



Germany Changes Migration Policy Course

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Following the knife attack in Solingen in August and then September's Länder elections in Thuringia and Saxony, which resulted in success for the far-right, Germany is tightening its migration policy. The government's priority increasingly is border protection and repatriation of irregular migrants. The securitisation of Germany's migration policy is part of a larger trend observed in the EU since the 2015/16 migration crisis. The reintroduction of internal border controls by Member States and the increasing fragmentation of the Schengen area, are creating pressure to implement effective solutions in the area of migration and asylum at the European level.

Migration and the Public Debate. According to available data from the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees, the number of people coming to Germany seeking asylum has been falling—in the period from January to the end of August, more than 174,000 applications were filed (mainly by citizens of Syria, Afghanistan, and Turkey), of which 46% were granted. In 2023, the number of asylum applications was more than 351,000, and in the record 2016, more than 745,000. In Germany, more than 1 million refugees from Ukraine are also registered in the temporary protection system.

Despite a decrease in the overall number of asylum seekers, public sentiment has been radicalising towards an anti-immigrant position. One reason for this is the recent knife attack in Solingen in August in which three people were killed and eight injured. The attack was carried out by a Syrian national who, according to the Dublin Regulation, should have been returned to Bulgaria in 2023 (a so-called Dublin transfer to the country responsible for processing his asylum application), but German police were unable to locate him. According to a poll for *Die Zeit* conducted after the attack, 82% of surveyed Germans seek the need to tighten migration policy. According to a survey by the Federal Statistical Office, reducing migration is in turn considered the most important challenge for the country (45% of those surveyed). This survey was followed by the rise of the far-right (15%) and economic stagnation (14%). In

media and political discourse, the topic of asylum seekers is portrayed as central to all migration policy and arouses the greatest public emotion.

The change in public sentiment works in favour of parties advocating a decisive tightening of migration policy: Alternative for Germany (AfD) and the Sahra Wagenknecht Alliance (BSW). Fears of irregular migration and outrage over the Solingen attack contributed to the success of these parties in state elections in Thuringia and Saxony, as well as the poor performance of the parties forming Chancellor Scholz's government. Public pressure and fears of further increases in the popularity of the AfD and BSW have caused a change in the position of the other parties, which are adopting some of their slogans. The leader of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and the party's candidate for Chancellor, Friedrich Merz, is calling for the temporary closure of Germany's borders and the turning back of migrants from it (which would prevent asylum applications). The demand to close the border has become an important part of the campaign ahead of the 22 September Brandenburg parliamentary elections. Such a step was advocated, among others, by that state's prime minister Dietmar Woidke of the SPD. This tactic contributed to the rise in popularity of the Social Democrats in the final phase of the campaign and the electoral victory (with the result of the fringe parties still very high: 29% for the AfD and 13.5% for the BSW).

Government Decisions. On 16 September, by a decision of Interior Minister Nancy Faeser, Germany introduced border controls with Belgium, the Netherlands, Luxembourg, and Denmark. Border controls already in place on the borders with Austria, Switzerland, Czechia, and Poland were maintained, as well as those introduced due to the Olympics on the border with France.

In addition to the introduction of controls, the government prepared a package of legislative changes, which is being processed in the Bundestag. In the security sphere, restrictions on the carrying of knives in public spaces are envisaged, as well as facilitation of service operations against those suspected of Islamic extremism and an illegal presence in Germany (including biometric data collection and social media invigilation). The processing of asylum applications is also planned to be accelerated and to take place in centres close to the border, which will make it easier to monitor the whereabouts of those awaiting a decision. It is expected that this will ensure that they are also returned more efficiently through [Dublin transfers](#). Asylum seekers for whom other EU countries are responsible under the Dublin mechanism are to lose their right to German social benefits before they are sent back from Germany.

The European Perspective. Since the 2015/16 migration crisis, many Member States have maintained internal border controls in the Schengen area to prevent so-called secondary movements of migrants (from the frontline countries responsible for processing their asylum applications to other Member States). Internal controls, which in principle should be temporary and applied in exceptional circumstances, are already a permanent feature of the Schengen landscape, going far beyond the timeframe set out in the Schengen Borders Code. Currently, in addition to Germany, controls at selected Schengen borders are maintained by Austria, Italy, Slovenia, Norway, Denmark, Sweden, and France.

The answer to the problem of secondary movements of migrants within the zone is, among others, the amendment of Reception Condition Directive, which is part of the so-called [pact on migration and asylum](#) adopted this year. The pact is expected to enter into force in mid-June 2026. Until then, Member States should cooperate with the European Commission in its implementation. Germany's unilateral decision to introduce border controls, although is understood by countries that have been doing the same for years and [demanding more freedom with this regard](#) (i.e., Austria, Germany, France, Sweden, and Norway), is not

liked by the frontline countries, which bear the greatest burden of protecting the external borders and accepting asylum seekers. Tensions over this issue may hinder the implementation of the migration pact.

Conclusions and Recommendations. The German government's actions are an attempt to meet the expectations of public opinion, which is demanding a stricter migration policy and an improvement in the level of security, while rejecting the most radical and questionable slogans from the point of view of European law, such as the complete closure of the border. However, the announced changes to the migration law will not significantly affect the migration situation in Germany—the northern and western borders, where controls have been introduced, are not important migration routes for people seeking asylum in this country. Due to the scale of the government's and the Chancellor's loss of popularity since taking power in 2021, the chances of improving ratings thanks to the changes being introduced are slim.

A characteristic feature of the discussion on limiting migration in Germany is the focus on domestic politics and unilateral, *ad hoc* actions. The decisions taken by the government there are also another manifestation of the Schengen crisis that has been observed since 2015/16. It is caused by the lack of effective solutions in the area of migration and asylum at the European level, which would give a sense of protection of the EU's external borders and trust in the frontline countries in terms of compliance with asylum regulations. Although the migration pact adopted this spring is intended to respond to these challenges, the controversy over its provisions and tensions between Member States do not allow us to determine the success of the project. Thus, the future of the Schengen area remains uncertain.

From Poland's point of view, it is crucial that the next steps of Chancellor Scholz's government in the field of migration policy are taken in consultation with neighbouring countries. The tightening of the migration policy in Germany will most likely result in an increase in the number of migrants returned to Poland as part of Dublin transfers. It is also important to shift the emphasis from the protection of internal borders, which in principle should be limited to ensure the free travel and conduct of business by EU citizens, to external borders, the protection of which is in the interest of the entire Union.