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Human Development

The Armenian-Turkish tourism cooperation

*Facing issues, challenges and business
strategies to develop prospective common
benefits*

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Introduction

Since October 2010, International Center for Human Development (ICHD) has been involved in Support to Armenian Turkish Rapprochement (SATR). One goal of this project is the “development of new business partnerships and regional professional network”¹. The consortium of Armenian and Turkish partners implemented in the program has fulfilled this aim by initiating meetings, conferences, studies and Business to Business (B to B) panels linking professionals from various economic sectors. This study pays special attention to tourism industry, which represents a prospective field for Armenian-Turkish cooperation. As SATR conclusion has been fixed to October, 2012, this report attempts to account for what has been accomplished since 2010 under this program, especially after the creation of the Association of Armenian Turkish Travel companies (AATTc). But it also offers an overview of the Armenian-Turkish tourism cooperation’s situation apart from SATR implementations, by presenting key stakeholders, opportunities and challenges related to this issue.

This research study has been prepared by a student specialized in Political Sciences studies, holding an intern-position at ICHD during the period between July 22nd and August 31st, 2012. It is based on various types of resources including SATR partners’ reports, American and European Union studies and credible academic research papers. Press articles mostly provided by Armenian and Turkish agencies accounting for the period between 2007 and 2012 have been used as factual information. We also found firsthand information in several websites detailing programs of travel agents, organizations, exhibitions and official meetings. Main conclusions have also been drawn from the execution and the analysis of interviews with travel agents and tourism organizations’ delegates.

Before entering the core of the research study, main motivations for developing “regional tourism” must be revealed and some parameters of this tourism cooperation must be defined.

It is necessary to underline how relevant it is to pay attention to tourism sector cooperation when it comes to have a vested-interest in the Turkish-Armenian rapprochement process. As the border has been closed since nearly 20 years and as political tenses have hardly provided governmental rapprochement between the two countries, business exchanges have played an important role in developing positive relations between Armenian and Turkish people. It is worth

¹ <http://armturkdialogue.net/about-satr/>

saying that tourism industry can be considered as a prolific field for cooperation. Linked to Eastern Anatolia by history, Armenian people are eager to cross the border and discover their heritage in Turkey²; while great development of Armenian tourism sector (especially since 2000, in term of visitors and facilities) also provides opportunities to welcome Turkish travelers. Considered with textile as “the main sector where cooperation already exists and is recommended” (from Businessmen opinion)³, tourism first collaborations go back to the early 1990’s. The report previously evoked also notices that 26 tourism businessmen respondents out of 28 have experienced cooperation with their Turkish/Armenian neighbors. Moreover, tourism cooperation cannot be only appreciated regarding to its economic benefits. Indeed, business collaborations and touristic trips set grounds for what some people called “popular diplomacy”⁴. By meeting each other and discovering their common culture and history, the two societies can little by little fill the gap of suspicion and resentment still remaining between their countries. What must be kept in mind is the main role of civil society, associations, individuals and private business sector in this tourism cooperation process. This is finally a major asset while diplomatic relations hardly gives favor to reconciliation.

This research aims to give an overview of Turkish-Armenian tourism cooperation but it focuses on “regional tourism”, which concerns specific preoccupations and areas. On the Armenian side, the gradual increasing of international tourism’s demand came along with the development of travel agencies operating in Turkey, especially to Istanbul or Antalya. This research study accounts for these destinations’ trips as they represent a large market for the Armenian-Turkish tourism industries. Nevertheless, it seemed more relevant to pay special attention to “regional tourism”, as the main stakeholders interviewed during the inquiry were focusing on this issue. Moreover, it may be about the regional tourism concerns that most of the potentials remain untapped; although cooperation could bring major opportunities. Attempting to define the area concerning regional tourism, we ought to integrate Iran, Azerbaijan and Georgia. Iranian and Georgian territories are mainly used as transit areas in the closed-border situation and are automatically included in the Armenian-Turkish preoccupations. It is actually already a subject of divergence whether the tourism cooperation should focus on bilateral or regional relations. Thus, let’s first consider the geographical area concerned by the Armenian tours, commonly designated as “Historical Western Armenia” or “Eastern Anatolia”. These Armenian tours (based on Narekavank tour LLC example⁵) focuses on areas as Cilicia, Van region, Mount Ararat and touristic sites in Turkey as Historical City of Ani, Akhtamar Island and several Armenian monasteries and churches in Anatolia. Although,

² Cf. “Armenian-Turkish Citizens’ Mutual Perceptions and Dialogue Project”, TESEV-HASA study report, Yerevan, Istanbul 2004: according to this opinion poll, 73,5% of Armenians respondents would be willing to go to Turkey for tourism and vacation (and overwhelming majority of them (94,8%) would like to visit Turkey to see the land of their ancestors. Also, Majority of Turkish respondents (50,4%) would go to Armenia for business and trade.

³ Cf. “Armenian-Turkish Business Relations through the Eyes of Business Opinion Leaders”, *SATR Study Report*, Yerevan 2011

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ <http://nvtour.am/>

Turkish tours (based on Fest Travel Tour example⁶) draw a regional tourism area around the South Caucasus, including Georgia and Azerbaijan.

On the left side: *Armenian's focus area concerning regional tourism: "Historical Armenia and Cilicia Tour"*⁷ mapping

On the right side: *Turkish's focus area concerning regional tourism: "Caucasus Tour"*⁸ mapping



Finally, it is now to define what are the issues and concrete projects requiring the Armenian-Turkish cooperation around these areas. First, the tourism cooperation refers to business collaborations. Travel agents operating abroad are usually linked to partners in the hosting country, who facilitate the organization of the trips concerning hotel facilities, guide tours, visa and transport accommodations. These partnerships also aim to enlarge the tourism market: travel agencies create new packages in the neighboring countries for their locals, as well as for their foreign clients. Thus, regional tourism joint-promotion (linking tours in Eastern Turkey and Armenia) devoted to international foreigners (especially Armenians from the diaspora) is a main issue of tourism cooperation projects. This can be accomplished in international and regional exhibitions, by designing and advertising joint-programs. Moreover, the cooperation can also implement stakeholders apart from tourism business: experts and officials. These stakeholders are implemented in several kinds of cooperation projects as the renovation and the promotion of historical sites or the implementations for fostering ways of communication between the two countries. To another extent, the cooperation could also aim to identify and to resolve difficulties

⁶ <http://www.festtravel.com/en>

⁷ <http://nvtour.am/?p=historical-western-armenia-cilicia> : this tour has been selected as an example as it witnesses for the whole Turkish area designated as "Western Armenia"

⁸ <https://maps.google.com/>: the mapping has been elaborated according to the information delivered by Mustafa Pestereli about a tour operated by Fest Travel. The connection drawn between the three capitals does not account for the itinerary of the tour but aims to point out the visited countries.

impeding tourism development. This would include lobbying actions and, finally, the involvement of the two States in the cooperation process.

Considering that many different stakeholders are implemented in the cooperation actions, merely questioning ourselves on the regional tourism's issues would be unsatisfying because it would not provide information about the ways to lead Turkish-Armenian cooperation programs. The following question aims to illustrate this preoccupation:

How do the different agents implemented in tourism issues handle the Armenian-Turkish tourism relations?

The first section pays attention to the tourism valorization of Armenian-Turkish historical heritage in Eastern Anatolia. The renovation and the promotion of several historical sites represent an important issue for both Turkish and Armenian tourism agents and could join them together. We decided to focus on the renovation project accomplished for the Holy Cross Church on Akhtamar Island and to pay attention to the current program held in the Historical City of Ani.

The second section reveals a main issue of Armenian-Turkish tourism cooperation: "crossing the border". It has been designated as the major preoccupation by several agents from both Armenian and Turkish side. The travel agents would certainly appreciate the opportunities created by an opened-border, or at least by a normalized situation. Facing difficulties on this issue, some of them attempt to give another solution to the problem by opening a new air routes.

The third section describes the cooperation programs and actions which has been and are currently accomplished. We attempt here to identify two approaches on cooperation, distinguishing divergent strategies led by different tourism agents. On one side, we can define a "regional concern approach"; on the other side, we can identify a "national and international platforms approach".

Section 1

The promotion of the Armenian historical heritage in Eastern Turkey: Taking advantage from renovation projects to foster cooperation

In the region of Van still remain hundreds of historical sites, monasteries, churches or cities, which represent several witnesses of the Armenian heritage. These sites are the fundamental elements of the regional tourism development and represent the opportunity to link together tourism promoters from Turkey and Armenia. Regarding to most of these sites remaining in a state of ruin, their renovation must be considered as an imperative cultural and economic issue. Then, it is not inaccurate to question the role undertaken by tourism organizations and agencies concerning the preservation projects. It is also essential to appreciate in which views the historical sites are promoted and to question whether their promotion valorizes their Armenian affiliation or not.

Our analysis will focus on few sites currently under the attention of the main stakeholders interviewed during the inquiry.

Opening The Holy Cross Church on Akhtamar Island: a new breath for faith tourism in the region of Van

After nearly one century of neglecting this monument, the Turkish State handled a restoration program on Akhtamar Island. The renovation has been held between 2005 and 2007, leading to the re-opening of the monument on March 29th 2007. The program has been financed (approximately 1.4 million USD) by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism. The reconstruction, led by the Armenian-Turkish architect Zakaria Mildanoglu, has been accomplished with the assistance of Van municipality. The regional administrations have been currently eager to develop an attractive area for faith tourism. Thus, the monument is a Turkish State property and has been re-opened as a secular museum, under the name of the Armenian Orthodox Church of the Holy Cross of Akdamar.

From this renovation program, we can highlight the main difficulties and issues faced by any project concerning the Armenian heritage promotion in Turkey. Among several goals, the Ministry of Culture and Tourism aims to develop faith and cultural tourism in Southern Anatolia. Nevertheless, many decisions have been taken in contradiction with this goal, treating the monument without respect for its religious and cultural value. Firstly, the church opened on March 2007 as a “secular museum” where the celebration of religious offices were not authorized. As a

result of the repeated requests from Armenian associations and from Patriarch Mesrob II, the Turkish government finally made a concession. On 2010, it permitted to perform a Mass Celebration in September, once a year. Secondly, the reconstructed site has been renamed. This act has been widely perceived as an outrageous denial of the Armenian historical presence in the region. Initially called the Sourb Kach Church (Church of the Holy Cross in Armenian) of Akhtamar Island (a name inherited from an Armenian legend) the museum is now named “Akdamar”, which means “white vein” in Turkish. Last but not least, a main subject of discontent has remained in minds until October 2010 because no Cross had been added to the dome of the monument while the renovation was over. Given that the Turkish State gave the permission for a first Mass to be celebrated on September 2010, a cross should have been placed on before the celebration. Finally the cross was not put on the dome before October 2nd (deputy minister citing technical problems). This neglect has led to an important boycott of the celebration among whom the Armenian Apostolic Church of Etchimiadzine, the Armenian State (which did not send any official) and some travel agencies⁹ participated in different ways. Facing these elements, we can assert that the promoters of the faith tourism development remain sensitively dependent from political and ideological concerns.

The municipalities and local agents from the region of Van constantly appreciate the Armenian heritage renovation projects with a vested-interest for their prospective advantages. The Holy Cross Church renovation witnesses for the economic benefits of this kind of program. Numbers speak for themselves. According to an Armenian newspaper article dated from April 2010¹⁰, the average tourist levels in Van were nearly 5.000 before the Akhtamar church was renovated. In 2009, Cihan news Turkish press agency accounted for 23.932 visitors at Akdamar. There were 30 804 visitors in 2010, and 25 500 were accounted for the first six month of 2011.¹¹ Archbishop Aram Ateshyan commented that the Mass celebration of September 11th, 2011 brought together nearly 3.000 pilgrims which could hardly enter the little monument¹². According to Abdullah Tuncdemir, director of Van branch of TURSAB, more than one service a year should be tolerated by Turkish State in the future year. The next celebration will take place on September 9th. It is planned that a Yerevan-Van Air flight would facilitate the travel of Armenian pilgrims. Moreover, since 2007, the renovation project aimed to be continued on Akhtamar Island. In order to be able to welcome the flood of 2011, a new quay was to be built. Also, during the recent months, green places maintenance and lighting activities are to be carried out. Akhtamar seems to become a major touristic area in Eastern Anatolia. It witnesses for the legitimacy of fostering the promotion of several similar

⁹ Narekavank tour LLC initially planned to lead 250 visitors from Armenia; Ani Tour would have lead 100 people to the celebration instead of more than 300 persons initially planned.

¹⁰ <http://www.arminfo.info/74092F13-97D5-23C9-201F79D9A26140AD>

¹¹ <http://news.am/eng/news/67687.html>

¹² <http://www.tert.am/en/news/2011/09/12/akhtamar-mass/>

religious monuments in the region as the St Girargos Armenian Church in Diyarbakir or the Seven Churches monastery of Varaka Vank.

Akhtamar renovation is a case in point of the regional tourism promotion. It aims to promote faith tourism in Eastern Anatolia and to create an attractive region for travelers interested in religious heritage. Nevertheless, ideological concerns set against the valorization of the Armenian affiliation of the site, impeding the ambition of developing an Armenian-Turkish tourism joint-promotion. The City of Ani does not face a similar situation as it is promoted in a quite different view.

The promotion of the Historical City of Ani: a global tourism project

The City of Ani used to be the capital of the kingdom of Armenia (961-1045) and is located on the Silk Route. Thus, it is a main Armenian and world heritage, but currently in a dramatic estate of ruin. The question of who are the stakeholders implemented in the renovation and how they promote this site focuses our attention here.

We first noticed the main role undertaken by the international organization of UNESCO. In 2004, The European Union Parliament urged Turkish authorities to ask for the registration on the world heritage list of several historical sites as Akhtamar Island and Ani city. Regarding Ani, this call has been taken up by the Turkish State. It recently registered the site in the preliminary world heritage list¹³. As the Turkish officials and Medias are inclined to minimize the “Armenian nature” of the site, it is accurate to question how it has been presented by the UNESCO delegation. The official presentation accounts for Ani “bearing exceptional testimony to the Armenian cultural, artistic, architectural and urban design development as a whole”, but also put forward its “multinational and multi religious” affiliation. Moreover, it is important to perceive that this UNESCO promotion reveals a certain ambition from the Turkish State: integrating the site into an international tourism issue.

This strategy of global promotion is going with renovation programs. Since 1995, various projects have been led by Turkish Ministry of Culture and Tourism but the current one should be more intensive as it had been promoted for the UNESCO registration. It involves Turkish and international experts and it is financed with the assistance of World Monument Fund. The first phase of the project concerning the church of the Holy Savior (Surp P'rikitch) is supported by a grant from the U.S. Department of State's Ambassador's Fund for Cultural Preservation.¹⁴ The

¹³ <http://whc.unesco.org/en/tentativelists/5725/>

¹⁴ <http://www.wmf.org/field/phase-i-work-completed-ani-archaeological-site>

restoration program is expected to cost 1 million USD and to take four years as it started in January 2012.¹⁵

Regarding to these elements, the renovation and promotion of the historical city of Ani does not seem to give any role to the Armenian stakeholders. Turkish officials faintly mention the need for the two countries to “cooperate to restore the ancient town of Ani”¹⁶ but there has been no deep thought about any kind of State consultations. Armenian experts are said to be integrated in the projects but they don’t seem to be part of the WMF collaboration program. Armenian travel agencies’ organizations do not seem to involve themselves in any kind of actions either, although some argued for intending to lobby in order to defend their interests on this issue. Is an opportunity for developing an Armenian-Turkish tourism cooperation left aside? Yeghishe Tanashyan, Vice president of AATA (Armenian Association of Travel Agents), claimed that the renovation and promotion of Ani city would bring an even more important growth of tourism than the one of Akhtamar Island.¹⁷ According to Turkish official statistics, 23.000 tourists visited Ani in the first half of 2011 but Armenians did not account for a large part of the visitors. Nevertheless, the location of the site (geographically on the border) can be considered as a highest opportunity to develop tourism exchanges. The restoration of this crossroad on the Silk Route should emphasize that the city of Ani represents a physical bridge between the two countries. Some goes as far as imaging the ultimate goal of creating a free zone which would allow tourists to cross the border on a pedestrian bridge¹⁸. If this hypothesis seems currently far to be realistic, It is obvious that an implication of Armenian stakeholders in the renovation of Ani would keep in mind the idea of an opened-border. On the contrary, a strategy of international promotion from the Turkish side would go in the opposite way.

On the left side: *A “touristic” panorama view on the Historical City of Ani from the Armenian side of the border*

On the right side: *The ruined Armenian Church of Saint Gregory through the barbed wire*

¹⁵ <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkey-renovates-armenian-monuments-as-gesture.aspx?pageID=438&n=turkey-renovates-armenian-monuments-as-gesture-2011-05-05>

¹⁶ <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/english/domestic/11425264.asp?gid=244>

¹⁷ <http://www.mediamax.am/en/news/region/1123/>

¹⁸ http://www.tepav.org.tr/upload/files/1271673940r8755.Building_Bridges_of_Trust_and_Confidence_between_Turks_and_Armenians_in_Support_of_the_Normalization_and_Recon.pdf



Section 2

Crossing the closed-border: Looking for Armenian-Turkish cooperation routes

Tourism prospects regarding to an opened-border and to the Turkish-Armenian normalization

On April 3th 1993, the Turkish government closed the border with Armenia in support of Azerbaijan in Karabagh conflict. Since then, in spite of the hindrances to Turkish-Armenian relations induced by this decision, tourism activities connecting the two sides of the border have not been nonexistent. Armenians have still been eager to discover their historical heritage in Turkey as they visited Ani City or Akhtamar Island. Turkish and Armenian tourism agents have been keen to foster regional tourism. As tourism businessmen consider the opportunities of a hypothetical re-opening of the border, we can account for important benefits that could be brought to tourism sector.

First of all, the re-opening of the border should come with a normalization of diplomatic relations. According to a survey led among Tourism businessmen from Turkey and Armenia¹⁹, one of the major hindrances to the tourism industries cooperation is a lack of consulting and information about programs and legislations. Diplomatic missions providing such kind of services would foster the development of a more effective tourism market. Moreover, an opened-border would intensify contacts between travel agents and organizations, facilitating business to business meetings, conferences and cooperation programs.

Secondly, the main benefits of an opened-border would be in transportation and the movement of people issue. Armenian and Turkish tourists would be concerned as well as international foreigners. Today, road vehicles are currently constrained to go round the border by passing through Georgia or Iran. This travel represents an important loss of time (20 hours from Yerevan to Van) and money (Visa and transportation). It becomes nonsense when we think about the promotion of the historical City of Ani. Indeed, it is hardly accessible to tourists coming from Armenia although it is located on the border. Concerning international foreigners, members of the Turkish Armenian Business Development Council (TABDC)²⁰ argued that 380 000 travelers visited Armenia in 2006, pointing that these tourists could have brought to Eastern Turkey approximately 76 million USD if they had easily crossed the border.

¹⁹ "Armenian-Turkish Business Relations through the Eyes of Business Opinion Leaders", *SATR Study Report*, Yerevan 2011

²⁰ <http://globalheritagefund.org/images/uploads/docs/GHFBSECIstanbul22006GULTEKIN.pdf>

Yet, there is no point in dealing with the issue of re-opening the border without paying attention to the realism of this hypothesis. Actually, if “the protocols” of 2009²¹ brought hopes for change in Turkey-Armenia relations, recent developments have driven away the possibility of a quick re-opening of the border. In October 2009, an optimistic Armenian Newspaper²² argued that it could happen before the end of the year. On February 12th 2010, a discussion on “Turkish-Armenian Relations and Cross-Border regionalism” witnessed for politics enthusiasm. However, consequently to the negotiation process’s renunciation stated on April 2010, the vision of the normalization stepped back. From travel agents’ and members of Turkish-Armenian organizations’ points of view the re-opening of the border is no longer on the political debate. Delegates of the Association of Armenian and Turkish Travel companies (AATTc) argued that lobbying on the two side of the border could enhance the normalization but also stated claimed that the associations of travel agents had not enough weight to accelerate any change yet.

Finally, the question at stake here is: “what can be expected on the field of normalization concerning tourism issues?” Professionals pointed few policies which could be led, as well as hindrances which could be removed:

- Fostering cooperation by supporting with funds organizations as AATTc
- Removing administrative obstacles (due to political reluctance) to the official registration of these organizations.
- Harmonizing legislations on road transportation (removing seats limitation for Armenian busses on Turkish territory) and advertisement (facilitating promotion of joint-tours).
- Supporting and facilitating Van-Yerevan air route opening.

At last, these demands are not shared by all the Turkish-Armenian tourism cooperation stakeholders. However, they witness for concrete steps which can be accomplished in spite of a remaining closed-border.

Van-Yerevan air route project : a challenge for Armenian and Turkish travel agents

Among the cooperation projects demanding for support, we decided to focus on the opening of a Van-Yerevan Air route. This project is a case in point of the Turkish-Armenian tourism industries cooperation, regarding to its aims, challenges and divergence of optimism and pessimism views.

Van-Yerevan air flight would be forty minutes long. When it comes to support regional tourism this opportunity of facilitating the communication between the two cities seems quite relevant. The current connection is not effective for tourism development: the travel by the road is considered as

²¹ More information on the Turkey-Armenia protocols: http://hrcolumbia.org/peacebuilding/diplomatic_history.pdf

²² http://www.armenianow.com/news/10692/travel_and_turkey_open_border_expe

a long and uncomfortable travel, air connection via Istanbul is even longer. In 1996, an air corridor was opened between Istanbul and Yerevan, re-establishing exchanges which had been broken since 1993. But the weekly air flight between the two capitals and the Yerevan-Antalya (-Trabzon or – Bodrum) summer flights do not facilitate the communication between Eastern Turkey and Armenia. In this view, Van-Yerevan may be a major step for the regional cooperation.

What are the main difficulties facing the opening of this air route and how are they handled? The first issue was to obtain states approvals. At the beginning, difficulties emerged on Turkish side. On August 2011, Arslan Bayram (owner of Van Way Airlines Company) had to postpone the opening of the project until he could get Ankara's permission²³, which he finally obtained. The second challenge consisted in transforming Van airport into an international platform. Today, Van facilities are still considered as an internal airport but a solution has been found with the cooperation of the Turkish State. It has been stated that custom and security services would be transferred from the border by busses in case of exceptional international air flights. Also, according to Abdullah Tuncdemir (Member of the Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Van)²⁴, a new international terminal should be under construction in Van. Finally, the major challenge is to make this new airline economic sustainable. Parameters concerning the airplanes hardly provide ideal solutions. Main difficulties remain in the conditions of rent and maintenance of the airplanes (annual or seasonal), their transfer from a third airport (Van having not any based-airplanes) and the model and size of the vehicles. These questions constituted the subject of negotiations during several meetings. It has been especially on the debate since July 2011, after the creation of the AATTc. The association has been the leading promoter of the project but It did not convince many other agents involved in the Armenian-Turkish tourism cooperation. Main critics opposed to the project concerned its economic sustainability. The price of the travel would remain more important than busses; wealthy and middle-class customers would not be satisfied by the current security and comfort facilities of Van. Also, it is argued that the project essentially focuses on Yerevan to Van connection, then concerning mainly Armenian tourists going to Turkey. Thus, it would be necessary to equally promote tourism from both sides of the border. Regarding to the current development of the project, these last critics does not seem to be groundless. Indeed, at the moment, what is expected by AATTc is a first and unique flight on September 9th, 2012. It would be a going-and-return flight from Yerevan to Van aiming to allow many Armenian tourists to attend the Celebration of the Holy Cross Church on Akhtamar Island. The circumstances of the Mass Celebration make this flight economically profitable. From AATTc delegate's point of view, it would provide indirect positive effects on tourism activities even if there are no major money earnings for the airline industry. However, according to most of the businessmen, back and forth regular flight is currently not profitable from economic sense.

²³ <http://news.am/eng/news/70184.html>

²⁴ <http://www.mediamax.am/printpage.php?lang=en&nid=1847>

Taking into account the divergence of views concerning this Van-Yerevan air route, it can be asserted that the Armenian-Turkish tourism cooperation cannot be the expression of a unique idea. Different approaches, strategies and interests are hidden besides this issue shared by several stakeholders.

Section 3

The main role of travel agents in the Turkish-Armenian tourism Cooperation: Strategies and organizations

The following part describes an attempt to identify two ways of perceiving the Armenian-Turkish tourism cooperation, which foster different strategies and actions. We should not claim that two groups of stakeholders strictly belong to two divergent approaches excluding one another. Nevertheless, the membership in an organization, the participation in a cooperation project and the faith in a specific way constitute some elements of distinction which allow us to draw a categorization of several travel agents. Then, it is relevant to ask ourselves whether these agents complete one another or act in competition.

The “regional concern approach”

Although it may be precipitated to draw an analysis of a quite young project, we would try to offer a comment on the nearly one-year old Association of Armenian and Turkish Travel companies (AATTc). Regarding to this association, a certain approach of the Turkish-Armenian tourism cooperation can be identified as a “regional concern approach”. It refers to the idea of valorizing the action of regional (and local, to a certain extent) stakeholders in Eastern Anatolia and Armenia. It does not mean that connections with national and international agents are rejected. However, the main goal of this approach is to consider the development of regional tourism as the concern of regional agents from Turkey and Armenia acting for their common benefits.

Let’s witness first how AATTc emerged with this particular view of the Armenian-Turkish cooperation. The project has been initiated by the Support for Armenian Turkish Rapprochement program (SATR).²⁵ At a first glance, this base would designate AATTc as a cooperation project on the national and international ground. Indeed, SATR provided AATTc with funds during one year and it is itself financed by the United State Agency for International Development (USAID)²⁶. Moreover, SATR is led by a consortium of Armenian and Turkish organizations acting on a national scale²⁷. We would designate AATTc as a regional/local project because of its integration into the

²⁵ <http://armturkdialogue.net/2011/07/23/armenian-and-turkish-businessmen-meet-in-yerevan/#more-1040>

²⁶ <http://armenia.usaid.gov/en/news-events/335>

²⁷ More information about SATR and Armenian and Turkish partners implemented: <http://armturkdialogue.net/about-satr/>

SATR 3rd priority area on “business partnership” and because the instigator of the association are regional tourism agents themselves. Six tourism businessmen acting in the Eastern Anatolia and Armenia created the association, signing a memorandum of understanding on July 22, 2011. Three were Armenian travel agencies, one other was a Turkish travel agency and the two last represented hotels in Van. Financial support from SATR program permitted to launch the association during its first year. But, as the period of the grant is now over, the association may continue to act independently. As there are no important financial needs at the moment, the association does not ask any registration fee. There are now ten members in the organization:

- Narekavank Tour LLC²⁸ (Armenia) Secretariat and Co-Chair
- LH Travel (Armenia)
- Mush-E (Armenia)
- Nata Tour (Armenia)
- Sil Plaza Hotel (Armenia)
- Ayanis Travel (Turkey) Co-Chair
- Tamara Hotel (Turkey)
- Mahan Tourism (Turkey)
- Rescate Hotel (Turkey)
- Van Asya Fuarcilik (Turkey)
- Oselo International Tours (Turkey, membership pending)

The secretariat and Armenian chair, Narekavank tour LLC is a travel agency exclusively specialized in regional tours in the Caucasus and in Anatolia (what is referred as “Historical Western Armenia”²⁹). It means that it operates in Armenia, Georgia, Turkey (Eastern) and Iran (northwest). Its clients are approximately 10% foreigners, 20% Armenians from diaspora and 70% Armenians locals. It is also to be noticed that Narekavank is a young business created in February 2008 by two co-founders well-connected to Turkey cooperation projects (as TABDC, ICE)³⁰ and to tourism activities (as the direction of tourism office). Yet, Narekavank does not seem strongly linked to the international and to the Armenian national travel agencies networks. Finally, the regional tourism activity of this travel agency essentially consists in leading Armenian locals to Eastern Turkey (and, to a limited extent, hosting international and Turkish tourists in Armenia). The leading position of Narekavank tour LLC in the association cannot let us exclude the idea that it has a certain influence on the AATTc cooperation strategies.

²⁸ <http://nvtour.am/?p=aboutus>

²⁹ <http://nvtour.am/?p=aboutus>

³⁰ For more information: <http://www.tabdc.org/>, <http://armturkbusiness.org/?p=news&l=en>

A deeper inquiry would have to describe the connections between AATTc members and their links with other organizations as the Armenian Association of Travel Agents (AATA)³¹ or the American Society of Travel Agents (ASTA)³². At the moment, it is argued that there is no theoretical contradiction about seeing these organizations completing one another; but facts shows that AATTc does not aim to subordinate its action to another institution. On the Turkish side, Abdullah Tuncdemir, president of Ayanis tour (co-chair of AATTc) is director of Van board of the Association of Turkish Travel Agency (TURSAB)³³. However, the support of TURSAB national boards to AATTc remains unclear. Concerning AATTc members themselves, they aim to enlarge their community but constantly keep in mind the idea that the organization should always act for its members benefit. It means that, even if a larger community would provide more weight to their lobbying actions, the members would see no interest in hosting a national or international agent as far as they are mainly local and regional organizations. A deeper inquiry would pay attention to the new future opportunities that will offer the recent membership of OSELO Tur³⁴, a travel agency based in Istanbul. Finally, it is to be noticed that the organization is not registered in Turkey and does not seem eager to be. This element emphasizes on the regional scale and the business field qualifying AATTc's approach on the tourism cooperation.

Then, what are the specific goals and actions led by the association? In which ways does it develop regional tourism? First, the goals and commitments established on July 22, 2011 dealt with promoting tourism services and fostering cooperation of Travel Agencies from Turkey and Armenia. But it also specifies concrete purposes as opening a direct flight between Yerevan and Van, participating in international tourism exhibitions and offering regional tour packages. The great deal of effort made for the fulfillment of the air line project gives a relevant illustration of AATTc's views on the tourism cooperation. Even if the project may not be economically sustainable for Air flight agencies, indirect benefits for tour operators lead the association to consider it in a positive way. Aside from this project of connecting the two countries by a regional air flight comes the idea of the regional tourism joint-promotion. AATTc gives concrete expressions to this idea when the Turkish and Armenian members exhibited their programs together. On October 7th 2011, Narekavank Tour represented AATTc at the "Silk Road Exhibition" in Van aiming to develop regional tour package and make contacts with new members. Few months later, five members could participate to the Berlin International Tourism Exchanges (ITB) on March 9-13 2012 among nearly 10 000 exhibitors. The Association offered them a prestigious umbrella, as the delegates of a regional tourism organization, which they could not afford when they were isolated travel agencies. International agents could appreciate a booklet of programs jointly designed by the Armenian and Turkish agencies of the region.

³¹ http://www.cts.am/index.php?cat_id=56

³² <http://asta.org/>

³³ <http://www.tursab.org.tr/en>

³⁴ <http://www.oselotur.com/>

Moreover, special views on several tourism issues illustrate AATTc's approach on the regional cooperation. First, AATTc delegates are among those who consider that travel agents can act for the preservation and the promotion of the Armenian heritage in Eastern Turkey. They also claim that travel agencies would act more effectively under the umbrella of a regional organization. Thus, AATTc aims to foster new restoration projects in Mush and Van. Delegates of the association would support renovation programs by participating in meeting, bringing their knowledge and advices, getting Turkish State authorizations and finding national or international funds. This implementation in the renovation issue would also be strengthened by lobbying strategies. Moreover, the delegates figured themselves that tourism travel agencies opportunities to get more weight in political and administrative could be improved. Concerning normalization or specific demands on ANI restoration, the association expressed confidence in its chance to defend the interests of regional tourism agents in Turkey as well as in Armenia. The association also perceives great support to their project in local municipalities (Van and Kars) and regional organizations (as the Trade and Industry Chamber of Van VATSO).

Nevertheless, several tourism agents do not share AATTc's approach on the Armenian-Turkish cooperation.

The “National and international platforms approach”

Apart from AATTc project, other views on Turkish-Armenian ways to cooperate on tourism activities can be identified. AATTc newly broke out with a new approach but it does not substitute strategies, organizations and tourism collaborations which have existed for more than ten years. In contrast to AATTc's approach, we would designate this original strategy as the “national and international platforms approach”. Several stakeholders implemented in the Turkish-Armenian tourism cooperation are concerned. They differ from AATTc by their conceptions of regional tourism and their activities.

According to this second approach, two organizations can set grounds for the cooperation on a national and institutional scale. These refer to the Association of Armenian Travel Agents (AATA) and the Association of Turkish Travel Agencies (TURSAB). The first one has been established in 1999 and brought together over twenty Armenian tourism industry companies on voluntary membership. On the other hand, the registration to the second one is mandatory for any Turkish travel agency since 1972. It is argued that these associations, and especially TURSAB, have more weight and legitimacy to lead a program of cooperation. Therefore, some would claim that the regional tourism cooperation should not avoid integrating key stakeholders of the Turkish tourism market by only involving regional agents from Van or Kars. Then, it would be accurate to lead a

deeper inquiry on the connections existing between the national and regional chapters of TURSAB, looking for possible divergence of approach on regional tourism. These national associations also offer more opportunities to develop Armenian-Turkish cooperation on the international ground, using their intense connections with global organizations. The American Society of Travel Agent (ASTA), a main international travel trade association uniting members from nearly 140 countries, is a case in point concerning this issue. Several Turkish and Armenian tourism agents attend this international platform in order to get into contact with each other. They can get advantage from the well-connected Turkish chapter of ASTA and, to a certain extent, from a ten-year old dynamic Armenian chapter. Moreover, the AATA organizes with the ASTA a major tourism event: the Caucasus Travel Show (CTS), also designated as the “Country of talking stones” travel exhibition.

CTS world event organized every year since 2001 is the main Armenian tourism fair. It provides opportunities for developing Armenian-Turkish tourism collaborations, as B to B meetings and conferences on Caucasus tourism issues are held. However, this reflects a specific approach on regional tourism, dealing with the establishment of Armenia-Turkey-Georgia interrelations more than an Armenian-Turkish cooperation³⁵. CTS exhibition also aims to act under national and institutional legitimacy as the event takes place under the patronage of the Armenian Ministry of Economy. Accounting for the CTS-2010’s concrete benefits to Armenian-Turkish relations, it can be noticed that among the 87 organizations taking part in the event, 40 were Turkish agents (from Van province especially)³⁶. Moreover, agents holding specific regional activities, as Narekavank tour LLC, take part in this international event³⁷. The participation of Van and other regional agents illustrates that the two approaches and their main promoters should not be strictly separated from each other. Then, we may question ourselves whether AATTC would be represented at CTS 2012 or not.

As Five Star Travel Tour³⁸ is an active organizer of CTS event, it could be relevant to consider this company as a key promoter of the “national and international approach” on the Armenian-Turkish cooperation. Indeed, Five Star director holds the chapter’s presidency of ASTA in Armenia (since 2001), and he is also vice president of AATA (since 1999). This provides the company with broad international connections and links with the *main players* of Turkish market. These later illustrate the national approach: priority to the connection with TURSAB general direction, partnerships with agencies based in Istanbul. Armenian and Turkish agents implement collaborations during national events. They meet at the Travel Turkey Izmir expo³⁹ organized under TURSAB and Turkish minister of Culture and Tourism umbrella (the event of 2010 hosting nearly 600 exhibitors) or at the East Mediterranean International Tourism and Travel Exhibition

³⁵ <http://www.yerevanreport.com/4297/turkish-travel-companies-to-take-part-in-cts-2010-in-armenia/>

³⁶ <http://www.cts.am/>

³⁷ http://www.cts.am/index.php?cat_id=59

³⁸ http://www.fivestars.am/main/about.php?h_id=1

³⁹ <http://www.travelturkey-expo.com/>

(EMITT)⁴⁰. Five Star Travel also uses international platforms to meet Turkish partners, as ASTA's "International Destinations Expo"⁴¹ held in Istanbul (2010) or CTS events. As we previously noticed, this international way promotes the cooperation not only with Turkey but also with Georgia. International supporters also give favor to the integration of Azerbaijan agents; then, the process faces important difficulties. In this way, Five Star Travel helped to organize several B to B panels during last years in Tbilisi (2009 Business forum), Istanbul (2010), and Yerevan (2010-2011). Finally, it is to notice that Five Star Travel took part in SATR meetings but it decided not to join the AATTc.

Several parameters of the tourism cooperation can help us to understand the divergence of views expressed on the related issue. First, it is mostly argued that the cooperation should equally benefit to the two countries. According to this preoccupation, Five Star Travel gives favor to initiatives that would strongly integrate the promotion of incoming tourism in Armenia. The idea of Yeghishe Tanashyan, president of the company, is to enlarge a flow of Turkish tourists which has already been growing for the few past years.⁴² Familiarization travels organized for TURSAB agencies (2011) aims to incite them to bring traveler to Armenia. They would design new tours to Armenia dedicated to Turkish people, as well as international clients, and they would also extend to Armenia their "Eastern Turkey tours". At last, to well-understand Five Star Travel position, it is to be noticed that this company is not dedicated to operate trip from Armenia to Turkey. This can also explain the little interest it paid to the Van-Yerevan air flight project.

Concerning another point of divergences which can be included in our second approach, some would see no point in giving faith to private agents' chances to deal with non-economic concerns. On the issue of the Armenian heritage renovations in Eastern Turkey, and especially concerning the Historical City of Ani, only diplomatic relations are considered as a way to link Armenian and Turkish stakeholders. Private sector having no power to initiate cooperation on this ground, it cannot be travel agencies' preoccupation. Moreover, lobbying or Boycott actions (as it occurred in September 2010 for Akhtamar Mass event) concerning regional tourism demands are not observed with optimism. Some would consider few opportunities in this kind of actions. They argue that no strong community of interests exists in the regional tourism sector and claim that business remains out of political or cultural issues. Nevertheless, concerning Ani's City valorization, it must be worth saying that a governmental handling from Turkish institution may not satisfy the Armenian heritage promotion of the site. Then, in the current situation excluding diplomatic relations, associative and private involvements seem to be much desirable.

⁴⁰ <http://emittistanbul.com/en>

⁴¹ <http://www.asta.org/Events/content.cfm?ItemNumber=7246&navItemNumber=596>

⁴² <http://www.mediamax.am/en/news/region/1123/>

To conclude, it is important to remind that these two different approaches on the Armenian-Turkish cooperation are always parts of business strategies directed by companies. The networking and the involvement in the Turkish tourism market is a field of competition between Armenian companies. That is why several agents equally eager to promote relations with Turkey would not be willing to cooperate together. Nevertheless, the two approaches can also complete themselves as they converge on several concerns, as the idea of opening the border. Also, they are not always preoccupied by the same issues. The “regional concern approach” fosters especially regional tours and local partnerships, while the “national and international platforms approach” concentrates on incoming tourism (in Armenia) and national/international networking.

Conclusion

Before summarizing key findings of this research and offering few recommendations, we should remember the main limits of our conclusions. The scope of the survey has been strictly defined. Concerning Armenian-Turkish fields for cooperation, we decided to focus our attention on regional tourism. More precisely, we had a vested-interest in “Western Armenia tourism”: cultural tours in Eastern Turkey mainly dedicated to Armenians. A larger survey should pay more attention to Armenian tourism activities in Istanbul and Antalya, and to Turkish activities in the Caucasus region. Secondly, our inquiry consisted mostly in interviewing Armenian Travel agents and associations’ delegates. Special attention to TURSAB’s views on the Armenian-Turkish cooperation would provide more comprehensive conclusions. Finally, consistent information related to governmental’ and local officials’ approaches on tourism co-development would allow us to specify most of our conclusions.

However, the following observations allow us to offer few conclusions and recommendations.

- The renovation of the Holy Cross Church on Akhtamar Island witnesses for the major benefits of Armenian heritage promotion projects in term of incoming tourism for Turkey and of tour operating for Armenian travel agencies. This should foster new programs of restoration in the region.
- A major challenge has been identified concerning the way of promoting the Armenian heritage in Eastern Turkey. The cooperation of Armenian and Turkish private stakeholders (tourism and cultural associations, experts) in the situation of non-existent diplomatic relations seems all the more desirable in order to prevent frustrations and resentments.
- Armenian and Turkish tourism agents all agree on the necessity of a normalized situation between the two States and on the opportunities induced by the hypothesis of opening the border. This consensus should give legitimacy to any association of Armenian and Turkish stakeholders jointly defending their common interests.
- The opening of the border is currently not on the agenda. In such situation, the Van-Yerevan air route project witnesses for the possibility of alternative solution provided by Armenian and Turkish businessmen cooperating together.
- The Armenian-Turkish tourism cooperation issue faces divergence of views from many stakeholders. These are related to business and networking strategies and specialized activities of every travel agent. Thus, the cooperation cannot be fostered in a one-line direction but should be promoted in several ways.

- Concerning AATTc, the enlargement of the association in order to be present on a national scale would provide more legitimacy to its demands and actions.
- The model of TURSAB in terms of state recognition and national responsibilities could inspire the development of the AATA, aiming to strengthen the authority of the national platforms. The dialog between the two national tourism associations could be fostered and provided with support from both Armenian and Turkish States.

Finally, tourism sector gives an insight into the common benefits provided by the private collaborations and the associated cooperation between Armenia and Turkey. Another step for fostering the Armenian-Turkish rapprochement would be to spread consciousness about these benefits both in civil society and political minds. Indeed, it is most probably partly because of the ignorance of such cooperation projects' existence that a climate of suspicion remains on both sides of the border.

Set of Initials

AATA: Armenian Association of Travel Agents

AATTc: Association of Armenian Turkish Travel companies

ASTA: American Society of Travel Agents

CTS: Caucasus Travel Show

EMITT: Mediterranean International Tourism and Travel Exhibition

ICE: Information and assistance Center for Armenian and Turkish Entrepreneurs

ICHD: International Center for Human Development

TEPAV: Economic Policy Research Foundation of Turkey

TABDC: Turkish-Armenian Business Development Council

TURSAB: Association of Turkish Travel Agencies

SATR: Support to Armenian Turkish Rapprochement

VATSO: Trade and Industry Chamber of Van

UMB(E)A: Union of Manufacturers and Businemen (employers) of Armenia

USAID: United State Agency for International Development

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USAID official website: <http://armenia.usaid.gov/>

ASTA official website: <http://asta.org/>

Regional (Turkish-Armenian or Caucasus) organizations websites

ICE official website: <http://armturkbusiness.org/?p=news&l=en>

SATR project official website: <http://armturkdialogue.net/>

TABDC official website: <http://www.tabdc.org/>

EPF official website: <http://www.epfound.am/>

Armenian organizations, events and tourism agents

UMB(E)A official website : <http://www.umba.am/>

ICHHD official website : <http://ichd.org/>

AATA presentation/ CTS2011 official website: <http://www.cts.am/>

Narekavank Tour LLC: <http://nvtour.am/>

Five stars Travel: <http://www.fivestars.am/main/index.php>

Turkish organizations, events and tourism agents

TEPAV: <http://www.tepav.org.tr/tr/>

TURSAB official website: <http://www.tursab.org.tr/en>

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