

GERMAN CULTURAL AND EDUCATIONAL POLICIES IN TURKEY DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC: CHALLENGES AND POTENTIAL

Elena Dück

Executive Summary

German External Cultural and Educational Policy (GECEP) aims at making “the ties between countries tangible.” Hence, many of its programs are based on personal encounters and in-person contact. The COVID-19 pandemic brought a sudden halt to the traditional formats of cultural and educational exchange. While the negative consequences of social distancing were obvious, digital solutions were quickly implemented and brought many benefits to the educational sphere. This policy brief sheds light on some unintended positive consequences within the broader framework of German foreign policy goals, such as climate protection and global justice. Focusing on the Goethe Institute and the Turkish German University (TAU), it summarizes lessons learned from the pandemic that will benefit GECEP even after the pandemic.

Introduction

External Cultural and Educational Policy is a cornerstone of German foreign policy. Its goal is to act as a “foreign policy of societies, which makes the ties between countries tangible.”¹ Hence, many of the projects realized under this umbrella focus on in-person encounters and exchange between artists, students, and civil society actors. While German External Cultural and Educational Policy (GECEP) is relatively independent from other forms of German foreign policy, it should nevertheless reflect Berlin’s foundational principles. Thus, GECEP needs to be analyzed within the framework of Europeanization as well as the commitment to sustainable development. Due to its goal of fostering encounters between societies, GECEP programs were hit especially hard during the COVID-19 pandemic as personal encounters became nearly impossible. However, some positive unintended consequences that might contribute to greater accessibility to the programs as well as a more sustainable implementation of GECEP were also observable. This policy brief aims at discussing these positive unintended consequences in light of the overarching goals of German foreign policy. As there is a broad range of GECEP projects in Turkey, this policy brief focuses on the activities of the Goethe Institute and the Turkish-German University (TAU). In order to do so, first, the role of GECEP in German foreign policy is described. Second, GECEP in Turkey is briefly explained, with a focus on the work of the Goethe Institute and the Turkish-German University (TAU). Third, the programs conducted during the pandemic are discussed, and the positive unintended consequences of the pandemic are identified.

Methodological remarks

This policy brief is based on a qualitative analysis of official policy documents by the German government and 18 semi-structured interviews with students of the TAU, a representative of the German Consortium at the TAU, a representative of the German consulate in Istanbul, a representative of the German embassy in Ankara, and three representatives of the Goethe Institute.

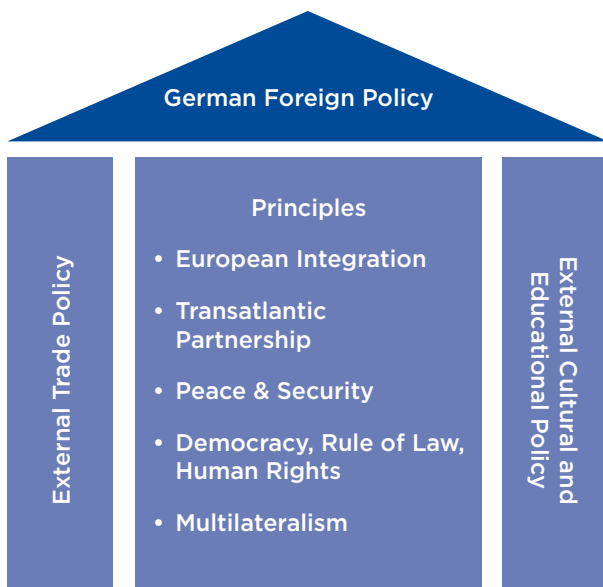
The Three Pillars of German Foreign Policy

German foreign policy is officially committed to the guiding principles of a sovereign Europe, the transatlantic partnership with the United States, working for peace and security, the promotion of democracy and human rights, and a commitment to multilateralism.² These guiding principles form the central pillar of German foreign policy and contain further secondary goals and measures. For instance, according to the federal office, Germany’s commitment to multilateralism not only entails strengthening international institutions but also a commitment to global justice, including, but not limited to, climate protection, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, and urbanization.³ This central pillar is accompanied by two additional pillars: External Economic Policy and Cultural Relations and Educational Policies. While the goal of Germany’s External Economic Policy is to facilitate companies’ entrance into international markets and improve business conditions, GECEP aims at fostering intercultural dialogue and strengthening global trust in Germany. While GECEP is an independent pillar, its contents should and often do reflect the more general objectives of Germany’s foreign policy, such as the promotion of liberal values, including the freedom of science and peace. In light of its alignment with Europeanization processes, GECEP should also reflect the goals of the strategic framework of EU cultural policies. Cultural policies are a top priority for the EU and according to the European Council: “promoting diversity through international cultural relations is an important part of the EU’s role as a global actor.”⁴ The European Commission has formulated the following three objectives for its external cultural relations:

- support culture as an engine for sustainable social and economic development
- promote culture and intercultural dialogue for peaceful inter-community relations
- reinforce cooperation on cultural heritage⁵

The European Commission strives to reach these goals through strong cooperation with its member states and stakeholders, including civil society organizations.⁶ In accordance with this, many of the

projects realized under the GECEP umbrella focus on in-person encounters and exchange between artists, students, and civil society actors from both countries.



In academia, cultural and educational policies are often conceptualized as an instrumental way of increasing a country's influence internationally and analyzed through a "soft power" perspective. However, the official goal of GECEP as well as the self-perception of the practitioners emphasizes the importance of dialogue and mutual understanding as an end in itself rather than a means to increase influence. Nevertheless, there is a normative component to GECEP, as it is explicitly designed to foster liberal values, according to the German Foreign Ministry:

It is a tool for bringing together actors from civil society, advocating the freedom of the arts and sciences around the world, cultivating spaces for critical exchange and freedom of expression as well as protecting cultural property as symbols of cultural identity.⁷

This underlying support for liberal values is also in line with the broader goals of the EU and the EU's cultural policies. Thus, while GECEP's objectives are formulated in more detail, the general EU principles are clearly reflected in them. However, in contrast to the EU, Germany does not list sustainable social and economic development as one of

its goals, instead focusing on peaceful inter-community relations. In practice, sustainability is nevertheless often addressed in GECEP projects. For instance, in 2020 the Goethe Institute Izmir started the project "Goethe goes Green" that organizes different events, educational material, and competitions on the topic of environmental protection and sustainability.⁸ This also reflects the crucial role that intermediaries play in implementing and shaping GECEP. In addition to the general goals of GECEP, the Federal Foreign Office also defines country-specific foci. Moreover, there are project-specific goals that are often formulated by intermediary organizations, such as the Goethe Institute. In the case of Turkey, the Goethe Institute as well as the Germany Embassy aim at increasing activities in Eastern Turkey and, in the case of the Goethe Institute, to start a dialogue with minorities in Turkey.⁹

German GECEP in Turkey

The long history of German activities in Turkey as well as German-Turkish cooperation predates the foundation of the modern republics of Turkey and Germany. For instance, German archaeologists¹⁰ were active in the Ottoman Empire in the 19th century,¹¹ and the Istanbul Department of the German Archaeological Institute (DAI), still active today, was founded in 1929.¹² German-Turkish cultural cooperation today is based on the German-Turkish cultural agreement from May 8, 1957.¹³ There is a great variety of GECEP projects in Turkey, ranging from residency scholarships for artists at the Cultural Academia Tarabya to youth exchanges organized by the German-Turkish Youthbridge. In September 2006, Germany and Turkey's foreign ministers at the time, Frank-Walter Steinmeier and Abdullah Gül, respectively, launched the Ernst-Reuter-Initiative (ERI), aimed at deepening German-Turkish dialogue and cooperation in the areas of arts and culture, politics, media, economy, education, and science.¹⁴ To foster integration of people of Turkish descendants in German society, within the framework of the ERI, the German Embassy Ankara and the Turkish Directorate of Religious Affairs (Diyanet) initiated intensive trainings at the Goethe Institute Ankara for Turkish imams who want to go to Germany.¹⁵ Furthermore, the ERI supports school partnerships, media projects, and the TAU.¹⁶ The

TAU was founded in 2010, based on an international treaty between the governments of Turkey and Germany. It is a “lighthouse project” with the goal of strengthening and deepening Turkish-German relations.¹⁷ Located in the Beykoz neighborhood of Istanbul, the TAU opened its doors to students in 2013. There are currently 3,089 students at the TAU, about half of the target figure once the university has opened all the planned bachelor’s and master’s degree programs. While the university operates under Turkish law, Germany supports the TAU on an academic level via a consortium of 38 German universities. Each of these universities is responsible for a faculty at the TAU or a BA/MA program. In most programs, dual degrees with the German partner university are already offered or planned. Financially, Turkey is responsible for the administrative organization and the buildings as well as the majority of the teaching staff, while Germany funds part of the teaching staff via the German Academic Exchange Service (*Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst*, DAAD). Members of the German partner universities come to the TAU every semester to teach classes in the respective program as part of the fly-in faculty. The BA programs are taught in German, with the exception of law, which is taught in German and Turkish. The master’s and PhD programs are taught in German or English. In order to earn a dual degree, depending on the program, students have to spend one or two semesters at the German partner university responsible for their program. The rest of the program is completed in Istanbul.

In contrast to the TAU, the Goethe Institute, one of the most important German intermediary organizations in Turkey, has been active in Turkey for decades. The Goethe Institute Ankara opened its doors in 1957.¹⁸ It coordinates the “Schools: Partners for the Future (PASCH)” initiative in Turkey, which works with local schools to integrate German classes into their curriculum.^{19, 20} There are also Goethe Institutes in Izmir and Ankara. All of them offer German language classes and exams for internationally recognized German certificates. They also provide advanced trainings for German teachers in Turkey. Furthermore, they organize a wide range of activities to promote German culture and intercultural exchange, ranging from art exhibitions to workshops and lectures. Moreover, the Goethe

Institute Istanbul coordinates the program “Spaces of Culture,” a core project of GECEP in Turkey, in cooperation with the European partner countries Sweden, the Netherlands, and France²¹ as well as the Turkish partner organizations Anadolu Kültür and the Istanbul Foundation for Culture and Arts (IKSV). “Spaces of Culture” is an outstanding project as it supports projects by local artists and organizations in Izmir, Gaziantep, and Diyarbakır, thus overcoming the strong focus on the cultural and political centers of, respectively, Istanbul and Ankara, which is often reflected in GECEP. While the Goethe Institute had to adjust all of its activities during the pandemic, resorting to online exhibitions and festivals, the focus of this policy brief is on the implementation of online German classes during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Challenges during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Due to the pandemic, the Goethe Institute as well as the TAU were forced to switch to online classes in spring 2020. Both institutions reported that from a technical point of view, they were able to do so without major challenges, as online tools had already been available prior to the pandemic. Hence, both institutions were able to switch to online teaching swiftly in spring 2020. The Goethe Institute had already planned to offer some online classes, thus there had been some preparation and instruction for online teaching. However, it had planned for only a small number of such classes. Likewise, as many members of the fly-in faculty at the TAU provide additional learning material online and some have used remote teaching in the past, all interview partners at the TAU said that switching to online teaching was rather easier from an administrative and technical point of view. While technical solutions could be implemented without delay, the switch nevertheless required adapting working and studying habits. For instance, the Goethe Institute reported that there were few teachers who were already totally familiar with using online tools, and additional trainings were necessary. Furthermore, some of the students had a more difficult time learning German online, as they were not used to studying independently. Several interview partners, students and teachers alike, stated that they

considered the role of autonomous, independent learning one of the major differences between the Turkish and the German educational systems. Turkish students reported that they greatly benefitted during the pandemic from having learned to work more independently at the TAU prior to COVID-19. However, they also reported that this was one of the greatest challenges they faced in the beginning of their studies at the TAU. The Goethe Institute offered additional online study groups to support students struggling with online learning.

In the case of the TAU, the majority of the students interviewed stated that they learned most about the Turkish, or, respectively, German, culture through close contact with students from the other group. While Turkish-German relations and intercultural communication is taught in some of the classes at TAU, the students nevertheless stressed that interacting with other students and to a lesser degree with professors from both countries taught them most about cultural differences. According to the students, classes on intercultural communication supported this process but could not replace personal encounters. This indicates that the goal of intercultural exchange cannot be met if relying purely on online formats at the university level. Prior to the pandemic, some members of the fly-in faculty at the TAU had already used the method of flipped classrooms, meaning that the students watched teaching videos and read texts in advance of the in-person teaching. The content of the videos and texts were then discussed in class. When asked to compare this method to online teaching during the pandemic, students stated that they liked the flipped-classroom method more as they were able to ask questions in person after preparing the material in advance. However, they said that the flipped-classroom method was not comparable to completely remote teaching, which they found overall more challenging.

Additionally, spending no time at the campus of the university also meant that students were not exposed to Turkish, or, respectively, German, on a daily basis, and interactions in the respective foreign language were limited to online classes. This is likely to have a significant impact on the language competencies acquired by students. Also, due to the lockdown many German students decided not

to move to Istanbul but rather stayed in Germany, which further reduced their exposure to Turkish language and culture. However, even for those German students that moved to Turkey, due to the pandemic social contacts were limited.

Positive Unintended Consequences

Despite the challenges that the pandemic posed, some positive unintended consequences were observable. The Goethe Institute reported that online learning provided the opportunity for people who do not live in Istanbul, Izmir, or Ankara to join the German classes. The same holds true for teacher trainings offered by the Goethe Institute. The online format made it possible for teachers living in other cities to join the workshops. Even for those living in one of the three cultural centers, a lot of time that would otherwise be spent in traffic could be saved by studying from home. For instance, in Istanbul, the fifth most congested city in the world,²² before the pandemic TAU students spent up to two hours one-way on public transportation to come to the campus in Beykoz. Thus, many students mentioned the benefit of saving time by taking classes online. While some students reported motivational problems and found it difficult to organize their work independently or spend all day in front of the computer, others valued the enhanced flexibility of working from home. Working students said it was easier for them to combine their employment and their studies during the pandemic, due to the possibility of working and studying from home. This indicates that distance-learning makes education more accessible to less wealthy people who need to work in order to support themselves. While online teaching does not eradicate social inequality, as studying from home raises issues such as access to a quiet studying environment, a stable internet connection, and technical equipment, it nevertheless at least facilitates working and studying for some interviewees and saved time otherwise spent in traffic.

Even though online teaching proved to be a feasible solution for knowledge transfer, the greater goal of facilitating cultural encounters and gaining a deeper understanding of the other culture cannot be met. The interviews also show the desire for enhancing online extra curricula activities to keep

students engaged with the university. Students feel that personal contact is a crucial part of their studies; they are very open to mixed formats such as flipped-classroom concepts, which had already been successfully implemented at the TAU. These methods provide a good way for German teaching staff to prepare and keep in touch with students without having to fly to Turkey more often, hence reducing CO₂ emissions in line with German climate goals.²³ Nevertheless, online formats cannot replace in-person teaching as personal contact, especially with other students, is crucial for intercultural exchange and learning German, or, respectively, Turkish.

Overall, the pandemic showed that the Goethe Institute and the TAU had already developed some crucial digital competencies before COVID-19 and were hence able to adapt relatively quickly. While in-person contact was limited, online formats saved time otherwise spent traveling and made it easier for working students to combine working and studying. In the case of the Goethe Institute, online classes and workshops became more available to people outside of the metropolitan areas of Istanbul, Izmir, and Ankara, thus making GECEP more inclusive.

Lessons Learned and Recommendations for the Future

Increased use of hybrid formats

The positive responses of TAU students to hybrid formats such as flipped classrooms indicate that these techniques have high potential in the context of joint teaching programs. The increased adaptation of hybrid formats is recommended in order to reduce the necessity for traveling, thereby contributing to the more environmentally friendly implementation of GECEP.

Heightened attention to different teaching and learning styles

Due to the difference in learning styles conveyed in the German and the Turkish educational systems, German academic staff teaching in Turkey should be sensitized to the need for teaching students how to study independently, especially when teaching online. Additional training might be necessary to raise sensitivity to this issue. Close cooperation between the Goethe Institute, the DAAD, German Schools in Turkey, and the TAU is recommended to profit from best practice examples and develop joint formats to strengthen teachers' qualifications in this area.

Broaden GECEP's inclusiveness

The use of online formats during the pandemic improved access to GECEP programs for people living across Turkey, outside of the cultural hubs of Istanbul, Izmir, and Ankara. Furthermore, online classes made it easier for working students to participate in these classes. This indicates that online formats can make education more accessible to less affluent people and hence more socially inclusive. Online classes and cultural events are valuable tools for a more inclusive GECEP and should thus become an integral part of GECEP after the pandemic.

Acknowledge the limits of online programs

Despite all the potential of digital formats, as online classes fared worse in conveying intercultural competencies—a central goal of GECEP—we need to stay mindful of the limits of digital formats. Rather than using them to replace in-person formats, they should be used as an additional tool in GECEP's toolbox in order to further its inclusiveness and lower barriers to cultural and educational activities.

Endnotes

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- 15 | The idea being that those imams act as role models for young Muslims of Turkish descent in Germany and provide "qualified" religious teachings, as there are very few formally educated imams in Germany. From a German point of view, this measure should help to counter extremist and/or violent interpretations of Islam.
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- 19 | The initiative offers additional benefits, such as competitions for students and youth courses in Germany.
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- 21 | While Sweden and the Netherlands participate in "Spaces of Culture" directly through their embassies, France, like Germany, conducts its cultural policy via an intermediary organization, the Institut Français.
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- 23 | However, as according to the International Energy Agency air traffic only makes up about 3% of global CO₂ emissions, compared to about 40% for electricity and heat, it is evident that reducing air travel can only be a small step in the much greater conversion of the global economy.

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About the Istanbul Policy Center-Sabancı University-Stiftung Mercator Initiative

The Istanbul Policy Center-Sabancı University-Stiftung Mercator Initiative aims to strengthen the academic, political, and social ties between Turkey and Germany as well as Turkey and Europe. The Initiative is based on the premise that the acquisition of knowledge and the exchange of people and ideas are preconditions for meeting the challenges of an increasingly globalized world in the 21st century. The Initiative focuses on two areas of cooperation, EU/German-Turkish relations and climate change, which are of essential importance for the future of Turkey and Germany within a larger European and global context.

Elena Dück is a 2020/21 Mercator-IPC Fellow at Istanbul Policy Center (IPC), Sabancı University.

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Istanbul Policy Center

Bankalar Caddesi Minerva Han No: 2 Kat: 4
34420 Karaköy-Istanbul
T +90 212 292 49 39
ipc@sabanciuniv.edu - ipc.sabanciuniv.edu