

Chapter 5

Education in Turkmenistan Under the Second President: Genuine Reforms or Make Believe?



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5.1 Introduction

Since the election of Turkmenistan's second president Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow, in February 2007, the Turkmen political system has experienced numerous shifts and changes.¹ The political system under the first president Saparmurat Niyazow (also known as Türkmenbaşy) was reformed, and the political culture changed, in order to fit in with the needs of the second leader Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow. Initially, Berdimuhamedow took several steps which *looked like* reform: dismissal of *Halk Maslahaty* ("People's Council," a monumental state institution totally controlled by the first president), institution of multicandidate presidential elections, establishment of new political parties, and removal of a bizarre ideological system based on the *Ruhnama* ("The Holy Book of the first President").² In social life, Berdimuhamedow removed roadblocks inside the country that were centers of substantial corruption, allowed the slow expansion of the internet, and introduced other reforms allegedly aimed at the improvement of life in the country. However, besides these steps, often promoted by Turkmen official propaganda, President Berdimuhamedow restructured the power system into a family-run oligarchy, which eliminated possible competitors and created the bureaucratic-economic elite consisting mostly of his family and others close to them. Any political reforms were designed to maintain this system. Ideologically, the personality cult of "Turkmen No. 1" and *serdarism* (leader) introduced by

¹For a general and comprehensive overview of the period, see, e.g., Stronski (2017).

²The *Ruhnama* (*The Book of the Soul*) was written by Saparmurat Niyazow, President of Turkmenistan 1990–2006. It blended autobiography, spiritual and moral guidance, and revisionist history.

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Niyazow was found to be an excellent tool to confirm the position of the second president. Berdimuhamedow presented himself as a kind of younger and active reincarnation of his predecessor, cementing his personality cult in a similar (albeit not the same) manner.

The education system has reflected and taken the same direction as the above-mentioned changes. Initially, Berdimuhamedow was welcomed with optimism, removing the most striking aspects of the previous system. However, as soon as he was firmly enough in power, he introduced even tighter control over the educational system and even reversed some of his initial changes, although the system did not take the extraordinary form it had under Niyazow. Ideologization returned, with books by the president increasing in number annually and being studied in schools. The leader (honored, in the best Niyazow tradition, with the title *Arkadag*, the Protector, literally “The One at the Back” or “The Patron”) was praised in the same way, by even more massive crowds.

Education has in principle become one of the priority sectors for the country’s development. Several reforms in the education system have been adopted since President Niyazow’s time to reverse the first regressive policies in this sector and establish a new, modern system. A little over 10 years after the reforms were launched, it is possible to carry out a proper analysis of the principal tendencies in Turkmenistan’s reformed education system. To what extent has the Turkmen educational system provided a more “standard” way of bringing up pupils and students, and to what extent does education reflect the character of the political system in the country? What are the positive and negative effects of the education system reforms on Turkmen schools and universities? We argue that educational reforms are aimed mostly at serving the political culture of corruption and sycophancy that emerged in Turkmenistan in the early years of independence and continues through “the period of Almighty and Happiness” introduced by the second president Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow. Although there still are good teachers, and parents interested in giving the best upbringing to their children, the opportunities for education of a standard similar to that of other countries are narrowing, with continuous ideological brainwashing or absence from school due to endless celebrations and events praising the president and his politics.

5.2 Elementary and Secondary Education

The elementary and secondary education system underwent substantial changes, starting in 2007. In particular, compulsory school attendance was extended initially from 9 to 11 years, and, as from 2013, pupils have had 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 to universities abroad. Turkmenistan was the fifth post-Soviet country—after the Baltic States and Georgia—to update the former Soviet 11-year elementary and secondary education system.

At the same time, the changes were implemented rather hastily and without adequate preparation. Extended curricula were implemented without appropriate 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. A compulsory school year zero, from age 6, was introduced without any discussion with school principals concerning required results and relevant methodology (Chronicle 2013c).

Berdimuhamedow launched a program of new school buildings, and several hundred new or newly refurbished schools have been opened (Berdimuhamedow 2012b). The new buildings seem to be the most visible result of the changes adopted in the elementary and secondary education sector, not only in the cities but also in more remote places (Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan 2011). However, the building and renovation contracts for the new schools seem to be extremely overpriced. The schools in Berdimuhamedow's family bases—Barabap and Yzgant—are particular examples (Berdimuhamedow 2012a). Many thousands of schools throughout the country could be renovated for the same amount of money. Those schools are self-run and, for small repairs, rely on the donations from the pupils' parents. Once a school is renovated, the maintenance becomes the responsibility of school teachers, principals, and, consequently, parents.

Modern schools are usually supplied with the latest technology such as computers, laptops, or interactive boards (Uraev 2018). The distribution of these items is highly selective as well—many supplies are incomplete, and most of the schools do not receive any equipment at all.³ Many teachers and principals fear the equipment will be damaged and therefore either do not allow its use in the classrooms or carefully make it available during inspections or official visits only. In addition, staff members and teachers are often 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 makes IT devices useless. Even in the cities, the Internet connection is slow, controlled by the government, and restricted to selected 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 for Turkmen education. New textbooks have been published every year since 2007 covering—at least theoretically—entire school programs. At the same time, teachers have frequently complained about content quality and the unequal distribution of textbooks (Ashirmuradov 2012a).⁴ The texts are unclear, and teachers and parents complain of many mistakes and poor methodology, as the books are written by inexperienced authors and teachers without proper qualifications (Radio Azattyk 2017d).⁵ In

³This reality was confirmed by Peace Corps Volunteers working in Turkmenistan and other sources.

⁴The textbooks could become a part of corruption and swindling in Turkmenistan.

⁵Also author's interview with Peace Corps Volunteers, February 2013.

addition, the Executive and the Ministry of Education allocate too little time (3 to 4 months) for the writing of each textbook. As a result, many teachers are not able to use the new textbooks in their classes and still use former Soviet textbooks from 1990 to 1992.

Insufficient and often ideologically based teachers' training is apparently one of the crucial obstacles to the development of the education system in Turkmenistan. After 13 years since their implementation, Niyazow's reforms have resulted in the dismissal and/or resignation of many experienced teachers. The gap has been filled to some extent with newly qualified graduates, although the new educational system, based on the study of the *Ruhnama* and other ideological literatures, is unable to produce well qualified teachers (Chronicle 2012b).

School and the educational program are constantly interrupted and disrupted by numerous events and celebrations, as well as by the mandatory drills before them. This Soviet tradition, maintained and further developed by Niyazow, has also been preserved by the new president Berdimuhamedow, on an even greater scale (Kirimdzhанov 2012). Called *chare* in the Turkmen language, under it the pupils and teachers are obliged by the district, regional, or central administrations to come to a particular place in or around the city (often early in the morning) to welcome and greet the president or an official delegation and dance or sing the national dances or songs, or they are simply forced to take part in sporting events, conferences, official concerts, parades, or openings of new facilities (Alternative News 2015a; Kirimdzhанov 2012; Radio Azattyk 2017c). Although forced labor by pupils in the cotton fields in autumn was reduced, various "working Saturdays" (*subbotniki*) are common practice for teachers and children (Radio Azattyk 2017b). For these events, people are forced to purchase national or sports uniforms (often overpriced, as principals of schools or regional administration staff want to earn money selling those clothes). Obligatory participation by pupils and teachers in these *chares* reduces the quantity and quality of teaching.

The school program has been improved slightly by reintroducing physical education as well as social sciences into the curriculum. Unfortunately, the expected de-ideologization has failed. The study of the *Ruhnama* as well as books and poems by Niyazow had been fully eliminated by about 2014. On the other hand, the growing cult of the second president means he has replaced Niyazow's works with his own. Berdimuhamedow's numerous books (he publishes several every year) are compulsory reading, starting from the fourth grade of elementary school (Chronicle 2014a; Kurbanov 2014). The pupils and parents have to follow the rules, which are aimed at making them become "devoted to the state and the president."

Although the president proclaimed foreign languages one of the priorities, the real situation has further deteriorated in the last couple of years. The number of Russian classes did not resume or increase in the schools, and only a few remained available throughout the country.⁶ Several Russian language classes in regional

⁶The real number of Russian-language classes is hard to assess as the figures significantly differ depending on the source. The Turkmen official press writes about 700 classes, while opposition media write about tens of this type throughout the whole country (excluding Russian-language

centers such as Dashoguz, Mary, Turkmenabat (former Çärjew), or Türkmenbaşy (former Krasnovodsk) cannot satisfy the demands of parents, and, as a consequence, the admission of children also requires bribes. These bribes, according to different sources, can run up to several thousand US dollars for admission of a child, depending on recommendations, social networks (*blat*), and the pupil's level of language ability (Alternative News 2018b; Chronicle 2018d). Although these classes are intended in particular for national minorities, due to the persistently high demand from parents, local Turkmen pupils, even those without appropriate language abilities, also attend these classes. The only school which conforms fully to Russian educational standards remains the Russian Pushkin School. Although nominally free of charge, the admission of new pupils requires substantial and increasing bribes (currently several thousand dollars). In any case, it will be extremely problematic to resume the work 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 the Turkmenistan sides to invite specialists from Russia.

At the very start of the reforms, the English language seemed to increase its significance at the expense of Russian. The provision of English language lessons increased as it became compulsory from the 1st grade to the 11th (and the 12th since 2013). There are also American areas in Mary, Dashoguz, and Turkmenabat, with frequent events and limited Internet access, in line with the limitations introduced in Turkmenistan. 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 (Foreign Language Experience or Exploratory Programs) registered a decreasing number of applicants (Chronicle 2012a; Cleek 2012;). There even were cases of threats to parents who intended to send their pupils to compete for places in the FLEX and other exchange programs. The government allows the tests to take place in Ashgabat only, so applicants from the regions have fewer opportunities to sit the exams (Chronicle 2018a). In 2018, test centers were opened in the regions as well.

Despite the fact that the government adopted a strategy for teaching languages in schools in order to reach some international standards, it seems that proper language instruction is the reserve of several selected schools or even classes, which for various reasons are able to maintain a high quality of teaching (Gündogar News 2018b). However, demand for such schools far exceeds their capabilities. As a consequence, it exacerbates the corruption climate in order to get the child into a good school.

National minorities are mostly deprived of elementary and secondary education programs in their own languages. Kazakh and Uzbek schools were closed under Niyazow, and the new president has not even expressed any intention of reopening them. Therefore, only the foreign elementary and secondary schools were prestigious: Turkmen-Turkish schools, the Turkmen-Russian School in Ashgabat, the

schools). It means that Russian-language education may cover from about 1000 to 1200 pupils up to some 25,000–30,000.

International School of Ashgabat (with instruction in English and Russian as lingua franca, but expensive and inaccessible for most Turkmen), and a small Sunday school sponsored by the Embassy of Ukraine. But Turkmen-Turkish schools started to be closed in 2011 for allegedly bringing Islamic thought into the curriculum (Chronicle 2011b). Finally, the last Turkmen-Turkish school, considered a kind of flagship for secondary education in Turkmenistan, was closed to Turkmen pupils in 2014, although it continues to take Turkish and other foreign citizens (Chronicle 2014b). 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 parents used to send their children to these schools in order to get a proper education with the possibility to study abroad. Moreover, a substantial number of winners at international competitions came from those schools (Balci 2003; Clement 2007, 2011). As of 2019, there are only Turkmen schools available for Turkmen pupils, except for two international schools (Russian and American) demanding substantial bribes and high fees, respectively, for admission. The remaining alternatives consist of Russian or other specialized classes in Turkmen schools. However, due to lack of places in these schools and classes which are regarded as prestigious (i.e., mostly Russian ones or specialized schools or classes focused on mathematics or French), bribes became the norm (Chronicle 2011a).

Generally, corruption is considered as one of the main obstacles for the improvement of elementary education. Teachers have to pay for being exempted from seasonal work in cotton fields or even go to the field during cotton harvest as they cannot afford to hire *mardikors* (day workers) (Alternative News 2018c). Maintaining the classrooms or purchasing supplies (chalks, papers, marker pens, and so on) have to be paid from teachers' salaries or demanded from pupils' parents.⁷ In addition, every year the Ministry of Education orders the school to hang new portraits of the president, which are also paid for by teachers, and eventually parents (Radio Azattyk 2018a, 2019). Moreover, the practice of accepting small bribes consisting of homemade meals or small animals (i.e., goats) in exchange for better grades is still widespread, due to the inadequate salaries teachers receive (Alternative News 2015b). Teachers are also often required to pay the school's principal to keep their posts (and principals 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.

In sum, elementary and secondary education suffer from a lack of qualified faculty and staff, increasing corruption, and continuous ideologization of the system, as well as from inefficient spending. More and more payments fall on the shoulders of teachers, who extort money from parents to complement their low salaries. Overall corruption in the system of elementary and secondary schools also continues

⁷Turkmenistan is by no means an exception among developing countries. The practice of gaining additional income by selling textbooks and small stationery is not unusual in other Asian states with similar budgetary problems.

to destroy the mentality of young people. They learn that knowledge and work are appreciated much less than corruption, gift-giving, personal ties, and sycophancy. If the pre-2007 generation grew up on *Ruhnama* and corruption, the new generation is growing up today on Berdimuhamedow's books, persuasion about the uniqueness of Turkmen people and culture in the world, and extortion rackets. It creates problems for their further socialization and success in the global market but keeps people adequately prepared for a decaying, corrupted, and sycophantic society inside Turkmenistan.

5.3 Higher Education

Universities went through major reforms, which could be considered as positive moves for the future. The extension of university programs to a standard 5 years (6 years for the Medical University) and the abolition of obligatory labor for everybody and of military service for young men before entering university became one of the first and logical steps of the new president, although this rule is not always observed, especially in the case of study abroad. These reforms abolished the unsystematic and destructive approach of Niyazow/Türkmenbaşy. The new president has even started to reopen several universities and invited foreign universities and scholars to Turkmenistan. For example, the reopening of the Academy of Sciences and the resumption of postgraduate studies were regarded as highly positive steps toward the normalization of the education system. However, in 2019, the president announced the transformation of Academy of Sciences to a self-financing and cut of its support from state budget since 2021 (Turkmenistan - Zolotoi vek 2019).

In 2009, the Gubkin Institute of Oil and Gas was opened, and several Russian universities opened their entry exam centers throughout the country. This was in addition to the existing Turkmen-Turkish University. In the northern parts of the country, the Dashoguz Institute for Agriculture was reopened after being closed for several years. In 2012–2013, preliminary negotiations took place for the Turkmen-American University to open in Ashgabat. As a result, the International University of Humanities and Development, with full English language instruction, was opened in 2014. The establishment is completely fee-paying, operating as a private school based on the Bologna program (4 years for undergraduate programs and 1 for Master's programs) and the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) (Clement and Kataeva 2018). As such, the university suffers less from bribery or financial problems. According to some official information, as well as some unofficial reviews, the level of education in this institution could be considered high by local standards. However, like others, this university suffers from a lack of specialists and of teachers fluent in English, the main language of instruction (Gaynor 2017,⁸ 2018).

⁸This text provides a unique account of a Western scholar from inside any Turkmen university. See also official reports; e.g., Gaynor (2018).

Nevertheless, the new university is on the way to becoming the flagship of university education in the country, despite all the problems and obstacles stemming from the country's university system as well as its political culture and social environment.

However, the results of the abovementioned positive measures have not always been good. The Institute of Oil and Gas was closed in 2012 together with the Technical University. The latter was transformed into the Turkmen State Institute of Oil and Gas as well as the Institute of Architecture and Building (Gündogar News 2013). Although many of its teachers and scholars moved to the new institutions, the Technical University's former prestige was seriously diminished. Academics are even forbidden to show the name of the institute in their biographies (Bayramova 2017).⁹ The Turkmen-Turkish University was permanently closed in 2016 because of alleged links between the university leadership and the *Fethullah Gülen* movement,¹⁰ and a subsequent appeal by Turkey to close all establishments founded and financed under his auspices. Officially, the university was transformed into the Oguz Khan University of Engineering Technologies with the program adopted under the auspices of the Ministry of Education and Academy of Sciences (Berdimuhamedow 2016). The university established close cooperation with Japan, with English and (partly) Japanese as languages of instruction (Gündogar News 2017). In this way, Turkmenistan eliminated one of the most prestigious universities in Ashgabat and adapted it to "Turkmen standards."

Although the university programs were extended in accordance with international standards, it became clear that the (often forced) dismissal of former researchers and/or professors from the universities in the past decade created a shortage of qualified academics that could barely be remedied. The new cadres turned out to be very poorly educated, with a strong ideological imprint from the previous and current periods. In the early 2010s, the potential opening of new universities attracting foreign researchers and lecturers to Turkmen universities (including private ones) could have improved the situation. However, at the end of the decade, we can clearly see that the few new universities, save for minor exceptions, are not able to attract new, quality professors and researchers from inside the country, let alone foreign scholars and teachers.

The number of students, according to official sources, has started to grow steadily, as shown in Fig. 5.1. At the same time, the number of university students is still extremely low. As of 2019, about 83,000 students graduated from secondary schools. Even if the real number might be lower than officially announced, the number of university students per head of population leaves Turkmenistan at the bottom end of world ranking.

⁹Two dwarfish candidates in the 2017 presidential elections, Serdar Jelilow and Ramazan Durdyyyev (both Turkmen Technical University alumni), mentioned the new name of their school (Architecture and Building Institute), although they graduated long before this institute was established.

¹⁰A transnational Islamic social movement advocates universal access to education, civil society, and peace, inspired by the religious teachings of Fethullah Gülen, a Turkish preacher who has lived in the United States since 1999.

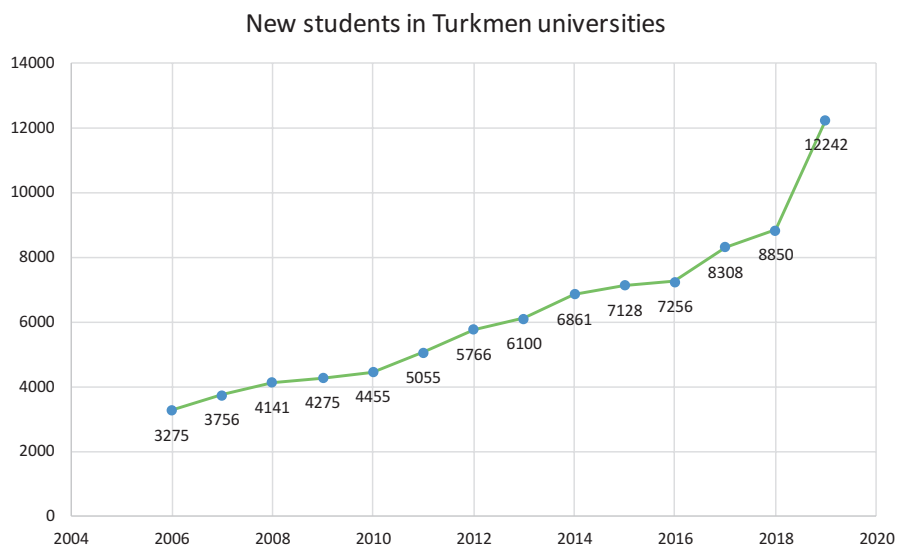


Fig. 5.1 Newly enrolled students in Turkmen universities (Neitral’nyj Turkmenistan 2011–2019)

Turkmenistan still maintains state-funded scholarships for those studying at universities. Although the amount increases every year typically by 10%, the cost of living in Turkmenistan is increasing more rapidly (Berdimuhamedow 2018a, b). In 2017, however, many students were forced to sign a voluntary refusal of state scholarship, apparently due to the economic crisis (Radio Azatlyk 2017e). Finally, the president announced fully paid universities in a near future with the motive to include Turkmen universities among world top ones (Neitral’nyi Turkmenistan 2020). For students, life at university has worsened after several incidents involving students and critical remarks about the president. The university regime has tightened as rectors fear dismissal. The students are officially not allowed to commute by car or taxi to or from college (Chronicle 2013b). They have become unwelcome in discos, bars, and restaurants after several incidents involving students, mostly from privileged families (Centrasia 2012).¹¹ The university accommodations (often the only option for students outside Ashgabat) work on a very strict schedule with curfew hours and limited access to shopping facilities or even learning activities (Ashirmuradov 2012b).

In order to raise the ideological profile of the regime in the country, as well as demonstrate their loyalty to the president and satisfy the leadership of the universities and institutes (which are usually managed by higher-ranking institutions), students are forced to attend sporting events, holiday celebrations, conferences, and other events. This forcible “mass recreation” is being further expanded as President Berdimuhamedow tours the country. Dances and mass meetings (*chare*) must

¹¹In 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 activities and hooliganism of their children in Ashgabat.

accompany any event in Turkmenistan. This bad policy was at least temporarily relaxed after the death of several students in November 2012 during the preparations for Constitution Days (Chronicle 2013a). Unfortunately, any hopes of putting an end to these abuses were soon dashed, as students have once again been forced to attend sporting and other events, shouting praise for the *Arkadag* (Protector) (Regnum 2013).¹² Once the president started to prefer cycling to horse racing, the students were usually the first groups taking part in the compulsory mass cycle races organized in Ashgabat. New bicycles were purchased for the occasion by the respective administrations and sold to the students (as well as state employees and other groups of citizens) (Chronicle 2015b). Students are forced to purchase new school and sports uniforms as well as school equipment, usually directly from the universities, at monopolistic prices (Chronicle 2015c). To be fair, these expenses usually come out of grants, still given to the students. The Asian Indoor and Martial Arts Games in 2017 became one of the most spectacular cases of students and pupils being misused. The education process was interrupted for the games; thousands of students were forced (together with other citizens) to make up crowds of spectators. Although these “spectators” went through a special selection process, those selected had to purchase the appropriate uniforms and take part in endless rehearsals.

Overall and systematic corruption is one of the principal problems in higher education. Only a minority of students enter the university based on their knowledge, mostly winners of various secondary school competitions within Turkmenistan or orphans (a legacy of the Soviet era). Others pass the exams based on *blat* (family connections, making use of relatives’ positions, particularly those of high-ranking officials), while the majority have to pay a certain amount to pass (Chronicle 2018c). Although President Berdimuhamedow ordered camera surveillance during the entrance exams in 2012 and threatened to punish bribery in the higher education system, this did nothing to eradicate corruption. Although the level of the “fees” to enter a particular university decreased in 2018 due to an economic crisis, the amounts are still in tens of thousands of US dollars (Chronicle 2018c).¹³ Such amounts are beyond the means of ordinary families, which means these families sell their property in order to enroll their children at the university. Moreover, the costs of a university education are at least comparable to, if not higher than, those of education in other countries (usually considered higher quality), which is one of the main reasons why students and their parents prefer foreign universities to Turkmen ones.

¹²Interview by the author in Ashgabat, April 2013, and attendance to one such event in Ashgabat.

¹³According to the information for 2018, the most expensive remain the Medical University and the Faculty of Law of Turkmen State University, where the entrance “fees” are about \$30,000 and \$40,000 respectively. Other universities are available for about \$20,000–\$25,000.

5.4 Turkmen Students Abroad

Education abroad is becoming a more attractive, less expensive, and higher-quality option for Turkmen. The abovementioned reasons are behind the increasing outflow of Turkmen students to Russia, Turkey, Ukraine, or Belarus, the main destinations (see Table 5.1).

A certain number of students (officially 1281) can study with the support of Turkmenistan state scholarships, predominantly in Russia, Turkey, Ukraine, Malaysia, and other countries, and this number is increasing rapidly. Other students have been able to study making their own private arrangements. In 2011, President Berdimuhamedow restored the recognition of foreign diplomas which had ceased to be recognized in 2004. The procedures were relaxed even further in 2017, although in reality students have to wait a long time for the validation of their diplomas, with no certainty that it will be granted. The approval of diplomas often involves bribery (Chronicle 2017).

Turkmen students often encounter many problems studying abroad—political, economic, and social. The Turkmen state tries to watch over its students, control them, and invite them for “prophylactic interviews” at its embassies in the relevant countries. In recent years, the crisis in Ukraine and attempted coup in Turkey, together with the outbreak of civil war in Syria, have greatly affected the movements of Turkmen students. Before the 2014 crisis in Ukraine, that country was the most popular destination for Turkmen, with reasonable quality higher education at moderate fees. Several thousand students also studied in the de facto Donetsk and Luhansk republics (Donetsk in particular), attending lectures in Russian. However, since fighting began in the region, and with political instability and growing corruption in Ukraine generally, some students were recalled by the embassy (often with threats from Turkmen diplomats and police within Turkmenistan). Others left the country of their own accord (Radio Azattyk 2014, 2018b). The decline in the number of Turkmen students in Ukraine was followed by a movement of students, particularly to Russia (see Table 5.1).

Education in Turkey is often the cheapest option for Turkmen students. However, the unsuccessful coup attempt in Turkey in 2016, and the country’s increasing role as a transit route to the so-called Islamic State, has focused special attention on Turkmen (especially male) students leaving for Turkey. These students are the

Table 5.1 University students from Turkmenistan in most popular destinations

	2019/2020	2017/2018	2015/2016	2010/2011
Ukraine	5344 (6.6%)	4447 (6.7%) ^a	9806 (15.3%)	10,452 (21.3%)
Belarus	9788 (53.1%)	7108 (48.6%)	8191 (56.1%)	3408 (36.4%)
Turkey	17571 (11.4%)	12,247 (9.7%)	9903 (11.2%)	2929 (13.3%)
Russia	35300 (13.2%)	20,368 (11.3%)	13,443 (7.0%)	3581 (2.9%)
Turkmenistan ^b	N/A	41,200	38,000	23,700

^aIncluding share of Turkmen students within foreign students in the respective countries

^bTurkmenistan figures for comparison

subject of “prophylactic interviews” and training from Turkmen *imams* and the Ministry of Education staff (Alternative News 2016b). Students are also screened for alleged contacts with the *Gülen* movement, the most suspected being the alumni of former Turkmen schools. Suspicions about the spread of the Islamic faith also caused several students to be taken off planes flying from Ashgabat to Istanbul, the most popular route (Chronicle 2018b; Mamedov 2018).

Social problems are often connected with culture shock, something new students go through after moving to a foreign country. In the new environment, people do not know much about Turkmenistan and do not praise and respect Turkmen culture as students are taught to in Turkmenistan. On the contrary, the image of the Turkmen student is rather negative in some countries or at certain universities, due to the crimes and disorderly acts committed by some citizens of Turkmenistan. Coming to a country that is much more relaxed compared to their homeland, students may react in several ways. The strongest individuals may overcome culture shock and, despite initial difficulties, quickly adapt to the new environment and opportunities. They often become excellent students. However, many others, especially those who cannot aspire to be top students, react rather negatively in a neighborhood which seems to be hostile toward them. They isolate themselves in “Turkmen circles,” attend “Turkmen parties,” and maintain relations mostly with one another or local Turkmen communities. In these circles, internal discord also occurs in the form of regional animosity (different regional affiliations back in Turkmenistan) or simply young men fighting over girls (Sokolova and Nikitina 2014).¹⁴ In extreme cases, such students can commit crimes, including murders or drug trafficking (Ashirmuradov 2013). In Belarus, these problems have even affected bilateral relations between the two countries (Makushina and Volkov 2013). Sociocultural adaptation, in this regard, is becoming one of the most crucial aspects of student life abroad for Turkmen students.

Moreover, Turkmen societies at different universities as well as diplomatic missions in Turkey, Belarus, Ukraine, or Russia make great efforts to watch over Turkmen students, their contacts and opinions. Turkmen students, especially the younger ones, are often enticed by the Ministry for National Security staff to tell them about Turkmen student communities, or even make written denunciations of other students (Gündogar News 2018a). This makes for a mistrustful atmosphere among Turkmen students, which can lead to confrontations among them, sometimes with tragic results.

Additionally, those studying abroad encounter numerous obstacles from the Turkmen state which makes their lives more and more complicated. Literally, all students are affected by strict regulations on transferring money out of Turkmenistan dating from January 2016. Especially after the Asian games in 2017, Turkmenistan

¹⁴The results in this section are based on anonymous Facebook research among Turkmen students in Belarus, Ukraine, and, partly, Russia conducted by the author in 2013–2015, as well as on Turkmen students’ internal Facebook and chat discussions. The students responded anonymously. However, the small sample of respondents (34 people) does not allow the author to use quantitative methods to reach a conclusion. See also a similar published sociological survey by Sokolova and Nikitina (2014).

was faced with foreign currency shortages and a growing black market for exchanging dollars or other currencies. Turkmen citizens have limited opportunities to send money abroad, with students suffering the most (Alternative News 2016a; Radio Azattyk 2017a). Since December 2017, students have been unable to withdraw, with their Turkmen bank cards, more than a few dozen dollars from ATMs. Their parents can send money abroad, for tuition fees and living costs, only with much trouble, and after obtaining numerous certificates (Radio Azattyk 2018d).

Some Turkmen students might study at “politically incorrect schools,” such as the American University of Central Asia (Kyrgyzstan) and, generally, other Kyrgyz or even Tajik universities. Since 2009, there have been many cases of students coming back for the summer holidays who were not allowed out of the country for the next semester, requiring special exit visas in 2011 (News Briefing Central Asia 2012). 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 rightly annoyed, and foreign embassies took a negative view of such steps. However, the situation remained unresolved, and many students remained “banned” from leaving the country. Only in 2018 did the state media admit the problem and promised to allow travel to Kyrgyzstan once more for Turkmen citizens, including those who previously were not allowed out of the country (Infoabad.com 2018). However, at the time of writing this text, the results of the negotiations had not been announced yet.

In 2018, several hundred students were not allowed to leave Turkmenistan to study in Tajikistan, unofficially for security reasons (Radio Azattyk 2018e). As of 2016, Turkmen students have been obligated to present, at the airport, confirmation of their place of residence from the educational committee when leaving the country for their next semester abroad. This means obtaining several papers, certificates, and documents, each of which can take time to procure (Alternative News 2016c). In any case, leaving the country is generally stressful for all citizens, including students. Any of them can be refused exit by the border police without any explanation.

Furthermore, state-sponsored students studying in Russia, Belarus, Turkey, or Malaysia are also facing problems. Living abroad and students paying for their own education are barely able to withdraw or transfer their funds. The Turkmenistan state also ceased the support of air tickets for students on state-sponsored fellowships, even if they are obliged to come back for summer holidays; the tickets became expensive and hardly available due to high season demand (Chronicle 2015a).¹⁵ The practice by Turkmen police of interrogating parents and relatives of students studying abroad was introduced in 2018, requiring the students to come back home after each exam session (Radio Azattyk 2018c). Together with the plans to limit the validity of a foreign-travel passport to 1 year, this measure, if strictly applied, might further limit student stays abroad and extend control over Turkmen students in other countries.

¹⁵According to an intergovernmental agreement, students under the Turkmenistan state program are obligated to return to Turkmenistan at least once a year; otherwise they could be deprived of their scholarship.

Foreign universities often expose the real level of Turkmenistan's secondary school education. Successful candidates usually either have to attend mostly preparatory classes at the universities or fulfill the exam requirements only after extensive self-preparation with the help of tutors (Turkmen Advisory Council 2012, pp. 15–16). Yet, in many cases, despite the initially poor quality of students from Turkmenistan, their motivation enables them to achieve the best results, and they become excellent students with the potential to receive prestigious foreign grants, such as Fulbright or Rumsfeld fellowships. However, these students are only a small part of all Turkmenistan's alumni. Furthermore, how useful they are to Turkmenistan is doubtful as the majority of them do not appear to return there, although a recent survey showed a more optimistic picture to some extent.¹⁶ A substantial number of students from Turkmenistan, especially those in Russia, Ukraine, or Belarus, also struggle with the education system abroad, study requirements, and bad behavior (Alternative News 2018a).

As a result of the conditions of the higher education system in Turkmenistan, the number of university students from Turkmenistan studying abroad has for a long time exceeded the number of students in Turkmenistan itself. Despite frequent and severe restrictions by the Turkmen authorities (money transfers, uncertain border crossings, purchasing flight tickets), the flow of those interested in studying abroad increases every year. As the majority of students with foreign university diplomas prefer to stay in the country in which they studied, or outside Turkmenistan in general, and given the generally low quality of education in Turkmen universities, the consequences are more and more visible within Turkmenistan. The state institutions and enterprises suffer from an overall lack of all kinds of qualified staff. The vacancies are filled through the system of social networks, or they are simply bought.

5.5 Conclusions

The Turkmenistan education system has gone through considerable changes and shifts in the last few years, with mixed results. The extension of elementary as well as university education so as to meet international standards and increasing the number of Turkmen students at universities both in Turkmenistan and abroad have meant that the country has moved away from the first president's legacy. The number of students in Turkmen universities is now comparable with the figure in the late Soviet period, when more than 40,000 students studied at Turkmenistan SSR universities (Great Soviet Encyclopedia 1990, p. 172). Moreover, the tendency is toward a slow but gradual increase. The principal eccentricities of the former regime—non-acceptance of foreign diplomas or mandatory working before applying to a university—have been partially eliminated. The revival of the Academy of

¹⁶The small quantity of respondents (about 100 in total) makes the results of an otherwise excellent survey problematic as different respondents could alter the results. However, no other survey was conducted on this issue. (Turkmen Advisory Council 2012, p. 17).

Sciences and the establishment of many new institutes helped re-establish full university education in the country. In this regard, the “normalization” period of legal and institutional framework building has been completed in recent years.

However, the education system in Turkmenistan still encounters massive problems and reflects the general social environment and political culture in the country. The heritage of Niyazow/Türkmenbaşy’s “reforms” was replaced by the new problematic measures of Berdimuhamedow’s government. Some problems not only remain but have even been exacerbated. The Niyazow legacy still weighs heavily, and its negative tendencies could again destroy the small successes unless the Ministry of Education and the president implement real, not merely illusory, reforms.

1. *Corruption and kinship (blat)*. The prevalence of corruption in education reflects the general and systematic corruption in the country. Bribes or kinship (family, friendships) are essential to get a proper education from elementary school through university. The level of bribes rises every year despite a substantial decrease in “fees” necessary to enroll in a university in 2018 (mostly caused by the economic crisis). The generally high level of corruption extends further into the education processes, thus increasing the cost of education. Overall sycophancy and devoutness encouraged another personality cult, one that often prefers less skillful but loyal staff in responsible positions to individual, independent-minded people.
2. *Increasing ideologization* and forced involvement of students and pupils in the regime’s mass events. The system of devotion to the first president Niyazow was mostly abolished, including the strong presence of his *Ruhnama Holy Book* and other works in the education process. However, this system of personality cult was to some extent replaced by another display of devotion, this time to the second president Berdimuhamedow. The education system from elementary school to university includes the study of the growing number of the president’s books and regular (at least once a year) replacement of presidential portraits (paid for by teachers and pupils) in schools and classes. The practice of *chare*, inherited in some measure from the Soviet system and developed under the first president, became even more frequent due to the president’s extensive travels around the country, increasing the number of international visits, events, and conferences.
3. *Lack of human capital*. Teachers with a poor education based on ideological principles are not able to fill the vacancies left after the removal of previous staff. The situation is even worse with an increasing demand for Russian classes. Official proclamations make exaggerated claims about the number of Russian classes all around the country, but there is a lack of appropriately trained Russian-speaking teachers, many of whom are aging or retired (Povelitsyna 2014). The constant fear among the teaching staff, or the principals, of being dismissed for failure to carry out instructions from “above” and their having little prospect of improving their own level of education work against the improvement of elementary education. Moreover, the usual Soviet system of teacher mentoring (new teachers receiving assistance from more experienced colleagues) has been abandoned or works only selectively.

4. *Hardware rather than software.* Although President Berdimuhamedow likes to talk about the successes in education, he prefers monumental and superficial reforms to any attempt to improve the educational system. Official media usually praise new school and university buildings, facilities, and technical equipment in the schools, but the lack of staff, corruption and, in many cases, inappropriate use of technical facilities, as well as a lack of, or limited, Internet access, seem to be more serious problems of Turkmen education. However, the local and regional representatives are always ready to satisfy the president, giving him the opportunity to open a new, or at least renovated, school.
5. *Increasing fear* caused by the regime, and the president himself, of a popular uprising or revolt, as well as of outside influences, leads to increasing control over the population. Students and, generally, Turkmens travelling abroad are the subject of distrust and suspicion. Together with economic crisis, officials in Turkmenistan try to limit the growing trend for younger and more active people to settle abroad. Growing pressure by the state and economic regulations aim, among other things, to limit the number of students outside Turkmenistan (Chronicle 2019). At some point in the future, fear of the economic crisis continuing or worsening might be a reason to remove most opportunities to study abroad, restricting them to a limited number of selected children of high-ranking officials.

Reforms over the last 10 years have brought substantial changes to the education system in Turkmenistan, with moderate and often selective progress in building the necessary school infrastructure. However, considering the impact of the abovementioned problems on children, we have to conclude, unfortunately, that a new generation of Turkmens is being, and will be, educated in, (a) an ideological system based on the exclusivity of Turkmenness (*türkmençilik*) and (b) an environment in which corruption, sycophancy, nepotism, and cronyism are facts of life. With more and more people aware of deteriorating morality and political culture, and as a consequence leaving Turkmenistan, the population in general will be more reluctant to approve any positive shifts.

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