

The Berlin attack – another problem for Merkel

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In the evening on 19 December a truck drove into one of the Berlin Christmas markets. 12 people were killed and 48 were injured in the attack. Islamic State has claimed responsibility for it. Chancellor Angela Merkel announced that the perpetrators would be strictly punished, and at the same time she declared that fear would not paralyse Germans, who would still live in accordance with their beliefs. Meanwhile, Horst Seehofer, the head of the CSU, the Bavarian party which co-governs Germany, demanded that the asylum and security policy be radically changed. In turn, the anti-immigrant and anti-Islamic party, Alternative for Germany (AfD), claimed that Merkel was politically responsible for the attack and insisted that something be done about the porousness of state borders, to close mosques where preachers call for jihad, and to deport potential terrorists. The head of Bavaria's Ministry of Internal Affairs, Joachim Hermann (CSU), appealed for an open debate on the risk accepting refugees poses. The chairman of the Green Party, Cem Özdemir, in turn, warned against exaggerated reactions to the attack.

Commentary

- The revival of the debate concerning the threat posed by the fact that a large number of people are staying in Germany without having their identity confirmed is a serious political problem for Angela Merkel. She must face the fact that support levels for her personally and for her party will fall, while the popularity of the AfD will grow, as was the case in crisis moments in the past. Merkel will not radically change her stance because this would mean admitting that she made the wrong decisions and would dishearten centrist voters. However, some politicians in the CDU will insist on the adoption of a tougher stance on migrants while also protecting Angela Merkel. These messages will be targeted at potential voters of the AfD.
- The government will most likely present bills introducing stricter asylum and anti-terrorist procedures already in January. The proposals of the changes formulated at present are not new and have been an element of the German debate for many months. These include establishing transit centres close to the borders where migrants' identity would be checked precisely, deporting migrants who fail to co-operate at the time of identity checking, introducing an annual limit of refugees Germany accepts, allowing the Bundeswehr to take action inside the country, facilitating wiretapping and electronic

correspondence monitoring, facilitating collaboration between the police and intelligence services. The government accepted the bill facilitating video monitoring of public places, which had been earlier prepared by the minister of internal affairs, Thomas de Maiziere (CDU), already on 21 December.

- The 2016 results of surveys commissioned by the insurance company R+V annually for 25 years concerning the most serious threats felt by Germans revealed a dramatic fall in confidence in state institutions and an intensification of the fear of attacks and conflicts with migrants. The Berlin attack will strengthen these tendencies which, in turn, may translate into an increased readiness to use violence and 'take matters into their own hands' among more radical circles.