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# FEUTURE EU 28 Country Report

## Germany

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## 1. History of EU-Turkey Relations<sup>1</sup>

### 1.1. No continuity in Germany's position

Relations between Germany and Turkey were always close, but rarely unburdened. When compared to Turkey's relations with other EU member states, political as well as economic and societal ties with Germany are unique in their intensity – and also in their vulnerability. With about three million people in Germany that have Turkish citizenship or are of Turkish origin, the political state of play in EU-Turkey relations is of high interest for the political elites and society alike. Consequently, Turkey-related news are usually covered intensively by the media. Beyond that, Turkey's accession prospects have regularly featured prominently in election campaigns.

Although against the background of recent tensions in the German-Turkish relations it seems more like a distant memory, the “traditional German-Turkish friendship” used to be a common image in political speeches on both sides. Diplomatic relations have a long tradition and date back to the Ottoman times and the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Further, in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Germany had long been perceived as a kind of ambassador of Turkey's interests within the European Community/European Union but also at the international level. Starting in the late 1950s, Germany also had the role of coordinator of the international financial aid for Turkey and provided considerable arms shipment to Turkey.

Analysts agree that Germany's stance on Turkey-EU relations matters a lot – if not the most – in the EU. However, unlike the case of many other member states there was no clear consensus among German political parties regarding Turkey's membership bid in the last decades. The coalitions led by the conservative party Christian Democratic Union/Christian Social Union (CDU/CSU) have always questioned Turkish membership aspirations or even tried to prevent substantial commitments by the EU. This was the case both under Chancellor Helmut Kohl, until 1998, as well as after 2005, under Chancellor Angela Merkel.

There were only a few years during which the German government actively pursued Turkish membership, namely under the coalition of the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and the Alliance 90/The Greens, which lasted from 1998 to 2005. The decision of the Helsinki European Council of 1999 to grant Turkey the status of accession candidate, in the eyes of most observers, would not have been possible without this shift in government in Germany in 1998, when the red-green coalition came into power. It is important to note that the German population is traditionally among the most sceptical ones in Europe when it comes to Turkish EU membership, with Austria being the only country that tops this rejection rate. One explanation is that the domestic dimension, for example perceived problems with the integration of some parts of the Turkish community in Germany, affects the stance towards Turkish EU membership.

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<sup>1</sup> The EU 28 Country Reports were completed before the Turkish Constitutional Referendum on 16 April 2017. Thus, the report does not take account of any potential changes in the national debate that might have occurred in the meantime.

## 1.2. A mix of narratives

Narratives in Germany about Turkey-EU relations are diverse and even conflicting. At least in recent decades, there was never a consensus among political elites on how relations with Turkey at EU level should develop. Over time, one can identify a mix of value- and interest-based arguments and sometimes identity-related narratives. Recently, value-based arguments dominate the debate, mostly focusing on the cutbacks of human rights and democratic standards in Turkey. These became a focus of attention already after the violent crackdown on the Gezi Park protesters in 2013, but even more so in light of the purges since the failed coup attempt of July 2016.

Interest-based arguments usually underline Turkey's strong economic role, as well as Turkey's contribution to regional security – which can be summed up as a narrative of “Turkey as geostrategic partner”. Even the opponents of Turkish EU membership acknowledge Turkey's unique (geo)strategic importance for Europe, but they continuously emphasize that Turkey does not fulfil the democratic standards needed to join the EU. What is more, they prioritize this statement over the argument that Turkey could achieve these standards in the course of the accession negotiations.

An identity-related narrative of “Turkey as the Other” implying an alleged non-Europeanness of Turkey is more present in the public debate than in the discourse of policy-makers, but it can be found on the political far right. Also relating to the identity dimension, it was often discussed whether Turkey could be an example for combining Islam and democracy successfully. This narrative of “Turkey as a bridge to the ‘Islamic World’” was mostly present in the years after 9/11 and is not as prominent at present.

## 1.3. Economy, democratisation and security in the focus

For export champion Germany, Turkey is an important trade partner and the economic dimension features high on the agenda for EU-Turkey relations. However, the long-time flourishing economic relations – Germany is Turkey's most important trade partner and among the biggest foreign investors in Turkey – have started to be overshadowed by the political sphere. It was reported in the media in spring 2017 that German firms are increasingly hesitant to invest in Turkey due to the political situation and diplomatic conflicts.

As for the security dimension, Turkey was for a long time portrayed as a stability anchor in its crisis-shaken neighbourhood. This argument was particularly stressed by supporters of the Turkish EU accession – such as politicians of the red-green coalition that was in government between 1998 and 2005. Turkey's crucial role for Europe's security, as had been most apparent during the cold war, remains an influential motive in the debate. However, this argument is also regularly used by sceptics of Turkey's membership bid, who point out that as an EU member, Turkey could also bring conflicts closer. Turkey's democratization process represents a stable priority for Germany – which due to the accession negotiations also relates to the EU level. The democratic reforms in Turkey under the Justice and Development Party (AKP) government, mostly until the mid-2000s, were acknowledged positively. At the same time, the reverse trends in the last years are followed very closely by elites and the public. The great interest in domestic developments in Turkey that can be identified in Germany is due to a considerable degree to the large group of German citizens with Turkish background.

This Turkish community in Germany has traditionally also been an important factor influencing the German set of preferences regarding Turkey at the EU level and vice versa. For example, when it came to the issue of a potential free movement of workers, it was always clear that Germany would be among the main target countries for incoming Turkish immigrants and in light of that German governments tried to avert this for a long time. In the context of the EU-Turkey deal of 2016, the German government however pleaded for progress regarding visa liberalization for Turkey.

## 2. Future of EU-Turkey Relations

### 2.1. Germany-Turkey-EU: a triangle in trouble?

After the failed coup in Turkey of July 2016 and particularly in the first months of 2017, tensions in the political and diplomatic relations between Turkey and Germany escalated further week after week, and seemed to mutually reinforce themselves. Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's comparison of Germany with the Nazi regime in reaction to the cancellation of several election campaign events of Turkish ministers for the upcoming referendum was only one of the many disputes that recently overshadowed the bilateral relations. Other contentious issues were the lawsuit of the Turkish president against German Satirist Jan Böhmermann, the German Bundestag's resolution on the Armenian question, but also the arrest of the German-Turkish journalist Deniz Yücel in Istanbul in February 2017. Relations were further strained by news on Turkish imams allegedly spying on Turkish parish members in mosques run by the Turkish-Islamic Union for Religious Affairs (DITIB). The DITIB is an umbrella association coordinating the Turkish mosques in Germany and is controlled by the Turkish Presidency of Religious Affairs (Diyanet) – therefore it has often been accused of being the Turkish government's "long arm" in Germany.

As for the political elites, the party spectrum was traditionally divided on the question of Turkish EU membership. However, in light of the recent developments it seems more likely that even the former supporters of Turkish EU membership will become more critical – also due to the increasingly negative public opinion. CDU/CSU has always been very sceptic of Turkish EU membership and is likely to keep this position. The Social democrats have not yet published their programme for the upcoming elections of 2017 at the time of publication, but their candidate Martin Schulz regularly underlined the importance of continuing the accession negotiations. However, he made clear that the re-introduction of the death penalty would be the red line for him. In their draft party programme for the elections, the Alliance 90/The Greens also claim that the door to the EU should be kept open for Turkey. They argue that a rejection would send the wrong signal to those forces in Turkey that oppose the growing authoritarianism. Lastly, the newcomer to the opposition, the right-wing populist Alternative for Germany (AFD), which is currently represented in 12 state parliaments but not yet at the federal level, openly argues for a stop to accession negotiations with Turkey. Nevertheless, and as would be expected by a party of this political kind, the AFD's representatives are less interested in international or European dynamics, and relate most of their statements to the domestic sphere.

## 2.2. “Privileged partnership” – an unpopular German invention

When asked about her stance towards Turkish EU membership, Chancellor Merkel usually replied that Turkey does not fulfil the EU’s criteria at the moment and often repeated the credo “pacta sunt servanda”. Put rather bluntly, these formulations could be interpreted as having to live with the decision of the coalition of the SPD and Alliance 90/The Greens to pursue the opening of negotiations. In a similar vein, the Chancellor regularly stressed the open-ended character of negotiations. In 2004, as opposition leader at the time, Merkel apparently even tried to prevent a decision to grant candidate status by writing a letter addressed to several European leaders.

Merkel’s CDU actually coined the concept of “privileged partnership” for Turkey, suggesting the idea of an alternative to membership, which they vaguely define as deepened cooperation. This notion was however immediately rejected in Turkey because it cemented the impression of a second-class status for Turkey among the EU’s accession candidates – and subsequently the German political leaders mostly abandoned this terminology. The SPD and the Greens criticized this concept and argued that with Turkey being a NATO partner, this kind of partnership already exists. In the meantime, they have also become more critical towards full EU membership for Turkey – at least under the current Turkish president. The liberal Free Democratic Party (FDP) has for a few years encouraged a discussion on differentiated integration, arguing that full membership was *de facto* out of question, and has particularly emphasized this in recent months, combined with a demand for practical solutions.

In light of the latest autocratic developments in Turkey and the increasingly hostile debate, it seems that the question of Turkish membership is off the table for the next years. Most recently, the discussion has rather shifted to the question of whether one should break off the accession negotiations or whether it is better to preserve the “fiction” and try to use the influence on Turkey that is left in a positive sense, or – thirdly, whether to engage in a discussion on models of differentiated integration.

Overall, given that Turkey is currently in the spotlight of attention in Germany, it is likely that Turkey-related topics, including the question of how the future relations should be framed, will be a hot topic during the campaigns for the federal elections in September 2017.

## 2.3. The refugee crisis: a change of priorities

Germany’s political leaders and public opinion alike have become more critical regarding domestic developments in Turkey, particularly since the violent reactions of the Turkish government towards the Gezi Park protesters. At the EU level, in June 2013 this criticism was channelled in a (successful) German initiative to temporarily delay further accession talks.

Against the background of the refugee crisis, the year 2015 at first saw a very strong German engagement at EU level. The Chancellor tried to convince her European peers to re-energize the accession process or at least to proceed with the visa liberalisation process for Turkey. This intensification of the political dialogue came rather unexpected for many observers.

In the months following the failed coup in Turkey, Chancellor Merkel was increasingly criticized by the opposition parties for not speaking up more clearly against the post-coup purges and in the current diplomatic crisis. The opposition argues that the Turkish government only speaks a language of power

demonstration and that the German government should therefore not hold back with its answer. This translates also to the EU level and several politicians demanded to stop the accession process. The opposition, such as the Alliance 90/The Greens, rejects the refugee deal and criticizes it on the grounds that it made the EU susceptible to blackmail by Turkey.

Considering the close economic and societal relations between Turkey and Germany, political leaders will however most likely not break relations with Turkey fully and at least until now, only few voices go that far in their demands.

The German public was traditionally quite sceptical towards Turkish EU membership, also compared with the political elite. Germans seem to have become even more sceptical than their political leaders when asked about the future of Turkish accession process. Surveys by *Forsa* and *Yougov* from 2014 and early 2016 showed that more than 60 percent of Germans did not want Turkey to accede to the EU. Since the coup attempt and the following purges, support in Germany for Turkish EU accession has decreased even further: according to surveys conducted right after July 2016, about 80 percent of Germans were against a Turkish accession. This rejection rate is likely to have remained at this high level or may even have increased in the last months of 2016 and the beginning of 2017. One can already observe the impact this has on the formulation of party preferences, for example regarding the formulation of the election campaign priorities for the 2017 federal elections.

### 3. EU-Turkey Relations and the Neighbourhood/Global scene

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#### 3.1. Is Turkey still a reliable partner?

Turkey has been considered an important geostrategic actor by German policy-makers for a long time, also with regard to the conflicts in the EU's Southern and Eastern neighbourhood. Historically, Turkey has been viewed as a reliable NATO partner and generally as a partner of the "West" – for example also in the case of the Kosovo War in 1999. Unlike the question of Turkey's membership bid, there is a consensus among political stakeholders' narratives on the strategic importance of Turkey for Europe. In fact, this has always been a major motivation and line of argumentation of the supporters of Turkish EU accession in Germany. After all, besides relations with Turkey via the European Union, Germany and Turkey are involved internationally through their engagement in NATO, the OSCE, the Council of Europe and the G20 group.

In the most recent phase however, German analysts and policy-makers underline that Turkey's Western embedment when it comes to the international sphere and its foreign policy is not a given. Turkey's initiatives for closer alignment with Russia and China, as well as its ambiguous involvement in the Syria conflict, have given rise to concerns. These developments have reinforced doubts on how reliable Turkey will be in the future. The Turkish government was widely criticized for using the fight against the so-called Islamic State (IS) in Syria also to weaken the Kurdish forces. However, many analysts agree that a solution to the war in Syria is not likely to be possible without Turkey.

### 3.2. The refugee question – a need for cooperation

The perception of Turkey's central role for securing the South-Eastern borders has not changed considerably in recent years. On the contrary, it has rather become an unavoidable fact due to the large number of refugees that seek asylum in EU member states. Aware of Turkey's central role in this dynamic, the German government became what could be called the driving force of the EU-Turkey deal. However, there is growing criticism in Germany – also directed against the Chancellor – that with this deal the EU has put itself in a difficult position of dependency.

At the same time, one can identify a general impression of uncertainty in Germany as to how Turkish foreign policy will develop and which fields of cooperation will be possible or necessary. The fickleness of Turkish foreign policy in the last years is sometimes even interpreted as a danger for Europe and for NATO, and also as a further indicator that Turkey might not be interested any longer in a stable cooperation with the “West”.

### 3.3. Global dynamics less in the focus

While purely foreign policy-related topics regarding Turkey feature slightly less in the German public debate and media than for example the EU accession process or the recent referendum in Turkey, the growingly diverging priorities at the international level have not gone unnoticed.

In the 2000s, and under the impression of Ahmet Davutoglu's “zero problems with the neighbours” foreign policy strategy, the question was raised whether Turkey would in the future prioritize the MENA region over the ties with the “West”. More recently, the Russian-Turkish deal on a ceasefire in Syria of December 2016 was interpreted by some media as some sort of power shift in the Middle East, in the sense that both governments may have recognized their joint interests in the region and want to use the power vacuum created by the potentially weakened role of the United States' (USA) role. Regarding transatlantic relations, the US support for Turkish EU membership may have had a certain influence on EU-Turkey relations in the past, but it is neither clear nor possible to predict from a German perspective how relations between the USA and Turkey will develop in the future. While the personalities of US President Donald Trump and Erdoğan are sometimes compared in the German media, the hard facts remain that Turkey continuously criticized the US support to Kurdish fighters in Syria and that the Turkish government has demanded the extradition of Fetullah Gülen – a request which the US government has declined so far.

**Links & Further Readings:**

- Hauge et al. (2016): FEUTURE Working Paper: Mapping periods and milestones of past EU-Turkey relations: <http://www.feuture.uni-koeln.de/de/publications/>
- Reiners, Wulf/Büyübay Can (2016): Germany's Turkey Policy in Troubling Times: A Needed Partner for Europe in an Unstable Region?, [http://www.fiia.fi/assets/publications/FIIRReport44\\_Europes\\_New\\_Political\\_Engine.pdf](http://www.fiia.fi/assets/publications/FIIRReport44_Europes_New_Political_Engine.pdf)
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