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Migration and Integration in Germany: The First Two Decades of the Twenty-First Century

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What is the biggest source of migration to Germany?

How does turnover in migrant populations affect integration policies?

How are new populations changing the concept of what it is to be German?

Few issues in recent years have dominated public and political discourse inside and outside of Germany as migration and integration. The movement of millions of people into the country have elicited some very different reactions from segments of the German population. This Issue Brief gives a short overview of some major aspects of the German migration and integration experience since the beginning of the new century. It uses a systematic historical approach to focus on four key themes and issues:

- Migration,
- Integration and integration policies,
- The refugee crisis, and
- National identity challenges.

Migration

While the 1990s were characterized by high amounts of net immigration into the Federal Republic of Germany, numbers went down significantly in the period from 2000 to 2013. The years 2008 and 2009 even saw an overall net negative migration balance. Due to dramatic increases of asylum seekers and refugees since 2014, with a climax of about 750,000 in 2016, net migration of foreign citizens rose to 1.2 million in that year. Since then and primarily as an effect of the Merkel-initiated Turkey-EU treaty, asylum numbers have gone down significantly with “only” about 220,000 persons seeking asylum in 2017 and about 185,000 in 2018.¹ At present, the number of refugees who come to the Greek Aegean islands is increasing again, but is not reaching the levels of 2015 and 2016.

Despite the marked publicity the asylum issue has generated, EU internal migration, particularly from Eastern and Southeastern Europe, has been the most significant form of migration to Germany in the first two decades of the twenty-first century. In 2017, for example, immigration from Romania was the highest at 174,888, followed by Poland with 118,024; other EU countries of origin were Bulgaria, Croatia, Italy, and Hungary.² Numbers for 2018 are similar, but even higher with 194,615 for Romania and 113,408 for Poland.³

The following features are important for a deeper understanding of migration to Germany in the twenty-first century:

- A high amount of coming and going,
- Self-recruitment by migrants,
- Low numbers of irregular migrants in the country, and
- High numbers of people with a migration background.

COMING AND GOING

Very often, when discussing migration in Germany, only intakes are mentioned. It is usually overlooked that large numbers of foreigners are also leaving the country and that there is a high degree of “migrant turnover.” One implication of this feature is that planning for integration is made more difficult and that many integration efforts are discontinued or interrupted; investments in these individuals are partly lost.

SELF RECRUITMENT

Lately, the number of foreigners from non-EU countries recruited for work in Germany by German authorities or organizations has somewhat increased, from around 26,000 in 2009 to around 60,000 in 2017.⁴ The very large majority of migrants coming into Germany, however, has not been invited or recruited by German authorities, but has come on their own will and on the basis of their own decisions. Constitutional rights for family reunion and asylum, EU mobility rights, and humanitarian laws make this possible. The implication of this is that migration control by the state is quite difficult and very often can be done only via indirect measures, if at all.

Another implication concerns the qualification level of migrants and their opportunities in the labor market. Since the large majority has not been recruited for particular jobs and very often does not have a qualification level necessary for a knowledge-based society, their unemployment rates—other than in the U.S.—tend to be above average.⁵ In view of “*Fachkräftemangel*” (lack of qualified personnel) and the demographic situation, an investment in the qualification or re-qualification of these migrants would be an opportunity for them and the receiving society.

IRREGULAR MIGRATION

Almost all people asking for asylum in Germany come into the country in irregular ways. Once they have asked for an asylum procedure to begin, however, their migration is no longer treated as irregular or illegal. This is one explanation for the comparatively low statistics of irregular migrants in the country.⁶ The other explanation is the rather stringent control of the residence status of foreigners, which makes it very difficult to live in the country without a legal status.

PEOPLE WITH A MIGRATION BACKGROUND

This concept roughly includes foreign residents who have migrated into the country and their children; naturalized Germans and their children; and “*Aussiedler*” and their children. Legally, *Aussiedler* are not foreigners, but are persons with a German background who as ethnic Germans have suffered from policies responding to the German war crimes in World War II in Eastern European countries and the Soviet Union.

The number of people who have a migration background has

steadily risen and is particularly high in the big cities, where in many cases almost half of the population has a migration background. In 2018 the total number of people with a migration background was 20.7 million, or 25 percent of the total population.⁷ Nothing shows more clearly Germany’s change into an immigration country.

Integration and Integration Policies

As Richard Alba has so rightfully stated, integration happens as the result of a series of small steps by individuals who want to improve their lives.⁸ On the other side, for the opportunity and success of these small steps to occur, integration is dependent upon certain macro-level conditions and decisions. In the case of Germany these were in the last two decades:

- a growing economy and a strong labor market offering opportunities;
- a new official definition of the societal migration situation (framing), i.e., that Germany has become an immigration country;
- opening up of general institutions (schools, hospitals, etc.) and welfare state institutions for migrants;
- opening up of civil society institutions for migrants;
- development of systematic integration policies;
- re-gaining more control over the immigration process after the refugee crisis.

In the context of this overview only a few remarks are possible about integration policies. These originate from different levels of government and from civil society, but are mainly realized at the local level. Levels of government are the EU, the national government, the *Länder* (states), and local governments; many projects target neighborhoods for their measures. Milestones for a new national integration policy have been the Citizenship Law of 2000; the Immigration Law of 2005 with, among others, the institutionalization of language/integration courses and counseling for migrants on a broad basis; the National Integration Plan of 2007; the institutionalization of an anti-discrimination policy and the German Islam Conference initiated in 2006 and continuing into the present.⁹

Despite an often-pessimistic tone in integration debates and controversies, scholarly data indicate the gradual progress of integration. For instance: integration is a function of length of stay in the country, the second generation is better integrated than the first, and differences between people with and without a migration background on social indicators decrease over time. Several so-called integration reports by institutes and foundations come to the same conclusion.¹⁰

Responses to the Refugee Crisis, 2014 to 2018

A crisis may be understood as serious stress on or even overstretching of resources of a society due to a number of unexpected events. We will briefly discuss here stress on two kinds of resources, material/personnel and psychological resources.

PERSONNEL AND MATERIAL RESOURCES

After the stormy 1990s with the opening of the Iron Curtain, migration and integration had somewhat “normalized” in the new century. The

situation began to change in 2014 and reached a climax in the following year. With sometimes daily arrivals of 10,000 refugees and an overall net immigration of foreign citizens of 1.2 million in 2016, not only administrative structures were overstretched, but logistical structures as well. Basic needs for food and shelter had to be provided for an unexpected number of people in an unexpectedly short time. Since the government continued to follow the principle of distributing the refugees all over the country according to the so-called “Königsteiner Schlüssel,” the challenge of suddenly having to provide basic resources for huge numbers of people was felt all over the country. In many cases tents had to be put up for some time, gyms had to be confiscated and changed into refugee camps, and former factory buildings were quickly transformed into provisional housing for refugees. All of this was mainly the job of local authorities and local welfare organizations. Since local financial resources were overstretched, the federal government provided funds for the local authorities; for instance, about €20 billion was transferred to local authorities in 2015 alone. The *Länder* governments helped as well. Funds were also used to recruit additional personnel for organizing the process and for counseling the refugees.

At certain initial stages during the mass arrival of refugees, police and asylum authorities from the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF) were unable to completely register people in an orderly manner. As a result, it was not exactly known for some time who or how many were in the country. This has been discussed and criticized as state failure (*Staatsversagen*) and loss of state control (*Kontrollverlust*). Federal and state governments responded to this challenge by increasing personnel resources in the police, in social work, and particularly in the BAMF. The BAMF almost doubled its personnel resources for registering, interviewing, and deciding on the hundreds of thousands of cases.

Civil society welfare organizations that traditionally play a major role in migrant integration in normal times also significantly increased their professional personnel for receiving and counseling the refugees. In addition, volunteer members of the welfare organizations were mobilized in great numbers for the support of the newly arrived.

WILLKOMMENSKULTUR¹¹ VS. NATIVISM

While the state and welfare organizations were acting in their field of responsibility and competence, something totally unexpected happened that helped tremendously to master the crisis. All over the country, hundreds of thousands of people spontaneously decided to assist, some as individuals and temporarily, others in self-organized groups over a longer period of time. Quite a few are still active. Local authorities recognized the potential of these groups and coordinated their work to make it more effective. A true *Willkommenskultur* (culture of welcome) developed.

While large parts of the population were in favor of *Willkommenskultur* and practiced it, significant minorities reacted to the stress of the new situation in an ethnocentric and racist way. Violent attacks on refugees significantly increased, as did demonstrations and hate speech in front of refugee reception centers. A clear East-West divide and along level of education could be

observed. There is evidence in the literature on right-wing radicalism that these attitudes and behaviors were not a reaction to the situation or even a result of it. Research has shown that over decades around 10 to 15 percent of the population in Germany has held rather stable ethnocentric, racist, and xenophobic attitudes.¹² In “normal” times these are more or less latent; they are mobilized and come to the surface in times of crisis. The new right-wing party Alternative for Germany (AfD) is mostly a result of this mobilization, at the same time it helps to reinforce these attitude structures.¹³

Diversity and Unity

“Deutschland schafft sich ab” (Germany abolishes herself) is the title of the bestselling book by Thilo Sarazin. It has racist, “völkisch,” and nationalistic tendencies, but, in a peculiar way, the title resonates with what has happened in the last decades. Germany has changed tremendously, and it has, indeed, become a different country. Due to migration, national reunification, socio-economic modernization, and Europeanization, enormous changes have occurred in the social structures and collective identities of the country. Often it is asked: Who is a German? What defines a German? Does Islam belong to Germany? Can black people be true Germans? Is there a common “we”?

As mentioned above, in 2015-2016 Germany experienced a significant influx of over one million asylum seekers. Some of these will ultimately return to the countries from which they escaped, but a majority is likely to stay. It can be observed that these new groups are forming minority-focused institutions and structures on the basis of ethnicity and regional and political-religious attitudes in the first phase of an integration process. As with previous groups that have come to the country, the question has a long-term implication: will the groups, after living in the country for decades and generations, retain a minority status and will Germany become a society of minorities? Is minority status transitory and will ethnic backgrounds change to just “symbolic ethnicity” that is not really a determining force in peoples’ lives?

There are several concepts that try to grasp these changes to frame the new situation: multicultural society, post-migration society, post-national society, and new nation-building. Multicultural and post-migration societies assume a duration of ethnic minority status within the larger nation-state society; post-nationalism works with the hypothesis that territorially and nation-state based organization have lost relevance for both migrants and natives.¹⁴ New nation-building conceives of the continuing domination of nation-state organization within a European and global context, acculturation, and weakening of ethnic boundaries over time and generations.

A precondition for new nation-building to happen is a concept of the nation that is not only based on descent, but includes membership on the basis of integration with respect for cultural origin, a set of common values, and consciousness: diversity within unity. By introducing *ius soli* (citizenship based on place of birth) in the citizenship law of 2000 Germany has laid the foundations for such an understanding and despite resistance from nativist sources, public discourse generally supports this as well.

- ¹ Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge, *Das Bundesamt in Zahlen 2018. Asyl, Migration und Integration* (Nürnberg: BAMF, 2019), p. 15.
- ² Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge, *Das Bundesamt in Zahlen 2017. Asyl, Migration und Integration* (Nürnberg: BAMF, 2018), p. 77-78.
- ³ Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge, *Das Bundesamt in Zahlen 2018. Asyl, Migration und Integration* (Nürnberg: BAMF, 2019), p. 83.
- ⁴ Bundesministerium des Inneren, für Bau und Heimat and Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge, "Migrationsbericht der Bundesregierung," *Migrationsbericht 2016/2017* (Berlin and Nürnberg: BMI and BAMF, 2019), p. 85.
- ⁵ "Over 28 million foreign-born US workers in 2018," *Rural Migration News*, June 17, 2019, <https://migration.ucdavis.edu/rmn/blog/post/?id=2305>.
- ⁶ For numbers see Bundesministerium des Inneren, für Bau und Heimat and Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge, "Migrationsbericht der Bundesregierung," *Migrationsbericht 2016/2017* (Berlin and Nürnberg: BMI and BAMF, 2019), p. 183-187.
- ⁷ Statistisches Bundesamt, *Migration und Integration* (Wiesbaden, 2019).
- ⁸ Richard Alba, "Immigration and the American Realities of Assimilation and Multiculturalism," in *Demographie aktuell* (1999), p. 6.
- ⁹ Friedrich Heckmann, *Integration von Migranten. Einwanderung und neue Nationenbildung* (Wiesbaden: Springer, 2015), p. 247-250.
- ¹⁰ For references see *ibid.*, p. 280.
- ¹¹ Literally "welcoming culture." The concept was designed before the crisis and did not mean to invite everybody to come to Germany, but to treat newcomers in a welcoming way in interpersonal, administrative, and work relations. For a systematic discussion of the concept see Friedrich Heckmann, "Willkommenskultur: was ist das und wie kann sie entstehen und weiterentwickelt werden?" *efms papers* 2012-7, http://www.efms.uni-bamberg.de/pdf/efms%20paper%202012_7.pdf
- ¹² See Gideon Botsch, *Die extreme Rechte in der Bundesrepublik von 1949 bis heute* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2012) for an overview on right-wing extremism. Before 1989 research exists only for West Germany. It is very plausible to assume that due to the isolation xenophobic and racist attitudes were even stronger in East Germany.
- ¹³ Factors specific to the East German *Länder* cannot be discussed here.
- ¹⁴ The concept is similar to that of transnationalism.

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