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DR. FUNDA TEKİN

*Director at Institut für Europäische Politik, Berlin,
Senior Research Fellow at Centre for Turkey and
European Union Studies*

InBrief Series

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DR. FUNDA TEKİN

Dr. Funda Tekin is Director at Institut für Europäische Politik in Berlin and Senior Research Fellow at the Centre for Turkey and European Union Studies (CETEUS) at the University of Cologne. She was Project Director of the H2020 Project “The Future of EU-Turkey Relations: Mapping Dynamics and Testing Scenarios” (FEUTURE), the Jean Monnet Network “Enhancing Visibility of the Academic Dialogue on EU-Turkey Cooperation” (VIADUCT) as well as the research project “TRIANGLE – Blickwechsel in EU/German-Turkish Relations Beyond Conflicts. Towards a Unique Partnership for a Contemporary Turkey?” funded by the Stiftung Mercator. She is also member of the board of the Trans European Policy Studies Association (TEPSA) and editing director of the academic quarterly integration.

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On 26 September 2021 Germany is going to take to the polls to elect a new German Bundestag and consequently a new government. These general elections are taking place in turbulent times of the prevailing COVID-19 pandemic, an increasingly unstable EU neighborhood and a changing world order. Additionally, relations between the EU and Turkey have just reached yet another all-time low at the end of 2020. Both sides have given evidence of their willingness to mend the relationship in order to preserve their fragile framework of conflictual cooperation over the past months. Yet, the tide can still turn either towards a positive agenda or to a decision by the EU to finally apply restrictive measures against Turkey.

Even though EU-Turkey relations are rarely a top priority topic in German general elections, Turkey generally features in the election manifestos of all campaigning political parties. Likewise, German general elections can be of relevance for EU-Turkey relations. There are three reasons why this year’s general elections are of particular importance on this score.

First, they are going to mark the end of the “Merkel” era that has lasted for 16 years. Ever since her announcement that she would not run for another term as Chancellor, the so-called “K-Question” (who will run for Kanzler, i.e. Chancellor) has preoccupied the CDU/CSU-camp. Second, the fact that the future Chancellor will be someone other than Angela Merkel is the only certainty about the elections. The question of what combinations of party-coalition the elections will make possible remains highly uncertain. According to the latest polls the general elections will most likely put an end to the era of the grand coalition because both the SPD and most recently the CDU/CSU have lost substantial shares in voters’ support. Several coalition formations are conceivable ranging from the so-called Jamaica-coalition of CDU/CSU, the Greens and the liberal FDP or the so-called streetlight-coalition of SPD, FDP and Greens to a black-red-green or a black-green coalition. While all such coalitions would be arithmetical options, each of them would demand substantial compromises of the political parties involved. History has proven how difficult it is to form either one of these coalitions at the federal

level. In 2017, for instance the liberals drew out of the Jamaica coalition negotiations at the very last minute. Third, in any case a government coalition without the participation of the Greens, that have almost tripled their electoral support from 8.4% in the 2017 elections to 22.3% in latest polls, seems to be a highly unlikely option. This means majorities in the Bundestag will shift and the government will change. Hence, this might have an impact on Germany's policies towards Turkey and towards EU-Turkey relations. There is historical evidence that changes in government coalitions in Germany have marked changes in EU-Turkey relations. The era of the red-green coalition government between 1998 and 2005 coincided with significant progress in EU-Turkey relations including the nomination of Turkey as one of EU's accession candidates at the Helsinki Summit in 1999. Since Angela Merkel's CDU has been forming the government, accession negotiations have stagnated. Part of the explanation might be the 'Merkel-factor', who has never been a strong promoter of Turkish membership in the EU and who has only half-heartedly played along in complying with existing path-dependencies. When she took office in 2005 the decision to open accession negotiations had already been taken. Hence, within the framework of the principle of *pacta sunt servanda* she did not seek to cancel this process but she successfully promoted the open-ended nature of these negotiations and the conditionality of the EU's so-called absorption capacity for Turkish EU membership.

Finally, it is also important to note that Ankara perceives Berlin as a key actor in shaping EU policy towards Turkey. This was particularly evident during the months of the so-called refugee crisis in Europe when Turkish leadership apparently understood Merkel to be the key representative of the EU vis-à-vis Turkey at the political level. This means that changes in German leadership are likely to make a notable difference in the terms of Ankara's access to Brussels.

The approaching end of the 'Merkel' era could represent another turning point in relations between Germany and Turkey as well as Turkey and the EU. Yet, there are certain factors that render Germany's approach to the relations between the EU and Turkey rather sticky, which deserve more detailed attention.

The Trilemma of Germany's Turkey and EU-Turkey Policy

Political party positions on Turkey and EU-Turkey relations are generally tied down by the close, longstanding bilateral relations that are particularly visible in their societal, political and economic dimensions. Germany is Turkey's most important trade partner and source for Foreign Direct Investments that constitute a fundamental pillar of the country's economy. In 2020, the bilateral trade volume amounted to 36.6 billion euros and an estimated 7.400 German companies and Turkish companies with German partnerships are active in the Turkish economy. Germany is among the most important countries for Turkey's imports after Russia and China. The social and cultural ties are similarly relevant, because almost 3 million people who originate from Turkey live in Germany and their votes count. Turkey's diaspora politics that allow Turkish people living abroad to vote in Turkish national elections and actively aim to strengthen their identification with Turkey as a prominent part of their national identities play an important role in the bilateral relationship and was at the root of several conflicts. Turkey's increasing institutionalization of identity building measures for instance via DİTİB raise concerns in Germany. Hence, concepts of integration, the provision of religious services, extra-territorial voting and election campaigning become critical questions of the bilateral political agenda. The Kurdish diaspora living in Germany adds to those critical questions, because domestic conflicts in Turkey spill over into Germany and become politically relevant.

While bilateral relations are very close, general support among the German population for Turkey's EU membership is in constant decline. In 2017, opposition to membership reached 84% and developments over the past years have given no reason for improving the general perception of Turkey in Germany.

Turkey has certain expectations from Germany. Based on the strong bilateral economic ties, Erdoğan sees in Germany a close ally within a world order with increasing numbers of global trade disputes. He also views cooperation in the fight against terrorism as highly important. However, Germany and Turkey have a different understanding regarding the definition of terrorist organisations, which has become most evident after the failed coup attempt in Turkey in 2016. Turkey holds the Gülen movement, which is classified as Fethullahist Terrorist Organisation (FETO), accountable for the coup attempt. Germany does not define the Gülen movement as a terrorist organisation, and hence is not able to meet Ankara's demands for cooperation. Furthermore, while narratives of the EU-Turkey relationship have changed throughout the years in Brussels and in the capitals of the EU member states, the dominant Turkish narrative has constantly been 'EU membership' regardless of the state of play in relations. Consequently, the German concept of "Privileged Partnership" has become a non-word in Turkey. Instead, Ankara still counts on Germany's support on their way into the EU. However unrealistic this goal might be at present both because of the EU's stance and perhaps more importantly in terms of Turkey's receding democracy, bruised human rights and rule of law practices.

This means that consecutive German governments face the trilemma of responding to the general mood of the German people, upsetting voters with Turkish backgrounds, and risking to alienate Turkey as an economic and strategic partner.

Wind of Change in Party Positions

German political parties face this dilemma in different ways. For the SPD, Turkish-German votes matter. Support for the social democrats is traditionally high among the Turkish diaspora in Germany. The majority of them initially came to Germany with the so-called "Gastarbeiter"-programme in the 1960s and are hence organized within trade unions that find their political partner in the SPD. In 2017, 45.3% of the people of Turkish origin living in Germany voted for the SPD and only 12% for the CDU/CSU. Hence, for the Christian Democrats, economic and strategic interests are far more pivotal than Turkish-German votes.

However, party manifestos in electoral campaigns since the general elections in 2013 highlight a general trend of decreasing support for Turkey's EU membership prospects across all parties. While in 2013 at least the FDP and SPD generally supported Turkish accession to the EU, this support had dissolved by 2017. Positions ranged from outright rejection by the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) – for cultural reasons – or qualified rejection by the CDU and DIE LINKE, to demands of termination of accession negotiations in order to reboot the relationship (FDP) or continued accession talks in spite of putting the membership perspective on halt (SPD, the Greens). The picture in the run-up to this year's electoral campaign seems to be different. Even though not all parties have yet published their party manifestos, certain details deserve highlighting: the leftwing party DIE LINKE opposes accession negotiations on grounds of qualifying "Erdoğan's Turkey" as an authoritarian regime. The SPD, that had already started to change its Turkey policy in the electoral campaign of 2017 when its candidate, Martin Schulz, suddenly promised that his party would suspend accession negotiations, seems to have completed its turnaround. The party manifesto dedicates no more than three sentences to

Turkey and demands an intensification of the EU-Turkey dialogue only in order to assess questions of Turkey's compliance with rule of law and democratic values critically. The Greens put an equally strong emphasis on democratic values and rule of law in Turkey but continue to perceive such developments as conditionality for consideration of accession negotiations. Visa liberalization and the EU-Turkey statement on Migration seem to be relevant policy areas for future bilateral relations and Germany's preferences for EU-Turkey policy. The Greens for instance promote visa liberalization because it can facilitate integration of people of Turkish origin while others like the AfD strongly oppose it. The so-called Migration deal is perceived rather critically and parties demand its cancellation for different reasons but mainly with the aim to set up a new arrangement along with a reform of the EU's migration and asylum policy.

German EU-Turkey Policy After the General Elections: Headwind for Turkey?

Regardless of election results there are certain givens that will determine Germany's approach towards Turkey and EU-Turkey policy. First, no future German government is likely to promote Turkey's accession to the EU because of the current state of play in EU-Turkey relations. Yet, this is not necessarily a fundamental change in policy since the coalition agreement of the current grand coalition had already excluded any opening or closing of chapters in accession negotiation and linked the modernization of the Customs Union or visa liberalization to Turkey's compliance with all of the required commitments.

Second, general narratives of individual political parties in debates in the German Bundestag have somewhat merged after 2016 and they now focus on the importance of Turkey as a geostrategic

asset for Germany and the EU. The parties also demand a fundamental change in the institutional EU-Turkey relationship. Accession negotiations are only referred to as an argument to realign with an important geostrategic partner.

This narrative is in line with the EU's current twin-track approach of offering a positive agenda while reserving the right to decide on restrictive measures against Turkey depending on Ankara's actions. However, there is also the need to refocus on the political conditionality of democratic values and rule of law issues in Turkey in addition to the geostrategic dimension and the future German government can be expected to do exactly this.

Third, bilateral cooperation between Germany and Turkey as well as the EU and Turkey in certain policy areas are likely to represent a prominent part of Germany's Turkey agenda. The close bilateral relations render the issue of visa liberalization relevant for integration policies in Germany, in which Turkey's diaspora politics are likely to remain a bone of contention. Germany will continue its mediation efforts in the disputes in the Eastern Mediterranean as this fits in well with the country's general foreign policy approach. Individual party positions of the future German government might be of greater relevance in view of Turkey's role in migration policy. However, a reform of the EU's migration and asylum policy as well as the renewal of the EU-Turkey Statement on Migration is on the agenda across the party spectrum in Germany.

Turkey does not need to fear fundamental changes in Germany's Turkey and EU-Turkey policies. This does not mean, however, that it will not have to prepare for strong headwinds that have been accumulating over the past years in spite of the longstanding and close bilateral relationship with Germany.

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