
Turkey Eyes Normal Ties With Armenia After Election

Reporting by Gareth Jones
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Turkey's president said on Thursday he hoped the victory of Serzh Sarksyian in Armenia's presidential election would lead to a normalization of relations between their estranged countries.

Turkey has no diplomatic relations with Armenia and keeps their land border closed in protest at Yerevan's occupation of territory belonging to ally Azerbaijan.

Turkey and Armenia are also at loggerheads over Ankara's refusal to acknowledge as genocide the mass killings of ethnic Armenians by Ottoman Turks in 1915-16.

"I hope your new position ... will permit the creation of the necessary environment for normalizing relations between the Turkish and Armenian peoples, who have proven over centuries they can live together in peace and concord," President Abdullah Gul said in a message of congratulations to Sarksyian.

"I sincerely wish that ... an atmosphere based on reciprocal trust and cooperation can be established that will contribute to regional peace and prosperity," Gul said.

Sarksyian, 53, took 52.86 percent of the votes in Tuesday's election but thousands of supporters of his main challenger Levon Ter-Petrosyan, Armenia's first president, say the ballot was rigged and have staged protests in the capital Yerevan.

Western observers say the poll was broadly fair.

The tiny ex-Soviet republic of Armenia is sandwiched between Turkey and Azerbaijan in a region that is emerging as an important transit route for oil exports from the Caspian Sea to world markets, though Armenia has no pipelines of its own.

Turkey was among the first countries to recognize Armenia's independence after the 1991 fall of the Soviet Union but has no diplomatic ties due to Armenia's occupation of Nagorno-Karabakh, a slice of Azeri territory populated by ethnic Armenians.

Sarksyian, like his predecessor Robert Kocharyan, who is seen in Ankara as a hardliner, is a native of Nagorno-Karabakh.

Turkey strongly denies Armenian claims, backed by many Western historians, that the massacres of Armenians by Ottoman Turks during World War One amounted to a systematic genocide.

Ankara says large numbers of both Christian Armenians and Muslim Turks were killed during the violent breakup of the Ottoman Empire. It also notes that many Armenians in eastern Turkey sided with invading Russian troops against the Ottomans.
