



EU-Turkmenistan Human Rights Dialogue: EU Should Call for Concrete Steps to Improve Civil Society Situation in Turkmenistan

Brussels, Vienna, The Hague 6 July 2011. Turkmen Initiative for Human Rights, International Partnership for Human Rights and the Netherlands Helsinki Committee urge the EU to raise concerns about persecution of civil society in an open and frank way during human rights talks with the Turkmen government this Friday. The EU should also make clear that failure to ensure real progress on this and other human rights issues will impact continued EU engagement with the country.

The EU has been holding annual Human Rights Dialogues with Turkmen authorities since 2008. A new round will take place in Brussels on 8 July. This meeting comes at a time when efforts to enhance EU-Turkmenistan relations are under way.

An Interim EU-Turkmenistan Trade Agreement (ITA) entered into force last August and is now in the process of being replaced by a broader Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) similar to those the EU has concluded with other countries. However, a vote on the PCA in the European Parliament has been postponed to September pending an investigation of the agreement's human rights dimension. This decision was made after a parliament delegation visited Turkmenistan in late April and reported a lack of progress on key human rights criteria previously identified by the parliament. The parliament's assent is needed to ratify the PCA.

Like other human rights NGOs, our organizations believe that the EU should require the Turkmen government to demonstrate concrete human rights improvements before moving ahead with the PCA. Given Turkmenistan's dismal human rights record, ratification may otherwise signal that the EU is not serious in its efforts to promote human rights in this country and undermine the PCA's human rights clause right from the start. This clause states that respect for human rights is an "essential element" of the agreement and allows either party to take "appropriate measures" in case of a breach of obligations by the other party. A similar clause included in the ITA has not been visibly enforced.

While Turkmenistan has seen a number of reform initiatives since current President Berdimuhamedov took office in 2007, most of these have only amounted to window-dressing with little practical impact. As a result, the human rights situation has remained largely unchanged. The environment for civil society remains extremely repressive and the rights to freedom of expression, association and assembly continue to be seriously curtailed.

As highlighted in a **briefing note** to the EU prepared by our organizations, no independent human rights NGOs are still able to work openly in Turkmenistan. Representatives of civil society who speak up about human rights problems or challenge government policies in other ways are intimidated and harassed by security services. They and their relatives are held under surveillance, summoned for



interrogation in the form of “preventive discussions”, prohibited from traveling abroad, arrested, prosecuted and forcibly placed in psychiatric care.

Any attempts by civil society members to stage public protests are suppressed by authorities.

Recent examples of harassment include the following cases:

- Police quickly dispersed a group of people who gathered in central Ashgabat on 8 June to protest the demolition of apartment buildings to make room for a new motorway. Four women believed to be organizers were later arrested.
- An ethnic Kazakh activist was convicted on 13 May on fraud and bribery charges believed to be motivated by his civic engagement. He was given a suspended prison sentence and banned from leaving the country.
- A married couple struggling to obtain justice for ill-treatment suffered at the hands of security services were arrested in their Ashgabat home on 19 April. Their arrest appeared to be a revenge for complaints they had submitted to national and international bodies.
- An 80-year old Radio Liberty contributor was forcibly placed in psychiatric care for several weeks in March-April. Prior to this he had criticized the corrupt practices of local authorities.
- Two young pop artists were arrested in February after giving an interview to a Turkish TV channel in connection with a concert in that country. They were subsequently sentenced to two years in prison on dubious criminal charges.

For more detailed information, as well as recommendations for measures the EU should request to improve the civil society situation in Turkmenistan, see our **briefing note**.

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