

A rmenia-Turkey relations: adding colors



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Armenian-Turkish relations have essential importance not only for Armenia, but also for the region of South Caucasus and beyond. The failure of the attempt to establish an Armenia-Turkey dialogue stagnated the process even further. The window of opportunity closed and the subsequent developments in the larger MENA region dramatically shifted the focus and priorities of the players. With Syrian crisis at the door, Ankara is now much more engaged with the possible spillover of the war to its own southern borders and is wary of the Kurdish issue again getting high in domestic agenda. With these plates at hand, Turkey is surely short of paying attention to the importance of continued efforts to establish proper relations with neighboring Armenia. However, with 2015 quickly approaching Ankara considers doing its homework to counter the worldwide commemoration of centenary of the Armenian Genocide in the Ottoman Empire.

2015: anchor data?

The pivotal axis of Armenian-Turkish relations is the issue of Armenian Genocide. Thus the centenary is being considered as an opportunity of major breakthrough. However, careful examination of policies both in Ankara and Yerevan do not disclose any key activity.

Being busy with regional developments, Turkey is not doing sufficient work at the official level in terms of preparing world public opinion or its own public opinion to what may happen in 2015. There is just the expectation that somehow Turkey's strategic importance once again will carry the day and Ankara may avert a "crisis". However, Turkey is trying to do some damage control in 2015, is by tuning its relationship with Armenian Diaspora and still have the trump card of unfreezing the protocols with Armenia putting them back at the table. Another renewed development is reviving the discussions on the possible change of the co-chairs of the OSCE Minsk group or, at least, bringing new active members on board. Apart from offering itself, Ankara works hard with other countries, notably Germany, to become active participants in the Karabakh process and to change the balance of powers within the Minsk group. Hence, Turkey has prepared at least three tracks for relationships with Armenia: Genocide, Karabakh and the Protocols. Those three are also highlighted as three topics of pre-conditions for diplomatic relationship with Armenia.

Unlike Ankara, Yerevan after the stagnation of Armenia-Turkey dialogue has focused its attention only on the issue of Genocide recognition, thus narrowing the focus. Obviously, for Armenia it could be perceived as a winning strategy due to the historical fact of the Genocide and the international community exerting pressure on Turkey and showing empathy towards Armenians. However, limiting the Armenia-Turkey palette of issues only to the Genocide recognition is problematic. It also gives most of the initiative to Ankara which is playing with multiple tracks and thus has more opportunities for maneuvering.

A limiting constructive ambiguity

Both sides are approaching the relations with the constructive ambiguity, i.e. deliberate use of ambiguous language on a sensitive issue in order to advance some political purpose. This is employed in negotiations when parties want both to disguise an inability to resolve a contentious issue on



19 Sayat Nova
Yerevan 0001
Armenia

Tel.: +374 10 582638
Fax: +374 10 527082

mail@ichd.org
www.ichd.org

which the parties remain far apart, and to do so in a manner that enables each to claim obtaining some concession on it. Turkish side intends to show the Armenian-Turkish normalization process as progressing, even if very slowly, and keeps the Protocols up its sleeve. Armenian side does not finally reveal its demands from Turkey that will be brought forward after eventual recognition of the Armenian Genocide. Both parties wait for a bonne chance in global developments to put the trump cards on the table.

However, Armenian side must get prepared for different possible scenarios. What if Turkish leadership recognizes the 1915-1923 events as Genocide but on a condition of being excused of further monetary and/or territorial reparation? What if Turkey opens its border gates on the eve of April 24, 2015, showing the international community its open-hearted and friendly approach, but in reality just to divert media attention from Genocide issue? This shows that constructive ambiguity being somewhat comfortable for short-term, however implicates limitations in foreign policy. While absence of clear-cut goals gives opportunities of manipulations to the other side, possession of well-defined goals enables the party to devise multiple alternatives to the negotiated agreement. Armenia can use future regional and global developments effectively only when having agreed goals and having the ground prepared. Multiple scenarios could be offered but all of them would be void in the absence of a destination.

Either...or vs. both...and

At any case wait-n-see logic seems not to be working effectively. A proactive stance must be taken into consideration. Armenia needs to use the opportunity of relative calm and get ready for a storm. And the most common mistake in Armenian public perception of is a very narrow focus: only one selected activity is regarded as a trump card: either work through civil society organizations or state level, either aiming the recognition of the Armenian Genocide or discussing the opening of the border and the protocols. In reality, all those activities could be run in parallel strengthening each other.

Armenian authorities should continue trying to disaggregate the issues of recognition of Armenian Genocide, Karabakh and opening of borders, and push Turkey to open its borders irrelevant of progress in other two topics. Opening of the border-gates has different areas of work. Activities in the domestic arena may include preparation of public opinion, work with local business and representations of international companies, reviewing various legislations and tuning the infrastructure. International arena requires raising of the issue on multiple stages via different actors, including media, politicians and businesspeople. Un-preconditioned and outright opening of the borders, a while ago being used by Yerevan, should regain its place in Armenian foreign policy arsenal.

The paper is elaborated based on the opinions passed by the participants of the discussion "Armenia-Turkish relations: 2012 -2015", which took place on December 19, 2012. The roundtable discussion was attended by independent analysts, government officials, and representatives of the international organizations.

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