

The Pivotal Relationship. German Doubts and the Turkish-EU Accession Process

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Germany and Turkey have seen economic, cultural, and social ties grow ever closer throughout the 20th century. Given Germany's position within the EU, and in particular on all issues related with EU enlargement, as well as its large Turkish diaspora (the largest in the world), it is the central actor when it comes to Turkey-EU relations. During the past two decades a clear pattern has also emerged in which Turkey-EU relations are stuck whenever Germany was opposed to accession, and have moved forward quickly whenever German governments were supportive, not least since Germany has also influenced the French position on enlargement in the past.

Before 1998, the coalition of the Christian Democrat CDU/CSU and the liberal FDP under Chancellor Helmut Kohl opposed Turkey's EU aspirations, leading to a serious diplomatic fall out in 1997. The Social Democrat SPD/Green coalition under Chancellor Gerhard Schröder made it clear from the beginning that it would enthusiastically support a Turkish membership bid, encouraging the government in Ankara to push for candidate status in 1998 already under the German EU presidency (it then worked in Helsinki in 1999). It emerged as the driving force behind the EU's decision to start accession negotiations with Turkey in 2005. Between 2005 and today Germany was first governed by a Grand Coalition of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU/CSU) and the Social Democratic Party (SPD) under the leadership of Chancellor Angela Merkel, and then by another Merkel-led coalition of CDU/CSU and FDP. All enthusiasm was gone, but there was no crisis as in 1997 either.

Angela Merkel's position on Turkey – and on enlargement in general – has been a commitment to *pacta sunt servanda*. Thus, in September 2006 she noted:

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"Turkey has been promised EU accession negotiations by a former German government, and that is why these accession negotiations are now being continued. [...] Negotiations are open-ended, but are being led in a fair manner. While the CDU and I personally prefer a privileged partnership of Turkey to membership, we are still reliable partners."¹

Since 2005 official Germany has thus been lukewarm, in favour of the status quo of an increasingly slow-moving accession process, unwilling to use its weight in either Brussels, Paris or Ankara to help broker a breakthrough.

And yet, while the mood has soured, and mutual distrust has increased among senior leaders, the German-Turkish relationship has never been more central for both countries – nor more intense. By the end of 2012 an estimated 3 million people with a Turkish background permanently lived in Germany; half of those are German citizens, constituting an increasingly important electorate in a number of German cities.² Turkey's tourism has been breaking records almost every year: here Germany is again the most important country, with 5 million German tourists flocking to Turkey in 2012.

As Turkey has seen its economy develop strongly, Germany has emerged as Turkey's largest goods export market. In 2011, Turkish export of goods to Germany amounted to 14 billion USD. In the same year, Turkish import of goods from Germany amounted to 23 billion USD, making Germany Turkey's 2nd largest supplier of goods. Turkish foreign direct investment (FDI) in Germany stood at 91 million USD while German FDI in Turkey was at 605 million USD (2011).³ In Germany itself, 75,000 ethnic Turkish entrepreneurs employ 370,000 people and generate an

1 Angela Merkel on ZDF TV, 28 September 2006. See ESI, "The German Turkey Debate Under the Grand Coalition", *ESI Discussion Paper*, October 2006, http://www.esiweb.org/index.php?id=156&document_ID=94.

2 German Ministry of Foreign Affairs website: *Foreign & European Policy - Bilateral relations - Turkey*, http://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/EN/Aussenpolitik/Laender/Laenderinfos/01-Nodes/Tuerkei_node.html.

3 Turkish Ministry of Economy website: *Countries & Regions - EU27 - Germany*, <http://www.economy.gov.tr/index.cfm?sayfa=countriesandregions&country=DE®ion=8>.

annual turnover of 35 billion Euros.⁴ Recently, European Energy Commissioner Günther Ottinger, a German CDU member said that he “would like to bet that one day in the next decade a German chancellor and his or her counterpart in Paris will have to crawl to Ankara on their knees to beg the Turks, ‘Friends, come to us’.”⁵ So far few of his political colleagues in power in Germany agree. And yet, few people doubt that this is even today a central relationship for both countries, and one that is only going to become ever more important.

In October 2010 then Federal President Christian Wulff and President Abdullah Gül jointly laid the foundation stone for the new University, the German-Turkish University (DTU) in Istanbul, which in the medium term is expected to cater for up to 5000 students. It was just one in a series of regular high-level meetings. In 2006 Chancellor Merkel visited Prime Minister Erdoğan in Ankara. In 2008, Prime Minister Erdoğan visited Chancellor Merkel in Berlin and also visited Munich. In 2011, he made another visit to Germany. In the same year, President Gül visited Germany. In October 2012, Prime Minister Erdoğan came to Berlin again, to open the new Turkish Embassy building. It is in fact his country’s biggest embassy worldwide.

For now there are no signs that the German government’s stance on Turkish EU accession is likely to change. Angela Merkel is still speaking out against Turkey’s full membership. Before she left for Turkey in February 2013 she declared in her weekly video podcast:

“I believe that we still have a long way to go. We are negotiating without fixed expectations regarding the results. Although I am sceptical I have agreed to continue the accession negotiations. They have become somewhat bogged down recently, and I would be in favour of opening a new chapter now in these negotiations so that we can move forward. I think that I will also discuss this with the Turkish government during my visit.”⁶

Merkel confirmed during her visit her backing for the opening of one new chapter (on regional aid) in what have become extremely slow-moving EU membership talks. This is useful, but will not change the overall mood of distrust and disappointment. The current German position thus leaves Turkey-EU relations in limbo.⁷

What could change this mood – either for good or bad – are upcoming decisions concerning the EU visa regime for Turkey. Turkey is the only EU candidate country without a visa-free travel regime with the EU. This is a source of huge and legitimate frustration for Turks, officials and citizens alike.⁸

4 German Ministry of Foreign Affairs website: *Foreign & European Policy - Bilateral relations - Turkey*, http://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/EN/Aussenpolitik/Laender/Laenderinfos/01-Nodes/Tuerkei_node.html.

5 Jürgen Gottschlich, “They Will Give In’: Turkey Pressures Germany on EU Accession”, *Spiegel Online*, 21 February 2013, <http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/turkey-pressures-germany-to-accept-eu-accession-a-884824.html>.

6 German Government, *EU/Türkei: Neues Verhandlungskapitel eröffnen*, 23 February 2013, <http://www.bundesregierung.de/Content/DE/Podcast/2013/2013-02-23-Video-Podcast/2013-02-23-Video-Podcast.html>.

7 As a result of the stalemates over Cyprus and the openly expressed scepticism of France and other EU members, the formal accession process has run into difficulties. The EU froze eight chapters of the *acquis* in 2006 and no chapter can be closed due to the non-ratification of the 2005 Ankara Agreement under which Turkey would have to open its ports to Cypriot ships and airplanes; the French government blocked an additional four chapters in 2007, and the Cypriot government blocked an additional six chapters in 2009.

8 Every year more than 600,000 Turks apply for a Schengen visa. However, most EU member states introduced the visa requirement only in 1980, like Germany, or even later (like Italy).



Any real prospect of visa liberalization would be an extremely important step. It would transform EU-Turkey relations at a time of stagnation. But is it realistic at a time like this?

The countries of the Western Balkans have been through such a visa liberalization process recently, with German support. There a visa obligation was introduced in the 1990s when war ravaged former Yugoslavia and Albania was mired in chaos. It took five years for serious discussions to begin. In 2008 the EU defined “visa liberalisation roadmaps” for each country, setting out close to 50 concrete benchmarks that each country had to reach. In December 2009, the EU lifted the Schengen visa requirement for Serbia, Macedonia and Montenegro, and one year later, in December 2010, for Albania and Bosnia.

During this visa liberalization process all five countries had to implement far-reaching reforms in the areas of document security, border control and migration management, the fight against organized crime, as well as corruption and illegal migration. These requirements are in any case part of the “Justice and Home Affairs *acquis*”, which candidate countries have to implement before they join the EU. In addition, Balkan countries had to be willing to implement readmission agreements and help the EU deal with irregular migration flows across their borders.

A similar process could begin with Turkey in the coming weeks. In June 2012 the Council of the EU issued conclusions offering a visa liberalization process for Turkey.⁹ Both sides initiated an EU-Turkey readmission agreement. The roadmap lists the conditions that Turkey needs to meet to qualify for visa-free travel with the EU. They touch upon document security, border control and the fight against irregular migration, organized crime and corruption. The Commission has prepared a roadmap for visa liberalization for Turkey and is now waiting for both sides to sign the readmission agreement.

In substance the visa roadmap process would be similar to opening the Justice and Home Affairs chapter. Conducted with a similar “strict but fair” approach as the one that guided the process for the Western Balkans, this would help to restore trust between the EU and Turkey and thus pave the way for ending the current stalemate in the Turkish accession process. The key to restoring trust however would be in concrete results: for Turkey to stop irregular migration (almost exclusively of

9 EU Council, *Council conclusions on developing cooperation with Turkey in the areas of Justice and Home Affairs*, 3177th Employment, Social Policy, Health and Consumer Affairs Council meeting, Luxembourg, 21 June 2012, http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_data/docs/pressdata/en/lsa/131103.pdf.

non-Turks) into the Schengen area via Greece, and for the EU to lift the visa requirement at the end of the process. Preserving Schengen while being able to control irregular migration across its external borders is a central concern of policy makers (not only) in Berlin. Since decisions are going to be taken in the EU by qualified majority voting, and there is thus no national veto of any EU member state, the key position is going to be the one held in Berlin ... in this case by the next incoming German government after elections this autumn.