Erdogan is Actively Trying to Score Points in Africa

Amid growing accusations against the Turkish government and calls for early presidential and parliamentary elections from the local population due to the intensifying domestic crisis in Turkey in recent days, there has been a surge in publications in the West about the impending power transition in Turkey. Thus, American edition Foreign Policy says that even before the date of the next presidential election in 2023, “important developments in Turkey” can be expected. At the same time, the American media is discussing the names of Erdogan’s potential successor, particularly Turkish intelligence chief Hakan Fidan, Defense Minister Hulusi Akar, and Interior Minister Süleyman Soylu.

In response, the pro-government Turkish media claim that more than half of citizens supposedly still yearn to see Erdogan as head of state, accept his political and ideological views, and, in some cases, even sympathize with his attempts to seek other ways to develop the country’s economy. At the same time, Turkish authorities are actively responding to any defamatory messages about the President and the state on the Internet, using various methods to combat misinformation on social media, including existing laws that criminalize defamation of officials. For example, 9,772 people, including 290 minors, were brought to court for insulting Erdogan in 2020 alone. Meanwhile, dozens of Twitter users were investigated last month for spreading fibs about President Erdogan’s death.

Under the above conditions, President Erdogan is trying to boost his rating by scoring points in Africa: On December 18, Ankara launched the 3rd Turkey-Africa Summit, hoping it will confirm the growing economic partnership under President Erdogan. The 3rd Turkey-Africa Summit, with the theme “Enhanced Partnership for Common Development and Prosperity,” was held in Istanbul with 16 African heads of state and 102 ministers from various African
countries. The Istanbul Declaration was adopted at the end of the summit. The first Turkey-Africa Partnership Summit was held in 2008 in Istanbul, the second in 2014 in Malabo, Equatorial Guinea. Focusing on the development of relations with Africa, Ankara is well aware that the population of this continent is the youngest and fastest-growing in the world. The UN estimates that Africa’s population will at least triple by 2100 and exceed 4 billion. Erdoğan, therefore, expects that investment opportunities in urban infrastructure, logistics, energy, and construction will be the natural outcome of the growing relationship. The Turkish President is confident that Africa is incredibly rich in traditional and renewable energy sources, which is fertile ground for a developing market.

As the data presented by Turkey at the summit show, the trade turnover between Turkey and African countries is growing, and the value of all projects completed on the continent so far is $70bn. In 2020, the value of Turkish exports to Africa was $15bn. According to President Erdoğan, who addressed the summit, Africa is one of Ankara's main foreign policy directions. Turkey aims to rapidly increase the trade turnover with African countries from $25.3 bn in 2020 to $75bn. “Turkish entrepreneurs now employ more than 25,000 people in Africa, and Turkish contracting companies have implemented 1,686 projects worth $78 billion on the continent,” the Turkish President said. Diplomatic channels began to be established by enhancing trade ties: Turkey was granted the status of a strategic partner of the African Union in 2008, with regular meetings at the level of Heads of State and Government. In October alone, President Erdoğan managed to visit Angola, Nigeria, and Togo.

Also, since Erdoğan came to power in 2014, security cooperation and political and economic partnership have intensified. In 2017 TURKSOY, Turkey's most extensive military base abroad, was established in Somalia, which provides access to sub-Saharan Africa. According to the Turkish Exporters Assembly, the export of Turkish arms and military aviation equipment to Ethiopia, for example, increased from $235,000 in January to $94.6 million in November. Shipments to Angola, Chad, and Morocco are also on the rise. One of the best-selling military products was the Turkish-made Bayraktar TB2 combat and reconnaissance drone. Reuters reports that Morocco and Tunisia accepted a large shipment of Turkish combat drones in September, and other African countries are also interested in buying Turkish unmanned aerial vehicles.

Speaking to African leaders and government members in attendance, Erdoğan said that Turkey would send 15 million vaccine doses to Africa. The number of cases is skyrocketing there, and vaccination rates are low. "We are aware of the global injustice in access to the vaccine and the unfair treatment of Africa. It is a shame for humanity that only six percent of Africa's population has been vaccinated," Erdoğan said. The Turkish leader also indicated that Turkey is developing its own vaccine, known as Turkovac, which is in the process of obtaining an emergency use permit. Once approved, it will be handed over to Africa, Erdoğan said.

Positioning himself as the most active defender of African interests, President Erdoğan called it unfair that the African continent, with a population of 1.3 billion, has no say in UN Security Council decisions and reminded Turkey's calls for UN Security Council reform. “The struggle Ankara is waging under the slogan “The world is more than five permanent members of the UN Security Council” is in the interest not only of Turkey but also of African countries. We need to unite our efforts so that Africa can be appropriately represented in the UN Security Council," the Turkish head of state declared.

At the same time, it should be reiterated that Turkish President Erdoğan's call to support his “road map” for UN "reform" was also voiced during his autumn tour of Africa. At the same time, the Turkish leader, speaking in the Parliament of the Republic of Angola, called his people “victims" of colonialism and imperialism and said that the Turks have never pursued a policy of conquest or persecution of other nations. "We share a history with Africa that is based on mutual respect, sincerity, cooperation, and brotherhood. We are a nation with neither the stain of imperialism nor the shame of colonialism in its history," the Turkish leader said.

In doing so, Erdoğan deliberately forgets the history of the robbery and extermination of entire nations during the Ottoman Empire. One of the greatest crimes of the Ottoman Empire was the wars with the primary purpose of capturing slaves. The Slavic captives were especially valued. Thus, according to the customs statistics of the Ottoman Empire in the 16th-17th centuries, about 2.5 million Slavic slaves from the Northern Black Sea area passed through the Istanbul market alone. The consolidated figure of Slavic slaves who passed through all the markets of the Middle East is from 5 to 6 million people! Hence, Erdoğan’s statements about the commonality of Turkey's history with the slave-trade-affected Africa raise obvious questions.

Since coming to power, Erdoğan's policy has been aimed to make Turkey a world power. At first, he saw himself as a world leader within a united Europe, especially after the European Council announced in 2004 that Turkey would begin accession talks with the EU. He then promoted the initiative to create a Turkic Union comprising Turkey,
Azerbaijan, the Central Asian republics, and himself at the head. Since 2014, Erdoğan has referred to Turks as "descendants of the Ottomans" and has steadily emphasized that he has the right to interfere in the affairs of any country that was once part of the Ottoman Empire. Interference in the internal affairs of Syria, Libya, Iraq, and Transcaucasia is associated with this policy. Now, Erdoğan has begun to actively exploit the theme of "unity with Africa." However, the mentioned Erdoğan’s "vectors" have not helped much to solve Turkey’s economic and social problems to date. Time will tell whether Africa will fall for his sweet talk.

Vladimir Danilov, political observer, exclusively for the online magazine "New Eastern Outlook".