

Turkmenistan's Kazaks Protest School Closures

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Repressive language laws are forcing ethnic Kazaks out of Turkmenistan.

News that from next year, Turkmenistan's schools will only teach in the Turkmen language has angered the country's ethnic Kazaks, who feel they now have no option but to leave their homeland.

On the orders of the government, schools that provide lessons using Kazak as well as Turkmen as the teaching medium are to close, along with those offering Russian and Uzbek.

There are only about 20 dual language schools left in Turkmenistan, where the introduction of Turkmen as the state language has been gradual but relentless. Universities lectures are now conducted entirely in Turkmen, restricting educational opportunities for young people for whom the national language is not their mother tongue.

Even at the remaining bilingual schools, lessons in the other languages were being scaled down. The only exceptions are Turkish-medium schools funded from Turkey, where the main emphasis is on Turkish although English and Turkmen are also taught.

Protests at their closure of Kazak schools have been futile, with parents told by authorities that they must "respect the honour and laws of their country". Ethnic Kazak Erbol Jaitikin, who said he was fired from his job as an architect because of his ethnicity, is deeply concerned that children are now falling victim to discrimination. "The situation has in my opinion got worse, because it has affected the rights of our children to be taught in their native language and preserve our ethnic culture," said Jaitikin. "But while adults can find a way to survive by doing agricultural work or trade, when it comes to the future of our children, it's worth thinking about what to do next." Making matters worse, the parents say, are government strictures that school children of all ethnicities must wear traditional Turkmen dress, and study the *Ruhnama* - a spiritual treatise written by President Saparmurat Niazov that is now central to the educational system.

Like the Turkmens, the Kazaks are a Turkic-language, Muslim and formerly nomadic people but they differ in language, history and traditions. About 30,000 remain inside Turkmenistan, mostly in areas close to Kazakstan, down from 90,000 several years ago.

"I don't agree that my children should wear the Turkmen skullcap, as Kazaks also have their own national headgear. Yes, we are citizens of this country, but we belong to a different ethnic group," said Bulat Davelnov, the father of three school-age children.

Asel Ertysova, a Kazak primary school teacher, told IWPR that the parents she has spoken to won't send their children to Turkmen schools, and are considering schooling them at home.

"They think that they would be better off hiring personal tutors and teaching their children at home, sad and unnatural as this might be.... Nevertheless, when schooling becomes nothing more than wearing the national Turkmen costume and studying the *Ruhnama*, I think it's the right thing to do," said Ertysova.

One leading member of the Kazak community said others are taking more drastic action and are planning to leave for Kazakstan, "waiting with their suitcases packed" for permission to go.

Kazakstan actively welcomes ethnic Kazak immigrants, promising housing and other benefits to encourage them to come from as far away as Afghanistan and Mongolia.

Alimjan, now living with his family of four in southern Kazakstan, arrived via Uzbekistan, where he had gone to attend a funeral.

“We didn’t go back,” he said. “We travelled through Uzbekistan to the south of Kazakstan, where we have relatives. A new school has opened and the children will go there. The whole family works in agriculture.”

Alimjan said he chose an indirect route as it was impossible for people in Turkmenistan to take advantage of the Kazak repatriation scheme, “If we’d tried to come under the quota, we wouldn’t have got out of Turkmenistan. The documents have to be sent away and you need to wait there. No one would have let us leave.”

If they can negotiate their way out of Turkmenistan, Kazaks are able to settle in Kazakstan, but once there they find it hard to win places on the preferential benefits scheme as most of the quota is currently reserved for people from Uzbekistan. Those who do get on the scheme often find the government subsidies due to them are delayed or do not cover their real housing costs. Despite the difficulties, 46-year-old Asan, a Kazak born in the Turkmen port of Krasnovodsk (now renamed Turkmenbashi after President Niazov), said life is better in Kazakstan than the “nuthouse” which his homeland has become.

“It is difficult to say Kazakstan, either, is a democratic state, but there’s a lot more freedom here,” said Asan. “Here they don’t force you to study the biography and works of the president, you can decide whether to vote in elections or not, and it’s up to you whether or not you participate in public life. In Turkmenistan they don’t ask you what you want. They demand blind obedience to the authorities. And that’s humiliating.”

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