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Kazakhstan

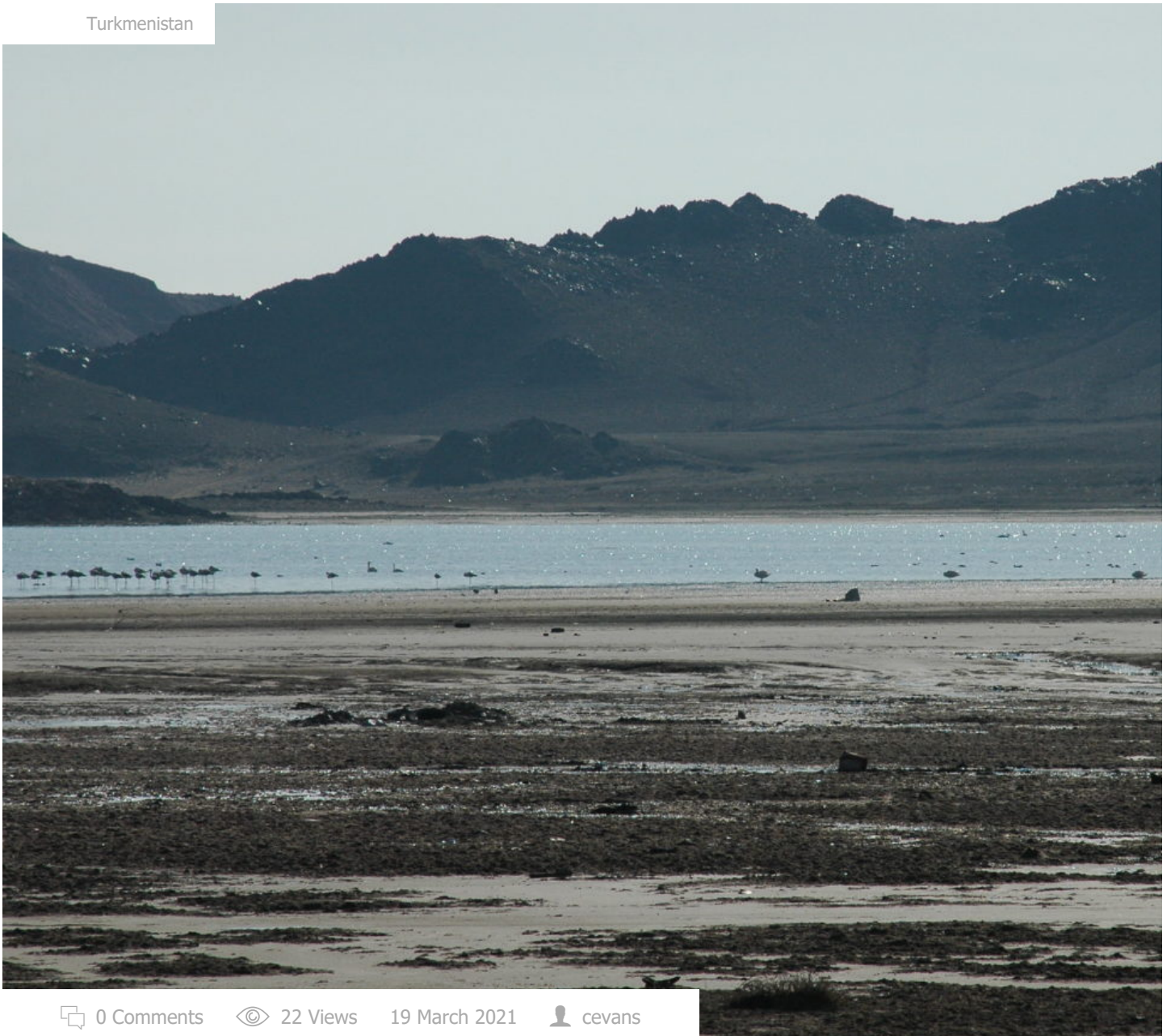
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## Troubled waters: Turkmenistan's environmental policy

Tags Environment Golden Age Lake Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow Turkmenistan

## Turkmenistan celebrates 30 years of independence in 2021. But what does its past and environmental policy look like, and what does it reveal about the country?

In an [article](#) published on the Turkmen news site Orient.tm on 16 February 2021, the journalist Sahatova praised Turkmenistan's recognition of the world's fight against global warming. That, to mark the occasion, 30 million seedlings will be planted across the country during the year. According to the article, this contribution to the wellbeing of Turkmenistan and its inhabitants is indeed the wider world comes alongside many other contributions.

The modernisation of key sectors of the economy (oil and gas, agriculture, industrial) is matched by the meeting of international environmental safety standards. An emphasis is also placed on the introduction of water- and energy-saving technologies and the value of the Turkmen experience in international practice.

The article also points towards Turkmen ratification of international agreements on climate change: the [1991 United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change](#), the [Kyoto Protocol](#) and the [Paris Agreement](#). The Central Asian state also included new goals related to the Paris Agreement in its 2019 National Strategy. Finally, the author highlights Turkmen initiatives on the environment and multilateral cooperation mechanism in the Caspian Sea.

Precise data on Turkmenistan can be difficult to acquire and analyse due to its being closed off from significant international relations with foreign countries under a policy of neutrality. With this in mind, it's worth asking whether the country's environmental record is as clean as it seems.

### A question of prestige

Independent Turkmenistan has had various environmental issues that weaken its reputation. The introduction of water-saving technologies, for example, seems overshadowed by the failure of the [Golden Age Lake](#) project, a plan for a 800-kilometre network of canals across the desert to lead water into the [Karashor depression](#).

This project was conceived under the former president [Saparmyrat Nyýazow](#) and continued by his successor Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow, in spite of expert warnings of the difficulty of a project of this scale in a water due to evaporation in an arid region.

Yet the Golden Age Lake fitted into the wider idea of a Turkmen Golden Age. At the completion of the first stage of the project in 2009, [Berdimuhamedow proclaimed](#) that the “most daring plan in the country's history”. The completion of the first stage of the project was thus a “truly historic event”. However, evaporation issues were compounded by poor construction and a lack of consideration of meteorological factors such as wind drift affecting the canal course, causing, [according to an expert](#), a ticking time bomb for the country's already troubled environmental situation.

politics, points out the discrepancy between “the government’s triumphant narrative and th raised by the scientific and international community”. However, he explained, the contradict understandable: “The aim seems to be the end in itself – with the end being launching a self-re that fits with and reinforces the *Altyn Asyr*, or Golden Age, rhetoric.”

Rather than strictly being about water, then, it is more a question of “projecting domestic p reinforcing the image of Berdimuhamedov as a visionary and benevolent leader who goes to gre improve living conditions in Turkmenistan,” Menga said. More recently, the project “seems to the radar in the political agenda of the government” due to the “apparent insuccess of the vent of 2021, the Karashor depression is almost empty.

## Beyond the Golden Age Lake

At a 19 February 2021 conference on the state of agriculture in the country, Berdimuhan [suggested](#) the cleaning and dredging of Turkmen rivers and the maintenance of dams to e supply for irrigation. International organisations have also recognised the importance of action in Turkmenistan: USAID, for instance, has recently [financed](#) the dredging of the M around \$170,000 (approximately £120,000).

In addition to the Golden Age Lake project, the Turkmen activist Farid Tukhbatullin has h wider problems of water governance in the country in [an article](#) for The Third Pole, an on dedicated to the issue of water in Asia. Tukhbatullin mentions the lack of a uniform post-i strategy, water-intensive cotton and wheat crops, and the expansion of irrigation. This is soil salinisation caused by poor maintenance of water collection systems, leaving a snow-salt which greatly reduces crop yield in Turkmenistan and even in neighbouring Uzbekist

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In his article, Tukhbatullin also mentions that localised actions, though helpful and well-ir address symptoms rather than root causes, and thus cannot be a major driver of change. similarly states that what is more necessary is a “coordinated regional action driven by a str political will to cooperate.”

And indeed, the knock-on effects of Turkmenistan’s lack of water collection system main Uzbekistan show the interconnectedness of the region. As Menga told Novastan: “Centra region, stands out as one marked by inextricable interconnections and interdependencies, and I cooperation on regional issues is not beneficial to anyone, and in particular the peoples of Centr be most severely affected by environmental degradation and unequal distribution of resources.’

“Lack of maintenance of shared regional infrastructure has been an issue in Central A... .. e ti the lack of a coordinated approach and long-term agreement to deal with this issue is likely to ti and conflicts in the future,” he added.

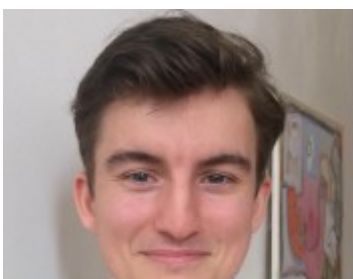
Furthermore, Turkmenistan is a country rich in oil and natural gas, and with the recent significant memorandum of understanding with Azerbaijan, may soon have the possibility to export and reduce its dependency on China and Russia, especially in the global post-corona virus economic resurgence which will see increased production, according to a 2021 [IEA report](#) on methane. The country is dependent on hydrocarbon revenue, and the steep decline in price from 2014 has intensified [food shortages](#).

**Read more:** [Agreement between Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan paves the way for Trans-Caspian Pipeline](#)

The country [aims](#) to stabilise or reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 2030, though a 19% reduction is expected. These targets may be complicated by multiple significant [methane leaks](#) detected. The latest, in February 2021, amounted to an equivalent of 10 tons of methane per hour for multiple hours into the atmosphere. This was equivalent to the emissions of 250,000 tonnes. French energy data analytics firm Kayrros [suggested](#) to Novastan the leak was the result of a slow-down in the hydrocarbon industry due to the coronavirus pandemic.

The rise of Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow's son Serdar to [the post of deputy prime minister](#) and [digitalisation and innovative technologies](#) is a signal of a future transfer of power from father to son. Though it is difficult to speculate on what his environmental and political stance may be, and a lack of comprehensive solutions mean that if he comes to power, Serdar Berdimuhamedow will inherit a fragile environment that will echo the predicament of the entire region.

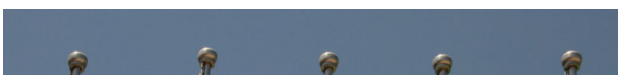
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