

Turkish-German relations in light of the upcoming German elections



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Germany is heading to the parliamentary elections on February 23rd. The country has been in distress since the collapse of the coalition government led by Social Democrat Olaf Scholz in the immediate aftermath of the US elections. The Traffic Light Coalition of the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD), the Union 90/Greens (BG90/Grüne) and the Free Democratic Party (FDP), were already in a difficult coalition because of their deep ideological differences, and their government coincided with the Russian invasion of Ukraine. There is no doubt that Germany and Turkey are linked by their deep and multidimensional relations in the fields of economy and defense, as well as their history of immigration. Given that the international system will be based more on bilateral relations in the upcoming period, the results of the German elections and the path the country will chart for itself from 2025 onwards are of great interest to Turkey. On the other hand, Germany is also a highly influential actor in Turkey's relations with the Western world and the European Union. In this set-up, one of the most pressing questions for Turkey is how the bilateral relations will be affected. We will focus on two questions: Which party is most likely to form a coalition government after the elections? What kind of a foundation can we expect Turkish-German relations to settle on under the new government?

Elections in an Unstable Environment

Germany is on the brink of a federal election in an atmosphere of uncertainty. One major source of instability is economic stagnation and pessimism about the economic prospects. GDP for example grew by only 0.2 per cent in the third quarter of 2024. In the second quarter it contracted by 0.3 per cent. Before recovering from the damage caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, Germany faced energy shortages and uncertainty caused by the war in Ukraine. The increase in energy prices due to the war in Ukraine, as well as Germany's inability to keep up with the technological advances of the US and China, and the weakening of the comparative advantage of its export-oriented industry and thus its competitiveness in world markets, weakened the economic situation in the country.

Another source, and at the same time an indicator, of instability has been the rise and radicalization of the right and the left, which has been reflected in the state elections. The far-right populist nationalist Alternative for Germany (AfD) and the left-wing populist Sarah Wagenknecht Union (BSW) both gained ground in three state elections. In Saxony the AfD won 30.6 percent of the vote, second only to the Christian Democratic Union (CDU, 31.9 percent); in Thuringia it won 32.8 percent (CDU: 23.6 percent); and in Brandenburg it came second with 29.2 percent. The BSW, which had previously

achieved double-digit results in Saxony and Thuringia, won 13.5 percent in Brandenburg, becoming the junior coalition partner of SPD. Besides, Elon Musk's over-hour-long online conversation with AfD leader Alice Weidel in early January 2025, along with his participation in the AfD's election campaigns via video conference, has boosted the party's popularity. Additionally, attacks on Christmas markets and kindergartens by individuals from Muslim countries across Germany are likely to benefit the AfD. According to a poll conducted in early January 2025, Merz, with 26 percent, was far ahead of Habeck (22 percent) and Chancellor Scholz (16 percent).¹ On February 17, 2025, according to the latest available poll, the CDU is in first place with 30 percent in response to the question "Which party would you vote for if there were a general election this Sunday?". It is followed by the AfD with 21 percent, the SPD with 15 percent, the Greens with 13 percent, The Left 6 percent and the BSW 5 percent. The FDP's votes are around 4 percent and with this rate it is out of the parliament.² On the evening of the election, however, we may well see a different picture in the German Bundestag than expected.

Scenarios and Possible Effects on Turkey-Germany Relations

While the first of the four scenarios is the most likely, we also consider the last two scenarios to better understand German politics and assess all possibilities in an increasingly uncertain world.

Scenario 1: Grand Coalition led by Merz

The most likely scenario is a "grand coalition" led by Merz, with the CDU/CSU and SPD, potentially securing an absolute majority in parliament (47-48 percent). This is favorable for Ankara, as both parties are pragmatic toward Turkey, despite the CDU/CSU's opposition to its EU membership. While revival of accession talks isn't on their agenda, they recognize Turkey's geostrategic importance in the Middle East, Black Sea, and Eastern Mediterranean. The CDU/CSU's election program highlights Turkey's importance to both the EU and Germany, a stance shared by Merz, who aims to strengthen the security partnership with Turkey. Merz stated in a newspaper interview after the fall of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad: "Russia was the power that supported Syria and the regime there, but it has weakened. Turkey, on the other hand, has become stronger and will play a bigger role in the Middle East. We need to work closely with Turkey to bring political peace to this region."³ Therefore, efforts to ease tensions with Turkey and establish dialogue are expected.

¹ Statista. 2025. «Wen würden Sie direkt zum Kanzler/zur Kanzlerin wählen?» (Who would you directly vote for as chancellor?) 7.1.2025, <https://tinyurl.com/29xtkuke>, 7.1.2025.

² »Sonntagsfrage Bundestagswahl« (Sunday Poll Bundestag Election), <https://tinyurl.com/32jdh8w9>, 17.2.2025.

³ »Merz nach Assad-Sturz: Stärker mit Türkei zusammenarbeiten« (Merz after Assad's fall: stronger cooperation with Turkey), in: Stuttgarter Zeitung, 9.12.2025, <https://tinyurl.com/296sww2d>, 17.2.2025.

The SPD expresses dissatisfaction with Turkey's political structure and does not see progress on EU membership, and Turkey is not mentioned in its election program. The party has made it clear that its approach will continue until Turkey initiates democratic reforms. However, the SPD supports maintaining dialogue with Turkey and includes many members of Turkish origin in local, state, and federal parliaments. Last year, the SPD-led government allowed dual citizenship, fulfilling an important expectation of Turks. As chancellor, Scholz has adopted a pragmatic stance toward Turkey. During his visit to Turkey, he acknowledged differences, particularly over the Middle East, but emphasized that there were no obstacles to improving bilateral relations. He also expressed openness to selling Eurofighter jets to Turkey as well as to exporting arms and military equipment.⁴

The Grand Coalition would also face contentious issues, particularly on immigration. The CDU/CSU favors a stricter approach, including halting immigration, limiting family reunification, and closing borders.

Merz's call to change the citizenship law, abolish dual citizenship, and revoke citizenship from some Germans with migrant backgrounds could create tensions with the Turkish community in Germany and Turkey. However, the SPD's presence in the government is likely to balance these positions. The SPD opposes systematic deportations and expanding border controls. Another topic of interest for Turkey is environmental and climate protection and green transformation. Related to climate targets, the SPD promises to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, speed limits on highways and speed up decarbonization of industry, financial support for companies that produce carbon-free products. To ensure that climate protection does not lead to social injustice, it favors "climate money"⁵ (Klimageld) for low-income people.

The CDU/CSU promises to build a strong economy focused on climate neutrality by 2045, with plans to lower electricity prices, expand energy grids, and emphasize energy sources like wind, solar, biomass, and geothermal. These goals align with Turkey's efforts to harmonize its economy with the European Green Deal. On security, the SPD supports continued financial, humanitarian, and military aid to Ukraine, but opposes deploying »Taurus« cruise missiles. It aims to strengthen the European Defense Union within NATO, with defense spending of at least 2 percent of GDP and a flexible, voluntary conscription system. The CDU/CSU also supports continued aid to Ukraine, sanctions against Russia, and an EU perspective for Ukraine. They aim to strengthen the transatlantic partnership, deepen relations with France and Poland, support Israel, and promote a two-state solution for Palestine. On

⁴ Cüneyt Karadağ and Erbil Başay, »Germany's Scholz vows closer defense ties with NATO ally Türkiye«, in: *Anadolu Ajansı*, 24.1.2025, <https://tinyurl.com/4kph8u8c>, 17.2.2025.

⁵ The SPD's programme for the future, <https://tinyurl.com/mtw5wm99>, 17.1.2025.

defense, the CDU/CSU advocates for returning to conscription, enhancing European defense capacity, and promoting nuclear energy, while upholding NATO's 2 percent defense spending target.

Scenario 2: Jamaica Coalition

A government led by Merz with the FDP and Greens, known as the Jamaican Coalition due to their party colors matching the Jamaican flag, faces two obstacles. *First*, the FDP may fall below the five percent threshold needed to enter parliament. *Second*, even if the FDP surpasses this threshold, the combined votes of these three parties might still not be enough for a parliamentary majority. However, if the CDU/CSU exceeds 30 percent, the Greens 16 percent, and the FDP, Left Party, or BSW remain outside, the CDU/CSU and Greens could still secure an absolute majority. In recent years, the Greens have been critical of Turkey, especially over its autocratic system, their 2016 promotion of the Armenian bill, and tensions between former Green leader and current Minister Cem Özdemir and President Erdoğan. However, a shift toward pragmatism is anticipated. A key indication of this is Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock's (Greens) statement agreeing with Turkey that "Kurdish rebels" in northern Syria should be disarmed and integrated into Turkey's internal security. Reports suggest her consultations with Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan in Ankara aligned with this position, and her later statement that northern Syria should not threaten Turkey's security indicates the Greens may be more open to security cooperation with Turkey.

Scenario 3: Left-Green-Socialist Coalition led by Scholz

A »Left-Green-Socialist« coalition is highly unlikely under current conditions. For this to happen, the SPD would need to be the leading party or the CDU/CSU would need to fail to convince the Greens to join a Merz-led coalition, and Merz would need to reject forming a government with the AfD. Additionally, the Left Party or BSW would need to secure close to 10 percent of the vote. Scholz's chancellorship depends on multiple factors, and such a coalition would likely face resistance from the business community. Moreover, it would be even more incompatible than the disbanded Traffic Light coalition, given the parties' differing views on key issues. The Greens advocate strong support for Ukraine and aim to strengthen Europe's defense capacity within NATO. In foreign policy, they seek to empower the United Nations in a multipolar world and activate the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. Their vision is a federal European Republic with its own constitution. In contrast, the Left Party calls for diplomatic conflict resolution and proposes transforming the Bundeswehr into a purely defensive force, withdrawing from foreign missions. Opposing conscription, they believe NATO is unsuitable for cooperative security and suggest creating a new European security architecture that includes Russia and Turkey, while rejecting the deployment of US medium-range missiles in Germany.

The BSW calls for ending arms deliveries to Ukraine and Israel, advocating for a peaceful policy and diplomatic solutions to conflicts. It supports transforming the Bundeswehr into a defense-only force and opposes NATO's two percent defense spending target. On immigration, the Greens view Germany as a country of immigrants and propose a pragmatic, people-oriented policy that also addresses security concerns. They support the right to asylum, fair family reunification, fast processing, and the swift return of criminals. The Left rejects refoulement, even for criminals, and advocates giving asylum seekers the right to work immediately. It supports granting citizenship after five years and permanent residence, emphasizing that immigration rights should be based on universal values, not origin or economic status. The Left also seeks to abolish Frontex and replace it with a maritime rescue program, allowing asylum applications at the EU's external borders. In contrast, the BSW argues that migration strains social systems and society, calling for restrictions. It believes those from safe third countries should not receive asylum or social benefits and that individuals without protection status should be swiftly expelled. The BSW supports a common European migration policy and maritime rescue projects but opposes asylum applications in third countries.

Scenario 4: Grand Coalition under Scholz

This scenario, which would be the best for Ankara, is highly unlikely. Even though the SPD's view of Turkey is more critical on issues such as democracy, human rights and the rule of law, the SPD does not view Turkey and Turkey's relations with the EU through a civilizational, culturalist and marginalizing prism as much as the Christian Union parties. That is why, this scenario might be the one that would bring most stability to Turkey and Turkish-German relations. In this scenario, serious ruptures between Turkey and Germany – neither negativity nor breakthroughs – should be expected.

Issues to Watch on Turkey-Germany Relations

The past three years of the Scholz government have been positive for both Turkey and Turks in Germany. In the likely scenario of a grand coalition led by Merz, Turkish-German relations are expected to remain pragmatic and cooperative. Given Germany's strong state and foreign policy traditions, a change in government is unlikely to fundamentally alter policies toward Turkey. However, in an era of uncertainty, three key areas of Turkey-Germany relations should be closely monitored.

Economic relations

Economic relations, including trade, investments, and partnerships, will remain the cornerstone of Turkey-Germany ties. Bilateral trade between Turkey and Germany has grown rapidly, reaching a

record high of USD 49.8 billion in 2023. Turkey's exports to Germany amounts USD 21.1 billion, while imports from Germany totals USD 28.7 billion. Turkey's main exports to Germany include machinery, textiles, vehicles, and metals. Germany is Turkey's largest export partner, with 8.7 percent of Turkey's exports going to Germany, compared to just 1.7 percent of Germany's imports from Turkey.⁶ Both German and Turkish companies continue to expand in bilateral trade and investment, as well as in transnational cooperation. Major German companies like Siemens, Mercedes-Benz, Hugo Boss, TUI, and SunExpress have long been established in Turkey, while Turkish companies such as Egetürk, Turkish Airlines, and Gazi have a significant impact on the German economy. In Germany, around 75,000 entrepreneurs, including both Turkish and German citizens, employ 375,000 people and generate an annual turnover of approximately 35 billion Euros. In Turkey, over 8,000 companies with German capital are active.⁷ In recent years, Turkish and German companies have established several institutional cooperation platforms, including the German-Turkish Joint Economic and Trade Commission (JETCO, founded in 2013) and the German-Turkish Energy Forum, established in 2012, focuses on renewable energy, energy efficiency, and electricity distribution networks. Germany also provides technical assistance to Turkey through the International Climate Initiative (IKI), with financial support totaling 10 billion.

Based on the trajectory of these economic relations and the needs of both economies, it is likely that economic ties between Turkey and Germany continue to grow. The decision by the Donald Trump administration to increase tariffs on EU goods may positively affect trade between Turkey and EU countries, including Germany, with tariff issues likely becoming another area for cooperation. However, the economic stagnation in Germany presents a challenge that will need to be considered moving forward.

Defense Industry and Military Relations

Turkey has been one of the largest buyers of German arms since the mid-1960s, consistently ranking among the top five buyers until 2000. However, after the Cold War, tensions arose, and Germany restricted arms exports to Turkey, citing concerns that the weapons were being used in violation of international agreements. The most recent restriction occurred after the July 15 coup attempt and Turkey's first Syrian military incursion, Operation Euphrates Shield, with Germany halting arms exports, excluding NATO defense projects. However, as the war in Ukraine and instability in the Middle

⁶ Yaşar Aydın, Jens Bastian, Maximiliane Schneider, "Visualising the Dynamics and Potential of Economic Relations between Germany and Turkey: Flourishing trade, investment and transnational relations promise further synergies for both countries", in: CATS Network (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, 2024), <https://tinyurl.com/46sk27ub>, 7.1.2025.

⁷ Ibidem.

East highlighted Turkey's strategic importance, the Scholz government authorized large-scale arms exports to Turkey in 2023. These exports included 100 anti-aircraft missiles, torpedoes for the Turkish navy, and substantial material packages for the modernization of Turkish submarines and frigates.⁸ Turkey's recent advances in the defense industry, particularly in the production of Unmanned Combat Aerial Vehicles, have attracted interest from German defense companies in terms of both Turkey's capabilities and potential technology transfers. Given the ongoing conflicts in the Middle East and Ukraine, it is likely that Turkey and Germany will strengthen their defense and security cooperation. However, the evolving priorities of figures like former U.S. President Trump and NATO's need to develop new strategies in response to his behavior should be closely monitored. Trump's recent remarks about Gaza, which reflect his dismissive stance toward its significance for Palestinians, will also be crucial in shaping Turkey's response, as Turkey has been one of the strongest international supporters of Palestinians. As CDU/CSU candidate Merz is expected to prioritize economic interests and security issues more than SPD leader Scholz, it is reasonable to anticipate that defense relations between Turkey and Germany could improve under a Merz-led government, assuming no unexpected developments, particularly related to the Kurdish issue, arise in Syria.

Migration, Refugees and Citizenship

There are over 3 million resident Turks in Germany, with half holding Turkish citizenship, and more than half a million holding dual citizenship.⁹ Since 2015, Germany has seen an influx of highly skilled and educated Turkish migrants working in various sectors, including healthcare and IT. The number of Turkish immigrants officially arriving in Germany increased from 27,805 in 2014 to 32,685 in 2015, and reached 126,487 in 2023.¹⁰ The Turkish diaspora in Germany has occasionally caused diplomatic tensions. Election campaigning by Turkish parliamentary candidates in Germany during Turkish elections and referendums, as well as practices by DİTİB (affiliated with the Directorate of Religious Affairs, Diyanet), have attracted media attention and harsh criticism in Germany.¹¹

Bilateral relations could be negatively impacted in two ways. *First*, if the Christian Union parties move forward with their proposal to abolish dual citizenship, as outlined in their election program. *Second*, if a Merz-led government adopts stricter immigration and refugee policies, potentially turning Turkey into

⁸ Matthias Gebauer, «Ampelregierung genehmigt wieder Waffenexporte in die Türkei» (Traffic Light Government again authorises arms exports to Turkey), in: *Der Spiegel*, 6.10.2024, <https://tinyurl.com/mr3t5yd7>, 9.1.2025.

⁹ BMI & BAMF, »Migrationsbericht der Bundesregierung 2020« (Migration Report of the Federal Government 2020), (Berlin and Nürnberg, 2022), <https://tinyurl.com/mrxrxctu>, 7.1.2025.

¹⁰ BMI & BAMF, »Migrationsbericht der Bundesregierung 2023« (Migration Report of the Federal Government 2023), (Berlin and Nürnberg, 2022), <https://tinyurl.com/7wptn5mh>, 9.1.2025.

¹¹ For more information cp. Yaşar Aydın, «Turkey's Diaspora Policy and the »DİTİB« Challenge», *Turkeyscope*, Vol. 3, No. 8, 15 May 2019, <https://tinyurl.com/y3np7fx9>, 9.1.2025.

a »migration depot«. While it's important to note that Turks in Germany are not a homogeneous group, the issue of dual citizenship will be a significant topic in Turkish-German relations, especially with the rise of anti-immigrant rhetoric before elections and increasing global radicalization. The hardening of public discourse in Turkey on this matter, particularly the rhetoric used during Turkey's 2014 and 2017 election campaigns targeting Turkish citizens in Germany, previously affected relations between the two countries, particularly in defense and economic matters.¹²

The issue of people fleeing conflicts in the Middle East, particularly within the scope of migration agreements with Europe, will undoubtedly remain a long-term concern for Turkey. The lower-than-expected number of returns of refugees who sought shelter in Turkey following recent developments in Syria, along with the fact that the children of these families now view Turkey as their home and speak Turkish more fluently than their native language, suggests that the similarities between Turkey and Germany may be greater than anticipated.

¹² For the course of Turkey-Germany relations, especially between 2005-2021, and the contentious issues, see Alemdar, Zeynep. 2021. "The State and Future of Turkey and Germany Relations the Political Backdrop," EDAM Foreign Policy and Security Notes, <https://edam.org.tr/en/foreign-policy-and-security/the-state-and-future-of-turkey-and-germany-relations-the-political-backdrop>, January 6, 2025.



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