

Jan Niemiec

Jagiellonian University, Kraków

jan.p.w.niemiec@gmail.com

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8593-451X>

Preserving Common Ties: Turkey's Public Diplomacy in Central Asia*

Introduction

This article analyses the impact of historical, social and cultural aspects on Turkish foreign policy towards Central Asian states during the rule of the Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, AKP). In this regard, it should be clarified at the outset that this study adopts a narrow definition of the term “Central Asia” which encompasses, in this view, five former Soviet republics: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan.¹ Each of the above-mentioned countries (with the exception of Tajikistan) have ethnic ties with Turkey, which created favourable conditions for establishment of regional cooperation. Having developed a new doctrine for Turkish foreign policy, AKP has significantly empowered numerous public diplomacy organisations tasked

* The article was funded by the National Science Centre in Poland under the project no. 2019/35/N/HS5/02859.

¹ A. Sengupta, *Heartlands of Eurasia: The Geopolitics of Political Space*, Lexington Books, Plymouth 2009, pp. 57–60.

with supporting traditional diplomatic services in implementation of the government's strategic objectives, especially in regions considered culturally close.²

The first part of the article provides a brief overview of Turkey's relations with Central Asian states, from declarations of independence by former Soviet republics to the end of the 20th century. This is followed by an outline of the basic tenets of AKP's foreign policy doctrine along with introduction of the concept of Turkish soft power. The third part discusses activities of four institutions (Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency, International Organization of Turkic Culture, Yunus Emre Institute, Presidency for Turks Abroad and Related Communities) that form the core of Turkish public diplomacy in Central Asia. The article concludes with an assessment of Turkey's activities to date, and offers some proposals for improving the effectiveness of public diplomacy in the region.

Image theory in international relations has been adopted as a theoretical framework for this research. This scientific approach stems from studies on national images conducted since the late 1950s. According to Kenneth Boulding's findings, state action is dependent on perceptions of decision-makers, who in general do not have sufficient knowledge of foreign policy. Consequently, politicians rely on their own subjective perceptions of particular events or processes that occur in the international space.³ In this context, Brett Silverstein argued that perceptions are determined by motivations and values, which, due to their structures, can be subject to various forms of manipulation. In his view, political elites and the media have a fundamental influence on consolidation of specific images in the public consciousness.⁴ The first typology of international images was developed in the 1990s by Richard Herrmann, and it soon became a theoretical pattern utilised in foreign policy analyses. As explained by the author, states attach great importance to image-related issues, which results in a wide range of measures being used by them in bilateral contacts in order to create as positive an image as possible.⁵ Contemporarily, soft power is one of primary determinants of states' international perception, and there are several institutions whose activities focus exclusively on this sphere. Together, these

² M. Ekşi, M.S. Erol, *The Rise and Fall of Turkish Soft Power and Public Diplomacy*, "Gazi Akademik Bakış", 2018, no. 11(23), pp. 18–20.

³ K. Boulding, *National Images and International Systems*, "Conflict Resolution Quarterly", 1959, no. 2(3), pp. 121–125.

⁴ B. Silverstein, *Enemy Images: The Psychology of US Attitudes and Cognitions Regarding the Soviet Union*, "American Psychologist", 1989, no. 6(44), pp. 906–909.

⁵ R.K. Herrmann, *Perceptions and Image Theory in International Relations*, [in:] *The Oxford Handbook of Political Psychology* (2nd ed.), eds. L. Huddy, D.O. Sears, J. Levy, Oxford University Press, New York 2013, pp. 336–343.

specialised organisations and agencies form so-called public diplomacy which has the capacity to direct the state's message to a much wider audience than traditional diplomatic services. Considered therefore as an increasingly significant instrument for efficient foreign policy management, public diplomacy contributes to enhancing a state's international image, which, in turn, improves the possibility of achieving its strategic objectives.⁶

This article is based on a review of academic publications (monographs, scientific articles, edited volumes) authored primarily by international relations scholars from Turkey. In addition to the works comprising literature on the subject, an analysis of reports and newsletters published by Turkish public diplomacy organisations was also relevant to the final shape of this study. The following research methods were employed: content analysis, factor analysis, comparative method and process-tracing method. As a result, this article attempts to determine the impact of activities of selected public diplomacy organisations on implementation of Turkish foreign policy in Central Asia.

Historical overview of Turkey's relations with Central Asian states

It is important to note that Turkey was one of the first countries to recognise declarations of independence by five former Soviet republics in Central Asia in 1991. According to then president Turgut Özal, geopolitical vacuum emerged after the collapse of the USSR provided an excellent opportunity to give new impetus to Turkey's one-dimensional foreign policy which for decades had been oriented toward maintaining positive relations almost exclusively with the West.⁷ As originally envisioned by the authorities in Ankara, potential regional cooperation was to be rooted primarily in the economic field. Lacking large deposits of energy resources, Turkey was interested in developing projects for transportation of oil and natural gas from Central Asia and the Caucasus, which later would be extended to Europe (Turkey as a key transit country).⁸ In bilateral contacts, Turkish politicians also referred to the religious and cultural community, repeatedly stressing that Turks had strong ethnic ties with the region. Among right-wing intellectuals, there was even an idea of unifying Turkic-speaking nations under

⁶ E. Castano, A. Bonacossa, P. Gries, *National Images as Integrated Schemas: Subliminal Primes of Image Attributes Shape Foreign Policy Preferences*, "Political Psychology", 2016, no. 3(37), pp. 361–365.

⁷ W. Hale, *Turkish Foreign Policy, 1774–2000*, Frank Cass Publishers, London 2000, pp. 287–290.

⁸ R. Ertürk, *Türkiye ve Orta Asya Türk Dünyası*, "İstanbul Üniversitesi Sosyoloji Dergisi", 2004, no. 3(8), pp. 86–89.

leadership of Turkey in order to jointly counter contemporary threats (“Turkish model”).⁹ Having established diplomatic relations with former Soviet republics, the authorities in Ankara thus offered their support for political, economic and social transformation of Central Asia. Turkey also sought to be an advocate for the interests of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan in the international arena by contributing, among other things, to the accession of all Central Asian countries to the United Nations and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe in 1992. At the initiative of the Turkish government, they were also included in the NATO “Partnership for Peace” program.¹⁰

Turkey’s active involvement in regional affairs was initially perceived favourably by authorities in all former Soviet republics. Fearing hostile actions from neighbouring powers (Russia, China, Iran), political elites in Central Asia highly appreciated Turkish commitment, especially since at the time Turks had powerful allies (United States and Western Europe). In addition, a significant part of local communities viewed Turkey as a role model due to its democratic system of government, liberal market economy and lack of religious extremism.¹¹ However, serious tensions between the states of the region, resulting from the Soviet policy of deliberately antagonising Central Asian societies, determined the failure of the Ankara-coordinated initiative. Although some border conflicts had been resolved, a number of contentious issues (e.g. Fergana Valley) remained, which derailed plans to establish multi-level cooperation.¹² Moreover, it became apparent relatively quickly that Turkey was unable to conduct an effective policy in Central Asia without taking into account Russian influence in the region. Despite some resistance from local authorities, continued strong military and economic dependence after the collapse of the USSR ultimately allowed Russia to maintain its status as the dominant actor in this part of the world. Finally, due to limited potential of Turkish economy, most of development projects announced by the authorities in Ankara were cancelled.¹³

Thus, the defeat of Turkish foreign policy in Central Asia in the last decade of the 20th century was caused by three main factors: unstable regional situation,

⁹ M.S. Erol, *Türkiye’nin Orta Asya Politikasına Rusya Federasyonu ve Bölge Ülkelerinden Genel Bir Bakış*, “Türk Dünyası İncelemeleri Dergisi”, 2012, no. 1(12), pp. 2–3.

¹⁰ C. Serinkan, F. Güney, *Türkiye ve Orta Asya Ülkeleriile İlgili Bazı Stratejik Değerlendirmeler*, “Yeni Fikir Dergisi”, 2019, no. 10(23), pp. 20–21.

¹¹ İ. Bal, *The Turkish Model and the Turkic Republics*, “Perceptions: Journal of International Affairs”, 1998, no. 3(3), pp. 5–9.

¹² H. Akengin, *Türk Dünyası ve Orta Asya Türk Cumhuriyetleri Üzerine Jeopolitik Bir Değerlendirme*, “Marmara Türkiyat Araştırmaları Dergisi”, 2017, no. 1(4), pp. 4–5.

¹³ E. Denizhan, *Türkiye’nin Kafkasya ve Orta Asya Politikası ve TİKA*, “Sosyal ve Beşeri Bilimler Dergisi”, 2010, no. 1(2), pp. 20–22.

growing influence of Russia, and Turks' overly ambitious objectives. Although the Turkish government expected that proposed economic cooperation would soon translate into deeper political integration, the leaders of the Central Asian states were basically interested only in Turkey's financial and investment assistance. Reacting to plans to spread the so-called "Turkish model" across the region, the then president of Uzbekistan Islam Karimov argued in 1992 that unification of Turkic peoples within a supranational structure would never be possible.¹⁴ After liberating themselves from Soviet domination, Central Asian societies were concerned about any possible external influence, as a result of which relations between Turkey and countries of the region loosened over the time. In addition, at the turn of the 20th century, Turkish politicians sought to commence accession negotiations with the European Union, and hence close cooperation within the "Turkic world" ceased to be a priority for them.¹⁵

AKP foreign policy doctrine and its concept of soft power

The right-wing Justice and Development Party (AKP) has been in power in Turkey continuously since 2002, and has made several profound structural reforms during the last two decades. The country's political and social transformation, implemented under the slogan of "New Turkey", has also extended to the diplomatic sphere. It has been influenced by Ahmet Davutoğlu, one of then-Prime Minister (and current president) Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's closest advisors.¹⁶ Being the originator of the strategic depth concept, adopted as an official doctrine of Turkish foreign policy, Davutoğlu called for a radical modification of Turkey's international activities. In his view, the post-Cold War era saw a growing role for so-called regional powers that had capabilities to dominate a specific geographic area. Recognising Turkey as one of these countries, Davutoğlu demanded that the authorities in Ankara adopt a program of active and multi-vector foreign policy, which was expected to result in improved relations with neighbouring states.¹⁷ In this context, Turkey's key area of influence was

¹⁴ B.A. Yılmaz, *Soğuk Savaş Sonrası Türk-Orta Asya İlişkilerinde Türk Keneşi'nin Rolü: Dönemlerve Değişim Dinamikleri*, "Barış Araştırmalarıve Çatışma Çözümleri Dergisi", 2019, no. 1(7), pp. 4–7.

¹⁵ B. Aras, H. Fidan, *Turkey and Eurasia: Frontiers of a New Geographic Imagination*, "New Perspectives on Turkey", 2009, no. 40, pp. 200–201.

¹⁶ C. Çandar, *Turkey's Neo-Ottomanist Moment: A Eurasianist Odyssey*, Transnational Press London, London 2021, pp. 43–49.

¹⁷ Z. Arkan, M. Kınacıoğlu, *Enabling 'ambitious activism': Davutoğlu's vision of a new foreign policy identity for Turkey*, "Turkish Studies", 2016, no. 3(17), pp. 390–398.

to be the Middle East, yet Turks were also to seek to regain political influence throughout the entire former Ottoman Empire (North Africa, the Balkans), as well as in regions with which they maintained strong ethnic and cultural ties (Central Asia, the Caucasus).¹⁸

In line with new Turkish foreign policy doctrine, the AKP government strived for enhancing Turkey's image in its immediate international proximity. The primary instrument for implementing Davutoğlu's concept was a model referred to as "zero problems with neighbours". It defined a mechanism of action in bilateral relations, under which Turkey was to employ all possible diplomatic, economic or cultural means in order to defuse disputes and tensions in the region.¹⁹ In addition to active measures in the international arena, AKP politicians attempted to stabilise the domestic situation in neighbouring countries by, for instance, engaging in mediation between governments and opposition parties. Moreover, regional security was also to be built by strengthening economic linkages between all sides involved in the Ankara-led cooperation initiative. Meanwhile, by promoting its own values and principles, Turkey presented itself as a role model and regional leader. According to Turkish foreign policymakers, this could significantly facilitate consolidation of Turkey's position among the world's most influential regional powers.²⁰

As stated by Davutoğlu, successful implementation of the strategic depth doctrine was dependent on skillful utilisation of Turkish soft power. It is worth noting that in the early 1990s American political scientist Joseph Nye introduced concepts of "hard power" and "soft power" into studies of international relations. In this view, soft power allows states to achieve certain political goals without using violence or coercion.²¹ According to Nye, there are three sources of soft power: culture, political values and foreign policy. Through proper use of cultural attributes, a state can form a positive image of itself in the international community, which can improve external perceptions about it. Political values, on the other hand, are considered the most important element of the soft power theory, as they indicate attractiveness of a state's ideological system. If a state conducts policy based on clearly defined norms, it can encourage others to voluntarily

¹⁸ B. Özyılmaz Kiraz, *Türk Dış Politikasında Merkez Ülke Olma Yönelimi: Dönüşüm Mü, Devamlılık Mı?*, "Süleyman Demirel Üniversitesi Vizyoner Dergisi", 2021, no. 12(30), pp. 506–508.

¹⁹ Z. Muhsin, *The Regional Impacts on Turkey's Zero Problems with Neighbors Policy Towards Iraqi Kurdistan*, Lexington Books, London 2022, pp. 64–67.

²⁰ T. Arı, O. Munassar, *Two Stages of Turkey's Quest for a Regional Power Status in the Middle East: An Integrated Role Status-seeking Approach*, "Gazi Akademik Bakış", 2020, no. 14(27), pp. 8–11.

²¹ J. Nye, *Soft Power*, "Foreign Policy", 1990, no. 80, pp. 164–167.

adopt its own standards and principles. The last dimension of soft power is foreign policy which should be closely aligned with the aforementioned political values, since convergence between declarations and actions greatly facilitates realisation of diplomatic goals. In Nye's approach, foreign policy functions as a tool for transmission of soft power at regional and global levels.²² From the perspective of the authorities in Ankara, the idea of Turkish soft power is rooted in culture, history and geography, and the imperial heritage of modern Turkey is a factor that unites all regions of the former Ottoman Empire.²³ In AKP's geopolitical narrative, Turkey has been portrayed as the centre of an emerging regional order that has deservedly achieved a status of core state due to its long tradition of statehood and unique model of Islamic democracy. The political values proclaimed by Turks have been promoted in neighbouring regions for two decades through public diplomacy organisations which, according to AKP politicians, contribute to dissemination of Turkish patterns around the world.²⁴

Activities of Turkish public diplomacy organisations in the region

In AKP's political strategy, transmission of Turkish soft power occurs at several levels and through a variety of channels, among which public diplomacy is of considerable importance. This term, introduced into political science in the 1960s, refers to use of non-traditional foreign policy tools by state authorities to shape a positive self-image in the international community. When properly combined with activities of other diplomatic services, it can significantly facilitate fulfilment of a state's strategic interests.²⁵ In contemporary Turkey, there is a broad range of public diplomacy organisations (governmental and non-governmental) whose primary task is to reinforce the official narrative of the Turkish government in various parts of the world. Although some of these institutions have been operating in Central Asia for three decades, it was only under AKP rule that their structure was reorganised and adapted to requirements of Turkey's new foreign policy doctrine. Recognising soft power as an extremely essential political tool, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's party has also established a number of new agen-

²² L. Lin, L. Hongtao, *Joseph Nye's Soft Power Theory and Its Revelation Towards Ideological and Political Education*, "Humanities and Social Sciences", 2017, no. 2(5), pp. 70–72.

²³ İ. Kalın, *Soft Power and Public Diplomacy in Turkey*, "Perceptions: Journal of International Affairs", 2011, no. 3(16), pp. 16–18.

²⁴ R. Erdağ, *Türkiye'nin Stratejik Kültürü ve Dış Politikada Yansıması*, "Akademik İncelemeler Dergisi", 2013, no. 1(8), pp. 65–71.

²⁵ K. Pisarska, *The Domestic Dimension of Public Diplomacy: Evaluating Success Through Civil Engagement*, Palgrave Macmillan, London 2016, pp. 13–15.

cies, thus creating a complex system of public diplomacy through which Turks promote their vision on the international stage.²⁶ Historical, social and cultural references play a vital role in the AKP's strategy, which becomes particularly evident when analysing Turkey's relations with neighbouring regions. In Central Asia, the authorities in Ankara hope to gain an advantage over other external powers (Russia, China) interested in expansion in the region, primarily by cultivating ethnic ties linking Turkic peoples.²⁷ Below are four institutions of Turkish public diplomacy that, by promoting Turkey's soft power among Central Asian states, provide significant support for implementation of AKP foreign policy.

Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency

Among Turkey's public diplomacy institutions, the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (*Türk İşbirliği ve Koordinasyon Ajansı Başkanlığı*, TİKA) has been operating in Central Asia for the longest time. Impulse for establishment of this organisation was the break-up of the USSR and declarations of independence by countries with which Turkey had ethnic and cultural ties. In an effort to implement the aforementioned "Turkish model", the authorities in Ankara decided to create an institutional structure capable of providing comprehensive development assistance to former Soviet republics in order to overcome constraints imposed by the communist system.²⁸ Thus, TİKA was given a very wide range of tasks in areas such as healthcare, infrastructure, administration, education, culture. Initially, the agency was closely linked to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which was intended to increase efficiency of traditional diplomatic services by enhancing Turkey's image as a state responsible for its geopolitical landscape. In the 1990s, TİKA's involvement in Central Asia was indeed considerable, as it participated in works on internal reforms in all five countries of the region (e.g. local government, social security system, public administration).²⁹ After taking power in 2002, the Erdoğan government undertook a major organisational transformation of TİKA. The main objective

²⁶ T. Çavuş, *Dış Politikada Yumuşak Güç Kavramı ve Türkiye'nin Yumuşak Güç Kullanımı*, "Kahramanmaraş Sütçü İmam Üniversitesi İktisadi ve İdari Bilimler Dergisi", 2012, no. 2(2), pp. 28–31.

²⁷ R.T. Gürler, *Turkey's Soft Power towards Central Asian Countries after the Cold War*, "İZÜ Sosyal Bilimler Dergisi", 2013, no. 1(2), pp. 105–110.

²⁸ F.S. Larrabee, I.O. Lesser, *Turkish Foreign Policy in an Age of Uncertainty*, RAND National Security Research Division, Santa Monica 2003, pp. 122–123.

²⁹ A.N. Yılmaz, G. Kılıçoğlu, *Türkiye'nin Orta Asya'daki Yumuşak Gücü ve Kamu Diplomasisi Uygulamalarının Analizi*, "Türk Dünyası Araştırmaları", 2018, no. 119(235), pp. 154–156.

was to streamline the process of strengthening multifaceted cooperation between Turkey and its neighbouring regions (not only Central Asia) by making greater use of Turkish soft power potential. In this context, TİKA was henceforth to be engaged in creating concepts for development of Turkey's diplomatic activities by defining directions, priorities and mechanisms of action.³⁰

Following the AKP-implemented reorganisation, since 2011 the agency has been divided into seven units, among which is the Central Asia and Caucasus Department. Based on bilateral agreements, TİKA's regional branches are located in capital cities of Central Asian countries (Ashgabat, Bishkek, Dushanbe, Nur-Sultan, Tashkent). Originally, one of the agency's most important programs in the region was the "Turkology Project". It involved establishment or modernisation of university faculties and other facilities for study of the Turkish language in all Central Asian countries. It demonstrates that the authorities in Ankara considered education to be a fundamental dimension of soft power.³¹ Another important investment in this context was construction of a Turkmen-Turkish library in Ashgabat which was completed in 2015. TİKA also specialises in restoration of historical monuments representing common heritage of Turkic peoples, thereby strengthening friendly ties between countries of the region. Within the scope of the program coordinated by the agency, the following landmarks have been restored in recent years: mausoleum of Hoca Ahmed Yesevî in Kazakhstan, the Nurullah Bey madrasa in Uzbekistan, and the building housing the Academy of Sciences in Tajikistan.³² In Turkmenistan, with financial and organisational support of TİKA, some tombs located at the Merv archaeological site have been reconstructed, including the mausoleum of Ahmad Sançar, a sultan of the Great Seljuk dynasty.³³ While analysing reports on TİKA's current projects, it can be concluded that restoration programs are an increasingly important aspect of the agency's activities. Furthermore, it is noteworthy that in the case of renovation of mosques and other religious objects, TİKA works closely with the Directorate of Religious Affairs (*Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı*, DİB) and the affiliated foundation Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı (TDV). Although DİB has never been a typical public diplomacy organisation, its activities are substantial for promotion of Turkish soft

³⁰ O.G. Hatipoğlu, *Farklı Bir Kamu Kurumu Olarak Tika: Örgüt Yapısının Dönüşümü Hakkında Bir Analiz*, "Türkiye Siyaset Bilimi Dergisi", 2018, no. 1(99), pp. 106–112.

³¹ S. Gömeç, *Türkiye Türk Cumhuriyeti İlişkileri Üzerine Bir Değerlendirme*, "Uluslararası Sosyal Araştırmalar Dergisi", 2007, no. 1(1), pp. 119–121.

³² Türk İşbirliğine Koordinasyon Ajansı Başkanlığı, *2018 Faaliyet Raporu*, <https://www.tika.gov.tr/upload/2019/Faaliyet%20Raporu%202018/TikaFaaliyetWeb.pdf>, access 11 VIII 2023.

³³ Türk İşbirliğine Koordinasyon Ajansı Başkanlığı, *2013 Faaliyet Raporu*, <https://www.tika.gov.tr/yayinlar/faaliyet-raporlari/faaliyet-raporu-2013.pdf>, access 11 VIII 2023.

power, especially in religious terms (cf. construction of mosques in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan).³⁴ Recently, TİKA has also focused on cooperation in healthcare, organising in Turkey, for example, training courses for doctors, nurses and students from Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan.³⁵ An extremely necessary project was also provision of drinking water to several thousand inhabitants of desert regions in Tajikistan, saving the country from a major humanitarian disaster.³⁶

Given that TİKA was founded with the aim of providing comprehensive support to newly formed states in Central Asia, the agency has indeed completed a huge number of projects in the region over the past three decades. Being a crucial instrument of Turkey's soft power, TİKA has been persistently working for economic, political and socio-cultural development of the former Soviet republics, thus fulfilling assumptions of AKP's political doctrine.³⁷ It should be noted, however, that with expansion of TİKA's outreach to other regions, Central Asia has ceased to be prioritised by the government in Ankara. As already mentioned, territories of former Ottoman Empire (i.e. the Balkans, the Middle East, North Africa) are of key importance for Turkish foreign policy, since AKP's historical, cultural and religious references may have the greatest impact on local perceptions there.³⁸ Nevertheless, despite some organisational changes, TİKA can still be considered a highly effective tool of Turkish public diplomacy in Central Asia.

International Organisation of Turkic Culture

Cultural cooperation between Turkey and Turkic-speaking states of Central Asia is provided by the International Organisation of Turkic Culture (*Uluslararası Türk Kültürü Teşkilatı*, TÜRKSOY). Founded in 1993 in Almaty as the Common Administration of Turkic Culture and Arts (*Türk Kültür ve Sanatları Ortak Yönetimi*), the institution is responsible for development of cultural con-

³⁴ Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı, *Yurt Dışı Camileri*, <https://yonetimhizmetleri.diyabet.gov.tr/Documents/Yurt%20D%C4%B1%C5%9F%C4%B1%20Camilerimiz.pdf>, access 11 VIII 2023.

³⁵ B. Aydemir, M.N. Çoban, *Bir Dış Politika Aracı Olarak Tika: Türkiye'nin Orta Asya Ülkelerine Yaptığı Kalkınma Yardımlarının İncelenmesi*, "International Journal of Academic Value Studies", 2017, no. 3(12), pp. 241–244.

³⁶ Türk İşbirliğine Koordinasyon Ajansı Başkanlığı, *2004 Faaliyet Raporu*, https://www.tika.gov.tr/upload/2017/YAYINLAR/Faaliyet%20Raporlar%C4%B1/2004/2004%20TIKA_Faaliyet.pdf, access 11 VIII 2023.

³⁷ T. Kardaş, R. Erdağ, *Bir Dış Politika Aracı Olarak TİKA*, "Akademik İncelemeler Dergisi", 2012, no. 1(7), pp. 177–179.

³⁸ S.B. Çevik, *Narrating Turkey's Story: Communicating Its Nation Brand Through Public Diplomacy*, [in:] *Middle Powers in Global Governance: The Rise of Turkey*, ed. E. Parlar Dal, Palgrave Macmillan, Cham 2018, pp. 217–219.

tacts between nations and communities that are part of the Turkic language family. Accordingly, in addition to Turkey and four Central Asian states (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan), Azerbaijan is a member of the organisation, and six Turkic-speaking Russian federal subjects (Bashkortostan, Khakassia, Tatarstan, Tuva, Altai, Sakha) have observer status. Gagauzia (an autonomous region in Moldova) and the internationally unrecognised Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus are also involved in TÜRKSÖY's activities.³⁹ By adopting such an open formula, TÜRKSÖY aimed at intensifying cultural contacts at the level of societies rather than nation states. Therefore, the organisation's mission is to strengthen the unity of the "Turkic world" and to promote cultural achievements of the entire region.⁴⁰

TÜRKSÖY, whose Secretary General has been since 2022 Kyrgyz Sultan Raev, is based in Ankara. Day-to-day activities of the organisation are determined by decisions of the Permanent Council of Ministers of Culture of the member states, and focus on providing opportunities for contacts between scientists and artists from Turkic-speaking communities (conferences, symposia, exhibitions).⁴¹ Since 2010, TÜRKSÖY has been in charge of preparing commemorations of prominent figures from the "Turkic world" by introducing their profiles and accomplishments to inhabitants of the member states. In 2012, the "Culture and Arts Capital of the Turkic World" project was inaugurated which aims to promote a selected city through a number of cultural events. The first capital was Astana in Kazakhstan, and this title is currently held by the city of Shusha in Azerbaijan.⁴² TÜRKSÖY is also active in the field of popular culture, and its biggest endeavour to date has been organisation (together with the Turkish Radio and Television Corporation, TRT) of the international Turkvision Song Contest for Turkic-speaking countries and regions (2013–2015, and again from 2020). With establishment of several publishing houses, the organisation enables Central Asian writers and researchers to publish their works for Turkish readers. Finally, TÜRKSÖY cooperates with numerous local government units, universities, research centres and NGOs from

³⁹ E. Sevin, *Public Diplomacy and the Implementation of Foreign Policy in the US, Sweden and Turkey*, Springer International Publishing, Cham 2017, pp. 151–155.

⁴⁰ E. Akıllı, *Türksoy, Turkic Council and Cultural Diplomacy: Transactionalism Revisited*, "Bilig", 2019, no. 91, pp. 2–3.

⁴¹ M. Ekşi, *Türkiye'nin Türk Dünyasına Yönelik Kamu Diplomasisi: Yeni Araç ve Mekanizmalar*, "Türk Dünyası İncelemeleri Dergisi", 2017, no. 1(17), pp. 15–16.

⁴² TÜRKSÖY, *2023 Türk Dünyası Kültür Başkenti Şuşa düzenlenen Açılış Töreni ile bayrağı devraldı*, <https://www.turksoy.org/haberler/2023-turk-dunyasi-kultur-baskenti-susa-duzenlenen-acilis-toreni-ile-bayragi-devraldi>, access 11 VIII 2023.

member states, as well as international organisations such as Organisation of Turkic States, Turkic Culture and Heritage Foundation, and UNESCO.⁴³

Although TÜRKSÖY's main focus lies on enhancing contacts in fields of culture and arts, sometimes its activities are affected by political events. During the crisis in relations between Turkey and Russia following the downing of a Russian Su-24 aircraft in Syria in 2015, the authorities in Moscow required Bashkortostan, Khakassia, Sakha (Yakutia), Tuva and Altai to withdraw from participation in the organisation. After the Russian-Turkish diplomatic dispute ended, only two of the above-mentioned republics returned immediately to TÜRKSÖY, revealing a certain weakness in the whole project. On the other hand, TÜRKSÖY plays rather secondary role in the AKP's political strategy, as evidenced by quite small amount of funds provided for its annual activities through budget subsidies.⁴⁴ Although the prominence of TÜRKSÖY for Turkish foreign policy is not as great as that of TİKA, its efficient transmission of Turkey's soft power at the societal level must be appreciated.

Yunus Emre Institute

Perceiving public diplomacy as an excellent non-traditional channel for spreading its foreign policy vision, the Erdoğan government, apart from reorganising structures of existing entities, has also established new institutions. One of the organisations created by the AKP is the Yunus Emre Institute (*Yunus Emre Enstitüsü*, YEE) which is linked to the Yunus Emre Foundation. The statutory objective of this body, set up in 2007, is to promote Turkish language, history, culture and art. An essential aspect of the foundation's activities is also to enhance Turkey's positive image in the world by ensuring cultural exchanges with the interested countries.⁴⁵ The YEE performs its tasks through a network of cultural centres under the supervision of the Ministry of Culture and Tourism. Above all, the YEE is responsible for comprehensive teaching of Turkish language (organisation of courses and classes, cooperation with philology faculties). In this context, in 2011 the institute took over from TİKA coordination of the "Turkology Project" which has been

⁴³ F. Purtaş, *Cultural Diplomacy Initiatives of Turkic Republics*, "Perceptions: Journal of International Affairs", 2017, no. 1(22), pp. 98–102.

⁴⁴ E. Sevin, *TÜRKSÖY Üzerinden Türk Kamu Diplomasinin Dış Politikaya Etkisine Bir Bakış*, [in:] *Türk Dış Politikası ve Kamu Diplomasisi*, eds. M. Şahin, B.S. Çevik, Nobel Akademik Yayıncılık, Ankara 2015, pp. 481–487.

⁴⁵ A.N. Ünalmış, *Yumuşak Gücün Tesis Edilmesinde Kültürel Diplomasinin Önemi ve Bir Uygulayıcı Olarak Yunus Emre Enstitüsü*, "Bilig", 2019, no. 91, pp. 146–147.

developing particularly dynamically in the Balkans. Moreover, YEE local centres host a number of events promoting Turkish culture and arts.⁴⁶

Currently, the YEE has fifty-seven field offices around the world, while in Central Asia there is only one cultural centre (in Astana). This should be seen as a failure, as countries of the region are (along with Azerbaijan) Turkey's closest partners in terms of culture and language. Despite plans announced by the authorities in Ankara a few years ago that by 2023 (centennial anniversary of foundation of the Republic of Turkey) there would be a hundred Turkish cultural centres around the world, this ambitious goal has not been achieved.⁴⁷ Moreover, there is no sign of YEE expanding its activities in Central Asia. Admittedly, the institute's representatives have been attempting to establish a regional branch in Kyrgyzstan since 2016, but so far their efforts have been unsuccessful.⁴⁸ The YEE's only centre operating in the region offers Turkish language learning courses for Kazakhstan residents and runs several cultural projects. For example, as part of the "Kemankeş Project", Kazakh students have the opportunity to improve their skills in traditional Turkish archery.⁴⁹ Following the failed military coup in Turkey, President Erdoğan's cabinet obliged the YEE to propagate the official narrative of the authorities in Ankara about alleged organisers of the putsch. Responding to political demand at the time, the Astana office of YEE organised a special photo exhibition, where the government's perspective on the events of 15 July 2016 was presented.⁵⁰

While the YEE is a relatively young organisation within the structures of Turkey's public diplomacy, it can already boast quite a lot of success in terms of promoting Turkish language abroad. Having examined the institute's recent activities, it seems that its priority area of activity is Europe (Western Balkans in particular), although lately there have also been noticeable efforts to increase the YEE's presence in Africa.⁵¹ On the other hand, plans for the YEE expansion in Central Asia appear to be suspended, which, given cultural and linguistic conditions mentioned above, can be considered a political mistake. It should be noted, however, that for societies with a still unestablished statehood, language is a fundamental

⁴⁶ B. Kurultuş, *Turkey's Foreign Policy in the Balkans: Soft Power in a Conflict Region*, [in:] *Conflict Areas in the Balkans*, eds. P. Yürür, A. Özkan, Lexington Books, Lanham 2020, p. 216.

⁴⁷ Yunus Emre Enstitüsü, *2023 Vizyonu*, https://www.yee.org.tr/sites/default/files/2023_vizyonu.pdf, access 11 VIII 2023.

⁴⁸ A.N. Yılmaz, G. Kılıçoğlu, *op. cit.*, p. 170.

⁴⁹ Yunus Emre Enstitüsü, *Kemankeş Projesi*, https://www.yee.org.tr/sites/default/files/yayin/yee_kemankeş_projesi_katalog_web.pdf, access 11 VIII 2023.

⁵⁰ Yunus Emre Enstitüsü, *2016 Faaliyet Raporu*, https://www.yee.org.tr/sites/default/files/yayin/2016_faaliyet_raporu_05.02.2018-db.pdf, access 11 VIII 2023.

⁵¹ E. Eren, *Education Policies as a Tool of Soft Power: Alliance Française and Yunus Emre Institute*, "Current Research in Social Sciences", 2020, no. 2(6), pp. 130–131.

component of their national identity. Thus, Central Asian governments' rather sceptical approach toward the institution that promotes foreign for them Turkish language is quite understandable.

Presidency for Turks Abroad and Related Communities

Another Turkish public diplomacy organisation focused on cooperation with Turkic countries is the Presidency for Turks Abroad and Related Communities (*Yurtdışı Türkler ve Akraba Topluluklar Başkanlığı*, YTB), founded in 2010. As with TÜRKSOY and the YEE, the Ministry of Culture and Tourism has the greatest influence on YTB's activities. The main objective of the presidency is to coordinate various activities in areas of education and cultural exchange. In accordance with its statutes, the organisation gives priority to Turkish citizens living abroad, for whom special programs for reintegration into the homeland are developed.⁵² The second focus of the presidency's activity is the so-called related communities, i.e. Turkic peoples. In this context, it coordinates projects designed for representatives of Turkic-speaking countries. The YTB pays particular attention to foreign students, especially those arriving to Turkey from Central Asia and the Caucasus.⁵³

Activities of the presidency in Central Asia are manifested, among other things, by providing financial support for execution of educational, social and cultural projects. Using synergies, YTB seeks to establish cooperation with local NGOs that do not have adequate funds themselves. Overall, the presidency's cooperation with Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan has been the most advanced. Both countries receive the bulk of financial aid directed by the YTB to Central Asia on various programs (e.g. labour activation, family counselling, educational support). At this point, it is worth noting that support to Central Asian countries represents only a few percent of the presidency's total expenditure.⁵⁴ One of the most important initiatives coordinated in the region by the YTB is the International Turkic World Culture Congress, organised by YTB together with Ege University in İzmir. It is attended by scholars and artists representing virtually all Turkish-speaking regions, even Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region (China) and Iranian Azerbaijan.⁵⁵

⁵² M. Ekşi, *op. cit.*, pp. 17–18.

⁵³ B. Aras, Z. Mohammed, *The Turkish Government Scholarship Program as a Soft Power Tool*, "Turkish Studies", 2018, no. 1(20), pp. 7–14.

⁵⁴ Yurtdışı Türkler ve Akraba Topluluklar Başkanlığı, *2017 İdare Faaliyet Raporu*, https://ytbweb1.blob.core.windows.net/files/documents/2017_FAAL_YET_RAPORU_Digital.pdf, access 11 VIII 2023.

⁵⁵ N. Yalçın, *Dr. Janna Yuhsa ile Türk Dili ve II. Uluslararası Kültür Kongresi Üzerine Bir Söyleşi*, "Türk Dünyası Dil ve Edebiyat Dergisi", 2010, no. 30, pp. 142–143.

The YTB also provides extensive support for students from Central Asia, offering them, for instance, the opportunity to attend summer schools in Turkey, where they learn about historical and cultural commonalities of Turkic peoples. In 2011, the presidency began work on a new scholarship program for students representing so-called related communities. The “Turkish scholarships” program was inaugurated two years later, and nearly four thousand students from Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan submitted their applications in the first edition. In AKP’s political narrative, fundings paid by YTB served not only to improve the quality of life of students, but also expressed Turkey’s responsibility for its “sister countries”.⁵⁶ In addition, contacts made during the course of studies can be maintained through the YTB-coordinated alumni associations of Turkish universities.⁵⁷ The presidency also cooperates with two universities founded by Turks in Central Asia in the 1990s: Ahmet Yesevî University (Kazakhstan) and Kyrgyz-Turkish Manas University (Kyrgyzstan). With YTB’s support, level of teaching and organisational structure in both establishments are gradually being improved after a period of decline in the first decade of the 21st century.⁵⁸

The Presidency for Turks Abroad and Related Communities is definitely an important institution of Turkish public diplomacy in Central Asia, but certain spheres of the organisation’s activity require some modifications. First and foremost, national languages of Central Asian countries should be used to a much greater extent during project preparation phase, as the vast majority of the region’s population is not sufficiently proficient in either Turkish or English.⁵⁹ In the field of education and science, the YTB should focus more on developing partnerships between universities in Turkey and Central Asian countries. In this way, Turks may gain a better understanding of local realities, which can consequently contribute to more adequate strategies for future educational cooperation. For, as already mentioned, education is one of the pillars of Turkey’s soft power under the AKP rule.⁶⁰

⁵⁶ B.S. Cankurtaran, *Türk Dış Politikasında ‘Diaspora Diplomasisi Açılımı’ ve Yurtdışı Türkler ve Akraba Topluluklar Başkanlığı*, [in:] *Türk Dış Politikası ve Kamu Diplomasisi*, eds. M. Şahin, B.S. Çevik, Nobel Akademik Yayıncılık, Ankara 2015, pp. 121–122.

⁵⁷ M. Güzel, M.S. Erol, *Türkiye ile Türk Cumhuriyetleri Arasındaki İlişkilerin Bilim Diplomasisi Boyutu*, “Bölgesel Araştırmalar Dergisi”, 2019, no. 1(3), pp. 25–26.

⁵⁸ M. Hasgüler, M.B. Uludağ, “Üçüncü Dünya” Yolunda Rusyave Orta Asya, “İ.Ü. Siyasal Bilgiler Fakültesi Dergisi”, 2009, no. 41, pp. 54–55.

⁵⁹ A.N. Yılmaz, G. Kılıçoğlu, *op. cit.*, p. 167.

⁶⁰ B. Akgün, M. Özkan, *Turkey’s Entrance to International Education: The Case of Turkish Maarif Foundation*, “Insight Turkey”, 2020, no. 1(22), pp. 62–66.

Conclusions

The main research conclusion of this study is that Turkey under AKP is skilfully employing public diplomacy-related instruments in its foreign policy. By making soft power a focal point in their political doctrine, Turks have gained new transmission channels which ensured that the Turkish narrative reaches not only politicians, but also the general publics of countries with which closer cooperation was intended.⁶¹ In this context, the AKP-led reorganisation of institutional structure of public diplomacy has contributed to a more effective implementation of certain objectives. A fundamental role in the transformation of Turkish foreign policy was played by Ahmet Davutoğlu, who firstly gave it a theoretical foundation (strategic depth), and then revised priorities of Turkey's diplomatic services (multidirectional foreign policy program). Despite the ultimate failure of Davutoğlu's vision, the AKP still benefits from several projects and initiatives he initiated.⁶²

Within the adopted theoretical framework, it can be emphasised that initially Turkey managed to significantly improve its international image. The AKP's positive engagement in regional affairs changed perceptions about Turks especially in neighbouring areas where they began to be seen as potential allies. Turkey's regional position was also strengthened by numerous historical and cultural references, through which Turkish political discourse reached a wider audience. Despite some political errors (e.g. exaggerated emphasis on the Ottoman past of some regions), it should be pointed out that by the end of the 2000s, Turkey could indeed be considered one of world's more influential regional powers.⁶³ However, inability to modify its foreign policy doctrine in the face of an unforeseen crisis (i.e. Arab Spring) has caused Turkey's international image to deteriorate significantly over the past decade. Having assumed almost full power after the 2017 constitutional referendum, President Erdoğan took an assertive and confrontational approach, which has consequently led to Turkey's gradual isolation on the international stage.⁶⁴

As already indicated, Central Asia has never been a key area in AKP's strategy. On the one hand, Turkish politicians remembered the defeat of political

⁶¹ Y. Gürsoy, *Turkey: Populism and Geography*, [in:] *Shaper Nations: Strategies for a Changing World*, eds. W.I. Hitchcock, M.P. Leffler, J.W. Legro, Harvard University Press, Cambridge 2016, pp. 129–131.

⁶² T. Ari, *Orientation of Turkish Foreign Policy: Disengagement from or Re-engagement to the West*, [in:] *Inter-State and Intra-State Conflicts in Global Politics From Eurasia to China*, ed. T. Ari, Lexington Books, Lanham 2021, pp. 9–11.

⁶³ Ş. Kardaş, *Turkey: A Regional Power Facing a Changing International System*, "Turkish Studies", 2013, no. 4(14), pp. 647–650.

⁶⁴ C. Çandar, *op. cit.*, pp. 108–110.

projects developed there back in the 1990s, and, on the other, it was the territory of the former Ottoman Empire which they regarded as a top priority for Turkey. Moreover, the authorities in Ankara perceived the region as a zone of Russian and Chinese influences, as a result of which activities of Turkish politicians in Central Asia have not been particularly intense in recent years. Accordingly, Turkey's regional interests are pursued to a large extent by public diplomacy organisations that undertake community-building initiatives at the societal level through numerous historical and socio-cultural references.⁶⁵ When assessing activities of institutions analysed as part of this research, it should be noted that AKP's foreign policy objectives are best fulfilled by TİKA. Achievements of other organisations are much less impressive, although it is worth adding that in the case of YEE and YTB this may be due to the fact that both institutions have only been operating in the region for about a decade. As an organisation with specific tasks and structure, TÜRKSOY does not have much influence on Turkish foreign policy in Central Asia, yet its accomplishments in the cultural sphere are undeniable. The more effective transmission of Turkish soft power seems to be hindered by application of the same political discourse to all states in the region, without taking into account their individual needs and expectations. While Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan are generally positively disposed *vis-à-vis* Turkish initiatives, the authorities in Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan view them with wariness. Tajikistan, as a state not belonging to the "Turkic world", has very limited access to projects coordinated by Turks.⁶⁶

Based on an analysis of activities of Turkish public diplomacy organisations in Central Asia, certain measures can be proposed to ensure more efficient implementation of AKP's political strategy. First, Turkey needs to improve relations with Uzbekistan which significantly dominates the rest of the region's countries by virtue of its population (34 million). Elseways, no serious strategic initiative by the AKP will have much impact in Central Asia.⁶⁷ Second, Turkey's efforts to spread Turkish language proficiency in the region should not be perceived as an attempt to impose its own culture. In this regard, employees of all institutions operating in Central Asian countries (especially YEE and YTB) need to become

⁶⁵ S. Köstem, *Geopolitics, Identity and Beyond: Turkey's Renewed Interest in the Caucasus and Central Asia*, [in:] *Turkey's Pivot to Eurasia: Geopolitics and Foreign Policy in a Changing World Order*, eds. E. Erşen, S. Köstem, Routledge, London 2021, pp. 114–115.

⁶⁶ M.E. Çaman, M.A. Akyurt, *Caucasus and Central Asia in Turkish Foreign Policy: The Time Has Come for a New Regional Policy*, "Alternatives: Turkish Journal of International Relations", 2011, no. 2/3(10), pp. 70–73.

⁶⁷ S.A. Budulgan, *Özbekistan'ın Jeopolitik Önemi*, "Asya Araştırmaları Uluslararası Sosyal Bilimler Dergisi", 2020, no. 2(4), pp. 177–180.

much more fluent in local languages. Third, religious bonds, rather than cultural or ethnic ties, are of paramount importance for Central Asian communities. Thus, there is a growing role for the Directorate of Religious Affairs which, being an institution responsible for reviving the region's Muslim identity, must be completely free of any political influence. Otherwise, Muslims in Central Asia may lose trust in AKP's intentions. Fourth, TÜRKSOY's achievements should be given more prominence, as this organisation is an excellent example of successful regional cooperation.⁶⁸ Ultimately, without attempting to impose its own solutions and by directing a much more individualised rhetoric to countries of the region, Turkey may succeed in creating a real community in Central Asia based on shared values and mutual understanding.

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⁶⁸ E. Akıllı, *op. cit.*, pp. 12–14.

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Abstract: This article aims to analyse and assess the effectiveness of activities undertaken by Turkish public diplomacy organisations in Central Asia. Since the Justice and Development Party (AKP) came to power in Turkey in 2002, the state's foreign policy doctrine has changed profoundly. The new government has adopted a program of active and multifaceted diplomacy, seeking to improve mutual relations with neighbouring regions (i.e. Middle East, North Africa, Balkans, Caucasus, Central Asia). Historical, social and cultural references play an extremely important role in the AKP's political strategy, and numerous public diplomacy organisations promote Turkish regional cooperation initiatives on behalf of the authorities in Ankara. In Central Asia, institutions such as the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency, the International Organisation of Turkic Culture, the Yunus Emre Institute, the Presidency for Turks Abroad and Related Communities,

ensure that ties between Turkey and countries of the region are being preserved. By utilising Turkish soft power potential, these organisations support traditional diplomatic services in implementing Turkey's foreign policy objectives.

Keywords: Turkey; Central Asia; public diplomacy; regional cooperation; soft power

Zachowując wspólne więzi: dyplomacja publiczna Turcji w Azji Środkowej

Streszczenie: Celem artykułu jest analiza i ocena efektywności działań podejmowanych przez tureckie organizacje dyplomacji publicznej w regionie Azji Środkowej. Odkąd w 2002 roku władzę w Turcji przejęła Partia Sprawiedliwości i Rozwoju (AKP), gruntownej zmianie uległa polityka zagraniczna państwa. Nowy rząd przyjął program aktywnej i wieloaspektowej dyplomacji, dążąc do poprawy wzajemnych relacji z sąsiednimi regionami (tj. Bliski Wschód, Afryka Północna, Bałkany, Kaukaz, Azja Środkowa). W strategii politycznej AKP niezwykle istotną rolę pełnią odwołania historyczne, społeczne i kulturowe, a liczne instytucje dyplomacji publicznej są wykorzystywane przez władze w Ankarze do promocji tureckich inicjatyw na rzecz współpracy regionalnej. W Azji Środkowej nad zachowaniem więzi łączących Turcję z państwami regionu czuwają organizacje takie jak Turecka Agencja Współpracy i Koordynacji, Międzynarodowa Organizacja Kultury Turkijskiej, Instytut Yunusa Emre, Prezydencja dla Turków Za Granicą oraz Pokrewnych Społeczności. Wykorzystując potencjał *soft power* Turcji, organizacje te wspierają tradycyjne służby dyplomatyczne w implementacji założeń tureckiej polityki zagranicznej.

Słowa kluczowe: Turcja; Azja Środkowa; dyplomacja publiczna; współpraca regionalna; *soft power*