

Anti-Turkey Sentiment in Europe during the Referendum Process

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ABSTRACT *In each era, relations with Europe have constituted one of the most significant areas of Turkish foreign policy. The commentary addresses the interventions into Turkish politics, and the manipulations of different factions in Europe during the process of constitutional referendum held in Turkey on April 16, 2017. The commentary presents the lack of respect for reciprocal sovereignty by examining the policies of ultra left, ultra right and center politicians relating to Turkey during the referendum process.*

Introduction

Recently, the relationships between Turkey and the European Union (EU), and Turkey and some of the European countries have been affected by a number of serious problems. Some developments before and immediately after the April 16, 2017 referendum in Turkey amplified these problems even more. While some European countries' attitudes, which implied direct interference in Turkish internal affairs, caused major dismay in Ankara, Turkey's harsh reactions extended the adversity in Europe against the AK Party and Erdoğan. Some circles in Europe that oppose the constitu-

tional change in Turkey took a stance to prevent this change from taking place, and interfered with the ruling party politicians' propaganda activities for Turkish constituents living in European countries such as Germany and the Netherlands.

In terms of the general principles of international law and intergovernmental relationships, this level of interference in the internal affairs of an independent country, along with explicit objection to the reforms that the independent country aims to realize in its administration, and hindering access to constituents living abroad point to a clear violation. In this case, it is necessary to grasp why some

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countries of the European Union take this interventionist stance and seek to prevent Turkish politicians from meeting the voters who live abroad for “Yes” campaigns, while openly supporting the “No” campaign themselves. The reasons why Turkey reacted critically to the EU, and the serious damage to the Ankara-Brussels relationships in the aftermath of this reaction are closely related to the negative stance taken by some European circles during the referendum.

This commentary examines Europe’s conduct during the referendum and addresses the differences of opinion among the relevant actors and their interactions. In this framework, the commentary refers to the discourse and activities of leading politicians in European countries and the EU. It is apparent that all the actors mentioned in the article take it for granted that they can interfere with Turkish politics, and that they tend to approach the issue of Turkey as one of the fundamental concerns of European politics. Therefore, presenting how the interventionist policies of these European actors toward Turkey

are regarded in Ankara will be productive in an accurate analysis of the progress of these policies and their effects on Turkey-EU relations.

Turkey’s Reactions against EU Intrusiveness

There are three problems that soured Turkey’s relations with Europe. As expressed by the Former European Commissioner for Enlargement, Günter Verheugen, the first of these problems is related to the fact that the discourse and policies of the center-right parties, led by Merkel and Sarkozy in Germany and France respectively after the second half of the 2000s, that centered on opposing Turkey’s EU membership, eroded the prior enthusiasm for EU membership felt by Ankara.¹ Intrusions from Brussels are now regarded as a superfluous burden in Turkey, which lost its membership motivation due to the oppositional positions of Germany and France, the two leader countries of the EU. Put another way, the right given to the EU in the framework of the Copenhagen Criteria to decide when a candidate country has met the required reform processes has become increasingly problematic in Turkey, where membership enthusiasm has been eroded. The AK Party administration, which had succeeded in the realization of highly important reforms on the way to EU membership between 2002 and 2005 with the encouragement of the Schröder government in Germany, and had responded positively to the criticisms and suggestions of EU during that



period, started to take a dim view of these criticisms during the Merkel administration which categorically objected to Turkey's EU membership.

Another reason why Turkey felt increasingly negative toward the criticisms and suggestions of the EU is related to the biases in the policies of European countries in terms of promoting democracy. The policies followed by the EU, which continuously purport to indoctrinate Ankara in developing democracy, have created serious questions in Ankara as to whether Brussels and other European capitals really want democracy for Turkey, especially after the July 15, 2016 coup attempt and the April 16, 2017 referendum. The fact that most of European countries, which already had a bad track record concerning their non-democratic attitudes during the coups in Algeria

1992, Turkey in 1997, and Egypt in 2013, stayed silent about the military coup attempt on July 15, 2016 undertaken by military officers affiliated with FETÖ, and even made statements which created the impression that they desired the putschists to be successful, has ruled out the existence of any moral legitimacy behind the suggestions and criticisms made by the EU regarding Turkey. The criticisms made by European leaders regarding the post-coup judiciary and governmental investigations held in Turkey were not found to be in good faith due to the delayed support they provided to Ankara against the coup.

The third reason why the criticisms from Brussels and other European capitals were not perceived positively is related to serious differences of opinion regarding the terror issue, and the dismay Turkey feels about the

There were long queues at all of the thirteen polling stations in Germany, set up for the Turkish citizens who wanted to vote for the April 16 referendum.

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impassive attitudes of the EU towards its struggles against terrorism. Turkey has been subjected to intense attacks of terrorist organizations such as the PKK, FETÖ and ISIS over the last two years and has lost many citizens during these attacks; as such, it expects cooperation and support from the European countries, many of which are NATO allies. The fact that the EU, which has been unwilling to support Turkey's fight against terrorism, laid down the condition that Turkey makes changes to its counter-terrorism legislation in return for the stipulated visa exemption accepted in an agreement in March generated major discomfort in Ankara. In the meantime, Turkey, striving to fend off the coup attempt by FETÖ on one hand and extensive attacks from the PKK and ISIS on the other, regarded these demands from Brussels as malevolent. Ankara has always complained about the fact that although the PKK is defined as a terrorist organization by the EU, the organization is able to find grounds for independent activity in Europe and it is even able to engage in politics in the European Parliament and in the parliaments of member countries under the umbrella of marginal left parties. The fact that European countries that have not taken Turkey's complaints and demands about the PKK into consideration are also not willing to provide the expected support in regards to FETÖ, another terrorist organization which is at least as dangerous as the PKK in terms of Turkish security, has increased the disquiet in Ankara. The criticisms among European circles about the state of emergency declared

in Turkey following the coup attempt are regarded as a form of interference intended to weaken Turkey's fight against FETÖ, PKK and ISIS terror. Reproaches against Turkey in this matter are not regarded to be in good faith since France, which is facing a much smaller terror threat in scope in comparison to Turkey, has declared a state of emergency for a longer period.

Briefly, the EU has lost its "right of influence" over Turkey by withholding the support expected by Turkey, which is under a heavy terrorist threat, by refusing to cooperate with Ankara in the face of the harshest attack against democracy in Turkey as experienced in the July 15 coup attempt, and holding out on Turkey's EU membership. While the support of the Turkish public for the EU has decreased to a mere 20 percent as a result of Brussels' policies, criticisms among EU circles regarding democracy and human rights issues in Turkey are now considered as "interfering with the internal affairs of a country whose membership wants to be put on hold forever" instead of "remarks and suggestions for a candidate country."

Referendum Policies of European Politicians

This section analyzes the attitudes of European politicians regarding the referendum held in Turkey for constitutional change, through their discourse and the statements made by them to influence domestic and foreign public opinion. In this framework, the European politicians are

categorized as ultra left, ultra right, and centrist, and the article concentrates on the politicians with these tendencies in Germany, the Netherlands and Austria because these countries were most local in discussions during the referendum. First, politicians with affiliations with ultra left parties will be addressed, since they were the individuals that took the most interest in issues in Turkey both prior to and during the referendum, and affected Europe's policies toward Turkey the most.

Ultra left

The leading political movement with anti-Turkish sentiments in Germany is *Die Linke* (leftist party), whose member Gabi Zimmer is the leader of the ultra left fraction GUE/NGL (European United Left - Nordic Green Left) of the European Parliament. *Die Linke* leaders and congress members who started an attrition campaign against the government in Turkey in general, and President Erdoğan in particular, long before the referendum, explicitly organized a “No” campaign during the referendum as well. When it comes to Turkey, it is seen that *Die Linke* is no different than the HDP, which is the political extension of the PKK in Turkey. In this sense, *Die Linke* acts as an opposition party to the AK Party rule. The attitudes and statements of *Die Linke* party leaders and some congress members during the referendum process established this antagonist discourse clearly.

Die Linke co-chairperson Katja Kipping acted as an opposition party leader on March 27, the date when

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the voting for the referendum started in Germany, by sharing in her twitter message, she summons that “No to Erdoğan means yes to democracy and EU membership,” with “HDP” and “No” hash tags.² Kipping acted in the same direction as the HDP, opposing all Erdoğan and the AK Party policies, and protesting Turkey's Syrian policy, arms sales to Turkey from Germany, deployment of German soldiers in Incirlik, and operations held in Turkey after the coup attempt, just as she opposed the constitutional reform.³ Not content with these actions, Kipping demanded that the propaganda practices of governing Turkish politicians in Germany be banned during the referendum process and made a radical call to the German public to engage in a tourism boycott against Turkey. Kipping, expressing hostility towards Erdoğan and going so far as to say that, “Turkey is a beautiful country but it will be better without Erdoğan,” argued that this boycott would send a strong message to Erdoğan about democracy and human rights.⁴

The other co-chair of *Die Linke*, Bernd Riexinger, also opposed Turk-

The referendum in Turkey proved to be a golden opportunity for Wilders, who strived to get votes for the March 15 elections in the Netherlands with his discourse against Muslims, immigrants, and foreigners

ish ruling party politician's right to give speeches in Germany about the constitutional referendum that would be held in Turkey. Riexinger argued that the German government should not be silent about the "Turkish government's campaign in Germany to create a dictatorship," and summoned the German Prime Minister and the Minister of Foreign Affairs to "take a stance against Erdoğan's constitutional reform."⁵ These politicians, who talked about democracy, openly opposed Turkish ruling party's meeting with its voters in Germany in the framework of the referendum, and did not refrain from interfering with the changes in the Turkish administrative system by working to influence public approval.

Gabi Zimmer, the leader of the ultra left fraction the GUE/NGL in the European Parliament, was also on the same page with the party of his membership, *Die Linke*. Zimmer, who harshly criticized Erdoğan in a press release on April 16, the date of the referendum, argued that the referendum was held under AK Party ma-

nipulations and that Erdoğan was using democracy to change the constitution for his own interests.⁶ It should be noted that Gabi Zimmer, featured for his hostility against Erdoğan, was included among the organizers of the 13th Kurdish Conference held on December 7-8, 2016 in the European Parliament, and gave a speech during the opening panel of the conference in which Zübeyir Aydar, a senior figure in the PKK and Salih Müslim, the leader of the Democratic Union Party (PYD), the Syrian branch of the PKK, were also speakers.⁷

Just like Gabi Zimmer, who did not abstain from inviting to the conference the terrorists Aydar and Müslim, who were charged for the terror attack that killed 29 on February 17, 2016, in Ankara and expected to be sentenced to life imprisonment, the other *Die Linke* congress members in the European Parliament, *Bundestag*, and state parliaments openly support Kurdish separatism; the fact that this separatism takes the form of terrorism does not deter them from this support.

These individuals classify the AK Party government and Erdoğan as the enemy, deem them as an obstacle to Kurdish independence, which is sought by the PKK/PYD using all possible methods, and lead an attrition campaign in Germany and other European countries through defamation and insults such as "dictator," "despot," "bandit," and "terrorist" directed especially towards Erdoğan. With the influence of pro-PKK Turkish nationals who are highly active

in the party, at times, *Die Linke* may be observed to be more interested in Turkish internal affairs than in German politics. It should be remarked that *Die Linke*, which acts like a Turkish opposition party, has had a rather negative impact on Germany and the EU's Turkey policy and that this impact has extended during the constitutional referendum period.

This attitude of the ultra left in Europe and especially in Germany damages the Kurds who are encouraged to revolt, Turkey, and Turkey-EU relations. Although they state that they have an ideology that opposes war and conflicts, the fact that the left follows a policy that encourages PKK terror and rebellion creates one of the biggest obstacles to finding peaceful solutions to the PKK issue.

Ultra Right

The individual who was most featured among the ultra right politicians in Europe during the referendum process in Turkey, and therefore the individual who most affected Turkey-Europe relations, was the xenophobic and anti-Islamist leader of *Partij voor de Vrijheid* (PVV) in the Netherlands, Geert Wilders. The referendum in Turkey proved to be a golden opportunity for Wilders, who strived to get votes for the March 15 elections in the Netherlands with his discourse against Muslims, immigrants, and foreigners. When the Dutch Government barred the plane carrying Turkish Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu from landing, and when the Minister of Family and Social Policies Fatma Betül Sayan Kaya was deported after

being barred from entering the Consulate in Rotterdam, Wilders declared these events as his own success. Moreover, he tried to increase tensions and gain more votes by making a statement to the effect that "he would call the whole cabinet of Turkey *persona non grata*."⁸ However, the fact that Wilders presented these scandalous decisions of the Dutch government as his own success is not a claim that should be lightly ignored. Just a short while before these decisions were made by the Dutch Government, Wilders, who had been campaigning against Turkey and Islam for a long time, opposed Turkish Minister of Foreign Affairs Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu's visit to the Netherlands within the framework of the referendum with a demonstration staged in front of the Turkish Embassy in Den Haag with a banner that read "Stay Away! This is our country!" and created pressure on the government.⁹ When taken into consideration along with the built-in anti-Turkey perceptions of the public, this populist demonstration was a step that would win more votes, according to polls before elections; in the face of these pressures, the Dutch government made and implemented decisions that would create a rift with Turkey.

The Netherlands has a population of 17 million, out of which an approximately one million is composed of Muslims. Although Geert Wilders, who threatened Muslims, talked about banning Islam, expelling Muslims and closing down the mosques and went so far as to liken the Holy Quran to Hitler's book *Mein Kampf*

and the mosques to “Nazi Temples” did all he could to make the referendum process in Turkey an instrument for his populist policy, his party was not the first party in March, 15 elections. Wilders, who attacked Muslims and Turkey at every opportunity during the Dutch elections, asked the Turks living in the Netherlands who supported Erdoğan to leave the country.¹⁰ Wilders continued in this manner after the elections and did everything he could to ensure that the constitutional change being considered in Turkey was not accepted. Following the referendum results that portrayed the “Yes” front as the winner, he shared a tweet with a photo that depicted Erdoğan as a terrorist: “Turkey chose for more islamofascism and totalitarianism today.”¹¹

The referendum in Turkey was also brought up by the ultra right in France, another European country that was in the midst of an atmosphere of election. Marine Le Pen, the leader of Front National, who opposed the French Government’s decision to allow Turkish politicians to engage in electoral campaigns for their citizens living in France, opposed Turkey’s election campaigns in France with a tweet shared on March 12, the date when tensions between the Netherlands and Turkey were heightened, and tried to legitimize her opposition with the question “Why should we tolerate on our soil words that other democracies refuse?”¹² Le Pen, who stated that she was opposed to the EU as well as Turkey’s EU membership,¹³ has heavily criticized German Prime Minister Angela Merkel, whom she regards as

the architect of the refuge agreement signed between Turkey and the EU in March 2016. In a statement made two days before the first round of presidential elections held in France, Le Pen stated that Merkel, whom she accused of “letting Turkey blackmail Europe,” made a weighty political mistake by signing this agreement.¹⁴

In Germany, the leading country in terms of opposing Turkey’s electoral campaigns planned abroad in the framework of the referendum, the leader of the ultra right party AfD (*Alternative für Deutschland*), Frauke Petry also wanted to use the issue of Turkey as an instrument of pressure, just like the other ultra right parties. Petry shared his anti-Turkish ideas in articles published on the social media network Facebook titled, “Is Turkey on the Way to Dictatorship? Our Government Is Silent,”¹⁵ “Turkey Cannot Be a Member of the EU,”¹⁶ and “Merkel’s Attitude towards the Turkey Issue Is an Indicator of Her Weakness,”¹⁷ both managing to oppose the German leading party on the topic of its Turkey policies and trying to influence Berlin to adopt more rigid Ankara policies.

Petry, who opposed Turkish politicians’ engagement in referendum work in Germany, made statements during the crisis declaring that he did not condone Turkey’s EU membership, the refuge agreement signed between Turkey and the EU, or the visa exemption agreement which stipulates that Turkish citizens can travel to Europe without obtaining visas.¹⁸ He claimed that the German gov-

ernment was following an overly soft policy towards Turkey due to the fear of Erdoğan supporters in Germany. Petry asserted that this soft policy was perceived by Turkey as weakness and in terms of Erdoğan's accusations against Germany, he defended the idea that Germany should suspend democratic relations by sending a diplomatic note to the Turkish Ambassador in Germany. Petry also stated that Germany should start following an independent policy against Turkey and demanded that German soldiers withdraw the Incirlik base.¹⁹

AfD Deputy Chair Beatrix von Storch was even harsher than Petry in regard to Turkey and Turks living in Germany. Von Storch argued that Turkish ministers' holding electoral meetings in Germany for the referendum was a threat to German internal security; she demanded that these meetings be banned immediately. Von Storch also declared that President Erdoğan, whom she insulted by calling "despot of the Bosphorus," had taken the Merkel government captive with the refugee agreement. She called for the annulment of this agreement, the discontinuation of Turkey's EU membership negotiations and the termination of EU aid to Turkey.²⁰ After the referendum results were announced and it was evident that the majority of Turkish citizens residing in Germany had voted "Yes," von Storch, who had trouble tolerating this result shared the following statement on Facebook: "To all Turks with German passports who voted for Islamic dictatorship: Please return to Turkey. It is clear that you are against our values of democ-

The developments in Europe during the Turkish referendum process has shown that the parties that represent the center right and left were not able to generate effective solutions against the shifting of their bases to ultra right and left discourses via their own values, and they drifted into these anti-foreigner, anti-immigration and anti-Islam discourses themselves

racy and freedom. You seek Islamist dictatorship..."²¹

As these examples demonstrate, the issue of Turkey is being used as an effective instrument of pressure in Europe by the ultra right as well as the ultra left against the center parties. Anti-Islam sentiments and xenophobia disseminated among the Europeans by generating fear and resentment around the issues of refugees and terrorism make it easier for these circles to access the voters, and make it difficult for the parties that represent the center to respond to these populist positions. The developments in Europe during the Turkish referendum process has shown that the parties that represent the center right and left were not able to generate effective solutions against the shifting of their bases to ultra right and left discourses



A collage of some of the inflammatory tweets posted by a number of European leaders prior to and after the April 16 referendum.

via their own values, and they drifted into these anti-foreigner, anti-immigration and anti-Islam discourses themselves. This shift in the EU's Turkey politics has been reflected in the relations between Turkey and the EU, which came to a breaking point, and on Turkey's relationships with countries such as Germany, the Netherlands, and Austria, which regressed to the worst level in the last half century.

Center Politicians

As a result of the defamation campaign against Turkey carried out by the European politicians and the media with ultra left and ultra right ideologies, a serious anti-Turkey sentiment was generated in a substantial

number of Europeans. It may be observed that politicians who represent center right and left and liberal ideology have been driven to very harsh policies on issues regarding Turkey, especially during times of election, as a result of pressure from the ultra camps. The center politicians who felt this pressure the most were mainly located in Austria and the Netherlands, where the ultra right and left are the most powerful.

While the *Sozialdemokratische Partei Österreichs* (SPÖ) and the *Österreichische Volkspartei* (ÖVP), representative of center politics in Austria, were eliminated with their approximate votes of 11 percent each during

the first round of the presidential elections held at the end of 2016, Norbert Hofer, the candidate of the ultra right *Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs* (FPÖ) and Alexander Van der Bellen, the candidate of the Green Party, competed in the second round. The results of the election, which ultra right candidate Hofer lost by only a slight margin, with 49.7 percent, clearly indicate the crisis that center parties in Austria faced. It was observed that realizing that anti-Turkey discourse was reciprocated by the public, the SPÖ and ÖVP toughened their policies on Turkey and tried to keep their constituents instead of objecting to the anti-Turkey sentiments of the FPÖ. In this context, Minister of Foreign Affairs Sebastian Kurz (ÖVP) and Prime Minister Christian Kern (SPÖ) were among the European leaders that brought up the issue of Turkey the most, expressing negative opinions about the referendum planned to be held in Turkey and demanding that Turkey-EU relations be suspended. Kurz demonstrated his dissatisfaction with the referendum results in Turkey with his call to “terminate membership negotiations with Turkey” on April 17. Kurz, who expressed that it was now too late to employ tactics with Turkey, stated that Turkey cannot be a member candidate to the EU anymore, and he added that he hoped the sects that had defended Turkey’s EU membership would change their minds now.²²

Kurz was among the first politicians in Europe to oppose Turkish politicians’ electoral campaigns targeting their constituents in Europe. When

he was asked his opinion in February about president Erdoğan’s meeting with Turkish constituents in Austria, he expressed that Erdoğan could come to Austria for bilateral meetings but that they would not desire Erdoğan to come to Austria for electoral campaigns. He stated his rationale that concern that the latter type of visit could polarize Turks residing in Austria and hinder their integration.²³ However, he was not able to explain how prohibiting Turkish politicians from meeting their constituents in Turkey complied with democracy while he criticized Turkey in terms of undemocratic practices. The statement from Turkey’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs criticized Kurz’ attitude as “racist” and “islamophobic,” and accused Kurz of using Turkey for his internal policy interests.²⁴

In a statement made on March 16, 2017, Kurz argued that Turkey’s EU membership was unthinkable and repeated his opinion that membership negotiations with Ankara should be terminated. Kurz, who suggested signing a new “neighborhood agreement” with Turkey instead of insisting on the membership issue, stated that a modernized customs union could establish the foundation of this neighborhood agreement. Additionally, he reported that close cooperation was possible with Turkey in foreign policy and security areas, in the scope of law and police organizations and especially in the fight against terrorism.²⁵ When one recalls that one of the main reasons for the problems between Turkey and Europe is the lack of cooperation from

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Austria and many other European countries in regard to the PKK and FETÖ terror organizations, what the Austrian Minister of Foreign Affairs means when he suggests cooperation against terror is hard to comprehend. Kurz repeated his demands to terminate the membership negotiations with Turkey in his press releases or in media interviews on March 20, April 7, April 25 and April 28.²⁶ Kurz followed a persistent policy regarding the termination of membership negotiations with Turkey even in the EU Summit held in December 2016; although this attitude was not accepted by the other EU countries at that time, Austria did block a common EU statement about Turkey.²⁷

The issue of Turkey's EU membership was questioned by the SPÖ in Austria, where ultra right parties applied immense pressure on center parties. Austrian Prime Minister Christian Kern made a radical statement at a time when Ankara's security measures after the July 15 coup attempt were being criticized in Europe; he expressed that Turkey's EU member-

ship was not a realistic goal and that he would demand in the EU Summit in September that membership negotiations with Turkey be terminated. Kern, who stated that the EU should develop an alternative route with Turkey other than membership emphasized that cooperation in security should continue with Ankara.²⁸ When the referendum in Turkey about the constitutional change came up, Kern openly opposed this constitutional change by claiming that a "Presidential system in Turkey would damage the rule of law even more." In this context, Kern suggested that taking a decision in the framework of the EU to ban Turkish politicians from undertaking electoral campaigns in Europe, and defended this position by saying that countries like Germany could overcome the pressures from Turkey only in this manner. In addition, the Austrian Prime Minister demanded that membership negotiations with Turkey not be suspended but completely terminated and that pre-accession aids be stopped.²⁹

While center politicians in Austria openly opposed Turkey's EU membership, in Germany both Prime Minister Angela Merkel and Minister of Foreign Affairs Sigmar Gabriel made efforts to keep Turkey-EU relations at a certain level. Merkel, who had maintained a negative opinion about Turkey's EU membership since the day she was elected and had suggested a different type of relationship with Turkey called a "privileged partnership" rather than membership, abstained from making a statement to the effect that membership negotiations should be ter-

minated with Turkey even during a period when relations reached a point of crisis due to the referendum arguments. The German Prime Minister suggested *de facto* suspension of Turkey's EU membership process by not opening new chapters of negotiation. However, while Merkel herself was that careful about Turkey's EU membership, leading figures in her party, the *Christlich Demokratische Union* (CDU), made open protests. About two weeks before the constitutional referendum in Turkey, in a statement to *Spiegel*, CDU General Secretary Peter Tauber expressed that "CDU policy is clear about Turkey's not having EU membership."³⁰ After referendum results showed prominently "Yes" votes, CDU congressman and *Bundestag* Foreign Relations Commission Director Norbert Röttgen demanded that membership negotiations between EU and Turkey be terminated and pre-accession aids be stopped.³¹ CDU Vice President Julia Klöckner expressed the same demands in a newspaper article right after the referendum results with the words, "the door to Turkey's EU membership is now definitely closed," and demanded that EU aids to Turkey be terminated, just as Röttgen had.³²

The CDU's smaller partner under Christian Unity Parties, the *Christlich Soziale Union* (CSU) had always opposed Turkey's EU membership, and had demanded that membership negotiations with Turkey be terminated in 2016.³³ As a result of increased problems in the Turkey-Germany relationship after the July 15 coup attempt, the CSU openly reiterated these demands during the growing

crisis in the referendum process. In an interview with journalists on March 9, CSU General Secretary Andreas demanded that membership negotiations with Turkey be terminated and opposed Turkish politicians' organization of electoral campaigns in Germany. In the same interview, Scheuer's stooped to the level of the ultra right and ultra left politicians by insulting President Erdoğan as "the despot of the Bosphorus." These words are worthy of note, since they establish the ultra right potential of the CSU.³⁴ Similarly to the CSU's general outlook, Manfred Weber, CSU Vice President and also the President of the largest group in European Parliament, the European People's Party (EVP), also claimed that "Turkey's EU membership was not possible anymore" after the referendum in Turkey.³⁵

Merkel, who did not openly ban any activities related to the referendum campaigns, but allowed municipalities and states to make decisions that created prohibitions, and permitted top level politicians to make statements that considerably offended Turkey, can be regarded as the individual mainly responsible for the crisis between Ankara and Berlin. Merkel, who observed the statements against the constitutional change in Turkey made by the politicians in her own party in an atmosphere poisoned by the media and politicians that belonged to anti-Turkey lobbies in her country and the prohibitions that banned Turkish ministers from making electoral campaigns in Germany did not change her attitude when these manners were likened to "Nazi

Germany failed to cooperate with Turkey against FETÖ members in the ensuing period, refused to acknowledge FETÖ as a terror organization, and continued its policies that annoyed Ankara by stating that the relationship of this organization and the July 15 coup attempt was not proven

practices³⁶ by President Erdoğan and other Turkish politicians. Faced with these accusations, Merkel, who delegated heavy criticisms against Turkey to other politicians, threatened Turkey that permissions given for referendum campaigns could be revoked if these types of accusations continued.³⁷ However, since heavy criticisms towards the referendum in Turkey continued in Germany, similar accusations against Germany were also continued by Turkey.³⁸

Minister of Foreign Affairs Sigmar Gabriel, who was the leader of the center left party *Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands* (SPD) until a short while ago, can be said to have followed a more moderate route towards Turkey in general. Despite pressures from the ultra right, ultra left and his own party, Gabriel claimed that terminating membership negotiations with Turkey would be wrong, and that “pushing Turkey to Russia” would not be in the best interests of

Germany and Europe.³⁹ Gabriel, who uttered these words during the EU Informal Meeting of Foreign Affairs Ministers, held in Malta on April 28, objected to member countries led by Austria who sought to terminate negotiations with Turkey. Referring to Austrian Minister of Foreign Affairs Kurz who was really eager in this issue, he said that “the ones who expect applause in their homes by saying we are not negotiating with Turkey anymore will not be able to change anything in Turkey in the end.”⁴⁰ Gabriel also objected to the ministers who demanded that Turkey’s NATO membership be terminated by stating that such a practice was not followed even during the military coup period of the 1980s. However, taking pressure from anti-Turkey constituents in Germany into consideration, at the same meeting, Gabriel proposed streamlining the visa processes of Turkish citizens in opposition who had voted “No.”⁴¹

Although there were criticisms about the arrests made in Turkey during the post coup attempt state of emergency, about six weeks after the coup attempt, Sigmar Gabriel was the first one to admit to the mistakes in Germany’s Turkey policy: “Maybe we should have acted faster and visited Turkey. The same day or the next day after the coup attempt. We should have demonstrated our feelings more strongly. Not only Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and the administration around him, but also his opponents and Turks residing in Germany feel excluded by us.”⁴² Despite this statement by Gabriel, Germany failed to cooperate with Turkey against FETÖ members in the ensuing

period, refused to acknowledge FETÖ as a terrorist organization, and continued its policies that annoyed Ankara by stating that the relationship of this organization and the July 15 coup attempt was not proven.⁴³

Martin Schulz, another politician from the SPD, visited Turkey three days after Gabriel's statement as the President of the European Parliament. This trip is noteworthy as the first visit by a senior level official from Europe after the coup attempt, but it did not help alleviate the coldness between Turkey and Europe. In his official visits in Ankara, although Schulz emphasized cooperation with Turkey which was under extensive terror attacks, the fact that he demanded changes to Turkey's anti-terror legislation in order to realize the visa exemption for Turkish citizens stipulated in March 2016 instead of providing the support expected by Ankara against the PKK and FETÖ terror was regarded negatively by the Turkish government.⁴⁴ The European Parliament made an advisory jurisdiction for ceasing membership negotiations with Turkey under Martin Schulz's presidency. During the period when Schulz left the European Parliament Presidency and became the SPD leader, he made harsh statements about Turkey in contrast to his predecessor Sigmar Gabriel. In the period of crisis between Turkey and Germany as a result of the referendum campaigns of Turkish politicians in Germany, Schulz objected to these campaigns,⁴⁵ and criticized Prime Minister Merkel for not acting decisively enough on the issue.⁴⁶

The policy toward Turkey followed during the referendum process by the Netherlands's liberal Prime Minister Mark Rutte, who represented center politics in Europe as the leader of the *Volkspartij voor Vrijheid en Democratie* (VVD), was also shaped under the shadow of the rise of the ultra right in his country. Public opinion polls conducted in the Netherlands before the parliamentary elections of March 15 showed ultra right PVV leader Geert Wilders to be ahead. Seeing that Wilders increased his votes via extremist statements, Mark Rutte made a stride forward in hindering Turkish politicians from making electoral campaigns in the Netherlands in the framework of the Turkish referendum in order to prevent Wilders from expanding his popularity.⁴⁷ Since he believed that he would take the support of European countries and the people whose anti-Turkey perceptions were quite strong, he decided not to follow international law or diplomatic traditions. Rutte, who harshly responded to criticisms from Ankara about these scandalous decisions,⁴⁸ managed to defeat Wilders in the elections at the end of the process and had the chance to form the government. However, having taken an anti-Turkey stance using Wilders' discourse during the elections, and using a language that would hurt the foreigners and immigrants living in the country, the question arises, "what is the difference between Rutte and Wilders?" in the mind of the public.⁴⁹

European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker, another representative of center politics in Europe,

followed an approach during the crisis between Turkey and the EU countries in regard to the referendum that sided with his European partners. Juncker, who had no criticisms against the Netherlands and Germany's decisions to ban Turkish politicians from meeting the Turkish citizens living in these countries, opposed the criticisms made by Turkey against the administrations of these countries in regard to the prohibitions. Juncker characterized Ankara as insolent for accusing Germany of using "Nazi practices," and explained that he could not accept the comparison between today's Germany and Nazi Germany.⁵⁰ Juncker also characterized Turkish accusations against the Netherlands and Germany as scandalous and stated that a country that sought EU membership could not act in this manner.⁵¹ While Juncker criticized Turkey and said nothing of the unlawful practices of Germany and the Netherlands, he abstained from making harsh statements about Turkey's EU membership. He objected to the cessation of negotiations with Turkey and stated that termination of the negotiations that were already *de facto* inactive would be meaningless. Juncker also defended the refugee agreements with Turkey concluded in March 2016 and claimed that Ankara could not revoke this agreement despite its threats to do so.⁵²

Conclusion

It is evident that the center politicians who have always been the main determinants in shaping EU's Turkey

policy are increasingly acting under the pressure of the ultra right and ultra left groups in their countries. Defining their policies under these pressures is pushing them to make mistakes and take up irrational stances. The irrational Turkey policies of the ultra left and the ultra right, shaped in line with ideological and Islamophobic perceptions, are reflected in the EU's Turkey policy via the assent of center politicians, and they are creating fractures that are hard to repair in Turkey-EU relations.

However, it would not be wise to claim that the fractures are only caused by the influence of the ultra right and the ultra left. It is not possible to assert that the perceptions of center politicians in regard to Turkey's EU membership are very healthy. While the course of the EU-Turkey relationship was very positive until 2005, this relationship started to break down after Merkel and Sarkozy came to power in Germany and France respectively. The categorical opposition of Merkel and Sarkozy to Turkey's EU membership decreased Ankara's motivation for membership. The fact that the EU, which had already given signals that the door to membership would not be opening for Turkey, had a negative attitude during the July 15 coup attempt, and expressed 'willingness to cooperate against terror with Turkey' while Turkey was suffering under PKK, FETÖ and ISIS attacks, caused this relationship to skid to the worst possible point. Not being able to find the expected support from its European allies in regards to these problems, Turkey started to get close to Russia.

One of the reasons why the Turkey-EU relationship took the worst turn during the referendum process is related to the fact that the recent anti-Erdoğan and anti-AK Party stance in Europe became widespread not only among the marginal left and right sects but also among center politicians. The fact that the political figures that represented the center and its media organs contributed to the defamation campaign organized for the last 3-4 years against Erdoğan, who obtained power as a result of people's choices in Turkey, is regarded by Ankara as an effort to remove Erdoğan and the AK Party from power. While the influential defamation campaign of the European media has seriously harmed Turkey-EU relations, the goal of the said circles in Europe to create a Turkey without Erdoğan has been unsuccessful. Just the opposite has happened, as demonstrated by the failure of the anti-Erdoğan and anti-AK Party campaign during the referendum. The Turkish people look out for their leader perceived to be under attack. The fact that the countries in Europe with the highest "Yes" votes were the countries in which the defamation campaign was organized extensively points to this reality. Hence, some European countries' pursuit of an anti-Erdoğan and anti-AK Party policy to the point of interfering with the internal affairs of Turkey for fear that their interests in the Middle East and the Balkans will be threatened has both increased public support for Erdoğan and caused Turkey to move away from Europe and get closer to Russia. The developments experienced during

One of the reasons why the Turkey-EU relationship took the worst turn during the referendum process is related to the fact that the recent anti-Erdoğan and anti-AK Party stance in Europe became widespread not only among the marginal left and right sects but also among center politicians

the referendum process have clearly demonstrated that.

In this case, Brussels and the other European capitals have two options to establish a healthier basis for Turkey-EU relations. They will either decide that they do not want Turkey as an EU member, and will stay away from policies that would mean interfering in the internal affairs of Turkey and develop a relationship based on mutual respect for sovereignty with Ankara. Or, they will develop a sincere policy about Turkey's EU membership just like the policy that prevailed in 2004 and 2005 so that they will regain the right to make suggestions to Ankara about human rights, democracy and other issues. However, in order to follow the second option, they will be expected to stay away from hypocritical policies in regard to democracy, such as those they demonstrated during the July 15

coup attempt, and to really cooperate with Turkey against terrorist threats.

The internal problems of the EU, such as Brexit and the rise of ultra right, as well as rigid opposition from some circles in Europe against Turkey's EU membership, show that the second option would be hard for the EU to select at present. In this case, it is necessary for the EU countries and Brussels to opt for the first route and abstain from actions taken under the false pretenses of bringing Turkey into the EU so that they can interfere with the internal affairs of Turkey, just as they do with other candidate countries. While suggestions from Brussels directed to Turkey were useful when Turkey had a real prospect of joining the EU, these suggestions would only indicate interference with Turkey's internal affairs if it is not really wanted as a member. It is imperative that EU countries make a choice between these two policies and act accordingly. This course of action will benefit both Turkey and the EU. ■

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By ENES BAYRAKLI • FARID HAFEZ (Eds.)

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