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Turkey and Pan-Turkism Influence on the Development of New National Identities in the Caspian Region: the Evidence from Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan

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Abstract. The article focuses on how Turkey and pan-Turkish ideology influenced the development of new national identities in Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan and the results of this influence. The theoretical basis of this study lies in the concept of transnational political spaces (ethno-worlds), which form new identities due to the spread of cultural patterns. The practical basis of this study entails a synthesis of several sociological methods: content analysis of data published from January 2, 2022, to July 31, 2023, collected according to specified criteria; surveys in the form of an electronic questionnaire; and a set of focused group and expert interviews attended by citizens of Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan. The results showed that “soft power” in both countries influences the field of those policies that are crucial for the development of new identities: education, language, memory, symbology, etc. The mechanisms for promoting identity politics in Turkic countries are the main strength of the formation process in this ethno-world. The results of the study demonstrate educational programs to be the most effective tool, whose status allows the

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returned youth to become a part of a new elite in their countries, as well as emissaries of pan-Turkist ideas. Based on the content analysis data, it can be noted that though Turkish-Kazakh and Turkish-Turkmen relations are actively and positively developing, primarily in the economic sphere, they still have certain contradictions. Though pan-Turkish ideas and Turkish cultural patterns are presented in the information agendas of the analyzed countries, they are not their trends.

Keywords: pan-Turkism, Turkey, new national identity, identity politics, Republic of Kazakhstan, Republic of Turkmenistan, Turkic ethno-world


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Влияние Турции и пантюркизма на конструирование новых национальных идентичностей Каспийского региона: пример Туркменистана и Казахстана

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Аннотация. Исследование посвящено выявлению характера и результатов влияния Турции и пантюркистской идеологии на конструирование новых национальных идентичностей в Республике Казахстан и Туркменистане. Теоретическим основанием данного исследования стала концепция транснациональных политических

пространств (этномиров), которые за счет распространения культурных паттернов формируют новые идентичности. В рамках практической основы данного исследования авторами был применен синтез нескольких социологических методов: контент-анализ данных, опубликованных в период с 02.01.2022 по 31.07.2023 и собранных по заданным маркерам; опросы в форме электронного анкетирования, а также серии фокусированных групповых и экспертных интервью, участниками которых стали граждане Республики Казахстан и Туркменистана. Результаты исследования показали, что в обеих странах воздействие «мягкой силы» идет в области тех политик, которые являются важнейшими в сфере конструирования новых идентичностей — образовательной, языковой, политики памяти, символической и т.д. Механизмы продвижения политики идентичности в страны с тюркским населением являются наиболее сильной стороной процесса формирования данного этномира. Основываясь на результатах исследования, наиболее действенным инструментом являются образовательные программы, статусность которых позволяет вернувшейся молодежи войти в состав новой элиты своих стран и одновременно стать эмиссаром пантюркистских идей. Исходя из данных контент-анализа, можно отметить, что турецко-казахстанские и турецко-туркменские взаимоотношения хотя и характеризуются активным и положительным развитием, прежде всего, в экономической сфере, но все же не лишены противоречий. А пантюркистские идеи и турецкие культурные паттерны, хотя и присутствуют в информационной повестке анализируемых стран, но не являются ее трендом.

Ключевые слова: пантюркизм, Турция, новая национальная идентичность, политики идентичности, Республика Казахстан, Туркменистан, тюркский этномир

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Introduction

Turkey is becoming a prominent player in the international arena, especially with the increasing influence of R.T. Erdogan. The roots of Turkish influence go back to the history of the Ottoman Empire (1299–1924). The first pan-Turkic ideas

appeared during the imperial period. Having ceased its official existence, the empire transformed not into a post-imperial space, as was the case with the Russian, British, and other empires, but into an ethnoworld — a supposed transnational political space of an “ethnic-oriented type” [Sigachev, Arteev 2022], the basis of the “Turkic world”, a Turkish-centric subsystem of international relations [Avatkov 2020]. At this stage, political and cultural ideological constructs are formed: pan-Turkism, pan-Turanism, Turanism, Turkism, neo-Pan-Turkism, neo-Ottomanism, etc.

Interest in pan-Turkism, which has long gone beyond the borders of Turkey, is especially intensified during periods of crisis: the Great War, the end of the Ottoman Empire, the end of the Russian Empire, the death of Atatürk, the beginning of World War II, and at bifurcation points (Turkey’s entry into NATO in 1952) [Nasibova 2015]. During the Soviet era, domestic researchers published a number of works that are still of interest [Arsharuni, Gabidullin 1931; Tveritinova 1957; Miller 1958]. Pan-Turkism received a new impetus after the collapse of the USSR, when the former Soviet republics with a Turkic population gained independence. At this time, the political discussion moved from the field of pure pan-Turkism and pan-Turanism to the sphere of geopolitics of the Caspian Sea, where the processes of constructing new identities are actively beginning, which sharply strengthens Turkey’s position. The processes and nature of this influence are being actively studied by Russian scientists [Shumilov 2022; Milyukova et al. 2021; Pritchkin 2022; Semenenko 2022], including those dealing with Russian regions with a Turkic population [Badretdinova, Badretdinov 2021; Aminov 2020; Mukhametdinov 2016], and by authors from the countries of the Caspian region and Central Asia [Imomaliyev 2021; Vakhitova 2007]. There are also popular works of a pseudo-scientific nature that have received recognition directly in Turkey [Adji 1998].

In the last three decades, pan-Turkism has been the most popular basic ideology for promoting Turkish influence on the policy of constructing new national identities in the territories of those countries where there

are Turkic peoples. The main mechanisms of this influence are processes of “soft power”. The idea of the Turkic world itself is a self-sufficient theoretical construct, but to get transformed into a political force, it needs an ideological engine. The simplified and generalized doctrine of pan-Turkism becomes such a driver, the main task of which is the gradual unification of all Turkic peoples either into a single cultural community or, in the most extreme version, into a single political space under the auspices of Turkey. True, the nature of the “Turkish aegis” is currently causing active discussion in scientific circles [Shumilov 2022]. The main subject of debate is the question of whether Turkey has abandoned its dominance in this alliance or simply changed tactics and approaches. On one side of the scale, there is an extremely negative assessment of this trend. Pan-Turkism is considered a danger for the non-Turkic world [Svarants 2010], and by some authors for the Turkic one, through the erosion of the cultural code of the Turkic peoples and the subordination of the Turkic to the Turkish [Avatkov 2021], in the narrow sense as “an aggressive racist, chauvinistic doctrine of the imperial circles of Turkish nationalism” [Nadein-Raevsky 2017]. However, some researchers argue that Turkey no longer aspires to “be the leader of the Turkic world.”¹ And such an ambiguous assessment in scientific and political discourse is quite predictable. On the one hand, Turkey is famous for its very multi-vector foreign policy, and on the other hand, “pan-Turkism” itself is ambivalent. It refers to those ideological movements that create new opportunities for some people and new problems for others. For Turkey, this is an opportunity to expand its influence into new territories. For genetically and linguistically close countries (Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, etc.), this is an opportunity to receive an “influential relative” and ally, as well as economic support. For countries where Turkic peoples are part of a diverse ethnic field, this is a

¹ Huseynov, A. (2023). Is the transition from the Turkic Council to the Turkic Union possible? *View from Baku*. Retrieved October 26, 2023 from <https://eadaaily.com/ru/news/2021/11/24/vozmozhen-li-perehod-ot-tyurkskogo-soveta-k-tyurkskomu-soyuzu-vzglyad-iz-baku>

potential danger of separatism and extremism. Therefore, pan-Turkism and its derivatives are perceived ambiguously.

To denote the modern version of pan-Turkism, domestic researchers propose new terms: “neo-pan-Turkism” [Avatkov 2021] and “collective pan-Turkism”, “which has ceased to be an instrument of Turkish expansion” [Shumilov 2022]. However, they are also debatable and are not generally used. Therefore, in this study, we will use the term “pan-Turkism” as a universal meta-category. The main goal of this study is to identify the nature and results of the influence of Turkey and pan-Turkist ideology on the construction of new national identities in Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan.²

Research methods and procedures

The theoretical basis for the study was the concept of transnational political spaces (ethno-worlds), the key role in the formation of which is played by the “export of cultural samples” [Arteev 2023], aimed at constructing a new common identity.

The methodological basis of this study is a network analysis of relationships between social objects as a means to explain social processes reflected in public opinion and social networks. The applied basis of this methodology is methods of machine analysis of text from social networks, online communities, and Internet media, supplemented by sociological methods.

The empirical basis of the study was made up of materials from sociological studies conducted by employees of the Center for the Study of Problems of the South of Russia and the Caspian Region at the Astrakhan Tatishchev State University, within the framework of the Russian Science

² We intentionally excluded Azerbaijan from this analysis, since it is a priori the country most closely associated with Turkey, subject to its influence even due to linguistic proximity. The research we conducted in the fall of 2023 in the Republic of Azerbaijan will be the subject of further analysis.

Foundation grant project in 2022–2023 in Kazakhstan (700 respondents in an online survey, 5 focused group interviews, 9 expert interviews) and among citizens of Turkmenistan (350 respondents in an online survey, 6 focused group interviews). When conducting two series of focus group interviews, the researchers used the method of “directed associations”. Additionally, the authors analyzed data from various online media, social networks, and instant messengers with geotags from the Caspian regions of Russia (Astrakhan region) and Kazakhstan (Atyrau and Mangistau regions): 272,033 unique posts and comments (from January 2, 2022 to July 31, 2023) according to predefined markers. In this study, the PolyAnalyst platform (text classification, taxonomy generation, entity extraction, semantic search, categorization, clustering, pattern detection, and sentiment analysis) was used to analyze text data.

The authors of the article were the main developers and coordinators of the research project and participated in conducting sociological research and working with an array of text data.

Turkey and the construction of identity in the countries studied

After the collapse of the USSR and the emergence of independent Caspian states, Turkey took a number of active political actions: it was the first to recognize its sovereignty in 1992, began to form the institutional framework of the future Turkic world,³ and gradually added new structures to it.⁴ Currently, Erdogan is carefully

³ 1992 — Agency for International Cooperation with Turkic-Speaking States (TIKA), Ankara Declaration on Mutual Cooperation; 1993 — organization for the joint development of Turkic culture and art (TURKSOY).

⁴ 2008 Baku — Parliamentary Assembly of Turkic States TURKPA; 2009 — Turkic Council on the basis of the Nakhichevan Agreement, in 2021 renamed the Organization of Turkic States; 2010 Astana — International Turkic Academy.

pursuing a policy of encouraging contacts⁵ and strengthening cooperation within the Turkic world.⁶

In turn, the leadership of Kazakhstan, both past (Nazarbayev) and present (Tokayev), eagerly responds to Turkey's proposals of an economic, socio-humanitarian nature and regards it as the closest strategic partner.⁷ The political position of Turkmenistan, due to its declared neutrality, is more cautious,⁸ but certain steps towards rapprochement are being taken.⁹

In both countries, the impact of “soft power” is in the area of those policies that are most important in the construction of new identities: educational, linguistic, memory, symbolic, etc. IMEMO RAS expert Stanislav Pritchkin believes that Turkey is a very “comfortable player, since it helps build an “alternative Turkic identity” that naturally merges with the UTG and turns its neighbors — Russia and China — from “ours” into “strangers”, with a different ideology, political aspirations, etc.¹⁰ But to evaluate this policy, it is important to identify its result: how susceptible are the citizens of the states under study to this influence?

The most constructive policy for Turkish influence is educational policy, which does not directly encroach on the managerial independence of the new states and is therefore perceived by them mostly positively. In the field of educational policy, in 1993, a law was passed under which Turkey began funding five-year educational programs for the Turkic world. It opened its doors primarily to students from Kazakhstan and

⁵ Erdogan: The countries of the Turkic world are developing comprehensive cooperation. URL: <https://caliber.az/post/198016> (accessed: 24.10.2023).

⁶ Same as above.

⁷ Tokayev: Turkey is our brotherly people and our closest partner. Retrieved October, 24, 2023 from https://tengrinews.kz/kazakhstan_news/tokaev-turtsiya-nash-bratskiy-narod-i-samyiy-blizkiy-partner-515774/

⁸ “Great Turan” may stumble over the real Turan // *Novaya Gazeta*. Retrieved October. 1, 2023 from https://www.ng.ru/dipkurer/2022-10-30/11_8578_turkmenistan.html

⁹ The presidents of Turkmenistan and Turkey signed a package of documents following the negotiations. Retrieved October, 16, 2023 from <https://tass.ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/19130577>

¹⁰ Panfilova V. Turkey and Kazakhstan are taking relations to a new level // *Novaya Gazeta*. Retrieved September, 12, 2023 from https://www.ng.ru/cis/2023-09-12/5_8824_kazakhstan.html

Turkmenistan. A network of Turkish lyceums was created in almost all Caspian states, including Russia, which were later closed for political reasons¹¹:

“Kazakh students have a positive assessment of Turkish education” (informant 4, FG-1, Kazakhstan);

“Turkey is also not lagging behind in the educational sphere” (informant 4, FG-2, Kazakhstan).

There are about 8,000 Kazakhstani students¹² in Turkey. However, for the most part, Kazakh informants give preference to Western education:

“Now many leaders are also from Bolashak¹³; they also studied in foreign countries, and now they govern our country” (informant 4, FG-4, Kazakhstan).

Turkish education is also valued by Turkmen, of whom 15,000 are currently studying¹⁴ in Turkey:

“My friends, those who study in Turkey, like it, perhaps because of mobility, chances of some kind of grant, a step into the future, as they say” (informant 3, FG-6, Turkmenistan).

But the Turkish educational direction is not the largest in Turkmenistan; it is significantly inferior to Russia.¹⁵

¹¹ Tatar-Turkish lyceums in the Volga region. Retrieved October, 11, 2023 from <https://posredi.ru/tataro-tureckie-licei.html> Kazakhstan is lost to Russia forever. How “Turkish lyceums” reformatted society in the post-Soviet space. Retrieved October, 14, 2023 from <https://dzen.ru/a/Ye0v9anft2pmTkxS>

¹² More than eight thousand Kazakh students study in Turkey. Retrieved October, 20, 2023 from <https://liter.kz/skolko-kazakhstantsev-uchatsia-v-turtsii-1675848410/>

¹³ Scholarship program of the first President N. Nazarbayev for training senior personnel in leading companies and universities in the world.

¹⁴ 15 thousand Turkmen students study at universities in Turkey. Retrieved September, 27, 2023 from: <https://orient.tm/ru/old/post/52613/15-tysyach-turkmenskih-studentov-uchatsya-v-vuzah-turcii>

¹⁵ There are 31 thousand Turkmen students studying in Russia. Turkmenistan wants to create a joint university. Retrieved October, 1, 2023 from <https://www.hronikatm.com/2022/06/v-rossii-obuchaetsya-31-tysyacha-turkmenskih-studentov-turkmenistan-hochet-so-zdat-sovmestnyj-vuz/> 1,300 applicants were admitted only to the Astrakhan Tatishchev State University in 2023.

“Many Turkmen study in Turkey, but I didn’t want to; the Russian education system is closer to me, more loyal; in terms of cultural characteristics and other criteria, it is closer to me. I clearly decided for myself that I do not want to study in Turkey” (informant 3, FG-6, Turkmenistan).¹⁶

Turkey’s successful conductor of soft power is the media. Since 1992, Turkey has organized special broadcasting to the countries of Central Asia and Azerbaijan:

“There is Turkish and Korean television” (informant 1, FG-1, Turkmenistan).

The Turkish film industry became an emissary:

“Young people love Turkey; they love TV series; they love how they live” (informant 3, FG-6, Turkmenistan).

Nevertheless, Turkmen informants do not consider this a mass trend:

“I do not have such fanaticism to study Turkish culture. It is not a trend to be a fan of Turkey” (informant 3, FG-6, Turkmenistan).

The impact of soft power on the construction of new identities includes language policy. It was carried out in Turkish lyceums opened in both countries in the 1990s of the 20th century. Two foreign languages were actively studied there: Turkish and English, which was due to Turkey’s pro-European policy. The attitude towards the Turkish language in Turkmenistan is ambiguous. On the one hand, Turkmen informants do not consider it identical to Turkmen, but on the other hand, they often understand the Turkish language due to the presence of Turkish channels and interest in cinema:

“Almost everyone knows the Turkish language in our city. It has become widespread recently due to the fact that many people started going there to earn money. And they sometimes speak Turkish on the phone” (informant 1, FG-6, Turkmenistan).

However, there is another assessment of the state of the Turkish language in Turkmenistan:

¹⁶ This informant lived in Turkey for several years.

“There is little interest in the Turkish language; it is not taught; interest is only in those regions where people left Turkmenistan for Turkey to work, in those families where Turkish is popular. To turn on a Turkish series at home without translation, without knowing the language—no” (informant 3, FG-2, Turkmenistan).

Thus, we see that in Turkmenistan, the Turkish language is spreading through interest in Turkish media and the opportunity to go to work in Turkey in the local environment. There is no trend towards learning Turkish as a compulsory foreign language. They do not teach it in schools. In Kazakhstan, interest in the Turkish language arose several years ago, but Kazakh and Turkish are very different. It is taught individually in language courses. Therefore, in this country, linguistic kinship as a basis for Turkic integration is questionable.¹⁷ Active work is also being carried out in the field of memory politics. The trend toward the Turkic origin of the peoples of Central Asia and the presence of family ties with Turkey is emphasized. This story is especially relevant in Turkmenistan. In line with the official policy of the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, as well as in feature films and scientific discourse, the policy “One nation, two states” (Turkish: *İki devlet, bir millet*) is implemented. Moreover, the Turkmens play the role of practitioners:

“I agree with this slogan. We are essentially one nation, if you dig deep. Different but similar languages” (informant 1, FG-6, Turkmenistan).

Turkmenistan and Turkey also have common cultural heroes, which almost all respondents from Turkmenistan know about. This is, for example, Gorogly (Korogly), a mythical hero, the hero of the Turkmen epic of the same name:

“In our history he is revered as a Turkmen, but, most likely, in Turkey he is considered a Turk” (informant 5, FG-6, Turkmenistan).

¹⁷ The similarity of Turkish, as the most widespread Turkic language, with the Kazakh language is 20 %, with Kyrgyz — 30 %, with Uzbek — 40 %, with Turkmen — 60 %, and only with Azerbaijani — 80 %. See: Will a Turk and a Kazakh be able to understand each other without an interpreter? Retrieved October, 17, 2023 from <https://obuchim24.ru/turetskiy-yazyk-v-kazahstane/>

List the main symbols of Turkmenistan, % (Open-ended question)

	Answers	%	Without those who found it difficult to answer
1	Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov - Arkadag (patron)	7.8	17.1
2	Saparmurat Niyazov (Turkmenbashi)	7.8	17.1
3	Oguz Khan (ancient ancestor of the Turkmen)	6.6	14.6
4	Serdar Berdimuhamedov	5.5	12.2
5	Makhtumkuli	2.9	6.4
6	Gerogly (Turkmen heroic epic)	2.9	6.4
7	President	2.4	5.2
8	The national flag	1.1	2.4
9	Korkut (Turkic songwriter and composer of the 10th century)	1.0	2.1
10	State Coat of Arms	0.8	1.8
11	Minister	0.6	1.2
12	People	0.6	1.2
13	Atamurat Niyazov (father of the first President of Turkmenistan Saparmurat Niyazov)	0.4	0.9
14	Mother Gurbansoltan (mother of the first Turkmen President Saparmurat Niyazov)	0.4	0.9
15	Ancestors	0.4	0.9
16	Other	3.7	9.6
	Difficult to answer	55.1	–

Source: compiled by the authors based on research results.

List the main symbols of the Republic of Kazakhstan, % (Open-ended question)

	Answer	%	Without those who found it difficult to answer
1	The State Coat of Arms of the Republic of Kazakhstan	4.5	9.6
2	The National flag of the Republic of Kazakhstan	4.5	9.6
3	Dinmukhamed Kunaev	4.5	9.6
4	Abai Kunanbayev	4.2	9.0
5	Nursultan Nazarbayev	4.0	8.4
6	The National Anthem of the Republic of Kazakhstan	3.1	6.6
7	Kassym Jomart Tokayev	2.8	6.0
8	Eagle	1.4	3.0
9	Gennady Golovkin	1.1	2.4
10	The people of the Republic of Kazakhstan	1.1	2.4
11	Alikhan Bukeikhanov	0.8	1.8
12	Baurzhan Momyshuly	0.8	1.8
13	Kenesary Khan	0.8	1.8
14	The Sun	0.8	1.8
15	Abulhair Khan	0.6	1.2
16	Other	11.7	–
	Difficult to answer	53.0	–

Source: compiled by the authors based on research results.

Variations of this epic exist among many Turkic peoples, including Turkey, as well as in the countries of Central Asia. However, it was included in the UNESCO list of intangible cultural heritage in 2015, specifically from Turkmenistan,¹⁸ where it acquired the status of national heritage. In line with supporting the cultural community of the Turkic world, TURKSOY annually selects one cultural figure as a symbol of the Turkic world. Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan included the great national poets Magtymguly (2014) and Abay (2020), who, according to our respondents, were among the top five main symbols of their countries. However, there were also protestors from Kazakhstan: two “enemies of Soviet power”, the repressed and executed Temirbek Zhurgenov (2023) and Magzhan Zhumabaev (2018), convicted directly for pan-Turkism. However, Kazakh respondents are practically unfamiliar with them.

The term “pan-Turkism” itself is familiar to the vast majority of informants:

“I know about the term pan-Turkism. I cannot say for sure, but this is the ideology of Turkish culture, the Turkish people, and cultural characteristics associated with Kemalism... Kemalism in Turkey is simply unbearable; it is a very militant nation” (informant 3, FG-6, Turkmenistan).

Informants view the Turkic world as a broad directory:

“Russia, Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, and Turkey are Turkic countries” (informant 4, FG-6, Turkmenistan).

However, they perceive it ambiguously:

“Even one acquaintance says: ‘Erdogan said that he wants to unite all the Turkic peoples.’ I am for it” (informant 3, FG-6, Turkmenistan).

“Yes, it is not as good there as they imagine—even just pan-Turkism—because of the TV series” (informant 1, FG-6, Turkmenistan).

“The traditions and customs of Turkey are very different from those of Turkmenistan. We do not want to adapt to any country” (informant 2, FG-6, Turkmenistan).

¹⁸ Intangible cultural heritage of UNESCO in Turkmenistan. Retrieved November, 1, 2023 from <https://www.advantour.com/rus/turkmenistan/culture/unesco-intangible-cultural-heritage.htm>

Data obtained from the analysis of interviews with Kazakh informants showed that the respondents were aware of pan-Turkism and had a fairly positive attitude towards it:

“I know about pan-Turkism; I think it is the Turkic people who are closer to us” (informant 3, EI, Kazakhstan).

“As for me, this is a great idea to unite kindred peoples” (informant 7, EI, Kazakhstan).

In the media space, this topic is also quite widespread: sorting the data by markers (pan-Turkism, Turan, Turki/Turk, Turkism, pan-Turanism) made it possible to identify 48,040 mentions of these markers in the texts of posts and comments, which is about 20 % of the entire array of collected data for the above period (see Figure 1).

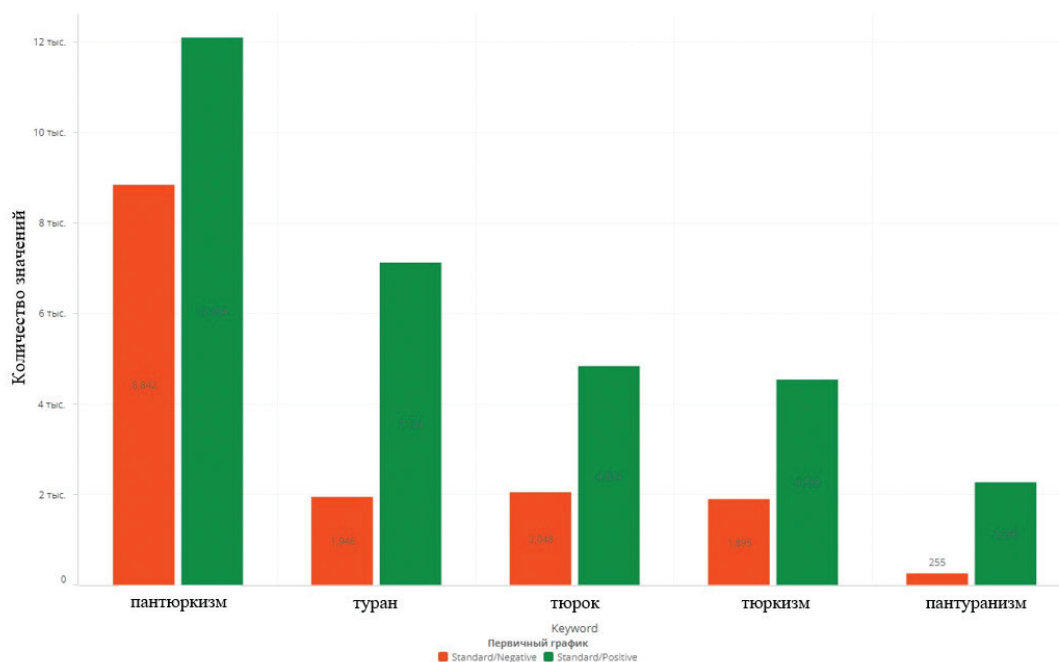


Figure 1. Sentiment analysis of data for given markers
 Source: compiled by the authors based on research results

It can be noted that the marker “pan-Turkism” is the leader both in the number of general mentions and also in the number of mentions in a negative tone. In our opinion, this is due, firstly, to the ambiguous assessment of this ideology among users, and secondly, to the large number of mentions of this marker on the VKontakte social network (more than 30%), where the main audience is Russian-speaking people as well as citizens of the Russian Federation, often criticizing this policy. The second aspect, in our opinion, somewhat shifts the representativeness of the use of this marker. Perhaps future studies based on data from other countries (Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan) will shift the results in favor of the positive use of this marker.

Additional extraction of entities by the specified marker made it possible to highlight the most mentioned persons in the text array (see Figure 2).



Figure 2. The cloud of words “persons” according to the given markers (pan-Turkism, Turan, Turks/Turks, Turkism, pan-Turanism)

Source: compiled by the authors based on research results

The vast majority of the mentioned persons are researchers in various fields of scientific knowledge, who in one way or another were engaged in the study of pan-Turkism. However, in some cases, a certain proportion of textual data was recorded mentioning Kazakhstani oppositionists spreading the concept of uniting the “Turkic world” among the local population (highlighted in green), and a low percentage of mentions of the main ideologues and adherents of pan-Turkism was noted (highlighted in blue). The exception is R.T. Erdogan, who is often mentioned in the online information agenda.

Exploring the perception of the relationship between Turkey and the Caspian countries, it can be noted that the data obtained as a result of focus group interviews has some differences in terms of positive perception. Focus group participants were asked to determine the degree of influence of key countries, including Turkey, on the economy and politics of their country in graphical form.

Among the drawings of Turkmen informants, Turkey can be identified as one of the closest partner countries (see Figure 3).

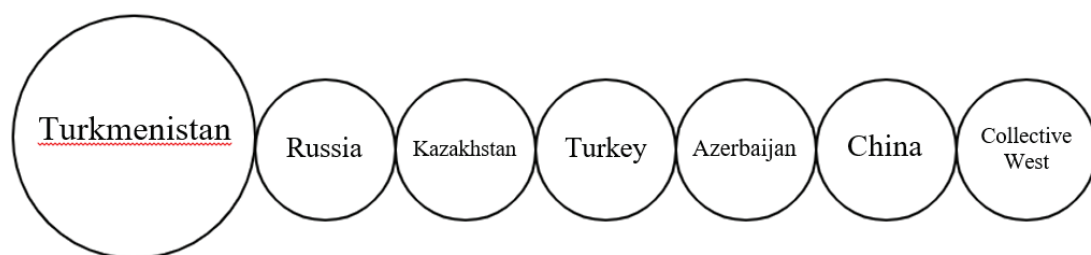


Figure 3. Proximity of partner countries (according to the total results of focus groups “Turkmenistan”)

Source: compiled by the authors based on research results

When asked why they consider Turkey to be so close, informants in one of the focus groups gave a collective answer that “*there are Turkmens here and there*” (informant 4, FG-2, Turkmenistan).

The attractiveness of Turkey for Turkmens is obvious for a number of reasons:

“Turkey, well, how can I say... Mainly, probably, trade, import, and export. Clothes are supplied. Food”.

“Construction (is being carried out)” (informant 5, FG-4, Turkmenistan).

Kazakh informants, on the contrary, consider the relations between the key partner countries to be equivalent (see Figure 3):

“Yes, everything is the same, just like a compass would turn out. It seems to me that we have good trade and economic relations with everyone; we have almost all goods. All four representatives in Kazakhstan are being sold” (informant 4, FG-2, Kazakhstan).

However, the assessment of Turkey’s influence by Kazakh informants is quite contradictory. On the one hand, mutual economic interest is noted:

“Turkey still has its own interests. Well, at least oil. They are interested in our oil and resources” (informant 6, FG-3, Kazakhstan).

“Turkish goods are sold... Turkish things, Turkish clothes” (informant 1, FG-1, Kazakhstan).

“It has an effect, but not much. It is further away, and I know little about the interaction between Turkey and Kazakhstan” (informant 4, FG-5, Kazakhstan).

“This kind of, you know, this nationalism is clearly expressed... with such an ardent religious bias... so I also think that Turkey is not particularly interesting for us” (informant 3, FG-5, Kazakhstan).

The analysis of the links between the keywords “Turkey” and “Kazakhstan” showed a fairly high number of links in the text collection within the framework of the project on identifying the relationship between the two countries (see Figure 5).

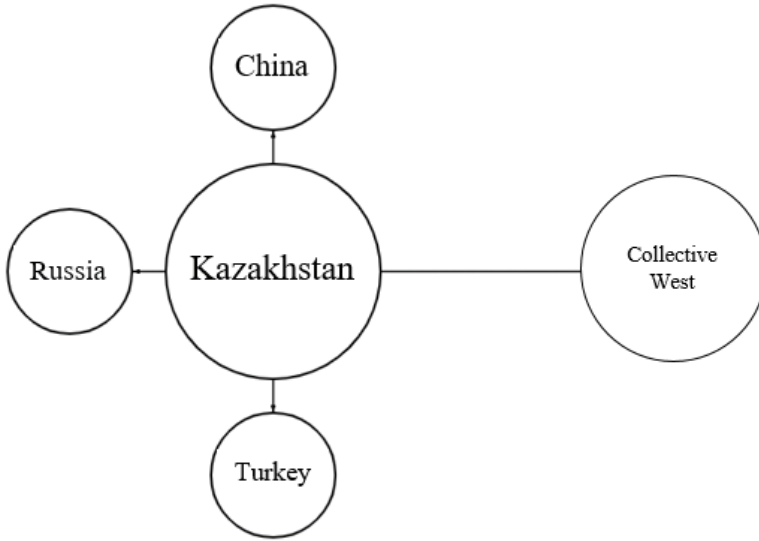


Figure 4. Proximity of partner countries (according to the total results of focus groups “Kazakhstan”)
Source: compiled by the authors based on research results

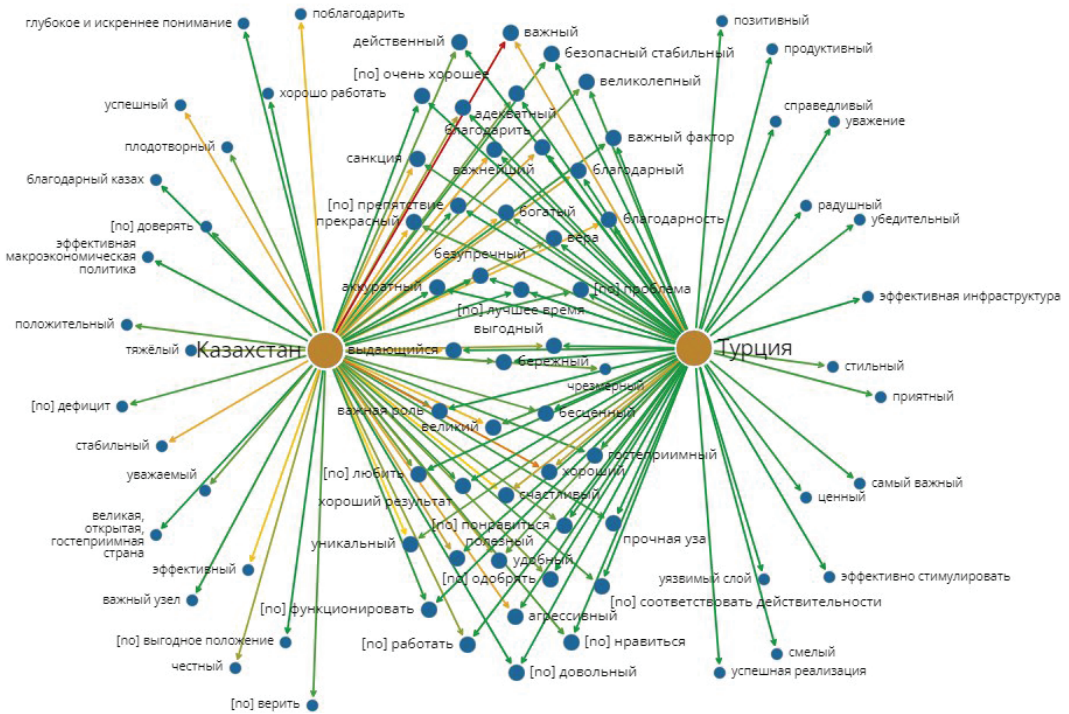


Figure 5. Graph of relations between the keywords “Turkey” and “Kazakhstan”
Source: compiled by the authors based on research results

The graph reflects the keywords, the relationships between them — the fact of their mass use in the general context, the degree of connection strength (edge thickness), as well as the tonality of the edge (positive — green / negative — red). In this case, one can observe a high degree of positive relations between the two countries (markers “useful”, “careful”, “happy”, “rich”, “most important”, “effective”, “profitable”, etc.). In our opinion, minor bursts of negative textual data from the marker “Kazakhstan” can be explained by the high activity of European, American and Chinese partners actively developing trade and economic ties with Kazakhstan over the past few years, which is a peculiar problem of the development of Turkish-Kazakh relations and is actively discussed in the online space, as well as active migration of Kazakhstani oppositionists and nationalists to Turkey:

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“Tokayev is tied up, Kazakstan is under China, Erdogan looses his positions...”¹⁹;

“We have done more for the Turks than they have for us”²⁰;

¹⁹ Retrieved October 26, 2023, from <https://web.telegram.org/a/#-1001165396196>

²⁰ Retrieved October 26, 2023, from https://dzen.ru/media/spik_kz/baltash-tursumbaev-kakie-kachestva-kazahov-ceniat-turki-60a4dd7cbeea8204693af2fe

especially Turkey. It was Turkmenistan that fully appreciated how Turkey deftly tries to replace everything Turkic with Turkish (In particular, the substitution of historical facts about the origin of the Turks), which was subtly noted by Turkologist Vladimir Avatkov, and this has already managed to displease neither the Turkmen authorities nor the Turkmen society, which did not accept the rather “audacious” attempts of Turkish assimilation in the 1990s.x and early 2000s [Avatkov, Ryzhenkov 2022].

“...haven't the Turks got enough from Turkmenistan? And you... are a Turkish litter and not a patriot of your homeland»²²;

“Turks need Turkmens as slaves, Turks will never accept Turkmens as equals. The Turks need fighters in Syria and Lebanon, cannon fodder and cheap manpower, for themselves (the Turks). It's a shame to do dirty work, so they wind up the Turkmens. Turks are no better than Americans»²³;

“Turkmenistan is just like a bride waiting for the groom to come and marry her»²⁴;

“The Turks just have a growing appetite” (comment in Turkmen);

“Turks consider Turkmens, Kazakhs and Uzbeks to be second-class servants. Visas have been introduced for Turkmens. Turkmens are the closest relatives of Turks”²⁵ (comment in Turkmen).

In addition, Turkmenistan seeks to counter the soft power of Turkey by restricting the activities of such important conductors as TURKSOY and TIKA on the territory of the country. The only working tool of Ankara's soft power remains the training of Turkmens in Turkey itself. As mentioned earlier, now, among the foreign students studying at Turkish universities, it is the Turkmen who are the most.

²² Retrieved October 26, 2023, from <https://anna-news.info/turetskoe-vmeshatelstvo-vo-vnutrennie-dela-turkmenii/>

²³ Retrieved October 26, 2023, from <https://anna-news.info/turetskoe-vmeshatelstvo-vo-vnutrennie-dela-turkmenii/>

²⁴ Retrieved October 26, 2023, from <https://web.telegram.org/a/#-1001196004297>

²⁵ Retrieved October 26, 2023, from <https://web.telegram.org/a/#-1001554502938>

Conclusion

What, based on our research, is the role of Turkey and the ideology of pan-Turkism in the formation of new national identities, and how successful is its policy? How ready are citizens of Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan to accept the ideas of unifying the Turkic world and the prevalence of the Turkish vector in foreign policy? Turkey is the coordinating center of the transnational space “Turkic ethno-world”, in which the countries of the Caspian region and Central Asia are most influenced at this stage. The “soft power” used by Turkey is aimed primarily at cultural relationships, emphasizing the elements of cultural kinship among the Turkic peoples, intensifying joint cultural events, providing grants for studying in Turkey, disseminating the Turkish language, expanding the symbolic field of the Turkic world, and intensifying the policy of memory within the activities of TURKSOY. All this is supported by mutually beneficial economic cooperation. However, the entire foreign policy of Turkey during the reign of Erdogan is of an ambivalent nature, manifested in attempts to sit on many chairs and not lose its “gesheft” from contacts with opposing political forces (Russia, the USA, Europe, and China), replacing real actions with stormy rhetoric and attempts to act as a reconciling party in the world conflicts of recent years, which also causes an ambivalent reaction. Based on the results of the content analysis, we see that pan-Turkic ideas are present in the information agendas of the analyzed countries but are not their trend. This is confirmed by sociological research data. The respondents showed awareness and, in principle, a positive attitude towards pan-Turkism but did not include it in their sphere of interests. The strength of Turkey’s policy is not so much the idea of “Great Turan” itself as the mechanisms for its promotion to countries with a Turkic population. The most effective tool is scientific and educational programs; their status allows returning youth to join the new elite of their countries and become an emissary of pan-Turkic ideas. The influence of Turkic ideas has its own characteristics in each of the countries we study. In Kazakhstan, participants in sociological research do not single out the

vector of relations between Kazakhstan and Turkey as particularly intense and the most influential. The presence of a fairly high representation of Turkey in Kazakhstan's online information agenda indicates a "latent creep" of its influence.²⁶

Based on the results of studies conducted among citizens of Turkmenistan who study or remain to work in Russia, it can be concluded that the vast majority of informants assess Turkey positively but as inferior in terms of proximity to Russia and, in some cases, to Kazakhstan (see Figure 3), which, in our opinion, can be explained by a whole complex of factors: the policy of neutrality, the presence of part of the Turkmen opposition in Turkey, and the influence of the Soviet past common with Russia, which is positively reflected in the mentality of the older generation since the policy of memory in Turkmenistan is not clearly negative in relation to Russia. However, the current geopolitical situation may change the vector of relations between Turkmenistan and Turkey, despite the neutral status of Turkmenistan. But at the moment, the "Turkish gambit" using "soft power" has not yet led to the obvious formation of stable elements of Turkic identity in the national identities of the countries of the Caspian region, and the prospects for their formation are still in doubt among the population.

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²⁶ In this case, we only analyzed the Kazakh online presence, therefore we exclude the influence of the Russian information agenda, which is de facto in opposition to the ideology of pan-Turkism.

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