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Turkey-Armenia Relations after Turkey's Elections

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The outcome of Turkey's recent parliamentary elections may partly reduce tensions in relations with Armenia, stopping the mounting hostile rhetoric of recent months. A normalization of bilateral relations should not be expected at this stage, but the trend of increasing cooperation in the humanitarian area, and in culture, tourism, and the media in recent years will likely continue. At the same time, some policies may need to be reassessed in consideration of regional security risks, including the growing level of militarization in the South Caucasus, increased tensions on the line of contact in Nagorno-Karabakh in the absence of progress in the negotiation process, as well as Russia's capacity for manipulating the regional conflicts.

BACKGROUND

On February 16, Armenia's President Serzh Sargsyan announced his decision to withdraw the Armenian-Turkish protocols from the parliament. Sargsyan described the decision as motivated by "Turkish authorities' continuous attempts to articulate preconditions" and "the intensified policy of denialism and history revision on the eve of the genocide centennial." Sargsyan restated his position in an interview with the *Hurriyet Daily News* in April.

Sargsyan's decision was expected, as Turkish officials have asserted on a number of occasions that establishing diplomatic relations and opening the border with Armenia will not occur until Armenia reaches an agreement with Azerbaijan. However, the timing of Sargsyan's move, which he made just two months before the centennial of the mass massacres of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire (which are widely considered to constitute genocide, a term Turkey rejects), allowed him to consolidate

the support from certain political circles in Armenia and the diaspora.

The centennial predictably took the level of Armenian-Turkish relations to a new low, and simultaneously put a strain on Turkey's relations with several states. Turkey recalled its envoy from the Vatican City State after Pope Francis I, during a mass commemorating the massacres of Armenians during World War I, referred to the events as "the first genocide of the 20th century." Turkey reacted adversely to statements by the French and German presidents, and Russian President Vladimir Putin's statement during his visit to Yerevan on April 24, during the commemorative service, received an angry response. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said that Russia should explain its own actions in Ukraine and Crimea before calling the 1915 mass killings "genocide." Turkish officials had previously avoided strong criticism of Russian policies vis-à-vis Ukraine. However, during a NATO foreign ministers' meeting in Antalya on May 13, Turkish Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu also

mentioned “the illegal annexation of Crimea.”

IMPLICATIONS

Despite the low level of trust and strong tensions in Armenian-Turkish relations, particularly in connection with the recent commemoration of the genocide, the Turkish government’s reactions have received some criticism domestically in Turkey. Suat Kınıklıoğlu, who was a member of the executive board of Erdogan’s Justice and Development Party (AKP) and spokesman of the foreign affairs committee in the Turkish Parliament at the time when the Zurich protocols were signed, criticized Erdogan’s approach in an article in *Today’s Zaman* on April 30, arguing that Erdogan had made normalization impossible by linking it to the Nagorno-Karabakh issue. Kınıklıoğlu challenged the assertion of some Turkish and Western analysts that the closed border is a strong leverage on Armenia to make concessions in the Nagorno-Karabakh peace talks, while opening the border would not decrease Yerevan’s motivation in the peace process. He argued that if the border had been opened, “the South Caucasus would have been a much safer region.” Moreover, Kınıklıoğlu confirmed with the opinion expressed by several Armenian analysts soon after the Zurich protocols were signed, that Russia had disclosed the draft protocols to the Azerbaijani side, who then pressured the Turkish government by means of lobbying, media efforts, alleged manipulation of gas prices and other means.

In November 2014, Turkey’s former ambassador to the United Kingdom, Ünal Çeviköz, made an argument similar to Kınıklıoğlu’s. Çeviköz suggested in *Hurriyet Daily News* that the border should be opened, noting that an environment of sustainable peace and stability can hardly be created in the Caucasus without a normalization in Armenian-Turkish relations. However, Çeviköz also predicted that the “2015 syndrome,” i.e. the increasing pressure on Turkey to recognize the genocide, would worsen Armenian-Turkish relations, as well as Turkey’s bilateral relations with a number of other states.

It should be noted that the failure to normalize relations with Turkey has not resulted in concessions from the Armenian side but instead helped advance Russia’s goals. In 2010, when linking normalization to the Nagorno-Karabakh issue made ratification of the protocols impossible, Russia easily persuaded Armenia to extend the deployment of its military base in Gyumri until 2044. In 2013, Russia’s security guarantees vis-à-vis Azerbaijan and Turkey became an excuse for persuading Armenia to join the Eurasian Economic Union instead of signing an Association Agreement with the European

Union, after which Russia’s military presence in Armenia has continuously grown. Simultaneously, Russia has contributed to the intensive militarization of the region by selling offensive weapons worth billions of dollars to Azerbaijan, thereby reducing Yerevan’s possibilities for maneuver even further. (Russia has long provided arms to Armenia at discount rates.)

The U.S. and EU’s current attitudes towards Armenia reflect an understanding of the security risks posed by Yerevan’s excessive dependence on Russia, among other factors. While the September 2013 decision not to sign the Association Agreement with the EU caused strong disappointment, the EU recently offered a new cooperation agreement providing for some financial assistance and investment promotion, and a few days ago the U.S. signed a Trade and Investment Framework Agreement with Armenia. The U.S. and EU have seemingly chosen not to disregard Yerevan completely but to make careful attempts to provide some policy alternatives. Any Western support to Yerevan may help reduce the risk of large-scale war. This is particularly important, keeping in mind that a series of clashes both on the line of contact in Karabakh and along the border between Armenia and Azerbaijan have already resulted in dozens of casualties in the recent months. There is a real risk that Yerevan could be persuaded by Moscow to agree to a Russian “peacekeeping” operation; and further isolation of Armenia could induce it to participate in possible hostile Russian actions against Georgia.

CONCLUSIONS

The recent parliamentary elections in Turkey could pave the way for a modified policy towards Armenia. A quick normalization of bilateral relations, including opening of the border, seems unlikely, particularly due to Azerbaijan’s strong influence in Turkey. Yet, the currently tense bilateral relations may become partly relaxed as neither Ankara, nor Yerevan, is interested in a further increase of tensions as both must deal with a range of different internal and external problems. After the elections, Erdogan’s confrontational and antagonizing rhetoric during the campaign period to mobilize voters, e.g. labeling some representatives of the opposition “agents of the Armenian lobby,” will likely give way to a more balanced, pragmatic approach. Although this will now also depend on the outcome of coalition talks, there is hardly any incentive to promote further hostility. The two countries will therefore likely continue their cooperation in the humanitarian area, culture, tourism, and the media, slowly expanding its scope.

However, Armenia’s excessive dependence on Russia

remains the main issue requiring a solution. Armenia's isolation has only helped Russia increase its influence in the region, adding to Moscow's capacity for manipulating the conflict in its own interest. Moreover, the habitual determination to use that capacity may have grown because of Moscow's perception of relations with the

West, especially concerning its influence in the post-Soviet area, as a zero-sum game; a perception that has become strongly aggravated by Russia's aggression against Ukraine resulting in the present strife with the West.

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