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Immigration and European identity: United in diversity?

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While migration within and immigration to Europe is not a new phenomenon from a historical perspective, global migration movements have decisively shaped and changed the European Union, especially in Germany, but also in France, over the last decade. More than one million asylum applications were submitted in Germany in 2015 and 2016. With the start of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine in February 2022, millions of refugees from Ukraine found temporary protection in EU countries. Welcoming and supporting new immigrants in large numbers poses major challenges for local authorities and can become a breeding ground for social tensions, fuelling collective fears. These tensions are frequently fostered and exploited by far-right political parties leveraging immigration as a focal point.

On the other hand, European societies are set to face significant challenges stemming from their ageing populations in the coming 50 years. As a consequence, immigration will likely be required by economic forces to deal with a working-age population in structural decline. Thus, the central issue is how to shape and deal with migration within Europe, especially in France and Germany, in the present and future. The following sub-questions of this major issue are discussed in detail below: how is the increasing political influence of far-right parties, both at the national and regional level, impacting migration and diversity policies? How could the debate in society about migration be more constructive and less polarised? What best-practice examples already exist for dealing with cultural diversity in a migration society and with the

integration of new immigrants? How can unity in diversity be promoted beyond the scope of laws and regulations at European and national level, as emerging from citizenship and civil participation?

The EU's immigration policy dilemma: conflicting narratives between “Fortress Europe” and “talent attraction/competitiveness”

The EU is in a paradoxical situation. On the one hand, there is a growing labour shortage across member states and across the skills spectrum, especially in medium- and lower-qualified jobs. Eastern member states are, to an increasing extent, also experiencing shortages and looking for skilled workers internationally. On the other hand, Europe needs to attract an international, highly skilled workforce to compete in the innovative sector. Immigrants are overrepresented in occupations experiencing shortages today. EU member states are facing risks regarding their prosperity, competitiveness, welfare and the green transition. At the same time, increasing polarisation across the political spectrum and inflammatory rhetoric, especially against irregular migrants, is present. This speaks to many voters, as shown by the last European elections and the current successes enjoyed by far-right parties in national elections (such as in Italy and Slovakia). These discursive focal points are not without consequences as anti-refugee rhetoric activates racist tendencies and also affects “wanted” migrants.

Opportunities for labour migration therefore need to be expanded and opened up to more target groups. In France, for example, a broad legalisation of migrant workers who are already in the country, often working in sectors such as gastronomy without any residence papers, was discussed as part of the most recent [immigration law](#). Programmes that help to build partnerships with sending countries, addressing common concerns and tackling labour shortages in EU countries, such as the [Talent Partnership](#) between Morocco, Tunisia and Belgium, should be enhanced. Such programmes help to ease pressure in countries of origin with high unemployment and create legal sources of employment, improved working conditions in relevant sectors and income opportunities for migrants. Within this framework, migrant workers can acquire temporary appropriate professional experience in Europe.

Conducting the public debate on immigration in a peaceful and constructive manner

As already mentioned above, the debate on immigration in our societies is highly polarised and is a source of diverse collective fears and rejection. Anti-immigrant narratives, based on fake news, are fuelling further prejudices. In his recent book [Immigration : le grand déni](#) ([Immigration: The Great Denial](#)), François Héran exposes the contradiction between political narratives claiming that France is facing a migratory “tsunami” and actual data on the subject. The number of immigrants has indeed increased in France since 2000, but to a lesser extent than in the rest of Europe. At the same time, the challenges, particularly for local authorities (especially in Germany), that are associated with the reception, accommodation, support and long-term integration of refugees, should be taken seriously. Against the backdrop of high inflation and declining real wages, the cost of policies deployed to accommodate migrants is perceived as unjustified by a segment of the European population. It is important to address these concerns in particular in order for migration policies to succeed. Migration transforms societies, increases social diversity and triggers processes of social change. This can generate new forms of exclusion and contribute to social conflict. All these

issues must be taken into consideration and discussed openly in order to prevent additional social tensions.

In light of this situation, the establishment of a Franco-German citizens’ convention on immigration could be a solution. It seems necessary to break out of the national discourse about this issue and to bring citizens from the most diverse social milieus into dialogue with one another with the support of experts and practitioners. This configuration is intended to help deconstruct false narratives on the subject and de-dramatise the debate. It would be useful to work with approaches that favour a micro-perspective, concrete situations and story-telling. Immigration is a transnational phenomenon, and a transnational view of practices and solution-oriented approaches in neighbouring countries can open up new scope for action. After all, there are numerous best-practice examples in the field of migration and integration, often initiated by civil society and supported by local and state actors. These many successful examples are cited far too rarely in the public discourse. The debate in such a citizens’ assembly also includes openly addressing and discussing the limits to one’s own receptiveness as well as conflicts and problems in the integration process and in intercultural understanding. A citizens’ convention of this kind needs to reach a wide audience and publicise testimonies. The discussions must be widely covered by the media and simultaneously disseminated by influencers.

Making European diversity an experience for all

Another important aspect is the question of a transnational European identity and dealing with cultural diversity within Europe. Too few Europeans have the opportunity to experience mobility within Europe. All Europeans aged 18 and over, regardless of their social situation, background and educational biography, should be given the opportunity to spend time in another EU country via a voluntary service or an extended Erasmus programme, without financial obstacles. Such a programme would need to enjoy professional support and could open people up to other foreign countries and promote a new identification with Europe’s cultural and linguistic diversity.

Addressing the topic of migration in schools in Europe could also diversify the approaches and channels for tackling migration issues (e.g. by applying educational modules from museum work). Last but not least, topics such as racism and antisemitism need to be addressed and problematised in educational contexts in curricula to a much greater extent than in the past. Numerous violent incidents in the present and a large number of studies have shown that racism and antisemitism are not a marginal phenomenon but a widespread experience in France, Germany and other European countries. Racism and antisemitism are stubbornly persistent in our societies.

European asylum and migration policy based on human rights and solidarity

For decades, Europe's migration policy has focused on securing and controlling its own external borders. The keyword here is "Fortress Europe", an approach that impedes efforts to address the structural labour shortage in Europe mentioned above. There has been a lack of internal European solidarity in the asylum-seeker reception and distribution process to date. The laborious and years-long search for compromise within the framework of the EU asylum package reflects the great resistance to and difficulties surrounding a common approach in migration policy. Nevertheless, we should not lose sight of a humane European asylum and refugee policy. For this, improved coordination in asylum policy at the European level with greater solidarity and a fairer distribution of asylum-seekers, such as with the creation of a European Asylum Agency, is needed. Each country currently has its own approach and its own administrative procedures. Migrants are particularly affected by this inconsistency of administrative rules in between European countries. In addition, there must be more legal, safe migration routes as well as programmes for temporary stays in Europe, also in light of the numerous human rights violations both on the EU's external borders and in transit countries.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the following results can be noted with regard to the problems discussed: Against the backdrop of a growing labour shortage and demographic change, labour mobility partnerships should be further expanded and implemented. A transnational Franco-German citizens' convention should open up a forum for public debate that discusses the problems and challenges of immigration in a constructive manner, deconstructs fake news and enables the joint development of solutions. In order to promote a transnational European identity, the objective is to enable more Europeans than ever before to enjoy intra-European mobility and to experience European cultural and linguistic diversity for themselves. As immigration is likely to remain a structural issue for European societies as well as a deeply polarised political issue, it should be addressed as such and as a core vector for deepening European integration and institutions.

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Genshagen Forum 2024

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