



Brief Overview

Increasing Cooperation between Armenian Civil Society Organizations while Addressing Armenia-Turkey Relations

On April 8, 2011, Eurasia Partnership Foundation (EPF) organized a first-ever discussion at Congress Hotel in Yerevan that convened about 50 Armenian stakeholders with experience in Armenia-Turkey project implementation. The event presented an experiment to enhance the cooperation among varied civil society organizations of Armenia while they work on Armenia-Turkey dialogue. The participants included civil society organizations, academia, representatives of the business community and the media, as well as those of the donor organizations. More than 20 organizations attended the discussion.

The event comprised two sections: an introductory session, where the participants presented their projects and a workshop session, where the participants were given a chance to elaborate in smaller groups on a set of key questions on Armenia-Turkey relations. The introductory session provided a unique opportunity to the participants of the discussion to present their activity to other implementers of Armenia-Turkey projects and thus to identify possible areas of cooperation. A roster developed by EPF that features brief information about the recently accomplished and ongoing Armenia-Turkey projects will be updated based on the information provided by the presenters and published on line. Ideas on creating a platform for publishing outputs of these projects were discussed. The participants agreed to share their project outputs for publication either via social media tools, such as the Forth Wave: Armenia-Turkey Facebook Group or possibly, the EPF website or other websites.

The second session led by Sven Behrendt, an international consultant, who has been hired by the EPF to conduct a research to help reinvigorate Armenia-Turkey dialogue on the civil society level, helped solicit participants' opinions on the following three questions:

- What will be the situation with Armenia-Turkey relations in three years' time from now?
- What is the impact of civil society initiatives on Armenia-Turkey relations?
- What are the challenges facing Armenia-Turkey relations? Is there any room for improvement with regards to civil society action?

The participants were broken down into five groups to enable a more thorough and in-depth discussion of the posed questions. The notes from the group discussions are aggregated below.

Assessment of the Situation with Armenia-Turkey Relations in Three Years' Time

Most participants expressed skepticism on the possibility of significant changes in Armenia-Turkey relations and confidence in the continued state with closed borders. The state-to-state relations will continue to remain frozen. Many agreed that it would be difficult to forecast the possible status of Armenia-Turkey

relations, as they are highly dependent upon geopolitical developments and how they will play out in the region. At the same time, however, 2014 was identified as a favorable time for enhancing the dialogue, as both countries will be no longer overwhelmed with elections in their political agendas. Some of the participants argued that there would be increasingly conducive environment for discussion of more painful issues. For instance, in three years' time the 100th year anniversary since the 1915 events will be marked, which would stir extensive discussion on the issue both within Armenia and beyond, and consequently possibly a repeated wave of denial by Turkey with stronger than usual dissenting opinion among Turkish civil society. There would be increased interaction between societies. As a result, the information flow between the societies will improve, and the stereotypes will increasingly weaken on both sides. What is more, it is expected that civil societies will be better prepared to supporting the dialogue in 2014 than they were in 2007 when the rapprochement process kicked off with the 'football diplomacy.' As far as business cooperation is concerned, some of the participants felt that the business climate would improve: some of those improvements could include a liberalized visa regime between Armenia and Turkey, launch of charter flights between the Armenian capital and cities in Eastern Turkey.

Assessment of the Impact of Civil Society Initiatives on Armenia-Turkey Relations

The fact that the normalization of Armenia-Turkey relations was put on a discussion table was assessed as a major breakthrough. With that in mind, there was unanimous agreement on the point that sustaining the momentum should be civil society's mission in the absence of state-to-state interaction between Armenia and Turkey. A relative success in breaking stereotypes and taboos surfaced in the discussion of this issue as well, given the array of activities, including exchanges, cultural events and others implemented by the civil societies in both countries over the past 2-3 years. A certain level of attitudinal and perceptual change can be traced, too. In addition, civil society initiatives have helped to increase diversity of views and raise awareness about each other. As a result, both societies opened up and improved their understanding of the 'other side.' In that sense, a TV channel owned by a party with a clear pro-recognition agenda airing talk shows supporting Armenia-Turkey rapprochement is a good example. On the other hand, growth in civil society initiatives can often spark growth of nationalistic sentiments in both countries.

Challenges and Room for Improvement

The majority of the participants agreed that the stalled political process presents a major challenge in Armenia-Turkey rapprochement. Despite the relatively increased interaction between the two countries, both societies still face psychological barriers to a better comprehension of one another. There is an atmosphere of mistrust towards Turks and vice versa. Scholarly exchange between Armenia and Turkey is often hampered due to emotional reactions on both sides. April 24 continues to remain a difficult issue and influences the discourse on Armenia-Turkey relations to a great degree, particularly during the times preceding the actual commemoration date. The linkage of Armenia-Turkey relations with the NK conflict continuously looms in the Armenia-Turkey rapprochement process. A number of challenges were attributed to the so-called 'asymmetry' between the societies, including difference in sizes of population, economy, debate traditions, structures of society and others, which cannot but have an impact on planning and implementation of initiatives and need to be considered by civil society organizations in implementation of Track2 diplomacy. There was unanimous agreement on the perception that there is too much focus on Istanbul and the bordering regions when implementing bilateral projects in Turkey, and there is a need to

shift the attention towards Ankara and perhaps move further towards the North and the West of Turkey. Armenian Diaspora is another issue that needs to be addressed. It is necessary to adopt a more pragmatic approach to addressing Armenia-Turkey relations, distinguishing them from the Genocide issue. Finally, the increased activism of nationalistic movements on both sides needs to be tackled.

A number of areas requiring improvement were identified. The issue of broadening the constituency in both countries continuously came up during the discussion. All the participants argued that it is necessary to move beyond the circle of 'usual suspects' and the civil society with a view to reaching out to the mainstream public, particularly the 'hard-liners' that tend to oppose the dialogue process. To this end, cooperation needs to be strengthened both with Turkish NGOs and within Armenian NGOs. As far as the state is concerned, some of the civil society representatives felt that both governments should establish better feedback with their societies and reveal the behind-the-scene developments in Armenia-Turkey relations for the public to be better prepared and trusting of the government's intentions and not be struck with a shock. Finally, to foster greater impact on Armenia-Turkey rapprochement, civil societies in both countries need to put their efforts in an international context.

USAID and the Consortium Members support Armenia-Turkey rapprochement by facilitating engagement between civil society groups, establishment and development of business partnerships and regional professional networks, and enhanced understanding between the people, for peace and economic integration in the region.