



The Turkish-Armenian Rapprochement at the Deadlock

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Abstract

In October 2009, after intense diplomatic talks and the active involvement of key external actors, Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu and his Armenian counterpart Edward Nalbandian signed two protocols aimed at restoring bilateral relations. The agreements have however remained unratified due to political obstacles closely linked to historic disputes and the geopolitical constellation in the South Caucasus. As a result, even if rapprochement between Ankara and Yerevan has the potential of producing far-reaching changes in the regional political equilibrium, the status quo remains the most likely scenario.

Keywords: *Turkey / Turkish Foreign Policy / Bilateral Relations / Armenia / Azerbaijan / Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict / Economic relations / Oil / Pipelines*

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by Nona Mikhelidze*

Overview

On October 10, 2009 Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu and his Armenian counterpart Edward Nalbandian signed two historical documents – the “Protocol on the establishment of diplomatic relations” and the “Protocol on the development of bilateral relations.” The event took place in Zurich and was attended by the U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton and Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov as well as French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner and Swiss Foreign Minister Micheline Calmy-Rey which highlighted thus the engagement of major powers with the Turkish-Armenian reconciliation process. However, the documents have since remained unratified due to political obstacles tightly-knit with historic disputes and the geopolitical constellation of the South Caucasus.

From the “soccer diplomacy” to the Armenia-Turkey Protocols

The Turkish-Armenian border was closed in 1993 by Turkey in sign of solidarity with its main ally in Caucasus – Azerbaijan – after Armenia occupied Azerbaijani’s Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast and seven adjacent districts. However, the hostility between Ankara and Yerevan goes back to 1915 when over a million Armenians were killed by the Ottoman Empire and is tied with the Armenian demand that Turkey recognize this tragic event as genocide. Turkey rejects the recognition of the genocide and offers to establish a special commission involving international historians to study and qualify the events of 1915.

Since 1993 the only concrete sign of improving relations between the two countries has been the re-establishment of an air connection between Yerevan and Istanbul in 1996 (however, for Armenia the import of goods has remained possible only via Georgia). Civil society groups have also striven to re-establish at least some cultural relations between two countries, but with no tangible results.

In the aftermath of the Georgian-Russian war of August 2008, the Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan launched a new proposal for a “*Caucasus Stability and Cooperation Pact*” (Cscp). The Cscp aims to bring together Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia as well as Turkey and Russia in order to create a new regional security framework. One of the main objectives of the initiative is to help solve ethnic conflict

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through regional cooperation. Armenia has welcomed the initiative and declared its readiness to cooperate without any preconditions, but it has underlined that the resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is possible only if Azerbaijan recognizes the right of self-determination of the Nagorno-Karabakh people.

For Turkey the reconciliation with Armenia has become part of its foreign policy concept “zero problems with neighbours.” Armenia has also seemed to change its approach towards its historical enemy. “There is a new mood that normalisation of relations with Turkey is inevitable. [It is] no longer a zero-sum game, but is now a win-win scenario,” one former senior Armenian foreign ministry official declared in an interview with International Crisis Group in November 2008¹.

The Turkish-Armenia rapprochement began in September 2008 with the so-called “soccer diplomacy”, when Turkey’s President Abdullah Gül travelled to Yerevan and attended a soccer match between the two countries’ national teams. Later Armenian President Serzh Sargsyan became the first Armenian leader who visited Turkey in order to attend the return soccer match.

After a year of intense diplomatic talks and active involvement of the international community, the two countries signed the above mentioned agreements. The Armenia-Turkey Protocols call for the enhancement of trade, economic and cultural relations especially in the framework of international (UN, the Osce, the Council of Europe, the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council) and regional (Bsec) organizations. Furthermore both parties have undertaken the commitment to “make the best possible use of existing transport, communications and energy infrastructure and networks.” The protocols shall be ratified by the parliaments of both countries. The borders would be opened “within two months after the entry into force of this Protocol”.

The protocols were approved by the Armenian Constitutional Court in January 12, 2010. In Armenia every international agreement shall be examined first by the Constitutional Court and then passed on to parliament. The Court approved the documents, but made references to the preamble of the protocols underlying three main issues. First, Armenia will continue its effort to reach worldwide recognition of the 1915 events as a genocide. The ruling reminded President Sargsyan that “The Republic of Armenia stands in support of the task of achieving international recognition of the 1915 Genocide in Ottoman Turkey and Western Armenia” as regulated by the Constitution of the Republic of Armenia and the Armenian Declaration of Independence. Second, it rejected any connection between the new agreement with Turkey and the Nagorno-Karabakh issue. Third and most crucially, it stated that the implementation of the protocols did not imply Armenia’s official recognition of the existing Turkish-Armenian border established by the 1921 treaty of Kars. By doing so, the Constitutional Court rejected one of the main premises of the protocols, i.e. “the mutual recognition of the existing border between the two countries as defined by relevant treaties of international law”.

¹ International Crisis Group, “Turkey and Armenia: Opening Minds, Opening Borders”, *Europe Report*, No.199, 14 April 2009, <http://www.crisisgroup.org/home/index.cfm?id=6050>.

Armenian President S. Sargsyan submitted the protocols to parliament on February 15, 2010. However the deputies have made clear that they will not vote on them before the Turkish Parliament's ratification. Furthermore they adopted an amendment to an existing law on interstate treaties, which makes possible the suspension of international agreements before they enter into force. The amendment which has to be signed by the President, allows Yerevan to refuse eventually the ratification of the Armenia-Turkey protocols. However President Sargsyan has guaranteed the ratification in the Armenian parliament "if the Turkish side does it in a reasonable time frame and without pre-conditions"².

Azerbaijan's reaction

The Turkish-Armenian rapprochement was widely perceived in Azerbaijan as a betrayal of the key principle on which the partnership between Ankara and Baku is predicated, i.e. that no accords between Armenia and Turkey should be agreed until the resolution of Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Baku fears that with the opening of borders and the resulting end of Armenia's isolation, Azerbaijan would lose a crucial leverage to influence the talks on the future status of Nagorno-Karabakh.

After the signing of the Armenia-Turkey protocols the Foreign Ministry of Azerbaijan issued a press release declaring that Turkey's decision "directly contradicts the national interests of Azerbaijan and overshadows the spirit of brotherly relations between Azerbaijan and Turkey built on deep historical roots"³. Indeed relations between Azerbaijan and Turkey have always been special because of language, ethnic and historical ties. Furthermore Azerbaijan is one of Turkey's main trading partners in the gas and oil sectors; they share interests in pipeline routes (e.g., the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline and Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum gas pipeline) transporting Caspian energy resources from Azerbaijan to Turkey via Georgia. In general, Baku provides a bridge for Ankara to Central Asia and its Turkic peoples (except the Tajiks).

Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev reacted harshly to Turkey-Armenia rapprochement, threatening to increase the price at which Azeri energy resources are sold to Turkey: "It is not a secret to anyone that for many years Azerbaijan has been selling its gas to Turkey at one-third of market prices," declared the President. Indeed, under an agreement signed in 2002 between Azerbaijan and Turkey, Baku has sold its gas to Turkey at \$120 per one thousand cubic meters⁴. The agreement has expired and new negotiations have begun between the parties. However, in the meantime, Turkey has continued to pay the same price for gas imports from Azerbaijan.

² "Armenia says Turkey must vote first on peace deal", *The Daily Herald*, 10.02.2010, <http://www.thedailyherald.com/international/4-international/369-armenia-says-turkey-must-vote-first-on-peace-deal-.html>.

³ Azerbaijan Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Statement of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Azerbaijan*, 12.10.2009, http://mfa.gov.az/eng/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=580.

⁴ Brian Whitmore, "Azerbaijan Could Scuttle Nabucco Over Turkey-Armenia Deal", *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 19.10.2009, http://www.rferl.org/content/Azerbaijan_Could_Scuttle_Nabucco_Over_TurkeyArmenia_Deal/1855784.html.

Additionally, Baku warned Turkey as well as the West that it could decide to redirect the gas resources of the Shah Deniz field (Caspian Sea) towards Russia, and refuse to pump its gas into the future Nabucco pipeline, which is designed to transport second stage Shah Deniz gas via Georgia, Turkey and Balkans to central Europe. Indeed four days after the ceremony in Zurich, Azerbaijan's State Oil Company and Russian Gazprom signed an agreement on Azerbaijani gas sales to Russia. Thus Baku made it clear that its oil and gas exports could be used also for projects other than the Turkish-Western ones. Furthermore, Azerbaijan began considering other options for its gas exports, including upgrading the Baku-Novo Filya and Gazimahomed-Mozdok pipelines to Russia's North Caucasus and two pipelines to Iran. Also the White Stream pipeline, which would transport Azeri and Turkmen gas via Georgia and the Black Sea to Romania, has been discussed.

Turkey – hostage to Azerbaijan?

Almost all visits of Turkish authorities to Armenia since 2008 in the framework of the reconciliation process have been followed by visits to Azerbaijan, thus demonstrating the high level of interconnection between the Turkish-Armenian and Nagorno-Karabakh conflict resolution issues.

"Azeri soil is as sacred for us as our own...and liberating this soil from occupation is one of our primary national issues," declared Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu soon after the Zurich ceremony⁵. At a joint press conference with Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev Turkey's Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan announced that "the occupation of Nagorno-Karabakh is a cause, and the closure of the border is an effect. Without the occupation ending, the gates will not be opened." Thus he called Armenia to withdraw its military troops from the occupied territories. In his statement at the news conference during the meeting with the U.S. president Barak Obama in December 2009 Erdoğan repeated once more that the Nagorno-Karabach question was "of great importance ... in the context of Turkish-Armenian relations ... because the normalization process between Turkey and Armenia is very much related to these issues"⁶.

The Turkish government has also met with considerable opposition in Turkey to the rapprochement with Armenia. The protocols are opposed by many parliamentarians and especially by its main opposition party – the kemalist Republican People's Party (Chp) – which argues that the accords with Yerevan jeopardize the Azeri cause. The right-wing Nationalist Action Party (Mhp) has refused to participate in the discussions on the protocols, accusing the Prime Minister of "selling the country" and "carrying out America's orders"⁷.

⁵ "Azerbaijan Threatens Turkey Over Armenia Agreement", *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 21.10.2009, http://www.rferl.org/content/Azerbaijan_Threatens_Turkey_Over_Armenia_Agreement/1857198.html.

⁶ Remarks by President Obama and Prime Minister Erdogan of Turkey after meeting, White House press release, 07.12.2009, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-obama-and-prime-minister-erdogan-turkey-after-meeting>.

⁷ "Bones to pick", *The Economist*, No. 8652, 10.10.2009.

Furthermore, the ruling of the Armenian Constitutional Court has levelled strong criticism in Turkey. Of 170,000 Armenians living in Turkey, "70,000 are Turkish citizens" - said Erdoğan to the BBC reporter in the aftermath of the Armenian Constitutional Court's ruling - "We are turning a blind eye to the remaining 100,000... Tomorrow, I may tell these 100,000 to go back to their country, if it becomes necessary."⁸ Ankara can therefore use the Armenian Court's decision as an excuse not to ratify the protocols and at the same time to free itself from the image of being hostage to Azerbaijan.

Views in Armenia and among the diaspora

"This is going to be the biggest change in the South Caucasus since 1994," said Gevorg Tel-Gabrielyan, the Armenia country director for the Eurasia Partnership Foundation. If the protocols are backed by Armenian civil society, however, the same cannot be said about the majority of the population and opposition parties in Armenia. Yerevan witnessed demonstrations of the nationalists shouting "no concessions to the Turks." In reaction to the signing of the protocols, the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (Arf) party – the so-called Dashnaktsutiun party – abandoned the government coalition. The Arf supporters marched to the Constitutional Court urging it to reject the Armenia-Turkey protocols. The documents were criticized also by the Armenian National Congress (Anc), the main opposition party which claims that reconciliation with Turkey is possible only after an agreement on Nagorno-Karabakh. Despite the widespread opposition, the ruling party can push ahead with the ratification of the protocols thanks to the majority it enjoys in parliament.

The Armenian diaspora opposes the prospective border opening much more staunchly than the population in Armenia. The protocols have been condemned by the Armenian communities in France, the US and Lebanon, which have labelled Serzh Sargsyan as a "traitor". Following the signing ceremony of the agreements the diaspora launched an online campaign against their implementation through an ad hoc website⁹.

Contrasting and converging interests of global and regional players

The West has long tried to promote the reconciliation process between Turkey and Armenia with three goals: free Armenia from the isolation imposed by the Turkey-Azerbaijan alliance; reduce the Kremlin's influence on Armenia; and help Turkey play a stabilizing role in the Caucasus.

Apparently Russia also supports the Turkish-Armenian rapprochement. Having closed its borders with Georgia and with no land border with Armenia, Russia could hope, according to some regional media, to use Turkey's territory for the transportation of supplies to its military base in Gyumri (Armenia). Besides, Moscow prefers to share its regional influence with Turkey rather than with Western actors, i.e. the U.S. and the

⁸ "Turkey threatens to expel 100,000 Armenians", *BBC News*, 17.03.2010, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/8572934.stm>.

⁹ Stop the Protocols Campaign, <http://www.stoptheprotocols.com>.

EU, which it wants to keep at arm's length in the Caucasus. Furthermore, the Turkish-Armenian rapprochement is in the interest of Russia also from other point of view: it may create new problems for Georgia. Indeed, if the protocols are implemented successfully, Georgia can lose importance as a transit country for Caspian energy resources, as possible energy routes from Azerbaijan to the West are much shorter via Armenia than Georgia.

However the Kremlin have not made big efforts to facilitate the process of Turkish-Armenian reconciliation. The Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin has urged his Turkish counterpart to keep the Turkish-Armenian question separate from Nagorno-Karabakh, but it has so far abstained from pressuring Yerevan to withdraw even from the adjacent regions of Nagorno-Karabakh. Baku's disappointment with Ankara may play in the hands of Russia because it can stir up tensions between Turkey and Azerbaijan and bring the latter back into Russia's orbit.

The Turkish-Armenian rapprochement is one of the few regional issues where Russian and US interests coincide. The reconciliation process was strongly backed by the United States. In order to accelerate the fulfilment of the Armenia-Turkey protocols, Washington called Ankara to delink the Nagorno-Karabakh question from the Turkish-Armenian rapprochement. However, the US's commitment to promote reconciliation has been weakened by the U.S. Congressional committee approval of a non-binding resolution to recognize the Armenian massacre of 1915 as genocide. Even if the US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton declared that neither she nor President Obama supported the resolution, Turkey recalled its ambassador to the US for consultations. "The US, instead of contributing to the relations between Turkey and Armenia, has helped to increase tension ... The protocols are in deep trouble now," commented Edibe Sözen¹⁰. Indeed the US Congress committee's genocide resolution has provided new ammunition to those in Ankara who oppose the ratification of the documents.

Changing geopolitical picture in the South Caucasus?

Should Turkey and Armenia ratify and then implement the protocols the geopolitical picture of the South Caucasus would change significantly. Ankara would become an even more important stakeholder in the region, even if its preferential ties with Azerbaijan could weaken, and win back "much of its recently faded prestige as domestic reformer [and] as regional peacemaker"¹¹; Moscow will also have the opportunity of increasing its regional role (especially in the energy sector) and strengthening its influence over Azerbaijan; and finally, all this would likely result into further marginalization of Georgia.

However such developments seem unlikely in the nearest future as the chances for the ratification of the Armenia-Turkey protocols remain slim. Both sides are creating big

¹⁰ Ercan Yavuz, "Armenia protocols now less likely to clear Parliament", *Today's Zaman*, 06.03.2010, <http://www.todayszaman.com/tz-web/news-203524-102-armenia-protocols-now-less-likely-to-clear-parliament.html>.

¹¹ Pelin Turgut, "Turkey and Armenia: Thaw in a Century Old Feud?", *Time.com*, 04.09.2009, <http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1920257,00.html>.

obstacles: Armenia by pressing on the recognition of the genocide and reiterating its territorial claims; Turkey by linking the bilateral rapprochement with the Nagorno-Karabakh issue. Much depends on how much pressure the West will exercise on Ankara to ratify the documents. However Erdoğan has remained adamant: “if you want to resolve Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, you should also resolve the Turkish-Armenian issue. Otherwise, you will fail to resolve it”¹². In sum, even if the recent Turkish-Armenian rapprochement may have far-reaching regional repercussions, the more probable scenario still remains the *status quo*.

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¹² ANS TV cited in “Turkish PM Erdogan makes a condition to White House in terms of resolution of Turkish-Armenian issue”, *Today.az*, 04.12.2009, <http://www.today.az/news/politics/57954.html>.



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