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Ideological Trends in the Context of Foreign Policy of Turkey



Arestakes Simavoryan

In recent years when Turkish political elite of Islamist orientation gave preference in foreign policy to neo-Ottomanism (Neo-Osmanlıcilik), this ideology has gradually become an axis of domestic and foreign policy.

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There are various visions of Turkey’s future in the “camps” of influential Turkish parties and due to this the discussions round the multi-polar, contrary ideologies (neo-Ottomanism, neo-pan-Turkism, neo-Kemalism, Turkish Eurasianism) continue and are reflected in the social life in Turkey. Those new ideologies are also important for the success of the parties in the domestic political competition.

Neo-Ottomanism

In recent years when Turkish political elite of Islamist orientation gave preference in foreign policy to neo-Ottomanism (Neo-Osmanlıcilik), this ideology has gradually become an axis of domestic and foreign policy.

The committed neo-Ottoman state propaganda has formed neo-Ottoman moods in different strata of society. Public shows great interest in “Ottoman Republic” historical-fantastic feature film which tells about Turkey under the Ottoman sultan. Among the youth T-shirt with the pictures of janissaries and “The Empire Strikes Back” inscriptions are widespread. The past is presented narrow-mindedly as the Pax Ottoman “Golden Age” when peace, tranquility,

prosperity and religious tolerance ruled over the Mediterranean Sea. “And such moods favour not accepting Turkey into the European society”¹.

In order to implement “big policy” the JDP uses many state structures which “educate” society in an Ottoman spirit.

In order to implement neo-Ottomanism, it is important to form appropriate moods in Muslim, and particularly, Arab countries and in this direction the purposeful policy is also carried out. The ideology is exported to both Turkish Diaspora and Arab countries. The agreement between the JDP and the senior educational council reached in January 2010 to carry out “neo-Ottoman” initiative, according to which students from Arab countries and particularly from Syria would enter Turkish universities for free, was remarkable event.

In our days the main architect of the geopolitical conception of neo-Ottomanism is considered to be the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Turkey Ahmet Davutoglu. The main goals of this ideology are reflected in his “Deep strategy”. But the roots of this ideology go back to the former president of Turkey Turgut Ozal, according to whom Islam is the factor which unites the population of the country and Muslims on Balkans and only newly elaborated ideology can unite them round the idea of a common state². Ozal did not mention which ideology can handle those issues but he implied the aspiration of Turkey to return to the Ottomanism.

During his address to the members of the Justice and Development Party in November 2009 the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Turkey stated that his country implements the policy of neo-Ottomanism. “There is a heritage left by the Ottoman Empire. We are called “neo-Ottomans”. Yes, we are “neo-Ottomans”. We are obliged to deal with the neighbour countries and we even get to Africa. Great powers are watching it in bewilderment”³, - he said.

Then, Davutoglu clarified that Turkey would not restrict itself to the implementation of one idea, and it will be followed by Turkey’s other ideologies of expansion: “The Ottoman Empire is a part of our history; Islam is one of the elements of our culture. The Western European orientation is our historical experience, Turkism – the main motion”⁴ – he mentioned.

Thus, three main components are distinguished: Ottoman Empire – Ottomanism, which is interconnected with Islam; Turkism – the main ideology of the historical self-identification and the simplest way to bring the Turkic speaking nations into the field of Ottomanism.

As we can see, the attempt of Turkey to become a member of the EU is a historical experience. But this does not mean giving up on the western direction in their foreign policy, but it considers the western direction as the alternative to it. Davutoglu thinks that the dependence of Turkey on the US and EU disturbed the balance of Turkey’s foreign policy, affected its national and

regional interests, that is why they have to stand up for the Ottoman heritage.

According to the analysts, in the foreign policy neo-Ottomanism will be based on several principles:

1. Turkey is not playing a role of the “younger brother” of the US and NATO, because this country is considered one of the main components of the security of Central Asia and region. From this the ideas of “OSCE” creation in the Caucasus and undertaking mediatory functions in the Middle East ensues.

2. One should not think that “neo-Ottomanism” constitute menace to the West and Russia.

3. “Neo-Ottomanism” has no aggressive sides⁵.

According to another opinion neo-Ottomanism has three underlined functions:

1. To come to terms on the domestic issues inside the country and with the Muslim world (Middle East, Balkans, North Africa). Not to position itself against the countries of those regions from the imperialistic positions. The soft and balanced policy of bringing the countries, which constituted part of the Ottoman Empire, into the field of “Ottomanism”.

2. Turkey must carry out very active diplomatic and economic policy in order to become a key actor in the region.

3. The policy of “neo-Ottomanism” will allow Turkey to “snatch” from the West Muslim Bosnia, Albania, Kosovo, even mainly Christian Macedonia and

Bulgaria (taking into consideration the percentage of Muslim population in that countries) ⁶.

According to a number of studies, the leadership in Ankara will use the so-called integration corridors as a mean to implement the policy of “neo-Ottomanism”, and it will begin from Turkey. It should be based on the Turkish “soft power” which has two main elements: economic might and the experience of democracy.

There are three known corridors:

1. Turkey-Syria-Lebanon-Jordan-Egypt, which later will include Israel and Palestine territories (first corridor).

2. Iraq and the countries of the Persian Gulf (second corridor).

3. Iran and Pakistan (third corridor) ⁷.

The third corridor is especially remarkable because it includes both the postulates of pan-Turkism and Eurasianism. On the one hand Turkey will aspire to involve Iran and Pakistan, as well as Afghanistan into the sphere of its influence and on the other hand the post-Soviet Turkic world – Central Asia and Azerbaijan.

In the opinion of the director of the Centre for the International Relations and Strategic Studies Sinan Ogan, Turkey is the only country which can lay a claim to modernize the Near and Middle East and is able to “reconcile” the region with the West. It is obvious that Turkey not only aims to restore the borders of the Ottoman Empire but also to obtain the energy resources and infrastructure, transportation junctions, ban-

king and communication networks in the region, which will turn the country into the geopolitical super power⁸.

The ambitions to become a geopolitical super power are also clearly reflected in the January 8, 2010 address of A. Davutoglu during his meeting with the diplomatic corps of Turkey. He particularly said that the goal of Turkey was obtaining the role of not only a regional but of a global power which was promoted by its unique geographic position, history and diplomatic experience⁹.

This model of foreign policy adopted by Turkey is just being implemented. Thus, taking into the assumption the claims to three regions (Middle East, Balkans, and North Africa) and the peculiarities of political, economic and other factors, it is difficult to predict whether the preference will be given to the military force or to the diplomacy. It is obvious that “open” diplomacy cannot help Turkey, because Arab world will never refuse the independence it obtained, thus, Turkey have to carry out “silent” diplomacy using all the possible leverages. Though Syria and Palestine, taking into consideration Israeli factor, may express political will to join Turkey. The policy carried out by Turkey in regard to other Arab countries, which have passive stance on the Israeli issue and rich oil resources, may bring to the collision with Anglo-American powers. So Turkey has many of problems in those issues.

There are also evidences that the Justice and Development Party of mo-

derate Islamists is an American elaboration and its author is the well-known neocon Paul Wolfowitz¹⁰. It is not a mere chance that this new policy of Turkey is backed by the American neocons too.

According to the estimations of the experts of the leading Turkish analytical centers this ideology is imposed on the Turkish political elite by the US. It is believed that it has been elaborated by the US and “think tanks” and it pursue long-term aims: to rule region, and particularly Arab world, through the mediator country, in this case through Turkey. In this aspect “neo-Ottomanism” has common ties with the well-known US “Great Middle East” project.

Davutoglu does not hide that the roots of the ideology and the term “neo-Ottomanism” originated in the US and that his vision of Turkey’s future is partially based on some postulates of George Freedman’s work¹¹.

The encouragement of the ideology by the US pursues other aim too, i.e. to neutralize Turkey’s national and Kemalist powers because the US does not want to see this country as a strong nation state¹². Besides, it is more advantageous for the US to see its ally Turkey in a role of the “leader” of the Muslim world instead of Iran.

The Islamic stronghold of neo-Ottomanism

Islam cannot be separated from the ideology of neo-Ottomanism. The Islamic factor (İslamcılık) plays a role of consolidating power, because Muslim

world and first of all the Arab countries of the Middle East and North Africa are regarded as the main ideological “target”. This all is also directed against the policy of Israel. As the latest developments in Turkish-Israeli relations come to prove, the first steps to implement that policy are taken in order to please Muslim world.

Later on it will include Balkan countries – Albania, Bosnia, Macedonia and Bulgaria – after which, according to the neo-Ottomans, Istanbul have to become a center of neo-caliphate (Neo-Halifelik) for the whole Muslim world.

Within the framework of this ideology the JDP, such groups as Army of Allah, soldiers of Allah and the warriors of Islamic revolution work.

The militaries of Kemalist orientation and oppositional Republican People’s Party scorn this initiative. In their opinion the incumbent administration has adopted ambitious and unrealistic project which will alienate Turkey from the republican principles of Atatürk. At the same time, the other issue which bothers Kemalists is the “Kurdish issue” because in case of implementation of the principles of neo-Ottomanism Kurds, like all other Muslims, will obtain wide cultural independence.

In fact, neo-Ottomanism is an ideological substantiation of the multi-cultural society. In this aspect it is opposed to Kemalism which tends to the homogeneity of the Turkish state.

Neo-Pan-Turkism

The next ideology which is revived

is pan-Turkism in its new interpretation – neo-pan-Turkism. For the US pan-Turkism was a powerful tool used against the USSR. But after the collapse of the later when the attempts of Turkey to unite Turkic speaking nations were put on more realistic plane this caused the concern of the US. However, the American political circles still use the pan-Turkic (Uyghur) factor directing it mainly against China, which can compete with the US today.

The main purpose of the pan-Turkists is to unite all the Turkic speaking nations in one common state, without taking into consideration their geographic sparseness and cultural differences.

In order to bring this ideology into life, the consolidation of the Turkic ethnoses from China to the Adriatic Sea is considered a primary aim. Significance is also attached to the economic factor which gives more underlined nature to that consolidation because the oil reserves of the Central Asia – the “Turan oil”, is a way to solve the energy problems of Turkey.

There are many controversies between neo-Ottomans and neo-pan-Turkists because for the later the main point is the ethnic factor which unites Turkic speaking nations and not the religious one (Semitic Arabs, Balkan Muslims). Even in case of such a controversy neo-Ottomans consider pan-Turkism as an alternative way, the factor which follows Ottomanism and supplements it and their final goal will be a Turkish Eurasianism.

Thus Turkism as ideology has never suffered regress and it can be used in case of the unpredictable changes in the region. The vivid example is the last war in Iraq when nationalist powers, including ultra-nationalist generals, provided propagandist and military help to the Iraqi Turkmen.

The adherents of the ideology of pan-Turkism are the National Movement Party, the ultra-nationalist wing of the militaries, semi-militarized radical nationalist group “Grey Wolves”.

Turkish Eurasianism

The ideology of Eurasianism and interest in it on state level are comparatively new phenomenon. It generally differs from the Russian Eurasianism in the elaboration of the concepts of which great role has been played by N. S. Trubetsky, P. N. Savitsky, G. V. Florovsky. The later believed that Russia with its historical and cultural specificity can be a core of Eurasia, thus stressing culture of the Asian-Turkic world, and this, in its turn has to play against the West. In our days this ideology was developed by A. Dugin. But Turkish Eurasianism today has other tendencies.

Sener Akturk, the American researcher of Turkish descent, thinks that it aims to reconcile two former empires – Turkish and Russian. According to the author, Turkish Eurasianism, together with pan-Turkism and neo-Ottomanism, has turned into one of the components of self-consciousness of the contemporary Turkish intellectual landscape. In accordance with

the author’s characteristic, the most important structural peculiarity of the Turkish Eurasianism is the struggle of Russia and Turkey against the West. As a result of such a struggle Eurasian conglomeration of Slavonic and Turkic nations should be formed. It turns out that Turkish Eurasianism is a project which counterbalances Western dominance¹³.

The pluralism of the opinions about the Turkish Eurasianism is not only far from disclosing the essence of this ideology but it tangles the points of view and complicates the forecasts. Nevertheless, Turkish Eurasianism has several directions, approaches to which are expressed in different ways by different Turkish parties. Due to this all, controversies between political powers are coming forward and impede forming of common logic.

JDP ruling party – Some postulates of the Eurasianism get the approval of neo-Ottomans but the approaches differ sharply. A. Davutoglu, who disclosed his vision on the way to Eurasia at the meeting of the Foreign Economic Relations Board (Dış Ekonomik İlişkiler Kurulu (DEİK) (February 5, 2010) is in the avant-garde of this approach too. Davutoglu offers to create Eurasian Union which will be able to create strong economic field. According to him Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway should become interlink connecting Central and East Asia. The railway going from Islamabad to Istanbul (east-west intersection) gives wide opportunities for the regional economic coope-

ration¹⁴.

Turkish analytics suppose that “creation” of the Eurasian Union is a challenge to the European Union. In reality, it is not known how the things will go in this direction because there is no clear reaction of the Asian countries on the proposal to create Eurasian Union. Davutoglu’s statement may have another subtext: coming out with such a proposal may be regarded as an attempt to create some structure which will be alternative to the European Union against the background of the possible failure to enter the European Union.

Nationalist powers – Ultra-nationalist and right-of-centre political and military powers find that the main goal of the Eurasianism should be establishing close relations with Turkic states of Transcaucasia and Central Asia. This, in its turn, will provide grounds for advancement of Turkey in those directions in future. In short, in nationalist circles the basic postulates of Eurasianism are based on the idea of Turkism and they do not offer anything new. Of course, here we speak about not the Eurasian (economic and etc.) union but about the Turkic union.

Liberal powers – In the opinion of the political powers of liberal orientation¹⁵, the axis of the ideology should be turning Turkey into the bridge connecting Europe and Asia which will bring to creation of the common economic field.

Kemalist powers – Kemalists have rather interesting formulations and as a result new sub-trend has been formed

within this ideology – Kemalist Eurasianism. Kemalist Eurasianism makes a sharp turn from the western values to the east, which is already deviation from the postulates of Kemal Ataturk.

The representatives of this trend find it important to create “Great Eurasian Space” which may include China, Russia, Turkey and Iran¹⁶, and this, in perspective, may contribute to the creation of a new military alliance which, undoubtedly, will be directed against the US. This group does not receive proper approval of the fervent Kemalists and gradually split the later.

The arrests of the high-ranking militaries in recent months by the order of the government were partially target policy directed on the one hand against anti-neo-Ottomans and radical nationalists and on the other hand against the oppositional power – RPP, which is supported by the later, in order to weaken it.

The idea of Eurasianism, in fact, embraced Turkish parties with different ideologies – both “moderate Islamists” and left oppositionists – Marxist-Socialists (Türkiye İşçi Partisi – Worker’s Party of Turkey is in close relations with the activists of the Russian Eurasian movement¹⁷ and receives rather great assistance from the US), and even national and confessional minorities (Alevites).

At the same time, Turkish high-ranking militaries, some intellectual circles (the most “outstanding” representatives of “think tanks” – Ali Sahin¹⁸, Süleyman Sensoy¹⁹) are also interested in

those processes. And at the same time, all three main ideologies are propagated in the society on a necessary level and for this purpose the most effective leverages are Turkey's "think tanks", state universities.

It is not a mere chance that on March 2-3, 2010, Eurasian symposium, which included well-known Turkish researchers, representatives of think tanks, political figures, militaries and officials, was held at the Ankara University. The following issues were on the agenda: Eurasianism as Turkey's current foreign policy direction; the strategic importance of Eurasia; issues regarding regional security; issues of the economic development and ways out of the global crisis as well as other issues concerning the history and other aspects of Eurasianism which have been left beyond the field of view of the Turkish intelligentsia.

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- 5 Валерий Петров, Новая внешняя политика Турции, <http://www.islamnews.ru/news-21431.html>:
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- 13 Sener Akturk, "Counter-Hegemonic Visions and Reconciliation through the Past: The Case of Turkish Eurasianism", Ab Imperio, 2004/4, pp. 207-238.
- 14 İbrahim Karagül, Davutoğlu, Avrasya Birliği, 'kaos kuşağı', Yeni Şafak, 05.02. 2010.
- 15 Such approaches are characteristic of Democratic Party (Demokrat Partisi) and other powers of the liberal orientation.
- 16 Эмель Акчали, Мехмет Перинчек, «Кемалистское евразийство: новый политический дискурс в Турции», <http://www.warandpeace.ru/ru/analysis/view/42088/>.
- 17 The leader of Workers' Party of Turkey Dogu Perincek who was arrested in connection with the "Ergenekon" case, is a member of the Eurasianist movement and he has strong ties with A. Dugin.
- 18 Ali Sahin is a chairman of Centre for Strategic Studies of South Asia (Güney Stratejik Araştırmalar Merkezi) established in 2004. The centre studies all the spheres concerning the countries of that region.
- 19 Suleyman Senoy is a head of Turkish Asian Centre for Strategic Studies (Türk Asya Stratejik Araştırmalar Merkezi) which is of high account. In February 2010 this centre held conference devoted to the cooperation and security of the Asian countries where the issues of the economic and political role of Asia in 21st century were discussed. This was the third conference in which the ambassadors of the Asian countries (Russia, China, Afghanistan, Japan and Central Asian countries) participated and where the issue of possibilities of the Eurasian geopolitics was discussed with the prospect of cooperation with Turkey.

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