



## Angela Merkel: Migrant Policy Shift and Prospects for her Re-election

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The Chancellor of Germany and the leader of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU), Angela Merkel faces a tough battle ahead in the forthcoming federal elections in 2017. Her policy towards the migrants from West Asian countries, known as the ‘open-door migrant’ policy, had always been a subject of controversy because of the differences of opinion outside party circles and even within the members of the coalition government<sup>i</sup>. Merkel’s recent defeat in the state elections in her home district, Mecklenburg-Vorpommern and her ruling CDU party coming third behind the Social Democrats (SPD) and the rightwing populists Alternative fur Deutschland (AfD) with an ‘all-time lowest result’ has sparked concerns over her future prospects of her being re-elected as the German Chancellor. These concerns have been heightened following the results of a survey report, published in the German newspaper *Bild am Sonntag*, which said that 50 per-cent of the 501 people surveyed, still a small number for analysis, don’t want to see her seek a fresh term of office. 42 per cent of the respondents said that they would vote to re-elect her.<sup>ii</sup> Would Merkel be able to continue as the Chancellor, or will she have to give way given the mood in Germany sifted after her pro-migrant policy? Though it’s too early to give a verdict on her chances of coming back to power, yet a sincere examination of the migrant policy that dims her once invincible position is necessary.

Given the fact that the issue of the migrant policy formed a major plank in the most recent state elections, Merkel’s policy towards migrants needs revisiting in the current circumstances. Lured by the stability and the job prospects offered by Europe’s largest economy, the number of first time asylum applicants in Germany increased from 1,73,000 in 2014 to 4,42,000 in 2015.<sup>iii</sup> Germany registered more than 1 million people as asylum seekers in 2015 alone, according to United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and, in addition, about half of them were from Syria.<sup>iv</sup> In her address to the nation on the eve of New Year 2016, Chancellor Merkel had acknowledged that the past had been challenging, but at the same time implored the nation to embrace migrants: “I am convinced that if we tackle the huge task posed by the influx and

integration of so many people in the right way today, then this will represent an opportunity for us tomorrow.”<sup>v</sup> The German Chancellor also used the occasion to reiterate her ‘*Wir Schaffen es*’ – ‘We can do it’ message while emphasising that Germany could still take in more refugees. Prior to that, at a news conference on August 31, 2015, Merkel had appealed for European unity to deal with the crisis. After the incidents of rape and molestation attempts on German women in Cologne during the 2016 New Year’s Eve celebrations were confirmed to have been committed by refugees, anti-immigrant protests were held in the city.<sup>vi</sup> A statement after the incident issued by the Cologne police said that the number of reported violence cases had reached 379 - 40 per cent of which were cases of sexual assault, and those in focus of criminal police investigations were people mostly from North African countries.<sup>vii</sup> In a move to control the situation, Merkel had proposed tightening of the law on asylum seekers for those who committed crimes. Meanwhile, anti-immigration campaigners seized the opportunity to point out the failure of Merkel’s asylum policy. The involvement of ISIS in the suicide bombing in Ansbach and the axe attack on train passengers in Wurzburg, both occurring in 2016 raised questions about the risks posed to security by the migrant influx. In the aftermath of the incidents, officials released a warning that jihadist fighters might have infiltrated Germany under cover of the refugee influx.<sup>viii</sup> Merkel was subjected to criticism for maintaining her silence after the Ansbach bombing, which was incidentally the first Islamic suicide attack in the history of Germany.

Despite two terror attacks purportedly carried out by refugees, Merkel stood firm on her policy of accepting refugees and vowed to ‘stick to our fundamental principles’ in offering asylum to refugees who deserve it. She was quoted as saying, “These principles mean we will give asylum to those who are politically persecuted and we will give protection to those who flee war and expulsion according to the Geneva Refugee Convention.”<sup>ix</sup>

The recent EU plans to continuously evaluate the residency status of people who have been granted asylum and also a consideration of proposal for setting up a new asylum ministry to keep a watchful eye on the situation in refugees’ countries of origin were followed by an announcement by Merkel, which at first glance, seemed as a significant departure from her earlier standpoint on migrant issue. Mrs. Merkel pointed out, “Not everyone can stay, and Italy has the same problem, so we have a common agenda...Those who do not have the right to stay have to be repatriated...It is unthinkable that we can accommodate everyone”.<sup>x</sup> However, what looked like a U-turn soon turned out to be only the same path taken with some twists and turns. Merkel admitted that the migrant policy was a ‘mistake’, but on the same count also said that Europe was ‘morally obliged to keep its borders open’. “We have to do it...We can do it”.<sup>xi</sup>

Nothing even losing the state election in her home district could deter her from standing firm on the issue. Merkel expressed confidence in the EU-Turkey deal, assuring that mass migration won’t take place.<sup>xii</sup>

While the German federal elections are scheduled to be held in October 2017, Angela Merkel is yet to announce whether she will run for her fourth term. Nevertheless, it is apt here to discuss

her prospects of serving a fourth term as Germany's Chancellor. Merkel is no stranger to crisis. In 2011, during the euro-zone financial crisis, a survey conducted by the German television channel ARD found that her ratings had plummeted down to 36 per cent compared to 51 per cent who backed the then likely coalition partners, the SPD and the Greens.<sup>xiii</sup> Back then, the German public had also reacted adversely in response to her handling of Germany's nuclear power stations, in the aftermath of the Fukushima disaster. Her positive handling of both the crisis, led to improvement of ratings as it reached an all time high of 77 per cent in 2012 to 2014.<sup>xiv</sup>

Things had however taken a different turn for Germany's Chancellor since 2015. The DeutschlandTrend poll for public broadcaster ARD showed a nine-point plunge in Merkel's popularity to 54 percent in October 2015, which was her worst rating since December 2011.<sup>xv</sup> Voters cited Merkel's 'open door policy' as the main reason for their voting in favour of AfD. Merkel's defeat in three state elections in March this year and together with her recent defeat in Mecklenburg-Vorpommern should give rise to serious concerns for her, if she wants to continue in power. One should also not fail to draw lessons from the past and recall them in the appropriate hour. It was Gerhard Schroder's defeat in a state election that ousted him from power in 2005.

At this stage, a look at the potential competitors of Angela Merkel might be given.

#### **AfD: A Threat to Merkel?**

With campaign slogans such as 'Secure the borders' and 'Stop the asylum chaos', the AfD has adequately captured the German mood and capitalised on the growing insecurity among the people. Frauke Petry, who took the reins from Bernd Lucke, is a voice which not many can ignore, given the fact that AfD now is in power in nine out of 16 states in Germany. She has been nicknamed 'Adolfina' by the German newspaper *Der Spiegel* due to her statements criticising Merkel's migrant policy.

#### **Wolfgang Schauble, Ursula von der Leyen, Horst Seehofer, Julia Klockner and Sigmar Gabriel: Successors within coalition?**

The growing disapproval for Angela Merkel's migrant policy, the drop in her popularity rankings, CDU's defeat in state elections and her marked silence on the possibility of competing for a fourth term have given rise to many speculations that she might give way to the more 'popular' Finance Minister Wolfgang Schauble and Defence Minister Ursula von der Leyen. According to the German opinion poll ARD-DeutschlandTrend, the approval of Schauble reached a high of 76 per cent in July 2015 due to the negotiations carried out during the Greek crisis.<sup>xvi</sup> The German newspaper *Das Bild* wrote about him saying, "The Finance Minister has immense authority, he held outstanding positions as federal minister, party leader or faction leader for more than 30 years, and also belongs to the heavyweights on the European stage."<sup>xvii</sup> Ursula von der Leyen, a Merkel loyalist and incumbent defence minister held the crucial position during the time of Germany's supply of weapons to Kurdish fighters in Syria, and also during the time of withdrawal of German soldiers from Afghanistan.

On the other hand, Horst Seehofer, Chairman of Christian Social Union (CSU) and Minister President of Bavaria had openly criticised Merkel's migrant policy on many occasions. Tensions in the CDU-CSU coalition have been intensified after Seehofer held the Chancellor's policy responsible for the CDU's defeat. Seehofer indirectly remarked recently that Merkel was creating confusion around foreign policies, and therefore, she should stick to domestic policies only.<sup>xviii</sup>

Julia Klockner, Deputy Federal Chairwoman of the CDU, is another potential candidate. However, her proposed plans are not clear cut, for instance, though she had adopted an alternative refugee policy known as 'Az', yet on the same vein she has supported Merkel's 'open-door policy'. Klockner has also emphasised on the aspect of integration with the greater German society, which has often come under the scanner.

The Vice-Chancellor of Germany and Minister for Economic Affairs and Energy, Sigmar Gabriel, who has in the recent times come out openly criticising Merkel's slogan, 'We can do it', saying that the leader had 'underestimated' the challenge, has also been considered as a potential candidate for Chancellorship.<sup>xix</sup> Gabriel has advocated for putting a stop to the flow of refugees from neighbouring countries.

Going by the current trends, the German population might be *wholly* offering a verdict this time *solely* on Merkel's 'open-door policy'. It is high time for Angela Merkel to either chart a convincing roadmap for the future of Germany, or adopt an 'actual' fundamental shift of policies regarding an issue which has been responsible for much of her defeat in state elections and overall German angst. At this point of time, she needs to be clear on the possible long-term consequences of her policies as well. Amidst opposition from her own coalition members and the EU member states, even if she sticks to her 'open-door policy' to prevent a possible collapse of the Schengen free movement zone, Merkel needs to check for alternatives so as to prevent more asylum seekers from coming into Europe. The EU-Turkey deal in this case is a hope, but then again disagreements on core issues within the deal have created uncertainties on its future continuation and implementation. Merkel's intentions, are no doubt, honest and in line with constitutional principles, but perhaps, the feelings of insecurity among the general German population might force her to promise a drastic change of policy.

Angela Merkel has undoubtedly been weakened by a crisis, not completely under her control. As the leader of Europe's most powerful economic powerhouse, Germany has an example to set forth for other member states of the EU, keeping in mind that traditional values and principles do not get compromised. This was what exactly prompted Merkel to stand rock solid behind her commitment to welcoming refugees into Germany. Though a policy change seems unlikely, which might weaken her chances of getting through a fourth term, yet it must also be remembered that popularity of other contenders among the German population together with required experience to replace a leader like Merkel will definitely be counted by the German voters. From this perspective, Merkel's contenders have little time to build up on that.

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Disclaimer: The views expressed are that of the Researcher and not of the Council.

### **Endnotes:**

<sup>i</sup> Bavaria's ruling Christian Social Union is a governing partner in Merkel's coalition on the federal level which has called for limits in asylum seekers in Germany. The Interior Minister of Berlin Frank Henkel also expressed regret at the government's policy giving a harsh criticism of people capable of 'committing barbaric crimes'. (Please see Chazan, Guy, "Merkel critics turn on refugee policy as Germans confront terror", *The Financial Times*, July 26, 2016, <https://www.ft.com/content/7eb992a6-5317-11e6-befd-2fc0c26b3c60> accessed on September 5, 2016). Most recently, Vice Chancellor Sigmar Gabriel addressed his support for a refugee cap for the first time on 28<sup>th</sup> August, 2016.

<sup>ii</sup> Turner, Zeke and Tom Fairless, "Half of Germans Oppose Fourth Term for Angela Merkel, Survey Finds", *The Wall Street Journal*, August 28, 2016, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/half-of-germans-oppose-fourth-term-for-angela-merkel-survey-finds-1472379679> accessed September 5, 2016.

<sup>iii</sup> "Asylum Statistics", *Eurostat*, May 2016, [http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Asylum\\_statistics](http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Asylum_statistics) accessed on September 5, 2016.

<sup>iv</sup> "Migrant Crisis: Merkel urges Germans to see 'opportunity'", *BBC News*, December 31, 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-35204495> accessed September 5, 2016.

<sup>v</sup> Ibid.

<sup>vi</sup> Gutteridge, Nick, "Cologne rapists were refugees: Prosecutor slams reports exonerating migrants as 'nonsense'", *The Daily Express*, February 19, 2016, <http://www.express.co.uk/news/world/644379/Cologne-attacks-German-prosector-New-Years-Eve-rapists-migrants-refugees> accessed on September 5, 2016.

<sup>vii</sup> "Cologne attacks: Merkel proposes tougher migrant laws", *BBC News*, January 9, 2016, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-35271171> accessed September 5, 2016.

<sup>viii</sup> Chazan, Guy, "Merkel critics turn on refugee policy as Germans confront terror", *The Financial Times*, July 26, 2016, <https://www.ft.com/content/7eb992a6-5317-11e6-befd-2fc0c26b3c60> accessed on September 5, 2016.

<sup>ix</sup> Troianovski, Anton and Ruth Bender, "German Chancellor Angela Merkel Stands Firm on migrant policy after terrorist attacks", *The Wall Street Journal*, July 28, 2016, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/bavarian-leaders-plan-more-security-tougher-measures-on-asylum-seekers-1469699655> accessed September 5, 2016.

<sup>x</sup> Gutteridge, Nick, "Merkel U-Turn: Now German leader vows to step up migrant deportations", *The Daily Express*, September 1, 2016, <http://www.express.co.uk/news/world/706167/Angela-Merkel-German-leader-step-up-deportation-economic-migrants> accessed September 2, 2016.

<sup>xi</sup> Miller, Joey, “Angela Merkel admits regret over migrant crisis – but says she’d still do it again”, *The Daily Express*, September 1, 2016, <http://www.express.co.uk/news/world/706090/angela-merkel-regret-migrant-crisis-do-it-again> accessed September 7, 2016.

<sup>xii</sup> Turner, Zeke and Tom Fairless, “Half of Germans oppose fourth term for Angela Merkel, Survey finds”, *The Wall Street Journal*, August 28, 2016, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/half-of-germans-oppose-fourth-term-for-angela-merkel-survey-finds-1472379679> accessed September 5, 2016.

<sup>xiii</sup> Jones, Bryony, “Eurozone crisis tarnishes Germany’s Iron lady”, *CNN*, August 17, 2011, <http://edition.cnn.com/2011/BUSINESS/08/17/germany.merkel.popularity/> accessed on September 7, 2016.

<sup>xiv</sup> Foster, Peter and Justin Huggler, “How Germany fell out of love with Angela Merkel”, *The Telegraph*, February 12, 2016, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/germany/angela-merkel/12154356/How-Germany-fell-out-of-love-with-Angela-Merkel.html> accessed on September 7, 2016.

<sup>xv</sup> “Merkel’s popularity slides to four-year low amidst refugee crisis”, *Reuters*, October 1, 2015, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-europe-migrants-merkel-popularity-idUSKCN0RV4VZ20151001> accessed September 6, 2016.

<sup>xvi</sup> Trager, Delia, “Wolfgang Schauble acclaimed as never before”, European Student Think Tank, July 12, 2016, <https://europeanstudentthinktank.com/2016/07/12/wolfgang-schauble-acclaimed-as-never-before/> accessed September 6, 2016.

<sup>xvii</sup> “‘Wine Queen’ or ‘Retirees Enemy’? Candidates who may replace Merkel”, *Sputnik International*, September 2, 2016, <http://sputniknews.com/politics/20160902/1044894315/candidates-replace-merkel.html> accessed on September 6, 2016.

<sup>xviii</sup> “Seehofer blames Merkel’s refugee policy for ‘disastrous’ AfD success in state election”, *Deutsche Welle*, September 6, 2016, <http://www.dw.com/en/seehofer-blames-merkels-refugee-policy-for-disastrous-afd-success-in-state-election/a-19528353> accessed on September 6, 2016.

<sup>xix</sup> Wagstyl, Stephen, “Sigmar Gabriel, the man taking the fight to Merkel”, *The Financial Times*, September 2, 2016, <https://www.ft.com/content/c663194a-6f98-11e6-9ac1-1055824ca907> accessed on September 6, 2016.