

## Media as a Tool for Regime Stability and Personality Cult-Building in Turkmenistan

### Introduction

With modern interest turning towards ‘Fake News’ and the influence of social media over political ideals, it is easy to understand the media’s role in shaping public values and beliefs.

While most countries tout ostensible promises to freedom of the press as proof of their democratic ideals, many modern states retain rigid control over their media in an effort to shape official narratives of events and prevent criticism of their regimes. Through censoring and filtering the information the public has access to, these countries ensure the stability of their often-authoritarian governments, creating a common national identity, impairing the public’s ability to form dissenting political opinions, and in many cases helping bolster the glorification of a country’s leader.

In Turkmenistan, this glorification has culminated in the creation of a cult of personality surrounding the current president, who is commended daily by the state’s broadcast and print media. However, Turkmenistan’s president Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov did not create this system of media control, and is instead benefitting from deeply entrenched, Soviet-era and post-independence media policies that were enacted to ensure regime stability and nation-building in Central Asia. Beginning as a region of ethnically similar albeit warring tribes, Turkmenistan was unified through various Soviet practices, especially the tight control of media narratives. This paper argues that the Soviet-influenced media landscape has since become a driving force in post-independence regime stability, particularly through the creation of cults of personality to glorify Presidents Saparmurat Niyazov and Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov.

This paper will address how and why media censorship policies influenced the stability of modern Turkmenistan and helped entrench the cults of personality created by its two post-

independence leaders. While many scholarly texts seek separately to outline how Turkmenistan's tribal past influences its modern politics, discuss the dynamics of Soviet Turkmenistan media, and describe the influence of the USSR on modern Turkmen leaders, this paper will integrate these subjects into a comprehensive narrative on the ways Soviet methods of nation-building through language and media policies influenced the personality cults surrounding Presidents Niyazov and Berdymukhamedov.

The first section of this paper discusses the historically tribal nature of what is now Turkmenistan before outlining the period of Soviet control over the region. The paper will emphasize the media policies that Lenin and Gorbachev enacted which remain prevalent today. Then, it will transition into a discussion on the ways President Niyazov utilized or abandoned these Soviet policies to reinforce the government's strict censorship over the media and the generation of his personality cult. The next sections of this paper discuss the transfer of power to President Berdymukhamedov before describing his unique and institutionalized approach to media control and cult-building. Finally, this paper concludes by remarking on how this system of media control limits political participation, mentioning possible future implications of this control as Berdymukhamedov grooms his son Serdar to succeed him.

### **History of Pre-Soviet Turkmenistan and the Soviet Press**

Prior to Russian control over much of Central Asia, the region was occupied by warring, nomadic tribes that claimed no true national identity. In such a society there was less emphasis on international political standards, as people thought about their families and bringing peace to their tribes rather than their individual rights as enforced by government institutions.<sup>1</sup> While people in the region were united to a degree by their shared Islamic faith and their claims to a

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<sup>1</sup> Oguljamal Yazliyeva, "Dynamics of the Media System in Post-Soviet Turkmenistan," *Journal of Nationalism, Memory & Language Politics* 14, no. 1 (2020): 96, <https://doi.org/10.2478/jnmlp-2020-0002>.

common ancestor, Central Asia's population had been divided into several tribal groups for hundreds of years, with each of these tribes believing different legends, having unique histories, and speaking varying dialects.<sup>2</sup> Additionally, these tribal groups—especially the Tekes, Yomuts, and Göklengs—were frequently at war with one another, as Teke migration pushed most other tribal groups off their native lands.<sup>3</sup> Thus, when Russia conquered Central Asia in the late-nineteenth century, it first had to solve the entrenched feuds between tribal groups in the region. As Russian economic and military elites colonized what would become Turkmenistan, they brought with them their ideas on statehood and nation-building. In addition to policies that supported standardization of a national Turkmen language, mass educational systems, and the establishment of local political elites, the Russian conquerors also brought the first printing presses to the region.<sup>4</sup> Since Central Asia had no experience with democratic journalism and true freedom of the press, media policies in tsarist Russia—and later the Soviet Union—had an immense impact on the historical and current media practices in Turkmenistan.

Russian colonizers established printing presses within Central Asia in part because newspapers could play a central role in helping build national identity. In his book *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson establishes that print media such as books and newspapers are valuable nation-building tools since they enable the creation of mass ceremonies and waves of simultaneous consumption. Anderson argues that, since each individual sitting down to read the paper knows thousands of others are doing the same, it creates a sense of communal identity which makes it possible for “rapidly growing numbers of people to think about themselves, and

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<sup>2</sup> Adrienne Lynn Edgar, *Tribal Nation: The Making of Soviet Turkmenistan* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 1.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>4</sup> Richard Shafer, “Soviet Foundations of the Post-Independence Press in Central Asia,” in *After Czars and Commissars: Journalism in Authoritarian Post-Soviet Central Asia*, eds. Eric Freedman and Richard Shafer (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2011), 20.

to relate themselves to others, in profoundly new ways.”<sup>5</sup> Thus, the spread of periodicals through Central Asia established a regular routine which unified people from various Turkmen tribes. Additionally, since these newspapers were printed in a standardized Turkmen language, they helped unite the various tribes under a common vernacular and writing system. As Anderson argues, this practice of promoting a shared written language helps with nation- and identity-building, since people who read media in a certain language, “become aware of the hundreds of thousands, even millions, of people in their particular language-field, and at the same time that *only those* hundreds of thousands, or millions, so belonged.”<sup>6</sup> Thus, despite the people’s differing tribal histories, these newspapers provided people in Turkmenistan with a lens through which they could view contemporary events and relate to people from different tribes, establishing an important basis for what would become the modern Turkmen identity.

Understanding that the media was a valuable tool for uniting a country around an identity or political movement, as early as 1901 Vladimir Lenin announced his desire to create press controls that would help support his political aspirations. In an article for *Iskra*, Lenin argued in favor of founding an “All-Russian political newspaper,” through which the Social Democrats might create “systematic, all-round propaganda and agitation,” for their movement.<sup>7</sup> Thus, Lenin understood from early in his political career that a tightly regulated newspaper would help his political party spread its ideas to the Russian people. He also argued that such a paper might provide an “effective means for the revolutionary party to influence” the public’s beliefs and political movements, encouraging them to become more politically conscious and engage in

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<sup>5</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 2006), 36.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>7</sup> Vladimir Lenin, “Where to Begin,” in *Lenin’s Collected Works* (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1961), 17.

politics.<sup>8</sup> While this proposed Social Democratic newspaper might not have directly affected people and nation-building in Turkmenistan, it does explain Lenin's views on the power of media in shaping public opinion and creating the conditions for a regime change. Thus, it justifies why, after the 1917 revolution when Lenin consolidated his power, he sought to censor the press, creating a precedent of media censorship that has carried into present-day Turkmenistan.

Tangible Soviet censorship of the press began almost immediately after Lenin's government came to power. In 1917, the Council of People's Commissars passed the *Decree on the Press*, a law which permitted the government to suppress any publication which called for "resistance or insubordination to the Workers' and Peasants' Government," attempted to "sow sedition through demonstrably slanderous distortion of facts," or inspired criminal actions.<sup>9</sup> As justification for his strict control of the media, Lenin compared the free press to a weapon, stating that, "It is no less dangerous than bombs and machine guns."<sup>10</sup> While the censorship of the free press was written to be a temporary measure, the Soviet media was never truly freed. In the 1920s Soviet control of Central Asian media was looser, with intellectuals in the region "often [expressing] views that differed substantially from those of the authorities in Moscow" in their local newspapers. However, it soon became practice that journalists could only publish their own opinions and interpretations of political events if they did not contradict the views of the party at large.<sup>11</sup> By the end of the 1920s, Central Asian media was coopted to advance the political views of the Communist Party, establishing a system for subsequent decades by which

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>9</sup> Council of People's Commissars, *Decree on the Press*, Moscow: Council of People's Commissars, 1917. <http://soviethistory.msu.edu/1917-2/organs-of-the-press/organs-of-the-press-texts/decrees-on-the-press/>.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Edgar, *Tribal Nation*, 5.

the government controlled all official narratives, and once-free journalists lived in fear of retribution if they contradicted the party.

Despite its violation of international norms, this media control served to unite disparate movements in the Turkmen Soviet Socialist Republic, particularly as the government in Moscow encouraged the formation of standardized Turkmen-language papers and fostered the creation of politically aware and highly educated classes.<sup>12</sup> As stated before, the establishment of periodicals in a common language was and is an essential component of nation-building that united the Turkmen people with others whom they may have never met but whom shared their regional identity and vernacular. This became especially true in the 1930s and 1940s—when Stalin made the use of the Cyrillic alphabet mandatory in the Soviet Union—since this change required people in Turkmenistan to identify with others under Stalin’s leadership.<sup>13</sup>

Additionally, censoring the press in Soviet Turkmenistan unified the narrative presented by the media, further helping to unite the people as they received the same information and likely held similar political beliefs. Interestingly, however, during the Soviet period people in Turkmenistan were banned from acknowledging that the Turkmen people had written before the Bolshevik revolution, despite the country’s literary history.<sup>14</sup> Thus, while Soviet-era policies were valuable to regime stability in Turkmenistan since they helped build a national identity, they also mandated the prevalence of Bolshevik and Soviet tradition in Turkmen literary tradition, since Turkmenistan’s pre-Soviet authors were forcibly forgotten.

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>13</sup> Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 46.

<sup>14</sup> Ak Welsapar, “Shadowing the Golden Age of Soviet Censorship: The Turkmen Author Discusses Those Who Got in Bed with the Old Regime, and What’s Happening Now,” *Index on Censorship* 49, no. 1 (April 2020): 42. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0306422020917612>.

As the Soviet Union opened up to democratic policies such as freedom of the press during its period of *glasnost*, Mikhail Gorbachev sent a directive to Central Asian SSR governments, instructing them to create television and radio programs that would promote political participation and freedom of expression among people in the region.<sup>15</sup> While this instruction led to the creation of the television program “Good Evening, Ashgabat,” which was only mildly censored, the channel was quickly discontinued after the newly appointed Turkmen president Saparmurat Niyazov sought tighter control over the media. Rather than opening Turkmenistan to foreign and democratic influences as the former Soviet Union attempted to do, Niyazov reverted to earlier policies of strict media control, allowing him to both ensure a smooth transition to power and to generate a cult of personality surrounding him and his family. The next section of this paper will examine how Niyazov’s media policies helped curb tribal factionalism and secure the stability of his regime.

### **The Media Under President Niyazov**

Saparmurat Niyazov held positions of power within Turkmenistan since 1985, just over five years before the collapse of the Soviet Union. Prior to ascending to the presidency, he served as part of the Politburo of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, as Secretary of the Communist Party of Turkmenistan, and as president of the Supreme Council of the Turkmen SSR. When Turkmenistan gained its independence in October 1991, Niyazov took over in the role of president. Though Turkmenistan had developed a national identity throughout its time as a Soviet republic, it maintained some elements of its tribal nature, specifically patrimonialism and an emphasis on family ties. As part of his attempt to unite tribal groups under one tribal ‘family,’ ensure the stability of his regime, and generate reverence for himself as a

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<sup>15</sup> Yazliyeva, “Dynamics of the Media System,” 99.

leader, Niyazov enacted a series of laws and policies on the media, culminating in him giving himself the title of “Father of All Print Media.” This section will outline Niyazov’s personality cult, how it reflects the tribal identity of Turkmenistan, and how he has used the censored media to spread positive interpretations of the state and his self.

In their article “A Tale of Two Presidents,” Abel Polese and Slavomir Horák establish that Niyazov’s personality cult would not have reached the extent it did, “without the background of Soviet political culture, based on hierarchy, devotion, and sycophantism within the party.”<sup>16</sup> Thus, Soviet-era controls and many years under strong-man leadership ensured that the Turkmen people were willing to follow an authoritarian leader. However, to ensure that his regime remained stable and the country’s tribal groups stayed united under the newly formed country, Niyazov quickly went about establishing a cult of personality for himself. Shortly after Niyazov’s rise to power, state historians were “charged with the task of matching and embedding, to the maximum possible extent, the personal history of the president and his family with the history of the Turkmen nation...They had to find real or symbolic connections between President Niyazov and legendary Turkmen heroes.”<sup>17</sup> By inserting his family into Turkmenistan’s shared history, Niyazov was able to take on an air of ‘quasi-holiness,’ simultaneously glorifying himself for being related to great historical figures and for uniting the Turkmen people, since they learned constantly of Niyazov’s successes and felt their ruler was worthy of supporting.<sup>18</sup> Additionally, he continued to entrench his regime in Turkmenistan’s tribal history by encouraging tribal practices of respecting elders and tribe leaders, as this helped

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<sup>16</sup> Abel Polese and Slavomir Horák, “A Tale of Two Presidents: Personality Cult and Symbolic Nation-Building in Turkmenistan,” *Nationalities Papers* 43, no. 3 (2015): 465, <https://doi-org.unr.idm.oclc.org/10.1080/00905992.2015.1028913>.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 462.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 458.



create a political elite that was loyal to him rather than the state at large. However, he excluded other tribal practices that did not enforce his autocratic rule. For example, after a 1994 referendum and removal of his term limit in 1999, Niyazov was permitted to remain president for the rest of his life, showing a departure from the Turkmen tribal policy of freely electing their *khans*, or leaders.<sup>19</sup>

As President Niyazov remained in power, his cult of personality took on a number of unique elements. In 1993 he gave himself the title of “Turkmenbashi,” or “Father of All Turkmen.” This provides further evidence of Niyazov’s attempts to use his personality cult to unite the people and ensure regime stability, since naming himself father of *all* Turkmen people inspired them to set aside tribal differences and support Niyazov. However, many aspects of his personality cult were less unifying, marking a shift towards simple glorification after his regime was consolidated. At the end of the twentieth century, Niyazov spent almost half of the country’s gross domestic product building the Neutrality Arch, a giant statue that depicted a figure of Niyazov, cast in gold, which followed the arc of the sun throughout the day. He temporarily encouraged doctors to swear loyalty to him rather than take the Hippocratic oath. His birthday was celebrated yearly as “National Flag Day.” In 2002, he passed a law to rename the months and days of the week after figures in his family, and his book, the *Ruhnama*, or ‘Book of the Soul,’ was mandatory teaching in schools. Additionally, a mosque was built in his hometown of Gypjak depicting the words of the *Ruhnama* along with scriptures in the Quran, directly contradicting Islamic teachings.<sup>20</sup> All of these examples show how his cult of personality

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<sup>19</sup> Abel Polese et al., “Strategies of Legitimization in Central Asia: Regime Durability in Turkmenistan,” *Contemporary Politics* 23, no. 4 (2017): 433, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13569775.2017.1331391>.

<sup>20</sup> Polese and Horák, “A Tale of Two Presidents,” 463.

extended to an absurd degree, unmatched by many other leaders in history, to the point that it was no longer a tool for unification, but rather became a strategy for his own glorification.

However, the real display of his cult-building was in the media, as Niyazov sought to tightly control all public narratives of the government and state events. This media control ensured that Niyazov continued to be revered by the people and the press, and it united the country under a shared narrative on politics and society. Following a celebration of Turkmenistan's independence, the front page of the Russian-language daily newspaper *Neytral'nyi Turkmenistan* began publishing regular photos of people holding banners stating “*Khalk, Vatan, Turkmenbashi*, (People, Homeland, Turkmenbashi),” displaying the media's systematic attempts to spread Niyazov's cult of personality through his self-styled moniker and connect his personal propaganda to that of the country.<sup>21</sup> Shortly thereafter, there was a decisive shift from reporting on Soviet affairs to promoting President Niyazov, his achievements, and his ancestry.<sup>22</sup> Both of these media policies ensured the people would support the president and encouraged a new national identity within the country.

Examining just the front page of the *Neytral'nyi Turkmenistan*, one of the primary daily papers in Turkmenistan, provides some insight into the ways the media climate changed from reporting the news to glorifying Niyazov's cult of personality. The paper's frontispiece transitioned a number of times, losing Soviet symbols in late 1992, adding the Turkmen coat of arms soon after, the Turkmen flag and quotes from Turkmenistan's national poet Magtymguly between 1993 and 1994, and a slogan about Turkmenistan's neutrality and Niyazov's role as the

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<sup>21</sup> Luca Anceschi, “Reinforcing Authoritarianism through Media Control: The Case of Post-Soviet Turkmenistan,” in *After Czars and Commissars: Journalism in Authoritarian Post-Soviet Central Asia*, eds. Eric Freedman and Richard Shafer (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2011), 65.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 66.

paper's founder in late 1995.<sup>23</sup> Additionally, after 1993 Niyazov's picture was printed on the front page of nearly every edition of the paper, and during 1994 the paper regularly featured the slogan "*Slovo Prezidenta—zakon* (The word of the president is the law)."<sup>24</sup> Thus, simply examining this one popular media source reveals a decisive shift within the first years of Niyazov's presidency, from Soviet narratives, to post-independence nationalism, to symbolic displays supporting Niyazov's cult of personality. Additionally, this shift was valuable to post-independence nation building, as it promoted a vision of a new, unified Turkmenistan that was not held together simply through Soviet rule.

It is easy to cast journalists in a negative light for not upholding Western ideas of journalistic integrity during the period under Niyazov's regime. However, journalists were commonly coerced into supporting Niyazov's cult of personality and official narratives. Many of the journalists who reported during this time had worked while Turkmenistan was a Soviet republic, meaning their careers were shadowed with the understanding that at any time they could be punished by the government for adversarial articles or broadcasts. Throughout this period, journalists in Turkmenistan were frequently harassed, threatened, or physically harmed, and reporting in a way that was displeasing to the leadership could result in sanctions, license revocation, imprisonment, or exile. Thus, many journalists felt forced into supporting Niyazov's narrative, and, "found it difficult to transition from the reactionary and defensive practices necessary for survival under a Soviet press system that rewarded loyalty and conformity."<sup>25</sup> Alternatively, younger reporters grew up during the "generation of *Ruhnama*," and may

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 67-68.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 70.

<sup>25</sup> Eric Freedman, "Theoretical Foundations for Researching the Roles of Press in Today's Central Asia," in *After Czars and Commissars: Journalism in Authoritarian Post-Soviet Central Asia*, eds. Eric Freedman and Richard Shafer (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2011), 12.

genuinely have supported the Turkmen government's censorship and cult-building practices due to what some scholars call brainwashing.<sup>26</sup> Thus, many Turkmen journalists were justified in their support for Niyazov's regime, either because the narrative they presented was the only truth they knew or because publicly expressing their opposition may have resulted in economic difficulties or threats to themselves and their families.

One idiosyncratic element of Niyazov's cult of personality is how he attempted to generate international recognition while ensuring Turkmenistan's isolation within global politics. Niyazov's main foreign policy agenda was "Positive Neutrality," which centered on a belief that, "So long as [Turkmenistan] could provide cheap gas that the Russian Federation could re-sell at much greater prices to its European neighbours he could expect the Kremlin's protection, and Western indifference to his regime's imperfections."<sup>27</sup> Thus, Niyazov believed that isolating his country would ensure his sovereignty and prevent international intervention in the country on the grounds of human rights concerns. However, he also demonstrated some desire for international recognition, publishing editions of his book the *Ruhnama* in various languages. While some argue that, "these foreign language publications were designed to impress people in Turkmenistan rather than to spread knowledge of the president's work abroad," it remains true that he used his intellectual work to create a legacy he hoped would last after his death and would ensure his recognition by foreigners.<sup>28</sup>

Upon his death in 2006, Niyazov had successfully used the media to bolster his cult of personality. He had created a system in which all media was state controlled, and journalists lived in near-constant fear of reporting the truth due to heavy surveillance by government forces.

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<sup>26</sup> Yazliyeva, "Dynamics of the Media System," 108.

<sup>27</sup> Polese et al., "Strategies of Legitimization," 434.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 434.

These policies were effective in moving the country away from its Soviet identity, uniting the people under a unique Turkmen identity, and reinforcing the idea of Niyazov as the country's founder and rightful leader. Thus, Niyazov, the self-declared 'Founder of all Print Media,' drew upon tribal and Soviet models of legitimization and media control to encourage Turkmen nationalism, regime stability, and a reverence for his personality among the Turkmen people.

### **Political Transition and Cult-Building Under Berdymukhamedov**

In December 2006, Saparmurat Niyazov died of a heart attack, leaving Turkmenistan to elect a new president. Per the Turkmen Constitution, the interim president should have been Parliamentary Speaker Ovezgeldy Ataev.<sup>29</sup> However, a self-appointed Security Council abandoned the constitutional path of succession in favor of appointing Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov, Niyazov's former dentist and then-Deputy Prime Minister, as interim president. Following his appointment, Berdymukhamedov launched a criminal investigation against Ataev, and he had the Turkmen Constitution amended to legitimize his succession and candidacy for President of Turkmenistan—a position he won by apparent popular vote in February 2007. During this time, many onlookers expected a battle for power as opposition groups, Niyazov's relatives in exile, and other members of the government, vied for the presidency. However, Berdymukhamedov's transition into power was largely peaceful, and he has remained the leader of a relatively stable regime in the years since. This section will trace the government policies and media promotion of Berdymukhamedov's personality cult immediately after his appointment to display how these factors ensured his smooth rise to power and the longevity of his regime.

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<sup>29</sup> David Stern, "Central Asia Braces for a Power Struggle in Turkmenistan." *Tribune Content Agency*, December 23, 2006, <https://unr.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://www-proquest-com.unr.idm.oclc.org/docview/456505183?accountid=452>.

A primary factor contributing to the peaceful transition of power between Niyazov and Berdymukhamedov was Niyazov's tendency to appoint upper-level ministers who were politically weak.<sup>30</sup> For example, during his 15 years as president Niyazov removed 58 prime ministers from Turkmenistan's government.<sup>31</sup> Since most of the political elite identified with the historic Akhal-Teke tribe in Turkmenistan, this purging "facilitated the elevation of less important Akhal-Teke" such as Berdymukhamedov, whose selection "hinged not only from his politically necessary origins in the Western Akhal region but was also most likely determined by his proximity to Turkmenbashi."<sup>32</sup> This displays how tribal identities factored into the selection of the president and other high-level bureaucrats, implying the continued relevance of tribalism in Turkmen politics. Additionally, Niyazov had adopted a foreign policy of "Positive Neutrality," which Berdymukhamedov has in many ways maintained throughout his presidency. This policy—which involved near-total isolation of Turkmenistan while satisfying international demands through oil and natural gas exports—ensured that foreign powers did not intervene in the country during the transition of power. Therefore, Niyazov's actions in the late years of his presidency, in addition to the tribal history of Turkmenistan which ensured certain tribes formed the political elite, guaranteed that there were few challengers willing to oppose Berdymukhamedov when he sought power in 2006 and popular election in 2007.

Early in his presidency, Berdymukhamedov set about simultaneously dismantling Niyazov's cult of personality and building his own. Niyazov was mentioned with less frequency in state media, more radical elements of his personality cult such as his renaming the days of the

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Charles J. Sullivan, "Halk, Watan, Berdymukhammedov! Political Transition and Regime Continuity in Turkmenistan," *Regional Studies of Russia, Eastern Europe, and Central Asia* 5, no. 1 (2016): 42, <https://doi.org/10.1353/reg.2016.0007>.

<sup>32</sup> Polese et al., "Strategies of Legitimization," 435.

week were reverted, and his statues—most notably the Neutrality Arch—were moved out of the capital.<sup>33</sup> While Berdymukhamedov's cult of personality is less all-encompassing than Niyazov's was, he also began marketing himself as a strong-man leader. Since Niyazov's policies had been highly successful in uniting the Turkmen people and ensuring regime stability, Berdymukhamedov adopted similar elements for his own cult. For example, while Berdymukhamedov did not falsify ties between himself and great Turkmen historical figures, he did prop up his ancestors, depicting his father as an influential teacher and his great uncle as a skillful horse breeder.<sup>34</sup>

Later in his presidency, Berdymukhamedov began creating statues depicting himself and key elements of Turkmen history and culture, such as the most famous of his statues depicting him astride an Akhal-Teke horse, and a recently built statue honoring the Alabai dog. By promoting his personality cult through elements of Turkmen culture, Berdymukhamedov has further united the people around him as a leader whom they see as representing Turkmen values. Additionally, like Niyazov, Berdymukhamedov has established himself as the leading author and ideological power in Turkmenistan, having apparently written more than sixty books during his presidency.<sup>35</sup> The abundance of his writings has ensured that Berdymukhamedov is a major literary figure within Turkmenistan, furthering the influence of his personality cult and his ideologies among the Turkmen people. Therefore, since Niyazov had found success uniting the country around his cult of personality, Berdymukhamedov emulated this policy by attempting to tie his family into Turkmenistan's history, creating statues of himself, and creating an ideological legacy through literature.

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<sup>33</sup> Polese and Horák, "A Tale of Two Presidents," 463.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 465.

<sup>35</sup> Welsapar, "Shadowing the Golden Age," 41.

Though the international community looked with caution towards Turkmenistan during the transition of power between 2006 and 2007, the country experienced a smooth regime change between presidents Niyazov and Berdymukhamedov.<sup>36</sup> This is largely due to two factors: Niyazov-era policies of tribalism and ineffective political elites, and the generation of a cult of personality surrounding Berdymukhamedov. Another strategy which helped ensure the Turkmen government's stability during transition and to this day is media control, which will be discussed more in the next section.

### **Turkmen Media Since 2007**

Since Berdymukhamedov secured his power in the February 2007 presidential election, he has systematically used the media to consolidate his authority over the country and advance his cult of personality. He is a leader who does not hold a status as a founder of modern Turkmenistan, so he has sought to encourage his glorification through other means. One of these methods is a continuation of the media control set forth by the stability of the Turkmen leader's regime and the unification of the Turkmen people. Through methods such as state ownership, glorification of Berdymukhamedov, and legal action officially censoring modern media, the current government of Turkmenistan has ensured a system in which diverging political opinions are not represented in the mass media. This section will analyze how the media laws recently enacted by Berdymukhamedov have helped quell political unrest, spread his cult of personality, and establish a sense of Turkmen nationalism where the masses tend to support the regime.

Perhaps the greatest way Berdymukhamedov has influenced political narratives, promoted unity, and spread his cult of personality is through official censorship and restrictions of the media. As the country entered the new millennia, the Turkmen government took control of

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<sup>36</sup> Stern, "Central Asia."



the internet—making access to the web both expensive and slow—and blocked domestic access to social media platforms that could inform the citizenry about what is happening internationally. This has ensured that the internet could not become a site for discussion and criticism of the government. Only one in five Turkmen citizens have access to the internet, those who are caught bypassing the social media bans may be imprisoned for up to five years, and citizens fear accessing these sites while abroad because their family in Turkmenistan can be imprisoned in their stead.<sup>37</sup> All of these policies ensure that the Turkmen people only access news that has been filtered by the government, making the information they receive essentially government propaganda.

In addition to blocking social media sites, the government also strictly censors press and broadcast media. One of the most vital media controls adopted by the Turkmen government to limit the spread of oppositional news and encourage Berdymukhamedov's cult of personality is the policy of 'cross censorship.' Under this rule, all Turkmen media is subject to review both by the company that runs the paper or station—thus by one government agency since all the media companies are state-owned—and by the official ministry which oversees what is discussed within the article.<sup>38</sup> For example, an article published on a school event in the *Neytral'nyi Turkmenistan*, which is owned entirely by Turkmenistan's Cabinet of Ministers, would be censored both by the Cabinet of Ministers and the Ministry of Education. Additionally, all broadcast media is prerecorded, so clips can be censored if they do not present the proper narrative of events. Interestingly, the participants of television programs are often relatives of

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<sup>37</sup> Welsapar, "Shadowing the Golden Age," 41.

<sup>38</sup> Yazliyeva, "Dynamics of the Media System," 104.

show hosts, which further displays the historical significance of Turkmenistan's tribal history, since these family units and clans make up the modern intelligentsia class.<sup>39</sup>

Additionally, as it was under Niyazov, all national media within Turkmenistan is required to glorify the president and the regime. In 2018, the country passed a Law on TV and Radio Broadcasting, which contained many sentiments consistent with international norms and freedom of the press. However, the law was largely intended only to appease foreign onlookers with language such as an official ban on media censorship, because hidden in the law are clauses which assert that all media must promote “a positive image of Turkmenistan.”<sup>40</sup> This positive image encourages unity of the Turkmen people and support of the government, but it has ensured that Berdymukhamedov remains in power despite ‘democratic’ elections, and it created a society where the Turkmen people are restricted from understanding the scope of political problems within the country. Additionally, similar to the constant references to the “Turkmenbashi” under Niyazov’s regime, modern Turkmen media must regularly include Berdymukhamedov’s picture or video and mention his name; titles; slogans, such as the phrase “*Berkarar döwletimiziň bagtyýarlyk dowry* (Prosperous Era of Powerful State);” and the epithet, “*Hormatly Arkadagymyz* (Our dear Father Protector).”<sup>41</sup> All of these practices ensure that the Turkmen people are constantly barraged with information about how excellently Berdymukhamedov is running the country, which ensures regime stability and unites the people since there is little opportunity for popular political dissent.

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 106.

<sup>40</sup> “ЗАКОН ТУРКМЕНИСТАНА О телевидении и радиовещании,” [LAW OF TURKMENISTAN On Television and Radio Broadcasting], Turkmenistan Golden Age, January 13, 2018, <http://www.turkmenistan.gov.tm/?id=15419>.

<sup>41</sup> Yazliyeva, “Dynamics of the Media System,” 106.

In the context of this strict control of domestic media, it is necessary to understand how the media influences Berdymukhamedov's cult of personality on a global scale. While the domestic media targeted at the Turkmen people promotes Berdymukhamedov's status of grandeur, "translations of the Turkmen texts into the Russian and English languages are edited, in which the passages or phrases used for praising and glorifying the leader are removed."<sup>42</sup> This displays that the government understands their cult-building practices would not be popular among international audiences, and thus amends its news media to present a more democratic façade to the international community.

However, even as the Turkmen press seeks to hide Berdymukhamedov's cult of personality from foreign observers, opposition news sources in exile frequently use state-sponsored videos and statements by Berdymukhamedov to provide commentary on the situation in Turkmenistan. Due to the grandiose way in which he is presented in national media, many of these official videos take on an almost surreal quality, such as one which depicts Berdymukhamedov driving rings around the Darvaza Gas Crater, commonly called the 'Door to Hell.'<sup>43</sup> By slightly editing these official videos, opposition papers, especially *Chronicle of Turkmenistan*, have created media that provide satirical commentary about the situation in the country. According to one of the *Chronicle of Turkmenistan*'s editors, the virality of these videos is intended to bring global awareness to the absurdity and unnecessary violence of Berdymukhamedov's presidency.<sup>44</sup> Thus, media control within Turkmenistan has international implications, since the government wishes to present a less authoritarian image to foreign

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 107.

<sup>43</sup> "Turkmenistan: State TV Footage Shows Turkmen President's Vacation Activities," YouTube video, 3:30, "Ruptly," August 9, 2019, <https://youtu.be/12y5H9IyOvo>.

<sup>44</sup> Gianluca Mezzofiore, "Activists Are Trolling This Authoritarian Leader One Viral Video at a Time," *Mashable*, August 4, 2017, [https://mashable.com/2017/08/04/turkmenistan-viral-video-parody-trolling/?utm\\_cid=hp-n-2#KLInl7hEMOqM](https://mashable.com/2017/08/04/turkmenistan-viral-video-parody-trolling/?utm_cid=hp-n-2#KLInl7hEMOqM).

onlookers, while exiled opposition members exploit the president's state media appearances to comment on Turkmen media control, politics, and life.

Generally, while Turkmenistan's modern laws tout freedom of expression and the press, it remains true that the media system is highly censored, internet access is limited, and the state-controlled news consistently promotes Berdymukhamedov's cult of personality. These policies are useful in ensuring regime stability within the country, since a population which only hears one narrative is likely to remain united under and subservient to the government. Exiled journalists and broadcasters have sought to use the state's own media to show foreign observers the highly censored and often surrealist nature of Turkmenistan's news. However, this opposition media is not accessible within Turkmenistan, so it is unlikely to be effective in changing the political and media culture of the country.

## **Conclusion**

This essay discussed the historical roots of modern Turkmen media censorship and personality cult creation, with an emphasis on how tribalism and Soviet influences effected unification and nation-building. However, the research provided in this essay is valuable in understanding the possible future of Turkmenistan's political system, especially regarding presidential elections. As established in this paper, the Soviet-era standardization of Turkmenistan's language and the choice to print in the vernacular established, "a new form of imagined community, which in its basic morphology set the stage for the modern nation."<sup>45</sup> However, Turkmenistan's media practices were not only significant in state-building; they also provided a means for the country's two post-independence presidents to establish cults of personality that helped ensure regime stability.

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<sup>45</sup> Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 46.

These practices have implications for the country's political future, especially as Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov prepares for another—probably fixed—election in 2024 and potentially grooms his son, Serdar, to succeed him.<sup>46</sup> Within Turkmenistan, only one political narrative is available to the people through their media, so the people are inclined to believe that Berdymukhamedov has truly done great things for the country, and they may perhaps see a Berdymukhamedov dynasty in a positive light. Compare this situation in Turkmenistan to that in the United States, where popular media varies so widely in its tone that it has encouraged immense political polarization and near-hatred among groups of differing ideologies. In this context, it is easy to see how, if the media promoted a single narrative of events as Turkmenistan's censored media does, it could, for better or worse, be a powerful factor in national unification rather than division.

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<sup>46</sup> Polese et al. "Strategies of Legitimization." 439.

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