

## Where The Past Is Painful. Where The Future Is Controversial.



With the tension between two of the global leaders, in many respects, being higher than what media might acknowledge, it seems that the search for an example of unity and cooperation between the United States and Russia would be in vain. Interestingly enough, this example of unity among enemies might be found in two countries with strong political ties to them. It only makes sense that since the U.S. and Russia are opposing forces, their geopolitically significant partners, Turkey and Armenia, would have a similar relationship. Neighboring countries, Armenia and Turkey, have a bloody history that influences current perspectives which perpetuates what could be argued as stronger emotional and political divide than their previously mentioned partners. In spite of that deep divide between the two, there seems to be a possible remedy to this coil-like situation. It can be found in Armenia, where the past is painful. Where reconciling that pain is the remedy. It's the Armenia of today and tomorrow, where Mt. Ararat is no longer located, though still a national symbol. To the west of this largely unknown landlocked little country is its historical enemy: military powerhouse, Turkey. It is here where Armenia's previously mentioned national symbol, Mt. Ararat, is located. Having a national symbol rest in a country regarded as a historical nemesis adds an ironically positive dynamic that can serve as a symbolic representation for the unity the future may hold for these two neighbors.

Two of the epicenters of these twenty-four-hour factories for a potentially united future are the Helsinki Citizens Assembly - Vanadzor (HCAV), to which I can gratefully attribute many sleepless nights wrapped in a whirlpool of writing and reflection, and Helsinki Citizens Assembly - Istanbul. Briefly describing this organization, the emphasis is the protection of human rights domestically. However, it seems that these small, controversial, at times even hated, organizations have decided to crack their knuckles at the sight of controversy and hate to take on a much bigger role. One that could serve as a beacon for a potentially united future. Locking arms with one another these two organizations have begun organizing events to chip away at the bloody, costly divide between the two ethnic neighbors, neighbors more similar to each other than either is willing to admit. Until now. It's at this point along this long walk, where we approach the thin ice with starving piranha waiting underneath. Drawing much controversy and critique from locals and politicians HCAV and HCAI organized a five day summer camp for young and aspiring teachers in both countries wherein the aim is to break barriers and establish strong social relations with one another.

In a conversation about this controversial topic with Artur Sakunts, Chairman of HCAV, the power of this dangerously progressive perspective was seen through a subtle and confident smile. As his glasses slightly lifted atop his smile, Chairman Sakunts wholeheartedly expressed to me the most impactful elements of the experience. He began to speak confidently about the participants who weren't much younger or older than us. He highlighted how warming it was to see their openness and willingness to meet Armenian participants half way. Much of it came from a curiosity that was sparked when Turkish participants found that there had been more information withheld from them than they knew. In this instance, with these people, it wasn't necessarily a lie that was told by their government that they found most troubling. Rather, bits of their history were withheld from them as several of the speakers emotionally confessed to being "the grandchildren of murderers." Herein, it was found that the betrayal did not only belong to Armenians, but the common Turkish person as well. With arm gestures pointing from his heart to his head, Chairman Sakunts went on to say that "they were good people" wherein he emphasized "people" in a seemingly involuntary way. He paused, locked listeners to their seats with half a smile and an intense gaze, and watched facial expressions change as the gravity of this small project began to settle in for those participating in the conversation.



The point of emphasis at this point in the conversation was the humanitarian perspective taking priority over a nationalistic one. Avoiding the murky and complex politics between the two nations, Chairman Sakunts reemphasized the significance of how receptive the participants on both sides were when he said, leaning back in his black leather chair behind his desk while gazing at the ceiling, "I saw the youth that was participating and how openminded they were. A more humanitarian perspective was taken by them." Clarifying that much of this was made possible after the resonating impact that the murder of Turkish-Armenian journalist Hrant Dink had, he mentioned the bigger issues that have a mental impact on the perspectives of Turkish and Armenian youth. With shoulder shrugs and a very matter-of-fact tone of voice he said "Opening Armenian-Turkish borders will have a mental impact on the youth as well as economic and political. Additionally, there had to be a lot of time spent with each other in general." Speaking testimony to the challenging nature of this task, it wasn't agreed upon whether it would be more feasible to open national borders or for Turkish and Armenian youth to simply spend time with one another, given the difficulties in travel for many of the citizens.

Peace Building Coordinator, Armine Sadikyan, was also hopeful of the goals though critical of the means while also commenting on the role of diasporic Armenians. The ugly reality is that schools are funded through the state and with that funding comes academic stipulation. When asked if this can have a big enough impact in the near future Sadikyan firmly said "no because teachers are fearful of losing their jobs. Since government propaganda is so strongly pro-Turkish and anti-Turkish claims are dangerous to make it slows the progress." This painfully cold fact was immediately soothed when Sadikyan expressed high hopes for the distant future with reasoning grounded in, ironically enough, history; more specifically, recent history. A subtly spoken about topic is common home among Armenians and Turks. Though many will openly disown the idea in passionate anger, there's been whispers about a commonality between Armenians and Turks. This with talks about the more financially stable lives people would tend to live in Turkey, and then segued into various topics of conversation about Turks and Armenians living and working together in the country. Sadikyan found this to be an inspiring point when asked about

whether or not such a reality was plausible: “I don’t just think so, it is. A lot of Armenians work in Turkey, even if they’re undocumented, without any problems. Many of them are actually proud to work in Turkey and find economic success.” Herein a ideological problem presents itself, and Sadikyan is critical of those who hold it.

Sadikyan began to discuss the problem she had with what she saw as a one sided and “held back” mindset that many diasporians have. “Firstly, many of them don’t pay attention to very important issues such as violations of human rights within Armenia but won’t hesitate to point the finger at Turks. But it’s hard to say, the mindset of diasporian-Armenians changes from place to place.” On a similar note, Chairman Sakunts pointed out a bias that Armenians tend to have toward Russia (not to undermine the



large community which is critical of the largely negative effect the Russian presence has had in Armenia). Sakunts noted that “about 100,000 Armenians live and work in Turkey and they’re not even spoken of among Armenians unless in a negative way. Meanwhile in Russia more Armenians are killed than in Turkey, but you won’t hear anything about it. If someone dies in Turkey you hear about it all the time.” Granted, this knee-jerk animosity is deeply rooted and understandable, but Sakunts and Sadikyan are adamant about diasporian-Armenians having a more modern and unbiased perspective in the well-being of Armenians.

The possibility of this event growing into a juggernaut social movement that creates a self-perpetuating social perspective for the better is slim. With its momentum it brings an entire history that’s raw-skin sensitive, touching nearly every wound of those with passionate nationalistic ideologies on both sides. However, one persistent and self-evident truth is that in order to have progress, there must be friction between opposing forces. Here there is friction. The opposing forces, however, are no longer clearly defined by name, culture, or national borders.

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