

## EU Centre Commentary Series

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### The “Migrant” Question – Why has “multiculturalism” failed in Germany?

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(Source: Rasande Tyskar/Flickr)

In Chemnitz, Germany, right wing protestors and left wing counter protestors collided on 25 Aug and again on 1 Sep, raising alarm for German politicians and international news media alike. The first weekend of violent protests was incited by neo-nazi activity online and amassed 6000 supporters on Sunday (25 Aug). The events unfolded after the fatal stabbing of a German citizen, Daniel Hillig, by two individuals—Iraqi and Syrian refugees who were detained. Amidst the anti-immigrant protestors who chanted “we are the people”, it was alleged that the Hitler salute was also used.

Chemnitz is a city in the state of Saxony, which used to be part of the former East Germany, and home to anti-Islamist grassroots movement, PEGIDA, which was founded in Dresden in 2014.

The far right party, Alternative for Germany (AfD), has 25% approval rating, [only five percentage points behind Merkel's CDU](#), in Saxony. The violent protests in Chemnitz are not just a series of isolated incidents but an outburst of the undercurrents seizing Germany since it opened its door to a flux of migrants and asylum seekers at the height of the refugee crisis in Europe in 2015.

#### What Merkel's open door policy reveals about Germany's immigrant fears

Three years ago, Merkel declared an open door policy on refugees, letting one million asylum seekers mainly from Syria into Germany; the repercussions are what we witness today. A [Politico report](#) claims that “a series of violent crimes committed by refugees is unsettling the nation”. While these are attributed to newly arrived asylum seekers many of the suspects in these high profile cases, including the [Christmas market attack on Berlin in 2016](#), are under a “tolerated” status and are not legally conferred as refugees. This means that these people have their applications for asylum or refugee status rejected and should have been deported or repatriated, but somehow continued to stay in Germany.

The paradox in Germany is that the Merkel government has so far delivered on jobs and growth, and no one is losing jobs because of the arrival of the migrants. However, as pointed out in the Politico report, immigration is viewed not as an economic issue by the German people but a security issue. The number of high profile terrorist attacks in Europe and the sensational reports on crimes stoked up fears amongst the citizens leading to increasing support for anti-Islam, anti-immigrant movement such as PEGIDA and far right political party, AfD. Despite these high profile cases, this [report by Deutsche Welle](#) shows that the perceived threat of immigrant is not exactly proven in violent crime statistics; instead, the sense of insecurity felt by the German population can be attributed a loss of a sense of homeland (“Heimat”).

While AfD is not responsible for organizing the protests in Saxony, their leaders marched alongside the 8000 anti-immigrant demonstrators and tweeted: [“people will go on the streets and protect themselves”](#) if the state fails to do so. CSU leader and Interior Minister Horst Seehofer, while not condoning the “vigilante justice” also said the [concerns of the populace are understandable](#).

The threats brought on by immigration is often framed by the far right as a problem of specifically one type of immigrant: Muslim. Europe is no stranger to Islamophobia but the rise of the far right alongside neo-Nazi extremists in Germany is concerning, especially as mainstream politicians keep sidestepping the issue. After Chemnitz, harassment of minorities can be expected to rise as in [this case of an immigrant father and son](#) being bullied in front of Daniel Hillig's memorial. While fears of the Muslim other have been encouraged by the message of the far right in delivering what the people want—security against the perceived threat of immigrants—it is worth noting that state policies in the past have also failed to provide adequate integration outcomes for immigrants in Germany.

### The legacy of migration and integration policy in Germany

In Germany, immigration has always been intertwined with the denial of cultural diversity. Like the rest of Western Europe, Germany took in migrant workers as part of the “guest worker” program from 1945 to the early 1970s. While the recruitment ban was instituted in 1973, many of these workers stayed and became permanent settlers although not without difficulty integrating as economically disadvantaged and racial minorities. These workers came from countries like Turkey, Yugoslavia, and Italy; they were distinguished from ethnic German migrants, Aussiedlers, who were better able to integrate. During this time, the discrimination came from state policies which refused the narrative that Germany was a country of immigrants and denied the guest workers citizenship and basic rights. [Between 1987-1992, around 2 million asylum seekers](#) sought entry from Eastern Europe and non-European countries, which prompted restrictions on irregular migration to be imposed for fear of creating more ethnic diversity.

It was not until recently that the German national law was amended to grant citizenship based on the *jus soli* (birthright) principle and naturalization of foreigners was passed in [the Citizenship act \(2000\)](#). Rapid speed of neoliberal globalization in the late 20th Century pushed many Western countries to open their borders once again for migrant workers. Demographically, Germany is aging and needed to attract both low-skilled and high skilled workers in the future. Moreover, the increasing EU influence and the signing of the Schengen agreement, which became effective in 1995, pushed human mobility as a vital agenda for the integration of Europe. Although it is not a traditional migrant nation, like the USA, the official stance has since acknowledged immigration as a fact of German society. The [Immigration act \(2004\)](#) signaled a turn-around for policy makers since the 1990s. While it made it harder for asylum seekers and low skilled migrants to gain entry, it was intended to attract a higher percentage of highly skilled and educated migrants in the German workforce.

However, in terms of integration, Germany has pursued an approach that is closer to assimilation than true multiculturalism. Since 2005, with the creation of Integration Plan at the federal level, those who desire to stay in Germany are expected to know the language and adopt the values of German culture, especially those that are essential to a democratic order. The official motto was to [“support and demand”](#) the voluntary assimilation of immigrants through the acquisition of language skills and higher education while the government would offer equal opportunity and treatment to immigrants. While approach is not bad in and of itself, it does put the burden of integration on immigrants and show a lack of genuine embrace of cultural diversity in Germany.

Yet, the backlash to multiculturalism came during the 2008 economic downturn when Europe was hit by the recession. This time, the anti-immigrant rhetoric, although geared towards “problematic” categories of immigrants, came from conservative leaders as well. In 2010, Angela Merkel herself declared the concept of “multikuli” where people of different cultures live side-by-side has [“utterly failed”](#), even though Germany has never truly espoused multiculturalism as a central value. While this wave of backlash from mainstream leaders expressed the economic concerns at the national and European level, it only served to reinforce the fear of the immigrant from outside of Europe and compounded fears of terrorism, which is a favourite angle of the far

right against immigration. Current integration policies are inadequate to battle fears of a Muslim ‘other’ who is deemed opposed to a German ‘Leitkultur’ (leading culture) because they actively posit that there is one right way to be German.

Indeed, the threat to cultural identity and national security posed by immigration is not a unique problem of Germany; and neither is the rise of nativist far right ideologies. Most notoriously, the populist US president Donald Trump instituted a Muslim Ban as one of the first things he did in office. The face of German nationalism often brings up historical resonances that are particularly unsavory. But even without a national culture, there can be social cohesion and solidarity if the political elite delivered the message that integration could be a reciprocal process of acceptance between the immigrant and native population. This is crucial within these times because what was seen at Chemnitz could well be an aberration in time to come but it could also be a slippery slope toward more intolerance and violence towards ‘others’.

### **About the EU Centre**

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The primary mission of the EU Centre is to promote knowledge and understanding of the EU, its policies and development of its relations with Singapore and Southeast Asia through research, publications and different outreach programmes.

The EU Centre is the Coordinator of a 3-year Jean Monnet Network grant (Sep 2016 – 2019). The Network comprising the EU Centre, University of Indonesia, University of Malaya and Maastricht University, will be jointly organising a series of programmes and activities tied to two research themes on Multiculturalism and Multilateralism.

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