

## **TESEV Foreign Policy Programme**

### **Policy Brief II <sup>1</sup>**

Rapprochement between Turkey and Armenia is a combination of two different processes. The first one is the technical process that involves the opening of the border and the establishment of diplomatic relations. The second process is the societal reconciliation where the two sides will face their common history, overcome mutual mistrust and prevail over existing stereotypes. This second process is more challenging than the technical phase and could only be seen as a long and gradual process. Turkish and Armenian societies have lived together for centuries, but their current perception of each other is still quite problematic. Thus, the reconciliation process will be long and hard but the real normalization will only happen during this phase when both societies will face each other as well as their histories.

This discussion needs to be further expanded and preferably to include new and potentially skeptical audiences. This seems like the only way to internalize and normalize the debate in Turkey – and in Armenia. In Turkey the circles in Istanbul and Ankara are to a certain familiar with the problems in relations. However, the debate is quite new and discussing normalization is more of a challenge in much of Anatolia.

In Turkey, Armenian heritage can be found in a significant number of cities. Izmir is such an example where Armenians lived for centuries yet today there are just a couple of families left. Indeed, now Izmir is a city that is famed for being a bastion of the republican mentality in Turkey, which is not very open to rapprochement with Armenia. As such, discussing Turkish-Armenian rapprochement in Izmir was an interesting experience in terms of understanding current perception about the

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<sup>1</sup> *This policy brief reflects discussions in an "off the record meeting" held in İzmir on May 27, 2011 with the participation of 20 experts from Turkey and Armenia. The meeting was conducted under the foreign policy programme's "Support to Armenia-Turkey Rapprochement" Project.*

rapprochement process with Armenia as well as their view of ethnic and religious minorities.

**Some of the main headlines of the meeting are as follows:**

- 1) Following the official rapprochement between Turkey and Armenia, the two societies have started to engage far more with each other through new dialogue channels established between the civil societies. Thus the official process has proved to be an important component in the success of the societal reconciliation phase.
- 2) Official Turkish-Armenian relations have been deadlocked since 1993; thus it would be optimistic to expect a sudden normalization after years of lack of communication. In addition, the changes in regional dynamics that played a role in triggering and facilitating rapprochement have lost momentum.
- 3) Even though the rapprochement process was in part triggered by regional dynamics, its domestic implications are noteworthy. For the first time since 1915, both societies have started to rediscover each other and face their common history.
- 4) A lack of confidence and domestic politics are the most significant obstacles to rapprochement. Therefore, the lack of knowledge and understanding on both sides needs to be addressed. The media should be more constructive and instrumental in that sense.
- 5) The genocide issue seems to be a very challenging issue in the societal reconciliation process. Both sides share a common tragic past about which they have significantly different interpretations of it. Indeed the way history is taught in both countries is problematic and needs to be revisited.

- 6) Concerning the future, the continuation of the rapprochement process is a positive sign. The protocols have served a good purpose and have become the catalyst for official political dialogue after two decades of very limited diplomatic communication.
- 7) The leaders should better prepare their respective societies for any agreement between the countries.
- 8) It is very important to increase the number of dialogue channels as well as the interactions between Turks and Armenians; in that sense to expand the scope of the dialogue to different centers in Turkey and Armenia is very helpful.