

Dear Friends,

I am very happy to announce that the European Institute of Istanbul Bilgi University has now published the second issue of the Germany Brief. Dr. Peter Widmann, who is a member of the Department of International Relations and the European Institute, is up-dating you about one of the recent debates in Germany. These briefs are being circulated to our e-mailing list in English and Turkish, and also accessible online in our website (<http://eu.bilgi.edu.tr>). In the second issue, Dr. Widmann is discussing about the Privileged Partnership proposed by the CDU within the framework of Turkey-EU relations. Dr. Widmann asserts that the CDU has so far consumed the idea of Privileged Partnership as a tool to be used in domestic politics. He also underlines that the use of this idea is no longer sustainable due to the recent problems of the European space stemming from euro crisis.

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Beyond Privileged Partnership

German Christian Democrats and Liberals search for new approaches towards Turkey

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Even though German Foreign Minister Guido Westerwelle did not make it to the front pages when he spoke in Istanbul a few weeks ago on occasion of the Bertelsmann Foundation's Kronberg Talks, some German observers did register a new tone. Michael Thumann, Istanbul-based correspondent of the weekly "Die Zeit", described Westerwelle's speech as emotional and conceptually strong, and the Financial Times' German edition tried to catch the Minister's approach in the headline "Westerwelle's Turkish Spring".



Guido Westerwelle, German Foreign Minister

Indeed, some observers were surprised to see the Minister, a leading figure in the centre-right German Liberal Party (FDP) and a key representative of the governing conservative-liberal coalition, hailing socialist François

Hollande's success in the French presidential elections and at the same time accusing conservatives of following a mere domestic agenda towards Turkey. Westerwelle said: "It is self-evident that the European Union cannot predict if and when Turkey will join the club. But our Turkish friends do have the legitimate expectation that progress must depend on Ankara's own merits, not on domestic considerations elsewhere. I am optimistic that the latest elections in Europe will strengthen this principle. I am optimistic to overcome the standstill."

Yet Westerwelle's position is hardly new. In January 2010 during his first official visit in Ankara, he has pointed out that Berlin will adhere to the accession negotiations. Regarding the coalition partner CSU, the Bavarian branch of the German Christian Democrats, and their demand to cancel negotiations, he said at that time: "This has nothing to do with responsible foreign policies." Still, Westerwelle's recent remarks are an even broader hint to the distance he keeps to the idea of a "Privileged Partnership" as an alternative to a Turkish EU membership that is favoured by his Christian Democratic coalition partners. Besides his urge for re-dynamised accession negotiations Westerwelle suggested closer German-Turkish ties through a "Strategic Dialogue" chaired by the Foreign Ministers and a "Turkish-German Youth Bridge" inspired by programmes Germany developed with its neighbours France and Poland.

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New undertones from the centre-right

Westerwelle's remarks can be seen as a part of a bigger picture. A closer look reveals a tentative change in attitudes among German centre-right policy elites towards an economically stronger and politically more significant Turkey. Not only among market-oriented Liberals but also among Christian Democrats signs of uneasiness with existing approaches become increasingly visible. Chancellor Angela Merkel's remarks during a press conference in Ankara after a meeting with her Turkish counterpart in March 2010 might have been only a first sign: "Now I have understood that Privileged Partnership has not a favourite appeal at all here."

However, signals from Christian Democratic foreign policy circles confirm the impression. Philipp Missfelder, CDU Foreign Affairs spokesman in the German Parliament, declared in an interview in September 2011: “Many Turkish politicians have communicated their disapproval of a Privileged Partnership often to me personally, and against this background I believe that we need a thinking process,



Elmar Brok, Chairman of the EP's Committee on Foreign Affairs

what we can offer Turkey beyond a privileged partnership in order to not lose the country as a partner.”

Two months later, in November 2011, CDU politician Elmar Brok, Member of the European Parliament for the European Peoples Party and chairman of the Affairs, indicated a possible direction of this thinking

process. In an extensive article on EU-Turkey relations for the EurActiv Network's German language webpage Brok entirely avoided the term “Privileged Partnership”, even in passages on possible alternatives to full membership. He predicted that neither the EU nor Turkey will fulfil accession conditions soon and called for negotiations on an “intermediate goal”. These negotiations should focus on a Turkish membership in the European Economic Area (EEA), currently the grouping that unites the 27 EU countries with Iceland, Liechtenstein and Norway into the Internal Market.

Brok made his suggestion in the context of a rather critical evaluation of recent developments in Turkey. He suspected Ankara of “neo-Ottoman tendencies” as well as “arrogance” and warned: “The recent impression is that Turkey is becoming a regional power without commitments to the EU”.

Brok wrote: “This can mean for example the adoption of 60 to 70 per cent of the *acquis communautaire*, a full membership in the Single Market and in the Schengen system. We would have gained much if such a ‘Norwegian status’ could be reached for a certain time. This would be not discriminating and could include everything from the Single Market to, ultimately, security policies. Then one could calmly and without further frustration see the coming developments. Such quick steps would have immediate positive effects for citizens and could show them the benefit of a European perspective. The strategy is realistic and can also make

the last step possible – if both sides develop in such a way that they consider it possible. Sweden, Finland and Austria have been successful with this strategy.”

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Low-key but significant

At first sight the shift visible in Broks article is not dramatic, since his suggestions resemble a “Privileged Partnership” insofar as they would result in a status that for the time being keeps Turkey outside the EU decision-making processes. Yet, against the background of the official Christian Democratic position on the issue a significant difference becomes visible: The final state of EU-Turkey relations remains open – also for a Turkish EU membership.

One might object that any analysis based on remarks of individual politicians risks to run into over-interpretation. Indeed, there have always been German Christian Democrats who differed from their party’s official position on Turkey. At present the most prominent among them is Ruprecht Polenz, chairman of the German Parliament’s Committee on Foreign Affairs and author of the book “Better for both – Turkey belongs into the EU”. Polenz stresses that his opinion might be a minority but not solitary position in his party and refers to other prominent Christian Democrats like the former Defence Minister Volker Rühle, the former President of the German Parliament Rita Süssmuth or the former Minister-President of Saxony Kurt Biedenkopf. However, all these politicians share one characteristic: The peak of their

party career lies behind them and meanwhile they are far away from their party's strategic centre. Polenz has announced not to run for a parliamentary seat any more in the 2013 general elections.

Elmar Brok by contrast is not only one of the prominent foreign policy experts of his party and chairman of the Christian Democrats Federal Expert Committee on Foreign, European and Security Policies that is in charge of drafting the party's objectives on these policy fields. In terms of media presence he regularly appears as the European voice of his party.

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Privileged Partnership and domestic politics

A further objection against the observation of a shift could be raised: The Christian Democrat's concept of "Privileged Partnership" has always been above all a tool to react on inner-party and domestic pressures - and these pressures remain. Indeed, when one recalls the history of the concept, its domestic purpose becomes obvious. The concept became prevalent in 2004 when formal EU-Turkey membership negotiations came in sight and Christian Democrats – at that time in the opposition - tried to formulate an alternative to a Turkish membership favoured by the Social Democratic Chancellor Gerhard Schröder.

First outlines of the concept, elaborated by Matthias Wissmann, then chairman of the German Parliament's EU Affairs Committee, and Karl-Theodor zu Guttenberg, then member of the Foreign Affairs Committee and later German Economy and – after that - Defence Minister, included a stronger integration of Turkey in the Single Market by abolishing still existing barriers, and an intensified and institutionalized cooperation in the framework of the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy.

German Christian Democrats could experience quickly that in relations to Turkey their approach did not lead them far. When Angela Merkel as an opposition leader came to Ankara in February 2004, the Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan rejected the idea



Angela Merkel, Chancellor of Germany

immediately since it would have resulted in his country's degradation from a candidate to a third state. As early as in 2006 a Working Paper of the Konrad Adenauer Foundation that is affiliated with the Christian Democratic Party recommended: "The political elite at the national or EU level should no longer use the concept of "Privileged Partnership", since Turkey, for whom the term was originally devised, has firmly rejected it."

Even among other European conservatives the success of the approach remained limited. In August 2005 – a few weeks before the general elections brought her into the Chancellor's office - Angela Merkel together with CSU leader Edmund Stoiber wrote a letter to conservative heads of government in Europe to promote their concept. In the end both failed to forge a common position among European centre-right politicians. In the case of France however the concept proved to be a successful export product: Already in January 2005 the CDU and the Gaullist UMP signed a joint declaration that warned of a loss of the European capacity to act if Turkey becomes an EU member. "Privileged Partnership" also found supporters in Vienna, where the centre-right Austrian People's Party (ÖVP) adopted the concept.

Privileged Partnership and inner-party cleavages

Even though privileged partnership quickly proved to be a dead birth on the level of EU-Turkey relations, Christian Democrats cherished the idea in the following years. The term even became part of the party programs of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and its Bavarian sister party, the Christian Social Union



(CSU). In its 2007 basic party program the CDU declared: "The full membership in the European Union cannot be the only answer in every case. Not only the fulfilment of the accession criteria is a condition for the admission of new members, but also the absorption capacity of the EU itself. We believe that the Privileged Partnership of the European Union and Turkey is the right solution." In the CSU's basic program, also approved in 2007, the rejection of a Turkish EU membership was explicitly connected with a cultural perspective: "The Christian Social Union advocates clear borders of the European Union. Besides geographical borders Europe for us also has borders there where there is a lack of a common historical and cultural ground." Both

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parties used the concept of Privileged Partnership in their manifestos for the 2009 European Parliament elections. In November 2011 the latest general party convention of the CDU in Leipzig confirmed the prominence of the concept and made it part of its general resolution on the party's EU policies.

While being fruitless and even damaging on an international level, the concept brought benefits on a domestic level. It could be used as an integration formula to bridge cleavages and contradictions inside the Christian Democratic Party. German Christian Democrats developed as a successful catch-all project after the Second World War, bringing together centre and right-of centre groups of

very different backgrounds, Catholics and Protestants, farmers and workers with a church affiliation, market liberals, conservatives as well as nationalists. Compared to other centre and centre-right formations in Europe, German Christian Democrats showed a high integration capacity for voters and activists from the centre to the very right. On the national level no political force right of the Christian Democrats established itself. German right wing populists never managed to gain more than regional significance, since Christian Democrats successfully prevented groups like the French Front National, Jörg Haider's Austrian Freedom Party or Geerd Wilders' Dutch Party for Freedom to thrive.

The precondition of this integration capacity was the capability to balance the needs of different groups, to reconcile the expectations of market liberals open to the chances of globalisation with those who see the nation state and traditional national identity as a shield against the threats of globalisation, who stayed sceptical of the social and cultural diversity that resulted from migration. Besides a further inner-party cleavage had to be bridged: The one between foreign policy elites thinking in terms of the EU's power to influence and stabilize its neighbourhood, securing the European energy supply and being attractive and credible enough to exert soft power towards key regions like Central Asia, the Middle East and Northern Africa on one side, and on the other side parts of the local party basis coming from a conservative

Christian background with a more parochial perspective perceiving Islam as a threat for the country's Christian character.

The concept of Privileged Partnership was a formula to at least intermittently pacify latent inner-party conflicts. It served as a signal to the more nationalist and Christian traditionalist circles among the voters and the party rank and file. At the same time the concept allowed the party elite to claim to respect the policy needs in international politics of binding Turkey close to the EU. "Privileged partnership" was symbolic politics securing inner-party coherence and mobilization capacity in elections.

The inner-party rhetoric compromise could survive for many years due to a time-tested division of responsibilities in German coalition governments. Since Christian Democrats have constantly been the bigger partner, they dominated the Chancellor's Office, while the smaller party – the Liberals and in times of the Grand Coalition the Social Democrats - took the Foreign Ministry. This resulted in "Privileged Partnership" being the party position of the Christian

Democrats, but not the position of the Federal Government – which until today saves

Angela Merkel from having to enforce it on the EU-level.

Accordingly, in their 2009 coalition treaty CDU, CSU and the liberal FDP found a compromise formula that stressed the openness of EU-Turkey negotiations: "The negotiations which commenced in 2005 with the aim of accession are an open-ended process that is not automatic in nature and the outcome cannot be guaranteed in advance. If the EU does not have the capacity to absorb a new member or if Turkey should not be in a position to meet all the obligations of membership, Turkey must be linked as close as possible to European structures in a way that allows the country to further develop its privileged relationship with the EU."

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Soon Christian Democrats will have to decide if they want to adhere to their existing approach. Germany's next general elections are scheduled for fall 2013, and even if the financial crisis will dominate the European agenda Christian Democrats will not be able to avoid the issue of EU-Turkey relations. As things stand, it seems that the more-of-the same formula will not work as it did in the past.

Numbered days of a concept

The price Christian Democrats had to pay for the successful integration of the more conservative segments of their voters and activists is obvious: “Privileged Partnership” was an element of defensive tactics. In the long run Christian Democrats, who proudly call themselves “the German party for Europe” in their basic party program, risk to marginalize themselves in a policy field of increasing significance without a positive vision that is communicable to Turkish partners. It seems that the Christian Democrats’ foreign policy elites have arrived at this conclusion. The question remains how many of those in their party they manage to convince who are mainly involved in domestic power struggles.

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