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Eye on the International Image: Turkmenistan's Nation Branding

Mariya Y. Omelicheva

Several years after the sudden death of Saparmurad Niyazov in December 2006, Turkmenistan's reputation as one of the most repressive countries in the world remains largely unchanged. Its deeply entrenched authoritarian regime keeps a tight lid on independent scrutiny of the republic's politics and social relations. The press and Internet are tightly controlled, and access to social media is banned. Human rights organizations have repeatedly condemned the oppressive rule of the new government of President Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov who brooks no dissent.

However, even this authoritarian regime has been susceptible to international opinion.

Recognizing the importance of reputation for attaining foreign investments and maintaining the desired bargaining position in global politics, the Berdymukhamedov cabinet has tried to repair Turkmenistan's international image and break with the cycle of international isolation. The process of image making has become a means of public diplomacy for the Turkmen elite who seek to raise Turkmenistan's prestige, primarily in international business circles and within the global political community.

As discussed in the introduction to this volume, national identity is both multi-level and multi-dimensional. Domestically, it is created and maintained through sustained, imaginative, and unavoidably contentious efforts of political elites, individuals, and various societal groups who draw on the available material and symbolic resources to effectuate the nation.

Internationally, national identity is formed through interactions with other states, international organizations, and non-state entities and, therefore, contingent on their recognition. The internal dimension of national identity gives it a subjective quality, while the external one – a relational or “intersubjective” quality.<sup>1</sup> Since state identity has both subjective and relational properties, a

process of identity formation features domestic- and international-level dynamics and interplay between them.<sup>2</sup> This chapter shifts its focus from the efforts of the Turkmen leadership at creating a cohesive national identity and image for domestic consumption and social regulation to the construction of the international image of Turkmenistan.

The creation of unique international images, also known as “national brand identities,” is a new venture for the Central Asian states. Kazakhstan has spearheaded these efforts by investing into an intelligent public relations in the Western media. Since recently, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Turkmenistan began implementing measures for capturing the attention of foreign corporations, governments, and tourists. Through the authorized publications, speeches, presentations at international exhibitions, and highly publicized cultural events, the governments of these states construct attractive narratives that trumpet their countries’ potential, embellish their accomplishments, and disguise negative events. The business of international image making has become a new form of communications marketing to the needs of various international audiences – governments, businesses, and tourists.<sup>3</sup>

To examine international image building by Turkmenistan, this chapter utilizes the concept of *nation branding*. It describes a process of constructing a favorable state image and disseminating it to the rest of the world with the goal of forming or changing external perceptions of the nation.<sup>4</sup> A *nation brand* represents a snapshot of the state’s desirable image formulated in a series of favorable associations and descriptions about its culture, political institutions, the nature of its economy, and foreign policies. It is usually communicated through the means of public diplomacy and mass and social media.

The chapter begins with a brief discussion of the importance of a state’s international image in its international politics followed by the introduction of the concept of *nation branding*

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and ways of examining Turkmenistan's *nation brand*. The subsequent sections offer an analysis of several elements that make up Turkmenistan's international image, namely, Turkmenistan's foreign policy, economic potential, tourist attractions, and ongoing political reforms and modernization.

#### The Role of Nation Branding in International Relations

States' images and reputation have been salient features of nations throughout history but came to play an increasingly important role in international relations since the end of the Cold War.

The processes of accelerated economic globalization and rapid dissemination of information accompanied by the spread of neo-liberal values and rise of commercialism encouraged the emergence of new norms and expectations about the proper forms of governance and economic development, among other things. Using the metaphor of world politics as marketing, whatever states try to attract - investments, foreign aid, or tourists - and whatever they try to export - products, services, or culture - can be done with a bigger premium if the state's image is positive and strong.<sup>5</sup>

The upswing of scholarly interest in the questions of state image and reputation coincided with a constructivist or sociological turn in international relations theory that brought the topic of state identity into the limelight of academic attention.<sup>6</sup> Constructivists of all genres view states as social actors entangled in the webs of relations and intersubjective meanings that render their "reality" meaningful. These intersubjective understandings include norms, identities, expectations, and other forms of shared knowledge and information.<sup>7</sup> This social embeddedness limits states' choices in the roles they can adopt for themselves and their national identities and images. Today, for example, an international environment demands conformity to at least

minimal democratic procedures, and even authoritarian states claim adherence to a nominal democratic rule.<sup>8</sup>

States' images serve an important diagnostic function. They provide succinct, if limited, information that shapes other actors' expectations about their likely actions. In the crowded informational space, where people and organizations are besieged with new data, there is limited time and ability to seek and acquire in-depth and informative views about other states. State images are used in the navigation of the complex world of modern international relations. They often become internalized prior to the most rudimentary factual knowledge about other places.<sup>9</sup> States' images and reputation thus become the repositories of factual and evaluative knowledge – positive or negative, true or untrue – affecting other actors' perceptions of other places as well as attitudes and behavior toward them, their products, and people.

State image is also an important national power resource helping a state to achieve its policy goals in international relations. States that are successful at projecting a favorable international image through the pull of popular culture, attractive political institutions, or levels of economic and technological development will be more adept at exercising their national power as well. With the positive image comes legitimacy and positive reputation. If a state's popular culture and political values are attractive, others are more willing to follow this state. If a state makes its influence legitimate in the eyes of others, it encounters less resistance to its foreign policy decisions and actions.<sup>10</sup> In this way, state identity manifests a kind of post-modern "soft" power, which most important asset is its ability to reach desirable outcomes without force, threats, or payment. This power has a discursive rather than coercive nature, and, as Joseph Nye who coined the term "soft power" once confided, "in an information age, it is often the side which has the better story that wins."<sup>11</sup>

For many “unmapped” states that are unheard of or unfamiliar to the majority of people beyond their borders, state image serves, yet, another important function of “putting the unknown nation on the map.”<sup>12</sup> In other words, it helps to promote obscure, distant, and, therefore, unattractive places into reliable, welcoming, and attractive destinations. This function is particularly relevant for the newly independent states. Even today, more than 20 years after the breakup of the Soviet Union, very few people, apart from real specialists, can tell the five Central Asian “stans” apart. The little that is known about these former Soviet republics is dominated by caricature, such as the satirical and grotesque representation of Kazakhs in Sasha Baron Cohen’s movie *Borat* - or bad news depicting the region as mired in corruption, despotism, and stalled political and economic reform. The Central Asian governments are now well aware of the importance of positive perceptions of their countries that get translated into various economic ratings, rankings, and other influential tags attached to these states by international organizations. The Central Asian governments, therefore, have tried to enhance, reverse, adapt, or otherwise manage their countries’ international image and reputation.<sup>13</sup> Image making has become recognized as an essential part of these states’ strategic capital, whereas a positive image and reputation are now viewed as the important elements of these states’ strategic equity.<sup>14</sup>

To examine international image building by Turkmenistan, this chapter utilizes the concept of *nation branding*. Introduced into the toolkit of states’ public relations (PR) campaigns in the mid-1990s, it describes a process of constructing and promoting a favorable image about a state and its people to the rest of the world with the goal of forming or changing external perceptions of the nation.<sup>15</sup> A *nation brand* can be thought of as a shortcut for a state’s desirable image that encapsulates its complex reality, including culture, history, politics, people, and other distinguishing features in a set of potentially valuable associations and descriptions.<sup>16</sup>

Conceptually, nation branding is compatible with the notion of national image and identity construction. Both nation brand and national image are facets of states' soft power, and both combine foreign policy goals with soft power strategies of non-coercive nature. The strength of state image and its national brand is partly determined by how it accords with international expectations and norms. Nation brand is, thus, a form of image capital. It embraces a set of potentially valuable associations that help a state to accomplish its foreign policy goals, secure favorable political decisions from other states and international organizations, attract tourists and capital investments, and drive the sales of national products.<sup>17</sup>

Recognizing the importance of nation brands, the vocation of nation branding has flourished in recent years spawning a popular Nation Brands Index ranking countries on a number of reputational factors.<sup>18</sup> Democratic and non-democratic states alike resort to the assistance of PR firms for manufacturing impactful promotional materials, designing intelligent advertising campaigns, drafting press releases and speeches, and even monitoring the online reports about a country and limiting the negative media coverage on the Internet.<sup>19</sup> In Central Asia, Kazakhstan has pioneered the nation branding efforts through its work with the PR specialists on developing promotional advertisements about the country. After the release of *Borat*, the Kazakh government hired a Western public relations firm to counter the movie's representation of the country and improve its national image. Since then, ads about "Kazakhstan – The Heart of Eurasia" have appeared on multiple international channels (BBC, CNN (International), Euronews, and others) or published in the international print media.

Whereas domestically governments are in a greater control over the ideas and images circulated for internal consumption, they have limited leverage over the external image of their country as it is anchored in the international norms, knowledge, and expectations floating in an

uncontrolled environment and scrutinized by more skeptical and unattached politicians, journalists, tourists, and investors. Furthermore, nation branding takes place in a highly competitive environment where many other states offer the same “product” – cultural assets, functioning institutions, educated people, and stable and effective government. To be successful in this international marketplace, not only do states have to meet the expectations of “quality” for their political institutions, business environment, and tourist infrastructure, but also exceed them by offering an “edge” attractive to potential investors, tourists, and other power holders on a global and regional scale.<sup>20</sup>

To analyze external image construction, or nation branding, by Turkmenistan, I examined international communications of the Turkmen government targeting other governments, international organizations, international business community, and potential tourists. These communications have been delivered at the meetings of various international and regional organizations, on the sidelines of international business expositions and conferences, and in the context of international forums. These communications have been published as texts in the international and Turkmenistan online media and press. To identify and download these texts, I used LexusNexus Academic database and EastView database in addition to several official and diplomatic sites supported by the Turkmen government.<sup>21</sup> These texts were downloaded and scrutinized to discern specific presentations of Turkmenistan’s political structure, economy, cultural heritage, as well as any unique markers that its government highlights for distinguishing Turkmenistan from other countries.

#### International Image Promoted by Turkmenistan

Turkmenistan is a latecomer to the enterprise of nation branding. The eccentricities of President Niyazov’s rule combined with the tight societal control of his administration bestowed a highly



negative image on Turkmenistan. President Niyazov cared little about his regime's unflattering reputation. The Turkmen government reacted to the criticisms of foreign governments and international organizations with more strenuous effort to insulate Turkmenistan from international pressure and demands for democratization.

The erratic foreign policy and dictatorial management style of the Niyazov administration also contributed to the country's growing international isolation. A home to considerable hydrocarbon reserves, Turkmenistan failed to capitalize on its endowments with natural resources and attract foreign capital. As a consequence of very cautious, controlling, and secretive energy policy most of the major investors and corporations left Turkmenistan, and the country was designated as "inhospitable to investment" by international financial organizations. At the end of Niyazov's sixteen-year rule Turkmenistan was known to the outsiders for all the wrong reasons: Pharaonic architectural projects of the President, his book of spiritual guidance *Rukhnama*, and Niyazov's personality cult most visibly defined by the golden statues of the President built across the country. Western publications portrayed Turkmenistan as the most repressive of all post-Soviet states. The international community denounced the country's arbitrary judicial practices and deplored the deteriorating human rights situation.<sup>22</sup>

In stark contrast to Niyazov, President Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov, who became an acting president following Niyazov's death and subsequently won the February 2007 and February 2012 presidential elections, has made numerous overtures to international leaders and international business community in an effort to improve Turkmenistan's reputation. The growing dynamism of Berdymukhamedov's foreign policy has been quickly dubbed as "the Great Era of Rebirth," "The Epoch of Happiness," and the new "Golden Age" in Turkmenistan.<sup>23</sup> Turkmenistan's foreign policy of positive neutrality has been showcased as the country's

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national brand. Turkmenistan as a new “Central Asian Kuwait” has become a conspicuous theme emphasizing Turkmenistan’s energy potential and attractiveness to foreign investors. The country’s age-old heritage of monumental culture and crafts has been creatively woven into its international identity. References to these cultural assets appear frequently in the image making rhetoric of the official representatives from Turkmenistan. Even the theme of a progressive democratic development has become a part of the country’s national brand, although it has been diluted in references to modern advances made by the Berdymukhamedov’s government in its urban design and architectural constructions.

*Remaking Foreign Policy of Positive Neutrality*

The doctrine of permanent neutrality has comprised a key element of nation building for post-Soviet Turkmenistan. Introduced in 1994 by President Niyazov as a doctrinal breakthrough in Turkmenistan’s foreign policy, it was recognized by the UN General Assembly Resolution in December 1995.<sup>24</sup> Positive neutrality has been presented as a grand strategy that organically corresponds to the Turkmen mentality and “the specific historical features of Turkmen people, who have always distinguished themselves by their peacefulness, good neighborliness, diligence, and originality.”<sup>25</sup> In reality, however, it was a pragmatic choice of the Niyazov government designed to break free from the Kremlin’s stranglehold over Turkmenistan’s exports of gas. Throughout the 1990s, Turkmenistan’s neutral status allowed the Niyazov government to do away with uncomfortable political alliances and binding economic commitments that threatened to limit its foreign policy alternatives. It also enabled the governing regime to shrink Turkmenistan’s army and considerably reduce the republic’s military expenditures.

Overall, the Niyazov regime failed to capitalize on the country’s pivotal position as one of the world’s major natural gas exporters and realize the “positive” and “constructive”

dimensions of Turkmenistan's neutrality. Under Niyazov, the constructive side of "positive neutrality" was merely a rhetorical device as his government cautiously sought bilateral agreements and recoiled from multilateral ties. This entailed a nearly complete disengagement of the country from international affairs and organizations and gave rise to the perception of its neutrality as a blueprint for self-isolation of Turkmenistan.

The Berdymukhamedov government turned the policy of permanent neutrality into a national brand of Turkmenistan and a linchpin of its ample international projects. Framed as an integral part of the "new era" for a "new country," in this way symbolizing a change from the isolationist tendencies of the past, international initiatives of the Berdymukhamedov government have been designed to not only improve Turkmenistan's international relations and facilitate its acceptance in the world community, but also raise the global awareness of the benefits of positive neutrality in the areas of international stability and peace. In other words, the Berdymukhamedov government has endeavored to create a stronger international appreciation for the principle of "positive neutrality" in international affairs and, with it, a greater recognition of Turkmenistan exemplifying it.

The foreign policy dynamism of the new Turkmen leader has been frequently pointed out as a token of active and constructive engagement of Turkmenistan with the world. After assuming the President's post, Gurbanguly Bedymukammedov has signaled a desire to engage more actively with Russia, to repair mistrust and damaged relations with the neighboring states, and reach out to the Western states and institutions. In the first year of his rule, President Berdymukhamedov accepted delegations from all neighboring states and representatives of the US and EU. He extended invitations to the leaders of many other countries and paid official visits to Russia, China, Kazakhstan, Iran, United Arab Emirates, and other countries, and spoke

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at the UN and NATO.<sup>26</sup> Turkmenistan's chairmanship of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) in 2012 became a pinnacle of its renewed efforts at constructive and multilateral engagement in regional and global affairs. President Niyazov, who thought of regional cooperation as dangerous and useless, held deep antipathy toward the regional projects and boycotted all regional groupings and initiatives. Turkmenistan became an associated member of the CIS in 2005, but its participation in the CIS activities was nominal. The 2012 chairmanship of the CIS by Turkmenistan was an unprecedented event in the 20-year history of this organization. The CIS summit chaired by Berdymukhamedov and a series of meetings and events organized by the Turkmen government during 2012 were designed to signify "a new chapter in the relations of friendship and cooperation that have been existing for centuries" among the CIS states.<sup>27</sup> Berdymukhamedov's ascendance to the leadership role has been framed as a historical opportunity for turning Turkmenistan's neutral status into true multi-vectorism.<sup>28</sup> Together with the preparation of Turkmenistan's capital for hosting the CIS meetings and summits, the Turkmen government published several glossy volumes about the country advertised as the passport to modern Turkmenistan and a comprehensive guide into the rich world of its national traditions and culture.

In the years preceding the Ashgabat meetings of the CIS, Turkmenistan redoubled its image-making efforts. To dispel myths about the republic and close the "gaps" about Turkmenistan's politics, culture, and society in the neighbors' informational space, the Turkmen government launched a unique electronic resource – Turkmenistan.ru – and an international magazine *Turkmenistan* published in English and Russian and registered in Russia. Serving the function of an official informational news agency for Turkmenistan, Turkmenistan.ru and magazine *Turkmenistan* claim to provide timely news and news analyses on foreign policy,

politics, economic development, and culture of Turkmenistan prepared by the Turkmen and Russian correspondents.

Turkmenistan's government has played up their country's pivotal position in the realm of global energy security in their international image-making projects. In 2008, the Turkmen government launched the inter-regional energy dialogue under the UN auspices with the goal of creating an international framework for safe and uninterrupted supply of hydrocarbon resources to international markets. The same year, Turkmenistan proposed a draft UN resolution called "Reliable and Stable Energy Transit and Its Role in Sustainable Development and International Cooperation" that was approved by the UN General Assembly on 19 December 2008.

Turkmenistan's energy diplomacy culminated in the most recent proposal in still another UN resolution on the transit of energy adopted by the UN General Assembly in May 2013. The aim of the resolution is to facilitate international cooperation for ensuring reliable transportation of energy to the international markets using the pipelines infrastructure or other systems of energy delivery. As part of the resolution, the government of Turkmenistan proposed to convene a meeting of international experts in 2014 in Ashgabat devoted to the implementation of the resolution as well as recommendations of the earlier conference on the topic of reliable and stable energy transit held in Ashgabat in 2009.

Overall, the capital of Turkmenistan has seen a torrent of international activity in 2012-2013. The government of President Berdymukhamedov supported conferences, forums, and diplomatic summits on a variety of topics ranging from energy and sustainable development to environmental risks, conflict and refugees in the Muslim world. These meetings accompanied by the energetic participation of Turkmenistan's leader in the activities of international and regional

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organizations have been portrayed as a symbol of growing international trust and respect for Turkmenistan as well as the recognition of its constructive role in international affairs.<sup>29</sup>

#### *Enhancing Market Attractiveness of Turkmenistan*

Strengthening Turkmenistan's market image is one of the priorities of the Berdymukhamedov government, if judged by the sheer number of references to Turkmenistan's steady rates of economic growth, rapid infrastructure development, changes in financial policies, and new measures of protection of investors' rights. The government has publicized these economic accomplishments to attest Turkmenistan's compliance with the international requirements and standards. Strong economic reputation is paramount for Turkmenistan. The country's gas deposits are vast but difficult to access and transport to foreign customers. Subsequently, the Turkmen government has regularly expressed enthusiasm for attracting more foreign investment. In addition, petroleum and petroleum products account for nearly 80% of Turkmenistan's exports making it susceptible to the world energy price fluctuations and changes in the supply and demand of energy products. Various programs of economic developments approved by the Turkmen leadership in recent years recognize the importance of the creation of a more diverse, reliable and stable system of deliveries of Turkmen energy products to international market and diversification of Turkmenistan's economy.

During the first year of his Presidency, Berdymukhamedov commissioned the first independent audit of the South Yolotan-Osman Field, which ultimately showed that the field's gas deposits stand between 13.1 and 21.2 trillion cubic meters of gas, second only in size to Iran's South Pars.<sup>30</sup> The first energy conference hosted by Ashgabat in November 2008 following the announcement of the gas field's audit attracted some 230 companies from 35 countries.<sup>31</sup> Welcoming the conference's delegates, Berdymukhamedov proclaimed a new "Open

Door” policy in the energy sector and invited foreign companies to invest their capital into the development of Turkmenistan’s vast reserves of gas. The President also promised a legislative foundation that is consistent with international norms and offered “equal conditions and possibilities to all those wishing to do business in Turkmenistan.”<sup>32</sup>

The same year the government of Turkmenistan launched a new international journal *Oil, Gas, and Mineral Resources of Turkmenistan*, which mission was defined as “positioning Turkmenistan’s oil and gas industry as a dynamic, promising, and highly significant element of the global energy system; propagating energy policy of Turkmenistan’s leadership and its achievements in the international arena; forming a positive investment image of Turkmenistan; and providing up-to-date information and analyses about the situation in the oil and gas industry of Turkmenistan.” In the following years, President Berdymukhamedov inaugurated a new National Bureau of Statistics and Institute for Strategic Planning and Economic Development. In April 2011, the Turkmen government unveiled a new oil and gas research center housing several laboratories for the Turkmengas Oil and Gas Institute, the Oil and Gas Institute Professional Training Center, and the state-owned TurkmenGeology Exploration Institute.<sup>33</sup> This project is one of the latest initiatives of a wide-ranging energy export program, which also prioritizes improvements in the technological process of energy production and enhancement of energy infrastructure.

Although, almost all foreign direct investments have been earmarked for projects related to energy, the government of Turkmenistan has sought opportunities for expanding its foreign trade and attracting foreign capital in other domestic industrial sectors. Turkmenistan’s carpets, unique fabrics, and jewelry have been the age-old trademarks of the Turkmen material culture. The Berdymukhamedov government has been actively popularizing Turkmen textiles through

the frequent participation of the representatives of Textile industry in the international and European trade, textile, and fashion exhibitions. The Turkmen textile industry received a boost from the increase in the domestic cotton and wool production but requires considerable investments for refurbishing its outmoded enterprises. It is not surprising that Turkmenistan's imports structure has been dominated by technological equipment for production purposes. In addition to textile and other products of the cotton-producing industry (yarn, knitting and denim fabrics, bedding, and clothing), the Turkmen government has been promoting its agricultural products grown in the favorable climate of Turkmenistan. Melons, watermelons, and a great variety of seasonal fruits and vegetables and the products of their processing have been recently showcased in the European trade fairs.

Lastly, as a patron to the country's house breeding industry and a head of the International Akhal-Teke Horse Association, President Berdymukhamedov has been seeking opportunities for reviving the ailing horse breeding industry including through partnerships between Turkmen and international horse breeders.<sup>34</sup> The Turkmen people share a great devotion for the Akhal-Teke horse, the proud national symbol of Turkmenistan adoring its State Emblem. Increasing the population of the Akhal-Teke horses and gaining international recognition for this desert racehorse breed has been named as one of the Turkmen government's priorities. The Berdymukhamedov cabinet undertook numerous efforts to enhance the international fame of Akhal-Teke horses including through the regular conferences and other events to encourage horse-breeding activities. The revitalization of the horse breeding industry has a significant symbolic meaning for Turkmenistan, which motto is "the country that was able to harness a mythical race horse."



*Turkmenistan: Destination Branding*

Images of foreign countries are affected by not only perceptions of their foreign policies, economic development and business climate, but also knowledge of their culture. Tourist industry, therefore, plays a vital role in nation branding. The carefully selected tourist destinations, images, and unique place identifiers serve as a microcosm of a country's rich cultural heritage and people. Destination branding that refers to the creation of a positive image of the place with the goal of turning a potential visitor into an enthused ambassador for the place is crucial to the national image.

The government of President Berdymukhamedov recognizes the importance of tourism for the country's international image and its socio-economic development. Turkmenistan's tourism industry has suffered from underdevelopment, visa restraints, and excessive government's control and red tape. As a consequence, tourism has amounted to less than 1% of Turkmenistan's GDP. The government's Tourism Development Program for 2012-2016 sets an ambitious goal of the formation of competitive tourist industry in Turkmenistan, and emphasizes the importance of creation of an attractive tourist image of the country as pivotal for international tourism in Turkmenistan, which is the most profitable tourist sector. A new State Committee for Tourism created in 2012 is now tasked with the expansion of geography and diversity of tourist routes, improvement of quality of services and tourist infrastructure, training of specialists for the tourist and hotel industry, and running effective promotional campaign about tourism in Turkmenistan.<sup>35</sup>

The descriptions of Turkmenistan displayed at the world tourism fairs and on the government and tourist websites reveal several strategies used by the Turkmen authorities for increasing the attractiveness of their country for potential visitors. First, the Turkmen

government and representatives of the tourism industry have promoted unique cultural markers – Turkmen carpets, jewelry, the Akhal-Teke horse breed, ancient ruins, and the “city of white marble,” Turkmenistan’s capital Ashgabat – that allow to differentiate their country from other tourist destinations. Turkmenistan’s culture has been reduced to its simplest and completely depoliticized folkloric expressions emphasizing Turkmen material and monumental culture (ancient ruins, traditional crafts, clothing, and food customs) and less so the corpus of its epical texts, tales and legends.<sup>36</sup>

The Turkmen carpet pigeonholed as the “soul of the Turkmen” has become a centerpiece of the national cultural brand of Turkmenistan.<sup>37</sup> Designated as a national symbol, it has been ascribed the same importance as the pyramids for Egypt on the Ministry of Foreign Affairs’ sites around the world. Both the Turkmen government and tourist agencies have been actively promoting Turkmen carpets and the carpet-making art among the foreign audiences for the “magical beauty,” “artistic expressiveness,” rich tapestry of colors, and longevity achieved over the centuries-long tradition of carpet-weaving. To commemorate the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of independence of Turkmenistan and one of its oldest cultural traditions, Turkmen carpet-makers produced the largest hand-made carpet in the world. Weighing about 1.5 tons and covering the area of 301 square meters, this masterpiece entered into the Guinness Book of Records and is now kept along with thousands of other unique carpets in the Carpet Museum in Ashgabat, a main contemporary tourist destination.<sup>38</sup>

In addition to carpets, Turkmenistan likes to play up its “most unexplored” antiquity. The ruins of the ancient city of Nisa, the first capital of the Parthian Empire, spectacular Islamic monuments, deserted caravan cities, and various artifacts of the nomadic and Shaman traditions have been presented as “a lost world of Central Asia” and a “must-see” destination. In the

simplistic historiography repeated on the tourist and governmental websites, the modern Turkmen are portrayed as the indigenous inhabitants of the area with a millennium-old history. The Turkmen state is presented as the descendant of the ancient Parthian civilization and, therefore, a rightful successor to its historical legacy.<sup>39</sup>

Along with conveying the expectations of a memorable and rewarding travel experience uniquely associated with Turkmenistan's cultural sites and traditional handcrafts, the tourist information posted on the tourist agencies' websites have been designed to create a perception that a visitor's needs and desires will be met and there will be no risks associated with the travel to the country. The hospitality of Turkmen toward foreign guests has been repeatedly stressed as well as the availability of the developed tourist infrastructure corresponding to the highest Western standards. Ashgabat, the capital of Turkmenistan, has been utilized as the country's tourist and business card. The Turkmen government has spent billions of dollars on modernization of the capital city flaunting high-rise luxury hotels, smooth highways and avenues, fashionable restaurants, and manicured parks. The modern hotel infrastructure has been built in the regions across the county, especially the areas rich in natural resources and cultural sites.

Avaza, a tourism zone on the Caspian coast, has become the centerpiece of President Berdymukhamedov's plans of building world-class tourism infrastructure in Turkmenistan. Most of the state investments into the tourism industry have been allocated toward the construction of this luxurious resort town. The idea of Avaza is supposedly emulating Kazakhstan's projects in the port towns of Aturau and Aktau and is designed to enhance Turkmenistan's international prestige.<sup>40</sup> Among the many incentives to attract foreign investment into the Avaza projects, the Turkmen government introduced simplified visa rules, tax breaks, custom privileges for

imported construction materials and equipment, and attractive land lease contracts.

*Creating an Image of a Modern and Democratic State*

Since the fall of communism and the so-called “third wave” of democratization in the countries of East and Central Europe and former Soviet Union, there has been a steady trend toward the acceptance of democracy as the only system, which confers legitimacy upon a government.<sup>41</sup> As a result, even the most undemocratic regimes now unabashedly portray their countries as law-governed and democratic.<sup>42</sup> Turkmenistan under the Berdymukhamedov government has been no exception to this practice. President Berdymukhamedov has trumpeted stability, democracy, and the rule of law as the building blocks of his governance and avowed to continue democratization as a guarantee of peace and wellbeing for all. Many analysts concur that political reforms carried out by the Berdymukhamedov government have been externally driven, cursory, and inconsistent.

In the run-up to the February 2007 Presidential elections, Berdymukhamedov announced that these elections would be held on a democratic basis. His electoral agenda included a number of promises indicative of an imminent relaxation of the regime’s grip over Turkmenistan’s political landscape. In an unprecedented gesture, Berdymukhamedov accepted the Needs Assessment Mission of the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) in January 2007, but this initiative did not materialize into a standard Electoral Observation Mission of the OSCE due to a very quick turnaround for the election. Many other political statements also failed to translate into operational policies.<sup>43</sup>

Following the elections, Berdymukhamedov initiated a series of constitutional changes approved in September 2008. These reforms entailed the abolishment of the Halk Maslahaty

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(People's Council) – the highest legislative and deliberative body of Turkmenistan consisting of about 2,500 members, some of whom were elected. Its powers were transferred to the President and the Turkmen Parliament (Majlis), which size was expanded from 65 to 125 members. The system of elections of provincial and district governors was terminated. The revised version of the constitution also established the right of any individual to own private property, including land and real estate, and form small and medium size businesses. This measure was explained as consistent with the goal of complete transition to market economy and demonstrating state support for entrepreneurship and small and medium business.<sup>44</sup> Following the enactment of the constitutional changes, a new law on the parliament went into effect in January 2009 that expanded the *de jure* competencies of Turkmenistan's parliament.<sup>45</sup>

Since its independence, Turkmenistan has been a single-party state with the Democratic Party of Turkmenistan being the only officially registered political entity. Upon his accession to the post of the President, Berdymukhamedov expressed interest in introducing political pluralism in the republic. In 2010, he announced the creation of a new party – the Agrarian Party (Daikhan) of Turkmenistan - to demonstrate his country's progress on "the path to democracy." Many speculated that the announcement came in the wake of March 2010 report by the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, in which the financial institution expressed concern with Turkmenistan's failure to make progress toward political pluralism and multi-party democracy.<sup>46</sup> It has been surmised that the announcement about the creation of a two-party system in Turkmenistan was made to encourage foreign states and financial institutions to provide assistance to Turkmenistan.

Little progress in the creation of a space for real political competition ensued these public proclamations and almost no information has surfaced about activities and operations of the

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Agrarian Party of Turkmenistan since 2010. The initiative at forging a two-party system was repeated two years later when the President announced the creation of another political party – the Party of Industrialists and Entrepreneurs – following the adoption of a new act on political parties by the Turkmen Parliament. The new party was officially registered in August 2012 and took part in the special elections for five vacant parliamentary seats the following summer. This landmark event in the political history of Turkmenistan resulted in the election of the chairman of the party – Ovezmammed Mammedov – who was not a member of the ruling Democratic Party of Turkmenistan to the Turkmen Parliament. President Berdimukhamedov hailed these accomplishments as consistent with the goals of democratization of the Turkmen society and gradual transition of Turkmenistan to a multi-party system.<sup>47</sup>

In the area of human rights where the Turkmen regime has had the most abysmal record, the Turkmen government has also shown interest in improving its record. In its report to the UN Human Rights Commission submitted in compliance with the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which Turkmenistan acceded to in 1997, the Turkmen government trumpeted progressive changes in various areas of political and social life and vowed to move forward with a package of the new laws approved by Turkmenistan’s legislators for protecting human rights.<sup>48</sup> The UN Human Rights Committee acknowledged Turkmenistan’s new willingness to improve its troubling human rights record and commended its government for allowing the Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion to visit Turkmenistan. Still, the final report noted that much work needed to be done as torture, appalling detention conditions, and lack of judicial independence continued to be major problems in Turkmenistan.<sup>49</sup>

Commenting on political reforms unfolding in his state, President Berdimukhamedov frequently stresses “a natural and harmonious nature of [the] process” of Turkmenistan’s

democratization. Rapid democratization or blind following of the democratic experiences of other states have been ruled out as inappropriate for Turkmenistan. According to the Turkmen leadership, the so-called “gradual and evolutionary” approach to democratization has been necessary to ensure that political and socio-economic reforms in Turkmenistan are consistent with “the centuries-old democratic traditions” of Turkmen and their “ancestors’ spiritual precepts.”<sup>50</sup> In other words, the shape and speed of democratization has been explained by the imperative of harmonizing political reforms with the people’s historical experiences and their philosophical and moral values. The latter have been frequently referred to as the binding principles of state building and determinants of the national peculiarities in the social and political processes in Turkmenistan. The Council of Elders – a consultative assembly of elders from all provinces of Turkmenistan assisting the President in addressing issues of state importance – is one such peculiar organ designed to embody the Turkmen tradition of reverence to the authority of elders and reliance on the advice of senior members of society in matters of importance. Consisting of several hundred Turkmen citizens over 60 years old and enjoying prestige and respect in their communities, the Elders’ Council functions on a voluntary basis convened by the President.

In addition to presenting their state as democratic, the leadership of Turkmenistan has been eager to present the country as a modern and rapidly developing state. References to modernity often go hand in hand and even supersede the Turkmen government’s remarks about democratization. President Niyazov’s determination to reshape the architecture and landscape of Turkmenistan has been viewed as an extension of his personality cult and manifestation of his personal megalomania. Berdymukhamedov’s monumental projects, on the other hand, have been framed as the epitome of national historical heritage combined with the highest modern

standards. The official presentations of Berdimukhamedov's architectural and other innovations emphasize how these modern projects exemplify the unique qualities of the Turkmen. The height of skyscrapers peppered around Turkmenistan's capital are said to symbolize high aspirations and hope for the future shared by the Turkmen people. Modern factories, medical, culture, and sport facilities, new schools, and establishments of higher education epitomize the economic might of Turkmenistan. The speed and spread of the new construction projects are posited as a testament of the "nation's horse speedy developments."<sup>51</sup>

Four architectural projects overseen by President Berdimukhamedov entered the records of the Guinness Book of World Records. These include the fountain complex of Oguzhkan and his sons featuring the greatest number of fountains; the tallest unsupported flagpole; the largest indoor Ferris wheel built inside of the new entertainment center; and the largest architectural stare built by on the façade of the 692-ft television tower. According to the President, the entry of these projects into the Guinness Book "signifies the triumph of the country's grandiose reforms." "It proves that the Turkmen people's architectural art has been raised up to the top level."<sup>52</sup>

## Conclusion

A new company that enters a marketplace immediately faces tough competition that can not be sustained on the price factors alone. The company must demonstrate its compliance with the internationally recognized benchmarks for corporate performance and public expectations concerning its social responsibilities. Doing so will allow the company to build a positive and recognizable image, strong reputation for quality and customer service, encourage customers' acceptance, increase market share, and boost sales and profits. If the company refuses or fails to embrace the corporate norms, it risks losing customers' trust in its financial, operational, and



social soundness.

New states as well as those that have recently experienced a principal shift in their identity, usually through the regime change, find themselves in a similar situation. They need to promote their names and reputation for securing global recognition and attracting positive global attention. This is partly accomplished through nation branding and anchoring their practices in the existing global expectations and norms.

The government of President Bedymukhamedov clearly recognizes the importance of international image for Turkmenistan's development and foreign relations. Today more than ever before it is concerned with their state's reputation. As this chapter showed, the Turkmen authorities have been actively engaged in nation branding to present Turkmenistan as modern, democratic, rapidly developing, and hospitable state. In its foreign policy, high stakes have been placed on Turkmenistan's renewed constructive engagement with other states and international organizations and leadership in the area of energy security and transportation. Positive neutrality – a central tenet of Turkmenistan's foreign relations – has been elevated to the vital principle of international relations capable of fostering international development, conflict resolution, and peace.

To increase its market attractiveness, the Turkmen government has flaunted the country's stable political and social situation, sustained economic growth, strong resource potential, and the availability of legal guarantees for foreign investments established in accordance with international requirements. To promote Turkmenistan's destination brand abroad, the Turkmen authorities and tourist firms have been playing up the country's unexplored antiquity and the little known world of unique monumental art and Turkmen cultural heritage. In addition to shaping expectations of a memorable and rewarding travel experience associated with

Turkmenistan's cultural sites and traditional handcraft, the government has pointed up the availability of modern tourist infrastructure. Even in the realm of politics, the Berdymukhamedov regime has portrayed the country as modern, law-governed, and democratic.

How successful has Turkmenistan been in revamping its image and refurbishing international reputation? Just like a successful marketing campaign requires a company to "live the brand," the international recognition of the state-promoted image is contingent on the consistency of the nation brand identity with its practices. National reputation is buried in the perceptions of governments and peoples around the world. It can only be rebuilt slowly and painstakingly by eliminating or altering practices that are inconsistent with the promoted image, and nurturing traditions that correspond to international expectations and norms.

Many reforms implemented by the Turkmen government in recent years for repairing the country's international image have been superficial and externally driven by a need of attracting foreign capital. Despite the few improvements made in the socio-economic, political, and foreign policy realms since the presidency of Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov, Turkmenistan remains a closed and secretive territory. The access to its bountiful natural resources and cultural riches is hindered by cumbersome bureaucratic procedures of acquiring visas and permits as well as stringent requirements and restrictions imposed on the movement of foreigners inside Turkmenistan. The low penetration of credit cards and mobile phones, scant connectivity to the World Wide Web and high Internet fees remain the main obstacles to the development of online services and payments. In the area of politics and governance, a precarious situation with regard to personal liberties and political rights persists. The political competition is paralyzed throughout the country, and freedoms of the press, assembly, religion, and speech are suppressed. Endemic corruption and legal uncertainty detract from the attractiveness of

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Turkmenistan as tourist or business destination. As a result, its international image remains bleak. The future development of the country's energy sector, foreign relations, and tourism industry will largely depend on the decisions and practices of the Berdymukhamedov cabinet and future Turkmen governments.

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Governments care about their reputation because it has a dispositional quality, i.e., other actors may rely on it for predicting and explaining states' behavior (Jonathan Mercer, *Reputation and International Politics* (Cornell University Press, 1996), 16. Reputation, therefore, matters for assessing the likelihood of conflict, conflict resolution, or international cooperation.

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