

## TURKMEN NATIONALISM TODAY: POLITICAL AND INTELLECTUAL MYTHOLOGEMES

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### *I n t r o d u c t i o n : The Political as the National in Turkmenistan*

The newly independent states in Central Asia were not the only regional result of the Soviet Union's disintegration in the early 1990s.<sup>1</sup> It also led to a boost in nationalisms in the Central Asian countries, which have become a significant political force and are especially active in language, culture, and the academic sphere.

The collapse of the common state changed the status of the local nationalisms, infused them with much more vigor, and led to their institutionalization. It can even be surmised that the independent Central Asian states appeared not only because the Soviet Union disappeared and left a vacuum, but also because the mounting national and nationalist movements were accumulating popular dissatisfaction with the Center.

This made nationalism one of the major factors in the emergence of the independent states in Central Asia.

<sup>1</sup> For more on the political processes of the 1990s in Central Asia, see: W.O. Beeman, "Formirovanie natsional'noy identichnosti v usloviakh mul'tikul'turalizma. Na primere Tadjikistana," available at [<http://www.politstudies.ru/N2004fulltext/2000/2/12.htm>]; F. Tolipov, "Demokratizm, natsionalizm i regionalizm v stranakh Tsentral'noy Azii," available at [<http://www.ca-c.org/journal/cac-10-2000/01.tolipov.shtml>].

Tajik, Turkmen, and Uzbek nationalisms functioned in authoritarian states with prominent colonial political legacies. These two factors largely affected the development of regional nationalisms.

The region's post-Soviet nature was manifested by the continuity between the Soviet and new national forms of political authoritarianism. The nationalist movements in the Tajik, Uzbek and Turkmen Soviet Socialist republics played an important role in undermining and finally destroying the Soviet system. As distinct from Central Europe, they never helped the nations to move away from authoritarianism to democracy.

In Soviet times, political discussions in the Central Asian republics were launched and channeled by political elites totally dependent on the republican communist parties. Independence also shifted this role to the politicians closely connected with the Soviet and party leaders.

Saparmurat Niyazov's dictatorship in Turkmenistan turned out to be the most unique phenomenon among the post-Soviet authoritarian regimes in Central Asia.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> For more on the specific features of the political processes in Turkmenistan, see: N. Saparov, "Ob osoben-

The authoritarian system, which existed in Turkmenistan between 1990 and the first half of the 2000s, was a close relative of the late Soviet authoritarian regime in the Turkmen S.S.R. In his speeches, President Niyazov dwelt in detail on the political meanderings of the republic's history: "Today, Turkmenistan is taking the first and, therefore, the hardest steps toward its res-

nostiakh turkmenskoy 'modeli demokratii,'" available at [<http://www.ca-c.org/journal/cac-08-2000/26.saparov.shtml>].

urrection. In fact, it is creating its own sovereign history and statehood. Its history is old and brimming with events, but today we have made a fresh start. We are free from the burden of old insults, ideologies, phobias, political clichés, and national labels."<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> S. Niyazov, "Turkmeny, Turkmenistan, mir: tysia-cheletia i XXI vek, sviaz' vremen i tsivilizatsiy," An article written to the U.N. Millennium Assembly, available at [[http://niyazov.sitecity.ru/ltxt\\_0409164936.phtml?p\\_ident=ltxt\\_0409164936.p\\_1710163846](http://niyazov.sitecity.ru/ltxt_0409164936.phtml?p_ident=ltxt_0409164936.p_1710163846)].

## The Political Vocabulary: Nationalism, Neutrality, and Discreteness

President Niyazov was fond of stressing the discreteness of Turkmen political history: "How did the Turkmens build over seventy states in the course of the five millennia of their history? How did they govern them? How did they defend them in the course of eight centuries of stateless existence?"<sup>4</sup>

This political narrative shows the desire of the Turkmen elite to strengthen the restored independence with historical expediency. In this way, history is subjugated to political expediency.

Prominent Irish historian Vincent Comerford has pointed out that it is hard to destroy the popular national and historical stereotypes inherited from the past.<sup>5</sup>

The situation in Turkmenistan is greatly complicated by the fact that it is not so much a national state; it is merely moving toward this aim while its elites have placed the stakes on authoritarianism as the main regime-reproducing instrument.

The authoritarian political regime was largely a product of the realization that in the 1990s the independent republic had been submerged in a political crisis. Not only that, the political elites responded by creating a new system of political coordinates: they abandoned the communist ideology and pretended to embrace democratic values.

By the time it acquired its independence Turkmenistan was not merely a Soviet periphery, but also a region best described as a "patriarchal social organization in which the sociocultural expanse was divided among clans and people from the same localities and which lacked a common civil self-identity and common legal consciousness."<sup>6</sup>

The communist ideology was replaced with principles typical of any post-colonial society: recognition of the Soviet heritage, its consistent criticism, and the idea of discreteness in Turkmen state-

<sup>4</sup> S. Niyazov, "Khochesh byt' velikim, popytaisia osmyslit' velichie Rodiny!" Speech of the First President of Turkmenistan Saparmurat Niyazov at the 3rd Congress of the Makhtumkuli Youth Organization, available at [[http://niyazov.sitecity.ru/ltxt\\_0409164936.phtml?p\\_ident=ltxt\\_0409164936.p\\_2607104011](http://niyazov.sitecity.ru/ltxt_0409164936.phtml?p_ident=ltxt_0409164936.p_2607104011)].

<sup>5</sup> See: V. Comerford, "Natsional'naia identichnost' i istoricheskaia nauka v Irlandii," in: *Rossia-Irlandia: kollektivnaia pamiat'. Materialy konferentsii 11-12 noiabria 2005 goda*, Moscow, M. Rudomino Russian State Library of Foreign Literature, ed. by E.Iu. Genieva and J. Harman, Rossiyskaia politicheskaya entsiklopedia, Moscow, 2007, p. 162.

<sup>6</sup> N. Saparov, op. cit.

hood. Turkmen nationalism, an object of humanitarian studies under Soviet power, was pushed into the political and state context. It can even be said that a synthesis of political authoritarianism and Turkmen nationalism was the hallmark of the Turkmen political context.

President Niyazov was one of the ideologists of the new nationalist discourse. The nature and political rhetoric of post-Soviet Turkmen nationalism was very close to the nationalisms of the other post-colonial societies.

Under Niyazov, the nationalist discourse was intended to actualize or, rather, create political identity; the new version was expected to be loyal to the ideas of political independence and neutrality rather than to communist ideology.

In 2005, President Niyazov pointed out that Turkmenistan “embraced neutrality immediately after it acquired independence, which determined the nation’s present and future ... The great independence won through the historic changes late in the past century gave all those living on the blessed Turkmen land a chance to decide what to do with their lives.”<sup>7</sup>

The official political discourse positively assessed the republic’s neutrality. Ovez Gundogdyev, for example, deemed it necessary to stress that “the idea of neutrality did not appear out of nowhere. President Niyazov realized, in contemporary conditions, the centuries-old desire of the Turkmen people to live in peace on their own land in good-neighborly relations with all the states around their country.”<sup>8</sup>

N. Saparov commented: “From the very beginning of the country’s independent development, the leaders placed the stakes on creating a sort of absolute authority and a certain national idea. The leaders expected the nation to be guided by such authority and by this idea while the political elite was expected to close ranks around them.”<sup>9</sup>

## National Authoritarianism: Turkmen Version

Everything what President Niyazov had to say can be regarded as a valuable source for studying the development and functioning of political nationalism and nationalist ideas in post-Soviet Turkmenistan.

The language and the alphabet had to change, and become practically purist, to fit the country’s new image: the Turkmen alphabet was replaced with Latin, while the Turkmen language gained a monopoly in all spheres, including record management, civil service and education. This was possible due to official support and the outflow of Russians from the republic. In this respect, Turkmenistan did not differ much from the other post-Soviet societies developing their own nationalist ideologies.

The republic’s post-colonial status complicated the language discourse. A country in which independence and authoritarianism came together could not just declare the Turkmen language the official one.

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<sup>7</sup> S. Niyazov, “Neytralitet—velichayshee dostizhenie nashogo naroda,” From the Address of Saparmurat Niyazov to the Compatriots on the Occasion of the 10th Anniversary of Turkmenistan’s Permanent Neutrality, available at [[http://niyazov.sitecity.ru/ltxt\\_0409164936.phtml?p\\_ident=ltxt\\_0409164936.p\\_1812123037](http://niyazov.sitecity.ru/ltxt_0409164936.phtml?p_ident=ltxt_0409164936.p_1812123037)].

<sup>8</sup> O. Gundogdyev, “Razmyshlenia turkmenskogo istorika o glubinnikh korniakh neytraliteta,” available at [[http://niyazov.sitecity.ru/ltxt\\_0608085523.phtml?p\\_ident=ltxt\\_0608085523.p\\_0608090415](http://niyazov.sitecity.ru/ltxt_0608085523.phtml?p_ident=ltxt_0608085523.p_0608090415)].

<sup>9</sup> N. Saparov, op. cit.

President Niyazov was convinced that the state should be actively involved in the process of restoring the genuine Turkmen language and studying it: "Old Turkmen words which appear in ancient texts should be explained to allow the reader to master the true Turkmen speech. Our TV now explains the meanings of the old words used in *Rukhnama* ... I regret to say that our young people do not know them. Our language is wonderful, very figurative, and simply beautiful. We should use these words in fiction writing."<sup>10</sup>

To a certain extent Turkmenistan followed in the Soviet Union's footsteps: I have in mind the more or less regular interference of the state leaders in the language sphere. Significantly, the Turkmen leader turned to the centuries-old historical tradition of his people.

Jerome Friedman of the United States has said about the historical manipulations of the nationalists that "the constructions of histories" were "products of particular social relations."<sup>11</sup> Vincent Comerford believes that in many respects historical studies are stamped with populist and official nationalism.<sup>12</sup> This explains the latest linguistic interventions of the Turkmen leaders as caused by their desire to consolidate the nation's identity.

By way of building up the country's new political image, President Niyazov invariably stressed: "Our Motherland, independent Turkmenistan, is pursuing its peaceful and genuinely human policies for the sake of positive cooperation with all states. Indeed, mankind has always wanted to live without wars, conflicts, terror, violence, and plunder. It has always wanted to live in peace and prosperity, kindness and agreement. This means that any reasonable person, any peaceful country, and any human community would like to see the world peaceful and free from conflicts, which wakens up the people to friendship and brotherhood. Neutral Turkmenistan is always prepared to be actively involved in everything what the world community undertakes and to contribute to all initiatives designed to preserve and strengthen peace on earth."<sup>13</sup>

The ruling elite, which sided with the first president of independent Turkmenistan, worked on its new and attractive image designed mostly for the rest of the world rather than for domestic consumption.

The intellectual sphere was molded according to the patterns of the authoritarian political discourse: "We live in a peaceful country; our nation is friendly and closely knit. The calm and creative life in our sovereign state is free from conflicts and scandals of any sort. Ours is a law-abiding people which knows well how elections should be organized, therefore the election campaign went without a hitch and at a very high level."<sup>14</sup>

This new version of the Turkmen socialist nation relied on loyalty, which created an even more unified political expanse than that of late-Soviet Turkmenistan.

Everything that President Niyazov ever said smacked of the Soviet political and rigidly ideological vocabulary.

The trends designed to instill and encourage loyalty toward the authoritarian regime went together with the president's efforts to create an enemy image, invariably personified in his speeches as his critics and opponents.

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<sup>10</sup> "Vystuplenie Prezidenta Turkmenistana Saparmurata Niyazova na otkrytii Turkmenskogo natsional'nogo tsentra kul'turnogo nasledia 'Miras,'" 12 February, 2004, available at [[http://niyazov.sitcity.ru/ltex\\_0409164936.phtml?p\\_ident=ltex\\_0409164936.p\\_2702070824](http://niyazov.sitcity.ru/ltex_0409164936.phtml?p_ident=ltex_0409164936.p_2702070824)].

<sup>11</sup> J. Friedman, "Myth, History, and Political Identity," *Cultural Anthropology*, Vol. VII, 1992, p. 194.

<sup>12</sup> See: V. Comerford, *op. cit.*, p. 168.

<sup>13</sup> S. Niyazov, "Neytralitet—velichayshee dostizhenie nashego naroda."

<sup>14</sup> S. Niyazov, "Do 2020 goda vybory v turkmenskiy Mejlis ne budut prokhodit' po partiynym spiskam," Speech of President of Turkmenistan Saparmurat Niyazov at the First Session of the Mejlis of Turkmenistan of the Third Convocation, 1 February 2005, available at [[http://niyazov.sitcity.ru/ltex\\_0409164936.phtml?p\\_ident=ltex\\_0409164936.p\\_0602102301](http://niyazov.sitcity.ru/ltex_0409164936.phtml?p_ident=ltex_0409164936.p_0602102301)].

He described the political opposition as “embezzlers, criminals, and scoundrels who fled their country, being afraid of just retribution. They intended to change the constitutional order and seize power.”<sup>15</sup>

This criticism contains a powerful post-colonial trend: “The terrorists intended to set up a provisional government with Shikhmuradov as its head, while Khanamov, Orazov, and Yklymov intended to become government members. All of them are thieves, absolutely depraved and corrupt people, ruffians who secretly left the country. These rogues expected to rule Turkmenistan. Driven by greed and inordinate ambitions, they acted on the instigation of other countries which promised support in exchange of part of Turkmenistan’s riches. Turkmens would be exterminated by other Turkmens.”<sup>16</sup>

He described the Turkmen opposition as anti-national, connected with Europe and the former Center (the Russian Federation). The official political parlance used in independent Turkmenistan described the opposition as the main enemy of the newly gained independence, seeking to restore the republic’s dependent status.

As the authoritarian nature of Saparmurat Niyazov’s regime became more and more obvious, the republic’s political elite spared no effort to present it as a democratic state: “Throughout the history of human civilization, the peoples of the world have lived through different periods of their development when they sought ways to achieve their statehood, self-assertion, flourishing of national self-awareness, and transformations of all sorts. These processes, inspired and driven by nations seeking democracy, freedom, lasting peace, and justice, were linked into a logical chain of history.”<sup>17</sup>

The loyal historians were actively building a history of the Turkmen model of democracy.<sup>18</sup>

The wide use of democratic rhetoric by the authoritarian political regime speaks of the post-colonial nature of Turkmen statehood in 1990-2000.

All post-colonial regimes at all times used and are using the political parlance of the former metropolitan country. They need time to develop a political vocabulary of their own in which the nationalist trends of the new and actively developing state are gradually coming to the fore. Such states can (and do) develop within the authoritarian political model, while paying lip service to democratic values and human rights.

## Post-colonial Turkmenistan

On the other hand, the political elite of Turkmenistan (an essentially post-colonial state) goes out of its way to stress sovereignty and stir up nationalist feelings. Not infrequently, the Soviet regime is criticized as undemocratic: “Under Soviet power, we had 364 deputies in our parliament, whereby none of them had any rights. The deputies obeyed the Center and the highest party structures. They had no say when it came to the republic’s economy or its domestic and foreign policies.”<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> “Vystuplenie Prezidenta Turkmenistana Saparmurata Niyazova na sovместnom zasedanii XIV Gosudarstvennogo Soveta stareyshin Turkmenistana, Khalk Maslakhaty i Obschenatsional’nogo dvizhenia ‘Galkynysh,’” 14-15 August, 2003, available at [[http://niyazov.sitecity.ru/ltxt\\_0409164936.phtml?p\\_ident=ltxt\\_0409164936.p\\_0509083101](http://niyazov.sitecity.ru/ltxt_0409164936.phtml?p_ident=ltxt_0409164936.p_0509083101)].

<sup>16</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>17</sup> S. Niyazov, “Strategicheskoe partnerstvo vo imia idealov mira i gumanizma,” available at [[http://niyazov.sitecity.ru/ltxt\\_0409164936.phtml?p\\_ident=ltxt\\_0409164936.p\\_2508120239](http://niyazov.sitecity.ru/ltxt_0409164936.phtml?p_ident=ltxt_0409164936.p_2508120239)].

<sup>18</sup> See: O. Gundogdyev, “Drevnie traditsii demokratii Turkmen,” available at [<http://turkmenhistory.blogspot.com/2005/11/blog-post.html>].

<sup>19</sup> S. Niyazov, “Do 2020 goda vybory v turkmenskiy Mejlis ne budut prokhodit’ po partiynym spiskam.”

In 2001, the president pointed out that Soviet order was absolutely alien to the Turkmen: "I lived under Soviet power and still as a young man was aware of my people's subjugation, its spiritual impotence and lack of faith in justice. I saw this and felt this: firmly convinced that the world was ruled by the strong, people saw no meaning in their own lives."<sup>20</sup>

The anti-Soviet narratives in President Niyazov's speeches can be taken as the outcrops of the Turkmen's post-colonial trauma, the result of 70 years of the Soviet authoritarian rule transformed, in the 1990s, into national authoritarianism.

The nationalists are tuned to the political dynamics. Craig Calhoun of the United States has written about the powerful adaptive potential of the nationalist imagination: Historical science of our days is a product of the tradition of creating national histories intended to instill collective identities in those who read them ... The nationalists are prone to tailor histories to suit themselves. Nationalist history is a nation-building instrument.<sup>21</sup>

President Niyazov's anti-Soviet rhetoric was basically anti-colonial: "Under Soviet power we had not a single more or less modern plant. We produced millions of tons of cotton without a textile factory to speak of. Or, although we produced tens of millions of tons of oil, we had no oil refineries. Under Soviet power, we exported 90 billion cubic meters of gas, but we never profited from these riches."<sup>22</sup>

In another speech the president pointed out: "We spent 70 years as part of the Soviet Union during which our economy declined... During these 70 years Turkmenistan acquired only two plants... Everything we produced in Turkmenistan—chemical and petroleum products, products of the gas industry and cotton—was distributed in Moscow. No one explained to us how... In 1960, Turkmenistan produced 17 million tons of oil and from 80 to 90 billion cubic meters of natural gas. We gathered about 1 million tons of cotton and processed about 3 percent of it; we produced yarn or coarse calico which was taken away for military needs. We gained nothing."<sup>23</sup>

The political discourse of 1990-2000 transformed the Soviet Union into a metropolitan country in the Turkmen's political consciousness; it kept the republic by force, subjugated it, and used its natural riches without bothering about the colony's interests.

It was then that the political elite set about the business of revising the nation's history: the considerably de-nationalized history of the Turkmen S.S.R. was pushed aside to be replaced with a nationally-oriented and largely ethnocentric history of Turkmenistan.

The Soviet period was revised without qualms; national development and the formation of the Turkmen nation were pushed to the forefront: "The Soviet epoch completed the nation's destruction in the most painful way: national statehood was replaced with autocratic statehood. The Soviet state, which called the tune, did not need historical promotion of the autochthonous people. On the contrary, it subjugated them in every possible way. Material riches were taken away, while spiritual values were destroyed."<sup>24</sup>

<sup>20</sup> "Otryvki iz vystuplenia Prezidenta Turkmenistana Saparmurata Niyazova na X sovместnom zasedanii Gosudarstvennogo Soveta stareyshin Turkmenistana, Khalk Maslakhaty i Obshchenatsional'nogo dvizhenia 'Galkynysh,'" 18 February, 2001, available at [[http://niyazov.sitecity.ru/ltex\\_0409164936.phtml?p\\_ident=ltex\\_0409164936.p\\_1810090215](http://niyazov.sitecity.ru/ltex_0409164936.phtml?p_ident=ltex_0409164936.p_1810090215)].

<sup>21</sup> See: C. Calhoun, *Nationalism*, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, 1997.

<sup>22</sup> "Vystuplenie Prezidenta Turkmenistana Saparmurata Niyazova na sovместnom zasedanii XIV Gosudarstvennogo Soveta stareyshin Turkmenistana, Khalk Maslakhaty i Obshchenatsional'nogo dvizhenia 'Galkynysh,'" 14-15 August, 2003.

<sup>23</sup> "Neytralitet Turkmenistana: istoria, mirovozzrenie i gosudarstvennaia strategia," Speech of Saparmurat Niyazov in Front of Turkmen Students, 1 December, 2000, available at [[http://niyazov.sitecity.ru/ltex\\_0409164936.phtml?p\\_ident=ltex\\_0409164936.p\\_2707094526](http://niyazov.sitecity.ru/ltex_0409164936.phtml?p_ident=ltex_0409164936.p_2707094526)].

<sup>24</sup> S. Niyazov, "Nekotorye mysli, kotorye mne zakhotelos' vyskazat' o strukture nezavisimogo neytral'nogo Turkmenского gosudarstva," available at [[http://niyazov.sitecity.ru/ltex\\_0409164936.phtml?p\\_ident=ltex\\_0409164936.p\\_2308080510](http://niyazov.sitecity.ru/ltex_0409164936.phtml?p_ident=ltex_0409164936.p_2308080510)].

## Historical Imagination and Turkmen Nationalism

The nationalist version of historical imagination developed into a dominant element of the political and intellectual discourse. Based not so much on reflections about the past (typical of the moderate tactics employed in Central and Eastern Europe to build up new national images of the past) as on its consistent mythologization, this discourse developed into practically official institutionalization of the primordial paradigm of writing (describing) the history of Turkmenistan.

By way of commenting on the quasi-historical studies pursued by the nationally oriented intellectuals, some academics point out that “interpretation of history has been and remains a battle field for identity ... the interest shown in specific historical subjects depends on the region. Potentially it disunites rather than unites and creates a shared historical image.”<sup>25</sup>

These trends are especially interesting in Turkmenistan if we take into account the development specifics of its political regime. Unlike some of the other Soviet-successor states, it did not embrace democratization but opted for stronger authoritarian trends based on the new nationalist rather than the old communist ideological foundation.

Any analyst of Turkmenistan’s political parlance should know that it differs little from the vocabulary of the late Turkmen S.S.R. (as far as the degree of glorification of the elite is concerned). This is best illustrated by the following: “The neutrality that came to blessed Turkmen soil after we gained great independence (the holy of holies for each of the Turkmens) is one of the most important milestones in our recent history. Its neutral status opened up a great road of victories and glory. Turkmenistan, which posed itself as a land of lasting peace, stability, unity, and good-neighborliness, marked the 10th anniversary of its permanent neutrality with great political victories, economic achievements, and spiritual summits.”<sup>26</sup>

In 1990-2000, the Turkmen elite heavily relied on history in their political parlance—a phenomenon typical of the post-Soviet political discourse.

History developed into a powerful instrument of the nation’s political mobilization: “Turkmens have a rich past; they have covered a long historical path. Three times they conquered a larger part of the world—this is the truth. Oguz Khan and Gorkut Ata and, later, Togrul Beg, Chagry Beg, and others ruled the world.”<sup>27</sup>

Historical subjects, of which President Niyazov was especially fond, were intended not only to promote the institutionalization of the ethnocentric version of Turkmen identity, but also to confirm primordialism of sorts: “Our ancestors formulated the principles which allowed the Turkmens to not merely preserve, for many centuries, their traditional features, but also face the challenges of time with dignity. The Turkmen people are a direct heir to the ancient world civilizations. Throughout the centuries of their history brimming with dramas, triumphs, and tragedies, the Turkmens have accumulated a powerful spiritual potential and preserved their national identity.”<sup>28</sup>

Those who shaped the authoritarian regime and supplied it with an ideology created an image of the Turkmens as the most ancient nation. Stability was described as its hallmark, making every effort to revise the foundations of the Niyazov regime illegitimate.

<sup>25</sup> Z.S. Kogut, “History as a Battlefield. The Russian-Ukrainian Relations and Historical Consciousness in Ukraine Today,” in: *The Roots of Identity. Studies of New and Recent History of Ukraine*, Kiev, 2004, pp. 219, 231 (in Ukrainian).

<sup>26</sup> S. Niyazov, “Neytralitet—velichayshee dostizhenie nashego naroda.”

<sup>27</sup> “Vystuplenie Prezidenta Turkmenistana Saparmurata Niyazova na otkrytii Turkmenskogo natsional’ nogo tsentra kul’turnogo nasledia ‘Miras,’” 12 February, 2004.

<sup>28</sup> S. Niyazov, “Sokhranenie kul’turnogo nasledia: istoricheskiy dolg i gosudarstvennaia neobkhodimost’,” available at [[http://niyazov.sitcity.ru/ltxt\\_0409164936.phtml?p\\_ident=ltxt\\_0409164936.p\\_1810090732](http://niyazov.sitcity.ru/ltxt_0409164936.phtml?p_ident=ltxt_0409164936.p_1810090732)].

The results are obvious: the authoritarian regime outlived (with minor alterations) the country's first president.

In one of his speeches President Niyazov pointed out: "The Turkmenians who descended from Oguz Khan Turkmen, who lived 5 thousand years ago affected, in a very noticeable way, the emergence of civilizations on the vast territories stretching from India in the east to the Mediterranean in the west. They built the kingdoms of Anau, Altyndepe, Margush, the Parthian Kingdom, the empire of the Seljuk Turkmen, and the Kunyaurgench Turkmen state on their territory—over 70 states in all ... From the time of the Prophet Nukh (Noah), who entrusted the lands of Turkmenistan to his son Yafesin and his children, until the present, the Turkmen people have covered a long historical road."<sup>29</sup>

The fact that Turkmen academics relied on similar narratives shows that the national paradigm dominated the science of history in Turkmenistan.

In one of his openly apologetic articles, Ovez Gundogdyev, head of the department of archeology and ethnology of the State Institute of the Cultural Heritage of the Peoples of Turkmenistan, Central Asia, and the East under the President of Turkmenistan, insisted that the Scythians, Sarmatians, Parthians, and Huns were among the Turkmen tribes.<sup>30</sup>

British sociologist Anthony D. Smith believes that "historians figure prominently among its [nationalism's] creators and devotees; but they have also led the way in seeking to assess and understand the phenomenon of nationalism ... They provided the moral and intellectual foundation for an emergence of nationalism in their respective communities. Along with the philologists, the historians have in many ways furnished the rationale and charter of their aspirant nations."<sup>31</sup>

In his other works, Gundogdyev listed the Tokhars<sup>32</sup> and the Alans<sup>33</sup> among the Turkmen tribes, even though their Indo-European origins are not questioned by the academic circles in Europe and Russia.

These ideas, accepted at the government level and sanctioned by the political elite, show that today the primordial paradigm dominates Turkmen historiography and academic and political vocabulary as a whole.

This situation is not unique—it is also typical of other post-Soviet states, which is confirmed by Ukrainian historian Ya. Gritsak, who has written: "The current domination of the national paradigm in historical works can only be likened to the domination of the positivist paradigm of Leopold Ranke's type."<sup>34</sup>

Ovez Gundogdyev, in turn, has written: "The Tivertsy, likewise, were a Turkmen tribe, while Kievan Rus was one of the Turkmen states that went on functioning thanks to the 'Oguz-Turkmen army'."<sup>35</sup>

Victor Shnirelman has written that Gundogdyev's works "found a place for the Turkic-speaking peoples in the earliest history of mankind, something which orthodox science had failed to do."<sup>36</sup>

<sup>29</sup> "Otryvki iz vystuplenia Prezidenta Turkmenistana Saparmurata Niyazova na X sovместnom zasedanii Gosudarstvennogo Soveta stareyshin Turkmenistana, Khalk Maslakhaty i Obschenatsional'nogo dvizhenia 'Galkynysh,'" 18 February, 2001.

<sup>30</sup> See: O. Gundogdyev, "Razmyshlenia turkmenskogo istorika o glubinnikh korniakh neytraliteta."

<sup>31</sup> A.D. Smith, *Myths and Memories of the Nation*, Oxford University Press, 2002, p. 29.

<sup>32</sup> See: O. Gundogdyev, "Turkmenistan i Egipet: sviaz' narodov," available at [[http://turkmenhistory.blogspot.com/2005/05/blog-post\\_12.html](http://turkmenhistory.blogspot.com/2005/05/blog-post_12.html)].

<sup>33</sup> See: O. Gundogdyev, "'Besstrashny lev,' sultan Beybars," available at [<http://turkmenhistory.blogspot.com/2005/09/blog-post.html>].

<sup>34</sup> Ya. Gritsak, "Ukrainskaia istoriografia. 1991-2001. Desiatiletie peremen," *Ab Imperio*, No. 2, 2003, p. 444.

<sup>35</sup> O. Gundogdyev, "Turkmenskiy sled v drevnerusskoy toponimike," available at [<http://turkmenhistory.narod.ru/gund-toponomy.html>].

<sup>36</sup> V. Shnirelman, "Simvolicheskoe proshloe. Bor'ba za predkov v Tsentral'noy Azii," available at [<http://magazines.russ.ru/nz/2009/4/sh8-pr.html>].



This and similar “historical” conceptions play an important role in the development of the present-day Turkmen nationalism.

Andrei Cusco and Viktor Taki from Moldova have pointed out that this function is typical of nationalism as a whole: “At all times, history has been used to add legitimacy to political processes and contexts ... it has become an important element of all sorts of national projects since the creation of identity is one of its functions.”<sup>37</sup>

In a rush to demonstrate that the Turkmen are a state-forming nation, the nationalists, always on the look-out for adequate evidence, are not alien to describing some of the ancient states as Turkmen. If the non-Turkmen origins of great civilizations are too obvious to be contended, they look for, and find, traces of progressive influence of the ancient Turkmen tribes.

The Turkmen nationalist-minded historians proved unable to completely Turkmen-ize the history of China; they insist, however, that in 231 B.C. China was united into a single state thanks to the efforts of ... Turkic (Turkmen) warriors.<sup>38</sup>

D. Usmanova from Tatarstan has emphasized that any national history is “inevitably dominated by ethnocentrism of sorts.”<sup>39</sup>

The ethnocentrist version of the national imagination probably explains why historians in Turkmenistan use the terms “Turks” and “Turkmen” (which circulate freely in academic writings) as synonyms.

This and similar theories which contend the Indo-European origins of the Scythians and other ancient tribes and which today are highly popular in Turkmenistan speak of the plummeting level of historical studies in the republic.

## The Turkmen Version of (Pan-)Turkism

The Turkmen nationalistic-minded intellectuals engaged in mythologizing and nationalizing history spare no effort to find evidence of the fact that even if people of Ancient Egypt cannot be counted as ancestors of the Turkmen, they at least had close contacts with the proto-Turkmen tribes.<sup>40</sup>

Victor Shnirelman of Russia who has commented on these and similar “historical” facts born by the nationalist imagination of certain post-Soviet leaders deemed it necessary to point out that “in the epoch of nationalism, nations were the main subjects of history; the primordial approach invests them with extremely stable cultural characteristics. In this way, they are, wittingly or unwittingly, identified with ethnic groups, the roots of which are lost in hoary antiquity.”<sup>41</sup>

These historical constructs are not random creations; they are used to underpin the Turkmen’s political identity and emphasize that they belong to great state and political traditions.

According to the devotees of the official, nationalized, and ethnocentric version of the history of the Turkmen, “in the 11th century our ancestors created a Great Turkmen Seljuk Empire on the lands of Horezm, Horasan, Afghanistan, Iran, Azerbaijan, parts of Armenia and Georgia, Iraq, Syria, and

<sup>37</sup> A. Cusco, V. Taki, “‘Kto my?’ Istoricheskiy vybor: rumynskaia natsia ili moldavskaia gosudarstvennost’,” *Ab Imperio*, No. 1, 2003, p. 485.

<sup>38</sup> See: O. Gundogdyev, “Turkmeno-kitayskie sviazi: vzgliad skvoz’ tysiacheletia,” available at [<http://turkmenhistory.blogspot.com/2006/05/blog-post.html>].

<sup>39</sup> D. Usmanova, “Sozdavaia natsional’nuu istoriu tatar: istoriograficheskie i intellektual’nye debaty na rubezhe vekov,” *Ab Imperio*, No. 3, 2003, p. 337.

<sup>40</sup> See: O. Gundogdyev, “Turkmenistan i Egipet: sviaz’ narodov.”

<sup>41</sup> V.A. Shnirelman, *Voyny pamiati. Mify, indentichnost’ i politika v Zakavkazie*, Moscow, 2003, p. 18.

Palestine ... foreign authors wrote favorably of the rulers of the Turkmen states Akgoyunly and Garagoyunly, the Turkmen-Ottoman Empire, and the Delhi Sultanate ... the Turkmens stopped the slaughter among sects in Muslim Asia and stood firm to protect the people of the Orient against the onslaught of the Crusaders.”<sup>42</sup>

President Niyazov deliberately built an image of the ancient Turkmens (or rather the Turks, of which his nation was part) as the founders of the most advanced and dynamic societies: “In Antiquity and the Middle Ages, the Turkmen states flourished and progressed because they were open to the world and devoted to the never-ending dialogue with all other countries and peoples.”<sup>43</sup>

For Niyazov, Turkism was Turkmen-centric, therefore he went to every length to associate the most important pages of the history of the Turkic world with the Turkmens: “The borders of the Turkmen state of the Seljuks went from the Chinese Wall to Egypt, Asia Minor, and the Caucasus. The Seljuks descended from the Turkmen tribe of the Kynyks ... in the 14th-19th centuries, the western descendants of the Seljuk Turkmens founded a large state in Turkey ... they all were Turkmens. We are proud of them. Our Turkmens came into being under Oguz Khan, their numbers increased under Gorkut Ata; they set up their states across the world. They fought to defend their land and their Islamic religion. In this way the Turkmen nations migrated across the world.”<sup>44</sup>

This was obviously an attempt to replace Turkey as the leader of the Turkic world with Turkmenistan.

However, the highly specific nature of the political regime of Niyazov and his heirs keeps these efforts at the margins. To a great extent, what the architects of the new intellectual expanse are doing in Turkmenistan brings to mind the East European nationalists of the 19th century who, being practically totally ignorant of what academic science had to say about the past of their nations, consciously and deliberately built ethnocentric versions of the past to legitimize the political processes of their time.

The republic’s political leaders created the image of a nation that fell victim to the intrigues of its neighbors: “In the last eight centuries, being drawn into thousands of wars, the Turkmens were exposed to all sorts of privations and cruelties of internecine wars. For eight centuries, they remained surrounded by close and far-away states which, always loyal to the ‘divide and rule’ principle, disunited the Turkmen tribes and drew them into big and small wars.”<sup>45</sup>

This is an attempt to stir up nationalist and historical imagination to channel it in the direction which the political elite find most desirable.

This explains why the “protest” narratives typical of the Soviet period were removed from the historical discourse at a relatively early stage—they were intended to describe the Turkmens’ fight against the unfair (according to the ideologists of Soviet times) power.

I have written above that President Niyazov was fond of historical subjects: “After gaining their independence in 1991, the Turkmen people, one of the oldest Turkic nations with over five millennia of triumphs and losses behind it, have entered a new era of genuine revival of independent Turkmen statehood; the nation of one of the most ancient and one of the richest cultures will return to the world arena after many centuries of non-existence.”<sup>46</sup>

<sup>42</sup> O. Gundogdyev, “Razmyshlenia turkmenskogo istorika o glubinykh korniakh neytraliteta.”

<sup>43</sup> “Neytralitet Turkmenistana,” Speech of Saparmurat Niyazov in Front of Turkmen Students, 1 December, 2000.

<sup>44</sup> “Otryvki iz vystuplenia Prezidenta Turkmenistana Saparmurata Niyazova na X sovmetstnom zasedanii Gosudarstvennogo Soveta stareyshin Turkmenistana, Khalk Maslakhaty i Obshchenatsional’nogo dvizhenia ‘Galkynysh,’” 18 February, 2001.

<sup>45</sup> S. Niyazov, “Nekotorye mysli, kotorye mne zakhotelos’ vyskazat’ o strukture nezavisimogo neytral’nogo Turkmenского gosudarstva.”

<sup>46</sup> S. Niyazov, “Strategicheskoe partnerstvo vo imia idealov mira i gumanizma,” available at [[http://niyazov.sitecity.ru/lttext\\_0409164936.phtml?p\\_ident=lttext\\_0409164936.p\\_2508120239](http://niyazov.sitecity.ru/lttext_0409164936.phtml?p_ident=lttext_0409164936.p_2508120239)]

The issues related to the history of the state and the political experience of the Turkmen states came to the fore in independent Turkmenistan.

President Niyazov said in particular: "The history of the Turkmen people, which can be described as the history of a state-forming nation brimming with unrivaled spiritual experience, is very illustrative. The contrasts of its epochs provide a graphic idea of the role and significance of the state in the progress of human civilization. Turkmen history has imbibed the experience of the nation that knew periods of flourishing statehoods and their complete collapse and even nearly complete oblivion of the national spirit."<sup>47</sup>

The Turkmen elite willingly accepted these narratives: they wanted to present the nation as a political community. On the other hand, while in the Turkmen S.S.R. history was, to a great extent, ideologically dominated, in independent Turkmenistan the historical accents shifted toward national history: history became mainly the national history of the Turkmen.

### *Conclusion:* *What is in Store for the Political Regime in Turkmenistan?*

Not much changed in the political discourse in post-Niyazov Turkmenistan: the regime remained as authoritarian as ever even though it became more open to the world.

This trend became obvious in the latter half of the 2000s when the number of Turkmen students at Russian universities increased. Young Turkmen prefer economics, technical, engineering, and medical professions for the simple reason that the post-Soviet East needs them to look like developed countries.

Exposed, to a certain extent, to Russian culture (a regional variant of European culture), the Central Asian students at Russian universities will be "Europeans" in their corresponding republics.

The Central Asian states are willing to embrace the Russian and European economic experience and technical know-how while politics are kept strictly apart from the Western trends and traditions.

The post-Soviet political transformations in Central Asia, which replaced ideological with national authoritarianism, caused a lot of pain.

The Central Asian Soviet successor-states inherited some of the Soviet political institutions, while the new political structures came into being by necessity; they had to legitimize or reproduce the authoritarian political regimes. The role of Central Asian nationalisms has changed.

As distinct from their East European colleagues, the local nationalistic-minded intellectuals were kept away from building the new political regime. Institutionalized political independence bred political authoritarianism.

In Turkmenistan, the political leader is the central and integrating figure. The Central Asian presidents have no political charisma to speak of; they have, instead, the state machine of administration and coercion inherited from the Soviet past and adjusted to the independent present.

The president, as the father of the nation, the architect of the political expanse, and the main nationalist theoretician, perfectly fits the Central Asian context.

Today, little can be said about possible democratization in Central Asia in the near future; the political elites will retain their importance in the nationalistic contexts of their respective countries,

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<sup>47</sup> S. Niyazov, "Nekotorye mysli, kotorye mne zakhotelos' vyskazat' o strukture nezavisimogo neytral'nogo Turkmen'skogo gosudarstva."

while the leaders (the presidents) will remain intermediaries of sorts between the top crust and the masses. They will use the language of nationalism (either political or ethnic) easily understood and willingly accepted by the people.

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