



Evaluation of the Organization of the Turkic States in the Light of Integration Theories

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Abstract

Five Turkic Republics—Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan—gained independence after the Soviet Union's dissolution. Discussions of a Turkic Union, akin to the EU, led to the establishment of the Cooperation Council of Turkic Speaking States (Turkic Council) in 2009, renamed the Organization of Turkic States (OTS) in 2021. Its primary goal is to enhance cooperation among Turkic states. Founding members—Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Türkiye—were joined by Uzbekistan in 2019. This article examines the OTS's current status and future through integration theories, primarily developed from the EU experience, such as Federalism, Functionalism, Neofunctionalism, Intergovernmentalism, Constructivism, and Liberal Intergovernmentalism. The study argues that the OTS aligns with regionalism, a state-led process creating formal regional institutions among at least three states, rather than regionalization, which involves increased interaction between adjacent states. The Turkic Union is a top-down process, better explained by Intergovernmentalism and Constructivism, as it is an intergovernmental organization rooted in cultural, historical, and religious ties. However, the economic interdependence among the members is limited, and stronger ties exist mainly between Türkiye and Azerbaijan, especially in the fields of energy and transportation.

Keywords

Organization of Turkic States, Integration theories, Regionalism, Regionalization

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Entegrasyon Teorileri Işığında Türk Devletleri Teşkilatı'nın Değerlendirilmesi

Öz

Beş Türk cumhuriyeti—Azerbaycan, Kazakistan, Kırgızistan, Türkmenistan ve Özbekistan—Sovyetler Birliği'nin dağılmasının ardından bağımsızlıklarını kazandı. Avrupa Birliği'ne benzer bir Türk Birliği fikri, 2009 yılında Türk Konseyi'nin kurulmasına öncülük etti ve bu yapı, 2021 yılında Türk Devletleri Teşkilatı (TDT) adını aldı. Temel amacı Türk devletleri arasındaki işbirliğini artırmak olan TDT'nin kurucu üyeleri Azerbaycan, Kazakistan, Kırgızistan ve Türkiye'ye, 2019 yılında Özbekistan da katıldı. Bu makale, TDT'nin mevcut durumu ve geleceğini, büyük ölçüde Avrupa Birliği deneyiminden türetilmiş entegrasyon teorileri çerçevesinde incelemektedir. Bu teoriler arasında Federalizm, Fonksiyonalizm, Neofonksiyonalizm, Hükümetlerarasıcılık, İnşacılık ve Liberal Hükümetlerarasıcılık yer almaktadır. Bu çalışma, TDT'nin, bölgeselleşmeden ziyade, en az üç devlet arasında resmi bölgesel kurumlar oluşturan devlet odaklı bir süreç olan bölgeselcilikle daha uyumlu olduğunu savunmaktadır. Kültürel, tarihî ve dinî bağlara dayanan hükümetlerarası bir organizasyon olarak TDT, en iyi şekilde Hükümetlerarasıcılık ve İnşacılık teorileriyle açıklanabilir. Ancak üyeler arasındaki ekonomik karşılıklı bağımlılık sınırlıdır ve özellikle enerji ve taşımacılık alanlarında daha çok Türkiye ile Azerbaycan arasında güçlü bağlar mevcuttur.

Anahtar Kelimeler

Türk Devletleri Teşkilatı, Entegrasyon teorileri, Bölgeselcilik, Bölgeselleşme

Introduction

After the French Revolution in 1789, nationalization and nationalist movements gained momentum and Western European countries completed the process of becoming nations and accelerated the colonization of the rest of the world. By the 19th century, nationalist movements had begun to threaten multinational empires. Of these, the Ottoman Empire in particular had become the most vulnerable to the effects of technological backwardness. The question of how to save the state was frequently asked among statesmen and intellectuals, and discussions were held on what kind of policy would be followed for this purpose. Three political ideologies emerged, Ottomanism, Islamism, and Turkism, as embodied in Yusuf Akçura's article (Akçora, 1976). According to Akçora, the idea of establishing an Ottoman Nation, which emerged with Mahmud II, reached its peak during the rule of Ali and Fuat Pashas, but with Napoleon's defeat by the Germans, it became history with the efforts to establish a nation in the French style. During the reign of Abdulhamid II, attempts were made to implement Islamic Unity (Akçora, 1976: 20). During the Young Turks period, Turkic unity policies were put into practice under the influence of the Germans' nation-building policy. Enver Pasha continued this hope in Central Asia. The circumstance, however, resulted in the collapse of the Ottoman Empire at the end of the First World War and the establishment of the Republic of Türkiye, failing all three of the above policies. A population exchange based on religion was carried out, and efforts were made to establish a Turkish Nation within the borders of the National Pact on the legacy left by the Ottoman Empire in Türkiye, and this was largely successful.

The majority of other Turkic elements remained in the territory of the Soviet Union, and in order not to damage relations with Soviet Russia, intellectuals who advocated Turkic Unity, such as Zeki Velidi Togan and Nihal Adsız were prosecuted. The new Republic of Türkiye adopted a strict secularist interpretation in the French style and did not even allow the idea of Islamic unity to be expressed for many years. Among the main examples of these policies are the abolition of the caliphate in 1924, a pivotal moment in this transformation, signalling the end of the Ottoman Empire's spiritual authority and the establishment of secular governance. Subsequently, religious institutions were systematically dismantled. The Ministry of Sharia was abolished, and Sufi orders and madrasas were banned, reducing the influence of traditional Islamic education and practices. In cultural reforms, the fez was banned, and European-style brimmed hats were mandated for government officials,

symbolizing a break from Ottoman traditions. The Gregorian calendar replaced the Islamic calendar, and the Latin alphabet supplanted the Arabic script, alongside restrictions on the teaching of Arabic (Ab Rahman et al., 2015: 203-4). Mosques were placed under government control, and religious content in public life was curtailed, including the removal of prayers for the caliph from Friday sermons (Aydın, 2007: 202). Finally, the 1926 adoption of the Swiss Civil Code replaced the Sharia-based Ottoman civil code, ending the application of Islamic law in personal status issues like marriage, divorce, and inheritance. The principle of laicism, derived from the French concept of 'laïcité', was enshrined in the 1937 Constitution, solidifying the separation of religion and state as a foundational element of the Turkish Republic (Ünsal, 1989: 595).

However, these currents of thought have not disappeared and have occasionally emerged. The fact that recent governments of Türkiye have been labelled as Neo-Ottomanist may indicate that Ottomanism is not dead either. As a result of the democratization movement in the 1950s, the strict secular practices were weakened, and the idea of improving relations with Muslim countries has been on the agenda. The most frequently expressed of these is the Turkic Republics that gained their independence with the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the possible establishment of a Turkic Union. Although there is no consensus on what exactly it means, the need to establish a Turkic Union has been frequently repeated. Politicians have also frequently expressed this idea. For example, in his opening speech at the 1992 Ankara Summit of Turkic-speaking states, Özal highlighted the potential of the 21st century as a period for the rise and empowerment of Turkish-speaking nations. He proposed creating a powerful union modelled on a 'common market', advocating for removing barriers to economic ties and simplifying customs laws among Turkic countries (*The History*, 2023).

In 1992, Former President of Kazakhstan Nazarbayev proposed the creation of a Union of Central Asian states, which would include four independent Turkic states, emphasizing the shared historical and cultural ties of the region's peoples. Former President of Kyrgyzstan Almazbek Atambayev said in his speech at the Turkish Grand National Assembly as follows: "Even if we cannot establish the Great Turkic Khaganate, we must at least strengthen the brotherhood of the Turkic states and establish a strong Turkic union" (*Ulu Türk Kağanlığını*, 2012). However, over the years, neither a common market among the Turkic states nor a Central Asian Union has materialized—let alone a Turkic Union that envisions uniting all Turkic countries under a single framework similar to the European Union. Independent Turkic states are included in different economic unions, such as Türkiye in the European Union and Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan in the Eurasian Economic Union. The Turkic states are also part of opposing security alliances; Türkiye has been a NATO member since 1952, and Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan are part of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). Trade among the OTS countries does not add up to large sums.

This study seeks to address two central questions: Why has the Turkic Union not been established, and what factors have hindered its realization? Despite widespread public interest and frequent references by politicians and intellectuals, the topic has received limited academic attention. It remains largely confined to subjective and emotional discourse, with few rigorous, objective studies conducted. This research aims to bridge that gap by offering an academic analysis of the issue. It tests several hypotheses: that the processes of nation-state building and national identity formation complicate efforts toward Turkic Unity; that alternative regional integration projects, such as the European Union and the Eurasian Economic Union, present obstacles; and that regional powers like Russia and China oppose such a unification. I argue that the efforts of states to strengthen their nation-states, and other powers and integrations in the region are obstacles to Turkic Unity. The lack of political will, weak economic and trade ties, differing political systems and regimes, and regional rivalries within the Turkic world emerge as key challenges.

The second question this article addresses is which integration theory best explains the Organization of Turkic States (OTS). This study argues that the OTS aligns more closely with the concept of regionalism, understood as a state-led process focused on the creation and maintenance of formal regional institutions involving at least three states, rather than regionalization, which refers to the spontaneous increase of cross-border economic, political, social, or cultural interactions. The development of the Turkic Union has largely followed a top-down approach. Among integration theories, Intergovernmentalism and Constructivism provide the most suitable frameworks for understanding the OTS, as it operates strictly as an intergovernmental organization grounded in shared cultural, historical, and religious ties.

This article is structured as follows: The next section defines key concepts such as the nation-state, globalization, region, regionalism, and regionalization, and explores how the Organization of Turkic States (OTS) fits within these debates. It also outlines the stages of regional integration. Following this, major integration theories—including Federalism, Functionalism, Neofunctionalism, Intergovernmentalism, Constructivism, and Liberal Intergovernmentalism—are discussed, and the current status and future prospects of the OTS are analyzed through these theoretical lenses.

Conceptualization: Nation-State, Globalization, Region, Regionalism and Regionalisation

In order to form an opinion on the Turkic Union, it is necessary to first examine the international system, its realities, and tendencies in the system. The basic unit of the international system is the state. The international system was previously governed by empires and religious authorities such as the papacy. In general, the emergence of the nation-state in its modern sense is based on the Peace of Westphalia in Europe in 1648. The emergence of

nation-states as dominant and independent institutions has made them the main actors of world politics. The state formation trend that started with this agreement continues. Nation-state formation first spread to North America, then to South America and Japan in the 19th century. With the colonies gaining their independence, it spread to Africa and Asia in the 20th century and covered the whole world. This trend continues in the 21st century. The number of countries recognized as members of the United Nations increased from 50 in 1945 to 193 in 2011. Many states, such as the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC), Taiwan, and Kosovo, are also waiting to be recognized. Many regions, such as Palestine and Chechnya, want to become independent states (Heywood, 2011: 112).

On the other hand, two trends have emerged in international relations over the last forty years: globalization and regionalization. Globalization, which has many definitions, is the increase in integration as a result of the rapid circulation of goods, services, technology, people, and ideas in the world. It is the name given to the efforts to liberalize world trade on a universal scale. It is not only an economic concept but also a subject with social, political, and cultural dimensions. Three important aspects of globalization have come to the fore: These are economic, cultural, and political globalization. The economic dimension of the globalization process that started in the 1980s and 1990s is more important. Economic globalization has been defined as the process of national economies transforming into a single global economy at various rates. Cultural globalization, on the other hand, is the process of ideas, cultures, and images produced in one part of the world spreading to other parts of the world, thus minimizing cultural differences between nations, regions, and individuals. Political globalization is the process of transferring sovereignty and decision-making from national governments to international institutions (Heywood, 2011: 10).

Another trend that has developed along with globalization is regionalization, which comes from the word region. The region is between 'national' and 'global.' Regions are social constructs that refer to regional location and geographical or normative proximity. Regions usually include more than two countries. Regions can be continental, such as Europe and Latin America, intracontinental, such as West Africa and Southeast Asia, and transcontinental such as transatlantic region and Eurasia (Börzel & Risse, 2016: 7). Regions are not objective categories but social constructions; that is, there may be no consensus on what a region is and where it begins and ends. Joseph Nye defines the international region as "a group of states linked by geographical proximity and interdependence" and international regionalism as "the formation of interstate organizations or groups based on regions" (Nye 1968: vii). Börzel and Risse (2016) distinguish between regionalism and regionalization and define regionalism as a primarily state-led process of building and maintaining formal regional institutions and organizations, in most cases among

at least three states. Organizations are formal institutions with a street address, that is, with at least some level of agency. Accordingly, regional organizations are formal and institutionalized cooperative relations between states or sub-state units of different countries, constituting regionality (Börzel & Risse, 2016: 7).

Regarding the scope of cooperation, regional organizations follow a continuum between mission-specific and multi-purpose or general-purpose. NATO is a mission-specific regional organization, while ASEAN and the EU are multi-purpose or general-purpose organizations. Regarding the level of coordination and cooperation, regional organizations attempt to solve collective action problems in a given region on the continuum between regional cooperation and integration. We understand regional cooperation primarily as intergovernmental relations that do not require the delegation of authority to the relevant regional institution. The League of Arab States or the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) constitutes such purely intergovernmental regional organizations. In contrast, regional integration begins when states devolve at least some authority and sovereign rights to the regional level (Nye, 1968; Lindberg, 1970). This is what the literature calls supranationalism, and the EU is a supranational Regional Organization par excellence.

Most of the research on regions focuses primarily on regionalism, which is understood as top-down state-led institution building. For example, Keohane(1984)'s work examines how states cooperate within international regimes, focusing on the role of state interests and institutional frameworks in regional cooperation. Hurrell(1995)'s chapter explores regionalism through a state-centric lens, emphasizing the role of states in regional organizations and the institutionalization of regional cooperation. Hettne, Inotai, and Sunkel (1999) discuss how regionalism is often driven by state interests and institutional arrangements, reflecting a top-down approach to regional integration. However, field studies and new regionalism approaches rightly criticize the neglect of bottom-up, spontaneous, and endogenous regionalization processes involving various non-state actors organized in formal and informal networks. Regionalization refers to the process of increasing economic, political, social, or cultural interaction between geographically or culturally adjacent states and societies. In other words, regionalization emphasizes non-state relations between non-state actors such as firms, interest groups, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs); not only as drivers of region-building but also as direct interveners (Börzel & Risse, 2016).

The simultaneous existence of three developments, namely the nation-state, globalization, and regionalization, has brought about discussions on the relationships between these phenomena. Is regionalization a part of the globalization process? Or is regionalization a reaction to checks and balances globalization? Will globalization and regionalization endanger the state's

continued existence as the basic unit of the international system? Or will the state continue to be the highest unit of the international system? International Relations theories interpret globalization differently. According to realists who approach globalization with a sceptical eye, the state continues to be the basic unit of the international system as a result of globalization. Far from being threatened by globalization, the state's capacity to regulate and control has increased rather than decreased in this process. Globalization is carried out by states, especially dominant states, for states.

From this perspective, although the places where Turks live are scattered over a large geography, as seen in Map 1., when looked at as the majority, they spread from the Aegean Sea to the Taklamakan desert, from the Siberian steppes in the north to the north of Iran and Afghanistan in the south. Therefore, in terms of geographical proximity, the places where Turks live constitute a region. Of course, Turks live as a minority, especially in Russia, China, Iran, and Afghanistan, and some Turkic dialects are very distant from each other. The lack of geographical proximity is complemented by normative proximity; in other words, common language, nationality, history, and culture, normative rapprochement can be a reasonable justification for the Turkic Union.

Map 1. Regions where Turkic nations live.



Source: Wikimedia Commons. <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Turkeli.png>

regional movements, such as Pan-Europeanism, Pan-Africanism, Pan-Asianism, and Pan-Arabism also emerged around this time, in the late 1800s and the first half of the 1900s (Fawcett, 2012). These pan-regional movements are early examples of regionalism and were usually composed of a mixture of geopolitical, socio-economic, and cultural (sometimes even racial) and, to some extent, functional beliefs and goals (Söderbaum, 2016: 20). Having similar cultural, historical, and ethnic roots is not always a cement for unity. In some cases, as seen in the example of the Russia-Ukraine war, it can even cause friction or war. Therefore, the Turkic Union needs to be purified from ideological nostalgic elements and placed on a solid foundation. This is necessary to determine the situation of the Turkic Union in terms of regionalization and integration theories.

What is Integration?

Integration is the establishment of connections between geographically close countries in political, economic, social, and military fields (Tavares & Schulz 2006). Nye (1968) distinguishes between economic, political, and social integration. Economic integration is the increase in trade; social integration involves the unification of masses, groups, or elites; Political integration is the behavioral similarities between countries in political decisions at the international level. Today, economic unification or grouping movements take many different forms. Bela Balassa outlines the types of economic integration according to the degree of unification as follows (Balassa, 2013):

- * **Preferential Trade Agreements:** This is the narrowest example of economic cooperation. Here, countries that are members of the agreement unilaterally or mutually reduce their customs tariffs on certain goods (make tariff concessions).
- * **Free Trade Zone:** In such unions, the member countries of the union abolish customs tariffs and quantity restrictions in trade between them, but each applies its own special tariff against those outside the union.
- * **Customs Union:** Here, there is a more advanced union than free trade zones. Namely, customs tariffs and trade quotas between members are abolished, and a single common tariff is applied against countries outside the union.
- * **Common Market:** It is an economic union that is more advanced than a customs union. Because, as in a customs union, members liberalize trade between themselves and apply a common tariff against the outside, while the free movement of production factors such as labour and capital within the region is ensured.
- * **Economic Union:** It is the most advanced form of economic union movement. In economic unions, the freedoms of the member countries

in following individual macroeconomic policies are transferred to the union to some extent. To reach such a stage, a supranational body must be established to determine and implement a single monetary and banking system, common financial policies, and common economic policies throughout the union.

- * Political Union: Political union is the most advanced form of integration movement. Political unions can manifest themselves as federations or confederations. The participating states are independent in their internal affairs and have transferred their authority in foreign relations and defence matters to a supranational federated or confederated union. Presently, the European Union stands as the sole example of a successful political union achieved through gradual integration efforts.

Integration Theories and the Turkic Union

In this section, integration theories will be discussed first, and the status and future of the OTS will be examined in the light of these theories. Integration theories have been produced mostly by taking the example of the European Union as a starting point. The main driving force of European regionalism was to reduce the destructive nationalism that caused the destruction brought by the Westphalian nation-state system and the two World Wars. The main theories can be listed as Federalism, Functionalism, Neofunctionalism, Intergovernmentalism, Constructivism, and Liberal Intergovernmentalism.

Federalism

Federalism, which inspired the pioneers of European integration in many ways, was more of a political program than a theory; although its project was to create a new kind of 'state', it was sceptical of the nation-state. Two Italian anti-fascist communists, Altiero Spinelli, and Ernesto Rossi, prepared the draft of the 'Ventotene Manifesto' in 1941, which would later lead to the European Federalist Movement. Spinelli and Rossi argued that a federal Europe would transcend national sovereignty, prevent the resurgence of authoritarianism, and promote lasting peace. They envisioned a Europe in which political power would be shared among supranational institutions and member states, ensuring both unity and regional identities. Although Spinelli remained a figurehead of European federalism until he died in 1986, there was no obvious theorist associated with federalism (Söderbaum, 2016: 21). The international system has long tended toward secession rather than unification. The most recent internationally recognized country to gain independence is South Sudan, which officially became independent from Sudan on July 9, 2011, following a referendum. It is indeed rare and difficult for two countries to give up their sovereignty to form an equal federal state. The most recent example of a successful unification of two states into a federal structure is the unification of the two Germanys after the Cold War on October 3, 1990.

The concept of federalism in the Turkic world faces significant challenges due to historical, political, and cultural factors. First, the newly independent Turkic states of the post-Soviet world face multifaceted challenges deeply intertwined with issues of sovereignty, national identity, territorial integrity, and nation-building (Akçali, 2003). Paradoxically, Türkiye supported the efforts of newly independent states. Second, many Turkic states exhibit centralized political structures that prioritize national unity over regional autonomy. Third, the absence of robust institutional frameworks for federalism in many Turkic countries further complicates its implementation. While the Organization of Turkic States (OTS) promotes cooperation among Turkic-speaking nations, it operates as an intergovernmental organization without the binding legal structures characteristic of a federal system. This reflects a preference for flexible cooperation over rigid federal arrangements. Finally, there is no such discourse or dialogue even between Türkiye and Azerbaijan, which are the most likely options. On the contrary, the independence and sovereignty of the Turkic states have been emphasized. The main stress in the catchphrase 'One nation, two states' (Vahapzade, 1991) in the poem 'Azerbaijan-Türkiye' written by Bahtiyar Vahapzade in 1991 is not on one nation but on two states. In other words, these states will not give up their sovereignty. However, this does not imply that loose federation or confederation models could be implemented to promote cooperation in the future.

Functionalism

Functionalism was a strategy designed primarily to build peace, built around the proposition that the provision of common needs and functions could unite people beyond state borders. It suggested that cooperation on technical and economic issues could lead to broader political integration. The theory is strongly associated with the works of David Mitrany (1943), who is considered the father of functionalism in international relations. While according to the functionalist view, form was expected to follow function, for federalists, what was important was primarily form, namely formal unification, especially through a constitution. The nation-state was generally to be disregarded, and international cooperation was preferred over regional cooperation. Mitrany criticized both federalism and neo-functionalism because both were primarily based on territory and form rather than function (Söderbaum, 2016: 21).

Functionalism is a strategy based on the idea that fulfilling common human needs and functions could unite people beyond state borders. There have been instances of regionalization in the Turkic world occurring without state involvement. Cross-border trade in Central Asia, particularly in the 1990s and 2000s, was often driven by informal networks of local entrepreneurs and merchants who facilitated economic exchanges despite the absence of state-driven initiatives (Kaminski & Mitra, 2012: 45). Bazaars, in particular, became key hubs for cross-border trade between Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan,

Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan, contributing to regional economic integration (Fehlings & Karrar, 2022: 134). These informal practices were critical to the local economy and often operated parallel to formal trade routes (Zuenko, 2020: 125).

Functionalism, which suggested disregarding nation-states, however proved impractical in the Turkic world. Because nation states are very sensitive about their sovereignty; any integration effort is not possible without the initiative and permission of the states. The regionalization that occurs spontaneously in border regions has sometimes been disrupted due to the restrictive policies of the states in Central Asia. During the period of Islam Karimov, the Uzbekistan-Kyrgyzstan border remained closed for a long time. "Uzbekistan tightened controls on its Kyrgyz border after pro-democracy unrest ousted Kyrgyzstan's president in 2005, then closed down 12 of its 15 crossing points thereafter more Kyrgyz political unrest in 2010" (Najibullah & Eraliev, 2017). After Mirzaiyev came to power, some border gates were opened. For example, the Kara-Suu border crossing, which has been closed for 14 years, were opened (*Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan to Reopen Kara-Suu Border*, 2024). Kazakhstan also occasionally closes its borders to Kyrgyzstan, despite both being members of the Eurasian Economic Union: "For weeks, a large number of trucks have been queuing up at the border between Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, further mocking the unfounded predictions that the Moscow-led Eurasian Economic Union is ushering in an era of frictionless regional trade" (Djanibekova, 2020).

Neofunctionalism

Neofunctionalism emerged as the most influential theory of regional integration in the 1960s, shaped by the aftermath of two European world wars and scepticism toward the nation-state (Söderbaum, 2016: 17). Its central figure, Ernst Haas, along with scholars like Leon Lindberg, Philippe Schmitter, and Joseph Nye, argued that integration occurs through a spillover effect, where cooperation in one sector expands to others. Unlike functionalists, neofunctionalists emphasized the necessity of political will—higher national institutions play a decisive role in driving economic integration toward political unity (Haas, 1958, 1964). Haas's work built on Jean Monnet's 'community method', favouring incremental, bottom-up integration over top-down constitutional designs (Söderbaum, 2016: 21). While sharing functionalism's focus on sectoral spillover, neofunctionalism distinctively stressed that integration requires active state commitment, challenging the assumption that it would unfold automatically.

Although it has more explanatory power than functionalism due to the role it gives to states, Neofunctionalism also falls short in explaining integration or its absence in the Turkic world. Because states have not taken the steps that would elevate economic activities in border regions to a higher level and lead

to integration, on the contrary, they prevented it. Instead of expanding the common power line inherited from the Central Asian Soviets, some countries withdrew and decided to establish their own power lines. For example, “Turkmenistan left this system in 2003, while Tajikistan left this system in 2009, choosing to establish its independent energy system. The remaining three countries decided to return to this common power system in 2019, albeit on a smaller scale than the Soviet Union period, including the entire power system of Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, and the southern part of Kazakhstan. These countries signed a joint declaration on regional cooperation in the field of energy reforms and the establishment of a single electricity market” (Kudaibergenov, 2022).

Intergovernmentalism

While the European integration project was interrupted by De Gaulle’s nationalism in the late 1960s, the predictions of Neofunctionalism began to conflict with reality, meaning that integration would not be possible without the active will of states. Stanley Hoffmann (1966) became the key figure in the intergovernmental approach to regional integration. Unlike the neo-functionalists, Hoffmann explained that regional integration would not spread from low politics, namely the economy, to high politics, namely the security sphere. Regional integration can only be achieved as long as it coincides with national interests and “by taking the nation with its memories and problems” (Hoffmann, 1966: 867). In short, the basic idea of this theory is as follows: States are the primary actors in the integration process and control the integration agenda. The mechanisms of intergovernmentalism, on the other hand, are that national governments prioritize their national interests when negotiating integration agreements. Intergovernmentalism, which is a top-down approach, sees integration as a process initiated and carried out by states for their interests, rather than political integration based on bottom-up, i.e. economic needs. States are the primary actors and the political elite sees integration in terms of their own interests and survival and allows or disallows it.

Intergovernmentalism should be analysed more comprehensively, not only in terms of leadership competition but also concerning the long-term interests of states and their regional policies. Taninchev(2015) presents a theory of how interaction within intergovernmental organizations (IGOs) leads to convergence in member state interests over time. He argues that IGOs facilitating more interaction between state agents promote greater interest convergence, not necessarily through shifts in state identities but via the diffusion of ideas about cause-and-effect relationships. This process influences long-term regional cooperation and policy alignment. Smeets and Beach (2020) examine the role of the European Council and member state leaders in EU reforms during crises. It highlights how intergovernmentalism, characterized by member state dominance, shapes long-term regional policies

and institutional leadership, impacting the EU's strategic direction. Research indicates a positive correlation between the institutionalization of relations among OTS members and their voting cohesion at the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA). This alignment suggests that as the OTS strengthens its institutional framework, member states exhibit greater unity in international decision-making, reflecting a shared commitment to regional policies (Salihi & Mehmetcik, 2025).

The OTS's foundational goals encompass strengthening mutual confidence, developing common positions on foreign policy issues, combating international terrorism, and promoting economic growth and social development. These objectives align with the long-term interests of member states, focusing on regional stability, economic integration, and cultural solidarity. For instance, the adoption of the 'Turkic Green Vision' at the 2024 summit underscores a collective commitment to sustainable development, reflecting shared environmental and economic priorities. Additionally, initiatives like the establishment of a simplified customs corridor aim to enhance trade efficiency and economic cooperation among member states (Omuraliev, 2024).

Indeed, the interests and decisions of states and those who govern the state have been effective in the integration of the Turkic world. Intergovernmentalism between Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev is exemplified through their collaborative efforts in energy, infrastructure, defence, and regional diplomacy, reflecting a convergence of long-term national interests. Projects like the Trans-Anatolian Natural Gas Pipeline (TANAP), the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway, and the Igdir-Nakhchivan pipeline align both countries' strategic goals in energy security and connectivity. Their defence partnership was formalized through the 2021 Shusha Declaration, leading to joint military exercises and coordinated regional security strategies. Türkiye's strong support for Azerbaijan during the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh conflict further cemented their political alignment. Economically, trade relations have deepened, with shared ambitions to increase bilateral trade volumes significantly. Together, these developments illustrate a sustained intergovernmental partnership driven by mutual long-term interests rather than just leadership affinity.

On the other hand, it has been stated that the lack of cooperation and integration in Central Asia is due to the Nazarbayev-Karimov conflict: "The Central Asian Union did not work for two main reasons. First, the conflict between states, especially the competition for regional dominance between the most populous Uzbekistan and the richest Kazakhstan. The elites in Uzbekistan were not interested in the idea from the beginning. The Kazakh leadership was interested, but other countries did not want to be dominated by Kazakhstan economically. Second, small states wanted to maintain their independence from their larger neighbours whose interests they did not share" (Zhambekov, 2015).

Recent developments have exposed significant fractures in the Organization of Turkic States (OTS), challenging Türkiye's leadership ambitions. In April 2025, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan signed a joint declaration with the EU agreeing with the two United Nations resolutions that deem the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC) as 'occupied', marking a significant diplomatic rift with Türkiye. These resolutions, passed by the UN Security Council in the 1980s, declare the TRNC's declaration of independence and all secessionist actions as legally invalid. The move is particularly notable as these Central Asian countries, all members of the Organization of Turkic States (OTS), had previously engaged with the TRNC. Since gaining observer status in the OTS in 2022, the TRNC has participated in several summits, including the 11th OTS Summit in Bishkek in 2024. However, it was notably excluded from the 10th summit in Astana in 2023. This shift in stance represents a departure from their earlier support and has the potential to strain relations within the Turkic world. Since 2020, some Central Asian countries have also accredited ambassadors to Southern Cyprus (Sorbello, 2025). However, Binali Yıldırım, Chairman of the Council of Elders of the Organization of Turkic States during the Council's meeting held in the TRNC on May 1, 2025, stated "OTS members hold no negative stance toward the TRNC," highlighting the Council of Elders' meeting in Northern Cyprus as proof of continued cooperation (*OTS Member States*, 2025).

Constructivism

This movement emerged as a 'middle way' (Adler, 1997) between rational choice and reflectivity theories as a part of the critique of rational choice theories and new regionalism in the 1990s, and its representatives include Alexander Wendt, John Ruggie, Thomas Risse, and Emanuel Adler. According to constructivists, integration is shaped by shared identities, norms, and values. Social and cultural factors, collective identity, and common beliefs encourage integration. Constructivism not only gives an important role in ideas, norms, and identity in how and why regionalism emerged and in shaping regionalism; it also provides an ideal and normative criterion for measuring the outcome of regionalism. The success or failure of regional institutions can be evaluated not based on material indicators such as free trade or collective defence, but on their ability to create, localize, and disseminate norms (Acharya, 2016: 120).

Constructivism provides valuable insights for understanding the emergence and development of the Organization of Turkic States (OTS), as it emphasizes how shared identities, norms, and social constructs shape international cooperation. The OTS fundamentally emerged from the collective recognition of common linguistic, cultural, and historical ties among Turkic-speaking nations, particularly following the collapse of the Soviet Union. As Erkan Aydın and Yi (2024) note, "The Organization of Turkic States (OTS) emerged when

member states came together around common elements such as language, culture, and history” (p. 36). This process began in earnest after the Central Asian and Caucasian Turkic states gained independence, with early diplomatic efforts crystallizing through initiatives like the Summits of the Heads of State of Turkic Speaking States starting in 1992.

International organizations play a significant role in norm creation. Drawing on the works of scholars such as Martha Finnemore and Alexander Wendt, constructivists argue that institutions like the Organization of Turkic States (OTS) function not merely as arenas for intergovernmental dialogue, but as active agents in shaping norms. The OTS influences state behavior by fostering shared values and collective identities. From a constructivist perspective, international cooperation is understood as a socially constructed process rather than one driven solely by material interests. As Yesevi (2022: 12) notes, “The OTS has made a concrete contribution to the construction of ‘Turkicness’, ‘the Turkic world’ and ‘Turkic cooperation’. Indeed, with its unique structure and affiliated organizations, the OTS has contributed significantly to constructing the international system and international relations.”

From a constructivist perspective, the OTS represents more than just a pragmatic alliance - it embodies a shared identity project that seeks to reinforce Turkic solidarity through institutionalized cooperation. The organization’s evolution reflects how intersubjective understandings among member states about their common heritage have gradually translated into formal political structures. However, constructivism also helps explain the OTS’s limitations, as the organization’s development has been constrained by competing national identities and the varying interpretations of ‘Turkicness’ among member states. While cultural and historical affinities provided the foundation for cooperation, the practical implementation of deeper integration has been challenged by differing political systems, economic priorities, and external alignments. The constructivist lens thus reveals both the possibilities and boundaries of identity-based regionalism in the Turkic world, showing how shared culture can initiate cooperation but may not automatically lead to comprehensive integration without accompanying material and institutional frameworks.

Liberal Intergovernmentalism

The basic idea of this movement, whose main representative includes Andrew Moravcsik, stems from the combination of integration, economic interdependence, domestic political preferences, and interstate negotiations. Liberal Intergovernmentalism, like neofunctionalism and multi-level governance approaches, privileges local actors such as chambers of commerce and industry, business associations, and unions that press for greater integration to support their economic or political interests (Börzel, 2016: 42). The mechanisms of liberal intergovernmentalism are that states, influenced by domestic

interests and financial benefits, engage in rational negotiations with other states, defend local interests in the regional arena, and create formal institutions to guarantee these interests (Moravcsik, 1991, 1998).

Azerbaijan and Türkiye represent the most developed example of interdependence among Turkic states. An example of interdependence between these countries is the Trans-Anatolian Natural Gas Pipeline (TANAP). TANAP is a natural gas pipeline in Türkiye. It is the central part of the Southern Gas Corridor, which connects the giant Shah Deniz gas field in Azerbaijan to Europe through the South Caucasus Pipeline and the Trans Adriatic Pipeline. The pipeline has strategic importance for both Azerbaijan and Türkiye. According to SOCAR, as of May 1, 2024, 62 billion cubic meters were transported via TANAP (*TANAP Considers Expansion to Supply More Gas to European Markets*, 2024). It accounted for over 48 percent of Azerbaijan's gas transportation. The second example is Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum Pipeline. It is a 1,768-kilometer-long crude oil pipeline from the Azeri-Chirag-Gunashli oil field in the Caspian Sea to the Mediterranean Sea. It connects Baku, the capital of Azerbaijan, and Ceyhan, a port on the south-eastern Mediterranean coast of Türkiye, via Tbilisi, the capital of Georgia. Azerbaijan's total oil transit in January-November 2024 amounted to 35.4 million tons, of which 75.9% flowed through the BTC. The amount of transit oil sourced from other countries, such as Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, via the BTC rose to 4.890 million tons in January-November from 4.780 million tons in the same period of 2023 (*Azerbaijan's January-November Oil Exports*, 2024).

The third example of interdependence Türkiye and Azerbaijan between is Baku-Tbilisi-Kars Railways, a railway connecting Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Türkiye, which became operational on 30 October 2017. It is a part of the Chinese-led Belt and Road Initiative, which shortened travel time from China to Europe: a goods train took only 15 days to travel from South Korea to Istanbul via China (Luo, 2024). The last, the ratification process of the Türkiye-Azerbaijan Preferential Trade Agreement was completed, and the Agreement entered into force on 01.03.2021. The agreement mainly covers the mutual reduction of customs duties on imports of a number of agricultural and food products (*A Preferential Trade Agreement*, 2021). Military cooperation was established. While Türkiye has actively promoted military cooperation within the OTS—including arms sales, such as Bayraktar TB2 drones to Azerbaijan, and joint exercises like *TurAz Kartalı*—the organization faces structural challenges that prevent it from evolving into a NATO-like collective defense structure (Kocatepe, 2023: 45-50).

Conclusion

The Organization of Turkic States (OTS) represents a significant experiment in regional cooperation among Turkic-speaking nations, one that must be understood through the lens of integration theories. While the organization has

made progress in fostering cultural and diplomatic ties, its development reveals fundamental limitations that prevent it from evolving into a deeper union akin to the European Union. The most relevant theoretical frameworks for understanding the OTS are Intergovernmentalism and Constructivism, which together explain both its achievements and its constraints.

Intergovernmentalism provides crucial insights into why the OTS remains a loose, state-driven alliance rather than a supranational entity. The organization operates strictly as an intergovernmental body, where member states retain full sovereignty and resist any delegation of authority to a central institution. This is evident in the way decisions are made by consensus, leaving the OTS without binding enforcement mechanisms. The recent diplomatic tensions between Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan over the extradition of Armenian figures, as well as Central Asian states engaging with the Republic of Cyprus despite Türkiye's objections, demonstrate how national interests consistently override collective Turkic solidarity. These conflicts remain unresolved because the OTS lacks the institutional capacity to mediate disputes, functioning more as a diplomatic forum than a cohesive alliance.

Constructivism helps explain why the OTS exists at all, despite its limitations. The organization is built upon shared cultural, linguistic, and historical ties among Turkic peoples, which provide a foundation for cooperation. Institutions like TURKSOY and the Turkic Academy promote this cultural unity, and regular summits reinforce a sense of common identity. However, as Constructivism also reveals, cultural affinity alone cannot sustain political or economic integration. The divergent geopolitical and economic priorities of member states—such as Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan's reliance on Russia through the CSTO, or Uzbekistan's balancing act between multiple powers—prevent the OTS from developing into a more integrated bloc.

Economic factors further constrain the OTS's potential. Unlike the European Union, which began with strong economic foundations (the European Coal and Steel Community), the Turkic states lack significant trade interdependence. The exception is the energy partnership between Türkiye and Azerbaijan, exemplified by projects like the Trans-Anatolian Natural Gas Pipeline (TANAP) and the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway. However, these remain bilateral initiatives rather than multilateral frameworks that could bind the entire OTS. Other member states prioritize economic ties with China, Russia, or the EU, leaving little room for a unified Turkic economic space.

The future of the OTS will depend on its ability to address these structural weaknesses. While a political or economic union resembling the EU remains unlikely, the organization could strengthen its relevance by focusing on pragmatic areas of cooperation. Energy security, infrastructure development, and educational exchanges offer potential pathways for deeper integration.

Additionally, the OTS could play a constructive role in mediating regional conflicts, provided it develops more robust institutional mechanisms.

Ultimately, the OTS exemplifies the challenges of building regional unity in a multipolar world where states prioritize sovereignty and diverse alliances. Its strength lies in its cultural and historical foundations, but its limitations reflect its members' competing geopolitical and economic realities. For the OTS to evolve beyond its current form, it must find ways to align national interests with collective goals, fostering deeper cooperation without undermining the independence that member states fiercely guard. Until then, it will remain an important but limited platform for Turkic diplomacy rather than a transformative force in regional politics.

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