

TODAY'S ZAMAN

Public diplomacy with Yerevan picks up speed

Collaboration between Armenian and Turkish civil society organizations has helped to ease the recent tension in Turkish-Armenian relations as various civil society organizations from Turkey continue meeting with their counterparts in Yerevan.

The Economic Policy Research Foundation of Turkey (TEPAV) is working on reconstructing a historic Silk Road bridge along the Turkish-Armenian border, while the Turkish-Armenian Business Development Council (TABDC) is calling on Turkish investors to start up businesses in Armenia through a series of conferences on the issue. The Caucasus Strategic Research Center (KAFKASSAM) and Fatih University are organizing cultural activities to bring the two nations closer together.

An improvement in relations with Armenia started when President Abdullah Gül visited the country to watch a soccer match between Turkey and Armenia in 2008. This was followed by two protocols signed by the two countries last year to improve relations between them. However, while the Armenian Constitutional Court upheld the legality of the two protocols in January, it underlined that they could not contradict Yerevan's official position that the alleged Armenian genocide must be internationally recognized. The US House Committee on Foreign Affairs also passed a resolution recognizing the 1915 mass killings of Armenians at the hands of the Ottomans as genocide, which further damaged the process. Experts believe these developments have been caused by Turkey's limited success in terms of public diplomacy and explaining its own position internationally. However, civil society organizations have continued to visit Armenia.

TEPAV's Burcu Gültekin, who is responsible for the Caucasus region, says the organization has been working on reconstructing the bridge over the Arpaçay River, which was part of the Silk Road. The Arpaçay River marks part of the border between Turkey and Armenia. She said TEPAV is very happy about President Gül's support for the project. The ancient bridge, built under the auspices Armenia's Bagratid Dynasty, will, at least symbolically, cover the political distance between the two countries, TEPAV hopes.

Gültekin added that the foundation is also working on two new projects that are likely to contribute to the region economically as well as having symbolic value. "The Turkish-Armenian border might not have been opened yet, but the walls are already coming down," she said, noting that a tourism cluster project for Turkey's eastern Anatolian region and Armenia is also in the works and is supported by the Armenian diaspora.

TABDC Co-Chairman Kaan Soyak says it is time for peace in the Caucasus. He says the TABDC tries to answer Turkish companies' questions about starting to do business in Armenia and has held various seminars on this topic. The TABDC has also started an international business forum called "The Bridge." Soyak said they have been talking to their Armenian counterparts about the business opportunities that may emerge when the Southern Caucasus railroad and another railroad connecting Turkey's border town of Kars and

Armenia's Gymru start functioning. Soyak also said they have been discussing possible investments in Armenia with World Bank representatives.

"The people of Armenia want to see good relations established with Turkey with no preconditions," according to KAFKASSAM President Hasan Oktay, whose organization is offering vocational training courses to young people in Armenia. Another of KAFKASSAM's projects involves Turkish and Armenian artists expressing their vision of İstanbul through art. Oktay said KAFKASSAM frequently conducts polls in Armenia to find out the Armenians' perception of Turkey as well as engaging in networking activities to bring the two nations together.

Fatih University's Cafer Ulu says bilateral projects between the two countries should be increased in number. Ulu recently met with female Armenian deputies in Yerevan as part of a project titled "Contributions of Turkish and Armenian Women to Turkish-Armenian Relations." Ulu said he attached great importance to communication between individuals who are considered opinion leaders on both sides. Ulu said that however insignificant they might seem, such projects can be very influential, especially at times when the two countries' relations are in crisis.

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