



Activism and Policy: Prospects for Change in Turkmenistan

Alexander Cooley , Farid Tuhbatullin , Masha Feiguinova , Devin T. Stewart

Monday, June 21, 2010



Flag of Turkmenistan

- [Introduction](#)
- [Remarks](#)
- [Questions and Answers](#)

Introduction

DEVIN STEWART: This is a Carnegie New Leaders program. If you haven't heard about our program, please check it out. There are about 10-12 main events a year, as well as a social aspect. We also go down to Washington, D.C., occasionally to take part in task forces and special projects from time to time.

This is the last event of the program year, before the summer starts and we are going to start organizing for fall programming.

So I'm glad you could make it.

Today we are going to hear on "Activism and Policy: Prospects for Change in Turkmenistan." Given a lot of the hope that activism, NGOs and the civil society world could effect change from the outside in, this topic is extremely interesting.

I'm going to turn it right over to one of our Carnegie New Leaders, Masha Feiguinova. She is a program coordinator at the [Open Society Institute](#). Masha put this panel together today. Thank you very much, Masha.

MASHA FEIGUINOVA: Thanks very much.

Thank you to the Carnegie Council for hosting the event. It's the first one that I've had the pleasure of organizing as a New Leader. It's nice to see how the program works from the participatory aspect.

As Devin mentioned, I'm a program coordinator at the Open Society Institute. I focus specifically on Turkmenistan.

Open Society is a private U.S. foundation operating globally. In Turkmenistan we have been working since 1995 to provide more legal and financial services to grassroots initiatives, mainly, that protect and foster civil and political rights. We also in our grant-making prioritize public health, access to information, and education.

We also promote efforts outside the country through Diaspora groups, to publicize abuses that take place in the country that has made this country notorious for its human rights record, and also a core business and diplomatic partner for the United States and for the European Union.

In this capacity, we work with groups like Farid Tuhbatullin's Turkmen Initiative for Human Rights, and we support their ability to gather independent, reliable information on the current state of human rights in Turkmenistan.

In addition to direct support that we provide through grant-making, OSI also supports independent media and scholarship on pressing concerns around the world.

It's a pleasure to have Alexander Cooley here with us. Alex is a professor of international relations at Barnard College at Columbia. He is also currently a global fellow at Open Society Institute, researching the [Shanghai Cooperation Organisation](#) and its activities in Central Asia.

The good people at the fellowship program have asked me to put a plug in for the program. I'll just say a few

words.

It's really an asset to our organization, and the fellowship program is open to all. It's designed to bring outstanding practitioners in a variety of fields, including journalism, activists, and scholars, into the OSI community to broaden our own thinking and to question our own assumptions on the work that we do and to help us better understand the pivotal problems.

Before I turn it over to the presenters, the goal of this presentation is to think about how civil society activism, diplomatic leverage, and commercial interest can help to create a more open and more democratic society that is better able to respect human rights.

In the context of this conversation, we are using Turkmenistan as a case study, but these dynamics can apply to many countries around the world. As I understand it, one of the goals of the leadership program is to foster these dialogues internationally.

With that said, I will turn it over to Farid Tuhbatullin.

Remarks

FARID TUHBATULLIN [through interpreter]: Thank you very much for coming and thank you for your interest.

Turkmenistan is a former Soviet republic in Central Asia. It borders Uzbekistan, Iran, and Afghanistan.

Turkmenistan is famous in the world for two things. The second thing that it is famous for is its reserves of natural gas. The first thing that it is famous for is its one-time president [Saparmurat Niyazov](#).

Niyazov became the leader of Turkmenistan in 1985 and headed the country until the end of 2006. The system that Niyazov created in the country is a classic example of a totalitarian state with a personality cult.

There is no opposition in Turkmenistan, nor is there any independent media. The education system, which is based on the study of Niyazov's book, the [Ruhnama](#), as well as the media, have been transformed into propaganda tools.

At the beginning of the period of independence, there were independent activists who were working under tremendous pressure. After an attempt on Niyazov's life in 2002, activity by the NGOs became virtually impossible and ground to a halt.

When I was still living in Turkmenistan, my colleagues and I engaged in letter-writing campaigns, at the very least on environmental issues. We wrote to local authorities and the government authorities in Ashgabat, the capital, and we did achieve some results.

Some of the activists who were obliged to leave Turkmenistan were able to continue their activities from abroad and have some impact through such organizations as the United Nations, the European Union, [the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe](#), and affect government decisions in Turkmenistan through those bodies.

But of course that activity is not really capable of achieving major changes in the country, because the system which was created by [Türkmenbasy](#) [title meaning "head of all Turkmens"] Niyazov is a harsh system, though rather stable, and he was president for life.

However, his president life term expired in 2006 [when he died]. He was succeeded as president by [Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow](#), who announced education and agricultural reforms, lifted the prohibition on the Internet, and also resumed paying pensions and social support, such as welfare and unemployment.

It's now three and a half years since Berdimuhamedow succeeded Türkmenbasy as president, so we've had enough time to assess the reforms that he introduced.

It's clear that they have not been very effective. The main reason for that is that their purpose was not really to effect significant change, but simply to show that he was going to be a better president than his predecessor.

He announced educational reforms. But it's clear that the purpose of education remains not the transmission of knowledge to young people, but rather to brainwash them.

There are very few people who have access to the Internet, and websites which have information about Turkmenistan are blocked.

As was the case when Niyazov was president, tremendous sums are spent on construction projects for luxury hotels, palaces, and other facilities which do not pay for themselves. These projects do not create jobs and, according to the data that we have, the unemployment rate in Turkmenistan stands at 60 percent.

Turkmenistan remains the most closed country in the world, or one of the most closed countries in the world. It is very hard to get in or out of the country.

Residents of Turkmenistan are not allowed to subscribe to the foreign press. And it has been many years now since the government ceased registering civic organizations and NGOs, and without registration those organizations cannot operate.

The small number of activists who remain in the country and who are continuing to operate as activists are persecuted. They are followed. Their families and those who support them are persecuted. They are put in prison, psychiatric hospitals, or forced out of the country.

In the grand scheme of things, the situation under the new president is not all that different from what it was under Niyazov. It hasn't changed.

One difference between the way things were under Niyazov and the way they are now is that Niyazov was an orphan. He had no relatives that he could appoint to senior positions.

Berdimuhamedow, to the contrary, has many relatives, many of whom are in positions of power and have been appointed senior officials. In addition to that, his relatives, who are referred to collectively all as "nephews," although they're not all exactly nephews, have seized a lot of the most successful businesses in Turkmenistan.

This is a sensitive situation, because when a private business is taken over this way it has an impact not only on the businessmen but also on the income of the members of the secret services. The reason for that is that the secret services used to engage in shakedowns of private businesses; they used to essentially rob them. If these businesses are being taken over by the president's relatives, that means that the secret services lose an income stream.

Most members of the secret services are loyal to the current government simply and only because the government accords them certain privileges. If they lose those privileges, then they lose all interest in protecting that government.

So the situation in Turkmenistan is coming to resemble the situation which reigned in Kyrgyzstan under [Bakiyev](#), when he had many relatives who were in positions of power, not only in the government but in profitable private business.

I do think that the people of Turkmenistan are probably more patient than those of Kyrgyzstan. But we are talking about a situation where power is becoming more concentrated, not simply in one tribe in the country, but in a single clan, which is a much smaller grouping.

It is in the interests of President Berdimuhamedow to establish things in a way that is consonant with the rule of law and encourage civil, community, and religious organizations to flourish and engage in their legal activities. When these organizations are forced to operate underground, then they break the law, and that is not in anybody's interest.

Recently Berdimuhamedow announced that there was going to be a multi-party system in Turkmenistan. He even announced what other party was going to be created and gave orders as to what kind of work that party was going to do.

That is to say that, multi-party announcements to the contrary notwithstanding, the situation will be very similar to what it was before, with quasi-NGOs and now quasi-political parties. In other words, the government is going to force civic activity onto an illegal basis.

So the reforms that Berdimuhamedow announced and which he is trying to implement—I don't know if he's actually trying to implement them or whether it's window dressing—but they all point to the fact that the system that was created by Niyazov cannot be reformed; it can only be broken so that you can build something.

Thank you.

ALEXANDER COOLEY: Thank you to Masha and Farid.

I want to talk a little bit about the international context that Turkmenistan finds itself in. If we ask ourselves,

"What are the prospects for the international community effecting change or the prospects of international agents, such as international organizations or nongovernmental organizations or foundations, making an impact?" I think we have to have the greater international picture in mind.

Unfortunately, it's difficult to say that the picture is a favorable one for the forces of change and liberalization in Turkmenistan.

Farid's analysis that this is one of the most closed societies in the world is correct. Societies that are this closed also bring their own sets of further problems. Sometimes the tactics that you can use in certain semi-open or authoritarian societies—tactics like naming and changing, for instance, or posting things on the Internet—don't have the same degree of bite or effectiveness, as they would in a place like Kyrgyzstan or perhaps Kazakhstan.

These kinds of special category of totalitarian or extreme authoritarian societies bring their own challenges, just because we can't even get the agents in there to use our levers that we traditionally have. Some of you may well know this first-hand.

I teach international relations at Barnard and at the [Harriman Institute](#) at Columbia, and I was also a member of the Harriman Institute educational delegation that was invited to go to Ashgabat twice over the last couple of years. So some of these impressions are quite anecdotal. Some are backed up by what specialists like Farid have pointed to, and I'll get to those towards the end of my comments.

In terms of the international context, Turkmenistan finds itself the center of competition over its energy sources. That's really the bottom line. Turkmenistan is estimated to have either the third, the fourth, or the fifth, depending on whom you talk to, largest reserves of natural gas in the world.

The big obstacle until now in terms of international consumers and companies was Turkmenistan's reliance on the old Soviet-Russian pipeline network. So what the geopolitical game has been about is building new pipelines and creating new agreements to access Turkmen gas and route it to markets.

Those of you in the business community familiar with the politics of natural gas know that for the most part it requires fixed pipelines, unless you're dealing in [LNG](#) [liquefied natural gas]. But fixed pipelines mean that once they're set, they become a kind of a fixed, immovable asset.

So pipeline politics is more important than in the case of oil, where we have a world oil market and oil is relatively fungible and its price is determined. This maneuvering over pipelines and access to Turkmenistan's gas is really the primary international context.

Who are the players here? Russia.

Russia does not want to see its traditional monopoly and access to Turkmen gas broken. For Russia, Turkmenistan acts as kind of a supplier that tops off Russian supplies. When demand in Europe is quite high, as it was up to 2007 before the financial crisis, Central Asian gas, and specifically Turkmen gas, was key to Russian companies, specifically [Gazprom](#), being able to fulfill their commitment to the European market.

Another player is the European Union, particularly a new energy project called [Nabucco](#). Nabucco is a pipeline that will be built from the Caspian region across Turkey into eastern and central Europe. It has a terminal at Baumgarten in Austria.

The key about this is that this pipeline is meant to bypass Russia (hence some of the gymnastics of the route) and the European Union, in its search for energy security, wants to avoid the problems of Russian disagreements with Ukraine and Belarus, that held up supplies (hence its interest and support in Nabucco).

Who is going to supply gas in Nabucco?

We're not quite sure yet, but there is a big hope that Turkmenistan will be a main supplier.

Recently, over the last months, it has become less equivocal and talked about supplying quite a bit of gas there. Before it was a little more reluctant. Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan will be the main Nabucco suppliers. In the future, perhaps Iraq or Iran, but both of those countries have real political problems to them.

Given the economic sanctions in Iran, it is unlikely that the international consortium will allow Iranian gas in. Given the problems between the northern region, the Kurds, and the central government in Iraq, it's unlikely. But the United States is pushing for Iraqi gas to supply Nabucco. So if Nabucco is ever to be built—and it's an over-10-billion-euro project and just keeps getting higher—it will have to have some sort of guarantees for gas suppliers.

Members of the consortia, the six companies in Nabucco, say that Turkmenistan is ready to supply some of that gas. So that's the second actor.

The third actor, and in my mind actually the most important actor, is the one that we don't talk as much about: China.

During this whole back-and-forth talking about geopolitics of energy over the last decade we have had an alternative route to Europe that bypasses Russia. The Chinese have built a pipeline from Turkmenistan to China, going through Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan.

And the pipeline was built on time. They first talked about it in 2003. Three years of preparatory work, and it was built in three years. Companies that are accustomed to building pipelines in countries like Sudan find Turkmenistan to be a similar kind of environment. So the Chinese have been very effective and quiet. This is the first major pipeline from Central Asia that bypasses Russia.

Part of this engagement has also involved Chinese loans to Turkmenistan. An over \$4 billion loan was made in exchange for more investments in a new field there, as well as investments in gas-related types of production.

Also, there has been some interesting movement in the area of security cooperation. For instance, China has transferred its Internet censoring technology to Turkmenistan. All the Internet cyber cafes that have been opened by President Berdimuhamedow are now being monitored by filtering software provided by Beijing.

So the Chinese-Turkmen relationship is broad, and is quite interesting and important, even though it's under the radar.

The point about this is that the United States also supports Nabucco. It supports the strengthening of ties. In the previous administration, the strengthening of ties away from Russia was quite explicit. So any project that weaned the Central Asian post-Soviet states away from Russia was viewed as good for the United States. Things are a little more complicated now.

There are three main interests for the United States in Turkmenistan:

- One is to try and encourage these alternate pipelines to Europe.
- The second is that U.S. big businesses have some commercial interest in the country. Boeing supplies aircraft to Turkmenistan. You have agricultural equipment and machinery made by Caterpillar or John Deere, and they are big customers and players in Turkmenistan. You have a new Turkmen-U.S. Business Council that has also been created as a result. In fact, Assistant Secretary [Blake](#) was in Ashgabat with some business leaders recently, leading a dialogue there.
- Thirdly, Turkmenistan is a relatively unacknowledged part of the logistics campaign in the war in Afghanistan. We have quiet gas-and-go operations in Ashgabat. Also, some of the subcontractors for fuel in Bagram buy from Turkmen suppliers—again very quietly, but it is going on.

So those are the common U.S. positions.

China and Russia don't particularly care about the state of governance or state of affairs in Turkmenistan. We can imagine that.

But how do the European Union and the United States manage this tension between their commercial interests and the kind of human rights/democracy deficits that you see in Turkmenistan? This is a real challenge for both the European Union and the United States. Interests have tended to trump the normative issues.

The European Union especially still thinks of itself as a normative actor. One of the things that it has done in its EU-Central Asia policy, which was led by the German chairmanship in 2007, was to create different categories of engagement with Turkmenistan. "We want to engage with Turkmenistan over energy, over rule of law, and create dialogues about civil society concerns." So you have an EU bilateral dialogue with Turkmenistan.

Under the [Obama](#) Administration, we've actually set up something very similar. It is a sort of working group that meets twice a year with each Central Asian country, in which a broad array of issues are supposedly addressed.

The problem with the dialogues of both the EU and U.S. side, for those who are skeptical of these forums, is that they kind of circumscribe the democracy and governance issues. There's almost a "Well, business leaders don't have to talk about these because we have the dialogues," or "The [Energy Forum](#) is not the place to bring these up because we have the dialogues." The dialogues are a welcome addition, but they also have these dual functions that critics point out.

I am running out of time, so let me just make another couple of points.

One is in Turkmenistan it's not only a personality cult that you see—yes, that's part of it—but there's just a lack of bureaucratic capacity and real bureaucratic fear about job security and being on the wrong end of a lot of these cabinet reshuffles.

Berdimuhamedow has kept the practice of Niyazov of rotating his cabinet ministers and deputy ministers on a regular basis so that no one gets too cozy, then ousting them on grounds of failure or corruption, whatever grounds he pounces on. That creates a culture of being very risk-averse or not wanting to do anything that draws attention onto what you might be doing. I think that's another impediment in terms of linking in with the international community.

Farid talked about security services. They have daily cabinet meetings, which is rather bizarre. All sorts of things are brought up at the cabinet level that just wouldn't be in a normal country. Questions about whom to give visas to in terms of exchange students are brought up at the daily meeting. It's an indicator of the degree of control that Farid is talking about.

The final issue I want to talk about is the lack of human capacity in Turkmenistan. This is really the one thing that struck me as getting even worse.

For 20 years you've had an educational system that has been gutted, where students have been forced to read the *Ruhnama*, which was Niyazov's own philosophic treatise. *Ruhnama* education became compulsory up to, I think, 30 hours at some point from 20.

It became compulsory for civil servants. Even doctors would be tested on the *Ruhnama* rather than their medical skill. But the accumulation of this is now showing its effects, and there is a real lack of technical knowledge and expertise, as a result of this sort of *Ruhnama*-centered education. The challenge now is that there is a real disconnect in a society like this and how do you manage an external flow of information or ideas.

I'll leave you with one final recent example. [Doctors Without Borders](#) was trying to do a public health survey of certain diseases or practices in Turkmenistan. Their findings were very disturbing to Turkmen bureaucrats, who had been accustomed to saying, "Everything is fine in our country." So they got tossed out.

This is a culture where this lack of human capacity reinforces the theme that knowledge is power, that even really basic things like statistics and data are not for public consumption.

For all these reasons, we are facing real headwinds in attempts to promote change in Turkmenistan.

I'd be happy to extend some thoughts about some strategies and techniques to make headway. But you can't underestimate the international, domestic, and human challenges in tackling some of the issues that Farid has brought up.

Thank you.

Questions and Answers

MASHA FEIGUINOVA: The situation that Farid has outlined is a country where all NGOs are closed.

You basically have severed any dialogue between civil society—between teachers that might have serious concerns about their students learning 30 hours of ideological teaching as opposed to math. You don't have dialogue between the press and the government about developments in the country.

There is little transparency of data, so the citizens of the country cannot hold the government accountable for its funding, budgeting, or its allocation of resources.

As Alex pointed out, Turkmenistan—we'll take the average number—has the fourth-largest reserves in the world. It's a small country with only 5 million people, and its revenue is about \$1 billion a month, just from gas alone. For 5 million people it's quite a lot of money. But it's still living at a fairly low level. This society doesn't really

have a space to question it.

The question that I have to Farid is: What can either Turkmen or the international watchdog community—NGOs, activists, etc.—do to influence the situation for the better?

Then the question that I have for Alex is: What are the ethics of either governments' diplomatic engagement?

The two choices are either engagement or isolation. You mentioned that the U.S. delegation like the State Department just had the annual bilateral consultation in Turkmenistan, with a diplomatic delegation of maybe seven people and a business delegation of 43 people. So you can appreciate the level of interest. So what do you do?

FARID TUHBATULLIN [through interpreter]: As I've already said, my colleagues and I who are abroad are seeking opportunities to have an impact on the Turkmen authorities. Sometimes we have some success.

For example, in February we prepared a report on prison conditions in Turkmenistan. In that report we included some recommendations for amendments to be made to Turkmenistan law, specifically to the Criminal Code, to improve the situation.

Just a week after we sent our report to Turkmenistan to the president's administration, he raised the issue in the Security Council. Of course, it appeared that this idea was coming from him. But to us it makes no difference, as long as these ideas are being advanced. As a result, there were changes introduced into the Criminal Code and into other legislative acts.

On the other side, when there is heightened activity around a particular issue, sometimes the result is pressure on our family and friends who are living in Turkmenistan.

It is sometimes difficult to understand the logic and try and see some consistency in the actions of the Turkmen leadership. But we don't have a lot of different kinds of levers. We prepare shadow reports for various bodies of the United Nations, and this is the way that we try to make a difference.

Unfortunately, in the post-Niyazov era the Turkmen opposition which was abroad has somehow lost its optimism and has become less active. So sometimes we have to take on tasks that should be handled by the political opposition.

That's how things are.

ALEXANDER COOLEY: Can you say a few words about the government angle and then a few words about the business angle, in terms of Masha's question on ethics here? It is very difficult.

But, number one, I think both Brussels and Washington can't fall into the trap of thinking that somehow they have the mechanisms or levers to out-compete Russia or China when it comes to cutting corners on governance or democracy issues. They can't offer the kinds of private benefits, legally anyway, to the Turkmen leadership as these other countries can.

And so the question is: What can you do? That is where I think especially the European Union has to have more faith in the kind of normative power that it stands for.

Countries like Turkmenistan actually do need the European Union, if only to play the European Union off of Russia and China, so they're not sandwiched in between. I think Brussels especially really sells itself short on the kind of transformative actor it can be by putting a lot of these concerns, not in the working dialogues, but out in the public sphere. It's really the public sphere that counts here.

In terms of the business angle, this is harder. But the question for activists in the most egregious examples is to raise the costs and profiles of businesses doing their work in Turkmenistan, and ask them to consider all aspects of this relationship and whether it's worth the reputational risks that they run of being affiliated with the regime.

I'll give you a recent example. [Daimler was just fined](#) by the U.S. government \$90 million in civil penalties for violations of bribery statutes. You know, it's a mark there.

Similarly, the French company [Bouygues](#), which has built a lot of white elephants and big projects in Ashgabat, has removed from its website references to Turkmenistan. They used to be quite prominent. Why did they do this? Because of the negative publicity that they have received.

Yes, business is business. But when you think of business in a more global context, sometimes these types of

campaigns are bad for business, especially if a particular company is associated with really harsh or egregious sorts of regimes.

I would say that can cut both ways in terms of global activism.

Finally, let me just make one point here on this very interesting analogy to the events in Kyrgyzstan.

The situations are different, but I think one similarity is that in both the United States and in the European Union we have come to use the code word of "stability" to justify our engagement with authoritarian regimes. "Well, we're really interested in stability." But really, who's interested in instability?

The one thing that Kyrgyzstan shows is that that's actually a false choice. The causes of the [regime collapse in Kyrgyzstan](#) were really governance issues. The people who protested in [Naryn](#) and [Bishkek](#) and brought down the government were protesting against corruption in the electricity sector.

Is the situation analogous in Turkmenistan? Maybe. Maybe not.

My point is we can't use stability as a synonym for authoritarianism. Authoritarian practice in and of itself is not evidence of stability. We've slipped into that, and both Washington and Brussels have conflated it to dealing with Central Asia broadly over the last two years. That's a mistake that we need to pull back on and take these trends seriously in these countries that over time stack up and lead to a real kind of mess in their social fabric and institutions.

QUESTION: I wanted to ask you for more background on the [students who were banned](#). Who made the decision about that? Were they attempting to send a message to America or to Kyrgyzstan or both? Was it about [color revolutions](#) or was it about other regional extremist movements that they feared?

The [recent events in Osh](#) revealed that in fact there were several hundred Turkmen students there, even despite all this business with the [refuseniks](#). It then turned out also that there's no consular representation from Turkmenistan in Kyrgyzstan. So I was wondering what the history of that was, why they fear the Kyrgyz angle so much, and how you see this?

If you look around in constituencies for change, there really aren't any, except students and foreign diplomats. People like [Turkmen Foreign Minister] Sheikh Muradov played a role, and the ex-pats and the Diaspora played a role. That's obviously why they have cracked down. But I just wondered do you see that constituency having been defeated, or will we see it appear again in some form? And what was the regime really up to with that?

Finally, do you have any more information of whether the United States has raised this issue? In the talks last week, they didn't publicly say anything about that issue, even though its students are going to U.S.-funded programs.

MASHA FEIGUINOVA: I'm going to ask either Cathy or Farid to sum up the student situation that Cathy is referring to, for the uninitiated. Do you want to say just a few words just for the people who don't know?

QUESTIONER: What happened was last fall several hundred students were literally about to board planes. They already had visas in hand and they were going to various institutions abroad, including the [American University in Central Asia](#); there was a Kazakhstan management program that some were going to and other universities abroad. They were stopped on the tarmac and prevented from leaving. The Ministry of Education suddenly said they needed to have extra paperwork and validation, even though they had already been granted the required exit visas there.

There was a lot of back-and-forth with this for some weeks. The United States was trying to quietly intervene. The university itself was trying to get the students there. They let through a few of them, but then some of them they rerouted into Russian programs that were completely not in their field. Let's say if they were in the humanities, they'd be asked if they wanted to go to an oil institute or something. I guess that's how it worked.

So clearly somebody got the idea in the ministries. I would say it would probably be the president himself, because that's how everything is done. The Ministry of Education and the Security Ministry, decided they could not have these students go abroad. So they didn't. They're still in limbo.

That was what my question really was, to figure out what happened to those people, what their future is.

FARID TUHBATULLIN [through translator]: Right now, thanks to the fact that there has been a hullabaloo about the situation and some fairly senior people have gotten involved, the situation is being resolved.

There was mention just now of a delegation that was in Turkmenistan recently. I met with some members of that delegation right before they left for Turkmenistan, with [Michael Posner](#), who is from the State Department. I gave him the name of one student who has still been unable to leave.

Her name is Madina Alieva. There are a lot of students who are in that situation. But what was finally agreed upon was that this one student's name would be mentioned in the meetings. Mr. Posner of the State Department agreed to raise the issue about the students generally and to mention Madina specifically. He also promised me that when he got back from the trip he and I would meet again. That meeting has not yet taken place.

Unfortunately, Madina has not yet been able to leave the country. I think that there are at least 20 students from that group who have not been able to leave yet of the ones whom I know.

The reason that many Turkmen students are trying to obtain foreign education is very simple. There are about 100,000 high school graduates every year in Turkmenistan and only 12,000 of them are able to be accepted into Turkmen institutes of higher education. Of those who don't have that opportunity, even if only half of them want to go on to college, they have to leave the country.

Higher education is much less expensive in Kyrgyzstan than it is in Russia or in Kazakhstan, and for that reason there is a large number of Turkmen students who are studying in Kyrgyzstan. And of course, the authorities are probably very frightened that those students are going to learn to be like the Kyrgyz students and participate in revolutionary activities.

QUESTION: I guess this would be directed to Professor Cooley. Do you see any role being played by the Turkmen coming to the United States or to the European Union for undergraduate or graduate universities; and, if so, what would that role be?

ALEXANDER COOLEY: You mean role in reshaping Turkmen society?

QUESTIONER: Yes.

ALEXANDER COOLEY: I think the problem is one of access. One conversation I was having earlier was the contrast between Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan, which has always struck me as quite instructive. In Kazakhstan you have had the [Bolashak](#) program, which is now privatized. It used to be a state-funded project, which would place thousands of Kazakh students in leading universities both in Europe and in the States.

I remember one year at the beginning of the decade we had at one meeting something like 13 or 14 Bolashak fellows at Columbia. We had a lunch for them. They were everywhere—business school, law school, policy, and so forth.

In exchange for doing this, they would go back to Turkmenistan and do government service for about five years under this kind of implicit contract that they had.

This sort of experience gives you the technical skills, but also the perspective about global norms and your home country's place there.

I think the Kazakhs could be doing a lot more with the human capital and the resources that they have in order to be true leaders in the region. But that's a different story.

Qualitatively, it's much different. You see a kind of an evolution, an internalization of what is being absorbed outside. We're not even at that point in Turkmenistan now.

One of the fears is not only that students that study abroad will incite these Kyrgyz-style revolutions and instability, but also that they won't return to the country. This is a problem.

Why go back to Turkmenistan and have to work yourself up these crazy bureaucratic clan kinds of structures when you can just try to get a job with a multinational corporation outside and earn a good salary there? Again, that's a particular problem of a very closed type of society.

So in theory, yes, it probably could have an impact over the long term. Just as this has hollowed out slowly, it has to be rebuilt slowly. But there's a lot of concern that these educational programs are security risks as much as they are education programs. At least that's the way the Turkmen security services see it.

On the question of how this happened, the working rumor that I heard on this was that in fact this was not an initiative of the education minister. It was that he was asked at one of these cabinet meetings, "Just how many Turkmen students are going abroad this year?" and he blanked, and didn't have an answer.

So then that led to a sort of a cataloguing of them all, when they couldn't find anyone who had the information about this, and counting up the visas. It then turned into a whole question of: Where are all of these people going? We don't have a clue what they're studying, where they are; and then these distinctions being made over English-language programs.

So I think actually the education minister was out of the loop. Because he was out of the loop, it became a national kind of crisis. He has since been fired.

QUESTION: The reason I asked about the message to the United States is because at the same time they also didn't let the Peace Corps in. We don't know a lot of what the U.S. relations are because they are pretty quiet when they deal with them. They don't even have an ambassador, which seems strange.

ALEXANDER COOLEY: Right. I was about to say that. It works both ways. We have sent signals that we're particularly interested in engaging with them. And then this ambassador role, that has been taken with some offense in Ashgabat. That's a real snub. Charge d'Affaires [Dick Miles](#) I think is one of the most capable diplomats we have, period. But in terms of the title, not being ambassador.

The other thing that annoys Turkmen authorities is when U.S. officials in the previous administration waltzed into Ashgabat and started lecturing them about where to build their pipelines. That sort of exasperated them and led them to think, "Who are you to dictate to us whether we should be building Nabucco or doing this or doing that?"

It's the combination of fear of instability and this kind of didactic sort of style that some—I won't name names—adopted towards them.

There's also a newfound self-confidence. One of the things that you see post Niyazov is a lot of groups and organizations courting the Turkmen. They are quite happy about this and use that as *prima facie* evidence that things are okay.

Everyone's interested in educational cooperation with them and wants to start up projects. So they feel a little better about this honeymoon period, that they have a lot of potential suitors, which proves that they're doing just fine, that the reforms are working, and that they are in fact having the sort of desired effect.

QUESTION: I have two questions.

To Mr. Tuhbatullin, you mentioned that you write alternative reports to the UN mechanism. What do you think the effects are of using the UN bodies and the means that they provide for providing a voice from the civil society? Secondly, what would you expect from global NGOs or civil society organizations in terms of providing a voice or view on what is happening in Turkmenistan to make sure that change can happen and to support the local initiatives that are happening?

To Professor Cooley, you talked a little bit about the ethics of the business community, and what you can expect. You also talked about the incentive of reputational risks. Could you talk more about what incentives you think could be reasonably expected and what actors you think would provide a way for us to get there?

Thank you.

FARID TUHBATULLIN: Yes, we do do shadow reports and the UN committees do use them. Our most recent one was for [CEDAW](#) [the Committee on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women]. Before that we prepared a report on national minorities.

These reports provide an alternative source of information. They are regarded as reliable within these committees. In their resolutions and in their documents they often raise issues which they have gotten from reading our reports.

However, the fact that these UN committees don't have a way of having a significant impact on the countries, and that Turkmenistan, for example, can reject decisions which it doesn't like, is another problem.

Your second question had to do with NGOs. As an example, on my organization's website, a forum took shape and an idea appeared on that forum. Some young people within Turkmenistan, whom we didn't know at all, decided to start collecting information inside the country about what was going on.

This group of young people started collecting email addresses of friends and friends of friends, and in four months, they have built up a network of 700 email addresses, and those people are receiving information from us and from other organizations about what's going on inside the country.

What that points to, first of all, is that there is a great interest in information. The second thing, which is very important, is that from among those 700 people who want to have information and who are not afraid, we can foster and train people to become activists and work for us. That's what we're working on now.

ALEXANDER COOLEY: I think the key to any kind of corporate reputational campaign is to link the presence of a company to some practice that violates an international widely regarded norm or that inflicts some sort of bodily harm or goes so against the grain of what's accepted in international society. That's why the Internet campaigns against [Gap sweatshop conditions](#) have been so effective.

Think about the [Cotton Campaign](#) in Uzbekistan. The idea of Uzbek cotton being dependent on a set of practices that violate the human rights of minors by collectively forcing them to go into the fields and pick cotton for two or three months a year. That's very effective too. We have this standard norm against child labor practices.

So the key is to identify companies with a specific impact in Turkmen society that would be violating that kind of strong sense of international norm. Maybe you could do it for some and not for others.

The campaign against Bouygues was partially the result of a couple of documentary films that came out publicizing them as building marble palaces for this kind of crazy man. You had a visual image that you could connect. You need similar types of connections to be made.

It might be more difficult to do with Boeing. But if you can link agricultural machinery with certain social practices, then maybe you can do it.

The key for activists is to find those kinds of narratives and create those kinds of connections that are going to resonate internationally.

QUESTION: Do you feel there has been a benefit from the Chinese investment? For investment going forward, do you think that represents a greater opportunity for social uprising, or do you think that there is a risk to political stability?

ALEXANDER COOLEY: It's a very interesting question. I wish I knew. It's too early to be able to tell. We don't even know the extent of what's in the package.

On the one hand, revenues as a result of this are potentially going to double for the Turkmen government as they start selling 30 bcn, then go to 40 bcn, and it's going to be higher than what they do to Russia. You have about 10,000 Turkmen who make a lot of money off of this, and you have millions who have utilities subsidized, and who are kept in a state of sort of depoliticization. It's not Kuwait where everyone is wealthy. There is a small elite that gains the most out of it.

But on the other hand, it is enough to keep them demobilized. So inasmuch as there are more revenues to spread about, then maybe it sort of demobilizes them.

Now, the other thing about Chinese investment is it comes with strange types of repayment schedules and expectations. This is what all the Central Asian countries are dealing with now. The question of what does China want out of this in 20, 25 years' time?

It's more unclear in Turkmenistan than the other areas, because from Turkmenistan it just wants the gas; all the other stuff, all the broad relationships, are vehicles towards ensuring a steady supply of gas. Whereas with the other ones it wants border stability, certain parts of land back, cooperation on security issues and so forth in [Xinjiang](#).

From Chinese strategic thinking, because you only want the energy, you have to make sure that your contacts are broad enough that that relationship becomes indispensable.

It's sort of the opposite of what we did with the [Manas](#) base for us. We started talking to Kyrgyz only about the base and now the interim government is very upset with us. Whereas the Chinese, even if they want the fix, they try and broaden contacts so as to make their kind of partnership indispensable going forward. But whether they provide a general level of public goods in Turkmenistan that's appreciated, I don't know.

One final thought on this. There was a very interesting report that I never saw—maybe Farid knows more about it—about a conflict between Turkmen workers and Chinese management on the pipeline. It was in September.

Apparently, about a dozen Chinese managers were hospitalized. This was all resolved very quietly and diplomatically. Whether that's an indication of potential tensions I don't know. The Chinese workers that come in

tend to be quite sequestered and separate from the localities in which they are operating.

QUESTION: In order to try and leverage and oil and gas interests, there has to even be a stake in the first place. It seems to me the trade balance between the United States and Turkmenistan is only like \$200 million, right above Togo. There isn't a stake and there isn't the willingness of the European Union to spend \$4 billion in a soft loan.

It works two ways. The Turkmens have been coquettish, but they also haven't heard a deal or an offer.

It seems to me like the European Union is also split, because you have the Italians. [Eni](#) is more gravitated towards the Russian projects; they even see themselves as making some kind of hybrid between something that might satisfy some Nabucco and some [South Stream](#). Just looking at it from afar, it seems that the European Union hasn't really ponied up the deal for the Turkmens. That's why they don't have a deal.

And the Turkmens gravitate towards whoever can drop money on them, which is also the Iranians. The Iranians are offering to buy more. So I just wondered if that's how you see it and whether you see that changing at all in the next five years.

ALEXANDER COOLEY: I don't have much to add to that. You've described it perfectly. Europe tends to have a lot of conferences on oil and natural gas in Eurasia, and the Chinese build pipelines while they're having conferences. It's a simple as that.

EU machinations are very slow and deliberate. They're getting there. It seems that there's a little more movement now on Nabucco. [RWE](#) has made a statement now "this pipeline is going to be built starting this summer." We'll wait and see.

But even aside from all that, Nabucco is a very small amount of gas for EU energy needs, so all this kind of fuss and courting of the Turkmens and back-and-forth is for what's just a small fraction of European needs.

Not only that, but we have seen tremendous technological breakthroughs in the last year in shale gas technology that is going to make the United States the leading gas producer. We're going to start exporting this year as a result.

As well as secondary effects. LNG that was coming to the States instead went to Europe, and created a spot market for liquid natural gas. Then, all of a sudden Gazprom had to give in and sell a fifth of its gas, when it said it never would do that, at the spot market for LNG.

There are these technological innovations too that I think will potentially give Europe a lot more bargaining leverage in how they deal with Eurasian energy producers than they think they have at the moment. But let's not get into the psychology of it.

MASHA FEIGUINOVA: I really appreciate people coming to this event. I realize that Turkmenistan is in a way an obscure case, only in that not that many people know about the country.

It is a really strong example of why protection of basic civic and political rights is incredibly crucial. It's one of those things that you don't miss them until they're gone. I hope we've been able to demonstrate what happens to the country when there is a complete absence of those.

It is also a good example of the kind of issues that we are going to have to start thinking about more, primarily in terms of how do you engage with an incredibly repressive regime that has something that you want very badly (in this case gas) or have convinced yourself that is incredibly needed.

These are the questions that we will have to be thinking about over the next 20, 30, 40 plus years. I hope we have been able to stir your imagination in that respect.

Thanks again to the Council and to the speakers.