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Cult of Personality in Monumental Art and Architecture: The Case of Post-Soviet Turkmenistan

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On December 21, 2006, the death of Turkmenistan President Saparmurat Niyazov at age 66 was announced by the Türkmen döwlethabarlary State News Agency. Thus, the presidency for life of this rather odious and eccentric dictator came to an end. He autocratically ruled this energy-rich Central Asian republic since the declaration of independence in 1991. Niyazov referred to himself as Turkmenbashi, literally meaning the "Head of the Turkmen." Through his charismatic leadership, he had a tight grip on all political power in Turkmenistan. He was in control of the Turkmenistan Democratic Party, the former Communist Party. This only legal political party in Turkmenistan filled the institutional vacuum after the collapse of the Soviet Union. All national media were also in the hands of the first President. Turkmenbashi's peculiar semi-autobiography titled *Rukhnama*, or the "Spiritual Code," was officially proclaimed as the Holy Book. Indoctrination reached unprecedented levels. In addition, the government maintained effective control over the national economy. Turkmenistan had been repeatedly denounced for a disastrous human rights record, which could have been even worse had the regime had more efficient administrative capacities. In the context of a predominantly rural and politically indifferent society based on clan allegiances, oppression has so far provoked little public outrage.¹

The passing away of Saparmurat Turkmenbashi, once almighty ruler of Turkmenistan during its constitutive period, is an important watershed for the history of this newly independent state. Coping with the manifold and troubled legacy left behind by the Turkmenbashi era will be a challenge to his successors for years to come. With respect to national ideology, a new kind of official world-view evolved in Turkmenistan since 1991. Its totalitarian character and aspirations are outstanding even in the post-Soviet context. The new ideological system contained features adopted from the Communist era, among them emphasis on state paternalism and historicism. Yet Turkmenbashi also needed to distance himself from the discredited *ancien régime*, if only to provide a sense of legitimacy for his rule. For this reason, he turned to the pre-Soviet era for in-

1 See e.g. the latest Freedom House *Nations in Transit 2006* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2006). For perhaps the best comprehensive works on post-Soviet Turkmenistan, see Sergei M. Demidov, *Postsovetskii Turkmenistan* (Moskva: Izdatel'stvo "Natalis," 2002); and Shokhrat Kadyrov, *"Natsiia" plemen. Etnicheskie istoki, transformatsiia, perspektivy gosudarstvennosti v Turkmenistane* (Moskva: Rossiiskaia Akademiia Nauk, 2003).

spiration. Ensuing revival of older traditions and customs became the driving force behind what was known as the “specific path of development,” a term coined by Turkmenbashi himself to denote the exclusionary state and nation building model promoted in Turkmenistan during the Turkmenbashi era.²

The cult of personality of President Turkmenbashi has been the unifying feature of all ideological aspects in Turkmenistan since independence. Turkmenbashi’s name is used for thousands of places and physical features throughout Turkmenistan, including at least ten towns, a river, a mountain, a bay in the Caspian Sea, and even a star in the Ursa Major constellation. In cities, municipalities and populated areas, countless squares, parks, streets and other public places carry the name Turkmenbashi, and so do various institutions and buildings (airports, schools, museums, banks or stadiums), artistic ensembles, agricultural cooperatives and factories. His face is virtually omnipresent; all banknotes, basic foodstuffs as well as the cheapest vodka feature the picture of the first President. Somewhat eerily, Turkmenbashi was present every time a TV was on, as a small golden picture of his face placed in the upper right corner of the screen accompanied each and every broadcast of Turkmen channels. He is praised in the national anthem and his birthday is celebrated as a national holiday. The first month of the year is called Turkmenbashi. His books and teachings form the core curriculum at both elementary and secondary schools. People used to swear loyalty to him unto death at spectacular public ceremonies, etc. The reflection of this personality cult in contemporary monumental art and architecture of Turkmenistan has not yet been systematically explored. This paper aims to fill the gap by a brief description and analysis of this phenomenon.

IDEOLOGY IN THE ARCHITECTURE OF ASHKHABAD

We will begin the overview of recently built sights and monuments in Turkmenistan in the Ashkhabad capital. Apart from being centers of social, economic and cultural life, the outlook of capital cities has an important symbolic function as well. Their architecture is indicative of aspirations of the ruling elite as they are seats of power at the same time. Ashkhabad, until recently a provincial town only some one hundred years old (in spite of Turkmen historiography seeking to prove its ancient origin),³ is no exception in this sense. We could hardly find a better example of a modern-day capital city being reconstructed for the purpose of underpinning a megalomaniacal rule of a single

2 For ideology of the Turkmenbashi regime, see Slavomír Horák, “Ideologija rezhima Turkmenbashi,” in *Politicheskaja nauka i gosudarstvennaja vlast’ v Rossijskoi Federatsii i Novykh Nezavisimykh Gosudarstvakh*. Otv. red. V.N. Rudenko, S.I. Glushkova, K.I. Zubkov, K.V. Kiselev, V.N. Merkushev (Ekaterinburg: UrO RAN, 2004), pp. 5-19. For context, see also his “Mify velikogo Turkmenbashi,” *Vestnik Evrazii/Acta Eurasica* 2 (2005), pp. 105-132.

3 For “thousands of years” of Ashkhabad history, see Öwez Gündogdyýew, *Aşgabat – kermatly Ärsagyň şäheri* (Aşgabat: Türkmenistanyň milli medeniýet “Miras” merkezi, 2005).

individual than Ashkhabad during the Turkmenbashi era. It is symptomatic that the building activity commenced in the early 1990s with the construction of the monumental Presidential (Turkmenbashi) Palace. It was to be the first structure of the architectonically unique palace ensemble surrounding the Presidential (Turkmenbashi) Square, which eventually became the core of a new city center. Ever since, the city has resembled a gigantic construction site. Allegoric monuments combining architecture with art conforming to ideological criteria set by the Turkmenbashi regime have become typical for the new look of the city, effectively making it an instructive textbook of the ruling ideology in marble, gold and stone.



Picture 1

The 63-meter Turkmenistan Arch of Neutrality (*Türkmenistanyň Bitaraplyk derwezesi* [Picture 1]) dominates the skyline of the new Ashkhabad city center. The arch is an allegory of Turkmenistan's conduct in the international arena oriented towards "peace and harmony." It became one of the principal landmarks of the capital soon after its festive opening in 1998. The inauguration of the monument took place on the occasion of the third anniversary of the "historic" UN General Assembly resolution. On December 12, 1995, the world community recognized Turkmenistan's pledge to be permanently neutral. Ashkhabad tends to interpret this act as a sign of unanimous international support for its policies, both foreign and domestic. The multi-story lookout tower, referred to as the "Tripod" by locals, is supported by three gigantic pylons symbolizing in the words of President Turkmenbashi the "three sources of modern Turkmenistan – neutrality, independence, and unity of the nation [spirit, e.g., *Rukhnama*]."⁴ The structure is capped by a 12-meter gilded statue of the grand architect of the neutrality concept, Saparmurat Turkmenbashi, standing with extended arms and receiving blessings from above. His majestic figure is, moreover, always facing the sun, as a sophisticated technical mechanism allows for its continuous rotation over the course of 24 hours. With its original architecture and scope, the tripod outshines other monuments dedicated to President Turkmenbashi, to his mother, his father or to other historical figures both in Ashkhabad and the rest of Turkmenistan.

4 Rech' Prezidenta Turkmenistana Saparmurata Turkmenbashi na torzhestvennom otkrytii Arki Neitraliteta, *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, December 14, 1998.



Picture 2

Not to be sidelined, Turkmenistan's independence is celebrated by the Turkmenistan Independence Monument (*Türkmenistanyň Garaşsyzlyk Binasy* [Picture 2]). It is located in the Ashkhabad southern district of Berzengi. The 118-meter structure is perhaps the highest in Turkmenistan. The monument is the key feature of the largest forest park in Ashkhabad.

The park includes also an amphitheater, a half-fountain, half-shopping-mall in the shape of an octagonal pyramid, various aquatic structures, as well as small sculptural forms, such as busts of Saparmurat Turkmenbashi. The monument itself was officially unveiled in 2000, on the occasion of the ninth anniversary of the declaration of independence. Its colossal foundation in the shape of a yurt carries a 91-meter stele crowned by a viewing gallery. The height of the stele is symbolic, as 1991 is the year Turkmenistan gained independence. On the top of the stele, there is a 27-meter flagpole featuring a standard with a golden crescent and five stars. Even the length of the flagpole is symbolic, as October 27 was the exact date when Turkmenistan's independence was declared. The monument is encircled by two dozen statues representing the greatest leaders, thinkers, and poets supposedly associated with the very foundations of Turkmen statehood and spirit. The composition of the monument is complemented by a wide, perfect for parades, boulevard overlooked by a gilded figure of the "Founding Father," Saparmurat Turkmenbashi, its size reflecting the "epochal significance" of Turkmenistan's independence.⁵

Also situated within the green zone, just a few minutes walk from the Independence Monument, is the Rukhnama Park (*Ruhnama seýilgähi* [Picture 3]) built in 2003. This public park is unique in its attempt to reflect the Rukhnama book, Saparmurat Turkmenbashi's ideological masterpiece, in an original synthesis of architectonic and sculptural form. Its central component consists of an imposing copy of the "Holy Book" with a gold relief portrait of its author on the cover. Thanks to subtle inner mechanics, the book seems to come to life for the fascinated visitors. Every Saturday night (Saturday, meaning the Day of Spirit in Turkmen under the Turkmenbashi calendar), the book opens to the sound of music and "glorious episodes" of national history since Turk-

⁵ *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, October 27, 2000.

men's progenitor Oghuz Khan to the Turkmenbashi era are projected on its giant pages.⁶ Seven granite columns representing seven generations of Saparmurat Turkmenbashi's forefathers in the male lineage have been erected around the monument, thus underlining the historical aspect of the regime's ideology.

What we see here is a representation of conceptual cornerstones of recent state and nation building practices in Turkmenistan through monumental art and architecture, according to the precise words of President Turkmenbashi: "The Golden Age of the Turkmens has two historical foundations. One of them is Independence, [the other is] Neutrality. If [using] the comparison of the Turkmen people



Picture 3

with a bird taking off, then one wing is Independence, [and the other one is] Neutrality. And Rukhnama lights up the way for the bird."⁷ According to the government propaganda, both these national accomplishments have been made possible only thanks to the personal presence and attention of Saparmurat Turkmenbashi. Dozens of his figurative sculptures in central Ashkhabad as well as elsewhere in Turkmenistan are thus interpreted by the regime as expressions of the nation's supposed unending gratitude for Turkmenbashi's paternal love and care. Turkmenistan's day-to-day reality, however, fails to comply with these grand conceptual notions.

THE MOTHER

Turkmenbashi's mother Gurbansoltan edzhe (1915?-1948) was the second most esteemed figure in Turkmenistan's history during the Turkmenbashi era. Official biography portrays her as an exceptional personality combining all the characteristics of an ideal Turkmen woman. She was to personify "infinite kindness and generosity, purity of soul, superior honor and virtue, devotion to the family hearth and boundless love to children."⁸ Her short yet fulfilled

6 *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, February 19, 2003.

7 President of Turkmenistan Saparmurat Niyazov: "Harmony and mutual respect are keys to morality," *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, August 8, 2002.

8 *Türkmenistanyň Gahrymany Gurbansoltan eje we Beýik Saparmyrat Türkmenbaşynyň Altyn Zamanasynyň zenanlary*. Awtorlar-düzüjiler: D.B. Berdiýew, N.A. Durdylyýew, W.M. Hramow, M.M. Mollaýewa (ylmy ýolbaşçy), O.A. Myradowa, A.A. Ýeskow (Aşgabat: Türk-



Picture 4

life, during which she gave birth to three sons, was tragically ended by the disastrous Ashkhabad earthquake of 1948. She perished in the catastrophe together with both of Turkmenbashi's little brothers and tens of thousands of other residents. A public organization called Gurbansoltan Edzhe Women's Union promotes the legacy of the "Kaaba of the Turkmen" as Turkmenbashi's mother is often nicknamed. The union backed most of the nationwide initiatives seeking to glorify the deceased mother. Among them was the granting of the republic's highest state honor of Hero of Turkmenistan in memoriam to Gurbansoltan edzhe, proclaiming the year 2003 as the Year of Gurbansoltan Edzhe, and establishing new national holidays associated with the milestones in her life.

Moreover, her name was given to a number of municipalities and districts, boulevards, and streets all over Turkmenistan as well as to governmental, educational, and cultural institutions, for instance the World Association of Carpet Connoisseurs.⁹ In 2002, the month of April was renamed Gurbansoltan in the newly adopted Turkmen national calendar.¹⁰

men döwlet neşirýat gullugy, 2005), p. 126. The book was reprinted in Russian in a series in the daily newspaper *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan* from January 20, 2006, to February 8, 2006.

9 Postanowlenie Medzhhlisa Turkmenistana "O prisvoenii zvaniia Geroia Turkmenistana Gurbansoltan edzhe – materi pervogo i bessrochnogo Prezidenta Turkmenistana Velikogo Saparmurata Turkmenbashi," *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, July 6, 2002; Postanowlenie Medzhhlisa Turkmenistana "Ob ob"iavlennii 2003 goda Godom Geroia Turkmenistana Gurbansoltan edzhe – materi pervogo i bessrochnogo Prezidenta Turkmenistana Velikogo Saparmurata Turkmenbashi," *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, January 18, 2003; Ukaz Prezidenta Turkmenistana "Ob ob"iavlennii v Den' pominoveniia obshchenatsional'nogo traura," *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, April 17, 1998; Postanowlenie Medzhhlisa Turkmenistana "O pereimenovanii Iylanlyiskogo etrapa Dashoguzskogo velaiata," *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, September 7, 2004; Reshenie Khalk Maslakhaty Turkmenistana "Ob obrazovanii v gorode Turkmenabate Lebapskogo velaiata etrapov imeni Geroia Turkmenistana Atamurata Niiazova i imeni Geroia Turkmenistana Gurbansoltan edzhe," *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, August 13, 2002.

10 Ukaz Prezidenta Turkmenistana "O vvedenii v neitral'nom Turkmenistane natsional'nogo letoschisleniia turkmenskogo naroda, oboznachenii dnei nedeli, dvenadtsatiletnego tsykla zhizni cheloveka, a takzhe prazdnovanii 'Ak goiun toi'," *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, August 13, 2002.

The glorification of Turkmenbashi's mother has had a strong impact upon monumental art and architecture in Turkmenistan. This process gained intensity following the festive opening in 1996 of the Ashkhabad memorial park named Motherly Love (*Ene Mähri* [Picture 4]). The park is situated in a quiet location at the beginning of a pedestrian zone in the city center. It is dominated by a bronze sculptural figure of a mother with a baby in her arms as the personification of a gentle Turkmen woman, whose slender lines appear to grow right out from the robust foliage in the middle of the pool. The thin squirts of water from the adjoining fountains symbolize the new life given by the mother to her beloved child.¹¹ This calm figurative composition was modeled on Gurbansoltan edzhe looking after the future President of Independent Turkmenistan, Saparmurat Turkmenbashi.¹²

The figure of Gurbansoltan edzhe, however, has been perceived not only as a symbol of tenderness and purity but also of human self-sacrifice. The scene where Turkmenbashi's mother dies in the devastating earthquake of 1948 is another popular theme in contemporary Turkmenistan's monumentalism. The Earthquake Victims' Monument (*Ýer titremesiniň pidalarynyň hatyrasyna bina edilen Ýadygärlik* [Picture



Picture 5

5)) in the very center of Ashkhabad is an excellent example. It forms one urban complex together with the Arch of Neutrality, constituting the northern side of the vast Presidential Square. The inauguration of the monument in 1998 was part of the nationwide festivities to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the "heroic death" of Turkmenbashi's mother.¹³ The monument's cube-shaped pedestal with a museum inside carries on top a metal sculpture of a mythical bull attacking the globe with its horn. The globe cracks wide open and the gaping chasm is just about to swallow the focal figure of a dying mother who is raising a defenseless little boy above her head and thus saving the future President from the fury of the elements. The shining golden figure of the miraculously rescued infant is meant to highlight the nation's relentless tenacity capable of overcoming any hardship.

11 Kurbandzhemal Kuraeva, "Monumental'naia skul'ptura nezavisimogo neitral'nogo Turkmenistana," *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, February 9, 2004.

12 *Novosti Turkmenistana*, May 6, 1996.

13 *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, October 7, 1998.

Another typical version of the monumental mother can be found in front of the Ashkhabad Palace of Justice (*Adalat Köşgi*), the seat of Turkmenistan's Ministry of Justice, Supreme Court and several law-enforcement agencies. Located in the south-eastern corner of the Presidential Square, the palace opened in 2001 together with the building of the Defense Ministry, architectonically its mirror image. With these two additions, the palace complex adjoining the central city square in fact acquired its present appearance. Personifying the idea of "absolute impartiality and objectivity of Turkmenistan's judiciary," Gurbansoltan edzhe is shown here as Themis, the Goddess of Justice, with the symbolic scales in her hand. Apart from classical inspiration, the statue has also some specific features such as Turkmen national dress as well as the indispensable "Holy Book" pressed to the chest with the second hand. Thus, in an allegorical sense, the mother warrants the "rule of law" embodied in the "supreme justice of the policy of Saparmurat Turkmenbashi," grounded in "humanity and national tradition."¹⁴ The fact that brutal interrogations of prisoners of conscience took place within the palace following the reported attempt on the life of President Niyazov in 2002 puts the monument in more realistic perspective.

In this way, Turkmenbashi's mother has become one of the most frequently depicted objects in monumental art and architecture all over Turkmenistan since the declaration of independence, with the Ashkhabad Motherly Love monument serving as a source of inspiration. In regional and district centers like Dashoguz, Turkmenbashi and Tedzhen, the author has recorded numerous sculptural compositions portraying Gurbansoltan with a baby in her arms. Different variations of the theme begin to appear as well. The majestic statue in front of the Culture Palace of Turkmenbashi the Great in Rukhabat, a new satellite town of Ashkhabad, might be indicative of a certain innovation, representing Gurbansoltan edzhe with a boy standing by her side, obviously introducing him to a grand life journey. A similar scene can be seen, for instance, in the picturesque Gurbansoltan Edzhe Park, which the author came across in the Karabekaul oasis in the remote Lebap Region.

THE FATHER

Turkmenbashi's reported father, one Atamurat Niyazov (1912-?), complements Turkmenistan's version of the "Holy Trinity." Unfortunately, as in the case of the mother, there has been hardly any documentary evidence about his life. According to findings of Turkmen intelligentsia in exile based on research in former Soviet archives, no person bearing the name Atamurat Niyazov has probably ever existed.¹⁵ This fact, however, was no obstacle to his gradual glo-

¹⁴ *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, October 27, 2001.

¹⁵ See particularly Choushir Toppyev (pseudonym), "Styd i nenavist' Saparmurata Niiazova-Annaniiazova," *Erkin Türkmenistan*, January 2, 2005, available at <<http://www.erkinnet/chronicle4/news2860.html>>.

rification within the Turkmenbashi regime. The cult of Turkmenbashi's father traces back to the exhumation of his supposed remains in 2000. Their discovery surprisingly occurred somewhere in the North Caucasus where he is said to have fallen heroically at the hands of Nazi captors in 1942 or 1943.¹⁶ Not even the year of his death has been declared for certain by the regime ideologues.¹⁷



Picture 6

Numerous geographical locations in Turkmenistan now boast the name of Turkmenbashi's father, including two administrative districts and a district capital, principal irrigation water canal and countless public spaces. A textile mill in Geok-tepe, a hospital in the city of Mary, an oil tanker in the Caspian Sea port town of Turkmenbashi, a motor rifle division or a collective farm all bear his name as well. Atamurat Niyazov's "credits" in the fight for Fatherland gained international recognition during protracted negotiations in 2005, when President of Ukraine Viktor Yushchenko reportedly awarded him the Order of Prince Yaroslav the Wise in memoriam in a final bid to keep supplies of natural gas from Turkmenistan flowing.¹⁸

Memorial Park of the Hero of Turkmenistan Atamurat Niyazov (*Türkmenistanyň Gahrymany A. Nyýazow adyndaky ýadygärlik seýilgähi* [Picture 6])

16 *Turkmenistan News Weekly*, May 8, 2000. Concerning the expedition searching for the remains of Turkmenbashi's father in the Caucasus, see "recollections" of the official Turkmen delegation member Murad Karryev in *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, June 16, 2000.

17 Several more or less accomplished attempts at its artistic rendering have been pursued since 1991 (e.g. in a two-part wide-screen epic movie). However, an official biography of the Hero of Turkmenistan Atamurat Niyazov had not been completed until late 2005. Unfortunately, the author has not been able to get hold of it. We thus have to rely mainly on fractional and anecdotal narration by Saparmurat Turkmenbashi available in the first volume of his "Holy Book" of *Rukhnama*, based on the memories of a certain Ivan Semenovich, whom young Turkmenbashi met sometime in the 1960s in a Leningrad library, and of a certain Chary Aga, whom he supposedly met one day on a train. See Saparmurat Turkmenbashi, *Rukhnama* (Ashkhabad: Turkmenskaia gosudarstvennaia izdatel'skaia sluzhba, 2002), pp. 49-53.

18 The facsimile of President Yushchenko's decree in Ukrainian was published on Turkmenistan's governmental server *XXI vek – zolotoi vek Turkmenistana*, May 3, 2005, available at <http://www.turkmenistan.gov.tm/politika/pol_out/030505.htm>. Official records in Ukraine contain no mentions about this award, although Kiev apparently did not protest nor rebut Ashkhabad news sources reporting the event.

in the Ashkhabad city is an archetype of the monumental portrayal of Turkmenbashi's father. The park was festively opened in 2001 for the celebration of the victory over Nazism. The memorial complex covers a kilometer long pedestrian zone stretching from the Motherly Love Park to the Hero of Turkmenistan Atamurat Niyazov Avenue in the west. Its central axis consists of a marble-paved boulevard, lined on both sides by decorative greenery and a variety of water pools, cascades and fountains. In the middle part we pass the Brothers (*Doganlar*) monument in honor of Turkmenbashi's little brothers, Niyazmurat (1938-1948) and Mukhammetmurat (1942-1948).¹⁹ Situated at the high end of the boulevard, there is a spectacular bronze sculpture of a soldier tightly holding his rifle. It represents Turkmenbashi's father as a World War II hero, supposedly embodying "true heroism and devoted will to victory." The monolithic figure is further accentuated through a relief depicting charging soldiers.²⁰ The platform in front of the monument with the flame of eternal glory serves as a venue for ceremonies held by the Hero of Turkmenistan Atamurat Niyazov War Veterans' Organization.

The search for an artistic embodiment of Turkmenbashi's father can be documented by a range of various sculptural compositions all over Turkmenistan. As a symbol of exemplary courage, vigor and bravery, Atamurat Niyazov is typically depicted as a soldier in a uniform with a weapon. In contrast to the monuments dedicated to the "Great Mother," which are usually part of public recreation areas and in this sense oases of rest and peace, monuments to the "Great Father" frequently stand in locations where military parades and other mass gatherings take place. The density of such monuments seems especially high on the left bank of the Amudarya river given the father's presumed connections with this region, e.g. in the town of Kerki that had itself been renamed Atamurat for the same reason.²¹ Monuments commemorating other stages of his life are apparently less common, as the soldier image best fits the mobilizing efforts of the regime. Nevertheless, Atamurat is also sometimes portrayed as a village teacher with various school aids (like in front of the Senagat bank in Annau featuring a huge abacus or on the main street of Dashoguz holding a globe).

MONUMENTS TO TURKMENBASHI'S FAMILY IN KIPCHAK

In the section above, the monuments celebrating the cult of Turkmenistan's late President Niyazov, his deceased mother, father and, to a lesser

19 For a story on Turkmenbashi's brothers see his latest "memoir book," S.A. Nyýazow, *Dogan – doganyň galasy. Ýatlamalar we oýlanmalar* (Aşgabat: Türkmen döwlet neşirýat gullugy, 2005), reprinted in Russian in a series in *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan* from November 1, 2005, to November 5, 2005.

20 *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, May 9, 2001.

21 Türkmenistanyň Halk Maslahatynyň Çözüdi Lebap welaýatynyň Kerki şäheriniň we Kerki etrabynyň adyny üýtgetmek hakynda, *Türkmenistan*, December 30, 1999, available at <<http://88.247.7.7:8080/Atamyrat/htm/perman-atamyrat.htm>>.

degree, brothers, have been treated more or less individually as separate entities. At the same time, however, there is a clear tendency towards adoration of Turkmenbashi's family as a whole. Following the declaration of independence in 1991, Turkmenistan embarked upon a course of national revival through a renewal of traditional institutions. The family as the bedrock of society holds a special place within this "back to roots" process, a stance that explains the regime's heavy emphasis on the Leader's family. An unrivalled manifestation of this exaggerated family cult through monumental art and architecture can be found at Saparmurat Turkmenbashi's native *aul* of Kipchak in Akhal Region, a 15-minute drive on a brand-new six lane highway west of



Picture 7

Ashkhabad. Vigorous construction activity focused on this area.

The architectonic development of Kipchak was accelerated by the inauguration in 1997 of the 1948 Earthquake Victims' Monumental Park (*1948-nji ýyldaky ýer titremesiniň pidalarynyň hatyrasyna döredilen ýadygärlik-bag*), an accomplished variation on the topic of elemental fury as a moment of the recent past that has shaped the nation's memory. A gigantic elevated granite base with a fountain carries a sculptural figure of a mother in a desperate effort to stop a wall from collapsing on top of her sleeping son with one arm, while holding her second terrified boy with the other. The tragic scene is contrasted with the mulberry tree that survived the disaster. This silent witness to the tragedy serves now as a symbol of invincible life in the background.²²

On the opposite side of the motorway there is the Recreation Park (*Dynç alyş seýilgähi* [Picture 7]), another Kipchak memorial complex with artistic aspirations. The opening ceremony was arranged as the people's gift to the President on the occasion of his sixtieth birthday in 2000. The locals even say it was they who proudly raised funds for the construction of the monument as an expression of thanks to the village's most renowned native.²³ This claim, however, is hard to believe given the meager incomes throughout the region. Water

22 See *Milleting énesine tagzym*. Red. B. Zhutdiev, A. Akmuradov, Zh. Mulkiev (Stambul: n.p., 1998).

23 Author's interview with Orazguli Annamuradov, director of the memorial complex, member of parliament and poet, Kipchak, August 2001.



Picture 8

pools, cascades and fountains are surrounded by a half-circle covered colonnade. Golden bas-relief behind depicts the moving scene of Atamurat's final good-bye to his pregnant wife and two sons as he is leaving to the front to fulfill his patriotic duty. Colossal golden statue of Saparmurat Turkmenbashi adds a triumphant note to the monument's composition.

In 2004, the ceremonial opening of the Turkmenbashi Spirituality Mosque (*Türkmenbaşynyň Ruhy metjidi* [Picture 8]) took place. It marked the most recent stage in Kipchak's transformation into a jewel of sorts in contemporary Islamic monumental art and architecture. Propaganda pamphlets compare the mosque to the Taj Mahal for its beauty achieved through purity of form. It is currently the largest shrine in all Central Asia. A spherical cupola covers the main hall which can accommodate up to 10,000 believers. As in all preceding cases, the construction of this approximately \$100 million project proceeded under the personal supervision of President of Turkmenistan, Saparmurat Turkmenbashi. He was even reported to have personally contributed to it with earnings from a record harvest of wheat on his small plot of land.²⁴ The four minarets above the golden dome of the white marble mosque rise to the height of 91 meters, thus again symbolically commemorating the year of Turkmenistan's independence. Yet what is certainly a new element, distinguishing the mosque from earlier monuments, is the unabashed full-scale attempt to sacralize Saparmurat Turkmenbashi, referred to in national media in later stages of his rule as God's last Prophet.²⁵ All the minarets, the dome, the arches above each of the eight entrances as well as the interior of the mosque are "adorned" not only with quotations from the Holy Qur'an, but from Turkmenbashi's "Holy Rukhnama" as well.²⁶ Visitors can borrow the complete book for prayer at the entrance free of charge.

²⁴ *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, June 18, 2002.

²⁵ See particularly Kakamurat Ballyev and Osman Odéev, "Slovo Proroka," *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, May 21, 2001.

²⁶ *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, October 23, 2004.

The dramatic rebirth of the once almost forgotten village of Kipchak within a single decade pointedly illustrates the changing nature of the Turkmenbashi regime's ideology, which gradually kept acquiring attributes of a regular religious cult. Shortly after its inauguration in 2004, the Turkmenbashi Spirituality Mosque saw ceremonial reburial of the remains of the President's closest relatives. The urns with the ashes of his mother and little brothers from the adjacent cemetery were transferred to the family vault next to the mosque, together with the urn containing "sacred" earth from the place where the father had supposedly been buried before.²⁷ In 2006, the late President Turkmenbashi was also interred in the family vault next to the remains of his kin.²⁸ Besides, a tradition was established of holding all commemoration ceremonies on national holidays in Kipchak, since 2005 the main spiritual center and memorial complex in Turkmenistan.²⁹ Thus, Turkmenbashi's birthplace became a popular site of government-sponsored pilgrimages.

PHENOMENON OF PRESIDENTIAL ARCHITECTURE

We can thus say that the "specific path of development" that we have witnessed in Turkmenistan since the declaration of independence is inseparable from the figure of the first President, Saparmurat Turkmenbashi. Turkmenistan underwent a radical change of ideological paradigms after 1991, a move that had profound effects throughout the society. In architecture an entirely new style with distinct forms emerged, based primarily on the ideas, imagination and taste of President Turkmenbashi, which allows us to speak of a phenomenon of presidential architecture.³⁰ In the following section I use examples of recently completed projects of various structural types to illustrate several key aspects of this new style.

The forms of presidential architecture in Turkmenistan can perhaps be best observed on new government buildings that were erected on a massive scale as the status and needs of the republic's administration increased dramatically after 1991. The Spirituality Palace of Congresses and Arts (*Ruhnyjet köşgi*) at the head of the Presidential Square in Ashkhabad is an excellent demonstration of the

27 *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, December 11, 2004.

28 *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, December 25, 2006.

29 Postanovlenie Khalk Maslakhaty Turkmenistana "Ob uvekovochenii opory natsional'nogo dukha – Mecheti dukhovnosti Turkmenbashi i ob obespechenii ei gosudarstvennoi podderzhki," *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, October 26, 2005.

30 For the term of presidential architecture, see Ata Kurbanaliev, "Ashkhabad: fenomen prezidentskoi arkhitektury," *Press-kur'er Turkmenbashi* 7 (2000), available at <http://www.tm-press.gov.tm/vol24_arch.html>. For perhaps the most comprehensive, rich factual work on the architecture of the Turkmenbashi era, regardless of ideological bias, see Annageldi Esenow, *Beýik Saparmyrat Türkmenbaşy eýýamynyň binagärçiligi* (Aşgabat: "Ruh" neşirýaty, 2003). See also the introductory sections to his earlier Annagel'dy Esenov, *Istoriia arkhitektury Turkmenistana* (Ashkhabad: "Rukh," 2001), pp. 7-32.



Picture 9

presidential style, which set the standards for subsequent projects as well. The palace was inaugurated in 1999 for the ninth session of the People's Council, Turkmenistan's supreme governmental body. During that session, the "Great Son," first President of independent Turkmenistan Saparmurat Turkmenbashi, was granted the "exclusive right to exercise the powers of the head of state without term limita-

tions," against his ostentatious reluctance.³¹ Symmetric dome composition of the building seems to evoke an open book. Rhythmic row of columns in front of the long main facade with lots of open spaces provide the building with an airy and simple atmosphere, which is supposed to imitate the accessibility of the plain words of the Leader's "Holy Rukhnama" for ordinary Turkmen. The public importance of the palace is accentuated by its placement on an elevated platform that is meant to be as massive and solid as the supposed spiritual foundations of the Turkmen nation.³²

Public parks, representing the synthesis of architecture, monumental art and landscaping, provide yet another opportunity for expression of the ruling ideology. As part of governmental campaign for the greening of cities, a number of such open-air monuments appeared in the capital of Ashkhabad as well as in other cities in recent years.³³ Apart from the parks mentioned above, the Ashkhabad city Park of the Ten Years of Turkmenistan's Independence (*Türkmenistanyň Garaşsyzlygynyň 10 ýyllygy seýilgähi* [Picture 9]) deserves particular attention. This park complements the magnificent Spirituality Palace on the southern side of the Presidential Square. It was inaugurated with great fanfare in 2001 and its purpose has been to allegorically portray all the "historic successes" Turkmenistan achieved during the first decade of independence.³⁴ The park is dominated by an elevated square platform, the sides of which are

31 Postanovlenie Khalk Maslakhaty Turkmenistana "O polnomochiiakh Pervogo Prezidenta Turkmenistana Saparmurata Turkmenbashi," *Press-kur'er Turkmenbashi* 18 (1999), available at <http://www.tmpress.gov.tm/vol18_edict.html>.

32 Kurbandzhemal Kuraeva, "Garmoniiia iskusstva i mysli," *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, October 30, 2001.

33 Leonid Kiiashko, "Parki i skvery Ashkhabada," *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, September 22, 2003.

34 *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, October 27, 2001.

symbolically exactly 91 meters long. There is a gigantic fountain on the platform in the shape of the traditional Oghuz octagonal star, which is crowned by a sculpture of ten noble Akhal Teke stallions that are relentlessly galloping forward. The direction of the herd is provided by the "Great Founder" of independent Turkmenistan, Saparmurat Turkmenbashi. His monumental oversize golden statue is the park's conceptual pinnacle.

As centers of Islamic faith, which has always been an integral part of Turkmen identity, mosques enjoy a special status in monumental art and architecture of Turkmenistan. Following the declaration of independence in 1991, several mosques have been built as part of the regime's nation building effort. They are supposed to revive the spiritual values of the Turkmens, yet at the same time they perfectly serve the personality cult of Saparmurat Turkmenbashi as well. Prior to the construction of the aforementioned Turkmenbashi Spirituality Mosque in Kipchak, the slightly less majestic Great Saparmurat Hajji Mosque (*Beýik Saparmyrat Hajy metjidi*) in Geok-tepe was the most important shrine in the republic. The mosque is operating since 1995. Its 60-meter minarets and a light blue dome are visible kilometers away thanks to the surrounding flat terrain. This memorial complex erected in order to immortalize President Turkmenbashi's pilgrimage to Mecca (*hajj*) is located on the "sacred soil" of a former fortress where in 1881 the resistance of Turkmen (Akhal Teke) tribes to the colonization efforts of tsarist Russia was ultimately broken in a bloody battle.³⁵ On January 12 each year, nationwide events commemorating heroic defenders of the fortress (the fallen, according to recent "findings" of Turkmenbashi's biographers, also include his direct ancestors) take place there together with ceremonies remembering those who fell for freedom and independence of the Fatherland in more recent times.³⁶

The architecture of public buildings, such as theaters, museums or exhibition halls, is another area where the ruling ideology leaves a no less prominent mark. President Turkmenbashi achieved notoriety for his highly selective approach towards true spiritual values as demonstrated for example by banning ballet and opera.³⁷ Construction of public buildings dedicated to art and culture is nevertheless experiencing rapid growth. During the last decade, a number of impressive structures have been erected mainly in Ashkhabad; the chief purpose of these buildings is to underpin and supplement the ideological needs of the

35 Ukaz Prezidenta Turkmenistana "Ob uvekovechenii svetloi pamiati pogibshikh v Gekdepinskom srazhenii za nezavisimost' turkmenskogo naroda," *Turkmenskaia iskra*, February 4, 1993.

36 For Turkmenbashi's Family Tree, see *Beýik Saparmyrat Türkmenbaşynyň ömür daragty*. Düzüjiawtorlar: D.B. Berdiyew, N.A. Durdylyýew, A.A. Ýeskow, O.D. Kuzmin, M.M. Mollaýewa (ylmy ýolbaşçy), W.M. Hramow (Aşgabat: Türkmenistanyň Ministrler Kabinetiniň ýanyndaky Baş arhiw müdirligi, Türkmenistanyň Prezidentiniň Arhiw gaznasy, 2006), reprinted in Russian in a series in *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan* from November 2, 2006, to November 16, 2006.

37 *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, April 3, 2001.



Picture 10

ruling regime. From the recently finished projects outside the capital, the concept and architectural form of the Great Saparmurat Turkmenbashi's Turkmenistan National Museum of White Wheat (*Türkmenistanyň Beýik Saparmyrat Türkmenbaşy adyndaky Milli Ak Bugdaý muzeýi* [Picture 10]) in Annau from 2005 stands out as a prime example of the current trend, attempting to visibly symbolize Turkmen "tal-

ent and diligence."³⁸ The cylindrical building is capped by gigantic golden ear of wheat glimmering in the sunlight and surrounded by two layers of garlands from smaller wheat ears. In front of the main entrance on a special pedestal there is a monumental statue of Saparmurat Turkmenbashi himself in the middle of a wheat field, his body charging energetically forward, presumably towards the glorious as well as bountiful future of his homeland.

Sporting facilities are an area where the personality cult finds distinctive expression. Having recovered from a series of cardiovascular interventions in the late 1990s, convalescent Turkmenbashi was strongly advised by doctors to stop smoking (a ban on smoking in public was soon afterwards extended to the whole nation by presidential decree) and to begin physical exercise.³⁹ Hence, the President, who was also the head of the national Olympic movement, became a tireless promoter of healthy lifestyle. His "concern" for the "high moral spirit and physical fitness of the golden generation entering the golden age" materialized, inter alia, in the establishment of Leader's Wellness Trail (*Serdaryň saglyk ýoly*) paved along the Kopet-Dag foothills. The 36-kilometer trail with unforgettable panoramic views of the Ashkhabad city starts on the southern outskirts of the capital. The concrete path leads through rugged mountain terrain with numerous ascents and descents; the maximum elevation difference is 800 meters.⁴⁰ In 2000, with the construction completed, the first Saturday in November was declared as Health Day by presidential decree.⁴¹

38 *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, July 16, 2005.

39 Ukaz Prezidenta Turkmenistana "O zaprete kureniiia," *Sobranie aktov Prezidenta Turkmenistana i reshenii Pravitel'stva Turkmenistana* 1 (2000), p. 7.

40 *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, November 8, 2000.

41 Ukaz Prezidenta Turkmenistana "Ob uchrezhdenii i provedenii natsional'nogo prazdnika - Dnia zdorov'ia turkmenskogo naroda," *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, November 6, 2000.

During this national holiday, numerous organized groups head for the trail. Government ministers got involved as well, leading the hikes, working there as part of the out-of-town sessions of the cabinet or even spending their free time there at least once a week,⁴² thus fulfilling Turkmenbashi's whim.

Construction of hotels as attributes of a cosmopolitan metropolis has also become a progressive part of contemporary Turkmenistan's architecture, reflecting the ruling elites' desire for international recognition, which would in turn enhance their own status. Accommodating VIP guests in comfort and style was part of this strategy. Since 1993 over two dozen top-class hotels have been erected in Ashkhabad's southern suburb of Berzengi, along the motorway connecting the capital with Saparmurat Turkmenbashi's spa residence of Archabil. Though almost empty to this day, the construction of these luxury hotels spurred the transformation of the southern part of the city into a peculiar business and administration center with numerous office buildings, luxurious housing and seats of various government agencies. The so-far highest 18-story President Hotel (*Prezident myhmanhanasy*) was completed in 2004 as one of the first skyscrapers in this part of the city. Its distinctive outline is considered to be the symbol of "Turkmenistan's drive towards the future."⁴³ Indispensable "decoration" is provided in the form of a six-story high portrait of the prime mover of this "grand project," Saparmurat Turkmenbashi.

Finally, transport structures are relevant in the context of Turkmenistan's presidential architecture. In accordance with the nationwide government plans (most recently the 2003 Strategy of Economic, Political and Cultural Development of Turkmenistan until 2020), the development of transportation network is the key to sustainable economic growth given the republic's transit potential stemming from geographic location.⁴⁴ The resulting expansion of infrastructure such as railways, roads or ports provides enough space for incorporation of elements of monumental art. Among others, the tradition of building allegorical gateways to mark administrative borders of individual municipal areas has been revived. The Great Turkmenbashi White Gateway (*Beýik Türkmenbaşynyň ak derwezesi*) on the western arterial road in Ashkhabad built in 2001 is perhaps the most accomplished work of this sort. The gateway is topped by five golden domes in a distinctive national style. Reminiscent of ancient gatekeepers, the entry into the city is guarded by bronze statues of brave and watchful *nukers*, soldiers of the Khan's personal retinue. In the central part of the building between both arches there is a massive pedestal supporting an oversize golden statue of the ruler of the city, Saparmurat Turkmenbashi.⁴⁵ Similarly rendered gateways were added in the following years on Ashkhabad's eastern, northern

42 *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, March 29, 2003.

43 *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, July 18, 2004.

44 Natsional'naia programma "Strategiia ékonomicheskogo, politicheskogo i kul'turnogo razvitiia Turkmenistana na period do 2020 goda," *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, August 27, 2003.

45 *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, October 29, 2001.

and southern access roads, as well as on the way from the International Saparmurat Turkmenbashi The Great Airport, so that the President himself can symbolically greet visitors who are entering the city.

The ruling ideology has also affected other areas of contemporary architecture in Turkmenistan, leading to incorporation of ideological symbols as integral parts of new buildings. However, due to overemphasis on a few megalomaniacal projects, construction of housing and basic urban infrastructure, to name just a few, has been largely neglected, thus further aggravating the rather dire living conditions in the country. Unfortunately, the limited scope of this article does not allow for detailed analysis in this respect.

CONCLUSION

The above survey was intended to demonstrate that a pervasive ideological system was developed in Turkmenistan under Turkmenbashi. The Turkmenbashi ideology affects practically all areas of life, reminiscent of the world's most notorious totalitarian dictatorships in modern history. Turkmenbashi's personality cult, gradually extended to include also other members of his family, provides a connecting link to all other ideological aspects of the regime. Monumental art and architecture are a specific reflection of this personality cult, as ideological considerations determine themes and topics for various projects. Their chief purpose is to symbolically underpin the uncontested one-man rule of Saparmurat Turkmenbashi. Now he is dead, but it was still too early to form any solid judgments as to the orientation of Turkmenistan under the new post-Niyazov leadership. However, the fifteen years of Turkmenbashi's regime have produced a new generation of Turkmens whose worldview does not go far beyond that of "Holy Rukhnama." Doing away with this ideological burden may therefore remain an issue long after the "Great Builder" has gone, just like his monumental sculptures as the most tangible relics of his era may also stand witness for years to come.

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