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Development of Cultural and Faith Tourism in SCO and Turkic States: Uzbekistan's Potential and the Exemplary Turkish Case

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ABSTRACT

This article treats Turkish tourism sector's recent changes, focusing on its increasing relationships with the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) countries and Turkic states. The paper examines Turkiye's efforts to expand its tourism partnerships beyond its traditional European allies and emphasizes its cooperation with SCO member countries such as Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. Furthermore, it underlines Turkey's efforts to revive the ancient Silk Road—particularly through the "Middle Corridor" plan—in an effort to increase Turkic states' cultural, economic, and tourism collaboration. Cultural and religious tourism in the Turkic states is highlighted, with a particular emphasis on Turkiye and Uzbekistan. The paper concludes with practical proposals to further develop cultural and faith tourism, i.e. effective promotional campaigns, cheap flights, and visa-free travel. Generally, the article provides a thorough overview of Turkiye's ever expanding tourism sector as well as its strategic efforts to promote significant cooperation within the SCO region.

1. Introduction

Cultural and faith tourism have become more popular and attractive among local and foreign visitors in the last decades. SCO countries and particularly Turkic states have a comparative advantage in cultural and faith tourism which needs further to be developed. In this regard, Türkiye and Uzbekistan are the two Turkic countries in close collaboration within the SCO promising potential prospects in the field of cultural and faith tourism.

Tourism is one of the most important economic pillars of the Turkish economy. It has been constantly growing despite some exceptional setbacks like the coronavirus pandemic in the last years. But the Turkish tourism has achieved to redress rapidly despite the pandemic.

In the last decades, Türkiye has sought to develop its tourism not only with European and western countries but also with Turkic states and SCO countries. Currently, SCO countries and mainly Russia are important tourism partners of Türkiye. For instance, Russian tourists rank 2nd among the overall inbound tourist numbers of Türkiye[1]. This geographical expansion and diversification of incoming tourists has served to develop the Turkish tourism industry and to protect it from occasional economic downturns.

Goal

The aim of this paper is to study the potential of Turkic states within the SCO to further develop cultural and faith tourism. A particular emphasis will be put on Türkiye and Uzbekistan's potential in this direction. In this regard, the development of the Turkish tourism sector in the last decades and the increase of Türkiye's tourism relations with SCO members and particularly with the Turkic states member to the SCO will be explained. The practical steps taken by the Turkish authorities to develop Türkiye's tourism and their positive results in this direction will be underlined. This development will be demonstrated through official tourism statistics. Within the framework of this article, the importance of culture and faith tourism and its potential for Turkic states and particularly for Uzbekistan which is home to historical sites, monuments and cultural heritage more than any other Silk Road countries will also be highlighted.

Materials and Methods

Official statistics retrieved from Turkish public institutions and international organizations such as UNWTO and OECD are used in this research. These figures are used to demonstrate the increase in the Turkish tourism sector in the last decades and also to confirm the increase of tourism among Türkiye and other Turkic states such as Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, which are full members of the SCO. Where appropriate, comparisons are also made between these figures and countries. Therewith, foreign and national literature on the topic is reviewed.

Research Paper

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[1]*See p. 4 (Table 1)*

As it is not possible to study all SCO members' tourism relations with Türkiye in a single article, four Turkic states member to the SCO will be selected for this analysis, namely Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. The development of tourism relations between Türkiye and these Turkic states will be examined.

2. Development of the Tourism Industry In Türkiye

Tourism is a main source of revenue and employment for Türkiye. Development of the tourism industry has vast repercussions on other economic sectors as well. According to OECD data, in 2018, tourism in Türkiye accounted for 7.7% of employment, which corresponds to 2.2 million people (OECD, 2018). In 2019, tourism revenues of Türkiye accounted for 5,4% of the Turkish GDP (worlddata.info. 2023). According to the UNWTO, Türkiye ranked 6th in world tourism with 51,2 million visitors in 2019 (United Nations World Tourism Organization, World Tourism Barometer and Statistical Annex, December 2020).

Key Figures of the Turkish Tourism Industry

The tourism industry in Türkiye has been growing continuously in the last decades. The first three countries which send most tourists to Türkiye are Germany, Russia and the UK. The tourism activities between Türkiye and Russia, which is an important SCO member, have been ever increasing. In 2022, Türkiye received more than 5 million Russian tourists. The most preferred touristic destinations by Russians are Antalya and other Mediterranean Sea resorts. However, the downing of a Russian war plane by the Turkish air forces in 2015 resulted with a significant decrease of Russian tourists to Türkiye in the following year (Aydınbaş and Tabak, 2020: 98). Later, thanks to the fruitful diplomatic demarches, the relations between the two countries redressed in a short time. Thus, the number of Russian tourists visiting Türkiye increased again considerably in 2017.

Like all other countries, COVID 19 pandemic has hit the Turkish tourism. With the pandemic, the tourism sector slowed down rapidly due to the travel limitations. The health measures taken during the pandemic had hit almost all components of the tourism sector, ranging from hotels to airline companies, travel agencies, restaurants etc. (Arıcı, 2023: 285-302).

Just before the pandemic, in 2019, Türkiye has reached a record of 51,75 million tourists. The tourism revenues attained 41,42 billion USD in the same year, which corresponds to 5,4 of the Turkish GDP. As seen from the below table, tourism revenues of Türkiye vary from 3% to 5,4% of the GDP, depending mostly on the number of the inbound tourist numbers.

Table 2. Number of Inbound Tourists and Tourism Revenues of Türkiye (2013-2021)

Year	Number of Tourists	Revenues	% of GDP
2021	29.93 m	27.90 bn $	3.4 %
2020*	15.97 m	13.77 bn $	1.9 %
2019	51.75 m	41.42 bn $	5.4 %
2018	46.11 m	36.79 bn $	4.7 %
2017	37.97 m	31.99 bn $	3.7 %
2016	30.29 m	26.51 bn $	3.0 %
2015	39.48 m	35.65 bn $	4.1 %
2014	39.81 m	40.03 bn $	4.3 %
2013	37.80 m	37.98 bn $	4.0 %

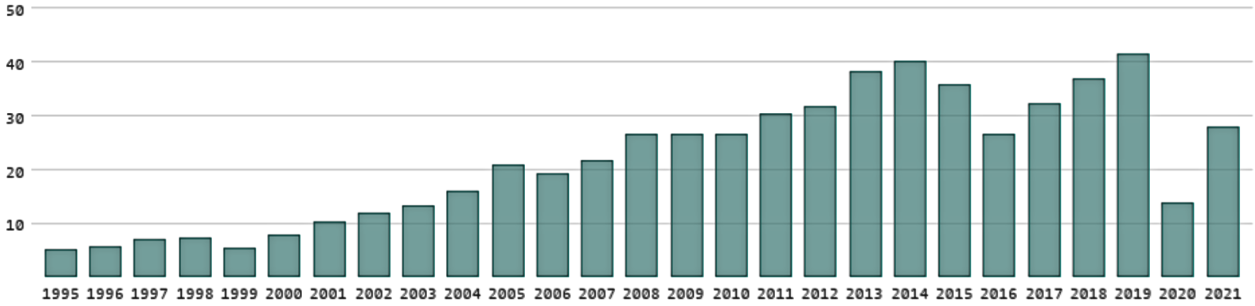
**COVID 19 Pandemic year*
Source: *https://www.worlddata.info/asia/turkey/tourism.php*

Table 1. Number of Tourists Visiting Türkiye by Countries (The First 3 Countries)

Year	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020*	2021	2022
Germany	5 580 792	3 890 074	3 584 653	4 512 360	5 027 472	1 118 932	3 085 215	5 679 194
Russia	3 649 003	866 256	4 715 438	5 964 613	7 017 657	2 128 758	4 694 422	5 232 611
United Kingdom	2 512 139	1 711 481	1 658 715	2 254 871	2 562 064	820 709	392 746	3 370 739

**COVID 19 Pandemic year*
Source: *Turkish Statistics Office*

Table 3. Türkiye's Tourism Revenues in Graphics (1995-2021)*



**Data in the chart are given in billion USD.*
Source: https://www.worlddata.info/asia/turkey/tourism.php

3. Practical Steps Taken by The Turkish Authorities for a Sustainable Tourism

Infrastructure and Superstructure Investments for the Development of Tourism

During the last two decades, Türkiye has enormously invested in the infrastructure and superstructure of the tourism industry. Modernization and renovation of the existing airports, construction of new airports, construction of additional highways and railways, stimulus packages recognized for large scale tourism facilities and well-trained human resources in the tourism field have all contributed to the development of the Turkish tourism industry (Union of Turkish Travel Agencies, https://www.tursab.org.tr/statistics-en/turkish-tourism-industry-today).

The number of airports in Türkiye was just 26 in 2003. This number has increased to 56 as of 2023 (sabah.com.tr, 2023). Türkiye is planning to construct 5 new airports in the coming five years and thus increase its airports number to 61 (Turkish News Agency, 2023). The length of divided roads in Türkiye has increased from 6.100 km to 28.300 km in the last two decades. The length of motor highways has increased from 1.714 km to 3.532 km in the same period (haberturk.com, 2023). The length of railways which was 10.959 km in 2003 has been increased to 13.022 km as of 2022 (Turkish Ministry of Transport and Infrastructure, 2023).

Coordination and Cooperation Among Public Institutions and Travel Agencies for the Development of Tourism

Turkish authorities aim to ensure a sustainable, competitive and also inclusive tourism industry. The relevant Turkish authorities exert efforts to attain a high-quality tourism that can meet fully the consumer expectations.

In the New Economy Program for the period 2019-2021, Türkiye has adopted a Tourism Master Plan which sets policy priorities in the tourism field. The Turkish Ministry of Culture and Tourism has prepared a Strategic Plan that sets sectoral priorities for the next four-year period. Main issues treated in the strategic plan are as follows: increasing the service quality, increasing the length of stay of tourists, extending the tourism season, diversification and innovation of tourism activities and attracting high spending visitors. It is noteworthy that health tourism is also an important topic within the Turkish tourism strategic targets.

In order to develop and promote Türkiye's global image in tourism, a separate institution, Tourism Promotion and Development Agency (TGA), was founded on 15 July 2019. TGA was tasked with developing Turkish tourism market as a quality brand and popular destination both domestically and internationally. TGA's main objectives were set as developing and promoting tangible and intangible cultural heritage and natural assets; boosting Türkiye's tourism capacity, increasing the quality of touristic services and diversification of tourism activities (Turkish Tourism Promotion and Development Agency, https://tga.gov.tr/about-us/).

Turkish public authorities have also paid attention to cooperate with the private actors in the tourism field. According to the data of the Turkish Ministry of Culture and Tourism, the number of travel agencies in Türkiye which was 4515 in 2003 has increased to 7377 in 2013 and to 11.410 in 2019 (Turkish Ministry of Culture and Tourism, https://yigm.ktb.gov.tr/tr-243988/yillara-gore-seyahat-acentasi-sayilari.html). The increase in the number of the travel agencies is another valuable indicator of the development of the tourism sector in Türkiye and its high potential for the future. It should be noted that these travel agencies played a crucial role in orienting the public authorities to further develop the tourism capacity of Türkiye.

Visa Policy in the Service of the Turkish Tourism

Türkiye has also utilized its visa policy to attract more tourists. It has eased the visa processes and recognized visa free travel to Türkiye for many countries, particularly for the citizens of the Turkic countries and citizens of the SCO members. Besides the simplified visa process, Türkiye has also recognized for tourists the right to extend their duration of stay in the country. In this regard, after the 3 months of stay, tourists can extend their stay in Türkiye for another 6 months just by a simple request to the relevant Immigration Office. In other words, a tourist can stay in Türkiye for 9 months without a residence permit (toroslar.com.tr, 2023)

Simplified visa process is also valid for health and medical tourism in Türkiye. In this respect, Turkish Trade Ministry and Turkish Foreign Ministry have signed a Medical Visa Cooperation Protocol with the Services Exporters' Association (HIB). Yet, this is another example of public-private cooperation in the tourism field. Türkiye expects 3 billion USD of revenue from the health tourism in 2023 (Turkish News Agency, 2023).

4. Development Of Türkiye's Tourism With Turkic States Member to the SCO

Traditionally, European countries like Germany and UK are the main tourism partners of Türkiye. In 2022, 5,6 million German tourists and 3,3 million British tourists visited Türkiye. However, Türkiye has sought to diversify and expand its tourism potential with other countries as well. In this regard, Türkiye has increased its tourism promotion campaigns (Tourism Strategy of Türkiye 2023, Ministry of Culture and Tourism, 2007: 25). through advertisements and tourism fairs in the SCO members like Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan (Evcin, 2018: 113-142). As a result, the number of tourists coming from the SCO countries and

Table 4. Number of Turkic States' Citizens Visiting Türkiye (2012 - 2022)

Nationality	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020*	2021	2022
Kazakhstan	380 046	425 773	437 971	423 744	240 188	402 830	426 916	455 724	137 213	366 076	712 136
Kyrgyzstan	42 866	64 905	81 941	88 369	88 877	104 911	114 926	121 364	52 142	102 840	147 487
Tajikistan	22 823	27 174	34 678	31 917	24 768	30 532	40 879	44 155	16 972	41 440	74 101
Uzbekistan	105 976	129 292	143 354	143 331	134 330	195 745	241 235	252 138	102 598	272 604	419 673

**COVID 19 Pandemic year*
Source: *Turkish Statistics Office*

Turkic states has increased within the years. The below table shows that tourists coming from the Turkic states have continuously increased within the years. In the same way, the number of Turkish citizens visiting the Turkic states has also risen.

Türkiye's Efforts for the Revival of the Silk Road

The historical Silk Road which passes through Türkiye and the Caucasus region traverses Turkmenistan-Uzbekistan-Kyrgyzstan or Kazakhstan and reaches finally China. Türkiye exerts efforts to revive the ancient Silk Road and has been promoting a project named "The Middle Corridor". Compared with maritime routes and other alternative routes, this route is more economical and shortens trade route between Europe and Asia for about 2.000 km and also reduces the travel time by 1/3 (almost 15 days) compared to the maritime route. A "Common Cooperation Protocol" was signed by the Ministers of Transport of the members of the Turkic Council within the context of the Middle Corridor (Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, https://www.mfa.gov.tr/turkey_s-multilateral-transportation-policy.en.mfa).

The Middle Corridor initiative, which envisages the revival of the ancient Silk Road, is in line with China's Belt and Road Initiative (Bora, 2017: 1-11) and Türkiye supports the Chinese initiative on the basis of "win-win" principle (Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, https://www.mfa.gov.tr/turkey_s-multilateral-transportation-policy.en.mfa). It should be noted that revival of the Silk Road will contribute not only to the development of economic relations among Turkic states but also will boost their cultural and tourism relations.

Common Cultural Heritage and Development of the Faith Tourism Among Turkic States of the SCO: Privileged Position of Uzbekistan

It should be noted that Turkic states have comparative advantages to attract more tourists in the field of religious tourism (Avcı and Norbaev, 2021: 208-225). In this respect, Türkiye and Uzbekistan are particularly two important Turkic states which have enormous potential for cultural and religious tourism.

Uzbekistan is a leading country for development of tourism among Turkic states in Central Asia and the SCO member states (Usmanova, 2018: 210). It is home to cities like Samarkand, Hive, Bukhara. Hive was declared cultural capital of the Turkic World for 2020 and Bukhara was declared Islam cultural capital for 2020 (Avcı and Norbaev, 2021: 209). Islamic scholars such as Imam Buhari, Imam Tirmizi, historical and cultural figures such as Ali Şir Nevai, Amir Timur, Ulug Beg, İbni Sina, İbni Haldun, Biruni, El Harizmi have all emanated from the lands of today's Uzbekistan (Avcı and Norbaev, 2021: 210-212). The country has five cultural sites listed in the "UNESCO World Heritage List", namely Itchan Kala, Historic Centre of Bukhara, Historic Centre of Shakhrisyabz, Samarkand – Crossroad of Cultures and Western Tien-Shan (UNESCO, World Heritage List, 2023. https://whc.unesco.org/en/list). Uzbekistan possesses more than 4 thousand cultural and historical artefacts and thus ranks among top 10 countries which preserves the most historical artifacts in their inventories (Norbaev, 2020: V). World Tourism Organization has inaugurated in 2004 a Regional Office in Samarkand (Karaağaçlı, 2012).

Given its cultural and historical heritage, Uzbekistan is an important destination for Turkish tourists (Kantarcı et al., 2015: 200). According to Norbaev and Avcı, Turkish citizens have mainly travelled to Uzbekistan to visit religious and cultural monuments (Avcı and Norbaev, 2021: 210).

As mentioned above, Turkic states have a rich history and culture which constitute pull factors for global tourism market. However, Turkic countries in Central Asia are far from benefitting sufficiently from their tourism potential (Kantarcı et al., 2015: 192). For instance, Karaağaçlı

Table 5. Number of Turkish Citizens Visiting Turkic States (2009-2019)

	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
Com. Of Independent States	75 327	95 583	118 898	158 192	137 814	217 128	145 940	123 627	154 629	182 785	268 379

Source: *Union of Turkish Travel Agencies (TURSAB)*

admits that Uzbekistan has made huge progress in tourism since 90s but also stresses that the country still needs to increase its investments to attract more tourists (Karaağaçlı, 2012).

Given the current situation of tourism in Turkic states, some scholars have elaborated propositions to further develop faith tourism and cultural exchange between these states. In this respect, Deniz and Şimşek highlight that Turkic states shall adopt a common tourism policy to develop cultural and belief tourism, and underline that *"…identifying sustainable tourism policies…considering how cultural and religious factors can be utilized in developing tourism…among Turkic states, awareness towards culture and history should be increased and some brand cities … Samarkand, Bukhara, Merv and Hiva etc. can attract more tourists with intense publicity campaigns and higher service quality…improving cultural tourism would provide competitive advantage for all of the Turkic States in Central Asia as well as Türkiye"* (Deniz and Şimşek, 2017: 15).

Evcin makes the following observation *"The tourism relationship between Türkiye and Uzbekistan has followed a rapid development and tourism has constituted a new field of opening as an effective element in strengthening the historical, cultural, political and economic ties between the two countries"* and underlines the importance of promotion campaigns and activities to further develop tourism exchange between the Turkic states (Evcin, 2018: 114). Avcı and Norbaev also propose to increase promotion campaigns and to intensify public-private cooperation to attract more tourists to Uzbekistan (Avcı and Norbaev, 2021: 223). Tuna and Özyurt also underline the importance of conventional promotion campaigns but also refer to digital campaigns to develop tourism between the Turkic states (Tuna et al., 2022: 167).

Moreover, Tuna and Özyurt propose foundation of a new mechanism "*Tourism Union of Turkic World"* and abolition of visas between Turkic states to develop tourism (Tuna et al., 2022: 168). Usmanova also underlines the importance of visa-free travel and proposes conclusion of a multilateral agreement between SCO members to abolish visas for the development of regional tourism (Usmanova, 2018: 211).

On the other hand, Deniz and Şimşek draw attention to the high prices of air tickets which hamper the development of tourism between Türkiye and Uzbekistan (Deniz and Şimşek, 2017: 19). Tuna and Özyurt also complain about the high prices of air tickets between Turkic states and propose implementation of a reasonable discount for the citizens of these countries, by the relevant public authorities (Tuna et al. 2022: 168).

5. Conclusion

Türkiye has made practical steps to develop its tourism industry in the last decades. In this sense, infrastructure and superstructures investments such as construction of new airports and seaports, modernization of existing ones, amelioration and extension of land routes (highways) and railroads, stimulus packages for large scale and modern touristic facilities have all contributed to the development of Türkiye's tourism industry in long-term.

Public-Private Partnerships and coordination with private actors of tourism such as travel agencies have also generated a synergy between public and private institutions for the development of the tourism in Türkiye. This cooperation has resulted in augmenting the inbound tourist numbers and in achieving a certain quality standard for the service providers.

Global promotion and campaign activities for attracting more tourists have paid off and the number of inbound tourists has gradually increased. In line with this, the tourism revenues of Türkiye have also augmented. Türkiye achieved also to use its visa policy as an able instrument to receive more tourists worldwide. This has helped particularly to develop medical tourism which generates high-level revenues for both medical and tourism industries.

European countries are traditional tourism partners of Türkiye. Apart from its traditional tourism partners, Türkiye has sought to diversify its tourism with other countries as well. In this regard, Türkiye promoted its tourism relations with the SCO countries and particularly with the Turkic states. As a result, the cultural and touristic interaction between Türkiye and Turkic states have increased. As demonstrated by the official figures, Türkiye, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan have reciprocally developed their tourism exchanges. However, there is still room to exploit the tourism potential of these countries. In this regard, cultural and faith tourism is the main field which shall be given priority. To further develop cultural and faith tourism among Turkic states and SCO countries, conventional and digital promotion campaigns shall be conducted efficiently, prices of air tickets shall be regressed to more affordable levels and visa-free travel shall be endorsed.

On the other side, Türkiye's efforts to revive the ancient Silk Road have also contributed to the development of economic, touristic and cultural cooperation among Turkic states. Uzbekistan's efforts to revitalize the Silk Road are also of great importance and constitute valuable steps for Turkic states and SCO countries. The cooperation among these countries will certainly ease the implementation of the Silk Road project and eventually provide benefits to all its members in the tourism field as well.

As a dialogue partner of the SCO and the 6th most tourist receiving country in the world, Türkiye can share its experience and know-how with SCO countries to further develop tourism and cultural cooperation within the SCO region.

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Development of Cultural and Faith Tourism in SCO and Turkic States: Uzbekistan's Potential and the Exemplary Turkish Case

Abstract

This article treats Turkish tourism sector's recent changes, focusing on its increasing relationships with the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) countries and Turkic states. The paper examines Turkiye's efforts to expand its tourism partnerships beyond its traditional European allies and emphasizes its cooperation with SCO member countries such as Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. Furthermore, it underlines Turkey's efforts to revive the ancient Silk Road—particularly through the "Middle Corridor" plan—in an effort to increase Turkic states' cultural, economic, and tourism collaboration. Cultural and religious tourism in the Turkic states is highlighted, with a particular emphasis on Turkiye and Uzbekistan. The paper concludes with practical proposals to further develop cultural and faith tourism, i.e. effective promotional campaigns, cheap flights, and visa-free travel. Generally, the article provides a thorough overview of Turkiye's ever expanding tourism sector as well as its strategic efforts to promote significant cooperation within the SCO region.

Keywords: *Faith tourism, Sco, Silk road, Turkic states, Türkiye, Uzbekistan.*

Authors

Full Name	Author contribution roles	Contribution rate
Ömer Bedir:	*Conceptualism, Methodology, Software, Resources, Data Curation, Writing - Original Draft, Visualization*	*100%*

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Justification: The methodology of this study does not require an ethics committee report.