

Turkmenistan at the Last Stage of Perestroika. Determinants of an Authoritarian Path

*Le Turkménistan à la dernière étape de la perestroïka. Les déterminants d'une
voie autoritaire*

ТУРКМЕНИСТАН НА ПОСЛЕДНЕМ ЭТАПЕ ПЕРЕСТРОЙКИ. ФАКТОРЫ
АВТОРИТАРНОГО ПУТИ

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Turkmenistan at the Last Stage of Perestroika. Determinants of an Authoritarian Path¹

Slavomír HORÁK*

Introduction

The last two years of Turkmenistan within the USSR clearly demonstrated a tendency of transformation from Soviet style to another form of authoritarian development, in this case under the guidance of one single person. Despite the fact that the First Secretary Saparmurat Niyazov was selected to his position as a supporter of perestroika, his steps inside the Soviet republic rather slowed down the process. His negative attitude towards perestroika and glasnost was fully confirmed by his steps after the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

The transition became one of the core paradigms for the analysis of the trajectories of post-Soviet states. As Thomas Caroters, the critique of the concept, pointed out, the transformation from the Soviet system assumed an inevitable shift towards liberalisation or democracy with a key role being played by the election processes (Caroters, 2002, pp. 6-9).

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Caroters, however, did not research the historical specifics of each “transition” country. The immediate historical conditions at the time of (or shortly before) the “breakthrough event” (USSR dissolution in this case) should be taken into consideration as decisive factors in the subsequent development of the country. In this context, I argue that the various shifts during perestroika (both long-term and short-term during the last years of this period) determined substantially the trajectory of its further development. Each Soviet republic (or region in some cases) underwent different paths within this period. The real reformist voices diversely influenced life in the appropriate republics and the leadership of each republic reacted in a different way from that of the centre. Therefore, the analysis of perestroika in Turkmenistan serves as an example of why the country’s transition undertook a regressive rather than a progressive path.

In an attempt to understand which long-term and immediate factors impacted the further development of the country, the text focuses on the following issues: the situation of the Turkmen Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR) in the Brezhnev and post-Brezhnev period and the character as well as the composition of the intra-Turkmen elite, which enabled (with the support of Moscow) the rule of a single person, in this case Niyazov. Consequently, once single person rule with his individual character is installed, it determines the character of the regime itself. From this standpoint, the selection of Saparmurat Niyazov as the First Secretary and subsequent cadre reshuffles made alternative ways of development complicated and even improbable. This process depends substantially on the president’s background and personal character. It leads me to the thesis that 1989-1991 were decisive years determining the current character of Turkmenistan’s political system and political culture without any alternative paths. Even the second president, who grew up politically under the regime, was not able and probably was not even willing to change fundamentally the system established by his predecessor. Therefore, the political culture created in Turkmenistan at the beginning of the 1990s influenced the independent Turkmenistan for several decades ahead.

In the first part the focus of the text is on the situation in Soviet Turkmenistan before perestroika. The internal formal and informal politics in the republic acquired its own specifics based on the conservation of cadres under Muhammetnazar Gapurov, then the First Secretary of

the Communist Party of the Turkmen SSR from 1969 to 1985. As in other republics in the Soviet Union, the conservation of and request for stability resulted in a political culture full of cronyism and preference for “one’s own” circles. The change of leader in 1985 to Saparmurat Niyazov led to substantial changes in the republican leadership, with the cadres trying to cement their newly acquired position. It was one of the principal reasons for further conservation of power in the republic and a barrier to the establishment of more visible alternative structures and informal groups, as was the case with other Soviet republics in the later 1980s.

Nevertheless, attempts to establish alternative groups to the power also appeared in Turkmenistan. The second part of this text analyses the growth of these groups and their main issues for discussion, as well as their interaction with the powers, with Niyazov as the head of the latter. This part is not able to provide an exhaustive analysis of the alternatives to Niyazov, which is the topic of another article (Kališevskij, 2014). It rather tries to show the growing authoritarianism of Niyazov, which fully unfolded after independence and the loss of upper control from the Soviet centre. Niyazov’s reaction to the alternative groups varied from case to case and oscillated between the incorporation of their programmes into his own agenda (and consequent marginalisation of his opponents), to their repression. Generally, it seems that Niyazov tolerated any alternatives to his power only temporarily and he used the first opportunity to get rid of them, even in the final stages of the existence of the Soviet Union. The dissolution of the USSR and the proclamation of independence fully opened the way to enforce Niyazov’s political views, which did not tolerate any alternative or even opposition.

The last part of the study shows how the personal character of Niyazov helped to establish an authoritarian political culture intolerant towards any alternative view. This situation determined the path of Turkmenistan for a long time ahead.

The problem with carrying out studies on current Turkmenistan is that researchers must struggle with a relatively small number of resources. In particular, Šokhrat Kadyrov, a Turkmen historian and demographer and currently a Moscow-based researcher, has extensively examined the elites of Turkmenistan in its historical dynamic, including the late-Soviet period (Kadyrov, 1996, 2001a, 2003a, 2009). However, the questions of political

culture within the political elites and the personal character of the leader were mostly beyond the scope of his interests. The political culture of Soviet and post-Soviet Turkmenistan, including the phenomena of corruption, nepotism and cronyism, are only selectively researched (Rashid, 1994; Botâkov, 2007). The problems of late-Soviet elite formation are also reflected in several texts and memories of former political figures and activists of that period (Kuliev, 2001 & 2006; Demidov, 2000 & 2002; Ryblov, 2004; Èsenov, 2008; Račkov, 2015).² Some information for this study comes from interviews with several members of the Turkmenistan opposition (particularly with Avdy Kuliev), or journalists coming from Turkmenistan (Viktor Panov). In particular, I acknowledge the interviews with staff at the Memorial Centre in Moscow, especially Vitalij Ponomarev), who also provided me with several sources from the beginning of the 1990s. As the formation of political culture and new ways of thinking are firmly connected with political psychology (psychology of the leader), I am also grateful to my colleague Jiri Sipek from the Department of Psychology, Charles University, in Prague. He shared with me his ideas on the psychology of authoritarian leaders. Based on the information about Turkmenistan, he brought valuable reconstruction of Saparmurat Niyazov-Turkmenbashi's, as well as the current president's, ways of thinking. Unfortunately, the interviews with political, social and cultural activists, an important part of the research, were not conducted due to lack of time within the deadline for the journal and an absence of technical tools, which I admit as one of the main heuristic problems of the work. However, for the next deeper analysis of the Turkmen opposition, this gap will obviously be filled.

Intra-Elite Struggles in the Turkmen SSR and its Consequences Before Perestroika

In the Brezhnev period, stability was proclaimed unofficially as the most decisive factor of the cadres' policy, particularly in the Central Asian area (Willerton, 1987; Miller, 1977). The First Secretaries of the respective republican Communist Party were appointed for a long time period in the 1960s. The maintenance of stability in the Soviet Republic was one of their principal tasks. For this reason, the leaders were either from the close circle

² Another newly published book of memories with a lot of new information remained beyond the reach of the author: Èsenov, 2015.

of Brezhnev (such as Sharaf Rashidov in Uzbekistan, who ruled over the republic from 1958), or from some particular informal group from within the republic. The balance of the elite group was one of the key factors in the appointment of Muhammetnazar Gapurov for the position of First Secretary in the Turkmen SSR in 1969. Turkmen historian Šokhrat Kadyrov points out that the nomination of the new Secretary in the Turkmen SSR was one of the latest within Brezhnev's reshuffle of the cadres, just after the consolidation of Brezhnev's position in the centre and together with the decreasing position of the then-First Secretary Balyš Ovezov. He was replaced and later sacked by Gapurov (Kadyrov, 2003a, pp. 130-131).

Gapurov was an experienced member of the Communist Party establishment and previously the head of the Turkmen SSR Cabinet of Ministers. He was also the representative of the non-Ashgabat elite group. His position had to balance the central Akhal-Teke group, which had tried in vain to achieve the highest position in the republic since the beginning of the 1950s (Kadyrov, 2005). A non-Akhal-Teke ruler in Akhal-Teke Ashgabat (and its surroundings) served as the loyalty guarantee of the First Secretary to the Moscow centre. Muhammetnazar Gapurov understood the threat coming from the Ashgabat elite group. The only option for keeping power over the place was to use protectionist politics towards his kin, who were fully entrenched in the political culture of non-elite Turkmen hierarchy (Botâkov, 2007, p. 150). As a result, Ashgabatians and Akhal-Tekes were systematically removed from influential positions in the republican apparatus or even eliminated from the political, social or cultural life in the first half of the 1970s (Kadyrov, 2001a, pp. 348-350; 2003, pp. 131-132). In this regard, we should mention the process with the Turkmen cultural elite, including, for example, the leading Turkmen poetess Annasoltan Kekilova (Rashid, 1994, p. 195), the leading writer Berdy Kerbabaev and many others.

The purges promoted the favourites of Gapurov into influential positions. They also included the cadres from other regions, such as Yomuts (Annamuhammet Klyčev, the long-term head of the Turkmen SSR Supreme Soviet Presidium in 1963-1978), or Mary-Teke (Maâ Mollaeva, the Central Committee Secretary for Ideology), or Northern Turkmenistan (Bally Âzkuliev, the deputy head of the Cabinet of Ministers in 1975-1978, Turkmen SSR Supreme Soviet Presidium in 1978-1987) (Kadyrov,

2001a, p. 349; Sitnânskij, 2011). The Akhal-Teke were, however, also represented in the highest, albeit not the most influential, positions in the republic. In this regard, Čary Karryev, one of the most important figures in Ashgabat with a wide range of kins within the Akhal-Teke elite, could serve as the example (Kadyrov, 2001a, p. 180; Račkov, 2015). At the same time, trying to demonstrate his loyalty to the Central Committee and to Brezhnev personally, he continued to maintain the politics of subservience and corruption towards his patrons in Moscow. There were rumours about wagons of fruits, nuts and rugs for the all-Union Communist Party Central Committee. His “contribution” to the pro-Moscow political culture also includes strengthening the position of the Russian language in the republic or the underlining of pro-Russian direction in Turkmenistan historiography. The Constitution of Turkmenistan adopted in 1978 did not contain any article about the superiority of the Turkmen language in the republic (*Konstituciâ...*, 1978). The promotion of the historical thesis on the “voluntary inclusion of Turkmen in Russia” became the second important issue in this field, which encountered only rare opposition within the elites (Kadyrov, 2003a, pp. 133-135; Annanepesov, Roslâkov & Gapurov, 1984).

The Rise of Niyazov

Saparmurat Niyazov – the future First secretary – worked at the Communist Party of Turkmenistan Central Committee during Gapurov’s leadership. In 1980 he became the First Secretary of Communist Party of the region of Ashgabat (*obkom*). His career was built and his political character was formed in the political culture of clientelism with preference given to the leader’s clan, as well as sycophantism, which served as his means of progress in the Party hierarchy, together with the right tribal and regional background (Aleksandrov, 1996, pp. 174-175). Such factors were adopted and developed under his rule for the reverse process – the promotion of an Akhal-Teke member into power. Niyazov also learned, since the time of his studies in the 1960s, how to use his orphan background for his own career promotion (Ryblov, 2004, p. 9). Although formally Akhal-Teke, he was not considered a real representative of this regional group.³ For this reason, he was found to be a suitable candidate for the position of First Secretary,

³ Niyazov was affiliated to Jewish (Tollyev, 2002), Kurdish-Iranian (Mitrokhin & Ponomarev, 1996) and even Arabic origin (Kadyrov, 2001b, p. 17).

despite there being more influential representatives of Ashgabat, such as Čary Karryev, the Head of Cabinet of Ministers of the republic. The Central Committee of the Communist Party adopted the policy of replacement of the First Secretaries in the republics in order to break long-term clientelistic structures. In this context, Niyazov became the first representative of Akhal-Teke appointed to the position of the first figure in the republic since 1951. Moscow was, however, not interested in the strengthening of this single group dominance within the republic. Niyazov, to a great extent “a stranger among his own people,” satisfied the Akhal-Teke group and, at the same time, he was dependent on the Moscow legitimisation in Ashgabat, despite his alleged Akhal-Teke origin. The invitation of Niyazov to Moscow, an unprecedented step in the republican Communist Party’s practice, had to foster the loyalty of the First Secretary towards the centre.

Within the perestroika process, Niyazov was presented as the supporter of Gorbachev’s reforms. Niyazov apparently understood that his mission as the First Secretary was determined by Moscow in order to satisfy the demands of the Akhal-Teke regional group and, at the same time, maintain the position of the republican leader loyal to Moscow (Kadyrov, 2003a, pp. 135-137). He kept his loyalty to Gorbachev, when he had real power. Once Boris Yeltsin increased his position, Niyazov turned his support to him in the last months of the Soviet Union (Ryblöv, 2004, p. 9). Inside the republic, however, he launched changes, traditional for a new leader, of the new Soviet republic’s leaders. These changes had two principal goals – ousting Gapurov and his allies and raising his authority within the Ashgabat elites. Gapurov had been accused of nepotism, flattery and careerism (Rashid, 1994, p. 195). However, despite the removal of cadres connected with Gapurov, some spheres remained untouched. The security services, as well as the energy sector, were the most important spheres in which Akhal-Teke were underrepresented and remained under the direct control of Moscow.

Therefore, Niyazov behaved in the style of “the two-faces policy,” one for Moscow and the second for intra-Turkmenistan issues. In the latter case, he adopted the political culture well known to him based on the above-mentioned characteristics. The symbolic significance of the appointment of Niyazov for the Akhal-Teke elite led to a fight for position in the republic within the Ashgabat elite and also led to it keeping its position, contrary

to reforms in the Soviet Union. Niyazov understood his role in the Soviet centre as well as his position within the Turkmen elite.

The Moscow purges of Central Asian and other Soviet Republic leaders, in particular the “cotton affair” in the neighbouring Uzbekistan, also influenced Niyazov and his personal character as politician (Lipovsky, 1995). Cleaning the elite from the Gapurov period, Niyazov also understood that his best allies (both in Moscow and within the republic) could easily become his enemies. This paranoid approach and his own loneliness without a firm anchor in the republic led him to the position of resistance to any attempts at alternative development. Although newly appointed Akhal-Teke groups supported this idea of stability, Niyazov preferred to act as if he had no allies or was only supported by occasional allies. He initiated a similar “cotton affair” within the republic, removing many important state figures from their positions (Rybllov, 2004, p. 21). Apparently, he did not want to repeat the fate of Rashidov’s cadres in neighbouring Uzbekistan.

The personal character of Niyazov has to be added to the abovementioned factors. Those who were in touch with him characterise him as cruel and demanding respect from his subordinates. He was not tolerant towards any alternative way of thinking or disagreement or challenge to his ideas (Rybllov, 2004, pp. 50-51; Račkov, 2015). On the other hand, he was considered to be sycophantic towards higher organs, such as the Central Committee of the Turkmen SSR Communist Party, the Central Committee of the USSR Communist Party, etc.⁴ He promoted his career using this approach to the authorities, also using his orphan status. As he was able to rise in his career, he required the same approach from his subordinates. He also surrounded himself with the people who always agreed with his ideas. Generally, he further developed the political culture existing already in Gapurov’s Turkmen SSR and contributed to it with his personal intolerant character. Niyazov’s system advanced the practice of vertical power, in which the lower level had to demonstrate its respect to the higher level of power (including material presents and bribes), while the highly positioned person had a neglectful attitude to the lower one.

⁴ Description of the personal character of Niyazov was provided to the author by several people from his former entourage in the first years of his rule (A. Kuliev, former minister of foreign affairs, 1999), or from business contacts (Czech businessmen conducting negotiations with Turkmenistan in 2004-2005).

In sum, the political culture during Gapurov's period (and even before him), together with cadre changes traditional in Turkmenistan after the appointment of a new First Secretary and the personal character of the new leader Saparmurat Niyazov, together created the mix of settings in which perestroika was taking place in Turkmenistan and also determined the political culture in post-Soviet Turkmenistan. These factors enabled Niyazov to suppress any opponents in the last stages of perestroika and the beginning of the independent period. Later on, this environment helped him to establish personal rule in the independent Turkmenistan.

Perestroika in Turkmenistan. The Last Chance for an Alternative to Authoritarianism?

Perestroika in Turkmenistan brought at least some chance to shift the political system in the country to bring it closer to reformist movement, as appeared in various parts of the Soviet Union (Baltic states, Georgia, or even Russia). However, the Turkmenistan case of perestroika and glasnost was determined by several specifics. As mentioned above, the cadre changes promoted Akhal-Teke middle-ranking powerful figures into the highest positions in the republic in the mid-1980s. These new rulers, including Niyazov, did not have much interest in dislodging the already established system. The political culture analysed above did not make the development of reformist movements or even political fractions easy. The reform-minded independent people, mostly from intelligentsia in the capital and fewer in the regions, were not able to gain powerful positions. Moreover, these representatives were often considered as representatives of Ashgabat (Akhal-Teke), with little support from other regions. As Kadyrov correctly points out, the representatives of the alternative groups often grew up and through in a different political culture (he calls it European), which caused their alienation from the political culture of the Turkmen elites (Kadyrov, 2002a). In fact, these two different and opposite views on the development of the Soviet republic put the alternative groups into opposition with the regime and its marginality in the substantial (and even politically influential) part of the Turkmen society. Moreover, the political culture of the elites, headed by Niyazov, was supported by power and media and administrative apparatus. The case of the dynamics of *Agzybirlik*, the most visible, albeit informal (at least from the beginning) movement established

in the Turkmen SSR, symptomatically shows this tendency and its fate was also repeated in other less important groups.

When analysing the problem of the informal and unofficial groups advancing a type of Turkmen SSR development alternative to the official course, we could define them under one category: “alternative groups.” This term could cover all the various instances that appeared in Turkmenistan. Although most authors writing about Turkmen perestroika (Rashid, 1994; Kadyrov, 2001a & 2003a; Peyrouse, 2012) called them “opposition,” in fact, many of the formal and informal members were in contact with or were even part of the establishment, which problematises their “opposition” dimension. This character was determined more clearly at the last stage of perestroika, when repressions were launched towards the representatives of these groups, turning them into the real opposition or, on the contrary, the supporters of Niyazov. The groups – movements, informal groups or, at the last stage of USSR existence, also political parties and entities – were personally interconnected with each other. Many former *Agzybirlik* representatives were involved in other groups.

The initial concepts behind the creation of alternative movements were based on questions of reinterpretation of Turkmen language status and Turkmen history. According to Rashid, the first protests in Ashgabat took place as early as 1987, when about 2,000 veterans of the Soviet Afghan conflict took to the streets (Rashid, 1994, p. 196), although the event took place within the first meeting of Afghan veterans, including a festival of Afghan songs (Rožkov, 2015). However, this one-time action did not have a long-term effect on the internal processes in Turkmenistan, despite the topicality of the Afghan issue for Turkmen society.

Apart from the Afghan problem, the question of the language became the first real key issue in the perestroika movements in Turkmenistan. Similar voices were heard in many other Soviet republics in which the local language was proclaimed as the primary one. Some Turkmen authors, even in 1990, supported the further process of Turkmenisation of the country and proposed the Latinisation of the Turkmen alphabet, moving back to the reforms of the 1930s (Clement, 2005, pp. 135-136). The language issue was also discussed on the important informal Turkmenistan intelligentsia meeting in April 1988, which resulted in vast interrogations with the organisers sanctioned by Niyazov (Ryblöv, 2004, p. 25). The protest against

the official interpretation of Turkmenistan history, defined by Gapurov as “Voluntary Turkmen Accession to Russia,” became yet another issue for discussion in the informal intellectual groups. At the same time, the meetings and protests for various demands within the glasnost process became more common in Ashgabat and in the regions in May 1989, despite the ban on public meetings within the republic (Kadyrov, 2001a, pp. 42-43).

Both issues – interpretation of history and language – laid a fundamental question for the first important alternative group in Turkmenistan, *Agzybirlik*, which gathered about 600 intellectuals in September 1989 following Niyazov’s expression on the language issues in the Central Press (Safronov, 2002). He also put the group under his control through his proxies at the Academy of Sciences. He pretended to be open to discussion with the intellectuals and to be ready to include some of the ideas of the movement on the republican agenda (Kadyrov, 2001a, p. 92). As a result, Niyazov announced the proposal of the Language Law in November 1989 (Ryblou, 2004, p. 26). However, typical of his character, he apparently feared any alternative movement or ideas. The first open event of the *Agzybirlik* movement on the site of the Geok Tepe battle and fortress in January 1990 challenged the official interpretation of Russian-Turkmen relations and demanded the establishment of a Memorial Day on 12 January, the date of the battle. Such actions affirmed Niyazov’s disgust at any liberal discussion. It demonstrated the ability of alternatives to organise real actions, which could, in the mind of Niyazov, turn out to be a real political challenge. It convinced him of the necessity to behave less tolerantly towards the movement. This demonstration became the starting point for further and increasing suppression of the activists and alternatives. *Agzybirlik* became for him the symbol of the opposition, as although many of those blamed for the support or membership of the movement were in fact not connected with it (Starodymov, 2012). As such, *Agzybirlik* represented an important challenge for the regime and the stability of those Akhal-Teke who were firmly connected with their recently gained positions.

Niyazov also took the initiative and proposed the Language Law in November 1989. Although the law was not adopted, Niyazov lately usurped fully the concern about the Turkmen language (Turkmenbashi, 2001, pp. 186 & 299-300; Niâzov, 1994, p. 17). He also adopted the initiative concerning the Geok Tepe battle. Although in 1990 the demonstration of

Agzybirlik was broken up by the power structure, a year later it was allegedly Niyazov's initiative to establish a National Memorial day (*Hatyra Günü*), which turned out later to be another manifestation of loyalty to the president (Kadyrov, 2003b, p. 114; Horák, 2015).

The Agzybirlik movement in 1989 was probably the most extensive and the most visible attempt to create an alternative to Niyazov's rule and increasing Akhal-Teke dominance, even if many of the Agzybirlik followers were also part of the Akhal-Teke. However, the movement was formed mostly within Ashgabat intelligentsia consisting primarily of "Russified levels of Euroturkmen elites" (Kadyrov, 2003a). The problem with Agzybirlik was, as one of its founders and later political emigrant Akmurad Velsapar pointed out, its overemphasis on democratic values and, consequently, a kind of intellectual introversion. The potential supporters from Ashgabat and, more particularly, from the regions and Ashgabat surroundings, demanded more nationalistic or Islamic renaissance rhetoric (Velsapar, 1997). The narrow group of intellectuals did not represent Turkmen society, especially the substantial non-Akhal-Teke part outside the capital, who mostly perceived them through the lenses of tribalism and considered them as the representative of another expression of Akhal-Teke hegemonism. Akmurad Velsapar also noticed that people from the regions were not represented at any potential meeting in Ashgabat ("foreign" territory for them), if they do not dominate in opposition movement (Velsapar, 1997, cited by Kadyrov, 2003a, p. 148). The society in Turkmenistan became more fragmented than Agzybirlik supposed. Therefore, the important democratic slogans and refusal to serve as more radical nationalists or followers of Islamic renaissance split the movement and its representatives from its potential supporters. As one moderate critic of Agzybirlik remarked, they generally considered the shift towards more nationalism unattractive to other levels of Turkmen society (Starodymov, 2012). It made it easier for the regime to gradually reduce and later suppress the movement. The powers intervened during both attempts to transform the group to an official movement or even a political party in March 1991 and January 1992 (Kadyrov, 2002b). The movement was only able to appeal to the public to vote for the preservation of the USSR during the referendum in 1991 (Kadyrov, 2001a, p. 44).

Other groups that could be considered as alternative were found at the end of the Soviet Union and at the time when Niyazov managed to consolidate his power together with his Party and State organs' repressive machine. He could rely on the strong mandate given by the non-alternative elections in October 1990, where Niyazov obtained 98.3% of the votes. It cleared the way for suppression of any alternative group potentially able to challenge his rule.

The latter was a case of an attempt to establish an initiative group supporting the so-called Democratic Reforms Movement (*Dviženie demokratičeskikh reform*) in Moscow under the leadership of several former Communist Party representatives and other activists (Eduard Shevardnadze, Alexandr Âkovlev, Gavril Popov, Anatolij Sobčak, etc.). Turkmen group creation was silenced from the very beginning and the initiators of the group in Ashgabat had to go through "prophylactic interview" with the Party and Power structures (Ryblöv, 2004, pp. 19-20).

In 1991, the famous journalist and philosopher Muhammedmurad Salamatov launched the political and social journal *Daânč*. The first issue was ready in September 1991 and was published in Moscow at the beginning of 1992. However, the journal was prohibited in Turkmenistan and the printouts of it (as well as other issues titled *Daânč-èkspress*) were confiscated in Ashgabat. The authors who agreed to contribute their texts in the journal came mostly from the Agzybirlik and other alternative groups. Many people from the intelligentsia of that time refused contribution to the journal as it presented open anti-Niyazov views (Berdyev, 2006). In 1995, Salamatov became more famous for another article entitled "Kto khožân v Turkmenistane" [Who rules in Turkmenistan] in the journal *Turkmeny. Al'manakh* (cited by Kadyrov, 2001a, p. 254). A similar fate affected the discussion club Pajkhas, created at the Academy of Sciences. The group reached only a limited public and its initiator Šokhrat Kadyrov became famous for his later article about the 1992 Turkmenistan constitution (Ryblöv, 2004, p. 45) and was subsequently forced to emigrate from the country.

Within the political system of expansion of Niyazov's regime in 1990-1992, Agzybirlik and other groups could not aspire to gain much success, even if they were able to attract more supporters. The group was labelled as nationalistic in the official press and its members started to be persecuted following the ban of the group in January 1990 (Kadyrov, 2002b).

Ideologically, Niyazov adopted some of the most important topics of the potentially most influential alternative groups. Open arrest was applied from 1990. Širali Nurmuradov, one of the leaders of Agzybirlik, was detained in October that year before the first presidential elections (Anonymous, 2006; Informacionnyj Centr ..., s.d.). Some figures from Agzybirlik and other movements who attempted to express their opinions in more open Moscow media were often subject to the “prophylactic interviews” back in Ashgabat or even dismissed from their positions (Rashid, 1994, p. 196). The Writers Union of Turkmenistan, which was potentially considered as one of the centres of alternative views (as expressed in the journal *Èdebiât ve sungat* [Literature and art] was silenced during the February 1991 congress when Niyazov dismissed its chief editor Aširkuli Bajriev and incorporated his favourites to the leadership of the Union. Even if some writers tried to adapt soft power through protest or hunger strikes, it had no results against the growing repressive machine of the regime in 1991 (Ryblöv, 2004, pp. 26-27).

The attempts to create alternative political parties occurred in 1991 or after the USSR dissolutions, that is at the time of full consolidation of Niyazov’s regime. Agzybirlik tried to establish itself as a national movement but was definitively banned (Kadyrov, 2001a, p. 92, *Agzybirlik...*, 1991). Part of the Agzybirlik movement attempted to create the Party of Democratic Development (*Partiâ demokratičeskogo razvitiâ Turkmenistana*) in 1991 with Durdymurad Khodžamuhammedov as the head of the party (Torkunov, 2012, p. 518). However, the party was not registered and its leader was later arrested and placed in a psychiatric hospital (Mitrokhin & Ponomarev, 1999).

Another alternative group, the Democratic Party of Turkmenistan (*Demokratičeskâ partiâ Turkmenistana*), was formed under the leadership of Muhammed Durdymurad, but its activities were banned in 1991 and the party had to hold its first congress in Moscow. The party strictly refused their ban after the Moscow coup in August 1991 (Vasil’eva, 1991), but, as Rashid points out, his message of unification of all Turkic people did not even reach Central Asia or Turkmenistan (Rashid, 1994, p. 196). Other experiments with the establishment of political parties were organised in 1992; the Agrarian Party, the Communist Party, Agzybirlik, as well as the Russian Society of Turkmenistan, had ambitions to participate in the future elections. All of these attempts were nipped in the bud as they were often

not able to organise the first steps towards their recognition or their applications were not answered (Kališevskij, 2014).

In the first years of independence, some representatives of the alternative movements did not lose hope of resistance to Niyazov's regime, co-existence and even dialogue with him. The last open protests were suppressed in 1994-1995. The regime involved the whole range of the repressive apparatus in order to cut down any alleged opposition activities (Saparov, 2000; Safronov, 2002). The remaining proponents of the alternative way of thinking were forced to emigrate, were persecuted or even disappeared (Kamalova, Vital'ev & Šilds, 2006). The process of a repressive approach towards former opponents continued throughout Niyazov's tenure, right up to his death in 2006.

Conclusion: Perestroika as Unsuccessful Attempt to Change Turkmen Political Culture

Ahmed Rashid considered Turkmenistan as potentially one of the most unstable states within Central Asia (Rashid, 1994, p. 205). However, it seems that the authoritarian path chosen by Niyazov, accompanied by the harsh repression against any alternative, meant it became one of the fundamentals for its long-term stability. Niyazov consolidated his power, eliminated the most important opponents and scared off any potential challengers. Niyazov himself created personal rule in order to keep his position in the Akhal-Teke surroundings (Aleksandrov, 1996, p. 175; Horák, 2010). The political culture based on cronyism, corruption and nepotism helped him to cement the authoritarian structures.

Niyazov was able to use all his administrative and power resources to limit the potential influence of alternative centres in the last years of the Soviet Union, with no influential reaction from Moscow. Although intellectual groups were able to partly express their thoughts and reach the public through their publications and articles in the Turkmen and, even more so, Moscow press, their influence was too weak to challenge the existing regime. Even if all the alternative centres were able to unite, they would hardly be able to correct the authoritarian rule of Niyazov based on the Soviet Turkmen political culture and his intolerant character. The programme and the topics based on the moderate and (in some cases) radical Turkmen nationalism did not find necessary reaction in the regions and

even beyond the narrow Ashgabat circles. As Akmurad Velsapar pointed out, “the history of Agzybirlík is the history of tragic opposition of leading representatives of Turkmen intelligentsia against Soviet totalitarianism” (cited by Salamatov, 1997). In this sense, it was the case not only of the Soviet totalitarian regime, but even more so the specific Soviet political culture in the specific Turkmenistan conditions.

In contrast to other more turbulent Soviet republics, there was only a small amount of mobilisation potential that would be able to challenge Niyazov’s emerging power. The ruling elites from the Akhal-Teke region did not support the intelligentsia as the decisive members among them were interested mostly in keeping their seats gained during the last Soviet purges in the mid-1980s. These cadres tended rather to conserve than to innovate the system.

Moreover, President Niyazov, based on his personal background (as an orphan) and characteristics, his political experience as well as the political culture he grew up in did not allow an increase in alternative or even opposition moods. Until the very end of Gorbachev’s leadership, he pretended to be a supporter of perestroika, while on his home field he suppressed any expression of it. After the interruption of Moscow support, he had, in his view, no other way to keep the rule but the crackdown on alternative movements as well as on the most prominent figures of the Turkmen elite with other points of view. They were all considered by him to be an unnecessary challenge and competition (Kuliev, 2006). On the ideological level he usurped the opposition’s topics and presented them as his own. He relied mostly on himself to repress and adapt the ideas of his opponents, while he did not trust the people around him (mostly Akhal-Teke). In this way, the political culture based on the only and central person by means of a personality cult and repressive apparatus was set up as the regular Turkmenistan. This culture was adopted by the second president, who mostly strengthened Akhal-Teke hegemonism, making any alternative (opinion, region) almost impossible.

All in all, it does not mean that many people in Turkmenistan are not ready to think in democratic terms and select an alternative to the ruling regime. However, the political culture established by the first president and prolonged in adapted form by the second one is not ready to provide such an option to the population.

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Abstract

This article focuses on the power shifts in Turkmenistan between the rule of Muhammetnazar Gapurov, the long-term First Secretary of the Turkmen SSR Communist Party and the dissolution of the Soviet Union. The special focus is on the transformation of the elite, power structures and political culture under Saparmurat Niyazov and the emergence and struggle of the alternative groups trying to challenge the order established under the last First Secretary. It argues that Niyazov developed the political culture set up under Gapurov, adding his personal character to the process. These factors determined the largely unsuccessful attempt of the alternative and opposition groups to change the Turkmen SSR in the last stages of perestroika. The political culture established in these and the first subsequent years within independent Turkmenistan also determined the character of the Turkmen regime and the composition of the elite for many years ahead, with significant impact on the system under the second president Berdimuhamedov.

Keywords: Turkmenistan, perestroika, Turkmen SSR, Saparmurat Niyazov, elites, political culture, opposition

Résumé

Le Turkménistan à la dernière étape de la perestroïka. Les déterminants d'une voie autoritaire.

Cet article traite des changements de pouvoir au Turkménistan entre le régime de Muhammetnazar Gapurov, Premier Secrétaire du Parti communiste de la RSS turkmène et la dissolution de l'Union soviétique. L'accent est mis sur la transformation de l'élite, des structures de pouvoir et de la culture politique sous Saparmurat Niyazov et l'émergence et la lutte des groupes alternatifs tentant de contester l'ordre établi sous le dernier Premier Secrétaire. Il soutient l'idée que Niyazov a développé la culture politique mise en place sous Gapurov, en y ajoutant son caractère personnel au processus. Ces facteurs ont déterminé la tentative largement infructueuse des groupes alternatifs et d'opposition de changer la RSS turkmène dans les dernières étapes de la perestroïka. La culture politique établie au cours de ces années et des premières années du Turkménistan indépendant a également déterminé le caractère du régime turkmène et la composition de l'élite pour les années futures, avec un impact significatif sur le système sous le second président Berdimuhamedov.

Mots-clés : Turkménistan, perestroïka, RSS turkmène, Saparmurat Niyazov, élites, culture politique, opposition

Аннотация

Туркменистан на последнем этапе перестройки. Факторы авторитарного пути.

Статья анализирует передачу власти в Туркменистане начиная с конца длительного срока первого секретаря Коммунистической партии Туркменской ССР Мухамметназара Гапурова до распада Советского союза. Особенное внимание уделено вопросам трансформации элит, властных структур и политической культуры тогдашней Туркмении под Сапармуратом Ниязовым. Анализ включает и развитие альтернативных структур пытающихся противостоять тенденциям правления Первого секретаря Партии. Оказывается, что Ниязов дальше развивал и углублял политическую культуру основанную Гапуровым и добавил в нее свой персональный характер. Фактор инерции политической культуры во многом предопределил провал целей оппозиционных групп в Туркменской ССР в последние годы перестройки. Установленная в республике политическая культура в эти и последующие годы независимого Туркменистана также предопределила характер режима и состава элиты на много десятилетий вперед с непосредственным влиянием на систему нынешнего второго президента Гурбангули Бердимухамедова.

Ключевые слова: Туркменистан, перестройка, Туркменской ССР, Сапармурат Ниязов, элиты, политическая культура, оппозиция