

The importance of the German-Turkish relationship

No. 27 August 2015

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“Believe me, they don’t like us”, said Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in his speech at the meeting of the Organisation for Islamic Cooperation (COMCEC) on 27 November 2014 in Istanbul. Accusing the Western World of only being interested in Muslims’ money, cheap workforce and natural resources.¹ This statement expresses quite well some of the prevailing notions and tensions between Turkey as part of the Islamic World and the Western World, including Germany. The question of attitudes behind relations between those two worlds has gained growing importance in recent years, especially since Turkey’s EU membership candidature in 1999 and negotiations starting from 2005 onwards. While Ankara plans its accession for 2023 (at the centenary of the foundation of the Republic of Turkey),² many EU members still disfavour Turkey joining the community. The discussion about Turkey’s membership is heavily disputed among different parts of society and politics, often focussing on Turkey being an Islamic country with a different cultural background.

Germany represents one of the most important partners for Turkey concerning economic trade relations but also in respect to its path to EU accession. Three million people of Turkish descent are currently living in Germany.³ Initially only seen as a human workforce (“Gastarbeiter”) rather than human beings, the Germans quickly realized that socio-cultural measures had to be taken to integrate them into their society. Positive

experiences came along with negative impressions caused by a clash of cultures often leading to misunderstandings, a lack of communication and the rise of manifold prejudices towards the foreign culture.

When it comes to differences and difficulties of integration and understanding, the German public, as well as the relevant literature, define religion as the most crucial factor.⁴ 99% of all Turkish people are Muslims and of the four million Muslims living in Germany, the majority is of Turkish nationality.⁵ So the fact that the overall majority of Turkish people are Muslims and the majority of Muslim immigrants in Germany are Turks leads to the strong correlation of Turkey and Islam in all its aspects within the German society. This can lead to wrongful and unreasonable confusions with terms such as Islam, Islamism and Islamic extremism and can result in negative connotations and prejudices towards the religion and people.

When it comes to the attitude towards Turkey’s EU membership within German society, a recent Forsa study pointed to a growing opposition. While 52% of Germans disapproved a Turkish membership in 2005, the number grew to 69% in 2014. Only 26% expressed being in favour (2005:43%). It is important to say that age, as well as level of education and political orientation influence the attitude: the younger and more highly educated respondents were, the more likely they were to have a positive attitude. Also voters

of the Green party were more likely to welcome Turkey than those of other parties. When asked, whether the President Erdoğan would hinder the accession of his country to the EU, the attitude was quite clear: 80 % affirmed.⁶ Erdoğan and his recent anti-democratic political activities have raised resistance in Germany, especially during the Gezi and Taksim protests and his comments during his visits to Germany, where in 2008 he asked his people to not assimilate to the German culture.⁷

When looking at the overall German attitude towards Turkey, a complex relationship can be diagnosed. While bonds with the “oriental” country seem to be strong due to economic ties, intense German-Turkish political exchange and the large German-Turkish community, barriers still exist. Germany remains sceptical towards Turkey, especially when it comes to the differences in political values and cultural habits between them. While the Turkish people should not be judged by their religious affiliation but by their degree of openness to and respect for important values in Germany such as respect for democracy, human rights and rule of law, their integration into German society should be further supported. A focus on common interests and mutual benefits could help to encourage Turkey on its way to modernisation and the consequential adaption of crucial (European) values such as democracy and the rule of law. Nevertheless, a single focus on mutual economic profits must not be the only basis for acceptance into the EU. Dealing with Turkey will always also mean dealing with Islam

in all its various aspects and Germany should become aware of its special role within the EU in this decision, which can be seen as a mixed blessing.

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