

# Armenian Domestic Policies and the Rapprochement with Turkey

By Alexander Iskandaryan<sup>1</sup>

Since its independence, Armenia's presidents and foreign affairs' ministers have repeatedly been saying that the country is prepared to normalize relations and open borders with Turkey without preconditions. In Armenia, Turkey has always been perceived as having initiated the current situation in order to support Azerbaijan in the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh, leaving Armenia to suffer from the consequences.

However, as long as normalization prospects were not perceived as realistic, the issue was hardly ever raised domestically. Once in a while, official reports mentioned that Turkey was unfairly blocking land communication to Armenia. Public attitudes to Turkey were mostly focused on history rather than a realistic perspective on modern Turkey. There is no research to-date to sustain this view but it does appear that the past of the Armenian-Turkish relations had been much more frequently discussed in Armenia than its present state.

Perceptible change began to occur soon after the election of Armenia's third president Serzh Sargsyan. It was not Sargsyan who initiated the process: rapprochement had been made possible by many years of latent changes that happened primarily in Turkey but also in the entire region as well as in Europe and in the U.S.

After the August 2008 Russia-Georgia war, Armenia got a strong illustration of how vulnerable its communications were. The bombing of a single bridge in Georgia caused Armenia's population to panic about potential fuel shortages; people started buying up car petrol, and petrol stations had to ration sales. The petrol panic coincided with the first successes of Armenian-Turkish diplomacy: the football match in Yerevan attended by the Turkish president.

Immediately after the match, Armenians began discussing the potential opening of the border. Debates around Armenian-Turkish normalization have since been omnipresent in the

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media and political circles. Now perceived as realistic, the prospect finds many supporters but also some opponents. Some economists fear that opening of borders may leave Armenian producers unable to compete against cheap imports from Turkey but most experts believe the economic benefits of the opening of borders will outmatch damage. Some hardliners insist that Turkey should recognize the Genocide of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire first and only then start talking about normalization; however, in the political field such views are marginal. The ruling coalition is generally positive about potential opening of the borders. One exception is the Dashnaktsutyun Party which is traditionally very skeptical towards Turkey; however, it has remained in coalition and raises its protests from within the establishment. As to opposition, both within and outside the parliament, it is generally very critical of the government on other counts but supportive of efforts at normalization with Turkey.

Overall, there is no significant opposition to rapprochement in Armenian political elites. This makes sense: most windows in Yerevan offer a good view of Turkey, and most people realize it is not normal to have two out of four land borders sealed. Geographically, the way to Europe from Armenia lies via Turkey, a fact most politicians realize, so that arguments about why this way should remain barred do not convince most of the establishment.

Should the border to Turkey open, the existing historical and mental legacies now burdening Armenian-Turkish relations will not disappear. Free travel and direct contact may even aggravate many problems. However, it's crucial that the format should be depoliticized, so that the historical legacies and memories are no longer components of interstate relations, paving the way to normalization and cooperation between the two nations.