

**Information Blockade and Fomenting Terror through Propaganda  
Must Be Stopped in Turkmenistan**

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This statement was delivered at the second session of the OSCE Supplementary Human Dimension Meeting on freedom of expression and freedom of the media on 28 October 2016 by the Center for the Development of Democracy and Human Rights, a member of the Turkmenistan Civic Solidarity Group and the Civic Solidarity Platform<sup>1</sup>.

The Turkmenistan Civic Solidarity Group expresses its utmost concern over the recent negative developments in Turkmenistan, which threaten to completely destroy freedom of expression and access to information in the country. For many years, Turkmenistan has had no independent mass media, and the government has prohibited the distribution of foreign press and brutally suppressed freedom of speech. However, recent developments could push the country even closer to total isolation from the outside world. The OSCE political bodies, institutions, and member States must pay attention to this dramatic turn of events. We urge them to take action to stop Turkmenistan's slide towards dictatorship.

First, the country's authorities are taking active steps to impose a full information blockade on Turkmen society. In particular, they are advancing an ongoing nationwide campaign to destroy satellite antennas. Throughout the post-Soviet years, privately owned satellite dishes have served as the only means for the Turkmen people to access independent international television and radio broadcasting. Official Turkmen and Russian television only broadcast propaganda. Countrywide removal of private satellite dishes on the pretext of "improving the look of cities" began in the spring of 2015. After an intervention by the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media, the campaign was put on hold, but soon resumed with new vigor. Today, with the adoption of the country's new Constitution, celebrations of the 25th anniversary of independence, and preparations for presidential elections, the campaign to destroy the remaining satellite dishes is gaining new strength. The removal of satellite dishes happens in two stages: first, in a targeted effort driven by the central government, TV antennas are removed from rooftops everywhere, one after another. After a while, the local authorities raid residential communities repeatedly, destroying any antennas that people have managed to recover and install in inconspicuous places. For this purpose, small teams of municipal employees make surveillance rounds of local communities and destroy any detected antennas in a most barbaric way so as to make them unrepairable and unusable. Residents trying to resist the ban have faced pressure and threats. Local observers have described the campaign as "information terror." As an alternative, the authorities are offering strictly censored "cable TV" which airs pre-recorded foreign entertainment programs and does not include any radio broadcasting. Satellite radio allowed Turkmen citizens to listen to Radio Azatlyk, which is the RFE/RL's Turkmen Service and the only Turkmen-language broadcaster independent from the authorities. The destruction of satellite dishes effectively cuts off Turkmen people from any information and news from the outside world, leaving them with nothing but the official propaganda broadcast by Turkmen and Russian television.

The Internet is prohibitively expensive in Turkmenistan, its speed is deliberately slow, and most importantly, it is subject to total censorship. Access is blocked to all websites that have ever posted critical information about the Turkmen authorities, including the websites of foreign NGOs and Turkmen human rights groups in exile. Virtually all known social media, messengers, and video hosting platforms, such as YouTube, are outlawed. All Internet access is channeled through a sole government-controlled

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<sup>1</sup> The Turkmenistan Civic Solidarity Group is one of the Working Groups of the Civic Solidarity Platform, a broad-based network of nongovernmental human rights organizations, which has been active for more than five years in the OSCE framework and brings together more than 80 member organizations from nearly 30 countries in Europe, Central Asia and North America.

monopolist provider, allowing the authorities to access and read all user correspondence. Attempts to use proxy servers and VPN are detected and blocked; their users are subjected to administrative penalties and summoned for “preventive interviews” to the Ministry of National Security, where they face psychological pressure and intimidation. As an example of the Turkmen authorities’ attitude towards the Internet and freedom of expression, President Berdymuhamedov said recently that Turkmenistan had already put together “a team of experienced professionals who will deal with the proliferation of false information on the Internet”<sup>2</sup> about the Asian Indoor Games to be held in the autumn of 2017 in Turkmenistan. Thus, the Internet, as well as television, radio and print media, can no longer serve as a channel for receiving and transmitting independent public interest information in Turkmenistan.

Second, the authorities have increased repression on independent collection and dissemination of information. We are gravely concerned over recent reports of persecution and punishment targeting civil society activists cooperating with foreign news agencies and non-governmental organizations. In particular, reporters of RFE/RL’s Turkmen Service (Radio Azatlyk) have faced continuing physical and psychological pressure. Last year, Azatlyk stringer and civic activist Saparmamed Nepeskuliev was sentenced to three years in prison on fabricated charges of drug possession. Last week, two new arrests were reported of activists documenting human rights violations in cotton production, and a violent assault against a female Azatlyk reporter, who was taking photos of people queuing for scarce food products in state stores. The authorities are doing all they can to stop critical reporting of the situation in Turkmenistan from getting out.

The disgusting propaganda against civic activists, which has in recent years grown into full-scale psychological terror, serves the same purpose. Turkmenistan’s senior government officials have initiated and supported a number of propaganda-driven websites to promote loyalty to the government, construct a foreign enemy image, and demonize the few remaining Turkmen civil society activists. While such websites never mention their government affiliation, their aggressive propaganda clearly indicates that they not only transmit the official opinions, but also seek to propagate the official ideology and outlook on domestic and international events. They react with aggressive publications to every critical comment voiced by foreign media or raised by intergovernmental organizations; such reactions are often extremely vulgar and clearly seek to create the image of an enemy. They also publish offensive comments and threats targeting human rights defenders in exile and the few civil society activists living in the country. They smear, marginalize, and attack specific individuals, independent activists as a social group, and civic engagement as a phenomenon. Such use of massive, sordid propaganda to forge the image of an enemy contributes to an overall atmosphere of intimidation and intolerance for independent activism, effectively calls for discrimination, and justifies violence against civic activists. Such legitimization of violence is extremely dangerous in the context of increasingly frequent threats and attacks against activists in exile and even murders of their relatives inside the country.

We also wish to draw international attention to another odious trend recently observed in these propaganda-driven publications, along with the already familiar insults, demeaning labels, and images of external and internal enemies. These publications have also engaged in explicit anti-Semitism. Blatant and increasing anti-Semitism projected by the authors and the government officials who stand behind them clearly indicates that they have crossed the last boundary. This disgraceful practice deserves strong and public condemnation by the international community. Turning a blind eye would be both impossible and unacceptable.

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.turkmenistan.ru/ru/articles/42050.html>

An investigation conducted by Turkmen activists has revealed both the customers and masterminds behind this psychological terror campaign. The names of the authors and, more importantly, ideologists and initiators of these publications, are also known. We know that, unfortunately, top level officials of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Turkmenistan are behind this disgusting campaign of harassment targeting civil society activists. These officials have been the architects of the Turkmen president's personality cult. Moreover, they were the organizers and participants of massive repression in Turkmenistan under President Niyazov and are personally responsible for the numerous ongoing disappearances in Turkmen prisons. They wish to hide the evidence of these crimes and other human rights violations from Turkmen society and international community and evade responsibility.

All of these developments suggest that the Turkmen authorities have chosen to ignore their OSCE commitments regarding freedom of expression and access to information in order to hide other massive and systematic violations of their human rights obligations.

Just two months ago, the OSCE once again tried to assist the Turkmen authorities in meeting their commitments regarding democratic institutions and the rule of law. With the consent of the Turkmen government, the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights conducted a legal review of the draft new Constitution and offered extensive recommendations on amending the draft pursuant to Turkmenistan's obligations under the OSCE and the UN. However, the country's authorities chose to blatantly disregard these recommendations and instead of amending the draft, put it on a fast track. The new Constitution passed all stages of adoption and approval within one day, a few months earlier than originally scheduled, with all provisions contrary to international law still intact. This is an overt challenge to the OSCE and the international community on behalf of the Turkmen government.

We note with regret that the absence of an adequate response from the international community to the willful disregard by the Turkmen authorities of their OSCE commitments and of recommendations by the OSCE institutions was soon followed by public rhetoric containing threats against civil activists and disgusting anti-Semitic statements. It was also followed by further suppression of the right to free access to information and freedom of expression. It is no longer possible to continue to engage in dialogue "as usual" with Turkmenistan and tolerate deception, simulation of cooperation, and massive violations of international obligations by the country's authorities. The international community must undertake a sober and responsible assessment of the situation in Turkmenistan and develop new approaches to addressing the untenable situation.