

## Firewall Crumbling

# Germany's Smoke and Mirrors on Immigration

To placate its critics, the German government has temporarily reasserted control over the country's borders. The measure is meant to stem the flow of immigrants entering the country to submit unfounded asylum claims. As of tomorrow, checks will take place on incoming traffic by roving border patrols. The actual border infrastructure was dismantled after the Schengen Agreement came into force in 1995. The agreement abolished internal borders to ensure hassle-free crossing between its 29 signatory countries.

Since 2015, Germany already checks traffic on its borders with Switzerland, Poland, and the Czech Republic. Under the terms of the Dublin Regulation, asylum seekers must lodge their claim in the first European Union member state they enter. According to officials at the ministry of Internal Affairs, some 30,000 travellers have been denied entry since October 2023 over concerns that they intended to make false asylum claims. Immigrants are attracted to Germany by its robust job market and generous state benefits.

Though the two main German police trade unions warn that the country lacks enough officers to take on additional tasks along the border, Chancellor Olaf Scholz is determined to look tough and convince voters that his government committed to bringing down immigration numbers. Next Sunday, elections take place in Brandenburg, the state enclosing the Berlin capital district.

### Voters Go Extreme

Polls predict a win for the nationalist and far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) and the Sahra Wagenknecht Alliance (BSW), a newcomer on the far left. Earlier this month, both extremist parties dominated the state legislature elections in Saxony and Thuringia, also formerly part of East Germany. In Brandenburg, the AfD stands to claim 29% of the vote, possibly becoming the largest party in the state.

In a slightly more hopeful sign, the vote share of the more traditional christian and social democrat parties seems to remain fairly stable. The gains on both extremes are mainly booked to the detriment of Die Linke and Die Grüne. Both are unlikely to meet the five-percent electoral threshold needed for admittance to parliament.

After welcoming around a million refugees in 2015, when then-chancellor Angela Merkel opened the country's borders, proudly announcing 'wir schaffen das' (we can manage this), most Germans have grown wary of immigrants and their perceived reluctance to embrace the values and customs of their new homeland.

### Knife Attacks

Tension boiled over after a Syrian immigrant scheduled for deportation attacked passers-by in Solingen, killing three and injuring eight. The knife-attack followed a spate of similar incidents involving radicalised immigrants, prompting Björn Höcke, the AfD frontman in Thuringia, to conclude that Germany's 'experiment with multiculturalism' had failed. Mr Höcke was recently fined €17,000 for using Nazi slogans during a campaign speech.

Over the past two months, German police have been instructed to visibly crack down on demonstrations organised by islamic groups and others sympathetic to the Palestine cause. Whilst Chancellor Scholz promised to speed up the deportation of criminal asylum seekers, opposition leaders claim that his tough line is not being implemented.

Right-wing media outlets routinely publish stories about immigrants with long criminal records being allowed to 'roam' free in the country. In late-August, Germany deported 28 Afghans, all

convicted criminals, to their home country. Previously, Berlin had refused to send Afghan citizens back, citing human rights concerns. The expulsions were made possible after Qatar agreed to act as an intermediate, avoiding the need for Germany to negotiate directly with the Taliban regime in Kabul which it does not recognise as legitimate.

### **Fundamental Rethink**

Friedrich Merz, leader of the Christian Democrat CDU, called for a 'fundamental rethink' of immigration policy and suggested the government reject asylum claims by Syrians and Afghans outright. A spokesperson for Chancellor Scholz' social Democrat party SPD reminded Mr Merz that the 1.3 million refugees Germany welcomed from Syria and Afghanistan cannot be discredited or punished as a group for the crimes of a few 'radicalised' individuals.

However, an attempt by both mainstream parties to find common ground and solutions to the immigration 'issue' ended in acrimony after the Christian Democrats walked out, accusing the government of 'pussy-footing' for its refusal to take 'ruthless and decisive' steps to curb the number of asylum seekers. Chancellor Scholz' social Democrats left the talks citing the opposition's 'theatrics'.

With their push to take control of the narrative on immigration now collapsed, mainstream parties must watch passively how the fringes of the political spectrum take charge and charm disillusioned voters. Nationally, support for the AfD is running at 17% whilst Sahra Wagenknecht's likewise anti-immigrant BSW stands at 8%. The radical anti-capitalist Die Linke, successor to the East German communist party, commands a further 3% of the vote.

### **Not Exceptional**

In Europe, Germany hardly stands alone. In France, Italy, Austria, The Netherlands, and of course Hungary, extremist parties have moved centre stage or are in the process of doing so. Whilst disconcerting in its own right, the growth of such parties has shattered the mainstream 'cordon sanitaire' (known in Germany as 'Brandmauer' or firewall) imposed to impede their accession to government. In most cases, it now proves nearly impossible to form ruling coalitions without the participation of anti-establishment parties.

However, as one of the last bastions to crumble under the weight of popular dissatisfaction with traditional politics, Germany may well go the way of France and Italy where the lure of power softened the radicals. Though it has sprung from neofascist roots, Giorgia Meloni's Brothers of Italy proved smart enough to ditch its more radical policy proposals and opt for a more pragmatic and acceptable approach.

In France, Marine Le Pen's National Rally no longer advocates an exit from the European Union, or a return to the franc, and tries its level best to claim to political centre ground. So much so, that the far-left Unsubmissive France party of Jean-Luc Méchelon now inspires considerably more fear.

In liberal and über-woke Sweden too, the anti-immigrant Sweden Democrats have become the centrepiece of a moderate centre-right government. They toned down as well in return for a share of power. Meanwhile in The Netherlands, nationalist-firebrand Geert Wilders has been neatly and safely encapsulated in a government led by a technocrat.

### **'Proven Extremist'**

However, given its history, Germany may find it more difficult to deal with right-wing radicals. The country's domestic intelligence service has formally designated the AfD as 'proven extremist', increasing the party's appeal to voters concerned, frustrated, and angered over the demographic shifts they witness. Conversely, dismissing the grievances of a third or more of the electorate seems anti-democratic - and doesn't address the issues but merely postpones them.

For now, the German Brandmauer holds, but for how long it can remain standing is uncertain. In Thuringia, where the AfD holds 32 of the state legislature's 88 seats, the four remaining parties - ranging from the far left to the moderate right - must somehow cobble together a 45-seat governing coalition out of their combined 56 seats. Due to the absolute refusal of christian democrats to share power with former communists, no majority coalition is possible unless sacred cows are sacrificed.