

New Year's Eve in Cologne: the end of German hospitality?

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The large-scale attack on women during New Year's Eve in Cologne, Hamburg and other cities has revived the German debate on not only the question of asylum, but also of immigrants, integration and crime among foreigners. The mainstream media have begun to present material that until a few days ago would have been classified as extreme-right in tone. The events in Cologne are the most egregious symbol so far of the unrealistic assumptions and expectations of the asylum policy presented by Chancellor Angela Merkel. This is not the first sign of the state's helplessness and unpreparedness in the face of the threats that have resulted from the migration crisis. None of the previous problems, however, have been so serious or affected the general public so directly. The scale of the incident was also too large to qualify as 'one-off incidents'. As a result, the narration of the anti-immigrant movements and parties has been lent credence and is gaining followers, and in the light of the large-scale nature of the events in Cologne, it is getting harder to label it as racist or xenophobic. For now, these changes apply to public opinion, but they will likely have far-reaching social and political implications, especially as in 2016 there will be parliamentary elections in several *Bundesländer* in Germany.

The bankruptcy of German asylum policy

In New Year's Eve a series of assaults on women took place in the centre of Cologne. As of 12 January, the police had received 553 reports of robberies and sexual harassment. The Interior Minister of North Rhine-Westphalia, Ralf Jäger (SPD), reported that most of the perpetrators were immigrants from North Africa and the Middle East. The police reported that the total of assailants, operating in small groups, could be around a thousand. Among the 32 people identified on the basis of recordings by the Federal Police are 22 applicants for international protection in the Federal Republic of Germany. In turn, the 23 people identified by the regional police do not include a single citizen of the Federal Republic of Germany. The reports about the mass assaults were only confirmed and commented on by Cologne police on 5 January, when the case had already been widely discussed in local media and social networks, and news reports began to appear of similar situations in other cities in Germany (including Hamburg, Berlin, Munich and Stuttgart). On 8 January, the head of the Cologne police Wolfgang Albers was dismissed for his errors in ensuring the event's security. The problem, however, is more serious than shortcomings in the security situation.

The events in Cologne are a consequence of the loss of control over immigrants caused by neglect on the part of Angela Merkel's government, especially since the beginning of the migration crisis. They resulted from the subordination of policy (and the accompanying

narrative) to the short-term political struggle of the German government, and thus both the Christian Democrats and the Social Democrats, with anti-immigrant parties and movements. The Chancellor's calculation that she would succeed in imposing a model of appropriate behaviour on the migrants (by making gestures of solidarity and by admitting the migrants resident in Hungary at the beginning of September 2015 to Germany) has failed. Attempts to stigmatise the backgrounds of groups opposing the admission of the migrants also failed.

Merkel did not foresee that these measures, combined with earlier instances of neglect (several years of ignoring the fact that the German asylum system is used as a gateway for economic immigrants, the lengthy consideration of applications for asylum and the over-extended deportation procedures, although since last September the relevant laws have been revised), will spread the view even more widely that Germany is not in a position to enforce its own regulations. And as a consequence, this will lead to increased pressure from the migrants. According to a former President of the Constitutional Court of the Federal Republic of Germany, Hans-Jürgen Papier, never in the legal order of the Federal Republic of Germany has there been "such a gap between the letter of the law and the reality".

The reactions of politicians: still without a coherent plan

The governing CDU and SPD parties have declared that they will do anything to punish the culprits, and will tighten regulations to prevent similar situations arising in the future. At the same time, they have distanced themselves from actions and statements which could stigmatise specific social groups. Among the proposals under discussion is one of introducing the possibility of deporting refugees and asylum seekers who have been legally convicted by a German court (also in cases where the sentence has been suspended); the CSU's proposal to set a limit on the number of refugees accepted into Germany, and add Algeria and Morocco to the list of safe countries of origin; relocating refugees in places designated by the authorities. The proposals have no chance of being implemented in the immediate future, not only because there are doubts as to their conformity with international law, but also because of the lack of consensus among the coalition parties. These new ideas are primarily a demonstration of the rapid and decisive reaction expected by the public. At the same time, the Christian Democrats and the Social Democrats have taken advantage of the events in Cologne to weaken each other's position, each accusing the other of negligence. However, the proposals listed above will not reduce the public's concerns. The impotency demonstrated by the authorities in Cologne and the obvious attempt to wait the whole thing out has led to an increase in the sense of risk among the public, as well as a crisis of confidence in the state's institutions. According to a survey by Emnid published on 10 January, 49% of Germans feared assaults of the kind which took place in Cologne (50% did not); 39% of respondents did not feel sufficiently protected by the police (57% did).

Increase in radicalisation among society

The sense of insecurity has translated into an increase in the popularity of anti-immigrant movements and parties, especially since both the behaviour of the migrants in Cologne and the subsequent reactions of the authorities and national media confirm the existing diagnosis of the situation offered by these groups. According to an INSA survey from 11

January, the anti-immigrant party Alternative for Germany (AfD) is the third most popular party in the Federal Republic of Germany (with 11.5% support; the CDU got 35% and the SPD 21.5%). The supporters of these movements feel they have been proved right in their beliefs, and also – in the face of the migrants' aggression and the authorities' powerlessness – that they are entitled to take matters into their own hands. This has led to an increase in the number of people ready to resort to violence. This trend was perceived last December by the head of the Federal Criminal Office (BKA), Holger Münch. Support for this idea may come from the series of organised assaults on foreigners in Cologne on the night of 9 to 10 January by skinheads, football fans and members of motorcycle gangs. The National Council of Muslims in Germany (ZMD) has suspended its phone operations due to the sudden increase in the number of threats they received after the incidents in Cologne. The increase in support for right-wing parties outside the political establishment, and the radicalisation in the context of the elections to the parliaments of five Länder planned for the current year, have increased the pressure on the governing parties to solve the migration crisis. Questions such as crime among immigrants, the unwillingness of some of them to integrate, the challenges posed to constitutional values, the police's ineffectiveness in fighting organised crime clans, are no longer taboo. The lack of response to what Cologne showed to be the reasonable fears of the general public will have consequences, not only politically, but also threatening to inflame social conflicts.