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An uninvited guest

If Germany's a democratic country, it should allow President Erdogan a platform whether it likes his views or not, says Niels Annen

German-Turkish relations are going through a rough patch. In the last year, hardly a month has gone by without a new stress test. In March 2016, there was the case of German comedian Jan Bohmermann, whose satirical poem about Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan sparked a diplomatic row. Now a German journalist, Deniz Yucel, is being held in a Turkish prison, on charges of propaganda and incitement to hatred. Between these two events we've seen Ankara recalling its ambassador over the German Parliament's Armenian resolution – recognising the mass killing of Armenians by Ottoman Turks during World War One as a "genocide"; contention over German lawmakers' right to visit soldiers at the Incirlik air base; waves of imprisonments and firings following the attempted coup in July 2016; the violent escalation of the Turkish-Kurdish conflict; Turkish complaints that Germany is not pursuing supporters of Fethullah Gülen, the Turkish preacher Ankara blames for the coup attempt in July 2016; and open accusations of spying.

Despite the greatest sympathy for Turkish sensitivities after the – luckily failed – coup attempt and admissions that Germans have also made mistakes, one can't overlook how President Recep Tayyip Erdogan is leading Turkey away from Europe and European values.

Germany has extended its hand to the Turkish government but there are no signs that Ankara will grasp it. A few weeks after the attempted coup, I wrote*[in German]* that Germany and Turkey must not create further distance between each other. Sadly, exactly that has happened.

In April, a constitutional referendum will be held in Turkey. The (so far theoretical) question of whether President Erdogan should be allowed to campaign in Germany ahead of this referendum is rousing strong emotions. My position is clear: I do not wish for Mr Erdogan to come here and advocate the destruction of democracy and the rule of law. But precisely because Germany is a democracy ruled by law – in which the freedoms of opinion, press and assembly do not exist merely on paper – it

would be wrong to stop him making an appearance. We know what he is campaigning for and we have to put up with it. Even when if reject his arguments. The important thing is that any appearance he makes remains peaceful. President Erdogan and his government officials bear special responsibility for that. They must not further polarise Turkish citizens here. As Germany's guest, Mr Erdogan must respect our rights and laws.

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At the same time, neither German politicians nor the public should roll out the red carpet for Mr Erdogan. The current situation in Turkey and especially Deniz Yucel's detention call for a frank discussion. In the face of groundless charges, *Die Welt* correspondent Yucel freely turned himself in to Turkish authorities. He did what any critical, independent journalist would have done. The decision to remand him in custody is incomprehensible and does not just harm German-Turkish relations. Above all, it damages Turkey itself.

In light of the ongoing state of emergency and the jailing and dismissal of thousands of judges and prosecutors, the likelihood of any independent judicial decision is zero. Yucel's case appears to be politically motivated. I see it as a way to further intimidate opponents of the planned constitutional changes, among them many parliamentarians of the pro-Kurdish HDP party who are already behind bars.

Journalist Deniz Yucel's case is not unique. More journalists are now imprisoned in Turkey than in any other country. Reporters without Borders publishes an annual World Press Freedom Index based on expert opinion and quantitative data. Turkey – a country that, at least officially, still wants to join the EU – occupies position 151 of 180.

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Whether Erdogan's intimidation attempts can succeed will be determined on April 16, when more than a million Turkish citizens who live in Germany will vote. Although much of the population may support a 'strong' Turkish state, it remains to be seen if Ankara's actions will attract support abroad.

Turkish institutions, including the security apparatus, have been weakened by their witch hunt of real and supposed Gülen supporters at the same time that 'Islamic State' terrorists pose a very real threat. Despite its stable partnership with Russia, Turkey is more isolated now

than it was a few years ago. Many governments are critical of Turkey's military engagement in Syria, which is aimed at the Kurds. The country is deeply divided socially and economically hard hit. Deniz Yucel's detention will not improve the situation. On the contrary: the negative headlines are scaring off foreign tourists as well as companies who would like to invest in the country but need legal certainty.

What should we do? Firstly, besides openly criticising the Turkish government strategy, we need to keep the channels of communication open to those in the country who support democracy and the rule of law. Yucel has received a great deal of support from courageous Turkish journalists and the opposition parties, CHP and HDP. Some members of Erdogan's own AKP have even criticised the journalist's detention. As the Nobel Peace Prize laureate and journalist, Carl von Ossietzky, wrote, 'In the age-old duel between physical violence and free thought, violence is always defeated.'

Secondly, German politicians need to keep their cool. Turkey's geopolitical situation will not change. We have common concerns, especially when it comes to fighting international terrorism that affects Turkey much more than it does Europe, and which demands our close cooperation. At the same time, we have to respect democratic values and demand that Turkey do the same.

It is not in our interest for Turkey to become part of the Middle East and disengage from Europe. But it is up to Turks to choose Turkey's path – and all that implies.



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