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That's Nobody's Business but the Turks': Rebranding "New Türkiye" for the New Century

Alp Yenen and Erik-Jan Zürcher

The year 2023 marks the centenary of the Republic of Turkey, not the centenary of "Turkey" as such. The term "Turkey" emerged from the Italian *Turchia* and Byzantine Greek *Tourkia*, which were used in reference to the realm of the Turks since the Seljuk conquest of Asia Minor in the eleventh century. It became widely used in major European languages throughout the history of the Ottoman Empire, with European contemporaries commonly referring to the "Turkish empire" as *la Turquie*, *die Türkei*, or *Turkey*. The use of "Ottoman Empire" was mostly restricted to academic circles. Arguably, the Ottomans only coined the term "Ottoman Empire" to describe the dynasty's governing polity in the nineteenth century to create a more European image of imperial sovereignty that legitimised the Sultan's rule over a multi-national population. Consequently, the Ottoman state had neither adopted the term "Turkey," nor was it opposed to being referred to as such in international politics. The only Ottomans to appropriate the term "*Türkiye*" (sometimes pronounced "*Türkiya*") for their state and country were political exiles who were involved in constitutionalist opposition to the governance of the Sultan and his Grand Viziers. Both the "Young Ottoman" and later the "Young Turk" movements presented themselves in Europe as the champions of "Young Turkey," a name that echoed the liberal "young" movements that emerged in Europe after the founding of the Young Italy (*Giovine Italia*) movement in 1831.

When the centuries-old homelands of Turkish settlers in "European Turkey" were lost after the Ottoman defeats in the Balkan War of 1912–13, Turkish nationalists increasingly started to see the remaining territories in Thrace and Anatolia as the new homeland of the Turks. Nevertheless, contrary to common wisdom, the single-party regime of the "Young Turk" Committee of Union and Progress (*İttihad ve Terakki Cemiyeti*, CUP) that ruled the Ottoman Empire from the Balkan War to the end of the First World War remained committed to the Muslim-imperial sovereignty of the Ottoman Empire instead of following policies of Turkism. The same was true when defiant remnants of the CUP were mobilised under the Committees of the Defence of Rights (*Müdafa-i Hukuk Cemiyetleri*) after the Ottoman defeat in the war. Their political vocabulary was focused on saving the Ottoman state and its Muslim nation, which were under threat of dissolution. However, as their political recognition grew in the years 1921–1922, Mustafa Kemal Pasha (Atatürk, 1881–1938) and his colleagues began referring to the counter-government of the Grand National Assembly in Ankara as the Grand National Assembly of Turkey (*Türkiye Büyük Millet Meclisi*). By 1923, this process was completed when

the Treaty of Lausanne was signed, which effectively nullified international recognition of the Ottoman Sultan's government in İstanbul and recognised the independence of the new government in Ankara. On 29 October 1923, the "Republic of Turkey" (*Türkiye Cumhuriyeti*) was officially proclaimed.

The country's new official name was readily embraced by the international community, which saw in the Kemalist republic a bold experiment in Western-style modernisation. Numerous book titles from the 1920s and 1930s echoed the Kemalist message that a "new Turkey" had replaced the old one. For the first time in history, the way the country was referred to in the outside world and the name it officially used for itself coincided, although it was spelled differently in various languages.

For nearly a century, Turks took pride in the official name of their country. However, with the full-scale globalisation of the English language at the turn of the twenty-first century, certain Turkish nationalists became increasingly disturbed by the English word "Turkey". This discontent stemmed from the fact that several centuries ago, English merchants started calling large exotic birds (Meleagris) that originated from North America "turkeys," as they were similar to another bird that in earlier times they had imported through traders in (Ottoman) Turkey and hence referred to as "turkeys". However, turkeys are commonly depicted in comedic portrayals as unintelligent or clumsy birds, resulting in Orientalist and racist jokes about the country that dismayed Turkish nationalists. Turkish expatriates in North America lobbied in 1990 to change the English name of the country to "Türkiye" by way of a petition for which over 3,000 signatures were collected. The Turkish Language Association (*Türk Dil Kurumu*) gave its blessings for the name change at a congress that it held on 29 September 1990. Nevertheless, these initiatives did not gain significant diplomatic traction and were largely forgotten. However, with the introduction of internet search engines in the late 1990s, increased confusion over the names of the bird and the country contributed to a sense of dismay resulting from this lexical ambiguity.

In 2002, a discourse of a "new Turkey" emerged with the rise of the Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, AKP) in opposition to Turkey's "old" Kemalist establishment. As the year 2023 drew near and along with it the centennial of the Republic, the AKP regime started to propagate its own vision of a new Turkey for a new century of the Republic. What few people expected was the return of the name issue. Hence, both the Turkish and international media reacted with astonishment when a declaration by President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan (1954–) was made public in the *Official Gazette (Resmî Gazete)* on 4 December 2021.

*Using Türkiye as a Brand**

In light of its Millennia-year-old state tradition, the state of the Republic of Turkey has accepted as one of its fundamental duties the task of preserving and promoting the culture and values of our nation by carrying out distinguished and worthy endeavours befitting the ancient Turkish nation.

In the course of activities conducted at home and abroad on the basis of this understanding, great care has been taken with the values stemming from the deep-rooted history of the Turkish nation, and the brand “Türkiye” has been accepted as the flagship brand of our country in the national and international arena.

The term “Türkiye” represents and expresses the culture, civilisation, and values of the Turkish nation in the best possible way. In this regard, by adopting the phrase “Made in Türkiye” instead of “Made in Turkey” for our export products, which are a source of pride for our country in international trade, our products will be introduced with the “Türkiye” label and the entire world will be brought into contact with it. The aim is from now on to represent everything that our State [sic] and nation have accumulated over thousands of years under the “Türkiye” brand.

Within this framework, as part of efforts to strengthen the “Türkiye” brand, all necessary care will be taken with regard to using “Türkiye” instead of “Turkey,” “Türkei,” “Turquie,” and the other versions therein for all activities and correspondences, particularly in official relations with other states and international institutions and organisations.

Please be informed accordingly and take the necessary actions.

3 December 2021

Recep Tayyip ERDOĞAN

PRESIDENT

The initial motivation behind the circular appears to have been a marketing ambition aimed at bolstering Turkey’s growing achievements in the export sector. It calls for Turkish products to be rebranded and mandates the use of the Turkish name of the country for parties associated with or representing the state in their dealings with foreign institutions. In essence, it

* Translated from the original Turkish in Cumhurbaşkanlığı, “Genelge (2021/24; 03.12.2021): Marka Olarak Türkiye İbaresinin Kullanımı,” *Resmî Gazete*, no. 31679, 4 December 2021. <https://www.resmigazete.gov.tr/eskiler/2021/12/20211204-5.pdf>

is an executive order intended to be implemented first and foremost within Turkey by the Turkish state. As a result, several ministries and state institutions have adopted the term “Türkiye” on their English-language internet pages.

In May 2022, the name-change campaign went global. Mevlut Çavuşoğlu (1968–), the Turkish minister of foreign affairs at the time, sent an official letter to the Secretary-General of the United Nations (UN), Antonio Guterres (1949–), requesting “the use of Türkiye instead of Turkey for all affairs”. The request was accepted, meaning that the name change went into effect at the UN starting from the day of the receipt of the letter, and the decision was then communicated to all member states. After the UN decision, the Presidency’s Directorate of Communications (*Cumhurbaşkanlığı İletişim Başkanlığı*) launched a media campaign with the hashtag #helloTürkiye, promoting the “Türkiye” brand in multiple publicity campaigns on international media platforms and channels.

The circular is notable primarily because it sheds light on the nature of the Turkish state ideology in the early 2020s. The first part of the circular emphasises the ancient heritage of the Turkish nation and the longstanding state tradition among Turks. As such, Turkey is portrayed as the latest manifestation of a history of states that dates back thousands of years. This narrative establishes not only a continuity with the Ottoman past but also with numerous purported Turkic states that have risen and fallen since the fifth century AD. This portrayal has been characteristic of the way the AKP regime has presented the state since 2015, when Erdoğan appeared on the steps of his recently inaugurated grand presidential complex accompanied by sixteen soldiers wearing historical military costumes representing a chain of sixteen Turkic states. This construction of historical continuity serves the purpose of instilling national pride and positioning Erdoğan as a historical figure. This idea of the ancient and mythical origins of Turkey creates an ideological bridge between the neo-imperialist and Islamist nationalists of the AKP and the far-right, often pan-Turkist nationalists of the Nationalist Movement Party (*Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi*, MHP) at a time when Erdoğan is reliant on a coalition between these two currents to maintain his hold on power. Curiously, the emphasis on these mythical origins of Turkish statehood relegates the Republic of Turkey to a status of being just one among many. This is a remarkable shift because for a century, the “Republic” (*Cumhuriyet*) has been the central notion of the Turkish state ideology. The once-omnipresent official state acronym “T.C.” (“*Türkiye Cumhuriyeti*”) that appeared on the records, registers, and documentation of all state institutions has been removed or replaced with “Türkiye” by the AKP in recent years. Hence, with the name change, Erdoğan has also distanced his ideological discourse from the Kemalist cult of “Republicanism”.

The other remarkable aspect of the circular is its use of marketing terminology. The text introduces “Türkiye” as a brand (*marka*) and initially mandates its use on Turkish export products, only later extending its use to official communications. The introduction of “Türkiye” as a brand closely follows standard marketing principles, emphasising the “core values” that consumers are supposed to associate with the brand and then applying it to various product categories. The labelling of the brand (“Made in Türkiye”) on a range of export products, which in the case of Turkey primarily consists of cars, spare parts, white goods, food

products, textiles, ceramics, and more recently weapons technologies, aims to communicate to the consumers of these goods the inherent “greatness” of Turkish culture and history. The final paragraphs of the circular reflect the transformation of the country itself into a product that needs to be marketed. “Türkiye” as a single flagship brand (*çatı markası*) will thus be used to distinguish not only its consumer products, but also the activities of the Turkish state, thereby enriching all of them with positive associations. Reflecting the marketing mindset of the name-change campaign, Çavuşoğlu referred to the UN’s approval of “Türkiye” as a “*tescil*” in a Twitter message, a term commonly used for registering industrial trademarks. The ease with which the circular draws an analogy between the value of consumer goods and the image of the nation-state, using marketing principles in the realm of international relations, highlights a significant aspect of contemporary Turkey. Not only has neoconservative nationalism become a hegemonic ideology, but neoliberal capitalism has also come to underscore Turkey’s trajectory in the 2020s.

The renaming of towns, cities, or entire countries is not uncommon in international politics. Often, such moves have occurred within the context of decolonisation, where countries have rejected names that were imposed on them by European imperialists (e.g., Rhodesia to Zimbabwe) or normalised transcriptions that were imposed during the age of imperialism (e.g., Bombay to Mumbai, Peking to Beijing). Nationalism and nation-building have also driven name-changing campaigns, as in the change from Persia to Iran in 1935 and more recently in the Greek-Macedonian name dispute over “North Macedonia”. Turkey was also keen on nationalising place names. During the years of the early Republic, thousands of villages that had Greek, Armenian, or Kurdish names were redesignated using Turkish names without drawing significant international attention. However, one name change that did garner international scrutiny occurred when the Turkish government made an announcement in March 1930 mandating the use of Turkish place names for telegrams and mail addressed to Turkey; from that point onward, “İzmir” had to be used instead of “Smyrna,” and only “İstanbul” was deemed acceptable, although “Constantinople” was still widely used internationally. With the exception of Greece, however, the international community quickly accepted these name changes, as highlighted in the lyrics of the 1953 hit single “İstanbul Not Constantinople” by The Four Lads with the line, “That’s nobody’s business but the Turks.”

Erdoğan’s 2021 circular did not officially declare a name change but rather demanded the use of the Turkish name of the country in international trade and foreign relations. However, the request made through the United Nations for the exclusive use of the Turkish name in the international arena did result in a *de facto* name change, as none of Turkey’s international partners were using that version at the time. This can be considered a significant and somewhat radical step that goes even further than name changes like the introduction of Czechia as an official shortened form in 2016. Many countries like Germany, Egypt, India, Japan, and China, for example, allow for the use of international descriptors that differ from the names

of the countries in the local language (in these cases *Deutschland*, *Misr*, *Bharat*, *Nippon*, and *Zhōngguó*, respectively). The shift from Turkey to Türkiye is a political strategy, not a solution to a toponymical problem.

The insistence on the use of “Türkiye” in all languages seems to go beyond the lexical ambiguity of English but probably still stems from a perceived need to avoid associations of the country with the name of an ugly, ungainly bird. So far, the use of “Türkiye” has largely remained limited to interactions with Turkish state officials and has not yet permeated third party communications, international academia, or the vernacular of different countries. Since the name change from Turkey to Türkiye is part of the AKP’s broader strategy to assert a revamped national identity and cultivate a positive image of the country during a period of economic and political crisis, the use of Türkiye in social media, journalism, and academia often indicates a favourable attitude towards the AKP’s policies. Either way, the change marks one of the key moments in the unmaking of the old Turkey in favour of a new Türkiye in the country’s new century.

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