

Angela Merkel's visit to Istanbul – dialogue resumed

Mateusz Chudziak, Kamil Frymark

German Chancellor Angela Merkel met with President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan while on a visit to Turkey on 24 January. During the conversation, she announced that Germany would back the continuation of EU support for Turkey that has been provided since 2016. As part of it, the EU committed itself to provide a subsidy of 6 billion euros to Turkey. Germany also intends to support Turkey's coast guard. Furthermore, Merkel hinted that Germany was ready to offer humanitarian and financial assistance in Syria due to the worsening situation in Idlib. Nor did she rule out Germany's financial participation in creating a 'security zone' in northern Syria. Merkel also raised the issue of withheld accreditations for German journalists and German citizens being forced to stay in Turkey (some of them also hold Turkish citizenship) – 74 people have no right to leave the country, and 59 are under arrest.

Commentary

- Regardless of the continuing disputes, Ankara is still a major partner for Berlin and the EU. Without it, sustainable solutions to such problems as the migration crisis or conflicts in the EU's close neighbourhood are impossible. Over the past few years, Turkey-EU relations have been strongly affected by tensions linked to increasingly authoritarian tendencies in Turkey, by Ankara using the Turkish diaspora in Europe for political purposes, and by the EU tolerating the operation of groupings that Turkey recognises as terrorist organisations. Ankara has also accused the EU of failing to support it properly in dealing with the negative consequences of the war in Syria. As recently as last November tension was caused by the EU's criticism of the Turkish intervention in northern Syria. However, both parties view co-operation on migration as effective, and strategic relations have been maintained.
- Merkel's visit to Istanbul, like Erdoğan attending the conference on the Libyan conflict on 19 January in Berlin, has strengthened the Turkish leader's position. The actions in which Ankara is engaged in its immediate neighbourhood have drawn severe criticism in Europe. The issues that meet with resistance from the EU include: the intervention in Syria, and Turkey's blocking natural gas production from the fields in the eastern part of the Mediterranean Sea (thus acting contrary to the interests of two EU member states, Greece and Cyprus). Europe is also critical about Turkey's risky military engagement in the Libyan conflict – Ankara has backed the government in Tripoli regardless of the increasingly distanced stance which most EU member states are taking towards it. Meanwhile, regardless of the recurrent criticism of Turkey expressed by the European

public and individual countries, Ankara still views itself as an appealing or even indispensable political partner for Germany, and potentially for the entire EU.

- Continuing the migration deal which the EU and Turkey entered into in 2016 is a priority for Germany – hence the readiness to maintain good relations with Ankara. Regardless of the toughening of Germany's migration policy and the reduced number of asylum applications in Germany in 2019 (a 14.3% reduction, to 165,938), migration issues, along with the climate policy, are among the main topics of public debate. Turkish pressure on Germany, linked to its demands towards the EU, has also been intensifying as Germany is due to take the presidency of the Council of the EU in the second half of this year. Economic co-operation is still Berlin's key bargaining chip. Turkey is interested in investments due to its difficult economic situation. German companies have invested around US\$14.5 billion there since 1980.