



*Delegation to the EU-Kazakhstan, EU-Kyrgyzstan, EU-Uzbekistan and EU-Tajikistan
Parliamentary Cooperation Committees and for relations with Turkmenistan and Mongolia*

29.6.2023

MISSION REPORT

following the 6th EU-Turkmenistan Inter-Parliamentary Meeting (IPM), 19-21
June 2023

Delegation to the EU-Kazakhstan, EU-Kyrgyzstan, EU-Uzbekistan and EU-
Tajikistan Parliamentary Cooperation Committees and for relations with
Turkmenistan and Mongolia

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Introduction

The Delegation for the relations with Central Asia (DCAS) paid a visit to Ashgabat and Mary from Monday, 19 June to Wednesday, 21 June 2023, to hold the 6th EU-Republic of Turkmenistan Inter-Parliamentary Meeting (IPM). The mission allowed the Delegation also to have meetings with a variety of interlocutors from different sectors of the Turkmen institutions and society: Government, EU funded projects, industrial companies, academics, civil rights organizations.

The mission has been the first and likely the only visit by the European Parliament during the mandate 2019-2024, and one of the few occasions of a direct dialogue with Turkmen counterparts. It should be noted that during the Covid-19 pandemic Turkmenistan was inaccessible, due to the implementation of a no flight policy. The previous Inter-Parliamentary Meeting took place in Brussels in December 2019.

Before the departure of the Delegation on this mission, on 5 June in Brussels, Mr Luc Devigne, Deputy Managing Director for Russia, Eastern Partnership, Central Asia, Regional cooperation and OSCE (EEAS) and H.E. Mr Sapar Palvanov, Ambassador of Turkmenistan to the European Union, briefed the EP Delegation for the relations with Central Asia in a preparatory meeting.

Context

The Delegation took place at a sensitive time for the bilateral relations of Turkmenistan with the European Union and for the international situation.

Turkmenistan is the only one, out of the six Central Asian countries, not having a Partnership Cooperation Agreement (PCA) with the European Union, following the decision of the European Parliament of not granting its consent due to the very serious violation to basic human rights. Therefore, for the Turkmen Authorities, the relationships with the European Parliament is of particular importance. Moreover, the country is the less integrated into the regional dimension and the visit of the European Parliament took place after a long and very strict policy of isolation during the Covid 19 pandemic - and PCR tests upon arrival are still requested. However, Turkmenistan has recently been active in sending few signals of willingness to increase direct contacts and to discuss possible ways out either to negotiate a new bilateral agreement or, due to the length of the process of this first option, to proceed to the ratification of the signed Partnership Cooperation Agreement.

The Russian aggression against Ukraine, the Taliban takeover in neighbouring Afghanistan and the January 2022 revolt in Kazakhstan, are three crucial issues of direct concern of Turkmenistan. On all those crisis, Ashgabat proclaims a strict neutrality policy, refusing to make public statements or even comments - and with the local media totally ignoring those issues. Yet, the Turkmen Leadership realizes that in such a moving international and regional landscape, the traditional positioning of Turkmenistan is increasingly inadequate and needs

gradual opening of the country. The reception of the European Parliament visit was one element of this dynamic.

Meetings

In only two days in Ashgabat and a third day in Mary, the Delegation managed to have an intense and high-level dialogue with the Turkmen counterparts: Government, Parliament, two important industrial companies in the leather and food sectors, academics and students, non-governmental organisations, cultural institutions and other entities.

In total, the Delegation held a lively Inter-Parliamentary Meeting and met with the Spokesperson of the Majlis, met one Minister and five Deputy Ministers, had a well-attended exchange of views with representatives of twenty-two civil society organisations, active in social and environmental fields, met also the local office of the Erasmus+ Programme, the State Border Control and the related BOMCA/EU funded projects) and academics and students of the International Relations Institute.

In Mary, in particular, the Delegation met with local Authorities and paid several visits to two impressive factories and to cultural and scientific institutions and sites.

The variety and the quantity of met interlocutors represented a positive development compared to previous visits of the European Parliament, also for the generally openness of the Turkmen interlocutors to debate a vast variety of topics, although in some case not always matched with substantial answers to questions posed by the Members of the European Parliament.

The full programme is attached at the end of this report (see Annex II).

Relations with the European Union

Turkmenistan is the only Central Asian country with no Partnership Cooperation Agreement (PCA), due to the refusal of the EP to grant its consent because of the serious violations of human rights. The previous IPM had taken place in 2019 and during Covid-19 the country was isolated to the extent that no flights were allowed. The EU Delegation in Ashgabat opened only in 2018.

In spite of this background, the country is now trying to strengthen its cooperation with the EU, asking for a positive reconsideration of the PCA consent. From the EU perspective, having a PCA in place would activate a number of legal basis for more cooperation and also more scrutiny and leverage - including on human rights - and the recommendation of this report is that the Foreign Affairs Committee (AFET) of the European Parliament should prioritise the reconsideration of the file at the beginning of the next parliamentary mandate.

Moreover, the EU Strategy for Central Asia cannot be fully effective without an active involvement of Turkmenistan. The country is key for its geostrategic position - between the Caspian Sea, Iran, Afghanistan, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan - and has much to offer in terms of vast energy supplies. As reiterated in several points during the meeting with the Deputy Minister for Foreign Affairs, Mahri Hojamgulyevna Byashimova, and also during the Inter-Parliamentary Meeting (IPM), Turkmenistan is very interested in exporting oil and gas to the European market. Notably as the consequence of the war in Ukraine, the interest is mutual. In its visit to industrial companies in Mary, the EP Delegation could assess the ground for more investments and more trade. The Minister of Finance, Serdar Acyldurdyevic Jorayew, underlined the positive climate for opening factories and the new code on digitalisation for commodities and raw material exchange. Nevertheless, such a good potential can remain unexploited if the Turkmen Authorities do not drastically change the policy of access to the country - such as Visa requirements, arrival procedure, exchange rates, access to international Internet and communication platforms. Lack of World Trade Organisation (WTO) membership is also a negative factor, not to mention the lack of independence of the judiciary, for more foreign investment.

Turkmenistan is also very keen in strengthening cooperation on climate change and environmental policies, such as water management. The Deputy Minister of Agriculture and Environment, Cetiye Charyyar, focussed on the respect to the Paris Agreement and on the Turkmen commitment to reduce methane emissions and on using new low-waste technologies, with an ambitious plan of targets to be reached by 2030. There is a perception, also echoed by local MPs speeches, that the country needs to increasingly open to international cooperation due to its growing vulnerability to climate change. Ashgabat is a very green city, due to constant investment in planting trees (just in 2021, on occasion of 30 years of independence, 30 million trees were planted in the country), yet water management remains very critical. The new city of Arkadag, designed as fully green and sustainable and visited by the EP Delegation, proves the Turkmen investment on smart cities. However, like in many parts of Ashgabat itself, there is an impression of excessive number of buildings compared to the actual size of population and with no, for instance, technologies such as solar power. The Turkmen interlocutors recognize that notably on those issues, the European Union is the obvious partner, with advanced regional projects, better legislation, and a strong green diplomacy. Such a cooperation, will certainly benefit by a full Partnership Cooperation Agreement frame.

The Deputy Minister for Education, Azat Atayev calling, emphasised to which extent the EU is perceived as an honest (also by not mixing it with a political agenda) provider of high level education opportunities. In a meeting at the International Relations Institute, the EP Delegation could see the degree of enthusiasm and opening to the outside world shown by the students. EU diplomats also insisted on the key factor of investment on the new generation as a priority. However, once more, issues such as free access to Internet and better Visa policy are crucial for improving the cooperation, and, not by coincidence, no foreign student is currently enrolled in Turkmen Universities.

Turkmenistan is also a unique and critical case for the implementation of the Erasmus+ Programme, as learnt in a meeting, at the local office, by very professional and motivated staff in charge. The huge discrepancy between the official and the real currency exchange rate, and the kind of the registration status of the Programme (as commercial or non-profit entity) is making unsustainable the continuation of the Programme in the country. This would represent a great loss, both for the Turkmen youth and for the EU itself. So far, reiterated efforts undertaken by the EU Delegation in Ashgabat have met too bureaucratic and inflexible responses by both the Commission in Brussels and the Turkmen Authorities. The Members of the European Parliament during their visit constantly raised the issue with several interlocutors in Ashgabat, and notably with the Minister of Finance Jorayew and with the Deputy Minister of Education Atayev, calling for a pragmatic solution, and will also continue in doing so with the offices in charge in Brussels.

Human rights

Compared to the previous visits, something is clearly moving in what is considered as one of the closest and most authoritarian regimes in the world. The meeting with Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) was attended by 22 associations, active on social and environmental projects. Issues such as domestic violence, gender inequalities, human trafficking, or rights of vulnerable groups, were clearly spelt out. For the first time criticism to the national politics could be heard during private conversations. The exchange of views during the Inter-Parliamentary Meeting were lively and interlocutors were not dismissing EP concerns.

Yet, the Deputy Minister of Justice, Babyr Muradov, refused to answer about cases of three individual prisoners - Reimberdv Kurbanov, Farnat Meimankulyeu and Narmul Reymeva - and even to generic questions raised by DCAS Members. Also the meeting with the representatives of the official Youth organization, all dressed in black and silent with the exception of their Leader, confirmed that the establishment, although now with some promising reformers, is still well controlled by conservative blocs. Access to international Internet and to all social networks is still impossible in the country; any kind of criticism to the President (whose portrait, sometimes very badly photo shopped in different contexts, is everywhere) is inconceivable. Corruption is widespread, and many aspects of lifestyle (from colours of buildings or of cars, to dress code) are still strictly regulated. Not to mention the censorship and the lack of several individual freedoms. Yet, the establishment of an official Human Rights Dialogue between the European Union and Turkmenistan is a positive step (and valued by the Turkmen Deputy Minister of Justice also as an opportunity “to learn more about international rules”), and the EU Delegation in Ashgabat was crucial in obtaining the release of some conscientious objectors. The EU diplomats believe that the implementation of the Partnership Cooperation Agreement would create a more effective ground to improve the human rights situation in the country.

Russia war

The Russian aggression against Ukraine is absent from the Turkmen media and from any political speech. The European Parliament's Delegation constantly presented the EU position, with Members of Parliament and of the Government, diplomats or students. The reception has been of a kind attention combined with a reiterated statement of full neutrality of the country. In case of Turkmenistan, this neutrality is recognised by the United Nations, therefore, is a sort of "structural" one, an "unshakable neutrality", as it was defined at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, not limited to the Russian aggression. The Foreign Affairs Deputy Minister insisted on the point that Turkmenistan has not issued nor will issue, one single statement on the war. The same was the approach on the situation of two troubled neighbours - Afghanistan and Iran. However, the Deputy Minister was also keen to underline that Turkmenistan is one of only three countries (with Poland and the Holy See), which never closed their Embassies in Kiev, and that Turkmenistan prevents circumvention of international sanctions to Russia (contrary to Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan), is not part of any organization with Russia and has dispatched humanitarian aid to Ukraine, notably for assisting children.

Central Asia and Afghanistan

The policy of strict neutrality applies also to Afghanistan. In spite of a very long border, Turkmenistan maintains a balanced approach to the Taliban, avoiding a pragmatic engagement as Uzbekistan, a de-facto support as Pakistan, and any criticism as Tajikistan. Therefore, compared to the visits to other Central Asian countries, Afghanistan was discussed very little in Ashgabat, and focus was rather on the humanitarian assistance provided by Turkmenistan to the Afghan population.

The meeting at the State Border Control, with the participation of the EU funded project Border Management in Central Asia (BOMCA), the largest EU-funded Programme in the region with an overall budget of 21 million €, provided an overview on security cooperation. Fight against trans-border crimes and human and drug trafficking, is the main regional priority for Turkmenistan, while participation to other dimension of Central Asia integration is limited with the exception of investment in energy connectivity projects, including the ambitious and still to accomplish TAPI (Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan and India) pipeline. In addition, cooperation with Turkey - very present in the country in political, economic and cultural terms - is, like other aspects of Turkmenistan, below its potential. Such a cautious approach by Turkmenistan is a limit, but, for the European Union, is also a promising ground still to explore with dialogue, sometime also a difficult dialogue, in several sectors, including parliamentary diplomacy.

The role and a follow-up of the European Parliament

Due to its decision not to grant the consent to the EU/Turkmenistan Partnership Cooperation Agreement, the European Parliament is playing a high profile role in the development of the EU relations with Ashgabat. The Foreign Affairs Committee could proceed to a new evaluation of the file (likely in the next 2024-2029 mandate). A careful examination is to be devoted to the progress of Turkmenistan in improving the respect of fundamental human rights, to the broad geo-strategic context, and to the need, for the European Union, to have adequate bilateral formal instruments to exert its role. Such a re-consideration of the PCA should be combined with more regular scrutiny of the situation of human rights in the country, evaluated also in its dynamic dimension, and with the trade and economic potential represented by the private sector. The Delegation for Central Asia believes the Turkmen files should be back to full consideration in Brussels.

The European Parliament should also follow-up the issue of the possible closure of the Erasmus+ Programme's Office, which will deprive the Turkmen youth of an important opportunity as well as the EU Delegation in Ashgabat of a crucial tool to promote EU values.

List of annexes

1. List of participants
2. Final programme of the visit
3. Agenda of the 6th EU-Turkmenistan Inter-Parliamentary Meeting

European Parliament

2019-2024



*Delegation to the EU-Kazakhstan, EU-Kyrgyzstan, EU-Uzbekistan and EU-Tajikistan
Parliamentary Cooperation Committees and for relations with Turkmenistan and Mongolia*

6th EU-Turkmenistan Inter-Parliamentary Meeting (IPM) Ashgabat and Mary Turkmenistan

19-21 June 2023

Final list of participants

DCAS Members

Mr Tomáš ZDECHOVSKÝ, DCAS Chair	EPP	Czech Republic
Ms Atidzhe ALIEVA-VELI, 2nd Vice-Chair	RENEW	Bulgaria
Mr Ryszard CZARNECKI, Member	ECR	Poland
Mr Karsten LUCKE, Substitute Member	S&D	Germany

INTA Member

Ms Katarína ROTH NEVEĎALOVÁ, Member	S&D	Slovakia
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DCAS Secretariat

2 Staff

Political advisors

2 Staff

Interpreters (RU/EN/TK)

3 Interpreters

European Parliament

2019-2024



*Delegation to the EU-Kazakhstan, EU-Kyrgyzstan, EU-Uzbekistan and EU-Tajikistan
Parliamentary Cooperation Committees and for relations with Turkmenistan and Mongolia*

European Union - Turkmenistan Inter-Parliamentary Meeting

6th meeting

19-21 June 2023

Ashgabat and Mary (Turkmenistan)

FINAL PROGRAMME

Monday 19/06/2023

09:30	Transfer to EUDEL
10:00-11:00	Meeting with the Civil Society Organisations (CSOs)
11:00-12:00	Meeting with the EU Delegation to Turkmenistan and a briefing by the EU Ambassador Mr Diego RUIZ ALONSO
12:30-13:15	Meeting at the Erasmus+ office with Head of the Office Ayna CHOREKLIYEVA
13:40-14:40	Lunch
15:00-15:30	Meeting with the Chairwoman of Mejlis Dünýägözel Akmuhammedowna GULMANOVA
15:30-17:15	6th European Union - Turkmenistan Inter - Parliamentary Meeting (IPM)
17:30-18:30	Meeting with the Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Mahri Hojamgulyevna BYASHIMOVA
19:00-21:00	Official dinner hosted by the Turkmen Parliament

Tuesday, 20/06/2023

09:00	Departure from the Hotel
09:30-10:15	Meeting with the Deputy Minister of Justice Babyr MURADOV
10:30-11:00	Meeting with the Deputy Minister of Education Azat ATAYEV
11:15-12:00	Meeting with the Deputy Minister of Agriculture and Environment Protection Cetiyev CHARYYAR
12:15-13:15	Meeting with the Minister of Finance and Economy Serdar Acyldurdyevic JORAYEV
13:30-14:00	Lunch
14:15-15:15	Meeting with the professors and students of the International Relations Institute and lecture on the work of the European Parliament
15:30-16:00	Meeting at the Youth Organization named after MAGTYMGULY
16:15-16:45	Meeting with the State Border Service and EU funded BOMCA project
17:00-18:45	Visit to the Arkadag city – Green City Project
19:30-21:30	Official dinner hosted by the DCAS Chair Tomáš ZDECHOVSKÝ with the Members of Mejlis and the EU Members States Ambassadors

Wednesday 21/06/2023

06:20	Internal flight from Ashgabat to Mary
07:00	Arrival in Mary and welcome by representatives of Mayor's office of Mary region and representatives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Turkmenistan in Mary region
07:15-07:50	Visit to the Mary Velayat Library and Observatory
08:00-09:00	Meeting with the Mayor of Mary region and local authorities

09:15-10:30	Visit to the Turkmen State Energy Institute and the Information Centre on Human Rights
10:45-12:00	Meeting with the local enterprise of the region – TAZE AY
12:30-13:45	Lunch organized by the Mayor of Mary city
14:00-15:15	Meeting with the local enterprise of the region – ROWSHEN
15:30-17:00	Visit to the Mary Museum with the participation of local artists
17:15-18:30	Visit of the Historical Site of Ancient Merv
19:35	Internal flight Mary-Ashgabat

*****End of programme*****



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6th EU/Turkmenistan Inter-Parliamentary Meeting

19 June 2023

Ashgabat

AGENDA

1) Opening of the working session, introductory speeches by:

- **Mr Begmyrat Muhammedov, Chairman of the Committee of Mejlis of Turkmenistan on international and inter-parliamentary relations Chair of the Majlis delegation**
- **Mr Tomáš Zdechovský, Chair of the European Parliament Delegation**

2) Adoption of the draft agenda

3) Adoption of the minutes of the 5th EU/Turkmenistan IPM (Brussels, 2nd December 2019)

4) Recent developments in the European Union and in Turkmenistan including:

- a) **Constitutional and political reforms in Turkmenistan;**
- b) **Responses to the war in Ukraine and deterioration of global security impact of sanctions, also with regard to the status of Turkmenistan as neutral country;**
- c) **Political situation in Europe and increase of energy prices;**
- d) **Empowerment of civil society, human rights dialogue and fundamental freedoms;**

- 5) State of the EU/Turkmenistan cooperation, with focus on:**
- a) EU Strategy on Central Asia and role of Turkmenistan in the region;**
 - b) Energy policy, Green and Digital Transitions and connectivity;**
 - c) Situation in Afghanistan;**
- 6) Any other business**
- 7) Date and place of the next meeting**