DOES RECOGNIZING THE GENOCIDE ACCOMPLISH ANYTHING?

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By Sergei Markednov, Russia Profile, 16 October 2007

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Steps towards similar resolutions have been made before, but this is the first time such an initiative has had sizeable support within the American political establishment. And even this decision was not unanimous--27 members of the committee voted for the resolution while 21 members voted against it.
Nevertheless, in the middle of November this resolution will be reviewed by Congress and the chances of it being passed are higher than ever. Of the 435 members of the House of

Representatives, 226 of them participated in writing the resolution. On the night of Oct. 11, the Yerkir Media TV Company, which has close ties to the ARF (the Armenian Revolutionary Federation) Dashnaktsutiun - the oldest broadcast the "historic" meeting of the Committee on Foreign Affairs.

According to Yerevan-based political scientist David Petrosyan, "the discussion demonstrated that the majority of the committee members are well acquainted with this subject; they presented a number of substantial arguments in defense of their position. This is the result of work by the most powerful and authoritative Armenian lobbying organizations in the United States: the Armenian Assembly of America and the Armenian National Committee of America." This discussion also showed that, although the leaders of the Armenian government talk about strategic relations with Russia, the "western vector" of Armenian foreign policy is very important.

Mixed Loyalties

Today the Russian expert community generally accepts that Armenia is Russia's most reliable ally in the South Caucasus. The prospect of Armenia reorientating toward the United States or the European Union countries is either not considered at all or thought to be insignificant. However, outside the cozy world of political clichés and ritual declarations of the centuries-old "Russian-Armenian" friendship, it is obvious that Armenia's foreign policy is much more complicated. Strictly speaking, Armenia does not need to tend towards the West, because it was never an "anti-Western" country, unlike Belarus under Alexander Lukashenko or Saparmurat Niyazov's Turkmenistan. The presence of a pro-Western element in the history of post-Soviet Armenia has always been an important factor in the republic's development.

Even before the collapse of the Soviet Union, Armenia stepped out on to the international stage and learned, with the help of its large diaspora, to appeal to global public opinion and help turn this opinion in a pro-Armenian direction. On May 17, 1999, the U.S. Senate passed a resolution condemning attacks on peaceful civilians and firing at unarmed civilians in reaction to a "cleanup" operation carried out by troops of the Soviet Union's interior ministry in the Armenian villages of Nagorno-Karabakh. In 1992, Congress passed Amendment 907 to the Freedom Support Act, which prohibited direct U.S. government aid to Azerbaijan. And although today many provisions of this amendment have been significantly "corrected," it has not yet been cancelled. Azeri President, Ilham Aliyev demanded the cancellation of Amendment 907 during his visit to Washington last year. Despite the fact that the oil lobby stands for complete cancellation of the amendment, the Armenian lobby (primarily the Armenian National Committee of America - ANCA) has been successful in its counter-efforts. Over the last 15 years, the United States has provided more than $1 billion of economic assistance to Armenia. More than 1 million ethnic Armenians reside in the United States.

In July 2006, the U.S. House of Representatives voted to guarantee that no import or export funds would be used to support the proposed construction of a railroad connecting the Turkish city of Kars to the Georgian cities of Akhalkalaki and Tbilisi and ending up in the Azeri capital Baku, bypassing Armenia. House Resolution 5068 says that "taxpayers' money will not be used for a greater isolation

of Armenia, which still suffers from a double blockade imposed by Turkey and Azerbaijan." Rep. Joseph Crowley (D-New York), one of the congressmen who supported this document, stated: "these measures will promote stability in the Southern Caucasus, while financial support for such a railroad construction project would contradict the U.S's interests."

Now in 2007, the time has come for the issue that is the most important for the world's Armenian community--recognizing the genocide of 1915 and including this issue in the U.S. foreign policy agenda. The vote on Oct. 11 has already received a negative reaction from Turkey. Officials in Ankara hinted that the vote could decrease the amount of aid Turkey provides for U.S. troops in Iraq; as U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates has noted, 70 percent of all air cargo and 30 percent of fuel for U.S. forces in Iraq transits through Turkey. Moreover, President George W. Bush has also strongly recommended that Congress not pass this resolution.

Although the president cannot strongarm the congressmen into voting his way, both the congressmen and the senators must understand how important the Turkish factor is for U.S. policy both in the Middle East and in the Black Sea region, particularly since there is already an ethnic group separating Ankara and Washington--the Kurds. The United States supports a de facto Kurdish state in the territory of Iraq while Ankara considers Iraqi Kurdistan a nest of terrorists providing support to the Kurdish separatist movement inside Turkey. Turkey has the second-largest army in NATO, which is well trained and prepared. Its special services are capable of liquidating their foes and also brilliantly discredited politically the longstanding Kurd leader Abdullah Ocalan.

The Turkish dilemma

Yerevan is accusing Turkey of committing genocide against Armenians during World War I, when about 1.5 million Armenians residing in the territory of the Ottoman Empire were killed. Turkey, in its turn, does not agree that the deaths were genocide, claiming that actually the number of Armenians killed was much smaller and that these deaths were a result of inter-ethnic conflict. Even the Armenians do not agree on the future of Armenian-Turkish relations. The first leader of the Armenian Republic, Levon-Ter Petrossian, was willing to give up overemphasizing the tragedy in favor of prospects for future positive relations with Turkey. Despite the fact Robert Kocharyan, Armenia's second president, has taken a much firmer stand toward its western neighbor, Yerevan has given up any territorial claims against Turkey. Even the Armenian diaspora is split on the genocide as well as on territorial claims and reparations.

According to well-known Yerevan political scientist Tigran Martirosyan, "the current demands of the Armenian people regarding Western Armenia are based on the world community accepting the statute 'The Necessity of Liquidating the Consequences of Genocide' as an international norm. And this, in its turn, is based on charters of international tribunals, resolutions of the UN General Assembly and the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, which was adopted on Dec. 9, 1948 and came into force on Jan. 12, 1951."

In the meanwhile, Turkish historians and politicians studying the Armenian issue have their own serious counter-arguments. According to Professor Halil Berktay, "this is a very serious issue. It is a mistake made by the Turkish Republic. Turkey is taking too long to determine its official political and legal position on the Ottoman Empire. **Turkey has not quite realized and has not completely adopted the fact that it overthrew the Ottoman regime and established a modern republic in its place. And this contains a very serious contradiction. The republic cannot be held accountable for these events… The Turkish Republic today can say one simple thing: the republic was founded in 1923. The events in question took place in 1915. The army of the Turkish Republic and its governmental institutions had nothing to do with these events. The Turkish Republic is a new state. From the legal point of view, it is not the legal successor of either the Ottoman government or the Unity and Progress party government ."** Today many Turkish researchers of Armenian-Turkish relations argue for depoliticizing the problem of 1915, leaving it for historians. However, many scientists, bureaucrats and politicians in Turkey consider even statements like Berktay's to be extremely "liberal," and Taner Akcam, the first Turkish historian to use the term "genocide" to characterize the 1915 tragedy, is now teaching at the University of Michigan, far away from his historical homeland.

At first glance, Ankara could have easily chosen to say farewell to the past. It would have been enough to simply develop the thesis of "liberal" Turkish historians that there is no legal succession between the Turkish Republic and the Ottoman Empire. Such a stance has been one of the key ideological points of modern Turkey since the time of the republic's founder, Kemal Ataturk. Once such a declaration was made, the Turkish government could have condemned the Ottomans and their killing of Armenians. Moreover, Ankara could have accepted the "pass" from Yerevan when it gave up its territorial claims to Western Armenia, which today is under Turkish jurisdiction. By accepting the 1915 Armenian genocide today, Ankara could have closed the issue forever.

However, acknowledging the Armenian genocide and saying farewell to the past is not so simple. Kemalist Turkey, which denounces the legacy of the Ottoman regime in many ways, still carries out the familiar old foreign and internal policies. This is true for the conflict over Cyprus, relations with Greece and Bulgaria, the policy in the territory of the former Yugoslavia and the policy toward ethnic minorities in addition to the problems with Armenia. Moreover, throughout the 20th century, the Turkish Republic was able to strengthen its position in the world by skillfully manipulating the conflicts between the world's great powers, which is why Armenia and the Armenian diaspora has expressed alarm about Turkey's possible entry into the European Union. Turkey has used NATO resources completely to its advantage, without worrying too much about making its actions comply with the high standards of the organization.

Today Turkey has its own interests in the South Caucasus and can turn the issue of acknowledging the genocide of Armenians into an item up for negotiation. Recognizing the genocide could become part of the negotiations over Nagorno-Karabakh, since Azerbaijan is

Turkey's strategic partner. It is quite possible that Ankara will suggest an "exchange of acknowledgments" between Turkey, Armenia and Azerbaijan. On March 26, 1998, then-President Heydar Aliyev issued a Presidential Decree "On the genocide of Azeris." March 31 was proclaimed as the Day of Genocide of the Azeris. The decree included such declarations as "the dismemberment of the Azerbaijani people," the "division of historical lands" of the Azerbaijanis, and the "occupation" of Azerbaijan after the Gyulistan (1813) and Turkmanchai (1828) peace treaties, which ended two Russo-Persian wars. The historical responsibility for the genocide of Azeris was laid upon the Russian Empire, the Soviet Union, Armenia and the Armenian people. Thus, it is also possible that in return for acknowledging the Armenian genocide of 1915, Turkey will ask Armenia, with the help of pressure from the United States, to acknowledge the "Azeri genocide." Only time will tell whether Washington will be ready for such a turn. And not just time, but also the situation around Iran, the dynamics in Iraq and the continued upheaval in the wider Caucasus region.