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**BROKEN DREAMS IN ASHKHABAD:  
AN OVERVIEW OF TURKMENISTAN'S POST-INDEPENDENCE  
POLITICAL CONTRADICTIONS AND THE CHALLENGES OF  
CENTRAL ASIAN MIGRANTS IN RUSSIA**

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**ABSTRACT**

This article presents a discussion on political contradictions of post-independence Turkmenistan. As part of a broader effort to understand the social and power dynamics resulting from the collapse of the Soviet Union, we apply a descriptive analysis of the principal domestic and foreign policy events involving the Ashkhabad government, as well as the implications for the lives of Turkmen migrants in Russia, who have chosen to leave their country of origin in search of better opportunities. The current paper suggests that Turkmenistan not only became a laboratory for the exercise of a local version of a 'Cult of Personality' of the leader, but also precariously operationalized its political neutrality due to economic dependence on Moscow and, more recently, on China. Regarding Turkmen migrants abroad, we evidence their difficulties of assimilation in Russia, due, in part, to a 'stereotyped' view about migrants on the part of Russian population.

**Keywords:** Turkmenistan, Central Asia, Authoritarianism, Post-Soviet Space, Russian Public Opinion.

## INTRODUCTION

Turkmenistan, a Central Asian country within the Post-Soviet space which is home to some 5.8 million people, has successfully managed to cut off almost any contact with the outside world and this situation is not expected to change any time soon. None of the Western-designed social networks (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram), messaging apps (Whatsapp, Messenger, Skype), applications (Youtube) or even search engines (such as Google) are allowed to work freely within the country. Russian versions of those same Western-designed social networks and apps (e.g. Vkontakte, Telegram, Yandex etc.) also do not fare much differently. Calling someone within Turkmenistan can be described as a '*tour de force*', as telecommunications around the country are intentionally undeveloped and whenever someone manages (very rarely) to get a call through, there is always the risk of being cut off abruptly due to connection issues or due to the country's always vigilant surveillance regime. Young people and women trying to fly from Ashkhabad to other countries can be stopped at the airport for no apparent reason and being simply denied to fly, unless a couple hundred dollars can be spent to bribe airport officials.

The stories above, albeit bearing resemblance to situations one would attribute immediately to North Korea, in fact occur at a daily basis within one of the most closed, and yet one of the least studied countries in the IR field, Turkmenistan. With the aim to fill this *lacunae* in knowledge concerning Turkmenistan, in particular, and to contribute to the studies of post-Soviet Central Asia, in general, this article sets out to present a discussion of Ashkhabad's post-independence political contradictions. To that end, the article is divided in three distinct sections: the first one deals with Turkmenistan's peculiar dictatorship and personality cult surrounding both presidents Niyazov (1992-2006) and Berdymukhamedov (2007-currently). The second section approaches Ashkhabad's dependence from Moscow and, more recently, China in view of its exploration of natural resources, especially gas. Finally, the third and last part will tackle Turkmen (and Central Asian) migrants' perils relating to their adaptation and acceptance within the Russian Federation.

In terms of methodology, the first section of our paper will rely mostly on a descriptive analysis of the main domestic political events of Post-Soviet Turkmenistan. The second section will bring data from the bilateral trade and the economic relationship between Turkmenistan with both China and Russia, whereas the third and last section will focus on general stereotypes held by the Russian population about Central Asian migrants obtained by public opinion surveys, as well as by interviews conducted by the author.

## TURKMENISTAN'S PECULIAR DICTATORSHIP: DOMESTIC CONTRADICTIONS AND PERSONALITY CULT

### Post-Independence: Niyazov's 'Cult of Personality'

After the fall of the Soviet Union, Turkmenistan continued to be ruled by President Saparmurat Niyazov, who was appointed the First Secretary of the Communist Party branch of the country back in 1985. Running unopposed for president in 1990 and 1992, Niyazov, as the only candidate available, won the electoral dispute in those years with 98.3 and 99.5 percent of the votes

respectively (OSCE, 2007). In 1993, Turkmenistan's Parliament (the Mejlis) cancelled the presidential election marked for 1997, extending the President's term up until 2002, a measure further approved by public referendum in 1994 by 99.99 percent of the voters. By the end of 1999, the government then decided to make Niyazov President-for-life in Turkmenistan, in a clear contradiction to the country's Constitution.

During his presidency, Niyazov adopted the epithet of *Türkmenbaşy* (Turkmenbashi), or "Father of All Turkmen", having taken further steps into the creation of an indigenous version of a 'Cult of Personality'. Including other extravagant endeavors, Niyazov built a 14 meter-high golden statue of himself in the capital Ashkhabad (with an estimated cost of around 12 million US\$), alongside various monuments and busts in his homage<sup>2</sup>. The image of the president was printed on paper money, posters, on different government buildings, in mosques, on front page of newspapers. Additionally, Niyazov also renamed the months of the year in his honor with January for instance being changed to Turkmenbashi (*Türkmenbaşy*).

In 2001 a moral/religious guide written by Niyazov named *Ruhnama* (or Book of the Soul in Turkmen), became a compulsory reading in high schools and universities (Burke, 2014), turning into a local analogue of the Quran itself. Not long after the book's release, the knowledge of *Ruhnama* was also mandatory for professional certification in all institutions and organizations of Turkmenistan (Ria Novosti, 2006)<sup>3</sup>. Niyazov's presidency was indeed marked by numerous polemics and political setbacks for Turkmenistan. As an example, after an unsuccessful attempt to assassinate Niyazov in 2002, Turkmenistan witnessed an increasingly level of mass repressions and imprisonment.

**Figure 1.** Golden Statue of Saparmurat Niyazov (Turkmenbashi) in Ashkhabad (Niyazov's 'Cult of Personality' takes physical form)



Source: Radio Free Europe

Benefitting from the lack of serious external threats to the State, the Turkmen government shifted "primary responsibility for national security to domestic

<sup>2</sup> During his presidency, Niyazov also used the State's wealth from gas exports in order to implement luxurious architectural projects. Among them, he built Central Asia's largest mosque, named Spirit of Turkmenbashi, with an estimated cost of more than £60 million.

<sup>3</sup> Notwithstanding, to promote the president's guide, all other literary works were suppressed in the country

security services [...] focused on combating internal dissent” (Gorenburg, 2014: 13). Also as a result of the failed attempt at his life, an earlier agreement with Russia on the possibility of Turkmen citizens to receive double citizenship (signed between Niyazov himself and [Russian President] Boris Yeltsin in 1993) was repealed unilaterally by Niyazov.

Citizens were then forcibly required to choose either the Russian or the Turkmen citizenship, but not the double citizenship which was previously available to them. In effect, Turkmenistan’s Russian-speaking population “perceived double citizenship as the only guarantee from the arbitrariness of the Turkmen authorities” (Kazantsev, 2016), meaning that they could, in view of the circumstances in their home country, try to make a life (in the quality of citizens) for themselves in Russia and still be able to preserve their rights in Turkmenistan.

Beyond those restrictive measures, in 2005 Niyazov ordered the closure of all hospitals in the country - with the exception of those located in Ashkhabad - on the grounds that people who got sick could travel to the capital for treatment<sup>4</sup>; not long afterwards, Niyazov also closed local libraries in the villages, once, according to the president, villagers still ‘don’t read’ (Lenta.ru, 2005)<sup>5</sup>. Turkmenistan’s Academy of Sciences (one of the most prestigious academic institutions of the country) was shut off as well and in the universities, the study period was limited to 2 years. All these aforementioned initiatives were undertaken within an environment of no-criticism towards the President, be it by domestic political opposition or media, as it was tightly controlled by the State<sup>6</sup>.

### **From *Turkmenbasi* to *Arkadag*: or How to Replace One Dictatorship with Another**

Niyazov died of a sudden heart attack at the end of 2006. According to the Constitution of Turkmenistan, in the event of a President’s death, new elections were to be held for the next Head of State, while his powers should be transferred to the Chairperson of the Mejlis (the country’s parliament). However, the Cabinet of Ministers and the National Security Council (NSC) of Turkmenistan, ignoring the Constitution, appointed Kurbanguly Berdymukhamedov, instead, then the Deputy Chairman of the Cabinet of Ministers, to occupy temporarily the post of Head of the State<sup>7</sup>. Then, in 2007 Turkmenistan held its multi-candidate presidential election (with all contenders belonging to the Democratic Party of Turkmenistan) in order to ‘legitimize’ the rule of Berdymukhamedov. As reported by OSCE (2007: 2) in the elections “no individuals who identify themselves as political opposition, and mostly reside outside Turkmenistan, were nominated

4 In 2005 alone, Niyazov fired 15,000 medical workers, while provincial hospitals ran short of doctors and medicaments (Lenta.ru, 2005)

5 During Niyazov’s period as Head of State in Turkmenistan ballet, opera, circus, and theater were too forbidden

6 Civil society in Turkmenistan being ill-developed (both administrative and organizationally) could do little to override or meddle with the government’s plans. Niyazov, nevertheless, implemented a few socially-oriented internal policies, providing Turkmenistan’s population with basically free gas, water supply and electricity (Paramonov and Stokov 2008). Those measures could thus be directed to appease popular dissent towards contradictory political measures undertaken by Turkmen authorities. Nevertheless, in 2017, due to an economic crisis (provoked by falling prices of oil and gas in international markets), the presidential administration had to cancel the gratuity of gas, water supply and electricity for the Turkmen.

7 The actual Chairperson of the Mejlis, Ovezgeldy Ataev, was barred from assuming the position of Head of State after Turkmenistan’s Prosecutor’s Office filed a criminal case against him (OSCE 2007). In fact, according to analysts, the Turkmen Constitution should be considered as merely a declarative document (Kazantsev, quoted in Независимая Газета 2016)

as candidate”. In that election, the acting President Berdymukhamedov won 89% of the votes.

After taking office, much akin Nikita Khrushchev's campaign of de-Stalinization of the Soviet Union, Berdymukhamedov got rid of some elements of his predecessor's 'Cult of Personality' in Turkmenistan. He cancelled the mandatory reading of *Ruhnama*, brought back the old traditional calendar, reopened Turkmenistan's Academy of Sciences and restored full secondary education (up to 5 years), opera, ballet and circus (Nezavisimaya Gazeta, 2016)<sup>8</sup>.

Notwithstanding, it didn't take long for Berdymukhamedov to replace one cult of personality with another. The new President for instance also adopted an epithet for himself, in this case *Arkadag*, meaning "Protector", whereas new golden monuments were opened in the capital city of Ashkhabad in his homage, while Niyazov's ones were transferred to the city's outskirts. Within this new context, in 2012, Berdymukhamedov obtained 97% of the votes and in 2017 (the last elections held in Turkmenistan so far) 97%. In fact, elections in Turkmenistan during Berdymukhamedov's presidency were also marked by the impediment of real oppositional political forces. Additionally, in 2016, prior to the last election, the Mejlis abolished the age limit for the presidency, in practice allowing Berdymukhamedov to become *de facto* Head of State for life (Nezavisimaya Gazeta, 2016).

Meanwhile, political freedoms in Turkmenistan were continuously repressed during *Arkadag's* presidency. As a result, a movement founded in 2013 and headed by international organizations dedicated to the defense of human rights released a campaign directed towards Ashkhabad known as 'Show Them Alive'<sup>9</sup>, with a list of more than 100 political prisoners currently held by the State, whose destinies remain unknown to their families. According to a recently released document by the organization, "the practice of enforced disappearances in Turkmenistan [...] has been systematic [...] in midst of severe suppression of civil liberties and lack of access to the country for foreign human rights organizations and international observers" (Pokazhite Ikh Zhivymi! 2019: 1)<sup>10</sup>. Meanwhile, the deaths of a significant number of people in custody were met with the authorities' indifference, which, by its turn, neglected their investigation, turning them into 'extrajudicial executions' by the State (*ibidem*).

Notwithstanding the overall restrictive political environment, Turkmenistan also faced the rise of drug addiction and trafficking in the country during Berdymukhamedov's tenure in power. There is indeed suspicion that Turkmenistan's border guards and personnel are themselves involved in cross-border smuggling operations, due to inherent corruption and political patronage (Gorenburg, 2014) by State's authorities. Addiction to drugs, according to non-governmental sources, is widespread especially among young people, due to the lack of educational as well as professional and economic opportunities, coupled with significant unemployment rates and the low price of narcotics (Berdyeva, 2010)<sup>11</sup>.

<sup>8</sup> Berdymukhamedov also reinstated provincial hospitals closed under Niyazov.

<sup>9</sup> In Russian Cyrillic Покажите их живыми!

<sup>10</sup> Практика насильственных исчезновений в Туркменистане на протяжении последних 17 лет носит систематический характер [...] в условиях жесткого подавления гражданских свобод и отсутствия доступа в страну для зарубежных правозащитных организаций и международных наблюдателей (original in Russian).

<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, Ashkhabad refused to join a regional anti-drug coalition led by Moscow in 2010 (alongside Pakistan, Afghanistan and Tajikistan), on the grounds that there are no problems related to drug addiction in the country (Berdyeva, 2010).

All this turmoil, meanwhile, occurred in a country with rich natural resources, especially oil and gas, but whose government's policies, instead of directing Turkmenistan's export revenues towards tackling acute domestic problems, preferred to use the State's budget for projects of personal aggrandizement of its leaders.

### **TURKMENISTAN'S [IN]DEPENDENCE DILEMMA: ASHKHABAD'S PIVOT FROM RUSSIA TO CHINA**

December 12<sup>th</sup> marked 25 years since Turkmenistan declared its 'political neutrality', being one of the few countries around the globe that upholds such a position and recognized internationally by the United Nations. Notwithstanding, Ashkhabad's political neutrality did not necessarily translate into economic 'independence' of the country, especially in relation to Russia and, more recently, China. In effect, Turkmenistan is famous by possessing the fourth-largest proven reserves of natural gas in the world<sup>12</sup>, turning it into a 'gas power' in Central Asia, with its economy relying heavily on the export of *commodities* to the international market. On average, from 1997 to 2018, natural gas composed approximately 74.3% of the country's total exports, seconded by refined petroleum with 10.9% (Observatory of Economic Complexity, n/d).

However, albeit rich in natural gas and oil, Turkmenistan suffers from lack of infrastructure to better exploit its resources, thus depending on external sources for investment in this sector. Up to this point for instance, Ashkhabad "has virtually no international oil pipeline infrastructure" (US Energy Information Administration, 2016) with Gazprom (the biggest Russian exporter and producer of natural gas) holding a monopolistic control over the transit and distribution of Turkmen gas to Europe. In effect, a component of Russia's political influence in Central Asia<sup>13</sup> regards the Turkmenistan's dependency on the economic infrastructures controlled by Moscow, especially in the transportation of natural gas and oil through Russian territory to European markets (Freire, 2008), a situation explained by the region's "decades-long membership in the former Soviet economic system" (Weitz, 2014: 37)

In 1996 for instance, then head of Gazprom, Rem Vyakhirev, was quoted as saying Gazprom would "not allow gas to be exported from Turkmenistan by routes other than through Russia" (Paramonov and Stokov, 2008: 20), thus putting Ashkhabad in a situation of dependence on Moscow's economic grip. Meanwhile, as Kotkin (2002: 29) suggests, "Russia [...] prefers to reap [Central Asia's] regional resources without [...] being burdened with responsibility for local government and social welfare", which helps explain Moscow's passive instance in face of the misdeeds and arbitrariness of the Turkmenistan's government (discussed in the previous section) for example.

In 2003, [Russian President Vladimir] Putin and Niyazov signed a long-term contract between the two countries for the sale and purchase of Turkmen natural

<sup>12</sup> As of 2019, Turkmenistan holds 9.8% of the total global reserves of natural gas, behind only Qatar (12.4%), Iran (16.1%) and Russia (19.1%) (BP, 2020).

<sup>13</sup> Central Asia is composed by Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, while also including parts of the territories of six other countries: Afghanistan, China, India, Iran, Mongolia and Pakistan. Historically the region is part of what can be considered a Russian zone of influence, having remained for centuries under direct control by Moscow, since the mid-19th. During the USSR period, Central Asian States' borders were designed by the Soviet government, according to ethnic-national lines, mostly on the same lines of today's regional frontiers.

gas for 25 years (Gazprom.ru, 2003). At the time, Gazprom's head Alexey Miller (2003) lauded the agreement as a "huge breakthrough in relations between Russia and Turkmenistan in the gas sector"<sup>14</sup> solidifying the cooperation between two 'leading gas powers'<sup>15</sup>. Within the agreement, Ashkhabad guaranteed the supply of natural gas to Russia, while Moscow accounted for its transportation to the end consumers<sup>16</sup>. By that time, gas production in Turkmenistan accounted for 60 billion m<sup>3</sup> per year, while domestic consumption revolved around 10-12 billion m<sup>3</sup>, with the exceeding gas being exported mainly to Ukraine, with Gazprom working as the transit guarantor of Turkmen gas (through the territories of Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and Russia) via the Central Asia-Center pipeline (CAC)<sup>17</sup>.

**Table 1.** Where does Turkmenistan export to? (1997-2010)

1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003
Ukraine (70%)	Italy (22.3% <sup>18</sup> )	Ukraine (32.2%)	Russia (33.5%)	Ukraine (70.6%)	Ukraine (70.7%)	Ukraine (64.6%)
2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010
Ukraine (54.6%)	Ukraine (54.9%)	Ukraine (63.2%)	Ukraine (71.9%)	Ukraine (70%)	Ukraine (34.3%)	China (38.8%)

Source: Observatory of Economic Complexity

Within this contract, between 2004 and 2006 50% of the Russian payments for Turkmen gas came in the form of equipment supplies to Ashkhabad for further development of its gas industry, in view of Turkmenistan's dire conditions in terms of infrastructure. Moreover, the prices for Turkmen gas initially set in 44 US\$ for 1 thousand m<sup>3</sup> in 2004 were raised to 150 US\$ in the second half of 2008, providing higher revenues for the Turkmenistan government, albeit not directed to the wellbeing of its population.

Nevertheless, from 2009 onwards the [once profitable] economic relationship between Turkmenistan and Russia started to change. In April 2009 supplies of Turkmen gas to Russia were interrupted due to an accident (which some observers believed to be caused by Gazprom as a retaliatory measure against Ashkhabad' dispute over gas prices) on the main pipeline connecting Russia and Central Asia. A new agreement between Gazprom and Turkmenistan was afterwards signed by the end of 2009, according to which Russia planned to import 10-11 billion m<sup>3</sup> of gas from Turkmenistan, way less than the amount provided by Ashkhabad just one year prior<sup>19</sup>.

In face of the situation, from 2010 onwards, however, Turkmenistan started to redirect itself towards China in order to diversify its exports, after the conclusion in 2009 of a gas pipeline connecting the country to the Chinese market via

<sup>14</sup> The documents signed today are a huge breakthrough in the relations between Russia and Turkmenistan in the gas sector [...] They define the future cooperation of the two leading gas powers for a quarter of a century (original in Russian) (Gazprom.ru, 2003).

<sup>15</sup> In this context of cooperation between 'gas powers', Russia has for instance been a co-author of two emblematic Turkmenistan-initiated UN General Assembly resolutions. One concerning "Reliable and stable transit of energy and its role in ensuring sustainable development and international cooperation" and another one on "the role of transport and transit corridors in ensuring international cooperation for sustainable development".

<sup>16</sup> According to the contract, Russia's purchase of Turkmen would leap from 5-6 billion cubic meters in 2004 to 70-80 billion cubic meters in 2009 (Gazprom.ru, 2003).

<sup>17</sup> The Central Asia - Center gas pipeline system was built between 1967 and 1985 during the Soviet era.

<sup>18</sup> In that year, 86.7% of Turkmenistan's exports to Italy were composed by refined petroleum.

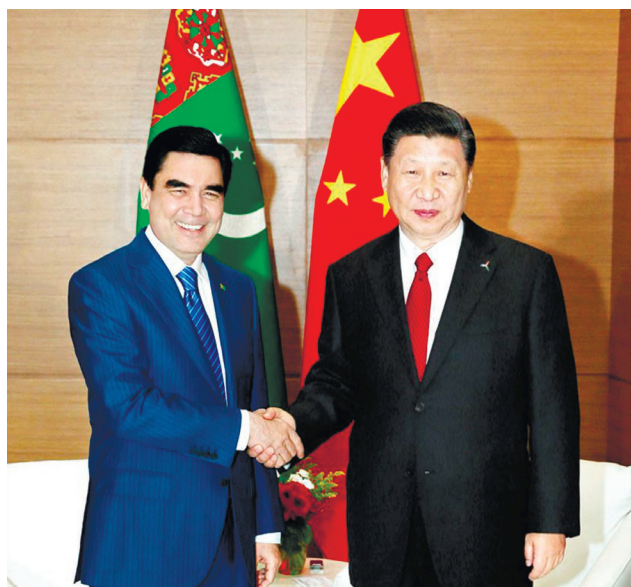
<sup>19</sup> Whose amount surpassed 60 billion m<sup>3</sup>.

Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, the Central Asia-China Pipeline (CACP).

As Russia did not want and in practice was not able to develop full economic relations with the countries of Central Asia, the States in the region began to try and achieve economic relations with other countries, mainly countries outside the former Soviet space. Precisely because of Russia's inconsistencies, as seen in its periodic attempts to dictate conditions for the export of hydrocarbon fuels and its low regard for the interests of the Central Asian countries themselves, Turkmenistan [...] [was] pushed to take decisive action to diversify the export routes for [...] [its] energy resources (Paramonov and Stokov, 2008: 10)

Within this context, it is important to note that the Turkmenistan-China pipeline was entirely financed by China. In fact, as stated by Starr (2014: 161), in Central Asia in general Beijing's "economic outreach [...] has been so effective as to pose the prospect of substituting Russian economic domination [...] with massive interventions by China". Resulting from this close economic relation, in 2013, China and Turkmenistan established a strategic partnership, with Ashkhabad politically supporting Chinese positions on issues related to Taiwan<sup>20</sup>, while adhering to the 'one-China policy'.

**Figure 2.** *Presidents Xi Jinping (China) and Berdymukhamedov (Turkmenistan)*



Source: Xinhuanet, 2013

Turkmenistan's approximation with China thus effectively represented a pivotal moment for the country, shifting its [long-term] dependence from Moscow to Beijing. As a result, while between 1997 and 2009, Ukraine was the destination of 84.5% of all Turkmen gas (through Russian soil), between 2010 and 2018 China accounted for 96.6% (Observatory Of Economic Complexity, n/d). In terms of overall exports, China then represented an average of 76.5% of all Turkmen's exports between 2011 and 2018.

<sup>20</sup> Opposing for instance Taiwan's accession to any international organization as a sovereign State, an issue of uttermost importance to Beijing.

**Table 2.** *Where does Turkmenistan export to? (2011-2018)*

2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
China (62.6%)	China (80.7%)	China (77.2%)	China (79.7%)	China (77.5%)	China (70.6%)	China (83.5%)	China (80.2%)

Source: Observatory of Economic Complexity

In 2019, Turkmen gas accounted alone for 2/3 of China's total imports of gas (BP 2020). Meanwhile, although this 'gas partnership' with Beijing represented a successful shift by the Turkmen's authorities in terms of its previous dependence from Moscow, it nevertheless evidenced the country's economic fragilities and the precariousness of Ashkhabad's 'political neutrality', once Turkmenistan is still in a position of dependency, this time with a different Eurasian power, and lacking the wherewithal to overcome its domestic problems even considering the country's stable revenues from the exports of natural resources. It is indeed due to this situation that most Turkmen people opted for leaving the country in search of better opportunities abroad, especially in Russia, which is the topic of discussion of the third section of this paper.

### **TURKMEN [AND CENTRAL ASIAN] MIGRANTS IN RUSSIA: A CLASH OF 'IDENTITIES' AND 'STEREOTYPES' FROM THE PUBLIC OPINION**

As of 2017, the Russian Federation accounted for the overwhelming majority of Turkmens living abroad, about 72%. In this context, the number of Turkmen students in Russia also grows every year<sup>21</sup>. Indeed, with the end of the USSR and the lack of economic perspectives left over within the former Soviet Central Asian republics, Russia became the most attractive destination for both economic and educational migration in the case of Turkmenistan.

**Table 3.** Data on Turkmen Population Abroad (selected years)

COUNTRIES	1990	2000	2017
Russia	140,551	175,252	185,795
Uzbekistan	52,226	42,565	7,100
Kazakhstan	42,141	33,227	2,493
Ukraine	32,406	24,926	23,824

Source: World Bank Migration and Remittances Data

Nevertheless, in Russia opinion polls reveal a certain sense of indisposition of the local population towards Central Asian migrants in general. In 2017, when asked about their attitude in relation to migrants from the republics of Central Asia, only 10% of Russians said they "sympathized with them", whereas 48% replied with "neutrality/tolerance" and 38% mentioned having a "negative" attitude towards migrants (Levada, 2017: 170). When asked, on the other hand, what constituted - in their opinion - the inherent traits of [Central Asian] migrants, the most referenced characteristics were as follows

<sup>21</sup> At the beginning of the 2019/2020 academic year for instance, it consisted of about 36 thousand people

**Table 4.** Russians' View on the Most Inherent Characteristics of Migrants from Central Asia (Number of Times a Given Characteristic Was Chosen per Each 100 Respondents)

2013	2016	2017
Lack of knowledge of the Russian language (53)	Lack of knowledge of the Russian language (39)	Lack of knowledge of the Russian language (36)
Low level of qualification in work they do (42)	Low level of qualification in work they do (32)	Low level of qualification in work they do (30)
Untidy, repulsive appearance (35)	Untidy, repulsive appearance (27)	High capacity of work, even receiving low salaries (25)

Source. Levada, 2017: 170

As shown in the table above, one of the most persistent views of Russian people towards Central Asian migrants concerns their perceived lack of control of the Russian language, as well as references to a low level of work qualification and even 'repulsive appearance'. When asked "in your opinion, which of the following traits are inherent in migrant workers?" Russian respondents also highlighted a perception of migrants as 'poorly educated people, capable only of common labor' (32 out of 100 respondents), that they 'are unhappy [...] [and having] to endure many difficulties and hardships' (28 out of 100) and their 'hard-work' (26 out of 100) (Levada, 2017: 170).

Representative of this overall view, a popular comedic show in the Russian television - aired between 2006 and 2011 - known as наша Russia (Nasha Russia), had one of its sketches depicting a pair of Central Asian migrant workers from Tajikistan, Ravshan and Shumshud (Равшан и Шумшуд), incapable of understanding the most basic orientations from their Russian boss, while committing a multitude of mistakes in varied construction projects. The national appeal of such a television show, especially known among young people, ultimately reinforced the stereotype of migrant workers as lacking both language and professional skills.

Although, however, the problem of 'prejudice' is rarely discussed in the Russian public sphere, it nevertheless provides a 'permissive' environment for differentiated treatment – mostly discriminatory - towards nationalities from Central Asia in many workplaces, a situation especially acute not only in vibrant economic capitals such as Saint Petersburg and Moscow, but also in the country's provincial and less metropolitan areas. As an example, episodes in 2017 and 2018 regarding Turkmen women working as caregiver assistants in kindergartens for Russian children in the city of Pskov (in Northwestern Russia) reportedly involved cases of persecution related to ethnic as well as religious differences (interviews conducted by the author)<sup>22</sup>. Those events demonstrate a somewhat uneasy coexistence of worldviews in Russia, where a tacit 'clash' of identities routinely takes place between adherents of Orthodoxy and atheists, on the one hand, and Muslims, on the other.

In fact, with the end of the USSR in 1991, the ideological vacuum left by

<sup>22</sup> Additionally, it was also reported a differentiation in salary between Turkmen and Russian workers exercising the same function in these provincial kindergartens. Whereas the former usually received 10.000 P monthly as caregiver assistants (interviews conducted by the author), the average income for the Pskov region in 2018 consisted of 26.000 P.

Communism provided the conditions for an Orthodox religious revitalization in Russia, with the former 'partially' occupying the place of State ideology (Huntington, 1996). According to survey data seemingly 70% of the current Russian population considers itself Orthodox, 12% are atheists and 6% are Muslims (Segrillo, 2015)<sup>23</sup>, thus placing Central Asians, in general, and Turkmen migrants, in particular, in the religious minority group. This reaffirmation of the Orthodox identity of Russia, albeit debatable in degree, is an element of contention with other sets of 'identities' within the Federation, such as the Muslims.

**Figure 3.** Aerial Photo of the Muslim Gathering at the Holyday Eid Al-Adha in St. Petersburg (Russia)



Source: Reuters.com

Additionally, in 2017 54% of Russians viewed migrants as 'a burden for our country because they take away workplaces from us' (Levada, 2017: 172), while 44% of respondents believed that migrants 'increase the possibility of terrorist attacks in our country' (*ibidem*). In 2017, for instance, a terrorist attack in a metro in Saint Petersburg was carried out by a young Russian citizen - Akbarzhon Jalilov - born in Kyrgyzstan, another former Soviet Central Asian republic of Muslim majority. Although the connection between the perpetrator and Islamic extremist groups had not been confirmed by Russian authorities, the incident led to the implementation of harsher security measures inside Metro stations both in Saint Petersburg and Moscow and to more frequent inquiries by Russian police officers towards Central Asian migrants in public spaces.

All the aforementioned provides an indicator into why Putin has always been careful when talking about terrorism in Russia, while attempting to dissociate it from Islam, a connection which is nevertheless often made by European and American leaders (Iandoli, 2017)<sup>24</sup>. Therefore, Putin usually avoids using the term 'Islamic terrorism', since it could potentially alienate millions of Russian residents (Kramer, 2017)<sup>25</sup> of Islamic confession, including migrants. Be it as it

<sup>23</sup> Moreover, post-2000 Russia witnessed an approximation between [its President Vladimir] Putin and the Orthodox Church, a consequential political movement that not only worked as a legitimizing factor for the Head of State, but that also resonated with a significant part of the Russian society (Bezerra 2019).

<sup>24</sup> This cautious attitude by the Russian president would take into account the sizable Islamic community in Russia, which encompassed around 10% of the total population in 2016 (Iandoli 2017).

<sup>25</sup> It does not, however, prevent Central Asians (or people with Arabic, Middle-Eastern and/or non-Slavic and

may, one recent observable trend in the public opinion is the growing number of Russians who favor the restriction of immigration into the country since mid-2000s (see Table 5 below)

**Table 5.** *What Should the Russian Government Policy towards Migrants Be Like?*

(N<sup>a</sup> of respondents = 1600)

	2002	2007	2012	2017
Should try to restrict the influx of migrants	45%	57%	78%	71%
Should not have any administrative barriers against the influx, should try to use it for the benefit of Russia	44%	32%	14%	20%
Difficult to answer	11%	11%	8%	9%

Source: Levada, 2017

As shown in the table above, there was an increase from a little less than half (in 2002) to more than two thirds (in 2017) of the Russian respondents favoring the limitation and restrictions of the influx of migrants. This overall position, coupled with a number of economic difficulties caused by the Western sanctions towards Russia after 2014, the fall in oil and gas prices in the international markets in comparison to mid-2000s and the turmoil effected by the most recent COVID-19 crisis are likely to keep the number of Russians disfavoring migration quite high for the foreseeable future. That observation, in turn, presents yet another obstacle and an additional adaptation challenge for Turkmen (and Central Asian's) migrants in the country, be it through educational or professional aims, alongside an already complex scenario involving a clash of 'identities' related to both religious and ethnic differences.

## CONCLUSION

What caused all this political domestic and external contradictions in Turkmenistan? And moreover, what prompted other former Soviet Central Asian republics to fall into authoritarian rule and lack of accountability before their populations and violations of human rights? According to historian Stephen Kotkin (2002) for instance, the explanation has its origins in the very demise of the USSR, whose Communist Party's disintegration after the attempted reforms undertaken by Mikhail Gorbachev in the late 1980s left the former Soviet nation-states as perfect vehicles for self-aggrandizement, culminating in political mismanagement and rampant authoritarianism<sup>26</sup>. Turkmenistan, in this sense, can be seen as text-book example of a Post-Soviet self-serving authoritarian State, embedded in a Stalinist-styled totalitarian political regime and 'Cult of Personality's' extravaganzas. It thus causes no surprise that although Turkmenistan held 9 elections since its independence, none was considered free and fair by international organizations.

non-European semblance) to being framed more often by security officers in the streets of Russia.

<sup>26</sup> In this context, concludes the author "nation-Statism has proven instrumental for consolidating and even extending the illiberal hyper-executive branches and shadow economies inherited from Soviet times" (Kotkin 2002: 36).

Indeed, the political contradictions of today's Turkmenistan owe much to its Soviet inheritance, where one-party rule signified, in the words of Hannah Arendt (1948: 253), the "dictatorial domination of one party over all others" and where newly independent ruling elites had easily taken control of the previously established State-machinery for their own benefit and perpetuation. Turkmenistan also join ranks with a relatively known archetypical understanding of the Muslim world<sup>27</sup> as non-democratic in general, which is sometimes explained by the lack of "strong institutional and cultural underpinnings" (Tibi, 2008) that democracy requires, where authority is highly personalized, State institutions are undeveloped and civil society is incapable to exercise participation in political decision-making (*ibidem*) as well as to form a credible and strong opposition<sup>28</sup>. Within such a context, substantial political changes in Turkmenistan in favor of a less authoritarian path or a revolution from the 'bottom' are unlikely to happen, once the country lacks key elements that were present in other successful revolutions occurred in the Post-Soviet space (*e.g.* Georgia in 2003, Ukraine in 2004 and Kyrgyzstan in 2005)<sup>29</sup>.

In foreign policy terms, although Turkmenistan usually takes pride in its choice for political neutrality after independence, this country's status in the international system could do little to ameliorate Ashkhabad's acute domestic problems and economic dependence on powerful external players such as Russia and China. In all reality, since mid-2000s Turkmenistan only managed to shift its dependence from Moscow to Beijing, but the country's vulnerability remained the same. Chinese investments in Central Asia in general (and in Turkmenistan in particular), on the other hand, while known for its non-attachment character, meaning no social or political change requirements for receptor countries, comes in handy for Turkmenistan's authorities, whose dictatorial exaggerations and misdeeds of its leaders are neither condemned nor sanctioned.

This overall situation prompted many Turkmen to leave their country in search of better economic and educational opportunities elsewhere, mainly to Russia. Nevertheless, many Turkmen, while avoiding inherent problems at their home State, end up having to deal with a different set of problems abroad. Due to their religious affiliation (mostly Islamic) inherited from family tradition as well as from a different cultural upbringing, Turkmen migrants (and Central Asian migrants in general) find themselves in an uneasy position when it comes to assimilation within Russian society. This situation is especially acute taking into consideration a 'tacit' clash of identities stemming from differences in worldviews coexisting in Russia, as well as by negative stereotypes held by the Russian population towards migrants, which demonstrates clear traits of 'prejudice'.

Be it as it may, in order to stop Turkmen from migrating to other neighboring countries, in 2018 the government in Ashkhabad - in a desperate measure to contain the outflow of the youth - banned citizens under 40 years old from leaving

27 89% of Turkmenistan's population is Muslim, from the Sunni branch of Islam, with the second biggest confession being Christianity with a distant 10% (World Atlas, 2019).

28 In Huntington's (1984) view, while requiring uncritical conformity and obedience to authority, Islam inadvertently provides a 'permissive' environment for totalitarian governments in some States, opposing democracy's values such as political openness, pluralism, individual autonomy and freedom.

29 Those elements are enumerated by McFaul (2005) as being: a semi-autocratic rather than fully autocratic regime (as in the case of Turkmenistan), an unpopular President, a united and organized opposition, independent media, divisions within coercive apparatus of the State and etc.

Turkmenistan (Radio Liberty, 2018)<sup>30</sup>, practically locking its own population and preventing many Turkmen from looking for a better life outside. In so doing, the authorities in Ashkhabad ended up *overnight* turning the hopeful aspirations of many into no more than just broken dreams. Therefore, in order to find an escape from the perils of their own reality, people were left only with the following verses of the 18th-century poet Magtymguly about a once existing - and now mostly forgotten - freedom and grandeur in Turkmen lands: “his heart takes off on a horseback; the mountains will turn to lava upon his glance; when the river flows, it will bring honey; the dams will not hold the flood of Turkmen”<sup>31</sup>.

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30 This act however was not publicized in the form of law, in order not to attract international criticism and scrutiny from human's rights organizations.

31 “Köňül howalanar ata çykanda / Daglar lagla döner gyýa bakanda / Bal getirer, joşup derýa akanda / Bent tutdurmaz, gelse sili türkmeniň” (original in Turkmen), from the poem *Türkmeniň* (of the Turkmen).

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