**RFE/RL Calls On Turkmenistan To Release Journalist**

**Saparmamed Nepeskuliev**, a contributor to RFE/RL’s Turkmen Service and other independent news outlets, is **imprisoned** in an undisclosed location in Turkmenistan after being arrested and held incommunicado on fabricated charges one year ago.

**RFE/RL and international human rights defenders demand his immediate release.**

**Background**

Saparmamed Nepeskuliev, a contributor to RFE/RL’s Turkmen Service since 2015, produced photojournalism and short videos that provided local audiences with uncensored news and information about their communities and their lives. His reporting about poverty, [official privilege](http://www.azathabar.com/a/27041292.html), [failing infrastructure](http://www.azathabar.com/a/27085289.html), and deficient schools was unique in a country long recognized as being among the most repressive in the world.

Nepeskuliev was [detained](http://www.rferl.org/content/turkmen-journalist-missing/27181556.html) by agents of Turkmenistan’s National Security Ministry on July 7, 2015 in the western city of Avaza while he was on assignment photographing sites in the coastal resort. A former detainee who shared a cell with him in a detention facility in the nearby city of Akdash has [recounted](http://www.rferl.org/media/video/nepeskuliev-cellmate-interview/27811785.html) how police placed illegal opiates in his luggage and rigged a drug test to produce evidence of drug possession and use. He was [convicted](http://www.rferl.org/content/journalists-in-trouble-mother-condemns-official-silence/27235236.html) on narcotics charges in closed proceedings in a Turkmenbashi city court on August 31, 2015.

Nepeskuliev’s last known communication was with the cellmate in late September, 2015 when they were both transferred to the Lebap province’s prison colony LBK-12, a facility notorious for its deadly conditions. It is believed that Nepeskuliev was subsequently transferred back to the country’s western Balkan province to the BL-D/5 facility, but despite numerous appeals, authorities have failed to confirm either his whereabouts or his well-being.

RFE/RL Editor in Chief Nenad Pejic has demanded his release, calling his imprisonment “a brutal attempt to silence a journalist and a violation of every human right and humanitarian standard.” He added, “There has been no communication with him since September last year--we cannot even be sure he’s alive.”

**Calls For Release**

International organizations have condemned Nepeskuliev’s detention and demanded his release on grounds that his disappearance, incommunicado detention, denial of family access, and the lack of due process in the adjudication of his case constitute flagrant violations of international law.

The UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention in 2015 designated his detention “[arbitrary](http://www.rferl.org/content/journalists-in-trouble-nepeskuliev-imprisonment-arbitrary/27490174.html)” and called for his immediate release, [declaring](https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G16/057/81/PDF/G1605781.pdf) that “the [Turkmen] Government failed to demonstrate that Mr. Nepeskuliev was tried, convicted and sentenced in a due process.” The Working Group also called the government’s account of the case “confusing,” drawing particular attention to its inability to establish the location of Nepeskuliev’s original arrest. The Working Group expressed concerns about torture allegations, referring them to the UN Special Rapporteur on Torture.

Nepeskuliev’s case was recently raised by European Union officials in the context of annual bilateral human rights talks with Turkmenistan in May, 2016. Citing unlawful detention, the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media Dunja Mijatović [called](http://www.osce.org/fom/176726) for his release in August, 2015. The U.S. - based Committee to Protect Journalists demanded his release in a [letter](https://cpj.org/2015/10/cpj-urges-kerry-to-call-for-release-of-imprisoned-.php) to U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry last fall that was co-signed by Mijatović, U.S. State Department Assistant Secretary for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor Tom Malinowski, and U.S. ambassadors George A. Krol, Sheila Gwaltney, Susan M. Elliott, Allan Phillip Mustard, and Pamela L. Spratlen. Amnesty International launched an [urgent action](http://www.amnestyusa.org/get-involved/take-action-now/turkmenistan-reveal-the-whereabouts-of-saparmamed-nepeskuliev-ua-17415) in August, 2015 demanding that Turkmen authorities declare where Nepeskuliev is being held. Freedom House, the Norwegian Helsinki Committee, Human Rights Watch, the Cotton Campaign, the Alternative Turkmen News, the World Movement for Democracy, Reporters Without Borders, and RFE/RL sent a [collective appeal](http://www.rferl.org/content/journalists-in-trouble-letter-demands-freedom-for-nepeskuliev/27307526.html) to Turkmen Ambassador to the U.S. Meret Orazov and Turkmen Foreign Minister Rashid Meredov in October, 2015 demanding Nepeskuliev’s release.

**Media Freedom In Turkmenistan**

Freedom House has labelled Turkmenistan among the “Worst of the Worst” of the world’s human rights offenders for each of the last 13 years, ranking it 198 out of 199 countries surveyed in its [Freedom of the Press 2016](https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-press/freedom-press-2016) report. Reporters Without Borders has ranked it 178 out of 180 countries in its [2016 World Press Freedom Index](https://rsf.org/en/turkmenistan). Human Rights Watch describes Turkmenistan’s human rights record as “atrocious” and “extremely repressive,” [documenting](https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2016/country-chapters/turkmenistan) the use of imprisonment and torture as forms of political retaliation.

Even by these standards, Nepeskuliev’s detention marks an intensification of the government’s suppression of the media. In the nine months prior to his arrest, six of nine correspondents with [RFE/RL’s Turkmen Service](http://www.rferl.org/content/pressrelease/27431793.html) were forced to resign from their jobs in response to a targeted intimidation campaign. Authorities staged [public shamings](http://www.rferl.org/content/central-asia-that-familiar-repression/27189039.html) aimed at humiliating them in their communities for reporting that was not sufficiently “patriotic,” and accused them of being spies; orchestrated the firing of their relatives from jobs; and interrogated their family members, including children.

Says Turkmen Service Director Muhammad Tahir, “Nepeskuliev’s imprisonment was only the most ruthless part of a campaign by the authorities to systematically destroy the country’s only independent reporting network.” The Service continues to operate, with online audiences in the millions, but according to Tahir, “the government is determined to stop any communication or engagement with citizens that it doesn’t control.”

**For more information please contact:**

**Yevgeniy Sydorov** sydorovy@rferl.org +1.202.457.6952 (Washington, DC)

**Martins Zvaners** zvanersm@rferl.org +1.202.457.6948 (Washington, DC)

**Joanna Levison** levisonj@rferl.org +420.221.122.080 (Prague, Czech Republic)