By 10am on a rainy Sunday morning in lower Manhattan, only two activists attending a protest against Turkmenistan’s government had arrived at the designated start point, across the street from the 9/11 Museum.

“I’m sorry,” said Zara Hayyt, one of the organizers. “I’m not sure how familiar you are with Central Asian people, but sometimes they run late.”

But within a few short minutes, everyone had appeared, and the obviousness of an impending protest was enough to attract the attention of a couple security guards from nearby buildings. Soon, enormous Turkmen flags were being hoisted, as well as a large “Wanted” poster of Turkmenistan’s dictator, Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow (“reward from the Turkmen people: unlimited amount of plov”).

Despite the fact that the rain and the pandemic ensured a live audience of precisely no one, the protestors understood that their real audience was elsewhere: the Turkmen diaspora all over the West. Speeches were recorded decrying the government’s incompetent responses to COVID-19, recent natural disasters, and the dire economic situation—but also directly exhorting fellow Turkmens to raise their voices.

“If not you, then no one else will save your country,” said Hayyt, addressing the diaspora in Russian.

The most remarkable thing about the protest, however, was that it happened at all. Historically, even Turkmens living abroad have been extremely reticent to openly protest their government, for fear of reprisals against family at home.

Another protestor, who shared only her first name, Shirin, addressed this issue head-on in her English-language speech. “You guys might be afraid that your family’s security is under risk, but how are you not afraid that they might die from coronavirus, that they might die from hunger?”

In one-on-one conversations with Eurasianet, this was the overwhelming reason that protestors cited for demonstrating now. Yes, it was risky to loved ones to be seen protesting. But between the unacknowledged pandemic and recent physical and economic devastation, the situation at home was dire enough that inaction seemed worse.

One of the last straws, for some, was religious. Olga Charyeva, another of the organizers, railed against the [flattening of graves](https://eurasianet.org/turkmenistan-hiding-from-satellites) of possible COVID victims in Lebap province to make them less visible—a bitter insult, she said, to Islam and grieving Muslims.

Whatever their personal reasons for demonstrating, this represented the first time many Turkmen activists in New York moved out from politically-oriented YouTube channels and anonymous Facebook groups, where contact info is obscured and members may not even know each other’s names, into the open.

Now that they had, the mood was convivial and broad-minded. Protestors embraced other post-Soviet movements, with some carrying placards in favor of Belarus. When the protest moved from lower Manhattan next to the United Nations building, the Turkmen protest merged with a group demonstrating for environmental preservation in Russian Bashkortostan, with both groups holding aloft each others’ slogans.

Fear of reprisal was certainly not the dominant emotion. But it was never far from the surface. As one activist joked, remarking on increasingly lax mask-wearing as the day wore on, “we’re not doing a very good job of hiding our identities.” She, like most, wouldn’t share her name.