

Report by OSCE Head of Centre in Ashgabat: UK response, June 2022

Mr Chair,

I would like to welcome you, Ambassador MacGregor, back to the Permanent Council and thank you and your colleagues for your report and for the work undertaken at the OSCE Centre in Ashgabat over the last year.

The United Kingdom and Turkmenistan have a close and productive relationship. At our first ever bilateral dialogue in February, our foreign ministries signed a joint Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) for future dialogues and committed to cooperate on trade, climate change, human rights, Afghanistan, and defence. Many of these issues are relevant to the discussion we are having here today.

We were pleased to read in this report that the Centre stepped up its activities to raise public awareness of the OSCE and promote the Centre's work through national and international media. We welcome these efforts, and we would be interested to hear about any positive effect you have noticed as a result.

Mr Chair, I would like to focus my remarks on three areas of the Centre's work – border management, human rights, and gender.

First, on border management. We welcome that the Centre increased its activities to address border security challenges in the region via an expanded Strengthening Border Service Capacities of Turkmenistan project, which the UK was pleased to help support financially. We also welcome the regional events on humanitarian assistance with representatives of relevant border agencies, including Afghanistan.

As our Deputy Foreign Minister agreed recently with Turkmen Foreign Minister Meredov, Afghanistan remains an area of mutual concern. Although we are rightly focusing our attention on Russia's illegal war of aggression in Ukraine we must not forget what is happening in Afghanistan.

We support the Turkmen Government's current policy of non-recognition of the Taliban and welcome the humanitarian support they are providing, especially for girls' education. The UK continues to provide political and humanitarian support to Afghanistan, and we will not stop our insistence that the Taliban be held to account against UNSC Resolution 2593.

Second, on human rights, and specifically on democratic freedoms. We welcome that the OSCE's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights were invited to observe the March 2022 elections, but regret that unlike other missions they had unreasonable restrictions placed on them, leading to ODIHR's conclusion that an observation mission was not "feasible". We also note that none of their recommendations following earlier elections had been

implemented, in particular those related to political pluralism and enjoyment of fundamental human rights.

With this in mind, we support the Centre's work to promote implementation of international human rights standards, respect for fundamental freedoms, and the rule of law. We urge the Government of Turkmenistan to continue to work with the Centre in Ashgabat on essential issues like constitutional recognition, electoral law, and freedom of expression or movement. Without such action there will be no change to democratic rights in Turkmenistan.

And finally, on gender. We were pleased to read about the Centre's continued work to promote gender equality in Turkmenistan, recognising the particular importance of this area. In this vein, we were encouraged to read about the support you provided to a hotline and shelter for victims of domestic violence. We welcome the work to promote the economic rights and opportunities for women, with a focus on rural and vulnerable women, and engaging men and boys in the advancement of gender equality.

This is particularly important at the moment as we are concerned with recent reports of restrictions imposed in Turkmenistan on women. Any restrictions cut across the most basic concepts of gender equality, which the Government of Turkmenistan's Gender Equality Action Plan is designed to promote.

To finish, I would like to once again thank you, Ambassador MacGregor and your team for your report and wish you every success in future.