

ANDREY BELINSKY. SHADOW OF ANKARA SPREAD OVER THE SPREE. RECEP TAYYIP ERDOGAN'S POLICY TOWARDS THE TURKISH COMMUNITY IN GERMANY // *The article was written for the bulletin "Russia and the Moslem World."*

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Abstract. The article examines the politics of R.T. Erdogan in relation to the Turkish community of Germany. It is noted that since his coming to power in 2003, Turkey has begun to intensify its activity in relation to compatriots living in the FRG. The main directions of the new policy are the preservation of Turkish identity, political control over the diaspora and suppression of dissidents.

The appearance of Turkish warships on the Greek sea shelf, the support of the Libyan Government of National Accord and military operations in Syria and Iraq once again confirmed the thesis repeatedly voiced by politicians and experts - since the coming to power of Recep Tayyip Erdogan in 2003, the interests of the Turkish Republic have gone far beyond limits of Asia Minor. The three-million-strong Turkish community of the FRG, numerical, economic and political potential of which has acquired considerable importance for elaborating the external and internal political course of official Ankara, is in the zone of special attention of the country's new elite.

Its formation was initiated by an agreement concluded in 1961 between Germany and Turkey, which opened the floodgates

for labor migration from Central and Eastern Anatolia, literally suffocating from overpopulation. Initially viewed by both sides as a temporary, purely economic phenomenon, migration has since become a constant variable in relations between the two countries, and Turkish eateries and shops with small interspersing of mosque minarets have become an integral part of the landscape of West German cities.

It would not be entirely correct to say that in the 1960s–1980s the Turkish government did not pay due attention to compatriots living in the FRG. However, its main efforts were directed primarily at protecting the economic interests of its citizens and providing them with access to the social system. The political significance of the dynamically developing Turkish community was viewed mainly through the prism of the struggle against left-wing radical and Kurdish activists.

Since the mid-1980s, Ankara has become aware of the growing importance of the Turkish community living in Europe¹, as evidenced by a number of steps in this direction. “Firstly,” notes Y. Aydin, an expert at the Berlin Science and Politics Foundation, “the Turkish government has ingrained the practice of coordinated protection of interests in relation to the respective resident countries, communes or local state institutions. Secondly, now it mobilized Turkish citizens abroad in situations that affected “national interests” and tried to use migrants in its struggle against Islamist, Kurdish-nationalist and left-wing radical groups ...”².

However, a qualitative shift in the policy towards the Turkish diaspora of the FRG took place after the victory of the conservative Islamic Justice and Development Party (Turk. Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi) in the parliamentary elections in 2003 and the election of R.T. Erdogan for the post of Prime Minister. This shift was due to at least two factors. First, by this time the Turkish community of the FRG had become a significant factor, both from a political and economic point of view. So, according to the data of the same Y. Aydin for 2014, half of Turkish

entrepreneurs in Western Europe (70,000) lived in the Federal Republic of Germany. The fact that about 1.4 million Turks have the right to participate in the elections cannot be disregarded, which in itself is an important factor in the internal political struggle. Secondly, since the AKP came to power in the Turkish establishment, the concept of "neo-Ottomanism" has gradually become established, the core of which has become an active (and in some places quite aggressive) foreign policy in those regions that were once under the rule of the Sublime Port. If in the first years of Erdogan's tenure in power, the country's foreign policy was guided by the principle of "Zero problems with neighbors" put forward by Ahmet Davutoglu, and the question of joining the European Union was seriously discussed at the highest level, then the rapid economic growth, fueled by the ambitions of the Turkish leader, led to a change in the political course; from now on, Turkey must regain its former position in the Middle East, North Africa and the Balkans.³ In these ambitious plans, the Turkish community of the FRG was assigned one of the key roles. So, what specific goals did the Turkish leadership pursue in relation to their compatriots?

The primary task of Ankara was to maintain by all available means the national and religious identity of the Turkish community of the FRG. The loss of culture or the complete assimilation of the Turks living in the FRG were not included in the plans of R.T. Erdogan and the AKP, not only for ideological reasons, but also because they would deprive them of an important instrument for achieving domestic and foreign policy goals. The importance of the top officials of Turkey attached to the preservation of the cultural and religious values of their compatriots can be judged from the speech of R.T. Erdogan, delivered in 2008 in front of 16,000 supporters in Cologne. In the speech of the Turkish leader, words were heard, the meaning of which should not cause any doubts among either the audience or an outside observer: "I well understand your sensitivity when it comes to assimilation. No one can expect you to accept

assimilation. No one can expect you to assimilate. Assimilation is a crime against humanity.”⁴ These words caused a storm of indignation among German politicians, complicating the already difficult relations between Berlin and Ankara.

The Turkish prime minister's declaration was not just a figure of speech or an attempt to score political points in the future election race. Back in 1984, with the active participation of the authorities of the Turkish Republic, the “Turkish-Islamic Union of Religious Institutions” (DITIB) was created, designed not only to satisfy the spiritual thirst of the Turks living far from their homeland, but also to strengthen the influence of the authorities on the Turkish community of the FRG. Thus, the candidacies of all imams of DITIB were approved by the Council for Religious Affairs under the Turkish government, and funding came directly from the state treasury. With the AKP coming to power, the number of mosques controlled by DITIB reached 900, and it gradually turned from an organization loyal to the Turkish authorities into “Erdogan’s long arm.” Providing a platform for the Turkish leader’s speeches, actually participating in the election campaign, or spreading conservative ideology among believers – all this actually turns DITIB into a German branch of the ruling AKP.

However, the Turkish government seeks to exert influence not only through DITIB, but also through other organizations. In particular, in 2007, with the direct support of Ankara, the Yunus Emre Institute (Turk. Yunus Emre Enstitüsü). Organized on the model of the Goethe Institute and the Confucius Institute, it was to become an effective instrument of “soft power” and a conductor of Turkish foreign policy abroad.⁵ Along with creating a positive image of the country, the Yunus Emre Institute supports language and culture through the organization of language courses, and also provides financial support to students in Turkey. But, as in the case of DITIB, the institute also performs a number of unofficial functions, that are entirely in the wake of Turkish foreign policy. “In the multi-lingual magazine “t.r.”,

published by the Institute, in the Turkish-English issue of January / February 2017 – notes the Swiss *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* – there appears an article titled “Turks brought freedom to Europe”. [...]. Afyondzhu⁶ (author of the article – A. B.) describes how in the 16th century Protestants found refuge in the European territories of the Ottoman Empire.⁷ As we can see, the Yunus Emre Institute sometimes acts not only as a popularizer of the Turkish language and culture, but also as a propaganda mouthpiece for the ruling AKP.

In addition to such official institutions as DITIB and Yunus Emre Institute Ankara also actively works as representatives of civil society, as evidenced, for example, by close cooperation of the AKP and the biker club “Osmanen Germania BC”. According to the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, three club leaders, former club president Mehmet B., former vice-president S. Selcuk and head of the Stuttgart branch, Levent U, have been in contact with representatives of the Union of Turkish-German Democrats, the AKP’s foreign affiliate. The subject of the negotiations was probably the financial support of the club in exchange for performing a number of tasks for Ankara (political agitation, surveillance or intimidation of political opponents, etc.).⁸

The network of official and private organizations, religious institutions and interest clubs, which is widely spread over the Turkish diaspora of the FRG, gives the ruling circles of Turkey the opportunity to mobilize supporters to achieve their external and internal political goals. Preparations for a referendum on amendments to the Turkish Constitution, which were supposed to turn the country into a presidential republic, became a showcase of all pro-Erdogan forces in the FRG.

DITIB, the Union of Turkish-German Democrats and other organizations actively campaigned for their adoption. Such foreign policy steps of Turkey as the military operation in Syria against the Kurds were also accompanied by a noisy propaganda “chorus” conducted from the shores of the Bosphorus. “After the

entry of the Turkish army into Syria, the Office of Religious Affairs (Turk. Diyanet) called to pray in mosques for the victory of Turkey. Subsequently, in the mosques that are part of DITIB, videos were shown showing preschool children in military uniform"⁹. Actions of this kind inevitably arouse criticism and alarm from the side of German politicians and the press.

Ankara connects certain hopes with the more active participation of the German Turks in the political life of the FRG. "Why shouldn't we have burgomasters in Germany, the Netherlands, Belgium and other European countries? Why shouldn't we have representatives or groups in political parties?"¹⁰ – asked the Turkish prime minister in Cologne. It is with the political activity of the Turkish community that Erdogan and the AKP link the improvement of Turkey's image and the strengthening of their negotiating positions. And although currently there are members of the German Bundestag with Turkish roots, not all of them support Erdogan's policy.

However, a much greater cause for concern in the eyes of Berlin is undoubtedly the activities of the Turkish special services on the territory of the FRG. As noted above, espionage on political opponents of the government (Kurdish activists, members of left-wing parties) also took place in the 1980s and 1990s, but after an unsuccessful attempt at a military coup in July 2016, the situation changed radically. The ensuing reprisal against the putschists began to rapidly ratchet up repressions, the victims of which were thousands of obvious and imaginary supporters of the opposition preacher F. Gulen, journalists, teachers and officials. Therefore, it is not surprising that the Turkish community of the FRG, among the members of which there were many critics of the regime, came under the scrutiny of the MIT (National Intelligence Organization of Turkey) intelligence service. As it was noted in the report by the German Federal Service for the Protection of the Constitution of Germany of 2019: "The presence of a large Turkish community and a large number of organizations, as well as diplomatic missions creates a

fertile ground for the activities of MIT.”¹¹ For well-known reasons, in a public report, German counterintelligence officers did not indicate either the number of agents or their specific operations. However, intelligence expert E. Schmidt - Eenboom, citing his sources, believes that the number of MIT informants in the Turkish community can reach at least 6,000 people who work “... at tourist bureaus, Turkish Airlines, banks, mosques and other institutions.”¹²

The following two facts are the most eloquent evidence of the recent intensification of the activity of the Turkish special services. So back in 2014, the prosecutor's office accused three MIT agents of monitoring Kurds and Yezidis. The fact that one of the defendants was Mohammed Taha Gergerlioglu, Erdogan's former adviser,¹³ made the situation especially piquant. Alinal Ozül, a young Turk, who was forced to move to Germany in 2016 because of his family's affiliation with the Gulen sect, was also caught in the crosshairs of the reconnaissance. Once in the small town of Wolfhagen, he visited a mosque where he hoped to receive support. However, the local imam, having learned about the political motives for the migration, began to threaten him and demanded that the young man immediately register at the embassy. He was subsequently attacked by several members of the local community¹⁴. Both of these cases clearly demonstrate how much the Turkish diaspora of the FRG is “shone through” by the special services and how strong the influence of Erdogan is¹⁵.

Based on control and close work with various organizations, espionage and threats, skilful propaganda and generous financial assistance, the policy of the Turkish authorities towards the diaspora has borne certain fruit. In parliamentary and presidential elections, the ruling AKP gained more votes among the Turks living in Germany than in Turkey itself. So in the June 2018 elections, the AKP received 42.56% in Turkey, while in Germany it managed to collect a truly rich harvest of 56.3%¹⁶.

It is obvious that the policy of the ruling elite in relation to the Turkish diaspora creates preconditions for numerous conflicts with the official authorities of the FRG. In November 2016, deputies of the Bundestag from the Left Party sent a request to the government regarding the activities of the Turkish special services on the territory of Germany. The document cited numerous facts of MIT surveillance of German citizens of Turkish origin. However, official Berlin prefers to keep diplomatic silence for the time being, preferring to once again exacerbate the already difficult relations with Turkey.

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15. In this case the activities of MIT may not be limited only to spying on the political opponents of the regime. The mysterious murder of three activists of the Kurdish Workers' Party in January 2013 in Paris and the kidnapping of Gülen supporters around the world by Turkish special services are direct confirmation of this.
16. This support of the domestic and foreign policy of R.T. Erdogan and the AKP on the part of a significant part of the diaspora is explained not only by the effective work of the Turkish authorities, but also by a number of other factors. First, the majority of those living in Germany are from Central and Eastern Anatolia. Conservative attitudes and high religiosity ultimately determine their sympathy for the AKP. Secondly, the lack of integration into German society and the feeling of national vulnerability among many German Turks create fertile ground for Erdogan's nationalist rhetoric, and in their eyes the Turkish president is turning into the "father of the nation", the defender of its interests. Thirdly, representatives of the diaspora do not directly face Turkey's internal problems (depreciation of the national currency, repression, etc.), which determines rather high sympathy for the Turkish president.