

Eyes on Germany: Migration Divides Generations of Greens

Article by Inge Jooris

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The Greens' congress in Karlsruhe came at an existential time for the party, caught up between constant coalition fighting and growing hostility to climate policy. But centre stage was migration, on which younger generations of Greens are at odds with the pragmatic approach of the party's leadership.

If last year was a tough one for the Greens, the last few weeks were a nightmare. The party came under increasing pressure from members, who become angrier and angrier about Green leaders accommodating the ever-tightening asylum policy. In both Hesse and Bayern, the Greens lost elections – in Hesse they were even expelled from government by the Christian Democrats, who decided to team up with the social-democratic SPD instead.

Moreover, on 15 November, the Constitutional Court ruled that the government's plan to repurpose 60-billion-euro from remaining emergency COVID-19 finances for the Climate and Transition Fund was illegal. This money was set up to be the federal government's lubricant for numerous green revolution projects. Now the money cannot be used. Add this to constant fighting within the government and its falling approval ratings, and it is no wonder that some opinion-makers are beginning to wonder whether the coalition will survive this latest blow.

In other words, last weekend's Green Party congress in Karlsruhe came not a moment too soon: there was a lot to explain and discuss. The first evening was used to reassure members. The Greens were working hard in government and would come up with solutions. The debt brake, which was at the root of the Constitutional Court's condemnation, must be modernised. There must be "Mehr Herz statt Merz": more heart and less of the Christian Democrat president Friedrich Merz, who is constantly attacking the government and the Greens in particular. The days that followed were reserved for agreeing on the programme and the list of candidates for the European elections – even though it had been clear for weeks that the issue of migration would take centre stage.

The Young Greens, led by the newly elected duo of Svenja Appuhn and Katharina Stolla, presented an uncompromising motion entitled "We are unconditionally committed to humanity". The motion is an indictment of what they see as the failings of Green ministers in the federal government. It makes a clear demand for all Green Party representatives to refuse further tightening of asylum laws: restrictive rules; the reduction of social benefits for refugees; lowering protection standards; the expansion of listed safe countries of origin; accelerated procedures; the reception of refugees in camps at external borders; and the return of refugees to supposedly safe third countries.

Their speeches at the congress were ideologically grounded and emotionally fierce: "No human being is illegal. Every day people are afraid of being deported. Every day refugees in Germany are afraid of racist attacks." They do not believe that embracing right-wing policies will win the Greens more voters: "People vote for the original. We are not the original for expulsions. We are the original for universal human rights." They see their position as an endorsement of Green ministers: thanks to their motion, the Greens in different governments will be able to exert more pressure during negotiations, they argue.

Their speeches were well received.

The opposing establishment of Green ministers and party leadership let it go for a while, but then lashed out just as vehemently. “This is a disguised vote of no confidence, which in reality says: leave the government”, said Vice-Chancellor and Economy and Climate Minister Robert Habeck, arguing that other factions would then inevitably lead policy-making.

Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock admitted that she could not meet the wishes of the motion. “If I imagine that this is about every refugee child in Thessaloniki, should I say that unfortunately I cannot help to negotiate, that my Hungarian colleague now has to do it alone?” She reiterated that an agreement on the common asylum system would have to happen soon in the coming months. For her, doing everything possible to ensure an agreement is vital, “because those who want to destroy Europe – the right-wing populists, the Putins of the world – are just waiting for Europe to fall apart on migration.”

The leaders did agree that they had to fight harder for core Green values but that this motion was not the way for them to fight harder. On the contrary, it would force them to leave the battlefield. The motion, they said, was not supportive. It was quite the opposite.

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Between the two camps, a diametrically opposed view exists on what is needed to make asylum policy as humane as possible. For those largely standing with both feet outside government office no tightening is possible, while those mainly sitting around decision-making tables see concessions as the only way to keep the policy from derailing. The first group does not want to give an inch on human rights, the second sees the battle lost but wants to limit the damage as much as possible. Both call themselves realists. One side says, migration is reality, how we deal with it is politics. The other says, the reality is that we are on our own.

The heated debate lasted about two and a half hours. In the end, the casting vote was less tight than expected. The congress voted by a clear majority in favour of the text put forward by the Green Party leadership, which states: “Control, order and repatriation are part of the reality of an immigration country like Germany.” Soon there will be faster asylum procedures in Germany, more deportations and payment cards for asylum seekers to stop them sending money back home, more robust EU external borders, all with Green Party support.

The Young Greens will not give in. After the vote, co-chair Stolla said: “I think it has become clear that there is very, very strong dissatisfaction in the party with this asylum policy that many people do not support.” With their motion, they have expressed a feeling that many Greens in Europe have: politics are moving to the right, human rights are being eroded, and no one seems to be able to build a dam. The Young Greens at least are keeping their mother party on its toes.



Inge Jooris is a writer and communications consultant. She was previously head of communications at KVS, one of Belgium's largest municipal theatres, and spokesperson for the Flemish Greens. She is current advising Cinquantenaire 2030, a project to transform Brussels' Cinquantenaire Park into Belgium's cultural and scientific hotspot, and follows German politics for the Belgian Green parties, Groen and Ecolo.

Because of her years of experience as spokesperson for the Flemish Greens and her now broader view, we asked Inge Jooris to write a monthly column on the work of the German Greens, drawing on her own experience where possible and looking for lessons that could be useful to all European Green parties.

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