

What next for Turkey-German-EU Relations?

[Published on 02. October 2017](#) by [Amanda Paul](#)

Over the last few months German-Turkish relations have reached an all-time low. Hopes that relations could improve after German federal elections on 24th September seem little more than wishful thinking. Serious damage has been done and it won't be easily repaired. The situation has been further complicated by German Chancellor, Angela Merkel's CDU getting its worst election result since 1945. Forming a coalition government is expected to be an arduous process for Merkel that may take months. This is not good news for German-Turkish relations, and by extension Turkey-EU relations which are already hanging by a thread as a result of the stalled accession process and democratic backsliding in Turkey.

Bilateral relations started to seriously deteriorate following Turkey's failed coup attempt on 15th July 2016, when Germany refused to extradite people with suspected links to the Fethullah Gülen movement (which Ankara accuses of orchestrating the coup attempt) and the Kurdish Workers Party (PKK), which is listed as a terrorist group by the EU and is banned in Germany. Yet clearly, as long as the emergency rule introduced by the Turkish government after the failed coup attempt continues, Germany will not carry out any extraditions as Berlin has no confidence in the Turkish legal system. Two further developments stepped up tensions: first, the arrest of German citizens including journalists Deniz Yücel and Mesale Tolu and human rights campaigner Peter Steudtner. Second, President Erdogan, ahead of Turkey's constitutional referendum on the expansion of presidential powers in March 2017, accusing Germany of using "Nazi practices" to suppress free speech after local German authorities barred pro-referendum rallies at which Turkish politicians planned to speak.

After decades of more or less predictable relations, this new Turkey with its increasingly authoritarian tendencies, has come as a dreadful shock. Berlin announced the intention to "re-orientate" its policy towards Turkey as well as within the framework of EU-Turkey relations. Merkel stated that Germany would veto starting negotiations to update the EU-Turkey Customs Union agreement and announcing plans to end discussions on Turkey's EU accession with EU counterparts at the EU Summit in October.

Germany, which is home to the world's biggest Turkish minority with nearly three million people of Turkish origin, has consistently had a realpolitik mentality aiming not to isolate Turkey. It seems unlikely that Merkel will make a total U-turn on this approach. However, the outcome of the election does make the situation more complicated. Despite the CDU being the biggest party, Merkel has been weakened. Whichever new coalition is formed, her partners are likely to push for a tougher view on Turkey than the previous one. Some are calling for steps on the issue of double citizenship. Whoever is eventually appointed as Foreign minister is particularly important. Merkel will also be under pressure to take account of Alternative for Germany's (AfD) populist messages and she has already promised to take steps to win back voters. While President Erdogan has described the AfD as an enemy of Turkey and called on Turks in Germany not to vote for them in the election, at the same time he also called on Turks in Germany not to vote for the big parties CDU and CSU who he defined as "enemies of Turks". If it is the case that some Turks listened to him and placed their vote elsewhere or simply chose not to vote then they may have – even if only fractionally – helped the AfD. According to recent polls 84% of Germans are now against Turkey's EU accession, the highest it has ever been, and 88% think that the government should take more decisive action against Turkey. Yet Berlin will need to balance domestic and external interests carefully as Berlin will not want to overly alienate Turks in Germany or risk further escalation with Ankara.

Given that Merkel has always opposed Turkish membership, her threat to end accession negotiations - which have been de-facto dead for years - has no weight and is not an instrument that can be successfully used to influence Ankara on the one hand. But on the other hand, it is used by Turkey's

leadership for domestic purposes. It would also take a consensus of all 28 EU member states to end the accession negotiations which currently does not exist. It would do little to serve the EU's agenda of improving democracy in Turkey. Furthermore EU leaders already agreed in December 2016 not to open any more negotiating chapters due to the on-going erosion of the rule of law and civil liberties and freedoms. Blocking the start of negotiations to up-grade the Customs Union is counter-productive and would further reduce the space for engagement and dialogue with Ankara. 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. It would be more sensible to kick-off the negotiations but make the final ratification process subject for Turkey to meet certain criteria related to civil liberties and freedoms.

On 19th and 20th October EU leaders will have a chance to discuss Turkey but there are no easy answers. Germany, and the EU more broadly, need to reevaluate the basic assumptions of their relationship with Turkey and work out how to best deal with an increasingly challenging strategic partner with whom the EU is closely entwined in many different areas. It is important for EU leaders to agree on a clear objective in this relationship which currently seems to be missing. They should also avoid making any rash decisions that could reduce its engagement with the country and its ability to offer support to civil society and other pro-democratic and pro-EU actors in Turkey. As the most influential member state, Germany will be at the centre of this process.