

## **The golden statue of Turkmenbashi removed from the centre of Ashgabad**

On 17 June the Turkmen media announced the launch of the process of removing the Neutrality Arch, on top of which stands the golden statue of the first president of Turkmenistan Saparmurat Niyazov (known as Turkmenbashi), from the centre of Ashgabad. The removal of the statue is another step on the road to replacing the cult of the first president with the cult of the new leader – Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow, who took power in December 2006.

The Neutrality Arch with the statue of Turkmenbashi (altogether 75 m high) was constructed in 1998 as a symbol of the neutral state of Turkmenistan. In practice it became an illustration and symbol of the extravagance of Niyazov and the system established by him. The statue of Turkmenbashi placed on the Arch revolved in a way that the front of the statue was always facing the sun. The authorities are planning to move the Neutrality Arch to a park that is being created on the outskirts of the city; it is however not certain whether the statue of Niyazov will be placed on the monument as well.

After Berdimuhamedow took power, despite small signs of a liberalisation of the system, a process of developing a cult of personality for the new president and diminishing the role of the first leader of the country has started. An element of this process was, among other things, the removal of the reference to Niyazov from the national anthem. The decision about moving the Neutrality Arch from the city centre proves that the position of Berdimuhamedow in the domestic arena is quite strong and symbolically marks the end of the cult of personality of Turkmenbashi. <ola>