THE

PEACE & SECURITY MONITOR

Central Asia

Issue 12 | July 2025

PLATFORM
FOR PEACE AND HUMANITY

Project Coordinator
Maya Hristova Ivanova

Editors
Maya Hristova Ivanova

Authors
Grace Bell
Matilde Gamba
Davide Campagnola

Graphic Designer
Gilson Njunga

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Foreword

Central Asia has stood as a dynamic crossroads, representing a center of trade and communication. It linked diverse civilizations: from the East, the Chinese empires; from the South, the rich Indian and Persian worlds and the expansive Islamic caliphates; from the North, the vast Slavic and Russian domains; and from the West, its European counterparts. This unique geographical position has, over different epochs, fostered both periods of peaceful exchange of goods and ideas, and times when military forces converged on its vast steppes.

Today, China is the latest major power to strategically leverage these historical and geographical connections. Our current monitoring research rigorously examines the socio-economic and environmental impacts of its ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in the region. As the flagship global project for the Chinese government, the BRI certainly offers unique opportunities for strategic investment and deeper economic development. However, like many large-scale investment plans, it comes with significant caveats. These include, but are not limited to, the predominant use of Chinese resources and labor, limited local engagement and dialogue in infrastructure development, and substantial ecological impacts. Our monitor concludes that there is a critical need for China to significantly increase its green investments and to enhance the transparency, accountability, and local ownership of the projects it undertakes.

Furthermore, several countries in the region continue to demonstrate a concerning record on upholding basic human rights, with some severely restricting the circulation of news and free access to the internet. What could serve as a powerful instrument for societal progress is, in many instances, being transformed into a tool of oppression. This month's issue specifically analyzes how Turkmen authorities are progressively tightening their control over the digital environment of their citizens, severely limiting access to independent information. Internet services in Turkmenistan are currently dominated by a monopoly, characterized by prohibitive costs and a low access rate, which fundamentally undermines citizens' rights. Digital repression and pervasive cyber surveillance in Turkmenistan profoundly impact human security and human rights, fostering a pervasive climate of fear and misinformation. In turn, this dismantles civic spaces, erodes social trust, and restricts individuals' ability to make informed decisions. Turkmenistan, unfortunately, is not isolated in this regard, reflecting a broader global trend where individual rights face persistent limitations.

The third monitoring research in this month's issue focuses on a cultural aspect in the region that is increasingly being leveraged to limit minority rights through the imposition of a singular national narrative. This phenomenon is often referred to as "Turkmenization," denoting the enactment and enforcement of policies designed to suppress ethnic minorities' cultural expression in favor of a dominant Turkmen culture. Such practices have a direct, detrimental impact on the lives of many communities, posing a serious risk to the undermining of individual rights and identities, thereby eroding a vital piece of the region's rich cultural tapestry.

Overall, the Central Asian region is confronting a complex array of political and security challenges. Various actors are actively exploiting existing vulnerabilities such as poor governance and a lack of accountability and transparency. Left unaddressed, many of these challenges threaten to profoundly undermine the rich cultural, historical, and political heritage of the region, fundamentally altering its character.

The Humanitarian Footprint of the Belt and Road Initiative in Central Asia

Davide Campagnola

Key Takeaways

- The Belt and Road Initiative offers Central Asian countries a strategic opportunity to broaden their market access and deepen integration into the global trade system.

- A significant share of China's funding under the Belt and Road Initiative flows to Chinese companies, which often import their own equipment, resources, and labour, questioning the empowerment and economic benefits for the local populations.

- Economic and ecological concerns among local populations regarding the Belt and Road Initiative is fostering the spread of Sinophobia in the region.

- With the right emphasis on sustainability, the Belt and Road Initiative can serve as an accelerator to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals with the help of projects tailored to address the root causes of poverty and climate-induced instability in Central Asia.

Introduction

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), embodying China's colossal development and investment initiatives, was announced by President Xi Jinping back in 2013 at the Nazarbayev University in Kazakhstan.[1] The BRI, also known as the New Silk Road, represents an immense network composed of maritime and land routes that resulted in the construction of physical infrastructures, such as hospitals and energy facilities, an emphasis on digitalization through internet connectivity projects, as well as trade programs, resulting in the reshaping of the regions and countries involved in the BRI.[2] A central region for such an ambitious initiative is Central Asia which represents, historically and presently, a key region for the Silk Road. Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan are vital stakeholders of the BRI, receiving huge amounts of funding and hosting essential infrastructures.

The Belt and Road Initiative offers potential benefits for the region's economic development, including growth and job creation. However, its broader humanitarian impacts, particularly on local populations and the environment, must also be taken into account. As China has become the region's leading trade partner, surpassing even Russia, it is essential to critically assess the full humanitarian footprint of the BRI in Central Asia.

A General Overview of the BRI in Central Asia

The BRI in Central Asia plays a fundamental role in the regional economy. It generates large-scale infrastructure, offers access to global trade systems, and improves regional networks.[3]

In 2023, the presidents of Central Asian states convened with Chinese President Xi Jinping for a regional summit in Xi'an. Facebook / Emomali Rahmon.

More than 100 projects have been launched in Central Asia to enhance connectivity, such as the China-Kyrgyz-Uzbek railway.[4] China has granted significant non-repayable aid to countries like Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan for road construction and access to clean water in remote areas.[5]

Official ceremony marking the start of the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway project in Kyrgyzstan on December 27, 2024. VCG.

The increasing connectivity has cascading effects into the regional economy by promoting integration and cooperation.[6] Moreover, the BRI fosters regional and international platforms integration for Central Asia countries, which bolstered their international participation.[7]

Additionally, the Digital Silk Road program offers Central Asian countries a new approach to regional security, notably through enhanced cybersecurity capabilities and reinforced resilience against digital threats.[8] It also presents a significant opportunity to modernize the region.[9]

Education and cultural initiatives, such as the establishment of Confucius Institutes and scholarships to Chinese universities, offer new opportunities for engagement.[10]

Number of Confucius Institutes in Central Asia by Country

Kazakhstan	5
Kyrgyzstan	4
Tajikistan	2
Uzbekistan	2
Turkmenistan	0
Total	**13**

Total number of Confucius Institutes in Central Asia per country. Confucius Institute Website.

The BRI embodies a unique opportunity for the countries from Central Asia to tackle enduring challenges and to advance in the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals, where core issues such as poverty and economic growth could be addressed. Nonetheless, the BRI also represents a potential threat to other regional challenges. Indeed, the countries participating in BRI projects often see a reduction in certain democratic freedoms and labour rights.[11] Moreover, large-scale infrastructure initiatives are more easily planned and executed in environments where media scrutiny, civil society oversight, and labour protections are limited.[12] This dynamic strengthens state control at the expense of public participation and individual rights, with direct consequences for local populations.

These developments have direct consequences for local populations, particularly for those already marginalized and vulnerable, as it shapes not only the distribution of economic benefits but also access to rights, services, and employment. Understanding these dynamics is key to assessing the humanitarian footprint of the BRI in Central Asia.

Reinforcing authoritarian regimes – undermining local populations

In this context, the region's political landscape increasingly shapes the nature of its international partnerships and the models of development its leaders choose to embrace. Indeed, Western investors remain cautious about investing in Central Asian states due to weak governance and insufficient rule of law, with Kazakhstan being a notable exception, making the Chinese economic model very attractive to local elites, who would otherwise lack alternative sources of financing.[13] Moreover, incumbent leaders prioritize economic development over political reform and align more closely with models of stability and state-led growth than with the market competition and democratic norms promoted by Europe.[14]

One of the major concerns is the lack of transparency, resulting in opaque projects that may foster the grabbing of resources by the elites. The widespread corruption diverts a portion of the potential benefits from the wider population.[15] A large proportion of the People's Republic of China's funding goes to Chinese companies, which in turn bring Chinese equipment, resources, and workforce, further reducing local empowerment.[16]

As infrastructure projects remain opaque and centralized in the hands of elites, local populations often face limited access to the social and economic benefits promised by development initiatives. The lack of transparency and local participation undermines accountability. At the same time, relying on foreign companies and workers reduces opportunities for local jobs and skills development. In the end, this approach to development increases inequality and widens the gap between governments and their citizens.

Despite the influx of foreign investments under the Belt and Road Initiative, local market vendors do not always see the promised economic benefits. Pexels.

Such trends are further reinforced by the risk of seeing several countries entangled by the debt trap. Beijing is the world's largest debt collector.[17] Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan are among the most indebted recipients of China's direct loans.[18] While Uzbekistan is benefiting from economic growth, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are especially at risk from China's debt-trap diplomacy; a scenario in which they could not repay their large debts to China and may be forced to hand over strategic resources to China in a debt-for-equity swap.[19]

Tajikistan's national debt to China has steadily increased, and Beijing has become its largest creditor.[20] Meanwhile, in Kyrgyzstan, the public perception of Chinese investment is largely negative, driven by doubts over the country's ability to repay the loans.[21]

These developments carry serious humanitarian implications. As governments become more indebted and increasingly dependent on Beijing, there is a risk that regimes will prioritize debt servicing and Chinese-backed projects over social spending and public welfare. In fragile states like Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, this dynamic may reinforce authoritarian practices, suppress dissent, and limit transparency. The burden of opaque deals and economic dependency often falls on local populations, who face worsening socio-economic conditions, reduced access to basic services, and heightened repression under the appearance of stability and development.

Security, Digitalization and Surveillance

This growing involvement also extends into the security sphere, where China's presence is becoming increasingly visible.

In terms of security, the first Chinese military facility, formally designated as a border guard post for Tajik troops, was constructed with Chinese funding a few years ago in the south of Tajikistan, near the border with Afghanistan and China.[22]

A combined Chinese-Tajik patrol unit oversees the border area. A Ran / Barcroft Media / Getty Images.

Moreover, China is steadily increasing its arms exports to Central Asia, accounting for more than 18% of the total arms imports in the region in 2019.[23]

Alongside official security cooperation and arms transfers, Beijing has also begun relying on non-state actors to safeguard its interests on the ground. Indeed, the presence of Chinese Private Military Companies (PMC) to guard Chinese infrastructures in the region [24] could arise as a humanitarian concern in the future. Although no major outbreaks of violence involving the PMCs have emerged yet, and they conform to local legal regulations, such developments raise critical questions concerning Beijing's capacity to adopt a more assertive security stance in the region, particularly in regard to growing anti-China sentiments. The 2020 Global Security Initiative (GSI), which prioritizes security cooperation, provides Beijing with a strategic tool for becoming a major security stakeholder in Central Asia.

The growing presence of Chinese security actors not only raises concerns about accountability and the erosion of local sovereignty but also risks enabling repressive practices under the pretext of protecting infrastructure. In fragile political environments, this trend can contribute to the marginalization of communities and increased surveillance, particularly of vulnerable groups. The securitization of China's investments in Central Asia is evident through the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, where member states have committed to combating separatism, terrorism, and religious extremism. This resulted in the extradition of alleged Uyghur separatists to China.[25] Notably, the Center for Uyghur Studies highlights how the Uyghur community in Kazakhstan is alarmed by China's transnational repression, including surveillance by Chinese intelligence and local authorities acting on Beijing's requests.[26]

A major humanitarian concern is that the connectivity created by the Belt and Road Initiative offers both the knowledge and means to pursue mass surveillance in Central Asia. The implications for human rights in the region are deep and worrying. China introduced the Digital Silk Road Program in 2015. Central Asia, a region in demand for increased connectivity, represents a crucial actor for such investment.[27] Notably, Chinese technologies are central in the digital surveillance of Central Asia's countries.[28] This results in growing concerns regarding data privacy and misuse, as well as fears over digital sovereignty.[29]

Chinese traffic surveillance system in Almaty. Kanat Altynbayev.

Taken together, China's support for political stability through alignment with Central Asian governments and the provision of surveillance technologies reflects a strategic partnership that prioritizes regime security over democratic reform.[30] While framed as promoting order and development, these dynamics limit political freedoms and civic space, raising concerns about long-term impacts on governance and the well-being of local populations.

As the BRI continues to expand its footprint across Central Asia, its implications go far beyond economics and connectivity. While the initiative has reinforced security cooperation, often at the cost of democratic space and civil liberties, its impact on the region's environment is no less significant.

Environmental and Sustainability Concerns

Chinese investments have also sparked widespread concern among local populations over their social and environmental impact. Public resistance to Chinese investments has been driven by fears of debt dependency, land appropriation, job losses, and environmental degradation.[31] For example, mass protests erupted in 2016 in Kazakhstan over land reform plans that many feared would enable Chinese control of farmland, prompting the government to suspend the reforms amid sovereignty concerns. Land represents a key issue for the local population, which in turn fosters the rise of national and anti-Chinese sentiment. According to the 2020 Central Asia Barometer survey, 75% of Kazakhstanis expressed strong concern over Chinese land acquisitions, while 71% were worried about rising national debt linked to Chinese projects.[32]

Such reactions should not be neglected by Central Asian states, because they could spill over into widespread protests challenging state authority and governance. Given the violent responses to protests that occurred in 2022 [33] in several Central Asia countries, such developments may have dramatic humanitarian outcomes. The attractiveness of Chinese investments for regional elites [34] may consequently undermine local populations' claims.

In addition, the lack of transparency regarding the projects raises questions concerning the environmental impact of such massive infrastructures in a region already under huge climate pressure and where climate-induced problems are erupting. The potential outcomes are facilitated by flexible legislation with regard to environmental protection: Uzbekistan has eased investment approvals by sidelining environmental regulations, while in Tajikistan, policymakers see environmental concerns as barriers to market reforms.[35] Polluting industries are also being moved from China to Central Asia, further worsening the environmental situation.[36] Additionally, illegal pesticides and agrochemicals are being used by Chinese companies, without opposition from the Central Asian States.

The construction of these massive infrastructures often overlooks the environmental provisions such as Environmental Impact Assessments.[37] Therefore, the BRI could face major environmental challenges, especially from poorly planned mountain roads that

increase risks like landslides, rockfalls, and road closures. In Central Asia, new roads built on steep terrain for resource extraction, particularly in the Pamirs, Pamir-Alay, and Tien Shan, exacerbate these hazards, threatening infrastructure, communities, and ecosystems downstream.[38] These road expansions also represent a risk for local and traditional cultivation practices that can be impacted by land exploitation, deforestation and new infrastructures.

New roads cutting through fragile mountain terrain threaten ecosystems, traditional livelihoods, and increase the risk of landslides and erosion. Pexels.

Central Asia is already under strong climate-induced stress, and further aggravation of the situation could have dramatic consequences on the water security, food production and local communities.

Conclusion

The BRI has significantly shaped Central Asia's development trajectory, offering economic opportunities while simultaneously reinforcing authoritarian governance, limiting civic space, and raising serious environmental concerns. Without greater transparency, accountability, and sustainability, its long-term impact may deepen regional inequalities and vulnerabilities. Addressing these challenges requires coordinated action and forward-looking strategies that place human dignity, social equity, and environmental sustainability at the core of development efforts.

Policy Recommendations

- Making the Belt and Road Initiative greener should be a central goal to ensure sustainability and climate change mitigation. To this regard, the Green Investment Principle (GIP) for the Belt and Road Initiative has been an important step for greening investment in the BRI.

- China is a leading actor in solar panels, wind turbines and electrical vehicles. Promoting these technologies within BRI's project will help lower carbon emissions. Such development should be complemented by strict laws and regulations issued by Central Asian States to ensure the sustainability of the BRI projects in the region.

- The projects should embrace greater transparency and accountability; this will foster projects' efficiency and increase the benefits for all the stakeholders involved.

- To this extent, a more grounded approach would help promote local ownership and inclusion, which could subsequently help reduce the resistance of the local populations. Engaging with local stakeholders could also facilitate the resolution of ground-based issues.
- The BRI's benefits could be supplemented by complementary projects by other actors, such as the European Union, who may introduce different tools, such as values and norms, which in turn could result in broader success stories in the region.

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The Digital Iron Curtain: Internet Censorship and Cyber Surveillance in Turkmenistan's Authoritarian Landscape

Matilde Gamba

Key Takeaways

- Digital technologies in Turkmenistan are weaponized by the Turkmenistani authorities as tools to monitor, censor, and punish dissent in the society, thereby significantly limiting access to information.

- The Turkmenistani government monopolizes internet services, with low access rates and high costs that severely undermine citizens' usage of digital platforms.

- While Turkmenistani law protects the freedom of expression, in practice, the government suppresses dissent and severely limits civic engagement. Cases like the illegal arrest of journalist Nurgeldi Halykov illustrate the risks faced by Turkmenistani citizens attempting to express critical views against the government.

- Digital repression and cyber surveillance in Turkmenistan severely impact human security and human rights by fostering a climate of fear and misinformation among citizens, shrinking civic spaces and undermining social trust.

Introduction

In authoritarian regimes, digital platforms are both lifelines and liabilities. In Turkmenistan, one of the most repressive and isolated states globally, online expression has become a perilous act. In late 2023, a 26-year-old man from the Mary Region, located in the south-east of Turkmenistan, was reportedly detained after posting a critical comment about food shortages in a private Telegram group.[1] While this arrest did not make international headlines, nor was the man charged under any transparent legal processes, this case represents only one among numerous instances of politically motivated arrests that regularly occur in Turkmenistan's tightly controlled digital space. Accordingly, through the opaque mechanisms of digital surveillance and censorship, the country's government systematically monitors its citizens, suppressing dissent, even in private or encrypted communications.[2]

This article investigates how the Turkmen government employs digital technologies as instruments of repression, transforming tools designed to connect and inform into powerful levers of social control and repression. Accordingly, it asks a crucial question: How do Turkmenistani authorities rely on internet censorship and cyber-surveillance to restrict freedom of expression and undermine human security?

Despite numerous international calls for reform from United Nations (UN) bodies and international human rights Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), Turkmenistan remains largely impermeable to external pressure due to its geopolitical insulation, strategic neutrality, and significant possession of natural resources that allow the regime to avoid conditional aid and bilateral pressure.[3] This lack of accountability heightens the urgency of research and sustained documentation of human rights violations and repressive practices within the country's digital sphere. Accordingly, while traditional media has long been censored in the country, the intensification of digital restrictions and state-sponsored surveillance technologies [4] highlights a new phase of tech-enabled authoritarian repression, one that operates quietly, effectively, and in many cases, invisibly.

For these reasons, unveiling the mechanisms behind digital authoritarianism in Turkmenistan is essential to comprehensively understand the evolving nature of human security and human rights violations in contemporary repressive regimes in Central Asia. Accordingly, while the post-Soviet Central Asian region has long struggled with limited political freedoms, weak civil societies, and restricted press landscapes, Turkmenistan presents today an extreme manifestation of authoritarian consolidation: a single-party state with no free press, no viable opposition, and one of the lowest rates of internet freedom in the world.[5] Moreover, as the state slowly expands internet access and new digital infrastructures, these new technologies are co-opted to surveil, punish, and isolate citizens, rather than empower them. Eventually, by addressing this pressing issue, this article contributes to the broader global discourse on the erosion of internet freedom, the freedom of expression, and the rise of digital authoritarians as an increasingly emerging governance model.

This piece begins by providing an overview of Turkmenistan's authoritarian media landscape and the government's approach to information control. It then explores the country's internet infrastructure, followed by a detailed analysis focusing on the state's censorship techniques and surveillance practices. Finally, by analyzing the imprisonment of journalist Nurgeldi Halykov, this report illustrates the consequences of digital dissent on human security and human rights. The conclusion summarises the key arguments and provides recommendations for international actors and human rights organizations.

Contextual Background: Turkmenistan's Authoritarian Media Landscape

Since gaining independence following the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, Turkmenistan has developed into one of the most authoritarian regimes in the world, characterised by intense and pervasive state control, the absence of political pluralism, and systematic suppression of dissent.[6] The country's first president, Saparmurat Niyazov, established a cult of personality and a highly centralised political system, eliminating opposition parties, restricting civil society, and exerting control over all branches of government. His successor, Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov, who came to power in 2006, and later his son, Serdar Berdymukhamedov, have perpetuated and expanded this autocratic legacy, further entrenching autocratic rule through constitutional amendments, rigged elections, and relentless censorship.[7]

Nowadays, Turkmenistan exemplifies a deeply entrenched authoritarian media system, where the Turkmenistani government exercises absolute control over the media landscape, in both traditional and digital information channels and platforms. Accordingly, all television channels, radio stations, and newspapers are state-owned or tightly regulated under strict government oversight.[8] Conventional and digital content is meticulously curated and used as a tool for disseminating state propaganda, suppressing dissent, and projecting a positive image of the nation and its leadership, with any form of criticism being strictly prohibited, thereby contributing to the country's extreme information isolation.[9]

Photograph of young Turkmenistani men and women working in a computer lab (Turkmenportal.com 26 April 2024), accessed 8 June 2025.

Within this tightly controlled media scheme, Turkmenistani journalists operate under severe restrictions, and independent media are virtually non-existent within the country's borders. Those individuals who deviate from the official governmental narrative face severe repercussions, including harassment, imprisonment, and even torture.[10] For this reason, the few independent journalists residing in Turkmenistan work undercover, as they risk prosecution and put their families under heavy control and pressure by government officials. Foreign reporters are rarely granted access to the country, and those permitted entry are faced with tight monitoring and limited movement.

Despite the existence of a 2013 law that formally prohibits censorship,[11] in practice, this legal provision remains purely symbolic. Accordingly, all publications require government authorization before dissemination, no transparency exists concerning the list of prohibited or banned websites or content, and new media outlets are regularly blocked without any official explanation.

Information Monopoly and Control: The Internet Infrastructure and Digital Access in Turkmenistan

In the digital realm, the Turkmenistani government has established one of the most restrictive and state-controlled internet regimes globally.[12] While the government nominally promoted digital development and connectivity, these efforts are part of the country's deliberate mechanisms of social and political control. Accordingly, internet access is severely limited, with less than 30% of the population having access to it, with even lower penetration rates in rural areas such as in the Mary and Lebap regions.[13] In those cases where internet is available, its access is deliberately expensive and slow as it is constrained by extensive official censorship and surveillance. Accordingly, the state-owned provider, Turkmentelecom, holds a monopoly over internet services, controlling all fixed broadband and mobile data networks, thereby enabling the government to monitor and control online activity comprehensively.[14]

Moreover, the government deliberately restricts independent internet service providers to effectively limit internet usage among the Turkmenistani population and monitor internet traffic through packet inspection techniques to filter content and identify users attempting to access prohibited information. Through these repressive strategies, official authorities are able to successfully limit and block access to numerous websites, including social media platforms such as YouTube, WhatsApp, and Signal, as well as independent news outlets, and even tools designed to circumvent censorship, such as Virtual Private Networks (VPNs).[15] Beyond infrastructural limitations, digital exclusion is also reinforced through pricing policies. In a country where the average monthly salary is roughly $250, monthly broadband packages can cost between $50 and $70, putting internet access beyond the reach of many households.[16] This economic barrier is further compounded by the government's control over hardware distribution. Accordingly, the market availability of devices capable of circumventing censorship, such as smartphones with pre-installed VPNs or Tor browsers, are rarely available in the domestic market, and importing them is increasingly difficult under tightening customs regulations.[17]

Photograph of a Turkmenistani woman in a café in Ashgabat using a computer (RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty, 5 August 2023), accessed 3 June 2025.

In 2019, the establishment of the State Cybersecurity Service under the Turkmenaragatnashyk Agency marked a significant shift in the government's ability to enforce digital censorship. Tasked with safeguarding the nation's "cyber-sovereignty," the Agency operates with little transparency or public accountability.[18] Accordingly, it has entered into agreements and frameworks with foreign cybersecurity services to improve its surveillance capabilities, further enhancing the government's control over digital information flows.

This environment of scarcity and surveillance has created a digital caste system in Turkmenistan, where only the political elite and their trusted associates enjoy uncensored and stable internet access. Ordinary citizens are forced into patterns of self-censorship or technological resignation, further isolating them from global information flows and civil society networks.[19] Meanwhile, digital scarcity becomes a tool of coercion: by denying internet access or threatening its removal, the government leverages control over information as a form of punishment and reward.

Digital Dissent and Freedom of Expression: What are the Broader Human Security and Human Rights Implications in Turkmenistan?

At the normative level, Turkmenistan is bound by an extensive body of international law protecting the right to freedom of expression. Notably, in 1977, Turkmenistan ratified the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), which, under Article 19(2), provides that "everyone shall have the right to freedom of expression," including the right "to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds."[20] This provision entails both negative obligations to refrain from interference and positive duties to protect and facilitate this right through concrete legislative and institutional measures. Further legal provisions derive from Turkmenistan's ratification of other core human rights instruments, such as the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.[21]

Turkmenistan's domestic legal framework theoretically reflects these commitments. Article 42 of the Constitution explicitly guarantees freedom of opinion and expression, and the 2013 Media Law purports to prohibit censorship and state interference in media activities.[22] Additionally, the government has established various bodies such as the Interagency Commission on Enforcing Turkmenistan's International Human Rights Obligations (1996), the Parliamentary Committee on the Protection of Human Rights and Liberties (2005), and the Institute of State, Law and Democracy (2018) to institutionalize and oversee human rights protections.[23] In practice, however, these instruments and mechanisms offer little more than symbolic compliance.

Accordingly, while formal legal guarantees may be enshrined on paper, empirical conditions reveal a vastly different reality. In a highly repressive and information-controlled government such as Turkmenistan, where the state de facto holds the monopoly of information flows and systematically limits its citizens' freedom of expression, the internet becomes one of the few spaces for civic discussions, participation, and dissent.[24] Yet, the use of digital platforms and channels is fraught with risk. Within this framework, the detention and imprisonment of freelance journalist Nurgeldi Halykov embodies the human rights and human security implications faced by Turkmenistani citizens who seek to circumvent government-imposed information controls and exercise their right to free expression.

In July 2020, Nurgeldi Halykov was arrested by Turkmenistani authorities after exposing the unreliability of COVID-19 statistics and data delivered by the Turkmenistani government.[25] While the charges against Halykov appeared administrative on their face, the underlying motive was unmistakably political and had one aim: to suppress the dissemination of unauthorized information and deter similar acts of digital dissent. Although in a second stage of prosecution, this arrest was revealed to be an act framed by authorities through

fabricated criminal charges unrelated to Halykov's digital activity, the journalist was convicted without a fair trial or any meaningful due legal process.[26] This results in what scholars have described as "abusive legalism",[27] referring to the use of the law and legal mechanisms not to uphold human rights and promote accountability and justice, but rather to suppress them.

Photograph of Nurgeldi Halykov (Turkmen.news, 14 December 2020), accessed 3 June 2025.

The implications of Nurgeldi Halykov's politically motivated arrest and conviction had a broader scope, which extends beyond the immediate breach of an individual's freedom of expression and right to due process.[28] Accordingly, Halykov's imprisonment sent a clear message to every Turkmenistani man and woman, to activists, and independent journalists alike: the digital realm is not a haven for dissent.Consequently by denying access to pluralistic information, the Turkmenistani government fully undermines civic engagement.

As a result, this entrenched form of digital authoritarianism severely restricts civil space and constraints human security. Accordingly, by denying access to pluralistic and independent information, the Turkmen state obstructs individuals' capacity to make informed decisions and develop critical thinking and civic awareness. Moreover, this climate of misinformation and fear discourages public discourse and erodes social trust and cohesion.[29] This dynamic is specifically amplified during periods of public emergency, such as economic crises or health epidemics, where access to reliable and timely information could represent a matter of survival for many Turkmenistani citizens who live in vulnerable conditions.[30] Accordingly, the ultimate consequence of digital authoritarianism is not merely the erosion of the freedom of expression and civil liberties, but the reproduction of authoritarian control that reinforces social stratification and a sense of powerlessness among the population.

In conclusion, while the Turkmen government remains formally committed to legal provisions and International Human Rights Law standards, their lack of implementation highlights a profound and systemic disjuncture between law and practice. Accordingly, those same state institutions established to safeguard human rights and enhance human security function less as independent bodies and more as legitimizing tools for authoritarian governance. Nurgeldi Halykov's case thus crystallizes this broader dynamic: despite existing legal protections, acts of digital dissent are criminalized as existential threats to regime stability.

Conclusion

The digital realm in Turkmenistan reflects the entrenchment of a new form of authoritarian control, one that is silent, systemic, and technologically sophisticated. While in many countries, the advancement of technology and the access to internet platforms and

channels represents a step toward democratic participation, civic empowerment, and informed publics, in Turkmenistan, those same digital tools and infrastructures have been weaponised by the state into an instrument of coercion, punishment, and fear. Turkmenistani citizens, human rights defenders, and journalists like Nurgeldi Halykov, who attempt to exercise their basic right to freedom of expression, are met with swift and severe retribution, often through arbitrary detention, surveillance, torture, or politically motivated trials.

This report has illustrated how Turkmenistan's government uses digital censorship, infrastructure control, and cyber-surveillance to maintain an information monopoly and repress civic dissent, thereby stifling democratic discourse and undermining any form of organized opposition or accountability. These practices are not isolated anomalies, but they represent a deliberate digital strategy of authoritarian entrenchment designed to silence pluralism and engineer compliance.

As authoritarian regimes increasingly adapt to the digital age, defending the freedom to speak, connect, and access information online must be understood as an essential pillar of both human rights protection and human security promotion in the 21st century. In Turkmenistan, silence is not merely imposed, but it is infrastructurally engineered. Dismantling that architecture begins with exposing it.

Policy Recommendations

The following recommendations aim to disrupt the mechanisms of digital repression, empower civil society actors, and uphold Turkmenistani citizens' basic human rights.

Recommendations for the Government of Turkmenistan:

- Uphold the right to freedom of expression and access to information by guaranteeing uncensored access to internet platforms and other means of digital and independent media in line with international human rights treaties ratified by Turkmenistan;

- Cease state-sponsored surveillance and censorship by immediately dismantling unlawful digital surveillance programs and content blocking practices and adopting transparent frameworks for any national security-related monitoring;

- Protect digital and press freedom activists from harassment by immediately ending intimidation, arrests, and arbitrary detentions of journalists and digital rights defenders; and

- Promote digital literacy and internet accessibility to the entirety of the Turkmenistani population by investing in the development of digital infrastructures to ensure equitable internet access, especially in rural and marginalized areas of the country.

Recommendations for International Organizations and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs):

- Establish an international coalition against digital authoritarianism by building a multi stakeholder platform to coordinate efforts, share intelligence, and amplify advocacy on digital repression;

- Impose targeted sanctions on enablers of repression by enacting and enforcing export controls and sanctions on firms and intermediaries supplying surveillance or censorship tech to authoritarian regimes;

- Enhance digital security training for vulnerable communities by developing localized, language-accessible training programs on digital hygiene and secure communication for Turkmenistani journalists, activists, and diaspora members; and

- Engage regional actors as pressure multipliers by working with regional powers and institutions (e.g., the OSCE, OIC, Central Asian states) to diplomatically pressure Turkmenistan to meet its digital rights obligations.

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What is Behind a Name? "Turkmenization" and the Erasure of Cultural Identity

Grace Bell

Key Takeaways

- Reports from Turkmenistan's eastern Lebab province suggest that ethnic minorities are now being told that they must give their children traditional Turkmen names.

- This is one in a long series of developments often referred to as "Turkmenization," or the enactment and enforcement of policies designed to limit ethnic minorities' cultural expression in place of a strong Turkmen culture.

- The requirement that newborns be given traditional Turkmen names, rather than allowing names from the cultures of their parents, has serious implications for individual cultural identity and cultural wealth as a whole. This is an infringement on international human rights, specifically social and cultural rights.

Introduction

A recent report from Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty's Turkmen service, Azatlyk, has revealed that officials in Turkmenistan's eastern Lebab Province have begun requiring that new parents name their children using traditional Turkmen names. While this is reportedly not a new practice, it was previously a suggestion rather than a rule.[1] Though Turkmenistan's opaque government and the limited availability of independent news sources make it difficult to reliably verify reports, the new law would prohibit ethnic minorities such as Uzbeks, Tajiks, and Russians from choosing names to reflect their own cultures and languages.

The Lebab province spans the majority of Turkmenistan's shared border with Uzbekistan, as well as a small segment of Afghanistan. Given its close proximity to Uzbekistan and the historical lack of a border separating the two areas, this region has long been home to a high concentration of ethnic Uzbeks. The history of these two ethnic groups is intertwined, from families spanning across both sides of the border and conversations a jumble of both Uzbek and Turkmen languages.[2] This new law ignores this shared history and cultural heritage and aims to create a homogenous population, or at least the appearance of one, where it does not exist.

WorldAtlas 2023. Map of administrative divisions of Turkmenistan.

Turkmenization

As of 2022, Turkmens account for a vast majority (86.7%) of Turkmenistan's ethnic makeup. Uzbeks make up roughly 9.1% of the population, followed by Russians (1.6%) and Balochis (1.2%). This is a marked difference from 2003 data, where Turkmens accounted for 85%, Uzbeks made up only 5% of the population and Russians represented a healthier proportion (4%) of the county. [3] Uzbeks make up a sizable—and growing—proportion of the population. Thus, while Turkmens largely dominate the ethnic makeup of Turkmenistan, they are not alone in the country, as this policy, and others like it, may aim to represent.

The suppression of ethnic minorities is not a new phenomenon in Turkmenistan. The current development is just one in a long series of policies in what has been coined as the process of "Turkmenization." Turkmenization refers to the enforcement of policies and practices designed to force minorities to adopt Turkmen culture. This trend began in the early 1990s with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the appointment of Saparmurat Niyazov as Turkmenistan's first president. [4] His lengthy rule saw the beginning of a series of bans and requirements—now referred to as Turkmenization—which restricted minorities' freedom of expression. In the 1990s, Russian language instruction was suppressed. In the early 2000s, schoolgirls were required to dress in traditional Turkmen attire, barring those without the obligatory garb from attending. In 2003, dual citizens of both Russia and Turkmenistan were required to choose between the two nationalities, and those who wished to maintain both were refused Turkmen passports, prompting many to leave Turkmenistan in favour of their Russian citizenship. [5]

Daro Sulakauri/Asian Development Bank 2011. Primary school students in Ashgabat, Turkmenistan dressed in traditional Turkmen clothing.

Long after Niyazov's death in 2006, Turkmenization policies are still prevalent and expanding. In addition to the ban of non-Turkmen baby names in the Lebab region, a law in March 2025 dictated that young women, already required to wear traditional Turkmen dresses, must wear either yellow headscarves or yellow dresses to denote their marital status, punishable by firing. [6] Newlyweds are now prohibited from playing foreign music at their wedding celebrations, given verbal instructions at registry offices to avoid such music when applying for marriage licenses. [7] For decades, state officials have been required to provide proof of Turkmen lineage going back three generations. Since 2006, the government has expelled many young Uzbek women and their half-Turkmen children from Turkmenistan, leaving them at the Uzbek border. [8] These are just several of the more prominent, and known, examples of Turkmenization. As can be seen, these policies are aimed at the expulsion and concealment of ethnic minorities and their cultures, in favour of a Turkmenistan for and of ethnic Turkmens. Ethnic diversity, both via population size and freedom of cultural expression, is under threat.

Veni Markovski 2008. Turkmenistan women.

One's Name; One's Identity

This latest development—the requirement that newborn children be given traditional Turkmen names—is problematic for a multitude of reasons. Not only because it is yet another act in a long history of ethnic suppression, but because of the individual and personal implications for one's identity. Psychologists have long recognized that a name carries more meaning than simple semantic representation. In particular, first names serve "as an identity marker for the individual and for those who interact with him or her." [9] Parents' choices as to what to name their children reflect a consequential decision as to how they would like their children to be perceived by not only those close to them, but the community broadly. This is particularly the case for immigrants or those from ethnic minorities, as they are often faced with the decision between culturally assimilative names or those reflecting their personal cultural identities.

Names are intrinsically tied to one's sense of self, and a key component of many's self identity is their cultural background. [10] By forbidding parents to name their children according to their culture's customs and traditions, Turkmenistan potentially interferes with these children's understanding of themselves and their personal and cultural identities. They threaten the cultural wealth of ethnic minorities by robbing next generations of the same personal connection to their culture via their names.

A closer look at the naming customs of Uzbeks, the largest minority in Turkmenistan, demonstrates the specific importance of naming customs in the region and the consequences of infringing on these customs. According to Uzbek scholar and pedagogist Gulshoda Avloyorova, many Uzbeks believe that the name given to a newborn child will determine their path forward—their health, future life, and more. Considering this, men have traditionally been given names that represent "strength, courage, bravery, and patriotism". Women's names are inspired by "beauty, chastity, purity, elegance, and sophistication". [11] Thus, a name represents new parents' hope for their child. It is much more than simply a label or moniker; a name holds personal and cultural value.

While the mandate that children have Turkmen names may seem trivial when considered amongst the vast array of serious and life-threatening human rights violations occurring both across the world and specifically within Central Asia, it should not be ignored. Naming is a personal, and often profound, decision, and one that should be entirely the choice of the parents or the individual. To restrict this choice by imposing naming requirements of any kind, let alone those of a different cultural identity, is a violation of universal human rights.

According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization's Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity, "Cultural rights are an integral part of human

rights, which are universal, indivisible and interdependent.…All persons should therefore be able to express themselves and to create and disseminate their work in the language of their choice, and particularly in their mother tongue; all persons should be entitled to quality education and training that fully respect their cultural identity; and all persons have the right to participate in the cultural life of their choice and conduct their own cultural practices, subject to respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms".[12] The various policies of Turkmenization, including the Turkmen naming mandate, clearly violate these universal human rights dictated by the United Nations.

Gulzar Nurlyyeva 2018. Traditionally dressed Turkmen children.

Conclusion

Names are an integral part of a culture's customs and traditions, and psychological research and works demonstrate their impact on individual identity and personal cultural connection. Turkmenistan continues to enact policies which threaten universal human rights, specifically those related to cultural expression and identity.

The recent naming restriction is just one of the latest of such instances. Unfortunately, there is little evidence suggesting the new development will be the last of such policies, unless serious changes are made.

Policy Recommendations

- Turkmenistan must reverse existing policies and stymie any forthcoming legislation or practices aimed at restricting ethnic minorities' cultural expression, practices and customs, and general existence in Turkmenistan. Uzbeks, Russians, Tajiks, and other ethnic minorities should be able to live freely in Turkmenistan, practicing their own customs and traditions, learning and living in their own languages, and naming their children as they see fit.

- Greater international scrutiny and awareness of Turkmenistan's Turkmenization policies is needed. There is currently limited international coverage and available information on the issue. Raising awareness is a crucial step in holding those responsible accountable and preventing further human rights violations.

- Further research and understanding of how infringement of cultural rights impacts individual well-being is also necessary. While perhaps less immediately obvious as physical human rights violations, they nonetheless have serious implications on cultural, emotional, and general well-being.

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