

# CONSOLIDATION OF THE TURKIC WORLD IN THE IDEOLOGY AND POLITICAL PRACTICE OF OFFICIAL ANKARA (*Retrospective Stage-by-Stage Analysis*)

Natalia MKHITARIAN

*Ph.D. (Political Science),  
senior researcher at the Institute of  
Global Economy and International Relations,  
Ukrainian National Academy of Sciences  
(Kiev, Ukraine)*

---

Since the end of the 1980s, Turkey has been keeping a sharp eye on the changes that occurred in the Soviet Union and then on the events that have been going on since its disintegration in the post-Soviet expanse. Ankara's attention has been primarily directed toward the Turkic-speaking nations closest to it linguistically and culturally, in particular the independent Central Asian countries and Azerbaijan. As early as September 1991 (with Moscow's permission), the Turkish leaders made an official trip to the still Union republics of Central Asia to get a feel for their intentions and possibly find closer rapport and more enhanced relations with them.<sup>1</sup> And on 16 December of the same year, Turkey was the first country in the world to officially recognize the state independence of Kazakhstan, Kirghizia, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan.

Developing relations with the Central Asian republics and the Caucasus raised Ankara's authority and graphically demonstrated the importance and need for the Turkish presence in this region, as well as its growing role as an alternative power on the international arena. It should be noted that the West, particularly the U.S., encouraged Turkey's intentions to develop relations with the new post-Soviet states, primarily with the Central Asian and South Caucasian countries. The Western capitals believed that this cooperation would stem any rise in Iranian, Afghan, and Chinese influence in this region. The West was also keen to see the new states lessen their dependence on Russia. On the other hand, when encouraging Ankara to establish closer cooperation with this part of the world, Western circles kept in mind that, in striving to reinforce their independent status and accelerate their entry onto the international arena, these young states would also lean toward Turkey, a country with which they

---

<sup>1</sup> See: Z. Chotoev, "The Turkish Factor in the Evolution of the Central Asian Republics," *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, No. 2 (20), 2003, p. 73.

feel a certain amount of affinity in terms of language, culture, and religion. What is more, Turkey upholds a pro-Western policy and supports secular development, in which respect it has accumulated much positive experience.

Meanwhile, the West has taken several practical steps to ensure that the Central Asian states and Azerbaijan also move in this direction. For example, in December 1991-February 1992, U.S. Secretary of State James Baker visited the Central Asian republics and strongly encouraged their leaders to “adopt the Turkish model of secularism, liberal democracy, and a market economy.”<sup>2</sup> And Turkey has been assisting them in their efforts to become members of such international organizations as the U.N. and the OSCE, to integrate into the global economy, and to join NATO’s Partnership for Peace program.

So it can be said that relations between Turkey and the Turkic post-Soviet states entered an active stage of development as early as 1991. At that time, these relations encompassed the economy, commerce, culture, and education. What is more, there were attempts to establish ties in the military sphere and security, as well as bring the overall policies of these countries closer together. After diplomatic relations were established between Turkey and the region’s republics and their embassies and consulates opened in 1992, summits of their heads of state were held almost every year.

In order to coordinate assistance to these countries and step up relations with them, a Turkish Cooperation and Development Agency (TIKA) was created in January 1992 under the Turkish Foreign Ministry. A particularly positive aspect of these relations should be noted: they were aimed at preventing a spread in Islamic fundamentalism. As Bülent Aras, head of the international relations department at Istanbul University, emphasized, “Turkey’s willingness to accept this role—promoting a secular-democratic model in this area—was a matter of ‘cultural correctness’ as well as political strategy.”<sup>3</sup> And this fully coincides with Ankara’s official ideological policy, since its ruling elite is placing the emphasis on Westernization of the country and justifiably believes (also in light of the recent political events) that Islamic radicalism is a serious threat to domestic political stability. Precisely because Muslimism always had (and still has) a huge influence in Turkey, its leadership supports the Turkish version of Islamism, or “demo-Islamism,” which unites the advantages of a secular democratic state with a traditional ideology based on moderate Islam. This unification is an alternative to Islamic fundamentalism, so it is favorably perceived by the Western democracies, since it creates the necessary conditions for preserving and extending their foothold in the Islamic world.<sup>4</sup>

Turkey also plays a very prominent role in the Black Sea and Caspian Region, it can even be maintained that it is one of the leading countries in this geopolitical space. As for Ankara’s influence on the South Caucasian and Central Asian republics, it is trying to compete with Russia and to a certain extent with Iran. Its ethnic kinship with the Turkic-speaking peoples of this region: Azeris, Kazakhs, Karakal-paks, Kyrgyz, Turkmen, Uzbeks, Uighurs, Gagauz, Volga and Crimean Tartars, and Bashkirs, as well as its confessional and cultural-historical propinquity with them, gives it extremely strong trump cards. The fact that Turkey has the image of an economically developed Turkic-Muslim secular state with strong military and political traits is also very important. What is more, it is a strategic partner of the U.S. and a member of NATO, thanks to which it can lobby the interests of the Turkic countries in the West. Nevertheless, the upsurge in clerical sentiments in Turkey itself, as well as the severe economic and political crisis could significantly undermine the above-mentioned advantages.

All the same, Ankara is striving to upgrade its role in the region, particularly on the crest of pan-Turkism. According to American political scientist Samuel Huntington, the collapse of the Soviet Union opened up a unique opportunity for Turkey to play a leading role in reviving the Turkic civilization, which encompasses seven countries, from the shores of Greece to China. Incidentally, the idea of pan-Turkism was brought to Turkey from outside. An ideological source and catalyst of Turkish nationalism were the nationalistic ideas popular in Europe during the second half of the 19th century. Native Tartars of the

---

<sup>2</sup> Quoted from: E. Urazova, “Trends in Turkey’s Economic Cooperation with Post-Soviet Turkic States,” *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, No. 5 (11), 2001, p. 115.

<sup>3</sup> B. Aras, “Turkish Foreign Policy toward the Transcaucasus,” *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, No. 5 (11), 2001, p. 79.

<sup>4</sup> See: *Turetskaia Respublika. A Guide*, Moscow, 2000, p. 104.

Russian empire, Akhmed Agaev, Iusuf Akchura, Ali-Husein-zade, Ismail Gasprinsky, Zaki Validi, and others, can be considered the ideological founders of pan-Turkism.

Thanks to the activity of these cultural political scientists, pan-Turkism was comprehensively developed. In a book by one of its founders, Zia Gök-Alp, called "The Foundations of Turkism" (1923), three stages are singled out in reaching this goal: Turanism in Turkey itself—assimilating or (if it is rejected) eliminating all non-Turkish elements, purifying the Turkish language of borrowed Arabic words, and creating a Turkish national culture; oguzianism—uniting countries populated by the descendants of Oguz (Turkey and the two Azerbaijanians—Persian and Russian); and a federation of other Turkic-speaking peoples. The conception of pan-Turkism coined by Zia Gök-Alp was based on a juxtaposition of two concepts—culture and civilization. In his opinion, Western civilization is what makes the Western world strong and so should be accepted by the Turks, who are striving to create a powerful Turkish state. Culture, on the other hand, should remain Turkish and be kept pure. The foundation of Turkish power is the Turkish culture, and civilization is merely the outer sheath required to protect it from external aggressors.

The opinion is frequently expressed that pan-Turkism and Kemalism would have met the same fate as Ottomanism, had the Kemalistic program not been put into practice at a time when it was advantageous for large states to support the military and political might of the Turkish state. That is, had the laicist (secular) republic not had such a strong army and had not been a symbol of revival of the state's former might in the eyes of its own people. The army was not merely the custodian of the ideology of Kemalism, but often of Kemalism, which is perceived as pan-Turkism. The official Turkish leaders categorically deny all accusations of being preachers of the ideas of pan-Turkism. Indeed, there is nothing unusual in the desire to expand ties with ethnically kindred peoples, who, in turn, are striving for the same cooperation. But statements by some high-ranking Turkish politicians to the effect that Turkey should rebuild its might along the borders of the former Ottoman Empire are providing certain food for thought.

In Turkey today the idea of Turkism has more of an economic foundation. Official Ankara has been fervently supporting the independent post-Soviet states and offering them trade benefits and loans. Based on its real possibilities, Turkey is trying to help the Central Asian countries overcome their serious economic problems, and support them in their transition to democracy and a market economy. During the years of their independence, Turkey has signed more than 350 contracts and agreements with these republics. In 1999 alone, Ankara gave these republics approximately 1.5 billion dollars in loans. Almost 2,500 Turkish companies have been involved in implementing investment projects in the Central Asian countries. Before 2000, they invested 8.4 billion dollars in the region; in particular, Turkish construction companies carried out four-billion-dollar worth of work, and the trade volume between Turkey and these countries increased from 145 million dollars in 1992 to 5.6 billion in 1999.<sup>5</sup>

As for the South Caucasian countries, Ankara's trade relations with them have still not reached the desirable level. For example, according to the export indices for the first four months of 2001, Azerbaijan occupied 21st place (0.7% of its total volume), and Georgia, 34th (0.4%).<sup>6</sup> On the whole, Turkey's economic penetration into Central Asia and the Southern Caucasus is going on at two levels: mediation by state agencies (mainly TIKA), which offer technical and financial support, and investments by Turkish businessmen. TIKA assumed the obligation to promote the development of agriculture, education, small and medium business, power engineering, tourism, civil aviation, and insurance.<sup>7</sup> All of this agency's projects and programs are aimed only at assisting these states to meet their needs.

Apart from these structures, Turkey's nongovernmental religious and nationalistic organizations are also taking active part in helping the country to find niches in the new states of Central Asia and the Southern

<sup>5</sup> See: H. Bayulken, "Turkey's Geopolitical Interests in the Black Sea Region and Central Asia," in: *Documents from the International Conference "Ukraine-Turkey: Security and Cooperation in the Black Sea Region," Kiev, 10-11 April, 2000*, Kiev, 2000, pp. 31-32 (in Ukrainian).

<sup>6</sup> See: B. Aras, op. cit., p. 81.

<sup>7</sup> See: H. Bayulken, op. cit., p. 30.

Caucasus. For example, in the area between Tanzania and China, the followers of Fethulah Gülen built more than 200 schools, mainly in Turkic republics. Not so much Islam as Turkish nationalism is preached in these learning institutions, since “from the Balkans to China, he [Gülen] wants to see elites formed with Turkey as their model.”<sup>8</sup> All of these organizations are placing the accent on pro-Turkish elements, and not on propagandizing the idea of Islam, fearing that the latter will be very much to Turkey’s detriment and will play into the hands of Iran and Saudi Arabia. Although the meetings and activities organized by nationalist groups, such as the Assembly of Turkish States and Communities, have not received official endorsement, prominent Turkish politicians, including Turgut Özal, Süleyman Demirel, and Tansu Çiller, have attended and addressed these meetings.<sup>9</sup>

In the spirit of Turkism, the written language of the Central Asian republics and some South Caucasian countries is being switched to the Latin alphabet, and cultural ties and contacts between the political elites are strengthening. Ankara has created (and is generally financing) quite a strong study and practicum program for students from these republics, within the framework of which approximately 7,000 people are currently studying in Turkey.<sup>10</sup>

An important factor of Turkish influence was the regular meetings of the leaders of the Turkic-speaking states held in 1992 in Ankara, in 1994 in Istanbul, in 1995 in Bishkek, in 1996 in Tashkent, and in 2001 in Istanbul. At these meetings, the question of closer cooperation within the borders of the Turkic alliance was discussed. And the Tashkent declaration talks about further cooperation in culture and information, as well as in the development of the Great Silk Road, and in the improvement of bilateral relations.<sup>11</sup>

But, after gaining their independence and wishing to establish relations with many of the world’s nations, these states do not want to place the emphasis too heavily on only one of them. As early as the first summit in 1992, it became clear that the leaders of these new countries were willing to sign the Ankara declaration and other documents adopted at it only on a bilateral basis, but gently rejected Turkey’s proposals to enter multilateral agreements. The declaration itself envisaged cooperation in culture, education, language, security, the economy, and the law. Nevertheless, during the meetings in Ankara, Kazakhstan President Nursultan Nazarbaev emphasized his unwillingness to develop relations on ethnic or religious grounds, talking in favor of civilized relations based on mutual respect and state independence.<sup>12</sup>

What is more, Turkey could not offer the region’s countries the full amount of financial assistance it promised, in which they were naturally unable to hide their disappointment. And after the Recep Tayyip Erdogan government came to power, Ankara was forced to reconsider its spontaneously developing relations with the Turkic countries and transfer them to a more pragmatic basis. We will note that at the beginning of the 1990s, it was Turkish companies (the first among foreign ones) which took the risk, without sufficient guarantees, and invested their capital in these republics, which promoted the development of small and medium businesses. And with the assistance of such European structures as the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), Ankara initiated a multitude of projects in the economy, including those which called for training and raising the qualifications of businessmen. In so doing, it helped to develop market relations in the region and create a corresponding legal base, which boosted the development of private business and encouraged the appearance of foreign investors and an inflow of their capital into these countries.<sup>13</sup>

Turkey is showing particular interest in transporting energy resources from the region’s countries to the world markets. In so doing, it is striving to ensure that Kazakhstani and Azerbaijani oil, as well as

---

<sup>8</sup> B. Aras, *op. cit.*, p. 82.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem.*

<sup>10</sup> See: H. Bayulken, *op. cit.*, p. 31.

<sup>11</sup> See: B.A. Parakhonskiy, “Ukraine and Turkey,” in: *Ukraine of 2000 and After: Geopolitical Priorities and Development Scenarios*, National Institute of Strategic Research, Kiev, 1999, p. 120 (in Ukrainian).

<sup>12</sup> See: Z. Chotoev, *op. cit.*, p. 74.

<sup>13</sup> See: E. Urazova, *op. cit.*, pp. 118-119.

Turkmen gas, pass through its territory. Washington is actively supporting Ankara in this endeavor, since it does not want hydrocarbons to be exported through Russia and Iran. In particular, it is lobbying for building the Baku-Ceyhan oil pipeline. At the OSCE summit in Istanbul (November 1999) attended by U.S. President Bill Clinton, the Turkish government signed an agreement on building this pipeline with the leaders of Azerbaijan, Georgia, Uzbekistan, and Kazakhstan.<sup>14</sup>

When justifying its economic policy in the region, Ankara places primary emphasis on the fact that it will give the Central Asian and South Caucasian states a chance to diversify the transportation of their energy resources and lessen their dependence on Russia. Second, Turkey itself needs energy resources (oil and gas) and, if they are pumped through its territory, it will become their consumer. Third, it is paying keen attention to the problems relating to the carrying capacity of the Bosphorus and Dardanelles straits and their pollution. All the same, it is not publicizing the fact that its assistance in building pipelines from Central Asian countries through the Caucasus to Turkey will promote the possible future economic unification of the Turkic states. Ankara is also particularly interested in routes for transporting Kazakhstani oil, without which the Baku-Ceyhan pipeline will not be economically profitable. What is more, it has a share in Kazakhstan's oil companies and is interested in its oil being exported to Turkey. As for Turkmen gas, the agreement signed on pumping it through Turkey, which is not underpinned by corresponding financial support, is up in the air.

Today, real prerequisites for developing relations between the Central Asian and Caucasian countries and Turkey are primarily found in security, as well as in power engineering, transportation, environmental protection, and so on, and even in the creation of a sub-regional economic union. The problem here is that if the construction of new pipelines is continuously postponed due to threats, disputes, and muscle flexing, the rest of the world, particularly large oil- and gas-producing companies, could lose interest in this region.

As a rule, the foreign trade of the countries belonging to regional unions is divided into two separate sectors: reciprocal trade among the member states of a particular organization free from customs and other barriers; and trade between these states and other countries using a variety of barriers. In this respect, the access of large volumes of Azerbaijani and Kazakhstani oil and Turkmen and Uzbek gas to the world market is minimizing the opportunities (financial and political) of OPEC and Russia for providing the West with cheap energy resources for any extended length of time. It is to the advantage of Tashkent, Ashgabad, Baku, and Tbilisi that events develop along this scenario. This can partially be explained by the appearance of American bases and strong points at the very sites where there are plans to lay strategic export oil and gas pipelines. The U.S.'s influence in Turkey, Washington and Ankara's rapprochement with Baku, and now the presence of the United States in Central Asia and the Caspian<sup>15</sup> show that the U.S. is trying to uphold its right to determine where oil is transported, but at the same time draw the Turkic-speaking world into a single whole.

Despite the fact that the moderate Islamic Justice and Development Party has come to power in Turkey, Ankara is still focusing its main attention on relations with the West, which is explained by its desire to join the EU, as well as by its intention to strengthen ties with Washington, even after the war on Iraq. Nevertheless, its priorities include balanced contacts with Russia and trans-Black Sea partnership relations with Ukraine and the Central Asian and Caucasian republics, but in no way building Turan and establishing its domination in it. Thus, since the second half of the 1990s, some Turkish researchers have sought to make a distinction between two different terms: *türki* (Turkic), as opposed to the more common *türk* (Turkish), which is often used interchangeably.<sup>16</sup> Calm and deliberate steps in this direction will continue, although plans to create an economic and cultural Turkic community cannot be excluded.

In this way, some stages characteristic of the various trends and priorities in Turkey's relations with the Turkic states of Central Asia and the Southern Caucasus can be singled out: the spontaneous and tem-

<sup>14</sup> See: Z. Chotoev, op. cit., p. 77.

<sup>15</sup> See: E. Shultz, "So Are We Going to Agree or What?" *Central Asian News* [www.centran.ru], 18 February, 2004.

<sup>16</sup> See: Z. Chotoev, op. cit., p. 80.

pestuous emotional blossoming of their economic and cultural relations; a more pragmatic approach to this process; and a certain waning of interest among the Turkish ruling circles in the Central Asian states during Necmettin Erbakan's government.

Summing up the above, it can be noted that the Turkish model of a secular state with its predominant Muslim population has disappointed the Central Asian and Southern Caucasian states to a certain extent, since it does not entirely coincide with the mentality and cultural and life experience of the people of these regions. But we should not underestimate the positive aspects of cooperation in economic relations, trade, culture, and education, or undervalue the influence of these relations on the development of these states as a whole.