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TRUST BUILDING IN ARMENIAN-TURKISH RELATIONS THROUGH CIVIL SOCIETY ACTORS' COOPERATION

PUBLIC REPORT



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In this brochure we have included the materials of main events, meetings and discussions organised within the scope of the project Trust Building in Armenian-Turkish Relations through Civil Society Actors' Cooperation. The project was organised by ACGRC with kind support of the Embassy of Switzerland in Georgia and Armenia. Within the framework of this project two distinguished Turkish experts visited Armenia – Diba Nigar Göksel (Editor-in-Chief of Turkish Policy Quarterly, Senior Analyst of the European Stability Initiative) and Özgül Erdemli-Mutlu (Member of the ARI Movement, Manager of the Women Entrepreneurship and Leadership Centre). It may be noted that the schedule of Turkish experts' week-long stay in Armenia was rather extensive: a few conferences, seminars and roundtables were organised; a meeting in Vanadzor; discussions with Armenian scientists, experts and students. The experts appeared on Armenian television channels, gave interviews to newspapers, met with foreign diplomats accredited in Armenia, visited some analytical centres and NGOs, as well as had opportunities to meet with ordinary citizens of Armenia.

This brochure presents the materials of the most interesting discussions and events. We believe that it may be of interest for experts and NGOs working in the fields of Armenian-Turkish relations and such issues as reconciliation, regional cooperation and conflict resolution.

We express our sincere gratitude to the Embassy of Switzerland for supporting our initiatives and to Deputy Head of the Mission Dr. Anita Schlüchter Roth for participation in our seminar in Vanadzor and for her continuous support during the realisation of our project.

Dr. Stepan Grigoryan

Trust Building in Armenian-Turkish Relations through Civil Society Actors' Cooperation

The Analytical Centre on Globalisation and Regional Cooperation (ACGRC), with kind support of the Embassy of Switzerland in Georgia and Armenia, organised the project titled Trust Building in Armenian-Turkish Relations through Civil Society Actors' Cooperation.

Within the framework of this project two Turkish experts visited Armenia – Diba Nigar Göksel (Editor-in-Chief of Turkish Policy Quarterly, Senior Analyst of the European Stability Initiative) and Özgül Erdemli-Mutlu (Member of the ARI Movement, Manager of the Women Entrepreneurship and Leadership Centre).

Project Goals

1. Establishing contacts between Armenian and Turkish NGO's, journalists and experts, which may promote mutual tolerance and understanding;
2. Starting discussions about opportunities of cooperation between NGOs, newspapers, experts, students and historians;
3. Development and improvement of cooperation between Armenian and Turkish civil society institutions, as well as improvement of mutual trust in the expert and scientific communities;
4. Dissemination of information about the countries through civil society institutions;
5. Trust building between societies, breaking of enemy stereotypes.

The following events were organised during Turkish experts' stay in Armenia:

On 24 November 2008 Diba Nigar Göksel participated in Urvagits talk show on Kentron TV (30-minute programme hosted by Petros Ghazaryan)

Petros Ghazaryan's question: In Turkey there was a belief that since Armenia's Constitution contains a clause about historical Armenia, Armenia does not recognise the territorial integrity of Turkey. Have there been any changes concerning that issue?

Nigar Göksel's answer: For Turkey, the border issue is a problem, and it is considered that a treaty with Armenia should be signed. But thanks to some changes in the context of South Caucasus, the attitude towards Armenia has also changed. In the recent past there was an opinion in Turkey that there should not be any communication with Armenia. But now there are many new forces in Turkey demanding a more liberal approach to Armenia. And the transfer of power from Robert Kocharyan to Serzh Sargsyan made the situation easier, created opportunities for Armenian-Turkish cooperation. Let us also note that Russia is now playing serious role in Armenian-Turkish relations and wants them to be improved. At the same time, Turkish politicians do not oppose Russia's larger involvement in the region, so Turkey is ready for cooperation with Russia in the South Caucasus.

Q: How was President Abdullah Gül's visit to Yerevan accepted in Turkey?

A: For the first time, Turkey's policy is in line with Turkey's regional interests. For the first time, it has been possible to explain to Turkish politicians that an improvement of relations with Armenia is needed because of Turkey's regional interests, especially after the Russo-Georgian war. It is important that this approach was not imposed on Turkey by the United States and European Union. Turkish media were very positive about Abdullah Gül's visit to Yerevan.

Q: Armenia's former minister of foreign affairs Vardan Oskanian has questioned Turkey's sincerity in intention to improve relations with Armenia.

A: In Turkey Armenia's sincerity is also questioned, and that is understandable because both sides do not trust each other. Besides, it is difficult for me to say whether the improvement of Armenian-Turkish relation will continue if there is no progress on the Nagorno-Karabakh issue.

Q: What kind of attitude do Turkish elites have?

A: For Turkey's liberal elite the Nagorno-Karabakh issue is not so important, good relations with neighbours are more valued. For liberals, democracy and Turkey's security are more important than other issues.

The opposition in Turkish parliament is against the processes that have been unfolding. Small marginal nationalist groups are also opposed to improvement of relations with Armenia.

The army elite do not express its opinion openly. And Turkish government is careful, but makes accurate moves.

Q: In Armenia, there are two points of view. The first is that as long as the Nagorno-Karabakh issue is not solved, there will be no improvement in relations with Turkey. The second is that the Nagorno-Karabakh issue is not significant for Turkey – the main problem is the 1915 Armenian genocide issue.

A: It would be ideal if the Nagorno-Karabakh issue was solved. There are now discussions in Turkey: what to do next? Continue development of relations with Armenia or wait until the Nagorno-Karabakh issue is solved? That's why Turkish government makes contradictory statements, that's why it proposes trilateral Armenian-Azerbaijani-Turkish initiatives. Turkey does not want to disappoint Azerbaijan, and some progress in resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh issue would help Turkey to improve relations with Armenia.

Q: What is Turkish society's attitude towards the 1915 Armenian genocide issue? Is there a solution?

A: I may tell my personal opinion: I think that Turkish government should not set creation of a commission of historians for investigation of the events of 1915 as a precondition. There is very much tension in our societies concerning that issue. The society should be free, let the people talk openly about that issue, and the tension will become weaker. If people are persecuted for uttering the word genocide, it means the issue is important for Turkey. It is bad that persecution for using the word genocide exists. It is interesting that there are certain limitations in Europe as well: people may be persecuted for genocide denial (a reference to France, where denial of the Armenian genocide was outlawed – S.G.).

Q: What does Turkey's initiative about creation of a Caucasus Stability and Cooperation Platform mean? In Armenia there has been rather favourable attitude towards that; how about Turkey, how that idea was met?

A: Prime Minister Erdoğan's proposal received good responses, but the experts consider the proposal rather unclear. Many questions arise: for instance, why the EU and USA are not included in that proposal? There had been similar

proposals in the past, but they had not been successful. Why would this one work? It is interesting that the latter proposal was met without much enthusiasm in Azerbaijan and in Georgia.

Q: Where will such initiatives lead us?

A: I think both sides understand that if there is no movement forward, there will be serious disappointment both in Armenia and in Turkey. I think that Turkey is waiting for some little progress on the Nagorno-Karabakh issue, which would be used for moving forward. Then, possibly, diplomatic relations will be established.

Q: Is the ball on our side now?

A: I think that Turkey wants either to see progress on the Nagorno-Karabakh issue or have its territorial integrity recognised. Otherwise we will have to move forward by little steps.

Q: Turkish Airlines wants to start operating flights from Istanbul to Yerevan. Is that good?

A: Yes, that is good, because Turkish Airlines is a state-owned company.

Q: During the presidential campaign in the United States, Armenians supported Barack Obama because he had promised to recognise the Armenian genocide. And who were Turks for?

A: Most Turks, even diplomats, supported Obama, although earlier Turkish diplomats, traditionally, used to support the Republicans.

On 25 November 2008 a roundtable discussion was organised at the editorial office of the daily newspaper Aravot (one of the most popular Armenian newspapers); the roundtable materials were published in the 27 November issue of Aravot. Among the participants were Diba Nigar Göksel, editor of Aravot Aram Abrahamyan, journalists Naira Mamikonyan, Melania Barseghyan, Gohar Hakobyan and Margarit Yesayan, expert of ACGRC Maria Amaryan and chairman of the board of ACGRC Stepan Grigoryan



During the meeting Nigar Göksel noted that it has been understood in Turkey that it was not possible to reach the desired outcome of the Nagorno-Karabakh issue by keeping the border with Armenia closed. So now there is a widespread belief that the border should be opened. Even those who during the 1990s favoured closing of the border have been admitting that unless the border is opened, any further development of Armenian-Turkish relations will be improbable.

Nigar Göksel also noted that the visit of President of Turkey Abdullah Gül to Yerevan in September 2008 had been accepted very favourably in Turkey. However, the significance of that visit had been rather overestimated, both in Armenia and in Turkey; that could be understood as expressions of good will

from both sides. Nevertheless, it should also be noted that there is certain development of the bilateral relations, or at least there are prerequisites for development. In Ms. Göksel's opinion, that will definitely lead to opening of the border and establishment of diplomatic relations.

Journalist's question: Why does Turkey connect the border opening issue with the Nagorno-Karabakh issue?

Nigar Göksel's answer: I do not realise how these issues are connected; however, I believe it would be easier for Turkey to establish diplomatic relations and open the border if Armenian side could make some steps. For instance, some of the lands surrounding Nagorno-Karabakh could be freed, or some promise could be made, some commitment could be expressed. Turkish approach is 'let us put the history aside and begin talking', while Armenian approach is 'let us put the Nagorno-Karabakh issue aside and begin talking.' Therefore, in order to begin a dialogue both sides have to put aside some issues, as such issues complicate the situation. It is important that more and more Turks understand nowadays that it is not right to connect all issues with the history. Ninety to 95 percent of Azerbaijanis viewed President Gül's visit to Armenia negatively, while 65 to 68 percent of Turks viewed it positively. It is mainly the nationalist opposition and the nationalist part of the Turkish society that oppose the development of Armenian-Turkish relations. And though there is a belief in Armenia that Turkish-Azeri relations are very smooth and that Turkey supports Azerbaijan without any reservation, in fact, there are some particular aspects and tensions in Turkish-Azeri relations. That is not known in Armenia. It is the nationalist political forces that connect Armenian-Turkish relations with Turkey's interests in Azerbaijan.

Q: There was an Armenian church in Kars (city in Eastern Turkey – S.G.) that was rebuilt into a mosque. Not it is being restored but is still surrounded by a fence in Islamic style. Armenians are let in only if they take off their shoes, and even after the restoration they will be no cross on the top of the building.

Q: Do national minorities in Turkey have problems concerning the issue of ethnic identity?

Nigar Göksel's answer: The identity issue is more applicable to the Kurds, who do not enjoy a minority status in Turkey; it was in fact denied that they are Kurds.

Q: Does it mean that the state claims that they are Turks, not Kurds?

Nigar Göksel's answer: It is now recognised that they are Kurds, but there were problems in the past. When Turkey's prime minister opened the discussion

about the Kurds' ethnic identity, he wanted, primarily, to create an open space for the Kurds to protect their rights and to raise the issues that concern them. Armenians in Turkey do not need to struggle for that – they are Turkish citizens and they enjoy a minority status. In Turkey there are grave problems concerning ethnic minorities, and the government also has its share of guilt. But there is some misinformation about problems faced by the Armenian community. It is true that many Armenian churches in Turkey are not in proper use now; but I would also like to say that sometimes the Armenian media tell that Turkish army uses Armenian churches as shooting targets during the exercises – and that is an obvious lie. Armenians have opportunities to organise festivities, to follow their religious canons, and so forth. Turkey's new minister of culture is rather progressive person, who makes some steps towards solution of the issues concerning the ethnic minorities.

It is very important to know the facts and to separate the truth from lies. Recently, I often note that reading the newspapers does not mean that one gets objective information. And the positive changes must also be noted. If the border were opened, people like you would be able to observe the positive changes themselves, and that would bring the rumours to an end. However, I undoubtedly agree that problems still exist.

Q: Is it a misinformation that the Armenian churches in Turkey are not registered, or they have some other status?

Nigar Göksel's answer: I cannot say there are no problems, surely there are, and that is bad. Every particular issue should be investigated and improvements should be made. But often the media do not mention positive information. For instance, the Armenian Patriarchy has got many rights now, and may restore any Armenian Church building by its own effort. As I know, some churches are already under reconstruction, and not only the Church but some businessmen as well take part in that.

Aram Abrahamyan's question: Is Turkey a democratic country?

Nigar Göksel's answer: Compared to which ones?

Aram Abrahamyan's question: Compared with the South Caucasus. I think, if Armenia and Turkey were democratic countries, all kinds of conversations about whether the societies want to be closer to each other or not would be really meaningful. But since our countries are not really democratic, it turns that everything depends on the wish of those in power, or at least of the elites. What do you think?

Nigar Göksel's answer: Turkey is obviously more democratic now in comparison with the 1990s. The present government is more democratic than the previous ones, the contemporary laws are more democratic, the civil society is better developed, that is, the people are better organised. Of course, Turkey still lacks democracy. Last month I was in Washington where I made a report about Armenian-Turkish relations. In that report I criticised the Turkish law, namely the clauses that refer to the freedoms and the criminal penalties. A Turkish representative asked if I was informed about relevant clauses of Armenian laws; and I replied that I compare the democratic situation in Turkey not with Armenia but with Europe – and if one views democracy from a European perspective, Turkey has a great number of problems.

Aram Abrahamyan's question: I think, in Armenia the problems are created not by the laws as such, but by the reality when the laws are not respected; so, it may look very nicely democratic on the paper but is not applied in real life. But in Turkey there are non-democratic laws, for instance, mentioning the Armenian genocide is punishable – the law provides that it is an insult of Turkishness.

Nigar Göksel's answer: Yes, such problem does exist, and that was precisely the law I criticised. The law contains a clause providing that one may be punished for insulting the state. That clause may have many interpretations. So it is true, there is such a bad law; but fortunately, a great number of people in Turkey oppose it nowadays, they express their opinion by means of demonstrations and via the European structures. The same law existed in the 1990s as well, but at that time nobody protested against it. Protests and pressure have already resulted in many legal amendments. Pressure is applied by different groups and the civil society. By now it is practically the only Turkish law restricting freedoms that has remained in place without changes. That law is contradictory to the attitude that the present government is trying to create.

Journalist's question: Does Turkish society like the reforms? In Armenia there are worries that at some point Turkey may stop it, forget about democracy and return to the past. Although some forces in Armenia oppose Turkey's entry into the European Union, we understand that it would be better for Armenia if Turkey joined the EU, than if Turkey returned to the past. If another government comes to power, would there be a possibility of Turkey moving backwards?

Nigar Göksel's answer: The present government is not such because its members were born as reformists. The present attitude is a result of the society's need for democracy; that is a social demand, not just someone comes and says he

will give us something. And what is also very good: when the government makes any hard decision, there is strong reaction from the society. I am convinced that democracy becomes mature within the citizenry, not within the government.

The anti-government demonstrations that were organised in Turkey were not aimed against the democratisation process, they were a result of the concerns that an excessive islamisation of the country could occur. Unfortunately, the opposition parties are not really progressive in their attitudes towards the minorities, relations with the EU and other issues of interest for us. So, we have serious problems within the political spectrum. I am critical of the government in many respects but when I look for an alternative I see that it is not in accordance with the contemporary spirit of the country. However, those are internal problems, and I do not think they will have strong influence on the Armenian-Turkish relations.

Q: What are the non-progressive opposition's ratings?

Nigar Göksel's answer: The ruling party, AKP, got near 50 percent of votes, the socialists – 17 percent, the nationalists – near 11 percent; a Kurdish party had many votes but not enough to pass the threshold. According to the polls, half of the voters were for the AKP; but many votes were in fact lost because many people did not want to vote for any of the parties.

Aram Abrahamyan's question: So, are you sure that the results really show the public's attitudes? For instance, if in Armenia one party has some share of votes, another one has its share, I still cannot assert that the percentage really reflects what the public wants. Our society has serious doubts about the legitimacy of election results.

Nigar Göksel's answer: There is a party in Turkey, which is against building a relationship with Armenia; but it is in the minority, I can tell this based on the public opinion and the media publications. One NGO has organised a survey about knowledge about Armenia and Armenians. Quite surprisingly, the knowledge was very limited. Very few people knew who Armenians are and who Jews are. So if you ask about the public, this is an issue on which the government may use its influence and show people the way. Certainly, before making any important step the government has to create an appropriate atmosphere. The present government is able to do that.

Journalist's question: How does the society accept Turkey's paternalist attitude towards Azerbaijan?

Nigar Göksel's answer: There is a belief in Armenia that Turkish-Azeri relations are very smooth and that Turkey supports Azerbaijan without any

reservation. However, during the recent time some particular aspects in Turkish-Azeri relations, some disagreements and tension have appeared, and that is not known in Armenia. In particular, Azerbaijan is very much interested in construction of the Nabucco pipeline, and in this respect some questions arise. Neither Azerbaijan nor Georgia is enthusiastic about the development of Russo-Turkish relations. That is also a problem. Nationalist politicians and civic leaders in Turkey have closer ties with Azerbaijan. Unfortunately, Azerbaijanis have been using the Turkish nationalists, but the latter have recently been losing public support in Turkey.

Q: During his recent visit to Azerbaijan, Abdullah Gül has said that Turkey’s standpoint on the Nagorno-Karabakh issue did not change and that Azerbaijan and Turkey would remain ‘brothers’ – strategically and otherwise.

Nigar Göksel’s answer: As I have said, the nationalists are very interested in Azerbaijan.



Q: Does it mean that the government is nationalist? But the question was about the words of Abdullah Gül.

Nigar Göksel’s answer: No, I noted at the beginning that Karabakh is not connected with normalisation of Armenian-Turkish relations.

Q: Does Turkish government connect those issues?

Nigar Göksel's answer: Sometimes it does, sometimes does not. The matter may be approached from another point of view: does Ankara realise that closing of the border with Armenia has not produced any result? But this is also not an answer to your question.

Q: Now they say that a historians' commission must be formed for establishing relations. So, all the time some obstacles appear.

Nigar Göksel's answer: My sole opinion is that it is not right to connect normalisation of relations with the history. But I am sure about one thing – that Turkey is frank in its wish to reach an agreement, open the border and establish relations.

On 26 November 2008 Turkish experts presented reports at the seminar on the topic The European Union and Turkey: Problems and Perspectives for Turkey's European Integration. The seminar was organised at the Yerevan State Linguistic University UNESCO Chair for Human Rights, Democracy and European Studies. Thirty-five students of the leading Armenian universities participated in the seminar



At the beginning of her report Nigar Göksel referred to 1999, when Turkey became an EU accession candidate. She presented the changes that occurred in Turkey after the beginning of the official process of EU accession. During the 1990s it was widely known what problems had to be solved, but there were not enough stimuli to perform the needed reforms because there had not been a perspective of joining the EU. However, from the moment when Turkey received a candidate status and the EU began to publish periodically, every six months, about what already was done and what still had to be done, the process of change started. The role and scope of activity of civil society grew; one of the reasons for that was EU's attention towards the opinion of NGOs, so they became more powerful. Besides, the EU was demanding to involve civil society institutions in planning and decision-making processes. And there was another important factor: the EU provided direct support to NGOs, enabling them to run their programmes

within the framework of proposed projects. Thus, a part of the society acquired power it had not had before. Solution of some issues that had been on the agenda and needed solutions for decades began only from year 2000. For example, there were issues in connection with the army; the Criminal Code and Civil Code had to be amended; and there were tasks to fulfil in connection with civil freedoms.

However, as Nigar Göksel noted, the process of reforms slowed in 2005. A reform process proposed by the EU may really work only when the society does believe that there is a chance for joining the EU. Otherwise, the politicians are not stimulated to move in that direction. Beginning from 2005, Turkish public got a feeling that joining the EU was impossible; so, fulfilment of the conditions set by the EU seems useless and not compulsory. The fact that in many European countries referenda on the issue of Turkey's possible EU membership were held makes Turkish public think that Turkey may not join the EU. That is why Turkey is now paying more attention to the Middle East and Central Eurasia, that is why Turkey has recently been more active in the South Caucasus, including the bilateral relations with Armenia.

The second report was presented by Özgül Erdemli-Mutlu, who represents two Turkish NGOs: ARI Movement, which works on democratisation and youth issues, and Women Entrepreneurship and Leadership Centre. Ms. Erdemli-Mutlu spoke about two areas that have been reformed deeply since the beginning of accession negotiations between Turkey and EU – gender issues and youth issues. Women's and youth organisations had existed in Turkey also before the beginning of accession negotiations; however, only after the beginning of negotiations they were able to petition the government and include their issues on the agenda. Ms. Erdemli-Mutlu noted that as many other citizens, she views EU membership as an opportunity to help women and some social groups to solve their problems. Although the EU has some shortcomings (and it has, indeed), the accession would provide serious advantages. Turkey and other candidate countries involved in joint work with the EU have already benefited from it. Ms. Erdemli-Mutlu noted that EU accession negotiations and negotiations for granting a candidate status are different stages. When in 1999-2004 Turkey negotiated for granting of official candidate status, the negotiation process received more support because the goal was clear. On 3 October 2005 Turkey became a candidate country. After that, the nature of negotiations between Ankara and Brussels changed. Now Turkey has certain commitments. They must be fulfilled, there are official procedures, there are bureaucratic impediments, and Turkey is now involved in that process. And it seems that process has become a burden for

some groups. That process is quite expensive, as there is a need to translate the EU laws, adapt them for the country and then apply them; it is huge and hard work. For being able to pass that difficult period, the government should, first of all, believe in the final goal and be able to convince the society that the final goal is close and achievable. After 2005, the incentives coming from the EU seem to be rather weak. Recently, the signs received from the EU, or from some EU member states, have not been clear enough and positive enough, and because of that the image of EU in Turkish society is not very good now. The society thinks now that Turkey's membership is not quite desirable for the EU. That has three reasons: Turkey's size (it is a large country), Turkish culture and the economy. In addition to the problems connected with EU-Turkey relations, EU has its internal problems. Let us, for instance, remember the issues connected with the EU Constitution, the long debates on that issue and contradictions within the EU. In 2004-2005 about 70 percent of Turks were in favour of joining the EU, now the rate is about 50 percent. Such 20 percent decline in a short time is a serious trouble. What should be done for sustaining the accession process? There should be a clear strategy of communication between Ankara and Brussels, as well as between Ankara and other main European capitals; that would let to explain to the society what does EU membership mean. Turkish government has to continue the reforms and to amend even those laws that EU does not want to be amended. Support from the civil society is very important. The civil society was rather critical in 1999-2005, it has become more critical now, while its support is crucial for membership. In this respect, the dialogue with youth is important, because youth is the future of the country. A dialogue should begin already.

Armenian students asked Turkish experts a number of questions and shared their views on possible developments.

A student's question to Özgül Erdemli-Mutlu: How do you evaluate Russo-Turkish relations?

Özgül Erdemli-Mutlu's answer: On official level, Russo-Turkish relations are rather good and there is accord on many issues. The same may not, however, be told about the society level, as some groups in Turkey oppose closer ties with Russia.

A student's question to Nigar Göksel: What is your opinion about U.S. president-elect Barack Obama's promise to recognise the Armenian genocide in the Ottoman Empire?

Nigar Göksel's answer: There were other American politicians and presidential candidates who made promises about recognition of the genocide, but

it has not happened. Probably, when they assume the office, other considerations are taken into account. For me it is more important if Turkish public may become able to view its history more critically, to have a more open atmosphere in Turkey, so the public may know its history better.

Özgül Erdemli-Mutlu's answer: Our president's visit to Yerevan has probably had more significance and has given more to Turkey than France or other countries may do for us or compel us to do. The ability of our state leaders and our peoples to begin a dialogue is more important.

A student's question: Armenia has made the first move, Armenian president invited his Turkish counterpart to Yerevan. If that first move were not made, would Turkey be ready to make a similar move?

Özgül Erdemli-Mutlu's answer: Let me make a little comment. I may tell what Turkish media wrote about Armenian president's invitation. In one of our newspapers there had been an interview with President Gül, who had been asked if he would go to Yerevan if Armenian president invited him. It means that in our diplomacy nothing is made by chance, invitations are not made suddenly. It means that both sides were ready to move forward, the interview I have mentioned is significant in this respect.

A student's question: We know that Turkish army plays an important role and used to take matters in its hands in critical situations. The government has not been able to control the army fully. And if Turkey does not become an EU member, may it happen that army will take the power?

Özgül Erdemli-Mutlu's answer: Of course, Turkish army has some influence on the government, but I do not think that the army will take over if Turkey does not join the EU.

A student's question: What benefits may be produced by cooperation between Armenia and Turkey and what kind of compromise would be needed for that?

Özgül Erdemli-Mutlu's answer: The very fact that there has been an attempt of cooperation with Armenia and border opening issue is on the agenda is a compromise on behalf of Turkey.

A student's question to both experts: Do our guests themselves recognise the 1915 Armenian genocide?

Özgül Erdemli-Mutlu's answer: I consider the events of 1914-1923 in the Ottoman Empire as ethnic cleansing, I do not regard it as genocide because there was removal of the population and that is ethnic cleansing.

Nigar Göksel's answer: I was brought up with Turkish point of view, I studied at a Turkish school. I have talked with people who have been trying to prove that what happened was genocide; I have also talked with people who have been trying to prove that the term genocide cannot be applied in this case. In either case the people I talked with were historians having knowledge of legal terminology. I am neither a historian nor a lawyer, and I could not decide who was right or wrong. But I am ready to hearing arguments, to attempts to convince me whether it was genocide or not. People change during their lifetime, learn many new things, and I am open for learning something new; here lay some opportunities and new perspectives. It should be understood that in both countries people have been learning different things since their childhood, and the only way to understand each other is through cooperation and mutual concessions.

Stepan Grigoryan addressed the students, noting that the genocide issue is very important for Armenians but at present it is more important to concentrate on opening of the border and establishment of relations. Although the genocide recognition process goes on, there is no need to concentrate on that; contemporary issues should be solved. Mutual history of our peoples was very complicated. Surely, we know what happened, but in Turkey complicated processes have been developing. Turkish public has been learning the truth about the past events. We, Armenians, are well informed about the genocide but we lack knowledge on many other issues. We lived in the Soviet Union, in a closed system, so we did not know many things, we have only been learning about them.

Nigar Göksel: The question is that when Turkey opposes the use of the word genocide it does not mean that nothing happened in 1915. Everybody knows that many Armenians suffered and tragic events took place. The issue is more technical – may the term genocide be applied or not, does the Republic of Turkey bear responsibility, and if yes, to which extent? That is the question, not whether something happened or not.

Özgül Erdemli-Mutlu: I have not used the term genocide but I have said that during the Ottoman period there was ethnic cleansing.



Some thoughts expressed by the students:

The notion that Turkey's EU accession process does not engage Armenia is wrong.

The visit of Turkey's president was a historic event for Armenia.

It is important that Turkey has interests in the South Caucasus and that it is even possible to say that Turkey returns to the region.

It may be seen that Turkey has been trying to find a common ground with Armenia and wants to open the border. After the visit of Abdullah Gül there has been a stronger inclination for opening the border.

Quite recently, Turkey viewed different problems such as the Nagorno-Karabakh issue and the border issue in connection with each other, but now the situation is changing.

If experts like Nigar Göksel and Özgül Erdemli-Mutlu come to Armenia and may familiarise themselves with our country, it already means that Turkey has been moving forward.

It is very important that such guests come to Armenia. They may gain personal experiences instead of reading old textbooks, they may see and hear that we have more commonalities than differences.

In connection with all we spoke about, it is important for Armenia that we may find a common ground with our neighbours and open the border.

Moving closer is more important for Armenia. For the sake of our future, we need to have our own policy towards Turkey, independent from Armenian diaspora in California, New York or Paris. The solution must serve Armenia's interests, not the diaspora's.

Of course, the genocide issue is very important. We never say it is not important but we must remember that it is not the single important issue, there are other important ones as well. I mean democracy, human rights and the future of Armenian-Turkish relations. That is why the present developments, which let us to be more optimistic, are so important.

On 26 November 2008 Turkish experts met with employees of the Armenian-Turkish Dialogue Programme of the Eurasia Partnership Foundation (EPF)



The meeting was attended by Nigar Göksel, Özgül Erdemli-Mutlu, Sarah Smith, Vazgen Karapetyan, Gevorg Ter-Gabrielyan, Stepan Grigoryan and Isabella Sargsyan



A detailed discussion of past projects and projects carried out at present by the EPF for improvement of Armenian-Turkish relations took place. The participants noted that there could be productive cooperation in such areas as transborder cooperation and cooperation between local communities; there are plans concerning cooperation between Armenian and Turkish secondary schools (however, language barrier may create difficulties in this case); cultural cooperation, in particular, reconstruction of churches; initiatives for cooperation of professional associations, for instance, between unions of architects of Armenia and Turkey; and so forth. Stepan Grigoryan noted that there is already significant experience of cooperation of experts, political scientists, civic leaders and former officials.

On 27 November 2008 Turkish experts presented reports during the international conference European Union and South Caucasus – A Security Partnership? The conference took place in the Great Hall of the Congress Hotel in Yerevan



The conference European Union and South Caucasus – A Security Partnership? was organised by the Analytical Centre for Globalisation and Regional Cooperation (ACGRC) and German Council on Foreign Relations (DGAP). The conference was also supported by the Black Sea Trust for Regional Cooperation, German Marshall Fund of the United States, Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung and Robert-Bosch-Stiftung.

Welcome speeches and reports were given by Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of Armenia Arman Kirakossian, German Ambassador to Armenia Andrea Wiktorin, head of European Commission delegation in Armenia Raul de Luzenberger and director of ACGRC Stepan Grigoryan.

Reports on issues of interest for Armenian society were delivered by Dr. Arif Yunusov (Institute for Peace and Democracy, Azerbaijan), Dr. Seyed Rasol Mousavi (Institute of Political and International Research of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Islamic Republic of Iran), Armen Rustamyan (member of the standing committee on foreign affairs of the National Assembly of Armenia), Aleksander Rusetsky (director of the South Caucasus Institute for Regional

Security, Georgia), Diba Nigar Göksel (Editor-in-Chief of Turkish Policy Quarterly, Senior Analyst of the European Stability Initiative), Özgül Erdemli-Mutlu (ARI Movement, Turkey), Vyacheslav Igrunov (director of the International Institute for Humanitarian and Political Studies, Russia), Gevorg Ter-Gabrielyan (Country Director, Eurasia Partnership Foundation, Armenia) and Ivlian Khaindrava (director of the South Caucasus studies programme, Georgia).

The number of participants reached 300, instead of initially planned 150. Among the participants were ambassadors of Bulgaria, Germany, Iran, Italy, Lithuania, Poland and Romania; heads of UN, EU, OSCE and Council of Europe missions in Armenia; head of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung office; representatives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Armenia; diplomats representing British, German and Greek Embassies; Armenian political scientists, historians, sociologists, university professors; heads of political parties and NGOs; students; and journalists of the leading Armenian media.

Reports about the conference were broadcasted by a number of TV companies: Public Television of Armenia, Kentron, Yerevan TV, Shant, TV5, YerkirMedia, etc. Daily newspaper Aravot published a detailed report about the conference on November 28 and November 29. Reports were also published in other newspapers and by information agencies Noyan Tapan, Arminfo, PanArmenian, Armtown, etc.

On 29 November 2008 seminar on the topic Armenian-Turkish Cross-border Cooperation: Feasible Initiatives from Armenian and Turkish Sides was organised in the city of Vanadzor



Welcoming address to the seminar participants was given by Dr. Anita Schlüchter Roth, Deputy Head of the Mission, Embassy of Switzerland to Georgia and Armenia; Khoren Gasparyan, Advisor to the Mayor of Vanadzor; and Dr. Stepan Grigoryan (ACGRC).

Turkish experts Nigar Göksel and Özgül Erdemli-Mutlu, as well as Arthur Sakunts, coordinator of the Helsinki Citizens' Assembly Vanadzor Committee, presented reports. Representatives of local NGOs, branches of political parties, professors and students of the University of Vanadzor, as well as journalists participated in the seminar (in total, 43 participants).

The goal of meeting was to break the stereotypes formed in Armenia and Turkey by creating new relationships and effective cooperation between the nations.

In her address Dr. Anita Schlüchter Roth noted that creating conditions for cooperation between peoples is one of the main priorities of Swiss Government. Support for the current event, for this attempt of dialogue, was one of the steps on that way. Since establishment of relations between Armenia and Turkey and opening of the border seem quite possible at present, conferences and seminars

like this one help to know each other better – not only on the political level but, what is also important, in everyday life. If there is no communication between the peoples, political decisions do not represent the peoples' will and are only formal. That is why organising such a project was considered very important. Dr. Schlüchter Roth expressed her hope that the seminar would be interesting and would stimulate further development of Armenian-Turkish relations.

Özgül Erdemli-Mutlu noted that since 2004 Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia have been involved in the European Neighbourhood Policy. Involvement of the Caucasian countries was a very important move made by the EU. But it will be meaningless, if EU does not help to solve the crises and stimulate political and economic reforms, as well as transborder cooperation.

Ms. Erdemli-Mutlu told about transborder cooperation between Greeks and Turks. She noted that their bilateral relations are different from Armenian-Turkish relations, but for solution of our problems we may use experiences drawn from any conflict. For example, after the disastrous earthquake in Turkey in 1991, the Greeks promptly offered their help; that let to break the stereotypes about 'bad' Greeks, as some Greeks helped Turks during the time of suffering. Some kind of cooperation may work in Armenian-Turkish relations as well. Civil society institutions should be involved in such cooperation, as it would help to break the 'image of enemy' and mutual distrust; communication should be promoted, and this visit of Turkish civic leaders to Armenia is an example of communication. This was one of the visible steps. Ms. Erdemli-Mutlu noted that she learned more during her visit to Armenia than she would have learned from Turkish media or books. She underscored the importance of communication between young people and of youth exchange programmes. She also mentioned the significant role of women's organisations and gave examples of countries, where women's active stance had contributed to solution of a number of issues.

After the report of Özgül Erdemli-Mutlu, Stepan Grigoryan referred to the situation in Georgia. He noted that after the Russo-Georgian war it became obvious that Georgia cannot be the only reliable transport corridor between Azerbaijan and Turkey; therefore, Armenia should not be isolated. Thus, attention should be paid to the factors that unite Armenia and Turkey.

Next report was delivered by Arthur Sakunts. He also noted that transborder cooperation is one of the most important issues in the South Caucasus. In that respect, Mr. Sakunts referred to the border issue. He stated that unfortunately, we inherited one strong concept from the Soviet Union – that closed borders guarantee security. Mr. Sakunts noted that in his opinion, we should learn that

open borders are more secure. Until now, there is in fact no border between Armenia and Turkey – in that place there is a border between Russia and Turkey, because the border is considered ‘the external border of the Commonwealth of Independent States’ and is controlled by Russian troops. Mr. Sakunts noted that first we need to define the border between Armenia and Turkey, and only after that discuss transborder cooperation.

Mr. Sakunts also noted that all difficulties notwithstanding, people pass any borders because life sets its own rules. Research shows that the turnover of trade between Armenia and Turkey amounts up to 120 million US Dollars a year. However, as cooperation is totally informal and has no legal status, it is affected by criminal activities: trafficking in persons, illicit drugs and other problems. So, what conditions exist for normal transborder cooperation? We need to look for such conditions at the local self-government structures and in the field of human rights in both countries. Armenia and Turkey are both members of the Council of Europe; but the South Caucasus is the only region where there are closed borders between members of the Council of Europe. We now have a closed and legally not defined Armenian-Turkish border and closed Armenian-Azerbaijani border. In order to overcome this situation, we need cooperation, at least on civil society level. Existing problems may not be solved without cooperation. Cooperation between civil society institutions is important in many areas, and such cooperation may help to establish official relations between the states. Whatever decisions statesmen make, that is not enough. ‘Football diplomacy’ was just a wish of presidents Gül and Sargsyan; but when the Asparez Club initiated a football game between teams of Kars and Gyumri, it was not possible because of some unclear reasons. So, the presidents’ meeting has not had its logical follow-up. Therefore, in either country civil societies have some work to do.

Stepan Grigoryan noted that there has been some positive change in the development of bilateral relations. For instance, two or three years ago it was very difficult to invite a Turkish expert to any Armenian educational institution; now such problem does not exist anymore. And the fact that this seminar was attended by a representative of the Mayor’s office of Vanadzor, who welcomed the participants on behalf of the Mayor, illustrated that positive change.



The reports were followed by a discussion.

A participant's question: Did Turkey provide any assistance to Armenia after the 1988 Spitak earthquake?

Özgül Erdemli-Mutlu's answer: Turkey supplied some foodstuff, as European community was providing intensive support.

Question: Did Turkey help on its own behalf or as a member of the European community?

Özgül Erdemli-Mutlu's answer: Turkey helped on its own behalf.

Question: We have been talking about improvement of Armenian-Turkish relations, but we do not discuss the genocide issue, and we, Armenians, are convinced that what happened in 1915 was genocide. I think, we will not get really close to each other until we discuss that burning issue. For example, Germany recognised the Holocaust, so the present generation of Germans and Jews is free from that heavy inheritance. Armenians and Turks should discuss the issue actively. I, for example, consider myself an Erzurumian (Erzurum – a city in Turkey where many Armenians lived until 1915 – S.G.); my father's ancestors lived in Erzurum, they were rich and had property there, and my mother's ancestry is from Kars (city in Eastern Turkey – S.G.). I have such a question: could it have happened that we lived in one state? I mean, if there were no genocide and my ancestors remained in Erzurum, would it be possible that we'd be living in one country, be neighbours, speak one language?

Özgül Erdemli-Mutlu's answer: We need some kind of assembly where Armenians and Turks would get together – not diplomats, historians or politicians, but common people. We should not wait until something is done; let us take the initiative in our own hands. Then it will be noticeable that there are organisations in Turkey able to act. I welcome discussions aimed to solution of problems, and to the difficult question about whether you may get your property back I would point to the Palestinian example. Palestinians who want to go back to Israel, to the homes they lost in 1948, cannot return and get their property back. I understand that your ancestors lost their property, but it is very important if you have any documents about it, since even if restitution is not possible now, sometime in the future a just approach may be adopted.

Nigar Göksel's answer: While talking about restitution of Armenian property in Anatolia, one has to consider that in Turkish society there is also such a point of view: that Turks who lived in the Balkans in the Ottoman period, had homes and other property there and left during the war, also have a right for restitution. The notion that many Turks lost their property exists in Turkey. It may be wrong, but it exists. So, if something is taken from Turks and given to someone else, there will be disturbance; but I think that your position and your demands are just. We may say the same about Karabakh. I do not treat these issues equally, I do not say they are comparable. It is very difficult to give all people opportunities to return to places they ran away from. Some areas in Turkey were inhabited by Kurds and Armenians, now there are only Kurds; but it is very difficult to provide justice for everyone, to restore justice completely. I am sure that many Turks believe it was unjust to Armenians, but it does not mean that your home must be given back to you. However, in any case it is good that people believe there was injustice.

Stepan Grigoryan: What is the difference between our two experts and other Turkish experts? They present Armenians' opinions and concerns to Turkish society, they do not just discuss with us. That is very important. They may agree with us or not, but they inform their society about our point of view, it becomes known what concerns Armenians have, and that is important. We conducted a survey in cooperation with Nigar Göksel among representatives of Armenian and Turkish political parties and NGOs. There were quite unpredictable responses from either side. Such research helps to change the approach of either side. When an Armenian reads the book we published, he starts to think: if some Turkish party or NGO is so open-minded, then there has

been some change. And that is our goal – to change our societies, to destroy the atmosphere of intolerance and mistrust.

Question: All countries have their ethnography and history. I would like to know, what you studied in Turkish school about formation and development of Turkish ethnicity, how did Turks inhabit these territories (Eastern Turkey – S.G.), what historic records about these territories exist, what is said about Byzantium and on which principles Turkish history textbooks are based?

Özgül Erdemli-Mutlu's answer: What we learned in school concerned the latter period of the Ottoman Empire. We referred shortly to attitudes of the Entente members during World War I, their plans to divide the Ottoman Empire between themselves; also how different minorities, ethnic groups were formed in the Ottoman Empire, and how those ethnic groups collaborated with the Entente on the issue of division of the Ottoman Empire. During that collaboration critical situations began. What we learned in school about the Armenian issue is that the Ottoman government forced people to move away. We learned that it happened during World War I, and the government in Istanbul tried to solve the 'eastern' issue by removing the Armenians.

Question: Do Turks consider themselves an aboriginal people, whose ethnic roots were in these territories?

Nigar Göksel's answer: I do not know if Turks had originated in these territories, we did not study such things; many of relatives of both my father and my mother come from other places, but I am a Turk because I am a citizen of Turkey.

Question: Özgül Erdemli-Mutlu has said how they learned the history, but what changes have occurred and how is the past interpreted today? They learned it differently, but are they familiar with the new interpretation as well?

Question: We see that Armenia is a small country, with a population of only 3 million. Turkey is a large country of 70 million, without counting population of Azerbaijan. During the 20 years of our independence, that large country has been isolating, keeping under a blockade our small country. From my point of view, a large powerful country, like a powerful man, must not be cruel. Does Turkish public feel ashamed because of your government's policies, for blockading Armenia? I would have felt ashamed.

Özgül Erdemli-Mutlu's answer: I do not represent the government and I criticise its policies on a number of issues. I think that the government makes positive steps on such issues as solution of the Cyprus conflict, relations with Greece and Armenia; that is not enough but what is being done is obviously positive.

Nigar Göksel's answer: One journalist wrote about a roundtable, which was rather like our today's meeting. When he asked the participants where they came from, they said they came from Mush, Artvin, or Erzurum (cities in Turkey inhabited by Armenians until 1915 – S.G.); so he understood why this problem was so important. I think, problems are still in place, but there have been some changes and we should be more optimistic. During a conference in a private Turkish university the events of 1915 were called genocide. Many Turks do not use the word genocide yet, but they speak about mass massacres. Just ten years ago that was impossible. Until now, there is a lack of information about Armenia in Turkey. When I came here, to Armenia, I saw that almost everyone knows about the political events in Turkey. You know Turkish history better than I do. In Turkey there is very little information about all this. There was a survey a few years ago, and some respondents thought that Armenians were Jewish.

Armenian churches in Turkey were completely abandoned, but in the recent time some have been restored. Everyone knows about Akhtamar. I think it has been a very positive change. Now about 120,000 Armenians live in Turkey, between 40,000 and 50,000 came to work, and Turks do not have stereotypes, as they communicate with Armenians. In this respect, the problem is that few Turks come to Armenia and communicate. We lived separated for decades, here you had communist propaganda, and we had Turkish state propaganda. Both had different approaches. But we now clearly see that in Turkey we compel our government to provide more space for discussions.

The territorial issue is a very delicate one in Turkey not only in connection with the Armenian issue, as there are some problems with Kurds and other ethnic minorities as well. I have already been a few times in Armenia and I understand Armenians' point of view, their concerns, but many more visits and discussions are needed. If we look at our relations from some high point, we may see that there have been serious changes. Direct flights to Armenia should begin soon; I have also heard that Armenians who want to buy land in Anatolia will get agreeable conditions. I would like if we looked for positive changes because since 1915 until now everything was going wrong. For the first time, we have an opportunity to move away from the negative, let us turn towards positive.

Question: I welcome opening of the border and discussions between us, and at the same time I think that any good plan must be based on three main pillars – principles, logic and honesty. If Turkish leadership demands that we recognise the border with Turkey formed after World War I, why they apply

pressure on us before beginning of the dialogue and make a precondition that we pull back from the border formed in 1992-1994, after the war in Karabakh?

Nigar Göksel's answer: I think that it is not right to connect Armenian-Turkish relations with Armenian-Azerbaijani relations. There was pressure because it was supposed in Turkey that Armenia would make concessions. But now more people do not think so anymore. As I noted, Armenians view Turks and Azeris as one people, but that is not right. We never lived together, and we have as many differences as shared features. So it would be better to separate two conflicts from each other.

Question: And so, why the border is not opened? There has recently been a conference in Vanadzor during which one of the participants, a German, said that Armenia sets a precondition: recognition of the genocide; so, in Germany there is an opinion that Armenia sets preconditions. But in the recent years Armenia has been declaring its readiness to establish relations without any precondition.

Özgül Erdemli-Mutlu's answer: For Turkish officials there are two issues connected to opening of the border with Armenia: solution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and establishment of a historians' commission, which would review the historic events. After Abdullah Gül's visit to Armenia and some other movement forward, solution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict has not been a priority issue as before. The main point is that Turkey wants to establish a historians' commission. Turkey says now: let us put historical problems aside, let historians solve them, and we shall work together on the issues that require solutions, we shall have our embassy in Armenia, and so forth.

Question: And what is Turkish society's attitude?

Özgül Erdemli-Mutlu's answer: If we talk about the society, its wants the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict to be solved, but that is not a priority on the society's agenda. Businessmen have been lobbying for opening of the border.

Question: Concerning the preconditions, I would like to say that public opinion is very important. Turkish society is very diverse. There is a big difference between Ankara, Istanbul and other cities and regions, especially in being informed. Armenia is much smaller but we also have a similar problem. There is a lot of work to do for formation of public opinion. We may form public opinion in cooperation instead of working separately. And it can be done by means of such discussions, just in regions. In my opinion, change may not happen without forming public opinion that would influence the decision-makers. I mean, even if the leaders make some decisions, they will not work as we will not be ready.

Özgül Erdemli-Mutlu's answer: I agree.

Question: Turkey closed the border with Armenia in 1992, because of the Nagorno-Karabakh issue. I also think that Azeri and Turkish societies should not be mixed with each other. By in that case, why did Turkey close the border? And my second question: at first sight, the historians' commission may seem a beautiful idea, but if we look at the context it turns that Turks seized our historic motherland, destroyed or desecrated our monuments, and now we should also erase our memories for establishment of a commission that would have to prove something?

Nigar Göksel's answer: The opinion that Azeris and Turks are the same did not appear in 1993. Such opinion had existed in Armenia much earlier. An Azeri friend once told me that we, Turks, had committed massacres, but Armenians had been punishing them, Azeris. Turks think that Armenia puts Azeris and Turks together in order to claim larger territories – today Karabakh, tomorrow – Eastern Anatolia. I am telling this, so you may understand that psychology. People who say Armenia must take Karabakh also say that Armenia must take Eastern Anatolia. And that leads to trouble. That is the reason why the border is not opened, why Armenia is under pressure so the borders in the Caucasus may remain unchanged. Returning to the historians' commission, I do not think someone has been saying that memories must be erased. You are afraid that forgetfulness may be the result, but establishment of commission is not aimed to forgetting and is not aimed to determine if genocide happened or no. It is rather for a more detailed understanding of all events. I am not a historian, and in different regions, in different villages in Turkey events were different. For the sake of understanding, we need to find a suitable format for discussion about the issue. A historians' commission could be such a suitable format.

Question: There is not a single person in Armenia, who is ignorant about what happened then. I am sure that in Turkey there are people, even if a few of them, who know what happened. The genocide was committed by orders of the Ottoman government. How we can be sure that it will not be repeated?

Nigar Göksel's answer: One thing, which makes me optimistic now, is that normalisation of relations with Armenia is not a result of requests from the USA or Europe; it originates in Turkey and suits Turkey's national interest. For Turkey it is more valuable if it does something on its own, without pressure. And for this normalisation to work, people with self-esteem are needed on both sides. Concerning your question, I have heard before as well that Turkey may be dangerous. I may say that contemporary Turkey is new Turkey, very different

from the Ottoman Empire of 1915; even the nationalists do not have the same ideology for repetition of the events of 1915.

Özgül Erdemli-Mutlu's answer: There will be many problems when the border will be opened, but gradually, step by step, there will be more and more common interests. Once the border is opened and stops being a troublesome issue, we will have other things to do, and we will concentrate on them. I am an optimist and a realist. And concerning your worries: I understand you but I do not think you now have reasons for being afraid of Turkey.

Question: I would like to say that we, Armenians, have more common features with Azeris than you, Turks; and I do not think Azeris and Turks are the same. Armenia and Azerbaijan were parts of one state, and if you look at actions of our leaders, you may observe the same style, even in amounts of bribes. I fulfilled my military service in Baku and I have many Azeri friends. During the war, my friends called me on the phone, they rescued many Armenians there. I want to say that friendship between our peoples has always existed. I also know history very well and I may add to what has been said that during the 1915 genocide not only Turkish citizens, but also Islamic organisations in Turkey, and even some members of government, saved Armenians. About what Nigar has said, that Turks think Armenians want to enlarge Armenia's territory, I would like to remind: in the Karabakh case it has been forgotten that it is an issue of self-determination. The people of Karabakh have been living on their territory, have determined and want to live separately from Azerbaijan. Karabakh was given to Azerbaijan only in 1918. So, what is wrong if people want to live separately? What does Armenia have to do with that? We just protect the rights of our kin. Look from this point of view, not from a point of view of a territorial dispute.

Nigar Göksel's answer: I was saying that when Armenians say it, they mean all historic lands, not only Karabakh.

Question: When they speak about historians' commission, I remember that from our family only a woman with two children survived. What that commission should prove, that my ancestors did not perish then? I want to say, let us open the border without preconditions, then we shall have discussions, if needed. Now Turkey creates another source of conflict, which is not yet known to Turkish society. I am talking about construction of the railway between Kars and Tbilisi, which must go through Javakhk (a region in Georgia with ethnic Armenian population – S.G.). My ancestors escaped to Javakhk from Erzurum, and I know that area very well. That railway will not work because of geographical reasons, but it may become a good weapon for the Russians, as a new source of conflict –

between Georgians and Armenians. Does not Turkish society ask its government: as there is a functioning railway through the territory of Armenia (Kars-Gyumri), and as you want to create a pact for peace and stability for the Caucasus, why don't you use the existing railroad link instead of spending huge amounts for construction of a railroad circumventing Armenia?

Nigar Göksel's answer: You ask why people do not ask the government; I think there are not even 70 persons who know about construction of the new railroad. Turkish public is more anxious about having the streets cleaned, infrastructure maintenance costs, or inflation.

Question: If you write in your journal about this issue it will be good – attention will be invited to it.

Nigar Göksel's answer: Thank you, I'll consider that.

Özgül Erdemli-Mutlu's answer: For me, it has been very interesting to hear all your remarks, demands and proposals. It is important for me to hear what Turkish government or the society should do from your point of view; I promise to tell that to my friends, relatives, to the media. In turn, I would like to ask you: let us try, first of all, to hear each other; please disseminate information about our meeting, so the existing misunderstandings may be corrected. Believe me, I have very warm feeling towards the Armenians, and I will take many good emotions to Turkey. During these five days I have heard many new ideas that I did not consider before. There are people in Turkey who try to settle the border issue peacefully. I am taking with me only positive emotions and I want everyone to feel positively. And, as Stepan suggested, I value your frankness and your open talk with us. Any change should begin in an open atmosphere, an atmosphere of honesty towards each other.

Question: During today's meeting, many words have been said about what we demand from Turkish government and society and few – about what we want from our own, Armenian government and society. I understand the worries that Turkish society has about our bilateral relations. For example, one of nationalist parties, Dashnaktsutyun, is a member of the ruling coalition. But if some representatives in the parliament and in the government say from time to time that Turkey represents a threat for Armenia, that naturally provokes some worries in the neighbouring country. In this respect, I think that cooperation between our civil societies is very important, so is cooperation between the media – the positive stimuli from such meetings should get to our societies. We have at least to attempt promotion of pluralism of opinions, and exclude narrow-mindedness that produces enmity. We always ask how they learn history in their schools. I

may say that a Turkish NGO made an interesting research of how other nations were presented in their history textbooks. Now I ask all of us: how we present Turks in Armenian history textbooks? Because this is yet another issue: is history that we learn an objective one? We also have things to do in this respect.

Nigar Göksel's answer: In either country, there are extreme nationalists. You should not think that all Turks are like me and Özgül Erdemli-Mutlu. I would like to tell about something I heard here. Once I talked to an Armenian who had a strict approach towards Turks, and I asked if he had visited Turkey. He was a retired army officer, and he said that he had not been in Turkey but he promised to himself to go to Turkey only as the commander of the Armenian army. I want to say that we may hear such opinions as well, and that is normal. You might have heard similar things from Turks. I do not think that man would lead the army in the direction of Kars, and there is no use in overestimating everything we hear.

Question: This is the first time I meet Turks and I am interested if everyone in Istanbul is as beautiful as you?

Nigar Göksel's answer: Izmir is famous for beautiful girls (Özgül Erdemli-Mutlu is from Izmir – S.G.).

Stepan Grigoryan: Here in Vanadzor we have learned about new issues, also heard about known problems – but with new interesting approaches. I thank everybody for participation.

During their stay in Armenia, Turkish experts also had many meetings with heads of NGOs, experts and foreign diplomats. We would specifically mention Nigar Göksel's meetings with ambassadors of Bulgaria and Iran in Armenia, as well as with the head of EU delegation to Armenia



«ANTARES» Publishing House
Yerevan–0009, Mashtots ave. 50a/1
Tel.` +(374 10) 58 10 59, 56 15 26
Tel./Fax` +(374 10) 58 76 69
antares@antares.am
www.antares.am