dishes beam foreign content, principally from Russia, directly into living rooms. The exact number of TVROs in Turkmenistan has always been debated. But their obvious ubiquity has invited reprisal and has provided a pretext for authorities to remove dishes in the name of “urban beautification.” Over the years, the raids themselves have also become customary, forming an uneasy ritual between authorities and citizens. However, the dynamic worsened in 2018 when authorities dramatically revved up the campaign. As early as May, the dish removal was so thorough in Turkmenistan’s outer provinces that Azatlyk declared it had caused an information blackout in rural and small urban areas.

Turkmenistan’s laws do not explicitly deny the right of citizens to access information from outside the country. In practice, this right is primarily limited to top-ranking officials, as a presidential decree permits official ministries and state media to consume selected foreign news. State journalists are also allowed to browse external news websites in order to seek out positive content on Turkmenistan. “Any opinion that is not in line with the official policy is persecuted harshly,” one panelist said. “The purpose is to create a completely apolitical society and to discourage any public debate.”

International travel was severely curtailed during 2018, with authorities granting far fewer permissions for its citizens to go abroad as in previous years. (The exact number of Turkmenistanis traveling abroad is unknown.) The import of newsletters, journals, magazines, and newspapers produced abroad is under a longstanding ban. Suitcases, computers,

phones, and thumb drives are checked at the airport. Authorities search cabs, trunks, and cargo of cars and trucks at the country’s highway border crossings, under the pretense of checking for weapons. Turkmenistani citizens, foreigners, and tourists alike are subjected to these searches.

Turkmenistan is as intolerant of the freedom of conscience as it is of the freedoms of speech, press, and information. For years there has been a steady trickle of anecdotes on authorities detaining and interrogating young, observant, male Muslims and examining their phones for merely mentioning religious beliefs online. Authorities also surveil the population by penetrating the “offline” social networks of homemakers, pensioners, the chronically unemployed, and social and sports clubs. Panelists said that gossip in particular is documented and collected by police and security forces into extensive dossiers.

Some observers fear that citizens are spying on their own neighbors, friends, and even families on behalf of authorities in exchange for money, favors, or resources. Whether the regime is succeeding with that is questionable. Regular people are also continuing efforts to get out information that counters Turkmenistan’s campaign for a pristine image. Independent news agencies such as Azatlyk, ANT, and the Europe-based Chronicles of Turkmenistan (CT) are prying apart closed doors thanks to citizen journalists, who are often aided by friends and family. As mentioned in a previous example, ANT published a remarkable video report in December in which pensioners, furious with the government, proclaimed that revolution is a possibility.

OBJECTIVE 2:  
PROFESSIONAL  
JOURNALISM

0.54

**As has long been the case, Objective 2 is Turkmenistan's only strong performer, thanks to the Berdymukhammedov regime investing in media technology. However, captures of the state media's televised and streaming content reveal a persistent failure to use its investments adequately, with poor quality evident in everything from television show image resolution to newspaper typography.**

As for professionalism in reporting, Turkmenistan has virtually none. It is unclear whether state journalists simply have no sense of professional norms and standards, or they know how their craft ought to be done but dare not buck the authorities. According to one panelist, "Self-censorship lies at the heart of their routine work," suggesting that Turkmenistan's state journalists do know better. Some have served as regular sources for Azatlyk, ANT, and CT — relationships that presumably would expose them to proper journalism. "I came to know some who are talented and would be interested to find out more; professionals who are interested in the truth," the same panelist said.

The truth may depend upon the individual journalist and personal incentive: "All local media outlets are state-owned, and journalists and editors are expected to unconditionally speak in support of and promote the state ideology," another panelist said. "Any action otherwise leads to termination of employment, followed by persecution."

As a whole, observers have taken to calling Turkmenistan's state journalists "palace writers," akin to the court poets and entertainers of monarchs. Television journalists are seen as the most

obsequious, literally following Berdymukhammedov wherever he goes and reporting on every antic that his handlers stage. "There is no other setting for reporting than following the president's every footstep on ceremonial days," one panelist explained. "Investigative reporting is taboo."

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This pattern of behavior has intensified as Turkmenistan's economic crisis has deepened — to the point that EurasiaNet, a New York City-based English news website, riffs on televised stunts in nearly every installment of its weekly *Akhal-Teke Bulletin*. The bulletin was 32 entries strong by the end of 2018.

As the exaggerated exploits of the president fill the airwaves and newspapers, some moments stand out for their surrealism. One was a New Year's discotheque jam performed on live television by Berdymukhammedov and his grandson, which included lyrics in German. Another has been a proliferation of official portraits showing the 62-year-old president with natural gray hair — an abrupt break with the established precedent of depicting him with jet-black hair. These subtle signs could be interpreted as the regime yielding to the tangible realities of the economic crisis, the German lyrics a reference to the recent discovery of billions of dollars reportedly in German bank accounts that may have once been owned by Niyazov, and the gray hair

an acknowledgement of the increased frailty of life inside Turkmenistan as its people grapple with the financial gloom.

Still, the media have spoken nary a word about five cases against Turkmenistan before the World Bank's arbitration panel. One case in particular by Iran, a key neighbor and erstwhile business partner, could exacerbate the delicate economic situation: Turkmenistan stopped gas exports to Iran in January 2017, alleging that Tehran was in arrears to Ashgabat by between \$1.5 and \$1.8 billion. Tehran has disputed the claim.

The media cover-up did falter this past year. Television reporters endeavored to portray scenes of plenty at state stores in reaction to claims of shortages. However, the reporters contradicted themselves blatantly. One television channel reported that a Turkmenistani province had met its annual quotas for grain but then a few days later reported that Berdymukhammedov had fired the official in charge of the harvest for "shortcomings in his work." Such slips do not go unnoticed by viewers. "If audiences watching television detect a slight shift from the normal reporting, it becomes big news among them, because all reports normally follow the same schemes," one panelist explained.

Since the formation of an anti-corruption agency in 2017, state media have covered the theme of corruption. This move suggests that the regime recognizes that it must at least appear to address citizens' concerns about this issue. Throughout 2018, state media trumpeted the tightening of anti-corruption laws and the sackings of crooked officials.

Panelists disagreed on whether salaries for state journalists are low or adequate for Turkmenistan, especially considering that no one really knows either the average salary or cost of living. In 2016, panelists and other observers generally said that they believe pay levels for state

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journalists are sufficient to discourage corruption. However, in 2017 one panelist claimed corruption had become “widespread” and “often endorsed by state officials as a ‘thank you’ for a good story.” Occasional claims of corruption among journalists continued through 2018.

### 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).

As in previous years, the most fertile ground for hope remains the “Turkmenet,” the Turkmen-language corner of the Internet. Turkmenetizens also include Turkmen from across Central Asia, the Middle East, and beyond. Comparing the country to infamous dictatorships, one panelist commented, “Turkmenistan is not Eritrea — mobile data does exist — or North Korea — the domestic Internet is connected to the global Internet.”

Digital citizen journalism, both individual and collaborative, declined during 2018. But it continues

to play a vital role in sustaining the lifeline of inside information to those on the outside. Citizen journalism in Turkmenistan covers a broader range of topics than in other closed societies, for even the weather sometimes must be a subject of independent and crowdsourced reporting. Bank machines no longer dispensing cash, infections among farm animals, salt storms in May and September hitting northern and eastern regions and devastating crops, flash floods, even earthquakes — the outside world knows about these developments and more largely because of the efforts of citizen journalists.

### OBJECTIVE 3: PLURALITY OF NEWS

0.31

**Turkmenistan’s score for Objective 3 has sunk from 0.38 in the 2018 edition to 0.31 for the 2019 edition — not the worst that Turkmenistan has ever scored for plurality of news, but certainly not the best. Fundamentally, little has changed in the media landscape for Turkmenistanis, either inside or outside the country. Given that the state owns all media, “Media ownership is highly transparent — in negative terms,” one panelist said.**

In addition to Azatlyk, ANT, CT, and EurasiaNet, Western-backed (and often Western-based) external news agencies and websites that cover Turkmenistan include Gundogar, openDemocracy, The Diplomat, the Jamestown Foundation’s Eurasia Daily Monitor, Global Voices Online, and the Ferghana News Agency (based in Moscow). SalamTurkmen and NewEurasia Citizen Media were also significant forces for several years, until funding shortfalls shuttered them in 2015

and 2016, respectively. From Russia, RT (formerly Russia Today), Rossiya Segnodniya, Sputnik, and EurAsia Daily also cover Turkmenistan. From the Middle East, the Iran-based PressTV service covers Turkmenistan to a degree, as does the Turkey-based TRT World. Several Twitter accounts and blogs are also available, hosted by experts and journalists from around the world, including India, the Middle East, Russia, Turkey, and Western countries.

Agencies not backed by Western entities occasionally get correspondents temporarily accredited, although usually for one-off, politicized reports that serve the agendas of the reporters’ governments. For example, Russian outlets have earned Ashgabat’s ire by periodically running uncorroborated reports depicting Turkmenistan as a breeding ground or “corridor” for Islamic radicals — a narrative intended to buttress Moscow’s strategy in the Middle East and Central Asia.

Turkey’s TRT World is another example. As Ankara desires good relations with Ashgabat, in 2017 the channel ran a bizarre feature defending democracy in Turkmenistan following the internationally panned presidential election (which Berdymukhammedov won by 97 percent). During the second half of the live broadcast, the host unsuccessfully went toe-to-toe with Azatlyk’s then-interim director Farruh Yusupov, defending “a little freedom” in Turkmenistan. “Would you be willing to give [Berdymukhammedov] any credit?” the host demanded, to which Yusupov replied, “I would correct you. There is not ‘little freedom.’ There is no freedom. Freedom of media is nonexistent. Freedom of speech is nonexistent. Free will is nonexistent.”

The Western external news agencies pose the most concerted threat to the Berdymukhammedov regime’s pursuit of total information control. The danger is not their resources, which have been

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dwindling since the first Turkmenistan MSI in 2008 and now pale in comparison to what Russia-backed agencies can deploy. The reason is their commitment to liberal, impartial, and watchdog-style reporting. The panelists said they consider these agencies often to be a “surrogate free press” in a media landscape controlled by the state.

**Given that the state owns all media, “Media ownership is highly transparent – in negative terms,” one panelist said.**

As with media from other regions, Western media’s independence is debated and willfully misunderstood by authorities. Azatlyk, for example, is an element of the US Agency for Global Media (USAGM, formerly the Broadcasting Board of Governors) and hence is ultimately funded by the US Congress. It was on this basis that Muradova and her colleagues were accused of working for Western intelligence agencies in 2006, ultimately leading to her death.

Internally, Turkmenistan’s media landscape is dominated by print. The country’s main newspapers are *Neutralny Turkmenistan* (Neutral Turkmenistan, named for the country’s official foreign policy of “neutrality”) and *Turkmenistan*. Both are dailies with Soviet pedigrees dating back nearly a century, the first publishing in Russian and running since 1924 originally under the name *Turkmenskaya Iskra* (The Turkmen Spark), the second publishing in Turkmen since 1920. The sole determining factors of prominence are output and circulation size, calculated in a back-of-the-envelope fashion by combining the hazy figures that the government periodically releases and the panelists’ anecdotal impressions. All news subscriptions are involuntary – essentially forced upon state workers and citizens

– so circulation figures also reinforce that these two newspapers are the regime’s main mouthpieces.

Following this logic, second-tier titles appear to be *Watan* (Homeland), also dating back to the 1920s and publishing three times weekly in Turkmen; *Habarlar* (Reports or The News), publishing three times weekly in Turkmen since 1975; and *Rysgal* (Welfare), which is supposedly a private business weekly, but in fact is state-run, and has been published since 2010.

Several ministries and state-run social organizations have their own dedicated titles (sometimes newspapers, sometimes magazines) and variously in Russian or Turkmen. Confirmed titles include (in alphabetical order): *Adalat* (Justice – Ministry of Justice), *Altyn Asyr Ykdysadyyeti* and *Berektli Toprak* (Economy of the Golden Age and Fertile Soil, respectively – Ministry of Agriculture and Water Resources), *Biznes Reklama* (Business Advertising – Ministry of Trade and Foreign Economic Relations), *Diyar* (Home – presidential cabinet), *Dunya Edebiyaty* (World Literature – Turkmen State Publishing Service), *Edebiyat we Sungat* (Literature and Art – Ministry of Culture and Broadcasting), *Esger* (Soldier – Ministry of Defense), *Galkynysh* (Development – Democratic Party of Turkmenistan, successor of the Communist Party and the ruling party since independence), *Garagum* (Black Desert – Turkmen State Publishing Service), *Gunesh* (Sun – Ministry of Education), *Mugallymlar Gazety* (Newspaper of Teachers – Ministry of Education), *Nesil* (Generation – Makhtumkuli Youth Organization), *Saglyk* (Health – Ministry of Health), *Turkmen Dunyasi* (Turkmen World – Humanitarian Association of World Turkmen), *Turkmen Sporty* (Turkmen Sports – State Sports Committee), *Turkmenin Yupek Yoly* (The Silk Road of Turkmen – Ministry of Railways), *Turkmenistanda Ylym we Tehnika* (Science and Technology in Turkmenistan – unknown affiliation), *Vozrojdenie*

(Rebirth – Democratic Party of Turkmenistan), and *Zenan Kalby* (Woman’s Heart – Women’s Union of Turkmenistan). Urban areas and larger rural regions also have their own dedicated newspapers.

It is a fake abundance, though, as every media outlet in Turkmenistan presents only one point of view. Content produced by the Turkmen Dowlet Habarlary (Turkmen State News Agency) is published verbatim across all print platforms. Panelists commented that police officers are said to have begun regularly investigating public and private restrooms across the country for signs of newspapers being used as toilet paper. Police investigations into the “misuses” of newspapers began in 2017, when, according to the Ferghana News Agency, children in Dashoguz were detained and tried for defacing newspaper photos of Berdymukhammedov by drawing a moustache and beard on his face.

In addition to its four radio stations and seven television channels, the regime maintains some flashy websites. The most prominent of these is Altyn Asyr (the Golden Age, Turkmenistan.gov.tm). The governmental press release service is maintained by Dowlet Habarlary, publishing in Russian, Turkmen, and English. Dowlet Habarlary also maintains its own website (Tdh.gov.tm), and likewise offers content all three languages. Other news websites include Turkmenistan.ru, Ashgabad.net, Turkmenportal.com, Infoabad.com, Arzuw.tm, Ork.tm, Turkmeninform.com, Halkara.com, Murgap.net, Krasnovodsk.net, and Gundogar-news.com.

Gundogar-news.com is an indicator of the lengths to which the regime will go to protect its image. In a transparent attempt at spoofing, Gundogar-news.com publishes reports countering those of Gundogar.org, a legitimate democracy and human rights website that runs analytical-style news reports.



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

The lone reputable private media operation known to exist inside Turkmenistan is *Zaman Turkmenistan* (Times of Turkmenistan). An autonomous edition of the *Zaman* newspaper of Turkey, it is unclear when exactly it launched, but IREX has been able to confirm its existence to at least 2011. In 2016, the Turkish government seized its parent organization for its ties to Hizmet, the spiritual movement headed by the controversial Muslim cleric Fethullah Gülen. One panelist said that Ashgabat, eager to maintain good ties with Ankara, may be targeting *Zaman Turkmenistan* for closure on the same grounds.

On December 23, the online social network Bizbarde (We Are Here) was launched to great fanfare in a special event held at the Concert Hall of the Republic. Bizbarde is the fourth attempt at a

Turkmenistan-specific online social network. Both the company ostensibly behind it, Sungat Esseri, and its chief executive officer, Eziz Beknazarov, are a mystery. They have the whiff of a front operation for either national security or an entrepreneurial regime insider, panelists said. One commented that the chief executive is “an unknown; a nobody” and that the company “was set up just overnight to make it happen; this is my guess.”

The linguistic topography of Turkmenistan’s media landscape remains unchanged from previous years. English is increasing incrementally, though — especially online. Turkmen dominates screens and airwaves. Text content is published primarily in Turkmen, using the Soviet-era Cyrillic and independence-era Latin alphabets, but not the Arabic alphabet that Turkmen use in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Iran. The second-most common language, spoken and in print, is Russian, followed distantly by English. Although nearly 10 percent of the country’s population are ethnic Uzbeks, panelists could not confirm official press in their language.

Panelists had little sense of how state media are faring financially in the present crisis. Turkmenistan’s main attraction has been its natural resources, with the government attempting to rapidly diversify away from natural gas and export electricity to its neighbors. Foreign investment into the media sector is nonexistent and panelists said it would probably not be permitted. If intrepid foreign entrepreneurs were to inquire about the media sector, they would probably be struck by Turkmenistan’s arbitration battles with corporations. The Global Arbitration Review too recently noted “a line of cases the state has faced from investors [alleging] state interference in projects and termination of contracts without payment.”<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> <https://globalarbitrationreview.com/article/1175731/turkmenistan-faces-two-new-icsid-claims>

**OBJECTIVE 4:  
BUSINESS  
MANAGEMENT**

0.21

**It is not possible to properly discuss either business or management of Turkmenistan’s media sector. For some context, a bright spot noted in the 2017 MSI was the appearance of OSCE’s journalism training courses and the degree programs offered by the International University of the Humanities and Development. In 2016, the positive news was the smattering of private advertisements for goods and services placed on billboards, on television shows, and in newspapers for the first time in memory.**

While both phenomena continued throughout 2018, the panelists now do not see them as signs of potential progress. “Advertising plays no significant role in the affairs of the state media,” one panelist said, “There is no market research, nor is there any particular strategy behind the programming of the local media outlets. The only strategy appears to be that these outlets are viewed as another state body, obliged to promote state ideology.”

Authorities have never published broadcast ratings, and the figures for circulation and Internet usage they occasionally provide have been impossible to verify independently.

Radio advertisements barely exist, and printed advertisements and commercials appear only slightly more often. Most advertising is visual (billboards, posters, stickers, etc.). According to the US International Trade Association, entities not registered within Turkmenistan are not permitted to place advertisements in media outlets.

Given that it is almost impossible for a foreign entrepreneur to register without at least a powerful

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insider connection, the overwhelming majority of the ads that citizens see feature products and services that are likely connected to regime affiliates.

### 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.

With respect to management practices, Turkmenistan's media simply have none that would be recognizable to most outsiders. State media do not develop business plans, conduct market research, or elaborate personnel policies. Broadcast media evince no ratings system, and the circulation figures of newspapers are conflated with the number of copies printed rather than verified readers. As explained earlier, the regime's control over media is fundamentally a matter of practice and not law, which enshrines freedom of the press. However, formal power is a factor. With precious few exceptions, the government accredits

only state media employees. This lopsided power dynamic pervades the entire structure of media inside Turkmenistan. Berdymukhammedov appoints toady editors, and standards are set by high-level officials according to his whims, real or perceived. Panelists said that the government is believed to control its journalists' social benefits and even housing.

The rabbit hole of control goes deeper and darker: national security "supervisors" — essentially modern-day commissars, or "*politruki*" — stalk the hallways of private media offices and production studios. According to one panelist last year, they "literally check every single word before it is published or aired. That's why there is hardly any live streaming [or] live talk shows." Panelists could not say whether authorities deploy an informant system among state journalists similar to the one they deploy among private groups, but such speculation is warranted.

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Media "business management" does tell one story, albeit unfortunate, in the uniquely prosperity-maniac version of totalitarianism cultivated by the Berdymukhammedov regime. According to the panelists, if the government does not replenish or at least stabilize its coffers soon, it could conceivably deploy the same faux liberalization

that it used to justify ending subsidies for ordinary citizens, which supposedly was to restructure state media.

De-subsidization would be a disaster for state media in Turkmenistan. They would not be able to sustain themselves even in a fake free market. Too many crucial changes would need to happen: The content would need to be diversified; the space for creativity and imagination for state journalists would need to rapidly expand; advertising would need to suddenly become a major industry; private companies would need to bubble into existence, in order to re-employ much of the eligible workforce; and household incomes would need to abruptly increase in order to sustain purchasing advertised products and news subscriptions at real rates.

### OBJECTIVE 5: SUPPORTING INSTITUTIONS

0.24

Turkmenistan's score for Objective 5 for the 2019 edition is 0.24 — up from 2017's all-time low of 0.13 but remaining unsustainable. With regard to this objective's technology indicator, all media equipment and distribution tools are owned by the state and tightly controlled by "handlers." Although Objective 5 is mainly examining the presence of civil society organizations (CSOs), they do not exist in Turkmenistan. Again, the dearth is not because the law expressly denies freedom of assembly, but because in practice, authorities restrict it into oblivion.

The government has near-complete control over its airwaves. Once MTS fully departs, Ashgabat will have undisputed dominion over whatever remains of Turkmenistan's information communication

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infrastructure. The regime also maintains an impressive, if antiquated, network of kiosks across the country through which it distributes print materials churned out on a daily and weekly basis.

Turkmenistan saw much fanfare around the launch of communications satellites into space, and the shining Turkmenistan Teleradio Merkezi (an enormous signals, communications, and observation tower) is very visibly situated upon the foothills of the Kopet Dag mountains outside Ashgabat. But according to the panelists, the Berdymukhammedov regime seems to be quietly pursuing a strategy of de-modernization, given that diminished telephony and archaic kiosks actually strengthen rather than weaken its control over information flow and access.

### 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.

Turkmenistani law requires that a would-be CSO have a citizen as its founder, who must register with the Ministry of Justice and the Ministry of Economics and Development. At first glance, these requirements do not seem onerous. However, applicants must procure a membership list of 500 names and addresses for the authorities — a terrifying prospect in a totalitarian surveillance state. Further, once established, a CSO must also routinely notify authorities of all its activities, as well as permit representatives of the Ministry of Justice to be present at meetings and events. Punishment for unregistered activities range from fines to short-term detentions and confiscation of property.

With the government the only owner of media, Turkmenistan effectively has no need for media owner associations.

For several years, IREX has tried unsuccessfully to confirm whether two journalist labor unions that once operated in Turkmenistan still exist in any fashion. One is the Soviet-era Union of Journalists of Turkmenistan, initially established in 1958 and re-registered in 1992 with an ironic mission: “the protection of journalists’ interests against state and public organizations, founders, and publishers of the media.” The other labor union is the Shamshyrag Association of Journalists of Turkmenistan, which the outside world last heard from in 2001.

**“Whatever journalism training exists, it is geared toward training solid propagandists and not actual journalists,” one panelist said.**

Media members do have some training opportunities. In fact, the panelists held that the only genuinely positive change in recent years has been the state’s occasional willingness to permit students, instructors, and media professionals to

pursue journalism training abroad. Panelists also said, however, that the content offered within Turkmenistan is actually detrimental to professionalism. “Whatever journalism training exists, it is geared toward training solid propagandists and not actual journalists,” one panelist said.

OSCE is one of the only international organizations permitted by the regime to train state journalists. But it focuses its workshops entirely upon technical matters and not practical skills. Another example is the International University of the Humanities and Development, which Berdymukhammedov opened in Ashgabat in 2014. Panelists continue to give it an F for quality: “The curriculum is wholeheartedly in line with the state ideology.”

### List of Panelists

*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.*