

My experience of Turkmenistan

1. I have always taken a close interest in Turkmenistan, but it has been and in many ways still is the most authoritarian, secretive and closed of all the states of the former USSR.
2. I was therefore delighted when in 2008 ODIHR asked me to travel to Turkmenistan to be the first foreign professor since 1991 to teach in the State University in Ashgabad, the capital of Turkmenistan. I visited Ashgabad from 18 to 23 May 2008, and gave a course of five lectures to students of Law and International Relations. I also had the opportunity of undertaking in-depth discussions with them and their professors, as well as with colleagues in the ODIHR, OSCE, United Nations and other agencies. I obtained an excellent grounding in the realities of life in Turkmenistan both under Saparmurat Atayevich Niyazov during his presidency – as “Turkmenbashi” – from 1990 until his death in 2006, and under his successor Gurbanguly Malikgulyevich Berdimukhamedov, who became President on 14 February 2007.
3. I have not had the opportunity to return to Turkmenistan since 2008, and my most recent work in the region has been for the British Embassy in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan’s neighbour.

Contemporary Turkmenistan

4. Turkmenistan was best known for the cult of personality created by the president-for-life, President Niyazov, which in many ways exceeded that of Joseph Stalin.
5. Many significant streets and buildings were named after him, and the only book generally on sale was the “Ruhnama” (The Book of the Soul) written by Niyazov. I acquired a copy while in Ashgabad. It combined spiritual and moral guidance, autobiography, and history. It was intended as the "spiritual guidance of the nation" and the basis of all arts and literature. It became the essential and compulsory component of teaching at all levels including the university, and in the end an exam on its teachings became an element of the driving test.

6. All of this was enforced by a very high level of authoritarian and police control. When I visited in May 2008 there were police officers every few hundred metres or so in the main streets, and very few ordinary pedestrians, even in the main streets. There was no freedom of expression, and all expression is still closely controlled by the government.