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Germany sends Turkey carefully calibrated warning signal

GEIR MOULSON

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Germany's government is signaling to Turkey that its patience is running out and it can hit back against escalating provocations, but has sought to stop well short of burning its bridges with its NATO ally.

More than a year of strains in the countries' relationship came to a head this week with Turkey's jailing of a German human rights activist, Peter Steudtner, who had no previous links to Turkey but was accused of links to terror groups.

A court jailed Steudtner along with five others from Turkey and Sweden days after Turkey blocked a visit by lawmakers to German troops serving in NATO air crews at a base in Turkey.

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The accelerating pace of mini-crises with Turkey meant that German politicians felt they had no option but to give Ankara food for thought, after months in which they had held back. With a German election coming Sept. 24, there was added pressure to get tough.

Yet while Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel and Cabinet colleagues switched to harsher rhetoric on Thursday, Germany announced little drastic immediate action — giving Turkey a glimpse of what damage could await but also leaving room for an improvement in relations. And as Gabriel noted, Berlin is keen to avoid a situation in which Germany's own ethnic Turkish minority "falls between stools."

Gabriel cast doubt on the future of government export guarantees to insure German companies' investments in Turkey, as they do in many other countries, arguing that "you cannot advise anyone to invest in a country if there is no longer legal security."

He didn't immediately announce concrete steps, but Germany's exporters association noted that many companies had already put investments on hold, and that losing out on Turkish business wouldn't badly affect the foreign trade of the European Union's biggest economy.

On Friday, the Economy Ministry said all applications for the export of defense equipment to Turkey are being put under examination. It didn't elaborate.

Two other steps are subject to discussion with EU partners, many also running out of patience with Ankara: discussing the future of financial aid allocated to help prepare Turkey to join the bloc, and examining credits from European development banks.

Germany's new travel advice set out the problems that have arisen in recent months — nine German citizens are currently in custody as a result of the crackdown following last year's coup attempt in Turkey. It stated that "people traveling for private or business reasons to Turkey are advised to exercise elevated caution."

But it stopped notably short of a formal travel warning, which would likely prompt tour operators to offer free vacation rebookings or cancellations.

Germany's finance minister, an influential figure in Chancellor Angela Merkel's conservative party, hinted that it could be worse for Turkey. In comments published Friday in the Bild daily, Wolfgang Schaeuble said Turkey is now arresting people arbitrarily and failing to comply with minimum consular standards — a reminder, he added, of "how things used to be in East Germany."

"If Turkey doesn't drop these little games, we must say to people: 'You travel to Turkey at your own risk, we can't guarantee anything for you any more,'" he said.

Merkel herself — an instinctively cautious leader who rarely rises to provocations — has kept channels of communication open with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, most recently holding a bilateral meeting on the sidelines of the Group of 20 summit in Germany two weeks ago.

On Thursday, she left the limelight to her foreign minister, leaving her spokesman to quote her on Twitter as saying that the measures he announced were "necessary and indispensable."
"We are still interested in good and trusting relations with the Turkish government. We want Turkey to remain part of the West," Gabriel said. "But it takes two to tango."
It remains to be seen whether Turkey will accept the invitation.