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CREATING SPACE FOR CIVIL SOCIETY IN TURKMENISTAN

An NCEEER Working Paper by

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Executive Summary

Despite long-standing restrictive state policies and a lack of opportunities, Turkmenistan's citizenry possess a capacity for intellectual growth and social development that has gone unrecognized in academic literature. This study argues that hidden beneath the layers of thick state control, there is civic engagement and volunteerism with the potential to mature into "civil society". Examining private initiatives in education and local participation in NGO/GONGOs,¹ this study aims to provide US policymakers and regional analysts with a coherent understanding of private educational initiatives in Turkmenistan as precursors to a more fully established civil society.

¹ NGO - non-governmental organization; GONGO - government organized non-governmental organization

Introduction

Turkmenistan's citizens yearn for a society in which they are meaningfully involved and where the state does not dominate daily life. Since gaining independence in 1991, a handful of proactive undertakings emerged in the public sphere designed to engender broader, quality social services to supplement state structures. Interviews and field research reveal that via private initiatives, grassroots efforts, and local participation in NGO/GONGOs, Turkmen citizens are eager to build on social and professional networks to support their vision of community, notwithstanding state policies. Because evidence of this inclination is located primarily outside the formal state sphere, I theorize that this activity comprises a burgeoning civil society.

The study's hypothesis grew out of several years (1997-2008) of first-hand observations both in the capital, Ashgabat, and throughout the five *wilayets* (regions). Western and Russian analyses have depicted the general difficulties grassroots initiatives or would-be NGOs face in Turkmenistan.² However, these publications omit stories of groups that have successfully served a social interest, in part because they did not conform to what Western observers thought Turkmen ought to want—namely, a pluralistic society.

In documenting the experiences of a handful of individuals who have developed methods for functioning legally within the parameters of Turkmenistan's laws, this study sheds light on civil society and on private initiatives in education, taking the analysis beyond official or state interests by clarifying quotidian concerns of citizens. Three significant case studies contribute to the findings of this report: 1. *Keik Okara* [Society for the Protection of Patients' Rights], Turkmenistan's Educational Association; 2. *Turan Mugallym* {Teachers of Turan}; and 3. *Tsentri innovatsionnykh obuchaiushchikh tekhnologii* (Russian)/*Ussatlyk Merkezi* (Turkmen) [The

Center for Innovative Teaching].³ These cases offer, respectively, an example of an officially recognized NGO, a grassroots initiative that defies easy definition, and a private group that recently attained GONGO status.⁴

Any analysis of Turkmenistan is hindered by the near impenetrability of motives or thought processes in everyday life. It has been especially difficult to disentangle efforts or desires of citizens from those of the grossly corrupt administration of Turkmenistan's mercurial first president, Saparmurat "Turkmenbashi" Nyýazow. Nyýazow was narcissistic and his sponsorship of widespread corruption left Turkmenistan isolated from the rest of the world. However, already savvy after years of experience manipulating the Soviet echelons of power (*vlast'*) and navigating the indispensable networks of family and acquaintances (*znakomstvo*) (Turkmen, *tanysh*), most Turkmen developed problem-solving agendas based on social networks. Average citizens worked the system nimbly to live for the most part without conflict with the state.

In fact, none of my interviewees ever adopted an oppositional attitude. Indeed, during the final years of Nyýazov's rule, and then even more so under second president Gurbanguly Berdymammedow, several entities representing "civil society" adopted approaches that were complementary to the state.

None of this study means to imply that there is no disaffection among Turkmenistan's citizens, but it does underscore the nuances between disaffection and dissension. These initiatives are highlighted here not to justify government policies—many of which have been

² See reports sponsored by OSI, RFE/RL, IWPR, *Novosti Press*, and *Deutsche Welle*.

³ For the significance of private "Turkish Schools" in Turkmenistan's "civil society" see Victoria Clement, "Turkmenistan's New Challenges: Can Stability Co-Exist with Reform? A Study of Gülen Schools in Central Asia," *Muslim World in Transition: Contributions of the Gülen Movement* (London: Leeds Metropolitan University Press, 2007), pp. 572-283.

⁴ Government Organized Non-Governmental Program.

dramatically detrimental to society, and especially education—but to underscore the capacity of the population to sustain its values and successfully use social networks in the face of poor governance.

Just two years into President Berdymuhammedow’s term examples of local initiatives may seem only tenuously to represent “civil society” in Turkmenistan; however, these grassroots activities demonstrate the capacity of a broad spectrum of people to work creatively in the face of great challenges. “According to the Director of Counterpart Consortium Turkmenistan, several categories of NGOs can be clearly delineated at the current state of civil society development. These are GONGOs, that is, government- or quasi-NGOs; independent registered NGOs; initiative groups (unregistered); and clubs and other voluntary societies (mainly in education).”⁵ Some participants share an intellectual heritage—they were teachers; some are farmers from the same former *kolkhoz* (Soviet-era collective farm); some are simply neighbors; and some come from miles away to interact with other citizens who share interests or concerns—for example, beekeeping, raising horses, or ecology. It is to this capacity I hope to draw readers’ attention.

Turkmenistan’s Social Context

Turkmenistan’s first president Saparmurat Nyýazow⁶ (1991-2006) maintained tight control over social activities (holiday celebrations, religious rituals), institutions (schools, hospitals), and the public sphere generally (signage, media, national costumes). Even after the country gained independence from the Soviet Union, there was little room for civil society, private initiatives, or cooperative efforts without the express approval of the government. And,

⁵ Anara Musabaeva and Charlie Buxton, NGOs in Turkmenistan: A Mapping Report, *INTRAC*, January 2003, p. 20.

though the mechanisms for receiving government approval were spelled out in the civil code, corruption and enigmatic leadership prevented many applicants from successfully gaining official recognition.⁷

Bureaucracy and rampant bribe-taking made it nearly impossible for a group to register as a religious community, environmental group, or even a private English-language center. Nevertheless, Turkmen have eagerly accepted opportunities offered by NGOs and such international entities as USAID, ACCELS, IREX, OSCE, and the World Bank. While previous studies concerning civil society in Turkmenistan have necessarily spent time on the difficulties local actors face, my most recent field research in Turkmenistan conducted throughout 2009 focuses on local achievements. This is not to dismiss the very real challenges Turkmenistan's citizens face, but to illustrate examples of success some have had in dealing with the state.

Perhaps the most important lesson this study can impart is that while the term "civil society" is employed here, Turkmenistan's citizens who are involved with NGOs are not necessarily interested in political activism. This is not civil society as a precursor to democracy-building. Indeed, most efforts have no connection to politics and rarely have any connection to Western ideas of "democracy." Turkmen citizens possess their own vision of community which they support through social and professional networks. This conceptualization of community ranges from such far-reaching aims as private initiatives in education to more basic goals of maintaining personal interests through mutual assistance.

Consequently, this study employs the term "civil society" according to the definition used

⁶ Before becoming "president," Nyýazow was the Communist Party Chief in Soviet Turkmenistan.

⁷ July 17, 1998 new Civil Code (*Vedomosti Medjdlisa Turkmenistana* (1998), no. 2, item 39) replaced the 1963 Civil Code of the Turkmen Soviet Socialist Republic (*Vedomosti Verkhovnogo Soveta Turkmenskoi SSR* (1963), no. 36, item 94), it went

by The Centre for Civil Society at the London School of Economics and Political Science:

*Civil society refers to the arena of uncoerced collective action around shared interests, purposes and values. In theory, its institutional forms are distinct from those of the state, family and market, though in practice, the boundaries between state, civil society, family and market are often complex, blurred and negotiated. Civil society commonly embraces a diversity of spaces, actors and institutional forms, varying in their degree of formality, autonomy and power. Civil societies are often populated by organisations such as registered charities, development non-governmental organisations, community groups, women's organisations, faith-based organisations, professional associations, trades unions, self-help groups, social movements, business associations, coalitions and advocacy groups.*⁸

This definition is useful as it does not limit the use of the terms to imply overt democracy-building projects, but rather allows for consideration of a wide variety of local initiatives.

Laws on Associations

In the early years after the fall of the USSR laws on groups or organizations were similar throughout Central Asia.⁹ The “Law on Public Associations” passed in 2003 made it particularly difficult for groups to attain legal status in Turkmenistan. The written law had clear guidelines. Nevertheless, government officials found reasons to deny applications that ranged from misplaced commas to insufficient information. Both foreign representatives and Turkmen citizens felt that the law was specifically designed to make registration difficult and to bring any new groups to the attention of the authorities.¹⁰ Many groups, like Turan Mugallym, lost track of the number of times they submitted applications; they applied seven times in 2008 alone. In 1997, 400 groups sought help from the U.S. organization Counterpart Consortium; that number

into effect on March 1, 1999. See *Turkmenistan Civil Code of Saparmurat Turkmenbashi*, William Butler, ed. and trans., (The Hague: Kluwer Law International, 1999).

⁸ <http://www.lse.ac.uk/collections/CCS/introduction.html>

⁹ Jay Cooper, “The Real Work: Sustaining NGO Growth in Central Asia,” *Civil Society in Central Asia*, ed. M. Holt Ruffin and Daniel Waugh (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1999), p. 214.

dwindled to 89 by 2006.¹¹ This information underscores not only the difficulties Turkmenistan's citizens have faced, but also demonstrates that despite those difficulties, people throughout Turkmenistan have displayed a desire to organize, join, and come together as a community to address a myriad of social issues.

Keik Okara

Inquiries about NGOs in Turkmenistan will surely lead to Keik Okara and its director Roza Kuzakhmamedova. Keik Okara is an officially registered NGO in Ashgabat that provides legal and psychological counseling to individuals in need. A lawyer and a counselor maintain offices on site where they meet people by appointment in privacy. Since these needs are sporadic, more of the organization's space is devoted to English and French classes in addition to community-building efforts.¹² During summer especially the classrooms are filled to capacity with students. Even outside of lesson times, during the teachers' off hours, the rooms are filled with children practicing English or working on group projects.

Keik Okara was founded on April 1, 1998, by a group of self-described "like-minded people, united in the idea of helping vulnerable categories of population under [sic] the social and economic conditions in Turkmenistan."¹³ Members came from backgrounds in medicine, social work, and education. Keik Okara existed as a group without NGO status, until it officially registered as an NGO with the Ministry of Justice on August 25, 2004. It was the first officially registered non-governmental agency in Turkmenistan after the introduction of the 2003 Law on

¹⁰ Interview with Marlin Harding, U.S. Embassy in Turkmenistan, spring 2003; "TURKMENISTAN: New Law Could Obstruct NGO Activity," International Center for Not-for-Profit-Law, November 20, 2003--<http://www.icnl.org/KNOWLEDGE/news/2003/11-20.html>, accessed September 8, 2009.

¹¹ "NGOs Denied Legal Status," Institute for War and Peace Reporting, (3.54) IV No 1, Sep 12, 2006.

¹² Interview with Roza Kuzakhmamedova, General Director, Ashgabat, June 9, 2009.

the Registration of Public Associations.¹⁴

In 2005, with USAID funding, Keik Okara established a “Family Support Center.” This Center offers trainings, seminars, workshops, and even holds contests for young people in areas focused on strengthening the role of the family in the community. Focusing on family traditions, intergenerational relations, ethics and etiquette (*terbiýä*), the Center prepares children for the ever-growing demands placed on them in post-Soviet Turkmenistan, while encouraging them to respect the long-standing family structures and the environment of Turkmens’ close-knit families.

In that same year, with the support of the US embassy, Keik Okara established a “Youth Volunteer Center,” which is designed to encourage volunteerism. Concurrently, it launched free-of-charge English-language courses and computer literacy training for youth 14-25 years.

In 2006, through the financial support of the OSCE, the Educational Center expanded its activity to incorporate a Training Center.¹⁵ Activities expanded into areas of social, economic, psychological, and legal issues. The most basic concepts of healthy living (anti-drug use, nutrition, healthy cooking) are combined with more nuanced social value of ethics and family traditions in order to prepare young people for the responsibilities of adulthood in Turkmen society. These efforts are in accord with the new course, *Ýaşayyş durmuş esaslary* [Basic health and social life], which was added to Turkmenistan’s general education curriculum in fall 2008.¹⁶

Keik Okara also works with UNHCR¹⁷ on refugee and asylum issues, providing asylum seekers with information and assistance, in addition to training local authorities and individuals

¹³ Keik Okara pamphlet, 2009.

¹⁴ Butler, 1999.

¹⁵ Interview with Anna Suota, Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe representative in Ashgabat, June 9, 2008.

¹⁶ “O novom predmete sbkol’noi programmy,” *Khronika Turkmenistana*, 12/19/2008, <http://www.chrono-tm.org/>.

on women's issues and questions related to HIV/AIDS. These classes bring together the concepts of family values and health and cleanliness with social responsibility.

In a country of only 5 million, with only about 1 million living in the vicinity of Ashgabat, the number of individuals who have benefited from Keik Okara's activities is impressive. From April 2006 through April 2009, Keik Okara's staff and volunteers oversaw projects, courses, and workshops that included 4,163 participants; participants were primarily age 14-25. Projects and workshops included the following:

- English-language—173 boys, 468 girls
- Computer literacy courses—268 boys, 473 girls
- Gender equality—168 boys, 230 girls
- Leadership—136 boys, 236 girls
- Conflict resolution—131 boys, 175 girls
- Street Choice (socialization, bullying, personal responsibility)—166 boys, 211 girls
- Rights of Children—112 boys, 126 girls
- Team-building—103 boys, 168 girls
- Debating—16 boys, 11 girls
- HIV/AIDS prevention and drug abuse—72 boys, 96 girls
- Traffic safety—107 boys, 133 girls¹⁸

In 2007, with the support of the embassy of the United Kingdom, Keik Okara established the Information Resource Center of Keik Okara (IRCKO). Within its office space it created a computer lab to offer Internet access as well as training in computer literacy. This is sustained by volunteer staff and on-going workshops as well as by a vast library of publications about computer usage.¹⁹ In 2008, again with UK Embassy support, Keik Okara began workshops focused on preparing young people for future work in social work, NGOs, and social activism more generally. This "Leadership School" is unique in Turkmenistan.

¹⁷ United Nations' High Commissioner for Refugees. Refugees hail primarily from Afghanistan, Iran, and Tajikistan.

¹⁸ 2009 Pamphlet.

The Center for Innovative Teaching—Grassroots Initiative

The Center for Innovative Teaching is comprised of a group of educators who came together in the 1990s to offer advice to the parents of young children. Originally they worked within the USAID.²⁰ When that program ended in 2007, the teachers, lawyers, and counselors cooperated to create the new Center. The self-described goals of this organization are as follows:

- To support private education initiatives
- To advance the quality of teaching around Turkmenistan
- To work with parents to prepare young children for schooling
- To offer children's summer camps
- To bring traditional pedagogy together with interactive methods of teaching

Because the Center for Innovative Teaching is not an NGO and has no official status, it does not maintain offices or a regular meeting place. This is in accordance with the Law on Public Associations. Members/participants meet at institutes that are already officially registered (not as NGOs, but as associations) like *Bilgerje* in Ashgabat or Turkmenabad's language center. The Center offers assistance to all families free of charge since it receives funding from USAID.²¹

Only twenty percent of Turkmenistan's youth attends kindergarten. In the opinion of the Centers' members, missing that one year of education contributes to problems of adjustment and learning in the first grades of primary school education. Thus, the teachers identified this as an area where they could bring parents into conversation about the needs of their children and aid them in preparing the students and the family as a whole for the educational process.

The Center offers advice on dealing with the academic calendar (holidays, exams), issues children face on the playground, the importance of homework, and general explanations of

¹⁹ Site visit and discussions with staff.

²⁰ U.S. Agency for International Development.

²¹ Interview with Irina Ashirovna Mukhamedova, Ashgabat, June 8, 2009.

school methods. Another unique offering of the Center is the assistance it offers to families in understanding *terbiýä* or *vospitanie* as related to education.²² Turkmen parents are familiar with concepts of etiquette, manners, responsibility, and respect for elders but can find it helpful to learn about school etiquette, discipline, teachers' responsibilities, or administrative expectations of parents.

Members of the Center are particularly passionate about methods of teaching. Members work with teachers, encouraging them to adopt "interactive" methods of teaching. Discouraging traditional methods of lecturing, passive learning, or rote memorization, the Center encourages teachers to interact with students in the classroom. Their method asks the students to participate often and engage in active learning. The goal is to teach students to learn rather than allowing them to sit passively expecting to be taught.

This is particularly challenging in a culture such as the Turkmen, where such ideas come into conflict with traditional *terbiýä*. For example, Turkmen children are taught that it is impolite to question elders. But with this interactive method teachers ask students to take an active role in their own education, expressing ingenuity and creative thinking. Meanwhile, at home they are required to obey parents without question; to greet all visitors silently with outstretched hands; and to avoid looking elders in the eye when speaking with them. The Center's programs address the tensions between upbringing and pedagogy and encourage students to find solutions for meeting expectations both at home and at school. The Center is not the only entity dealing with such issues, but it may be the only one that works so closely with parents to bring these methods into communication rather than conflict with traditional values.²³

Traditional values have been incorporated into the nation-building efforts of

²² See Clement, forthcoming

Turkmenistan's leadership. The idea that Turkmen-speaking, ethnic Turkmen are the true inheritors of the post-Soviet nation has seeped into all spheres of life: schools, military, legal, political—even economic spheres. The Turkmen language was made the official language in 1990, and this idea was then made a reality by the firing from jobs of those citizens who did not speak Turkmen.²⁴

In a country where ethnic and linguistic identity have played such a large role in providing or preventing access to forms of power, I asked Director Irina whether she found a difference between the ethnic groups in Turkmenistan—Uzbek, Russian, Ukrainian, Azerbaijani, etc. She said she did not, but noted there remain obvious differences between rural and urban centers. Rural schools are not as well-equipped, do not have access to extra-curricular activities, and are not privy to the cultural opportunities found in urban centers. Therefore, parents may have more questions not only about how education works, but also about how students might take advantage of such opportunities as summer camps.

While the Center for Innovative Teaching is the least developed of the three groups examined here, it shares a mission and a method with the others. A group of concerned citizens joined together to address social issues they felt were being inadequately served by state institutions. In relying on international donors for support they too are a step removed from completely independent grassroots initiatives. However, within the context of Turkmenistan, the method of pursuing local initiatives with the support of international aid is common. It is difficult to define this group as either an NGO or a GONGO. Nevertheless, the social contribution the membership is making and the social capacity it advances are evident.

²³ See Clement, forthcoming, on *terbiyä* in Turkmen families.

²⁴ Victoria Clement, "Rewriting the "Nation": Turkmen Literacy, Language, and Power, 1904-2004," PhD dissertation, The Ohio State University, 2005.

The Association Turan Mugallym

Founded on January 14, 2002, the Association Turan Mugallym was organized by a group of Soviet-era university professors from a variety of disciplines, who sought alternative methods of academic and pedagogical development. The organization has never been licensed as an NGO or a school, because the state would not approve its application. But the individual teachers are each licensed by the Ministry of Education and are authorized to offer private lessons for a fee. In keeping with the particulars of these registrations, members may not refer to their group as a “school” but rather as a “training center.”

The Association’s goals and objectives, as stated in its charter, are “to set up a flexible, market-oriented, and demand-driven organization in the field of education in the conditions of a fast-changing economic and social environment. The Association aims to become a bridge between state, civil society, and international organizations in Turkmenistan and provide customers with individually-tailored training programs.” An example of such cooperation is the project with OSCE to offer customized and content-specific English-language classes for customs officials.²⁵

In 2008, Turan Mugallym was comprised of more than twenty instructors from different fields of study. Each has had teaching experience at the university level. Thus, they comprise a group with a strong reputation and are held in high esteem by students. Teachers combine traditional methods with new, innovative approaches to foreign language and computer training. Twice a year all members travel from around the country for professional development workshops in Ashgabat.

²⁵ “*Uchit’sia nikogo ne pozdno,*” *Neutral’nyi Turkmenistan*, December 25, 2007, p. 2.

During these two-day workshops instructors relate experiences, share materials and ideas, and rotate among themselves the responsibility of offering lessons. An example of a new pedagogical technique that was discussed at the December 2008 meeting was “teaching in virtual environments.” The teachers and the government of Turkmenistan are keen in the information age to develop distance learning, and pilot lessons have already started connecting the regions. However, there are nearly insurmountable problems with infrastructure and access to reliable Internet services.

Many provincial centers reported that it was often impossible to establish an Internet connection, even in areas that received backing from NATO’s Virtual Silk Highway project. The government approves a limited amount of remote teaching, but the communication system is not yet sufficient to support such plans.

Turan Mugallym undertakes two essentially different types of projects: classes for children at a private, rural training center and courses for state employees in cooperation with international organizations or Turkmenistan’s government. These will each be discussed in turn.

Training Center for Young Farmers, “Green School”²⁶

Operating on a pilot basis with support from the European Union’s Technical Aid to the Commonwealth of Independent States (TACIS), Professor Jamila Sarjaeva led a group of local Turkmen educators in the creation of the Turan Mugallym Association in 2003. During the first three years, classes were held at a successful private farm, just outside of Ashgabat. The farm’s owner volunteered space for classrooms as well as basic, practical training in animal husbandry,

²⁶ The term “green” here references an emphasis on agriculture and does *not* reference Islam. In Muslim societies colloquial usage or the political opposition’s adoption of “green” as a label can imply Islamist orientation. For example, “green businesses” in Turkey have this meaning. Neither does it refer to an environmental or ecological project.

offering access to his livestock.²⁷

This emergent training center provided beginner-level training in crop management and animal husbandry together with training in English, Russian, and basic computer skills. After three successful years, the owner of the private farm felt pressured by state authorities to close the training center. Visits by “men in epaulets” were becoming a nuisance, and officials were recording the license plate numbers of cars visiting the farm. So, while he was interested in continuing his support for Turan Mugallym, the farmer finally decided to sever ties with the association. Nevertheless, this farmer had initiated a link between farmers and educators that others viewed as a model.

Members of the *Altyn Ýap* farmers association, led by its head (*urunbaşy*) Tokga Nursultan, approached Jamila Sarjaeva with a request to open a new training center for their children. The farmers’ association is based loosely on the *kolkhoz*, which the village once comprised. In 2006 the school moved from the private farm to the village of Hurmant Gökça (50km to the west of Ashgabat, population 6,000) with the support of the local Voluntary Farmers Association (*Dayhan Birleşilgi*), *Altyn Ýap*.

While the Association initially operated with the aid of small grants from Switzerland and Netherlands, Jamila and the Farmers’ Association agreed that classes would be fee-based. The enterprise is not yet self-sustaining, and students whose families are member of the Farmers’ Association—to which they pay dues—are admitted without charge. The teachers essentially volunteer their time and the resources they rely upon come from the other activities in which Turan Mugallym are engaged.

²⁷ The farmer will remain anonymous in this study.

In addition to offering students training to supplement general education, the farmers' association and the teachers hope to address such urgent problems as water management, reconstruction of pumping networks, soil analysis, and revolving credit. Classes do not yet contain such content. However, Turan Mugallym has created both a physical and conceptual space with the potential for enlightenment and problem-solving within the local community quite apart from any government program. In employing teachers, involving students in extra-curricular activities, and bringing village members together in conversation about education, Turan Mugallym encourages development and creates space in the daily lives of the students, teachers, and parents for future advancements in local capacity-building.

Despite the discouraging atmosphere created by the state, this group of teachers, farmers, and parents are organizing, not in opposition to the state, but to supplement state programs in language and agricultural courses. The capacity for growth runs strong through Turkmenistan's population. It is not always obvious due to economic and political circumstances, but is identifiable through careful observation. Turan Mugallym's teachers are instilling an appreciation for education in rural youth. They, along with families, are preserving long-standing social ties and fostering new networks by bringing Ashgabat's experienced teachers to village youth. Within the context of failing public schools, these efforts are important in the preservation of Turkmen values and potential within the future workforce.

2009: A Change in Official Status

Having applied innumerable times for recognition as an official NGO, Turan Mugallym persisted in its conviction that it should be recognized as more than a training center. Turan Mugallym has already gained the trust of families, parents, and village administrators. Finally in

May 2009 the state created an official space for Turan Mugallym. The Institute of Turkmen Language and Literature under the Supreme Council²⁸ hired the teachers of Turan Mugallym as individually licensed teachers and asked them to teach English to its various members. To facilitate a long-term relationship, the state changed each license from the typically restrictive three-month permission to teach and awarded the teachers permanent licenses. They do not need to re-apply or return for recertification in order to teach. The students represent a wide variety of professions, from oncologists and engineers to the secretaries who work among the many members of the Supreme Council.²⁹

While this arrangement prevents Turan Mugallym from calling itself an NGO, the members may use a term heard with increasing frequency: GONGO. The teachers consider this to be not only a palatable relationship with the state, but quite a success story for their membership. They are able to carry out the teaching; they are still able to support their “Green School”; and they now have access to classrooms as well as offices with high-speed Internet access—thanks to donations made by the British Council.

Cooperation with States—or Co-optation?

Any discussion of international support, or local state support, must take into consideration the influence of “donor logic,” that is, international donors almost always favor reform methods that aim to shape a recipient in the donors’ own image.³⁰ Due to this tendency,

²⁸ Nominally replaced the Academy of Sciences in post-Soviet Turkmenistan.

²⁹ Interview with teachers, summer 2009, site visit at Turan Mugallym’s office/classroom within the Supreme Council in Ashgabat.

³⁰ Brian Holmes, *Comparative Education: Some Considerations of Method* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1981).

aid can be driven more by what the lender envisions than what the recipient actually needs.³¹ Not only does financial support come with limitations, but recipients typically must compete for those funds through grant applications designed to promote the donor's mission. So how can we categorize as "local initiatives" organizations in Turkmenistan funded with international monies?

The London School of Economics and Political Science's definition of civil society aids in thinking about local initiative within the expansive realities of everyday life. It underscores not the anti-state nature of local projects, but rather that "*the boundaries between state, civil society, family, and market are often complex, blurred, and negotiated.*" The emphasis on "negotiation" between state and society broadens conceptualization, whereas, for example, the Open Society Institute's definition of civil society narrows the notion to politically driven activities. It offers assistance to groups in East Europe that will do the following:

- Work on sensitive and unpopular social and political issues
- Promote transparent and effective democratic processes in their countries and counteract illiberal tendencies
- Advance systems for monitoring the performance of governmental institutions³²

While the goals of transparent, inclusive policy change are desirable goals everywhere, the anti-state stance embedded in this donor's mission causes them to overlook projects in which a local actor or grassroots organization functions in part due to its negotiated *modus vivendi* with the state. Olivier Roy suggests an approach based not on the "philosophical validity of such a model, but rather its practical implications."³³ Roy's characterization may come closest to describing the relationship between Turan Mugallym, the state, and the people.

³¹ Iveta Silova and Gita Steiner-Khamsi, "Unwrapping the Post-Socialist Education Package Reform," *How NGOs React: Globalization and Education Reform in the Caucasus, Central Asia, and Mongolia* (Bloomfield: Kumarian Press, 2008), p. 5.

³² http://www.soros.org/initiatives/thinktank/focus_areas/open/guidelines. Accessed on February 22, 2009.

In Turkmenistan, Turan Mugallym has formed a partnership with the state in several educational projects. In each case, the government is represented by a specific educational institute such as The Supreme Council for Science and Technology under the President of Turkmenistan, Turkmenistan's Magtymguly State University, Turkmen Agricultural University, or the National Research Institute of Education.

For example, the Supreme Council oversees the contract with Turan Mugallym to teach English at the Ministry of Finance and Ministry of Economy and Development. The Association offers English-language training to ministerial staff who work on international projects. Classes take place during working hours in a room that has been designated as a classroom. Essentially, employers are being paid to learn English. The Ministries seem committed to supporting this training long-term.

Cooperation with Local NGOs

Turan Mugallym and Keik Okara are also involved with such local NGOs as Bosfor, Bilgirdji, and Hemayat.³⁴ These are legally recognized as NGOs. However, in Turkmenistan a group may not assume designation of a Non-Governmental Organization without registration with the state. Again, the ties to the state complicate the theoretical concept of "civil society". Nevertheless, NGOs that register with the state typically maintain a large degree of autonomy thereafter. To gain recognition as an NGO by an international entity such as OSI or the US Embassy would require a similar amount of self-justification and paperwork. Turkmenistan's state registration formally constitutes essentially a monitoring mechanism. It is however clearly

³³ Olivier Roy, "The New Central Asia", *Civil Society in the Muslim World: Contemporary Perspectives*, Amyn B. Sajoo ed., (London: Institute for Ismaili Studies, 2004), p. 136.

³⁴ Active NGOs in Ashgabat.

the manner in which the state wields this registration process that turns it into a tool for active state control.³⁵

Cooperation with International Agencies

Turan Mugallym is an active partner in international as well as local projects. The teaching staff has strong linkages with CIS, European, and US research and training institutions, including TACIS/TEMPUS, OSCE, NATO, IREX, USAID/Foreign Agricultural Service, and the British Council. As these organizations are all funded by foreign governments, it is fair to question whether projects they support can be seen as building an indigenous civil society. Each case must be examined individually to determine whether their support reflects the direct influence of a foreign state. The summaries below represent the earliest stages of research combining information collected through formal interviews, personal conversation, site visits, and classroom observation from 2004-2009. These brief sketches do not provide an exhaustive list of activities.

European Union

Turan Mugallym reached an agreement with the Netherlands Management Cooperation (PUM) to offer Turkmen an opportunity to learn about Dutch technology and trade and industry by gaining practical experience in a number of companies in the Netherlands. As of 2008, more than 10 projects had been successfully completed, most of them in the field of agro-business and training.

³⁵ “No Light on Horizon for Turkmen NGOs,” IWPR, No. 586, August 15, 2009.

In order to strengthen the professional capability of customs officials and develop effective and efficient border control:

- 150 customs officers took part in English-language training;
- 350 customs officers were given basic computer skills; and
- 120 customs officers participated in a training course on processing cargo customs declarations

These programs complement Turkmen's pre-existing ability to employ social networks outside of government controls by adding to human capital.

Great Britain

Within the framework of partnership with TACIS, Turan Mugallym is providing English-language training based on agricultural terminology. In 2008-09 the Agricultural University reinstated English-language training in its curriculum. Turan Mugallym designed a special course for retraining English teachers in agricultural terminology. Six have completed the program. The task was to develop the practical courses relevant to specific groups of English-language teachers and to create innovative well-suited material with field terminology to meet the needs of agricultural students. In late 2008, instructors designed, tested, and published a trilingual dictionary with the help of English professors from Duchy Agricultural College, UK.³⁶

British Council

The British Council has actively supported English-language teaching in Turkmenistan. It is the leading provider of training and materials for learning English. Turan Mugallym set up a Reading Club for English-language teachers and senior students of Turkmen State University under the guidance of the regional British Council Center. This center is the official partnership

between the UK and Turkmenistan, which will assist in creating opportunities in English-language skills and in encouraging cultural, scientific, technological, and educational cooperation.

On June 9, 2008 the Foreign Language Center was opened with the support of the British Embassy and the British Council in the Supreme Council of Science and Technology. The main goal in setting up such a center is to provide foreign-language training for those who started post-graduate training this year. According to an April 2008 presidential decree, graduate and post-graduate studies (*aspirantura* and *doctorantura*), having been eliminated under Nyýazow, were reestablished, and this program is designed to meet the needs of those candidates.

State Customs Service of Turkmenistan

In cooperation with TACIS and OSCE a training program for customs officers began in June 2004. It offers content-specific, basic and professionally oriented, English-language classes, basic computer skills, and training in processing electronic cargo declarations.

NATO Virtual Silk Highway Project

The Supreme Council of Science and Technology under the President of Turkmenistan created a program in research methodologies and another that offers English-language and computer/Internet courses for staff and faculty at institutes of higher education. The training courses began in May 2004 and continue to expand into the provincial centers (*wilayets*). More than 1000 students have participated in these courses. This is made possible by the NATO project, which aims to link educational institutions. Officially, thus far 52 academic institutes of

³⁶ I possess one example of this tri-lingual dictionary and would be willing to make it available to any interested parties: Turkmen-Russian-English.

the country have acquired high-speed Internet access. However, many have problems gaining access due to poor infrastructure, high costs, or lack of functioning equipment, so in fact they cannot use the Internet. And, the provincial centers have been slow to inform the EU representative in Ashgabat, so little action has been taken to solve these most basic problems.

The lack of modern communications systems presents an obstacle to quick, efficient networking and information exchange. Turkmenistan's citizens cannot rely on the luxury of electronic communications. This, however, is another example of an obstacle Turkmen overcome in part by relying on long-standing traditions. Social networks are maintained the old-fashioned way: through relatives, neighbors, schoolmates, and colleagues. It is one more aspect of community-building and grassroots activity that is difficult for an outsider to learn about, or even to recognize.

Conclusion

Since gaining independence in 1991, Turkmenistan's state-sponsored social systems have deteriorated so acutely that an entire generation of human capital is threatened. Education has been particularly damaged.³⁷ Turkmenistan's post-Soviet leadership dismantled Soviet educational systems, replacing them with lower quality schools and curricula. Moreover, classrooms became sites more for the transmission of ideologies to children than for the teaching of elementary skills. Citizens have responded by supporting non-governmental initiatives to include the enhancement of general studies with fee-based lessons, centers for vocational training, and in particular centers offering English-language training. As Turkmen, via grassroots initiatives and social networks, currently struggle to maintain cultural values nearly

³⁷ Victoria Clement, "Education in Post-Niyazov Turkmenistan," School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, January 25, 2007.

three years after the death of the mercurial first president,³⁸ this research illustrates significant non-governmental initiatives that contain the seeds of civil society in Turkmenistan.³⁹

³⁸ The Ministry of Education adopted Niyázow's book *Rubnama* as a formal part of the curriculum in 2001; later it added *Rubnama* volume II and Niyázow's poetry to studies at primary, secondary, and professional levels of study.

³⁹ Victoria Clement, "The Seeds of Civil Society in Turkmenistan," Harriman Institute, Columbia University's School of International & Public Affairs, March 9, 2006.