

Don't be misguided on Turkmenistan

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Specific human-rights criteria are needed on Turkmenistan.

In October, Veronika Szente Goldston of Human Rights Watch wrote that the European Parliament must “send a clear message that enhanced relations with the European Union must go hand in hand with concrete improvements in human rights” when it considers whether to support a partnership and co-operation agreement (PCA) with Turkmenistan (“A test of Parliament's resolve”, EuropeanVoice.com, 31 October 2012).

She was right. The Turkmen government is repressive in the extreme. Under the leadership of President Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov, Turkmenistan's self-styled “protector of the nation”, the government closely controls all aspects of public life. As Ms Goldston notes, journalists such as Annakurban Amanklychev and Sapardurdy Khadzhiev and political dissidents such as Gulgeldy Annaniyazov face the threat of arbitrary detention. Even singers such as Maksat Kakabaev (aka Maro) and Murad Ovezov have been wrongfully detained on fabricated charges because of their Western-style music and clothing. Prisoners of conscience are frequently held incommunicado; reports of mistreatment in Turkmen prisons are widespread. Unsurprisingly, monitoring groups like Freedom House and Reporters Without Borders have consistently ranked Turkmenistan among the world's most repressive regimes.

Despite this record, EU foreign ministers have waved through an interim trade agreement that grants Turkmenistan preferential treatment, and the EU's new special representative to central Asia, Patricia Flor, indicated in July that she did not support establishing concrete benchmarks for progress on human rights as a condition for improved relations. This has fed a belief among observers that, thanks to Turkmenistan's energy resources, a permanent PCA deal is inevitable.

To abandon human-rights benchmarks would be misguided. It also runs counter to the documents establishing the EU's relationship with Turkmenistan, which require, among other things, progress on respect for freedom of religion, expression, press and assembly, the release of all prisoners of conscience, and free access for international human-rights monitors. It also goes against the EU's stated policy that a ‘silver thread’ of human rights should be woven into all policies.

The EU should do the right thing. This spring, the EU is scheduled to hold its annual 'human-rights dialogue' with Turkmenistan. The effectiveness of such dialogues rests on establishing and monitoring specific human-rights criteria – not ignoring them.