

TESEV Foreign Policy Programme

Policy Brief ¹

Turkey-Armenia relations have slipped down Turkey's seemingly endless list of agenda items in recent months as election campaigning took hold, the Kurdish question remained uncertain and turmoil in the Middle East began to dominate. Alas, the future political climate does not look particularly conducive either: domestic tension, constitutional reform, the Kurdish question, Cyprus and turmoil in the Middle East may conspire to keep Armenia where it is.

However, the Armenia issue will be a problem that a post-election government must take seriously; the almost suspended rapprochement process with Armenia will be one of the challenging items of the new government's foreign policy. Turkey's policy of taking two steps forward, then one step back creates a sense of mistrust in Armenia that if it were to continue would risk further losing the Armenian side.

Therefore, in order to prevent relations with Armenia falling further down the agenda, a concerted effort from all stakeholders is required. Any solution to tension between Armenia and Turkey must deal with two major issues: the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and the issue of the Armenian genocide.

Nagorno-Karabakh is a major concern for Turkey. Recent border tensions have not gone unnoticed in Turkey and any escalation of the conflict no doubt complicates the picture. A deeper independent look at the problem that digs into what is really going and the possibility of an active conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh is necessary to prompt discussion in Turkey about the issue. At the moment, the issue is not discussed in any detail and public discourse is dominated by the usual old rhetoric.

Directly linked to the Nagorno-Karabakh problem, Azerbaijan is yet another dimension to the issue of Turkey-Armenia. Whereas the Armenian side and international actors are perhaps fed up of this argument, it is a real challenge for Turkey that has received little international support. If the Madrid protocol is sufficient to open the border, Turkey should force the US and EU to put pressure on Armenia and Azerbaijan to ratify it.

Both state-to-state and civil society will need to further improvement in order to avoid Azerbaijan being a barrier to any rapprochement between Armenia and Turkey. Unfortunately, the level of dialogue between civil society in Azerbaijan and Turkey is rather limited. More recently, Azerbaijanis have become more involved in joint projects but

¹ This policy brief reflects discussions in an "off the record meeting" held at TESEV's offices on April 26, 2011 with the participation of 25 experts from Turkey. The meeting was conducted under the foreign policy programme's "Support to Armenia-Turkey Rapprochement" Project.

cooperation has been largely limited to the economic sphere. There are certain difficulties in engaging with Azerbaijani civil society but nevertheless such efforts are worth enlarging since any dialogue with Azerbaijan will help Turkey and the process a lot.

As is often stated, positive progress in the normalization of Turkish-Armenian relations will ease the solution to others. Indeed, fully established relations with Armenia will help facilitate resolution in Nagorno-Karabakh; Turkey will be better placed to engage with Armenia vis-à-vis Nagorno-Karabakh than currently. Once and if the border can be opened and diplomatic relations can start, it will help to generate cooperation in all areas. At the moment economic relations – albeit indirect - seem to be the area where there is at least some degree of cooperation. Economic relations follow three patterns: institutionalized companies, small-middle size contracts or merchants. These relations have to be institutionalized. If there is institutionalized economic cooperation, then it can have an impact on politics. Sectors such as technology, IT, energy can be tools to shape politics because those sectors are managed by politically influential circles. There is also need to improve regional trade. At the moment trade is largely concentrated in Istanbul but if the border is opened, cross border trade can increase and help to improve relations.

On direct civil society cooperation there is an important role for the media, especially on the genocide issue. There is a misconception in Turkey that if genocide is to be recognized by the state, there will be cases for financial and territorial compensation. Different arguments have different claims on this, however what will be good is to provide a platform where these ideas can be discussed.

On the Armenian side, even the most well-intentioned attempts (apology campaign etc.) are thought to be constructed as a state policy. The Armenian press has to come to Turkey in order to understand and be able to reflect discussions in Turkey. The lack of trust in Armenia towards Turkey is understandable, but responsible journalism that does not pander to the nationalistic rhetoric on either side is very important

The fact that civil society in Turkey is very active since the second half of 2000s on the Armenia case is a positive development. Whether there is a solution in the foreseeable future or not, the efforts of the second track diplomacy should be noted. Such initiatives could be taken further if done mutually. Although civil society in Turkey faces numerous problems, operating in Armenia seems to be an even more difficult task. It is known that the reaction of the Armenian state towards any opposition is so fierce that neither the youth nor the oppositional parties have been able to raise their voice. Most of the time the strict mind set of Armenian officialdom complicates any attempts by civil society to break the current deadlock. In the presence of a more independent and diverse civil society in Armenia, more courageous joint steps could be taken.

There are four areas that civil society in Turkey can take the initiative and help the political process:

- 1) Civil society has to develop understanding of the legal background to the genocide issue since there is a lack of information on it and, thus, a misperception of the problem among the public. In order to inform the public of the issue, a meeting could be arranged with the participation of lawyers to analyze the process in detail. Third country experts can also be part of such initiatives to present examples from different regions/countries that faced similar processes.
- 2) Azerbaijan needs to be incorporated into the dialogue. Turkish-Armenian rapprochement will facilitate Azerbaijani-Armenian dialogue.
- 3) Civil society needs to work on Turkey's image. Radical policies on minority rights may be helpful in this regard.
- 4) Armenian Diaspora should also be incorporated into the process; trust-building is the key to the reconciliation process.