

MASS MEDIA FREEDOM IN TURKMENISTAN: ONLY A MIRAGE

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Turkmenistan today is a country where the idea of media freedom is still viewed largely along the same lines as it was under communism. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union the country has even seen a consistent policy aimed at subordinating all news media to the needs of a totalitarian state.

President Saparmurat Niyazov of Turkmenistan is the founder of all national and regional newspapers, and his golden profile is in the top right hand corner of the TV screen accompanying every television program. Under the guise of a campaign for higher national morals, the list of free foreign newspapers and magazines has been significantly abridged; the seizure of foreign newspapers and magazines by customs and in the mail has become a regular practice. Access to the Internet has been absolutely monopolized by the state. All attempts by Turkmen journalists and publishers in the early and mid-1990s to take the initiative to try and change the situation were mercilessly thwarted by the government.

GOVERNMENT AND MEDIA

It is noteworthy that President Niyazov appoints all media editors through his decrees, which contain clear-cut instructions as to what the editorial policy should be. Normally, such a decree reads like this: "Hereby I order that so-and-so be appointed the editor-in-chief of so-and-so edition for a probation period of six months. Should he/she fail to fulfill his/her responsibilities he/she will be relieved of his/her post without being offered other employment." This practice has

become permanent. In a lot of his speeches the president directly orders the guidelines the media should cling to, comparing them to a secure bridge between the state, its home and foreign policies and the people. Therefore, the guarantee of freedom of expression boils down to the guarantee of the absolute power of state ideology and a total control over all media reporting on public opinion.

All printed publications must feature a photograph of President Niyazov, a quotation from his numerous pronouncements and an oath of allegiance to the president and Homeland. Actually, newspapers only differ in their names and sizes. Most publications are just eulogies on President Saparmurat Turkmenbashi's (Head of Turkmen) meritorious service to the Turkmen people. The rest is predominantly Soviet-style in content, including upbeat reports on accomplishments made, descriptions of various national holidays, traditions, personality sketches of working people, and so on.

Turkmenistan's media does not contain any critical remarks unless specially sanctioned by the authorities. Most critical comments are contained in President Niyazov's speeches, which take up the larger part of printed publications and are published simultaneously by all the

dailies. The majority of news items are written by the presidential press service. According to public opinion polls, the population does not in fact read newspapers, finding them odious and uninformative. The state, therefore, takes the initiative by organizing subscriptions to printed publications. Ministerial and other public officers are forced to subscribe to trade periodicals.

NO FOREIGNERS AROUND

About 20 state-controlled publications are produced in Turkmenistan today. Despite there being significant Uzbek, Kazakh, Azerbaijani, Armenian and some other communities in this country, there are no mass media publications written in the languages of Turkmenistan's other ethnic groups except for *Neitralny Turkmenistan* (Neutral Turkmenistan), the sole Russian-language periodical. Nor are there any independent or opposition news media.

National newspapers include only *Neitralny Turkmenistan* and *Turkmenistan*. Newspapers such as *Ashgabat*, *Vatan* (Homeland), *Mari-Shikhu-Jakhan* and *Balkan* are regional. Newspapers like *Esger* (Soldier), *Adalat* (Patriot), *Mugalymlar* (Teacher), *Turkmen duniyasy* (Turkmen World) and magazines such as *Luqman* (Doctor) and *Gurbansoltan-ejeh* (a magazine for women named after President Niyazov's mother) are branch or specialized editions.

Due to the rigidly centralized power structure and the current

hard-line news policy, the regional media enjoys no independence, and all they do is rerun national media publications and follow the state-ordered news policy at the regional level. The only foreign edition operating in Turkmenistan is the Turkish *Zaman* newspaper that owns a separate office “Zaman-Turkmenistan” and publishing equipment. Agreement on *Zaman*’s operation was concluded at the highest level and fixed by a special presidential decree.

At this stage, there is a single state-run news agency, TDH (*Turkmen dovlet habarlari*, Turkmen State News Agency), until recently known as Turkmen-Press. Under the existing national news structure, all mass media and TDH reporters are supposed to get information concerning government authorities from the presidential press service or other authorized state bodies. Until recently, TDH has been headed by President Niyazov’s press secretary Kakamurad Balliyev. Foreign news agencies accredited in Turkmenistan face the least favored treatment status and are strongly ordered to display loyalty to the Turkmenistani government as they cover events in this country. Television broadcasting includes three national channels: 01 0-1, 01 0-2, 01 0-3.

SONGS FOR THE PRESIDENT

All three television channels operate in the Turkmen language for 16-17 hours a day each. Domestic newscasts take up 10 percent of the total airtime with 20% to 25% earmarked for feature films and animated cartoons. The rest of the schedule is divided between two blocks: music (folk songs, dances and pop shows) with items mostly devoted to President Saparmurat Turkmenbashi; and patriotic and ideological programs, including

“Lessons of Great Saparmurat Turkmenbashi”, “The 21st Century as the Golden Age of the Turkmen People”, and “Turkmenistan Resurrected and Independent”.

The programs are aimed at praising the “wise policy of the President” and “happy life of the Turkmen people”. Actually, the three national channels are identical in content. The President’s

said ORT programs, except newscasts, would be censored because they contained material inconsistent with the Turkmen national mentality. In fact, the ORT broadcasts allowed in the country include mostly shows designed for children and teens and edutainment programs.

Following the disintegration of the Soviet Union, Turkmenistan, for a time, followed the Russian

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Saparmurat Niyazov, President of Turkmenistan.

golden profile in the top right hand corner of the screen serves as a logo of each channel. The usually fixed program schedule is only not observed when broadcasting the government show meetings called by the President or his travels around the country. Such reports or the President’s speeches take up to 50 percent of airtime and are rerun three times a day.

National radio programs are broadcast in the Turkmen language and have the same basic content as the television programs. The only Russia programs retransmitted in Turkmenistan are those of the Mayak station. No private broadcasters are available in Turkmenistan. In October 1998, broadcasts in Turkmenistan by the Russian ORT television channel were reduced to 5-6 hours a day in the evening. Turkmenistan’s authorities claimed that the reduction was due to financial differences with the ORT heads. However, in an interview with the *Nezavisimaya Gazette* (Moscow-based *Independent Newspaper*), President Niyazov

broadcasting pattern. In 1994, though, broadcasts by RTR were banned after its few programs were found to conflict with the views of Turkmenistan’s leadership. It is indicative that many Turkmen citizens prefer to install individual dish aerials that are capable of receiving 4 to 200 channels. Relatively cheap (each one costs under \$100), they have become extremely popular in Turkmenistan. The channels most regularly viewed are NTV, ORT, TV-Center, and RTR, while channels from Turkey and India, CNN and MTV are less popular.

With the development of information technology, controls over the news have become more sophisticated. In 2000, licenses were revoked from all independent providers in the country. Currently, all services on the Internet and email market are offered exclusively by TurkmenTelecom, a state-owned company whose services are too expensive to ensure free access to the Internet. Servicing is accompanied by a long list of cumber

some pre-conditions making access to the Internet problematic, and, also, cases are known of opening and inspecting email correspondence followed by reprisals against the correspondents.

TOTAL CENSORSHIP

In his keynote speech proclaiming a long-term strategy of national development “Ten Years of Prosperity” (since 1994 known as “Ten Years of Stability”), President Niyazov announced that restrictions would be imposed on the media. “We have chosen the path of building a democratic state. To attain this goal, we intend to introduce democracy stage by stage. What does a stage-by-stage transition to democracy mean? It means that in this transitional period democratic principles will be introduced by evolutionary rather than by revolutionary means, gradually, stage by stage. For the time being, though, a great role will be assigned to the state in all spheres of soci-

ety. Control will be imposed on the press and the media.”

Censorship in Turkmenistan permeates its entire society, and is exercised at different levels: at the editorial level; through a specially authorized institution, the State Secret Protection Committee; by branch ministries and government institutions whenever a projected publication covers their area. As a result, journalists’ self-censorship has become the most common manifestation of the government’s censorship. With the government exercising total control over the media, the loss of their job in any media outlet would mean an absolute *Berufsverbot* for a journalist.

FOREIGN PRESS SEIZED

Turkmenistan’s customs control the import of any printed matter. There are numerous cases where they have seized newspapers and magazines and for one reason or another placed them on the list of excluded goods with the criteria for

the seizure remaining unclear. Subscription to the foreign press is restricted, the list of subscribers being under the authority of the security services, and must be paid for in foreign currency, thus seriously narrowing the circle of potential subscribers. Facts are known about newspapers arrested in large quantities after being delivered to subscribers. As a rule, the newspapers arrested were found to have staff critical of the Turkmenistani authorities. At present, newspapers arrive with delays and not before being inspected for criticisms about the existing political system.

There’s plenty that can be said about the current situation regarding the mass media in “free” Turkmenistan – a country that has proclaimed itself a democratic state. There are a lot of facts that can be cited here. The closure of the Journalism Department at the State University is, perhaps, a fact that tells volumes about the way the state treats journalism.