



## Organization of Turkic States: Diverse Motivations For A Common Aim

Türk Devletleri Teşkilatı: Ortak Bir Amaç İçin Çeşitli Motivasyonlar

Merve Erkan Aydın<sup>1</sup> , Yi Liu<sup>2</sup> 

### Abstract

The Organization of Turkic States (OTS) was established to strengthen relations and increase cooperation between Turkic-speaking countries. The roots of the organization, which has the capacity to influence the balance of power in its geography, date back to the early 1990s, when the Turkic republics in Central Asia and the Caucasus declared their independence. The process, which started with the Presidential Summits held for the first time in 1992, has undergone transformations over time and has taken its current form. As in every organization, the motivations of member states have been effective in the mentioned transformations. This study aims to reveal the political, economic, and cultural motivations of the member states towards the OTS. In this context, firstly, information will be given about the emergence, transformations, structure, goals, and cooperation areas of the organization. Afterward, the motivations of the organization's leading actors (Türkiye and Kazakhstan) and other members (Kyrgyzstan, Azerbaijan, and Uzbekistan) will be examined in two subsections. In this study, in which a comparative analysis method was adopted, scientific data, books, articles, internet resources, official documents, and reports were used. The main argument of the study is that economic and political expectations come to the fore in the interest of member states to the organization, and cultural motivations play an encouraging role in the realization of these expectations.

**Keywords:** Organization of Turkic States, Turkic Republics, Central Asia, Kazakhstan, Türkiye

### Öz

Türk Devletleri Teşkilatı (TDT) Türkçe konuşan ülkeler arasındaki ilişkilerin güçlendirilmesi ve işbirliğinin artırılması amacıyla kurulmuştur. Bulunduğu coğrafyada güç dengesini etkileme kapasitesi olan bu teşkilatın kökenleri Orta Asya ve Kafkasya'daki Türk cumhuriyetlerinin bağımsızlıklarını ilan ettikleri 1990lı yılların başına kadar uzanmaktadır. İlk kez 1992 yılında düzenlenen Başkanlık Zirveleriyle başlayan süreç, zamanla dönüşümler geçirerek günümüzdeki halini almıştır. Her örgütte olduğu gibi, söz konusu dönüşümlerde üye devletlerin motivasyonları etkili olmuştur. Bu çalışma, üye devletlerin TDT'ye yönelik politik, ekonomik ve kültürel motivasyonlarını ortaya koymayı amaçlamaktadır. Bu kapsamda ilk olarak, teşkilatın ortaya çıkışı, dönüşümleri, yapısı, amaçları ve işbirliği alanları hakkında bilgi verilecektir. Ardından, teşkilatın önde gelen aktörlerinin (Türkiye ve Kazakistan) ve diğer üyelerinin (Kırgızistan, Azerbaycan ve Özbekistan) motivasyonları iki alt başlıkta incelenecektir. Karşılaştırmalı bir analiz yönteminin benimsendiği bu çalışmada, bilimsel veriler, kitaplar, makaleler, internet kaynakları, resmî belge ve raporlardan yararlanılmıştır. Çalışmanın ana argümanı üye devletlerin örgüte olan ilgisinde ekonomik ve siyasi beklentilerin ön plana çıktığı, kültürel motivasyonların ise bu beklentilerin gerçekleştirilmesinde teşvik edici bir rol oynadığıdır.

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**1 Corresponding Author:** Merve Erkan Aydın (PhD Candidate), Shanghai University, Liberal Arts, Institute of Global Studies, Shanghai, China. E-mail: merve.erkanydin@gmail.com ORCID: 0009-0007-3669-3821

**2 Yi Liu (Prof. Dr.),** Shanghai University, Liberal Arts, Department of History, Shanghai, China. E-mail: liuyi1980@shu.edu.cn ORCID: 0009-0003-5079-5710

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## Introduction

States become members of international organizations in line with several common interests (economic, political, cultural, etc.) or values. The Organization of Turkic States (OTS) emerged with member states coming together around common elements such as language, culture, and history. Declaring their independence after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Turkic states in Central Asia and the Caucasus made certain diplomatic initiatives to improve their relations with each other and with Türkiye. The most important of these was the Summits of Heads of States of Turkic Speaking States (Presidential Summits), which had been held since 1992. As a result of these institutionalized summits over time, The Cooperation Council of Turkic Speaking States (Turkic Council or Turkic Kenesh) was officially established in 2009. By 2021, the Turkic Council changed its name to the Organization of Turkic States and took its final form.

Political and economic meanings are attributed to this organization, shaped around the common values of the Turkic world. Considering the perceptions, expectations, and motivations of the member states towards OTS, it can be understood better. In this respect, the political, economic, and cultural motivations of the founding members (Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Türkiye) and Uzbekistan (becoming a member in 2019) are significant. Bearing in mind the experienced transformation and gained momentum since its establishment, OTS membership offers significant potential to member states in various aspects. Although common cultural values were emphasized more at the beginning, the political and economic expectations appear as the main provider of the continuity and effectiveness of this organization today.

As the center of gravity of international relations started to shift towards Asia, the importance of Central Asia and the Caucasus began to increase. After decades of Soviet domination, Moscow continues to exist as an influential actor in the region. Similarly, the United States of America (USA), the dominant power of the international system after the Cold War, is one of the determinants of the developments in Central Asia and the Caucasus. On the other hand, China is one of the significant actors that has recently increased its economic and political influence in this region. In this direction, it is discussed in the literature whether OTS will be a balancing power in Central Asia and the Caucasus, and the future of this organization's position in regional and global politics is questioned. This organization derives its structure, which has been developing and transforming for more than thirty years, and its sustainability from the approaches of the member states. Accordingly, to better understand the discussions and to make a consistent assumption about the future of the organization, it is important to examine and evaluate the main motivations of the OTS members.

When the relevant literature is examined, there are various studies on the OTS. However, a lack of studies stands out in the literature that address the motivations of member states towards the organization separately. Therefore, in this study, OTS members' expectations, goals, and motivations will be examined in a multidimensional way. In the first part, the emergence, transformations, structure, objectives, and cooperation areas of the organization will be briefly revealed. In the second part, the political, economic, and cultural motivations of member states will be analyzed in two subheadings. Firstly, the motivations of Türkiye and Kazakhstan, the leading actors, will be discussed in detail.

Secondly, the motivations of Kyrgyzstan and Azerbaijan, which have a limited capacity compared to Ankara and Astana, and Uzbekistan, which joined the organization later, will be included. Thus, the goals and expectations of the member states for membership and continuity of the OTS will be emphasized. In this framework, the article mainly argues that political and economic motivations take precedence in members' interest to the organization, while cultural motivations play a promotive role to these.

### **Organization of Turkic States: Emergence, Structure and Goals**

The disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991 was one of the most important developments of the 20th century. Following its disintegration, 15 new independent nation-states emerged in Central Asia, the Caucasus, and Eastern Europe (Sapmaz, 2008, p. 11). Accordingly, the impacts of the national and international conjuncture have brought new opportunities and risks at local, regional, and global levels. One of the opportunities offered by the dissolution of the Soviet Union, especially for the Turkic world, is the existence of an independent Turkic belt stretching from the borders of China to Europe. In other words, the declarations of independence of Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan have created a natural opportunity for further cooperation between Türkiye and the Turkic republics in Central Asia and the Caucasus in many areas (Yıldırım, Tuğluoğlu, Gökçe & Okumuş, 2021, p. IV). Considering the bilateral and multilateral relations between the parties, it is seen that multidimensional cooperation initiatives in political, economic, social, and cultural fields began immediately after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

After the independence of the Turkic republics, the foundations of the OTS were laid (Nazarbayev, 1997, p. 201-202). In this context, Presidential Summits started to be organized since 1992 with the participation of the heads of state of Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Türkiye, and Turkmenistan (Erol & Çelik, 2017, p. 20). At these summits, in addition to emphasizing common language and culture, the parties discussed cooperation opportunities in various fields (such as economy, customs, transportation, etc.) and took some steps for institutionalization. In this direction, ten summits were held in different cities of the Turkic world between 1992 and 2010. The mentioned summits were institutionalized as the "Turkic Council" with the Nakhchivan Agreement signed by Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Türkiye at the ninth summit in 2009 (Ulutaş & Tanrısever, 2019, p. 114). Consequently, the Turkic Council was officially launched at the 10th summit in 2010 (Tosun, 2020, p. 21).

Following the launch of Turkic Council, eight more summits were organized, between 2011 and 2021, including different themes such as education, science, culture, transportation, tourism, sports, digitalization and smart cities. At the seventh summit in Baku, Azerbaijan in 2019, Uzbekistan became a full member of the council and Hungary was accepted as an observer member (OTS, 2023A). At the eighth and last summit in Istanbul, Türkiye in 2021, heads of state decided to change the name of the organization to the Organization of Turkic States (Çiçekli, 2022). Moreover, Turkmenistan, which stands out as neutral state, became an observer member since this summit (Kaya, 2022). Starting from the ninth summit in Samarkand, Uzbekistan in 2022, these summits began to be referred to as OTS summits instead of Turkic Council summits. During this summit,

the idea of integration and the Turkic World 2040 Vision were especially emphasized (OTS, 2023B). The Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, which is not recognized by any state other than Türkiye, was also accepted as an observer member at the ninth summit (Başaran, 2022).

It can be mentioned some factors, often intertwined with each other, that were influential in the establishment of OTS and its predecessors. The first of these is the need and quest to emphasize a common identity among member states and their societies (OTS, 2021A, p. 3). As it is known, the members of the organization have rooted historical ties and similar socio-cultural backgrounds. This situation, which provides the basis for the OTS, creates a supportive effect in two aspects: Promoting economic and political collaborations through cultural affinity and placing a new shared identity as an alternative to long-standing Russian influence in the region. The mentioned dimension of the organization is interpreted in some studies as a social construction effort through similar identities like “Turkicness”, “Turkic world” and “Turkic cooperation”. In other words, it is argued that a collective cultural identity can influence member states’ motivations toward the organization and their foreign policy decisions (Yesevi, 2022, p. 12-13; Demir, 2022, p. 44; Akçapa, 2023, p. 475). Moreover, as emphasized by Türkiye’s president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, this is compatible with the approach of İsmail Gaspıralı, one of the founding ideologists of Turkic nationalism, to “unity in language, thought, and work” (Directorate of Communications, 2023). On the other hand, the transformations of the organization over time have brought the “axis shift” and “Turkic nationalism/Turanism” discussions into the agenda. In this respect, it has been discussed whether Türkiye’s leading role in OTS means an axis shift of this state from the West to Eurasia (Devonshire-Ellis, 2021). Similarly, the possibility of encouraging Turkic nationalism/Turanism in Central Asia by OTS has caused some concerns in countries such as Russia and China, which have minorities of Turkic origin (Akçay, 2022.; Chan, 2021).

At this point, another factor is the reflections of the power vacuum caused by the post-Soviet era and rising international competition in the region. As previously stated, the region’s abundant natural resources and strategic significance have resulted in a power struggle among actors such as the USA, Russia, and China since the emergence of independent states (Erdoğan, 2020, p. 990-1012; Sarı, 2022). On the other hand, no individual actor, whether from within or outside the region, has been able to effectively stabilize Central Asia and resolve its complex issues on their own (Gök, 2022, p. 118). In terms of the Turkic republics, this situation was particularly challenging during the initial years of their independence. For this reason, some integration initiatives and/or multilateral regional organizations have emerged both among these states and under the leadership of international actors. However, the weak institutional capacities of the mechanisms established among Turkic states and the secondary or less important roles of these states in the organizations led by international actors have rendered these initiatives and organizations relatively inadequate (Sarıkaya, 2021, p. 4). Therefore, the OTS has emerged because of nearly thirty years of experience as an organization with Turkic states at its center and which has established its institutional structure over time.

Moreover, some studies in the literature address the emergence and transformations of the OTS from a neofunctionalist perspective (Tekir, 2023, p. 1084-1094.; Emeklier, Taş

& Yılmaz, 2022, p. 73-99). Accordingly, it is assumed that cooperation and integration efforts in one area will encourage similar efforts in other areas and therefore create a spillover effect. From this point of view, it is accepted that the cultural cooperation efforts of the Turkic states also constitute a basis for further economic and political cooperation efforts. Indeed, another important factor influencing the emergence of the OTS was the needs and expectations of the member states for economic and political cooperation. In the economic dimension, these included issues such as enhanced trade relations, adaptation to a market economy, efficient use of natural resources, and better utilization of strategic locations for energy and freight transportation (Özsoy, 2023, p. 45-47.; Topsakal & Zengin, 2021). Politically, the member states' aims to increase their prestige in international relations and their quests for support or solutions in problematic areas like ethnic issues, border disputes, sharing of transboundary waters, and the fight against terrorism played a dominant role (Sarı, 2022). Despite these similarities with the neofunctionalist perspective, the OTS has emerged in line with an understanding that does not aim to transfer the sovereignties of member states to a higher authority, but to establish multifaceted partnerships among member states in various fields (Yüce, 2022).

To understand OTS better, it is necessary to touch upon its organizational structure and purposes, as well as its historical background and emergence factors. In the Nakhchivan Agreement, which is accepted as the founding document of the Turkic Council (predecessor of OTS), the structure, functions, purposes, and duties of the organization are mentioned (Turkic Council, 2009, p. 1-7). According to this agreement, OTS consists of five administrative bodies: The Council of Heads of State (CHS), the Council of Foreign Ministers (CFM), the Senior Officials Committee (SOC), the Council of Elders (*Aksakals*), and the Secretariat. CHS, which is formed by the heads of member states coming together during summits, is the main decision-making and management body of the organization. The duties of this council include evaluating the activities of the organization, determining the primary areas of cooperation, and addressing current problems. Similarly, CFM, consisting of the foreign ministers of the member states, gathers before the meetings of CHS. The duties of this council involve discussing the activities on the agenda of OTS, determining the agenda of CFM meetings, and approving the personnel structure and financial report of the Secretariat (Erkiner & Eray, 2022, p. 230-234).

SOC consists of experts appointed by member states, and each state is represented by at least one representative. The main task is to evaluate and approve the draft documents prepared by the Secretariat before the meetings of CFM and CHS. *Aksakals*, on the other hand, was formed as a part of the tradition of consultation in Turkic culture. This council consists of the elders of each member state and operates as an advisory body in related fields (Turkic Council, 2009). Finally, the Secretariat, which was established as the permanent executive body and is headquartered in Istanbul, has particular importance for the organizational structure (OTS, 2021D). At the head of the Secretariat, there is a Secretary General appointed for a three-year term according to the alphabetical order of the English names of the countries, and deputies consisting of representatives of each member. According to the Nakhchivan Agreement, the duties of the Secretariat include organizing official meetings, preparing draft documents, establishing and ensuring

archiving of documents, providing interaction with other international organizations/forums, and submitting financial activities reports (Turkic Council, 2009).

As well as the main administrative bodies, there are also some associated and integrated organizations/institutions with the OTS. Among these, the International Organization of Turkic Culture-TURKSOY, which is called UNESCO of Turkic world (Yüce, 2021, p. 22), aims to strengthen the interaction between Turkic peoples, to transfer Turkic culture to future generations, and to introduce it to the world (Kaseinov, 2015, p. 19-25.; TURKSOY, 2023). International Turkic Academy, established in 2012 by Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Türkiye, is responsible for organizing research on Turkic culture and scientific activities related to it (OTS, 2023C.; Kydyralı, 2019, p. 49-58.; International Turkic Academy, 2023). The Parliamentary Assembly of Turkic States (TURKPA), consisting of parliamentarians of member states, targets inter-parliamentary cooperation and organization of the national legislative dimension of the decisions of associated organizations regarding the Turkic world (TURKPA, 2023). Finally, the Turkic Culture and Heritage Foundation conducts multifaceted activities with the basic mission of protecting and promoting the common cultural heritage of Turkic-speaking peoples (Afandiyeva, 2015, p. 35-39).

OTS aims to develop mutual ties between members in line with common language, culture, tradition, and historical ties. According to the Nakhchivan Agreement, some of the main aims and duties of the organization are: Strengthening mutual trust/friendship; contributing to regional/global peace and security; acting on international platforms/forums jointly; fighting against terrorism, separatism, and human and drug trafficking together. In addition, improving the economic, social, and cultural conditions of the societies is among the primary objectives (Turkic Council, 2009). When the official documents are examined, the steps taken to fulfill these goals and tasks can be seen (OTS, 2023D). In this direction, conferences, forums, symposiums, and exhibitions are organized; research funds are established; meetings between the relevant units of the members are held; academies and committees are established; protocols are signed; sports competitions are organized, and various other projects are implemented. Moreover, sectoral meetings are held covering all segments of societies/states such as various ministries, professional chambers, writers and cinema professionals, lawyers, official news agencies, and national TV channels. On the other hand, it is envisaged that basic principles such as sovereignty, territorial integrity, inviolability of borders, and non-interference in internal affairs will be respected while fulfilling the mentioned objectives and duties (Turkic Council, 2009).

Strong cooperation between member states is needed to obtain the objectives, tasks, and projects of the OTS. When the official website is examined, it is seen that many cooperation areas are mentioned. Some of these can be listed as international issues, trade, investments, customs, transportation, education, culture, media, youth, sports, diaspora, technology, energy, health, agriculture, justice, human capacity, and religious institutions (OTS, 2023E). Considering the official documents, it is clear that many more examples can be given for the fields of cooperation. However, no matter how diverse they are, it is possible to collect these cooperation areas between members under three pillars: Political cooperation, economic cooperation, and cultural cooperation. Moreover, these pillars point to the main framework of member states' motivations towards the



organization. Therefore, in the next part, the main motivations of the member states will be examined in line with political, economic, and cultural expectations.

### **Motivations of Member States: Political, Economic and Cultural Expectations**

Although OTS currently has five members and three observers, member states' influences within the organization and their expectations from it differ. In this regard, Türkiye and Kazakhstan stand out as the leading actors of the Turkic world's integration efforts. Azerbaijan and Kyrgyzstan, which have a limited capacity compared to these states, and Uzbekistan, which joined the organization later, play a complementary role in Ankara's and Astana's efforts. Therefore, in this part, the basic motivations and expectations of the organization's member states will be discussed in two subheadings. In the first, the political, economic, and cultural motivations of Türkiye and Kazakhstan, which are considered as the driving forces of the organization, will be discussed comparatively. In the second, the meaning of OTS for the other three members will be examined from the aspects. Thus, the motivations of all member states will be evaluated comparatively.

### **Intentions of Leading Actors: OTS for Türkiye and Kazakhstan**

After the independence of Turkic states, Türkiye and Kazakhstan have stand out as leading countries of Turkic world's integration efforts. This situation is mainly because the political and economic capacities of these two countries are more developed compared to others. With its institutionalized state structure that has existed for centuries, Türkiye is seen as the natural leader of the Turkic Belt in Eurasia. This state is one of the first countries to recognize the independence of Turkic republics and to support them the most (Aras, 2000, p. 45). For example, Türkiye, which signed almost 150 agreements with these states during their early independence (Alaranta & Silvan, 2022, p. 3), provided more than 90% of the aid to Central Asian countries between 1992 and 1996 (Laruelle & Peyrouse, 2013, p. 75-76). Similarly, the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TİKA) was established in 1992 to organize Türkiye's development assistance to the Turkic states and thus to expand Ankara's sphere of influence in Central Asia and Caucasus. In this context, improving relations with the Turkic world has been among the priorities of Turkish foreign policy for more than thirty years (TİKA, 2023).

On the other hand, Kazakhstan's effort to play a leading role in integration efforts in the Turkic world since the 1990s was influenced by the expectation that it would become the rising-leading country of the region and its quest to become more engaged in the international system (Zengin, 2021, p. 75-80). Accordingly, Astana's adoption of a multi-vector foreign policy approach has been effective in its tendency to develop good relations with the Turkic world (Diyarbakırlıoğlu & Yiğit, 2014, 70-82). In this context, it is possible to attribute special importance to founding president, Nursultan Nazarbayev. Defining as the Elder (Aksakal) of the Turkic world, Nazarbayev was a key figure in the process ranging from the Presidential Summits to the establishment of the OTS (Doğantekin, 2019). The statement on the organization's website that the "OTS is the brainchild of President Nazarbayev" also confirms the above argument (OTS, 2019). However, it would be not appropriate to only associate Kazakhstan's relations with the

Turkic world and OTS with the personality of Nazarbayev. On the contrary, this state has made the goal of improving relations a comprehensive state policy and has continued its activities in this direction after Nursultan Nazarbayev's rule (Sanchez, 2020, p. 4-5).

Türkiye's and Kazakhstan's main political motivations for OTS are the search for regional and global influence. For Ankara, this organization points to a new and strong orientation in its foreign policy perspective. Türkiye, which was a loyal member of the NATO alliance during the Cold War, has started to face serious problems in its relations with Western countries, especially since the 1990s (Laruelle & Peyrouse, 2013, p. 75-80). For example, the differences in perspectives on the fight against terrorism and the deadlock in the European Union integration processes are some of the problematic areas (Hale, 2013: 158-194). As a result of this situation, Ankara needed to diversify Western-centered foreign policy understanding since the mid-1990s, especially after the change of government in 2002 (Alaranta & Silvan, 2022, p. 4-5). In this context, Türkiye has begun to adopt a multidimensional and proactive foreign policy approach in geographies such as Central Asia, the Middle East, and Africa. In today's world, OTS appears as one of Ankara's leading foreign policy instruments towards Central Asia and the Caucasus.

Despite Türkiye's increasing interest in Central Asia, Russia and recently China are among the most influential actors in the region. Considering its current economic and political potential, it does not seem possible for Ankara to enter a struggle for influence alone with Moscow and Beijing. For this reason, it is possible to describe the OTS as both a complementary alternative to Western influence and a balancing actor against Russia and China, in terms of Turkish foreign policy (Gökçelik, 2022.; Samar & Ademoğlu, 2022). A relatively analogous situation applies to Kazakhstan's foreign policy goals. OTS, which is on its way to becoming an important economic and political power in the region, stands out as a third way against Russian and Chinese influence in Central Asia (Demir, 2022, p. 65). Unlike the asymmetric relations established with Russia, which sees the region as its backyard, and China, which increases its influence in the region, Astana has the chance to establish more equal and balanced relations with OTS members (OTS, 2021A, p. 2). Although Türkiye is the most influential state in the organization, Ankara's limited economic and political capacity compared to Russia and China provides a significant opportunity for Kazakhstan in this respect.

Kazakhstan is the world's ninth-largest country by surface (Pavlovic & Gritzner, 2003, p. 9) and the largest landlocked country (Kassen, 2018, p. 319-320). If the OTS project is successful, Astana has the potential to make its strategic position in Central Asia more important, as in the Soviet era. In this direction, a strategic alliance that can be established with Azerbaijan over the Caspian Sea and the improvement of relations with neighboring countries (Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan) within the organization will create a strategic advantage for Astana government. Moreover, the fact that Kazakhstan, which tries to play an active role in regional/international organizations (McDermott, 2006), has undertaken a leading mission in the establishment of the OTS supports Astana's claim and efforts to regional leadership. Lastly, the Astana government approaches this organization as a window opening to the West. In other words, Türkiye's active position within the OTS constitutes one of Kazakhstan's main motivations towards this organization at the point of developing relations with Western countries (Ormanova, 2016, p. 630). In addition,



Türkiye has enabled the Turkic republics, especially Kazakhstan, to participate in other organizations such as the Economic Cooperation Organization (Yalçınkaya, 2019, p. 93). The fact that Türkiye is a part of the Western alliance, that the OTS connects China and European countries, and that Hungary is an observer member strengthens this motivation of Astana.

Türkiye's and Kazakhstan's main economic motivations for OTS mostly focus on mutual trade and energy. After the disintegration of the Soviet Union, Ankara has been trying to increase its commercial share in the Central Asian market, especially in areas such as construction, textiles, and telecommunications (Alaranta & Silvan). Following the success of Turkish unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) in the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War in 2020, on the other hand, there was a visible increase in demand for Turkish defense industry products by the Turkic republics (Yüce, 2022). Also, as seen in Table 1, the increase in Türkiye's commercial relations with the Turkic republics in the period from 2009 to 2020 is promising for the future of economic relations. Similarly, by effectively using the Middle Corridor project, Türkiye aims to create a Turkic transit route extending from east to west, with OTS at its center. The scope of this project is planned to facilitate freight transportation between members and to create an uninterrupted commercial line between European markets and Asian countries. Considering Türkiye's geostrategic position within the project, the possible success of the Middle Corridor may also mean more economic and political benefits for Ankara (Toprak, 2020, p. 24-26). Alike, Türkiye's geopolitical position is also significant for another transport network whose establishment process began in 1992 and whose founding document was signed in 1998. Transit Corridor Europe-Caucasus-Asia (TRACECA), an international organization based in Baku, stretches from the European Union to Kyrgyzstan and includes all Turkic republics. This organization has a transportation network that includes land, rail, and Caspian sea routes connecting the Turkic republics to Europe (Yalçınkaya, 2012: p. 34-39; Yalçınkaya & Güzel, 2021: p. 106-107 ).

Table 1

*Türkiye's exports to Turkic States: 2009 and 2020 (Thousands of US Dollars)*

Country	2009		2020	
	Export	Import	Export	Import
Azerbaijan	1,400,446	140,599	2,085,574	410,710
Kazakhstan	633,417	959,454	985,684	1,180,549
Kyrgyzstan	140,002	31,446	417,546	91,158
Turkmenistan	945,655	327,559	786,965	319,386
Uzbekistan	279,963	413,078	1,154,334	969,983

(World Bank, 2023A)

In terms of energy, it is possible to emphasize two main motivations of Türkiye. Firstly, Türkiye, 92.8% foreign-dependent in energy (Yalçın & Doğan, 2023, p. 207), desires to diversify its energy suppliers through some member countries with rich natural resources such as oil, natural gas, and uranium. Secondly, as in the examples of Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan-BTC (Yiğitgüden, 2023) and Trans-Anatolian Natural Gas Pipeline-

TANAP (Aras, Suleymanov & Hasanov, 2013, p. 1-9), Ankara aims to be a transit base for the transportation of member states' resources to European markets. In this way, the Turkish government expects to increase its strategic importance and expand economic opportunities (Akçapa, 2023, p. 487-488). From this point, the economic motivations of Astana towards OTS basically consist of three factors: Firstly, Kazakhstan targets to export its oil and natural gas safely owing to the projects and agreements of this organization. In this context, almost all the energy resources that the Astana government exports to Europe are transferred via Russia. For Kazakhstan, the introduction of the OTS for alternative energy transportation can eliminate the possibility of interruption of energy trade with Europe in case of a possible crisis with Moscow. On the other hand, this situation may increase the amount of energy resources that Astana exports to European countries in case of emerging new sanctions against Russia by Western countries (Nakhle, 2023.; Abdrahmanov & Zhumagulova, 2023).

Secondly, Kazakhstan sees OTS as a convenient platform to make its market economy more functional and diversify the sectoral distribution of its economy. This country, which has rich natural gas, oil, coal, and uranium reserves (Karatayev & Clarke, 2014, p. 97-104), plans to avoid dangerous situations such as a resource curse that will be created by its economy being heavily dependent on natural resource income (Aliiev, 2015, p. 1-28). The fact that 50% of Kazakhstan's exports and 30% of government tax revenues consist of oil and natural gas revenues makes understandable Astana's economic motivation towards OTS (Bjerde & Proskuryakova, 2022). Finally, Kazakhstan aims to increase its economic and strategic importance for China and European countries, by actively participating in OTS initiatives such as the Silk Road, Caravanserai and Middle Corridor projects. On the one hand, as in the TRACECA example, Astana hopes to further integrate into Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) too and benefit from it. Beyond that, Kazakhstan targets to be the locomotive of its region by reaching European countries through Azerbaijan and Türkiye and by diversifying its commercial and political cooperation with them. Thus, by benefiting from the increasing influence of OTS, Kazakhstan strives to become one of the central countries of a wide route extending from east to west (Szumski, 2022.; Jafarova, 2023).

Table 2

*Kazakhstan's exports to Turkic States: 2009 and 2020 (Thousand US Dollars)*

Country	2009		2020	
	Export	Import	Export	Import
Azerbaijan	91,513	145,442	84,124	25,012
Kyrgyzstan	390,495	116,477	580,520	267,582
Turkmenistan	108,949	61,387	76,623	51,356
Türkiye	959,454	633,417	1,180,549	985,684
Uzbekistan	891,845	304,414	2,136,391	793,026

(World Bank, 2023B)

Another motivation of both countries is to improve cultural relations with other members. The development of cultural relations is accepted as the driving force in

accelerating the economic and political relations between OTS countries. It is possible to see the traces of cultural identity, especially in Türkiye's foreign policy approaches. For example, Ankara, which emphasizes values such as modernization, secularism, and democracy in its relations with Western countries, puts special emphasis on the Muslim identity when establishing relations with Middle Eastern countries (Göl, 2009, p. 795-811). Similarly, it is observed that common features in language, culture, and history are mostly pointed in Türkiye's policies towards other members (Fida, 2018, p. 114, 120). In this context, OTS membership creates a suitable ground for this country to accelerate its integration efforts in fields such as education, culture, history, geography, language, religion, sports, and literature. The fact that institutions such as TİKA and TURKSOY operate within the borders of member countries and with the collaboration of OTS can be shown as an example to this (Akıllı & Çelen, 2019, p. 135-152.; Purtaş, 2017, s. 98). However, Türkiye's activities in this direction should not just be evaluated regarding nationalism/Turanism. The expectations of economic and political mutual benefit are effective in these activities more than ideological motives. The statement by Binali Yıldırım, *Aksakal* of Türkiye and OTS, that "China and Russia are natural members of the organization" strengthens this argument (Sputnik Türkiye, 2021).

For Astana, as well as increasing cultural interactions with other members, consolidating the Kazakh identity within the country and strengthening national integrity is also a cultural motivation. This situation, which is not desirable for a modern nation-state, stems from the fact that the percentage of ethnic Kazakhs in Kazakhstan is relatively low and the country hosts more than 100 different ethnicities (Daminov, 2020, p.1). For this reason, the Kazakh government aims to ensure that the Kazakh language is spoken more in Kazakhstan, the survival of Turkic culture in the country, and increased communication with relative societies by being more integrated into the cultural projects and institutions of OTS. In this context, Astana actively participates in many projects conducted within the framework of this organization. International Turkic Academy and Orkhun Student Exchange Project are some of the cultural projects supported by Kazakhstan (Akıllı, 2019, p. 14-15). On an individual basis, initiatives such as planning to gradually change the Cyrillic alphabet between 2023 and 2031 and including the languages of the Turkic states as elective foreign languages in some schools are among the examples of this (Şimşek, 2023, p. 242).

### **Expectations of Other Members: OTS for Kyrgyzstan, Azerbaijan and Uzbekistan**

Although their capacities are limited compared to Ankara and Astana, it would not be wrong to state that the motivations of the other three members are relatively similar to these two leading countries. Politically, the main motivations of these three countries are centered around factors such as multidimensional regional cooperation efforts, increasing their prestige in Central Asia, finding regional/international support in solving their problems with neighbors, and some security concerns. In this context, OTS means for Kyrgyzstan the opportunity to resolve its problems with neighbors through peaceful ways and to find strong regional/international support in times of crisis. The Bishkek's resolution of the border/water problem with Uzbekistan through diplomacy in 2022 (RFE, 2022) and the OTS members' support for Bishkek during the border conflicts between

Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan in January 2022 are examples of this (OTS, 2022A). Also, the dominant positions of Kazakhstan and Türkiye in the organization are among the factors that increase the interest of Kyrgyzstan, which places security concerns at the center of its foreign policy. Astana's active role in the solution of many regional problems since its independence and Ankara's decades of experience/capacity sharing with Kyrgyzstan in economic, political, and military aspects has been influential in the emergence of this situation.

Azerbaijan also seeks the support of OTS members in disputes/conflicts with neighboring countries such as in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. The fact that OTS members stood by Baku in the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War and that Azerbaijan's victory in the war was congratulated at the Unofficial Turkestan Summit held on March 31, 2021, clearly shows this (OTS, 2021B). In this context, this victory revealed an uninterrupted transportation line between the Turkic republics in Central Asia and Türkiye and had an encouraging effect on cooperation efforts (Bayramova, 2021, p. 8-9). On the other hand, the expectation of developing relations with the Turkic world, especially with Türkiye, plays a leading role among Azerbaijan's political motivations towards OTS. In other words, Baku sees OTS as a suitable platform for the collective development of bilateral relations in various fields. As stated, the victory of Azerbaijan in the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War brought the cooperation efforts between the member states to a different point. It is known that Türkiye, which played a vital role in this victory with its defense industry products such as Bayraktar TB2 and TRG-300, has also given intensive support to the modernization and training of the Azerbaijani army for decades. In this respect, this support and victory strengthens not only Azerbaijan's motivation, but also other countries such as Kyrgyzstan, which have made an agreement with Türkiye to modernize its army (Gök, 2022, p. 131).

On the other hand, Uzbekistan, which is not a founding member of OTS, has become a full member of the organization since 2019 because of its changing foreign policy preferences (Sobirov, 2020, p. 726-729). Shevket Mirziyoyev, who came to power after Islam Karimov passed away in 2016, followed a policy that Tashkent should strengthen its cooperation with Central Asian countries in various fields (Toktogulov, 2022, p. 53-55). The fact that Mirziyoyev organized official visits to Türkiye, Azerbaijan, and other Central Asian OTS members after he took office is also evaluated from this perspective. Therefore, the thought that political and economic stability in the region can be achieved by deepening cooperation with neighboring countries is the main political factor in Uzbekistan's rising interest in OTS (Tulyakov, 2022). Uzbekistan, which tried to follow a balanced and changeable foreign policy between the USA, Russia, and China in line with its interests during the Karimov era, perceives OTS as a rising actor in the region for the new period. For this reason, Tashkent desires to diversify its foreign policy alternatives and to balance the activities of the great powers in Central Asia, by increasing political and economic integration with the OTS countries. Mirziyoyev's words "Uzbekistan and the Turkic Council are connected not only by common culture, language, and spirituality, but also by traditional friendship and mutually beneficial cooperation" at the Cholpan Ata Summit reveals Tashkent's will to develop multidimensional cooperation with members (Otaxonov, 2022).

From the economic perspective, energy-related issues, mutual trade, and the importance of the Middle Corridor are among the leading motivations of Kyrgyzstan, Azerbaijan, and Uzbekistan. For example, for Kyrgyzstan, which has poor natural resources and the weakest economy in the region, economic interests regarding OTS are as crucial as political interests (Kayani, 2021, p. 550). In this context, Bishkek's main economic expectations are access to energy resources in Central Asia and the acceleration of mutual trade between members. Moreover, the Middle Corridor project has also a noteworthy potential for the economic and political interests of Kyrgyzstan. Efforts to integrate the Middle Corridor into other international projects such as BRI, New Silkroad Project and TRACECA may mean new investments, possible commercial gains, and increased strategic importance for this country, which may be on the route of these projects (Kaya, 2022). In this direction, Kyrgyzstan attaches special importance to its relations with other OTS members on the project route. It is also possible to mention similar motivations for Azerbaijan. This country is in an extremely critical location in the Middle Corridor and other international transportation route projects. Especially after the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War, the emergence of the possibility of opening the Zangezur Corridor increased the strategic importance of Baku. In this respect, Azerbaijan, providing the connection between Türkiye and other Turkic states, may be the commercial bridge of the Middle Corridor and other projects (Gawliczek & Iskandarov, 2023, p. 37-44).

On the other side, the development of commercial relations with member states is among Baku's main motivations for the organization. This is because OTS provides a suitable platform for this country to advance its economic relations with Türkiye and other Turkic states in the region. In this context, Azerbaijan desires to benefit from the collaborative environment created by OTS's emphasis on common language, culture, and history in its relations with member states. For Azerbaijan, which aims to increase trade volume and market opportunities with the Turkic world, OTS is an important organization that tries to facilitate and develop economic relations through customs agreements and projects (Baghirov, 2022, p. 61-66). The economic potential of the organization is of particular importance for Uzbekistan also. The reason for this is that some of the main trade partners of Tashkent are other members of the organization like Türkiye and Kazakhstan (World Bank, 2023B). In this respect, Uzbekistan is of the opinion that the deepening of cooperation and integration efforts within the organization will also contribute to the economic growth of the countries (Rakhimov, 2023, 403-404).

Therefore, the Uzbek government has put forward and/or supported moves that will improve economic cooperation between member countries in every meeting. For example, during the eighth summit, President Mirziyoyev proposed the establishment of a research center within the OTS, which would help by increasing trade and cooperation between members (Behruz, 2022, p. 266). As another example, the Turkic Investment Fund, which is the first joint financial institution of the Turkic world and every member state contributes equal capital, was established at the Samarkand summit hosted by Uzbekistan (TURKPA, 2022). Uzbekistan also participated in OTS's Sister Ports Project through logistic centers such as Universal Logistics Service (Tashkent), Akhtachi (Andijan), and Termez Cargo Center (Surkhondarya). In addition, Tashkent is trying to advance bilateral and multilateral economic relations with member countries by actively participating in

projects like “YePermit”, “Green Corridor” and “DigitalTIR” in areas such as customs, mutual trade, and digitalization in transportation. Based on all these, economic factors relatively come to the fore among the main motivations of Uzbekistan (Kun.uz, 2022).

The goal of strengthening cultural ties, which is accepted is also manifested in the main motivations of these three states. In this regard, cultural activities constitute the most active area of Kyrgyzstan in the organization. For example, the second and sixth Turkic Council summits hosted by Bishkek government were organized with cultural themes such as education, science, and sports. Similarly, Kyrgyz Kazakh, Kyrgyz-Turkish, and Kyrgyz Uzbek universities located in Kyrgyzstan also demonstrate the will of this country to develop scientific-cultural cooperation between the members. On the other hand, Kyrgyzstan, which hosts sports organizations such as Ethnosport and World Nomad Games, believes that the development of cultural relations with member states will increase the number of tourists coming to the country and its reputation (Anarkulov et al., 2021, p. 387-394). Likewise, Azerbaijan actively participates in sports competitions, events related to literature, festivals, and meetings organized by OTS. The most attractive cultural activity of Baku in OTS is hosting the Turkic Culture and Heritage Foundation, which was officially established at the Astana Summit in 2015 (Idrissov, 2015, p. 11-14). The objective of this foundation, whose secretariat is in Baku, is “to protect, study and promote the Turkic culture and heritage through support and funding activities, projects and programs” (OTS, 2023F).

Finally, it can be stated that Uzbekistan acts with similar motivations as Kyrgyzstan and Azerbaijan in the cultural field. In this context, the Tashkent government carries out some activities to increase cultural cooperation within the OTS and to better use the existing potential. Hosting the First Turkic Agricultural Forum, giving an international award in the name of Alisher Navoi, trying to establish a research center for Turkic cultural heritage, carrying out studies on climate change and environment for the OTS geography, and declaring the city of Bukhara as the first youth capital of the Turkic world are some of these activities (OTS, 2022B.; Uza, 2021.; Kun.uz, 2022). Uzbekistan is also trying to increase its effectiveness in the field of tourism within the OTS, with moves such as proposing the *Tabarruk Ziyarat* (Holy Ziyarat) project (Bukhari.uz, 2023) and declaring Kokand the tourism capital of the Turkic world (OTS, 2021C). As a result, when considered from the perspective of all three states, the idea of developing cultural relations, which forms the philosophical background of OTS, in Turkic world is a catalyst for the search for improving political and economic relations between member states.

### Conclusion

The multidimensional cooperation efforts developed by Turkic republics since 1992 were institutionalized over time and the Turkic Council was established in 2009. The organization took its final form with a name change in 2021. After the disintegration of the Soviet Union, common points such as language, history, and culture came to the fore as a significant source of motivation in the members’ cooperation efforts in the beginning. In the following years, however, the economic and political motivations of member states have become dominant in the sustainability of the organization. Accordingly, in today’s world, the economic and political expectations of the member states stand out and cultural



elements play a supportive role in realizing these expectations.

From political perspective, the organization offers member states the opportunity to diversify foreign policy alternatives based on equality. Although Türkiye and Kazakhstan are the leading actors, the limited economic and political capacities of these states compared to other regional/global powers make it easier for the other three countries to approach the organization within the framework of the equal partnership principle. Moreover, OTS promises its members a noteworthy potential in international politics for the future. When considered in this context, on the one hand, it is discussed in the literature whether this organization can be an effective actor in the balance of power in the region against the USA, Russia and China. On the other hand, OTS allows its member states to become an uninterrupted Turkic line between Europe and Asia.

Similarly, the OTS attracts the attention of the member states with various economic opportunities. First, the most basic expectation of OTS members is to increase mutual trade and investments through various agreements and projects. Secondly, reducing the dependence on other actors by providing diversity in energy transportation and distribution is among the primary economic goals of member states. Thirdly, the idea of being at the key point of a continuous Turkic line extending from Asia to Europe, which will emerge because of the possibility of the Middle Corridor and its merger with other international projects, attracts member countries economically, due to their strategic locations.

The expectation of cultural integration between the Turkic republics is still an important source of motivation for the member states. In other words, member states aim to strengthen cultural ties and interaction with each other through OTS. Affiliated organizations, cooperation projects, and other initiatives are significant in this manner. Similarly, OTS organizes joint events between the members in sports, tourism, literature, and many other fields. At this point, it would not be wrong to claim that all these activities were carried out within the framework of the “unity in language, thought and work” approach of İsmail Gaspirali.

Overall, it is possible to put forward that Türkiye and Kazakhstan are the leading actors of OTS. However, although their capacities are relatively limited, other three countries (Azerbaijan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan) also embrace this organization and actively participate in its activities. When the motivations of member states are examined, it is seen that their political and economic expectations are in a dominant position. On the other hand, cultural motivations, which played a key role in the establishment process, are still a driving force. In other words, the development of cultural relations is highly crucial for member states in terms of the realization of their economic and political interests. Therefore, it can be stated that economic, political, and cultural elements are mostly interconnected in the motivations of member states towards OTS.

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