Turkmenistan

Capital: Ashgabat
Population: 5.31 million
GNI/capita, PPP: US$14,520

Source: World Bank *World Development Indicators.*

### Nations in Transit Ratings and Averaged Scores

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NOTE: The ratings reflect the consensus of Freedom House, its academic advisers, and the author(s) of this report. If consensus cannot be reached, Freedom House is responsible for the final ratings. The ratings are based on a scale of 1 to 7, with 1 representing the highest level of democratic progress and 7 the lowest. The Democracy Score is an average of ratings for the categories tracked in a given year. The opinions expressed in this report are those of the author(s).
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Turkmenistan is an authoritarian regime with a neopatrimonial governing system under which little has changed in terms of governance and administration since the death of President Saparmurat Niyazov in 2006. Under Niyazov’s successor, Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow, the judiciary and legislative branches continue to act as extensions of the executive, whose decrees function as both law and justice. Until very recently, the totalitarian regime’s stability rested on high prices for its ample natural gas that enabled the state to provide free or heavily subsidized gas, water, flour, salt, electricity, and gasoline.

This model is now facing unprecedented challenges due to the collapse of oil and natural gas prices, security threats along the country’s border with Afghanistan, and the radicalization of Central Asian youth. Cutbacks to the state subsidy system beginning in January 2014 and a currency devaluation of 19 percent in January 2015 produced some harmless, yet significant for Turkmenistan, signs of social unrest, with people holding demonstrations against the destruction of satellite dishes and unpaid workers demanding their salaries. Even the traditionally optimistic official GDP statistics, which experts have treated with skepticism for years, showed a sharp reduction in the annual growth rate, from 10.3 percent in 2014 to 6.5 percent in 2015. At the same time, the military has engaged in periodic clashes with the Taliban along the border with Afghanistan, contributing to worries about security and challenging the state’s official status of neutrality. Additionally, Central Asian youth, including Turkmen, have shown increasing interest in the war in Syria and the Islamic State which also led to further restrictions on travel of Turkmen residents abroad.

In this way, Turkmenistan’s foreign policy of “neutrality” and self-imposed isolation have not produced the protection from conflicts that the government promised. Economic pressures, coupled with growing security concerns, are slowly but surely changing the government’s general attitude toward its foreign partners. In terms of internal politics, the government has responded to these pressures by seeking to further restrict the influence of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), limit access to information, and reveal even less to the outside world. There remains no true opposition or media outlet that could challenge the state in Turkmenistan.

No score changes.

Outlook for 2016: The deepening crises spurred by falling oil and gas prices and the growing security threat from the Taliban and Islamic State will force Turkmenistan to continue rethinking its model for both internal and external relations. Reforms are necessary to address the country’s economic stagnation and collapsing infrastructure. The reduction in GDP growth and currency devaluation in 2015 highlighted the critical economic issues within the country. The government will also be under pressure to rethink its energy policies and position within the global security system in order to gain more military support for defending its borders with Afghanistan. The decision to have Turkmengaz head the construction of the Turkmenistan–Afghanistan–Pakistan–India (TAPI) gas pipeline after no major energy companies came forward to lead its construction is another sign the government is feeling pressure to act and is seeking new partners in Southeast Asia in its power bargain.
**Main Report**

**National Democratic Governance**

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- In December 2015, Turkmenistan celebrated the 20th anniversary of its foreign policy of “permanent neutrality” and 24 years of independence. The country has had two presidents in this time: Saparmurat Niyazov, who named himself *Turkmenbashy* (“Head of all Turkmen”) and ruled until his death in 2006, and current president Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow, who named himself *Arkadag* (“Protector or Protective Mountain”) of the nation. Both presidents erected golden statues of themselves, with Berdimuhamedow’s ceremonially unveiled in the capital, Ashgabat, on May 25, 2015. This date was not accidental, as it marked the celebration of the last day of school (*posledniy zvonok*) for all secondary and primary schools in the country, and students were mobilized to act as a cheering audience. The statue is over 20 meters tall and covered with 24-carat gold leaf. The 58-year-old president intends to rule for life, as shown by two changes in the constitution drafted for approval in 2015 that would extend the president’s term from five to seven years and remove the upper age limit of 70 years for serving as president.

- In 2015, shocks from the worldwide drop in gas prices, Taliban gains along the border with Afghanistan, and the Russian economic decline induced signs of panic at the top of the regime. The year started with a currency devaluation of 19 percent in early January, which followed changes in 2014 to the country’s extensive state subsidies, including the revocation of free natural gas and rations for private car and motorcycle drivers. At a meeting of the cabinet in January, the president rebuked state officials, including the ministers of economics, finance, health, education, labor, and social protection, for the country’s growing economic problems, currency devaluation, rising prices, budget deficit, and economic stagnation. Such dressing-downs of public officials are broadcast on state television and aim to displace blame for the country’s problems from the president onto government officials.

- In October, as discussion of the threat from the Taliban and the Islamic State (IS) on Turkmenistan’s border with Afghanistan was gaining traction, the president made changes in the ranks of top defense officials, appointing the Minister of National Security as the new Minister of National Defense, and appointing the Minister of National Defense as Garrison Commander of the Naval-Armed Forces.

- The government’s heavily promoted status of “neutrality” contributed to the current situation on the Afghan border, as it provided no basis for the government to develop defensive military capabilities. Despite a concentration of military and security forces on the border regions with Afghanistan, the state has appeared incapable of defending itself from any external threat. In late October, when a group of Taliban fighters occupied an island in the Amu Darya river that forms part of the border between Afghanistan and Turkmenistan, Turkmen border guards reportedly cited neutrality as the reason for refusing to attack the fighters or to allow the Afghan government to do so.

- Afghanistan has also begun to play a more central role in Turkmenistan’s economic development policies as the latter tries to diversify away from China. In the fall, Turkmenistan completed its construction of the Turkmenistan–Afghanistan–Tajikistan railway funded by the Asian Development Bank. The railway is intended to reduce transit costs to Turkmenistan and help ease the isolation of the landlocked country. Turkmenistan’s energy exports to Russia have been declining since 2009, a trend that is continuing due to the Russian economic crisis. This has left Turkmenistan completely dependent on China as the major buyer of Turkmen gas. In 2015, the government put extra effort into beginning the long-awaited construction of the Turkmenistan–Afghanistan–Pakistan–India (TAPI) gas pipeline.
• TAPI is intended to free Turkmenistan from export dependence on Russia and China. The pipeline will cost $10 billion and transport up to 33 billion cubic meters of natural gas per year, of which India and Pakistan will each receive 42 percent and Afghanistan the remaining 16 percent. The pipeline will run from Turkmenistan’s Galkynysh field through Afghanistan (Herat, Helmand, and Kandahar) and Pakistan (Quetta and Multan) to India with a length of some 1,800 kilometers. Because the pipeline will pass through Taliban-controlled areas, security issues are among the several challenges to the ambitious plan. Leaders of both Afghanistan and Pakistan have promised that the pipeline will be protected.¹⁴

• In August, after years of failing to attract a major international energy company to lead the project, the international steering committee representing the four countries involved in TAPI selected Turkmenistan’s state-owned Turkmengaz to head construction of the pipeline.¹⁵ In October, media reported that Turkmenistan had signed an agreement with Japanese corporations to help develop the Galkynysh gas field to ensure there would be enough gas to supply TAPI.¹⁶

Electoral Process

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• Elections for local self-governance bodies (gengeşlar) and for two districts represented in the parliament (Mejlis) took place on August 16, 2015, without the observation of monitors from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). Turnout in the local elections was reported at 77.36 percent.¹⁷ These elections, however, are not indicators of true democratic participation: the parliament and gengeşlar serve as façades that allow Turkmenistan to claim democratic governance, but in practice are subordinate to the country’s president.

• The electoral system in Turkmenistan closely resembles the Soviet system and is not based on democratic participation. In practice, the country still operates on a one-party system, despite the existence of three pro forma parties: the Democratic Party of Turkmenistan (the president’s party, founded in 1991), the Party of Industrialists and Entrepreneurs (founded in 2012), and the Agrarian Party (founded in 2014).¹⁸ The latter two parties function only as trade unions representing industry and agriculture.¹⁹ There is also no locally defined concept of “political participation” among Turkmen, who have had no history of democratic statehood in the Western understanding of the term, even though the Soviet system introduced some notions of equality and community through communism. Citizens interviewed do not feel they can participate in political decision-making nor believe their votes will change anything.²⁰ Total political control over the population and daily promotion of the president and his ideology through the media also serve to keep the people out of politics.

Civil Society

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• According to the most recent survey, Turkmenistan had 106 officially registered nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in 2014, two-thirds of which were government-initiated and funded.²¹ External funding for NGOs is very difficult to obtain. This means these organizations are, to a large extent, governmental organizations that serve the state. The law “Concerning legal regulation of internet
development and provision of internet services,” adopted December 29, 2014, assigned a new role to NGOs, namely, “searching for and identifying illegal information on the internet.” From the text of the law itself, it is not clear if there will be special NGOs set up for these purposes or these new tasks will be assigned to existing NGOs.22

- Turkmenistan’s first-ever law on public assemblies came into force July 1. While the law establishes for the first time the right of any individual to organize a public assembly, it also provides stark restrictions on that right, including information and permission requirements for assemblies of more than one person, limits on the times and places these demonstrations may occur, and prohibitions on suspended or banned organizations from organizing protests.23 The practical impact of the law itself is also limited by existing restrictions on speech and association.

- In August, Turkmenistan adopted a law establishing gender equality and equal opportunities for men and women.24 and authorities presented it in October at a conference on equal rights at the Center of Civil Society Organizations in Ashgabat. The conference was organized by the parliament, Union of Women, and National Center of Trade Unions. It is difficult to say how the law “On state guarantees to support equal rights and opportunities for women and men”25 will work in practice, because such laws are often adopted to boost the country’s human rights image internationally, and because the president effectively makes all decisions through executive decrees rather than laws.

- There are no official numbers on ethnic composition or religious affiliation within the country. According to 2014 estimates from the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), the country is 85 percent Sunni Muslim and 9 percent Russian Orthodox. People of other religious affiliations, including Jehovah’s Witnesses, Jews, and Evangelical Christians, make up 2 percent of the population, and Shia Muslims, mostly ethnic Iranians, Azeris, or Kurds, make up the remaining small percentage. USCIRF reported that there were 121 registered religious organizations (consisting of more than 50 members) and seven registered religious groups (consisting of at least 5 and fewer than 50 members). According to USCIRF, this number was practically unchanged from 2010, when there were 123 such groups. All religious organizations must register with the Ministry of Justice in order to operate legally. Religious communities are frequently denied registration, and the registration procedure remains opaque.26

- Practicing religion remains very risky for unrecognized groups, and Forum 18 reported police raids on homes and gathering places of religious groups throughout 2015, often resulting in imprisonment and fines.27 In February 2015, five prisoners were convicted of Wahhabism, a conservative strain of Islam, and sent to Seydi labor camp where they were brutally beaten by prison guards.28 In March, police raided the home of a Jehovah’s Witness, Bayram Hemdemov, and detained 38 worshippers gathered there. Hemdemov was sentenced to four years’ imprisonment for inciting social hatred.29

- Like other post-Soviet Muslim countries, Turkmenistan’s citizens treat Islam as more of a tradition than an object of devotion. Registered mosques are used to promote state propaganda, and mullahs attend state gatherings and official meetings.30 Although a large majority of Turkmenistan are Sunni Muslims, the state discourages religious practice, especially among youth. Young people who regularly visit the mosque or wear Islamic clothing are persecuted by the National Security Office.31

### Independent Media

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- Media in Turkmenistan act primarily as tools to promote the state ideology and praise the president, with entertainment of the people as a side function. The country’s first media law entered into force in January 2013. Although it provides for free media and prohibits unlawful censorship and interference
in the work of journalists, the law is not enforced, and authorities exercise tight control over media in practice. Moreover, the executive branch governs on the basis of decrees that often contradict the laws.32

• Television is the dominant means of receiving information and entertainment. Printed newspapers and journals are heavily regulated and not popular, although those who work for state organizations and the government are forced to subscribe to them in order to bolster circulation numbers. This year, the Turkmen government set out to dismantle privately owned satellite dishes, the only means people had of receiving information from outside the country, mainly from Russia. In March 2015, the local administration of the capital, Ashgabat, started warning residents to remove their satellite dishes, and over the next several months, groups of young men took down satellite dishes in Ashgabat and its surrounding areas. Authorities said the dishes were diminishing the city’s beauty.33

• In April 2015, Turkmenistan launched into geosynchronous transfer orbit its first telecommunications satellite, which will be operated by the Turkmenistan Ministry of Communications. The satellite has a coverage area that includes Europe, Central Asia, and Africa and is intended to improve internet services, television broadcasts, communications, and satellite surveillance imagery of the country.34

• Three books “authored” by the president were highlights in the national media in 2015.35 The third volume of the president’s book Medicinal Herbs of Turkmenistan was translated into Korean.36 These events filled up the schedule of public celebrations alongside public shows and mass concerts.

• Turkmenistan’s State News Agency reported that the number of internet users quadrupled in 2015,37 although these numbers are not confirmed by international sources. As of December 31, 2014, Turkmenistan had one of the world’s lowest official internet penetration rates—12.2 percent, and only 0.2 percent of the population is on Facebook, which is blocked or throttled along with services like Twitter and YouTube. The Russian social media networks Odnoklassniki and vKontakte are the most popular social networks in Turkmenistan.38

• Journalists who do not conform to state-prescribed formats face harassment, intimidation, and sometimes imprisonment. There are no independent media outlets operating openly inside the country, and contributors to dissident media experience constant pressure. In July, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) correspondent Saparmamed Nepeskuliev, who reported on issues such as shortages in water and electricity, was detained and held incommunicado for months despite international pressure. In September, he was sentenced to three years in prison on dubious narcotics charges.39

Local Democratic Governance

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• Turkmenistan’s system of government retains many features from the Soviet era and is characterized by a highly centralized power structure that functions in a top-down manner.40 There are five regions (welayats) and one independent city (Ashgabat), which are further divided into districts (etrapy) and cities (sheher).41 Local elected councils (halk maslahats) are supposed to complement the work of appointed district governors (hakim) and city mayors. In practice, none of the governors or councils has the power to make independent decisions, instead relying on the president. Obtaining a position within the state system requires paying high bribes. Depending on the position, the sums may vary from $500 to tens of thousands of dollars. Along with ethnicity, tribal, and regional affiliations, patron-client networks play a decisive role in state appointments.

• Local administration and government serve as an extension of Ashgabat, as the president personally appoints and fires district governors and city mayors. In August, Berdimuhamedow appointed as new
mayor of Ashgabat Myratniyaz Abilov, who had previously served as governor of two different Ashgabat districts.42

- As a result of the unequal distribution of capital and power in Turkmenistan, there is a great disparity in resources between Ashgabat and the rest of the country. There are particularly big differences between urban and rural areas, some of which lack access to gas, electricity, water, and other basic services.43 The government promised to invest in infrastructure and improve lives in rural areas in 2015.44 Water supply is one of the country’s most pressing issues. In February, the government reported that a water purification plant was under construction in Lebap welayat.45 In June, the president went to Lebap to attend the opening ceremony of the reservoir.46

- Every year from late September until the end of November, the state, with support from local administrations, organizes a mass cotton harvest by forcing tens of thousands of state workers and schoolchildren to pick the cash crop. This kind of mass organization is performed by local governments with strict orders from Ashgabat. At a meeting of the Cabinet of Ministers in September, Berdymuhamedow criticized local leaders for their handling of the cotton harvest, blaming them for delays and giving them a week to rectify the situation.47

- The number of cotton pickers is difficult to estimate, since almost everyone is urged to join in, and shops, bazaars, and most services are closed during the harvest. RFE/RL reported that in 2015, unlike in previous years, schoolchildren were collectively transported to cotton fields, accompanied by their teachers.48 The payment for a kilogram of cotton is about 7 cents, with a 50-kilogram quota per picker. In October, the Turkmen State News Agency reported that the quota had been met and 1.05 million metric tons of cotton were delivered to the state.49

- The practice of detaining “evening walkers,” or people who stay out later than the police deem appropriate, continued. During the celebrations of the country’s independence on October 26–28, detention cells were overcrowded with citizens who had missed their trains or had simply gone out and were detained in their slippers. The detainees had to pay a fine before their release the next morning.50

### Judicial Framework and Independence

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- Article 4 of the 1992 constitution establishes separation of powers between the executive, judicial, and legislative branches. In practice, however, all power lies in the hands of the president, and the judicial system is under the direct influence of the head of state. With the executive unquestionably the strongest branch of government, the judiciary can best be described as overly compliant with the demands of the president.

- Turkmenistan is ruled by force instead of law. The legal system is inherited from Soviet times, and the police serve as the extended hand of the state rather than overseers of public security. The system disregards the role of lawyers in civil and criminal proceedings. Disputes are solved through personal, kinship, tribal, and other patron-client networks, and not through courts.

- Human rights violations are widespread and arbitrary. An analysis of satellite images by Amnesty International showed the destruction of the entire Choganly neighborhood on the outskirts of Ashgabat of some 10,000 houses, each home to an average of five people, between March 2014 and September 2015.51 The organization linked the demolitions to Turkmenistan’s preparations to host the 2017 Asian Indoor and Martial Arts Games.
• In February, media reported that 80 people were arrested on accusations of terrorism and links to Afghan militants in the small town of Tejen in Akhal Province bordering Afghanistan. The total number of detained in the case reportedly reached 150, the majority of whom were from Tejen, and the others from the remaining provinces of Turkmenistan.52

• In addition to government-sponsored removal of satellite dishes (see “Independent Media”), there were mass removals of air conditioners in order to beautify Ashgabat in 2015. Some neighborhoods protested against the removals, a serious issue in a country where the summer heat can reach 45 °C (115 °F). Residents in one neighborhood complained that authorities provided no legal basis for removing the air conditioners, which are private property.53

• Numerous former officials who broke with the government have faced imprisonment and exile in politically motivated cases. Ex-chairman of the Central Bank Khudaiberdy Orozov and former ambassador to Turkey Nurmukhamed Khamanov have both been in exile for more than 15 years. Avdy Kuliyev, Turkmenistan’s first minister of foreign affairs from 1990 to 1992 and head of the United Turkmen Democratic Opposition, died in exile in 2007. A 2014 report by Crude Accountability documented some 66 political prisoners that have “disappeared” in Turkmenistan’s prisons in a wave of repressions since the late 1990s and early 2000s, including Serdar Rakhimov, a former journalist and diplomat who led the reconstituted Communist Party of Turkmenistan, and ex-foreign minister and ambassador to China Boris Shikhmuradov, who founded the People’s Democratic Movement of Turkmenistan.54

• Another 2014 report by Crude Accountability on the Ovadan Depe prison stated that a number of “Novemberists” like Rakhimov and Shikhmuradov, who were accused of attempting a coup against President Niyazov in November 2002, have been held in solitary confinement for more than a decade under conditions amounting to torture. No international monitors are allowed to visit Ovadan Depe, and Crude Accountability’s report was based on satellite imagery and testimony from a released prisoner and anonymous sources.55 Former deputy prime minister Yolly Kurbanmuradov, another political prisoner who had been imprisoned since June 2005, was reported to have died in prison in December 2015. His cousin, a minister of communications under Niyazov, died in prison in 2013.56

• The freedom of citizens to leave Turkmenistan is extremely restricted through the use of informal bans, passport requirements, and official exit visas, and may be becoming even more so. There are two kinds of passports in Turkmenistan: one for internal use and a biometric one required for traveling abroad since July 2013. The latter, however, has become more and more difficult to obtain. In the last two years, some young people have been refused exit visas and instead conscripted to serve in the military as the threat along the Afghan border has risen.57

• On October 24, some 45 passengers on two different flights to Istanbul from Ashgabat were prevented from leaving the country without any explanation.58 The Khorezm-based NGO Najot alleged in 2010 that the president had signed a travel “blacklist,” including 37,057 people barred from leaving Turkmenistan in the following categories: employees of the government, employees of executive bodies in the field, and Turkmen citizens under constant surveillance by the security services.59 The list of individuals barred from entering the country reportedly includes representatives of international and Turkmenistani human rights organizations.

• Dual citizenship has been banned since 2008, but a large number of dual Russian-Turkmen citizens had continued to hold both passports as a diplomatic solution was sought. Turkmenistan officially ceased recognizing dual citizenship in May 2015, and citizens who did not want to lose their Turkmen citizenship had to sell their properties quickly and leave Russia. Valentina Matviyenko, Chairman of the Federation Council of the Russian Federation, stated that the question of dual citizenship is still under discussion, and suggestions for the next agreement will be proposed to the Turkmen government in the near future. It is not certain, however, that the Turkmen government will accept the new conditions.60
Corruption

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- Corruption is systemic in Turkmenistan. Transparency International ranked Turkmenistan 154 out of 168 countries and territories in its 2015 Corruption Perceptions Index, giving it the worst score of any country covered in Nations in Transit. A large portion of the enormous revenues gained from hydrocarbon resources is transferred to the foreign bank accounts of the small elite group led by the president. A leaked 2012 census contained information that 4 percent of the Turkmen population controls 45 percent of the country’s wealth.

- The construction industry, especially in the newly built showpiece sections of Ashgabat, is another site for grand corruption. International companies pay huge bribes for the right to build government buildings, such as Berdimuhamedow’s presidential palace, and are often freed from paying local taxes as a reward. The business model is not without risks for builders. Eurasianet reported in May 2015 of a case in which 20 companies were jointly suing the government for more than $1 billion in losses; a single Turkish construction company was separately seeking $300 million in international arbitration. In October, a dissident website reported that German energy giant DEA (formerly RWE) was pulling out of Turkmenistan altogether after years of waiting for equipment needed to develop a gas field it had identified to clear customs.

- Corruption in the education and healthcare systems has had disastrous consequences, such as illiteracy, decline in the quality of personnel, loss of incentive to study among youth, and the spread of diseases. These outcomes are worsening in the light of economic distress and falsification of data reported in all relevant fields, including healthcare. In December 2009, Doctors without Borders (MSF) left the country. In a report issued four months later, the organization characterized the healthcare system as “smoke and mirrors reinforced by fear.” Despite heavy spending under Berdimuhamedow (a former health minister), little seems to have changed since then. Modern infrastructure in the cities lacks qualified personnel to operate it, and healthcare statistics continue to be unreliable.

- Turkmenistan is a transit country for drug trafficking from Afghanistan to Iran, Russia, and Europe, a problem that is enabled in part by corruption among border services. Drug addiction among youth escalated during the previous president’s rule and continues to be a chronic problem. While President Berdimuhamedow has openly stated that the problem needs to be addressed, the country lacks the infrastructure, personnel, resources, and knowledge to combat drug addiction.

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1 Nicholas Kunyasz, “From sultanism to neopatrimonialism? Regionalism within Turkmenistan,” Central Asian Survey 31(11):9 (2011). In addition to the citations given, this report draws on interviews and informal communication with residents of Turkmenistan as well as Turkmenistanis who temporarily or permanently reside outside of the country.


17 “В Туркменистане проходят выборы членов Генштаба” [In Turkmenistan elections are held for the members of Gengesh], Parahat.info, 16 August 2015, http://www.parahat.info/news/2015-08-16-v-turkmensiane-prohodyat-vybory-chlenov-gengesh
20 Personal communication with people from Dashoguz velayat and Turkmenbashi.
24 “Закон Туркменистана о государственных гарантиях обеспечения равных прав и равных возможностей женщин и мужчин” [Law of Turkmenistan on state guarantees for the equal rights and opportunities of men and women], Government of Turkmenistan, 18 August 2015, http://turbkmenian.gov.tm/?id=9491


Author interviews and field research.

Interviews with residents of three regions of Turkmenistan.


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