

November 15, 2020

Russian language policy in Turkmenistan and the interests of Russian universities

Anastasia Pogorelskaya

Nowadays Turkmenistan is considered one of the most closed states not only at the post-Soviet area but also in the world in general. The information exchange with the rest of the world is limited both due to restricted Internet access (only 21,25% of the population used it in 2019) (International Telecommunication Union, 2019), and to the state policy aimed at preserving the current regime.

However, the rumors on final curtailment of education in Russian language in Turkmenistan gripped the attention of Russian authorities and mass media in the beginning of September 2020. After two weeks it was reported that the Turkmen Ministry of education provided the long-awaited announcement on the issue. It stated that the number of classes providing school education in Russian stayed the same around the country because after the Russian-language department was closed in one of Ashgabat schools the new special school providing education in Russian was opened in one of the new Ashgabat quarters (Russian Newspaper, 17 September 2020). Nevertheless, taking into account the unfortunate experience of Turkmen-Turkish schools that were closed in Turkmenistan about 10 years ago (officially it was done at the request of Turkish official authorities), the reduction of opportunities for receiving education in other languages except for the official one, namely Turkmen language, seems to be the state strategy originating in the last century.

Anastasia Pogorelskaya, PhD, Associate Professor, World Politics Department, National Research Tomsk State University.

This research was supported by 'The Tomsk State University competitiveness improvement programme' under grant № 8.1.33.2020.

The views expressed by the author herein do not necessarily reflect those of the TSU Centre for Eurasian Studies.

Language and Education policy in Soviet period

Before the Soviet rule was established at the territories nowadays considered to be Turkmenistan, education was provided there in religious schools called maktab and madrasahs. In the end of the XIXth century secular schools for the children of Russian immigrants as well as some local children started being established. However, literacy rate among the locals was very low (0,7% of the population) (Large Soviet Encyclopedia). Most Turkmen girls received education at home. Soviet primary and then secondary education system had been finally developed by the 1930s. Since the new schools lacked teachers the latter were at first invited from other Soviet republics. Afterwards the local teachers' training colleges were established that were finally united in Turkmen teachers' training institute named after Vladimir I. Lenin in 1959.

The system of free state elementary, primary and secondary education created in the country allowed to achieve mass literacy among the Turkmen population. The level of education started growing, too. In 1985/1986 there were 37 thousand students at 35 colleges. Nine universities were established in Turkmen Soviet republic to provide free higher education to those students who managed to pass successfully the entrance exams. In 1985/1986 there were almost 39 thousand students there (Soviet Encyclopaedia, 1988. P. 1368).

Soviet period of Turkmen history also witnessed several language reforms. Thus, Turkmen alphabet that used to be based on the Arabic written language was converted to the Latin script in 1927–1928. Due to growing centralization and Russification it was converted to Cyrillic script in 1940 (Clement, 2007). However, the knowledge of Russian that used to be the language of inter-ethnic communication in the USSR was also the prerequisite for successful career in all the Soviet republics.

The independence era

Before the dissolution of the USSR the Turkmen language was granted the status of a state language in 1990. After Turkmenistan got independence the new head of the state, namely President Saparmurat Niyazov who took the title of the Head of the Turkmen initiated significant reforms, including language and education reforms. At first the change of Cyrillic script back into Latin one had the symbolic meaning. Turkmenistan was the first state in the post-Soviet area that took the dissociation from the Soviet past. Although the language reform made some social and age groups feel almost illiterate, it seemed that the aim of strengthening Turkmen identity was then achieved (CAA Network, 02 June 2017). In addition, the switch back to Latin script could facilitate further increase of communication with foreign partners in future. However, the latter turned out to contradict the isolationist foreign policy conducted by the new government of independent Turkmenistan.

The only theater providing performances in Russian language, namely the Russian drama theater named after Alexander Pushkin, was closed in Ashgabat – the capital of Turkmenistan in the 1990s. Russian editorial staff joined the Turkmen-language editorial offices and stopped issuing most papers in Russian. Since 2002 the import of Russian press was prohibited. Broadcasting in Russian was also gradually curtailed (Arefiev, 2012. P. 148).

Although the first years of Turkmenistan independence witnessed the massive outflow of the Russians from the country (by 2010 their number decreased by 3 times from 9,5% in 1989 to 2,7% in 2010), Russian continued to be used for interethnic communication. Nevertheless, the percentage of people able to use Russian easily dropped up to 12% within 20 years of Turkmenistan independence (Arefiev, 2012. P. 146).

Educational policy of independent Turkmenistan

The educational reforms initiated by Saparmurat Niyazov resulted into the reduction of the period of schooling from 10 to 9 years in secondary school, from 3 to 1 year for vocational schools. Higher education was changed to include 3 years of theoretical and 2 years of practical training outside the university. That made it difficult to acknowledge Turkmen secondary school certificates and diplomas abroad (Litvinova, 2014. P. 86), thus hindering the outflow of school-leavers from Turkmenistan aggravated by sharp turns in Turkmenistan policy on diplomas acknowledgement. In addition, the curricula were revised to bring the President's doctrine named Ruhnama in their center. The exam on Ruhnama, that was the specific interpretation of Turkmen history and spiritual origins, was announced the obligatory to enter any Turkmen university. In addition, any Turkmen citizen wishing to get higher education in a Turkmen university had to receive at least two-year working experience. The number of students in Turkmen universities in the 1990s – beginning of 2000s reduced significantly (by 75%, according to Chatham House) (Bohr, 2016. P. 53). That was also the result of evening and extramural higher education prohibition. Moreover, the postgraduate education was abolished due to the Academy of Science closure.

The number of schools providing education in Russian also dropped from 150 (8,3% of all schools in 1989) up to 49% (2,5% of all schools in 2000) and then to 20 schools (1,2% in 2009) (Arefiev, 2012. P. 149). It mostly meant that there was one class per a form providing education in Russian in addition to one school providing education only in Russian.

Since the new President Gurbanguly Berdymuhamedov came to power in Turkmenistan many decisions in education taken before were abolished. The period of schooling was prolonged up to 12 years, the period of university education was also prolonged up to previous standards. Some subjects that had been displaced by Ruhnama in school curriculum were brought back (Bohr,

2016. P. 54). The obligatory requirement for receiving work experience before entering the university was cancelled. Postgraduate education was resumed in some universities.

The number of places available at universities and vocational training schools started growing formally allowing more people to receive education at the state expense. For instance, the number of places at the universities allowing getting education at state expense in 2019 increased by more than 3 thousand (State Information Agency of Turkmenistan, 08 July 2019). In 2020 it increased by more than 2 thousand places (Business Turkmenistan Portal, 07 July 2020). The number of places providing education at state expense in vocational training schools in 2019 and 2020 made up more than 9 thousand each year.

However, current educational policy of Turkmenistan is difficult to evaluate unambiguously. The official rhetoric promises the quickest implementation of the 'innovative educational model' (State Information Agency of Turkmenistan, 23 April 2020) according to the international standards together with 'the inclusion of Turkmen universities in international university rankings by 2024' (Chronicles of Turkmenistan, 18 April 2020). Nevertheless, the strive for raising the quality of education and training highly qualified specialists gets along with the distrust towards the quality of education provided abroad.

Thus, the foreign diplomas acknowledgement rules changed in Turkmenistan several times within the independence period. In 2004 all the foreign diplomas that Turkmen citizen had been awarded since 1993 were nullified by Turkmen authorities. Later Turkmen graduates of foreign universities were granted the opportunity to get their diplomas acknowledged after passing two exams in Social Sciences and the Speciality in Turkmen language (Huisman et al, 2018. P. 398). In 2014 the foreign diplomas legalization procedures were temporary stopped (Bohr, 2016. P. 53). In spring 2019 the new rules of foreign diplomas acknowledgement were introduced. According to them, the Turkmen Ministry of Education will acknowledge only those foreign diplomas that were received after taking full-time education. In addition, the Ministry introduced the state classifier including the specialities in Economics, Law and Foreign languages, diplomas in which should meet additional requirements. The latter consider the university place in international rankings, namely, the foreign university whose diplomas in these specialities are acknowledged should be included in top universities of the Times Higher Education World University Ranking (Turkmenistan information portal, 02 May 2019). Nevertheless, all the graduates that received the diplomas in those specialities and universities still have to pass two exams in Turkmen. For diplomas in other specialities the procedures stayed the same, including passing two exams in Turkmen language and providing some documents, including the application for acknowledgement, the translation of the diploma, the notarized copy of the diploma and the transcript. However, in this case there are no requirements the university that awarded the diploma should meet.

The changes will affect those Turkmen students who have entered foreign universities since March 2019. The changes in foreign diplomas acknowledgement rules may also affect the degree of popularity some countries and universities have among Turkmen school-leavers. Thus, only one Belorussian university, namely, the Belorussian State University, is included into the THE World University Ranking 2021. Although the number of Turkmen students in Belorussian universities had been growing and made 9 788 students, or 53% of all international students in Belarus in 2019 (National Statistics Committee of the Republic of Belarus, 2019. P. 43), the absence of most Belorussian universities in international university rankings may decrease the export of Belorussian educational services in the nearest future.

Russian as one of foreign languages

According to the Agreement of friendship and cooperation between the Russian Federation and Turkmenistan signed on 23 April 2002, the signatories should promote learning of Russian language in Turkmenistan as well as Turkmen – in Russia (article 14 of the Agreement). To implement the Agreement the only Turkmen-Russian secondary school named after Alexander Pushkin was founded in 2002 in Ashgabat, the capital of Turkmenistan. Today there are about 1200 pupils studying there. The curriculum there meets Russian educational standards; however, includes both Russian and Turkmen languages and history (Joint Pushkin Turkmen-Russian secondary comprehensive school, 2018). In addition, the events promoting Russian culture and language are organized in the school.

Turkmen pupils still have the opportunity to study Russian in some other schools where there are a limited number of Russian-language classes. Nevertheless, the situation with Russian language in mass media seems to improve after President Gurbanguly Berdymuhamedov came to power, for instance, some magazines in Russian started being published. Thus, the general strategy aimed at improving Turkmenistan and its president's positive image both for international and domestic audiences made Turkmen authorities revise the policy towards Russian language that is still popular at the post-Soviet area.

However, Russian is now competing with Turkish and English languages in Turkmenistan. Turkish became popular in the country due to the existence of Turkmen-Turkish schools that had good reputation for high-quality education. In 2011 about 20 Turkmen-Turkish schools were transformed into ordinary secondary schools formally due to the request of Turkish authorities that changed their attitude towards the movement founded by Fethullah Gülen, that supported the schools (Bohr, 2016. P. 54).

American center working under the US Embassy in Ashgabat contributed a lot to the promotion of English as well as the American corners (centers) working in large Turkmen cities. However, English is still more the sign of erudition rather than common practice (CABAR).

The rumors concerning the cancellation of Russian-language classes in Turkmen schools that appeared just before the new school year started, made many parents feel anxious because they regarded secondary education in Russian a long-term strategy that may one day provide their children with the opportunity to enter some foreign (Russian or Belorussian) university, to receive better education there and probably to move to a different country.

Recommendations for Russian universities

Since Turkmen authorities prefer to balance among different international partners, the position of Russian language in Turkmenistan may be affected by such foreign policy. Taking into account the strive of Turkmen authorities to prevent the school-leavers outflow abroad it is less plausible to expect the extension of opportunities for learning Russian in the country.

Despite the popularity of some Russian universities among Turkmen school-leavers (for instance, Kazan Federal University, Astrakhan State University, etc.), the activities of Russian universities and schools in Turkmenistan on both Russian language teaching and school-leavers' preparing for entrance exams mainly depend on the highest-level negotiations. Not many Russian regions, except for the cities of federal status, namely Moscow and Saint-Petersburg, as well as Tatarstan managed to build up rather strong relations with the Turkmen side without additional support from the federal level.

Taking into account the peculiarities of Turkmenistan foreign policy, it seems necessary to act very cautiously in order not to ruin the balance Turkmen leadership is trying to maintain among its international partners. In addition, the cooperation on promoting Russian language in Turkmenistan seems more plausible if both sides regard it as the opportunity to increase the educational level of Turkmen people but not the trigger of the brain drain. Moreover, according to the Agreement of friendship and cooperation signed in 2002 the cooperation in promoting the official languages of the partner means that any activities for promoting Russian language and culture in Turkmenistan should be accompanied by the activities of promoting Turkmen language and culture in Russia.

References:

- 24 thousand of Turkmen guys and girls will become students // Business Turkmenistan, 07 July 2020. URL: <https://business.com.tm/ru/post/5730/24-tysyachi-turkmenskih-yunoshei-i-devushek-stanut-studentami>
- 25 Years of Transformations of Higher Education Systems in Post-Soviet Countries: Reform and Continuity / Huisman J., Smolentseva A., Froumin I. (eds.) Palgrave Macmillan, 2018.
- Clement V. Alphabet Changes in Turkmenistan, 1904–2004 in *Everyday Life in Central Asia: Past and Present* / Sahadeo J & Zanca R. (eds). Indiana University Press, 2007. Pp.266-280.
- Percentage of the population using the Internet // International Telecommunication Union, 2019. URL: <https://www.itu.int/net4/ITU-D/icteye/#/topics/2001>
- Arefiev A.L. Russian language at the turn of XX and XXI centuries. Moscow: the Center for social forecasting and marketing, 2012. 482 p. URL: https://civisbook.ru/files/File/russkij_yazyk.pdf
- Bohr A. Turkmenistan: power, politics and petro-authoritarianism // Chatham House – The Royal Institute of International Affairs, 2016. 120 p. URL: <https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/publications/research/2016-03-08-turkmenistan-bohr-russian.pdf>
- About the school // Joint Pushkin Turkmen-Russian secondary comprehensive school, 2018. URL: <http://www.trsosh.edu.tm>
- The way written language changed in Turkmenistan in 1904–2004 // CAA Network, 02 June 2017. URL: <https://caa-network.org/archives/9206>
- The comments of the Ministry of Education of Turkmenistan about the Rules of foreign universities diplomas acknowledgement // Information Portal of Turkmenistan, 02 May 2019. URL: <https://turkmenportal.com/blog/18810/kommentarii-ministerstva-obrazovaniya-turkmenistana-o-poryadke-legalizacii-diplomov-zarubezhnyh-vuzov>
- Litvinova E.V. The Development of the Education System in the Republic of Turkmenistan // The Bulletin of Tourism and Services Universities Association, 2014, № 4, P.85–93.
- The application process started in universities and colleges // State Information Agency of Turkmenistan, 08 July 2019. URL: <http://tdh.gov.tm/news/articles.aspx&article18806&cat15>
- Novosyolova E.V. One more Russian-language school has been opened in Turkmenistan // Russian Newspaper, 17 September 2020. URL: <https://rg.ru/2020/09/17/v-turkmenii-otkryli-eshche-odnu-russkoiazychnuiu-shkolu.html>
- Education in the Republic of Belarus (2019/2020 school year) // National Statistical Committee of the Republic of Belarus, 2019. URL: https://belstat.gov.by/ofitsialnaya-statistika/socialnaya-sfera/obrazovanie/publikatsii_8/index_16031/
- Palvanova B.P. Popular schooling and cultural organizations // Large Soviet Encyclopaedia. URL: <https://www.booksite.ru/fulltext/1/001/008/112/966.htm>
- The realization of the EU project 'Promoting educational development of Turkmenistan' // State Information Agency of Turkmenistan, 23 April 2020. URL: <http://www.turkmenistan.gov.tm/?id=20779>

Soviet Encyclopaedia. Fourth edition. Moscow: Soviet Encyclopaedia Publishing, 1988.

The list of universities whose diplomas will be acknowledged in Turkmenistan // Chronicles of Turkmenistan, 26 April 2019. URL: <https://www.hronikatm.com/2019/04/uni-list/>

Turkmenistan will transfer the universities to self-financing to include them in the international university rankings // Chronicles of Turkmenistan, 18 April 2020. URL: <https://www.hronikatm.com/2020/04/self-financing/>

Turkmen paradox: there is no Russian language de jure but it is necessary de facto // CABAR. URL: <https://cabar.asia/ru/turkmenskij-paradoks-russkogo-yazyka-de-yure-net-de-fakto-on-neobhodim>

VPO-1 Form 'The data on the organizations providing higher education, namely Bachelor, Specialist, Masters programmes' // Ministry of science and higher education of the Russian Federation. 2019. URL: <https://minobrnauki.gov.ru/ru/activity/stat/highed/index.php>