

The Struggle for the German-Turkish Partnership: Preventing the “Train Crash”

Written by Ebru Turhan

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EBRU TURHAN, DEC 4 2016

The German-Turkish relationship appears to be at the crossroads. During the last 6 months the bilateral dialogue between Germany and Turkey has resembled a rollercoaster ride, with the display of dramatic tensions followed by signs of rapprochement in view of common interests and preferences. Yet, the latest testy exchanges of views (Zeit Online, 2016; Tagesspiegel, 2016) of the last couple of weeks between the two governments point to severe differences between Germany and Turkey in terms of ideological attitudes as well as the normative attributions of freedom and security. This brings about the necessity for both parties to calibrate their foreign policies to effectively and tranquilly deal with bilateral differences while finding common ground to continue pursuing security and economy-related shared interests. Germany and Turkey are tied to each other through a unique variety of economic, political and societal linkages culminating in a complex interdependency between the two countries. Continuous and open bilateral dialogue is a necessity for both parties, particularly given that Germany, Turkey and Europe have entered an era of multiple crises.

German-Turkish Complex Interdependence at a Glance

Germany and Turkey are in fact exceptional partners on a number of levels. For decades, Germany has been Turkey's foremost trading partner, with bilateral trade volume reaching a new record of 36.8 billion Euros in 2015 (Auswärtiges Amt, 2016a). German impact on Turkish trade can be better illustrated by means of a comparison with Russia, another key trading partner of Turkey: Whereas Germany takes 9.3 percent of Turkish exports, Turkish exports to Russia count for only 2.5 percent of Turkey's total exports (de Bellaigue, 2016). Germany is also defined as the biggest foreign investor in Turkey with the operations of approximately 6,500 German companies and companies with German capital residing in Turkey (Auswärtiges Amt, 2016a). While many German firms manage their regional operations from Turkey, fostering Turkey's standing as a regional business hub, Turkish companies have been increasingly involved in investments in Germany in sectors of strategic importance such as telecommunications, white goods, electronics, and automotive industries. Particularly, in the middle of the Eurozone crisis, leading German companies had referred to Turkey as one of their core countries for investment (Bild Zeitung, 2011; Financial Times, 2012).

As far as foreign policy related bilateral dialogue is concerned, the two countries cooperate intensively in regards to issues of strategic importance including the fight against organized crime and international terrorism, the management of the European refugee crisis as well as economic development and reconstruction assistance in third countries such as Syria (GIZ, 2016). The 2013 decision of German and Turkish foreign ministries to initiate the German-Turkish Strategic Dialogue Mechanism (Auswärtiges Amt, 2013) in order to nurture bilateral dialogue on recent common challenges and the launch of the official intergovernmental consultations in 2016 (Bundesregierung, 2016) hint at growing areas of interdependence between Germany and Turkey as far as foreign policy making is concerned. The German federal parliament (the *Bundestag*) has recently renewed the mandate for the German Armed Forces' deployment at Turkey's Incirlik base to participate in combat missions as part of the anti-IS coalition. The decision came despite Turkey's blocking of the visits of German lawmakers to the Incirlik base following the Armenian resolution of the Bundestag, which points to the crucial “geopolitical partnership” between the two countries.

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The societal relations between Germany and Turkey are in particular marked by the presence of nearly 3 million people of Turkish origin currently residing in Germany, which brings recurring issues related to migration, integration, diaspora politics and Turkey's compatibility with the so-called European identity to the forefront of bilateral dialogue. The recent visa liberalization dialogue between Turkey and the European Union (EU) is also followed by both societies quite closely. The German federal government has played a key role in setting out the conditions for and the timing of the visa exemption for Turkish citizens travelling to the EU. The “EU-Turkey deal” of 18 March 2016 regarding the management of irregular migration flows into the EU was reached under strong German guidance (Turhan, 2016a).

From a “Rollercoaster” towards a “Train Crash” in German-Turkish Relations?

German-Turkish bilateral dialogue has for a long time been dominated by ebbs and flows. Due to the complexity of the multidimensional relations founded on both converging and diverging interests as well as on compound interconnectedness between both countries leading habitually to the blurring of domestic and bilateral issues, a love-hate-relationship has long existed between Germany and Turkey. A vicious cycle of phases of conflict followed by moments of rapprochement has become characteristic of German-Turkish dialogue. Lately, however, the relationship that has until very recently resembled a “rollercoaster ride” with equal ups and downs has started to increasingly experience severe ebbs.

The first serious German-Turkish diplomatic rift of recent years took place in June 2013, when the German federal government unilaterally vetoed the opening of Turkish Chapter 22 accession talks with the EU. The German veto was supported only by the Dutch government. Berlin grounded its veto inexplicitly on Ankara's reaction to the Gezi Park demonstrations, which started in late May 2013 to protest the urban development plans for Istanbul's Taksim Square (Sattar and Busse, 2013). The German attitude contradicted the position of the European Commission (EC), which believed that “more than ever, [...] there is a need to push for the negotiations for new chapters being open” (Brown and Pawlak, 2013) and the attitudes of the remaining 25 member states of the EU, with the exception of the Netherlands. Following the German veto, the bilateral dialogue between Germany and Turkey experienced a significant low with both countries having summoned each other's ambassadors. The bilateral tensions eased after Germany lifted its veto on the Chapter 22 negotiations in the aftermath of federal elections.

Between November 2013 and May 2015, German-Turkish relations experienced a normalization in light of the existence of a common ground for tackling the recent refugee crisis and the management of irregular migration flows into the EU. While Germany has become the prime destination for refugees from Syria since the onset of the war in the region, Turkey's strategic importance as both a transit and destination country has immensely increased as well (Turhan, 2015). In light of the evident interdependence between Turkey and Germany in regards to the management of the refugee crisis, Chancellor Angela Merkel referred to Turkey as a key actor for the protection of the EU's external borders in October 2015 (European Parliament, 2015) and advocated the opening of new chapters in Turkey's accession talks with the EU after a 2-year hiatus (EurActiv, 2015). Chancellor Merkel also frequently met with her then counterpart former Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu and played a central role in the construction of the EU-Turkey “deal” on tackling the refugee situation (Turhan, 2016b).

The German-Turkish relationship started to seriously go downhill when the Bundestag adopted a resolution in June 2016 recognizing the deportation process and death of Armenians in 1915 as a genocide (Deutscher Bundestag, 2016). Although Chancellor Merkel and Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier were absent from the vote, the resolution greatly deteriorated the political dialogue between both countries which was reflected in the recall of the Turkish ambassador to Germany Hüseyin Avni Karslioglu. For about 4 months, Turkey's diplomatic representation in Germany was maintained at the level of counsellor, until Ambassador Karslioglu returned to his post in early October. In the meantime, two developments further weakened the mutual trust between Germany and Turkey: firstly, during June-August 2016, Ankara banned German parliamentary delegations from visiting the Incirlik base hosting approximately 250 German troops as part of the anti-IS Coalition, demanding the German federal government distance itself from the Armenian resolution (Schult, 2016). The ban was lifted in September 2016, only after the German federal government described the resolution as legally not binding. Secondly, in a classified, though leaked, report of August 2016 the German Interior Ministry referred to the Turkish regime as a supporter of terrorist groups in

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the Middle East (Tagesschau, 2016). Following the leak, Ankara accused Germany of having a “distorted mentality” that aimed at weakening Turkey (n-tv, 2016a).

German-Turkish Relations after the attempted Coup

Sharp differences between German and Turkish governments' views on the measures needed to be taken after the July 15th coup attempt have further deteriorated the dialogue between the two countries. It would not be an exaggeration to say that after the attempted coup, German-Turkish bilateral dialogue has reached an all-time low. German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier has been one of the most active voices in Europe in openly commenting on Ankara's post-coup policies and actions. Between 16 July and 27 November 2016 Steinmeier made around 20 official statements (press releases or press conferences) on the post-coup developments in Turkey. During the first couple of weeks following the attempted coup, statements by the German Foreign Minister were quite cautious, merely pointing to the need to respect the rule of law and fundamental freedoms while taking concrete measures to restore stability and security in Turkey (see for example Auswärtiges Amt, 2016b).

As a response to mass arrests, detentions and suspensions, Steinmeier increased his criticism of Ankara's post-coup actions as of late August by regularly making statements in front of cameras and microphones, where he referred to Turkey as a difficult partner (Auswärtiges Amt, 2016c) and emphasized that Ankara needed to decide which path it was going to follow while keeping in mind what this was going to mean for Turkey's EU accession process (Die Welt, 2016). Following his recent visit to Turkey, the Foreign Minister stated that Germany was willing to cooperate again with Turkey on the basis of European fundamental rights, and that Ankara needed to decide whether or not it would respect those (Auswärtiges Amt, 2016d). Steinmeier's statement hinted at the scope and content of German-Turkish bilateral cooperation reaching an important crossroads. His statement was echoed by another prominent German politician at level of the European Union. Martin Schulz, President of the European Parliament, questioned Turkey's European aspirations and brought to the table the possibility of economic sanctions (such as the termination of talks on the deepening of the EU-Turkey Customs Union) on Turkey (Deutsche Welle, 2016).

Ankara's reaction to the official German position on post-coup measures has not been any softer. President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has repeatedly referred to Germany as a refuge for PKK terrorists due to Berlin's “open-door” policy (see for example Deutschlandfunk, 2016), while he called Schulz “the president of ‘some’ parliament” (BBC Türkçe, 2016) following Schulz's statement on the likelihood of economic sanctions on Turkey. In a similar vein, Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu and German Foreign Minister Steinmeier have become participants in probably the most tense intergovernmental meeting in the contemporary history of German-Turkish relations. Çavuşoğlu stated three times during a joint press conference and under Steinmeier's watchful eyes that the German federal government did not appropriately process the 4500 legal cases pending regarding PKK terrorists residing in Germany (Popp and Schult, 2016). The tense dialogue between key representatives of the Turkish government, on the one hand, and the Steinmeier-Schulz duo on the other, draws the future of German-Turkish relations into question as Steinmeier has recently become the ruling coalition's joint candidate for German presidency and Schulz seems to be very likely to replace Steinmeier as Germany's next foreign minister following the upcoming federal elections.

A Dialogue at the Crossroads

The German-Turkish partnership, in fact a unique one due to the complex interdependence between the two countries, has entered a profound crisis: both governments accuse each other of deliberately acting as a refuge for terrorism and regularly summon each other's ambassadors or top diplomats over increasing tensions in regard to a variety of issues of strategic interest for both. While in Germany President Erdoğan mostly makes the headlines of leading media outlines, the Turkish media ever more focuses on official German reaction to post-coup measures taken by Ankara. Although it is rather the Austrian government that openly calls for the complete termination of Turkey's accession talks with the EU (Tagesschau, 2016), Berlin grabs the headlines in Turkey.

Looking at the status quo, it would not be an exaggeration to say that German-Turkish bilateral dialogue has hit an all-

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time low, and the crisis between both partners has become even more complex than the best remembered conflict of early 1998. Following the December 1997 Luxembourg European Council the then Turkish Prime Minister Mesut Yılmaz had accused the German federal government of preventing the acknowledgement of Turkey's candidacy status in Luxembourg due to a hidden agenda. He argued that Berlin supported the candidacy status of the countries of Central and Eastern Europe due to believing in a “Lebensraum”, a concept associated with Hitler's expansionist policies towards Eastern Europe, to provide “living space” for the growing German population.

In spite of their differences, both countries rapidly need to take measures which would ease the recent bilateral conflict as German-Turkish political tensions have profound implications for Germany, Turkey and Europe. They put, above all, German-Turkish high-level strategic dialogue and cooperation on bilateral issues and matters related to the multilateral such as the management of the current refugee crisis and prospective irregular migration flows to the EU, the fight against terrorism, economic, energy and environmental affairs as well as the maintenance of peace and stability in the European periphery at great risk. Berlin and Ankara should not forget that German-Turkish cooperation constitutes a key pillar of both countries' actorness in Europe and the wider neighbourhood as well as Europe's stability. The crisis between both parties also has negative implications for the scope, content and characteristics of Turkey's relations with the EU and its EU accession process, particularly since Germany, with its aggregate structural capabilities, assumes a leadership role in interstate bargaining and decision-making processes in regards to the EU's widening.

Recommendations for the Strengthening of the German-Turkish Relationship

In view of the complex interdependence between Germany and Turkey and the likely consequences of the bilateral conflicts for Germany, Turkey and Europe, the following policy recommendations should be considered by German and Turkish governments:

- Key representatives of the German and Turkish governments need to communicate their differences and conflicting views to each other not mainly in front of the cameras and under the watchful eyes of the public and media, which is likely to culminate in the provocation of the public “space” and decrease the room for manoeuvre of political elites. The processing of bilateral disputes should take place behind closed doors, in the form of ad hoc intergovernmental meetings or within the framework of already established mechanisms such as the German-Turkish intergovernmental consultations or the Strategic Dialogue Mechanism.
- In view of Ankara hinting at a possible referendum in early 2017 (n-tv, 2016b) on whether to continue accession talks with the EU or not, Germany should seek to persuade Cyprus and other prospective veto players such as Austria to open the essential Chapters 23 and 24 negotiations, relating to fundamental rights, justice and security ahead of a possible referendum in Turkey. In doing so, Germany and the EU would signal their sincere willingness to continue accession negotiations with Turkey, and most probably prevent a possible referendum, which is likely to further deteriorate EU-Turkey dialogue.
- Ankara needs to re-open all communication channels with Steinmeier and Schulz, two top German politicians, who are likely to act as the next German President and Foreign Minister, respectively. Constructive dialogue with the Steinmeier-Schulz duo would foster the elimination of tensions between the two countries.
- With Turkish and German publics increasingly becoming distanced from each other and showing scepticism towards each other's political elites who make headlines in the media of the other mostly with negative tonality, German and Turkish governments should explore how they can foster mutual societal understanding and rapprochement by supporting civil society initiatives, academic, scientific and journalism exchanges and other related programs.
- German and Turkish governments should examine the effectiveness of the current institutional architecture of the German-Turkish bilateral relationship and explore ways as to how to tap the full potential of key institutional catalysts of the dialogue such as German-Turkish intergovernmental consultations, bilateral strategic dialogue mechanism and a high-level energy forum.
- As the granting of visa free travel to Turkish citizens appears to be an unrealistic goal in the short term in view of the seven difficult benchmarks (European Commission, 2016) yet to be fulfilled by Turkey, Germany could mobilize other EU member states to grant visible and very well-defined visa facilitation to specific

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groups in Turkey such as business circles, academics and students, as early as 2017 and ahead of a possible referendum in Turkey on accession process in order to nurture pro-EU public opinion in Turkey.

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