

# Merkel presses allies to cut funds for Turkey's EU bid



Germany's Chancellor Angela Merkel arrives at the EU summit meeting in Brussels — REUTERS

BRUSSELS - 19 October 2017: German Chancellor Angela Merkel urged her fellow leaders on Thursday to cut European Union funds to Turkey that are linked to Ankara's bid to join the bloc due to concerns about the country's growing authoritarianism.

While praising Turkey for taking in Syrian refugees, Merkel stuck with the tougher tone she adopted during her reelection campaign last month, although she stopped short of calling for an outright end to Ankara's decade-long push to join the bloc.

"The rule of law in Turkey is moving in the wrong direction," Merkel said as she arrived for the EU summit, in a reference to the large-scale purge that President Tayyip Erdogan has carried out following a failed coup attempt in July 2016.

"We are very concerned about this. I will push for the pre-accession funds to be reduced," said Merkel, who asked for Turkey to be put on the summit agenda,

with Germany bearing the brunt of Erdogan's criticism of NATO allies.

Launched in 2005 after decades of seeking the formal start of an EU membership bid, Ankara's membership negotiations were always sensitive for France and Germany because of Turkey's status as a large, mainly Muslim country.

But the scope of Erdogan's response to last year's coup attempt, his detention of U.S. and European citizens including dual nationals, and his jibes at Germany and the Netherlands for what he has called "Nazi-like" behaviour.

Aside from money that the EU gives Turkey as part of its 2016 migration deal, Ankara is set to receive 4.4 billion euros from the EU between 2014 and 2020. Only a small part of that has been committed for projects such as infrastructure.

Some northern countries, including the Netherlands, say European financial aid meant to help Turkey reform politically so it can to join the EU now makes no sense because Ankara has cracked down so dramatically after the failed coup.

With 50,000 people jailed pending trial, including German-Turkish nationals, EU membership also looks more distant than ever, EU officials say, citing Erdogan's referendum earlier this year giving him sweeping new powers that rights groups say lack checks and balances.

"Why are we funding political reform when the country is moving away from democracy in such a dramatic fashion," said a senior EU official involved in Turkey policy.

Turkey is set to receive almost 500 million euros next year for the EU's common budget and European governments are discussing how much to limit that while not hitting projects such as infrastructure and agriculture.

The European Parliament has proposed reducing the transfer by 50 million euros next year, with another 30 million euros set aside for further cuts should the relationship with Turkey deteriorate even more. It is set to vote next week.

However, EU governments are divided, with Poland, Britain and Sweden maintaining their strong support for Turkey's EU membership and countries such as Austria demanding not just a freeze to accession funds but an end to membership talks.

“Entry negotiations with Turkey must be broken off,” Austria’s Sebastian Kurz, whose conservative OVP party won the most votes in Sunday’s parliamentary election, said on Twitter as he arrived for his first EU summit.

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