

Discussion Paper: The Armenian-Turkish Normalization Process:

1 Introduction

In recent years, Armenia and Turkey have launched a new effort to normalize their historically fraught relationship. Both countries' foreign ministries have emphasized that the process is taking place "without preconditions" marking a significant shift after decades of diplomatic estrangement. Despite Turkey recognizing Armenia's independence in 1991, formal ties were never established, and their shared border has remained closed — largely due to Ankara's close ties with Azerbaijan and the unresolved Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

The last major attempt at normalization — the "Zurich Protocols" of the late 2000s — ultimately failed due to both domestic backlash and external pressures, particularly from Azerbaijan. Since then, the geopolitical landscape of the South Caucasus has changed dramatically, especially following Azerbaijan's victory in the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war. Between January 2022 and July 2024, Armenian and Turkish special envoys met five times, resulting in modest but tangible steps such as the resumption of direct air cargo transport (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Armenia 2024b). Building on these developments, it is important to assess the broader implications of the normalization efforts and their possible outcomes.

This discussion paper examines the current normalization process and explores its potential future trajectory. First, it provides a brief overview of the relevant historical and political background, including the enduring impact of the 20th-century Armenian genocide on contemporary interstate relations. It also examines the historical dynamics of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and its connection to Azerbaijani opposition to a rapprochement between Ankara and Yerevan, as will be shown by the example of the "Zurich Protocols". Second, the paper analyzes the changing regional and global dynamics that influence this normalization process and how these shifts impact the approaches and stances of the involved countries. Third, the paper identifies the remaining risks and challenges that could derail the process and proposes potential solutions to address these challenges. Finally, the paper offers concise recommendations for sustaining the positive momentum of normalization, including actionable suggestions for European stakeholders.

2 Historical and political background

2.1 The Armenian Genocide as a Historical Impediment

The historical relations between Armenia and Turkey have long been marked by hostilities over the Armenian genocide and its characterization. Turkey's refusal to recognize the large-scale massacre and deportation of Armenians during World War I as genocide, despite

widespread acceptance of this characterization by historians (Gatrell 2013), and numerous governments (Armenian National Institute 2025), remains a subject in the process of normalization. The unresolved dispute has inhibited normal bilateral relations, fueling mistrust and shaping tensions for over a century on a societal and on a political level. In a 2015 opinion poll in response to the question what interested them most about the Armenia-turkey relations, 85% mentioned the genocide. This shows that the issue of genocide remains relevant in the broad Armenian society. The Armenian Foreign Ministry explicitly defines these events as genocide, stating: “The atrocities committed against the Armenian people of the Ottoman Empire during WWI is defined as the Armenian Genocide” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Armenia 2024a) In contrast to this statement, the Turkish foreign ministry states that “[t]he Armenian deaths [during WWI] do not constitute a genocide” (Turkey Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2022b). These opposing narratives exemplify the challenges this historical issue poses to the normalization process.¹

2.2 Nagorno-Karabakh and the “Zurich Protocols”

A further factor which has historically impeded the Armenian-Turkish relations is the issue of Nagorno-Karabakh and the broader antagonistic relationship between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Turkey and Azerbaijan share a close alliance often referred to as “one nation, two states,” built on deep and multifaceted ties in many vital areas (Hajizade 2024, 2).

The Armenia-Azerbaijan tensions have hence been a major obstacle to the normalization process between Ankara and Yerevan. The Turkish Foreign Ministry states that the alleged Armenian aggression toward Azerbaijan during the first Karabakh War was the cause which prevented the establishment of diplomatic ties between Turkey and Armenia after Armenian independence (Turkey Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2022a). In the following decades of the Karabakh conflict persisting this has created, as Aydıntaşbaş and Giragosian (2022, 2) state, an “insurmountable barrier” to forming diplomatic neighborly relations. There was strong opposition in Baku toward the “Zurich Protocols”, which would have weakened Azerbaijani leverage over Armenia. The economic stranglehold through which Baku sought to pressure Yerevan into compliance with would have been substantially weakened (Chikhladze 2022, 7). The rapprochement was hence seen by Baku as a betrayal as it betrayed one of the key principles of their relation, namely that no Armenian-Turkish accords should be agreed upon until the Nagorno-Karabakh issue was concluded (Mikhelidze 2010, 4). Therefore, Baku lobbied heavily and aggressively against it, threatening to raise the price of gas exports to Turkey (ibid.). The Azerbaijani leadership considered a consolidation of the Armenian position, as a weakening of its own advantage in the confrontation (Iskandaryan and Minasyan 2010, 25). This historic low in Turko-Azerbaijani relations, was then followed by a period of strengthened relations. This encompassed the coordination of the Turkish stance toward Yerevan between the two states (Hajizade 2024, 2f), as Turkey seemed to view continuing positive relations with Baku as more in its interest than improving relations with Yerevan. A further factor contributing to the ultimate failure of the “Zurich Protocols” the reliance on secret diplomacy conducted through Swiss negotiators, instead of relying on public personal

¹ For further in-depth reading on the Armenian genocide and its contemporary relevance, see Waal (2015).

meetings (Aydıntaşbaş and Giragosian 2022, 4). Additionally, though the initial negotiations were successful, the protocols focused on large scale issues which could not be conciliated without parliamentary ratification from both sides.

This served as a substantial obstacle (ibid.). Though the initial negotiations were successful, and the protocols signed, the protocols were not ratified by the respective parliaments and thus not implemented. The Armenian Constitutional Court approved the protocols for parliamentary ratification, a necessary step regarding international treaties, but issued references to three main issues in the protocols (Mikhelidze 2010, 3). These references Turkey considered as preconditions “which impair the letter and spirit of the protocols” (*Yeni Şafak* 2010). Yerevan guaranteed that it would ratify the treaty once the Turkish parliament had voted on it, and if it does so in a reasonable time frame and without preconditions (Mikhelidze 2010, 4).

Turkey on the other hand arguably succumbed to Azerbaijani pressure and then Prime Minister Erdogan later made an end to the alleged occupation of Nagorno-Karabakh by Armenia, a precondition for the ratification of the treaty (Socor 2010). Yerevan withdrew the protocols from the parliament agenda in 2018 citing Turkey protracted ratification process and the post-signature preconditions, which had been a goal of the political elites and civil society for years. But Baku reiterated that this it was willing to engage in new opportunities to normalize relations with Turkey (Abrahamyan 2018).

The “Zurich protocols” also encountered backlash in both countries’ domestic domain which contributed to their ultimate failure. In Armenia the conservative foreign policy stance and the deep mistrust of Turkey fueled the backlash against the protocols. The influential Armenian diaspora further reinforced opposition, contributing to their failure (Iskandaryan and Minasyan 2010, 15ff). Similarly, pro-Azerbaijan and conservative forces in the Turkish population lobbied against the process (Ter-Matevosyan 2021, 164). The backlash from the respective societies shows that the reliance on diplomatic efforts with a lack of inclusion of the respective civil societies and thorough preparation for normalization could hamper this process (Chikhladze 2022, 7). There does exist substantial ongoing cooperation between the two countries’ civil societies, as (Punsmann 2015) describes. But as an opinion poll on public sentiment regarding the normalization process from 2015 shows, 73% of Armenians state that they consider Turkish experts, researchers/scientists and civil society representatives as being “absolutely untrustworthy” (Caucasus Research Resource Center Armenia 2015, 11 f.). This shows that despite the significant cooperation on a civil society level, there still exists strong distrust between the two sides.

3 Current Developments

The current process of normalization between Turkey and Armenia after the Second Karabakh War in 2020, is likely not a coincidence. Azerbaijan’s victory significantly altered the regional power balance, weakening one of the major impediments to normalization. This is reflected in Turkey’s characterization of a “conducive political landscape after the Second Karabakh War” (Turkey Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2022a). Despite Turkey’s strong support for Azerbaijan’s 2020 offensive — through military advisors, weapons shipments (Aydıntaşbaş and Giragosian 2022, 7-9), the extensive use of Turkish UAVs by Azerbaijani forces (Hecht 2022), and alleged involvement of Syrian mercenaries (Cookman 2025) — Armenia initiated diplomatic

engagement with Turkey within a year of the war. This suggests that Armenia recognizes its vulnerable security situation and is acting accordingly.

Russia's role in the region also warrants attention. Following the 2020 war, a ceasefire was brokered under Russian oversight, leading to the deployment of Russian "peacekeeping" troops in Nagorno-Karabakh. This expanded Russian influence in the South Caucasus region and led to an increased level of dependence on Russia for both Armenia and Azerbaijan (Aydıntaşbaş and Giragosian 2022, 8). While Azerbaijan was able to depend on its close partner Turkey regarding support in military matters, Armenia did not have the same experience with its closest military partner Russia. Armenia closely aligned itself with Russia, to balance the potential threats emanating from Turkey and Azerbaijan, and hence was strongly depended on Russia in security matters. However, Moscow's failure to respond to Armenia's invocation of Article 4 of the CSTO for military assistance during Azerbaijan's incursions into Armenian territory in 2022 significantly eroded Yerevan's trust in Russia as a security provider (Chkhikvadze 2024). In April 2024, Russian peacekeepers began withdrawing from Nagorno-Karabakh (Osborn and Bagirova 2024). This development has reduced Russia's regional presence and influence, a fact not lost on the Armenian government (Osborn 2023).

As Armenia adapts to these shifting dynamics, its foreign policy "cost-benefit" analysis has evolved. The longstanding potential advantages of normalization with Turkey — such as economic benefits from open trade routes to the Mediterranean and Europe (Shangoyan 2022), as well as improved relations with its largest neighbor — remain compelling. However, Armenia now also faces an urgent need to diversify its security partnerships which has created a strong impetus for Yerevan to break out of its regional isolation (Tol 2022), reduce its reliance on Russia, and regain strategic leverage. In this context, the Armenian Prime Minister Pashinyan has made it clear that normalization with Azerbaijan and Turkey is Armenia's number one priority (Waal 2024).

For Turkey, domestic, regional, and geopolitical shifts have also influenced its stance on normalization. The Erdogan government faces internal challenges, including declining popularity and economic difficulties, making it more inclined to engage in diplomatic negotiations. Economic benefits from reopening the Armenian border are an additional motivating factor, particularly in Turkey's economically underdeveloped Kurdish regions, which could see stabilization through increased trade (Aydıntaşbaş and Giragosian 2022, 5, 11). Erdogan has also expressed strong interest in expanding regional transport links, which would enhance Turkey's geostrategic position in the South Caucasus. The decline of Russian influence in the region presents an opportunity for Turkey to strengthen its foothold, particularly in Armenia (Chikhladze 2022, 8). Some analysts argue that increasing political influence in Armenia is Turkey's main strategic goal in normalization (Shangoyan 2022).

Reopening transport routes through Armenia would further reinforce Turkey's ties with Azerbaijan, strengthen its economic connections with the states in Central Asia, and enhance trade with China. In this context, the proposed "Zangezur Corridor" — a transport route through southern Armenia linking mainland Azerbaijan with Nakhichevan² — plays a crucial role (Tol 2022). Additionally, normalization with Armenia could serve as a diplomatic opening for Turkey to improve relations with its NATO partners, particularly the United States, as

² An Azerbaijani exclave bordering Armenia, Turkey, and Iran

Washington would welcome this process. The rapprochement would reduce Armenia's enduring dependence on Russia, and Washington, historically, has viewed the reduction of Russian influence in the South Caucasus and Armenia's decreased reliance on Iran as strategically beneficial, this aligning with broader Western geopolitical interests (Chikhladze 2022, 8). However, the new Trump administration's unpredictable nature makes its stance on this issue difficult to discern. Whether it will follow the same regional policies is unclear and will likely depend on the developments in the other arenas concerning Russia and Iran, namely Ukraine and Israel. So far, Washington has sent conflicting signals toward Yerevan. On one hand, the two sides have adopted a "Strategic Partnership" agreement, coordinated with the incoming Secretary of State Marco Rubio, which suggests that Washington seeks to retain and strengthen close relations. On the other hand, the stoppage of vital financial aid under the USAID umbrella sends a more negative signal for future cooperation (Giragosian 2025). But as this is a global phenomenon, Armenia should attempt to focus on the positive developments and to leverage these.

Western actors, including the U.S. and EU, were already supportive of the previous normalization efforts in the 2000s and the current geopolitical climate has only strengthened their interest. When it was announced that Armenia and Azerbaijan had agreed on a peace deal, both the US and the EU issued official statements approving of the development (*Radio Free Europe Armenia* 2025). The conflict in Ukraine and Russia's growing influence in Georgia have increased Western motivation to facilitate regional stability. Additionally, opening trade routes through Armenia would improve European access to Central Asian and Azerbaijani energy resources (Shangoyan 2022), which has become more critical as EU relations with Georgia deteriorate (*Politico* 2024). Moreover, Armenia has shown its intention on strengthening its EU ties and applying for EU membership. This has seen the Armenian government pass a bill concerning its EU accession process (Khachatryan 2025), which clearly depicts Armenia's EU ambitions. Facilitating connectivity with Armenia, therefore, aligns with the EU's strategic interests in the region.

There have also been recent positive developments in bilateral relations between Turkey and Armenia. Notably, the Armenian side has made one of the checkpoints on the border with Turkey operational for handling cross-border traffic. While the checkpoint has not yet been opened to the public (*Armenpress* 2024), this is a noteworthy step in the normalization process. An additional noteworthy development is an interview Pashinyan gave to Turkish journalists, whom the Armenian government invited to Armenia specifically for this purpose. Yerevan stated that this initiative was aimed at contributing to a lasting and stable peace with Ankara (*Jamnews in English* 2025).

Finally, regarding the current developments, the regional roles of Russia³ and Iran⁴ must be considered. Both countries have historically played significant roles in the South Caucasus albeit at present they are preoccupied with other pressing issues. Russia remains heavily engaged in its war in Ukraine, while Iran is dealing with multiple setbacks in its regional ambitions, including the fall of Assad in Syria and the crippling of Iran's proxies Hezbollah and Hamas (Haltiwanger 2025). But these situations could change rather rapidly.

³ For Iran's historical role in the South Caucasus, see Koolae and Hafezian (2010)

⁴ For an explanation on Russia's regional interests and role, see Markedonov (2018)

4 Potential Issues

The role of Azerbaijan remains a central and unresolved factor in the Turkey-Armenia normalization process. Initially, optimism arose that Azerbaijan, having gained control over Nagorno-Karabakh adjacent territories after the 2020 war, would no longer obstruct the normalization process. Huseynov and Scotti (2021) analyzed that Azerbaijani opposition had decreased significantly due to the territorial gains and the potential economic benefits of a successful normalization process. In 2021, Aliyev stated that Azerbaijan would view the normalization of relations favorably (President of the Republic of Azerbaijan 2021). However, Tol (2022) took a more skeptical stance, arguing that although the post-2020 realities favor Baku, the unresolved status of Nagorno-Karabakh makes Baku's sustained support for normalization uncertain.

This skepticism appears more aligned with recent developments, as Baku continues to exert influence over the process, even as the conflict around Nagorno-Karabakh seems fully "resolved" and a peace deal between Yerevan and Baku has been agreed upon, though not yet signed (Light and Bagirova 2025). While Yerevan considers normalization with both its neighbors a top foreign policy priority (Waal 2024), it has sought to separate rapprochement with Turkey from its ongoing negotiations with Azerbaijan. Yet, Ankara has reportedly made clear that it will continue to coordinate its approach with Baku (Shangoyan 2022) effectively linking the two processes. This position contradicts Turkey's initial commitment to normalization "without preconditions," leaving Armenia in a difficult position with potential deadlocks on both its eastern and western borders.

Parallel to Turkey-Armenia negotiations, Azerbaijan and Armenia entered extensive bilateral talks in late 2021, focusing on the restoration of trade and transport routes, as well as border delineation (Aydıntaşbaş and Giragosian 2022, 12). While a peace treaty has been agreed upon, some roadblocks remain. Baku insists upon constitutional amendments in Armenia regarding territorial claims in Nagorno-Karabakh as a precondition for a peace agreement (Light and Bagirova 2025). This demand is challenging for Armenia to fulfill, particularly given the strength of nationalist forces.

On the Armenian side, Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan has actively lobbied for a peace treaty with Baku (Martirosyan 2025) and shown increasing readiness for concessions, arguing that Armenia should prioritize "[r]eal, not historic Armenia" (Gadarigian 2024).⁵ Meanwhile, Azerbaijan has maintained a firm stance, demanding structural political changes in Armenia and employing aggressive rhetoric, such as referring to Armenia as "Western Azerbaijan" (Waal 2023) and threatening the use of force regarding the "Zangezur Corridor" (President of the Republic of Azerbaijan 2023). Despite the finalized text of the peace agreement between Armenia and Azerbaijan being concluded, Baku's ability to prolong negotiations and impose new conditions presents a serious challenge. The extent to which Azerbaijan will use this leverage to shape Armenia's foreign policy—including its approach to Turkey — remains an open question.

⁵ This refers to the role of historical grievances and claims in Armenian foreign and domestic policy, e.g., see chapter 2 regarding how this affects the relations with Turkey

Alongside Armenia's and Turkey's initial commitments to negotiations without preconditions, both sides have stated terms as vital for their respective national security (Chikhladze 2022, 8). These are not defined as clear preconditions, but they certainly play a role in the negotiation process. These are for one, the recognition of the Armenian Genocide. Historically, Armenia has remained firm in its demand for recognition, while Turkey could unpredictably shift its stance and demand concessions — placing the Armenian leadership in a difficult position. Pashinyan recently made statements on the Armenian Genocide that some perceived as questioning the national historical narrative (Minoyan 2025). This sparked widespread condemnation and accusations of denialism from multiple organizations and groups in Armenia and the large diaspora community (ibid.), highlighting the continued sensitivity of this issue for the Armenian people. Specifically, for the politically influential Armenian diaspora the subject of genocide has been very delicate. They, to a large part, are the descendants of those murdered and deported from Turkey in the early 20th century. For them the memory of the Armenian Genocide remains a key part of their Diaspora Identity. The Armenian diaspora has historically been an essential contributor to the Armenian economy and state budget and has played an exceptional role in Armenia's development path (Iskandaryan and Minasyan 2010, 19f). As such, if the subject of genocide is mishandled, this could incite nationalist fervor and pose the threat of economic difficulties, obstructing the negotiations.

The significant power imbalance between Turkey and Armenia (Shangoyan 2022), coupled with Armenia's vulnerable geostrategic position, could encourage Turkish nationalists to demand further concessions from Yerevan. If nationalist forces in Turkey regain influence, the normalization process could become hostage to domestic political developments (Aydıntaşbaş and Giragosian 2022, 18). In turn, nationalist factions in Armenia could obstruct the process, placing Pashinyan in an increasingly difficult position.

Further complicating matters is the decades-long lack of trust between Turkish and Armenian civil societies. This deep-seated mistrust stems from historical grievances, Turkey's role in the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war, and the unresolved Armenian Genocide issue, which has stark influence on both populations' nationalist tendencies (Adar 2018). Nationalist forces on both sides leverage this distrust to obstruct diplomatic progress (Chikhladze 2022).

The "Zangezur Corridor" is another contentious issue in normalization negotiations. For Turkey, the corridor represents a major economic and geopolitical interest, as it would facilitate connectivity between Turkey and Azerbaijan. Turkey seeks an "unsupervised" link, whereas Armenia insists on maintaining sovereignty over its transport routes (Shangoyan 2022). This issue remains a major point of contention in Armenia-Azerbaijan relations, with analysts identifying it as the next major flashpoint (Waal 2023). Relinquishing control over the corridor would severely weaken Armenia's negotiating position, threaten its sovereignty, and heighten security concerns, particularly in its southern region bordering Iran (Kucera 2023).

To address connectivity issues, Yerevan proposed the "Crossroads of Peace" initiative, aiming to reopen all currently blocked transport routes, including the "Zangezur Corridor," while ensuring the sovereignty of each country over its respective routes (Government of the Republic of Armenia 2023).

The involvement of regional power Russia must also be considered. Its role is fittingly described as a "wild-card" as its ambitions and possible further actions are difficult to discern (Tol 2022). Historically, Russia has had a vested interest in obstructing normalization, as it

benefited from Armenia's continued dependence and isolation (ibid.). However, Russia's stance has shifted since Azerbaijan's 2023 military victory and the subsequent withdrawal of Russian 'peacekeeping' troops. Moscow now seeks stronger ties with Baku for multiple geopolitical reasons (Krivosheev 2024). The new regional power dynamic, combined with Russia's weaker positioning, likely reduces its incentive to support the Turkish-Armenian normalization process, particularly as Azerbaijan perceives it unfavorably. Despite these factors, recent Russian proclamations have suggested support for normalization (Fisayo-Bambi 2025). Moreover, Russia's growing influence in Georgia (Nixey 2024) and its apparent interest in Azerbaijan and the Armenian-Azerbaijani peace process stem from its connectivity plans in the South Caucasus. These plans are closely tied to the geographic realities that will emerge from any agreement between Baku and Yerevan (Waal 2024). This suggests that Moscow still has strategic ambitions in the region. At the same time, its long-term role and stance in the Turkey-Armenia normalization process remains uncertain.

Meanwhile, Iran, shares a border with Armenia and opposes both Turkish and Azerbaijan's regional ambitions, including the proposed "Zangezur Corridor" highway which could marginalize Iran in the region. Thus, Iran has strong incentives to maintain close relations with Yerevan (Isachenko and Azizi 2023, 2ff.). Given Armenia's limited geopolitical options, Iran remains a key actor in the region's diplomatic landscape.

5 Potential solutions

1 Engaging Turkey Separately and Strengthening Bilateral Negotiations

One of the most delicate obstacles remains Azerbaijan's ability and willingness to act as a spoiler. Armenia and its international partners must work to limit Baku's capacity to derail negotiations. While Armenia has already demonstrated some willingness to make concessions, Azerbaijan has continually escalated its demands, signaling that unilateral Armenian concessions will not be sufficient. Armenia must guard against being overly dependent on a trilateral format that could expose it to increased pressure.

To balance against this risk, Yerevan should simultaneously seek to engage Turkey separately and push for a diplomatic framework that allows bilateral negotiations to progress independently where possible. While Turkey has previously declined Armenian attempts to separate these tracks, offering Ankara incentives — such as economic cooperation or confidence-building measures — could encourage Turkey to moderate Azerbaijan's demands. While Turkey has historically aligned itself closely with Azerbaijan, Ankara's economic and strategic interests are not necessarily identical to Baku's. Armenia and its partners should seek to widen this gap by strategically influencing Turkey's cost-benefit calculations regarding normalization. One key factor is economic incentives. Turkey stands to gain significant benefits from increased trade with and through Armenia, particularly through expanded regional transport links such as the Crossroads of Peace initiative. To be noted in this context is the already existing railway line between the eastern Turkish city of Kars and the Armenian city of Gyumri. An opening of this in a controlled manner for transporting humans and goods, could be a first step in the normalization process between Turkey and Armenia, offering economic benefits in a controlled environment.

Ensuring that Turkey understands the long-term economic advantages of an independent approach to Armenian relations — rather than full deference to Azerbaijan — could help shift Ankara’s stance. The question remains whether Azerbaijan would engage economically with Turkey in this scenario of separate negotiations. But Baku is not the only party with leverage in the region, as Turkey remains economically and militarily a powerful actor. In addition, the recent Turkish success in Syria (Tol 2024) and the deterioration of Azerbaijani-Russian relations due to Russia shooting down an Azerbaijani airplane (Loh 2025) could embolden Turkey to take a more confident stance. If Turkey presented Azerbaijan with a “fait-accompli” it would arguably be challenging for Baku to not use this economic opportunity for its own benefit.

Highlight Turkey’s capacity to act independently of Azerbaijan, emphasizing economic and strategic advantages, and promoting a fait accompli approach to ensure that normalization proceeds without Baku’s obstruction.

2 Leveraging Third-Party Actors in a Hedging Strategy

Additionally, Armenia must leverage its existing diplomatic ties to counterbalance Azerbaijani influence. This can include, for one, the United States and the EU. The West has a vested interest in reducing Russian and Iranian influence in the South Caucasus, making it a potential ally in ensuring that Turkey does not fully align its stance with Azerbaijan and pursues its own interests independently, which align more with the West’s. Most notably, the United States has this strategic interest, though the impact of the new Trump administration remains to be seen, making it a potential backer of Armenian diplomatic efforts. By expanding its security and economic engagement with Washington, such as with the “Strategic Partnership” agreement Yerevan can increase Western pressure on Turkey. Turkey remains a Western ally and has incentive to improve relations with the West and hence engage in bilateral talks. Additionally, the European Union and Western actors can play a pivotal role in influencing Turkey’s decision-making.

Given Turkey’s economic challenges and its interest in maintaining strong economic ties with the EU, Brussels and Washington could apply economic and diplomatic leverage to encourage Turkey to pursue a more autonomous approach to Armenian normalization. The EU could offer enhanced trade opportunities, infrastructure investments, and financial support for regional connectivity projects that reinforce Turkey-Armenia economic ties. Meanwhile, the EU and the U.S. could use Turkey’s aspirations for closer ties with Western institutions as a tool to encourage greater flexibility in its Armenia policy.

Furthermore, by engaging the EU and Western powers in structuring the normalization process, Armenia could increase international scrutiny over the negotiations, reducing the likelihood of Azerbaijan and Turkey exerting undue bilateral pressure on Yerevan. If the EU and the U.S. integrate Armenian normalization into their broader regional diplomacy efforts, Ankara may feel compelled to act more independently rather than aligning unconditionally with Baku.

Iran is another actor with whom Armenia maintains friendly relations. Given its strategic rivalry with Azerbaijan, Iran could support Armenia diplomatically, particularly in opposing

certain corridor projects that challenge its regional influence. Teheran has also stated that it will not tolerate any border changes between Armenia and Azerbaijan, providing political support. Moreover, Iran stationed additional troops in the area (Soghom 2023), signaling readiness to support Armenia militarily.

And there also remains Russia, despite Armenia's deteriorating ties with Moscow, Russia still retains military, political and economic interests in the region that Yerevan could exploit to maintain leverage.

This multi-vector "hedging strategy" (Ciorciari and Haacke 2019), of hedging the influence and interest of multiple state actors against one another and thus maintaining sovereignty and power, may be the right fit for the current vulnerable Armenian position. It could counterbalance the constraints imposed by Turkey and Azerbaijan, improve Armenia's negotiation stance and thus facilitate the negotiation of normalization.

For Armenia to implement a multi-vector hedging strategy by balancing engagement with the U.S., EU, Iran, and Russia to counterbalance Turkish and Azerbaijani pressures.

3 Armenian Strategy in a Trilateral Framework

If Armenia is ultimately unable to prevent the merging of the two negotiation tracks, which is not an unlikely scenario due to Armenia's rather weak current position, it must seek to maximize strategic gains within a trilateral framework. While this approach presents risks, it could also serve to increase Azerbaijani accountability — not just to Armenia and the international community, but also to Turkey.

By aligning its interests with Turkey's economic aspirations, Armenia can increase Ankara's stake in a successful outcome. Turkey stands to gain significantly from normalized ties with Armenia, including expanded regional trade networks and strengthened connectivity to Central Asia. If structured correctly, trilateral formats could thus serve as a mechanism for Turkey to moderate Azerbaijani demands, rather than simply reinforcing them. The Armenian "Crossroads of Peace" transportation initiative proposal, one Armenian multilateral initiative, should be reinforced by Armenia as it has the potential to facilitate long-term regional stability and economic integration and to solve some of the long-term issues such as that of the "Zangezur Corridor", which remains as one of the top issues between Yerevan and Baku.

Use trilateral negotiations to increase Azerbaijani accountability by structuring the process in a way that ties Baku's actions not only to Armenia but also to Turkey's economic and regional interests.

4 Encouraging a Balanced Mediation Approach

Additionally, in this scenario third-party mediators such as the EU should choose a balanced approach, encouraging dialogue between all three parties. Since the previous failure of the Zurich Protocols was partially attributed to opaque, third party-driven negotiations, it is crucial

that any efforts aiming to facilitate the negotiations be transparent and involve direct talks between the primary actors as to not alienate Azerbaijan. As Waal 2024 describes there is no need for direct Western mediation, as this would likely derail the negotiations, since Azerbaijan has expressed its dissatisfaction with Western actors allegedly siding with Armenia in their mediation efforts. The West should consider using its further available tools of foreign policy to create a productive environment for negotiations. The aforementioned approaches of economic and political pressure could conceivably also be an additional path for Western actors to take influence in the negotiations and put pressure on a confident Baku. Though as to what degree this is realistic with Azerbaijan's wealth of energy being attractive for Europe remains to be seen. Likely Ankara is the more approachable and pragmatic actor between the two and the more likely to change its stance.

Avoid direct Western mediation to prevent alienating Azerbaijan while instead utilizing diplomatic engagement and economic incentives to create a favorable negotiating environment.

A significant facilitator to the normalization process would be if both Turkey and Armenia returned to their previous commitments of “no-preconditions” as this has impeded the negotiations in regard to Azerbaijan as well as to a multitude of other areas. The previous paragraphs have depicted multiple possible paths to pressure and incentivize Turkey to again engage in discussion with “no-preconditions”, something it had initially committed to, or at least “fewer preconditions”.

5 Addressing the Armenian Genocide Issue in Normalization Talks

The issue of genocide remains a contentious historical issue between Turkey and Armenia. Nationalist on both sides regard this as an issue, particularly for the Armenian nationalist constituency and powerful diaspora, a pragmatic policy in this arena remains a formidable task. Though this is not a precondition in the normalization process, this is still an important subject for Armenian society, especially the diaspora community, and thus must be handled and approached with care. One suggestion as to how to approach this issue is the following. By decoupling the process of normalization from reconciliation, both parties can establish diplomatic ties without the immediate burden of addressing this highly sensitive issue at a governmental level. As Ter-Matevosyan (2021, 164) describes: “reconciliation is between nations (Armenian–Turkish issues), whereas normalization is between states (Armenia–Turkey issues).” Instead, reconciliation efforts should thus focus on fostering open discussions through academic, cultural, and historical initiatives that gradually pave the way for mutual understanding. A phased approach allows civil society actors to take the lead in addressing historical grievances and counterbalancing nationalist narratives while ensuring that political negotiations remain pragmatic and forward-looking. The technical step of open borders would encourage the exchange between the two sides civil societies’ and thus encourage this process of reconciliation. As (Chikhladze 2022) describes, the current process has much more open and more based on face-to-face meetings, in contrast to the failed process in 2008-2009 which

mainly consisted of many months of secret diplomacy. This led to nationalist backlash in both countries toward the process. This was one of the main criticisms toward the Zurich protocols, something that should be approached differently this time around.

Separate the diplomatic normalization process from historical reconciliation efforts to ensure that immediate political agreements are not derailed by deeply rooted nationalist grievances. Frame normalization as a state-level diplomatic initiative while allowing reconciliation to develop organically through long-term societal engagement, reducing pressure on political actors to resolve historical disputes

6 Managing Nationalist Opposition on Both Sides

Nationalist forces on both sides have historically obstructed normalization efforts, as seen during the failed 2008-2009 negotiations. Nationalist elements in both Turkey and Armenia often frame normalization as a betrayal of national interests, which can generate public backlash and pressure against political leaders. To mitigate these risks, both governments should actively engage in public diplomacy to communicate the benefits of normalization, emphasizing economic growth, regional security, and diplomatic stability. The nationalist forces must also be confronted with pragmatic arguments for the urgency of the making of concessions. For the Armenian side this follows up on the previously mentioned argument of Pashinyan of focusing more on the current Armenia instead of the historical. Armenia finds itself in a precarious political position. The no-preconditions policy toward negotiations with Turkey and the finalizing of an agreement would strongly improve the Armenian position. This urgency must be communicated clearly and decisively. Particularly toward the Armenian diaspora it must be transmitted that currently it is not historical Armenian which finds itself vulnerable but the contemporary Armenia. The existing nationalist fervor should point toward policies to retain Armenian identity, statehood, and sovereignty instead of historical arguments, however important and morally righteous they may be. While this may create some economic difficulties due to the diaspora's economic strength, the opening of the relations and the border will in turn yield significant economic benefits for the Armenian population. A more stable regional security structure, to which a normalization with Turkey will contribute, will also make Armenia more attractive for foreign investment, and thus provide further economic benefits.

In comparison, for Turkish nationalists the most pressing issue of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is no longer relevant, and these will be increasingly inclined to not stand in the way of negotiations. The messaging to them similarly should include pragmatic arguments for the normalization, namely economic benefits as well as the potential benefits to Turkey's relations with its Western partners. Additionally, framing normalization as a move that strengthens Turkey's influence in the South Caucasus could appeal to nationalist sensibilities. Instead of viewing normalization as a concession to Armenia, it can be presented as a strategic move that positions Turkey as a leading regional power capable of shaping the post-Karabakh regional order. By directly engaging Armenia in economic and political cooperation, Turkey reduces

the space for external actors such as Russia and Iran to exert influence in the region, reinforcing Turkey's role as the dominant geopolitical player in the South Caucasus.

Engage in targeted public diplomacy to emphasize the urgency of normalization, framing it as essential for Armenia's contemporary security, sovereignty, and economic resilience rather than a concession on historical injustices and traumas.

Frame normalization as a strategic opportunity rather than a concession, reinforcing Turkey's role as a dominant regional power shaping the regional order after the dissolvment of Nagorno-Karabakh.

7 Russian Influence and Its Potential Disruptive Role

Regarding Russia, which Aydıntaşbaş and Giragosian (2022, 18) identify as one of the main risk factors in the normalization process, formulating a potential solution remains difficult due to the unpredictability of Russian policy. Moscow has sent mixed signals regarding the normalization, making its long-term stance uncertain. While Russia has a vested interest in the region, several factors suggest it may attempt to undermine the negotiations. The extent to which it will do so largely depends on its capacity, interest, and willingness to assert influence — variables contingent on broader geopolitical developments, particularly in Ukraine and Georgia.

If Russia regains strength and seeks to reassert its influence in the South Caucasus, Armenia and Azerbaijan are likely to become focal points for Moscow's strategic maneuvering. Armenia, having demonstrated a clear intent to disengage from Russian dependence for security and economic reasons, could face retaliatory measures designed to limit its autonomy, as Russia remains influence in the country, including a military base. In contrast, Azerbaijan has been more open to pragmatic engagement with Russia and could therefore be more susceptible to Moscow's influence, particularly if Russian objectives align with Baku's broader regional ambitions. In such a scenario, Russia could leverage its ties with Azerbaijan to stall or obstruct the Turkey-Armenia normalization process, especially if it perceives this rapprochement as a threat to its traditional sphere of influence.

Given this uncertainty, Turkey's role becomes critical in counterbalancing potential Russian interference. If Moscow decides to act as a spoiler, Turkey must assert itself diplomatically and strategically to prevent Russia from exploiting divisions between Yerevan and Baku. Strengthening Turkey's economic and security cooperation with Azerbaijan while simultaneously reinforcing its diplomatic engagement with Armenia could mitigate Russian influence in the negotiations. Furthermore, involving Western actors such as the European Union and the United States in the normalization process could serve as an additional layer of deterrence against Russian intervention. These external players could offer Armenia greater economic incentives and security assurances, reducing its vulnerability to Russian coercion.

Ultimately, the trajectory of Russian policy remains uncertain and will depend on its broader geopolitical calculations. However, proactive engagement by Turkey and its Western allies

could limit Moscow's ability to manipulate the process, ensuring that Armenia and Azerbaijan can pursue normalization based on their own national interests rather than external pressures.

Reduce Russian leverage over the normalization process by strengthening Armenia's economic and security ties with Turkey and the West, limiting Moscow's ability to manipulate negotiations through political or economic coercion.

Encourage Turkey to assert itself as the primary regional mediator by deepening its engagement with both Armenia and Azerbaijan, counterbalancing potential Russian interference, and ensuring that the process remains driven by regional actors rather than external powers.

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