

# PAN-TURKISM: CIVILIZATIONAL PROJECT OF MODERN TURKEY

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## ABSTRACT

**T**he paper examines the conditions and circumstances under which Pan-Turkism became the foreign policy cornerstone of the Turkic Republic, traces its transformations and use by the Turkish political elite to consolidate the Turkic-speaking peoples and unite them into a single state, the Great Turan. Pan-Turkism strongly af-

fects the policy of the Turkic Republic and the political processes unfolding across the post-Soviet space, as well as the situation in the Muslim regions of Russia. Certain measures that may help Russia stand opposed to the widening sphere of Pan-Turkism in the zone of Russia's traditional political presence are presented in the Conclusion.

**KEYWORDS:** *Pan-Turkism as a civilizational project,  
Pan-Turkism in the post-Soviet space,  
Turkey's policy in the Muslim regions of Russia.*

## *Introduction*

Leaders of a country who seek to conquer or preserve its leading positions in the world will inevitably devise a civilizational project as the ideology of the state's external and internal policies.

At the same time, the genesis of such projects and their realization should be discussed in the context of history of political thought, traditions, national mentality and political culture of the given country. This is typical, first and foremost, of the empires that lost their geopolitical consequence and left the historical stage. They are likely to suffer from phantom pains caused by lost territories and power.

Political science differently assesses the role of ideology in the political process ranging from a complete rejection of ideological impact (Russia is a pertinent example) to an assignment of a hyperbolized significance, in the case of Turkey. A constructive approach to ideological impact on political processes presupposes the assessment of the role played by the political elite in the implementation of ideological attitudes and formulation of new or revival of old traditional values in people's minds.

The above means that we should pay particular attention to Pan-Turkism and its role as a civilizational platform of Turkish policies.

A glance into the past will show that Pan-Turkism emerged in Turkey in the 1920s when ideological trends split up into Pan-Turkism and Turkism, radical and moderate Islamism, neo-Ottomanism and Pan-Turanism, all dominated by Kemalism, which was formulated by Kemal Atatürk as the basis of Turkish-style democracy.

## **Pan-Turkism as the Driver of Political Processes Unfolding in the Turkic World**

There are currently three factors that shape the political processes in the Turkish Republic:

- failed attempts of the Turkish leaders to achieve equal cooperation with the European Union and the United States, which forced Ankara to look towards the Middle East and Russia<sup>1</sup>;
- the concept of neo-Ottomanism that was revived when the previous factor remained unrealized, as the phantom pains caused by the lost power of the Ottoman Empire increased. The new concept was largely formulated by Ahmet Davutoğlu in his *Stratejik derinlik: Türkiye'nin uluslararası konumu* (The Strategic Depth)<sup>2</sup>;
- Pan-Turkism became Turkey's civilizational project used by its leaders in the post-Soviet military, political and economic vacuum as an instrument of realization of their imperial ambitions.

Disintegration of the Soviet Union merely kindled the ideas realized in a latent form during the Cold War to undermine the Soviet Union's positions in its Central Asian republics. Today, the full-scale implementation of the project in the post-Soviet space may deprive Ankara of apparent economic, military and political advantages created by its partnership with Russia and is, therefore, fraught with considerable losses.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See: P. Varbanets, "A Turkic Alliance: Possible Alternative to Turkey's Unrealized EU Membership?" *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, No. 1 (55), 2009.

<sup>2</sup> See: A. Simavorian, "Ideologicheskie techeniia v kontekste vneshney politiki Turtsii," available at [[http://www.noravank.am/rus/articles/detail.php?ELEMENT\\_ID=5011](http://www.noravank.am/rus/articles/detail.php?ELEMENT_ID=5011)], 4 November, 2019.

<sup>3</sup> See: A.B. Burashnikova, "Neopanturkizm i neosmanizm vo vneshney politike Turtsii," *Izvestia Saratovskogo universiteta*, History. International Relations Series, No. 2, 2013, available at [<https://imo.sgu.ru/ru/node/1140>], 23 December, 2017; E.R. Nikulin, "Kontseptsia panturkizma v sovremennoy vneshnepoliticheskoy doktrine Turetskoy Respubliki," in: *Globalnye problemy i protivorechia XXI veka*, 2018, available at [<https://nauka.me/s241328880000081-3-1>], 4 November, 2019.

The size of the Turkic family of peoples (about 200 million) endows the Pan-Turkism project with a fairly large potential.<sup>4</sup>

Today, Pan-Turkism has acquired even greater significance thanks to the following:

- the Turkic states are the field of competition between the Russian and Chinese integration projects that Turkey wants to join as a regional power;
- as consumer markets and as sources of natural resources and cheap labor in the Eurasian economic system, the Turkic countries are ready to meet Turkey half-way to diversify their partnership with all entities of international politics;
- Turkic countries are pursuing a multi-vector policy to develop relations with Russia and Turkey as a road towards closer contacts with Europe.

The Turkic states consider Turkey an investor that helps develop their economies.<sup>5</sup> Turkey, in turn, invests in the Turkic states of Central Asia and in the countries where the Turkic people are a minority (Georgia, Iran, Iraq, Bulgaria, Rumania and Greece); the total volume of Turkish investments has reached \$5.35 billion against a rather unfavorable background. The EU future of Turkey is dim<sup>6</sup>; Turkey's relations with Germany, the "locomotive of Europe" are deteriorating even though the Turkish diaspora in Germany spares no effort to pull Turkey towards the European Union.

The relations between Ankara and Washington are at their all-time low: America refuses to deport Fethullah Gülen who, according to the Turkish leaders, had stirred up a military coup in 2016. This suggests with a great degree of certainty that Turkey will not abandon the European track of its foreign policy in the near future.<sup>7</sup>

On the other hand, Turkey's political weight in the Middle East is not impressive enough to make the realization of the Pan-Turkic ideas easy. There is a sufficient number of global and regional players seeking domination in the Middle East and the post-Soviet space.

The Arab Spring of 2011 and the civil war in Syria seemed like a good chance for Turkey to gain regional leadership;<sup>8</sup> it was undermined by the incident with the downed Russian plane and support of the anti-Assad coalition in Syria. The Turkish potential was further undermined by the problem of the Kurds who had Americans on their side for a period of time. Americans pursued their own aims in the region together with a coalition of states that joined the anti-ISIS campaign to camouflage their opposition to Assad.<sup>9</sup>

The ideas of Pan-Turkism, however, are very much "alive and winning." This is confirmed by the work of the International Turkic Kurultai, regular summits of the Turkic states and economic integration spreading across the Turkic world. Cultural cooperation, empowered corporate spirit and civilizational unity are growing increasingly more obvious on the international arena.<sup>10</sup>

Ilkham Aliev, President of Azerbaijan confirmed this by saying that "any problem of any Turkic state should become a problem for all Turkic states." By this the President also confirmed that Azer-

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<sup>4</sup> See: "Rasprostranenie idey panturkizma. Sovremenny analiz geopoliticheskikh ugroz," Vektor Evrazia. Federalnaia ekspertnaya set, 2018, available at [<https://vector-eurasia.org/internal/project-analyst/22/>], 4 November, 2019.

<sup>5</sup> See: "Priamye inostrannye investitsii Turtsii," TRT Russkiy, 2017, available at [<https://www.trt.net.tr/russian/proghrammy/2017/05/25/>], 23 December, 2017.

<sup>6</sup> See: P. Varbanets, op. cit.

<sup>7</sup> See: "Recep Tayyip Erdoğan: ES ne dolzhen stat khristianskim klubom i ne dolzhen prinimat uchastie v kampanii islamofobiii," available at [<http://najmnews.com/>], 11 January, 2018.

<sup>8</sup> See: T.A. Ganiev, V.V. Karyakin, "Bolshoy Blizhniy Vostok: geopoliticheskaya regionalistika konfliktogennogo tsentra mirovoy tsivilizatsii," *Arkhot*, No. 4 (7), 2018, pp. 15-28.

<sup>9</sup> See: T.A. Ganiev, V.V. Karyakin, "Kurdskiy faktor i ego rol v formirovanii geopoliticheskoy obstanovki na Blizhnem Vostoke," *Arkhot*, No. 2 (5), 2018, pp. 4-13.

<sup>10</sup> See: E.T. Mekhdiev, "Neo-Osmanizm v regionalnoy politike Turtsii," *Vestnik MGIMO*, No. 2 (47), 2016, pp. 12-39, available at [<https://vestnik.mgimo.ru/jour/issue/view/17>], 11 January, 2018.

baijan was a pillar of Pan-Turkism in Transcaucasia. These feelings are not popularized at the official level, since the political elite of Azerbaijan does not want to worsen its relationship with Russia and cherishes its relations with Western partners.<sup>11</sup>

Back in 1989, Aliev, the future president of Azerbaijan, expressed the common opinion held by the Azerbaijani political elite: “We want to proclaim the Turkic democratic republic of Azerbaijan, a dream of eight million of Azeri Turks to confirm our sovereignty and independence. Turkey is a window to the West for all Turkic peoples of Asia and the Caucasus... We want to create a Great Turkey that would unite all Turks under its egis.”<sup>12</sup>

Turkmenistan occupies a special place among its Central Asian neighbors. Turks and Turkmen have a common ethnic root—Seljuq Turks who in the 10th century build up a huge sultanate. In post-Soviet times, they added economic cooperation to their shared history and culture.

Their linguistic and cultural affinity is gradually bringing the two countries closer: the number of students from Turkmenistan at higher educational establishments of Turkey is great and growing; there are Turkish companies working in Turkmenistan, which has already brought it into the orbit of Ankara’s pan-Turkic policy.<sup>13</sup>

The political elites of Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan are gradually embracing the ideas of Pan-Turkism; meanwhile, Russia and China, countries that attach special importance to their role in the Eurasian integration projects, actively oppose this trend. The pro-Turkish elites, in turn, are working hard to turn their states’ foreign policies towards Turkey and to encourage separatist sentiment in the Muslim regions of Russia and China (Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region).

Turkey is implementing its Pan-Turkism project along two tracks:

- closer ties with the Turkic states;
- support of Turkic-speaking minorities in non-Turkic states (particularly, in the Balkans).

This is how Ankara acquires and supports its lobbies in the power structures of the above-mentioned states and can thus influence the results of national elections. Bulgaria, where the consistent successes of the pro-Turkish party Movement for Rights and Freedoms in the 2005 and 2009 elections (14% in 2009) are explained by Turkey’s support; between the elections the party boasted no more than 8%.<sup>14</sup>

Ankara behaves very aggressively within its Pan-Turkic project, causing concern in the countries in contact with the Turkic world: Bulgaria, China, and Greece, which have considerable Turkic diasporas and, of course, Russia. Pan-Turkism emerged as a counterbalance to Russia’s Eurasian integration project and is, therefore, clearly anti-Russian.<sup>15</sup>

Turkey will certainly spare no effort to implement its economic and cultural projects. The political elites of the Turkic world find the project highly attractive, which is confirmed by the idea of a Council of Cooperation of Turkic States voiced by Nursultan Nazarbayev several years ago (more on this below).<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> E.R. Nikulin, *op. cit.*

<sup>12</sup> Quoted from: V. Egiazarian, “Neopanturkizm: Azerbaidzhan i Tsentralnaia Azia,” 10 May, 2013, available at [<http://www.diplomat.am/load/public/neopantjurkizm/5-1-0-38>], 10 July, 2020.

<sup>13</sup> See: D. Valiuzhenich, “Turetskoe vmeshatelstvo v situatsii v Turkmenii,” 19 May, 2020, available at [<https://anna-news.info/turetskoe-vmeshatelstvo-vo-vnutrennie-dela-turkmenii/>]; I. Polonskiy, “Turtsia i panturkizm na postsovetском prostranstve,” 2 December, 2015, available at [<https://topwar.ru/87172-turciya-i-panturkizm-na-postsovetском-prostranstve.html>], 10 July, 2020.

<sup>14</sup> See: E.R. Nikulin, *op. cit.*

<sup>15</sup> See: A.B. Burashnikova, *op. cit.*

<sup>16</sup> See: “Rasprostranenie idey panturkizma. Sovremenny analiz geopoliticheskikh ugroz.”

## Pan-Turkism in the Muslim Regions of Russia

Pan-Turkism, driven by the concept of unification of all Turkic peoples under the Turkish aegis into a sphere of influence that would include practically all Asia and a big chunk of Europe is spreading across the Russian borders. Plainly speaking, it threatens Russia's national interests.

The fact that during WWI adherents of Pan-Turkism called on Turkish leaders to side with Germany against Russia speaks volumes about the historical roots of its anti-Russian trend. They supported the Armenian genocide in 1915. Twenty years later, during WWII, Pan-Turkists stood for the German aggression against the Soviet Union in hopes of capturing Azerbaijan, Armenia and Crimea.

Turkey's NATO membership gave these ideas a new lease of life; active in Turkey's ideological confrontation with the Soviet Union, Ankara encouraged separatist sentiments in the Central Asian republics and Azerbaijan. This was very much in tune with the politics pursued by the United States, which aimed to weaken the Soviet (and, later, Russian) influence in these regions in the context of diversified hydrocarbon supplies to Europe. The Soviet Union's disintegration triggered the active propagation of Pan-Turkism across the post-Soviet space through educational establishments in both Russia and post-Soviet states.<sup>17</sup>

An Assembly of the Turkic Peoples was set up in 1991 to proliferate the ideas of Pan-Turkism. In 2009, President of Kazakhstan Nazarbayev suggested that Turkic countries should set up a Council of Cooperation of Turkic-Speaking States, a center for the studies of the Turkic world, a Turkish academy, a center of Turkic history and culture, a Turkic library and a Turkic museum. In 2010, the Turkish world responded with the Council of Cooperation of Turkic States, the Council of Heads of State; the Council of Foreign Ministers, the Council of the Elders, the Committee of Highest Officials and the Turkic Business Council.<sup>18</sup> Common Turkish textbooks on history, geography and literature that concentrated on history and achievements of the united Turkish ethnicity were recommended for secondary schools.

Turkish leaders relied on education, culture and religious organizations (jamaats) set up for in-depth studies of Islam to promote the ideas of Pan-Turkism far and wide beyond the Turkish borders. Jamaats consisted of parishioners of one mosque headed by an imam. In Chechnia, jamaats (at least, many of them) were part of the terrorist organization Imarat Kavkaz.<sup>19</sup>

Today, the majority of jamaats abandoned terrorism, but still insist on the ideas of separatism and extremism. The Nurcular jamaat, which opposes President of Turkey Erdoğan, is one of them.

It promotes the ideas of Pan-Turkism in the Islamic states and the Muslim regions of Russia. Founded by a radical preacher Said Nursi, the jamaat prefers the methods of psychological personality deformation to detach people from the real world, subjugate them, deprive them of their individuality and an ability to think independently, and even to prepare them for imprisonment or even martyrdom.<sup>20</sup>

The network of Nurcular Fethullahçılar jamaats, named after its founder, the Turkish preacher Fethullah Gülen, is one of the heavyweights. Their supporters are opposed to radicalism and extremism. Unlike all other jamaats, Fethullahçılar is a secular structure, it does not insist on beards for men and hijabs for women and stakes on lyceums, Turkish gender-specific boarding schools.

<sup>17</sup> See: A.B. Burashnikova, op. cit.

<sup>18</sup> See: A. Shustov, "Pantiurkizm protiv Evrazijskogo souza," *Stoletie*, 6 November, 2012, available at [[http://www.stoletie.ru/geopolitika/panturkizm\\_protiv\\_jevrazijskogo\\_sojuza\\_793.htm](http://www.stoletie.ru/geopolitika/panturkizm_protiv_jevrazijskogo_sojuza_793.htm)], 10 May, 2020.

<sup>19</sup> See: A.B. Burashnikova, op. cit.

<sup>20</sup> See: E.T. Mekhdiev, op. cit.

In Russia, Gülen set up lyceums, cultural and scientific centers at higher educational establishments or libraries engaged in agitation and propaganda under the cover of legal organizations.<sup>21</sup>

The Süleymancılar jamaat founded by Süleyman Hilmi Tunahan, known as holy Ishan among his followers, is highly popular among the adherents of Pan-Turkism in Russia. It is one of the Sufi structures, yet, unlike traditional Sufism, members of Süleymancılar believe that there will be no more saints after the death of the holy Ishan Süleyman, but only his caliphs.<sup>22</sup>

The well-known mufti and fighter against radicalism Valiulla Yakupov insists that the approach preached by Süleymancılar is not appropriate for Islamic orthodoxy.<sup>23</sup> In Russia it avoids open propaganda with the exception of children's courses at mosques during school holidays. So far, its teaching programs have remained faithful to the traditional teaching of Islam.<sup>24</sup>

In summary, it can be stated that Muslim Turks in Russia were in the past, and remain today, loyal to authorities despite certain separatist sentiments betrayed by the desire of the elites of Tatarstan, Bashkiria and Chuvashia to gain independence in the 1990s. In the post-Yeltsin era the trend was cut short by Moscow; however, it had never threatened the unity of the state. The national elites of the Russian Muslim regions were and remain incorporated in Russia's political system; they invariably appealed to Moscow to manage social problems and contradictions and never thought about separatism. It should be said, however, that in the distant future the ideas of Pan-Turkism may develop into a real threat.

## Conclusion

Ankara relies on Pan-Turkism as an element of soft power with an anti-Russian hue; its activity in Central Asia and Trans-Caucasia is designed to elbow Russia out of the spheres of its traditional influence in the post-Soviet space.

In order to effectively oppose Turkish Pan-Turkism, while preserving the current degree of cooperation with Turkey, Russia should become more active

- in expanding Russia's influence across the post-Soviet space through education and culture, two instruments of soft power, by educating foreign students in Russia's educational establishments, setting up Russia's cultural centers abroad, organizing conferences, symposiums and youth summer camps, teaching the Russian language and history;
- in its efforts to disengage Azerbaijan from Turkey's geopolitical influence and involve it in the Chinese New Silk Road project and the North-South transport corridor;
- in cooperating with the Central Asian countries and China in opposition to the spread of radical Islamism;
- in developing education on the basis of traditional Islam by making the course on the fundamentals of world religions part of the secondary school curriculum.

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<sup>21</sup> See: R.R. Suleymanov, "Religioznoe vliianie Turtsii na musulman Uralo-Povolzhia v postsovetkiy period," available at [<http://www.apn.ru/publications/article34669/>], 24 March, 2018.

<sup>22</sup> See: "Chto takoe sekta Nurcular?" available at [<http://voprosik.net/chto-takoe-sekta-nurdzhular/>], 24 March, 2018.

<sup>23</sup> See: V.M. Yakupov, *Neofitsialny islam v Tatarstane: dvizheniia, techeniia, sekty*, Izdatelstvo Iman, Kazan, 2006, p. 11.

<sup>24</sup> See: R.R. Suleymanov, op. cit.