

Turkmenistan: Consultations Pose Test of EU's Resolve

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Later this May, European Union officials will meet a delegation from Turkmenistan during annual human rights consultations. President Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov's authoritarian regime in Ashgabat is one of the most repressive in the world, yet the meeting poses perhaps the biggest test for the EU side.

In 2008, the European Parliament formulated human rights benchmarks as a precondition for the European Union's (EU) relations with Turkmenistan. But since then, EU officials have consistently sidestepped Turkmenistan's atrocious human rights record as they have sought to engage Ashgabat on security and energy issues.

Last July, the new EU Special Representative for Central Asia, Patricia Flor, stated that she did not support setting concrete benchmarks for progress on human rights in Central Asia as a foundation for the EU's relationships with states like Turkmenistan. As the EU prepares to engage the Turkmen government at the EU-Turkmenistan Human Rights Dialogue, it is imperative that the EU hold the Turkmen government accountable for its rights failings, and convey to Berdymukhamedov's government that advancing relations with the EU is contingent upon its compliance with international standards.

Turkmenistan is an autocratic state in which Berdymukhamedov, who hails himself as Arkadag (Protector), enjoys unlimited power and total control over all aspects of public life. Since 2001, Freedom House has continuously ranked Turkmenistan as "the worst of the worst" among the world's most repressive countries. The Turkmen government severely retaliates against anyone critical of its policies, including human rights defenders, journalists, and lawyers.

Arbitrary detention remains a serious problem. Despite pardoning some prisoners of conscience in February, the government continues to detain longtime political dissident Gulgeldy Annaniyazov. Mr. Annaniyazov, who was sentenced to 11 years in prison on unconfirmed charges after a closed trial in 2008, is being held incommunicado and the Turkmen government refuses to disclose information about his whereabouts or well-being. Young Jehovah's Witnesses also face imprisonment for objecting to compulsory military service, a requirement of their faith.

Despite Turkmenistan's abysmal human rights record, the EU has been lax in its obligations to address these violations and the total absence of genuine democratic reforms in Turkmenistan. Many of the documents establishing the EU's relationship with Turkmenistan, including the

EU's Interim Trade Agreement with Turkmenistan, require that the Turkmen government meet human rights benchmarks, such as guaranteeing civil liberties, releasing all prisoners of conscience, and allowing international human rights monitors free access to the country. To date, Turkmenistan has not met any of these benchmarks.

Turkmenistan's failure to make real progress has stalled ratification of its Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) in the European Parliament several times. However, some experts believe that ratification will eventually happen—in large part because of the EU's growing interest in diversifying its energy supply by gaining access to Turkmenistan's vast resources. But the EU must make it clear to the Turkmen government that its failure to meet the human rights benchmarks set by the European Parliament will not be rewarded with further engagement. The EU should not pursue stronger ties with Turkmenistan without the Turkmen government first showing definitive progress towards adhering to international standards for human rights.

In May, the EU will have the opportunity to engage the Turkmen government during its annual EU-Turkmenistan Human Rights Dialogue. The EU should use this dialogue to call for the Turkmen government to meet its human rights obligations. Specifically, the EU must press the Turkmen government to respect freedom of religion, belief, expression, press and assembly. The EU should make it clear to the Turkmen government that without the effective guarantee of these rights, there can be no genuine progress on democracy and human rights. The EU should also call for the immediate release of those arbitrarily detained for exercising their fundamental human rights, including the political dissident Gulgeldy Annaniyazov and at least nine imprisoned Jehovah's Witnesses.

At the Human Rights Dialogue, the EU must make it clear to the Turkmen delegation that the country's progress towards meeting human rights benchmarks is an essential element of its relationship with the EU and that progress toward deepening relations will not take place unless improvements are made.

Editor's note: *Mirakmal Niyazmatov is a program lawyer with Freedom Now, a US-based nongovernmental organization that works to free prisoners of conscience.*