

Turkmenistan Needs to Choose its Friends Carefully

By [Global Research](#)

Region: [Russia and FSU](#)

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As the February 11 presidential election in Turkmenistan draws close, there is little doubt who will win, but considerable uncertainty about what will happen next. Will Gurbanguly Berdymuhammedov really live up to his pledges to reform education, health and pensions and give his people greater opportunities to travel and access information, or will he revert to the tough style of the man he replaces, the late Saparmurat Niazov?

On the foreign policy front, most observers agree Russia will remain Turkmenistan's key partner, not least because it buys most of the country's natural gas. But Turkmenistan's proximity to Iran is likely to give it some role to play - albeit unwillingly - in the confrontation between Washington and Tehran.

At a London briefing held by the Institute for War and Peace Reporting on January 19 to mark the launch of a new report, Turkmenistan: What Chance of a Thaw?, there was consensus among the invited speakers that Russia remains a major player, but opinion differed on whether this is the only relationship that really matters to Turkmenistan.

Shohrat Kadyrov, an expert on Turkmen politics living in Norway, is sceptical that a transition he describes as a "palace revolution" will make the country more independent of Moscow, or that the relationship will help Turkmenistan become a better place.

In fact, he said, Berdymuhammedov might turn out to be worse than Niazov in some respects. Niazov was initially brought to power in the late Soviet period by reformist leader Mikhail Gorbachev, but even then he did "almost nothing for democracy".

Niazov was at least "relatively independent" of Putin, said Kadyrov. Berdymuhammedov, on the other hand, is likely to have the backing of President Vladimir Putin, who has fewer democratic leanings and is also tending towards the "re-colonisation" of former Soviet republics.

Arkady Dubnov, a Russian journalist and Central Asia-watcher who writes for the Moscow paper Vremya Novostey, said Turkmen foreign policy was likely to continue to revolve around gas exports.

One fact of life for the new leadership, he said, was that "until Berdymuhammedov has access to Niazov's treasury, the accounts of which are probably frozen... the gas income from Russia will remain extraordinarily important".

"Turkmenistan now depends much more on Russia [than the other way round] when it comes to gas, just as Russia depends more on Europe. We live in times when the seller of energy resources is more dependent on the buyer than vice versa," said Dubnov.

In the short term, Moscow is likely to try to re-engage with Turkmenistan by encouraging it to join former Soviet groupings from which Niazov distanced himself, for instance the Eurasian Economic Community.

Dubnov expects Berdymuhammedov to make positive noises in response to these advances – but he says this does not make a rapprochement inevitable. “The more Berdymuhammedov consolidates his power, the less he will listen to Moscow,” he said.

Instead of relying solely on Moscow, a Berdymuhammedov administration may reach out to the West as it seeks acceptance and legitimacy.

Dubnov said the government’s unexpected decision to invite the OSCE to monitor the presidential election was significant. “I see this as a sign that not all policy-making in the new Turkmenistan will be in accordance with what Moscow wants,” he said.

Niazov’s successors are likely to be just as keen to diversify the country’s gas export routes as he was. Although the western-sponsored plan to lay a gas pipeline under the Caspian Sea has seemed an unlikely prospect until now, Dubnov believes the United States could now start pushing for it to happen.

He said the way was open for Turkmenistan to take a new approach to the disputed status of the Caspian and its oil and gas resources. In the past, personal animosity between Niazov and the late president Heidar Aliev of Azerbaijan obstructed a solution to their bilateral dispute over certain oil and gas fields. With both men now gone, their successors can at least begin discussing possible solutions.

Niazov also found it difficult to get on with President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad of Iran, in contrast to his cordial relationship with the former president Hashemi Akbar Rafsanjani.

“Now that Niazov has gone, Tehran very much wants to make up for lost time with the new leadership, and there will be a flurry of [Iranian] activity on the Turkmenistan front,” said Dubnov.

Ashgabat’s diplomatic relationship with Tehran also depends on Russia and the US. Within the region, the key relationship is between Moscow and Tehran, with Ashgabat a lesser player.

The challenge for Berdymuhammedov is to position his government in such a way that it avoids antagonising either the Americans or the Iranians, so that it “reduces the risk of being drawn into the confrontation between Iran and the United States”, said Dubnov.

The US has a major interest in Turkmenistan as one of the closest staging posts to Iran. In particular, said Dubnov, the new Turkmen government will have to contend with American pressure to use a major military airbase at Mary in southern Turkmenistan.

Aside from external pressures, Berdymuhammedov and his allies still have to strengthen their own position to make themselves invulnerable to domestic challenges.

Dadadjon Azimov, a Central Asian expert based in London, picked out key findings of the research and interviews he conducted to produce the IWPR report. The big question, he said, was whether the system left behind by Niazov was sustainable.

Turkmen society as a whole seems apolitical, and regional powerbrokers rather than grassroots movements may be the most likely form of anti-regime mobilisation.

Among the analysts he spoke to, “no one knew in what form and in what shape anti-regime mobilisation would take place, and how possible clans would challenge the regime”, he said. The reason, he said, was that “if there’s a revival of clans and a possible emergence of regional groupings against the regime, this is at the very initial stages”.

Dubnov said it was important not to view Berdymuhammedov in isolation; in fact he is “only the tip of the iceberg” of a largely invisible political elite, among whom the key figure is Akmurad Rejepov, head of the Presidential Guards, a paramilitary security force.

“There is no doubt it is Rejepov who is in control of Berdymuhammedov and his [election] promises. One cannot underestimate the figure of Rejepov,” said Dubnov.

But at the same time, he believes it could be Berdymuhammedov and not Rejepov who is the long-term political survivor.

“Berdymuhammedov could turn into a kind of Turkmen Brezhnev,” said Dubnov, referring to Soviet Communist Party chief Leonid Brezhnev who stayed in power from the Sixties to the early Eighties. “Initially Brezhnev seemed to be a weak transitional figure, but because he suited a lot of [different] groupings in the Kremlin....he hung on for so long that they learned how to manipulate him.”

Guvanch Geraev of RFE/RL gave an update on what he and his colleagues are hearing from its contacts about the mood inside Turkmenistan.

Despite the lingering “fear factor”, he said, people are gradually becoming emboldened to speak out and are really expecting some kind of change, in light of the reforms and improved public services that all the presidential candidates are promising.

Two practical things that people agree on are that rampant drug abuse should be tackled and dissenters now held in prison should be amnestied.

The seminar was held at the end of a project in which IWPR presented news and analysis out of Turkmenistan in online text and audio format, with possibly the first-ever podcasts made in the Turkmen language. Many of the stories were picked up and broadcast by Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty’s Turkmen Service to its audience inside Turkmenistan.

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