

Reopening of Turkish Border to Create Shift Between Armenia and Its Diaspora

By [Paul Goble](#)

October 11, 2009

The  **Moscow Times**

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Window on Eurasia covers current events in Russia and the nations of the former Soviet Union, with a focus on issues of ethnicity and religion. The issues covered are often not those written about on the front pages of newspapers. Instead, the articles in the Windows series focus on those issues that either have not been much discussed or provide an approach to stories that have been. Frequent topics include civil rights, radicalism, Russian Islam, the Russian Orthodox Church, and events in the North Caucasus, among others.

Author **Paul Goble** is a longtime specialist on ethnic and religious questions in Eurasia. Most recently, he was director of research and publications at the Azerbaijan Diplomatic Academy. He has served in various capacities in the U.S. State Department, the Central Intelligence Agency and the International Broadcasting Bureau as well as at the Voice of America and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty and at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. He writes frequently on ethnic and religious issues and has edited five volumes on ethnicity and religion in the former Soviet space.

VIENNA — The restoration of diplomatic relations between Armenia and Turkey and the reopening of the border between those two countries represents, in the words of one Russian commentator, "a test for the Armenian mentality" and an event whose impact will likely be as great on that nation as the freeing of prices was on Russia.

On the one hand and most obviously, Andrei Kolesnikov argues in an [essay](#) on the Chaskor.ru portal, the opening of the border gives Armenia and Armenians another window out to the world and thus "a chance to shift from the model of 'a blockade' to a model of development."

On the other hand, and far more significantly, he points out, this move offers Yerevan the possibility, in the words of Armenian Prime Minister Tigran Sargsyan, to move "Armenian public opinion 'from anti-Turkish positions to pro-Armenian' ones," a transition that if

successful would put "ratio in place of emotio."

Because "just as in Russia there is practically no family untouched by the events of the Great Fatherland War, so in Armenia, the history of almost every family is marked by the memory of the cruelties of the times of the Ottoman Empire," and such a shift would lead a fundamental redefinition of "the mentality of the Armenian nation," Kolesnikov says.

And that shift in turn involves another that the author suggests will likely involve equally great consequences; such a change in the Armenian mentality will almost inevitably lead to a change in the relationship between Armenians in Armenia and the Armenians in the diaspora around the world.

If up to now, Kolesnikov continues, Armenians everywhere have focused on 1915 as the common core of their identity, now Armenians in Armenia are increasingly at odds with the Armenian diaspora as a result of their experiences and the efforts of the leadership.

The diaspora, the Moscow commentator notes, is less "tolerant" of developing a relationship with Turkey that will inevitably downplay the centrality of the genocide than are Armenians inside Armenia because the former "are not living in the forced autarchy of their historical motherland" and suffering the economic consequences thereof.

To the extent that this difference in perspective grows, Armenia and the Armenian diaspora could find themselves focused on different issues, a division that could mean that Yerevan will be less interested in supporting the diaspora's efforts to get other countries to declare 1915 a genocide, and the diaspora in turn will be less interested in supporting Yerevan on other issues.

"The protocol on the restoration of diplomatic relations and the opening of borders" is scheduled to be signed tomorrow, Kolesnikov says, and after "the parliaments of the two countries ratify the protocols, the border [between Armenia and Turkey] that was closed 16 years ago will again open."

That action "in essence" will not change a great deal on the ground. Armenia will gain "another transportation and communications window." It will win the chance to sell its excess electric power "not only to Georgia and Iran but also to Turkey." And it will allow for a certain "economic, but not military, expansion" of Armenia into eastern Turkey.

But if "strictly speaking" not that much will change, "the opening of the borders will become a useful shock for Armenian society," Kolesnikov says. As Armin Darbinyan, the former Armenian prime minister and now rector of the Russian-Armenian University has pointed out, Armenians "will be forced" to make their political and economic systems competitive.

At present, these systems are not competitive at least in comparison with those in Turkey, Darbinyan says, and if Armenians do not move to become competitive and "stimulate civil society," there is a great risk that the nation could find itself falling "under a new Turkish yoke," perhaps the worst of all possible outcomes from an Armenian perspective.

Many things have driven the Yerevan leadership to take this chance: "the unresolved Nagorno-Karabakh problem, the dependence on Russian business," the need for foreign

investment "other than Russian and diaspora-linked." And having decided to do so, Yerevan has no choice but to serve as "a modernizer of the mentality and culture" of Armenians.

That has not been easy for many Armenians in Armenia to accept &mdash polls show that a large share of the population opposes the accords &mdash but it has been even harder for the diaspora to take, a reality that has forced President Serzh Sargsyan to travel to key diaspora centers this past week to try to bring them around or at least reduce their opposition.

But this change in the mentality of Armenians in Armenia is also having an effect in Turkey as well, Kolesnikov says. Two years ago, "on the streets of Istanbul, tens of thousands of people came into the streets with signs reading 'I am an Armenian,'" in order to condemn the murder of an ethnic Armenian journalist by a Turkish nationalist.

That would have been unthinkable only a few years earlier, Kolesnikov says, and it is a sign that the opening of the Armenian-Turkish border may affect not only the mentality of Armenians in Armenia and in the diaspora but also the mental maps of Turks as well, something that might help transform that country as well.

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