



BULLETIN

No. 84 (816), 22 September 2015 © PISM

Editors: Jarosław Cwiek-Karpowicz • Aleksandra Gawlikowska-Fyk • Dariusz Kałan
Piotr Kościński • Sebastian Płóciennik • Patrycja Sasnal • Marcin Terlikowski
Katarzyna Staniewska (Managing Editor)

Less Openness, More Integration: German Ideas for Handling the Migration Crisis

Sebastian Płóciennik

In its policy towards migrants, Germany plans to tighten conditions for granting a permanent residence permit, while simultaneously intensifying efforts to integrate foreigners into German society and the labour market. This means that—quotas notwithstanding—Germany will place increasing emphasis on controlling the EU's external borders.

Germany's approach to the migration crisis so far does not look like it is particularly cohesive. Back in July, international media reported on Chancellor Angela Merkel's "heartlessly" bringing home to a weeping Palestinian teenager that it would not be possible for all refugees to stay in Germany. Later came the extremely bold decision to open the borders, resulting in an inflow of tens of thousands of people to Bavaria in just several days. The enthusiasm was short-lived, though: within two weeks the German government not only backtracked on its previous decision, it actually suspended the Schengen regime, which allows for free movement between participating countries, on its borders.

In these circumstances, asking about a German plan or strategy of response to the migration crisis has good reason. The questions asked are about the migrant quotas, the most controversial issue in European politics. But the quotas alone do not say much about Berlin's priorities, and to find out more one has to take a look into Germany's internal discussions about asylum policy reform and the integration of migrants.

Pressure for Reform. Just several months ago Germany had no reason to assign higher priority to migration. In the first quarter of 2015, over 73,000 asylum applications were lodged in the country, i.e., twice as many as in Hungary (32,000) and several times more than in Italy, France (some 15,000 each) or Sweden (11,000). But in relative terms, as reflected in the ratio of asylum seekers to the population, Hungary is the unrivalled leader, with Germany placing towards the end of the top ten. Last year, the picture was similar: 202,000 asylum applications in Germany out of 626,000 throughout the EU28.

The situation changed abruptly in the latter half of 2015. Initial estimates put the refugee numbers at no less than 800,000 this year and around one million each year to 2019—and there is widespread belief that, against Merkel's claim that "we can do it," Germany is not up to the challenge. The asylum procedures are ineffective, and lodging is in short supply, as are school classes, language courses, relevant regulations on the labour market and, most importantly, the financial resources. Meanwhile, according to estimates by a German think tank, some €10 billion will be needed to render the situation under control this year alone.

The re-imposition of border checks should be seen as a means of buying time and breathing space in which to develop a strategy—and this strategy will have to stay within two extremes. One is a policy to draw immigrants, e.g., through social benefits and transfers, thus allowing Germany to keep its demographic advantage in Europe and patch up the country's growing labour market imbalances. The other is staunching the flow of refugees and immigrants and doing away with the incentives to stay in Germany.

More Stringent Conditions for Asylum. According to the interior ministry's new proposals, the present rules will be applied more rigidly or tightened. Migrants who reach Germany from another EU country and apply for asylum will only get a return ticket to the first country and provisions for the journey. The government also is discussing how to speed up readmission procedures, for example, by abandoning the requirement of prior notice and cutting down the

readmission suspension time from six to three months. The list of so-called safe countries will be extended to include Albania, Kosovo and Montenegro, which translates in practice into rejecting applications from those countries and thus reducing the number of potential immigrants. There are plans for separate “economic” migration legislation to deal with those countries but its passage is going to be a long slog, given the aversion of the leading party, the Christian Democratic Union (CDU).

Social benefits for asylum seekers are likely to be adjusted as well. As things stand now, the state initially provides lodging, provisions, clothing and €143 in pocket money (plus at least €84 per child). After leaving the “centre of first reception,” i.e., usually after several months, an asylum seeker gets €359 and is granted accommodation. Now, consideration is given to limiting advance benefit disbursements to one month and replacing monetary allowances with in-kind benefits. More radical plans foresee cuts in benefits for asylum seekers, but there are serious doubts whether such changes would be in accordance with the constitution.

Integration of Foreigners. The tighter asylum regulations would go hand in hand with measures to accelerate immigrants’ integration into German society. The ministry of finance wants the 2016 budget to include an added €9 billion for this purpose, to be obtained from this year’s budget surplus and savings. But finances alone will not suffice. In many areas, much greater flexibility of the administrative apparatus is needed, as is a revision of laws and regulations.

This is especially true of construction, remembering that tens of thousands of asylum seekers have nowhere to live, and hence, the proposals to suspend many constraints, such as fire-protection requirements, till 2019 and to speed up investments in the sector. The coalition partner Social Democratic Party (SPD) also proposes that the real estate resources of federal offices be tapped to a greater degree.

Another area targeted for improvement is German language teaching, which is to be provided at first reception centres (the so-called first linguistic module) and in the form of courses offered by the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF). This goal, though, will be hard to achieve without raising salaries for language instructors and drawing teacher collages into personnel training. Staff shortages are also felt at primary schools, where immigrant children are going to attend so-called welcome classes before moving on to regular instruction.

German politicians agree that for the crisis to be successfully resolved, asylum seekers should take up employment as soon as possible. Consequently, proposals were aired at an early stage for removal of bans that effectively prevent asylum seekers from taking low-paid jobs in services. Some economists go even further and urge the suspension of the newly introduced minimum wage or “forcing” migrants to work: they would not be allowed to reject job offers or would risk losing a portion of their benefits. On the incentives side, health insurance would be covered through the introduction of a health card, and asylum seekers’ residence permits would be automatically prolonged if they embarked on vocational training for new skills.

A barrier to asylum seekers’ employment, however, may be the German job placement system itself, which, for example, lacks consistency. During the asylum application proceedings, foreigners are taken care of by the Federal Employment Agency, while later the so-called basic provision becomes, for the most part, the responsibility of municipality-level Job Centres (Hartz IV). The challenge at this stage of the person’s transition is the continuity of care and the speed of data transmission. There are organisational problems, too. Job Centres need 2,000 more staffers if the principle of one officer per 150 job seekers is to stay, and there is also a shortage of interpreters and translators available to Job Centres and employment agencies. But the situation is expected improve soon, with Labour Minister Andrea Nahles promising to provide an added €3 billion in 2016 for these purposes and for innovative integration programmes, such as Cologne’s “Early Intervention.”

Increased Interest in the EU’s External Borders. A review of the steps taken and proposals put forward in Germany produces a relatively coherent picture of its planned immigrant policy. Its first element is a major narrowing of the availability of asylum in Germany, to be achieved by means of stricter procedures and scaled-down social benefit incentives. This is accompanied by the simultaneous intensification of measures to quickly integrate foreigners into society through language training and the labour market by using an improved system of job placement services and skills training. The conditions for making these changes now are quite favourable: Germany’s unemployment rate is at its lowest level in decades and the country has a budget surplus.

There are many indications that control of immigrant flows will be among the top priorities for the government in Berlin. It is also known that—in a situation in which checks on the EU’s internal borders are not on the agenda—even the introduction of mandatory quotas will not prevent immigrants registered in other countries such as Poland or Hungary from moving to Germany (and their illegal status will not scare them off). This means that Germany is likely to press for a uniform annual refugee quota for the entire EU and engage more strongly in protection of the EU’s external borders—a direction that happens to be more in line with the demands of Central European countries, compared to the present emphasis on rigid national quotas.