



Feature Article
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Russian Influence in Turkmenistan: Rapprochement or Pragmatism?

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Turkmenistan underwent a serious rapprochement with Russia in recent years, particularly after the establishment of a ruling tandem with Serdar Berdimuhamedow as a formal president and his father, Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow, who retained significant influence in Turkmenistan's domestic and foreign policy. Due to a few viable alternatives, Russia represents the balancing factor for Turkmenistan towards the increasing Chinese influence over the country and the principal supporter of the regime. On the contrary, Turkmenistan remains a loyal partner in the region for Russia, where the most significant players (Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan) expressed their cautious approach towards Russia's advance in Ukraine.

Turkmenistan can be considered as a particular case of the growing Russian attempts to maintain its position in Central Asia. The country, with its harsh authoritarianism, centralized rule in the hands of one ruling family, and proclaimed neutrality, seems to be increasingly vulnerable to Russian pressure. The economic and financial crisis that occurred in the



Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow receiving the order of Aleksandr Nevskiy, 2017. (Kremlin.ru)

country in recent years, its dependency on gas exports to China, and security concerns regarding neighboring Afghanistan are among the most cited reasons for Russia's diplomatic advancements in the country. However, the pro-Russian signals from the Turkmen establishment need not necessarily be a sign of Russia's growing influence in the country; rather, both regimes have found agreements in

some particular fields. At the same time, there are several areas in which Russian and Turkmen interests can clash and raise concerns among the latter's elite.

Background

Russia–Turkmenistan relations since the dissolution of the USSR have had several ups and downs. For a long time, these relations were determined mainly by the strict neutrality established by Turkmenistan in 1995, the need to secure the regime domestically, and gas issues.¹ While the first two spheres remained stable in foreign policy, gas export became a fluid aspect, shifting from an exclusive Russian vector, mixed partially with the Iranian gas pipeline, up to the current nearly exclusive dominance of China in Turkmenistan's exports. The decline of the relationship started in 2009 after the still unexplained explosion of the Central Asia–Center gas pipeline, and the subsequent decrease in gas exports to Russia (in favor of China). In addition, the Russian telecommunication company MTS encountered enormous problems in Turkmenistan up to its final forced departure from the Turkmen market, a development that

handed the Turkmen main operator a monopoly. These and other isolationist measures adopted by Turkmenistan deteriorated mutual relations despite ongoing mutual contact and affirmations of friendship and partnership.

Nevertheless, blunting the crisis and resuming the relations, the president Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow in 2017 concluded a treaty on strategic partnership between Turkmenistan and the Russian Federation during the summit.² Based on this diplomatic activity, Gazprom again declared interest in buying Turkmenistan's gas starting in 2019, even if in insignificant amounts.

Security became the most important sphere in which Russia could affect Turkmenistan's political elites. The conflict on the Afghan–Turkmen border started in 2013 and threatened Turkmenistan's territory with the occasional eruption of border clashes between Afghan fighters and Turkmen border guards.³ According to several sources of information, Russian soldiers and instructors were involved, although no side confirmed this and the matter was kept as

¹ Jan Šír. "The Russian vector in Turkmenistan's foreign policy", *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, Vol. 7, Issue 4(40), 2006, pp. 132–141; Luca Anceschi. "Turkmenistan's foreign policy: Positive neutrality and the consolidation of the Turkmen regime," Routledge, 2008; Luca Anceschi. "Integrating domestic politics and foreign policy making: the cases of Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan." *Central Asian Survey*, Vol. 29, Issues 2, 2010, pp. 143–158; Sebastien Peyrouse. "Turkmenistan. Strategies for Power, Dilemmas of Development," Routledge, 2015, pp. 193–217.

² "Turkmenistan–Russia relations upgraded to strategic partnership – 14 documents signed," Newscentral-

asia.net, October 3, 2017, <http://www.newscentralasia.net/2017/10/03/turkmenistan-russia-relations-upgraded-to-strategic-partnership-14-documents-signed/>.

³ Igor Rotar. "Taliban and Afghan Military Clash near Turkmenistan's Border," *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Vol. 10, Issue 85, May 6, 2013, <https://jamestown.org/program/taliban-and-afghan-military-clash-near-turkmenistans-border/#!>; Jan Šír and Slavomír Horák. "Turkmenistan's Afghan Conundrum," in: *The Regional Security Puzzle around Afghanistan. Bordering Practices in Central Asia and Beyond* (Helena Rytövuori, ed.). Barbara Budrich Publishers, 2016, pp. 107–129.

a strict state secret.⁴ According to the author's interviews with several Turkmen experts living abroad, President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow may have used Russian guards to protect himself and his family. Several sources also speculated about the Turkmen security services, whose staff was trained mostly in Russia, and being interconnected with the Russian counterparts. If this uncertain information is accurate, it would demonstrate a significant Russian influence and probably a deep knowledge of Turkmenistan's weaknesses in terms of security and defense.

In contrast, Turkmenistan every year demonstrated the acquisition of new military equipment from all over the world during its traditional parade, showing its military independence from Russian supplies.⁵

Rustam Mukhamedov also points out the increasing Chinese vector in Turkmenistan's trade and the lack of alternatives for Turkmenistan.⁶ However, the Turkmen leader appears relatively unconcerned about the country's growing dependency on China. In this regard, Russia also does not insist on Turkmenistan's participation in its integration

structures (such as the Eurasian Economic Union), respecting (officially) the neutral position of Turkmenistan. Unlike neighboring Uzbekistan, the question of joining the EEU was not even raised during mutual meetings.

Wheels of Change in Turkmenistan?

The new president Serdar Berdimuhamedow, elected in 2022, could be easily considered a pro-Russian politician. He not only studied in Russia (with the help of the Turkmenistan embassy staff) but also maintains contact with some of the Russian elites, albeit not at the highest level. Despite the change in the presidential office, the political culture in the country did not substantially change. Serdar Berdimuhamedow continues to rotate cadres every few months, except for several key people he trusts. Understandably, former diplomatic staff at Turkmenistan's embassy in Moscow from the time of Serdar Berdimuhamedow's studies appear to be the closest people to the new president. For example, Guvanch Owezow, appointed as deputy interior minister, is responsible (among others) for the forced

⁴ "Inostrannyye vojennoye pomogayut okhranyat' granitsu s Afganistanom," *Khronika Turkmenistana*, March 24, 2015, <https://www.hronikatm.com/2015/03/inostrannyie-voennyie-pomogayut-ohranyat-granitsu-turkmenistana-2/>; Bruce Panier. "How Much Is The Russian Military Helping Turkmenistan?" *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, January 4, 2020. <https://www.rferl.org/a/how-much-is-the-russian-military-helping-turkmenistan-30360150.html>.

⁵ Stijn Mitzer and Joost Oliemans. "Turkmenistan's Parade Analysis: What's New?" *Oryx*, October 03, 2021,

<https://www.oryxspioenkop.com/2021/10/turkmenistans-parade-analysis-whats-new.html>; Stijn Mitzer and Joost Oliemans. "Snaps From Ashgabat: Turkmenistan's 2021 Military Parade," *Oryx*, September 27, 2021, <https://www.oryxspioenkop.com/2021/09/snaps-from-ashgabat-turkmenistans-2021.html>.

⁶ Rustam Muhamedov, "Turkmenistan-Russia. Turkmenistan-Russia: the Breakthroughs and Limits of Cooperation," *Cabar.Asia*, October 6, 2021, <https://cabar.asia/en/turkmenistan-russia-the-breakthroughs-and-limits-of-cooperation>.

repatriation from Russia and Turkey of Turkmen dissidents and politically active emigrants.⁷

The real power in Turkmenistan, however, remains firmly in the hands of Serdar's father, Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow. Known as "the Leader of the Nation" or "Arkadag," honorific titles of the former president, he did not give up his participation in the most distinguished foreign policy meetings, including those in which his family has interests. The internal changes in constitutional design left Serdar in mostly a position of an enthroned prince.⁸

As for the Russian vector, Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow continues to receive guests from Russia and to cement important informal contacts, such as with Rustam Minnikhanov, the president of Tatarstan. At the same time, Serdar Berdimuhamedow upholds protocol functions, such as receiving diplomats or participating in the annual May 9 parade in Moscow. A substantial part of the family business empire also is linked to Russia, in addition to interests in Turkey and the UAE.⁹ The reshuffling within the Turkmen elite and the shifts in the duumvirate of the father and the son do not indicate a growing

Russian influence over the cadre politics of Turkmenistan. On the contrary, the long-term Russians who previously surrounded the first and the second Turkmen presidents and opened doors for Moscow have passed away, retired, or been deprived of access to Berdimuhamedow's family.¹⁰ Even if some figures could be considered pro-Russian, their careers depend rather on the political will of the ruling family in Turkmenistan. At the same time, Russia needs not interfere in these internal Turkmen political changes unless the leadership expresses an openly anti-Russian position—a step that should not be expected in the current situation.

Political and Security Activities

In the context of the limited options for Russian foreign diplomacy in 2022–2023, Turkmenistan became the object of Moscow's special attention. Russian President Vladimir Putin received President Serdar Berdimuhamedow in Moscow in June 2022 shortly following his accession to power, at the first such summit of this kind after the outbreak of the war in Ukraine.¹¹ Later in the same month, the Russian president performed a

⁷ "Deputy Security Minister Ovezov Linked with Forced Repatriations of Activists to Turkmenistan," *Turkmen.news*, 06.11.2023, <https://en.turkmen.news/news/deputy-security-minister-ovezov-linked-with-forced-repatriations-of-activists-to-turkmenistan/>

⁸ Riza Hasanov. "Strana ottsa in syna", *Novaya Gazeta*, May 13, 2023. <https://novayagazeta.ru/articles/2023/05/13/strana-ottsa-i-syna-media>. Galiya Ibragimova. "Like Father, Like Son: Why Turkmenistan's Power Transition Is In Reverse", *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, May 4, 2023. <https://carnegieendowment.org/politika/89679>.

⁹ Slavomir Horak. "Osobennosti vneshnei politiki personalistskich rezhimov (na primere Turkmenistana)," *Mezhdunarodnaya analitika*, Vol. 12, Issue 2, 2021, pp. 153-169. <https://www.interanalytics.org/jour/article/view/347/326>.

¹⁰ "Posledniy iz mogikan. Ushel na pensiyu 'seryi kardinal' turkmenskoy politiki Viktor Khramov," *Turkmen.news*, September 21, 2023, <https://turkmen.news/poslednij-iz-mogikan-ushel-na-pensiyu-seryj-kardinal-turkmenskoj-politiki-viktor-hramov/>.

¹¹ Andrey Kolesnikov. "Ofitsiyal'nyi vizit Serdara Gurbangulyevicha Berdymukhamedova v Rossiyu," *Kommersant*, June 10, 2022. <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/5405861>.

quick tour of Tajikistan and Turkmenistan, the countries in the region that seemed the most amenable to the Kremlin's influence. The visits legitimized the position of the Russian president as a respected leader. They helped to break Russia's isolation from Europe and enabled its diplomacy to launch mostly successful activities throughout the "Global South."

Russian diplomacy also dispatched a series of influential figures to pay visits to Turkmenistan in late 2022 and early 2023. This included Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin, Deputy Head of Russian Government Alexei Overchuk, Head of State Duma Vladimir Volodin, St. Petersburg Mayor Vladimir Beglov, and Tatarstan President Rustam Minnikhanov.¹² This unprecedented diplomatic avalanche from Russia to the country aimed to cement the ties with the old president and establish relations with the new one, and drove home the point that Turkmenistan was willing to entertain close relations with Moscow. Several symbolic steps were taken to support the relationship, such as the supply of new Russian history books to the single Russian-Turkmen school, the erection of a monument honoring Turkmen eighteenth-century spiritual leader Magtymkuly in St. Petersburg, and the establishment of the "twin cities" agreements between St. Petersburg and the newly built city of Arkadag (which is still a

mostly empty place used for show for the internal and external public).

The participation of Serdar Berdimuhamedow in the Moscow parade also seemed to send a strong signal regarding his Moscow foreign policy vector, together with his other Central Asian colleagues. These efforts are not necessarily to be interpreted as growing Russian influence in Turkmenistan or, generally, in Central Asia. The presence was more symbolic and preceded by personal intervention through phone calls before the event. Serdar Berdymuhamedow was one of those whom Vladimir Putin specially invited.¹³

The Russian diplomatic offensive toward Turkmenistan after the initiation of the war in Ukraine resulted in maintaining ties between the two governments that have, in many cases, aligning views and that need each other. Turkmenistan needs Moscow's support as one of the two countries (together with China) that could secure its existence and neutrality, which can be interpreted mainly as the regime's stability or security and lack of unwanted interference from outside.¹⁴ The family fears principally an open intervention of external insurgents (such as the Islamic forces from Afghanistan) or the emergence of the opposition against the regime that could challenge the ruling elite. Maintaining stable relations with the Taliban, both Russia and Turkmenistan face the former challenge, while

¹² " 'Zdes populyarny nashi gruzoviki': zachem Mishostin i Minnokhanov poekhali v Ashkhabad". *Tatar-inform.ru*, January 20, 2023. <https://www.tatar-inform.ru/news/svyazi-gorazdo-bole-fundamentalnye-zacem-misustin-vzyal-minnixanova-v-asxabad-5893660>.

¹³ Irina Romaliyskaya. „Pochemu vizit inostrannykh liderov na parad v Moskve vovse ne oznachaet predannost' Putinu,“ *Nastoyashchee vremya*, May 10, 2023, <http://currenttime.tv/a/preuvelichivat-parade-liderov-moskvu-predannost-putin/324036679.html>.

¹⁴ Charles J. Sullivan. "Neutrality in Perpetuity: Foreign Policy Continuity in Turkmenistan", *Asian Affairs*, Vol. 51, Issue 4, 2020, p. 779-794.

the cooperation between the security forces (even if unconfirmed and speculative) defends the regime from the latter threat. In the current situation, the presidential family is convinced (with a high probability) that Russia (and China) are the only forces that could guarantee the regime and its proclaimed neutrality. Other external players (Turkey, Iran, the West) are seen as not strong enough, non-reliable, far away or too critical to what happens in the country. Russia, in contrast, is interested in Turkmenistan to keep the country, at least somehow, within its orbit and legitimize its presence on the international stage.

Gas Competitors or Economic Allies?

Natural Gas is Turkmenistan's crucial export product, accounting for up to 90 percent of its total exports. Out of this amount, 80 percent of Turkmen gas is exported to China, according to 2022 statistics. Russia used to be a crucial buyer of Turkmen gas up until 2009, but exports were almost entirely cut off in the 2010s in favor of the China route, which looked the most promising for Turkmenistan. Russia's aggression in Ukraine significantly shifted the Russian flow of mineral fuel exports away from Europe and toward China and Central Asia. This made the two countries genuine competitors for the same markets. Indeed, Russian gas exports to China slightly exceeded Turkmenistan's in 2022.¹⁵

¹⁵ "Turkmenistan vyrazil ,ser'yoznuyu obespoennost' planami Rossii rasshirit' gazovyi soyuz," *Fergana.agency*, August 14, 2023, <https://fergana.agency/news/131005/>. According to TradeMap.org statistics, China imported gas for 10,26 bln. USD from Turkmenistan, while Russian figures reached 10,86 bln. USD. See Trademap.org. As for the

Although Russia is still behind Turkmenistan regarding the necessary infrastructure to export more gas eastwards, the growing amounts of gas delivered to China raised Turkmenistan's concerns about a competition with Russia in this decisive market that it did not expect. Moscow's recently concluded gas agreements with Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan regarding gas supplies intensified Russia's rivalry with Turkmenistan. Uzbekistan's interests are driven by the need to secure supplies for the population after gas shortages in the winter of 2022–2023. The country is more dependent on Russia in many other spheres, so the priority of the Russian vector prevails over its Turkmen neighbor. China, as a strong player and negotiator, can benefit from Russia–Turkmenistan competition, leaving both countries in the same uncertain position. In this game, no Russian involvement in Turkmenistan can impact Chinese decisions about the gas suppliers.

However, the visit of Aleksey Miller, head of Gazprom, to Turkmenistan in February 2023 paved the way for Russia's deeper involvement in Turkmenistan's diversification of gas export routes to Iran and Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India, even if the projects are still far from being materialized. In this way, Russia has tried to tie Turkmenistan back into its orbit.

January-June 2023 statistics, Russia is still beyond Turkmenistan. Daniil Sotnikov. "Turkmenistan predostereg Rossii ot postavok gaza v Kitai," *Deutsche Welle*, August 13, 2022. <https://www.dw.com/ru/v-turkmenistane-zaavili-o-voprosah-k-rossii-izza-post-avok-gaza-v-kitaj/a-66518765>.

Due to the sanctions regime, Turkmenistan is also considered an essential part of Russia's plans to diversify and redirect its transit corridors from the west to the north-south route. This issue was likely a particular topic of discussion during the visit of Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin to Ashgabat in January 2023.¹⁶ Russia, unsatisfied with Kazakhstan's ambiguous approach toward re-exporting sanctioned items through third countries, tried to open a new corridor connecting the Astrakhan port with Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan.¹⁷ However, Turkmenistan still lacks the necessary facilities for transit despite the existence of a railway from Kazakhstan to Iran that opened in 2014. Deliveries through the country are slow and costly compared to other routes through Azerbaijan and the Caspian Sea.¹⁸

Effectively, such a proclamation will probably have a relatively minor effect except for propaganda use.¹⁹ Although the flow of goods (including those under sanctions) through Kyrgyzstan has increased in recent months, the route is still marginal and complicated due to several border crossings, road/rail to ferry reload, and back.

Despite all the limitations, the trade exchange between Russia and Turkmenistan almost doubled in 2022, at least based on official

figures.²⁰ This made Russia the most important trade partner, excluding gas exports, with a substantial disbalance in favor of Russia's exports to Turkmenistan.

In the economic field, Russia could capture a more extended share of Turkmenistan's foreign trade, especially as a sales market for Russian products. As economic weight is an inseparable part of the political processes in the region, Russia turned the country into a priority, albeit still a minor partner. This was partially caused by Turkmenistan's limited capacity and questionable management of the export, import, and transit of goods.

Russia's Ideological Involvement and People-to-People Relations

The previously mentioned visit of St. Petersburg's mayor announced the delivery of Russian textbooks for the only Russian-Turkmen school in Ashgabat, including with high probability controversial history books containing new interpretations of the war in Ukraine and relations with the West. Turkmenistan did not react in any way, which means that the relation of Turkmenistan leadership to the Russian narrative is at best indifferent. Moreover, the Turkmen leadership turned its attention to softening its colonial or

¹⁶ Evgenya Kriuchkova. "Turkmenskiy transit," *Kommersant*, January 19, 2023. <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/5774801>.

¹⁷ Viktoriya Panfilova. "Rossiya obkhodit Kazakhstan iz yuga," *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, July 7, 2023. https://www.ng.ru/cis/2023-07-02/1_8762_south.html.

¹⁸ Slavomír Horák. "Turkmenistan in Eurasian Railway Geopolitics," *Central Asian Survey*, Vol. 42, Issue 1, 2023, pp. 171-190.

¹⁹ Kubatbek Aybashov. "Problemy tranzita i infrastruktury. Est' li budushchee u marshruta cherez 'yuzhnyi koridor?'" Radio Azatlyk, July 13, 2023, <https://rus.azathabar.com/a/32501627.html>.

²⁰ Ivan Volykhyn. „Vmeste k novym gorizontam sotrudnichestva," *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, June 12, 2023.

postcolonial rhetoric toward Russia. If Russia was treated partially as a colonial power during the presidency of Saparmurad Niyazow, recent interpretations tend to remove any negative connotations toward Russia. After the abolition of Victory Day (May 9) as a state holiday in 2017, the celebration of this holiday has become more pompous in recent years, even changing its name – now using the Russian narrative of “The Great Patriotic War 1941–1945”.²¹ In contrast, Memory Day (January 12) connected with the Turkmen (and particularly ruling Akhal-Tekke elite) defeat in 1881 has become neglected, without any mention of Russia as a colonizer.²² These symbolical and historiographical shifts indicate that the two narratives (Russian and Turkmen) became less conflictual, and Turkmenistan certainly does not want to irritate Moscow by exploring other “historiographical battles” in the post-Soviet area.

After the launching of the war in Ukraine, the Russian view of the events was widely spread by the authorities in Turkmenistan, warning the people against Western influence and the Western threat.²³ Although this trend is aimed at the increasingly visible Turkmen activists abroad rather than Russian influence, both processes are tightly connected. Turkmenistan still remains

fertile soil for internalization of Russian narratives, as a substantial part of the population still consumes Russian media content and its specific narratives.²⁴

Struggling against the alternative and critical information about Turkmenistan that emerged abroad in recent years, Turkmenistan’s government has made serious efforts to silence Turkmen activists operating in Turkey and Russia, the most important destinations for Turkmen emigrants. Several prominent people were forcibly returned to Ashgabat from both countries.²⁵ Such forcible repatriations became much easier in Russia after the silencing of independent advocates there and also due to the disrespect of Russian authorities for the European Human Rights Court in Strasbourg, the decisions of which were, until recently, able to delay extraditions. Turkmenistan also decided not to extend passports at its diplomatic missions abroad, forcing Turkmen emigrants outside the country to return to Turkmenistan with uncertain chances to leave again.

At the same time, genuine people-to-people relations are far from being in the interest of the ruling elites of the two countries. Officially, the rumors about establishing a visa-free regime or at

²¹ V Turkmenistane otmetili Den’ pobedy, pensii veterana na khvataet na lekarstva. *Radio Azatlyk*, May 9, 2023. <https://rus.azathabar.com/a/32403422.html>.

²² Oguljamal Yazliyeva. „Turkmenistan forgets Memory Day,” *Eurasianet.org*, January 12, 2023, <https://eurasianet.org/perspectives-turkmenistan-forgets-memory-day>.

²³ Farangiz Najibulla. " 'Bratskie svyazi s Rossiyej'. Kak v Turkmenistane vedut prokremlevskuyu propagandu," *Radio Azatlyk*, December 13, 2022.

<https://rus.azattyq.org/a/turkmenistan-turns-up-pro-russian-propaganda/32174085.html>.

²⁴ Oguljamal Yazliyeva. „Social media: opportunities for public communication in Turkmen society”. Manuscript of the article.

²⁵ “Deputy Security Minister Ovezov Linked with Forced Repatriations of Activists to Turkmenistan,” *Turkmen.news*, 06.11.2023, <https://en.turkmen.news/news/deputy-security-minister-ovezov-linked-with-forced-repatriations-of-activists-to-turkmenistan/>.

least a visa facilitation process voiced by the Russian ambassador in Ashgabat were quickly denounced.²⁶ Turkmenistan seeks to control departures from the country; while this was at first due to COVID, recently, the official explanation is the need for security and harder checks of citizens traveling abroad.²⁷ Turkmenistan already faces the threat of depopulation and emigration of different social groups.²⁸ If borders became more open, the process would inevitably accelerate, as many still living in the country have their suitcases ready, even to go to Russia.

Turkmenistan Airways cut flights to Moscow, officially due to the increasing threat of Ukrainian UAV attacks on Russian cities and airports. Turkmenistan's government and diplomats also launched propaganda encouraging Turkmens to return from Russia due to the closure of airports in Moscow after drone strikes on the city and surrounding areas in the summer of 2023.²⁹ Numerous students in

Russia have suffered from complicated and costly bank transfers from Turkmenistan, with barriers created on both sides. As a result, young people are forced to work illegally, which traps them between being forcibly returned to Turkmenistan or becoming involved in military operations in Ukraine as convict Storm-Z battalions following pressure from Russian security organs.

Russia could be satisfied with its Turkmenistan counterparts in terms of blocking dissent and simple people-to-people contact. Both regimes became supportive of each other as the respective human rights situations deteriorated. However, even in this situation, demands to further complicate matters for citizens comes mostly from Turkmenistan, and Russia does not have any reason to interfere in Turkmenistan's internal affairs.

²⁶ "Russia is ready to switch to a visa-free regime with Turkmenistan - Russian Ambassador Blohin," *Turkmenportal.com*, 20.04.2023, <https://turkmenportal.com/en/blog/60757/russia-is-ready-to-switch-to-a-visafree-regime-with-turkmenistan-russian-ambassador-blohin>.

²⁷ Farangiz Najibullah. "Ocheredi i vzyatki radi pasportov. Zachem turkmeny stremyatsya pokinut' stranu," *Radio Azatlyk*, February 9, 2023. <https://rus.azattyq.org/a/turkmen-see-passports-to-leave-poverty-stricken-country-/32263066.html>. "V Turkmenistane zhelayushchim vyekhat' za granitsu predlagayut proiti test," *Radio Azatlyk*, August 30, 2023. <https://rus.azathabar.com/a/v-turkmenistane-zhelayushchim-vyehat-za-granitsu-predlagayut-proyti-test/32571482.html>.

²⁸ "Çeşmeler: Türkmenistanda ýiti ilat ýetmezçiligi. Ýurtda 2,7 million ilat galdy," *Azatlyk Radiosy*, July 3,

2021, <https://www.azathabar.com/a/31339016.html>; " 'Türkmenleşdirme' sebäpli milli azlyklaryň obalary boşap galdy," *Azatlyk Radiosy*, May 20, 2022, <https://www.azathabar.com/a/31859701.html>.

²⁹ Such steps strongly contrast with the inactivity of the Turkmenistan embassy in Kiev during the early stage of the war and evacuation of foreign (including) Turkmen citizens from Ukraine. See Oguljamal Yazliyeva and Shirin Rahman. "Turkmen students. Escaping from war-torn Ukraine. Global Voices, March 10, 2022., <https://globalvoices.org/2022/03/10/turkmen-students-escaping-from-war-torn-ukraine/>. "Turkmenistan gotovit extrennuyu evakuatsiyu svoikh grazhdan iz Rossi iz-za uchastivshikhsya obstrellov v VSU," *Khronika Turkmenistana*, August 1, 2023, <https://www.hronikatm.com/2023/08/turkmen-evacuation/>.

Conclusions

The shifts in Turkmenistan's foreign policy are closely connected with the key priority of the ruling family—its stability and maintenance of power in a depopulating country. To achieve these goals, they have to rely on several partners within the region only. While Europe and the U.S. are far away with their own problems and without any intention to provide any support let alone guarantees to the regime, Turkey, China, and Russia remain closer to the country, with indisputable interests in the region. Balancing between their positions in Turkmenistan paved the way for the rapprochement of Russia–Turkmenistan relations that were seriously damaged after 2009. In this case, Turkmenistan's interests, as mentioned above, overlap with Russia's plans to keep the Central Asian states at least partially in its orbit. Turkmenistan, along with other smaller states like Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, looks like a promising player, while

the principal regional players, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, have expressed caution toward Russian involvement in the region.

Russia, with its growing involvement, is Turkmenistan's logical priority, and in the Turkmen government's view complementary rather than in competition with the Chinese vector. Nevertheless, Russian influence on the decision-making process within the Turkmen elite depends on conformity with the interests of the ruling family.

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