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THE ROLE OF LEADERSHIP DISCOURSES IN THE ONTOLOGICAL CONSTRUCTION OF THE ORGANISATION OF TURKIC STATES AS A REGIONAL POWER

KÜRŞAD GÜÇ
kursad.guc@gmail.com
Assistant Professor, Gendarmerie and Coast Guard Academy (Türkiye), Department of International Security and Terrorism. ORCID: 0000-0003-2007-9580

Abstract

This study examines the influence of the discourses of member state leaders on the ontological construction of the Organisation of Turkic States (OTS) as both a political and social entity. While the OTS is an international organisation that prioritises cooperation among Turkic-speaking states by emphasising political, economic, cultural, and social dimensions, it is simultaneously in the process of constructing its own identity. Accordingly, the OTS is not merely a political formation but also seeks to establish itself within the international system with a distinctive identity rooted in a shared past, language, and culture, projected into the present and the future. In this respect, the discourses of leaders are significant as they reveal how the OTS positions itself within rapidly changing social spheres of the international system. Therefore, this study employs discourse analysis and content analysis methods to demonstrate how the political leaders' statements of the OTS member states contribute to shaping the organisation's ontological construction.

Keywords

Organisation of Turkic States, Turkic World, International Organisation, Ontological Construction, Discourse.

Resumo

Este estudo analisa a influência dos discursos dos líderes dos Estados-membros na construção ontológica da Organização dos Estados Turcos (OTS) como entidade política e social. Embora a OTS seja uma organização internacional que prioriza a cooperação entre os Estados de língua turca, enfatizando as dimensões política, económica, cultural e social, ela está simultaneamente em processo de construção da sua própria identidade. Assim, a OTS não é apenas uma formação política, mas também procura estabelecer-se no sistema internacional com uma identidade distinta, enraizada num passado, língua e cultura comuns, projetados no presente e no futuro. Nesse sentido, os discursos dos líderes são significativos, pois revelam como a OTS se posiciona dentro das esferas sociais em rápida mudança do sistema internacional. Portanto, este estudo emprega métodos de análise de discurso e análise de conteúdo para demonstrar como as declarações dos líderes políticos dos Estados-membros da OTS contribuem para moldar a construção ontológica da organização.

Palavras-chave

Organização dos Estados Turcos, Mundo Turco, Organização Internacional, Construção Ontológica, Discurso.

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KÜRŞAD GÜÇ

Introduction

This study focuses on the discourses of the leaders of member states in the process of shaping the identity of the Organisation of Turkic States (OTS) as an international organisation. It examines how references to shared history, culture, language, and identity contribute to the ontological construction of the OTS and its positioning within the international system. In this regard, leaders' public statements, summit declarations, and official communiqués are analysed through the combined use of discourse analysis and content analysis.

Discourse analysis, which rests on the claim that social reality is constructed through language and discourse -and that behind this reality lie identity narratives highlighted by political elites- functions as a method that makes such realities visible (Gee, 2011; Wodak & Meyer, 2015). Content analysis, in turn, seeks to identify structures, themes, and patterns across selected texts, including discourses (Krippendorff, 2013). Accordingly, by applying both approaches, this study aims to reveal not only the link between identity narratives and political elites in the construction of the OTS as a social organism, but also the recurring themes, frameworks, and patterns embedded in these narratives.

Within the discipline of international relations, scholarship rooted in social constructivism emphasises that social realities are not given; rather, the identities, interests, and actions of actors are constructed through recurring practices and discourses and are continuously reconstructed over time (Wendt, 1999; Onuf, 1989; Kratochwil, 1989). In this framework, the concept of "ontological construction" refers particularly to the processes through which collective identities are formed and the reasons for actors' existence in the world are discursively articulated. From this perspective, the OTS is not only established as a functional platform from institutional, legal, and political standpoints, but it is also subject to processes of "ontological construction" that seek to assign it a meaningful rationale for existence. The statements of member state leaders - emphasising historical continuity, shared memory, and collective values- play a critical role in defining "who" the OTS is. In doing so, these discourses support the construction of the organisation as a distinctive actor within the international system. Ontological construction, therefore, allows the OTS to be understood not only as an institutional framework but also as a site of identity formation and existential grounding.

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December 2025, pp. 411-433
The Role of Leadership Discourses in The Ontological Construction of the Organisation of Turkic States as a Regional Power
Kürşad Güç

For any actor (individual, state, or organisation) to perceive itself as an entity, it must first experience a sense of continuity within a historical space. The construction of a linear existential trajectory between the past, present, and future is made possible through biographical narratives. From the accumulated realities of the past, certain elements are selectively transferred to the present and projected into the future. In this way, the actor is portrayed - both to itself and to others - not as an arbitrary or momentary presence, but as an entity possessing historical continuity. The biographical narrative used in constructing such historical continuity is made manifest through the discourses of the actor itself or the elite that constitute the actor.

The formation of collective identity through ontological construction is not exclusive to the Organisation of Turkic States. Similar patterns have been documented in other regional and international organisations, where identity emerges alongside functional cooperation. The European Union, for example, has been widely explored as a case in which a shared European identity is fostered through institutional narratives that emphasise common history, values, and aspirations (Risse, 2010). In a similar vein, ASEAN has cultivated an "ASEAN identity" or promoted "Asian values" through summit declarations and diplomatic rhetoric (Acharya, 2014). Building on these examples, international organisations with a distinct cultural and identity-based background emerge not only as arenas of functional practice but also as platforms where existential dynamics are ontologically constructed. In this sense, analysing the OTS within the framework of ontological construction, particularly given its foundations in shared history and cultural dynamics, holds significant theoretical value.

Considering the Organisation of Turkic States' (OTS) growing influence in recent years, the organisation has articulated a bold vision not only through its institutional mechanisms but also in cultural terms. Therefore, identifying the direction and purposes of the OTS's identity construction is meaningful not only for analysing the organisation per se, but also for understanding how it positions itself within the international system. Although recent academic studies on the OTS have largely focused on its historical development, institutional structure, and political, social, and economic potential, research addressing its social construction remains scarce. Moreover, no existing study has directly examined the discourses of leaders as part of this social construction process.

The existing literature on the Organization of Turkic States (OTS) has primarily been shaped around themes such as regional geopolitical cooperation (Gündoğdu, 2023; Emeklier, Taş & Yılmaz, 2022), political and economic potential (Aydilek, 2022; Çınar & Uzun, 2022; Korkmaz & Soğukoğlu Korkmaz, 2024), historical development and integration processes (Akçapa, 2023; Tekir, 2023; Uzunağaç, 2025; Altymyshova & Omurova, 2025), and legal-institutional frameworks within the broader context of international organisations (Erkiner & Eray, 2022; Jane, 2025). However, the constitutive role of leadership discourses in the collective identity construction of the OTS has not been sufficiently explored. Although a few discourse-oriented studies exist, most research tends to assess the OTS through its functional dimensions (see Özsoy, 2023). This article seeks to address this gap by treating discourse not as a supplementary element, but as a central mechanism in the construction of institutional identity. In doing so, it offers an original perspective that positions discourse analysis at the core of

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Kürşad Güç

understanding the ontological formation of the OTS through the lens of leadership rhetoric.

At this point, the official statements issued by the organisation as an institution, along with the discourses produced by the leaders of its member states, have played a significant role in the ontological emergence of the OTS. As reflected in the leaders' discourses, the OTS is not a coincidental mechanism designed merely to address immediate practical needs in interstate relations. Rather, it aspires to be a meaningful socio-political entity rooted in historical continuity. In this sense, the OTS seeks not only to resolve political and economic issues and foster cooperation in these domains, but also to generate a shared sense of belonging around a specific historical identity. In this context, the leaders of the member states frequently emphasise common ties of history, culture, language, and faith, expressing that the organisation is not merely a coalition of interests but also a "civilisational family." These discourses contribute to the ontological (existential) construction of the organisation while simultaneously reinforcing its political legitimacy.

The dataset for this study is composed of speeches, official statements, and summit communiqués delivered by the heads of state from the member countries of the Organisation of Turkic States (OTS) between 2019 and 2024. This timeframe was chosen deliberately to focus on the post-rebranding phase of the organisation -from the Turkic Council to the OTS-and to examine how this institutional shift was reflected discursively. A purposive sampling method was employed, prioritising speeches that clearly reference notions of shared history, cultural ties, linguistic unity, identity, and forward-looking visions. Each speech or relevant textual segment containing expressions of collective identity was treated as a unit of analysis. The coding process followed an inductive logic: initial open coding helped identify recurring themes and symbolic patterns, which were then organised through axial coding into four central categories - historical continuity, spatial belonging, cultural and linguistic commonality, and future vision. Grounded in the principles of critical discourse analysis, this coding approach enabled the study to explore the ways in which language contributes to the formation and projection of institutional identity.

Accordingly, the first part of the study presents the theoretical framework regarding how collective identity is constructed through discourse. Within this framework, the study elaborates on key concepts such as historical narratives, collective memory, and political myths, based on the understanding that identity construction is not fixed but continuously reproduced through discursive practices. The second part focuses on the discourses of leaders in the context of the OTS, categorising them under four main themes: historical continuity, spatial belonging, cultural unity, and future vision. It then evaluates the contribution of these discourses to the construction of the organisation's institutional identity. In the conclusion, the study discusses how these discourses shape the ontological existence of the organisation in light of the findings and offers a general assessment.

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The Role of Leadership Discourses in The Ontological Construction of the Organisation of Turkic States as a Regional Power
Kürşad Güç

The Ontological Construction of Collective Identity and Discourse

Collective identities are not fixed or natural entities; rather, they are constructs that are formed through discourse within social processes (Hülsse, 2006: 396; Slocum-Bradley, 2010: 51). This approach asserts that identity is essentially a socially constructed practice, continuously reproduced through language, metaphors, narratives, and historical memory. According to Hülsse (2006: 397), metaphors do not merely reflect existing realities but also create new social realities. Slocum-Bradley (2010: 55-57) emphasises that identities are dynamically positioned through narrative structures and discursive acts. While narratives assign specific roles to individuals and groups, discursive acts enable these roles to gain visibility within social reality. Therefore, the process of identity construction is not static but is constantly reshaped through discursive interventions.

Historical narratives play a central role in the construction of collective identity. According to Schmidtke (2023: 3), community identities are formed through collective memory by generating a shared perception of the past and a belief in the continuity of this sharedness into the future. This understanding allows individuals to perceive themselves as part of a broader political and cultural community, thereby reinforcing elements of collective identity such as solidarity and loyalty.

This shared world of meaning fosters a sense of "we" within the community, enabling individuals to feel a sense of belonging to a collective identity. Common narratives provide guidance about who individuals are, where they come from, and what values they embody. These narratives generate emotional bonds and a shared cultural memory within the community. In this way, identity emerges not merely as the sum of individual experiences but as a social construct shaped around meaningful stories and shared values. Historical narratives not only serve to remember the past but also reinterpret it, imbuing it with new meanings that serve today's identity constructions (Bilgin, 2013: 26).

As Christoffer Kølvraa (2015: 62-63) argues, identity is not shaped by the linear transmission of historical events, but rather through the selection and interpretation of events within the framework of narratives. Unlike the discipline of history, collective memory does not claim objectivity; instead, it is organised through mythical structures that serve the present needs of the community. Similarly, Olick and Robbins (1998) assert that collective memory is not merely about remembering the past but is closely related to the structures of meaning that shape community identity.

In this context, Paul Ricoeur's (1984: 64-71) theory of narrative time argues that the narratives of elites bring the past together in a coherent and meaningful way. These narratives go beyond providing a chronological account of past events; they construct a historical consciousness that unites individuals or actors around a shared past, values, and goals, thereby fostering a collective will. Through such narratives, societies achieve social cohesion by reinforcing belief in the historical continuity of their social structures. In this way, the past not only shapes the present and the future but also lends legitimacy to these processes.

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December 2025, pp. 411-433
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Kürşad Güç

Collective memory, in this sense, is not simply a collection of personal recollections. It is a socially constructed phenomenon. As Misztal (2003) argues, memory serves not only as a record of collective experiences but also as a framework of meaning that sustains group identity and cohesion. Through shared symbols, emotions, and references to the past, collective memory shapes what a community values, what it chooses to remember, and how it defines itself across generations.

Importantly, past events are not remembered neutrally - they are reinterpreted in ways that align with the community's current moral and existential concerns. This dynamic process of reconfiguration demonstrates that memory is not fixed; rather, it evolves in response to cultural and political needs. From a Kierkegaardian perspective (1985: 12-14), memory acts as "recollection," not in the sense of passive recall, but as a deeply emotional and moral re-engagement with the past that generates new meaning (Kølvraa, 2015: 69-71).

Ines Gabel (2013: 250-251) also underscores that collective memory is inherently ideological. The process of remembering - which events are highlighted, how they are interpreted, and why they are passed on - reflects the power structures, value systems, and identity needs of the present moment. In this context, collective memory functions as a tool that serves the interests of specific actors and reproduces group identity. Memory thus becomes not merely a reflection of the past, but an ideological space that shapes the social imagination of both the present and the future. To build a meaningful future, the past is internalised by being reinterpreted through the lens of a hoped-for future - a process that Giddens (2014: 104) describes as the re-evaluation of the past in light of the future. The transmission of the past becomes the foundation for the future, resulting in what Giddens (2014: 117) refers to as the "colonisation of the future."

Similarly, Motzafi-Haller (1994: 417-418) underscores the foundational role of historical narratives in identity construction. These narratives not only convey the past but also play a key role in clarifying group belonging and differentiation. According to Motzafi-Haller, historical narratives also determine how a community spatially situates itself; in other words, identity construction is not solely a temporal but also a spatial process. In this framework, historical narratives draw social boundaries by linking group identity to spatial references, defining the inside and the outside, and thus shaping the community's perception of "us" and "the other" (Motzafi-Haller, 1994: 420–423).

Bikmen (2015: 310–312), who investigates the impact of historical narratives on group performance, draws particular attention to the positive influence of themes such as collective victory and resistance on individual motivation. Such narratives enable individuals to perceive their roles and positions within the group as more meaningful and valuable. Themes that resonate within collective memory - such as resistance, victimhood, or heroism - strengthen solidarity and the sense of belonging among group members.

The impact of these narratives is not limited to individual motivation; they also enhance the group's capacity for collective action and internal cohesion. Symbolic events from a shared past become foundational justifications for the group's present political and cultural stance. In this context, historical narratives create a framework for future unity by recalling how past hardships were overcome and how the group maintained its

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December 2025, pp. 411-433
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Kürşad Güç

cohesion. These narratives reinforce the belief that the group is capable of collective action not only in the past but also in the future, thereby sustaining the continuity of collective identity.

As Olivier Schmitt (2018: 488-489) points out, strategic narratives are only effective if they resonate with existing political myths. The myths produced by political elites are narratives that bring communities together and ensure the continuity of these shared identities, rendering past experiences meaningful for the present (Schmitt, 2018: 490-491). These narratives, which selectively shape communities' perceptions of the past and construct a shared historical consciousness, are, according to Bell (2003), influential both in the formation and legitimation of collective identities. Thus, political and social myths do not merely facilitate the remembrance of the past but also transmit the system of values derived from historical experiences into the present. Moreover, myths that highlight what has occurred in the past also indicate the cultural and political foundations upon which the present and future can be constructed (Schmitt, 2018: 491-492). Building on Bell and Schmitt, discourses that foreground political and historical myths become effective mechanisms in the construction of collective identity.

The role of elites -particularly political elites- is crucial in the selective transmission of historical narratives and myths from the social memory of communities into the present. The remembrance of the past is not a passive or spontaneous process. On the contrary, these myths are actively promoted by political elites as tools for addressing current societal challenges and constructing a meaningful future. In this sense, political myths possess a constitutive and ideological dimension. As such, this process not only enables communities to establish a link with their past but also unites them around shared values and goals, fostering the creation of a collective sense of "We."

The meanings attributed to past experiences strengthen collective belonging and provide a foundation for projecting this identity into the future. From this perspective, identity construction is not limited to recalling the past; it is also a forward-looking strategic practice. It determines how political communities imagine their future, define their aims, and construct a shared vision. Identity, therefore, emerges not simply as a narrative of the past but as a performative discourse that directs the future.

Ontological Construction through Discourse in the Organisation of Turkic States

The disintegration of the Soviet Union paved the way for the Turkic states to come together under Türkiye's leadership, leading to the establishment of the Summit of Heads of State of Turkic-Speaking Countries in 1992. This summit laid the institutional foundations of what would later become the Organisation of Turkic States (OTS). Initially designed to foster friendship and cooperation among Turkic-speaking countries, the summit gradually expanded its scope to include economic and cultural collaboration. With the signing of the Nakhchivan Agreement in 2009, the platform acquired the structure of an international organisation under the name "Turkic Council," and in 2021, it was renamed as the Organisation of Turkic States.

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December 2025, pp. 411-433
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Kürşad Güç

The transformation of the OTS from a leaders' summit into an international organisation reflects not merely institutional evolution, but also the effort to consolidate and institutionalise a collective identity rooted in a shared civilisational legacy. Member state leaders have frequently described this unity as a family bond grounded in common ancestry and a strong cultural heritage. This perspective positions the organisation not simply as a technical intergovernmental mechanism but as a custodian of collective memory and identity. In other words, this approach aligns with Anderson's (1991) conceptualisation of "imagined communities," whereby geographically distant groups of people are brought together through shared narratives and identities.

From this perspective, the OTS not only seeks to recall a common past and unite communities across different geographies but also aspires to build a shared future through a strategic vision. Expressions frequently appearing in institutional documents and leaders' discourses, such as "shared history," "walking together into the future," and "civilisational roots," demonstrate the organisation's promotion of an inclusive Turkic identity that transcends the national identities of its member states.

In the sections that follow, the construction of the institutional and collective identity of the OTS through leadership discourse will be examined under four main themes. First, the identity formation grounded in historical continuity and common origins will be discussed. Second, the narratives of spatial belonging articulated through specific cities and regions will be analysed. Third, the construction of collective identity and future projection along the axis of shared language and cultural unity will be presented. Finally, the role of future-oriented visions and the OTS's search for international influence, as expressed in leadership discourse, will be evaluated in terms of their contribution to identity production.

Historical Continuity and Common Origins

In the ontological construction of the OTS, one of the central themes emphasised in the discourses of member state leaders is the notion of shared historical origins among the states and communities that constitute the Turkic World. The idea that the OTS is not a conventionally formed organisation designed to meet specific political, social, economic, environmental, or military needs, but rather a natural - even inevitable - entity emerging through the pendulum of history is evident in their frequent references to a common past. In this context, the statements of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan hold a significant place in shaping the identity of the OTS within a shared historical consciousness of the Turkic World. Erdoğan has described the Turkic World as "brothers nourished by the same spiritual heritage, sharing a common past, culture, and ancestors," and declared, "We will exert all our efforts to make the coming period the Century of the Turkic World" (Anadolu Agency, November 7, 2024), demonstrating a strong will to carry this historical continuity into the future. President Erdoğan's statement constructs not only a narrative of historical and cultural unity but also actively produces a sense of collective "we" identity. His emphasis on "the same spiritual heritage," "common past," and "brotherhood" implies the continuation of a long-standing unity into the present. By invoking collective memory, the discourse creates an emotional connection and serves to legitimise the ontological continuity of the Organisation of Turkic States. Such

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December 2025, pp. 411-433
The Role of Leadership Discourses in The Ontological Construction of the Organisation of Turkic States as a Regional Power
Kürşad Güç

statements evolve into political myths in the sense described by Bell (2003), contributing to the reconstruction of Turkic identity on the basis of historical continuity. They also serve to update collective memory, turning the past into a resource for today's identity and tomorrow's vision.

Another notable statement by Erdoğan further illustrates this narrative: "God willing, the time is near when the sun will once again rise from the East. The Turkestan region, which for thousands of years has been the cradle of civilisation, will once again become a centre of attraction and enlightenment for all humanity" (Milliyet, November 13, 2021). This metaphorical expression, invoking the image of the sun rising again from the East, implies a return to historical roots and suggests that this return will bring about a universal awakening. Such discourse aligns with Ricoeur's (1984: 64-71) theory of narrative time, reconstructing past events in a way that grants meaning to contemporary political identity. At the same time, it constructs a mythical narrative that positions Turkestan not merely as a geographical location but as a foundational space of civilisation.

This historical vision is also reflected in the recent summit declarations of the OTS, which emphasise "civilisation-based cooperation." The strategic language of institutional documents advancing in harmony with leadership discourse indicates that discourse directly contributes to the organisation's institutional identity formation process.

In this context, the remarks of Uzbek President Shavkat Mirziyoyev during the 2022 Summit of the Organisation of Turkic States held in Samarkand are particularly noteworthy: *"The Turkic world has an awe-inspiring great history, great ancestors, and a unique richness. And I believe that the Turkic world has a great future. We will build this future together with our hardworking, generous, and noble people"* (uzbekistan.org.ua, November 11, 2022). This statement reflects Mirziyoyev's respect for the past of the Turkic world and his aspiration to construct a common vision for the future. This also highlights that the Organisation of Turkic States is not solely rooted in historical connections, but is equally shaped by common aspirations and values. In his statements, President Mirziyoyev underscores the importance of building a shared identity and collective future for the Turkic world, reflecting how this vision is actively supported at the highest political level. Such leadership narratives do more than express goodwill - they play a vital role in reinforcing the OTS's institutional identity and in fostering a deeper, more cohesive collaboration among its member nations. It is evident that such narratives play a crucial role in reinforcing the historical legitimacy of the organisation.

A similar approach is articulated by Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev, who has emphasised that the OTS represents not only a political union but also one of identity. While underlining the priority of the organisation in the international arena, Aliyev described the Turkic world as a large family to which its members belong (Aliyev, February 14, 2024). His emphasis on "family" highlights the unity of ancestry, culture, and history among the Turkic states. According to Aliyev: *"This unity is natural; it is rooted in common origins. Therefore, this unity is stronger than all others. Our unity is based on ethnic and cultural roots"* (Anadolu Agency, June 6, 2024). In this discourse, identity is presented - through what Slocum-Bradley (2010) refers to as a discursive act

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December 2025, pp. 411-433
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Kürşad Güç

- as a natural, immutable, and historically given reality, thereby legitimising political unity within a historical and cultural framework. Aliyev's discourse provides an answer to the question "Who are we?" in both historical and contemporary terms, thus reinforcing the institutional identity of the organisation.

Kazakhstan's founding leader and the intellectual architect of the OTS, Nursultan Nazarbayev, particularly emphasised the shared historical identity of Turkic peoples during the period when he proposed the establishment of the Turkic Council (now the OTS). In his essay *"The Seven Facets of the Great Steppe,"* Nazarbayev underscored the common origins and cultural heritage of the Turkic peoples (Kozyrev, 2019). According to Nazarbayev, the OTS is "not a new bloc" but rather a sign that "Turkic civilisation is beginning to revive" (TRT Avaz, November 12, 2021). Through this discourse, Nazarbayev conveyed that the OTS should not merely function as a platform for cooperation but should also emerge as a cultural revival movement grounded in historical roots.

Uzbek President Shavkat Mirziyoyev also explicitly expressed themes of identity and belonging within the Turkic world following Uzbekistan's accession to the OTS. In his speech at the Samarkand Summit, he stated: *"Our Turkic world has an enviable great history, great ancestors, and a unique richness, and I believe that a magnificent future awaits the Turkic world. This summit in the ancient city of Samarkand will mark a new stage of growth in the history of the Turkic world"* (Arıdemir, 2022: 131). Mirziyoyev's statements illustrate how the historical past of the Turkic peoples contributes to contemporary unity and reinforces the role of the OTS in this process. His characterisation of the organisation as a new phase in Turkic history reveals a framework that emphasises historical continuity within the biographical narrative of the OTS.

Hungarian President Viktor Orbán, whose country holds observer status in the OTS, has also made favourable remarks regarding the identity and cultural roots of the Turkic world. He declared: *"The Hungarian people are connected to the Turkic peoples by a historical and cultural heritage that stretches back centuries. In Europe, we were scorned as the barbaric Huns and the people of Attila. Yet, our people take pride in this historical legacy"* (BBC News Turkish, November 14, 2021). According to Orbán, the unity of the Turkic states is the result of historical continuity. Similarly, the President of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC), Ersin Tatar - another observer member - emphasised that *"the unity of brotherly countries that share the same language, religion, culture, ancestry, and roots gives strength to the Turkic World,"* thus highlighting the OTS as a continuation of deep historical roots (TRNC Presidency, November 6, 2024).

Such leadership discourses do not merely construct a historical narrative; they also lay the ideological groundwork for that narrative. As Schmitt (2018) points out, strategic narratives become effective only when they resonate with existing political myths. In this context, the discourses of OTS leaders reinforce both internal solidarity and external legitimacy by keeping shared historical references alive. These discourses enhance the functionality of collective identity in terms of both emotional belonging and institutional orientation.

Thus, leadership discourses not only reinforce the power of historical narratives in constructing collective identity, but also imagine the Turkic World not merely as a legacy

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December 2025, pp. 411-433
The Role of Leadership Discourses in The Ontological Construction of the Organisation of Turkic States as a Regional Power
Kürşad Güç

of the past, but as a collective subject of the future. In this framework, history becomes not merely a story of the past, but a constitutive element in envisioning a shared future. This approach regards historical continuity not only as a mode of remembrance but as a strategic narrative architecture that ensures institutional continuity.

Spatial Emphasis and Shared Places

In the production of collective identity within the OTS, spatial representations function as powerful instruments of construction - no less significant than historical continuity. Certain cities and geographical regions are not merely geopolitical entities; they also serve as symbolic carriers of historical narrative. Place names become "sites of memory" laden with associations, thereby rendering the perception of common origin tangible for the community (Assmann, 2011). The emphasis on place in the discourse of OTS leaders reflects not only spatial belonging but also the attribution of historical meaning. In this regard, space is not merely a physical territory, but a symbolic dimension that represents collective memory and identity.

During the opening ceremony of the Informal Summit of OTS Leaders held in Shusha in 2024, Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev stated: *"Today we are in Shusha, the Cultural Capital of the Turkic World. This is an event of great historical and spiritual significance. This decision demonstrates our unity"* (President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, June 15, 2024). In the same speech, Aliyev highlighted the emotional significance of Shusha for the Turkic world, declaring: *"This unique city evokes a deep sense of respect and pride not only in the hearts of the Azerbaijani people but in those of all Turkic peoples"* (President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, March 15, 2024). These statements demonstrate that Shusha is encoded as a cultural and historical centre not only for Azerbaijan but for the broader Turkic World. Aliyev's emphasis on "unity" generates a sense of identity and cultural solidarity through a spatial reference.

President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan similarly highlighted the cultural and symbolic significance of Shusha during his visit on June 15, 2021, stating: *"I believe the messages we convey from Shusha, Azerbaijan's cultural capital that has produced many artists throughout history, will be highly significant for our region and the world"* (Anadolu Agency, June 15, 2021). Erdoğan's discourse illustrates how space is transformed from a site of historical memory into a strategic focal point for contemporary shared identity and future vision. In line with Pierre Nora's (1989) concept of *lieux de mémoire* - sites of memory - cities like Shusha function as material anchors of collective identity. Such spaces not only preserve the memories of the past but also become sites where those memories are emotionally and symbolically reproduced. Places associated with war, resistance, or reconquest, in particular, serve as symbols through which communities reinforce their identities and regenerate their shared values and sense of belonging. As in the case of Shusha, the act of reclaiming or reasserting control over a space symbolises not only a victory but also enables the community to embody its cultural and historical continuity through spatial terms.

Similarly, the geographical and cultural elements articulated by Nursultan Nazarbayev in his essay *"The Seven Facets of the Great Steppe"* express the idea of spatial continuity

JANUS.NET, e-journal of International Relations
e-ISSN: 1647-7251
VOL. 16, Nº. 2, TD1
Thematic Dossier - *Emerging Powers In-between Global and Regional Organizations*
December 2025, pp. 411-433
The Role of Leadership Discourses in The Ontological Construction of the Organisation of Turkic States as a Regional Power
Kürşad Güç

encompassing not only Kazakhstan but the entire Turkic World (Kozyrev, 2019). This discourse positions the geography inhabited by Turkic peoples as the cradle of civilisation and construct's identity unity through a shared spatial heritage. Nazarbayev's approach defines geography not merely by physical borders, but through historical, cultural, and mythological layers of meaning. His narrative, which unifies the roots of Turkic peoples along a historical trajectory stretching from the Altai Mountains to Anatolia, aims at constructing a common consciousness of space.

This spatial consciousness continues to be reinforced through contemporary political visions. In his 2024 statement during Kazakhstan's term presidency of the OTS, President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, under the slogan *"TURKIC ERA!"*, emphasised that the preservation of the common Turkic heritage and cultural geography is among the organisation's top priorities (OTS, February 15, 2024). Tokayev's discourse signals a strategic orientation not only toward preserving cultural heritage but also toward sustaining a shared spatial identity at the institutional level. In this context, space is understood not only as a medium of remembrance but also as a foundation for reproduction, ownership, and the construction of a future vision.

A similar emphasis is found in the speech delivered by OTS Secretary General Kubanychbek Omuraliev during the 9th Great Hun-Turkic Kurultai in Hungary. Omuraliev stated that the event not only commemorates the common Turkic-Hungarian roots and cultural heritage but also strengthens the spatial projection of the Turkic World within Europe (OTS, August 19, 2023). Such institutional representations function - much like Michel Foucault's (1986) concept of *heterotopia* - as spaces that simultaneously reference the past while representing alternative identity imaginaries. As in the case of Hungary, even spaces that lie geographically outside the centre are integrated into the organisation's narrative at a symbolic level as performative stages of identity.

The discourse of spatial continuity also allows for the reinterpretation of cultural geography within a political framework. Thus, historical spaces transform into symbols that carry not only the memories of the past but also today's political objectives and future strategic visions. Such discourses position space as the carrier of cultural memory, drawing the boundaries of collective identity while simultaneously constructing a shared vision of fate for the Turkic World. This clearly demonstrates that space is not merely geographical, but a tool for forging deep historical and emotional connections.

Symbolic narratives about space are frequently and prominently featured in the documents of the Organisation of Turkic States (OTS). In this way, selected places have come to acquire a constitutive role in the ideological and ontological construction of the organisation. The Final Declaration of the 2021 Istanbul Summit, which included proposals such as organising a "Silk Road Rally from the Danube to the Orkhon Valley" and completing the "Sacred Sites of the Turkic World" project, clearly demonstrates the importance attributed to the symbolic value of space (OTS, 2021). Similarly, the 2022 Samarkand Summit Declaration designated Samarkand as the "Cultural Capital of the Turkic World," aiming to reinforce the narrative of a shared civilisational identity through spatial references (OTS, 2022).

Thus, specific places are intended to function not merely as geographical entities but as instruments in the construction of collective identity. Certain locations, beyond their

JANUS.NET, e-journal of International Relations
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Thematic Dossier - *Emerging Powers In-between Global and Regional Organizations*
December 2025, pp. 411-433
The Role of Leadership Discourses in The Ontological Construction of the Organisation of Turkic States as a Regional Power
Kürşad Güç

cultural or historical significance, are imbued with symbolic meanings that reflect the ideals and aspirations of the Turkic world. Drawing on Foucault's (1986) concept of heterotopia, such spaces serve both as sites of historical memory and as imagined arenas for collective purpose. In this regard, places like Shusha carry multilayered meanings: they simultaneously render cultural belonging visible and project the vision of regional integration that the OTS seeks to promote. Consequently, spaces are transformed into strategic sites where identity is materialised, collective memory is transmitted to the present, and the spatial dimension of future expectations is articulated.

Thus, spatial references in institutional documents reinforce the historical continuity, cultural proximity, and shared civilisation narratives of the OTS. Through these spaces, which materialise the narratives, collective identity gains authenticity, emotional connection, and a visual-ideological foundation. The discursive framework constructed through common cities, sacred regions, or historical geographies redefines the borders of the Turkic World not only in a physical sense but also in a symbolic realm. In this way, spatial references evolve into strategic tools that enhance the OTS identity's capacity for emotional connection and strengthen the sense of belonging.

Common Language and Cultural Unity

Another fundamental theme that reinforces the identity of the OTS is the emphasis on shared language and cultural commonality. In the discourse of leaders, these themes are positioned as strategic tools for the formation of a collective consciousness and its transmission to future generations. As Anderson (1991) points out, language lies at the core of meaning-making in the construction of "imagined communities." A common language is not merely a means of communication, but also a vehicle for shared belonging and cultural cohesion.

In his speech at the 2022 Samarkand Summit, Uzbek President Shavkat Mirziyoyev's general emphasis on the common history and future of the Turkic world highlighted the pivotal role of linguistic unity and cultural integration in ensuring the sustainability of unity within the OTS. This aspect does not emerge merely as a result of a motivation for symbolic solidarity. Generations of different countries are intended to be raised with a shared consciousness and identity. Therefore, efforts such as creating a common alphabet, increasing interaction among national education systems, and harmonising curricula represent not only a practical and technical endeavour but also aim to foster convergence among Turkic communities belonging to different states and to build a collective identity. The inclusion of common myths and narratives into national curricula lays the groundwork for the formation of collective identities that go beyond individual state borders and are hoped to be carried into the future.

The harmonisation of national education around selected common narratives contributes not only to intellectual alignment but also adds emotional layers to the collective identity. The existence of new generations raised around shared values facilitates the transfer of the OTS into the future in ontological terms and constitutes an important part of the organisation's vision for the future. This point is clearly evident in the speech of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan at the 11th OTS Summit, where he emphasised the necessity of

JANUS.NET, e-journal of International Relations
e-ISSN: 1647-7251
VOL. 16, Nº. 2, TD1
Thematic Dossier - *Emerging Powers In-between Global and Regional Organizations*
December 2025, pp. 411-433
The Role of Leadership Discourses in The Ontological Construction of the Organisation of Turkic States as a Regional Power
Kürşad Güç

linguistic and cultural unity for the effective and influential existence of the Turkic world. Erdoğan stated, *"We are working meticulously on the common Turkic alphabet. If we can adopt a unified alphabet, we will surpass a historic threshold and achieve a great embrace,"* thereby underscoring that alphabet unification signifies not merely a technical reform but a transformation of identity (QHA, November 8, 2024). His statement reveals that the common alphabet initiative represents a symbolic milestone in the construction of a shared identity, rather than simply a linguistic adjustment.

In this context, Erdoğan's discourse is not just a declaration of political intent but also an example of a strategic narrative that reveals the emotional and cultural dimensions of linguistic integration. Alphabet unity, consistent with Halbwachs's theory of collective memory (as cited in Kølvraa, 2015: 67), functions as a carrier of shared history and cultural memory. Moreover, as Schmitt (2018) argues, strategic discourses gain efficacy when they resonate with existing political myths. Erdoğan's metaphor of a "great embrace" transforms the notion of alphabet reform into a powerful mythological narrative that fosters a sense of cultural unity.

The impact of such discourse extends beyond institutional documents; it also serves as an ideological foundation that contributes to the construction of collective identity in the public sphere. Therefore, Erdoğan's statement demonstrates that the common alphabet holds a foundational function not only on a political and cultural level but also symbolically, positioning it as a core instrument in the formation of a common Turkic identity. The discourse surrounding the common alphabet reflects a strategic attempt to transmit a shared identity to future generations. Concepts such as a "common alphabet" and joint "education initiatives" are not merely technical tools; they function as ideological instruments for the reproduction of collective identity. This narrative constructs a future-oriented vision in which identity is continuously rearticulated through discourse.

At the informal summit held in Shusha in 2024, the President of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC) and OTS observer member Ersin Tatar, Uzbek President Shavkat Mirziyoyev, Turkish Vice President Cevdet Yılmaz, and the host, Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev, all emphasised the cultural significance of Shusha as an important symbol for the unity of the Turkic World (President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, March 15, 2024). These statements by leaders highlight the role of cultural symbols in the construction of a shared identity and demonstrate the unifying impact of cultural spaces through collective memory.

Another important example of cultural unity reflected in discourse within the OTS is the celebration of Nowruz. At the 2024 Nowruz celebrations held in Ankara under the auspices of the OTS Secretariat, Turkish President Erdoğan described this holiday as a "symbol of ancient values, peace, and brotherhood" and proposed that Nowruz be celebrated as a "common day of commemoration and festivity for the Turkic World" (BBC News Turkish, March 12, 2025). Similarly, OTS Secretary General Baghdad Amreyev described Nowruz as "one of the most distinguished shared cultural values of the Turkic World" and emphasised its deep historical roots as well as its role in strengthening unity and solidarity (OTS, March 20, 2022).

JANUS.NET, e-journal of International Relations
e-ISSN: 1647-7251
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Thematic Dossier - *Emerging Powers In-between Global and Regional Organizations*
December 2025, pp. 411-433
*The Role of Leadership Discourses in The Ontological Construction of the Organisation of
Turkic States as a Regional Power*
Kürşad Güç

These approaches to Nowruz show that this holiday is not seen as an ordinary traditional celebration but, rather, is coded as a cultural symbol of strategic importance for the entire Turkic World. The emphasis on a holiday celebrated annually across the Turkic World at the discursive level is the result of an effort to strengthen common belonging and to make emotional unity visible. In this context, shared cultural rituals are highlighted as performative functions for collective identities. It contributes both to the internal legitimation of historical and cultural narratives strengthened through leadership discourse and to the external projection of a message of shared belonging.

In his message on the occasion of Kyrgyzstan's Manas Epic Day, then Secretary General of the Turkic Council, Baghdad Amreyev, described the *Manas Epic* not only as the cultural property of the Kyrgyz people but as "a shared spiritual and cultural heritage of the entire Turkic World" (OTS, December 4, 2020). Amreyev's statement is a discursive example of the collective identity the OTS seeks to construct through shared cultural elements. Presenting the *Manas Epic* not solely as part of Kyrgyz identity but as a symbol of collective memory shared across the Turkic World demonstrates how national narratives are reframed for the purpose of regional identity construction. Within the OTS's emphasis on common language and culture, this approach illustrates how symbolic narratives that reinforce historical ties among members are instrumentalised for collective identity production. Baghdad Amreyev's statement exemplifies how individual national traditions are being recontextualised within a shared Turkic civilisational framework. Rather than presenting cultural values as isolated elements of national heritage, such discourse reframes them as part of a common symbolic reservoir that binds OTS member states together.

These expressions demonstrate that collective identity is sustained not only through remembering the past but also through projecting cultural continuity into the future. By prioritising shared initiatives in language, alphabet, education, and cultural policy, the leaders of the OTS articulate a vision of the organisation that transcends conventional political cooperation. In doing so, the OTS is positioned as a civilisational Project -one that aspires to shape future generations through a unified cultural legacy. This perspective reveals that cultural transmission functions not only as a pedagogical tool but also as an ideological and identity-forming mechanism. Joint initiatives in education, alphabet reform, and culture serve as tools that enable member actors to envision a shared history and future.

At this point, it becomes clear that discourses in the context of identity construction do not remain at a merely symbolic level; rather, through discursive acts, they produce institutional realities. When considered alongside Benedict Anderson's theory of imagined communities, shared cultural projects and alphabet policies emerge as concrete practices that facilitate the construction of a supra-identity within multinational frameworks. Thus, discourses do not merely generate emotional belonging - they also give rise to institutionalised practices that reinforce that belonging. Accordingly, the discourses of OTS leaders should be interpreted not only as a reflection of the past but also as a performance of identity that engages with the present and projects into the future.

JANUS.NET, e-journal of International Relations
e-ISSN: 1647-7251
VOL. 16, Nº. 2, TD1
Thematic Dossier - *Emerging Powers In-between Global and Regional Organizations*
December 2025, pp. 411-433
The Role of Leadership Discourses in The Ontological Construction of the Organisation of Turkic States as a Regional Power
Kürşad Güç

Future Imagination and Shared Vision

In the institutional identity construction of the OTS, the future-oriented discourses of its leaders constitute not only declarations of current political objectives but also foundational elements of a collective imagination. As Schmitt (2018) emphasises, strategic narratives do not merely serve to legitimise the present—they also offer communities a sense of common direction for the future. The effectiveness of this orientation depends on the narrative's resonance with collective memory and existing political myths. In this context, the future-focused statements of OTS leaders indicate that the organisation is not only anchored in the past but is also progressing toward a shared future.

During the 2022 Samarkand Summit, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan declared: *"As the Turkic World, thank God, we are stronger today than we were yesterday. Our family council, built on a foundation of spiritual unity, has transformed into an international organisation that stands firmly on its feet and moves forward confidently toward the future"* (Takvim, November 11, 2022). This discourse is not merely an evaluation of the present but also a declaration of confidence and strategic orientation regarding the future. Erdoğan positions the OTS as an entity that carries the legacy of the past into the future, showing that the will to shape the future has become an institutionalised narrative.

Kazakh President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, in the same summit, stated: *"As the countries of the OTS, we must contribute to the resolution of regional and global issues and become a significant force. To overcome threats, we must unite our strength"* (Haber7, November 11, 2022). This statement underscores the potential of the OTS to be not only a cultural union but also a political and strategic actor. It demonstrates that the identity construction of the OTS is framed not solely in symbolic terms but also in functional terms within the realm of international relations.

Emphases on the organisation's potential to emerge as a strong actor that bridges the past and influences the future are clearly reflected in the discourses of its leaders. The future-oriented statements of the leaders concerning the OTS reflect not only their belief in its institutional continuity but also the formation of a shared strategic vision. Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev emphasised that, given the OTS's geopolitical position and its natural and human resources, it could become a global centre of power. He expressed his confidence with the assertion: *"The day will come when all the world's problems will be resolved through consultation with the Organisation of Turkic States"* (Anadolu Agency, June 6, 2024). Aliyev's discourse indicates that the Organisation of Turkic States seeks to be regarded in the future not only as stronger and more effective, but also as a more influential actor. The expressions used in Aliyev's speech, such as "all the world's problems" and "consultation," show that at a time when the global system is experiencing various ruptures, the OTS is positioned not merely as an alliance concerned with the issues of its own members, but as an actor with a high capacity for international influence. The expectation attributed to the OTS in this regard both strengthens the common sense of belonging among member states and societies, and at the same time brings the organisation to the fore as an actor with significant potential for influence in the eyes of others (the international community). Similarly, Kazakh President Kassym-

JANUS.NET, e-journal of International Relations
e-ISSN: 1647-7251
VOL. 16, Nº. 2, TD1
Thematic Dossier - *Emerging Powers In-between Global and Regional Organizations*
December 2025, pp. 411-433
The Role of Leadership Discourses in The Ontological Construction of the Organisation of Turkic States as a Regional Power
Kürşad Güç

Jomart Tokayev pointed to a comparable vision by highlighting that the OTS has quickly become a "respected organisation" whose visibility and influence in the international system are increasing (TRT Avaz, November 6, 2024).

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's statement, *"We will work with all our strength to make the upcoming era the Century of the Turkic World"* (Anadolu Agency, November 7, 2024), stands out as the strongest expression of an effort to position the OTS as a long-term regional power hub. These discourses contribute not only to the organisation's current political agenda but also to its ontological construction; they directly address the questions of what the OTS is and what it aspires to become, defining its institutional identity within the framework of a future-oriented vision. The global vision articulated most clearly by Aliyev and Erdoğan illustrates the OTS's pursuit of becoming not just a platform for cooperation but a political and cultural subject in the international system. Moreover, these discourses, by emphasising the organisation's continuity across past, present, and future, reveal an effort to construct a secure ontological subjectivity for the OTS.

Such discourses also find resonance in the *"Turkic World Vision 2040"* document adopted at the 2021 Istanbul Summit. The document sets forth the objective of transforming the Turkic World into a more active actor in international relations, a culturally integrated entity, and one that is adaptable to technological developments (OTS, 2021). This document is not merely a technical strategic text; it also provides an ideological framework concerning the raison d'être of the OTS. In alignment with Anderson's (1991) concept of "imagined communities," this framework illustrates how a shared vision of the future reinforces communal belonging.

In this context, the future-oriented emphases in the leaders' discourse demonstrate that the continuity of the OTS's identity is ensured not only through remembrance of the past but also through the construction of a shared vision. This vision strengthens the sense of belonging within member communities while simultaneously repositioning the OTS as both a regional and global actor.

Conclusion and Evaluation

Discourse is not merely a reflective but also a constitutive and transformative element in identity construction. In post-structuralist international relations literature, identities are not fixed, natural, or predetermined structures; rather, they are continuously reproduced through social practices and discourse. According to this approach, the question of "who" an actor is is determined not by what it does, but by how it defines itself and how it is positioned by others. Discourse constructs identity through historical narratives, collective memory, symbols, and visions of the future. In this regard, actors respond to the questions "who are we?" and "who are we not?" through discursive frameworks.

For international organisations, this process is even more pronounced. Given their multi-actor composition, identity construction must be carried out through discourse. Within this framework, institutional documents, summit declarations, and leaders' speeches do not merely convey information - they shape the existence, meaning system, and collective belonging of the organisation.

JANUS.NET, e-journal of International Relations
e-ISSN: 1647-7251
VOL. 16, Nº. 2, TD1
Thematic Dossier - *Emerging Powers In-between Global and Regional Organizations*
December 2025, pp. 411-433
*The Role of Leadership Discourses in The Ontological Construction of the Organisation of
Turkic States as a Regional Power*
Kürşad Güç

This study highlights the significance of the discourses of member states and organisational leaders in the ontological construction of the Organisation of Turkic States (OTS) as a social and political entity. The political narratives emphasised in leaders' discourses not only point to an effort to legitimise interstate cooperation, but also aim to bring together the societies of member states around a shared past, common values and symbols, cultural affinities, and a vision for the future. Within these discourses, four main themes come to the fore: historical continuity, spatial belonging, cultural-linguistic unity, and future-oriented vision.

By invoking a shared past, leaders seek to present the existence of the OTS as a natural outcome of historical continuity. In doing so, the OTS is positioned ontologically not as a contingent or merely technical organisation, but as an entity with an organic foundation. Persistent references to certain selected places, and the symbolic emphasis attached to them, also serve to materialise historical continuity in spatial terms. Discourses on common language, alphabet, culture, and education represent an effort to ensure the continuity of cultural unity transmitted from the past through new generations. In this way, it is intended that new generations who embrace a collective identity around shared cultural dynamics will guarantee both the institutional and ontological continuity of the Turkic World. Finally, the assertive references made by leaders regarding the future of both the OTS and the Turkic World aim to demonstrate the organisation's place within the international system, which shows strong signs of transformation in the 21st century. In this context, the Turkic World, as articulated by OTS leaders, aspires to emerge as an influential and powerful actor in shaping the future global order.

This study also contributes to the broader literature on the construction of identities within international organisations. In this respect, the attainment of an ontological existence by international organisations, alongside their institutional construction, involves a threefold process. First, leaders perceive the existence of such organisations not as coincidental but as a natural outcome of historical continuity. In line with this perspective, facts, events, and symbols from the past are selectively transformed into various narratives through discourse. Subsequently, these narratives are transferred into summit declarations or official documents, thereby acquiring an institutional dimension. Thirdly, these elements are systematically repeated and revised in accordance with emerging needs throughout the process.

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e-ISSN: 1647-7251
VOL. 16, Nº. 2, TD1
Thematic Dossier - *Emerging Powers In-between Global and Regional Organizations*
December 2025, pp. 411-433
The Role of Leadership Discourses in The Ontological Construction of the Organisation of Turkic States as a Regional Power
Kürşad Güç

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VOL. 16, Nº. 2, TD1
Thematic Dossier - *Emerging Powers In-between Global and Regional Organizations*
December 2025, pp. 411-433
The Role of Leadership Discourses in The Ontological Construction of the Organisation of Turkic States as a Regional Power
Kürşad Güç

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e-ISSN: 1647-7251
VOL. 16, Nº. 2, TD1
Thematic Dossier - *Emerging Powers In-between Global and Regional Organizations*
December 2025, pp. 411-433
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