



Germany's New Government Coalition: A Red, Yellow or Green Light for German-Turkish Relations?

TURKEY PROGRAMME

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Summary

- After the national elections of 26 September 2021, the SPD, Greens and FDP formed for the first time in German history a three-party coalition.
- The new chancellor is Olaf Scholz (SPD), while the minister of foreign affairs is a woman, Annalena Baerbock (Greens), for the first time.
- The coalition agreement mentions Turkey only as an “important neighbor of the EU” and speaks of “worrying domestic political developments and foreign policy tensions.”
- During the election campaign, the Greens and Baerbock spoke of a value-based foreign policy guided by human rights, ecological issues and democratic standards would be guiding principles.
- Baerbock has been critical of Turkey: after it left the Istanbul Convention, for instance, or over the refugee deal and “violations of human rights and the rule of law.”
- The Greens remain the only party in the Bundestag, which still views the revival of Turkey’s EU accession process as a possibility.
- The Greens, and the FDP in particular, want to intensify exchanges between the two countries with civil society and youth exchange programs.
- The new Bundestag is the most diverse ever, with more German-Turks in parliament than ever before (18/19), and a German-Turk holding a ministerial position (agriculture) for the first time.
- Greens and FDP voters expect a harsher stance on countries like Turkey: a pragmatic approach à la Merkel would disappoint them.
- The future of bilateral relations will also depend on how cooperative or confrontational a position Turkey adopts.
- A best-case scenario is also possible: the next elections put a reformist government in power in Turkey, which will then be supported by the new German administration.

Introduction

On 26 September 2021, the [SPD \(Social-Democratic Party of Germany\) won the national elections](#) (25.7%) under its candidate for chancellor, Olaf Scholz. The CDU, in government since 2005, ended up in second place (24.1%), followed by the Greens (14.8%), the FDP (11.5%), the AfD (10.3%) and "Die Linke" (4.9%). Shortly after the elections, it became clear that the SPD would form a government with the Greens and the FDP. What does this new government mean for Germany-Turkey relations? What views does the coalition and its foreign minister, Annalena Baerbock, have on Turkey? While the rhetoric is explicit, what will the *Realpolitik* look like?

What becomes obvious is this: if the status quo in Turkey continues, relations between the two nations will become more tense, especially since Greens and FDP voters would expect this as part of a "value-based" foreign policy. If, however, there is a change in Turkey towards a reformist government, then the new German government would be more supportive of Turkey's EU endeavors than at any time since 2005. The key word here is "if".

"Baerbock was the Greens' first ever candidate for the chancellorship, and will be Germany's first female foreign minister."

Traffic Light Coalition Formed

["The traffic light stands!"](#) With these words, Olaf Scholz (SPD) began his speech concerning the coalition agreement on 24 November 2021 in Berlin's Westhafen, entitled ["Dare more progress."](#)¹ Scholz was the SPD's candidate for chancellor and would follow Angela Merkel as the head of government. To his left on the stage stood Annalena Baerbock and Robert Habeck, the co-presidents of the Greens. Baerbock was the Greens' first ever candidate for the chancellorship, and will be Germany's first female foreign minister. To Scholz' right stood Christian Lindner, chairman of the FDP and the future finance minister. The three parties--in German called the traffic-light coalition because their colors are red, green and yellow respectively--presented their 177-page long coalition treaty.

"Turkey is referred to only as a neighbor of the EU."

Foreign policy is not among the top priorities of the coalition agreement (it wasn't during the election campaign, either) and has to wait until the 7th chapter, which is entitled "Germany's Responsibility to Europe and the World" (pp. 130-157). There is a sub-chapter on Turkey:

"Turkey remains an important neighbor of the EU and a partner in NATO for us, despite worrying domestic political developments and foreign policy tensions. The large number of people with biographical roots in Turkey creates a special closeness between our countries and is a natural part of German society.

Democracy, the rule of law and human, women's and minority rights in Turkey have been massively eroded. We will therefore not close any chapters or open any new ones in the accession negotiations. We will breathe life into the EU-Turkey dialogue agenda and expand exchanges with civil society and youth exchange programs" (pp. 154-155).

Turkey is referred to only as a neighbor of the EU, not a candidate country. The dialogue agenda in the second paragraph is a reference to the "positive agenda" launched

¹ The subtitle reads: Alliance For Freedom, Justice and Sustainability.

between the EU and Turkey at the EU Council summit in March 2021, which foresaw high-level dialogue meetings “[on issues of mutual interest, such as migration, public health, climate, counterterrorism and regional issues](#)” (item 11b, p. 6). Therefore, the new German government finds itself subject to the same confusion that prevails in large parts of the EU: the accession process is practically dead and hopes of reviving it in its old form through the *acquis* and chapter openings hardly exist anymore, but beyond a catchy term it is not clear what the alternative should be, either. Support for civil society was mentioned in both the Greens’ and the FDP’s election campaign programs, and this approach could cause problems with Turkey, which often views foreign donors’ support for NGOs, democratization and minority rights as interference in its domestic affairs.

Annalena Baerbock: Germany’s New Foreign Minister

Two days after the presentation of the coalition agreement, the Greens nominated their five ministers. Baerbock (40) was set as party chairwoman and [got the Foreign Ministry](#). It will be Baerbock’s first ministerial post, and she will be the first woman in this position. Even if she was mostly known until now as a climate policy expert, having served as spokeswoman on climate for the Greens parliamentary group, she has already been involved in foreign, and especially European, policy in recent years.

In the [previous legislature \(2017-2021\)](#), she was a Member of the Committee for European Union Affairs. Before joining the Bundestag in 2013, she sat [on the executive board of the European Green Party \(2009-2012\)](#), served as an advisor on foreign and security policy to the parliamentary group of the Greens (2008-2009), and worked as office manager for Elisabeth Schroedter, then a Member of the European Parliament (2005-2008).

Over the years, she has also commented on developments in Turkey. After the constitutional referendum of 16 April 2017, for example, she wrote under the title “[What's next in German-Turkish relations?](#)”:

“For us, the referendum means a fundamental recalibration of relations between Turkey and Germany [...] EU accession negotiations must be put on hold, but not suspended. All German arms exports to Turkey must be stopped immediately. [...] The Bundeswehr (German Armed Forces) must finally be withdrawn from Incirlik.”

Even then, she emphasized

“support for democratic forces in Turkey. More than ever, Germany and Europe must stand up for human rights and the rule of law vis-à-vis Ankara and break away from existing dependencies. [...] As Turkey’s most important trading partner, Germany has some leeway here. We must use this leverage in a targeted manner, without punishing the general public in Turkey.”

These are tough positions and go far beyond the demands of previous governments. At the time, Baerbock also argued that the modernization of the customs union should be put on hold, unless significant improvements were made with regard to the rule of law. She also sharply criticized the EU-Turkey refugee deal of March 2016, on the grounds that “Europe has made itself vulnerable to blackmail.”

“EU accession negotiations must be put on hold, but not suspended. All German arms exports to Turkey must be stopped immediately.”

“As Turkey’s most important trading partner, Germany has some leeway here. We must use this leverage in a targeted manner.”

As party chairwoman since 2018, she has commented on foreign policy developments more frequently. Many of her statements regarding Turkey have been about the refugee deal between the EU and Turkey. On [7 March 2020](#), Baerbock said: "In place of of this failed deal, we need a new agreement guaranteed by the rule of law that learns from the mistakes of the past, ensures that people are well taken care of, and that the 27 EU states do not fall over like dominoes when Erdogan puffs."

She has also commented on domestic developments in Turkey, such as when [Turkey left the Istanbul Convention in March 2021](#): "The regime is in the process of legalizing violence against women [...]. To dismiss this on the part of the German government with a laconic 'wrong signal' is the opposite of an active foreign policy."

"She has also commented on domestic developments in Turkey, such as when Turkey left the Istanbul Convention in March 2021: 'The regime is in the process of legalizing violence against women'."

A week before the elections, [on 18 September](#), she called the Turkish president an "antidemocratic actor" in a statement in which she criticized European migration policy. Then, five days ahead of the elections, she summarized her positions on Turkey when asked what her Kurdish policy would look like on [abgeordnetenwatch](#):

"We condemn the violations of human rights and the rule of law in Turkey, demand an immediate release of all political prisoners and a return to a political dialogue and peace process on the Kurdish question. We firmly reject the aggressive foreign policy of the Turkish government and call on it to return to a multilateral foreign and security policy. This must also be addressed within NATO, not least in view of Turkey's military offensive in northern Syria, which is contrary to international law. We condemn Turkey's withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention and call on it to reverse it. The resumption of talks on EU accession is our political goal. But there can be no such talks until Turkey makes a U-turn back to democracy and the rule of law."

"...the Greens differ from all the other parties in parliament in still entertaining the possibility of an EU negotiation process for Turkey."

Reading these statements, having Baerbock at the helm of German foreign policy must seem like a nightmare for the Turkish government. Especially in comparison to the soft-spoken Merkel, whose "[cordial approach](#)" focused on dialogue and protected Turkey from extremely harsh criticism and, for example, EU sanctions in recent years. Human rights or the rule of law were hardly mentioned, at least not openly.

However, Baerbock's statements do not really come as a surprise because, by and large, they reflect the attitude of the Greens as laid out in their election program, which was the most detailed and concrete of all the programs in terms of Turkey. In "[Germany. Everything is there](#)", the Greens differ from all the other parties in parliament in still entertaining the possibility of an EU negotiation process for Turkey. However, this could "only happen when Turkey makes a U-turn back to democracy and the rule of law" (p. 230). The Greens also criticize the refugee deal in their election program and call for a new agreement that "complies with international law and the rule of law and does not fight against their escape, but must improve people's prospects." Support for civil society is also mentioned as an important aspect: "Especially in difficult times, we want to expand exchanges with human rights-oriented and democratic civil society in Turkey, as well as exchange programs."

"The FDP sees a need to intensify relations with civil society, because 'there will be a Turkey after President Erdogan'."

This last intention was reiterated by the FDP in its election program, entitled "[There has never been more to do](#)." While the FDP criticizes Turkey for not meeting the accession conditions in terms of the rule of law and respect for human rights, this could change again: "Already today, our economic, scientific and civil society relations with Turkey

must form the basis for this moment.” This is closer to the Greens than to the CDU, the FDP’s traditional coalition partner. The FDP sees a need to intensify relations with civil society, because “there will be a Turkey after President Erdogan.” Since both the Greens and the FDP are in government and the Greens hold the foreign office, it can be expected that more resources will be allocated to supporting civil society--a civil society critical of the current government-- in Turkey. It can be understood that the AKP will be anything but thrilled at having to deal with a German government and foreign minister of this sort. Foreign funding of civil society has been targeted in Turkey many times since at least the late 1990s, when German political foundations were put on trial. The most recent episode was in June 2021, when a law was announced to regulate [foreign-funded independent media outlets](#).

“In terms of people with a migration background, the new Bundestag is the most diverse in Germany’s history.”

The elections and the German-Turks

Just as Turkey hardly figures as an issue in the German elections of 26 September 2021, so were migration, integration, and Turks or Muslims in Germany largely ignored. The Turkish Community in Germany, the TGD, criticized the lack of attention paid to the migrant communities in Germany. Its chairperson, [Gökay Sofuoglu, told the German Press Agency](#): “I see that the parties--with the exception of the Greens--are very cautious right now when it comes to the topic of migration and shaping the immigration society.”

“There have never been more MPs with a Turkish background in the Bundestag. The number rose from 14 in 2017 to 18 or 19 now.”

Four years ago, [the situation was very different](#). The 2017 elections happened shortly after roughly one million Syrians had arrived in Germany. Comparing 2017 with today, it is **not only bad** that immigration was not among the top issues during the election campaign. Issues like migration, Turks/Muslims in Germany, and integration are seldom debated with the necessary seriousness and sobriety. After 2015, immigration polarized society, helped the AfD to grow from an anti-Euro party into a right-wing extremist party and to successfully ride the wave of racism, xenophobia and anti-immigrant policies.

In terms of people with a migration background, the new Bundestag is the most diverse in Germany’s history. No fewer than 82 MPs out of 736 were born with a foreign passport, or have at least one parent who was. This is more than [11 percent, and represents an increase from 8.2% in 2017 and only 5.9 % in 2013](#).² It is also close to the number of people with a migration background who are eligible to vote, which is 12.3%, although , in total, [almost 27% of people in Germany have a migration background, of whom 10.3 million are foreign citizens](#).

There have never been more MPs with a Turkish background in the Bundestag. [The number rose from 14 in 2017 to 18 or 19 now](#) (one MP is an ethnic Greek with family roots in Istanbul, so he could be counted as having a background in Turkey, but also in Greece). German-Turks/Kurds now make up roughly 2.5% of the German parliament. For a country which denied its migration reality for a long time, this is a fairly large number. German-Turks/Kurds with a German passport account for c. 1.5 million of a total population of 83 million, and thus for 1.8 percent of the electorate. However, when those who hold a Turkish passport are also factored in, [the population rises to 2.8 million, which represents 3.3 % of the population](#). This means that this parliamentary

² SPD 35
 Grüne 17
 Linke 11
 CDU 8
 AfD 6 (these are ethnic Germans born with a foreign passport, e.g. Romania, Russia, Kazakhstan).
 FDP 5

presence falls between the percentage of German passport holders and the percentage represented by the Turkish-Kurdish community overall.

The political party with the most MPs in the parliament (206), the SPD, also has the highest number of German-Turkish MPs (10), followed by the Greens (5), the Linke (3) and the CDU (1). None of the candidates from the FDP reached parliament via their state lists.

The MPs are, divided by Land (state):

Bavaria: Ekin Deligöz (Greens) and Ateş Gürpınar (Linke)

Berlin: Cansel Kızıltepe, Hakan Demir (SPD), Canan Bayram (Greens)

Hamburg: Aydan Özoğuz and Metin Hakverdi (SPD)

Baden-Württemberg: Macit Karaahmetoğlu, Derya Türk-Nachbaur, Takis Mehmet Ali (SPD), Cem Özdemir, Melis Sekmen (Greens), Gökay Akbulut (Linke)

Lower Saxony: Filiz Polat (Greens)

North-Rhine Westphalia: Gülistan Yüksel, Nezahat Baradari, Mahmut Özdemir (SPD), Serap Güler (CDU), Sevim Dağdelen (Linke)

There are MPs with a Turkish background in six of the 16 Länder (states). This means there is a concentration of a few states which send Turkish/Kurdish MPs to Berlin. It is not so surprising that none of these MPs were elected in East German states, where the migrant population is very low. What is rather surprising, though, is that states like Hessen, which includes the city of Frankfurt, and Rhineland Pfalz, with the city of Mainz (home to Biontech), do not send a single German-Turk/Kurd to the Bundestag.

In previous legislatures, all 14 German-Turkish/Kurdish MPs came from the three center-left parties, and this unbalance has not really been resolved in the current parliament. Only 1 out of the 18/19 is from a center-right party, in this case the CDU. The MP in question, [Serap Güler](#), comes from the social-liberal wing of the CDU and is a close ally of Armin Laschet, who was the CDU's candidate for chancellor. She was state secretary for integration in the Ministry of Children, Family, Refugees and Integration in North-Rhine Westphalia. She has been a member of the federal executive board of the CDU since 2012, and was elected one of the party's deputy chairpersons of 2014.

Some German-Turkish/Kurdish candidates won their direct mandates with a very high vote. [Cem Özdemir received the highest vote of any Green candidate, with almost 40% in his constituency \(Stuttgart\)](#) in Baden-Württemberg. This means he also received the highest vote of any candidate in Baden-Württemberg. The second highest vote among the Green candidates was received by [Canan Bayram, with almost 38% of the vote \(11.5% more than in 2017\) in Berlin's Kreuzberg-Friedrichshain district](#), which has been a stronghold of the Greens for many years now. But a German-Turkish SPD candidate, [Hakan Demir, was also directly elected with 26% in Berlin's Neukölln district](#). These are signs of normalization, indicating that a majority of ethnic Germans in central big-city districts do not have a problem voting for ethnic non-Germans. The German parliament is still far less representative than the German national soccer team, but the trend is a positive one.

And the new government will have one more first: [Cem Özdemir will be the first German minister with a background in Turkey](#). And what could be more German than agriculture. A joke popular in Berlin right now is that the Turk Özdemir will be responsible for potatoes, a term used in Turkish for Germans. He is the second minister with a migration background after [Philipp Rösler \(FDP\), who was born in Vietnam](#) and adopted as a baby

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by a German couple; he served as Minister of Health, 2009-2011, and Minister for the Economy and Deputy Chancellor, 2011-2013.

Özdemir's nomination is good news for Germany, but will not have a positive impact on Germany-Turkey relations. In 1994, he was the first German-Turk elected to the Bundestag. For a long time, Özdemir and other Turkish/Kurdish MPs were appreciated by both the German-Turks and the Turkish government and public, even if they had significantly different political views. However, since the Bundestag's [Armenian resolution of June 2016](#), [the German-Turkish MPs are seen as traitors, and some even as terrorists](#), by the latter. Even if there are now some quite newly elected German-Turkish MPs, this situation will not change, because none will be in favor of the current Turkish government's policies, or have a different view on the past. As a result, they will not be in a position to serve as a bridge between the two countries, and will be regarded at best with skepticism and at worst as terrorists by the governing party in Turkey, and by its voters and sympathizers in Turkey and Germany. The pro-AKP papers in Turkey took this stance on Özdemir becoming minister; the [Yeni Safak](#), for instance, ran this headline: “The enemy of Turkey Cem Özdemir becomes the new agriculture minister.”

In the 2017-2021 legislature, [the parliamentary friendship group between the Bundestag and the Turkish Parliament](#) never met, because the AKP refuses to meet with the group headed by the Kurdish-German MP Sevim Dağdelen, whom the pro-government *a Haber* TV channel described as [“Terror-lover Sevim Dağdelen has spewed hatred towards Turkey once again.”](#) The commissions and Parliamentary Friendship Group will only be set up after the new government has been sworn in, so the degree to which it will be functional or remain non-functional will largely depend on the composition of the group. In theory, this group is an important mechanism for facilitating dialogue between the two parliaments. Since the same problem exists in the [European Parliament, whose joint parliamentary group](#) is also being boycotted by the AKP due to its including a German-Kurdish MEP among its members, Turkey has currently denied itself access to important fora for dialogue with Germany and the EU.

“...a pragmatic approach would disappoint many voters, and especially those who voted for the Greens and the FDP.”

Which direction for Germany-Turkey relations: Rhetoric, Realpolitik, or a best-case scenario?

The new government isn't all bad news for Turkey, however. The Greens are the only party in the Bundestag which still views a revival of Turkey's EU accession process as possible. They are the second largest party in the governing coalition and will hold the foreign ministry and head the Committee for the Affairs of the European Union in the Bundestag. If Turkey returned to a reform agenda and the rule of law, re-aligning with EU standards, the Greens would be the most willing to engage in a serious dialogue on EU membership. The key word here, however, is “if”, because given a continuation of the status quo, the Greens will be a more inconvenient partner than the previous CDU-SPD government.

The Greens and its leadership stated many times during the election campaign that their goal was a value-based foreign policy, which has been officially called a [“Feminist Foreign Policy”](#) for the first time. Since human rights and respect for ecological standards should be its guiding principles, a pragmatic approach would disappoint many voters, and especially those who voted for the Greens and the FDP. Their voters expect Germany to change its attitude towards Turkey in particular and authoritarian and dictatorial states in general. This could include harsher condemnations of human rights violations or a ban on arms exports to countries like Turkey. However, would this change or improve

“Germany is not Russia, and the huge interdependencies between the two countries mean that it cannot declare economic war on Turkey to make it comply with democratic standards.”

anything on the ground? If foreign minister Baerbock openly criticized the unlawful custody of Osman Kavala, would it have any effect on his trial? If not, what would have an effect? Economic sanctions, which [Baerbock was already hinting at in 2017](#)? In theory, maybe yes, as Russia demonstrated after Turkey shot down a Russian jet in November 2015 over the Syrian-Turkish border, when it applied [tough sanctions](#) to punish Turkey, to force it to apologize and to subordinate itself to Russia in its Syria policy. Tourist charter trips were banned, agricultural imports were stopped, common construction projects were terminated, and restrictions on Turkish workers in Russia were introduced. This proved "successful:" [Turkey officially apologized](#), courted Russian tourists and businesses, and subordinated itself to Russia in Syria. However, Germany is not Russia, and the huge interdependencies between the two countries mean that it cannot declare economic war on Turkey to make it comply with democratic standards.

Put into perspective, bilateral relations currently are not that bad. After a low point in 2017, relations have gradually improved, especially after Germany stepped into the role of mediator between Greece and Turkey in the summer of 2020. At that time, Merkel was considered one of the few Western politicians who could still influence the Turkish leadership. With her leaving the chancellorship, Turkey will (most likely) lose its main defender within the EU. Much of the rest is not so certain. It is no secret that party and election programs often differ significantly from Realpolitik. Criticism and courageous statements are easier to make in opposition, when the consequences are minimal at most, than they are in government. Time will show how the new government with a young and unexperienced foreign minister will deal with a difficult partner when all the thorny issues come to the fore: migration and refugees, German citizens imprisoned in Turkey, tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean, Turkey's ailing democracy and weakened rule of law, EU-Turkey relations, and Turkey's place in NATO and the European security architecture.

However, some of the key parameters in bilateral relations will remain the same. There will still be [7500 German companies or companies with German capital](#) active in the Turkish market under the new minister of the economy, Robert Habeck, and they will remain important for German companies and jobs in Germany. There will still be 2.8 million people with a migration background in Turkey living in Germany. Germany's interdependencies with Turkey will remain higher than any other country in Europe, so any actions taken must be well thought-out, as they will almost always impact on both nations.

“...the new government should allocate a significant budget to civil society support, which should not be limited to urban, secular, Western-Turkish NGOs.”

This is no to say that Germany cannot do anything and must simply continue the Merkel approach. Since both the Greens and the FDP have stressed the importance of civil society, the new government should allocate a significant budget to civil society support, which should not be limited to urban, secular, Western-Turkish NGOs whose representatives are fluent in English or even German. Every democratic force should be able to benefit from funding and support, including religious-conservative NGOs outside the big Western cities. Support or democratization, pluralism and the rule of law should be the guiding principles here.

Germany should take the lead within the EU in clarifying EU-Turkey relations and dragging them out of the current stalemate. If the accession process cannot be revived at present, then the fora for high-level dialogue should be used to intensify contacts and the dialogue which has been clearly absent in recent years. Such dialogue should be used to re-introduce a values-based relationship that transcends pure transactionalism. The same goes for the modernization of the Customs Union. In a dire economic crisis, this would benefit Turkey, but also the EU, but then introduce conditionalities to elevate the

economic relations.

If the Greens are so unhappy with the current migration deal, they need to come up with a concrete solution that respects European laws and the refugee convention, benefits the refugees and migrants in Turkey, and—ideally—also convinces states like Hungary to agree with it. Until now, we only know what they don't want.

“...dialogue should be used to re-introduce a values-based relationship that transcends pure transactionalism.”

How all these issues will develop in practice is difficult to predict and will also depend on how confrontational or cooperative Turkey's policies and behavior are; for example, whether it complies with ECHR rulings or not. It will also depend on Olaf Scholz' foreign policy ambitions. Will he act like a parallel foreign minister, as Merkel did, balancing out the Greens' more ambitious approach, or will he leave the field more to Baerbock and the Green agenda?

It seems likely that the smooth times in Germany-Turkey relations will soon be coming to an end. There will be a return to more heightened tensions. But this will also be an opportunity for new approaches, increased dialogue and interaction with more actors; for an open and honest relationship which will be enormously important for both sides.

To end on an optimistic note, there is also a best-case scenario. This German legislature could coincide with the election of a new party to government in Turkey after roughly 20 years of AKP rule—a result most of the polls in 2021 have predicted. With a new Turkish government including a reformed CHP, which in parliament could count on the support of liberal conservative parties like Deva, Gelecek and the HDP, and given that the IYI Party does not constitute too much of an obstacle, Turkey could get back on a reform agenda similar to the one it pursued between 1999-2005. Despite the differences between the main opposition parties, they all agree on the need to return to the parliamentary system and to strengthen the rule of law along with the independence of the judiciary and other state institutions (e.g. the Central Bank). If the next elections were to produce such a result, then a reformist-government in Turkey would coincide with a traditionally pro-Turkey and pro-EU coalition in Germany. The key word here is, once again, “if.”

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