

When Diplomats Score: The Role of Football in the Turkish-Armenian Rapprochement

By Tarek Hohberg¹

From Moscow With Love

On June 23th, 2008 the Armenian President Serzh Sarkisian surprised the world during a visit to the Russian Capital when he announced that he would like his Turkish counterpart, Abdullah Gul, to come to Yerevan to watch a World Cup qualifying football match between the two countries. While meeting representatives of the Armenian community in Moscow, Sarkisian made clear that this symbolic gesture was aimed at normalising overall relations with Ankara by declaring that “there should be no closed borders between neighbour countries in the 21st century.”² The official invitation was delivered two weeks later in a Wall Street Journal article: “Just as the people of China and the United States shared enthusiasm for ping pong before their governments fully normalized relations, the people of Armenia and Turkey are united in their love for football. [...] I hereby invite President Gul to visit Armenia to enjoy the match together with me in the stadium.”³ - Sports diplomacy at its best.

August 20th, 2008 – the Dress Rehearsal

While an official response from Ankara regarding Gul’s potential attendance was still pending, 16 days before the scheduled match between the national teams of both countries, an under-21 qualifier match took place in Yerevan. Entrance to the newly renovated Hrazdan Stadium was free. Many Armenians came to watch their youngsters achieve a stunning comeback in the 89th minute when they first managed to equalise and then snatch a spectacular 2:1 victory in stoppage time. Most importantly however, the atmosphere was friendly. No acts of hooliganism destroyed the high spirits so that on the eve of travelling to his

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² President of the Republic of Armenia: Press Release (23 June 2008)
<http://www.president.am/events/news/eng/?search=imposed&id=89>.

³ Serzh Sarkisian “We Are Ready to Talk to Turkey” in *The Wall Street Journal* (7 July 2008).

own match, the trainer of the Turkish senior national team, Fatih Terim, could feel safe: “Nothing happened in the under-21 teams' game between the two countries, and nothing will happen this time, either.”⁴

Overcoming Opposition

Prior to the match, various parties in both countries protested against the attendance of President Gul. In Turkey the opposition parties CHP and MHP launched strong criticism against both the visit and the general foreign policy aimed at normalising relations with Yerevan. Public Opinion polls however reassured the government that the majority of Turks (65.6 %) regarded the campaigns against the visit inappropriate and supported their President accepting the invitation.⁵

The Armenian President had to deal with criticism from within its own coalition, when the Dashnaksutiun party, which generally takes a hard-line stance on Armenian-Turkish issues, announced that thousands of their supporters would follow every step of the Turkish President. Even though their leaders announced that they would stage protest at the airport and in the stadium, they at the same time promised to express their political views in an acceptable manner.

Overall, protests in both countries did not exceed what both governments were prepared for but nevertheless, nothing was left to chance. In a symbolic gesture, as if to appease possible critique in advance, the Armenian foreign ministry announced that it would ease visa access for Turkish fans planning to travel to Yerevan. At the same time however, nobody was really going to take the risk of letting fanatic fans spoil the event by making negative headlines. Hence, the Turkish Football Association renounced their five percent ticket quota that is usually granted to the guest team according to FIFA rules, making the job of the Armenian police and security officials much easier as no Turkish teams would actually get tickets for the match. At the same time, Ruben Hairapetian, one of Armenia's wealthiest businessmen and head of the football federation, prohibited any banners referring to the Armenian “Genocide” or other political issues in the stadium.

Caucasian Hospitality

After months of preparations by both countries official diplomats and their sporting deputies everything went smoothly on September 6th. Over 150 journalists attended the match and broadcasted what the organisers had hoped for: A competitive but fair 92 minutes of football, two presidents sitting next to each other enjoying the game, and a good Caucasian

⁴ “‘This Is Football, Not War’ Says Turkey Coach” in *Turkish Daily News* (3 September 2008).

⁵ metroPOLL Research Group *Social and Political Situation in Turkey ‘Reflections of President Abdullah Gul’s Visit to Armenia’* September 2008.

host letting its guests take home only the best memories and a 2:0 victory. Finally some positive headlines from the Caucasus, a month after the deadly war in Georgia.

The National Football Associations of both countries received the FIFA-Fairplay-Award 2008 for their contribution to normalising relations between their countries. Just as President Sarkisian had written in its Wall Street Journal op-ed, people in both Turkey and Armenia love football, which made the World Cup Qualifier a very good choice for publically demonstrating the new rapprochement between the neighbouring countries.

However, the troubling history these countries share left little choice to pick another public event to announce such a groundbreaking change in attitude towards each other. Sports seem to be one of the very few areas of common public life not tainted by the past. It could therefore play an even more significant role in bringing the societies of both countries together, once the borders have opened. As the situation continues to be in favour of further rapprochement, the re-match on October 14th, 2009, would be an interesting bet for the borders to actually open.