

Germany: Turkish prime minister incurs wrath of politicians and the media

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Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan's recent visit to Germany was met by a political campaign of intolerance and open xenophobia.

Erdogan made the inaugural address to last week's Munich security conference, where he underlined the strategic importance of Turkey for Europe and the Middle East, and canvassed Turkey's European Union membership. He also visited Ludwigshafen, where a fire had killed nine Turkish immigrants, visited Chancellor Angela Merkel in Berlin, and spoke to a meeting of 20,000 Turkish immigrants in Cologne.

Erdogan is a conservative bourgeois politician with Islamic roots, whose political opinions we reject. However, in the normal course of events, a visit to Germany is nothing exceptional for the representative of a country with a large exile population—approximately 2.5 million people of Turkish descent live in Germany, of whom about three quarters possess a Turkish passport (Germany refuses to grant dual citizenship to them). So it is customary for the head of the Turkish government to visit his fellow countrymen and take an interest in their concerns.

In this regard, the German government goes much further than Erdogan—still considering itself the representative of the interests of those whose German ancestors emigrated to Russia and Romania in the eighteenth century. Hardly a German head of state or government visits Russia without meeting a delegation of Russian-Germans. To this day, their descendants are still regarded as Germans, who can claim a German passport and return to Germany at any time.

But for those of Turkish origin in Germany, another yardstick applies. The visit by the Turkish government leader unleashed a storm of outrage from both Christian Democratic and Social Democratic politicians unmatched in terms of hypocrisy and narrow-minded nationalism.

The leader of Bavaria's Christian Social Union (CSU), Erwin Huber, accused Erdogan of "preaching Turkish nationalism on German soil" and demanded negotiations about Turkey's accession to the EU be cancelled. Bavarian Prime Minister Günther Beckstein (CSU) spoke of "nationalist and unpleasant tones," claiming that the Turkish government supported tendencies towards ghetto-isation. "This is something we must talk about very openly and seriously with the Turkish government," he said.

Wolfgang Bosbach (Christian Democratic Union, CDU), the vice chair of the joint CDU/CSU parliamentary faction, accused Erdogan of interfering in German domestic policy. "German politics are responsible for ensuring peaceful coexistence in Germany. The Turkish government should not try to make domestic policy inside Germany," he told the press. Chancellor Angela Merkel (CDU) was somewhat more restrained, saying that Erdogan had a wrong conception of integration. "That's why I think we have not yet reached the end of the discussion," she said.

Erdogan had suggested setting up Turkish elementary schools and high schools in Germany, as well as sending Turkish teachers to the country. In his Cologne speech, he drew a sharp line between integration and assimilation. He called on his Turkish compatriots to learn German and to integrate themselves into German society but warned against assimilation.

The latter, according to Erdogan, is literally a "crime against humanity."

With these words he has touched on a sore point in German politics. His formulation might have been exaggerated, but nobody who has followed the political debate of the past years concerning the rights of foreigners living in Germany could misunderstand what was meant.

The demand for complete assimilation—i.e., for the abandonment of one's own culture, language and nationality—runs like a thread through this debate. This is what was behind the horrifying demand for a "defining German culture," which the CSU adopted as part of its party programme; the campaign against granting Turkish immigrants dual citizenship used by Roland Roland Koch (CDU) to win the Hesse state election nine years ago; the burdensome naturalisation tests that some of Germany's *Länder* (states) make a condition for gaining German nationality; and an Immigration Act that only permits family members to join their relatives if they can show sufficient knowledge of the German language.

Use of the term "assimilation" can be traced back to the former SPD Interior Minister Otto Schily, who six years ago, at the high point of the debate about a defining German culture, announced that assimilation was the best form of integration. By assimilation, Schily meant a certain conformance and adaptation "to local conditions."

Since then, politicians have learned to avoid this provocative term, but in substance, nothing has changed. In response to Erdogan's public appearances, Chancellor Merkel stressed again that integration means to become familiarised with the way of life of a country and accept its habits.

To say the least, that is a highly one-sided and undemocratic view of integration. Integration in the sense of an amicable coexistence presupposes equal rights above all. Forcing one side to give up their language and culture and subordinate themselves to a "defining culture" makes integration impossible. It is not cultural diversity that leads to the formation of ghettos but cultural and economic discrimination. Turkish immigrants, who have poor educational opportunities, who work in poorly paid jobs and are the first to be sacked are particularly affected by this.

The reproach made again and again—that immigrants are responsible for their own situation because they refuse to learn the German language—is a downright lie and muddles cause and effect. Although Turkish immigration to Germany first began in the 1960s and 1970s, even today there are still too few appropriate language courses. Where they are offered, there is an active demand. According to data from the interior ministry, in the past three years approximately 350,000 of some 500,000 legal immigrants attended integration courses, which include German language instruction.

In schools and kindergartens, there is a shortfall in the number of qualified teachers necessary to support children from immigrant families, who then have poor opportunities within the selective German education system. It is just as difficult for German pupils to learn Turkish, which in view of the high number of Turkish immigrants would be quite sensible and promote integration. So far, only a few schools offer Turkish as a foreign language.

Under these conditions, Erdogan's suggestion to send Turkish teachers to Germany makes some sense. The accusation that to conduct lessons in Turkish would hinder integration is absurd. Most educators believe that mastering the language spoken at home in both oral and written form is an advantage when learning another language. Many young people from Turkish families face the problem that they speak neither the one nor the other language adequately, and talk a form of slang that adversely affects their educational and career opportunities.

In this question as well, German politicians apply a dual standard. While they have reacted with cries of indignation to Erdogan's suggestions, the government operates numerous German-language schools abroad. At present, there are 117 such institutions, including one in Istanbul, where another German-Turkish school also offers pupils the opportunity to take their *Abitur* (high school diploma, required to enter a German university). On behalf of the German government, some 1,700 German teachers work abroad, and half of the foreign ministry's cultural budget is spent promoting the German language. Conversely, there are English and French high schools in Germany that are also attended by German children. At some universities, it has become generally accepted that in the age of globalisation, English functions as a second language of instruction.

But when it comes to Turkish, different rules apply. The arrogant presumptions behind this attitude are unmistakable and are not limited to those from the right wing of the Christian Democrats. Prominent SPD politicians, including party chairman Kurt Beck and numerous media figures, have supported the campaign against Erdogan.

This was kicked off by Anne Will on her talk show. The programme, which for years invited prominent guests from the worlds of politics and journalism, has reached a new media low point—at times giving vent to pure agitation.

The recent programme carried the title, "Mourning, accusations, distrust—Ludwigshafen between hysteria and the truth." The topic under discussion was the reaction to the fire tragedy that had cost the lives of nine Turkish citizens on February 2.

The first report came from an eyewitness, emergency medic Albrecht Reineke, who confirmed that the firefighters had arrived at the scene very quickly and had done their best to save those trapped by the fire. He said the suspicions and criticisms raised against them were therefore completely unfounded.

The guests on the programme did not bother to analyse the causes of the heated emotions that had given rise to such suspicions. What was clear was that the firefighters had become the objects of criticism in place of those politicians who for years had encouraged anti-foreigner sentiments. Above all, the notion that the fire in Ludwigshafen must have involved arson was nourished by the recent Hesse state election campaign conducted by Roland Koch (CDU), who functioned as an intellectual incendiary, agitating unrestrainedly against "criminal foreigners."

Instead of approaching the event within this context, Anne Will expressed her indignation about a "burgeoning hostility to Germans" on the part of the Turks. With the inclusion of journalist Henryk M. Broder and Interior Minister Wolfgang Schäuble as guests, the programme gave voice to two individuals who rank high among these intellectual incendiaries, and they were allowed to speak largely unchallenged.

Broder has made something of a reputation as a political provocateur through his cynical and unrestrained tirades against Islam. He imagines the world is threatened by a "wave of suicidal Islamic fundamentalism" and accuses Europe of the politics of appeasement in relation to Islamism. He has supported both the Iraq war and the war threats of the Bush administration against Iran. He regularly accuses critics of Israeli policy of anti-Semitism, above all if they stand on the left. His disparaging and insulting attacks on political opponents have resulted in several court cases.

It was to this person that Anne Will offered a platform from which to fulminate about the alleged "hostility to Germans" on the part of Turkish immigrants. And Broder fulfilled the expectations that had been set for him, stating, "For the first time in the history of migration, we are confronted by a phenomenon that has not existed before—i.e., that a section of migrants despise the society into which they have come." This was the "cause for the readiness to despise the firefighters who had saved lives, afterwards being spat upon." He called Erdogan's public appearance in Cologne "shabby" and "tasteless."

Interior Minister Schäuble expressed his indignation with "irresponsible" Turkish newspapers that had encouraged the wrong emotions, but which otherwise seemed conciliatory. He evaded the reference by Hesse Green Party leader Tarek Al-Wazir to the election campaign of Schäuble's party colleague Koch, and instead blustered on about how the disaster would again bring people together. Al-Wazir did not pursue the matter.

As interior minister, Schäuble bears the main responsibility for sealing off the borders, which has made immigration all but impossible. As a prominent CDU politician, his utterances are constantly littered with anti-foreigner phrases.

For example, two years ago in a press interview, he demanded that immigrants who did not accept German living conditions should leave the country, and rejected any state responsibility for unemployed young Turkish immigrants. He has expressly supported the restrictive immigration tests imposed in Hesse. And his constant demand that immigrants should learn German did not prevent him from cutting the budget for integration and language courses for foreigners and immigrants by €69 million two years ago, transferring the funds into the budget of the federal police.

The arrogant presumptions that sections of the ruling elite display towards Turkish immigrants recall the darkest periods of German history. They reveal a frightening lack of elementary democratic principles. Their cause, however, lies less in the past than in the present.

Official politics over the past years, and in particular the effects of the Agenda 2010 welfare "reforms," have led to a dramatic social polarisation. Broad sections of the population endure low wages or social security benefits that are hardly enough to sustain life, while a thin upper layer lives in the lap of luxury. Immigrants are particularly harshly affected by poverty and unemployment. The present witch-hunt against foreigners seeks to isolate them and make them the scapegoats before the emergence of a broader social movement that unites German and immigrant workers.



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