

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS WITH ASSOC. PROF. NARGIS KASSENOVA (KIMEP)
REGARDING KAZAKHSTAN'S TURKEY POLICY

11.05. 2014

Assist. Prof. Dr. Serdar YILMAZ
İstanbul Arel University

1. Where do you think that Turkey is located in Kazakhstan's foreign policy?

There is Turkic brothers the big brother is Turkey, we have certain affinities with Turkey, People became aware of Turkey after independence, Turkey acted fast, dealt with visa regime, organized Turkic Summit. During the Soviet, people did not know much about soviet time, they did not think about Turkey, there was only one country namely Soviet Union, Turkey was regarded as part of Middle East, After independence things changed quickly, Turkey was active, created connections between two countries.

Turkey plays a special role for a number of reasons, Turkey is a country that is next to Europe, in between Caucasus and Europe and for us it is sort of a bridge, both geographical bridge and mental bridge because we see Turkey another Eurasian state, similar to us with the same identity. So if for example Turkey can become a part of the EU, then we may think why can't we. So in these sense we are looking what Turkey is doing. If Turkey maybe does certain things we can do certain things as well. Kazakhstan is a secular state with a Muslim population, we are trying to look at the West to some extent, become part of it, and that makes Turkey special for us. It also makes Kazakhstan separated a bit from the rest of the region.

Do you agree with the statement that whenever Turkey takes steps then Kazakhstan acts?

Well in terms of you are being so actively yes. But Turkey is not a priority; it is important state for Kazakhstan but not a priority. We look at the big ones first of all: Russia, Chine, USA, the EU, Central Asia and Turkey. If you look at our Foreign Policy Concept you see, it is very clearly spelled out. It is written our priorities and you see our strategic alliance with Russia, China, regional states then USA, the EU and the rest basically.

2. What factors are affecting Kazakhstan's Turkey policy?

In terms of person, state, system national features, culture, Which one do you think more affective that others in terms of Kazakhstan's Turkey policy?

Although Nazarbayev is the main decision-making factors affecting Kazakhstan foreign policy but in terms of Turkey there are other things. At the end of the day everything more or less is down to Nazarbayev. It is not that Nazarbayev has special attitudes towards Turkey that somehow closes to Turkey. So with regard to Turkey, it is not that Nazarbayev is the only factor. Of course he has close relations with Turkish leaders, but basically leaders change, with the first one is the closest, after Süleyman Demirel we can't say relations went down, because there were objective factors why we keep having relations with Turkey. So it is a matter of geopolitics. So in that case, the personality of Nazarbayev is not that much affective? Yes not that much a decisive factor.

3. How does the leadership profile of Nursultan Nazarbayev affect Kazakhstan's Turkey policy?

He is a smart, patient and visionary, however in Turkey's case his personality is not the only decisive factor.

4. What is the perception of Kazakhstan's towards Turkey and how this perception affects the reciprocal relations?

I would not say like great brothers in a sense in general, because even in Central Asia, we are close to each other but still the regional identity is quite problematic, it is not strong, and we do not know much about each other. In terms of news, we get to know what is happening for example in Switzerland better that what is happening in Tajikistan, except small community who tries to follow the close region.

5. How do you see the perception of Turkey in the eyes of the ruling elite of Kazakhstan? There are two factors in that regard that I need to ask. First of all, the perception of Turkey in the eyes of regular Kazakhstanis?

Well, kind and Turkish men have a good reputation of being good family man, so they care the family, they love kids and Kazakh people go to Turkey more than any other countries. Yes, last year 420 thousands Kazakh went to Turkey. Yes that made us much closer of course, the fact that Turkish airlines, Pegasus and

charter companies fly to Turkey from Astana, Almaty and Chimkent almost every day. That's amazing really. I think people really appreciate that they can go to many places in Istanbul, Antalya or any other cities with visa free. How about in the eyes of ruling elite of Kazakhstan? There is nothing to be negative, why would be anyway. Do you know specific elites who are pro Turkish? No, not that I know. There are some pro Chines, some pro-Russian, but somebody being pro Turkish, you do not hear it really.

6. Since the independence of Kazakhstan, do you think both countries have utilized (appreciated) the opportunities of further collaboration? Do you think they should have come much closer, should have missed something?

I would not say that both countries are performing badly in terms of relations, but for personal view, we should have stronger pro-European policies. Now it would be really difficult to do that in the aftermath of Ukraine. Turkey played a very important role with especially Baku-Ceyhan energy routes, but maybe more could have been done. So in general I think more or less good although initially Turkey had big expectations that is why for Turkey there is disappointment. For Kazakhstan, we never underestimate the relations with Turkey, we always go to Turkic Summit, we do not do this turns like some other member states. So it is very consistent and well established relations we see. Now, with these complex politics in Turkey let's see what happens, because the issue of Turkish schools for example. In here there is no plan to close those lyceums (lise). Now the complexity of Turkish politics, the presidential election will affect what is going to happen in Central Asia.

7. With Turkey's initiatives the Great Student Project had been implemented, educational institutions such as International Hoca Ahmet Yesevi University in the city of Turkestan and Turkish schools run by private organizations in many areas were opened. Türkiye Scholarships and state funded Mevlana Exchange Program have been met recently towards Central Asian Turkic Republics. Do you think Turkey's implementation of these educational policies has influenced Kazakhstan's Turkey Policy? In what directions?

There Turkish high schools in Kazakhstan have very good reputation. I think these educational policies actually take Kazakhstan closer to Turkey and vice versa. Especially Turkish schools I mean lyceums take more kids from elite

groups. These schools internalized sort of Turkish values. I think Turkey is more successful actors in this regard, doing something tangible in education sector. In Kazakhstan it is really shining example. Turkish educational policy in Kazakhstan is very important aspects I must say. I am not sure if it has influenced Kazakhstan's Turkey policy but in the future we will feel a considerable impact of that. A group of educated people who will be in important positions they will have the knowledge and affinity about Turkey. So I think really really big success I must say. Now more Kazakh students prefer to go to Turkey to study as we have the same religion, same language family and fairly similar culture.

8. Finally what would you like to say about Kazakh-Turkish relations? Do you think the future is bright for them?

It is not bad but depends on what will happen in both countries. Things will definitely change if Turkey goes into Europe. By the way, I do not think Turkey will be joining Eurasian Custom Unions. Because after Crimea it is now more problematic. Now people began to think whether Russia ever turn to our country or not. If we misbehave they can start creating problems. Anyway I do not think it will happen, then they would be in trouble, but we are not number one on the list. The next would be Moldova, Belorussia. I am trying to find something good in being occupied by Russia. On the good side, it was a wakeup call as our leadership is too much relaxed; they thought everything was under control. We are ready to join to the Eurasian Economic Integration and people think that Russia is too weak have imperial project, and now we see that yes on the one hand Russia is weak, but on the other they can very negative thinks. That is why the leadership is much more aware. The situation complicated our multi vector policy, as the relations of Russia with the West are really worsening. So it is difficult to visualize what to do, we have on the reverse very good relations with the West, declaring that Russia is strategically our number one partner. However at the same time Russia would say why we are cooperating with NATO, why you are friends with USA, what do we do?

There is also a problem seems unclear about what will happen after Nazarbayev passes from the scene. Nobody wants to talk about it; no one predicts what will happen. I myself do think that after Nazarbayev is not dark as Kazakhstan is on

the way of settling down with its strategy 2020 and 2050. They know where to look, what to do.

Well to be honest with you, strategies seem to be nothing. Off course, a lot will depends on who will come next. But imagine if pre strongly Russian nationalistic will come, then different think may happen. We are dependent on Russia, Russia is not going anywhere, and we always need to have good constructive relations with Russia. We cannot become enemy of Russia, we simply cannot afford. So how to get out of situation, we strengthen ourselves, be a constructive partner, keep having ties and cooperation, but at the same time avoiding dominance. I hope pro-Russian government will not ever come in power in here. Also nationalism and Kazakh patriotism are growing.