



Germany-Turkey Relations: It could be worse

TURKEY PROGRAMME

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Summary

- Turkey-watchers expected from Germany's EU presidency a new impetus in EU-Turkey relations, but the program of the presidency didn't even mention Turkey.
- From the beginning of the presidency, there were high tensions in the East-Med between Turkey and EU members Greece and Cyprus, which were backed by France.
- Germany has been trying to mediate between Greece and Turkey, which was positively acknowledged by Turkey and harshly criticized by Greece.
- Since mid-October there is an additional confrontation between a member state (France) and Turkey over Islam(ism) and freedom of expression. Here, Germany can't mediate.
- Germany will face similar issues to France regarding its Muslim communities. Who will fund the mosques, who will educate the imams, what will be preached.
- German-Turks are well represented in Germany's parliament(s), however, they run almost exclusively for centre-left parties, are critical of Turkey's authoritarianism and regarded as traitors by the Turkish government.
- German-Turks active in pro-AKP NGOs or political parties have little influence in Germany.
- If until the next EU summit in March 2021 no improvements are reachable, then there should be a discussion not only about sanctions, but also on a new framework for the relations beyond the accession process.

Introduction

“Germany moved into the role of a mediator between Turkey and several EU member states, such as Cyprus, France and Greece.”

Germany-Turkey relations are not at the lowest point of their long history. That was more than 3½ years ago, in the run-up to the constitutional referendum in April 2017, which paved the way for Turkey’s current presidential system. Germany then was accused of “using Nazi methods”, because it didn’t allow Turkish politicians to campaign in Germany. However, better than spring 2017 does not mean good; the general problem of mistrust prevails. This won’t change any time soon, and Germany’s EU presidency didn’t reach any breakthrough either. However, what has changed recently is that Germany moved into the role of a mediator between Turkey and several EU member states, such as Cyprus, France and Greece, on issues concerning the Eastern Mediterranean. Some argued Germany would take the role the US traditionally played in such conflicts. This will most likely also continue. However, in October yet another layer of problems between the European Union and Turkey was added, and there Germany cannot mediate: a confrontation on Islam(ism), secularism and freedom of expression after the killing of a French teacher in the suburbs of Paris. The clash between Erdoğan and Macron is also one about influence over Muslims in Europe, and this issue is (latently) also present in Germany. The debate on who supervises the mosques, who educates the imams and pays them, and what content is taught, has already started and will grow in the future. That leaves us with one solvable and one unsolvable issue. The solvable should be solved in order to be able to focus on the second, which could be better contained without a war between Greece and Turkey on the doorstep.

Germany, therefore, should try to continue mediating and facilitating a rapprochement, especially between Turkey, Cyprus and Greece and be prepared for complicated bilateral relations, at least under the current government. The large community of German-Turks will be part of and party to the dispute.

High expectations among Turkey watchers

“...Germany was one of the very few EU states which still had some leverage over Turkey and its president.”

When Germany’s Presidency of the Council of the European Union started on 1 July 2020, there was some hope for a new impetus in EU-Turkey relations. The reasons for a cautious optimistic outlook were that Germany was one of the very few EU states which still had some leverage over Turkey and its president and would now be for six months in the position of agenda-setter. However, this hope was expressed mostly by experts, for whom Turkey is important for professional reasons. On 16 July, Belgian MEP and the current chair of the EU-Turkey Forum, Kris Peeters said during an online conference that he was [“hoping that Germany can make an opening and start to build this trust again.”](#)¹ Also the head of the EU Delegation in Ankara until September 2020, the Austrian diplomat Christian Berger, then was [“convinced that the German Presidency can be an important catalyst in reestablishing this trust.”](#)²

However, this expectation was not matched by the program of the Presidency. On 28 pages and more than 12,000 words, the program entitled [“Together for Europe’s recovery”](#) doesn’t even mention Turkey. When Chancellor Merkel presented the German program in the European Parliament in Brussels on 8 July, she did mention Turkey once, but only when [talking about “Europe’s responsibility in a globalized world”, as a country located on “Europe’s external borders”](#). For Michael Thumann, a long-time correspondent

¹ Minute 6

² Minute 20:20.

for the German weekly *Die Zeit* in Turkey, it was [“very surprising that Turkey was not on the list of priorities.”](#)³

“Turkey has been at odds with several Mediterranean coastal states concerning their exclusive economic zones.”

However, first geopolitical tensions in the East-Med and then a debate on Islam(ism) and freedom of expression forced Turkey into Germany’s program. Since the beginning of the presidency, there has been a blazing tension in the Eastern Mediterranean, involving Turkey and EU member states on opposing sides. Turkey has been at odds with several Mediterranean coastal states concerning their exclusive economic zones, continental shelves and the exploitation of natural resources, namely natural gas under the seabed around Cyprus. Concerning the latter, Cyprus, Egypt, Greece, Israel, Italy, Jordan, and Palestine founded on 16 January 2020 the East Mediterranean Gas Forum, but [“key countries such as Turkey and Lebanon are excluded due to persistent tensions with Greece and Cyprus.”](#) Against this largely hostile alliance, some of whose members don’t have diplomatic relations with Ankara, Turkey relied on its own seismic exploration to claim certain maritime zones and their putative gas reserves as its own.

Chancellor Merkel in Bill Clinton’s footsteps?

“Chancellor Angela Merkel is playing the role that U.S. presidents traditionally play.”

Even if this conflict involves EU member states and an accession country, most EU states do not want relations to further deteriorate, e.g. by applying sanctions. In this situation, as Ülgen and Aydıntaşbaş argue, [“Chancellor Angela Merkel is playing the role that U.S. presidents traditionally play, periodically calling Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis separately.”](#) On 25 August German foreign minister Maas travelled to both Athens and Ankara declaring that the [“discussion windows between Greece and Turkey must now be further opened and not closed. To do this, instead of new provocations, we need to take steps towards détente and enter into direct talks. We want to do our utmost to support this.”](#) Germany is also trying to mediate because it has much more to lose than France or Greece if relations with Turkey deteriorate, both domestically and economically. There are currently over 7,500 German companies or Turkish companies with German capital participation in Turkey. Among them are big players like Siemens and Mercedes, and many of the medium-sized companies which are the backbone of Germany’s economy. [The investment volume of German companies in Turkey since 1980 amounts to almost 14 billion Euros and the trade volume in 2019 was over 33 billion Euros.](#)⁴

“There are currently over 7,500 German companies or Turkish companies with German capital participation in Turkey.”

German efforts were positively acknowledged by the Turkish side. On 17 September, Ibrahim Kalin, spokesperson and senior advisor to President Erdoğan, said during an online discussion with the ECFR that [“I believe the German mediation has been very helpful, they have been fair.”](#)⁵ Kalin expressed his esteem again at an online event with the GMF on 9 December, [“Germans have played a remarkably positive role.”](#) Also, a group of leading Turkish academics underlined that Germany [“adopted a conciliatory position and acted as a facilitator and mediator to start dialogue and reconciliation between the parties”](#).⁶

Not so surprisingly, this view was not shared by all within the European Union. On 22 October, in an article for the LSE, Hans Kribbe called Germany’s role as mediator an “absurdity” because [“The EU is neither the UN nor neutral Switzerland, and the role of mediator is not the only role it can or should perform in the world. Europe has interests and borders. And on this occasion, that makes it a conflict party. The EU should recognise](#)

³ Minute 29:55.

⁴ The trade volume between France and Turkey is about 14 billion, there are roughly 1500 French companies in Turkey.

⁵ Minute 39:45.

⁶ p. 3.

“There is still broad support for a conciliatory approach by experts wishing for improved EU-Turkey relations.”

[this and](#) begin to act like one.” In Greece, Germany’s position was criticized and described as appeasement. Angelos Syrigos, MP for Nea Dimokratia since 2019, said that [“Germany has to realise that Turkey constitutes a threat for the whole of Europe.”](#)⁷

A common foreign and security policy of the EU exists, however, only on paper. There is no common EU position in Syria, nor in Libya, nor in the Eastern Mediterranean. This helps Germany in not taking sides and trying to mediate between a member and a non-member and can be justified with a bigger cause, such as peace and stability in Europe’s neighbourhood.

There is still broad support for a conciliatory approach by experts wishing for improved EU-Turkey relations and a situation when the EU would be able again to positively influence Turkey’s domestic situation, as it could in the years 1999 to 2005. The magic word is conditionality. Only a few see this as still possible within the accession process.

Customs Union instead of Accession Process

“...the EU should accept its limits to affect democratization in Turkey and focus on certain economic and trade conditions.”

This is why among those aiming for closer relations the focus is on the modernization of the Custom’s Union, which has been in place since January 1996. In a very optimistic view, as put forward by an SWP Comment in October 2020, this would “help Europe to establish a rules-based communicative space where the EU and Turkey can negotiate their positions. ...re-socialising Turkey back into diplomatic circles may help Europe convince Turkey to abide by agreements”.⁸ The authors argue that the EU should accept its limits to affect democratization in Turkey and focus on certain economic and trade conditions for the modernization of the Customs Union. These outstanding issues are no secret, as Angelina Eichhorst, Managing Director for Western Europe, Western Balkans, Turkey and United Kingdom at the European External Action Service, said during an online conference on 22 October: “Turkey knows what to do to modernize the Customs Union.”⁹ This is also the position of Nils Schmid, SPD foreign policy spokesperson and a Turkey expert: “A dialogue mechanism to tackle the existing problems of the CU and modernize it to reflect the EU’s and Turkey’s economic interests and needs should be the way forward. The offer was made. Now Turkey has to act on it. Words are not enough.”¹⁰

However, as Turkish academics stated, [“neither the modernization of the Customs Union, nor the tacitly referenced visa liberalization process, can be materialized anytime soon given Turkey’s lack of compliance with EU requirements in these areas.”](#)¹¹ The Commission too is very clear in its newest Turkey report: [“no further work towards the modernisation of the Customs Union can be currently foreseen.”](#)¹²

Since negotiations in the framework of both the accession process and the Customs Union won’t materialize soon, the EU needs to focus on trying to ease the tensions in foreign policy issues and facilitating the return of conflicting parties to the negotiation table. Therefore, Michael Thumann calls for [“contingency planning in case that there is a](#)

⁷ Quote translated by Iason Tsaldaris.

⁸ SWP Comment NO. 48, October 2020, Customs Union: Old Instrument, New Function in EU-Turkey Relations Sinem Adar, Nicola Bilotta, Aurélien Denizeau, Sinan Ekim, Dorothee Schmid, Günter Seufert, Ilke Toygür, and Karol Wasilewski, p. 3.

⁹ VIADUCT Online Conference "Bridge Over Troubled Waters: Researching and Teaching EU-Turkey Relations".

¹⁰ Mail answer to the author on 23 November 2020.

¹¹ p. 4.

¹² p. 3. [The European Council conclusions of December 2006](#) remain in force.

“...neither the modernization of the Customs Union, nor the tacitly referenced visa liberalization process, can be materialized anytime soon given Turkey’s lack of compliance with EU requirements.”

[conflict](#),¹³ as there is currently in the East-Med, which could become very explosive. Evidence for the explosiveness was the [search of a Turkish vessel by German marines on 22 November about 200km off the coast of Libya, as part of the EU Operation “Irin” to enforce the arms embargo on Libya](#). This time it only had as a consequence [diplomatic notes](#), but such situations bear the danger of escalating.

Despite all the tensions, according to Nils Schmid Germany should continue to try to mediate: “Germany can and should be a broker in this process. If we differentiate between impartiality and neutrality in negotiation, I can see a continued role for Germany as the mediating actor within the EU framework.”¹⁴ Germany also played this balancing role at the EU summit on 10-11 December, in which some EU members had called for tougher sanctions against Turkey. These did not materialize. The EU merely decided to continue light sanctions against individuals and companies involved in gas exploration in the Eastern Mediterranean. Only one day before the EU summit, [50 German and Greek MEPs demanded that Germany at least suspend its submarine exports to Turkey](#). This too has little prospect of success, because the [German defence industry has exported warships or parts worth 1.5 billion Euros to Turkey since 2004](#). Turkey is simply too good a market. [Only in the first six months of 2020, Germany granted export licenses for military equipment to Turkey worth more than 18 million Euros](#).

“The EU merely decided to continue light sanctions against individuals and companies involved in gas exploration in the Eastern Mediterranean.”

In view of the next EU summit in late March 2021, the EU commissioned its High Representative Josep Borrell to [“submit a report and options on how to proceed by March.”](#) But, by March, Joe Biden will have taken over the U.S. presidency and will probably have already decided how to handle the issue of sanctions against Turkey, which the Trump administration already enforced on 14 December. In the frame of the Countering America’s Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA), passed in August 2017, the US sanctioned “Turkey’s Presidency of Defense Industry (SSB), along with key individuals involved in the purchase of the Russian-made S-400 air and missile defense system.” This is the third step in sanctioning Turkey because of the purchase of the S-400, after removing Turkey from the F35 program, which cost Turkey approximately 9 billion USD and a de-facto arms embargo, in place since October 2019. In the next months we will see how Turkey will react to the sanctions. Escalation or rapprochement. This decision will then also influence how the EU will position itself towards Turkey, either harsher or more conciliatory. The ball to decide on this is now in Turkey’s court.

Germany cannot mediate on Islam(ism), secularism and freedom of expression

In mid-October, another layer of problems was added. This makes it even more pressing to try to solve or at least ease the regional tensions, because otherwise there could be too many simultaneous problems to be able to deal with them.

On 16 October 2020, French school teacher Samuel Paty was brutally murdered in a Parisian suburb by a Muslim Chechen who had emigrated to France with his family as a child. Paty became the target of parents and the local mosque because he showed in class, while discussing freedom of expression, the 2015 Charlie Hebdo Mohammed caricatures. As a reaction [numerous persons were arrested, the local mosque ordered to close for six months because it showed videos targeting the teacher](#), and two Muslim associations banned. President Macron defended the publishing of the caricatures and referred to [“Islam in crisis.”](#) Both acts provoked harsh reactions from a few Muslim-majority countries,

¹³ Minute 55:10.

¹⁴ Mail answer to the author on 23 November 2020.

“President Erdoğan: ‘What’s the problem of the individual called Macron with Islam and with the Muslims?’.”

some of which started boycotting French goods. However, the harshest reaction came from President Erdoğan: [“What’s the problem of the individual called Macron with Islam and with the Muslims?”](#). He also suggested that [“Macron needed mental treatment.”](#)

According to the French-Turkish scholar Samim Akgönül, this confrontation is a perfect opportunity: after having lost the Arab streets, [“Erdoğan is now trying to go down the European path - and the French suburbs are a perfect example -, and present himself as a new caliph, the true defender of Muslims in Europe. President Macron therefore becomes a perfect enemy, ‘the persecutor of Muslims’”](#). "

And in this confrontation, Germany cannot mediate. As the German Foreign Ministry tweeted on 26 October citing foreign minister Maas: [“We stand in solidarity on the side of our French friends, in particular in the fight against Islamist extremists. The attacks by President Erdoğan against Emmanuel Macron are a new low and completely unacceptable. We have great understanding for diplomatic measures.”](#)

“President Macron therefore becomes a perfect enemy, ‘the persecutor of Muslims’.”

Ulrich Ladurner commented on 27 October in *Die Zeit*: [“The relationship with Turkey may be important, but solidarity with France is much more important. This is the message behind European support for Macron. And it is high time for such messages. The current debate is about the fundamental values of Europe, about freedom of opinion and belief. Erdoğan attacks these values, he defames and denounces them.”](#)

“Ulrich Ladurner commented on 27 October in Die Zeit: ‘The relationship with Turkey may be important, but solidarity with France is much more important.’”

This is one explanation for the clear fronts in this issue. The second reason is that in Germany similar debates and conflicts will arise sooner or later. On 4 November France banned ultranationalist Turkish NGOs, after a memorial of the Armenian Genocide was vandalized in Lyon. Thirteen days later, the [Bundestag decided to investigate whether three ultranationalist roof organizations could be banned in Germany too, with a total of 11,000 members](#). This is tricky because these NGOs are closely linked to the MHP, the de-facto coalition partner of the AKP, which won’t be able to stay silent in case of measures.

On the other hand, the issue of Islam in Germany is another candidate for bilateral problems with the current Turkish government. One consequence of the fact that, until recently, Germany was not very interested in its Muslim citizens, is that roughly 90% of the 2,500 imams working in Germany come from abroad. [This is not only because other states want to send their imams, which is also true, but because until 2011 there was not a single education option for Islamic theology.](#)

“...the Bundestag decided to investigate whether three ultranationalist roof organizations could be banned in Germany.”

According to numbers of the Bundestag from February 2020, [DITIB](#) (Turkish-Islamic Union for Religious Affairs) is [responsible for 796 mosques in Germany of a total of 1771 i.e. roughly 45% of the mosques](#). This makes it the biggest Islamic organization in Germany, which is funded and staffed by the Turkish Directorate of Religious Affairs (Diyanet). [The religious personnel in Germany is estimated at 1,100, of which only 110 speak German](#). According to Öztürk, a scholar at the London Metropolitan University with an expertise on Turkey’s religious ambitions in Europe, these imams are [“more valuable than diplomats.”](#) Additionally to DITIB, there are also 217 mosques run by Milli Görüş, a movement of political Islam in Turkey since the 1970s, now with close ties to the AKP -and Saadet Partisi (Felicity Party)- and some more by nationalist Turkish organizations, in total numbering roughly 1,100. To reach the conservative Turkish-German community, that is by far the biggest arena. Therefore, these mosques will become a battle ground for influence: who will organize and supervise them, the content of the sermons, the education of its staff, the whole package? It will accompany bilateral relations for years, if not decades.

Raid in small local Berlin mosque – highest Turkish authorities protest

“President Erdoğan tweeted that the raid was ‘obviously nourished by racism and Islamophobia, totally flouting freedom of belief, and bringing Europe closer to the darkness of the Middle Ages’.”

A foretaste of the tensions that could develop is the reaction of the Turkish authorities to a raid in the [Mevlana Mosque](#) in Berlin, which is part of the Islamic Federation of Berlin, a branch of Milli Görüş. [On 21 October the police searched the mosque with more than 100 officers on suspicion of fraud concerning CoViD-19 emergency aid totaling 70,000 Euros.](#) The harsh behaviour of the police during the morning prayer was also criticized in Berlin, but the fact that a local incident that is not about religion was publicly condemned by the president, foreign minister, vice president, and head of the religious authority of a foreign country, among others, is quite surprising. President Erdoğan tweeted that the raid was “obviously nourished by racism and Islamophobia, totally flouting freedom of belief, and bringing Europe closer to the darkness of the Middle Ages.” Turkey’s foreign ministry stated that “this raid was not only against the community in the Mevlana mosque; it was also an act against all the Muslim community, and it is inexplicable.” Zafer Sirakaya, an AKP MP from Istanbul who was born and raised in Germany, tweeted in German and saw “an obvious indicator of institutional racism. ... a new phase of repression of the Muslim community has begun.” Sirakaya is the head of the sub-commission of Turks Abroad and Related Communities: [“we will pursue this issue, possibly on international platforms.”](#) Imagine what would happen if Germany decided to reduce the number of imams from Turkey, for example, and replace them with Germany-educated staff or to expel imams because of the content of their sermons.

The German-Turks can’t bridge it (anymore)

“...there are 2,824,000 people living in Germany with a personal or family background in Turkey [...] There has always existed a mismatch between the politically active German-Turks and the broader German-Turkish society in Germany.”

This issue will haunt the bilateral relations, because many people are concerned. Germany and Turkey have very special relations because of the human factor. According to recent statistics from 2019, [there are 2,824,000 people living in Germany with a personal or family background in Turkey.](#) This is the highest number ever and accounts for 3.4 percent of Germany’s population of roughly 83 million. Among these, 1,472,390 were Turkish passport holders. The ratio of German and Turkish passport holders, therefore, is roughly 50:50. Turks and Kurds are well represented in politics; the current German parliament counts 14 such MPs,¹⁵ the highest number ever, which accounts for almost 2 percent of MPs. This is, by percentage, more than the German-Turks with a German passport. However, these MPs, who in the current parliament represent only three centre-left parties (SPD, Greens, Left), are in an awkward position, because they are seen as anti-Turkey agitators by the governing coalition in Turkey and supporters of President Erdoğan in Germany. There has always existed a mismatch between the politically active German-Turks and the broader German-Turkish society in Germany and the mainstream in Turkey, because of issues of importance for German-Turkish politicians such as minority rights, LGBTI rights, feminism, coming to terms with the past etc. However, until the [Armenian resolution of the German Bundestag of June 2016](#), these MPs were also seen by Turkey and the broader German Turkish community as “their” MPs; many were looked upon with pride. The most famous of them and the first person of Turkish origin to become MP in 1994, [Cem Özdemir](#)¹⁶, was a frequent guest in Turkey, invited not only concerning Green or minority issues, but also by business associations and nationalist universities such as Bahçeşehir in Istanbul.¹⁷ This was mostly during the golden years of Turkey’s EU alignment

¹⁵ These MPs are Metin Hakverdi, Cansel Kiziltepe, Elvan Korkmaz, Mahmut Özdemir, Aydan Özoğuz, Gülistan Yüksel (SPD); Danyal Bayaz, Canan Bayram, Ekin Deligöz, Filiz Polat, Cem Özdemir (Die Grünen); Gökay Akbulut, Sevim Dağdelen, Evrim Sommer (Die Linke).

¹⁶ Özdemir’s webpage is largely in German. It is interesting that on the home page among the subjects, one item still is the Armenian resolution and there is a focus on Turkey, even if the one is almost five years ago and the other currently not a real priority.

¹⁷ Starting in 1997 in Izmir, the author has met/seen Mr. Özdemir at numerous occasions in Turkey until 2013.

when also many German-Turkish artists like Fatih Akin whose movies then were shot fully (Crossing The Bridge – The Sound of Istanbul, 2005) or partially (In July, 2000 or Head-On, 2004) in Turkey, were frequently seen in cafes and bars in Istanbul. Soccer players like Mesut Özil seemed to be able to bridge the German and German-Turkish societies. There were lots of visible human bridges between the two countries.

“...the politicization of the German-Turkish community increased enormously, and Turkey’s harsh polarization was more visibly imported to Germany.”

Then two things happened: the aforementioned Armenian resolution and the possibility for Turkish passport holders abroad to vote, which happened for the first time in 2014. Through this, the politicization of the German-Turkish community increased enormously, and Turkey’s harsh polarization was more visibly imported to Germany.

This had as a result two parallel universes with hardly anything in common. Besides the above-mentioned German Turks in mainstream political parties, German-Turkish supporters of the AKP and President Erdoğan have two options: state sponsored DITIB mosques and Turkish language and culture classes organized by the consulates. Or, more active NGOs like the UETD, which renamed itself [UID \(Union of International Democrats\)](#)¹⁸ in 2018, or even political parties such as the BIG party founded in 2010 or the AD party which was founded as a reaction to the Armenian resolution in June 2016, symbolically at 14:53 hours, in reference to the conquest of Constantinople. [“This time, according to the will of the party founder, it’s Berlin’s turn.”](#) The founder is a business person, with roots in the UETD and supposedly strong links to the AKP. This party and the UID have close and direct links to the Turkish government, but little influence on German politics.

Furthermore, pro-government circles seem to have understood this handicap, which is why [some candidates in municipal elections in 2020 had supposedly close contacts to either the AKP or the Ülkücü movement](#), and there are already a few personalities with such supposed linkages in local parliaments, such as [Mustafa Güngör, who is the chair of the SPD parliamentary group in Bremen](#). This issue will not go away; this group with a large base in the German-Turkish community will certainly try to become more influential in German politics, both through its own lists and parties, but also within mainstream parties. For these parties this poses a dilemma, because President Erdoğan and the AKP are very popular among German-Turks. [In the 2018 presidential elections, the AKP won almost 56 % of votes in Germany, 13% more than in Turkey, and President Erdoğan received almost 65%, which is 12% more than in Turkey.](#) Even if we assume that the German passport holders are slightly less enthusiastic about Erdoğan and the AKP, this is an important potential voter source that political parties will want to tap into and cannot with their current Turkish and Kurdish candidates.

“...some candidates in municipal elections in 2020 had supposedly close contacts to either the AKP or the Ülkücü movement.”

The best that currently can happen is that you are praised in both countries, but with no connection. The founders of BioNTech, Uğur Şahin and Özlem Türeci, are in Turkey praised as successful [“Turks”](#) and in Germany as a [“great example of integration.”](#) Their luck is that they have not voiced anything political so far, which could disturb the one or the other country. However, they could be forced to take a stand. [In parliament on 1 December the pro-Kurdish HDP MP Gergerlioğlu suggested granting the BioNTech founders the Turkish medal of honour.](#) If this was to happen and they accepted, they would be criticized in Germany, but if they refused, the same would happen in Turkey. However, since the motion came from an HDP MP, the chances of acceptance are close to zero.

¹⁸ While the name is “international” democrats, the site only exists in Turkish. It says that there are currently 253 representation offices in 17 countries.

Conclusion

EU-Turkey and Germany-Turkey relations have proven to be “more resilient than many expected” (Ilke Toygür). The train crash never happened, but this is no guarantee that it might not happen one day. Since the accession process is, to borrow from Macron, “brain dead” and the Customs Union or visa liberalization won’t help institutionalizing the relations within a rules-based framework soon, the focus should be on easing tensions first and then finding a modus vivendi with increased exchange and cooperation once again.

Many observers in and outside Turkey project immense hopes onto the Turkish opposition, similar to the hopes Biden is now confronted with. A return to multilateralism, cooperation with partners, dialogue, international agreements and law are some of the common expectations, which might be much more likely for Biden than for the Turkish opposition. However, giving the benefit of the doubt, the accession process and the Customs Union should be kept on stand-by for when conditions change.

“...the German-Turks’ role in the bilateral relations significantly diminished from protagonists to background actors. With the current Turkish government, the roller coaster is likely to continue, but if windows open, they should be tried.”

Germany should continue trying to ease these regional tensions with its support for exchange programs and civil society, as it has been doing for decades, e.g. through the political foundations. In future, these established contacts and human bridges might be very much needed and valuable and cannot be built from scratch. Relations need time to grow and build trust. In the past, German-Turks played an important role for and in these bilateral contacts; they were part, often promoters, of the large bridge existing between the two countries. For some years now, the German-Turks in German mainstream parties and NGOs cannot play this role anymore because they are seen as traitors in Turkey and those German-Turks linked to the AKP have little influence in Germany. Therefore, the German-Turks’ role in the bilateral relations significantly diminished from protagonists to background actors.

“...the debate should not be about sanctions and punishments, but about how to find a new framework for the relations beyond the accession process.”

With the current Turkish government, the roller coaster is likely to continue, but if windows open, they should be tried. Within less than a month, the Turkish president said towards the EU: On 26 October: ["You are in the truest sense of the word fascists....links in the chain of the Nazis."](#) But on 21 November the same Erdoğan said: ["We see ourselves nowhere else but in Europe. We contemplate to build our future together with Europe."](#) And on 11 December, after the EU summit, Erdoğan spoke of ["reasonable countries in the EU,"](#) which avoided harsher sanctions. This might be tactics, because of growing economic problems and the fear of sanctions by both the US and the EU, which could further deteriorate international trust in the Turkish economy and further weaken the Lira. But it might also be an entry point to engage again more solidly, at a time when in Turkey a debate has started recently within the governing party on the release of political prisoners and the need to engage more with Europe. Until March, the EU must evaluate whether Turkey is sincere this time. If by then there is still no progress on any of the problematic issues and no signs of convergence, then the debate should not be about sanctions and punishments, but about how to find a new framework for the relations beyond the accession process. The EU and Turkey should use the winter months, in light of strict CoViD-19 lockdowns, to come up with alternatives and concrete offers on how to improve relations. Otherwise, the regular tensions accompanied by short-term damage control will continue for quite some time. Such a relationship is not a real one, and does not correspond to its importance for both sides. The name of the relationship’s framework would be secondary; it would be more important that it works.

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