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ARMENIAN–TURKISH RELATIONS

- Armenia–Turkey Rapprochement: The Most Significant Positive Event in the Region Since 1994 (If It Happens) 2
By Gevorg Ter-Gabrielyan, Yerevan
 - The Turkish–Armenian Protocols: Implications for Azerbaijan 5
By Anar Valiyev, Baku
 - After Years of Silence, Turkey and Armenia Will Try to Come Up with a New Language of Understanding 8
By Karin Karakaslı, Istanbul
-
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Armenia–Turkey Rapprochement: The Most Significant Positive Event in the Region Since 1994 (If It Happens)

By Gevorg Ter-Gabrielyan, Yerevan

Abstract

The signing of the Armenian–Turkish Agreement on October 10, 2009, in Zurich could prove to be a milestone in the relations between the two neighboring states and a major factor impacting positively on the stability of the entire Caucasus region. Yet the agreement needs to pass the difficult ratification test in the parliaments of Armenia and Turkey, and domestic opposition groups and the large Armenian Diaspora have to play along. If indeed this agreement is to bring more stability to the Caucasus, then Azerbaijan also needs to be convinced that the Armenia–Turkey rapprochement is in its national interest as well. Yet this is unlikely to happen because of the unresolved Karabakh conflict, an issue which clearly needs to be tackled with utmost urgency, by Armenia and Azerbaijan primarily, but also by the regional actors including Russia, and the international community.

Armenia–Turkey Relations: How It Started, or Rather Did Not Start

Turkey moved quickly to recognize Armenia's independence in 1992, in an effort to secure its border and to prevent any territorial disputes. But diplomatic relations were not established between the two countries. As the conflict over Nagorny Karabakh escalated, Azerbaijan asked Turkey to keep the border closed. Turkey supported its brotherly nation, especially when Armenia prevailed in the conflict.

Independent Armenia's first government declared its readiness to establish relations with Turkey without preconditions, seeing Turkey as a more appealing regional power than post-Soviet Russia. But that government was unable to avoid war in Karabakh. Facing a blockade, Armenia entered a strategic alliance with Russia and attempts to open the border with Turkey were abandoned. Turkey came to be perceived as an undeclared enemy alongside Azerbaijan. The closed border became the last intact part of the Iron Curtain.

The first President of Armenia, Levon Ter-Petrosyan was willing to compromise with Azerbaijan over Karabakh, nullifying the Armenian military victory. In taking this position, Ter-Petrosyan came into conflict with the century-old *Dashnaktsutyun* nationalist party, which sought to maintain Armenian victories. He banned that party and jailed some of its leaders. *Dashnaktsutyun*, however, had played an important role in Karabakh, and worked devotedly to win the war.

The second President of Armenia, Robert Kocharyan, came to power on a platform diametrically opposed to that of Ter-Petrosyan. Kocharyan freed the *Dashnaktsutyun* members from jail, made the party a member of

the coalition government, and declared recognition of the Genocide a major foreign policy objective (Turkey denies that the events of 1915, when about two million Armenians disappeared from Ottoman-era Turkey, were an act of Genocide). Kocharyan engaged the Armenian Diaspora in a worldwide campaign for Genocide recognition. The governing bodies of numerous countries recognized the Genocide in a variety of ways.

Despite the closed border, Turkey created a system of easy access for Armenian visitors: Armenian citizens can get a visa at Turkey's other borders. As a result, tens of thousands of poor Armenian citizens, mainly women, became illegal workers in Turkey. Many Armenians visited Turkey for vacations. Armenia and Turkey traded via Georgia, paying transit duties.

From “Football Diplomacy” to the Signing of the Zurich Agreement

The third President of Armenia, Serj Sargsyan, came to power under controversial circumstances. On March 1, 2008, after series of rallies, protesters who did not accept his electoral victory clashed with security forces. Ten people were killed. The government imposed emergency rule for a month. The US did not congratulate Sargsyan with victory. He became a president with weak legitimacy, in need of a quick success and recognition by the West.

In August 2008 the five-day Russian–Georgian war ended with Russia recognizing Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states. This changed the geopolitical situation in the region. Over the years Azerbaijan had routinely declared that without an advance in the negotiations over Karabakh, it would go to war. After

the Russian–Georgian war, Azerbaijan had to reconsider this rhetoric. To strengthen its image and further weaken Georgia, Russia enhanced its role as a peacemaker in the Armenia–Azerbaijan negotiations and supports – or at least did not hinder – Armenian–Turkish rapprochement. It was before the August war when Sargsyan, while on a visit to Moscow, invited Turkey’s President Gul to Yerevan for the upcoming football game between Armenia and Turkey. Thus began the so-called “football diplomacy.”

A year of secret negotiations followed. In his remarks on April 24, 2009 (Armenian’s Day of Commemoration of the Genocide), US President Barack Obama, contrary to his pre-election promise, did not use the word “Genocide.” This is typical for a US President, but every year around April 24, Turks worry and Armenians are surprised. Obama used the second-best, but hardly legally binding, term: “the Great Calamity” in Armenian. Perhaps to prevent him using the “G-word”, Turkey, Armenia and Switzerland (the facilitator) published a joint statement on April 23, saying they had worked out a roadmap to full-fledged bilateral relations. This statement, issued immediately before April 24, was considered by many to be a major concession by Sargsyan. Then the process seemed to stall. It seemed Turks got what they wanted (Obama’s not using the “G-word” on April 24), then ceased to make any effort.

After midnight on August 31 (evening in Washington DC, the behind-the-curtain force driving the rapprochement process), the Declaration of Armenia, Turkey and Switzerland was published, followed by two Protocols. These documents were to be signed by both sides within six weeks, after which they would go to the respective parliaments for ratification.

The documents were signed in Zurich on October 10, 2009. The ceremony was not uneventful. The last-minute maneuvering exposed the difficulties that the sides still faced; Washington’s leading role in moving them forward; and Russia’s somewhat aloof position.

Armenian Criticism of the Agreement

Turkey has already presented the documents to the *Milli Mejlis* (parliament). Armenia has not yet presented them to its National Assembly. There is no clear deadline for when this should be done, or how long the ratification process might take.

Turkey has conveyed the message that without an advance in Armenia–Azerbaijan negotiations (if “a piece of land”, at least of a symbolic size, is not returned to Azerbaijan) ratification may be stalled, limited or outright impossible. Here, Turkey forgets its own history

with Cyprus and that this type of conflict is no piece of cake. Any change in the balance of power, even a small territorial concession, may have dire consequences for the security of the entire region if it is not backed by strong security guarantees.

The Protocols generated a loud but somewhat hollow outcry from members of the Armenian public, official opposition parties, and the Diaspora. Sargsyan says that the documents reflect Armenian policies vis-à-vis Turkey from the very beginning of independence, i.e. readiness for diplomatic relations and open borders without preconditions. But many people read at least three major preconditions between the lines.

First, according to critics, the documents prevent Armenia from making territorial claims on Turkey. In their opinion, if the Genocide is internationally recognized there could be territorial reparations. This position is irrational. Weak and small Armenia will not be able to claim any territory from large and strong Turkey in the conceivable future.

The *second* criticism is that the documents accept Karabakh as part of Azerbaijan. While some language in the documents could be interpreted as supporting that claim, there is no clear statement to that end.

The *third* is that the clause establishing a sub-committee on history allegedly violates one of the major tenets of the Armenian nation: that no Armenian should ever engage in a debate about whether or not the Genocide happened, or whether or not what happened was Genocide.

The Larger Context

Opening the border with Turkey, insofar as the US, Europe and Russia support it, is in the interest of many actors. It is even in the interest of Azerbaijan, since a Turkey with more leverage in the region will be able to influence the Karabakh negotiations process. Rapprochement is also in Georgia’s interest in the long term, because it will substantially increase stability in the region. The only actor whose interest is doubtful is one of two Russias: the Russia which wants to rule and influence its neighbors via military power. The “other Russia” (the civilized trading partner wielding only soft influence) will benefit from this process. Both Armenia and Turkey will benefit economically by attracting more foreign direct investment. International businesses will come to Armenia via Turkey. The under-developed areas of Turkey which lie to the west of the border, populated by Kurds, will find themselves at a newly opened crossroads.

The border opening will be the most positive event in the Caucasus since the signing of the Armenia–Azer-

baijan-Karabakh ceasefire in 1994. Most events here in recent years have been either outright tragic (six wars in the region since the collapse of the USSR!) or had disappointing consequences. The Khasavvyurt cease-fire between Russia and Chechnya did not result in peace; the second Chechen war ensued soon afterwards. Terrorism, kidnappings and military atrocities flourished and the North Caucasus was soaked in blood. Instability and Islamic Fundamentalism are growing there.

The Rose Revolution brought Mikheil Sahakashvili to power in Georgia, but despite his reformist agenda Georgia ended up at war with Russia. This ended hope for a peaceful settlement of the conflicts with Abkhazia and South Ossetia. South Ossetia is hardly capable of serious self-governance and is about to be swallowed by Russia. Abkhazia has an able and democratically-elected president, but is facing new elections which, under Russian domination, could damage its fragile inner governance system.

Karabakh, a victor of the hot stage of conflict with Azerbaijan, remains isolated and sparsely populated. It was not recognized and was not annexed by Armenia. The result is that both Karabakh and Armenia remain underdeveloped. This brews authoritarianism, militarism and paranoia. Internationally, Karabakh is all but forgotten as a party to conflict because of inept Armenian negotiation strategies within the OSCE Minsk group.

The region is in dire need of good news. If the two states do ratify the Protocols, this positive historical event may turn the tide.

The Impact of Change on the Two Nations

The more the Armenians get to know Turkey, the faster they discover it is not the cartoonish enemy they have learned to distrust. Turkey has a rapidly developing economy. Its universities are well-funded and their graduates well-educated. While in the past its government was periodically overthrown by the military, Turkey has made efforts over the last 30 years to remove preconditions for such volatility. While EU accession remains uncertain, Turkey is moving closer to Europe in visible ways. Its current government and leading party represent moderate Islamists, but, perhaps incomprehensibly to biased non-Muslims, are more democratic than their predecessors, even as those governments downplayed some Islamic values in the name of Western ones.

The situation in Turkey is changing for the better. After the great civic leader and journalist, Hrant Dink, an ethnic Armenian citizen of Turkey, was killed in 2007, his assassination became a turning point which united progressive civic and political forces around the slogan

“never again”. Moreover, Nobel Prize-winning Turkish writer Orhan Pamuk recognizes the Genocide. He faces persecution in Turkey for it, but he has survived it and even become more famous.

While Genocide recognition is illegal in Turkey, the word or concept is being used more and more frequently in the pluralistic Turkish media. Turkey is rediscovering its past. This concerns not only its dark history with Armenians, but also its history with the Kurds and other hidden ethnicities, such as the Abkhaz and Kabardinians, who have resided there for more than 150 years.

Turkey is puzzling the US, its old NATO ally, by playing a more independent role in the region and entertaining ambitions to play such a role globally as an envoy of the Muslim world to the West and vice versa. If it is able to build trust with Armenia, this will be further proof that Turkey has made a choice in favor of the 21st century values of global humanity.

The global Armenian public's outcry against the Protocols is understandable, since members of the Diaspora are the direct descendents of those who suffered from the Genocide. In response, Sargsyan engaged in public dialogue to an unprecedented degree, visiting several global Diaspora centers. Large-scale discussions took place in Armenia proper. This created hope that the government will become more open and democratic if the process of rapprochement moves forward. The good news is that Sargsyan has a majority in the National Assembly, so ratification will not be difficult. The bad news is that this majority is not a result of fair elections.

If Turkey does not ratify the Protocols, prospects for democracy in Armenia and in the entire region will be damaged further. Those who feel that they can benefit from moving against Sargsyan may unite using strong nationalist and traditionalist rhetoric. This will end hopes – as happened in 1993 – that corruption will be reduced and oligarchic power structures weakened in Armenia by opening the border.

It is unrealistic to expect rapid progress in the Karabakh peace process. Turkey has to ratify the Protocols despite internal nationalist resistance and despite getting the cold shoulder from official Azerbaijan. If Turkey and Russia do not swerve at the last moment, at least one cornerstone in a new, sustainable security architecture will finally be in place in the South Caucasus.

Focusing on the Future

With Genocide recognition, as well as with the post-ratification implementation of Protocols, Armenia is playing a risky game. The Protocols may further Armenia's interests, or they may become a lever for pressuring the weak

government into more concessions. If the government were stronger, it could insist on better wording for some points in the Protocols, and protect its interests during implementation. But if there is good will from the government, civil society and progressive forces within the Diaspora, Armenia may come out of this historical trial more prosperous and secure than it was before.

There is a plethora of issues on the table which have not yet been addressed properly. How to envision, eventu-

ally, a positive-sum solution for the future of Karabakh? Is it conceivable at all, given the lack of democracy in Armenia, and still more significant lack of it in Azerbaijan? How will the region eventually emerge from the impasse between Georgia, Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Russia? As we wait for ratification of the Protocols, these questions are the next set of issues on the agenda.

About the Author

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The Turkish–Armenian Protocols: Implications for Azerbaijan

By Anar Valiyev, Baku

Abstract

Turkish–Armenian rapprochement and the signing of the related protocols had a tremendous impact on Azerbaijan’s foreign policy. The failure of the Turkish side to link the Karabakh problem with normalization of relations between Ankara and Yerevan forced Azerbaijan to re-evaluate its policy toward Turkey and the West. With the opening of borders and the establishment of diplomatic relations between Turkey and Armenia, Azerbaijan loses an important tool of leverage in negotiating with Armenia to withdraw its troops from the occupied territories. Finally, Azerbaijan’s disappointment with the Turkish position could negatively affect the development of energy projects, and increase Russian influence in the region.

A New Agreement

On October 10, 2009 foreign minister of Turkey Akhmet Davutoglu and his Armenian counterpart Edward Nalbandyan signed Protocols on the Establishment of Diplomatic Relations between the two countries. The ceremony was attended by the Swiss and Russian foreign ministers as well as U.S. Secretary of State Hilary Clinton.

The ceremony almost did not take place because of the sudden demarche of the Armenian side, which disagreed with the text of the final statement. The Turks insisted on raising the Karabakh issue, while the Armenians hoped to include a “genocide” clause. Under pressure from the other participants of the ceremony, both ministers agreed not to mention these issues in the final statement.

The protocols stipulate opening the Armenian–Turkish border within two months after ratification in the parliaments and establishing a working group to define procedures for a newly created intergovernmental commission and its sub-commissions.

Azerbaijani–Turkish Relations after the Protocols

The once cordial relations between Turkey and Azerbaijan have been deteriorating since April, 2009, when negotiations between Turkey and Armenia entered into the decisive stage. Under Swiss mediation, both sides adopted a road map for normalization of relations. The fact that the negotiations took place and the parties’ decision to sign an accord without considering Azerbaijani interests shocked the Azerbaijani public and establishment. Despite Prime Minister Erdoğan’s speech in the Azerbaijani parliament in May, he could not silence the voices of criticism coming from Azerbaijan.

The major concern of the Azerbaijani side was the exclusion of the Karabakh issue from the road map and protocols. The signing of the protocols caused a storm of criticism in Azerbaijan. Immediately after the ceremony, the Azerbaijani foreign ministry issued a special statement regarding the protocols. The ministry reminded the Turkish side that the borders between Turkey and

Armenia were shut in 1993 because of the Armenian occupation of Azerbaijani territories.

Normalization of relations between Turkey and Armenia before Armenia's withdrawal from Azerbaijani territories goes against the national interests of Azerbaijan and casts a shadow on fraternal relations between the two countries. "Taking into consideration the importance of opening the borders and communications, Azerbaijan believes that opening the borders between Turkey and Armenia in a one-sided way will undermine the architecture of peace and security in the region," the statement said.

The Azerbaijani public was unanimous in its attitude toward the signing of the protocols, considering the protocols and possible opening of the borders as a betrayal of the country's interests. Meanwhile, most Azerbaijani political analysts believe that Turkey, under pressure from the West, will ratify these protocols and open the borders within two months.

Two weeks after the protocol signing ceremony, Azerbaijani-Turkish relations reached what historians might eventually call a "nadir." A strange "flag war" erupted between the two countries. First, the authorities in the Turkish city of Bursa, where the soccer match between Turkey and Armenia was held, banned Azerbaijani flags from the game. The TV images of Azerbaijani flags thrown into a garbage can infuriated many people in Azerbaijan and tensions between the two states reached a peak. On October 15, Turkish flags decorating monuments commemorating the Turkish soldiers who died while liberating Azerbaijan from Bolshevik rule in 1918 were removed. The Azerbaijani authorities stressed that the decision had no political connotation and they were just simply enforcing the law of the Azerbaijani republic regarding the display of foreign flags. The tensions over the flags eased after Turkish foreign minister Ahmet Davutoglu visited Baku and local authorities returned the flags to their place.

All Quiet on the Karabakh Front

The major argument that Azerbaijan makes against the protocols and the possible opening of borders is that such a move would make settlement of the Karabakh conflict impossible. Analysts pointed out that Armenian rhetoric after the adoption of the "road map" became harsher. If Turkey hoped that the road map and protocols would soften the Armenian position and spur Karabakh negotiations, it did not work. Instead, the road map and protocols emboldened Armenia to take an unconstructive position. With the protocols signed and the possibility of the border opening, Azer-

baijan and Turkey lost one of their important levers over Armenia.

What would Azerbaijan do if there is no progress on the Karabakh issue, Armenia continues to take an unconstructive position and there is an imminent threat of the border opening? The Azerbaijani government's first and immediate action would be to increase the military budget. Azerbaijan's military spending in 2010 will total 1.205 bn manats (approximately 1.5 bn USD), a figure that comprises 10.7 percent of all budget expenditures and slightly more than military spending in 2009. Meanwhile, for the first time since Azerbaijan joined the NATO Partnership for Peace and the Individual Partnership Plan (IPAP), the state budget envisages no funding for activities within the framework of the plan. In the 2009 budget, the government allocated 1.3 m manats (1.6 m. USD) for such activities. The fact that Azerbaijan is diminishing its participation suggests that the country is decreasing contacts with NATO, and especially Turkey, which is the main implementer of NATO policy in the Caucasus.

Energy Projects Are Under Threat

The Turkish-Armenian protocols and the related short deterioration of relations between Baku and Ankara have cast a shadow over regional projects such as Nabucco and the Kars-Ahalkalaki railroad. For the last five years, Azerbaijan and Turkey championed the idea of delivering gas from the Caspian Basin region to Europe via Georgia and Turkey. In 2006 Azerbaijan started to export its gas to Turkey and on to Europe.

But the main question – the price of Azerbaijani gas – remained open. Azerbaijan has become increasingly dissatisfied with the Turkish position on transiting gas and oil. In many cases, Azerbaijan sacrificed its economic interests for the sake of fraternal relations with the Turks. For years Azerbaijan helped Turkey to become an energy hub and improve its position with energy-hungry Europe for accession to EU. For example, Azerbaijan sells its natural gas to Turkey for \$120 per thousand cubic meters, a fraction of the European price for that commodity. Moreover, in 2008, just before the Russian-Georgian war, Azerbaijan incurred major losses when an explosion on the Turkish section of the Baku-Ceyhan pipeline knocked it out of service. Azerbaijan did not demand compensation for the losses.

The Turkish government's unexpected decision to improve relations with Armenia in April 2009 disappointed the Azerbaijani establishment, which has now started to talk with Turkey in a different way. President Aliyev reduced his contacts with Turkish officials and

even rejected an invitation to visit the Alliance for Civilization summit held in Turkey. Less than a week after the protocols were signed, the Azerbaijani president spoke at the meeting of the Cabinet of Ministers and stated that for many years Azerbaijan was selling its gas to Turkey for one-third the market price. He added that it was illogical from an economic perspective to sell the gas for below market prices and also stated that Ankara should decrease the transit fees for Azerbaijan gas that is going to Europe. The president tried to present this statement as being linked to commercial considerations rather than connecting it to the protocols. Analysts, however, considered this move to be a hidden signal to Turkey to take Azerbaijani interests into consideration. With this statement, Azerbaijan was warning Turkey and future European consumers that problems with gas supply to Turkey could undermine or even kill the Nabucco project since Azerbaijan is considered the main supplier and a key transit state.

At the height of Azerbaijani–Turkish tensions, Baku made another strong move. On October 14th when Turkish President Gul met with his Armenian counterpart Sarkisyan during the soccer match, the State Oil Company of Azerbaijan Republic signed an agreement to sell 500 million cubic meters of gas a year to Russia's Gazprom, starting from 2010, at a price of 350 USD per cubic meter. Furthermore, Aliyev stressed that this was not the limit for Azerbaijani gas sales to Russia.

In cutting the deal with the Russians, Azerbaijan was pursuing its own interests. First, it made the EU countries worry that Azerbaijan would choose Russia for its gas exports and, as a result, Europe would remain a Russian hostage for the indefinite future. Second, the agreement shows Turkey that Azerbaijan is not dependent on the Turkish territories for transiting its gas and can successfully sell its gas for higher prices than offered by Turkey. Third, the agreement showed Turkey what it would lose if it opens its borders with Armenia.

Moreover, a few days before the protocol signing ceremony, Azerbaijan announced reductions in its financing for the Baku–Tbilisi–Kars railway. This transportation link, often called the Iron Silk Road, was supposed to connect Azerbaijan with Turkey by railroad via Georgian territory. The project would tremendously increase trade turnover and make it possible to open Central Asian markets to the EU. According to President Aliyev's October 7 decree, the State Oil Fund of Azerbaijan would allocate only 30 m AZM (37.4 m. USD) to the project instead of the 80 m AZM (100 m USD) that was intended for 2010. The move indicates that Azerbaijan has lost interest in the project and is sending another signal to Turkey.

Given these developments, analysts have been trying to predict how the energy and other projects between Azerbaijan and Turkey will develop. Will Azerbaijan frustrate the Nabucco project? What other options does Azerbaijan have?

Definitely, the Turkish–Azerbaijani tensions benefited Russia – another great player in the Caucasus. Russia's policy in the wake of Armenian–Turkish rapprochement is understandable. Moscow tries to take maximum advantage of the divide between Turkey and Azerbaijan, seeking political and economic dividends from the situation. An open border will not shake Moscow's position in Armenia, since Russia still has military bases in this country. Moreover, Azerbaijan's disappointment is working well for Russia, which is presented as alternative to Turkish influence. With the strategic partnership between Azerbaijan and Turkey, and consequently with the EU and US, under threat, Russia seeks to utilize this unique opportunity to secure its position in the Caucasus. With the deal to buy Azerbaijani gas and promises to obtain more, Russia hopes eventually to kill the Nabucco project and any other alternative pipeline bypassing Russia.

But Azerbaijan is also trying to find a balance. Fearing political and economic dependency on Russia, Azerbaijan is also trying to avoid relying solely on Russia to transport its energy resources. In his statement at a recent meeting with the Cabinet of Ministers, President Aliyev stressed that Azerbaijan is looking for alternative routes to export its gas. Aliyev was hinting at the projected White Stream Pipeline, which is supposed to ship gas from Azerbaijan to Georgia and further through the Black sea to Romania and the EU. President Aliyev began negotiating the White Stream Project with Romanian President Traian Basescu in September of 2009.

Conclusion

The deterioration of Azerbaijani–Turkish relations can negatively affect the regional power balance and eventually destroy the Baku–Tbilisi–Ankara union. For years all three countries were supportive of each other and most regional economic and political projects involved all three countries. If the Azerbaijani–Turkish alliance drifts apart and Azerbaijan relies more on Russia, Georgia's position will be significantly weakened. With increased Russian influence on Azerbaijan, Azerbaijani–Georgian relations eventually will also drop from a strategic partnership to merely average relations. In the absence of Azerbaijan's economic support to Georgia, Tbilisi will become easy prey for Russian influence.

A further deterioration in relations between Azerbaijan and Turkey will tremendously change the course of Azerbaijan's foreign policy. Ever since Azerbaijan's independence, Turkey was not only a staunch ally of Azerbaijan, but a link for the country to the West. With relations between the two countries severed, Azerbaijan will be left with the choices of having closer relations with Iran or Russia. The EU and USA would lose influence in Azerbaijan. Unfortunately, the situation in the Caucasus reached the point where it is not possible to satisfy all sides. By winning Armenia through opening the border and economic incentives, Turkey and the West will undermine their relations with Azerbaijan.

Nevertheless, despite the unfriendly moves of the Turkish establishment, Azerbaijan's leaders are not inclined to move into Moscow's sphere of influence. This desire comes not only from the fear of political dependence on Moscow, but also the absence of economic prospects in relations with Russia. Turkmenistan is a

vivid example of how reliance on Russia leads to the loss of many billions in economic revenues. Azerbaijan fears that a decision to undermine Nabucco could make Russia a monopolist in Azerbaijani gas purchases, subsequently leading to lower gas prices. Thus, it is not in Azerbaijani interests to torpedo the project that could bring additional political and economic dividends to the country.

The next few months will be decisive in the Caucasus. If Turkey ratifies protocols without developing a solution to the Karabakh conflict, Azerbaijan will definitely reconsider its relations with Turkey and the Western countries. Azerbaijan will not zealously pursue the Nabucco pipeline and could halt its participation in regional projects. More importantly, ratification of the protocols will reinforce the negative public perception toward West and Turkey, leading Azerbaijanis to believe that the military option is the only solution for the Karabakh conflict

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After Years of Silence, Turkey and Armenia Will Try to Come Up with a New Language of Understanding

By Karin Karakashi, Istanbul

Abstract

The author, an Armenian living in Turkey, examines how to build trust and confidence between Armenians and Turks. Past Turkish state policy drove wedges between citizens of Turkey who had different religious and ethnic backgrounds. Now efforts to address both the Armenian and Kurdish issues should be seen as part of Turkey's overall democratization process. Literature in general and the stories and memories of ordinary people who survived 1915 can help build a new type of politics.

Protocol of Trust and Confidence

Sometimes the reaction to something tells more than the event itself. This is also true for the Protocol on the Establishment of Diplomatic Relations and the Protocol on the Development of Bilateral Relations, signed by the foreign ministers of Armenia and Turkey on October 10, 2009, under Swiss mediation. While debates go on in both countries and among the members of the Diaspora, it is becoming clear that establishing reciprocal trust and understanding will take more than a signature.

In order to understand why these protocols represent a historical step, it is necessary to remember a few details about the recent situation of Turkey and Armenia. Though Turkey was one of the first states to recognize the independence of Armenia in 1991, it then turned the Nagorno Karabakh conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia into a pretext for closing the border with its neighbor. Accordingly, there have been no diplomatic relations between Turkey and Armenia and the borders have been closed since 1993. The situation becomes even more absurd when one takes into consideration that ever

since the ceasefire agreement signed between Azerbaijan and Armenia, representatives of these fighting states have come together several times, while Armenia has only been a ghost for Turkey.

In signing these protocols, both Turkey and Armenia declared readiness to establish diplomatic relations and open the common border. A timetable was set for the implementation of the protocols as they affected political, economic, trade, tourism, energy, transport, scientific, technical, cultural and environmental issues. The parties decided that Nagorno Karabakh will be handled separately and will no longer be submitted as the precondition for potential relations between Turkey and Armenia. Hopes are also present that the US, Russia and the EU will create common interest fields for Turkey and Armenia in order to restore relations as a completely independent process from the Nagorno Karabakh conflict.

Another important point which concerns history and yet shapes the future is defined as an “aim to restore mutual confidence between the two nations,” by establishing “an impartial scientific examination of the historical records and archives to define existing problems and formulate recommendations”. It is obvious that understanding what happened in 1915 will necessitate more than an impartial scientific examination if we want to reach moral justice. Still, there are special expressions in the protocol’s text that contain deeper meaning than mere diplomatic nuances and make clear what needs to be done: “bearing in mind the importance of the creation and maintenance of an atmosphere of trust and confidence between the two countries” and “considering the perspectives of developing their bilateral relations, based on confidence and respect to their mutual interests” are two of them, the key words being “trust and confidence.”

When countries set the goal of achieving a “normalization of bilateral relations,” it is also an implicit confession that there was an abnormality internalized for a long time.

Sources of Abnormality

In order to understand the reasons of abnormality, we have to mention the state policy of division. While the government emphasizes national unity all the time in Turkey, people bound to the country by citizenship but possessing different ethnic or religious identities have been distanced from each other. Thus, the words “Kurdish” and “Armenian” were usually followed by the concepts of “problem” or “issue,” revealing that something problematic exists with these identities. Moreover, the

problems were separate and confronted with different, frozen tactics: 1915 was a historical taboo for decades or a subject of official history, which was related and taught with the use of hostile generalizations that described “traitor Armenians collaborating with Russian armies and thus deported.” The denial of the Kurdish Problem on the other hand, led to a civil war and the hardening of ethnic hostility.

Only recently did we go through a historical period where for the first time the correlation of these two problems has been acknowledged. Now we are seeking a solution to both simultaneously.

All the tension present in the hard-fought parliamentary debates display once again how we need clear information and mutual talks in order to overcome all the obstacles in our mentality that block a real democratization process. It is necessary to win the support of public opinion because when inner dynamics are not included, this great shift of mentality cannot take place. Merely superficial changes can easily give rise to ultra-nationalistic outbursts that were once defined as the result of “outside pressure.” It should be made clear that what is done is actually done for the sake of the country.

Domestic Obstacles, Parallel Realities

The domestic obstacles blocking advances on both issues speak for themselves. Although the ministers of foreign affairs of both Turkey and Armenia came together to sign the protocol, it was almost impossible for the government and opposition parties of Turkey to meet at the National Assembly to talk about these recent developments. The same scene was repeated when the parliament began discussing ways to address the Kurdish Problem and the opposition parties produced the same antagonistic discourse of “terror and blood.” As government is involved in all these attempts, it is of crucial importance that stability be preserved both in this new discourse and in actions to follow.

There is still a situation of what I call parallel realities: something and its complete opposite happen and exist side by side. Thus, while the Kurdish Issue is acknowledged as one of the greatest problems of the Republic and discussed in the Parliament, Kurdish children present at a demonstration are tried as members of a terrorist organization; Democratic Society-Kurdish Party MPs face prosecution; and obstacles remain blocking the use and teaching of the Kurdish language.

As for the Armenian Issue, while hostile expressions against Armenians continue to exist both in school books and in the media, while there are still efforts to escape from history, and while the trial for the mur-

derer of Hrant Dink is not used to reveal the state mechanism that made him such an open and vulnerable target, there will be little sense that the signed protocol has any meaning.

What politicians call an “opening” is actually a meeting, a coming together. Efforts to resolve both the Kurdish and Armenian issues should be seen as part of Turkey’s democratization process. These problems do not belong to Kurds or Armenians alone; they are actually the problems of Turkey. Once they are solved, every single citizen will be relieved of the burdens on their shoulders.

We all saw how the speeches supposed to be delivered after the protocol signing ceremony on October 10 created a crisis that could only be solved through the intervention of third parties. This again shows that we still must travel a long path in order to reach a true face-to-face dialogue. And enough time has been spent in vain.

The fact that Turkish and Armenian identities included antagonistic depictions of each other, let them become impoverished, as hate weakens the soul. In order to overcome the great burden of denial, an official policy of forgetting was imposed on Turkish society that led to a “learned ignorance.” After centuries of a common life on the same territory, new generations of Turkish citizens were unaware of the existence of the Armenian people. The situation reached such a degree that some would ask “Where do you come from?” when a person said “I am Armenian.”

When the founder and editor-in-chief of Turkey’s first weekly Turkish-Armenian bilingual newspaper *Agos*, Hrant Dink, called on Armenians of the Diaspora to be aware of and free themselves from the “poisoning effect of hatred against the Turks,” he also wanted to call attention to the problematic past of Armenian identity. Now that an independent Armenia existed, all productive energy should be used to boost the prosperity of this new country. As for the heavy burden of 1915, he proposed carrying it on one’s shoulders until the end of the world. This reality was above any efforts to convince others of its existence. It was their own moral struggle and problematic of being a human to acknowledge it. Still, efforts should be made in order to clear the minds of Turkish people who had been taught lies for decades. That’s why the democratization process in Turkey was the key solution for him, given the fact that only in a democratized country could people question their past and come to terms with it.

Ironically, his language of peace, so strong in conviction, was turned into a monster when his call to Diaspora

Armenians to build an identity of reconciliation was distorted out of context and defined as an insult to Turkishness, as if he had said: “Turkish blood is poisonous.”

When we speak of normalization, it is necessary to remember and go through all these abnormalities. Abnormalities that ultimately cost Hrant Dink his life. And abnormalities that turned his funeral into an unforgettable demonstration of the Turkish people who marched in silence with placards in their hands: “We are all Armenians. We are all Hrant Dink.”

Opening up is to free oneself from one’s own obstacles. When you are free, you feel confident. When you are confident, you can no longer be contented with taught fears. In order to provide trust, it is necessary to turn the conditions of the protocol into a demand for freedom. What we signed for was actually our own freedom. Because anger, fear and uncertainty only imprison people. Demonstrations and protests, both in Armenia and among the Diaspora, showed that life is not easy on the other side of the closed border either. A lack of trust leads to a feeling of uncertainty and people all the time feel as if they are betraying their own identity when they move closer to each other.

In fact life offers us miraculous opportunities to meet. When the legendary voice of Kurdish music, Armenian Aram Tigran, passed away recently, his desire to be buried in Diyarbakır became a hot point on the political agenda. Officials denied his request, pointing out that Tigran was not a citizen of Turkey. When he was ultimately buried in Brussels, a handful of Diyarbakır soil was brought to his funeral in exile. Born from a family of Batman, he sang songs in Kurdish, Armenian, Assyrian, Arabic, Greek and Turkish. He was the personification of Anatolia and a symbol of opening up the soul. Yet the courage and vision of politics fell short of his embrace.

The language of politics needs to reach ordinary people on both sides. This can best be achieved when the discourse of politics is widened to include the stories of ordinary people that usually finds its expression in literature rather than history. Here I have to mention the famous US writer William Saroyan who was born in Fresno, sought his lost motherland of Bitlis, Anatolia, and also dreamed of Armenia as a Utopia. Saroyan smiled in all his pain, saying: “If I want to do anything, I want to speak a more universal language... Babies who have not yet been taught to speak any language are the only race of the earth, the race of man: all the rest is pretence, what we call civilization, hatred, fear, desire for strength”.

The same was true when Turkish lawyer Fethiye Çetin told the story of her grandmother Seher, who

one day confessed to her granddaughter that she was born as an Armenian girl, Heranuş. Çetin's search for the Armenian part of her family became a turning point in the recent history of Turkey, now that the atrocities and suffering of 1915, that taboo time, have been told from the perspective of a survivor. Çetin's *My Grandmother* became a call and many others contributed their own stories, now collected under the title *The Grandchildren*; a book edited by Fethiye Çetin and Ayşe Gül Altınay, actually revealing another way of handling history and building up the future.

We are going through tough days. Still I believe that to fall into despair would only be a luxury as there are so many things to be done to diminish misunder-

ings. The identity of being Armenian in Turkey can at this stage even turn into a priority as this identity in itself brings together both parties' controversies. Thus finding a solution is not a political need, but an existential necessity for me.

I stand in between Turkish and Armenian people reaching hands to all the courageous ones to take the first step. When I can embrace Armenians of Armenia and the Diaspora and the people of Turkey, I will then become what I am actually called: an Armenian of Turkey. The souls will find peace, among them the dearest one of Hrant Dink, inspiring us all to a new promise of trust and confidence. Confidence in oneself and trust in the other.

About the Author

Karin Karakaşlı worked from 1996 to 2006 as an editor and head of the editorial department of the Turkish-Armenian weekly newspaper *Agos* and as a columnist for its Turkish and Armenian sections. She is currently studying comparative literature, works as a university tutor of translation and as an Armenian teacher at the college. She is a columnist for the Sunday edition of *Radikal* newspaper, *Radikal 2*.

Chronicle

From 21 October to 16 November 2009

21 October 2009	Armenian President Serzh Sarkisian visits the Nagorno Karabakh region
22 October 2009	Azerbaijani, Armenian and Russian MPs meet in Moscow
22 October 2009	Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu meets with Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev in Baku
27 October 2009	A Turkish parliamentary delegation arrives in Baku to ease tensions between Turkey and Azerbaijan over the Turkish–Armenian rapprochement
27 October 2009	Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Grigory Karasin meets with former Georgian Prime Minister and opposition leader Zurab Nogaideli in Moscow
27 October 2009	Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili visits Poland
30 October 2009	Sixteen Georgians arrested by Russian border guards on 25 October are released by the authorities of breakaway South Ossetia
2 November 2009	The Armenian government says that Russia will build a nuclear power plant in Armenia
4 November 2009	Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili visits Qatar
5 November 2009	Russian military intelligence (GRU) chief Aleksandr Shlyakhturov says that Georgia might again start an attack against South Ossetia and accuses NATO countries of supplying arms to Georgia
5 November 2009	Georgia plans the launch of a Russian-language regional television channel in the Caucasus
6 November 2009	Georgian Foreign Minister Grigol Vashadze renounces his Russian citizenship
6 November 2009	Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev meets with Chechen President Ramzan Kadyrov in Baku
9 November 2009	NATO's special representative to the South Caucasus Robert Simmons says that Armenia will soon send a small contingent of troops to Afghanistan
10 November 2009	The Russian Chief of the General Staff of the Army General Nikolai Makarov says that Georgia is rearming
11 November 2009	Negotiators from Georgia, Russia and the breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia take part in the Geneva international talks co-chaired by the EU, the UN and the OSCE
11 November 2009	Two Azeri opposition bloggers receive prison sentences
11 November 2009	Russian soldiers detain Georgians accused of illegally fishing in waters near the breakaway region of Abkhazia
11 November 2009	Azerbaijan's budget deficit is expected to reach 1.56 billion US dollars
11 November 2009	Azerbaijan and Iran sign a memorandum on gas exports
13 November 2009	Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev visits Bulgaria
4 November 2009	Five candidates are nominated to run in the presidential elections in Abkhazia scheduled for 12 December 2009
5 November 2009	Belarusian MPs decide to set up a working group to develop a position on the possible recognition of the breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia
13 November 2009	The European Union expresses its "deep concern" at the detention of four Georgian teenagers in Tskhinvali, the capital of the breakaway republic of South Ossetia
14 November 2009	Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili discusses with government members and representatives of opposition parties the possible reopening of the Zemo Larsi-Kazbegi border crossing point with Russia during a session of the National Security Council (NSC)
15 November 2009	Abkhazia switches from Georgia's to Russia's international dialing code
16 November 2009	A Georgian battalion departs to Afghanistan to serve under the French command

About the Caucasus Analytical Digest

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