

Turkmen Media Shake-up Draws Scepticism

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Local journalists say the president's call for reform is meaningless unless he is prepared to allow genuine freedom of speech.

Turkmenistan's media have been told they face a shake-up by the country's leader, who criticised their output as pedestrian and uninteresting.

Speaking to a gathering of Turkmen intellectuals on January 19, President Gurbanguly Berdymuhammedov savaged the work of newspapers, television and radio, saying most programmes were made in an "off-hand" and perfunctory way, were of poor quality and were not interesting to readers, viewers and listeners.

"The main shortcoming of the programmes on national TV and radio and of the newspapers is their alienation from the real life, thoughts and expectations of the people," said the president. "Journalists must think seriously about how to improve the situation, and start to think and work in a new fashion."

In another sign of official displeasure with the state of the media, the president fired his press secretary, Akmyrat Khudaiberdiev, on January 11, apparently holding him to blame for "the lack of a creative approach and of diversity in the mass media".

Khudaiberdiev was replaced with former culture minister Kakageldi Charyardurdyev, whose job went to his deputy, Gulmyrat Myradov.

While the president's moves would seem to suggest he is serious about wanting a degree of change in the servile state-run media, local journalists doubt he is about to allow anything approaching freedom of speech.

Censorship continues to be rigidly enforced on the state broadcasters and press, while the authorities refuse to countenance independent media.

Currently, there are four state TV channels and a national radio service, 24 national and local newspapers and 16 magazines.

Berdymuhammedov's latest outburst was not the first time he had levelled criticism at the activity of the Turkmen press, TV and radio.

He has sacked two ministers of culture and replaced the chief editors of all the newspapers since his election last February. Last summer, the president singled out television and radio from criticism, saying they often used unverified information for their stories.

Thus far, there have been few signs of change.

“All our newspapers are alike because they just republish official material from the state-run Turkmenovlethabarlary news agency,” said one Ashgabat resident, Perhap Sabirov. “It’s the same on television and radio. They fill most of their airtime with official messages and greetings from the president.”

Another disappointed viewer, a retired Russian teacher from the northern Dashoguz region, agreed that little had changed, saying, “The newspapers and TV screens all show the same thing – praise for the president. We have a great many problems but you won’t find any critical articles or interviews about them in the newspapers.”

Some media-watchers discern small signs of progress in an otherwise bleak landscape.

One observer in Ashgabat said he had noticed a slight improvement in the quality of the information published these days compared with the reign of the late president Saparmurat Niazov.

He said the main daily newspaper Neytralny Turkmenistan had become “slightly more informative than it was under Niazov, and faster in commenting on events”.

He explained, “It used to be that information about a cabinet meeting would only be published two or three months later, whereas now it comes out the next day.”

Another viewer from the Balkan region in the west of Turkmenistan said he had been hoping to watch more serious programmes on current affairs and politics, as well as discussions on topical issues, but this had not happened.

Even if the reporting is becoming somewhat more informative and timely, the Turkmen media are still a long way from any real change to the culture of subservient, censored journalism that existed during Niazov’s 15-year rule and the preceding Soviet period.

“During the Niazov years, the majority of Turkmen journalists developed a culture of stereotypical praise for the Leader,” one journalist working for state media told IWPR. “It became a disease for journalists to praise the president on every conceivable occasion. We have to try to rid ourselves of this.”

Media analysts in Turkmenistan say criticism handed down from the president’s office is not the answer. In fact, the idea that everything should be directed and controlled from the top down is part of the problem.

Instead, they say, what is needed are systemic reforms, the creation of private media, legal safeguards for media freedom and the emergence of a climate where journalists no longer feel the need to censor their own work.

“Although Berdymuhammedov is demanding a more creative approach from journalists, the culture of self-censorship among editors remains strong and they are in no hurry to introduce innovations,” said the Turkmen journalist.

Fear of losing one's job or of being arrested for making anti-government statements has taught journalists to be circumspect in preparing material, and to report only good news about Turkmenistan.

According to the annual report on "Freedom in the World" published by the United States-based Freedom House, the latest edition of which came out on January 16, Turkmenistan remains a deeply repressive state.

"Freedom of speech and the press is severely restricted by the government, which controls all radio and television broadcasts and print media," said the report, describing the situation in 2007. "Dissenting political views are banned, as are even mild forms of criticism of the president."

Media observers note that President Berdymuhammedov has made no move to abandon any of his powers over the press, radio and TV. He continues to directly appoint the heads and chief editors of the Turkmen media, just as before.

As well as self-censorship, all print, audio and video products continue to be subjected to the external censorship of a special government committee that is supposed to ensure no state secrets are divulged.

"Media and journalists remain under the tight control of the government," said a staff member at Neytralny Turkmenistan, speaking anonymously. "Any material that the chief editors are doubtful about is thrown away or sent to the presidential administration for approval or 'harmonisation'. Only after that procedure can the material appear in the press."

As an example of the kind of non-political issue that remains off limits, a lecturer at the Turkmen State University recalled how he tried to interest a reporter on a local paper in his own story of being forced to pay large bribes to doctors to obtain medical treatment for his daughter. The correspondent flatly refused to touch it.

A writer for a law magazine said the reporter's reaction was not surprising.

"Even if we imagine the impossible - that such a story could be passed by the censor and approved for publication - you can imagine how many journalists' heads, including the editor's, would roll if it was actually published," he said.

Journalists interviewed by IWPR in Turkmenistan said real change in the media would only be possible if there was genuine liberalisation, including specifically a loosening of control by the security services.

"Today every media organisation is monitored by a designated supervisor from the security services, who visits the editorial office as if it were his home," complained a photojournalist. "How can we have any freedom if we are preparing material in these conditions?"

(The names of interviewees have been withheld out of concern for their safety.)

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