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Changes in the Education System under the AK Parti Governments

Mehmet YILMAZ¹

Abstract: The Turkish Justice and Development Party (AK Parti) after its first electoral victory in 2002 slowly started to reform the educational system of the country after a decade of economic crisis and political uncertainty. Without changing the driving principles of the 1973 law on education, the ruling party of Turkey managed to establish a new structure in which both students and families took their share of responsibility, ensured finances and took cognizance of western educational trends. The original aim of the AK Parti was to strengthen democracy and make freedom an essential component of the whole system; in fact, lately, it considered education as more a tool for progress at a time Turkey was dreaming of becoming a regional power.

Keywords: Turkey, education, AK Parti.

Introduction

Education in general and in times of political and economic development in particular are key elements in the electoral and political programs of leading political parties across the globe. The Turkish Justice and Development Party (known to the local public as AKP or AK Parti) rules the Middle Eastern nation since 2002 by winning five consecutive parliamentary elections. During this period of one and a half decade, the AK Parti considerably stabilized the county which, in the 1990s was tormented by continuous political turmoil, coalition discords, economic recession and a so called “Postmodern military coup”. It can be stated that this right-wing conservative political formation succeeded in consolidating the overall social structure of the Turkish Republic including its system of education in the primary, secondary and higher education levels. Therefore, the goal of this paper is not only to describe educational reform, but also to present it as an inherent element of a wider political change and as a pillar of sustainable social and economic development. As Turkey’s main goal is to become an indispensable international actor by 2023, the year of the 100th anniversary of the founding of the republic by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk falls. However, it is evident that it cannot be achieved unless a spectacular advancement is realized in all aspects of life including the field of education.

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In this essay, after explaining the historical background of public education in Turkey, the changes that have taken place under the AK Parti rule will be analysed by examining the modifications to the law on education and the electoral programs of the party as they reflect what the party intends to do and what they really do. After this long analysis two interesting cases will be proposed to see how, despite the modernization and the democratization of the system, politics and education still remain intertwined.

History of modern education in Turkey

Turks, during the time of the establishment of the Ottoman empire in 1299 and even prior to it, had various forms of educational institutions mainly focusing on military and religious education, sometimes separately or in combination. The Ottomans were supporting the madrassahs or Islamic theological schools providing a wide range of knowledge - not necessarily only religious - to the pupils. The modern western style schools came into existence in 1839, at the time of sultan Albulmeced, an important Ottoman reformer who introduced a new political regime called the “tanzimat”, meaning administrative reforms, in Turkey (Turk, 2013). The tanzimat, inspired by the ideals of the European nationalism and the burgeoning nation-states in the West, took place at a time when nationalist feelings were running high that led to the founding of the first schools called “Sibyan mekteb” that taught modern secular sciences such as history and geography that deferred from the Islamic religious history taught in madrassahs at that time. Abdulmeced saw these reforms as a window of opportunity to open Turkish education system to the west, especially towards France, the country Turkey had chosen to emulate in its reformation efforts. In the same year, elementary schools known as “mulkiye mekteb” were also opened and education was made compulsory for the youngest generations. As a modern school system is impossible without a proper teacher training strategy, the first Darulmuallimin or teacher training college was launched on the 16th March, 1848. Abdulmeced’s successor, sultan Abdulaziz continued the work of his predecessor by ordering the constant revision and renewal of the national programs of each and every school subject. He is also credited with the founding of Darul Muallimat in 1870, the higher educational institution to train future female teachers.

In the 1870’s, schools began proliferating in the Ottoman empire, some of them were designated to various religious and ethnic minorities, some others were even run by foreign nationals or institutions. As the

Islamic nature of the system was slowly challenged, sultan Abdulhamid II issued a general law on education. This regulation named Kanun-i esasi was the first to precisely determine the Turkish system of education in detail (Baytal, 2000, p. 29). The same emperor, in 1873, founded the first modern secondary school or “lise”, modelled after the lycées found in France. This Mekteb-i sultani, though under a different name, is still in operation in the Galatasaray district of Istanbul (Baytal, 2000, p. 30).

The first decades of the 20th century can be described as the era of over-politicization of schools. The sultan Abdulhamid showed to be supportive of a nationalist change in education with his program of Milli terbiye or national education (Sahin and Tokdemir, 2011, p. 853). This nationalist course did not end at the fall of the empire and the subsequent establishment of the republic. On the contrary, Mustafa Kemal and his followers by issuing the Tevhid-i Tedrisat Kanunu (Law on Uniform Education) in 1924, their new law on education, stressed the importance of national unity. A new feature of this system was secularization. Persian and Arabic were no more taught, the Ottoman empire was pictured as evil and the ancient Turkic elements were presented as ideal for the republican generations (Aslan, 2012, p. 334).

“Due to the importance given to modern education since the founding of the Turkish Republic in mid 1920s and the steps taken by the ruling governments since then, the demand for education at every level increased considerably.” (Cekerol, 2012, p. 344) The next change in the system came in 1973, well after the introduction of a multiparty system in 1946 and the first free and fair elections held in 1950 and several coups staged by the army. This law, called Milli Egitim Temel Kanunu or Basic Law of National Education is still in force though regularly modified according to the needs of the changing governments.

Principles of and changes in the Basic Law of National Education

The law enforced in 1973 and modified several times since its first ratification still bears the marks of the Ataturk era is not only a frame for the system, but also features a set of ethical and political principles to be followed by the diverse political forces. As the Turkish constitution prohibits any change to the secular nature of the country, these Ataturkist ideals restrict everyone in power, including the otherwise Islam-friendly AK Parti. So, they are under obligation to respect the following basic principles: universality, equality, right to education, access to opportunities, continuity, the revolutionary ideas of Ataturk and his version of nationalism,

democracy, secularism, mixed education from a gender point of view, and scientific approach. These represent a mixture of old and new principles that were there from the beginning to the end of the 20th century.

Careful observation of the changes that has been made to the text of this 43 year old law makes it apparent that the alterations implemented during the last 14 years by the AK Parti legislation are not based on ideological issues, but rather on practical aspects such as the school model or the status of the teachers. Worldwide studies support the view that pro-government teachers are happy with their professional status and it is obvious that those governments wanting to get re-elected attempt to keep them that way by addressing the issues in their professional statuses.

Close analysis of the law on education reveals the changes done to it during the one and half decade long rule of the Justice and Development Party.

In this essay, an attempt is made to give a systematic overview on how these modifications reformed the system of education in Turkey. In fact, since the law is rather old and had been in force for over four decades, all changes that had been done during this period do not fall under the administration we are now examining. However, the changes done during the period under consideration outnumber the modifications carried out during the past periods. To check the original Turkish text and articles of the law and its modifications, please, refer to the two versions added to our bibliography under the title of authentic documents.

Article n. 16

The first main change concerns the founding of school campuses. The changes to Article n. 16 make the establishment of new school campuses and their management much easier. It previews the cooperation of the Ministry of Finance and the Ministry of Education in the realization and the administration of such facilities. The law proposes the establishment of complete campuses comprising multi-functional buildings aimed at the ease and comfort of the students and teachers. The changes voted in 2009 have reformed the functioning of the schools, too.

A step taken towards a better cooperation of the actors in the field of education can be seen in the passage of the law that installed a system in which the school administration and the parents of the pupils can coordinate their actions. During the past decades in the West and to some extent in Turkey as well, one could notice a widening gap between the institutions and the families. Until the 1980's, families tended to accept the evaluation of their children done by the teachers but today they voice more and more

concern and criticism. This Western habit gained hold in the non-European context of Turkey urging decision-makers to act. The Turkish solution for this problem was the so called “school-family units” having the goal of the eventual settlement of disputes. These units play an even wider role as they support students in difficulty or in need or organize certain thematic campaigns and stage cultural events. They also intervene in the functioning of the school services such as refectories, and they are even entitled to collect money to cover the expenses of those services. “Another arrangement which strengthens parents’ participation in school administration within the context of localization of education in Turkey is the “Student-Parent-School Agreement” brought into force with the notice no 92 by the Office of Research and Development in Education under the Ministry of Education on 10th October 2005.” (Yolcu, 2011, p. 1244)

This article of the law also presents the decentralized nature of these school campuses and school-family units as they are supervised by government bodies at the departmental level.

The above reforms now make the founding of schools much easier and during the rule of the AK Parti many local communities have seen the opening of new institutions. Schools with their school-family units are more integrated with the overall Turkish society, whereas the decentralization of school supervision acted in the sense of implementing more democratic values than before.

Article n. 21

Article n. 21 of the Turkish law on education was amended in 2008. The amendment withdrew the permission given to companies under the Law on Businesses to establish their own kindergartens. Accordingly, larger firms were unable to run their institutions and all pre-school facilities were managed and supervised by the government. This change seems to have had a centralizing effect, but as the age category involved was sensitive, it was understandable that the nation preferred to have control over how the youngest children were educated. Another reason why this change was crucial is that “children enrolment 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.” (Celik & Gur, 2013, p. 152)

Article n. 22

Article 22 of the law has been amended on two occasions since its initial drafting in 1973. The first amendment was done in 1983 and the

second under the AK Parti rule in 2012. The amendments define what compulsory education is. In 1983, the age of compulsory education was defined as between the ages of 6 and 14 and in 2012, it was changed to ages 5 and 13. This change could be considered a technical one, however, one cannot forget that in the western world the compulsory education lasts much more, until the ages of 16 or 18. During the first half of the AK Parti rule, the age of compulsory education was not extended, but later measures were taken to do so. "The fact that the durations of primary and secondary education were extended according to the prevailing conditions and the fact that multi-program secondary education models and "preparation school" practices for universities being available caused more and more individuals in Turkey to spend more years in educational institutions as well as encouraged young people to continue with university education." (Cerekol, 2012, p. 348)

Another alarming feature of the law is compulsory education not being free anymore at government run institutions. This means that the state can charge fees for what it considers as obligatory. These disturbing changes did not end there. As the phrasing of the law got simplified sections of the law that made education equally compulsory to male and female students had also been removed. The reason for this removal is unknown. The old version was more explicit in terms of gender equality. A ruling party frequently accused of being Islamist can be easily criticized for such a measure more so because of their expressed claim of modernizing Turkey.

Articles n. 24-28

These articles describe the general structure of the Turkish national education system. During the rule of the AK Parti there was a major change at this level leading to greater autonomy to different levels of education, especially after dividing what used to be the first eight years of education. Primary education after the 1983 school reform following an important military coup was a compact training of eight years, whereas the present system launched in 2012 after a proposal by the AK Parti legislators makes the first period of four years (ilkokul) and the second period of four years (ortaokul) two independent stages. The law permits the establishment of such complex institutions where the students can stay from the beginning of their schooling until they finish their secondary education (lise). This system is popularly referred to as "4+4+4" and is a strategy to provide opportunities of secondary school enrolment to some (Tok, 2012, p. 290) and an education system turned upside down to others (Sasmaz, 2015a, 2015b, 2013). With the above measures most Turkish children (over 97%)

attended school in the last years of the 2000's (Celik, 2012, pp. 153-154). Their numbers had been growing in the 2010's according to the electoral campaign documents to be presented later.

The main reason for the change is the introduction of areas of specialization to the second four year period orienting the students in their effort of find a suitable career. The second period gives opportunities of professional or technical education for those who are not willing to continue after the compulsory years. A meaningful modification was done to the number of years of this training by extending it to two more semesters. Those who finish this level are honoured by a newly introduced middle school diploma. These steps show a close cooperation between the government and the civil society organizations working in this field (Tok, 2012, p. 291).

The second important novelty is the so called imam-hatip schools engaged in religious education and training future Islamic scholars and speakers at the level of the *ortakuls*. The AK Parti benefiting from the massive vote of the more religious strata of society made this alteration to please this conservative segment of its electorate. It is to be noted though, that the AK Parti-government itself did not amend the Article n. 32 that established the imam-hatip schools in general.

Article 43

This is rather a long article regulating the status of the teachers and has been amended during the AK Parti rule several times due to multiple objections by the Constitutional Court. This court always being very loyal to the Republican and Atatürkist principles acts reasonably and fairly in the most disputed cases of legislation, in this case further education of teachers. This precisely means that the law has abolished the continuous training as a condition for progressing in the career scheme comprising of four levels (candidate, teacher, master teacher and head teacher). It is a very interesting decision in a situation where in the Western World lifelong learning is more and more emphasized.

The changes done during the AK Parti era specify the conditions for the ones who desire to become teachers in the public education system. According to the new version of the law it is not enough to have a required diploma, but also the candidate has to pass an exam organized by the Ministry of Education or its Measurement Center. The candidate after one year of practice has to pass another written and oral examination where a certain number of pedagogical qualities of the candidate is tested. Only the ones with proper self-esteem and good communication skills are able to pass

these tests. The law also describes the future of those who succeed and those who fail. These preconditions is a step towards a quality management approach. According to Tok, the AK Parti also planned to implement a new system of payment for the teachers including a premium for those who teach in underdeveloped and problematic regions (Tok, 2012, p. 276). In general, one can say that the socially conservative ruling party favours liberal economic views, including the implementation of Western business principles like Total Quality Management, first in the field of manufacturing and later in the services and the civil service sectors.

Article n. 51

This article of the law on education stipulates the way the finances of a school should be managed in Turkey. The main supporter of the educational institutions is the Turkish National Treasury. The passage was voted in 2003. This means that economic independence of the schools and their good finances were first priorities of the newly elected Ak Parti government.

As we can see from the above examples, the AK Parti has brought multiple changes at various levels to an old basic law governing the Turkish public education system in general. These changes could considerably modify the old structure established in 1974 without fundamentally overthrowing the existing scheme. These gradual changes could secure a calm transition from an over-centralized and under-financed regime to a more stable one.

Educational policy of the AK Parti in the light of the electoral programs of the party

It is clear from the above alterations to the text of the basic law that a certain number of practical measures have been taken. It is always a good idea to compare these achievements with the actual aims and goals of a political party has stated through its most complex documents: the electoral campaign proposals. As the AK Party has won five consecutive elections since 2002 and two in 2015 one can closely examine how the policy has changed over the years and how it is related to the modification of the above law and other fundamental legal documents.

In our present chapter, we will try to give a systematic overview of the political goals and ideals of the AK Parti through its electoral campaign documents and their proposals related to education. To check the Turkish

text, please, refer to the AK Parti electoral programs under the title of authentic documents in the bibliography.

“Everything for Turkey”

The first winning program and electoral slogan have been “Everything for Turkey” or *Her şey Türkiye için* in Turkish. The importance of education in this document is already mentioned in its preface where it is closely linked to the important question of democracy and democratization. After a decade of turmoil and shifting coalitions in the 1990’s, the AK Parti suggested that only an educated Turkish society can be democratized and led towards an ever democratizing and open nation. In this document a proper education system appears as a prerequisite for the country’s development and modernization. It is also to be noted that in the introductory chapter of the document education and its reforms are always mentioned with an equally important factor: health care.

The chapter dedicated to the question of education comes on the 79th page of the document under the title of “Excellent education”. The entire program contains 93 pages and out of which 3 pages are consecrated to the field of education.

It was a good sign that the AK Parti was considering the system of education and especially the universities as top priority at a time Turkey was going through its worst economic crisis and its resultant severe austerity measures.

In the same document education is also given a key role in solving Turkey’s incredibly high unemployment rate.

From a political viewpoint, it is very exciting to see that the introductory slogan for the chapter on education in this document places very clear emphasis on the notion of freedom as the AK Parti is not a liberal political formation per se. The slogan “educating a generation with freedom of thought, freedom of consciousness and freedom of wisdom” is not what was expected of conservatives with a distinctive religious background. From a pedagogical perspective, it is surprising as it gives preference to the competences over knowledge, another approach imported from the liberal West. The document also describes the ideal output of the system. So, a good student who understands the AK Parti, is the one who is free in his or her intellectual gains, decides independently, open to novelties, self-confident, optimistic and capable of solving problems.

The first proposal for the things to be changed is closely related to the above ideals. It is an evident introduction of the new western and liberal pedagogical trends on the abolition of the old methods based on learning by

heart and replacing them with competence-oriented ways. The latter proposals preview all the major changes that were highlighted during the presentation of the amendments to the law including the demolition of the strict hierarchy, securing the independence of the establishments and an efficient preparation both for those who wished to continue with higher education and the ones who preferred to get a professional diploma. Some proposals were in vain. One area, which is still problematic in Turkey, is the development of foreign language education in public schools. Even though the AK Parti has been ruling Turkey for 15 years, in this question we cannot report an important schism; most Turks fully ignore foreign idioms.

The paragraph on universities is much less ambitious, especially when compared with recent achievements. The idea of establishing universities in every region of the country that could bring higher education to less developed areas of the nation is not found here. What is still remarkable is the infiltration of this part of the text with an important western notion of project oriented approach that currently governs the overall structure.

“Do not stop, keep going”

The second winning campaign document and electoral slogan in 2007 was “Do not stop, keep going” or *Durmak yok, yola devam* in Turkish. As this document is substantially longer, deeper in its analysis and proposes a wider range of solutions, the chapter on education also contains considerably more pages. The plans for education are detailed on 12 pages.

Going through the electoral campaign proposals, one has to notice a remarkable change in the approach. Between the years of 2002 and 2007, Turkey was able to terminate its deep economic crisis and start a spectacular growth, whose achievements displaced freedom with the notion of development. In the document published five years earlier, the chapter on education was organized around promoting a western-style understanding of human liberties, whereas in the present context education is pictured as an important partner of ongoing advancements. The key phrase with regard to this change is as follows: “education is a lifelong service that enables our population to take part in the progress, stability and prosperity of the nation”.

This document has a number of interesting proposals for the voters besides a visible moving away from the main approach that emphasised more on freedom than on a better economy, thanks to education. The first is the importance placed on pre-school education. The goal of the AK Parti here is to raise the percentage of kindergarten-educated kids from 11% to

25% by the next election and 80% by the year 2023, the 100th anniversary of the founding of the modern Turkish Republic. As a matter of fact 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.” (Celik-Gur, 2013, p. 153). After an impressive development of new secondary schools and student hostels in the rural areas across the country, including 385 Anatolian (traditional) high schools, 65 Anatolian pedagogical high schools, 20 scientific high schools and a number of sportive and arts schools, the ruling party promises to carry the modernization of the public education with an elevated financial support to 1.6 billion poor families to help them educate their children. As we have already noticed in the previous chapter dealing with the law on education, one of the top priorities of AK Parti in the early stages of its rule was to secure funding for Turkish education. As money was gradually flowing into the system since 2003, the conservatives could promise one more step: after supporting the schools, support the families in need.

One of the main promises concerning the public education is to make the number of compulsory years grow from eight to twelve until 2023. As we could see earlier, even today there is no major change in this issue even though the very text of the law has been modified several times, but the number of years remain unchanged.

A very visible attention is paid to professional education. Three pages out of the 12 pages on education deal with this aspect. The main goal of the AK Parti here is to accord the old system with an ever evolving and fast developing technologies. An interesting proposal to solve the problem of the existing technological gap is to follow the European pattern, namely the good practice of EU’s Leonardo program. This idea clearly shows us that principle of westernization is still alive among the policymakers of the Justice and Development Party.

The same can be said when the chapter on higher education is examined. The most important achievement of the first five years of the AK Parti rule according to this document is that after 2006 one thousand Turkish students could start their studies abroad with the help of the government and 5.000 more could enter domestic scholarship programs. A good news for the students and probably a very appealing albeit populist offer for the young voters at that time was the increase in the stipend from a monthly 45 Turkish Lira to 150 Turkish Lira. This support proved to be

elementary to the further development of the Turkish higher education sector (Tok, 2012:300).

The key elements of the 2007 electoral program were economic progress and better finances, a clear shift from the political claims for freedom in 2002. The AK Parti tried to attract voters by rightly distributing a part of the increasing central incomes and accordingly raising the quality and strengthening the conditions of the Turkish education.

“Turkey is ready: the aim is 2023”

For the 2011 general elections, the AK Parti had published a document named “Turkey is ready: the aim is 2023” or *Türkiye hazır: hedef 2023* in Turkish. 2023 -as we specified earlier in this chapter- is the 100th anniversary of the republic, which is a very important and symbolic date for the Turkish nation. This program -as far as its length s concerned- is shorter than the previous one, but longer than the first one, compared to this the four page long chapter on education seems a bit short, but it has to be kept in mind that it is still the first point under the title of “Strong society”.

The introduction and the general description on the importance of education word by word is the same as it was in 2007. This means that the economic-minded approach to education has not changed over the years. One reason for this stability could be that during the first two terms of the AK Parti, as seen by examining the modifications to the law, was the implementation of major structural changes. This document also refers to the previous ones stating that they achieved all what they had promised in 2002 and 2007. According to this program the main achievements are the following. First, an important pedagogical reform has been introduced and now the education is not based on learning by heart. Second, the budget for education has been raised from 10,8 billion Turkish Lira in 2002 to 49 billion in 2011. Third, until 2011 the number of classrooms have been augmented by 162.000 representing a 30% growth. Additionally, 747 student hostels, 920 sporting facilities and 6146 libraries and documentation centers have been added to primary and secondary schools. Fourth, measures have been taken to prepare the pupils for the challenges of the present information society by distributing 844.000 computers among them and by equipping 97% of schools with fast internet connections for digital class rooms. Fifth, since 2003 textbooks have been given for free and also a remarkably high number of scholarships (Tok, 2012, p. 306-307). As “today, while the enrolment rate of boys and girls in elementary education is equal, almost one third of adult Turkish women are still illiterate and illiteracy among women is three times as much as that of among men and is mostly found in rural

areas of the eastern and south-eastern provinces,” (Kose, 2013, p. 102). The document proudly announces another interesting facet of development. During the years between 2002 and 2011 350.000 girls - who were not attending school for various reasons - could start their studies and 567.000 illiterate mothers could learn how to read and write. This last step must be seen in the right context. The AK Parti, a political formation that is frequently accused of being Islamist, puts a visible emphasis on the education of girls and their illiterate mothers. Another noteworthy project mentioned here is the so called “Bridge of hearts” that tried to narrow the differences between the richer Western provinces and the poorer Eastern regions of Turkey by relocating 130.000 students in the two areas.

Spectacular changes can be noticed at the university level, too. By founding 89 new public universities, their numbers have doubled in 9 years. Today, there is not a single administrative unit of Turkey without a proper higher educational institution. Their budget has grown by almost 500% including an ever growing amount of money given to the students as scholarships. The number of young people studying at universities across the country has increased considerably (Yavuzaslan, Barışçıl, & Fekete-Farkas, 2016). “As such, approximately 950,000 students were able to secure university admissions 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.” (Celik-Gur, 2013, p. 155)

The main goals for the future according to the 2011 electoral program is the strengthening of pre-school education. This had been already promised five years earlier, but only a few steps were taken to implement them. Now, the AK Parti pledges to make kindergarten education obligatory in 81 regions of the country. The second noticeable proposition is the nomination of more teachers than before bringing down the student to teacher ratio to 20:1. Back in the 1990’s, it was quite frequent to have over 40 pupils in a classroom. Unfortunately, in some areas this is still the case. An article revealed a painful anomaly. Despite the diminution of the classes in Anatolia, only 25 out of 700 high schools in Istanbul start their classes with less than 40 students according to a directive given by a ministerial decree in 2014. Paradoxically enough, classes in the richest western cities are the most overcrowded (Balmuk, 2015).

After founding a large number of new universities, the ruling party now promises to raise their social status while making an interesting proposal to initiate Turkish language universities in different countries of the World.

This last idea makes us think that the AK Parti considers that the transformation of the educational system in Turkey is over and as Turkey's intention is to become an important international actor and a regional super power by 2023, this expansion of the Turkish interests also includes the expansion of the Turkish school model abroad.

On the way to a new Turkey - Permanent justice, permanent development

In the year 2015, Turkey had two national elections because after the first one in June, no party had an absolute majority and the four parties elected were not able to form a coalition. As two elections were held, the political parties were obliged to write two distinct electoral programs for the two occasions. So, the first one is called On the way to a new Turkey - Permanent justice, permanent development or *Yeni Türkiye yolunda - Daima adalet, daima kalkınma* in Turkish. This document is much longer than any of its predecessors and gives a priority place to education it considers "an investment into the future".

Again, the program starts with the list of achievements. From a political angle, it is interesting to see that the first accomplishment was the lifting of the ban on the Islamic headscarf. This could be seen as the first religiously motivated step of the conservative AK Parti during this period of 15 years under analysis. However, one should not forget that this religious item was indeed prohibited in a country where 99.7% was populated by Muslims. The second attainment was similar to the first; the AK Parti announced that they have abolished the unjust distinction between the traditional vocational schools and the *imam-hatips* that train the future religious leaders and speakers. So, the profession of being an imam is finally recognized as equal to any other profession and those finishing imam-hatips are no more discriminated against when they want to study at the university. In the past, many former imam-hatip students were forced to go abroad to continue their studies. In Vienna, Austria, there is even a large center called Wonder to accommodate former imam-hatips studying in that country.

Going through the promises, one easily discovers that the key term is quality. "TIMMS 1999 and PISA 2003 data sets clearly indicate that the quality of education in Turkey was highly problematic in the early 2000s. According to TIMMS 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 (Celik-Gur, 2013, p. 156). According to the AK Parti, they have laid a solid foundation for the educational system in Turkey and now the time has come to think about quality of education. In order to promote quality education, an Educational Quality Index is planned to be

introduced to measure the differences between institutions and teachers. The latter should now must prove their capabilities through a certain number of examinations and by obtaining the National Teacher's Strategic Diploma at the end of this procedure. Two key factors for quality development is a better adaptation to the current digital environment and a better foreign language education as most Turks cannot speak any language other than Turkish.

The rapid increase of the universities in their numbers necessitates a legal update. The AK Parti proposes a new "framework law" to ensure not only the quantity, but also the quality. The document notes that students and teachers alike are over-stressed and the law, before anything else, should find a solution for this problem. Besides this, quality of the services has been a major concern, though the construction of new universities or faculties is not in the program, the construction of more dormitories is.

Turkey's road map with peace and stability

As the elections in June did not produce any workable coalition for the nation, on the 1st of November, a second election was organized securing one more term for the AK Parti in power. For this election the AK Parti proposed a program entitled *Turkey's road map with peace and stability* or *Huzur ve istikrarla Türkiye yol haritası* in Turkish. The title evidently refers to the security issues, the ongoing terrorist activities in the South East of the country and just over the border in Iraq and Syria. In this situation, it is clear that the country's security is the foremost essential social issue in Turkey. So, it is not surprising that the last program with regard to education is almost identical to the first and it contains the same ideas as the first one.

Two controversial cases during the AK Parti rule

Political programs reflect what the political will is, the modifications to the law shows how that will is put into practice, and after the application of the political will, life produces some controversial moments. A few of these are highlighted below.

Teaching Kurdish

The security issue mentioned in relation to the 2015 electoral program is mostly related to the terrorist activities in the south eastern part of Turkey by some extremist elements of the Left-wing Kurdish PKK. This does not mean that Kurd as such are the enemies of Turkey or that of the AK Parti. On the contrary, the AK Parti government made a number of concessions to the Kurds, for example by allowing them to use their mother

tongue in diverse areas like the media and education. It was already visible by the beginning of the 2000's that the "Kurdish population would request greater educational rights and, under the westernization policy, Turkey would have to solve these educational problems" (Cinoglu, 2006, p. 677).

Kurdish language education was introduced to public schools in 2012 with Kurdish being an "optional foreign language" meaning that the students willing not to learn English or another language could study the Kurmanji. At that time, the system lacked the necessary pedagogical materials, books and teachers were not trained for it. A great breakthrough was made when in the city of Diyarbakir, in 2014 a fully Kurdish-language primary school opened its doors. The Ferzad Kemanger Elementary School named after a Kurdish activist teacher executed in Iran now provides education according to the Turkish national program but from materials written in Kurmanji (www.cumhuriyet.com, 2014).

Teaching Kurdish serves to pacify Kurdish nationalists, but might infuriate some ethnic Turkish nationalists. It seems that the overall Turkish society should accept the existence of the above school, so that a normalization of the security issue becomes feasible.

Teaching Ottoman

Another language creating controversies in the modern and secular Turkish Republic is the defunct old Ottoman tongue. Replaced by the present day Turkish written with Latin scripts, the old Ottoman using the Arabic alphabet was for long ignored by the Turkish public education as it was considered by some as a thing of the past. In 2015, the Ministry of National Education lead by Nabi Avci came up with the idea of offering Ottoman Turkish as an optional lesson for the secondary schools (Rotahaber, 2015). In the more liberal region of Izmir, some school directors were opposing the plan, but were later obliged by the local branch of the ministry to make the necessary preparations. The Turkish opposition interpreted this issue as the Ministry putting pressure on the head of institutions (www.taraf.com, 2015).

We have cited the above two controversial issues to show how certain divisions in the socio-political environment of Turkey infiltrate into the field of education. Two main demarcation lines in the present Turkish society are the security issues related to the rights of the Kurds and the secular-religious dichotomy. One can think that Kurdish or Ottoman Turkish were mere languages and their dispensation in public schools cannot be a problem. However, one can see that language education in a country where most people ignore foreign languages indeed have many ideological

implications. For this, the structural reforms in education alone is insufficient; the entire society has to be changed - through education.

Conclusion

A political party can profoundly modify a system in 15 years. This is true for the Turkish education as the ruling Justice and Development Party not only reformed the composition of the schools, but also changed the pedagogical programs from teaching information to giving the students the necessary competences and provided the financial sources for building and managing schools.

AK Parti officials like to speak about this time period in general in terms of investments. They try to impress the voters by enumerating the facilities built around the country. If they say that the number of classrooms built and equipped with the most modern technologies since 2002 is 162.000, the elector might think that the change was mainly an increase in the numbers. If what lays deeper is examined, it could be discovered that a process of westernization and modernization was also going on. This process includes a shift in the approach to education. At the beginning, the goal of the AK Parti was to free the Turks, to give them freedom through education, later they started to profess that education is a necessary tool for economic growth, and finally, they started to consider it as an investment for the future for the prestigious national plans and national security.

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