



2012 OSCE Human Dimension Implementation Meeting

Written Intervention by Turkmen Initiative for Human Rights, International Partnership for Human Rights and the Netherlands Helsinki Committee

Working Session 1 (Fundamental Freedoms I), Monday 24 September 2012:

Freedom of expression under continued threat in Turkmenistan

Freedom of expression remains seriously limited in Turkmenistan. In the global 2011-2012 Press Freedom Index published by Reporters Without Borders (RSF)¹, Turkmenistan was ranked 177th out of 179 countries. All state media in the country are tightly controlled, there are no independent media outlets, and internet use is subject to far-reaching restrictions. During the UN Human Rights Committee (HRC) review of Turkmenistan in March 2012, the Turkmen delegation claimed that people in Turkmenistan are allowed to freely collect and disseminate information.² However, in reality, anyone who dares to express and share views that differ from state propaganda risks being harassed and persecuted.

Harassment of critics of the regime

Individuals who exercise their freedom of expression to criticize official policies in Turkmenistan are subject to intimidation and harassment. This is only one example from the period leading up to the February 2012 presidential elections, where incumbent President Berdymukhamedov was re-elected with an overwhelming majority after being only formally contested by seven other candidates:

- On 2 February 2012, ten days before the presidential elections, human rights defender Nataliya Shabunts gave an interview to Radio *Azatlyk* (the Turkmen Service of Radio Liberty) criticizing the Turkmen authorities for gross violations of fundamental rights in the country. A day later a bloodstained sheep's head was put at her door, presumably by the Turkmen secret services with a view to intimidating her.³

Internet restrictions

During the March 2012 UN HRC review session, the Turkmen delegation claimed that the Turkmen government only takes restrictive measures against internet sites that promote pornography. However, in a report published the same month, RSF concluded that Turkmenistan is "imposing drastic censorship" on the internet.⁴

* This publication has been prepared with assistance of the European Union and the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA). The contents of this publication are the sole responsibility of the organizations issuing it and can in no way be taken to reflect the views of the European Union or the Netherlands MFA.



Foreign-based news sites providing alternative information about developments in Turkmenistan such as gundogar.org and ferghana.ru are blocked in the country, and social networks such as LiveJournal, Facebook, Twitter and YouTube are often unavailable. The website of Austria-based Turkmen Initiative for Human Rights (“Chronicles of Turkmenistan”, chrono-tm.org), which is well-known for its independent reports and analyses of developments in Turkmenistan, is also blocked inside the country. Moreover, since 2010, the organization’s website has been exposed to numerous cyber attacks. Only in 2012 it has been attacked more than six times.

- On 2 February 2012, the “Chronicles of Turkmenistan” website was attacked by unknown hackers and remained offline for nine days. Turkmen Initiative for Human Rights (TIHR) believes that this attack was intended to prevent it from posting critical coverage on the 12 February Turkmen presidential elections. While the website was down, TIHR continued to publish information on its blog and Twitter.⁵

The TIHR website had previously been subjected to two attacks that similarly disabled it for several days. The first one of these took place on 29 September 2010.⁶ TIHR chairman Farid Tuhbatullin believes that it was provoked by the critical comments he made about Turkmen President Berdymukhamedov’s policies in an interview he gave to the Kazakh satellite TV channel *K+* shortly before the attack. After publishing a number of articles on the July 2011 explosions at the Abadan weapons depot, which the Turkmen authorities tried to cover up, the website was again attacked and disabled for several days.⁷

Internet forums are under close surveillance by the Turkmen authorities. In the following case, TIHR believes that the security services may have resorted to a repressive measure against a popular online forum due to the increase in posts on politically and religiously related issues made by its users:

- Access to the Turkmen Internet forum Ertir.com, which has become one of the most popular web resources among Turkmen youth since it was launched in 2009 and features discussion on a broad range of topics, was blocked in Turkmenistan for most of June 2012. After being targeted by a series of hacker attacks on 1 June, the forum became inaccessible and remained so until 13 June, when it briefly reappeared online before access to it was curtailed again on 14-15 June. Since then it has been online. During the time the forum was unavailable, Turkmen visitors were, however, able to access it via proxy servers.⁸

The authorities also interfere with electronic correspondence.⁹ As of 16 February 2012, Gmail accounts could not be accessed in Turkmenistan for ten days. TIHR believes that access was blocked by the Turkmen security services in order to prevent users from reporting to the outside world about the inauguration of re-elected President Berdymukhamedov on 17 February and the National Flag Day celebrations that took place a day later.¹⁰ In the wake of the July 2011 Abadan events, when Turkmen citizens used their internet connections to channel first-hand information about these events abroad, the Turkmen authorities have grown increasingly concerned about preventing similar challenges to government propaganda.

When first taking office, President Berdymukhamedov promised to promote internet access. However, while 15 internet cafes were opened in 2007, no additional ones have been opened since. Moreover, all internet café visitors are required to provide ID information, register in a logbook and indicate Internet surfing time, while security services monitor what internet content is accessed.¹¹

Private internet connections remain costly and the services of the Turkmen internet state provider *Altyn Asyr*, which gained monopoly after the expulsion of the Russian Mobile TeleSystems (MTS) operator in December 2010, have been unsatisfactory: access speed has been chronically slow, which has caused problems in particular with respect to downloading images and videos¹². In May 2012, MTS signed a new contract with the Turkmen authorities¹³, and as of late August, it resumed its services in Turkmenistan following announcements to this end in the country's state-owned newspapers. In one of these announcements, MTS warned that "customers might initially experience poor quality connections"¹⁴.

Concerns in the area of print media

Turkmen authorities tightly control the country's state-run newspapers, which are used as outlets for ideological propaganda. These newspapers glorify the president and report in detail on different state-promoted events in the country, while ignoring everyday issues of interest to the population, such as price increases on basic necessities.¹⁵

Interest in state-owned print media is generally limited among Turkmen readers due to the rigid censorship to which these publications are subjected and the low quality of them. The weekly newspaper *Turkmen Dili* ("Turkmen Language") is the most popular, with 117,500 subscribers. The only available Russian-language newspaper, *Neutralny Turkmenistan* ("Neutral Turkmenistan"), has a circulation just over 49,000.¹⁶

In a questionable practice used to boost subscription rates, employees of different state institutions are required to take money from their own pocket to subscribe to state-owned periodicals issued in their field of work. For example, employees of schools and universities must subscribe to at least four newspapers and one magazine, while postal service employees must fork out some EUR 30 a year for the newspaper *Turkmenistan*, a publication they may already have read when they receive it as they enjoy free access to all state-owned newspapers distributed by the postal service.¹⁷ As the average monthly salary in Turkmenistan is only about EUR 200, the forced subscriptions pose a significant financial burden for those affected.¹⁸

The country's only privately-owned newspaper *Rysgal*, launched in October 2010, publishes semi-official information targeted at the members of the Union of Industrialists and Entrepreneurs, to whom it caters. It is owned by Aleksander Dadaev, a wealthy and powerful entrepreneur with close ties to the current president. Dadaev was also engaged in the formation of the new Party of Industrialists and Entrepreneurs, which held its founding convention in Ashgabat on 21 August 2012¹⁹. While the establishment of this party formally has brought an end to Turkmenistan's one-party system, there are serious doubts that the party will be advocating any independent positions as it was set up at the president's initiative and Turkmen political life remains fully controlled by President Berdymukhamedov. Since May 2012, the weekly *Rysgal* has regularly published announcements encouraging entrepreneurs to submit applications for membership in the new party.²⁰

Other forms of state propaganda and censorship in media

While several new state TV channels were launched in 2011, no programs can be shown on these channels without President Berdymukhamedov's direct or indirect interference.

- For the first time since the country's independence, Turkmen state TV broadcasted directly from a major international sports event during the June 2012 European football championships. The games were aired on the recently launched *Turkmenistan Sport* channel. In previous years, Turkmen TV has only broadcasted pre-recorded reports from similar events. During all the matches aired, the sport commentators (who were reporting from an Ashgabat studio) repeatedly expressed gratitude to the president for making it possible for Turkmen fans to follow the games. Before the start of the championships, promotional video clips were shown to inform viewers that the games would be broadcasted live thanks to the president.²¹

This is another example illustrating the efforts of authorities to ensure compliance with the government line in state media:

- In connection with this year's 9 May holiday, which is celebrated to commemorate the end of World War II, the Turkmen Ministry of Culture instructed editors of Turkmen media outlets to start describing the war as the "war of 1941-1945". Since the Soviet-time, this war has been known as the "Great Patriotic War" in Turkmenistan, as well as in other former Soviet republics. The reference to the war had to be changed in accordance with the new instructions in TV- and radio-broadcasts made on 10 May to convey well-wishes to the Turkmen president from different government ministries and agencies on the occasion of the holiday.²²

Recommendations to the authorities of Turkmenistan:

- Stop intimidating and harassing civil society activists and other representatives of civil society (including those in exile) who criticize official policies.
- Stop conducting systematic monitoring of internet use and refrain from blocking websites simply because they contain information that does not please authorities, such as information critical of current policies.
- Take effective measures to promote internet access, ensuring that access is widely available, affordable and meets reasonable quality standards.
- Abolish excessive control of the work of state media, refrain from using these media as tools of ideological propaganda and abolish the practice of compulsory subscriptions to state publications.
- Promote the growth of privately owned media and ensure that such media can operate independently of the state.

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- ¹² Ground Report, "Russia Telecoms Firm Heads Back to Turkmenistan", 29 May 2012, http://www.groundreport.com/Media_and_Tech/Russia-Telecoms-Firm-Heads-Back-to-Turkmenistan/2946437
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