

Appeal to the Participants of the 16th annual OSCE Human Dimension Implementation Meeting

RFE/RL's Turkmen Service is losing its noble mission

September 23, 2013

Dear friends,

My name is Dowletmyrat Yazkulyev, and I am an independent journalist from Turkmenistan, as well as a recipient of the 2012 Hellman/Hammet Grant.

I am deeply grateful to all colleagues, friends and personally to HFHR President of the Board, Danuta Przywara, for an invitation to take part in the OSCE annual Human Dimension Implementation Meeting. I am also sad that I am not able to participate at this conference. That is why I decided to appeal to the conference in writing.

I urge you to intervene hastily and help save the noble mission of Radio Azatlyk, the Turkmen Service of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, the only source of free information in the Turkmen language that broadcasts to Turkmenistan: one of the most repressed countries in the world, along with North Korea and Eritrea, with the poorest records of press freedom.

Despite this, I am a witness of how U.S. corporate officials have been destroying this unique Turkmen language radio. It is a well-known fact that U.S.A. advocates democracy all around the world. Moreover, with the support of the U.S. Congress and its soft power policy, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty's broadcasts in 28 languages contributed much to the fall of the repressive dictatorship and authoritarian regime that was the Soviet Union. I am thankful that its reports on human rights issues have helped bring about the release of activists and journalists in Turkmenistan from prison, including myself. I am very grateful to American taxpayers for their support of RFE/RL's mission.

However, I am deeply concerned about the fact that Radio Azatlyk has been losing its noble mission of promoting democratic values to the underprivileged people of Turkmenistan. Its current editorial policy contradicts to RFE/RL's mission statement, which states that "RFE/RL's mission is to promote democratic values and institutions by reporting the news in countries where a free press is banned by the government or not fully established. Our journalists provide what many people cannot get locally: uncensored news, responsible discussion, and open debate". In the summer of 2011, Radio Azatlyk stopped its special radio debate programs about human rights violations in Turkmenistan and left the people of Turkmenistan face to face with an authoritarian regime. Since then, Radio Azatlyk has distanced itself from the principles of broadcasting "responsible discussion" to people that are suffering under a dictatorship.

The Turkmen listeners have been disappointed about the fact that analysis and commentaries about the political and economic situation of the country are banned in the Turkmen Service. Moreover, the reporters were ordered, "to do only news-reports on local issues, such as poor and dirty streets, shortages of electricity, delayed salaries...". As a result, RFE/RL's Turkmen Service, once famous for its journalistic analysis, comments, and debates, has turned into a tabloid media outlet. Its news stories

are far from the listener's real life and based on discredited information. Now almost 50% of the programs of the Turkmen Service are illiterate translations of the material of other media outlets. The audience's cooperation, which has been established for a long time, has been fully destroyed. I would be correct to state that Radio Azatlyk has lost a drastic majority of its target listeners in an unprecedented short period of time.

Mass firing of experienced staff members and freelancers at the Turkmen Service in 2012 has completely destroyed this once unique platform for information about Turkmenistan. It is unclear as to why the Turkmen journalists, all with a deep understanding of the political, economic and cultural situations in Turkmenistan and the former Soviet Union, were forced to resign and most of the jobs at the Turkmen Service's Prague operation centre were annulled. Moreover, the Turkmen Service is silencing the advocates of free thought in its broadcasts. Experienced journalists and local activists with thousands of listeners were side-lined and cooperation with them was totally suspended.

The currently laid-off colleagues have served for the mission of RFE/RL for many years and sacrificed the safety of their families in Turkmenistan in order to provide alternative information to the people who live under the repressive regime of Turkmenistan, where there is no press freedom and where journalists put their lives at great risk to write a story. I believe that this mass firing is an inhumane action on RFE/RL's behalf towards its dedicated employees. Radio Azatlyk abuses the rights of its journalists and this should be strongly condemned.

In the early months of this year we, the thirteen journalists, activists and friends of Radio Azatlyk from Turkmenistan had signed a letter of concern about the latest irregularities at the Turkmen Service and sent it twice to Mr. Kevin Klose, respected President of RFE/RL, who has been recently appointed to improve the damaged reputation of RFE/RL. Unfortunately, we haven't received any response. Why? We don't know. Does RFE/RL's management support such a destructive policy at the Turkmen Service? We don't know either.

On behalf of thousands of my countrymen I urge you to intervene and help restore Radio Azatlyk that once served as the only source of alternative information in the Turkmen language. I believe the people of Turkmenistan deserve a free flow of information.

Thank you.

Sincerely on behalf of thousands of Turkmen listeners,

Dowletmyrat Yazkulyev
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