

AN ASSESSMENT OF POLITICAL PARTICIPATION, FREEDOM OF THOUGHT AND FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION FOR THE COUNTRIES OF THE ORGANIZATION OF TURKIC STATES*

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Abstract

The Organization of Turkic States (OTS), whose foundations were laid with the signing of the Nakhchivan Agreement on October 3, 2009, under the name “Cooperation Council of Turkic-Speaking Countries,” officially revised its name to “Organization of Turkic States” after the Istanbul Declaration in 2021. The member states of this international organization, whose purpose is to develop comprehensive cooperation among Turkic-speaking states, are Türkiye, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan. Turkmenistan, Hungary, and the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus have been included in the organization as observers. The organization, whose General Secretariat is located in Istanbul, is currently chaired by Kyrgyzstan.

Political participation as a form of behavior can be explained as the willpower of the political system, which supports the implementation process of the government and its policies, through the voluntary activities of voters. Accordingly, the concepts of freedom of thought and expression, which are enjoyed by all citizens as well as voters, refer to the freedom to express and disseminate one's thoughts and opinions through various means, as guaranteed by law. In this study, the themes of political participation, freedom of expression, and freedom of thought in the countries within the Organization of Turkic States (OTS) will be explored through the lens of member countries and in the context of the organization's institutional identity. This study is a qualitative research case based on historical and descriptive methods and supported by document analysis evaluation will be used.

Keywords: Organization of Turkic States, Political participation, Freedom of expression, Freedom of thought

TÜRK DEVLETLERİ TEŞKİLATI ÜLKELERİNDE SİYASAL KATILIM, DÜŞÜNCE VE İFADE HÜRRİYETİ ÜZERİNE BİR DEĞERLENDİRME

Öz

Temelleri 3 Ekim 2009'da Nahçıvan Anlaşması'nın imzalanmasıyla atılan ve “Türk Dili Konuşan Ülkeler İşbirliği Konseyi” adıyla faaliyet gösteren Türk Devletleri Teşkilatı (TDT), 2021 yılında İstanbul Bildirgesi'nin ardından adını resmen “Türk Devletleri Teşkilatı” olarak değiştirmiştir. Amacı Türk dili konuşan ülkeler arasında kapsamlı iş birliğini geliştirmek olan bu uluslararası örgütün üye ülkeleri Türkiye, Özbekistan, Kırgızistan, Kazakistan ve Azerbaycan'dır. Örgüte gözlemci olarak Türkmenistan, Macaristan ve Kuzey Kıbrıs Türk Cumhuriyeti katılmıştır. Genel Sekreterliği İstanbul'da bulunan örgütün başkanlığını hâlihazırda Kırgızistan yürütürmektedir.

Bir davranış biçimini olarak siyasal katılım, seçmenlerin gönüllü faaliyetleri aracılığıyla hükümetin ve politikalarının uygulama sürecini destekleyen siyasal sistemin iradesi olarak açıklanabilir. Dolayısıyla, tüm vatandaşların ve seçmenlerin yararlandığı düşünce ve ifade özgürlüğü kavramları, kişinin düşünce ve görüşlerini çeşitli yollarla ifade etme ve yayma özgürlüğünü, yasalarca güvence altına alınmıştır. Bu çalışmada, Türk Devletleri Teşkilatı'na (TDT) üye ülkelerde siyasal katılım, ifade özgürlüğü ve düşünce özgürlüğü temaları, üye ülkeler merceğinden ve örgütün kurumsal kimliği bağlamında incelenecaktır. Bu çalışma, tarihsel ve betimsel yöntemlere dayanan nitel bir araştırma örneği olup, belge analizi ile desteklenmiş bir değerlendirme kullanılacaktır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Türk Devletleri Teşkilatı, Siyasi katılım, İfade özgürlüğü, Düşünce özgürlüğü

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Introduction

The Organization of Turkic States (OTS), whose foundations were laid with the Nakhchivan Agreement (2009) under the name “Cooperation Council of Turkic-Speaking Countries,” officially changed its name to “Organization of Turkic States” with the İstanbul Declaration in 2021. The OTS member states, which aim to develop broad cooperation among countries where Turkish is spoken, are Türkiye, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, and Kyrgyzstan. Turkmenistan, Hungary, and the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus have been included in the organization as observers. Kyrgyzstan holds the rotating presidency of the organization, whose General Secretariat is located in İstanbul.

The foundations of the Cooperation Council of Turkic States were laid in 2009 with the signing of the Nakhchivan Agreement by Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Türkiye. The council, which facilitates cooperation based on a common language, historical roots, religion, culture, and traditions, is now an international organization under the name Organization of Turkic States. The Organization of Turkic States, institutionalized within a multilateral framework as a result of efforts dating back to the 1990s, continues to be a highly effective tool for development, cooperation, and the consolidation of active political balances in the Turkic region. In this context, recent analyses emphasize that the institutionalization of Turkic cooperation should not be understood merely as a symbolic cultural alignment but rather as a political framework shaped by regional security concerns, historical legacies, and emerging governance expectations, as political actors and institutional structures in peripheral states have historically been shaped by international security dynamics (Derin, 2025a). The Organization of Turkic States (OTS) also continues to exist as an umbrella organization for other cooperation organizations such as the Parliamentary Assembly of Turkic Speaking Countries (TURKPA), the Turkic Cultural Heritage Foundation, the Turkic Academy, and the International Organization of Turkic Culture (TÜRKSOY). Established with the aim of ensuring and establishing peace in the region and beyond, building and maintaining mutual trust between countries, combating separatism, terrorism, and extremism, developing cooperation in investment and trade, and enhancing cooperation in science, technology, education, and culture, the organization has established its internal system with the “Council of Heads of State” “Council of Foreign Ministers” “Secretariat”, “Council of Elders” and “Committee of Senior Officials.

The Organization of Turkic States, which covers a large part of Eurasia with its population and plays an important role in the global order with the rise of Turkic states in the 21st century, is the largest union established by Turkic states with historical and cultural common roots. Providing deep economic cooperation and cultural affinity to Turkish states that had experienced empire until the early 20th century, the union has now taken on the task of strengthening the economic and political independence of its members.

With the Turkish World Vision-2040, the Organization of Turkic States aims to strengthen its member states both nationally and as a whole. In this context, the principles defined within the framework of the Turkish World Vision-2040 chart a roadmap that strengthens the unity of Turkish states, which have a particularly dynamic political arena, within the council. These principles are expressed as political and military cooperation, economic cooperation, cooperation between peoples, and cooperation with external stakeholders and parties. Within the scope of the topics addressed under the heading of political and military cooperation, the political agendas of member states are primarily determined by common notes, while it can be said that there is an exchange and transfer of experience within the council regarding political participation at the national level. Based on this, the study will examine the political participation status of the council member countries, also addressing the context of the organization’s institutional identity.

Political participation as a form of behavior can be defined as the determination of the political system, which provides the basis for the implementation of the government and its policies, through the voluntary activities of voters. It is extremely important for citizens to participate consciously in all stages and areas of the political process, to develop their critical thinking skills, and to actively support democratic principles (Balcı & Keser, 2023, p. 908; Acar, 2018). However, the freedom of thought and expression enjoyed by all citizens, alongside voters, is a right guaranteed by law, meaning the freedom to express and disseminate thoughts and opinions in various ways. Political participation refers to direct or indirect activities that enable elected officials and the policies they produce to influence political decision-making, implementation, and elements within and outside the system. In this regard, definitions are generally based on sociology and political science. Political participation reveals the most accurate examples of its definition in societies where active participation is ensured and where there are no restrictions or prohibitions. Based on this, it is possible to say that political participation is not a system that consists solely of the voting process for individuals. Citizens' decisions, behaviors and attitudes towards events, actions, and sociopolitical reactions can be counted among the criteria used to measure political participation qualitatively. At this point in the context, freedom of thought and expression, in particular, are based on the complementary elements of political participation. Freedom of thought, which is enshrined in the European Convention on Human Rights and the United Nations Declaration, is expressed as "the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion"; this right has secured its place in legal texts by guaranteeing citizens the freedom to express their thoughts and religion, alone or with others, in public and private spheres. In the context of fundamental human rights, it can be said that the legal definitions and bases of both freedom of thought and freedom of expression support each other. Freedom of expression is described as a political right in which the boundaries of the message conceived by thought, its recipient, sender, and impact are determined by law, but it is also accepted as a natural aspect of fundamental freedoms and a prerequisite for democratic politics.

In other words, political participation is the stance and attitude taken by individuals towards all kinds of political, economic, and social decisions concerning society, the country, themselves, and the state. Political participation, in a narrow sense, goes beyond the function of voting in elections; it encompasses citizens' behaviors, attitudes, opinions, reactions, and actions in the face of all kinds of political decisions and events. Freedom of thought can be expressed as the ability of individuals to freely form their own worldviews, beliefs, and ideas, to change them at any time, and to adopt them. It means the freedom for individuals to think about these matters in their own minds without any pressure or censorship. Freedom of expression is the right and freedom of individuals to convey their ideas, beliefs, feelings, or thoughts to others in writing, verbally, or by any other means. Freedom of expression is a fundamental right, legally defined, which guarantees that individuals can freely express their ideas/thoughts without any pressure. This right, which is indispensable for the functioning of democracy, is important because it maintains a pluralistic social structure and acts as a counterbalance to state authority.

The purpose of this study is to describe the political participation practices and freedom of expression standards of the countries under the umbrella of the Organization of Turkic States (OTS) from its establishment to the present day using a descriptive approach. The study aims to contribute to the literature by examining the will of the political system and the processes of exercising citizens' rights in member countries in light of institutional documents. This study adopts a qualitative research design utilized within a comparative case study framework. While the primary methodological approach is qualitative-based on document analysis and historical-descriptive methods-the study incorporates secondary quantitative data to ensure the objectivity and transparency of the evaluations. The examination of political participation, freedom of expression, and freedom of thought in the Organization of Turkic States (OTS) relies on a dual-

layered analysis: the internal dynamics of member countries and the collective identity of the organization. To establish clear evaluation criteria, the study triangulates qualitative interpretations with standardized indicators from V-Dem (Varieties of Democracy), Freedom House, and The Economist Democracy Index. These indices provide the concrete parameters for assessing the otherwise abstract concepts of participation and liberty.

1. Political Participation, Freedom of Thought and Expression

Verba and Nie (1973) describe political participation in their work titled “Participation in America: Political Democracy and Social Equality” as a designed form of behavior, an element that influences the selection of government or policies. Accordingly, any activity performed by individuals at various levels of the political system with the aim of directly or indirectly influencing political choices can be described as political participation (Verba & Nie, 1973, p. 125). A widely accepted typology design for classifying the context of political participation is one that categorizes society in terms of interest, concern, knowledge, and action into non-political groups, political groups, groups intending to gain power, and groups in power (Dahl, 1998, p. 51). When defining political participation, it is possible to draw on both political science and sociology sources. In this context, active and passive interpretations of “participation” have been particularly relevant. Empirical studies in both political science and sociology have defined the context of “participation” in two parts. The first part, where participation is quantitative, refers to the situation within a given population, while the second part refers to the affluent group, which participates more in politics than the poor, regardless of the context and environment (Salisbury, 1975, p. 5).

The expression “freedom of thought” appears in the draft text of the European Convention on Human Rights, signed on November 4, 1950, as “the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion.” and it is also included under the heading of freedom of thought, conscience, and religion in accordance with Article 18 of the United Nations Declaration and in Article 26, paragraph 3, of the United Nations Declaration. Taking into account the reservations of Türkiye and Switzerland, the final condition added is that “Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion; This right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship, and observance.” (Clarke, 1987, p. 32). Freedom of thought, accepted by many sectors of the political arena, has been expressed by Rosa Luxemburg as “the freedom of the person who always thinks differently” and by Benjamin Franklin as a form of freedom without which there can be no wisdom. It has been noted that when freedom of thought, which is philosophically extolled as a fundamental liberty in the liberal tradition, is restricted, it has harmful effects and is essential for full thinking (Swaine, 2018, p. 408). The focus of freedom of thought is the methods of acquiring beliefs through thought and free inquiry. Therefore, the acquisition of philosophical and religious beliefs is accepted not only as the freedom to prevent their suppression but also as another method of protecting human rights and reaching the essence of being human (McCarthy-Jones, 2019, p. 14).

It refers to the right to communicate messages, the boundaries of which are defined by law, determining who says what to whom and what effects it has, and ensuring the distinction between anonymous and private speech in the legal sphere (Alexander, 2005, s. 56). The carefully preserved issue of freedom of expression is not contingent on the qualities of freedom in relation to other values. Although freedom of expression, which should not be restricted by equality values and related freedoms, is not fully expressed as a direct preference for freedom, it is a subject that has been constantly criticized by advocates of equality. It is known that freedom of expression, which was embraced by the left wing for most of the 20th century, was defended both as a natural aspect of freedom and as a prerequisite for democratic politics (Cohen, 1993, p. 212). Defended more strongly than other freedoms for various reasons, freedom of expression functions as a safety valve

in liberal societies, valued for protecting pluralism and diversity, considered the cornerstone of liberal tolerance, and allowing the people's demands to be expressed without infringing on freedoms. It can also be said that the concept, which often lives in an environment of uncertainty regarding whether governments will regulate freedom of expression, acts as a shield against increasing authority and legal regulations, especially by central governments (Bonotti & Seglow, 2021, p. 2).

Political participation, freedom of thought, and freedom of expression are fundamental aspects that democratic regimes control and nurture. Political participation refers to the broad scope of influencing political and social decisions (Verba and Nie, 1973, p. 125); freedom of thought refers to the right to freely form, adopt, and change one's beliefs and opinions (McCarthy-Jones, 2019, p. 14). Freedom of expression, on the other hand, is a right that guarantees the ability to express oneself without fear of censorship (Alexander, 2005, p. 56). The relationship between political participation, thought, and freedom is a critical element for the healthy functioning of democratic systems. The effective realization and implementation of politicization depend on the protection of freedom of thought (Dahl, 1998, p. 51), indicating that in democratic regimes, pluralism can only flourish in an environment of free thought. Freedom of expression has been subjected to censorship or restriction, and has been politically constrained (Freedomhouse, 2018; Aksu, 2021, p. 2). Freedom of thought is a crucial element in determining the nature of political discourse. The ability to think freely and use this freedom facilitates its political application. Cohen (1993, p. 212) stated that freedom of expression is the foundation of democratic politics and that without this freedom, political participation would be meaningless and go no further than routine. On the other hand, in societies with low levels of political decline, freedom of thought and expression is often suppressed/restricted. This is a frequent occurrence in authoritarian regimes (Linz, 2017, s. 38). In general, it is possible to say that social participation exists in a reciprocal communication between freedom of thought and interest. The coexistence of these freedoms is indispensable for the sustainability of democratic systems.

Political participation, freedom of thought, and freedom of expression form a whole that democratic regimes not only control but also derive from. The relationship between these three structures is a linear and complementary process:

The Foundation (Freedom of Thought): The process begins with freedom of thought, where individuals can freely form their own beliefs and opinions without any pressure. This freedom is the most fundamental element determining the nature of political discourse; because an individual who cannot think freely will lack originality in their contribution to the political sphere.

The Bridge (Freedom of Expression): The transformation of these formed thoughts into social value depends on the existence of freedom of expression. Freedom of expression acts as a "safety valve," allowing thought to be brought into the public sphere without fear of censorship. When this environment of freedom is not provided, political participation becomes merely a routine action and loses its democratic depth.

The Result and Action (Political Participation): Political participation is the practical outcome of these two freedoms. Individuals can only influence government policies and play a role in societal decisions in a pluralistic climate that protects thought and expression.

In conclusion, freedom of thought forms the mental preparation for political participation, while freedom of expression constitutes the communication channel for this participation. The weakening of political participation in authoritarian structures where these freedoms are restricted demonstrates how inextricably linked these concepts are (Habernas, 1993, s. 27).

To analyze the interaction between political participation, freedom of expression, and freedom of resolution with concrete and measurable data, the following data books, whose reliability is

accepted in the international literature, were preferred: The Economist (Democracy Index), Freedom House (Freedom in the World), and V-Dem (Types of Democracy). The structure of these indices allows for the empirical recording of concepts such as ‘active participation’, ‘pluralism’, and ‘political rights’, emphasized in the theoretical section, through different sub-protections such as civil liberties, electoral packages, and democratic participation. In particular, the depth of V-Dem’s existence and Freedom House’s approach to human rights violations allow for a multi-dimensional comparison and evaluation of political parties in OTS member countries.

2. Organization of Turkic States: A General Overview

In the 1990s, the successive departures of traditional actors on global foundations brought about prolonged ethnic tensions for the states that emerged in the newly formed order. States that arose with ideals of independence shaped their new identities around national sovereignty through globalization (Hoffmann, 2002, p. 104). Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, Türkiye was the only independent and globally recognized state in the world that spoke the Turkic language. On October 30, 1992, the first Summit of Turkic-Speaking Countries was held in Ankara at the initiative of the President of the Republic of Türkiye, Turgut Özal. The summit was attended by the President of the Republic of Türkiye, Turgut Özal; the President of Azerbaijan, Abulfaz Elchibey; the President of Uzbekistan, Islam Karimov; the President of Kazakhstan, Nursultan Nazarbayev; the President of Turkmenistan, Safamurat Niyazov; and the President of Kyrgyzstan, Askar Akayev. The summit announced the establishment of political and economic cooperation. On July 12, 1993, an agreement was signed in Almaty, Kazakhstan, establishing the International Organization of Turkic Culture (Батырбекқызы, 2016, p. 4). Following 10 Summits of Heads of State of Turkic-Speaking States held over 17 years starting in 1992, the Turkic Council was established with the Nakhchivan Agreement signed on October 3, 2009. The Organization of Turkic States, which gained international status and legal personality with the agreement that entered into force on November 17, 2010, acts as an umbrella organization, uniting around common values such as supporting the social and cultural ties of member states, contributing to the solution of bilateral, regional, and global problems; preventing potential conflict risks between member states or between members and external actors; and fostering a diplomatic culture (Şahin, 2020, p. 1173).

3. Political Participation, Freedom of Thought and Expression in Member States

The member countries of the Organization of Turkic States have developed areas of cooperation under the Nakhchivan Agreement. One of the leading areas of cooperation is political cooperation. Although global and regional goals have been set in the field of political cooperation, there are also objectives in the context of implementing democratic practices among national institutions. In this context, steps have been taken to strengthen the rule of law, judicial systems, legal infrastructure, and institutional capacities in member states in order to effectively increase political participation (Yıldız, 2023, p. 68). Political participation and freedom of expression are essential components of democratic governance, yet they are often shaped and constrained by state-centered security considerations. Minority-related political participation and freedom of expression are frequently framed through security-oriented state policies, particularly in contexts where identity and historical narratives intersect with foreign policy concerns (Derin, 2025b). Türkiye, one of the founding members of the Organization of Turkic States, stands out as a prominent example in the examination of the relationship between modernization and political participation. Türkiye, which can be described as one of the very few countries that have been able to maintain a stable democratic system for a long time, has undergone rapid socio-economic change, especially in the first half of the 21st century, and this change has remained on the agenda regarding political participation (Özbudun, 2015, p. 112). Unlike democracies whose foundations for political participation are based on international conventions and legal texts, Azerbaijan, which chose the

path of democratic development, has established a strong normative-legal basis for the political activities and participation of its citizens. In Azerbaijani law, citizens are actively involved in the political sphere in areas such as voting in referendums, the election of the president and members of parliament, and local elections. In Azerbaijan, where legal regulations concerning the individual and collective political participation of citizens have been established, it can be said that the necessary arrangements for this transformation have also been made in accordance with the legislation (Rahimova, 2023, p. 46). Kazakhstan, a founding member of the Organization of Turkic States, presents both qualitative and quantitative results when examined in terms of political participation. In Kazakhstan, where civic and political motivations overlap, the identification and intersection of the context of political participation with post-materialist motivations is not coincidental. It can be argued that giving more importance to the results of research on identity conflicts (ethnocentric & civic nation-building, secularism & religiosity, traditionalism & modernism, pro-Western, pro-Russian or pro-Turan orientations) in a democratic system will accelerate the spread of unconventional forms of political participation (Nassimova & Buzurtanova, 2024, p. 98). Kyrgyzstan is a country in Central Asia where democratic institutions are still maturing. In the country's elections, there are sometimes instances of counter-incentives such as inciting identity conflicts, promising political positions, etc., which negatively affect the democratic process. Furthermore, it can be said that this situation also supports a mercantilist citizen attitude towards the governing bodies. The fact that the voter turnout among young people aged 18-29, who constitute one-third of the eligible population in the country, was 43% in the 2017 Presidential Elections, while the overall voter turnout was 55%, highlights the importance of supporting and developing Kyrgyz democracy in terms of political participation (Ismailov & Mamatova, 2019, p. 345). Turkmenistan, which submitted a report on human rights violations to the UN Human Rights Committee in 2012, joined the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights 15 years after its initial entry in 1997. The UN Human Rights Committee emphasized the need for progress, particularly regarding freedom of assembly and association, and stressed the importance of accelerating democratic progress in the areas of freedom of expression, press, and travel. The UN Human Rights Council's request for a special rapporteur, accepted by all other Central Asian states, was also a matter that Turkmenistan had temporarily suspended (Bohr, 2016, p. 47). Uzbekistan, having made significant progress in the political and social spheres, stands out as a country in need of legal reforms, particularly regarding press freedom and independent media. While Uzbekistan's democracy, which needs to be motivated by encouraging the formation of opposition parties and fostering a competitive electoral process, has made significant strides in political and social areas under its semi-presidential system, it presents itself as an example where steps to increase citizen participation in the electoral process should be encouraged (Esonova, 2025, p. 834). The Organization of Turkic States also represents "Opening to the East" for Hungary, an EU member state. Recent constitutional amendments and a new electoral law that makes it more difficult to remove the ruling party from power have increased interest in activism in the context of freedom of thought and expression. Particularly in the period following the 2010 parliamentary elections, civil society trends have focused on political participation and freedom of thought and expression it has also been observed that there is a tendency to support this. Indeed, the role of political parties in the public policy-making process is of great importance, regardless of whether they are in power or not (Balcı & Keser, 2023, p. 136). The existence of a democratic environment where different forms of social and political participation evolve democratically is a crucial motivational tool for Hungarian political participation (Mikecz, 2022, p. 137). The Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, which has faced serious international isolation for years, adopts a democratic motivation shaped by the constitution, parliament, elections, and political party culture that existed before the establishment of the TRNC. While political participation rates were quite high until 2013, they have shown a downward trend since then due to the decrease in voters' trust in political institutions. According to Freedom House, the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus,

which is generally defined as a largely democratic state with a multi-party political system that supports civil liberties, still maintains its free status in terms of political rights and freedoms. However, Freedom House reports see the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus as lagging behind in terms of minority rights (Ünal, 2025, p. 73).

4. An Assessment of Political Participation, Freedom of Expression and Thought in OTS Countries

Political participation, freedom of thought and expression in member countries of the Organization of Turkic States have been comparatively evaluated in light of data from international rating and evaluation organizations. The evaluations were conducted within the context of the last five years' analyses by Freedom House, The Economist, and V-Dem, and the member countries' indices are presented in tables. Freedom House, which has been rating countries' political rights and freedoms worldwide since 1973, provides numerical rankings for 195 countries and 13 regions.

Analyzing the form of democracy, political participation, freedom of thought and expression, rule of law, individual rights, and civil society participation for each country and region, Freedom House arrives at its final ranking by analyzing information from local research, independent analysts, governments, NGOs, expert consultants, and regional experts (Freedom House, 2025).

Table 1: Freedom House Assessments of Political Participation, Freedom of Thought and Expression in OTS Countries (Freedom House, 2025b)

COUNTRY	2020- 221 PP	2020- 221 FREE	2020-2021 Status	2021-22 PP	2021-22 FREE	2021-2022 Status	2022-23 PP	2022-23 FREE	2022-2023 Status	2023-24 PP	2023-24 FREE	2023-2024 Status	2024-2025 PP	2024-2025 FREE	2024-2025 Status
	2020- 221 PP	2020- 221 FREE													
Azerbaijan	7	6	NF	7	7	NF	7	7	NF	7	7	NF	7	7	NF
Hungary	3	3	PF	3	3	PF	3	3	PF	3	3	PF	3	3	PF
Kazakhstan	7	5	NF	7	5	NF	7	5	NF	7	5	NF	7	5	NF
Kyrgyzstan	7	5	NF	7	5	NF	7	5	NF	7	5	NF	7	5	NF
Türkiye	5	6	NF	5	6	NF	5	6	NF	5	6	NF	5	6	NF
Turkmenistan	7	7	NF	7	7	NF	7	7	NF	7	7	NF	7	7	NF
Uzbekistan	7	6	NF	7	6	NF	7	6	NF	7	6	NF	7	6	NF

Table 1 shows the political participation, freedom of thought and expression contexts of the member countries of the Organization of Turkic States over the last five years according to Freedom House data. Political rights, where political participation is strengthened, are expressed as PP, while civil liberties, which include freedom of thought and expression, are expressed as FREE. The expressions in the status section indicate the degree of freedom of each country.

Examining the table, it can be seen that Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Türkiye consistently ranked in the "Not Free (NF)" category between 2020 and 2024, with political rights (PP) and civil liberties (FREE) evaluated in the 6-7 range. This evaluation by Freedom House is considered the lowest index. In this context, it can be said that Turkmenistan (7-7) and Uzbekistan (7-6) exhibit a profile of fully repressive regimes. Türkiye, being at the 5-6 level, displays a "strong authoritarian tendencies, weak democratic standards" appearance. Another detail in the table stands out for Hungary, an EU member state. While the PP and FREE values are given as 3-3, it is also seen that the political participation index value is higher than other OTS member countries. The country's status is assessed as "Partly Free (PF)".

This situation shows that despite elections being held in Hungary, there is a democratic regression and serious restrictions on freedom of expression and thought.

In terms of political participation, according to the table, it is possible to state that political participation is limited in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Azerbaijan. In general, the reasons for this can be said to be single-party dominance, authoritarian rule, and unfair elections. According to Freedom House indexing, it can be said that there is political participation in Türkiye, but it is also stated that there are restrictions on free and fair elections and the opposition's ability to compete on equal terms.

In terms of freedom of thought and expression, countries such as Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Azerbaijan received the lowest scores (6-7); In this respect, the inadequacy of independent media, freedom of expression, and civil society organizations has been cited as one of the reasons. In Türkiye, the ongoing conflicts regarding media freedom and academic freedom have caused the DSG score to remain consistently at 6. Although Hungary's DSG score is 3, it can be said that it is not fully free due to government-controlled media and problems with judicial independence.

The Economist's Democracy Index rates the democratic situation of 165 countries and two regions. The Economist, which indexes almost the entire world population excluding microstates, uses a 0-10 rating system in the categories of electoral process and pluralism, government functioning, political participation, political culture, and civil liberties (The Economist, 2025, s. 6).

Table 2: The Economist's Assessments of Political Participation in OTS Countries (2020-2024) (Our World in Data, 2025)

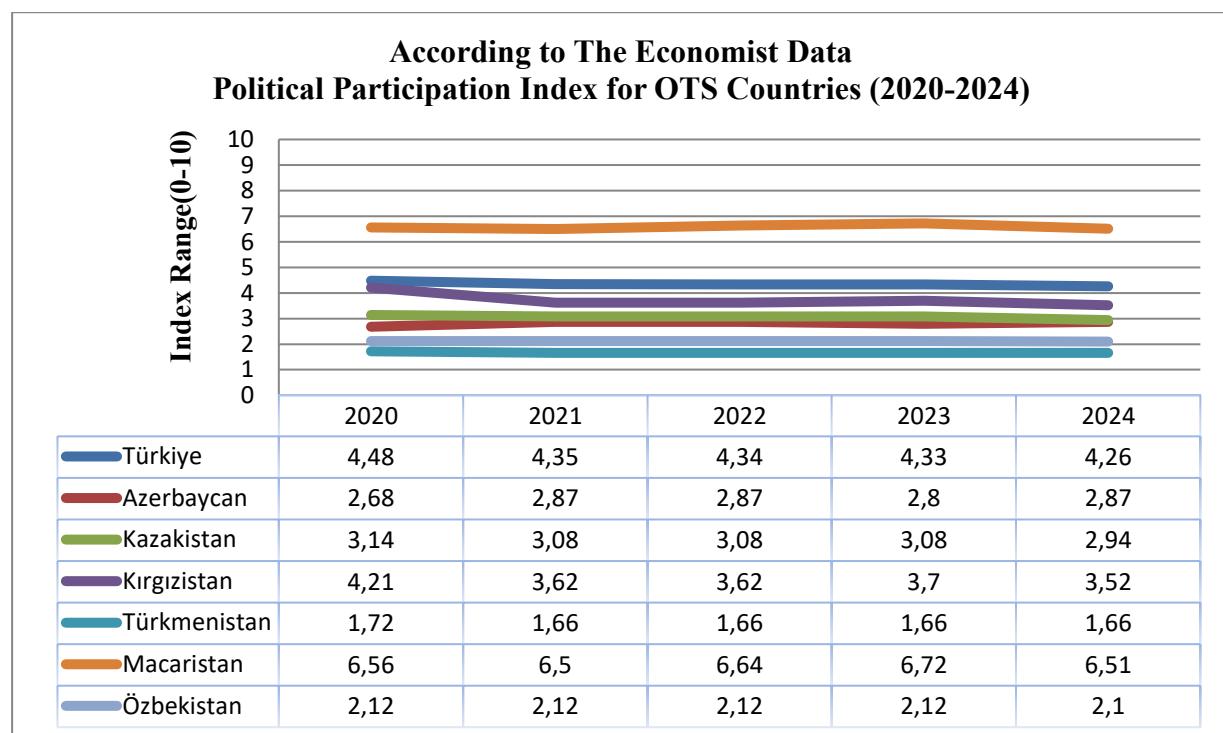


Table 2 shows the contexts of political participation in the member countries of the Organization of Turkic States between 2020 and 2024, according to The Economist data. The Economist index values range from 0 to 10, with citizens' political participation ratings corresponding to the highest or most active value, 10.

According to The Economist data, in most of the Turkic States member countries, where political participation indices are generally low and stagnant, scores range from 2 to 4. In countries

considered democratic, this score range is generally 6-7. In light of this data, it can be said that political participation is limited in these countries due to the lack of competitive election processes and the significant isolation of citizens from decision-making processes. When analyzed on a country basis, Hungary, which has the highest value, is seen to have the highest value among Turkic States member countries, although below the average compared to Western-style democracies. Türkiye, which has a moderate level of political participation, has generally maintained its stagnant position in the last five years. Political participation appears to be relatively higher in Kyrgyzstan compared to other Turkic states. Kyrgyzstan has the second highest value after Türkiye, reaching its highest value in 2020. Kazakhstan, where very little change is observed, has a relatively higher value than Azerbaijan. Similar to Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan's political participation remains low and limited, and its authoritarian structure has remained stable at around 2.8 over the last five years. According to the table, Uzbekistan, one of the countries with the lowest political participation, has shown almost no change in its index values over the last five years. According to The Economist data, Turkmenistan, which has the lowest value among the OTS countries, stands out with its very limited political participation rating.

V-Dem (Varieties of Democracy) is an organization that has been rating over 600 indicators annually for all countries worldwide since 1789. V-Dem evaluations encompass several fundamental principles, including electoral, majoritarian, consensual, participatory, deliberative, and egalitarian. The evaluation principles are further divided into specific indicators, encompassing components such as civil liberties, judicial independence, freedom of thought and expression, and free and fair elections (V-Dem Varieties of Democracy, 2025).

Table 3: The Economist's Assessments of Freedom of Thought and Expression in OTS Countries (2020-2024)

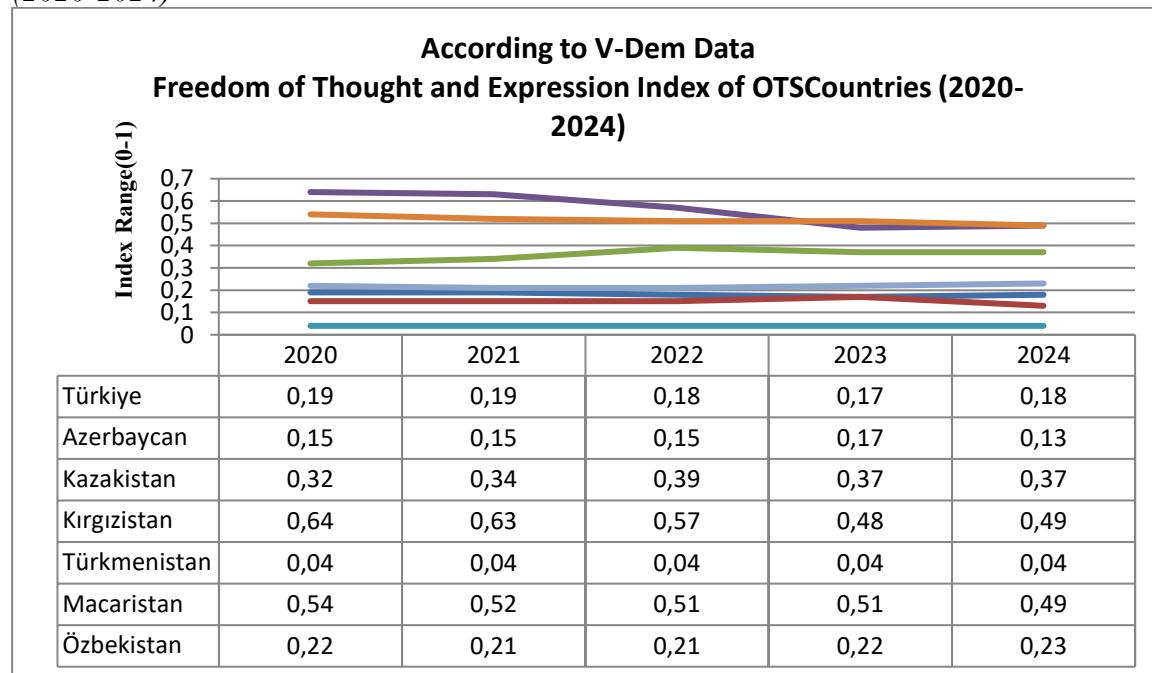


Table 3 shows the contexts of freedom of thought and expression in the member countries of the Organization of Turkic States between 2020 and 2024, according to V-Dem data. V-Dem index values vary between 0 and 1, with freedom of thought evaluations corresponding to a value of 1 at the highest level.

According to V-Dem data, the average evaluations of freedom of thought and expression are generally low in the member countries of the Organization of Turkic States. None of the member

countries exceeded 0.7 points. At the same time, a slight decrease and stagnation are observed in most member countries from 2020 to 2024. This indicates a tendency towards decline or stagnation rather than improvement in freedom of thought and expression. Türkiye's value, which was 0.19 in 2020, remained in the 0.18 range in 2024. In this context, it is among the member countries of the Organization of Turkic States where freedom of expression is weakest. In Azerbaijan, the already low level has further declined, a situation explained by pressures on the media and civil society. Kazakhstan, while showing improvement from 0.32 to 0.49, presents a better picture compared to other countries. Kyrgyzstan, which has the highest score in terms of freedom of thought and expression among the OTS member states, has experienced the most significant decline in the last five years, falling from 0.64 to 0.49. Turkmenistan, which has remained constant at 0.04 points in the evaluations of the last five years, has the lowest freedom of expression score in the union. Hungary, which has shown a decline over the years with a score from 0.54 to 0.49, has maintained its position among member states with a moderate level of freedom of thought and expression. Uzbekistan has shown a small increase from 0.22 to 0.23, but still remains at low levels. When evaluating the countries of the Organization of Turkic States by different rating agencies, the assessments and analyses made by researchers, analysts, experts, and regional experts are particularly taken into account. The scores in the tables are based on data used by the rating agencies regarding the evaluation of the countries, and are scored according to issues derived from the national agendas concerning political participation, freedom of thought, and expression. In this context, issues related to political participation and freedom of thought and expression constitute the final part of the evaluation. The 2020 elections in Azerbaijan, where the Aliyev family held power for many years, were not considered fair by observers. Although promises of reforming the long-standing political system dominated the agenda in the parliamentary elections held on February 9, 2020, the election results were overshadowed by unequal opportunities and irregularities. The new results, in which almost the majority of the previous parliament reappeared, provided motivation for a new generation that felt the need to organize with political differences to change the familiar political scene. In this sense, it can be said that although political participation appears diverse, its quality needs to change (Hajiyeva, 2020, p. 227). Azerbaijan has recently faced criticism regarding freedom of thought and expression, particularly after the disappearance and subsequent arrest of opposition journalist Afgan Mukhtarli in Georgia, where he was in exile (BBC, 2017).

Hungary has long been at the forefront of discussions about freedom of expression due to its state control over the media. The intense pressure on the media under Viktor Orbán's government, including the closure of opposition channels and the restriction of media freedom, significantly lowered the country's score in terms of freedom of thought and expression (Kovacs & Trencsenyi, 2019, p. 215). Following two tumultuous and unsuccessful social democratic governments, Viktor Orbán's Fidesz Party, after winning the 2010 election with a two-thirds majority, changed the electoral system and adopted a new Basic Law. This initiative, which involved the manipulation of legislation and disregard for judicial independence, drew heavy criticism from the opposition and the EU (Zoltán Bán, 2022, p. 6). In terms of political participation, Kazakhstan faced harsh criticism from international rating agencies in 2022. Demonstrations initiated by a group of opponents of the Tokayev government escalated with the involvement of terrorist groups and propaganda elements, resulting in hundreds of deaths and injuries. These demonstrations are referred to as the "January Events" in analysis reports (Syssoyeva, 2023, p. 251). Furthermore, the government's response to the foreign terrorist threat during the demonstrations-including the continuation of traditional interventions in social events, such as the approximately five-day internet outage and disruptions to telephone and cable TV services-were also described in reports as interventions restricting freedom of thought and expression (Zhandayeva & Rosenberg, 2022, p. 4).

Kyrgyzstan, which has the relatively “open” system among the member states of the Organization of Turkic States, underwent a constitutional amendment in 2021. Although the amendment increased trust in the courts, it is necessary to point out that procedural limitations, political influences, and the lack of a robust enforcement mechanism prevent the full implementation of judicial decisions. In this context, the need for improvement in the legal framework to protect political participation and democratic principles stands out (Tailakova et al., 2025, p. 66). In the annual World Press Freedom Index of Reporters Without Borders, Kyrgyzstan fell to 144th place in 2025. The Kyrgyz court’s decision in April 2023 to uphold the Ministry of Culture’s decision to close Radio Azattyk, an organization that has been broadcasting since 1953, is being discussed as a restrictive and obstructive measure in terms of media and freedom of expression for the organization (Pannier, 2025). In Türkiye, the rise of the AKP to power in 2002 brought about political transformations and democratic reforms. The ruling power attempted to implement democratic reforms in many areas during this period (Aksu & Fatsa, 2024, p. 98). The constitutional and legal changes made within the framework of the European Union accession process can be seen as important steps taken towards the functioning of democracy. However, problems, interventions, and allegations of intervention regarding issues such as freedom of the press and media, freedom of expression, and the independence of the judiciary pose significant obstacles to the functioning of democracy. As seen in The Economist’s democracy indices since 2020, there has been a regression in democratic assessments each year, and Türkiye has been described as a hybrid regime since 2006.

In Turkmenistan, criticized for having a system almost a one-party regime in terms of political participation, Serdar Berdimuhamedov was elected in place of his father, Gurbanguli Berdimuhamedov, in the 2022 elections. Father Berdimuhamedov, who decided not to run again due to his age, stated that “it is time for new young leaders to take over the country,” and expressed his confidence in his son Berdimuhamedov, who was expected to win the election. Turkmenistan, considered one of the most authoritarian regimes in the world, was criticized by foreign observers who stated that the elections did not take place in a fair and free environment (T24, 2022).

In the Karakalpakstan Autonomous Republic of Uzbekistan, the protests in 2022, following the public discussion of proposals to change the articles concerning the status of the Karakalpakstan Autonomous Republic, led to a strong reaction from the Uzbek government with harsh repression, as it was believed that the right to secede from the country through a referendum would be taken away. The context, particularly its restrictive nature on political rights and freedom of expression, was heavily criticized by international observers (Independent Turkish, 2022).

5. Conclusion

The Organization of Turkic States (OTS), the largest union established by Turkic states, has taken its place in the global order, particularly in the 21st century, with the rise of Turkic states. Alongside the dynamically evolving world politics, economics, security concepts, and governance principles, issues such as political participation, freedom of thought, and expression have become crucial criteria in the conduct of inter-state politics and economics.

Turkic states, having experienced imperial rule, must prioritize compliance with international political and legal policies as they participate in common developments within the global order. OTS member states, which, according to international indices, have low democratic values, should take measures to strengthen these values as a unified front.

Political participation, which involves a reciprocal interaction between freedom of thought and expression, can be considered an indispensable element for the coexistence of freedoms and the sustainability of democratic systems. Among the main findings of this study is that there are serious limitations on freedom of thought and expression in OTS member states, and media

freedom is problematic in all member countries. In this context, it is necessary to strengthen civil society organizations, support media freedom, and introduce political and regulatory reforms.

The democracy and political participation indices evaluated in this study were examined according to globally accepted data from The Economist, Freedom House, and V-Dem. In the context of these indices, it is crucial for the organization to establish its own internal assessment body to promote the development of democratic values.

Ultimately, the consolidation of the Organization of Turkic States as a global actor is possible not only through economic and strategic cooperation, but also by aligning democratic standards and fundamental rights in member states with universal criteria. The index data analyzed in this study reveals that expanding channels of political participation and guaranteeing freedom of expression are not a choice, but a necessity for sustainable integration, in order to strengthen the organization's institutional identity. Reform steps taken in this direction will both strengthen the internal social dynamics of member states and reinforce the organization's democratic legitimacy in the international system.

Consequently, the strategic future of the OTS depends on its ability to harmonize these internal political standards with international norms. As this study highlights, a sustainable regional power cannot rely solely on economic integration or cultural affinity; it requires a robust foundation of shared political values to ensure long-term stability and global legitimacy. The findings underscore that current restrictions on freedom of expression create a bottleneck, preventing genuine political participation and limiting the organization's 'soft power' potential. Therefore, implementing the proposed internal monitoring mechanisms and structural reforms is not merely a normative preference for member states, but a strategic necessity for the OTS to evolve from a regional cooperation mechanism into a credible, influential pole in the multipolar world order.

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