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## Türkiye -Latin America relations

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## ***Introduction***

Over the last twenty years, Türkiye has developed a very active foreign policy based on the idea of being a middle power with global interests, a global actor. In this respect, its growing presence in Africa and Latin America is part of this policy framework, which has emerged mainly since the AKP government came to power in 2002.

Africa and Latin America became areas of interest through the opening of embassies, high-level visits and the promotion of trade and investment. In addition, through the support of soft power initiatives such as the promotion of the Turkish language, culture, history and even international cooperation programs.

In this work, we are interested in identifying the main drivers of Turkish foreign policy towards the region, the response of Latin American countries to this policy, the areas of work and the place this region occupies on the current and future Turkish foreign policy agenda.

From our point of view, Latin America appeared to be a region where Türkiye could strengthen its ties, open up new trade opportunities and do so at an acceptable cost. The benefits of being active in the region outweighed the potential costs. It was a clear cost-benefit analysis in the last decade of the 20th century and especially in the first decade of the 21st century. It was a time when Latin American governments in particular were very open to the idea of diversifying their foreign relations, overcoming a Europe-centered or United States-centered approach that had long prevailed in Latin America during the 19th and 20th centuries.

As we have noted, Türkiye has pursued a multi-domain foreign policy based on the exercise of soft power (soap operas, tourism and direct flights, and the promotion of Turkish language and culture), trade and, to some extent, political understanding focused on the Latin American G-20 countries (Argentina, Brazil and Mexico) and presence in Latin American regional institutions.

This strategy depended on the surplus of political resources, or at least the absence of urgent priorities, in other regions more relevant to Türkiye, such as the Middle East, Europe or the United States. The international financial crisis of 2008 and the domestic Turkish economic crisis that followed, in addition to the new political and diplomatic conflicts, turned Türkiye back to its traditional areas of interest. Although less attention and political resources were invested in Latin America, the region remained relevant, at least rhetorically. In other words, this does not mean that Latin America will cease to be a relevant region, but it will have to share its place on the Turkish foreign policy agenda.

## ***Türkiye and Latin America***

Historically, Turkish relations with Latin America date back to the 19th century, when the first contacts were established between Latin American countries and the Ottoman Empire.

In the second half of the 19th century, many Ottomans emigrated to Brazil, Argentina and Mexico, where they became known as "turcos" (Turkish, in Spanish) because they arrived with Ottoman Turkish passports. In fact, they were not Turkish by language; they were mainly Arab-speaking immigrants (Christians, Jews and a minority of Muslims) or Druze or Armenians. During the First World War (1914-1918), these immigrants became very active in supporting the nationalist movements that led to the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire, and their political position was at odds with the authorities in Constantinople.

After the establishment of the Turkish Republic in 1923, these populations living in Latin America lost contact with the newly established republic.

On the other hand, the Republic founded by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk had other geopolitical and foreign policy priorities in the 1920s and 1930s, and the situation did not change during the Second World War

and the Cold War era. Latin American countries established diplomatic relations with the new Turkish Republic and opened embassies in Ankara, but we can say that the relations were merely formal and characterized by mutual irrelevance.

It was only after the end of the Cold War that the then Republic of Türkiye and Latin American countries began to consider the possibility of strengthening their bilateral relations.

Argentine President Carlos Menem was the first Latin American president to visit Türkiye in 1992, and Turkish President Süleyman Demirel visited Latin America (Argentina, Chile and Brazil) for the first time in April 1995.

Menem, whose parents were from Syria, was very interested in the Middle East, and Argentina's foreign policy during his two presidencies (1989-1995 and 1995-1999) reflected this interest. Menem was the first Argentine president to visit Israel, offered himself as a mediator between Israelis and Palestinians, and it is worth noting that Argentina also suffered two terrorist attacks linked to the Middle East, which led to an interest in the region and political security developments in the Middle East in Argentina.

In 1998, Türkiye drew up a "Latin America and the Caribbean Action Plan" ("Latin Amerika ve Karayipler Eylem Planı"), but the economic and political crisis at the end of the century in Türkiye left it unimplemented. In the 1990s, Turkish foreign policy opened up to new areas, such as the former Soviet Union, the Turkic states (Azerbaijan and the Central Asian countries) and Latin America, but the Caucasus and Central Asia were of course considered much more important for Ankara.

Undoubtedly, the most significant political change in Turkish politics took place in 2002, when the Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi - AKP) won the elections and in the following years implemented a political, economic and cultural programme that was very different from the policies implemented by other political parties since the establishment of the Republic of Türkiye. Turkish foreign policy and Turkish foreign policy towards Latin America were also affected by this new government.

### ***Türkiye`'s foreign policy towards Latin America during the AKP government***

There are two different approaches to understand Turkish interest in Latin America: why? (main drivers of Turkish foreign policy) and why at this time? (specific domestic and regional opportunities).

After 2002, the AKP government created a new framework for Turkish foreign policy, which aimed to signal the party's new ideological drive and to respond to the new geopolitical situation of Türkiye. This "reorientation of Turkish foreign policy within global politics<sup>1</sup>" has put regions that were not important in previous decades on the Turkish foreign policy agenda. In this respect, Africa, Latin America and Asia became the new frontiers of the Ankara government.

It was very clear that the new Turkish foreign policy makers had a different framework than the previous ones. The AKP government wanted Türkiye to be more than a "middle power<sup>2</sup>" and to achieve the status of a "global actor". Latin America and Africa were, according to this new framework, areas where Turkish foreign policy should become active and promote the idea of Ankara as an actor with global interests.

At the same time, two other factors supported this policy: firstly, the European Union's rejection of Türkiye as a candidate for membership. The Turkish political system was deeply affected by this

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<sup>1</sup> Ozkan, Mehmet (2010) 'What drives Turkey's involvement in Africa?', Review of African Political Economy, 37: 126, pp. 533-540.

<sup>2</sup> González Levaggi, Ariel, Towards the peripheries of the Western World: Eurasian regional policies in Latin America, Anuario de Integración 13, 2016, pp. 61-87.

rejection and helped those who advocated a different foreign policy approach, or at least the idea of diversifying priorities. Even if there were some basic ideas shared by the majority of AKP decision-makers, in the case of foreign policy the relevance of Ahmet Davutoğlu was beyond doubt the strongest, and it has to be recognized that other less relevant thinkers or practitioners believed that the European-centered approach should not be changed. In the end, those who advocated a new foreign policy approach prevailed and regions such as Africa and Latin America emerged as new priorities.

Secondly, we often hear that "it takes two to tango" and this was the case between Türkiye and Latin America. At that time, the region was experiencing the interest of several non-traditional extra-regional powers such as Türkiye, Iran and India, in addition to the other global players such as the United States, European countries, Russia or China. These new extra-regional actors were interested in deepening their relations with Latin American countries, and the "new left" governments in the region were open to new partners.

In Latin America, many felt that the best option was a foreign policy that was as multi-vectoral as possible. The South-South cooperation of the 1980s was modernized and the idea of finding new partners in Africa, Asia and the Middle East was very acceptable to Latin American governments.

Therefore, there was a coincidence between the new domestic political situation in Türkiye, the closure of traditional areas of interest and the opportunities that were opening up in new regions of the world.

### ***Political and diplomatic relations***

It was actually before the AKP government that Türkiye considered the importance of Latin America. As mentioned above, a "Latin America and the Caribbean Action Plan" was drawn up in 1998, but as it could not be implemented, in 2006 under the new government it was revised and updated. The year 2006 was declared the Latin American and Caribbean Year in Türkiye, and in 2009, the "Trade Development Strategy towards the Americas" identified Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Cuba, Mexico and Venezuela as key trading partners<sup>3</sup>.

This "multidimensional" foreign policy had a prestige component (Türkiye as a global player), but at the same time it was very much in the economic interest, as the objective of increasing bilateral trade was emphasized in many of the official declarations and statements. Türkiye's economic growth of 5% per year from 2003 to 2010 demanded new markets for Turkish products<sup>4</sup>, and Latin America, with its growing economies due to the expansion of the commodity trade, appeared to be the "brave new market".

It is hard to say whether this policy was the result of a cautious analysis of existing opportunities or just an exercise in wishful thinking. The only way to confirm or deny the success of this policy would be to look at the results of bilateral foreign trade and the agreements and cooperation at the diplomatic and political level.

It is therefore important to note that since 2006 we can identify many high-level visits by the President and the Foreign Minister. 20 years after the first visit of Demirel to the region, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan visited Mexico, Colombia and Cuba in February 2015. A year later, in February 2016, there was a second presidential trip to the region, where Erdoğan visited Chile, Peru and Ecuador. There

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<sup>3</sup> "Turkey's Relations with Latin America is Deepening", Inter-American Dialogue, February 25, 2015, <https://www.setav.org/en/turkeys-relations-with-latin-america-is-deepening/>

<sup>4</sup> Gonzalez Levaggi, Ariel, "Turkey and Latin America: A New Horizon for a Strategic Relationship", PERCEPTIONS, Winter 2013, Volume XVIII, Number 4, pp. 99-116, [http://sam.gov.tr/pdf/perceptions/Volume-XVIII/winter-2013/Ariel\\_Levaggi.pdf](http://sam.gov.tr/pdf/perceptions/Volume-XVIII/winter-2013/Ariel_Levaggi.pdf)

were other visits by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in 2009, when he visited Mexico, and in May 2010, when he visited Brazil and Chile, but at that time he was Prime Minister.

Between 2009 and 2016, Latin America became very relevant on the Turkish foreign policy agenda, with high-level visits, the opening of Turkish Airlines routes, scholarships for Latin American students and trade missions. However, the attempted coup of July 2016 changed Türkiye's foreign policy priorities, and although Latin America did not disappear from the agenda, its relevance decreased.

In 2009, Türkiye had six diplomatic missions in Latin America; in 2016, it had 13!

It is important to note that the Turkish approach to the region during these years was quite comprehensive, including many tools and issues, not only the political or diplomatic channels, but also emphasizing the soft power and cultural aspects.

### ***Bilateral relations between Türkiye and Latin America: Argentina, Brazil and Mexico***

At the bilateral level, it is impossible to look at two decades of bilateral relations with 33 Latin American and Caribbean countries as a whole. If we focus on the three Latin American G-20 members: Argentina, Brazil and Mexico, we could get a clear idea of Türkiye's policies and bilateral relations.

### ***Argentina and Türkiye***

Bilateral relations between Türkiye and Argentina began in 1910 when the Ottoman Empire and Argentina signed their first consular protocol and both governments sent consuls general, but the beginning of World War I and the end of the Ottoman Empire ended diplomatic contacts.

After the proclamation of the Republic of Türkiye, the first bilateral agreement between Argentina and Türkiye was signed in Rome in 1926, the Treaty of Amity, and then the ambassadors of both countries presented their credentials in 1938.

Focusing on bilateral contacts during the AKP government, relations could be considered somewhat problematic due to the diplomatic tensions caused by the suspension of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's two planned visits to the country: the first in May 2010<sup>5</sup>, during a regional tour that included Brazil and Chile. On that occasion, the government of the city of Buenos Aires cancelled an event to inaugurate a monument to Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. The head of the city government at the time was Mauricio Macri, who became president of Argentina between 2015 and 2019.

The Turkish government blamed the Armenian lobby for the decision of the city of Buenos Aires and relations remained cold for a few months. In April 2011, we find another diplomatic milestone when the Argentinean Federal Judge Norberto Oyarbide dictated “the Turkish state has committed the crime of genocide against the Armenian people<sup>6</sup>”. This resolution was not the first in Argentina, where the Parliament (Chamber of Deputies and Senate) has approved similar decisions since 1993, leading to periods of bilateral tension with successive Turkish governments.

In July 2022, President Erdoğan planned a trip to South America, which was cancelled a few days after it was announced. We should mention that Recep Tayyip Erdoğan visited Argentina in December 2018, during the G-20 presidential summit in Buenos Aires. Although it was not an official bilateral visit.

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<sup>5</sup> “Argentina: El primer ministro turco cancela su viaje”, BBC, May 30th, 2010, [https://www.bbc.com/mundo/internacional/2010/05/100530\\_1551\\_turquia\\_argentina\\_erdogan\\_armenia\\_fp](https://www.bbc.com/mundo/internacional/2010/05/100530_1551_turquia_argentina_erdogan_armenia_fp)

<sup>6</sup> “Argentinian Judge dictaminated that Turkish State committed the crime of genocide against the Armenian people”, The International Raoul Wallenberg Foundation, April 11, 2011, <https://www.raoulwallenberg.net/news/argentinian-judge-dictaminated-that-turkish-state-committed-the-crime-of-genocide-against-the-armenian-people/>

It is easy to understand that these episodes caused some diplomatic annoyance, but in other areas, relations continued. Just to mention, for example, that during the same period, in July 2022, the Yunus Emre Institute office was inaugurated in Buenos Aires and began to organize many cultural activities.

During the COVID pandemic, Turkish Airlines maintained the Buenos Aires - Sao Paulo - Istanbul flight, which became very important since Emirates Airlines and Qatar Airways suspended these routes during 2020.

The IV Joint Economic Commission was held in Ankara in a hybrid format under the co-chairmanship of Deputy Minister of Trade Mustafa Tuzcu and Secretary of International Economic Relations of Argentina Cecilia Todesca. In order to underline the importance of this meeting, it should be noted that the III Joint Economic Commission was held in Buenos Aires in October 2009. In July 2022, the IX Political Consultations between Türkiye and Argentina took place in Ankara, the previous one being in 2014.

An often overlooked issue on the bilateral agenda is the continued presence of Argentine blue helmets in Cyprus<sup>7</sup> as part of the United Nations peacekeeping mission (UNFICYP). Unfortunately, this mission is not fully integrated into Argentina's Eastern Mediterranean foreign policy framework, which could lead to interesting areas of cooperation with countries in the region, including Türkiye.

Regarding the bilateral Turkish-Argentine trade turnover, the trade relations have been growing in the last decade, the figures of the first three quarters of 2022 show a trade turnover of 932 million USD, and in 2021 it was around 870 million USD and in 2019 it was 544 million USD. Regarding the components of this trade relationship: “The main products exported by Türkiye to Argentina are automotive main and sub-industry, iron and steel, tobacco, cement, electrical appliances, machinery and equipment, textile and plastic products, construction materials. The main products exported by Argentina to Türkiye are agricultural products such as soybeans, sunflowers, maize and cereals<sup>8</sup>”.

One of the things that is often mentioned by Argentine and Turkish officials is the potential of bilateral trade, but perhaps this is just a politically correct statement. Latin America in general, and Argentina in particular, should avoid the primarisation of its exports, and it would be unwise to focus on primary products as the core of bilateral trade relations, as this would not contribute to the development of the economy. Primary products are important, but they cannot be the only products that countries should trade. On the other hand, if we look at the manufacturing sector, Argentina and Türkiye are sometimes competitors, and in Latin America, this could not be the basis of a mutually beneficial trade relationship in the long run.

Technology sector might be a way to overcome these structural constraints. This sector could become a win-win situation for both Türkiye and Argentina. The experience of cooperation in the satellite industry<sup>9</sup> is a good example of what can be done if the other partner is considered not only as a market for the products, but also as a partner for the development of technology-intensive products.

In this case, Turkish Aerospace Industries (TAI) and the Argentine state-owned company INVAP agreed to cooperate in the development of a geostationary satellite. The recent visit of the Argentine Ministry of Foreign Affairs to Ankara, the importance given to this agreement and the future development prospects show a new technology-intensive path that could generate more benefits for the development of both countries.

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<sup>7</sup> Dubois, Gaston, “New Argentine peacekeeping contingent of Blue Helmets left for Cyprus”, January 19, 2023, <https://www.aviacionline.com/2023/01/new-argentine-peacekeeping-contingent-of-blue-helmets-left-for-cyprus/>

<sup>8</sup> “Turkey - Argentina Strategic Dialogue Thinking Diplomacy: New World New Horizons”, TASAM, July 28, 2021, [https://tasam.org/en/Icerik/66942/turkey\\_argentina\\_strategic\\_dialogue\\_thinking\\_diplomacy\\_new\\_world\\_new\\_horizons](https://tasam.org/en/Icerik/66942/turkey_argentina_strategic_dialogue_thinking_diplomacy_new_world_new_horizons)

<sup>9</sup> González Levaggi, Ariel; Blinder, Daniel, “High in the sky: Turkish-Argentine South-South space cooperation”, *Third World Quarterly*, 2022, Vol. 43, No. 1, 94–113

Another area where Türkiye has emerged as a global leader is in the military industry, particularly in the field of drones. The Argentine armed forces have taken note of these developments, but the lack of agreements in this area is more related to Argentina's financial constraints than to any other reason.

A source of concern in Ankara regarding bilateral relations with Argentina is the Armenian community, which is perceived by Türkiye as essentially opposed to any bilateral Turkish-Argentinean development. The community exists, of course, and some of its political sectors oppose the idea of strengthening ties between Buenos Aires and Ankara, but it might be a mistake to think that this is the only factor that can have a direct impact on bilateral relations.

It seems that the underdevelopment of Argentinean-Turkish relations is rather rooted in the lack of strategic planning on the Argentinean side and in the new interest on the Turkish side. On the other hand, a positive development in a future normalization between Armenia and Türkiye would also have a positive impact on Argentina.

### ***Brazil and Türkiye***

Brazil is the largest economy in Latin America, a regional leader and a global player. Therefore, Türkiye's interest in the country is understandable. In 2006, the Turkish-Brazilian High Level Cooperation Commission was established and in the same year, the Brazilian-Turkish Business Council was established under the Turkish Foreign Economic Relations Board (DEİK)<sup>10</sup>.

Lula da Silva (President of Brazil from 2003 to 2011) visited Türkiye in 2009 and Dilma Rousseff (President of Brazil from 2011 to 2016) in October 2011. During this trip, both countries signed a document entitled "Strategic Perspective of a Dynamic Association Türkiye Brazil" and bilateral cooperation agreements in the fields of higher education and justice.

However, it was during President Lula's term that the relationship between Türkiye and Brazil gained international attention: in 2010, both countries tried to mediate between Iran and the 5+1 countries in order to reach an agreement on Iran's nuclear programme<sup>11</sup>.

At that time, Brazil and Türkiye shared a mutual perception as regional powers and global players, and the Iranian file served as an international showcase for both, which unfortunately did not help to reach an agreement.

Brazilian foreign policy during the Lula administration was interested in the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa), Türkiye and even Iran. These were countries that were regional powers and were considered by Brasilia to be the best partners for the country.

In the case of Brazil, Türkiye's interest, and at least that of Lula's government, was not only commercial - Brazil is Latin America's largest economy - but also diplomatic and even geopolitical.

The domestic political changes in Brazil after Lula da Silva's presidency: Dima Rousseff (2011-2016), Michel Temer (2016-2018) and Jair Bolsonaro (2018-2022), a highly polarised political spectrum, diminished the importance of the foreign policy agenda while media attention and political resources were monopolized by domestic politics.

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<sup>10</sup> Daly, John, Turkey Seeks to Increase Trade With Latin America, Eurasia Daily Monitor Volume: 5 Issue: 77, April 23, 2008, <https://jamestown.org/program/turkey-seeks-to-increase-trade-with-latin-america/>

<sup>11</sup> Ozkan, Mehmet, Turkey–Brazil Involvement in Iranian Nuclear Issue: What Is the Big Deal?, Strategic Analysis, 2011, 35: 1, 26 — 30

### ***Mexico and Türkiye***

Mexico and Türkiye established diplomatic relations in 1927, but relations remained at a very low level for decades.

Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, then prime minister, visited Mexico in 2012 to attend the G20 summit in Los Cabos. A year later, in December 2013, Mexican President Enrique Peña Nieto visited Türkiye, the first presidential-level visit between the two countries.

During the visit, the two countries established a strategic partnership and a binational high-level commission.

Turkish President Erdoğan visited Mexico in February 2015, and in 2017 the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TİKA) opened its first regional coordination office in Mexico City. Turkish Airlines launched direct flights from Istanbul to Mexico City and Cancun in August 2019.

At the diplomatic level, relations are not as developed, but trade, cultural and tourism ties remains quite significant.

### ***Türkiye and Latin America Multilateral relations***

It is interesting to note that during these years, Türkiye focused both on bilateral contacts and on the multilateral level. In this regard, Türkiye conducted a very active foreign policy towards regional institutions in Latin America. It is difficult to find any other extra-regional actor that had such a comprehensive and multifaceted foreign policy towards the region.

Türkiye attempted to sign a free trade agreement (FTA) with the Southern Common Market (MERCOSUR), an institution composed of Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay, Uruguay and Venezuela. The "FTA Framework Agreement" was signed in 2008 to set the framework for FTA negotiations between Türkiye and MERCOSUR<sup>12</sup>. Unfortunately, the institutional crisis of MERCOSUR, with growing tensions among its members, reduced the possibilities for progress on the FTA. Other countries in the Middle East, such as Israel and Egypt, have signed FTAs with MERCOSUR, but the results have not been very positive. Therefore, based on these results, the practical incentives also are lacking on the Turkish side.

In 2016, Turkish President Erdoğan visited the headquarters of the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) in Santiago, Chile, where he expressed Türkiye's interest in becoming a member state of ECLAC<sup>13</sup>.

Moreover, with regard to the Organization of American States (OAS), the Association of Caribbean States (CARICOM) and the Rio Group, Türkiye has the status of "observer country". As for CARICOM<sup>14</sup>, an organization with 14 member states, a High-Level Meeting was organized in Istanbul in 2008 and a Consultation and Cooperation Mechanism in 2011. The first meeting of foreign ministers of the Türkiye-CARICOM Consultation and Cooperation Mechanism was held in Istanbul in 2014.

Even in the Inter-American Development Bank, Türkiye was given the status of a "non-borrowing member country".

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<sup>12</sup> Turkey - Argentina Strategic Dialogue Thinking Diplomacy: New World New Horizons, TASAM, July 20, 2021, [https://tasam.org/en/Icerik/66942/turkey\\_argentina\\_strategic\\_dialogue\\_thinking\\_diplomacy\\_new\\_world\\_new\\_horizons](https://tasam.org/en/Icerik/66942/turkey_argentina_strategic_dialogue_thinking_diplomacy_new_world_new_horizons)

<sup>13</sup> Erdogan: Turkey Seeks to Foster Relationships with Latin America and the Caribbean, CEPAL, February 1, 2017, <https://www.cepal.org/en/comunicados/erdogan-turquia-busca-potenciar-relaciones-america-latina-caribe>

<sup>14</sup> Türkiye, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Türkiye's Relations with the Caribbean Community (CARICOM)", <https://www.mfa.gov.tr/caricom.en.mfa>



In other less institutionalized fora such as the G-20 and MIKTA (Mexico, Indonesia, South Korea, Türkiye and Australia), Türkiye shares membership with Latin American countries and as a result there are new areas of interaction with the region.

It is interesting to note that a new area of multilateral cooperation could emerge on the basis of the Organization of Turkic States. As we have seen, Türkiye has tried to participate in the economic and political institutions developed in Latin America, but little attention has been paid to generating the interest of Latin American countries in participating in Eurasian or Turkic institutions.

In this respect, the Organization of Turkic States could fill this gap by offering Latin American countries the possibility to interact with a regional institution in which Türkiye has a leading role, and by giving them the possibility to reach out to the Turkic states of the Caucasus and Central Asia.

### ***Economic and trade relations***

As mentioned above, in 2006 Türkiye published a document entitled “Turkish Trade Development Strategy towards the Americas”, the main objective of which was to “increase our exports to \$3-4 billion in 5 years and ensure a sustainable presence in the region, including contracting services and investments<sup>15</sup>”. Türkiye's trade-oriented foreign policy had a very clear objective.

In 2007, Turkish-Brazilian bilateral trade was worth around \$900 million and, according to official data reached \$6 billion in 2022 (\$4.8 billion in Brazilian exports and \$999 million in Turkish exports)<sup>16</sup>.

Other important Turkish trade partners in the region are Mexico, which exported USD 1.18 billion and imported USD 1 billion from Türkiye in 2022, and Argentina, which exported USD 840 million and imported USD 308 million from Türkiye in 2022.

We should recognize that trade relations have been growing during these 17 years, overcoming financial and political crises, and even the Covid-19 pandemic. However, the main objective of increasing Türkiye's exports to the region has not been achieved, at least not at the level set as desirable in the 2006 document.

Trade institutions such as the Foreign Economic Relations Board of Türkiye (DEİK) and the Turkish Confederation of Businessmen and Industrialists (TUSKON) have been very active in the region, but they have not been able to achieve the aforementioned goals.

Türkiye signed a free trade agreement with Chile in July 2009, which entered into force in March 2011<sup>17</sup>. FTA negotiations are also underway with Peru, Colombia, Costa Rica and Mexico.

In our view, the emphasis on Latin America as a “market” rather than a “technological partner” is a reductionist approach that ignores many other opportunities that have not been sufficiently developed, such as the satellite cooperation between Argentina and Türkiye.

### ***Educational and cultural relations***

The Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TİKA)<sup>18</sup> was established in 1992, but focused on the Caucasus and Central Asia. However, after 2003 it adopted a more global approach, including Africa and Latin America.

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<sup>15</sup> Daly, John, Turkey Seeks to Increase Trade With Latin America, Eurasia Daily Monitor Volume: 5 Issue: 77, April 23, 2008, <https://jamestown.org/program/turkey-seeks-to-increase-trade-with-latin-america/>

<sup>16</sup> Official data from <https://iz.tuik.gov.tr>

<sup>17</sup> Republic of Türkiye, Ministry of Trade, <https://www.trade.gov.tr/free-trade-agreements/chile>

<sup>18</sup> Web page <https://www.tika.gov.tr/en>

In Latin America, there are programme offices in Mexico (since 2014) and Colombia (since 2015), but the Agency developed activities in other Latin American countries, such as Argentina and Brazil, just to mention the countries we cover in this monograph. According to the Agency's webpage, TİKA has carried out 172 projects in Latin America between 2008 and 2018<sup>19</sup>.

Another relevant cultural institution is the Yunus Emre Institute (Yunus Emre Enstitüsü)<sup>20</sup>, which was founded in 2007 and started its activities in 2009 with the aim of promoting the Turkish language and culture abroad. In Latin America, the first office was opened in Mexico and now there is a new office in Argentina (since 2022) and there are plans to open new ones in Venezuela<sup>21</sup> and Brazil<sup>22</sup>.

The Yunus Emre Institute organizes Turkish language courses and many other cultural activities, which have attracted a lot of interest in Latin America, mainly due to the widespread popularity of Turkish soap operas<sup>23</sup>, which are watched by thousands of Spanish and Portuguese speakers in the region during prime-time television.

The popularity of these TV shows generated interest in Türkiye and triggered the expansion of Latin American tourism to the country<sup>24</sup>. This growing interest in Türkiye was facilitated by the expansion of Turkish Airlines in the region.

Since 2012, the company has increased its activities in the region and now operates flights from Buenos Aires to Istanbul via Sao Paulo, Mexico to Istanbul via Cancun, Havana to Istanbul via Caracas, Panama to Istanbul via Bogota<sup>25</sup>.

This network of flights has helped to facilitate contacts between Latin America and Türkiye, benefiting tourists as well as business people, who can reach Istanbul without having to go through European airports, which increases the time and cost of the trip.

As the tourism sector is very important for Türkiye, the majority of citizens from Latin American countries do not need visas to visit Türkiye.

Holders of ordinary passports from Argentina, Belize, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Guyana, Honduras, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Uruguay and Venezuela are exempt from visa requirements for trips of up to 90 days<sup>26</sup>. Costa Rican passport holders do not require a visa for up to 30 days. Only citizens of Cuba, Dominican Republic and Mexico require a visa to enter Türkiye. On the other hand, Latin American countries do not require visas from Turkish passport holders<sup>27</sup>.

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<sup>19</sup> “TİKA carried out 172 projects and activities in 10 years in Latin America”, TİKA, [https://www.tika.gov.tr/en/news/tika\\_carried\\_out\\_172\\_projects\\_and\\_activities\\_in\\_10\\_years\\_in\\_latin\\_america-49205](https://www.tika.gov.tr/en/news/tika_carried_out_172_projects_and_activities_in_10_years_in_latin_america-49205)

<sup>20</sup> Official webpage <https://www.yee.org.tr/en>

<sup>21</sup> Yunus Emre Enstitüsü, 8 June 2022, <https://twitter.com/yeeorgtr/status/1534580873328205825>

<sup>22</sup> “Yunus Emre Enstitüsü to open new centres in 9 countries”, Yunus Emre Enstitüsü, 7 June 2017, <https://www.yee.org.tr/en/news/yunus-emre-enstitusu-open-new-centres-9-countries>

<sup>23</sup> “Turkish telenovelas are thriving in Latin America”, 6 November 2021, The Economist, <https://www.economist.com/the-americas/2021/11/06/turkish-telenovelas-are-thriving-in-latin-america>

<sup>24</sup> “Popularity of Turkish soap operas leads Latin American tourists to flock to Turkey: Association”, October 22, 2018, Hurriyet Daily News, <https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/popularity-of-turkish-soap-operas-leads-latin-american-tourists-to-flock-to-turkey-association-138141>

<sup>25</sup> Polito, Sebastian, Turkish Airlines to increase flights to Sao Paulo, 12 March, 2022, <https://www.aviacionline.com/2022/03/turkish-airlines-to-increase-flights-to-sao-paulo/>

<sup>26</sup> Türkiye, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Visa Information For Foreigners, <https://www.mfa.gov.tr/visa-information-for-foreigners.en.mfa>

<sup>27</sup> Countries where Turkish passport holders can travel visa-free in 2022, Turkish Airlines Blog, 10 February 2022, <https://blog.turkishairlines.com/en/countries-where-turkish-passport-holders-can-travel-visa-free-in-2022/>

Regardless of whether it is based on tourism or political will, the fact is that the visa-free arrangements and the direct flights operated by Turkish Airlines are important in considering any improvement in bilateral relations between Latin America and Türkiye.

Returning to the active Turkish institutions in the region, has to be mentioned the Turkish Maarif Foundation (TMF)<sup>28</sup>, which was established in 2016 with the aim of “opening schools, universities, dormitories and all activities related to education outside Türkiye in close cooperation with Turkish embassies and other Turkish institutions in order to promote Turkish education abroad<sup>29</sup>”. In fact, the main reason for the establishment of this institution was to take control of the network of Turkish educational institutions operating abroad and managed by the Fetullah Gülen movement, which the Turkish government named the Fetullah Terrorist Organisation (FETÖ) after the attempted coup of 15 July 2016.

Several schools in Buenos Aires (Colegio Hércules), in México (Colegio de Excelencia Raindrop) and in Sao Paulo (Colegio Belo Futuro Internacional)<sup>30</sup> were closed or transferred to the Turkish Maarif Foundation.

International Maarif Schools can be found in Venezuela (Caracas) and Colombia (Bogotá)<sup>31</sup>. In these primary and secondary schools, the students learn Turkish language and culture in addition to the national curricula according to the Ministries of Education of the different countries where the schools are located.

### ***Religious institutions***

The most prominent Turkish religious institution is the Türkiye Diyanet Foundation<sup>32</sup>, which was established in 1975 to “support the activities of the Presidency of Religious Affairs, to bring religious services to a wider audience and to raise the next generation who will attend religious services<sup>33</sup>”. As can be easily understood, the main partners of the Turkish Diyanet Foundation are the Islamic institutions and the Muslim faithful, and it offers Islam-related courses and scholarships to study online and in Türkiye. The institution cooperates with the country's foreign policy in a model that has been called “Türkiye's religious diplomacy<sup>34</sup>”.

Türkiye Diyanet Foundation was the organizer of the first religious summit of Latin American Muslim leaders in 2014<sup>35</sup>, which was held in Istanbul.

### ***Scholarships for foreign students***

There are several Turkish institutions that offer scholarships to foreign students wishing to study in Türkiye. In addition to the aforementioned Türkiye Diyanet Foundation, the Türkiye Government Scholarship (Türkiye Burslari Scholarship<sup>36</sup>) is a government-funded higher education scholarship

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<sup>28</sup> Official webpage <https://maarifschool.org/>

<sup>29</sup> Ozkan, Mehmet and Akgün, Birol, Turkey's Entrance to International Education: The Case of Turkish Maarif Foundation, Insight Turkey, Winter 2020, Vol. 22 / No. 1 / pp. 59-70.

<sup>30</sup> Wallace, Arturo, La huella en América Latina del Movimiento Gülen, la red a la que Turquía acusa por el intento de golpe de Estado, BBC, July 27, 2016, <https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias-america-latina-36866500>

<sup>31</sup> Dünyada Türkiye Maarif Vakfi, <https://maarifschool.org/page/2018-MAARIF-IN-THE-WORLD-16>

<sup>32</sup> Official website <https://tdv.org/en-EN/>

<sup>33</sup> Official website <https://tdv.org/en-EN/about-us/>

<sup>34</sup> Ozkan, Mehmet, Turkey's Religious Diplomacy, Arab World Geographer, 2014.

<sup>35</sup> Turkey hosts Latin American Muslims in conference, 10 November 2014, <https://worldbulletin.dunyabulteni.net/islamic-world/turkey-hosts-latin-american-muslims-in-conference-h148091.html>

<sup>36</sup> Official website <https://www.turkiyeburslari.gov.tr/>

programme that offers international students the opportunity to fund their undergraduate, master's and doctoral studies in Türkiye.

Another institution is the Presidency for Turks Abroad and Related Communities (YTB), which was established in 2010 “to manage and expand Türkiye's interaction with the world by providing scholarships and supporting the diaspora's relations with Türkiye<sup>37</sup>”.

The Scientific and Technological Research Council of Türkiye (TÜBİTAK<sup>38</sup>) offers research scholarships at the undergraduate, graduate and postdoctoral levels for Turkish and foreign students.

The Higher Education Council (YÖK<sup>39</sup>) also offers scholarships to foreign students, including those from Latin America.

Although we do not have data on how many students from Latin America have benefited from these programmes, it is unlikely to be very large, as the United States and Europe continue to be the most attractive destinations for Latin American students. The opening of tailor-made opportunities for students from this region shows the importance that the Turkish government attaches to Latin America.

### *News agencies*

The main Turkish news agency is Anadolu News Agency<sup>40</sup>, which has a website in Spanish that combines news translated from Turkish into Spanish, news from Latin America about bilateral relations between the region and the Republic of Türkiye, and news about Türkiye that might be of interest to Spanish-speaking audiences.

The Turkish Radio and Television Corporation (TRT; Turkish: Türkiye Radyo ve Televizyon Kurumu) maintains a website in Spanish<sup>41</sup> and Portuguese<sup>42</sup> with the same format as Anadolu Agency.

Latin American news agencies generally do not reach Turkish-speaking countries.

### *Latin American and Turkish studies institutions*

It is impossible to understand a region and formulate a foreign policy towards it without an in-depth knowledge of its politics, society, history and economy. In this regard, the academy (university and think-tanks) plays a prominent role in developing these technical and specialized skills. In the case of Turkish academia<sup>43</sup>, the first was the Latin America Research Centre<sup>44</sup> at Ankara University, which was established in July 2009. On this occasion, then Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu attended the inauguration and delivered a speech in which he emphasized that “Africa and Latin America form the axis of the new panoramas formulated in Türkiye's foreign policy. In fact, they play an important role in Turkish foreign policy”.

Subsequently, Bahçeşehir University opened a Centre for American Studies, which covers not only Latin America but the whole continent, but which seems to be rather inactive since 2019. Finally, the Middle East Technical University (METU) still maintains a graduate programme in Latin and North American studies.

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<sup>37</sup> Official website <https://ytb.gov.tr/>

<sup>38</sup> Official website <https://www.tubitak.gov.tr/en>

<sup>39</sup> Official website <https://www.yok.gov.tr/en/>

<sup>40</sup> Official website <https://www.aa.com.tr/>

<sup>41</sup> Official website <https://www.trt.net.tr/espanol/>

<sup>42</sup> Official website <https://www.trt.net.tr/portuguese/>

<sup>43</sup> Yazar, Ayşe, “Estudios Latinoamericanos en Turquía”, in Ferez Manuel y Gonzalez Levaggi, Ariel, eds., *Turquía-América Latina y el Caribe: Una asociación emergente*, Istanbul, 2016, pp. 339-355.

<sup>44</sup> Ankara University, Latin American studies, [http://bbs.ankara.edu.tr/Amac\\_Hedef.aspx?bno=3664&bot=1166](http://bbs.ankara.edu.tr/Amac_Hedef.aspx?bno=3664&bot=1166)

One of the most important Turkish think tanks, TASAM (Turkish Asian Center for Strategic Studies), has organized several conferences on the region. The most recent was the 4th Turkish-Latin American and Caribbean Congress in September 2022, entitled “The Future of the Latin American Economy and Türkiye<sup>45</sup>”.

The third Congress was held in April 2016 under the title “Strategic Cooperation and Los Turcos<sup>46</sup>”. The second was held in September 2010 under the title “Regional Integration, Cooperation and Development in Latin America and the Caribbean<sup>47</sup>”. The first one was organized in September 2009<sup>48</sup>.

The establishment of the Center for Latin American Studies at Ankara University and the organization of the TASAM Congress are milestones that signal the interest in Latin America since the end of the first decade of the 21st century.

TASAM has also organized several activities in Latin America, such as in Brazil (in March 2012) in cooperation with the Fundação Getulio Vargas (FGV)<sup>49</sup> and in Mexico (in June 2014) in cooperation with the Mexican Council on Foreign Relations (COMEXI)<sup>50</sup>.

In the case of Latin America, Turkish studies are less developed, with only a few institutions interested in Türkiye and the wider Turkic world. In Colombia, there was a Centre for Turkish and Caucasian Studies at the Universidad Externado, but it seems to have ceased its activities. In Argentina, there has been a Chair of Turkish Studies at the Institute of International Relations (National University of La Plata) since 2013.

There is a clear lack of institutions studying Latin America in Türkiye and institutions studying Türkiye in Latin America. The lack of specialists and academic production will have a direct impact on future possibilities to deepen and broaden areas of cooperation based on analysis and identification of opportunities beyond the political will of the different administrations.

## **Conclusions**

On the Turkish side, the relevance of Latin America for Ankara's foreign policy is mainly linked to the AKP and began to gain a place on the agenda after it came to power in 2002. The newly implemented foreign policy was not only rooted in the new ideological position of the newly elected decision-makers, but was also a reaction to the lack of answers from traditional Western partners.

This combination coincided with the openness of the Latin American governments of the time, which were interested in including other partners in their political framework.

On the Turkish side, a policy was implemented that combined the search for economic and trade opportunities for the growing Turkish economy (especially after 2005) with the will to achieve a status of global prestige.

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<sup>45</sup> 4th Turkish - Latin American and Caribbean Congress, TASAM, [https://tasam.org/en/Etkinlik/16237/4th\\_turkish\\_-\\_latin\\_american\\_and\\_caribbean\\_congress\\_](https://tasam.org/en/Etkinlik/16237/4th_turkish_-_latin_american_and_caribbean_congress_)

<sup>46</sup> 3rd Turkish - Latin America and Caribbean Congress, TASAM, 21 April 2016, [https://tasam.org/en/Etkinlik/228/3rd\\_turkish\\_-\\_latin\\_america\\_and\\_caribbean\\_congress](https://tasam.org/en/Etkinlik/228/3rd_turkish_-_latin_america_and_caribbean_congress)

<sup>47</sup> 2nd Turkish-Latin American And Caribbean Congress Was Held In Ankara, TASAM, 26 September 2010, [https://tasam.org/en/Icerik/3238/2nd\\_turkish-latin\\_american\\_and\\_caribbean\\_congress\\_was\\_held\\_in\\_ankara](https://tasam.org/en/Icerik/3238/2nd_turkish-latin_american_and_caribbean_congress_was_held_in_ankara)

<sup>48</sup> Şensoy, Süleyman, First Workshop Final Report "the Relations Between Turkey - Latin America, TASAM, 8 September 2009,

[https://tasam.org/en/Icerik/3283/first\\_workshop\\_final\\_report\\_quothe\\_relations\\_between\\_turkey\\_-\\_latin\\_america](https://tasam.org/en/Icerik/3283/first_workshop_final_report_quothe_relations_between_turkey_-_latin_america)

<sup>49</sup> Brazil - Turkey Country Meeting in Rio, TASAM, 7 March 2012, [https://tasam.org/en/Icerik/4656/Brasil\\_-\\_Turqu%C3%ADa\\_country\\_](https://tasam.org/en/Icerik/4656/Brasil_-_Turqu%C3%ADa_country_)

<sup>50</sup> Turkey - Mexico Round Table Meeting, TASAM, 20 June 2014, [https://tasam.org/en/Icerik/5286/turkey\\_-\\_mexico\\_round\\_table\\_meeting](https://tasam.org/en/Icerik/5286/turkey_-_mexico_round_table_meeting)

The results have been mixed. It is clear that Türkiye's presence in Latin America has increased, but the growth of trade turnover has been more related to the growth of Latin American exports than to Turkish exports to the region.

By the end of the second decade of the 21st century, a more complex geopolitical situation in the Middle East/Eastern Europe/Eastern Mediterranean demanded more political and economic resources from Türkiye and, as in a communicating ship system, fewer resources were available to invest in Latin America.

In addition to these shortcomings, Turkish foreign policy will soon benefit from the high investment made in soft power policies over the past two decades. The results of these policies will not be reflected in the short term, but will be very relevant in the medium and long term. The increasing number of Turkish speakers in Latin America, people who have visited or studied in Türkiye, will become a potential advantage for any Turkish policy in the future.

This advantage will survive the political and diplomatic shortcomings, the lack of trade surplus and even the domestic political changes in Türkiye.

In the economic field, the focus on joint research activities or cooperation in technology-intensive areas, such as the projects implemented with Argentina, will open the door to a new partnership beyond the buyer-seller framework. Trade is structurally constrained and in some cases, as in the case of manufacturing, Türkiye and Latin America are competitors, so new areas of cooperation should be identified.

Türkiye will increase its relevance in Latin America by emphasizing, as it did in Europe, its central geopolitical position, which is becoming very relevant for Latin American economies that want to reach Central Asian countries and China. In this respect, Türkiye's position among the Turkic states will increase its importance for Latin American countries interested in this region.

In conclusion, Türkiye's interest in Latin America has not been able to achieve the goals that this policy sought to achieve, but it has laid the foundations for future developments that will be more resilient to domestic political changes.

The Achilles heel of Turkish-Latin American relations is related to the lack of specialists and institutions dedicated to the study of the other country/region. Without this indigenous knowledge, it is impossible to sustain any diplomatic or economic effort in the long run.

In this regard, the development of Turkish studies as a specialization in Latin American academia and Latin American studies in Turkish academia would be the most relevant issue in the future, which could support other areas of cooperation such as diplomacy and trade.