



## **The Turkmen authorities must stop the disinformation campaign about people disappeared in prisons and instead give relatives and international observers access to them**

### **Statement of the Prove They Are Alive! Campaign concerning a publication on Radio Azatlyk website**

2 March 2018

On 28 February, an article<sup>1</sup> was posted on Radio Azatlyk's website based on information received from an anonymous "source" who alleges having seen Konstantin Shikhmuradov free when meeting him in August 2016 in Garabogaz (Bekdash). The "source" asserts that Konstantin, 15 years after his trial and conviction in January 2003, is currently not in prison but lives in a settlement in that remote region of Turkmenistan, is employed, "has no complaints about his fate" and even has been able to travel to Ashgabat to attend the funerals of his father 14 years ago and his mother 10 years ago. This "source" also claims that along with Konstantin Shikhmuradov, some other prisoners sentenced to long prison terms after the 25 November 2002 events also live in the same settlement at Bekdash where they are "totally free," "employed and earning a salary" and "living in rented apartments."

We consider this information to be false, and its appearance to be the Turkmen authorities' provocation by cynically taking advantage of this authoritative media outlet. A few facts prove this information untrue. First, it clearly contradicts the official data on the verdicts handed down to Konstantin Shikhmuradov and more than 50 others convicted in "the case of November 25" published by the government mouthpiece *Adalat* in January 2003. To remind, Konstantin Shikhmuradov was sentenced to 17 years of imprisonment, of which the first five years were to be served in a prison and the rest in a strict regime colony. It is widely known that all convicted "Novemberists" were subjected to severe torture and held incommunicado in prison after receiving their sentences. It is impossible to imagine that this punishment would have been replaced by a "free settlement regime" for Konstantin Shikhmuradov accused of involvement in an anti-presidential "conspiracy" and for a group of other people convicted in the case. Second, if Konstantin Shikhmuradov was really exiled to Bekdash and allowed to move freely around the city for these 15 years, it is impossible to explain why neither he nor other convicts have made contact with their families and why their relatives have never visited them. Third, the "source" alleges that Konstantin visited Ashgabat to attend his father's funeral in 2004, while in reality Oraz Shikhmuradov had died in 2000, long before the events of November 2002 and the arrests that followed. At that time, Konstantin was free and lived in Ashgabat with his family.

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<sup>1</sup> Azatlyk's source claims having personally seen the disappeared in prison Konstantin Shikhmuradov in Garabogaz. Radio Azatlyk, 28 February 2018 (updated on 1 March 2018) <https://rus.azathabar.com/a/29067778.html>

We have many reasons to believe that this is not just a memory error but a deliberate spread of false information orchestrated by the authorities as part of their campaign designed to mislead the international community and prevent new international action in response to the problem of enforced disappearances in Turkmenistan. This clearly follows from the fact that the “source” suddenly decided to contact Radio Azatlyk now, a year and a half after allegedly seeing Shikhmuradov, precisely at a time when discussions are going on in the OSCE about new possibilities for participating states to take action in connection with the continuing disappearances. In particular, three days before this publication, on 25 February, the Prove They Are Alive! campaign held a briefing for diplomats in the framework of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly session to mark the 15th anniversary of the 2003 release of the OSCE Moscow Mechanism Report on Turkmenistan. At that briefing, the campaign called upon the OSCE participating states to take new and active steps to address the problem of enforced disappearances in Turkmen prisons<sup>2</sup> and presented an updated list of 113 disappeared persons with biographies.<sup>3</sup> The briefing also featured an appeal by the disappeared people’s relatives calling for decisive action in the OSCE framework<sup>4</sup>, supported by more than 50 representatives of international NGOs.

There are strong grounds to believe that the authorities put pressure on Radio Azatlyk’s “source” forcing him to call up the radio 18 months after the alleged “meeting.” When answering additional questions asked by the radio’s editorial staff, the “source” gave out the true reason for his call. He said that he “did not know that Konstantin Shikhmuradov was on the list of people who had disappeared in Turkmen prisons.” “The lists of disappearances are fake, no one has disappeared, there is nothing to discuss at the international level” – these are the Turkmen authorities’ key messages for the world. This disinformation is aimed, among other things, at discrediting those working to address the problem of disappearances in Turkmen prisons. By denying the very existence of the problem of enforced disappearances and refusing to solve it, the authorities are hiding behind persons whom they are able to intimidate to create a veil of disinformation.

Sadly, this type of “reaction” to international discussion of the problem of disappearances in Turkmen prisons is not the first attempt by the government of Turkmenistan to spread misleading and provocative messages. Over the years, the country’s authorities have been evading responsibility by compiling “alternative” lists and thus causing delays in their dialogue with international organizations, providing untrue information in response to enquiries from UN mechanisms or simply ignoring them, taking diplomats on tours to “exemplary” prison colonies and denying access to actual prisoners, rather than enable direct contacts with people from the list of disappearances. They have been doing all they can to withhold true information and prevent direct independent contact with people who have disappeared in prisons. It is noteworthy that a year ago, the International Committee of the Red Cross exited its negotiations with the Turkmen government since the authorities had refused to accept the ICRC’s standard procedures for visiting places of detention. Some time ago, the Turkmen authorities added a new tactic to their longstanding pattern of secrecy around the fate of those who disappeared in prisons and their calculated lies on the issue in dealing with international organizations. Their new technique is based on spreading false information through “witnesses” claiming to have seen a disappeared person.

All this time, people continue to die in prisons, held incommunicado for many years. Over the past three years, there have been reliable reports of at least nine deaths in detention of people from the list of the disappeared. We are aware of incidents of brutal pressure on families to stop them from telling

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<sup>2</sup> <http://provethyarealive.org/moscow-mechanism-on-turkmenistan/>

<sup>3</sup> <http://provethyarealive.org/updated-list-of-the-disappeared/>

<sup>4</sup> <http://provethyarealive.org/years-of-secrecy-and-despair/>

anyone about the condition of their loved one's body released for burial or about the fact of his death. A similar tactic involves attempts to force people who still hope to see their disappeared relatives alive to keep quiet by threats or empty promises and by spreading rumors about allegedly granted visits. By doing so, the Turkmen authorities do not only continue to torture those who are in prison but also humiliate and torment their relatives and friends by forcing them to keep silent or to tell lies.

In this respect, the Prove They Are Alive! campaign reiterates: all reports concerning visits to any person on the list of those disappeared in prisons or their release, any information about their health status and whereabouts, about their medical treatment or other interactions with them must be verified via sources independent of the Turkmen authorities and by direct contacts of independent lawyers, international monitoring organizations and diplomats with these prisoners. Prisoners' relatives free from the Turkmen government's control, e.g. those living abroad, can also serve as independent sources of such information. Unfortunately, practice reveals that without independent verification, any falsification may be possible.

We urge the authorities of Turkmenistan to disclose the truth and provide direct access to the prisoners, and we call upon journalists to be rigorous about checking their facts and choosing reliable sources, particularly since their reports can deeply affect the victims' relatives causing them new suffering.

Anyone trying to help those who have disappeared in prisons and their relatives, including international organisations and diplomats, must be careful not to allow themselves to be misled by the disinformation spread by the Turkmen authorities. We can trust only reliable and independently verifiable data. The only way to solve the problem of the disappeared persons is to prove they are alive.

*For additional information:*

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*The international human rights campaign "Prove They Are Alive!" has been working since 2013 to halt the practice of enforced disappearances in Turkmenistan's prisons. The campaign members include non-governmental organisations Crude Accountability (USA), Centre for the Development of Democracy and Human Rights (Russia), Freedom Files Analytical Centre (Russia), Human Rights Centre "Memorial" (Russia), Norwegian Helsinki Committee, Human Rights Watch and Turkmen civic activists. The campaign acts with the support of the international Civic Solidarity Platform and actively interacts with a broad range of human rights defenders, experts, and inter-governmental organisations, including the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe, the United Nations, and the European Union. For more information please see the campaign's website <http://provetheyarealive.org>.*