

Turkmenistan

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Freedom of the Press

President Gurbanguly Berdymukhammedov's autocratic government continued to maintain near-total control over the media in 2013. The constitution's nominal protections for press freedom and freedom of expression are not observed in practice. Libel is a criminal offense, but it is rarely invoked due to the intensity of official media control and self-censorship, and the scarcity of independent and critical reporting.

A new media law was enacted in December 2012 and came into effect on January 4, 2013. Drafted in consultation with the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), the law outlines procedures for gathering and disseminating news and is the first of its kind to be approved in Turkmenistan since independence in 1991. While the law ostensibly protects freedom of expression and prohibits censorship and government interference in the activities of the media, it is not expected to result in a significant relaxation of current restrictions, given the existing repressive legal, political, regulatory, judicial, and economic structures in the country. For example, Berdymukhammedov complied with a provision that required him to relinquish his ownership of most of the national newspapers by the end of January. However, ownership was merely passed to the cabinet of ministers—which the president heads—or to certain ministries. At year's end, little progress had been noted in creating space for genuinely independent media.

In September 2013, the UN Human Rights Council announced the results of its Universal Periodic Review (UPR) of Turkmenistan. While the Turkmen government accepted seven of the council's general recommendations in the area of freedom of expression, it rejected calls for more robust protections for media workers and human rights activists. The government has failed to follow through on previous UPR recommendations, which it had officially endorsed.

Censorship remains extensive, and an atmosphere of fear prevents reporting on accidents or negative events. Ministry of State Security officials pay regular visits to editors, and journalists are kept under tight surveillance. In October 2013, the authorities introduced a new system of "cross-censorship," requiring all newspaper articles to be reviewed by a second ministry in addition to the one responsible for the subject. Berdymukhammedov appoints editors and deputy editors by presidential decree, and independent news websites are blocked. In April, Berdymukhammedov was thrown from his mount shortly after winning a horse race. Security officials forced all media representatives and spectators to delete any images of the president's fall from their cameras and mobile telephones; the state-controlled media later broadcast only glowing reports of Berdymukhammedov's victory with no reference to the fall. Tourists leaving the country shortly after the incident also reported having their computers, phones, and cameras searched at the airport in an apparent attempt to prevent images of the accident from leaving the country.

The government retains total control over the dominant internet service provider, Turkmen Telecom. Access is intermittent, slow, and highly restricted. Opposition and foreign news websites, such as Gundogar.org and Ferghana.ru, are blocked, as are social-media sites including Facebook, Twitter, LiveJournal, and YouTube; however, these are available through proxy servers. Mobile messaging applications such as WeChat, WhatsApp, and Viber have also been blocked since November 2013. Authorities monitor electronic correspondence and internet activity. State agents posing as ordinary users regularly post provocative comments on Russian social-networking sites 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 passports. Continued government restrictions and high costs kept the internet penetration rate low in 2013, with only about 10 percent of the population using the medium.

On December 15, Turkmenistan held parliamentary elections. The OSCE deployed an observation mission to monitor the polling—the first in the country's history to be contested by more than one party. Despite the appearance of democratic reform, however, observers and rights groups criticized the climate of repression and fear ahead of the elections and lamented the absence of genuine opposition parties, noting that all seats were won by groups loyal to the president. Media coverage remained tightly controlled, and voters received little information beyond the glorification of the president and his supporters.

Journalists who are critical of the government are blacklisted and prevented from traveling within the country or abroad. The few independent media professionals who remain in the country—and at times even their relatives—face persecution, attacks, harassment, and surveillance. In May 2013, authorities arrested Rovshen Yazmuhamedov, a local correspondent for Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL), and held him for more than two weeks before releasing him in the face of international pressure. Yazmuhamedov, who covers social issues for the outlet, had been questioned by authorities at least twice before, after his articles elicited an overwhelming online response. RFE/RL is among the few remaining independent sources of information on Turkmenistan, even though the government has failed to reply to its requests for accreditation of its journalists.

Two journalists, Sapardurdy Khadjiyev and Annakurban Amanklychev, were released in February 2013 after serving out their full prison terms of almost seven years. The two men were originally arrested with a colleague—Ogulsapar Muradova, Khadjiyev's sister—after helping a French television station with a report on Turkmenistan. Muradova died several months after her arrest as a result of severe beatings she received in prison, according to her family and human rights groups. In April, the Open Society Justice Initiative filed a complaint with the UN Human Rights Committee on behalf of Muradova's family, calling on the government to account for her death. The UPR report on Turkmenistan also urged the government to hold an independent inquiry into Muradova's death, which the government refused.

Turkmenistan has 39 newspapers, five radio stations, seven television stations, and one press agency. State-run newspapers are used to disseminate government propaganda and ignore many issues that are relevant to Turkmen citizens. The paper with the largest circulation is *Turkmen Dili*, with 117,500 subscribers. The government forces institutions and individuals to take subscriptions of state newspapers, which most people reportedly do not read. A privately published magazine, *Rysgal*, focusing on business and real estate news, opened with great presidential fanfare in 2010. It soon became clear that the magazine was produced by the government-controlled Union of Industrialists and Entrepreneurs and did not stray from the official line. In 2012, *Rysgal* owner Aleksandr Dadayev, who is close to Berdymukhammedov, 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—notably including Russian newspapers—and confiscate books and periodicals 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.

At the end of 2013, the government announced plans to launch its first telecommunications satellite, to be made by the French firm Thales Alenia Space. The firm will train specialists from Turkmenistan's National Space Agency in its use, which will include broadcasting, internet service, telephony, and video-conferencing service.

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. Both Altyn Asyr and Turkmen Telecom are overseen by the Ministry of Communications.

2014 Scores

Press Status

Not Free

Press Freedom Score

(0 = best, 100 = worst)

95

Legal Environment

(0 = best, 30 = worst)

30

Political Environment

(0 = best, 40 = worst)

36

Economic Environment

(0 = best, 30 = worst)

29