



Armenia-Turkey rapprochement: historic turning point or missed opportunity?*

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The purpose of this policy brief is to analyse the state of the Armenia-Turkey rapprochement, current factors of political action and inaction, and to deliver policy recommendations especially for the EU.

Background

The two protocols on establishing diplomatic relations and opening the common border, agreed upon by Turkish and Armenian governments with Swiss mediation and signed on 10 October 2009 in Zurich, are not a point of arrival that will freeze and fix bilateral relations. They rather provide a working framework necessary to start the normalisation process. The spill-over effect of such an engagement, in terms of conflict resolution throughout the wider region, will certainly increase the mutual trust of Euro-Atlantic and Russian political elites, once the protocols are ratified by the respective parliaments and their provisions implemented. After all the tensions and even the recent war in Georgia, peace and stability in the South Caucasus require a first positive signal that disputes can actually be resolved with diplomatic means. The key question is: Can the process be concluded, i.e. can the protocols be ratified by the parliaments in Turkey and Armenia and then implemented?

Current status

After almost a century of strained, if not confrontational and violent relations between Armenia and Turkey and almost two decades of unilateral closure by Turkey of its border with Armenia, a process of bilateral rapprochement mediated by Switzerland began two years ago and produced its first tangible results by the signing of two protocols, namely on establishment of diplomatic relations and normalisation of relations, on October 10, 2009 in Zurich.

Symbols matter always in such occasions, but in the case of Zurich signing ceremony, it went well beyond conventional protocol rules. On the one hand, heads of foreign services of the most important world players active in the region, namely the US, Russia, the EU and France were present to provide their support and emphasise their interest; on the other hand, after a series of postponements and last minute fierce shuttle diplomacy efforts led by US Sec. of State Hillary Clinton the parties signed the protocols without delivering any statements, highlighting the fragility of the entire process. Indeed, the above-mentioned rapprochement, while increasingly catalysing the interests of the world big players into a synergic vision of the South Caucasus, affects deeply the sensitivities of both Armenian and Turkish societies.

All this can have fatal consequences on both processes, especially with a view to Turkish efforts aiming to insert a linkage between the parliamentary ratification of the protocols and the resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Turkey has closed the border in 1993 in solidarity with Azerbaijan over the war in Karabakh. Sharing language and religion with Azerbaijan, it is still very difficult for Turkish MPs today to take any decision which could harm relations with the so-called *brothernation*.

Furthermore, the Azerbaijani government is paradoxically considering the Armenian-Turkish rapprochement and the opening of the border as a direct threat to its own security and is not sparing any efforts to derail the whole process by calling for the solidarity of its political ally and ethnic brother Turkey. Worse than that, the Azeri government has openly accused the Turkish government of treason, and with that given ammunition to the nationalistic forces in Turkey. This must have been a very bitter pill for the Gul/Erdogan administration to swallow, given that they consulted Azerbaijan at every inch of the way. It shows that Azerbaijan strongly tries to interfere in Turkish foreign policy and does not want Turkey to become a regional political power, at least not as far as perceived Azeri interests are touched.

At the time of writing this paper, the two governments have yet to conclude the ratification processes of the protocols. While both governments have far more than the necessary numbers of seats in their

parliaments to ratify the protocols, uncertainty persists over the Turkish political will to finalise the process. At the same time, the relevant big players backing these normalisation efforts, namely the US, the EU and Russia, have a diametrically opposite positions on the issue, calling for a rapid ratification of the documents by the two national parliaments and rejecting any sort of preconditions, such as linkages with the peace process around Nagorno-Karabakh.

The Turkish efforts to introduce *progress on Karabakh* as a condition strengthens of the maximalist position of Azerbaijan during the peace talks with Armenia and indirectly encourages the continued use of war rhetoric by the Azerbaijani leadership. It also openly allows Azerbaijan to exercise a veto on a key Turkish foreign policy issue, which cannot be in the interest of Turkey.

Another key factor is the Genocide, which Barack Obama during his electoral campaign promised to recognise, and its connection to the rapprochement process. In his April 2009 commemoration letter he stopped short of using the term *Genocide* in order to avoid any negative influence on the ongoing mediations. The US has a strong interest in concluding the normalisation of relations between the two countries. In a letter to the Armenian Assembly of America, dated November 20, president Obama has stated "that normalization between Armenia and Turkey should move forward without preconditions and within a reasonable timeframe," reaffirming previous statements by the Secretary of State Hilary Clinton and other high ranking US officials. The statement came just days before Turkish Prime Minister R. T. Erdogan's US visit. President Obama on 7 December reiterated his message during a joint press conference with Erdogan by congratulating him "on some courageous steps that he has taken around the issue of normalizing Turkish/Armenian relations", and encouraging him "to continue to move forward along this path". On that occasion, contrary to the spirit and the word of the protocols and the position of the US, Russia and the EU, Erdogan has again linked relations between Armenia and Azerbaijan to the Armenia-Turkey rapprochement by stating that "more impetus in the Minsk process is going to have a very positive impact on the overall process, because the normalization process between Turkey and Armenia is very much related to these issues".

It is self-evident that the stakes are high in the Turkish-Armenian rapprochement. The risk of losing the window of opportunity that will not remain open for long, is high. If it failed now, the whole process would need to wait for another generation of leaders in both countries, and even then it is likely that they would still consider it as a political hot potato.

Perspectives

If there is a breakthrough in Armenia-Turkey relations, the threat assessments defining security strategies on both sides are set to be modified. This implies more stability in the region. For Armenia, among other effects, it will bring more opportunities to strengthen the complementary nature of its foreign and security policies. It will also strengthen the country as such, as a market, as a producer and as a developing stable and reliable player in the region.

Turkey is a relevant actor with a particular perspective on this scenario. A key member of NATO and candidate for the EU membership, Turkey seems to be seriously committed to a result-oriented political cooperation when it comes to multilateral actions, for instance in the NATO framework. Simultaneously, the country still has to fully demonstrate its commitment to its declared "zero problems" policy with its neighbours. In other words, it has to begin delivering concrete policy actions in its relations with Armenia, and pursue a genuine reconciliation. This process would trigger multidimensional cooperation with Armenia through strong confidence-building measures implemented by both sides and backed up by the major actors involved, namely the Euro-Atlantic community and Russia.

Clearly, the major stumbling point remains the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Decoupling between the Armenian-Turkish reconciliation and the Nagorno-Karabakh resolution is a precondition for the success of the process. While the beneficial effects of the Armenian-Turkish rapprochement on the resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict are evident, linking these two issues before the

ratification of the protocols by the Armenian and Turkish parliaments will render both disputes unsolvable. Azerbaijan will make no concessions allowing a solution on Karabakh if they know that this will also entail the opening of Armenia's border with Turkey. No progress on Karabakh will continue to block Turkey from ratifying – a vicious circle.

But can the two processes really be decoupled entirely? It seems to be a fact that for large parts of the Turkish society, government and parliament, there will always remain at least an indirect link. Unfortunately, the Turkish government does not seem to do anything to promote a decoupling and to prepare MPs and the public for a softer link, namely that the ratification and implementation of the protocols will promote a peaceful solution between Armenia and Azerbaijan. On the contrary, they fear that Armenia might become bold enough to stop any conciliatory step in the Karabakh negotiations. That is why the Prime Minister undiplomatically demanded significant progress on the Karabakh dispute BEFORE his parliament could ratify the protocols.

Observers of the negotiations about Karabakh mostly agree that a resolution of this conflict is very likely to take several years rather than months. Together with the demotivating effect that this coupling has on Azerbaijan to allow for any progress, this condition becomes a heavy burden and likely killer of the protocols.

But Prime Minister Erdogan never asked for a complete settlement of the conflict. The question is what in his eyes would be a significant progress on Karabakh, which would make Turkish MPs swing to vote in favour of the protocols. The most widely spread view on this is the handover of some of the territories around Nagorno-Karabakh, from which Azeri troupes used to fire heavy artillery on Karabakh and which the Armenian army controls as a security buffer zone to prevent that.

The Turkish fears that such a handover would be unlikely once Armenia receives the freedom of an open border are in so far unfounded, as Armenia has clearly stated in the Minsk Group negotiations that they are ready to make this handover as part of a comprehensive peace deal with security guarantees for the population of Karabakh. It is inconceivable to give up the control over these territories without a peace deal and without these security guarantees. In short, Prime Minister Erdogan is expecting the impossible.

In order to last in time, the solution has to be endogenous, but upheld by international efforts. In this perspective, the EU together with other actors involved in the region should be ready to contribute to the post-conflict rehabilitation and peace-keeping, once a final resolution to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is found. Such an involvement will undoubtedly strengthen the EU's international stance on the combination of civil and military tools for conflict resolution and international advocacy for multilateralism.

Finally, the Armenian Genocide is a very important issue. After almost a century of hostility, Turkey's acknowledgement of the Genocide would be a major catalyst for the success of the whole process. The EU has acknowledged the Genocide through both the European Parliament and a number of key member states, demonstrating its strong stance on this issue. However, it seems more realistic that Turkey can come to a less nationalistic view on their past after exchanges of information between Armenia and Turkey become possible and normal, i.e. after establishing normal relations. That said, the whole process is very likely to die if Turkey appears to be playing on time, i.e. using the rapprochement only in order to avert an explicit acknowledgement of the Genocide in the yearly commemoration by the US President on 24 April.

Conclusion and policy recommendations

Ensuring security and stability in the South Caucasus is a key priority for the EU, Russia and the USA. A transformation of the Armenia-Turkey enmity logic is essential to guaranteeing stability across the macro region. The EU should commit itself to implementing serious confidence building measures for the ongoing process. Waiting for the conclusion of the process is very likely going to be too late. In

order to add consistency to its action in the region, the EU should also coordinate its policies with Russia. In fact, normalisation of Armenia-Turkey relations and its stabilising effects over the wider region can be considered as the most appropriate occasion for the three to score a trilateral success. Furthermore, it will be the *casus pax* they need to re-launch their dialogue.

The way out of the conditionality is possible if Turkey and Armenia respect the other's sensitivities and if the international community continues to exercise pressure on the conclusion of the process. Nagorno-Karabakh is not mentioned as a condition for ratification, in fact, it is not mentioned at all. And even following the recently circulated Turkish interpretation of the protocols' reference to *territorial integrity* as a reference to Karabakh, this could not be a condition for ratification but on the contrary a commitment that would only FOLLOW from ratification, for example in the context of a peace deal. The EU needs to stress this as any bundling would overburden the whole package and turn it into an unsolvable Gordian knot.

At the same time, Armenia could surprise all players and assure the position of the constructive player by publicly assuring that they have no intention to keep the districts surrounding Karabakh, once a peace deal with security guarantees and a feasible corridor have been agreed upon. This statement, though made in the Minsk Group negotiations, has so far never clearly been made public. However, the Armenian government should do this only as part of an agreement with the Erdogan government that this does constitute the *significant progress* he is seeking. Armenia would not see such a move in the context of the protocols whereas Turkey would – but the result could be a way out of the current impasse.

Finally, there is a need to deal with the different calendars of the two governments. For Armenia, the window of opportunity closes with every day that the next Genocide commemoration gets closer, i.e. 24 April 2010. They could not accept that Turkey uses the open protocol ratification to push US President Obama a second time into using vague language on the Genocide in his annual commemoration letter, just to keep the rapprochement undisturbed. Essentially, this means that the Armenian side may give up hope, if the protocols are not ratified by the end of March or at least before 24 April 2010. The Turkish side, however, seems to think more in dimensions of 6 to 18 months for the ratification, allowing enough time to swing the Turkish parliament. In fact, several sources indicate that the Turkish government favours a ratification after the next parliamentary elections in 2011. This long delay contains considerable risks, not only because nobody knows the setup of the next parliament, but also because any development in the two countries or just in any of the other players involved, including Russia, the EU, the USA and Azerbaijan, could in the meantime make the ratification impossible.

Therefore, the international community should press for a quick ratification. They should continue emphasising the importance of regionalisation and economic growth in the Southern Caucasus in order to uphold peace efforts generated internally and to counter regional hegemony. To reduce the risk of potential regional hegemonies they should assist local actors in achieving stability and security. In this process, the EU, Russia and the USA should try to capitalise on the expertise acquired in the post-Dayton Balkans.

The normalisation of relations between Armenia and Turkey will be a truly historic development, as it will signify the first resolution of a dispute in the South Caucasus by purely diplomatic means. In this regard, the EU has not only the responsibility to contribute to the process, but the opportunity to project its soft-power and reaffirm its stance for multilateralism.

- **The EU should fulfil the role of a guarantor for the implementation of Armenia-Turkey agreements**, in order to make sure that the protocols are first ratified by both Parliaments, and then fully implemented by the parties. The Swiss mediated Armenia-Turkey normalisation talks lack a guarantor for the implementation of the protocols' provisions and the broader normalisation process. The EU should together with Switzerland guide the rapprochement between Armenia and Turkey.

- **The EU should apply “conditioned anchoring” to both parties**, an easy-to-win case for the EU stance on the use of soft-power in conflict transformation. By “conditioned anchoring” we mean the process in which the Union grants financial, economic and political incentives to the parties involved, conditioned to further progress in the implementation of the protocols. The Union can perform “conditioned anchoring” in the framework of the accession talks with Turkey and ENP/EaP conditionality, when it comes to Armenia.
- **The EU should, among other initiatives, implement Confidence Building Measures in Armenia and Turkey**, promote cross-border projects and strengthen P2P contacts. The whole process is not only intergovernmental, civil societies on both sides have to be actively involved, as they are the primary stakeholders of the process.
- **The EU, together with all the third parties involved, should press for a quick ratification, using the current window of opportunity and momentum in the process, using also the deadlines of the political calendar (24 April) as a catalyst.** They should use all means in order to guarantee a consistent follow up of the signature of the protocols. It should push for their ratification by the two parliaments in a reasonable timeframe and refuse any new preconditions in the whole process.
- **Armenia should seek to make a constructive move on the Karabakh dispute, regardless of the protocols.** The protocols have no link to Karabakh, but they should also not be an obstacle for progress on Karabakh. It is anyway the Armenian government’s policy to seek a peaceful settlement of this conflict, so, for example, a clear and public description of the Armenian stance on the districts surrounding Karabakh, as described above, could provide the missing trust and clarity on this sensitive issue. Armenia would keep being the constructive and proactive player, while providing arguments for the moderate forces in Turkey – without preempting the necessary comprehensive peace deal for Nagorno-Karabakh.
- **Turkey should make the political investment necessary to conclude this process, which the government says it is wholeheartedly engaged in and which will ensure Turkey’s status as a regional power.** Turkey’s reliability and credibility would be seriously at risk if it plays on time while making little efforts to ensure a positive vote through their comfortable majority in the Turkish parliament. In most countries heads of governments that submit a major project to their parliament and then cannot assure a majority have to undergo a vote of non-confidence. This cannot be in the interest of the Gul/Erdogan government.

The EU, by its vocation of soft-power player and advocate for multilateralism when it comes to CFSP and in virtue of its pre-existing strong nexus with the parties involved, fits perfectly into the role of an honest-broker and guarantor for the ongoing process. Its success in this framework would not require troop deployment on the ground, large financial burdens or hard legitimisation processes which are politically costly.

Finally, the Union will score one more success story in its stance for the use of soft-power in conflict transformation. The winners of all this will be all parties who seek stability in the South Caucasus, especially Armenia and Turkey.

* This paper was written by Sargis Ghazaryan and Michael Kambeck, reflecting exclusive input from high-ranking officials very closely involved in the process on both sides.