

## Analysis

November 10, 2011

**Summary:** After the fall of the Soviet Union, Turkey attempted to step into the power vacuum left in Central Asia. It sensed an opportunity for itself because of its close ethnic, linguistic, and religious connections to Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. After recognizing the newly independent Turkic republics, Ankara started to establish institutions to develop relations with them and encouraged businessmen, universities, and artists to do so. But these initiatives have not always delivered results or facilitated real cooperation. Yet we should not be surprised to see Ankara assigning heightened importance to the larger Turkic world in its emerging foreign policy as Turkey gives up its former commitment to the status quo for a more visible strategic activism.

## Taking Stock: Turkey and the Turkic World 20 Years Later

by *Nadir Devlet*

When the USSR dissolved in 1991, to the surprise of most Sovietologists, one of the burning questions concerned the shape and depth of the substantial vacuum a diminution of Russian power in non-Russian areas of the former Soviet Union was certain to cause. Some regions, like the Baltic States, already claimed solid attachments to Europe, and little uncertainty surrounded where they would anchor themselves going forward. In contrast, Central Asia was a much more complex problem. Ethnically, linguistically, culturally, and religiously mixed, Central Asia had never enjoyed attachments to Europe or to any other great power except Russia, now in decline. It had been artificially isolated by rigid Soviet borders from populations of ethnic and religious kin in bordering states like China, Afghanistan, and Iran, all of which were as wary of how the political turmoil the collapse of Soviet power and the onset of nominal independence among the new states might infect their own disaffected populations as they were excited at the prospects of expanding influence into the newly opened Central Asian territories. So who would fill this vacuum?

Turkey was one of the vanguard countries sensing an opportunity for itself because of its close ethnic,

linguistic, and religious connections to Central Asia's five new states. (In the beginning Tajikistan was mistakenly also counted as a Turkic country.) Yet Turkish diplomats, politicians, journalists, and academics had little or vague knowledge about these newly independent countries. In the Cold War era, the USSR and everything related to it was taboo, the enemy. Only a few scholars who were working on the ancient or medieval period of Turkish history, literature, and language were able to gather information about the Turkic peoples of the Soviet Union, but like scholars elsewhere, their access to Central Asia itself and to research materials was limited.

Moreover, Turkish scholars for the most part were predisposed to fasten mainly on similarities between Turkey and the Turkic societies of Central Asia — a common cultural background, history, and heritage — ignoring many profound differences. Not surprisingly, such analyses led to one-sided and misleading conclusions. In reality, the Turks of Turkey and Central Asia's Turkic peoples had been less than intimate with each other for many centuries, during which time commonalities declined, and during the Soviet period they were cut off from each other completely

G | M | F OFFICES

WASHINGTON, DC • BERLIN • PARIS • BRUSSELS  
BELGRADE • ANKARA • BUCHAREST • WARSAW



## Analysis

as the direct object of Soviet policy. Émigré communities of Central Asians in Istanbul and other Turkish cities were considered the worst of enemies by Soviet authorities precisely because these émigrés were frequently and implacably motivated to oppose Soviet domination of their peoples captive inside the USSR. So forcing distinctions was an act of Soviet social engineering with a purely political intent. For example, each Soviet Turkic society was ordered to develop its own distinct alphabet, language, and literature so that they diverged from each other, and of course from more distant Turkey, even in daily language. Despite these divergences and against considerable evidence, Turkish scholars insisted that only one Turkish language existed with many dialects, the latter spoken in the new states of Central Asia. From there it was a short hop to the conclusion that the Turks of Turkey and the Turkic peoples of the former Soviet Union shared not just language but traditions and culture. And of course they were all Muslims. This predisposition was to lead to many misunderstandings in the first years of Turkey's involvement in the former Soviet space.

After recognizing the newly independent Turkic republics, Ankara started to establish institutions to develop relations with them and encouraged businessmen, universities, and artists to do so. The first important official step was the creation of Turkish Cooperation and Development Agency (TIKA) in the beginning of 1992. TIKA was an agency within the Foreign Ministry with its own budget and staff, created in order to provide technical and cultural support to the newly independent Turkic republics. In May 1999, TIKA was moved to the prime minister's office and restructured. TIKA now works toward not only the Turkic republics, but is also involved in 37 countries. During the period 2005 — 2009, US\$7 billion of resources were channeled to TIKA through public and private sources, but it is likely that the amounts directed to the post-Soviet space were not large because after 2002 the agency was more involved in the Balkans, Middle East, and Africa.

Turkey chose education as the second area of support to the Turkic republics to promote the Turkish image abroad. When former Turkish President Süleyman Demirel launched an educational program in 1992 to grant scholarships not just to students from the Turkic republics, but also those from the Russian Federation — the home of large Turkic populations of Tatars, Bashkirs, and others — 10,000

students were invited. Students from the Balkans, Middle East, and Asian countries were included in the program soon after it was launched. As a result, not only students from the independent Turkic republics and Turkic regions of the Russian Federation, but also students from a wide range of countries had access to secondary and tertiary education in Turkey.

During 1992-2000, 20,665 students were invited to Turkey for education, 3,076 of them graduated and 9,935 students had their scholarships cancelled because of absenteeism or other reasons. The project still continues, although with declining number of students. To date, Turkey has spent approximately US\$250 million for this project. These figures indicate that the Turkish scholarship program was not as successful as Turkish authorities hoped. There are different reasons for the failure of this ambitious scholarship program. The main reason may have been the amount of scholarship given per student. Turkey hoped that students educated in Turkey through this program would become cultural representatives in their respective countries. But it is doubtful that students who were not satisfied or left Turkey without finishing their education could be expected to be goodwill representatives.

Turkey hoped that students educated in Turkey would become cultural representatives in their respective countries.

Turkey also had direct involvement abroad, establishing two universities in Turkic republics, one in Kazakhstan, and one in Kyrgyzstan. The Akhmet Yasawi Turkish-Kazak University was founded in 1994 in Turkestan in southern Kazakhstan. Kyrgyzstan-Turkey Manas University opened in 1996 in Bishkek, the capital of Kyrgyzstan. Both universities are financed by Turkey.

Another private initiative was conducted primarily by the religious leader Fethullah Gülen and his Nur community, which are propagating Islamic values. The Gülen movement concentrated in former Soviet republics mainly in

the Muslim regions. Approximately 70 schools in five Turkic republics and 30 in the Turkic regions of the Russian Federation were established by the Gülen community. They were well received by the local authorities because they maintained high education standards and taught students not only in local languages, but also Russian, Turkish, and English. The prospect of receiving an education in English, recognized as the fundamental global language in contrast to Russian's more limited usage, is one of the main reasons parents send their children to these schools. Graduates from these schools quickly employed their knowledge of English in future college education and in business.

In more recent years, the Russian Federation and Uzbekistan banned these schools. Both countries were suspicious that religious influence would taint the students, and authorities worried openly that graduates of these schools become potential Islamic extremists. Indeed, on their face, these schools appeared fully secular. But the majority were boarding schools where students received their Islamic instruction and training in hard-to-monitor dormitories. Despite this prejudice, Fethullah Gülen's schools have expanded to more than 100 countries. To show the success of these schools, almost every year Turkish Language Olympics are being organized. At the 9<sup>th</sup> Turkish Olympiad in 2010, approximately 1,000 students from 130 countries — mostly from Central Asia, Russia, the Balkans, the Middle East, and Africa — attended and performed, singing, reading poems, or performing other kinds of plays in Turkish.

Turkey is involved in the Turkic World beyond just the educational or scientific fields. Many activities are underway in political, economic, and religious areas as well. After the recognition of Turkic republics by Turkey, leaders of these republics started to hold summit meetings under Ankara's initiative. The first of these summits, called "Summit of Heads of State of Turkish Speaking States," was held in 1992, and the 10th took place last year in İstanbul. During the summit in Nakhchevan, Azerbaijan, in 2009, participating leaders decided to create a Council of Cooperation of Turkish Speaking States (Turkish Council) with its headquarters in Istanbul. In addition to this, TÜRKPA (Turkish Speaking Countries Parliamentarian Assembly), which was founded in Baku in November 2008; TÜRKSOY (Joint Administration of Turkic Arts and Culture), which was founded on June 1993 in Almaty, Kazakhstan, and has

Turkey is involved in the Turkic World beyond just the educational or scientific fields. Many activities are underway in political, economic, and religious areas as well.

its headquarters in Ankara; and the Turkish Academy with its seat in Astana, Kazakhstan, were all integrated into the Turkish Council. This new organization had its first summit in Almaty on October 20-21, 2011 and discussed economic cooperation amongst its members.

These initiatives have not always delivered results or facilitated real cooperation among the six Turkic republics. Uzbekistan has been attending the Turkish summits since 1998, yet along with Turkmenistan it did not sign agreements regarding establishing of TÜRKPA or the Turkish Council. Although they are called Turkish speaking republics, participants in these summits actually speak in their own native languages or Russian. Still, Turkey has not given up the dream of close cooperation with these countries.

Turkey has focused attention on the autonomous regions within the Russian Federation or Ukraine that boast substantial Turkic populations. For example, Turkey opened a General Consulate in Kazan, the capital of Tatarstan (part of the Russian Federation) in 1996 with Moscow's approval. Turkey's President Abdullah Gül visited Kazan on October 3, 2009 when he was returning from an official visit to Moscow. Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan also visited on March 17, 2011. More recently, in October 2011, Minister of Foreign Affairs Ahmet Davutoğlu found a diplomatic solution to bring the remains of a famous Crimean Tatar émigré, author Cengiz Dağcı, from England to the Crimean Republic, which is part of Ukraine. The funeral was held in Simferopol. The Turkish delegation consisted of two ministers, Davutoğlu and Minister of Culture and Tourism Ertuğrul Günay, and some 200 Turkish citizens.



## Analysis

The funeral prayer was led by Turkey's President of Religious Affairs, Prof. Dr. Mehmet Gömez.

Turkey's growing attention to the cause of Turkic solidarity in both substantive and symbolic ways may be part of the driving force behind Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin's recent proposal to create a "Eurasian Union" composed of Russia, Belarus, and Kazakhstan.<sup>1</sup> On the very next day after the announcement, Abdullah Gül responded pointedly to Putin's appropriating much of the post-Soviet space to Russia's interests — and implicitly against Turkey's — when he opened the international conference on the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Turkish republics in Ankara. Turkey, along with Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan, he stated, should act in consciousness as "one nation, six republics."

In sum, Turkey's efforts to penetrate the Turkic regions of the former Soviet Union with its own influence have had a number of successes and failures. President Gül has been a particular advocate for a more assertive Turkish approach in this regard. Yet to date, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan are not important business partners for Turkey, despite their geographic proximity, energy riches, and other resources. Turkey's relations with Turkmenistan are in fact deteriorating, and its relations with Uzbekistan — which with a population of nearly 30 million is Central Asia's most important actor — are at their lowest level in many years. Turkish-Turkic integration clearly has a long way to go. Yet we should not be surprised to see Ankara assigning heightened importance to the larger Turkic world in its emerging foreign policy as Turkey gives up its former commitment to the status quo for a more visible strategic activism.

### About the Author

Prof. Dr. Nadir Devlet teaches at the International Relations Department of Istanbul Commerce University. He concentrates on 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century political, social, cultural, economic situations, and security issues for Turkic peoples. He has also taught at Marmara (1984-2001), Columbia (1989-1990), Wisconsin-Madison (1996-1997), and Yeditepe (2001-2007) universities. He has more than 20 published books in Turkish, Tatar, and English as well as some 200 articles in Turkish, Tatar, English, and Russian.

### About GMF

The German Marshall Fund of the United States (GMF) is a non-partisan American public policy and grantmaking institution dedicated to promoting better understanding and cooperation between North America and Europe on transatlantic and global issues. GMF does this by supporting individuals and institutions working in the transatlantic sphere, by convening leaders and members of the policy and business communities, by contributing research and analysis on transatlantic topics, and by providing exchange opportunities to foster renewed commitment to the transatlantic relationship. In addition, GMF supports a number of initiatives to strengthen democracies. Founded in 1972 through a gift from Germany as a permanent memorial to Marshall Plan assistance, GMF maintains a strong presence on both sides of the Atlantic. In addition to its headquarters in Washington, DC, GMF has seven offices in Europe: Berlin, Paris, Brussels, Belgrade, Ankara, Bucharest, and Warsaw. GMF also has smaller representations in Bratislava, Turin, and Stockholm.

### About the On Turkey Series

GMF's On Turkey is an ongoing series of analysis briefs about Turkey's current political situation and its future. GMF provides regular analysis briefs by leading Turkish, European, and American writers and intellectuals, with a focus on dispatches from on-the-ground Turkish observers. To access the latest briefs, please visit our web site at [www.gmfus.org/turkey](http://www.gmfus.org/turkey) or subscribe to our mailing list at <http://database.gmfus.org/reaction>.

<sup>1</sup> In *Izvestia*, October 4th, 2011, Putin is quoted: "A crucial integration project, the Common Economic Space of Russia, Belarus, and Kazakhstan (CES), will kick off on January 1, 2012. This project is, without exaggeration, a historic milestone for all three countries and for the broader post-Soviet space... I am convinced that the establishment of the Eurasian Union and efficient integration are approaches that will enable members to take a prominent place in our complicated, 21<sup>st</sup> century world. Only by standing together will all our countries be able to take their places as leaders of global growth and drivers of progress, only together will they succeed and prosper."