



Ms. Federica Mogherini
High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy/Vice-President of the
Commission
European Commission
Rue de la Loi / Wetstraat 200
1049 Brussels
Belgium

Subject: Raising key human rights concerns during visit of Turkmenistan's Foreign Minister

Brussels, Vienna
5 October 2018

Dear High Representative Federica Mogherini,

We are writing to you on behalf of International Partnership for Human Rights (IPHR) and Turkmen Initiative for Human Rights (TIHR) ahead of your meeting with the Foreign Minister of Turkmenistan, Raşit Meredow, in Brussels on 12 October. Taking into consideration that this is the first Brussels visit by Turkmenistan's Foreign Minister in five years, we urge you to use this opportunity to prominently raise human rights issues with the Minister, seek concrete commitments from Turkmenistan's government for human rights progress and make it clear that closer EU-Turkmenistan relations requires improved compliance with international human rights standards.

While there has recently been a certain opening on human rights in neighbouring Uzbekistan, the situation in Turkmenistan remains essentially unchanged and fundamental freedoms continue to be seriously curtailed. As before, Turkmenistan features at the bottom of international freedom rankings.¹

Below we briefly describe a number of current key human rights concerns in the country, which we encourage you to address during your meeting with the Foreign Minister:

Turkmenistan's Media Law prohibits censorship and guarantees media independence, but in practice, there is **no media freedom**. The state rigidly controls all national media outlets, uses them for propaganda, and **pressures them to focus on reporting about positive developments** and achievements of the government. As a result, state media does not cover the current economic crisis and other serious problems in the country.



The state also **restricts access to foreign sources of information**, including by **arbitrarily removing private satellite dishes** that are used to watch and listen to foreign TV and radio stations. This campaign has been under way for years, under the pretext that the satellite dishes spoil the city view, and it shows no signs of ending. While internet use has increased in the last few years², **access remains restricted, speed slow and prices high** compared to global standards, despite the government's pledged commitment to promoting internet development. Foreign news and NGO sites that contain alternative information about the situation in the country, as well as many social media and communications apps are blocked.

Independent human rights organizations cannot operate openly in Turkmenistan and **civil society activists, journalists working with foreign media, and other government critics have faced growing pressure** in the context of the current economic crisis.

Independent journalist **Soltan Achilova** has repeatedly been assaulted by unknown perpetrators, intimidated and warned to give up her work. Animal rights defender **Galina Kucherenko** was arbitrarily detained last December and sentenced to 15 days' arrest based on an alleged complaint from neighbours.

She has later been subjected to renewed intimidation. Human rights activist **Nataliya Shabunts** and social media activist **Galina Vertyakova** are other victims of harassment and threats. Independent journalist **Saparmed Nepeskuliev** was finally released in May 2018 after serving a three-year prison sentence on charges believed to have been brought in retaliation for his reporting. His health seriously deteriorated in prison. Family members of activists and journalists have also been singled out for harassment. For example, a year ago, unknown perpetrators threw stones and bricks at the windows of the apartment of **Khalida Izbastinova**, the 76-year-old mother of TIHR's Austria-based director Farid Tuhbatullin in an apparent attempt to put pressure on him because of his human rights work and TIHR's uncensored coverage of developments in Turkmenistan. Those responsible have not been found.

While suppressing any expressions of discontent and intimidating those who dare to speak up on socio-economic and other problems in the country, the authorities **forcibly mobilize residents for state-organized, regime-praising mass events**. This practice runs contrary to the freedom of assembly, a fundamental aspect of which is the right to voluntarily participate in assemblies. It also jeopardizes the health and well-being of those affected since the events, and the rehearsals for them often are lengthy, intense and held in any weather conditions.

Dozens of individuals previously imprisoned after trials shrouded in secrecy remain **forcibly disappeared** in Turkmenistan. The authorities deny these prisoners contact with their families, who have not received any information about their fate or whereabouts for years and do not know whether they are dead or alive. Some of the disappeared have died in prison. An updated list of disappeared individuals that the Prove They Are Alive NGO campaign published in September 2018 features 121 names.³



A prison reform program has resulted in improved conditions for some categories of detainees. However, **conditions in other detention facilities remain dire**, with overcrowding, undernourishment, tuberculosis, and lack of access to adequate medical care.⁴ Credible allegations of the **widespread use of torture and ill-treatment** in detention facilities persist, with individuals convicted on politically motivated grounds or in politically charged cases reportedly being singled out for particularly abusive treatment, including at the notorious high-security Ovadan Depe prison. There is **no independent monitoring of places of detention** and a Criminal Code provision on torture is not being applied in practice.

In another practice in serious violation of Turkmenistan's international human rights obligations, the authorities continue to **arbitrarily restrict travel abroad of citizens**. According to information from Turkmenistan's Independent Lawyers Association, a Netherlands-based exiled NGO with which TIHR cooperates, the number of citizens blacklisted for travel abroad is currently close to 31 000.⁵ Security concerns are often used to justify travel bans, but there are no transparent criteria for prohibiting citizens from travelling abroad.

For further information about the issues summarized above, please refer to TIHR's and IPHR's briefing paper for the 2018 EU-Turkmenistan Human Rights Dialogue (attached), as well as the most recent updates on fundamental freedoms in Turkmenistan prepared by our organizations for the CIVICUS Monitor:

Turkmenistan: the state restricts fundamental rights to cover up crisis, 3 Oct 2018

<http://iphronline.org/turkmenistan-the-state-restricts-fundamental-rights-to-cover-up-crisis.html>

Turkmenistan: release of journalist does not signal any improvement, 27 June 2018

<http://iphronline.org/turkmenistan-release-of-journalist-does-not-signal-any-improvement.html>

We thank you for your attention to this letter and wish you a productive meeting with Foreign Minister Meredow.

Sincerely,
International Partnership for Human Rights (IPHR)
Turkmen Initiative for Human Rights (TIHR)



¹ For example, Turkmenistan was included among the “worst of the worst” countries in the world in Freedom House’s Freedom in the World 2018 survey, with only Syria, South Sudan, Eritrea and North Korea receiving worse aggregate scores. In the 2018 Press Freedom Index published by Reporters Without Borders Turkmenistan was ranked 178th out of 180 countries, with only Eritrea and North Korea behind it.

² According to the most recent figure from the International Telecommunication Union, about 18 percent of the population uses the internet. See <https://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Pages/stat/default.aspx>

³ The list is available at: <https://provetheyarealive.org/the-disappeared-updated/>

⁴ See more in report on Turkmenistan’s penitentiary facilities by TIHR and Turkmenistan’s Independent Lawyers Association, <https://en.hronikatm.com/2018/01/turkmenistans-penitentiary-facilities-report-by-tihr-and-tila/>

⁵ See <https://en.hronikatm.com/2018/09/turkmenistans-black-lists-includes-over-30-thousand-names/>