

## **Turkmen Journalists' Job Fears**

**Author:** [Oraz Hallyev](#)

State-run newspapers are told to slash staff levels in cost-cutting offensive - but no one reads them in any case.

Turkmen journalists appear to be next in line for a wave of sackings in the name of budget cuts, following the president's announcement that "unreasonably inflated" staff numbers at state-run newspapers would have to be cut.

While the news has dismayed reporters who stand to lose their livelihood in Turkmenistan's already depressed economy, the general public has such a low opinion of the entirely state-owned media that expressions of sympathy are tempered with apathy.

President Saparmurat Niazov, who likes to be called Turkmenbashi or "Leader of the Turkmen", first hinted at the upcoming job losses at a cabinet meeting on August 18, where he warned newspaper editors that a planned wage increase for public-sector employees would have to be offset by savings.

Plans to sack reporters have already filtered down to those likely to be affected.

"There are more than 40 people working in our editorial office now," said one of the longest-serving journalists in the eastern Lebap region, who spoke to IWPR on condition of anonymity. "But according to a new staff list - which came down from the very top - we'll be able to retain only 24. Our editor-in-chief's head is spinning. One colleague is the sole breadwinner in a very large family, another is a single mother of young children. Who's going to be sacked?"

The reporter said that while several members of staff were past retirement age, the quality of the newspaper - already poor - would suffer dramatically if they were sacked, as the younger members of staff had no training and would not be able to cope.

"Turkmen universities don't train reporters, and the state forbids us to employ those who graduated from journalism schools in Russia or Uzbekistan after 1993. So we have hardly any qualified staff," he said. "At one point we were employing people who walked in off the street. As long as you could write articles without making too many mistakes and proofread a page, you were qualified to work on the paper."

There is no independent media in the former Soviet republic, and the complete lack of free speech is compounded by the personality cult surrounding Turkmenbashi.

As well as articles praising the president's self-penned "spiritual guidebook", the Rukhnama, Turkmen journalists often find themselves writing about Turkmenbashi and his family, rather than the real issues affecting local people.

"Last year was named after the president's late mother, who is always referred to as Hero of Turkmenistan Gurbansoltan-edge. So we peppered all of our articles - even those that dealt with economic or environmental issues - with praise for the woman who gave the Turkmen people such a wise and shrewd leader," said one journalist. "This year is named after the Hero of Turkmenistan Atamurat Niazov, Turkmenbashi's father. Now our articles mention him more often than they do the latter.

This man concluded bitterly, "To be frank, we journalists have already forgotten how to prepare a proper news story on the numerous problems facing the Turkmen people - prostitution, rising drug addiction among young people, official corruption, and the involvement of young children in cotton harvesting."

One reporter from the Ahal Durmushi newspaper told IWPR that the reputation of Turkmenistan's press was now so bad that journalists were treated with the utmost contempt.

"Journalists are denied access to information, which makes it very difficult for us to work," he said. "Managers either give flimsy excuses not talk to us, or they tell us straight out that they won't speak on any condition, because in any case the state press won't criticise them for snubbing journalists."

"So here we are, missing the good old days of perestroika and glasnost when we journalists could influence the course of events, shape public opinion, and have our voices heard."

The public has little time for the state newspapers' continual diet of adulation of the head of state. Hundreds of unsold copies are bought in bulk by street vendors who use them to make the paper cones in which they sell sunflower seeds, or by people who need cheap table covers for weddings.

Those who do subscribe to the official newspapers and magazines generally do so because they have been ordered to do so by their state employers, on pain of dismissal.

"Our family gets two copies of the teachers' newspaper Mugallymlar Gazety," said Dashoguz resident Pirnepes Abdullaev. "I was ordered to subscribe to it at school, while my daughter - who's also a teacher - found that the cost of the subscription had been deducted from her salary without her permission."

A Ashgabat resident who did not want to give her name expressed sympathy for journalists, but argued that many newspapers are a waste of time and energy.

"The experienced journalists - the real masters of the pen who graduated from Russian journalism schools - are no longer published in Turkmenistan. They either became disillusioned or they were sacked and now sit at home unable to find another job," she said.

"In their place, we have only mediocrity. I feel that many newspapers should be closed down altogether - after all, they are all the same as each other and nobody reads them. It would save some serious money for the budget, and nobody will miss them."

Speculation is growing that the treasury is badly short of cash, despite a series of cost-cutting measures which have put thousands out of work in an already depressed economy.

Earlier this year, around 15,000 nurses and other hospital workers were sacked and replaced with conscript soldiers - effectively free labour - which dismayed the population and caused concern among human rights organisations and the international community.

Further job losses are expected early next year, with ministries and state bodies bracing themselves for considerable cuts.

Analysts agree that the few journalists left in their jobs will not be allowed to cover the story, let alone voice any criticism.

Oraz Hallyev is the pseudonym of a journalist in Turkmenistan.

**Location:** Uzbekistan  
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Stavropol  
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