

Tightening Borders in Western Europe: How immigration is changing societies

By Anca Gurzu

Three years ago, police detained two men for savagely beating a 37-year-old Ethiopian-born man in Potsdam, Germany. Prosecutors presented the attack as racist – out of hatred for foreigners. Similarly, a 76-year-old German man was sent to hospital a year ago, after two young men of Greek and Turkish origin beat the victim, who had asked them to stop smoking.

Responding to this latter event, politician Roland Koch of the Christian Democratic Union of Germany – a centre-right party – said Germany has too many “criminal young foreigners.” “Germany has had a Christian Occidental culture for centuries,” he said to the English-language German news-site Spiegel Online. “Foreigners who don’t stick to our rules don’t belong here.”

Immigration and crime has entered the political realm of other European countries as well. A campaign poster depicting three white sheep kicking a black sheep, with the Swiss flag in the background, could be seen in Switzerland ahead of the general elections in 2007. The right-wing Swiss People’s Party was targeting the deportation of foreigners who commit crimes.

Xenophobic feelings are increasing, and far-right parties are gaining points especially in Western Europe. Analysts blame the lack of integration policies, and a fast-paced societal change for this trend. While some experts present Canada’s immigration policy as a model for European change, others say Canada is emphasizing diversity too much, and should become more selective in its immigration.

Some societies in Western Europe have been seeing a fast change in their demographic, says Elizabeth Collett, analyst at the European Policy Centre, a think-tank based in Brussels. Immigration is creating a sense of unease and is posing challenges for policy-makers, she says.

In the last few decades, many immigrants – from Eastern Europe, the Middle East and Northern Africa – came to Western Europe to perform mostly low-skilled jobs, which natives were less willing to take.

This was the case with Germany. In the 1950s and 1960s, Germany saw a large influx of Turks through its guest-worker program. But many of these guests never left. They built a life and a family.

Immigration and integration

Although a shortage of skills still exists, an increasing number of Western Europeans blame immigrants for taking jobs away from natives. Ethnic, religious and cultural differences are behind the increasing anti-foreigner sentiments. This translates to the political level.

Since 2007, under the rules of the new German Immigration Act, all those seeking citizenship or reuniting with family have had to pass a language fluency exam. Since this fall, candidates have also had to pass a test to become German citizens – similar to the one in Canada. However, unlike Canada, where residents can apply for citizenship after three years, German residents can do so only after eight, and must give up their previous citizenship.

Immigration poses a great challenge for integration, and language is one of the main problems, says Jörn Rohde, Deputy Head of the Mission at the German Embassy in Ottawa. A lack of German knowledge will lead to ghettoization, he says.

According to the latest Eurobarometer results, the European Unions' public opinion database, more than 63 per cent of Germans oppose Turkey's membership to the EU, a status the country is currently seeking.

“There are Turkish TV stations and Turkish newspapers everywhere, you can live in your own little Turkey in almost every European city,” Rohde says. “Integration is not only something we offer, but also something we demand. We demand a willingness to prepare for a change of life, and that means a basic knowledge of German.”

Germany is not the only Western European country focusing on integration. French politicians, who are seeing increasing numbers of African immigrants, recently passed a controversial law that allows DNA testing to prove genetic ties for those seeking to reunite with family.

In the Netherlands, would-be immigrants must test their compatibility with Dutch liberal values by watching a film showing two gay men kissing in a park and a topless woman walking on the beach. The test is targeting only immigrants from “non-Western countries.” A large proportion of immigrants to the Netherlands come from Morocco, where people don't share these values.

Immigration has crossed national barriers, and it is now at the top of the EU's agenda as well. Under the initiative of the French presidency, EU officials have put forward the European Pact on Immigration and Asylum. This states: “the European Union [...] does not have the resources to decently receive all the migrants who hope to find a better life here.”

Canadian lessons?

Europe does not look at immigration as a new source of citizens, says Collett. The Immigration Pact points towards a conservative shift in Europe, she says. “There is much less focus on migrants as individuals and on the welcoming aspects of immigration, and more emphasis on the idea of selective migration.”

This is exactly what Europe does wrong, according to University of Ottawa immigration expert Ravi Pendakur. “What we do right is that we stress permanency rather than migrant labour,” says Pendakur. Canada embraces immigrants as new society members, whereas Europe sees them as temporary workers, he says.

In fact, Canada's approach has been that of hyper-tolerance, according to University of Ottawa

Prof. Gilles Paquet, author of “Deep Cultural Diversity: A Governance Challenge.” “What we have to recognize is that the policy of multiculturalism has been a policy of division.”

Multiculturalism is emphasizing the rights, not the responsibilities new citizens have, Paquet says. “It becomes a passport of convenience. I think it’s perverse. When you come to Canada, it’s not Hotel Canada; it’s not a bingo hall. You join a society.”

Canada has a much longer immigration history, and Europe is still grappling with the idea that citizens are not European-born, says Collett. But we often tend to ignore the success stories, she adds. The new leader of the German Green Party comes from Turkey, Rotterdam’s mayor is a Moroccan-born Muslim, and at the end of October Germany opened its biggest mosque – intended to hold 1,200 worshippers and meant to break down barriers between Turks and Germans.