

Normalization of Turkish-Armenian relations should continue

BURCU GÜLTEKIN PUNSMANN

The signing of the protocols to establish diplomatic relations and the development of relations by the Turkish and the Armenian Ministers of Foreign Affairs in Zurich on Oct. 10, 2009, concluded two years of bilateral negotiations conducted under the Swiss mediation. This first inter-governmental text ever signed between Turkey and Armenia since the Treaty of Kars on Oct. 13, 1921, has been hailed as a harbinger of winds of change in South Caucasus where the status quo characterized by conflicts divides, blockades and trade restrictions is far from satisfactory.

Both sides have poured in months of effort to work out the extremely careful wording of the texts. The protocols establish the ground of the bilateral inter-governmental consensus. The protocols incorporate a detailed outline for establishing diplomatic ties, opening the common border and improving bilateral and human-to-human relations according to a set of principles and a timetable. It would be naive and misleading to assume that the texts aim at full normalization and an overnight settlement of all problems between Turkey and Armenia and Turks and Armenians. The ratification of the protocols by the parliaments of both countries is only a start to the reconciliation process between Turks and Armenia.

The protocols are pointing at the need for co-operative actions for enhancing regional stability and security aiming at ensuring the democratic and sustainable development of the region and are highlighting specifically the importance of co-operation in the fields of science and education, aiming at preserving the cultural heritage of both sides and launching common cultural projects. The protocols are also envisaging the creation of a sub-commission on trade, tourism and economic cooperation. The scope of activity and aims of the sub-commission on the historical dimension are clearly worded. The sub-commission will carry on an impartial scientific examination of the historical records and archives to define existing problems and formulate recommendation. The sub-commission aims at opening a channel of dialogue and enabling Turks and Armenian to jointly look back to their common history and bridge progressively the historical gap so sadly symbolized by the sealed border between the two countries.

Both sides have indeed a lot to win on the regional and the international arena from this proactive problem-solving attitude. As expressed by President Sargsyan, "The initiative to normalize Armenian-Turkish relations is in the epicenter of attention of the international community"

and replied by President Gül, "The bilateral efforts aimed at the normalization of Turkish-Armenian relations attracted due attention world-wide by creating a new hope for peace in our conflict-ridden geography."

However today the process seems to be in a vacuum. Ahmet Davutoğlu, the Turkish Minister of Foreign Affairs introduced the protocols to the Parliament end October 2009, with a speech, depicting the recognition of the border as a major gain for Turkey. The protocol on the establishment of diplomatic relations confirm the mutual recognition of the existing border between the two countries as defined by the relevant treaties of international law. However the minister's speech didn't end with a call for ratification.

On Jan. 12, the Constitutional Court of the Republic of Armenia has declared its decision of constitutional conformity on the protocols with a short statement. However the publication on Jan. 18 – that came as a surprise and probably was motivated by domestic political reasons – on the grounds that the decision has generated a dangerous tendency to interpret and read between the lines a text of diplomatic consensus. It is important to bear in mind that the signatures of ministers Nalbantyan and Davutoğlu ended the negotiation process. The bottom line is that the court decided the protocols are in compliance with the constitution of Armenia. It added no qualification to the key sentence spelling out this final decision.

The Armenian government has sent this week the ratification papers for the deal to parliament. Some new voices evoke the eventuality, as slight as it might be, that Armenia has taken the initiative by ratifying first the protocols. However the fear to be let down is here: the National Assembly of Armenia began debating on Feb. 23 a government bill that would make it easier for Armenia to annul its normalization agreements with Turkey if Ankara continues to delay their ratification.

The process of normalizing Turkish-Armenian relations and the resolution of Karabakh cannot be inter-linked. None of the members of the OSCE Minsk Group seems ready to accept a change of the format of negotiations. Despite the six meetings held in 2009, Armenia and Azerbaijan only reached an agreement on the wording of the preamble of the updated version of the 2007 Madrid Principles in Sochi on Jan. 25. The normalization of Turkish-Armenian relations has the capacity of fostering new dynamics in the settlement of the Karabakh conflict, the most intractable conflict and among the biggest obstacles to region-wide cooperation. At this stage, the interruption of the Turkish-Armenian bilateral relations will dissipate the international attention focused on the region and decrease the chances

to reach in a foreseeable future an agreement on the conflict over Karabakh.

If the window of opportunity is lost and the process is interrupted, the perspective to establish normal state-to-state relations between Turkey and Armenia can be lost for many years. That might push to region back, far beyond where the talks started. The degree of disappointment and disillusion will be commensurate with the intensity of hope generated by the visits of the presidents and the breathtaking signature ceremony in Zurich. The initiative of the two presidents has brought additional source of legitimacy to Turkish and Armenian civil society and business community looking forward for increased interaction between the two countries.

In Armenia, the main motivation goes far beyond the expectation of economic gains. The aspiration to reach Turkey and to be allowed to go beyond the border is essential. Turks on the borderland are also curious to discover their neighbors. It would be misleading to take for granted that there is a strong opposition on the grassroots level in Turkey to the normalization of relations and the opening of the border with Armenia. The same curiosity and aspiration to rediscover the Armenian neighbor is present in many Anatolian cities. The issue of the normalization of Turkish-Armenian relations is indeed a popular one in Turkey. It is just not an issue on the national level. It's hard to say that the signing of the protocols has triggered an animated debate in Turkey. This points to the fundamental asymmetry of Turkish-Armenian relations. Armenia cannot forget about Turkey. Even a Turkish policy of indifference will impact the Armenian side.

The exchange of messages between presidents Gül and Sarkisian on 7-11 February re-asserted the adherence on both sides to the primary provisions of these protocols and stressed the existence of a shared political will to complete the process that was jointly initiated. The necessity to stand behind words and to support words by deeds were emphasized by both President Gül and President Sarkisian, as well as the reciprocal commitment to honor commitments and display political courage and vision.

The personal re-involvement of the presidents of both countries will hopefully push the issue of normalization of bilateral relations beyond domestic politics. There is a pressing need to support the decision-making process with practical and symbolic steps that will prepare people mentally for the opening of the border.

*Ms. Burcu Gültekin Punsmann is a Foreign Policy Analyst at the Economic Policy Research Foundation of Turkey (TEPAV) in Ankara

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