

"TODAY'S ZAMAN" INTERVIEWS NCWA EXECUTIVE

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Sevgi Akarçesme, [Today's Zaman](#), 1 December 2013

The of an Armenian diaspora organization based in France is seeking recognition from Turkish civil society to overcome problems between Turkey and Armenia. Speaking to Sunday's Zaman, Garen Mikaelyan, the deputy chairperson of the National Congress of Western Armenians ([NCWA](#)), says the main purpose of their organization is to represent and defend the rights and interests of Western Armenians, the descendants of citizens of the Ottoman Empire of Armenian origin.



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Mikaelyan believes that the role of Turkish civil society as a mediator is essential to "re-establishing the rights of Western Armenians" and the organization is trying to initiate continuous dialogue with different institutions in Turkey. According to him, the ongoing democratization reforms in Turkey "would create an atmosphere of mutual understanding as well as the establishment of trust and justice."

In response to a question about their expectations from Turkey, Mikaelyan says the Armenian question has three focuses as far as Turkey is concerned: The establishment of diplomatic relations between Armenia and Turkey and the opening of borders without preconditions; the elimination of all forms of discrimination of both Christian and Muslim Armenian citizens in the Republic of Turkey; and the recognition by Turkey of the rights of the descendants of Armenians from the Ottoman Empire currently living outside Turkey and the restitution of these rights by the Turkish authorities.

In addition to these extensive demands, Mikaelyan is also seeking to officially register the NCWA as a civil society NGO in Turkey.

"Turkish society must rid itself of the long-lasting prejudice introduced and encouraged by ultra-nationalist Turkish circles," Mikaelyan said, adding that Armenians are portrayed as "enemies of the

Turkish state who allegedly betrayed their country."

Stating that the contributions of Armenians to the Ottoman Empire are a "historical fact," Mikaelyan says the involvement of a few Armenian organizations in "anti-Ottoman activities does not justify the mass annihilation and deportation of Armenians." Mikaelyan believes that Turkish civil society is ahead of the authorities as far as the acknowledgment of the "truth" is concerned.

Responding to a question about how they define themselves, Mikaelyan says, "We consider ourselves the descendants of the people subjected to annihilation," noting that the population of Western Armenians around the world is around 7 million. He says that the grandparents of these people were admitted as refugees in the Middle East, the Americas, Europe, Russia and the Republic of Armenia.

Asking Turkey to accept 'crimes of Young Turks'

When asked about their demands, Mikaelyan says the "issue of compensation can be raised once the damages caused as a result of 'Medz Yeghern' have been identified and quantified." He adds that NCWA specialists are trying to gather the necessary data based on political, historical and judiciary documentation and present quantifiable demands to the Turkish authorities.

Expecting the Turkish public and the authorities to accept the "criminal acts of the Young Turks leading to the annihilation of Armenian Ottomans," Mikaelyan is also seeking the necessary legislative changes to "re-establish the loss of rights of their descendants," including the rights of citizenship, the right to restitution and/or compensation for confiscated property and other losses, the cancelation of laws and decrees referring to "abandoned property" and the right to return and live in peace and security in their historic homeland if they so desire.

According to Mikaelyan, after the Hrant Dink murder in 2007, the democratization process in Turkey created "conditions conducive to an improved pragmatic and true understanding of 1915."

As far as the Armenian perceptions of Turks are concerned, Mikaelyan says "Armenians cannot understand the reasons for the Turkish authorities not having the courage to condemn the crimes of the Young Turks." However, he notes that some Armenians are developing a "pragmatic and optimistic approach" toward Turkish people. "There is a slowly emerging belief that the time will come when hate and animosity will be replaced by mutual tolerance and understanding," the of the NCWA stated, underlining the importance of dialogue with Turkish civil society.

