

Krzysztof Garczewski*

CONTEMPORARY MIGRATION CRISIS IN EUROPE AND ITS IMPACT ON SOCIO-POLITICAL SITUATION IN GERMANY

ABSTRACT

Migration crisis is currently one of the biggest challenges facing EU states. The role of this issue in the German socio-political discourse in 2015–2016 is the main focus of the analysis presented in this paper. Among all members of the EU, Germany accepted majority of the migrants as a result of opening the borders in the late summer 2015.

Keywords: European Migrant Crisis, Refugees, Islam, Internal Security in Germany, Terrorism

1. INTRODUCTION

Massive flow of immigrants in Europe, mostly from North Africa and Middle East, with the peak in summer and autumn of 2015, has caused major political crisis in EU and initiated discussions within EU and member states (Adamczyk, 2016, p. 41). Tackling the issue EU tried to modify asylum policy what turned out to be more difficult and challenging than expected (compare: Trauner, 2016, p. 93).

Main aim of the paper is the analysis of the socio-political situation in Germany in the context of the migration crisis. In 2015 and 2016 it was Germany that accepted majority of the immigrants after Germany's Chancellor, Angela Merkel, had decided to open the borders in August 2015. Her words: „We'll manage it!” (Wir schaffen das) has become symbolic and been often referred to since. In autumn of 2015 thousands of Germans were meeting newcomers in the atmosphere of the „welcoming culture” (Willkommenskultur). The situation changed within a few weeks after mass flow of immigrants, social moods shifted

* Pultusk Academy of Humanities, e-mail: kgarczewski@wp.pl

and became less optimistic (Bachmann, 2015, p. 1–10.). Uncontrollable stream of refugees caused internal chaos in the state, rise in attacks on migrants centers and fall of popularity of the leading party and Angela Merkel, as well as increase in support of the right-wing anti-Islam Alternative for Germany (*Alternative für Deutschland, AfD*) (Cziomer, 2016, p. 91). Also social movement “Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamisation of the West” (PEGIDA) created in autumn of 2014 gained popularity, especially in eastern states (Vorländer, Herold, Schäller, 2016, p. 5-7). Simultaneously Islamic extremists became increasingly active with subsequent terrorists attacks threatening Germany’s safety. In effect in 2016 under political and social pressure Angela Merkel slowly began to move away from her liberal migration policy, however, without admitting previous mistakes.

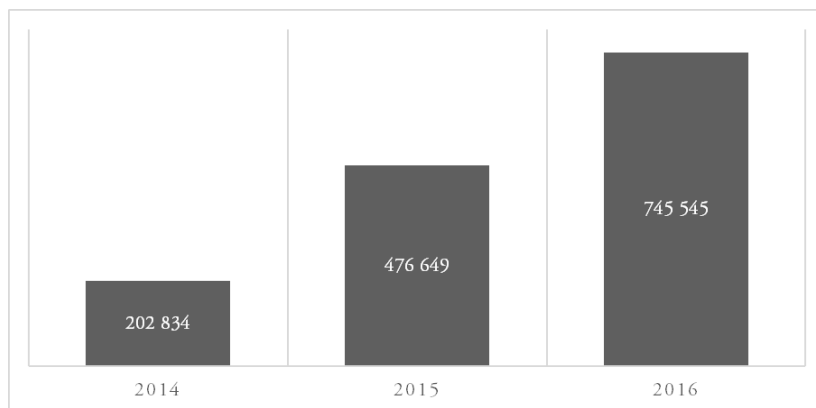
2. MASS INFLUX OF MIGRANTS TO GERMANY

At the beginning of 2016 German authorities informed that the state welcomed ca. 1,1 million refugees. The data was corrected in September 2016, Federal Minister of the Interior, Thomas de Maizière, said there are 890 000 migrants, the number is lower because some people were registered multiple times, and some already left the state (dpa, 2016).

In 2016, mostly in the first three months of the year, ca. 280 000 migrants came to Germany. Later on the number of newcomers has begun to decrease, mostly because of shutting down so called Balkan trail and due to an agreement between EU and Turkey signed in March 2016 (Dobrowolska-Polak, 2016, p. 1–5).

There were 745 500 asylum applications in 2016 in Germany. It is 269 000 more than in 2015. Some refugees were allowed to apply for asylum months after reaching their destination in 2015 as the Agency was not able to proceed such amount of filings.

Chart 1. The amount of asylum applications filed in Germany in 2014–2016



Source: (Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge, 2016a, p. 3).

The country of origin of the people seeking asylum in Germany in 2016 was: Syria (36,9%), Afghanistan (17,6%) and Iraq (13,3%). During 2015 more than 35 000 migrants left Germany, and 80 000 left next year, including 55 000 out of their own free will (Reuters, 2016).

Table 1. Countries of origin of the asylum seekers in Germany in 2016

	country of origin	volume of the asylum applications	asylum recognition
1	Syria	268.866	98,0 %
2	Afghanistan	127.892	55,8 %
3	Iraq	97.162	70,2 %
4	Iran	26.872	50,7 %
5	Eritrea	19.103	92,2 %
6	Albania	17.236	0,4 %
7	unknown / unexplained	14.922	84,4 %
8	Pakistan	15.528	3,3 %
9	Nigeria	12.916	9,9 %
10	Russian Federation	12.234	5,2 %
TOTAL		612.731	75,9 %
Amount of all the asylum applications		745.545	62,4 %

Source: (Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge, 2016b, p. 2).

During 9 months of 2016 Germany proceeded more asylum application than other EU countries all together (see chart 2).

Table 2. The amount of asylum applications proceeded in EU, January-September 2016

EU (28 states)	755.770
Germany	420.080
Italy	67.555
France	63.310
Sweden	57.395
Austria	29.065
Holland	24.175
Greece	7.610

Source: (Eurostat, 2017).

According to official data more than 1 170 000 refugees came to Germany in 2015–2016. In 2014 there were “only” 200 000. At the beginning of 2016 German government expected 2 500 000 more to come within next 5 years (2016–2020). Adding those numbers gives ca. 3 600 000 refugees. (sun/dpa, 2016). Even taking under consideration the correction given by the federal officials the total estimated by the federal government was 3 400 000 of migrants coming to Germany between 2015–2020. However, enormous wave of refugees during such short period of time triggered strong emotions and influenced socio-political debate. For Germany it is not only a cultural and social challenge it is also an economic encounter – the cost of maintenance and integration of so many people is expected to run into billions even despite budgetary surplus (Koszel, 2016, p. 153).

3. FROM OPENNESS TO ANIMOSITY

Migration crisis induced visible split within German society leading into cultural conflict (Wiesendahl, 2016, p. 53–79). Week by week Angela Merkel's decision about opening borders was more and more criticized. Her policy of „open doors” caused substantial political divisions within Christian Democrats as well as other significant parties.

One of the biggest opponents of the open migration policy was Bavaria's Minister-President Horst Seehofer. Christian-Social Union (CSU) politician in September 2015 supported Viktor Orban's actions against migrants and met with him in Munich. Seehofer called for closing the borders with Austria, crossed by countless migrants coming to Bavaria. He also demanded Merkel to establish an upper limit of reception of migrants threatening at the same time to file a complaint to Federal Constitutional Tribunal on account of the migration policy conducted by the federal government (Kubiak, 2015, p. 4).

Members of CSU criticized Angela Merkel's attitude also during the next months. H. Seehofer demanded mostly tightening of the asylum law with an upper limit (Obergrenze) of 200 000 refugees per year. Merkel's veto on the subject induced serious crisis between sister parties: CDU (Christian Democratic Union) and CSU. For Bavarian CSU strong desire to tighten immigration policy has become central element of the party after the migration crisis outbreak. In the second half of 2015 it was Bavaria that was the first state hit by a large groups of refugees crossing the border with Austria. The richest state could not manage to deal with such amount of migrants coming on such short notice. With other states having similar problems the whole Germany slumped. Situation started to improve after Austria and Balkan states closed borders for migrants trying to pass through the Balkan trail on their way to central and northern Europe. In contrast to German federal government, Austria, in 2016, introduced an upper limit of refugees: 37 500 per year. Austria is estimated to accept not more than 127 500 of asylum seekers till 2019. (KURIER/APA / la, mk, jk, 2016).

Austria's decision on closing the Balkan trail was not welcomed in Berlin. German diplomats were not invited to Vienna for the meeting on the matter. However, Austria's arrangements seemed to agree with Merkel, as the amount of refugees reaching Germany started to visibly decrease, calming down German society. On the other hand Austrian's resolution was assessed positively by many activists of CSU and conservative politicians from CDU. Therefore, some of the CDU members more or less openly talked about federal migration policy opting for altering and tightening law. Conservative members of CDU judged Angela Merkel for too liberal migration policy shifting the party into left wing of the political scene. One of the politicians presenting such attitude was Erika Steinbach, who strongly criticized the Chancellor for such approach on multiple occasions during the migration crisis in 2015. The former president of the Federation of Expellees (1998–2014), known especially in Poland for her controversial project Center Against Expulsions (Zentrum gegen Vertreibungen), was also criticized by many politicians of the CDU for her harsh statements about Germany's contemporary migration policy. In effect, to protest against federal migration policy E. Steinbach resigned from membership of CDU to which she belonged since 1974 (Tagesschau, 2017).

The fiercest opponent of federal government actions is Alternative for Germany (AfD). The movement used anti-Islam rhetoric to sway increasing numbers of disappointed Germans. Emotions seemed to be a large part of migration debates within most of German parties.

4. MIGRATION CRISIS AND STATE ELECTIONS IN 2016

Migration crisis and internal security played central part during the elections in five German states in 2016. On 13 March 2016 elections were held in Baden-Württemberg, Rhineland-Palatinate and Saxony-Anhalt, while on 4 September in Mecklenburg-West Pomerania and in Berlin. Results were mirroring moods of society, partly fearing for their safety after the substantial influx of the refugees. In effect AfD became the most successful party. It seems that its adamant resistance toward Merkel's migration policy persuaded large volume of voters, especially in Saxony-Anhalt (24,3%) Mecklenburg-West Pomerania (20,8%) or south-western Baden-Württemberg (15,1%). Except for AfD only the liberals (FDP) gained some voters. They were also distancing themselves from the federal open migration policy. Christian democrats noted significant losses although political commentators expected far worse results. Particularly meaningful was CDU's failure in Mecklenburg-West Pomerania, where Angela Merkel's electoral district for Bundestag is situated. The anti-Islam AfD (20,8%) defeated CDU (19%) for the first time and became the second political force (after center-left Social Democrats) in the state parliament – Landtag (Tagesschau, 2016a).

Table 3. Election results for the main parties in the state elections in 2016 (in %) Difference between current and last elections is in the brackets

the state	election date	CDU	SPD	Alliance '90/ the Greens	The Left	FDP	AfD
Baden-Württemberg	13.03.2016	27,0 (-12,0)	12,7 (-10,4)	30,3 (+6,1)	2,9 (+0,1)	8,3 (+3,0)	15,1 (+15,1)
Rhineland-Palatinate	13.03.2016	31,8 (-3,4)	36,2 (+0,5)	5,3 (-10,1)	2,8 (-0,2)	6,2 (+2,0)	12,6 (+12,6)
Saxony-Anhalt	13.03.2016	29,8 (-2,7)	10,6 (-10,9)	5,2 (-1,9)	16,3 (-7,4)	4,9 (+1,1)	24,3 (+24,3)
Mecklenburg-West Pomerania	04.09.2016	19,0 (-4,0)	30,6 (-5,0)	4,8 (-3,9)	13,2 (-5,2)	3,0 (+0,2)	20,8 (+20,8)
Berlin	18.09.2016	17,6 (-5,7)	21,6 (-6,7)	15,2 (-2,4)	15,6 (+3,9)	6,7 (+4,9)	14,2 (+14,2)

Source: own calculations based on (Tagesschau, 2016b).

5. SOCIAL AND POLITICAL DIVISIONS

Intense debate on security and safety in the context of the migration crisis was triggered by 2015/2016 New Year's Eve incidents. In Cologne many women were assaulted during the festivities on the streets conducted by young men with "non-European appearances". Within 24 hours at least 100 women, and during next 6 weeks more than 1000 women, reported sexual assault and/or robbery to the police. (Flade, Pauly, Frigelj, 2016).

Similar assaults, although on a smaller scale, took place in other German cities such as Hamburg, Frankfurt, Bielefeld, Stuttgart, or Nuremberg. Incidents of such nature were also reported in other European countries e.g. in Salzburg or Zurich (Deutsche Wirtschafts Nachrichten, 2016).

At first, neither German police nor media informed on events taking place in Cologne. It took 4 days and public opinion pressure to handle the topic by politicians and reporters. Events of the New Year's Eve gained much publicity in many countries and initiated intense debate on safety of the EU citizens not only in Germany but in majority of the EU countries. After revealing the background of the incidents prominent politicians in Germany started to press for tightening of the asylum and migration laws. The regulations were altered in the beginning of 2016. (AFP/dpa/epd/nago, 2016).

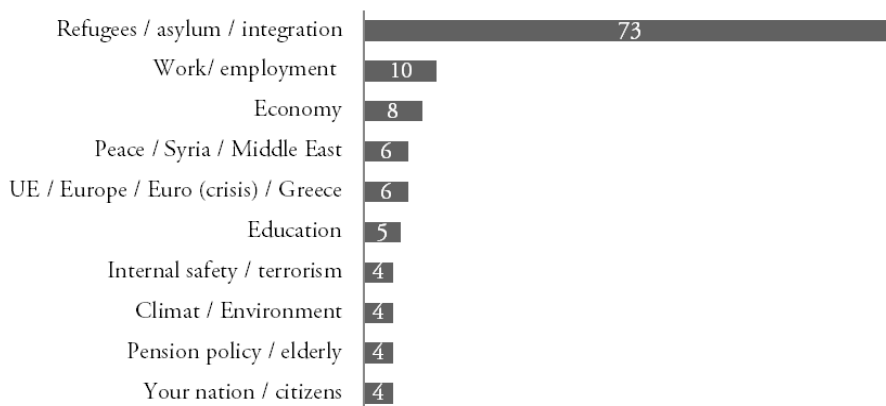
At the same time there was a very emotional debate on the possibility of acknowledging Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco as "safe countries of origin" (sichere Herkunftsländer). Those were the countries of origin for many migrants coming to Germany in the refugee flow. The issue became additionally politically significant when it turned out that many of the New Year's Eve attackers were from North Africa (Jansen, 2016a).

In summer of 2016 the Bundestag approved of enacting regulations that would accelerate asylum proceedings and would allow sending those citizens back to their home countries. The idea was strongly criticized by majority of Alliance '90/ the Greens pointing out that human rights are often violated in those states. The party managed to block the legal initiative in Bundesrat for months. (amz/dpa/AFP, 2016). The problem was brought back into highly intensified discussion after terrorist attack conducted by a Tunisian citizen on 19 December 2016. He killed several people by running a stolen Polish truck into a festive crowd in Berlin (sti/hk,dpa, rtr, 2016).

Terrorist attacks with Islamic background that took place in Würzburg and Ansbach during summer of 2016 caused immense sense of fear among Germans. It is connected with the migration crisis as both terrorists came to Germany as refugees. (Forster, Benrath, dpa, 2016). Within one week the bloodshed took place in Munich and Reutlingen. All those accidents shook up the German public opinion causing immense debate on the level of security in the state (Jansen, 2016b).

Migration crisis has become the most important socio-political problem in Germany, pushing far away any other issues. At the same time more and more Germans feel insecure and express anxiety and concern for the situation in their home country.

Chart 2. What is the most important political subject?



Source: (ARD-DeutschlandTrend, 2016a).

Citizens of this state expected politicians to make bold decisions and take effective measures to resolve the crisis, mostly on European level. Simultaneously due to strong opposition of some member states of the EU most Germans were sceptic about possibility of swift decisions on the matter (see chart 3). It was an option sturdily endorsed by A. Merkel, however she did not manage to convince her European partners to it.

Chart 3. National or European solution of the migration crisis?



Source: (ARD-DeutschlandTrend, 2016b).

6. CONCLUSION

German government with the Chancellor Angela Merkel decided to accept and welcome hundreds of thousands of migrants in 2015 and 2016. Their motivation was universal value of human life, respect for human rights and dignity, regardless of their origin or religion. Therefore the calls for introducing upper limits of asylum seekers were dismissed. Such options were strongly proposed by the sister party CSU from Bavaria, as well as by other politicians, including AfD. German Chancellor opened the borders in 2015 was also motivated by the difficult history and Nazi past of the country, trying to persuade the world that Germany is a state of tolerance, free of racism and xenophobia. Such policy was confronted with difficult reality. German state was not prepared for immense volume of migrants coming in a very short period of time. In 2015 alone there were almost 900 000 refugees and immigrants coming to Germany, with additional 280 000 the next year. The chaos initiated by the crisis deepened differences already existing within community. Massive influx, of mostly Muslim, newcomers caused debates on their place in German society and the level of internal security. It was a perfect ground for anti-Islam and Euro-sceptic AfD, that managed to introduce its members to all states' parliaments achieving spectacular success, mostly in Saxony-Anhalt, Mecklenburg-West Pomerania or Baden-Württemberg¹. At the same time main parties, including CDU and SPD, lost immense amount of voters. The poles show that many people, who voted for them previously, decided that the open door policy enforced by the authorities was a mistake and created insecure situation for the citizens. Situation was often complicated

¹ At the end of 2016 AfD already had its representatives in 10 German state parliaments.

by the terrorist attacks conducted by the people coming to Germany as immigrants. During that time German security forces managed to thwart at least a dozen assassination attempts by Islamic fundamentalists. Migration crisis showed also large deficiencies in functioning of agencies and authorities responsible for citizen's safety which was visible e.g. in the 19 December 2016 attack. All the events that took place within last 2 years were also a serious wake up call for Angela Merkel's government, especially for the 2017 Bundestag election. Contemporary migration crisis on one hand caused increased activity of Islamic fundamentalists (mostly Salafi movement) becoming imminent danger to the safety of the state, on the other hand it triggered activity of the far-right movements, that prays on disappointed voters and scared citizens. It seems that Angela Merkel noticed that, as she started to retreat from the liberal migration policy. Nevertheless, she has not admitted to committing mistakes on migration situation and still defends her decision on opening borders for migrants in 2015.

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