The January events in Kazakhstan and the CSTO’s response proved to be a real litmus test of many countries’ attitudes towards Russia and the regional balance of power in modern times.

Turkey was no exception here, as it showed what was behind its active assurances to Russia and the Central Asian countries of “bona fide development of friendly relations.”

Since the start of the January events in Kazakhstan, they have been the focus of intense scrutiny in Turkey. The latter manifested itself in statements made by a number of Turkish politicians and in a wide-ranging political debate in Turkish media, including some important points regarding the interpretation of the events.

After Turkey’s active involvement in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, it seemed to many in Ankara that a similar game could also be played in Central Asia, given the factor of Turkocentric integration and the corresponding positioning of Kazakhstan. But the situation changed with the CSTO’s swift decision to bring in its peacekeeping troops. In this context, the criticism of Russia by some Turkish politicians over the deployment of CSTO troops in Kazakhstan, and the unexpected statement by Turkish Defense Minister Hulusi Akar that “Ankara is ready to provide any assistance and support to Kazakhstan if it makes any request” become understandable.

The Türkiye newspaper published a piece titled “Putin has taken over” which, among other things, points that, “Moscow, which swallowed Crimea and inflamed tensions in Donbas, also intervened in Kazakhstan under the pretext of ‘helping to resolve internal disturbances’.” A number of other Turkish media published their articles voicing similar sentiments, clearly reflecting the Turkish authorities’ attempt to unofficially convey their attitude...
towards Russia and the events in Kazakhstan.

At the same time, President Erdoğan’s chief adviser, İhsan Şener, at a conference of the Organization of Turkic States (OTS), bluntly accused Russia of occupying Kazakhstan. Claims by some senior Turkish officials that Russia was involved in the turmoil in Kazakhstan to “occupy the country” are a blow to Ankara’s relations with Moscow, Turkish Cumhuriyet wrote, outraged at the tone the “Erdoğan’s palace” is using towards Russia. The publication is convinced that the US is behind the provocative statements: “The view emanating from the presidential palace about the operation against the OTS and Russia’s alleged occupation of Kazakhstan serves to drive a wedge into Turkish-Russian relations, just as the US wants.”

Former Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu said it was necessary for the OTS to be proactive in order to prevent the CSTO from sending troops, and Kazakhstan itself should not have turned to the CSTO.

Nevertheless, official Ankara has chosen to take a cautious, wait-and-see attitude, limiting itself to as neutral rhetoric as possible, clearly aware that it could fall out of the Central Asian ensemble altogether if it is not considerate enough.

And it is well known that Washington is actively trying to play the “Turkish card” in the post-Soviet space in its confrontation with Russia, particularly in Ukraine, the Transcaucasus and also in Central Asia. The spread of Turkish influence to the Turkic-speaking republics of the former Soviet Union, and to Kazakhstan in particular, is nothing new. Ankara officially proclaimed this as its strategy in 1992, with the approval of the US, which saw it as a counterweight to the spreading influence not only of Russia in the region, but also of China and Iran. For the first two decades, however, Turkish influence spread mainly through the spheres of economy and culture, and the opening of numerous Turkish schools and universities.

Issues of Washington’s increased use of Ankara’s “capabilities”, despite the occasional friction between the US and Turkey, are the subject of various “consultations” between diplomats, the military and representatives of the intelligence services of the two countries. Thus, the discussion of the situation in Kazakhstan between US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan and Turkish Presidential Spokesperson İbrahim Kalın was mentioned in a State Department statement released on January 10. This, in fact, was followed by a statement from Turkish Defense Minister Hulusi Akar about Turkey’s readiness to play a more active role in “resolving the situation in Kazakhstan.”

As for Kazakhstan, keep in mind that it was at the initiative of Washington and Ankara that this very country was made one of the drivers of the so-called “union of Turkic forces.” Under former President Nazarbayev, the work of many bodies of this union has intensified, mosques have been built, various political, educational institutions and scientific projects in Kazakhstan have ramped up their work, with all of this fixated on Turkey in recent years. Ankara has invested huge amounts of energy and money to bring Kazakhstan into its ideological and political agenda, trying to occupy the “voids” created after the collapse of the USSR. Nazarbayev himself participated in the development of the Great Turan concept; in fact, Kazakhstan did everything it could to make this organization political.

Therefore, Turkey was not too happy with the change of power in Kazakhstan and the arrival of Tokayev, who was associated in Ankara more with Moscow. In this regard, Ankara had a clear interest in changing the situation in Kazakhstan in its favor, and it is possible that in addition to the West, Turkish “capabilities” could have been actively involved in what was happening. As noted by The Economic Times (ET), Turkey is actively working on Kazakhstan together with two other states, Pakistan and Afghanistan, and in this regard the publication, citing its sources, stresses that “well-trained radicals” with Afghan experience were actively involved in the Kazakhstan unrest. So Ankara and Islamabad could be involved in preparing a “favorable environment” for their invasion, including through neighboring Kyrgyzstan. To reinforce this point, ET also stresses that members of the Pakistani branch of Tablighi Jamaat (a movement banned in Russia) played a serious role in the unrest.

Lately, Ankara has been clearly outplaying Moscow on the Kazakhstan track, actively pursuing Turkocentric integration. As the Turkish publication Cumhuriyet reports, certain forces in Ankara believed that “Kazakhstan will end up like Ukraine” and they could then mediate between the two “centers” - Nur-Sultan and Alma-Ata through the Organization of Turkic States. But Turkey lacked the resources, and indeed the time, to pursue its ambitious projects in the region. It should also be remembered that the idea of a “Turkic world” was not initially very close to the Kazaks, as historically Central Asia was not part of the Ottoman Empire. And after Kazakhstan suppressed the turmoil with the help of CSTO members Russia and Kyrgyzstan, Turkey was left with little chance of implementing its idea at all. Furthermore, despite Ankara’s demonstrated willingness to introduce troops into Kazakhstan, it had no legal authority to do so. In addition, the geographical remoteness and the lack of sufficient means of transport to
move troops there quickly on their own must not be forgotten.

Under these circumstances, Ankara’s emphasis, following the events in Kazakhstan, that the Turkic states should immediately establish a common army becomes understandable. This was stated by former Brigadier General and ex-Attaché of Turkey in Azerbaijan Yücel Karauz, who addressed the Organization of Turkic States, which includes Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkey and Uzbekistan, as well as Hungary and Turkmenistan as observer countries. There is also an explanation for his emphasis that “at the first meeting of the organization the legal measures relating to the creation of a joint military force should be adopted and the real steps implemented. If we are too late, we could do irreparable damage. What is happening now in Kazakhstan could also happen in other fraternal republics.”

However, the creation of a new regional military alliance under Ankara’s direct leadership in the near future is unlikely. Since for most of the “Turkic countries” that Ankara is counting on in this matter, it is not Turkey but the CSTO that has now shown its real strength and capability as a regional protector, both from internal and external threats. Therefore, Turkey can now only count on strengthening its influence by helping Kazakhstan recover from the crisis. However, Russia, learning from the experiences of Georgia, Ukraine and Moldova, is unlikely to repeat past mistakes and will try not to lose Kazakhstan. It is also likely that in the long term Russia will be the one to hold the military-strategic advantage in Kazakhstan and the region as a whole. And this is understandable: Kazakhstan borders thousands of kilometers with Russia, not with Turkey. As for trade and investment projects, Turkey can retain its niche as long as it does not intensify its anti-Russian vector in favor of its nationalist aims and instructions from Washington.

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