

Sean Bilge Özalpaşan

Turkic World Youth Forum

Almaty, Kazakhstan 2024

The President-Elect of ATAA (Alev Weiland) selected me to represent all Turkish-American Youth at the Youth Forum of the Turkic World, held in Almaty, Kazakhstan. This youth forum was organized by the International Organization of Turkic Culture (TURKSOY). TURKSOY is the cultural branch of the Organization of Turkic States, which is a multi-state government organization that aims to promote positive cultural, diplomatic, and economic relations within the Turkic world.

The goal of this forum was to gather young Turkic people from across the world, and provide a platform for them to exchange ideas on cultural diplomacy, as well as discussing the advancement of all Turkic people.

The forum consisted of 134 young Turkic advocates from 20 different countries, me being the only American. I was a part of the Western Diaspora Turks group, which was hosted by the Yurtdışı Türkler ve Akraba Topluluklar Başkanlığı (YTB). Our YTB group was 10 people total, and almost all of my time in Kazakhstan was spent with them.

The program duration was from November 19 - 24. For the first two days, we were given a tour of the city of Turkistan. This tour was organized only for our YTB group. During the tour, we went to many important historical sites, witnessed traditional Kazakh music and dance, and met with one of Istanbul's parliament representatives as well as the Turkish Consul in Turkistan.

After Turkistan, we landed in Almaty to join the other 124 young Turks for the forum. The forum was held at Al Farabi University, Kazakhstan's most prestigious university. There were many impactful speakers, ranging from political leaders bestowing wisdom to the youth, to up and coming Turkic activists like myself.

While there were around 134 people from across the world present at the forum, the total size of the forum was roughly 250. Many university students were in attendance, and there were four live translators that could be accessed through the provided headset and radio.

During my speech, I touched on important topics such as, how to find unity across Turkic youth; preserving tradition in modern life; how to preserve Turkic culture in the diaspora; and how to further promote Turkish activism.

The speech was received very well, and after that section of the forum was done, a professor in Journalism came up to me with a group of his students and asked if he could interview me. His group was compiling highlights from the forum, and told me that he wanted to get my interview on Kazakh national news.

During the second day of the forum, many important political leaders gave speeches on the importance of youth leading the way for a better world, and a lot of networking took place. Once the forum concluded, the leaders of the University announced there was a gala organized for the entire forum. During this farewell gala, there was music, dancing, and singing from anyone who volunteered.

On our last day in Kazakhstan, the entire forum attendees were given a nature tour of Almaty's mountains, and this was a fun way of concluding the forum and saying goodbye. The networking I did throughout the conference was extremely beneficial and I have made many close relationships that will be valuable in the future. My peers from Hungary, Germany, and Gagauzia definitely gave me some good ideas that I will bring up at the next ATAA UN meeting.

It is important to note, throughout my entire time in Kazakhstan communication was exclusively in Turkish. A good amount of students from Al Farabi University spoke English, but communication with the 134 youth from across the Turkic world was fully in Türkiye Turkish.

Simply interacting with my peers in Turkish only furthered my realization that in America, our biggest problem is that of cultural assimilation and our youth not being able to speak Turkish. Furthermore, I also learned that Turks across the world place more emphasis on religion, and our work in America is more based on historical identity.

Moreso, the work we do in America in regards to the United Nations seems more exclusive to us. It was great to see that different groups across the world promote their culture in different ways: in the US, we do that through history. However in Europe, the primary avenue is through religion.

I hope that in the future, ATAA can have events with prominent European Turkic groups, as well as have events with Turks from Central Asia in order to continue our sustainment of culture. A lot of people I spoke with were eager to either host Turkish-Americans, or be hosted by them.

There were people I spoke with who could be very beneficial to future ATAA events, and there are definitely ways that we can share our mission of sustainability throughout the world as well.

I want to conclude by saying thank you to ATAA for choosing me to represent America on an international stage, and going to that part of the world really put into perspective the sheer beauty of humanity, and how diversity is the most powerful force for innovation.

Not only did I hear some great ideas, but a lot of my peers were shocked to hear about the great events we hold here in America.

I am very grateful for this once in a lifetime opportunity, and I want to relate my special thanks to Ms. Nilüfer Esen-Bilgin, Mr. Selim Erhan, Ms. Yücel Burdurlu, once again Ms. Alev Wieland, and the ATAA Board. Discussing Culture, Art, Sports, and Technology with like-minded Turkic people from across the globe will definitely enhance all future ATAA events!