Online civic activism in politically restricted space: case study on Turkmenistan

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Summary

In 2020, Turkmen citizens abroad staged a record number of peaceful demonstrations demanding socio-economic and political reforms. This study analyzes the online dimension of this surge in protest activism, specifically the use of social media for dynamizing offline protests and disrupting hegemonic narratives of the ruling regime online. The study identified that social media played a crucial role in shaping initial motivations for protest actions, improving its "visibility", mobilizing and coordinating actions, contributing to mutual assistance and support, and raising the interest of Turkmen citizens, both abroad and at home, in politics-focused content. The research also identified a set of structural and conditional factors that constrain the opposition movement's outreach to the domestic audience, and as a consequence, limit its possibilities for articulating, mobilizing, and networking anti-government protests at home.

Introduction

In 2020, Turkmen citizens abroad staged a record number of peaceful demonstrations demanding socio-economic and political reforms and the resignation of president G. Berdimuhamedov and the government. Collective public displays of discontent with local authorities over grave social problems and "silent" forms of political protest were also recorded in Turkmenistan itself, despite the overall repressive political environment.

While this wave of protest activism took the government by surprise, it attests to deepening frustrations over inequality, wider socioeconomic hardships, and the government's blatant disregard for the plight of people that had been boiling up in the Turkmen society in the preceding several years. Moreover, the surge in Turkmen political activism is not an isolated process as it occurs in the context of budding grassroots social activism throughout Central Asia. The societies in the region are becoming more pluralistic, reflecting the proliferation of an array of new voices seeking greater accountability and transparency from their governments. Lacking access to formal political processes, these groups are finding alternative, non-institutionalized channels through which to mobilize around causes and convey their grievances and interests.[1]

The multifaceted and complex character of this development is reflected in the fact that not all of these groups support Western-style democracy and political and social liberalization. There is an identified growth of conservative, nationalist-populist, and alt-right groups in the region. To illustrate, in 2020, alt-right groups in Kazakhstan launched a massive information campaign to discredit the proposed bill on countering domestic violence. The groups used cyber-bullying tactics, spread false and manipulative information about the bill, and its alleged consequences for traditional values, labeling the so-called "Western" values and gender equality as threatening developments (Azhigulova, 2021). In neighboring Kyrgyzstan, the supporters of populist Sadyr Japarov ensured his rise to power amidst a governance crisis that ensued from the fraudulent elections in October 2020. This group turned the country's social media into a medium for nationalist mobilization, intimidated and harassed

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[1] See, for example, The Nazarbayev Generation: Youth in Kazakhstan, ed. Marlene Laruelle (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2019); Daniyar Kosnazarov, "#Hashtag Activism: Youth, Social Media and Politics in Kazakhstan," CAP Paper #217, The George Washington University, Washington, DC, 2019; Sergey Marinin, "Agents of Change? Civic Engagement of Western-Educated Youth in Kazakhstan," CAP Paper #222, The George Washington University, Washington, DC, 2019; Nafissa Insebayeva, "Choosing Your Battles: Different Languages of Kazakhstani Youth Activism," CAP Paper #226, The George Washington University, Washington, DC, 2020; Paul Stronski, Russel Zanca, "Societal Change Afoot in Central Asia," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, October 18, 2019

pro-liberal activists during anti-corruption and feminist marches in Bishkek, and supported Japarov's constitutional efforts to return Kyrgyzstan to a super-presidential system (Baialieva, Kutmanaliev, 2021).

Turkmen civic and political activism has far more constrained opportunities to influence domestic developments in comparison to similar groups in other Central Asian states. The country's political system provides no space for political pluralism and even mild criticism of the government's actions and does not create even minimal preconditions for the emergence of an independent civil society. As a result, independent activists are forced to operate from exile, using the online space as the primary instrument to convey their messages to the domestic public. The wave of anti-government demonstrations gave these groups a viable opportunity to expand their outreach and strengthen the support base, improve strategies, and bridge efforts into a unified front.

These considerations guided this study to analyze the online dimension of the budding protest activism, specifically the use of social media platforms for dynamizing offline protests and disrupting hegemonic narratives of the ruling regime online. Given the study's interest in examining the capacity of these groups to lay the foundation for transformative societal changes in the country, the research also critically examines their role as facilitators of democratic norms and practices. It specifically looks at how these groups define and debate these notions in the context of socio-political developments in Turkmenistan, and how they convey these values to the public. The analysis also identifies a set of structural and conditional factors that restrict these groups' outreach to the domestic audience, and as a consequence, limit their possibilities for articulating, mobilizing, and networking anti-government protests at home.

For sake of clarity, independent civil society is understood herein as various forms of a civic organization that seek to hold the government to account, limit the power of the state, "[…] provide a venue for disempowered groups to voice their concerns, […] and serve as a check against the misappropriation of power by monitoring and publicizing governmental "abuses" of authority" (Sullivan, 250-251, 2015) through collective and individual online and offline actions. Such conceptualization, although with its limitations, best captures the diversity of actors that constitute the Turkmen protest movement in the context of this study. Furthermore, the focus on the objectives of such groups rather than their structure helps to better understand how the Turkmen government decides on which civil society groups to allow and which to discriminate against.

This study uses different methodological tools for its two main parts – background and analysis. The study relies on secondary sources and content analysis to provide sufficient background information on the state of civil society in Turkmenistan as well as the government's policy pursuits that triggered the offline protest activism in 2020. The secondary sources used for the study include scholarly articles and book chapters, interviews, media texts, and reports by

international organizations, non-governmental organizations, and human rights groups.

For the analysis, this study applied covert observations made across various online Turkmen-speaking communities, combined with content analysis of information produced and shared via these channels, focusing on video content. At the initial stage, the author traced the developments on the researched subject from the following sources: Azatlyk (Russian), Radio Free Europe's Turkmen Service (English), Hronika Turkmenistana (Russian), and Turkmen.news (Russian) covering the period from April 1, 2020, to November 1, 2021. These sources were selected because of their reputability regarding the coverage of developments in and around Turkmenistan.

This tracing helped to identify the main cohort of activists, opposition figures, and the channels they use to broadcast their messages. While, initially, the study observed the activity across various platforms, YouTube was eventually selected as the primary focus for the analysis (Table 1 in Appendix). The study analyzed the video materials broadcasted by independent activists via their YouTube channels to identify commonalities and divergences in narratives and topics discussed, understand the peculiarities and internal dynamics of the actors involved in the protest movement, and factors that hinder their further development.

The choice of platform was determined because the majority of activists cross-posted their materials on YouTube, even if originally they had been broadcasted via other platforms. Furthermore, the selection was also determined by the fact that YouTube and other publicly accessible virtual communities have a low barrier for users to access content, which is crucial given the low digital literacy among the majority of Turkmen citizens and age-based gradation across various social media platforms. Hence, such a selection strategy allowed to capture a variety of actors with different levels of social capital and social media usage opportunities and skills. The limitation of this approach is that it does not capture all relevant virtual spaces; thus, whatever results this study yields should be taken with a grain of salt. That being said, the purpose of this study is not to provide a fully comprehensive assessment of the variety of actors within the protest movement and their work online; rather, it aims to look at the bigger picture by exploring the aggregate data, capturing general patterns of political engagement on social media, and finally spur the discussions on a topic that has not been adequately explored in the academic literature so far.

The civil society space in Turkmenistan

Independent civil society organizations and civic and political activism have never thrived in Turkmenistan as a result of the government's rigid posture of intolerance toward any organization or activity that dissents from its agenda and policies. The country's lack of democratic progress is best exemplified by the consistent poor record in virtually all international indexes measuring political and economic freedoms.[2]

Turkmenistan is one of the world's most closed and repressive authoritarian regimes under the rulership of an eccentric strongman. Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov, the country's president, maintains a hyper-centralized power vertical with himself at the apex, enjoying an unchallenged authority and personality cult that reaches bizarre proportions. He determines all political, social, economic, and cultural policies, and personally appoints key post holders at all levels, including members of the government, governors, prosecutors, and judges (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2020). The country's governing institutions are devoid of any real power to influence the decision-making process or provide checks and balances on his authority (Bohr, 2016).

G. Berdimuhamedov strengthens his rule further through pervasive security apparatus that closely monitors the activities of citizens and silences regime critics, defectors, and independent voices that dare to speak out against the government. Furthermore, the president advances the hegemonic position of his family and relatives, and natives from his Ahalteke tribe through informal networks and formal structures. These people comprise the inner circle of the elite and occupy influential posts in the government, management, business, and education, which they use as a source of private income, perpetuating the clientelist and corrupt practices (Crude Accountability, 2021; Freedom House, 2020).

This entrenchment of expansive formal and informal power in the hands of the president, his family and relatives, and personal loyalists, help to explain the regime's intolerance toward independent civic actors, which are viewed as a challenge to the existing opaque and corrupt power structures. This suspicion of and antagonism towards civil society has largely emerged following its important role in protest movements that toppled the authoritarian governments in

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[2] See, for example, Bertelsmann Transformation Index, Freedom House Nations in Transit, Freedom House Freedom in the World, Human Rights Watch World Report, World Press Freedom Index, and others, for the country report on Turkmenistan

Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan in the mid-2000s (Polese, Beacháin, 2011; Berdiqulov, Buriev, & S. Marinin, 2021). The recent rise of protest and civic activism across the post-Soviet space, particularly in Central Asia, its growing popularity at the grassroots levels, and signs of success in pressuring the local governments to address citizens' concerns and grievances (Stronski, Zanca, 2019), entrench this suspicion further.

The government's antagonism is best exemplified by the state-induced hindrances to civil society development, namely restrictive laws and tight state control of activities. The Law on Public Associations contains burdensome requirements, such as the need to: officially register with the Ministry of Justice to conduct any activities, go through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs if cooperating with international organizations, register foreign funding, and have an inordinately high number of founders for registration, etc. It also grants the aforementioned Ministry excessive powers, such as sending representatives to CSOs' events and meetings and requiring CSOs to notify the government about their planned activities. The work of unregistered CSOs is strictly prohibited and is punishable by fine, short-term detention, and confiscation of property (Freedom House, 2018; Bohr, 2016).

The cumbersome registration process and stringent requirements have been used by authorities to discriminate against unfavorable organizations on technical grounds and limit their ability to attract financial and other resources. As a result, most of them either suspended or limited their activities, while very few continued with their work, most often covertly.

The dreary state of the civil society sector in Turkmenistan can be illustrated by the small number of registered organizations; as of 2019, there were only 122 such organizations (U.S. Department of State, 2020). Most of them, however, are government-organized NGOs (GONGOs) or public associations closely affiliated with them. The most prominent of them, such as the Women's Union, the Youth Union, or the National Center of Trade Unions, resemble Communist-era public associations, given their membership size, the scope of declared activities, modus operandi, and lack of institutional autonomy. They receive preferential treatment from the state, such as in the form of funding, because they do not depart from the state agenda and act as a conduit of its interests.

Similar to "pocketed" political parties, these associations are used by the regime to enhance its domestic and international legitimacy, imitating the government's cooperativeness, openness, and a trend toward democratization. Also, these GONGOs help the regime to reinforce its interests in various social strata and absorb potentially disaffected groups, filter the activities or narratives that the authorities regard as unwanted (i.e., violence against women, LGBT issues), and marginalize and weaken non-favored civil society actors.

The very few activists inside the country who publicly criticize the government and its policies, spotlight human rights violations and abuse of power, provide non-biased coverage of events alternative to state propaganda, and jeopardize the authorities-promoted "positive image" of the country have found themselves under constant surveillance and harassment. For instance, Soltan Achilova, a former reporter for RFE/RL's Turkmen Service, was detained by police, physically assaulted, threatened over her journalism, and barred from traveling abroad (Committee to Protect Journalists, 2019). In another case, animal rights activist Galina Kucherenko was physically and psychologically abused and given administrative arrest for documenting the killings of domestic animals by Ashgabat authorities in preparation for the 2017 Asian Indoor and Martial Arts Games (Alternative News of Turkmenistan (ANT), 2017).

There is a considerable number of documented cases, however, in which independent activists and journalists face a much harsher treatment, specifically being imprisoned on trumped-up charges in unfair trials as was, for instance, the case with Saparmamet Nepeskuliyev, Mansur Mingelov, Nurgeldy Khalykov, Pygamberdy Allaberdiyev, and others (Freedom House, 2018; Analytical Center for Central Asia, 2021; International Commission of Jurists, 2020).

Due to highly restrictive conditions, independent activists have been forced to emigrate and work in exile. These activists can be categorized into three broad clusters: journalists, human rights advocates, and political opposition. This categorization does not suggest a strict delineation between them as many groups conduct activities covering more than one area, for instance: the Turkmen Initiative for Human Rights (TIHR) which mainly focuses on writing reports on the human rights situation in the country also manages Hronika Turkmenistana (Chronicle of Turkmenistan) news website; similarly, the human rights organization Rights and Freedoms of Turkmenistan Citizens also manages the Turkmen Yurt TV website and YouTube channel, which serve as both news coverage outlet and political platform. Overall, the human rights groups have become the most visible segment of the Turkmen civil society, also in the online space, playing a crucial role in informing the international community and Turkmen public (both inside and outside the country) of the reality on the ground.

Regarding the political opposition, up until 2020, it was predominantly represented by middle- and senior-aged former government officials and the intelligentsia, many of whom had fled the country after falling out of favor with the regime. Some of them organized political movements, such as the Republican Party of Turkmenistan (Nurmuhammet Hanamov) and Hereket (Akmuhammet Bayhanov), and even expressed interest in participating in elections in Turkmenistan following S. Nyýazov's death (Sikorskaya, 2011). Regardless, these political platforms always remained rather "virtual"; lacking unity, coordination, clear strategies, and well-established networks inside the country, the opposition's impact on domestic political processes has been negligible.

The triggers of Turkmen protest activism in 2020-2021

The first waves of protests were provoked by two immediate concerns: the government's incompetent response to the COVID-19 pandemic and its implications, and a similarly inadequate response to the natural disaster in the Lebap and Mary regions in April 2020. These issues attested to deepening frustrations over inequality and wider socioeconomic hardships that had been building up in the society in the preceding several years.

Since 2015, Turkmenistan has been in the grip of one of the worst economic and financial crises in its independent history. The combined impact of a drastic drop in export prices for hydrocarbons, decreased export volumes due to losing customers, and massive public spending on vanity projects exposed the vulnerabilities of the country's misbalanced and ineffective economy, rigidly controlled by the state and overdependent on the export of fossil fuels.

The pervasive corruption, clientelism, nepotism, incompetence, and opaque and arbitrary decision-making guided by the self-interest of the inner elite exacerbated the situation further. As was mentioned earlier, Turkmenistan is practically a "family-run" business; the inner elite benefits from its privileged position, perpetuating opaque and clientelist practices. To illustrate, despite the significant drop in revenues, the government continued splashing public funds on large-scale construction projects with inflated budgets so the members of the elite could siphon off funds and redistribute the spoils among themselves (ANT, 2019; Turkmen.news, 2019).

At the same time, the cash-strained ruling regime cut the government spending on the provision of public goods and services which diminished the living standards of most of the population. The government, for instance, merged ministries and state agencies, cut public sector employees, raised fees for preschools, decreased public subsidies, and imposed strict restrictions on the sales of foreign currency, cash withdrawals, and wire transfers, to name but a few (RadioFreeEurope/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL), 2019; Hug, 2019; Pannier, 2019). In 2018, the government scrapped the free provision of gas, electricity, and water to residents, a policy that served as the basis of a "social contract" since the early 1990s, claiming that such a system was no longer needed because of the citizens' increased income (RFE/RL, 2018).

As a result of the government's misguided policies, Turkmenistan has been plagued with a cascade of socioeconomic hardships: food shortages, rationing,

long lines at state shops, low wages and weakened purchasing power, spiking prices, increasing unemployment, lack of hard domestic cash and foreign currency, and volatile "black market" exchange rate, to name but a few (Pannier, 2019; Human Rights Watch (HRW), 2020). Meanwhile, the government continued to fail at developing discernible policies for poverty alleviation and ensuring food security, identifying disadvantaged groups, and openly acknowledging the existence of poverty, which only deepened the social inequality.

These conditions forced many Turkmen citizens, especially young and qualified, to leave the country in search of a better life. While the exact figure is unknown, some sources claim that around 1,9 million people "left between 2008 and 2018 either for permanent residency abroad or permanent work outside the country" (Najibullah, 2019). The healthcare and education sectors, already suffering from the dearth of well-trained specialists, were hit hardest by this outflow which led to the further deterioration in the quality of provided services (Hronika Turkmenistana, 2019).

In 2020, the government's incompetent response to the COVID-19 epidemic in the country aggravated further the plight of the local population and caused public health emergency.[3] Since the beginning, the authorities' approach has been marked by inconsistencies, questionable tactics, stubborn denial, and attempts to conceal the truth. Initially, the authorities hesitated to impose strict restrictions and sheltering-in-place measures, akin to those of neighboring states, to halt the spread of the disease. Subsequently, the authorities took some preventive steps, such as limiting movements across and within the national borders. The positive effect of these measures was undermined by inconsistencies, such as failing to provide medical workers with adequate protective equipment and enforce adequate safety protocols, keeping certain facilities open (i.e., museums, theaters, schools), organizing mass events to celebrate Novruz and International Health Day that gathered large groups of people together, and, overall, discouraging the mask-wearing and social distancing not to cause "public chaos" (Sikorskaia, 2020; Aytakov, 2020; Dzardanova, 2020).

The government's stubborn reluctance to share detailed and accurate information about the COVID-19 outbreak in the country has been perhaps the most egregious form of misconduct. The government insisted (and still insists) that there were no cases of COVID-19 infections in the country and invested considerable efforts to protect this narrative at any cost. The authorities silenced medical workers and pressured them to cover up cases with coronavirus-like

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[3] This discussion only covers the COVID-19-related developments in Turkmenistan through mid-July 2020 that had a direct impact on provoking the first wave of peaceful protests organized by Turkmen citizens abroad. For further discussion on COVID-19-related developments in Turkmenistan in 2020-2021, see for example Turkmen.news' report, Survival of the Fittest, January 2020-May 2021, https://turkmen.news/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Coronavirus-in-Turkmenistan-Report.pdf

symptoms, intimidated activists and independent reporters who discussed and shared information about the influx of people with acute respiratory conditions and increased mortality rates due to such conditions, and repudiated statements that contradicted the state-endorsed messages communicated through national media (Yaylymova, 2020; International Partnership for Human Rights (IPHR), Turkmen Initiative for Human Rights (TIHR), 2020). In June, for instance, the Foreign Ministry publicly rejected the U.S. Embassy's alert on the coronavirus situation in Turkmenistan, labeling it "fake" and "distorted" (Kashgarian, 2020). The authorities also obstructed the work of the WHO mission to Turkmenistan by delaying its deployment; it was allowed to visit the country only in July when the patients with coronavirus-like symptoms were removed from the facilities the experts were expected to visit (IPHR, TIHR, 2020).

Unlike in neighboring states, the government also did not implement emergency financial measures to compensate citizens for the loss of income caused by the pandemic. Due to closed land and maritime borders, many Turkmens who made their living by selling local or imported goods in neighboring Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan and withdrawing cash there were no longer able to provide for themselves and their families (Dzardanova, 2020). The government also did not take adequate steps to bring back or assist a sizeable group of labor migrants that was stranded in foreign countries and most of whom also lost income due to closed businesses.

On April 27, the Lebap and Mary regions were hit by a hurricane that caused severe damages to the property and the infrastructure and human casualties. The local authorities and the national government failed resoundingly in dealing with this emergency and its aftermath. There were reports that hydrometeorological services informed local authorities, including emergency services, in advance about the coming storm who then failed to inform the public (Radio Azatlyk, 2020). After the hurricane, the authorities hesitated to provide proper relief support and help with repairing. Instead, they focused their efforts on preventing the residents from sharing information that documented the scale of the hurricane's destruction. They shut down communications, including mobile and landline phones and the Internet, and blocked entry to the affected areas. Furthermore, the authorities harassed and detained residents and activists who shared visuals of the damages; independent sources claim that around 60 people were detained, some of whom faced charges (IPHR, TIHR, 2021). At the same time, the government and the national media outlets kept a deafening silence about the disaster, the damages, and the casualties it had caused, all the while Radio Liberty reported about 30 deaths (Denber, 2020).

On May 13, nearly a thousand people, mainly women, and children held a protest by sitting on the main road to express their anger at the government's inaction; the following day, they managed to meet with representatives of the city administration. As a result, the officials pledged to restore public housing at the expense of the state, which was covered by the deductions from the salaries of

public employees in other regions, while providing loans and construction materials at discounted prices to private homeowners (Hronika Turkmenistana, 2020). The authorities also intimidated entrepreneurs and ordinary citizens who tried to help the victims of the hurricane by donating money, food, and clothes, insisting that any help should go through state entities (Radio Azatlyk, 2020). At the same time, the government had sent humanitarian aid to neighboring Uzbekistan, which suffered severe flooding caused by a dam failure in early May, and to Iran, Afghanistan, and Russia's Astrakhan region, to assist them in coping with the coronavirus pandemic (Pannier, 2020), to boost its international image.

Discussion of findings

Visibility of the protest movement, mobilization, and coordination of actions

The initial wave of protests staged by Turkmens abroad in May shows the key role of the internet, namely the positive impact of "horizontal surveillance", in shaping motivations for participation in protests. The large mass of personal footage of the damages caused by the hurricane that seeped abroad via personal social media accounts highlighted the government's misconduct, its unwillingness, and ineptness in dealing with crises, becoming the key trigger for protests and public mobilization abroad. Citizen journalism has similarly been crucial in spotlighting the government's inadequate response to the COVID-19 pandemic, both inside the country and regarding its citizens stranded abroad, fueling the protests further and expanding its agenda. The incident of about 50 Turkmen labor migrants dying in Turkey from tainted alcohol due to the spread of false information that it may prevent contracting novel coronavirus and the Turkmen consulate's unwillingness to help repatriate the bodies back to Turkmenistan became a recurrent theme in many protests as a vivid example of the government's ignorance and failure to help its compatriots in the context of the pandemic.

In this regard, it is important to note the work of independent online media outlets, namely the Chronicle of Turkmenistan, Radio Azatlyk, and Turkmen.news, which amplified these messages through the extensive coverage of developments, including intimidation of citizens and activists who shared the visual materials and information. The outreach of these messages was expanded further along horizontal lines through reshares and the growing number of "news-focused" YouTube channels and accounts in other social media that rebroadcasted news from these sources through text-to-speech generation tools or personal commentary.

The first wave of protests also highlighted the positive power of "connective action" when joint actions were organized without the mobilization and coordination from any formal organization or party. The very first protest involved only a handful of concerned citizens who encouraged fellow compatriots stranded abroad to take it to the streets to voice their grievances and demands. The video of the picket shared via the Chronicle of Turkmenistan YouTube channel generated 75 thousand views, 1,4 thousand "likes", and over 600 comments. In the next few weeks, a series of protests were organized in Northern Cyprus, Turkey, and the USA, which started to gather around 20 to 50 people who did not associate themselves with any specific opposition figure or movement. While the number of participants may seem low, it needs to be noted that the

overwhelming majority of Turkmen citizens, even abroad, have always avoided any kind of protest actions against the regime for fear of retribution from authorities.

That being said, social media turned out to be fundamentally important for creating a sense of the growth of protests or the so-called "visibility effect", including in terms of its geographic spread, and the diversity of participants, which also led to the emergence of online platforms that focused on mobilizing support and coordinating offline actions. New groups in social media, namely "Туркмения- Объединяемся! Birleşeliñ! Unite!" on Facebook, and political movements, such as Democratic Choice of Turkmenistan, were created; also, the protests brought in new voices with diverse backgrounds who were not connected to previously established opposition movements, such as Dursoltan Taganova (former labor immigrant), Nagima Muzapberova (a law student), Annamuhamet Annayev (entrepreneur). These and many other politically engaged individuals, particularly the young, became instrumental in expanding the outreach of protest activism, mobilizing, organizing, and coordinating further offline actions via virtual communities (Figure 1), such as closed Telegram chats, and personal accounts, and spurring public discussions on political topics online.
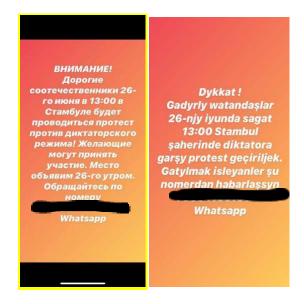

Figure 1. The call to join the protest in Russian and Turkmen languages was shared via Instagram ("Attention! Dear compatriots, on June 26, at 1 pm there will be held a protest against the dictatorial regime. Anyone willing can take part in the protest. The venue will be announced in the early morning of June 26. Please contact the following number on Whatsapp")

The widely shared materials from the protests served another important purpose of setting the agenda of further actions and identifying narratives that reflected the grievances of the local diaspora groups. Though the protests in N. Cyprus, Turkey, and the US had common narratives, such as the pervasive corruption and calls for the resignation of the president and the government, the analysis helped

to identify the differences in their agenda-setting. The protests in the USA centered mainly around political issues and human rights violations, also concerning labor immigrants in Turkey and N. Cyprus. They also targeted not only the Turkmen government but also US policymakers and international bodies, such as the UN and the WHO, to urge them to spotlight the country's failure to uphold its international commitments. The venues of protests reflect this point as demonstrations were held in front of the Turkmen Embassy, the UN and the WHO offices, and the U.S. Congress. In this vein, activists used posters and chants in the English language to convey their messages to the identified audience (Figure 2).

Figure 2. The examples of posters during one of the protests in New York, USA

The protests in N. Cyprus and Turkey, on the other hand, predominantly centered around issues that were of direct concern to Turkmen labor immigrants who were the main force of protests there. The protestors, for instance, outlined the main socioeconomic factors that forced them to leave the country in search of a better life abroad, and expressed dissatisfaction with the work of the Turkmen embassy, which did not prolong passports, organize return flights to Turkmenistan, and assist local diaspora with problems caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, such as loss of employment and income. In the case of immigrants in N. Cyprus, the issue of the government's posture that obstructed people's return to this country for work and forced them to pay hefty bribes to migration officers (Table 2 in Appendix) was one of the main themes at all protest actions.

As can be seen from the examples above, this group sought to achieve some tangible results through collective action by getting Turkmen authorities to least meet them halfway on some of the demands, such as organizing flights back home or helping with prolonging the passports, which did not challenge the general policy of the government. In this vein, these protests shared similarities with open demonstrations in Turkmenistan, where spontaneous protests focused specifically on everyday issues. The protests in Turkey were mainly organized in front of the Turkmen consulate in Istanbul, and predominantly used posters in the Turkmen language (occasionally dubbed in Turkish). As Turkmen authorities'

intimidation of activists intensified in Turkey in late 2020 and 2021, the focus of protests shifted from socioeconomic issues to more radical political demands.

The analysis of online content also identified activists' efforts of developing common symbols and elements of the protest movement and showcasing individuals and groups who provided assistance and support, such as members of the diaspora in need. These efforts aimed at improving societal ties among Turkmens abroad for them to extend beyond personal relationships, and elevating a sense of solidarity, trust, support of the movement, and willingness to help and volunteer. The videos show, for instance, that at later stages, the majority of protestors wore white shirts, often with a crossed portrait of G. Berdymukhamedov. Similarly, "Güm bol, Haramdag!" became a commonly used slogan. The epithet "Haramdag" plays on the president's official title "Arkadag" (which literally means a mountain behind one's back, in other words, a supporter or protector), replacing "arka" (behind) with "haram" meaning something forbidden. "Güm bol!" can be loosely translated as "Get lost!"

The activists also tried to expand these symbols of resistance to Turkmenistan as well; for instance, one of the groups announced that it would carry out street protests of "white shirts" in September 2020; because of poor organization, however, it resulted only in isolated solitary acts. At the same time, the aforementioned slogan appeared on many banknotes and anti-government leaflets inside the country as one of the silent forms of protest (Figure 3). Several YouTube channels also shared video "statements" of ordinary people, both inside and outside the country, who expressed dissatisfaction with the government and stated that they had joined the protest movement.

Figure 3. The examples of anti-government statements on banknotes as a form of protest expression inside Turkmenistan

Regarding the mutual assistance narrative, the online community shared multiple stories of volunteer work, charity, and acts of solidarity. In early May, Turkmen citizens in the US gathered 5,000 US dollars in charity for people who suffered damages caused by the hurricane. Volunteers also found a way to transfer the money to Turkmenistan, however, the local authorities intimidated a person who was supposed to give the money to the victims, threatening him with a prison

sentence (Radio Azatlyk, 2020). This act was matched by similar charity initiatives inside Turkmenistan, as was described in the previous chapter. In Turkey, several individuals, such as Batyr Allaberdyev, carried out initiatives that provided help to Turkmen labor migrants who suffered from the loss of jobs and income. Also, ordinary people in Turkey helped bury around 50 Turkmens who had died because of alcohol poisoning, as was mentioned above.

In sum, during the first months of protests, social media proved to be instrumental in dynamizing offline protest actions. It helped attract new followers and expanded the audience of opposition platforms, and those generally interested in politics-focused content and public discussions in Turkmen, establishing new venues for the exchange of ideas. It also helped in mobilizing and coordinating protest activities, showcasing stories of mutual assistance and support, contributing to the strengthening of social ties, and bringing in new voices and perspectives. In the following months, as the offline protest activism started to decline due to quarantine restrictions imposed by local authorities, mainly in Turkey, the social media replaced the streets as being the main venue of protests and political debates to keep the momentum going.

The online dimension of protest activism

The surge of offline protest activism generated considerable demand for politics-focused content in the Turkmen-speaking online community, which led to the mushroom growth of accounts and virtual communities across various platforms that produced and rebroadcasted a variety of such content. They took forms of humorous (sarcastic) content, news bulletins, personal interpretation (analysis) of events, political debates, political programs of specific movements, discussions on issues involving direct engagement from viewers, and roundtables with protest activists, independent journalists, and members of the political opposition and intelligentsia (see Table 1 in Appendix).

The analysis identified the tendency of rapidly and unpredictably changing dynamics in the popularity of content produced by specific YouTube channels and their general audience; meaning, while channels were able to establish their support base exemplified by the number of subscribers, the viewership rates across channels have demonstrated (often dramatic) upward and downward trajectory. This finding corresponds to Vitaly Ponomarev's general assessment of the 2020 protest wave:

"There were new people who ran their channels. These channels have experienced *leaps and bounds in the audience, pull, and churn*. Today, everyone rushed to watch some person, then another appeared - some switched to a new leader, then another one appeared, and so on" (Kozyreva, 2020).

In a similar vein, Farid Tukhbatullin, founder and director of the Turkmen Initiative for Human Rights (TIHR) that runs the Chronicle of Turkmenistan media outlet,

explained these dynamics by drawing parallels with the Soviet perestroika period and its *glasnost* policy reform:

"It reminds me of perestroika times when it was possible to print a lot, and many people started to read everything in a row indiscriminately, that is, everything that had been previously forbidden (note, by the Soviet authorities) must be read […] now, it all happens again in some form on the Internet […] people who were able to bypass the authorities' filters and got access to social media *to read everything about everything, and everything is of an interest to them*" (Radio Azatlyk, 2020).

The volatile viewership (popularity) dynamics can be attributed not only to indiscriminate consumption of such content on the part of the viewers and individual attitudes towards specific opposition actors but also to the "focus" of the content and its quality. As was mentioned earlier, the protest movement brought in new faces who did not have prior ties to opposition platforms, and political or civic activist backgrounds. On the positive, such "diversification" expanded the outreach of the protest movement, including in the online space, as new activists introduced new platforms, such as Telegram and Tik Tok, and modes of communication with viewers, such as "talks" with feedback (questions and comments) options via live streams.

These developments have spurred further interest in politics-related discussions as they allowed the audience to become directly engaged, expressing their personal opinions and debating them not only with "hosts" of streams but also with other viewers. It needs to be noted though that this "diversification" has also resulted in the age-based gradation of the audience; as independent observers note, new online platforms and blogging activists attracted mainly followers among the youth, while older generations preferred sticking to more familiar social networks, such as Odnoklassniki (Radio Azatlyk, 2020). YouTube remained a popular site across different groups, which explains why activists reposted their videos from various platforms and also held live streams on this site.

On the downside, the diversity in voices did not lead to the same level of diversity in topics and narratives discussed. The analysis identified that the overwhelming majority of videos across channels (re)broadcasted similar messages content-wise. While they touched upon a range of issues, the discussions predominantly centered around the "anti-regime" narrative, namely the criticism of the president, his relatives, and the political elite. In general, the content lacked analytical depth and breadth when discussing the sociopolitical and socioeconomic problems in the country, "oversimplifying" their causes and further developments. Also, the analyzed channels and their content heavily relied on emotive language to evoke a certain response from the viewers, including through the use of derogatory epithets and remarks (the usage frequency varied across channels). Overall, these findings confirm the assessment of independent

observers who similarly pointed out the low quality of content and professionalism among many blogging activists (Radio Azatlyk, 2020).

While such an approach may resonate with the audience and (overall) align with the objectives of the protest movement, it has its disadvantages both for the activists and the general public. First, as was mentioned earlier, it leads to the volatile dynamics in viewership as the audience shifts from channel to channel in search of reliable and qualified information. Second, the focus on the "anti-regime" narrative in its broad sense leaves certain important topics out of public discussions; for instance, there is an acute dearth of content covering gender equality-, minority- (religious, sexual, ethnic, etc.), education-, ecology-related issues and developments, and many others. The analysis, for instance, could identify only one YouTube channel that claims to be focusing on gender-related topics; even so, the channel has very low visibility (subscribers, views) and only a small number of videos on the matter.

Furthermore, even when such issues enter the public discussion domain, they are not analyzed in their own right but are eventually used as a contextual background for the "anti-regime" narrative. Third, the low-quality content also makes the public susceptible to intentional and non-intentional disinformation and misleading messages. The analysis, for instance, identified that no less than four channels have several videos that rely on information not backed by real evidence, such as about the near-collapse of the ruling regime or spreading rumors about the death of the president. Needless to say, such "clickbait" tactics diminish the credibility of activists and do not contribute to nurturing a well-informed and engaged public.

Theme-wise, the "news" content was dominant across groups and platforms in terms of volume and variety. These materials usually featured information from independent sources, such as the Chronicle of Turkmenistan, Turkmen.news, Radio Azatlyk, and some others; in some instances, presented content defined anonymous "insiders" as sources of information. The delivery and the quality of the content varied dramatically across channels; channels that were established as online political platforms produced videos of greater professional quality and offered a comparatively more complex analysis, compared to individual activists who usually discussed "news" via live streams, often with inputs from the public via questions-answers mode, or short pre-recorded video messages with personal commentary.

The former groups also often hosted live streams of roundtables with activists and experts who shared their insights on the discussed matter. Such roundtables and group meetings were usually held to discuss major political developments in and around Turkmenistan, as was, for instance, the case with the then-upcoming Halk Maslahaty meeting in September 2020 where the amendments to the Constitution were adopted. The roundtable discussed how these changes would affect the further political dynamics, namely the hereditary power transition in

Turkmenistan, and its impact on the protest movement. Also, such live streams often involved discussions related to further steps of protest activism and repressions against the activists.

Following the findings of the research, it can be argued that former members of the political opposition, as well as newly-emerged opposition actors who were able to self-organize into ad-hoc online communities, have benefited the most from the surge of offline activism; they were able to attract new followers, expand their support base, and reignite interest in their activities, de-facto becoming the opposition community leaders who determined the character and the flow of information, at least in the online milieux.

Factors hindering the impact of the Turkmen online activism on domestic developments

Thus far, the surge in offline and online protest activism among Turkmens abroad has not generated the same level of political and civic activism at home. In the past few years, the protest activism in Turkmenistan has taken two forms: the "silent" forms of expressing dissatisfaction with the regime (i.e., spreading anti-government leaflets and banknotes with political messages), and isolated and sporadic protest actions that focused on specific everyday issues of direct concern to residents.

The latter targeted provincial and local authorities and were devoid of any political messaging that challenged the general policy of the government. They, for instance, focused on increased fees and rising prices for many essential goods, shortages of flour and cooking oil, and other foodstuffs, shortages of cash at local ATMs available for withdrawal, etc. (IPHR, TIHR, 2021). Given the absence of any political demands, the authorities responded to such public displays of dissatisfaction with a bundle of conciliatory and intimidating measures.

These developments indicate that the pressure in society has been on the rise and that people are becoming more aware of the power of collective actions. Nonetheless, there is no reliable evidence suggesting the emergence of deeper structural changes at the grassroots levels and shifting habitual practices; meaning, there is no indication that the public, in general, is willing and able to channel its dissatisfaction into meaningful political messages demanding (democratic) reforms. Similarly, there is a lack of reliable evidence suggesting that opposition platforms in exile are gaining traction at home and facilitating the cultivation of such practices, despite their claims.

That being said, this study identifies two sets of factors, structural and conditional, that restrict the opposition in exile's outreach to the domestic audience, and as a consequence, limit its possibilities for articulating, mobilizing, and networking protests at home. Structural factors include the ruling regime's tight control of the civil society space and the media environment and the heavy repression of activists and their relatives at home and abroad. Conditional factors

include shortcomings within the protest movement itself, such as limited resources, weak institutionalization, fragmentation, and lack of clear (communicative) strategies.

Turkmen authorities employ a variety of means to restrict citizens' access to independent information. The government directly controls all broadcast (TV, radio) and print media in the country. Internet access is slow, unreliable, and exorbitantly expensive, particularly given the diminished purchasing power. As a result, Turkmenistan holds the lowest spot in Central Asia in terms of the number of individuals using the Internet (21%), far below the global average (54%) (Burunciuc, 2021). The digital divide is an acute problem as the national information and communications technology infrastructure is largely underdeveloped outside of major urban areas, hence, limiting access to the Internet to residents of rural and remote areas who constitute a sizeable share of the population.

The state-owned Turkmentelecom is the sole internet provider in the country, allowing the government to tightly monitor the flow of information within its borders and censor access to sites with undesirable content. These restrictions are arbitrary, not subject to independent judicial review, and are imposed without warnings. It is difficult to estimate the number of blocked websites as the government does not maintain an open register for such purposes. The authorities, for instance, block access to most social networks and independent media outlets, which are used by independent activists (Zhyrmont, 2021).

In recent years, the government has been bolstering its repressive cyber capabilities, also establishing partnerships with Russia and China in cyberspace. The government, for instance, intensified its crackdown on virtual private networks (VPN) and proxy servers, which help the local population bypass state filters and access blocked sites (IPHR, TIHR, 2021a). In March 2021, for instance, the government launched a massive shutdown of VPN applications, which resulted in their large-scale failures that continued until the end of the month (IPHR, TIHR, 2021b). The government also blocks online stores where people get such applications, and intimidates and harasses citizens who either use or help to install them. Low digital literacy also plays a negative role in this regard; the majority of the population still has little awareness of the available circumvention tools and how to use them effectively.

The government also improved its tactics of targeting independent journalists' online content, primarily through government-associated social media accounts. Previously, the regime mainly relied on carrying out direct DDoS attacks on opposition sites, such as against the Chronicle of Turkmenistan website. In 2020, the government allegedly filed copyright infringement accusations against Erkin Turkmenistan Radio Youtube channel for its independent coverage of COVID-19-related developments in Turkmenistan (Kashgarian, 2020). Similarly, in 2021, the Chronicle of Turkmenistan YouTube channel was blocked on charges

of copyright violations filed by the state Watan Habarlary channel for using official footage from Turkmen state TV (Eckel, 2021), though the channel properly acknowledged all sources of information. During this research, the author identified several YouTube channels, previously belonging to opposition activists, which were inaccessible; the activists had to open new channels under different names to continue their work online.

The total control of the media environment helps the government to keep political discontent from gaining ground. Aware of the potential for censorship and surveillance, and harsh penalties for accessing and producing politically-charged content, the majority of the population applies self-censorship, avoiding accessing such websites and expressing their political opinions altogether. Instead, they use the Internet mainly as a medium for social interaction and recreational tools. Furthermore, as state media outlets do not cover demonstrations and similar unfavorable topics, citizens are prevented from learning about the scale of dissatisfaction with the government's policies in various regions, the success stories of facing authorities, and the power of collective demands.

In a similar vein, the government's repressive actions against activists and their relatives, both at home and abroad, seek to disrupt the mobilizational potential of the protest movement. While activists abroad have never been fully safe, in the past two years, Turkmen authorities have become particularly keen to use the means of "transnational repression."

Turkmen government became particularly vigilant against activists residing in Turkey. When the protests were only gaining momentum, Turkmen diplomats took steps to prevent further actions and track down activists, urging local authorities to ban demonstrations and detain participants. On July 19, around 80 people were arrested ahead of a scheduled large-scale antigovernment demonstration in Istanbul; among them, there was Dursoltan Taganova, one of the protest leaders in Turkey, who was subsequently kept at a deportation center until October (Najibullah, 2020). Furthermore, the authorities carried out a full-scale discrediting campaign against her and other activists in Turkmenistan by holding meetings attended by law enforcement officers, warning people not to watch or read their content (Radio Azatlyk, 2021).

In 2021, the crackdown on Turkey-based activists continued and even intensified. Ahead of scheduled protests, Turkish officials, sometimes along with people believed to be associated with Turkmenistan's diplomatic representations in Turkey, warned many activists of the potential negative consequences of taking part in any anti-government demonstrations (IPHR, TIHR, 2021a). There is a considerable number of various cases documenting the increasing intimidation and harassment of many notable activists, including Dursoltan Taganova (RFE/RL's Turkmen Service, 2021a), Murad Kurbanov (Hronika Turkmenistana, 2021), Rozgeldy Choliev (Memorial, 2021), Aziz Mamedov, Nurmuhammet Annayev (RFE/RL's Turkmen Service, 2021b), and others. In early November, over

30 human rights organizations called on Turkey to stop the prosecution of Turkmen activists, following the intensifying crackdown on their activities (Farooq, 2021).

The outreach of the protest movement and its potential is weakened further by the shortcomings within the movement itself. While opposition figures claim to have considerable support throughout the country, all of their protest initiatives inside Turkmenistan failed exactly due to lack of support. Turkmen citizens are indeed becoming more active in the online space, such as by sharing videos and other materials with activists and independent media, participating in discussions, such as on various Telegram channels, commenting on videos on YouTube channels, and following live streams of opposition activists.

These activities, however, do not indicate the fundamental changes in habitual practices; as opposition leaders underline, people inside the country expect the activists abroad to initiate actions that could topple the regime: "They are waiting for us to come and save them from the Arkadag" (Zverintseva, 2020). The activists, on their part, continue to stress the importance of mass mobilization in Turkmenistan as a crucial prerequisite for potential changes. As such, a lack of clear strategies, resources, and well-established networks between the two identified groups results in the absence of meaningful and progressive actions.

In certain instances, the initiatives either anger or diminish the credibility of the opposition figures, pointing at the lack of clear communication strategies for engaging the domestic audience. To illustrate, one of the figures' pledges to give out 500 US dollars to those who would revolt against the regime in Turkmenistan was viewed among many activists and ordinary citizens as evidence of corrupt behavior and negligence for people's security. In another notable case, the following comments similarly generated a significant public backlash with the "Open Your face" initiative that asked the Turkmen labor migrants to openly criticize the regime:

"If a migrant gets spotted participating in some activity frowned upon by the government, officers from the Ministry of National Security (MNS) put pressure on his relatives. But we carried out some calculations... In order to exert pressure on a single family, you need to deploy one police officer and at least three officers of the MNS... What happens if migrants start to openly express their opinions en masse? For every thousand people who make such a statement, they will need at least eight thousand officers. And let's say there are 100 MNS officers in total in the Dashoguz velayat (region). Even if they only have to put pressure on 300 families in the region, they won't be able to do this effectively. Their efforts will be paralyzed. When we've got together three thousand such statements, the remaining migrants won't have to worry about expressing their opinions, and after ten thousand statements, the whole issue of hiding one's identity will be forgotten forever" (Ibid).

While all groups within the opposition movement appeal to democratic values, the analysis identified an acute dearth of content that provides a qualified and detailed discussion about democratic norms and practices, particularly in the context of Turkmenistan. In this regard, the questions like "what is democracy for Turkmen citizens?" and "what type of government Turkmen citizens are yearning for?" are still largely left unanswered.

Furthermore, the analysis identified a considerable segment of content that disregards principles of pluralism and acknowledgment of differing political stances regarding fellow opposition figures. Many of such videos do not shy away from using strong language, derogatory statements, and epithets, including concerning family members of the persons discussed. The "fractioning" tendencies are still strong within the movement as the majority of activists and opposition figures, both old and new, divide into groupings and perpetuate the atmosphere of mutual accusations and squabbles. The older generation of activists is often accused of being inactive for many years and being corrupt as many of them had previously been part of the elite who later fell out of favor and were forced to emigrate. Another widely used narrative is that some of the activists are "agents of the regime" who seek to identify supporters of anti-government protests and sow disturbance.

Overall, such squabbles discredit the protest movement, framing its narratives as power struggles between a small cloak of individuals who contest for political power and influence, including the recognition from the international community. Several activists, who participated in human rights-focused events organized by international organizations, were labeled as "opportunists" who use their activism to gain political asylum in Europe. As such, these tendencies downplay the positive developments this wave of protest activism brought about, namely the emergence of new voices and perspectives. As a result, such disunity fragments and marginalizes the movement, and more importantly, diminishes the mobilizational potential for its causes among the population.

Conclusions

The current state of Turkmen protest activism, particularly in the online space, raises more questions and skepticism about its potential than admiration. The following study identified that it lacks "maturity" and does not exhibit a "learning process" as most of its inner shortcomings from the past remain relevant. While it was able to reignite itself after years of hibernation by organizing a wave of protest actions, it still lacks the capacity to take it to the next stage. This point is crucial as there is already growing tiredness of "endless talk shows" of activists discussing the wrongdoings of the regime – currently, the most visible part of their work. The movement, hence, should not overestimate the degree of social support it enjoys; it needs to refine its approach and strategies and work on its shortcomings.

The movement needs to strengthen its skills in translating political demands and criticism into tangible actions, even if the latter does not lead to immediate drastic changes. Raising awareness and developing effective mobilization campaigns that take into account local peculiarities could help erode the regime's support further; this may entail reaching out to the more pragmatic elements and the silent defectors of the regime. Similarly, the activists need to improve their strategies of building stronger horizontal ties and laying sociocultural foundations for protest networking and future concerted action.

The movement needs to show that its members can lead the country by enacting long-overdue reforms. The activists need to improve their skills in crafting proper policy proposals, offering a new vision, improve the strategic, management, and communication skills within their ranks, which can persuade the defectors and swinging opinions. In the same vein, the activists need to learn how to advocate and lobby their causes more effectively, while acknowledging that they cannot rely solely on hopes of possible international sanctions.

In this regard, improving cohesion within the diverse group of activists and opposition figures becomes a crucial factor. The activists need to learn to work with each other, putting their mutual grievances and accusations aside. Similarly, the movement needs to improve its networking strategies to strengthen its capacity and self-sustainability and learn about best practices that might work in Turkmenistan's political realities. Cultivating closer ties with the civil society sector of Central Asian countries can be of particular use due to shared socio-cultural bonds and many similarities in political systems. The Turkmen protest activism has already reached the stage when the activism only in the Turkmen-speaking segment of the Internet is no longer sufficient to bring changes. Thus, it needs to expand its contacts with international actors, foreign

media, human rights, and advocacy groups to make its causes more visible and appealing.

As the online space is most likely to remain the main venue of further protest actions, the movement needs to invest greater efforts in promoting evidence-based and data-driven content and discussions leading to more complex analyses, free from speculations and (non)intentional misinformation. Furthermore, the activists can set up informal knowledge hubs and online media projects focused on cultivating a better understanding of democratic values and practices and civic consciousness among the audience and spotlighting issues and topics that, thus far, have not received due attention but are of great importance, such as gender equality.

In this regard, the movement needs to develop and mobilize people around a sustainable and inclusive future-oriented agenda focused on attaining realistic long-term goals. Currently, there is an acute dearth of such content; while it is important to continue spotlighting the wrongdoings of the ruling regime, it is equally important to promote discussions centered around the "Turkmenistan of the future" narrative in which the fundamental democratic values take the central stage.

Indeed, the protest movement's potential is significantly constrained because of the uneven playing field as the ruling regime has a far stronger capacity to mobilize resources to attain self-serving interests even under pressure circumstances. That being said, it is highly unlikely that the movement will succeed in toppling the existing authoritarian power structures in the near future. Even so, it is still crucial that it capitalizes on the current momentum, and continues to develop and expand its professional competencies. Doing so can lay the solid foundation for the deeper changes in society in terms of shifts in values. The 2020 revolution in Kyrgyzstan demonstrated that the surge in protest activism does not necessarily succeed in democratic transformation as it led to the emergence of the government demonstrating authoritarian tendencies. Given this, if Turkmen activists are genuine in their aspirations of fostering democratic norms and practices in the country, they need to focus their efforts on cultivating well-informed and engaged citizens.

Appendix 1

The list of main YouTube channels included in the analysis, belonging to independent civic groups and the political opposition.

YouTube Channel/ Presence on other social media	The focus of Activities/Themes	Subscribers/ viewership	Commentary
TurkmenYurtTV Also: Telegram, Facebook, VK, OK.RU, and own website	News coverage in the form of weekly bulletins; The coverage of the human rights situation in the country; Public discussions on politics-focused topics; Horse-breeding-focused content	Subscribers: 50K Total: 29,272, 209 views Most watched: 1.1M	Turkmen Yurt TV is part of the human rights organization "Rights and Freedoms of Turkmenistan Citizens". It is run by Geldy Kyarizov, former head of the Turkmen Atlary (Turkmen Horses) State Agency and well-known horse breeder. Arrested in 2002 on charges of negligence and abuse of office, which he personally believes were politically motivated. Released in 2007; lives and works in exile. The channel is ultimately used as Kyarizov's political platform. The videos on the channel extensively use derogatory epithets and remarks toward the members of the country's elite, namely the president and his relatives. The channel also contains videos of him criticizing some members of the political opposition and activists.
Hronika Turkmenistana (Chronicle of Turkmenistan) Also, VK, LINE, Facebook, OK.RU, own website	Unlike the website, which mainly focuses on news coverage and human rights reports, the YouTube channel contains mainly short videos (1-2 minutes runtime) of satiric content that targets the ruling regime	Subscribers: 105K Total: 64,158,779 Most watched: 3.1M	Chronicle of Turkmenistan is part of the Turkmen Initiative for Human Rights (TIHR) created to provide information about developments in Turkmenistan, mainly focusing on human rights violations, abuse of office, and government mismanagement. TIHR has extensively cooperated with several international human rights watchdogs and prepared reports for international bodies on the human rights situation in the country. It is one of the well-known sources of credible and independent information about the country that is extensively used as a source of reference by the foreign press, academia, and international indexes.

Habartm.org (Turkmen.news, former Alternative News of Turkmenistan) Instagram, Facebook, Telegram, Twitter, Turkmen.news website	The coverage of sociopolitical developments, including a video version of investigative reports into the corrupt business schemes of the country's inner elite;	Subscribers: 29.5K Total: 10,695,237 Most watched: 1.1M	Turkmen.news is an independent news and human rights organization, founded in 2010. In 2014, registered as a public organization in the Netherlands. Turkmen.news prepared several investigative reports that probe into the corruption schemes of the ruling elite, namely the president and his relatives. It is also active in spotlighting the human rights violations in the country, including inhumane conditions in prisons. Along with the Chronicle of Turkmenistan, it is one of the few well-known sources of credible and reliable information that is widely cited by the foreign press, academia, expert community, and indexes.
Halkyň Sesi Media (The voice of people) Instagram, Tik Tok, Facebook, Twitter, Telegram	News coverage; A platform for public discussions on contemporary sociopolitical developments in and around Turkmenistan, including foreign policy developments; Political platform	Subscribers: 18.9K Total: 13,645,433 Most watched: 558K	The channel refers to Sapar Yklimov for contact and cooperation, who is a former government official forced to emigrate because of his criticism of the government. He lives in Sweden where he gained political asylum. One of the main features of the channel is live streams of public discussions on contemporary developments and roundtables with various activists, which include the feedback option in the form of live comments and questions from the audience.
Zenanlaryň Sesi (The voice of women)	Commentary on contemporary sociopolitical developments, including activists-related (i.e., arrests, harassment); Women- and children-rights related content	Subscribers: 2.14K Total: 710,802 Most watched: 32K	While, according to the description, the channel's main focus is on producing content that discusses the protection and advancement of rights of women and children, there is an acute dearth of materials related to these specific causes. The channel also has very low visibility, reflected in the small number of subscribers and viewers.
Murad Kurbanov (the leader of the Democratic Choice of Turkmenistan party (DVT))	The coverage of contemporary sociopolitical developments in and around Turkmenistan; Ultimately, the political platform for the DVT party	Subscribers: 4.63K Total: 1,601,127 Most watched: 75K	The overwhelming majority of videos are live streams, often involving other activists, in which they provide their view and analysis of contemporary developments and criticize the ruling regime. There are several videos of discussions involving other activists on protest-related matters and further steps.
Kakamurad Khydyrov	Criticism of the regime and commentary on the contemporary sociopolitical	Subscribers: 6.57K Total: 3,008,843 Most watched: 36K	Kakamurad Khydyrov started his opposition political activity in 2019 by recording several videos criticizing the political regime in the country. He is one of the co-founders, along with

	developments in and around Turkmenistan; Political platform		M. Kurbanov, of the DVT party. He is a former government official who had worked in the prosecutor's office. He currently lives in exile. The channel contains several videos of Khydyrov openly criticizing other members of the opposition group, including through the usage of derogatory statements.
Turkmenim (Devlet Bayhan)	Criticism of the regime and commentary on the contemporary sociopolitical developments in Turkmenistan, including protest actions-related content	Subscribers: 2.74K Total: 1,177,082 Most watched: 47K	The channel has very low visibility, reflected in the small number of subscribers and active viewership.
Arslan Duyeji	Political platform; Commentary on contemporary sociopolitical developments	Subscribers: 4.36K Total: 1,814,923 Most watched: 45K	The channel contains a video, dating September 2021, in which Duyeji spreads false information about the president of Turkmenistan being in a coma, referring to his credible sources.
ERKIN TÜRKMENISTAN TV-RADIO	Commentary on contemporary sociopolitical developments; A platform for public discussions and roundtables with various activists and opposition figures	Subscribers: 5.44K Total: 2.285.354 Most watched: 219K	The channel has several videos that target some of the members of the opposition group by using discrediting language and accusations of former corrupt practices.
Turkmenistan.Khal murad Soinov	Commentary on contemporary sociopolitical developments; A platform for public discussions with activists; Coverage of protest actions, including sharing of videos of citizens who joined the protest movement and criticize the ruling regime	Subscribers: 4.69K Total: 1,875,603 Most watched: 85K	

Appendix 2

The list of offline protests staged by Turkmens residing abroad in 2020 – 2021 (based on the analysis of information from Chronicle of Turkmenistan, Turkmen.news, Radio Azatlyk)

When, where	no. of protestors	Main demands, issues raised
May 11, 2020, Northern Cyprus	approx. 7	The government's inadequate response to the April hurricane that hit the Lebap and Mary provinces, including the government's unwillingness to help with repairing the damage; Opening the borders once the situation with the COVID-19 pandemic stabilizes so those willing can return and help their relatives to repair the damage; Low salaries and purchasing power and spiking prices; The government's unwillingness to allow Turkmen citizens to go to N. Cyprus for work (people have to pay bribes as high as 5-6 thousand US dollars to do so); Criticism of the president, his family, and relatives, for their corrupt practices and other wrongdoings; Demands for the president and the government to step down; Call for solidarity among Turkmens residing abroad and joining the protest movement
May 2, 2020 Washington DC, USA In front of the Turkmenistan consulate	2	Two young people left flowers and placards with condolences without expressing political demands; "I do not consider myself an activist, but it was quite hurtful for me, when my relatives told me about the damages and a large number of deaths, while it was not officially reported. I decided to express my support for the victims because I myself am from Turkmenabat. I wanted as many people as possible to know about what happened." In a private talk, they also mentioned that the embassy does not perform its duties, i.e., it does not renew passports for foreign travels, does not answer questions, etc.
May 15, 2020, Istanbul, Turkey In front of the Turkmenistan consulate	approx. 20	The government's continuing ignorance of the aftermath of the hurricane in the Lebap and Mary provinces; Socio-economic problems in the country: low wages, spiking prices, unemployment, pervasive corruption, the shortages of affordable food; Demands for the president and the government to step down

May 20, 2020, Northern Cyprus	approx. 40	Socioeconomic problems in the country: pervasive corruption, economic hardships, unemployment, the abuse of office, and widescale violations of basic human rights and freedoms; The issue of travel restrictions, specifically the authorities' unwillingness to let people return to N. Cyprus for work and demands of bribes (5-6 thousand US dollars); Criticism of the president, the government, his relatives, and the inner elite, and their corrupt practices; Demands for the president and the government to step down; Demands for opening the borders
May 29, 2020, Istanbul, Turkey	approx. 20	Socio-economic problems in the country; Criticism of the president, the government, his relatives, and the inner elite, and their corrupt practices; the government's double-standard actions, referring to Turkmenistan's sending of humanitarian aid to Afghanistan, and Russia, while the country itself experiences harsh socioeconomic conditions and has to deal with the aftermath of the hurricane; restrictions on money transfers
May 29, 2020 New York, US In front of UN Headquarters	7	The government's continued inadequate response to the hurricane; Pervasive corruption, widescale violations of human rights and basic freedoms; The government's unwillingness and inability to properly perform its duties and adhere to international commitments; Participants encouraged the international community to pay closer attention to the socioeconomic troubles in Turkmenistan and the government's mismanagement
June 10, 2020 Pittsburg, US	around 10	The government's ignorance of tragic deaths of Turkmen citizens, both abroad and inside the country: the deaths of Turkmen citizens from alcohol poisoning in Turkey (based on false information that alcohol helps prevent the novel coronavirus), and deaths caused by the hurricane in April 2020; Widescale human rights violations, including constrained access to affordable food; Demands for the president and the government to step down
June 14, 2020 Northern Cyprus	around 50	Help the victims of the hurricane by repairing the damage; remove restrictions on telephone and internet communications; give the citizens working abroad an opportunity to renew their passports, and those living and working in N. Cyprus an opportunity to freely enter and leave Turkmenistan; solve the socioeconomic problems, including pervasive corruption

June 26, 2020 Istanbul, Turkey	around 50	The criticism of the ruling regime and calls for the resignation of the president and the government;
		The widescale violations of human rights and basic freedoms, and the multitude of socio-economic hardships
		The organizers mentioned that the event was monitored by members of the Turkmen consulate in casual clothes and masks, and some unknown men, who tried to instigate a fight with some of the protestors.
June 28, 2020 Washington DC, USA, In front of the Turkmen consulate	No info	The protest was dedicated to G. Berdimuhamedov's birthday; protestors left "presents" for the president at the doorsteps of the consulate: handcuffs and the prison robe;
		Among the demands: widescale violations of human rights, ignorance of socioeconomic problems, abuse of office and pervasive corruption, ignorance of the COVID-19 epidemic;
		Calls for the international community, namely the WHO, to express criticism of the government's ignorance of problems, namely the worsening situation with the COVID-19 epidemic;
		Protestors noted that the consulate called the police once the protest started and closely followed it from the windows; the organizers later released a 25-minute video of the protest
June 28, 2020, New York, USA	around 10	The protest was dedicated to G. Berdimuhamedov's birthday;
		The widescale violations of human rights and basic freedoms, and the government's ignorance of the multitude of socioeconomic hardships
July 19, 2020 Istanbul, Turkey	around 100	The protest was supposed to be held on this day; 18 people were detained before it began, later, according to independent journalists, around 100 people were detained.
		The protest did not receive confirmation from the authorities
July 29, 2020, Washington DC, the USA	around 20	The first part of the protest was held in front of the WHO office: Criticism of the organization's position following the visit of its mission to Turkmenistan;
		The protestors then marched through the streets and held a meeting in front of the Turkmen consulate and later Capitol: Widescale violations of human rights and basic freedoms in Turkmenistan, including the government's denial of the COVID-19 presence in the country
August 15, 2020, New York, USA	No info	The expression of solidarity and support with the protest movement in Belarus
August 16, 2020, New York, USA	No info	The protest was organized in front of the 9/11 Memorial and the UN Headquarters: Urging the international community to spotlight and criticize the Turkmen government for the inhumane conditions in Turkmenistan's prisons and political prisoners

Date & Location	Participants	Demands / Notes
August 30, 2020 Houston, USA		The protests also included representatives from the Democratic Choice of Turkmenistan party;
August 31, 2020 Pittsburg, USA		Widescale violations of human rights, unemployment, shortage of food, lack of access to the Internet, political prisoners
September 1, 2020 Washington DC, USA		The protests were also dedicated to the then upcoming decision of the government to adopt changes to the country's Constitution that instituted hereditary power transition from G. Berdimuhamedov to his son Serdar
September 2, 2020 New York, USA		The protestors also urged the citizens of Turkmenistan to stage protests inside the country and express their dissatisfaction with the constitutional reforms
September 22, 2020 New York, USA In front of UN Headquarters	around 15	Release political prisoners and stop the forced labor on cotton fields
December 6, 2020	Online protest	Widescale violations of human rights and freedoms; Release of political prisoners; Urge the government to launch flights to return citizens stranded abroad
March 6, 2021 New York, USA	No info	Demanding an independent and fair investigation of the death of Suleyman Tursunbayev
August 1, 2021 Istanbul, Turkey, In front of the Turkmen consulate	No info	The consulate called the police, labeling protestors as "terrorists" who threaten their security and wellbeing; upon arrival, the police asked the protestors to disperse because they did not gain permission from the city council to hold this meeting. Later, several activists were intimidated and physically beaten by unknown men in sports clothes; one of the activists was dragged into the consulate where he was beaten. Around 10 activists were detained and held at the deportation center.
September 28, 2021, New York, USA	No info	In front of the UN headquarters: The government's continuing inadequate response to the COVID-19 epidemic in the country; The release of activists from deportation centers

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