

The OSCE Centre in Ashgabad: The Way Ahead

Central Asia and Turkmenistan

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Central Asia, with its rich energy resources, has become a unique geostrategic region in the heart of Eurasia, between Europe, Russia, and China. Facing various threats to regional security and development, Central Asian states are challenged to define their foreign policy priorities and their means and spheres of regional co-operation.

Located at the crossroads of civilizations, trade, transport, and communication routes, and surrounded by political turbulence and dynamic economic opportunities, Turkmenistan occupies a special position in this geopolitically important region.

Turkmenistan's total area is 488,100 sq km, with desert covering some 90 per cent. The country's lifeline is the Amu Darja river. According to official figures, the population is more than six million, although this figure is widely disputed. The country has a young population and a high birth rate, with 40 per cent of people under 15 years of age. Half of all the population of Turkmenistan live in rural areas. Human settlements are concentrated along the southern, southeastern, and northeastern borders, while the vast central, northwestern, and northern areas are virtually uninhabited. Turkmenistan's ethnic structure is less diverse than many of the Central Asian states; ethnic Turkmen comprise more than 80 per cent of the population. Traditional tribal and territorial community allegiances are still strong.

Since the first year of its independence, Turkmenistan has taken its own unique path of development. Despite the surrounding political instability in the region, Turkmenistan managed to preserve stability in the country and "avoid many of the troubles that have afflicted other former Soviet republics of Central Asia".¹

As an independent state, Turkmenistan became a member of a number of international and regional organizations, such as the UN system, the OSCE, the Organization of the Islamic Conference, the World Bank, IMF, EBRD, ECO, and NATO's Partnership for Peace Programme.

On 12 December 1995, the United Nations General Assembly unanimously recognized Turkmenistan's status of permanent neutrality. Since that date, the concept of permanent neutrality has been the guiding principle of the country's security policy. Turkmenistan avoids political and military alliances, giving bilateral relations priority.

1 Rory Mulholland, Turkmenistan Relishes Neutral Status, in: *The Los Angeles Times*, 14 October 2001.

During the years of independence, Turkmenistan has made significant progress. The country's economy has grown steadily, with particular progress in the development of the oil and gas, textile, and construction sectors. By providing free gas, electricity, and water to all citizens and maintaining low prices for communal services, transport, and basic foodstuffs, the government ensures a relatively high level of social security and stability. Yet the country faces many problems, such as drug trafficking, a lack of the rule of law, slow progress in democratization, corruption, and human rights violations.

Turkmenistan and the OSCE

The OSCE was the first organization to show a genuinely strong interest in the Central Asian region after the five Central Asian countries, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, became independent. In becoming participating States of the OSCE, the Central Asian countries explicitly subscribed to its principles and common values, and agreed to apply all commitments and responsibilities deriving from OSCE documents. The Central Asian states made a determined pro-democratic and pro-reform choice and pledged to act in their politics and practices accordingly. In return, they wanted the OSCE to support their reform and transformation processes, including the mobilization of funds for development assistance, and, in particular, the provision of additional guarantees of their independence, sovereignty, territorial integrity, security, and stability funds.

In 1992, in its first year of independence, Turkmenistan, along with the other former Soviet republics in Central Asia, recognized the Helsinki Final Act and other CSCE commitments, and thus became an OSCE participating State even before joining the UN.

In July 1998, the OSCE Permanent Council decided to establish a permanent presence in Ashgabad in order to intensify co-operation between Turkmenistan and the OSCE. In December 1998, a Memorandum of Understanding on the establishment of an OSCE Centre in Ashgabad was signed by the OSCE and the government of Turkmenistan, and in January 1999 the OSCE Centre in Ashgabad commenced its activities.

The mandate of the OSCE Centre in Ashgabad calls for it to assist the host country in implementing OSCE principles and commitments, and to promote the co-operation of Turkmenistan with the OSCE in all spheres of activities. The Centre's mandate also includes establishing and maintaining contacts with local authorities, universities, and other institutions of higher education and research as well as with non-governmental organizations. Facilitating contacts between Turkmenistan and OSCE authorities and institutions and organizing visits by high-ranking OSCE representatives to Turk-

menistan comprise another important aspect of the Centre's activities.² Practice has shown that such visits are of great use in terms of advancing the understanding of the role of the OSCE and promoting co-operation with the host country.

Since its opening, the OSCE Centre in Ashgabad has assisted Turkmenistan in translating OSCE commitments and values into concrete policy. The Centre's activities focus on promoting regional co-operation, strengthening border security, combating terrorism and trafficking in arms, drugs, and human beings; establishing the framework for the transition to a market economy; raising public awareness of environmental issues; promoting the rule of law and human rights; and strengthening the development of civil society. The Centre established and maintains close co-operation with international presences and organizations.

For the time being, the Centre's staff encompasses six international and nine national staff members. The Head of the Centre is Ambassador Ibrahim Djikic from Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The Current Political Situation in Turkmenistan

On 21 December 2006, President Saparmurat Niyazov, the country's first leader since independence and president for life since 1999, died.

Immediately after President Niyazov's death, the Security Council and the Cabinet of Ministers appointed the long standing Vice Chairperson of the Cabinet of Ministers (overseeing education, science, health, information, tourism, and culture) Gurbanguly Berdimuhammedov acting president and convoked the *Halk Maslahaty* (people's council), Turkmenistan's supreme constitutional body, in order to schedule presidential elections. The transition of power went smoothly, and the situation in the country remained calm and stable.

On 11 February 2007, six candidates selected by the *Halk Maslahaty* contested Turkmenistan's first multi-candidate presidential elections. Acting President Berdimuhammedov received 89.23 per cent of the votes and was sworn in on 14 February. The OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) sent an Election Support Team of eleven experts to enhance the Centre's capacity to follow the elections. The Election Support Team was present in all five regions and in the capital in the lead-up to the poll and on election day itself. Members of a delegation from the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly, who had visited the country for consultations with the acting head of the *Mejlis* (assembly), Akdja Nurberdiyeva, and were still in the country on election day, were also permitted to visit a number of polling

2 Cf. Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, Permanent Council, 179th Plenary Meeting, PC Journal No. 179, Agenda item 4, *Decision No. 244*, PC.DEC/244 of 23 July 1998 on the establishment of the OSCE Centre in Ashgabad.

stations. The task of the ODIHR Election Support Team was not to observe in the official sense, but rather to collect information on the elections process in Turkmenistan. The willingness of the authorities to accept an expert team demonstrated a new degree of openness. Together with Turkmenistan's authorities and the Centre's staff, the team identified possible areas of future cooperation. Minimum conditions with regard to the campaign and election process and compliance with ODIHR election observation methodology would have to be established in order for future ODIHR observation activities to be undertaken. ODIHR conducted a preliminary assessment of the law on presidential elections adopted by the *Halk Maslahaty* on 26 December 2006 and stands ready to extend its technical support in bringing election-related legislation in line with existing commitments and methodology.

President Berdimuhammedov embarked on a government programme based loosely on the policy of late President Niyazov and in line with Turkmenistan's policy of permanent neutrality, but which also addresses areas in need of reform and development. He set the following priorities:

- agricultural, educational, healthcare, and social reforms (including increased internet access);
- developing infrastructure, the textile and food industries, and the oil and gas sector; and
- enhancing legal protections for citizens.

Immediately after assuming office, the new president began focusing on reforming the social and educational systems. In March 2007, parliament adopted a new social security code that aims to improve the pension and state benefit system. Pensions that were cut in January 2006 were re-established and minimum pensions were introduced as of 1 July 2007. State and social benefits are also to be increased. The period of education in secondary schools was increased from nine to ten years, and at institutions of higher education from four to five years. The subjects of physical education and social sciences are being reintroduced in the curriculum.

Since Berdimuhammedov took office, Turkmenistan has demonstrated increased openness and expressed willingness to intensify dialogue and cooperation with international organizations such as the UN, the OSCE, and the EU. In his meeting with the OSCE Chairman-in-Office, President Berdimuhammedov stated that Turkmenistan fully supports OSCE assistance, especially in important elections, but also in areas such as border management, combating drugs, legislation reform, and administrative capacity building. The growing number of Turkmenistani participants in OSCE events and the country's initiative to host the preparatory conference of the OSCE's Economic Forum demonstrates its increasing interest in the OSCE.

The Centre's Activities

Since the OSCE Centre in Ashgabad opened in 1999, its activities have significantly expanded in variety and scope. In close co-operation with Turkmenistan's government and international donors, the Centre carries out numerous projects that fall under its mandate and meet the country's needs.

Politico-Military Dimension

Confidence and Security Building and Regional Co-operation

Turkmenistan has gradually increased its co-operation in the area of confidence- and security-building measures. Turkmenistan has participated in the annual exchange of military information and in the inspection and evaluation regime established by the Vienna Document on Confidence- and Security-Building Measures.

As part of the OSCE Centre in Ashgabad's programme on "Promoting confidence and security building in Central Asia", the Centre organizes workshops on identifying and tracking small arms and light weapons and on combating the illicit arms trade. The threat stemming from man portable air defence systems (MANPADS) has also been addressed in this context. The Centre initiated the translation of the Handbook on Small Arms and Light Weapons and the Vienna Document into the Turkmen language to ensure greater dissemination and comprehension.

The Centre facilitates the participation of Turkmenistan's representatives in OSCE events on confidence and security building. The participation of two representatives of Turkmenistan's defence ministry in the regional workshop on confidence building and regional co-operation through mine action, which took place in Almaty in March 2007, was a good opportunity for the representatives of Turkmenistan's armed forces – which have destroyed all anti-personnel mines – to share their experience on the implementation of the Ottawa Convention on the ban of landmines with their colleagues from Central Asia and the South Caucasus.

Border Security and Border Management

Strengthening border security and improving border management is another area of active co-operation between Turkmenistan and the international donor community. The Centre assists Turkmenistan in strengthening border security through technical support and training.

Examples of such co-operation include the organization of practical training events for mid-level law enforcement personnel on integrated border management at Turkmenbashy airport and ferry terminal and at the Farap border crossing point on the Turkmen-Uzbek border.

In co-operation with EU TACIS, the Centre organized English language and basic computer training courses for state customs personnel from Ash-

gabad and the regions. By the end of 2006, nearly 300 customs officials had been trained. The courses are continuing. Recently, customs officials who had successfully passed the basic computer courses developed a computer-based customs clearance programme that will reduce waiting time at border crossing points.

Anti-Terrorism Issues

Turkmenistan's authorities do not see an immediate threat of home-grown or foreign terrorism or extremism. They are, however, interested in OSCE activities in the field of anti-terrorism.

In 2004, the Centre organized a seminar that focused on the global fight against terrorism. The training event on border management also addressed techniques for preventing terrorist acts, which caused a lively interest among the participants from law enforcement agencies and the judiciary. In addition, the Centre facilitated the participation of six police officers from Turkmenistan in the OSCE regional project on strengthening regional co-operation among law enforcement canine services in Central Asia to combat organized crime and terrorism more effectively, which was organized by the OSCE Project Co-ordinator in Uzbekistan. The four-month training programme, which began in May 2007, was aimed at improving practical and theoretical skills of dog handlers and training tracker dogs to find explosive devices and weapons, apprehend armed criminals, and release hostages during counter-terrorist operations. In November 2007, the Centre conducted a workshop for security officials on fighting terrorism and safeguarding fundamental rights.

Combating Drugs

Drug abuse and drug-related crimes continue to be significant problems for Turkmenistan. The Centre supports efforts to combat drug abuse and drug trafficking through workshops and practical training both in the country and abroad. Previous training events were highly appreciated by Turkmenistan's authorities, and the Centre's experts are well-regarded by other donors. In July, the Centre implemented three three-day practical training courses for border and customs officials at border crossing points on the Turkmen-Iranian border.

Policing

With its unique experience in policing, the OSCE can provide valuable assistance to Turkmenistan's police force, which faces serious challenges, such as crime, corruption, arbitrariness, and a lack of confidence in the police on the part of citizens. To assist Turkmenistan in restoring people's confidence in the police and raising the level of professionalism of police officers, the Centre, in co-operation with the Turkish Police Academy in Ankara, organized two one-week training courses in community policing, one in 2006 and another in 2007.

Economic and Environmental Dimension

Promoting Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises

Promoting small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) is one of the Centre's key activities within the economic and environmental dimension. The Centre addresses economic development through activities focused on the mechanisms of a market economy and the development of private entrepreneurship and tourism. The programme includes a series of lectures on the global economy and international economic relations, as well as on global financial markets and international finance, the publication of a four-volume collection of domestic law for entrepreneurs, and the development of a curriculum for entrepreneurs and a business simulation class for interactive methods of learning and practical business management. To contribute to higher education in the field of economics and business, the Centre plans to support the development of resource centres and training activities that enable young entrepreneurs to navigate the legal and institutional obstacles.

Since early 2004, the Centre, in co-operation with EU TACIS, has supported a revolving micro-credit fund for voluntary farmers' associations. The project has helped six associations to create economic opportunities in rural areas, such as a citrus greenhouse and a cheese factory.

In 2006, the Centre supported the training of about 200 young people from Ashgabad and the regions in taking advantage of employment opportunities, career building, and tourism management. More than half of the participants found a job in the tourism sector after having received the training, and some of them were granted an internship in the tourism services sector.

The Centre responded to Turkmenistan's interest in tourism development by supporting a study tour for employees of the Ancient Merv Archaeological Park to the United Kingdom and supporting the publication of a tourist brochure about the ancient site of Merv. It also plans to assist the country in developing community-based tourism (CBT) models, which will help citizens to generate income and establish small enterprises. In addition, as Turkmenistan is interested in developing its Caspian coastline, the Centre may contribute to a conference or training event aimed at the developing the tourism industry in this area.

Environmental Activity

Under its programme on environmental protection, the Centre supports the implementation of the National Environmental Action Plan (NEAP). The Centre supported the NEAP Resource Centre and the publication of environmental monthly bulletins, and facilitated the participation of an environmental journalist in the International Environmental TV Festival. The Centre also equipped and refurbished resource centres in Ashgabad and Mary and supported a series of environmental summer camps organized in co-operation with the municipality of Khazar on the Caspian Sea.

Human Dimension

In the human dimension, the Centre offers regular legal consultations to individuals, who have raised issues ranging from acts of torture, denial of freedom of movement, and the absence of due process to eviction without proper compensation and harassment of minority and religious groups. The Centre, through legal consultation and the drafting of appeals to courts, has helped to obtain the release of unfairly sentenced persons, assisted individuals in exiting the country, and more generally helped citizens gain access to their rights. The Centre has also helped a number of individuals to address the State Commission for Consideration of Citizens' Complaints Regarding the Activities of Law-enforcement Agencies established by the new government in February 2007.

The Centre offers OSCE legal expertise and advice on best practices for the country's legislative reform. Co-operation in this sphere is expected to develop substantially, specifically in the sphere of electoral and criminal justice reform.

Human Rights

In co-operation with Turkmenistan's National Institute for Democracy and Human Rights, the Centre organizes regular seminars on international human rights standards for law enforcement personnel, legislators, judges, and prosecutors. Specific seminars on human rights standards related to arrest, detention, and the right to defence were held throughout 2006 and 2007. In addition, a course on international law and human rights was organized at the Turkmen State University for students of the International Law department, and in 2007, a seminar on international standards for democratic relations was organized for domestic elections observers.

Civil Society

The Centre facilitates the participation of civil society representatives in conferences, seminars, and workshops abroad. Turkmen citizens and officials participated in the OSCE supplementary human dimension meeting on upholding the rule of law and freedom of association and assembly in Warsaw, and in the working group on education organized by the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities in Astana. In addition, the Centre supports a number of health and reproductive rights centres across the country and summer camps for young people that aim to promote their active participation in public life and the development of Turkmenistan.

Education

The Centre supports English language and computer courses delivered to employees working in the fields of education, healthcare, transport, engineering,

and administration in Ashgabad and in all the provinces of Turkmenistan. The programme complements the EU TACIS Tempus programme and aims to strengthen the professionalism of state officials and help them communicate effectively with the international community.

The Centre pays special attention to youth education and development. It supports the operation of five resource centres where computer, English classes, and training courses on various topics (gender, leadership, writing and journalism skills, healthy lifestyles) are held. More than 1,000 individuals have so far participated in these activities. The publication of a trilingual teacher's aid and methodology training manual, a resource book for teachers of English as a foreign language, and brochures on HIV/AIDS and drug abuse complement these activities.

The Centre delivers presentations across the country on the OSCE Academy in Bishkek and contributes to the academy's master's programme by facilitating the applications of local candidates.

The Centre's Information Unit, which opened its doors in February 2006, provides information on OSCE principles, commitments, activities, and related research, as well as computer and internet access. It receives about 300 visits from ordinary citizens, scholars, and researchers from Ashgabad and the regions each month. The Information Unit also organizes training events, round tables, discussions, and presentations on political, economic, environmental, and human rights issues ranging from freedom of the media to gender issues and domestic violence.

Summary and Prospects

In more than 15 years, Turkmenistan and the OSCE have come a long way. There is still much to do – the OSCE and Turkmenistan must continue to work intensively to promote steady progress towards political and economic reforms, and democratic transformation, as well as ensuring security, stability, and well-being in the country and the region.

In the future, the Centre will continue to focus on establishing a platform for the exchange of experience and knowledge between Turkmenistan and other OSCE participating States, and expanding its co-operation with government institutions and civil society representatives in order to promote Turkmenistan's full implementation of OSCE commitments. In the Centre's programmatic activities, special emphasis will be placed on such areas as the rule of law, education, environmental awareness, SME development, policing, and combating drug use and trafficking. Programme activities which attract the greatest interest and are especially successful will be continued and extended. The Centre welcomes important initial steps undertaken by Turkmenistan to increase its openness with the international community and begin the process of reform in a number of key areas, and offers its support to this

reform process and the intensified dialogue and co-operation with the OSCE and OSCE institutions. It is hoped that Turkmenistan will make full use of the available opportunities to co-operate with the OSCE in various spheres of mutual interest and concern.