GETTING THIS WRONG WILL BE UNFORGIVABLE

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Category: Opinions

By Vartan Oskanian, Former Foreign Minister of Armenia, The Civilitas Foundation, 8 September 2009

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Yet, the debate on the issue is going in the wrong direction. It is hugely insulting that high-level government officials can be this dismissive and trivializing on a matter that is so critical for our people.

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There is no sense whatsoever in telling us that what we see is not what we get. It is not reasonable to spell out a set of specifics and then defend an incongruous but desirable interpretation. That is not how political documents work. It is indeed possible to write flexibly and loosely in order to allow both sides to interpret things differently. But this is not that document. This document, perhaps good intentioned, is formulated badly.
When the Armenian side says that although the protocol specifies recognition of today's borders, that does not mean that we are renouncing past borders, that is absurd. That would be commensurate to the Turks saying, for example, that although there is reference to the border opening, that does not mean that Armenians will necessarily receive visas.
Or when the Armenian side says that the formulation about a sub-commission's "examination of historical records and archives" does not mean they will study the genocide, this is like the Turkish side saying they will open the border, but not at Margara, but some 10-meter space somewhere near the 40th latitude and 45th longitude. Again, this is absurd.

The reality is that a good idea, a needed policy, a necessary move toward rapprochement has been negotiated poorly and framed dangerously. It is irresponsible of our government to force our people to make such choices about our present and our future.

The history of our relations (and non-relations) with Turkey has a pre-history and begins before Turkey's closing of the Turkey-Armenia border in 1993.

After Turkey recognized Armenia as an independent republic in 1991, it laid down two clear conditions that had to be met by Armenia before it would establish diplomatic relations: Armenia was expected to renounce territorial claims on Turkey, and Armenia was to set aside or dismiss the genocide recognition process. (Turkey's later proposal of a historic commission was the modification of this last condition.) In 1993, with the border closure in support of its brethren in Azerbaijan, Turkey added a new condition to the other two already existing, that Armenia renounce Nagorno Karabakh's struggle for security and self-determination by conceding to an Azerbaijani-favorable solution.

To forget this pre-history, or to expect us to forget, or – worse – to pretend that Turkey has forgotten, is not serious. In the context of Turkey's consistent policies about territorial issues, genocide recognition and Karabakh concessions, our public debate must revolve on the substance of what this protocol gives Armenians and what it takes away.

Even when signed, these protocols merely tell us Turkey's willingness to enter into diplomatic relations and to open the border. The open border will become reality only after eventual parliament ratification.

But whether ratified or not, Turkey will still have received what it wanted. When signed, this protocol gives Turkey the opportunity to tell the world that Armenians have in fact conceptually relinquished territorial claims and are also ready to offer the genocide for bilateral study, therefore no third-party involvement, recognition or condemnation is in order.

As someone who has worked for such normalization both with Turkey and Azerbaijan, I would want nothing more than to see agreements, knowing full well they must come with difficult concessions. The negotiations about these concessions however should not endanger our future security nor violate our integrity and values.

We can and should, as the protocol says, 'implement a dialogue on the historical dimension' with 'the aim of restoring mutual confidence' but the way to do that is not by mandating an 'impartial scientific examination of historical records' as if all other examinations thus far have been neither impartial nor scientific. In earlier negotiations, we focused on creating an intergovernmental commission with the aim of overcoming the consequences of our tragic past.

Alternate, more dignified, wording is also possible on the border issue. We can and should, as the protocol says, 'respect and ensure respect for the principles of equality, sovereignty, non-intervention in internal affairs of other states, territorial integrity and inviolability of frontiers.' The focus on territorial integrity is the international formulation that protects concerns about frontiers, while not diminishing the right to pursue historical injustices. The current formulation about 'the mutual recognition of the existing border' should have been avoided.

However, an equal risk in this document is the unwritten one. The link to Nagorno Karabakh. Unwritten perhaps, but clearly spoken at every turn are the repeated, continuing, unabated, undiminished affirmations of the highest Turkish and Azerbaijani officials who insist that Turkey will continue to defend the interests of Azerbaijan and nothing will be done, no border will open, until the Nagorno Karabakh settlement process begins to move in a direction that suits Azerbaijan.

In fact, expecting Turkey to move without considering Azerbaijan's interests would be similar to expecting Armenia to move without considering Karabakh's interests. This is not and was not a reasonable expectation.

In which case, if ratification is to take place, and if it's to take place before the next Obama-April 24 deadline facing Turkey, then we can expect that Azerbaijan has received sufficient guarantees on the return of territories and on the status of Nagorno Karabakh.

These are the worrisome elements – both in the content of these documents, and in the hasty process that accompanies it – that cast doubt on the intent of the document. It also makes clear the readiness to lower the bar to reach an agreement, at questionable cost.

If this implies distrust on our part, that should be eminently understandable. On the Armenian side, those who crafted this document are insisting that it really means something other than what it says. On the other side, Turkey is to 'refrain from pursuing any policy incompatible with the spirit of good neighborly relations,' yet it continues to side with one neighbor Azerbaijan, against their other neighbor Armenia.

In other words, on the ground, nothing seems to have changed. Yet, the Armenian bar has clearly moved lower in the Armenia-Turkey negotiations, and therefore it is natural to assume that the same thing may be happening in the Armenia-Azerbaijan negotiations.

This is the situation today, as we are presented documents not for and by third parties, as with the countless historical documents of the past where Armenia is a subject and not a party, but for the first time in history, a document in which Armenia is signing on to its own perceived place in history.

This document with such formulations should not be signed. Indeed, no one is authorized to sign this document with such formulations.