



Key trends in the protection of fundamental rights in Turkmenistan

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The Turkmenistani government continues to systematically deny fundamental rights and freedoms to its citizens and stifle dissent. For this reason, the country has received new bottom ratings in international surveys measuring the level of freedom across the world. For example, in the 2020 Freedom in the World survey, published by Freedom House, Turkmenistan was among the worst of the worst countries. It had an aggregate score for political and civil liberties equal to that of Eritrea and South Sudan and only war-torn Syria fared worse.¹ In the 2020 World Press Freedom Index, compiled by Reporters without Borders, Turkmenistan was ranked 179th among 180 countries, with only North Korea behind.²

The Turkmenistani government has responded to the global COVID-19 pandemic with denial, lack of transparency and intimidation. As COVID-19 has spread across the world, the government has insisted that there are no registered cases of infections in Turkmenistan, although independent sources have reported about such cases. At the same time, it has been slow in facilitating a World Health Organization (WHO) mission to look into the COVID-19 situation in the country. The authorities have also sought to prevent discussion about the virus and supposedly “prevent panic” over the pandemic and have detained and threatened people speaking about COVID-19 related issues in public places.

In a similar vein, the authorities have attempted to cover up the destruction caused by a hurricane that hit parts of the country in April 2020 and the worsening food shortages that have resulted from the protracted economic crisis and restrictions on transportation introduced because of COVID-19. The authorities have prevented citizens from learning about the real state of affairs on these and other issues by rigidly controlling state media, obstructing access to foreign sources of information, and discrediting and attacking independent Turkmenistan-covering outlets based abroad. They have also sought to track down and intimidate individuals believed to have provided information to foreign-based outlets or to have used censorship circumvention tools to visit regime-critical websites that are blocked in the country. Following the April 2020 hurricane, several dozen people were detained on accusation of sharing photos and video clips of the havoc caused by this natural disaster with relatives and other contacts abroad, and some of them faced charges of allegedly defaming and insulting authorities. The authorities have also warned residents that those who spread “slanderous” foreign media and social media reports about the current food shortages will be “held liable”, while using both persuasion and intimidation to quell spontaneous protests by residents venting their frustration at the decreasing availability of flour and other basic food staples at affordable prices.

Independent journalists, civil society activists and others who publicly criticize the authorities remain highly vulnerable to persecution, including politically motivated imprisonment. Several dozen individuals imprisoned on such grounds remain disappeared.

The Turkmenistani authorities have called on citizens to inform them about fellow citizens who spread “rumours” about the situation in the country and have recruited designated informants to report on people who engage in “suspicious” behaviour on- and offline. Independent journalists, civil society activists and other government critics face a high risk of persecution, including politically motivated imprisonment. Several dozen individuals imprisoned on such grounds remain disappeared within the country’s prison system.

The authorities have continued forcibly mass mobilizing residents for regime-praising events at the threat of repercussions, even after the outbreak of the global COVID-19 pandemic. This practice runs counter to the right to freedom of assembly and has been criticized by international human rights experts. While new travel restrictions were introduced in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the authorities already previously barred citizens from travelling abroad on arbitrary grounds. In the past year, such bans have particularly affected people on their way to work or study in Turkey as the government has become increasingly fearful of opposition to its policies among the large Turkmenistani diaspora community in this country.

These issues are described in more detail in the sections below, which are followed by a set of recommendations to the Turkmenistani authorities.

Government response to COVID-19: Denial, censorship and intimidation

The Turkmenistani government’s approach to the global Covid-19 pandemic has been characterized by denial and the lack of transparency. The authorities have taken some steps to prevent the spread of the virus in the country, including by restricting travel across the national borders, placing those arriving from abroad in quarantine, limiting internal migration, and raising awareness of hygiene related issues among citizens.³ At the same time, the government has continued to insist that there are no registered cases of COVID-19 infections in the country, although independent sources have reported about such cases. In particular, in mid-April 2020, TIHR learned that seven people held in a Turkmenabat-located quarantine zone for people recently having returned from abroad had been diagnosed with COVID-19.⁴

At a government briefing held for representatives of international organizations on 22 April 2020, Foreign Minister Raşit Meredow dismissed allegations that the government was concealing cases of COVID-19 infections. He said that the government is “not hiding anything” and that it “immediately would inform” the WHO about any confirmed case of COVID-19.⁵ Unlike previously, the government acknowledged the existence of quarantine zones in the country, but without indicating that anyone would have tested positively for COVID-19 among those subjected to quarantine.

In response to the government’s declaration about the absence of any COVID-19 infections in the country, the WHO announced plans to conduct a mission to Turkmenistan to look into the situation.⁶ However, the WHO only confirmed having received an invitation to visit Turkmenistan on 5 May⁷, and at the end of May, the mission was still being organized⁸. In response to a media inquiry, on 3 June, WHO Regional Director for Europe Hans Kluge said that the mission would take place “within a couple of weeks”.⁹

According to TIHR's information, the announcement of the upcoming WHO visit prompted the Turkmenistani authorities to take measures aimed at preventing the international experts from finding out the real situation in the country with respect to the corona virus. In particular, the authorities transferred COVID-19 infected individuals from quarantine zones to hospitals located in remote areas of the country.¹⁰ Attempts of the authorities to cover up the destruction caused by a hurricane that hit the Lebap region, where one of the quarantine zones is located, in late April might also have contributed to the delay of the WHO mission.¹¹

National state-controlled media outlets have been largely quiet about COVID-19, while some of them have attempted to discredit independent Turkmenistan-covering sources because of reporting related to the pandemic. For example, an article that appeared on the pro-government Gundogar News site on 28 March 2020 accused the Prague-based Turkmen service of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) of publishing "fake news" about cases of COVID-19 infections in Turkmenistan to "create panic".¹² In addition, the authorities have discouraged the use of the term "corona virus". At an early stage of the global pandemic, brochures were distributed at schools, hospitals and workplaces to inform people about the corona virus and how to avoid being infected.¹³ However, a later version of the brochure that appeared in March 2020 had no mentioning of the virus but instead spoke about "acute respiratory infectious diseases" in general.¹⁴

The authorities have also sought to stifle discussion about the corona virus and supposedly "prevent panic" among the public in relation to the pandemic. The Turkmen RFE/RL service, Radio *Azatlyk* reported that plain clothed law enforcement officials listened in on discussions among residents at bus stops and in other public places and detained people who were speaking about the corona virus, with some of these people being locked up for 10 days.¹⁵ Radio *Azatlyk* also reported that the Ministry of Health demanded that high-level managers at medical facilities ensure that there is no discussion about the corona virus among their staff. According to the service, the ministry demanded that the managers identify staff members who violate this informal ban and make them shut up, if necessary by putting pressure on them through their family members.¹⁶

In another case about which TIHR learned, police detained a woman in Ashgabat for wearing a medical mask, asking her if she "didn't trust" the measures taken by the government to protect public health and telling her that people wearing masks "create panic". She was fined before being released.¹⁷ Moreover, TIHR's sources documented the following case involving a doctor treating possibly COVID-19 infected individuals:

- In mid-April 2020, a doctor working in the Turkmenabat-located quarantine zone was detained by security services after being found to have his cell phone in his pocket during his shift, in violation of staff rules in place in the zone. For two days, he was held for questioning at the local department of the Ministry of National Security (MNS) before being released. Accused of being negligent and violating confidentiality requirements, he was temporarily suspended from his work, while the MNS continued to investigate his case. The MNS confiscated his phone for the duration of the investigation, reportedly warning him that he "may be held criminally responsible" if they find out that he has transferred information, photos or videos to foreign media. The MNS also questioned his wife.¹⁸ A few days later, TIHR learned that the doctor had been allowed to resume his work and that his cell phone had been returned to him.¹⁹

State control over the dissemination of information

As previously, there is no media freedom in Turkmenistan. The authorities control all national media outlets and use them as tools for state propaganda. At the same time, they continue to obstruct the dissemination of independent information about the situation in the country. The websites of independent Turkmenistan-covering outlets based abroad are blocked in the country, state media regularly publish articles discrediting such outlets, and Turkmenistan-based journalists working with them are highly vulnerable to intimidation and harassment (see more on these issues below). In addition, the authorities have detained and intimidated people believed to have shared information with foreign-based outlets, such as in the following cases:

- A devastating hurricane that hit the Lebap and Mary regions of Turkmenistan in late April 2020 is believed to have resulted in the death of at least two dozen people, while many more went missing and hundreds of people saw their houses and other property destroyed because of the heavy storms. Independent Turkmenistan-covering sites based abroad promptly reported about the hurricane and published photos and videos of its impact, but the country's state-controlled media kept silent about it and the authorities made no official statements. Only a week after the hurricane did one Turkmenistan-based outlet – the little-known, regional *Jeyhun* News briefly report about the hurricane, without mentioning the victims of it or detailing on the damage caused by it.²⁰ Moreover, instead of focusing on assisting the victims of the hurricane, the authorities went after citizens accused of documenting the destruction inflicted by the storms on their phones and of sharing photos and videos with contacts abroad. TIHR learned that more than 60 people were detained on these grounds in the city of Turkmenabat.²¹ Most of those detained were released after being questioned and warned that they would be “held accountable” if they did something similar again. However, some of the detainees faced criminal charges.²² According to TIHR's information, in one case, a woman detained for sending video material about the hurricane to her contacts abroad was charged with defaming law enforcement authorities and publicly insulting a representative of the authorities (under Criminal Code articles 192 and 212). At a trial held on 18 May 2020, she was fined and thereafter released after having been held in custody since her detention.²³ In another case reported by TIHR's sources, charges of publicly insulting a representative of the authorities were brought against a woman detained for filming the damage the hurricane had done to her house and sending it to her daughter who lives abroad. As of the end of May 2020, TIHR had not received any additional information about her fate.
- The Turkmen service of RFE/RL has reported about a growing number of cases in which the police has detained people simply for taking photos or filming at food markets. According to the service's local correspondents, in this way, the police has sought to identify people who share photo and video material with RFE/RL and other foreign-based media that publish reports challenging government information on the protracted economic crisis, which has resulted in shortages of major food staples.²⁴ In the last few months, food shortages have further worsened in the country, with some residents publicly protesting against the lack of access to flour and other goods at affordable prices (see more below). In this context, TIHR has learned that law enforcement officials have warned local residents that those who spread foreign media and social media reports containing “false, slanderous information defaming the country” in relation to the current food crisis will be “held strictly liable”. Law enforcement officials have also called on residents to inform them about fellow residents who spread such “rumours”.²⁵

- After TIHR published an article in August 2019 about the dismissal of two government officials on corruption allegations in the Lebap region,²⁶ the organization learned that the regional department of the Ministry of National Security had summoned dozens of people for questioning in relation to this article. The security service officials reportedly warned these people that those who had provided information to TIHR might be prosecuted for defaming law enforcement authorities or revealing state secrets.²⁷ TIHR did, however, not receive information about any arrests in follow-up to the threats.
- Another example of how the authorities attempt to control the flow of information was seen in July 2019, when reports about the alleged death of Turkmenistan's president appeared on the internet. Rather than simply denying the rumours, the authorities orchestrated a defamation campaign against those accused of spreading this information.²⁸ Articles posted on state-controlled media resources criticized, insulted and attacked sites and journalists who had published the reports about the president's death²⁹, and a number of pro-government celebrities shared video clips on Instagram labelling those who spread this information as "slanderers" and "traitors".³⁰ TIHR's sources also learned that three individuals were detained in the Lebap region on charges of "spreading rumours destabilizing the situation in the country". TIHR has received no further information about the fate of these individuals. In April 2020, a Turkmenistani pro-government site published a report about the alleged death of Sweden-based dissident journalist and writer Akmuhammet Velsaparov (also known as Ak Welsapar), who runs a YouTube channel called *Erkin Turkmenistan* ("Free Turkmenistan"). Velsaparov believed that this might have been done in retaliation because his channel published the unconfirmed information about the president's alleged death last year. Velsaparov has also published other information presenting the Turkmenistani authorities in an unfavourable light, most recently by criticizing them for concealing the spread of the coronavirus in the country.³¹

For years, the Turkmenistani authorities have been carrying out an arbitrary campaign against satellite dishes, which residents use to watch and listen to foreign TV and radio channels, as an alternative to national state-controlled channels. In the framework of this campaign, the authorities have forcibly removed privately owned satellite dishes under the pretext that they spoil the city view. According to TIHR's information, the campaign continues, although it recently appears to have been less actively implemented than in previous years.

Restrictions on internet use

The Turkmenistani government has repeatedly promised to promote internet development and ensure internet access across the country. While internet use has been on the rise in recent years, access is still limited. There are no reliable official statistics, but according to the most recent estimate of the International Telecommunication Union (from 2017), about 21 percent of the population uses the internet.³²

Internet speed is also slow and prices are high compared to global standards. The cheapest unlimited, fixed internet connection offered by the state Turkmen Telekom provider, which has an announced speed of 256 Kbps (0.25 Mbps), costs 150 manat (some 40 EUR, or about 10 percent of the average salary) per month.³³ A test carried out by a TIHR correspondent in the country showed that the real speed was even lower than the one announced: or only about 130 Kbps (0.13 Mbps), although TIHR's sources also reported that the speed varies between different hours of the day depending on the

number of internet users online.³⁴ The fastest unlimited, fixed internet connection that the Turkmen state provider offers to private individuals has an announced speed of 2 Mbps. This option comes at a price of 350 manat (or about 90 EUR) per month, and even this one is significantly slower than the global average for fixed internet connections, which according to the Speedtest Global Index was 74.74 (download speed) in April 2020.³⁵ This site has ranked Turkmenistan last worldwide, among 174 countries in terms of the speed of fixed internet connections.

Because of poor internet connections, Turkmenistani students enrolled at universities abroad have had difficulties to continue their studies through online means after returning to their home country in connection with the COVID-19 pandemic. Such students have reported being unable to take part in online classes and obtain assignments.³⁶

Further restricting internet access, the Turkmenistani authorities continue arbitrarily blocking websites that provide independent coverage of developments in Turkmenistan, such as TIHR's site. At the beginning of November 2019, the global online encyclopaedia Wikipedia was also reportedly blocked after the Russian-language entry on President Berdimukhamedov was updated to include unfavourable quotes about his person from a leaked cable from the US embassy in Ashgabat.³⁷ According to the leaked information, which was published by WikiLeaks,³⁸ Berdimukhamedov is "vain, fastidious, vindictive" and "does not like people who are smarter than he is".

Many social media sites, as well as messenger apps are also not available to users in Turkmenistan other than with the help of censorship circumvention tools such as VPNs (Virtual Private Networks). At the same time, the authorities seek to prevent the use of such tools and regularly block access to VPN apps. According to TIHR's information, after a new government service for internet security was created in September 2019³⁹, the authorities further stepped up efforts to restrict the use of VPNs. Only in October 2019, a number of the most popular VPNs were blocked. TIHR's sources also reported that new VPNs emerging instead of previously blocked ones were more quickly blocked than previously and that both free and paid VPN apps were affected.⁴⁰ In addition, TIHR has learned about cases when mobile phone users downloading VPN apps have lost internet access altogether and have had to buy new sim-cards to be able to re-access the internet.⁴¹ There have also been reports of police and security services intimidating and harassing individuals using VPNs.⁴²

An investigative report, published by the Sweden-based non-profit organize Qurium in July 2019,⁴³ highlighted the wide-ranging restrictions on internet use in Turkmenistan and provided details on the techniques used by the authorities to block websites. The organization concluded: "A small part of the population has access to a highly-censored version of the internet, where all regime critical websites are blocked, as well as all social media platforms". It found that the government currently is using several different techniques to block websites, including DNS spoofing, HTTP Host Header Inspection and IP blocking. In addition, it found that the government does not only block Turkmenistan-related news sites, but also international news sites such as the BBC, Reuters and *Deutsche Welle*, as well as global social media platforms and messenger apps such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, LiveJournal, Messenger, Line and Telegram.

Monitoring the "loyalty" of citizens with the help of informants

The Turkmenistani authorities are engaged in ongoing efforts to monitor the "loyalty" of citizens and identify regime critics. For this purpose, the authorities have also recruited informants – both in- and

outside the country – and tasked them with monitoring and reporting about “suspicious” activities of their fellow citizens.

According to the Turkmen RFE/RL service, the national security services have recently stepped up efforts to recruit informants at Turkmenistan’s universities. The “agents”, who have been recruited with the help of both threats and promised rewards, have been asked to share information about students who express dissatisfaction with the authorities or use censorship-circumvention tools to access websites and messenger apps that are blocked in Turkmenistan.⁴⁴

Similarly, TIHR has learned that the national security services have increased their efforts to recruit informants among the growing community of Turkmenistani citizens who reside in Turkey, the most popular country of destination for Turkmenistani students and labour migrants because of its geographical, cultural and linguistic proximity with Turkmenistan. These informants have been requested to share information about “dubious” actions of their fellow citizens in Turkey, such as if they express negative views about Turkmenistan and the president’s policies, or use the internet to obtain, exchange and discuss information on the situation in Turkmenistan by accessing sites that are blocked in their home country.⁴⁵ This development can be seen in relation to government fears about growing opposition to its policies among the Turkmenistani diaspora in Turkey, whose members have more opportunities than their fellow citizens at home to discuss the situation in their home country with others, access independent Turkmenistan-covering websites without using censorship circumvention tools, and contact exiled human rights and dissident groups. (See also the section on “Arbitrary travel bans” below).

According to TIHR’s information, officials from the migration and national security services have also been questioning labour migrants returning to Turkmenistan from Turkey, holding them for hours at Ashgabat airport and asking them to explain the reasons they went to Turkey and what they did there. Those targeted for questioning have included both migrants who have been deported from Turkey because of migration violations (such as overstaying their visas or working without permission) and migrants lawfully residing in Turkey who have arrived to Turkmenistan to visit relatives. A topic of particular interest to the authorities has been whether those questioned have any connections to exiled opposition actors or “hostile” websites that report independently about the situation in Turkmenistan from abroad (such as TIHR’s site).⁴⁶

In addition, relatives of labour migrants working in Turkey have come under pressure by the Turkmenistani authorities. For example, in August 2019, law enforcement authorities in the Mary region reportedly carried out a targeted operation to gather information about citizens working abroad and summoned relatives of such individuals for questioning.⁴⁷

Pressure on government critics and politically motivated imprisonment

The few independent journalists who cooperate with foreign-based media, civil society activists and others who publicly criticize the authorities remain highly vulnerable to intimidation and harassment in Turkmenistan, including surveillance, bans on travelling abroad and politically motivated imprisonment.

Independent journalist **Soltan Achilova**, who previously worked for RFE/RL and currently cooperates with TIHR, has repeatedly faced harassment. On 11 March 2019, migration authorities stopped her at Ashgabat airport as she was on her way to Georgia to participate in an international seminar and told

her that she had been blacklisted for travel abroad.⁴⁸ The migration services later confirmed the ban in writing, without providing any explanation for it.⁴⁹ Following international attention to Achilova's case, the travel ban against her was eventually lifted. Thus, in August 2019, a national security official visited Achilova in her home and told her that she was allowed to travel abroad again. However, she remains subject to attention by the authorities. Because of the harassment targeting her, Achilova has experienced growing reluctance on the part of relatives and neighbours to assist her in her efforts to carry out her journalist work.

Dissident **Gulgeldy Annaniyazov** was due to be released in March 2019 following the expiration of his 11-year prison sentence. This sentence was handed to him in 2008 on charges of illegal border crossing after he returned to Turkmenistan from Norway where he had been granted asylum. However, according to information obtained by the Prove They Are Alive! NGO campaign,⁵⁰ Annaniyazov had five more years added to his sentence shortly before it ended and was transferred to a settlement colony in the Caspian coastal town of Karabogaz. While Annaniyazov's whereabouts now are known and he has been allowed limited visits by his family, unlike previously when he was held incommunicado for years, it is of utmost concern that he continues to be deprived of his liberty. It is not clear on what charges the new five-year sentence against him was issued, but extending the sentences of political prisoners who are about to be released is a well-known practice used by authoritarian governments. In 2013, the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention concluded that Annaniyazov's imprisonment was in violation of international human rights law and called on the Turkmenistani authorities to release him and accord him an enforceable right to compensation in accordance with article 9(5) of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR).⁵¹

Gaspar Matalaev, an activist monitoring and reporting on human rights violations in the cotton harvest, was released in September 2019 after serving the full three-year prison term to which he was sentenced in 2016.⁵² Matalaev was arrested in October 2016 and imprisoned after being convicted on charges of fraud and bribery in an unfair trial and after allegedly being forced to confess to these charges under torture.⁵³ His arrest came shortly after his photo report about the use of forced labour in the cotton harvest appeared on the Turkmen.news site,⁵⁴ with which he cooperated and had close ties. Human rights organizations had campaigned in Matalaev's support and more than 100 000 people signed on to an international petition calling for his release.⁵⁵ In 2018, the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention found Matalaev's imprisonment to be in violation of international law. It called on the Turkmenistani authorities to release him; grant him compensation and other reparations; ensure a full and independent investigation into the circumstances surrounding his arbitrary deprivation of liberty; and take appropriate measures against those responsible for the violation of his rights.⁵⁶ The Turkmenistani authorities have failed to comply with the Working Group's opinion on all counts, including by keeping him behind bars until his prison sentence expired.

The Turkmenistani authorities have also failed to comply with the opinion of the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention in the case of journalist **Saparmed Nepeskuliev**, who paid a heavy price for cooperating with foreign-based news sources by being sentenced to three years in prison on charges of possessing a banned medical drug in 2015. In an opinion issued in 2015,⁵⁷ the Working Group concluded that the Turkmenistani authorities had imprisoned Nepeskuliev in violation of their international human rights obligations and called on them to release him and accord him an enforceable right to compensation in accordance with article 9(5) of the ICCPR. However, the authorities failed to release the journalist before his sentence ended in May 2018 and has not granted him compensation. Nepeskuliev's health deteriorated seriously in prison and in March 2019, he left Turkmenistan to undergo treatment abroad. He currently remains outside the country.

Attacks on exile-based groups challenging government propaganda: the case of TIHR

Exile-based critics of the Turkmenistani authorities have also come under pressure. For example, as a prominent exile-based Turkmenistani human rights NGO and a leading source of independent information on developments in Turkmenistan, TIHR has been subjected to repeated attacks it believes have been initiated by the Turkmenistani authorities in an attempt to obstruct its work.

State-controlled media outlets in Turkmenistan regularly publish articles that attempt to disprove information posted by independent Turkmenistan-covering sources, such as TIHR. The gundogar-news.com site has even created a separate section for such articles, called “Rubbish about us”.⁵⁸ A number of articles published in this section have been aimed at discrediting TIHR through the play of words, manipulation of facts and direct attacks. In one example, an article published on 8 April 2019 claimed that “destructive elements calling themselves opponents, legal experts and human rights defenders use disinformation as a tool for manipulation and control” and featured a family photo of TIHR’s head Farid Tuhbatullin and his son Ruslan Tuhbatullin, who also works for TIHR. It is not clear how this photo got into the site’s possession.⁵⁹

In addition to being blocked in Turkmenistan, TIHR’s website, *The Chronicles of Turkmenistan* has regularly been subjected to cyberattacks, which the organization believes have been initiated by the Turkmenistani security services. Recently the site has been the target of malicious attacks on a weekly basis, with the attacks following the publication of new posts, which suggests that they have been targeted in nature. The attacks have resulted in an ongoing threat to the functioning of the website. TIHR has, however, been able to navigate the attacks thanks to security arrangements in place and has, thus, ensured that the site has remained accessible to visitors.

Continued practice of enforced disappearances

Dozens of individuals who have been imprisoned on politically motivated grounds or in politically charged trials remain disappeared within Turkmenistan’s prison system. The relatives of these prisoners have not received any information about the fate and well-being of the prisoners for years.

An updated list of victims of enforced disappearances in Turkmenistan, published by the Prove They Are Alive! NGO campaign in September 2019,⁶⁰ features 121 names. Compared to the previous version of the list, some names were removed as the individuals in question have been released or their relatives informed about their whereabouts. Among these is dissident Gulgeldy Annaniyazov, whom the authorities transferred to a police supervised settlement and allowed limited visits by relatives in spring 2019 (see more about his case above). Other names were instead added to the updated list of the disappeared, such as that of the following student activist:

As a student enrolled at university in Turkey, **Omruzak Omarkuliev** established a Turkmen student association for his fellow citizens. In late January 2018, he gave an interview to the Turkmen service of RFE/RL, in which he spoke about the association he had established and said that Turkmenistan’s embassy in Turkey had shown an interest in it and offered to support it. Shortly after this, at the initiative of the embassy, he was invited to participate in government-organized preparatory events for the parliamentary elections held in Turkmenistan in March 2018 and assisted with travelling there for this purpose.⁶¹ However, when Omarkuliev wanted to go back to Turkey, he was barred from leaving

Turkmenistan. After repeatedly being stopped at the border when attempting to leave the country in late February-early March 2018, and receiving no responses to his appeals to different authorities, Omarkuliev contacted the Turkmen service of RFE/RL and other foreign-based news sources to highlight his situation. After this, he disappeared.⁶² In June 2018, the RFE/RL service reported that the authorities had detained Omarkuliev and that he was held at the notorious Ovan Depe prison, believed to have been sentenced to a lengthy prison term.⁶³ TIHR's sources confirmed this information.⁶⁴ However, it is not known on what charges the student was convicted and there has been no further news about his fate.

Shortly after Omarkuliev's name was included on the updated list published by Prove They are Alive! in September 2019, a video appeared on the internet seeking to disprove the reports about the imprisonment and disappearance of the student activist. The video,⁶⁵ prepared by a former RFE/RL correspondent, claimed that Omarkuliev is in fact serving in Turkmenistan's army. It also claimed that Omarkuliev's father, who was previously reported to have died of a heart attack following his son's arrest,⁶⁶ was still alive and personally had asked the journalist to prepare the video to "put an end to the dissemination of rumours" about his family. While the video featured footage of Omarkuliev supposedly carrying out his army service, as well as of a man said to be his father, neither of them spoke in the video. Fellow journalists who analyzed the video found it questionable and its authenticity was not confirmed. The journalist who filmed it was imprisoned in 2011-2016 on charges believed to have been brought in retaliation for his reporting for RFE/RL. However, following his release, he publicly justified the repressive measures taken by the authorities against other RFE/RL reporters and made statements that gave rise to speculation that he had been recruited by the national security services.⁶⁷

Spontaneous protests related to economic crisis

Public protests are rare in Turkmenistan because of the repressive climate in the country and the overhanging risk of persecution facing anyone who criticizes the authorities. However, on several occasions in recent months, residents have publicly expressed their discontent about worsening food shortages. In particular, stores selling food at state subsidized prices have recently been offering decreasing rations of major staples such as flour and vegetable oil, while prices for such staples have gone up among private retailers. These shortages have resulted from the protracted economic crisis in Turkmenistan and have been further exacerbated by restrictions on movements within the country, as well as across its borders that the authorities have imposed in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.⁶⁸

- According to TIHR's information, on 4 April, some 30 women gathered outside the headquarters of the Mary regional administration and demanded to see the head of the administration to convey their concerns to him. The head of the administration - accompanied by two of his deputies and the regional police chief - eventually arrived to listen to the women, who complained about the shortages of flour and vegetable oil in state stores selling food at subsidised prices. After receiving assurances from the head of the regional administration that he would look into these issues, the women left.⁶⁹ The Turkmen service of RFE/RL reported that the protesters were each given sacks of flour.⁷⁰
- In another case covered by Radio *Azzatlyk*, some 100 women gathered outside the office of the local administration in the Farap district of the Lebap region on 14 April, demanding to be given flour. However, the women's request was rejected and they were reportedly warned that they might be detained for 15 days if they continue to complain about the shortage of foodstuffs.⁷¹

- In a third case reported by TIHR's sources, a group of women standing in line to buy bread at state subsidized prices at a local store in the Dashoguz region on 9 May vent their frustration about the shortage of flour at a local government official who passed by. Thus, as the head of the region's Turkmenbashi district was on his way to inspect an agricultural complex, the women caught sight of him, surrounded him and started accusing him of the lack of flour in the region because he had ordered vast lands previously used for wheat farming to be turned into cotton fields. After escaping from the agitated women, the government official called for the police, who arrived to the spot and briefly detained the women for questioning.⁷²

Mass mobilization of residents for state events in violation of freedom of assembly

The authorities continue forcibly mass mobilizing citizens for various state-organized parades, celebrations and other regime-praising events, at the threat of dismissal or other repercussions for the refusal to participate. According to TIHR's information, when hired, employees at state institutions have even been required to sign agreements, expressing their consent that they may be dismissed if they refuse to participate in "mass events aimed at glorifying the great achievements of the country and its leadership".⁷³

The practice of forcible mobilization for state events is in violation of the right to freedom of assembly, a basic element of which is voluntary participation in assemblies. International human rights bodies have also criticized it. In particular, when reviewing Turkmenistan's compliance with the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) in 2017, the UN Human Rights Committee stated that it was "concerned about reports of forcible mass mobilization of the population for participation in various mass events organized by authorities". The Committee called on the authorities to ensure "that participation in mass events is voluntary and refrain from any reprisals for non-participation".⁷⁴

The state events, which citizens are mobilized to take part in, are often preceded by time-consuming and exhausting rehearsals that pose a danger to the health and well-being of those involved. This is one example of such a case documented by TIHR in the past year:

- Ahead of the Independence Day celebrations on 27 September 2019, employees at state institutions in Ashgabat were required to participate in marching exercises at the Dagdan stadium for several hours a day. When the rehearsals began in early August, the outdoor temperature was 35-40 degrees Celsius in the capital, making the marching exercises highly challenging for the participants.⁷⁵

The practice of mass mobilization of residents for state-organized events has continued also following the outbreak of the global Covid-19 pandemic, in the context of which many states have restricted mass gatherings. Thus, for example, mass Novruz spring holiday festivities were held across Turkmenistan on 23 March 2020. Only in the capital Ashgabat, hundreds of employees at educational, cultural and arts institutions were mobilized to participate in these festivities, with rehearsals starting in mid-March.⁷⁶

In another practice that is of concern in view of both freedom of assembly and the ban on forced labour, the authorities regularly organize so-called *subbotniki*, or days of free labour, requiring state employees and other residents to carry out unpaid work at the threat of repercussions if they refuse to participate.

In addition to being mobilized for participation in official celebrations and *subbotniki*, employees at state institutions and students are also often asked to provide supposedly “voluntary” contributions to help cover the costs related to state-organized events, such as the costs of flowers or other decorations or costumes or equipment used by the participants. The required contributions are sometimes sizeable and add up given the frequency of state-organized events. In addition, the contributions are often withheld from salaries and student stipends before these are paid out, which shows the organized nature of the collection of such funds.

Arbitrary travel bans

Starting in February 2020, the Turkmenistani authorities restricted travel across the national borders in response to the global COVID-19 pandemic.⁷⁷ However, already prior to this, the authorities restricted the right to leave the country and blacklisted citizens for travel abroad on arbitrary grounds. Among those who have been blacklisted from travel abroad are individuals considered “disloyal” to the regime. For example, as covered above, journalist Soltan Achilova was barred from leaving the country for several months in 2019, until her name was removed from the blacklist following international attention to her case. However, those prevented from leaving the country also include many citizens who are not known to have publicly criticized the regime or otherwise fallen out of favour with it. In the past year, there has been a growing number of reports of cases in which people on their way to study or work abroad have been denied the right to leave the country, without receiving any explanation of the reasons for this.⁷⁸ This development has, in particular, affected those seeking to go to Turkey and appears related to government fears about growing opposition to its policies among the large Turkmenistani diaspora community in this country (see also the section on “Monitoring the ‘loyalty’ of citizens” above). In November 2019, the Turkmen service of RFE/RL reported that, for each Istanbul-bound flight at Ashgabat airport, on average 20-30 people were prevented from leaving the country.⁷⁹ In January 2020, a new wave of such cases was reported, including the following ones:

- According to information from Turkmen News, some 30 people were not allowed to board a flight from Ashgabat to Istanbul on 10 January 2020. The migration services did not provide any explanation for this, and an official from the national security services reportedly threatened those who complained that they might be blacklisted for travel abroad for life. Among those barred from leaving were also those on their way to Turkey to undergo potentially life-saving medical treatment not available in Turkey.⁸⁰
- TIHR learned about another case, in which about 20 people who had purchased tickets for an Istanbul-bound flight on 15 January 2020 were prevented from leaving the country at Ashgabat airport.⁸¹

TIHR has also learned about cases in which individuals with connections within the migration services have offered assistance to citizens barred from leaving the country in exchange for bribes. Thus, such citizens have been asked to pay bribes of several thousand euros to regain the right to travel abroad.⁸²

Recommendations

The Turkmenistani authorities should:

- Enforce, in practice, the provisions of the national Media Law that prohibit censorship and allow media, including exile-based outlets covering Turkmenistan to operate without government interference.
- Safeguard the right of citizens to seek, receive and impart information and ensure that no one is intimidated, detained or subjected to other retaliatory measures for documenting, sharing and discussing information on issues of public interest, including issues related to COVID-19, the recent hurricane that hit Turkmenistan or the economic crisis in the country.
- Take effective measures to promote internet access, speed and affordability, and stop the practice of arbitrarily blocking access to websites, social media platforms and internet apps.
- Put an end to intimidation and harassment of independent journalists, civil society activists and other government critics, including politically motivated imprisonment.
- Fully comply with the opinions issued by the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention in the cases of Gulgeldy Annaniyazov, Gaspar Matalaev and Saparmed Nepeskuliev, including by releasing Annaniyazov; granting all three individuals reparations for the human rights violations to which they have been subjected; and holding the officials responsible for these violations to account.
- End the practice of enforced disappearances and provide information about the fate and whereabouts of all those reported to have disappeared in prison, including Omruzak Omarkuliev.
- Safeguard the right to freedom of peaceful assembly and ensure that residents are not intimidated and harassed when staging spontaneous protests on issues of concern to them.
- In accordance with the recommendation of the UN Human Rights Committee, end the practice of forcibly mobilizing residents for participation in government-organized mass events, and ensure that participation in such events is voluntary and that the refusal to participate does not result in reprisals.
- Stop blacklisting individuals for travel abroad and ensure that residents are not denied the right to exit and enter the country on arbitrary grounds.

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- ¹ <https://freedomhouse.org/countries/freedom-world/scores>
- ² <https://rsf.org/en/ranking>
- ³ These measures were outlined in an official document submitted by the Turkmen government to the UN. See <https://www.hronikatm.com/2020/05/un-letter/>
- ⁴ <https://www.hronikatm.com/2020/04/seven-infected/>
- ⁵ <https://www.hronikatm.com/2020/04/denial-stage-2/>
- ⁶ https://twitter.com/hans_kluge/status/1253321797228826624
- ⁷ <https://www.hronikatm.com/2020/05/invitation/>
- ⁸ <https://rus.azathabar.com/a/30622193.html>
- ⁹ <https://www.hronikatm.com/2020/06/whos-coming/>
- ¹⁰ <https://www.hronikatm.com/2020/04/cover-up/>
- ¹¹ See more in <https://www.rferl.org/a/analysis-turkmenistan-says-it-s-coronavirus-free-but-doesn-t-want-who-to-check/30600762.html>
- ¹² http://gundogar-news.com/index.php?category_id=11&news_id=15350
- ¹³ <https://rus.azathabar.com/a/30426223.html>
- ¹⁴ <https://www.hronikatm.com/2020/03/no-coronavirus-brochure/>
- ¹⁵ <https://rus.azathabar.com/a/30510309.html>, <https://rus.azathabar.com/a/30525059.html>
- ¹⁶ <https://rus.azathabar.com/a/30543511.html>
- ¹⁷ <https://www.hronikatm.com/2020/02/no-panic/>
- ¹⁸ <https://www.hronikatm.com/2020/04/mobile/>
- ¹⁹ <https://www.hronikatm.com/2020/04/released/>
- ²⁰ <https://www.hronikatm.com/2020/05/news-from-under-a-rock/>
- ²¹ <https://www.hronikatm.com/2020/05/lebap-mayday/>
- ²² <https://www.hronikatm.com/2020/05/arrests/>
- ²³ <https://www.hronikatm.com/2020/05/pardoned-2/>
- ²⁴ <https://rus.azathabar.com/a/29821189.html>
- ²⁵ <https://www.hronikatm.com/2020/03/deficit-causes/>
- ²⁶ <https://www.hronikatm.com/2019/08/prosecutors-hustle/>
- ²⁷ <https://www.hronikatm.com/2019/09/molehunt/>
- ²⁸ <https://www.hronikatm.com/2019/07/prove-he-is-alive/>
- ²⁹ http://gundogar-news.com/index.php?category_id=10&news_id=14385
- ³⁰ <https://www.hronikatm.com/2019/07/celebs/>
- ³¹ <https://www.hronikatm.com/2020/04/ak-velsapar/>
- ³² This figure is ITU's own estimate. No newer figure is available. See: <https://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Pages/stat/default.aspx>
- ³³ <https://telecom.tm/ru/internet>
- ³⁴ <https://www.hronikatm.com/2020/01/turkmenet/>
- ³⁵ <https://www.speedtest.net/global-index>
- ³⁶ See, for example, <https://rus.azathabar.com/a/30500999.html>
- ³⁷ <https://fergana.agency/news/112727/>
- ³⁸ https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/09ASHGABAT1633_a.html
- ³⁹ The state news agency Turkmenistan Today reported about the establishment of this service on 9 September 2019, <http://tdh.gov.tm/news/articles.aspx&article19534&cat14>
- ⁴⁰ <https://www.hronikatm.com/2019/10/vpn-bolonok/>
- ⁴¹ <https://www.hronikatm.com/2019/01/v-turkmenistane-nachalas-aktivnaya-borba-s-vpn-prilozheniyami/>
- ⁴² <https://rus.azathabar.com/a/29675734.html>
- ⁴³ <https://www.qurium.org/alerts/turkmenistan/turkmenistan-and-their-golden-dpi>
- ⁴⁴ <https://rus.azathabar.com/a/30162140.html>
- ⁴⁵ <https://www.hronikatm.com/2019/07/gvozdika/>, <https://www.hronikatm.com/2019/04/300-snitches/>
- ⁴⁶ <https://www.hronikatm.com/2019/04/tm-iron-curtain/>
- ⁴⁷ <https://rus.azathabar.com/a/30097465.html>
- ⁴⁸ <https://www.hronikatm.com/2019/03/soltan-achilova/>
- ⁴⁹ TIHR, "Journalist Soltan Achilova officially denied exit from Turkmenistan", 29 July 2019, <https://en.hronikatm.com/2019/07/journalist-soltan-achilova-officially-denied-exit-from-turkmenistan/>
- ⁵⁰ <https://provethyarealive.org/international-community-should-urgently-intervene-annaniyazov/>
- ⁵¹ <http://www.freedom-now.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/Petition1.pdf>
- ⁵² <https://www.hronikatm.com/2019/09/matalaev-2/>
- ⁵³ <https://www.frontlinedefenders.org/en/case/gaspar-matalaev-remains-prison>
- ⁵⁴ <https://habartm.org/archives/5771>
- ⁵⁵ <https://www.freedomunited.org/advocate/free-gaspar-matalaev/>
- ⁵⁶ https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Detention/Opinions/Session81/A_HRC_WGAD_2018_4.pdf

https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Detention/Opinions2015AUV/Opinion%202015%2040_Turkmenistan_Nepeskuliev_AUV%20final.pdf

⁵⁸ At http://gundogar-news.com/index.php?category_id=11

⁵⁹ The article appeared at http://gundogar-news.com/index.php?category_id=10&news_id=13968

⁶⁰ <https://provetheyarealive.org/updated-list-of-the-victims-of-enforced-disappearances/>

⁶¹ <https://fergana.agency/news/108473/>

⁶² <https://rus.azathabar.com/a/30175359.html>

⁶³ <https://rus.azathabar.com/a/29287171.html>

⁶⁴ <https://www.hronikatm.com/2018/06/skonchalsya-otets-omruzaka-omarkulieva-studenta-aktivista-osuzhdennogo-na-20-let/>

⁶⁵ <https://fergana.agency/news/111009/>

⁶⁶ <https://www.hronikatm.com/2018/06/skonchalsya-otets-omruzaka-omarkulieva-studenta-aktivista-osuzhdennogo-na-20-let/>

⁶⁷ <https://rus.azathabar.com/a/30175359.html>

⁶⁸ See more in <https://www.rferl.org/a/turkmenistan-quells-food-shortage-protest-with-bags-of-flour/30530360.html>,
<https://en.fergana.ru/news/116754/>

⁶⁹ <https://www.hronikatm.com/2020/04/zhitelniczy-mary-potrebovali-ot-gubernatora-reshit-problemy-s-prodovolstviem/>

⁷⁰ <https://rus.azathabar.com/a/30530262.html>

⁷¹ <https://rus.azathabar.com/a/30554627.html>

⁷² <https://www.hronikatm.com/2020/05/spontaneous-protest/>

⁷³ <https://www.hronikatm.com/2019/10/pay-to-work/>

⁷⁴ Paragraphs 44 and 45 of the Committee's Concluding observations on the second periodic report of Turkmenistan, adopted in March 2017,

http://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolNo=CCPR%2fC%2fTKM%2fCO%2f2&Lang=en

⁷⁵ <https://www.hronikatm.com/2019/08/byudzhetniki-turkmenistana-nachali-gotovitsya-k-torzhestvam-v-chest-dnya-nezavisimosti/>

⁷⁶ <https://www.hronikatm.com/2020/03/v-domike/>

⁷⁷ See more in <https://www.hronikatm.com/2020/05/un-letter/>, <https://www.hronikatm.com/2020/02/no-panic/>

⁷⁸ <https://rus.azathabar.com/a/30118971.html>

⁷⁹ <https://rus.azathabar.com/a/30249544.html>

⁸⁰ <https://turkmen.news/news/zapret-na-vyezd-turkmenistan/>

⁸¹ <https://www.hronikatm.com/2020/01/travel-ban/>

⁸² <https://www.hronikatm.com/2019/11/pass-solution/>