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Track Two Diplomacy between Armenia and Turkey: Achievements and Limitations

By Vahram Ter-Matevosyan, Yerevan

Abstract

The aim of this brief survey is to examine key aspects of Turkish–Armenian track two diplomacy and its major achievements and failures over the past 25 years. It argues that current problems in official Turkish–Armenian relations should not discourage donors and participants from further assisting civil society contacts between the two nations.

Introduction

The lack of Turkish–Armenian diplomatic relations remains a perplexing challenge not only for the security and stability of the South Caucasus but also for Europe. The fruitless process of “football diplomacy” did not change *the status quo*, as Turkey keeps its border with Armenia hermetically sealed. Moreover, the situation, with its non-existent official relations, became more strained and complex as the parties became increasingly distrustful of one another’s intentions and policy preferences. Diplomatic communications between Turkey and Armenia have effectively broken down, with no hopeful perspectives in sight. As a result, the relations between two countries have only deteriorated. The lack of understanding on many key questions has effectively diminished any trace of the minimal trust developed during the “football diplomacy”.

In the given circumstances, unofficial contacts between people remain the only option to sustain a minimum of communication between two societies. Citizens of Armenia and Turkey began to travel to one another’s countries once the border checkpoints were opened in 1992. Although the Margara/Alican (northwest of Armenia) and Akhurik/Akyaka (west of Armenia) border crossings were open only occasionally, they allowed many Armenians to travel to Turkey and establish initial business contacts in the early 1990s. As a result, since then more Armenians have travelled to and stayed in Turkey than has been the case in the opposite direction. Some Armenians settled in Turkey, mainly in Istanbul, others became labour migrants, while some established families in Turkey. However, given the nature of differences between Turkey and Armenia on a range of historical problems, the contacts established by ordinary people were not sufficient to pave the way for official, “track one” diplomacy.

Soon, as the prospects for normalization were stalled, different stakeholders and organizations attempted to contribute to the normalization process. A number of civil society, business and cultural initiatives have been implemented since then. Some of these initiatives were

rather successful and progressed continuously, while others were short-lived. The various projects conducted by these groups sought to bring two societies together, overcome cognitive and emotional challenges, establish inter-personal contacts and compensate for what politicians were unable to achieve. Interestingly, that process has run rather smoothly, although the true implications have yet to be quantified. The aim of this brief survey is to examine the key aspects of Turkish–Armenian track two diplomacy and its major achievements and failures over the past 20 years. Since 2007, the author has participated in various Turkish–Armenian projects, forums, and discussions and hence has developed a set of observations and perspectives that may help to grasp the underlying features in question. Note that for the past ten years, there have been a number of publications that provide a rather comprehensive picture of those projects that have been operating since the 1990s¹; therefore, this contribution focuses more on the internal discussions and dynamics of those projects, which previously were not addressed or only began recently.

Who Are the Participants and What Are They Attempting to Achieve?

From the outset, the US government has been particularly interested in facilitating contacts between the Turkish and Armenian societies. The US embassies in Yerevan and Ankara and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) have invested enormously in developing contacts and attempting to build momentum in connections between the two societies. In the recent years, the European Union joined the process by funding a number of projects implemented by different

1 David Philips. 2005. *Unsilencing the Past: Track Two Diplomacy and Turkish–Armenian Reconciliation*. New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2005; “*Armenian–Turkish Track 2 Diplomacy Projects: Assessment of Best Practices*”. International Center for Human Development. Yerevan, 2006; Esra Çuhadar and Burcu Gültekin Punsmann. 2012. *Reflecting on the Two Decades of Bridging the Divide: Taking Stock of Turkish–Armenian Civil Society Activities*. Ankara: TESAV.

civil society organizations from both Turkey and Armenia. These organizations typically formed a Consortium composed of equal number of participant organizations from each country and jointly implemented a number of projects.² From time to time, other organizations and research and educational institutions also organized joint events with the aim of establishing an alternative framework for discussions and networking, for instance, the German foundation Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, Kadir Has University (based in Istanbul), Ankara Policy Centre, and the Centre for Eurasian Studies based in Ankara, the International Centre for Human Development based in Yerevan. Most of these projects pursued rather ambitious goals, e.g., contribute to the normalization of the process and serve as channels for communication between the two governments, while others were more modest, as they strove only to maintain minimal contacts between the two societies.

Most of these organizations have long been engaged in the Turkish–Armenian normalization process. Furthermore, frequent exchange of visits, joint statements, print and online publications, press conferences and interviews allowed the participants to accumulate a wealth of experience and knowledge in the Turkish–Armenian problems and the major challenges that the two societies face. These organizations were also able to establish some form of contacts with their respective governments and communicate certain messages that were discussed or raised during the meetings, discussions and implementation phase of the projects.

Although the events have been run rather smoothly and the parties were able to cooperate in many areas (business, education, media, etc.) and reach joint agreement on certain formulations, in some instances, those organizations and individuals participating in Turkish–Armenian joint projects faced a number of questions. One commonly referenced question them concerns the real-world impact that his or her participation can have on the process. Especially during times featuring a lack of political and diplomatic contacts between the two states, the participants questioned the rationale for participating in such projects.

Overall, participants from Turkey rarely questioned the need to have the Turkish–Armenian border opened. It was considered a necessity with respect to international law and vital to earn the trust of the Armenian society. This perspective contradicted the official Turkish posi-

tion, which tied the opening of the Turkish–Armenian border with the Karabakh conflict. The other observation that could be drawn from these projects concerns the ultimate objectives that they pursued. In rare cases, it was clear that disagreements surfaced over terminology. The Armenian participants primarily favoured the term ‘normalization of Turkish–Armenian relations’, rather than reconciliation, which some Turkish participants tended to favour. It was a common belief among the Armenian participants that reconciliation should follow the normalization process, which implied that reconciliation is a more challenging and difficult process. Normalization, in the Armenian terminology, implied certain basic confidence-building measures that would allow Armenian society to recognize that official Ankara is determined to develop normal relations with Armenia. In the eyes of many Armenians, it is exceedingly difficult to discuss normalization when the borders are unilaterally sealed. According to their perceptions, Turkish political leadership constantly threatens Armenia and the Armenian nation and regards the process through the lenses of the Armenian Genocide discourse or the conflict over Nagorno Karabakh.

The other problem that one can clearly identify concerns the fact the Armenian Diaspora was generally absent from the process. Of course, there were projects, for instance, operated by the French-Armenian organization “Yergir” that included Armenians from France, or the Turkish-Armenian Reconciliation Committee (TARC) project, which also had participants from the Armenian Diaspora (USA and Russia). However, the projects, which that are generally operated by organizations based in Turkey and Armenia, do not include Armenians from the Diaspora. This, in turn, creates certain perceptual problems in the Diaspora, which surfaced during the pan-Armenian tour of the Armenian president in September 2009 prior to signing the Zurich protocols. He was not welcomed in the Diaspora communities he visited in France, the USA, Lebanon and Russia. It should have been an indication that the majority of the Diaspora wants to have a greater say in the Turkish–Armenian normalization process. Protests in different parts of the world served as a message that, except for a few cases, the Diaspora generally objected to the conscious decision of the Armenian government to exclude the Diaspora from the process or consider its opinion at the later stage of the process when the Protocols on Normalization of Relations were made public.

The other observation that can be made regards the professional background of the participants. Typically, the participants in joint projects have predominantly been artists, journalists, or people from the media sphere and expert communities, retired diplomats. Quite often,

2 From the Turkish perspective, the organizations include Anadolu Kültür, the Economic Policy Research Foundation of Turkey, Helsinki Citizens’ Assembly, and the Hrant Dink Foundation; from the Armenian perspective, the following organizations are involved, Civilitas Foundation, Eurasia Partnership Foundation, Public Journalism Club and the Regional Studies Center.

the participants were the same people, with the same views and opinions about the same process, which visibly limited the “peace constituency” and precluded the engagement of the mainstream. Of course, the participation of journalists was sometimes done on purpose. Many projects sought to include journalists from both sides to allow the ideas and insights generated during the projects to disseminate in their respective nations. In some cases, journalists had to travel to different regions of the opposite countries to talk to the people and place their perspectives into the wider context. There have also been joint projects covering slightly different aspects of bilateral relations involving culture, arts and literature. In the recent years, the focus of many projects has shifted somewhat, as they began to target young people from both countries.

Prospects and Challenges

It has been generally agreed that these projects are critical to sustain even minimal contact between the two societies. It has also been reported that the Armenian government was not particularly supportive of civil society contacts, as it argued that the Turkish government was abusing these projects to claim that despite the opposition stemming from the Armenian government, the dialogue between the Turkish and Armenian societies were progressing smoothly. Notwithstanding these debatable interpretations, Armenian society has largely been supportive of these interactions, as there have not been any particular opposing views. By contrast, in Turkey, there some nationalist voices and opinions have been raised, which also reflect Azerbaijani concerns and views, that interactions with Armenian civil society organizations should be halted. At the societal and regional levels, the populations of the border regions of Armenia and Turkey have generally been lukewarm towards the process, with the possible exception of the Iğdir region of Turkey, where the nationalist voices have become more vocal.

However, track two diplomacy has also been criticized by some, arguing that most of these projects have the same organizations as members and were unable to engage new people. This was particularly the case for Turkey. Both Turkish and Armenian critical voices have argued that after securing the support of liberal intellectuals and progressive voices in Turkey, the Turkish–Armenian civil society projects should have worked more consistently with radical (nationalists, conservatives) and opposing views. Engagement with these voices, according to this line of criticism, could have secured their attention, participation in and possible support for the Turkish–Armenian projects, which, in turn, would broaden the support of the grassroots level.

The geographical component was also no less significant. Turkish participants were mainly from Istanbul, and to a lesser extent from Ankara, Izmir, Kars, and Diyarbakir; similarly, the participants from Armenia were predominantly from Yerevan and to a small degree from Gyumri and Vanadzor. Moreover, Gyumri, the second-largest city in Armenia, is the most affected by the closed border because of its close location to the border. Although there have been some joint business initiatives between Kars- and Gyumri-based entrepreneurs, they were not sustainable.

It has been generally argued that the societies in both countries at large were not actively engaged in the discussions; however, this opinion is debatable, at least in Armenia. The findings of various projects were aired on TV programmes. That allowed Armenian society or, at least those who were interested in the topic, to follow the subject and expert opinions. In Turkey, however, the situation was different, and no TV channel aired specifically tailored programs on Turkish–Armenian relations. There have been a number of publications in the online media, however.

Outlook

Parallel to these developments, the growing authoritarianism in Turkey can limit the activities of civil society organizations, freedom of speech and freedom of press, which can have negative implications for track two diplomacy. The recurring statements of the Turkish President that Armenian citizens should be expelled from Turkey, the violation of Armenia’s air-space by Turkish military jets, and Turkey’s unyielding support for Azerbaijan may have negative implications for the existing channels of communication. The Turkish–Armenian normalization process requires determination and consistent support; otherwise it is too weak to be sustained. Armenia, by contrast, is overly dependent on foreign markets and, therefore, is eager to open up the border as soon as possible. Even now, after the “football diplomacy” has failed, political forces and civil society at large remain sympathetic to the idea of opening the border. Hence, it can be argued that Armenia regards the border as an economic opportunity, whereas, for Turkey, the border closure has been and remains a political tool that visibly weakens Armenia.

The discussion allows us to conclude that Turkish–Armenian problems may become more acute if the contacts between the countries’ civil societies were discontinued. What has been achieved thus far has already been partly undone in recent years. There has also been a slight change in the nature of the projects since 2008. In the light of the experience with the failed rapprochement in 2008–09, many projects simply concern pre-

servicing the existing minimum contacts. The existing differences and obstacles should not discourage donors and participants because the substantial problems that

exist are related to geopolitics and history and can only be overcome in the long term.

About the Author

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How Non-Governmental Are Civil Societal Relations Between Turkey and Azerbaijan?

By Hülya Demirdirek and Orhan Gafarlı, Ankara

Abstract

After the break-up of the Soviet Union, expressions such as the “brotherhood of Azerbaijan and Turkey” and “one nation, two states” found resonance in both countries. Here, we highlight how societal ties are most active on the discursive nationalist level but not independent of state influence—the reach of which extends to Azerbaijani diaspora organizations in Turkey.

Introduction

Being among the first countries to recognize the Republic of Azerbaijan’s independence after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Turkey’s relations with Azerbaijan began to develop rapidly through shared nationalist rhetoric in the two nations. Reinforced by the wider use of social media and the proliferation of physical and virtual spaces and their overlapping constellations, the discourses of friendship, brotherhood and anti-Armenian sentiment among these nationalities are reproduced. The high number of Azerbaijani and Turkish brotherhood associations in Turkey, the more than ten thousand Azerbaijani students who study in Turkey, and the availability of mutually intelligible audio-visual media, particularly Turkish TV series—in addition to formal political and business connections—are a significant part of the societal ties that foster Turkish–Azerbaijani relations. While this may not always be visible in all social spaces, these elements collectively mould the discursive space of the brotherhood between Azerbaijan and Turkey.

Discourse of “One Nation, Two States”

The Nagorno-Karabakh War, joint Turkish and Azerbaijani enmity against Armenians, the development of the ideas of Turkish nationalism and Pan-Turkism, and the emergence of discussions of nationalist ideas among

Azerbaijani historians (e.g., Ziya Bunyatov) beginning in the 1960s can be listed as the major elements fostering the emergence of the thesis of “one nation and two states”.

Within the brief period following the 1990s, Turkey’s nationalist discourse resonated within the local Azerbaijani population and expressions such as “two brother countries” and the “one nation” discourse were popularized. This was essentially made possible through the perception of a shared enemy (Armenia) and a shared language and “race”¹. Alibey Hüseyinzâde, Ahmet Ağaoğlu, and Mehmed Emin Resulzâde were all intellectuals of Azerbaijani heritage who also played a role in the development of Turkish nationalist discourse in Turkey.

The fact that Azerbaijan, a country with a population of 10 million, has come under the influence of Turkey, a country of 80 million, facilitates the discursive hegemony in Azerbaijan of nationalism and Islamic movements that originated in Turkey. Yet, who can be considered “Turkish actors” in Azerbaijan is a complicated story. Here, we adopt the opposite approach and illustrate how the Azerbaijani diaspora in Turkey may be seen as one of the “Turkish actors” in Azerbaijan.

¹ Reference to Turkic peoples is often made through the use of the term “Turkish race” (*Türk ırkı*) in both nationalist and casual conversations among Turkic speakers.