



Why re-engage in the Armenia-Turkey normalization process?

**Imagine Center
for Conflict Transformation**

How to re-engage meaningfully?

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Introduction

Once again, Armenia and Turkey are engaged in official negotiations to normalize relations. And once again, the prospects of normalization are under question. The political clocks of the sides are not working in sync; Ankara was invested in normalization in 2021 when the Pashinyan government was fighting for its survival after the disastrous Second Nagorno-Karabakh War, during which Turkey openly sided with Azerbaijan. In 2022, Yerevan made normalization with Turkey its foreign policy priority while Ankara's attention shifted to Russia-Ukraine, normalization attempts with Israel, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Egypt, United Arab Emirates, and later, a devastating earthquake and preparations for the May 2023 elections.

Despite the absence of full-scale normalization, the sides have registered some progress. Blockages long-endured are showing breaches; charter flights between Yerevan and Istanbul resumed and the border was temporarily opened to allow the passage of humanitarian aid from Armenia to Turkey's earthquake-struck regions and the return of Armenian rescuers. In addition, restrictions on cargo shipments were removed, a principled agreement for opening the border for third-party nationals and diplomatic passport holders has been reached, and technical work to assess and improve the state of the border crossings, roads, and other infrastructure in preparation for the possible opening is ongoing.

According to the Turkish authorities, technical teams are now preparing all the ingredients needed for the "meal." Once all ingredients are in place, it will be up to the chef to decide if, when, and how to cook with them. Turkey is pursuing a pragmatic, slow-paced, and phased approach.

Meanwhile, Armenia has repeatedly reiterated that it expects the establishment of diplomatic relations and border opening as soon as possible. According to the Armenian authorities, normalization talks are proceeding rather slowly without tangible results, and Armenia must be careful and keep the process moving, even with small steps. Armenia's decision to send search and rescue teams,

humanitarian aid, and its Foreign Minister to Turkey in response to the earthquake was a significant move in this direction, one that has garnered new momentum.

Unlike previous efforts, in which official diplomacy was accompanied by civil society exchanges and third-party mediation in a multi-track approach, current talks—for the most part—are taking place solely between Ankara and Yerevan officials. Without civil society or grassroots support, the official talks risk stumbling over public resistance in their societies, which may see the process as illegitimate.

Any government working towards full-scale normalization must engage in serious cooperation with society to enhance the chances of a positive outcome. This includes engaging with skeptics and supporting a society that has fears and concerns; the prerequisite of every official negotiation is support from the civil society actors, including the think tanks, expert community, and grassroots. Efforts should also be made for a more meaningful engagement so normalization is not perceived as a mere economic opportunity.

In an effort to better understand the new dynamics between the two countries after the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War in 2020, and the absence of civil society and grassroots engagement in the normalization process, the Imagine Center for Conflict Transformation conducted a

parallel study in Armenia and Turkey from October 2022 to May 2023. As part of this exercise, the project team held 55 one-on-one interviews in both countries. In major cities (Yerevan, Ankara, İstanbul) the project team met with policy-makers, former diplomats, civil society actors, and analysts previously involved in Armenia-Turkey dialogue/normalization efforts. The project team also organized field visits to the Armavir and Shirak regions in Armenia as well as the city of Kars and Iğdır in Turkey and met representatives from local communities living in border cities.

This report consists of three sections:

the first is focused on questions surrounding the mistrust that hinders communication on both official and unofficial levels;

the second explores the information and analysis gap that exists between the two societies, making each side's motives and interests hard to grasp;

the third section looks into the economic interests and anxieties of the border communities. Each section is organized along the "problem-solution" continuum.

(mis)trust

Armenian fears, Turkish indifference

How to re-engage civil societies?

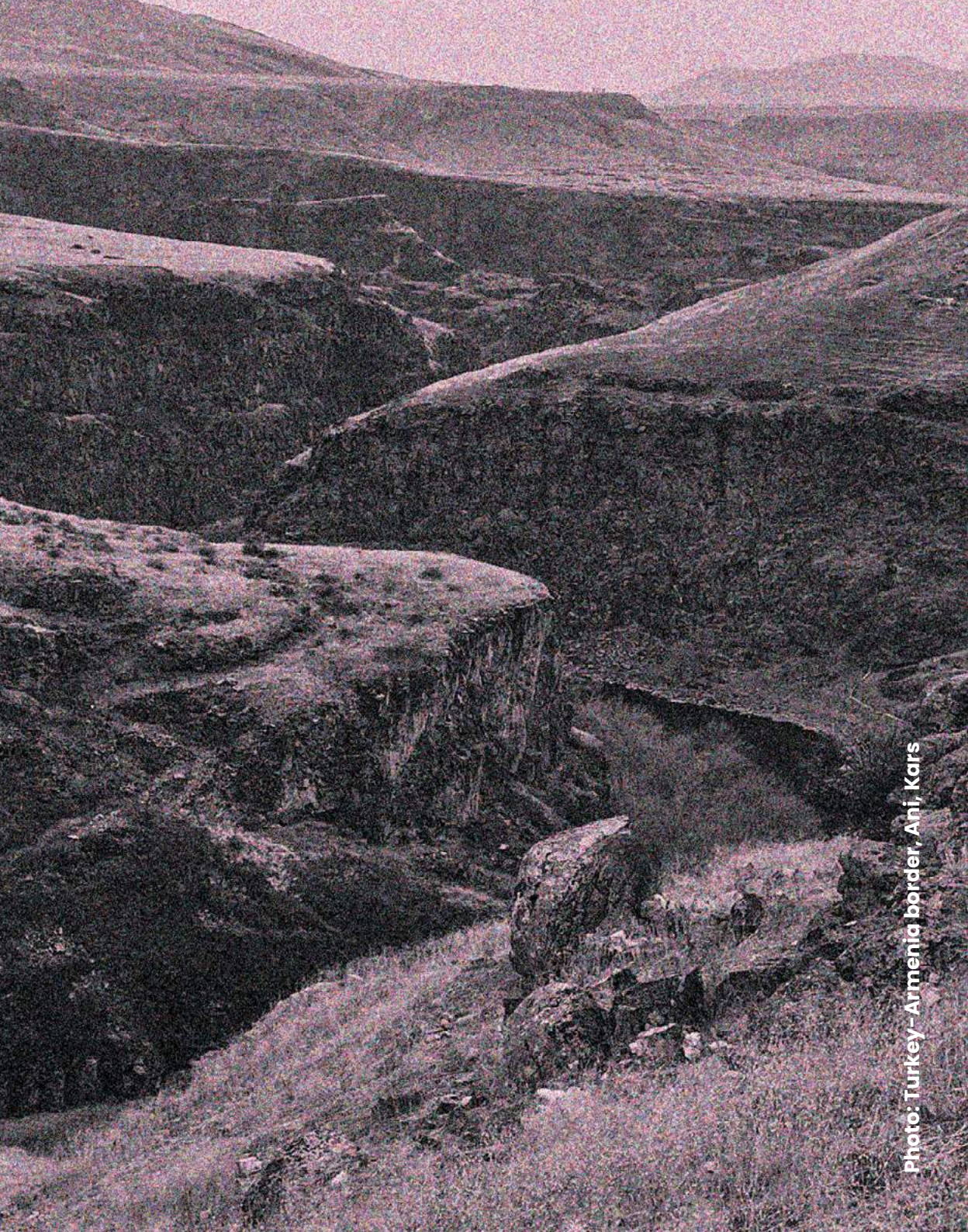


Photo: Turkey-Armenia border, Ani, Kars

Armenian fears, Turkish indifference

In the 2000s and 2010s, governments and institutionalized civil society organizations (NGOs) tried to bridge the gap between the two societies. However, the unresolved Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and nationalistic sentiments limited the space for dialogue between Armenian and Turkish societies. In recent years, as a result of the failed official normalization efforts, continually closed borders, absence of diplomatic relations, and the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh War, the gap between these civil society organizations has widened.

This section analyzes reasons why the trust and efforts to engage in dialogue diminished, and what conditions could lead to an emergence of renewed efforts to rebuild lost trust and prevent a further downward spiral.

On the Armenian side, some NGOs previously engaged in normalization efforts/cross-border initiatives with Turkey expressed mistrust towards their former counterparts, conditioned by the latter's lack of criticism during the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War. This led them to distance themselves from cooperation with Turkish counterparts and withdraw support for the Armenian government's normalization agenda. For others, the war led them to question the potential impact of civil society-led peacebuilding activities. The Armenian civil society groups who expressed empathy or understanding for the difficult conditions their counterparts in Turkey face cited the limited leverage of civil society over Ankara's decision-making as another reason for the loss of motivation to engage.

In Turkey, some NGOs expressed bitterness connected to the experience of their Armenian partners' withdrawal from cooperation following the war. Another factor limiting their engagement scope was Turkish civil society's focus on other problems. Armenia has never been on the radar of Turkey's public at large, except for the border provinces and a small

why the trust and efforts to engage in dialogue diminished, and what conditions could lead to an emergence of renewed efforts to rebuild lost trust and prevent a further downward spiral.

number of civil society actors and academics. Challenges for Turkish counterparts started after the failed coup attempt in the Summer of 2016 which triggered arrests of key figures engaged in dialogue efforts, particularly the arrest of the head of Anadolu Kultur, Osman Kavala. Soon after, nationalistic discourse became more of a constricting factor on the Turkish side. With Turkey facing other pressing challenges, enduring risks of the war spilling over from Syria, escalation of conflict with PKK, Russia's war against Ukraine, tensions in the Aegean and Mediterranean, a devastating earthquake, and the run-up to the highly contested May 2023 elections, space for Armenia on the radar of Turkish analysts, media, and civil society organizations was further diminished. Even if a narrow segment of Turkish civil society were to re-focus on Armenia, the significant gap between that segment and broader civil society and the public would likely endure.

The institutional civil society sectors in Yerevan were either skeptical of or did not support

the normalization process, and their Turkish counterparts were focused on other issues they found more pressing. In parallel, representatives of civil society and local leadership we interviewed in the border regions, particularly those in and around Kars and Gyumri, were more open to a potential opening of borders and markets.

Certainly, there is mistrust and concern among local communities as well. On the Armenian side, there are growing concerns about the prospective security and economic impact of normalization of relations, and a frequently articulated fear that Turkish businesses will take over the Armenian economy. These concerns, however, are mixed with sentiments in favor of normalization. Despite 30 years with a closed border, many in the Shirak region have memories of the open borders, particularly the border town Akyaka in Kars, the first stop in Turkey for passenger trains from Gyumri. While these interactions have been significantly cut off with the sealing of the land border, some limited contacts remain. In the town of Akhurik, neighboring Kars, Armenians working in the fields find themselves working nearly side by side with people from Turkey. Similarly, villagers in the Kars region shared their stories of interaction with Armenians in Russian and anecdotes of sharing food while grazing their animals. Since the Armenia-Turkey land border is not entirely fenced, such

interactions could be possible. The Arpaçay/Akhuryan reservoir is also an area where the villagers often come across each other while fishing. According to the villagers, they sometimes tie their fishnets together. Respondents in Iğdır remember the official contacts made during the Soviet era, where officials from both countries used the “Protocol Bridge,” and allowed cotton trade.

Fears are also present. On the Armenian side, most residents in the border provinces and towns are descendants of Armenian Genocide survivors that fled the Ottoman Empire. Turkey’s involvement in the recent war with Armenia reopened these wounds. Men have difficulty imagining interactions with ‘Turks’ following Turkey’s involvement in the war. Women share physical fears about opening the border with Turkey, and those with daughters expressed concerns about their interactions with men from Turkey. Many on both sides also mentioned concerns of the **“Batumization” of Gyumri**, which, on the Turkish side is associated with gambling and sex work perceived to be run by mafia, and in Armenia is related to unregulated investments from Turkey.

On the Turkish side of the border, there is a mirror concern around the narrative of territorial demands of Armenia from Turkey. This perception is mostly present among the interviewed Turkish citizens of Azeri descent residing in Kars and Iğdır, who believe that Armenia has territorial claims

to Turkey. Some of them do not support the border opening, believing it will benefit mostly Armenians, and expressed concerns about physical safety if they travel to Armenia. But they do not intend to object to the border opening either, if that becomes state policy.

Turkish citizen Kurds residing in Kars tend to be far more enthusiastic about the idea and many showed eagerness to meet people from the other side to cooperate. Those who support the opening of borders, stated "borders are only closed to them," referring to the direct flights between Istanbul and Yerevan through which urban elites, but not borderline villagers, are able to travel. They feel like, in Kars, they are being isolated and punished with closed borders. While this feeling was documented in previous research [*] as well it also seems there has been a further shift in support of the border opening. In addition to demographic and economic factors, the shift is inevitably linked to the results of the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War. They see the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War as an enabling factor. In the past, the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict was seen as an obstacle to the border opening, particularly for the Turkish citizens of Azeri descent. It seems the outcome of the War alleviated these sensitivities even for the Azeri residents of Kars and Iğdır.

[*] Hrant Dink Foundation. 2014. "Research on the Socio-Economic Impact of the Turkey-Armenia Border" <https://hrantdink.org/en/hdv-publications/63-reports/333-research-on-the-socio-economic-impact-of-the-turkey-armenia-border>;

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How to re-engage civil societies?

As of this writing, institutional civil societies (NGOs) remain largely disengaged from the normalization process. Unlike in the past, the restart of official negotiations and the donor community's monetary incentives were insufficient to motivate them to re-engage. The governments and international know-how have lost the legitimacy they enjoyed in the past when advancing national interest and peacebuilding and democratization, respectively. The power disparity between the sides has increased, trust towards each other and peacebuilding processes diminished, and the vision for peace previously tied to democratization was lost. To engage the wider institutional segments of civil society, governments, donor agencies, and the few civil society actors who remained engaged should consider the power disparities and asymmetries between the states as well as different perceptions and sentiments between the two societies, rebuild trust, and propose a vision.

Rebuilding trust will entail dialogue, acknowledging and addressing the lack of understanding in Turkish civil society about the impact of the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War in Armenia as well as the limitations of Turkish civil society. Considering the power asymmetry and that the impact of the war was felt in Armenia but not Turkey, according to the Armenian civil society, the previously engaged NGOs from Turkey remained silent during the war. While the reasons for this silence might vary on Turkey's end and entail further investigating, there is a need for better communication between Armenian and Turkish NGOs, particularly for the Turkish civil society actors to understand the sensitivities in Armenia and clearly communicate to their Armenian counterparts their limitations in Turkey. With the critical May 2023 elections in Turkey behind us, and following Armenian participation in the earthquake relief efforts and Pashinyan's attendance in the inauguration activities, the Turkish civil society actors should become more proactive, familiarize themselves with post-war sensitivities, take the initiative to acknowledge the pain and work towards regaining the trust of their counterparts in Armenia. Before re-engaging with larger-scale efforts targeting the attitudes in the larger society, the civil society actors would need to re-engage in dialogue to better understand each other's fears and reasons for the silence and mistrust, and develop

empathy and understanding. Many interviewees from Armenia and Turkey emphasized the role of culture and arts, given the shared cultural heritage, culinary, music, and folklore. Culture and arts could serve as an entry point into restarting dialogue.

Perhaps more important than rebuilding trust between NGOs based in Yerevan and Istanbul – a carefully crafted dialogue process for border communities and eliciting their input into the normalization process is essential for multiple reasons. These communities will be most affected by the border opening and will have to interface with neighbors against whom they hold multiple stereotypes yet whom they have rarely, if ever, seen. Without preparatory work, possible conflicts and even a singular case of violence could acquire national significance and derail years of work toward normalization. On the contrary, the support of border communities can ensure a smooth transition from mutual isolation to a new era of connectivity and open borders. To get this support, however, the border communities, grassroots activists, and representatives of local governments and municipalities should have input into the political process, at least on topics that pertain to their daily lives.

The vision and strategy should become the next priority as trust is slowly built. In a less democratic world where conflicts are once again settled through power politics, the official track can no

longer be expected to routinely invite civil society to join the peace process. In turn, civil society cannot afford to wait until governments invite them to the table and should take into their own hands the initiative not to leave the monopoly over shaping the peace process to the former. While such an invitation would be welcomed, given the perception that a regional war is more likely than ever and the possibility that a signed agreement might reflect only the interests of power players leaving the affected societies behind, it is crucial for civil society actors to devise their vision(s) for normalization. To monitor the official talks, serve as a channel of communication between local populations and officials and when necessary, between the officials, and advance the human security agenda as well as the interests and voices of the society and local communities in the political process.

Considering that local communities on both sides of the border are impacted the most by the closed borders and will also be impacted the most by their opening, it is vital to understand their concerns, needs, and expectations throughout the process and (re) focus attention, support, and resources to build infrastructure for their voices to be included. Further, peace professionals and various experts should not build the vision and strategy alone. The approach marked by technocratic processes, detached from the local communities,

failed to deliver results for over 30 years, and alienated institutional civil society actors (NGOs) from the populations they claim to represent. Building platforms for dialogue among residents of Gyumri, Armavir, Kars, and Iğdir, as well as between these residents and officials, building networks across local public agencies/ authorities, involvement of local journalists, economic operators, cultural actors, and universities, would pave the way for a smoother transition to open borders. To this end, civil society actors with previous experience and networks with the neighboring country will be responsible for facilitating dialogues. The international donor community should consider direct grants to smaller and grassroots actors to ensure that financial resources reach the local actors.

Institutional civil society-led collaborations and efforts toward reconciliation cannot restart where they stopped before the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War. The absence of sustained interest from civil society in Turkey, particularly during the war, and the mistrust from the Armenian civil society are compounded by the loss of vision and guiding principles that could streamline peacebuilding work. Investment into dialogue and trust building, both among the civil society and border communities, followed by developing a new vision, are necessary instruments on which a future sustained civil society and grassroots engagement and support for normalization could be built.



Photo: Akyaka train station in Kars last stop before Armenia border

information gap

Growing information and analytic gap

How to bridge the information gap?

Growing information and analytic gap

The second major finding of our study was the glaring gaps in understanding internal politics, narratives, motivations, and sensitivities on the other side of the border. These gaps, in part, were caused by the lack of dialogue and communication referenced in the previous section and with information about the other side, if any, learned from one's propagandistic outlets or third parties rather than from the primary sources. This informational and analytic gap and overreliance on propaganda and third parties in turn created a cycle of misunderstanding, further fueling the mistrust.

The lack of information and analysis permeates every level of communication, including the official level, media, and analytic community. At the official level, there has been a significant drop in the level of personal trust compared with the previous official talks. Previous generations of diplomats from Armenia and Turkey maintained personal contacts and continually built trust outside official talks. The new generation of diplomats engaged in official talks relies primarily on formal meetings of Special Representatives who developed little personal rapport. Ongoing informal communication, often a key component of successful negotiations, has been missing. Diversification of connections beyond the offices of special representatives and the development of personal ties could help advance the process.

The nuanced understanding of the other side is limited. While some back-channel forms of communication between Armenia and Turkey exist, they are limited in scope and advanced by former or opposition politicians, or academics with limited reach.

Bureaucratic hurdles also complicate mutual understanding. In the Turkish MFA, Armenia falls under the portfolio of the Directorate General for Bilateral Relations responsible for Eastern Europe, Caucasus, and Central Asia, which covers both Armenia and Azerbaijan. Considering the close relationship between Azerbaijan and Turkey, in practice,

the former serves as a key source of information about Armenia for the Turkish government. Baku, however, pursues its own interests and has the opportunity to filter what information gets delivered to Ankara and how the delivered information is interpreted. Further, even if Armenian concerns are understood in Ankara, other foreign policy priorities and the mindset of “victor’s peace” make the policymakers dismissive, complicating the Pashinyan government’s ability to advance the policy of normalization domestically.

On the Armenian end, there has been a drop in professional expert analysis that informed the official talks. That is not to say that the Armenian government did not look for engagement opportunities. As their decision to send a rescue team to Turkey following the devastating earthquake demonstrated, they are ready for bold steps even in the face of popular backlash. The challenge we point out here is not the intentions or the political will, but the ongoing and nuanced analysis of internal Turkish politics conducted by government think tanks and independent expert communities that could help maximize such opportunities and minimize risks and frustration. A major example of such missed opportunity was the inability to recognize in a timely manner the initial interest of Ankara to normalize relations that lasted through 2021 and engaging in the process only later that year,

shortly before Ankara's priorities shifted to Ukraine and beyond.

The missteps associated with the lack of analysis are not always obvious. The official negotiations undertaken through the Special Representatives are progressing well, and both countries' technical teams focused on border infrastructure and other bureaucratic matters are working constructively and registering progress. Yet in the absence of ongoing nuanced communication and sound analysis, the progress made and trust built at the technical/bureaucratic level remain vulnerable to manipulation or sabotage by various spoilers. For instance, on 24 April 2022, during his visit to Uruguay, the now former Turkish Foreign Minister Cavusoglu made the gesture of a nationalist Grey Wolf sign as his vehicle drove past a group of Armenian protesters, causing public indignation in Armenia and across the Diaspora as it was perceived as a humiliating act by Ankara rather than that of individual actors. However, Cavusoglu's actions and opposition to normalization with Armenia were not necessarily aligned with the intentions of the presidential administration or the Turkish state at large, a nuance lost in the Armenian media space and official discourse, and the fallout from that otherwise marginal event was not mitigated.

The lack of sound analysis and nuanced understanding is not limited to the official level. In Armenia, coverage of Turkey in

media, analytic, and academic space is mostly based on cliches, stereotypes, and beliefs in their own nationalist propaganda or fears rather than sound and nuanced analysis. More problematically, anti-Turkish rhetoric regularly voiced by talk show hosts and individuals with academic titles is routinely mistaken for expertise.

In Turkey, there has typically been a shortage of expertise and a lack of media coverage of Armenia. The Second Nagorno-Karabakh War was accompanied by increased and negative coverage of the country, followed by state-sanctioned positive coverage as the normalization process resumed. The coverage still remains extremely limited and relies on a random set of interviews from the streets of Armenia without giving much context or deep understanding. In the expert community, similar to the official track, Azerbaijani sources are key sources of information on Armenia.

Further, the few concerned with Armenian issues focus primarily on the history of Ottoman Armenians and the Armenian minority in Turkey rather than the Republic of Armenia. Only a few academics understand Armenia as a country.

Finally, no direct channel, information flow, or fact-checking mechanism between journalists of the two countries currently exists.

How to bridge the information gap?

The impact of negative or offensive rhetoric and gestures by individual politicians could be mitigated and downplayed, and positive gestures such as the earthquake diplomacy and Pashinyan's speeches in support of peace and re-humanization of Turks, and attendance of Erdogan's June 2023 inauguration could be amplified through intentional and sustained messaging on both sides of the border. The mitigation of negative coverage and amplification of positive and coordinated messaging could be achieved with relatively modest input through government media channels and solicited support from the civil society sector and encouragement of think tanks and academic collaborations.

In recent years, several programmes directed at understanding Turkish society have been hosted on Aliq media and Civilnet media platforms in Armenia. These could serve as the seeds through which the mainstreaming of public discourse on the real and not imaginary risks and benefits of normalization and border opening can develop. The absence of Turkish media outlets engaging in cross-border collaborations is particularly urgent to address.

Nationalist statements by individual politicians are inevitable and will continue. Intentional messaging by governments

regarding their policy in favor of normalization could help mitigate the fallout from these. The Pashinyan government has engaged in such messaging substantially. It would be important for the Erdogan government to reciprocate. The dialogues and sustained collaborations of analysis and media representatives, including those representing mainstream and government-affiliated institutions, should be encouraged and funded to counter misinformation and hate narratives, and to restart public dialogue.

economic interests and concerns of border communities

Addressing anxieties and building on
interests



Photo: Akhurik railway station in Gyumri, last train stop before Turkey border

The communities living in the bordering cities and towns of Armenia and Turkey are those most affected by the absence of normalization. Kars and Iğdır are among the most underdeveloped cities in Turkey and Shirak is statistically the poorest region in Armenia. They will also be first to have direct daily interactions with their neighbors, should the land border open. Their support, or to the contrary, resistance, and acting as spoilers, could be the difference between the successful implementation of the normalization agenda or its failure. Yet, in the media and the political track, local or international, little attention is given to the local communities and their needs and concerns.

Our parallel study conducted in the bordering regions of Getashen (Armavir), and Akhurik (Shirak) in Armenia, and Kars (Akyaka and Çetindurak) and Iğdır in Turkey in October 2022–May 2023 revealed both the concerns and hopes that these communities have regarding the normalization process.

On the Armenian side, a frequently articulated fear was that Turkish businesses will overwhelm the Armenian economy as a result of the border opening. By contrast, in the Turkish border areas, there was more optimism about the prospective economic impact of normalization. Yet they were not quite aware of the anxieties on the other side of the border that have been on the rise following Turkey's involvement in the Second Nagorno–Karabakh War.

The anxieties among the Armenian border populations were not evenly distributed. They were particularly well-pronounced in the Armavir region located close to Yerevan, while the residents of the Shirak region were more receptive to the idea of open borders. Distance from the capital, the degree of agricultural development, and the history of prior interaction with Turkey were the factors that influenced these differences.

The Armavir region, which borders the Iğdır province of Turkey and is located just south of Yerevan, is the agricultural center of the country and supplies the capital and the rest of the country with produce. Armavir residents expressed far greater anxiety regarding the possible expansion of cheaper Turkish goods. Further, although the Cold War-era Alican–Magara land border crossing has been located in Armavir, the crossing was used mainly by officials and law enforcement, not local communities. As such, the region has no living memory of everyday interaction with their Turkish neighbors, making fertile ground for official propaganda and nationalist narratives.

The Shirak region in northern Armenia is located farther away from Yerevan. It is economically isolated from the trade routes and depends on other regions for produce. Shirak is statistically the poorest region of Armenia, and its population heavily relies on seasonal migration for low-paying jobs in Russia and other countries.

Shirak also has a relatively recent history of everyday interaction with people from Turkey; the train route between the Soviet Union and Turkey ran through the region twice a week. Local trade was fairly developed, and the residents enjoyed the shared use of the Akhurian water reservoir, which provided additional opportunities for interaction following the 1993 closing of the border. Therefore, the Shirak region respondents were far more likely to see the border opening as an opportunity than those in Armavir. The mayor of Akhurik in particular, stressed that the open borders would create a market that would allow young people to remain in the region and not have to migrate for seasonal jobs.

In neither region, however, were opinions uniform. Some residents of Shirak expressed fears of coexistence with Turks and concerns about economic expansion. And many residents of Armavir believed that the border opening could open new markets for their produce and overall economic growth. Others stressed that irrespective of their concerns, Armenia cannot continue existing as an island isolated from its neighbors.

On the Turkish side, we registered far more optimism about the prospective impact of normalization. Unlike the rest of the country, where Armenia is mostly off the radar, the residents of the Turkish cities bordering Armenia closely follow the negotiation process, as the

opening of the border will directly impact their lives. Isolated from other population centers in Turkey, many are enthusiastic about trade with Armenia. At the same time, they have a limited understanding of Armenia's economic structure, beliefs centered on the common misperceptions that "Armenia is a poor country," that "the products in Armenia are far cheaper," and that the border opening will have an economic impact on Armenia but not Turkey. These misconceptions overlook the fact that Armenia is a mostly urbanized country with Yerevan as a well-developed internationalized city located in the proximity of the Turkish border. The cultural and economic interaction between mostly rural provinces of North Eastern Turkey and urban Armenia can lead both to cultural complexities. Economically, Kars remains to be one of the most underdeveloped cities in Turkey, with animal husbandry and dairy farms as its main industries that barely meet local demand, contrasted with the Armenian perceptions of cheap Turkish goods flooding Armenian markets. Contrary to the expectations, on the local level, the impact of a diversified Armenian economy on the rural Turkish provinces is likely to be far greater than the other way around. Both Kars and Iğdır suffer from high levels of emigration due to both economic and cultural constraints.

There are also marked differences among different segments of the population

of Kars and Iğdır in regard to border opening. Turkish citizens of Azeri descent interviewed were less invested in the border opening and daily interaction while conceding that they might engage in cross-border trade should that happen. Meanwhile, the Turkish citizen Kurds interviewed saw the border opening as both an economic opportunity and an opportunity to foster cultural ties with Armenia. Many people from Kars have ancestry in Gyumri and vice versa, with shared historical and cultural ties. Many also expect tourism,

coming from or through Armenia to Kars, to flourish, particularly emphasizing the importance of the ancient city of Ani. On the other hand, many residents of Iğdır have ancestry in Yerevan, and the Azeri population of Iğdır in particular expressed their longing and interest in visiting the other side of the border to see the homeland of their ancestors. For respondents in Iğdır, being only 20–30 minutes from a capital city is a great opportunity, particularly for cultural life, and benefiting from restaurants, opera, concerts, and an international airport.

Addressing anxieties and building on interests

With Armenian and Turkish societies separated by diverging collective memories and narratives about the genocide, nearly a century of closed borders, and recent war, the social and economic impact of sudden border opening can create substantial challenges.

There are marked differences between residents' attitudes towards the opening of the border in the Armavir and Shirak regions of Armenia. In the case of the more developed and affluent Armavir region, residents expressed a higher degree of animosity towards the other side and more concerns regarding the destructive economic impact of opening. They also lack any recent memory of interaction and a high level of mutual mistrust, making conflicts and violent incidents possible after the border opening. Trust-building, local dialogue, sober assessments of the economic impact of the border opening on local communities, and mitigating policies have to be put in place to prevent fallout.

On the contrary, the residents of the more remote and economically disadvantaged Shirak region in Armenia as well as Kars and Iğdır in Turkey showed markedly higher interest and enthusiasm towards normalization, judging that the economic impact on these regions is likely to be overwhelmingly positive. The Kars-Gyumri border presents a rare bright spot, where the residents are relatively interested in the opening and have a relatively recent history of daily interaction. Many do not see the opening as a mere economic opportunity but are also interested in fostering cultural exchange. While the Kars-Gyumri railway can play a pivotal role in resuming the cross-border trade between the two cities after three

decades, the ancient city of Ani, a UNESCO World Heritage location, that lies on the Armenia-Turkey border can serve as a concrete example on which build on mutual interest. Meanwhile, Iğdır holds experience with cross-border trade with Iran and Nakhchivan and has advantages, including its closer proximity to Yerevan, existing roads for trailer fleets, and individual businesses already exploring potential business ideas with Armenia. On the other hand, the presence of a large Turkish-citizen Azeri population in Iğdır and their strong sentiments and skepticism need to be taken into account alongside the concerns of the Armavir region.

Piloting the opening with the third-party nationals and diplomatic passport holders, learning from challenges and opportunities, considering the needs and sensitivities of the residents of the two countries, and designing preliminary visits/confidence-building measures accordingly could pave the way for the future full-scale normalization.

recommen- dations

Recommendations for Governments

1.1. Addressing Mistrust

- Free the normalization process from negative rhetoric and hate speech. Pay attention to asymmetries, sensitivities, and concerns in both countries. Build on the positive momentum gained from the earthquake diplomacy and inauguration ceremony, devise and act upon more positive examples, more gestures, and confidence-building measures.
- Offer platforms/venues/mechanisms for the participation of civil society and local communities in the normalization process.

1.2. Addressing information gap

- Make use of all resources available including former diplomats, think tanks, civil society with track records and skill sets, and engage them in the normalization process by offering platforms/venues of contribution.
- Invest in undertaking nuanced analysis of the domestic and foreign policy of the neighboring country, and encourage cross-border collaboration of think tanks, academia, and mainstream media professionals.

1.3 Addressing the economic needs and concerns of local communities

- Establish a mechanism/platform to ensure civic engagement in the normalization process, particularly

the local communities on both sides of the border.

- Pilot the opening of the border with tangible and phased steps: open the border for third-country nationals and diplomatic passport holders first, based on the lessons learned, and design confidence-building measures for local communities before the simultaneous opening of Kars (Doğukapı)-Gyumri (Akhurik) and Alican (Iğdır)-Margara (Armavir) crossings.
- Undertake or commission parallel assessment of the actual economic impact of border opening on local communities including risks and opportunities. Provide scientific and realistic information to public about opportunities and take necessary measures for identified risks to address concerns.
- Organize or commission cross-border dialogue/preliminary visits involving local authorities, local economic operators, civic actors, and journalists from border cities prior to the border opening to build trust and prepare the ground for the full border opening.
- Do not consider the normalization process as a mere economic opportunity/transaction. Consider tangible steps for fostering cultural cooperation. Work towards the joint restoration of the ancient Ani Bridge in parallel to the phased opening of the land border.

Recommendations for Institutional Civil Society (NGOs)

2.1 Addressing Mistrust

- Re-engage in the civil society dialogue across Armenia and Turkey, and make best efforts to rebuild trust while taking into account the sensitivities/the impact of the postwar situation in Armenia. Civil society actors from Turkey who have built relations and trust with Armenian counterparts over the years should be proactive and take the initiative for rebuilding trust.
- Re-engage in the normalization process by putting together a vision and strategy, closely monitoring the official process, and reporting sensitivities to authorities.

2.2. Addressing information gap

- Encourage joint productions or journalists' programmes across media, academia, and the think tank community.
- Consider building alliances/partnerships with independent journalists/media outlets from both countries to establish joint fact-checking platforms against misinformation and propaganda.

2.3 Addressing the economic needs and concerns of local communities

- Invest more efforts to better understand the needs of local communities and to directly work with them. Share cross-border dialogue experience, know-how and networks with local communities. Focus resources and efforts on building people-to-people contacts/institutional connections between various actors from Kars and Gyumri, Yerevan and Iğdır, including cultural actors, architects, universities, local journalists, tourism agencies, cooperatives, entrepreneurs, local authorities.
- Invest in research and studies on economic cooperation, and training of local communities/businesses/entrepreneurs on cross-border trade.

Photo: Akyaka train station in Kars last stop before Armenia border.



