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ARMENIA-TURKEY NORMALIZATION PROCESS: OPPORTUNITIES AND BARRIERS

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EXPERT OPINION

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ISSN 1512-4835 ISBN Armenia-Turkey relations have experienced numerous tensions over the decades associated with both the historic issues between the two nations and contemporary regional developments. Turkey's refusal to recognize the mass killings of Armenians as a genocide¹ in the Ottoman Empire during World War I has long been an important difficulty in bilateral relations. However, relations significantly worsened during the Nagorno-Karabakh war between Armenia and Azerbaijan in the 1990s. As a response to Armenia's capture of the territories surrounding Nagorno-Karabakh, Turkey closed the border with Armenia in 1993 in support of its ally Azerbaijan.² The attempts to normalize relations did not have any fruitful outcome in the past decades which resulted in the two countries not having diplomatic or commercial relations for almost 30 years.

However, the second Karabakh war in 2020 resulted in Azerbaijan gaining control over much of the territory to which it had a claim. Therefore, Turkey's position about "Armenian occupation" has lost its actuality. The war fundamentally changed the realities in the region which created the need for political moves to help the countries adapt to the new circumstances. This resulted in shifts in the bilateral relations between Turkey and Armenia.

Positive steps were taken in terms of a normalization process in Armenian-Turkish bilateral relations during the recent months. In December 2021, Turkey and Armenia appointed special envoys – Turkish diplomat, Serdar Kilic, and Deputy Speaker of the Armenian Parliament, Ruben Rubinyan, in order to start discussions on the normalization of relations.³ Since December, the special representatives from the two countries have held meetings in Moscow and in Vienna. As a result of the first two meetings, which were held in a constructive atmosphere, the parties expressed their readiness to engage in the normalization process "without preconditions" and that the ultimate goal is to achieve a full normalization of relations.

Specific steps have also been taken in parallel with the negotiations. Armenia has lifted the embargo on Turkish goods which was introduced during the Karabakh war in 2020 because of Turkey's support to Azerbaijan. The decision about lifting the embargo aimed to create favorable conditions for the export of Armenian goods and it is awaited that Turkey will follow the same path in terms of supporting commercial relations.⁴ The two countries have allowed charter flights between Istanbul and Yerevan as a part of the normalization process as well. Most importantly, the normalization process has raised hopes that the border between the two countries might also open in the future if the process continues and the two sides maintain

a constructive approach.⁵ During the Antalya Diplomacy Forum in March 2022, which included a meeting between Turkish and Armenian foreign ministers, the representatives of both countries exchanged their positive attitudes about continuing the normalization process and expressed support for the countries' efforts to establish peace in the region.⁶

Transformation of Armenia-Turkey relations could benefit the peace and stability situation in the South Caucasus, a region with a history of unresolved conflicts. However, while discussing opportunities for the Armenia-Turkey normalization process, it is important to view the process in a wider context. There is the need to consider the past experiences and the perspectives of other regional actors like Azerbaijan whose involvement and support is important for the success of the negotiations as well as the barriers that still remain in the bilateral relations and have the potential to challenge the process.

Historic Context and Previous Attempts

While discussing Armenia-Turkey relations, it is important to note that bilateral relations have long been affected by historic issues like the atrocities against the Armenians in the Ottoman Empire during World War I. In parallel to WWI, the Ottoman government started the displacement process of the Armenian population from the eastern parts of the empire from 1915, fearing that the Christian Armenian population could have been used by the enemies against the Ottomans during the war. The large-scale forced displacement of the Armenians was accompanied by mass violence. Today, the Armenians claim that more than a million of their people were killed during the displacement process, calling it genocide and demanding Turkey to recognize the historic fact with the same term.⁷

The Turkish government does not deny the mass killings of the Armenians. In April 2014, the former Prime Minister and current President of Turkey, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, described the tragic historic event as "inhumane" and offered his condolences to the descendants of those who died during the events.⁸ However, Turkey refuses to recognize the killings of Armenians as a genocide and instead is describing it as a consequence of the complex and the turbulent context of WWI. Turkey denies that the killings were organized and carried out in a systemic way and that this period of turbulent times also took the lives of Muslims living in the Ottoman empire. Turkey's refusal to recognize the killings as a genocide against the Armenians still plays a significant role in public attitudes regarding contemporary Turkish-Armenian relations. However, it is not an only issue causing decades-long tensions between the two countries. The Nagorno-Karabakh war between Azerbaijan and Armenia in the 1990s became a reason for worsened relations between Turkey and Armenia. Turkey is an important ally of Azerbaijan. The cooperation of two countries has bases in their common history, culture and language. The both countries widely agree and appreciate the concept of "One nation, two states", which has been strengthened over the years by close trade, energy and military relations.⁹ As noted above, Tukey closed its border with Armenia in 1993 as a response of Armenian capture of seven districts surrounding Nagorno-Karabakh with Azerbaijani majority population.

Turkey has always supported Azerbaijan's claims over Nagorno-Karabakh and surrounding territories. Turkey has been providing military exercises and army building support with NATO standards for Azerbaijan for years.¹⁰ Turkeys support to Azerbaijan, both on political and military levels, became increasingly visible during the second Nagorno-Karabakh war, where Turkish support played a significant role in Azerbaijan's victory in 2020. Azerbaijani's trained military forces and provided weapons, including Turkish drones, helped Azerbaijan in the 44 days' war which resulted in Armenia losing control over territories that were considered as occupied both by Azerbaijan and Turkey.

These historic and contemporary issues are important while discussing the current Armenia-Turkey normalization process. As past experiences of reconciliation attempts show, they have potential to affect the success of the normalization. In 2008-2009, there was an attempt to restore relations between Armenia and Turkey. Russia-Georgia war in 2008 has created momentum in Armenia to reevaluate its strategic interests in terms of staying in a blockade both from Azerbaijan and Turkey. The damaged diplomatic relations between Russia and Georgia put Armenia's chances to use Georgia as a trade route to Russia under threat, which strengthened Armenia's interest to improve positions through starting talks with Turkey. Armenian President Serzh Sargsvan invited Turkish president, Abdullah Gül, to a football game between the two national teams in Yerevan in 2008. This so-called "football diplomacy" continued in further talks about normalization process between two countries.¹¹ The negotiations was brokered by Swiss foreign ministry. During the talks, the parties agreed to establish diplomatic relations, normalization and mutual recognition, to open the border and establish a special commission of experts to deal with the historic dimension of relations.¹² On October 10, 2009, the Zurich

Protocols were signed by the foreign ministers of Turkey and Armenia. However, the protocols were never ratified and diplomatic process did not have any practical outcome.

Even though the willingness to normalize relations from both sides was visible, numerous factors influenced the success of the diplomatic process. One of the main factors was Azerbaijan's dissatisfaction with the normalization process. Considering the close relations of Azerbaijan and Turkey, Azerbaijan's position had an important influence on the process. After the first war in Nagorno-Karabakh, Azerbaijan has supported the idea of Armenia's blockade as it could weaken the country economically and make it more willing to compromise about Karabakh issue. Reconciliation with Turkey could have reduced this possibility. Thus, Azerbaijan had a reason to increase its pressure on Ankara to change its reconciliation plans with Armenia.¹³

On the other hand, some analysts think that the reason of the failure of the 2008-2009 normalization process could be the miscalculation that resulted in being largely depended only on diplomacy and not preparing societies sufficiently to restore mutual trust and respect, as historical grievances in societies still had a significant impact on the perceptions regarding the process.¹⁴

New opportunities

After 2009, the situation in the region for both main actors – Turkey and Armenia, as well as Azerbaijan, whose position has previously been important in the determination of Turkey-Armenia relations, has changed significantly. More specifically, Nagorno-Karabakh's second war in 2020 and Azerbaijan's success fundamentally changed realities in the region, making Turkey's previous attitude and reason for a closed border with Armenia irrelevant. On the other hand, Armenia's defeat and losses did increase country's insecurity, thus created a need to quickly re-shape the relationship strategy with its neighbors to adapt to the post-war environment and increase stability.

The shifts have been clear in Azerbaijan's position towards the Turkey-Armenia normalization as well. As previous experience shows Azerbaijan's position and approval is important for Turkey. Now, when the cooperation between Turkey and Azerbaijan are very comprehensive and Azerbaijan has won the war, Azerbaijan has started its own normalization process with Armenia. Azerbaijani authorities openly support the normalization process between Turkey and Armenia and as Ankara often stresses, Baku's position "matters for Turkish public opinion".¹⁵

Geopolitical changes caused by Nagorno-Karabakh second war created a climate for political need and therefore will to arise in Turkey and Armenia to normalize relations. The most widely discussed benefits for Armenia are economic ones that can follow the successful normalization. Opening the border with Turkey and unblocking trade routes will be an important outcome for both countries. It opens a chance for businesses and civil society actors to create ties. ¹⁶ For Armenia, stronger economic relations with Turkey could help to lessen the country's dependency on Russia. Russia appeared not necessarily a reliable partner during the war in 2020 for Armenia. Putting an end to its regional isolation is a chance for Armenia to adapt a post-war reality. Its better regional integration and improved relations with Turkey can help balance Russian influence on the country.

Russian factor in the region is possibly, as important as never before for Turkey, considering the Russia's current "Ukrainian venture" and its consequences in South Caucasus region. Even though Turkey and Azerbaijan are often described as victorious actors after the 2020 war in Nagorno-Karabakh, victory for Turkey is not as clear and undoubtable as it seems at first glance. Russia's peacekeeping mission after the war allowed it to increase its influence in the region. It also successfully excluded Turkey from the commission on unblocking regional transportation and trade routes, which was formed in January 2021 by Russia-Armenia-Azerbaijan.¹⁷ The normalization process with Armenia can be seen as beneficial for Turkey in terms of balancing Russian influences in the post-war South Caucasus regional configuration and as some experts say "gain a seat at the table".¹⁸

Turkey's aim to balance Russian influence in South Caucasus can become increasingly relevant in parallel of Russia's war in Ukraine which already affected the situation in Nagorno-Karabakh. There have been reports about partial withdrawal of Russian peacekeepers from Karabakh amidst the war in Ukraine and Russia's inability to quickly gain victory, which led to a crisis in military power. At the same time, Azerbaijani military experts have expressed dissatisfaction with Russian peacekeeping mission, calling it unable to maintain ceasefire in the region. As it is known, periodic tensions still occur between Armenian and Azerbaijani forces.¹⁹ Unprecedented sanctions and isolation of Russia are expected to affect it in a long term perspective and weaken its capabilities to maintain strong influence on foreign arenas. This, alongside the growing dissatisfaction in Azerbaijan, opens another momentum for Turkey to be more enthusiastic about sorting out relations with Armenia as well, to strengthen positions in the region while Russia's influence has a potential to decrease in future.

Barriers

The new realities and changing geopolitical environment as well as positive steps raises hopes for successful normalization process between Armenia and Turkey. However, there are several factors that can still influence the success of the diplomatic process.

First and the most important is still very fragile situation in Nagorno-Karabakh and periodic clashes between Armenia and Azerbaijan. For example, incidents like in November 2021, which included heavy fighting on the Armenia-Azerbaijani border that caused casualties,²⁰ possess a serious threat for the ongoing normalization process. The end of March 2022 has also seen a growing tension in Nagorno-Karabakh and even military readiness was announced in the region after Russian and Armenian sides announced that Azerbaijani armed forces has entered in a zone controlled by Russian peacekeeping mission and attacked the village of Farukh. Russia has called Azerbaijan to pull out the forces. As a response, Azerbaijani side described the events as "immediate measure" against Armenian forces' sabotage and called Russia's statement "one-sided".²¹ The further deterioration of relations between Azerbaijan and Armenia may change Azerbaijan's attitude towards the Turkish-Armenian normalization process, which is likely to affect Ankara's attitudes as well.

Another obstacle could be public opinion in Armenia. As noted, the parties agreed on a normalization process "without preconditions". However, the nonexistence of preconditions might not appear entirely acceptable for many in Armenia. According the recent polls, a majority of Armenia's population supports the normalization process with Turkey, while 44% is remaining opposite.²² However, it is important to note, that historic issues between the two countries, like demanding the recognition of genocide against Armenians by Turkey still remain as an important issue for the majority of Armenians. Moreover, polls show that 70% of Armenians believe that Armenia should put forward its own precondition for Turkey's non-interference in Nagorno-Karabakh peace process. Armenians still perceive Turkey as the greatest security threat. These complex attitudes, plus the experience of Turkeys political and military support to Azerbaijan during

the war with Armenia, presents a challenge to the normalization process. Given the fragility of Nagorno-Karabakh issue, in case of deterioration of situation, public support to normalization might decrease, as it is expected the perceptions about Turkish threats to start dominating in that kind of scenario.

It is also important to take into consideration, that Russian factor might also influence the process. Even though Moscow has previously offered support to Turkey and Armenia in the negotiation process and the first meeting between the envoys was held in Russia in January 2022, the situation has changed after the invasion in Ukraine. While Moscow should clearly see that the war in Ukraine will significantly weaken the country economically and militarily and has a potential to reduce its influence in South Caucasus, Moscow might try to influence Armenia-Turkey normalization process, if it now perceives it as damageable for its interests in the region. This is potentially possible, especially when Turkey, a NATO member state, has been supporting Ukraine's territorial integrity, criticizing Russian annexation of Crimea and supplying Ukrainian army with Turkish drones, that proved to be important for Ukraine while fighting the aggressor.

Conclusion

To conclude, the results of Nagorno-Karabakh second war, changing geopolitical situation and political need and will of participating parties make it possible for the Turkey-Armenia normalization process to be successful this time. There has been number of fruitful steps and positive diplomatic messages from both sides. The positive attitude of Azerbaijan, whose position has previously played an important role in the failure of Turkey-Armenia normalization, gives additional positive hope that the process can succeed and long-closed border between the two countries can open. However, historic and contemporary issues still have a great influence and carry the potential to challenge the process. The fragility of Nagorno-Karabakh situation, as well as the war in Ukraine plays a significant role in it. Thus, it is safe to conclude that Turkey-Armenia normalization is a complex and still vulnerable process to challenges. Which means that careful and constructive steps from all parties are required for successful developments in relations between the two countries.

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