



TURKEY'S PUBLIC DIPLOMACY ACTIVITIES IN KYRGYZSTAN

Public diplomacy methods are becoming increasingly important for states to achieve their goals in line with their foreign policy agendas and strategies. Over the last 10 years, Turkey has also made considerable strides in its international relations, establishing new institutions and restructuring pre-existing ones. In this regard, Turkey's public diplomacy activities towards becoming a regional power began in 1992 through the Turkish International Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TIKA). After the establishment of Turkey's Office of Public Diplomacy in 2010, the activities evolved within a certain method and system. Today Turkey implements an effective public diplomacy policy towards the public opinion of other countries through various institutions such as the Turkish Radio and Television Corporation, the Directorate of Religious Affairs, the Yunus Emre Institute, the Presidency for Turks Abroad and Related Communities (YTB), and Turkish Airlines. Turkey's foreign expansion process that began in the 1990s and multilateral active foreign policy trends have revealed the need to strengthen social and cultural ties, particularly with the Balkans and the Turkic Republics. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Turkic Republics in Central Asia gained their independence, which allowed Turkey to initiate public diplomacy activities towards the countries in the region under the leadership of TIKA. This article will examine Turkey's public diplomacy in Kyrgyzstan among the Central Asian countries where Kyrgyzstan has an appropriate infrastructure for some regional and global powers to apply soft power.

Kyrgyzstan has an important place in Turkey's regional foreign policy. Relations between the two countries began when Turkey was one of the first countries to recognize Kyrgyzstan's independence on December 24, 1991. The cooperation between the two countries is based on shared history, culture, language, and religion. More than 100 agreements and protocols covering political, trade and economic, cultural, educational, military-technical areas provide the legal framework of relations between Turkey and Kyrgyzstan. Among these the Agreement on Eternal Friendship and Cooperation signed in 1997, the "Turkey and Kyrgyzstan: Together Towards the 21st Century" declaration issued in 1999, and the Joint Statement on Establishment of High-Level Strategic Cooperation Council signed in 2011 are fundamental ones. Since the beginning of diplomatic relations, the presidents of Kyrgyzstan visited Turkey 11 times, while the presidents of Turkey paid an official visit to Kyrgyzstan 8 times.

The feature of Turkey's public diplomacy activities in Kyrgyzstan allows us to consider Turkey as a donor country, which provides foreign assistance to Kyrgyzstan. The

political revolutions in Kyrgyzstan in 2005 and 2010 significantly affected the country's economy and caused a crisis in the country in general. The assistance provided by Turkey to Kyrgyzstan in difficult times was well received by the Kyrgyz public. In 2011, after his visit to Kyrgyzstan, Turkey's then Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan provided \$71 million in financial assistance to the country and wrote off Kyrgyzstan's external debt of \$51 million.

TIKA first started its activity in September 1992 under the name of the Bishkek Program Coordination Office. Since it started operating in Kyrgyzstan in 1992 until 2018, TIKA has implemented 761 projects in various fields such as infrastructure, education, health, cultural cooperation, communication, emergency response, and humanitarian aid. These projects include 117 health, 166 education, 180 other infrastructure and services, 124 economic infrastructure and services, 80 cultural cooperation and communication, 40 water and sanitation, 40 production, and 14 emergency response and humanitarian projects. According to the Development Partners Coordination Council in the Kyrgyz Republic, Turkey ranked first in 2007, 2009, 2010, and 2011 and second in 2008 among the countries engaged in official development assistance to Kyrgyzstan. The assistance provided by Turkey during the period of revolutions and tensions in Kyrgyzstan can be considered as part of public diplomacy. In recent years, TIKA's one of the major projects in Kyrgyzstan has been the Bishkek Kyrgyz-Turkish Friendship State Hospital built with the financial support of Turkey. The hospital with a closed area of 11,000 square meters was constructed according to international standards. TIKA also provided necessary medical equipment for the hospital to provide a better service. The Bishkek Central Mosque completed on the initiative of the Turkish Foundation for Religious Affairs in 2016, is also one of the significant projects of Turkey's public diplomacy. The mosque with a capacity of 20,000 worshippers was built on an area of around 3.5 hectares.

In addition, Turkey rehabilitated the Karataş water channel in Kyrgyzstan to prevent problems related to flooding, water distribution, and agricultural use of water in villages where Kyrgyz and Uzbek citizens live. The wear out of the 652-meter part out of the total 3.2 km length of the channel caused floods. The channel covers were often closed to prevent flooding, resulting in the dehydration of the agricultural land in the village of Mirmahmudov (Uzbekistan), which in turn caused tensions between ethnic groups in the Osh region of Kyrgyzstan. Rehabilitation of this water channel has contributed not only to the Osh region of Kyrgyzstan but also to peace and understanding between fraternal peoples in Central Asia in

general. We can say that with these projects, Turkey managed to achieve the aim of positive development/reinforcement of the country's perception abroad, which is one of the goals of public diplomacy.

Education is another area of public diplomacy. Manas University, which is a joint venture between Turkey and Kyrgyzstan, is one of the significant activities in this field. The university was founded in accordance with the agreement between the governments of the Republic of Turkey and the Kyrgyz Republic on the establishment of Kyrgyzstan-Turkey Manas University in Kyrgyzstan's capital city Bishkek, which was signed in Izmir on September 30, 1995. The competent authorities of both countries afterward approved the agreement, and the academic process at the university started in 1997-1998. The university accepts students from three main sources. In addition to Kyrgyzstan, students come from different countries, especially from Turkey, Turkic Republics, and related communities. The total number of active students is 5,684, while 6,165 students have graduated from the university so far. Apart from that, some universities in Kyrgyzstan have Turkish Language Centers for teaching Turkish. For example, the Turkish Language and Culture Center operates at Kyrgyzstan-Turkey Manas University and the Kyrgyz-Russian Slavic University. Again, with the support of TIKA, a language center was opened at Bishkek Humanities University. In addition, the Turkish Education Center under the Embassy of the Republic of Turkey in the Kyrgyz Republic helps Kyrgyz students to receive education in Turkey by organizing Turkish language courses. Moreover, Kyrgyz students are educated in Turkey's universities through YTB, which is an important instrument of Turkey's soft power in the field of education. The number of Kyrgyz students studying at the universities of Turkey in 2018-2019 was 1,937.

To conclude, since Kyrgyzstan's independence, Turkey continues to assist and support the country through a variety of public diplomacy tools. TIKA's activities in Kyrgyzstan are among the primary drivers of Turkish soft power. Kyrgyzstan-Turkey Manas University, which is a successful example of cooperation in the field of education, also contributes to training highly skilled personnel and fostering cultural attachments between the two countries. Named as Central Asia's island of democracy, Kyrgyzstan is a country, where there is a concentration of different powers trying to use their soft power through various channels. Considering those, Turkey is taking the lead with its financial and moral support provided under public diplomacy.

Politics, Foreign Affairs, and Security

- At the initiative of President of Azerbaijan Ilham Aliyev, the current chairperson of the Non-Aligned Movement, a summit of the movement's contact group, set up in response to the coronavirus pandemic, was held via videoconference. The meeting focused on measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19 and deal with its social and economic consequences. Participants adopted the final declaration reaffirming the movement's full support for the work of the World Health Organization (President of Azerbaijan, 04.05.2020).
- Foreign Minister of Turkmenistan Rashid Meredov held talks with OSCE Secretary General Thomas Greminger via videoconference. The parties discussed practical issues of Turkmenistan's interaction with the OSCE and emphasized the need to coordinate efforts in addressing socio-economic and humanitarian issues caused by the coronavirus outbreak. The parties also discussed the implementation of the OSCE project "Promoting the Development of Green Ports in the Caspian Sea Region" (MFA of Turkmenistan, 06.05.2020).
- President of Kazakhstan Kassym-Jomart Tokayev and his Uzbek counterpart Shavkat Mirziyoyev discussed over the phone the implementation of measures to mitigate the consequences of the flooding in the border areas of the two countries caused by the burst of the Sardoba dam. The two leaders reached an agreement on further improvement of mechanisms for joint management and use of transboundary river resources. In this regard, the governments of the two countries will consider the establishment of a permanent high-level ad hoc group (Akorda, 08.05.2020).
- During a ceremony held at the Kant air base, the Russian Ministry of Defense transferred radiation, chemical and biological protection equipment worth 4.9 million soms (66,533 dollar) to the Armed Forces of Kyrgyzstan as part of bilateral military-technical cooperation. Personal protective gear such as gas masks and special suits will be used by Kyrgyz servicemen ensuring the state of emergency introduced in certain parts of Kyrgyzstan due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Kabar, 04.05.2020).
- Three Kyrgyz border guards and two Tajik civilians were injured during a skirmish on the border of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. The Tajik side claims that the conflict was provoked by Kyrgyz citizens who tried to seize a land plot that belongs to Tajikistan. The Kyrgyz side insists that the disputed land is located in an undocumented area used by Kyrgyzstan. Border guards became involved in the conflict when Kyrgyz and Tajik villagers began to throw stones and fire at each other (Deutsche Welle, 08.05.2020).
- Georgia recalled its ambassador to Ukraine for consultations after the country's former president Mikheil Saakashvili was appointed as the chair of the Ukrainian Executive Reform Committee. According to Georgian Foreign Minister David Zalkaliani, the move did not mean breaking diplomatic relations between the two countries, although Kiev's decision "raises questions". In 2018, Georgia convicted Saakashvili of abuse of power and seeking to cover up evidence about the 2005 beating of an opposition parliamentarian (Al Jazeera, 08.05.2020).

Economy, Finance, and Energy

- Ministers of economy and heads of customs administrations of the Turkic Council member and observer states held a videoconference meeting to discuss measures to maintain the current level of economic and trade relations and mitigate negative effects of the coronavirus. The parties agreed to develop a joint action plan under the coordination of the Turkic Council Secretariat, consisting of measures to ensure food security and accelerate customs clearance procedures of essential goods and humanitarian aid (Daily Sabah, 06.05.2020).
- The Indian Embassy in Baku organized an online conference on the promotion and development of business between Azerbaijan and India. Officials and business representatives of the two countries discussed prospects of cooperation in the areas of tourism, agriculture, pharmaceuticals, services, consulting, and IT. The National Confederation of Entrepreneurs of Azerbaijan proposed to create a digital platform to facilitate interaction between Indian and Azerbaijani companies, as well as to develop a roadmap for cooperation in the post-pandemic period (Trend, 08.05.2020).
- As Russia faces a deep economic contraction due to the coronavirus outbreak and lockdown, its central bank will consider cutting its key rate by 100 basis points in June 2020. If implemented, this cut would take the key rate to 4.5%. According to Chair of the Central Bank Elvira Nabiullina, the GDP of Russia could shrink by 8% in the second quarter from a year earlier, while its banking sector would see a decline in profits in 2020 because of bad loans (Reuters, 08.05.2020).
- TAV Airports, Turkey's leading airport operator, reached a deal to acquire the Almaty International Airport in Kazakhstan for \$450 million. The Almaty Airport, a main transit hub between Asia and Europe, will become the 15th airport in TAV's global network. When the deal is finalized, TAV and its investment partner, VPE Capital, will purchase 100% of the airport's shares, with TAV holding no less than 75%. In 2019, the Almaty Airport served 6.4 million passengers (Airport World, 08.05.2020).
- In his letter to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) requesting financial assistance, President of Tajikistan Emomali Rahmon stated that migrant worker remittances from Russia dropped by 50% (\$80 million) in March and the first half of April 2020. Rahmon emphasized that the reduction of remittances could continue for several months, which would lead to negative economic and social consequences. Following the receipt of the letter, the IMF approved a \$189.5 million disbursement to Tajikistan under the Rapid Credit Facility (Asia-Plus, 08.05.2020).
- The Yamalo-Nenets Autonomous Region of Russia plans to increase exports of fish products to the markets of Belarus and Kazakhstan. The region's export potential of processed fish is 240 tons, or about 1 million cans. Regional officials are completing formalities to license the Salekhard Plant to export fish products within the EAEU. The plant produces more than 60 types of canned fish and 90 types of fish products (TASS, 07.05.2020).

Society and Culture

- TURKSOY and the Turkish Historical Society released the second volume of the bibliographic dictionary of Eurasian Turkologists named "Turkologists of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan". The 463-page book, written in Turkish and Russian, provides biographical information about 340 well-known researchers in the field of history, linguistics, literature, archeology and sociology, as well as the bibliography of their main scientific works (Kabar, 05.05.2020).
- The ceremony of laying the first stone in the construction of a specialized pottery center was held in the Rishton district of Uzbekistan's Ferghana region. Rishton, located along the ancient Silk Road route, has always been famous for its ceramics and was the center of its production in Central Asia. Today, more than 20 senior craftsmen live and work in Rishton, as well as about 7,000 of their students. The center that will house workshops and exhibition galleries will help to further develop the traditions of Rishton artisans, as well as to disseminate their experience to other regions of the country (Podrobno.uz, 04.05.2020).
- At the initiative of Mayor of Dushanbe Rustam Emomali, the Tajik Orien Farm company purchased medicines and other medical supplies in India and delivered them to Tajikistan on a special charter flight. The cargo also contained humanitarian aid provided by the government of India – drugs for the treatment of patients infected with COVID-19. All delivered supplies will be used at medical institutions of Dushanbe and other regions of the country (Avesta, 07.05.2020).
- A recent poll by the Russian Levada Center revealed that the approval rating of President Vladimir Putin's activities fell to a historic low. According to the poll, 59% of respondents approved the work of the Russian leader in April 2020 compared to 63% in March 2020. 33% of respondents did not approve Putin's activities. The previous minimum of President Putin's approval rate, 61%, was recorded twice – in November 2013 and June 2000. As stated by presidential spokesman Dmitry Peskov, the Kremlin is not inclined to entirely trust the results of the Levada Center's polls (Vedomosti, 06.05.2020).
- The Ministry of Culture of Turkmenistan held an online meeting with representatives of the World Tourism Organization. The main topic of the meeting was the participation of Turkmen organizations specializing in tourism in the international competition "Healing Solutions Tourism Challenge". This global campaign aims at finding effective solutions to support the tourism business in the current economic conditions, as well as innovative ways to restore the industry after the pandemic (Turkmenistan Today, 07.05.2020).
- The first zoo hotel for temporary housing of animals opened in the Turkmen city of Anau. It is intended to help animal owners who go on vacation or on a business trip and face the problem of what to do with a pet during their absence. The complex, located next to the veterinary clinic, is divided into several zones for cats, dogs, birds, as well as fish, for which an aquarium is provided (Turkmen Portal, 08.05.2020).