

## Merkel, Erdogan Spar Over Schools, Spotlighting Turks' Role in Germany

BERLIN—A call by Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan to open Turkish secondary schools—in Germany—set off a war of words this week that spotlighted Germany's difficult relationship with its sizeable Turkish minority.

Just days before Chancellor Angela Merkel's visit to Turkey earlier this week, her first to the country in four years, Mr. Erdogan called for Germany to set up Turkish secondary schools. "In Turkey we have German secondary schools—why shouldn't there be any Turkish secondary schools in Germany?" Mr. Erdogan said in an interview with the German newspaper *Die Zeit*, published March 25.

The Turkish politician's message appeared largely aimed at currying favor at home, but in Germany, the message struck an uncomfortable chord. The country, home to Europe's largest Turkish minority, has largely failed to integrate a population that began to arrive decades ago to provide a workforce that would be low-cost and, Germans believed, temporary.

Now Germany's Turks number 2.5 million, the European Union's largest Turkish community. Turkish politicians and media often argue that Germany treats its Turkish minority poorly.

Many Germans, meanwhile, resent Turks' many segregated neighborhoods and high rates of unemployment, and feel many don't try hard enough to adapt to Germans' way of life, or even learn the German language. Before her trip to Turkey, Ms. Merkel responded to Mr. Erdogan's suggestion by calling on Turks living in Germany to make a greater effort to integrate. "Of course, that means that the German language must be learned and that German laws must be obeyed," she said in a video address released March 27.

Mr. Erdogan soon replied: "I wouldn't have expected this from Chancellor Merkel. Is Turkey a whipping boy?"

The Turkish politician's comments appeared largely designed to show his domestic audience that he was willing to take a tough stance against Mrs. Merkel, whose center-right government has thrown cold water on Turkey's bid to join the EU. Turkey's large population, much of it poor by EU standards, would give the country strong voting rights and financial entitlements in the EU. Some European politicians have opposed Turkish entry on grounds that the country is far from Europe's core culturally, economically and geographically.

Ms. Merkel has long argued Turkey should have a "privileged partnership" with the EU, but not full membership.

The issue of Turkish assimilation puts Germany in an uncomfortable state of ambivalence about its own identity. With a rapidly aging population and one of the lowest birth rates in Europe, Germany has long relied on immigrants to bolster its labor force but has been slow to open up German citizenship to immigrants and their children.

Laborers from Turkey and other poorer countries arrived in the postwar years to bolster Germany's labor force, often taking menial jobs. Germany deemed the migrants "guest workers," but many stayed. Turks make up about 3% of the country's population, some in

their third and fourth generations in the country. Only about half of the ethnic Turk population has German citizenship.

Children of Turkish descent tend to perform worse in school than their ethnic-German classmates. That is in part because many still return home every day to a Turkish world, said Gerd Hoff, a professor at Berlin's Free University who specializes in the issue of Turkish students in German schools. Speaking almost exclusively Turkish outside of school, many struggle to keep up in class.

A survey by the Center for Studies on Turkey, an institute at the University of Duisburg-Essen that promotes German-Turkish relations, showed only 57% of Turks in one German state felt they had mastered the language. About 13% of Turkish students make it to gymnasiums, Germany's top-level secondary schools designed to prepare students for university education, according to an integration report in 2009 by the German government. Nearly half of students in the broader population attend gymnasium.

The unemployment rate for ethnic minorities, which the government doesn't break down by national group, was about double that of native Germans' 9.3% in 2007.

By the end of Ms. Merkel's two-day Turkey trip on Monday and Tuesday, she had softened her rhetoric, saying Turkish high schools were a subject worth examining. She dropped talk of a "privileged partnership" for Turkey. Instead, she said Turkey's EU negotiations should remain an "open-ended process," and was noncommittal on whether Germany would support or oppose Turkish accession.

The German government has started a number of initiatives to promote educational integration in recent years, but has seen little success.

Germany has publicly funded high schools where students are taught in English and French, but so far has resisted the idea of state-funded schools for its largest immigrant population.

A few private schools where classes are taught in both Turkish and German exist already in Germany, said Nihat Sorgec, director of Bildungswerk in Kreuzberg, a heavily Turkish Berlin neighborhood. The vocational training school for underprivileged or unemployed youth—many of whom are immigrants—trains students in professions such as floral arranging or metal working.

Mr. Sorgec, who is also vice president of the German-Turkish Chamber of Commerce, said he does support Turkish-German schools where both languages are used. "Students need to learn both languages at the same level," a valuable commodity in the business world. "I don't think it's good when the teaching is done only in Turkish, because we live here in Germany."

Mr. Hoff of the Free University is more skeptical, saying Turkish high schools would only serve to "separate parts of the Turkish young people from the German mainstream culture."

Mr. Erdogan says Turkish schools would allow children to succeed even if they can't speak German. "One must first master one's own language, Turkish—and unfortunately this is rarely the case," he told *Die Zeit*.

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