

Germany's interior ministry considers random on-site checks on the Polish and Czech borders

Kamil Frymark

In her speech to the Bundestag (on 22 September) and in an interview for the *Welt am Sonntag* daily newspaper (on 24 September), Germany's interior minister Nancy Faeser (SPD) announced her intention to consider setting up on-site border checkpoints to carry out random controls on the borders with Poland and the Czech Republic. For the time being, no final decision on this matter has been taken, and no time frame for launching the possible additional checks has been set. Chancellor Olaf Scholz backed this idea during his electoral rally in Nuremberg (elections to the *Landtags* of Bavaria and Hesse will be held on 8 October). In addition, the German leader accused Warsaw of irregularities in issuing visas, saying, "I don't want people from Poland to simply be waved through, and then have a discussion about our asylum policy afterwards" and "whoever arrives in Poland needs to be registered there and undergo the asylum procedure there". He announced that talks on these matters would be held with Warsaw.

The SPD–Green–FDP coalition is divided on the issue of introducing random on-site border checks modelled on those which have been carried out on the German-Austrian border since 2015. The social democrats and liberals have expressed their support for this plan; the Greens are opposed to it, and have highlighted the staff shortfalls affecting the Federal Police (*Bundespolizei*), whose prerogatives include border protection. Police trade unions are also divided on this issue. Deputy head of the federal German Police Trade Union (DPoIG) Heiko Teggatz argues that stepping up control on Germany's border with Poland and the Czech Republic in order to prevent unauthorised entries into Germany will contribute to curbing the activity of traffickers. Opponents of this mechanism include Lars Wendland, the head of the Trade Union of the Police (GdP) in Berlin and Brandenburg. He emphasises the limited effectiveness of this measure, as individuals who have so far not applied for legal protection in other EU member states are still able to seek asylum in Germany. Other opponents of the proposed border checks include representatives of German business such as the president of the Federation of German Wholesale, Foreign Trade and Services (BGA), who has mentioned the possible trade disruptions which may emerge as a result of these decisions.

Commentary

- Since the beginning of 2023, Germany has recorded an increase in the number of illegal border crossing attempts, especially on its borders with Poland and the Czech Republic. According to the Federal Police statistics quoted by *Die Welt*, in August 2023 3964 such

attempts were recorded on the border with Poland, 3038 with Austria, 2879 with the Czech Republic and 1223 with Switzerland. The biggest number of unauthorised entries into Germany was recorded on the border with Poland, a total of 18,269 as of the end of August (up 156% y/y). Aside from increased migration pressure on the EU-Belarusian border (see '[A surge in the number of illegal border crossings in Germany](#)'), one of the reasons for the increase involves a shift of the migration route from the Balkans to Germany: it now runs through Poland, and on some sections also through the Czech Republic, rather than Austria. Information shared by the German media, citing surveys carried out by the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF) among asylum seekers, states that it is Syrians (who account for the biggest group of asylum seekers – 61,000 applications submitted this year) who are increasingly frequently arriving in Germany, via Serbia, Hungary, Slovakia and Poland, as well as the Czech Republic. However no official statistics are available on this issue. The shift in migration routes results, among other things, from Croatia stepping its border control regime, Austria registering the refugees in a more diligent manner than before, and from stepped-up border checks on the Austrian-German border.

- The change in minister Faeser's approach (she was previously opposed to introducing border checks) mainly results from internal political pressure ahead of the Landtag election in Hesse, in which she is running for the post of minister-president of this German federal state. In opinion polls carried out in Hesse, the SPD is running second (supported by 18% of respondents) after the ruling CDU (31%). The SPD's coalition partner, the Greens, and the AfD are both running third on 17%. These two parties view migration issues as the most important political problem. The proposed plan to introduce checks on Germany's borders and to step up measures to combat the migration crisis has been supported by various politicians, including Faeser's main electoral rival Boris Rhein of the CDU. Moreover, the interior ministers of Saxony and Brandenburg (both representing the CDU) have for many months called for introducing permanent random checks on the border with Poland. The leader of the CDU Friedrich Merz has also voiced similar demands. The Christian Democrats are under substantial pressure from the AfD, which tops the polls in Brandenburg and Saxony, as well as Thuringia (it enjoys the support of 32–35%) ahead of the elections which will be held in these federal states in 2024. Until recently, the federal interior minister had challenged the need to introduce border checks mainly in terms of practical reasons, such as problems which may affect Polish employees commuting to work in Brandenburg and Saxony, as well as the personnel shortfall in the border protection services.
- Minister Faeser's initiative is intended to help her launch a political offensive ahead of the Landtag elections and to improve her standing as a member of the cabinet. The interior minister is viewed as one of the least efficient members of the German federal government. She is accused of not taking sufficient steps to fight illegal immigration to Germany, and of committing irregularities in the process of dismissing the head of the Federal Office for Information Security (BSI) in 2022. Faeser dismissed Arne Schönbohm from this post, having accused him of unspecified links with Russian intelligence. Recent weeks have seen hearings on the Bundestag's internal affairs committee regarding the replacement of the BSI director (Faeser was absent from two out of the three hearings).

It should be noted that the interior minister is among the least popular members of the government. 52% of the respondents would welcome her dismissal, while a mere 21% would like her to continue her job (as stated in a poll by the Insa polling company for the *Bild am Sonntag* daily newspaper on 16 September).

- Strong pressure to step up the border regime also results from the fact that Germany is currently facing the most serious phase of the refugee crisis since 2015. The debate on curbing migration, including stepping up control on the border, is the most important topic in Germany. Since the beginning of the year 205,000 asylum applications have been submitted in Germany (up 77% compared with 2022). Moreover, Germany is hosting around 850,000 Ukrainian refugees (see '[Ukrainians are slowly adapting to life in Germany](#)'). This results in the insufficient number of vacant places in refugee facilities, and in difficulties with funding the stay of asylum seekers in Germany. Moreover, integration of the newly arrived refugees is often impossible (for reasons including the insufficient number of places in educational facilities and the overcrowding of integration and German-language classes: see '[Dispute over funding refugees' residence in Germany](#)'). The magnitude of the problem is corroborated by increasingly frequent appeals from politicians representing the SPD and the Greens, who until recently were in favour of a liberal asylum policy but now are beginning to demand that it should be toughened.
- From Berlin's point of view, border checks are the simplest and the fastest method for reducing the number of illegal border crossings and for fighting traffickers (the interior ministry's decision is exempt from the painstaking process of consultation within the coalition). Considering the mounting migration pressure affecting Germany and the record-high level of support for the AfD, these two measures will join the permanent elements of managing the migration crisis. Germany is convinced that the restrictions which apply to the border with Austria have been effective. In 2023, around 17,000 individuals were diverted from this border, compared to around 15,000 in the previous year. Most of these individuals had registered as refugees in other EU member states. Another important issue, which at the same time poses a challenge to German employers, will involve practical aspects of the border traffic for Polish and Czech employees who commute to work in Germany daily. During the COVID-19 pandemic, restrictions imposed on Polish and Czech employees who commuted to Germany disrupted the operation of some sectors of the German economy (including agriculture) and the service sector, including key services such as health care and welfare services. Every day around 70,000 Poles and 34,000 Czechs commute to work in Germany.