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Turkish Referendum Casts Dark Shadow over Germany Erdogan and His Followers

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Turkey is divided ahead of a key constitutional referendum to grant President Erdogan more power. So too is Germany's Turkish population. Officials are concerned that violence could be the result while ordinary Germans are unable to understand how anyone could support Erdogan. By SPIEGEL Staff

A man in a long, black beard stops and spins around. "What did you say?" he screams in Turkish over the heads of the Hamburg police officers. His adversary leans over a metal barricade and

screams again: "You dog!" Behind him, fellow protesters chant: "Murderer Erdogan! Murderer Erdogan!" They hold signs in the air reading "*Hayir*," or "No." The reference is to the upcoming April referendum in Turkey on proposed amendments to the country's constitution.

The liberal Alevi Cultural Center, along with several other organizations, was behind the demonstration, called to protest the appearance of Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Cavusoglu in Hamburg. In response, dozens of people gathered in the northern German city late last Tuesday afternoon to heckle supporters of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

The bearded man is furious. "You are the dog," he screams towards the demonstrators. He then adds: "Are you Christians or what?!" His face is contorted in anger as though he has just uttered the worst curse he can imagine.

When asked about it later, he says he doesn't have anything against Christians, but he does add that they are weak and don't have true faith. "Germany is going to the dogs. Should I let my children grow up in such a country? I can hardly bear the Islamophobia anymore." The man was born here and speaks perfect, accent-free German. "Yeah," he says, "we're not stupid. We understand everything that is going on here, including German hypocrisy. That's why we are going to emigrate to Turkey soon."

He's standing next to a white metal fence at the entrance to the Turkish consulate-general's residence in Hamburg. People waving Turkish flags are streaming into the front yard of the elegant building on Alster Lake. Some have wrapped themselves in the banners or wound them around their heads. For the neighbors in this Hamburg neighborhood, it is a strange scene: on the one side are the demonstrators calling out "Erdogan! Dictator!" On the other are 300 supporters of the president chanting "Allahu akbar!"

The evening's events exposed the deep divisions in Turkish society that have been created by the constitutional referendum campaign. President Erdogan is seeking to tighten his grip on power by making himself head of government in addition to his current role as head of state. But it is by no means clear that he will get his way. Which is why he is also doing all he can to secure the vote of Turkish citizens living overseas, thus making the conflict over Turkey's future into a German conflict as well -- one which is becoming a threat, and deepening rifts within German society as well.

On the one hand, the Turkish community is perhaps more divided than it has ever been in the 50 years since Turks began coming to Germany as guest workers. On the other, German skepticism of their Turkish neighbors has grown of late. How is it possible, they wonder, that so many young people who grew up here venerate a man who is seeking to erode those democratic values of which Germans are so proud? Conversely, many of those with Turkish roots wonder why Germans still see them as Muslim aliens, even if they are cosmopolitan, successful and perfectly integrated. Why are the group's achievements so rarely highlighted?

Susceptible to Blackmail?

The conflict is a challenge for the chancellor as well. Many Germans are outraged by Erdogan's provocations and would like to see Angela Merkel stand up to him more decisively. They are concerned that the refugee deal with Ankara has made Merkel susceptible to blackmail and that she has no choice but to accept Erdogan's impertinence.

All of that is toxic for societal cohesion. Around 3 million people with Turkish roots live in the country. If they have a problem, Germany does too. Every political tremor in Turkey triggers aftershocks in Berlin, Cologne and Stuttgart. When the Turkish military launches a putsch to topple Erdogan, tens of thousands of people in Germany likewise sit glued to their televisions out of concern for Turkey's future.

When Erdogan has journalists, lawyers, teachers and scientists arrested, their relatives in Germany are consumed with worry. And when the German journalist Deniz Yücel, who also has a Turkish passport, is locked up as an alleged terrorist, his German and Turkish supporters drive through cities in Germany in protest convoys. What is German and what is Turkish? They have become inextricably bound.

But tensions are rising. Last week, when a journalist from the influential weekly *Die Zeit* appeared at Cavusoglu's campaign appearance holding a sign reading "Free Deniz," Erdogan supporters attacked him with the flags they were wearing, knocking off his glasses.

The atmosphere, particularly on the radical fringes of the two camps, is becoming more hostile to the point that German security officials have now become concerned that the conflict could erupt in violence in Germany as well. "The fault lines between the various camps in Turkey are mirrored in Germany," says Hans-Georg Maassen, head of Germany's domestic intelligence agency. There is, in short, a part of Germany that is deeply affected by Erdogan.

Yahya Kilicaslan, 32, shows up to his interview with SPIEGEL in a white Porsche SUV. "In my eyes, Erdogan remains a successful politician," the businessman says in a café in the Old Town center of Esslingen, located just east of Stuttgart. "He didn't just talk; he did what he said he was going to do." Turkey, Kilicaslan says, needs political stability to flourish, which is why he is supporting the referendum.

'For Me, He's a Demagogue'

Kilicaslan's enthusiasm shows that the Turkish president isn't just supported by the rural population of Anatolia. The young man is a third-generation immigrant who got his high-school degree in Esslingen before completing a trainee program in banking. He's now in the real estate business. "I see my future in Germany and I feel connected to the people here," says Kilicaslan, who sees himself as being right-of-center politically.

Regarding Erdogan's recent comments comparing today's Germany with the Third Reich, he says: "That's unacceptable." But, he adds, more important than the rhetoric is the fact that Turkey adheres to its international agreements, such as the deal made with Germany in 2016 designed to stem the flow of refugees to Europe.

But what about human rights, the arrest of civil servants and journalists, and the detention of the German journalist Deniz Yücel? "I hope he gets a fair trial," Kilicaslan says. "But I have no sympathy for him at all. For me, he is a demagogue."

Germans don't like to hear such sentiments, and neither do Turkish opponents of Erdogan's Justice and Development Party (AKP). Kilicaslan is aware of that. He is one of the few who has been willing to defend the Turkish president in the German media and has appeared on a widely viewed primetime talk show in addition to a national radio program. He says he does so because he wants to help explain how many Turkish-Germans think.

He is frequently attacked for his views. In response, he posted a message on his Facebook page reading: "Yes to debate and critique! No to hate campaigns and violence!" There isn't much uniting those who bitterly oppose Erdogan with those who support him, but when it comes to hate for their adversaries, the similarities are difficult to ignore.

Integration expert Caner Aver, of the Center for Turkish Studies and Integration Research at the University of Duisburg-Essen, sees another commonality uniting the parties to the conflict: "There is a collective malaise. Everybody recognizes that something is going fundamentally wrong at the moment." Though they disagree about the reasons.

Appealing to Deep Emotions

The conflict over the coming referendum has exposed the degree to which many Turks in Germany feel their pride has been hurt and that they are not respected. They feel that, as Muslims, they are constantly on the defensive. When Foreign Minister Cavusoglu appears before them in Hamburg and says, "nobody can sever the bond we have with you. We will always be there for you," he is appealing to deep emotions and strikes a nerve among his listeners. What German politician has ever approached them with such commitment?

A survey conducted on behalf of the University of Münster last year found that 87 percent of German citizens with Turkish backgrounds feel closely bound to Germany. But more than half of the 1,200 respondents also said that they feel like second-class citizens because of their origins. According to the survey, 83 percent get angry when Muslims immediately fall under suspicion following a terror attack.

But it's not just about feelings and emotions. Turkish Germans, after all, have been successful in Germany and have good reason to exhibit more confidence than they sometimes do.

Many AKP supporters, though, have a different understanding of democracy -- despite their integration in Germany and lessons on politics and civics in school. If the majority of a population decides to place its faith in a single party and a single head of state, then other countries simply have to accept that, many believe. The lessons of German history -- the reflex most Germans have to think back to 1933 when hearing such arguments -- are not as deeply rooted among all of those with Turkish roots. They view the separation of powers as largely unnecessary because they believe that Erdogan's patriotism will lead him to act in Turkey's best interests. Plus, those in Germany who watch pro-government broadcasters from Turkey have

difficulty separating the propaganda from reality. Because they live in Germany, they have little experience with the more ominous elements of Erdogan's rule.

Neither are they inclined to place much blame on Erdogan's shoulders for the recent spate of terror attacks that have shaken Turkey, for the country's suddenly weak economy or for the ongoing conflict with the Kurdish minority in the southeast. Instead, they believe the fault lies with the Zionists, with the United States, with the Kurds and with Europe. They see accusations that the AKP is destroying press freedoms as a joke. On the contrary, they see the fact that no German media outlet has reported positively about Erdogan's referendum as proof that if anyone has a problem with freedom of opinion, it is Germany.

Doubts and Concern Among Turkish-Germans

"Many have the feeling there is a double standard," says integration expert Aver. Why, for example, was the Dutch right-wing populist Geert Wilders allowed to hold a speech in Dresden but when it comes time for a Turkish minister to campaign on behalf of the constitutional referendum, he suddenly can't find a venue? It is difficult for many Turks to believe in German democracy, Aver says, when they have the feeling that the freedom of assembly doesn't apply equally to all.

There are a number of similar discrepancies. Why, for example, are Islamist terror suspects pursued to the fullest extent of the law yet followers of the Muslim cleric Fethullah Gülen, who has been accused of being behind the coup attempt in Turkey, are protected? And, if the Kurdish Workers' Party (PKK) is banned in Germany as a terrorist organization, why don't German authorities do more about extremist Kurds in the country?

These are questions that the journalist Polat Karaburan wonders about as well. Two years ago, he founded the news website NEX24 and he and his team report on Turkey in German as an "independent, non-partisan media outlet," Karaburan says. He only agreed to answer questions from SPIEGEL in writing. "We only report on those things that you won't see elsewhere," he wrote, meaning positive news about Turkey and Erdogan. "The Turkish president calls for aid to combat hunger in Africa," reads one headline, for example. Many Turks celebrate NEX24 on social media platforms as the only "truly objective" media outlet.

Kurds and liberal Turks are less enthusiastic. NEX24, they say, is merely a purveyor of fake news and is controlled by Ankara, they write in emails and on Facebook. Karaburan, for his part, wrote to SPIEGEL that his critics only say such things "because we also publish reports that are critical of the PKK."

Recently, Karaburan received a frightening threat from someone who identified himself as Kurdish. The writer said he wanted to blow up Karaburan with a hand grenade and then "extinguish your burning body with my urine."

German security officials are just as concerned about the PKK youth organization as they are about the ultranationalist Turkish group the Gray Wolves. The PKK group has posted calls for violent resistance on the internet. But in addition to those radical groups, Turkish clans and even

Turkish motorcycle gangs are represented in Germany, a milieu with a high potential for violence.

Domestic intelligence head Maassen has warned of a "significant, powerful threat potential," both among supporters of Erdogan and among their opponents. Security officials are worried about the possibility of a repeat of the street battles and riots that took place in 2014 between PKK supporters and Salafists in Germany during the battle for the Syrian city of Kobani.

'Oil on the Fire'

In March 2016, PKK supporters in Aschaffenburg attacked a demonstration of Turkish nationalists and then began throwing rocks at police. "The situation in Turkey is so explosive, it won't take much for things to escalate here," says one high-ranking intelligence official. "It seems clear that appearances by AKP politicians or Erdogan himself are likely to pour oil on the fire."

Dilan Karacadag, a journalist with Kurdish roots whose family migrated to Germany two generations ago, is sitting at her computer in Frankfurt clicking through the layout of the next day's issue of the daily *Yeni Özgür Politika*. The paper is printed in both Turkish and in Kurdish - and it doesn't offer its readers much in terms of good news. There are stories about oppression and violence against opposition activists in Turkey and about the conflict between Erdogan followers and Kurds in Germany. It is the only Kurdish newspaper in Germany and has long been accused of being close to the PKK. "I've never seen things as bad as they are now," Karacadag, 27, says.

For the last two years, she says, Erdogan has been exploiting the conflict with the Kurds to launch aggressive attacks against the minority group as a way of solidifying support. "The result has been significant hatred."

The Turkish community these days seems to be gripped by destructive emotions that are driving it apart: Kurds versus the Turks, progressives versus the conservatives, the extreme right versus the leftists. Since organizing a campaign against the referendum in Germany, Mürvet Öztürk has learned just how deep this hatred runs. Angry Turkish taxi drivers have accused her of being an "enemy of Turkey" and she was branded a criminal by a group in front of a mosque. But she nevertheless continued her campaign, spending a recent afternoon dropping in on Turkish greengrocers, barber shops, restaurants and telephone shops in the Wiesbaden city center.

In her shoulder bag, she was carrying two stacks of brochures. On one stack, the word "*Hayir*" was on the cover, on the other, the German translation: "*Nein*." She says she doesn't want to leave the streets and event venues in Germany to pro-government Turkish politicians and to Erdogan fans. Instead, she hopes to start a conversation with the many voters who still haven't made up their minds and she wants to encourage those who are opposed to the constitutional amendments to cast their ballots in the Turkish Consulate on March 27.

'Business Is Priority No. 1'

In some shops, Öztürk has an easy job of it. In one barber shop, three freshly shaved young men immediately identify themselves as opponents of Erdogan's constitutional reform plan and they pose with Öztürk while holding up the "Hayir" brochures. In a Turkish restaurant, the owner takes a pile of the brochures for his counter so he can hand them out to his Turkish guests.

Most, though, are warier. One travel agency owner says that many of his customers are Erdogan supporters and that he has sought to stay out of the debate. The man behind the counter of a Turkish jewelry shop takes a similar tack, saying: "Business is priority No. 1." Plus, he plans to vote "yes" anyway, because he is certain that Erdogan won't abuse the power he is asking for.

Öztürk, 44, is a representative in the Hesse state parliament who, despite being a member of the Green Party, does not belong to a political party group in the legislature. A few weeks ago, she joined forces with Turgut Yüksel, a Hesse state parliamentarian with the Social Democrats who also has Turkish roots, to launch a non-partisan "No" campaign. Since then, they have found more than 300 active supporters, collected donations and printed 80,000 flyers. She believes that between 60 and 70 percent of Turkish-Germans are opposed to Erdogan's grab for uncontrolled power. "The problem, though, is going to be that of getting them to actually take part in the referendum."

Not surprisingly, their adversaries have been quick to react. The pro-Erdogan paper *Sabah* called on its readers to refuse to open their doors to the two "traitors."

The effect of such propaganda has seeped deep into the daily lives of Turkish-Germans. Filiz Ilhan, a 41-year-old lawyer from Berlin, tells the story of a recent visit to a Turkish supermarket in the German capital. She noticed that conversation stopped as soon as she walked in because she wasn't wearing a headscarf. At check-out, the cashier made a demonstrative show of friendliness to the woman behind her, who was wearing a headscarf.

Ilhan is a self-confident, thoughtful woman. With her left-leaning liberal worldview and turn-of-the-century apartment in the Wilmersdorf neighborhood, her Turkish roots seem like more of an afterthought. She and her legal partner focus on criminal law, Ilhan has two sons and she is involved in public life and politics. But she says that it has become more difficult.

She says that she lives "in a silent country" because everyone now seems to have to carefully weigh their words to avoid being immediately categorized, judged and maligned. Because the pressure brought to bear by AKP supporters has become so great, she says, those who think differently are pulling back and going quiet. "We can hardly be heard anymore," she says. Everybody is becoming increasingly careful about who they speak with and what they talk about. The unease is reminiscent of that encountered in countries with widespread state surveillance.

Keeping Her Cool

Ilhan laments that there is a lack of solidarity from German civil society, saying that she had expected more people to take part in demonstrations on behalf of imprisoned journalist Deniz Yücel. "It is a mistake to believe that Erdogan is merely a Turkish problem," she says. "It is something that now affects us all."

Nevertheless, she is opposed to simply banning Turkish politicians from campaigning in Germany for Erdogan's proposed constitutional amendments, a position she shares with the German chancellor. Thus far, Merkel has been doing her best to keep a cool head in her interactions with the Turkish government. In response to Erdogan's Nazi accusations, she merely said: "You can't even seriously comment on such misplaced aspersions."

Last year, German-Turkish relations suffered as a result of parliament's passage of a resolution on the genocide perpetrated against Armenians in the early 20th century. Turkey likewise complained about the perceived lack of sympathy following the putsch attempt last summer. Since then, the German government has been doing all it can to avoid providing Erdogan with further excuses to raise his profile by attacking Germany. Merkel is doing her best to solve all conflicts away from the public eye.

That, though, is not to Erdogan's liking. He is aware that blasting away at Merkel is a useful strategy for winning over Turkish-German supporters -- which explains his eagerness to provoke reactions from Germany.

Yücel, the correspondent from *Die Welt*, is still behind bars, despite Erdogan having given Merkel the impression during a personal meeting in early February that a solution to the case could be negotiated. But on March 3, the president doubled down, accusing the journalist of being a "German agent" and a "representative of PKK."

Ankara has also accused Merkel's government of being responsible for preventing Turkish ministers from campaigning in Germany on behalf of the referendum. This despite the fact that both Merkel and Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel have spoken out in favor of allowing such events to proceed.

The two of them would have welcomed it were at least one of the events allowed to go ahead. After campaign appearances were cancelled in Gaggenau and Cologne, Germany's Foreign Ministry even sought to intervene to ensure that Turkish Foreign Minister Cavusoglu's event in Hamburg would go ahead. When local officials revoked permission for the event ostensibly due to fire safety concerns, Gabriel's staff called Hamburg City Hall to ask if perhaps a different venue could be arranged for the Turkish foreign minister -- without success.

Diplomatically Sensitive

The extent to which trust between Germany and Turkey has eroded could be seen at a breakfast meeting between the two foreign ministers last Wednesday in the Adlon Hotel in central Berlin. Cavusoglu told Gabriel that he was convinced that Berlin had, in concert with the secret service and municipal governments, prevented the events. Gabriel was unable to convince his counterpart of the contrary.

Still, the Turkish government has now submitted to Berlin a list of upcoming campaign events. It remains unclear, however, whether Erdogan is planning a personal visit to Germany prior to the vote. His name doesn't appear on the list, but the German Foreign Ministry is convinced that the Turkish president will make an appearance.

Around 1.4 million Turks in Germany have the right to vote in the referendum, and polling stations will be opened at 13 different sites across the country between March 27 and April 9. Turkish law does not allow for voting by absentee mail ballots. In 2015 parliamentary elections, around 60 percent of voters in Germany supported the AKP, but there are no surveys to indicate how Erdogan's popularity has evolved since then.

At the same time, Germany must address a further diplomatically sensitive issue: the climbing number of asylum applications being submitted by Turks. The Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF) has not been moving quickly to approve these applications, with a waiting period of around 16 months. But at some point, the agency will have to resolve the cases filed in the aftermath of last July's attempted overthrow. Should they be approved, the Erdogan government won't be happy. Indeed, Ankara has demanded that Germany extradite alleged followers of cleric Fethullah Gülen, whom Erdogan blames for the failed putsch.

Many of the asylum applications likely have a good chance of approval. In a confidential report regarding the "situation in Turkey from the perspective of asylum and extradition" compiled at the end of February, the German Foreign Ministry painted a rather dark picture. "There are significant current indicators of systematic oppression against presumed Gülen movement followers without the existence of criteria for what signifies a 'follower,'" reads the report, which is a significant basis for decisions made at BAMF.

Since the coup attempt, more than 500 Turks have been applying for asylum in Germany each month, including diplomats and soldiers. Just last week, the German Interior Ministry reported that four additional high-ranking military officers with diplomatic status had applied for asylum.

Foreign Minister Gabriel has been doing his best to tip-toe around the looming conflict. He noted that even during the 1980s military dictatorship, Turkey was allowed to remain a member of NATO. Turkish economic interests and European security interests, he added, are significant enough to warrant caution when it comes to tensions in the relationship.

Overcoming the 'Us vs. Them Approach'

But the question remains as to whether trust between Erdogan and Merkel has already eroded too far. The two didn't like each other from the very beginning. A Turkish government official says that Erdogan still hasn't forgotten Merkel's vocal opposition to Turkish EU membership, even before she was elected chancellor. Many Turks saw the failed EU membership application as rejection, as a collective slight of an entire people. Such emotions are now playing into Erdogan's hands.

Many integration experts believe that Merkel's approach is fundamentally the correct one. Erdogan likes to play the victim role, says Ahmet Toprak, dean at the University of Applied Sciences and Arts in Dortmund, adding that one should avoid encouraging him. But for the domestic climate in Germany, Toprak says, it is important -- with the chancellor's help -- to overcome the "us vs. them approach."

Detlef Pollack, a sociology of religion professor at the University of Münster, agrees. "The greatest achievement of civil society is that people get along even if they hold diametrically opposing views," he says. That, he continues, isn't so easy for some Turks because they never learned how to deal with self-criticism and diversity. Pollack nevertheless believes that majority German society, because it is in a position of strength, must take a step toward the Turkish community. "Of course you should be allowed to criticize, but you should also exhibit a certain amount of understanding and empathy when it comes to their strong connection to Turkey."

Back in Hamburg last Tuesday, Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Cavusoglu steps into his sedan following his appearance, leaving his cheering supporters behind. Three young men stick around in the cold, continuing to talk in front of the consulate general's residence. "It isn't fair how we are being treated by the Germans," one of them says. "If you support Erdogan, you don't have a chance anymore of being accepted." His friend agrees, saying he used to get along well with his German coworkers. But that is no longer the case. "Nobody wants to go to lunch with a Turk who votes for Erdogan."