

September 21, 2017

The Turkish – German Tug-of-War

by Emily Hruban

In the lead-up to Germany's federal elections on September 24, the nation's 2.9 million Turkish-born residents have found themselves in the middle of a tug-of-war between Berlin and Ankara.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has long enjoyed a certain amount of support in the Turkish community in Germany. In April, 63.1 percent of Turkish voters in Germany supported the constitutional amendment expanding the president's powers.¹ Erdogan passed his amendment narrowly, with 51.4 percent of the total population voting "yes."

This support should not be overstated, however: Of the 2.9 million Turkish-born in Germany, only 1.43 million were eligible to vote, and only 661,000 did so.² Approximately 416,000 cast ballots in favor of the amendment.³

German Elections

Erdogan is now trying to channel the support he commands to influence Germany's upcoming elections. "I call all on of my countrymen in Germany: the Christian Democrats, SPD [Social Democrats], the Greens are all enemies of Turkey," said Erdogan, asking more than 1 million eligible Turkish-German voters to oppose these three mainstream parties.

German leaders were quick to hit back. "We do not tolerate any kind of interference," Chancellor Angela Merkel (CDU) declared.⁴ And writing in the German weekly Spiegel, Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel (SPD) and Justice Minister Heiko Mass (SPD) called Erdogan's words "a danger to the democratic culture in Germany."

Alternatives?

A Turkish-German who actually wanted to heed Erdogan's call would have few options. Over 80 percent of Turkish-Germans support the three parties he said to boycott. Although Turkish-Germans tend to be socially conservative, traditionally they have favored the working-class focus of the center-left Social Democrats (SPD) (40.1 percent), with 27.6 percent and 13.2 percent, respectively, preferring the Christian Democrats and the Greens.

None of Germany's other major parties seems a likely alternative. Although Erdogan did not mention Germany's liberal Free Democratic Party (FDP), its leader, Christian Lindner, has also been quite critical of Ankara. The Left Party's (die Linke) open stance on immigration might be appealing, but the party is likely too far left for many Turkish-German voters' more conservative social positions. Finally, the

Alternative for Germany (AfD) is too far to the right to win support, and its anti-immigration rhetoric is alienating for anyone with their own migration story.

If Turkish-Germans aim to boycott the major parties, they are most likely to stay home on September 24. According to one recent study, 15 percent of Turkish-Germans do not plan to vote in the upcoming election, and 41 percent said they were not sure if they would vote or refused to answer the question.⁵

Beyond the Rhetoric

Erdogan's comments may have a limited impact on the upcoming election, as a decline in Turkish-German turnout could do some damage to the SPD. However, the debate goes much deeper. Erdogan's statements are also political posturing, geared at rallying support at home and creating political confusion for Germany, which has condemned his anti-democratic tendencies. Merkel has been particularly critical of Ankara's response to the attempted coup in 2016, after which the government dismissed thousands of public employees and imprisoned thousands more, including German nationals.

Representation in Government

Germany's response to Erdogan's meddling reflects a broader internal debate about integration. Erdogan's call for a boycott of the major political parties has called attention to the fact that after decades in the country, many Turkish-Germans still have not found a home in the German political sphere. One major reason is that Turkish-Germans, and immigrants more generally, are underrepresented in the federal government. Although 19 percent of the German population has a so-called migration background – they are or one of their parents is an immigrant – only 37 of the 630 members, less than 5 percent, of the Bundestag do. The current ruling coalition members, the SPD, CDU and CSU, have the lowest shares of lawmakers with migration backgrounds, at 6.7 percent, 3.1 percent and 1.8 percent, respectively.

In a recent survey of the 1,779 candidates running directly for national office this year conducted by the influential Turkish Community in Germany, 74 percent of Green candidates and 64 percent of SPD candidates said they would support target quotas for participation of people with migration backgrounds in federal offices and the political parties. In contrast, The AfD, CDU/CSU and FDP were almost unanimously opposed (96 percent, 95 percent and 93 percent, respectively).⁶

Of course, more Bundestag members with migration backgrounds is no guarantee that issues facing Germany's Turkish-German population would be tackled head-on – Germany's immigrant families are not homogenous and their interests are not always aligned. Even within the Turkish-German community, major divisions and differences in opinion exist among different communities and social classes. By encouraging more Turkish-Germans to participate in the parties and run for office, though, the political parties may be better able to address issues important to the Turkish-German community and immigrants in general. The Turkish Community in Germany cites improving integration prospects for immigrants and fighting racism and xenophobia as top priorities.

Turkish-German politicians may also be a powerful force in the tug-of-war between Berlin and Ankara. They are some of Erdogan's most vocal critics in Germany and act as a counterweight to him in the Turkish-German community. Cem Özdemir, leader of the Green Party and arguably the Bundestag's highest-profile member with Turkish roots, actively fought for a resolution declaring the killing of Armenians during the Ottoman era a genocide. He took the opportunity to criticize Erdogan's anti-

democratic practices, telling his fellow parliamentarians, “When I go home tonight I won't be arrested or beaten. This isn't true for my colleagues in Turkey fighting for Armenians.”⁷ All Bundestag members with Turkish heritage voted for the resolution. They were met with heavy criticism from Ankara and threats not to enter Turkey.

Germany's established political parties will more easily win Turkish-German support if they retool their platforms to focus more on integration, education and social mobility. Although they may not cast the decisive votes in the 2017 election, Turkish-Germans will account for a projected 2 million votes by 2030.⁸ As their numbers increase, their voices will become more powerful. They cannot – and should not – be ignored.

Emily Hruban is project manager for transatlantic relations at the Washington, DC-based Bertelsmann Foundation. Emily.Hruban@bfna.org

¹ https://www.welt.de/newsticker/dpa_nt/afxline/topthemen/hintergruende/article163799477/Wie-Tuerken-in-Deutschland-waehlen.html

² <http://www.zeit.de/politik/ausland/2017-04/deuschtuerken-tuerkei-referendum-volksabstimmung-receptayyip-erdogan>

³ <http://www.zeit.de/politik/ausland/2017-04/deuschtuerken-tuerkei-referendum-volksabstimmung-receptayyip-erdogan>

⁴ <http://www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/inland/merkel-verbittet-sich-einmischung-erdogans-in-wahlkampf-15158186.html>

⁵ <http://www.bild.de/politik/inland/bundestagswahl2017/tuerken-wollen-nicht-waehlen-52799904.bild.html>

⁶ <http://www.tgd.de/2017/09/08/auswertung-der-wahlpruefsteine-der-tgd-zur-bundestagswahl-2017/>

⁷ <http://www.dw.com/en/bundestag-passes-armenia-genocide-resolution-unanimously-turkey-recalls-ambassador/a-19299936>

⁸ <https://www.bayernkurier.de/inland/14819-in-deutschland-links-zuhause-religioes-konservativ/>