



**Border Politics: The Geopolitical Implications of Opening  
the Turkish-Armenian Border\***

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**Abstract**

Since the independence of Armenia in 1991, relations with its western neighbor Turkey, has been on the agenda of the country's successive administrations. After an initial warming up of the relations, the Turkish-Armenian border was closed for traffic. The economic arguments put aside, the opening of the Turkish-Armenian border also poses political implications which could influence not only the politics of both countries but also the overall geopolitics of the South Caucasus. Thus if Armenia and Turkey normalize their relations, a shift in the balance of power in the region would occur. This paper is an attempt to raise and examine the political issues related to the Turkish-Armenian border opening and the implications that it could have on the political outlook of Armenia as well as the geopolitical realignment in the South Caucasus.

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## **Introduction**

Since their independence, the countries of the South Caucasus have tried to chart their foreign policies in a new environment of international and regional system. The lack of independent and sovereign experience to conduct foreign policy for these countries has made the foreign policy formulation process a task reliant on factors such as historical experience, perceptions of other actors' intentions, domestic constraints and to some extent geopolitical realities.

In the case of Armenia, historical experience and domestic politics played an important role in determining the new republic's relations with its western neighbor Turkey. During the initial independent phase, the new Armenian leadership under President Levon Ter-Petrossian was very keen on establishing diplomatic relations with Turkey to counterbalance the Russian influence as well as to obtain an outlet towards the West for the infant republic. However despite the initiatives of the Armenian government to normalize relations with Turkey several factors rendered their attempts futile.

The factors influencing the Turkish-Armenian relations are multifaceted. The reasons most commonly cited from either side include the following: Armenian demands and Turkish refusal for the recognition of the Genocide of the Armenians in 1915 by the Young Turks;<sup>1</sup> the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict of Nagorno-Karabakh and Turkish solidarity with Azerbaijan; pressures from nationalists in both countries demanding a tougher policy against their neighbor; and economic dependence of Armenia from Turkey which in the minds of many Armenians is tantamount to political dependence.

This paper will try to discuss the reasons why the Turkish-Armenian relations by looking at the developments in the bilateral relations between the two countries. The research will argue that the major political forces opposing the border opening in both countries are nationalists and that their opposition to the normalization of the relations between the countries is based on preconditions, which in turn are either emotional (support of Turkey to Azerbaijan as their ethnic keen) or historical (the demands by Armenian nationalists that Turkey recognizes the Genocide of 1915). On the other hand, supporters of opening the border use economic gains as the main tenant for their argument without any substantial economic research to back their position. This having said, it should be mentioned that the paper will not examine the economic impact of opening up the Turkish-Armenian border. Although there have been several scattered researches done on the economic relations between the two countries, the studies are not conclusive enough to provide a definite answer to the economic benefits or drawbacks that might result with the potential opening of the Turkish-Armenian border. The very few existing reports usually predict positive outcomes for both countries but the lack of substantial scientific research on this topic make it very difficult to examine the economic aspect in this context.

## **The (D)evolution of Turkish-Armenian Relations**

After independence, Armenia pursued an active policy of independence, relying on regional and international powers to chart a policy of non-dependence on a single power.

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<sup>1</sup> The recognition of the Genocide is closely associated with the territorial demands and reparations that Armenia might claim from Turkey if the latter recognizes its responsibility in the Genocide.

While this attempt promised to be a balanced one, in part because of strategic reasons Armenia remained in the Russian orbit.<sup>2</sup>

The Russian strategic interests in the Caucasus (both north and south) have led to the creation of a view that it is a protector of Armenia in the latter's war against Azerbaijan.<sup>3</sup> This view of Armenians as Russia's pawns helped create an atmosphere of mistrust between Armenia on the one hand and its neighbors on the other based mostly on the premise that Armenia is a fifth column for the Russians in the region. Therefore, because of Armenia's geopolitical isolation a sense of reliance on an outside force has developed in the Armenia psyche, this belief has been reinforced throughout the ages when mostly Russia has acted as that "outside" force. This reliance on Russia has continued even though the Russian views or policy towards Armenia has been less than consistent and Russian policy did have instances of "neglect" towards Armenia.<sup>4</sup>

However, in modern Armenian foreign policy priorities, not always did Russia or Russian orientation remained the only way out. Even when Armenia was obtaining its independence there were debates among intellectuals in Armenia regarding whether or not Armenia needs to rely on a third (outside) force to guarantee its independence. The overwhelming majority of those against reliance on third force were identified with the Armenian National Movement (ANM)—the organization that was the successor of the Karabakh movement and the party of independence.<sup>5</sup> However there were also some nationalist circles such as the Armenia Revolutionary Federation (ARF) where several leading party intellectuals came out against Armenia's dependence on third forces.<sup>6</sup>

In 1991 Turkey was one of the first countries to recognize Armenian independence and even showed signs that it was willing to cooperate with the new republic.<sup>7</sup> But in 1992 Ankara put forward a set of preconditions to normalize its relations with Yerevan. These included: a) Armenia's abandonment of all territorial claims (Western Armenia) from Turkey

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<sup>2</sup> For an overview of the development of Armenia's foreign policy, see Gary Bertsch and Cassady Craft, eds., *Crossroads and Conflict: Security and Foreign Policy in the Caucasus and Central Asia* (New York: Routledge, 1999); Bruno Coppieters, ed., *Contested Borders in the Caucasus* (Brussels: Vrije Universiteit Brussel Press, 1996); Adeed Dawisha, and Karen Dawisha, eds., *The Making of Foreign Policy in Russia and the New States of Eurasia* (Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, 1995); Edmund Herzig, *The New Caucasus: Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia* (London: The Royal Institute of International Affairs, 1999); Shireen Hunter, *Transcaucasia in Transition: Nation Building or a New Empire?* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 1994); and Svante Cornell, *Small Nations and Great Powers: A Study of Ethnopolitical Conflict in the Caucasus*. (England: Curzon Press, 2001).

<sup>3</sup> Leila Alieva, "Reshaping Eurasia-Foreign Policy Strategies and Leadership Assets in Post-Soviet South Caucasus," *Berkeley Program in Soviet and Post-Soviet Studies*, Working Paper Series (University of California, Berkeley, 2000), 6-7.

<sup>4</sup> Ronald Suny deals with issue in *Looking Towards Ararat: Armenia in Modern History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 34-43.

<sup>5</sup> One of the most vocal presenters of this issue was Rafael Ishkhanian. See his "The Law Excluding the Third Force," in Gerard Libaridian, ed., *Armenia at the Crossroad: Democracy and Nationhood in the Post-Soviet Era* (Watertown, MA: Blue Crane Books, 1991): 10-38.

<sup>6</sup> Two articles on this issue have appeared in May 13 and 27, 1987 issues of *Droshak* (the official ARF newspaper) by Khajag Der-Grigorian and Hrair Marukhian respectively.

<sup>7</sup> When the Turkish ambassador to Moscow paid a visit to Armenia in 1991, he expressed optimism for the development of normal relations between his country and Armenia. "Turkish Official Says Relations with Armenia 'Relatively Positive'," *BBC Summary of World Broadcasts (SWB) (ME/1057/A/1)*, April 27, 1991.

and the recognition of Moscow Treaty;<sup>8</sup> b) to call off the campaign by Armenians to force Turkey to recognize the Armenian Genocide; c) to drop Yerevan's support for Nagorno-Karabakh and to withdraw Armenian troops from occupied Azerbaijani territory.<sup>9</sup>

For its part, the first Armenian President, Levon Ter-Petrossian, realized that land-locked Armenia required an outlet and that it needed to establish good relations with Turkey. Ter-Petrossian and the ANM claimed that Turkey was not the same country as it was 70 years ago and that establishing good relations with Ankara would benefit Armenia not only economically but politically as well.<sup>10</sup> This idea was best expressed by a former senior advisor of Ter-Petrossian, who later wrote:

What if having normal diplomatic and economic relations with Turkey is in the interest of Armenia as well as of Karabakh? Would not improved Armeno-Turkish relations weaken the Azerbaijani negotiating position, the rigidity of which is based on a policy of strangling the Armenian economy? Should the answer to these questions be positive... then the normalization of relations with Turkey would facilitate Armenia's role as a transit route of Caspian Sea hydrocarbon resources."<sup>11</sup>

This policy of establishing good relation with Turkey came under attack from many Armenian circles especially nationalist ones. The arguments that the nationalists such as the ARF maintained, was that Turkey remains a genocidal power, which if left unchecked would overrun Armenia and commit atrocities against the Armenian population.<sup>12</sup> These fears were aggravated when the Turkish president Turgut Özal threatened Armenia with a blockade if a peaceful resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict were not achieved.<sup>13</sup> In April 1993 Ankara announced that it will stop the delivery of wheat or any other aid through its territory until the Armenian government complied with Ankara's demands.<sup>14</sup> This signaled the closing of the border between the two countries which remains as such until this day.

### **Nationalist in Armenia, Azerbaijan and Turkey, Unite!**

During the 1990s, the entities opposing the opening of the border between Armenia and Turkey included the Armenian Diaspora, nationalist groups in both Armenia and Turkey and most importantly Azerbaijan. While some of these groups have merely voiced their concerns over the opening of the border, others have actively lobbied to prevent such an accomplishment from the Turkish government.

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<sup>8</sup> Signed on March 16, 1921 the Moscow treaty set the current borders between Armenia and Turkey.

<sup>9</sup> Nikolay Hovhanisyan, *The Foreign Policy of the Republic of Armenia in the Transcaucasian-Middle Eastern Geopolitical Region* (Yerevan: Noyan Tapan, 1998), 31-32.

<sup>10</sup> See Hunter, *Transcaucasia in Transition*, 30.

<sup>11</sup> Gerard J. Libaridian, *The Challenge of Statehood. Armenian Political Thinking Since Independence* (Blue Crane Books, 1999), 116.

<sup>12</sup> Richard G. Hovannisian, "Historical Memory and Foreign Relations: The Armenian Perspective" in *The Making of Foreign Policy in Russia and the New States of Eurasia*, eds. Adeed Dawisha and Karen Dawisha (Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, 1995): 237-276.

<sup>13</sup> "Turkish Threat to Cut Off Armenia," *Financial Times*, March 7, 1992.

<sup>14</sup> See "Turkish Wheat Deliveries to Armenia Stopped," *BBC SWB (SU/1660/CI)*, April 12, 1993.

On the Armenian side the major groups opposing the opening of the border are the Diaspora and several political parties in Armenia. What will follow is an attempt to look at the views of each of these groups regarding the border issue. Without a doubt, the ability of Armenia to conduct an influential (but not necessarily successful) foreign policy is very much dependent on the dispersed Armenian communities all over the world. At the time of independence and compared to most of the former Soviet republics, Armenia had the most exposure in foreign media stemming from the relentless efforts of the Diasporan Armenians. Since the first days of independence, the majority of the Diasporans have supported the foreign policy efforts of the new republic. As a result, Armenia was able to receive economic and humanitarian aid from international donors and institutions, simultaneously combating the efforts of big business and oil companies in the lobbying war against Azerbaijan.

For instance, Armenia has benefited from the various Armenian communities around the world as those communities provide physical space for the embassies, and in some cases even incur the monetary costs of various embassy activities. These efforts are particularly helpful for small and new states, which face various challenges in conducting their foreign policies. Financial constraints hamper small states from investing considerable amounts of money in various diplomatic activities and in the case of Armenia the Diaspora alleviated that pressure.

The formulation of foreign policy is dependent on different variables some of which include the geographic location and geography of the country, the state of the economy, security issues and the overall well-being of the state itself. All these factors are sometimes referred to as Realpolitik, corresponding to the conduct of politics in a realist way without being influenced by emotion, ideology, religion or historical experience.

In the case of Armenia, conducting a foreign policy based on Realpolitik is difficult but not impossible. The difficulty arises from the fact that the Diaspora factor and their demands play an important role in Armenia's foreign policy. Moreover the factors shaping the Diaspora's understanding and conducting of foreign policy are more subjective. What is meant by subjective is the burden of history that Diasporan Armenians carry. A good example of the burden of history is the recognition of the Genocide and Turkish-Armenian relations. For the Diaspora, or at least a large section of the Diaspora, as well as a number of Armenians from Armenia, Turkey remains the default enemy, which not only refuses to accept its responsibility for the Genocide and the subsequent dispersion of Armenians all over the world, but also engages in an active policy of denial, a policy which certainly strengthens the position of Diasporan Armenians who perceive Turkey as that default enemy. Fueling these feelings is Turkey's continuous blockade of Armenia and its insistence on putting forward preconditions to normalize ties with Armenia. Consequently, any agreement that the Armenian government makes with Turkey is viewed with skepticism by the Diaspora, which considers Turkey's recognition of the Genocide to be a starting point of bilateral state-to-state relations.

For their part, foreign policy makers and formulators in Armenia view Turkey as a regional power and a neighbor with which Armenia must establish diplomatic relations and engage in political and economic activities. In this formula, the burden of history is not forgotten, but is put on the backburner, or at least used as a card to exert pressure on Turkey. However the main dilemma facing Armenia's foreign policy makers is how to balance

Realpolitik with the wishes and demands of the Diaspora and those of the nationalists in Armenia, which contributes in no small degree to the various economic and social development plans and projects in the republic.

One of the most vocal opponents of opening up the Turkish-Armenian border is the ARF which has a nationalist view and is well established in the Diaspora. This might be one of the reasons why it is the major party in Armenia opposing the border opening since the party might have been too much identified with the Diaspora and shares its concerns and views.<sup>15</sup> Other nationalist groups and parties in Armenia have also voiced their concern against the border opening considering it a direct threat not only to the interests of Armenian consumers, but also to Armenian statehood as a whole. These nationalist parties include the Union of Armenian Aryans, the Armenian Aryan Fist Party, the One Nation Party, the Nationalist Party of Armenia, the Military and Patriotic Union of Youth and others. All of these groups operate under an umbrella organization called the Armenian Nationalist Front.<sup>16</sup> While they have thus far, failed to provide a viable argument supporting their claims that the border opening would harm Armenia, they have repeatedly stated that such an act would hurt the Armenian economy.<sup>17</sup> Apart from the economic arguments the ARF disputed that even if Turkey opens the border without any preconditions; such an act should be undertaken having in mind “the interests of other regional countries such as Russia and Iran.”<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, the ARF put forward its own precondition for normalizing relations with Turkey which includes recognition of the Genocide.<sup>19</sup>

On the other side of the border, the groups opposing the opening of the border include Turkish politicians and nationalists and the Azerbaijani lobby. Whenever the issue of opening up the border became a topic of agenda, Turkey emphasized that this was out of question as long as Armenia did not comply with several of the conditions that they have put forward. One of the most recurring preconditions has been demands by Turkey that Armenia ceases its campaign to force Turkey recognize the Genocide of 1915.<sup>20</sup> The introduction of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict in the Turkish-Armenian relations on Ankara’s initiative, and its usage as a pretext to close the border as late as 1993 (nearly two years after the start of independent relations between the two countries), could be a sign that the conflict was not a factor between the two states’ relations and that it was introduced only after the public opinion, along with some officials,<sup>21</sup> in Turkey wanted their government to have a more pro-

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<sup>15</sup> Another party opposing the border opening is the Democratic Party of Armenia, which on occasions has announced its concurrence with the views of the ARF on this issue.

<sup>16</sup> *Arminfo*, August 8, 2003.

<sup>17</sup> The ARF has repeatedly spoken against the opening of border considering that such an act would prove disastrous economically and politically. See “Armenian Politicians, Economists Divided Over Opening Border With Turkey,” *RFE/RL Caucasus Report* 7, no. 38 (September 30, 2004).

<sup>18</sup> “Unchanged Turkey is a Serious Threat to our National Security,” *Azg Daily*, August 22, 2003.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> The current Turkish Prime Minister, Recep Tayyip Erdogan in his speech during a trip to the city of Kars on June 27, 2003 demanded from Armenia to give up its territorial claims from Turkey and to stop its Genocide claims. See “Turkish PM Insists On Preconditions For Improving Ties With Armenia,” *RFE/RL* June 30, 2003.

<sup>21</sup> At the time the opposition parties in Turkey adamantly demanded that their government goes to the extent of sending military aid to Azerbaijan. These parties included Islamist Welfare Party (RP), the Democratic Left Party (DSP) and the then main opposition Motherland Party (ANAP). The fact that the chairman of DSP Bülent

Azerbaijani stance and put pressure on Armenia.<sup>22</sup> Another factor that might explain the Turkish government's solidarity with Azerbaijan and the introduction of the Nagorno-Karabakh issue is to appease the Azerbaijani leadership which by that time was disillusioned by the lack of Turkish support in their war with Armenia and were looking for alternative—read Iran—supporters to resist the Armenians.<sup>23</sup>

From the Azerbaijani perspective, similar statements have been repeatedly made whenever the border issue was raised. The confidence of Azerbaijani leadership that Ankara would not open up the border with Armenia until the Nagorno-Karabakh issue is solved has been reestablished on many occasions when the late Azerbaijani President Heydar Aliyev visited Turkey. At the end of almost every visit, President Aliyev reconfirmed that Turkey is taking into consideration Baku's views in regards of the border opening.<sup>24</sup> There have been many instances when it has been stated that Turkey would improve its relations with Armenia at the expense of Azerbaijan or Azerbaijan gave a positive response to the desire of Turkey to improve relation with Armenia. These statements, however, were disowned by Azerbaijan and Turkish officials. For instance in September 2003 when the Turkish and Azerbaijani foreign ministers—Abdullah Gül and Vilayet Guliyev—met in Ankara, they came up with a joint statement dismissing claims by Armenian Defense Minister Serge Sarkissian that the border would be opened in the near future.<sup>25</sup>

The latest developments related to the Turkish-Armenian border took place before and during the visit of Azerbaijan's new President, Ilham Aliyev to Turkey in April of 2004. Prior to the visit, Azeri press declared that Turkey was likely to open its border with Armenia and a committee of Azerbaijani media representatives organized demonstrations in Turkey in order to protest against such an event.<sup>26</sup> After meeting with the Turkish president and other officials, Aliyev reiterated his belief that the border between Turkey and Armenia will not be opening anytime soon. As leverage, Aliyev also emphasized that Azerbaijan will be one of the first countries to recognize the independence of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus to express his country's support for Turkish diplomatic initiatives on that question.<sup>27</sup>

### **The Realpolitik of Opening the Border**

Similar to those who oppose the border opening, the “camp” supporting the opening includes a wide range of individuals and institutions in both Turkey and Armenia. From the Armenian side, supporters of opening the border site two main reasons for their conviction. The first is that such an act could help fuel Armenia's economy by lowering transport costs

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Ecevit when came to power several years later continued the more balanced policy of his predecessors makes one wonder if the demands by the opposition to militarily support were not made for local consumption.

<sup>22</sup> Shireen Hunter discusses in detail the domestic factors influencing Turkey's relations with Armenia and Azerbaijan. See, Hunter, *Transcaucasia in Transition*, 163-166.

<sup>23</sup> The border closing from Ankara's side came only days after the Azerbaijani President Abulfaz Elchibey dispatched his vice president, Panah Husseinov, to Tehran to seek “material and spiritual” aid in Azerbaijan's conflict with Armenia. See details in “Disillusioned with Turkey, Azeris Turn to Iran,” *Inter Press Service*, April 13, 1993.

<sup>24</sup> “President Aliyev Arrives in Turkey,” *ITAR-TASS News Agency*, January 9, 2000.

<sup>25</sup> “Gül Says Relations with Azerbaijan are Beyond Friendship,” *Turkish Daily News*, September 13, 2003.

<sup>26</sup> “Azeri Reporters Protest in Turkey's Iğdir Against Opening of Armenian Border,” *BBC Monitoring*, April 6, 2004.

<sup>27</sup> “Azeri Daily Says President's Cyprus Remarks Success of Diplomacy,” *BBC Monitoring* April 17, 2004.

and create new markets—although like the opposition these groups also fail to provide a viable economic study on this issue. Secondly, Armenian politicians realize that the opening of border with Turkey is a political victory not only for Armenia but also for the current Armenian leadership. Some of the more vocal supporters in Armenia for opening the border included the Prime Minister Andranik Markarian,<sup>28</sup> Defense Minister Serge Sarkissian,<sup>29</sup> Deputy Minister of Trade and Economic Development Tigran Davtyan,<sup>30</sup> and former Prime Minister and presidential candidate Vazgen Manukian.<sup>31</sup>

A very rough survey of Armeno-Turkish relations over the past several years reveals increased activities between the two states to break the existing deadlock between them. These actions include the creation of the Turkish-Armenian Reconciliation Commission (TARC) and the Turkish-Armenian Business Development Council (TABDC). Created in Geneva on July 9, 2001, TARC became one of the hotly debated and contested organizations in Armenian communities around the world and in Armenia.

The objectives of TARC were published in a document called Terms of Reference. According to it, the Reconciliation Commission aimed to promote mutual understanding and goodwill between Turks and Armenians, to encourage improved relations between Armenia and Turkey, to build on the increasing readiness for reconciliation among Turkish and Armenian civil societies including members of Diaspora communities, to support contact, dialogue and cooperation between Armenian and Turkish societies in order to create public awareness about the need for reconciliation and to derive practical benefits. Terms of Reference stated that the Reconciliation Commission would undertake activities and catalyze projects by other organizations and it would also develop recommendations to be submitted to concerned governments. The Reconciliation Commission pledged to support activities in the fields of business, tourism, culture, education, research, and environment.<sup>32</sup>

TARC did not deal with the Armenian Genocide or Nagorno-Karabakh problem rather it skipped them since they were deemed difficult to compromise. According to some of the members of the commission, the main idea behind the TARC was to open new horizons for the future and enhance mutual understanding between Turkey, Armenia and the Armenian Diaspora following a method of unofficial or second track diplomacy.<sup>33</sup> The assumption that the governments of Armenia and Turkey had nothing to do with the founding and activities of TARC comes across as very naive. The statements issued by Armenia's foreign ministry at the time stated that the Armenian government was aware of such activities, but did not participate in, nor prevent them.<sup>34</sup> This statement was able to shift the criticism away from the Armenian government and onto the individual members of the commission itself. This is a perfect example of how the current Armenian administration handles the Armenian-Turkish relations and avoids coming under fire by the Diaspora. This is especially true considering

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<sup>28</sup> "Armenian Prime Minister: Opening of Armenian-Turkish Border Mutually Beneficial," *Economic News*, July 31, 2002.

<sup>29</sup> "Armenian Defense Minister Gives Wide-Ranging Newspaper Interview," *Golos Armenii*, September 9, 2003.

<sup>30</sup> "Minister Says Opening of Turkish Border to Bring Huge Dividends," *Arminfo*, July 1, 2003

<sup>31</sup> "Veteran Armenian Politician Supports Opening of Borders with Turkey," *ArmenPress*, August 4, 2003.

<sup>32</sup> See official TARC website at <http://www.tarc.info/tor.htm>.

<sup>33</sup> "Turks and Armenians Establish Reconciliation Body," *Reuters*, July 10, 2001.

<sup>34</sup> See the official statement of the Armenian foreign Ministry on TARC on August 2, 2001, titled "TARC Statement," at <http://www.armeniaforeignministry.com/PR/PR108.html>.



that those segments opposed to any such activity, over the past years have become closely identified with President Kocharian's administration. The short lived TARC was not able to create the rapprochement between Armenia and Turkey. Although TARC had unequivocally supported the opening of the Turkish-Armenian border, the discrediting of the members of the commission did not allow it to become a viable force in the process of such negotiations. Moreover the wide opposition that it faced from wide circles in the Diaspora and in Armenia,<sup>35</sup> the Commission lacked the necessary momentum to become an actor in the Turkish-Armenian relations. Having been stripped off of official support and not having popular backing, the commission met several time until it was dissolved in April 2004.

Unlike TARC, the TABDC has been more consistent in its efforts. Established in May 1997, TABDC served as a link between the public and private sectors within and in between Armenia and Turkey. Co-chaired by an Armenian (Arsen Ghazarian) and a Turk (Kaan Soyak), TABDC was able to promote and facilitate close cooperation between the Armenian and Turkish business circles. It also tried to establish direct trade and business links in various sectors, to maintain close ties between the governments of Armenia and Turkey to enable them to forge global economic policies.<sup>36</sup> Active to this date, TABDC has been an active lobby which works in Ankara to open the border with Armenia.

Unlike TARC, TABDC has been more of a business group and that might be one of the reasons why it faired better than TARC. Also the main concern of TABDC is the eastern region of Turkey and its view that opening of the border could bring in economic development to the regions of Kars and Erzerum through agricultural cooperation and tourism.<sup>37</sup> Furthermore, TABDC's efforts have been reinforced by the support they received from local government officials in Eastern Anatolia. For instance Kars mayor Naif Alibeyoglu was one of the main engines behind the drive to collect signatures of Kars residents to appeal to the Ankara government to open the border with Armenia.<sup>38</sup> In a more recent development, it was announced that in January 2005, a tour of friendship by a non-governmental delegation of Kars to Armenia, Georgia, Azerbaijan and Nakhichevan will take place. Some circles expressed concerns that the delegation will be consisting mostly of border opening advocates.<sup>39</sup>

### **Who Would Benefit After All?**

The arguments for and against the opening of the Turkish-Armenian border vary from nationalist based rejection to a more pragmatic acceptance. As mentioned above since there have not been any full range economic researches conducted on this topic, assessing the economic benefits or losses of border opening remain ambiguous at best.

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<sup>35</sup> Discussing about the opposition of TARC is beyond the confines of this paper. A comprehensive survey of the opposition to the Commission could be found at <http://asbarez.com/TARC>.

<sup>36</sup> See official TABDC website at <http://www.tabdc.org/about.php>.

<sup>37</sup> "150 Historical Monuments to be Restored and Relations to be Formed between Armenia and Erzurum, Kars," *Turkish Daily News*, May 18, 2002.

<sup>38</sup> "Kars Mayor Urges Opening of Armenia Border Gate," *Turkish Daily News*, June 9, 2004 and "Kars Governor has Collected 50,000 Signatures in favor of Opening of Armenian-Turkish Border," *Arminfo News Agency*, November 11, 2004.

<sup>39</sup> "Azeri Consul General to Kars on Possible Opening of Armenian-Turkish Border," *Arminfo News Agency*, December 7, 2004.

From a political perspective, the biggest loser of border opening would undoubtedly be Azerbaijan since its attempts to isolate Armenia and bring it to “submission” through blockade would fail. Moreover the Azerbaijani side would face tremendous pressure to deal with the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict while Armenia is able to transcend the economic embargo. The completion of the Baku-Ceyhan pipeline could also deprive Azerbaijan from its leverage against Turkey and the lobbying of pro-Azerbaijani groups in Ankara would significantly lose their power.

From the Armenian perspective the opening of the border could be translated as a great diplomatic success and victory against Azerbaijan. However the victory could also be applied on the domestic front. The political gains that the Armenian government will receive include the propaganda that the policy of blockade has failed and that Armenia was victorious, consequently boosting President Robert Kocharian’s struggle with the Armenian opposition which has accused him of the isolation policy. Kocharian will prove his ability to end the country’s isolation without concessions in such principled issues as the Nagorno-Karabakh. Geopolitically speaking the border opening could also lessen Armenia’s dependence on Russia and Georgia. The idea that relations with Turkey might be normal could eventually diminish the view that Armenia should rely on Russia to “protect” it from Turkey.<sup>40</sup> Similarly the direct contact between Armenia and Turkey could make Georgia’s role as a transit country less important and hence put the relations between Tbilisi and Yerevan on a more equal footing.

Regardless of the economic implications of the Turkish-Armenian border opening, the political gains for Armenia promises to be high. The main problem remains to “sell” the idea to nationalist circles in both Turkey and Armenia and divorce it from the preconditions that both sides put forward. When and if the border is opened, Armenia’s position in the region could change drastically and it could become more active in regional political games by having more foreign policy alternatives and having the option of playing balance of power regionally to maximize its strategic gains.

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<sup>40</sup> It is worth mentioning here that the idea of reliance on third force mentioned at the beginning of this paper, has been re-emerging in Armenia. According to a survey done by a research center in Yerevan researchers are finding the “law to exclude third force” a more feasible alternative then relying on Russia or the West. See “Armenia’s National and International Security in the Next Decade,” *Presentation of Expert and Public Poll Results*, Armenian Center for National and International Studies, Yerevan Armenia August 2004.

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