

The refugee crisis: a call for a change of course in Europe and in Germany

The refugee crisis has turned into a crucial test for European politics. The goal of friendly cooperation in a Europe of diversity is currently being crushed between national egoism and an inhumane closed door policy. Germany too faces an enormous challenge that is unsettling many people and cannot be successfully met unless our political leaders act courageously and determinedly to effect a change of course. However, since the will and strength required to do so have so far been lacking, an atmosphere is developing in which anxieties are being converted into fears - fears of excessive demands on resources, of being overwhelmed by immigrants and of unfair advantages. This stoking up of fears is helping to buoy up backward-looking, xenophobic, ethno-racist and nationalist parties in Germany and other European countries.

We cannot extricate ourselves from this political cul-de-sac unless we see the refugee crisis as a call for action. It has suddenly dragged the political mistakes and failures of the past into the spotlight. The unwillingness to show solidarity and to work together in Europe is the result of the path the European Union has been treading for years, one that has forced member states into competition with each other and created divisions between the stronger and the weaker. The European mansion lacks a social and solidaristic foundation. And in Germany it is becoming clear how utterly wrong it is rigidly to adhere to a policy that attaches greater importance to a fully balanced budget than to building a sustainable body politic. The refugee crisis is a stark reminder of just how overdue a radical change of political direction is.

Bridges not walls

The change of direction must begin with an immediate large-scale humanitarian action programme in Europe. People fleeing war and misery must no longer be forced to make their way to Europe because of the shameful underfunding of the UN relief agency. They need access in their own regions to means of subsistence, to education and to paid work. At the same time, orderly escape routes and legal arrangements for entry into Europe must be put in place in close cooperation with the UN. The European Union must not erect bulwarks against people fleeing persecution and terror bombing, regardless of what country they come from. Europe will founder, both politically and morally, if it does so. Politically, Europe will be unable to resolve its problems unless it faces up to its own responsibility for combating the causes of migration and does not make itself dependent on governments like that in Turkey. And morally, any attempt to erect barriers in contravention of international law will simply be to tread European values underfoot. The UN Refugee Convention and the basic right to asylum are inviolable!

Break out of the dead end of austerity

Instead of pouring money into border regimes, walls and barbed wire, constructive efforts must finally be made to tackle the gigantic challenge facing Europe. More EU member states could be encouraged and given financial support to take in refugees in a spirit of solidarity and in accordance with international law and absorb them into their societies. In order to

expand the coalition of those willing to accept refugees, the EU should launch a joint special programme for housing, schools, hospitals and jobs, funded for example by project bonds, for which local authorities particularly keen to take in immigrants could apply. At the same time, this would be a contribution to a European investment initiative that was not subordinated to the rules of the ‘fiscal compact’, so dogmatically defended by the German federal government, that for years have impeded economic development in many European countries, wreaked social and environmental havoc, particularly in Southern Europe, and given rise to increasing doubts about the democratic legitimacy of political decision-making. In this way, strategic investments, for example in climate protection, will create new pathways to sustainable economic growth for the countries hardest hit by the crisis and at the same time make an effective contribution to combating some of the major causes of future migration.

Changing direction by investing in Germany’s future

The task of integrating migrants who have fled war, misery and political persecution into German society has to be approached with intelligence and courage. It will succeed only if it forms part of the renewal of the social infrastructure for the benefit of *everyone* living in Germany.

First of all, central government must, without delay, provide the federal states and, above all, the local authorities with sufficient funding to enable them to get to work on urgent future investment projects. It is important for everybody living in Germany now and in the future that our education system – starting with early years provision – be modernised and strengthened. We need more and better paid specialists in the public services and more affordable accommodation for all in our towns and cities. The necessary investment in our community’s sustainability must not be sacrificed on the altar of austerity. Given that interest rates are at an historic low, it has never been cheaper for central government to finance public investment projects. Above and beyond that, it is essential, if the state is to maintain its ability to act, that tax loopholes be closed and that income from capital and large fortunes be taxed more fairly. And positive developments in the labour market should not be put at risk by those who would exploit the refugee crisis in order to lower social standards such as the statutory minimum wage. The difficult task of integrating the refugees into the labour market cannot be successfully managed unless it benefits everyone in Germany, whether in work or seeking work.

We’ll rise to the task

The election successes of the AfD (Alternative für Deutschland/Alternative for Germany) and the numerous attacks by right-wing extremists should not blind us to the fact that the vast majority of Germans remain open-minded and willing to help. This social commitment is evidence of our energy and inventiveness – always the strongest engines of social cohesion and social progress. This solidaristic civil society can and must be the foundation of an intelligent policy that offers strong leadership.

If we change course with both head and heart, we’ll rise to the task, as a people, as a society and as an economy. If we invest now in our future, Germany will in ten years be a stronger, more socially just and an environmentally more sustainable country than it is today. At the

same time, by changing course in this way, Germany will help to rebuild confidence in the future of Europe, both at home and abroad: a solidaristic, democratic and social Europe is possible!

(translated by Andrew Wilson, Manchester)

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