

TURKMENISTAN: YEAR ONE OF THE POST-NIAZOV ERA

***By Lieutenant Colonel (ret.) Renaud FRANCOIS,
Research Associate at ESISC***

Though it was 10 days in advance of the official calendar, very likely the date December 21, 2006 will long remain the symbolic point of beginning of the year 2007 in Turkmenistan.

The announcement of the death of Saparmurad Niazov, after the 21 years he spent as the country's head of state, suddenly attracted the attention of world media to a country that is, in the imagination of a great many people, just a patch of land in Central Asia which is isolated, poor and desert-like, vaguely located in some distant region that is better known for its glorious past association with the mythical 'Silk Route' than for its fragile and uncertain present.

The funeral of the dead President attracted a large part of the high society of Eastern Europe, the Community of Independent States (CIS) and Southern Asia. Normally, the death of a second tier personality in the world order does not draw so much attention.

But here we are in Turkmenistan. This is an Eldorado of gas situated in a region where, unlike Central Europe, the collapse of the Soviet empire has had only the slightest direct and immediate geopolitical consequences.

While Russia slipped into a '*kleptocracy*' following a period of shock therapy and the Baltic States and Central European countries turned resolutely towards the European Union and the Caucasus were taken out by separatist conflicts now '*frozen over*', Central Asia was, relatively speaking, '*spared*.'

The authoritarian political and economic system of the Soviets gave way to a political and economic system that was just as authoritarian and was now in the hands of the former local Communist potentates who were skillfully recycled by getting themselves elected as Presidents.

And it was precisely because this region had only known, with a few rare exceptions, just one generation of Presidents who came out of the old system that the sudden death of Saparmurad Niazov appeared to specialists of the region to be a signal indicating that its history, ossified since 1992, was beginning to come alive and to be written.

One year later, where is Turkmenistan going and what are the prospects for the future? Has the death of Saparmurad Niazov led to hoped for and heralded changes? These are the questions one may pose as we draw up an assessment of the post-Niazov year.

1) 'We mourn the Turkmenbashy'!

This is how Dominique Bromberger, a journalist for *France-Inter*², ironically entitled his daily journal 'View of the World' on the evening of December 21. He traced there the 'extraordinary fate' of that little eight year old boy who was the only one to survive a decimated family amidst the ruins of the capital of the Soviet Socialist Republic of Turkmenistan that the earthquake of 1948 had just leveled. Taken care of by the Soviet authorities, he grew in his admiration of a Stalin and a Brezhnev and in his respect for the values of an all-powerful Party to the point of being singled out in 1985 by Mikhail Gorbachev, then becoming the number 1 and taking the future of his country in his own hands.

And it was this extraordinary fate that was brutally interrupted on the morning of December 21, 2006. The deceased 'President for life' of Turkmenistan left behind him a very special regime without any designated successor and, furthermore, without a ruling elite worthy of the name. An eccentric leader, he had carefully muzzled all his opponents and ruled without sharing power with anyone over an 'energy empire' that had become his personal property. His regime was surely dictatorial, though probably not one of the worst. It was surely one of the most surrealistic.

Little deals among friends

This is the impression that emerges from the decisions taken in the hours and days that followed the death of Saparmurad Niazov. The Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Health Gurbanguly Myaligulyevich Berdimuhammedov became interim President. According to the Constitution, this role should have passed to the President of the Parliament, Ovezgeldy Ataev, but due to an investigation 'opportunistically' opened against him for suspicion of 'immoral conduct and abuse of power,' he resigned his posts and was sent to prison³.

The Constitution was then amended to entrust the Deputy Prime Minister with the task of interim President, and to maintain a semblance of democracy, the Halk Maslahaty - the Council of the People – the highest legislative instance in Turkmenistan, in charge of selecting the candidates, decided to authorise the candidature of five other political personalities, all coming from the circles of power. No Opposition candidate was registered. No one was fooled. As Murad Karriev, chief of the Central Electoral Commission said: 'Everything should be done to ensure the victory of Gurbanguly Berdimuhammedov, the most suitable of the candidates.'⁴

It therefore came as no surprise that Gurbanguly Berdimuhammedov was elected with nearly 90% of the votes. And on February 14, 2007, in front of the 2,500 members of the Halk Maslahaty, the heads of state of Afghanistan, Georgia, Kazakhstan, and Tajikistan, Turkey, Russia and the Ukraine and a certain number of heads of governments, he delivered his speech, praising, in all seriousness, an electoral process that could hardly be considered in reality to have been fair and democratic.

¹ Litterally the 'Father of all the Turkmens.' This title was attributed to Saparmurad Niazov before being attributed also to the former month of January, a palace, an amusement park, a port, the highest peak in his country and even a brand of vodka.

² www.radiofrance.fr/franceinter/chro/regardsurlemonde/index.php?id=50714

³ <http://www.rferl.org/featuresarticle/2006/12/7FEO7Bo-6A63-4893-8446-CADF27B29412.html>

⁴ <http://www.rferl.org/featuresarticle/2006/12/f02efa71-93bf-478a-9200-d909ecb87380.html>

Many different scenarios...

No sooner was Gurbanguly Berdimuhammedov installed in power than many analysts and observers began to wonder about the future of Turkmenistan. While some feared an internal destabilisation and a fratricidal struggle between the members of the entourage of the deceased Turkmenbashy⁵, the general sentiment that prevailed has been one of gradual improvement which is seen, at a minimum, in several reforms and in a critical re-evaluation of the Niazov era.

The most optimistic make a bold comparison between Stalin and Niazov, and see in Gurbanguly Berdimuhammedov a new Nikita Khrushchev who is ready to break with the totalitarian past, to denounce and condemn the errors of Niazov and to proceed with a partial liberation of the regime.

Among the more pessimistic observers is Andrei Tsygankov, director of the programme within the Association of International Studies⁶ and Associate Professor of International Relations and Political Sciences. In an article entitled '*Danger lurks in Turkmenistan,*' published in the *Asian Times* on January 20, 2007⁷, he believed that the death of Saparmurad Niazov could not only have consequences for the evolution of the regime but also for the security and economic policy of the whole region.

In his view, there were just two possibilities. Either the ruling elites would agree on finding a compromise acceptable to all – and this seemed most likely - or Turkmenistan would descend into chaos. This chaos would be all the more dangerous given that the cocktail of '*arms, drugs and social despair*' could, at any moment, unleash powerful self-destructive forces which would serve front ranking political personalities who were publicly known to have close ties with the Taliban, Al-Qaeda and the Afghan drug barons.

... but one sole stage director

Indeed, none of these scenarios occurred. Apart from some minor changes which are more cosmetic than a sign of profound reform, the foundations of the regime remain rigidly in place and Gurbanguly Berdimuhammedov has faithfully taken over the role of predecessor and rapidly fit into the function of President.

In an article which appeared on the site of the press agency *Ferghana*⁸, Adjar Kurtov, analysed the conditions of the arrival in power of Gurbanguly Berdimuhammedov and the internal situation of Turkmenistan following the death of the Turkmenbashy. He believed that if this transition was made without conflict and without any major problems that was due to the remarkable stability of the regime and absence of any internal fighting within the ruling elites.

There was no blood bath, not civil war. No secret Junta was pulling the strings from the wings as appeared to be the case to the historian Artem Ulunian, from the Russian Academy of Sciences, who considered Gurbanguly Berdimuhammedov to be a straw man, with real power held by the Minister of Defence, Agageldi Mammetgeldiev, the man who held the confidence of the Turkmenbashy, Akmurad Redzhepov, and, to a lesser extent, the Minister of National Security and Minister of the Interior.⁹

⁵ <http://www.rferl.org/featuresarticle/2006/12/3F7885AA-B6AA-4028-A29C-3CF882FC2FA0.html>

⁶ The International Studies Association (ISA) was founded in 1959 to promote research and education in the area of international relations. It collaborates with some fifty organisations in more than thirty countries and is based in the United States.

⁷ http://atimes01.atimes.com/atimes/Central_Asia/IA20Ag01.html

⁸ <http://enews.ferghana.ru/article.php?id=2282>

⁹ http://www.regard-est.com/home/breve_contenu.php?id=710

The situation never got out of Berdimuhammedov's control. Almost unknown to the outside world, this 49-year-old former dentist, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Health, known as the most '*corrosion-resistant of the ministers*' for his exceptional longevity in government, is one of those rare persons to have survived the innumerable purges decreed by the Turkmenbashi. He knew how to play the game admirably well so as to appear to be the man who was needed and inescapable at the moment of the death of Saparmurad Niazov.

It was this sudden appearance at the highest level that has led some observers to think that the death of President Niazov may not have been as natural as the official version would have us believe¹⁰, while others think that Gurbanguly Berdimuhammedov owed his accession to the rumour, apparently unfounded, that he was the illegitimate son of the deceased President. Despite a troubling physical resemblance with his predecessor and his belonging to the tribe of Tékés¹¹, the tribe from which the Turkmenbashi also originally came, Gurbanguly Berdimuhammedov in fact owes his arrival in power to his relative anonymity and to his non-involvement or prudent holding back from the most widely discussed and reprehensible acts of the reign of Niazov.

2) No movement within

As regards domestic policy, Gurbanguly Berdimuhammedov has restrained himself from behaving like a reformer or revolutionary, instead making it a point of honour to appear as the worthy successor of Niazov and jealous guardian of the authoritarian arsenal he received in inheritance.

Some very timid progress

He quickly revised several decisions taken by his predecessor. He restored to 10 years the legally required period of public education – which had been reduced by a year under Niazov – and he restored the pensions and other social services which had been abolished. But he never criticised any of the actions or policies of Saparmurad Niazov. Neither did he show that he was ready to break with the practices of the past.

In the issue of education, one has to acknowledge, together with Erika Dailey, director of the '*Turkmenistan*' project of the *Open Society Institute*¹², that '*things have started to move in the right direction, in particular with respect to infrastructures, to recruitment of teachers and new classroom textbooks.*' However, we also have to recognise that '*keeping the Rukhnama as a reference book is obviously prejudicial to a change of mentalities.*'¹³

Presented as a Quran of modern times, the *Rukhnama* is a collection of moral and spiritual advice written in 2001 by the Turkmenbashi in person. Reading and studying this work was made mandatory. It was even once required that one recite whole passages by heart to pass school exams, get a driver's license or take part in hiring competitions for public sector jobs.

Addressing himself to students at Columbia University in New York on September 24, 2007, the Turkmen President very effectively confirmed that the *Rukhnama* '*was part of the cultural heritage of Turkmenistan and there was no reason to eliminate its mandatory study.*'¹⁴

¹⁰ <http://www.jamestown.org/docs/Jamestown-DeathofTurkmenbashi.pdf>

¹¹ A tribe well known for its breeding farms of *Akhal-Tékés*, which are also called the '*Turkmen horses*.'

¹² The Open Society Institute is part of the network of the Soros Foundation and the '*Turkmenistan*' project is aimed at promoting Turkmen civil society through artistic, cultural, media and public health programmes.

¹³ <http://www.rferl.org/featuresarticle/2007/10/DoF154E3-81C1-4FC3-A037-8B8E7E64E82B.html>

¹⁴ <http://www.rferl.org/featuresarticle/2007/9/96CBE108-BA4B-4B35-BA75-6B2D4064AE97.html>

Other indications of movement were the various amnesties which marked the first months of the new presidency. But one may wonder if they really constitute progress. The amnesty of former Deputy Prime Ministers Jolly Gurbanmuradov and Dortkuli Aidogdyev, then the amnesty in the month of August which involved the freeing of the former Imam Nasrulla ibn Ibadulla and the one at the end of the month of October which freed 9,000 prisoners should not obscure the fact that all the opponents of Niazov and all those accused of the attempted assassination of 2002 are still in prison. By acting in this manner, Gurbanguly Berdimuhammedov has issued a very clear warning and a message of firmness to his possible opponents.

Yet another Turkmenbashy?

The Chinese lanterns of the celebrations organised in honour of Gurbanguly Berdimuhammedov's 50th birthday had barely been extinguished when most of the Russian and Western press agencies concluded that they had witnessed the birth of the Turkmenbashy-II.

In a little less than six months following his accession to power, the new Turkmen leader already published his autobiography and had gold medallions bearing his portrait minted and put into circulation. He also was elected unanimously by the 2,500 delegates as President of the Halk Maslahaty and, in the form of a resolution of the Mejlis (the Turkmen Parliament), he was promoted to the rank of Army General. Commander in Chief of the Armed Forces of Turkmenistan. Finally, he was elected on August 4 as head of the only authorised political party, the *Democratic Party*, and as head of the *Galkynysh* (Renaissance) movement, which brings together the labour unions as well as various organisations of young people and veterans. Above all, he organised a ceremony to commemorate his fiftieth birthday which was in no way inferior to the grotesque demonstrations put in place by his predecessor. It was during this ceremony that he awarded himself, for 'exceptional services,' the Medal of the Order of the Fatherland - the Watan Order – which consists of a gold and diamond pendant weighing around one kilogram. On the same occasion, he gave himself a bonus of \$20,000 dollars and a 30% salary increase.¹⁵

For a time liberal, the style of Gurbanguly Berdimuhammedov rapidly took an openly conservative turn. The national media have been asked to express their gratitude to the talents and efforts shown by the national leader. Special funds were unfrozen to finance an unprecedented press campaign intended to celebrate the Turkmen experience, including promotion on certain Russian television channels. Quite recently he ordered the removal of satellite antennas which rather anarchically, it is true, decorate the façades of buildings in Ashkhabad. One may have some doubts as to whether this decision rests on purely aesthetic considerations.

The good old days of the purges

The deceased Turkmenbashy Niazov had the custom of dismissing his ministers on a whim. Thus, on December 13, 2007, just eight days before his death, he removed the minister responsible for the roads, Baimukhammet Kelov, accusing him of 'serious failures' in his work. The official press agency of Turkmenistan, *TDH*, announced the nomination of his replacement, Ashyrgeldy Zamanov, for a 'trial period' of six months. Immediately after, Niazov also removed the Dean of the International Turkmen-Turkish University, Shary Komekov, and replaced him with the Minister of Education Shemshat Annagylyjova. He accused Dean Komekov of having 'contributed to the deterioration of the level of studies.'

¹⁵ <http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insight/articles/pp070507.shtml>

Beginning on March 5, 2007, President Berdimuhammedov publicly reprimanded the Minister of Energy and Industry Yusup Davodov, who was named to this post a week before, for '*serious weaknesses*' in his work. He was the object of a Presidential decree criticizing '*insufficient attention being paid to the electricity generating plants and electrical installations*' following a series of power outages in the capital of Ashkhabad.

In his misfortune, Yusup Davodov, can nonetheless consider that he was better off than the director of the Presidential Secret Service, General Akmurat Redjepov, who, on May 16, 2007, was relieved of his post and was discreetly given '*other duties*.' Redjepov directed the Secret Service for 17 years. Very closely linked to Saparmurad Niazov, he was considered by some to be the true strong man of Turkmenistan¹⁶. This arrest was preceded by that of Murad Agayev, owner of the Oriental Company and a businessman very close to Redjepov and to Niazov.

We learned the day after this general was arrested that his son, Colonel Nurmurat Redjepov, was recalled on some pretext from his post of Military Attaché in the Embassy of Turkmenistan to the United Arab Emirates.¹⁷ As for the Minister of National Security, Geldimuhmet Ashirmuhammedov, who three weeks before still accompanied the Turkmen President to Moscow, according to well informed sources, he was also arrested and subjected to interrogations. Indeed, his removal only was announced on October 8, together with that of the Minister of Interior, Khojamyrat Annagurbanov, who was accused of '*abuse of power and incompetence*.'

Thus, in less than six months, Gurbanguly Berdimuhammedov succeeded in getting rid of the most burdensome personalities from the old guard of the Niazov era. The general opinion was that he owed his post to them. If that is the case, they will have learned, at their personal expense, that the old adage '*have no accomplices, or eliminate them after using them*,' attributed to Machiavelli, is still up to date. But the most symptomatic and disturbing thing for some observers, including Arkady Dubnov, correspondent in Central Asia of the Russian daily *Vremya novostei*, is that those who have replaced the personalities who were removed all come from the current President's native town.¹⁸

It may be too early to draw any definitive judgments on the young presidency of Gurbanguly Berdimuhammedov. The trends indicated till now still make it hard to divine the future and one can only subscribe to the opinion of John MacLeod, editor-in-chief of the Institute for War and Peace Reporting (IWPR), who says that '*so long as the basic structures of authoritarianism remain in Turkmenistan – and they should last a good long time – it will be impossible to see reform and improvements, because systems of this kind have never, themselves, been factors of reform and of change*.'¹⁹

3) Opening up to the world

Under the iron rule of Saparmurad Niazov, Turkmenistan joined the sad club of '*pariah*' countries which figure, with a constancy that is never contradicted, in the annual reports of the organisations defending human rights, at the bottom of the lists. At his accession to power, Gurbanguly Berdimuhammedov very quickly realised the hopes that the international community placed in him. Turkmenistan has gas resources which, if they are proven, would place it in fifth rank worldwide among the producer countries.

The sudden death of his predecessor re-launched the manœuvres and intrigues which characterise the '*Grand Game*' which the world powers are practicing to win over the

¹⁶ <http://www.rferl.org/featuresarticle/2007/5/137DD623-7537-4372-A01E-C745FE972EFD.html>

¹⁷ <http://www.caucaz.com/home/depeches.php?idp=2252>

¹⁸ <http://www.rferl.org/featuresarticle/2007/10/BB3511D1-F53C-482F-892C-5EC0C3A5F3F3.html>

¹⁹ Idem.

immense energy resources of Central Asia. This is why Gurbanguly Berdimuhammedov has above all sought to appear on the international scene as reliable and worthy of trust, someone ready to take his country out of the isolation in which it has been kept for 20 years.

The lure of gas

The death of Saparmurad Niazov came at a moment when the struggle for control of the immense energy resources of the region entered a particularly intense phase, with many outside actors who were turning now towards Central Asia with more insistence and interest.

Turkey is looking for a new strategic vision, which is all the more necessary now that its possible integration into the European Union appears to be rebuffed, or to be more precise, compromised. Iran is interfering more and more in Iraq and Central Asia can constitute the next step for it. China is seeking to consolidate its economic miracle and wishes to find in Central Asia the resources necessary for its development. Russia is awakening and has decided suddenly to look nostalgically to the South, dreaming of a restored empire. As for the West, the United States wishes to counter the initiatives of Russia. The European Union is keen to assure its gas supplies and its influence in terms of economic development, all of which justify its entry into the energy debate now going on. On the evening of December 20, the geopolitical situation in Central Asia in general and that of Turkmenistan in particular seemed petrified. In the morning of December 21, the announcement of the death of the Turkmenbashi allowed one to see the fragile equilibrium of the five Central Asian states put in question.

The time of promises...

No sooner was he installed than President Berdimuhammedov tried to reassure Turkmenistan's commercial partners. Turkmenistan would respect all its agreements and commercial commitments. Thus, he committed himself to honour the contract signed by his predecessor with the Chinese authorities on April 3, 2006 dealing with the construction and start-up in 2009 of a gas pipeline linking the two countries and delivering between 30 and 40 billion cubic metres a year of gas to China. He also committed himself to respect the 25-year contract signed with Russia in 2003.

At the death of Niazov, the disagreements with Russia were somewhat smoothed over. After serious tension over the sales price, the Turkmen authorities and leaders of the giant Russian company *Gazprom* announced on September 5, 2006 that they had reached a compromise. The sales price was fixed at \$100 per 1,000 m³, meaning an increase of \$35 with respect to the former price. This accord covered the period 2007-2009 and was for an annual quantity of 50 billion m³.

From the first months after taking office, President Berdimuhammedov broke with the habits of his predecessor by making a series of trips to Moslem countries (Saudi Arabia and Iran), Western countries (United States and Belgium) and the CIS countries (Kazakhstan, Russia and Tajikistan). In return, many foreign delegations, including some important ones, have made the voyage to Ashkhabad. Already, during the funeral of Saparmurad Niazov, one noted the presence of the General Director of *Gazprom*, Alexei Miller, present within the Russian delegation paying its respects to the Turkmenbashi. Several weeks later, he was present at the inauguration ceremony of Gurbanguly Berdimuhammedov. The last bigwig of the gas world to take the road to Ashkhabad, in November 2007, was Arnaud Breuillac, the manager for Central Asia in the French group *Total*. Like all the other top personalities before him, he expressed the wish of his company to get involved in major programmes with Turkmenistan.

...and the time of doubts

Though Gurbanguly Berdimuhammedov was able to skillfully draw advantage from the increased interest in his country – something which would not have displeased his predecessor – certain specialists of the country and of energy problems raise the question of the validity of the promise, which rests on a never confirmed estimation placing the gas reserves of Turkmenistan at between 2 and 9 trillion m³. On December 28, 2007, President Gurbanguly Berdimuhammedov requested that certification be carried out in 2008.²⁰ The certification findings will certainly put an end to this enigma.

The year gone by will remain in memory as the year of three gas pipelines. The Eastern project, towards China, is scheduled to come into service in 2009 and is the least controversial of the three. On the other hand, the two others have fed a polemic all year long.

The Northern project, in the direction of Russia via Kazakhstan, launched with a lot of publicity in May 2007 during the energy summit of Turkmenbashi, a port city on the Caspian Sea, provides for the establishment of a consortium charged with the task of building a new Caspian gas pipeline. The objective of this consortium will be to lay a new section along the eastern shoreline of the Caspian Sea, to raise the throughput of the existing gas pipeline from Central Asia to Central Russia (Centre 4) to 10 billion m³ per year versus less than 2 billion at present. As regards the flow rate of the gas pipeline from Central Asia to Centre 3, which links the Turkmen, Uzbek and Kazakh networks to the Russian network, it should be raised to 20 billion m³ per year. In the period to 2014, this ensemble of gas pipelines should be able to deliver up to 90 billion m³ of Central Asian gas to Russia each year.

The latest project under study, the Western project, is the trans-Caspian. This project is heavily supported by the Western countries, which are keen to get out from under Russian control in the matter of gas deliveries. They are pushing the construction of this pipeline which, after crossing the Caspian Sea, will emerge at Baku in Azerbaijan, to be connected with the Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum (BTE) gas pipeline inaugurated in 2006 which runs across Georgia and Turkey, avoiding Russian territory, just as the BTC oil pipeline runs from Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan. The death of the Turkmenbashi, who had delicate relations with the Azerbaijan authorities, has made it fashionable to consider a reconciliation between the two countries. This would, *de facto*, remove one of the main obstacles to this project.

Gurbanguly Berdimuhammedov has continually repeated that Turkmenistan has enough resources to supply all three gas pipelines. He appears to place great hopes on the latest discovery – the Osman field – but in the absence of independent verification, world experts balk at taking the extravagant Turkmen announcements at face value.

Despite all the uncertainty, the countries and gas consortiums remain very interested at positioning themselves on the Turkmen market whatever the cost. This explains no doubt the recent price hike that *Gazprom* and the Turkmen authorities have agreed upon : - 1,000 m³ will rise from \$100 to \$150 in mid-2008. Formerly, for the fathers of geopolitics, *'whoever owned the Mediterranean owned the whole world.'* Today, whoever controls the tap of an oil pipeline or a gas pipeline has every chance of becoming a new centre of the world. That is the lesson that Gurbanguly Berdimuhammedov seems to have learned in his first year in power.

4) Conclusion

Following the unexpected death of the Turkmenbashi, the year 2006 ended for Turkmenistan on a dramatic note. Three hundred sixty four days later, on December 20,

²⁰ <http://www.interfax.com/3/351290/news.aspx>

2007, there was a new dramatic development which will remain, with 11 days to go before the official calendar date changes, the symbolic point of departure for the year 2008 in Turkmenistan and in Central Asia.

The official signing, amidst heavy promotion, of a final contract for the construction of the Caspian gas pipeline was a kind of Christmas come early for the Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev and his Russian and Turkmen counterparts, Vladimir Putin and Gurbanguly Berdimuhammedov. This was, above all, a decision that put the final dot on the 'i' after months of negotiations, prevarication, and grim manoeuvres which, against the background of a rivalry between Russia and the West, have opposed those favouring a northern route and the supporters of the trans-Caspian route.

Following the example of many recent commercial accords concluded by the Kremlin, this one carries a geopolitical message of primary importance. While the Russian-Western rivalry for Central Asian energy resources is nothing new, it has nonetheless assumed a more aggressive turn in line with the growing influence of the Kremlin over the Russian giant gas company *Gazprom*.

It is public knowledge that Moscow's strategy in Central Asia is to block all alternative energy routes which could be used to short-circuit the Russian route. This is why the Northern project aims at sinking the Trans-Caspian project, which is strongly supported by the European Union and the United States. Already back in May 2007, upon the announcement of the agreement of the Turkmenbashi, observers considered that *'History would record that in May 2007 the energy ambitions of the Western countries in Central Asia collapsed. In the course of this month, Russia seems to have reduced to zero the Western plans to import Central Asian energy resources directly. This defeat of the American strategy of direct access to the immense reserves nips in the bud the similar efforts which the European Union has pursued since 2006.'*²¹

Within the signing ceremony of December 20, this gloomy forecast was confirmed, as well as the death warrant of the European Nabucco project.²² Planned by the European authorities, this gas pipeline would have served to extend the BTE network and would have provided for the gas supply of European countries. Starting from Erzurum, in Turkey, after transiting Bulgaria, Romania and Hungary, it was supposed to hook up with the Austrian gas network in Baumgarten. With a storage capacity of 2.5 billion m³, this gas centre would constitute, as from 2011, the second largest gas storage centre in Central Europe and the biggest European centre for managing gas transit lines.

After balancing between Russia and the West for some time, President Gurbanguly Berdimuhammedov has chosen his camp. He emerges financially strong by winning this round of bluff poker. By playing skillfully on the existing antagonisms, he won the contest by getting *Gazprom* to agree to a rise of nearly 50%, putting in question, among other things, the accord of September 5, 2006, which runs until 2009. Politically, this accord confers on him an enhanced legitimacy on the regional and international level.

For Moscow, the year 2007 ended in a grand slam in Central Asia. With Kazakhstan's scheduled assumption in 2010 of the presidency of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), the Russian President has been able to boast of the effectiveness of coordinated action on this problem by Russia and Kazakhstan. With the quite doubtful re-election of the most faithful of his allies, the Uzbek Islam Karimov, President Putin can send a cheap message of benevolence to the autocrats and apprentice dictators of Central Asia. Following the agreement of December 20, 2007, Vladimir Putin,

²¹ http://www.regard-est.com/home/breve_contenu.php?id=797

²² From the name of the king of Babylon, Nabuchadnezzar II, who restored the irrigation system in his kingdom.

Nursultan Nazarbayev and Gurbanguly Berdimuhammedov may not be kings of oil, but they have become the kings of gas.

Copyright © ESISC 2008
www.esisc.eu