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Trends in The Development of Cultural Relations Between Türkiye And the Countries of Central Asia

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Abstract: This article examines the challenges in developing cultural relations between Türkiye and the countries of Central Asia. The study aims to identify the principal factors hindering deeper cultural cooperation and to determine possible ways of overcoming them. Through comparative analysis, it examines the specific features of Türkiye's engagement with each country in the region, as well as the role of key instruments of cultural diplomacy, such as TİKA, the Yunus Emre Institute, TURKSOY, the Organization of Turkic States, and educational programmes.

The principal directions proposed for strengthening cultural relations include a differentiated approach to engagement with individual countries in the region, the expansion of educational and academic exchanges, the development of joint research and cultural projects, increased youth cooperation, the use of digital tools, and greater mutual representation of the cultures of Türkiye and the Central Asian countries. The article substantiates the need to move from predominantly isolated cultural events towards a more sustainable system of educational, scientific, and societal ties.

Keywords: Türkiye, Central Asia, cultural diplomacy, cultural cooperation, comparative analysis, soft power, TİKA, TURKSOY, Yunus Emre Institute, Organization of Turkic States, humanitarian cooperation.

Introduction: In the twenty-first century, cultural engagement has become a prominent dimension of states' foreign policies. Education, language, scientific exchanges, cultural events, and the preservation of historical heritage are used not only to develop humanitarian contacts but also to build more enduring relations between societies. This is particularly significant in regions where contemporary interstate relations rest on a long history of interaction and cultural affinity.

Central Asia occupies a distinctive place in Türkiye's cultural and foreign policies. Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Tajikistan became independent actors in international relations, and Türkiye was among the first countries to establish diplomatic relations with them. A shared historical heritage and linguistic and cultural ties with the Turkic-speaking states created favourable conditions for cooperation. At the same time, Ankara gradually expanded its instruments of engagement, moving from predominantly bilateral contacts towards a more developed system of institutional and multilateral cooperation.

These ties originated long before the Central Asian states gained independence. Trade, religious, and cultural contacts existed between the Ottoman Empire and the peoples of Central Asia, while interest in the region increased in the second half of the nineteenth century against the backdrop of a changing geopolitical environment in Eurasia. Nevertheless, Türkiye's contemporary policy in Central Asia should not be regarded as a direct continuation of Ottoman policy or early pan-Turkist projects. After 1991, Ankara had to develop new mechanisms for engaging with independent states, taking account of their established national political systems and their own interests. Studies of Turkish policy in the region demonstrate that initial expectations of a possible unified Turkic space gradually gave way to a more pragmatic model based on bilateral cooperation, trade, institutional mechanisms, and instruments of public diplomacy.

The cultural dimension gradually became an important component of this policy. Türkiye established an extensive network of organisations and programmes whose activities encompass education, culture, language, humanitarian projects, and the preservation of shared heritage. TİKA, the Yunus Emre Institute, TURKSOY, the Organization of Turkic States, Türkiye Scholarships, and the Turkish Maarif Foundation occupy a prominent place among them. These institutions perform different functions, but collectively they help expand contacts between Türkiye and Central Asian societies.

However, the expansion of Türkiye's cultural and institutional presence in the region does not mean that cooperation with all Central Asian states develops in the same way. Despite the apparent similarity of their historical and cultural foundations, the nature and scale of engagement differ considerably. These differences are shaped by state cultural policies, national priorities, the linguistic situation, attitudes towards historical heritage, the degree of openness in education and culture, and the foreign policy orientations of individual states.

Nevertheless, a shared cultural foundation and a developed institutional infrastructure do not imply an equal level of cooperation with all Central Asian states. This is precisely where one of the principal issues requiring further examination arises. Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Tajikistan differ substantially in their national identities, linguistic environments, state cultural policies, and foreign policy priorities. Cultural affinity with Türkiye therefore creates opportunities for cooperation, but does not in itself determine its scope or substance.

Certain limitations also stem from the nature of cultural cooperation itself. The activities of cultural institutions and the organisation of festivals, exhibitions, and other events create opportunities for expanding contacts, yet these forms of engagement do not always generate long-term ties. A similar problem can be observed in education and science. Despite the availability of scholarship programmes and opportunities to study in Türkiye, the potential for academic mobility, joint research, and sustained interaction between universities and research institutions remains underutilised. Consequently, individual cultural initiatives do not always develop into lasting professional and academic ties.

Reciprocity in cultural exchange is also significant. Cultural diplomacy involves promoting national culture beyond a state's borders, but its long-term effects depend largely on the ability to accommodate partners' interests and cultural characteristics. In Türkiye's relations with Central Asian countries, this requires not only expanding the presence of the Turkish language and culture in the region, but also creating opportunities for the broader representation of the cultures of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Tajikistan in Türkiye. Such an approach can make cultural cooperation more sustainable and reduce the risk of its being perceived as one-sided cultural influence.

It should also be noted that Türkiye's cultural engagement with Central Asia develops in a context shaped by the presence of other external actors. Russia retains a substantial position in language, education, and historical memory; China is expanding its influence through economic, educational, and humanitarian projects; and the United States, European countries, and other states also show an interest in the region. Türkiye's opportunities therefore depend not only on its own cultural resources but also on its ability to take account of the broader structure of relations in the region. Contemporary studies characterise the Turkish presence in Central Asia as contingent and uneven: its opportunities expand where cultural affinity is reinforced by enduring institutional ties, while also being constrained by Russia's position, China's economic scale, and the varying receptiveness of the region's states.

Thus, a shared historical and cultural heritage is an important prerequisite for cooperation between Türkiye and Central Asia, but cannot by itself precisely determine its substance and outcomes. A certain gap and a number of problems persist between the potential for cultural engagement and the actual level of cooperation. This contradiction is the central concern of the present study. It raises the question of why Türkiye's relations with individual countries in the region develop differently despite similar historical and cultural foundations, and which factors most constrain the further deepening of humanitarian ties.

To address this question, the article undertakes a comparative analysis of Türkiye's cultural cooperation with the countries of Central Asia. Comparing the five states makes it possible to identify challenges common to the region while also accounting for the specific characteristics of each country. The analysis focuses on the activities of key cultural diplomacy institutions, educational and academic engagement, the preservation of cultural heritage, youth contacts, and contemporary forms of cultural exchange.

This approach makes it possible to examine Türkiye's cultural relations with Central Asian countries in terms of both their achievements and their existing limitations. Particular importance is attached to

identifying forms of cooperation that accommodate differences among the region's states while maintaining a shared foundation for humanitarian engagement. Expanding academic and youth exchanges, developing joint scientific and cultural projects, using digital tools, and strengthening reciprocity in cultural exchange can be regarded as directions for the further development of relations. The effectiveness of these measures, however, depends on the extent to which they are adapted to the specific conditions of each Central Asian country.

Main Discussion. Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, cultural engagement gradually became an important dimension of Türkiye's relations with the states of Central Asia. This development was facilitated not only by new political and economic conditions but also by historical and cultural ties that could now develop within relations between independent states. For Türkiye, cultural affinity with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan created additional opportunities for humanitarian cooperation. Relations with Tajikistan, meanwhile, developed from the outset in a somewhat different cultural and linguistic environment. It therefore became clear at an early stage that shared historical foundations did not preclude differences in the substance and scale of cooperation.

In the early years of independence, a substantial part of Turkish policy in the region was associated with the notion of cultural and linguistic affinity among Turkic peoples. As relations developed, however, this approach came to be complemented by more practical forms of engagement. The predominantly symbolic emphasis on common origins gradually gave way to the establishment of enduring mechanisms for cooperation in education, culture, science, and the preservation of historical heritage. This enabled cultural ties to evolve from isolated initiatives into more organised institutional engagement.

One of the first multilateral mechanisms for such engagement was the International Organization of Turkic Culture (TURKSOY), established in 1993 with the participation of Türkiye and a number of Turkic-speaking states. Its principal activities included organising cultural events, supporting artistic ensembles, promoting cultural heritage, and developing contacts between cultural institutions.

In subsequent years, the network underpinning Türkiye's humanitarian presence in Central Asia expanded considerably. It came to include TİKA, the Yunus Emre Institute, the Organization of Turkic States, the Turkish Maarif Foundation, and various educational programmes. Each of these institutions performs its own functions, but collectively they constitute an infrastructure through which Türkiye maintains cultural, educational, and societal ties with the states of the region.

Nevertheless, the activities of these organisations should not be regarded as a single mechanism. Their objectives and modes of operation differ. TİKA combines development projects with humanitarian and cultural initiatives, including those concerned with restoring historical sites and supporting educational infrastructure. The Yunus Emre Institute focuses primarily on teaching the Turkish language and promoting culture. TURKSOY operates as a multilateral platform for cultural cooperation, while the Organization of Turkic States connects humanitarian engagement with broader processes of Turkic integration. This division of functions enables Türkiye to operate simultaneously at the interstate and societal levels.

Educational cooperation remains one of the most enduring areas of engagement. Opportunities to study in Türkiye, scholarship programmes, and university exchanges help establish direct contacts among young people and academic communities. In this respect, educational diplomacy has a long-term character: individuals educated in another country retain professional and personal ties after completing their studies. The influence of such programmes therefore cannot be assessed solely by the number of students participating in them at any given time.

Another area of cooperation between Türkiye and Central Asia is the preservation of historical and cultural heritage. Projects to restore historical sites and the organisation of exhibitions, festivals, conferences, and other cultural events help sustain interest in a shared past. For Türkiye, such initiatives also have broader significance, as they enable it to maintain a presence in the region's cultural space not only through state structures but also through engagement with local cultural institutions, research organisations, and community groups.

Yet it is precisely the focus on cultural heritage that most clearly reveals differences in how Central Asian states perceive their shared historical past. A common Turkic cultural and historical heritage provides an important foundation for Türkiye's humanitarian cooperation with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan. At the same time, each state in the region develops its own interpretation of the historical past, cultural values, and national identity. Consequently, this common cultural heritage is not perceived uniformly and cannot automatically ensure equal levels of interest in Turkish cultural initiatives. For

cultural diplomacy, this implies the need to take account of distinctive national historical narratives and the particular features of identity formation in each country, rather than merely emphasising common origins and cultural traditions.

Differences in the national cultural policies of the region's states are a significant factor behind the uneven development of Türkiye's cultural relations with Central Asian countries. Despite shared historical and cultural elements, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Tajikistan adopt different approaches to language, education, the preservation of cultural heritage, the formation of national identity, and engagement with foreign cultural partners. These differences directly affect perceptions of, and demand for, the instruments of Turkish cultural diplomacy. What proves effective in one country does not always produce comparable results in another. The effectiveness of Türkiye's cultural diplomacy therefore depends largely on its ability to adapt its instruments to each state's national context, combining the promotion of shared cultural values with respect for established patterns of national identity and cultural policy.

A comparative analysis of all Central Asian countries indicates that the most favourable conditions for a Turkish cultural presence have emerged in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan. The nature of cooperation with each of these countries nevertheless differs. Kazakhstan combines the development of ties with Türkiye with a multi-vector foreign policy. The Turkish cultural presence therefore develops alongside Russian, Chinese, European, and other forms of engagement. For Türkiye, this means competing less for a cultural presence as such than for Kazakhstani society's sustained interest in Turkish educational and cultural programmes.

Historical and cultural cooperation should therefore not be built exclusively around a one-sided presentation of the Turkish interpretation of the shared past. Its sustainability depends on reciprocal engagement with the historical heritage of both countries. A positive direction in this respect is the development of projects in which Kazakhstani and Turkish researchers jointly study historical processes, literature, art, and the cultural heritage of the Turkic world. Such an approach enables a transition from simply using a shared past as an instrument of rapprochement to developing a joint scholarly understanding of it.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the comparative analysis indicates that Türkiye's cultural engagement with the countries of Central Asia has considerable potential, but varies in its degree of institutionalisation and intensity. The most favourable conditions for developing cultural ties are found in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan, owing to historical, cultural, and linguistic affinity, as well as the existence of enduring educational and institutional mechanisms for cooperation. Turkmenistan's distinctive position, meanwhile, is determined by the predominantly state-led nature of cultural engagement, whereas in Tajikistan the absence of a Turkic linguistic and cultural foundation necessitates reliance primarily on educational, scientific, and humanitarian instruments of cooperation. Thus, cultural affinity is an important factor, but does not automatically determine the scale and effectiveness of bilateral ties.

A comparison of the five states suggests that the limited sustainability of cultural initiatives remains a common problem, as these initiatives do not always translate into long-term academic, scientific, and professional contacts. Accordingly, the further development of Türkiye's cultural diplomacy should be based on a differentiated approach that takes account of each state's national characteristics, as well as on the principles of reciprocity, institutional sustainability, and long-term cooperation.

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