



Pan-Turanism and TÜRKSOY: The Common Turkic Cultural Identity as a Political Tool

Vasiliki Myrtside

Abstract

TÜRKSOY introduces itself as an international organisation aiming to promote the common cultural identity of the Turkic speaking states. Delving into the organisation's actions and stances, though, it becomes clear that its motives are in accordance with deeper political interests. In particular, TÜRKSOY strives for the establishment of the pan-Turanistic idea as the fundamental pillar of an artificially constructed Turkic nation. This vision, supported mainly by the Republic of Turkey, is promoted by the use of soft power on the Turkic and the outside world.

Since early 2000's, Turkey attempting to re-approach its identity and position on the world stage decided to announce itself as the leading state of the Turkic world. Through Davutoğlu's "zero problems with our neighbours" policy Turkey applied a soft power-oriented foreign policy; theoretically approaching the western powers and practically placing itself as the Turkic super power in the Muslim populations of the Turkic world and the Middle East. In particular, Turkish foreign policy focused on the promotion of its positive public image abroad by investing in NGOs favorably disposed toward cultural diplomacy. In addition to that, exploiting the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the Turkish government approached the Turkic groups of the region stressing their common past and heritage in order to emerge as an important player in Eurasia.¹ Taking a look at the recent developments we should notice the development of the Turkish foreign policy on this terrain. On September 3, 2018, the Cooperation Council of Turkic

MA in International Relations and European Studies (University of Nicosia).

¹ Giorgos Michalakopoulos, "Turkey in Pursuit of a new Public 'Image': Public and Cultural Diplomacy in times of Global Change" [Η Τουρκία σε αναζήτηση νέας «εικόνας»: Δημόσια και Πολιτισμική Διπλωματία σε μία εποχή παγκόσμιων ανακατατάξεων,] *Geopolitics* (2010): 105 (in Greek).

Speaking States' (Turkic Council) summit was held in Kyrgyzstan's Cholpon-Ata² attended by Presidents of Turkey, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan as well as the Hungarian Prime Minister.³ Turkish President Erdoğan trying to underline the importance of solidarity among the Turkic states and the need for co-acting in international fora proposed that the Turkic World should "trade in [its] own currency rather than the US dollar."⁴ The Turkic Council established in 2009 is "constructed on four main pillars as common history, common language, common identity and common culture [and] aims to broaden the existing bilateral cooperation areas such as economy, science, education, transportation, customs [and] tourism."⁵ Interestingly the intergovernmental organisation is also affiliated with the International Organisation of Turkic Culture (TÜRKSOY). TÜRKSOY political interests in promoting Turkic nationalism are covered by an exclusively culture-centered mantle, an argument which is indicated by the organisation's connection with diplomacy and policy making. By this logic of events, it uses identity, culture, education and science to establish the idea of its member states' co-acting as a Turkic nation. What is more, TÜRKSOY's journal runs long articles on populations of Turkic origins settled in foreign states' territories, who keep their Turkic traditions. The organisation in collaboration with the United Nation organises, also, a plethora of cultural events honouring the Turkic customs in- and outside the Turkic world having as its cornerstone the celebration of Nowruz. Last but not least, TÜRKSOY strongly supported the adoption of a common Turkic language underlining the communicational benefits among the Turkic states, an idea which was abandoned considering the linguistic gaps among the Turkic languages.

Pan-Turkism and the foundation of TÜRKSOY

Pan-Turanism or pan-Turkism refers to a Turkic nationalism based on the idea that all Turkic tribes come from the mythical land of Ötüken (Mongolia). By this logic of events, the Turkic nation is a mixture of Turkic populations, which at present are either met in the form of Turkic independent states (e.g. Republic of Turkey) or Turkic groups settled in other states (e.g. the Russian Republic of Tatarstan). The pan-Turanistic ideology emerged as the Turkic reaction to the Russification and Christianisation of the minorities conquered by the Russians in the 19th century. This movement was revived in the mid-20th century by Mustafa

² Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty, "Mirziyoev Says Uzbekistan Eager To Join Turkic Council" Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty, accessed on 16 September 2018, <https://www.rferl.org/a/president-mirziyoev-says-uzbekistan-eager-to-join-turkic-council/29468091.html>

³ Kazakh-tv.kz, "VI Summit of cooperation council of Turkic states" Kazakh-tv.kz, accessed on 16 September 2018, http://kazakh-tv.kz/en/view/politics/page_197567_vi-summit-of-cooperation-council-of-turkic-states

⁴ Anadolu Agency, "Turkish President Erdoğan proposes to trade without U.S. dollar" Hürriyet Daily News, accessed on 16 September 2018, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkish-president-erdogan-proposes-to-trade-without-u-s-dollar-136412>

⁵ turkkon.org, "About Turkic Council > General Information" turkkon.org, accessed on 16 September 2018, http://www.turkkon.org/en-US/general_information/299/308

Kemal Atatürk and scholar Ziya Gökalp during the formation of Turkey. Nowadays, pan-Turkism is once again promoted by TÜRKSOY.

The foundational concept of TÜRKSOY was developed in 1992 by the Ministers of Culture of Turkey Mr. Fikri Sağlar, Azerbaijan Mr. Polat Bülbüloğlu, Kazakhstan Mr. Erkegali Rahmadien, Kyrgyzstan Mr. Danial Nazarmatov and Uzbekistan Mr. Zafer Hakimov. It was officially established, though, on July 12th, 1993 upon signature of its founding agreement⁶ and acts under the aegis of UNESCO and ISESCO ever since. In 1998 the autonomous Republics of the Russian Federation Tatarstan, Bashkortostan, Altai, Sakha, Tyva and Khakassia as well as the Autonomous Territorial Unit of Gagauzia (Moldova) and the so called "Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus" joined TÜRKSOY as members with an observer status. The organisation's leading figures are the member states' Ministers of Culture and its headquarters are located in Ankara, Turkey. TÜRKSOY aims at introducing the common Turkic culture to the world and portrays itself as an advocator of peace, brotherhood and solidarity.⁷

More than a culture-oriented organisation

In accordance with its articles of association, TÜRKSOY is an exclusively culture-oriented organisation, which is not related to policy or diplomacy area. Nevertheless, MP Şükrü Elekdağ on July 9th, 2003 declaimed about the organisation's contribution to Turkish foreign policy.⁸ Furthermore, TÜRKSOY's connection to policy making is demonstrated by the fact that its agenda includes many non-cultural items. Two notable examples are the reference to the frozen conflict of Artsakh (Armenian) or Nagorno-Karabakh (Azeri) at an organisation's multilateral meeting⁹ and TÜRKSOY's views on Kosovo concerning the involuntary association of local Turkic groups with the Serbian-Albanian conflict, which deprived them of being informed of the back-then current events in their mother-tongue.¹⁰ In addition, celebrating the 20th anniversary of the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the parallel independence of Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, separate issues of the journal were published dedicated to each of these Republics and enriched with a variety of articles on each honored state. Last but not least, TÜRKSOY attaches particular importance to the Christian Gagauz people, who due to the old days' propagandistic Greek assimilation policy have developed national consciousness,

⁶ Kemal Ocak, "TÜRKSOY'nun Kuruluş Öyküsü: Amaçları, Etkinlikleri ve Bugünü", TÜRKSOY 1 (2001): 4.

⁷ TÜRKSOY, "The 29th Meeting of the Permanent of the Ministers of Culture of Turkic Speaking Countries", TÜRKSOY 36 (2012): 47.

⁸ TÜRKSOY, "TÜRKSOY'ya Arsa Tahsisi", TÜRKSOY 10 (2003): 60.

⁹ TÜRKSOY, "TÜRKSOY Kültür Bakanları 15. Dönem Toplantısı Bakü'de Yapıldı", TÜRKSOY 3 (2001): 58.

Lale Sivgin Dundar, "Summit of the Cooperation of Turkic Speaking Countries", TÜRKSOY 36 (2012): 52.

¹⁰ İbrahim Üstün, "Etnik Savaş sonrası Kosova'da Türklerin Durumu", TÜRKSOY 9 (2003): 53-56.

despite their Turkic origins.¹¹ On the other hand, the Minister of Culture of Gagauzia Mr. Dmitriy Kambur underlined Turkey's economic support to the Autonomous Territorial Unit and the special bond between them.¹²

TÜRKSOY and soft power

TÜRKSOY's statutory objective is the promotion of the cultural assets that constitute the Turkic identity, which, we believe, is being pursued by the use of 'soft power'.¹³ In particular, TÜRKSOY's cultural agenda includes events in and outside the Turkic world, which indicates that the organization's objective is not simply a display of the common Turkic identity, but the creation of a new one that will represent a TÜRKSOY-centered pan-Turanistic ideology.¹⁴ Typical examples of this are the celebration of Nowruz (see below) as a Turkic custom in European and American capitals, the declaration of one city of the Turkic World as its Cultural Capital every year or the protection of the Turkic cultural heritage by UNESCO. In relation with the Cultural Capital, we underline the fact that during the host city's tenure various infrastructure projects are being carried out, which are funded by the Member States' Ministries of Culture and external actors, such as NGOs, universities and local governments without mentioning, though, the participation rates of each. A valuable tool to this initiative is, also, the publication of the TÜRKSOY's journal, which gives the opportunity to every Turk to be informed and be affected by the messages which the organization attempts to convey without having to attend its events. Last but not least, TÜRKSOY demonstrates many achievements in the education sector. It has collaborated with many Turkic universities by offering scholarships to students from its member states. In 1990's, for example, TÜRKSOY and TİKA (Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency) helped students from Central Asia and Caucasus region to study in Turkish universities,¹⁵ while Turkish students attended classes in the State University of Komrat (Gagauzia) and in 1993 a memorandum of understanding was signed between the University of Manas (Kyrgyzstan) and the Republic of Turkey.¹⁶ What is more, the publication of the Encyclopedia of Turcologues (a vision of Secretary General Dusen Kaseinov), which describes the history of the Turkology, supports the realisation of common national characteristics among the Turkic states and regions.

¹¹ Feyyaz Sağlam, "Yunanistan (Batı Trakya Türkleri)-Gagavuz Türkleri Kültürel İlişkilerine bir bakış", TÜRKSOY 3 (2001): 39-41.

¹² K. Melih Sariarslan, "Gagavuz Yeri'nin Yeni Atanan Kültür Başkanı İle Söyleşi: Gagavuz Kültürü Dmitriy Kambur'a Emanet", TÜRKSOY 23 (2003): 10-13.

¹³ Joseph S. Nye Jr., *Soft Power: The Means To Success In World Politics* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2005).

¹⁴ James Sawyer, "Turkic Identity and the Depoliticization of Culture: A Case Study of the International Organization of Turkic Culture (TÜRKSOY)", *Scholarly Commons* 4 (2013): 12.

¹⁵ Sawyer, *Turkic Identity and the Depoliticization of Culture*, 23.

¹⁶ Sebahattin Balci, "The Polar Star of the Central Asia: Kyrgyz-Turk Manas University", TÜRKSOY (2011): 48.

Delving into the cultural (political in reality) agenda of TÜRKSOY we come across with Nowruz. Nowruz being celebrated on March 21st, is the first day of spring and means new day.¹⁷ It originates from Persia and narrates a nationalist's heroic resistance to the Assyrian occupation.¹⁸ In the context of the co-existence between Iranians and Ottomans the Nowruz celebration became integrated with the Turkic culture. It was abolished, though, after the declaration of the Turkish Republic as it was considered a non-Turkish element, while after the 1970's the celebration became synonym to PKK attacks.¹⁹ It was Prime Minister Süleyman Demirel in 1990's who precluded any link between Nowruz and the Kurdish element.²⁰ In addition to that, Turkey adopted the idea that Nowruz stems from the founding myth of Ergenekon,²¹ while the Turkic post-Soviet Republics celebrate it as a symbol of their independence of the USSR.²² In summary, the revival of Nowruz by TÜRKSOY brought about nationalist motives aiming to create a common Turkic identity.

The main method of communication between TÜRKSOY and its wider audience, though, is the publication of a journal of the same name, which promotes the organisation's cultural activities, pays tributes to personalities of literature, music and arts, runs articles on Turkic customs and presents some characteristics of the Turkic mentality, such as tolerance towards the freedom of religion, the belief in military power and the strong bond between the equestrian and his horse.²³ What is more, trying to identify common features among the Turkic ethnic groups, the TÜRKSOY journal runs long articles on not widely known Turkic communities, like Tatars, Turkmens, Tyvans and Altai, Qarai, Poland, Ashika and Sakha Turks. The abovementioned instances implicitly underline the pan-Turanistic ideology of TÜRKSOY. It is also clear that TÜRKSOY journal tries to preserve the Turkic national consciousness. Ismail Gasprinski, a Crimean scholar of the 19th century, is given extensive coverage due to his vision of a common Turkic language and the preservation of the Turkic tribes' ancestral culture.²⁴ Furthermore, religion takes a dominant position at TÜRKSOY's attempts to back the Turks against common enemies. An article published in 2001 refers to Ashika Turks, who were a Muslim population in Georgia subjected to ethnic cleansing by the "Christian Georgians."²⁵ In addition to that, the Turkic belief in freedom of religion is underlined by given examples of contemporary Turkic groups that believe in

¹⁷ Kemal Ocak, "Nevruz", TÜRKSOY 3 (2001): 56.

¹⁸ Sawyer, *Turkic Identity and the Depoliticization of Culture*, 17.

¹⁹ Sawyer, *Turkic Identity and the Depoliticization of Culture*, 16-17.

²⁰ Sawyer, *Turkic Identity and the Depoliticization of Culture*, 17.

²¹ Bahar Aykan, "Whose Tradition, Whose Identity? The politics of constructing "Nevruz" as intangible heritage in Turkey", *European Journal of Turkish Studies: Social Sciences on Contemporary Turkey* 19 (2014): 8, accessed on 2 January 2018, URL: <http://ejts.revues.org/5000>.

²² Sawyer, *Turkic Identity and the Depoliticization of Culture*, 16-18.

²³ Yrd. Doç. Dr. Ali Abbas Çınar, "Türkmen Halk Felsefesinde At'ın Yeri", TÜRKSOY 3 (2001): 21-24.

²⁴ Nail Tan, "Doğumunun 150. Yılında Gaspıralı İsmail Bey", TÜRKSOY 3 (2001): 6-9.

²⁵ Doç. Dr. Fadil Ali, "Ashika Türkleri", TÜRKSOY 3 (2001): 15.

Judaism, such as Karai Turks,²⁶ or Christianity, such as Gagauz Turks.²⁷ The Muslim element is distributed in all the issues of the journal.

A careful look at TÜRKSÖY's issues makes clear that the Republic of Turkey has a dominant position in the organisation, since the headquarters of TÜRKSÖY are located in Ankara. Interestingly, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk is depicted as the Father of all Turkic tribes and the promoter of the Turkish nationalism freed from any pan-Turanistic ideologies.²⁸ Moreover, the language used on the organisation's journal is mainly the Turkish one, while advertisements for Turkish language courses and companies with interests in Turkey are really common. It is also notable that the occupied territory of Cyprus is referred as "Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus", a designation officially recognized only by the Republic of Turkey. Considering all the above mentioned we become aware of Turkey using TÜRKSÖY as a soft power tool to fulfill its political purpose; to establish itself as the leading Turkic power among the organisation's member states. Creating a Turkic national consciousness based on common identity and tradition elements is, of course, easier to be accepted than imposing it as political decision.

Considering the abovementioned arguments, the creation of a common Turkic language is one of pan-Turkism's cornerstones, which is being successfully transmitted through TÜRKSÖY. The idea of a "lingua turca" freed from linguistic barriers was first announced at the 17th Meeting of Turkic States' Ministers of Culture (Almaty/Kazakhstan, 2002) by TÜRKSÖY and the Turkish Language Institution.²⁹ Working on this initiative the organisation attempted to present the Turkic language as a potential world language arguing that its traces can be located in a wide area, from China to the Balkans.³⁰ The language spoken by a nation or an ethnic group is the characteristic that establishes its identity. The creation of a common Turkic language would, of course, require full supervision by the Turkish Republic, which is the most powerful Turkic independent state and, therefore, would be responsible for resolving the impediments of the different alphabets in the Turkic world.³¹ Moreover, a similar suggestion was made for the establishment of Turkish as a common language due to its easy grammatical and syntactical structure and the use of the Latin alphabet.³² These ambitions were abandoned, though, when the President of the Azerbaijani Authors' Union spoke

²⁶ Dr. Yaşar Kalafat, "Farklı Dini İnançlara Mensubiyet İtibariyle Türk Halk İnançları Çalışmalarında Metot ve Teori", TÜRKSÖY 10 (2003): 29.

²⁷ Dr. Yaşar Kalafat, "Farklı Dini İnançlara Mensubiyet İtibariyle Türk Halk İnançları Çalışmalarında Metot ve Teori", TÜRKSÖY 10 (2003): 28-30.

²⁸ Oktay Sanan, "Atatürk ve Türk Dünyası", TÜRKSÖY 1 (2001): 15-16.

²⁹ TÜRKSÖY, "Türk Dünyasında Ortak Dil Türkçe Bilgi Şöleni Ankara'da Yapıldı", TÜRKSÖY 8 (2003): 61.

³⁰ Yrd. Doç. Dr. Ertuğrul Yaman, "Dünya Dili Türkçe", TÜRKSÖY 10 (2003): 8.

³¹ Prof. Dr. Mahmut Kaşgarlı, "Türk Dünyasını Ortak Alfabe ve Ortak Yazı Diline Kavuşturmak için Bazı Öneriler", TÜRKSÖY 3 (2001): 16-20.

³² Cengiz Aslan, "Türk Dünyası Kültür Bütünü Açısından Bilgi ve İletişim Dili Olarak Türkiye Türkçesinin Önemi", TÜRKSÖY 11 (2004): 52-54.

out against the common Turkic language arguing that the adjustment process would be troublesome.³³

Towards a more unified Turkic world?

To conclude, it is not safe to say that TÜRKSOY's vision of the pan-Turanistic ideology's dominance in the Turkic world has been fulfilled, because the organisation does not have a formal political status. This assumption is reinforced by the failed attempt to establish a common Turkic language due to the differences in perceptions among linguists. Furthermore, every Turkic state has developed its own national interests, which prevents the development of a common national consciousness (e.g. "Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus" has officially been recognized only by the Republic of Turkey). The fact that it has not yet fulfilled its statutory objective, though, does not exclude this possibility in the future, mainly operating in an auxiliary but effective way towards a purely political organisation or even union of states. In particular, the creation of a "Union of Turkic States" to the standards of the European Union could emerge as a future project. That means constructing a united states-like organisation with federal characteristics that would represent the Turkic world as a whole in international fora. For some, this idea may partially be implemented by the existence of the Turkic Council as an intergovernmental organisation. Even though the Turkic Council may be closer than TÜRKSOY in approaching the Union of Turkic States' logic, it is still a structure merely supporting the collaboration among the Turkic states. For the pan-Turkistic ideology to prevail, a strong political core is required, such as the establishment of an elected Turkic parliament or a common approach on international matters. Therefore, it seems that so far none of the Turkic institutions is efficient enough to serve the pan-Turanistic purposes appropriately.

³³ Doç. Dr. Abdulvahap Kara, "Türk Lehçeleri arasında Aktarma Soruları", TÜRKSOY 9 (2003): 23.