**Translation of the interview with Dr. János Hóvári, the Executive Director of the Representation Office of the Organization of Turkic States** – published on June 21, 2023 in Hungarian in ***Magyar* *Demokrata*,** a conservative Hungarian political and cultural magazine published weekly in Budapest since 1997.

**Interviewer: Tamás Pataki**

**Common roots, common vision**

Brussels has not opened up to the Turkic World in the way that would be reasonable, said János Hóvári, Head of the Representation Office of the Organization of Turkic States in Hungary and former ambassador to Ankara. In light of the Russian-Ukrainian war, the Turkic states are becoming increasingly important for Hungary and Europe.

**- What is Hungary, which strongly emphasizes its Christian identity, doing in an organisation made up of Muslim states?**

- The simple answer is: that's not why we're there. Within the Organisation of Turkic States (OTS), the symbolic basis for cooperation is explicitly not Islam but Turkic roots: a common history, language, culture and Turkic identity are the binders. The world of Islam like Christianity is not a monolithic and homogeneous block but a colourful kaleidoscope of many different readings and practices, with different emphases within the Turkic World. Even Türkiye, where Islam is most strongly present in public life, is a secular state, not to mention Azerbaijan or the countries of Central Asia.

In the case of the post-Soviet countries, one cannot ignore the anti-religious Soviet era or the popular Islam that has been re-emerging after independence, which gives a particular colour to the manifestations of Islam there. On this basis, it is also customary to speak of a separate Turkic version of Islam.

**- Yet, is it not a problem to work together in an environment of different civilisations?**

- In general, all Turkic states are known to be tough on extremist Islamism in all its forms, but it should also be remembered that within the Turkic World, the Gagauz Turks in southern Moldova are Orthodox Christians and read the Lord's Prayer in their own language. There are also Buddhist Turks in Siberia and those who preserve some of the ancient shamanistic traditions. There are significant non-Turkic-speaking Christian communities in all the OTS member states: Orthodox and Roman Catholic, and all the OTS member states have good relations with the Vatican. Our common roots, which form the basis of our cooperation, go back to long before these major world religions were adopted.

**- Was it an emotional decision or a very cool-headed one to join the Turkic Council (now OTS) in 2018?**

- If I remember correctly, we were the ones who were invited, not the ones who knocked on their door. Many Turkic leaders have praised the policy of opening up Hungarian foreign and economic policy to the Turkic World between 2013 and 2018. In September 2018, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán took part at the opening ceremony of the Nomad World Games in Cholpon-Ata, Kyrgyzstan. He was the main guest of honour together with the heads of Turkic states, who have come together for a Summit, which is how we became observers in the organisation. We had previously participated as observers in the work of the Parliamentary Assembly of Turkic States (TURKPA) and I was able to arrange our observer membership in Ankara in 2013, during my post as an ambassador. We also have links with the International Organisation of Turkic Culture (TURKSOY), also known as Turkic UNESCO, dating back to the late 1990s.

**- As you mentioned, Hungary is an observer in the organisation. What does the observer status mean and how realistic is it for Hungary to become a full member of the organisation at some point?**

- Hungary remains an observer for the time being. We have often been asked to become members, but I think that the observer framework is enough to build and develop our relations. In many ways we are the intermediary between the European Union and the OTS, and the Budapest office is also the European office. It is not an easy role to play because the current leadership in Brussels is not as open to the Turkic World as they should be. The biggest misunderstanding in Brussels is that they refuse to acknowledge that Central Asia is linked to the EU through Azerbaijan, Georgia and Türkiye because of the Russian-Ukrainian war, and has consequently become a geostrategic priority for European countries. The Türkiye policy cannot be left in such a fragmented state, what Brussels is currently following: a separate Türkiye policy for the sake of membership, a separate Azerbaijan policy in the Eastern Partnership system, and a separate Central Asia policy. Brussels should interpret and assess the Turkic cohesion that has been strengthened by the war in Ukraine. This is difficult at the moment. But this may change, and from the summer of 2024 there will be a new EU leadership, which will hopefully be more understanding to this issue.

**- In a study published in Magyar Szemle (Hungarian Review) 2022, you write that the Russian-Ukrainian war should make Europe realise that it is vital to strengthen its relations with the Turkic states, because Azerbaijani oil or other Central Asian minerals could come from there, and the Caspian-Caucasian "middle corridor" could become an attractive alternative economic route. You called this the biggest challenge for Turkic cooperation in the 21st century. How do you see things developing now?**

- Indeed, Europe should be made aware of this, because the Turkic World is the most important energy hub and east-west transport corridor for the south-eastern region of the EU. New forms of cooperation are essential to increase the economic strength of the Western Balkans. Many key EU leaders understand this. But there are states in the EU that want to block links with the Turkic World on the basis of some perceived interest. Unfortunately, they are quite effective. But that could change at any time. We shall see what kind of EU leadership emerges in the summer of 2024, perhaps one that will reverse the deadlock into which Brussels has led itself. This would be in the interest not only of the Turkic World, but also of Europe, especially the Danube and Mediterranean countries.

**- You also wrote that, especially in the current political, military and economic crises, the relationship between Brussels and Ankara is ripe for a new approach. In the light of the Turkish elections, how do you see Türkiye's strategy going forward?**

- It is an important factor in the global economy and cannot be ignored. The re-election of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and his ruling coalition could be a stabilising factor not only in Türkiye, with its 85 million inhabitants, but also in a vast region between the Black Sea and the Mediterranean, the western reaches of the Caucasus and the southern slopes of the Balkan Mountains. The old-new Turkish President will obviously seek to improve the Turkish economy, and based on Türkiye's productive potential, he is likely to succeed in tackling the monetary crisis. He will follow the so-called Turkish path, which he has always followed, because Türkiye is a middle power and a geopolitical and geostrategic power centre, it has no other option in times of crises.

**- Can they continue the EU accession negotiations?**

- Türkiye has a complex system of relations with the EU. Membership is just one of them. Türkiye has been a candidate country since 12 December 1999 and membership negotiations started on 12 December 2005. Negotiations have progressed slowly and continued until May 2016. One chapter was closed, however they have been frozen ever since. In my view, the new EU leadership will have to take a new stance on this in the summer of 2024. It is also a fact that in the meantime, Turkish society's attraction to the EU has diminished considerably. Hungary and several other Member States support Türkiye's EU membership. Time will give the answer to this question too.

**- Which Turkic state do we currently have the closest relations with? Are they economic or other types of relations? More precisely, how much is this relationship worth to us, has our economic cooperation strengthened or stagnated since 2018? Could we give some figures, for example, on how much opportunity this has created for Hungarian public or private companies to gain markets in these countries?**

- We have growing relations with all the Turkic states, of which trade and investment are measured in figures, but even more than that, I see the future as being built on a system of relations that helps the Central Asian states to modernise. Our energy cooperation with Azerbaijan or the joint Hungarian-Turkish industrial activity are also good examples. Another very important aspect for the future is that over one thousand new students from the Turkic states are coming to our universities every year under the *Stipendium Hungaricum* programme, and they will become cultural ambassadors of Hungary in their home countries after graduation. But if we look at the corporate sector, we can also take stock of many important achievements: OTP has acquired a ten per cent share in the Uzbek banking sector, there are real and potential Hungarian investments in the energy and pharmaceutical industries, and MOL's presence in Azerbaijan speaks for itself, as 9.57 per cent of the Azəri-Çıraq-Günəşli oil field is owned by MOL. Our trade turnover with the OTS states has increased from $3 billion before the pandemic to well over $4 billion, with a strongly positive balance.

**- Since the outbreak of the Russian-Ukrainian war, Azerbaijan has played an increasingly important role for Europe in the energy sector. To what extent can Turkic relations contribute to the diversification of Hungary's energy imports, and what does this mean for the Hungarian-Azerbaijani relationship?**

- Building on previous high-level discussions, Minister Péter Szijjártó held bilateral talks in Baku on 3 February this year on the supply of Azerbaijani natural gas to Hungary, which could reach up to two billion cubic metres in the coming years. Since then, technical details have been discussed and so far, the talks seem to be successful. We hope that by the end of the year the first delivery of gas from Azerbaijan will arrive through a complex but hopefully well-functioning system. If all goes well, 60% of Hungarian gas consumption will be supplied from Azerbaijan by 2024.

**- The recent opening of Uzbekistan's first Embassy in Budapest is a sign of renewed interest. What is the potential of Hungarian-Uzbek relations?**

- Hungary is Uzbekistan's only strategic partner in the EU. It all started when Uzbekistan's Xalq Bank imported 1,800 ATMs from Hungary, and since then a number of investments in agriculture, water management, manufacturing, pharmaceuticals, automotive and telecommunications have been developed with leading Hungarian companies. I am also pleased to report that an agreement has been reached to set up a special industrial zone with the necessary infrastructure for Hungarian companies near Tashkent, where investors can start investment projects and economic activities with tax incentives.

**- Returning to the spiritual issues: is there a kind of common Turkic consciousness? How serious is the intention to create one? The history of the Turkic states has been very different - Türkiye has been an independent state, other Turkic peoples had to manage within the Soviet Union. Are the differences between them greater than the similarities?**

- The universal Turkic consciousness is a product of the late 19th century, in its creation Ármin Vámbéry and Hungarian Turkology as a whole, played a great role. The Young Turks who were renewing the Ottoman Empire paid attention to the Turks in Russia, and vice versa. The Kingdom of Hungary supported this movement by requiring the prestigious Eötvös Collegium to admit a Turkish student every year from 1913 to 1947. It was in Budapest that the prominent linguist and strategist for Turkic cooperation, Bekir Chobanzade (1893-1937), a Crimean Tatar, organised the first Turkic Congress in Baku in 1926, which not only sought to harmonise the new Latin-based alphabets but also to promote Turkic modernisation. In 1937 Stalin had him executed for this activity.

**- Was it only after the collapse of the Soviet Union that the situation was resolved?**

- Indeed, the real integration of the Turkic World, or a large part of it, was made possible after the break-up of the Soviet Union. In 1991, five new Turkic states were born: Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. The then Turkish President Turgut Özal immediately invited the new leaders to Ankara. Over the past 30 years, all these countries went through many changes, the Turkic states have learned a lot from each other and an incredible development has taken place: after a long colonial period they have begun to develop a real sense of national identity and modern statehood. In societies whose identities had been deliberately dismantled by the Soviet system, a sense of inferiority to Russian-Soviet culture had developed. Since gaining independence, it was sometimes difficult for the Turkic peoples to find the new identity. In this road the Turkic nations can learn not only from Türkiye, but Hungary and Poland can be a model too.