

DEMOCRACY IN POST-SOVIET KYRGYZSTAN AND TURKMENISTAN

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Global Democracy

The economic impact of globalization usually draws the most attention, while the accompanying aspects, which may include the transformation of an entire culture, are mentioned only secondarily. However, deeper transformational changes occur in culture and the social structure, which also affects changes in an individual's thinking and reasoning.

However, efforts to unify (perhaps slowly and not always as visibly) are also an important aspect of globalization, and these efforts deeply influence culture, particularly in terms of political systems and methods of delegating power. Even here a uniform model has been created—the so-called Western-type democracy, which should be ideally applied at an all-planetary level. It is not always easy to leave the original system and accept a new system. Very often certain matters with little or no interrelation may be misunderstood. This applies to the interdependence among the standard of living, culture, and the political system.

Where there have been contacts between two different cultures, there have been comparisons (mostly in the area of material culture). Suddenly members of one culture feel inferior to another culture and want to catch up and achieve the same success. In countries where there is a relatively low standard of living, we can often recognize the effort to adopt a “higher” culture (typically American and Western-European), hoping that by adopting it they will achieve the prosperity they desire. Occasionally, although rarely, we see direct pressure on people to stop wearing their traditional clothing, to wear European- or American-style clothing, to change their eating habits, to wear baseball caps or start watching foreign films. This kind of pressure is usually indirect, whereby people

leave their culture quite freely, believing they are not modern or cosmopolitan enough. During this process of accepting foreign models, which is often uncritical, uprooting often occurs and there are attempts to look for substitutions, which can result in various political, religious, and ethical extremes. It is often suggested that precisely “Western democracy” is the necessary base for economic prosperity.

Then there is the wide definition of democracy, which we may encounter much more often than the procedural conception. In the case of the wide definition of democracy the results of government are known in advance—democracy is not a method for achieving a good life, democracy itself is this good life.

Under the procedural definition democracy is only a process or a system where decision-making is carried out based on the majority principle. Democracy itself is not the target of this definition, but only a means to achieve certain targets, regardless of what decisions will be made in this manner. Therefore, it cannot be said in advance whether it will produce good or bad decisions.¹

It goes without saying that the wide definition of democracy is considerably more common, however this can have certain negative connotations. As the main target (achieving democracy) is firmly fixed, it also becomes unchallenged as well as unchallengeable. The method of delegating power is dogmatized. An example can be found in the requirement to unquestionably accept democracy: “the overwhelming majority *must* believe that democratic procedures for solving conflicts and bringing about political changes are the *only correct way*...”² Whereas democracy is compared to totalitarianism, even here the total acceptance of certain dogmas is required.

To put it simply, what is democratic is of good quality, what is undemocratic is bad.

In his article on the misuse of the term democracy published in 1925, Czechoslovakian writer Karel Poláček gives the example of a Prague newspaper that praised the ribbons of the Alliance medals because they were different from those of the Austrian medals, thanks to their *democratic color as well as their shape*. Or take the advertisement for the purchase of short fur coats, which are, compared to long fur coats, *more democratic*, published in a magazine for young men.³

Current democracy as a method of delegating power tends to delegate power to far-away levels, in a direction and in a way that greatly limit effective communication and sometimes make it impossible. The most significant delegation of power is typically parliamentary or presidential elections. Few wonder that voter-representative communication happens very rarely, since it is practically impossible. On the other hand, the delegation of power at the lower levels is typically seen as something much less important, even though voter-representative communication may be much more effective.

The effort to create some distance between the voter and his/her representative is deepened due to the reduction in power of national governments, as well as to the transfer of power to even more remote centers. Here it is almost inevitable that a *free* election is replaced by a *pseudo-free* election. The image of a representative is not real—in fact it is created to order. According to American analyst Chomsky, the elite possess enough means and methods (modifying meanings which contrast with reality; transferring important matters to the periphery; media-promotion of what is irrelevant; cleverly using information based on the interests and goals of the owners of the media; diverting attention from important, however not very popular, decisions...) to *produce approval* by the public. In the U.S., 170,000 employees are involved in influencing the news, public opinion, and politics based on demand by paying clients within *Public Relations*, which is 40,000 more than the number of journal-

¹ See: V. Hrabák, *Současná diskuse o vzestupu neliberálních demokracií ve světě a její souvislosti*, Vol. II, *Distance* No. 4, 2004, p. 92.

² M. Kubát, *Post-communism and democracy*, Dokořán, 2003, p. 17.

³ See: V. Hrabák, *op. cit.*, p. 91.

ists.⁴ The winner in *free competition* is usually the person who recommends the currently most successful strategy for attracting the largest number of voters.

The Missing “Democratic Tradition”

It was not difficult for some transition states to accept the uniform model of the Western-type democracy. Many post-socialist states (especially from Central Europe—Czechoslovakia, Poland, Hungary) had experience of a certain method of delegating power from the pre-socialistic period, which was similar to the new system.

However, some countries, when accepting *global democracy*, may not have any adequate traditions to build on. It is not always easy, especially for these states, to leave their original system and accept a new system. The example of two Central Asian states, Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan, shows us a way of establishing democratic institutions and the results this democratization has brought.

The pasture and farming regions had one aspect in common in terms of delegating power—the closeness of the representatives to the delegated (many times very indirect, other times very direct) judicial as well as political power. For this reason, the enforceability of the law in the pasture areas of Central Asia was quite high and the decisions made were understandable. A penitentiary system was not very common in the areas inhabited by the settled population either—e.g. in Bukhara there was a prison for debtors only (the debtor would be released from prison only after he, or his relatives, paid what was owed from his property) and also for prisoners of conscience. First-time thieves had their right arm cut off, second-time offenders had their left arm cut off, and a third wrong would mean execution.

Today, when building a new identity, the Central Asian states very often look up to the original system of government, describing the previous system as a “steppe democracy.” It was certainly positive, taking into account the closeness and decentralization of power, as well as the closeness of the verdicts reached. However, it did not involve a system of delegating power in which all members of the community could participate based on the same principles. Technically speaking, this would not constitute a system of government by the “majority” either. It would be a big mistake to see the previous system as a remedy for all the difficulties Central Asian society faces today. The previous system was considerably despotic, using tough feudal practices, and based on these aspects it should rather be described as “steppe despotism.”

Central Asia in the Soviet Era

After the Great October Socialist Revolution in 1917 society-wide transformations started to take place. The result of this total transformation should have been a new man who would correspond to the spirit and ideology of the new regime. Not only the Soviet regime (but also other regimes) claimed (and still claim) to influence the individual as a whole.

The transformational changes altered all aspects of the country’s culture—it was necessary to start a new economic system, as well as live by a new lifestyle. In Central Asia lists were compiled of appropriate new names and it would be inappropriate to give children different names. There were also strong recommendations about how to celebrate weddings and funerals.

⁴ See: H. Pravdová, *Paradoxy globalizačních procesů*, in: *Reflexia globalizácie v lokálnom spoločenstve*, ed. by S. Letavajová, Trnava, 2006, pp. 20-22.

Despite this the social structure remained patriarchal, after the wedding girls would go and live with the husband's family (patrilocality). The vast majority of marriages were decided by the parents without the future wives and husbands having the possibility to choose their own partners, which is still the custom in many places today. Payment for the bride was illegal, but neither the Soviet nor the current regime have been able to eliminate this phenomenon. In some places in Kyrgyzstan the practice of bride-kidnapping has been resumed, which is presented as a return to old traditions.

The Soviet system was not able, in many cases, to totally change the original structure of society. The Tajik Kulob region, which had very good farming conditions, can be given as an example, but since it is a long way from larger cities, trade could not be developed based on monetary relations on a large scale. The fact that the distance from cities was quite considerable resulted in lower consumption of "over-the-standard" goods, as well as in keeping with the traditional way of living to a large extent, including *commons* elements. During the Soviet era *commons* (a form of associating people that was especially characteristic of the primitive communal system where it was typical to co-own the means of production) were formally transformed into *kolkhozes* and the foreman of a commons unit—*rais*—had unlimited powers, becoming the chairman of the *kolkhoz* (he would be addressed as *bobo*—father). Kulobs in particular quite naturally became members of the communist party and supporters of the Soviet order.

According to the estimates of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, from 1990 one third to one half of the population of the Central Asian republics lived below the poverty line, compared with less than 2% in Estonia and less than 5% of the Russian population (R.S.F.S.R.). These differences could also be seen when purchasing consumer goods: whereas the sale of TV sets in 1984 reached 6.3 per 1,000 inhabitants and fridges reached 16 per 1,000 inhabitants in Uzbekistan, in Russia these numbers were almost double (16.3 TV sets and 31.4 fridges per 1,000 inhabitants).⁵

The short period of the Andropov administration (1982-1984) had a great influence on the Soviet Union and its population. Even today respondents praise the vehemence he employed to get rid of corruption, overpriced goods, and alcoholism. However, the real reform was carried out by his successor Mikhail Gorbachev. The political thaw that occurred in connection with Mikhail Gorbachev did not influence all the Union republics to the same extent. For example, there were private shops in Ukraine as early as the mid-1980s, whereas the Central Asian republics experienced this thawing much later, and in Kyrgyzstan, for example, the top representatives tried to boycott *perestroika* directly.

This example shows us there were disputes over the distance or closeness concerning power-delegating methods. Despite the fact that Gorbachev is seen as a democrat abroad, his measures in carrying out *perestroika* in Central Asia led, in some respects, to suppressing decision-making at the level of individual republics and to strengthening control over personnel issues on the part of the central, meaning the Moscow, government. Due to Gorbachev's effort to tighten control over the internal political situation of the Union republics (which was relaxed under Brezhnev), First Secretary of the Communist Party of Kyrgyzstan Absamat Masaliev started a very intensive conflict with the Moscow leadership. Masaliev warned that Gorbachev would disintegrate the Union due to his activities, not make it more unified. The following years (as well as the disintegration of the U.S.S.R.) fully confirmed Masaliev's criticism in this respect.

Assessment of the results of the Soviet government in Central Asia is very disputable. For example Osorov⁶ states that a transition from the nomadic to the settled way of life is a turning point in the history of every culture, as it will bring socioeconomic as well as cultural development. According to Osorov, it shows only that a culture which experienced this earlier will inevitably win. The Russian

⁵ See: *A Study of the Soviet economy*, Vol. 2, IMF, The World Bank, OECD and European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, Paris, 1991, pp. 154-155.

⁶ See: Z. Osorov, "Myths and Survivals of Nomadic Past," *Kyrgyzstan Times*, 28 September, 2000.

colonization of Kyrgyzstan during the 19th century accelerated the transition to a settled way of life—still, according to the statistics of 1914, only 21,772 Kyrgyz families (22%) out of 98,840 lived settled lives. Only thanks to the creation of the U.S.S.R. and the Stalinist regime did collectivization take place and the nomadic population (often forcibly) made to settle. In the 1930s, over 400 new villages were built, as well as tens of thousands of new houses, new roads were quickly laid and schools and hospitals went up, electrification took place and a campaign against illiteracy was launched.

Osorov states a paradox, saying that the worst methods were to a certain extent fruitful because thanks to them the newly formed Central Asian republics became modern states. A similar position on socialism was taken by respondents from the Tajik Nishusp, for example, according to whom *the period under the U.S.S.R. was a “golden age” and the socialist experiment was a “great victory,” especially when compared with the situation in neighboring Afghanistan only a few kilometers away.*

If we assess the socialist transformation, we can say it brought, although ineffective means were used initially, good results in some respects, for which, however, a high price had to be paid—a transformational shock followed by a huge decrease in production and a long period of subsequent delays, as well as cultural uprooting. This unpleasant situation could have been avoided had a different approach been taken.

Building Democracy in Central Asia

After the disintegration of the U.S.S.R., totally new states that had never been independent before appeared on the world map and within borders which had been determined around the 1930s without particularly considering the national structure of the local population.

In the former Soviet republics a new model had to be immediately created in the 1990s, after the fall of the old system, which also provided its own ideology. The difficulties in finding new roots were numerous—the ensuing ideological vacuum started to be misused by various groups trying to push through their own goals (political, religious, nationalistic), which resulted in an increase in the radical moods in society (ethnic conflicts in Kyrgyzstan, religious unrest in Uzbekistan, civil war in Tajikistan).

A new model started to be built within the political system, which was described as *democratic*, but due to the fact that the term democracy had not been strictly defined, these changes could have had any interpretation.

After the disintegration of the U.S.S.R. it was usually the members of the communist elite who came to power and, after declaring their sovereignty, they started to carry out a policy of change that could hardly be described as positive.

In all the Central Asian republics the term democracy became overused, but even here democracy has been attributed some value. The political system introduced here was presented as democratic, and thus it would receive a positive response. Since the term democracy currently has a positive value (as has been mentioned above), it is necessary to at least create the illusion that these changes are *democratic*.

To create this kind of illusion a *free democratic election* (presidential or parliamentary) should be held and *democratic institutions should start to function*. The West European countries then, together with the U.S., consider themselves the arbitrator of this process, and it is they who decide whether the election was carried out in accordance with the Western standards of democracy, or whether this election did not meet these standards.

The example of the Central Asian states does not at all confirm the opinion stating that a free election will lead to a freer world.⁷ Many systems of government currently meet the requirements, so

⁷ See: J.G. Pilon, “Election Realities,” *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 1998.

they can be described as democratic. Free elections are held regularly, however serious breaches of personal freedom occur, as well as the abuse of power by elected representatives.⁸

It is obvious that the establishment of a parliament and the organization of a democratic election do not necessarily lead to effective delegation of power to the representatives. The application of parliamentary democracy to Central Asian conditions has shown again that this method of administering a state is not a cure-all, and in this region it has greatly failed.

This is actually quite the opposite of what used to be traditional in Central Asian society—very strong delegation of power at the lower levels and a different method of social bonding (especially relative-based, tribal, and regional).

Kyrgyzstan

The year 1991, since Kyrgyzstan has been an independent state unit, saw the trends that started reach the finish line. The lack of alternative political entities with sufficient support and a unified manifesto led once again to the Communist Party of Kyrgyzstan achieving the overwhelming majority during the election for representatives to the Supreme Soviet. A. Masaliev easily became the chairman of this highest state body.

The disintegration of the U.S.S.R. made Akaev the highest representative of the independent state. A supposed element of the required goal, i.e., a republic built on the principles of a civil society, involved creating a system of functional political parties. A strong pluralistic democracy was one of the main slogans, which the first president, Askar Akaev, emphasized in his speeches. Despite the warning voices that Kyrgyzstan was not at all ready to function within democratic standards, Akaev would resolutely dismiss these opinions.

Compared to the parallel development of the Central Asian neighbors, in which the presidents suggested a government of strict authority from the very beginning, which gradually developed into a personality cult, and who chose economic strategies based on mineral resources or cheap labor, Kyrgyzstan appeared to be a utopian model. “New Switzerland” or “Oasis of Democracy” were names which, in connection with Kyrgyzstan, appeared not only as propaganda by the president’s administration, but also in the foreign media.

The country’s post-socialistic development confirmed the creation of a pluralistic system, however, its authenticity was doubtful. The total number of political parties amounts to 58 (2007), however, their capacity to influence the affairs of the republic is very low. None of the political parties has been able to receive wide support precisely due to the parties’ image being based on individuals and not on their manifesto. It was very difficult for the voters to orientate themselves within the confusing range of political entities whose representatives were connected with a particular region. Within Kyrgyz society tribal favoritism started to exist at the all-state level as well, particularly in the sphere of business and politics. This resulted in a considerable role within the party system again being fulfilled by traditional tribal ties—individual parties would push through the interests of their tribes rather than those stated in their programs.

Knowledge of one’s ancestors up to the seventh generation (*dzeti-ata*) and knowledge connected with tribal relatives plays an important role in the lives of the Kyrgyz even today. Even though there has been a certain decrease in the significance of traditional Kyrgyz values, such as knowledge of *dzeti-ata* and the skill of detailed orientation in one’s tribal structure, this does not mean that one’s tribal affiliation does not have practical meaning in Kyrgyz society today. Solidarity with the other members of the tribe is especially shown (apart from political and economic favoritism) among the

⁸ See: F. Zakaria, “The Rise of Illiberal Democracies,” *Foreign Affairs*, November/December 1997.

village population, but kinship bonds among relatives also play an important role in an urban environment with respect to the current parliamentary elections and the election of representatives in general.

Kyrgyzstan's inability to accept democracy based on the Western model was emphasized by people who did not understand and who saw the negative aspects the democratization processes brought. Again a certain kind of ethnocentric view comes into play, when international observers gave a very positive assessment of the period immediately after the disintegration of the U.S.S.R., a period of tightening one's belt, which would allegedly give way to "dream" democracy. President Akaev ended up moving further away from the "democratic" method of government, becoming an increasingly despotic ruler.

Respondents from Bishkek, Osh, and Karakol had quite a uniform opinion about the events that happened at the beginning of the nineties. The people were mostly confused and distrustful, drawing on the experience of the political farces from the socialist years, and the economic fall of the country would increase this feeling. Respondents also suggested they were tired of the numerous elections and referendums which were held without anyone considering them to be important at all. Voting was carried out more as a matter of habit. The democratization processes and efforts exerted to develop civil-social factors lost their importance in the respondents' minds due to the difficult economic situation.

In connection with the "democratization" of society new phenomena have appeared, such as corruption in obtaining deputy mandates. In some cases, voters are given sums of money (as much as several hundred soms) to vote for a given candidate. What can be seen by some as plain corruption is seen by others as quite normal—if in the past someone in a rural society wanted to gain influence, he/she would need a great amount of money and would also have to be in the habit of giving "gifts."

Many international organizations (the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund) also greatly praised Kyrgyzstan for the pace at which it was carrying out its economic reforms, especially for the large amount of privatization. In farming, the collective farm sector (*kolkhozes*) and state farms (*sovkhoses*) did in fact disappear very rapidly. However, this process did not so much concern transformation, rather it meant the destruction of a functional system. Privatization may bring good results, but the possibility of accumulating capital must be well organized. Many private farmers do not produce enough for their own living.

After the coup of 2005 and the following victory by Kurmanbek Bakiev within the framework of a "democratic" presidential election, the situation did not improve. The fact that the president was not willing to change the constitution, under which the role of the president is very strong (Bakiev himself demanded this change when he was a representative of the opposition), led in the November of 2006 to more demonstrations and protests. As more and more people took part in the protests, more than during the revolution of 2005, with the demonstrators requiring that Bakiev step down, the situation became dangerous for the president and consequently he agreed to change the constitution. The person who tried to become involved in resolving this crisis was the former secretary of the C.C. of the Communist Party of Kirghizia, Tyrdykun Usubaliev (in the Soviet Union the highest representative of the republic), who was a member of the Patriarchs League (*aksakals*) and, during the period of the mentioned unrest, he celebrated his 87th birthday.

The unhappy economic situation was very often resolved by means of labor migration, especially to Russia. The statistical estimates claim that up to 80% of Kyrgyz under the age of 35 work, or have worked, abroad. The International Labor Organization (ILO) estimates that there are 500,000 such persons, while the Kyrgyz provide even higher numbers—up to 1.2 million inhabitants.⁹

Kyrgyzstan could therefore be an example showing that democracy based on the model of Western countries and purposely forced into a context very different from countries with a democratic tradi-

⁹ See: U. Melisbek, "Gastarbaitery rastaskivayut Rossiyu," CRP, available at [<http://www.kyrgyz.us>], 30 September, 2006.

tion is not a positive ideology or political practice. It could be positive indirectly, considering the parallel standards of adherence to civil and human rights, which may be common in countries where there are various forms of democratic government.

Turkmenistan

In the history of Turkmen tribes we almost never encounter an effort to strengthen tribal bonds in a manner that leads to the creation of a higher political unit. Turkmen tribes have never reached national unity, they would never agree even to a free administration under tribal chiefs. This was the greatest social difference between the Kyrgyz and Turkmen. Whereas the Kyrgyz recognized their relatives up to the seventh generation, Turkmen would discontinue bonds after the third or fourth generation.

Differences could be seen even in tribal aristocracies. Turkmen tribes had no khans or hereditary sultans in contrast to the Kyrgyz and Kazakhs. In most cases individual tribes did not even vote for their representatives. As for private disputes, if the parties reached no reconciliation, each party would make its own arrangements. The only law, based on customary law (*adat*), used to be revenge.¹⁰

Of all the Central Asian states, Turkmenistan took the longest to form a “united socialist nation,” as well as an affiliation to individual tribes (e.g. Teke, Jomud, Salar). Even though it does not match the level of affiliation to the nation, it still plays a considerable role today. The creation of the current Turkmen nation can largely be attributed to the Soviet nationalities policy.

The policy of exchanging state representatives based on tribes did not have the desirable effect of creating a united nation. All the representatives of the Turkmen S.S.R. carried out absolutely the same personnel policy—they found support in the members of their own tribes. Every time the representative of the republic was changed, there was a change in almost the entire civil service section throughout the country. After Šadža B. Batyrov became the secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party in Turkmenia, almost all leadership posts were taken over by Akhal Tekints. The Akhal Tekints were replaced after the inauguration of Suchan Babaev by the Alilints, etc. When in 1985 the future Turkmen president, Niyazov, became the first secretary of the C.C. of the Turkmen Communist Party, he followed the policy of his predecessors, giving the people from his tribe civil service posts within the republic.

During Niyazov’s administration the preference for Akhal Tekints became much stronger than previously under his predecessors. Dissatisfaction was not only shown by the representatives of other tribes, but also by representatives of the Akhal-Tekint tribes themselves. According to the representative of the Turkmen opposition, Avdy Kuliev, Niyazov’s clear goal was to break down the Turkmen tribes even more, so it would be easier to control them based only on the slogan “divide and rule.” Niyazov (according to Kuliev) achieved this goal relatively easily since Akhal Tekints are very unpopular with the other Turkmen tribes. Kuliev states that Moscow’s nationalities policy was, despite its many shortcomings, much more sensitive than the current policy, which is again leading (despite the proclamations of a united Turkmen nation) to the spreading of separatist tendencies and competition both between the tribes as well as within the tribes.¹¹

Independent Turkmenistan has become a presidential republic. The president is the official head of state as well as the prime minister. The post of president had already been introduced in Turkmenistan in 1990, which means sooner in real terms than officially, according to the constitution. First

¹⁰ See: E. Fait, *Central-Asian Nations*, Praha, 1910.

¹¹ See: A. Kuliev, “Rodoplemennaya prinadlezhnost ne mozhet razyedinyat nas,” *Erkin Turkmenistan*, 10 January, 2002, available at [<http://www.erkin.net/analytics/rodoplem.html>], 17 October, 2006.

Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party and Chairman of the Supreme Soviet of the Republic Saparmurad Niyazov became president in a nationwide vote after 98.3% of the voters showed their preferences (based on the official data).

The Turkmen Communist Party remained the main political party until 26 August, 1991. On this day Niyazov, who already held the post of president of the republic, as well as first secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party, announced the need to rename the Communist Party the National Democratic Party (a similar renaming had taken place in Uzbekistan).

In Turkmenistan, after the disintegration of the U.S.S.R., there was uncertainty as to what direction the new state should take. It was becoming clearer and clearer that the transformation of society would be very intensive, but it would definitely go in the direction of creating a pluralistic democracy along with a free market economy. The economic transformation in Turkmenistan would focus on something totally different. The priority goal was not economic liberalism at all, it was economic as well as political independence. Also for this reason state control today is similar in all fields (possibly even higher) than in the U.S.S.R.

Niyazov, the former first secretary of the Turkmen Communist Party, was able to concentrate a great amount of power in his hands—Niyazov was the president as well as the chairman of the legislative body (*Mejlis*), the prime minister, and the chairman of the National Council (*Khalk Maslakhaty*). Niyazov also started to create a new identity for the Turkmen nation. There are many similarities to the history of modern Turkey and its founder Atatürk. These similarities include the striving for neutrality, reform of the writing system, and describing the Turkmen president as *the father of all Turkmen* (Turkmenbashi)...

As has already been mentioned, countries with a low standard of living attempt to borrow cultural models from countries that are economically more developed. In Turkmenistan, during the transition period, the opposite phenomenon was observed—on the order of the state, historical half-truths were made up, the goal of which was to point to the antiquity and special position of the Turkmen nation on a global level. The state's influence on the population had reached a level where it was strongly demanded (under the threat of sanctions in state-run institutions) that people wear *the traditional* Turkmen clothes, Turkmen girls have certain hairdos, and boys and men *traditional* headwear, etc.

President Niyazov took one more step by giving his nation his prophetic book *Rukhnama*, which is considered *sacred* (*mukkades*). Opponents of the practice of misusing religion were effectively silenced, and on the walls of mosques, next to the *ajats* from Koran (in the Arabic alphabet), quotations from the *sacred Rukhnama* (in the Latin alphabet) appeared.

The president used the tactics of “destroying everything old and building everything anew.” Everything reminiscent of the Soviet Union was considered old, while the new was everything referring to the old traditions of the ancient Turkmen nation, which were, however, created on political orders. New holidays were created as well as new national heroes—founders of the Turkmen statehood, removal of the *azbuka*, and renaming of the days of the week and the months of the year. Niyazov's direction was strongly nationalistic—Turkmenistan for the Turkmen. In his statements (both in *Rukhnama* and through the media) he sometimes referred to the Turkmen as *my beloved black-eyed children*. These terms, through which he associated the nation with a particular race type, found (based on the statements by the respondents) a negative response even among the Turkmen themselves—still they led to great discrimination against ethnic minorities living in the country.

Culture (based on its wide interpretation) has changed dramatically. This can be easily noticed in the clothing and hairdos which must correspond to the uniform style (girls must wear long skirts and two long pigtails, boys must wear *tiubeteikas* (skullcaps) on their heads), as well as in the way of thinking, especially among the younger generation. Based on the statements by some university professors, the generation that grew up on *Rukhnama* (with some exceptions) is almost incapable of critical thinking, and they can only work with submitted *facts*.

Some informative value concerning Niyazov's personality cult can be found in examples of topics for the final examination in the Russian language classes at secondary schools in Turkmenistan in 2005: *Permanent spring has come to the Turkmen state. The sacred Rukhnama is the golden book of the Golden Age. The books by the Great Serdar are the basis for our studies.*

Despite the many negatives of President Niyazov's regime it is important to point out the permanent social stability in Turkmenistan, even the most remote areas of the country have been electrified and a gas-distribution system has been also installed. The social benefits well-known from Soviet times have been retained (in contrast to all the other post-Soviet countries), and in many areas they have actually become more ingrained. Political turmoil and civil unrest have not occurred in Turkmenistan at all, especially under the influence of strong central power. Despite these positive aspects of the new system the Soviet system is still seen as more positive due to the much lower level of interference by state power in private life.

Even though the respondents often showed dissatisfaction with the existing regime, they still appreciated the stability aspect, mentioning the low rate of crime in the country. Compared to other post-Soviet Central Asian states (civil war in Tajikistan and the ensuing economic collapse; the immense drop in the standard of living and total loss of social benefits after too rapid implementation of privatization and other reforms in Kyrgyzstan; also Uzbekistan is usually described as an economically unsuccessful state in Turkmenistan), the situation in Turkmenistan seemed to be relatively acceptable. What is more, many inhabitants accepted (just based on the principle of *a lie repeated one hundred times will become the truth*)—despite their declared disagreement with the regime—many of the offered slogans and they often also believed in (as an external observer) the most ridiculous historical half-truths proving the uniqueness of the whole nation. These cases do not include only “simple, uneducated” citizens. Even some university professors and other researchers who regard the mandatory events concerning *Rukhnama*, for example, as a “joke,” in fact at least partially believe in the historical half-truths about the antiquity of the Turkmen nation and its worldwide cultural contribution.

The case of Turkmenistan shows us clearly that during the reform as well as transition period, it is much easier for an individual or a very closed group of people to concentrate power in their hands, which may be strengthened over time and lead to unlimited power over the whole country. Despite the fact that democratization of society was not an officially declared priority, democratic slogans were heard even in Turkmenistan (renaming the Communist Party the Democratic Party for example). The *democratic* elections held were only to legitimize the existing power clique.

Conclusion

Whereas in Kyrgyzstan very intensive economic reforms based on the recommendations of international monetary organizations began to be carried out, which were also accompanied by the creation of a political system similar to Western parliamentary democracies, Turkmenistan, after the initial declarations of democracy, took a totally different development path. This led to a state where absolute power in the country was de facto held by a lifelong president possessing legislative, judicial, and executive powers.

Neither system of government has been a success—the people in both countries are visibly upset about the reforms carried out. The level of satisfaction as a benchmark of success of whether a system is working well would be very low with respect to both systems. Neither state can boast of effective delegation of power at the lower levels, which used to be very typical of this region. Even the Soviet system of government, where a very strong central power existed but the local administration also possessed extensive powers, was closer to this model. Patriarchs (*aksakals*) in the villages had

quite a lot of influence even in the U.S.S.R. In pre-Soviet times many important decisions were made within the tribe, and the members of this community entirely understood these decisions. The political party system and pluralistic democracy have not been understood since local experience knows of nothing similar.

The problem of “democratization” of society should be taken as a problem of power delegation. Merely borrowing the government models from Europe, and possibly the U.S., will be very complicated in the Central Asian countries. All political systems develop depending on the conditions under which they originated, however in Europe this process often took several centuries. Therefore, it would not be very realistic to expect these models to be successful under totally different conditions or that this success will come quickly.

The published data concerning the current political situation has been acquired in particular from long-term research carried out in 2005 and 2006 in Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, dealing with the post-socialistic transformation and the subsequent changes in culture. This article also presents the experience the author gained during his long-term stay in these countries in 2007, as well as his short-term stays in 2000, 2002, and 2004.
