

VOICES FROM ARMENIA AND TURKEY ON THE FUTURE OF RELATIONS

This is the second compilation of interviews on bilateral relations conducted in Turkey and Armenia with NGO and political party representatives. The project, supported by the Eurasia Partnership Foundation and USAID was carried out by the Analytical Center on Globalization and Regional Cooperation. Seven interviews were included in the Fall 2007 issue, and in this issue we include the full interviews with two representatives of Armenian NGOs and two Turkish experts. In addition we have included the sections relating to the role of international organizations of four leading Armenian NGOs. Clashing emotions and conflictory logical frameworks shine through in the comments, along with, in parts, a sense of humor...



1. Civic Disobedience Initiative

Led by former Minister of Foreign Affairs of Armenia Alexander Arzoumanian, this Initiative was formed in 2007, rallying around issues like human rights and fair elections. Mr. Arzoumanian is currently under arrest due to his opposition activities.

Interview conducted with: Alexander Arzoumanyanyan, Chairman.

How would you characterize the present state of the Armenian-Turkish relationship?

At present, there are no relations on state level. There are contacts between the societies, on cultural and educational issues, and in the sphere of sports. But establishing diplomatic relations is becoming more and more difficult. I consider the present state of Armenian-Turkish relations not satisfactory.

How would you characterize Armenian and Turkish official approaches to the establishment of relationships between the two states?

Both states set preconditions for the establishment of relations, and I firmly believe that such approach is not future-oriented. Although during the recent years Armenian authorities have been declaring that they are ready to establish relations without any precondition, their actions do not correspond to their declarations. The same is true for Turkish authorities. Turkey has been conducting a non-productive policy ever since Armenia's declaration of independence, setting preconditions before Armenia, i.e. connecting Armenian-Turkish relations with the resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

From your point of view, is there a difference between the opinion of the Armenian society and the official approach?

During the recent years anti-Turkish propaganda has been intensified in Armenia; however, at the same time there have been more contacts between non-governmental organizations and journalists. There are already groups of individuals, institutions, and persons who are more interested in development of Armenian-Turkish relations than the authorities of two countries. That process on the level of societies is inescapable. In Armenia, as well as in Turkey, the civil society is a step ahead of the authorities.

What is your opinion about the reason why the two states have not established diplomatic relationships yet?

Turkey set non-productive preconditions from the very beginning. When Armenia had declared independence, Armenian authorities had stated that they had been ready to open the border and establish diplomatic relations without any precondition. However, there had not been a response from Turkey. Later, after the change of authorities in Armenia, Armenia's approach became more extreme and identical to Turkey's. As a result, we have what we have.

From your point of view, how much does the Armenian side's recent approach about opening the border without preconditions contribute to the progress in relationships?

The approach about opening the border without preconditions is not something new. That approach has been existing from the moment Armenia declared its independence. Now that approach exists just on the level of good wishes. The incumbent Armenian authorities say that only in order to be liked by the international community.

From your point of view, who suffers or benefits because of the closed border between Armenia and Turkey?

The situation is favorable for all those who are opposed to the success of Armenia's independent statehood.

From your point of view, what actions should be taken by the two sides for opening of the border?

I was a founding member of the Turkish-Armenian Reconciliation Committee (TARC), and as a result of our four-year-long work we presented our proposals that would contribute to improvement of Armenian-Turkish relations to both states' governments. All members of TARC, Armenians as well as Turks, believed that the border between two states should be opened without preconditions. Meanwhile, political and civic initiatives should prepare the public opinion in favor of friendly relations; that would not only lead to opening of the border but also to establishment of diplomatic relations, with all its consequences.

What would the two sides gain from opening the border (in economic, political, cultural, social, and other spheres)?

Opening of the border may have only positive consequences in all spheres for both sides. Armenia would have an alternative route to Europe, transportation costs would decline by 30 percent. Mutual trade would flourish, while at the present third countries benefit, as trade between Armenia and Turkey is conducted through them. Armenia's and Turkey's less developed regions would also benefit. Therefore, opening of the border is advantageous for both sides, and first of all in the economic sense.

What negative consequences may have opening of the border for two sides?

There are political actors who believe that opening of the border would have negative effect for Armenia. This issue is worth discussing with the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (the Dashnaks). I believe it is unreasonable to have a closed border with a neighbor. The present situation is negative.

From your point of view, in which areas should the development of Armenian-Turkish relations begin?

The relations are already developing. Intellectuals are always the first to establish relationships – through joint concerts, exhibitions, discussions. Nowadays, the two countries' journalists also have rather active contacts. Even common magazines are printed.

May cultural dialogue contribute to the establishment of diplomatic relations (e.g., the restoration of Akhtamar's Holy Cross Church)?

Intercultural dialogue is very important. Work towards restoration of the churches of Ani has been underway. There are also working groups discussing the issue of restoration of other gems of cultural heritage. At the present, Turkish laws are being changed, and Armenian Patriarchy of Turkey has been entitled to decide about the future of Armenian cultural heritage. Any similar action contributes to cooperation. The young generation of Turks is, in general, badly informed about Armenian-Turkish relationships. For instance, during recent years many young Turks have visited the Patriarchy and said that they are Armenians, that they had to keep their ethnic origin secret, but now they want to be baptized following the rite of the Armenian Church.

From your point of view, may the religious differences of the two peoples hinder the establishment of relationships or contribute to it?

We have been living in this region for 3000 years, and experience shows that at least during the last millennium we have always been surrounded by Islamic states. Armenian communities have always prospered in the Islamic world and clashes with Armenians did not happen because of religious reasons. It was not a coincidence that after the genocide many Armenians emigrated not to the West but to Islamic states.

Can the two states' legislatures contribute to the establishment of official relations?

Surely. The legislatures have opportunities to clarify the approaches of two sides.

What role can non-governmental organizations and the media play for the development of Armenian-Turkish relations?

The media can play a very important role, and this is understood both in Armenia and in Turkey.

From your point of view, does the presence of the 1915 Armenian genocide recognition issue on Armenian foreign policy agenda contribute to the development of Armenian-Turkish relationships or restrain it?

In 1915, a crime was committed and Turkey should be the first to recognize and condemn it. It is very logical that our fellow nationals in many countries of the world voice the issue of recognition and condemnation of the Armenian genocide, as they now are in those countries because of this.

But recognition of the Armenian genocide by different states' legislatures now creates obstacles for the development of Armenian-Turkish relations. The parliaments' resolutions are just declarative. It has been repeated for ten years that Robert Kocharyan voiced the issue of Armenian genocide from the UN pulpit. But any issue may be voiced from the UN pulpit. There had even been an occasion when a head of state took off his shoe and hit the pulpit, but nothing changed because of that.

There should be no speeches from the UN pulpit, there are appropriate procedures, and there are resolutions that should be used. Bold declarations just increase the opposition to the solution of issues. The Turkish government

always repeats that Armenia incites the lobbyists; but they forget that a number of states had condemned the Armenian genocide before Armenia's declaration of independence, back in 1960s. I do not think that the issue of recognition and condemning the Armenian genocide should be included on Armenian foreign policy agenda.

From your point of view, what was the state of Armenian-Turkish relations before 1915, what positions did Armenians have in the Ottoman Empire and what influence did they have?

One should refer to the 1878 Berlin Congress to answer this question. In the beginning and end of the 19th century the Armenians were a minority – an oppressed one – and during the rule of Sultan Hamid there were massacred regularly. The massacres happened in response to the Armenians' demands for autonomy. Since 1871, when the issue of Armenian autonomy was proclaimed, the declining Ottoman Empire was very resentful to all minorities' liberation efforts. The minorities that used to live in geographically remote parts of the Empire managed to break away, and the resentment turned against the Armenians and Greeks.

From your point of view, how does the process of Nagorno-Karabakh conflict resolution influence Armenian-Turkish relations?

From the moment when Armenia became independent we declared that the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict must not influence Armenian-Turkish relations; our point of view has not changed. Armenian-Turkish relations must not in any case be dependent on the Nagorno-Karabakh issue. The Nagorno-Karabakh issue is a dispute between Azerbaijan and Nagorno-Karabakh and it must be solved by means of negotiations. Turkish governments' existing policy, which makes the Armenia-Turkey relationship dependent on the Nagorno-Karabakh issue, is not correct, to say the least. Turkey, as well as Armenia, should not engage any third country in the relationship.

What influence do Armenian-Turkish relations have on the regional developments?

The present state of Armenian-Turkish relations has a negative impact on regional developments. Absence of Armenian-Turkish relations on one hand, and Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict on the other hand make Armenia's participation in the realization of regional programs impossible.

Are there regional issues on which Armenia's and Turkey's interests overlap?

Of course there are. Both Turkey and Armenia should be interested in Turkey's accession to the European Union. Two countries' interests match here. That would give Armenia an opportunity to share a border with the EU.

Are there global challenges on which Armenia's and Turkey's interests match?

Both Turkey and Armenia are very important for Europe's security framework in the 21st century. Both states have an important role to play in the common security of Europe.

From your point of view, can international organizations facilitate the improvement of Armenian-Turkish relations?

They can only help, facilitate, of course, if both sides have such a wish.

What is your attitude about Turkey's possible EU membership?

Very positive. I welcome it and think that Turkey should become an EU member.

How would Turkey's EU membership influence Armenian-Turkish relations?

Positively. If Turkey joins the EU it will have to accept certain obligations and carry out fundamental reforms – first of all, in the domain of human rights and democracy. That would only contribute to the support of the Armenian Cause, the issue of 1915 Armenian genocide.

In your opinion, are there images of enemy in Armenia and Turkey? Alas, both in Turkey and Armenia there are people who create such an image.

2. Union of Industrialists and Businessmen of Armenia

The Union of Industrialists and Businessmen of Armenia is a non-governmental organization that aims to promote entrepreneurship and liberal economic legislation. The organization is headed by Arsen Ghazaryan. This interview was conducted with Inga Sargsyan, representing the Union.

Interview conducted with: Inga Sargsyan*

How would you characterize the present state of the Armenian-Turkish relationship?

It is not satisfactory.

How would you characterize Armenian and Turkish official approaches to the establishment of relationships between the two states?

They are bad.

What is your opinion about the reason why the two states have not established diplomatic relationships yet?

There are not enough negotiations and conferences with the participation of historians, politicians, and civil activists.

From your point of view, how much does Armenian side's recent approach about opening the border without preconditions contribute to the progress in relationships?

Opening the border without preconditions would make further negotiations easier.

From your point of view, who suffers or benefits because of the closed border between Armenia and Turkey?

The Armenian and Turkish people who need to live and develop in a healthy atmosphere suffer; politicians with more extreme views benefit.

*The interviewer's name: Viktoria Abrahamyan

From your point of view, what actions should be taken by the two sides for opening of the border?

There should be negotiations between the two sides, supplemented by mediators' efforts based on experience of other states.

What would the two sides gain from opening the border (in economic, political, cultural, social, and other spheres)?

I believe both sides would gain, however, before that the two peoples need to reach an agreement based on respect to each other's feelings.

What negative consequences may the opening of the border have for the two sides?

I do not think there will be negative consequences. As far as I am informed, there has not been an example of two neighbor states suffering from open borders.

From your point of view, in which areas should the development of Armenian-Turkish relationships begin?

Trade, and then gradually, cultural sphere and tourism.

May cultural dialogue contribute to the establishment of diplomatic relations (e.g., the restoration of Akhtamar's Holy Cross Church)?

I think so, yes. I value the restoration of Akhtamar's Holy Cross Church very much, even if there is no cross on top of it. Many churches in Armenia are in worse condition. If Turks restore Ani temple and other Armenian churches, I will praise such actions – even if they are only to show off.

From your point of view, may two peoples religious differences hinder the establishment of relationships or contribute to it?

Iran is not a Christian state either, but there have not been any complications because of it.

What role can non-governmental organizations and the media play for the development of Armenian-Turkish relations?

True historical facts must be presented to both societies; meetings and dialogue should be facilitated; all that will contribute to a positive outcome of the problem.

From your point of view, does the presence of the 1915 Armenian genocide recognition issue on Armenian foreign policy agenda contribute to the development of Armenian-Turkish relationships or restrain it?

It is a fact beyond any doubt and Turks should recognize it if they want to be considered a civilized nation.

From your point of view, what was the state of Armenian-Turkish relations before 1915, what positions did the Armenians hold in the Ottoman Empire and what influence did they have?

Armenians were in a rather good position in the Ottoman Empire. Research should be conducted to uncover the reasons for the deterioration, rooted in internal and external relationships, as Armenians were puppets in big politics.

From your point of view, how does the process of Nagorno-Karabakh conflict resolution influence Armenian-Turkish relations?

I may repeat that we should depart from historical facts. History must not be studied beginning from the Soviet period; facts of earlier history must be reviewed.

What influence do Armenian-Turkish relationships have on the regional developments?

Bad relations cannot have good influence. Bad things must always have bad consequences, good things – good consequences.

Are there regional issues on which Armenia's and Turkey's interests overlap?

It is difficult to say.

Are there global challenges on which Armenia's and Turkey's interests match?

If you mean regional development in general, establishment of relations between societies, normal coexistence of neighbor states, then yes. But national and moral norms must be kept; we may not let our small nation be assimilated in any aspect.

From your point of view, can international organizations facilitate the improvement of Armenian-Turkish relations?

Undoubtedly, they must have their influence; if they don't, what is their mission?

What is your attitude towards Turkey's possible EU membership?

If Turkey complies with all conditions, my opinion is positive. But if the conditions are adopted for Turkey's comfort, I do not believe it is right.

Would you like to add anything?

The issue must be approached with great commitment, with an understanding that this is an issue remaining unsolved for the past 100 years. And I believe that not all possible actions have been applied for making it a success. There should be as many contacts between people on all levels as possible.

The interviewer's name

Karine Asatryan

3. Yerevan Press Club

Interview conducted with: Boris Navasardyan*, Head of Organization

From your point of view, can international organizations facilitate the improvement of Armenian-Turkish relations?

Of course they can, and first of all, the EU, which is a very important structure for Turkey. Taking into account Turkey's attitude towards the EU in connection with the Armenian genocide, I would say that the EU may propose to Turkey and Armenia some formula for resolution of their problems. The USA may also play a positive role in Armenian-Turkish relationships, but at a later stage, when it will become clear in what direction the anti-American sentiments in Turkey are going. Taking into account the progress that Turkey has reached during the recent four years, I think very positively. We know that the road to EU is usually more effective than becoming an EU member. So, Turkey's movement towards EU membership should become more effective. There are two issues here. First, there should be an attempt to speed up the process that may result in Turkey's EU accession without conducting any important reforms. Second, there is the problem of double standards. Those double standards may lead to anti-European sentiments in Turkey.

*The interviewer's name: Karine Asatryan

What is your attitude towards Turkey’s possible EU membership?

Certainly, the EU will apply pressure on Turkey concerning the genocide issue and opening of the border. I have to say that the conditions set before Turkey must be realistic, i.e. Turkey would be able to fulfill them.

How would Turkey’s EU membership influence Armenian-Turkish relationships?

Positively.

4. International Center for Human Development

Interview conducted with: Tevan Poghosyan, Executive Director

From your point of view, can international organizations facilitate the improvement of Armenian-Turkish relations?

International organizations have to create some framework for discussions about the relationships. They also have to specify the “game rules.” The EU has a certain role to play here. OSCE works on democratization issues and by means of monitoring prevents the eruption of war between the two states. However, international institutions demonstrate their weakness; they are motivated by their own interests and they cannot persuade the two states to find out a mechanism that would help the border. Therefore, international institutions have a role to play but they lack power. Turkey has enough leverage to persuade them to make some deals. Turkey does not obey and is not punished.

What is your attitude towards Turkey’s possible EU membership?

If it is in accordance with all standards I will only welcome it.

How would Turkey’s EU membership influence Armenian-Turkish relationships?

If the accession is in accordance with all European standards it will have only a positive influence. In my opinion, in the case of accession, we may solve the issues of genocide recognition, opening of the border, and establishment of diplomatic relations. Moreover, Armenian minorities in Turkey would have more rights. But if EU accession is just a political decision it will have negative consequences.

5. Armenian Office of AEPLAC

Interview conducted with: Tigran Jrbashyan, Director

From your point of view, can international organizations facilitate the improvement of Armenian-Turkish relations?

EU is the only body that can have influence. But we cannot use the system of interests within the EU for our benefit. I may, for example, mention the EU structural fund, which should contribute to regional development. Funds are allocated for regional development. We have calculated that if the borders remain closed and Turkey joins the EU, there will be rather serious changes in the structure of the structural fund. The largest amounts will go to the territory of Western Armenia and, accordingly, countries that now receive that money will lose it. Poland, Romania, Bulgaria, stimulated by their natural economic interests, could now promote our interests: if the Armenian-Turkish border is opened the regions I have mentioned will develop, and as money will go there, the mentioned countries will receive less.

Another example: both Armenia and Turkey are members of the Customs Union. As a matter of fact, one member of the Customs Union creates obstacles for the other member's relations with third countries. The EU could raise that issue without difficulty; Turkey could be told that unwillingness to trade with Armenia is Turkey's own business but the EU demands free movement of goods across the borders.

At the present, we do not raise these issues and do not manage to use the influence of international structures.

What is your attitude towards Turkey's possible EU membership?

Very positive. We must welcome it.

How would Turkey's EU membership influence Armenian-Turkish relations?

Turkey asks the EU to apply the same criteria that were applied to the Eastern European states, and not to ask for more. We should stand next to Turkey and say: Turkey's EU accession must not depend on criteria other than those applied to the Eastern European states. Then we would get an equivalent response from the Turkish society, which would influence the official approach. We do not use these opportunities.

6. European Integration NGO

Interview conducted with: Karen Bekaryan, Head of Organization

From your point of view, can international organizations facilitate the improvement of Armenian-Turkish relations?

International structures have their certain interests, as is the case with states; they can certainly have influence if the two countries demonstrate political will. But no one will benefit if the international structures take the process in their hands. Every intermediary has its interests and promotes them.

What is your attitude towards Turkey's possible EU membership?

Very positive. I just wish that Turkey's EU accession process proceeds smoothly and reaches its logical end. If in compliance with European standards, Turkey will become very much predictable and I believe that is in accordance with Armenia's interests.

How would Turkey's EU membership influence Armenian-Turkish relationships?

If there is compliance with the usual standards and not just a political decision is given, there could be only positive consequences.

7. Turkish Economic and Social Studies Foundation (TESEV)

Interview conducted with: Aybars Görgülü

How do you assess the current condition of Armenian-Turkish relations?

The current condition can be described as a vicious circle since both parties do not demonstrate the necessary will to normalize relations. Despite some official attempts like the letter of diplomacy between Erdoğan and Kocharian, the current state of affairs nestles lots of unknowns. Apparently the Turkish side waits for the results of the upcoming elections in Armenia and they will act according to the new government's policies towards Turkey.

What is your opinion about Armenian and Turkish governments' official approaches to the issue of establishing relations between the two countries?

Turkey's top priority to normalize relations with Armenia is the recognition of Turkey's territorial integrity and the peaceful resolution of the Nagorno-Karabagh conflict. On the other hand, the Armenian side has no preconditions for the normalization of relations and suggests that unresolved issues should be addressed after bilateral political relations are established. I sincerely believe that the unique preoccupation of the Turkish side is the Karabagh issue. Unless the land dispute between Azerbaijan and Turkey is solved in a peaceful way, Turkey's official position will remain basically the same.

In your opinion, is there a difference between the approach of the Turkish society and the official point of view?

The Eastern part of Turkey, especially the residents of Kars and Ardahan regions, who will benefit from the opening of the borders with Armenia after the establishment of diplomatic relations, support the idea of normalization of relations and the opening of the border. The rest of the society, however, is not well informed about the current state of affairs. Armenia's invasion of Azerbaijani territory fuels the anger towards the Armenian society and damages the mutual perceptions between the two societies. That is why the approach of the Turkish society does not differ that much from the official point of view.

In your opinion, what is the reason for not establishing diplomatic relations until now?

As I have mentioned above, the Karabagh dispute, which became an internationally recognized regional conflict, is the primary reason for not establishing diplomatic relations until now. Other issues including the recognition of the territorial integrity and the genocide claims are also cited as reasons of the discord between the two sides, however I believe that once the Karabagh issue is resolved in a peaceful way, there will be no barriers for the establishment of diplomatic relations.

In your opinion, how much does the recent approach of the Armenian side about opening the border without preconditions contribute to the development of relationships?

This situation is not new. Armenian officials declared in several occasions that they have no preconditions to normalize relations with Turkey. It is the Turkish side who expects opening outs from the other side. So the recent declaration will not contribute to the development of relationships.

In your opinion, who loses and who benefits from the closed Armenia-Turkey border?

It is for sure that both sides sides lose from the closed border. The re-opening of the Doğu Kapı/Akhourian border crossing is likely to yield significant benefits for the local population. The municipality of Kars has been striving hard to develop relations with Armenia by establishing more cross border contacts. It is Georgia who probably benefits most from the closed border both ecomomically and politically. The exclusion of Armenia from major projects like the Baku-Ceyhan pipeline opens room for the Georgian side. In addition to that, all commercial activities between Armenia and Turkey are done through Georgia.

In your opinion, what measures should be taken by the two states for opening of the Armenia-Turkey border?

The settlement of the Karabagh dispute between Armenia and Azerbaijan is the most urgent issue that should be worked out for the opening of the border.

What negative consequences might the opening of the border have for the two sides?

I can not predict any negative consequences from the opening of the border apart from the development of good neighbourly relations between the two sides. On the other hand, the establishment of diplomatic relations between the two countries might upset Azerbaijan, however this a risk that should be taken.

In your opinion, in which areas should the development of Armenian-Turkish relations begin?

The establishment of direct, bilateral commercial activities might be a good starting point. Secondly, the activities which will contribute to the intercultural dialogue and the development of mutual perceptions between the two communities should not be neglected either.

May intercultural dialogue contribute to the establishment of diplomatic relations (e.g., restoration of the Saint Cross Church on Akhtamar Island)?

This type of activities increase awareness on both sides. According to a TESEV survey, there were a significant number of people in Turkey who were thinking that Armenians were Jewish. That is why any activity which will contribute to the development of mutual perceptions, whether it is a marketing tactic or not, may contribute to the establishment of good relationships.

In your opinion, do the religious differences between the two peoples' hinder the establishment of Armenian-Turkish relations or contribute to it?

I don't think that religious differences should be evaluated as a barrier. Turkey has many non-muslim neighbour countries with whom diplomatic relations are established.

Could the legislative bodies of the two states contribute to the establishment of official relations?

Of course the parliaments of both sides can play a constructive role in the establishment of good relationships. Besides, they have the final word in the normalization of diplomatic relations.

What role can NGOs or media outlets play in the development of Armenian-Turkish relations?

I care a lot about the non state actors' contribution to the settlement of the dispute. After the closure of the borders in 1993 and the rupture of official connection, various non-governmental actors have tried to fill the gap generated by the absence of dialogue between the two sides. In this context, under the pioneering

of both civil society organizations and business world representatives from both countries, the disadvantages of the closed border have been displayed in several occasions. In addition, there have been significant efforts to establish academic and cultural exchange programs in order to develop mutual perceptions in both Turkey and Armenia.

How does the Nagorno-Karabagh conflict resolution process influence Armenian-Turkish relations?

The most acute problem among all of the problems is the ongoing Nagorno-Karabagh conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan, the ‘brother’ state to Turkey. The remaining problems such as the recognition of the border issue and the genocide claims are also problematic; however Turkey’s priority is the peaceful resolution of the Karabagh conflict.

What is your opinion about Turkey’s membership to the European Union?

Armenia is included in the European Neighborhood Policy. This situation indicates that the European Union puts great emphasis on good neighborhood relations in the South Caucasus. Besides, in each EU progress report since the beginning of the negotiation process with Turkey, the EU recommends Turkey to open the closed border with Armenia and normalize relations on the basis of good neighborhood policies. As it is mentioned in a TEPSA report, “the EU considers conflict resolution and good neighborly relations as one of its prime foreign policy objectives. It calls for all accession candidates to resolve outstanding difficulties with their neighbors before acceding to the EU.” So it can be argued that Turkey will eventually open its closed borders with Armenia in order to become a full member of the EU.

How much time is needed to establish diplomatic relations between Armenia and Turkey?

There exists a lack of “trust” between the two sides. This is probably one of the paramount reasons that the two countries could not establish diplomatic ties until now. In this perspective, unless both parts do not step out of the tragic past’s shadow, it will not be realistic to expect amelioration in bilateral official relations any time soon.

Would you like to add anything?

The opening of the border might launch a confidence building process for both sides. Due to deeply embedded fears, both Turkey and Armenia have essentially tried to protect the common border separating the two countries. Turkey suspects that Armenia has territorial claims and does not respect Turkey's territorial integrity. Nonetheless, Armenia is afraid of a Turkish offensive. In fact, the Treaty of Kars draws a border that both sides are eager to preserve. In this respect, the opening of the border and its recognition will increase the sense of security on both sides. The perception of a potential threat stemming from the border will vanish with emerging trade ties and human interactions. Intense cross border relations will contribute to the stability of the Turkish-Armenian border and security on both sides.

8. German Marshall Fund Ankara

Interview conducted with: Özgür Ünlühisarcıklı, Director

How do you assess the current condition of Armenian-Turkish relations?

Armenian Turkish relations suffer from multidimensional and multilevel problems. The different interpretation of the events of 1915, the prejudices and stereotypes this difference in interpretation has caused, the ongoing campaign of the Armenian diaspora against Turkey, the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh, the resulting invasion of parts of Azerbaijan by Armenia and the sealed border between the countries are the primary factors causing this conflict.

How do you view the attempts to normalizing relations between the two governments?

The Turkish government is reserved while the Armenian government is only demanding the opening of the border without discussing the problems that have caused the border to be closed.

Do you think there is a difference between the approach of the population and the official perspective in Turkey?

The Turkish society has an even more determined negative approach than the official approach. On the other hand this perception is also the result of the official view.

Why do you think diplomatic relations have not been set up as of yet?

The negotiations between Turkey and Armenia on establishing diplomatic relations and opening the border was suspended by Turkey as a reaction to the Nagorno Karabakh conflict and invasion of regions of Azerbaijan by Armenia. The continuation of the occupation is the main reason why diplomatic relations are still not established. Other problems mentioned in response to question 5 are important, but would not prevent diplomatic relations if the conflict over Nagorno Karabakh was resolved.

How do you think Armenia's offer to open the borders without preconditions effects the relations?

The sealing of the border was not independent of the main problems and it's opening can not be either. The expectation that Turkey open the border without any steps towards the solutions of the problems between Turkey and Armenia is unrealistic and does not help.

Which segments benefit from the closed border, and who loses?

Armenia is the net loser. Turkey gains by evading the opportunity cost of losing the trust of Azerbaijan and other countries close to Turkey in the region. Georgia is benefiting from the sealed borders by gaining a strategic importance it otherwise would not have. Iran is profiting at least in trade.

What steps do you think each state should take for the border to be opened?

First of all a rapprochement between Turkey and Armenia should not cause Azerbaijan to move away from the West (towards Russia) and should not marginalize Georgia. This is important not only for Turkey, but the whole transatlantic community. Therefore firstly a vision about the future of the South Caucasus including Turkey, Azerbaijan, Georgia and Armenia should be formed, a vision that pulls Armenia towards the West rather than pushing Azerbaijan towards Russia. Once this vision is formed steps towards the solution to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict should precede the opening of the border.

How would each nation benefit from the opening of the border?

Armenia would have obvious gains in economic, political and social areas. It could trade with the world more directly. Considering the potential of Armenian economy and the size of the Turkish economy, the economic gains for Turkey

can be neglected. Turkey's most important gain would be political. After all Turkey has to resolve the problems with her neighbours.

What could the negative consequences of the border opening be?

If Turkey opens the border with Armenia without any development between Azerbaijan and Armenia, Turkey would lose the trust of Azerbaijan and other countries close to Turkey in the region. Azerbaijan could find no other way but to move towards Russia in order to protect her interests. In this case, not only Turkey, but the whole Transatlantic community would lose, because the opening of the border between Turkey and Armenia could result in the sealing of the East-West energy corridor.

The only negative consequence in Armenia would be for the authoritarian actors in Armenia and the Armenian diaspora that tries to govern Armenia with remote control.

In which areas should an improvement in relations begin?

Cultural diplomacy and regional economic cooperation

Do you think religious differences are an obstacle to the establishment of relations?

Unfortunately yes.

Can the parliaments of Armenia and Turkey play a role in the improvement of relations?

Parliamentary diplomacy could be part of broader efforts or actually could trigger such efforts. On the other hand, within the given conditions, it would be unrealistic to expect the Grand National Assembly of Turkey should to take any unilateral steps.

Can civil society organizations play a role?

The rapprochement between Turkey and Greece was started by the civil society on the two sides of Aegean. The same thing can be possible between Turkey and Armenia. For example they could be very instrumental in breaking the prejudices and stereotypes on both sides.

Do you think the efforts of Armenians to get the 1915 events recognized as genocide are an obstacle for the development of Turkey-Armenia relations?

It is an obvious hindrance. History should be interpreted by historians and by international courts if need be, not by parliaments.

How was the relationship between Armenians and Turks before 1915?

The events of 1915 were a reaction to the atrocities Armenians committed against Muslims with the support and “motivation” of external actors. However before these atrocities, Armenians were favored subjects of the Empire and they made great contributions to the Ottoman Civilisation. Armenians were very influential in the trade and international relations of the Empire and there were even Armenian Pasha’s. On the other hand the even more important contribution of Armenians to Ottoman art, music, architecture, handcrafts, cuisine are inherited by the modern Turkish society.

Are there regional issues where Turkey and Armenia have joint interests?

Turkey is a transatlantic country and Armenia is under Russian influence. In this regard, for the time being, apart from soft issues like environment, Turkey and Armenia do not have many common interests.

Are there global interests that Turkey and Armenia share?

Neither Turkey nor Armenia are countries with global interests.

Can international organizations effect Turkey-Armenia relations?

They can, with the right approach. Pushing Turkey to open the border will give Armenia the hope that the border can be opened without Armenia taking any positive steps particularly in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and this is counterproductive. Pushing Armenia to withdraw from the territories of Azerbaijan would be the right approach for international organizations.

How would Turkey becoming an EU member effect Turkey-Armenia relations?

It would definitely have a positive effect. It would make the solution of problems easier. However, it would still be up to Turkey and Armenia to solve their problems, not third parties.

Do Turkey and Armenia see each other as enemies and does this need to be overcome?

Yes to both.

Anything to add?

Turkish-Armenian rapprochement should be achieved in a way that will not push Azerbaijan away from the west and marginalize Georgia.

Also, Turks are always told to face their history. This is fine, but Armenians should also face their own history. We will be looking into the same mirror, looking at terrible events where both sides share the responsibility. Then we can look to the future together.