

German Media's Perception of Turkey

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ABSTRACT *The difficulty of rendering a meaningful image of the German media's perception of Turkey lies in the general character of modern media itself –as well as in its technical imperatives and economical paradigms. As the audience and consumers (and also as occasional producers) of a variety of media products, we are subject to an overall loss of quality, a lowering of professional standards, and a general degradation of the media's discourse in the past 15 years. Of course, this is not something specific akin to the coverage of Turkey and its issues. However, the case of Turkey's representation in the German media is particularly glaring.*

Politics? It's not a Simple Equation

In a purely mechanical world-view, one would presume that the present media coverage of Turkey in Germany would be a mere reflection of the political climate or direct political will, influencing the different German media outlets. On the one hand (see below), a direct and overt attempt of imposing a political will goes against the grain of established relations between politics and the media. On the other hand, the presentation of Turkey in German media is even more counter-intuitive to the most recent state of relations between

the German government (and its actions inside the EU) and the Turkish administration.

Concerning German-Turkish relations, German Chancellor Angela Merkel has transformed her stance and her policies since running against Gerhard Schröder, who was an outspoken supporter of Turkey, before she took office the first time in 2005. From Merkel's beginnings and her then-critical stance towards Turkey to her latest position as a dynamic force in the negotiations between Ankara and Brussels –there has been a remarkable transformation. Compared to Britain, France and some Central European EU member states,

* Islamische Zeitung, Germany

Merkel has isolated her politics from destructive ideological neoconservative trends. In this, Angela Merkel follows a tradition of disconnecting Germany's foreign policy from internal ideological debates.

If there were to be any deduction, explaining the present media coverage by looking at the political landscape, we would have to search elsewhere and for different factors. I would suggest two possible, rather loose, connections: One would be a remnant of the so-called "ethical foreign policy" preferred by the Schröder-Fischer coalition. This might be the source of a critical attitude on the part of the rather left-leaning branch of Germany's media with its strong focus on issues surrounding human rights and their perceived violations. Another strain –rather more focused on the ideological debate in Germany– involves using Turkey in a banal juxtaposition of "Christian" Europe vs. "Islamic orient." For those conservatives dissatisfied with Merkels' non-ideological approach, a predominantly negative coverage of Turkey might be considered a vote against Merkel herself.

No Unified Media Landscape in Germany

Several factors contribute to the common reporting of foreign affairs in Germany, and shed light on German media coverage of Turkey. One of them is the relatively close and generally stable relationship between Ankara and Berlin. Another factor,



<http://www.sabahdeutsch.de/der-spiegel-hassliebe-erdogan/>.

which has a growing significance, is the rising participation of journalists (as well as politicians) of Turkish ancestry in the debate itself.

The German media recipient, depending on his or her educational level and interest, will find a widespread variance in the quality of reporting –or the lack of it. This is the case in regard to media in general, and in its coverage of issues surrounding Turkey in particular. On the one hand, there is a sober, balanced and non-partial coverage of Turkish subjects available –especially when the respective newspaper, magazine or broadcaster relies upon the experience of experts and academics. But for some years, we have had to take into consideration the pendulousness of many media institutions in Germany. At a closer look, one finds an oscillation between negative

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and positive content. For example, a highly rhetorical editorial with the usual slogans about Turkey might be followed by a sober interview with one of Germany's leading experts on foreign affairs or a feature about the effects of globalization on Turkey's society.

In the past couple of years (sparked by the Taksim events, the rise of ISIL in the Levant, Turkey's exported conflicts, and the ongoing success of AK Party politics) a growing chorus of journalists and media outlets have emerged who demonstrate predominantly negative attitudes towards the present Turkish government and political landscape. Alas, even a cursory glance over the available content of conservative (neoconservative, to be precise) and, ironically, left-liberal newspapers and magazines provides plenty of material. Some media outlets, foremost among them the daily *Die Welt*, are known for employing leading commentators on Turkish issues who have a veritable negative at-

titude toward Turkey and its present government.

One could, as some do, come to the conclusion that Germany's journalists and writers are merely a bunch of unfair demagogues and slanderers of Turkey. Which would be wrong, of course. But, it would be equally wrong to conclude in turn that the media perception is without influence. It has, of course, an impact on the wider public discourse and on the general public. To give a recent example: The immediatism of the media, as in the case of the recent terror bombings in Istanbul's Sultan Ahmet quarter, led to a decrease of tourist bookings by 40 per cent.

Different Standards

In order to understand the real or perceived attitudes embedded in the German media's presentation of Turkey and its essential questions, one has to understand the specific characteristics of the German situation. Since the formation of the modern German republic, direct attempts to influence the media have not been the norm. Furthermore, occasional attempts to do so have hardly met with success. Closing down a newspaper or imprisoning a journalist by direct means has been rare in the past 67 years. Of course, the republic has her own "culture" of political lobbying and influence-seeking in the media. An example is the peculiar system of Germany's governmental or publicly financed broadcasters (TV, radio and internet) which is slightly

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different from the commercial media –since a political influence, alongside with pressures on the journalists, is not unknown there.

Despite the obvious political sympathies and leanings of editorial boards, direct pressure is usually rejected by the professional media. Such pressure is viewed as an undue influence by third parties. Nevertheless, some media outlets do publish along political divides. The supposed independence of the media has fostered a spirit which might be perceived by others as irreverence towards heads and organs of state. The recent critical or even harsh coverage of Turkey has been observed by many political figures in Turkey and by German Turks as “defamation,” “bashing” or “slander.” Understandable as this sentiment might be, it overlooks the fact that Germany’s political media is comparably vicious concerning other items too.

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sion-making. In order to find voices closer to the political epicenter one has to include the publications of leading think tanks like the *Stiftung Politik und Wissenschaft* (Foundation for Politics and Science). Here, a far more sober and analytical tone prevails, as does a spirit of *Realpolitik*. As far as Turkey is concerned, however, the lines between politics and media are becoming more blurred. Some politicians, mostly leftist with supposed sympathies with the PKK and their affiliates, are using some newspapers and magazines for their undeterred criticism of Turkey’s government and its policies. Ironically, they find common ground with a more right-wing criticism. The latter one has been driven in his arguments also by “cultural” imperatives like preserving a supposedly ‘Christian Europe’ etc.

Germany – A Special Case

Germany finds itself in a special situation in regard to Turkey, unlike many other countries with a large media landscape (even though it constantly shrinks due to the concentration processes in the industry). Germany’s large community of Turks, as well as German citizens of Turkish origin or background, provides extra layers of debate and reflection. This section of Germany’s immigrant population is rapidly participating in our society, and turning itself into an active agent in shaping the media’s representation of Turkish issues. To date, this small but growing group of Turkish media professionals can only be considered

an exception to the majority cases of covering foreign affairs.

Today, Germany's Turkish segment of our population is participating directly, indirectly, and actively as recipients in the coverage of Turkey and Turkish politics. Some correspondents and commentators of Turkish affairs are themselves of Turkish origin. And some of these are the harshest ones when it comes to criticism. Adding to this, political currents and divides within Turkey (for example, the old establishment vs. the AK Party, Kurdish activists and others groupings) have been imported to Germany, and have their counterparts in Germany's society and field of media.

In Germany today, persons with a Turkish background are not just writing about Turkish affairs. They are also participating in the German-Turkish debate and in politics themselves. Some are social activists, others influential members of established political parties and still others are operating the growing selection of Turkish grassroots media projects in Germany. It should not be a surprise that the rifts within Turkey itself are finding their equivalents here. Ironically, the German media's coverage has come under fire from this segment of our society. The motivations behind this criticism are two-fold. One camp follows a Turkish lead and perceives media coverage in Germany for example as "defamation" or "slander." The other camp sometimes criticizes mainstream media for not attacking Turkey enough for what it

perceives as repression and injustice perpetrated by the government and the ruling party in Ankara.

Against the Historical Grain

An unbiased look on the given question must, like other debates, take tradition into account. This would also, of course, be valid for the rich and varied history and institution of German-Turkish relations. Recently, the well-known German historian Eberhard Straub justly criticized the great lack of historical knowledge on the part of our journalists – and politicians – in this respect. Straub stated in an interview with the Muslim monthly *Islamische Zeitung*, that "journalists or politicians do not have the necessary literacy," when the debate is directed towards Turkish issues.

Later, in Federal Republic, the Turkish expatriate workers set out on their long and also sometimes stony path in Germany. Notwithstanding their hard labor, occasionally tough conditions and sometimes resentment, the more than 50 years of Turkish presence in Germany can justly be declared a success story. Vis-à-vis the challenge of mass migration in the past months, the Turkish community (which indeed is an integral part of present-day Germany) is a solid segment of our society. Indeed, a relevant segment of Germany's society perceives it as part of the new civility.

A double crisis, if you will, has clouded the domestic German debate



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during the past 15 years. A growing polarization and lack of communication between the parties has fostered a degradation of the media. Unfortunately, the German media's representation of Turkey (and related questions in Germany) was negatively affected as part of this trend.

This crisis has had a negative impact, in turn, on our media's coverage of present-day Turkey. Firstly, 9/11 and subsequent developments brought forth a catalytic transformation of previously outmoded and socially ostracized forms of prejudice, and launched them squarely back into the midst of society. The banished biological racism which, by the middle of the 1990s had lost most of its legitimation, returned in wake of the nihilistic attacks as a growingly accepted form of "cultural critique."

Unfortunately, German Muslims found themselves in an increasingly tense intellectual climate, shaped significantly by the media's coverage, a climate whose landscape was perceived predominately as "Islam." This trend touches on our subject since the absolute majority of the local Muslims are of Turkish descent. They maintain a vivid and dynamic relationship with Islamic traditions and institutions in Turkey. Due to the global and often aggressive "debate" revolving around everything supposedly "Islamic," Turks or German-Turks living in Germany were turned into negatively tainted surrogates for a rather undefined threat labeled with "Islam."

Secondly, the German version of the global debate on "Islam" coincided with a massive crisis of German con-

servatism (a development which is actually worldwide). It is also due to the tectonic changes in our society and the ascent of a new, globalized elite that conservatism in Germany lost its potential for formulating positive goals. Instead of being an active intellectual and political leadership, it turned to a negative dialectic.

The political and spiritual crisis of German conservatism created unproductive myths such as the idea of a "Christian Europe" (ignoring a fundamental, long-standing Muslim presence in our continent) in order to oppose Turkish membership in the EU. Rather than seeing present-day Turkey as a dynamic, new nation, this thinking clings to the failed neoconservative concept of a supposed *Clash of Civilizations*. This supposed ontological antagonism blinds this faction of the German debate –and its journalistic expressions– to the positive effects that a dynamic, friendly Turkey could have vis-à-vis extremist trends in the Middle East. Unfortunately, the growing economic and political relevance of Turkey for Germany has remained cloudy in this perspective.

Patterns of Negative Perception

It is not my intention to offer a tedious repetition of often interchangeable examples for negative press or abstract statistics about the quantification of media coverage. It suffices to say, that in the camp of partisan journalism we find an obvious amount of negativity, not to mention a plethora of politicians and activists as visit-

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ing authors in the editorial columns. Quite often, these are already predisposed towards a given perception of Turkey and Turkish policies. What does it say about one of the leading dailies in Germany, when it hired as their main correspondent in Turkey, on more than one occasion, persons who were far more than "critics"?

Of course, there is no justification –as some of the more simplistic pro-Turkish activists are currently arguing– for a forced pro-Turkish journalism. Unbiased media recipients would recognize this easily as a cheap attempt to exchange one partisanship for another. It is absolutely legitimate to write or report critically about Turkey and its present leadership –even if it may be painful for some or many. Especially when one has a sympathetic eye for the critical position of Turkey and here present leadership, there might be a need for a realistic position. Understandably, this kind of distant sobriety is difficult for countries which are engaged

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in militant action against internal and external foes.

There are well recognized (at least proclaimed) professional standards of journalism which should insure that there is a minimal amount of balanced and fair media. When claims to editorial objectivity are sacrificed, at a growing rate, to meet the audience's demands, then we enter a critical zone. And, in this case a need for a corrective coverage in order to reach a more realistic image will have to evolve and has to be satisfied –not the least because of the growing number of German-Turkish readers.

A minimal demand should be, in any case, the cessation of obvious stupidity and blatant partisanship. “Sultan Erdogan,” “Angela Merkel must not look away from Tayyipistan” or “Erdogan against the Kurds,” “The regime of Turkey’s president Erdogan incorporates aspects of fascism” – these are but a minute fraction of recent headlines in Germany. Even a cursory glance at the German media’s perception of Turkey prompts quite a stream of questions:

Why is the German media calling the Turkish president a “Sultan” while

staying traditionally silent about the present-day Egyptian government or the brutal rulers of places like Uzbekistan? There might be good reasons for reporting on the so-called presidential palace in Ankara. But, why is there no parallel mentioning that the HQ of Germany’s external secret service BND is far more expensive than the former. The complex in Berlin exceeds Ankara’s –including moving costs– by roughly one billion Euros. Another, more serious, question is why Germany’s media has become so preoccupied by the internal freedoms of Turkish citizens and minority rights while there was no comparable interest when Ankara was ruled by the old elite or military dictatorships? Why is a justified critical analysis of Turkey’s policy towards Syria not put into the perspective of a disastrous decade of interventionism in the Near East which created the ground for ISIL/Daesh? Why are parts of Germany’s media not able to distinguish between the Kurdish population and the PKK and are therefore attacking a “war against terror” which they otherwise support, even if it entails a brutal war by drones?

Behind the tediousness of “breaking news” and the present-day immediatism of modern media, there are long-term trends in this respect. In some magisterial works (e.g. Kai Hafez’ book on the German media coverage of the Islamic world and subjects surrounding Islam) covering the 1980s and 1990s, you find some of the same patterns. Certain issues like the “Kurdish question” or “human

rights” come to the forefront when recent events necessitate them. The ongoing issue of Turkey’s EU membership was, according to Hafez, only put on the media’s agenda when there was political pressure for it.

As Siegfried Quandt attested for some months in 1995, there was an under-reporting of subjects like economy or culture. Quite often, and even without a negative impetus, one misses a rounded picture of Turkey. In the midst of many crises, it seems normal to report only something dramatic or negative. But, one should not forget that Turkey has undergone enormous changes since the 1980s and 1990s. As a renewed and dynamic nation, Turkey deserves the same standards of media coverage that we journalists would apply to comparable places.

Realizing the Value of Turkey

Despite the cacophony of opinion-based writings, one must not forget that there are plenty of intelligent experts and journalists who know the value of Turkey. *Deutsche Welle*, the foreign German broadcaster, for example, wrote on February 1, 2016 about a “difficult partnership.” But he did not forget to speak also about a need for “re-vitalization.” Several pressing problems make it necessary for Berlin and Ankara to cement their traditional friendship in order to brace for things to come.

One of the direst of these problems is the migration crisis which currently

holds the Mediterranean countries and EU members in its grip. Luisa Seeling acknowledged in a commentary dated January 31, 2016 for the daily *Süddeutsche Zeitung* the urgent need for the EU to support and strengthen Ankara under pressure from migration which is permanently fueled by the armed conflict in the region. Nico Fried went even further on February 8, 2016. Given the present state of Europe, he concluded, Turkey is presently the most important partner of German chancellor Angela Merkel – and “the most European one.”

Even though there might be plenty of global storms we should not forget the positive potential of the German-Turkish relationship. The possibilities of Turks living in our country are a positive asset for both sides. This should not be underestimated and deserves a fitting place in Germany’s media. A symbol for this potential was a small story from the South-Western town of Schwäbisch Hall where two former presidents, Christian Wulff and Abdullah Gül, spoke in a local mosque. The friends conversed about the necessity of a strong German-Turkish partnership. Fittingly, the guest from Turkey advised the local Turkish community to engage with the local media.

Demand for Alternatives

The handful of Germany’s journalists and academically rooted experts are not the only ones who provide a sober voice about Turkish issues today.

A rising multitude of German citizens with Turkish roots is engaging with the media sector on a national level. Whilst there are already plenty of Turkish journalists working in the mainstream media, we can also witness a significant rise of media projects under the direction of German-Turks. Most of them are based in the internet and rely heavily on the advantages of social media.

One of their motivations is dissatisfaction with what they perceive as “Erdogan-Bashing” (a term coined by one blogger in June 2013) by a segment of the mainstream media. On one hand, they observe an unfair strain in the German media’s representation of Turkey. This is aggravated by what is perceived by many German Turks as a blatant disregard for the Turkish successes of the past decade. On the other hand, a large segment of the Turkish immigrant population in Germany has still a strong identification with Turkey and its present leadership. Everything which is “defamation” or “slander” for them has to be –in this rationale– an attack on their own identity.

Germany’s media market is shrinking. Even the ongoing concentration processes and the intra-enterprise attempts of cost-cutting (which also cuts the quality of coverage) have

been unable to stop this decline. Beyond the necessary ethics of professional journalism, can Germany’s media houses allow themselves to lose German-Turkish readers to the internet or their Turkish competitors? The weekly *Die ZEIT* documented in February 2014 that the Germany media’s depiction of Turkey is in the eyes of their readers with Turkish roots– one-sided.

One example of a different approach may be found in the ongoing academic program of the Muslim monthly *Islamische Zeitung* and its partners. This independent academy is working with different partners to further several socio-political debates in Germany. One aim is to bring several experts together in order to discuss relevant questions in the fields of politics, culture, economy and arts.

Under the headline “Idea and Reality – Turkey as Projection Screen,” several events are dedicated to different aspects of the German-Turkish relationship –in the past, present and future. One aim of the program is to educate journalists and other media personal. Since direct encounters and debates are the lifeblood of professional journalism, it is to be hoped that Germany’s media will deal in future with Turkey’s reality and not only with their own perceptions. ■