

Merkel's migration gamble

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If the arrival of migrants from outside Europe has been an issue for all EU countries, only few of them have accepted to receive a large number of immigrants. Following the outbreak of Iraq war in 2003 Sweden was more than generous in accepting Iraqi refugees whereas Germany, Italy and Greece were in the forefront of the massive arrival of people from Syria, Afghanistan and a number of African countries. In 2015 Germany alone welcomed almost a million of people fleeing the Middle East. The wholehearted reception of many ordinary Germans has been exceptional in many ways, crowned by the famous Chancellor's statement "Wir schaffen das". Two years ago, Germany threw the doors open, abrogating temporarily the EU Dublin rule which requires migrants to be registered and their claims processed in the first EU country they arrive in. But it wasn't long before the mood drastically changed. The recent German elections were a wake-up call for the usually composed Chancellor who during the election campaign didn't move an inch from her open door policy. Angela Merkel's decision to provide shelter for refugees and migrants in 2015 was informed and morally justified. But in the face of the magnitude of the challenges and withering public support Mrs. Merkel had to push for the EU-Turkey migration deal, restricted family reunification rules, empowered police and intelligent services to fight terrorism. She also insisted on helping out the countries of origin to stem the flows towards Europe.

Yet none of these corrections seemed to be enough for disenchanting voters. Around a million of former CDU voters with another half a million from the SPD defected to the AfD (Alternative für Deutschland), the right wing party whose ascendance bears upon simmering anti-migrants and anti-Islam sentiment. What's perhaps even more troubling is the fact that the AfD managed to tap into the well of voters who were staying home in previous elections, collecting over a million of additional votes. According to the ZDF survey carried out a few days before the elections more than 50% of voters expressed their dissatisfaction with Merkel's migration policy. This has translated into the AfD 12.6% record score, propelling the once marginal party to the third place in the German federal parliament, Bundestag. More worrying is the fact that the sidelining of party moderates and openly racist tone of the hard line members considerably brightened the party's prospects. In addition, the AfD high scores were recorded not only in more conservative and less migration-friendly former Eastern Germany (caused by a long communist isolation when barely any foreigner lived in this part of the country) but in two wealthiest German federal states: Bayern and Baden-Württemberg where the party obtained 12,4% and 12,2% respectively. Germany joined the club of other European countries where the growing resonance of right wing parties profoundly shattered the traditional political landscape.

Compared to France or other countries the score of the AfD was considerably lower. But in Germany those results carry particular weight. With a troubled past and the high moral standards the country embraced in the aftermath of the Second World War, the far right has been a non-existent political force so far. However today, with more than 90 AfD deputies holding a seat in the Bundestag their voice has become political reality. To win back despondent voters the new coalition will most likely have to harden its stance towards migrants. Some of the new measures may include: quicker forcible return of migrants who do not qualify for asylum, lower refugee benefits, stricter family reunification rules, extension of the list of safe countries to which migrants can be returned, but also sending the Syrian refugees back home as soon as the conditions in the country improve. The CSU for its part has in addition floated the idea of the upper limit on asylum seekers. Another idea heard in the aftermath of the elections was to set up a distinct Ministry of immigration and integration, based on the Danish model. On EU level, Germany might harden its tone over relocation of refugees, requiring financial repercussions for countries which refuse to share their part, while pushing for a stricter implementation of Dublin principles and most importantly reinforcing the EU external borders - a trend that has already started to take a concrete shape following the

Italian struggle to exert control over the migrants' crossing in the Mediterranean. In any event, it looks inevitable that the elections' results - which deeply polarized the population - will impact the German 'Willkommenskultur'. But even if the migrants' arrivals grind to a halt the task of integrating those who already obtained the refugee status will remain a challenge. However it could also be an opportunity to replenish German labour market shortages, boost the economy and offset demographic decline, which is threatening to put in jeopardy the pension system, as the baby boomers retire.

It is often said that integration is a two way process in which both receiving societies and migrants need to make efforts and compromises to build new patterns of living. While this is certainly true, the hurdles on the way of implementation - visible and invisible - are big. The command of language, jobs with decent pay and adequate housing are undoubtedly the preconditions for successful integration. And this process is still ongoing, despite good organization, such as federal repatriation system and money allocated to speed up labour and social integration. What might facilitate the task is the fact that the majority of newcomers are still young and more likely to learn the language and acquire new labour skills.

What is more difficult to achieve is what the European Commission in its 2011 European Agenda for Integration of Third-Country called "the sense of belonging". And there is no guarantee that this sense grows with a second or third generation of migrants, France' failed integration of people from former colonies, being the case in point.

Research shows that migrants are better integrated in the countries of permanent settlement when they have the possibility to adhere to a common project to build a better future for society. The renewed European project advocated by the French president can provide an opportunity to allow refugees and migrants to be an active part in the new endeavour, in which they participate on an equal footing with other members of society. Also, it can outweigh the danger of growing territorial nationalism, absent from the European identity which is per definition greater than the sum of its parts. This doesn't mean that the newcomers have to relinquish their rights to keep alive the sentiment of their national origins. Yet they will have to respect the European values which offer plenty of space to accommodate. Wise policy options and massive investment in migrants integration combined with the readiness of the newcomers to abide by the rules can yield the results to the benefits of all. The task is more than urgent as the right wing parties might be only biding their time for the next opportunity to ratchet up their rhetoric and further pull away votes from across the political spectrum.