

The Trump Effect May Solve Germany's Migrant Crisis

Friedrich Merz, likely the next chancellor, shocks the country by promising to control its borders.

By Philipp Piatov

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Migrants and refugees line up at the central registration center for refugees and asylum seekers in Berlin, Jan. 4, 2016. PHOTO: MARKUS SCHREIBER/ASSOCIATED PRESS

Berlin

Friedrich Merz suddenly sounds a lot like [Donald Trump](#). That's surprising because Mr. Merz—leader of the conservative Christian Democratic Union and the front-runner to serve as Germany's chancellor, has long been regarded as a methodical realist with little flair for populism, uninspiring and even dull.

But on Thursday he made a declaration that electrified the political landscape and for the first time since 2015 put a way out of the migration crisis within reach.

The previous day, a horrifying crime shook Germany. A 28-year-old illegal Afghan migrant attacked a group of kindergarten children with a kitchen knife, killing a 2-year-old boy and a 41-year-old man who tried to intervene. It's the latest in a long line of brutal crimes committed by migrants. But the perfidy of the attack barely a month before the Feb. 23 election made it a defining event.

On Monday, the newly inaugurated President Trump had signed a series of executive orders addressing the migration crisis. That bold move resonated in Germany. Mr. Merz spent a night weighing his options, then stepped before the press on Thursday morning and delivered remarks unlike anything ever heard from a conservative German leader. He spoke of the “completely unrestrained brutality in Germany” and the “wreckage of a decade-long misguided immigration policy”—a scathing indictment of Angela Merkel's legacy.

Then came words that party insiders say he never would have uttered without Mr. Trump's inspiration: “If elected chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany, on the first day of my term, I will instruct the Federal Ministry of the Interior, using the chancellor's directive authority, to permanently control Germany's borders with all of our neighbors and to categorically reject all attempts at illegal entry.”

He promised in effect to translate Mr. Trump's executive orders into German. It was perhaps the first time a German politician had pledged to enact sweeping measures “on day one,” a phrase familiar to Americans but not part of Germany's cautious political discourse. Green Party chancellor candidate Robert Habeck immediately accused Mr. Merz of pursuing a “Germany first” agenda.

Mr. Merz addressed his party's leadership that evening in a closed meeting, where he declared: “I'm going all-in.” His party said he would forgo the chancellorship rather than compromise on this issue. The conservatives acted swiftly, submitting corresponding motions to Parliament. They also made it clear they were indifferent to whether these plans would require support from the far-right Alternative for Germany—a move that, until

recently, was considered unthinkable and has drawn fierce criticism from the left. Mr. Merz doubled down, insisting that addressing the crisis is more important than politics.

Opinion polls confirmed that the risk had paid off. Sixty-six percent of Germans supported his proposal to turn back migrants at the border, including 56% of voters from the center-left Social Democratic Party of Chancellor Olaf Scholz.

Mr. Trump's method, it seems, has found fertile ground in Germany. Germans have observed his actions with a mix of astonishment and fascination and asked themselves: Is he really as bad as we were told? Mr. Trump's approach to addressing long-standing issues reshaped his image in Germany.

In 2015 the German public welcomed Syrian war refugees with open arms. But when the influx grew to nearly 1% of the population within a year—and as hundreds of thousands of African and Arab migrants continued to arrive annually—the mood shifted. The societal impact became undeniable, from rising crime rates to strained welfare systems and a housing crisis. It took Germany five years (2020-24) to increase annual deportations from 10,000 to 20,000, while more than one million asylum seekers entered. Despite claims by Green politicians that migration “plays no role in people's everyday lives,” the issue has become omnipresent for many Germans.

Yet for years, political leaders lectured Germans that resolving the crisis was impossible. They claimed deportations were legally restricted and border controls would undermine the Schengen Area, the open-borders agreement that has become a central pillar of the European Union. This rhetoric of resignation masked as pragmatism became a hallmark of governmental paralysis.

Mr. Scholz's left-Green government clings stubbornly to the status quo, citing EU law. This is an absurd act of self-deception. The entire European asylum system is fundamentally based on the persistent violation of its own laws. EU law technically requires migrants to seek asylum in the first member state they arrive in. Germany is in the heart of Europe with no Mediterranean coastline or troubled state on its borders. Yet nearly one-third of all illegal migrants in Europe end up here. They often pass through multiple countries that under EU law are obligated to register and care for them. In practice, nations like Italy and Greece have been funneling migrants through their territory for years and later refusing to take them back.

In 2024, Italy was obligated to take back more than 10,000 migrants registered there who had traveled to Germany. German authorities managed to return only three.

Mr. Merz's proposal could trigger a domino effect and topple the dysfunctional EU asylum system. If German police effectively close the open borders by monitoring all border crossings and immediately returning intercepted migrants, a chain reaction could unfold: Every other EU country that had previously relied on passing migrants through to Germany would implement its own border controls and rejections. Berlin would shed its role as the EU's migrant magnet and force an immediate reform.

Suddenly, a turning point in migration policy—elusive since 2015—seems within reach. And it is no coincidence that this shift began three days after the American inauguration.

Mr. Trump's influence is particularly striking given his reputation during his first term as one of the most disliked U.S. presidents in German history. Political campaigns were built around accusations of being “like Trump.” But Berlin's ineffectiveness has left the public hungry for decisive governance. Many of Mr. Trump's policies, once unimaginable in Germany, enjoy growing support. Germans may never warm to Mr. Trump personally, but they've adopted his voters' attitude, no longer accepting excuses from their government for failing to solve obvious problems. Being labeled “like Trump” on migration won't be a liability for Mr. Merz in this election campaign. It could work to his advantage.

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