

## **Berlin After the Brussels Bombings: a Growing Sense of Insecurity**

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In Germany, the tragic news of the Brussels bombings came as a shock. This time, the terrorists aimed directly at the heart of Europe – and managed to hit it right in the middle. The terrible events at Brussels' airport Zaventem and metro station Maalbeek triggered a wave of German solidarity with the victims. Chancellor Merkel condemned the terrorists as 'enemies of all values Europe stands for' and emphasised that Europe's strength lies in its unity. 'Our free societies will prove stronger than terrorism,' she said. While the Brandenburg Gate in Berlin was illuminated in the national colours of Belgium, social media were full of condolences and solidarity slogans. The much used and always slightly adapted 1963 Kennedy quote reappeared as 'Je suis Bruxelles / Ik ben Brussel' accompanied with the hashtag #aufdieliebe (to love). This call for love and peace as a response to the events in Brussels and to those who want to spread suffering, hatred and terror went viral within just a few hours.

At the same time, the attacks on the EU's capital have urged German government representatives, politicians, security officials and experts to send the message to the German public that the terror threat is real – also for Germany. Despite the murders of many civilians in terrorist attacks on European territory since 2004, Germany has always been a mourning bystander, never a direct target. However, the close proximity in time and the direct connection between the terrible events in Brussels and the Paris attacks last November have made the sounding of the alarm bells difficult to ignore. The very fact, that once again a direct neighbour fell victim to Islamic State terrorist attacks has ultimately made it painfully clear to many Germans that Germany is not an island of peace and happiness immune against the terror that has already struck other European countries. Security – even in Germany – cannot be taken for granted anymore.

Already the cancellation of the football friendly between Germany and the Netherlands in Hannover just days after the Paris attacks and the concrete terror warnings in Munich on New Year's Eve have made Germans more sensitive to the fact that their country is a potential target for terror attacks. The Brussels bombings have been the ultimate proof for the German public that the threat of terrorist activity on European territory will continue and that also Germany can be hit at any moment as long as Islamist terrorists and their supporters inside and outside Europe continue their mission to attack Europe's liberal values and its open society. Thus, the public debate about national security in general, and more specifically about the root causes for Islamist terror in Europe as well as necessary measures to prevent similar attacks is likely to receive more attention in Germany.

This is certainly bad timing for Chancellor Merkel. As the shocking events in Brussels occurred at a time when Merkel thought to be on the right path for an orderly solution to the refugee crisis, concerned citizens might now turn even more hesitant about migration. The right-wing, populist Alternative für Deutschland (AfD), strengthened by double-digit election scores in the recent triple state elections in Baden-Württemberg, Rhineland-Palatinate and Saxony-Anhalt has not wasted time in exploiting the tragic events in Brussels and misusing the hesitant reactions of citizens to its own advantage. It has now become even easier for the party to blame the government for making Europe vulnerable to terrorist attacks by opening its borders and to call for closed national borders and a 'fortress Europe' approach, thus further poisoning the national discourse on migration.

This poses new challenges for Chancellor Merkel only days after she managed to survive relatively unscathed the triple state election day and after she brokered the EU-Turkey deal, on which she has placed all hopes for a long-term solution to the EU migration crisis. Merkel might end up being trapped in

a public debate in which the German discourse revolving around national security is pitted against the *Willkommenskultur* (welcoming culture) she has tried to establish in Germany over the past months for those that have fled war and terror. The government has already realised the pitfalls that might occur if it lets such a debate get out of hand. Thus, similar to last November, in the days after the Brussels bombings, government representatives repeatedly pointed out that Syrian refugees must not be lumped together with terrorists of the Islamic State, emphasising that, on the contrary, the terrorists belong to a group from whom Syrian refugees are fleeing and that most perpetrators of the terror attacks hold an EU-citizenship.

This shows that Chancellor Merkel is not likely to make a U-turn overnight abandoning her guiding principle that the EU cannot lock itself away from the refugee crisis: she has made far too many compromises to broker an agreement with Turkey that is supposed to secure the EU's external borders and that allows her to buy time in order to push for a European solution in form of a burden-sharing mechanism. In fact – and widely overlooked by international media – her policy approach in the refugee crisis has already been increasingly flavoured with *realpolitik* in recent months as a reaction to domestic pressures by her unpredictable Bavarian coalition partner CSU and the AfD in an attempt to respond to the worries of concerned citizens.

Nevertheless, even if the numbers of newly arriving refugees should go down drastically as a result of the EU-Turkey deal, the debate about national and internal security will continue to feature prominently in the public discourse. Mainstream parties have to carefully monitor the debate on how to properly integrate those refugees into German society that have already arrived, an aspect which has so far been widely neglected in the public discourse. However, events like the terrorist attacks in Paris and Brussels or the sexual assaults in Cologne on New Year's Eve – even though completely different in nature – provide explosive ingredients for populists to spark off an over-simplistic, dangerous and xenophobic blame game in which questions of integration and migration are mixed up with the demand for more public security and in which Muslim migrants inevitably end up as scapegoats.

At the same time, discussing different approaches to integration and offering credible solutions may provide plenty of opportunities for all German mainstream parties to prove to its electorate, which just recently demonstrated its fatigue with the political establishment, that they are not one of a kind but offer different profiles and policy options. This would then also allow them to demystify the AfD's xenophobic demagoguery and put the party on the spot.