

The Role of NGOs in Turkey-Armenia Rapprochement¹

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Abstract. The article discusses the nature of Armenian-Turkish Track Two Diplomacy efforts and their influence on the normalization in the relations between Armenia and Turkey. The key question posed and address is whether the NGOs (or general bilateral civil initiatives) played a pivotal role in the rapprochement between Armenia and Turkey. For that purpose the analysts have studied all the 50 initiatives implemented in the last decade or so. The analysis proves that civil society initiatives and government actions have been mutually strengthening factors in the Turkey-Armenia rapprochement process. Armenian-Turkish NGO activities have gained much attention and coverage only when there was an explicit or even implicit interest for political normalization of relations by the governments of Armenia and Turkey. It would be wrong to claim that NGOs played pivotal role in the Armenian-Turkish rapprochement efforts, but it is also undeniable that those initiatives have supplemented the political rapprochement.

Keywords. Armenia, Turkey, rapprochement, normalization, civil society, dialogue, NGO initiatives, TARC, “football diplomacy”, Eurasia Partnership Foundation (EPF).

Introduction

It is well known that civil societies historically have played key roles in conflict resolution or reconciliation initiatives worldwide. Track Two diplomacy is the term used for such initiatives whether they are locally or international donor supported efforts. Various layers and social groups are generally included in such efforts as media, think tanks, academic institutions, culture groups, economic and business representatives, youth groups, etc.

Armenia and Turkey have not had any diplomatic relations ever since Armenia became an independent state in 1991. In April 1993 when the Karabakh war had its culmination, Turkey even sealed its borders with Armenia. Though there is trade circulation between the two countries and the air corridor is open, Armenians and Turks visiting each others countries without any difficulties, but the diplomatic relations are yet to be established and borders between them to be re-opened. In 2008-2009 the Armenian and Turkish governments initiated diplomatic negotiations which have been termed as “football diplomacy” in the international relations vocabulary (due

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to the fact that World Cup qualification matches between Armenia and Turkey and the President's watching them together granted an opportunity to meet and discuss issues with one another, similar to "ping-pong diplomacy" between the US and China in 1970s). This process culminated into the drawing up of 2 protocols, for establishing diplomatic relations and developing relations, signed by the two foreign ministers on October 10, 2009. The Parliaments of the two countries are to ratify those protocols after which relations between Armenia and Turkey can be considered as normalized though reconciliation between the Armenian and Turkish people would take longer and will need the involvement of both nations on all levels.

Through this article we would analyze the impact of the NGO activities on the normalization process between the two countries. The main question that we would raise and address in this piece is whether the NGOs (or general bilateral civil initiatives) played a pivotal role in the rapprochement between Armenia and Turkey. For that purpose we have taken into consideration all the bilateral or multilateral NGO initiatives, approximately 50 such initiatives in 2000-2009, between the Turks and Armenians.

1. First Phase of Track Two Diplomacy: A Birth of a Process (1990-2000)

There were some attempts at establishing links (e.g. business, academic, culture representatives, etc.) since early 1990s. The first phase, where we could include the rare projects implemented in 1990-2000, was the birth of a long process. Some of them, especially those which were one off cultural or academic events, were implemented successfully. But others, which aimed at longer term involvement and commitments did not succeed. Partially such failures were the result of local pressure and prejudice against the neighbor or those cooperating with it.

Starting in June 1991, before Armenia's official independence, the business initiative to create a free trade port in Trabzon for Armenia and jointly run by Ishak Alaton (Jewish-Turkish businessman and Chairman of Alarko Holding) and Hrair Hovnanyan (contractor from New Jersey, at the time chairman of the Armenian Assembly of America-AAA) grabbed the spotlight and set the scene for the "lost 90s" in terms of bilateral initiatives. Alaton was accused of being a traitor, a "greedy merchant" etc. by some circles in Turkey. Two incidents were particularly flammable: a) In December 1991, the Turkish press reported Alaton having said that AAA will give up its campaign for the Armenian genocide recognition as a result of the joint venture. The Armenian Revolutionary Federation published this and AAA immediately denied it. Turkish press subsequently accused Alaton of lying for his own business interests. B) Ishak Alaton took Hrair Hovnanayan and Van Krikoryan to visit Turkish Foreign Minister Hikmet Cetin in February 1992. When this visit was learned by the Turkish press, Çetin was attacked for hosting "enemies of Turkey" ("leaders of genocide campaigns", etc) in his state office. Cetin claimed he had not been informed that these guests would also join the meeting, that he had only granted an appointment with Alaton. Alaton was accused harshly again for "tricking" the foreign minister. Alaton pulled out of the venture. Alaton continuously was receiving threats. This incident set an un-conducive ground for other prospective initiatives.

The failure of this project coincided also with the deterioration and complete freezing of any relations between Armenia and Turkey in 1993 over the conflict of

Karabakh. Media in both countries keenly followed this initiative. In some cases Turkish media reports were translated into Armenian and published in the Armenian press (particularly the Armenian daily “Azg” published several such materials in 1992-93). In addition to its grandiose ambitiousness one of the most probable reasons for such media and public attention to this project on both sides was the fact that from both sides the governments showed some interest in it and encouraged the initiative in the beginning (the Turkish and Armenian governments’ top officials received Alaton and Hovnanian and approved of the effort). Similar attention, criticism and initial government support would be shown only to the Turkish Armenian Reconciliation Commission (TARC) in 2001-2004.

Beyond this initiative during this first phase of non-governmental contacts the Turkish Armenian Business Development Council (TABDC), one of the principal joint initiatives, was founded in 1997. There were contacts among academicians, involving mainly diaspora Armenians and Turks. In 1999 Turkish and Armenian universities made an attempt to establish relations. Memorandum of Understanding was signed between Yerevan State University and the Middle Eastern Technical University (ODTU) in 1999. In February 1999 a Yerevan State University delegation visited Turkey to sign this agreement. Some Armenian students were received by ODTU for a few weeks however a return visit could not take place as it coincided with 1999 October Parliament shootings in Armenia. But the MoU itself was quite abstract – calling for exchanges however not specifying the budget arrangements, departments, methodology, etc. In April 2000, a delegation from the Ankara State University, headed by the rector, visited Yerevan and signed agreements with Yerevan State Conservatoire and Yerevan State University however nothing appears to have followed.

The lack of progress in the early years had to do with mainly two factors.

- a. Those initiatives that went further were locally (organizational) driven and there was not the necessary social support: there was no international donor interest activity in this area.
- b. NGO scenes in both countries was only starting to diversify and getting more professionalized. In Armenia the NGO scene was in formation and in Turkey none of the NGOs were enthusiastic in projects with Armenia.

2. Second Phase of Track Two Diplomacy: Ice-breaking (2001-2005)

The second, more active or “ice-breaking” phase in the civil society dialogue between the Turks and Armenians commenced since 2001. Those NGO bilateral projects began on a systematic basis with US State Department funds through the implementation of the American University Center for Global Peace. This wave of around approximately 13 projects lasted until early 2005. There were a few initiatives (Workshop for Armenian Turkish Scholarship, Summer Camps (YAVAS/GAMATS), Armenian State Opera and Ballet Concert, Rotary Club’s Caucasus Reconciliation Conference) that were not within the scope of the American University run project.

Despite the main NGOs involved were the TABDC, TOSAM from Turkey and ICHD from Armenia, but the most successful and definitely ice-breaking project was directly American University run initiative, the Turkish Armenian Reconciliation Commission (2001-2004). When one reads the memoir account about those projects

by David Phillips, State Department adviser and manager of the Turkish Armenian Reconciliation Commission (TARC) project (round table discussions between retired ambassadors, foreign affairs ministers and professors from Armenia, the diaspora and Turkey, which narrowed down to debates on the Armenian Genocide), one understands that even though the other projects were run simultaneous to the TARC, but the State Department's main attention was directed at TARC, before the start of which the governments in Armenia and Turkey had given their behind-the-doors approval for it.

"TARC originally emphasized small steps and practical areas for cooperation, which would build momentum toward tackling core issues," wrote Phillips. This, however, turned out to be untenable in the long run: the Armenian genocide issue, having figured in almost each and debate from the outset, had to be addressed. To break the logjam, writes Phillips, TARC requested the International Center for Transitional Justice (ICTJ) to help provide an "independent legal analysis" on the applicability of the 1948 Genocide Convention to events which occurred during the early twentieth century. The ICTJ report arrived in February 2003. Armenians could welcome the report's conclusion that the events of 1915, "viewed collectively, can be said to include all of the elements of the crime of genocide as defined in the Convention". Turks, meanwhile, could take comfort in its finding that "no legal, financial or territorial claim arising out of the Events could successfully be made against any individual or state under the Convention." On 14 April 2004, TARC members decided that their work should come to a close. It may not have lived up to expectations (not least those of its own members) but, says Phillips, TARC did manage to pave the way for a more open debate. "Today peoples of the two nations are talking about relations more freely and with fewer prejudices," Tevan Poghosian, director of the Yerevan-based International Center for Human Development (ICHHD) was to tell Phillips. "Even though the physical border remains, the psychological barrier has been broken."

There was rather intensive press coverage. In the Armenian press the criticism towards its activities were more common than in the Turkish press. With the ending of TARC activities funding the other projects by the American University stopped too.

An evaluation of the American University implemented projects was prepared in 2006 by one of the main participants of the projects, the Yerevan-based International Center for Human Development (ICHHD) [1]. ICHHD had been the Armenian partner of at least 4 of the projects as well as having had impact on the design of the program through planning meetings with David Phillips (who was not only the facilitator of TARC, but also led the planning phase of the rest of the projects that the American University subsequently supervised). ICHHD spoke to project partners and participants of all the projects in preparing this book. The book goes over each project supported by the Center for Global Peace – American University. It concludes that the projects needed to be more flexible and last longer than one year, in order to have the desired impact. It also recognized that many of the projects seem to have had little impact beyond increasing familiarity between a narrow circle of people from both countries towards "the other", fond memories of socialization, and providing temporary livelihood to the involved NGOs.

Some of the drawbacks and characteristics of the projects implemented or attempted in this phase were;

- a. There was a misconception in the US that the borders between Armenia and Turkey would be soon opened and hence there was a need to prepare the societies for it. Even some in the governments of Turkey and Armenia thought

that the opening of the borders and normalization of relations would occur very soon. Therefore there was the feeling that societies need to prepare for normalization and this can be done through such projects as Musicians' Exchange, Mayors of the Region, Dialogue Between Armenia and Turkish Parliamentarians, few businessmen forums (as Regional Economic Working Group, Business Leaders, Marketing Network of the Caucasus (MANEC)).

- b. Projects were funded and supervised from the US directly and there was not on-the-ground supervision in Turkey and Armenia. Thus there was insufficient understanding on behalf of the donors about the context within which the projects were implemented.
- c. There was a very restricted circle of NGOs involvement. The principles of selecting NGOs or the selection of participants by those NGOs were never clarified. For example, in a few of the projects, like Leadership Development, Virtual Agricultural Wholesale Market (VAWM), Regional Economic Working Group, Business Leaders, Marketing Network of the Caucasus (MANEC), i.e. in 5 projects, one could see the same participants being involved from one project to the other (grantee organization staff was considered as "participants" in those projects as well).
- d. There was very limited press coverage and general indifference about those initiatives. TARC received most attention. The reason to it was that there was high level governmental interest in it and the people involved in it were former top officials or leading academicians very well known in Turkey and Armenia as well as diaspora. Also, there was some media coverage of projects realized by mass media NGOs (3 projects with participation of the Yerevan Press Club, the Union of Turkish Journalists, People's Foundation of Turkey, Diplomatic Correspondents Association (Ankara)).
- e. One of the disadvantages of this phase, which occurs in any first attempt Track Two efforts, was that too many areas were selected as worthy of support (media, business, youth training, culture, film, survey, parliamentarians, academia, gender issues (Women's Magazine). This approach would later on prove that in some areas, like business initiatives and educational (training, workshops, universities) the projects failed due to existing gap of high expectations and the real grounds for any successful implementation.

3. Intermission: Studies

Before the commencement of the next phase of Track Two diplomacy projects, three institutions in Armenia and Turkey conducted research on the potential economic and social developments in Armenia and Turkey when the borders between those countries are open (two studies by TABDC (2002, 2007), a study by AEPLAC (2005), five main studies by the Armenian International Policy Research Group-AIPRG (2006), but several more presented during the AIPRG conference in January 2007 and later on published in proceedings). Each of those studies uses differing economics models with varying conclusions. What the studies have in common though is that the economies of both countries would benefit the opening of the borders, though they have not unanimous approach as to the level of benefits. For instance the AIPRG and TABDC studies do emphasize several nuances (for example, the border opening having a

positive impact on lowering the 'external conflict risk' on Armenia and its effect on FDI, as well as Armenia's redirecting its economic potential on other than defense sectors development; the decrease of threat perceptions on both sides; tourism potential, especially Armenian diaspora involvement in it) ignored by AEPLAC study. The AIPRG and TABDC calculations have higher expectations about the impact of opened borders on the Armenian and Turkish economies than AEPLAC's study. One of the AIPRG studies calculates that the open borders would increase the volume of Turkish imports into Armenia by 50% and Armenian imports into Turkey by 38%, especially the Armenian inflows in South Eastern (Van) and Central Eastern (Kars) provinces are expected to have a great rise. The most modest calculations though calculate that medium term Armenian export into Turkey would rise by 17.7% and import rise by 13%. All studies though highly evaluate the potential of transit routes effects on the Armenian economy and the importance of Armenia's getting less dependent on the only Georgian seaports for transit. On the other hand, Turkey would benefit largely by making Kars and Trabzon more competitive international trade points. Taking into account that the trade level would expand some sectors of trade would benefit more than others in both countries. Some of the studies agree that Armenia's economy would be more affected than Turkey's. Armenia has also vulnerabilities in terms of higher levels of corruption and infrastructural underdevelopment. AIPRG presented its studies at an international conference in January 2007, where several additional papers were represented and some Turkish authors were invited as well (ARI, Isik University, Istanbul, TABDC). In 2007 AIPRG represented those studies in Armenian regions and in Istanbul-Ankara where it received intense media coverage. In Armenia the AIPRG conference attracted media (TV and limited press) coverage, unlike the other studies.

4. Third Phase of Track Two Diplomacy: Track Two on Full Track (2006-)

The next round of multiple parallel projects (2006-2009) was again US State Department funds (USAID), implemented this time by the Eurasia Partnership Foundation which had offices in the region (not in Turkey, but in Armenia, connected to the regional center office in Tbilisi). This track of projects is within the frames of Armenia-Turkey Cross-Border Dialogue and Cooperation Program which started in 2006. Eurasia PF, compared to the American University Center for Global Peace, had more experience on the ground in the region, providing grants for other regional integration projects. Eurasia PF set up a selection committee of people in Armenia who had worked on bilateral projects. It was through their experiences and the book prepared by ICHD that continuity and a 'lessons learned' perspective was factored in. After 2006, some projects were directly implemented by Eurasia PF, such as on migration and media bias, with support from the government of Norway. Thus far around 10 projects have been completed in this framework. Eurasia Partnership Foundation assessed the success of these projects on the basis of their coverage in media. However when asked what sets their approach apart from the American University projects, they note "longevity" (being more a "long term investment.") Along these lines, four of the 8 projects they deem as having had very little impact, or unsuccessful.

Eurasia PF had more hands-on monitoring as well as a stronger understanding of regional actors and challenges. This is partly due to the staff being based in Yerevan (and with locals). However not having an office in Turkey created some weakness. The projects were prepared and applications made by Armenian NGOs. The Turkish partners in many cases were approached late in the process, agreed without having much knowledge or input about the project proposal, and applied the projects with less of a stakeholder approach. The relevance of the Turkish NGOs to the topics at hand or the effort they put into outreach was relatively weaker.

There were a number of features in this phase of project implementation.

1. In 2006-2007 the Eurasia foundation started with several projects (as the American University multidimensional approach had been), but then by the end of 2007 and early 2008, it narrowed down the scope to two main initiatives, media and cultural projects (in 2007 Yerevan Press Club had made a media assessment of Turkey Armenia media reactions to Turkish-Armenian relations, including reactions to civil society initiative).
2. There were some more donors' involvement in this phase as the Swiss and British governments (through embassies), the German foundations of Friedrich Ebert and Friedrich Naumann, the Open Society Institute (which had supported such projects in early 2000s as well), the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE).
3. Selection of projects for funding by Eurasia was much more transparent and selection approach much stricter compared to previous donor approaches. The competition of the NGOs was fiercer.
4. The funded organizations which were more diversified and the field was open for newcomers with good ideas to implement projects. If during 2001-2004, for example, ICHD was involved in 4 projects, from 2005-2009 ICHD got involved in 2 projects only (the initial assessment and the 2009 border opening scenario discussions in town halls in Armenian marzes). Though on the Turkish side there is a growing tendency to have more varied organizations, but TESEV, TABDC, ARI are the first ones any Armenian organization gets in touch for a potential partner. There is a lack of knowledge in Armenia and Turkey about the respective civil societies.

This lack of knowledge is partially connected to the absence of any political relations between the two countries. It is known that there were some "secret negotiations" behind the doors in 2007-08, but only once the dialogue became more public and the leaders of both countries through good will got involved in it, the media outlets of both countries covered more and more articles about each other. The political dialogue started after the 2008 Presidential elections in Armenia.

The 2008 February Armenian presidential elections were won by Serzh Sargsyan. Soon a congratulatory message followed from the Turkish president Abdullah Gül. "I hope your new position will offer an opportunity for the normalization of relations between the Turkish and Armenian peoples," Gül says in his message to Serzh Sargsyan. The appointments of Tigran Sargsyan as Prime Minister and Edward Nalbandian as Foreign Affairs Minister were followed by warm congratulations from Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan and Foreign Affairs Minister Babacan. Later in July Armenian President Sargsyan invited the Turkish president to visit Armenia on 6 September to watch the World Cup qualifying match between Armenia and Turkey. In an article published in Wall Street Journal, July 8, 2008, the Armenian President wrote:

“The time has come for a fresh effort to break this deadlock, a situation that helps no one and hurts many. [...] I take this opportunity to propose a fresh start – a new phase of dialogue with the government and people of Turkey, with the goal of normalizing relations and opening our common border. [...] Establishing normal political relations would enable us to create a commission to comprehensively discuss all of the complex issues affecting Armenia and Turkey. We cannot expect tangible progress without such structured relations. Only through them can we create an effective dialogue touching upon even the most contentious historical issues”.

The changed political atmosphere and the launching of the “football diplomacy” invited more media attention to the Armenian-Turkish NGO projects as well as warmer welcome of such initiatives. For example, when in 2008 February (organization started in 2007 fall) Girogi Vanyan’s Caucasus Center of Peace Making Initiatives organized a Turkish Film Festival in Armenia, certain government officials threatened him not to implement it. ARF organized a campaign against it. The Turkish participants were stopped at the customs on waiting to be deported. After Vanyan reached a deal with the government that the films would not be shown in the anticipated format (not in a festival format, but limited show in a room), could the Turkish participants enter the country. Yet in 2009 March, with a new Armenian government in place, the same organization managed to show 7 Turkish works of animation, play and documentary genre in cinema Moscow, in the heart of Yerevan. Previously only one or two TV stations would cover the NGO initiatives (and those would be very lucky to get such an attention), during the recent protocol discussions (due to governments’ interest in the process) ICHD’s project of towns-hall meetings were covered by almost all Armenian TV stations for a few days.

The hypothesis that governments’ bigger interestedness in normalization process hailed the NGO projects is proven through recent surveys in Turkey and Armenia.

The YPC study on Media Assessment (which was supported by Eurasia Partnership Foundation) for the period 2002-2007 reveals that the TARC was the most discussed and mentioned project both in the Armenian and Turkish press. It had some political implications and there was an initial government agreement to launch this project. TABDC activities (founded since 1997) are from time to times mentioned as well. Other civil society initiatives in 2001-2007 were not much discussed through the press. And it did not mean that those organizations had no outreach strategies. The main reason was that this was not viewed as a relevant issue to the media compared how media started to react after 2008 spring rapprochement process.

According to Global Political Trends center (GPOT) Istanbul, a noticeable increase of frequency in Turkey of the subject of Armenia was noticed in 2006-2009 (with 2008-09 naturally standing as the peak). But the increase has to do not with the increase of civil society initiatives (they are covered more than previously), but because of the political activities. Intergovernmental multilateral or bilateral relations and foreign policy have altogether 51% of Turkish media coverage. The judgement of the study is that the “media follows an “official” or political agenda covering the Armenian-Turkish relations. The primary actors of media coverage in Turkey-Armenia relations are the President, Prime Minister and the diplomats with 53.5%.The main subjects of the stories covered are also political.

This has had another impact as headlines, clichés and expressions that represented a general anti-Armenian bias in the Turkish media have mostly disappeared from the mainstream press.

Similarly the Armenian press, according to Journalists' Team for Sustainable Future NGO (GPOT and Journalists' Team was the Eurasia Partnership funded "Armenia-Turkey Media Bias" project (with funds from the Norwegian government and the USAID)), pays more attention to intergovernmental relations and foreign policy in Armenia Turkey relations (31.3%). The leading actors are the President, government, coalition parties 31%. In the Armenian press, according to the study, there are still clichés and stereotypes towards Turkey, but the situation has significantly changed by the expansion and coverage of the sports events between 2008 and 2009.

Conclusion

After the study of those initiatives since 1990s we can claim that the pillars for people to people reconciliation were established through civil society and NGO contacts. The early phases made the civil societies closer to one another and laid the grounds for further cooperation. There was little outreach and little media coverage of those initiatives, with the exception of media projects when journalists paid mutual visits and wrote articles. The media coverage got more expansive after political interestedness in such initiatives (Alaton initiative, TARC, football match and "football diplomacy"). The political rapprochement also helped those who were previously involved in the NGOs dialogue to be more audible and have their say in the reconciliation process through wider public discussions in increasing numbers of conferences and media debates. So civil society initiatives and government actions have been mutually strengthening factors in the Turkey-Armenia rapprochement process.

Answering the question initially put whether the NGOs played *pivotal* role in the rapprochement, the answer would be a negative one, as NGO projects were having wider dimensions and media coverage only when the governments showed interest. In themselves the civil society projects were not successful in garnering wider social and public support. Though, on the other hand, the NGOs formerly or currently involved in Track Two are getting more extensive forum through media to express their views and share their experiences which were accumulated in earlier phases. Thus, the NGO projects have greatly supplemented the political rapprochement.

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