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CENTRE FOR EASTERN STUDIES 3.10.2018 www.osw.waw.pl

Erdoğan in Berlin: cooperation without enthusiasm

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On 27-29 September, the President of Turkey Recep Tayyip Erdoğan paid a state visit to Berlin, where he met President Frank-Walter Steinmeier and Chancellor Angela Merkel. Their discussions focused on the economy, migration, the fight against terrorism and the war in Syria. At a press conference after the meeting, Merkel merely announced a willingness to talk with the presidents of France, Russia and Turkey on the situation in Syria. No other decisions were presented. President Erdoğan participated in the opening of a mosque in Cologne, where he met members of the Turkish diaspora.

In recent months there has been an uptick in the frequency of bilateral visits: on 5 September the head of the German Foreign Ministry visited Ankara, the finance ministers held consultations on 21 September in Berlin, and in October the economy minister Peter Altmaier will visit Turkey. In addition, in February this year Turkey released the *Die Welt* journalist Deniz Yücel from custody, and later several other detained Germans. At the same time, the German government withdrew from its officially consider intention to issue travel warnings for tourists visiting Turkey, strengthened guarantees for German investors, and announced the resumption of the activities of the two countries' joint economic commission and energy forum. Germany is the most important trade partner for Turkey, whereas Turkey is only Germany's sixteenth most important. There are over 6500 German companies present on the Turkish market, and German banks have lent Turkish companies around €21 billion.

Commentary

- Erdoğan's first official visit to Germany in four years was aimed at confirming his readiness to continue cooperation, while at the same time forcing Berlin into making concessions on issues such as the release of members of the Gülen movement, who are charged with organising the failed coup in 2016, and the fight against members of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). Normalising relations with Germany is one of Turkey's priorities in its policy towards the West. Support from Ankara's most important business partner is essential for it in the face of the country's currency crisis and the upcoming recession. At the same time, serious disputes between Turkey & the US, as well as the tense situation in Syria, have forced Ankara to seek allies in its relations with the US, as

well as tough negotiations on the future of Syria.

- Germany is dependent on the stability of Turkey, which derives both from its economic interests and fear of the effects the economic crisis could have on maintaining the EU/Turkey migration agreement. From Berlin's perspective, maintaining this agreement is crucial in stemming the influx of refugees from Syria. However, increased German support for the Turkish economy, is dependent on political conditions, including the release of five German citizens who were arrested on charges of promoting terrorism.
- Erdoğan's visit to Berlin did not iron out the discrepancies in the two state's mutual relations. Germany has criticised the rule of law and freedom of expression in Turkey; it also opposes the abolition of visas to the EU for Turkish citizens unless the law to combat terrorism in Turkey is changed. Another threat to Germany's internal policy is the increase in activities by Turkish organisations in Germany. Berlin has restricted its funding from next year's federal budget for the largest Turkish organisation in Germany, DITIB (the Turkish-Islamic Union for Religion), which covers around 900 of the approximately 2350 mosques existing in Germany. DITIB has received around €6 million since 2014. An investigation is also being carried out into possible espionage by DITIB on behalf of the Turkish state.