Turkey Takes an Important Step toward Armenia

The OSCE Minsk Group cochairmen, Igor Popov (Russia), Jacques Faure (France) and Ian Kelly (United States), issued a surprise brief statement after meeting with the Armenian and Azerbaijani foreign ministers, Edward Nalbandian and Elmar Mammadyarov. It says the mediators working the Nagorno-Karabakh problem discussed steps for strengthening the cease-fire in the conflict zone with the ministers and that the cochairs again expressed their concern about “recent violence on the Line of Conflict” and issues pertaining to civilian flights to Nagorno-Karabakh. The mediators confirmed that they would visit the region in the coming weeks to discuss “next steps aimed at reaching a peaceful resolution of the conflict” with the presidents of Azerbaijan and Armenia. Technically, the OSCE Minsk Group was in full compliance with its previously announced “politesse”: The cochairs held separate meetings with Mammadyarov and Nalbandian, followed by a general meeting in the 3+2 format, which included the cochairs and both foreign ministers.

There was another scheme. The previous meeting between the Minsk Group cochairs and the Armenian and Azerbaijani foreign ministers took place on January 28, also in Paris. Therefore, the intense nature of the Karabakh negotiations suggested that new ideas for settling the Karabakh conflict would be discussed. Incidentally, Jacques Faure, the cochair from France, had hinted as much. If we consider that the Karabakh negotiations are based on the Madrid Principles that were updated in 2009 and have been adopted but not signed by the parties to the conflict, and that the OSCE Minsk Group has not disavowed them, we can speak with complete certainty only about new ideas in the “Madrid format.” Azerbaijan is unhappy about that because one of its principles calls for giving Karabakh an interim status.

That is why we should have anticipated a diplomatic surprise from Baku. And there was one, but not what was expected. Turkey offered the OSCE Minsk Group a plan of its own late last year. Armenia would return to Azerbaijan seven regions neighboring on Nagorno-Karabakh other than Karabakh itself. Then it would take part in the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railroad project, and the Kars-Gyumri rail line and highway service would be opened between Turkey and Armenia. However, as the Azerbaijani political analyst Mubariz Ahmedoglu, chairman of the Center for Political Innovations and Technologies, has said, neither the mediators nor Armenia has reacted to it.

There are many reasons for that. The first is that after signing the Zürich Protocols with Armenia that were supposed to restore diplomatic relations between the two countries and open their borders, Turkey failed to ratify the documents. The second reason is the pressure placed on Ankara by Baku, which forced it to link implementation of the Protocols with Karabakh settlement. Therefore, both the cochairs and Yerevan see Turkey’s proposal for the OSCE Minsk Group about unblocking Armenia as an attempt either to paralyze the group or to change its format. Even Azerbaijani Foreign Ministry spokesman Elman Abdullayev was forced to admit that “any gesture from Turkey to Armenia adversely affects the peace talks on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.” At the same time, he reiterated that “the Nagorno-Karabakh peace talks are incompatible with the Turkish-Armenian rapprochement process because Armenia insists on negotiations without preconditions.” Strictly speaking, however, Armenia is right, because the Zürich Protocols do not provide for such a linkage.

If Turkey had met the “Zürich conditions,” it would at least have had a chance of becoming another mediator in the OSCE Minsk group, something Azerbaijan has been insisting on. But when Abdullayev says that “Azerbaijan expects more than just Turkey’s support for changing the status quo on Nagorno-Karabakh,” it makes us wonder about
further actions by Baku, especially if we consider the statement by Ali Hasanov, head of the Department of Public and Political Issues of the Administration of the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan: “If the status quo continues, war with Armenia is inevitable.”

There is another remarkable fact that is apparently related. Russian Airborne Troops Commander Colonel General Vladimir Shamanov had the following reaction to events in the South Caucasus: “In addition to problems that may arise in Russian territory, there are certain aspects to our recognition of the sovereignty of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, as well as our obligations as allies within the framework of our relations with Russia’s CSTO partners. They have to do with Armenia, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan.”

What comes next? Incidentally, the OSCE Minsk Group has expressed concern about the impact of “civilian flights to Nagorno-Karabakh.” Meanwhile, the Turkish media has reported that the first direct Yerevan-Van flight will take place on April 3. Thus, Turkey has made significant progress towards normalizing relations with Armenia. Unless, of course, Baku once again attempts to block the plan.