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Russia and Eurasia Programme Meeting Summary

Ways Forward for the Turkey-Armenia Rapprochement

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This is a summary of an event held at Chatham House in May 2012. The event was held under the Chatham House Rule. Participants included experts from academia, think tanks and the policy-making community.

Track I developments are steered by the approaching centenary of the Armenian genocide in 2015. The official denial of the genocide stands in Turkey. Civil society efforts continue unabated; there have been a number of meetings between Armenians and Turks in France, the US, and the UK. These activities are tolerated and sometimes encouraged by both governments. Among other things, the ban on using the word 'genocide' in Article 301 of the Turkish Penal Code is no longer applied in practice. The Kemalist national narrative crumbled with the arrival of the Justice and Development (AKP) party, to power. Turkey needs a new narrative. Challenging the official discourse on certain events in Turkey's history is a part of this process. The genies are out of the bottle; when and how they will affect state policy is difficult to predict. Some AKP deputies are challenging the official narrative on the genocide.

There have been a few proactive initiatives by the Turkish government. Foreign Affairs Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu asked the Armenian patriarchate in Istanbul to send a message to Armenians in Syria, stating they can seek refuge in Turkey. In August 2011, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan gave the go-ahead for the return of the property of non-Muslim religious organisations, which was *de facto* seized in 1936. Unfortunately, 'reactive' initiatives are plentiful. After US President Obama's speech on the conventional Genocide Remembrance Day, 24 April 2012, the Turkish Foreign Minister said there is no difference between 23 and 24 April for the Turkish government.

With the approaching centenary, the Turkish government is likely to publicize the Maltese verdicts of 1919, when Ottoman officials accused of the massacre, tried in Malta, were discharged by the British for political reasons; this is considered proof of non-genocide.

No international jurisdiction has recognised the genocide as was the case with the Nuremberg trials. Turkey is also taking action internationally. In 2007, the Turkish parliamentary delegation to the United Nations (UN) managed to obstruct a conference on the genocide in Rwanda. The climax will come on 15 September 2012, when over a thousand Turkish and Turkic associations from several countries will gather in Istanbul, presumably to refine Turkey's

counter-thesis to Armenian arguments before the approaching centenary. The date is an anniversary of Ottoman Field Marshal Osman Nuri Pasha's invasion of Baku, when 15,000 Armenians were killed. 15 September was also the birthday of Hrant Dink, the Turkish writer and Minority Rights Campaigner, assassinated in 2007.

Progress on this issue is unlikely before the end of Abdullah Gül's presidential term in 2014, when Erdoğan is expected to replace him. It will be difficult for Erdoğan to bypass Gül even after he steps down as President. Gül will not retire and he has accumulated tremendous political experience. The MFA may seek to continue the normalization process but the decision is up to Erdoğan. Erdoğan seeks to create a presidential system with minimal checks and balances; but there is opposition to this even within the AKP. Erdoğan's power may be beginning to decline as Turks are growing tired of his authoritarian leadership style. Also, he may be forced to downgrade his involvement in active politics due to health problems. His recent absence from public view following surgery exposed considerable rifts within the AKP.

The Karabakh vector is also important in Turkey's considerations. Azerbaijan is a newcomer on the political rapprochement environment, and Turkey's energy needs make Azerbaijan a key player. The 'Khojaly genocide' was discovered by Erdoğan in 2009. The Zurich protocols were made public in April 2009; a few days later Erdoğan made an unscheduled visit to Baku and declared that Turkey supports Azerbaijan on Karabakh. Neither Davutoğlu nor the diplomats in charge of the talks had been aware of Erdoğan's plans.

The Karabakh vector is fuelled by a number of activities by the Azerbaijani state. The Azerbaijani state cultural agency tried to cancel the screening of a film by Suzanne Khardalian at the Istanbul film festival in March 2012. A week before the anniversary of the 1992 Khojaly massacre, the Turkish Minister of Interior, İdris Şahin visited President İlham Aliev. The following Friday there was a sermon to commemorate Khojaly in all mosques in Turkey. The official commemoration rally, endorsed by Erdoğan, marked a return to the denial of the Armenian genocide. Extreme right-wing politicians were among the most active participants at the rally, which featured hate speeches against Armenians and other non-Muslim elements of Turkish society.

The embassy in Ankara and the consulate in Kars are centres of Azerbaijani activism in Turkey. The consulate monitors all activities in the border regions, and seeks to counteract all reconciliation initiatives. The consulate worked against a petition for the reopening of the Turkey-Armenia border which collected 50,000 signatures. Azerbaijani MP and member of her country's

delegation to the Council of Europe Ganira Pashayeva is also active in lobbying her country's cause in Turkey and elsewhere in Europe. The Turkish and Azerbaijani diaspora, especially in the US, are working together to develop a counter-strategy for 2015. Diaspora activities are not as frequent in Europe. One of the notable events was the unsuccessful motion in the Swedish parliament demanding immediate retreat of Armenian forces from the occupied territories, initiated by Mehmet Kaplan, a Swedish Green MP of Turkish origin, in May 2012. The friendship has its limits, though. The Turkish market is open to Azerbaijani businessmen, but Azerbaijan is not an easy place for Turkish companies to do business in; Barmek, the Turkish Holding Company, ran into difficulties over unpaid bills.

The Azerbaijanis are justified in their frustration with the lack of progress of the Karabakh peace talks and their sense of betrayal by Turkey; Azerbaijan was only consulted after the protocols had been signed. The real danger of the current situation is in perception; Turkey is in danger of being perceived as an insincere interlocutor. The protocols meant the death of the notion of 'one nation – two states' invented by late Heydar Aliiev.

Azerbaijan demands to be treated with respect. It is unlikely to grow closer to Turkey, as Erdoğan and Aliiev do not get on well. In reaction to the protocols, Azerbaijan mobilised public opinion in Turkey to oppose the normalization process; they claimed that the AKP had betrayed them. The policy of no preconditions will become more difficult to sustain. The approaching centenary puts psychological pressure on Turkey; no activity is likely until 2015, when some steps may be taken to pre-empt a lasting impact of the one hundred-year anniversary.

Normalization of Turkey-Armenia relations would have positive regional and international repercussions. At the moment, it is the only potential positive game-changer in the region. Georgia should pay more attention to the issue, as successful normalization of Turkey-Armenia relations would mean an opportunity for Georgia to rethink its place in the South Caucasus. The status quo helps Russia marginalise and isolate Georgia. The economic aspect is the weakest. An open border would bring little direct benefit to Armenia; it would overcome Georgia's monopoly on border trade, but would also provide advantages for Russian-owned companies in Armenia. The rapprochement agenda was not set by the US, for whom Turkey-Armenia relations are only a subset of relations with Russia and Iran. This makes the process more indigenous and sincere, as there is no pressure to please the US. There have been some efforts to expand the EU's role in supporting the Minsk group. However, the EU has less and less leverage on Turkey.

The October 2009 Zürich protocols did not include the issues of genocide or Nagorno Karabakh; they concerned border opening and diplomatic relations. Both Turkey and Armenia were more comfortable with the vague wording suggested by the Swiss hosts than with specific proposals. The usefulness of the historical sub-commission envisaged in the documents would depend on its mission, mandate and membership. The protocols were politically interesting, but it is time to move beyond them. The two sides should try to achieve a limited implementation of the terms without ratifying the protocols. They should try to make their unofficial relations more official, e.g. via Tbilisi, at first to carry out ordinary tasks at a consular level. Another option would be not to open the border fully, but to open two border-crossing points, including one for cargo. This would enable Turkish goods to reach Armenia directly. Armenians have no problem with buying Turkish goods; the diaspora campaigns against this have been unsuccessful. Also, Turkish Airlines should open an office in Yerevan to cater for the diaspora and Iranian clientele.

Recognition of the genocide by the US is not a priority; Turkey's recognition is what counts for Armenia - the most important event for normalisation is the commemoration of the genocide on Taksim Square in Istanbul, which has been taking place for three years. The opening of the border would create such an interaction that recognition of the genocide would become unavoidable. Turkey's recognition of the genocide would remove the main rallying point of the Armenian diaspora.

The Zürich protocols represent an important achievement in terms of opening minds. Turkish and Armenian specialists and students are getting to know one another again. Track II diplomacy is trying to sustain momentum and broaden the constituency for the normalization of relations, both geographically and demographically. Track II activities are trying to build bottom-up pressure and provide cover for politicians. Focus groups based on demographic cohorts are used to track trends before they reach papers and television.

War by accident remains a possibility in Nagorno Karabakh, but an escalation of hostilities is less likely than in late 2011. Neither side wants war but it is not clear whether that is enough to prevent it. Track II meetings between Azerbaijan and Armenia have taken place in various countries.

The Armenian side needs to be more creative in offering steps that would enable Azerbaijan to save face - a win-win situation. Hardliners in Baku and Yerevan do not understand social media, which helps the moderates. Civil society is trying to create more room for the elites to justify small steps

forward. Political elites in both Armenia and Azerbaijan are tired, and the nationalist card no longer works as well as it used to. Both sides are frustrated with the lack of progress and they no longer think time is on their side. The young Armenian elite sees the current situation as unsustainable. They realize economic and political reform is the only way forward. The international and donor community should broaden their constituency and empower new elites and reach beyond the long-established NGO community.

Activities such as the Nuclear Energy Security Working Group involving the ministries of energy of Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkey are also important. In addition, under the terms of the Conventional Forces in Europe Treaty, Turkey and Armenia are entitled to inspect each other's military facilities; this has happened twice so far and there has been more cooperation than is generally admitted. There is enough ground for shared security interests – avian flu, PKK etc. There are some mid-level officers in the Turkish general staff who are in favour of opening the border in order to stabilise the Kurdish east.

The Armenian government would be wise to ratify the Zürich protocols and thus put pressure on Turkey, but such action is unlikely. Nevertheless, a clear set of demands should be articulated, at least. The May 2012 parliamentary elections in Armenia brought a landslide victory for the ruling party, which is seen as a prelude to Sargsyan's re-election. He may be looking to his legacy, and it may be in the form of normalization of relations with Turkey. He is the last of the Karabakhi elite that came to power in Armenia because of the war in Karabakh. The next generation of politicians will not have links to Karabakh, which may create room for political manoeuvre. During the elections campaign in Armenia, Nagorno Karabakh and genocide were not important issues; the focus was on the economy, corruption, and unemployment. While this shows that there are no major differences of opinion on this issue, it also suggests the two topics are no longer on top of the domestic agenda. The genocide is the key rallying point for the Armenian diaspora. However, diaspora is less of a spoiler; their recent call to Armenians in Armenia to boycott Turkish goods was unsuccessful.