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# THE LIMITS OF ZERO PROBLEM POLICY IN THE CAUCASUS: THE IMPASSE IN TURKISH - ARMENIAN RELATIONS*

## *SIFIR SORUN POLİTİKASININ KAFKASYA'DAKİ SINIRLARI: TÜRK-ERMENİ İLİŞKİLERİNDE AÇMAZ*

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### *ABSTRACT*

*Turkish foreign policy has been in a transformation process since the end of the Cold War. However, each transformation period comes with new crisis and advantages that should be assessed carefully. Turkey has been trying tackle with these newly emerged challenges by pursuing a proactive foreign policy since the end of 1990s. In this framework, zero problem policy, which was introduced by Ahmet Davutoglu, has been effective to overcome certain problems with its neighbours and create a better environment to stimulate partnership in the Eurasian region. Yet, this policy seems to be not functioning properly in Turco-Armenian relations due to its complex characteristics that is directly related both with internal and external policies of these countries. In this paper, the relations, which have entered into a new phase with football diplomacy, will be examined in a critical manner to understand the current impasse in the relations between Turkey and Armenia. It is argued that the relations are in impasse due to domestic and international dynamics that affect the politics in Armenia and Turkey and there is a need for paradigm shift for a new phase to begin.*

***Key Words:*** *Turkey, Armenia, Zero Problem Policy, the Caucasus, Conflict Resolution*

### *ÖZET*

*Türk dış politikası Soğuk Savaş sonrası dönemde bir dönüşüm sürecine girerek ortaya çıkan yeni tehditlere ve fırsatlara yönelik pozisyon almıştır. 1990'ların sonundan itibaren de aktif siyaset yanlısı yaklaşım benimseyen ülke, Ahmet Davutoğlu tarafından ortaya konan sıfır sorun politikası çerçevesinde de komşuları ile var olan problemlerin üstesinden gelmek adına inisiyatifi eline alan bir tutum sergilemektedir. Avrasya bölgesinde belli oranda başarılı olan bu yaklaşım, Türk-Ermeni ilişkilerindeki sıkıntıların üstesinden gelme konusunda iç ve dış siyasetin karmaşık ilişkisinin bu ülkelerin siyaseti üzerindeki etkileri nedeniyle belli noktalarda problem yaşamaktadır. Bu çalışma, futbol diplomasisi ile yeni bir döneme giren Türk-Ermeni ilişkilerini eleştirel bir yaklaşımla ele alarak, sıkışmış kalmış izlenimi veren ilişkilerde mevcut durumu analiz etmeye çalışmaktadır. Öne sürülen argüman ise ilişkilerin geldiği son durumda iç ve dış siyasi dinamiklerin bu süreçte etkili olduğu, yeni bir sürecin başlaması için ise bir paradigma değişikliğine ihtiyaç duyulduğudur.*

***Anahtar Kelimeler:*** *Türkiye, Ermenistan, Sıfır Sorun Politikası, Kafkaslar, Çatışma Çözümü*

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## INTRODUCTION

Turkish foreign policy has been undergoing a process of transformation since the end of the Cold War. However, each transformation period comes with new crises and advantages that should be assessed carefully. Turkey has been trying tackle these challenges by pursuing a proactive foreign policy since the end of 1990s. In this respect, the "zero-problem" policy, introduced to Turkish foreign policy by Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu, has been effective in overcoming certain chronic problems with its neighbors and creating a better environment to stimulate regional partnerships. In the Caucasus, particularly good relations with Azerbaijan beginning in the 1990s have turned into a regional integration process, with Georgia's enthusiastic participation in the 2000s. The South Caucasus has become a transit zone for trade, energy products, and transportation. However, compared to Turkey's cooperation with the Middle East, the dynamism in the Caucasus is limited. One of the main reasons is the exclusion of Armenia from the mega projects, those are conducted in the region. The conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia is only one side of the coin. On the other side, the impasse in Turkish-Armenian relations also stands in the way of further cooperation opportunities, due to the complex characteristics of both countries' internal and external policies.

Turkish-Armenian relations entered a new era with the "football diplomacy" visits of both countries' leaders in 2008–2009. In this article, the current state of relations between Turkey and Armenia will be examined in a critical manner to understand the continuing impasse. In this framework, the dynamics of Turkish politics will be scrutinized; this will then be compared to the picture in Armenia. It is argued that both sides need time to regain energy and move forward. Conjectural changes over this period can function as a catalyst for development in relations. However, under current circumstances the relations seems to be in a deadlock due to dominance of internal politics as well as unfavorable environment in international terms.

### 1. Turkey in Transformation, but in an Unfavorable Environment

In the aftermath of the Cold War, Turkey failed to grasp the structural changes taking place in the international arena. The problematic nature of NATO and the emergence of conflicts in the region forced Turkey to act in a reactive manner in its foreign policy. The creation of a new concept in Turkish diplomacy was put off until 2000s. Yet even this new approach, known as "zero-problem diplomacy," has some shortcomings.

Turkish-Armenian relations are one of the main pillars of this approach. The issue is multidimensional, even affecting Turkey's policies in the West and the rest of the Caucasus. Moreover, Turkey has succeeded in overcoming or de-escalating its problems with all of its neighbors by pursuing economic, political, and cultural policies—except with Armenia. In this respect, domestic and international dynamics have played important role in the current position of Turkey and prevented a solution through normal means. As is known, Turkey

and Armenia both signed protocols restoring relations in 10 October 2009, but since then both the Armenian and Turkish parliaments have failed to ratify them. Since then, the issue has remained high on the political agenda but has started to move down, particularly since the spring of 2010.

One of the main reasons for this delay in the political sphere has been the political and economic transformation process in Turkey. In domestic terms, politics hangs in an extremely sensitive balance. The high-profile Ergenekon case, which began in 2007 and has sought to uproot a "deep state" intent on destabilizing Turkey, has been a big blow to the status quo in the country. In addition to ongoing judicial process, tensions between the mechanisms of the bureaucracy and the political sphere peaked in 2010. This has undermined the efficacy of politicians to enact needed changes and led to administrative crises, particularly in the executive and judicial branches. As a result, the AKP (Justice and Development Party) government took a radical decision to propose serious amendments to the constitution to be able to overcome the legal shortcomings as well as enhance democratic and individual rights. These two issues, combined with resurgence in the activity of the PKK terrorist organization, have dominated the political agenda in the country. With its hands as yet tied by power struggle of political parties and bureaucracy, it is difficult for the government to take a radical step toward a long-lasting solution with Armenia, in spite of its large majority in the parliament. Moreover, the prospect of general elections, to be held in June 2011, has put the government in a critical position. Support for the AKP has decreased pre-referandum period and in this political environment, nobody wanted to take further risks. Nationalism plays a role in this respect. The territorial dispute between Armenia and Turkic Azerbaijan over Karabakh is emotional and draws reactions particularly from those with nationalist and conservative tendencies.

It seems that the government's strategy worked well and it regained power after the referendum, which was held in 12 September 2010. Still there are some major problems to be addressed in Turkish politics and still Armenian issue unlikely to gain impetus in political agenda before the spring of 2011.

While the domestic environment seems unfavorable, recent international dynamics play a mixed role in fostering reconciliation. The status quo in the Caucasus certainly changed as a result of the Russo-Georgian war of August 2008. In the war's aftermath, Turkey drafted a proposal for a Caucasian Cooperation and Stability Pact. Though it failed to bring together the countries in the region, the discussions did help to enhance Turkey's relations with Caucasian countries, one by one, via shuttle diplomacy. Among Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Turkey, a cooperation zone had existed even prior to the war. This became the platform for "mega projects" such as the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan Pipeline, which brought investment and interest to the region. Yet the inclusion of Armenia is clearly required for further cooperation in the region. In line with Turkey's "zero-problem" diplomacy, Turkey also searched for further cooperation options with Armenia. It was in this context that the football

diplomacy started by Presidents Abdullah Gül and Serzh Sargsyan were a prelude to the October 2009 protocols in Zurich.

The role of the United States in the project of Turkish-Armenian rapprochement cannot be ignored. As is known, U.S. President Barack Obama explicitly declared during his election campaign that the events of 1915[1] should be recognized as "genocide", to garner the support of the Armenian diaspora in the elections.[2] Thus, especially just before the presidential speech on 24 April 2009, Turkey focused its efforts on making Obama avoid referring to "genocide" in his statement on the events of 1915. Though Obama did not explicitly used the word "genocide", he sought common ground by using the word "*metz yeghern*", which means the "great catastrophe" in Armenian. However, this did not affect Turkey's decision to sign the protocols in October 2009. During the ceremony in Zurich, both the U.S. secretary of state and the Russian foreign minister played crucial roles. However, the role of the Obama administration in creating the protocols should not be exaggerated. Obama's administration played the role of catalyst, not of founder, since secret negotiations had already started in Zurich between the two parties long before the election of Obama as president.

The process which began in Zurich, however, has come to a halt because of structural problems in the region. In this respect, relations between Turkey and Azerbaijan should be scrutinized carefully. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Turkish leaders Turgut Özal and Süleyman Demirel and Azeri President Heydar Aliyev developed a relationship based on friendship and bilateral interests. Bonds between two nations have developed quickly thanks to cultural and economic cooperation based on education, media, and commerce. Azerbaijan became Turkey's main gate to Caucasus and Caspian, while Turkey's membership in NATO and accession membership in the EU made it the main gate for Azerbaijan to the West. However, Turkey's insistence on pursuing a "zero-problem" policy and Azerbaijani sensitivities during the Turkish-Armenian rapprochement revealed the fact that even though bilateral relations between Azerbaijan and Turkey are described as "special", when it comes to national interest, Azerbaijan will act in line with realist motives.

Both Azerbaijan's political elite and public opinion view the normalization process between Yerevan and Ankara as a Turkish abandonment of Azerbaijan. In this respect, it is hard to ignore the rising voice in Baku's political sphere of

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[1] Under the circumstances of World War I, Ottoman Empire decided to relocate Armenian minority to Damascus Province of the Empire due to increasing attacks of Armenians to the Muslim minority in the Eastern part of Anatolia. However, during their travel to the South Turkish and Kurdish groups attacked to Armenians, who wanted to take revenge of their losses in their families, caused many losses in the Armenian side. Moreover, during their transfer many Armenians lost their lives on the road due to unfavorable conditions. Yet, the losses were not the result of systematic ethnic cleansing policies of the Ottoman Empire as suggested above. Rather Ottoman Empire wanted to decrease the tension in its eastern provinces due to the ongoing war.

[2] "Days Left to U.S. Presidential Election, Obama Again Pledges to Recognize Armenian Genocide", *Panarmenian.net*, 03 November 2008.

the Russian lobby, which has attempted to turn Azerbaijan's gaze toward Moscow in the country's "best interest". The process between Turkey and Armenia was used as a tool of manipulation, and Turkey had to resort to restating its stance, held since the 1990s, that any rapprochement rests on a solution to the Karabakh issue. Sour reactions could only be brought under control by public statements by the foreign minister, president, and prime minister of Turkey at different platforms. In particular, Turkish Prime Minister R. Tayyip Erdoğan's statements in Azerbaijan's parliament, which reiterated that Turkey would not approve the protocols without ending the Armenian occupation in Azerbaijan's territory,[3] was a critical point in Turkish diplomacy. This gave Turkey a small space to maneuver, but helped to mend the relations with Azerbaijan to a certain degree. Nevertheless, all the efforts of Turkish authorities still seemed insufficient to regain the confidence of Azerbaijan. Azeri Foreign Minister Elmar Memedyarov, who visited Turkey at the end of 2009 with the intent of signing a protocol that would abolish visas between two countries, left the country without signing the agreement.[4]

Perhaps Turkey's prerequisite of linking the normalization process to Karabakh issue should have been indicated before the start of negotiations, since the closure of the borders between Armenia and Turkey was itself a result of the occupation of Azerbaijani territory by Armenian forces. Nevertheless, due to the delicate nature of relations, which also caused some problems during the signing the protocols, this problem could not be put forward explicitly. Rather, in the protocols, there are indirect references to the conflict and the need for a solution within the framework of international law. The absence of an explicit reference to the issue could be perceived as a problem. However, Turkey's use of the Karabakh conflict as an excuse for not approving the protocols in parliament was indirectly criticized by international actors. Both American and Russian authorities stated openly and indirectly that normalization between Turkey and Armenia should not be linked to the peace process in Karabakh.[5] Nevertheless, it is hard to claim that such declarations on the part of Russia and the United States actually help to solve of the problem, since they simply encourage Armenian recalcitrance rather than pushing them to reach a solution to the conflict, an open violation of international law.

Last but not least, the decision of the Constitutional Court of Armenia[6] caused some suspicions in Turkey regarding the Armenia's sincerity, since it eviscerated the very essence of the protocols.[7] Meanwhile, the Turkish government, which defends the protocols, had two strong arguments. One of them was that the 1915 events should be examined by a common history

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[3] "Bakü'nün Şüphelerini Sona Erdirdi", *Sabah*, 14 May 2009.

[4] Duygu Güvenç, "Azerbaycan ile Vize Kaldırmaya Rötar", *Hürriyet*, 26 December 2009.

[5] Joshua Kucera, "Turkey: Obama Administration Official Cautions Against Armenian Genocide Solution", 16 March 2010; "Putin: Uvyazka Karabahskoy Problemi i Armyano-Turetzkih Otnoşeniy – Strategiçeski Neverna", REGNUM, 13 January 2010.

[6] For the full text of the Constitutional Court of the Republic of Armenia please refer to (http://www.conco urt.am/english/decisions/common/pdf/850.pdf).

[7] Sedat Laçiner, "Bir Ermeni Tasarısı Hiç Bu Kadar İşe Yaramamıştı", USAK *Gündem*, 15 March 2010.

commission composed of members from both states. The second is that the border between Armenia and Turkey, which was drawn up by the Kars Treaty in 1921 and ratified by both countries, will be recognized by post-Soviet Armenia, which still makes references to Turkish territory as "Western Armenia" in its declaration of independence (Article 11).

## 2. Armenia – Stuck Between Diaspora and Nationalism

The turn in Armenian foreign policy toward a pro-peace stance was perceived positively both in Turkey and the international arena. Unlike his predecessor Robert Kocharyan, Armenia's current President Sargsyan came together with his Azeri and Turkish counterparts in different venues despite domestic political pressure, especially after Georgian-Russian War. However, regarding the Turkish-Armenian rapprochement, domestic barriers similar to those of Turkey give the Armenian government very little leverage. While dialogue with Turkey was harshly criticized, especially by opposition parties in the country, the reaction of the Armenian diaspora was even stronger. Sargsyan's meetings with intellectuals in Armenia or in the diaspora were anything but positive for the president's political career. Yet, both Turkish and Armenian governments are continuing to take steps that would break political and social taboos.

Turkish and Armenian foreign ministers have left behind one of the main obstacles on the way to the long lasting solution on 10 October 2009, when the protocols released on 31 August were signed both by Turkish and Armenian ministers in spite of a last-minute crisis that emerged in Zurich. Armenian Foreign Minister Eduard Nalbandyan, implicitly referring to the Nagorno-Karabakh issue, wanted to emphasize the principle of starting relations unconditionally. However, his Turkish counterpart Ahmet Davutoğlu wanted to underline the importance of a solution to *all* regional problems in the South Caucasus, also an indirect reference to the Nagorno-Karabakh problem. The presence of these issues in the texts of the ministers' speeches caused the ceremony's start to be delayed, but Turkey's proposition to cancel ministerial speeches after the ceremony helped to overcome this problem. Although the political will of the Minsk Group members, particularly Russia and the United States, proved to be sufficient in terms of overcoming this problem, their attitudes later regarding the process have been less than constructive, as noted above.

In Armenia, some obstacles to reaching a long-lasting solution in the Caucasus began to emerge after the protocols were signed. One of the main questions for Armenia is the will of the Turkish parliament to ratify the protocols quickly. Armenian politicians have suggested that the Turkish parliament ratify the protocols first. In fact, they started to impose deadlines, particularly before 24 April 2010. As suggested above, the Turkish government continued to emphasize the Nagorno-Karabakh issue and underline that these two processes are not independent from one another. This discussion was followed by three important developments. The decision of Constitutional Court of Armenia was followed by a government bill, ratified by parliament, that would make it easier

for Armenia to annul its normalization agreements with Turkey,[8] and finally by a suspension of the protocols.[9]

One of the main factors behind this step was the reaction of the diaspora to the protocols. During his five-stop tour of major diaspora Armenian communities in France, the United States, and the Middle East, Sargsyan faced harsh criticism.[10] With its strong financial support of the country and its political power, the diaspora is a significant factor in Armenian politics. The main problem is that the Armenian economy is dependent on financial injections coming from abroad and good relations with diaspora favor inflow of "diaspora investments"[11]. Moreover, diaspora plays a vital role for Republic of Armenia as representing the country in political spheres and protecting its interests in the West.

Nevertheless, it was not only the diaspora that resisted such a paradigm shift in Turkish Armenian relations. In Armenia itself, the hardliner Dashnaktsutyun Party threatened the government with "regime change" and pushed for the president's resignation.[12] Remembering the fate of former President Levon Ter-Petrossian, who was forced to resign under similar circumstances, it becomes harder to ignore these kinds of comments from opposition parties. Actually, the ruling Republican Party is in power only with the support of the coalition party, and it is hard to presume whether other members of parliament are going to vote in favor of the sensitive protocols. Additionally, the government lost the support of the Dashnaks in April 2009. Bearing in mind the fact that the Republican Party stays in power with the coalition and 64 seats out of 131 is belong to the Republican Party. This also brings new political risks for the president.

Last but not least, the global financial crisis in the country has made it difficult for the government to force through unpopular policies. The country's economy contracted by 14.4 percent in 2009, and the expectations are not optimistic for 2010.[13] Considering the fact that economy plays a vital role in the popularity of the incumbent government, its impacts of politics cannot be ignored easily. In this framework, Pacek and Radcliff argue that there is the possibility of asymmetry in voter response to the economy.[14] In this sense,

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8 "Armenian Parliament Ratifies Law on Nullifying International Treaties", *Asbarez.com*, 24 February 2010.

9 "Armenia Suspends Ratification of Turkey Deal", RFERL, 22 April 2010.

10 Aza Babayan, "Sarkisian on Last Leg of Diaspora Tour", *Azatutyun.am*, 07 October 2009; "More Than 12000 Protest Sarkisian, Protocols in Los Angeles", *Asberez.com*, 05 October 2009; Hasmik Smbatyan and Gevorg Stamboltsian, "Sarkisian Continues Diaspora Tour", *Azatutyun.com*, 05 October 2009.

11 Lev Freinkman & Evgeny Polyakov, Carolina Revenco, *Armenia's Trade Performance in* 1995-2002 *and the Effect of Closed Border: A Cross Country Perspective*, Working Paper (Washington: Armenian International Policy Research Group, 2004), p. 5.

12 Sargis Harutyunyan, Irina Hovannisian, Ruzanna Stapanian, "Dashnak Leader Threatens 'Regime Change Drive'", *Armenian Liberty*, 08 October 2009.

13 "Armenia Reports Mounting Economic Growth", RFERL, 23 March 2010.

14 Alexander Pacek & Benjamin Radcliff, "The Political Economy of Competitive Elections in the Developing World", *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 39, No. 3, 1995, p. 746.

electorate may have different reflexes in bad or good economic conditions. Focusing on the voter behavior in developing countries they come up with the conclusion that "economic decline imposes severe electoral costs on incumbent governments, but economic growth provides no benefits."[15] In other words, electorate is more likely to punish the incumbent government, due to economic crisis but the rewarding mechanism seems to be not functioning well enough in time of economic expansion. Similar symptoms can be seen in Armenian politics as well. A survey conducted in 2010 shows that the main problem areas in Armenia is directly related with economics. The 46 per cent of people surveyed indicated that the main problem is unemployment whereas poor social conditions and poverty indicated as the second issue by the 27 per cent of the people.[16]

Then, it is hard to claim that there is a favorable environment in Armenian domestic politics. Considering this fact, Turkey' explicit linking the normalization process to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, did not help to the Sargsyan government. Consequently, the Armenian side chose the non-risky way and began to pursue an aggressive stance regarding the protocols. In other words, Sargsyan again had to play the nationalist card to court the public support to balance other factors arising as a burden.

## CONCLUSION

Structural problems between Turkey and Armenia persist: the border issue, the events of 1915, and the Karabakh issue. The problematic relation itself is multidimensional and, when it is combined with international and domestic dynamics of these two states and the region, it becomes even more complicated. Additionally, a democracy deficit in both Armenia and Azerbaijan presents a political ground fertile for political exploitation of Karabakh issue by playing on nationalistic tendencies.

The political will shown for starting diplomatic relations and opening the border between two countries, which began with the conjectural changes in the region and domestic policies of both countries in 2008, has come to a standstill due to rapidly changing international and domestic political agenda in both countries. Nevertheless, we might find some hope for future prospects in the fact that the process of reconciliation has not been abrogated, but merely suspended. Conjectural changes, which helped the process to start, can again help to take the process further. The peace efforts of Russia and the Minsk Group in the conflict over Karabakh have a capacity to directly affect the rapprochement between Armenia and Turkey. A road map that would be accepted by Azerbaijan and Armenia and aftermath start of a normalization process would open a new phase in the Caucasus that would turn into a region-wide integration project. For this, the international community must pressure

[15] Ibid., p. 753.

[16] European Friends of Armenia, *Poll Conducted in Armenia: Main Findings*, November 2010, p. 8; (http://www.eufoa.org/uploads/Armenia%20Final%20Report.pdf).

these countries to come up with a long-lasting solution. Under current circumstances, peace in the Caucasus stands on delicate ground.

Thus, the process in the Southern Caucasus should be carried out simultaneously both in Karabakh and Turkish-Armenian relations. Otherwise, the normalization of Turkish-Armenian relations would be limited and would carry the potential to bring new political risks for both countries' governments. In the future the two countries should strive to keep the channels of dialogue open, but not in an aggressive manner. In this context, the power balance between Armenia and Turkey is not equal. Demands dictated by third parties are causing new reflexes in Turkey that are not in line with a solution. Turkey, unlike Armenia, is more ready to assess the process objectively, and demands from Turkey should likewise be rational. In this sense, zero problem policy represents a favorable ground. However, territorial claims or compensation demands from Turkey by Armenians in Armenia or the diaspora simply affect the process of rebuilding relations negatively and pave the way to stronger taboos in Turkey.[17]

Instead, the relations between the two nations should be enhanced via cultural organizations, which would help politicians to overcome the public resistance. In this regard, Turkish-Greek relations represent a good model. The normalization process which began after the 1999 earthquake near Istanbul turned into a political success. The friendly dialogue among politicians and increasing interaction between the two nations helped the relations to develop. Yet again, the predominance of the Armenian diaspora in Armenian politics would influence these efforts.

Finally, outside players in the region and the international community have shown their intention to act pragmatically in the region. However, to solve the problems facing the South Caucasus, there is also need for rationalism among the Caucasian nations themselves. Rational policies should be pursued based on mutual interests as well as respect for international law and the sovereignty of each nation.

[17] A recent law suit against Turkey was opened by diaspora Armenians in Los Angeles. For more information please refer to Minhac Çelik, "Diaspora Tazminat Davası Açtı, 'Sessiz Diplomasi' Etkilenebilir", *Zaman*, 31 July 2010.

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