



## United States Mission to the OSCE

### **Response to the Report by the Head of the OSCE Centre in Ashgabat, Ambassador Natalya Drozd**

As delivered by Ambassador James S. Gilmore III  
to the Permanent Council, Vienna  
June 4, 2020

Thank you, Mr. Chairperson.

The United States welcomes you, Ambassador Drozd, back to the Permanent Council today, and we thank you for your presentation. Your leadership of this mission speaks well of your home country of Belarus, and I have enjoyed, very much, our personal interaction as well.

We welcome the Center's contributions to building Turkmenistan's capacity to manage its borders in cooperation with its neighbors, including Afghanistan. The United States appreciates Turkmenistan's commitment to addressing Afghanistan's food security during the COVID-19 pandemic and its support to the Afghanistan peace process. Furthermore, Ambassador Drozd, we support your work on countering violent extremism and radicalization that lead to terrorism, in keeping with international human rights obligations and OSCE commitments.

We also appreciate your Office's collaboration with the OSCE's *Action Against Terrorism Unit* on its important recent guidebook on "*A Whole of Society Approach to Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism and Radicalization that Lead to Terrorism*" for Central Asia. Whole-of-society collaboration is key to addressing today's evolving terrorist threats.

Strengthening good governance and anti-corruption is a priority for my government, and we support the Center's work to improve Turkmenistan's ability to combat money laundering and terrorist financing in line with Financial Action Task Force standards. Thank you for your work to identify and launch additional Economic and Environmental Dimension projects in 2020. Specifically, the Center's project to support Turkmenistan's participation in the *Eurasian Group on Combating Money Laundering and Financing of Terrorism* is very promising.

We should acknowledge that the exercise of human rights and fundamental freedoms is severely restricted in Turkmenistan. We therefore urge the government of Turkmenistan to take full advantage of the OSCE's assistance and expertise to promote respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, including the freedom of religion and belief. The United States continues to designate Turkmenistan as a "Country of Particular

Concern” for religious freedom and we are confident that your mission will assist that country and the OSCE region in addressing these issues.

Mr. Chairman, the United States commends OSCE efforts in developing the Ombudsperson’s Office of Turkmenistan. It is important that the government ensure the Ombudsperson has both the political support and the independence needed to perform effectively. I know the Head of Mission has been personally committed to this ongoing effort.

Penitentiary reform is another area in which Turkmenistan could benefit from additional OSCE assistance. The United States welcomes learning that in 2019, the family of activist Gulgeldy Annaniyazov was reportedly able to visit him in his place of detention in Garabogaz, although we note that he received an extremely harsh sentence for crossing the border into his own country. The student Omurzak Omarkuliev should have completed his two-year military service and be free to resume his studies now. We would appreciate an update on both these individuals’ situations. It is disheartening that reports from last year’s Human Dimension Implementation Meeting highlighted a retrenchment by the government of Turkmenistan in relation to its treatment of political prisoners.

The United States remains concerned about the many prisoners of conscience in Turkmenistan who still have not been allowed to communicate with the outside world for years. We note, in particular, that our former permanent representative colleague here in Vienna, Batyr Berdiev, is among those about whom there has been no reliable information for more than a decade. We urge authorities to provide the families of those detained with access to and information about all prisoners and ensure that families have information on the whereabouts and well-being of their relatives. We encourage the government of Turkmenistan to allow the requested working visit of the UN Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances. We have called for the unconditional release of persons incarcerated in Turkmenistan for exercising their human rights and fundamental freedoms. We do so again now, with acute urgency, and especially encourage the government of Turkmenistan to grant clemency, given the heightened risk from COVID-19 to persons in confinement.

The United States encourages the Center to step up its activities to support the development of civil society and independent media in Turkmenistan, including through the increased participation in OSCE events of civil society representatives and independent journalists.

Both sectors are underdeveloped and severely restricted in Turkmenistan, and we support activities that include and support these vital voices. The two-day seminar for young journalists hosted last November by the Center was a step in the right direction.

The United States also values the Center’s assistance in promoting gender equality in Turkmenistan, as well as in addressing domestic violence. We noted in your January

report that at an OECD working group meeting on business in Central Asia, 50 percent of participants were women.

Finally, I would like to discuss developments in Turkmenistan in light of the current coronavirus pandemic. I am aware that the government of Turkmenistan reports that it has no COVID-19 cases - none!

Government transparency and accountability are necessary parts of the solution to public health crises and governments have the responsibility to provide the public with thorough and accurate information. Civil society and independent media also can—and should be permitted—to play important roles during times of crisis, serving as critical links between governments and the public.

Ambassador Drozd, once again we thank you and your dedicated team for your tenure at the OSCE Center in Ashgabat and wish you success in your next endeavor. I am aware that the Permanent Representative from Turkmenistan will, in fact, be addressing you in the next few minutes. The United States representative looks forward to the comments from the Ambassador of Turkmenistan to the OSCE.

Thank you, Mr. Chairperson for the opportunity to speak to this today.