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TURKISH COOPERATION AND COORDINATION AGENCY (TİKA) IN CENTRAL ASIA: DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION, SOFT POWER, AND THE DYNAMICS OF REGIONAL INFLUENCE

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Abstract. This article analyses the activities of the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TİKA) in the states of Central Asia within the framework of development-cooperation and soft-power theory. The study spans the period from 1992 to 2023 and draws on data from the OECD and the World Bank, as well as on scholarly sources indexed in the Scopus and JSTOR databases. The article examines the agency's institutional evolution, the dynamics of the financial flows directed to the region, and their interrelationship with the objectives of Turkish foreign policy, considered on a year-by-year basis.

Keywords: TİKA, Central Asia, official development assistance, soft power, Turkish foreign policy, technical cooperation, Turkic integration.

The dissolution of the Soviet Union at the end of 1991 and the emergence of five independent republics in Central Asia - Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan - created an opportunity for Turkey to redesign its foreign-policy orientation. It was precisely under these geopolitical conditions that the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TİKA) was established in January 1992; its initial mandate was to support the socio-economic development of the newly independent Turkic republics (Özkan & Demirtepe, 2012). In other words, the agency itself was institutionally a direct product of the Central Asian question - a fact that shaped the entire logic of its subsequent activity.

From a theoretical standpoint, TİKA's activity is understood more productively not by interpreting development assistance as a purely charitable phenomenon or a matter of development economics, but as an instrument of foreign policy. According to the concept of "soft power" advanced by J. Nye, a state may attain its objectives not through coercion or economic pressure, but through its capacity to attract - through values and cultural affinity (Nye, 2004). Testing this theory specifically on the case of TİKA and proceeding from a constructivist approach, P. İpek stresses that the transformation of foreign-policy instruments is shaped not only by material interests but also by ideas that form within domestic structures (İpek, 2015). In this sense TİKA manifests itself in Central Asia simultaneously as a development agency and as a vehicle that converts cultural-civilisational affinity into a political resource.

The agency's early history, however, did not unfold smoothly. During the 1990s, Turkey's own political instability and chronic economic crises directly constrained TİKA's effectiveness; to these were added the waning appeal of the "Turkic model" and Russia's restoration of its influence across the former Soviet space (Özkan & Demirtepe, 2012). As a result, in its first decade the agency operated with extremely modest financial resources, largely within the framework of pinpoint projects in education and culture - building schools and libraries, and awarding

scholarships for study in Turkey. In this period Turkey's official development assistance (ODA) was exceedingly low - around 85 million dollars in 2002 (OECD, 2025).

The situation changed fundamentally after 2002, amid steady economic growth and a foreign-policy course oriented towards multilateralism. A law adopted in 2011 institutionally restructured the agency, expanded its geographic reach, and sharply increased its financial capacity (Özkan & Demirtepe, 2012). Turkey's ODA grew rapidly from 488 million dollars in 2004 (Fidan & Nurdun, 2008), and by 2017 the total official development assistance allocated from the national budget exceeded 8.1 billion dollars (İpek & Kayabaşı, 2025). The agency's field structure expanded at the same pace: the 12 representative offices of 2002 had reached 28 by 2010, and today TİKA operates through 63 coordination offices in 61 countries (İpek & Kayabaşı, 2025). The overall dynamics of Turkey's ODA are presented year by year in Figure 1.

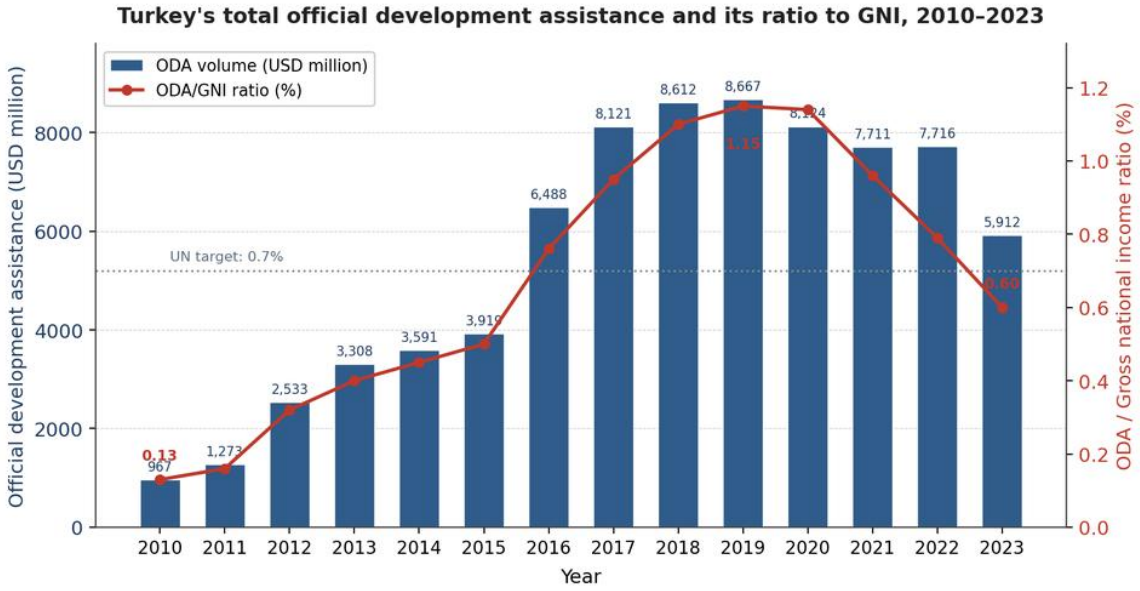


Figure 1. The volume of Turkey's total official development assistance (ODA) and its ratio to gross national income (GNI), 2010–2023 (in USD million and per cent). Source: compiled by the author on the basis of data from İpek & Kayabaşı (2025) and the OECD Data Explorer (2024).

Analytical note: The chart shows that, over the 2012–2019 period, the indicator increased almost fourfold, while the ODA/GNI ratio reached 1.15 per cent in 2019, substantially exceeding the UN benchmark of 0.7 per cent. The cause of this rising curve, however, must be interpreted with caution, as shown below.

A detailed year-by-year examination of the dynamics reflected in the chart makes it possible to distinguish several qualitatively distinct phases. In 2010–2011 the indicator remained at a relatively low level - the ratio of ODA to gross national income within the range of 0.13-0.16 per cent. In 2012, a notable jump occurred and this ratio rose to 0.32 per cent; over the following three years it grew steadily, reaching 0.50 per cent by 2015 (İpek & Kayabaşı, 2025). The sharpest acceleration falls within 2016-2019: during this period the indicator rose from 0.76 to 1.15 per cent, while in absolute terms Turkey's total ODA exceeded 8.6 billion dollars in 2019, reaching its historical peak. After 2020 the opposite tendency is observed: the ratio fell to 0.96 per cent in 2021, to 0.79 per cent in 2022, and to 0.60 per cent by 2023 (İpek & Kayabaşı, 2025). This decline reflects, on the one hand, a contraction in absolute volume and, on the other, the relatively rapid growth of national income; it demonstrates that Turkey's assistance policy is sensitive to both external and internal economic conjuncture.

Applying these aggregate indicators directly to conclusions about Central Asia would be methodologically erroneous. The Syrian crisis that began in 2011 and the subsequent refugee flows fundamentally altered the composition of Turkish assistance: in 2015-2022, of the total 63.5 billion dollars of assistance allocated by the country, 78.9 per cent (50.2 billion dollars) went to humanitarian aid, principally to Syria (İpek & Kayabaşı, 2025). Thus the sharp increase after 2012 is associated almost entirely with the Middle Eastern direction, while the flows directed to Central Asia constitute a very small but qualitatively different part of these figures - one that is more development- and technical-cooperation-oriented in character. It is precisely this distinction that serves as the principal methodological reference point in analysing TİKA's role in the region.

Concrete regional indicators clearly demonstrate this difference. In 2016, among the largest recipients of Turkey's bilateral official development assistance, Kyrgyzstan (25.39 million dollars) and Kazakhstan (18.96 million dollars) occupied some of the highest positions after Syria (Akıllı & Çelenk, 2019). According to OECD data, in 2015 Kyrgyzstan was among the five largest partners in Turkey's bilateral development cooperation (OECD, 2025). These figures are presented in Table 1, and they reveal two important aspects: first, Syria's absolute predominance in the geography of assistance; and second, that, notwithstanding this, the Central Asian republics still occupy a prominent place within the structure of Turkish assistance.

Table 1. The largest recipient countries of Turkey's bilateral official development assistance, 2016 (in USD million)

Recipient country	ODA volume (USD million)	Region
Syria	5,851.23	Middle East
Somalia	59.63	Africa
Palestine	43.12	Middle East
Afghanistan	32.69	South Asia
Bosnia and Herzegovina	30.29	Balkans
Kyrgyzstan	25.39	Central Asia
North Macedonia	18.96	Balkans
Kazakhstan	18.96	Central Asia
Azerbaijan	14.24	South Caucasus
Niger	11.91	Africa

Source: compiled on the basis of data from Akıllı & Çelenk (2019) and the Turkish Development Assistance Report 2016. Central Asian states are highlighted in blue.

Analytical note: The table reveals the disproportion in the distribution of assistance: Syria's share is several times higher than the combined total of all other recipients. At the same time, the fact that Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan rank among the largest recipients after Syria confirms that the region's strategic priority for Turkey was preserved even during the period when the Middle Eastern direction intensified. Notably, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Tajikistan do not appear on this list - an indication that they hold a comparatively small share within the structure of assistance.

The sectoral composition of TİKA's projects in Central Asia directly reflects the agency's soft-power function. In education this takes the form of scholarships for study in Turkey and the establishment of Turkology centres at higher-education institutions; in healthcare, the construction

of modern hospitals and the training of medical personnel; and in culture, the restoration of historical monuments (Kahveci & Kuşçu Bonnenfant, 2023). For instance, TİKA has brought into operation a 72-bed hospital specialising in cardiology and gastroenterology in Kyrgyzstan; a traditional handicrafts centre has been established in Khiva, Uzbekistan; and archaeological excavations have been financed in Kazakhstan. A notable feature is that these projects are often strategically located and highly visible - which points to their symbolic-political function in addition to their direct developmental effect.

Among these projects, the educational dimension is of particular strategic significance, since it represents the most long-term and far-reaching mechanism of influence. Students from Central Asia who have studied in Turkey, together with the cadres who have benefited from the activities of Turkology centres at local universities, over time become integrated into the administrative, academic, and cultural elite of their countries; in this way, affinity at the level of language, values, and worldview is transmitted to subsequent generations through institutional channels (Kahveci & Kuşçu Bonnenfant, 2023). From a constructivist standpoint, it is precisely the formation of such networks that constitutes the most durable source of soft power, for - unlike a one-off financial transfer - it gives rise to a self-reproducing system of social ties (İpek, 2015). At the same time, the effectiveness of this mechanism is not automatically guaranteed: it requires continuous monitoring, the maintenance of contact with alumni, and alignment with local demand - otherwise the initial investment may gradually lose its strategic value.

It is this very visibility that reveals the "nation branding" dimension of the agency's activity. Akıllı and Çelenk analyse TİKA as a vehicle that shapes Turkey's positive international reputation and reinforces the state's "generous" and "humanitarian" image (Akıllı & Çelenk, 2019). Central Asia is an exceptionally favourable arena for this strategy, since here assistance is built upon a foundation of shared language, history, and religion (Kahveci & Kuşçu Bonnenfant, 2023). At the same time, the authors also emphasise that Turkey's activity is not uniform: cooperation with non-Turkic Tajikistan, grounded in cultural-linguistic affinity, proceeds on a considerably more limited scale than with the Turkic republics. This circumstance indirectly confirms that the assistance is governed by a logic of civilisational belonging rather than by purely developmental need.

These features should be situated within a broader international context. Unlike traditional Western donors, Turkey entered the arena as a "rising" donor that integrated relatively late - mainly after the 2000s - into the international development-assistance community (Fidan & Nurdun, 2008). This delay, paradoxically, afforded the agency a distinctive freedom of manoeuvre: relatively unconstrained by the norms historically established within the OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC), it gained the latitude to reframe the donor–recipient relationship in the language of "equal partnership." As Fidan and Nurdun emphasise, Turkey's development assistance is closely bound up with its broader foreign-policy objectives, uniting economic, cultural, and strategic dimensions within a single instrument (Fidan & Nurdun, 2008). Central Asia became the most vivid testing ground for precisely this integrated approach, since here development assistance, cultural diplomacy, and geopolitical interest merge almost inseparably.

At the conceptual level, Turkey presents its approach as a "Turkish model of development cooperation" distinct from the Western model of "conditional aid": it advances the principles of horizontal partnership, mutual benefit, and demand-driven project design (İpek & Kayabaşı, 2025). For the states of Central Asia - given their sensitivity to questions of sovereignty - this rhetoric is politically attractive. From a critical standpoint, however, the language of horizontal cooperation cannot be separated from the agency's political-symbolic function: the flags on hospitals, the plaques of gratitude beside state institutions, and projects that reinforce pan-Turkic symbolism all indicate that the assistance is, among other things, also a means of rendering Turkey's influence visible.

That said, TİKA's influence in Central Asia is subject to a number of objective limits. First and foremost, the traditional and economically far more powerful presence of Russia and China in the region constrains Turkey's possibilities. Second, rapidly developing states such as Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan increasingly prefer investment and technical cooperation to traditional assistance; Kazakhstan even established its own international development agency (KazAID) in 2021, beginning to assume donor status (OECD, 2025). As İpek observes, the effectiveness of soft power is context-dependent and requires further mechanisms such as continuous monitoring and the strengthening of alumni networks (İpek, 2015). Turkey's "return" to Central Asia from the 2020s - the institutional rapprochement within the Organization of Turkic States - may be interpreted as an attempt to overcome precisely these constraints and to embed assistance within a broader strategic framework (Kahveci & Kuşçu Bonnenfant, 2023).

The constraints enumerated above have stimulated a significant shift in Turkey's regional strategy. Whereas in 1990-2010 TİKA's activity was largely bilateral and project-based in character, from the 2020s it has increasingly come into alignment with a multilateral institutional framework - the process of regionalisation within the Organization of Turkic States (Kahveci & Kuşçu Bonnenfant, 2023). This shift is theoretically important, for it transforms soft power from pinpoint influence directed at individual states into a collective project built around a shared Turkic identity. As Kahveci and Kuşçu Bonnenfant emphasise, it is precisely the logic of regionalisation that enables Turkey to convert cultural affinity into an institutional foundation (Kahveci & Kuşçu Bonnenfant, 2023). This approach, however, also has its limits: the multi-vector foreign policy of the regional states and their tendency to place their own sovereignty above any supranational union constitute a natural obstacle to the deepening of pan-Turkic integration.

Conclusion

The analysis conducted allows TİKA's activities in Central Asia to be set out in the form of several generalised conclusions. First, the agency moved beyond the conditions of resource scarcity and institutional weakness of the 1990s and, in the 2000s, became a mature instrument of Turkey's multilateral foreign policy; its evolution directly mirrors Turkey's rise on the international stage. Second, in the Central Asian context it is appropriate to understand the agency's activity not as assistance aimed at the pure reduction of poverty, but as a vehicle of cultural-civilisational affinity, the strengthening of institutional capacity, and the projection of soft power - an aspect manifested in the fact that the assistance, while modest in quantitative terms, is substantial in symbolic and strategic terms.

Third, the agency's future effectiveness will depend directly on its capacity to adapt to the new status of the region's states as they evolve from recipients of assistance into equal partners. In this sense, TİKA constitutes a theoretically rich case that vividly illustrates the complex interrelationship between development cooperation and foreign policy - the fact that assistance is never merely a technical-economic phenomenon, but is always shaped within a particular political logic. Under present conditions, marked by intensifying competition in the region and the growing agency of local states, this topic retains its relevance for future research as well.

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