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FAMILY AND SOCIAL POLICIES IN THE ORGANIZATION OF TURKIC STATES: INSTITUTIONAL ALIGNMENT

Fatih DEMİRCİOĞLU*

Abstract

The Organization of Turkic States (OTS) is a multilateral platform aiming to foster political, economic, and cultural integration among its member states. In recent years, issues such as family structures, social policy, and the rights of women and children have become increasingly visible in the organization's institutional agenda. This study examines the level of institutional alignment in family and social policies within the OTS framework. It analyzes cooperation mechanisms, joint declarations, and regional social policy documents developed through the meetings of member states' Ministries of Family and Social Policy. The study also evaluates the role of family policies as tools of cultural diplomacy and soft power. Findings suggest that while a normative convergence in family-related policies is emerging, institutional alignment in practice remains limited. This indicates a growing potential for the OTS to institutionalize social policies within a more coherent and strategic framework. The study aims to contribute to discussions on regional governance, norm production, and identity building through the lens of social policy.

*  Dr. Öğr. Üyesi, Hakkâri Üniversitesi, İktisadi ve İdari Bilimler Fakültesi, Siyaset Bil. ve Ulus. İlişkiler, fatihdemircioglu@hakkari.edu.tr, Hakkâri/Türkiye.

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TÜRK DEVLETLERİ TEŞKİLATINDA AİLE VE SOSYAL POLİTİKALAR: KURUMSAL UYUM

Öz

Türk Devletleri Teşkilatı (TDT), üye ülkeler arasında siyasi, ekonomik ve kültürel alanlarda bütünleşmeyi amaçlayan çok taraflı bir yapıdır. Son yıllarda sosyal politika, aile yapısı, kadın ve çocuk hakları gibi konular, teşkilatın kurumsal gündeminde daha görünür hale gelmiştir. Bu çalışma, TDT kapsamında aile ve sosyal politikalarda kurumsal uyum düzeyini incelemektedir. Üye ülkelerin Aile ve Sosyal Politikalar Bakanlıkları düzeyinde gerçekleştirdiği iş birliği mekanizmaları, ortak deklarasyonlar ve bölgesel sosyal politika belgeleri analiz edilmiştir. Çalışmada ayrıca aile politikalarının kültürel diplomasi ve yumuşak güç unsuru olarak kullanımı da değerlendirilmektedir. Bulgular, üye devletler arasında aile politikalarına dair normatif bir yaklaşmanın başladığını, ancak uygulamada kurumsal uyumun sınırlı olduğunu ortaya koymaktadır. Bu durum, TDT'nin gelecekte sosyal politikaları daha bütüncül ve kurumsallaşmış bir çerçeveye oturtma potansiyeline işaret etmektedir. Çalışma, sosyal politikalarda bölgesel yönetim, ortak norm üretimi ve kimlik inşası konularına katkı sunmayı amaçlamaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Türk Devletleri Teşkilatı, Aile ve Sosyal Politikalar, Kurumsal Uyum.*

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the transformation of regional organizations from primarily economic or political blocs into platforms addressing a broader set of issues, including social policy, has become increasingly evident. The Organization of Turkic States (OTS) represents a dynamic example of such an evolution. Initially conceived as a mechanism to foster linguistic, cultural, and economic cooperation among Turkic-speaking countries, the OTS has gradually expanded

its institutional agenda to incorporate family and social policy dimensions. This shift reflects both internal demands for social resilience and external pressures to enhance regional identity through value-based governance.

The inclusion of family and social policy issues within the OTS agenda signals a deliberate attempt to build a shared normative framework beyond the domains of trade or diplomacy. It indicates an emerging understanding among member states that social cohesion, cultural preservation, and family structures are integral components of long-term regional integration. As family policy is deeply embedded in national traditions and cultural narratives, its transnational coordination within a multilateral framework presents both challenges and opportunities. On one hand, it offers a platform for cultural diplomacy and soft power projection through shared heritage; on the other, it requires navigating diverse legal systems, administrative capacities, and policy priorities.

The increasing frequency of joint meetings between the Ministries of Family and Social Policy, the publication of common declarations, and discussions on harmonizing approaches to child protection, gender equality, and youth welfare all point to the institutionalization of social policy within the OTS. However, the depth of this coordination remains uneven. While rhetorical alignment and symbolic gestures suggest convergence, actual policy harmonization is still in its early stages. The question of whether a coherent and functionally integrated social policy framework is emerging within the OTS thus remains open.

This study seeks to explore the extent to which family and social policies are becoming aligned institutionally among OTS member states. By analyzing organizational structures, cooperative mechanisms, and declared objectives, the paper aims to assess whether social policy is merely an auxiliary component of the OTS or a developing pillar of regional governance. In doing so, it also reflects on how family policies may serve not only domestic social agendas but

also transnational identity-building and soft power strategies. Ultimately, understanding this dimension of the OTS provides a more comprehensive view of the organization's evolving role in shaping not just economic or political integration, but also the socio-cultural fabric of the Turkic world.

2. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative research design grounded in institutional and interpretive approaches to regional cooperation. Given the non-quantifiable nature of social policy alignment and the complex interplay between culture, norms, and institutional arrangements, a qualitative methodology enables a more nuanced exploration of how family and social policies are being articulated and coordinated within the framework of the Organization of Turkic States (OTS).

The core method employed is document-based analysis, focusing on primary organizational outputs such as summit declarations, ministerial communiqués, memoranda of understanding, official speeches, action plans, and internal reports produced or endorsed by the OTS and its affiliated bodies, particularly in the field of social and family policy. These documents are examined to trace the evolution of institutional language, the emergence of shared priorities, and the degree of policy convergence over time. Special emphasis is placed on identifying recurring normative themes, such as family cohesion, cultural preservation, gender roles, and child protection, which serve as markers of institutional alignment or divergence among member states (Biermann, 2015: 47).

Additionally, the study employs discourse analysis to interpret the symbolic and ideological dimensions of social policy cooperation. Through a close reading of official texts and public statements by member state representatives, the

analysis explores how common cultural references, historical narratives, and value-based rhetoric are deployed to legitimize cooperation in family policy domains. This approach highlights the performative role of discourse in constructing regional identity and fostering normative cohesion (Steffek, 2003: 250–252).

To complement the textual analysis, the study also uses a comparative institutional lens, mapping out the organizational structures and decision-making mechanisms through which family and social policy collaboration is pursued within the OTS. This includes an assessment of the institutional pathways for implementation, such as the meetings of the Ministers of Family and Social Policy, intergovernmental working groups, and collaborative frameworks between national institutions (Lenz & Burilkov, 2016: 654–657).

Importantly, this research does not involve fieldwork, surveys, or interviews, and is thus exempt from ethics committee approval. The analysis is based exclusively on publicly accessible materials, official documentation, and secondary scholarly literature that contextualizes the institutional behavior of regional organizations.

The methodology aims to strike a balance between empirical specificity and conceptual insight, allowing for an assessment of not only what the OTS is doing in the realm of social policy, but also how and why it frames these efforts as integral to its broader mission. In doing so, the study seeks to generate theoretically informed conclusions about the institutional alignment of family and social policies in a unique regional context where culture, politics, and identity are closely intertwined.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Understanding the institutional alignment of family and social policies within the Organization of Turkic States (OTS) requires an interdisciplinary theoretical foundation that spans international relations, comparative public policy, and regional studies. This study draws upon three interrelated theoretical lenses to analyze the evolving role of the OTS in shaping social policy collaboration: normative institutionalism, regional governance theory, and soft power/cultural diplomacy frameworks. These perspectives together allow for a comprehensive examination of how institutions create, embed, and disseminate shared social norms and policy orientations in a regional multilateral context (March & Olsen, 1989: 24; Hurrell, 2007: 42; Nye, 2004: 11–12).

2.1. Normative Institutionalism

At the core of this study lies normative institutionalism, a strand of new institutional theory which posits that political and bureaucratic behavior is not merely shaped by rational utility-maximizing preferences or formal rules, but also by embedded norms, values, and shared identities within institutions. Unlike rational-choice or historical institutionalism, normative institutionalism places emphasis on the internalization of shared beliefs as a driver of institutional behavior. In the context of the OTS, this perspective is particularly useful in understanding how family and social policy cooperation is not only a matter of institutional design or capacity, but also of normative convergence rooted in shared cultural and civilizational values (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998: 897–899).

The promotion of family as the “core unit of society,” the emphasis on traditional values, and the recurrent references to Turkic heritage in official declarations suggest that social policy in the OTS is not technocratic, but ideologically and normatively infused. Normative institutionalism helps explain how such shared ideational frameworks may lead to policy alignment even in the absence of formal legal harmonization or enforceable agreements. It also provides a lens through which to interpret how regional actors internalize a sense of “oughtness” in shaping family-oriented policies in ways that reflect collective identity (Barnett & Finnemore, 2004: 23–25).

2.2. Regional Governance and Policy Convergence

A second theoretical pillar of this study is regional governance theory, particularly in its focus on policy convergence and the emergence of soft institutional mechanisms across non-Western regional organizations. Regional governance, in this sense, refers not only to formal political integration but also to the coordination of public policy across national borders in response to shared challenges or values. As the OTS increasingly seeks to institutionalize its social policy agenda, it raises important questions about the nature of policy coordination: Is it directive or voluntary? Is it symbolic or operational? Is it led by a dominant actor or negotiated multilaterally? (Acharya, 2007: 130–131).

This framework allows the study to analyze to what extent family and social policy within the OTS context is moving toward policy convergence, and through which instruments: ministerial meetings, declarations of intent, or the establishment of working groups and expert networks. It also helps assess the quality of this convergence: Is it normative (shared values), procedural (common methods), or substantive (identical outcomes)? By applying regional governance theory, the study moves beyond mere description to evaluate the structural and procedural depth of cooperation (Börzel & Risse, 2009: 10–12).

2.3. Soft Power and Cultural Diplomacy

The third and complementary framework employed is drawn from soft power theory and cultural diplomacy, especially as developed in post-Westphalian and civilizational contexts. Family and social policy, especially when linked to tradition, moral values, and historical continuity, can function as instruments of soft power, particularly in regions where shared cultural codes and kinship narratives are prevalent. In the Turkic context, appeals to common ancestry, cultural resilience, and familial solidarity transcend national boundaries and serve as a form of normative attraction among member states.

This framework is useful in analyzing how OTS member states utilize social policy, not only to address domestic welfare goals, but also to foster regional affinity and symbolic unity. Joint celebrations of cultural traditions, cross-national initiatives on parenting and youth, or common statements on gender roles are all part of a larger strategy to use family policy as a cultural-political adhesive. Rather than coercing alignment, soft power mechanisms create a normative environment conducive to voluntary policy coordination and identity construction (Zamorano, 2016: 165).

2.4. Integrative Approach

Taken together, these three theoretical lenses provide a robust conceptual foundation for the analysis. Normative institutionalism reveals the ideational underpinnings of social policy cooperation; regional governance theory situates this cooperation within broader questions of policy design and institutional capacity; and soft power theory interprets the symbolic and cultural dimensions of family policy as a tool of regional cohesion.

While much of the existing literature on regional organizations, particularly within the European Union context, has focused on economic and legal integration, the case of the OTS demands a different analytical toolkit, one that accounts for the interplay of culture, identity, and informal cooperation mechanisms. This study, therefore, contributes to the emerging body of scholarship on non-Western regionalism, offering an original case study where social policy serves as both a practical and symbolic arena of integration (Acharya, 2009: 5–7).

By applying these theoretical perspectives in tandem, the paper aims to provide a comprehensive account of how and why family and social policy have become areas of institutional experimentation and norm articulation within the Organization of Turkic States, and what this tells us about the evolving nature of regional governance in the 21st century.

3. INSTITUTIONAL STRUCTURE OF THE ORGAZINATION OF TURKIC STATES

The institutional architecture of the Organization of Turkic States (OTS) reflects a gradual evolution from a symbolic and cultural alliance into a more functionally diversified regional organization. Founded in 2009 as the Turkic Council, the organization initially prioritized areas such as language preservation, cultural cooperation, and historical commemoration among its member states, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Türkiye, with Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan later joining as a full and observer member, respectively. Over time, the organization's institutional scope has expanded to include economic cooperation, security dialogue, digital transformation, and, notably, social policy coordination (Kocaman, 2023: 51).

At the core of the OTS institutional framework lies a multilevel governance model consisting of political, executive, ministerial, and technical organs. The

Council of Heads of State serves as the highest decision-making body, setting strategic direction and approving key initiatives. Beneath this level, the Council of Foreign Ministers and the Senior Officials Committee operationalize decisions and maintain intergovernmental coordination. However, it is at the sectoral ministerial level that the growing institutionalization of social and family policy becomes most evident (Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Foreign Affairs, n.d.; Organization of Turkic States, n.d.b).

Among these sectoral bodies, the Meetings of the Ministers in Charge of Social Policy, Family, and Women's Affairs have become increasingly frequent and structured in the past decade (Trend Azerbaijan, 2025). These meetings provide a forum for dialogue on shared social challenges, ranging from child protection and demographic sustainability to gender equality and cultural preservation (Orient, 2025). The resulting joint declarations, memoranda of understanding, and action plans represent soft law instruments aimed at fostering voluntary policy harmonization without legally binding obligations (DOST Agency, 2024). This institutional configuration suggests a preference for flexible governance mechanisms that allow for normative convergence without infringing upon national sovereignty.

In addition to political-level coordination, the OTS Secretariat, headquartered in Istanbul, plays a critical role in maintaining the organizational memory and continuity of social policy initiatives. The Secretariat facilitates communication among national ministries, drafts policy papers, and monitors the progress of initiatives across member states. Moreover, specialized working groups and expert committees, often composed of bureaucrats, academics, and civil society representatives, support the technical aspects of cooperation, especially in areas such as youth policy, women's empowerment, and family values (Organization of Turkic States, n.d.a).

Importantly, the institutionalization of social and family policy within the OTS structure reflects not only functional considerations but also symbolic and identity-based motivations. The establishment of common thematic years, such as “The Year of Youth” or “The Year of the Turkic Family”, demonstrates how social policy becomes a platform for collective identity-building and cultural diplomacy. These initiatives often involve educational exchanges, cultural festivals, and awareness campaigns that transcend bureaucratic coordination and aim to foster a shared sense of belonging among Turkic populations (Astana Times, 2025).

The institutional setting also allows for the inclusion of observer states and affiliated organizations, such as the International Organization of Turkic Culture (TÜRKSOY) and the Turkic Academy, which play auxiliary but influential roles in shaping the normative context of social policy debates. These bodies contribute intellectual and cultural capital, providing research, comparative analysis, and policy recommendations that reinforce the legitimacy and continuity of OTS social policy initiatives (Organization of Turkic States, n.d.c).

Nevertheless, despite the increasing institutional density, challenges remain in terms of coherence, sustainability, and enforcement. The absence of a binding legal framework for social policy coordination means that much of the progress depends on political will, bureaucratic capacity, and cultural affinity. Moreover, variations in administrative structures, policy priorities, and socioeconomic conditions among member states create obstacles to full alignment. Institutional asymmetries, such as Türkiye’s relatively advanced welfare infrastructure compared to smaller Central Asian states, also shape the dynamics of influence and policy transfer within the organization (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2005: 617).

In summary, the institutional structure of the OTS reveals a regional organization in the process of normative deepening and sectoral expansion. While still lacking the legal integration mechanisms of more mature regional blocs, the OTS has nonetheless developed a functional and symbolically resonant institutional framework for engaging with family and social policy. This structure not only supports the dissemination of shared norms but also reflects the organization's broader ambition to construct a cohesive Turkic regional identity grounded in cultural and civilizational values.

4. FAMILY AND SOCIAL POLICY COOPERATION AMONG MEMBER STATES

The cooperation in family and social policies among the member states of the Organization of Turkic States (OTS) has evolved from ad hoc expressions of cultural solidarity into more structured and recurring institutional engagements. While still situated within a flexible and voluntary governance framework, this collaboration demonstrates an emerging regional awareness of the strategic role that family and social policy can play in consolidating cultural bonds, enhancing social resilience, and advancing soft power goals (Yenokyan, 2023: 612-615).

A central instrument of this cooperation is the Ministerial Meetings on Social Policy, Family, Women, and Child Affairs, which have been convened periodically since the early 2010s. These meetings provide a formal platform for member states' ministries responsible for family and social affairs to engage in dialogue, share national experiences, and formulate joint visions. Discussions commonly center on demographic challenges, family integrity, women's participation in public life, protection of children and vulnerable populations, and the preservation of traditional values (Organization of Turkic States, 2024; Organization of Turkic States, 2025).

One key outcome of these gatherings has been the adoption of Joint Declarations and Statements of Intent, which articulate shared concerns and outline areas of cooperation. For example, communiqués have emphasized the importance of strengthening family institutions as the foundation of social cohesion, combating domestic violence, promoting women’s empowerment within culturally appropriate frameworks, and preserving intergenerational bonds. While these documents do not have binding legal force, they reflect a degree of normative convergence, a shared vocabulary of social responsibility rooted in Turkic civilizational values (Trend Azerbaijan, 2025).

Another mechanism for coordination is the formation of technical working groups and expert-level committees, often tasked with drafting action plans, conducting comparative research, and proposing training and capacity-building initiatives. These mechanisms create avenues for policy learning and the diffusion of best practices, especially in areas such as early childhood development, family counseling services, and social assistance programs. They also facilitate the translation of abstract commitments into practical, implementable projects (Börzel & Risse, 2009: 298–299).

In addition to formal bureaucratic channels, symbolic and thematic initiatives have played a key role in strengthening cooperation. The declaration of thematic years, such as “The Year of the Turkic Family” or “The Year of Youth”, has been instrumental in generating public awareness and fostering a sense of common purpose. These thematic years often include a range of transnational events such as family festivals, youth forums, academic conferences, and public campaigns across OTS member states. Such initiatives not only deepen institutional cooperation but also reinforce the narrative of a shared social destiny among Turkic nations (Anadolu Agency, 2023).

Furthermore, several bilateral and trilateral collaborations within the OTS framework have complemented broader multilateral efforts. For instance, Türkiye and Azerbaijan have engaged in joint programs on family support services, while Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan have collaborated on rural family development and maternal health initiatives. These partnerships often function as policy laboratories, offering replicable models for the wider region and demonstrating how cultural proximity can translate into policy innovation (AZERTAC, 2025; Rechel & Moldoisaeva, 2021).

Digital platforms have also emerged as new arenas for cooperation. The development of online family education programs, digital archives of Turkic cultural traditions, and transnational youth portals signal a shift toward e-governance in social policy (Paskaleva-Shapira, Azorín & Chiabai, 2008: 389–390). These tools enable broader reach, cost-effective dissemination of ideas, and the engagement of diaspora populations, thus extending the normative influence of OTS beyond its geographic boundaries.

Despite these promising developments, the cooperation remains constrained by several factors. Administrative asymmetries among member states, ranging from institutional capacity to funding availability, limit the depth and sustainability of joint initiatives. Additionally, differing legal frameworks and political priorities result in uneven implementation and varying interpretations of shared goals. The absence of a centralized monitoring mechanism or compliance framework further exacerbates these challenges, placing the burden of continuity on political will and diplomatic momentum (Glušac, 2025).

Nevertheless, the steady accumulation of shared experiences, symbolic gestures, and institutional interactions points to a gradual process of social policy convergence. This convergence is not enforced through hierarchical integration but cultivated through a shared normative orientation, frequent

communication, and mutual learning. Over time, such mechanisms may serve as the foundation for more formalized cooperation, including harmonized standards, joint institutions, or region-wide policy instruments (Börzel & Risse, 2009: 8–9).

In sum, the OTS member states are engaging in a form of norm-driven, culturally anchored regionalism in the field of family and social policy. The collaborative actions undertaken thus far, though soft in form and limited in scope, are shaping a distinctive model of multilateral social governance, one that blends traditional values with modern institutional practices. As this cooperation continues to mature, it holds the potential to contribute not only to domestic social resilience but also to the construction of a cohesive and value-rich regional identity.

5. INSTITUTIONAL ALIGNMENT: GAPS, CHALLENGES, POTENTIALS AND CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES

While the Organization of Turkic States (OTS) has demonstrated a clear and increasing interest in institutionalizing cooperation on family and social policies, the extent to which this cooperation translates into genuine policy alignment remains uneven. The evolution from rhetorical commitment to operational coordination is marked by both promising developments and significant structural challenges. An assessment of institutional alignment in this context must therefore move beyond declarations and symbolic initiatives to interrogate the mechanisms, depth, and sustainability of intergovernmental cooperation in social policy domains.

5.1. Institutional Gaps

One of the most evident gaps in the current framework is the lack of standardized policy instruments or benchmarks that would allow member states to assess convergence or divergence in social policy outcomes. While joint declarations often articulate shared goals, such as strengthening the family unit or supporting women's participation, they rarely specify measurable targets, timelines, or enforcement mechanisms. This absence of quantifiable criteria undermines efforts at tracking progress or identifying best practices, resulting in a reliance on informal coordination and discretionary implementation.

Furthermore, the OTS does not yet possess a centralized institutional body exclusively dedicated to family and social affairs, akin to the social policy directorates found in more advanced regional organizations. The thematic responsibilities are dispersed among various ministries and ad hoc working groups, which leads to coordination inefficiencies and inconsistency in agenda-setting. Without a permanent technical secretariat or observatory function focused on social indicators, institutional memory is fragmented, and long-term strategic planning becomes difficult (Uzbek Embassy, 2021).

5.2. Structural and Political Challenges

The pursuit of institutional alignment is also constrained by structural disparities among member states in terms of administrative capacity, economic resources, and legal frameworks. For example, Türkiye and Kazakhstan possess relatively developed bureaucratic infrastructures for implementing comprehensive family and welfare policies, while other member states may face limitations in policy formulation, budget allocation, or service delivery. This

disparity creates asymmetries in expectations and capabilities, affecting the degree of meaningful cooperation (Knox, 2008: 477–479).

In addition, domestic political priorities and ideological orientations vary across the OTS landscape. While all member states rhetorically emphasize the centrality of family and traditional values, their interpretations of gender roles, social intervention, and state responsibility differ significantly. In some contexts, family policy is framed primarily in terms of demographic preservation; in others, it is linked to nation-building or religious morality. These ideological divergences shape national approaches and may hinder the harmonization of policy tools, particularly in sensitive areas such as gender equality or reproductive rights.

Language barriers, bureaucratic inertia, and occasional political tensions further complicate coordination efforts. While the shared Turkic linguistic and cultural heritage facilitates symbolic communication, administrative cooperation still requires formal translation, technical interoperability, and sustained diplomatic engagement, capacities that remain uneven across the region. Moreover, the absence of legally binding treaties or arbitration mechanisms in the OTS structure means that policy misalignment carries no institutional cost, relying instead on goodwill and consensus politics.

5.3. Normative and Strategic Potentials

Despite these obstacles, the institutional landscape also reveals significant potential for deeper alignment, particularly through normative convergence and strategic soft power initiatives. The repeated invocation of “shared Turkic values” and “civilizational continuity” in policy documents indicates the presence of a regional normative framework that, while currently implicit, could

be formalized into common principles guiding family and social policy development (Aris, 2009: 454).

There is also untapped potential in policy transfer and emulation, where successful programs in one country can serve as models for others. Türkiye's experiences with integrated family support centers or Kazakhstan's digital youth policy platforms, for instance, could be adapted regionally through structured knowledge exchange and technical assistance. The creation of a "Turkic Social Policy Resource Center", jointly funded and managed by member states, could institutionalize such practices by providing data, training, and evaluation tools for collaborative policymaking.

Another area of potential lies in leveraging cultural diplomacy as a means of social policy diffusion. Public campaigns, cultural festivals, and joint media initiatives that frame family well-being as a shared regional value can create public support for aligned policies. These efforts contribute not only to intergovernmental alignment but also to societal-level convergence, where public expectations and cultural imaginaries begin to reflect a common regional identity (Zamorano, 2016).

Finally, the OTS could consider developing a "Social Cohesion Index", drawing on existing national indicators to measure areas such as family stability, youth well-being, and gender inclusion. Such an index would serve both as a benchmarking tool and a symbolic commitment to measurable progress in social development, enhancing transparency and mutual accountability (Council of Europe, 2005).

5.4. Critical Perspectives on the OTS's Family and Social Policy Agenda

The Organization of Turkic States (OTS) member countries have embraced an emphasis on traditional values as a shared normative framework in family and social policy. However, the notion of traditional can carry divergent meanings in the context of gender roles, gender equality, and intra-family power relations. In some member states, the expansion of women's labor force participation is explicitly articulated as a policy goal, whereas in others, strong cultural narratives frame women's primary role as fulfilling caregiving responsibilities within the family (UN Women, 2020). Such divergence can create potential tensions with gender equality norms defined in international human rights instruments, including the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW, 1979) and the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (United Nations, 1995).

Social policy, particularly when centered on family-oriented campaigns and national-moral values discourse, can also serve as a tool for generating political legitimacy. In this regard, social policy instruments may be instrumentalized not only to achieve welfare or equity objectives but also to consolidate regime support bases, weaken opposition, or reinforce national unity narratives (True, 2012). This instrumentalization risk can distance policy design from evidence-based approaches and allow short-term political gains to overshadow long-term social development goals.

Significant differences exist among member states in terms of social policy capacity, budgetary resources, administrative structures, and legal frameworks. These disparities hinder the uniform implementation of OTS-level declarations on the ground. Certain countries may lag in achieving common objectives due to technical and financial capacity limitations. The absence of a centralized

monitoring and evaluation mechanism makes it more difficult to reveal and address these disparities.

Moreover, the OTS's traditional values-based approach to social policy carries a risk of misalignment with certain international norms. For example, reproductive health rights, prohibitions against discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity, and adherence to international standards for combating violence against women are not equally embraced across all member states. Such divergences may limit cooperation with international organizations such as UN Women or the Council of Europe and weaken the OTS's normative legitimacy on the global stage (True, 2012; UN Women, 2020).

5.5. Strategic Outlook

The current state of institutional alignment in family and social policy among OTS member states can best be described as formative but fragmented. While substantial progress has been made in creating symbolic and dialogic infrastructure, functional convergence remains at an early stage. The consolidation of this domain will depend on three interrelated factors: the political will to institutionalize soft cooperation into structured governance; the administrative capacity to implement and monitor policy commitments; and the shared normative ambition to articulate a distinctive Turkic social policy identity (Börzel & Risse, 2009: 4–6).

For the member countries of the Organization of Turkic States, it would be useful to create a composite compliance index to support the discussion of institutional alignment in the field of family and social policy with quantitative data.

Table 1. Raw Indicators

Country	Female labor force participation (%) (2024)	Adolescent fertility rate (15–19, per thousand) (2023)	Under-5 mortality rate (per thousand) (2023)
Türkiye	36.3	12.1	12.8
Azerbaijan	60.4	35	18.6
Kazakhstan	66.0	18.2	9.6
Kyrgyzstan	53.0	28.3	17.2
Uzbekistan	39.4	34.1	13.3

Considering appropriate and up-to-date data availability, three indicators have been selected: female labor force participation rate, adolescent fertility rate (ages 15–19), and under-5 mortality rate. A high female labor force participation rate combined with low adolescent fertility and low child mortality is interpreted as a more advanced situation in terms of social policy alignment. The indicator values were normalized to a 0–1 range using the min–max method to facilitate cross-country comparison, and then an equally weighted composite 'Compliance Index' was calculated.

Table 2. Normalized Scores and Composite Compliance Index (0–1)

Country	Normalized female labor force participation (0–1)	Normalized adolescent fertility (0–1)	Normalized U5 mortality (0–1)	Compliance Index (0–1)	Rank
Kazakhstan	1.000	0.734	1.000	0.911	1
Türkiye	0.000	1.000	0.644	0.548	2
Kyrgyzstan	0.562	0.292	0.156	0.337	3
Azerbaijan	0.811	0.000	0.000	0.270	4
Uzbekistan	0.104	0.040	0.589	0.244	5

The composite index (0–1) results present a relative ranking among countries. In the sample, Kazakhstan, which has the highest female labor force

participation, scores relatively higher, while countries with relatively high adolescent fertility and under-5 mortality rates have weaker scores. Despite low adolescent fertility and a moderate level of child mortality, Türkiye shows potential areas for improvement due to low female labor force participation. These findings indicate the need to prioritize policy alignment in the OTS regarding gender equality in employment, sexual and reproductive health of youth, and child health (World Bank, 2025a; 2025b; 2025c).

In the long run, the alignment of family and social policies has the potential to transform the OTS from a primarily cultural-political organization into a more comprehensive regional community, one that balances sovereignty with solidarity. Achieving this will require a recalibration of priorities, resources, and institutional design, but the foundational elements, shared values, political engagement, and a growing body of cooperative experiences, are already in place.

3. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The findings of this study reveal that family and social policy have gradually emerged as meaningful dimensions of regional cooperation within the Organization of Turkic States (OTS), though not yet in a legally binding or operationally unified form. This evolution reflects a broader trend in contemporary regionalism, whereby cultural affinity and value-based governance gain salience alongside traditional economic or security-driven forms of integration. In this regard, the OTS represents a distinctive case of norm-driven regional construction, in which family policy functions both as a vehicle of soft power and as a site for regional identity articulation (Riggirozzi, 2017; Barbieri, 2019: 424-426).

One of the central insights from the institutional and discursive analysis is that family and social policy serve a dual function in the OTS framework. On one hand, they address internal development needs, strengthening social cohesion, preserving cultural continuity, and supporting vulnerable populations. On the other, they provide a normative foundation for regional unity, serving as a symbolic marker of a shared civilizational space rooted in Turkic traditions and moral values. This duality is emblematic of how soft policy domains are increasingly instrumentalized in regional politics, not merely as administrative concerns but as strategic arenas of legitimacy-building and cultural resonance (Edney, 2015: 270–271).

The OTS’s invocation of the family as a foundational social institution resonates deeply with the cultural imaginaries of its member states. The consistent use of phrases such as “strong family, strong nation” and “Turkic family values” in policy documents and public discourse points to a shared ideological grammar that transcends legal frameworks. This normative cohesion, while still informal, creates fertile ground for voluntary alignment and mutual recognition among member states. It also allows for cultural diplomacy to flourish through social policy, presenting the OTS not as an imitator of Western integration models, but as a *sui generis* regional actor shaped by indigenous values (Republic of Türkiye Directorate of Communications, 2025: Khalafov, 2024)

Moreover, the use of family and social policy as instruments of soft power is increasingly evident in the organization’s public-facing initiatives. Thematic years, youth forums, women’s summits, and public campaigns not only advance domestic agendas but also project a unified regional narrative that is attractive to both internal and external audiences. These initiatives help to construct what may be termed a “social-cultural regional brand”, one that positions the OTS as a morally cohesive and culturally self-conscious bloc in a multipolar world order.

Such branding enhances the organization's diplomatic identity and provides a basis for normative influence, particularly in Central Asia and among diasporic communities.

In the context of normative institutionalism, the gradual emergence of a common social policy vocabulary and the repetition of shared symbols (such as the Turkic family, traditional gender roles, and intergenerational solidarity) reflect a shift in organizational behavior from procedural coordination to identity-infused policymaking. This shift suggests that the OTS is not merely coordinating policy for pragmatic reasons, but is also constructing an internal logic of appropriateness, what ought to be done, not just what can be done. This form of norm internalization marks a key step in the institutional deepening of regional governance (Sommerer & Stetter, 2011: 5–7).

However, it must also be recognized that this normative convergence does not yet equate to policy harmonization in the strict sense. Differences in legal traditions, administrative models, and socio-political contexts among member states continue to create divergence in the implementation of shared principles. As such, the OTS currently operates in a symbolic-institutional mode, where alignment is driven more by consensus-building, shared rhetoric, and soft law instruments than by enforceable policy regimes. While this mode has its limitations, it also offers flexibility and cultural legitimacy, key assets in regions characterized by high political diversity but strong civilizational commonality (Börzel & Risse, 2009: 9–10).

This discussion points to the importance of understanding social policy not merely as a domestic matter, but as a domain increasingly shaped by international and regional dynamics. In the case of the OTS, family and social policies have become tools of both internal resilience and external projection. They allow member states to craft a shared sense of moral purpose, establish

common standards of social good, and cultivate a regional public sphere where cultural authenticity and modern governance can coexist (Pevehouse, 2002: 520–522).

Going forward, the strategic use of social policy for regional cohesion may deepen further if the OTS invests in institutional innovations, such as monitoring bodies, data-sharing mechanisms, and joint policy evaluations, that translate normative consensus into actionable frameworks. Such developments would move the organization closer to becoming a norm-producing regional community, one capable of shaping not only trade or diplomacy, but also the social imagination and welfare trajectories of its constituents (Riggirozzi, 2017: 6–8).

This study has examined the evolving role of family and social policies within the institutional architecture of the Organization of Turkic States (OTS), offering a comprehensive analysis of how these policy domains are being used to promote normative convergence, cultural solidarity, and soft regional integration. The analysis demonstrates that, while not yet unified through formal legal frameworks or harmonized implementation mechanisms, member states of the OTS are progressively engaging in shared discourses, joint initiatives, and symbolic gestures that reflect an emerging consensus around the social foundations of regional cooperation.

Through the lens of normative institutionalism, the study has shown that the OTS is gradually internalizing a set of shared values, centered on family integrity, traditional morality, and social cohesion, which inform both policy language and intergovernmental cooperation. This norm-based alignment is not imposed through hierarchical structures but emerges organically through ministerial dialogue, joint declarations, and thematic campaigns. The repeated

use of culturally resonant concepts such as “the Turkic family” or “moral unity” illustrates how policy becomes a vehicle for identity formation.

From the perspective of regional governance theory, the findings indicate a growing institutional density in the social policy sphere, albeit one characterized by flexibility and soft coordination. Ministerial meetings, expert committees, and working groups provide the scaffolding for gradual policy convergence, even as legal and administrative disparities among member states persist. The institutional framework of the OTS remains voluntary and dialogic, yet it serves as a platform for mutual learning and symbolic unity.

Equally important is the role of family and social policy as instruments of soft power and cultural diplomacy. By emphasizing common heritage, moral values, and societal responsibilities, the OTS leverages these domains to project a unique regional identity, both internally to its populations and externally to the broader international community. These efforts contribute to the creation of a distinct “Turkic model” of regionalism, one rooted in cultural continuity rather than bureaucratic integration.

Despite these promising developments, the analysis also highlights ongoing challenges and institutional gaps. The absence of centralized monitoring tools, disparities in policy capacity, and divergent national priorities limit the depth and effectiveness of current cooperation. Without enforceable mechanisms or common standards, policy convergence remains largely rhetorical. Addressing these shortcomings will require not only greater political will, but also investments in institutional innovation, such as the establishment of a permanent social policy unit within the Secretariat or the development of shared indicators for benchmarking progress.

Nevertheless, the OTS has succeeded in creating a normative environment where social policy matters, not only as a domestic concern but as a regional strategy. In doing so, it offers a model of civilizational regionalism, where culture, history, and identity form the backbone of integration efforts. This model may hold particular relevance for other regional organizations in non-Western contexts that seek to balance sovereignty with solidarity, and tradition with modernization.

In conclusion, the institutional alignment of family and social policy in the OTS is a work in progress, incremental, uneven, yet symbolically powerful. It reflects a new frontier of regional cooperation, one that situates human development, cultural values, and social resilience at the heart of multilateral governance. Future research could build upon this foundation by conducting empirical case studies of specific programs, analyzing public perceptions of regional social initiatives, or exploring comparative lessons from other regional blocs. Ultimately, understanding how social policy contributes to regional integration offers valuable insights into the changing nature of international cooperation in the 21st century.

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GENİŞLETİLMİŞ ÖZET

Giriş

Türk Devletleri Teşkilatı (TDT), son yıllarda kültürel dayanışmanın ötesine geçen bir yapıya evrilmiş; ekonomi, dijitalleşme ve güvenlik gibi alanlarda bölgesel iş birliğini derinleştirmeye başlamıştır. Bu dönüşüm sürecinde öne çıkan temalardan biri de aile ve sosyal politika olmuştur. Geleneksel olarak ulusal hükümetlerin iç meselesi olarak görülen bu politika alanı, TDT bağlamında hem ortak kültürel değerlerin taşıyıcısı hem de bölgesel norm üretiminin bir aracı haline gelmektedir. Bu çalışma, TDT kapsamında aile ve sosyal politika alanında yürütülen iş birliğini analiz etmeyi, bu iş birliğinin kurumsal düzeyde nasıl yapılandığını incelemeyi ve bölgesel kimlik inşasına katkılarını değerlendirmeyi amaçlamaktadır.

Çalışmanın temel varsayımı, TDT üyesi ülkelerin aile ve sosyal politikalar üzerinden yalnızca refah temelli değil, aynı zamanda normatif ve kültürel bir yakınlaşma süreci inşa ettiğidir. Bu yakınlaşma, zorlayıcı değil; aksine gönüllülüğe dayalı, yumuşak güç stratejileriyle ve ortak söylemlerle ilerlemektedir. “Türk ailesi”, “milli-manevi değerler” gibi kavramlar, bu sürecin temel taşıyıcılarıdır. Çalışma, normatif kurumsalcılık, bölgesel yönetim ve yumuşak güç kuramları çerçevesinde çok boyutlu bir değerlendirme sunar.

Yöntem

Bu araştırma niteliksel bir tasarım benimsemekte ve betimleyici-analitik yöntemle ilerlemektedir. Veriler, TDT tarafından yayımlanan zirve bildirileri, sosyal politika temalı bakanlar toplantısı sonuç raporları, ortak deklarasyonlar, eylem planları ve kurumsal belgeler üzerinden elde edilmiştir. Ayrıca TDT'ye bağlı organların (Sekretarya, Türk Akademisi, TÜRKSOY vb.) sosyal politika çerçevesinde yürüttüğü faaliyetler, sembolik temalar ve kültürel programlar da değerlendirme kapsamına alınmıştır.

Araştırma sürecinde, TDT'nin sosyal politika alanındaki kurumsallaşma düzeyi; karar alma mekanizmaları, uygulama araçları ve izleme süreçleri açısından analiz edilmiştir. Ayrıca üye ülkeler arasındaki söylemsel yakınlaşma, ortak kavram kullanımı ve tematik yıllar gibi yumuşak entegrasyon unsurları da derinlemesine incelenmiştir.

Ek olarak, nitel bulguları desteklemek amacıyla sınırlı düzeyde nicel bir değerlendirme de yapılmıştır. Bu kapsamda, Türk Devletleri Teşkilatı (TDT) üye ülkelerinin aile ve sosyal politika alanındaki kurumsal uyum düzeylerini sayısal olarak karşılaştırmak üzere bir "Bileşik Uyum Endeksi" oluşturulmuştur. Endeks, üye ülkelerdeki toplumsal cinsiyet eşitliği ve sosyal kalkınma göstergelerine ilişkin mevcut veri setlerinden yararlanılarak hesaplanmıştır. Bu amaçla, kadın işgücüne katılım oranı, 15–19 yaş arası adölesan doğurganlık hızı ve beş yaş altı çocuk ölümleri gibi üç gösterge seçilmiştir. Veriler, ülkeler arası karşılaştırmayı kolaylaştırmak için min–maks normalizasyon yöntemiyle 0–1 aralığına dönüştürülmüş ve göstergeler eşit ağırlıkla birleştirilerek kompozit bir endeks değeri elde edilmiştir. Bu endeks, TDT üye ülkeleri arasında sosyal politika uyumunun nicel bir görünümünü sunmakta; nitel analizde belirlenen kurumsal yakınlaşma eğilimlerini sayısal olarak desteklemektedir. Böylece çalışma, nitel ve nicel yöntemleri harmanlayan karma bir analiz yaklaşımı kazanmıştır.

Çalışmada doğrudan alıntı ve anket türü veri kullanılmamış; belge analizi ve kavramsal okuma teknikleri ön planda tutulmuştur. Bu yönüyle çalışma, hem teorik katkı sunmayı hem de bölgesel politika süreçlerine dair yorum üretmeyi hedeflemektedir.

Bulgular

Araştırma bulguları, TDT'nin aile ve sosyal politika alanında sembolik düzeyde güçlü bir normatif zemin oluşturduğunu, ancak kurumsal uyumun henüz tamamlanmadığını göstermektedir. Üye ülkeler arasında "güçlü aile, güçlü toplum", "kadim değerler", "Türk kültürel kodları" gibi kavramlar etrafında bir ortak dil oluşmuş durumdadır. Aile yapısının korunması, kadınların toplumsal

yaşama katılımının desteklenmesi ve gençliğin ortak kimlik duygusuyla yetiştirilmesi, temel öncelikler olarak sıralanmaktadır.

TDT bünyesindeki Sosyal Politika ve Aileden Sorumlu Bakanlar Toplantıları, teknik komiteler, uzmanlar forumları ve tematik yıllar gibi mekanizmalar, bu alanlarda politika alışverişi ve söylem uyumu sağlama amacı taşımaktadır. Ancak uygulamada ülkeler arasında ciddi yapısal ve yönetsel farklılıklar bulunmaktadır. Bazı ülkelerde sosyal politikalar daha kurumsal ve bütçesel olarak güçlü biçimde uygulanırken, diğerlerinde sınırlı kapasite dikkat çekmektedir. Ayrıca hukuki uyumdan çok gönüllülüğe ve ortak kültürel mirasa dayalı bir eşgüdüm öne çıkmaktadır.

TDT'nin sosyal politikaları aynı zamanda bir yumuşak güç stratejisi olarak da işlev görmektedir. Aile temalı kampanyalar, kültürel etkinlikler, ortak medya projeleri ve diaspora ile kurulan bağlar, hem iç kamuoyunda ortak kimlik duygusunu pekiştirmekte hem de bölgesel imaj inşasına katkı sağlamaktadır. Bu yönüyle sosyal politika, sadece refah alanı değil; aynı zamanda kimlik üretimi ve dış politika enstrümanı haline gelmektedir.

Sonuç ve Tartışma

Sonuç olarak, TDT'nin aile ve sosyal politika alanındaki kurumsal uyumu henüz başlangıç aşamasındadır; ancak söylemsel yaklaşma ve norm üretimi açısından önemli bir potansiyel barındırmaktadır. Kurumsal yapı içinde sosyal politika özelinde sürekli çalışan bir birimin olmaması, ortak veri sistemlerinin bulunmaması ve uygulamada bağlayıcılığın olmaması önemli yapısal sınırlılıklar olarak öne çıkmaktadır. Buna karşın, ortak bildiriler, tematik yıllar ve karşılıklı iyi uygulama transferi gibi mekanizmalar, yumuşak bir kurumsallaşmanın ipuçlarını vermektedir.

TDT'nin sosyal politika alanındaki çalışmaları, klasik entegrasyon modellerinden farklı olarak, kültürel benzerlikler ve ortak değerler temelinde yükselmektedir. Bu yönüyle teşkilat, Batı merkezli bölgeselcilik yaklaşımlarına alternatif bir model sunmaktadır. Gelecekte, sosyal politika alanında daha kurumsal yapılar kurulması, ortak izleme-eğitim mekanizmalarının oluşturulması ve sosyal göstergelerin standardize edilmesi, bölgesel iş birliğini daha ileriye taşıyabilir.

Bu çalışma, TDT örneği üzerinden sosyal politikanın bölgesel yönetimdeki rolünü göstermeyi amaçlamış; aynı zamanda normatif kurumsallaşmanın nasıl işlediğine dair kuramsal bir çerçeve sunmuştur. Gelecek araştırmalarda, saha verileriyle desteklenen ülke bazlı karşılaştırmalar, halk düzeyinde algı analizleri ve TDT dışı bölgesel örgütlerle kıyaslamalar bu alandaki bilgi birikimini artıracaktır.