



ARMENIANS AND TURKS:

LET THE PEOPLE TALK ABOUT IT

By Edgar Khachatryan and Vahagn Antonyan,
Peace Dialogue NGO, 2009

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In April and May of 2009 representatives of Peace Dialogue NGO had several meetings and interviews in Istanbul, Turkey among the citizens of the city to reveal the approach and moods of Turkish society regarding the present state of Armenian-Turkish relations. Discussions were organized among those citizens of Istanbul from different ethnic origins, with intellectuals, and with ordinary people.

“It seems like there is no Armenia”

Though for Armenians living in Armenia Turkey is not “under the seven mountains” (far away), nowadays there is a new “diaspora” emerging in Turkey consisting of Armenians going abroad to seek employment. At the same time, for Turks Armenia is something unknown, unable to be understood, unreliable, and that sounds a bit aggressive, but all behind a wall.

“It seems like there is no Armenia because of the closed borders,” says a Turkish citizen of Kurdish background, freelance journalist Ulash Tosun. “As a journalist it was very easy for me to visit Georgia, but I couldn’t visit Armenia. It is an injustice for these two peoples. I would like for the borders to be opened, as a journalist, as a tourist. Of course, there is a big historical scar between Armenians and Turks, but how can we discuss about 1.5 million victims when the borders are closed?”

For many Turks the topic of opening the borders and normalization of relations with neighboring Armenia is not an agenda and not even terribly interesting. Even though the issue is broadly covered by the mass media --TV and print media outlets -- during the interviews on the streets of Istanbul some of the people experienced with English language indicated that they were not very or at all familiar with the topic of inquiry, nor even had heard about it.

However, Turkish-Armenians living in Turkey are following the process with great attention. Bagrat Estukyan, who is a representative of the editorial board of Agos media outlet, has a dual approach to this end. He greatly wants to see the Armenian-Turkish border opened and relations between Armenians and Turks improved, but on the other hand he has hesitations. “As an individual and as an Armenian I wouldn’t like for Armenia to be spoiled because I am afraid that opening the borders so far will bring some ‘smuggling disease.’

“There can’t be forced dialogue”

Concerning the newly warming relations between Armenians and Turks, U. Tosun shared with us his ideas on the topic of dialogue forced by the current political reality, in which Turkey and Armenia have been forced to engage in dialogue; but everything that is forced meets barriers, and new rising Armenian-Turkish dialogue could be halted. “In general it is not a topic for politicians. There is a need for the topic to be discussed by the peoples of Armenia and Turkey.

There is a need for non-governmental cooperation. Aren’t the current difficulties made primarily by politicians? They closed the borders in order to say afterward ‘is there a necessity for opening?’ and to make it a topic of a never-ending agenda with a permanently hidden solution.”

Turkish journalist Altu Yilmaz agrees with Tosun. “Politics, of course, has a heavy influence but what is more valuable for me is a dialogue between the ordinary people of these two countries. I place great importance on human relationships and each time when I meet a representative of the Armenian diaspora, taking into consideration that the genocide is a great burden on the shoulders of the diaspora, I simply invite them to come to Turkey. I want them

to come see and meet the people and relate to them. Only thus we can change the opinions of Turks about Armenians and vice-versa; only by making simple human relationships can we overcome all prejudices and stereotypes against each other and improve the relationships between these two peoples.”

Even the 23 year old bell-boy Ali in the Erboy Hotel in Istanbul, who meets thousands of guests from all over the world as part of his duties, gains a special joy from meeting Armenians and he emphasizes that it's a great pleasure for him when people from Armenia can come and see Turkey; he wishes to one day visit Armenia.

“Bir millet, iyi devlet”

Negotiations recently held between Armenia and Turkey are occurring as a secret process. From behind the cover of this secrecy some small scraps of the main content are coming to us and are very controversial. Although there have been a couple of announcements that the negotiations should be held without preconditions, the Prime Minister of Turkey Recep Tayip Erdogan declared during his visit to Baku on May 13 that the reason for closing the borders is the “occupation” of Azeri lands and Nagorno-Karabakh and the borders can be opened only after these reasons are removed.

Because of the controversy over this information Bagarat Estukyan is very careful about making his opinion regarding this topic. “Erdogan said that such things are not being declared during the process in order to give space for the calm work of politicians. We have no information on the roadmap; it is not published yet (although the roadmap is not a matter of secrecy). That's why I don't have much of an opinion to express on the topic.”

For Altu Yilmaz it seems incorrect to view the topic of bringing back territories “occupied” by Armenians as a precondition. “Nagorno-Karabakh is not the care of Turkey and the expression ‘one nation two countries’ is childish. That's an old story and smells like nationalism. There are several nations with Turkish background all over the world, as in Asia, even in China. Why should I feel in solidarity with them?”

In the opinion of Istanbul-born Armenian Hrant Kasparyan the above mentioned announcement by Erdogan in Baku again shows that Turkey is happy and proud to “be the tail of Azerbaijan.” “Turkey declares that the borders can't be opened before the resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. According to me, that means the borders will never be opened. Turkey should not be allowed to observe this difficult topic as a precondition. In order not to be two-faced, Turkey should not forget about the issue of ‘Turkish Republic of Cyprus’, which is not recognized yet and is considered as an occupied territory by the EU and many countries in the world.”

As a balance to the above mentioned opinions many Turks consider Armenian-Azeri relations to be an important issue. “Our consciousness tells us that those are different problems, and we should not connect them. It is very important to improve our relations with Armenia, at least for normal development. As in present reality it is impossible to develop without making good relations at least with your immediate neighbors. But on the other hand somewhere deep in our souls we realize that we are one nation with Azeris, living in different countries,” says Yilmaz Ozluk, head of the tourism agency ‘Onur Tourism.’

“Consortium of foxes”

As Serge Sargsyan, President of Armenia, says, the Armenian government is publicly declaring that it is ready for negotiations and normalizing relations with Turkey without any preconditions, but this doesn't mean that Armenians should forget about the genocide. People in Turkey, even those who feel themselves far from nationalistic ideas and who are not against the opening of borders and normalization of relations, are quite careful on this issue because they're unsure if it is in Turkey's interest. Turkish society constantly feels negative and full of anger when hearing about Armenia and the Armenian diaspora continuously trying to present the events of 1915 as genocide. Yilmaz Ozluk believes that this topic is a matter of discussion between historians and adds that the government of his country has proposed several times to Armenia to make a consortium of historians to discuss the topic. “Let's jointly discuss the issue to together build up our future,” he says.

Hrant Kasparyan strongly disagrees with this opinion. “As a member of the youth and as an objective Armenian, I am sure that if that proposal comes true, it will be a ‘consortium of foxes,’ with unclear perspective and of course totally dependant on Turkish interests. The events of 1915 are a non-negotiable truth for Armenians which can't be discussed; the government can't be allowed to create such a consortium.”

U. Tosun also highlights the importance of recognition of historical facts, admission of the past, and conciliation of each others' pasts, mentioning that without those conditions we can't have normal development. He summarized his speech with words from the Turkish poet Nazim Hikmet, who even in the 1940s wrote a poem addressing this now nearly forbidden topic in Turkey. “This our neighbor Armenian food-seller never will forget that his people have been wiped out in the mountains.”

Altu Yilmaz also mentioned the topic of genocide and the Turkish government's policy of refusal. According to him, to refuse and hide the past is not the best way and there is a need to look to the past, not by the historians but on the governmental level—there is a need to admit the past in order to have the possibility to solve current problems.

“Erministan...arkardash”

To talk about Istanbul and about the moods and concerns there without mentioning the innumerable Turkish bazaars would be to omit the approach of a sizeable part of Istanbul's society. Although, naturally, only a few of them are experienced in different languages, sometimes emotions and gestures are more than expressive enough. One constantly meets smiles and warm greetings after being asked the question “where are you from?” and answering “Armenia.” “Oh, Erministan? Arkardash!” they are saying, and trying to show Turkish hospitality, offering Turkish coffee or tea. It seems for these persons that what the Turkish media says about Armenia, and possible threats that their government sees behind the demands about recognition of the Armenian genocide, is unimportant. They are mostly thinking about simple and friendly human relations and as a result the prosperity of their business and their families increases.

ARMENIANS AND TURKS:

LET THE PEOPLE TALK ABOUT IT -- Part 2

The Armenian Perspective

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Armenian-Turkish relations and all the developments related with them continue to be an agenda topic, not only in Armenia and Turkey but other countries as well. Although the mass media of both of these countries are flooded with information about this topic, the main accent is focused on the responsible parties of internal relations and on the announcements and comments of experts. At the same time, the societies of these two countries have fallen into the role of passive observer.

Armenian-Turkish relations, as well as the topic of the regulation of the Nagorno-Karabakh problem, are once again becoming the topic of discussion primarily for the political elite. Broad layers of society are receiving very little information on the negotiations and decisions and as a result have very little image about possible developments and perspectives. Small scraps of received information are becoming the basis for various suspicions and possibly incorrect commentary; this commentary became clear from the diverse opinions gathered during interviews held by Peace Dialogue NGO among the citizenry of Armenia. Peace Dialogue-a peace NGO aimed towards the support of peaceful regulation of regional conflicts-held a number of interviews previously in Istanbul, Turkey on this topic.

“Hidden means there’s something to hide”

Many participants were unhappy with the secrecy of the negotiation process. Although, as Prime Minister of Armenia Tigran Sargsyan said, all the decisions and agreements made during the process will be discussed in Parliament - meaning they will make the process transparent and accessible for the society - presently the process continues to remain secret. “People aren’t familiar with the content of negotiations and so naturally will think that something is bad for them; otherwise, why would they be hiding the information? Doesn’t it mean there’s something to hide?” says journalist and poetry - translator Khoren Gasparyan. In the opinion of Edgar Hakobyan - historian by education but presently unemployed - this game is dictated by powerful countries and the parties of negotiations are afraid to present to their societies their activities done under the dictates of others; however, not everybody agrees with this opinion. “This is something that our governments should decide and positive solutions and decisions gained during this process will be accepted by the people of both of these countries. In this case, people have nothing to do.” This is an opinion of Edgar Marukyan, a 25 year old IT specialist. The head of a union of Ukrainians “Ukraine” in the Lori region of Armenia, Ludmila Kozhemyachenko, has a similar opinion. She says “regulation of diplomatic relations is primarily an area of politicians, and people can only prepare a relevant basis for the work of these politicians.”

“If normalization of relations, then only without preconditions”

Most of the interviewees, if not all of them, agreed on one point: if Turkish-Armenian relations will be normalized or diplomatic relations established and, as a result, borders are opened, then the process will be accepted only without preconditions. According to Kh. Kasparyan, presentation of preconditions are “very bad things” and not allowable, and preconditions presented by one of the parties means that each of the parties will press for his precondition to be accepted. It would be better to start the improvement of relations and the opening of the border without any preconditions, and then, as a parallel process for the development of relations, the necessary discussion of existing problems will arise; in that case, the solutions will be found during the process. According to Kh. Kasparyan, Turkey isn’t

allowed to propose any preconditions - regulation of the Nagorno-Karabakh problem, for instance - to Armenia if Armenia “forgets to raise even the painful topic of genocide as a precondition.” E. Hakobyan and Aramais Gyulbekyan, a systems administrator, think that Armenia presently is not in a condition to dictate any preconditions. “Of course,” says A. Gyulbekyan “I can never accept that in the near future that genocide or the Nagorno-Karabakh problem will be forgotten, but stabilization of relations necessarily should be started without preconditions and normalization of relations hopefully will bring the normalization of Armenian citizens’ situation in Turkey and their legal protection will be improved.”

On the topic of eligibility of preconditions, representatives of national minorities of Armenia also agree. The head of the Greek community in Vanadzor, Arkady Khitarov, and head of “Ukraine” union Ludmila Kozhemyachenko are positive about Armenian-Turkish cooperation, but with one precondition: that there be no preconditions. It is surprising for them when relations with a third country—Azerbaijan—and the existing conflict and its regulation are perceived as a precondition. A graduate of International Studies from University of Wyoming, Armen Bejanyan, expresses his worries. “Why are Armenian-Azeri relations and Armenian-Turkish relations becoming trilateral relations, even though they are different problems and have different reasons?”

There is a sense among the interviewees that there is an existing intention to destroy the improvement of relations by raising preconditions and that it is just a hidden political game. With its attempts to show to the international community that they do everything possible to improve relations with Armenia, Turkey, on the other hand, is raising preconditions and is trying to stop the process, in the opinion of many of the interviewees. “This is just a game, trying to show that they are approaching and sniffing each other, and then running away; but in this condition, Armenia became the winner because it does not change its direction, but Turkey does,” E. Hakobyan expresses with certainty. A. Bejanyan also believes that it is nothing but political games of Turkey and he doesn’t see any serious readiness. “I think Turkey will use any possibility to stop the negotiations and as a reason can be presented, for instance, protests from the inhabitants of Kars region or something else.”

Advisor to the governor of Lori region, Edik Hovsepyan, interjected that the project of making the region into a place of stability and peace is an idea of Ahmed Davutoghlu - minister of foreign affairs of Turkey, but how can Turkey achieve that if it doesn’t have relations with one of the countries in the region? “Several thoughts such as this bring me to the idea that these are just political games,” he says and adds, “a part of this present situation is harmful even to Azerbaijan, when Turkey, its major partner, does not have any influence on Armenia and as a result has a weak role in the region.”

Opening of borders: expectations and worries

Although interviewees were positive about the possible opening of the border between Armenia and Turkey, a part of the expectations are reasons for worries. Though mentioning that opening of borders is a way to end the blockade, that it will be a stimulus for the economy, and a good basis for the prosperity of the citizens, interviewees were still quite careful about expressing their ideas on this topic. Aramais Gyulbekyan strongly agreed with the opening of the border. “This is a new alternative road for Armenia. A part of the existing

road through Iran is more or less stable, but the other one with Georgia is dependant on relations between Russia and Georgia and if they have problems Armenia is affected.”

“It will be very good if the borders are opened, which will give me the possibility at least to visit my motherland without passing through an extra border in Georgia; however, I am worried that after the opening of borders the powerful economy of Turkey will swallow the weak Armenian economy,” says the head of the Greek community in Vanadzor, A. Khitarov, and afterwards tries to show the necessity of creating mechanisms for prevention.

According to E. Hovsepyan even with closed borders people are coming and going to Turkey, “but the borders are closed. For nearly 3 years Armenia will not see the influence of the opening of borders; only going and coming will occur, and traveling expenses will be decreased only a bit. Any economic development will occur only after 3 years, but it will mostly depend on the policy of Armenia. Regarding my opinion on the border opening, I would say that we are not ready yet to do it; we need at least 1 or 2 years to prepare our legal base for it, and only after that to open the borders.”

Some of the interviewees mentioned that the fact of opening borders without the improvement of the legal system of Armenia will bring doubt about the future existence of Armenia. “There are apprehensions that are not mine, but I have heard from most people, that the opening of borders and poor economic situation of Armenia will lead to massive emigration from Armenia or the number of Turks in Armenia will critically increase,” says Kh. Gasparyan. Based on this or a similar approach towards the opening of borders, ideas of revision of the legal system of Armenia before opening the borders were expressed by most of the interviewees.

The consortium of historians: “... the genocide is a large burden on the shoulders of Armenians”

Concerning the creation of a consortium of historians proposed by Turkey, although the formats are unclear, the topic still creates a negative reaction among most of the interviewees; there are many opinions that show that it is not important, but some positive opinions as well.

According to E. Hakobyan there is no necessity for establishing such a consortium. “If Turkey needs to discover the historical truth, let it establish the consortium in Turkey; let them discover first their own archives.” If afterward they will still need help from Armenian historians, let them apply to Armenia, adds E. Marukyan. “I think Armenian historians have never refused nor will ever refuse to give them existing materials.”

“I’m not sure about the consortium, but the possibilities should be created for historians from both countries to work together, cooperate, and jointly utilize existing archives. What are we talking about if this cadastral archive of Turkey is closed even now and it is impossible to discover even the information about what and to whom things have belonged until 1923? That’s why this establishment of a consortium is an absurdity for me,” says E. Hovsepyan.

Armen Bejanyan has a different approach. “Armenia has not rejected the creation of such a consortium; I do not see any problem with that. Furthermore, this is a good

opportunity for Armenians to present to Turks and the whole world the truth about the genocide, but as a part of this Armenia should consistently demand that Turkey opens its archives.”

In general, the topic of the genocide was a dominant topic because, as one of the interviewees mentioned, it is a heavy burden on the shoulders of Armenians; however, from the words of A. Khitarov it is not only so for Armenians. “I have to mention that genocide was also committed against Greeks, Assyrians, and other nations. One of the missions of our community is recognition in the world of the genocide against Greeks, which is right now recognized only by Greece and Cyprus,” he says and adds that even Armenia still does not recognize it.

“Who needs this consortium? I don’t know. What do they have to do? Are they going to turn the facts around? If it is possible to create such a consortium without a hidden agenda and with a fair approach, let it be. Although independent of historical scars there is a necessity of good relations between the societies of these countries, there is a pain from the past called ‘victim syndrome’ that is a heavy heritage for a large amount of Armenians. In psychological or even on the unconscious level, this syndrome is deeply seated and has deep roots. Even the word ‘Turk’ is associated with the image of martyr and executioner. As a descendant of refugees from Kars and Mush and descendant of the victims of the genocide who lost his historical motherland, I would like for the topic to find a solution accepted by both of the peoples - and a medicine for the pain that is increasing and becoming deeper in cases like Hrant Dink’s murder is that Turkish people have to find the strength to recognize historical truth,” says Kh. Gasparyan.

“It is impossible to be eternal enemies”

“Opening of borders and normalization of relations without any doubts will bring a new positive turn to the situation; even if only from the angle of human relations, it can play a great role in our lives. As a result of joint visits and economic and individual cooperation, probably this ‘executioner’ image will be destroyed,” continues Kh. Gasparyan. According to E. Hovsepian Turkish society isn’t ready yet to discuss the mutually painful topic. “No, Turkish society isn’t ready yet for discussion, and not only our topic but also topics of Kurds, Alevi Kurds, Greeks, Assyrians, and Lazes. If Turkey is ready, we will peacefully discuss it; but none of those topics could be discussed as long as the 301st article of Turkish legislation continues to exist, which closes all discussion on the matter. In any case it is impossible to stay eternal enemies as well as to be eternal friends, because benefits regulating relations between countries are inconstant.”

Systems administrator Aramais Gyulbekyan has his own experience on communications with Turks through the internet. “The only communication is via internet. A Turk was very interested about historical facts regarding the genocide. About 4 or 5 months we talked with each other, and he was the only ‘adequate’ person among those virtual Turks; other Turks or Azerbaijanis were busy only with being obscene in the forums,” he says. A. Gyulbekyan expressed his desire to visit Turkey, to see Istanbul, and to communicate in person with the inhabitants of the country. “It could be interesting; I would like to go. Why not? I know, I heard, that when they find out that I am Armenian, they will not come with axes. Turks are coming as well; let them see and communicate with our people without any

hidden agenda. Turks who were here will tell their friends, and I will tell my friends, ‘do you know, Turks are not so bad.’ I am afraid that as enemies Turkey will never accept the genocide, but as a friendly country it probably will; who knows?” he summarizes.

“People are always desirous to know each other, to communicate, and to have good relations; but who asks for the people?” complains E. Hakobyan.

The head of the Greek community in Vanadzor shared an interesting observation. “I had an Armenian friend who crossed himself each time he heard the word ‘Turk,’ either from himself or from others. Now he is in Turkey and has totally changed his opinion towards Turks,” tells A. Khitarov.

“Look at this,” concludes L. Kozhemyachenko showing a leaf picked from a wild chestnut tree. “There is nothing straight on this leaf, neither line nor shape, but during the years it became the idyll and holistic product of nature. It is the same with relations - with a straight way, it is impossible to achieve anything. People should come together step by step; once it could be as a sporting event, next time as a cultural event, and so on until Armenian-Turkish relations will achieve their ‘final structure’ like this leaf.”



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