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## Germany's Hardline on Turkey Begins to Soften Erdogan's Insults

By Peter Müller and Christoph Schult

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**With the Turkish president firing away at Germany at will, Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel recently announced that Berlin would take a tougher stance. It hasn't happened. Indeed, Germany may soon have to cough up significant amounts of money for Ankara.**

When German Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel and Angela Merkel met at the end of July to discuss how to handle the most recent indignities fired off by Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan in the direction of Germany, the chancellor gave the impression that she completely supported Gabriel's proposals. Speaking on television afterwards, Gabriel said "everything I am telling you has been coordinated with Ms. Merkel."

One month later, though, things look markedly different. It is apparently more difficult than he thought to follow up tough words with deeds. And consensus in Merkel's cabinet has also suffered. Gabriel was able to achieve a quick success by convincing Erdogan to withdraw a list of terrorism supporters which included German companies. Not long later, though, the Turkish president sharpened his tone once again, launching a personal attack on the German foreign

minister: "Who are you to speak to the president of Turkey?" he hissed at Gabriel. The number of refugees arriving on the Greek islands has also been on the rise of late, a situation that Berlin and Brussels are monitoring with concern.

As such, Gabriel's appetite has only grown for taking the kind of tough stance on Turkey that Germany had threatened. But the Foreign Ministry in Berlin has lately found itself confronted with reservations and opposition in both Brussels and Berlin.

When it comes to Gabriel's demand to review state export credit guarantees for deals with Turkey, the chancellor herself has intervened. Gabriel would like to introduce a cap on the total sum of such guarantees (known as Hermes Cover), but the Chancellery is skeptical. Merkel is concerned that such a move could hurt German exporters and she isn't interested in damaging relations with that constituency in the middle of her re-election campaign - particularly out of fear that she could lose votes to the business-friendly Free Democrats (FDP). The consequence is that negotiations between the Foreign Ministry and the Chancellery on the issue are making no progress.

### **Trying for Weeks**

A second threat aimed at hurting Erdogan has met a similar fate. With agreement from the Chancellery, Gabriel wrote to the EU's foreign policy chief, Federica Mogherini, and to Enlargement Commissioner Johannes Hahn to inquire whether pre-accession assistance, being paid to Ankara as part of ongoing accession negotiations, could be suspended. Between 2014 and 2020, Turkey is set to receive 4.45 billion euros in accordance with the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance II (IPA II) program. Thus far, only around 250 million euros has been dispersed.

Internally, Commission officials have been trying for weeks to make it clear to their German counterparts that suspending the payments is far from straightforward. Indeed, Brussels doesn't even have the power to make such a decision. The responsibility lies with EU member states, a qualified majority of whom would have to agree that Turkey is no longer in fulfillment of the so-called Copenhagen accession criteria on, for example, human rights or rule of law issues. That, though, is risky, since that would force a suspension of the accession talks - at least according to the Commission's interpretation. Berlin, though, doesn't agree.

Only minor adjustments are possible. Hahn's office, for example, has long been looking for ways to prevent EU money from aiding the purges that Erdogan launched after last summer's unsuccessful coup attempt. Smaller projects, such as one to train judges in Turkey, have been stopped since its goal can hardly be achieved at a time when the Turkish president is throwing independent lawyers in jail.

## **Vehemently Opposed**

The mid-term review of pre-accession aid for all EU accession candidates (including countries like Albania and Serbia in addition to Turkey) could represent a greater danger to Erdogan. Should Turkey get poor marks on issues such as the rule of law, up to 20 percent of the money earmarked for the country could be sent elsewhere. Again, though, EU member states must grant their approval.

And that, as the German government has realized, is not a foregone conclusion. After surveying their 27 EU partners, Berlin found that only a minority are in favor of its course. France and Italy are among those most vehemently opposed.

Plus, the EU is in the process of trying to drum up more money for Turkey as it is. At issue is the second tranche of the 6 billion euros Turkey was promised as part of the refugee deal. The deal calls for the entire sum to be paid by the end of 2018 and is earmarked for such projects as the provision of humane shelters for refugees. The first tranche of 3 billion euros will have been used up by the end of the year and Budget Commissioner Günther Oettinger has included around 300 million euros for the second tranche in his 2018 draft budget. The rest, though, is to come from EU member states. "The member states have to finance 2 billion plus X," he says. Germany contributed around 500 million euros to the first tranche, but will likely have to pay more this time around - both because the Commission itself has less money available and because it isn't clear whether Britain will continue to contribute its share.

There is even opposition within Gabriel's Social Democratic Party (SPD) to cutting Turkey's pre-accession assistance. Jens Geier, head of the German SPD caucus in European Parliament, says: "A portion of our funding serves to strengthen civil society. As such, it often helps those who stand up to Erdogan."