

spotlight europe

2009/10 – October 2009

After Soccer Diplomacy: The Turkish-Armenian Relations

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The protocols on the normalization of relations between Turkey and Armenia were signed in Zurich on 10 October 2009. Neither of the two issued a statement after the signing ceremony, since it could have gone beyond the finely balanced contents of the protocols. What are the expectations, hopes and fears associated with the reopening of the border and the normalization of relations? A report from four capitals and the EU.

ANKARA

by Mustafa Aydin

The burden of history, geopolitical considerations, the influence of third parties and the convoluted nature of domestic politics made it impossible for Turkey and Armenia to have normal relations. And the road ahead is still tortuous because opposition parties in both countries have lashed out against their governments, and because third-party actors exercise considerable influence.

Azerbaijan is an extremely important strategic partner, though it can also cast a veto on Turkey's policy towards Armenia. This happened because Turkish politicians and the public were in favour of it. Turkey closed the

land border with Armenia after the occupation of Azerbaijani territory. The fact that this situation still persists makes the Turkish public question its government's intention to normalize relations with Armenia. In Turkey the man in the street tends to ask the same question as the opposition parties: "What has changed that leads us to be so magnanimous, and why should we accede to Armenian demands without getting anything in return?"

However, there are several reasons why the two countries need to move towards normalization now. Part of the explanation is provided by the lessons that the main actors have drawn from last year's conflict between Russia and Georgia. It demonstrated to Armenia that the region's "frozen" conflicts are not so icy after all. Thus, in view of Azerbaijan's burgeoning military procurement

programme and Turkish involvement in the training of its armed forces, simply waiting for the Karabakh problem to solve itself was not a feasible option.

Azerbaijan came to similar conclusions. The initiation of a new round of hostilities over Karabakh might not achieve the desired result, since Russia has given a clear indication of how it would react. The conflict taught Turkey that unless it becomes more pro-active and somehow manages to pacify the region, the Caucasus might easily be overwhelmed by instability.

Secondly, the election of President Obama and the policy lines he espouses encouraged both Armenia and Turkey to move towards reconciliation. And Russia, which to the dismay of the West has been pushing for better relations with Turkey, finally became more receptive towards a Turkish-Armenian compromise.

The fact that Sarkisyan needed a success story for domestic reasons and Erdogan for European and international consumption also helped. It went hand in hand with the appointment of Ahmet Davutoglu, the architect of the AKP's "rhythmic diplomacy" and "zero problem with neighbours" policy, to the helm of the Turkish Foreign Ministry. While he was chief foreign policy adviser to the prime minister, Turkey began to pursue a more active role in its neighbourhood. As foreign minister he supported the rapprochement with Armenia. And since Turkey was embroiled in a bitter domestic debate about its handling of the Kurdish question, the discussion of a foreign policy issue provided some respite to the government.

The Turkish public has been deeply divided over the issue since it first hit the headlines in April 2009. Although sections of the foreign policy community are unhappy about the fact that another country can place constraints on Turkey's foreign policy options, the Azeri cause still receives a great deal of support. Thus the Azeri government could easily become a game breaker by playing on Turkish

sentiments. This became apparent in April when Turkey and Armenia announced their desire to improve relations. The Azeri reaction towards the idea of reopening the Turkish-Armenian border without parallel progress on the Karabakh issue led to a staunch backlash in Turkey, and forced Erdogan to temporarily halt the negotiations.

However, he managed to make a good job of explaining his position to Azerbaijan. As a result there have not been any more acrimonious comments from Baku. Criticism of the government's actions among the Turkish electorate is now largely restricted to two opposition parties, CHP and MHP.

YEREVAN

by Alexander Iskandaryan

The Armenian-Turkish rapprochement transformed the public discourse in Armenia quite dramatically. From September 2008, when President Sarkisyan invited President Gül to watch a soccer match in Yerevan, up to the announcement of the road map and the signing of the two Armenian-Turkish protocols in October 2009, domestic Armenian attitudes to Armenian-Turkish relations underwent a complete transformation.

Before 2008 two factors influenced Armenian attitudes to Turkey. The first was the historical memory of the Armenian genocide in 1915, a memory aggravated by Turkey's denial that it actually took place. The second was the fact that Turkey's reason for closing its border with Armenia back in 1993 had been the armed conflict between ethnic Armenians and Azeris in another country, i.e. Azerbaijan. Thus in Armenia Turkey was perceived as an ally of the Azeris.

Obviously, all this caused Armenians to mistrust Turkey. However, this negative attitude was very general and rather vague. The border remained closed, people rarely visited the other side, there was little tourism,

cross-border trade was impossible, and cultural interaction virtually non-existent. To the average Armenian Turkey was a country

kept secret from the public, led to a situation which left Armenian society in a state of shock.

One of the ruling parties, Dashnaksutyun, left the ruling coalition after the announcement of the road map in April 2009, and joined the opposition merely in order to protest against Armenian-Turkish rapprochement. The August protocols were severely criticized in the media, which adopted a nationalist stance. Many commentators accused Turkey of double-dealing, and opponents of normalization organized a number of demonstrations.

However, Armenians have criticized the protocols for a variety of reasons. The first and foremost motive is conservatism, a fear of changing anything, and certainly not the regional structure that Armenians have got used to over the last 15 years. The second is the profound Armenian distrust of Turkey, which, it seems, is unable to distinguish between its own interests and those of Azerbaijan. If this is the case, then Turkey's intentions as stated in the protocols are obviously insincere, and, if the truth were known, the issue of Nagorno-Karabakh will become a part of the agreements, if indeed it has not already been included in them, albeit in some secret kind of way.

Some of these suspicions seem unfounded or even irrational, but they reflect the general level of anxiety in an isolated nation. The fact that Turkish leaders, who are trying to reassure both their own anxious electorate and that in neighbouring Azerbaijan, have made some rather

vague statements about the parameters of the rapprochement process has not managed to restore Armenian confidence.

that one knew from history books and not a modern state, let alone a neighbouring one.

Armenia's isolation from Turkey, and the fact that the negotiations between Armenian and Turkish officials and Swiss mediators were

However, the Armenian government seems rather buoyant. Despite public demonstrations

Turkey-Armenia Relations since 1987

The Freeze	
'87 – '88	Glasnost permits an open discussion over Nagorno-Karabakh
FEB '87 – JUN '88	Voting in Armenia, Azerbaijan and Karabakh over the future affiliation of Nagorno-Karabakh
FEB '88 – MAY '94	Active war between Armenia and Azerbaijan
DEZ '91	Turkey recognises Armenia as an independent state
APR '93	Closing of the Turkish-Armenian Border , termination of diplomatic relations
OCT '95	Opening of the air corridor Istanbul–Yerevan
OCT '00	First public recognition by a Turkish expert in Turkey of the Ottoman genocide
	Introduction of a visa requirement for Armenians in Turkey: reaction to lobbying from the diaspora
JAN '02	Liberalisation of the visa regime
The Thaw	
NOV '02	AKP elected in Turkey , new foreign policy "zero problems with neighbours"
2005	Opening of membership negotiations between Turkey and the EU
APR '08	Serzh Sargsyan elected in Armenia
Football Diplomacy	
AUG '08	Russian-Georgian War
SEP '08	Visit of Abdullah Gül to Armenia , beginning of football diplomacy
NOV '08	Moscow meeting of the Minsk Group
APR '09	Roadmap for Normalisation of Relations between Armenia and Turkey
MAY '09	Meeting between Aliyev and Sargsyan in Prague at the founding of the Eastern Partnership
OCT '09	Turkey-Armenia Protocols signed in Zurich on the establishment of diplomatic relations
	Football game Armenia vs. Turkey in Turkey

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and a spate of criticism in the media, its mindset, which is focused on “opening borders and normalization without preconditions,” has so far remained unchanged. In view of the current coalition majority in the Armenian parliament, it seems likely that the president will be able to persuade parliament to ratify the protocols.

There are no survey data to corroborate this, but it appears that antagonism to rapprochement with Turkey exists chiefly amongst intellectuals, nationalist groups, opposition politicians, journalists and young activists. Furthermore, the opponents of rapprochement do not represent the majority of the population. The Dashnaktsutyun Party, the nucleus of protests against the Armenian-Turkish normalization process, only secured 16 out of the 131 seats in the parliament in the 2007 election. Anti-rapprochement rallies attract a few thousand people at the most. Among the ruling elites there is no antagonism to normalization, and decision-makers are swayed by pragmatic motives.

BAKU

by Tabib Huseynov

Azerbaijan is watching the Turkish-Armenian rapprochement with a strange mixture of anxiety, confusion, and hope. Azerbaijanis see it mainly through the prism of its possible repercussions on the Nagorno-Karabakh peace process. However, there is no standard view on how Turkey’s new policies on Armenia might affect the Karabakh talks. Officially Baku wants Turkey to keep the borders closed as long as Armenia continues to occupy Azerbaijani territory. It maintains that the borders were closed in retaliation for the occupation of Azerbaijani territory, and should thus be reopened when it ends.

Azerbaijani pundits have tried in various ways to explain what lies behind Turkish-Armenian rapprochement. Many think that the Turkish policy is first and foremost part of Ankara’s overall strategy of removing the obstacles

standing in the way of EU membership, and its desire to be seen as a regional power. Others maintain that the Turkish move is part of a broader Western strategy to take Armenia out of the Russian ‘sphere of influence.’ And there are those who believe that Turkey is using the normalization talks with Armenia merely in order to stop Armenia from claiming that it was the victim of genocide.

But regardless of Ankara’s perceived motives, the dominant attitude in Azerbaijani society is that Turkish proposals to reopen the border with Armenia before the resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is tantamount to Turkey stabbing its closest ally, Azerbaijan, in the back. Only a handful of liberal commentators have argued that Azerbaijan might actually benefit from Turkey’s rapprochement with Armenia, since it would give Turkey greater political credibility and economic leverage to promote the resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

Within the public discourse, it is possible to discern a visible difference in the ways in which Azerbaijani officials and the public reacted to Turkish-Armenian rapprochement before and after May 2009. Before there were fears that as a result of international pressure Turkey would give in to demands to reopen its border with Armenia without making any progress on the Karabakh conflict. Many people in Azerbaijan believed that in the wake of President Obama’s election, and in view of his endorsement of Armenian genocide claims during the election campaign, Ankara would reopen the border with Armenia by the end of April 2009 in an effort to avert censure from the new US administration.

During the first half of the year the Azerbaijani media were full of reports and commentaries expressing their anger at Turkey’s “betrayal” of Azerbaijani interests. In order to demonstrate his objections to reopening the border, President Ilham Aliyev even turned down an invitation to attend the Alliance of Civilizations summit in Istanbul in early April in spite of phone calls from Turkish

President Gül, Prime Minister Erdogan and US Secretary of State Clinton.

Criticism of Turkey decreased significantly after Erdogan’s mid-May visit to Baku, when he reassured the Azerbaijani leadership that Turkey would not act unilaterally without bearing in mind Azerbaijan’s interests. Since then this message has been repeated on numerous occasions by Turkish officials.

also benefit from the process. There is a growing perception among both regional players and the international mediators that reopening the Turkish-Armenian border will have to be accompanied by some kind of “tangible progress” in the Nagorno-Karabakh talks.

Without such “progress,” even if it is defined in a rather vague kind of way, Turkey would hardly be able to ratify the protocols it has already signed and to reopen the border. Such progress would not have to start with an Armenian withdrawal from Azerbaijani territory, which has hitherto been the official Turkish position, but might be a framework agreement on the basic principles proposed by the OSCE Minsk Group. These would try to strike a balance between the Armenian and Azerbaijani positions. There are hopes that this scenario may be acceptable to Azerbaijan, and this would allow Turkey to reopen the border with Armenia without at the same time burning its bridges with Baku.

However, there is a growing concern in Azerbaijan that, contrary to expectations, the Turkish-Armenian rapprochement may be detrimental to the Nagorno-Karabakh peace process, since Armenia might deliberately drag its feet on the question of basic principles in order to avoid fulfilling the commitments it made in the protocols, while at the same time putting the blame on

Turkey and Azerbaijan for the failure to achieve tangible results. The OSCE Minsk Group mediators have stated repeatedly that the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and Turkish-Armenian rapprochement are parallel and mutually reinforcing processes. In order to

**Who wants what?
Main Interests of Important Actors**

- Turkey**
 - EU membership
 - Gaining influence as a regional power
 - Maintaining favourable relations with Azerbaijan despite rapprochement with Armenia
- Armenia**
 - Promotion of its economic development through open borders
 - Recognition of the Armenian Genocide
 - Avoiding issue linkage of the border opening and conflict resolution in Nagorno-Karabakh
- Russia**
 - Maintaining influence in the region
 - Avoiding diversification of pipelines into the EU
- European Union**
 - Stability through the resolution of regional conflicts bordering the EU
 - Diversification of pipelines through the South Caucasus
 - Economic prosperity and political independence of Armenia
- Azerbaijan**
 - Linkage of the border opening between Turkey and Armenia with Armenian concessions in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict

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It is an interesting fact that, since Turkish-Armenian rapprochement is high on the international agenda, it has also turned the spotlight on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. This has raised Azerbaijani hopes that it might

bring about a genuine and sustainable normalization of Turkish-Armenian relations, it is important to put an end to the Nagorno-Karabakh stalemate. An agreement between Armenia and Azerbaijan on a basic principles framework agreement by the end of the year could pave the way for progress on both fronts.

MOSCOW

by Andrei Zagorski

On 1 September 2009 the Russian Foreign Ministry welcomed the forthcoming establishment of diplomatic relations between Armenia and Turkey and the proposed reopening of their common border. It expressed the hope that the “long-awaited” rapprochement would lead to meaningful accords, and noted that the two protocols which were to be signed did not appear to harm the interests of third parties. The anticipated establishment of good neighbourly relations between Yerevan and Ankara could help to reduce tensions, strengthen peace and security in the region, boost trade and improve social and economic standards.

The formal language of the statement is not on a par with the enthusiastic welcome which came from the US and the EU. This reflects Moscow’s cautious attitude towards the rapprochement between Armenia and Turkey. Since April 2009 officials in Moscow have been unwilling to express their emotions in public. Nor has there been a lively debate on the issue in Russia. Apparently Moscow is trying to understand what this rapprochement may mean for Russo-Armenian, Russo-Turkish and Russo-Azerbaijani relations, and for the South Caucasus in general.

However, with the exception of a few liberal voices, most Russians tend to believe that the negative impact of anything which transcends the status quo ante bellum –and Armenian-Turkish rapprochement is part of such a process– may outweigh any positive effects.

They are of the opinion that the Turkish overtures to Armenia were very much the result of US pressure, which left Russia with little or no leverage on what was happening. If normalization continues, the outcome may well be rather sobering from a zero-sum perspective, since it would encourage Yerevan to drift further towards the West, and at the same time reduce Russian leverage.

This becomes apparent when we consider what will happen once the Turkish-Armenian border is reopened. For more than a decade and a half Armenian overland links, with the exception of a minor route through Iran, were restricted to a few routes to Russia via Georgia. However, these links were at the mercy of the progressive deterioration of Russo-Georgian relations, which meant that air travel to Russia was the only available option. Reopening the border with Turkey would dramatically change this situation and would mean that Armenia no longer has to rely on the fragile link with Russia via Georgia.

As a result of Armenian “drift” towards the “West”, Russian geostrategists believe that the status quo in the South Caucasus will change at the expense of the Russian Federation. They think that the strategic alliance with Armenia, where Russia has been the most important provider of security for the past two decades, is endangered, and that the status of Armenia as the most important military outpost of the Russian Federation in the South Caucasus is being called into question. This loss can hardly be compensated for by new Russian bases in Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

On an official level Moscow does not appear to have succumbed to worst case scenarios as far as the forthcoming geopolitical and geostrategic consequences of the rapprochement between Armenia and Turkey are concerned. However, it has not shown much enthusiasm for the process either, and has remained a passive observer of the bilateral negotiations between Ankara and Yerevan.

At the same time Moscow has visibly intensified its political consultations with

Turkey, Armenia and Azerbaijan over the past year and a half. It seems that Russian diplomats are trying to understand what kind of regional political and economic balance will emerge from the Russo-Georgian war, the rapprochement between Turkey and Armenia, as well as the cautious rapprochement between Russia and Azerbaijan.

They are also trying to determine an appropriate way of preserving an important role for Russia in the region despite the perceived intrusion of extra-regional actors. In general the experts believe that, despite recent hesitancy and its genuine concerns, Moscow will not try to impede the Turkish-Armenian rapprochement process. In fact it will probably try to become involved once it has been set in motion. The participation of Foreign Minister Lavrov in the signing ceremony in Zürich on 10 October 2009 is visible proof of this assumption.

AND THE EU?

by Armando Garcia Schmidt

The official reactions of the EU and its member states towards the rapprochement process between Turkey and Armenia amount to no more than a cautious welcome. Whereas it is true that three leading EU politicians were present in Zurich on 10 October—French foreign minister Bernard Kouchner, Javier Solana, the High Representative for the Common Foreign and Security Policy, and Slovenian foreign minister Samuel Zbogar, neither the Swedish Presidency of the Council nor the European Commission were represented at the ceremony.

And in fact other actors had provided a great deal of support for the process before it reached this point. Two years ago Switzerland began to mediate in secret between Armenia and Turkey. This Helvetian diplomacy led to the two protocols on the restoration of bilateral relations. The US also became actively involved. On his first trip abroad President Barack Obama encouraged Turkey to pursue

its new policy of openness to its neighbours and to keep enhancing its role as a sheet anchor for stability in the region. Behind the scenes the US provided staunch support for Switzerland's shuttle diplomacy.

On 10 October Hillary Clinton and her Swiss counterpart intervened directly in order to mediate between the Armenian and Turkish delegations in a dispute sparked off by the wording of the planned announcements. The disagreements about the official statements on the day of the signing ceremony shows the fragility of the fledgling rapprochement process. A failure to sign the protocols in Zurich would have led to decades of stalemate. Whilst the American and Swiss foreign ministers were attempting to save the day, Sergei Lavrov and top European diplomats devised a new variety of soccer diplomacy, that is, they simply waited and teamed up to watch the game between Russia and Germany.

There are two reasons why the EU's attitude to the rapprochement process between Turkey and Armenia has hitherto amounted to no more than a benevolent kind of inactivity. On the one hand there is the EU's unclarified relationship with Turkey, an area in which emotions tend to get the better of rational politics. The EU stands to gain from a Turkey whose foreign policy is cast in the European mould, which understands how it can generate long-term and profitable benefits for itself and its environment by deploying "soft power". So whether or not one sees Turkey as a partner or as a member of the EU, this fundamental policy change should be welcomed and receive support. The EU and those who are especially sceptical of Turkish EU membership still find this difficult. The fear of being compelled to take action because Turkey is in the midst of a successful transformation seems to have clouded people's ability to engage in rational decision-making.

On the other hand the EU, despite or precisely because of the plethora of policy approaches which prompt it to look in the direction of its eastern neighbours (ENP, Black Sea Synergy, Eastern Partnership), continues to be unable to address basic issues of war and peace in its

vicinity. In the South Caucasus the way the EU deals with the latent conflicts is often considered to be unfocused and ambivalent. There is talk of stability, development and democracy, but in contrast to little Switzerland the EU is unable to come up with a strategic vision of how to resolve the conflicts and how to make a contribution to attaining this goal with the resources at its disposal.

The EU is obviously the beneficiary of the developments now taking place. It will benefit from a peaceful Caucasus as a transit corridor for energy and from an Armenia which has begun to take its bearings from the West. And, whether it likes it or not, it is beginning to benefit from Turkey, whose successful foreign policy is now being conducted on European lines.

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