

# Dynamics of the Media System in Post-Soviet Turkmenistan

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## Abstract

This article explores the media environment in Turkmenistan from a comparative perspective, analyzing periods when this Central Asian nation was ruled by President Saparmurat Niyazov and his successor Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov. It examines critical trends of the media system's development since the early 1990s and onward based on the political culture established under the ruling of these two state leaders. The paper argues that media plays a primary role in building a cult of personality of Saparmurat Niyazov, which was further implemented and developed by the administration of Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov. A case study of the Turkmen TV channels, in particular, is focused on styles of presenting materials, the language and propaganda techniques (clichés, slogans, labels), used to promote the cult of personality. The article analyzes the behaviors of the constructors and supporters of the cult of personality using the concept of the political culture in authoritarianism. Thus, the paper outlines that with some moderate dynamics in the media system, President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov continues to strictly control media – the policies established by his predecessor, who used methods of total control and censorship of all media outlets in the country.

## Keywords

Political culture; media; personality cult; cross censorship; Turkmenistan

## Introduction

One of the primary focuses of my research of media and authoritarian rule is exploring the political culture in the post-Soviet Central Asian state of Turkmenistan as a framework of the media environment in the country. The political regime of Turkmenistan in its post-Soviet period of development and the personality of its leadership have been studied comprehensively, in particular in the Western scholarship (Anceschi 2011, Horák 2009, Peyrouse 2012, Polese 2015, Roberts 2003, Sabol 2003, Šír 2009). Based on existing studies of this aspect, as well as my observations, I look at the transformation of the media landscape that may provide the possibility to change the political culture of the society. The study includes the period from 1991 onward in

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a comparative perspective of the political culture developed under the first President of Independent Turkmenistan Saparmurat Niyazov, who named himself *Türkmenbaşy* (Head of Turkmen) and then his successor Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov, known as *Arkadag* (Father Protector).

Building on the concept of the political culture in conditions of an authoritarian regime, the paper attempts to study the behaviors of the policymakers, including the state leaders' personality cults through media channels. The study findings of Western scholars focusing on the personality cult of the Turkmen presidents suggest that "the eccentric project aimed at constructing a cult of personality ... might also impact the sense of national identity of the citizens of Turkmenistan" (Horák, Polese 2015, 458). Following this assumption, this paper reveals the behaviors of the political leaders, the power subjects, and other members of the Turkmen society. It sets out to answer the question: what moves the media workers – editors and reporters – and average people to follow the existing political culture in the country?

It may be argued that the study of media is interrelated with political science as the media play a role as political actors (Brian 2014). There are a significant number of theoretical approaches that address this interrelation. The review of some theoretical concepts helps us to understand the political changes that occurred with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the transformation of the media system in the post-Soviet region. This historical phenomenon was the turning point in the transition from the communist totalitarian regime to the new political system.

Along with the formation of the new sovereign states, independent Turkmenistan appeared on the world political map as a sovereign state with its national flag, symbol, and state structure. Saparmurat Niyazov, the first secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Turkmenistan, has been holding this position since December 1985. He was also a member of the Politburo of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, a chair of the Supreme Council of Turkmenistan Soviet Socialist Republic (TSSR), and a president of TSSR. Since 1990, he continues his political power as the first president of independent Turkmenistan (Kadyrov 2003). The former communist leader who was stealthily opposed to Michael Gorbachev's policy of "Glasnost" and "Perestroyka" officially declared a liberal democratic path of the development of Turkmenistan in line with the international commitments. Nevertheless, in real life, the dynamics of the political–social life in the country shows the tendencies toward the strengthening of the "one-man rule" authoritarian model (Horak 2012).

It is a commonly agreed argument in social sciences that the political system of Turkmenistan is authoritarian. Among definitions of authoritarianism in social sciences, the one suggested by Jeroen J. J. Van den Bosch may best fit the research purposes of this paper and be suitable to understand the political system in Turkmenistan. His definition of authoritarian rule is based on the impact of “personalism” on the regime transitions. The regime is “governed by a small group internally regulated by an informal set of rules,” whose power may be concentrated in one or more branches of the government (Bosch 2017, 23).

These characteristic features of the authoritarian regime may be suitable to describe the political culture founded by the first president of independent Turkmenistan and developed by his successors with the specifics of their personalities. President Saparmurat Niyazov’s political aim is described to achieve total isolation of the country from the external world. It is explained by his “pathological fear of foreign influence as well as the personality cult associated with it” (Peyrouse 2015, xii).

The study of the implementation of suppressed media policy and its possible political repercussions in the region may be of interest to the scholars of social studies in a global context. The knowledge of the Turkmen case of “one-man rule,” modeling the cult of personality that shapes the political practices in this authoritarian regime and the specifics of media control strategies, may be valuable for researchers to understand the way politics work in this authoritarian country. The findings of this study may also be useful for those who research mass media in an authoritarian environment.

### **Overview of “Political Culture” in Turkmen Society**

To understand the values, behaviors, norms, and expectations that form the model of the political practice of the people in the Turkmen society, it is essential to define what is political culture. More than that, the study of the political culture developed under the political power of the state leader in the transition period is critical for understanding the media strategies established in this Central Asian country.

In the early 60s of the last century, Gabriel A. Almond and Sidney Verba widely examined the concept of political culture within the structural–functionalist tradition (Almond, Verba 1963). Scholars in social sciences define this concept as historically based values that serve as a relationship between citizens and government. However, many researchers found the initial definition of the concept of political culture problematic. Critics of this theory refer to the weak specification of its measurement. This problem may be explained by

the fact that the concept of political culture primarily connected more with the democratic environment. Nevertheless, it had a significant impact on the study of comparative politics. Later, the founder of the political culture theory revisited his arguments and shifted some of his postulates. Gabriel Almond brought arguments that communist regime, for example, maybe viewed as “natural experiments” in attitude change. He wrote: “The political culture theory imputes some importance to political attitudes, beliefs, values, and emotions in the explanation of political, structural, and behavioral phenomena – national cohesion, patterns of political cleavage, modes of dealing with political conflict, the extent and the character of participation in politics, and compliance with authority” (Almond 1983, 127). Based on the existing studies of the theory of political culture, I suggest that the definition or measurement of the political culture is essential in analyzing the political system of the regime type that does not take into account the formal legal aspect of the issue. It is worth to mention here the recent years’ renewal of an approach on how the political culture influences the regime type (Inglehart 1988). The researchers of political culture have widely discussed the question of the putative link between mass political culture and regime type.

There have been brought compelling arguments by Mitchel A. Seligson and John A. Booth on this issue by using a comparison of the similar systems – cases of political cultures in Latin American countries of Costa Rica and Nicaragua. These countries have similar historical developments and predominantly similar cultures. However, their political regimes differ: Costa Rica is the oldest and stable democracy in Latin America, whereas Nicaragua has hatred lengthy authoritarian regimes before 1990. The authors raise here a question: Is a regime type the cause or the effect of political culture? They resume it in a way that “all directions of causality suggest a congruence between structure and culture in these two Central American countries. If political culture is either a determinant, a concomitant, or a consequence of regime type, one would expect to find a political culture in Costa Rica far more democratic than in Nicaragua” (Seligson and Booth 1993, 779). Following this argument, we may use it in determining the regime type in Turkmenistan, which is most commonly agreed as authoritarian. Thus, the authoritarian type of regime predetermines the political culture that consists of “the shared values, norms, expectations, approaches, and conventions that shape political practice, and allows its meanings to be communicated to others of similar views” (Rugh 2007, ix).

The authoritarian character of the political culture in Turkmenistan takes its roots from the history of its political system and the history of the people.

Turkmen traditions of moral values and tribal lifestyle represent a long history of nomadic cultures, as well as 70 years of the communist regime in the Soviet period of its development. Before the Soviet power established in the Turkmen land, loyalty to families, clans and tribes was predominant. The people identified themselves by the names of their kinship, neighborhood, or village. Historically, tribal representation was significant for Turkmen.

As stated in the work of Almond and Verba, in tribal societies, people have less interest in politics: “the individual thinks of his family’s advantage as the only goal to pursue, or conceives of his role in the political system in familistic terms” (Almond and Verba 1963, 120). The nomadic and tribal traditions of the Turkmen people likely played some role in the predetermination of the political culture in contemporary Turkmenistan. Our observations and the surveys conducted using the average people in Turkmenistan within the timeframe between 2003 and 2018 may complement this argument. Most of the respondents prefer “peace for their families” rather than to be involved in active political processes. This behavior of the people has increased since the authoritarian regime under the leadership of Saparmurat Niyazov became more repressive after the so-called *Sanjar* 2002 (November 2002) events in Turkmenistan (Bohr 2003), a full-scale crackdown of the opposition or alternative movements that might question the government policy in the country. The real civic activism of the people in that period was severely suppressed. Another reason for the passive political behavior of the people may be explained by the emergence of the so-called “*Ruhnama* generation”<sup>1</sup> under Turkmenbashi’s ideology. As a result, some part of the young population in the country is believed to be brainwashed.

Turning back to the Soviet history of the Turkmen people, we observe the changes and modernization in the lifestyle and traditions of the nomadic Turkmens with the establishment of the Soviet communist regime in the land of Turkmens. A soviet culture brought changes to their mobile lifestyle, and the people started to build towns and cities. Various social classes, including the urban intelligentsia, workers, and rural peasantry, have emerged. These social classes played different roles in the society. With its authoritarian character, the Soviet government established national territories. The people became more educated and aware of government policies. They started to, some extent, participate in the country’s political life. This part of the history

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1 *Ruhnama*, the Book of the Soul, is authored by Saparmurat Niyazov. It is considered to be a core part of the personality cult of Saparmurat Niyazov and his ideology of Turkmenization. The book was published in two volumes in 2001 and 2004. It was imposed as compulsory reading for schoolchildren, students, and all the members of the society as must know the text. Passages from the *Ruhnama* were broadcast daily on Turkmen TV channels during Turkmenbashi’s rule.

of the Turkmen people suggests that some movement in the formation of the political culture may also be inherent to Turkmenistan.

The historical period of the Soviet Perestroika in the second part of the 1980s of the 20th century and the first decade of the period of Independence of Turkmenistan in the 1990s may be described as the most active but limited participation of the Turkmen people in their country's political life. The centralized government in Moscow sent directives to the National Republic of Turkmenistan to increase the peoples' participation in their lives. We may observe these changes in the examples of the Turkmen media that will be described further in the next part of this paper.

The Kremlin appointed Saparmurat Niyazov as a Secretary of the Communist Party of Turkmenistan in 1985. Later, after the fall of the Soviet Union, he became the first president of independent Turkmenistan. Analyzing the high politics in this country, Sebastien Peyrouse describes Saparmurat Niyazov's political aim to achieve total isolation of the country from the external world (Peyrouse 2015). It is explained by his excessive fear of foreign influence as well as by the personality cult that he could manage to create and develop while in power.

Aside from the impact of the Soviet legacy in the regime formation, a compelling argument is brought into consideration by Slavomir Horak in his research work about Turkmenistan's post-Soviet and post-Niyazov political elite. He underlines the importance of two factors in the regime formation, such as "formation of the local political culture and the personality of the leader," the interaction of which demonstrates "neopatrimonial logic at work in contemporary Turkmenistan" (Horak 2012, 372). In support of this argument, I suggest the first president of independent Turkmenistan Saparmurat Niyazov used his leadership and some elements of tribal Turkmen society's traditions (respect to elderly and tribe leaders *or khan*) to transform the political elite into a new character, more powerful and capable of providing dominant control over the Turkmen society. He excluded some democratic practices of the traditions in the Turkmen tribal society development (a practice of the voting system in electing tribal leaders *or khan*), promoting the so-called "traditional Turkmen democracy." The analysis of state of the art and observations demonstrate that the first president's successor Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov behaved the same way but with slight differences. Unlike his predecessor, Berdimuhamedov had to reconstruct the complete isolation policy, which is considered necessary for foreign investment, as the nation's economic growth relies on diversification of its export of natural resources.

Under both presidents, the media played a vital role as a tool to secure their powers.

I support the argument that interaction of the Turkmen political culture and the personality of the political leaders is the critical factor in defining the dynamics of the media landscape in the Turkmen society (Horak and Sir 2009). The authoritarian political culture, characterized by the concentration of all constitutional and informal powers in one hand, remains active for more than two decades. It is interesting to observe that the significant circle of the policymakers during the rules of both presidents remains and continues to be in the center of the president's administration. Comparison of the personalities of the presidents demonstrates that the cult of personality is manifested in a holy spirit in the case of Saparmurat Niyazov with the myth of *Altyn Asyr* (Golden Age) of the Turkmen people and glorifying himself to the level of the prophet. Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov replaced Niyazov's Golden Age to *Berkarar döwletiň bagtyýarlyk döwri* (Prosperous Era of Powerful State) and declared himself *Arkadag* (Protector) of the Turkmen people. In contrast to the existing discourse on nondynamic or static authoritarian mood in Turkmenistan, I assume that some gentle and slow transformation has been noticeable in the political system since the power change in 2007. It is evident in the media sphere in particular, although strict control and media censorship are maintained.

After the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, the country gradually entered a period of isolation that has only begun to end to some extent after Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov came to power in 2007 following the death of the first president of independent Turkmenistan Saparmurat Niyazov. With this power change, the focus of scholars was directed to the peculiarities of these two political powers in Turkmenistan (Horak 2009, Peyrouse 2012, Polese 2015, Sabol 2003, Šír 2009, Roberts 2003). Based on the existing research, I suggest my study of the political context as a framework of the suppressed media environment. This approach is understudied in scholarship due to the isolation of Turkmenistan from the outside world. I offer a comparative analysis of the rules and behaviors of these political actors to understand the philosophy behind these two state leaders and their media-control strategies. These strategies include maintaining authority over its citizens, propaganda of personality cult, isolating civic activists from the society, and preventing internal and external criticisms of their activities. I also look at the behavior of media, reporters, and those who participate in building a personality cult of the political leaders.

### Turkmen Media: A Comparative Perspective

The analysis of the media system of the period from early 90s and onward based on the political culture established under the ruling powers demonstrates that the Turkmen media serve only one primary mission. All media content glorifies the cult of personality of the state leader and consolidates the power of the regime. The central argument here is “repression and propaganda” (Anceschi, 2011).

My observations of the political culture developed by the state leaders in Turkmenistan demonstrate that the early 90s may be characterized as a period of a short life of relatively free speech that gradually switched to the process of increased suppression in the media landscape. Since obtaining its Independence in October 1991, the Turkmen government has been holding an absolute monopoly over the media. The authorities monitor media outlets, control print media and lay down editorial policies. To explore the dynamics of the media in the country, I reviewed the content of the official Turkmen TV productions (*Watan habarlary* newscasts of *Altyn Asyr* [Golden Age] TV channel, cultural shows on *Miras* [Heritage] TV channel, Turkmenistan Sports program<sup>2</sup>), print media (newspapers *Watan* [Motherland], *Нейтральный Туркменистан* [Neutral Turkmenistan], *Türkmenistan* [Turkmenistan]), radio (Turkmen Service productions of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty [RFE/RL]), online portals including social media, and the work of the journalists and editors starting from the early 1990s up to 2019.

According to the information and data I have obtained from the content analysis of the media outlets, as well as from my interviewees, the very beginning of the media environment in independent Turkmenistan may be characterized as “centralized free media.” In December 1989, during the Soviet Perestroika, the central government in Moscow under the leadership of Michael Gorbachev sent directives to the national governments in the regions to launch TV/radio programs that would provide people to participate and express their thoughts openly. These new programs intended to promote more involvement of the members of the society in the political processes of their republics. Following these directives, the Communist Party of Turkmenistan under the leadership of Saparmurat Niyazov had to support this initiative. A new live TV show “Good evening, Ashgabat” was launched. This live program was a five-days-a-week broadcast of two hours in Turkmen and one

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The content analysis of the piece of the sports event broadcast on Turkmenistan Sports TV channel demonstrates the commentators’ glorification of the cult of personality of President Berdimuhamedov using epithets “Gahryman” (Hero) and “Hormatly” (Esteemed/Dear) several times during their comments of the show, available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZNFSI-NeKx0/>.

hour in Russian on the frequencies of the capital city areas. The program started gaining popularity among the city population where the journalists could invite the district government officials, writers, doctors, and the average residents of the city for live discussion. There was censorship, but moderate.

The journalists themselves could choose whom to invite as a guest to their programs and to select the topic for discussion. This program promoted social activity among the intelligentsia, students, and other young people. Corruption among government officials and other acute social problems were broadcast live. However, this kind of openness in media productions started to displease Saparmurat Niyazov, who was already occupying the position of the president of independent Turkmenistan. In December 1991, he ordered to discontinue this live TV program and beefed up censorship by being directly involved in building his personality cult. Television has been the most popular media tool in the country and continues to be a primary platform for political actors to push their agenda forward. After the closure of the live broadcasting, the editors and journalists working for the production of the program had to find other means where they could practice free speech. Moreover, at that moment, the team of journalists—defenders of free speech continued activities in print media, where they saw some possibilities to participate in the social life of the people and political processes enjoying less censorship. Among the print media, *Ýaş communist* (Young Communist) newspaper was the only paper experiencing free speech, but limited.

Later in August 1992, Saparmurat Niyazov imposed pressure on this newspaper as well. He renamed it as *Nesil* (Generation) and fired the periodical's team of editors and reporters. He started personally appointing editors for all print newspapers in the country. The team of journalists did their best to practice free speech and to participate in the political processes of the government, but gradually they faced severe suppression. For about two more years, some of the editors tried to produce documentaries, working for the state-owned "Turkmenfilm" studio. Despite pressure from the government agencies, the group of editors could manage to screen historical events about the people who were struggling for their homeland (documentaries *Kasam* [The Oath], telling the story about the battle of the Turkmen tribes with the army of the Russian empire known as the Geokdepe Battle<sup>3</sup> of 1881 and *Tatyana Tekinskaya*, about a woman from the tribe of Teke captured by the Tsarist

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The Geokdepe Battle played a crucial role in the history of the Turkmen people. Since then, the Turkmen have lost their independence and went under Russian control. See "Slavomir Horak, The Battle of Gökdepe in the Turkmen post-Soviet historical discourse," published online in 2014 and "Hojageldiyew Nargylyç. 1991. *Gökdepe galasy*. [Fortress of Gökdepe]. Ashgabat. ÇÄÇ."

army soldiers in the Geokdepe battle and brought to Russia). The plot of such documentaries irritated Saparmurat Niyazov, and in February 1994, he ordered to dismiss this group of documentary makers.

The early 1990s may be characterized as years of “centralized free media” for radio channels as well. In 1992, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Turkmenistan agreed to launch a bureau of Radio Azatlyk,<sup>4</sup> the Turkmen broadcasting service of the RFE/RL. An official document of this agreement signed by then the Chief of Press Service of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Turkmenistan is available in the RFE/RL’s archives (Nazar 2001). In an unprecedented move, Saparmurat Niyazov met the Director of RFE/RL’s Turkmen Service (Radio Azatlyk) personally in 1992 when they agreed to accredit independent correspondents on the territory of Turkmenistan and allowed them to report for Radio Azatlyk. However, this agreement has stayed on paper since then.

Saparmurat Niyazov cautiously implemented his campaign to restrict critical media outlets that emerged after gaining the independence and those inherited from the Soviet period. He eliminated satirical radio, TV and video, and print media productions (*Ýartygulak*, *Bökelek*, *Najza*, *Tokmak*) that had been operational since the Soviet time. These media productions touched critical subjects and themes about life in the Turkmen society, including ill doings and failures of nomenclature. By the end of his power in 2006, Niyazov enjoyed absolute control over the media, having eliminated independent and analytical reporting, and strengthening surveillance over journalists and reporters and their family members. He used mass media as a powerful tool to create a fear factor among the population and prevent possible mass uprisings in the country. The culmination of his autocratic rule is characterized by his bizarre measures, including broadcasting images of his subordinates kissing his hands, or banning newscasters from wearing make-up and ordering female anchors to wear headscarves. More than that, he managed to silence critics of the regime and isolated the country from the outside world. Thus, Saparmurat Niyazov took control over the media into his own hands, declaring himself as a founder of all print media. He demanded the editorial board of all media outlets to report directly to him.

After the death of Saparmurat Niyazov, who ruled the country for 21 years, his successor Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov continued the strict media censorship of his predecessor, using methods of silencing independent

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4 Radio Azatlyk, the Turkmen Broadcasting Service at RFE/RL, sponsored by the US Congress and operated in Prague, Czech Republic, broadcasts alternative news and information to Turkmenistan on multiple platforms (radio, web, and social media).

reporters and banning free speech. However, Berdimuhamedov purposefully took some measures to ease the isolation of the country from the outside world that he inherited from Niyazov.

This study applies the concept of media censorship as an indication of the Turkmen official media outlets. The political elite under the leadership of Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov went further suppressing media in the country. The first Law on Mass Media of Independent Turkmenistan, endorsed in late December 2012, prohibits media censorship and obstruction of the legitimate, professional activities of journalists by officials of state bodies and public organizations. In reality, there is an assumption that the Turkmen authorities under the leadership of Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov adopted this law to appear to the broader world as a country open for democratic reforms. More than that, in February 2013, President Berdimuhamedov renounced to be a founder of any print media outlet in the country that has been a practice initiated by Saparmurat Niyazov at the very beginning of his rule as a president of independent Turkmenistan. For two decades, media in Turkmenistan was functioning according to the Soviet media law of 1990, the Act of Turkmen SSR “On Press and Other Mass Media.” Therefore, the adoption of the first National Law on Mass Media that bans media censorship may be considered a demonstration of a modest step forward for modernization of the media landscape. Another step forward for modernization may be seen in the adoption of the law of Turkmenistan “On Television and Radio Broadcasting” in the context of the existing law of Turkmenistan “On Mass Media,” the Constitution of Turkmenistan and the international standards on freedom of expression. Analysts evaluate this act as an achievement that reflects the favorable dynamics of the development of legislation (Sherstoboeva 2018). The adoption of this law is necessary for Turkmenistan as a member-state of the United Nations (UN) and Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) in the context of implementing international commitments. Although this document envisions a gradual transition from state funding of the broadcast media into a competitive broadcasting market, it needs to conform to international standards in the field of freedom of expression and freedom of mass media. Within the framework of the implementation of this act, the international experts of OSCE provide knowledge for representatives of mass media in Turkmenistan about different models of broadcasting, focusing on the respective advantages and challenges of public service, private and commercial television (Turkmenistan Golden Age, 2018).

Even though the laws adopted under the rule of President Berdimuhamedov ban the formal censorship, in practice, however, the restriction remains,

and the legislation's democratic idea is generally compromised. Therefore, international advocates of freedom of expression and press freedom list Turkmenistan among the "worst of the worst." The Paris-based Non Governmental Organization (NGO) Reporters without Borders (RSF) in its annual Press Freedom Index in 2019 has ranked Turkmenistan as the most severe offender of press freedom and placed the Turkmenistani regime at the end of the list of 180 countries in the world rankings (Reporters Without Borders, 2019). The authorities monitor all media outlets, control printing presses, and lay down editorial policies.

As a necessary premise for understanding the nature of the media environment in contemporary Turkmenistan, the study examines a political dimension of censorship. The Law on Mass Media in Turkmenistan endorsed by the members of *Mejlis* (Parliament) stresses that mass media in the modern era is a unique mechanism for regulating the social and cultural relations between the state and society. It is underscored that their activities are carried out in the context of observing the generally accepted legal and moral–ethical norms and rules that operate within the framework of specific legislation. This legislative act determines the procedure for collecting, preparing, and disseminating information, and establishes the rights, duties, and responsibilities of the entities that develop and distribute information (The State News Agency of Turkmenistan, 2018).

Since the Law on Mass Media was adopted, only one private newspaper *Rysgal* (The Welfare), has been launched by the decision of the government. The periodical is owned by the Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Turkmenistan and carries mostly decorative functions. It operates under strict control and censorship of the state agencies.

The comparative analysis of the mechanism of censorship of print media in Turkmenistan in two periods of its development (under the power of Saparmurat Niyazov in 1991–2006 and under Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov from 2007 onward) demonstrates that censorship over the content of all print media has been a key practice of the political culture of both actors of power with new rules regarding censorship. What are the dynamics of the media censorship mechanism under the authority of these two state leaders? President Saparmurat Niyazov personally took part in the censorship activities as he proclaimed himself a founder of all print media in the country, and the editorial board of all print media outlets reported directly to him.

Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov introduced new censorship rules and assigned related ministries to review all materials written by journalists for publication. According to this initiative of President Berdimuhamedov, the Ministry of

Sports and Youth Issues, for instance, must approve articles about sports events, before they are published. The rule applies to all other articles and media products, which must get preliminary approval from corresponding ministries for publications. In October 2013, Turkmen authorities introduced a new practice of “cross censorship,” according to which ministries controlling certain periodicals must approve articles for publication in such media before the approvals by the ministries related to the topics covered in the articles. In other words, Berimuhamedov-era new “cross censorship” has replaced Niyazov’s censorship mechanism of reporting to the president directly. The posts of deputy ministers were established to run such a procedure. Along with these innovations, the old Soviet-time state entity, the committee on safeguarding state secrets in the print media, and the specialized agencies continue exercising censorship practices.

### **Modeling Personality Cult of State Leaders**

The widespread view of the Turkmen media environment under the authoritarian regime as a “black hole” underscores restrictions on the free flow of information and the methods of silencing independent reporters, surveillance of subscribers of new media, and persecution of critics of the government policy (Committee to Protect Journalists, 2018). Meanwhile, the emergence of the new generation of journalists, including citizen journalists in contradiction to the journalists and media workers who are constructors of the personality cult of the state leader, may challenge the authoritarian regime.

The comparison of the media environment in Turkmenistan under the rule of the two presidents after gaining independence interprets that media are used as a tool to control the society and limit the people’s participation in political processes. The primary focus is directed to the figure of the president in both cases. Our observation of the content, the style of the materials’ presentation, and language of the official Turkmen media illustrate that media serve only for one persona, the president, glorifying the cult of personality. This state of the art of media demonstrates that the political culture impacts the behavior of media in the country. To understand and interpret the motive of the media workers – journalists, editors, photographers, and writers to follow the political culture and do the job of a constructor of a cult of personality – I conducted in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with journalists and participants at the Turkmen TV broadcasts. Why do they follow the existing political culture in an authoritarian regime? Do they agree with the policy of the government? Do they like their jobs as constructors of the cult

of personality? Why do they take part in the programs promoting the cult of personality of the president? Do they think about alternative policies? The overview of the collected data suggests that media workers, following the political culture, may be divided into two categories: brainwashed and forced. The first category of workers may be characterized as *dar dünjägeräýşly* (narrow-minded), who are unaware of the government's policies and far from the political processes. They are mainly those who moved to the capital city from rural areas. The second category belongs to those who have to accept the job to feed their families. They are forced to do the job, first, because of the limited employment opportunities; second, they prefer to stay aside from political processes for the sake of peace in their families. This type of people may belong to *özboluşly dünjägeräýşly* – those who are forced to behave according to the existing norms and values of the regime, for example, fear of imprisonment or other punishment by the authorities for opposing the state policies. Alternatively, there is *Giň dünjägeräýşly* (broad-minded) journalists, who defend the freedom of speech and free media. They exist inside and outside of Turkmenistan; however, they have to do their job covertly.

I explored the content delivery in the official Turkmen media, styles of presenting materials, and ways of promotion of a personality cult. I studied current national TV channels and texts of the news materials published online by *Türkmen Döwlet Habarlar Gullugy* (Turkmen State News Agency), the central news media outlet of the government of Turkmenistan. Seven national TV channels broadcast in the Turkmen language except for some hours daily broadcasting in Russian and English: *Altyn Asyr* (Golden Age), *Yaşlyk* (Youth), *Miras* (Heritage), *Aşgabat* (Ashgabat), *Türkmen owazy* (Turkmen music), *Türkmen sport* (Turkmen sport), and *Türkmenistan* (Turkmenistan). They are all state funded, and their broadcasting programs mainly cover the state leader's activities. The specific style of presenting material in all channels relates to the cult of personality of Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov. Even the coverage of cultural, sports events in the country or health programs must include the name of the president and underscore his “tremendous” leadership skills.

My analysis of one of the sports news of *Watan* (Homeland) program on *Altyn Asyr* TV channel proves that in a six-minute report about bicycle riding in the Serdar district of the Balkan province, the reporter used the phrases and sentences eight times that glorify the state leader's “achievements, inspirations, and initiations.” The presenter repeats such epithets as *mähriban we gahryman Arkadag* (dear and hero Father Protector). The cult of personality of Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov is a predominant feature of all Turkmen

TV channels. The images of the president singing, playing guitar or a keyboard, riding a horse, doing sports, shooting guns, etc. are the necessary part of national broadcasting. The language of the presentation materials on air includes the compulsory and frequent mentioning of the current slogan of the government policy and the name, title of Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov: *Berkarar döwletimiziň bagtyýarlyk dowry* (Prosperous Era of Powerful State) and *Hormatly Arkadagymyz* (Our dear Father Protector). All news stories about the events in the country are related to the name of *Arkadag* (Father Protector).

There is no live broadcasting. The programs, including news, are prerecorded. There are no open discussions on air. The journalists and presenters undergo three stages of censorship: self-censorship, censorship by the editor or director of the program, and censorship by the representative of the State Committee of Turkmenistan for the protection of state secrets in the media (Alternative News of Turkmenistan, 2017). The examination of a cultural program about one of the prominent Turkmen actors and a film producer that *Miras* TV channel broadcast in 2016 is an example of how the presenters and participants of the production fit the requirements of the constructors of a personality cult. They have to follow the strict rule of thanking the “esteemed President” frequently throughout the talk show. One of the participants of the talk show, whom I interviewed, stated that the speakers obliged to follow the compulsory requirements of praising the president for “his hard work” as a leader of the nation.<sup>5</sup> More than that, women presenters and participants of the programs are required to wear national dress decorated with traditional embroidery and headscarves. This element demonstrates the state leaders’ national policy that emphasizes *Türkmençilik* (Turkmenization) ideology. To my question, why to participate in the program and follow the imposed rule of calling the president *Arkadag* and repeat it several times, during the show I received an answer that interestingly proves the narrative about the importance of belonging to a particular family, tribe, or clan. This attitude is the characteristic of the historical behavior of the Turkmen people. Most of the participants of the program under analysis turned out to represent the expanded family members of the leading character of the talk show, a prominent member of the Turkmen intelligentsia.

Another feature of the Turkmen TV newscast is almost all images and stories look like a staged production with the president as a leading character and his administration and sycophantic followers, as well as students, teachers, doctors, business people, and other members of the society, providing a crowd

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<sup>5</sup> The interviewee talked on condition of anonymity.

scene. The level of the cult of personality style of President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov constructed by ideology makers and supported by media may be characterized as “theatricalism.”<sup>6</sup> The study of cases demonstrates that features of theatricalism have been developed to more sycophantic level<sup>7</sup> under Berdimuhamedov’s ruling. A journalist from Turkmenistan named Çoluk Möwlamow (Choluk Mowlamow) compares this phenomenon with human disease in his blog posted by Radio Azatlyk:

Like any adverse impact of a disease on a human body, the emerged sycophancy disease of the society did severe harm to the epoch and the society. Sycophancy turned into a vital ideology of the epoch. Typically if a person does not give a servile display of exaggerated affection, he/she does not gain a favor, does not get a job or a position in the country. Sycophancy has broken down the country<sup>8</sup> (Mowlamov. Radio Azatlyk. 2010).

The comparative analysis of the texts of the Turkmen News Agency that appeared on its website reveals that the specific language style and phrases glorifying the personality of the president are the dominant features of the texts in Turkmen only. Translations of the Turkmen texts into the Russian and English languages are edited, in which the passages or phrases used for praising and glorifying the state leader are removed. This approach of the editors may justify the intention of the constructors of the personality cult to influence the target audience in the society.

## **Conclusion**

Since obtaining independence following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the Turkmen society has gone through painful periods of a severe political system and the current ruling regime remains harsh yet with some easing. The authoritarian political culture established by President Saparmurat Niyazov prevails after his death, and his successor Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov continues this culture based on his leadership style.

The dynamics of the media landscape under the leadership of the two presidents in Turkmenistan demonstrate total control of the content and form of media directly by the president in the case of Saparmurat Niyazov and

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6 See for some features of theatricalism, video news report on the meeting of the State Security Council of Turkmenistan led by President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov broadcast on *Watan habarlary* news-cast, *Altyn Asyr* TV channel, June 13, 2018 (the video report starts at 1:20 min), available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ky1m5VJMkvM>.

7 See screenshots (starts at 1:40 min) of sycophantic behavior of the members of power circle of President Berdimuhamedov, available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tRkYRktxuNA>

8 The quotation is translated from the Turkmen language by Oguljamal Yazliyeva.

the centralized government agencies with the practice of “cross censorship” introduced under the leadership of Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov. The analysis of the national TV channels, texts of print media, and online news reports demonstrates the dominant role of the cult of personality of the nation’s leader. The survey respondents refrain from expressing their opinion openly because of the fear factor in the Turkmen society that emerged under the first president of independent Turkmenistan. Materials glorifying the President of Turkmenistan, the propaganda of state ideologies: “The Era of Golden Age” under S. Niyazov and “Prosperous Era of Powerful State” under G. Berdimuhamedov, remain essential elements of broadcasting. Alternative information about the state policies, human rights abuse, or outside criticism of the government is banned.

Although it is hard to suggest positive changes, I observe minor dynamics of the media environment in Turkmenistan. The international community welcomes the act of approval and adoption by the Turkmen government series of legal documents on media that are in line with the international standards of freedom of expression and freedom of media. The launch of the first private newspaper in the history of independent Turkmenistan may look like a step forward in media dynamics. However, the question remains whether this process will have its positive developments in line with international standards of freedom of expression and freedom of media. The real picture standing behind this process looks artificial.

The type of political culture in Turkmenistan takes its roots from the traditional nomadic lifestyle of the Turkmen people and more than 70 years of life under the totalitarian communist regime. Taking into consideration this historical narrative, we may decide that the members of the Turkmen society, including presidents, their administration, media, and personnel play a role in designing and promoting the cult of personality of the state leaders. The political culture impacts the behaviors of the media landscape in the country. Thus, the two types of journalists follow the political culture in Turkmenistan: *Dar dünýägaraýyşly* – brainwashed, narrow-minded generation of *Ruhnama* – and *Özboluşly dünýägaraýyşly* – forced journalists under certain circumstances, who are not willing to participate in political processes. They witnessed the repressive policy of Saparmurat Niyazov, under which fear of disappearance or persecution emerged in the Turkmen society. The emergence of citizen journalism and social media channels may challenge the existing political powers in Turkmenistan, which is the topic of further research.

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