

Increasing tolerance for anti-immigrant views in Germany

Rosnąca akceptacja dla poglądów antyimigranckich w RFN, Marta Zawilska-Florczyk

An unprecedented debate on the degree of the integration of immigrants living in Germany is underway. The theses which sparked off the discussion were presented in a book by the controversial SPD politician and German central bank executive, Thilo Sarrazin. Problems related to immigrant integration, such as unemployment, educational problems and the existence of parallel societies in Germany, are being discussed. Key German politicians, including Chancellor Angela Merkel and the Minister of Foreign Affairs Guido Westerwelle, publicists, experts, Internet users and newspaper readers joined in the debate. The dispute revealed increasing support among a section of the public and the political elite for an open expression of views previously unacceptable in public discourse. This acceptance means that anti-immigrant rhetoric may become part of political campaigns in Germany, as it is for example in France and Holland.

The integration of foreigners poses a real problem

One in five residents of Germany is of immigrant background, yet a large part of this group is not integrated in German society. As a consequence of long-lasting negligence and the lack of an effective integration policy, parallel societies have developed in Germany, in which immigrants live without knowing German and, as a result, do not receive education. The level of unemployment in such societies is much higher than among ethnic Germans and naturalised immigrants, which, according to estimates, costs the German budget approximately 16 billion euros annually. 84% of German citizens believe that people who are unable to adapt themselves to life in Germany should leave their country. Assimilated individuals of immigrant descent who enjoy successes in politics, media and business raise no controversies.

Demographic changes in Germany, the ageing society and the demand for a well-qualified workforce on the labour market have made politicians take action. The CDU/CSU/FDP coalition mentioned the integration of foreigners as one of the priority tasks for the government in their coalition agreement signed in 2009. The government's wide-scope activity (a conference on Islam, bringing into effect the guidelines of the National Integration Plan and integration summits) is to contribute to the assimilation of foreigners to the largest possible extent through learning German and vocational training. The goal of this integration policy is immigrant naturalisation. However, these are long-term actions, the effects of which are impossible to present to public opinion in the short term. Hence, the widespread

opinion that the present government is also making insufficient efforts to resolve the problem of poorly integrated immigrants.

A new impulse to the old debate

The controversy over Thilo Sarrazin's theses results mainly from their harsh wording (for example, "Muslims are people who have a clearly lower intelligence than ethnic Germans"). Similar ideas have already appeared, albeit in a milder form, in rhetoric used by local Christian Democrat politicians. However, a majority of the political elite has found them inadmissible in public debate.

The ongoing debate reveals a change in the approach by part of society and the political elite to the open criticism of immigrants. While being sharply criticised by leaders of the key parties, Sarrazin has been supported by some well-known Christian Democrats, including Peter Gauweiler (CSU) and Roland Koch (CDU). Some politicians have defended Sarrazin, stating that he has done a good thing in raising this serious issue. According to a survey conducted by the polling institute Emnid, 18% of Germans would vote in an election for a party whose programme was focused on a critical approach to non-assimilating immigrants and a restriction of their influx to Germany. Such public sentiments are nothing new, however open approval for slogans hostile to immigrants has so far been deemed to be the domain of the electorate of neo-Nazi parties and, as such, discredited. The propagation of theses offensive to individuals of immigrant descent by a representative of the SPD (which along with the Green Party supports a multicultural society) may be perceived by some of the public as acquiescence to openly stating their anti-immigrant views, which have so far been concealed.

Consequences of the debate on integration

1. The debate on the unsuccessful integration of immigrants reveals the scale of public dissatisfaction with the integration policy conducted by the German government although its guidelines (namely the desire to ensure the assimilation of immigrants to the largest possible extent) meet the expectations of citizens. The discussion currently underway may bring about a change in the German government's communication strategy: conducting a more open debate on integration (including naming the problems) and providing better information on the actions the government is taking in this area.

2. The scale of support for anti-immigrant views indicates a change which has taken place in German society. At the same time, the use of such rhetoric in countries which are Germany's neighbours (Holland and France) no longer raises major controversy and allows electoral success to be achieved. Therefore, it may be expected to play a larger part in future election campaigns in Germany, as well.

3. The fact that well-known Christian Democrat politicians have offered their support to Sarrazin also reveals a serious problem which the CDU/CSU has been facing for a long time. Many conservative politicians accuse Chancellor Angela Merkel of having departed from

traditional Christian Democratic values, such as the attachment to religion and the motherland. The increasing tolerance for demonstrating anti-immigrant views, evident in public opinion polls, indicates that a niche for a new conservative party – which, however, would distance itself from the neo-Nazi NPD – is emerging on the German political scene to the right of the Christian Democrats.