

Germany: stricter asylum laws

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On 15 October, the Bundestag adopted a legislation package adopting stricter asylum laws and lifting the burden off the federal states during the migration crisis. Some of these laws will come into force as early as 1 November. To reduce the number of migrants who abuse the asylum system and to expedite the procedures, Albania, Kosovo and Montenegro were put on the list of safe countries of origin (around 99% of applications from citizens of these countries have been rejected). In an attempt to weaken the motivation of people who file asylum applications for financial reasons, the federal government intends to reduce the benefits paid in cash to a minimum. These will be replaced with coupons or goods. From now on, cash benefits will be paid only one month in advance. Individuals from safe countries of origin who submitted asylum applications after 1 September 2015 will not be allowed to work (at present, everyone who seeks international protection in Germany has the right to work after three months of stay). To lift the burden off the federal states, the federal government, starting from 2016, will pay the federal states and communes 670 euros to finance the costs of living of each migrant until the asylum application is considered. Additionally, the government will support social housing in 2016–2019, earmarking 500 million euros annually for this purpose.

Commentary

- The legislation package has been adopted under pressure from the federal states, which are finding it difficult to cope with the wave of migration. This also has to be viewed as an admission that the German asylum system has been used contrary to its purpose. Chancellor Angela Merkel has long opposed this move, being unwilling to agree with the circles propagating the view that some of the individuals entering Germany as refugees are asylum cheats. However, the decision was taken too late and will only resolve the problem of migrants from the Western Balkans and not of those from the Middle East. In September, new asylum applications were submitted by citizens of the following countries: Syria – 40% Albania – 16%, Afghanistan – 6%, Iraq – 6%, Serbia – 2.9%, Eritrea – 2.7%, Pakistan – 2.6%. These changes will not prevent migrants from reaching Germany.
- The debate on the ways to curb the migration wave will continue, leading to a further polarisation of the public and conflicts between the political parties (including the government coalition members). Some deputies from the CDU insist that the possibility of building a fence along the German border needs to be considered. In turn, Angela

Merkel – regardless of protests from the SPD – wants to push through the construction of transit zones on the borders to which migrants would be directed and where their chances of being granted international protection would be checked.

- The continuing migration crisis has resulted in falling approval ratings for Angela Merkel and the CDU/CSU. If the election were to be held now, 37% Germans would vote for the Christian Democrats (the worst result since May 2013). 48% of German citizens believe that Merkel's policy on the migration crisis is wrong (39% see it as good). 33% believe that because of this she should stand down as chancellor (50% are of the opposite opinion). Adopting stricter asylum laws is one of the ways to stem the haemorrhaging support. The second way is to consistently stick to the narrative according to which the migration crisis is not a problem of Germany but of the world as a whole, and that actions taken by Germany alone will change nothing.