



Germany's Migration Policy Correction: Distancing from Extreme Proposals

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The mass-migration crisis that enveloped Germany in 2015 has had consequences for ruling party CDU, mainly costing it support. It also increased the popularity of extreme right-wing party Alternative for Germany, which demands a drastic tightening of the country's immigration policy. Instead of the extreme measures, Chancellor Angela Merkel has decided on a revised approach that combines tightening immigration laws, greater protection and monitoring of borders, and increasing deportations of people refused legal protection in Germany. Merkel's policy has brought positive results, but the price for it is seen in cracks in the ruling coalition and even within her own party.

During the mass-migration and refugee crisis of 2015, anxiety grew in German society. It seemed for a time that the ruling coalition of the Christian Democrats (CDU) and Christian Socialists (CSU) would accept proposals from the far-right Alternative for Germany (AFD), which demanded radical action be taken. AFD has gained popularity based on its anti-immigration and anti-Muslim slogans and demanded closure and additional protection of borders, returning immigrants to their countries of origin, setting up centres for asylum-seekers outside the EU, and admission to Germany of only those foreigners who receive refugee status. Chancellor Angela Merkel did not yield to the pressure for drastic action and instead has embarked on a course correction of sorts that combines various elements of increased border protection with better control of migration flows. The government also has been restrained in its rhetoric, which has allowed it to maintain some distance from the extreme proposals.

Changes to Migration Law and Border Protection. At the end of February 2016, the German Bundestag approved changes to a second asylum package, tightening some rules. Among them are more restrictions on family reunification programmes. People who have received additional protection in Germany (not refugee-level) for a two-year period cannot bring members of their family to the country.

The government also improved means of deportation. The list of so-called safe countries has been expanded to include Albania, Kosovo and Montenegro. A few months earlier, Tunisia, Morocco and Algeria were added to the list. Moreover, in October 2016 the government signed an agreement with Afghanistan allowing the repatriation of that country's citizens denied legal residence in Germany. Deportation also now been extended to migrants with medical certificates or pending deportation appeals where previously they were allowed to remain. The effect of the new deportation rules is already being seen. In 2015, 37,000 were deported, but in 2016, 55,000 have already been sent out of the country.

The government is preparing further changes. The latest proposal is to create a Centre for Support of Return, which would coordinate deportations between the Länder and Berlin. The next step will be the creation of special centres where those about to be deported will be placed for a few weeks or days before their formal deportation.

The third part of Merkel's migration policy change was an extension of the voluntary return programme. Previously, only people denied residency in Germany could use it. Since February of this year, people whose application for asylum is still pending can use "Help Start Plus" (*Starthilfe Plus*) to get financial assistance to return to their country of origin in the meantime. They would receive money for a return ticket, advice after returning to their country, and

participation a reintegration programme (though it does not include citizens of the Balkan countries and there is a separate programme for Kosovo).

Adjustments to the country's migration policy were supported by EU decisions concerning the bloc's border regime. Germany became the first Schengen area country to introduce controls on its border, in September 2015 with Austria. In the meantime, it tightened and improved its procedures. As a result, between January and August 2016, for security reasons, more than 550 people who were in the Schengen Information System were denied access to Germany. These actions could discourage people from trying to illegally cross the border of Germany. An even more important limit on migration to Germany was the EU-Turkey agreement of 18 March 2016, under which Turkey would accept migrants back from EU. The agreement, which cost Merkel a lot of energy and political capital, led to the end of the so-called Balkan route.

Success and Its Price. The measures taken by Chancellor Merkel have had a positive effect on migration. They were certainly one of the factors leading to the decrease in the number of migrants from 890,000 in 2015 to 280,000 in 2016. Merkel's calmer reactions have led to growing public support for her and a freeze on or even a drop in AfD's popularity. The far-right party, though, uses every opportunity to strike at the government and continues to warn of dire threats, mainly terrorism. After the terror attack in Berlin in December 2016, AfD politicians tried to persuade public opinion that the Chancellor was responsible for the tragedy. A Forsa Institute survey conducted three days after the attack, however, showed that 68% of Germans did not see any connection between the government's migration policy and the attack. In the same survey, support for CDU amounted to 38%, the highest in over a year.

Merkel's relatively prudent policy has had a cost, though. There is friction in the coalition and problems within her party. Since the beginning of the crisis, the Chancellor has been sharply criticised by the chief of CSU, Horst Seehofer, whose demands were similar to those formulated by AfD. Merkel has repeatedly sought to settle the dispute, including an attempt at the beginning of December 2016 at the CDU congress in Essen, where she assured party members that the mass-migration crisis would not be repeated and showed her willingness to discuss a further tightening of policy towards immigrants. For CSU members, though, it was not enough. One point of contention is the annual limit on refugee admission, which according to the CSU should be 200,000. The party advocates even sharper border control, faster deportation of people who pose a threat to public security, and stopping people without documents at the border. CSU also calls for creating transit centres where people should wait for the completion of the asylum procedures.

Then there is Merkel's own party. Critics say the government's migration policy pushes to the margins politicians with more conservative views and has forced them to consider continued membership of CDU. One example is Erika Steinbach, a right-wing member who left the party, although she has denied joining AfD and will not resign her seat in parliament. Although the Chancellor offered some concessions, including a ban on wearing the burqa in public spaces, most conservative CDU politicians still believe it is not enough.

The Election Campaign and Further Challenges. The success of Chancellor Merkel's migration policy is a solid asset in an increasingly intense campaign for the Bundestag, but it may prove insufficient to win the election. A terrorist attack or further waves of refugees may act against her. Thanks to the agreement with Turkey, the number of people entering the EU through Greece has dropped by 79% compared to 2015, Frontex reports. This does not mean that the problem has been solved. People are still trying to get to Europe through the sea route from Egypt and Libya to Italy. The unstable situation in Libya, however, precludes the signing of a similar migration agreement with its government. A significant challenge for the CDU may also appear from the left. Candidate for chancellor from the Social Democrats (SPD), former European Parliament President Martin Schulz, may use the campaign to attack Merkel for proposals like the burqa ban and the extension of deportations, especially citizens of Afghanistan. According to the SPD, the security situation in the country does not warrant deportations. Merkel's policy may therefore no longer be the sole point of reference for centrist voters who choose to vote for the Social Democrats.

Another issue is the need to integrate the more than 1.2 million people who came to Germany in 2015 and 2016. Refugee centres are overcrowded and experts say asylum-seekers may become easy targets for Islamic radicals that actively recruit in them. The challenge for the German government is improving the efficiency of integration policy, particularly access to the labour market. The refugee procedures last from six to eighteen months and prevent applicants from taking employment, which reduces the chances of rapid integration. It is estimated that even after obtaining residency, the vast majority lack the skills and knowledge to work and will require a long period of welfare, burdening the German budget. In 2016, 406,000 refugees were registered in the labour office, of which only 34,000 found jobs. The weekly *Der Spiegel* reported that 30 German companies listed on the DAX stock market index from January to September 2016, had recruited only 125 refugees, which confirms the pessimistic forecasts. There are demands for more effective programmes and incentives for both sides, refugees and employers.