

Turkmen Lining Up for Cellular Telephones

By [The Moscow Times](#)

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ASHGABAT, Turkmenistan — It took a threat from the authoritarian leader of this reclusive nation to give desperate, cutoff mobile phone users a chance to chat again.

Most users in Turkmenistan lost service last year when authorities pulled the license of Russian-owned mobile company MTS, leaving only state-owned monopoly mobile phone provider Altyn Asyr. Up to 2.4 million subscribers were left without service, and Altyn Asyr has only been able to provide for a fraction of those customers.

President Gurbanguly Berdymukhammedov warned the communications minister on Friday that he would be fired if service were not improved within three days.

Altyn Asyr said rules on who can buy SIM cards have been relaxed. Huge lines appeared Tuesday outside Altyn Asyr outlets in the capital, Ashgabat, after the news spread.

The sale of Altyn Asyr SIM cards is still being limited to one per subscriber, although the rule forbidding customers from buying cards in cities other than where they are officially registered has been lifted.

Under strict rules inherited from the Soviet Union, Turkmen citizens must obtain permits specifying their permanent place of residence, which greatly complicates receiving basic public amenities for those living and working in another city.

Although demand for SIM cards is high nationwide, waiting times for connection in cities outside the capital can last several months.

At one Altyn Asyr office in central Ashgabat, assistants at the six open counters struggled to serve the several dozen customers crowding the hall.

Olugerek, who lives in Yolotan, a town about 450 kilometers east of Ashgabat, said she had waited several hours outside another Altyn Asyr shop before trying her luck elsewhere.

"In our provincial capital, Mary, I got a notice last month telling me that I was due to receive my SIM card only on Sept. 7," said Olugerek, declining to provide her surname, as many do in Turkmenistan out of fear of harassment from the authorities.

In April, Turkmenistan signed deals with China's Huawei Technologies and Finish-German venture Nokia Siemens Networks to help increase capacity at Altyn Asyr.

Berdymukhammedov had earlier slated Altyn Asyr, which currently serves about 1 million users, saying "bungling" at the company was harming its efficiency.

The president has also said the local market needs at least three private mobile phone companies to foster competition and boost the provision of telephony and Internet services.

But Russian-owned MTS has been urging the international business community not to invest in Turkmenistan, saying it was unjustly deprived of its operating license.

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