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Moving Beyond Symbolism

The normalization of Turkish-Armenian Relations: a Window of Opportunity for Regional Prosperity?

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The signature of the protocols on the establishment of diplomatic relations and the development of relations by the Turkish and the Armenian Ministers of Foreign Affairs in Zurich on 10 October 2009 concluded the two year long bilateral negotiations conducted under the Swiss mediation. The ministers of the Foreign Affairs of the United States, Russia and France, co-chair countries of the OSCE Minsk Group established for the settlement of the Upper Karabakh conflict attended the signature ceremony. This first inter-governmental text ever signed between Turkey and Armenia since the Treaty of Kars of 13 October 1921, is likely to be a harbinger of winds of change in South Caucasus where the status quo characterized by conflicts divides, blockades and trade restrictions is far from being satisfactory.

On 3 April 1992, the Turkish government issued a decree halting the supply of wheat across Turkish territory to Armenia and closing direct land communications between the two countries. The closure and the ensuing refusal to establish diplomatic relations with Armenia took place in view of the escalating conflict in Upper Karabakh between Armenia and Azerbaijan, and Armenia's ambivalence over the recognition of its common border with Turkey. Since April 1993, the major official reason underpinning Turkey's closure policy and its unwillingness to establish normal relations with Armenia is the 'frozen' conflict in Karabakh.

As a matter of fact the Turkish support to Azerbaijan expressed by keeping the border closed proved nothing more than a symbolical gesture. For the last seventeen years, Turkey's boycott of Armenia hasn't brought about a solution. It seems hardly difficult to argue that the insistence to keep the border with Armenia closed had any positive impact on the resolution of the Karabakh problem. Moreover, Turkey's policy has limited Ankara's potential influence on Armenia. While being a permanent member of the Minsk group and supporting its work, poor Turkish-Armenian relations have hindered Turkey's prospects of playing an active mediating role in the Karabakh conflict. Hence the status quo was not helpful to Turkey in terms achieving her policy objectives. The status quo is also hardly beneficial for Azerbaijan. Events which followed the August 2008 war between Russia and Georgia advocate for the need to rule out the military option in the settlement of the conflicts and the restoration of territorial integrity. The return of the war to the region demonstrated major risks associated with the functioning of the East-West transit and transportation corridor via Georgia. Georgia's transit function and transportation infrastructure had become vital for both Armenia and Azerbaijan, after the breakdown of the Armenian-Azerbaijani and Armenian-Turkish communications. Azerbaijan has the highest interest in

practical ways aiming at unlocking the South Caucasus region and channeling oil revenues into regional investments.

The opportunity cost of the closure policy is very high for Armenia. Landlocked, with its western (Turkish) and eastern (Azerbaijan) borders closed and connected to distant markets via expensive routes through Georgia and Iran, Armenia's development is heavily handicapped. Re-opening of the border would significantly help Armenia's economy and society, even if some economic sectors suffer from external competition. Easier access to import and export channels with the diversification of international economic relations will increase domestic competition, prevent rent-seeking activities and support the further democratization of the country.

Russia expressed openly his support for the normalization of Turkish-Armenian relations. The opening of the Turkish-Armenian border, the last closed one of Europe, will bring new opportunities for Turkish and Russian business sectors active on the Armenian side of the border in infrastructure projects. The restoration of former transport links holds the potential of mitigating existing tensions. South Caucasus, formerly a transit zone at the heart of east-west and north-south connections, has been a cul de sac. The intensification of human interactions, the opening-up of economies and diversification of external connections has the potential to decrease regional tensions and create a momentum for regional integration. The normalization of Turkish-Armenian relations has the capacity of fostering new dynamics in the settlement of the Karabakh conflict, the most intractable conflict and among the biggest obstacles to region-wide cooperation. At this stage, the interruption of the Turkish-Armenian bilateral relations will dissipate the international attention focused on the region and decrease the chances to reach in a foreseeable future an agreement on the conflict over Karabakh.

The future of the region depends on its re-orientation away from regional polarization. There is a pressing need to transfer the unique economic cooperation between Russia and Turkey – a cooperation that verges on interdependence - to South Caucasus. It is of necessity to promote pragmatically-oriented approaches based on self-interest and business initiatives, and to stress the importance of competition, rather than confrontation and domination. In this regard, Turkey and Russia can set the example. The two traditional foes found a political common ground. Economics, private sector actors and tourists have been the driving force in this rapprochement.

The challenge ahead is to transform old frontiers into borders secured through trade and human interactions. Cross-border cooperation will be the reconciliation with geography and the triumph of people over history.