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Reporters Without Borders

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**Evidence of Reporters Without Borders, an NGO with special consultative status, about
press freedom in TURKMENISTAN**

Introduction: Press freedom

There is no independent press in Turkmenistan, the foreign media are not welcome, and the Internet is totally controlled by the state, with the result that the one per cent of the population that is online only has access to a filtered version. Things are nevertheless slowly changing regarding Internet access.

1/ Free flow of information online

The first Internet cafés - State controlled - were allowed to open in February 2007 and the country reportedly now has about ten, including at least two in the capital. This was seen as encouraging since Internet access in Turkmenistan is one of the most tightly controlled in the world, with only 1 per cent of the population able to get online. According to monopolistic State provider Turkmentelekom, there are about 4 000 Internet users in Turkmenistan, far less than in 1996-99, when some private providers were allowed to operate in the country.

Despite repeated claims from the authorities about their will to liberalize access to the Internet, there has been reports of a tightening of the control exerted by the KGB on the Internet users. Especially since April 2008 many web users in Turkmenistan reported that they were denied access to numerous foreign websites, including Central Asian websites, that are very popular and usually raise less suspicion from the authorities.

Furthermore, it is mandatory to present an ID to be allowed to use a computer in any of these Internet cafés, allowing State Security Services to know which sites have been visited by each Internet user. Connection fees are also very high compared with the average monthly income (less than 100 dollars), even if, since 1st of May, under Presidential decision, one hour time connection fees was lowered to 30 000 manats (about 2,5 dollars) instead of 60 000. Quality

of the connection is also of great concern, and President Berdymukhamedov has openly criticized Turkmentelekom for the slow and poor connection it provides.

Since June 2008, this company has issued statements about private citizen connection to the Internet being now allowed. So far, only governmental organisations, public and foreign companies were allowed to register to subscribe to the Web. But users report that since then connection and access conditions worsened.

These contradictory trends are believed to result from a conflict between the head of state and other public authorities, such as the State Security services. In May, the President fired the Communication Deputy Minister Annaly Berdinobatov because of delays in developing the Internet. Anonymous sources within KGB underlined that each Internet user was under scrutiny and that even proxy server, through which one can try to bypass filters were thoroughly monitored. Private - and thus illegal - access provider also gave testimony that their clients were facing difficulties, in accessing the Internet, showing that the authorities were trying to circumvent their access to the Web.

2/ Government efforts to improve the situation

President Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov's policies are contradictory and pragmatic. He said he wanted to continue in Niyazov's path but would introduce reforms. But when he visited the United States and Europe in the autumn of 2007 in a strong position thanks to the country's huge oil and natural gas reserves, he dismissed questions about human rights when he addressed students at Columbia University in New York.

He said during the campaign that he favoured more freedom of expression. A few very small steps were taken. Internet cafés were allowed to open in February 2007 and the country reportedly now has five, including at least two in the capital. Internet users were also given a chance to leave comments on one of the official news websites, www.turkmenistan.gov.tm. This came soon after the October 2007 visit of Javier Solana, the European Union's High Representative for the Common Foreign and Security Policy, and Pierre Morel, its special representative for Central Asia.

Portraits of the late Niyazov disappeared from the corner of TV screens during news broadcasts. Eleven political prisoners, including two allegedly involved in a failed bid to kill Niyazov in 2002, were pardoned in August 2007 but, contrary to hopes, this was not followed by any large-scale release of political prisoners, estimated to number several thousand.

Despite the many signs of an economic opening, no major political reforms have been undertaken. The one possible exception is an announced overhaul of the constitution to be submitted to parliament in September. But so far the leading element of this reform, revealed on 23 April, is an increase in the presidential term from five years to seven. The new regime's direction will probably depend on what international allies Berdymukhamedov can find.

So far, the president has not responded to repeated appeals to set up a commission of enquiry into the death of *Radio Free Europe* journalist Ogulsapar Muradova from a beating in prison in September 2006. The information emerging about Annakurban Amanklychev and Sapardurdy Khajiev, who were sentenced to seven years in prison in August 2006 for helping to make a documentary for the French TV station *France 2*, is meanwhile also disturbing.

Reporters Without Borders is also worried by last December's decision to ban individually-owned satellites dishes and replace them by communal satellites dishes.

3/ Recommendations

In the light of the proposed reform of the constitution, there is clearly a need to abolish censorship, protect the independence of journalists and create privately-owned news media. Space for foreign news media also needs to be created. The Turkmen population is dramatically cut off from the world. This isolation must be ended, as a matter of urgency. The authorities could, for example, make it easier for foreign TV channels, especially Russian ones, to be broadcast and give the required impetus so that Internet access finally becomes a reality.

Imprisoned journalists must be freed. A thousand detainees were pardoned in May, on the anniversary of the Nazi Germany's defeat, bringing to 11,000 the number of releases ordered since Berdymukhamedov's election. As we said, the pardoning of 11 political prisoners in August 2007 was not followed by any large-scale release of political detainees, and to our knowledge, no journalist or human rights activist has been pardoned. The release of journalists who have been imprisoned just for doing their job would put an end to an injustice and an absurdity that does Turkmenistan's image a great deal of harm.

The government must appoint a commission of enquiry into *Radio Free Europe* journalist Ogulsapar Muradova's death in prison in September 2006. There is also no news of Annakurban Amanklychev and Sapardurdy Khajiev, who were sentenced to seven years in prison in August 2006 for helping to make a documentary about the country for the French TV station *France 2*. Government shall allow their relatives to know where they are detained, and to visit them.

The government's efforts to convince the outside world that it is evolving should be treated with the utmost prudence until there are clear signs of political change. The recent purges (including house arrest for the late president's close associates) and the fact that released prisoners remain under government supervision show that the government is not yet moving in a democratic direction.

Methods used

The material in this update was gathered and checked by Reporters Without Borders, which has a worldwide network of correspondents (in 130 countries) and partner organisations (in about 20).

Journalists in some countries can be sent to prison for several years just for a word or a photo that offends. Jailing or killing a journalist eliminates a vital witness and threatens the right of each of us to be kept informed. Reporters Without Borders has been fighting day-by-day for press freedom since it was founded in 1985.

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