

## The Turkish diaspora landscape in Western Europe: between the AKP's power aspirations and migrants' grievances

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# SWP Comment

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## The Turkish Diaspora Landscape in Western Europe

**Between the AKP's Power Aspirations and Migrants' Grievances**

*Sinem Adar, Yaşar Aydın, Cengiz Günay and Günter Seufert*

The AKP leadership's diaspora policy has created tensions between Turkey and European countries. Turkey's gradual slide into authoritarianism, Islam's steady expansion into public life and the increasing divergence between the foreign and security policies of Turkey and the EU have deepened the mistrust in relations between that country and the Union. Concerns abound about Ankara's "long-arm" influence and the loyalties of Turkish migrants and their foreign-born children to their countries of residence. Meanwhile, the mainstreaming of anti-migration and anti-Islam sentiments in European countries has led to a conflation between Ankara's ambitions and the diaspora's attitudes and demands in the public discourse. While it is crucial not to overstate the AKP's ability to mobilise the diaspora, the genuine grievances of individuals with a migration background should be taken seriously. At the same time, European governments should continue to advocate the greater independence of mosque communities from Turkey's influence in order to maintain a balanced diaspora landscape.

Under the rule of the Justice and Development Party (AKP), Turkey's diaspora policy has become a key element in the government's efforts to strengthen its power domestically and extend the country's influence globally. Since the 2010s, Turkey has pursued an ever more assertive, identitarian and polarising approach to diaspora engagement. Following Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's victory in the 2023 presidential and parliamentary elections, there has been a clear intent to consolidate the president's unchecked authority. And while the main opposition party's unexpected success in

the recent local elections in March 2024 is a setback to achieving that goal, the government's efforts to convince the public of the need for a new constitution suggest that Ankara will not back down easily.

This enduring ambition to hold onto power may intensify existing trends in diaspora engagement, including the Turkish government's instrumentalisation of migrants' grievances amid growing anti-migration and anti-Islam sentiments in West European host societies. At the same time, Turkey's ruling elites will continue to propagate a form of conservative morality



that claims there are ontological differences between members of the Turkish diaspora and Europeans. Ankara's policies and discourses promoting such ideas may contribute to further polarisation within the diaspora. It is also realistic to expect increased surveillance of the political opposition in the diaspora that the Turkish authorities blame for the religious, cultural and political decline of the local Turkish populations.

### Steady electoral support abroad for President Erdoğan and the AKP

Unlike other political parties, the AKP was not only aware of the numerical significance of the diaspora vote but rightly expected that its impact on the election results would work in its favour. Addressing the persistent demand of Turkish migrants in Europe to be able to easily participate in Turkish elections, the party leadership implemented significant changes to the election law in 2008 and 2012. Those measures – which allowed Turkish citizens residing abroad to cast their votes in the countries in which they live – marked a transformative shift. Previously, Turkish citizens living abroad had had to travel via air or land to vote at Turkish customs points or inside airports upon entering Turkey. The financial and logistical challenges of such undertakings had contributed to the low turnout rates among the diaspora ever since 1987, when Turkish migrants voted for the first time in Turkish elections.

From 2014 onwards, when Turkish citizens first cast their votes outside Turkey, turnout rates increased significantly from a mere 8.37 per cent to 52.04 per cent in the second round of the 2023 presidential elections (49.4 per cent in the first round). Through a network of old and new migrant associations with close ties to Turkey, the AKP has systematically worked to mobilise eligible voters over the past decade. State resources, increasingly available to party elites, have facilitated this mobilisation effort. Consulates have emerged as central actors in reaching out to eligible voters,

thereby contributing to the effective engagement of the Turkish diaspora in the electoral process.

In the presidential run-off on 28 May 2023, Erdoğan secured re-election with 52.18 per cent of the total vote (that is, inside and outside Turkey) in what was an impressive voter turnout of 84.15 per cent. Notably, the trend observed in the diaspora since 2014 continued: Turkish citizens abroad overwhelmingly supported Erdoğan, ensuring that he gained a higher percentage of the total vote (59.71 per cent) with a lower turnout (52.04 per cent). Erdoğan received even higher vote shares in Germany, the Netherlands, Belgium, Austria and France (see Table 1). In each of these countries, a significant portion of Turkish voters have consistently supported the incumbent president in those elections in which voting has also taken place outside Turkey.

Table 1

#### Results of Run-Off Presidential Election of 28 May 2023

	Vote share of President Erdoğan	Turnout
Germany	67.22 %	50.38 %
Netherlands	70.59 %	54.90 %
Belgium	74.70 %	59.40 %
Austria	73.85 %	58.85 %
France	66.77 %	51.87 %
Turkey*	52.18 %	84.15 %

\*Includes votes cast inside and outside Turkey

Compiled by the authors based on data available at the website of the daily *Yeni Şafak*.

Meanwhile, the opposition presidential candidate, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, performed strongly in the US – securing 82.67 per cent of the votes – where the Turkish population is composed predominantly of students and white-collar professionals. And in Switzerland, where there is a sizable Kurdish

Table 2

**Results of the Parliamentary Elections of 14 May 2023**

	AKP	MHP*	CHP	HDP
Germany	50.50%	12.60%	19.20%	8.70%
Netherlands	53.40%	13.00%	18.90%	4.60%
Belgium	55.00%	14.20%	14.70%	5.98%
Austria	54.80%	14.00%	14.40%	7.40%
France	48.20%	13.90%	12.70%	17.90%
Turkey	35.61%	10.07%	25.33%	8.82%

\* Nationalist Action Party

Compiled by the authors based on data available at the website of the daily *Yeni Şafak*.

migrant community from Turkey, Kılıçda- roğlu won 57.04 per cent of the vote. All in all, the outcome of the May 2023 presiden- tial election reflects the diverse political inclinations within the Turkish diaspora worldwide.

The varied migration patterns and the corresponding political preferences within the Turkish diaspora were also evident in the May 2023 parliamentary elections. The Republican People’s Party (CHP), the main opposition party, gained 60.2 per cent of the vote in the US (while the AKP won just 13.1 per cent). Similarly, the vote share of the Kurdish People’s Democratic Party (HDP), which ran under the banner of the Green Left Party, was the second highest in Switzer- land (after the AKP with 25.1 per cent). In Germany, the Netherlands, Belgium, Austria and France, on the other hand, the AKP gained significantly more votes than the other parties (see Table 2 above).

**The significance of the diaspora vote for the AKP’s power consolidation**

In previous elections, the diaspora’s support had played a pivotal role in tipping the balance in favour of Erdoğan, highlighting the significant impact of Turkish migrants

on Turkey’s electoral landscape. In the 2017 constitutional referendum, which intro- duced the presidential system, the voting preferences of the diaspora accounted for approximately 19 per cent (256,000) of the total difference (1.37 million) between the “yes” and “no” votes. That share under- scores the significance of the diaspora’s contribution towards shaping the outcome of crucial elections.

In the 2018 presidential elections, Erdo- ğan was able to clinch only a marginal victory among the electorate within Turkey, having secured 50.8 per cent of the eligible vote in the first round. But, combined with the 894,585 votes cast for him by Turkish migrants in other countries, he ultimately won a more comfortable 52.59 per cent of the total eligible vote.

**Conservative morality: Emphasising how the diaspora and host society differ**

The AKP’s mobilisation efforts have led to the emergence of a fervently engaged group of voters within the Turkish diaspora. Fol- lowing Erdoğan’s victory in the 2023 presi- dential run-off election, enthusiastic AKP supporters took to the streets of various German cities. Their actions sparked public

criticism, underscoring European societies' ongoing frustration with the AKP's influence over considerable parts of the Turkish diaspora and their concerns about the perceived loyalty of Turkish migrants and their European-born children to a foreign state.

Given the assertive, identitarian and polarising shift in Turkey's diaspora policy over the past two decades, European discontent is not entirely unfounded. During a visit to Cologne in 2008, Erdoğan defined assimilation as "a crime against humanity" and called on Turkish-origin migrants and their foreign-born children to maintain their linguistic and religious roots as a sign of enduring attachment to their homeland.

The narrative is also built on the idea that there are ontological differences between the Turkish (and Muslim) diaspora and their host societies in terms of values and morals, identity and culture. Indeed, the AKP promotes itself and its leader as the representative and defender of a "(post-colonial) new subjectivity" enabled through the establishment of a "new Turkey" – a term introduced by Erdoğan in 2014 during the presidential election campaign. This vision emphasises the building of a new nation that draws its strength from Turkish society's authentic values and local knowledge, aspires for independence (mainly from the West) and acts with self-confidence to propel the nation forward.

Government officials often contrast what they perceive as the resilience of upright people in the Muslim world with what they describe as the nihilism of the West, despite the latter's political stability, economic welfare and development. This mindset was highlighted by İbrahim Kalın, the current head of Turkey's National Intelligence Organisation and former spokesperson for and adviser to the Office of the Presidency, at the 2018 World Forum organised by Turkey's national broadcaster, TRT. And it is further reflected in Erdoğan's emphasis on assimilation being "a crime against humanity".

Blurring the boundaries between the nation and the party, the AKP leadership perceives the Turkish diaspora as composed essentially of pious Muslims. Women are

assumed to play a crucial role in enacting and spreading piety. For the AKP leadership, the lifting of the headscarf ban is the prime example of what it perceives as the empowerment of underrepresented citizens.

Such conservative morality – which emphasises the family as the core of society and recognises only traditional gender roles within it – is promoted by Diyanet, the Turkish Directorate of Religious Affairs, among other state institutions, as a safeguard against perceived identity challenges that the European "lifestyle", as interpreted by the ruling elites, might present to Turkish migrants and their foreign-born children. Over the past two decades, the AKP leadership has established a patronage network composed of both old and new associations in order to reach and mould the diaspora in accordance with the party's political and cultural self-understanding. The aim is to tighten the AKP's political grip on the diaspora vote and consolidate its political hegemony in Turkey.

### **The diaspora's political empowerment is in line with the ruling party's worldview**

However, the AKP's interest in the Turkish diaspora goes beyond consolidating its own power. Turkish migrants and their foreign-born children are being encouraged to participate in the political life of their host societies and to form political parties in order to increase Turkish and Muslim representation in the national assemblies of their countries of residence as well as in the European Parliament. Such parties are intended to address issues that are of concern to both Turkish and non-Turkish (Muslim) migrant communities.

In the Netherlands, the political party DENK (meaning equal or balanced in Turkish) is a notable example. It was established on the initiative of two Turkish Dutch members of the House of Representatives who were expelled from the Dutch Labour Party (PvdA) in 2014 over proposals for the "stronger monitoring of several conserva-

tive Turkish organisations". The DENK party programme promotes a tolerant society and advocates global justice through the reform of international institutions. It also supports initiatives such as the creation of a "racism registry" to track racist incidents, the integration of Islamic education into the school curricula, imam training without interference by the Dutch government and expanding the presence of imams beyond mosques to institutions like hospitals, prisons and the armed forces. Currently, DENK has three seats in the Dutch House of Representatives. In the 2019 European elections, the party nominated 14 candidates, including three of Turkish origin, but did not gain enough votes to send any representatives to the European Parliament.

Another example is DAVA (Democratic Alliance for Diversity and Awakening), which was founded by four German citizens with Turkish backgrounds. The formation of the new party sparked controversy in Germany's public discourse. Its name is associated with the Arabic word "Da'wa", which means inviting people to Islam and is widely used within the Turkish Islamist movement.

One of DAVA's founders was a member of the centre-left Social Democratic Party (SPD) until 2011, while two others were actively involved in the Union of International Democrats (UID), an AKP lobby organisation that has played a central role in the mobilisation of the Turkish migrant vote. The remaining founders are affiliated with AKP-related religious associations. Similar to DENK, DAVA emphasises the need to combat Islamophobia and advocates Islam's recognition as a statutory body under German public law. It also argues in favour of the strengthening of traditional gender roles.

## Expanding Turkish influence abroad

The AKP government's efforts to engage the Turkish diaspora in Europe are not being made in isolation; rather, they form an intrinsic part of Turkey's domestic and foreign policy. Just as Turkey is presenting

itself in Europe as the defender of the pious Turks, so it is promoting itself at the global level as the patron and sponsor of Muslims in particular and of the globally disenfranchised in general.

Under Erdoğan's leadership, the Turkish ruling elites view the empowerment of Turkey's conservative and pious communities – which was brought about by the AKP – as a precursor to the liberation of disenfranchised communities worldwide. Inevitably, Muslims feature prominently in this narrative. Over the past decade, Ankara has strategically developed four foreign-policy talking points aimed at positioning Turkey as a champion for the disenfranchised around the globe:

- 1) *Defending Palestine and Palestinian rights:* Turkey advocates the rights of Palestinians and promotes itself as a defender of justice in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.
- 2) *Combatting Islamophobia:* Turkey staunchly opposes Islamophobia in Europe and the US and aims to address the issues of discrimination and exclusion faced by Turkish and Muslim communities.
- 3) *Criticising the West's colonial past:* Ankara is critical of the colonial history of Western states and seeks to align itself with post-colonial narratives and appeal to those who harbour grievances against the former colonial powers.
- 4) *Demanding reform of the international system:* Turkey calls for the reform of the global international system, positioning itself as a voice for change and advocating a more inclusive and equitable global order.

These talking points resonate with Turkish and Muslim communities in Europe and leverage their concerns about discrimination and exclusion. The rise of civilisationist narratives and identity politics in mainstream societies in Western Europe has provided Ankara with a platform from which to amplify its narrative. Political parties like DENK and DAVA echo Ankara's talking points in their programmes, while simultaneously addressing the main concerns of migrant communities, such as discrimination and Islamophobia, and thereby rein-

forcing the alignment between Ankara's foreign-policy narrative and how the diaspora communities themselves feel.

## **Polarisation within the Turkish diaspora**

However, not every member of the Turkish diaspora is considered equally deserving of participation in the imagined nation promoted by the AKP leadership. If conservative morality is one crucial criterion for determining inclusion or exclusion, loyalty to Erdoğan and the AKP is another.

The ethnically and religiously diverse nature of the Turkish diaspora has long been a source of tension among Turkey-origin migrants. Political partisanship – in particular, loyalty to Erdoğan and the AKP – has exacerbated the frictions and given rise to new fault lines within the diaspora between pro-AKP supporters and opposition parties, including the right-wing Good Party (IyiP) and the splinter parties that have emerged from the AKP, such as the liberal-conservative DEVA and the more traditionalist-conservative Gelecek. During last year's twin elections in Turkey, isolated violent incidents in Belgium, the Netherlands and France involving clashes between AKP supporters and opposition voters were a vivid illustration of just how fractured the diaspora is.

Furthermore, the AKP's efforts to outlaw and undermine Gülenists following the 2016 failed coup attempt have generated tensions between AKP supporters and those who were affiliated with the Gülenist network in previous years. Indeed, the political polarisation within the diaspora – which is based on who is loyal to Erdoğan and the party and who is not – adds a layer of complexity to the dynamics within the Turkish communities in Europe.

## **Transnational repression**

Indeed, since it fell out with the Gülenists, the AKP government has stepped up its

repressive measures even outside Turkey. In Germany, for example, the authorities launched investigations in 2017 into the activities of imams and other members of the Turkish-Islamic Union for Religious Affairs (DITIB) who were alleged to be spying on Turkish nationals suspected by Ankara of having links to the Gülenist network. At the same time, religious attachés at Turkish diplomatic missions in the Netherlands, Austria, Switzerland and Belgium were reported to be collecting information on suspected Gülenist sympathisers and passing it on to Ankara. As part of its global campaign against the Gülenists, Ankara has been deploying “mobility controls, detentions, and illegal renditions”, according to a detailed report by Freedom House.

However, Gülen's supporters are not the sole targets of Ankara's repressive measures. Since 2016, these tactics have also been applied to a broader group of individuals whom Ankara considers a threat. For example, in exchange for greenlighting Sweden's NATO membership, Turkey demanded that Stockholm extradite those included on a list of individuals who allegedly had ties to both the Gülenist network and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which Turkey, the EU and the US all regard as a terrorist organisation. In a speech at the Turkish parliament on 16 January 2024, Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan, formerly the head of the Turkish National Intelligence Organisation, noted that Ankara had been actively taking measures to slash the financial support that the PKK received from “anti-Turkey groups” within Europe. Meanwhile, in late March, there were violent confrontations between members of the Turkish and Kurdish diaspora in Belgium.

## **Outlook**

Given the political, social and economic landscape of Turkey, it is likely that in the coming years, Ankara will continue i) exploiting grievances, particularly of Muslim migrants and their foreign-born children, ii) emphasising the perceived differences

between the Turkish diaspora and the host society, iii) polarising the Turkish diaspora and iv) repressing political dissent of Turkish origin. Ankara's emphasis on defending Islam aligns with the AKP's ongoing efforts to Islamise everyday life, particularly within the family and in the educational sphere. The divisions within the diaspora are likely to persist, too, not least because of growing migration from Turkey to Europe. In 2023, the number of Turkish citizens applying for asylum in EU countries reached an annual all-time high.

However, there are several factors suggesting the appeal of the AKP leadership for the Turkish diaspora appears to have reached a certain limit. First, while voter turnout has steadily increased since the 2014 presidential elections, the growth rate has been declining significantly over the years. The recent increase in turnout abroad – from 50.1 per cent in 2018 to 52.04 per cent in 2023 – can arguably be attributed, above all, to the efforts of opposition parties to mobilise voters. And the diaspora vote did not play as big a role in favour of Erdoğan as it did in previous elections: even without the votes cast abroad, the president won 51.91 per cent of the vote in the run-off election on 28 May 2023.

Second, European governments have in recent years increasingly been adopting an approach towards Ankara aimed at restricting its influence on the diaspora. For example, since 2018 Turkish political parties have not been allowed to organise election rallies within EU member states. While political actors can still reach constituencies through events at mosques and other associations, the public reach of such events is limited.

At the same time, European governments have taken measures to curb third-party funding to mosques. Austria, for example, banned foreign funding for religious associations in 2020 as part of an anti-terrorism package that included amendments to the country's Islam Act. For their part, other countries have imposed restrictions on imam training programmes. In December 2023, the German minister of internal affairs announced the decades-long practice

of Turkey-trained imams serving in Germany would be phased out. France introduced a similar measure in late 2023 aimed at promoting the independent recruitment and employment of imams. And three years earlier, in 2020, the French government banned the Grey Wolves, a Turkish far-right organisation affiliated with the ultranationalist MHP, which is a member of Erdoğan's People's Alliance and whose symbol had been outlawed in Austria in 2019 under legislation prohibiting the symbols of extremist organisations. The banning of the Grey Wolves has also been discussed in the Dutch and German parliaments, while the organisation features regularly in the annual German domestic intelligence-service reports at the federal and state levels. All these developments signify a more restrictive attitude towards external influences on religious and political activities within diaspora communities.

Finally, it is important to recognise that Turkish migrants and their foreign-born children are not passive recipients of Ankara's efforts to gain influence. For example, in 2018, following allegations of interference by the DITIB headquarters in Cologne and the Turkish religious attaché, the entire board of DITIB in Lower Saxony resigned. Ideology is not always the main reason for the appeal of the AKP; individual interests – both material and non-material – play a role, too. The success of the AKP leadership in co-opting the diaspora's civic space should not detract from what is a growing gap between the party's efforts to promote a conservative morality and the aspirations of today's younger generations.

## Recommendations

European governments should approach the AKP's efforts to gain influence over the diaspora bearing the above in mind.

The following deserves special attention:

- There is a need to differentiate between AKP policy and the actual grievances of the Turkish diaspora. The rise of far-right





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voices in many European countries notwithstanding, it is essential to signal to individuals with migration backgrounds that they have an equal place within mainstream society. This will help prevent Ankara from exploiting migrant resentments and filling a vacuum in the political landscapes of the host countries that exists amid anti-migrant and anti-Islam sentiments.

- In their statements and criticisms, European governments and political parties should clearly distinguish between the Turkish government and Turkish political parties, on the one hand, and Turkey and “the Turks”, on the other.
- The issue of more proportionate political representation should be considered.
- The same applies to the issue of religious representation. Despite differences among various European countries over how to regulate the religious realm, it is necessary to recognise Islam as part of the host society. Muslim religious organisations should be granted the same status, rights and obligations as Christian and Jewish religious bodies.
- At the same time, European governments should break the chains of administrative command between religious state bodies of foreign countries (such as Diyanet) and/or religious attachés, on the one hand, and Muslim associations in the European diaspora, on the other.
- Efforts should be directed towards ensuring the greater independence of mosque communities from Turkey. This could contribute to fostering a more inclusive and balanced representation within diaspora communities.

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