

**15th Anniversary of the Moscow Mechanism on Turkmenistan:**

**Time for the OSCE Participating States to Act on Enforced Disappearances**

23 February 2018

The international human rights Campaign [“Prove They Are Alive!”](http://provetheyarealive.org/) and a group of more than 30 civic activists and relatives and friends of victims of enforced disappearances in Turkmen prisons, living in Turkmenistan, called for an application of the [OSCE mechanisms of response to human dimension crises, including the Vienna and the Moscow Mechanism](http://www.osce.org/odihr/human-dimension-mechanisms)s in respect of Turkmenistan at a side event of the 17th Winter Meeting of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly in Vienna. [The appeal by the relatives](http://provetheyarealive.org/years-of-secrecy-and-despair/) has been supported by representatives of more than 50 international civil society organisations, Turkmen activists and family members of the disappeared living abroad.

March 2018 marks 15 years since the release of the [Moscow Mechanism report on Turkmenistan](https://www.osce.org/odihr/18372?download=true). This strongest possible OSCE reaction to human dimension crises was caused by a massive wave of repressions in Turkmenistan that followed an alleged coup-d’état attempt on 25 November 2002. More than five hundred people were arrested, many of them were subjected to torture and forced to confess, and tried in swift, closed and unfair trials. In the end, more than 60 people were sentenced for long prison terms, including seven people sentenced for life. No one has seen them since the time of their arrest or trial. They disappeared behind the bars.

This unprecedented crisis prompted 10 OSCE participating States to invoke the Moscow Mechanism, which allows concerned states to investigate and address serious human rights problems taking place in any OSCE state. It has been the strongest ever OSCE engagement in the human rights situation in Turkmenistan. The OSCE Moscow Mechanism Rapporteur for Turkmenistan, renowned French expert Dr. Emmanuel Decaux, [described in great detail](https://www.osce.org/odihr/18372?download=true) the extensive human rights violations that were perpetrated during the arrest, trial, and imprisonment of those involved in the attempt. “Enforced disappearances in prisons which the government of Turkmenistan does not acknowledge, are a gross human rights violation and a crime. The government bears full responsibility for the disappearances because this practice contradicts both the international norms and the domestic legislation”, said Prof. Décaux. In spite of the Turkmen authorities’ non-cooperation, the report was published in March 2003. It laid ground to further response by the international community, including three resolutions of the UN General Assembly and two reports of the UN Secretary General in 2003-2006. Application the OSCE Moscow Mechanism and the follow-up actions by the UN had a visible impact: while more than 500 people were detained or arrested between November 2002 and February 2003, the majority were released after the report’s publication. Unfortunately, this could not save those who were already missing in Turkmen prisons.

While the attention of the international community to the situation in Turkmenistan remained high, the Turkmen government committed very few new disappearances. However, as attention waned after 2006, the government started to commit this crime with a new vigour. As a consequence, the human rights crisis that started 15 years ago has continued, and has now even a more systematic and protracted character. While Turkmenistan is notorious for its numerous violations of human rights, eenforced disappearances of prisoners is among the gravest violations. People subjected to repressions throughout all these years are still held incommunicado. Their relatives and acquaintances have no contact whatsoever with them and no information about their whereabouts and condition since the time of their imprisonment – in some cases for as long as 16 years. “I was 14 years old when all this happened. My father said goodbye to me as I was leaving for vacations. I could not imagine at that moment that this would be the last time I would see him in such a long. long time. I have kids of my own now, and it is very difficult to accept that I have lived most of my life without seeing my father and knowing whether he is alive,” said Umed Uldzhabaev, whose father [Rustem Djumaev](http://provetheyarealive.org/the-disappeared/25-djumaev-rustem/) was arrested in early December 2002.

This is a growing trend: “Prove They Are Alive!” campaign documented 66 cases when it was launched in 2013; the number grew to [113 by February 2017](http://provetheyarealive.org/updated-list-of-the-disappeared). There are close to 30 documented cases of deaths of the disappeared since 2002, including at least nine in the last three years. The crime of enforced disappearance continues and is claiming new victims every year.

In spite of sustained pressure from the international community, including OSCE institutions and participating States, UN human rights bodies and EU institutions to put an end to enforced disappearances, the Turkmen authorities have avoided taking any real steps to end this gross violation of human rights and have not implemented relevant decisions by inter-governmental bodies, [such as the UN Human Rights Committee decision](http://provetheyarealive.org/decision-on-boris-shikhmuradov/) on the case of former Minister of Foreign Affairs [Boris Shikhmuradov](http://provetheyarealive.org/the-disappeared/75-shikhmuradov-boris/). Instead, they simulate an ineffective “dialogue” with international organizations and other states on this issue.

In 2016-2018, the situation has deteriorated further. Responses from Turkmenistan to inquiries of intergovernmental bodies and other states on the problem of disappearances have become increasingly empty and often are simply absent. The pace of deaths of people held incommunicado is increasing. Testimonies of former prisoners and of people who saw the bodies of the deceased when they were returned to the families indicate that the disappeared had been subjected to torture and ill-treatment. Since 2016, the government started a new wave of enforced disappearances, with dozens of new victims subjected to full isolation in direct violation of the country’s obligations under international and domestic law. Thus, enforced disappearances cannot be seen anymore as only a matter of the past; they are widely practiced by the current leadership.

Evidence of continued enforced disappearances in Turkmenistan, the growing rate of deaths of people held incommunicado, and the obvious ineffectiveness of efforts to engage the Turkmen authorities on this subject are a clear indication of the need for the international community to adopt a new strategy.The core of such strategy should be the utilization of more resolute and proactive means, including conditionalities in economic cooperation agreements and the activation of existing political and legal mechanisms of reaction to human rights crises such as the OSCE Vienna and Moscow mechanisms. “This important process started 15 years ago but stopped halfway. It is essential now to take it to completion and affirm truth and justice so that we may avoid such tragedies in the future,” [said Tatiana Shikhmuradova](https://youtu.be/50GDE91sit0), wife of former Minister of Foreign Affairs Boris Shikhmuradov.