

# **Cross-Border Political Orientations of Migrants of Turkish Descent in Germany**

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## **Abstract**

Transnational political orientations and participation of immigrants are often distrusted, being interpreted as the result of a lack of loyalty towards the host society and a sign of failed assimilation. We present results from a representative survey which we conducted in 2017 among immigrants from Turkey and their descendants in Germany to examine the relationship between social integration and transnational political orientation. Our analyses show that those who are socially and politically well integrated actually tend to have a greater interest in Turkish politics than those who are less well integrated.

## **German Synopsis**

Grenzüberschreitenden politischen Orientierungen von Einwanderern wird oft mit Misstrauen begegnet. Interesse für das Herkunftsland wird als Zeichen mangelnder Loyalität zum Aufnahmeland und fehlgeschlagener Sozialintegration gedeutet. Der Beitrag beruht auf der Auswertung einer repräsentativen Befragung Türkeistämmiger in Deutschland aus dem Jahr 2017 und betrachtet den Zusammenhang zwischen Sozialintegration und grenzüberschreitender politischer Orientierung. Im Ergebnis zeigt sich eine vom Prozess der Sozialintegration weitgehend unabhängige politische Orientierung in Richtung Türkei. Wenn überhaupt, begünstigt die Sozialintegration eher das Interesse an türkischer Politik als dass sie dieses Interesse schmälert.

## Introduction

Currently 2.8 million people of Turkish descent are living in Germany. In terms of national origin, they are still the largest immigrant group in this country. Accordingly – and due to their relatively large cultural distance to German people – people of Turkish descent have been a subject of public debate for many years, especially with regard to their ‘social integration’. Moreover, no other immigrant group has been researched to a comparable extent by the domestic social sciences. The perception that this group constitutes a social problem and social sciences research have been closely interrelated, with issues addressed by research including social integration (in particular educational success and this group’s relationship to its host society), value orientation, deviance, and the inclination of people of Turkish descent towards naturalisation. At the beginning of the new millennium, the focus of public debate seemed to have shifted away to Muslims – a group defined not on a national but on a religious basis, which was seen as a particular challenge in view of Islamist terror activity.

Recently, however, people of Turkish descent have once again become the focus of debates on the success of immigrant integration. Reasons for this renewed focus include the increasingly authoritarian behaviour of the Turkish government and the resulting deepening of the social division between denominations (Alevi vs Sunni), ethnic groups (Turks vs Kurds), and worldviews (secularist vs religious), which also became apparent among the population of Turkish descent in Germany and which was intensified by the suppression of the Gezi Park protests in 2013, the end of the Turkish-Kurdish peace process in 2015, and the dispute over the introduction of the presidential system in Turkey in 2017. At the same time, political participation in Turkey from abroad has recently been made considerably easier. Whereas from 1961 onwards, people of Turkish descent who are living abroad could only vote in elections at border crossings, since 2012 it has also been possible for them to vote in Turkish consulates. Turkey is thus following a global trend. The number of countries that allow their citizens living abroad to vote in domestic elections is growing steadily (IDEA 2007, p. III).

Immigrants’ transnational political orientation and participation are often met with suspicion and are considered as stemming from a lack of political commitment to the immigrants’ host society. This is particularly true of Turkish immigrants in Germany, as reflected in the recent public discourse about their interest in politics outside of Germany and especially their sympathies for the Erdoğan regime, both of which are taken as evidence of poor social integration and a failure or an unwillingness to adhere to democratic principles.

In the context of Bloemrad (2015, p. 76), the narrative of a German national identity seems to have been particularly challenged by a combination of religious-cultural differences and a supposed lack of loyalty on the part of the population of Turkish descent. Even where this is not the case, a transnational political orientation is often thought to result from an absence of political opportunities for immigrants in the host country (see e.g. Koopmans/Statham 2003).

However, research on particular immigrant groups in specific institutional settings challenges such general assumptions. For example, assimilation might prove to be a prerequisite for cross-border political action (see e.g. Guarnizo et al. 2003).

Public debates on the integration of immigrants continue to adhere to nation state-centred paradigms. The potential for integration or disintegration, related to migration as an originally cross-border process, is largely overlooked by the general public, while migration research has been addressing issues concerning the relationship between migration, de-bordering, and integration since the 'transnational turn' in the 1990s. However, early research on the transnational activities of immigrants focused on remittances to their country of origin, which were interpreted as a strategy for ensuring that they would have the option to return if they chose to do so.<sup>1</sup> Only later (see, e.g., Sana 2005) – initially for the United States – were remittances considered in relation to a wide variety of possible functions and motives that might reflect immigrants' long-term cross-border commitment to their country of origin, which then resulted in a change of perspective.

Consequently, this text, too, is based on the assumption that social action, especially by immigrants, can take on a permanent cross-border character. The focus is then no longer on the question of whether immigrants are orienting themselves towards their country of origin or towards their host country, but on hybrid forms of affiliation whose consequences for (national) social integration – for example, in the dimensions of acculturation, placement, interaction, and identification (Esser 2001) – cannot be modelled conclusively. This corresponds with Hans' view (2010, pp. 69-70) that different dimensions of social integration permit varying degrees of multiple integration: a simultaneous labour market orientation towards Germany and Turkey

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Oser (1995) on people of Turkish descent in Germany, among other groups.

is not very realistic, whereas an identification with Germany and Turkey can be achieved 'additively'.

Few studies have been conducted on the transnational political orientation of immigrants in general, and of people of Turkish descent in Germany in particular, in contrast to studies on participation, party preferences, and electoral behaviour in host countries (most recently, Wüst/Faas 2018; Goerres et al. 2018).

We draw on a representative survey that we conducted among immigrants from Turkey and their descendants to examine the relationship between social integration and the degree and quality of transnational political orientation.<sup>2</sup>

Our data stems from a computer-assisted, bilingual, multi-topic telephone survey that the Centre for Studies on Turkey and Integration Research (ZfTI) conducted among 1,500 people of Turkish descent aged 18 and over throughout Germany in 2017. The survey measured indicators of the integration-related dimensions of acculturation, placement, interaction, and identification with the host society and the society of origin, as well as indicators of cross-border orientation, political integration into the host country, and party preference in Turkey.

We assume that different arrangements of assimilation, identity, residence, citizenship, and political participation in the host society lead to different forms of cross-border orientation, but that there is no linearity between these orientations and inclusion in the receiving society.

Our analyses show that this is true for the Turkish community in Germany and that those who are socially and politically well integrated actually do not display lower levels of interest in Turkish politics than those who are less well integrated.

## Results

The majority of respondents (49%) considered only Turkey to be their homeland, whereas 33% considered both Germany and Turkey to be their homelands. Correlations between levels of identification and social integration, if they exist at all, are extremely weak (identification and interaction: Cramér's  $V = 0.122^{***}$ ; identification and acculturation: Cramér's  $V = 0.079^{**}$ ). The response behaviour of second-generation immigrants is not significantly different from that of first-generation immigrants, which suggests that the country of origin will continue to be a major emotional point of reference in the future.

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<sup>2</sup> This text is an abridged version of Sauer/Halm (2018, in German).

Table 1: Degree of interest in Turkish politics by immigrant generation (not including marriage migrants, row percentages)

	Degree of interest in Turkish politics			
	low	moderate	high	mean*
First generation	40.2	27.6	32.2	0.92
Following generations	28.3	38.7	32.9	1.05
Gamma	n.s.			
n	1,095			

\* Means on a 3-point scale ranging from 0 = low degree to 2 = high degree of interest. Significance levels: \*\*\* < 0.001; \*\* < 0.01; \* < 0.05; n.s. = not significant.

34% of the respondents had a strong interest in Turkish politics, 35% had some interest, and 31% had little or no interest.

Bivariate analysis shows a significantly positive but weak correlation between this cross-border political orientation and the dimensions of social integration (acculturation:  $\gamma = 0.194^{***}$ ; placement:  $\gamma = 0.166^{***}$ ; interaction:  $\gamma = 0.150^{***}$ ). Thus, with increasing social integration, interest in Turkish politics tends to increase as well. Respondents who are highly educated and well integrated in the labour market, who work in higher-level positions, have a relatively high income, and have close ties with the majority society often have a cross-border political orientation. Interest in German and Turkish politics also correlates strongly ( $\gamma = 0.704^{***}$ ).

Many people of Turkish descent in Germany believed that they have few opportunities for political participation (38%). 31% thought that there are few such opportunities, 24% thought that there were quite a few, and only 8% thought that there were plenty of opportunities. However, this perception is not related to the participants' interest in Turkish politics. Of those who thought that there were few opportunities for their political participation in Germany, 42% stated that they were very interested in Turkish politics, while the percentage of those who thought that they had quite a few or plenty of opportunities was 41.

Multivariate analysis does not provide a comprehensive explanation for the respondents' interest in Turkish politics on the basis of the influence of dimensions such as social integration, generation, actual commitment and other indicators of political participation (e.g. citizenship, involvement in migrant organisations).

Multivariate analysis shows that only the low degree of social placement has a significant effect, in that the probability of a pronounced cross-border political orientation is then significantly lower than it is for a high degree of placement.

Overall, the bivariate and multivariate analyses of the data show that the extent to which people of Turkish descent in Germany are socially and politically integrated is only weakly correlated with having a cross-border political orientation and also proves to be largely independent of a respondent's generation.

Those highly interested in Turkish politics make up a very heterogeneous group in which those who are politically and socially well integrated in Germany are overrepresented. This suggests that, at least in part, this is the result of additive or multiple integration, which seems to contradict the assumption that country-of-origin orientation is due primarily to social and political marginalisation.

A cluster analysis of those highly interested in Turkish politics finds a group with clearly below-average sympathies for the Turkish ruling party, AKP. This group accounts for as much as one third of the cases included in the cluster analysis.

Major factors that distinguish this group from the other two are German citizenship, frequent (though not constant) involvement in political matters in Germany, and a below-average level of exclusive identification with Turkey despite a marked interest in that country's politics. These factors may also explain why people of Turkish descent in Germany are less susceptible to the autocratic Turkish leader Erdoğan and his AKP's claims that people of Turkish descent in Germany are socially and politically marginalised. However, it should be noted that such susceptibility is not correlated with the immigrants' objective degree of social integration.

## Discussion

The study of people of Turkish descent presented here shows that there is not necessarily a direct correlation between levels of interest or involvement in political issues in the country of origin and processes of social and political integration in the country of arrival. Nor did our analysis show that the degree of political interest in the country of origin diminishes in the course of intergenerational change, nor when there are opportunities for participation in Germany that are perceived as good, nor for those among our interviewees who have German citizenship.

Consequently, debates about immigrants' loyalty to their country of arrival in general and about the loyalty of people of Turkish descent to Germany in particular remain fruitless as long as political commitment to the country of origin is assumed to undermine political and civic integration in the country of arrival. Instead, it is necessary to provide opportunities for a comprehensive representation of immigrants' interests, because this is the best way to counteract any potential susceptibility to anti-democratic positions originating from the country of origin.

Results of a survey conducted among German citizens of Turkish descent after the 2017 German federal election indicate a fairly low degree of loyalty to Erdoğan (see Goerres et al. 2018, p. 18), which fits well with the finding that there is a correlation between political marginalisation in Germany and leanings towards the AKP. However, we also find that the perception of political participation and of identification with Germany does not necessarily make people immune to supporting authoritarian rule in their country of origin. Our results suggest that Germany, as a country of immigration, will not be able to completely resolve this contradiction, even in the long run.

The fact that it is certainly possible to identify contrasting groups among those with a high degree of political interest in Turkey and different political attitudes – among other things, in terms of levels of social integration, political integration, and generational affiliation – demonstrates that analysing political activities in the diaspora is complex enough if it involves only one group of immigrants in a country of arrival, and that different conditions and motivations must be considered in each case. For this reason, it is highly unlikely that there will

ever be any general findings spanning two or more countries of immigration and groups of immigrants.

This article does not allow for a proper empirically-based assessment of intergenerational change within individual families. However, data from the 2,000 Families Project points to additional avenues for research on the group of people of Turkish descent in Germany that will make it possible to take a closer look at the relationship between intergenerational change and identification with Germany and Turkey.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> See Guveli et al. (2017) on the research potential of this data set.

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