

A further deterioration in relations between Azerbaijan and Turkey will tremendously change the course of Azerbaijan's foreign policy. Ever since Azerbaijan's independence, Turkey was not only a staunch ally of Azerbaijan, but a link for the country to the West. With relations between the two countries severed, Azerbaijan will be left with the choices of having closer relations with Iran or Russia. The EU and USA would lose influence in Azerbaijan. Unfortunately, the situation in the Caucasus reached the point where it is not possible to satisfy all sides. By winning Armenia through opening the border and economic incentives, Turkey and the West will undermine their relations with Azerbaijan.

Nevertheless, despite the unfriendly moves of the Turkish establishment, Azerbaijan's leaders are not inclined to move into Moscow's sphere of influence. This desire comes not only from the fear of political dependence on Moscow, but also the absence of economic prospects in relations with Russia. Turkmenistan is a

vivid example of how reliance on Russia leads to the loss of many billions in economic revenues. Azerbaijan fears that a decision to undermine Nabucco could make Russia a monopolist in Azerbaijani gas purchases, subsequently leading to lower gas prices. Thus, it is not in Azerbaijani interests to torpedo the project that could bring additional political and economic dividends to the country.

The next few months will be decisive in the Caucasus. If Turkey ratifies protocols without developing a solution to the Karabakh conflict, Azerbaijan will definitely reconsider its relations with Turkey and the Western countries. Azerbaijan will not zealously pursue the Nabucco pipeline and could halt its participation in regional projects. More importantly, ratification of the protocols will reinforce the negative public perception toward West and Turkey, leading Azerbaijanis to believe that the military option is the only solution for the Karabakh conflict

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After Years of Silence, Turkey and Armenia Will Try to Come Up with a New Language of Understanding

By Karin Karakashi, Istanbul

Abstract

The author, an Armenian living in Turkey, examines how to build trust and confidence between Armenians and Turks. Past Turkish state policy drove wedges between citizens of Turkey who had different religious and ethnic backgrounds. Now efforts to address both the Armenian and Kurdish issues should be seen as part of Turkey's overall democratization process. Literature in general and the stories and memories of ordinary people who survived 1915 can help build a new type of politics.

Protocol of Trust and Confidence

Sometimes the reaction to something tells more than the event itself. This is also true for the Protocol on the Establishment of Diplomatic Relations and the Protocol on the Development of Bilateral Relations, signed by the foreign ministers of Armenia and Turkey on October 10, 2009, under Swiss mediation. While debates go on in both countries and among the members of the Diaspora, it is becoming clear that establishing reciprocal trust and understanding will take more than a signature.

In order to understand why these protocols represent a historical step, it is necessary to remember a few details about the recent situation of Turkey and Armenia. Though Turkey was one of the first states to recognize the independence of Armenia in 1991, it then turned the Nagorno Karabakh conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia into a pretext for closing the border with its neighbor. Accordingly, there have been no diplomatic relations between Turkey and Armenia and the borders have been closed since 1993. The situation becomes even more absurd when one takes into consideration that ever

since the ceasefire agreement signed between Azerbaijan and Armenia, representatives of these fighting states have come together several times, while Armenia has only been a ghost for Turkey.

In signing these protocols, both Turkey and Armenia declared readiness to establish diplomatic relations and open the common border. A timetable was set for the implementation of the protocols as they affected political, economic, trade, tourism, energy, transport, scientific, technical, cultural and environmental issues. The parties decided that Nagorno Karabakh will be handled separately and will no longer be submitted as the precondition for potential relations between Turkey and Armenia. Hopes are also present that the US, Russia and the EU will create common interest fields for Turkey and Armenia in order to restore relations as a completely independent process from the Nagorno Karabakh conflict.

Another important point which concerns history and yet shapes the future is defined as an “aim to restore mutual confidence between the two nations,” by establishing “an impartial scientific examination of the historical records and archives to define existing problems and formulate recommendations”. It is obvious that understanding what happened in 1915 will necessitate more than an impartial scientific examination if we want to reach moral justice. Still, there are special expressions in the protocol’s text that contain deeper meaning than mere diplomatic nuances and make clear what needs to be done: “bearing in mind the importance of the creation and maintenance of an atmosphere of trust and confidence between the two countries” and “considering the perspectives of developing their bilateral relations, based on confidence and respect to their mutual interests” are two of them, the key words being “trust and confidence.”

When countries set the goal of achieving a “normalization of bilateral relations,” it is also an implicit confession that there was an abnormality internalized for a long time.

Sources of Abnormality

In order to understand the reasons of abnormality, we have to mention the state policy of division. While the government emphasizes national unity all the time in Turkey, people bound to the country by citizenship but possessing different ethnic or religious identities have been distanced from each other. Thus, the words “Kurdish” and “Armenian” were usually followed by the concepts of “problem” or “issue,” revealing that something problematic exists with these identities. Moreover, the

problems were separate and confronted with different, frozen tactics: 1915 was a historical taboo for decades or a subject of official history, which was related and taught with the use of hostile generalizations that described “traitor Armenians collaborating with Russian armies and thus deported.” The denial of the Kurdish Problem on the other hand, led to a civil war and the hardening of ethnic hostility.

Only recently did we go through a historical period where for the first time the correlation of these two problems has been acknowledged. Now we are seeking a solution to both simultaneously.

All the tension present in the hard-fought parliamentary debates display once again how we need clear information and mutual talks in order to overcome all the obstacles in our mentality that block a real democratization process. It is necessary to win the support of public opinion because when inner dynamics are not included, this great shift of mentality cannot take place. Merely superficial changes can easily give rise to ultra-nationalistic outbursts that were once defined as the result of “outside pressure.” It should be made clear that what is done is actually done for the sake of the country.

Domestic Obstacles, Parallel Realities

The domestic obstacles blocking advances on both issues speak for themselves. Although the ministers of foreign affairs of both Turkey and Armenia came together to sign the protocol, it was almost impossible for the government and opposition parties of Turkey to meet at the National Assembly to talk about these recent developments. The same scene was repeated when the parliament began discussing ways to address the Kurdish Problem and the opposition parties produced the same antagonistic discourse of “terror and blood.” As government is involved in all these attempts, it is of crucial importance that stability be preserved both in this new discourse and in actions to follow.

There is still a situation of what I call parallel realities: something and its complete opposite happen and exist side by side. Thus, while the Kurdish Issue is acknowledged as one of the greatest problems of the Republic and discussed in the Parliament, Kurdish children present at a demonstration are tried as members of a terrorist organization; Democratic Society-Kurdish Party MPs face prosecution; and obstacles remain blocking the use and teaching of the Kurdish language.

As for the Armenian Issue, while hostile expressions against Armenians continue to exist both in school books and in the media, while there are still efforts to escape from history, and while the trial for the mur-

derer of Hrant Dink is not used to reveal the state mechanism that made him such an open and vulnerable target, there will be little sense that the signed protocol has any meaning.

What politicians call an “opening” is actually a meeting, a coming together. Efforts to resolve both the Kurdish and Armenian issues should be seen as part of Turkey’s democratization process. These problems do not belong to Kurds or Armenians alone; they are actually the problems of Turkey. Once they are solved, every single citizen will be relieved of the burdens on their shoulders.

We all saw how the speeches supposed to be delivered after the protocol signing ceremony on October 10 created a crisis that could only be solved through the intervention of third parties. This again shows that we still must travel a long path in order to reach a true face-to-face dialogue. And enough time has been spent in vain.

The fact that Turkish and Armenian identities included antagonistic depictions of each other, let them become impoverished, as hate weakens the soul. In order to overcome the great burden of denial, an official policy of forgetting was imposed on Turkish society that led to a “learned ignorance.” After centuries of a common life on the same territory, new generations of Turkish citizens were unaware of the existence of the Armenian people. The situation reached such a degree that some would ask “Where do you come from?” when a person said “I am Armenian.”

When the founder and editor-in-chief of Turkey’s first weekly Turkish-Armenian bilingual newspaper *Agos*, Hrant Dink, called on Armenians of the Diaspora to be aware of and free themselves from the “poisoning effect of hatred against the Turks,” he also wanted to call attention to the problematic past of Armenian identity. Now that an independent Armenia existed, all productive energy should be used to boost the prosperity of this new country. As for the heavy burden of 1915, he proposed carrying it on one’s shoulders until the end of the world. This reality was above any efforts to convince others of its existence. It was their own moral struggle and problematic of being a human to acknowledge it. Still, efforts should be made in order to clear the minds of Turkish people who had been taught lies for decades. That’s why the democratization process in Turkey was the key solution for him, given the fact that only in a democratized country could people question their past and come to terms with it.

Ironically, his language of peace, so strong in conviction, was turned into a monster when his call to Diaspora

Armenians to build an identity of reconciliation was distorted out of context and defined as an insult to Turkishness, as if he had said: “Turkish blood is poisonous.”

When we speak of normalization, it is necessary to remember and go through all these abnormalities. Abnormalities that ultimately cost Hrant Dink his life. And abnormalities that turned his funeral into an unforgettable demonstration of the Turkish people who marched in silence with placards in their hands: “We are all Armenians. We are all Hrant Dink.”

Opening up is to free oneself from one’s own obstacles. When you are free, you feel confident. When you are confident, you can no longer be contented with taught fears. In order to provide trust, it is necessary to turn the conditions of the protocol into a demand for freedom. What we signed for was actually our own freedom. Because anger, fear and uncertainty only imprison people. Demonstrations and protests, both in Armenia and among the Diaspora, showed that life is not easy on the other side of the closed border either. A lack of trust leads to a feeling of uncertainty and people all the time feel as if they are betraying their own identity when they move closer to each other.

In fact life offers us miraculous opportunities to meet. When the legendary voice of Kurdish music, Armenian Aram Tigran, passed away recently, his desire to be buried in Diyarbakır became a hot point on the political agenda. Officials denied his request, pointing out that Tigran was not a citizen of Turkey. When he was ultimately buried in Brussels, a handful of Diyarbakır soil was brought to his funeral in exile. Born from a family of Batman, he sang songs in Kurdish, Armenian, Assyrian, Arabic, Greek and Turkish. He was the personification of Anatolia and a symbol of opening up the soul. Yet the courage and vision of politics fell short of his embrace.

The language of politics needs to reach ordinary people on both sides. This can best be achieved when the discourse of politics is widened to include the stories of ordinary people that usually finds its expression in literature rather than history. Here I have to mention the famous US writer William Saroyan who was born in Fresno, sought his lost motherland of Bitlis, Anatolia, and also dreamed of Armenia as a Utopia. Saroyan smiled in all his pain, saying: “If I want to do anything, I want to speak a more universal language... Babies who have not yet been taught to speak any language are the only race of the earth, the race of man: all the rest is pretence, what we call civilization, hatred, fear, desire for strength”.

The same was true when Turkish lawyer Fethiye Çetin told the story of her grandmother Seher, who

one day confessed to her granddaughter that she was born as an Armenian girl, Heranuş. Çetin's search for the Armenian part of her family became a turning point in the recent history of Turkey, now that the atrocities and suffering of 1915, that taboo time, have been told from the perspective of a survivor. Çetin's *My Grandmother* became a call and many others contributed their own stories, now collected under the title *The Grandchildren*; a book edited by Fethiye Çetin and Ayşe Gül Altınay, actually revealing another way of handling history and building up the future.

We are going through tough days. Still I believe that to fall into despair would only be a luxury as there are so many things to be done to diminish misunder-

ings. The identity of being Armenian in Turkey can at this stage even turn into a priority as this identity in itself brings together both parties' controversies. Thus finding a solution is not a political need, but an existential necessity for me.

I stand in between Turkish and Armenian people reaching hands to all the courageous ones to take the first step. When I can embrace Armenians of Armenia and the Diaspora and the people of Turkey, I will then become what I am actually called: an Armenian of Turkey. The souls will find peace, among them the dearest one of Hrant Dink, inspiring us all to a new promise of trust and confidence. Confidence in oneself and trust in the other.

About the Author

Karin Karakaşlı worked from 1996 to 2006 as an editor and head of the editorial department of the Turkish-Armenian weekly newspaper *Agos* and as a columnist for its Turkish and Armenian sections. She is currently studying comparative literature, works as a university tutor of translation and as an Armenian teacher at the college. She is a columnist for the Sunday edition of *Radikal* newspaper, *Radikal 2*.