

Post-Election Prospects for Armenian-Turkish relations

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The year 2007 may prove to be crucial in the relations between Armenia and Turkey, as elections in both countries are under way. Armenia held its parliamentary elections in May and Turkey will have its elections for the Parliament in July 2007 which will be followed by the Presidential elections.

The first question, which could rise after those elections, is whether we should expect any positive shifts or any amelioration in relations between Armenia and Turkey.

The elections in Armenia reasserted the Republican Party as the dominant party in Parliament. This means that the said party will have an equally great chance of asserting itself in power during Presidential elections due in February 2008. As such, Armenia's foreign policy is likely to continue, albeit with minor changes, for the foreseeable future. After all, it was under the supervision of the current Prime Minister of Armenia and the leader of the Republican Party, that Armenia's National Security Strategy was formulated and confirmed.

Currently there are two issues which serve as the main hurdles to the restoration of Armenian-Turkish relations: the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, with the ensuing Turkish embargo of Armenia (with closed borders and no diplomatic relations), and the 1915 Armenian Genocide issue.

Officially, Armenia has ascertained that relations with Turkey have no pre-conditions whatsoever. The Armenian security strategy mainly concerns the provision of Armenia's independence and territorial integrity, the survival of the Armenian people in and outside of Armenia, the development of a free market and its successful democratization. A similar approach is adopted by almost every state, because every state seeks to ensure its *survival*. Thus *'survival is a prerequisite to achieving any goals that states may have'*.

Having said that, we should underline that Armenia has viewed the issue of 1915 from such a *survival-ist* prism. It is assumed that rejection might mean the possibility of recurrence. In addition, and even more importantly, this is a moral issue and it will likely be on the foreign policy agenda of a newly formed Armenian government - though not as a precondition - in the foreseeable future. Indeed there could be various political views in Armenia about the nuances of the Genocide recognition issue. For example, its priority (whether it should be the most important aspect of the country's foreign policy, one of the issues or not a foreign policy agenda issue at all), the pressure exerted (whether recognition should come from within Turkish society or due to external pressure) and its timing (whether Turkey should recognize it before EU membership or in due course) - but there is an overall consensus that Turkey should recognize that the Armenian

massacres committed by the Young Turks equate to an act of Genocide as defined by international law sooner or later.

Nevertheless, I would think that the issue needs to be more precisely presented. The lack of precision on the Armenian side has created a sense of misperception in Turkey. This precision lies in forming or having a clearly stated doctrine of Genocide policy. It should clearly state what is expected from recognition, whether a moral, material, territorial, or some other issue is at stake, how those claims are justified, and whether it is the Armenian state or the Diaspora who is responsible for that policy. The lack of a clear approach further complicates the nature of this issue. Indeed, after the change in government in Armenia in 1998, the new elites were much tougher in their relations with Turkey compared to the previous ones. But it is a positive sign that the Armenian government constantly stated that it had no preconditions for establishing relations with Turkey. Also one can notice an improvement in approaches towards Turkey in the National Security Strategy document released recently, where the vocabulary regarding Turkey is more careful and leaves room for an improvement in relations. Otherwise, the guidelines of the same Strategy, which were under discussion from early 2005, were much more critical of Turkey, indirectly terming it as an 'enemy state'.

So positive movements are evident but that is not satisfactory and much more needs to be done in this regard.

The elections in Turkey on the other hand are expected in July. It may seem that the results of those elections are even more significant for the amelioration of relations between Armenia and Turkey. The positions of political forces in Turkey regarding Armenia are not as similar as it might initially seem. The AKP has had a more positive stance in this regard. In its 2002 election campaign, the AKP promised to take a fresh look at Armenia, to encourage trade and to include active politicians from the Armenian community to create a larger alliance of minorities for upcoming elections. The AKP were partially successful in fulfilling its promise. Also, the initial preconditions made by Turkey were several - such as the withdrawal of Armenian forces from territories under the control of Armenian forces after the war of Nagorno-Karabakh, the returning of Shushi, recognition of Turkey's and Azerbaijan's territorial integrity and their borders, the provision of a communication corridor for Azerbaijan and Turkey via Meghri, the reconfirmation of the treaties of Kars and Moscow, 1921 and the deletion of the phrase Armenian Genocide from the Declaration of Independence.¹ Now there are the above mentioned two preconditions.

¹ The Turkish General Staff has held a much tougher position in this regard; the web site of TGS identifies the "Armenian Issue" as one of Turkey's key security concerns. Likewise, the TGS can by no means question any issue, which puts under question the purity of their forerunners, the Ottoman officers corps, out of which the Young Turks and Kemal Ataturk came. *And the "Armenian Issue" in this context is perceived to be one of the threats to the survival of the **form of state and ideology** (Kemalism - the army being its staunch defender) on which the country is currently based.* Therefore, only changes from within Turkish society would lead to open debates on this issue and further recognition. However, this will require patience and even support from the Armenian side.

In economic terms, the Turkish embargo has lost its efficiency as Armenia has re-adapted itself to the set conditions and has experienced good economic growth rates in the past few years. Therefore, while some in Turkey might view this embargo as a ‘punishment’ towards Armenia for the war in Nagorno-Karabakh, in reality the main losers of this situation are the local communities in the northwestern regions of Armenia and the eastern regions of Turkey. Politically however it hurts Turkey far more as such a stance does not cohere to any European perspectives which Turkey currently pursues. Also the international community accepts that the OSCE Minsk Group has the mandate to mediate peace talks on Nagorno-Karabakh, which recently it has been doing successfully. Turkey has not objected to this. Therefore, in terms of international politics it is unacceptable to support one process multilaterally and implement the contradictory policies on a bilateral level.

It may seem that this is a mistaken Turkish policy that lets Azerbaijan dictate Turkish national interests and that the Turkish national interest of reopening the border is still “hostage” to Azerbaijan (it should be noted that no state in the world, including Greece, has conditioned the establishment of any relations with Turkey upon Turkey’s withdrawal of troops from Northern Cyprus).

But here we should underscore Turkey’s new role as a key country providing Caspian oil and gas to the Western world. The gas and oil pipelines from the Caspian, bypassing Armenia, have the same trajectory of going via Georgia to Turkey where from they are delivered to the outside world. Thus, we cannot ignore Turkey’s new role as a station for energy distribution, which brings great economic benefits to the country (the annual transit fee for Turkey from the oil pipeline Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan only is \$1.5 billion). The ‘dictate’ of Azerbaijan is in the best geo-economic interests of Turkey, though it is harmful politically. By opening its borders with Armenia, Turkey would indeed indicate that European perspectives remain in its priority, that it is not pursuing a zero-sum politics in the region, but rather a more inclusive policy of “both...and” and not “either...or”, and, following its National Defense Policy, stands for ‘developing positive relations’ and ‘reducing all kinds of international tensions’. Otherwise, the current Turkish stance towards Armenia merely exacerbates the tensions in the region, isolates Armenia and spirals the security dilemma in the region by further forcing the formation of rival alliances.

So what are the further steps to be taken by the Turkish and Armenian states and societies, and other interested parties, to put the progress in relations on a more positive track and make them more predictable and precise?

The Turkish and the Armenian governments should

- Initiate meetings and discussions of the key issues, which serve as impediments to the normalizations of their relations, at bilateral and multilateral levels. It is positive that the positions regarding one another are softer than they were 5-6 years ago, but direct talks are the best means of solving problems. The Armenian issue, in various forms, has become an internationally debated topic and it can be

used for internal purposes by other states as well. Therefore, the sooner the leadership in both countries understands that they are the key players able to solve all problems facing them, the better for both societies. No international forum or conference should be a missed opportunity for such meetings. Due to the decisive impact of the Turkish General Staff on political processes in Turkey, the Armenian government should simultaneously try to engage with the TGS as well.

- With the support of international observers, the occasional running and monitoring of TV and other mass media programs in both countries would lessen the propaganda of hatred, revenge and threat towards one another. The societies should be prepared for co-habitation. We are destined to live next to one another and we must live so in an honorable manner. There is nothing more dangerous than centrally directed public attitudes. Such social misperceptions concerning the neighborhood have often had tragic outcomes in history.
- The European vision should be the common ground for moving ahead with the re-establishment of relations between Turkey and Armenia. Armenia should be more specific with its policies of Genocide recognition and solve this issue together with Turkey. Several commissions and joint work-groups could be established which could discuss the political, social, demographic and other aspects of the issue in order to encourage public diplomacy and create all the incentives for that as well. On the other hand, Turkish membership of the EU should be supported wholeheartedly and unconditionally. The sooner Turkey is in the EU the closer Armenia is to the EU and the more trustful Turkey is. Therefore here we need a more genuine approach. The same European vision and international commitments should drive Turkey to revise its relations with Armenia beyond *machtropolitik* (power politics) and by opening the borders and establishing diplomatic relations with Armenia, support the process of establishing peace in the Caucasus as soon as possible.

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