

The Positions of Political Parties in Turkey on the Resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict and  
Turkey-Armenia Relations

# **The Positions of Political Parties in Turkey on the Resolution of the Nagorno- Karabakh Conflict and Turkey-Armenia Relations**

**Tolga Er**

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[www.imaginedialogue.com](http://www.imaginedialogue.com), [info@imaginedialogue.com](mailto:info@imaginedialogue.com)



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[www.cisr-berlin.org](http://www.cisr-berlin.org), [info@cisr-berlin.org](mailto:info@cisr-berlin.org)

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# Introduction

Sixteen political parties as well as 21 independent candidates ran for Turkey's latest General Snap Election in November 2015 after the Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, AKP) – the party in power at the moment – or any other political parties failed to get or form a majority in the Parliament during the General Election in June of the same year. Since the November 2015 General Election, four political parties are in the Parliament with the AKP in the government and Republican People's Party (*Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi*, CHP), Peoples' Democratic Party (*Halkların Demokratik Partisi*, HDP), Nationalist Movement Party (*Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi*, MHP) in opposition. These parties had 317, 134, 59, and 40 members in the Parliament respectively at the time they entered the Parliament.

85.23 percent of Turkish people eligible to vote turned out in Turkey's previous General Election. The AKP, CHP, MHP and HDP shared the 98 percent of the overall vote by getting 49.50 percent, 25.32 percent, 11.90 percent, 10,76 percent respectively<sup>1</sup>.

After the ratification of the bill to strip MPs of immunity, eleven Parliament members of the HDP – including Figen Yüksekdağ and Selahattin Demirtaş, – the co-leaders of the party – and a member of the CHP got jailed. Further, four members of the HDP including Figen Yüksekdağ were stripped of their seats in the Parliament. Also, the MHP expelled four members from their party.

Therefore, the current number of MPs of the AKP, CHP, HDP and MHP is 317, 133, 55, and 36 respectively. There are also five independent – including four ex-members of the MHP – MPs in the Parliament. (Grand National Assembly of Turkey 2017)

Despite the political turmoil and polarization between parties becoming more and more obvious after the 2016 coup d'état attempt and the Turkish constitutional referendum which was held in April 2017, parties on the opposite sides of the polarization, with only few exceptions, are in union in the view on

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<sup>1</sup> Even though the HDP's votes are less than the MHP's, they do have more seats in the Parliament since seats in the Parliament are also determined by how many votes parties have in each city.

relations with Azerbaijan, the Turkey-Armenia border, the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, and forming an international committee to research the “1915 Events”.

Therefore, the only parties outside the Parliament that have been included are the ones that albeit slightly add nuances to the positions already presented by the parliamentary parties. The most articulate are Islamic fundamentalist and eurosceptic Felicity Party (*Saadet Partisi*, SP), cultural nationalist and Islamist Great Union Party (*Büyük Birlik Partisi*, BBP), socialist libertarian Freedom and Solidarity Party (*Özgürlük ve Dayanışma Partisi*, ÖDP), Communist Party of Turkey (*Türkiye Komünist Partisi*, TKP), and Patriotic Party (*Vatan Partisi*, VP) which describes itself as Vanguard Party and aims to bring socialists, revolutionaries, Turkish nationalists, and Kemalists together. Other parties outside the Parliament have not been included since they do not represent opinions that are radically different from those already present in the Parliament or among the extra-parliamentary parties that have been analyzed.

The positions according to which the parties are grouped are “formation of an international committee on 1915 and the resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict in favor of Azerbaijan”, “a tough stance”, and “normalization of relations without any preconditions”.

The sources according to which the positions have been teased out are the election programs as well as the speeches, interviews, and statements of the party leaders and spokespeople as well as analytical articles and reports about the parties’ positions.

Due to the AKP being the party in power during the Turkish-Armenian normalization process which started in 2007 and acting as the powerhouse directing Turkey’s foreign relations for the last 15 years, international agreements and statements made by ministries of Turkey during this period have also been used to have a better understanding where the AKP stands regarding Turkey-Armenia and Turkey-Azerbaijan relations.

# Formation of an International Committee on 1915 and the Resolution of the Nagorno- Karabakh Conflict in Favor of Azerbaijan

## Justice and Development Party (AKP)

When the AKP, the party in power since 2002, leader and Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan was asked three years ago whether establishing Turkey-Armenia diplomatic relations and opening the border can be expected, he was quite frank where he and his party stands: "There are some conditions. The Karabakh conflict is the essential matter for us. Before reaching a solution on the Karabakh conflict, our government can't say yes to those things since there is a serious injustice in that matter. The Karabakh conflict must be resolved first (Evrensel.net 2014).

Interrelated relations between the three countries and the AKP's view on the precondition of resolving the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict for improving relations with Armenia have not changed much since then as it can be seen from the annual document titled "Our Foreign Affairs at the Beginning of 2017" published by Turkey's Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In the document, it is stated, "As long as there are no improvements in the relations between Azerbaijan and Armenia, any progress in the relations between Turkey and Armenia won't be sufficient and permanent". In the same document, it is said that the normalization process depends on the genuine steps Armenia will take: "Turkey's willingness for the normalization of relations with Armenia is preserved, but the process was interrupted by the suspension and recall of the Zürich Protocols from the Armenian parliament" (Mfa.gov.tr 2017).

The intention of the AKP to normalize relations with Armenia depends foremost on the resolve of the dispute between Azerbaijan and Armenia, but

the party does not seek any military intervention according to the program announced for the 2015 election. In the program, it is stated that “the country will keep making efforts to bring the occupation of Azerbaijan’s territory to an end and finish the tension between Azerbaijan and Armenia with the goal of resolving disputes in the South Caucasus by peaceful means (Justice and Development Party 2015).

Although the election program sets the peaceful solution as the goal, it does not necessarily mean there are zero relations between the two countries’ armies. Turkey and Azerbaijan have conducted joint military drills – the latest one was conducted this year. In June 2017, the Turkish Underwater Offence (*Sualtı Taarruz Grup Komutanlığı*) also trained navy forces of Azerbaijan in Turkey.

Turkey and Azerbaijan also signed an Agreement on Strategic Partnership and Mutual Support in 2010 which will last till 2020 with the option to extend the date to 2030. The terms of the treaty declare that “if one of the sides suffers an armed attack or aggression from a third country or a group of countries, the sides will provide reciprocal aid” and “both countries will cooperate to eliminate threats and challenges to national security” (Grand National Assembly of Turkey 2010).

The other aspect of Turkey-Armenia relations for the AKP is surely the Armenian Genocide. President Erdoğan sees it as an “allegation, a tool for blackmail” and refuses to see the “1915 Events” as genocide by stating, “Turkey cannot accept the label ‘Armenian genocide’, because we do not carry a stain like genocide” on many occasions (TheGuardian.com 2015).

There are many in the AKP claiming the genocide allegations are not about the past, but present-day politics. One of them is the AKP’s Parliamentary Group Deputy Chairman Naci Bostancı. For him, “the allegation of genocide in this case is not about what happened in the past, it is about international affairs” (Haberler.com 2017).

President Erdoğan has repeatedly proposed the formation of an international committee of historians, including people with a range of perspectives to debate the issue. He argued that a group of historians, political experts, and scientists would be better qualified than politicians to understand the facts.

AKP MP Markar Esayan, one of the three MPs with an Armenian background in the Parliament, has the opinion that the past condolence messages given by President Erdoğan on the anniversary of 1915 means “denial coming to an end”

(Gültekin 2015). However, Erdoğan's many discriminatory remarks and refusal to call the "1915 Events" genocide can be interpreted as demonstrating that he does not wish to form an international committee to objectively reveal the truth and face it but to confirm his opinion on the matter.

## Republican People's Party (CHP)

Even though the CHP, Turkey's oldest political party, is at odds with the AKP over countless internal affairs and foreign policies, it shares the view adopted by the AKP regarding the country's relations with Armenia and Azerbaijan.

CHP leader Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu supported the proposal to assemble an international committee to work on the "1915 Events" within a historical context, and he sees this proposal as a courageous step taken by Turkey. However, like Erdoğan, he and his party members denied the Armenian Genocide on many occasions.

Yet, willingness to have good relations with both countries could be seen from the party's election program. It was stated in the program that "the CHP will strengthen the brotherly relations with Azerbaijan, and the party will be aiming for establishing good neighborly relations with Armenia and solving conflicts between Turkey and Armenia" (Republican People's Party 2015).

However, according to the party program CHP has some preconditions to have better relations with Armenia: "Armenia putting an end to the invasion into Azerbaijan territory, stopping their approach against Turkey via Armenian organizations all around the world regarding genocide allegations, removing some parts of the Armenian state's official papers which gives the impression that Armenia desires some parts of Turkey's land" (Republican People's Party 2015).

CHP MP Öztürk Yılmaz added that the solution between Azerbaijan and Armenia must be reached by peaceful means, but the CHP emphasized many times that the OSCE Minsk Group's efforts were not efficient and far from achieving peace in the region (Republican People's Party 2016).

Regarding relations between Turkey and Armenia, there are also a couple of people with different perspectives within the party. One of them is Selina Özuzun Doğan. Doğan, an MP of Armenian background, said the suffering of the 1915 Events continues even today and Turkey should stop ignoring the past.

She also highlighted the importance of opening the border in order for people of both countries to get to know each other closely (Odatv.com 2016).

## A Tough Stance

### Nationalist Movement Party (MHP)

The MHP is arguably the most controversial party in the parliament at the moment, and the path the party leader Devlet Bahçeli is taking the party through is not only criticized by its opponents, but also by its own MPs especially after Bahçeli expressed his support to the AKP for the referendum which will grant sweeping new powers to the president elected in 2019.

Five members who were not content with the leadership of Bahçeli got expelled from the party, and some of the five declared that they will be forming a new nationalist party. However, their mindset is not different from Bahçeli and his party regarding Turkey's relations with Armenia and Azerbaijan.

Years ago, Bahçeli stated that he opposes the opening of the Armenia-Turkey border and establishing diplomatic relations until Armenia puts an end to the occupation in Azerbaijan and their hostile politics questioning Turkey's territorial integrity (Hürriyet.com.tr 2009). It does not look like his opinion on the matter has changed since then.

The MHP considers Azerbaijani people kinsmen and kin-women. For them the unity of the Turkish people across the region is essential. This can be seen in their election program in which it is stated that the MHP wants to create a Turkish Energy Business Association with the other Turkic countries in the region (Nationalist Movement Party 2015)

Accepting the Armenian Genocide is also out of question for the MHP. Bahçeli articulated that there were many terrors and rebellions caused by Armenians at the time, and relocating Armenians doesn't mean annihilating them. In his opinion, it was done in order to ensure the security of the state (Diken.com 2016).

Some MHP members such as the historian Yusuf Halaçoğlu, one of the expelled MPs, went further during his time in the MHP by claiming that the Armenian gangs within the Russian army massacred hundreds of thousands of Turkish people (Haberler.com 2017).

## **Great Union Party (BBP)**

The BBP, a far-right Islamist and nationalist political party, also has a tough stance against Armenia. Preconditions of Mustafa Destici, the leader of the party, for opening the border are related to the Khojaly Massacre.

After the tension between Azerbaijan and Armenia rose once again this year, Destici demanded that Armenia declare an apology message for the genocide they carried out in Khojaly and to pay a compensation for the massacres they have done. According to Destici, until Armenia fulfils these preconditions, Turkey should not have any relations with Armenia by any means, and the border should not be opened (Hürriyet.com.tr 2017).

## **The Patriotic Party (VP)**

VP leader Doğu Perinçek is perhaps best known from his conviction by a Swiss court for publicly denying the historical fact of the Armenian Genocide. After the preliminary hearing on the appeal, the Grand Chamber ruled in favor of Perinçek and confirmed his right to freedom of speech.

Claiming that the Armenian Genocide is an imperialist lie, Perinçek and his party state that they will start a mobilization to revoke decisions in foreign countries which recognize the Armenian Genocide (Patriotic Party 2015).

For the party, Azerbaijan having back Nagorno-Karabakh from Armenia is also crucial (National Government Program 2015).

## **Felicity Party (SP)**

According to the party program of the SP, an Islamist political party, the Armenian genocide allegations have started to get recognition by countries which are accepted as allies of Turkey and at this rate, this might force Turkey to pay compensation and result in land concessions.

Furthermore, the SP sees the conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia as the occupation of Armenia of Azerbaijan territory (Felicity Party 2014).

# Normalization of Relations Without Any Preconditions

## Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP)

Co-leaders of the HDP, a pro-local democracy political party, called on Ankara to recognize the Armenian Genocide on several occasions. Selahattin Demirtaş, one of the two party leaders, said in an interview on TV that just because official Turkish history says so, he cannot deny that the events of 1915 were a genocide, and he emphasized the need to resolve this kind of issues in order to bring democracy into Turkey (Selahaattin Demirtaş: Armenian Genocide is a Fact 2015).

According to the election program of the HDP, the party supports opening the Turkey-Armenia border without any preconditions and establishing friendly relations with Armenia: "The economic embargo against Armenia will be lifted, and the necessary economic, diplomatic, and political relations will be developed. The Turkey-Armenia border which was closed by Turkey will be opened without any preconditions. Solution efforts regarding the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan will be supported" (Peoples' Democratic Party 2015).

Demirtaş stated that Nagorno-Karabakh was an autonomous region and the AKP is provoking both countries into the conflict which should have been resolved by dialogue between the countries in conflict (Agos.com.tr 2016).

The HDP was also the only party in the Parliament not to sign the declaration published by the Foreign Affairs Commission of the Grand National Assembly of Turkey concerning the Khojaly massacre. In the declaration, it is stated that an attack by the Republic of Armenia forces resulted with the death of hundreds of Azerbaijanis and almost one million Azerbaijanis were forced to leave their homeland. With this declaration, parties in the Parliament also called on Armenia to withdraw from the Azerbaijani land which they occupy (Iha.com.tr 2016).

## **Freedom and Solidarity Party (ÖDP)**

The ÖDP, a libertarian and internationalist socialist political party, believes it is impossible to abolish the truth or cover the issue with the denial method embraced by parties in power since 1915. By facing the events of 1915, they want to build a common future.

They want to have the border re-opened and be named after the Turkish-Armenian journalist Hrant Dink who was assassinated ten years ago. According to the party, the embargo against Armenia should be lifted and economic, social, and cultural relations with Armenia should be established (Odatv.com 2015).

## **Communist Party of Turkey (TKP)**

After a period of internal strife, two rival factions of the TKP reached a consensus to freeze the activities of the party and that neither faction shall use the name and emblem of the TKP. However, the two groups the Communist Party (KP) and People's Communist Party of Turkey (HTKP) has the same view on Armenia.

When the party was split in two, they both published a message on the 100th anniversary of the Armenian Genocide. The KP used the wording "Meds Yeğern" to describe what they call the biggest suffering witnessed on the land of Turkey.

The HTKP stated on the same day that the pain of the Armenian nation is the mutual pain of this land. They see the events of 1915 as a disaster which is shared by everyone (Odatv.com 2015).

## **Conclusion**

In his famous article "A Just Memory for All", Turkey's former Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu, who was sidelined by Turkey's President Erdoğan just six months after the AKP won the majority in 2015, appealed to all stakeholders, policy shapers, and creative thinkers to seize the moment and to join them to reconstruct a better future for Turkish-Armenian relations. He declared that "Turkey stands ready", and they can only succeed if this endeavor is embraced

by a wider constituency intent on leaving their mark on a historical process of reconciliation (Davutoğlu 2014).

However, even though Turkey's previous initiatives in the era of the 2000s such as the "Kurdish Opening" and the "Turkey-Armenia Normalization Process" can be considered as a valuable experience and gains for future initiatives, they were never truly transparent to the public and the attempts to make those initiatives embraced by the masses of people were often weak.

Facing the past and resolving a conflict "as a nation" was never one of the elements during the Turkey-Armenia Normalization Process. Instead, the authorities of Turkey chose directly to reach a conclusion on a state-to-state basis. As a result, Turkey could not face or half-faced the Genocide, and still, parties representing more than 85 percent of the country are not in favor of accepting the Genocide and do not wish to re-open the Turkey-Armenia border unless the tension between Azerbaijan and Armenia ends in favor of Azerbaijan.

Only one party in the Parliament, the HDP, sees the Armenian Genocide as a fact and states in their party program that they will re-open the border and lift the embargo against Armenia, but they – it is the same for the TKP and the ÖDP – do lack the method which will make people living in Turkey come to terms with the past and accept the decision to establish diplomatic relations with Armenia. It is a different question that many parts of the civil society not only have the necessary method and vision but have exerted many successful efforts towards open dialogue and transformation.

Changing their stand on the trilateral relations between the three countries is also difficult for the parties amid the political turmoil. The results of the elections in June 2015 and the referendum in 2017 can be seen as an important indication showing how narrow the margin is and how quickly tables can turn in 2019 during Turkey's first ever presidential elections. This circumstance makes it much more difficult for parties to embrace an alternative way of thinking or to shift their positions – not that there are implications towards a change – regarding intertwined relations with Azerbaijan and Armenia.

A statement by the historian İlber Ortaylı in response to the question "what would happen if Turkey were to accept the genocide allegation", clearly explains how difficult it would be: "Accepting the genocide allegation can't be

compared to blaming Union and Progress, Sultan Abdulhamid or the one-party period of Turkey. People would call it a treason" (YouTube.com 2015).

However, with the start of the normalization process and due to countries, such as Germany, recognizing the Armenian Genocide, the past has emerged once again in Turkey, and this time it cannot easily go unaddressed – for better or worse. Yet, the decision to re-open the border and to establish good diplomatic relations is directed not only by internal politics, but also by the course of the conflict between Azerbaijan, Turkey's important ally in the region, and Armenia.

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## Author

Tolga Er is a journalist based in Istanbul. He holds a BA degree in Economics from Marmara University in Istanbul and is currently doing his MA in Economic Development and International Economics at Istanbul University.