

Turkmenistan: Learning the Turkish Way

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With few other options around, many parents send children to Turkish schools in hope of improving their chances in life.

Parents who want to ensure their children receive a good education in Turkmenistan have little choice but to send them to Turkish schools, but some are concerned about the nationalist and religious content in the curriculum.

Turkish high schools or lycees appeared in Central Asia after the collapse of the Soviet Union, offering students an alternative to the faltering education system their countries inherited.

In Turkmenistan, schooling has declined to a particularly low level, as chronic government underfunding is compounded by problems unique to this country, such as President Saparmurad Niyazov's arbitrary decision not to recognise qualifications gained abroad, and the increasing requirement that schoolkids and college students focus on his *Ruhnama*, a sort of spiritual handbook for the nation, to the exclusion of other subjects.

Schools that used to employ Russian, Uzbek or Kazak as the primary medium of instruction have been closed one by one, and almost all teaching is now done in Turkmen. The loss of Russian schools does not just affect the minority Slav population since they were an important stepping-stone for Soviet students of any ethnicity to go on to further study or a career.

With old educational choices curtailed and few new ones appearing, the Turkish lycees offer a unique chance for ambitious students to get ahead.

The schools are allowed to operate in this otherwise closed country because President Niyazov, also known as Turkmenbashi, has fostered good relations with Ankara, bringing in Turkish firms for a wide range of construction and industrial projects. For Turkey, providing schools has helped expand its influence in Central Asia, with which the Turks have cultural and linguistic ties.

Almost every sizeable town has a Turkish school of some kind, either privately-run or sponsored by the Turkish government. A Turkmen-Turkish university has also been opened, with branches across the country, offering a natural progression for school-leavers.

The diplomas awarded by Turkish schools are officially recognised in Turkmenistan and can bring significant advantages to students, who have a better chance of finding a job at home and also the option of going on to study in Turkey. An added bonus is that as well as Turkish, the schools also use English as a teaching medium.

"For my children, it's the only way they'll get any kind of education," said Batir, the father of two sons. "Here at least there's hope that my children will learn foreign languages, while at our state schools it's a nightmare - they don't teach anything except the *Ruhnama*."

"Since we don't have Russian citizenship, I can't send my children to study in Russia, like many people do. So the only alternative is to send them to a Turkish lycee."

Looking back, one graduate from the Turkmen-Turkish university had no regrets about the Turkish schooling and higher education he had received. "I believe my Turkish education is far superior to the current state Turkmen education," he said. "When I graduated from university, I was able to land a job with a Turkish firm. If I'd had a Turkmen diploma I don't think I would have got it."

Some parents resent what they see as a Turkish nationalist slant to the teaching at the schools, with a lot of time devoted to pan-Turkic ideology, for example the view that the Turkmen and other Central Asian peoples are Turks and their languages are merely dialects of the language spoken in Istanbul.

In some of the private schools, there is also an emphasis on Islamic studies that worries some people in this largely Muslim society.

One parent, who did not want to be named, used to send his son to a Turkish boarding school, where he says, "the students were forced to pray and to honour Turkish precepts and laws".

"I was a little alarmed by this," he continued, "but I thought that knowing another language and culture was more important. However, when he started coming home and talking about religion I decided to transfer him to an ordinary school. It's easy to plant the seeds of extremism in children's impressionable minds, and that scared me.

"I won't be sending my younger son to be taught by Turkish teachers - especially as it's not entirely clear who finances these schools."

A former student at a lycee in the capital Ashgabat confirmed that at his school, "religion is indeed a strong component of the teaching, but it's done in a very subtle way. The most talented pupils are given extra lessons, and then taken to private apartments to read religious books at weekends.

"Quite often our school would be warned by someone from the security services that there was to be a police raid, so our teachers would hide the religious books for a couple of days, and then bring them out again afterwards."

One history professor who is worried about the implications of the Islamic education provided by Turkish schools told IWPR, "They say he who sows the wind reaps a storm. But the expansion of aggressive Islam in Turkmenistan will disprove this proverb. It won't be those who sowed the wind- whether charitable foundations or extremist sects - who end up reaping the results, but us. And God only knows how the students will be used later on."

Other observers in Turkmenistan express a more general fear that the dominance of Turkish education could eventually lead to the emergence of a pro-Turkey elite, since graduates from the lycees are likely to get top jobs and eventually succeed to leadership positions. So far, very few Turkish-school graduates hold key positions in the Turkmen administration, but that may be because most are still too young.

For pupils enrolling at the Turkish schools, the cultural differences are most obvious in day-to-day matters such as stricter discipline and separate classes for boys and girls.

Kamal, now in the eighth grade, found himself in a boys-only class after moving from a state school. "I used to have girls in my class and we're still friends, but the boys who started here in the first grade don't know how to talk to girls, and generally they are quite aggressive," he said.

“I was in the Russian-language section of an ordinary school, and I liked it more there: I could trust my teachers, I had a lot of friends and we had common interests. But here... the teachers are very strict, sometimes excessively so.

“I find it strange that if a conflict arises, it is not dealt with by the whole class like in my last school, but instead we get punished for the offence and are then forced to pray and ask forgiveness from God.”

Location: Central Asia
Uzbekistan
Turkmenistan
Turkey

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