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Resentment against the Support for East German Refugees (January 22, 1990)

The generous material aid given to a seemingly endless stream of GDR refugees, combined with the strain caused by ethnic German remigrants and asylum seekers, created widespread popular resentment, not least because housing in the Federal Republic was already scarce, two million West Germans were already unemployed, and social insurance funds were running dry. Therefore, some politicians recommended cutting back the support given to ethnic German remigrants and GDR refugees to reduce expenditures.

“Circuit Overload”

At least 500,000 GDR citizens will resettle in the Federal Republic this year; hundreds of thousands of people are coming from the Eastern bloc countries. Who is supposed to pay for these immigrants? The fight for jobs and apartments is getting tougher; enormous additional demands are being placed on pension and health insurance funds.

[. . .]

The initial enthusiasm over the opening of the border is subsiding; the joy that brings tears to the eyes is giving way to a soberer look at what intra-German freedom of movement will cost the affluent Western state. [. . .]

The figures on new citizens are being added up and are leading to worrisome projections. At the moment, as many as 2,000 East Germans are moving to West Germany every day. Authorities in Bonn no longer rule out the possibility that more than a half million East German resettlers [*Übersiedler*] could come to the West over the course of the year. If the economic situation in the GDR remains as dismal as it is at the moment, or gets even worse, then the stream of migrants could still increase considerably.

On top of this are the people from Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union who are moving to the supposed paradise of the Federal Republic. All told, West Germany will gain a million citizens, at the very least, this year on account of ethnic German remigrants from Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union [*Aussiedler*] and East German resettlers. The number for 1989 was already at 720,000.

Fears are growing that those who can now cross the border with ease will overtax the strength of even the rich Federal Republic; that the social welfare system, that the job and housing markets will prove no match for the onslaught; that the country's hard-won prosperity will be threatened.

Who will fill the government coffers used to pay for university grants, welfare benefits, and integration assistance for the newcomers from the East? Will a social network that is already stretched to the limit be able to withstand the additional pressure of millions of ethnic German remigrants and resettlers?

There were already heaps of problems even without the most recent wave of immigrants, even before the opening of the border. Bonn politicians were caught totally unawares when the housing market turned around in 1987-88. Empty residences in the social ghettos on the outskirts of the cities were suddenly filled with people again; the demand exceeded the supply. By now, there is an oppressive housing shortage, not only in big cities, but also in many smaller cities and towns as well.

The labor market has been out of kilter for years. The Federal Republic has lived with roughly two million registered unemployed since 1983. Even the "super boom" of recent years hasn't been able to rectify the shortage of paid jobs.

Last but not least, there's the social welfare system. We all remember well that its restructuring – even without the new citizens – was considered the most significant political task of this legislative period. It took a grand coalition of Christian Democrats, Liberals, and Social Democrats to secure the pension scheme, at least into the next millennium.

Only with a drastic reduction in services was it possible to slow the rise in health insurance premiums at least temporarily. Unemployment insurance is still dependent on federal subsidies in the billions. Local authorities are groaning under the burden of welfare payments.

The housing shortage, millions of unemployed, empty social security coffers – and now hundreds of thousands, if not millions, who will intensify all these shortages and hardships.

By now, politicians all over the spectrum, especially the unofficial SPD chancellor candidate Oskar Lafontaine, have recognized that a dangerous mixture of resentment and existential angst is brewing.

Ethnic German remigrants and GDR resettlers and the alleged or actual preferential treatment they receive with respect to jobs and apartments, pensions, and health costs – this subject threatens to become a major issue in the 1990 election campaign in the Federal Republic. The parties are diligently preparing themselves for this dispute.

Suddenly everyone is noticing that, 45 years after the war, the law aimed at mitigating the consequences of war for ethnic Germans and victims of the NS regime [*Kriegsfolgerecht*] is

inadequate when it comes to mass migration in the age of freedom of movement. “The whole law needs to be given a new foundation,” says social policy expert Gerhard Scheu of the CSU.

The CSU nimbly pushed itself into the spotlight with its own program last week. The party aims to cut pensions for ethnic German remigrants and resettlers. This shot from the hip aims to please the public by preventing known SED functionaries and members of the state security services [Stasi] from collecting lush pensions in the Federal Republic.

At the coalition meeting on Tuesday of last week in Bonn, CDU labor minister Norbert Blüm showed that he was prepared to keep GDR military and Stasi retirees far away from West German social coffers. It was decided at the meeting that a governmental working group would also quickly review the entire pension law. The heads of the state governments want to decide this week on scaling back numerous special benefits for ethnic German remigrants and resettlers.

The politicians, for a change, have a good sense of the mood at the grass roots. The people in government know this from years of experience: sharing with an anonymous collective has never been among those skills that are particularly pronounced among West German citizens.

Development aid for the Third World was pushed through by the Bonn government basically against the will of the majority, because foreign policy considerations demanded it. Foreign nationals living in Germany were always objects of social envy, no matter how much they contributed to the gross national product.

Tolerance toward Germans from the GDR is certainly greater – neither their skin color nor their native language makes them conspicuous. But the more people start talking about what the newcomers are costing or could cost the country, the more decisive the defensive posture is likely to be. Especially since the GDR citizens possess well-developed “resource tapping” skills. About sixty percent of the East Germans who came to West Berlin in the first six months of last year took immediate advantage of sick leave. Doctors willingly issued attestations for “migration syndrome” or “adaptation difficulties.”

There were certainly signs of illness here and there, but the main incentive to start their new lives in the West by getting sick surely lay elsewhere: Sick pay is considerably higher than unemployment benefits. [. . .]

Source: “Circuit Overload” [“Da brennt die Sicherung durch”], *Der Spiegel*, no. 4, January 22, 1990.

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