



FFVT media workshop 13 September 2021— Forced displacement and migration in the party election manifestos for the Bundestagswahl (short report: press talk)

In the press talk, Vera Hanewinkel (researcher at IMIS and author of monthly reviews of migration policy for the German Federal Agency for Civic Education – bpb) presented her analysis of the migration and integration policy positions of the major parties running for election at the Bundestagswahl in Germany 2021. The paper, a descriptive-neutral handout, was made available to the discussants and interested journalists in advance. Originally, the plan had been to also publish this paper via the bpb, which, however, cancelled it a few days before it was due to be published. The reason was that after the launch of the Wahl-O-Mat (an online tool allowing interested voters to compare the major parties' stance on important topics of the election), there had been complaints that it left out the small and very small parties. The analysis also only covered the major parties in the Bundestag.

This brief report cannot convey all the contents of the analysis; this is why we would like to refer to the paper "What's your take on migration? Migration policy positions in the manifestos for the Bundestagswahl 2021" itself, which is available at [this link](#). The media directly took this up and reported on [dpa](#) (for instance in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*), as well as in the [taz](#).

Vera Hanewinkel reported that compared to earlier manifestos, the general stance of the right–left margins remained relatively constant; they either viewed migration as a threat that must be countered or called for global freedom of movement. As migration was treated as a cross-cutting subject in the manifestos, references to it could be found in multiple chapters. According to the author, the focus of the manifestos, however, was on other topics, particularly the climate/environment, which corresponds to those mentioned by voters in pre-election surveys. While the Christian and Social Democrats stressed what they had already achieved, the opposition parties prominently addressed migration-related issues and made some innovative policy suggestions.

Besides the growing focus on the role of the local authorities, among other things, topics related to integration policy included the so-called change of track (*Spurwechsel*), that is the transition from asylum to work, which some of the parties increasingly emphasised. In general, integration as a topic was more clear cut compared to former manifestos. The narrative of the two poles was 'integration as a duty for immigrants to adjust to or assimilate into the host societies' on the one hand and the demand on the state to allow migrants active opportunities for participation in social life on the other. The latter could,

for instance, be found in the guiding principle of the Green Party ('unity in diversity'), inspired by the Canadian model. Cosmopolitanism and tolerance were also important demands by the Liberal Democrats. In this context, the author noticed the stronger focus on racism, which conservative parties tended to see in terms of the 'single perpetrator hypothesis' and 'fighting extremism', while the Left and the Green Party considered this a structural and institutional challenge of society as a whole.

A rather innovative suggestion by the Green Party was to remove immigration issues from the Federal Ministry of the Interior and to transfer them to a new, to-be-established ministry, the Federal Ministry for Society, Migration and Participation. According to the author, the Left Party has even abandoned using the term 'integration' altogether. For the parties of the current government, by contrast, it was often more the case of 'old wine in new bottles', calling for a continuation of 'business as usual' and being satisfied with what has been achieved so far.

There was also a broad spectrum of opinions about the sub-policy of forced displacement: On the one hand, there were calls for easier regulations for refugees fleeing war (i.e. creating exceptions for the individual assessment); on the other, there were calls to lift (again) existing restrictions for family reunification of beneficiaries of subsidiary protection. The large majority of the parties continued to acknowledge the Geneva Refugee Convention, the Global Compact for Migration and the Common European Asylum System and were prepared to respect, if necessary reform, these supra- and international agreements in the future. Regarding the question of how to distribute those who are seeking protection in the European Union, for instance, parties were calling for more solidarity among member states.

The topic of irregularised migrants was mentioned at the interface between forced displacement and integration policy. Here, many parties posited that there should be the option to create prospects of remaining legally, particularly for those whose deportation has been temporarily suspended for the long-term ('chain-toleration'). After the presentation of the analysis, Professor Petra Bendel, Chair of the Expert Council of German Foundations on Integration and Migration (SVR) was asked about her experiences with the ideas and recommendations of expert commissions: Do they find their way into the manifestos, or do they rather 'fizzle out'? The panellists confirmed that contributions by academia had been identified (for instance, the Liberal Democrats had adopted the call for a 'generation cap' word for word by—a term coined by the SVR). The call for a simplification of the complex immigration policy, too, has found its way into the manifesto of the Social Democrats, for instance. Many suggestions can also be found in a less differentiated form than suggested by the experts.

All in all, Professor Bendel summed up, election manifestos represented a bundle of ideas of many actors—some of which originated from suggestions and recommendations by groups of experts and were taken up word for word—but lacked a holistic approach.

Before the second round of discussion began, the moderators asked whether there had been any surprises. Vera Hanewinkel mentioned the large overlaps of the Green, the Left Parties and the Liberal Democrats. Professor Jochen Oltmer added that reading in the manifestos about resettlement and humanitarian asylum in embassies was rather a

surprise. Compared to 2017, he however noted a less close link between development- and migration policy. For example, the parties analysed did not attach much importance to fighting the causes of displacement, combining both policy areas. He was also surprised that education policy was only a relatively minor topic in the integration policy positions even though it had featured strongly before. On the issue of who is actually allowed to vote in Germany, he also felt that there was a lack of alternative suggestions: How—besides reforms of the naturalisation policy (mentioned only in passing in the party manifestos)—could there be greater equality between those who are residents in Germany and those who are eligible to vote? The Green Party suggested a municipal right to vote, the Left Party a general right to vote for all.

In the second round of discussion, the discussants Professor Andreas Blätte (University of Duisburg-Essen) and Professor Andreas Wüste (Hochschule Munich) added to their assessments: In their view, the Social Democrats and the Christian Democrats were rather reluctant to address the salience of the migration issue: This was likely based on the analysis of many strategists that this topic would only benefit the far-right Alternative for Germany Party (AfD). For example, the Social Democrats had drafted an immigration law in 2017 that was later not taken up again. He posited that this was to be interpreted as electoral strategy: Ambiguities like these depended on the party's assessment of the situation. Participants also stressed that all in all, liberal views prevailed in the party manifestos but that one expected less consensus among the working class. As a result, they observed a shift in these topics away from high politics and towards expert arenas (like the experts' commission of the Federal government) whose suggestions would then only arouse little public interest or even dissipate. According to this experts' opinion, the major parties were largely content about the declining importance of the migration topic compared to other topics.

This discussion was completed by insights into the research on voter turnout and voting preferences of people with international roots. The consensus here was that one of the things one would like to see from a future government is to enable more detailed research with an improved data situation in this field.

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