



Turkmenistan in the modern world

Interview given at the time of the 62nd General Assembly of the United Nations to the *Herald of Europe* international magazine by KURBANGULY BERDYMUKHAMEDOV President of the Republic of Turkmenistan

Q: During the Soviet Era it was commonly held that the Central Asian republics, including Turkmenia, as Turkmenistan was called then, were a kind of buffer zone between the European part of the former Soviet Union and the rest of Asia. Turkmenistan, in fact, has Iran and Afghanistan as its neighbours in the South, Kazakhstan in the North, and it looks towards Russia and Azerbaijan across the Caspian Sea. I would like to ask you how your country's geopolitical position affects the basic principles of Turkmenistan's foreign and domestic policies?

A: The way you frame your question suggests we both know the obvious answer — my country's geopolitical position has always been vital for Turkmenistan's international relations in recent history and in the distant past as well...

Q: Can you perhaps elaborate?

A: For centuries my country has been at the crossroads between East and West, South and North. It was a major stage on the Silk Road, and an important element in the network of routes crisscrossing the vast expanses of Eurasia.

We know from historical records and the findings of modern science that present-day Turkmenistan was a cradle of the ancient civilizations that contributed enormously to the emergence of the world as we know it today. Last year, my country hosted an international academic conference on the ancient land of Margush, known to Greek and Roman historians as Margiana. At that world forum which I masterminded and attended, I was fortunate enough to hear world

celebrated scholars officially recognize Margush as the fifth centre of world civilization, along with Ancient India, China, Egypt, and Mesopotamia.

Apart from Margiana, several other states, including Parthia and Urgench, or Gorganj, which arose on our soil, also had a major influence on the politics, economics, and culture of the East, and on relations between East and West, North and South.

Now an independent country, Turkmenistan is a vast territory inhabited by people who faithfully maintain the traditions of peace and friendship with other nations inherited from their forefathers, and which they follow to this day. Above all, we are cultivating these relations with our near neighbours.

Q: The Turkmen people certainly have a history to be proud of, but I would rather like you to speak about today.

A: Actually I want to start with history to give you a glimpse of where independent Turkmenistan stands in relation to other countries. In reality the civilizations that arose on our ancient soil flourished precisely because our political and diplomatic traditions were built on a unifying idea. I would call it the Turkmen's unfaltering devotion to dialogue with other nations and their deep respect for other people's views and cultures. These aspects of the Turkmen mentality were at the root of the choices they made for the structure of government and the domestic and foreign policies of the new, sovereign Turkmenistan.

To put it another way, the traditions of peace, tolerance and respect for our neighbours we have cherished

for centuries are still central to the national identity of modern-day Turkmen. You can clearly recognize this in our government's foreign policy based on the principle of positive neutrality, which has been followed from the moment Turkmenistan became independent. Ever since the UN General Assembly unanimously passed the relevant resolution on December 12, 1995, Turkmenistan has been recognized throughout the world as a country that embraces permanent neutrality in the eyes of international law.

These underlying principles of permanent neutrality and the international obligations we have assumed, shape the foreign policy priorities that help Turkmenistan to fulfil its national interests effectively and to comply with the basic aims and principles of the UN Charter and the world community as a whole.

While Turkmenistan's neutrality is aimed at harmonizing the interests of the different countries in the region, it also provides the framework for constructive dialogue and cooperation with other countries, international organizations, and major business interests that want to have a hand in this country's major projects, above all those in the fuel and energy industries.

A crucial role in this respect is played by Turkmenistan's unique geopolitical position, which has assisted our cooperation with other countries in transportation and communications and our integration into the global infrastructure of networks and commercial and economic corridors. As a result, our country is turning into a major transportation hub that serves, if you like, as a "dynamo" of expanding regional cooperation.

Q: Mr. President, given these fundamental principles of Turkmenistan's foreign policy, would you please give us your vision of your country's relations with the European Union?

A: We, in Turkmenistan, have always given considerable attention to deeper ties and greater momentum in our diversified cooperation with the European Union and its individual member countries. Business contacts between Turkmenistan and the EU were established in the early days of my country's independence. And I am glad to tell you that interest has been displayed recently on both sides, as can be seen from the intensified dialogue between us. Visits from the European Union's high-level delegations have become more frequent recently. A highly productive practice, as I see it, is the annual sessions of the Turkmenistan-European Union joint committee, and there is more besides. In the next few months, we shall have a series of high-level meetings with delegations of the EU and

we shall be opening a Europe House in Ashgabat. A further stimulus to our relations is the enormous potential the EU has in economics and trade, finance and investment, manufacturing and high technologies, science and culture, which are vital to every country. Many member countries of the EU, especially Italy, Germany, and France are important trade and economic partners for Turkmenistan in these areas.

Q: Could you, Mr. President, tell us something about projects Turkmenistan is carrying out in joint ventures with countries of the European Union?

A: There are many different joint projects which all serve to support our society's sustainable development. They are mostly related to science and education, civil law practices, government agencies, and nongovernmental organizations that we want to develop. Also, we benefit enormously from projects that help us to make headway in manufacturing, transportation, communications, agriculture, financial and investment facilities, and the private sector. I take this occasion to convey my best respects to the European Commission's Directorate for External Relations and the Europe Aid Cooperation Office for the close co-operation they have given us.

Q: Which of the projects now under way are of most importance to you?

A: There are very many, and I want to name only the most successful of those we have launched here in Turkmenistan.

They are:

- establishment of farming associations and a pilot programme to introduce renewable micro-credits;
- projects to modernize the Turkmenbashi seaport;
- a training centre for Turkmenistan's Ministry of Gas, Oil, and Natural Resources;
- a science research station to improve the quality of wheat and produce seeds, mini meatpacking and dairy units;
- a programme to upgrade the efficiency of the customs and border control services;
- projects to develop information and telecommunications technologies and high-speed access to the Internet under the Virtual Silk Road programme jointly with the NATO science programme and TEMPUS educational programme;
- establishment of an Interbank Finance College;
- assistance in the preparation of civil, customs, and tax codes for Turkmenistan, and for compliance with the international conventions on the conservation of the Caspian Sea marine environment, climate change, and the Kyoto Protocol;

a programme to promote higher education institutions in Turkmenistan.

They are many, indeed, you will agree, and we shall soon see the benefits once they have been completed. That is why Turkmenistan welcomes the European Commission's efforts to encourage the European Union's closer involvement in large-scale reforms and changes in my country.

Q: Could you talk about any new joint projects and prospective cooperation between Turkmenistan and the European Union?

A: It is a welcome fact in this context that this year has witnessed the largest increase in technical assistance projects undertaken in the country since the start of its cooperation with the European Commission in 1992.

The EU's projects running in Turkmenistan today include a national programme in education, travel, science and technologies, statistics, and coordination of the EU's technical assistance. In addition, several regional projects are being pursued in oil and gas under the INOGATE programme, in marine transportation under the TRASECA programme, and in nature conservation under the Caspian Environmental Programme. Also very much under way are the EU's long-term regional programmes — border management in Central Asia (BOMCA) and Central Asian drug control program (CADAP).

In the second half of this year, several new national programmes were launched in an effort to promote economic growth, agriculture, education, international arbitration law, coordination of the EU's assistance, and statistics.

Please note here that our attention is focused on raising the efficiency of the ongoing projects. It is important to gain experience, and we are currently giving more weight to short training tours for our personnel in EU countries and training programmes offered here to executives and managers in various industries, and also to public servants, both in Turkmenistan's central government and at the grassroots.

To answer your question about the prospects for Turkmenistan's relations with the European Union, I want to point up that Turkmenistan is always open to mutually rewarding cooperation.

We are ready to cooperate with other countries in many fields, including fuel and energy. You will not be surprised when I tell you that many countries are eager to engage with Turkmenistan in this area, in the first place, because our subsoil is very rich in natural resources, with large deposits of hydrocarbons.

Q: This is, Mr. President, exactly the subject we want to hear you discuss in greater detail. One of the biggest problems facing the European Union today is energy security, which implies stability of energy supplies with fuel gas at the top of the list. What is your country's outlook for cooperation with the EU, particularly in the context of its recent agreements on Russia's involvement in the construction of a joint gas pipeline?

A: Let me say, first of all, that Turkmenistan is fully independent in choosing strategic routes to reach world energy markets and in building up its oil and gas exports, and power generation, too. This is the stand we take in our partnership relations with Russia, China, Iran, and other countries, for that matter.

The fact that Turkmenistan is taking a leading place in global energy policies imposes great responsibility on us in our approach to international problems facing the world today. Current international experience suggests there is a need for new approaches to finding regional and global partners.

The current rate of industrial growth in the world and the rising role of energy sources in sustaining the world economy means every country must construct the energy security system that suits it best. As the biggest consumers of the global supply of energy and fuels, it is the world's leading powers and major industrial centres that have the greatest need for energy security.

This underlies the growing interest in the world market toward regions known to have large reserves of oil and natural gas.

Much depends on the kind of strategy at the core of relations with countries whose rich natural resources give them international stature and leverage in international affairs, and which are deluged with lucrative offers of joint development of their oil and gas fields. Undeniably, this is especially important against the background of a new economic set-up beginning to take shape in the world, with some regions supplying energy to others, and neither being able to survive without the other. Having accepted this truth as an obvious fact, Turkmenistan is in favour of a pattern of relationships that work towards global cooperation and integration, rather than dividing the world into competing blocs.

Access to sources of oil or gas should never become a cause for confrontation around the world nor a tool in the hands of some countries to put pressure on others. In the context of global processes unfolding in the 21st century, the energy component of Turkmenistan's strategy toward the rest of the world evolves from its acceptance of the underlying principles of permanent

neutrality, equitable and mutually beneficial cooperation, and, of course, the country's national interests. It is in this context that we see favourable prospects in our relations with member countries of the EU. Already today, many famous European companies, including among others, Maersk of Denmark, Wintershall of Germany, and British Barren Energy, are running successful operations in Turkmenistan.

Our country is demonstrating that it is one of the leading countries that give a sense of energy security to Europe and Asia. Turkmenistan's policy in this area is to put its abundant natural resources at the service of sustainable development and the prosperity of people in many other countries.

Q: What are the estimates of the hydrocarbon wealth hidden in Turkmenistan's soil?

A: In the estimates of foreign experts, Turkmenistan's hydrocarbon resources comprise 23 trillion cubic meters of natural gas and 12 billion tonnes of oil. Given such capacity, Turkmenistan is building its foreign trade strategy around exports of crude hydrocarbon along any economically viable route, based on the principle of multiple options for its emerging pipeline infrastructure.

We have already built and put into service a gas pipeline from Western Turkmenistan to Iran. A few weeks ago, we gave practical effect to our agreements with China to build a gas pipeline and pump natural gas to that country.

As you may be aware, we are also working on the development of a project to build a gas pipeline from Turkmenistan to Afghanistan, and on to Pakistan and India. We are also ready to look into proposals to have Turkmen gas delivered westward as well, to European markets.

Q: What, in your view, lies at the basis of your focus on the oil and gas industries in your country?

A: Our continued emphasis on oil and gas is based on the need for foreign investment and modern technologies to pour in to develop our country's hydrocarbon resources efficiently. Our successful open-door policy and the passage of the Hydrocarbon Resources Law have appreciably improved the investment climate in Turkmenistan and made it attractive to investors to come here and put their money into oil and gas production. Several big-name European and Asian companies are operating in Turkmenistan under profit-sharing agreements, intent on going after more hydrocarbons.

Building modern-age oil refineries and a petrochemical industry is yet another priority for us. More than

a billion and half U.S. dollars has been invested to date to modernize existing plant and to build new distillation units at the Turkmenbashi cluster of oil refineries.

New plants are under construction to manufacture petrochemical products and process liquefied gas, and a project is under consideration to build a facility to convert gas from the gas fields in Eastern Turkmenistan chemically into polyethylene.

Q: Your country's prosperity today depends on how much oil, gas, and petroleum products originating in Turkmenistan you put on the world market. My question then is what are you doing to process more crude hydrocarbons on site in order to increase the share of high added value products on foreign markets and what are your expectations of the results?

A: It might appear at times that our endeavours and plans to build a welfare state are linked only to the sale of our rich natural resources. Yes, it was Mother Nature that lavished hydrocarbons on the land of Turkmenistan, and it would be wrong to expect us to wax rich by selling off this wealth indefinitely.

Turkmenistan has received an unsurpassed opportunity to avoid repeating the mistakes of other countries blessed with oil and gas that placed their bets on selling their resources without giving thought to building an infrastructure for the coming generations of their peoples to live in dignity.

Although our main focus is, of course, on oil and gas we are building the most up-to date plants and factories in other manufacturing industries as well. I am certain that the projects we have initiated, with a helping hand from leading foreign companies, will enable us to make the best use of available opportunities and sharpen the competitive edge of our economy to meet world standards.

Fast growth in the output of the petrochemical industry is an offshoot of the infrastructure we have developed in oil and gas refining. The Turkmenbashi cluster of refineries alone has significantly increased the share of high added value output after the refineries switched to new processes and technologies.

Our lubricants, polypropylene, plastics, and other products are finding a ready market in many countries of the world.

Recently, we have encouraged the emergence of high-earning small and medium-size gas processing businesses using state-of-the-art technologies. The result is that Turkmenistan is soon set to become the biggest liquefied gas producer in the region, with an output nearing a half million tonnes of liquefied gas a year.

Q: Could you tell us which industries, apart from natural resources, are next in line for a boost?

A: A strong trend is for other key industries, such as power generation, manufacturing, textiles, foodstuffs, transportation, and communications, among others, to follow the path travelled by oil and gas.

Textiles are a good example of how quickly other industries can rise like a phoenix from the ashes. After textiles hit rock bottom, we had to turn it around from near zero. A rare exception was cotton fibre processing but even that, at the time of independence, could handle barely 3% of the cotton harvest.

Now that Turkmenistan's textile factories have been refurbished with the world's latest equipment, they are processing at least half the country's cotton harvest. These days, Turkmenistan exports cotton yarn, denim and other cotton fabrics, and ready-to-wear textile products.

Other farming businesses are making a comeback under the impact of the land reform that has been vigorously put into practice. There is a growing class of private landowners and market instruments are being put in place.

The People's Council, or Khalk Maslakhaty in Turkmen, which is the nation's highest representative body, meeting in spring of this year, passed laws directly related to reforms in agriculture, beginning with the Farm Law and Farmers Associations Law.

We did not have to wait long to see encouraging results coming in. Overall, Turkmenistan produces enough grain to meet its needs, and nearly 90% of other foodstuff requirements as well.

Add to this the fact that Turkmenistan is the only country in the world where no taxes are levied on leaseholders and landowners. We do not impose taxes on land, or water, or cattle farming.

In broad terms, the country has every opportunity for foreign companies to come in and start investing in local projects. Our national laws offer generous safeguards to investors and give a battery of tax and other concessions to foreigners who start their own businesses on our land.

We are doing more than just wishing to develop many different industries. We are doing exactly what we want — building a versatile economy using advanced technologies and the ability to be self-sufficient.

Q: Turkmenistan is certainly a modern secular country, save that Islam plays a far greater part than you would normally expect. Given the Turkmens' ancient traditions such as freedom of religious beliefs, a generally more equal role for men and women in society, no constraints

on women's involvement in politics, or, to put it otherwise, given the highly tolerant strain of Islam in your country, our next question is — how does Turkmenistan build its relations with its neighbours, Iran and Afghanistan, notorious for their fundamentalist variety of Islam that behaves aggressively towards other religions?

A: I, for one, would not rush to stick questionable labels on any one of the existing religions, including Islam. Every nation and every country has a national culture unlike any other nation's, a culture steeped in tradition and fed from historic roots, at the foundations of its civilization. In this sense, we show a great respect for our neighbours, both nations and their governments, and maintain friendly and amicable relations with them, as our tradition requires.

I must concede you are right when you speak about the Turkmens' religious traditions and the high tolerance of Islam as it is practised in our land. Today, the Constitution of Independent Turkmenistan guarantees, through the institutions of the state, the freedom of faiths and beliefs, which all are equal under the law. Everyone is free to take whatever attitude to religion they like, to practise alone or jointly with others any religion or embrace none at all, speak out and disseminate their views on religion, and participate in religious services, rituals, and rites. All this, I repeat, is guaranteed by Turkmenistan's Constitution.

As my country's national laws enforce compliance with accepted international rules, they allow religious organizations and groups to be registered in Turkmenistan, regardless of the size of their congregations or faith. Turkmenistan's laws allow religious and non-governmental organisations to practise without fear of criminal prosecution even if they are not legally registered.

Religious organizations and groups of Muslims and Orthodox Christians, and about a dozen other religions are officially registered and are practising their faiths freely in Turkmenistan today.

At the moment, our relations with the governments of Iran and Afghanistan are not affected by the differences between our shades of religious practices.

And I want again to make my point that Turkmenistan has always followed, and will follow in the future, the principles of respect, equality, and mutual benefit in its relations with other countries. We do not, however, look at our cooperation with them from the perspective of our own or mutual interests alone, but rather in the regional and international contexts. There is no denying that stronger and deeper fraternal relations between the peoples of Turkmenistan and Iran have

a favourable impact on the peace and stability of the Central Asian region as a whole.

We are fully convinced that present and future relations between Turkmenistan and Iran rest on firm principles, which have been reinforced during the recent summits. The sound legal framework for our bilateral relations and the agreements reached between us provide durable foundations on which to develop and fortify the long-term mutually beneficial cooperation between Turkmenistan and Iran.

Turkmenistan and Iran have gained enormous experience in fruitful cooperation on a number of major joint projects. In particular, the building and operation of the Dostluk Dam, a key water management project, and Iran's participation in our project to modernize the cluster of oil refineries at Turkmenbashi, to name but two.

Our main exports to Iran are liquefied gas, electric power, and natural gas, which is pumped down the pipelines running from Korpej to Kurt, Kui Artyk to Liut and terminating at Abad.

We also have commendable experience of cooperation in road building, an excellent example of which is the complete reconstruction of the highway from Ashgabat to Gokdepe and on to Archman, which was completed by Iranian engineers to high quality standards. In our desire to meet the interests of other countries and nations and to promote our relations of respect and friendship with our generous neighbour, Turkmenistan will continue to take part in various mutually beneficial joint projects.

Q: How would you describe your relations with Afghanistan, a country that has been in turmoil for many decades now?

A: Turkmenistan is an immediate neighbour of Afghanistan, and it has been, and still is, one of the countries with the greatest interest in seeing that country stable and at peace. During a recent visit by Afghanistan's President Hamid Karzai to Turkmenistan, we had fruitful talks in an atmosphere of full understanding and respect for each other.

We look at the prospects of deeper and broader bilateral ties from the angle of fraternal and good-neighbourly relations between our two peoples growing stronger and more diversified. Our cooperation is ongoing and offers us attractive prospects, particularly in trade and economic links between Turkmenistan and Afghanistan.

Among its ongoing projects, Turkmenistan supplies electric power to Afghanistan, helps Afghans to receive an education at its educational institutions, and

provides medical services to Afghan citizens at our country's medical institutions.

As trade and economic links between our two countries expanded, we launched long-term energy projects which we expect to last long into the future. At present, we are gradually stepping up the export of electric power from Turkmenistan to Afghanistan. In addition, Turkmen civil engineering companies have built and put into service several power generation projects in that country.

Q: Even though Turkmenistan has declared neutrality, we know that no one country in the world, even if it has longstanding traditions of neutrality, can feel safe against aggression by other countries. What are you, in Turkmenistan, doing to maintain your own security and what is your personal vision of this issue?

A: Turkmenistan's permanent neutrality and its foreign policy, based as they are on our country's status in international law, are guided by the will of our nation, its outlook and understanding of the world, and its relations with other nations.

This gives us a solid standing in the world community, and wins us the respect and trust of our distant and near neighbours, in fact, all countries of the world.

You must know, of course, that we have a defensive military doctrine. We want our armed forces to be always ready for any contingency. A fighting force is a key attribute of the state, and our army must be trained to repulse an attack of whatever strength from outside. The concept of a military dimension in Turkmenistan's foreign policy does not in any way conflict with our neutrality.

Permanent neutrality has rewarded us with many rights and opened up broad prospects for us, but at the same time it has imposed on us a heavy burden of responsibility. We keep out of all conflicts and wars. This is the pledge we have given to the world community. We have not encumbered our nation with membership of any military blocs, associations or alliances, and we have only our defensive doctrine to draw on.

Working on the international scene from its vantage point of positive neutrality for international peace and worldwide welfare, Turkmenistan has earned the respect it truly deserves from its neighbours in the Central Asian region and the world community at large. In recognition of this role, the UN is about to open in Turkmenistan's capital city a UN Regional Centre for Preventive Diplomacy in Central Asia, which is to become an effective early warning tool to prevent conflicts from flaring up and to achieve peaceful settlement of perilous situations in our region.

Involvement in world politics for us is promoting co-operation among all countries to the best of our ability. At home we want peace and stability, and a better and happier life for our people. This will be our way to write our country's history book, every line of which will record the fine achievements of our people, in which coming generations of our countrymen and women will take real pride.

Q: A question suggests itself here — what do you see during your tenure as President as your main duty to your country's young people, the rising generation, or, in other words, what do you want to do for them?

A: The rising generation is the future of our country. Time is running out fast on us, too fast indeed to notice it at all — today's children in schools and care centres will be the country's driving force tomorrow. And Turkmenistan's tomorrow will be as good as we teach them to be today. We have initiated reforms in

our educational system, being fired by an ambition that school certificates and university degrees awarded in Turkmenistan should be recognized across the world. This year, we have raised enrolment at our higher education institutes. New schools and colleges or universities will soon be opened in the administrative centres of all velayats [regions]. This is but a small fraction of what we are doing with the sole purpose of giving our children a bright future, and creating a future for our country today.

Q: Mr. President, I have the honour to thank you on behalf of our editorial board and readers of the Herald of Europe international magazine for this interview and I would like to say how dearly we hope to see you again.

A: It will be real pleasure for me. We have so much to do, and I will be glad to tell your readers about the results.

COUNTRY PROFILE: TURKMENISTAN

Turkmenistan is made up mainly of desert and has the smallest population of the five former Soviet republics in Central Asia.

It possesses the world's fifth largest reserves of natural gas, and has substantial deposits of oil. Yet it is still impoverished, and since independence from the Soviet Union in 1991 has remained largely closed to the outside world.

It is effectively a one-party state, that party being the Democratic Party of Turkmenistan led by the late president Saparmurat Niyazov until his death in December 2006.

The late leader styled himself Turkmenbashi, or Father of the Turkmen, and made himself the centre of an omnipresent cult of personality. Mr Niyazov, who was made president for life in 1999, spent large sums of public money on numerous grandiose projects, but not on social welfare.

His successor, Kurbanguly Berdymuhamedov, says he will follow in Mr Niyazov's footsteps, but has shown signs of a different approach, for instance by eschewing the pomp that accompanied his predecessor's public appearances.

His influence spread into every conceivable area of life in the republic. Turkmen were even expected to take spiritual guidance from his book, Ruhnama, a collection of thoughts on Turkmen culture and history.

Turkmenistan is the most ethnically homogeneous of the Central Asian republics, the vast majority of its

population consisting of Turkmen. There are also Uzbeks, Russians and smaller minorities of Kazakhs, Tatars, Ukrainians, Azerbaijanis and Armenians.

In contrast to other former Soviet republics, it has been largely free of inter-ethnic hostilities. However, strong tribal allegiances can be a source of tension.

With foreign investors keeping away, the Turkmen economy remains underdeveloped.

The country has been unable to benefit fully from its oil and gas deposits due to the absence of export routes and because of a dispute between the Caspian Sea littoral states over the legal status of the sea where the oil wells are to be found.

Turkmenistan produces roughly 60 billion cubic metres of natural gas each year and about two-thirds of its exports go to Russia's Gazprom. A protracted dispute between the two countries over the price ended in September 2006 when Gazprom agreed to pay 54% more.

Facts

Population:	5 million (UN, 2007)
Capital:	Ashgabat
Area:	488,100 sq km (188,456 sq miles)
Major language:	Turkmen, Russian
Major religion:	Islam
Life expectancy:	59 years (men), 68 years (women) (UN)
Monetary unit:	1 Turkmen manat = 100 tenge

Facts

Main exports:	Oil, gas, textiles, raw cotton
GNI per capita:	US \$1,340 (World Bank, 2005)
Internet domain:	.tm
International dialling code:	+993

LEADERS

President:

Kurbanguly Berdymukhamedov was sworn in as president after winning elections in February 2007 with 89% of the vote.

There were six candidates in the poll, all from the Democratic Party of Turkmenistan. Exiled figures from the Turkmen opposition were banned from competing. Electoral officials put turnout out at over 95%. Rights groups and Western diplomats condemned the election as rigged.

Weeks later the president was chosen as chairman of the People's Council, Turkmenistan's highest legislative body. He was the only candidate.

A former deputy prime minister, Mr Berdymukhamedov became acting president after authoritarian leader Saparmyrat Niyazov died in December 2006. Mr Niyazov had been in power since Soviet times.

His nomination for the presidency surprised observers because under the constitution the post should have gone to People's Council chairman Ovezgeldy Atayev. However, after Mr Niyazov died Mr Atayev became the subject of a criminal investigation and was sacked.

The new president has promised to continue the policies of his predecessor but also to introduce reforms, including unlimited access to the internet, better education and higher pensions.

Soon after coming to power, he restored pensions to more than 100,000 elderly citizens, reversing President Niyazov's decisions to withdraw them the previous year.

Once Mr Niyazov's personal dentist, Mr Berdymukhamedov became Turkmen health minister in 1997 and deputy premier in 2001. One of his tasks was to implement Mr Niyazov's health service reforms which are widely seen as having brought about its near collapse.

Kurbanguly Berdymukhamedov was born in 1957.

MEDIA

The Turkmen government has an absolute monopoly of the media. The authorities monitor media outlets, operate printing presses and lay down editorial policies.

The Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe has described the lack of press freedom in the country as "unprecedented" in the body's history.

Paris-based Reporters Without Frontiers said former President Niyazov's only use for the media was to "promote his own glory".

Turkmenistan has "one of the worst media climates in the world," according to the Canada-based International Freedom of Expression exchange forum.

Programmes from Russian TV stations are censored before being rebroadcast.

Turkmentelecom and other state bodies control internet access. There are around 70,000 internet users (ITU, March 2008). All foreign-based Turkmen opposition websites are blocked.

THE PRESS

Neytralnyy Turkmenistan — Russian-language, published six times a week

Turkmenistan — Turkmen-language, published six times a week

Watan (Homeland) — Turkmen-language, published three times a week

Galkynys (Revival) — Turkmen-language weekly, mouthpiece of the ruling Democratic Party of Turkmenistan

Turkmen Dunyasi — Turkmen-language monthly, mouthpiece of the Ashgabat-based World Turkmen Association

Adalat (Justice) in Turkmen

Edebiyat we Sungat (Literature and the Arts) in Turkmen

TELEVISION

Turkmen TV — state-owned, operates four networks, including main channel Altyn Asyr (Golden Age)

RADIO

Turkmen radio — state-owned, operates four networks

NEWS AGENCY/INTERNET

Turkmen State News Service (TSNS) — official news agency

News Central Asia — Turkmenistan-based agency, registered in US

Story from BBC NEWS: http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/1/hi/world/asia-pacific/country_profiles/1298497.stm

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