

## Turkmenistan: Has There Been a Thaw?

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## SUMMARY

- In contrast to other CIS states, Turkmenistan is characterized by a tribal culture and the fact that under the first president, Saparmurat Niyazov, a totalitarian regime had been established there.
- After a certain liberalization carried out under the second president, Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov, the current regime still remains the most authoritarian of all Central Asian states. However, recent changes have led to the establishment of a multi-party system, the abolishment of Niyazov's personality cult, and holding at least formally free elections.
- Islam did not play a political role in Turkmenistan until the 1990s, when Niyazov attempted to monopolize religion in order to strengthen his own power. However, this tendency has faded away under Berdymukhamedov.
- The country's economy, regime stability, and success of its populist ideology depend on the availability of financial resources coming from the sales of gas. The aggravation of relations with Moscow in 2008 led Ashgabat to change the direction of its gas exports from the north to the east (China, India, and Pakistan) and south (Iran).
- Opinions among experts on how long Berdymukhamedov will stay in power differ, yet most of them agree that society in Turkmenistan is not ready for mass protest.

Turkmenistan has several specific features distinguishing it from the other Central Asian countries. First of all, it is the most traditional society. The country has a high level of urbanization; of the population of approximately 5 million, 800,000 live in Ashgabat, and several other towns have a population of more than 200,000. The Soviet period brought the development of the modern gas, construction, and textile industries and a modern education system (as measured by 1970s standards).

But Turkmenistan remains a society based on a tribal construction with the corresponding hierarchy and even a kind of tribe-based "division of labor." Members of the largest and most influential Akhal-Teke tribe hold the highest state posts (the country's former and current presidents both belong to this tribe.) Of course, this tribal structure should not be seen as an absolute. Turkmenistan's first president, Saparmurat Niyazov, owed his rise not just to his tribal identity but also to his



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work in the Communist Party apparatus, including in the Central Committee. He never forgot his tribal identity, however, especially since the Akhal-Teke tribe was the largest and most powerful among the tribes. To his credit were the efforts he made to act as a mediator in relations between the different tribes.

Niyazov was the exemplary Soviet politician and representative of Soviet political culture even as the society he ran remained the quintessence of traditionalism. This turned post-Soviet Turkmenistan into a symbiosis of Eastern despotism and totalitarianism. In the post-Soviet area, the term "totalitarian" could be suitably applied only to Turkmenistan under Niyazov's rule.

It was his regime's utmost similarity to the Soviet regime that made Niyazov try to distance himself in every way from the Soviet past and put into oblivion any notion of continuity with regard to the Soviet period. In 1998, at a meeting with a Russian State Duma delegation, Niyazov explained: "Not a single person here expressed the desire to fight against the communist ideology. Nobody in Turkmenistan utters the words 'communist' and 'communism.' These words have faded from our social lexicon all on their own."<sup>1</sup> In neighboring Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan these words and the respective parties continued to function, albeit without any real influence. Niyazov turned out to be the most zealous guardian of the Soviet communist tradition, which did not allow any opposition to exist.

Niyazov's assumed title, "Turkmenbashi" – "Father of the Turkmen" – was not simply an expression of his ambition<sup>2</sup> but also reflected his desire to transform the Turkmen people from a collection of tribes into a new Turkmen nation. This nation began to form back in the Soviet period. The Turkmen Soviet Socialist Republic was established as the nucleus

of Turkmen statehood in 1924. No one can deny that Niyazov-Turkmenbashi made marked progress along this path, transforming Turkmenistan into a nation state and becoming its undeniable, albeit eccentric, leader.

Under the Constitution adopted in 1992 (and subsequently amended five times), the president was at the same time also prime minister and formed the government. The parliament has powers only to examine the candidates for the posts of interior minister and justice minister. In 1999, the country's highest representative body, Halk Maslahata, gave Niyazov the right to remain in office without limit. In 1994 and 1995, there was even talk of establishing a hereditary monarchy, and members of Niyazov's entourage were ready to make him Shah and declare Turkmenistan his shahdom, but Niyazov, no doubt guessing what jeers would come from abroad, decided this was excessive. During the discussions of this possibility, however, the word "republic" vanished from the country's official name (the only such case in Central Asia), leaving some maneuvering room for Niyazov, should he want to take on a monarch's title in the future.

Neutrality was proclaimed the main principle of foreign policy. Of all the organizations that Russia established, Turkmenistan chose to be a member only of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), although in reality it took no real part even in this organization's work. Consistent with its foreign policy, Turkmenistan did not join the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. Niyazov attempted to get rid of any external influences and to consolidate Turkmenistan's status as an independent country, equally distant from all foreign groups and forces.

Like all dictators, he became gradually more paranoid with age, often changing the members of his entourage. According

to people who worked with Niyazov, including government ministers, he did not listen to anyone's advice and often made spur-of-the-moment and hasty decisions.

Niyazov died on December 21, 2006. His death has been the subject of debate to this day, with some asserting that he was poisoned by members of his inner circle, fed up with his unpredictability.

**Niyazov's death was followed** by a period of a brief and fierce succession struggle from which Gurbanguly Berdymukhammedov emerged as the country's new leader. Berdymukhammedov, a dentist by profession, was Niyazov's former personal doctor before becoming health minister from 1997 till 2001, and then deputy prime minister. Niyazov did not designate a successor and could not have done it in any case, since his death was sudden.

Berdymukhammedov looked like an unexpected compromise figure, although history has known enough cases of "interim" leaders ending up with lasting careers at the political summit. No one probably seriously expected the new president to radically change the face of the country, but there were hopes for some transformation nonetheless.

Change did come, most importantly in the form of some liberalization. Moscow-based analyst Andrei Grozin described the new regime as "more vegetarian,"<sup>3</sup> while Sebastien Peyrouse called the reforms "cosmetic" and said they were "illusions of a Khrushchevian Thaw."<sup>4</sup> In reality, the changes made were not even half-hearted but purely formal. Yet the regime has managed to change its image, going from near totalitarian to hardline authoritarian, or, to put it another way, from the category of exotic exceptions (like North Korea), to the category of the typical.

However, the steps toward liberalization have not changed the political system itself. The Law on Political Parties

was passed on January 13, 2012. Berdymukhammedov gave his seal of approval to a multi-party system, saying that it "is relevant in terms of the big changes taking place in state administration and in terms of modernizing political mechanisms and rethinking the role and place of the country's social and civil institutions."<sup>5</sup> But hardly anyone believes that the parties that could emerge would be allowed to operate outside the authorities' control. Turkmeni-

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Berdymukhammedov won his second presidential election in February 2012, with 97.14 percent of the vote. And while in 2007 he had received 89.2 percent of the vote and had five "rivals," this time he had seven opponents<sup>6</sup> (public groups and organizations initially put forward as many as fifteen candidates.) Public wit called these candidates the "seven little goats," implying that the role of Wolf had already gone to Berdymukhammedov. And indeed, these "rivals" succeeded in getting no more than from 0.16 to 1.07 percent of the vote.<sup>7</sup> Borrowing an election campaign trick from Putin's book, Berdymukhammedov declined to take part in TV debates with his opponents, "giving" them his share of the airtime.

The country had closed its land borders to foreigners before the elections, and

people arriving at the airport had the contents of their computer disks inspected. The security services also had blocked access to two opposition websites operating from abroad.

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In 2011, Berdymukhammedov announced that members of the opposition based abroad – the Republican Party and the Vatan Socio-Political Movement – could take part in the election. This did not happen, however, first, because the conditions for free elections were non-existent in Turkmenistan, and second, because to take part in the election, the opposition politicians would have had to return home and run the risk of being arrested.

Turkmenistan agreed for the first time to submit a report on the human rights situation to the UN Human Rights Committee. Several politicians were released from prison, including former Speaker of the Parliament Ovezgeldy Atayev,<sup>8</sup> and also several of those arrested in connection with the 2002 assassination attempt on Niyazov. But the main suspect accused in that case, Boris Shikhmuradov, remains in prison and his fate and the state of his health are unknown.

Berdymukhammedov restored the ten-year primary and secondary education system in schools (during Niyazov's time there was a nine-year school program), reopened the country's Academy of Sciences, as well as the Opera and Ballet Theater, which Niyazov had "abolished," and allowed internet cafes to open, although under strict government control.

One of Berdymukhammedov's most noticeable steps was to liquidate, albeit not completely, the Turkmenbashi cult of personality. In this respect, he can be compared in some degree to Nikita Khrushchev.

Berdymukhammedov freed the Turkmen people from morning public readings and the study of Niyazov's "Ruhnama," which his intellectual and political cohorts had compared to the Koran. Niyazov's name was no longer mentioned in the national anthem, and the oath of loyalty to Turkmenbashi was dropped. The months went back to their Gregorian calendar names.

But this process of dismantling the cult of personality did not fundamentally change anything. Berdymukhammedov himself has never expressed doubt in his predecessor's greatness and has been cautious in the way he proceeds, fully aware, as are the other politicians in the country, that to completely dismantle Niyazov's image would deal a blow to him and his colleagues, too. It would thus be naïve to expect Berdymukhammedov to start seriously denouncing the old regime, while a real transformation of the power system could only begin after this.

Meanwhile, a "modest" cult of Berdymukhammedov himself is starting to emerge. He now has his own title – "Arkadag" – "Protector," which sounds almost as pretentious as "Father of the Turkmen."

**The "Golden Age"** Niyazov proclaimed has given way now to the more modest and realistic "Renaissance Epoch." At the same time, an "era of might and happiness" has been declared, and conferences on the topic of "Turkmenistan my homeland – land of health and happiness" take place at the country's universities and other public forums. A concrete path, the "Path of Health," has been laid in the Kopetdag Mountains eight km from Ashgabat.

Instead of Niyazov's "Ruhnama," Turkmen now read the "Turkmenname" ("Story of the Turkmen"), which extols the Turkmen people's glory rather than giving moral lectures. The book is a typical product of nationalist ideology, written by scholars close to the authorities. In typical fashion, it portrays the Turkmen as a chosen people; thus, the Biblical patriarch Noah is said to have landed in Turkmenistan, and if local academician Odek Odekov is to be believed, the Turkmen are the ancestors of the Aztecs and the Vikings, and Zarathustra came from southern Turkmenistan.<sup>9</sup> Russian epic folk hero Ilya Muromets has also been added to the Turkmen gallery of great names. Not that there is anything original here, for many countries indulge in such legend-making, especially in the post-Soviet space, where many peoples are trying to improve the "quality" of their national identity.

Portraits of the president fill the country once more, potentially surprising the casual visitor who does not follow developments in Turkmenistan, for Berdymukhammedov looks a lot like his predecessor (one rumor even has it that he is Niyazov's illegitimate son), thus creating the impression that one and the same person has been in power all these years.

Power lost its sacred aspect after Niyazov's death. Berdymukhammedov does not have the required charisma, and people do not worship him the way they did Niyazov. His nickname, "GB" (begging associations with the all-so-familiar acronym "KGB"), was born out of a sense of humor rather than out of fear.

Berdymukhammedov realizes that he probably will not be a "second Turkmenbashi" and does not make this his ambition in any case, preferring to give himself the image of "liberal despot." So far, he is succeeding.

**Turkmenistan is a Muslim society,** though it is hard to say exactly what role Islam plays there. The nomads practiced a syncretic form of Islam that influences family relations and everyday behavior but does not play any big part in shaping politics. Turkmenistan's Islam was aptly characterized by the term "cultural Islam," widely used in Soviet literature in the 1970s-1980s.

But for all its apolitical nature, even "cultural Islam" influences Muslims' outlook, including their political perceptions. Moreover, "cultural Islam" is very resistant. It survived the Soviet period, adapting to the environment's demands and coexisting with the state-imposed atheist education. Religious scholars during the Soviet period noted that remnants of Sufi Islam also persisted among the Turkmen.<sup>10</sup>

In this regard, little has changed at first glance in post-Soviet Turkmenistan. Islam's influence is most visible in family life and rituals and appears distanced from public and political life. Turkmenistan has not been affected by the Islamic revival that began with the Soviet Union's decline. And it has been affected still less by the politicization of Islam that is taking

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place. Attempts to create Islamic parties or movements, as happened in the neighboring republics, have not been successful, partly because of repression. In the early 1990s, when the president of one Muslim country visited Turkmenistan, a police-



man was sent to the home of every member of the Islamic Party for the Renaissance of Turkmenistan (there were only four of them) to stop them from leaving their houses.

Niyazov did not pay any attention to Islam at first, not seeing any threat to power in it. In 1992, Niyazov said that “there is no reason to exaggerate the likelihood of Turkmenistan’s Islamicization.”<sup>11</sup> In maintaining a closed society and state (the idea of Turkmenistan’s neutrality was aimed at keeping the country sealed off), Niyazov followed the Soviet example to some extent, replacing the cult of Lenin with a cult of himself. But in the mid-1990s, he decided that some kind of official recognition of Islam was needed and that Islam could also help to strengthen his regime. Furthermore, he wanted to expand contacts with Muslim countries, hoping to receive financial assistance from them.

Thus, the country began building mosques, and *imams* started singing Niyazov’s praises in their sermons. In *imams’* sermons and in religious literature, as

the country’s most influential spiritual figure, who attempted to initiate an Islamic revival in the late 1980s-early 1990s, was imprisoned for criticizing excessive worship of Niyazov.

Niyazov monopolized Islam, in which he genuinely thought himself deeply knowledgeable. In this respect he begs comparison with other post-Soviet politicians, such as Tajikistani President Emomali Rakhmon and Chechnya’s leader, Ramzan Kadyrov. In 2000, Niyazov ordered the burning of 40,000 copies of the Koran because he did not like the way they had been translated into Turkmen.

Berdymukhammedov shows little interest in Islam and takes the earlier approach that politicization of Islam in Turkmenistan is not possible. There is no evidence yet to back up the talk that a religious-political opposition could emerge in the country. At the same time, there is an opinion that there exists a so-called “parallel Islam,” and some of those who have left Turkmenistan say that even in rural areas, some villages have two mosques (such were the words of one respondent), one of which is an underground prayer house in which protest sermons can be heard.

Turkmenistan is unlikely to be able to completely isolate itself from the events taking place in the rest of the Muslim world, and it cannot build some kind of “Great Wall” on the borders with its Central Asian neighbors, where radical Islam is becoming increasingly active. If Berdymukhammedov is to face the rise of Islamic protest sentiments, this will be something he is obviously ill-prepared for.

**Fossil fuels are the cornerstone** of Turkmenistan’s regime. Gas sales accounted for 70 percent of the country’s GDP in 2009. The authorities use gas revenues to maintain a tolerable standard of living and put on a show of caring for the people’s needs. Gas ensures the re-

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well as in official propaganda, a symbiosis of religion and idol worship emerged. Niyazov put Islam under his total control and did not allow even a hint of criticism from the Muslim clergy. Nasrulla ibn Ibadulla, the chief *mufti* of Turkmenistan (formerly *imam* of the Tashauz mosque and *kadi* in the Mari Region) and

gime's survival and the success of its populist ideology. When he came to power, Berdymukhammedov did not abolish free supplies of gas, electricity, and also water and salt for the population. What's more, since 2008, private car owners receive 120 liters of gasoline free each year, bus owners get 200 liters, and motorbike owners get 40 liters.<sup>12</sup>

Turkmenistan has the world's fourth largest gas reserves. Politicians, engineers, and economists debate the exact size of these reserves. The Turkmenistan authorities say they have accessible reserves of 20 trillion cubic meters. Russia, which has the world's largest accessible gas reserves, has 44.8 trillion cubic meters. According to British Petroleum, Turkmenistan's proven reserves increased by no more than between 2.6 trillion to 8 trillion cubic meters from 2000 to 2011.<sup>13</sup> Accessible reserves come to no more than 3 trillion cubic meters. The Turkmen authorities put the reserves of the biggest field, Yolotan, at 6 trillion cubic meters,<sup>14</sup> but in reality they are several times lower. What's more, Yolotan gas has a high hydrogen sulphide content, making extraction more difficult.

The Turkmen authorities have deliberately exaggerated the country's gas reserves and offer big contracts to foreign partners from all directions – China, Europe, Iran, and Russia – only these contracts do not always have a real basis to them. However, these tactics have kept potential buyers' interest in Turkmenistan's gas running high and enabled Ashgabat to attract investment for building the required infrastructure.

Turkmenistan's gas production has undergone such large ups and downs over the last twenty years that it is hard to assess its real level today. The big fluctuations were due as much to the global economic situation as to Turkmenistan's own technological capabilities. Between 2000 and 2008, for example, gas production went

up from 42 billion to 66 billion cubic meters per annum, but in 2010 it dropped to 45 billion cubic meters.<sup>15</sup> Gas exports in 2010 came to only 22.6 billion cubic meters. In 2012, estimated gas production will reach 66.5 billion cubic meters. Development is currently underway at the Garabil and Gurrukbil fields, the Central Karakum, and on the right shore of the Amu Darya River.

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For many years, Russia was Turkmenistan's largest gas buyer, but starting in 2008, relations between Moscow and Ashgabat soured. In 2008, Turkmenistan sold Gazprom 50 billion cubic meters for \$7 billion, but at the end of that year, with the global crisis underway, Gazprom refused to agree to the higher contract price that Turkmenistan demanded. This provoked a dispute that finally led Gazprom head Alexei Miller to cut off the Russian supply route in 2009. An explosion took place in the gas pipeline. Gazprom said that the causes of the explosion were purely technical, while Ashgabat claimed that Gazprom deliberately set it up. This left Turkmenistan without the possibility of supplying gas to Russia. Sales resumed again only in 2010, but came to no more than 11 billion cubic meters. Moscow refused to purchase the remaining 40 billion cubic meters, using this as a leverage to pressure the Turkmenistan authorities.

Europe's market no longer needs large quantities of gas from Turkmenistan, and Gazprom is able to satisfy Europe's gas demands with its own resources. This is

keeping Turkmen-Russian relations tense. Naturally, Ashgabat has responded by stepping up efforts to diversify gas supply routes. It has been supplying gas to neighboring Iran for the last few years now, delivering from 8 to 14 billion cubic meters in 2011, according to various estimates. Iran has also made a proposal to Turkmenistan to build a new gas pipeline with an outlet to the Persian Gulf.

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Turkmenistan again showed interest in the NABUCCO project, but to join the project Turkmenistan would need to construct a 300 km trans-Caspian gas pipeline, to which Russia and, recently, India have expressed objections. There are two proposed routes for the NABUCCO project: a trans-Anatolian and a trans-Adriatic (Turkey-Greece-Italy) route. The project is the main rival of the Southern Stream project, in which Moscow has big economic and political hopes. So far no one has offered to invest in building an underwater pipeline across the Caspian anyway. (Some think that in the case of an extreme aggravation of tensions, Russia would be ready to prevent the construction of an underwater pipeline using any means, including its formidable Caspian military flotilla, which is the most powerful among the Caspian states' navies.)

China is in the process of becoming Turkmenistan's main gas customer. The gas pipeline to China was opened in 2009, and in 2010 Turkmenistan exported around 5 billion cubic meters of gas to China at a price of \$192 (or \$170-\$180) per cubic meter. Gazprom was paying \$240 per cu-

bic meter at that time. Exports to China could reach 15 or even 30 billion cubic meters in 2012, and 65 billion cubic meters by 2015. Work on a second pipeline to China has already begun.

Ashgabat places big hopes on the TAPI project. This project envisages the construction of a 1,735 km pipeline linking Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India, with a capacity of 30-33 billion cubic meters of gas. Along with the Chinese export routes, it is seen as the main alternative to cooperation with Russia.

An agreement on the project was signed in 2010. The project cost is estimated at \$7.6 billion, but higher figures of up to \$12 billion have also been cited.<sup>16</sup> Construction is scheduled to begin in 2013, and the pipeline will start operation in 2016.

In Turkmenistan's view, TAPI will help to stabilize the situation in Afghanistan. At the same time, however, certain Taliban groups could also use the gas pipeline, or more precisely the related security issues, as a means to put pressure on the Afghan authorities and to use extortion tactics against the companies and countries anxious to ensure that the pipeline operates smoothly. The need to guarantee that the gas flows safely and without interruption could therefore contribute to the radical opposition's growing influence (as was the case in Russia during the Chechen wars).

Interest in TAPI has been shown not only by countries looking to buy Turkmen gas, but also by Gazprom, which is increasingly getting involved in energy projects not directly related to Russian gas.

TAPI faces a host of obstacles. First, Turkmenistan's partners are still worried about insufficient transparency in settling the financial issues. As during Niyazov's time, gas sales remain under direct presidential control, with 80 percent of the revenue going into Berdymukhammedov's own pocket, thus continuing the tradition



started by Niyazov, who controlled all energy sector contracts through special accounts in what has become one of the distinguishing features of Turkmenistan's shadow economy. Turkmenistan's laws state that only 20 percent of oil and gas export revenue goes to the state budget.<sup>17</sup> Berdimukhammedov has simply developed these corrupt schemes further. Contracts concluded between foreign buyers and Turkmenistan are thus essentially contracts concluded with the country's president.

Second, instability continues in Afghanistan, and third, the project's success depends on the unpredictable relations between India and Pakistan.

Finally, there is the question of whether or not Turkmenistan actually has enough gas for all these ambitious projects. The country plans to increase its gas production to 230 billion cubic meters and its exports to 180 billion cubic meters by 2020. Of these exports, 65 billion cubic meters will go to China, 33 billion will be supplied via TAPI, 20 billion will go to Iran, 10 billion to Europe, and 42-52 billion to Russia.<sup>18</sup>

After the dispute with Russia, Turkmenistan will concentrate on developing gas exports to its eastern neighbors – China, India, and Pakistan – and to Iran in the south. Gas exports to the West and to Russia will probably play a secondary role, all the more so since Turkmenistan has plenty of rivals in the European market.

According to the World Bank's Control of Corruption Index, Turkmenistan is sixth on the list of least favorable countries out of 210 that were reviewed.

China is the one exception. Beijing gave Ashgabat a loan of \$4.1 billion in 2010 to develop the Southern Yolotan gas field. However, as in Tajikistan's case, this binds Turkmenistan so tightly with China that one could speak of the country turning into a "Chinese province."

**The status of ethnic Russians** remains a sensitive issue in relations between Turkmenistan and Russia. The exact number of ethnic Russians in the country is not known. The Russian Foreign Ministry put their number at 3.5 percent of the total population in 2005, and in 2001, Niyazov said they constituted 2 percent of the population. Clearly, their number is somewhere around 120,000 to 150,000 people.

The Turkmenistan authorities have taken an ambiguous approach to the Russians. The Russian cultural and language environment is shrinking. The only Russian-language newspaper in Turkmenistan now is *Neutral Turkmenistan*, which contains nothing of interest and is just a dull symbol of a Russian-language presence in the media. A ban was put on the import and distribution of Russian newspapers in 2002, and, supposedly for technical reasons, the Russian radio station Mayak, which used to broadcast to all of the former Soviet republics, had to end its broadcasts. Access to broadcasts by Russian Public Television (ORT) was limited to two hours a day.

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The Russian Community of Turkmenistan, a public organization whose mission was to protect ethnic Russians' rights, was closed down at the end of the 1990s, and its leaders, Nina Shmelyova, Vyacheslav Mamedov, and Anatoly Fomin, were given prison sentences and then forced to leave the country. Russian community organizations had at least minimal opportunities for

social activity in the other Central Asian republics, including the defense of the Russian population's rights, but in Turkmenistan they lost all such opportunities.

The Russian leadership abandoned the Turkmenistan Russians to their fate, showing no interest in them until 2010. The Russian government's interests were solely in energy cooperation and gas purchases and transit, and any other issues got only peripheral attention, if even that.

Turkmenistan and Russia signed an agreement on dual citizenship in 1993, which set out the rules in this area. At that time, Turkmenistan's Russians had the same rights as ethnic Turkmen.

But in 2011, Ashgabat announced that people with dual citizenship would not be allowed to leave the country unless they made a choice in favor of Turkmen citizenship only. Additionally, on April 1, 2012, a new law changing the rules for travel abroad came into force. Now, only those with a new foreign travel passport can go out of the country, but this new passport is not issued to people with dual citizenship.

Russia did not recognize Turkmenistan's withdrawal from the 1993 agreement as lawful, but could do nothing to change the situation. Meanwhile, Russians in Turkmenistan now also have found themselves unable to privatize their homes. Rumors have it that the prices at which they would have to purchase their homes from the state will be set at such prohibitively high prices that it will be impossible for them to do so.

It is difficult to say whether Russia will be more energetic about protecting Russians' rights in Turkmenistan. But in Turkmenistan, as in the other Central Asian republics, what is needed is to develop and implement a set of principles and a general concept for protecting Russians' rights; however, at the moment, as over the past

years, this is still not on the agenda for Russia's strategy in the region.

**Opinions are divided on Turkmenistan's future.** One view, expressed in a report by the American organization Crude Accountability, suggests that sooner or later Berdymukhammedov's regime will encounter the same problems that have brought down regimes in the Middle East and North Africa. The question is whether events will follow the milder "Tunisian" scenario, or whether they will take the Libyan path and evolve into a civil war.<sup>19</sup>

In contrast, journalist Arkady Dubnov, one of the best experts on Central Asia, thinks that "Berdymukhammedov's sun will shine for a long time yet."<sup>20</sup> Dubnov's view is the more likely one since Turkmenistan's society is clearly not ready for mass protests yet. In terms of its organization, it can indeed be compared to Libyan society, but the Libyans live in a completely different geopolitical environment than the Turkmen. Turkmenistan has been on the periphery of global political and cultural processes for decades. It is too "sluggish," and even a hypothetical revolution would not radically change the dominant values and political culture there. Thus, Berdymukhammedov's sun, and the "sun of dictatorship" in general will indeed shine there for a good while yet.

As for foreign policy, no major change should be expected. The regime is not about to renounce the declared policy of neutrality that has already brought it a fair number of advantages and has been recognized by its international partners. Turkmenistan is very unlikely to allow military bases to appear on its soil. There is no substance to the rumors that the United States is seeking to take over the former Soviet Air Force base in Mary (although it is true that the base in Mary would be a very convenient platform from which to launch airstrikes against Iran).

Turkmenistan's participation in the CIS is purely formal. It is symbolic that Ashgabat has never hosted a CIS summit. There are no grounds for the hints made that Turkmenistan might join the Collective Security Treaty Organization, and it certainly has no plans to join the Customs Union, and even less so the Eurasian Union. Perhaps the only organization it might consider joining in the future (under special conditions) would be the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, but such a decision would depend above all on Ashgabat's interest in developing relations with China.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> *Vneshnyaya politika neitralnogo Turkmenistana. Rechi, intervyyu prezidenta Turkmenistana Saparmurata Turkmenbashi* [Neutral Turkmenistan's Foreign Policy. Speeches and interviews with President of Turkmenistan Saparmurat Turkmenbashi] (Ashgabat: 1999), p.140.

<sup>2</sup> The opposition and the media reacted to the "Turkmenbashi" title by coming up with the term "bashism" as a definition for the semi-oriental, semi-communist regime.

<sup>3</sup> *Pravda.ru*, February 14, 2012.

<sup>4</sup> Sebastien Peyrouse, *Turkmenistan. Strategies of Power, Dilemmas of Development* (Armonk, New York, and London, England: M.E. Sharpe, 2012), pp. 108, 114.

<sup>5</sup> *Turkmenistan.ru*, March 26, 2012.

<sup>6</sup> One view has it that people representing the country's main economic sectors and some of its regions were selected to be his rivals in the elections.

<sup>7</sup> *RIA Novosti*, February 13, 2012.

<sup>8</sup> Atayev was arrested on charges of inciting inter-clan hostility and in connection with murky circumstances in his family life. In reality, under the Constitution, after Niyazov's death Atayev should have been acting president until the election. This would have made him Berdymukhammedov's rival, and he was thus eliminated from the political competition.

<sup>9</sup> "Turkmensky akademik dokazyval aziatskoe proiskhozhdenie atstekov i vikingov" ["Turkmen academic proves the Asian origins of the Aztecs and Vikings"], *Khronika Turkmenistana* (Published by the Turkmenistan Initiative for Human Rights), [www.chrono-tm.org/2012/05aziatskoe-proishozhdenie-atstekov-i-vikingov](http://www.chrono-tm.org/2012/05aziatskoe-proishozhdenie-atstekov-i-vikingov).

<sup>10</sup> S.M. Demidov, *Sufizm v Turkmenistane* [Sufism in Turkmenistan] (Ashgabat: Ilym, 1978), p.157.

<sup>11</sup> *Islam i politicheskaya borba v stranakh SNG* [Islam and political struggles in the CIS countries], ed. Alexander Verkhovsky, p. 29 (Moscow, August 1972).

<sup>12</sup> V.A. Kulagin, "Neftegazovy kompleks Turkmenistana" ["Turkmenistan's oil and gas sector"], [www.gas-journal-ru/gij\\_detailed\\_work\\_php?GIJ\\_ELEMENT\\_ID=43398&W](http://www.gas-journal-ru/gij_detailed_work_php?GIJ_ELEMENT_ID=43398&W).

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<sup>13</sup> “Neftegazovy kompleks Turkmenistana” [“Turkmenistan’s oil and gas sector”], *Gas Industry Journal* (January 13, 2012).

<sup>14</sup> Innokenty Adyasov, “Konets turkmenskogo gazovogo blefa” [“The end of Turkmenistan’s gas bluff”], *INFOLine – Natural gas*.

<sup>15</sup> “Neftegazovy kompleks Turkmenistana” [“Turkmenistan’s Oil and Gas Sector”].

<sup>16</sup> “India poluchila dostup k turkmenskomu gazu” [“India gets access to Turkmenistan’s gas”], *Izvestia*, May 24, 2012.

<sup>17</sup> [www.crudeaccountability.org/en/uploads/File/turkmenistan/Private%20pocket\\_EN.pdf](http://www.crudeaccountability.org/en/uploads/File/turkmenistan/Private%20pocket_EN.pdf).

<sup>18</sup> *Neftegazovaya vertical* (Feb.20, 2012).

<sup>19</sup> [www.crudeaccountability.org/en/uploads/File/turkmenistan/Private%20pocket\\_EN.pdf](http://www.crudeaccountability.org/en/uploads/File/turkmenistan/Private%20pocket_EN.pdf).

<sup>20</sup> [www.gundogar.org/?0234051216600000000000013000000](http://www.gundogar.org/?0234051216600000000000013000000), February 12, 2012.

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