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THE INFLUENCE OF RELIGION ON TURKISH FOREIGN POLICY

After World War II, the Turkish government began to loosen the religious (Islamic) restrictions imposed under Mustafa Kemal, due to fear of popularity of the communist ideologue in the world at that time. Turkish ruling circles wanted to avoid the spread of communist ideology in Turkey via strengthening their religion, because the Soviet Union was a proximate neighbor to that country.

The Turkish government has taken effective steps to ease religious restrictions. In particular, religion was introduced, as a subject, in schools, at the same time theology faculties were opened in universities; it became voluntary to go to the Muslim holy city of Mecca and perform Hajj; religious schools were opened, the massive construction of mosques and the restoration of the existing ones began. Various Islamic religious organizations were launched. In addition, the secular Republic of Turkey became a member country of Islamic organizations: "Islamic World League" (IWL) and "Islamic Conference Organization" (ICO) that were created on the basis of religion. If before that, Turkey acted on foreign agenda together with the USA and European countries, this time it started to take independent steps in the foreign-political direction and emphasized its Islamic identity via joining the mentioned organizations.

All this led to the strengthening of the role of Turkey in Islamic organizations and the improved performance of the positions of these organizations in Turkey, which was manifested, by establishing the pro-Islamic "National Order Party" (Millî Nizam Partisi) for the first time in January 26, 1970. The party was headed by Necmettin Erbakan.

The political line of the newly founded party was mainly focused on the

criticism of secularism, which became the reason for the closure and ban of this party. And the leader of the party, Necmettin Erbakan, was arrested.

The parties with pro-Islamic ideology, despite oppressions, still managed to form various political parties under the leadership of Necmettin Erbakan and attracted the public attention to the religious issues.¹ This is confirmed by the fact that in the parliamentary elections held in December 24, 1995, the pro-Islamic “Party of Welfare” (Refah Partisi) received the most votes. A coalition government, led by Erbakan, came to power.

N. Erbakan, during the short period of his prime ministership, actively supported the introducing of religious rituals in everyday life and making them mandatory, such as: praying five times a day, wearing a chador for women, etc. On the initiative of his party, the diplomas of secular and theological universities were equalized, which gave the graduates of these universities an equal opportunity to work in different state institutions. Also, in the period of his tenure in this post, he was interested in establishing closer relations with Muslim countries. For this purpose, Erbakan initiated carrying out the conference of Islamic countries in Istanbul, where the main item on the agenda was discussion of the possibilities of establishing an organization of Islamic countries, similar to NATO. The next meeting was scheduled for the fall of 1998, but due to the political situation in Turkey, the mentioned meeting could not be arranged. In January 16, 1998, the Constitutional Court declared the Party of Welfare abolished, and banned Erbakan from participating in the next elections.

The “Justice and Development Party” (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi-AKP) under the leadership of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, received the majority of votes in the parliamentary elections of 2002. Erdoğan, was distinguished by moderate Islamic rhetoric and at the same time his priority was to join the European Union.

In the first stage of Erdoğan’s administration, significant steps were indeed taken on the way to get closer to the European Union. In 2003-2004, the Turkish Mejlis adopted 261 new laws related to the abolition of the death penalty, reform of the judicial system, freedom of speech and press, freedom of religion, gender equality, protection of the rights of religious and ethnic minorities, etc. Also, the Turkish constitution came into compliance with the requirements of the European Union.²

The issue of freedom of religion is the subject of debate in Turkey, despite the changes in the law, because law and practice often do not coincide. In this regard, it is important the report of the Norwegian Helsinki Committee on the issues of Freedom of Religion and Belief in Turkey,

1 M. Svanidze, “History of Turkey”, publishing house, Artanuji, Tbilisi, 2007. p. 528-530

2 Sanikidze G, Alasania G, Gelovani N, “History of the Middle East”, Ilia State University, Tbilisi, 2011, p. 384-386

presented in 2013.¹ The report was focused on the activities of the Department of Religious Affairs (Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı), the main function of which is to administer the affairs of mosques (89,817 registered mosques),² imams, muezzins, Quran teachers, muftis and other (total 138,458) religious personnel, which is financed from the central budget of the state and exceeds the budgets of other ministries.³ The mentioned department, due to the changes in the Turkish constitution, is obliged to the president since 2018 and mainly holds control of the Sunni direction of Islam. The department also pays attention to Turks living abroad. In particular, their imams are sent to mosques in different countries in order to expand the activities of the department. As early as on March 13, 1975, the Turkish Religion Foundation was established. The main field of its activity is education. Religious schools are subordinated to the foundation and are also engaged in translation and scientific activities. The Foundation has published the Encyclopedia of Islam (Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı İslâm Ansiklopedisi), which consists of 46 volumes.⁴

Proceeding from the above mentioned, on the one hand, Turkey, as a secular state, has recognized equality before the law regardless of language, race, gender, political and philosophical opinion, religion, sect and other similar features.⁵ On the other hand, Islam, in particular, the Sunni direction, is subject to the direct supervision of the state. Meanwhile, the issues of other religious minorities are regulated by the Law on Minorities.

The European Union often calls on Turkey to protect the rights of religious and ethnic minorities. The European Union assessed the events of Gezi Park in 2013, the arrests after the unsuccessful coup of July 15, 2016, the transition to the presidential system of government as a setback for democracy and suspended financial assistance to Turkey. In March 2019, the European Parliament recommended the suspension of the ongoing procedures for Turkey's accession to the European Union.

On his part, Erdoğan also expressed his complaints against the West and accused them of double standards. It is unacceptable for President

1 Alasania G, "Relation between the state and religion in the Republic of Turkey", *Oriental Studies*, N4, Tbilisi, 2015, p. 211.

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Türkiye'de Toplam Kaç Cami Var? 2023 Ý Cami Sayışý

, www.milliyet.com.tr/.

3 Note: The budget of the Department of Religious Affairs for 2023 is 16 billion liras.

4 Turkish Religion Foundation official website, www.tdv.org/tr-TR/.

5 Note: Article 10 of the Constitution of the Republic of Turkey. "Regardless of language, race, color, sex, political and philosophical views, religion, sect and other similar features, everyone is equal before the law."

Erdoğan to give asylum to FETÖ representatives¹ in Europe and he demands their extradition. Otherwise, he threatened to review the relations with Europe and even considered it possible to put the question to the referendum: whether the Turkish people want to join the European Union, and this is happening at a time when the number of people in favor of joining the European Union is decreasing due to the rapid Islamization of Turkey.²

The relations of Turkey with the USA has been strained on the same issues too, because it is still unsuccessfully demanding the extradition of Fethullah Gülen, who has been hiding in the USA for a long time.

However, it should be noted that the “cooling” of Turkey-USA relations started from an earlier period, when the Turkish Mejlis refused to participate in the Iraqi operation, and then, in 2017, when Turkey together with Iran resisted announcing declaration of independence of the Kurdistan of Iraq. The next disagreement came over the issue of Iran. It was revealed that Turkish Bank, notwithstanding the economic sanctions, secretly cooperated with the Iranian government; Also, Turkey assessed the Kurdish grouping - YPG (People’s Defense Units), operating in Syria and supported by the West, as a terrorist organization, which evoked the contradictions. The acquisition of the S-400 missile defense system in 2016-17 was also a subject of disagreement between Turkey and the USA. Washington condemned this move by Turkey and imposed sanctions on it. Turkey strongly protested the recognition of the so-called “Armenian Genocide” by the US House of Representatives on December 12, 2019.³

Distancing of Turkey from the West, despite the above-mentioned disagreements, seems unlikely to happen for: Turkey still remains one of the most important strategic partners for the USA, both in the format of NATO and in the format of bilateral relations. The geopolitical reality and the Russian factor determine the maintenance of relations between Turkey and the USA at the strategic level.

Turkey constantly criticizes Israel and the USA regarding Palestine. Turkish-Israel relations were particularly strained in 2010, when Israel opened fire on the Turkish ship “Mavi Marmara”, loaded with humanitarian aid moving towards the Gaza Strip in neutral waters. As a result of the shooting, 9 Turkish activists died on the spot, and more than 50 were wounded.⁴

1 Note: FETÖ is recognized by the Turkish government as a theoretical organization, and its leader Fethullah Gülen, who is hiding in the USA, is wanted by a red circular. He is accused of trying to stage a coup in Turkey on July 15, 2016 and establishing a parallel state structure.

2 Tekturmanidze N, “The influence of Islamic and republican principles on Turkey’s foreign policy during Erdogan’s rule”, European-Georgian Institute, February 1, 2021. www.egi.ge/ka

3 Bakuradze S., “Main orientations of Turkey’s foreign policy in the post-Cold War period,” Caucasus House, Tbilisi, 2020, p. 8 www.regional-dialogue.com/

4 Mavi Marmara saldırısının üzerinden 11 yıl geçti, www.aa.com.tr/tr.

Turkey had the strongest reaction to the mentioned fact. Ankara recalled its ambassador from Israel and reduced diplomatic relations to a minimum level. Only in June 2016, it was possible to improve diplomatic relations between them, which did not last long. In December 2017, announcement of the USA President Trump's notice, declaring Jerusalem the capital of Israel and moving the embassy to Jerusalem caused great excitement in the Muslim world. Turkey, which was the chairman state of the Islamic Cooperation Organization at that time, on the initiative of President Erdoğan, convened the 6th extraordinary meeting on December 13, 2017, where Washington's decision was strongly condemned. And Turkey recalled an ambassador from Israel for consultations in Ankara in May 2018, leaving diplomatic relations at the level of a temporary envoy until September 2022, which had previously been preceded by high-level meetings between Israel and Turkey.¹ Diplomatic relations between Turkey and Israel have also been strained amid the ongoing Israel-Palestinian conflict. As in previous years, Erdoğan took the side of the Palestinians. He called on Israel to stop the massacre of peaceful Palestinians. Moreover, he justified the actions of Hamas and stated that it was not a terrorist organization. In addition, President Erdoğan also calls on the USA not to support Israel in the destruction of the Palestinian people. Support speeches of the Palestinians were held even in Turkey. As a sign of protest, they came to Incirlik military base and tried to enter it. The police could hardly stop the people. All this resulted in the cooling of diplomatic relations between Turkey and Israel once again - Israel recalled its ambassador from Turkey.

The second factor that greatly influenced Turkey's foreign policy from a religious point of view, in the Middle East was the Arab Spring, namely the Egyptian revolution. The Turkish government under the leadership of President Erdoğan established good relations from the beginning with the new Muslim Brotherhood and its representative, President Mohamed Morsi, with whom he had religious and ideological congruence. It was important for Turkey to include Egypt in its geopolitical camp, which is distinguished by a large population, strong army and foreign influences in the region.

This relationship did not last long. On the 3rd of July, 2013, the military elite of Egypt removed President Morse from power and appointed Abdel Fattah El-Sisi – a high-ranking military official as the interim ruler of the country. The new government of Egypt was supported by Saudi Arabia, which was dissatisfied with the strengthening of the influence of the "Muslim Brotherhood" in the region. The developments in Egypt irritated Turkey. Turkey did not recognize the new government and summoned the

¹ Türkiye ve İsrail'den ilişkileri normalleştirme kararı: Büyükelçiler 4 yıl sonra yeniden atanacak, www.bbc.com/turkce .

ambassador to Ankara for consultations, though, maintained diplomatic relations with Egypt at the level of a temporary trustee.¹

Lately, the tendency of improving diplomatic relations between the two countries has been observed. On the 1st of July, 2022, Ankara sent its ambassador to Cairo. And later, the meeting of the leaders of Turkey and Egypt was held for the first time at the opening of the football World Cup ceremony in Qatar, in November 2022, which is a definite step forward to improving relations between the two countries.²

The Balkan countries occupy important place in the foreign policy of Turkey, with which it develops relations based on the factors of common historical past, culture and religion. Turkey, by applying its soft power and public diplomacy, tries to maintain a positive image of a rational actor on the political stage in case of political changes in the region. It provides significant assistance to the Balkan countries in the field of education by offering various programs such as Bachelor, Magister and doctoral scholarships. Hundreds of Balkan students get knowledge at different universities in Turkey with the support of these programs. Two universities are successfully operating in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Macedonia with the financial support of Turkey. Also, “Turkish Maarif Education Fund” and “Yunus Emre Institute” operate in the Balkans, the main activity of which is introducing the Turkish language and culture. Turkish language is taught as an optional course at the primary and secondary grades in three regions of Bosnia-Herzegovina. Turkey actively cooperates with the religious organizations operating in the Balkan countries. Turkey provides management of financial and administrative issues for these organizations. Of course, Turkey pays special attention to the Muslim community, although, envisages the multiculturalism and multi-ethnicity of the Balkans and such issues are handled very delicately and carefully.³

Conversion of Hagia Sophia, a historical monument of Christian heritage in Istanbul, into a functioning mosque and the reception of Muslim worshipers was another reprehensible action towards Islamization. Hagia Sophia was declared a museum of Christian heritage since the time of Atatürk and had a symbolic load of “unifying civilizations”. Erdoğan’s decision to reopen Hagia Sophia to Muslim worshipers was met with severe reactions both inside and outside the country. This decision was assessed by the opposition as politically irresponsible and risky action. The European

Union countries and the USA released statements, where they ex-

1 Batashvili D, “How Turkey implements its new geostrategy: outline, expert’s opinion, Center for the Study of Strategy and Relations of Georgia, 2017, p. 11. www.gfsis.org.ge/

2 Türkiye – Mısır Siyasi İlişkileri, www.mfa.gov.tr/

3 Mehmet Uğur Ekinci, „Türkiye-Balkanlar İlişkisi“, Analiz, SETA, sayı:204, Mayıs 2017, 33. 11-12, www.setav.org

pressed their sadness and disappointment about the abovementioned decision. Greece called this decision provocative.¹

We believe that Erdoğan's decision emphasizes the tendency of assigning a greater role to Islam in the country. This fact points to gradual departure from Atatürk's principles. In our opinion, this case should be discussed not as an example of one specific historical monument, but we should see it in a broader perspective, as a kind of relationship with the West. With this step, Erdogan wants to remind the West that Turkey is a strong sovereign Islamic state and will act based on its national interests. It should be noted that in the first stage of his leadership, Erdogan tried to gain the favor of the West, because the military and secular elite in the country still maintained strong positions and posed a threat to the ruling Justice and Development Party. And since 2010, when the ruling party strengthened its position, a new phase of confrontation with the West began, which was dictated by Turkey's desire to become a regional leader, taking into account its religious and cultural aspects. This led to disagreements with the West on certain issues. The first issue that became the reason of disagreement between Turkey and the USA was the Iraqi problem, the Kurdish issue and Turkey-Iran relations. Lately this was followed by the new developments in the region, such as the Arab Spring and the removal of the "Muslim Brotherhood" from the government in Egypt; Syrian Civil War; Palestine-Israel conflict and Jerusalem issue; Purchase of the Russian missile system S-400.² And the fundamental turning point in relations with the West occurred after the failed military coup of July 15, 2016, when Erdogan accused the West of double standards and cooperation with terrorists.

The ruling party (AKP) actively applies such components of "soft power" as culture and religion, in conducting Turkey's foreign policy. Turkish organizations TIKA and Yunus Emre Institute represented abroad, are actively involved in the promotion of Turkish culture abroad.

Conclusion.

On the one hand, Turkey is trying to adapt to the role of regional leader and protect its national interests, for which it does not hesitate to confront the West. On the other hand, it tries to establish close relations with the regional countries by means of soft power.

1 Uluslararası Toplumun Ayasofya Tepkisi, www.dw.com/tr

2 Erdogan on guard of the Ottoman Empire, www.amerikishkhma.com



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