

# Turkmenistan: Profile of Media Ownership and Potential Foreign Influence Channels

Emily Dumont, Jonathan Solis, and Lincoln Zaleski

## Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1
Russian Media Footprints.....	2
Top Media Outlets.....	3
Media Ownership.....	5
Results.....	6
Television, Print, and Radio.....	6
Online.....	8
Conclusion.....	9

## Acknowledgements

The authors would like to acknowledge Vera Choo, Samantha Custer, and Rodney Knight for their advice and assistance in the research and compilation of this profile. We additionally want to acknowledge AidData’s team of student Research Assistants who collected data for this project, including Diane Frangulea, Maggie Herndon, Daniel Highland, Katherine Hughes, Sonia Kelly, Morgan King, Deb Kornblut, Amelia Larson, Abby Maher, Daniella Marx, Harper Ortlieb, Caroline Prout, Andrew Tanner, Emmeline Walker, Sophia Zaman, and Noa Zielinski.

# Introduction

What are the entry points for foreign actors to shape and influence the narrative in the Turkmen media market? This profile seeks to address some of the entry points related to media ownership and Russian state-owned media. AidData recognizes that malign influence may affect narrative creation in other ways, including through republishing of foreign content in domestic media outlets, interactions on social media, and journalist biases. However, this project focuses solely on direct and indirect ownership of traditional domestic media outlets to identify potential entry points for Russian influence through elites and media owners. By better understanding Turkmenistan's domestic media ownership environment, including what media outlets citizens consume and who the owners of those outlets are, we can anticipate entry points where malign actors may try to influence domestic narratives.

Since owners of top media houses have the potential to influence the content and tone of topics covered by journalists in their employ, understanding who owns the media is crucial to identifying avenues for influence and potential bias in reporting.

Turkmenistan has a virtually closed media market, with no independent media operating openly within its borders due to government restrictions.<sup>1</sup> Given this reality, collecting market share or survey data on citizen's media consumption habits proved challenging. The top outlets that do operate openly in Turkmenistan are generally controlled by the government. In this profile, we take an in-depth look at domestic media ownership in Turkmenistan.

This media ownership profile and the supporting data were prepared by AidData, a research lab at William & Mary's Global Research Institute.<sup>2</sup> The data for this profile was collected manually by AidData staff and student research assistants. We began by conducting web searches to identify a list of media in Turkmenistan, and then identified a list of the top-ranked outlets in terms of overall consumption. We then used this information to gather the ownership data. We gathered this information using limited

---

<sup>1</sup> Reporters Without Borders. 2021. Turkmenistan. URL: <https://rsf.org/en/turkmenistan>, accessed April 7, 2022.

<sup>2</sup> This profile is part of a collaboration with the USAID E&E Bureau made possible through a buy-in to a Higher Education Solutions Network cooperative agreement (AID-A-12-00096) in place between USAID/LAB/HESN, AidData, and William & Mary.

information from IREX's 2019 Media Sustainability Index report as well as a 2021 AidData survey of observers with expertise on Turkmenistan's media.

In the following sections, we provide summary data on the presence of Russian state-owned media, top outlets, and media ownership in Turkmenistan as of 2021. This profile focuses on the ownership of traditional broadcast, print, and online media outlets. Social media is not included in this analysis. By mapping out the ownership and influence of traditional forms of media, these profiles lend insights into potential channels for foreign influence in the top consumed outlets.

## Russian Media Footprints

Although the most direct form of Kremlin influence is via Russian state-owned media, none of the eleven Russian state-owned media outlets we tracked have a physical presence in Turkmenistan (see Table 1). Physical presence includes physical infrastructure, such as cable packages, physical office space or local bureaus, and radio broadcasters, but excludes satellite broadcasting and online or streaming availability. This is not surprising, given that the Turkmen government does not allow foreign media to invest in Turkmenistan.<sup>3</sup> Although some citizens are able to view media using other means like satellite television or streaming online, this is generally limited due to poor telecommunication infrastructure in the country.<sup>4</sup>

Table 1: Russian state-owned media in Turkmenistan, 2021

Television		Print		Radio		News Agency	
Russia I	✗	Rossiyskaya Gazeta	✗	Sputnik	✗	TASS	✗
Russia 24	✗					Sputnik	✗
Russia K	✗						
RTR-Planeta	✗						

<sup>3</sup> IREX. 2019. Media Sustainability Index: Turkmenistan, p. 9. URL: <https://www.irex.org/sites/default/files/pdf/media-sustainability-index-europe-eurasia-2019-turkmenistan.pdf>, accessed April 7, 2022.

<sup>4</sup> Central Intelligence Agency. 2022. Turkmenistan: Communications. In The world factbook. URL: <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/turkmenistan/#communications>, accessed April 7, 2022.

TV Centre	X			
Channel One	X			
RT	X			

Other indirect forms of Russian influence are possible, including domestic outlets republishing narratives and pro-Russian journalists in-country. In this profile, AidData focused on direct Russian channels of influence through state-owned media infrastructure.

## Top Media Outlets

Table 2 identifies the most-consumed media outlets in Turkmenistan by medium (e.g., television, print, radio, online) based on available data. While we cannot know the exact influence of each individual outlet, we can assume that outlets that reach higher numbers of consumers have greater potential to influence more citizens.

AidData used a weighted average of data from our 2021 media survey of country experts and IREX’s 2019 Media Sustainability Index report to determine the top media outlets in Turkmenistan. As such, the top outlets may not exactly reflect the current order of most consumed outlets, but do show a reasonable picture of the media landscape over the past three years.

Table 2: Top Turkmen media outlets ranked by overall consumption

Rank	Television	Print	Radio	Online
1	Altyn Asyr	Neutralny Turkmenistan	Çar Tarapdan	Turkmenportal.com
2	Türkmen Owazy	Biznes Reklama	Wattan Radio	Tdh.gov
3	Miras	Turkmenistan	Owaz Radio	Azathabar.com
4	Türkmenistan Sport	Watan	Miras	Turkmenistan.gov.tm

Experts from our 2021 AidData survey reported that ORT—the Russian state-owned Channel One television station—was the top TV outlet; however, AidData staff could not independently verify the physical presence of Channel One in Turkmenistan. Viewership for ORT likely comes from a satellite feed or through a streaming website or app. As a result, the data for physically present outlets in Turkmenistan only included four top television outlets.

In addition, experts offered Hroniki Turkmenistan as a top print outlet, but this paper does not publish openly in the country and operates mainly as a Turkmen-language digital platform outside of Turkmenistan.<sup>6</sup> We removed it from our list and replaced it with Habarlar, the sixth most-circulated paper according to experts.

The survey results also suggested Türkmen Döwlet Habarlary (TDH) and Azatlyk Radiosy (Radio Liberty) were top radio channels, but we found no evidence that TDH has a radio channel or that Azatlyk Radiosy operated in the country. In fact, Turkmenistan only has four domestic stations, so we removed these two from our top outlets and placed Miras—the remaining radio station not on the list—as the fourth most listened to radio outlet.<sup>7</sup>

## Media Ownership

The government of Turkmenistan controls almost all media outlets operating in the country. Television and radio outlets are regulated by the State Committee of

---

<sup>5</sup> When less than five outlets were verified as operating in Turkmenistan, N/A connotes that there is no fifth outlet based on the available data.

<sup>6</sup> Chronicle of Turkmenistan. About Us. URL: <https://www.hronikatm.com/about/>, accessed April 7, 2022.

<sup>7</sup> IREX. 2019. Media Sustainability Index: Turkmenistan, p. 2.; Central Intelligence Agency. 2022. Turkmenistan: Communications.

Turkmenistan for Television, Radio Broadcasting and Cinematography,<sup>8</sup> though AidData was unable to find which government entity regulates print and online outlets.

Table 3 lists the ownership information of top Turkmen media outlets by medium (e.g., television, newspaper, radio, online). The sixteen Turkmen state-owned media outlets are color-coded blue. AidData staff categorized the remaining privately held media outlets based upon the level of Russian ownership that might increase their susceptibility to Kremlin influence. These categories are denoted with increasing saturation of red—no known Russian ties (no color), suspected Russian ties, known Russian ties, and direct Russian ownership. In Turkmenistan, one outlet has ownership with known Russian ties.

Table 3: Ownership of top Turkmen media outlets by share

No Russian ties  
  Suspected Russian ties  
  Known Russian ties  
  Direct Russian ownership  
  Local state-owned media

Medium	Rank	Outlet	Owner, Company	Owner, Individuals	Owner (%)
Television	1	Altyn Asyr	Government of Turkmenistan		100
	2	Türkmen Owazy	Government of Turkmenistan		100
	3	Miras	Government of Turkmenistan		100
	4	Türkmenistan Sport	Government of Turkmenistan		100
Print	1	Neutralny Turkmenistan	Government of Turkmenistan		100
	2	Biznes Reklama	Government of Turkmenistan		100
	3	Turkmenistan	Government of Turkmenistan		100
	4	Watan	Government of Turkmenistan		100
	5	Habarlar	Government of Turkmenistan		100
Radio	1	Çar Tarapdan	Government of Turkmenistan		100
	2	Wattan Radio	Government of Turkmenistan		100

<sup>8</sup> Asia-Pacific Broadcasting Union. Members Profile: State Committee of Turkmenistan for Television, Radio Broadcasting and Cinematography. URL: [https://www.abu.org.my/portfolio-item/state-committee-of-turkmenistan-for-television-radio-broadcasting-and-cinematography/?doing\\_wp\\_cron=1649264670.1222550868988037109375](https://www.abu.org.my/portfolio-item/state-committee-of-turkmenistan-for-television-radio-broadcasting-and-cinematography/?doing_wp_cron=1649264670.1222550868988037109375), accessed April 7, 2022.

	3	Owaz Radio	Government of Turkmenistan	100
	4	Miras	Government of Turkmenistan	100
	1	Turkmenportal.com	SNG-Media, LLC	Schetinin Pavel Konstantinovich 100
	2	Tdh.gov	Government of Turkmenistan	100
Online	3	Azathabar.com	Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty	U.S. Agency for Global Media 100
	4	Turkmenistan.gov.tm	Government of Turkmenistan	100
	5	Gundogar-news.com	Government of Turkmenistan	100

## Results

### Television, Print, and Radio

The top television, print, and radio outlets in Turkmenistan are entirely owned and controlled by the Turkmen government. The government allows seven television channels to air in Turkmenistan, though experts in our survey only identified four channels. In order of most watched, they are Altyn Asyr, Türkmen Owazy, Miras, and Türkmenistan Sport. Altyn Asyr covers political events, Türkmen Owazy is a music channel, Miras features content on history and culture, and Türkmenistan Sport features coverage of sporting events.<sup>9</sup> Rounding out the other available channels are the Turkmenistan TV Channel (a news channel that broadcasts in several languages including Russian), Yashlyk (which provides youth content), and Ashgabat TV (with local content related to the capital).<sup>10</sup>

More data exists about print than other outlets but it is still generally sparse. As of 2019, print dominated the media landscape in Turkmenistan,<sup>11</sup> which is unsurprising given the country's poor telecommunication infrastructure.<sup>12</sup> The top outlets are

<sup>9</sup> Asia-Pacific Broadcasting Union. Members Profile: State Committee of Turkmenistan for Television, Radio Broadcasting and Cinematography.

<sup>10</sup> Asia-Pacific Broadcasting Union. Members Profile: State Committee of Turkmenistan for Television, Radio Broadcasting and Cinematography.

<sup>11</sup> IREX. 2019. Media Sustainability Index: Turkmenistan, p. 8.

<sup>12</sup> Central Intelligence Agency. 2022. Turkmenistan: Communications.

Neutralny Turkmenistan, Biznes Reklama, Turkmenistan, Watan, and Habarlar, respectively. All five are owned by the government. IREX reports that Neutralny Turkmenistan and Turkmenistan are the country's main newspapers that are published daily, while Watan and Habarlar are published thrice weekly. Finally, Biznes Reklama is a business advertising paper published specifically by the Ministry of Trade and Foreign Economic Relations.<sup>13</sup>

There are four Turkmen radio stations that broadcast in-country. The experts rank Çar Tarapdan, Wattan Radio, and Owaz Radio as the top three radio outlets, respectively. Miras is the only remaining outlet that broadcasts in-country, and we list them as the fourth-most consumed radio station. All four outlets are state-owned. Additionally, WorldRadioMap indicates that several foreign radio stations broadcast on Turkmen airwaves from neighboring countries, including stations from Iran, Tajikistan, and Armenia.<sup>14</sup>

In sum, we find the Turkmen state completely dominates all top traditional media in-country. This is no surprise given its closed nature and high level of state control. Directors of news outlets that do not follow the government's proscribed narrative are fired, such as the recent case of Miras director Guvanch Bayramdurdyev, who did not cover the country's economy in accordance with government expectations.<sup>15</sup> While the Turkmen government controls all top traditional media in-country, this single ownership structure leaves the Turkmen media highly vulnerable to foreign influence. If the president or his government were compromised by a malign foreign actor, this could greatly affect the narratives that Turkmen citizens consume every day.

## Online

Turkmenistan has the lowest level of Internet penetration (21.25%) of any country in the Europe and Eurasia region.<sup>16</sup> While online media ownership generally mirrors

---

<sup>13</sup> IREX. 2019. Media Sustainability Index: Turkmenistan, p. 8

<sup>14</sup> World Radio Map. Radio stations in Ashgabat. URL: <https://worldradiomap.com/tm/ashgabat>, accessed April 7, 2022.

<sup>15</sup> Freedom House. 2021. Nations in Transit: Turkmenistan. URL: <https://freedomhouse.org/country/turkmenistan/nations-transit/2021>, accessed April 7, 2022.

<sup>16</sup> World Bank. 2022. World Governance Indicators: Individuals using the Internet (% of population) - Turkmenistan. URL: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/IT.NET.USER.ZS?locations=TM>, accessed April 7, 2022.



traditional media in being completely state dominated, there is some evidence of foreign ownership based on the responses provided by experts. The top online outlet is Turkmenportal.com. While based in Ashgabat, it is registered at the Federal Service for Supervision of Communications, Information Technologies and Mass Communications (Roskomnadzor), a Russian federal agency that monitors and censors Russian media. Roskomnadzor's database lists SNG-Media, LLC as the company that owns Turkmenportal.com. The Russian legal entities database SKRIN points to CIS Media, LLC as owning SNG-Media, with Schetin Pavel Konstantinovich as the ultimate owner.<sup>17</sup> Although foreign-owned, the content of Turkmenportal.com appears to adhere to Turkmen government expectations<sup>18</sup> that published articles "should not mislead readers and contradict the legislation of Turkmenistan."<sup>19</sup>

The second-most visited webpage is the government-owned Tdh.gov, which is the main website of the country's flagship news agency. Third is Azathabar.com, the Prague-based and U.S. government-funded Turkmen language Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty service. Although the government blocks online access to Azathabar.com in the country, some citizens are likely able to access it through circumvention software such as virtual private networks (VPNs).<sup>20</sup>

The fourth-most consumed online site is the government-owned Turkmenistan.gov.tm, which like Tdh.gov serves as a news outlet and direct channel of information from government to citizens. Finally, experts suggest Gundogar-news.org is the fifth-most trafficked website in Turkmenistan. Gundogar-news.com is a government-run spoof of Gundogar.org,<sup>21</sup> a pro-democracy website run by Turkmen exiles that is barred in Turkmenistan.<sup>22</sup> The government uses this platform to counter the narratives Gundogar.org publishes.<sup>23</sup>

---

<sup>17</sup> SKRIN. Counterparty check: ООО "СНГ-МЕДИА." URL: <https://kontragent.skrin.ru/issuers/1167746868849>, accessed April 7, 2022.

<sup>18</sup> IREX. 2019. Media Sustainability Index: Turkmenistan, p. 8.

<sup>19</sup> Turkmenportal. Cooperation page: Basic terms of publication of articles. URL: <https://turkmenportal.com/en/information/3>, accessed April 7, 2022.

<sup>20</sup> Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. 2021. RFE/RL's Turkmen Service: Radio Azatlyk. URL: <https://pressroom.rferl.org/rferl-turkmen-service-radio-azatlyk>, accessed April 7, 2022.

<sup>21</sup> IREX. 2019. Media Sustainability Index: Turkmenistan, p. 8.

<sup>22</sup> Gundogar. О «ГУНДОГАРЕ». URL: <http://www.gundogar.org/?0150000000000000011000000>, accessed April 7, 2022.

<sup>23</sup> IREX. 2019. Media Sustainability Index: Turkmenistan, p. 8.

In sum, like traditional media, the Turkmen government dominates the online space. The Turkmen government owns three top outlets directly, exerts influence on a Russian-owned outlet, and severely restricts access to another outlet that publishes content critical of the government. Although it is possible that Azathabar.com is accessed by many in Turkmen citizens using VPNs, this access is in jeopardy. Freedom House reports that the state-owned Turkmentelecom recently installed technology to increase surveillance on Turkmen citizens.<sup>24</sup> Azathabar.com itself reported that security officials identified and harrassed several residents using a VPN to view information critical of the government on YouTube in 2020.<sup>25</sup>

## Conclusion

Turkmenistan is one of the most closed countries in the world, and its media ownership reflects this reality. All of its top traditional outlets are dominated by the government. The state also dominates the online space, directly controlling some outlets, while limiting the autonomy of action of others through restricting broadcasts or incentivizing outlets to adhere to the governments' content policies. Given that the vast majority of the media is controlled by a single owner, Turkmenistan is highly vulnerable to narratives from foreign, malign actors should they be able to influence the President. In this respect, Russian narratives could be inserted into stories that Turkmen citizens consume every day, spread by Turkmen state-run media, adding foreign manipulation into an already closed media system.

---

<sup>24</sup> Freedom House. 2021. Nations in Transit: Turkmenistan.

<sup>25</sup> Azatlyk Radiosy Türkmenistan. "Туркменистанцев допрашивают за просмотр заблокированных в стране сайтов." Published December 14, 2020. URL: <https://rus.azathabar.com/a/30999952.html>, accessed April 7, 2022.