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Turkish Diaspora as an Instrument of the ‘New’ Turkish Foreign Policy – The Case of Europe

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The assumption of power by AKP in 2002 adumbrated new era in the development of Turkish foreign policy. Following the consolidation of internal power position at the end 2010s, initially minor foreign policy changes and adaptations gained the scope of new doctrines and conceptions reflected not only in adoption of multi-vectoral foreign policy, but also in growing assertiveness, self-confidence and perceived readiness to assume the role of actor of regional and global significance.

The key thesis of this ‘new’ approach to Turkish foreign policy - as formulated by country’s former prime and foreign minister Ahmet Davutoglu - accentuated Turkey’s unique historical and geographical heritage as predisposing sources of power for country’s rise in the international arena. The invention of country’s new approach to foreign policy has been embodied in the emphasis on its civilizational and idea dimensions. From the geostrategic point of view, Turkey has been seen as a centrally located player with a number of regional identities, making it a Middle Eastern, Balkan, Caucasian, Central Asian, Caspian, Mediterranean and Black Sea country [2]. Building on the above-mentioned pillars of the ‘new’ Turkish foreign policy, Turkish officials argue that Turkey, as the natural heir to the Ottoman Empire, has the potential to become a transregional power and, just like the Ottoman Empire, may help to reunify and eventually lead the Muslim world [5].

In the process of promoting indicated goals and interests, the AKP leadership attaches great importance to instrumentalizing Turkish diaspora. On the contrary to previous regimes, the party highlights diaspora as a key soft power asset and intensifies efforts of diaspora policy generation. While doing so, AKP aims not only at supporting the diaspora members, but also at strengthening their loyalty to the ruling party which uses diaspora’s potential to advance its own domestic and foreign policy interests.

When analyzing Turkish diaspora, it is necessary to take a step beyond the general interpretation of efforts to mobilize and manage diasporas as a part of the general Global South trend and see it as one of the dimensions of deep internal transformation the country has been undergoing since the dawn of AKP leadership. Although AKP initially sought to mobilize the diaspora through a holistic approach that included social, economic and political agendas, the real transformational motivation came from the party’s own vision and the future goal for a ‘new Turkey’ it wanted to create - a vision that includes both domestic and foreign policy dimensions and places special emphasis on ethnic, religious and ideological hierarchies. This position was well-demonstrated in 2011 by foreign minister Ahmet Davutoglu’s remark: *We are changing the term of diaspora. We primarily change its content; what it contains. We conceive as our own diaspora not only our citizens living abroad, but also all kin communities that had been together with us in the past. The first orbit is our citizens abroad. Just outside that is the orbit of Albanians, Bosniaks, Circassians, Caucasians... Azeri people, all Turkic Republics are in the second orbit. The third orbit is composed of everyone who emigrated from these territories in some way and then lost their citizenship.*

Such redefinition of the concept of diaspora is two-folded. First, according to this interpretation, the term of Turkish diaspora has been extended not only to Muslim populations around the world, but it has also become so complex that it includes localities where no major Turkish diaspora exists - but may be a foreign policy area interest of the AKP [1]. Second, it is closely related to transnational promotion of the AKP vision of the 'new Turkish identity'. This 'new identity' formulated on the basis of unique combination of nationality and religious affiliation is omnipresent in policy transmission into Turkish diaspora which, as the result of the last five decades of migration, has become a true reflection of country's internal diversity and created more visibly heterogeneous collection of ethnic (Kurdish, Laz, Zaza) and religious (Sunni, Alevi) sub-groups [3]. In this context, incorporation of new bases of Turkey's foreign policy into the definition of Turkish diaspora is both extensive and at the same time strictly selective. The adoption of Neo-Ottomanism as an unofficial foreign policy orientation affects how the AKP defines the 'citizen' who lives abroad and individuals who are 'kin' to ethnic Turks. As the result, the major determinant of the diaspora membership is not expectable Anatolian origin, but belongingness to 'great Turkish nation', which further translates into national diaspora-building and engagement mechanisms. In the same spirit, references to a Muslim nationalist/Muslim Sunni identity provide ground for isolation of those Turkish citizens who come from different, 'undesired' ethnic and religious backgrounds [4].

The research works with the extended definition of the Turkish diaspora concept and its application on the case of Europe. This takes the form of comparing the AKP mobilization practices in two regions that are home to Turkish diaspora, namely Western Europe and the Balkans. The selection of comparisons is narrowed down to political and religious dimension including the issue of international spillover of the Gülen movement persecution. What are the possibilities and limitations of comparing tactics AKP uses to engage with local Turkish communities in these, in terms of diasporas' origin and nature, very different regions? How does AKP approach these communities to advance its domestic and foreign policy interests, often at the cost of creating tensions within the host societies?

References

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