



STRAINS IN TURKEY-GERMAN RELATIONS

By
Shamsa Nawaz
Research Fellow

Edited by
Najam Rafique

October 12, 2017

(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)



Given the heightened tensions between Berlin and Ankara, just before elections in Germany on September 24, 2017, Angela Merkel called for all EU accession talks with Turkey to be scrapped during her television debate. “The fact is clear that Turkey should not become an EU member,”¹ said Merkel.

This was an unprecedented approach by a highly realistic Merkel towards Ankara’s accession hopes. Merkel’s vocal criticism on Turkey’s accession dates back to 2005, when she pledged to talk to EU partners about “a joint position... so that we can end these accession talks”.²

Her prime challenger, Martin Schulz of the Social Democrat Party, was the first one to have announced that he would break off the talks if he won the parliamentary elections.³ He even opposed the demand that President Erdogan be allowed to speak during his German visit to attend G20 Summit, in Hamburg in June, 2017.

Turkey has been a candidate for the EU membership since 1999. In November 2016, Members of EU (MEPs) adopted a resolution asking for the temporary suspensions of the negotiations since the

¹ Stefan Wagstyl and Guy Chazan, “Merkel’s Turkey should not become EU member”, *Financial Times*, September 4, 2017. www.ft.com

² Ibid.

³ Reiss Smith, “German Elections 2017 polls: Angela Merkel v Martin Schulz-latest poll tracker”, *Express*, June 21, 2017. www.express.co.uk

Turkish “government’s actions are further diverting Turkey from its European path.”⁴ Some German politicians have recently urged the EU to halt pre-accession assistance to Turkey of some €4.4 billion (\$5.2 billion) for the period 2014-2020.⁵

Earlier, in July, 2017, Turkish President Erdogan sacked nearly 7,400 civil servants and more than 300 German citizens for alleged links to terror groups on the eve of the country’s first anniversary of last year’s failed coup attempt.

Would Merkel face more difficulty in shaping her foreign policy towards Turkey in the times to come? Her most likely coalition partners - the Greens and the Liberals (known together as the Jamaica coalition) – already hold a hard-line policy against Turkey. Agreeing on a common position and implementing a Turkey policy in a Jamaica coalition will certainly pose difficulties for Turkey.

Merkel faced a backlash at home last year when she allowed for the prosecution of a German satirist over a rude poem about the Turkish president. In June 2016, a German parliamentary vote recognized the killing of Armenians a century ago during the Ottoman Empire as genocide. That led Turkey to bar German lawmakers from visiting their country’s soldiers engaged in a fight against terrorism, stationed at a base in Turkey.

Caught in the crossfire, Germany’s BGA exporters signaled the threat over business. The companies had already halted investment at 22 billion euros (\$25 billion) in deliveries of mostly auto parts and chemical products. Turkey ranked in 15th place last year in its trade with EU. By contrast, Turkish exports to Germany of some \$14 billion made it the No. 1 destination for foreign sales, ahead of the UK, Italy and Iraq.⁶

After a year and a half of tension, the relationship between the two NATO allies reached an apparent breaking point in late July 2017, after Turkey German rights activist Peter Steudtner and five others were detained on the grounds that they were part of a terrorist organization. Germany’s federal police had received a list of 678 German companies suspected by Turkey of supporting terrorism.⁷ The act was uncharacteristically and bluntly denounced by Merkel as “absolutely

⁴ “Estonian FM urges German politicians not to politicize Turkey-EU relations”, *Daily Sabah*, June 9, 2017. www.daily-sabah.com

⁵ Menekse Tokyay, “Turkish-German relations: from bad to worse”, *Arab News*, August 6, 2017. www.arabnews.com

⁶ Patrick Daunahue and Asli Kandemir, “Erdogan lashes out at Germans as Tensions over trade spiral”, *Bloomberg politics*, July 21, 2017. www.bloomberg.com

⁷ *Ibid.*

unjustified”.⁸ In his address to the reporters, the German Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel announced a “reorientation” of relations between the two countries.⁹

Both sides have a lot to lose by letting the relationship deteriorate. Merkel needs Erdogan’s help to keep the flow of refugees into Germany in check. Relations began fraying after Merkel helped broker a deal between Erdogan and the European Union in March 2017, at the height of the migrant crisis. The conciliatory approach adopted has been regarded as a “very fine balancing act.”¹⁰ Turkey would receive a total of €6 billion (\$7 billion)¹¹ by 2018 from the EU in return, making it loath to drop its side of the bargain.

On the other hand, Turkey’s Foreign Ministry has accused Germany of meddling with the independence of its judiciary system by criticizing the arrests and directly interfering in Turkish judiciary.¹² During the Turkish referendum, German authorities stopped Turkish Cabinet ministers from campaigning for ethnic Turk votes and invoked criticism peppered with Nazi references by the Turk authorities. During his visit to attend the G20 summit, Erdogan was even refused a permission to hold a rally for ethnic Turks.

Turkish authorities also blame Germany for harboring terrorists, including members of the Gulenist movement who lead the coup attempt last year and the autonomy-seeking Kurdish PKK. It accused Berlin of not taking a clear stand against last July’s failed coup attempt.

After months of discord over NATO troop visits and imprisoned journalists, tensions came to a head over the detention of a German human-rights activist recently. Turkey has often threatened to suspend the migrants deal, accusing the EU of not living up to its commitments. Berlin is also relocating its forces in the coalition against Islamic State from the Turkish Incirlik air base.

The history of Germany and Turkey is studded with deep ties. There are about 1.3 million Turkish voters living in Germany making them the biggest Turkish diaspora in the world. Millions of Germans flock to Turkey’s beaches and historic cities, and almost 7,000 German companies—from giants such as Deutsche Bank, Siemens, and Volkswagen to tiny importers of textiles and food— are doing

⁸ Philip Oldermann, “Berlin to change policy towards Turkey as German citizen is held”, *The Guardian*, July 20, 2017. www.the-guardian.com

⁹ Ibid

¹⁰ Chad Thomas and Rainer Buergin, “Germany and Turkey are at a breaking point”, *Bloomberg businessweek*, July, 28, 2017. www.bloomberg.com

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

business there worth \$36 billion a year.¹³ The EU is by far Turkey's largest export market (44.5%), while Turkey is the EU's fourth largest export market (4.4%).¹⁴

The current bilateral strains are having real consequences. The freeze in accession talks has inherent vulnerability for populist forces that would serve more to undermine the EU's image. None should be given carte blanche to do whatever they like.

¹³ "Chad Thomas and Rainer Buergin, "Germany and Turkey are at a breaking point", *Bloomberg businessweek*, July, 28, 2017. www.bloomberg.com

¹⁴ "New beginnings: Reassessing EU-Turkey relations", *News: European Parliament*, April 27, 2017. <http://www.europarl.europa.eu>