

# Stabbing Oranges and Burning French Flags: The Consequences of the EU-Turkey Crisis for Europe's Turks

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Although relations between Turkey and Europe have hit rock bottom in previous weeks, the political consequences of the diplomatic row do not look quite as bad for both sides' leaders. Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte was comfortably re-elected in mid-March and Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan secured a two-point increase in the "yes" votes for a critical April 16 referendum, which could significantly expand his powers. However, these outcomes came at unprecedented costs for Turkey-EU relations, the brunt of which will be borne by Europe's Turks.

The long looming tensions escalated over Dutch authorities' refusal to permit Turkish ministers' campaign rallies just days before their own national elections. What followed was a demonstration of Turkish leaders' willingness to throw around Nazi comparisons as they immediately decried the Netherlands as "[Nazi remnants](#)," while earlier going after Germany, accusing it of being "[worse than Nazi Germany](#)." Such allegations were rejected by the Europeans as a "[disgusting distortion of history](#)," which signaled a historic break with the traditionally cordial relations.

Apart from the rhetorical slugfest, Turkey reacted with retaliatory diplomatic measures and by expelling 40 Dutch cows. However, the row did not merely trigger somewhat odd reactions by Turkey's rulers: echoing their leaders' anger, hundreds of protesters gathered in the streets to stab and squeeze [oranges](#), a national symbol of the Netherlands. Elsewhere, groups of ultranationalists mistakenly burned a [French flag](#)—confusing it for the Dutch. Without a doubt, such reactions were rife with inept symbolism in which emotions mattered more than facts. To truly understand this ruckus, one must look at Turkish voter constituencies and their stances vis-à-vis the referendum. The President traditionally relies on his Justice and Development Party's (AKP) own religiously conservative base and can usually count on the Nationalist Action Party (MHP). However, this time, the ultranationalist leadership failed to unite its own base for the constitutional changes. Realizing that a satisfactory threshold of "yes" votes might not be reached at home, Erdoğan and his entourage focused on Europe's nearly 2.9 million eligible Turkish voters.

While the German and Dutch authorities made a legally solid decision when banning Turkish campaign rallies, understanding the collective psyche of Turks in Europe would have offered an alternative analysis. On the one hand, there are the rallies that would have gathered some 10,000 likely "yes" voters. Many of them already follow every word Erdoğan says via Turkish state television, which runs around the clock in Europe's Turkish households. One could reasonably argue that the rallies would not have changed the outcome of the referendum. On the other hand are the bans that likely convinced a good chunk of undecided voters who would not have attended the rallies. Many of them are rather suspicious toward Erdoğan's domestic policies based on their nationalism and desire to defend Turkey's republican values and to avoid the meddling of Islam in politics. However, many diaspora Turks are able to make distinctions between Turkey's domestic and foreign policy realms: though critical of the regime's increasing crackdown on political and civil society opposition, many cannot help but like Erdoğan's tough stance toward Europe. Within these groups, the bans likely helped the "yes" camp to change the game.

For decades, Turkish nationalists could not quite swallow the feeling that their leaders were not taken seriously by the West, culminating in the perception that “Christian Europe” has been giving Turkey the runaround for too long. Just like the stalled debate about the country’s accession to the EU, European Turks – from different political, social, and educational backgrounds – also feel as if they have never been welcome in Europe. There is a common feeling of disconnect and mistrust on the part of Turkish communities toward their Western host societies and their leaders, either because of experienced discrimination or existing collective narratives about their “natural” marginalization as byproducts of prevailing xenophobia. As a result, many of these migrants do not feel represented by their European leaders.

“When we call them Nazis, they [European leaders] get uncomfortable,” Erdoğan [recently slammed](#) on the campaign trail. “They rally together in solidarity. Especially Merkel. But you are right now employing Nazi measures. Against who? My Turkish brother citizens in Germany.” While Erdoğan’s lax Nazi comparisons might irritate his foreign counterparts, it is hitting the right nerve among those groups he needs to court. As [Hatice Akyun](#), a Turkish-German author, recently put it: “Turkish politicians behave like pubescent Turkish adolescents on a train who have been told to remove their dirty shoes from the seats and aggressively respond: ‘why, are you a Nazi?’”

At the same time, Turks abroad, particularly those born in Europe, can feel a similar disconnect in their relationship to Turkey. For many second- and third-generation “almançı,” a pejorative Turkish term for Turks in Germany, their idealized imagination of the home country stands in stark contrast to the reality they find once they go “back” to a place they never lived. Most of them are all too accustomed to European influences infusing the Turkish sub-cultures in certain neighborhoods of cities like Berlin and Rotterdam.

With the rise of populism, Islamophobia, and anti-immigration rhetoric in Europe, these communities feel under attack and Turkish leaders realize this could be the right time to rally them around the Turkish flag. Campaigning on these vulnerabilities, Erdoğan is the first Turkish leader to speak to them directly. In another March [campaign speech](#), he said: “I am calling on my citizens in Europe: Take more ownership over there. Send your children to better schools. Drive the best cars. Live in the nicest houses. Don’t have three but five children. This is the best response to the brashness that they are showing to you.” While more educated and secular elites among these Turks are estranged from such advice, Turkey’s leaders understand the hardships of their lives and the desires of many European Turks.

The German and Dutch authorities could have anticipated that Erdoğan would seize the moment like this – and they likely did but chose to condone the harsh tirades for tactical reasons. As standing European leaders grapple with frustrations about the “refugee crisis” and the growing rifts in their multicultural societies, this super election year – with the French and the Germans going to the ballots as well – puts them under significant stress. The Dutch elections have shown that being tough on a foreign despot’s ruthless claims helps stymie far-right populist contesters who gained significant traction in all three countries.

As a transit country for refugees and migrants from the Middle East, Turkey has enjoyed a good bargaining chip vis-à-vis Europe ever since it concluded a controversial refugee readmission deal with the EU. The looming threat that Turkey could open the valve for Europe-bound refugees and migrants at least immunized it from harsh criticism about its authoritarianism, especially after last year's failed coup attempt. Alluding to this threat, Turkish Interior Minister Süleyman Soylu [threatened](#) to lift the grip on refugees and migrants "until the Europeans learn their lesson."

While political leaders on both sides benefitted from the events unleashed by the latest crisis in the short term, the new era between Europe and Turkey will significantly change the lives of those caught in the crossfire – Europe's Turks. Decisively rejecting sloppy Nazi comparisons and revealing their historical relativism is one thing Europe's leaders can do. Clearly addressing Turkey's own [large-scale human rights violations](#) is another. This could close diaspora Turks' perceived gaps between Turkish domestic and foreign policies. Most importantly, a broad public debate about lessons from European history should be re-opened to make young European Turks resistant to its distortions from afar. At the same time, it would re-sensitize Europeans to the lessons from their past and help to counteract far-right populists. At the moment, anything seems more promising than waiting for one of Erdoğan's notorious political U-turns after the Turkish referendum.



*The opinions expressed herein are those of the author and do not reflect those of the Wilson Center.*

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