

‘Refugees’ – Germany’s increasing problem

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Thomas de Maizière, the German Minister of the Interior, released a statement on 13 September that controls had been reintroduced on Germany’s border with Austria. This move was expected to stem the uncontrolled flow of immigrants wishing to seek asylum in Germany. De Maizière said that this decision was a signal to Europe that the crisis can only be resolved through a shared effort undertaken by the community as a whole. In his opinion, Germany cannot be responsible for most of the refugees coming to the EU, and the Dublin III Regulation is still in force, meaning that refugees cannot freely choose the country of their stay and should seek international protection in the first EU member state they arrive in. The German government’s decision has been criticised by the opposition. According to the Green Party, this decision is intended to cover up the true scale of the government’s failure and negligence. At the same time, it has revealed a conflict emerging between the federal government and the local governments as well as an internal conflict between the various Christian Democrat factions, especially between the CDU and the CSU (the latter of which is the governing party in Bavaria). Chancellor Angela Merkel has not developed a comprehensive solution to the crisis as yet and is (seemingly) making efforts only to deal with the most pressing issues. Border checks were reintroduced in response to the chaos at Munich railway station and to the dramatic appeals from the city government in the media. Merkel hopes that Germany will manage to convince the other EU member states to ‘share the burden according to the principles of solidarity’. Meanwhile, some German politicians insist that fines should be imposed on those EU member states which oppose the obligatory quota system.

Dissent inside the party and in the federal states

The ‘refugee’ issue is becoming an increasingly serious internal political problem for Angela Merkel. Since 5 September, Horst Seehofer (and other politicians from the CSU) has criticised her decision to allow the ‘refugees’ who stopped in Hungary to come to Germany. In his opinion, this was a mistake and its consequences will be felt for long to come. On 11 September, contrary to the negative tone predominating in the German media and among German politicians, Seehofer declared support for the Hungarian prime minister Viktor Orbán and gave assurances that Bavaria was ready to help Hungary protect the external border of the EU. Seehofer also invited Orbán to the CSU’s meeting at the Bavarian Landtag, where plans to resolve the crisis will be discussed. Merkel’s policy is raising ever more doubts inside her own party. During the meeting of the CDU’s leaders on 14 September, this policy was criticised indirectly by the head of the CDU in Rhineland Palatinate, Julia

Klößner, the Minister-President of Saxony-Anhalt Reiner Haseloff, the Minister-President of Hesse, Volker Bouffier and by Mike Mohring, the CDU's head in Thuringia. In all but the latter case this was something new. Mohring has criticised the CDU on a regular basis for turning its back on its conservative values. The ministers for the interior of German federal states – regardless of their party membership – have accused Merkel of making moves which encouraged 'refugees' to come to Germany. This concerns not only the single consent to accept the refugees from Hungary but also further assurances that Germany will cope with the challenge and that "the right to asylum has no limits". In effect, there is a shortage of accommodation and a large number of unregistered people in Germany. According to the most recent estimates from Sigmar Gabriel, the deputy chancellor and head of the SPD, one million 'refugees' will arrive in Germany this year (previous estimates were 800,000). The related costs are set to reach 12–14 billion euros. In the opinion of the German Civil Service Federation (DBB), 20,000 additional civil servants are needed to cope with the new wave of migration.

Still no plan

The fact that border checks have been reintroduced does not mean that 'refugees' cannot enter Germany. The only difference is that they are registered at an earlier stage and assigned to specific refugee centres (regardless of whether they have valid documents or not). Only those who do not wish to seek asylum in Germany can be sent back. According to reports from the Federal Police (Bundespolizei), there are no such cases. After a short-lived decrease in the number of those willing to come to Germany (1,200 people on 14 September), their number is returning to previous levels: 3,500 arrived already on 15 September.

Given the unfavourable forecasts and problems the federal states and local governments need to face, the German chancellor has adopted a tactic of justifying her previous decisions. She will not respond to specific complaints but will rather resort to the emotional argument: you cannot expect somebody to apologise for behaving humanely (i.e. ensuring assistance to those seeking shelter in Germany). Merkel can still do this because most Germans (66%, according to a poll conducted on 11 September for the ZDF TV station) back her decision concerning the transfer of 'refugees' from Hungary. Furthermore, support levels for the CDU remain at 40% to 42%, depending on the polling organisation. On the other hand, Merkel is still to develop a comprehensive solution to the crisis and (seemingly) has been making efforts to deal only with the most pressing issues. Border checks were reintroduced in response to the chaos at Munich railway station and to the dramatic appeals from the city government in the media. During the meeting with the Ministers-President of the federal states on 15 September, Merkel promised to create 40,000 new places for 'refugees' to stay, to open distribution centres so as to prevent the build up of newcomers at one place (as was the case with Munich), logistic assistance from the Bundeswehr, and to accelerate the asylum procedure. However, when making each of the promises she added that the details would be known in a few days. The chancellor emphasised once again that the crisis was a challenge to all Germans. She also added that Germany should offer assistance to those who are in need of it, but that those who are not eligible for such assistance will have to leave Germany. Merkel hopes that Germany will manage to convince the other EU member

states to 'share the burden according to the principles of solidarity'. Meanwhile, some German politicians insist that fines should be imposed on those EU member states which oppose the obligatory quota system.

Merkel is still capitalising on the image in public opinion polls as being one of those few European leaders who have risen to the challenge. However, this may only last until the moment when German citizens begin to feel the difficulties linked to the crisis on a larger scale. It is already clear that the prolonging problems are garnering support for anti-immigrant movements and parties. 5,000 people took part in the demonstration held by Pegida (Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamisation of the Occident). The founder and the head of this movement, Lutz Bachmann, has promised that demonstrations will be held again on a weekly basis, and that Pegida will be transformed into a political party and will take part in local and federal elections. Meanwhile support levels for the Alternative for Germany (AfD), which had been falling until recently, rose from 3.5% to 5.5% in the first weeks of September.

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