

Hollande's visit to Turkey

Dr. Claire Visier
Istanbul Bilgi University
European Institute

French President F. Hollande came to Turkey on 27th and 28th of January. It was the first official visit by a French head of state in 22 years. He came accompanied by a large delegation consisting of seven ministers (Foreign Affairs, Army, Foreign trade, Industrial Renewal, Agriculture, Energy, Higher Education & Research), Presidents of Parliamentary French-Turkish friendship groups, representatives of major French companies. The visit was designed to repair the nations' frayed ties under the presidency of N. Sarkozy whose strong views against Turkey's bid for EU membership strained relations between the two capitals. Paris aims at putting relations back on track and tapping Turkey's economic potential, as the visit featured the signing of a number of agreements on cooperation in various fields.

Focusing on French and Turkish media coverage of the event, I would like first to point out how the visit has been perceived in both countries. The comparison reveals an interesting asymmetry in the way media handle the information. Before the visit, French press had produced quite a lot of articles. Most of them were rather pessimistic, stressing all the difficulties and traps of the visit. In Turkey, Hollande's coming was officialized very late (just 5 days before his visit), and Turkish press did not pay too much attention to the forthcoming visit, much less than to French President's personal problems with his partners... During his time in Ankara and then in Istanbul, French media did not so much covered his visit. On the first day of his visit, the publication of the last unemployment rates in France (an issue that is at the top of the President's internal agenda) has largely vanished the Turkish issue. In the same



François Hollande, French President

time, Turkish media coverage has largely increased. The evaluation of the visit was quite positive and optimistic. From these observations one can assess the success of the visit. Then, putting it in a broader European context, I will try to go beyond the impact on media in order to evaluate what could be the long term effects of the visit.

Media, transceiver of population concerns

« *Turkey, Hollande steps into a (political) minefield* » (*Le Figaro*, 26/01); « *Turkey, Hollande's visit on the background of political crisis* » (*Le Monde*, 26/01); « *F. Hollande in Turkey: a sensitive travel* » (*Le Point*, 27/01)... Reading French headlines on the eve of Hollande's trip, his visit which had been scheduled in November 2013, appears to be delicate and tricky because of Turkey's current political situation and the forthcoming French local and European elections.

First, the articles pointed out that Hollande will be the first major Western leader to visit Turkey since the Gezi Park protests. Furthermore the visit will take place in the growing turmoil and uncertainty about the course of Turkey. In December 2013 a big corruption scandal erupted at the top of the state, launched by the judiciary power. It has triggered a harsh government's reaction with massive waves of purges within the Police Department and the judiciary system and a bill giving the executive authority over judges and prosecutors. One week before Hollande's coming to Turkey, Erdoğan, who was on visit to EU institutions in Brussels, was told that his bill extending control over police, judges and prosecutors ran foul of European constitutional norms on the separation of powers. In this political context, while Hollande stresses the need to close N. Sarkozy's era, to move forward with bilateral relations and to strengthen the links between France and Turkey, his visit may be at risk of being seen as a support to Erdoğan. This difficulty has really been taken into account by the French State, which hesitated to cancel the visit until the last moment.

The French Press also insisted on French political context. Municipal elections will be held in March, and will be followed by European elections in May. The context of electoral campaign does not seem to match very well with a state visit in Turkey. Although N. Sarkozy has played a key role in the construction of Turkey issue as a public concern in France, its political withdrawal did not affect the image of Turkey. The specific frame of Turkey issue in France goes back to the beginning of the 2000'. In

2002, V. Giscard d'Estaing, former President of France, President of the Convention on the future of Europe, was one of the first leaders to take a strong political stand against Turkey's EU membership. In a backdrop of Convention debating on EU's future, his main concern was not Turkey but EU; his position was not a real stand against Turkey but rather a strategic attempt to legitimize the European Union project. The very strong impact of V. Giscard d'Estaing's claim in both European and French politics showed the power of Turkey issue used as a resource. Following that, in 2004, several French politicians opposed Turkey's EU membership in order to mobilize French citizens for the European elections. Some of them also started to use this political resource within the national French political competition, as it is symbolized by N. Sarkozy's stand against Turkey as a way to oppose President Chirac (who claimed to be in favor of the membership) and put forward his own candidacy for presidential elections. In parallel to this politicization, and as a result of it, media started to increase their coverage of Turkey issue whereas the number of books and journal special issues about Turkey dramatically increased during this period. Regardless of the type of books (essays, scholars...) they all focused on the political debate about Turkey's bid to the EU. Most of them framed the debate through a perspective of identity: What is Europe? What is Turkey? Can one match with the other?

In the context of the merging public debate about achievement of enlargement toward Eastern European Country, Turkey issue has been framed within the French public sphere as a radical other. Indeed from these years, definition of EU identity mainly focused on frontiers. Considering borders of the EU, allows defining it not *per se* but from the outside (what EU is not). "Turkish identity" can fluctuate from one definition to another, but Turkey definitely remains the other.¹ In this context of salience of identity debate in French public sphere, Turkey's EU bid gradually vanished from the politicians' strategies, to become an issue that they couldn't manage as they wanted to. The issue rose not only as a resource but also as a handicap for French polity.² As soon as Turkey comes to the agenda, politicians must take a stand on it, paying attention on its potential effect on the "public opinion".

¹ B. Ç. Tekin, (2010), *Representations and Othering in Discourse: The Construction of Turkey in the EU Context*, Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 268p.

² C. Visier, « La Turquie: instrument de politisation, objet de politisation », *European Journal of Turkish Studies* [Online], 9 | 2009, <http://ejts.revues.org/3709>

Hollande's visit is not an exception. Aiming at a renewal of French-Turkish bilateral relations, means to take a stand on Turkey's EU accession after harsh opposition of N. Sarkozy. President Hollande already lifted French veto on chapter 22, on regional policy, allowing the accession talks to restart in last November. But he had not unblocked the four other chapters vetoed by France. French media warned of the potential effect of supporting Turkey's EU bid on the forthcoming French elections. Doing that, media contribute to keeping alive the very high sensitivity of the French opinion to Turkish issues. One week before the visit, "*Valeurs Actuelles*", a very conservative weekly French newspaper, published results of a poll it had specially commissioned: "*French opinion on Turkish EU membership*". The poll reveals that 83% of the French are against Turkey within the EU. "*After his disastrous choice about Syria, François Hollande embarks France on a new fuzzy adventure, with uncertain potential outcomes, and in total contradictions with the expectations of the public opinion*" concluded the article.³ The results of the poll have been quoted by all the other newspapers.

In the context of the merging public debate about achievement of enlargement toward Eastern European Country, Turkey issue has been framed within the French public sphere as a radical other

Media also worried about the Armenian heated issue. Articles stressed on the one hand, the French Armenian community opposition to Turkey EU's bid. Boosting Turkey-EU issue could have negative impact on the behavior of local Armenian communities for the next local elections. On the other hand, media also raised the fact that bilateral relations are at risk of any French move forward with "Armenian genocide".

Although it is a demand of French Armenian diaspora, it would meet with furious reaction in Ankara (as did the 2008's bill about the penalization of deny of Armenian genocide).

³ «Europe : les Français disent non à la Turquie », *Valeurs Actuelles*, 23-29/01/2014, 4026, p. 36/37.

Focusing on challenges and underlining the bad timing of the visit, French media did not even question the reason why this timetable had been chosen. Since his election, F. Hollande has said he will come to Turkey. When the visit was scheduled, last November, of course corruption scandal had not yet erupted but Gezi's events had already happened and local elections in France had been planned... And the high degree of politicization of Turkish issues was well known! One part of the answer to this question could be that this calendar was the less bad option. Postponing it after local elections could have been even worse: aside Armenian communities, French sensitivity to Turkish issues is less important for local elections than for European ones. Then, 2015 horizon with the hundredth anniversary of the Armenian "Genocide" makes it much more difficult to be at the forefront of France-Turkey relations. Another part of the answer could be that the President also expected some positive effects on planning his trip before local elections, and Armenian issue may paradoxically be one of them. Known for its Armenian sensibility, F. Hollande's visit could be shown as a way to encourage Turkey to face Armenian issue. And then turn into a signal towards French Armenian community which has a real electoral influence at the local level (Armenian associations state that around 600 000 Armenian people live in France, divided in three main regions: Paris, Lyon and Marseille).

Finally, the French Press underlined the economic aim of the visit. Expressing his regrets over the decline of French market share in Turkey (which dropped to 3% in 2012, down from 6% in 2002), F. Hollande vowed to reverse this situation. Various agreements to be signed and organization of a French Turkish Enterprises forum were planned. Media considered this economic shape of the visit mainly as a way to escape from the trap of the visit.

French media didn't adopt a critical point of view about the visit and only captured the part of his discourse that arouses much interest among French audience. At the opposite, Turkish media has largely covered the event. Different parts of the visit were broadcast on Television; newspapers followed and talked about the program of the President: meetings with A. Gül and R.T. Erdoğan, joined press conference with A. Gül, meetings with K. Kılıçdaroglu, H. Dink's family, meetings with TÜSIAD and other representatives of Turkish business, Economic Forum, Adress/speech at the University of Galatasaray, Medal Ceremony with the singer Candan Erçetin.

Most of French media frame of the visit was rather pessimist and skeptical.⁴ Focusing on a very short time context, they did not expose all the ins and the outs of the visit, like the normalization process which was started two years ago, or the potential benefit of it. Doing that they reflect and also participate to shape French perception of Turkey as a warning and difficult issue. As we already said, the Turkish press did not pay attention to the visit before it happened. Much more was said about the love affair of the President than about his coming. Newspapers only emphasized that it would be the first official French state visit since the one of F. Mitterrand in 1992, besides the 5-hour visit of N. Sarkozy in 2011, which has been taken very badly in Turkey as a sign of former President contemptuous being. This relative silence demonstrates that bilateral French Turkish relation is no more considered as essential in Turkey.

The success of the visit

It is of course too early to assess the impact of the visit. At least, in regard to French and Turkish newspapers coverage, the visit has been a success. The media coverage in France has been very light. On the first day of the visit, the last rates of unemployment were announced in France. Declarations of the President from Ankara, and then Istanbul, on this issue which is at the top of his internal political agenda, has partially vanished the rest of the visit. But the weak coverage can be considered as an asset: it has allowed President to escape from a too high media focus on Turkey issue and its potential bad effects. Furthermore, French media didn't adopt a critical point of view about the visit and only captured the part of his discourse that arouses much interest among French audience. At the opposite, Turkish media has largely covered the event. Different parts of the visit were broadcast on Television; newspapers followed and talked about the program of the President: meetings with A. Gül and R.T. Erdoğan, joined press conference with A. Gül, meetings with K. Kiliçdaroglu, H. Dink's family, meetings with TÜSIAD and other representatives of Turkish business, Economic Forum, Adress/speech at the University of Galatasaray, Medal Ceremony with the singer Candan Erçetin. No matter of their ideological position, media's point

⁴ A. Bonzon was the only one I find that took an opposite stand. For instance, she pointed out that the protocol will help F. Hollande. Focusing on his relations with his counterpart, A. Gül, will avoid him to face too much and to be too much seen with R.T. Erdoğan. "Mais que F. Hollande va-t-il donc faire en Turquie?" 27/01/2014, *Slate*, <http://www.slate.fr/story/82695/francois-hollande-turquie> (connection on 27/01/2014)

of view was rather positive. According to their editorial line, they picked up different moments of the visit, underlying its benefits.

Turkey-EU issue was the main issue raised by media in France and in Turkey, mainly through the coverage of the joint press conference held by A. Gül and F. Hollande. French and Turkish newspaper shaped this information in a very different manner. French media quote F. Hollande's declaration about the negotiation process *"no date [of the end of the process] has already been fixed... and we are far from it (...) we don't know how the process will end ... if it ends, there will be a referendum (...) there is no need to frighten, French people will anyway have the last word"*⁵. All the headlines focus on the referendum: *"Hollande promises a referendum about Turkey and the EU"* (*Libération*, 27/01; *Le Figaro*, 27.01; *Le Monde*, 29/01); *"Turkey, Hollande Bring out the weapon of the referendum"* (*Le Parisien*, 27/01). Doing that, French media participate to defuse French fear about Turkey's membership.

Turkish media also quoted the reference to referendum but emphasized another part of F. Hollande's speech that insisted on the need to pursue the negotiation process. Governmental press emphasized: *"Hollande: France is ready to open a chapter"* (*Aksam*, 28/01); *"Chapters must go on"* (*Sabah*, 27/01). They also underlined Gül's position: *"EU is a strategic goal for us. Even if we succeed completing the negotiation process, there is no guarantee of being a member of the EU (...) Turkey has undertaken the technical process of compliance with the acquis. I wish there won't be any political mortgaged in these negotiation. At the end of this process, Turkish people will also have to choose. (...) I hope everybody will be reliable to its promise (...) I wish there won't be any obstacle on the path toward negotiation"*. From these declarations, they concluded a lift to EU-Turkey process.

Turkey-EU issue was the main issue raised by media in France and in Turkey, mainly through the coverage of the joint press conference held by A. Gül and F. Hollande. French and Turkish newspaper shaped this information in a very different manner

⁵ Since 2004 and the modification of the French Constitution, a referendum is required to ratify a Treaty of accession. However, if 3/5 of the MPs or 3/5 of the Senators ask for it, the treaty may be ratified by the congress with a majority of 3/5 of the presents.

Newspapers close to the Gülen movement and from the liberal opposition also underlined the French President's will to go further on the EU negotiation process, but put it in a political context. Radikal, Zaman, Today Zaman, Taraf stressed F. Hollande's concern about the respect of rule of law, freedom and independence of Justice. "Especially concerning rule of law and judicial independence, negotiations must be opened and should progress. This will be for the benefit of Turkey". Radikal editorialisit, M. Yetkin considered that "Turkey's democratic and economic merger process to the EU is in the interests of almost every one".⁶ On the second day of the visit Hürriyet welcomed the reference at Gezi's proteto made by the French President during his speech at the University of Galatasaray: "French President F. Hollande: last events showed a dynamic Turkish youth".⁷

EU was not the only issue raised in different media. Armenian issue was also raised by many of them. When titles were written about this issue ("Hollande: We will comply with the Law" (Radikal, 20/01), "Hollande: law must be implemented" (Radikal, 27/01), "Important explanation about the law on deny" (Sozcu, 27/01), "Collision on Genocide" (Hürriyet 27/01), most of the articles were only a report of the joint press conference. Few of them added a comment about the divergence of view of A. Gül and F. Hollande, but insisted that F. Hollande didn't speak about "genocide". Even if

M. Yetkin assessed that there was no change concerning the French policy on Armenian issue, even media report the meeting with H. Dink's widow and son, there were no anger at all in the words.

Economic issue was echoed by newspapers, but without too many details. Media reported the various economic schedule of the visit, stressed French wish to bring up the commercial relations and Gül's aim to grow the bilateral exchanges up to 20 billion dollars. Pro-governmental newspaper Sabah emphasized F. Hollande's statement about Turkish economy "Hollande: France is looking at you with admiration" (29/01). Media

Newspapers close to the Gülen movement and from the liberal opposition also underlined the French President's will to go further on the EU negotiation process, but put it in a political context. Radikal, Zaman, Today Zaman, Taraf stressed F. Hollande's concern about the respect of rule of law, freedom and independence of Justice.

⁶ "Fransa, AB ilişkileinde kilit önemde", Radikal, 28/01/2014.

⁷ "Gezi'yi selamladı", Hürriyet, 29/01/2014.

also talked about recent agreement for the building of Turkey's second nuclear plant by Japan's and French Areva companies, but did not give further details about the agreements which were signed during the visit⁸. A single exception was in Cumhuriyet which dedicated a long article to bilateral cooperation on defense. Regardless of the exact content of the economic issue, the most important seemed to be the intention and the common position of the two leaders. Syrian issue was also mentioned in order to underline the shared point of view of the two Presidents.

Some critics have also merged from one paper to another that can be summed up by the statement of pro-european francophone intellectual, G. Aktar. In *Today Zaman* he argued that "*On the subject of Turkey's accession to the EU, Hollande employed one of the French right's anti-Turkish tactics by calling for a popular referendum (...)* It is difficult to conclude that President Hollande is well-advised here, unless the French left is now openly on the same wavelength as the French right with regard to Turkey's EU bid".⁹ The Turkish version of his article, published in *Taraf* ("President Holland") was even harsher. Talking about the nuclear agreement, he concluded: "*France with Japan will be the brokers of this catastrophe. Instead of genocide Nuclear power plant! What is the level of insanity?* ".

Anyway, the rather positive coverage of the visit and the very moderate comments on it contrast a lot with the hostility developed by some media against France few months ago about French military intervention in Mali. In the French side, a strange article about "*F. Hollande's frolic mood in Turkey*" was published in *Le Monde* on the second day of his visit. "*The President who "ended his life together" with Valérie Trierweiler by press release four days earlier and officially failed, Monday, Jan. 27, to keep his promise to reverse the unemployment trend, is clearly in top form. More jovial than ever....*" (28/10). Very ironic, the article can also be seen as recognition of F. Hollande's skill to make less tense a situation considered to be highly complex. It is of course impossible to assess the concrete effects of the visit but at least F. Hollande succeed to defuse bilateral relations.

⁸ 12 agreements, protocols or declaration have been signed during the visit: Turkish Ministry of energy and GDF Suez; MÜSIAD and General Confederation of Medium and Small Enterprises; French Agency for Development and Turkish Treasury for a project of sustainable development of Forests; French National Research Agency and TÜBİTAK; rail transportation; customs; Ministries of Agriculture; Joint declaration about cooperation in the energy field; cooperation agreement in the energy field; Türksat and Eutelsat; Sanofi and Koç University.

⁹ "Assessing Hollande's visit", *Today Zaman*, 29/01/2014.

New perspectives on EU?

Beyond bilateral relations, I would like to focus on A. Gül's and F. Hollande's declarations about Turkey and EU, that can be seen, in the current political context, as a renewal in the interpretation of the enlargement policy.

In the middle of 2000, the end of the East European Countries process accession, the beginning of the identity crisis of the EU (symbolized by the abortion of the Constitutional Treaty) and the focalization on the so called "specificity" of the Turkish case had led to the decline of enlargement issue in the European political agenda. Although the policy is still alive, its methodology has been completely transformed. Since 2006, enlargement policy is no more conceived as a support for countries in their way to accession but rather as a way to evaluate the degree of compliance with European standards and norms of countries which may join the EU. The focus on adoption of the *acquis communautaire*, and the formalization of benchmarks for opening and closing chapters have transformed the process. The end of the process, the accession, is dependent on a very high degree of compliance which is guaranteed by a step by step process and a very strict conditionality. Conditionality is no longer a reward but a *pre-requisite* to progress in negotiations. Member states, which have reaffirmed their power on the policy, used their veto in a strategic way to control the process. Turkey is not an exception but rather an extreme case of what one can call a vicious circle. Meanwhile some member states denied its right to become a full member, the absence of perspective has gradually pushed aside of the AKP agenda the EU issue. The non-commitment of Turkish government has slowed down the process; meanwhile the weakness of the process didn't prevent the government from turning into a more authoritarian way of running the country. Enlargement process was almost dead.

With Gezi protest and then the current political crisis in Turkey, debate has emerged in European circles about the opportunity to go further on negotiations. In the line with the ongoing enlargement methodology, some people set against the opening of new chapters, arguing that Turkey is getting farther and farther of European norms.

With Gezi protest and then the current political crisis in Turkey, debate has emerged in European circles about the opportunity to go further on negotiations. In the line with the ongoing enlargement methodology, some people set against the opening of new chapters, arguing that Turkey is getting farther and farther of European norms. But others have voiced that opening chapters could be a tool to put pressure on the

government. Talking about the chapters 23 and 24, F. Hollande took this stand. But this position doesn't match with the logic of the current methodology of enlargement policy that considers the opening of a chapter as a reward and as a progress in the enlargement process. A. Gül's assertion during the press conference has paved the way toward another interpretation of the policy. A. Gül insisted on the distinction between the process of compliance to European norms and standards on the one hand, the accession to EU on the other hand, giving the example of Norway. Disconnecting the negotiation process and accession, he reassured the ones who are opposed to Turkey membership. But he also allowed to consider negotiation process apart from the enlargement methodology drawn in the middle of 2000'. He got back the offensive on the front of negotiations, demanding a real commitment of the member states and give legitimacy to the ones who ask for opening new chapters. The meeting between A. Merkel and R.T. Erdoğan, one week after the visit of F. Hollande, and their common statement about the potential opening of chapters 23 and 24, endorsed this new interpretation of the negotiations process.

Although accession is currently not anymore seen as an aim in itself, negotiation process remains the framework of a policy named "Enlargement"! Without making any clear decision about Turkey's candidacy, European Union still committed in this policy. Nobody knows what will be the outcome of the process...