

## TURKEY'S FOREIGN POLICY IN CENTRAL ASIA AND THE CAUCASUS: ECHOES OF THE ARAB SPRING

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### *Introduction*

In recent years, Central Asia and the Caucasus have traditionally been a priority of Turkey's foreign policy. Since the beginning of the 1990s, Ankara has been pursuing an active campaign aimed at establishing close relations with the Turkic republics in this region. However, despite the loud statements and assorted declarations about the development of friendly relations with fraternal peoples, Turkey has not made any significant progress in this vector (apart from strengthening its relations with Azerbaijan).

Furthermore, when the Arab Spring uprisings began at the end of 2010-beginning of 2011, Turkey's official authorities were accused, both inside and outside the country, of conducting a

one-dimensional foreign policy oriented only toward the Arab world. The opposition also joined these accusations, saying that the ruling Justice and Development Party was ignoring the Central Asian vector of foreign policy.

So two questions arise. First, how can the Arab Spring demonstrations have an effect on the development of Turkey's relations with the Central Asian and Caucasian countries? And second, what will Ankara's foreign policy be in the region in the next few years?

The author primarily focuses on Turkey's relations with the region's Turkic republics—Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan; other countries remain beyond the scope of this study.

## Central Asia and the Caucasus in Ankara's Foreign Policy Priorities

At present, Turkey's foreign policy course is being set by the triumvirate of leaders from the ruling Justice and Development Party—Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, President Abdullah Gül, and Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu. The latter, a professor and well-known academic in international relations, is the ideologue of Turkey's current foreign policy. It was he who elaborated the concept of "strategic depth," the main idea of which boils down to increasing Turkey's influence on the former Ottoman world and turning the country into a regional super power. According to analysts, this policy shows that Turkey is no longer giving preference to the West or the East; it is making its own debut on the stage.<sup>1</sup>

Turkey embarked on its new foreign policy course in 2009 when the country gradually began moving away from the European integration policy and paying more attention to its own region. According to Ahmet Davutoğlu's concept, the new policy was to include such vectors as improving relations with immediate neighbors, primarily with Syria and Iran (the "zero problems with neighbors" policy), developing maximum cooperation with the Islamic countries of the Middle East (the "wise country" policy), and moving toward confrontation with Israel; all of this was supposed to promote a rise in Turkey's authority in the Islamic world.

In keeping with the new course, the Turkish Foreign Ministry mainly concentrated on the Middle East; the Central Asian region was also seen as one of the priority targets.

The election platform of the Justice and Development Party adopted in 2011 defined the main vectors in Turkey's political and socioeconomic development until 2023. It should be noted that it also gave significant attention to developing relations with the Turkic states of Central Asia and the Caucasus.

This document envisaged that the Justice and Development Party's policy toward the Turkic republics would be aimed at cancelling visa regimes, intensifying the political dialog, developing commercial ties, and supporting the activity of nongovernmental organizations. Particular attention would go to developing education and culture; Manas University in Kyrgyzstan and Hoja Ahmed Yasawi University in Kazakhstan established with Turkey's assistance are noteworthy cooperation projects in these areas. There were also plans to extend a new format of cooperation to the Turkic republics involving the establishment of High-Level Strategic Cooperation Councils.

However, the Arab Spring events changed the initial plans of the Turkish leadership. The urgency of the situation in the Arab world, where spheres of influence were being redrawn, compelled Turkey to focus on its own interests in the Middle East and relegate other regions into the background.

## Impact of the Arab Spring Events on the Development of Turkey's Relations with the Turkic Republics

For many years now, Turkey has been trying to advance its own model of political structure of an Islamic state, which analysts call liberal Islamic democracy. However, after the Arab Spring demon-

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<sup>1</sup> See: "Türkiye: Avrasiyanın yeni büyük gücü," *Newtimes*, 17 July, 2012, available at [<http://newtimes.az/print-204.html>].

strations, Ankara acquired a real chance to increase its influence on the region and particularly on the new young Islamic democracies that emerged there. The Turkish leadership was convinced that establishing political models and institutions similar to the Turkish in the Arab Spring countries would help to raise Ankara's influence on the Middle East.

Judging by foresaid, it would seem that Turkey could count on acquiring a similar chance in Central Asia and the Caucasus, where most of the countries also have authoritative regimes. However, the Turkish leadership came across problems in this area.

According to American researcher Richard Weitz, "one of the few points of division among Turkish government officials and analysts is their competing views regarding future political developments in Central Asia.

"One group believes that Central Asia is ripe for deep political change. They see the region as the last bastion of one-party authoritarian rule and consider the prospects for its near-term democratization to be high. This first group would also welcome a phenomenon like the Arab Spring in the region since they consider the absence of functioning democracies in most Central Asian countries a significant problem for Turkish entities. In addition, the constraints on most individuals' ability to access information in authoritarian regimes as well as the legal arbitrariness common in non-democracies present major obstacles to domestic and foreign entrepreneurs seeking to run profitable businesses in these countries.

"But another group of Turkish officials consider the prospects for Central Asia's near-term democratization to be low because they are more optimistic about these regimes' ability to withstand the kind of political chaos sweeping through the Arab world. They argue that it would take decades for these countries, whose leaders still consist of people who have overwhelmingly developed their political views during the Soviet period, to abandon their Soviet mentality and adopt Western liberal values. In the view of these Turkish analysts and officials, another constraint on political change in Central Asia is the geographic isolation of these states from other democratic countries as well as their history of authoritarian rule. They argue that Central Asia's democratization would entail a lengthy process requiring the further political and economic evolution of these countries. Conversely, this second group of Turkish officials fears that efforts to rush Central Asia's democratization could easily backfire and lead their rulers to adopt even more repressive domestic policies.

"It is worth noting that at present, this second group of Turkish officials seems to have greater influence in Ankara,"<sup>2</sup> since the solution to Central Asia's political future they espouse looks more pragmatic and corresponds to current reality. By striving to promote democratization and Islamization of the region, Turkey would most likely lose more than it gained.

Central Asia today has once of the most repressive political systems in the world, and it is unlikely that any revolutions will happen there. Religion could be a potential starting place for building a civil society in the region's countries, but the authorities keep it under tight control. For example, in Uzbekistan, Islamists were repressed from essentially the outset. The governments of other countries also gradually repressed the Islamists, accusing them of participating in the civil war in Tajikistan. Consequently, today there is no organized Islamic movement in the CA countries along the lines of the Muslim Brotherhood, for example.<sup>3</sup>

In this situation, the moderate Islamic position of the Turkish leadership, which it used as a trump card in its relations with the Arab countries and Turkic republics of the region, could play a negative role. The thing is that even the moderate Islamism is seen by the existing regimes as a direct threat. This is confirmed by the events in Uzbekistan that occurred in 2011-2012. The authorities of this country,

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<sup>2</sup> R. Weitz, "Turkish Foreign Policy in Evolution," *Turkey Analyst*, Vol. 4, No. 21, 7 November, 2011.

<sup>3</sup> See: S. Radnitz, "Waiting for Spring," *Foreign Policy*, 17 February, 2012.

fearing that Turkey's stronger cultural and political influence might encourage an increase in religious and revolutionary moods in society, unleashed an anti-Turkish campaign. Within the span of two years, 54 prominent Turkish businessmen were arrested in the country and sentenced to 1 to 3 years in prison. In addition, at least 50 Turkish companies operating in the republic were closed down. Examples are the Turkuaz supermarket chain, the Mir Store shopping mall, and several enterprises of the light industry. At the end of February 2012, Turkish television programs were taken off the air and compulsory closedown of educational institutions financed by Turkey began.<sup>4</sup>

Despite the displeasure voiced by several media, the Turkish leadership made no response to these incidents. However, in October 2011, the Turkish parliament did not include Uzbekistan on the list of countries with which it planned to create interparliamentary committees (the other four Central Asian republics were on this list).

There are no active anti-Turkish campaigns in the other Central Asian republics; nevertheless, their authorities continue to intensify their repressive political systems and, should a threat arise, might begin acting along the lines of Uzbekistan.

## A Turkic Union: To Be or Not To Be?

Ever since the Soviet Union collapsed, Turkey has been actively supporting the idea of Turkic unity. It sees itself as the center of the Turkic world and a model for the young Central Asian and Caucasian republics. It even established a ministry responsible for relations with kindred states. But these far-reaching plans were not realized, partially because the Turkish foreign policy machine proved incapable of introducing systematic activity (economic and political) in the region.

The idea of Turkic unity was revived in 2008-2009. During these years, with Turkey's active participation, several new interstate structures of Turkic unity appeared, among which the Parliamentary Assembly of Turkic-Speaking States and the Turkic Council can be named.

The Parliamentary Assembly of Turkic-Speaking States was established in 2008 in Istanbul with the participation of the parliamentary speakers of four countries—Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Turkey. The headquarters of the organization's secretariat is located in Baku.

In September 2009, the first plenary session of the Assembly was held in Baku. At the second plenary session held in April 2011 in Astana, chairmanship was passed from Azerbaijan to Kazakhstan. The third plenary session of the Assembly was held in June 2012 in Bishkek (Kyrgyzstan).

The history of the Turkic Council goes back to the first sitting of the heads of the Turkic republics held in 1992 in Ankara. Since then similar meetings have been held more or less regularly for 18 years.

In September 2010, the 10th summit of the heads of the Turkic-speaking states was held in Istanbul. The Turkic Business Council with its headquarters in Istanbul was founded at the summit. It was decided that the Council's secretary general would be elected for a three-year term, and the Council itself would have five subdivisions: the Council of Presidents, the Council of Foreign Ministers, the Committee of Administration Heads, the Committee of Experts, and the Secretariat.<sup>5</sup> All the Turkic states, apart from Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, became members of the Council.

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<sup>4</sup> See: "Uzbekistan: Tashkent Takes Hardline Approach on Containing Turkish Soft Power," *EurasiaNet.org*, 3 April, 2012.

<sup>5</sup> See: "Turkey Set to Head New Secretariat to Develop Ties with Central Asia," *Hürriyet Daily News*, 9 June, 2010.

In 2011, the first summit of the member countries of the Turkic Business Council was held in Astana. The second summit was held in August 2012 in the Kyrgyzstan capital of Bishkek. Four of the six Turkic-speaking countries participated in it; Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan still showed no desire to join the organization.

At the last summit, internal issues were decided. A decision was also made to establish a Turkic academy (in Astana) and a Turkic Cultural Heritage Foundation (in Baku).

On the whole, when summing up the activity of the Turkic organizations, it can be noted that things did not go as far as resolving important political and economic issues and no real results of their activity (apart from in the cultural sphere) are yet to be seen. The Council may prove to be lucrative if it expands the range of problems it examines, but it cannot yet be described as an organization on the same level as the League of Arab States or the EU.

The Achilles' heel of such organizations is that their activity is limited to the cultural sphere, and international practice shows that such associations are not very effective. Moreover, they encounter problems even in the cultural sphere. For example, a very urgent but still unresolved problem is creating a common alphabet for the Turkic-speaking countries. It is raised at every summit, but so far without results.

Interstate tension is also causing difficulties with Turkic integration. At present, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan are not interested in Turkic integration. Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan are also in disagreement over the controversial sections of the Caspian Sea. Moreover, as mentioned above, there are religious problems between Turkey and Uzbekistan.

All of the above factors are complicating the prospects for Turkic integration. So far the Turkic Business Council does not have much more to show for itself than a series of vociferous declarations. At the organization's third Assembly, its Secretary General Halil Akıncı said that in the future there were plans to carry out a unified foreign policy of the Turkic-speaking countries. Keeping in mind the countries' ambitions and their different interests on the international arena, this statement looks highly dubious.

## **Economic Issues— Priority of Developing Bilateral Relations**

The obstacles constantly arising on the path to political integration of the Turkic states have forced Turkey to pay more attention to resolving economic issues and overcoming ongoing urgent problems. For example, in order to help strengthen the contacts among countries, Ankara has unilaterally cancelled the visa regime for citizens of all the Turkic-speaking states. Turkey has also begun using a new format of cooperation with respect to the Turkic republics that envisages establishing High-Level Strategic Cooperation Councils (in certain countries).

In October 2011, the first sitting of the High-Level Strategic Cooperation Council with Azerbaijan was held. In May 2012, during Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's visit to Kazakhstan, a joint statement was signed on establishing a High-Level Strategic Cooperation Council between the Republic of Kazakhstan and the Turkish Republic. The first sitting of the new Council was held in October 2012 in Ankara.

Turkey's relations with its strategic partner Azerbaijan are developing the most successfully. The close cultural and economic proximity of these states at one time prompted former Azerbaijan president Heydar Aliiev to put forward the slogan "One nation—two states."<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> M. Aydın, "Turkey's Caucasus Policy," *UNISCI Discussion Papers*, No. 23, May 2010, p. 189.

Turkey is Azerbaijan's largest trade partner and investor in non-energy spheres. As of today, such strategic facilities as the Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum gas pipeline and the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline have already been implemented; steps are being taken to join up the railroad systems of both countries. At the end of December 2011, Azerbaijan and Turkey signed a memorandum on implementing a new Trans-Anatolian gas pipeline project (TANAP), which aroused a great public response. If constructed, it will transport gas from the second stage of Azerbaijan's Shah Deniz gas field.

In September 2012, at the second High-Level Strategic Cooperation Council meeting, Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, when summing up the achievements of bilateral relations development, stated that whereas 10 years ago the foreign trade volume between the two countries amounted to \$1 billion, today it is equal to \$3.5 billion. Over the last 7 months, the trade turnover between Azerbaijan and Turkey reached \$2.7 billion.

Recep Tayyip Erdoğan also said: "If we exert a little effort, we will reach the \$5 billion mark planned for 2015 by the end of the year. After 2020, we will raise trade turnover to the \$20 billion mark."<sup>7</sup>

So, there is every reason to talk about positive trends in the development of relations between these two countries, and the disputes that periodically arise between them will unlikely become a serious obstacle on the path to mutual understanding.

Turkey's most important economic trade partner on the other side of the Caspian is Kazakhstan; in 2011, the trade turnover between these countries topped the \$3.3 billion mark. The total volume of Turkish investments in Kazakhstan amounts to around \$2 billion; they are made in the oil, food, and chemical-pharmaceutical sphere, as well as in the hotel business, banking, and construction. The total cost of the construction projects carried out by Turkish contractors amounted to \$15 billion.<sup>8</sup>

During the official visit of Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan to Kazakhstan in May 2012, a joint statement was signed on establishing a Kazakh-Turkish High-Level Strategic Cooperation Council. At a business forum held during this visit, 13 agreements totaling more than \$1 billion were signed.

After a long period of hostility and disagreements, a thaw has also begun in Turkey's relations with Turkmenistan. In 2012, the Turkmen president has made two official visits to Turkey (in February-March and in August of this year). An increase in reciprocal trade turnover between the two countries has been designated, which in 2011 rose by 25% compared to 2010.

Today more than 600 Turkish companies operate in Turkmenistan, which have already implemented and continue to implement several projects in the textile industry and construction (housing and medical and cultural centers). Turkish enterprises are developing more than 1,270 investment projects in Turkmenistan; more than \$15 billion were spent on 1,200 of them, 26 cost almost 2 billion euro, and another 26 cost more than 56 billion manat.

More than 100 different agreements entered at the interstate, intergovernmental, and interdepartmental levels form the legislative framework of Turkmen-Turkish partnership. The possibility is also being examined of Turkey's participation in modernizing the sea port in Turkmenbashi and developing the tourist zone of Avaza on the Caspian coast, as well as its participation in different energy projects.

Turkey is also developing economic trade relations with Kyrgyzstan (although not as intensively as with the above-mentioned countries). As of today, more than 50 economic agreements have been entered. Turkey, which is the second largest investor in Kyrgyzstan, has invested \$450 million in it and issued financial aid in the form of grants and low-interest loans (\$20 million in 2001 and \$106 million in 2012), as well as waived the country's debt to Exim Bank.

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<sup>7</sup> *Trend*, 12 September, 2012.

<sup>8</sup> See: *Ekspress K*, No. 232 (17347), 14 December, 2011.

A Turkish international cooperation agency (TİKA) actively operates in the country. The total amount of resources TİKA has allotted Kyrgyzstan (since the agency was established) amounts to more than \$30 million.<sup>9</sup>

As for Uzbekistan, the policy it is pursuing aimed at aggravating relations with Turkey could be detrimental for the country's economy in the future. Turkish companies occupy a significant place in different branches of Uzbek industry, including textile, food, pharmaceutical, the manufacture of plastics, construction, and the hotel business. The total trade turnover between the countries, which showed an increase from \$1 billion in 2010 to \$1.3 billion in 2011, began to drop in 2012. For example, during the first 8 months of 2012, it amounted to \$846 billion, compared to \$867 billion in 2011.<sup>10</sup>

### *Conclusions*

Despite everything, Turkey does not want to lose Central Asia and the Caucasus. But it has proven much more difficult to have influence on this geostrategically important region than the Turkish authorities thought in the 1990s. Turkey's efforts directed toward creating integration structures in the region similar to the LAS or EU *have not been crowned with any significant success* so far. Today, cooperation has only been established in the cultural sphere and has not spread to all the Turkic republics of the region: Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan are still out of the picture.

In recent years, Turkey has significantly increased its economic presence in Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan; relations with Azerbaijan are also successfully developing. However, it should be kept in mind that Ankara has already encountered the growing influence of China and Russia on the region, which, despite the increase in Turkey's economy and its immense investment potential, have greater possibilities.

The Arab Spring events, which presented Turkey as a protector of political Islam, could have a negative effect on its heretofore far from simple relations with Uzbekistan and with other countries of the region in the future (should Turkey decide to support the local opposition). But the Turkish authorities, who are conducting a pragmatic foreign policy course, are unlikely to do that.

If Turkey wants to become a strong country capable of dominating in Central Asia, it will have to choose its foreign policy methods more carefully; in order to become a stable power center, it must improve its tools and levers of pressure on the region's countries.

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<sup>9</sup> See: A. Pazarıcı, "Turkey, Kyrgyzstan Set Common Goal to Further Regional Peace, Stability," *Todays Zaman*, 22 August, 2012.

<sup>10</sup> See: "Foreign Trade Statistics," *TurkStat*, available at [[http://www.turkstat.gov.tr/VeriBilgi.do?alt\\_id=12](http://www.turkstat.gov.tr/VeriBilgi.do?alt_id=12)].