

Washington, D.C., November 25, 2024

PhD Review: Oguljamal Yazliyeva, "Authoritarian rule and media in Turkmenistan," Faculty of Social Sciences, Charles University.

Oguljamal Yazliyeva's dissertation provides an original contribution to the fields of media studies, political science, and Central Asian studies by addressing the understudied relationship between authoritarianism and media within the specific and highly restrictive context of Turkmenistan. The research fills a significant gap in scholarship on Central Asian authoritarian regimes, where limited data access often restricts empirical analysis. By drawing on primary and secondary sources, including interviews, content analysis, and social media data, Yazliyeva offers a multi-dimensional study of Turkmenistan's media landscape, blending historical, sociopolitical, and cultural analyses to contextualize the modern-day control of media.

A significant strength of the content lies in its historical analysis. Yazliyeva traces the roots of Turkmenistan's "one-man rule" back to tribal traditions, illustrating how historical patterns of leadership and loyalty shape the contemporary political culture. This context provides a foundation for understanding the entrenched nature of authoritarianism in the country. By examining figures like Saparmurat Niyazov ("Türkmenbaşy") and Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov ("Arkadag"), the dissertation illuminates the ways in which media has been harnessed to promote a cult of personality that resonates with Turkmenistan's historical values.

Furthermore, the dissertation's empirical insights are particularly valuable given the scarcity of research on Turkmenistan, where restrictions make it challenging to access reliable information. Through interviews with Turkmen citizens, bloggers, and activists, Yazliyeva sheds light on the practical realities of media control, censorship, and public reception of government narratives. The case studies of state-run media provide new insights into how official narratives are constructed to reinforce the state's ideological agenda and maintain social control. Additionally, by analyzing content from alternative media sources like Radio Azatlyk and the "Chronicle of Turkmenistan," Yazliyeva introduces perspectives on resistance and dissent within a repressive environment, highlighting the strategies used by exiled journalists and citizens to counter state propaganda.

Elliott School of International Affairs

1957 E Street NW Suite 412 Washington, DC 20052

t 202-994-6340 f 202-994-5436 ieresgwu@gwu.edu www.ieres.org

Yazliyeva's work further contributes to the discourse on digital authoritarianism, addressing the role of social media in Turkmenistan's restricted environment. Her findings on social media usage patterns, limited as they are due to low internet penetration and heavy censorship, provide an important addition to the emerging field of digital authoritarianism in Central Asia. The dissertation's analysis of how social media offers a limited but notable space for public discourse adds a nuanced layer to the understanding of online resistance and public engagement in repressive regimes.

In summary, Yazliyeva's dissertation makes a significant scholarly contribution by providing an in-depth, contextually rich, innovative examination of media in authoritarian Turkmenistan. It opens pathways for future research in Central Asian media studies, authoritarian political culture, and the role of media under repressive regimes, thereby establishing a foundation for scholars to further investigate media practices in isolated and controlled societies.

Yazliyeva's research is particularly compelling for its interdisciplinary approach, combining political science, media studies, and Central Asian studies. This enables the work to go beyond a purely political or media-focused analysis, instead offering a holistic view of how media serves as an arm of authoritarian control in Turkmenistan.

Yazliyeva's dissertation is well-composed. The writing is clear, precise, and appropriately formal. Technical terms related to media studies, political science, and authoritarianism are carefully consistently used, ensuring clarity and coherence throughout the dissertation. Yazliyeva's use of language is particularly effective when conveying ideas such as "one-man rule" or "personality cult," grounding these terms in the Turkmen context with detailed explanations and historical references.

In addition, Yazliyeva employs a balanced writing style that engages with both empirical data and theoretical frameworks seamlessly. The language effectively bridges theoretical discourse with Turkmenistan's specific social and political landscape, making the text not only informative but also relatable for readers with or without specialized knowledge of the region. The author also exhibits a sensitive approach to potentially contentious or controversial topics, such as government censorship and propaganda, presenting them in a neutral and analytical tone.

The dissertation utilizes charts, tables, and other visual aids to complement the text, especially in sections that cover data-heavy content, such as survey results on media consumption or case study analyses of state-controlled versus alternative media. The graphics are well-integrated into the analysis and are referenced within the text, ensuring that they reinforce rather than distract from the argument.

Based on all the arguments presented above, I consider that the thesis meets the standard requirements for dissertations in the field. Therefore, I recommend it for defense.

Sebastien Peyrouse
Director, Central Asia Program,
Research Professor, IERES
Elliott School of International Affairs
George Washington University