



# English Learning for Curious Minds



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## Episode #056

### Turkmenistan

### 22 May, 2020



[00:00:05] Hello, hello, hello, and welcome to English Learning for Curious Minds by Leonardo English, the show where you can listen to weird and wonderful stories and learn fascinating things about the world at the same time as improving your English.

[00:00:23] I'm Alastair Budge and today we are going to be talking about Turkmenistan.

[00:00:31] It is an [authoritarian](#)<sup>1</sup> country in central Asia, ruled by an [eccentric](#)<sup>2</sup> president who recently changed the [constitution](#)<sup>3</sup> so that he could rule for life.

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<sup>1</sup> demanding that people obey completely and refusing to allow them freedom to act as they wish

<sup>2</sup> strange or unusual, sometimes in a humorous way

<sup>3</sup> the set of political principles by which a state or organisation is governed, especially in relation to the rights of the people it governs



## Turkmenistan

[00:00:44] Human Rights Watch called it "one of the world's most isolated and [oppressively](#)<sup>4</sup> governed countries", and it is just a very weird, weird place as we are going to find out today.

[00:00:59] But before we get right into this episode, this is just my chance to remind those of you listening to the podcast on Spotify, iVoox, Apple Podcasts or wherever you may be listening to it, that you can get all of the bonus episodes plus transcripts, key vocabulary and more over on the website, which is [Leonardoenglish.com](http://Leonardoenglish.com).

[00:01:22] From bonus episodes on things like the Royal family and member only Q&A sessions, the next one is coming up on Wednesday the 27th of May by the way, there has never been a better time to become a member and join our growing group of curious minds.

[00:01:41] So if you want to find out more about that, and I certainly hope you do, then the link to go to is [Leonardoenglish.com](http://Leonardoenglish.com).

[00:01:50] Okay then, let's talk about Turkmenistan.

[00:01:55] I guess you have probably never been to Turkmenistan.

[00:02:00] Very few tourists have, and a combination of the fact that it is so hard to get to and the fact that it has this strange or [authoritarian](#) rule has meant that it is pretty unknown to the outside world.

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<sup>4</sup> in a cruel and unfair way that does not allow people the freedom they should have



## Turkmenistan

[00:02:17] It's a relatively small country with under 6 million people, but it is only slightly smaller than Spain in terms of size, of landmass.

[00:02:30] And if you'd have a hard time figuring out exactly where it was on the map, it's directly to the north of Iran, and has a border with Uzbekistan, Afghanistan, and Kazakhstan.

[00:02:46] So it's firmly in this central Asian block of countries that all gained independence from the USSR after the breakup of the Soviet Union, and Turkmenistan got full independence in 1991.

[00:03:05] Since independence, which is what we'll be mainly talking about in today's episode, it has remained a weird, isolated country.

[00:03:17] It was initially governed by a man called Saparmurat Niyazov, who was a North Korean style leader.

[00:03:26] He had a proper [cult of personality](#)<sup>5</sup> and complete, [supreme](#)<sup>6</sup> control over the country.

[00:03:35] With this control he created some [downright](#)<sup>7</sup> bizarre laws for Turkmenistan.

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<sup>5</sup> a situation in which a public figure (such as a political leader) is deliberately presented to the people of a country as a great person who should be admired and loved

<sup>6</sup> having the highest rank, level, or importance

<sup>7</sup> (especially of something bad) extremely or very great



## Turkmenistan

[00:03:44] Some of these might sound completely crazy, but it is worth talking about them in a bit more detail here to give you a bit of an understanding of quite how strange life in this country was under his rule.

[00:04:00] Firstly, Niyazov, the president, was apparently worried about the development of music in Turkmenistan, so he [outlawed](#)<sup>8</sup>, he forbid, [lip-synching](#)<sup>9</sup>, which is when someone at a concert or on TV pretends to speak, and then the real audio track is played in the background.

[00:04:23] He was not a fan of [lip-synching](#).

[00:04:26] He also [banished](#)<sup>10</sup> all dogs from the capital.

[00:04:30] He said that they weren't allowed into the city because, and I quote directly here, of "their [unappealing](#)<sup>11</sup> smell".

[00:04:39] In short, he didn't like the way that dogs smelled, and so he decided that none should be allowed in the capital city.

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<sup>8</sup> not allowed

<sup>9</sup> Performers who lip-sync songs pretend to be singing them when in fact they are just moving their lips

<sup>10</sup> to send someone away, especially from their country, and not allow them to come back

<sup>11</sup> not attractive or interesting



## Turkmenistan

[00:04:48] He had to quit smoking because of a heart condition, but rather than just quit himself, he banned smoking in all public places and said that all government employees also had to quit.

[00:05:06] And finally, he was a very good son, a [doting<sup>12</sup>](#) son, you could say.

[00:05:13] I say this because it seems clear that he loved his mother very much because he got rid of the Turkmen word for bread and replaced it with his mother's name, Gurbansoltan.

[00:05:29] And he wasn't just content to have changed the word for bread to his mother's name - he also changed the word for the month April to his mother's name as well.

[00:05:41] There was even a golden statue of Niyazov that rotated throughout the day to always face the sun, which [allegedly<sup>13</sup>](#) cost \$12 million to make.

[00:05:56] Quite something, right?

[00:05:58] He ruled Turkmenistan with [an iron fist<sup>14</sup>](#) until his sudden death in 2006.

[00:06:07] When he died, there was a bit of a [scramble<sup>15</sup>](#) for power.

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<sup>12</sup> showing that you love someone very much

<sup>13</sup> to say that someone has done something illegal or wrong without giving proof

<sup>14</sup> to control a group of people very firmly, having complete power over everything they do

<sup>15</sup> to compete with other people for something there is very little of



## Turkmenistan

[00:06:12] Unlike in North Korea, for example, where it is clearly a family affair, Niyazov hadn't [designated](#)<sup>16</sup> a successor.

[00:06:24] However, shortly after his death, his deputy prime minister, Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow took over power, and if you, or even if the Turkmen people were expecting a return to normality, then unfortunately that was not to arrive with the rule of Berdimuhamedow.

[00:06:47] The era of the new president, Berdimuhamedow, has proved to be equally strange, albeit in slightly different ways.

[00:06:58] Firstly, we should mention horses, and in particular a special [breed](#)<sup>17</sup> of horse called the Akhal-Teke.

[00:07:07] This breed of horse plays a big role in the life of Berdimuhamedow.

[00:07:13] He is completely mad about them; he has written and published poetry about them and apparently he personally has a collection of 600 different Akhal-Tekes, which is 10% of the world's population, of this particular kind of horse.

[00:07:33] He has even given himself the [nickname](#)<sup>18</sup> " The people's horse [breeder](#)<sup>19</sup>".

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<sup>16</sup> to choose someone officially to do a particular job

<sup>17</sup> a particular type of animal or plant

<sup>18</sup> an informal name for someone or something, especially a name that you are called by your friends or family, usually based on your real name or your character

<sup>19</sup> someone who keeps animals for the purpose of producing young animals in a controlled way



## Turkmenistan

[00:07:37] A horse **breeder** is someone who raises horses.

[00:07:41] And just in case people didn't know how much he loved horses, he, like his **predecessor**<sup>20</sup> decided to build a huge gold statue of himself on a horse that sits on top of a 20 metre high white marble statue in the capital of Turkmenistan, Ashgabat.

[00:08:05] You may have heard his name because he was in the news last year, in 2019, as there were reports that he had died.

[00:08:15] He hadn't been seen for a few weeks, and **rumours**<sup>21</sup> were circulating that he had suddenly died.

[00:08:24] So what did the state TV do to prove to the people that their president had not died?

[00:08:33] You might think, well, they probably just did an interview with him or something like that to make it clear that he was alive and well, but that will be far too normal for Turkmenistan and for Berdimuhamedow.

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<sup>20</sup> someone who had a job or a position before someone else, or something that comes before another thing in time or in a series

<sup>21</sup> an unofficial interesting story or piece of news that might be true or invented, and quickly spreads from person to person



## Turkmenistan

[00:08:50] Instead, state TV broadcast clips of him doing very strange things, including driving a [rally car](#)<sup>22</sup> around a burning hole in the ground, firing a gun while riding a bike, and of course, riding a horse.

[00:09:09] Pretty strange, right? Now, it's [all well and good](#)<sup>23</sup> to just talk about the slightly ridiculous things that the leaders of Turkmenistan have done, and are still doing, but there are a few slightly more serious topics that are worth mentioning here.

[00:09:29] Firstly, it's how Turkmenistan as a country makes money and what this means for its people, specifically right now.

[00:09:41] Turkmenistan is home to the fourth largest natural gas reserves in the world, and it also has a large amount of oil, yet it's still a poor country - the average salary is around \$400 per month, and male life expectancy is just under 65, female life expectancy is a little bit higher.

[00:10:05] Like many countries with a large amount of natural resources, it has struggled to turn this into [prosperity](#)<sup>24</sup> for its people.

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<sup>22</sup> a car that has been specially designed or modified to be used in motor rallies

<sup>23</sup> You say that something is all very well/fine/good if it seems good by itself but you think that there are problems connected with it

<sup>24</sup> the state of being successful and having a lot of money



## Turkmenistan

[00:10:15] And this is, as you may know, pretty common with countries that have large amounts of natural resources, and is called 'the resource curse' or 'the [paradox<sup>25</sup>](#) of plenty'.

[00:10:29] It's a really interesting idea and something that's definitely deserving of its own episode, but the theory goes that for lots of countries, they find that having large amounts of natural resources actually ends up hurting them and harming their development in the long run.

[00:10:49] And it would seem that Turkmenistan is [no exception<sup>26</sup>](#) - it has not managed to turn its [wealth<sup>27</sup>](#) of natural resources into any significant increase in standard of living for its people.

[00:11:04] And in the past few months, things have got even tougher for Turkmenistan and for the Turkmen people.

[00:11:12] When there was the big drop in the oil price in March this year, this had a [knock-on effect<sup>28</sup>](#) for the price that Turkmenistan could get for its natural gas.

[00:11:25] It reduced significantly.

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<sup>25</sup> a situation or statement that seems impossible or is difficult to understand because it contains two opposite facts or characteristics

<sup>26</sup> not different

<sup>27</sup> a large amount of money or valuable possessions that someone has

<sup>28</sup> When an event or situation has a knock-on effect, it causes other events or situations, but not directly



## Turkmenistan

[00:11:28] Because of this, Turkmenistan suddenly didn't have nearly as much money coming into the country, it was running out of foreign currency, of dollars and rubles.

[00:11:41] So the government implemented some pretty [drastic<sup>29</sup>](#) measures and said that all companies had to sell all of their foreign currency to the government at the official rate.

[00:11:55] Now, [note<sup>30</sup>](#) the use of the word 'official' here because Turkmenistan, like several other central Asian countries, has two exchange rates: the official exchange rate and the black market rate, and there is often a big difference between the two.

[00:12:15] In Turkmenistan, if you have a dollar and you exchange that at the official rate, you will get 3.5 of the local currency, the manat.

[00:12:27] But if you find someone who will exchange manat with you on the black market, you can normally get more than 20, so you can get about six times more on the black market.

[00:12:41] The result of this is that these businesses that have to give up their dollars to the government do so at the official rates of course, and they get about a sixth of what they're actually worth, which of course is not popular with the businesses.

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<sup>29</sup> (especially of actions) severe and sudden or having very noticeable effects

<sup>30</sup> pay attention to



## Turkmenistan

[00:13:01] And on another [topical](#)<sup>31</sup> note, Turkmenistan is one of a [handful](#)<sup>32</sup> of countries that have not, as of May the 20th, reported any cases of COVID-19, of coronavirus.

[00:13:16] Now, whether that is due to excellent preparation or the fact that it is one of the most or [authoritarian](#) countries in the world, rated third worst in terms of freedom of the press, that is something that I will leave you to make up your own mind about.

[00:13:34] But it does seem pretty unlikely.

[00:13:38] One final point about Turkmenistan and its leader that is firstly just an interesting story to end on, and secondly, just makes you think quite how bizarre the world can sometimes be is related to the Guinness World Records.

[00:13:56] Now, we actually recently did an episode on the Guinness World Records, it was Episode 52, so if you're interested, then you can go and listen to that one.

[00:14:06] But how this is related to Turkmenistan is that the Guinness World Records makes a lot of money through allowing companies and organisations to pay to get records to promote their products or services.

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<sup>31</sup> of interest at the present time; relating to things that are happening at present

<sup>32</sup> a small number of people or things



## Turkmenistan

[00:14:23] But they also allow countries to pay large amounts of money to get records, and it turns out that the president of Turkmenistan, Berdimuhamedow, is a huge fan of the Guinness World Records.

[00:14:39] The result of this is that Guinness World Records is very happy to take the money to promote Turkmenistan breaking all sorts of really, really strange records.

[00:14:55] These records are so weird that you probably couldn't even imagine them if you tried, but they include the record for the largest architectural image of a star, which is basically just a huge star.

[00:15:11] Then the world's largest statue of a horse head, obviously, because the president loves horses, and the weirdest one for me, which I just can't really believe deserves to be a record, is for the most people in a cycling awareness lesson.

[00:15:30] So a lesson about how to ride a bike safely.

[00:15:34] And it was 3,246 people in that lesson, if you're asking.

[00:15:40] I did have a look at the Guinness Records website, but unfortunately it doesn't say whether they all actually learned anything at this record breaking lesson.

[00:15:51] Of course, that wasn't the point, and I'm sure that Berdimuhamedow was just very happy to have another record to add to his collection.

[00:16:01] It also doesn't say how much Guinness World Records got paid for promoting it, but no doubt it was pretty significant.



## Turkmenistan

[00:16:11] Okay then that is it for this little look at one of the strangest places in the world.

[00:16:20] It doesn't really get much attention, mainly because it isn't very threatening, it's famously [neutral](#)<sup>33</sup>, and so it is just left to be strange and unique on its own.

[00:16:33] But it is quite fascinating to think that there is this entire country, almost the same size as Spain, with a not insignificant population that just exists in this weird, unbelievable state.

[00:16:49] So if you have ever been to Turkmenistan, I would love to know what you thought.

[00:16:55] I've actually been to Uzbekistan, next door, which is quite strange, but I'm told that Turkmenistan is an awful lot weirder.

[00:17:05] So if you have ever been there or even if you haven't, I would love to hear from you.

[00:17:11] The email is [hi hi@leonardoenglish.com](mailto:hihi@leonardoenglish.com).

[00:17:16] And as a final reminder, if you would like all of our podcasts episodes, that's twice as many as you get on the podcast apps and transcripts, key vocabulary, member only Q&A sessions and more then the place to go to is [Leonardoenglish.com](http://Leonardoenglish.com).

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<sup>33</sup> not saying or doing anything that would encourage or help any of the groups involved in an argument or war



## English Learning for Curious Minds | Episode #056

### Turkmenistan

[00:17:35] You've been listening to English Learning for Curious Minds by Leonardo English.

[00:17:40] I'm Alastair Budge, you stay safe and I'll catch you in the next episode.

[END OF PODCAST]

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## Key vocabulary

Word	Definition
<b>Authoritarian</b>	demanding that people obey completely and refusing to allow them freedom to act as they wish
<b>Eccentric</b>	strange or unusual, sometimes in a humorous way
<b>Constitution</b>	the set of political principles by which a state or organisation is governed, especially in relation to the rights of the people it governs
<b>Oppressively</b>	in a cruel and unfair way that does not allow people the freedom they should have
<b>Cult of personality</b>	a situation in which a public figure (such as a political leader) is deliberately presented to the people of a country as a great person who should be admired and loved
<b>Supreme</b>	having the highest rank, level, or importance
<b>Downright</b>	(especially of something bad) extremely or very great
<b>Outlawed</b>	not allowed
<b>Lip synching</b>	Performers who lip-sync songs pretend to be singing them when in fact they are just moving their lips



**Turkmenistan**

**Banished** to send someone away, especially from their country, and not allow them to come back

**Unappealing** not attractive or interesting

**Doting** showing that you love someone very much

**Allegedly** to say that someone has done something illegal or wrong without giving proof

**An iron fist** to control a group of people very firmly, having complete power over everything they do

**Scramble** to compete with other people for something there is very little of

**Designated** to choose someone officially to do a particular job

**Breed** a particular type of animal or plant

**Nickname** an informal name for someone or something, especially a name that you are called by your friends or family, usually based on your real name or your character

**Breeder** someone who keeps animals for the purpose of producing young animals in a controlled way

**Predecessor** someone who had a job or a position before someone else, or something that comes before another thing in time or in a series



**Turkmenistan**

**Rumours** an unofficial interesting story or piece of news that might be true or invented, and quickly spreads from person to person

**Rally car** a car that has been specially designed or modified to be used in motor rallies

**All well and good** You say that something is all very well/fine/good if it seems good by itself but you think that there are problems connected with it

**Prosperity** the state of being successful and having a lot of money

**Paradox** a situation or statement that seems impossible or is difficult to understand because it contains two opposite facts or characteristics

**No exception** not different

**Wealth** a large amount of money or valuable possessions that someone has

**Knock-on effect** When an event or situation has a knock-on effect, it causes other events or situations, but not directly

**Drastic** (especially of actions) severe and sudden or having very noticeable effects

**Note** pay attention to

**Topical** of interest at the present time; relating to things that are happening at present



**Handful** a small number of people or things

**Neutral** not saying or doing anything that would encourage or help any of the groups involved in an argument or war

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