



CRUDE ACCOUNTABILITY



July 14, 2015

Federica Mogherini

High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy /

Vice President of the European Commission

European Commission

Rue de la Loi / Wetstraat 200

1049 Brussels

Belgium

Dear Federica Mogherini,

We are writing to ask that you urge the Turkmen government to immediately halt its campaign to dismantle privately-owned satellite dishes which is designed to deny citizens access to independent information and news sources. In particular as the European Union (EU) moves closer to finalizing a Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) with Turkmenistan, the EU should make clear that the satellite removal campaign, in current conditions, constitutes yet another serious violation of the right to freedom of expression, specifically the right to seek and receive information, in a country where such rights are already so thoroughly limited and is inconsistent with the human rights clause of the PCA. We urge the EU to make clear to the Turkmen authorities that failure to allow the restoration of private satellite dishes will be a serious setback to the PCA.

This is an issue of crucial importance to people in Turkmenistan because without their satellite dishes they will be completely cut off from independent sources of information and further isolated from the outside world. For instance, many residents had used their satellite dishes to receive Radio Azatlyk, the Turkmen language service of the US-funded Radio Liberty, the only alternative source of Turkmen-language news available in the country. Without privately owned satellite dishes, residents have no access to Radio Azatlyk, nor to radio and television broadcasts

in other languages that would broadcast views in Russian, English and other languages that would present alternatives to those of the Turkmen authorities.

The government's campaign to force the dismantling of privately-owned satellite dishes started at the end of March 2015 in the capital, Ashgabat, and has spread throughout the country. Authorities told residents they could instead get cable television packages through the government, which very tightly controls their content.

The threat to freedom of information

Turkmenistan is an extremely closed and repressive country. The government directly or indirectly controls all print and electronic media. Internet access is very expensive for average people in Turkmenistan and remains heavily state-controlled. Many websites are blocked, including those of foreign news organizations. The security services have massively invested into the control of internet traffic and the government is known to extensively monitor electronic and telephone communications for evidence of political dissent. Almost all alternative portals for accessing the internet are inaccessible to most people.

The provider for the cable television packages offered to residents is Turkmentelekom, the state telecommunications company. While the packages are said to contain about 100 channels, in practice, due to duplications there are far fewer, most of which are entertainment channels, do not include news channels that would convey any kind of criticism of the Turkmen government, and are easily censored by the authorities. State-owned satellite packages likewise do not carry channels that would convey information or feature debates in local languages in any way critical of the government.

Moreover, the government can shut off cable television at any time, as it did in 2011 to prevent the dissemination of news about an explosion at a munitions warehouse. The government's virtual total monopoly on the internet and cellular telephones means that all telecommunications can be subjected to arbitrary and comprehensive shut-downs.

The satellite removal campaign

In March, local housing authorities in Ashgabat and its suburbs started ordering residents of multi-story apartment buildings to take down their satellite dishes, citing simply an "order from above" that allegedly stated the dishes ruined the view of the city. The authorities made no reference to any legal grounds for the forced removal nor did they show any official document with an order for the removals.

In recent weeks, sources inside Turkmenistan have reported the removal of satellite dishes throughout the country: in Dashoguz, along the route to Turkmenbashi, and in Mary. Photographs taken by the Turkmenistan Initiative for Human Rights on June 17, the day the EU-Turkmenistan human rights dialogue took place, [show](#) dozens of satellite dishes that had been removed from private dwellings.

In April, a source in Turkmenistan told Human Rights Watch that after many residents refused to remove their dishes, in several locations in and around Ashgabat, unidentified people set about

destroying them. In some cases when residents refused to take down their satellite dishes police threatened them with fines or 15 days' administrative detention.

We are aware that the EU raised the issue of the dismantling of satellite dishes with the Turkmen government during the June 17 human rights dialogue. However without strong public action the Turkmen government is unlikely to reconsider its campaign. The government's previous attempts, including in 2007 and 2011, to force people to give up their satellite dishes were ultimately reversed only after international outcry.

The government's reference to aesthetics as grounds to justify the forced removal of satellite dishes is highly dubious. Authorities have forced the removal of satellite dishes in large cities—where the sheer number of satellite dishes on multi-story buildings can in some cases block the view of the building itself—and rural areas alike, where it is difficult to justify forcing the removal of a satellite dish on a stand alone, one-story home. More importantly, the proliferation of satellite dishes reflects widespread public dissatisfaction with the highly censored news and entertainment otherwise available in Turkmenistan and the persistent denial of the right to freedom of information.

This is the third time in four years that the government has sought to force people to abandon satellite television, and as noted above, an earlier government attempt in 2007 to dismantle satellite dishes failed due to an international outcry. Therefore we urge you to call on the Turkmen government, in your bilateral relationship and in multilateral fora, to immediately end this campaign and respect the right to freedom of information in Turkmenistan.

Sincerely,

Farid Tukhbatullin – Turkmen Initiative for Human Rights (TIHR)

Tinatin Tsertsvadze – International Partnership for Human Rights (IPHR)

Denis Krivosheev – Amnesty International

Ivar Dale – Norwegian Helsinki Committee

Kate Watters – Crude Accountability

Yuri Dzhibladze – Centre for the Development of Democracy and Human Rights

Rachel Denber – Human Rights Watch