

## TURKMENISTAN: CHANGING STATE POWER CONSTRUCTS AND POLITICS

Askar ABDRAKHMANOV

*Expert, Institute of World Economics and  
Politics under the RK First President Foundation  
(Almaty, Kazakhstan)*

It is extremely hard to obtain reliable information of any sort about the political developments in Turkmenistan. The ruling regime is too closed to be studied in any detail. The latest events, however, revealed hitherto concealed aspects of Turkmenian policy.

President Niyazov's death created an absolutely new political situation in the country. This was the first time in post-Soviet history that the military and law-enforcement structures represented by the Security Council assumed responsibility for the future of the country and the nation. It acquired its leading role and the right to remove the president and/or chairman of the People's Council—Khalk Maslakhaty (KM), the parliament—under the constitutional amendments. The changes in the ruling elite that began when KM Speaker O. Ataev was removed from his post to make it possible to nominate G. Berdymukhammedov as presidential candidate were successfully completed when he was elected president; the country also acquired a new Cabinet. On 30 March, the results were confirmed by the election of the new president as chairman of the Khalk Maslakhaty.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See: XX zasedanie Khalk Maslakhaty. 30 marta 2007. Governmental Internet site *Turkmenistan: The Golden Age*, 30 January, 2007, available at [www.turkmenistan.gov.tm].

To legitimize their power in the eyes of the nation and the international community, the new leaders eased up on the pressure imposed by the regime and outlined measures designed to improve the people's standard of living. The new rulers did not hesitate to prevent any form of anti-government activity and took pains to ensure that political emigrants remained abroad in order to exclude their involvement in Turkmenian politics in the near future.

In fact, there is no need to tighten the regime's grip on power to earn the nation's respect. The new elite should be more open; it should invite the world to engage in a reasonable and equal dialog; the regime will inevitably be less strict.

The new Turkmenian leadership is clearly hoping to improve the country's international image; it has already started active and dynamic talks with all the interested forces (Russia, the U.S., Iran, China, Kazakhstan, and Azerbaijan). In the absence of any real alternative to the Russian gas export route, Ashgabad will continue improving its relations with the Kremlin, a trend that is already clear under the new conditions. The prospect of new export pipelines is vague because of the highly complicated geopolitical context; it is not yet clear whether the country has enough fuel reserves, in addition to those already sold under long-term contracts.

### President Niyazov's Death and Changes in the State Power Constructs

Despite the more or less regular media reports about President Niyazov's deteriorating health, which appeared in particular in May and early October 2006,<sup>2</sup> his death came as a surprise for many.

<sup>2</sup> See: K. Zatspein, "V Turkmenistane nazrevaet revoliutsia. Niyazov smertel'no bolen," Internet publication *Ukraine Daily*, 16 May, 2006, available at [www.uadaily.net]; G. Savchenko, "Otets vsekh Turkmen ne vechen. U Saparmurata

His closest circle, however, was obviously prepared and had already come to terms on the best course of action.

On 21 December, 2006, the State Security Council assumed power to prevent any political complications. There is no exact information about the personal composition of the new highest structure of state power. It seems that it is staffed with high-ranking officers of the law-enforcement bodies, the presidential security service, and top officials of the Prosecutor General's Office. Under Niyazov, the Security Council, as a consultative structure, had no important role to play in state administration<sup>3</sup> and was deprived of any real power. In the vacuum created by the president's death, it proved to be the only structure capable of preserving stability.

Immediately after Niyazov's death was announced to the nation, the Security Council removed KM Chairman O. Ataev from his high post, which under the constitution made him interim president. This was done under the pretext of a criminal investigation that, according to official sources, had begun several weeks earlier. The Security Council and the Cabinet of Ministers agreed to appoint Vice Premier Gurbanguly Berdymukhammedov as interim president and commander-in-chief of the army.<sup>4</sup>

Five days later these steps were confirmed by constitutional amendments passed by the 19th special sitting of the KM. At first glance, the substitution of the KM chairman as interim president, in the event of the death or resignation of the elected president, for a vice premier of the republic's Cabinet was one of the most important amendments, along with permission for the acting president to run for presidency and the changed age limits for the posts of president and KM chairman.

In actual fact, other amendments were even more important: revised Art 50 gave the Security Council the legal power to decide whether the president was able to fulfill his duties or not, which means that it acquired the legal right to remove the president and appoint an interim president.

Under the Constitution, decision-making on all key issues belongs to the KM; the KM chairman, or the president, has the right to convene the parliament (since 30 March, 2007, both posts are filled by one man, G. Berdymukhammedov, which continues the tradition started by Saparmurat Niyazov). The new version of Art 50 of the republic's Constitution says that in cases when the chairman of the Khalk Maslakhaty or the president of Turkmenistan cannot fulfill their duties for any reason, the Khalk Maslakhaty is convened by the State Security Council.<sup>5</sup>

The amendments did not specify the main issue: who is empowered to decide that the KM chairman or the president "cannot fulfill their duties." At the same time, the fact that the Security Council acquired the right to convene the KM means that the Council is empowered to pass a judgment on the head of state's inability to perform his duties. The fairly vague wording of the amended article allows the Security Council to remove the president and the KM chairman. Such actions cannot be described as illegal.<sup>6</sup>

On 11 February, 2007, the new power structure acquired full legitimacy in the eyes of at least the majority of the country's population and the international community as soon as Gurbanguly Berdymukhammedov was elected the second president of Turkmenistan by general vote. By nominating a common presidential candidate as a sure winner and bringing the first presidential alternative election in the history of Turkmenistan to its successful conclusion, the ruling elite demonstrated its ability to compromise. Contrary to expert forecasts, the power system in Turkmenistan survived thanks to the constructive changes.

---

Niyazova mogli obostritsia problemy a serdtsem," *Gazeta*, No. 180, 4 October, 2006; A. Dubnov, "Niyazov zabyt pro post. I prichislil sebja k bol'nym i beremennym zhenshchinam," *Vremja novostey*, 25 October, 2006.

<sup>3</sup> See: Ch. Topjev, " 'Glavnym' v Turkmenistane po novoy konstitutsii stal Akmurad Redjepov," Internet *Gazeta Turkmeniskaia iskra*, 27 December, 2006, available at [www.tm-iskra.org].

<sup>4</sup> See: "Turkmenistan Declares National Mourning," Internet newspaper *Turkmenistan.Ru*, 21 December, 2006, available at [www.turkmenistan.ru].

<sup>5</sup> See: "Changes and Amendments Introduced to the Constitution of Turkmenistan," Internet newspaper *Turkmenistan.Ru*, 27 December 2006, available at [www.turkmenistan.ru].

<sup>6</sup> See: Ch. Topjev, op. cit.

## Changes in Social and Economic Policy

As long as the ruling regime remains in power and gas and cotton export continues to bring in enough money, the state will steadily pour money into social services, while cutting short any attempt at creating a more pluralist political system.<sup>7</sup> The new leaders may count on wide support from the people by annulling some of the former president's reforms.

As the former health minister, the new president should pay special attention to medical services. As soon as he became president, he signed several decisions designed to increase the supply of cheaper medications<sup>8</sup> and announced that old medical centers would be reopened and new ones built.

The presidential candidate's promises to reform the pension system, which for several years has not been paying well-earned pensions to a considerable number of old-age pensioners on the strength of the late president's decision, ensured G. Berdymukhammedov national support. The revised pensions will be paid starting on 1 July, 2007.

Wide-scale educational reform was a cornerstone of Gurbanguly Berdymukhammedov election platform. He promised to restore 10-year secondary education and 5-year higher education; include Russian and English in the secondary school curriculum, open new higher education establishments to create more student vacancies, give more gifted young people the opportunity to study abroad, and invite foreign lecturers to Turkmenian institutions of higher learning.<sup>9</sup>

On 14 February, 2007, he confirmed his promises in his inauguration speech in front of VIP guests; on the second day of his presidency he signed a decree on educational reform.<sup>10</sup>

The new leaders pledged to preserve the privileges people enjoyed under the previous president: free supplies of set amounts of salt, drinking water, natural gas, and electric power. The government also pledged to keep gasoline prices at a low level.

In the first days of his presidency, G. Berdymukhammedov introduced a state monopoly on bread and flour trade, probably to cope with the wheat shortages. After Niyazov's death, the interim rulers avoided mass discontent over bread shortages by increasing supplies of bread and other foodstuffs. Most of the poorer population groups normally shop for foodstuffs, clothes, and consumer goods at the markets, where prices are extremely flexible, which makes the inflation level hard to determine.

The election programs of the six presidential candidates cover the entire range of the worst social ailments: unemployment, food shortages, overdue reforms in the agrarian sector, water use, the declining number of livestock, inadequate housing construction, drug addiction among the youth, education, pensions, and medicine. The voters wanted state regulated food and consumer goods prices and indexed wages, which indirectly confirms the high inflation level.<sup>11</sup> The most probable steps in social liberalization will be more grain purchases. In the near future, the country may fill the market with consumer goods so far in short supply.<sup>12</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> See: D. Azimov, "Turkmenistan: What Chance of a Thaw?" *Institute of World and Peace Reporting, Reporting Central Asia*, No. 480, 29 January, 2007, available at [[http://iwpr.net/?apc\\_state=hrufca328880&l=en&s=f&o=329191](http://iwpr.net/?apc_state=hrufca328880&l=en&s=f&o=329191)].

<sup>8</sup> See: A. Dubnov, "Turkmenskaia terapia," *Vremia novostey*, 28 February, 2007.

<sup>9</sup> See: "Gurbanguly Berdymukhammedov Sets to Increase the Number of Higher Education Establishments and Carry Out Pension Reform," Internet newspaper *Turkmenistan.Ru*, 11 January 2007, available at [[www.turkmenistan.ru](http://www.turkmenistan.ru)]; A. Dubnov, "Tri nedeli bez vozhdia. Turkmenam poobeshchali poezd na Rossiu," *Vremia novostey*, No. 2, 11 January, 2007.

<sup>10</sup> See: "Gurbanguly Berdymukhammedov Introduces Major Education Reform in Turkmenistan," Internet newspaper *Turkmenistan.Ru*, 15 February, 2007, available at [[www.turkmenistan.ru](http://www.turkmenistan.ru)].

<sup>11</sup> See: "Voters Want State Regulated Prices for Goods and First Necessity Products," Internet newspaper *Turkmenistan.Ru*, 16 January, 2007, available at [[www.turkmenistan.ru](http://www.turkmenistan.ru)].

<sup>12</sup> See: "Round Table Discussion within the Program 'Religion, Society, and Security' that discussed the subject 'What will Happen in Turkmenistan?'" (The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 23 January, 2007)," Carnegie Moscow Center, 30 January, 2007, available at [[www.carnegie.ru](http://www.carnegie.ru)].

The admission that drug abuse and drug trafficking were among the worst problems is a sign of the new leaders' new approach. Nearly all candidates, particularly G. Berdymukhammedov, openly discussed the issue during their election campaign; 562 kg of drugs (including 49 kg of heroin produced in Afghanistan) were destroyed in Ashgabad on the election eve in front of foreign diplomats and members of international organizations.<sup>13</sup>

If fuel prices remain high, the gas- and oil-rich country may rest assured of its economic future.

The majority, however, are more concerned with reform in the agrarian sector; the Security Council has already said a lot about the override changes in the state's policy in the agrarian sector. Much was also said about this during the election campaign.

Only 3 percent of the land is irrigated; nearly half of the area is planted with cotton, which means that the country cannot grow enough wheat. It needs 1.7 million tons, which cannot be locally produced on any sustainable basis.<sup>14</sup> No wonder, under Niyazov many of the regional leaders were removed either because they failed to produce the planned amount of cotton and wheat or because they doctored the figures.

The new leaders used alternative candidates to inform the nation about some of their plans: at least two of the candidates spoke of increasing the role of private capital in the national economy (in the agrarian sector in particular) and in the country's integration into the world economy.<sup>15</sup>

The new leaders probably used this to warn the public about the coming changes: partial privatization of industry and agricultural land. This will give the ruling elite a chance to divvy up the most attractive national economic assets among themselves. This hardly democratic method notwithstanding, private capital will undoubtedly add flexibility to the national economic system.

According to the Azerbaijanian information agency Trend, in March the new president stated several times that his Cabinet was resolved to increase the production of energy fuels (particularly oil) in the Turkmenian sector of the Caspian shelf at a faster pace. His statement about the need "to expand mutually advantageous partnership with foreign investors and companies which use high technologies"<sup>16</sup> deserves special mention. This should be interpreted as a direct invitation to foreign investors to put their offers related to the Turkmenian market of oil and associated gas production on the table.

For the time being, Ashgabad is unlikely to demonopolize the production and transportation of natural gas (something that has been done in the oil sector): gas export is too important for the national economy. Foreign investors will have to accept the political risks of working in the Turkmenian sector, since the Caspian between Azerbaijan, Iran and Turkmenistan has not yet been delimited.

## Expectations of Liberalization in the Sociopolitical Sphere

The expert community has agreed that in the next six months liberalization of the ruling regime will proceed stage-by-stage. The Berdymukhammedov Cabinet has already extended access to the

---

<sup>13</sup> See: "Turkmenistan Destroys Over Half Tonne of Narcotics," Internet newspaper *Turkmenistan.Ru*, 7 February, 2007, available at [www.turkmenistan.ru].

<sup>14</sup> See: "Grains of Truth in Turkmenistan," *Institute for War and Peace Reporting, Reporting Central Asia*, 14 February, 2006, available at [http://iwpr.net/?apc\_state=hrufrc257360&l=en&s=f&o=257361].

<sup>15</sup> See: B. Pannier, "Turkmenistan: Sorting Out the Presidential Candidates," *Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty*, 7 February, 2007, available at [www.rferl.org].

<sup>16</sup> "Turkmenia ob'javliaet o polnomashtabnom osvoenii uglevodorodnykh resursov Kaspia," Trend Information Agency (Azerbaijan), 25 March, 2007, available at [http://news.trendaz.com].

Internet and liberalized the restrictions on movement around the country. During his election campaign, the new head of state announced that, “in the future,” the country might acquire a multiparty system and described the “democratic processes in Turkmen society as irreversible.”<sup>17</sup>

The country has acquired wider access to information: the government Internet newspaper *Turkmenistan.Ru* carries neutral articles from the Russian press and more or less critical discussions of Turkmenistan’s new political context by foreign political scientists.<sup>18</sup>

Liberalization went even further than that: the new leaders invited OSCE observers to watch the presidential election;<sup>19</sup> some of the OSCE team members were very critical about the election, but the very fact that they had been invited at all spoke of important shifts in the country’s policy. Before that, no foreign observers had ever been invited.

The ruling elite deemed it wiser to snatch some of the slogans from the opposition rather than tighten control over society: increased supplies of foodstuffs (the opposition’s “flour revolution”), reform of education, medical services, and the pension system, wider access to the Internet, etc. Liberalization will not obviously widen the circle of those involved in domestic policy at the expense of the opposition; the leaders tend to dismiss Western criticism of human rights violations in Turkmenistan.

Some of the opposition members in exile admitted that if after the presidential election the ruling elite goes on talking about what was promised during the election campaign (future liberalization), the process of cautious democratization would become irreversible.<sup>20</sup>

On the other hand, there is the opinion that most of the promises are idle talk and that the new leaders will never let control out of their hands. This means that the positive expectations inside and outside the country are being used to tighten control over the country and rule out real political liberalization.<sup>21</sup>

It seems, however, that the intentions are quite serious: this is amply testified by the consistent nature of the new president’s statements and the new Cabinet’s recent steps. Wider access to information will add freedom to the press and help create civil society institutions in Turkmenistan.

As for the specifically Central Asian problems (which differ greatly from those the rest of the post-Soviet expanse is dealing with), the threat of an outburst of Islamic fundamentalism looks minimal, even though the country is living in a situation of uncertainty, something which is inevitable after the long rule of one leader. Despite the close proximity of Iran, the Turkmen are less susceptible to religious radicalism than their neighbors in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. The Muslim clergy and Islamic educational establishments are closely and effectively controlled by the state, while all the roots of political extremism were pulled out at the early stage.

From time to time, however, information about a gradually growing number of Hizb ut-Tahrir supporters does appear, particularly among prison and colony inmates. This means that today and in the near future we cannot exclude the long-term possibility of a stronger Islamist position in Turkmenistan, a country that borders on Iran, Afghanistan, and Uzbekistan, which is not entirely stable in this respect.

<sup>17</sup> “Presidential Candidate Emphasizes Irreversibility of Democratic Processes in Turkmenistan,” Internet newspaper *Turkmenistan.Ru*, 25 January, 2007, available at [www.turkmenistan.ru].

<sup>18</sup> See: “Round Table in Moscow Discusses Upcoming Presidential Elections in Turkmenistan,” Internet newspaper *Turkmenistan.Ru*, 7 February, 2007, available at [www.turkmenistan.ru].

<sup>19</sup> See: “Turkmenia dopustit na vybory inostrannykh nabliudateley,” *Delovaya gazeta “Vzgliad”*, 20 January, 2007.

<sup>20</sup> See: Round Table Discussion within the Program...

<sup>21</sup> See: N. Nikolaev, D. Ozodi, “Strategia i taktika novoy vlasti v Ashkhabade,” *IA Ferghana.Ru*, 27 February, 2007, available at [www.ferghana.ru].

## Ashghabad's Foreign Policy in the Context of Gas Export and the Geopolitical Situation in the Region

Fairly extravagant and unpredictable, Saparmurat Niyazov was a skilful foreign policy player who could maneuver between the interests of various political forces. A skilful negotiator, he landed on his feet every time, no matter how complicated the situation.<sup>22</sup> So far, it is unclear whether the new leaders will demonstrate similar abilities; it should be said in all justice that they have been able to reach an agreement among themselves.

The following foreign policy issues can be described as the country's top priorities:

- Stabilization of the ruling regime by excluding negative influence from abroad;
- Neutralization of the negative impact of the Iran-U.S. confrontation;
- Stable gas export at acceptable prices;
- Delimitation of the Caspian and its resources;
- Better relations with Central Asian neighbors.

In the short-term perspective, the new leaders should work toward legitimizing the post-Niyazov regime in the eyes of the world community. This is the country's top priority. Some of the distance has been partly covered by the successful election campaign and public inauguration attended by official representatives of Russia, China, the United States, and other countries. It looks as if further liberalization of the regime will improve Turkmenistan's relations with the West.

The new leaders will have to work hard to minimize the risk of being drawn into the American-Iranian conflict; they will have to perform a highly tricky balancing act to preserve stable relations with Tehran in opposition to the Americans' intention of gaining access to the country's military infrastructure in order to station their land troops and complete encirclement of Iran and of gaining access to the region's largest military airbase in Mary.

Under the late president, there were no conflicts between Ashghabad and Tehran; trade and economic contacts were fairly developed, but in the political sphere there was no closeness between the secular regime in Ashghabad and the clerical regime in Tehran. To avoid any complications with the United States, Turkmenistan cut back its gas export to Iran. As a gas-exporting country, Iran is exploiting its transit position to keep Turkmenian gas export within certain limits. For these reasons, the new leaders will hardly seek closer relations with the IRI; on the other hand, they are unlikely to allow the U.S. to use their territory and air space to deliver strikes on Iran.

The country's neutral status in this highly conflict-prone region looks like an advantage to be preserved as one of the priorities. In fact the newly elected president has already promised this. According to most experts, neutrality is one of the best options for a country driven into a geopolitical corner: it can play on the disagreements between Russia, the United States, and Iran, which are having the greatest influence on Turkmenistan.

Russia will remain the key figure in the gas-export sphere: relatively cheap Turkmenian gas goes to the Urals and other Russian regions, while excess West Siberian gas is sold to Europe. In fact, discontinued gas export from Turkmenistan might upturn Russia's gas balance.

---

<sup>22</sup> See: S. Akimbekov, "Pod turkmenskimi gazom," *Kontinent* (Kazakhstan), No. 1 (186), 17-30 January, 2006, p. 20.



In an effort to improve the relations between the two states, the Russian airline company Siberia opened a direct flight between the two countries; there are plans to restore railway transportation.<sup>23</sup> By releasing an ecologist with two passports (Russian and Turkmenian) who was arrested shortly before President Niyazov's death, Ashgabad demonstrated its desire to remain friends with Moscow. After taking into account the Russian Foreign Ministry's appeal, A. Zatoka was sentenced to three years in prison on probation.<sup>24</sup>

Today Moscow and Ashgabad are mutually interested in stronger bilateral relations; for the next two years, Turkmenian diplomats will be engaged in maintaining mutually advantageous relations with Russia as the main gas buyer.

Today the country produces about 60 billion cu m of gas every year; Gazprom buys 40-42 billion cu m to be consumed in Russia and Ukraine (through RosUkrEnergo); about 8 billion cu m go to Iran, and the rest is consumed inside the country.<sup>25</sup>

According to the Soviet assessment confirmed by BP, the country's proven gas reserves are about 3 trillion cu m. The Turkmenian authorities insist on 6 trillion cu m or an even larger figure. So far, the expert community remains fairly skeptical about this: the figures of the latest international auditing conducted with the help of ADB in 2005 have not yet been published. Ashgabad deliberately overstates the figures to strengthen its negotiating position.<sup>26</sup>

So far the possibility of gas pipeline alternatives to the Russian one (to China, and trans-Caspian and trans-Afghan pipelines) looks vague because the available volumes of gas have been already sold under contracts; there are restrictive geopolitical factors as well. The situation may change if larger gas reserves are proven.

Judging by the new president's first statements, the Chinese vector will be the most preferable among all the other alternatives to the Russian routes, if larger amounts of unsold gas are found. Kazakhstan, as a transit country, will profit from the Chinese alternative as well.

The very fact that Georgian President Mikhail Saakashvili, Turkish Premier R. Erdoğan and Azerbaijani Premier A. Rasizade attended the inauguration ceremony confirmed their, and America's, interest in Turkmenistan's involvement in the planned trans-Caspian pipeline. So far, the country's participation looks doubtful because of the gas shortage, Gazprom's negative attitude, and the price pressure on Ashgabad. Iran might object to a pipeline in the Southern Caspian; there is information that the neighbors have already warned Turkmenistan.<sup>27</sup>

In November 2006, Turkmenistan signed another agreement in Delhi on a trans-Afghan gas pipeline; the project stands little chance of being implemented because of the above considerations. As for India, there are obvious dangers created by the situation in Afghanistan.<sup>28</sup>

It looks as if for the next 3 or 4 years the key export route to Russia will remain the main one. Last year, Gazprom's price doubled, which means that it will remain stable in 2008.

The national policy of production modernization carried out by the state limited the flow of FDI into the most promising (oil-and-gas) sector, compared with the money invested in Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan. The "open doors" policy will make the ruling elite even richer than before. For this reason, we can expect that foreign investments will become one of the foreign policy tools.

<sup>23</sup> See: A. Dubnov, "Tri nedeli bez vozhdia. 'Sibir' otkroet dlia rossian Turkmeniu," *Izvestia*, 8 February, 2007.

<sup>24</sup> See: "Turkmenia: Ekolog Andrei Zatoka osvobozhden iz-pod strazhi," IA Ferghana.Ru, 31 January, 2007, available at [www.ferghana.ru].

<sup>25</sup> See: A. Grivach, "Trilliony neizvestnogo proiskhozhdenia. V Ashgabade soobshchili ob ocherednom neftegazovom gigante," *Vremia novostey*, 24 January, 2007.

<sup>26</sup> See: G. Gleason, "Turkmenistan after Turkmenbashi," *Eurasia.Net*, 23 December, 2006, available at [http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insight/articles/eav122306.shtml]; A. Grivach, op. cit.

<sup>27</sup> See: A. Grivach, A. Dubnov, "Al'ians v obkhod Rossii. SShA pomogut Azerbaidzhanu lobbirovat Transkaspiskiy gazoprovod," *Vremia novostey*, 26 March, 2007.

<sup>28</sup> See: S. Akimbekov, op. cit., p. 24.

## Possible Shifts in Ashghabad's Regional Politics

Russia and the Central Asian neighbors need domestic stability in Turkmenistan more than in any other country, therefore it appears likely that the new leaders, without the strong political positions of their predecessor, will drop the "positive neutrality" doctrine after a couple of years for the sake of membership in the SCO and later in the CSTO and EurAsEC.

The new leaders have the unsettled legal status of the Caspian on their hands, which means that a compromise should be found. Until the mid-1990s, the very complicated relations between Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan were a stumbling block. The new leaders in both countries might find fresh approaches to the old contradictions. Delimitation of the Southern Caspian, in which Iran should also be involved as one of the coastal states, would have eased the talks on the Caspian legal status.

So far, the future of the complicated relations between Ashghabad and Tashkent is vague. To avoid proliferation of Islamic extremism from Uzbekistan, the last president limited transborder relations with Turkmenistan's neighbor. The Amu Darya water resources breed even more contradictions. The rivalry of the region's two largest cotton producers over water, as well as implementation of large-scale hydro-technical facilities in Turkmenistan based on the water resources of the regions' main river, has already somewhat complicated bilateral relations. The Russia-China rivalry over Central Asian gas may intensify the Turkmenian-Uzbek rivalry over transportation capacities. The raid of the Turkmenian special services on the Uzbek embassy in Ashghabad in December 2002 and the accusation of its involvement in an attempted coup have not yet been forgotten.

Relations between Astana and Ashghabad might improve, especially if Turkmenistan joins the regional processes, something that the previous leader was not keen on. As an active supporter of multi-sided cooperation on post-Soviet territory, Kazakhstan will try to tempt the new Turkmenian leaders with the prospect of more active participation in regional cooperation.

There is an economic dimension to Astana's interest in closer cooperation with Ashghabad: the two countries can increase mutual trade, Turkmenistan can be invited to discuss increased supplies of trans-Caspian hydrocarbons; and it can open its market to Kazakhstan's investments in the financial and oil sectors. There is another important issue: the volume of Turkmenian gas moved across Kazakhstan to Russia (the traditional route) and to China (the prospective route) might increase. The two sides are resolved to achieve breakthroughs in bilateral cooperation: President Nazarbaev attended the inauguration on 14 February; the Minister of Energy and Mineral Resources of Kazakhstan B. Izmukhambetov visited Ashghabad in March 2007; there is an agreement for Kazakhstani Premier K. Masimov to visit Ashghabad in the next few months.

\* \* \*

Turkmenistan will obviously not abandon President Niyazov's course in a hurry. We should not expect full-scale political liberalization, a multiparty system, or democratization in the near future. Stability is guaranteed by the military and law-enforcement structures represented in the State Security Council empowered to control all the other branches of power.

In the absence of direct foreign interference, the country will not threaten regional security, and its further domestic development will depend on the continued agreement within the ruling elite until the end of 2007. Much will depend on the new president.

In the mid-term perspective, the fulfilled election promises to liberalize certain aspects of social life may strengthen democratic trends. Increasing the role of private capital's role in the national econ-



omy may help to promote the trend further. At the same time, the partially lifted ban on access to information will contribute to strengthening civil society and extend the competitive sphere in the country's political expanse.

Ashghabad is unlikely to abandon its neutrality: it is needed in the context of the fairly complicated interrelations among Russia, America, and Iran in the region. It looks as though the country will drift toward China and the SCO in a couple of years and later toward the EurAsEC and CSTO.

On the whole, the situation remains suspended: the ruling elite might change its configuration to a great extent; the same applies to domestic policy, while the country's foreign policy leaves too little room for maneuver.