

Turkey's Education Policy During the AK Party Era (2002-2013)

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ABSTRACT *The AK Party has been a leading reform actor with particular emphasis on education. AK Party governments implemented educational reforms to increase access to education, improve the quality of education and democratize the education system. Some challenges, however, persisted: Turkey still lags one year behind the OECD average PISA 2009 indicators. This article focuses on the educational policies of the AK Party governments during the last decade. The AK Party's education reforms and policies will be examined through the lenses of access, quality, governance, finance, and democratization of education. The current problems and challenges of Turkey's education system will also be discussed.*

As a number of international observers have noted, the “education system in Turkey has shown remarkable improvement since 2003 in terms of better students’ performance and reduced inequality with a concurrent and sustained increase in enrollments”.¹ Indeed, Turkey has achieved an unprecedented success in expanding educational opportunities and access from preschool to higher education by building new educational institutions and renovating existing ones. The recent improvements in Turkey’s educational system are a direct result of the Justice and Development Party’s (the AK Party) educational policies and reforms. Indeed, the AK Party has been one of the most reformist governments of Turkey to date and has paid particular attention to improving the country’s educational system. As of 2002, successive AK Party governments implemented many educational reforms with a number of goals in mind, among them to increase access to education, to improve the quality of education, to democratize the education system that had been unable to meet social demands. Notwithstanding these improvements, some challenges remain. For instance, Turkey still lags one full year behind the OECD average according to the OECD’s Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2009.²

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Turkey has achieved unprecedented success in expanding educational opportunities and access from preschool to higher education

This article focuses on the educational policies of the AK Party governments during the last decade. The AK Party's education reforms and policies will be examined through the lenses of access, quality, governance, finance, and democratization of education. The current problems and challenges of Turkey's education system will also be discussed. In order to analyze national educational policies, strategies, and plans and their implementation during the AK Party era, this article utilizes document analysis as a research method. Major documents sources used in this analysis include official agenda of governments;

development plans; official reports, statistics, and documents; nongovernmental documents including reports prepared by national and international organizations; as well as international studies such as PISA and TIMSS, conducted by OECD and the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) respectively.

Enhancing Access to Education

Up until the early 2000s, students' enrollment levels and duration remained considerably low. For instance, the average Turkey's student received six years of schooling, only half of the average among EU and OECD students, when the AK Party came to power in the country.³ In 2002, only 5 percent of children attended pre-school compared to 90 percent in elementary schools, 50 percent in secondary education and 15 percent in higher education. (See Table 1) Acknowledging that the lack of adequate schooling represented an obstacle for Turkey's economic growth, successive AK Party governments sought to improve enrollment rates and the average years of schooling at all levels from pre-school to higher education. Below, we discuss developments with respect to access to education.

Pre-School

Children's enrollment rate in pre-school institutions remained quite low in the early 2000s. In 2000, only 5.38 percent of children between 36 and 72 months of age were enrolled in educational institutions. (See Table 1) Various public debates and official reports during this period raised the question of promoting pre-school education and enhancing access to pre-school education.⁴ Similarly, national education programmes and initiatives highlighted the importance of pre-school education and pledged to take concrete steps to promote pre-school education. For example, the government aimed to increase pre-school enroll-

ment to 50 percent in its 9th Development Plan and the Official Agenda of the 60th Government.⁵ Similarly, the Strategic Plan of the Ministry of National Education aimed at raising the pre-school enrollment rate to 70 percent by 2014.⁶ The vocal support for pre-school education evolved into government policy as of 2009. The Circular Note No. 53 on Promoting Pre-School Education was released on June 15th, 2009 and emphasized the need to ensure that pre-school institutions worked at full capacity, that each elementary school had at least one pre-school grade and that vacant schools be used for pre-school education. Furthermore, the Ministry hired 10,000 pre-school teachers in 2009.⁷ The Ministry also resolved to reach 100 percent pre-school enrollment rates among 60 to 72 months-old children in 32 provinces in the 2009-2010 school year and began its implementation. The following year, the initiative expanded its scope to a total of 57 provinces.⁸ As a result of all these efforts, Turkey witnessed significant improvements with respect to pre-school education. Over the decade-long tenure of the AK Party, the pre-school enrollment rate among children of 36-72 months of age increased eight-fold to reach 39.7 percent in 2012. (See Table 1)

Table 1. School Enrollment in Turkey, 2000-2012 (%)

Year	Pre-school Education (36-72 months)			Primary Education			Secondary Education			Higher Education		
	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female
2000/01	5,38	5,57	5,19	95,28	99,58	90,79	43,95	48,49	39,18	12,27	13,12	11,38
2001/02				92,40	96,20	88,45	48,11	53,01	42,97	12,98	13,75	12,17
2002/03				90,98	94,49	87,34	50,57	55,72	45,16	14,65	15,43	13,53
2003/04	8,34			90,21	93,41	86,89	53,37	58,01	48,50	15,31	16,62	13,93
2004/05	10,31			89,66	92,58	86,63	54,87	59,05	50,51	16,60	18,03	15,10
2005/06	13,41			89,77	92,29	87,16	56,63	61,13	51,95	18,85	20,22	17,41
2006/07	16,03			90,13	92,25	87,93	56,51	60,71	52,16	20,14	21,56	18,66
2007/08	17,71	18,10	17,29	97,37	98,53	96,14	58,56	61,17	55,61	21,06	22,37	19,69
2008/09	20,61	21,11	20,08	96,49	96,99	95,97	58,52	60,63	56,30	27,69	29,40	25,92
2009/10	26,92	27,34	26,48	98,17	98,47	97,84	64,95	67,55	62,21	30,42	31,24	29,55
2010/11	29,85	30,25	29,43	98,41	98,59	98,22	66,07	68,17	63,86	33,06	33,44	32,65
2011/12	30,87	31,23	30,49	98,67	98,77	98,56	67,37	68,53	66,14	35,51	35,59	35,42
2012/13	39,72	41,03	38,33	98,80	98,88	98,71	70,06	70,77	69,31	38,50	38,40	38,61

Source: MEB, 2013 and TÜİK, 2013.

Primary Education

From the late 1990s onwards, low levels of primary school enrollment became a pressing concern in Turkey. The decision to adopt 8 years of mandatory education in the late 1990s made it necessary for governments to identify access to primary education as a priority item on their education agenda.⁹ To address the issue, governments implemented the Basic Education Project I


with support from the World Bank. The project, however, failed to increase primary school enrollment to desired levels. In 2002, 90.98 percent of all children (94.49 percent of male children and 87.34 percent of female children) attended primary school. A major concern was the extremely low levels of female children's enrollment in certain geographical areas: For instance, only 69.4 percent of female children, compared to 90.98 percent of male children, in eastern and southeastern provinces enrolled in primary school in the 2003-2004 school year.¹⁰ Throughout the 2000s, a series of government and civil society initiatives sought to promote female children's schooling.¹¹ Especially after 2006, primary school enrollment levels improved significantly. By 2012, 98.86 percent of children gained access to primary education and the gender gap was practically eliminated. Improvements with regard to the schooling of female children in disadvantaged geographical regions proved most notable.¹² Discrepancies between provinces, however, persists: For example, certain cities in central-Anatolia, including Çankırı, Tokat and Gümüşhane experience relatively low enrollment levels –90.04 percent, 92.90 percent, and 93.99 percent respectively.¹³

Secondary Education

In the early 2000s, approximately 50 percent of students in Turkey enrolled in secondary education institutions –a rather low figure compared to developed countries. The 8th Development Plan (2001-2005) aimed to increase secondary education enrollment levels to 75 percent by the end of its mandate in 2005. With the goal of promoting secondary education enrollment, the AK Party government created specific targets through a variety of official documents: For instance, the Official Agenda of the 60th Government (2008-2012) aimed to increase secondary education enrollment to 90 percent. Meanwhile, the 9th Development Plan (2007-2013) aimed to boost the enrollment rate to 100 percent by 2013. From 2009 onwards, secondary education enrollment levels recorded a steady rise and reached approximately 70 percent in 2012. The Parliament adopted Law No. 6287 (popularly known as 4+4+4 reforms) to increase mandatory education to 12 years. As such, although the government failed to meet the targets outlined in the 9th Development Plan, the introduction of 12 years of mandatory education will likely cause a rapid rise in secondary education enrollment rates.

Although significant improvements have been made over the past ten years with respect to secondary education enrollment, certain gender and geographical differences persists. While secondary education enrollment rates for male and female children differed by almost 10 percent (55.72 percent to 45.16 percent respectively), the difference was reduced to only 1 percent by 2012 (70.77 percent to 69.31 percent respectively). Regional discrepancies, however, have

been alarming. While developed regions enjoyed rather high enrollment levels, disadvantaged regions have remained steadily below the national average. For instance, 2012 data showed that provinces such as Bilecik, Rize, Artvin, and Bolu recorded over 90 percent secondary education enrollment rates with a number of provinces like Edirne, Kırklareli, Çanakkale, Kütahya, and Kocaeli steadily above 80 percent. Meanwhile, enrollment rates in certain areas like Bitlis, Şanlıurfa, Şırnak, and Siirt remained around 40 percent while Ağrı, Van, and Muş were below 40 percent.¹⁴ In short, Turkey made important progress in terms of gender equality in secondary education with enrollment rates among female children surpassing male children in the country's Western provinces. Despite this impressive performance, inter-regional differences have been alarming as enrollment levels in Eastern and Southeastern Anatolia regions have been drastically below the national average. Moreover, enrollment levels among female children remained considerably lower than among male children in these disadvantaged areas.



Over a decade, the pre-school enrollment rate among children of 36-72 months of age increased eight-fold to reach 39.7 percent in 2012

Higher Education

The rapid rise in secondary education enrollment rates and subsequently the demand for higher education has placed the country's higher education system under immense pressure. For decades, there had been a serious gap between supply and demand in university admissions. In 2002, only a third of 1.8 million university entrance exam applicants, approximately 660,000 students, were able to secure admission. In this respect, 2006 was an important year in the history of higher education in Turkey. While no new public universities were established between 1994 and 2006, a total of 21 private universities emerged during the same time period. As of 2006, a number of public and not-for-profit private (foundation) universities were established in order to meet the rising demand for higher education in the country. To date, 97 new higher education institutions have been established. As such, approximately 950,000 students were able to secure university admission in 2008 due to the availability of new universities and the Council of Higher Education's decision to admit a greater number of students to university programs. Roughly 900,000 applicants have secured admission in each following year. In light of these new developments, higher education enrollment levels rose from 14.65 percent in 2002 to 38.50 percent in 2013. (See Table 1) In other words, the number of students enrolled in higher education increased 2.6 times over the past ten years. The total number of enrolled students, including students registered in

open university programs, has increased from 1.9 million in 2002 to nearly 5 million in 2012.

Improving Quality

This section engages in a discussion about the ways in which the AK Party government improved the quality of elementary, secondary, and higher education in Turkey.

Quality of Primary and Secondary Education

Improving the quality of education has been one of the key objectives of the AK Party governments. For this purpose, the government made considerable investments in educational infrastructure. In 2002, the average number of students per class and student-teacher ratio was approximately 30. By 2012, the average number of students fell to 22 in primary schools, 27 in secondary schools, and 23 in high schools. Moreover, the government significantly improved the technological infrastructure of classrooms. Over the past decade, the government oversaw the installing of nearly one million computers in classrooms and launched the “Fatih Project” in 2011 to enhance the technological infrastructure of classrooms and provide all students with tablet computers. Furthermore, the Ministry of National Education updated the entire primary- and secondary education curriculum and teaching methodology in accordance with a student-oriented approach in 2004-2005.¹⁵

In order to correctly determine the improvement in the quality of education following a series of reforms, it would help to assess the effectiveness and efficiency of government policies as well as the remaining weaknesses of Turkey’s education system. International studies including TIMSS and PISA provide valuable data for such analysis. TIMSS 1999 and PISA 2003 data sets clearly indicate that the quality of education in Turkey was highly problematic in the early 2000s. According to TIMSS 1999 results, Turkey scored 429 points to rank 31st out of 38 countries in mathematics and 433 points to rank 33rd out of 38 countries in science.¹⁶ According to PISA 2003 results, Turkey scored considerably below average in mathematics, science, and literacy and only managed to outrank Mexico among OECD member countries. The same data set indicated that a significant part of students failed to meet minimum proficiency requirements in each subject: 52.3 percent of students failed mathematics, 38.6 percent failed science, and 37 percent failed literacy.¹⁷ A more important issue was that students’ performance showed great variation across geographical regions, rural and urban areas, type of school, and socio-economic structures. Turkey’s students’ poor performance attracted attention in national and inter-



University students demonstrate the headscarf ban in 2009.

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national reports about the state of education. For example, the final report of the World Bank Basic Education Project maintained that the quality of Turkey's education system continued to represent a problematic area.¹⁸ Again, a World Bank report on the education sector stated that the majority of Turkey's schools proved inadequate in providing student with basic skills and that students graduated from both academic and vocational institutions without necessary capabilities. According to the report, the Turkey's education system educated a small minority of students at international standards while providing low-quality education to a considerably large group of students.¹⁹ Similarly, the OECD's Basic Education Report emphasized that Turkey's education system suffered in terms of quality and equality.²⁰

In contrast, PISA 2009 and TIMSS 2011 studies have demonstrated that Turkey made improvements in national average scores. Nonetheless, Turkey's relative position in overall rankings have not changed much. According to PISA 2009 results, Turkey scored 445 point in mathematics to rank 41st among 65 participating countries and 31st among 33 OECD countries. In science, the country received 454 points to rank, respectively, 41st and 31st. Similarly, Turkey was, respectively, 39th and 31st in literacy.²¹ As such, Turkey improved its overall performance by 20 points compared to 2003. Having described education in Turkey as highly problematic in response to PISA 2003 data, the World Bank described Turkey's rapid progress in PISA 2009 as an exceptional performance. The Bank stated that developments in education reflected both Turkey's strong economic performance and decisive reforms.²² Moreover, the

Enrollment levels among female children at the secondary schools remained considerably lower than male children in disadvantaged areas

country significantly reduced regional inequalities between PISA 2003 and PISA 2009.²³ Despite all these positive developments, PISA 2009 results nonetheless demonstrated that problems persists. For example, Turkey scored 40 points less compared to the average OECD member country. In other words, the results established that the average Turkey's student was lagging behind the average OECD student by approximately one year. Furthermore, the data established that socio-economic structures and school types were closely related to academic success.²⁴

According to TIMSS 2011 results, Turkey scored a total of 483 points in science to improve its 1999 score by 50 points and to rank 21st among 42 countries.²⁵ Similarly, Turkey improved its 1999 performance in mathematics by 23 points to reach a total of 452 points and become 24th out of 42 participating countries.²⁶ The TIMSS 2011 scores clearly indicated that Turkey made significant progress in mathematics and science. Much like PISA 2009, however, TIMSS 2011 results established a stronger link between socio-economic structures and academic success compared to other participating countries.

Quality of Higher Education

Engaging in a discussion about quality of higher education, we must point out the following: The Council of Higher Education, not the Ministry of National Education, serves as the leading authority on education in Turkey. As such, we shall briefly discuss issues such as funding related to the government as opposed to policies and quality of higher education. Under the AK Party governments, a series of improvements have been made to the higher education system. For instance, education's share of the annual budget rose from 0.76 percent to 0.97 percent.²⁷ Furthermore, R&D investments rose from 0.53 percent to 0.86 percent of GDP.²⁸ Moreover, the resources available to the Scientific and Technological Research Institution of Turkey increased 25-fold to reach 81.3 million Turkish Lira (TL) compared to 3.2 million TL in 2003. In line with the availability of additional funding, the Institution sponsored a total of 18,141 researchers in 2011 compared to 1,527 scientists in 2003.²⁹ These developments resulted in a significant increase in patent applications from 1874 to 10,241 between 2002 and 2012 and in the number of approved patents from 1784 to 6539.

Over the past decade, Turkey's higher education system grew by 250 percent in terms of the total number of students. However, the number of PhD-hold-

ing academics failed to increase at the same rate. Similarly, the annual salary of academics in Turkey remained considerably lower than other professional groups in the country as well as academics in other countries.³⁰ In light of these financial shortcomings, academic positions seemed less appealing to successful young scientists.

Administrative Improvements

When the AK Party came to power, its leadership pledged to make comprehensive changes to the country's administration of national education and higher education systems in the Official Agenda of 2002 and the Urgent Action Plan of 2003. The aforementioned documents emphasized that the Ministry of National Education's size would be reduced to provide greater power to provincial authorities, and that the Council of Higher Education would be reorganized as an independent body responsible for coordination.³¹ The need to decentralize Turkey's education system has been acknowledged in a variety of national and international assessments about a broader public sector reform.³² These documents recommended that local governments, the private sector, and civil society participate more effectively in administrative and decision-making processes in order to establish a more efficient system of education administration. Furthermore, The Urgent Action Plan pledged to reorganize the Ministry of National Education whose 50+ divisions and 5,500 staff members account for its failure to offer services effectively in terms both of size and bureaucratic structure.³³

All government initiatives and development plans voice the need to reorganize the Ministry of National Education. However, the government took no steps toward this objective until 2011, when Decree No. 652 on the Ministry of National Education's organization and duties significantly altered the central structure of the institution. Previously, the Ministry constituted an oversized and fragmented government institution with 16 main service divisions and 13 secondary service divisions as well as several advisory offices. This structure caused a lack of coordination and duplications among other problems. The decree restructured the Ministry's central organization into 10 main service divisions and 19 total divisions. Moreover, the restructuring efforts eliminated various offices of deputy directorate-generals, division and branch heads. These changes rendered the Ministry's central organization smaller and simpler.³⁴ Nonetheless, there is no comprehensive study regarding the influence of these changes to the education system's general functions.

Turkey's education system has a tradition of strong centralization. Not only curricular matters and schools' finances but also staff employment and transfers as well as examinations are highly centralized. Similarly, teachers' appointments and placements take place centrally: All placements occur according to

Public Personnel Selection Test scores. Teachers seeking to transfer to other institutions similarly require centralized appointments.³⁵ Furthermore, the Ministry of National Education strictly determines all curricula, approves school textbooks, and ships all textbooks to institutions across the country. Student take centralized exams in order to enroll in high schools and universities. As mentioned above, the AK Party governments have long aimed at transforming the education system's tendency toward strong centrism and develop a more decentralized education system. Over the past decade, however, the governments actually further strengthened tendencies towards centralization in certain areas. For instance, the centrally authored and delivered guidebook for teachers has, as of 2004, described in great detail each specific task that the teacher is required to do during each class session. The Ministry even developed a detailed set of guidelines to determine how individual teachers would perform their evaluations. The Ministry also identifies how many exams students must take in each course, how many questions each examination ought to feature, and what specific areas the questions must address.³⁶ Although only 10 percent of all students enrolling in primary school took centralized exams for high schools in the early 2000s, over 50 percent sought high school placements through centralized examinations in 2013.³⁷ In other words, more students are being placed into high schools through centralized exams.

A common criticism toward the higher education system is that the Council of Higher Education enjoys extensive powers and thereby exerts pressure on universities and restricts the independence of these institutions.³⁸ In response, almost all post-1990 development plans and government programs pledged to restructure the Council of Higher Education and restrict the institution's mandate to coordinate efforts. No comprehensive reforms, however, have been made over the past two decades. Much like its predecessors, the AK Party government emphasized the need to restructure the Council of Higher Education in the immediate aftermath of its rise to power. Government officials stated that the Council would serve to ensure coordination between universities and that the AK Party would take necessary measures to increase universities' administrative and academic independence.³⁹ Reform initiatives that former Ministers of National Education Erkan Mumcu and Hüseyin Çelik, respectively, developed in 2003 and 2004 faced fierce opposition from university administrations, the Council of Higher Education and President Ahmet Necdet Sezer, and stirred tensions that, at times, involved the country's military commanders. The AK Party's 2004 higher education reform bill received the Parliament's approval, however, it was vetoed by President Sezer. Unwilling to cause further tensions, the AK Party government postponed its plans to reform higher education.⁴⁰

Abdullah Gül's election as the country's new president in August 2007 and his subsequent decision to appoint Yusuf Ziya Özcan as the new chairperson of the

Council of Higher Education in December 2007 significantly reduced tensions between the government and higher education officials to mark the beginning of a period of regularization in education.⁴¹ The trend toward regularization, as we will discuss below, helped resolve a series of long-standing problems, including the coefficient system and the highly controversial headscarf ban in universities. Consequently, students' access to education has drastically improved across the country. Ironically, the Chief Public Prosecutor with the Court of Appeals raised questions about a decision taken by the Council of Higher Education, an independent regulatory body acting within the limits of its constitutional mandate, as part of a case that sought to outlaw the country's ruling AK Party—which had nothing to do with the aforementioned decision. As such, it was a practical impossibility for the government to embark on an ambitious reform programme amidst such intense tensions.

Despite various challenges, Özcan initiated public debate about a much-needed higher education reform as early as 2009. More decisive efforts, however, required time: The Council released a press statement on March 10th, 2011 to announce that the existing system of higher education failed to satisfy popular expectations and called for a total restructuring of higher education in Turkey.⁴² The same statement manifested the Council's commitment to achieving greater accountability and diversity through a more diverse set of government institutions. Having been formed in July 2011, following the AK Party's landslide victory in June 2011 parliamentary elections, the third Erdoğan government, once again, voiced the need to reform higher education in Turkey. The official agenda of the 61st government therefore stated that the Council of Higher Education should coordinate universities' efforts, offer accreditation services, and set quality standards.⁴³

Gökhan Çetinsaya, who took over as the president of the Council of Higher Education in December 2011, has been a more vocal advocate of higher education reform that represented a key objective for the government. In 2012, the Council organized a series of workshops and roundtable discussions with university administrators, academics and NGOs to determine the scope of reform efforts. The year-long discussions helped craft the fundamental principles of the Council's draft proposal by September 2012 and the draft became public in November 2012. In light of responses from education professionals and NGOs, the Council developed a final draft of the higher education reform bill and submitted the full text to the Ministry of National Education in January 2013 for review. The reform bill offered only minor changes to the institution's legal mandate and objectives. Meanwhile, no



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progress with regard to the higher education reform bill has been made public since January 2013.

An overwhelming majority of Turkey's population seems to be in favor of reducing the Council's powers, restricting the Council's mandate to coordination and planning, enhancing universities' administrative and financial independence, and promoting greater accountability within the higher education system.⁴⁴ In a general sense,

Turkey's students' poor performance attracted attention in national and international reports about the state of education

many observers voice support for a more decentralized system of higher education that would allow universities to specialize according to their individual goals and thereby introduce greater diversity among higher education institutions. Although there seems to be a broad

consensus with regard to the need to reform Turkey's higher education system, the failure to develop a specific roadmap that would appeal to a variety of different social groups has thus far rendered all efforts to restructure higher education inconclusive. Surely, proposed changes to higher education have long served as a political battleground with no winners. Briefly put, the question of who would maintain authority over higher education and how they would utilize their powers continues to represent an area of contestation. Thus, the AK Party governments have encountered serious challenges and have not been able thus far to take decisive steps toward higher education reform. This stands as the case at stake. Since public debate about higher education reform tends to concentrate almost exclusively on the procedures for appointing Council members and university chancellors, other crucial issues including accountability, universities' relations with the general public, finances, planning and coordination have been forced into the background. All these factors resulted in the Justice and Development Party's failure to actually reform the higher education system despite keeping the issue on its agenda for over ten years.

In addition to above mentioned reform efforts, the all-party Parliamentary Commission drafting Turkey's new Constitution has reached an agreement with regard to higher education over the past year. In this respect, the new Constitution shall replace the Council of Higher Education with the Higher Education Regulatory Council. The Council's duties and functions, however, remain very much the same –as does the relevant article's length and scope:

The Higher Education Regulatory Council facilitates coordination among institutions of higher education and offers planning and consultation services with regard to the country's higher education needs with a focus on scientific and academic

freedoms, academic and institutional independence, transparency, accountability and participation. [The Council] encourages cooperation between institutions of higher education and various social groups, takes measures to enhance quality [of education], establishes criteria regarding the establishment and closure of universities, schools, institutes and institutions in cooperation with universities, reaches decisions in accordance with evaluations and reports of the relevant institutions, accredits diplomas and academic titles from foreign universities, offers recommendations with regard to the establishment of new universities and changes to the higher education system, sets the fundamental criteria about academic faculty positions and student admissions, evaluates the performance of institutions of higher education and takes necessary precautions.

The newly-established Council, however, would greatly differ from the existing institution in terms of its membership:

The Council consists of fifteen members. Nine members of the Council shall be elected from among full professors by academic personnel currently working at institutions of higher education. During the elections, each academic staff member shall vote for one and only one candidate. The remaining six members of the Council shall be appointed following a vote by the Grand National Assembly of Turkey with a minimum of three-fifths of all Members of Parliament present.

The most striking new development, without a doubt, is that Members of Parliament (in other words, elected officials) would have the power to appoint Council members. As such, the new regulatory body would strongly resemble similar bodies in developed countries. The principle of appointing only full professors to the Council might, however, weaken existing relations between academia and society instead of developing their ties. After all, the common practice in the United States and the overall tendency among OECD member states is to appoint members of both regulatory bodies and board of trustees at universities from outside academic circles.⁴⁵ Yet, it is not certain that the recently agreed upon draft articles of the new Constitution will eventually replace existing articles.

Funding Education

During the AK Party's tenure, the education system experienced considerable improvements in funding. (See Table 2) Education funding has increased to 3.99 percent of Turkey's total GDP in 2013 compared to a mere 2.84 percent when the JDP rose to power in 2002. The establishment of a number of new universities in 2008 resulted in the availability of additional funds following this period. While the Council of Higher Education and individual universities received a total of approximately 0.77 to 0.78 percent of the country's

annual GDP in earlier years, the government increased funding to 0.97 percent of GDP in 2009. Moreover, an August 2012 resolution by the Council of Ministers abolished all tuition fees for day-time university programmes as well as open university majors. Keeping in mind the significant growth that the Turkey's economy enjoyed over the past decade, additional real resources for education has experienced outstanding growth. Compared to only 7.5 billion TL (ca. \$3.75 billion) in 2002, education funding rose sixfold to 47.5 billion TL (ca. \$23.75 billion) in 2013.⁴⁶ The numbers alone demonstrate the significance of recent improvements in education funding.

Table 2. Education Budget to GDP Ratio, 2002-2013 (%)

Year	Ministry of National Education Budget to GDP Ratio	Higher Education Council and University Budgets to GDP Ratio	Total Education Budget to GDP Ratio
2002	2.13	0.71	2.84
2003	2.24	0.75	2.99
2004	2.21	0.79	3.00
2005	2.29	0.81	3.10
2006	2.18	0.78	2.96
2007	2.53	0.78	3.31
2008	2.41	0.77	3.18
2009	2.88	0.97	3.85
2010	2.57	0.84	3.41
2011	2.63	0.93	3.56
2012	2.73	0.91	3.64
2013	3.02	0.97	3.99

Source: Ministry of National Education, 2013.

Comparing available resources for education in Turkey to OECD member states provides a comparative perspective. According to 2010 data, OECD member states allotted an average 6.3 percent of their annual GDP to education while EU member states spent 5.9 percent of their annual GDP on education. Some OECD member states, however, provide significantly more funding to education compared to others. For instance, the United States and New Zealand spend approximately 7.3 percent of their annual GDP on education; similarly, South Korea spends 7.6 percent, Denmark 8 percent.⁴⁷ In short, although the Turkey's government has made significant improvements to the amount of funding available for education, the ratio of education spending to annual GDP remains significantly low compared to OECD and EU member countries.

Another key issue in understanding education funding in Turkey concerns private schools. Education in the country heavily relies on public funding with only a fraction of all students attending private institutions. According to 2002 data, only 1.5 percent of all elementary school students, 1.8 percent

of secondary school students, and 1.6 percent of all students attended private institutions.⁴⁸ The AK Party government made considerable efforts to increase private institutions' share within the broader education system and declared its intentions to increase the private sector share in education to 10 percent.⁴⁹ In order to meet its targets, the AK Party government developed an education bill in July 2003 that offered merit-based public funding to cover low-income students' private school tuitions and authorized the government to provide up to 1,000 TL financial support per year to successful students. Although the Parliament passed the education bill, then-President Ahmet Necdet Sezer declared it unconstitutional since the state could not entrust other institutions to provide services within the government's constitutional mandate. Although future development plans and the Ministry of National

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Education's education strategies continued to support greater private sector involvement, the government could not take any serious steps in this area until 2012. At this point, the AK Party declared its intentions to shut down *dershanes*, private tutoring centers specialized in centralized tests and offering supplementary classes, and announced that public subsidiaries will be available to *dershanes* willing to transform themselves into private schools. The Ministry of National Education has announced that there are certain concrete plans in the pipeline but these efforts have yet to yield any results. Notwithstanding the lack of major reforms, there has been some increase in the total number of students enrolled in private schools over the past ten years. In 2012, participation to private schools was still at lower levels compared to public school enrollments; 3 percent of all elementary school students and 3.1 percent of all secondary education students enrolled in private institutions.⁵⁰

Much like elementary and secondary education, higher education in Turkey has traditionally been represented as a public service. According to Article 130 of the Turkey's Constitution, the Parliament is required to pass a legislation in order to allow the establishment new universities including not-for-profit private ones. In other words, foundations are allowed to establish only not-for-profit universities. Over the past decade, the number of not-for-profit private (foundation) universities rose rapidly from only 23 in 2002 to 69 in September 2013. Moreover, eight private professional schools have been established during this period. Consequently, the number of university students enrolled in private institutions rose steadily to nearly double between 2002 and 2012.⁵¹ Briefly put, improvements with regard to access to education in recent years required additional funding in this area. In response, the AK Party government has both made available additional public funds for education and

sought to reach out to new financial sources by promoting private schools and universities.

Democratizing the Education System

During the AK Party's initial years in power, successive governments concentrated on technical issues such as constructing new schools, promoting school enrollment, and modernizing curricula. In recent years, the government took some significant and bold steps in an attempt to democratize the country's education system. Below, we analyze these democratization efforts in greater detail and engage in a discussion about unresolved problems.

Equal Opportunity in University Entrance Exams

The *coefficient system*, a method of calculating applicants' scores in university entrance exams to keep them within their academic discipline, represented one of Turkey's most controversial issues of its education system throughout the 2000s. The Council of Higher Education adopted the system in the immediate aftermath of the military's *postmodern coup* on February 28th, 1997. Under the coefficient system, applicants who wished to enroll in university programs other than their high school concentration would experience severe reductions in their test scores.⁵² The AK Party pledged to abolish the coefficient system, one of the leading problems with the education system, in its Official Agenda of 58th Government in 2002 and in the Urgent Action Plan in 2003. The government adopted measures to reduce the coefficient system's influence as part of its higher education reform efforts in 2003 and 2004. Consequently, the Parliament passed a legislation in May 2004 to move away from the coefficient system. President Ahmet Necdet Sezer subsequently vetoed the legislation.⁵³ President Abdullah Gül's decision to appoint Prof. Yusuf Ziya Özcan as the new President of the Council of Higher Education in December 2007 revived public debate about the coefficient system.

Under Özcan, the Council resolved to ensure equal opportunity for students of various academic backgrounds by using the same coefficient for all applicants on July 21st, 2009. As such, students would compete over university positions regardless of their high school concentrations. The Council of Higher Education, however, had to reinstitute the coefficient system with some limitations when the Council of State struck down its July 2009 decision that effectively abolished the coefficient system. The new university entrance examination regime that came into effect in 2010 failed to address all the problems associated with the coefficient system yet managed to partially remedy inequalities and allow fairer competition between applicants.⁵⁴ In 2012, the AK Party

government sponsored Law No. 6287 –popularly known as “the 4+4+4”- that stated that all university applicants, regardless of their concentration and high school, were subject to the same coefficient. The 2012 law effectively abolished the coefficient system that had provoked much controversy since its adoption in 1998.

Furthermore, another 2012 legislation abolished the Weighted High School Cumulative GPA system that was adopted in 1999 and functioned as an unofficial coefficient by providing additional points to applicants from high schools that performed strongly in university entrance exams in the past. In this regard, the Weighted GPA system served as an instrument to maintain inequality of opportunity among students.⁵⁵ Therefore, the decision to abolish the Weighted GPA system marked an important step toward greater equality of opportunity in education.

Abolishing the Headscarf Ban

Another heavily contested practice throughout the past decade was the controversial headscarf ban that prevented college students from wearing the religious hijab on university campuses. As such, the ban imposed severe restrictions on students' right to education and represented the single most negative impact of the February 28th regime on higher education. Ever since its introduction, the headscarf ban faced heavy opposition from the general population. The most notable attempt to abolish the ban took place when AK Party and Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) deputies sponsored a constitutional amendment in 2008. Dissatisfied with the resulting legislation that sought to eliminate the headscarf ban and thereby safeguard the right to education, the Republican People's Party (CHP) appealed to the Constitutional Court that subsequently struck down the law on June 5th, 2008. The Court maintained that “the legislation violates Article 4 of the Constitution that prohibits all amendments, proposed and actual, [regarding the first four articles of the text] as it makes indirect changes to the Republic's fundamental attributes and renders them ineffective.”⁵⁶ In the aftermath of the Court's decision, the government sought to develop a de facto solution to address the headscarf ban due to a lack of available legal channels. The 2010 Constitutional referendum, once again, initiated a public debate about the ban. The Council of Higher Education, upon receiving a complaint from a female university student who was expelled from a classroom due to her refusal to take off her hat (a practical



Over the past decade, the number of not-for-profit private universities rose rapidly from 23 in 2002 to 69 in 2013

replacement for the headscarf), issued a formal warning to the university that students who disobey the disciplinary code may not be expelled from class. The Council's orders created an impromptu channel to circumvent the headscarf ban. Moreover, Özcan pioneered efforts to abolish the headscarf ban at centralized examinations.⁵⁷

The 4+4+4 Reform

The primary forces that shaped Turkey's education system have traditionally been members of military juntas and the high judiciary. For example, it was the military command that requested significant changes to elementary and secondary school curricula as well as higher education following the February 28th postmodern coup. These changes, however, failed to reflect popular demands for education. A case in point was the decision to shut down religious

vocational schools despite fierce opposition from the general public. In 2012, AK Party deputies with some support from MHP and BDP deputies passed the 4+4+4 reform that marked an important step in democratizing the education system and paved the way for significant improvements in education. The legislation stirred reactions from main opposition party (CHP) and certain NGOs during parliamentary hearings.⁵⁸

Democratization Package of 2013 includes permission to use regional and minority languages as medium of instruction in private schools

The 4+4+4 reform's immediate effect was the division of mandatory education (previously 8 years) into two four-year stages. The vast majority of edu-

cation experts agree on the benefits of providing primary education in stages.⁵⁹ Nonetheless, opponents of the 4+4+4 reforms claimed that the new primary education programme represented a harmful practice from a pedagogical standpoint and argued that the plan contradicted successful practices across the globe.⁶⁰ Despite their allegations, many developed countries provide four to six years of primary education in various individual stages.⁶¹ Nonetheless, certain experts from among the supporters of the plan to abolish the 8-year mandatory education advocated 5+3 years as opposed to 4+4 years of primary education in light of Turkey's education infrastructure and tradition.⁶² The restructuring of primary education resulted in a surplus of primary school teachers and caused a large number of teachers to start teaching different subjects than they were trained in.

The second major change was the re-establishment of religious vocational schools and the introduction of elective courses on religion. Critics maintained that these developments demonstrated the government's hidden agenda

to render the country's youth more religious. Moreover, certain commentators argued that many children, most notably students from the lower classes, would be compelled to enroll in religious vocational schools.⁶³ Despite the claims, religious vocational schools enjoyed considerable popularity among students, 7.7 percent of whom enrolled in these institutions according to official data.⁶⁴ Opponents of elective courses on religion similarly voiced concern that students who opt not to elect these courses would face severe peer pressure.⁶⁵ Researchers testing these claims, however, failed to gather any conclusive evidence in this regard. On the contrary, studies have shown that the introduction of these elective courses satisfied popular demand and received widespread support from parents.⁶⁶

The 4+4+4 reform programme introduced elective courses not only on religion but also various native languages including Kurdish and Abkhazian. In 2013, the Laz language was added to the list of electives. These new elective courses represent an important opportunity for students whose native language is not Turkish and/or are interested in learning the said languages. The Ministry of National Education introduced these courses against the background of the Kurdish community's demands to educate their children in their native language – an issue that The Wise People Commission reports strongly emphasized as part of the 2013 Peace Process in the country.⁶⁷ The AK Party declared a new Democratization Package in September 2013 which includes permission to use regional and minority languages as medium of instruction in private schools.

It has been argued that new education policies in the aftermath of 2011 elections, such as 4+4+4 reform, show a substantial change from the previous policies of the AK Party. This argument stresses that new policies now stem directly from the government; not from bureaucracy, international organizations, and civil society.⁶⁸ However, contrary to this argument, new education policies including 4+4+4 reform are a result of popular demands and previous policy documents. To illustrate, the National Education Congress in 2010 suggested, among others, that the education system should be restructured as 4+4+4.⁶⁹ Moreover, public opinion polls showed that the great majority of people in Turkey were in favor of introducing new elective religious courses after the 4+4+4 reform in 2012.⁷⁰ In addition, it is true that the passage of the 4+4+4 law was hotly debated and some controversies are “as old as the republic, such as the role of religious education in the education system of a secular state, and these continue to generate much emotion”.⁷¹ The good news is that as the political discussions are going on and the military's influence on political parties is reduced, all different viewpoints on educational policies are heard in the public domain. Moreover, due to the diversity within public opinion on the early forms of the 4+4+4 law draft, many changes were made in order to answer the criticisms against the early form of the draft. As Turkey is attempting

to renew the Constitution that was drafted after the military intervention, it is very reasonable to think that a reformed educational system will meet what society demands of it.

De-militarization Efforts

Still, various elements of Turkey's education system continue to bear traces of the country's military tutelage regime. For example, the Higher Education Law that came into force one year after the military coup of September 12th, 1980, structured the entire system of higher education hierarchically and identified its primary objective as educating students who were committed to the "nationalism of Atatürk." In other words, the purpose of the law was to indoctrinate students. A draft legislation that the Council of Higher Education prepared in 2013 –still pending Parliament's approval- seeks to remove certain expressions within the law that reference indoctrination.

One of the most important steps that the AK Party government took toward the education system's de-militarization was to abolish the mandatory National Security classes that received severe criticism due to the assignment of uniformed military officers as instructors. Experts on the subject stated that abolishing National Security classes served to reduce the military's influence over education. However, many observers contend that the militarist perspective in curricula and textbooks remains intact and that the government needs to take additional steps in this area.⁷² Furthermore, the government took several steps to eliminate rituals and ceremonies originating from authoritarian periods. It was in this regard that the Ministry of National Education declared in 2012 that ceremonies for the Commemoration of Atatürk, Youth and Sports Day (May 19th) would be held exclusively at schools, not at stadiums. Then-Minister of National Education Ömer Dinçer defended the regulation by maintaining that such events distracted students from academic activities.⁷³ As a matter of fact, preparations for these events prevented students from attending classes for several weeks at a time. It was in this sense that the Ministry's decision to abolish massive ceremonies at stadiums and elsewhere represented a positive development.⁷⁴ Opponents, however, stated that cancelling the ceremonies was an attack against shared values that kept Turkey's society together.⁷⁵

Necessary Steps for Democratization

Surprisingly, the students' oath, which was just abolished by the AK Party in September 2013 Democratization Package, included extremely nationalist elements. Similarly, female educators lacked the legal entitlement to wear the headscarf until October 2013. Notwithstanding these democratic moves,

Turkey still has to address a variety of significant challenges. Both primary and secondary education as well as higher education still remains geared toward constructing a monotype identity devoid of cultural plurality found in Turkey's society and maintains its ideological stance. Moreover, the education system lacks the level of diversity that is necessary to meet society's demands and international standards for competitiveness.

Concluding Remarks

As this article has shown, Turkey has expanded educational opportunities in an unprecedented way in the last decade with the leadership of AK Party. The Government's educational policies have contributed to "the improvements in education outcomes including curriculum reform, phased modernization of teaching and learning materials and practices, stronger focus on measuring learning outcomes through large scale national and international assessments, and enhanced monitoring and evaluation systems".⁷⁶ During the last decade, international organizations such as the World Bank, European Commission, and UNICEF and national organizations including business associations, think tanks, foundations, and teachers' unions played an important role in helping and formulating the policies of the Ministry of National Education and the Council of Higher Education. This civil cooperation during the AK Party era is relatively new and very noteworthy considering the fact that the education policies had been previously formulated by top-down approaches during the eras of military tutelage in Turkey.

There is no question that the AK Party government's greatest achievement over the course of its decade-long tenure was the significant improvement in enrollment levels at all levels from kindergarden to higher education. In addition to higher enrollment levels, the government succeeded in alleviating region- and gender-based inequalities to a great extent. Furthermore, the educational system reforms helped reduce the average number of students per classroom, increase the instructor-to-student ratio as government-sponsored initiatives equipped classrooms with advanced computer technology and brought existing education programmes up-to-date with new developments. The AK Party, an ardent supporter of



Both primary and secondary education as well as higher education still remains geared toward constructing a monotype identity

education reforms, succeeded in meeting the vast majority of its targets from the Official Agenda of 58th Government as well as the Urgent Action Plan. In this process, however, the party was unable to make additional reforms with regard to the education system's decentralization, increased private sector contributions, and the restructuring of the Council of Higher Education. Nevertheless, looking at the impact of a variety of reform efforts under the AK Party, it becomes clear that Turkey made considerable progress vis-a-vis TIMSS and PISA scores over the past ten years. Commenting on the Turkey's education system, the World Bank in its report in 2005 stated that the education system provided inadequate and low-quality education to the majority of students and offered quality education only to a privileged minority.⁷⁷ In contrast, the World Bank praised Turkey's exceptional performance in increasing both access to education and the quality of education in its 2013 report.⁷⁸ Eventhough the average scores of Turkey's PISA performance in 2009 increased, it still remained considerably lower than the OECD average.

Despite various improvements, certain major problems and difficulties continue to persist in Turkey's education system. In the area of access to education, some provinces experience low enrollment levels in primary education. Furthermore, the level of access to secondary education remains particularly low in Turkey's eastern provinces. Similarly, enrollment of female children in institutions of secondary education is disproportionately low in the same provinces. In addition to these issues, the country fails to provide high quality education to all citizens. In this respect, geographic location and socio-economic structures successfully account for students' academic success. Even though the Turkey's government channels increasingly more public funds to education every passing year, country-wide education spending remains significantly modest compared to OECD and EU member states. In terms of administrative structures, both national (primary and secondary) education and higher education systems maintain their excessive emphasis on centralization, and too many reservations remain towards diversity because of this over reliance on centralized decision-making processes. In this sense, a series of obstacles before the education system's democratization await Turkey's education system in the future. These include the education system's excessively centralized organizational structure as well as the presence of overly nationalistic expressions in school curricula that leaves no room for pluralism and seeks to indoctrinate the student body. ■

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