



# BULLETIN

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## Armenia–Turkey Normalization Accord

by Tomasz Sikorski and Adam Szymański

*Two protocols on normalization of mutual relations, signed by Armenia and Turkey, map out the legal framework for good neighborly cooperation—but only after coming into force will they bring tangible effects. The ratification process may slow down or get scuttled by major differences between the parties over Nagorno-Karabakh or the massacres of Armenians during World War I. Yet the two governments are determined to go on with normalization in the expectation of mutual advantages.*

At a ceremony in Zurich, on 10 October 2009, the foreign ministers of Armenia and Turkey, Edward Nalbandian and Ahmet Davutoğlu, signed two protocols on the establishment of diplomatic relations and their development, thus marking a new phase in the process of normalizing mutual relations, launched in September 2008 and mediated by Switzerland. Once the protocols come into force the two countries will establish diplomatic relations, and their border is expected to be opened two months later. The agreement provides for regular consultations by foreign ministers and the formation of an intergovernmental commission with a dozen sub-commissions, including on examination of contentious historical issues, especially those dating back to World War I. The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict was not mentioned at all.

**Problems with Further Normalization.** Signing the protocols was just a stage in the normalization process which can still be put on hold: no deadline was set for ratification, and it is by no means certain that the documents will be ratified at all. Before the two countries' parliaments give their consent to ratification, a host of problems need to be resolved. A sign of the things to come could be seen right at the protocol-signing ceremony, which was delayed by Turkish resistance to Mr. Nalbandian's making references in his speech to the 1915–1916 massacres of Armenians, and by Armenia's opposition to Mr. Davutoğlu's taking up the subject of Nagorno-Karabakh.

With the bulk of Armenian society well disposed towards the prospect of normalizing relations with Turkey, it is the Armenian diaspora (for whom history matters much) that opposed the agreement, signed as it was without prior Turkish recognition of the Armenian massacres as genocide (90.5% of Armenian-Americans condemned the signing of the protocol). The diaspora is going to press the Armenian government to halt the ratification process. While it is true that the government's backers in Parliament (Republican Party of Armenia, Prosperous Armenia and the Rule of Law) are capable of winning the vote even without party discipline, yet ratification may indeed be held up by diaspora pressure, threats from the nationalist opposition, and a possible further weakening of the government (after the nationalist Armenian Revolutionary Federation left the cabinet last April in protest against the setting of an initial timetable for normalization).

A sufficient majority to approve the protocols can also be found in the Turkish Parliament, where they are likely to be backed (with a few exceptions) by the ruling Justice and Development Party and the pro-Kurdish Democratic Society Party. The opposition Republican People's Party and the Nationalist Movement Party rule out their consent without a prior pullout of Armenian troops from Nagorno-Karabakh—a position shared by a large segment of the Turkish public. Another obstacle may be posed by the opposition of Azerbaijan, which is also demanding an earlier solution to the Nagorno-Karabakh problem. Turkey must take this into account unless it wants to alienate an important partner, especially in the economic field.

Notwithstanding these problems, the Turkish and Armenian governments will be seeking further normalization. Mutual benefits and welcome regional implications will work in favor of the presidents, Serzh Sargsyan and Abdullah Gül, who launched the normalization process in defiance of parts of the public.

**Benefits for Armenia.** The signing of the accord will alone suffice to improve the image of Armenia, especially in the European Union, which has scaled back its cooperation with the country in the aftermath of public protests and police intervention in March 2008 (leaving eight people dead). Once the protocols come into force, their welcome effects, in addition to economic benefits, will include Armenia's greater room for a more independent policy. So far, the country has been hugely dependent on Russia—a situation enforced by unfavorable geopolitical determinants: the conflict with Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh and adjoining areas, unregulated relations with Turkey, and problems in relations with Georgia. The agreement's entry into force would thus come as part of a strategy to pursue a multidirectional policy whenever possible. Examples of this approach in recent years include the development of cooperation with Iran and efforts to achieve a constructive solution to problems of the Armenian diaspora in Javakheti, Georgia. A long-term objective of this policy, pursued by Nagorno-Karabakh-born President Sargsyan, is to strengthen Armenia's political position vis-à-vis the ever-stronger Azerbaijan by means of resolving all other conflicts weakening the country.

**Significance for Turkey.** The image of Turkey will also get a boost from the signing of the protocols, as already reflected in a European Commission report on that country. But far greater benefits would accrue with a normalization of bilateral diplomatic relations. The protocols' entry into force would mean a final recognition by Armenia of its border with Turkey, as delineated under the 1921 Treaty of Kars, and also admission that the Armenian massacres should be treated as a historical issue (to be dealt with by a joint commission), not as contemporary problem. The success would also bolster Turkey's reputation as an honest broker in the South Caucasus—a role the country has been seeking since the Georgia-Russia war of August 2008, at the same time confirming the efficiency of the zero-problems-with-neighbors approach, which is behind Turkey's current foreign policy doctrine.

With the protocols coming into force, Turkey's relations with the EU and the U.S. would improve. Normalization of relations with neighbors is among the conditions the country has to meet if it wants to speed up its EU accession negotiations. Combined with progress in resolving the Kurdish question, this would strengthen Turkey's hand, recently weakened by accusations of freedom of speech limitations or the government's continued refusal to open up sea- and airports to Cypriot planes and vessels. A normalization of Turkish-Armenian relations would also weaken the threat that the U.S. Congress might take up the Armenian massacres once again and, under pressure from the Armenian diaspora in the country, adopt a resolution describing these massacres as genocide.

**Regional Consequences of Armenia–Turkey Normalization.** A favorable course of normalization process involving the two countries will positively influence South Caucasus stabilization. With expected greater independence on the international arena, Armenia may now open up to cooperation under the EU's Eastern Partnership project. A fleeting turn towards Russia on the part of Azerbaijan is inevitable, but this will come more as an element of Turkey-targeting rhetoric than as manifestation of true reorientation. For Georgia, the effects of the agreement will be indirect: on the one hand, its role as a strategic liaison between Azerbaijan and Turkey will diminish, while on the other the country will benefit from an overall increase in regional security. Russia officially backed the accord too, but is unlikely to favor its coming into force, given that a possible stabilization in the South Caucasus would restrict its room for exploiting for its own gains the differences among countries in the region.

Improvement in Armenia–Turkey relations will have the effect of stabilizing the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. For several years now, Azerbaijan has been building up its armed forces (capitalizing on the country's robust economic growth), thus strengthening the drive to solve the conflict by force. A continuation of normalization with Turkey will improve Armenia's position, restoring a relative balance and helping to preserve the status quo. Not inconceivably, the development of Armenia-Turkey relations may persuade the international community that chances for a Nagorno-Karabakh solution are on the rise, which would prod an activation of the OSCE's Minsk Group.