

TÜRKIYE'S CULTURAL DIPLOMACY AND SOFT POWER STRATEGY IN THE REGION OF CENTRAL ASIA

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Abstract: This article examines Türkiye's cultural diplomacy and soft power strategy in the region of Central Asia, focusing on how Ankara utilizes historical, linguistic, and cultural affinities to strengthen its regional influence. Building on Joseph Nye's concept of *soft power*, the study explores the instruments through which Türkiye projects its image and fosters cooperation—such as the Yunus Emre Institute, Türkiye Scholarships, TİKA, and the Organization of Turkic States (OTS). It analyzes Türkiye's efforts to promote *Turkic solidarity* and construct a shared identity while balancing political, economic, and strategic interests amid the presence of other powers such as Russia and China. The article argues that Türkiye's engagement in Central Asia represents not merely cultural outreach, but a comprehensive soft power policy aimed at securing long-term influence and partnership in a geopolitically significant region.

Key words: Türkiye, soft power, cultural diplomacy, Central Asia, Turkic identity, Pan-turkism, Organization of Turkic States, TİKA, regional strategy.

Аннотация. В статье рассматривается культурная дипломатия и стратегия мягкой силы Турции в регионе Центральной Азии, с акцентом на то, как Анкара использует исторические, языковые и культурные связи для укрепления своего регионального влияния. Опираясь на концепцию «мягкой силы» Джозефа Ная, исследование анализирует инструменты, посредством которых Турция формирует свой имидж и развивает сотрудничество — такие как Институт имени Юнуса Эмре, стипендиальные программы Türkiye Scholarships, Турецкое агентство по сотрудничеству и координации (ТІКА) и Организация тюркских государств (ОТС). В статье рассматриваются усилия Турции по продвижению тюркской солидарности и формированию общей идентичности при одновременном балансировании политических, экономических и стратегических интересов в условиях присутствия других крупных держав, таких как Россия и Китай. Автор приходит к выводу, что вовлечённость Турции в Центральной Азии представляет собой не просто культурное взаимодействие, а комплексную политику мягкой силы, направленную на укрепление долгосрочного влияния и партнёрства в геополитически значимом регионе.

Ключевые слова: Турция, мягкая сила, культурная дипломатия, Центральная Азия, тюркская идентичность, пантюркизм, Организация тюркских государств, ТІКА, региональная стратегия.

Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Türkiye emerged as one of the first states to recognize and engage with the newly independent Central Asian republics—Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Tajikistan. Sharing deep linguistic, cultural, and historical affinities through Turkic heritage, Türkiye sought to transform these connections into instruments of *soft power*—a concept introduced by Joseph Nye, referring to a state's ability to

attract and co-opt rather than coerce. Over the past three decades, Ankara's approach to the region has evolved from a symbolic appeal to Turkic brotherhood into a sophisticated network of cultural, educational, media, and developmental initiatives, forming the backbone of its foreign policy toward Central Asia. Türkiye's cultural diplomacy in Central Asia is grounded in the notion of a shared *Turkic identity*. Early in the 1990s, this idea inspired optimism about a "Turkic world stretching from the Adriatic to the Great Wall of China." Although initially met with caution by Central Asian leaders wary of external dominance, Türkiye gradually institutionalized its outreach through stable mechanisms of cooperation. The establishment of the International Organization of Turkic Culture (TURKSOY) in 1993 marked a turning point, providing a formal multilateral platform to promote language, arts, and cultural heritage among Turkic-speaking nations. Over time, Türkiye's strategy came to balance cultural symbolism with pragmatic tools of influence, including education, media, development assistance, and institutional cooperation.

Türkiye shares historical, linguistic and cultural affinities with many Central Asian states (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan) through the Turkic-language family, shared Ottoman/Turkic heritage, and religious links. According to one analysis, this "ethno-cultural closeness" gives Türkiye a comparative advantage in its soft power endeavors in Central Asia. Thus, cultural diplomacy becomes a key instrument of its foreign policy in the region: not solely economic or security-based but rooted in identity and culture. Türkiye's cultural diplomacy in Central Asia represents a **strategic investment in soft power** grounded in shared Turkic heritage and cultural-linguistic ties. Rather than relying only on economic or security tools, Ankara uses language promotion, media, heritage events, and institutional frameworks to build a favorable image and networks of influence. This has led to measurable favorable perceptions and stronger ties in the region. However, the effectiveness of this soft power is moderated by Turkey's relative resource constraints, the complex politics of Central Asian states, and the presence of stronger external actors. Going forward, Türkiye's success will depend on its ability to integrate cultural diplomacy with economic, educational, and strategic initiatives in a sustained and context-sensitive way.

Türkiye's cultural diplomacy operates through a variety of state and semi-state institutions. The Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TİKA) has become one of the central actors in Ankara's outreach, funding development, educational, and cultural projects across the region. Since its establishment, TİKA has implemented over 1,300 projects in Kyrgyzstan alone, ranging from cultural heritage restoration to educational infrastructure. Similarly, the Presidency for Turks Abroad and Related Communities (YTB) manage the Türkiye Scholarships program, which grants scholarships to thousands of international students—including nearly 800 recipients from Central Asia annually, representing around one-fifth of total awards.

Educational diplomacy constitutes a crucial pillar of Türkiye's soft power. The **Kyrgyz-Turkish Manas University** (established in 1995) and the **Ahmet Yesevi International Kazakh-Turkish University** (1992) symbolize institutionalized academic cooperation. As of 2021, over **25,000 students from Central Asia** were enrolled in Turkish universities, including **15,500 from Turkmenistan, 4,800 from Kazakhstan, 3,400 from Uzbekistan, and 1,700 from Kyrgyzstan**. Beyond degree programs, Türkiye sponsors roughly **100 Turkish language and culture centers** in Central Asia, often coordinated through the **Yunus Emre Institute** and **TÖMER** language institutions.

Cultural and religious diplomacy also play visible roles. The Diyanet (Directorate of Religious Affairs) supports the construction and restoration of mosques and educational facilities,

fostering religious and social ties. Heritage projects under TURKSOY and TİKA celebrate Turkic art, literature, and traditions, reinforcing a collective identity narrative. Meanwhile, Turkish media—particularly TRT Avaz, Turkish films, and TV series—has achieved wide popularity in Central Asia, effectively shaping Türkiye’s cultural image and promoting a sense of familiarity and shared values.

Türkiye’s cultural diplomacy in Central Asia pursues several intertwined objectives. First, it aims to consolidate a common Turkic identity as a framework for regional cooperation and solidarity. This identity serves both emotional and strategic purposes—helping Ankara position itself as the natural leader or “elder brother” of the Turkic world. Second, cultural diplomacy functions as a foreign policy multiplier, strengthening Türkiye’s influence without provoking the geopolitical anxieties that military or economic dominance might cause. Third, it acts as a balancing mechanism in a region where other major powers—Russia and China—retain significant influence. Türkiye’s approach offers Central Asian states an alternative partner grounded in cultural affinity and mutual respect, not dependency.

In this sense, Ankara’s soft power tools complement its economic and political outreach. The Organization of Turkic States (OTS), established in 2009 (and renamed in 2021), institutionalizes this blend of diplomacy, economics, and identity politics. Within this framework, Türkiye champions initiatives such as a common Turkic alphabet, educational cooperation, media networks, and infrastructure connectivity. These efforts collectively enhance Ankara’s role as both a cultural and geopolitical bridge between Central Asia, the Caucasus, and Europe.

Quantitatively, Türkiye’s cultural diplomacy achievements are substantial. Surveys by the Central Asia Barometer (2023) reveal that Türkiye enjoys the highest favorability ratings among external powers in countries like Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan—surpassing Russia and China in public perception. The Atlantic Council (2025) notes that more than 4,000 Turkish companies operate across Central Asia, often leveraging networks formed through educational and cultural ties. TİKA’s investment portfolio in the region continues to expand, funding projects in health, culture, governance, and education. Furthermore, Turkish cultural products—music, literature, film, and television—dominate regional entertainment markets, further consolidating soft power through popular culture.

Despite its visible successes, Türkiye’s cultural diplomacy faces several constraints. Economically, Ankara lacks the vast financial and infrastructural resources of Russia or China, which continue to dominate Central Asian markets and security frameworks. Politically, Central Asian governments guard their sovereignty and avoid over-dependence on any external actor, including Türkiye. While cultural affinity facilitates cooperation, it does not automatically translate into political alignment or economic integration. Furthermore, the concept of *Turkic unity* is interpreted differently across the region: whereas Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan embrace cultural cooperation, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan pursue more autonomous national strategies. Another challenge lies in the depth of cultural engagement. Analysts note that while Türkiye’s initiatives—such as TV broadcasting, scholarships, and language programs—create symbolic influence, they sometimes lack long-term institutional anchoring. Sustaining soft power thus requires continuous investment and the development of local partnerships rather than reliance on short-term, identity-based appeals.

Türkiye’s cultural diplomacy in Central Asia represents a **mature form of soft power strategy**—one that combines emotional, historical, and pragmatic dimensions. Unlike coercive or transactional forms of influence, Ankara’s approach operates through attraction and shared identity, facilitating trust and visibility in a complex geopolitical environment. Over time,

Türkiye has institutionalized this approach through agencies like TİKA, YTB, TURKSOY, and the OTS, effectively transforming cultural diplomacy into a strategic instrument of foreign policy. The effectiveness of this policy lies not only in symbolic gestures but in the creation of **human capital linkages**—students, scholars, entrepreneurs, and cultural elites educated or trained in Türkiye who become bridges between Ankara and their home countries. Nevertheless, the future success of Türkiye’s soft power will depend on its ability to sustain resources, align cultural diplomacy with economic and technological cooperation, and maintain sensitivity toward the diverse political and cultural realities of Central Asia.

Conclusion. In summary, Türkiye’s cultural diplomacy in Central Asia is an evolving and multi-layered enterprise. It draws upon deep historical connections while adapting to the contemporary realities of global politics. Through education, culture, media, and development assistance, Ankara has established itself as a **key soft power actor** in a region historically dominated by larger powers. While its capacity remains limited compared to Russia or China, Türkiye’s strategy offers a distinct model of middle-power diplomacy—where culture, identity, and shared values form the foundation of international influence and partnership in the heart of Eurasia.

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