

Dismantling Totalitarianism? Turkmenistan under Berdimuhamedow

Slavomír Horák
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The Central Asia-Caucasus Institute
Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies
1619 Massachusetts Ave. NW, Washington, D.C. 20036
Tel. +1-202-663-7723; Fax. +1-202-663-7785
E-mail: caciz@jhu.edu

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The Silk Road Studies Program
Institute for Security and Development Policy
V. Finnbodavägen 2, SE-13130 Stockholm-Nacka
E-mail: info@silkroadstudies.org

Editorial correspondence should be addressed to Svante E. Cornell, Research and Publications Director, at either of the addresses above (preferably by e-mail).

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Executive Summary

The death of Saparmyrat Nyýazow (also referred to as Türkmenbaşy the Great), officially announced on December 21, 2006, marked the end of one of the most repressive regimes of the twenty-first century. For one and a half decades, and since Turkmenistan gained independence in 1991, President Türkmenbaşy concentrated in his hands all constitutional as well as informal powers within the country. His rule also deeply affected the overall political culture in Turkmenistan. In the first few weeks after his passing, analysts hoped that at least partial liberalization of both politics and society would follow. Some initial steps of the new leadership headed by Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow, the vice-chairman of the cabinet of ministers under Türkmenbaşy, supported such optimism as the most bizarre aspects of Türkmenbaşy's rule were gradually dismantled. The following analysis, however, claims that as the new regime stabilized, it became more and more focused on the figure of the new leader. It is thus difficult to conclude at this stage that the character of the post-Nyýazow regime in Turkmenistan has undergone liberalization in any meaningful sense of the term.

More than two years have now passed since Berdimuhamedow took power in Turkmenistan, and the initial uncertainty has now shifted towards a more fully consolidated system. The provisional leadership developed basic transition mechanisms already before the presidential election of February 11, 2007. At that time, it appeared as if the Berdimuhamedow government would be more oligarchic in nature, and the orchestrated election campaign subtly hinted at a possible liberalization of the generally repressive system. At the same time, the fact that the political process was still controlled by people close to the deceased Türkmenbaşy indicated the very limitations of such a contention. After he was elected, Berdimuhamedow's first task was to constitute and stabilize his own system of government. Elite structures were reshuffled and potential contenders or challengers to the rule of the new president were eliminated. It became apparent that relatives and natives of

his region would play a more important role than was the case with his predecessor. The new president gradually became a real leader with undisputed supreme authority and a broad base of loyal clients. Frequent purges of senior government officials prevented the formation of internal opposition. Ethnic Turkmens became more prominent within the state administration, but foreign (mostly Russian) advisors to the late Türkmenbaşy maintained their positions. Institutional changes followed the consolidation of the new elites and the settlement of their informal power relations. The constitutional amendment adopted in 2008 was essential in this respect, as it simplified the decision-making process and at the same time concentrated power in the hands of the new president.

In order to gradually distance itself from the Türkmenbaşy era, the current government has sought to develop a new ideology. Even though several aspects of the old ideological system (e.g. the worship of the “holy book” of *Ruhnama*) remain in place, the personality cult of the deceased president has been suppressed over time. The Berdimuhamedow government invented the concept of the “Great Renaissance” era of Turkmenistan, following the “Golden Age of the Turkmens” promoted under Türkmenbaşy. The growing personality cult of the new president Berdimuhamedow slowly became the cornerstone of the new Turkmen ideology. He, the “Great Reformer,” has since then been officially addressed as “Founding Father and Leader of the Great Renaissance” era.

Whereas domestic policy underwent mostly cosmetic changes which did not affect the autocratic nature of the system, Turkmenistan’s foreign policy differs markedly from the Türkmenbaşy era. President Berdimuhamedow became very active in this area, strengthening relations with all relevant partners and in all directions. Cooperation with Russia remained a priority, especially with respect to the energy sector. At the same time, regional ties with other Central Asian countries expanded and relations were re-established with states of the Southern Caucasus. Contacts with China were greatly enhanced as well with the construction of the Turkmenistan-China gas pipeline. Mutual visits and consultations with the United States and Europe also became more frequent. This flurry of diplomatic activity by the new president sparked once again a heightened interest in Turkmenistan abroad. The energy sector attracts the most attention, but unlike under the

old regime, cooperation in investment and trade and other areas also increased. More profound integration into the norms and rules of the international system is, however, still to come.

As regards social conditions and social policies, these are often neglected in foreign publications on Turkmenistan; which is understandable given the primacy of the energy sector in the interests of outside actors. These are nevertheless highly relevant as they clearly demonstrate the heavy-handed, non-democratic nature of the government in Turkmenistan, even after several attempts to implement reforms were taken. This paper analyzes changes in education, health care, and state-media relations, which were the three sectors singled out as priorities in the election campaign of Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow in 2006/2007. As it turns out, lack of financial resources and qualified personnel as well as the prevalent mindset of the ruling elite preclude any substantial progress in these areas. After a promising start, most reforms were hampered by the gross inefficiency, systemic corruption, and clientelism of the state bureaucracy.

The *Türkmenbaşy* regime severely restricted access to education and the curriculum of schools. As a result, for an entire generation of citizens, education consisted primarily of memorizing the “holy book” of *Ruhnama* and other writings of its author, the president himself. Thousands of qualified teachers have left the profession, which together with a dilapidating school infrastructure contributed to a serious crisis within the educational system. President Berdimuhamedow undertook several reforms like increasing the mandatory schooling years, renewal of postgraduate studies, and reopening of the Academy of Sciences. However, a lack of educators and absence of adequate educational opportunities persist as serious systemic problems. Moreover, high-profile initiatives like the buying of computers or introduction of Internet and multimedia instruction in classrooms often prove counterproductive, as they tend to absorb resources needed to tackle the most serious challenges in the educational sector: collapsing school buildings, lack of textbooks, or grossly underpaid teachers.

The situation is similar with respect to health care, which was largely inaccessible in many parts of Turkmenistan under *Türkmenbaşy*. This sector is also subject to extensive corruption and clientelism. Use of illicit drugs is rampant within Turkmenistan, but authorities are either unable or unwilling

to adequately address this problem. Senior members of the state bureaucracy and security apparatus are very likely complicit in the lucrative drug-trafficking business, which limits the potential for positive changes and meaningful efforts in counter-narcotics.

Despite his election campaign promises, the liberalization of media and removal of internet restrictions did not become a priority of the new president. Censorship was not lifted in any substantial way. After years of isolation, foreign periodicals are slowly becoming available within Turkmenistan, but only a select number of trusted people within the state bureaucracy have access to them. Journalists are still fired from their jobs and prosecuted for presenting views inconsistent with the regime and its ideology. Even though several Internet cafés have opened in the major cities of Turkmenistan, government control over the Internet remains strong and has in some respect further intensified. Moreover, prohibitively expensive fees restrict wider access to telecommunication services.

This analysis allows us to conclude that while the new Berdimuhamedow leadership may seek to distance itself somewhat from the deceased Türkmenbaşy, it is in many ways held captive by his legacy. Turkmen elites as well as the general population were deeply affected by the long Türkmenbaşy rule on many levels. The current regime has only limited incentive to change the prevalent mindset and attitudes, as these contribute to social stability in Turkmenistan. At the same time, the new Berdimuhamedow government has been successful in creating an image of greater openness for an outside audience. Repressive yet stable political systems do not deter pragmatic outside players to the same degree as unstable ones. Rather, the key players interested in Turkmenistan's vast energy resources have so far demonstrated willingness to curry favor with the ruling elites.

Introduction

When Saparmyrat Nyýazow's death was officially announced on December 21, 2006, it was perceived by many as the end of one of the harshest political systems of the twenty-first century. Türkmenbaşy (Head of the Turkmen), as Nyýazow liked to be referred to as, autocratically ruled post-Soviet Turkmenistan since independence in 1991. Turkmenistan under Türkmenbaşy came in many ways close to the totalitarian ideal as elaborated by theorists of non-democratic regimes. There were hopes that Türkmenbaşy's passing would open a chance for at least a partial transformation of both the politics and society of Turkmenistan. The initial statements by the republic's new leadership regarding their commitment to abolish some of the most egregious aspects of Turkmenistan's social and political life fueled an optimism of future developments in the country. However, the people who came to power after Türkmenbaşy's death were closely associated with the previous regime. Their acquired habits and codes of conduct have proven difficult to change, at least in the short run. The preconditions for a genuine transformation of the regime towards greater openness were thus virtually absent. At minimum, expectations have centered on a shift from totalitarianism towards a softer authoritarian form of government. With respect to prevailing political tradition it was easy, however, to anticipate that the new president, Berdimuhamedow, would fill the role as the "leader of the nation," thus becoming the new cornerstone of the political system. What remained unclear at first was the extent to which his figure and persona would serve as a symbolic instrument in the hands of the wider oligarchic elite.

The following study¹ examines the main aspects of the new government headed by Berdimuhamedow by surveying the politics, foreign policy, and

¹ This paper is a result of the Research Intent No. MSM0021620841 administered by the Faculty of Social Sciences, Charles University in Prague. The body of the text was finished in January 2008. Subsequent amendments during the editing process focused

relevant social policies of post-Nyýazow Turkmenistan. By focusing primarily on domestic issues, this study explores the contrast between promised and actual changes that have recently occurred in Turkmenistan's public life. For this reason the primary analytical focus is not the national economy, though we could not omit developments in the energy sector when analyzing Turkmenistan's external relations. The focus on domestic issues distinguishes our work from some of the earlier studies on post-Nyýazow Turkmenistan.² We are convinced that the passing of more than two years since Türkmenbaşı's death is sufficient to identify some of the main features of the new regime as it has already stabilized. From this standpoint, we can also attempt to assess Turkmenistan's prospects under the new Berdimuhamedow leadership.

The research for this study is based on both official and unofficial materials and sources. Whereas official sources are clearly identifiable, have standard form, and are readily accessible, other materials are available only through the Internet. We remain aware of the dangers of using such information. All political groups and agencies that report on Turkmenistan present their own perceptions, or misperceptions, of the republic's developments. Verifying such information is practically impossible, especially due to continuing travel restrictions, which is one of the main problems for researchers focusing on Turkmenistan. The power shifts within the elite are especially difficult to verify since this political arena is essentially closed to outsiders.

The authors of this study were denied entry into Turkmenistan. This complicated the already difficult verification of data and facts included in

primarily on correcting factual omissions as well as updating the presented arguments with current developments. Both authors would like to thank in particular Jiří Vykoukal, the director of the Institute for International Studies at the Faculty of Social Sciences, Charles University for institutionally supporting the research required for this paper. Special thanks go to Hana Klamková and Kryštof Kozák for their invaluable help with translation into English as well as with the final editing. It goes without saying that all factual mistakes, omissions as well as errors of judgment are the sole responsibility of the authors.

² Stephen Blank, *Turkmenistan and Central Asia after Niyazov* (Carlisle: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, September 2007); *Turkmenistan after Niyazov*, Asia Policy Briefing no. 60 (Brussels: International Crisis Group, February 2007). Other issues such as human rights are analyzed more precisely by Human Rights Watch in a report entitled "Human Rights Reform in Turkmenistan. Rhetoric or Reality," November 3, 2007, <http://hrw.org/backgrounders/eca/turkmenistan1107/turkmenistan1107web.pdf>.

this study. However, this was partly compensated for by relying on experiences from extensive field trips and research projects carried out in Turkmenistan between 2000 and 2005. Furthermore, interviews and expert consultations with Moscow-based journalists and NGO employees were also conducted who have their own sources in Turkmenistan, and who kindly shared their information with us. Considering the sensitivity of these consultations, we have used “Chatham House Rules,” meaning that the acquired data is used but that the specific source of information is not disclosed.

As no consistent system for transliteration of Turkmen names into English exists, we have chosen to present the names as they are written in the Latin alphabet in Turkmenistan.

Domestic Politics

Much has been written about Turkmenistan under Türkmenbaşy's reign.³ However, when reporting on Turkmenistan, foreign media have focused primarily on describing the bizarre ideas of the late Nyýazow. Even the academic world did not pay systematic attention to Turkmenistan's domestic situation and thus failed to provide deeper insights into the very essence of the Türkmenbaşy regime. Post-Soviet Turkmenistan came very close to the totalitarian ideal, fulfilling the usual defining features of a pervasive state ideology, highly repressive state apparatus, monopoly on power by one political party, total control of the media, and command economy, all capped with a hegemonic central figure manifested in the first and lifelong president, Saparmyrat Nyýazow.

At the institutional level, President Türkmenbaşy had all the key competences in Turkmenistan. As president-for-life, he was at the top of a political system with extremely strong presidential powers, which were by no means limited to the executive branch. In addition, Türkmenbaşy was life head of Turkmenistan's supreme collective body called the People's Council, or *Halk Maslahaty*. This body contained all three main branches of government—the executive, legislative, and judiciary. Furthermore, Türkmenbaşy presided for life over several extra-constitutional but nonetheless symbolically influential public organizations, for instance the State Council of Elders (*Ýasulular Döwlet maslahaty*), the Turkmenistan Nationwide Revival Movement (*Türkmenistanyn Umumymilli Galkynys hereketi*), and the World Turkmen Humanitarian Association (*Dünýä türkmenlerinin gumanitar birlesigi*).

³ For perhaps the best comprehensive works on post-Soviet Turkmenistan, see Sergei Demidov: *Postsovetskii Turkmenistan* (Moskva: Natalis, 2002) and Shokhrat Kadyrov, "Natsiia" plemen. *Etnicheskie istoki, transformatsiia, perspektivy gosudarstvennosti v Turkmenistane* (Moskva: Rossiiskaia Akademiia Nauk, 2003).

Transformation of the regime seemed inevitable in the wake of Türkmenbaşy's death given the strongly personalized nature of political power. The character of the transformation, however, depended heavily on the personality of the new leader. The weakening of the bizarre personality cult of Saparmyrat Türkmenbaşy was also expected to take place, as part of the dismantling of the former system. The extent of this process and continuation of personality cult of the new leader nevertheless are indicative of the nature of the new regime. The following chapter on domestic politics in Turkmenistan covers the transformation of political elites in the context of the de-ideologization of the old regime and formation of new ideological paradigms.

Elites during Türkmenbaşy's Rule

Türkmenbaşy's cadre policy influenced the composition and outlook of Turkmen elites even after the life-long ruler himself had passed away. Türkmenbaşy belonged to the key tribal group known as Ahal Tekke, the principal informal elite body in late Soviet Turkmenistan. This was an advantage for his orchestrated election to the post of the first secretary of the Communist Party of the Turkmen SSR in late 1985; in reality, his appointment by Gorbachev did not significantly alienate the elites in Aşgabat. In post-1991 Turkmenistan, two main factors—the fact that Türkmenbaşy operated outside the main influential groups, and his eccentric personality—facilitated establishment of an extremely centralized regime with a pervasive personality cult. Türkmenbaşy was an orphan and had a Russian-Jewish wife, which meant that in spite of his belonging to Ahal Tekke, he was not affiliated with traditional Turkmen tribal networks. Thus, he was not expected to act as a patron bound by the unwritten laws of lending support to his own clients. As a consequence, Türkmenbaşy's power over Turkmen elites was absolute.

When examining the elites under Türkmenbaşy, the president's prime concern with limiting the number of people with access to power is evident. In this way, Türkmenbaşy, who lived under constant fear of being overthrown, eradicated his prospective competitors. People who *only seemed* to have the ability to endanger his position were removed in increasingly harsh ways. In the early 1990s when the post-Soviet regime in newly

independent Turkmenistan was still consolidating, they were simply sent into retirement or given “harmless” ambassadorial posts. But towards the end of Türkmenbaşy’s one-man rule the persecution of “traitors from within” became more frequent as well as more intense. Türkmenbaşy’s putative challengers from within the inner circle were usually sentenced to many years of imprisonment, had their property confiscated, and saw their relatives harassed as well.

Türkmenbaşy progressively acted in this manner, particularly following a major purge at the National Security Committee (the Soviet KGB successor organization) in the spring of 2002. This purge deeply affected the secret services’ leadership together with its chief, Muhammet Nazarow. Other extensive purges in the government were carried out in 2005, when the former vice-chairman of the cabinet of ministers, Ýolly Gurbanmyradow, was jailed together with Rejep Saparow, the by then feared chief of the Presidential Administration. Saparow had been a long-time ally and henchman of Türkmenbaşy ever since the 1980s. One of the last high-profile trials under Türkmenbaşy concerning the elite (apart from decimation of any genuine opposition) occurred after prosecutor general Gurbanbibi Atajanowa was relieved of her duties and subsequently jailed in the spring of 2006. Atajanowa had been at the forefront of the biggest wave of state terror in Turkmenistan so far, unleashed after a reported assassination attempt on President Türkmenbaşy on November 25, 2002. She is believed to have kept at her disposal a large amount of compromising material on important members of the Turkmen elite, which eventually proved fatal for her, once she was no longer deemed useful for the ruling regime.⁴

Following these purges, only a very limited group of people had the power, information, and contacts needed to influence President Türkmenbaşy. The presidential guard, headed by General Akmyrat Rejepow, soon became the strongest power structure in Turkmenistan. Rejepow’s people oversaw the work of other security agencies towards the end of Türkmenbaşy’s rule. Agageldi Mämmetgeldiýew was the defense minister, Geldimuhamet Asyrmuhammedow held the top position in the security ministry, and Akmämmet Rahmanow was the minister of interior. The prosecutor general

⁴ Slavomír Horák, “Rumbles in the Turkmen Elite,” *Central Asia and the Caucasus* 8, no. 9 (2006): 7-8.

Muhammetguly Ogsukow was also associated with this group. Rejepow seems to have been instrumental in the process of choosing the new head of state to replace the deceased Türkmenbaşy in late 2006. Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow, until then a long-standing minister of health and pharmaceutical industry, a vice-chairman of the cabinet of ministers, and reportedly the late president's personal doctor, presumably belonged to Rejepow's clients. Berdimuhamedow was known as the person responsible for overseeing the forced resettlement from the Lebap and Dasoguz border areas into the Garagum desert as part of a dubious land-reclaiming scheme devised by Türkmenbaşy in 2002, the racial subtext of which raised concerns within the international community.⁵ Berdimuhamedow was the only minister in the Turkmen government who kept his office for many years while receiving only sporadic criticism from the president.⁶ This is indicative of the protection that only Rejepow could have provided by the end of Türkmenbaşy's rule.

Aside from ethnic Turkmen elite structures, other people around Türkmenbaşy played very important roles. Alexander Zhadan, Vladimir Umnov, and Viktor Khramov, who formed the closest circle of advisors to the late president, worked officially in the Presidential Administration. Zhadan is believed to possess extensive knowledge about Türkmenbaşy's cash flows on his personal accounts. In other words, he was probably the only man who had access to data concerning the assets of the late president. Umnov, for his part, was mainly in charge of cadre policy. Since the 1980s, Khramov had been responsible for propaganda and ideology. Moreover, Khramov was instrumental in establishing and promoting the personality cult of President Türkmenbaşy, with all its extravagant features such as the

⁵ For Türkmenbaşy's decrees on that matter, see *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, November 19, 2002, and January 4, 2003. See also "OSCE Rapporteur's Report on Turkmenistan." By Prof. Emmanuel Decaux, ODIHR.GAL/15/03, March 12, 2003; and United Nations. International Convention On the Elimination Of all Forms of Racial Discrimination. Consideration of reports submitted by States parties under Article 9 of the Convention. Concluding observations of the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination. Turkmenistan. CERD/C/TKM/CO/5. August 19, 2005. Between 2003 and 2005 the UN General Assembly also expressed grave concern in separate resolutions on the situation of human rights in Turkmenistan, particularly at the continued discrimination of ethnic minorities by the Turkmenistan government, including forced displacements.

⁶ *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, November 15, 2003.

“Holy Book” of *Ruhnama*. These persons did not form part of the ethnic Turkmen elite; on the contrary, they—being of Russian, or Russian-Jewish, origin—were, in a sense, foreign elements. Analogous to *Türkmenbaşy* himself, they did not make use of traditional ties and obligations that would have resulted from their social standing. Thus, they were not involved in the traditional Turkmen patron-client networks.

Had the country’s elite been broader and more heterogeneous, *Türkmenbaşy*’s death could have caused internal disputes. These could even have developed into violent clashes. However, during the initial period after December 21, 2006, there were few indications of disagreements within the elite concerning the prospective political course in Turkmenistan. The privileged few, who seized power, associated with the State Security Council (*Döwlet Howpsuzlyk Genesi*), promptly came to an agreement, which was one of the main underlying factors behind the peaceful transition of power after *Türkmenbaşy*’s death.

The Transitional Period following *Türkmenbaşy*’s Death

The cause of death of the first president of Turkmenistan has given rise to much speculation; while *Türkmenbaşy* may have died of natural causes after long-term health problems, as the official version claims, the possibility that his death was not natural also exists. By now, in terms of Turkmenistan’s stability, the question is of little practical value, as the transition has already taken place and the new regime is fairly stable. What matters, however, is that the new leadership represents a direct, personal continuation of the *Türkmenbaşy* era. There is only one difference between the previous and the present authority: the latter lacks strong external patronage. While *Nyýazow* was installed and afterwards also backed by Moscow, especially at the beginning of his rule, *Berdimuhamedow* draws support primarily from domestic sources.

Acting President *Berdimuhamedow* embodied the new authority for the outside. *Berdimuhamedow* was one of *Türkmenbaşy*’s closest associates, and as such, he could have approached the “Eternally Great Leader” even at his deathbed. Both power centers, the *siloviki* (security apparatus) and the Presidential Administration, also belonged to this privileged category. The transitional period proved that members of the power-wielding elite

demonstrated a sense of pragmatism and that they were both able and willing to cooperate when it came to keeping their lucrative positions. When Berdimuhamedow replaced the deceased Türkmenbaşy, these leaders managed to handle several crucial tasks in the post-Nyýazow environment with the aim of remaining in power.

The first and foremost concern of the new leadership of Turkmenistan was to keep the population under control. Soon after Türkmenbaşy's death, the current elite needed to maintain rigid public order throughout the country. Steps like closing of borders, tightening restrictions on movement, and putting the armed forces on a state of high alert were taken immediately after Türkmenbaşy's death. In this way, the elite averted any possible public displays of euphoria following Niyazov's death. The appointment of Türkmenbaşy's successor also went smoothly. As mentioned earlier, only a very limited group of people remained members of the top state apparatus because of the frequent purges. This narrow group was able to agree on Türkmenbaşy's successor without any major interference. Adherence to constitutional provisions did not play a decisive role in this process.

At the same time, the new leadership proved capable of preventing competing centers of power from mobilizing. Immediately after Türkmenbaşy's death was made public, leaders of opposition parties scattered around the world announced their intention to return to their homeland, compete for power, and push for democratic reforms. Though they made several attempts to enter Turkmenistan, all their efforts eventually failed. Turkmenistan's land borders have been closed to all exile opposition members since the 1990s. The opposition members based in Moscow chartered an airplane to Aşgabat but this was reportedly denied permission to enter Turkmenistan's air space.⁷ Soon thereafter, two opposition leaders, Nurmuhamet Hanamow and Hudaýberdi Orazow, met in Kiev to gain the support of Ukraine's democratic forces, but this attempt also proved unsuccessful.

Thus, the new rulers in Aşgabat had few problems to worry about with respect to the opposition in exile. Not only were they able to bar all

⁷ "Turkmenskoi oppozitsii ne dali desantirovat'sia v Ashkhabad na charternom reise," *Moskovskii Komsomolets*, December 23, 2006.

opposition leaders running for offices on formal grounds (the exiled politicians do not meet the constitutional requirement of having a permanent residency in Turkmenistan), but they also benefited from the fractionalization of the opposition. The exiled groups proved unable to nominate a single leader ready to challenge Berdimuhamedow in the upcoming presidential elections. While the Sweden-based Watan movement proposed Hudaýberdi Orazow for president during the first days following the announcement of Türkmenbaşı's death, the Moscow United Opposition of Turkmenistan eventually announced the candidacy of Nurberdi Nurmämmedow, a Turkmen dissident living in Aşgabat.⁸ Several days later, some of Hanamow's previous supporters from the exile-based Republican Party began to oppose him, further fragmenting the opposition movement.⁹ Moreover, in the spring of 2007, the head of the United Opposition of Turkmenistan, Awdy Kulyýew, died in Oslo, and with him the ruling regime in Aşgabat lost another outspoken critic.¹⁰ Though Kulyýew's influence within the exiled opposition had steadily diminished during the last few years, his death significantly weakened the position of all the groups opposing Berdimuhamedow.¹¹

The immediate legitimization of power achieved with the help of quasi-constitutional mechanisms illustrated the efficiency with which the post-Nyýazow elite reacted to Türkmenbaşı's death. According to the constitution in force at the time, in the event that the president was dead or for other reasons not capable of executing his duties, presidential powers

⁸ "Ob"edinennaia turkmenskaia oppozitsiia Turkmenistana vydvigaet svoim kandidatom v prezidenty Turkmenistana predsedatelia demokraticeskogo dvizheniia Agzybirlik Nurberdy Nurmammedova," *Erkin Türkmenistan*, December 27, 2006, <http://erkin.net/index.php?newsid=130>.

⁹ See the public statement of Sapar Yklymow, the co-chairman of the exile Republican Party of Turkmenistan, *Dogry Ýol*, December 31, 2006, <http://www.dogryyolcom/article/7038.html>.

¹⁰ Bruce Pannier, "Exile Opposition Leader Kuliev Dies At 71," *RFERL*, April 10, 2007.

¹¹ The illegal return of Gülgeldi Annanyýazow, an exile living in Norway, to Turkmenistan in 2008 became the most visible step of Turkmen dissent. Once in Turkmenistan, he was immediately arrested and put into jail. Cf. "Turkmenistan: Free Dissident Arrested on Return Home," Human Rights Watch, News Release June 25 2008, <http://www.hrw.org/en/news/2008/06/24/turkmenistan-free-dissident-arrested-return-home>.

were to be transferred to the chairman of the parliament (*Mejlis*).¹² Accordingly, with Türkmenbaşy's death the then parliament chairman, Öwezgeldi Ataýew, should have automatically become the acting president of Turkmenistan based on these constitutional provisions. However, a fear existed within the elite that Ataýew could become too independent, a prospect which the post-Nyýazow leadership wanted to prevent. In order to remove him, the prosecutor general quickly brought fabricated charges against him, on the basis of which Ataýew was removed from his office on the very same day. Since the People's Council session convened at very short notice and announced several groundbreaking constitutional changes, it became no longer necessary to look for a new chairman of the parliament. Accordingly, two thousand five hundred members of the People's Council unanimously adopted two key laws during its extraordinary session of December 26, 2006. The first one contained amendments to the constitution. The second was a law on electing the president. It was significant that until that day, no such law had existed in Turkmenistan. Such a legal norm was deemed redundant since a resolution from 1999 proclaimed Türkmenbaşy president for life, and the prospect of the "Eternally Great" leader's demise was too terrible to contemplate publicly.

On December 26, 2006, only four articles of the constitution were amended by the People's Council of Turkmenistan, but three of those were of crucial importance. First, according to the second paragraph of article 50, the State Security Council was now empowered to convene the People's Council (it is this institution that was to decide on holding presidential elections) in case the president was incapable of fulfilling his duties. Thus, the steps taken by the elite group associated with the State Security Council immediately after Türkmenbaşy's death were legalized, at least retrospectively. In this context, it is noteworthy that the State Security Council hitherto did not appear in the constitution at all. Keeping in mind that Akmyrat Rejepow was in control of this council after Türkmenbaşy's death, speculation soon arose that

¹² For the text of the Turkmenistan Constitution that was in force until December 26, 2006, see *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, November 14, 2005.

this new constitutional provision empowered Rejepow to oust Berdimuhamedow from office in the event of a conflict between them.¹³

Second, because of Berdimuhamedow, Article 51 of the constitution was amended as well. Since the designated president could not have met the lower age limit of fifty-five for the would-be heads of the People's Council, necessary amendments were made to the constitution. The lower age limit was set to forty and the upper age limit to seventy. This change indicated that the new head of the People's Council would be Berdimuhamedow himself, an assumption that was eventually confirmed at the subsequent session of the People's Council on March 30, 2007.¹⁴ Moreover, in order to prevent other opposition members from aspiring to this office, the constitutional provision requiring permanent residency in Turkmenistan and employment in government institutions was raised from ten to fifteen years.

Third, Article 60 of the constitution of Turkmenistan was rewritten in order to correspond to the current situation and tailored to suit Berdimuhamedow's eligibility for office. According to the new phrasing of this article, should the president no longer be capable of fulfilling his duties, the State Security Council was not only entitled to convene the People's Council, but it also had the mandate to appoint an acting head of state; this post became newly reserved for vice-chairmen of the cabinet of ministers. This also amounted to the retrospective quasi-legalization of steps already undertaken when Berdimuhamedow assumed office instead of Ataýew. Likewise, the provision according to which the acting head of state could not run for the presidential office was discarded from the constitution.¹⁵

The Law "On Electing the President of Turkmenistan" adopted on December 26, 2006, together with the abovementioned constitutional amendment, implemented the general guidelines formulated in the

¹³ For one of the first analyses of the existing situation, see Choushir Toppyev, "Glavnym' v Turkmenistane po novoi konstitutsii stal Akmurad Redzhepov," *Turkmenskaia iskra*, December 27, 2006, <http://www.tm-iskra.org/news2006/Akmurad-1.htm>.

¹⁴ "Postanovlenie Khalk Maslakhaty Turkmenistana 'Ob izbranii Prezidenta Turkmenistana Gurbanguly Mialikgulyevicha Berdymukhammedova Predsedatelem Khalk Maslakhaty Turkmenistana'," *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, March 31, 2007.

¹⁵ For the text of the constitutional law on changes and additions to the Constitution of Turkmenistan, see *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, December 27, 2006.

constitution regarding the general elections. This particular act specified that it was the People's Council that was to call the election and set up the Central Electoral Commission. The right to approve a presidential candidate also remained fully within the competency of this institution.¹⁶ While this law made the People's Council formally appear as the highest decision-making body, it had thus far served only as a rubber-stamp for decisions taken in the Presidential Administration. Considering the composition of this body (its members consisted mainly of semi-literate elders), a change of its status as the principal constitutional institution was imminent. Abolishment of the People's Council was eventually the key point of the constitutional reforms approved in 2008.

The provisional period following Türkmenbaşy's death ended with the presidential election on February 11, 2007. For the first time in the history of Turkmenistan, six candidates were introduced during the December 26, 2006 session of the People's Council. The main candidate, however, was Acting President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow, nominated by the Nationwide Revival movement and symbolically also representing the Mary Region (*welaýat*). The latter was considered particularly insulting for the Mary Tekke, as he has no connection to this region whatsoever.¹⁷ Both the election campaign and the steps that followed immediately afterwards resembled a well-staged effort to promote the new leader. Within this framework, the remaining candidates were simply a part of this grand spectacle. Their political program did not differ much from that of Berdimuhamedow. There exist credible reports that the Presidential Administration in fact organized the campaign for all the candidates. Furthermore, the pre-election meetings allegedly ran according to a well-designed script and only carefully selected

¹⁶ Cf. "Zakon Turkmenistana 'O vyborakh Prezidenta Turkmenistana'," *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, December 28, 2006.

¹⁷ The other candidates were Amanýaz Atajykow (nominally representing Dasoguz Region), Orazmyrat Garajaýew (Ahal Region), Muhammetnazar Gurbanow (Lebap Region), Isanguly Nuryýew (Aşgabat city), and Asyrnyýaz Pomanow (Balkan Region). For the list of candidates and their short biographies, see *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, December 27, 2006.

groups of employees could attend.¹⁸ People who publicly supported presidential candidates other than Berdimuhamedow lost their jobs.¹⁹

In his campaign, Berdimuhamedow pointed out several priorities for Turkmenistan. His speeches were primarily focused on launching reforms in education, health services, social security, agriculture, and Internet availability. This latter step was designed to symbolize the transformation of Turkmenistan into a modern society and the expected disavowal of the previous regime. However, the election campaign was subject to heavy administrative interference. The inertia of the candidates as well as of voters, together with the general setup of the electoral process, did not offer much hope for anything other than a virtual make-believe campaign. Hence, the election outcome was easy to predict well in advance. Nevertheless, the process itself was significant, as it symbolically legitimized changes made in the transition period after Türkmenbaşy's death. For the outside world, the election was intended to demonstrate Turkmenistan's transformation into a formal democracy. However, with a reported turnout of almost 99 percent and close to 90 percent voting for Berdimuhamedow, the results were typical for non-democratic regimes.²⁰ As was the case under Türkmenbaşy, no independent election observers, for example the OSCE, were allowed to monitor the ballot.

Consolidating the Regime and Institutional Changes

With the new leader of Turkmenistan officially installed, the next question was how Berdimuhamedow would exercise his power. Rapid democratic reforms were not expected; it was clear that rhetorical promises of opening up the regime would be kept only as far as they were advantageous to those in power. The new leadership was acutely aware of Turkmenistan's

¹⁸ "Predvybornaia kampaniia prokhodit po-niiazovski," Institute for War and Peace Reporting, January 17, 2007, http://www.iwpr.net/?p=btm&s=b&o=328521&apc_state=hruh/.

¹⁹ Dadodjan Azimov, "Turkmenistan: What Chance of a Thaw?" Institute for War and Peace Reporting, January 29, 2007, http://www.iwpr.net/?p=rca&s=f&o=328880&apc_state=henprca.

²⁰ According to official sources, the election turnout was 98.65 percent and Berdimuhamedow gained 89.23 percent of all votes. See "Soobshchenie Tsentral'noi komissii po vyboram i provedeniiu referendumov v Turkmenistane 'Ob itogakh vyborov Prezidenta Turkmenistana'," *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, February 15, 2007.

centrifugal tendencies and its factionalized regional groupings. These instabilities and challenges to power would only grow stronger should the regime show any kind of weakness, especially in a critical transition period, which put additional pressure on social and political stability. Institutional changes were adopted in order to help consolidate the new regime.

Thus, after Türkmenbaşy's death, not only was the constitution amended, but new laws were introduced altering Turkmenistan's institutional design. The aforementioned Law "On Electing the President of Turkmenistan" from late 2006 as well as the Law "On the President of Turkmenistan," published in early July 2007, are two examples.²¹ The latter act specifies the functions of the president and, most importantly, it also provides for guarantees of his rights and immunities.²² This law was most probably devised by the current president as a safety mechanism, ensuring stability and also protecting Berdimuhamedow after he leaves office.

Besides, the consolidation of power manifested itself in a swift accumulation of important political functions in the hands of the new president. These political dynamics could be observed not only during the Türkmenbaşy era, but to some extent also in Soviet Turkmenistan. Thus, in March 2007 Berdimuhamedow was quickly elected chairman of the People's Council. Moreover, by October 2007 Berdimuhamedow had also been elected Head of the World Turkmen Humanitarian Association, the Nationwide Revival movement, and the Turkmenistan Democratic Party as well as the national Olympic Committee, to name but a few.²³ Taking into account the traditions of Turkmen deference to leadership, these steps appear necessary to symbolically legitimize his position. However, the influence of the abovementioned public organizations and movements is in fact diminishing, as unlike Türkmenbaşy, Berdimuhamedow does not grant them any special status within his ideological framework.

The most recent reform of the constitution was meant as the obvious next step in removing the institutional deficiencies of the old regime and at the

²¹ "Zakon Turkmenistana 'O Prezidente Turkmenistana'," *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, July 4, 2007.

²² See articles 19 and 20 of the Law on the President of Turkmenistan.

²³ *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, March 2, 2007, March 31, 2007, August 6, 2007, and October 26, 2007.

same time strengthening the position of the current regime. The reform was passed by the People's Council on September 26, 2008. It is officially presented as the pinnacle of Berdimuhamedow's efforts to shift the institutional design towards democratization based on Turkmen national traditions.²⁴ The fact that the constitutional reform is accompanied by the construction of an enormous Monument to the Constitution of Turkmenistan in northern Aşgabat is a clear reminiscence of the Türkmenbaşy era. This grandiose monument is to be 185 meters high, which symbolizes both the date of the promulgation of Turkmenistan's first constitution (18.5.1992) and the number of member states in the United Nations that approved the "historic" General Assembly resolution on the permanent neutrality of Turkmenistan, one of the constitutive features of the national ideology.²⁵ The process of constitutional change also closely followed the political traditions established by Türkmenbaşy. Thousands of citizens supposedly had some input in the process, sending letters with proposals, suggestions, and comments from all across the country. In reality, the process did not become a subject of any public discussion or even interest of the general public.²⁶

The abolishment of the People's Council was the key element in the restructuring of Turkmenistan's institutional design under the new constitution. Its competencies were divided between the president and the parliament. All references to state-sponsored "traditional" organizations like the Nationwide Revival Movement or the State Council of Elders, which also participated in the Halk Maslahaty, were deleted as well. For the first time in the constitutional history of independent Turkmenistan there was an effort to separate the three branches of government. Competencies of the Parliament (*Mejlis*) became defined more clearly, and the number of representatives increased from 65 to 125. At least formally, the parliament was defined as the principle legislative body and potentially also an

²⁴ *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, September 29, 2008. For text of the new Turkmenistan Constitution, see "Konstitutsiia Turkmenistana," *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, September 27, 2008.

²⁵ This monument should also serve as a history museum of independent Turkmenistan. See *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, May 19, 2008.

²⁶ "New Constitution Fails to Spark Debate," Institute for War and Peace Reporting, July 30, 2008, http://www.iwpr.net/?p=btm&s=b&o=345957&apc_state=henbbtmdate20087.

autonomous part of the government. Parliamentary elections are to be held in late 2008 in accordance with the new election law.²⁷

The presidential form of government remained “eternal and permanent” even in the new wording of the constitution. As head of the executive branch, the president still has extensive powers that he does not have to share with anyone. He is still the chairman of the cabinet of ministers that he personally appoints. The power to issue presidential decrees, which have the force of law, has also been preserved in the reformed constitution. There is no term limit for presidents in office. The president moreover acquired from the People’s Council the power to appoint members of the Central Electoral Commission, which allows him to effectively control the overall electoral process and thus prolong his rule indefinitely. To further enhance the powers of the presidency, the president has also recently been able to appoint the regional governors (*häkim*), who are considered to be his personal representatives in the regions. This subtle change only formalized the previous practice, under which local councils supposedly elected their representatives, who were nevertheless in reality chosen by the president.

On the whole, the reformed constitution confirmed the autocratic character of the Berdimuhamedow regime. The new document closely follows political developments in the country after 2006. The new president pragmatically simplified the formal features of the regime, and institutions too closely associated with his predecessor were eliminated as these could interfere in the process of the concentration of political power. Presidential powers were redefined and the president acquired various clearly stipulated competences necessary for long-term rule, thereby precluding the necessity of changing or sidelining the constitution in the future. If everything goes well for Berdimuhamedow, this constitution may well last until the end of his reign.²⁸ However, the specific implementation of constitutional changes is likely to be haphazard and influenced by informal ad hoc measures corresponding to the current political situation. The events of December 2006 clearly demonstrated that changes in the person of the president (whatever their

²⁷ “Zakon Turkmenistana ‘O vyborakh deputatov Medzhliisa Turkmenistana’ (novaia redaktsiia),” *Neitral’nyi Turkmenistan*, October 15, 2008.

²⁸ Shokhrat Kadyrov, “Turkmeniia meniaet konstitutsiiu. No pri étom sozdaet rezervnuii vetv’ vlasti,” *Nezavisimaia gazeta*, September 15, 2008.

cause) could result in significant constitutional modifications, adjusted to the needs of the key players. In this respect, the reform of the constitution, which streamlines the institutional framework, does not offer much hope in terms of the democratization of the regime.

Cadre Policy

When forming his government, Berdimuhamedow proved to be a veritable specialist on cadre policy with sensitivity for traditions. Berdimuhamedow installed mainly members of the leading Ahal Tekke tribal groups into key government positions. A limited number of positions and related spoils were left for the members of the smaller Mary Tekke group.²⁹ However, the influence of Mary Tekke appears to have waned somewhat in the meantime, particularly after the minister of agriculture, Paýzgeldi Meredow, was dismissed and subsequently jailed in the summer of 2007.³⁰ As of today, Mary Tekke members appear mostly as lower-ranking officials without significant political clout.

At the same time, Berdimuhamedow preserved the leadership from the Nyýazow era in the strategic oil and gas sector. Taçberdi Tagyýew (the vice-chairman of the cabinet of ministers in charge of mineral resources) and Garýagdi Taslyýew (the head of the national oil company Turkmenneft'), both originally from the western region of Turkmenistan (Balkan *weláyat*), kept their chief positions in the energy sector. Their influence was diminished somewhat in 2008, when the former head of the Turkme gaz company Ýasgeldi Kakaýew became the key person responsible for all strategic commodities under the newly passed law "On hydrocarbon resources."³¹ Aside from Tagyýew and Taslyýew, Berdimuhamedow re-appointed several high-ranking officials who had been discharged from their positions by Türkmenbaşy's unpredictable cadre policy, but had the luck of not being imprisoned. This involves Jemal Göklenowa who had to leave her

²⁹ Meret Babayev, "The Teke Government of Turkmenistan," *Khronika Turkmenistana*, February 26, 2007. It is possible to place Hydyr Saparlyýew, the minister of education and later the vice-chairman of the cabinet of ministers for education, science, culture, health care, media and civil organizations, among members of the Mary Tekke people.

³⁰ Meredow was believed to be one of the most influential Turkmen "oligarchs" and an informal leader of the Mary Tekke in Aşgabat.

³¹ *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, August 21, 2008.

seat as cabinet vice-chairman in 2002 for a diplomatic position in Turkmenistan's embassy in Moscow. Later, she was director of the state-owned carpet making corporation "Turkmenhaly," and became the minister for textile industry and vice-chairman of the cabinet of ministers. The newly reappointed minister of education Hydyr Sapyrlyýew shared a similar fate. During the years 2005-2007, he served as Turkmenistan's ambassador to Armenia. At the same time, those who had already been sentenced to prison were not given a reprieve by Berdimuhamedow.

In order to create an appearance of continuity, Berdimuhamedow at first preserved those who installed him in office, that is, representatives of the republic's security apparatus. However, from Berdimuhamedow's perspective, these persons were in a position to limit or endanger his leadership. Consequently, from this standpoint it is understandable that the persons who helped Berdimuhamedow to the presidency (and who might know details surrounding Türkmenbaşy's death and the related power-sharing deals) were the first to be removed. Minister of Interior Akmämet Rahmanow was the first of the "men of December 21" to be removed. He was fired already in the spring of 2007 after serving three years in office.³² At the same time, a rearrangement of competencies took place among the security, defense, and law enforcement agencies.³³

Akmyrat Rejepow turned out to be the next "man of December 21" in line. His elimination on May 13, 2007 was the key step in stabilizing Berdimuhamedow's one-man rule. Unsurprisingly, and characteristic for Berdimuhamedow's grip on power, the official media paid virtually no attention to these remarkable purges. Though usually the presidential decree on withdrawing from office is published, in Rejepow's case (he did not have an official government position) no similar announcement appeared in national media. This tactic differs markedly from that of Türkmenbaşy, who enjoyed the public lambasting of the supposed traitors. The measured pragmatism of Turkmenistan's new leader is evident also in this respect. Only in July 2007 were foreign media informed that General Akmyrat Rejepow, his son Nurmyrat, and the important businessman Myrat Agaýew

³² *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, April 10, 2007.

³³ Cf. Vitalii Volkov and Oraz Saryev, "Gotovitsia reforma silovykh vedomstv," *Deutsche Welle*, February 27, 2007.

had been sentenced to long prison terms. There were rumors that these men belonged to the group trying to conceal and subsequently acquire the fortune amassed by the late Türkmenbaşy.³⁴ In any case, Rejepow's fate was sealed. He not only overestimated his power, but was left virtually without any allies at a critical moment, a miscalculation that cost him not only his position but also his freedom.

With Rejepow gone once and for all, it was clear that elimination of the other officials (especially from the security apparatus) who had helped Berdimuhamedow into office would follow. This concerned first of all the minister of national security, Geldimuhamet Asyrmuhammedow, and the prosecutor general, Muhammetguly Ogsukow. Asyrmuhammedow was dismissed from office in October 2007, and is said to have escaped abroad. Several top officials at the ministry of national security were also removed.³⁵ Muhammetguly Ogsukow, who was appointed prosecutor general after the elimination of Atajanowa in the spring of 2006, was removed from office in March 2008.³⁶ Only two people from the security apparatus who were vital for the transition of the regime after Türkmenbaşy's death remain in office as of today: Baýram Alowow, chief commander of the Border Guard, and Agageldi Mämmetgeldiýew, minister of defense and secretary of the State Security Council. The latter was reportedly under house arrest in the first few days after Türkmenbaşy's death, but is now considered to be one of the most loyal allies of the new president.

In mid-2007, further cadre shake-ups took place. As already mentioned, the minister of agriculture Paýzgeldi Meredow was jailed. Meredow is considered to be a political prisoner of the new Berdimuhamedow regime. He has been held in detention at the ministry of national security since July 27, 2007. Later the same year, Human Rights Watch reported that he was kept in

³⁴ According to some witnesses, Türkmenbaşy's son Myrat Nyýazow transmitted this information. Nyýazow's alleged "guardian" Myrat Agaýew (who was sentenced to seventeen years in prison in the same process in July 2007) introduced him to a profitable business in tobacco and alcohol. See Arkadii Dubnov, "Konets niiazovskogo biznesa," *Vremia novostei*, July 31, 2007.

³⁵ *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, October 9, 2007. See also Aleksandr Mogilevskii, "Byvshii glava MNB sbezhhal na Zapad?" *Turkmenskaia iskra*, May 12, 2008, <http://www.tm-iskra.org/20/08/Ashirmuh-4.htm>.

³⁶ *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, March 4, 2008.

very harsh conditions.³⁷ Furthermore, the minister of railway transportation Orazberdi Hudaýberdiýew was fired, together with several other officials.³⁸ At the end of 2007, further purges and cadre reshuffles followed. In November 2007, most regional heads were dismissed. This involved, for example, Gurbanberdi Orazmyradow, the governor of the Ahal region, who was relieved from his office because of agricultural failures (especially the harvest in 2007), and Hojaberdi Bäsिमow, the governor of the Mary region. In the Lebap region, located in the east, Tagaýmyrat Mämmedow, the governor of the region, and Toýli Meredow, the head of Türkmenabat city, were replaced.³⁹ Personal replacements fundamentally affected also the composition of Turkmenistan's Supreme Court in late 2007, where almost all judges were replaced and new regional judges introduced.⁴⁰ While the aim of these reshuffles was to publicly demonstrate Berdimuhamedow's unrelenting policy of dismissal when faced with unacceptable deficiencies in these public positions, it is obvious that by doing so Berdimuhamedow was able to dispose of many people too closely associated with Türkmenbaşy.

These purges led to the incorporation of members of the president's own family and people from his native region (Gökdepe) to the administration. Given that supporting one's own region generally plays an important symbolic role in Turkmenistan, it would have been difficult for the new president to act otherwise. This aspect manifested itself immediately after Türkmenbaşy's death, when the deputy for Gökdepe Akja Nurberdiýewa assumed the post of the acting chairman of the Parliament after the arrest of Öwezgeldi Ataýew, the previous chairman of this body. The nomination of Kakageldi Çaryýardurdyýew to the post of minister of culture, radio, and television broadcasting in mid-2007 and later on also to the post of the president's press secretary, serves as another example of this approach⁴¹ as he also comes from Gökdepe. Moreover, Berdimuhamedow has already appointed several of his relatives to his government. The new minister of health, Ata Serdarow, is reported to be his cousin and the minister of

³⁷ Human Rights Reform in Turkmenistan. Rhetoric or Reality," Human Rights Watch (November 2007): 19, <http://hrw.org/backgrounders/eca/turkmenistan1107/turkmenistan1107web.pdf>.

³⁸ *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, May 22, 2007.

³⁹ *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, November 13, 2007.

⁴⁰ *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, November 21, 2007.

⁴¹ *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, June 9, 2007, and January 12, 2008.

interior, Hojamyrat Annagurbanow, is a relative of Berdimuhamedow's wife.⁴² The new prosecutor general, Çary Hojamyradow, is also presumed to be one of the president's closest advisors on account of his regional affiliation. Some of Berdimuhamedow's relatives and regional compatriots were also granted lucrative positions in companies controlled by the state.⁴³ In early 2008, the town of Gökdepe was elevated to the administrative status of a town,⁴⁴ a move that was viewed by many as an effort to symbolically raise the overall prestige of the president's native region.

It is noteworthy that Berdimuhamedow has refrained from eliminating Türkmenbaşy's Russian advisors, namely, Alexander Zhadan, Vladimir Umnov, and Viktor Khramov. Information according to which they had been arrested in 2007 proved to be only a rumor. All three have long-term experience with day-to-day administration of the country and have deep and detailed knowledge on the intricacies of the cadre policy of the former president (and likely also of denigrating materials on the current president) and are thus difficult to get rid of. Furthermore, they are still needed and useful. In particular, Viktor Khramov made a great effort to establish the cult of the new president by using his literary talents when he authored various propaganda pieces, including the official Berdimuhamedow biography.⁴⁵ Through his contacts in Russia, Khramov is also known to control several important businesses in Turkmenistan (also in the energy sector), which helps him to gain preferential access to the president.⁴⁶

Another important figure in the Turkmen elite is Rasit Meredow, the minister of foreign affairs, who has extensive international experience. Meredow has continued to preside over the diplomatic activity of present-day Turkmenistan since 2001. He became a favorite of Türkmenbaşy after the

⁴² *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, February 28, 2007, and April 10, 2007.

⁴³ TIHR, "Berdymukammedov is not an orphan," *Khronika Turkmenistana*, June 4, 2007.

⁴⁴ "Postanovlenie Khalk Maslahaty Turkmenistana 'Ob izmenenii statusa nekotorykh gorodov i poselkov Turkmenistana'," *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, February 4, 2008.

⁴⁵ Viktor Khramov and Maiia Mollaeva, eds., *Prezident Turkmenistana Berdymukammedov Gurbanguly Mialikgulievich. Kratkaia biografiia* (Ashkhabad: Turkmenskaia gosudarstvennaia izdatel'skaia sluzhba, 2007), published in a series in the daily *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan* from July 26 to August 4, 2007, and from August 7 to August 9, 2008.

⁴⁶ Begench Aydin, "Who is ruling Turkmenistan?" *Turkmenskaia iskra*, May 21, 2008, <http://www.tm-iskra.org/20/08/Hramov-V-2-eng.html>.

putative assassination attempt on him in 2002, when he led the campaign of government officials who pleaded with Türkmenbaşy to execute all those who dared to threaten the Great Leader. It is symptomatic that among those on the list of potential traitors were also two of Meredow's predecessors, former ministers of foreign affairs Boris Syhmyradow and Batyr Berdiýew.⁴⁷ Meredow's name appears in second place behind that of the president in the official media of Turkmenistan. He also has close long-term ties to Viktor Khramov. For this reason, Meredow could be a major challenger to Berdimuhamedow in case the power struggle within the elite intensifies. The constitution, which stipulates that the successor to the president will be chosen by the State Security Council from the vice-chairmen of the cabinet of ministers, opens an easy venue for Meredow to become president in case Berdimuhamedow leaves office or is otherwise eliminated.

Berdimuhamedow is still closely associated with foreign businessmen who supported the late Türkmenbaşy. These are mainly representatives of Turkish companies (Polimeks, controlled by Erol Tabanja, and others) and the French construction holding Bouygues.⁴⁸ These companies have been closely involved in the construction of the city of Aşgabat, and they will take their share in building the super-modern holiday resort of Awaza near the Caspian Sea port town of Türkmenbaşy (formerly Krasnovodsk).⁴⁹ It is believed that transfers from these companies are important sources of revenue for the president and his family.⁵⁰ Several prominent businessmen of the Türkmenbaşy era have, however, lost their previous influence. These

⁴⁷ "Trascript (Excerpts) from the Broadcast on Turkmenistan Television of the Session of the People's Council 30 December 2002," OSCE Office of the Representative on Freedom of the Media, www.osce.org/press_rel/2003/pdf_documents/01-2998-rfmi.pdf.

⁴⁸ TIHR, "Turks – the only minority facing no problems in Turkmenistan," *Khronika Turkmenistana*, August 5, 2006.

⁴⁹ This project involves the construction of sixty hotels and other sanatoriums; moreover, it shows the Turkmenistan elites' ambition to build a "Caspian Dubai." "V Türkmenbashi sostoialas' prezentatsiia pervoi natsional'noi turistichekoi zony 'Avaza'," *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, July 24, 2007. See also the photo documentation of the project on websites *Internet-gazeta Turkmenistan.ru*, August 6, 2007, http://www.turkmenistan.ru/?page_id=10&lang_id=ru&elem_id=115&type=section&sort=date_desc.

⁵⁰ Maksim Pender, "G. Berdymukhamedova pobuzhdaiut prodolzhat' bashistskuiu politiku," *Turkmenskaia iskra*, June 16, 2008, <http://www.tm-iskra.org/20/08/slivguly.html>.

include the Israeli lobbyist Yosef Maiman and possibly also Ahmet Çalyk, Turkish entrepreneur of dubious reputation who was connected to various construction projects and industrial enterprises in Turkmenistan. The number of public works projects awarded to the Çalyk Holding has continued to decline (especially in construction) since Berdimuhamedow came to power.

Overall, the Ahal have strengthened their predominance within Turkmenistan's elite during the new regime. The favoring of people from the Gökdepe region, Berdimuhamedow's birthplace, has become an integral part of the Ahal supremacy. This is not without exceptions. The usefulness of a person to the new president, either in terms of unquestioned loyalty or even professionalism, may also determine appointments. Cadre policy of the new president is thus far able to satisfy both the wider elite as well as the president's inner circle. For the time being, however, and in spite of the gradual solidification of his rule, the current president does not wield similar absolute powers as Türkmenbaşy once did. This forces Berdimuhamedow to adopt a more careful approach in balancing competing groups and interests.

Ideology

The emphasis on ideology remains a characteristic of Turkmenistan's political system. This is not merely a result of deep historical roots or the cultural environment of the region. The strong personality cult established by Türkmenbaşy played a decisive role in the development of a national ideology.⁵¹ President Berdimuhamedow is bound to sustain the ideological policies of his predecessor to retain his symbolic status of a Leader, at least temporarily. This aspect cannot be understated since Türkmenbaşy's ideologues remain in their positions and the system as a whole demonstrates strong inertia.⁵² At the same time, in the consolidation period of the new

⁵¹ For an overview of the main concept of Türkmenbaşy's ideology, see Slavomír Horák, "The Ideology of The Turkmenbashi Regime," *Perspectives on European Politics and Society* 6, no. 2 (2005): 305-19.

⁵² Among the chief Turkmenistan ideologues were Viktor Khramov from the presidential office, and Maýa Mollaýewa, the chief of the archival division at the cabinet of ministers and chief of the presidential archives. Onjyk Musaýew, the former deputy head of the Turkmenistan Democratic Party (withdrawn from the office within Democratic Party and Nationwide Revival movement congress in July 2008), is one of the most active executors and initiators of any kind of Leader-oriented ideology.

regime, President Berdimuhamedow slowly started dismantling the previous ideology and replacing it with symbols associated with himself only.

As mentioned above, the 2007 presidential election campaign and its aftermath resembled a well-written screenplay, which stressed Turkmen political traditions and patterns established by Türkmenbaşy. As the new leader of Turkmenistan, Berdimuhamedow was obliged to present an innovative policy that would ostensibly distinguish itself from that of the old regime. This is how we should interpret the somewhat populist election campaign, which focused on the most visible social problems in the country, such as inadequate education, health care, or retirement and the social welfare system, all eliminated by Türkmenbaşy by decree. Reform proposals, however, did not endanger the basic operating principles of the political system.

The new regime demonstrated its attention to ideological symbolism already at the elaborate inauguration ceremony, which took place on the very same day the election results were announced. While Türkmenbaşy's ceremonies focused primarily on his overpowering personal presence, Berdimuhamedow was portrayed as a humble devotee of Turkmen traditions, old and new. For example, while standing on a white carpet (the symbol of a safe journey) Berdimuhamedow was given a quiver with arrows (a symbol of unity) and bread with salt (a symbol of prosperity and well-being).⁵³ These rituals give the appearance of being "genuine" and "authentic"; however, this combination of symbolic acts had never previously been used in Turkmenistan's history. As a sign of deference to the traditions of the previous regime, Berdimuhamedow was presented with the *Ruhnama*, the "Book of Spirit," reportedly written by the late Türkmenbaşy himself. In his inauguration speech, Berdimuhamedow not only promised to protect Türkmenbaşy's legacy, but also swore on both the Holy Qur'an and the "Holy" *Ruhnama*.

The national oath instituted by Türkmenbaşy has been preserved, symbolizing the continuity of the regime. The oath served as the key mantra

He has already called for assigning Berdimuhamedow with the epithet "the Great," as was Türkmenbaşy's official title. See Ondzhik Musaev, "Politika novogo natsional'nogo vozrozhdeniia," *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, September 19, 2007.

⁵³ *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, February 15, 2007.

within the political system and was recited at all public gatherings and meetings. The oath was codified in early 2007 under Berdimuhamedow. Nonetheless, at the same time, it underwent an ideological transformation when the Great Saparmyrat Türkmenbaşy's name was removed from the text and replaced by the simple word "president."⁵⁴ The meaning is essentially unchanged and the continued use of the oath is meant to strengthen Berdimuhamedow's personal leadership.

Turkmenistan's new president has also preserved several rituals of everyday governance. This involves the broadcasting of Berdimuhamedow's meetings with ministers, representatives of major enterprises, or foreign delegations on national television. During these meetings, Berdimuhamedow is seated on an impressively decorated throne made for his predecessor, Türkmenbaşy. The president's inferiors, on the other hand, are seated on customary chairs or present their reports standing. These scenes of everyday governance unmistakably define the subordination of all others to the president.

The Ruhnama was itself an important symbol for the generation brought up under the guidance of the deceased first president. In September 2007, a major international conference called "Ruhnama—the Philosophy of the New Millennium" was held in the capital of Aşgabat.⁵⁵ However, the continuing cult of the holy Ruhnama no longer focuses on the author of the book, but rather on the text itself. Quotes from the book are no longer used in daily promotional messages. State television stopped its daily readings of this "holy book" already in the summer of 2007. In schools the courses on Ruhnama have been scaled down, even though quotes from the book are still required to decorate school bulletin boards.⁵⁶ But students still need to pass exams based on the thorough knowledge of the Ruhnama, new schools specializing on the study of the Ruhnama keep opening, and competitions in reciting the book are still widely held. Lavish celebrations of Ruhnama Day (still a national holiday) persist. In 2008, Ruhnama Day was accompanied by an academic conference, exhibitions, theater performances, and songs all

⁵⁴ For the law "On National Oath of Turkmenistan", see *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, March 20, 2007. The law also specified punishments for its misuse.

⁵⁵ *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, September 12, 2007.

⁵⁶ Kumush Ovezova, "Teachers and Students," *Khronika Turkmenistana*, April 25, 2008.

based on *Ruhnama*, even though most attention was given to post-Nyýazow topics and themes connected to the current “Great Renaissance” era.⁵⁷

At the same time, President Berdimuhamedow took steps that were designed to break away from the past regime with its absurd manifestation of Türkmenbaşy’s personality cult. The decision to replace ideological names for days of the week and months of the year with a standard international format in the official calendar, which became effective on July 1, 2008, was a widely reported move in this respect.⁵⁸ Likewise, the omnipresent golden silhouette of the previous president vanished from the upper right corner of television screens in the summer of 2007. In its place the main TV news “Watan” broadcast an image of Berdimuhamedow giving his speech at the United Nations General Assembly. This picture was chosen to evoke the image of a young, energetic president with important personal contacts around the world. These partial relaxations of ideological rigidity, while welcome, did not in any way threaten the foundations of the new regime. However, the ambition to preserve the ideology of Türkmenbaşy’s personality cult does exist, at least to some extent.⁵⁹ This effort is for example supported by the Foreign Ministry. As a part of the diplomatic protocol, all official foreign visitors and delegations are still taken to Gypjak, Türkmenbaşy’s native village and the place of his tomb.

Thus, there are signs of a gradual dismantling of the Türkmenbaşy cult. Türkmenbaşy’s name is only rarely mentioned by the media, and his statues and portraits are slowly disappearing from towns and villages. Because of the planned monetary reform in 2009, Türkmenbaşy’s portrait will vanish from most national bank notes, even though Türkmenbaşy will symbolically still appear on the highest bill in Turkmenistan.⁶⁰ The official media reported on the plan of removing the grandiose Turkmenistan Arch of Neutrality—with

⁵⁷ *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, September 12, 2008. “Dukhovnyi maiak na puti velikogo Vozrozhdeniia,” *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, September 11, 2008.

⁵⁸ “Postanovlenie Medzhliisa Turkmenistana ‘O natsional'nom letoschlenii v Turkmenistane,’” *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, May 26, 2008.

⁵⁹ The fact that December 21 (the day of Türkmenbaşy’s death) was proclaimed a remembrance day of Saparmyrat Türkmenbaşy demonstrates the role of the first president in today’s Turkmenistan. “Ukaz Prezidenta Turkmenistana ‘O dne pamiati pervogo Prezidenta Turkmenistana Velikogo Saparmurata Turkmenbashi,’” *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, March 5, 2007.

⁶⁰ *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, October 12, 2007.

the twelve-meter-high golden statue of Saparmyrat Türkmenbaşy revolving with the movement of the sun—from the center of Aşgabat.⁶¹ President Berdimuhamedow rarely mentions his predecessor in official speeches by name and when mentioning the previous era, he emphasizes the “forging of Great independence” and other impersonal concepts instead.⁶² Indirect criticism of the old regime can be observed even in official media, especially with respect to the current political program of the “Great Renaissance.”⁶³ Once highly developed, the cult of Türkmenbaşy’s reported parents has been curtailed in a similar manner.⁶⁴ Nevertheless, the first president remains an important symbolic figure in terms of moral authority. He is revered as the “Founder of Modern Turkmenistan” and its “First President.” For many in the generation growing up in the first fifteen years of independent Turkmenistan, the continuing legacy of Türkmenbaşy serves as one of the key legitimizing factors of the current political system. If Türkmenbaşy’s ideology is to be completely dismantled one day, it will most likely occur because Berdimuhamedow’s own concepts will require more space and attention.

Throughout 2007 the ideologues of the new regime developed the principal national metanarrative for the Berdimuhamedow era. All official documents and commentaries now mention the key term “Great Renaissance” (*Beýik Galkynys*). This concept surfaced already at the twentieth session of the People’s Council at the end of March 2007 and was further elaborated by the president at the Nationwide Revival movement plenary session in the summer of 2007.⁶⁵ President Berdimuhamedow incorporated the “Great Renaissance” era into the concept of the “Golden Age of the Turkmens” originally developed under Türkmenbaşy. Since this speech, the “Great Renaissance” became connected with a grandiose project of economic, social,

⁶¹ “S rasshirennogo zasedaniia kabineta ministrov Turkmenistana,” *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, May 3, 2008.

⁶² See for example Berdimuhamedow’s comments on the constitutional reform. Arkadii Dubnov, “Turkmenbashi pozvoleno ne vspominat',” *Vremia novostei*, May 26, 2008. Cf. also *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, May 23, 2008.

⁶³ Among others see e.g. B. Durdyeva, “Zrimye plody reformy,” *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, February 7, 2008.

⁶⁴ “Both the Rukhnama and mother of all Turkmen fall into oblivion,” *Khronika Turkmenistana*, August 24, 2008.

⁶⁵ *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, August 6, 2007.

as well as spiritual advance under the leadership of Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow. In 2008 the detachment from the previous era became apparent in the formulation of the “Great Renaissance” project, as all references to the *Ruhnama* and Türkmenbaşy disappeared. The main motto of the program, “State in Service of the Common man!” (*Döwlet adam üçindir*), came from a phrase the president uttered at a meeting with intellectual elites of the nation.⁶⁶ The new Berdimuhamedow era was characterized as another distinct development phase, even though the previous notion of the “Golden Age of the Turkmens” has not been rejected in its entirety. The Türkmenbaşy era was labeled as a “transitory period from Soviet to democratic social order,” which allowed Berdimuhamedow to emphasize democratization as the key element of the “Great Renaissance.”⁶⁷ In practice, however, this concept serves primarily to confirm the independent political course of the new president. Another important discursive function of the “Great Renaissance” ideology is the consolidation of the nation and the state, which should lead to reconciliation between the leader and the people, presumably after the “transitory period” under Türkmenbaşy when the people were deprived of direct access to power.

The role of President Berdimuhamedow within this ideological concept has been repeated over and over again in Turkmenistan’s official media. He is portrayed as the “Founding Father and Leader of the period of Great Renaissance and Grand Achievements.” The supposedly increased standard of living in Turkmenistan is, for example, presented by media as a miraculous byproduct of the president’s enthusiasm and relentless work in the name of the glorious future of the Fatherland.⁶⁸ Pompous celebrations of Berdimuhamedow’s fiftieth birthday in the summer of 2007 provided a further impulse for the transformation of Türkmenbaşy’s personality cult into one of a similar kind, differing in form rather than in content. Massive celebrations were organized all around Turkmenistan, and the president was awarded the “Watan” (Fatherland) order, which was established specifically

⁶⁶ “Epokhe Velikogo Vozrozhdeniia — dostoinoe tvorcheskoe osmyslenie,” *Neitral’nyi Turkmenistan*, January 21, 2008.

⁶⁷ “O Konstitutsii Turkmenistana epokhi velikogo vozrozhdeniia. Vystuplenie Prezidenta Turkmenistana Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedova na zasedanii Konstitsutsionnoi komissii,” *Neitral’nyi Turkmenistan*, May 23, 2008.

⁶⁸ *Neitral’nyi Turkmenistan*, July 23, 2008.

for this occasion.⁶⁹ Moreover, portraits of the previous president were replaced by images of Berdimuhamedow,⁷⁰ while other major state awards in the honor of Berdimuhamedow soon followed. Statues are yet to be seen, but might well appear in the future.

Billboards of the new president became the most visible manifestation of the incipient new cult at the same time as pictures of Berdimuhamedow were introduced in schools. The wearing of red ties in schools was considered an offence as the president already wore one on the picture.⁷¹ According to sources within Turkmenistan, official pictures of the president have been replaced twice in the last two years. In August 2007 teachers had to buy portraits of Berdimuhamedow, one with a serious-looking face and a black tie, at their own expense.⁷² In the spring of 2008 these pictures were replaced yet again by a new photo of Berdimuhamedow sitting behind a desk with a solemn face.⁷³ This is indicative of the fact that the pragmatism of the new ideologues has its limits, beyond which a personality cult similar to *Türkmenbaşy's* begins anew.

The use of government-sponsored compulsory textbooks as a primary source of the official ideology is yet another aspect of the Berdimuhamedow regime which is reminiscent of the previous era. The edition of Berdimuhamedow's book *Türkmenistanda saglygy goraysy ösdürmegift ylmy esaslary* (Scientific foundations of the Development of Health Care in Turkmenistan) is a compilation of his reported previous scientific works, mostly short articles. The book serves as the example of achievements in implementing the president's ideological vision of promoting health issues in Turkmenistan.

⁶⁹ "Postanovlenie Medzhliisa Turkmenistana 'O nagrazhdenii Prezidenta Turkmenistana Berdymukammedova Gurbanguly Mialigkulievicha ordenom Turkmenistana 'Watan'," *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, June 30, 2007. "Zakon Turkmenistana 'Ob uchrezhdenii ordena Turkmenistana Watan'," *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, June 30, 2007.

⁷⁰ "Turkmenbashi lishili pamiatnika," *Radio Maiak*, May 25, 2007. It was reported that in some schools portraits of Berdimuhamedow had been hung already before the new presidential elections in February 2007. See Viktor Diatlikovich, "Pervyi upal," *Russkii reporter*, June 28, 2007.

⁷¹ "Red tie campaign," *Khronika Turkmenistana*, March 27, 2008.

⁷² "Serious-looking Berdymukammedov in black tie," *Khronika Turkmenistana*, August 14, 2007.

⁷³ Kumush Ovezova, "Ocherednaia smena portretov v shkolakh," *Khronika Turkmenistana*, March 7, 2008.

The president's traditional hike on the "Leader's Wellness Trail" near Ashgabat confirms this trend.⁷⁴ Further in line with Türkmenbaşy's traditions is the appearance of Berdimuhamedow's speeches in the form of a book, published in the fall of 2007 by the Archival Department of the Presidential Administration.⁷⁵ This book further deepens the ideological nature of the new regime and has since become a compulsory subject of research and education. Other books were supposed to follow in 2007 and 2008. So far the most recent one is Berdimuhamedow's popular-science monograph in three languages on noble steeds of the Ahal breed entitled "Ahalteke Horses are Our Pride and Glory."⁷⁶

As mentioned earlier in this study, Berdimuhamedow concentrated several functions in his hands. On a symbolic level, Berdimuhamedow adopted all ideological features that Türkmenbaşy had established before him and which demonstrate absolute power of the Leader over both the state and society. As a result, the new president can be portrayed as the nation's protector in army uniform,⁷⁷ as the supreme political leader, or the wisest of scholars. In 2007, the degree of Doctor of Medicine and the title of professor, presumably for his previous efforts in stomatology, were conferred upon Berdimuhamedow.⁷⁸ Thus, the new academic title—one of the first tangible results of his educational reform—was not in any way connected to research or teaching activity but was purely a political decision in line with the tradition of glorifying the abilities of the leader. As commander-in-chief, Berdimuhamedow was celebrated during the exuberant Independence Day anniversary on October 27, 2007, where the crowd chanted *Halk, Watan,*

⁷⁴ "Prezident Turkmenistana prinial uchastie v massovom voskhozhdenii po 'Trobe zdorov'ia'," *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, November 5, 2007. In this way, the new president commemorated his predecessor, who also often participated in the hike along the "Leader's Wellness Trail."

⁷⁵ Viktor Khramov and Maiia Mollaeva, eds., *Politika Prezidenta Turkmenistana Gurbanguly Berdymukhammedova po novomu vozrozhdeniiu strany* (Ashkhabad: Turkmenskaia gosudarstvennaia izdatel'skaia sluzhba, 2007).

⁷⁶ TDH, "Turkmenskii skakun – zhivoi simvol epokhi velikogo Vozrozhdeniia," *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, October 31, 2008.

⁷⁷ "Postanovlenie Medzhliisa Turkmenistana 'O prisvoienii Prezidentu Turkmenistana, Verkhovnomu Glavnokomanduiushchemu Vooruzhennymi Silami Turkmenistana G. M. Berdymukhammedovu voinskogo zvaniia generala armii,'" *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, May 5, 2007.

⁷⁸ "Nauka Turkmenistana na sluzhbe reform i progressa," *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, June 13, 2007.

Gosunbasy (People, Fatherland, Chief [of the Army]) to glorify Berdimuhamedow in an analogy to the chanting of *Halk, Watan, (Beýik) Türkmenbaşy* in the previous era.⁷⁹ The resemblance of these chants to the Nazi slogans of *ein Volk, ein Reich, ein Fuehrer* is disturbing indeed. In conjunction with the acquisition of numerous titles and positions, the influence of selected institutions founded by the previous president is being diminished. Even though President Berdimuhamedow became the head of almost all relevant public organizations in order to symbolically emphasize his all-encompassing leadership, the real power was gradually transferred to the office of the president.

The new personality cult also manifests itself in architecture. Investments in megalomaniac construction projects within the republic continue under the direct supervision of Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow, as was the case during Türkmenbaşy's rule. Today, the two most advertized building projects in Turkmenistan are the summer resort of Awaza near the Caspian sea port town of Türkmenbaşy, and the construction of a two hundred meter high television tower in the Aşgabat capital.⁸⁰ Other structures worth mentioning include the grandiose monument planned for the twentieth anniversary of Turkmenistan's independence, set for completion by 2011.⁸¹ The new ideology is to be further embodied in the planned monument of the Constitution of Turkmenistan, which will manifest the key achievements of President Berdimuhamedow in the field of constitutional reforms. According to official Turkmen sources, this monument should symbolize the "celebration of democracy and indivisible unity of the Turkmen nation, which enters into a new era in its history, an era of peace, development, prosperity and bliss."⁸² However, unlike Türkmenbaşy's architecture, these new projects thus far lack ostentatious symbolism associated with the figure of the new

⁷⁹ "Watan," Turkmenistan TV, October 27, 2007.

⁸⁰ "Rukotvornyi simvol epokhi Velikogo vozrozhdeniia," *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, April 12, 2008.

⁸¹ "Zasedanie kabineta ministrov Turkmenistana," *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, February 4, 2008.

⁸² "Velikii simvol vozrozhdeniia, edinstva i demokratii," *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, May 18, 2008.

president.⁸³ If we take into consideration that the new president presents himself as the chief architect of the nation and makes his own corrections to building plans and project documentation very much like his predecessor, it appears likely that a new symbolism based on Berdimuhamedow's person might develop over time.⁸⁴

Thus, we can conclude that the ideology of the new regime reflects the changes that have occurred in politics and the composition of elites in Turkmenistan in the post-Nyýazow period. The continuing growth of Berdimuhamedow's cult is inevitable in the present atmosphere of servility to the republic's leader—and generally to the institution of leadership (*serdarçylyk*) in Turkmen society. The political culture of Turkmenistan favors personality cults as validating and legitimizing factors of the ruling regime. President Berdimuhamedow is both pragmatic and cautious in this respect as he gradually dismantles old ideological concepts without causing major disruptions. Selected elements and institutions of the old regime, which can lend support to the ideology of the current president, are preserved. What distinguishes Berdimuhamedow's rule from his predecessor's, however, is a lesser emphasis on the cult of personality and his own persona. For the time being he seems, for example, less interested than his predecessor in calling upon the divine nature of the presidency or other extreme manifestations of the personality cult.

In this way, the political decisions that were made after Türkmenbaşy's death seem to follow pragmatic and calculated steps based on a close reading of Turkmenistan's cultural background. Initially, the new regime appeared to be developing an oligarchic leadership configured around a coalition of several key figures within the security apparatus and where Berdimuhamedow would serve as the final arbiter. But soon he was heavily promoted as the new leader of Turkmenistan. His family roots in the Ahal region helped him to assert power in the capital Aşgabat. It is difficult to

⁸³ For overview of construction activities of the late Türkmenbaşy, see Jan Šír, "Cult of Personality in Monumental Art and Architecture: The Case of Post-Soviet Turkmenistan," *Acta Slavica Iaponica* 25 (2008): 203-20.

⁸⁴ "Zasedanie kabineta ministrov Turkmenistana," *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, July 12, 2007. Berdimuhamedow's comments when inspecting the construction of a highway between Aşgabat and Türkmenbaşy were a recent example. Cf. "Watan," Turkmenistan TV, November 2, 2007.

know whether the security ministers envisioned beforehand how Berdimuhamedow would act as president, a position that obviously gave him extensive powers over them as well. As it turned out, in the first few months of Berdimuhamedow's period in office, the political situation changed quickly and Berdimuhamedow and his close allies started to fight for predominance against the old security structures. After Berdimuhamedow took over the presidency, he abandoned the compromising attitude that the *siloviki* had envisioned for him, and evolved into the real leader. To preserve his supremacy he needed the mandate to imprison potential rivals, which he acquired through the powers of the presidency.

As Berdimuhamedow's power increased, the process of forming the new elite started to conform to local traditions. For instance, new political and economic networks were established as Berdimuhamedow's relatives and people from his native region were appointed to important positions. Without any doubt, the key node of all these networks is Berdimuhamedow himself. In this way, Turkmenistan started resembling other regimes in the region where one's origin is central to his or her prospective career. Relatives and compatriots from Gökdepe, traditionally loyal to forces in power, now form the base of the Berdimuhamedow clan. On a lower administrative level, new power structures, which are headed by Berdimuhamedow's people, seek to establish their influence. Inevitably, they start to compete with each other, which could potentially be destabilizing for the whole regime. One of the ways to prevent these new elites from creating their own "clan structure" is to conduct regular purges and rotation of cadres, which keeps all the functionaries on their toes in a state of constant suspense and tension. The new constitution should be helpful to Berdimuhamedow in this respect, as it allows him to appoint and dismiss regional officials as well.

Although the new president was raised at the time of the Soviet Union, he does not have a strong communist background, and was never a member of the highest apparatus of the party. Unlike for his predecessor, Soviet legacy does not play a significant role for Berdimuhamedow. Hence, he can be considered to be one of the "new" national leaders, whose accession to power in post-Soviet states has already begun. In any case, all future changes in Turkmenistan will progress within the general framework of the political system established by Türkmenbaşy. For the time being, there is little chance

for major political transitions in the sense of comprehensive democratization or liberalization of the political environment. Barring foreign intervention or a coup, 51-year old Berdimuhamedow may expect a long period in office.

Foreign Policy⁸⁵

On December 21, 2006, reports were made public about the unexpected passing away of the first president of independent Turkmenistan, Saparmyrat Nyýazow. The presidential term for life of the authoritarian leader, who had ruled this Central Asian republic for the last twenty-one years, thus came to an end. The State Security Council, headed by the vice-chairman of Turkmenistan's cabinet of ministers, Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow, effectively took control over the government. As acting head of state, Berdimuhamedow quickly confirmed his position as Türkmenbaşy's sole successor, claiming an overwhelming victory in the subsequent presidential election. Consolidation of the post-Nyýazow regime, the unconstitutionality of the process notwithstanding, opened a window of opportunity for gradual liberalization of public life and a corresponding opening towards the outside world. In foreign policy, the new leadership's major task was to overcome Turkmenistan's international isolation, which was the result of Türkmenbaşy's isolationist policy pursued under the rhetorical guise of "permanent neutrality." The following section offers an outline of Turkmenistan's foreign policy after Türkmenbaşy.

The Northern Connection: Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus

Turkmenistan's principal external interests lie to the north of its borders, primarily in Russia, but also Ukraine and Belarus. This is a legacy of over a century of connections within a single state, first tsarist Russia and then the Soviet Union, as part of which Turkmenistan belonged to one of the most underdeveloped areas. Thus, Turkmenistan's development had for a long time been largely dependent on support from the center. During the Türkmenbaşy era, Turkmenistan opted for a policy of isolationism as a way

⁸⁵ An earlier Russian draft of this chapter was presented at the international political science seminar "CIS – a Terra Incognita? Recent Political Processes in the former Soviet Union," organized by the Institute of Regional Policy, Kazan, Russia, November 29-30, 2007.

to overcome this excessive dependence and thus increase the autocratic power of the president. As a result and only out of necessity, the oil and gas exports had effectively been the only areas where Turkmenistan had been striving for deeper international engagement. However, even in this one area in which Türkmenbaşy was willing to cooperate internationally, Moscow was holding all the trump cards in its hands, controlling virtually all export transportation routes to the world markets. In the spring of 2003, Russia and Turkmenistan signed a fundamental and comprehensive agreement on cooperation in the gas industry for the next 25 years. In this agreement, Turkmenistan committed itself to delivering massive supplies of natural gas to Russia every year. According to the subsequent executive contract signed in the fall of 2006, Russia's state-owned energy giant Gazprom was to purchase 150 billion cubic meters (bcm) between 2007 and 2009. However, relations between independent Turkmenistan and Gazprom have a long history of crises dating all the way back to the beginning of the 1990s. Thus, confirming the existing energy deals was a critical point for relations between Russia and the new leadership of Turkmenistan after Türkmenbaşy's passing.

Moscow potentially has the most to lose from a realignment of Turkmenistan's essentially "pro-Russian, isolationist" foreign-policy orientation, but the death of Turkmenistan's almighty ruler did not result in any dramatic changes in the Moscow-Aşgabat relationship. Russia as the regional superpower left nothing that could threaten its interests to chance. Hence, the Kremlin reacted to Türkmenbaşy's death with increased diplomatic activity. In its first reaction, Moscow warned against any foreign interference that could destabilize the political situation in Turkmenistan. Only a few days later, a high-level Russian delegation headed by Prime Minister Mikhail Fradkov attended Türkmenbaşy's funeral. Russian officials used this opportunity to engage in the first face-to-face consultations with Turkmenistan's new leadership, seeking and eventually receiving a firm "guarantee of continuing good neighborly relations."⁸⁶ It also appears that the new power holders in Aşgabat were well aware of the emerging regime's vulnerability to possible pressures from Russia as well as other countries. Therefore, as soon as the new leadership consolidated, it undertook steps that

⁸⁶ IA REGNUM, December 25, 2006.

were to accommodate Moscow's interests. For instance, the broadcasting of Russia's ORT public television was quickly reestablished in Turkmenistan already in January 2007.⁸⁷ By the end of the same month, the well-known Russian environmental activist Andrei Zatoka was released from jail after being sentenced only on probation in what was initially prosecuted as a serious terrorism case.⁸⁸ Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the designated election winner Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow announced wide reform plans during his election campaign. These included changes in public policies for the most devastated sectors such as education, health care, and social security.⁸⁹ In this way Aşgabat demonstrated its goodwill, if not firm intention, to alleviate the appalling social conditions and thus also ease the situation of the Russian minority in Turkmenistan, which has been hit especially hard by the social experiments of the previous Türkmenbaşy regime. All aforementioned activities of the new leadership met with a positive response in the Kremlin, as demonstrated by the subsequent visits of Russia's Prime Minister Fradkov and Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov to Aşgabat in February and April 2007.⁹⁰

During April 23 and 24, 2007, President Berdimuhamedow paid a working visit to Moscow. Aside from his previous Hajj pilgrimage to Mecca and Medina in Saudi Arabia, this was Berdimuhamedow's first foreign visit as president. He had the opportunity to become personally acquainted with President Putin. At the end of their meeting, only a short joint communiqué was issued in which both parties reiterated their commitment to maintain cooperation in line with the 2003 gas agreement.⁹¹ Yet, few anticipated the rapid pace with which the measures to increase gas pipeline transportation

⁸⁷ *Deutsche Welle*, January 21, 2007. Yet, this concession by the Aşgabat government changed nothing concerning the fact that Russia's broadcasting in Turkmenistan is still heavily censored.

⁸⁸ *Vremia novostei*, January 31, 2007. Zatoka, who has dual Turkmenistan-Russia citizenship, was the last victim of Nyýazow's secret police plot.

⁸⁹ *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, January 6, 2007.

⁹⁰ *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, February 15, 2007. Fradkov led the extensive Russian delegation at the lavish inauguration ceremony. See also *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, April 7, 2007. Lavrov came to Aşgabat to work out the details of the upcoming first Russia-Turkmenistan summit to be held in Moscow.

⁹¹ "Kommiunike," *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, April 25, 2007. Details from the summit were not made public, as the talks took place behind closed doors.

capacity for Turkmenistan's gas to the north would be implemented on the ground.

Moscow took the initiative and quickly moved forward with its plans. Already during the second week of May 2007, Putin undertook a three-day visit to Turkmenistan as part of his tour of Central Asia. In Aşgabat, Berdimuhamedow and Putin laid the foundation stone for the new extension of the Pushkin Turkmen-Russian high school.⁹² However, media attention was focused more on the second part of Putin's program, which took place in the Caspian port town of Türkmenbaşy. At this point, the President of Kazakhstan Nursultan Nazarbayev joined the two leaders as well. On May 12, 2007, the three presidents discussed their future cooperation in exporting natural gas. At the end of the summit, a trilateral statement was issued, calling for the governments of Russia, Turkmenistan, and Kazakhstan to draft and prepare for signing, by September 1, 2007, a more specific and binding agreement on cooperation in constructing a Caspian coastal pipeline.⁹³ In a later statement the presidents of Russia, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan also committed their governments to drafting an agreement on cooperation in upgrading the arterial Central Asia-Center gas pipeline system on their territories.⁹⁴ For obvious reasons, the Caspian accords caused alarm in the West, which only escalated the struggle over energy resources in Central Asia.

After several postponements the joint Turkmenistan-Russia intergovernmental commission, which existed but was barely active under Türkmenbaşy, met in Aşgabat on July 10, 2007. During the consultations, the

⁹² "Sovmestnoe zaiavlenie Prezidentov Rossiiskoi Federatsii i Turkmenistana," *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, May 12, 2007. The Pushkin Turkmen-Russian high school is the last bulwark of Russian language education, and thus also of Russia's cultural influence in this remote region of the former Soviet empire.

⁹³ "Sovmestnaia deklaratsiia Prezidenta Respubliki Kazakhstan, Prezidenta Rossiiskoi Federatsii i Prezidenta Turkmenistana o stroitel'stve Prikaspiiskogo gazoprovoda," *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, May 14, 2007. This planned new pipeline is proposed to skirt the east shore of the Caspian Sea and end in southeastern Russia, and is a parallel gas pipeline to the existing extension of the Central Asia-Center gas pipeline system.

⁹⁴ "Sovmestnaia deklaratsiia Prezidenta Respubliki Kazakhstan, Prezidenta Rossiiskoi Federatsii, Prezidenta Turkmenistana i Prezidenta Uzbekistana o razvitii gazotransportnykh moshchnostei v regione Tsentral'noi Azii," *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, May 14, 2007. President Karimov of Uzbekistan had signed the declaration a few days earlier when the Russian energy minister Khristenko visited Tashkent.

principal obstacles in their trade relations were addressed. Furthermore, an understanding was reached regarding Turkmenistan's engineers who seek to study at Russian universities.⁹⁵ However, it became evident that the work on the Caspian coastal pipeline agreement began to linger. In the summer of 2007, Aşgabat hosted a number of official envoys from the United States whose first and foremost aim was to commit Turkmenistan to exporting energy westwards via a Trans-Caspian pipeline that would bypass Russia. During the last week of August, moreover, Turkmenistan and China made important headway in energy cooperation as they launched the construction of the Turkmenistan-China gas pipeline. Since there was no agreement yet to sign, President Putin did not attend the Turkmenistan-Kazakhstan energy summit, which took place in Aşgabat on September 11 and 12, 2007. During this meeting, both Central Asian partners confirmed their intention to expand energy exports in all directions and coordinated their steps to present a more unified position in their negotiations with Russia.

Russia, Turkmenistan, and Kazakhstan finally signed the Caspian coastal pipeline agreement in Moscow on December 20, 2007. This occurred without much fanfare and media attention as the agreement was concluded on a ministerial level only, which is unusual for treaties of such significance. This agreement commits all three contracting parties to build a new gas pipeline from Turkmenistan via Kazakhstan to Russia with a capacity of up to 20 bcm annually.⁹⁶ Even though the construction was planned to start as early as the fall of 2008, the many obstacles to the project have led to this date being postponed. Firstly, there are no guaranteed supplies in the agreement and it is unclear whether Turkmenistan has sufficient reserves available in the western part of the country, from where the natural gas for this project would be obtained. Furthermore, the key aspects of the deal, such as financing, terms of trade for the national oil and gas companies, and the very formula for establishing transit tariffs and prices are still subject to negotiations. It is thus likely that the negotiations will be as complex and difficult as the 2007 Turkmenistan-Russia agreement when Aşgabat's hard bargaining resulted in a price increase for gas delivered in 2008.

⁹⁵ *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, July 11, 2007. During Russian Prime Minister Zubkov's late 2007 visit to Aşgabat, the Turkmenistan quota of 70 students was raised to 150 students per year.

⁹⁶ *Vremia novostei*, December 21, 2007.

As Turkmenistan's economy becomes increasingly oriented towards Russia, Aşgabat's traditionally good relations with Kiev, its second "strategic partner" in the northern pipeline direction, are stagnating. On the one hand, Ukraine is still the main consumer of Turkmenistan's natural gas. On the other hand, since the five-year joint contract from 2001 had already expired, Ukraine has not been purchasing Turkmenistan's natural gas directly, but through Russia's Gazprom, which uses its subsidiary RosUkrEnergo as an intermediary. Moreover, Aşgabat's overall export obligations and general difficulties when supplying natural gas straight to foreign markets leave Kiev with little hope for renewing direct supplies. Aside from this, relations between Turkmenistan and Ukraine became tense already in the last week of 2006. As mentioned earlier, leaders of Turkmenistan's exiled opposition met in Kiev after Türkmenbaşy's death to coordinate their agendas and plans ahead of the presidential election. Aşgabat interpreted this as a hostile act by Ukraine.⁹⁷ The attendance of Ukrainian President Viktor Yushchenko at Berdimuhamedow's inauguration ceremony did not alleviate the strained relations.⁹⁸ Throughout 2007, several high-level Ukrainian officials paid visits to Turkmenistan, including Prime Minister Viktor Yanukovich during the Aşgabat CIS heads of governments meeting on November 21 and 22, 2007. During these consultations, Aşgabat pressured Kiev to complete the semi-finished infrastructure projects in Turkmenistan.⁹⁹ As a result of the termination of direct gas supplies, the barter trade under which Ukraine paid for gas by investment projects in Turkmenistan is no longer practical, which is likely to hamper bilateral relations in the future.

Given the established economic ties, Turkmenistan's business relations with Belarus display good potential. The Soviet and late Türkmenbaşy era introduced positive trends that were maintained by leaders of both countries, particularly after President Lukashenka's visit to Aşgabat in the spring of

⁹⁷ *Zerkalo nedeli*, December 30, 2006. An international arrest warrant has been issued by Turkmenistan for all participants long before the gathering.

⁹⁸ *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, February 15, 2007. Yushchenko was the only democratically elected head of state who accepted the invitation to be present at Berdimuhamedow's inauguration.

⁹⁹ *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, November 23, 2007. This particularly concerned the multifunctional bridge over the Amu Darya river near the town of Atamyrat (previously Kerki). The construction of this bridge has been halted since 2006 due to frictions relating to the quality of building materials provided by Turkmenistan.

2002. Reduction of energy subsidies from Russia to Belarus in recent years provided further incentives for the leadership in Minsk to strive towards cooperation with Turkmenistan. In the last week of July 2007, a senior governmental delegation of Belarus led by Deputy Prime Minister Alexander Kosinets visited Aşgabat and expressed Minsk's interest in closer relations in the oil and gas industry.¹⁰⁰ Moreover, Berdimuhamedow's agrarian reforms announced during the twentieth People's Council in the spring of 2007 opened new opportunities for Belarusian companies, which are major suppliers of farm machinery to Turkmenistan.

As this section indicates, Turkmenistan's northwestern neighbors are likely to remain the focus of Aşgabat's external interests in the near future. Russia is still by far the dominant purchaser of Turkmenistan's natural gas and is, therefore, also Turkmenistan's main economic and trade partner. Almost half of Turkmenistan's total exports are destined for Russia. The export pipelines inherited from the USSR inevitably tie all Central Asian energy exporters to Russia. The plan to launch a new Caspian coastal pipeline will further strengthen Moscow's position in the region. Nevertheless, as Turkmenistan opens to the outside world, other players will start competing for Turkmenistan's gas. It is therefore likely that Moscow will have to take Aşgabat's interests and demands more seriously than ever before in order to retain its predominant position of influence over Turkmenistan.

Relations with the Caucasus

Turkmenistan's engagement with the South Caucasus was revived when Berdimuhamedow came to power. If we recall the Türkmenbaşy era, Turkmenistan's relations with the republics in that region were poor at best. This was in spite of the fact that the Caucasus is geographically adjacent over the Caspian Sea and serves as a potential doorway to the West. In the 1990s, trade was sustained only in the form of exchange of goods for past supplies of Turkmenistan's natural gas. Russia, however, soon replaced Turkmenistan in this market by using its effective control of export pipelines from Central Asia. In the case of neighboring Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan's relations were further complicated by the long-standing territorial disputes over four overlapping offshore oil and gas fields in the Caspian Sea, which are

¹⁰⁰ *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, July 26, 2007.

currently under the jurisdiction and control of Baku. This dispute became a major hindrance for both states to develop oil and gas wealth in the Caspian, for it deterred potential investors.

However, Turkmenistan's relations with the republics of the Southern Caucasus have recently intensified. In particular, mutual contacts with Georgia became more frequent. During the first six months of 2007, Georgia's three top government officials paid visits to Turkmenistan. While in Aşgabat, President Saakashvili, Prime Minister Noghaideli, and speaker of the parliament Burjanadze stressed the growing transit potential of their republic for Central Asian gas. Moreover, several similar consultations between the Georgian and Turkmen leaders were held within various international forums, for example at the UN General Assembly's regular session in the autumn of 2007. While repayment of Georgia's state debt was still on the agenda, focus shifted to other areas as well, including the establishment of a joint intergovernmental commission intended to promote trade and cooperation between Turkmenistan and Georgia. In order to encourage this aim, both presidents agreed to the establishment of an embassy of Turkmenistan in Tbilisi. Moreover, regular flights between their capitals were to be launched.¹⁰¹

From the perspective of the geopolitics in the Caspian, Turkmenistan's relations with Azerbaijan play a much more essential role. Within the informal CIS summit in St. Petersburg on June 10, 2007, the first bilateral meeting between Turkmenistan's President Berdimuhamedow and Azerbaijan's President Ilham Aliyev took place. During these talks, the reopening of the embassy of Turkmenistan in Baku was arranged.¹⁰² The embassy had been closed in 2001, as the then plan for building the Trans-Caspian gas pipeline collapsed due to the deep personal antipathies of former presidents Nyýazow and Heydar Aliyev. After that, mutual relations remained distant and tense. In the summer of 2007, the first preliminary meetings concerning the newly established intergovernmental commission on economic cooperation were held in Baku. According to reports of the

¹⁰¹ *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, September 27, 2007. The establishment of a joint commission and the launch of regular direct flights have also been discussed with Armenia.

¹⁰² *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, June 11, 2007.

Azerbaijani press, various aspects of mutual relations were discussed—including Baku's willingness to launch a joint exploration and prospecting of oil and gas reserves on Kapaz, the largest of the disputed fields in the Caspian, which is claimed by Turkmenistan.¹⁰³

The positions of Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan are also becoming closer in regard to a larger international dispute regarding the legal status and related territorial claims in the Caspian Sea. Since the collapse of the USSR in 1991, this dispute has been a matter of concern for all the littoral states of the Caspian. On October 16, 2007, the second Caspian summit was held in Teheran. All five presidents of the Caspian littoral states were present. In his address to the summit, Turkmenistan's head of state spoke of the need to speed up the work on a general convention on the legal status of the Caspian Sea. This convention would provide the basic framework for further accords on cooperation in the areas of preservation, reproduction and use of biological resources, prevention of poaching, freedom of navigation, tourism, as well as exploitation of the hydrocarbon deposits. According to Berdimuhamedow, such a convention is to be based on international law, and should be arranged "in such terms and extent, which will secure both the sovereignty and legal interests of the Caspian states."¹⁰⁴ This seems to be a subtle hint at Turkmenistan's support for dividing the Caspian Sea bed into national sectors, a regime previously agreed upon by Azerbaijan, Russia, and Kazakhstan.

Generally speaking, the importance of the Caucasus lies in the fact that through improved relations with countries in this region, Turkmenistan opens new possibilities with respect to the United States and the European Union. Resolving Aşgabat's relations with Baku is crucial for Turkmenistan's engagement in Western-backed international infrastructure projects in the Caspian. This involves particularly the Trans-Caspian gas pipeline project, which would become a major connecting link to the already constructed East-West transportation and communication corridor. The aim of this project is to supply Central Asian natural gas to Europe. The planned pipeline is expected to bypass the territory of both Russia and Iran, and as such is strongly supported by both the United States and Europe. As part of

¹⁰³ *Ékho* (Baku), July 21, 2007.

¹⁰⁴ *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, October 18, 2007.

this strategy, Washington in 2007 provided Azerbaijan's state oil company with a grant for conducting a feasibility study for two pipelines bringing Central Asian oil and gas to the West.¹⁰⁵ Furthermore, the European Union encourages Turkmenistan to connect to the already completed Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum gas pipeline. For Brussels, Turkmenistan's participation is of great strategic importance as it would provide enough reserves for the planned south European gas route (the Nabucco project). To be sure, this strengthens Ashgabat's negotiation position vis-à-vis its other partners who are interested in Turkmenistan's natural gas.

Regional Cooperation in Central Asia

With Berdimuhamedow, the new Turkmen establishment pays greater attention towards relations with other countries in Central Asia, which were purposefully neglected during the Türkmenbaşy era. Türkmenbaşy's policy condemned Turkmenistan to international isolation, which had a direct impact on relations with neighboring states. This holds true especially for Uzbekistan, a republic that shares almost a 2000 kilometer long border with Turkmenistan. Turkmenistan's draconian border enforcement strategies, including construction of barbed wire fences, cancellation of regular bus and rail connections, and introduction of stringent visa requirements effectively separated traditional trans-border regions inhabited particularly by ethnic Uzbeks. This approach also effectively blocked most of the cross-frontier exchange. Türkmenbaşy's grandiose projects aggravated the tense Turkmenistan-Uzbekistan relations as well. Türkmenbaşy, for example, moved ahead with his plan to build the Great Turkmen Lake in the Garagum desert, which would inevitably disrupt the already very fragile balance of regional water supplies. The reported involvement of Tashkent in the putative assassination attempt on Türkmenbaşy in 2002 moreover led to the most severe crisis in bilateral relations. Turkmenistan also boycotted all regional cooperation and integration projects in Central Asia by stressing its permanent neutrality policy.

Following Türkmenbaşy's death, Kazakhstan rapidly became the chief foreign partner of Turkmenistan in Central Asia. In 2006 and 2007 alone, the heads of Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan met nine times and several

¹⁰⁵ RFE/RL, August 16, 2007.

intergovernmental and interdepartmental meetings took place, which clearly demonstrated the close ties between the two neighboring countries. On May 28 and 29, 2007, Berdimuhamedow visited Astana, where he signed with Nazarbayev a broad treaty on cooperation in business, trade, science, and culture until 2020.¹⁰⁶ Major joint projects are to be carried out within this agreement. One is the aforementioned Caspian coastal gas pipeline projects, which ensure expansion of overall export gas pipeline transportation capacity for both countries. Another involves building a trans-regional road and railway corridor “North-South” that will connect Iran, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, and Russia, enhancing the transportation possibilities for all the countries involved.

As for Uzbekistan, Tashkent’s reserved approach led to a rather frosty start in relations with post-Nyýazow Turkmenistan. Unlike other heads of states from the region, Uzbekistan’s President Islom Karimov did not even attend Türkmenbaşy’s funeral. Whereas there was an intense exchange of delegations between Aşgabat and Astana, Berdimuhamedow met his Uzbek counterpart Karimov for the first time only at the mid-2007 informal CIS summit in St. Petersburg.¹⁰⁷ The ensuing diplomatic activity, however, indicated that the long expected presidential meeting is on its way; the aim of the summit was to elevate mutual relations to a “fundamentally new level.” Finally, on October 18 and 19, 2007, Karimov paid an official visit to Turkmenistan. While in Aşgabat, Karimov and Berdimuhamedow signed a treaty on strengthening friendly relations and increased mutual cooperation. In addition, several other more specific accords were signed on topics such as frontier crossings and cultural exchange.¹⁰⁸ For both republics, improved access to existing transportation and communication networks was a priority, which would enable increased trade volumes as well as more efficient transport routes for trade with third parties.

Turkmenistan’s relations with Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan lag behind somewhat. Their geographical detachment from Turkmenistan has been the primary cause of the hitherto limited economic and social ties. Positive steps

¹⁰⁶ *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, May 29, 2007.

¹⁰⁷ *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, June 11, 2007.

¹⁰⁸ “Sovmestnoe turkmeno-uzbekskoe kommuniike,” *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, October 19, 2007.

have nevertheless been taken. On August 16, 2007, Berdimuhamedow accepted Kyrgyzstan's official invitation and attended the Shanghai Cooperation Organization summit in Bishkek as a guest. Western news agencies reported that Kyrgyzstan, in order to decrease its energy dependency on Uzbekistan, held unofficial negotiations with China on tapping into the Turkmenistan-China gas pipeline project.¹⁰⁹ The subsequent CIS summit in Dushanbe on October 4 and 5, 2007 represented the first official visit of Turkmenistan's president to Tajikistan. As a result of the talks at the summit, several bilateral agreements were signed, among others, a bilateral treaty of friendship and cooperation.¹¹⁰ On December 9 and 10, 2007, when Tajikistan's President Rakhmon visited Aşgabat, another step was taken in this direction by signing a package of agreements on cooperation in trade and economic issues.¹¹¹ In the winter of 2007-2008, as a result of the improving relations, trade in electricity between Turkmenistan and Tajikistan resumed, after having been cut off in 2001 when the parties failed to come to an agreement with Tashkent on the terms of transit of electricity through Uzbekistan.

It is thus possible to observe Turkmenistan's cautious return to Central Asian regional politics. Berdimuhamedow's diplomacy made significant progress in relations with both Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, but when compared with previous years, Turkmenistan is more intensively involved in the mechanisms of regional cooperation as well. The United Nations Regional Preventive Diplomacy Center in Aşgabat is an example. The Center was opened at the initiative of Turkmenistan in late 2007 with the support of all Central Asian republics. Thus, Turkmenistan's reversal of its isolationist policy has had a potentially positive influence on the whole region. Closer regional cooperation is essential for addressing critical trans-border problems in Central Asia, such as asymmetric security threats, division of water reserves, or the environmental disaster of the Aral Sea. Moreover, closer cooperation will enable successful completion of common infrastructure projects essential for improved access to world markets. Consequently, the Central Asian countries will become more and more

¹⁰⁹ *Reuter*, August 15, 2007.

¹¹⁰ *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, October 5, 2007.

¹¹¹ "Sovmestnoe turkmeno-tadzhikskoe kommiunike," *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, December 10, 2007.

important for Turkmenistan, since the existing pipelines to Russia and the planned pipeline to China pass through their territories.

Foreign Policy towards the Rest of Asia

The following section analyzes Turkmenistan's external relations with other relevant Asian countries. From Turkmenistan's perspective, this involves primarily Turkey, Iran, and Afghanistan. Together with Pakistan, Turkmenistan's southern regional neighbors have been core members of the Economic Cooperation Organization, effectively the only multilateral structure in which Turkmenistan was somewhat active during Türkmenbaşy's reign. China and India, each with populations of over one billion and rapidly expanding internal markets, form together with Japan another group of prospective trade partners in Asia. Last but not least, Turkmenistan's business interests also involve the Persian Gulf monarchies. All the previously mentioned connections are appealing, as they enable Aşgabat to diversify its external relations. These countries are of crucial importance as Turkmenistan seeks integration into the international system to decrease the remaining Soviet-era dependencies.

Turkey is a longstanding and indispensable partner of Turkmenistan, and the traditionally close cultural, ethnic, and language ties link the two nations. Turkey's influence benefited from the comprehensive de-Sovietization of Turkmenistan's public life under Türkmenbaşy. Ankara is Aşgabat's only foreign partner that can operate its own educational institutions in Turkmenistan. The metropolitan International Turkmen Turkish University is a prime example, in addition to a Turkish Cultural Center in Aşgabat. Turkish TV broadcasting Avrasya is also available in Turkmenistan without major government interference. Besides cooperation in culture, both countries have strong economic ties, as Turkey is the biggest exporter of goods to Turkmenistan. Key Turkish advisors to late Türkmenbaşy such as Ahmet Çalyk were instrumental in promoting joint business ventures. With their own industrial holding companies, these men controlled a significant portion of Turkmenistan's national economy, including stakes in cotton, textiles, construction, petrochemicals, and energy. On December 6 and 7, 2007, Abdullah Gül, the new President of the Republic of Turkey, visited Turkmenistan. During the intergovernmental talks, the parties discussed

expanding mutual economic and trade cooperation. Since Turkey's demand for electricity is growing, Ankara expressed interest in deepening joint energy ties. The planned increase of Turkmenistan's electric energy supplies through Iran should partially satisfy Turkey's demands.¹¹² To identify further prospective spheres of business cooperation, both parties agreed on establishing a joint intergovernmental commission. Its first session was planned for 2008.

Turkmenistan's relations with its southern neighbor Iran are also expanding. Teheran is Ashgabat's second largest destination for Turkmen exports after Moscow. Both Russia and Iran are interested primarily in Turkmenistan's natural gas, as it is practically the only commodity that Turkmenistan can at the moment realistically export. Turkmenistan's gas supplies are delivered to Iran through the gas pipeline Körpeje-Kordkuy, which has been in operation since late 1997. The Körpeje-Kordkuy pipeline is Turkmenistan's only alternative to northern energy routes, which are effectively controlled by Russia. However, having low capacity, the Iranian connection is only of local importance, and there are only minimal chances that it could be increased and extended to other countries, as Iran itself is an important producer of natural gas. Despite this fact, routes leading through Iran are for Turkmenistan the shortest and thus possibly also cheapest way to get its goods to the world market. Expansion of transportation and communication networks is thus one of the priorities of the new president. On July 15 and 16, 2007, President Berdimuhamedow made his first official visit to the Islamic Republic of Iran, soon after which several reciprocal visits followed. The agenda centered on the construction of a new railway track from the Caspian town of Türkmenbaşy to Gorghan in northern Iran.¹¹³ In a later phase, this new track should be connected to the existing railway lines in Kazakhstan within the proposed "North-South" transportation and communication corridor. The final deal on building the new railway between Turkmenistan,

¹¹² "Sovmestnoe kommiunike po itogam ofitsial'nogo vizita Prezidenta Turetskoi Respubliki Abdullakha Giulia v Turkmenistan," *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, December 7, 2007.

¹¹³ "Sovmestnoe kommiunike Prezidenta Turkmenistana i Prezidenta Islamskoi Respubliki Iran o razvitii dvustoronnikh otnoshenii," *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, July 18, 2007.

Iran, and Kazakhstan was signed at the aforementioned Caspian summit in Teheran on October 17, 2007.¹¹⁴

With regard to security risks, Turkmenistan's unstable neighbor Afghanistan is much more problematic. Aşgabat officially sided with the internationally recognized government in Kabul throughout the civil war of the 1990s. However, in the second half of this decade, when the Taliban controlled even the northern parts of the country, Turkmenistan preserved its foreign consulates in the Afghan cities of Herat and Mazar-e-Sharif. These consulates were active in cross-border traffic, a large part of which was presumably illicit. In Afghanistan, the most active phase of fighting in the northern provinces ended with the U.S.-led military intervention in 2001, after which Turkmenistan participated in efforts towards the economic restoration of Afghanistan. The construction of two high-voltage electric mains between 2002 and 2004, which were to supply electricity to the adjacent frontier areas, was Aşgabat's largest infrastructure project in Afghanistan. Further trade cooperation between Turkmenistan and Afghanistan was discussed during the most recent official visit of President Hamid Karzai to Aşgabat. During the summit, which took place on July 5 and 6, 2007, both parties granted each other most-favored-nation status, and special attention was paid to the expansion of transit infrastructure.¹¹⁵ As a consequence, Turkmenistan opened a new frontier terminal in Imamnazar in the summer of 2007.¹¹⁶

Afghanistan's location constitutes a bridge for approaching other South Asian states, which is an additional reason for Turkmenistan's interest in this country. This particularly concerns Pakistan, a potentially large consumer of Turkmenistan's energy supplies. Turkmenistan realized this fact already in the early 1990s, when Aşgabat introduced the Trans-Afghan gas pipeline project. Indeed, an international consortium, headed by the U.S. energy company Unocal, was created specifically for this project in 1997. However, with Washington slowly reassessing its relations with the Taliban movement in the late 1990s, the implementation of the project was put aside.

¹¹⁴ *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, October 18, 2007.

¹¹⁵ "Soglashenie mezhdú Pravitel'stvom Turkmenistana i Pravitel'stvom Islamskoi Respubliki Afganistan o torgovo-ékonomicheskom sotrudnichestve," *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, July 6, 2007.

¹¹⁶ *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, August 14, 2007.

The idea to construct a Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan gas pipeline was revived only in 2002 at the trilateral summit in Islamabad. India joined the project in 2005. For Turkmenistan today, the Trans-Afghan project is a central issue on the agenda with Afghanistan, but also with Pakistan and India. With funding from the Islamic Development Bank, a feasibility study of the project has been carried out. However, the undertaking would require a large investor, and considering the unstable security situation, it will remain a high risk project for potential investors in the foreseeable future.

Thus, of all Asian countries, China is the most promising consumer of Turkmenistan's energy supplies. As one of the world's fastest growing economies, China is facing urgent energy shortages. Turkmenistan, conversely, is facing problems in finding reliable output markets for its energy exports. These complementarities have led China to expand its interests in Central Asia since the second half of the 1990s. In the case of Turkmenistan, this expansion was further facilitated by the strict Chinese policy of non-interference in domestic affairs of other countries. On the subject of joint energy projects, an important breakthrough was achieved in the spring of 2006 during Türkmenbaşy's last visit to Beijing. At that time, Türkmenbaşy and his counterpart Hu Jintao signed a general agreement on the implementation of the Turkmenistan-China gas pipeline project and on the sale of natural gas from Turkmenistan to China. According to this agreement, a joint pipeline was to be commissioned in 2009, through which Turkmenistan is committed to supply gas to China for the next thirty years. However, one important matter remained unsolved, namely how this agreement would be implemented in practice and how it would relate to the "eastern vector" of Turkmenistan's foreign policy.

On July 17 and 18, 2007, President Berdimuhamedow paid an official visit to China. In Beijing, he was received by Hu Jintao, the Chinese head of state. According to Turkmen press, Berdimuhamedow informed Beijing about Turkmenistan's ongoing audits and exploration efforts of its oil and gas resources. The results reportedly proved that new gas and gas-condensate deposits were found on the right bank of the Amu Darya River. Bearing this in mind, both parties also discussed the issue of building the required infrastructure on Turkmenistan's territory. The summit resulted in the signing of a joint statement on the further strengthening of friendly relations

and bilateral cooperation. With this, both parties pledged to support each other on questions related to their vital interests.¹¹⁷ An additional intergovernmental agreement on technological and economic cooperation marked out priorities in a long-term perspective. With regard to the new gas pipeline project, Beijing gave Aşgabat an interest-free loan for the purchase of Chinese drilling rigs that are to be used for the exploration and development of gas fields. Simultaneously, Beijing and Aşgabat signed a production sharing agreement regarding the Bagtyiarlyk territory. In line with this contract, the China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) was granted the rights to develop onshore gas deposits – the first equity stake granted to a foreign partner in Turkmenistan’s history. The terms of future supplies were also agreed upon in the purchase and sale agreement between the two national oil and gas corporations, Turkmengaz and the CNPC.¹¹⁸

On August 29, 2007, Berdimuhamedow undertook a visit to the eastern Lepab region where his final destination was the village of Bagtyiarlyk. Here, the commencement ceremony for the Turkmenistan-China gas pipeline project organized by the CNPC took place. This “construction project of the century,” as referred to by Berdimuhamedow, measures seven thousand kilometers in length, and connects Turkmenistan with China through Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. Upon completion, Turkmenistan plans to supply 30 bcm of natural gas to China annually, of which 13 bcm will come from the Samantepe and Altyn Asyr fields (which are part of the Bagtyiarlyk contractual territory). In a later phase, the remaining 17 bcm will be extracted from other deposits to be jointly developed by Turkmenistan and China under the production sharing agreement.¹¹⁹ It should be noted, however, that according to the wording of the 2006 general agreement, if additional volumes of gas are needed, Turkmenistan would guarantee the amount of supplies from other gas deposits, a clause that may clash with Turkmenistan’s export obligations in other directions. To express Beijing’s acknowledgement, China’s Prime Minister Wen Jiabao paid a visit to Aşgabat in early November 2007. By the end of Jiabao’s stay, bilateral

¹¹⁷ “Sovmestnaia deklaratsiia Turkmenistana i Kitaiskoi Narodnoi Respubliki o dal’neishem ukreplenii i razvitii otnoshenii družby i sotrudnichestva,” *Neitral’nyi Turkmenistan*, July 18, 2007.

¹¹⁸ *Neitral’nyi Turkmenistan*, July 20, 2007.

¹¹⁹ *Neitral’nyi Turkmenistan*, August 30, 2007.

agreements on interest-free loans were signed to help Aşgabat build the required investment units.¹²⁰

Among the countries of the Far East, Japan is Turkmenistan's leading trading partner and provides both high technology and investment units to Turkmenistan. On September 19 and 20, 2007, the seventh session of the Turkmenistan-Japan Committee on Economic Cooperation was held in Aşgabat, attended also by representatives of Japan's most important corporations. At this intergovernmental session, the Turkmen delegation specified its demands for joint priority projects. Turkmenistan stressed the need to further modernize strategic refineries in Türkmenbaşy, and to maintain existing deliveries of advanced technologies, which Aşgabat uses for drilling purposes and to construct roads and highways.¹²¹ In addition to Japan, new relations are developing with South Korea as well. In May 2007, during an intergovernmental Turkmenistan-Korea meeting, Seoul announced its intention of opening an embassy in Aşgabat.¹²²

As mentioned at the beginning of this section, the Persian Gulf monarchies present another important vector in Turkmenistan's external relations. There are two main reasons for Turkmenistan's interest in the Middle East. Firstly, the wealthy oil monarchies are Aşgabat's closest global financial and trade centers. Secondly, for Turkmenistan, the Sunni states of the Persian Gulf are a welcome alternative to the increasingly influential Shiite Iran. Apart from the first official visit abroad to Saudi Arabia, which was important for the new regime mainly in terms of symbolic legitimacy, President Berdimuhamedow paid a two-day-long visit to the United Arab Emirates on August 26 and 27, 2007. During the official stay, Aşgabat inquired about the possibilities of mobilizing Arab capital and using it to restore Turkmenistan's economy. Both parties agreed to increased investments in their traditional spheres of interest, namely oil and gas extraction, refining, and petrochemistry. Additionally, while in Abu Dhabi, Berdimuhamedow had the opportunity to study local achievements in town-planning, architecture, and tourism. These experiences might be useful especially with

¹²⁰ *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, November 5, 2007

¹²¹ *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, September 24, 2007.

¹²² *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, May 17, 2007.

respect to his recent grandiose project of the Awaza national tourist resort.¹²³ The most discussed project of the visit was the building of a second construction site at the Carbamide Plant in the town of Tejen in the Ahal region to be carried out through the International Petroleum Investment Company.

This paper indicates that there is a gradual stabilization of Turkmenistan's external relations. Most Asian countries are in some respect important to Turkmenistan, though each in their own respective way. Nevertheless, it is evident that as of today, only China can aspire to function as Turkmenistan's principal benefactor in Asia. In this respect, the launching of the Turkmenistan-China gas pipeline project in the summer of 2007 was a decisive moment. By putting this project into motion, new gas export routes are opened for Aşgabat. On the part of Beijing, this project is the key in projecting its influence in Central Asia. Since the details of the gas deal between Turkmenistan and China were not made public, important questions still remain unanswered. The central issue has been whether Turkmenistan will be able to deliver the contracted gas supply quotas. This question is today of less relevance following the results of the independent audit of Turkmenistan's gas reserves. However, even if there will be no shortage in Turkmenistan's reserves, an inevitable struggle for control of the remaining gas fields will arise. This will negatively affect the current consumers in particular, since China will join the scramble for Turkmenistan's remaining natural gas. Aşgabat will almost certainly make use of this increased Chinese interest to enhance its own position for diplomatic maneuver.

The West

This section analyzes Turkmenistan's relations with the West. Special attention will be paid to the United States, the world's only superpower with truly global influence. The active engagement of the United States and its European allies in Central Asia has been perceived as an important factor for peace, security, and stability in the region, particularly after September 11, 2001. Moreover, the Western countries are important trading partners for

¹²³ "Sovmestnoe kommuniike Turkmenistana i Ob"edinennykh Arabskikh Émiratov," *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, August 28, 2007.

Turkmenistan. For Aşgabat, the West represents an extensive source of capital, know-how, and high technologies needed for putting its national development strategy into practice. Through access to these resources, Aşgabat seeks to sustain the economic foundations necessary for Turkmenistan's independence. Deals made with the West also greatly facilitate Turkmenistan's access to world markets. However, relations between Turkmenistan and democratic countries in Europe or North America have been significantly hampered by human rights issues. During the 1990s, when Türkmenbaşy's regime systematically violated human rights, key international financial institutions sponsored by the West (such as the IMF and EBRD) suspended their activities in Turkmenistan. After the presumed assassination attempt on Türkmenbaşy on November 25, 2002, Aşgabat launched an unprecedented repressive attack against its own citizens, to which the West eventually responded with sanctions. Turkmenistan's troubled relations with the West have been a longstanding obstacle for Aşgabat's integration into the international community.

Under Berdimuhamedow, Turkmenistan has made a great effort to normalize its relations, especially with the United States. Washington kept a low profile in Aşgabat during the whole Türkmenbaşy era. Turkmenistan, which shares borders with Iran and Afghanistan, is however of important geostrategic importance for the United States. Bearing this in mind, in the past few years, the Bush administration regularly granted Turkmenistan a waiver from trade sanctions that would otherwise have been imposed pursuant to the Jackson-Vanik amendment and the International Religious Freedom Act. U.S. energy corporations have been active in Turkmenistan since the 1990s, with Mobil Oil, Halliburton, and Western Atlas participating in the development of offshore oil and gas structures in the Caspian. Likewise, major American corporations delivered airplanes (Boeing), construction vehicles (Caterpillar), and farm equipment (John Deere) to Turkmenistan. General Electric is the main U.S. corporation delivering power plant investment units to Turkmenistan. Considering the peculiarities of Türkmenbaşy's regime, USAID's involvement in Turkmenistan's humanitarian assistance has been very limited. In the fall of 2007, the new president of Turkmenistan paid a four-day-long official visit to the United States. The speech at the United Nations General Assembly was the official

reason of his visit, which was accompanied by a massive PR campaign in New York. On September 25, 2007, President Berdimuhamedow met with U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice to discuss the possibilities of increasing mutual trade and economic ties as well as cooperation in the energy sector.¹²⁴ Asked about democracy and civic society development in Turkmenistan, Berdimuhamedow expressed his wish to cooperate with the U.S. in the sphere of education. In particular, he raised the possibility of Turkmen citizens studying at U.S. universities.

Turkmenistan's relations with the European Union are gradually stabilizing as well. Turkmenistan is the last remaining post-communist state whose relations with the EU are based on agreements signed during the Soviet era. Even though a Partnership and Cooperation Agreement was signed between the EU and Turkmenistan in the early 1990s, it did not come into force. Because of the clause on democracy and human rights, Brussels postponed the treaty's ratification several times. Moreover, in 2006, the European Parliament ruled out any discussions of concluding a provisional trade agreement with Turkmenistan for the same reasons. Throughout the 1990s, Brussels' affairs with Aşgabat were limited to providing transformation aid and assistance. The EU TACIS program assisted small-scale individual agricultural and educational projects in Turkmenistan. There were a few additional EU regional programs available from which Turkmenistan could benefit. This involved particularly the Transport Corridor Europe-Caucasus-Central Asia (TRACECA), Interstate Oil and Gas Transport to Europe (INOGATE), and Water Resources Management and Agricultural Production (WARMAP). The reported attempt on Türkmenbaşy's life in 2002 and the following deterioration of the human rights situation in Turkmenistan severely disrupted the political dialogue, leading international organizations such as OCSE, UNHCR, and the UN General Assembly to issue resolutions and eventually impose sanctions sponsored by the EU member states. Hence, European engagement in Turkmenistan comprised largely of individual commercial projects, conducted mainly by British, French, and German corporations (Burren Energy, Bouygues, and Deutsche Bank, among others), which maintained close relations with the late president. Berdimuhamedow's first official visit to Brussels, which took place

¹²⁴ *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, September 27, 2007.

between November 5 and 7, 2007, aimed to open a “new chapter” in the EU-Turkmenistan dialogue. In Brussels, Berdimuhamedow was received by top EU officials, including the President of the European Commission José Manuel Barroso, the High Representative of the Common Foreign and Security Policy Javier Solana, and the President of the European Parliament Hans-Gert Pöttering. Separate meetings with EU commissioners for external relations, energy and trade were arranged. The EU declared support for the reforms proposed by Berdimuhamedow and expressed its willingness to assist Turkmenistan in the areas of agriculture, justice, and administration. As in the past, the precondition for full trade relations with Aşgabat was a genuine improvement of Turkmenistan’s human rights record. Furthermore, Brussels declared its intention to approach Turkmenistan more flexibly. Part of this strategy is Turkmenistan’s forthcoming participation in EU education, training, and research mobility programs within the TEMPUS and Erasmus Mundus framework.¹²⁵

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization embodies the military influence of the West. NATO’s relations with Aşgabat are conducted within the Partnership for Peace program, which Turkmenistan joined in 1994. However, Aşgabat’s participation is severely limited by its declared policy of permanent neutrality. It is important to note that Turkmenistan’s neutrality policy was not affected by the allied intervention in neighboring Afghanistan. Turkmenistan was the only Central Asian republic that avoided engagement in the active phase of the military operation. Turkmenistan rejected Germany’s request to establish a military base for troop carriers on its territory but permitted the use of its air and ground transport corridors for delivering humanitarian supplies to Afghanistan. On September 7, 2007, during his trip to Brussels, Berdimuhamedow visited NATO headquarters and met Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer. They talked about deepening a constructive dialogue, which was renewed in 2007 with the signing of a special program of Turkmenistan’s partnership with the Alliance for that year. There are three broad priority areas in this partnership. The first one encompasses cooperation in the sphere of civil defense, emergencies, and prevention of natural disasters. The second area involves cooperation in research, particularly in the development of

¹²⁵ *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, November 6, 2007.

information networks. The last area concerns frontier control, which includes combating terrorism and organized crime as well as drug trafficking.¹²⁶

Possible political progress in Turkmenistan aside, oil and gas reserves are nevertheless of primary concern in the relations between Turkmenistan and the West. Turkmenistan has been perceived as a possible alternative source of natural gas supplies to Europe, thus contributing to the security of energy supply for the EU member states. For the U.S., this diversification of external relations of the newly independent states is a central part of its strategy, which seeks to strengthen the emerging geopolitical pluralism in what had long been perceived by Russia as its own exclusive zone of interest. Consequently, Turkmenistan is becoming an important player in pipeline geopolitics focusing on oil and gas resources in the Caspian and Central Asia. The outcome of this clash of competing interests will have a direct impact on the future direction of energy flows. As such, it will also influence the distribution of power in most of Eurasia. The international conference Oil and Gas of Turkmenistan, which took place in Aşgabat in mid-November 2007, was a clear indication of the growing global interest in Turkmenistan. For the first time in the conference's twelve-year history, it was attended not only by traditional partners from Russia, the CIS and Asia, but also by senior government officials and business leaders from the United States and Europe. "Openness and Pragmatism" is the main political slogan of the new leadership of Turkmenistan with respect to its relations to the West. These two words symbolize Turkmenistan's new strategy that is supposed to attract foreign investments to key sectors of the national economy.

The preceding chapter offered a basic overview of Turkmenistan's foreign policy following the death Turkmenistan's first president, Saparmyrat Türkmenbaşy. The analyses indicate a stable trend in Turkmenistan's external relations. In this respect, the period under scrutiny can be characterized by Turkmenistan's evident increase in diplomatic activity. In turn, external players also became very active. In a critical moment, they tried to influence Turkmenistan's new foreign policy course for their own benefit. A visible diversion from the policy of isolationism can thus be

¹²⁶ *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, November 8, 2007.

observed. Throughout 2007, the new leadership greatly expanded the republic's contacts with foreign powers. Türkmenbaşy's death resulted in the elimination of the chief obstacle for establishing more constructive relations with other members of the international community. The oil and gas sector remains the driving force in developing external relations. With respect to Turkmenistan's economic structure, these energy exports also form the financial basis of the regime in power. At the same time, it is apparent that Turkmenistan's international cooperation has slowly progressed to other areas such as trade and economy, politics, security, and even renewed social contacts with people from other countries, which is undoubtedly a breakthrough in the context of post-Soviet Turkmenistan. As a result, Turkmenistan opened outwards to a significant degree. However, it remains to be seen if this is a genuine beginning of Turkmenistan's effective integration into the international community, or a mere "time out" for the post-Nyýazow elites to ensure favorable external conditions throughout the transition process. Only the following years can give a more precise answer to this question.

Social Policies

The fifteen years of rule under Türkmenbaşy in post-Soviet Turkmenistan led to a dramatic worsening of the social conditions of most people in the country and the availability of basic social services. In most other post-Soviet republics the system for providing public goods was replaced with new policies, which eventually led to gradual improvements in social conditions. Post-Nyýazow Turkmenistan, in contrast, is faced with a completely ruined system for the provision of public goods such as education and health care. These were often of low standard or existed merely on paper while a large part of the population did not have access to or could in any case not afford them.

After Türkmenbaşy's death, Berdimuhamedow set three priorities for his administration throughout his election campaign: education, health care, and improved Internet availability, implying the possible liberalization of media. Changes in these three areas can be used to compare Berdimuhamedow's "Great Renaissance" era with the "Golden Age" of the Türkmenbaşy regime. At the same time, all these sectors are plagued by systemic problems prevalent in society as a whole, including massive dislocations of public funds, mismanagement, and rampant corruption. There are no easy solutions to the problems of reforming the social system. Stereotypes of prevalent social norms, institutions, and political culture are deeply ingrained even in open democratic societies. Changing them is thus almost impossible in closed or semi-closed systems typical for Central Asia, including Turkmenistan.

On the macroeconomic level there have been good reasons for measured optimism with regards to recent developments in Turkmenistan.¹²⁷ On the level of social conditions, however, the situation under Berdimuhamedow is improving only very slowly. Even though the state is capable of generating substantial revenue, public goods as well as basic state functions still remain

¹²⁷ Richard Pomfret, "Turkmenistan after Turkmenbashi," CACI Forum, Central Asia-Caucasus Institute, Johns Hopkins University SAIS, Washington, D.C., July 16, 2008.

underfunded. The following analysis of three selected public policies (education, health care, and media) takes into account the prevalent corruption mindset, the continuity of stereotypes and habits from the old regime, as well as the state's lacking of capability in improving social conditions. It concludes by suggesting that the social transformation of Turkmenistan under Berdimuhamedow is in many respects only cosmetic.

Education

Education under Türkmenbaşy

The educational system of Turkmenistan worsened dramatically after the collapse of the Soviet Union, and it started to seriously lag behind the more rigorous Russian school system, not to mention Western standards. In 1993, Türkmenbaşy introduced a reform program called "Education" (*Bilim*).¹²⁸ This program, among others, curtailed compulsory primary and secondary school attendance from eleven to nine years, which effectively blocked the potential ambitions of young Turkmenistanis to later study at universities abroad. Furthermore, students were forced to learn the Turkmen language based on a Latin script, which for practical purposes liquidated the heritage of most Turkmen writings from the Soviet times, as these were all written in Cyrillic. Even though the Türkmenbaşy reform program called for every pupil in Turkmenistan to become proficient in three languages (Turkmen, Russian, and English), this goal was never achieved. Financial constraints, lack of competent teachers and, most importantly, excessive emphasis on nation-building and ideology derailed this project.

In the first place, the cutting of educational expenditure resulted in a diminishing number of teachers and instructors. The most extensive staff reduction in Turkmenistan occurred in the mid-1990s, when all schools providing instruction in Russian were closed under the *Bilim* program. The number of pupils per class rose accordingly. Having over forty pupils in one classroom is now common and, according to official data, in 2002-2005 pedagogic staff was cut by another ten percent. New teachers, who were

¹²⁸ "Postanovlenie Prezidenta Turkmenistana 'Ob utverzhdenii gosudarstvennoi programmy po realizatsii novoi politiki obrazovaniia Prezidenta Saparmurata Turkmenbashi v 1993-1997 gg.'," *Turkmenskaia iskra*, November 18, 1993.

themselves educated in schools under Türkmenbaşy, proved unable to teach anything else than the “Holy Ruhnama” or other ideological topics. A further negative consequence of the substantial underinvestment in the educational system was the low salaries of teachers. As of 2007 the average teacher’s salary was only US\$ 100-120 per month (black market exchange rate); yet still one of the highest incomes in the category of state employees.¹²⁹

By 2002, virtually all schools for national minorities were closed down. Separate classes taught in Russian, which are to be found mainly in regional centers, are as of today the only remnants of the Soviet era. The demand for Russian classes, however, markedly exceeds supply, the continuing exodus of the Russian population notwithstanding. Schools providing education in Uzbek language, which were located in the northern and eastern parts of Turkmenistan, were transformed or effectively shut down as well. The same occurred to Kazakh schools in the towns of Türkmenbaşy and Garabogaz (Bekdash). Even though the fourteen Turkmen-Turkish schools that were established after 1991 are still open, pupils are required to pay a tuition fee, which makes these schools accessible only to a very limited segment of the population. The Pushkin Turkmen-Russian high school in Aşgabat is a notable exception, both to the trend of suppressing schooling in other languages and to the generally very low quality of education within Turkmenistan. Operating under the auspices of the Russian embassy in Aşgabat following a 2002 Turkmenistan-Russia intergovernmental agreement, it is now the only institution in Turkmenistan that offers an eleven-year long schooling in line with the Russian standard curriculum. Since this school follows the rigorous Russian standards, its alumni are the only ones among Turkmenistan pupils who can hope to have their diplomas recognized abroad. Needless to say, bribery is an important factor in the admission process, as the capacity of the school is only six hundred pupils.

As in virtually all other areas of Turkmenistan’s society, corruption is an essential part of the national educational system. When it comes to schooling, the most common form of corruption is purchasing a place in a better school, which usually means one with Russian classes. Like most other

¹²⁹ As foreign exchange transactions are still heavily regulated and unavailable for ordinary Turkmenistanis, the black market rate used for the figures provides a more accurate comparison.

public services, important exams need to be paid for on the side as well. With respect to systematic underfunding of education and corresponding dismissals of personnel, teachers bribe principals in order to maintain their jobs. Thus, they become integral parts of the all-encompassing bribery chain.¹³⁰

Aside from “Holy Ruhnama” and other books written reportedly by Türkmenbaşy himself, practically no new textbooks were produced in Turkmenistan after 1991. Moreover, the few new books on the Turkmen language and literature contain convoluted texts, such as excerpts from presidential speeches. As a result, teachers still use old Soviet textbooks from the 1980s.¹³¹ Since it is practically impossible to subscribe to periodicals from abroad (not even from Russia), there is little if any possibility for teachers to update their knowledge. Even though the situation might have recently improved somewhat in this respect, with Berdimuhamedow allowing for subscription to Russian newspapers by selected Turkmenistan ministries and government agencies, the normalization of access to foreign press is still a long way ahead.

Ideology (classes covering the “Holy Ruhnama”), literature (classes covering the literary heritage of Saparmyrat Türkmenbaşy), and modern history (classes covering the history of Turkmenistan after independence, that is, the Türkmenbaşy era) were given heavy preference under Türkmenbaşy.¹³² The pervasive personality cult of the late president was also present in other

¹³⁰ A principal position on a district school costs around US\$ 2000. See Meret Khemraev, “Easy to say...” *Khronika Turkmenistana*, February 17, 2007.

¹³¹ TIHR, “Textbooks of the independence period,” *Khronika Turkmenistana*, September 19, 2006.

¹³² Second-grade curriculum (number of hours per week) in Russian classes: native language 4hrs, Turkmen language 5hrs, English 3hrs, mathematics 6hrs, art class 1hr, manual training 1hr, music class 2hrs, Ruhnama 1hr, general science 1hr, computers 1hr, health education 1hr, class on organizational matters (usually based on readings from Saparmyrat Türkmenbaşy’s works 1hr). Eighth-grade curriculum: Turkmen language 1hr, physics 4hrs, Russian literature 3hrs, history of Turkmenistan 1hr, chemistry 2hrs, algebra 2hrs, geometry 2hrs, Russian 1hr, biology 2hrs, modern history (mainly Saparmyrat Türkmenbaşy) 2hrs, Turkmen literature (Saparmyrat Türkmenbaşy’s books) 2hrs, Ruhnama 2hrs, geography 2hrs, law 1hr, English 1hr, computer science 1hr. These are rather theoretical examples since many schools do not teach the whole curriculum. The chief problem is in foreign languages. *Ibid.*

subjects including mathematics and biology.¹³³ While votive niches to Türkmenbaşy, eventually complemented by votive niches dedicated also to his mother and reported father, were compulsory for primary and secondary schools,¹³⁴ colleges and universities had to maintain whole departments dedicated to the study of the “Holy Ruhnama.”

Teachers and their pupils are also widely used as supplementary labor. As manpower, both groups are sent to work on cotton fields especially during the harvest season or to support official ceremonies in the countryside. For instance, on various anniversaries they are supposed to greet high-profile delegations, plant trees, and lay wreaths next to statues, busts, and monuments depicting Saparmyrat Türkmenbaşy and/or his reported parents.¹³⁵ Teachers have also to subscribe to central and regional newspapers. Moreover, they are expected to repair any damage in their schools or classrooms and maintain the proper ideological paraphernalia from their own resources. School inspections control mainly the displays of national ideology, such as appropriate portraits on all walls, updated notice boards, and well-maintained votive niches. The compulsory attendance and direct involvement of teachers on numerous official occasions takes time, which would be otherwise devoted to actual teaching or preparation for classes. Schools also require parents to pay additional fees for school uniforms or any extra expenses.

If we combine all the abovementioned problems with the context of a generally unsatisfactory socio-economic situation in Turkmenistan, the rising rate of functional illiteracy in recent years is hardly surprising. A significant part of the population, mainly the poorest strata of society in rural

¹³³ An example from a math textbook: Calculate how many days passed between independence day (October 27, 1991) and neutrality day (December 12, 1995). A sample biology question on the leaving exams (ninth class): “Botanical forms. Wise phrases and verses about plants in the Father Books of the Great Saparmyrat Türkmenbaşy,” “Important sowing in Turkmenistan. Witnesses in the Father Books of the Great Saparmyrat Türkmenbaşy.”

¹³⁴ Such votive niches were already typical in Soviet classrooms, originally dedicated to Lenin, Marx or Engels. In Turkmenistan, they consist usually of a notice board with the portrait of Saparmyrat Türkmenbaşy and/or his parents, the Turkmenistan flag and quotations from the “Holy Ruhnama.”

¹³⁵ Sakhra Amanova, “Nulevoi tsykl,” *Oazis*, no. 8 (52), April 2007. See also Nazar Saparov, “An ‘animal’ perspective for rural children,” *Khronika Turkmenistana*, May 12, 2008.

areas, has stopped sending their children to school altogether, using them for work within their own household or farm.

Tertiary Education

The aforementioned “innovations” introduced by Türkmenbaşy had their impact on higher levels of education as well. While the supply of tertiary schooling is constantly growing in Europe and Russia, in Turkmenistan this segment was deeply and systematically decimated under Türkmenbaşy. Some schools crucial for Turkmenistan’s economy were not only neglected but even closed down. This applies for example to all the regional branches of the Agricultural University outside the capital or to some medical schools, which are particularly important for the adjacent rural areas. Currently, the Turkmenistan labor market lacks not only nurses and general medical personnel—which is mainly due to emigration of educated people of non-Turkmen (primarily Russian) origin—but also farming specialists, tractor mechanics, agronomists, etc. The situation is even worse given the fact that all forms of distance, external, and evening schooling were abolished as well.¹³⁶

Moreover, only students who had completed a two-year internship could be accepted to a university under Türkmenbaşy. In other words, prospective students had to find work first and then study. Furthermore, when students finally got accepted to a university, they spent only two years there. Afterward, all university students were required to undertake an additional two-year mandatory internship, often in agriculture, in order to get their degree. To get around this requirement, the students, or their parents, could also pay a hefty bribe and receive the necessary papers immediately. Thus, if we calculate the total years of schooling, eleven years at school were sufficient to obtain a university degree in Turkmenistan. There is evidence, however, that even after completing their studies, a sizeable group of alumni are unable to acquire their degrees. The lack of employment opportunities in

¹³⁶ TIHR, “At university students can learn how to subtract, to multiply and how to operate a tractor...” *Khronika Turkmenistana*, June 18, 2007.

Turkmenistan prevented students from meeting the mandatory internship requirement.¹³⁷

As for studies abroad, tight restrictions were in force under Türkmenbaşy. Students in Turkmenistan were confronted with huge problems when attempting to complete their studies in a foreign country. Firstly, as the mandatory schooling years were shortened, Turkmenistan high school diplomas are simply not recognized abroad (not even in Russia). Even diplomas issued in Turkmenistan before 1993 are not automatically accepted.¹³⁸ Other impediments for students who wish to study abroad are the major bureaucratic obstacles when applying for a passport. As a rule, those who have not completed their military service cannot be issued a passport and thus cannot leave Turkmenistan. Conversion of money necessary to study abroad is also a problem.

People with diplomas from abroad are required to pass a supplementary exam on Türkmenbaşy's writings (especially the "Holy Ruhnama") and to prove their knowledge of subjects which are not taught at foreign universities, but which are deemed relevant by Turkmenistan's education ministry. Otherwise, their degrees are not accepted and they cannot get the necessary work positions and job permits. The Turkmen Initiative for Human Rights reported that it was difficult to determine what this supplementary validating exam actually consisted of. So it is no wonder that this ambiguity is conducive to corruption on the part of both the ministry and the examiners (according to some testimonies, the price for a passing grade can be as high as US\$ 1,000).¹³⁹ This situation persists although the economy is in desperate need of specialists in nearly all fields. During Türkmenbaşy's rule, everything that remotely resembled educational standards in other countries was purposefully liquidated as part of a campaign against the intelligentsia, seen as potentially the most politically active and therefore dangerous group. The education that persists in Turkmenistan is largely influenced by

¹³⁷ Aisha Berdyeva, "Certified specialists without certificates," *Khronika Turkmenistana*, October 26, 2007.

¹³⁸ "Russkie v tsarstve Turkmenbashi. Interv'iu s Anatoliiem Fominyom," *Russkaia tsivilizatsiia*, October 11, 2007, <http://www.rustrana.ru/article.php?nid=30188>. See also Aleksei Vlasov, "Zolotoi vek turkmenskoi vysshei shkoly," *Evraziiskii dom*, February 6, 2006, <http://www.eurasianhome.org/xml/t/expert.xml?lang=ru&nic=expert&pid=529>.

¹³⁹ TIHR, "Naturalizatsiia zarubezhnykh diplomov," *Khronika Turkmenistana*, November 22, 2006.

ideological concerns. For this reason, possible reforms, however sincere, can only be implemented gradually, and it will be a long time before they bear any fruit.

Reforms of Berdimuhamedow

President Berdimuhamedow proclaimed educational reforms to be his top priority throughout his electoral campaign at the beginning of 2007. Following Berdimuhamedow's accession to power after the general presidential elections, promising steps to be taken have been announced in this regard. However, the changes that have been introduced are rather modest at best and political decisions have often not been accompanied by concrete measures. The limited reforms are, furthermore, incoherently implemented, which further hampers their potential impact.

One of the first decrees adopted by Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow after the presidential elections was to extend compulsory schooling by one year (from the academic year 2007/2008).¹⁴⁰ As a result, ninth graders remained in schools, even though the specific curriculum for the tenth year was still to be developed. The government of Turkmenistan also called for new textbooks to be prepared, but the implementation of this decision is lagging behind. Not only were no new textbooks prepared for the beginning of the 2007/2008 school year, but schools were also not given any curriculums or methodical guidelines.¹⁴¹ In the proposed new textbooks, which had been set up under the old president, the expert commissions merely replaced the images of the late Türkmenbaşy with portraits of Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow.

The government emphasizes two additional aspects of the educational reforms. The first one is concerned with the need to provide schools with modern computer equipment, including Internet connection. The official press keeps referring to new schools built in each region of the country. In the 2008/2009 school year, for instance, thirty schools with the latest multimedia equipment were to be opened.¹⁴² With respect to hardware, about

¹⁴⁰ "Ukaz Prezidenta Turkmenistana 'O sovershenstvovanii sistemy obrazovaniia v Turkmenistane'," *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, February 16, 2007.

¹⁴¹ TIHR, "What is new in schools," *Khronika Turkmenistana*, November 12, 2007.

¹⁴² *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, May 2, 2008.

12,000 Hewlett-Packard computers were to be given to schools in 2007/2008.¹⁴³ The president also reportedly discussed further computer deliveries with IBM representatives.¹⁴⁴ However, it is important to note that many schools, particularly those in rural areas, are facing more pressing issues than computers. For instance, there are places outside the few urban areas where electricity supply has been halted for prolonged periods of time. At any rate, it is far from certain that the computers will reach their planned destinations in schools even if the government really acquires them as promised.

The second aspect of the Berdimuhamedow reform proposals deals with the question of language. Government officials promised that foreign languages would be given a broader space in the curriculum, starting with the 2007/2008 school year. Thus, after many years, the project of a trilingual population proficient in Turkmen, Russian, and English reappeared, together with an emphasis on computer literacy. In order to achieve this goal, in early 2007 President Berdimuhamedow even instructed the government to hire new teachers for these subjects.¹⁴⁵ However, it is far from clear that teachers with computer and foreign language skills will find Berdimuhamedow's offer attractive enough. With these skills, they usually have a range of more attractive options open for them or, most probably, have already left the country. In the meantime, several specialized schools were reported to have returned to instruction in the Russian language. However, there are still very few schools offering education in Russian, and hundreds of students apply to these.¹⁴⁶

Teachers' salaries have been raised several times since 2007.¹⁴⁷ However, not only are there delays in paying wages, but the rise has had the same effect as when pensions were suddenly increased. The market responded by an increase in the price for basic foodstuffs, which led to additional inflationary

¹⁴³ *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, September 1, 2007.

¹⁴⁴ "Watan," Turkmenistan TV, October 9, 2007.

¹⁴⁵ "Novaia vlast' vozvrashchaet v stranu normal'noie obrazovanie," *Fergana.ru*, February 26, 2007.

¹⁴⁶ Esen Aman, "Turkmen Education and Ethnic Groups," *Khronika Turkmenistana*, September 5, 2007.

¹⁴⁷ "Ukaz 'Ob uvelichenii razmera oplaty truda rabotnikov obrazovaniia Turkmenistana i studencheskikh stipendii,'" *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, March 31, 2007. See also Ogulmaral Redzhepova, "Edinstvo slova i dela," *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, October 10, 2007.

pressures. Simultaneously, the teaching load was reduced from thirty to twenty hours per week. This meant that more teachers were needed in schools. Just to fill the gap, approximately 23,000 teachers were thus supposed to return to schools in March 2007.¹⁴⁸

In terms of tertiary education, five to six years of schooling is to be established again. This would mean that both the two-year internship before enrolling at a university as well as the so-called work internships afterwards would be cancelled. In June 2007, the vice-chairman of the cabinet of ministers Hydyr Saparlyýew, who is in charge of education, was ordered to ensure an increase of the number of university students, and to broaden the spectrum of university specializations. According to official statistics, 3015 students enrolled at Turkmenistan's universities in 2007, while four thousand students were, according to official estimates, to enroll in tertiary education the following year.¹⁴⁹ Thus, there were approximately 13,000 students in total at these universities in the academic year 2007/2008. Even if we account for this recent increase, this is still not even one half of the number of enrolled students in the mid-1970s.¹⁵⁰

Also, an aim to abolish oral exams in front of commissions that were especially prone to corruption was proclaimed; so far it has not been achieved. Instead, it turned out that the price for enrolling at a university has actually increased. According to some sources the required bribe can be as high as several thousand dollars.¹⁵¹ After some academics reportedly had to leave because of a bribery scandal, this fee was likely raised to cover the higher risk.¹⁵² The announced university reforms (five-year-long university studies, cancellation of the two-year work internships, enrolling a higher

¹⁴⁸ Arkadii Dubnov, "Turkmeniia gotovitsia k XX s"ezdu," *Vremia novostei*, March 29, 2007.

¹⁴⁹ *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, September 1, 2007, and June 24, 2008. To have a complete picture, there were 3,175 students enrolled in Turkmenistan in 2006. Cf. *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, August 11, 2006.

¹⁵⁰ The Great Soviet Encyclopedia says that there were thirty-one thousand one hundred students in 1975/1976 in Turkmenistan.

¹⁵¹ In this sense, the most popular universities were the law faculty at the Magtymguly State University, the Police Academy, and the Institute of Oil and Gas Industry; here the bribery fee could have exceeded US\$ 20,000. See Sakhra Amanova, "Zelenyi konkurs," *Oazis*, no. 18 (62), September 2007.

¹⁵² TIHR, "Only family members and friends," *Khronika Turkmenistana*, October 15, 2008.

number of students) attracted more pupils than before—approximately 40,000 students applied to universities in 2007 and roughly the same number a year later.¹⁵³ This higher demand only served to fuel the corruption at many educational institutions.¹⁵⁴

Few positive steps have been taken to lessen the influence of ideology on education as of today. The gradual lowering of significance of special classes on *Ruhnama* since 2008 could be regarded as a small but important step in this direction. Study of this “holy book” has been incorporated into the curriculum of a new subject, civic education. It is probable that the system of obligatory exams on *Ruhnama* will be abolished in the near future. However, in 2008, understanding and knowing *Ruhnama* was still one of the requirements for university admission.¹⁵⁵ As before, students who return to Turkmenistan after studying abroad have to pass the aforementioned supplementary state exams. Moreover, with respect to current trends, subjects on Türkmenbaşy’s *Ruhnama* might soon be replaced by mandatory classes in another ideological subject covering the Berdimuhamedow “Great Renaissance” era.¹⁵⁶

In 2007, Berdimuhamedow awarded several students, primarily those who went to study at Russia’s technical universities, with a foreign stipend. Sixty-seven Turkmen students in total were reported to have benefited from this scholarship program during the last year. Even though this number was far from impressive, it gained wide coverage in the national press.¹⁵⁷ In September 2007, 267 Turkmenistan students left on government scholarships to Russia, Ukraine, Turkey, Malaysia, and China.¹⁵⁸ One year later, this number was reported to have risen to 500.¹⁵⁹ However, both bribery and

¹⁵³ *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, August 9, 2007.

¹⁵⁴ “Platnoe obrazovanie budet garantirovano Konstitutsiei,” Institute for War and Peace Reporting, July 29, 2008, <http://www.iwpr.net/RU-btm-b-345936>. See also Aisha Berdyeva, “Skol'ko stoit syr v myshelovke,” *Deutsche Welle*, August 15, 2008.

¹⁵⁵ Farid Tukhbatullin, “College is still there (greetings from the recent past),” *Khronika Turkmenistana*, July 19, 2007.

¹⁵⁶ Aisha Berdyeva, “V sfere obrazovaniia ne proizoshlo sushchestvennykh izmenenii,” *Deutsche Welle*, September 6, 2008.

¹⁵⁷ *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, July 11, 2007. See also “V Turkmenii vozobnovilsia priem v rossiiskie vuzy,” *Gundogar.org*, July 16, 2007.

¹⁵⁸ “V dobryi put' za novymi znaniiami,” *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, August 25, 2007.

¹⁵⁹ “Obrashcheniie rabotnikov obrazovaniia, prepodavatelei, studencheskoi i uchashcheisia molodezhi nezavisimogo neitral'nogo Turkmenistana k Prezidentu

unequal treatment tainted the selection process. For instance, during the interviews, applicants were required to speak in Turkmen only, a measure that effectively ruled out the participation of ethnic and national minorities.

The session of Turkmenistan's Supreme Council on Science and Technology commemorating the Day of Science on June 12, 2007, proved to be crucial in the positive process of reopening Turkmenistan's Academy of Science, which was dissolved by Türkmenbaşy in 1998. New members of the Academy, who were nominated by the general meeting, were officially confirmed. Consequently, doctoral studies programs were reopened and tenure decisions made throughout the year 2008.¹⁶⁰ However, one year after the announcement, the Academy looks like a virtual body. Neither a board nor any other institution has thus far been established. As is the case in the entire education sector, the Academy lacks qualified personnel and professional accreditation committees. In sum, tertiary education in Turkmenistan is suffering not only from a brain drain but also from technological and institutional underdevelopment.

An entire generation of Turkmenistanis received inadequate and distorted education due to the reforms introduced by the late Türkmenbaşy. These children were brought up under the ever-present shadow of the "holy book" of *Ruhnama*. Also older age groups spent at least several of their formative years in this deformed school environment. Even if reasonable educational reforms stemming from the actual needs of Turkmenistan schools continue to be introduced under Berdimuhamedow, the training of competent personnel alone will take several years at best. Since a large portion of the educational staff is probably gone for good and options to recruit new personnel from both internal and external sources are limited, full recovery cannot be achieved even in a medium-term horizon.

The autocratic governing style of President Berdimuhamedow is likely to further strengthen this trend. There is a tendency within the bureaucracy to dutifully execute every slightest whim of the president in order to please him. This also leads to falsification of statistical data, suppression of the

Turkmenistana Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedovu," *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, September 2, 2008.

¹⁶⁰ "Reforma otechestvennoi nauki: po puti prakticheskoi realizatsii," *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, April 1, 2008.

most troublesome issues as well as to other problems that complicate all reform efforts. Hence, actual future results in the form of benefits for pupils and students might not even materialize. Apart from the positive aims that the reforms aspire to achieve, the government of Turkmenistan has to deal with problems that are often beyond its capacity.

Health Care

Health Care under Türkmenbaşy

According to WHO statistics, the health care system of Turkmenistan is among the worst in the post-Soviet territory, as demonstrated by a number of relevant indicators including the average life expectancy.¹⁶¹ In 1995, a new governmental program called “Health” (*Saglyk*) was implemented under Türkmenbaşy with the aim to enhance health care in the country, based on voluntary health insurance. The official press reported that 85 percent of Turkmenistan’s citizens were insured by 2004.¹⁶² Yet, this number appears to be exaggerated, because a large number of the population does not have enough money to pay the extra costs for insurance. In 2006, the health insurance was made compulsory. After that, health insurance costs started to be automatically deducted from salaries again. However, this insurance does not cover the majority of the expenses for treatment, and patients are obliged to pay unofficial extra fees.¹⁶³ The doctors consider the additional (and often much bigger) payments as an integral part of the health care system.¹⁶⁴

As of 2005, an unwritten rule existed, under which it was forbidden to diagnose serious diseases such as jaundice, cholera, spotted fever, or

¹⁶¹ Available data show that in 2002, men in Turkmenistan could expect to live until fifty-one and women until fifty-seven. The 2005 data were slightly more optimistic (57 years for men, 62 for women); but still, Turkmenistan is in very last position if compared with Europe or the other former USSR republics. See the WHO website, www.who.int.

¹⁶² “Za strokoi Postanovleniia Prezidenta. Zdravookhranenie Turkmenistana: kurs na kachestvenno novyi uroven' meditsinskogo obsluzhivaniia,” *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, January 20, 2004.

¹⁶³ “Reforma zdravookhraneniia,” *Khronika Turkmenistana*, August 8, 2006.

¹⁶⁴ According to *The Turkmenistan Chronicle*, one needle costs US\$ 0.5-1, an operation US\$ 100-200, and anesthesia US\$ 20-30. One week in neurologist hospital would cost around US\$ 80 (including medicaments, a place in a hospital room, food etc.). See TIHR, “Corrupted medicine,” *Khronika Turkmenistana*, March 18, 2007.

tuberculosis in Turkmenistan. In this way, the authorities found means to manipulate the health statistics and allay the fears of international health organizations.¹⁶⁵ In the same year, all district hospitals were closed down and turned into so-called diagnostic centers. These cannot accept patients for long-term treatment.¹⁶⁶ Surgery and internal medicine, for example, was only available in the provincial centers. The official aim was to offer the best-quality treatment in Aşgabat, and also to cut health care expenditures overall. Brand new clinics with state of the art equipment were built in the capital, primarily to be used by the former president himself. However, only a limited portion of the Turkmenistan population has enough money to be treated there.¹⁶⁷

In this way, the government effectively withdrew public health care services from people residing outside the main urban areas. The majority of the diagnostic centers located in rural areas operate under disastrous sanitary conditions. Many patients do not have enough resources to travel to Aşgabat for treatment, and their families cannot support them financially while in hospital, not to mention restrictions on the freedom of movement. It is therefore not surprising that use of traditional medicine, sometimes conducted by the local clergy, is on the rise again.

Similar to other public sector employment, the lack of qualified personnel is another notable problem of the health service. Already in the 1990s, a substantial portion of medical personnel, primarily of non-Turkmen origin, left the country. Budgetary cuts in 2004 caused an additional 15,000 people to be removed from their jobs in hospitals and medical centers. An unskilled labor force, typically those undergoing compulsory military service, were to replace them. To add to this, doctors who had completed their medical studies abroad after 1993 were deprived of their licenses to treat patients, unless they were able to pass the supplementary state exam. Medical training also declined during the Türkmenbaşy era. Canceling Latin in medical

¹⁶⁵ “Sanitarno-epidemiologicheskaiia situatsiia v Turkmenistane vyzyvaet trevogu,” *Turkmenskii Khel'sinskii Fond*, February 13, 2006.

¹⁶⁶ “Turkmenbashi Wields The Axe,” *Institute for War and Peace Reporting*, March 11, 2005, http://www.iwpr.net/?p=rca&s=f&o=238797&apc_state=henirca2005.

¹⁶⁷ In these centers, the price for a medical scan was US\$ 40, the equivalent of two average pensions at the time. Cf. Vitalii Volkov and Oraz Saryev, “Siluet kobry,” *Deutsche Welle*, December 14, 2005.

faculties and replacing it strictly with the Turkmen language or replacing the Oath of Hippocrates with an oath of loyalty to the “Holy Ruhnama” were only two of the most extravagant “reform steps” taken by the first president with respect to medical education.¹⁶⁸ Furthermore, even doctors tend to bribe officials to obtain their positions. They pay off these bribes later with money acquired from patients.

Drugs and Drug Trafficking

The trafficking of drugs between Turkmenistan and Afghanistan has become a serious problem for international efforts to combat drug trafficking. After the last Russian border troops ultimately left Turkmenistan in 1999, the crossing between Turkmenistan and Taliban-controlled Afghanistan began to be widely used by drug dealers. Despite the fact that Turkmenistan is a signatory party to international covenants on combating narcotics, its involvement in this endeavor has been purely formal. As a rule, after signing the agreements no further activity on the part of Turkmenistan has followed.¹⁶⁹ Furthermore, Turkmenistan has since 2000 failed to provide international organizations with data regarding the fight against drug trafficking within the country (including, for example, statistics concerning the amount of seized opium). In 2006, the Turkmenistan Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights asserted that as much as twenty percent of Turkmenistan’s population has some experience with hard drugs.¹⁷⁰

In Turkmenistan, narcotics are not solely a matter concerning a few criminal gangs; it is likely that senior government officials are aware of the drug trade. Statements made by the late president himself, the content of charges against officials who fell into disfavor, as well as testimonies of prominent opposition members indicated that government structures (particularly the ministry of interior, the office of the prosecutor general, and the border patrols operating under the ministry of national security) were directly engaged in this business. Sources within the Turkmenistan opposition claim

¹⁶⁸ “Zakon Turkmenistana ‘Ob okhrane zdorov’ia grazhdan’ (novaia redaktsiia),” *Neitral’nyi Turkmenistan*, November 15, 2005.

¹⁶⁹ Cf. Country Factsheets, Eurasian Narcotics: Turkmenistan 2004, Silk Road Studies Program, http://www.silkroadstudies.org/new/inside/research/narcotics_crime/FactSheet/2004/Turkmenistan.pdf.

¹⁷⁰ “Narkoproblemy po turkmenski — 2,” *Turkmenskii Khel'sinskii Fond*, July 21, 2006.

that approximately 80-120 tons of opium reached Turkmenistan annually during the period of Taliban administration in Afghanistan.¹⁷¹ In 2001, Hudaýberdi Orazow, the former head of Turkmenistan's Central Bank, claimed that large supplies of opium from Afghanistan were hidden in the cellars of the former headquarters of the Communist Party Central Committee in Aşgabat city center.¹⁷² However, there is little direct evidence to verify this claim.

In Turkmenistan, the use of relatively cheap narcotics from Afghanistan has turned into a significant social problem.¹⁷³ The desperate overall social and economic situation only exacerbates this trend. Entire families were reported to use narcotics regularly, and rural areas were the hardest hit by the problem.¹⁷⁴ As this issue is not that visible outside the cities, it receives little attention by the authorities. The traditional interpersonal relations are deeply affected by the prolific drug addiction. In villages, girls increasingly remain unmarried as their parents refuse to give consent to a marriage with a drug addict.

There is no relevant data available concerning drug addiction in Turkmenistan, although the number of addicted users has been estimated to be as high as several tens of thousands.¹⁷⁵ Added to this, occasional use of

¹⁷¹ For comparison, 4,600t of opium was produced in Afghanistan in 1999 (that is, one year before it was forbidden to grow opium; this ban was a result of international, especially U.S., pressure). Cf. Afghanistan Opium Survey 2006 (UN Office for Drug and Crime, September 2006).

¹⁷² Beseda rukovoditelia Ob"edinennoi Oppozitsii Turkmenistana Avdy Kulieva s byvshim vitse-prem'erom, predsedatelem Tsentrobanka Turkmenistana Orazovym Khudaiberdy Artykovichem (December 2001), *Erkin Türkmenistan*, <http://www.erkin.net>. See also Rustem Safronov, "Turkmenistan's Niyazov Implicated in Drug Smuggling," *EurasiaNet*, March 29, 2002.

¹⁷³ In Aşgabat, one heroine dose costs US\$ 1.5. The prices are even lower in the countryside. Cf. Merdan Nurov, "Territorii bor'by," *Gundogar.org*, August 4, 2005.

¹⁷⁴ There is a case that a father gave opium to his daughters so that they could tie carpets more quickly. After several months, these daughters were fully addicted to opium, and consequently their working abilities declined dramatically. See "Turkmenistan's Rising Drugs Crisis," Institute for War and Peace Reporting, June 23, 2004, http://www.iwpr.net/?p=rca&s=f&o=175878&apc_state=henirca2004.

¹⁷⁵ According to unofficial information, some 32,500 people were listed at drug clinics in 2007. It is probable that the real figure is much higher. Cf. "Turkmenistan's Drug Problems," Institute for War and Peace Reporting, July 11, 2008.

illicit drugs is not an uncommon practice at various types of social events.¹⁷⁶ Most experts on drug addiction lost their jobs due to reshuffles within the health care system, and social welfare institutions for drug addicts were effectively closed down. As of today, Turkmenistan's only institution known to treat addiction is located in the northern Dasoguz region.¹⁷⁷ However, sources claim that clients of this institution suffer from desperate sanitary conditions. There are credible reports that the ministries of interior and defense commonly use these "patients" as cheap labor in the course of therapy.¹⁷⁸ The late Türkmenbaşy attempted to solve the problem of drug addiction, as well as other dire social problems, by bringing the nation back to its spiritual roots through the spreading of his *Ruhnama* book.¹⁷⁹ However, it became painfully apparent that this approach has not exactly been a success.

In 2007, President Berdimuhamedow declared a war against narcotics and drug addiction. This war was to be waged by the ministries of the interior and national security. Subsequently, a new agency, the State Service for Combating Drugs, was even established for this purpose in early 2008.¹⁸⁰ However, it turned out that this declaration was also a harbinger for subsequent purges in the security apparatus. As previously mentioned, in the spring of 2007, Minister of Interior Akmämmed Rahmanow was dismissed due to "serious shortcomings in work."¹⁸¹ General Asyrmuhammedow, long-term chief of the secret services and also a member of the December 21 coup group, was fired in the autumn of 2007.

Drug addiction is likely to remain a problem for public health care in the country, even if some reform programs are successfully carried out. Turkmenistan will not be able to deal with this problem without allocating

¹⁷⁶ Martin McKee and Bernd Rechel, *Human Rights and Health in Turkmenistan* (London: London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, 2005), 39-40.

¹⁷⁷ Redzhep Gel'dyev, "Zombi 'zolotogo veka'," *Delovaia nedelia* (Kazakhstan), March 28, 2005.

¹⁷⁸ Vitalii Volkov and Oraz Saryev, "Prinuditel'nyi trud vmesto lecheniia," *Deutsche Welle*, November 20, 2006.

¹⁷⁹ C. J., Chivers, "Heroin Seizes Turkmenistan, a Nation Ill Equipped to Cope," *New York Times*, July 11, 2007.

¹⁸⁰ *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, January 19, 2008.

¹⁸¹ *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, April 10, 2007. See also TDH, "Zasedanie kabineta ministrov Turkmenistana," *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, June 23, 2007.

increasing amounts of resources to it. The expanding number of drug addicts may, moreover, further contribute to the already increasing crime rates. The pervasive corruption in the health care system is further enhanced by profits from drug trafficking, making any realistic solutions difficult to achieve.

Turkmenistan's health care is in the same desperate condition as education. Both areas face similar problems of a systemic nature: underinvestments, a handful of better-quality institutions virtually inaccessible for the general population, and a lack of qualified personnel. Moreover, new doctors, who completed their medical training at one of the local universities, are not a guarantee for restoring the need for personnel. Not only do they lack solid training because of the defective educational system, but they are also more prone to corruption. As a result of being raised in such an environment, they tend to find bribery and fraud an acceptable social norm. Restoring and repairing the neglected hospital facilities requires massive investments, a prospect that is unrealistic in the near future. Therefore, recovering even the basic fundamentals of health care will be a daunting task. Attempts to assist Turkmenistan in its effort from the outside will encounter powerful forces and interests ready to abuse any good intentions for personal gain.

Media

National Media Framework

In 2007, Reporters without Borders ranked Turkmenistan once again amongst the world's very worst offenders in a ranking of the freedom of the press.¹⁸² In Turkmenistan, the government keeps tight control over all national media. All media outlets are owned by the state, and, as before, no legal alternative media exists. Everything that is broadcast or published is under the yoke of heavy government censorship. In addition to this, journalists have developed a high degree of self-censorship. The grim fate of those journalists who departed from the official line, or stood up against the regime, further enhanced this mechanism of self-control.¹⁸³

¹⁸² Worldwide Press Freedom Index 2007. Reporters without Borders, press release, October 16, 2007. According to this index, Turkmenistan is third from last in a list ranking of freedom of the press.

¹⁸³ The arrest and subsequent imprisonment in 2006 of three journalists, namely Annagurban Amangylyjow, Sapardurdi Hajiýew, and Ogulsapar Myradowa (Radio

The only officially permitted media in Turkmenistan is of domestic origin. The effective ban on subscribing to foreign newspapers and journals is still in force, despite limited exceptions adopted recently by the Berdimuhamedow government for subscription of Russian periodicals in the case of some ministries and agencies.¹⁸⁴ At the same time, the regime forces the citizens of Turkmenistan to become acquainted with its official positions and approaches. State employees are still under pressure to subscribe to official newspapers and journals, as was the case not only under Türkmenbaşy but also in the Soviet period; failure to comply with which may result in dismissal from their jobs.¹⁸⁵

In the first weeks after Türkmenbaşy's death, it was possible to find occasional and slight hints of criticism in the official releases, primarily focusing on less political and more specific issues (e.g. rail ticket profiteering).¹⁸⁶ Nevertheless, this practice quickly stopped with the February 2007 presidential elections.¹⁸⁷ The only, and very cautious, criticism in today's official media is directed against specific aspects of the former regime. Shortcomings are usually described as being only partial and temporary. Such articles moreover appear only when accompanied by praiseful articles applauding the reforms of the new Berdimuhamedow government. Even casual content analysis of Turkmenistan's media clearly reveals that many issues, events, or persons are treated as taboos and thus not even mentioned in the press.

Since Türkmenbaşy's death, little has changed in the official approach toward journalists. Self-censorship remains extensive, as is the opposition on

Free Europe/Radio Liberty correspondent), was the most significant event before Türkmenbaşy's death. They had all assisted a France-2 reporter with making a documentary on Turkmenistan. Ogulsapar Myradowa died in prison three weeks later, with wounds on her body indicating torture. Cf. "RFE/RL Turkmen Correspondent Dies in Prison," RFE/RL Press Release, September 14, 2006.

¹⁸⁴ *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, December 12, 2007. To be precise, there exist also the semi-legally imported non-political magazines with TV-program, crossword puzzles, and horoscopes from Uzbekistan sold in bazaars in border areas.

¹⁸⁵ TIHR, "Newspaper to each family," *Khronika Turkmenistana*, August 6, 2006.

¹⁸⁶ TDH, "V tseliakh sovershenstvovaniia raboty transportnoi infrastruktury," *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, January 26, 2007.

¹⁸⁷ Meret Babayev, "The country of TV aerials and broadcasting receivers," *Khronika Turkmenistana*, March 6, 2007.

the part of the power holders towards new ideas.¹⁸⁸ The security apparatus, particularly the ministry of national security, interferes in journalistic work and decides who will retain or lose their job.¹⁸⁹ The patterns established in the Türkmenbaşy era have thus been carried over to the new regime, too. Given its essence, substantial improvements in media freedom appear unlikely in the near future. Intimidation and arrests of inconvenient journalists, particularly of those who cooperate with foreign media or organizations, persist.¹⁹⁰ Just as under Türkmenbaşy, when foreign journalists who sought to verify official information were denied entry into Turkmenistan, no-entry provisions for potentially troublesome persons are still in force.¹⁹¹

Television and Radio Broadcasting

The four channels of Turkmenistan's national television are virtually identical. Their broadcasting consists mainly of covering the president's activities, displays of traditional Turkmen music and dance, and soap operas. The main news broadcasts of television, "Watan" (domestic news) and "Jahan" (world news), have a similar content. This is why most Turkmenistanis do not watch national television. However, the range of other television stations is very limited. Turkmenistani may tune into the Turkish Avrasya channel without difficulty, but Turkish television does not offer controversial news about Turkmenistan. The broadcasting of Russia's public ORT channel, which was limited to just a few hours per day under the former president,¹⁹² was slightly extended in early 2007 and is available throughout Turkmenistan. Yet the broadcasting is subject to thorough government censorship. In border areas, it is also possible to tune into Uzbekistani or Iranian television stations (including local broadcasting in Turkmen), which do not offer any controversial views and are heavily

¹⁸⁸ Sakhra Amanova, "Shtampovka popugaev," *Oazis*, no. 15 (59) August 2007.

¹⁸⁹ For instance, Zeinapbibi Agamamedova, a prominent commentator with the official Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan daily, was fired from her job in 2007 for contacts with international organizations. Cf. TIHR, "Deprived right to profession," *Khronika Turkmenistana*, August 8, 2007.

¹⁹⁰ In April 2007, two Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Turkmen Service stringers were arrested. RFE/RL Correspondents Report Harassment, RFE/RL, April 27, 2007.

¹⁹¹ "V Turkmeniiu po-prezhnemu ne vpuskaiut neugodnykh," interview with Arkadii Dubnov, *Fergana.ru*, May 12, 2007.

¹⁹² TIHR, "Censorship (the notes of Turkmen TV viewer)," *Khronika Turkmenistana*, May 17, 2006.

regulated by their respective governments anyway. Similar to all other foreign TV stations, their broadcasting practically does not cover the situation in Turkmenistan at all and thus has no impact in this respect.

A significant number of Turkmenistan households, predominantly in urban areas, own a satellite receiver. In this way, they can watch broadcasting from Russia, Turkey, or even the West, which remains their only window to the outside world. At the end of 2007, however, while inspecting the city streets, Berdimuhamedow remarked that satellite dishes were detrimental to the scenery of Aşgabat. Following that statement, satellite dishes on several houses in Aşgabat were removed by the city authorities. For the time being, no further official steps seem to have been taken to address this issue and the elimination of satellite dishes was subsequently silently removed from the agenda. Yet many feared that individual satellites would soon be forbidden in Turkmenistan.¹⁹³

Among the radio stations in Turkmenistan, the Prague-based Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Turkmen Service *Azatlyk* (Liberty) is the most popular. It is virtually the only Turkmen-language broadcast offering at least some independent information that can be accessed across Turkmenistan.¹⁹⁴ Broadcasting of the last Russian radio station *Maiak* (Lighthouse) remains blocked by Turkmenistan authorities since 2004, reportedly due to technical reasons.¹⁹⁵

It was expected that with Berdimuhamedow's accession to power, the liberalization of media coverage would gradually follow. Many hoped that there would be more options for receiving foreign, especially Russian language, television broadcasting. So far, there is no verifiable information that improvements have been made, or that television stations have altered their broadcasting format. When it comes to the media, the government's

¹⁹³ TIHR, "Again about satellite dishes," *Khronika Turkmenistana*, December 24, 2007; Adalat Bairiev, "One 'dish' is not enough," December 2, 2007. See also "Turkmen Leader Wipes 'Ugly' TV Dishes from Skyline," Institute for War and Peace Reporting, December 14, 2007, http://www.iwpr.net/index.php?apc_state=hen&s=o&o=p=rca&l=EN&s=f&o=341395.

¹⁹⁴ TIHR, "No trust in state TV channels in Turkmenistan," *Khronika Turkmenistana*, August 5, 2006.

¹⁹⁵ Viktoriia Panfilova, "V Turkmenii ne ostalos' rossiiskikh SMI," *Nezavisimaia gazeta*, July 13, 2004.

activities are restricted to the building of a new television tower in Aşgabat and the purchase of high quality television and radio broadcasting devices.¹⁹⁶ These measures are unlikely to address the lack of professionals, high level of censorship, and the poor media environment in general. In early 2008, Berdimuhamedow used the blatant display of incompetence on the part of the state TV, whereby on one occasion a cockroach moved freely on the moderator's desk throughout the evening news, to fire almost the entire TV personnel, comprising of some 40 people at the headquarters in Ashgabat; however, new staff does not always mean different ethics and working standards.¹⁹⁷

Internet

During the Türkmenbaşy era, only a few government institutions had access to the Internet and only carefully screened officials were allowed to use it. These people used the Internet to inform the president about the activities and opinions of Turkmenistan's opposition and the outside world. For the "ordinary" Turkmenistani population the Internet was available in one or two Internet cafés in Aşgabat, and in centers run by the U.S. development agencies and programs such as USAID, IREX, and the Peace Corps, which are present mostly in the main urban areas. The bureaucratic apparatus, particularly in the regions, closely followed all those who had access to the Internet at these centers. Some officials, out of fear of sanctions from the authorities, even spoke of the "rotten influence of the Internet" and of an "alien culture and traditions for the Turkmens who could lose their national values."¹⁹⁸ Few nongovernmental organizations still operating in Turkmenistan focused on improving computer literacy and use of the Internet.

¹⁹⁶ "TV, Radio Need Less Censorship, Not Better Technology," Institute for War and Peace Reporting, September 3, 2007.

¹⁹⁷ *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, October 31, 2007 and January 19, 2008. See "Skeptitsizm otnositel'no reformy turkmenskikh SMI," Institute for War and Peace Reporting, January 26, 2008; TIHR, "Tarakan'i bega na turkmenskom TV," *Khronika Turkmenistana*, February 19, 2008.

¹⁹⁸ TIHR, "S dubinoi protiv interneta," *Khronika Turkmenistana*, November 27, 2006. What is more, these quotes show also the influence of the exclusionary nationalist ideology and chauvinism established by Türkmenbaşy.

Improving Internet access by means of the program “Internet for All” was one of the chief points in Berdimuhamedow’s election campaign in 2006/2007.¹⁹⁹ Thus far, his plan has only brought about the opening of a few state-owned Internet centers. The first two were set up almost immediately after the presidential elections in February 2007;²⁰⁰ the others were later opened in regional centers. However, in order for a person to enter these centers, he or she is obliged to display an ID card. Moreover, officials not only archive attendance records but also all the web pages visited.²⁰¹ The repressive bodies of the government are believed to check and monitor the content of the visited pages. Internet pages run by Turkmenistan’s opposition, or sites of the world’s leading news agencies that cover current affairs, remain inaccessible in Turkmenistan. The government also has the ability to control all incoming and outgoing electronic mail, so the only remaining option for Turkmenistanis is often to “freely” browse just the official government pages.²⁰²

The connection speed of Turkmenistan’s Internet service was for a long time well below world standards. Currently, this issue appears to have been solved.²⁰³ The fact remains, however, that the majority of the population cannot afford an Internet connection at all. Internet cafés used to charge approximately US\$ 4 per hour. In early 2008 this price was brought down to US\$ 2.5 per hour.²⁰⁴ The semi-legal Internet clubs offer slightly cheaper services and their Internet connections are not always censored. However, together with other small businesses, these providers are subject to harassment by the racketeering law enforcement officials.

Data services operating via mobile phones can theoretically be a future alternative to the Internet. One of the two cell phone operators on the market, Russia’s MTS, has recently begun to offer such services to its

¹⁹⁹ “Vystuplenie Gurbanguly Mialikgulievicha Berdymukhammedova, *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*,” January 4, 2007.

²⁰⁰ “V Ashkhabade otkryty Internet-kafe,” *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, February 17, 2007.

²⁰¹ TIHR, “Fees for Internet Access Drop,” *Khronika Turkmenistana*, September 1, 2007.

²⁰² Guvanch Ataev, “Internet s petlei na shee,” *Khronika Turkmenistana*, May 14, 2008.

²⁰³ “Vlasti po-prezhnemu derzhat SMI zheleznoi khvatkoi,” *Eurasianet.org*, May 8, 2007.

²⁰⁴ For a comparison, the price for an airline ticket from one of the regional centers to Aşgabat cost around US\$ 1.5-2 at that time.

customers.²⁰⁵ However, introduction of this technology is coordinated with the government, and thus it is likely that mobile access to the Internet will be controlled and censored as well. Extensive monitoring is already in place with respect to both stationary and mobile phones.²⁰⁶

Thus, it appears that the electoral promise of an accessible Internet service was merely an empty gesture of the new president. Accessing the Internet is still very complicated in Turkmenistan due to bureaucratic obstacles, censorship, and the prohibitively high price.²⁰⁷ The situation has certainly improved since Türkmenbaşy died, but the few new Internet centers opened by the state-owned company Türkmentelekom are still far from the promise of comprehensive Internet availability. President Berdimuhamedow has repeatedly expressed his discontent with the slow pace of implementation of the improved Internet access program and even called for increased competition in provision of Internet services.²⁰⁸ The telecommunication ministry, however, is proving to be very inflexible in putting the president's ideas into practice.²⁰⁹

There are two key Internet sites in the official media domain, which inform about the current situation in Turkmenistan. The information gateway *Internet-gazeta Turkmenistan.ru* (turkmenistan.ru) is the oldest still-functioning official news server, which has provided daily reports on Turkmenistan since the year 2000. Though nominally independent, it is believed to be operating under the auspices of Turkmenistan's embassy in Moscow. Its content has not changed much since the death of Türkmenbaşy. For the most part, it publishes excerpts from the daily *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*. The web site provides its readers with useful information

²⁰⁵ "Prezident Turkmenistana priniial glavu OAO 'Mobil'nye TeleSistemy'," *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, October 29, 2007.

²⁰⁶ Under Türkmenbaşy, the government acquired a Siemens eavesdropping machine that was capable of discerning key words and automatically blocking selected phones. See "High-Tech Phone Tapping," Institute for War and Peace Reporting, May 19, 2008, http://www.iwpr.net/?p=btm&s=b&o=345701&apc_state=htkb-347723.

²⁰⁷ Türkmentelekom offers a landline connection for 120,000 manat, a monthly fee of 120,000 manat and 200 manat for each minute. With an average wage of around 2 million manat, this service is not easily accessible for the normal population.

²⁰⁸ "Turkmen Leader Promises IT Revolution," Institute for War and Peace Reporting, September 26, 2008, http://www.iwpr.net/?p=btm&s=b&o=346908&apc_state=hENbbtmdate2008.

²⁰⁹ Nury Ataev, "I snova o sviazi," *Gundogar.org*, January 20, 2008.

about official visits in Turkmenistan, and about all kinds of declarations made by the new regime. The government in Aşgabat uses this website also to refute foreign criticism, which it does not dare to mention in the official printed media.

The information site *Turkmenistan — Zolotoi vek* (Turkmenistan — The Golden Age) is officially affiliated with the daily *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*. This site (turkmenistan.gov.tm) changed its layout twice in 2007, and since then it has focused exclusively on the new Berdimuhamedow government. The fact that information about the first President Saparmyrat Türkmenbaşy and the “Holy Ruhnama” in some twenty languages was erased from the website signals an ideological shift away from the former regime. Liberalization of mass media in Turkmenistan is, however, not part of this shift. A feature offering comments from readers was added with the changes in layout in the summer of 2007, only to be taken down after a few days.

As far as the opposition websites are concerned, their activities decreased significantly after Türkmenbaşy’s death. This is partly due to the fact that the opposition parties were incapable of taking advantage of the opportunities that arose when Türkmenbaşy died. This is true especially of the first wave of exiles who left the country already in the first half of the 1990s, predominantly for Russia. As previously mentioned, in the spring of 2007 the opposition lost one of its leaders, a long-term head of the United Opposition of Turkmenistan, Awdy Kulyýew. He served through his *Erkin Türkmenistan* (Free Turkmenistan) website as the voice of dissent and provided numerous critical commentaries on the situation in Turkmenistan. Since his death, his web page (erkin.net) has not been updated.

There are nevertheless three active opposition media servers operating from abroad. The best informed and updated of them is *Türkmenistan Gundogar* (Turkmenistan Uprise) administered from Moscow by Baýram Syhmyradow, the son of the still imprisoned former minister of foreign affairs of Turkmenistan, Boris Syhmyradow (gundogar.org). It offers by far the most extensive media monitoring on developments in Turkmenistan. Furthermore, we could also mention *Dogry Ýol* (True Path) affiliated with the Turkmenistan Republican Party led from Vienna by Nurmuhamet Hanamow (dogryyol.org), and *Watan* (Fatherland) administered from Sweden by the Watan Social Political Movement centered around the figure

of Hudaýberdi Orazow (watan.ru). Both sites are seemingly somewhat chaotically organized and lack broader coverage. Only a small portion of these websites features commentaries and original reports. The rest consists of links to news stories on Turkmenistan from Russian and English language media.

Khronika Turkmenistana (The Turkmenistan Chronicle), operated from Vienna by the well-respected human rights activist Farid Tukhbatullin (chrono-tm.org), provides original news on social, political, and economic life in Turkmenistan. Reports posted on this web page are written mostly by people living in Turkmenistan and thus provide very valuable information about living conditions within the country. Additionally, both the blog of the Paykhas Club, run by the Norway-based sociologist Shokhrat Kadyrov (turkmeny.blogspot.com), and the website *Turkmenskaia iskra* (Turkmen Spark), run by exiles in Sweden around former parliament member Halmurad Soyunov, (tm.iskra.org) offer sporadic yet original commentaries on the social and political situation in Turkmenistan.

In general, the situation in the media accurately reflects the current social and political conditions in Turkmenistan. Persons deemed unsuitable are fired from their jobs even if they have high qualifications. Only those loyal to the regime retain their jobs. Thus, writing skills and professional experience are not the chief criteria for those who work as journalists in Turkmenistan. On the contrary, additional journalism training provided by foreign NGOs invokes suspicion on the part of relevant power structures and immediate superiors. Journalists are faced with a formidable dilemma. They are presented with the choice of either being fully loyal to the regime or losing their job, in case their work diverges from the official line. Moreover, this line is often ill defined. It is evident that journalism in Turkmenistan will suffer from this problem for a long time to come, particularly if the new Berdimuhamedow regime maintains a tight grip over society, including the national media.

Conclusions

The new regime in Turkmenistan needed only about one year to become fully stabilized. Within this short period of time, President Berdimuhamedow, who replaced the deceased Türkmenbaşy, consolidated his position as Turkmenistan's supreme leader. The new head of state managed to eliminate all his potential rivals among the Turkmen elites; however, the majority of non-Turkmen advisors still remain in their positions. If we compare the power base of the two presidents, there is one striking difference: the new one relies more on people from his native region and his family. These people were given a number of functions, albeit not necessarily the key ones, in the government itself as well as within the sprawling state bureaucracy.

After the factual consolidation of power, President Berdimuhamedow solidified his position on the institutional level by adopting a new constitution. The new constitution of 2008 simplified, to a certain degree, the institutional design of Turkmenistan. Yet, this notwithstanding, it was drafted to suit the needs of the new president. For the time being, there is nothing to jeopardize the stability of the Berdimuhamedow regime. This could change only if Berdimuhamedow unintentionally enables a prospective competitor to gain wider margins of maneuver in the future. Currently, there are no such observable tendencies. This issue could however appear if the lobbyist groups gain larger access to power. In an extreme case, a power struggle could cause instability and even a coup d'état.

In terms of national ideology, the personality cult of the new president is continually being strengthened. Nevertheless, it has not yet reached the dimensions and bizarre forms of the Türkmenbaşy cult, which is still important for Berdimuhamedow as it cannot be completely abolished without causing major disruptions in society. The new ruling regime is likely to continue to be heavily based on personal leadership. Berdimuhamedow will certainly not be as eccentric as Türkmenbaşy, but he will nonetheless be

reluctant to reform the existing system too much, as he himself benefits from its main features. The question remains whether he will be willing to introduce more and more repressive measures to retain this stability.

What is clear, however, is that it will not be possible to immediately change the mindset of both Turkmenistan's society and its elite. The underlying patterns of behavior were already introduced by the Soviet system and were later maintained by an even more brutal regime under Türkmenbaşy. Overcoming these codes of conduct will probably be a lengthy process. It will take at least one or two generations for any prospective liberalization of the regime. Hence, Turkmenistan will go through a difficult period, where a harsh political system is likely to prevail at least for some time. Thus, transformation into a less severe form of autocracy is possible only within a long-term perspective. Democratization is not a realistic option with the current cadres, who would rather lead the country into deeper regression than to relinquish some of their power. Unfortunately, there is little hope of replacing these cadres given the large scale exile of educated people and intelligentsia in past years.

Unlike the rigid domestic policies, the foreign policy of Turkmenistan has undergone significant changes under the Berdimuhamedow leadership. In contrast with the isolationist policy of the deceased Türkmenbaşy, the new regime has been clearly opening up to the outside world. Turkmenistan's abundant natural gas reserves make both its Central Asian neighbors as well as the great powers eager to extend diplomatic ties with Aşgabat. For the West, Turkmenistan is important also from a military-strategic aspect due to its proximity to Afghanistan and Iran. So far, Aşgabat has managed to skillfully maneuver among those interested in Turkmenistan's hydrocarbon resources (primarily Russia, China, Europe, and the United States). All these players are kept in the dark about the future export routes of Turkmenistan's gas.

Turkmenistan's international activities help legitimize the new regime, both from within and without. Indeed, the increasing openness of the Berdimuhamedow regime towards the outside world, including the West, often leads to overly optimistic and thus flawed analyses and wishful thinking with regards to domestic politics in Turkmenistan. For the outside world, interest in Turkmenistan is mostly driven by economic concerns.

Thus, one cannot expect much pressure on the Aşgabat regime to loosen its grip over society. As soon as one of the outside players starts talking about necessary democratization, his chances to profit from the country's vast hydrocarbon resources is reduced correspondingly. The leadership of Turkmenistan is aware of this fact, which only strengthens its position. Consequently, major changes in terms of political liberalization or a relaxation in the social climate of Turkmenistan are unlikely to occur in the near future. Interference from abroad could only increase the risk of instability, which is for the time being not in the interest of any of the major outside players.

About the Authors

Slavomír Horák is Research Fellow at the Institute of International Studies, Charles University in Prague, Czech Republic. He specializes in social and political development in Central Asia and Afghanistan. He is the author of three monographs, written in Czech, entitled *Central Asia between East and West* (2005), *Afghan conflict*, (2005) and *Russia and Central Asia after 1991* (2008).

Jan Šír is Research Fellow at the Institute of International Studies, Faculty of Social Sciences, Charles University in Prague, Czech Republic. His research interests cover the problems of political, security, and energy developments in the successor states to the former Soviet Union. He has published widely on post-Soviet Central Asia.