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Educational Reforms in Turkmenistan: Good Framework, Bad Content?

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Since the election of Turkmenistan's second President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov in February 2007, education has become nominally one of the priority sectors for the country's development. Several reforms in the education system have been adopted so as to overcome the legacy of the first President Niyazov/ Türkmenbashy's regressive policies in this sector.

Any educational reform needs to be considered on a long-term basis in order to be drafted and implemented. However, after only six years it is possible to analyze general tendencies in Turkmenistan's education system. Discussed below are the positive and negative effects of the reform of the educational system on Turkmen schools and universities.

Key Points

Turkmenistan's education system has gone through considerable changes and shifts in the last few years, with ambiguous results.

The extension of elementary as well as university education, and increasing the number of students at universities both inside the country and abroad has meant that Turkmenistan has moved away from the first president's legacy.

However, the heritage of the Türkmenbashy era still weighs heavily, and its negative tendencies could again destroy the small successes achieved unless the authorities implement real and not only illusory reforms.

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Elementary and Secondary Education

The elementary and secondary education system underwent substantial changes in the period 2007-12. In particular, compulsory school attendance was extended from nine to ten years in 2007 and, as from 2013, pupils will have to study for 12 years in order to complete their secondary education. The aim of this measure is to harmonize the Turkmen education system with international standards and, in theory, allow Turkmen students to apply for universities abroad. If this is implemented, Turkmenistan will be only the fifth post-Soviet country—after the three Baltic states and Georgia—to have “updated” the former Soviet 11-year elementary and secondary education system. The problem is that changes have been implemented hastily. The nine-year, and now 12-year, curricula were extended without textbook support or methodological guidelines. As a result, all-state school programs in the highest classes often simply repeat or summarize the information from lower classes, while the directors and teachers have not been able to prepare more appropriate conditions for the first grades.¹

Teacher training is apparently one of the crucial obstacles for the development of the education system. Niyazov’s “reforms” resulted in the dismissal and exit of many experienced teachers. Today the gap has been filled to some extent with newly-qualified graduates, although the quality of their teaching tends to be low and insufficient.

The building of new schools seems to be the most visible result of the changes adopted in the Turkmen education sector. In 2012 it was announced that 114 new schools had been opened,² not only in the cities, but also in more remote places.³ However, the building and renovation contracts seem to be extremely overpriced. The schools in Berdimuhamedov’s family bases—Barabap and Yzgant—are particular examples.⁴ Many thousands of schools throughout the country could be renovated for the same amount of money. The majority of them is still self-run and relies for small repairs on donations from pupils’ parents.

Modern schools are usually supplied with the latest technology such as computers, laptops, or interactive boards. The distribution of these materials is highly selective as well—many schools’ supplies are incomplete and the majority of them do not receive any equipment at all.⁵ However, many teachers and directors fear the equipment will be damaged and, therefore, they either do not allow their use in the classrooms, or they carefully make them available only during inspections or official visits. In addition, members of staff are not adequately trained in IT, in general, and educational software and hardware, in particular. Furthermore, regions often lack an internet connection and, even more importantly, suffer from electricity shortages, which render IT useless. Even in the cities, the internet connection is slow, controlled by the government, and restricted to just a few websites. Thus, the idea of employing technology in schools has remained mostly on paper and is far from being implemented to improve the education system.

School textbooks, in general, remain a persistent problem of Turkmen education. However, some improvements have been observed since 2007, and every year new textbooks are being published covering, at least partially, the school programs. We can only assume that complete sets of textbooks for every subject will become available in future years. At the same time, teachers have frequently complained about content quality and the unequal distribution of textbooks.⁶ New textbooks are mostly written by inexperienced authors and teachers without proper qualifications.⁷ In addition, too little time (3-4 months) is allocated by the authorities for the writing of each of them. As a result, many teachers are not able to use the new textbooks in their classes and still use former Soviet ones from 1990-1992.

Teacher training is apparently one of the crucial obstacles for the development of the education system in Turkmenistan. Niyazov’s “reforms” resulted in the dismissal and exit of many experienced teachers. The gap has been filled to some extent with newly-qualified graduates, although these were educated under the new university system, so the quality of their teaching tends to be low and insufficient.⁸ Education is often interrupted by seasonal events such as cotton harvesting. Although children in the elementary level are

not obliged to go to the fields, teachers are not exempted from the practice. Moreover, pupils are forced to congregate in masses along the roads during the arrival to Ashgabat of a foreign delegation, and the visit of the president or highly-ranked officers to the regions. Others have to assist in the place where the event or ceremony is held. This Soviet tradition, which was maintained and further developed by Niyazov, has been also preserved by the new president, and it even seems that the scale of these ceremonies has expanded.⁹

The school program has been improved slightly by reintroducing physical education as well as social sciences to the curriculum. Unfortunately, the expected de-ideologization has failed. The study of the *Ruhnama* (“The Holy Book of the first President”) has not been fully eliminated, as it still remained the topic of an obligatory exam for secondary schools and universities in 2012, as well as a topic in the process of approving foreign diplomas.¹⁰ However, since 2011 the *Ruhnama* is no longer a topic in secondary schools’ graduate exams.¹¹ The growing cult of the second president is also evident instead. Berdimuhamedov’s books are already studied in several classes as part of the school’s curriculum and his portrait has replaced that of his predecessor in the new textbooks.¹²

Although the president proclaimed foreign languages as one of the priorities, the real situation in this domain has further deteriorated in the last couple of years. Russian classes did not resume or increase in the schools, and only a few Russian classes remained available throughout the country (about 30 in 2011, which means that only 750-1,000 out of 100,000 first-graders were able to enter them). These are intended in particular for national minorities, although due to the persistently high demand from parents, local Turkmen pupils also attend them. In any case, it will be extremely problematic to resume the normal functioning of Russian schools in the future due to the lack of teachers and a decrease in the Russian-speaking population in general. There is also a lack of interest on both the Russian and Turkmenistan sides to invite education specialists and teachers from Russia.

The English language seemed to have increased in significance at the expense of Russian at the very beginning of the reforms. The provision of English language lessons increased as it became compulsory from the first to the eleventh grades (and the twelfth one since 2013). However, the Peace Corps which offered English language classes and summer camps closed its office in Turkmenistan at the end of 2012 and exchange programs such as FLEX registered a decreasing number of applicants.¹³ There were even cases of threatening parents who intended to send their pupils to compete for places in the exchange programs.

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National minorities are mostly deprived from elementary and secondary education programs in their national languages. Kazakh and Uzbek schools were closed down during the Niyazov era, and the new president has not even expressed any intention of reopening them. Therefore, the only foreign elementary and secondary schools are prestigious Turkmen-Turkish schools, the Turkmen-Russian School in Ashgabat, the International School of Ashgabat (with instruction in English and with Russian as “lingua franca,” although it is expensive and inaccessible for most Turkmens), and also a small Sunday school sponsored by the Embassy of Ukraine. Notwithstanding, Turkmen-Turkish schools started to be closed in 2011 for allegedly spreading Islamic doctrine in the curriculum.¹⁴ Although there were different views on the role of these schools, they filled a significant gap in providing quality elementary and secondary education, and most Turkmen winners at international competitions in the humanities came from them.¹⁵

Finally, corruption is considered to be one of the main obstacles to the improvement of elementary education. Due to the lack of vacancies in what

are regarded as “prestigious” classes (i.e. mostly Russian ones), bribes became the norm.¹⁶ Moreover, teachers have to pay for being exempted from seasonal work in cotton fields, maintaining classes, or purchasing supplies (chalk, paper, marker-pens, and so on). These payments are afterwards demanded from pupils’ parents.¹⁷ Moreover, the practice of accepting small bribes consisting of home-made meals or domestic animals (i.e. goats) in exchange for better grades is still widespread, due to the inadequate pay teachers receive. The latter are also often required to pay the school’s director to keep their position (and directors have to do the same to local or regional education authorities). Thus, the petty corruption caused by the low budget for education, as well as widespread and systematic pyramid-shaped corruption, with the Ministry of Education at the top, and teachers and parents at the bottom, substantially undermines educational processes and is one of the main challenges for any reform.

Higher Education

Universities have already undergone major reforms, which could be considered as a positive development for the future. The extension of university programs to a standard of five years (six years for the medical school) and the elimination of obligatory labor and military service for young men before entering university was one of the first and logical steps taken by the new president. Berdimuhamedov has even started to re-open several universities and invited foreign university delegations and scholars to Turkmenistan. The reopening, for example, of the Academy of Sciences, followed by the resumption of postgraduate studies, has been regarded as highly positive steps toward the normalization of the higher education system.

In 2009, a branch of the Gubkin Institute of Oil and Gas was opened, and several Russian universities now offer entry exam centers throughout the country; this in addition to the existing Turkmen-Turkish University. In the northern parts of the country, meanwhile, the Dashoghuz Institute for Agriculture was reopened after several years of closure. In 2012-13, there were also initial negotiations over the opening of the Turkmen-

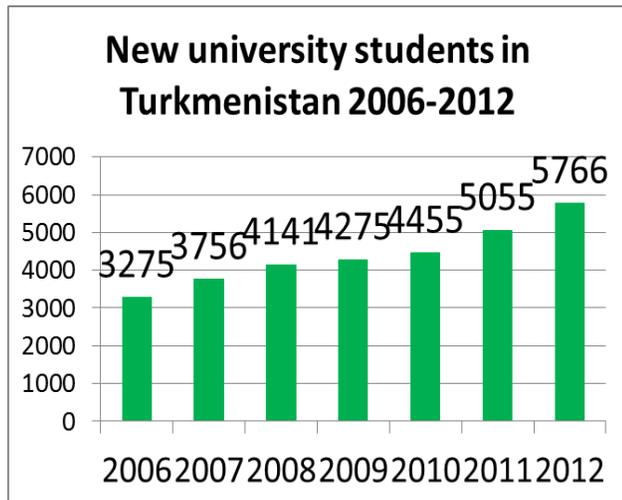
American University in Ashgabat. If successfully concluded, the project has the potential to attract teachers and scholars from all over the world, in particular from European, Turkish, and/or Russian universities in the most needed specializations—law, engineering, education, IT, and so on. The establishment of private schools, announced for 2013-14, furthermore, could bring necessary competition if higher caliber teachers, both from within Turkmenistan and abroad, could be attracted and so give the country’s younger generation a better quality education. As a consequence, the mass corruption of the universities could potentially be reduced as parents would rather pay official fees for education than unofficial bribes.

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At the same time, although the university programs were extended in accordance with international standards, it became clear that the (often forced) dismissal of former researchers and/or teachers from the universities in the past decade has created a hardly recoverable gap in qualified staff. The new cadres turned out to be seriously undereducated with a strong ideological footprint stemming from the previous period. In this situation, probably, the temporary attraction of foreign researchers and teachers to Turkmen universities as well as opening new universities (including private ones) could improve the situation.

The number of students according to the official sources started to grow steadily as shown in the graph below. Those supported by the Turkmen state to study abroad, predominantly in Russia, Turkey, Ukraine, Malaysia, and other countries, is also booming. In 2011 the official statistics registered about 2,000 students leaving to study abroad with state support.¹⁸ Others were able to study making their own private arrangements. President Berdimuhamedov also resumed the

recognition of foreign diplomas in 2011, the validity of which had been made void in 2004. However, students still need to go through an approval process, including having to do the problematic test on knowledge of the *Ruhnama*. Russian university graduates are, theoretically, waived from this rule following the intergovernmental agreement from 2009.¹⁹



But here also, the reverse side of the coin is problematic. In 2009, the refusal to allow students going abroad to study at the American University of Central Asia in Bishkek and other universities has initiated measures being taken against those who have studied in “politically incorrect schools.” Kyrgyzstan, in general, became a black-listed country for Turkmen students as the Turkmenistan government started to require additional exit visas for this country in 2011.²⁰ While the official clarification was understandable from the regime’s point of view (new universities and specializations in Turkmenistan itself as well as a low demand for several specializations in the country), the students were also rightfully annoyed and foreign embassies negatively evaluated such steps. However, the situation remained unresolved and many students remained “banned” from leaving the country.

Foreign universities often showed up the real level of Turkmenistan’s secondary school education. Successful candidates to such universities usually have to attend preparatory classes at the universities, or at secondary schools, and/or pass the exam requirements through much self-study

and the help of tutors.²¹ However, in many cases, despite the low initial quality of students from Turkmenistan, their motivation enabled them to achieve the best results and they became excellent students with the potential for receiving prestigious foreign grants, such as Fulbright or Rumsfeld fellowships. However, these students are only a small part of all Turkmenistan alumni. Furthermore, their usefulness for Turkmenistan is doubtful as the majority of them do not appear to return to their home country, although a recent survey to some extent showed a more optimistic picture.²²

Meanwhile, the situation of universities in Turkmenistan has worsened. After several incidents involving students and critical remarks made by the president in the period 2009-12, the university regime has tightened as rectors feared being sacked. Now, students are officially not allowed to drive a car or come by taxi to the university.²³ They were also effectively barred from discos, bars, and restaurants after several incidents involving students mostly from privileged families.²⁴ Students are, however, forced to attend sporting events, holiday celebrations, conferences, and other events. Indeed, this further expanded after the appointment of Gulshat Mamedowa as the new Minister of Education in 2009. And while the death of several students in November 2012 during preparations for the Constitution Day temporarily undermined such mass participatory events,²⁵ students have again been forced to attend sporting and other events with shouts praising *Arkadag* (the title of the new president, meaning Protector).²⁶

Here, too, corruption is one of the principal problems in higher education. Although Berdimuhamedov ordered video observation during the entry exams in 2012, it did not decrease the “fees” for rectors and teachers from students trying to enter the universities. On the contrary, according to unofficial sources, the amounts paid for successfully passing the exams increased last year to US\$40,000 and even \$70,000 at prestigious schools such as the Medical University or Faculty of Law of Turkmenistan State University.²⁷ Apart from these expenses, students are also faced with official and unofficial fees for obligatory medical reports and also for notarial and

translating services if they wish to enter a foreign university.²⁸

Conclusions

Turkmenistan's education system has gone through considerable changes and shifts in the last few years, with ambiguous results. The extension of elementary as well as university education so as to meet international standards, and increasing the number of students at universities both inside the country and abroad has meant that Turkmenistan has moved away from the first president's legacy. The statistics show that the number of university students could amount to about 24,000, with another 10-15,000 studying abroad. The figure almost reaches that of the late Soviet period at the end of 1980s, when more than 40,000 students studied at Turkmen SSR universities.²⁹ Moreover, the principal eccentricities of the former regime—non-acceptance of foreign diplomas or forced labor before university—have been eliminated. The revival of the Academy of Sciences and establishment of several new institutes such as the Strategic Studies Institute could help to re-establish scientific work in the country and provide a basis for political decision-making processes. In this regard, then, there has been a “normalization” period of legal and institutional framework building in recent years.

However, the heritage of the Türkmenbashy era still weighs heavily, and its negative tendencies could again destroy the small successes achieved unless the Ministry of Education and the president implement real and not only illusory reforms. Some of the main challenges are outlined below:

1. **Corruption.** A generally high level of corruption permeates the education sector, thus increasing the cost of education. Further, a promotion of the personality cult of the president means that often less skillful but loyal staff is put into responsible positions at the expense of more independent-minded people.

2. **Lack of human capital.** Teachers with a poor education based on ideological postulates are not able to fill the void left by the removal of previous cadres. The constant fear amongst the teaching

staff, or the directors, of being sacked in case of failure to carry out instructions from “above,” or with little prospect of improving their own level of education, works against the improvement of elementary education. Moreover, the system of passing on knowledge from more experienced colleagues (as was usual in Soviet times) has been abandoned or works only selectively. The introducing of new programs is obstructed by the rigid or (on the contrary) non-existent programs and textbooks.

3. **Hardware more than software.** Although Berdimuhamedov likes to talk about the successes in education, he favors more “showcase” and superficial reforms rather than any genuine attempts to make things better.

4. **An increasing mistrust of foreign influence** (in particular Western), a persistent high level of nepotism, and further bureaucratic and administrative barriers for students going abroad to “incorrect universities” are impediments to real reforms.

In spite of the above, it would be a mistake to fully dismiss in their entirety all recent reform attempts. Indeed, clearly visible efforts, in the face of significant obstacles, have been made to tentatively improve the situation of the education sector in the country.

¹ “Shestiletnee pervoklassniki,” *Khronika Turkmenistana*, July 7, 2013, <http://www.chrono-tm.org/2013/07/shestiletnee-pervoklassniki/>.

² “Vystupleniie Prezidenta Turkmenistana Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedova na zasedanii Soveta stareishin Turkmenistana,” *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, October 24, 2012.

³ *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, September 1, 2011.

⁴ “Prezident Turkmenistana prinial uchastie v tseremoniakh otkrytiia novykh ob'ektov sela Yzgant,” *Turkmenistan zolotoi vek*, October 20, 2012.

⁵ This reality was confirmed by Peace Corps Volunteers working in Turkmenistan and other sources.

⁶ Textbooks are also not immune from corruption and swindling in Turkmenistan. See Toily Ashyrmuradov, “Turkmenistan: Uchebniki vmesto shkol popali v svobodnuiu prodazhu,” *Fergananeews.com*, July 12, 2012. <http://www.fergananeews.com/articles/7423>.

⁷ Author's interview with Peace Corps Volunteers, February 2013.

⁸ “V shkolakh ne khvataet uchitelei matematiki,” *Khronika Turkmenistana*, July 11, 2012. <http://www.chrono-tm.org/2012/07/ne-hvataet-uchiteley/>.

⁹ Il'ia Kirimdzhanov, "One Long Holiday in Turkmenistan," *IWPR.net*, September 21, 2012. <http://iwpr.net/report-news/one-long-holiday-turkmenistan>.

¹⁰ "Vstupitel'nyie ekzameny: Videokamery, tiubeteiki i Ruhnama," *Khronika Turkmenistana*, August 5, 2012. <http://www.chrono-tm.org/2012/08/vstupitelnyie-ekzamenyi-videokameryi-tyubetyki-i-ruhnama/>. See also "Turkmen 'Holy Book' Still on Shelves," *IWPR.net*, September 11, 2012, <http://iwpr.net/report-news/turkmen-holy-book-still-shelves>.

¹¹ "V Turkmenii Ruhnamu zamenili na informatiku," *Lenta.ru*, April 25, 2011.

¹² Although the portrait of the head of state is a tradition in many countries (monarchies in particular), republics with changing governments and heads of states do not usually bear the portrait of the leader. Nepal could serve as recent example: when the kingdom was abolished, the portraits of the king were removed from school textbooks. Schools with an Austro-Hungarian tradition traditionally hung the portraits of their heads of state on the walls of the classrooms, though the tradition is being phased out.

¹³ Ashley Cleek, "Peace Corps Pulling Out of Turkmenistan," *Eurasianet.org*, September 3, 2012, <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/65853>. See also "Ne nado FLEXov," *Khronika Turkmenistana*, January 12, 2012. <http://www.chrono-tm.org/2012/01/ne-nado-flexov/>.

¹⁴ "V Turkmenistane zakryvaiut turetskie shkoly," *Khronika Turkmenistana*, August 14, 2011. <http://www.chrono-tm.org/2011/08/v-turkmenistane-zakryvayut-turetskie-sh/>.

¹⁵ Bayram Balci, "Fethullah Gülen's Missionary Schools in Central Asia and their Role in the Spreading of Turkism and Islam," *Religion, State and Society* 31, no. 2 (2003): 151-177. See also Victoria Clemens, "Turkmenistan's New Challenges: Can Stability Co-exist with Reform? A Study of Gülen Schools in Central Asia, 1997-2007," in Louis J. Cantori, Marcia K. Hermansen, and David B. Capes, eds, *Muslim World in Transition. Contribution of the Gülen Movement* (London: Leeds Metropolitan University Press, 2007), 572-584, http://www.academia.edu/333441/Muslim_World_In_Transition_Contributions_of_the_Gulen_Movement.

¹⁶ "Khochesh' v russkii klass - plati ... kholodilnikom," *Khronika Turkmenistana*, August 9, 2011.

¹⁷ Turkmenistan is by no means an exception amongst developing countries. The practice of earning additional income in the form of selling textbooks and small stationery is not unusual in other Asian states with similar budgetary problems.

¹⁸ "More than 2,000 students go abroad for study," *Turkmenistan.ru*, August 29, 2011, <http://www.turkmenistan.ru/en/articles/15305.html>.

¹⁹ "Soglasheniie mezhdru Pravitel'stvom Rossiiskoi Federatsii i Pravitel'stvom Turkmenistana o vzaimnom priznanii dokumentov gosudarstvennogo obraztsa ob obrazovanii," *Biulleten mezhdunarodnykh dogovorov*, no. 8 (2009): 62, http://www.mid.ru/BDOMP/spd_md.nsf/0/ODF875504690887944257B18004254B4.

²⁰ "Turkmenistan: molodezh' ne speshit vozvrashchat'sia na rodinu," *IWPR.net*, January 13, 2012. <http://iwpr.net/report-news/foreign-study-provides-escape-turkmen-students>.

²¹ *Turkmen Students Abroad: Goals, Challenges and Prospects for the Future*, Turkmen Advisory Council Report, December 2012, 15-16, http://arzuw.org/s/TAC-Report_2012_Final.pdf.

²² *Ibid.*, 17. The small quantity of respondents (about 100 in total) makes the result of an otherwise excellent survey problematic as different respondents could alter the result. Anyway, no other survey was conducted in this issue.

²³ "Kliatva studenta," *Khronika Turkmenistana*, February 17, 2013. <http://www.chrono-tm.org/2013/02/klyatva-studenta/>.

²⁴ In April 2012, the former Minister of Education and rector of Polytechnic University Hydyr Saparlyew and Minister of Energy and Industry Yarmuhammet Orazgulyýew were dismissed due to the illegal and "hooligan" activities of their children in Ashgabat. "Ministr Energetiki Turkmenistan Orazgulyev uvolen za plokhoe vospitanie syna," *Centrasia.ru*, April 16, 2012. <http://www.centrasia.ru/newsA.php?st=1334596980>.

²⁵ "Studentov pozhaleli," *Khronika Turkmenistana*, February 4, 2013, <http://www.chrono-tm.org/2013/02/studentov-pozhaleli/>.

²⁶ "Turkmenistan: eshche odna vseobshchaia obiazalovka," *Regnum*, February 15, 2013, www.regnum.ru/news/fd-abroad/1625624.html. Interview in Ashgabat, April 2013, and firsthand presence of the author at one of these events in Ashgabat.

²⁷ Bekdurdy Amansaryev, "Turkmenistan: prognivshaia sistema obrazovaniia," *Centrasia.ru*, September 24, 2012. <http://www.centrasia.ru/newsA.php?st=1348470120>.

²⁸ "Uroven' turkmenskikh VUZov i summy vziatok," *Blog Ruslana T.*, November 26, 2012, http://chrono-tm.blogspot.com/2012/11/blog-post_26.html.

²⁹ *Sovetskaia entsyklopediia* (Moscow, 1990), 172.

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