
Turkey's relations with Germany and the EU: Breaking the vicious circle

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Relations between Germany and Turkey have reached an all-time low. With escalating rhetoric and mutual recriminations, the relationship that Berlin and Ankara have maintained for decades has entered uncharted waters.

Following the declarations made by Chancellor Angela Merkel in the run-up to the recent federal election, it remains to be seen to what extent the new German government will re-orientate its Turkey policy. Given its powerful position within the EU, Germany is a very influential player in EU-Turkey relations. It can act as a motor or a brake. Any shift in policy would not only impact bilateral but also EU-Turkey relations, which are already at breaking-point because of the stalled accession process and democratic backsliding in Turkey.

For possibly the first time in their relationship, Germany and Turkey have lost credibility and standing in the eyes of the other. And yet, both sides expect concessions from the other. To move forward, both parties need to acknowledge the costs of further escalation. Perpetuating the vicious circle risks leading to a complete breakdown in relations. Consequently, Germany and the EU need to think carefully and strategically about how to shape their future relationship with Turkey.

BACKGROUND

Germany and Turkey have had close relations since the Ottoman times, being intertwined by multiple historical, economic, cultural, and societal ties. Germany hosts the world's largest Turkish community abroad with nearly three million people of Turkish origin, more than half of which have German citizenship. For decades, Germany has been Turkey's largest trade partner and foreign investor, with nearly 7,000 German firms currently operating in Turkey.

The German position on Turkish EU membership represents an important aspect of German-Turkish bilateral relations. Ankara sees Berlin as a pivotal influencer in shaping EU policy towards Turkey. While throughout the decades, Germany has recognised Turkey as an important strategic partner that should be kept close and not isolated, for most of the time it has not supported Turkey's EU membership aspirations. Alternative ways to keep Turkey anchored to Europe have been pursued, such as the Customs Union (CU) with the EU, which was championed by former Chancellor Helmut Kohl. The only shift in position came under the Social Democratic (SPD) and Alliance '90/The Greens Coalition between 1998 and 2005. The then Chancellor Gerhard Schröder and Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer were instrumental in Turkey becoming a candidate country and subsequently opening accession negotiations in 2005.

Following her election in 2005, Angela Merkel adhered to the principle of *pacta sunt servanda*, despite favouring a privileged partnership. She publicly declared that "negotiations are open-ended, but are being led in a fair manner".¹ What played out thereafter fell short of this. While Germany did not unilaterally block negotiating chapters, Merkel seemed to apply a tactic of discouraging Turkey by allowing the negotiations to be dragged out and by not using her political clout to try and unblock the process when some member states vetoed the opening of chapters for political reasons. This led to significant resentment and disappointment in Ankara and from Turkish society more broadly. Frustration ran especially deep towards Germany, Turkey's historical ally.

The slowdown of the accession process coincided with the growing domination of Turkey's ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) and the emergence of illiberal trends in domestic politics. As the accession process stalled – which happened around the same time the AKP was re-elected for the third time in 2011 – reform in Turkey slowed, then stopped and finally went into reverse gear. Having undermined the accession process, the EU found itself with little leverage over Ankara.

At the peak of the Syrian refugee crisis in 2015 when more than one million migrants and asylum seekers entered Germany, Berlin changed its approach towards Turkey. Merkel offered to revitalize Turkey's accession and visa liberalisation processes as part of a deal with Ankara to help stem the refugee flow. While the deal reached between the EU and Turkey in March 2016 was key to stabilising the flow of migrants into Germany, it damaged the EU's and Germany's image as human rights advocates, given the erosion of civil liberties and freedoms underway at that time in Turkey. For Ankara, the deal represented a major shift in the balance of power. For the first time since the Cold War, when Turkey helped shore-up Europe's security against the Communist bloc, Ankara felt it had gained important leverage over the EU. Fear of Turkey abandoning the deal, as repeatedly threatened by Ankara, seems to explain why Germany remained rather silent over the worsening human rights situation in Turkey. Only in the last few months, as the crisis with Berlin deepened and German citizens were detained in Turkey, has Merkel begun to toughen her language.

STATE OF PLAY

Since May 2016, senior politicians from both sides have levelled increasingly hostile accusations at each other. This rupture not only impacts Germany-Turkey and EU-Turkey relations but also Germany's Turkish community.

Tensions started to rise in June 2016 when the German parliament adopted a resolution declaring the killing of Armenians by Ottoman Turkish forces during the First World War as genocide. This led to Ankara recalling its ambassador. Relations deteriorated further in the aftermath of the 15 July 2016 failed coup attempt in Turkey. Ankara complained that European leaders were too slow in condemning the coup and its perpetrators. While Merkel clearly excoriated the coup attempt and emphasised the urgent need to re-establish the rule of law in Turkey, Vice-Chancellor Sigmar Gabriel later expressed regrets for the government's rather cold reaction.

The fact that no senior German official came to Turkey to express solidarity in the days and weeks that followed was viewed particularly negatively. Many Turks felt the EU was disappointed that the coup had failed and was more concerned by the detainment of thousands of soldiers, judges and others on suspicion of involvement, rather than supporting Turkish democracy.

The German authorities allowing rallies of the Kurdish Workers Party (PKK) is a further issue of contention. The PKK is listed as a terrorist group by the EU and is banned in Germany. Berlin's refusal to extradite people with suspected links to the PKK as well as the Fethullah Gülen movement, which Ankara accuses of masterminding the failed coup, resulted in Turkey denying permission for a German parliamentary delegation to visit German troops stationed at Turkey's Incirlik airbase. When German threats to withdraw troops fell on deaf ears in Turkey, Berlin relocated its troops to the Al-Azraq Air Base in Jordan.

A new nadir in the plummeting relationship was reached when Turkey accused Germany – and other member states – of interfering in the 16 April 2017 constitutional referendum (aimed at transforming the country from a parliamentary democracy into a presidential system of governance) by preventing Turkish Ministers from campaigning in Germany ahead of the referendum. It resulted in President Recep Tayyip Erdogan accusing Germany of "Nazi practices", something that still profoundly offends Germans.

From a German perspective, this "new" Turkey with its increasingly illiberal tendencies, has come as a dreadful shock. As long as the state of emergency that Turkey introduced after the failed coup attempt continues, Germany will not carry out any extraditions since Berlin has no confidence in the Turkish legal system. At the same time, Turkey's attitude regarding the Incirlik airbase not only risked hampering effective NATO cooperation in the fight against the so-called Islamic State (ISIS), it also raised concerns about Turkey's reliability as a NATO ally.

Moreover, what Berlin considers to be Turkey's interference in German domestic affairs (calling on German Turks not to vote for mainstream parties, holding rallies in Germany, etc.) is a major concern, not least because it creates tensions between those who support Turkey's ruling AKP and those who do not – something that has led to violent clashes. Ankara works hard to maintain influence and instrumentalise Germany's Turkish community. The success of this influence was displayed when 63% of registered binational voters in Germany (around 400,000 people) supported the proposed constitutional amendments. In November 2015, almost 60% of Turks in Germany voted for the AKP in Turkey's parliamentary elections.

A particularly worrying development for Berlin has been the detention of Turkish-origin German citizens, including journalists Deniz Yücel and Mesale Tolu. The arrest of human rights activist Peter Steudtner in July 2017 marked a turning point in the crisis. Until then, the German government's approach seemed to have been to endure the many provocations coming from Ankara without changing the fundamental direction of Germany's narrative toward Turkey in the belief that Ankara would come to a more conciliatory stance. But the latest incidents have resulted in Berlin announcing a "re-orientation" of policy toward Turkey, warning companies against doing business in the country, issuing revised guidelines for travellers, and considering a potential suspension of export credit guarantees for German companies working with Turkish businesses, among other things.

This was followed up with Merkel announcing at her summer press conference in August that Germany would veto starting negotiations to update the EU-Turkey Customs Union agreement and requesting the European Commission to suspend preparatory work to this end, underlining there would be no progress with Turkey if the rule of law was not guaranteed in the country. Berlin also called for the suspension of pre-accession aid (IPA). Finally, during a debate with the leader of the Social Democratic Party (SPD) Martin Schulz on 3 September, Merkel stated that Turkey could not and should not be allowed to become a member of the EU and announced plans to discuss the future of accession talks with her EU counterparts in October.

For a relationship built on pragmatism, this was an unprecedented step. Coming just ahead of the federal elections, it is not irrelevant that her main challenger Schulz was taking a tough line on Turkey as well, along with all other main political parties in Germany.

PROSPECTS

Any significant reduction in tension seems unlikely at this point. Berlin cannot ignore the arrest and imprisonment of German citizens. Nor can acrimonious rhetoric be easily dismissed. Ankara, on the other hand, is clearly exploiting German-Turkish and EU-Turkey relations for domestic political gains. Turkey's current foreign policy choices are dictated by domestic political imperatives. Considering the forthcoming 2019 Presidential elections, for which Erdogan has already launched his campaign, there is no reason to expect a significant shift in Ankara's approach. That is why Germany and the EU should tactically assess how to avoid perpetuating this vicious circle and strategically rethink their relationship with Turkey for the future.

What can Merkel do?

Germany has consistently had a *realpolitik* mentality aiming to avoid isolating Turkey and it seems unlikely that Merkel will make a U-turn, irrespective of the governing coalition that will result from the recent elections. That said, Merkel is not known for making reckless or impulsive statements, even if under pressure. Caution has been her calling card throughout her career. Therefore, there is a high chance that Merkel will follow through on some of her statements after the elections. In that regard, she will also be catering to her domestic audience: 84% of Germans are now against Turkish EU accession, the highest it has ever been, and 88% think that the government should take more decisive action against Turkey.² Nevertheless, Merkel will need to balance domestic and external interests carefully as Berlin will not want to overly alienate Turks in Germany or risk further political escalation with Ankara.

Merkel's long-standing opposition to Turkish membership has resulted in a lack of a credible accession narrative. Her threat to end accession negotiations, thus, has no weight and is not an instrument that can be successfully used to influence Ankara. Cutting off Turkey may help domestic political interests in both the EU and Turkey. It would, however, do little to serve the EU's agenda of improving democracy in Turkey as it would alienate a large majority of those forces in Turkey fighting for greater democracy who continue to view the EU anchor as important.

It would also take a consensus of all 28 EU member states to end the accession negotiations. The informal meeting of EU foreign affairs ministers in Tallinn on 7 September showed that such a consensus does not exist. Even though Turkey's membership currently seems improbable, abandoning this framework before elaborating an alternative offer is very risky as it threatens to leave the two partners in a grey zone. In fact, alienating Turkey would be welcomed by those parties both inside and outside of Turkey, like Russia, who believe that Turkey's drift from the West would serve their (geopolitical) interests.

The Customs Union question

Turkey is keen to extend and modernise its Customs Union with the EU, to include services, agriculture and public procurement. Until recently, negotiations for this upgrade were viewed as the most promising way to rebuild relations, as all parties have an interest in its success. While it seems unlikely that Merkel will change her position on

the CU upgrade as long as German citizens remain incarcerated, such an approach is counterproductive and lacks vision. It also risks further marginalising Turkey and reduces space for dialogue.

It would make more sense to start the negotiations but make the final ratification process subject to conditionality by demanding improvements on fundamental freedoms and human rights. In the mid-1990s, when the CU was first established, EU-Turkey relations were also strained due to the country's poor state of democracy and human rights. It led to Germany imposing a partial arms embargo on Ankara. Despite this, negotiations went ahead on the condition that the European Parliament's ratification of the agreement would be subject to political reform. This time around, while the situation is more serious, there is nevertheless a need to have a strategic approach and not take steps to deepen the divide.

While Turkey is endeavouring to strengthen relations with other players such as Russia, China and Iran, the Turkish economy remains very dependent on the EU. By pegging conditionality to the upgrade, the EU would thus be putting the ball in Turkey's court.

The Turkish government recently withdrew a list of nearly 700 German businesses it had accused of having ties to terrorism. This fact shows that, despite the frequent narrative to the contrary, Ankara is aware of the importance of economic ties with Germany. Similarly, Merkel will have to deal with pressure from the German business sector, which has invested a lot in the CU and in Turkey in general and has concerns over the consequences of a total collapse in relations.

No easy answers

Navigating the complexity of the future relationship between the EU and Turkey will remain difficult and a significant part of that burden will fall on Berlin. Its own relationship with Turkey will continue to play a crucial part in tipping the balance. Germany, and the EU more broadly, need to reevaluate the basic assumptions of their relationship with Turkey. Such a discussion should kick off at the European Council on 19-20 October. The EU and its members will have to figure out how to best deal with an increasingly challenging strategic partner with growing illiberal tendencies right at their doorstep.

While today's Turkey may be travelling down a road that is at odds with EU values, it is also important to remember that millions of people in Turkey are fighting for democracy. The nearly 50% of the population that voted against expanding presidential powers in April 2017 are evidence of this. One must also consider the crowds drawn by the 25-day "Justice March" from Ankara to Istanbul, led by Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, leader of the main opposition party. The EU should not make any rash decisions that could reduce its ability to engage with the country but rather look for ways to further support civil society and other pro-democratic and pro-EU forces in Turkey.

Despite the crisis, the EU and its member states must not lose sight of the fact that the decades-old partnership with Turkey is of paramount interest to both sides. Turkey will remain an important ally for the EU and Germany, due to migratory pressures in the region, cohesion in NATO, the fight against terrorism and geostrategic interests in the Black Sea and Middle East. While at this juncture it seems unlikely that Turkey will ever become an EU member, the EU's lack of strategic investment in relations with Turkey over the last decade was short-sighted and eroded its ability to influence the country's political trajectory. This mistake should not be repeated. While there is no easy way out of the current crisis, putting an end to Turkey's European vocation would be strategically self-defeating.

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The views expressed in this Policy Brief are the sole responsibility of the authors.

¹ Angela Merkel on ZDF TV, 28 September 2006.

² Infratest Dimap, ARD-DeutschlandTREND, September 2017.

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