

President Gurbanguly Berdymukhammedov's autocratic government continued to maintain near-total control over the media in 2014. The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) noted reports of some changes in the treatment of libel in 2014, including a reduction of criminal penalties for the offense. However, there were few changes in the overall media environment throughout the year.

Legal Environment

The constitution's nominal protections for press freedom and freedom of expression are not observed in practice. A January 2013 media law ostensibly protects freedom of expression and prohibits censorship and government interference in the activities of the media. Although the law was the first of its kind to be approved in Turkmenistan since independence in 1991, there has been little progress in creating space for genuinely independent media amid the country's repressive legal, political, regulatory, judicial, and economic structures. As of July 2014, no new media outlets had been registered since the enactment of the law.

Following public remarks by Berdymukhammedov about the need to reform the constitution, the government established a commission for this purpose in August 2014. Draft amendments were subsequently announced, including for the creation of a human rights ombudsman position and stronger legal protections for citizens. However, it remained unclear whether these steps will lead to substantive improvements to basic civil liberties in the country.

Although libel is a criminal offense, it is rarely invoked due to the intensity of official media control and self-censorship, and the scarcity of critical reporting. Amendments to the Criminal Code that went into effect in January 2014 allow for financial compensation as an alternative to imprisonment for libel. The OSCE noted in June 2014 that some minor cases of libel and insult had been moved from the Criminal Code to the Code of Administrative Wrongdoings, but the impact of these legislative changes on the country's media environment has otherwise been limited.

In December, the government adopted a new law for the regulation of the internet, ostensibly with the goal of increasing internet access in Turkmenistan. The law requires that internet access be available in all government bodies as well as scholarly, educational, and cultural institutions. It also requires government bodies to create websites with information about their work, and to respond to online inquiries. However, a number of the law's provisions restrict the freedom of expression on the internet. The law holds individuals liable for the truthfulness of information they publish online, makes it illegal to insult the president online, and restricts access to websites that advocate illegal behavior, among other things. The low rate of internet penetration in the country limits the capacity of the law.

Political Environment

Censorship remains extensive, and an atmosphere of fear discourages reporting on a wide range of sensitive topics. While public criticism of the government remained virtually nonexistent in 2014, the Turkmen service of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) reported in April that dozens of individuals had recently contacted the outlet with complaints about the government and low living conditions. Some of those individuals had even consented to being identified and filmed.

Journalists who are critical of the government are blacklisted and face restrictions on both international and domestic travel. The few independent media professionals who remain in the country—and at times even their relatives—face persecution, attacks, harassment, and surveillance. RFE/RL is among the few remaining independent sources of information on Turkmenistan, even though the government has failed to reply to the outlet's requests for the accreditation of its journalists.

In 2014, several RFE/RL journalists faced interference from security forces while attempting to cover newsworthy events on multiple other occasions throughout the year. One local RFE/RL correspondent was detained at a local police station for attempting to report on long lines for tickets at a train station in Mary. Police questioned another RFE/RL correspondent for six hours for attempting to report on a long line for automobile certification.

No information was available at year's end on the death of human rights activist and journalist Ogulsapar Muradova, who died in prison in 2006 as a result of severe beatings, according to her family and human rights groups. The government has refused requests to account for her death.

Economic Environment

There are approximately 39 newspapers, four state radio broadcasters, seven television stations, and one press agency active in Turkmenistan. State-run newspapers are used to disseminate government propaganda and ignore many issues that are relevant to Turkmen citizens. With more than 100,000 subscribers, the *Turkmen Dili* newspaper has the largest circulation in the print market. The government forces institutions and individuals to subscribe to state newspapers, which are reportedly not widely read. The privately owned business magazine *Rysgal* is produced by the government-controlled Union of Industrialists and Entrepreneurs. In 2012, *Rysgal* owner and Berdymukhammedov ally Aleksandr Dadayev helped to establish the new Party of Industrialists and Entrepreneurs, nominally ending the political monopoly of the ruling Democratic Party of Turkmenistan. In practice, the new party is loyal to the regime.

Authorities maintain a ban on almost all foreign newspapers and periodical subscriptions—including Russian newspapers—and routinely confiscate foreign publications from travelers. Many citizens have some access to international media through satellite dishes: Russian and Turkish television channels, as well as the France-based Euronews, are available via satellite. Repeated government attempts to crack down on such receivers have been largely unsuccessful, but cost barriers continue to limit access to satellite television. In late 2013, the government announced plans to launch its first telecommunications satellite, to be made by the French firm Thales Alenia Space and controlled by the Turkmenistan National Space Agency. The satellite had not been launched by the end of 2014.

Fixed-line internet services are provided primarily by Turkmen Telecom, while Russian operator Mobile TeleSystems (MTS) dominates the mobile market. The company was allowed to return in 2012 after being expelled by the government in 2010. MTS provides a faster connection speed than the state-owned Altyn Asyr and allows users to access banned social media. The Communications Ministry oversees and controls both Altyn Asyr and Turkmen Telecom. Access to the internet is intermittent, slow, and highly restricted. Opposition and foreign news websites, including Gundogar.org and Ferghana.ru, are blocked, as are social-networking platforms like Facebook, Twitter, LiveJournal, and YouTube. These websites are, however, available through proxy servers. Mobile messaging applications such as WeChat, WhatsApp, and Viber have been blocked since November 2013. Authorities monitor electronic correspondence and internet activity. State agents posing as ordinary users regularly publish provocative comments on Russian social-networking websites such as Odnoklassniki.ru to draw unwitting users into criticism of the

government, for which they can be punished. Internet cafés require visitors to present identification documents, and monitor users' online activities. It is also necessary to present identification when purchasing a SIM card. Continued government restrictions and high costs kept the internet penetration rate low in 2014. Approximately 12.2 percent of Turkmen citizens accessed the internet in 2014.