

21.12.2021

What does a traffic-light coalition in Germany mean for the relations between Germany, the European Union and Turkey? What will be the continuities and ruptures?

Since the signing of the Ankara Agreement in 1963, Germany has typically functioned as a key driver of the scope and direction of EU-Turkey relations both inside and outside the accession framework. In recent years Germany, and more specifically Chancellor Angela Merkel, played a crucial role in keeping relations with Turkey on track. Recently, Germany led the group that wanted to offer Turkey a Positive Agenda – which would include, among other things, economic cooperation and high-level dialogue meetings – conditioned on decreasing the tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean. Now that Germany has moved towards a three-party coalition of Social Democrats, Greens and Liberals, the bets are on the table. What will be the continuities and changes in the post-Merkel era? With a Social Democrat Chancellor, Olaf Scholz, and a Green Foreign Minister, Annalena Baerbock, in charge, what can we expect from the new German government?

Anne Duncker, Center for Europe in the World, Stiftung Mercator, Essen

Shaping relations with Turkey on the basis of European values, with a clear substantive agenda and, at the same time, an orientation toward partnership, will be one of the most difficult foreign policy tasks for the new German government, especially for Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock.

Regardless of how much or how little the new government likes to negotiate with Erdoğan, it will have to deal with Turkey, especially with regard to migration policy and stability in the region. Turkey, in turn, would benefit from a reform of the customs union and visa liberalisation. The negotiation of these mutual interests requires clear processes and reliable agreements – combined with verifiable improvements in democracy, human rights and the rule of law in Turkey, which the coalition agreement rightly addresses.

The new government wants to strengthen the exchange with Turkish civil society and foster youth exchange. This is vital and future-oriented, since we need more people who deeply understand both countries and build bridges between the two states and societies. Additionally, the parliamentarians of the yet-to-be-formed German-Turkish parliamentary group should do their best to build and sustain political bridges.

The next elections in Turkey are scheduled for 2023. The signs that these might bring a change of government are getting stronger. The German government should start its strategic planning for a possible post-Erdoğan era.

Ioannis N. Grigoriadis, ELIAMEP, Athens

The end of the Merkel era in German politics indeed heralds a new era in German-Turkish and EU-Turkish relations. Chancellor Merkel had developed a personal communication channel with President Erdoğan which proved crucial as institutional relations between the European Union and Germany on the one hand and Turkey on the other hand declined.

Merkel's pragmatic approach was appreciated by some as true statesmanship but was reproached by others as cynical defence of German economic interests in Turkey at the expense of European values. The new German coalition government includes parties that objected to the sale of German arms to Turkey, the sidelining of human rights and the rule of law, and raised concerns about Turkey's unilateralist moves in the Middle East and the Eastern Mediterranean.

The appointment of Green Party co-leader Annalena Baerbock to the post of Foreign Minister can be interpreted as a symbolic move: it will likely lead to renewed efforts to inject norms and rules into an increasingly transactional relationship. This would also mean stronger interest in the state of democracy, human rights and the rule of law in Turkey. This is even more important as Turkey is likely to go through political and economic volatility in 2022.

Daniela Huber, Istituto Affari Internazionali, Rome

Despite the governmental change in Germany, it is likely that there will be more continuities than ruptures in Germany/EU-Turkey relations. In terms of security, Germany has established itself as an important anchor when it comes to the connected conflicts in Libya and the Eastern Mediterranean. Giving up this anchoring role would be a major fall-out in times of a US retrenchment.

In terms of migration, since the crisis of EU migration governance in 2015, the relationship between Germany, the European Union and Turkey has become defined to an important degree by the EU-Turkey statement on refugees. As the deal has also become the pillar of the EU's migration governance system, it is unlikely that the current German government will change it, considering also that the ministry of the interior will be held by the Social Democrats.

What might become more of a factor on the side of Germany will be critique through the foreign ministry – held by the Greens and Annalena Baerbock – on human rights and democratic freedoms. However, more of a rupture – or a new beginning – to EU-Turkey relations could possibly come from the impact which the economic crisis in Turkey might have on the presidential and parliamentary elections in 2023 or even earlier.

Çiğdem Nas, Economic Development Foundation, Istanbul

The ending of the Merkel era and the formation of a new coalition government signify a critical turning point both for the future of the EU and for EU-Turkey relations.

Firstly, the coalition government may be regarded more as a process of consensus-building among equals rather than one party significantly dominating the other. This could mean that Germany's approach towards the EU and Turkey will be predicated on a search for consensus and bargaining between Social Democrat, Green and Liberal priorities of the three parties.

In addition, issues such as human rights, environmental concerns and sound monetary policy are generally shared across the political spectrum and are expected to leave a strong imprint on the coalition's policies. Due to changes in the international power configurations, climate, environment and digital agendas have acquired geopolitical significance.

Regarding Turkey, the same uneasy relationship as during the Merkel era may continue in the absence of significant political change in Turkey, based on the dichotomy between the need for practical cooperation in such areas as trade, migration and security and adherence to normative priorities such as democracy and human rights. In any case, the ticking clock of the climate crisis accelerates the urgency of collaboration in order to achieve climate neutrality targets, take action to transform supply chains and take Turkey on board in the wider perspective of the Green Deal.

Marc Pierini, Carnegie Europe, Brussels

As the traffic-light coalition begins to govern Germany, the substance and tone of the German-Turkish relationship in the years ahead will be closely watched in Brussels. Reading the recently published coalition document, 'continuity with a different emphasis' seems to be the message.

Continuity has a simple reason: Turkey is important in the life of Germany – socially, economically and culturally – and will remain so. Similarly, migration from Syria has been an important concern for Berlin since 2015 and will also remain so. Both justify a close dialogue with Ankara.

However, a different emphasis might emerge on rule-of-law issues. The coalition has stressed the critical downgrading of rule of law in Turkey. As a result, no EU accession chapters will be opened or closed. Berlin will likely become more vocal about these issues, especially as it attaches great importance to the EU dimension of Germany's foreign policy.

Personalities will matter too, as will the composition and chairmanship of relevant committees in the Bundestag, or the coordination with EU institutions and with France on foreign policy.

Turkey's direction of travel will obviously influence Berlin's policies. Among the most critical issues in this respect are the implementation of the European Court of Human Rights judgments, the monetary crisis and its potentially dramatic fallout, relations with Russia, and military operations in Libya and Syria.

Günter Seufert, Centre for Applied Turkey Studies (CATS) at the German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP), Berlin

The agreement signed by the three-party coalition that runs the new German government promises a principled and values-based approach in a number of policy areas. In the domestic realm, it acknowledges the diversity of German society, underlines the need to fight racism, and pledges the introduction of dual citizenship. In matters of migration, it adheres to the Geneva Convention and the European Convention on Human Rights, and announces swift integration of refugees in education, occupation and the right of residence. In foreign policy, the document opts for the support of an alliance of democracies, the strengthening of super-national bodies like the EU and the Council of Europe.

How will such an approach resonate with Turkey, which insists on membership in the EU but is not willing to implement decisions of European Court of Human Rights? And how will the new German principledness fit into EU policies towards Turkey marked by conflictual cooperation? The new government has not yet spelled out how it will deal with pressing issues in EU-Turkey's relations like the deepening of the Customs Union, visa-free travel and the future of refugee cooperation. It will have to bridge values and interests and to decide whether it is ready to shape EU policy towards Turkey as its predecessor was able to do.

Ilke Toygür, Centre for Applied Turkey Studies (CATS) at the German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP), Berlin

The post-Merkel era will surely be a new one when it comes to relations between the EU, Germany and Turkey. First and foremost, the personal link between Chancellor Merkel and President Erdoğan no longer exists. This may hopefully serve institutionalisation of relations while involving other European actors and leading to more transparency.

Secondly, new individuals from the traffic-light coalition will be representing Germany in EU institutions. A Social Democrat Chancellor will join his colleagues in the European Council. As this is the institution that has been shaping relations with Turkey lately, it will be important how Olaf Scholz acts there. The same could be said for the Foreign Affairs Council where Annalena Baerbock will speak for Germany. My expectation is that they will both tone up democracy, rule of law and basic rights.

Thirdly, in addition to shaping green and digital transition, Europeans will be soul-searching over security and defence in 2022. The EU's Strategic Compass and NATO's Strategic Concept will both be on the table. With a fast-changing global context, both the EU's role in its neighbourhood and the division of labour with the United States will be discussed.

Turkey and the EU have the task of finding a well-functioning framework for their relations. Turkish foreign policy and its stance towards Western institutions will be an important component in this.

Alper Üçok & Ayse Yürekli, TUSIAD, Berlin

The coalition protocol entails both elements of change and continuity. An essential change is regarding the Foreign Office with Annalena Baerbock. The Greens will be the most decisive actor in future bilateral relations. Aside from the Foreign Ministry, very critical posts such as Economy & Climate, Environment & Agriculture Ministries are handed over to Greens. Although the major foreign policy positions towards Turkey could be expected to remain unchanged, the coalition protocol includes buzzwords hinting at the new period of bilateral relations.

In terms of foreign trade, investment and tourism, we anticipate a continuation of good business relations. Most remarkably, the coalition protocol points to digital and green transition as an overarching topic cross-cutting all policy areas domestically, as well as in Germany's relations with third countries. Hence, it will not be wrong to envisage an even stronger cooperation along these issue areas, where Turkey is also interested to collaborate with Germany and align its policies with Europe.

The coalition protocol also announces ground-breaking plans related to the naturalisation laws in Germany and promises renewed hope for about 3 million people of Turkish descent. A dual citizenship option appears on the horizon, as the rules and regulations of naturalisation would be modernised responding to today's realities. German society and politics may evolve to become more diverse and inclusive.

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