



Regional Studies Center (RSC)
Yerevan, Armenia

RSC SUMMARY REPORT ON ACTIVITIES IN SUPPORT OF ARMENIA-TURKEY NORMALIZATION

Background

The Regional Studies Center (RSC) is an independent think tank conducting a wide range of strategic analysis and objective research, and implementing a number of educational and policy-related projects. As a leading think tank based in Armenia, the RSC conducts research and analysis and develops policy initiatives aimed at bolstering political and economic reform and conflict resolution in the broader South Caucasus region. As an independent think tank, the RSC is actively engaged in the public policy process and, over the longer term, seeks to serve as a catalyst for democratic reform and sustainable economic development through the empowerment of civil society and by contributing to the formulation of public policy through innovative and objective research, analysis and policy recommendations.

The RSC is also actively involved in supporting the Armenian-Turkish “normalization” process and works closely with other think tanks, research institutes and civil society organizations in both Armenia and Turkey. Our core mission and mandate of our Turkey-related research and activities focus on five strategic goals:

- To ***sustain the momentum*** in Armenian-Turkish normalization by forging and deepening ties between civil society organizations in both countries, while seeking to shape the political context to foster a resumption of official Armenian-Turkish diplomatic and political engagement;
- To ***broaden the constituency*** for normalization, both in terms of geography, by going beyond the capitals and the usual cities to engage border regions and more rural areas of each country, and in terms of issues, by reaching out to other specific niche groups (energy, trade & commerce, academia, local municipal and regional government, culture, etc.);
- To ***conduct, disseminate and promote research, analysis and publications***, while also expanding the audience through by public events (conferences, seminars, roundtable discussions, etc.) and targeted outreach (focusing on key interest groups) in order to raise awareness and elevate the level of debate within each country;
- To ***coordinate, cooperate and collaborate in presenting more analytical coverage*** of issues with media outlets in Turkey and Armenia, while also working closely with elite “opinion-makers” and “opinion-shapers” as part of a more sophisticated informational campaign and communications strategy aimed at confronting stereotypes and challenging the narrative, while also correcting misinformation in both countries.

The Regional Studies Center (RSC) has been deeply engaged in support of efforts to “normalize” relations between Armenia and Turkey. Our support for this process of engagement is based on a more nuanced perspective, however, whereby we see the “normalization” process as a prerequisite, first step toward a much longer and more complex process of “reconciliation.”

In this regard, our understanding of normalization is comprised of three distinct elements:

- the imperative to establish diplomatic relations between Armenia and Turkey;
- the mutual need to reopen the closed Armenian-Turkish border;
- the benefits from a deeper effort at “confidence building,” designed to contribute to a more conducive environment for the later process of “reconciliation.”

In line with these objectives, the RSC has implemented various activities and smaller projects focusing on Armenia-Turkey normalization since our institutional founding in July 2012. RSC staff members have also been long engaged in these efforts and have a wealth of experience a well-established prominence on the issue of Armenia-Turkey normalization. Our strategic objective is to promote civil society efforts in support of the normalisation of relations between Turkey and Armenia, including the opening of the closed Armenian-Turkish border and the establishment of diplomatic relations. The RSC carries out a number of activities in support of this goal, including efforts to enhance people-to-people contacts, expand economic and business links, promote cultural and educational activities and facilitate broader access to more balanced information within both societies.

As an integral component of our broader Turkey-related activities and research, the RSC implements four specific activities: (1) media support and collaboration, (2) policy support and deepening unofficial relations, and (3) training youth as an “agent of change” in support of normalization.

I. Media Support

Similar to the lack of information and limited awareness of developments in Turkey within Armenia, there is a related lack of objective analysis among both Armenian and Turkish media professionals. In light of this pronounced lack of more serious media coverage and more sophisticated analytical content, there is need to focus on improving and deepening the information environment within the Armenian and Turkish media.

More specifically, RSC media support activities include four specific goals: (1) to elevate the level of discourse by providing more serious analytical content, (2) deepen and expand the scale and scope of media coverage, (3) to correct and counter inaccurate or stereotypical media coverage and (4) to facilitate closer cooperation and collaboration between Armenian and Turkish media professionals, with a specific focus on columnists, TV talk show hosts, pundits, “experts,” and other “opinion-makers” and “opinion-shapers” in each country.

II. Policy Support

Given the lack of bold ideas and apparent absence of any sustained strategic vision to resume the official normalization process, the RSC has sought to contribute to the process by initiating a new effort to engage several prominent retired diplomats and officials, and other high-profile figures from Armenia and Turkey to solicit a range of new policy ideas and suggestions.

The specific objectives of this initiative centers on both targeting decision-makers and helping shape public opinion through a process designed to facilitate a sharing and exchange of ideas and views. This process is conducted through a series of closed meetings and seminars, as well as some public events, utilizing a select group of retired politicians and policy makers from Armenia and Turkey, as well as other interested third parties. These eminent figures contribute new ideas and policy recommendations based on their personal and professional experience, including a broader strategic vision for the future relations between both countries, and have helped us to formulate a set of specific policy recommendations.

Moreover, although Armenia and Turkey were unable to establish official diplomatic relations to date, as originally envisioned in the signed diplomatic Protocols, both countries are engaged in “unofficial” diplomatic relations, based on their interaction within international organizations and other third-party institutional forums. Such informal contacts and diplomatic interaction between Armenia and Turkey government officials need to be strengthened in order to encourage and better prepare for the subsequent return to more official diplomatic engagement. The outcome of this activity is to encourage the use of neutral international settings and institutional forums for diplomatic contact and collaboration between Armenia and Turkey in order to both prepare for the subsequent return to more official diplomatic engagement and to offer a set of policy recommendations for each side.

III. Youth Training

The potential transformative power of the youth as an agent of change has long been recognized as a crucial element of Armenian-Turkish normalization, with a number of important and largely successful youth exchange initiatives between Armenia and Turkey, many of which were supported by a range of international donors. In light of previous activities, the RSC continues to support youth exchanges and offers youth training opportunities, while focusing on empowering youth (including organized youth groups, university students, activists and civil society representatives) by forging ties between civil society actors in both countries, offering targeted training on civic activism on a wide range of issues, and helping to shape a more positive political context underlying Armenian-Turkish engagement.

The outcomes of our youth-focused activities are aimed at empowering youth as an “agent of change” and forging deeper ties between civil society organizations to help shape a more positive political context to strengthen and advocate for the Armenian-Turkish normalization process. Moreover, the second training course also deepened participants’ understanding of the key concepts on conflict management/transformation and peace-building efforts; exposed the participants to new concepts of designing initiatives/projects which could promote the Armenia-Turkey normalisation process at least on the civil society level; developed a common vision of the normalisation process and its final outcomes; and mapped the potential resources for joint efforts to contribute to a shared, common vision of Armenia-Turkey normalisation.

PAST PERFORMANCE

Project Title: Support to Armenia-Turkey Normalization Process: Stage Two (ATNP2)

Duration: April 2016-August 2017
(16 months)

Amount: 1.5 million EUR (RSC share €130,000)

Donor: European Commission Instrument contributing to Stability and Peace (IcSP)
(ICSP/2016/372-465)

Summary: As a follow-up to our previous work on Turkey-related activities and research, the RSC continued to serve as a member of an Armenian-Turkish consortium of eight civil society organizations within the EU-funded “Support to the Armenia-Turkey Normalisation Process” (ATNP) programme. The overall objective of the 16-month “Support to the Armenia-Turkey Normalisation Process: Stage Two” (ATNP2) programme was to empower and engage civil societies of Turkey and Armenia to contribute to the enhanced regional peace and stability, democratic pluralism and social inclusion across and within their societies through engaging new actors in economic, cultural, educational, and awareness-raising activities between Armenia and Turkey, and improving information flow, communication exchange and networking between media, expert communities and institutions.

The programme carried out a number of activities in support of this goal, including efforts to enhance people-to-people contacts, expand economic and business links, promote cultural and educational activities and facilitate broader access to more balanced information within both societies. As an integral component of our broader Turkey-related activities and research, the RSC implemented four specific projects within the ATNP programme: (1) media support and collaboration, (2) policy support and deepening unofficial relations, and (3) training youth as an “agent of change” in support of normalization.

Project Title: Support to Armenia-Turkey Normalization Process” (ATNP) programme

Duration: January 2014-June 2015
(18 months)

Amount: 2 million EUR (RSC share €175,000)

Donor: European Commission Stability Instrument (ENPI/2011/281-693)

Summary: This EU-financed project implemented by a consortium of eight civil society organizations from both countries.¹ Based on a unique model of collaboration and consensus among the eight Armenian and Turkish civil society partner organizations,² the overall objective of the ATNP programme is to promote civil society efforts in support of the normalisation of relations between Turkey and Armenia, including the opening of the closed Armenian-Turkish border and the establishment of diplomatic relations. The programme carried out a number of activities in support of this goal, including efforts to enhance people-to-people contacts, expand economic and business links, promote cultural and educational activities, and facilitate broader access to more balanced information within both societies.

¹ For more information on the ATNP Programme, see: <http://armenia-turkey.net/en/home>

² Consortium partners include the Civiltas Foundation (CF), Eurasia Partnership Foundation (EPF), Public Journalism Club (PJC), and the Regional Studies Center (RSC) from Armenia; and from Turkey, Anadolu Kültür, Economic Policy Research Foundation (TEPAV), Helsinki Citizens’ Assembly (hCa), and the Hrant Dink Foundation.

Project Title: Support to Armenia-Turkey Normalization Process” (ATNP) programme

Duration: December 2015-May 2016
(six months)

Amount: \$20,630

Donor: Black Sea Trust (BST)/German Marshall Fund (GMF)

Summary: The project implemented activities in support of the process of “normalization” between Armenia and Turkey based on cooperation and collaboration between civil society organizations and youth groups in each country, with an added focus on the need to create a more conducive environment for the resumption of formal, state-level normalization engagement.

RELATED PROJECTS

THE WIDER BLACK SEA REGION

As a founding member of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC) organization, Armenia is considered to be a component of the wider Black Sea region. For Armenia, the wider BSEC area, which also extends into the South Caucasus and Balkans, as well as the Black Sea littoral states, is also a significant strategic arena, for several reasons:

- First, with an area spanning nearly 20 million square kilometers, the BSEC region comprises a total population of more than 330 million people, with an important level of intra-BSEC trade that exceeds \$300 billion in annual volume;
- Second, for landlocked Armenia, the BSEC region is the second-largest source of oil and natural gas along with its rich proven reserves of minerals, metals and other natural resources, after the Persian Gulf, and is rapidly emerging as Europe’s major transport and energy transit hub;
- A third factor underlying the significance of the Black Sea region for Armenia is an avenue to overcome isolation.

Moreover, the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC) organization offers Armenia an essential opportunity as a neutral platform to engage the other members (Albania, Azerbaijan, Bulgaria, Georgia, Greece, Moldova, Romania, Russia, Serbia, Turkey and Ukraine). Based on a charter that aims to foster “interaction and harmony among its members, as well as to ensure peace, stability and prosperity, and encourage friendly and good-neighborly relations in the Black Sea region,” BSEC serves as an important forum for Armenia to overcome closed borders and surmount geographic isolation.

From that wider perspective, the RSC conducts a wide range of research and analysis focused on issues related to the Black Sea region and focused on ways to maximize opportunities for Armenia to increase its activities, broaden its engagement and deepen its cooperation with the BSEC and its member states. These areas of RSC research and analysis include broader topics of regional trade and transport, structural impediments to regional reintegration, energy security and conflict resolution.