



TURKEY AS VIEWED FROM CENTRAL ASIA

VLADIMIR FEDORENKO

RETHINK PAPER 26

APRIL 2016

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ISBN: 978-1-938300-36-3

Printed in the USA

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Washington, DC 20002
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This publication can be downloaded at no cost at
www.rethinkinstitute.org

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SUMMARY

Diplomatic relationships and partnerships between Turkey and the countries in Central Asia started after the republics gained independence in 1991. The Central Asian republics, namely Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, share many common trends and developments along with distinctive political, economic and social characteristics that affect the development of relationships with Turkey. While the stance of Turkey toward Central Asia is clearly positive, how do Central Asian nations perceive Turkey? Do they share the same attitude, or view Turkey with more caution? Also, how have recent events impacted the attitude of Central Asia toward Turkey?

Turkey's image and the development of its soft power in Central Asia have been cultivated through diplomatic, business, educational and cultural channels. The establishment of diplomatic relations with Turkey enabled Central Asian states to construct business relations, strengthen cultural interactions and launch education partnerships. The cultural ties between Central Asia and Turkey, which are based on a common history, language, religious practices, culture and traditions, facilitated partnerships, not only on a bilateral basis, but also at an intraregional level.

The Central Asian republics will continue to observe Turkey's political challenges and democratic development. Among the main factors that should be addressed in Central Asia are the development of civic national identity, the management of their Islamic identity, and strengthening of civil society. In this regard, the Turkish experience in some ways could be seen as a "How To" guide for the Central Asian republics.

The future of relationships of the Central Asian countries with Turkey will be affected by Chinese, Iranian, Russian and Western involvement in the region. For the Central Asian republics, Turkey's presence in the region is important because it introduces economic opportunities, trade diversification and strategic flexibility. However, due to Turkey's current political polarization, the Kurdish dilemma, the Syrian war, a huge influx of refugees and a tense relationship with the West, strengthening relationships with Central Asia is not a priority for Ankara at the moment. Nevertheless, partnerships in energy, improvements in transportation routes, business partnerships, and trade are ongoing.

INTRODUCTION

Diplomatic relationships and partnerships between Turkey and the countries in Central Asia started after the republics gained independence in 1991. While the stance of Turkey toward Central Asia is clearly positive, how do Central Asian nations perceive Turkey? Do they share the same attitude, or view Turkey with more caution? Also, how have recent events impacted the attitude of Central Asia toward Turkey? The Central Asian republics, namely Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, share many common trends and developments along with distinctive political, economic and social characteristics that affect the development of relationships with Turkey.

The modern relationships between Central Asia and Turkey were initiated after the fall of the Iron Curtain at the end of the Cold War in 1991. At that time the newly established Central Asian republics faced a number of pressing issues and challenges. The paramount tasks for national governments were to fill the post-communist political vacuum, adopt new national ideologies, strengthen state sovereignty, and rebuild their domestic economies. The populations of the Central Asian republics were segmented into various interest groups with their own agendas and demands on the new national governments. The most outspoken public demands, such as recognition of Islamic identity, introduction of religious customs and practices, political liberalism, freedom of speech, private ownership and entrepreneurship were all accompanied by a common, strong intolerance of communism, with the exception of a small portion of these societies, predominantly elderly people who were still loyal to the old communist system. Therefore, Central Asian elites were in search of completely new political and economic models that could better address national challenges and satisfy public demands.

A tide of so-called “third wave democracy” hit the “shores” of the newly independent Central Asian states. The new systems could not resemble the old communist or socialist regime for obvious reasons. Authoritarian rule would attract harsh criticism from Western democracies and was not feasible because of social instability, weak state institutions and strong public enthusiasm for liberal changes. For these reasons, following a democratic path seemed to be the only possibility at the time. The local elites, who wanted to remain in power circles and gain support from the West, joined in foreseeable and even inevitable systematic transitions. Moreover, Moscow, which had been a conventional compass for Central Asian political decision-making processes for decades, encouraged the independent republics to embrace democracy when the Yeltsin administration plunged into democratic reforms.

THE TURKISH MODEL

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Turkey welcomed the emergence of the newly independent Central Asian republics with great enthusiasm. It became the first country to recognize the independence of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. Turkey had already aligned itself with the West by being a North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) member and persistent candidate for European Union (EU) membership. The collapse of the Soviet Union introduced a new world order in which Turkey had an unprecedented opportunity to strengthen its position in Asia by establishing new relationships with the post-Soviet countries. Also, because of Turkey's

unique geographic location between Europe and Asia, building new partnerships in Central Asia would strengthen Ankara's significance in the West. Moreover, for many people in Turkey, strengthening ties with Central Asia was viewed, not just as an opportunity to explore new markets and find strategic allies, but even as an obligation because of common ethnic roots and culture.

Certainly Turkey was not the most advanced democratic government. But, in comparison with European democracies, and because of religious, social and cultural similarities and the analogous problems and challenges faced in the Central Asian republics, Turkish democracy was the most suitable political system to learn from. Ruling elites in predominantly Muslim Central Asia were inspired by the Turkish political system because it was designed to accommodate and reconcile demands for democracy and a liberal economy with Asian traditions, Islamic identity and religious practices. Turkish democratic practices had their own social and political problems, but the existence of the similar challenges, their acknowledgment, and the methods used to resolve them were very

Turkish democratic practices had their own social and political problems, but the existence of the similar challenges, their acknowledgment, and the methods used to resolve them were very educational for Central Asian observers.

educational for Central Asian observers. The Turkish system was a great example of harmonization of Islamic traditions, democratic practices and a liberal economy.

Central Asian leaders who visited Turkey were impressed by developments in the country. During his visit to Ankara in December 1991, the first and current president of Uzbekistan, Islam Karimov, publicly announced, "My country will go forward by the Turkish route."¹ The first president of Kyrgyzstan, Askar Akayev, declared, "Turkey is a morning star that shows the true path to other Turks."² Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev made a similar statement: "When I was in Turkey, I carefully examined how Turks are developing a market economy. And if we follow the same route, it will rapidly bring us prosperity."³ Moreover, the West also promoted the Turkish model as an example, with its secular, democratic political structure and free market economy, to Central

Asian elites in order to counter attempts by Iran to gain influence in the region.⁴

While the official position was that democracy would be introduced in Central Asia, due to political considerations, the interest of national elites in the Turkish model was actually

¹ Hiro, Dilip. *Inside Central Asia: A Political and Cultural History of Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkey, and Iran*. 2009. Overlook Duckworth: Michigan. p. 124

² Bal, Idris. *The Turkish Model and the Turkish Republics*, 1998, [Accessed on July 26, 2016 <http://sam.gov.tr/wp-content/uploads/2012/02/IdrisBal.pdf>]

³ Nazarbayev: Turkish Model is the Most Convenient for Kazakhstan (Nazarbayev: Turetskaya model samaya priimimaya dlya Kazakhstana), 1992, [Accessed on July 26, 2015 <http://www.interfax-religion.ru/?act=archive&div=8226>]

⁴ Bulent Aras & Hakan Fidan. "Turkey and Eurasia: Frontiers of a New Geographic. Imagination", *New Perspectives on Turkey*, no. 40 (Spring 2009), p. 200

limited to two key elements: Turkish secularism and economic development. Local elites desired to create mechanisms that would not only satisfy public demands by introducing some degree of political pluralism and liberalism, but also provide state control over religious affairs and secure the longevity of their political rule.

Even though the Turkish democratic model was seen as the most suitable one, the ruling elites in Central Asia faced a number of challenges to its implementation. Democratic progress in Turkey had developed over almost seven decades of political and nation-building processes. It had experienced ups and downs, including military interventions, but resulting in the development of strong institutions, robust civil society organizations, a system of political pluralism and economic freedom. However, the Central Asian republics had their first rendezvous with democracy under challenging conditions of political instability, dysfunctional institutions, damaged economies, social discontent and critical security concerns. Consequently, it was utterly unrealistic to expect rapid development of democratic practices within a short time in such a troubled environment.

National security was another factor that hindered the implementation of a democratic model and advancing relationships between the Central Asian republics and Turkey. Upon declaration of independence, Central Asia faced security problems such as extreme nationalism, religious radicalism, territorial disputes and political and ethnic intolerance. After a series of riots and intergovernmental protests in Dushanbe in February 1990, it became apparent that Tajikistan needed substantial reconstruction of its political system and restoration of social order. The first president of an independent Tajikistan, Qahhor Mahkamov, visited Turkey in June 1991 and met with then-president Suleyman Demirel. Mahkamov was impressed by economic development and democratic progress in Turkey. However, the situation in Tajikistan was already tense, and before Mahkamov was able to introduce any reforms, he resigned from the presidency because of political turmoil. Starting in May 1992, Tajikistan was engulfed in a five-year civil war.

Uzbekistan also encountered security concerns that impeded the country's democratic development. In addition to other serious security problems, Tashkent identified radical Islam as a main factor that jeopardized stability and state sovereignty. The group Adolat Uyushmasi (Justice Society), later to be transformed into the main rival of Karimov's government – the regional radical militant group Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) – was founded by Jumma Namangani and Tohir Yuldashev in 1991. The IMU was active not only in Uzbekistan but also in Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan and Afghanistan. To address the security situation and guarantee the longevity of Karimov's regime, Tashkent chose to implement a heavy-handed approach instead of advancing pluralist democracy.

As political instability and conflicts spread to the regional level, security became central to national interests in the Central Asian republics. The reaction of the Central Asian national elites was initially to strengthen their authority, reassure themselves of domestic support from interest groups, and confirm alliances with local stakeholders. Then they took a firm stance against any ideas that contradicted the national strategies of their governments. Consequently, because of political pressure from the elites, the democratic development in Central Asia that had once been inspired by Turkish developments slowed down. As a result, intergovernmental collaboration and exchanges of practices and democratic experience between the Central Asian governments and Turkey has remained underdeveloped, and democratic practices have not been completely implemented.

TURKEY AS AN ECONOMIC PARTNER

The markets of the newly independent Central Asian states were attractive to Turkish businesses and investors. The Turkish International Cooperation and Development Agency (TIKA), established in 1992 by the Turkish government, aimed to promote social and economic development by providing financial and technical support, particularly in the Central Asian region. TIKA program coordination offices were opened in all Central Asian capitals to promote partnership and sustainable development among the member countries. There were also non-governmental initiatives to bring Central Asian countries and Turkey together. The Turkish Confederation of Businessmen and Industrialists or TUSKON (founded in 2005) has made considerable contributions to the development of trade and business partnerships among the Central Asian and Turkish republics. The Central Asian countries also received large investments from Turkey. Close to 2,000 Turkish companies specializing in construction, textiles, foodstuffs, machinery and equipment have been operating in Central Asia, with total investments exceeding USD 4.7 billion in 2010⁵.

Economic relationships between Central Asia and Turkey have continued to grow with relative stability during the 2000s. Turkish imports have grown 9-fold, and Turkish exports, 7-fold since 1996 (see charts below).

Turkish Imports	1996	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
Kazakhstan	100	558	993	1,284	1,861	959	1,392	1,995	2,056	1,760	1,236	1,109
Kyrgyzstan	5,8	14	27	45	47	31	30	52	45	36	65	76
Tajikistan	2,7	47	118	143	147	107	283	324	345	371	160	203
Turkmenistan	100	160	189	396	389	327	386	392	303	653	623	557
Uzbekistan	58	261	415	613	580	413	861	939	813	815	780	711
Total	267	1,042	1,745	2,482	3,026	1,838	2,954	3,704	3,563	3,637	2,866	2,659

Turkish Exports	1996	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
Kazakhstan	164	459	696	1,079	890	633	818	947	1,068	1,039	977	750
Kyrgyzstan	47	89	132	181	191	140	129	180	257	388	421	294
Tajikistan	4,4	46	71	118	176	126	143	172	234	283	277	162
Turkmenistan	69	180	281	339	662	945	1,139	1,493	1,480	1,957	2,231	1,859
Uzbekistan	230	151	175	225	337	279	282	354	449	562	603	489
Total	511	927	1,358	1,946	2,258	2,125	2,514	3,148	3,490	4,231	4,510	3,556

In million USD. Source: Turkish Statistical Institute [www.turkstat.gov.tr]

⁵ Turkey's Relations with Central Asian Republics, [Accessed July 26, 2015
http://www.mfa.gov.tr/turkey_s-relations-with-central-asian-republics.en.mfa]

Turkey's total import volume grew from USD 1 billion in 2005 to USD 2.6 billion in 2015. However, there were significant increases and decreases in this 10-year period, caused by various events in Central Asia. The energy crisis in Central Asia in 2008, combined with an abnormally cold winter, caused import numbers to drop almost by half in 2009.

Similar to imports, exports increased over a period of 10 years, from USD 927 million in 2005 to USD 3.5 billion in 2015. The increase was gradual and stable until 2015, when the total dropped from USD 4.5 billion to USD 3.5 billion. The decrease in Turkish exports to Central Asia can be explained by the diminishing purchasing power of the Central Asian countries, which was affected by the weakening economy of Russia and falling oil prices. In 2015, oil prices dropped even lower, and the economic situation in Russia, upon which Central Asia is largely dependent, was exacerbated even further. Therefore, it can be expected that exports will continue to decrease in 2016.

Shuttle trading (known as *chelnochnyi bizness* in Russian and *bavul ticareti* in Turkish) is another important dimension of economic relationships between Central Asia and Turkey. Shuttle trading is a term used for the post-Soviet economic practice in which small-scale businessmen shuttle back and forth across countries trading goods. Although shuttle trading by definition refers to small- and medium-scale trade, because there are many entrepreneurs and considerable trade volume, it contributes significantly to the economic relationships between Turkey and the Central Asian countries. In 2014, shuttle trading amounted to USD 8.6 billion, with Russia making up 49%, Ukraine 19.6%, Turkmenistan 6%, Iran 4%, Uzbekistan 3%, etc.⁶ It is extremely common for Central Asian shuttle traders to declare much lower invoice values or undervalue the prices of acquired products to avoid paying high import duties and taxes; therefore, the trade is significantly underreported and does not provide accurate values for the volume of shuttle trading.

Starting in 2014, the Central Asian economies suffered from the ongoing drop in oil prices, devaluation of national currencies, and decreases in remittances coming in from Russia; these economies have also been significantly affected by the general decline in the Russian economy. Cooperation with Turkish businesses is important, since it can moderate economic hardship and introduce new means of cooperation. Along with China, Turkey is the most popular destination of Central Asian businessmen for a number of reasons. Central Asian traders prefer Turkey because of cultural and linguistic similarities that enable them to communicate relatively easily. Moreover, Turkish made products are considered better in quality than Chinese products.

POTENTIAL COOPERATION IN ENERGY AREA

With abundant hydrocarbon resources and relative geographic proximity, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan would welcome cooperation with Turkey in the energy sector. Kazakhstan ranks 12th in the world with 30 billion barrels of proven oil reserves, and 17th

⁶ Rusya ile bavul ticareti 2014'te 4.2 milyara indi (Shuttle trading with Russia fell to 4.2 billion in 2014) 6 April, 2015 [<http://www.haberturk.com/ekonomi/ekonomi/haber/1062428-rusya-ile-bavul-ticareti-2014te-42-milyara-indi>]

in the world with 1,900 bcm of proven natural gas reserves.⁷ It has been exporting its hydrocarbons predominantly to Russia and China and is searching for alternative markets. Similarly, Turkmenistan, which ranks 4th in the world with 17,500 bcm of proven natural gas reserves, is eager to diversify its energy routes.⁸ Currently, Turkmenistan exports its hydrocarbons to or via Russia and China, with some modest volumes going to Iran and Afghanistan. Adding Turkey to Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan gas export routes would not only diversify gas export options, but would also provide a connection to stable European markets with a demand for energy. There is ongoing cooperation to deliver Turkmen gas to Europe. Besides the South Caucasus Pipeline (commissioned in 2006; 25 bcm/year) and the Trans-Anatolian Natural Gas Pipeline now under construction (to be completed in 2018; 16 bcm/year), construction of the Trans-Caspian Gas Pipeline would allow Turkmenistan to export natural gas to Europe via Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkey, bypassing Russia and Iran. In March 2015, during Turkmen President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow's visit to Turkey and after meeting with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, the two announced a triple mechanism involving Turkey, Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan to address energy issues.⁹ Consequently, as a country that imports energy, Turkey is of interest to Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan and, to lesser degree, Uzbekistan, not only as a buyer, but also as a transit energy route to the European market.

CENTRAL ASIA'S TAKE ON TURKISH SOFT POWER

Turkey's image and the development of its soft power in Central Asia have been cultivated through diplomatic, business, educational and cultural channels. The establishment of diplomatic relations with Turkey enabled Central Asian states to construct business relations, strengthen cultural interactions and launch education partnerships. The cultural ties between Central Asia and Turkey, which are based on a common history, language, religious practices, culture and traditions, facilitated partnerships, not only on a bilateral basis, but also at an intraregional level.

Many multilateral institutions have been established to promote cooperation in various fields and strengthen cultural ties between the Central Asian republics and Turkey. There are many prominent organizations, including: the International Organization of Turkic Culture, established in 1993; the Turkic Council, created in 2009; the Parliamentary Assembly of Turkic-Speaking Countries, established in 2008; and the International Turkic Academy, a research center founded in 2010. In addition, there have been initiatives such as the creation of a common Turkic language and the establishment of a Turkic TV channel.

⁷ BP Statistical Review of World Energy June 2014, [Accessed July 26, 2015
<http://www.bp.com/content/dam/bp/pdf/Energy-economics/statistical-review-2014/BP-statistical-review-of-world-energy-2014-full-report.pdf>]

⁸ Ibid

⁹ Energy, security top focus of Turkish and Turkmen leaders, [Accessed July 26, 2015
<http://www.dailysabah.com/money/2015/03/03/energy-security-top-focus-of-turkish-and-turkmen-leaders>]

For the Central Asian governments as well as the general public, cultural interaction, cooperation and the exchange of ideas and experiences are seen as beneficial. However, the use of intercultural cooperation as an instrument of political ambitions and interference in domestic affairs could be counterproductive. Some conservative figures

If Turkey promoted Pan-Turkism, which implies the political unification of all Turkic nations, it would be perceived as direct Turkish interference in the domestic affairs of the Central Asian states.

and national groups see Turkish cultural and educational activities as a tool for Turkish imperialism. If Turkey promoted Pan-Turkism, which implies the political unification of all Turkic nations, it would be perceived as direct Turkish interference in the domestic affairs of the Central Asian states. The Central Asian republics have all been through a complicated nation-building process, ensuring that their national identities are unique and very different from their neighbors. Therefore, the establishment of a supranational structure and the creation of a new, salient identity based on political “Turkicness” would not be welcomed. Concerning the ideas of Pan-Turkism, Uzbek President Karimov said: “Turkey wants us to become Turks. We are Uzbeks, not Turks.”¹⁰ In fact, Uzbek-Turkish relationships deteriorated after Tashkent accused Ankara of interfering in domestic

relations and harboring opposition leaders in Turkey. Similarly, Tajikistan would refuse to be associated with Pan-Turkic discourse due to its ethnic and linguistic attachment to a Persian heritage. To summarize, Turkish soft power, otherwise beneficial, educational and attractive, would lose its appeal in the eyes of Central Asian people and ruling elites if mixed with political ambitions and goals.

COOPERATION IN EDUCATION

One of the main pillars defining relationships between Central Asia and Turkey is education. In early 1990, the then-Prime Minister Suleyman Demirel in Turkey launched the “Grand Student Project” (*Büyük Öğrenci Projesi*), allowing students from Central Asian states and the Caucasus and the Balkans to study in Turkish universities, with tuition remission and scholarships. Every year, Turkish universities provide up to 1,500 scholarships for the Turkic republics; as a result, about 35,000 students have received an education in Turkey since the start of the program.¹¹ This number does not include a large number of Central Asian students who come to study in Turkey on their own means and

¹⁰ Kalishevskiy, Mikhail. Uzbekistan: Dictatorship as a result of “Scientific Approach” (Uzbekistan: Diktatura kak rezultat “nauchnogo podhoda”), 23 December 2013, [Accessed on July 26, 2015 <http://www.fergananews.com/articles/7990>]

¹¹ Ozoglu, Murat . International Students in Turkey in the Light of Global Trends, SETA: Ankara, 2012 [Accessed July 26, 2015 http://www.academia.edu/4268730/K%C3%BCresel_E%C4%9Filimler_I%C5%9F%C4%B1%C4%9F%C4%B1nda_T%C3%BCrkiye_de_Uluslararası%C4%B1_%C3%96%C4%9Frenciler_International_Students_in_Turkey_in_the_Light_of_Global_Trends_]

funding. Some take the YOS exam (Examination for Foreign Students), which allows students to study in Turkish universities but doesn't grant scholarships.

Another significant collaboration is the establishment of Turkish universities in Central Asia. Two universities have been established as a result of bilateral agreements between the government of Turkey and host nations: Kyrgyz-Turkish Manas University, established in 1995 in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan; and Ahmet Yesevi University, established in 1993 in Turkistan, Kazakhstan. Turkish non-governmental engagement in educational activities in Central Asia also has a considerable effect on perceptions of Turkey. Turkish schools opened by entrepreneurs and volunteers inspired by the ideas of Turkish-Islamic scholar Fethullah Gulen have become popular because of the high-quality education they provide. Three universities have also been established by Turkish entrepreneurs: Suleyman Demirel University, established in 1992 in Almaty, Kazakhstan; International Turkmen-Turkish University, established in 1994 in Ashgabat, Turkmenistan; and International Ataturk-Alatoo University, established in 1996 in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan. In addition, dozens of Turkish schools and learning centers are operating in Central Asia. All of these institutions are characterized by high-quality education. Although it is difficult to quantify the effect of these educational efforts, knowledge about and views of Turkey gained in these institutions by students will obviously have a positive influence on relationships between the countries.

REGIONAL TRENDS AND GEOPOLITICAL DIMENSIONS

It is important to understand that the Central Asian republics do not perceive Turkey in the same way that Turkey perceives Central Asia. When Ankara considers developing new partnerships in Central Asia, it calculates the gains and challenges of bilateral partnerships with each country as an independent player. However, for the Central Asian republics, the same process is much more complicated. The establishment of new partnerships requires not only a calculation of the gains and risks of bilateral cooperation, but also a thorough assessment of other outcomes from Russian and Chinese influences. In other words, the equation for cooperation of Central Asian countries with Turkey must include economic and political consequences as well as the cost of lost opportunities for alternative partnerships with China and Russia.

A bitter conflict between Russia and Turkey erupted in the aftermath of the downing of a Russian Sukhoi SU-24 plane by a Turkish Air Force F-16 fighter jet in November 2015, citing alleged violation of the Turkish-Syrian border. This event triggered demonization campaigns targeting and blaming each other. The fight rapidly escalated after both sides refused to seek compromise, and Moscow issued sanctions against Turkey. Both countries used all possible means and media outlets, the majority of which are under the control of the current governments in both countries. Central Asia was affected as well. The most popular source of information in Central Asia is pro-government media outlets, especially Russian TV channels. Therefore, public opinion about Turkey was affected negatively, especially after Putin officially called the Turkish government “accomplices of terrorism”¹² and accused them of doing business with terrorists and aiding radical groups

¹²Vladimir Putin uvidel podsobnikov terrorizma v Turtsii (Vladimir Putin saw “perpetrators of terrorism in Turkey”) 24 November, 2015 [<http://www.kommersant.ru/doc/2861504>]

in the region.¹³ Prior to this incident, Turkey had refused to support Western sanctions against Russia, and the Russian media had praised Turkey because of this. The Russian media had extensively covered Ankara's independent decisions concerning foreign policy, the Turkish Stream natural gas pipeline, Putin's official visit to Turkey in December 2014, and Erdogan's attendance at the inauguration ceremony of a mosque in Moscow. As a result, Central Asian republics had more positive views of Turkey, because Central Asian opinion about Turkey is partly shaped by the Russian media. Since the Russian media proclaimed that Turkey had "stabbed Russia in the back," referring to the plane incident, Central Asia's attitude toward Turkey has deteriorated significantly. Thus, the Russian media plays an important role in shaping Central Asian attitudes toward Turkey.

Central Asia is directly and indirectly affected by the confrontation between Moscow and Ankara. President Nazarbayev said: "This year, Kazakhstan will celebrate the 25th anniversary of its independence. From the first days of our sovereignty, we have been making every effort to bring closer our brotherly peoples... Turkey means much for Kazakhstan and we will never give up the policy of cooperation. For us, the crisis in the relationship between Turkey and Russia has become a big problem. Both countries are our important partners and allies."¹⁴

The equation for cooperation of Central Asian countries with Turkey must include economic and political consequences as well as the cost of lost opportunities for alternative partnerships with China and Russia.

Another regional development that introduces profound changes in Central Asia is Russia-led Eurasian integration, which aims to promote intergovernmental cooperation and integrate the economies of member states. The first major step towards Eurasian integration was the establishment of the Eurasian Customs Union of Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan (January 1, 2010), with the objective of removing all intra-union customs barriers. Kyrgyzstan became a member in August 2010. Tajikistan is also a candidate for the Eurasian Economic Union. While Turkmenistan remains uninterested, Uzbekistan is outspoken about not becoming an Economic Union member. President Karimov shared his thoughts about Eurasian integration: "We have our own way of development; we have a responsibility to our people. Frankly speaking, Uzbekistan won't join the Eurasian Economic Union or the Customs Union."

¹⁵ There is also concern that the Customs Union will focus on creating trade barriers with non-union member states, instead of promoting

¹³ Putin ne poshadil neftyanoy biznes Erdogana s terroristami IG (Putin didn't have mercy on oil business of Erdogan with IS terrorists) 27 November, 2016 [<https://russian.rt.com/inotv/2015-11-27/N24-Putin-ne-poshadil-neftyanoy>]

¹⁴ Prezident: ot politikisotrudnichestva my nikogda ne otkajemsya (President: We will never give up on politics of cooperation) 6 February, 2016 [<https://kapital.kz/economic/47655/prezident-ot-politiki-sotrudnichestva-my-nikogda-ne-otkazhemsya.html>]

¹⁵ Islam Karimov refused to enter Eurasian Union (Islam Karimov otkazalsya vstupit v Evraziyskiy Soyuz), 2015, [Accessed July 26, 2015 http://www.vesti.uz/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=48326]

intra-union cooperation for trade and development. As one of the instrumental players in Eurasian integration and founder of the Eurasian Economic Union, Kazakhstan has repeatedly stated that Astana is interested solely in economic integration and has never aimed for the creation of any type of political union.¹⁶

Due to increased trade tariffs, there is a high probability that the Eurasian Economic Union will negatively affect Turkey's trade relations with member states of the Customs Union (Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan) and will improve trade partnerships with non-member states (Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan). On the other hand, the Economic Union could encourage entrepreneurs to invest in and establish production facilities in the region, since production in the territory of the Economic Union presents non-tariff, intra-union trade opportunities.

Economic agreements, along with diplomatic ties with Turkey as a full-fledged member of NATO and an EU candidate, increase Central Asian interconnectedness, not only with Turkey, but also with the West. Turkey was already seen as an important transatlantic partner, and has now become a more important player in Central Asia, especially since the closure of the US Manas Air Base in June 2014. As a result of political and economic connections and cooperation with Turkey, Central Asia contributes to trade flexibility, better competition, security and political resilience.

On the area of security, Turkey has the second largest army in NATO with 612,900 active military personnel, yet it does not have any significant military cooperation with the Central Asian republics. All the Central Asian states except Uzbekistan are members of the Russia-led Collective Security Treaty Organization. After the Manas transit center was closed, Russia reestablished its de facto military presence in key locations in Central Asia. A military presence in Central Asia and security cooperation is one of the main geopolitical priorities of Russia and, due to significant strategic differences between Ankara and Moscow – such as in the case of Syria – Turkish military cooperation in Central Asia seems to be impracticable. In fact, Central Asian governments do not see Turkey as a military ally ready to address security concerns in the region.

Other factors troubling government officials and the public in Central Asia are religious radicalism and the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL/Daesh). Media sources indicate that 2,000 to 4,000 Central Asians have joined extremist groups in Syria by travelling through Turkish territory. The Central Asian community is concerned that Turkey is widely perceived as a trouble-free transit route to ISIL.

¹⁶ Nazarbayev: Eurasian Integration not aimed at reincarnation of political unions, 2013, [Accessed July 26, 2015 <http://www.inform.kz/eng/article/2527318>]

THE TURKISH DOMESTIC POLITICAL SPLIT AND ITS EFFECTS ON CENTRAL ASIA

Recent domestic political developments in Turkey have affected relationships with the Central Asian republics. Public discontent, triggered by a series of abuses of authority and undemocratic practices by the prolonged single-party reign of the Justice and

The Central Asian republics were perplexed when the Turkish government requested that they close the Turkish schools due to political polarization in Turkey.

Development Party (AKP), surfaced during the Gezi Park protests of May 2013. The once pro-democracy AKP government has been severely criticized for undemocratic behavior and attempts to inhibit fair investigation of corruption cases. Political pressure on opposition parties, independent media outlets, civil society organizations and community leaders has increased political polarization and deepened social cleavages in Turkey. As a result of the AKP's confrontational stance against the Hizmet (aka Gulen) movement, Hizmet-affiliated organizations and schools have been targeted in Turkey and abroad. Turkish schools are well known in Central Asia and have played an instrumental role in

building and strengthening bilateral relationships between Turkey and the host countries. Many Central Asian people learned that Turkish schools did not belong to the Turkish government, but were governed by various civil society organizations affiliated with the Hizmet movement. In fact, the Central Asian republics were perplexed when the Turkish government requested that they close the Turkish schools due to political polarization in Turkey. This unusual request undermines Turkish soft power and damages the prestige, not only of the AKP government, but also of Turkey in general.

CONCLUSION

In the early years of independence of the Central Asian countries, Turkish secularism and its market economy were attractive to the new governments. However, once national security became a primary concern, Central Asian elites adopted more conservative policies and turned to Russia to forge strategic alliances. Despite Turkey's considerable military strength, security cooperation with the Central Asian republics has not been established due to Turkey's geographic remoteness and the Russian military presence in the region. Security concerns have forced Central Asian republics to seek Russian military support through the Collective Security Treaty Organization, and this situation is not likely to change in the foreseeable future. It is highly unlikely that Central Asia would rely on Turkish military support to address ongoing security concerns such as domestic military groups, ISIS and the Taliban.

The Central Asian republics will continue to observe Turkey's political challenges and democratic development. Among the main factors that should be addressed in Central Asia are the development of civic national identity, the management of their Islamic identity, and strengthening of civil society. In this regard, the Turkish experience in some ways could be seen as a "How To" guide for the Central Asian republics.

The future of relationships of the Central Asian countries with Turkey will be affected by Chinese, Iranian, Russian and Western involvement in the region. For the Central Asian republics, Turkey's presence in the region is important because it introduces economic opportunities, trade diversification and strategic flexibility. However, due to Turkey's current political polarization, the Kurdish dilemma, the Syrian war, a huge influx of refugees and a tense relationship with the West, strengthening relationships with Central Asia is not a priority for Ankara at the moment. Nevertheless, partnerships in energy, improvements in transportation routes, business partnerships, and trade are ongoing.

Turkey is geographically distant from the Central Asian republics; therefore, logistics and costs of transportation security are important factors negatively affecting trade relationships. However, there are regional developments that could expedite and facilitate trade and accelerate transportation. Another important factor that could help boost cooperation between Turkey and Central Asia is Turkey's Silk Road Initiative, which started in 2008 with the aim of reconstructing the historic Silk Road as a link between Asian and European markets through simplification and unification of customs regulations¹⁷. There are many ongoing new Silk Road projects, such as the US-promoted New Silk Road Initiative, the Chinese Silk Road Economic Belt, and the Transport Corridor Europe-Caucasus-Asia that aim to modernize transportation routes, expedite customs procedures, promote trade partnerships and build people-to-people relationships. Moreover, there is considerable potential for investment in underdeveloped sectors such as tourism and renewable energy, where cooperation with Turkish companies is feasible. Due to its important geographic location and growing economy, Turkey has all the prerequisites for becoming a more influential partner for Central Asia.

¹⁷ See Fedorenko, Vladimir. *The New Silk Road Initiatives in Central Asia*, Rethink Institute: Washington, D.C., 2013, [<http://www.rethinkinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/Fedorenko-The-New-Silk-Road.pdf>]

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