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**Research Report**

## Germany's new government and its foreign policy on Turkey: Lines of conflict and areas of cooperation

SWP Comment, No. 55/2021

**Provided in Cooperation with:**

Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP), German Institute for International and Security Affairs, Berlin

*Suggested Citation:* Seufert, Günter (2021) : Germany's new government and its foreign policy on Turkey: Lines of conflict and areas of cooperation, SWP Comment, No. 55/2021, Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP), Berlin, <https://doi.org/10.18449/2021C55>

This Version is available at:

<https://hdl.handle.net/10419/256716>

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# SWP Comment

NO. 55 OCTOBER 2021

## Germany's New Government and Its Foreign Policy on Turkey: Lines of Conflict and Areas of Cooperation

Günter Seufert

In stark contrast to Germany's Bundestag elections in 2017, Turkey has hardly been mentioned in this year's election campaign. Nevertheless, today's relatively relaxed atmosphere between Berlin and Ankara and the lack of prominence ascribed to their relationship in the German election campaign do not mean that shaping future foreign policy on Turkey will be an easy undertaking. Ankara is making a number of demands on the European Union (EU). Cooperation on refugee matters and efforts to deepen the customs union with the EU are to continue. The Turkish government also wants to be involved in European consultations. It is now up to Germany's new federal government to make its position known on these matters. However, Turkey is no easy partner to deal with and in order to achieve rules-based cooperation, Berlin and Brussels must, for their part, formulate clear conditions, for example, when it comes to cooperation on migration and defence. They also need to decide how to shape Turkey's future relationship with Europe.

In the 2017 election campaign, officials in Berlin and voters in general were preoccupied by three things: the recent Bundestag resolution on the Armenian genocide, the permanent suspension of civil rights in Turkey after the attempted coup in 2016 and the matter of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan equating German politics with Nazi practices. Berlin issued travel warnings, was considering suspending government-backed export credit guarantees and potential chancellors Angela Merkel and

Martin Schulz said, live on television, they were in favour of breaking off negotiations on Turkey's accession to the EU. While in 2017, the Turkish President described Germany's two governing parties, the CDU and SPD, and the country's Green party as the "enemies of Turkey", his Defence Minister, Hulusi Akar, just four years later, referred to Germany as "one of our most important allies in the European security architecture".

This positive assessment is no coincidence. Germany was largely responsible —

**2021** Future  
German  
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both this year and last year – for preventing the EU from imposing sensitive sanctions on Turkey in response to its expansive strategy in the eastern Mediterranean and accompanying military threats against EU members Greece and the Republic of Cyprus. The German government’s accommodating attitude – compared to that of France at least – was largely determined by the need to maintain cooperation with Ankara on refugee policy and not jeopardise the close economic ties between the two countries. Certainly, keeping a lid on tensions with Turkey despite all the problems with Ankara was also the prevailing trend in most other European capitals.

### **Simply carrying on as before is no longer an option**

It will be difficult to continue this policy of restraint for three reasons. Firstly, there is a considerable disconnect between the German government’s cordial approach to Ankara and the negative perception of Turkey and its government among the German population. A survey by the European Council on Foreign Relations from June 2021 conducted in 12 EU countries showed that in Austria, Germany and France, Turkey is viewed as even more of a rival and/or opponent than Russia and China. The election manifestos of the political parties in contention for the Bundestag election reflect this mood.

Secondly, while Turkey has moderated its foreign policy rhetoric in recent months, it is sticking to its goals in principle. This applies to the dispute with Greece and the Republic of Cyprus over exclusive economic zones in the eastern Mediterranean, where the Turkish Navy again obstructed a European research vessel in September 2021. Such actions threaten to undermine the basis of a “positive agenda” between the EU and Turkey, which the European Council adopted in March 2021 under considerable influence from Germany. Turkish politics in Cyprus, Syria and Libya and the continuation of Ankara’s security cooperation with

Russia are no different – Turkey wants more units of the Russian S-400 missile defence system. And there are no signs of Ankara relaxing its domestic policy either. While it is true that the opposition is beginning to sense an opportunity, support for the ruling party is rapidly dwindling and, in the elections scheduled for 2023, Erdoğan’s AKP could lose its status as the strongest party for the first time since taking office in 2002. But pressure on the opposition and civil society is rising. Social media is controlled, the judiciary has become an instrument acting in the interests of government and the apparatus of violence is growing. As a result, doubts are growing in Turkey as to whether the government would still recognise and respect the elections if they were to lose them.

Thirdly, the US’s unilateral decision to withdraw from Afghanistan has made it clear that the policies of Biden’s government are also aimed exclusively at US interests. Europeans need to lower their expectations that Washington will actually even discuss its policy on Turkey with them. The recent snub against France by Washington, London and Canberra (in setting up a new security alliance, AUKUS) clearly illustrates this point. The fact that the Western alliance of states in Afghanistan has withdrawn from the country having achieved close to nothing in 20 years is just another sign of the rapidly declining dominance of the West and its influence across the world. All of this reinforces the long-established notion in Turkey that the West is in unstoppable decline. Turkey (no longer) needs to meet Western expectations and instead can align itself with Asia in the medium and long term.

As a result, the future German government will not only have to decide whether to continue to coordinate and significantly shape European policy on Turkey and whether it is capable of doing so. It will also have to find answers to the problem of how to deal with Turkey in future, a country whose cooperation the EU depends on in certain areas, but whose foreign and domes-

tic policy is increasingly diverging from European ideas.

A look at the Bundestag manifestos of the parties whose participation in a coalition government is considered possible in principle, gives us an idea of their views on the problem and the status of the discussion. In their election manifestos, the CDU/CSU, Alliance 90/The Greens and FDP reflect on Turkey's candidacy for EU accession, mention their membership of NATO and nearly all of them see Turkey as playing an important role in security policy. Turkey is also referred to – though not always mentioned explicitly – on issues relating to arms exports and arms control, as well as the protection of human and civil rights. All the parties are very concerned about the issue of migration where Turkey plays a pivotal role.

## Cooperation between the EU and Turkey on migration

On 18 March 2016, the European Union and Turkey agreed in principle to unlimited cooperation to overcome irregular migration. Turkey undertook to control its borders with Greece and to take back Syrian migrants who were not entitled to asylum. For its part, the EU promised financial aid totalling six billion euros for the years 2016 to 2019, as well as directly admitting refugees from Turkey. Critics of the agreement in Turkey and Germany, but also internationally, said it undermined the rights of refugees. It has, however, significantly reduced the number of irregular migrants crossing the border from Turkey to Greece, from around one million in the 12 months before the start of the agreement to around 26,000 in the 12 months since. During the same period, the number of people who died on sea crossings fell from around 1,100 to 81.

The cooperation with Turkey has made migration manageable, especially for Germany, whose party system has changed significantly as a result of the large influx of refugees in 2015. Despite many differ-

ences of opinion between Ankara and Brussels and despite serious shortcomings in the implementation of the agreement, the European Council announced in December 2020 that it would make available the funds necessary for the cooperation to continue.

In Turkey, targeted EU funds have helped improve the lives of Syrian refugees in a number of areas. For Ankara, whose relationship with the EU has steadily deteriorated since the beginning of the agreement, its cooperation on migration has given it leverage to influence both Brussels and Berlin. The future course of this cooperation will largely determine Turkey's ties to the EU going forward.

## EU-Turkey cooperation on migration in German election manifestos

Despite the key importance of the “refugee deal”, neither the CDU/CSU, the SPD nor FDP mention it in their election manifestos.

As far as migration via Turkey is concerned, many of the goals that the CDU/CSU explicitly mention in their election manifesto are already largely being achieved through the refugee cooperation with Ankara: for example, the wish to prevent “illegal migration”, “to keep the number of people fleeing to Germany and Europe [...] permanently low” and to “open up life prospects for refugees in their home countries or nearby”.

The SPD's election manifesto says, “We will defend the 1951 Refugee Convention”. It then goes on to say, “Pushbacks are a blatant violation of international law”. It also recommends setting up “legal migration routes”. The latter is part of the existing agreement with Turkey. Large-scale pushbacks, i.e. the rejection of refugees, occurred at the end of February/beginning of March 2020 at the Turkish-Greek border. The Turkish President had large numbers of refugees transported to the border in a concerted action and the Turkish police accompanied refugees to Greek territory. At the time, EU Commission President, Ursula von

der Leyen, justified the rejection of the refugees by the Greek authorities by saying its actions were protecting the EU's external border. That Turkey failed at the time to sneak large numbers of refugees into Greece paradoxically ensured that its cooperation with the EU on migration matters still continues today.

The FDP election manifesto says, “[...] the basic right to asylum for politically persecuted people [is] inviolable”. It goes on to say, “It must be possible to get to Europe safely – without having to take a life-threatening journey and risk falling into the hands of human traffickers.” At the same time, it also calls for effective protection for the EU's external border. The FDP, too, makes no reference to the agreement with Turkey, even though it allows a number of the goals mentioned in its election manifesto to be achieved. The silence of Germany's political parties on the refugee agreement with Turkey is all the more astonishing given that it has obviously served as a blueprint for a number of cooperation agreements between the EU and/or its members and North African countries.

The Green party's election manifesto, on the other hand, goes into the EU's agreement with Turkey in some detail. It says, “The current EU-Turkey deal undermines [...] international asylum law, has failed and must be abandoned”. The Green party wants to “expand financial and logistical support for first arrival and transit countries such as Turkey [...]”, but European cooperation with third countries “should not be aimed at preventing people seeking refuge”. They are calling for a new agreement in which European financial support for Turkey is only linked to looking after and integrating refugees properly. The EU must also “set binding quotas for resettling vulnerable refugees to the EU”.

Two trends have become apparent. On one side of the fence are the CDU/CSU, FDP and SPD. In the manifestos of the CDU/CSU and FDP, they explicitly call for limiting irregular migration and in 2016 the SPD helped initiate the refugee agreement with Turkey and is jointly responsible for it.

However, none of these parties have commented on the cooperation – probably due to Turkey's negative image in German society. On the other side of the fence, there are the Greens, who have rejected the current agreement with Ankara for legal and humanitarian reasons and do not want an agreement whose aim is to limit irregular migration. Instead, they are in favour of increasing the intake of refugees. It is highly likely that the future government coalition will include parties from both sides of this fence and so this issue will need urgent clarification.

### **The current dynamic on the refugee question**

NATO's withdrawal from Afghanistan and concerns about another massive rise in the number of refugees have set alarm bells ringing in Ankara, Athens, Brussels and Berlin. In Turkey, people's tolerance of the government's refugee policy is fast evaporating, especially given the country is still in the midst of a long-running economic crisis. The opposition has seized this opportunity to put the government under pressure on the refugee question. In polls, seven out of ten eligible voters are in favour of closing the borders to refugees and well over half of those surveyed and more than a third of those who normally vote for the ruling AKP said that letting in more refugees would drive them away from Erdoğan's party.

The EU approach, which has always been criticised in Turkey as an “externalisation of the refugee question”, of leaving refugees primarily in the neighbouring states of conflict areas and helping these countries, is now also seen as the only possible solution in Turkey. The Turkish President and his Foreign Minister are calling on the EU and the international community to support Iran, Pakistan and Uzbekistan, the primary host countries of Afghan refugees, and show willingness to provide financial support to these countries as well. The Greek Prime Minister and a summit of EU countries bordering the Mediterranean (EuroMed9), which he convened, has made similar state-

ments. Even EU member states that have so far given migrants refuge are categorically refusing to continue doing so on a larger scale and point out that they have already taken in many refugees.

Meanwhile, the Turkish government is pushing hard for the EU to continue and even increase the amount of aid it provides. The EU is about to officially announce the next tranches. The new federal government is unlikely to be able to buck this trend. At the European level, it will have to continue cooperating with Turkey on the refugee issue and be faced with the additional task of winning over the electorate.

### **Turkey as an unstable partner on security policy**

Turkey is of crucial importance to NATO because of its location to the south of Russia and as a bridge to the Middle East. The country became a member of the alliance as early as 1952, before the Federal Republic of Germany. With a total of 445,400 men (2021), Turkey is the largest force in the alliance after the US. Ankara spends 2.8 percent of its gross domestic product on defence (2020).

NATO has a radar stationed in Central Anatolia (Kürecik) which is indispensable for its ballistic missile defence system. During operations against the “Islamic State” (IS), NATO AWACS planes took off from Konya Airport and fighter jets from the Incirlik Airbase. NATO’s allied land command (LANDCOM), which coordinates the army units of the allies during joint operations, is located in the Aegean İzmir. Turkey also took command of the Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF) in 2021.

In recent years, however, Turkey’s relationship with a number of NATO partners has deteriorated considerably. When some of the Turkish military attempted a coup on 15 July 2016, the Turkish government accused the US of complicity, and even of taking part. In response to the coup, the government ousted the military leadership

and not only those responsible for the coup but also pro-Western and secular cadres fell victim to the subsequent purges in the military. This weakened what was the most reliable link between Washington and Ankara. In order to protect itself against Western aircraft, Turkey acquired the Russian S-400 missile defence system in 2017, which is why the US imposed sanctions on Ankara at the end of 2020.

Also in 2016, Turkey carried out the first of four large-scale military operations in Syria, three of which were primarily aimed at territories held by Syrian Kurds. Ankara sees its attacks on Syrian Kurds as part of its “low-intensity war” against fighters of the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) in their own country, which began in 1984. According to government agencies, the conflict has left between 35,500 and 44,000 people dead. It was and is associated with serious human rights violations that have permanently damaged Turkey’s image in Western Europe. In the fight against IS in Syria, the Syrian Kurds acted as Washington’s ground troops, which is why the Kurdish question is now putting a strain on Turkish-US relations as well.

But the list of problems does not end there. In recent years, Turkish threats against Greece and the Republic of Cyprus, the use of Islamist fighters in Libya and military support for Azerbaijan in its campaign against Armenia have exacerbated Turkey’s estrangement from the West, and especially from France. Today, NATO partners Greece and the Republic of Cyprus once again regard Turkey as the most important challenge to their national security.

Even before tensions in the eastern Mediterranean flared up again, scenarios were modelled about a possible exit from NATO by Turkey. In order to keep Ankara in the alliance, in July 2020 the German government agreed to supply Turkey with key components for the construction of six German submarines, despite fierce protests from Greece. According to assessments by experts, these submarines are shifting the balance of power in the eastern Mediterranean in favour of Turkey due to their advanced propulsion technology.

## **NATO partner Turkey in the parties' election manifestos**

The FDP's manifesto says, "As a NATO member, Turkey is and will remain an indispensable partner, which is why we are working hard to reduce heightened security tensions in the alliance". The addendum, "There will be a Turkey after President Erdoğan", makes it clear where they believe the problems for the current security tensions lie. The CDU/CSU focuses on normative expectations on Turkey, "NATO is a community of values. Its members must commit themselves to upholding human rights and the rule of law." Reading between the lines, they express doubts about Ankara's reliability as a partner, "As a NATO partner, Turkey must make its contribution to collective security and meet its obligation to hold consultations on security policy."

The SPD's manifesto does not explicitly mention Turkey in connection with NATO, but calls for the "outlawing of autonomous, lethal weapons systems" in order to "counteract the temporal and spatial delimitation of military violence [...]". The use of drones in Azerbaijan and Libya is cited as an example of a delimitation of military force; armed Turkish drones were used in both countries and those in Libya even carried out autonomous killings. The SPD is also announcing a "restrictive arms export policy" and wants to "coordinate a tightening of EU arms export agreements with our European partners [...]".

The Greens are calling for "no German weapons in war zones and dictatorships". It also states in their manifesto, "For Germany, we will introduce legislation to control arms exports [and] the right to bring a class action if the new laws are broken [...]". As with the SPD's manifesto, these measures will directly affect Turkey because as well as arms exports to Saudi Arabia and Egypt, it is largely contracts with Turkey that keep arms exports on the agenda in Germany. Like the SPD, the Greens are calling for autonomous weapons systems to be banned internationally. The Greens have even gone one step further by announcing that they

will "address Turkey's illegal military offensive in Northern Syria at NATO level".

There is a long list of reasons why Germany's political parties are dissatisfied with Turkey's behaviour in the alliance. It ranges from the dismantling of democracy and authoritarianism to military interventions in neighbouring countries and cooperating with Russia on defence policy, NATO's greatest challenge in Europe.

## **Turkey's strategic calculus**

The Turkish government knows how controversial its policies are in the alliance and in the West in general. In order to prove that it is still an indispensable partner, Ankara has underlined its diplomatic support for Kiev in recent months. Much to Russia's annoyance, Turkey is selling armed drones to Poland and Ukraine. Ankara also responded to Washington's proposals for Turkey to protect and control Kabul airport — which could not be done due to resistance from the Taliban.

In order to reduce its dependence on military technology, in particular from US, German and French suppliers, Turkey has diversified its arms imports considerably. Ankara also now sources weapons from Russia, China, South Korea and Ukraine. Not least due to sanctions, the US is currently only just Turkey's largest arms supplier; Ankara's imports from Italy and Spain are almost as high.

It was the arms embargo imposed by the US in response to Turkey's invasion of Cyprus in 1974 that prompted Turkey to develop its own defence industry. Today, around 60 percent of civil aviation and military equipment comes from domestic production. Turkey has enjoyed international success as a producer of armed drones which have been decisive in a number of military encounters, particularly in Libya and Azerbaijan. Since 2015, the Turkish defence industry has made a significant contribution to its country's exports, but suffered a severe setback in 2020 due to US sanctions. Against this background, German restrictions on arms exports to Turkey



will only be effective if they are coordinated at the European and transatlantic levels.

## Germany as key influencer of EU policy on Turkey

At the beginning of the current legislative period in Germany, Ankara's relationship with Brussels was chilly. The coalition agreement from 7 February 2018 between the CDU/CSU and the SPD ruled out progress on the accession process as well as on the matters of customs union and easing of visa restrictions – for as long as Turkey refuses to move further towards more democracy and the rule of law. The EU General Affairs Council adopted this position in its resolution of 26 August 2018.

It was Turkey's expansive policy and its demonstration of military power in the eastern Mediterranean that led the European Council on 25 March 2021 to promise Turkey to enter into negotiations on modernising the customs union, to initiate high-level dialogue on issues such as health, climate and counter-terrorism, and to extend financial aid linked to the refugee agreement. The primary condition for the implementation of such a positive agenda was for Turkey to take further steps to de-escalate the conflict with the Republic of Cyprus and Greece – otherwise, the EU would resort to sanctions.

In their manifestos for the federal election, all the major parties spoke in general terms of the close ties between Germany and Turkey and emphasised the need for intensive cooperation and partnership. Though when it came to the issue of accession negotiations with the EU, they were more specific. As already stated in their 2017 election manifestos, the CDU/CSU and FDP are categorically ruling out Turkey's accession to the EU. The FDP is calling for an end to accession talks. The SPD, which in its 2017 election manifesto was still advocating the continuation of accession negotiations, no longer mentions EU membership for Turkey as an option in its latest manifesto. Only the Greens are against

breaking off negotiations. None of the parties commented on Turkey's calls to deepen and modernise the customs union and permit the issuing of visas, nor on Ankara's interest in being involved in explorative discussions on European foreign, security and energy policy.

## What next for Germany and Turkey?

The new federal government will face two big questions. Firstly, how can Ankara be persuaded to cooperate with Brussels and Berlin and consider the interests of the EU and its member states if there is no prospect of deepening economic relations, visa-free travel or diplomatic consultations? And secondly, how will Germany and Europe strike a balance between the desired partnership with Ankara, on the one hand, and European normative expectations and the necessary restrictions on Turkey's foreign policy activities, on the other?

It is therefore on the coalition partners that form Germany's new government to first clarify their positions on Ankara's expectations. They should then recognise that the EU's current strategy is unlikely to work and therefore needs improving because it is extremely unlikely that the EU will actually make taking any action on areas as diverse as cooperation on migration, economic policy, issuing visas, arms export policy and diplomatic consultations solely dependent on Ankara no longer further escalating the situation in the eastern Mediterranean. The interests of member states in these areas are too varied for them to be able to find a common position vis-à-vis Turkey within the framework of these negotiations. Ankara will therefore continue to test the EU's pain thresholds on these matters.

At the same time, Turkey cannot rely on the current supposition that cooperative behaviour really will be rewarded. It is therefore necessary to define criteria for each individual policy area. Brussels must show Ankara its red lines, but also commit itself to complying with Turkey's calls, once



Turkey has delivered on its promises. For example, starting negotiations to deepen the customs union should only be made dependent on the removal of trade barriers put up by Turkey in recent years which have hampered the current customs union. Cooperation on defence policy, on the other hand, should be tied to de-escalation and Ankara putting more distance between itself and Moscow. And for further cooperation on migration, Turkey should be made to comply with the minimum standards for dealing with migrants. Only if the EU formulates clear criteria for Ankara and only if it makes credible commitments to meet Ankara's demands, will Berlin and Brussels come to an agreement with Ankara that is based on rules and gives both sides something they can rely on.

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ISSN (Print) 1861-1761  
ISSN (Online) 2747-5107  
doi: 10.18449/2021C55

*Translation by Martin Haynes*

(English version of  
SWP-Aktuell 65/2021)

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The Centre for Applied Turkey Studies (CATS) is funded by Stiftung Mercator and the German Federal Foreign Office.

SWP Comment 55  
October 2021

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