



## **Briefing paper for EU-Turkmenistan Human Rights Dialogue: Key trends in the protection of fundamental rights in Turkmenistan**

**May 2021**

The Turkmenistani government continues to systematically deny fundamental rights and freedoms to its citizens. Because of the bleak human rights situation, the country has received new bottom ratings in international surveys measuring the level of freedom across the world. For example, in the [2021 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, while only Syria and Tibet fared worse. In the [2021 World Press Freedom Index](#), compiled by Reporters without Borders, Turkmenistan was ranked 178th among 180 countries, with only North Korea and Eritrea behind.

As previously, there is no separation of powers in Turkmenistan, and the president controls all branches of power. This became even more evident with President Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov's [recent election](#) as chair of the upper house of parliament (Khalk Maslakhaty), a body that was introduced following [the adoption](#) of constitutional amendments in September 2020. Part of the members of this legislative body are also directly appointed by the president. The personality cult surrounding the president continues to be heavily promoted and has recently been extended to his son, Serdar Berdymukhamedov, who was [appointed](#) vice prime minister in February 2021 and is considered a potential successor to his father. Turkmenistan has no prime minister, with the president leading the work of the government. There is no functioning political opposition inside Turkmenistan, and members and supporters of opposition movements based abroad are subjected to persecution. Media is strictly controlled by the state, civic space is [closed](#), and any dissent is suppressed.

This briefing paper highlights current key concerns regarding the protection of the freedoms of expression, association and peaceful assembly in Turkmenistan, as well as recommendations on these issues. It is based on monitoring conducted by TIHR, with the help of its network of collaborators inside Turkmenistan, and regular [updates](#) prepared by TIHR and IPHR for the CIVICUS Monitor in the past year. Attached to the briefing paper is a list of individual cases, which we urge the EU to raise with the Turkmenistani authorities.

## Summary

Since the beginning of the global COVID-19 pandemic, the government has pursued a policy of denial, insisting that Turkmenistan is COVID-19 free, although independent reports indicate that the pandemic has taken a serious toll in the country. The authorities have pressured medical workers to participate in covering up the COVID-19 outbreak, and have failed to adequately inform citizens about the Coronavirus, preventive measures introduced to prevent its spread, as well as treatment options.

Against the background of the government's flawed response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the protracted economic crisis in the country and the failure of the authorities to care for the basic needs of citizens, recent months have seen growing expressions of discontent on social media platforms and the emergence of a protest movement abroad. In response to these developments, the authorities have stepped up pressure on critical voices both in- and outside Turkmenistan, targeting outspoken social media users, protest participants, and individuals accused of supporting the agenda of the protest movement, as well as their relatives. Several people have been detained and imprisoned in Turkmenistan in this context, and several activists based abroad have faced the threat of being returned to Turkmenistan.

In addition to seeking to prevent further anti-government rallies abroad, the authorities have sought to curb rare spontaneous protests of citizens inside country venting their frustration at issues related to the ongoing economic crisis. At the same time, the authorities have continued their problematic practice of forcibly mobilising citizens for state-organised mass events, thus also exposing the participants to a heightened risk of contracting COVID-19.

While national state-controlled media only convey state-endorsed messages, the authorities arbitrarily block access to internet sites that provide independent information on the situation in the country, as well as to online platforms that are used for discussion by activists based abroad. The authorities have also recently intensified their campaign against internet circumvention tools, systematically blocking such tools and intimidating individuals who have used them to access foreign-based sites that are otherwise unavailable in the country. Internet access remains limited, slow and expensive compared to global standards.

## Expression

### Policy of COVID-19 denial

As documented in detail in an IPHR-TIHR [report](#) issued in summer 2020, Turkmenistan's government has responded to the global COVID-19 pandemic with denial, lack of transparency and attempts to conceal the truth. Thus, the government has persistently claimed that the pandemic has not reached the country, although the reports of independent, Turkmenistan-covering outlets and organisations have pointed to a serious national outbreak, with hospitals being strained by the influx of people with acute respiratory conditions.

Ahead of the WHO mission to Turkmenistan in July 2020, TIHR and other independent organisations [learned](#) about steps taken by the authorities to prevent the experts from finding out the real state of affairs in the country with respect to COVID-19, such as by transferring patients with COVID-19

symptoms out of the hospitals the experts were due to visit. In accordance with the WHO's recommendations, the government nevertheless initiated measures aimed at preventing the spread of COVID-19, but these measures have been [selectively enforced](#) and the authorities have failed to explain the real purpose of them to citizens. For example, initially, the authorities referred to the allegedly increased level of dust in the air to justify the requirement to wear masks. Thus, the authorities have failed to adequately inform citizens about COVID-19, its prevention, as well as diagnosis and treatment options.

The authorities have [pressured](#) medical workers to participate in covering up the national COVID-19 outbreak and threatened them with repercussions should they leak information about COVID-19 related cases. For example, in July 2020, the prosecutor's office in Balkanabat reportedly [summoned](#) doctors and threatened them with imprisonment unless they signed agreements not to disclose any information about the COVID-19 related situation in this city.

The authorities have also sought to track down medical workers suspected of using their phones to document and share COVID-19 related information, such as in a case [reported](#) by *Radio Azatlyk*, the Turkmen service of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty in March 2021, when police in the city of Turkmenabat carried out checks of the mobile phones of staff working at local medical institutions.

Moreover, medical professionals have been intimidated for raising concerns about the lack of adequate resources for the diagnosis and treatment of people with acute respiratory conditions (conditions indicative of COVID-19, although they are not officially classified as such). In August 2020, TIHR [learned](#) about a case in which medical workers in Turkmenabat, who had appealed to the regional authorities to provide hospitals with more means of personal protection, medicine and equipment, were warned that their action was "contradictory to the president's policies" and that they might be held accountable.

As part of the cover-up efforts of authorities, relatives of people who have died to due COVID-19 like symptoms have [received](#) the bodies of their loved ones in sealed packages and been requested to [bury them](#) immediately without opening the packages.

## **Recommendations**

The authorities of Turkmenistan should:

- Put an end to the policy of denial and cover-up in relation to Covid-19 and acknowledge the current public health crisis in the country.
- Stop pressuring medical workers to participate in covering up the COVID-19 outbreak in the country and ensure that no one is subjected to retaliatory measures for documenting, sharing and discussing information on COVID-19 related issues.

## **Persecution of government critics**

As previously, any kind of civic engagement entailing criticism of the authorities is associated with the risk of persecution in Turkmenistan. The Turkmenistani authorities have recently stepped up pressure on critical voices in response to growing expressions of discontent with the government, in particular through social media platforms and anti-government rallies held by Turkmenistani diaspora communities (see more in the section on Assembly).

Turkmenistani authorities have sought to put pressure on activists based in Turkey and Russia, who have taken part in anti-government protests, posted videos and social media messages critical of those in power and engaged in the activities of opposition movements, both directly and with the help of local authorities in those countries (see more in the section on Assembly). In a number of cases documented by human rights groups in the past year, law enforcement authorities in Turkmenistan have visited and summoned the relatives of foreign-based activists, threatening them with repercussions unless the activists stop their civic and social media engagement and refrain from criticising the authorities. Below one example is described, additional ones can be found on the List of individual cases.

- The relatives of Khamida Babadjanova, an activist living in Turkey who has engaged on the YouTube forum of an opposition group, were subjected to pressure starting in mid-June 2020. As [documented](#) by Memorial Human Rights Centre (“Memorial”) and the Turkmen Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights (THF), on 25 June 2020, local officials in the city of Kunya Urgench summoned Babadjanova’s mother and older brother for an informal discussion, demanded that the activist stops appearing on the internet and threatened to arrest her as a “traitor” if she returns home. In connection with a planned anti-government rally in Istanbul in mid-July 2020 (see the section on Assembly), where Babadjanova was among the participants, local police in Kunya Urgench summoned her younger sister, demanding that the activist deletes all her videos on the internet and stops publishing such video appeals.

In some cases, Turkmenistani activists based abroad have been threatened with deportation to Turkmenistan, where they would be at imminent risk of arrest, torture and ill-treatment, and imprisonment on trumped-up charges in retaliation for their civic engagement and criticism of the authorities. Activists Dursoltan Taganova and Rozgeldy Choliev both faced such threats as part of broader campaigns of intimidation targeting them and their relatives (see the List of individual cases for more information).

Human rights groups have also documented a number of cases where the Turkmenistani authorities have tracked down and [threatened](#) Turkmenistan-based individuals who have used social media platforms to speak out against the government and engage with like-minded individuals based abroad. In some cases, such as the two described below, such individuals have been detained:

- Security services [detained](#) Murad Dushemov and his mother in Ashgabat on 16 June 2020 after the activist published a YouTube appeal, in which he criticised both the government and the exile-based opposition and called on political movements to work together with people in the country. Prior to this, he had reportedly [taken active part](#) in the discussions on a chat forum of an exile-based opposition group. Dushemov’s mother was released later the same day, while Dushemov [was held](#) for ten days.
- On 8 August 2020, law enforcement authorities in Turkmenabat [detained](#) Kurbanov Reimberdy, an active participant in chat discussions with protest movement participants based abroad, and searched his home, confiscating his computer, telephone and flash cards. During the search, the security service officials reportedly threatened Reimberdy’s mother and other family members. Reimberdy [was released](#) after being held for 15 days.

In other cases, Turkmenistan-based individuals have been criminally charged in retaliation for their contacts with activists and groups abroad. Journalist Nurgeldy Khalykov and lawyer Pygambergeldy

Allaberdyev were both handed prison sentences in September 2020 on charges believed to have been initiated on these grounds (see more on their cases on the List of individual cases).

## **Recommendations**

The Turkmenistani authorities should:

- Put an end to the pattern of intimidation and harassment of activists based in- and outside the country, as well as their relatives because of the activists' criticism of the current situation in Turkmenistan and their contacts with like-minded individuals to discuss, exchange information and engage on issues of concern to them.
- Ensure, in particular, that no one is criminally charged, declared wanted, arrested or imprisoned because of their expressions of discontent, peaceful civic engagement or contacts with foreign-based opposition groups and promptly release anyone held on such grounds.

## **Restrictions on internet use**

While internet use has increased in Turkmenistan in recent years, access is still limited. There are no reliable official statistics, but according to the [Digital report](#), internet penetration in Turkmenistan was 26 per cent in 2020.

Based on the president's order, the state monopoly internet provider, *Turkmentelekom* [significantly decreased](#) its tariffs in February 2021. Thus, the monthly costs decreased from 150 to 100 manat (around USD 29 at the official exchange rate) for the cheapest unlimited internet access rate at the speed of 256 kbps, and from 350 to 200 manat (around USD 57 at the official exchange rate) for the fastest available internet access rate at 2 Mbps. The services nevertheless remained expensive in relation to the level of income in the country (where the minimum monthly salary was [set at](#) 957 manat for 2021). There were also reports indicating that *Turkmentelekom* did not cope with the increasing demand the price decreased result in, with internet users [complaining](#) about growing problems with internet interruptions and internet speed below the promised ones, especially during evening peak hours.

Moreover, even the fastest available internet access option in Turkmenistan (2 Mbps) is slow compared to global standards. According to the [Speedtest Global Index](#), the global average speed for fixed broadband connections was 98 Mbps in February 2021. The site listed Turkmenistan last on its ranking of the speed of both fixed broadband and mobile internet connections in different countries across the world.

Residents of Turkmenistan can use mobile internet services through the state monopoly mobile operator *Altyn Asyr* ("Golden Age"). However, because of the high costs of these services, their accessibility is [limited](#).

In addition to internet access being limited, expensive and slow, it is heavily restricted. Many social media networks, messenger apps and websites that provide independent information about the situation in Turkmenistan have been arbitrarily blocked in the country. Most recently, the Zoom conference platform and Paypal payment system were reportedly [blocked](#).

Blocked internet resources are only accessible to residents of Turkmenistan with the help of internet censorship circumvention tools such as Virtual Private Networks (VPNs). At the same time, the authorities regularly block access to such tools as well. In March 2021, TIHR and other independent outlets [learned](#) about large-scale service failures for VPNs in the country, which appeared to be the result of renewed efforts by the authorities to prevent residents from accessing internet resources that are only available through VPNs.

There have also been new reports about intimidation of residents using VPNs to access blocked internet resources. For example, in December 2020, the security services reportedly [summoned](#) at least ten people living in the Lebap region, questioning them about why they were watching online content critical of the situation in Turkmenistan and pressuring them to sign statements saying that they would stop accessing such resources. One of those targeted told *Radio Azatlyk* that security service officials questioned him for about eight hours about YouTube content he had recently watched and threatened him with criminal prosecution and imprisonment unless he agreed to sign a statement saying that he would stop using VPNs to access information critical of Turkmenistan's government and president. He said that the security service officials asked him: "Are you a traitor? Against the president?".

## **Recommendations**

The Turkmenistani authorities should:

- Take effective measures to promote internet access, speed and affordability, and stop the practice of arbitrarily blocking access to internet resources.
- Refrain from intimidating internet users who are using censorship circumvention tools to access internet resources that have been arbitrarily blocked.

## **Association**

### **Closed space for independent NGOs**

Turkmenistan's Law on Public Associations [requires](#) organisations to obtain compulsory state registration in order to operate lawfully, provides for strict registration rules especially for nation-wide associations and grants authorities wide powers to oversee the activities and finances of associations, as well as to close them down. In practice, the Turkmenistani authorities continue to promote government-supported and controlled organisations and have failed to take steps to enable genuinely independent civil society organisations to operate in the country. Thus, as previously, no independent NGOs addressing human rights are registered or able to work openly in the country.

Turkmenistani human rights NGOs that are based in exile also face pressure. The website of Austria-based TIHR, *The Chronicles of Turkmenistan* is regularly the target of cyberattacks. While TIHR has been able to successfully navigate most attacks, some particularly powerful ones have resulted in temporary disruptions to the work of the site. For example, in September 2020, TIHR was [subjected](#) to such an attack. TIHR believes that the cyberattacks are carried out at the orders of the Turkmenistani security services in an attempt to obstruct the organisation's independent coverage of developments in Turkmenistan. Similar to other independent Turkmenistan-covering sites, TIHR's site is blocked in the country and only available through VPNs. Because of the large-scale VPNs service failures reported in

March 2021 (see above under Expression), TIHR observed a significant [decrease](#) in the number of visits to its site.

TIHR's director Farid Tukhbatullin and his family members have also repeatedly been subjected to intimidation. Most recently, on 9-11 March 2021, Tukhbatullin's mother, brother and aunt, who live in the city of Dashoguz, all received suspicious calls/visits from local officials, leading the defender to suspect that this was another attempt at putting pressure on him through his relatives.

Most of TIHR's contributors inside Turkmenistan work clandestinely for security reasons, while activists with a public profile who cooperate with the organisation are held under surveillance and face ongoing attempts by authorities to obstruct their work (see more on the List of individual cases).

### **Recommendations**

The Turkmenistani authorities should:

- Bring the provisions of the Law on Public Associations into full compliance with international human rights standards, and take concrete steps toward creating genuine space for independent NGOs to operate in the country.
- Refrain from putting pressure on independent human rights and news providing NGOs, which are based in exile for security reasons, their leaders, as well as their contributors and relatives inside Turkmenistan.

## **Assembly**

### **Attempts to put down anti-government protests abroad**

In summer 2020, members of Turkmenistani communities abroad, above all in Turkey and the United States organised a series of peaceful rallies to protest against the policies of Turkmenistan's government. These protests were prompted by the government's [flawed response](#) to the devastating hurricane that hit parts of Turkmenistan in April 2020 – instead of focusing on assisting the victims of this natural disaster, the government sought to cover it up. However, participants in the anti-government rallies abroad also raised other issues of concern, including the government's policy of denial with respect to the COVID-19 pandemic and its failure to take adequate action to protect citizens at this time. The rallies were promoted on social media and reported on by independent exile-based outlets covering Turkmenistan.

These developments did not please the Turkmenistani authorities, which sought to prevent further anti-government protests abroad by targeting participants and potential participants both directly and indirectly with the help of local authorities in the countries concerned. In connection with a planned protest outside Turkmenistan's consulate in Istanbul on 19 July 2020, Turkish police [detained](#) some 80 people, held them for several hours and requested their contact information. It appeared that this information was handed over to the Turkmenistani authorities as Turkmenistan-based relatives of those detained subsequently were subjected to pressure (see more under Expression and on the List of individual cases). While Turkish police justified the detentions with the lack of permission to hold the planned protest amid COVID-19 related restrictions on assemblies, there were also [reports](#) suggesting that Turkmenistani diplomats had requested the Turkish authorities to intervene to stop the planned

protest. One activist detained on this day, Dursoltan Taganova was held for more than a month and threatened by deportation to Turkmenistan – officially for a visa violation, but in reality, in retaliation for her engagement in the protest movement against Turkmenistan’s government (see more on the List of individual cases).

In recent months, foreign-based opposition groups have initiated new anti-government protests. For example, in February 2021, opposition groups planned on holding [a series of one-person pickets](#) in Istanbul in connection with the death of a young athlete, who was [killed](#) under unclear circumstances in Turkmenistan the same month. According to TIHR’s information, ahead of the planned protests, Turkish police called up activists known to be involved in the Turkmenistani protest movement and warned them that they would be held accountable if they took part in unsanctioned actions held in violation of current COVID-19 restrictions. Those targeted believed that the Turkmenistani authorities had informed the Turkish police about the planned protests and provided the names and contact details of activists. People believed to be associated with Turkmenistan’s diplomatic representations in Turkey also reportedly visited several companies and educational institutions where Turkmenistani migrants work and study, [warning](#) them not to participate in opposition events if they wanted to “avoid problems” for themselves and their relatives in Turkmenistan. TIHR’s sources reported that the pickets eventually [did not take place](#) as planned in Istanbul.

### ***Recommendations***

The Turkmenistani authorities should:

- Respect the right to freedom of assembly of citizens living abroad and refrain from any attempts to intimidate and harass the participants or potential participants in peaceful protests against the government’s policies held in other countries.

### **Quelling spontaneous protests**

Public protests are extremely rare in Turkmenistan because of the repressive climate in the country and the risk of persecution facing anyone who criticises the authorities. However, in some cases, residents have staged spontaneous protests to express their discontent about problems they are facing in their everyday lives and to demand action from the authorities. The past year has seen a number of spontaneous protests of citizens venting their frustration at issues related to the protracted economic crisis in the country, such as the lack of basic food staples sold at affordable prices in state subsidised stores and the lack of cash at ATMS (cash is still the only accepted form of payment in many stores and market places). The authorities have sought to quell these protests using tactics of, on the one hand, intimidation and, on the other hand, persuasion.

These are two examples:

- On 10 November 2020, residents of the Karakum district of the Mary region [staged](#) a spontaneous protest because of the lack of flour sold at state subsidised prices. About 30 people who were standing in line at a local state store to buy the promised monthly ration of flour took off to the local government administration when learning that there was not enough flour for the several hundred people wishing to buy this staple. They demanded that the authorities solve the problem with the lack of flour at state stores and grant them the flour rations to which they are

entitled. A representative of the local administration came out to talk to the protesters, but after exchanging a few words with them, he called the police, who promptly arrived and dispersed the crowd.

- Turkmen News reported about two cash-related protests in the city of Balkanabad in September 2020. On 7 September, about 200 people who were unable to withdraw money at Turkmenistan Bank operated ATMs in this city after standing in line for hours to do so [joined forces](#) to complain to the authorities. They first went to the regional prosecutor's office, where officials said that they did not deal with these kinds of issues, and then to the Central Bank's branch office in the city, where officials promised that money would be available at the ATMs "within half an hour". However, this did not happen and eventually the protesters had to go home without cash. On 25 September 2020, about 300 people who similarly were unable to withdraw cash after standing in line for hours [went](#) to the prosecutor's office to complain. This time, officials there intervened and contacted the director of the Turkmenistan Bank, and as a result, protesters were able to get cash.

### **Recommendations**

The Turkmenistani authorities should:

- Safeguard the right of citizens inside Turkmenistan to freely assemble on issues of concern to them, including by holding peaceful spontaneous protests without facing repercussions.

### **Forcible mobilisation for state-organised mass events**

While repressing the right of citizens to discuss and freely assemble on issues of public concern, the Turkmenistani authorities mass mobilise residents for state-organised parades, celebrations and other events, at the threat of repercussions for the refusal to participate. Public sector employees and students are the groups most frequently mobilised.

The practice of forcible mobilisation of state events is in violation of the right to freedom of assembly, a basic element of which is voluntary participation in assemblies. Among others, the UN Human Rights Committee has [criticised](#) Turkmenistan for this practice and called on the authorities to ensure "that participation in mass events is voluntary and refrain from any reprisals for non-participation".

In the recent months of the global COVID-19 pandemic, the Turkmenistani authorities have continued the practice of mass mobilisation, although there have been fewer state-organised mass events than previously. In this way, the authorities have not only violated the freedom of assembly of citizens but also exposed them to a heightened risk of contracting COVID-19, in particular by failing to ensure that event participants comply with protective measures such as the use of masks and social distancing enforced in other contexts.

Below we describe two examples documented by TIHR:

- On Saturday 7 November 2020, a so-called *subbotnik* – a day of free labour for public purposes – took place across the country. According to TIHR's information, employees at state and public institutions, students, schoolchildren and army conscripts [were mobilised](#) to plant trees and

clean outdoor areas. The participants in the *subbotnik* did not use masks or keep a physical distance.

- In March 2021, local authorities mobilised public sector employees and students to participate in [mass celebrations](#) of the Novruz spring holiday in the capital Ashgabat and other parts of the country. In order to get to the venues of the celebrations, participants had to travel on overcrowded buses, and they did not use masks.

### ***Recommendations***

The Turkmenistani authorities should:

- End the practice of forcibly mobilising residents for state-organised mass events, and ensure that participation in such events is voluntary, in accordance with the recommendation of the UN Human Rights Committee.