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AUTHORS: Baktygul KALAMBEKOVA

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The Paradigm of Soft Power and the Importance of the Organization of Turkic States: Perspective from Kyrgyzstan

Baktygul KALAMBEKOVA*

Abstract

The concept of soft power, which has been introduced to International Relations studies by Joseph S. Nye Jr., has become an integral element of states' foreign policies, particularly since the end of the bipolar system. Türkiye has made significant use of soft power in its foreign policy since the 1990s. The Turkic states of the Caucasus and Central Asia have particularly benefited from Türkiye's soft power approach, which was instrumental in the foundation of the Turkic Council in 2009 – renamed as the Organization of Turkic States (OTS) in 2021. The cooperation among the Turkic states dates back to the voluntary disintegration of the Soviet Union which resulted in the peaceful resolution of the Cold War as one of the major international conflicts. The collapse of the Soviet Union also prepared the ground for the restoration of the links between the Turkic-speaking peoples who share common cultural, linguistic and religious roots. However, the geopolitical climate in the initial period was not conducive to reach this long awaited goal. As a result, the cooperation in the Turkic world has had ups and downs. In other words, it took some time to foster collaboration among the Turkic-speaking states and unleash their true potential even after the collapse of the Soviet Union. However, the institutionalization of the Turkic cooperation through the establishment of the OTS was a turning point. Against this background, this article seeks to understand Türkiye's policies toward the Turkic states from a soft power perspective. After reviewing the vision put forward by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk with regard to

* PhD & Ambassador at Large, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan.
E-mail: rahsanbaht@yahoo.com. ORCID: 0000-0002-7374-6298.

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the Turkic world, the article discusses the significance of Türkiye's approach in the post-Cold War period. It also highlights the use of soft power by the OTS to boost the regional cooperation in the Turkic world. Finally, the article draws attention to the contribution of Kyrgyzstan to the soft power dimension of the OTS.

Keywords

Turkic world, Organization of Turkic States, soft power, regional cooperation, Kyrgyzstan.

Introduction

In international relations, whereas hard power has been traditionally used to refer to a state's military and economic capabilities in coercing other states, soft power is usually associated with positive attraction and persuasion in order to achieve foreign policy objectives.¹ Joseph S. Nye Jr., who first introduced the concept of soft power to International Relations (IR) studies, identified three main pillars of soft power that are important for a state in achieving its national objectives: political values, culture and foreign policy.² As time passed, it was understood that each category included other sources that could be utilized as soft power instruments in a state's foreign policy. This inspired growing interest in the origins and vectors of development of the theory on soft power. Today, a number of special agencies even prepare periodical and internationally recognized publications that are in high demand on the issue of soft power.

In July 2015, the international consulting company Portland Communications published a global rating of states' soft power in a publication titled *Soft Power 30*, which supplements earlier attempts to measure and compare the soft power of various countries.³ The leader of this initiative, Jonathan McClory, a specialist in soft power, public diplomacy and socio-humanitarian technologies, created the first combined rating—the soft power index—which has been published annually since 2010 by a nonprofit institute in partnership with the British magazine *Monocle*.⁴ The index is compiled by looking at 75 indicators across six sub-indices (government, culture, education, global interaction, enterprises and digital technologies) and seven categories of international survey data.

Türkiye is naturally not isolated from these developments. Indeed, it has become one of the key players in the modern world as a state that makes active

efforts to take its place in the soft power rankings. The first decade of the post-bipolar period posed serious military, socio-economic and political problems to the governments of Türkiye. However, a comprehension of the true essence and potential of Türkiye's soft power is associated with the coming to power of the Justice and Development Party (AK Party) in 2002. Paying particular attention to the issues of security in foreign policy, the AK Party leaders have not ignored the task of rethinking Türkiye's position and perception in the international arena. Subsequently, Türkiye was included twice in the *Soft Power 30* index, although its ranking was unexpectedly low in both instances. Türkiye has many resources that constitute its soft power, such as its unique geography, rich culture and glorious history, and the effective utilization of these resources is important to enhance its influence in its neighborhood.

One of the earliest examples of Türkiye's soft power is its foreign policy activism in the post-Soviet space in the early 1990s. The independence of five Turkic-speaking republics in the Caucasus and Central Asia allowed Türkiye to highlight the factor of ethnicity for the very first time in its foreign policy. Despite Türkiye's efforts, however, Turkic cooperation developed very slowly in the 1990s. As a result, Türkiye chose a strategy of establishing long-term and consistent influence in the Turkic world through the formation of future elites in the Turkic states. Türkiye's official institutions have significantly contributed to the development of the Turkic states' educational systems and institutions through the opening of many schools, lyceums and universities, providing education in Turkish, English and native languages. The Istanbul Summit Declaration of the OTS indicates the success of these programs, stating that the heads of state "take note of the useful activities of the Turkish Maarif Foundation (TMF) schools in the Turkic World."⁵

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A large volume of grants and scholarship programs have been allocated annually by the Turkish government to Turkic students who want to receive higher education in Türkiye since the early 1990s. The "Great Student Project" (*Büyük Öğrenci Projesi*), which was initiated for this specific reason, later became the "Türkiye Scholarship" (*Türkiye Bursları*) program, which has been implemented by the Presidency of Turks Abroad and Associated Communities (YTB) with the contribution of other relevant agencies since 2012. In addition, the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TİKA) has been carrying out significant projects such as the restoration of monuments related

to Turkic history and the opening of hospitals in the Turkic states since the 1990s. Türkiye has been playing a leading role in fostering cooperation among the Turkic states in a multilateral format. Hence, many regional platforms have been created, such as TURKSOY, TURKPA, the Turkic Academy and the Turkic Culture and Heritage Foundation, to systematize the cooperation and coordination between the Turkic-speaking states.

In short, soft power has become a key factor in the implementation of Türkiye's foreign policy priorities in the Turkic world. Initially, Türkiye's soft power was mainly based on its historical, cultural and linguistic ties with the Turkic states. More recently, Türkiye has begun to actively strengthen its business ties in the region and pursue a policy to promote economic cooperation among these countries. The bilateral and multilateral business councils that were established through the Turkish initiative have become the key mechanisms for developing business ties in the region.

Türkiye's experience in using soft power in its foreign policy is arguably relatively new. During the first ten years that followed the end of the Cold War, Türkiye mainly tried to find its way in a radically changed international environment. However, that period also enabled Türkiye to take remarkable steps for rapprochement with the Turkic states. This article will therefore focus on Türkiye's activities toward the Turkic states from a soft power perspective. After reviewing the vision put forward by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk with regard to the Turkic world, the article discusses the significance of Türkiye's approach in the post-Cold War period. It also highlights the use of soft power by the OTS to boost the regional cooperation in the Turkic world. Finally, the article draws attention to the contribution of Kyrgyzstan to the soft power dimension of the OTS.

Origins and Vectors of the Concept of Soft Power

Although the concept of soft power was introduced by Joseph Nye Jr., an IR scholar from Harvard University, in the U.S. in 1990, it first became popular in IR studies in the 2000s and 2010s.⁶ Its rise in popularity was mainly due to the dire consequences caused by the "hard power" approach that was then extensively used in various regions, including the Middle East, which inevitably led to growing threats of terrorism and extremism and the increasingly negative attitude of the international community toward the military operations of a number of countries.

Soft power can be regarded as both a theoretical and practical concept, since it is implemented by states in line with their socio-political resources. Yet it

should be mentioned that Nye originally proposed the concept to explain U.S. foreign policy. He later had to revise the concept as “smart power” in order to analyze Washington’s changing foreign policy priorities. However, using foreign cultural policy as an instrument of influence at the international level is not a new phenomenon, since these methods were utilized in earlier periods. Nye himself indicates that the use of soft power dates back to many centuries ago and includes ancient cultures. For instance, Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu says, “a leader is best when people barely know he exists, when his work is done, his aim fulfilled, they will say: we did it ourselves.”⁷

It could be argued that the prototype of soft power in the modern sense was developed during the colonial era, when the imperial powers faced the long-term challenge of forming loyal elites in the conquered territories. For this reason, a whole range of measures was developed and implemented, including the export of educational standards, cultural norms, language, principles and models of public administration.

Some researchers believe that contemporary foreign cultural policy is an invention and prerogative of France, which sought to preserve, support and promote its cultural and linguistic heritage in a remarkable way.⁸ In fact, the 19th century was marked by the recognition of French high culture as the world standard. French became the language of official diplomacy and one of the leading means of communication in Europe until the beginning of the First World War. The non-governmental organization “Alliance Française” was created back in 1883 to spread French culture abroad.⁹ France retained its status as the cultural hegemon of Europe until Britain and Germany began to create serious competition in the international arena. The rivalry between France and Britain in the field of culture in particular led to the development of the external dimension of cultural policy. The first English cultural institute abroad appeared almost half a century later than the French one. The British Committee for Relations with Other Countries (now the British Council) was established in 1934 to create a basis abroad for building acquaintance and fostering understanding of British philosophy and way of life, and thus the adoption and support of British foreign policy.

Germany joined the process of promoting its image in the world only after its unification in 1871. However, over the next 30 years, it managed to take a leading position in the international scientific community on the basis of its achievements in the field of education and science. Alexander Humboldt’s idea of combining teaching and research has become a model for many countries, and the Kaiser Wilhelm Society was founded in 1911 as a system of specialized scientific research institutions wherein the state played a decisive role and the participation of industrialists was encouraged. Thus, education

and science became the main components of German soft power at the turn of the 20th century.

Although states had used cultural tools to create a positive image in the international arena in support of their foreign policy for centuries, Nye's theory became popular because he managed to systematically describe the basic principles and approaches of foreign policy as soft power.¹⁰ Nye emphasizes that

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soft power is opposed to the methods of forceful pressure inherent in hard power. After all, attractiveness means a conscious and voluntary choice. Nonetheless, as McClory rightly notes, soft power may seem like the best and less risky option compared to economic or military power, but it is often difficult to use, easy to lose and expensive to restore.¹¹

In 2004, Nye published *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*, in which he interestingly suggests using

the concept of sensible (smart) power.¹² He coined this term to correct the misperception that only soft power can ensure the effectiveness of foreign policy, defining sensible power "as the ability to combine hard and soft power resources."¹³ Thus, the concept of soft power acquired a more complex, nuanced and multi-faceted definition.¹⁴

Türkiye's Soft Power Approach and the Evolution of Turkic Cooperation

Last year marked the 30th anniversary of the declaration of independence of the former Soviet republics. Since their independence, these states have sought to strengthen their sovereignty and increase their active involvement in regional and global processes, while continuing to transition away from the socialist system. After the collapse of the bipolar world, the countries of Central Asia and the Caucasus found themselves at the center of the geopolitical interests of other countries. This included, among other things, the geopolitical confrontation that has existed between the "sea" powers and the "land" powers.¹⁵ Moreover, they were involved in the globalization process leaving a significant impact on the needs of Turkic people. However, most of them lacked the material basis, tools or the personnel corps required to conduct for-

eign policy and diplomacy. Türkiye was a very crucial actor in this regard, as it was the first country to recognize the independence of these states. Türkiye also opened embassies in the capitals of all the Turkic-speaking countries as early as 1992.

It was during this initial period that the words of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the founder of the Republic of Türkiye, acquired a new meaning for the Turkic states. In a meeting held following celebrations for the tenth anniversary of the foundation of the Republic of Türkiye in 1933, Atatürk described the ideal that could be transferred from generation to generation for the Turkic peoples: “Undoubtedly, every nation should have its ideals. States cannot talk openly about them. Ideal lives in the hearts of the people. Just as we cannot see our eyes, with which we see everything around us, we cannot notice the ideal that lives in our hearts, but we do everything by it.”¹⁶ Atatürk was making reference to the fact that there were people living in the Soviet Union who shared the same language, religion and history as Türkiye, and indicating that this was a solid bridge between Türkiye and the Turkic peoples.

Atatürk’s vision for the Turkic world is best exemplified by the creation of language and history councils in Türkiye. On this issue, he said:

“We are trying to bring our language closer to their [Turkic] languages; we are making efforts to restore our shared history with them. It will allow us to easily understand each other, have friendly relations and be together in joy and peace. Our goal is to learn and apply a common language and a shared history. We have a shared past, and it needs to be known and understood. Therefore, the study of history in our schools begins with Central Asia. Our children must be aware of the people living there. Now their children should know about us too. For these purposes, the Institute of Turkology has been established. We intend to integrate our cultures.”¹⁷

This is how Atatürk concluded his clarification as to how any ideals regarding the Turkic cooperation could be transferred from generation to generation. As a result, despite all the difficulties, Türkiye tried to maintain its links with the Turkic world by focusing on activities in three main spheres: a) activities for the formation of a common Turkic language by purifying it of words borrowed from other languages and enriching the vernacular, b) activities for bridging the 5000-year common history of the Turkic peoples with the history of the Ottoman Empire and constructing a common continuous history; c) efforts to turn the unity of the Turkic peoples into a factor that is capable of ensuring the balance in world politics. To these ends, the Language Councils (*Dil Encümeni*) were later transformed into the Institute of Turkic Studies

(*Türkiyat Enstitüsü*). Ankara University's Faculty of Language, History and Geography emerged on this solid base. The activities of specialized institutions for language (*Dil Kurumu*), history (*Tarih Kurumu*) and culture (*Kültür Merkezi*) were coordinated by the Council for Language, History and Culture at the Office of the Prime Minister. All these activities contributed to the systematic formation of an institutional framework for the rapprochement of the Turkic peoples on the basis of language, culture and history. At the same time, this may be regarded as an indication of the use of soft power in Turkish foreign policy.

During the Soviet era, it was not easy for Ankara to highlight the soft power dimension of Turkic cooperation while remaining tactful in order not to damage its official relations with Moscow. However, the vision put forward by Atatürk became a powerful slogan after the collapse of the Soviet Union, as Türkiye started to hold annual *kurultays* (gatherings) of Turkic-speaking communities, as well as other festivals and symposiums, conferences and official meetings. Türkiye's foreign policy activities in the post-Soviet space at that time centered on the concept of Turkic unity and solidarity.

The budding sovereignty of the former Soviet republics coincided with the presidency of Turgut Özal, which marked an era of unprecedented growth in Türkiye's international activities. Özal made reference to the transformation of the Turkic world and asserted that "the twenty-first century will belong to the Turks."¹⁸ He was responsible for the launch of special summits between the heads of states of the Turkic states in 1992, believing that Turkish foreign policy had to be proactive and pragmatic. As a result, Özal became the first Turkish leader to conduct telephone diplomacy with the heads of other states. He also emphasized the importance of economic diplomacy, since he correctly assessed global trends and the transformation of geopolitics into geo-economics. During his period, a large group of entrepreneurs and journalists began to accompany the president on his foreign trips. For example, in addition to many high-ranking officials, around 220 businesspeople and 40 journalists joined his visit to Central Asia in 1993. More importantly, Türkiye opened 22 new embassies and five consulates-general under Özal's leadership, including the embassies opened in all Turkic-speaking countries in 1992.

Türkiye's proactive approach toward the Turkic states continued in subsequent periods under the leadership of presidents Süleyman Demirel (1993–2000), Ahmet Necdet Sezer (2000–2007) and Abdullah Gül (2007–2014). Owing to Türkiye's intense diplomatic efforts in the aftermath of the dissolution of the Soviet Union, there is now an extensive network of cooperation among the Turkic-speaking countries. The most notable institution in this sense is

the former Cooperation Council of Turkic Speaking States, also known as the “Turkic Council”, which was established with the signing of Nakhchivan Agreement on 3 October 2009 as a regional cooperation mechanism. This was actually the fruit of the “Summit Process” that endured from 1992 to 2012. During this period, ten summits of the Turkic-speaking countries at the level of heads of state were organized – the first of which was held in Ankara in 1992. These summit meetings were crucial for Turkic cooperation, as they provided a consistent platform for diplomatic consultations between the Turkic states which eventually led to the formal establishment of the Turkic Council in October 2009. In November 2021, at the eighth summit meeting of the Turkic Council, this regional institution was officially renamed the Organization of Turkic States (OTS).¹⁹ The same summit was also remarkable because the first strategic document for Turkic cooperation, “Turkic World Vision–2040” was adopted, and Turkmenistan gained the status of an observer state in the OTS.²⁰

In 2021, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan underlined the importance Türkiye attributes to the OTS by stating,

“We are changing the name of our Council, which has developed its institutional structure and boosted its prestige in its region and beyond, to the Organization of Turkic States. Obviously, this historic change should not remain limited to rhetoric; it should be put into action as well. The structure and the operating procedure of the secretariat as well as our political, economic and social solidarity must reflect the institutional quality of our family assembly.”²¹

Today, the OTS not only represents the ideal that has been transferred from generation to generation in the Turkic world in accordance with Atatürk’s vision—it is also a very clear example of Türkiye’s expanding soft power in international relations.

Soft Power Aspect of Turkic Cooperation and Kyrgyzstan

The OTS, which has become the umbrella organization for Turkic cooperation, can be regarded as a very effective soft power instrument for all the member states. It is an intergovernmental organization aimed at integrated

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and harmonious development in all areas of interaction in the Turkic world on the most topical issues of the regional and global agenda. Its cornerstone is the need for cooperation between the Turkic-speaking peoples, who share common ancestral roots, history, culture and language. Moreover, the OTS is based on the principle of equality among its member states which provides further impetus to enhance regional cooperation.²² Thus, the decisions are based on consensus and each member state has an equal voice in the decision-making process.

As a multilateral platform, the scope of the activities of the OTS cover many areas ranging from political, economic, educational and cultural issues to specific collaboration fields such as tourism, youth, diaspora, media, agriculture and environmental protection. In each cooperation area, both the public and

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private sectors are quite active and well-engaged.²³ The project-based approach of the OTS in particular yields remarkable benefits for the citizens of the Turkic states. For instance, projects related to the younger population and education are very significant for enhancing quality of life and social standards in the Turkic world.²⁴ Moreover, with a comprehensive approach, the OTS also supports the activities of the other official Turkic cooperation organizations regarding the educational, cul-

tural and parliamentary dimensions of the Turkic solidarity. This multi-dimensional perspective strengthens the soft power of the OTS and its member states. In this regard, it touches the “hearts and minds” of the Turkic-speaking people in a wide range of areas through its activities and projects. Meanwhile, the OTS is also active at the international level.²⁵ It cooperates with other regional and international organizations starting from the UN and its special agencies to ASEAN. This cooperation is instrumental in raising awareness on the joint soft power of the Turkic states in the international arena.

The OTS is also active in the resolution of regional conflicts. An extraordinary meeting initiated by Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Türkiye, held in Istanbul in September 2021 on the issue of Afghanistan, is a significant example. The joint statement issued at the end of the meeting contributed to the soft power agenda of Turkic cooperation, as the member states declared their “support to the stabilization and humanitar-

ian efforts of the international community in Afghanistan.” Collectively, they pledged to “stand ready to contribute to all efforts to assist the Afghan people in their endeavor to achieve lasting peace, national reconciliation, stability and development.”²⁶

Kyrgyzstan is one of the founding members of the OTS. It maintains close ties with the other Turkic-speaking states and intends to further deepen these ties both in a bilateral and multilateral framework. The participation of Kyrgyzstan in the activities of the OTS is quite natural, as the Kyrgyz government prioritizes political and economic cooperation with the Turkic states in addition to tending their common historical, cultural, and linguistic bonds. Kyrgyzstan’s interactions with other Turkic states within the framework of the OTS is in line with the multi-vector character of its foreign policy, which aims to foster the country’s regional and international influence by taking active part in such regional platforms. Reciprocally, the OTS also supports the economic and financial interests of Kyrgyzstan.

Kyrgyzstan has a number of advantages in terms of enhancing the soft power aspects of the OTS. For example, modern Kyrgyzstan inherited the unique contribution of the Kyrgyz as an ancient people to the treasury of world folklore—a trilogy of the heroic epic *Manas*, which is regarded as an encyclopedia of the life by dozens of generations. Furthermore, Kyrgyzstan launched and hosted the first World Nomad Games in 2014, 2016 and 2018. These games later became a regular landmark sports event that continues to bring together the Turkic peoples. The next round of the games is expected to take place in Türkiye in 2022.

Overall, the OTS has a significant soft power potential and taps this potential through its activities in relevant fields of cooperation. Furthermore, its dynamic approach towards the resolution of regional conflicts as well as its relations with regional and international actors play a significant role to boost its soft power. As a founding member state, Kyrgyzstan certainly makes substantial contribution to the enhancement of the soft power dimension of the OTS.

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Conclusion

Soft power retains its place among the key instruments of states in international politics. By its nature, soft power is much more flexible and sensitive to changes in the environment compared with hard power. Soft power is also an important component of Turkish foreign policy from a historical perspective. It has become even more visible in the post-Cold War period in Türkiye's approach to the Turkic states of the Caucasus and Central Asia. Atatürk's ideal of strengthening Turkic unity and solidarity has provided the basis for Türkiye's soft power activities in the region following the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Türkiye's main objective is to build strong bridges between the Turkic states to strengthen the common ethnic, linguistic, religious and cultural bonds of the Turkic-speaking peoples. Thus, it could be argued that Atatürk's vision has become the guiding star of Türkiye's soft power approach toward the Turkic world in the post-Cold War era.

The establishment of the Turkic Council in 2009, which was renamed as the OTS in 2021 is one of the most significant products of the collective efforts of the Turkic-speaking states. Today, the OTS is well-equipped with the necessary tools and adequate mechanisms to jointly promote soft power. The "Turkic World Vision–2040" document adopted at the Istanbul Summit in 2021 is expected to provide further momentum in this direction. The role of the member states in the adoption of such an important strategic vision document is very crucial as this document includes many elements promoting a much more sophisticated soft power dimension. The document is also important as the future success of the OTS in fostering cooperation among the Turkic-speaking states will be determined by the efforts of the member states in advancing the soft power dimension of this organization. The projects that have been launched within the framework of the OTS in many issue areas seem to be quite promising in this regard.

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