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Ethnic German Migration after 1989 – Balance and Perspectives

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Ethnic German Migration after 1989: Balance and Perspectives

Speech given at the SFU President Series in May 1999, SFU Harbour Centre

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Abstract: Among all European countries, Germany absorbs by far the largest number of immigrants. But to date, the German government has yet to adopt a system that will effectively control the influx of foreigners. The immigration of Ethnic Germans from Eastern Europe, which is due to historical events and therefore constitutionally guaranteed, is a special case. It is marked by selection criteria (language tests), de facto quotas, and mobility restrictions. Although the immigration of foreigners and Ethnic Germans produces overall positive effects, the recent trend has been more problematic, especially as the economic situation in Germany deteriorated. Ethnic Germans are basically facing the same difficulties with social and economic integration as foreigners. A majority of young Ethnic Germans have no cultural or language ties to Germany. Insufficient language skills and the lack of adequate education and training often limit their labour market prospects to simple tasks and physical labour. Over the last few years, unemployment among Ethnic Germans in the workforce has increased. This study concludes that Germany needs a well-directed immigration policy in order to make the immigration process transparent and predictable. This would also lead to a better acceptance of foreigners and Ethnic Germans in society. A German immigration law could be based on the existing structures that apply to the influx of Ethnic Germans.

This paper has been previewed for the RIIM Website by Don DeVoretz and copyedited by Sydney Preston.

Introduction

The immigration of Ethnic Germans (*Spätaussiedler*) into the Federal Republic of Germany is a unique phenomenon. No other country in the world has experienced similar immigration flows of a particular ethnic group based on historical events and constitutional guarantees. The enormous scope of Ethnic German migration has frequently triggered discussions about domestic policy in Germany. This is especially true for the last ten years, which have witnessed a considerable increase in migration to Germany after the fall of the Iron Curtain.

People abroad — and this applies especially to traditional immigration countries like Canada — often find it hard to believe that Germany has refrained from a comprehensive legal control of immigration. That the influx of Ethnic Germans is *de facto* subject to immigration regulations and limitations therefore seems even more surprising.

This situation prompts a closer look. It is also reason enough to ask exactly what Germany can learn from the Canadian experience of immigration.

Let me start off my presentation with an overview of the institutional framework — the essential facts and data concerning Ethnic German migration. I will continue with a few thoughts on the economic significance of this type of inflow. Finally, I intend to place Ethnic German migration in the context of overall immigration into Germany and will offer some future perspectives. My presentation will end with the suggestion that Germany should learn from Canada and treat the immigration issue in a self-confident, but also actively shaping manner.

1. Historical and legal background

In order to explain the influx of Ethnic Germans into the Federal Republic, we have to consider the historical background. In the 18th century, a large number of Germans emigrated to Eastern Europe. Ethnic minorities in the German Reich became German citizens by virtue of the Germanization laws that originated under Bismarck in the late

19th century. As a result of the territorial losses after World War I, many of those Germans became foreigners.

Under its regime of terror, the National Socialists implemented lunatic resettlement and annihilation plans for the population of the occupied territories, while they “germanized” other ethnic groups by force and expatriated German citizens to the eastern territories. After World War II, about 15 million German citizens became refugees or expellees. The first West German post-war census in 1950 revealed that almost 10 million expellees from the former German eastern territories now lived in Germany and made up nearly 20 percent of the population.

Until today, however, hundreds of thousands of German natives and their descendants continue to live outside of post-war Germany. Their precise number can only be estimated and depends on the exact recognition criteria used. Article 116 of the German Constitution (*Grundgesetz*) still awards these people German citizenship in the event of immigration. The German expellee legislation, entitled the “Bundesvertriebenengesetz,” covers the details for the recognition and admission of these immigrants. In general, it requires some proof that these people maintain “Germanness” in such aspects as descent, language, and culture. The same law deals with government programs to support integration for Ethnic Germans, such as low-interest loans and language courses.

To sum up, those who are recognized by the authorities as Ethnic German immigrants receive an entry visa, they are granted German citizenship on request, thereby acquiring all rights and duties of a citizen — and all that without a waiting period. This is one of the major differences between Ethnic Germans and other types of immigrants, who have to wait for many years to become citizens. Almost all of the Ethnic Germans, incidentally, enjoy dual citizenship. While they are allowed to carry both passports, regular foreign immigrants may keep their original passports only in exceptional cases. Family members of Ethnic Germans are entitled to move to Germany even if they are not themselves recognized as Ethnic Germans. They are recorded in the same statistics, even if they would normally be regarded as foreigners.

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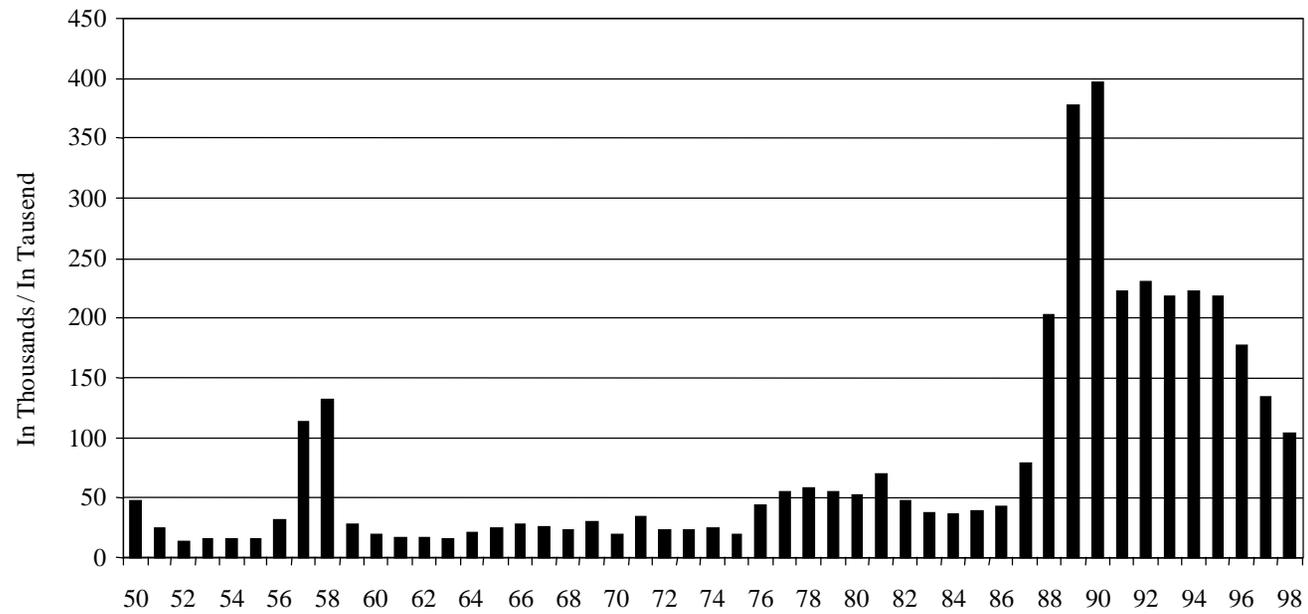
To sum it up: Those who are recognized by the authorities as ethnic German immigrants receive an entry visa, they are granted German citizenship on request, thereby acquiring all rights and duties of a citizen — and all that without a waiting period. This is one of the major differences between ethnic Germans and other types of immigrants, who have to wait for many years to become citizens. Almost all of the ethnic Germans, incidentally, enjoy dual citizenship. While they are allowed to carry both passports, regular foreign immigrants may keep their original passports only in exceptional cases. Family members of ethnic Germans are entitled to move to Germany even if they are not themselves recognized as ethnic Germans. They are recorded in the same statistics, even if they would normally be regarded as foreigners.

In the early 1990s, prompted by the dramatic increase in immigration, German policy towards *Spätaussiedler* undertook noticeable changes. The recognition criteria for ethnic Germans were tightened and funding for integration programs was cut.

Fig. 1: Influx of Ethnic Germans

Abb. 1: Zuzüge von Aussiedlern

1950 – 1998



Source / Quelle: Bundesverwaltungsamt, Europäisches Forum für Migrationsstudien

2. The quantitative dimension and changes in legislation

After the walls and the barbed wire came down, the relaxed exit regulations in the countries of Eastern Europe caused the influx of Ethnic Germans to rise dramatically in a single year (see Figure 1). In 1989 and 1990 alone, nearly 800,000 Ethnic Germans came to Germany. Considering the increase in foreign immigrants and refugees that took place during the same period, it is evident that Germany suddenly had to deal with a whole new situation. Taking into account all groups of immigrants and refugees, Germany recorded more immigration during the early 1990s than the United States, Canada, and Australia combined. This shows the true dimension of migration to Germany.

As a consequence, this development has led to social tension and acceptance problems for immigrants and Ethnic Germans in German society. These problems were aggravated as the first signs of the economic difficulties resulting from the German reunification process became apparent. Politicians felt compelled to react, and they did so not only by tightening the refugee legislation, but also by limiting the influx of Ethnic Germans. The recognition practice became much stricter, the budget for integration programs was cut again, and the German Parliament — remarkably enough — introduced a quota for Ethnic Germans at the end of 1992. From then on, no more than about 200,000 Ethnic Germans per year were to come to Germany. This decision has been effective, although it never formally became a law.

Immigration statistics reflect the effect of these legal changes. Since the introduction of the quota, the influx of Ethnic Germans has dropped significantly. Further legislative changes reduced that number even more in the mid-'90s. The level is now quite stable at about 100,000 persons per year. At the same time, the circumstances under which immigration of foreigners takes place have changed. Today more foreigners emigrate from Germany than immigrate into the Federal Republic. After all, one of the main features of an immigration country without immigration laws is the high fluctuation of migrants. With the exception of Ethnic Germans, Germany has traditionally been prone to a high degree of emigration. The comparison with classical immigration countries, therefore, also has to account for the fact that net migration in those countries

does not differ so much from the absolute number of immigrants as it does in Germany — at least as far as the outflows are recorded or estimated.

Let me give you some numbers to illustrate this fact. While an annual average of over a million people came to Germany in the 1990s, between 600,000 and 800,000 people moved away. Net migration has been around 350,000 people per year since 1995. From 1997 on, this balance became negative for the first time since the early 1980s. This trend, in combination with a lower influx of ethnic Germans, has been quite a relief for Germany's situation as an immigration country in the centre of Europe. (Note that while the outflows from Germany might suffer from significant measurement errors, there are no official emigration statistics for the US or Canada. This is not related to the ideology of a classical immigration country, but to the fact that they have no population registers.)

One major reason for the decline in Ethnic German immigration was the introduction of a language test, which poses an insurmountable obstacle to many potential Ethnic German immigrants. Another reason, of course, is the fact that continuing migration to Germany has significantly reduced the number of remaining Ethnic Germans in Eastern Europe. A “natural” end to the influx, however, is currently not in sight. Although it could always be politically mandated, this would almost certainly cause a last-minute panic.

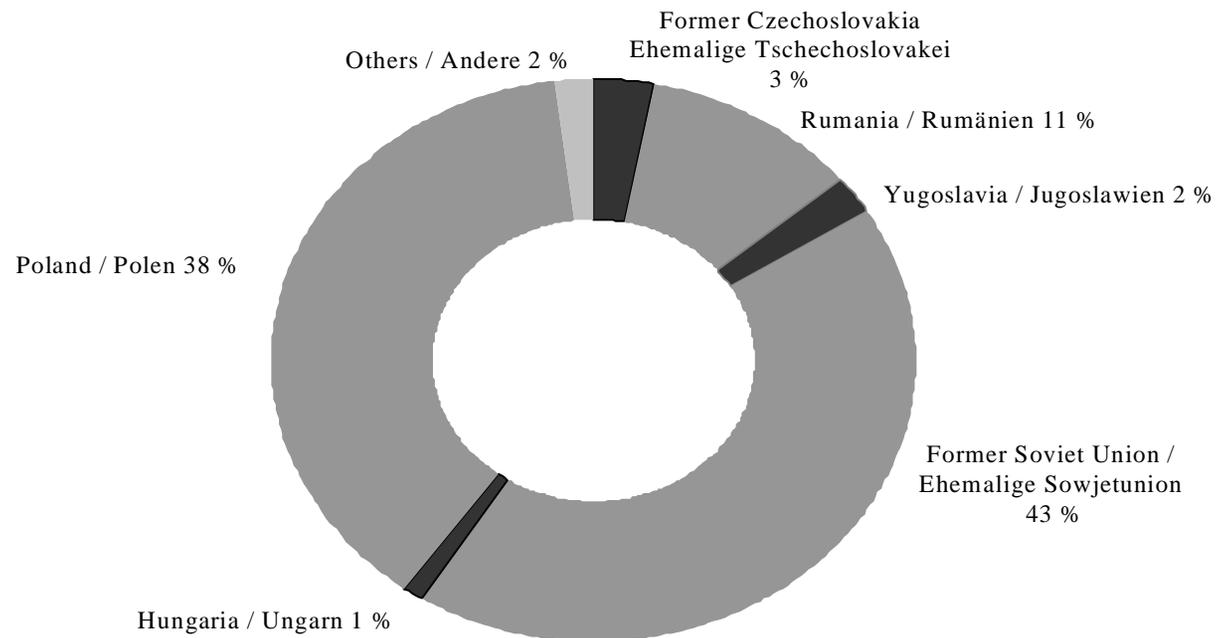
An estimated 200,000 Ethnic Germans are already in possession of an entry visa, and have virtually packed their bags. In addition, there is a large “hidden reserve” of potential Ethnic German immigrants who have not yet applied for a visa, but are expected to do so if immigration were to be stopped. A careful regulation of the influx, therefore, remains necessary. In most respects, this corresponds to the view held by all political parties represented in the German Parliament.

Nevertheless, the European history of migration since 1989 shows an enormous susceptibility to radical political changes. Take, for example, the refugee situation after the civil wars in Yugoslavia, or the economic, social, and political situation in Russia, which remains critical. East-west migration flows react to such changes on the European continent like a high-sensitivity seismograph. The possibility that this might put the pressure on more Ethnic Germans to migrate to Germany can not, therefore, be ruled out.

Fig. 2: Source Countries of Ethnic Germans

Abb. 2: Herkunftsgebiete der Aussiedler

1950 – 1998



Source / Quelle: Bundesverwaltungsamt, Europäisches Forum für Migrationsstudien

With regard to the composition of Ethnic German immigrants, there are two striking facts — a shift in the country of origin and a shift in the age structure. Ten years ago, Ethnic Germans from Poland and Romania made up a large percentage of the overall influx. As Figure 2 suggests, these groups account for about half of all Ethnic German immigrants since 1950. But the picture is quite deceptive. In fact, Ethnic Germans from Poland and Romania have played an insignificant role since 1993. In the case of Poland, this can be explained through the rapid development of democratic structures and the successful transformation from a planned to a market economy, which causes people to stay. Today, temporary migration from Poland to Germany plays a larger role. Incidentally, this also contributes to shadow-market activities in Germany. In the case of Romania, on the other hand, the migration process of Ethnic Germans is almost complete.

More than 90 percent of all Ethnic Germans now come from the former Soviet Union, especially from Kazakhstan. This is important insofar as Ethnic Germans from Poland, and even from Romania, find it easier to integrate into German society. They are also more successful in the labour market because they show a higher degree of education and training overall. Today, newly arriving Ethnic Germans often face the same problems in the labour market as foreigners.

Fig. 3: Age Structure of Ethnic Germans

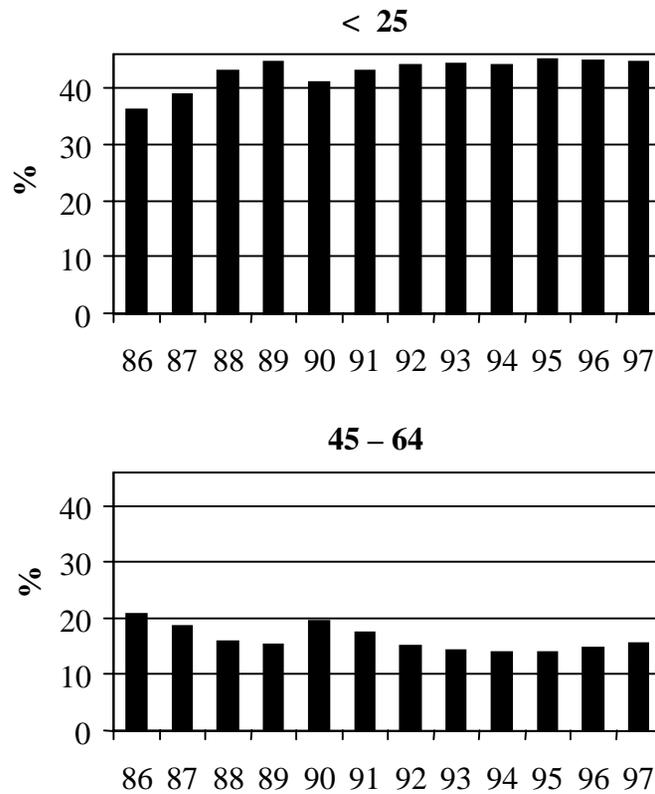
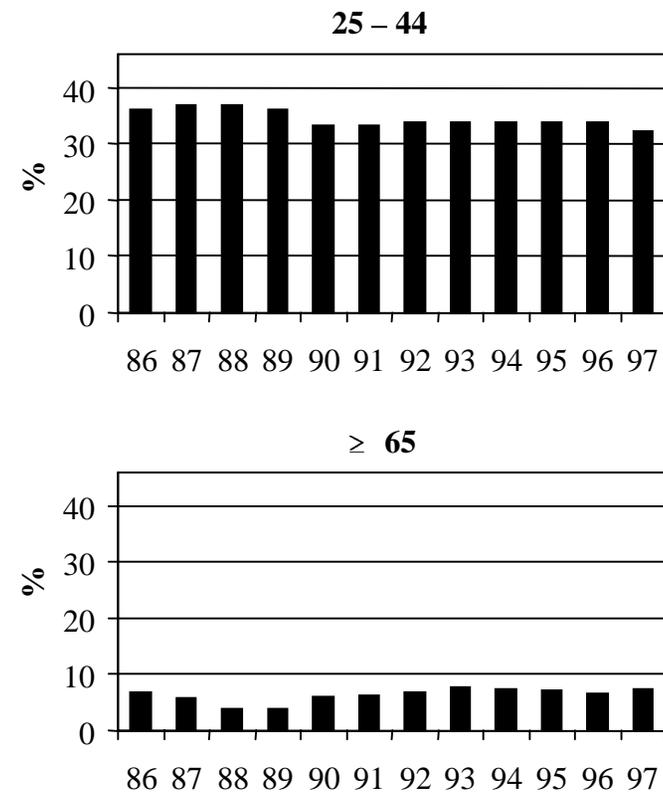


Abb. 3: Altersstruktur der Aussiedler



Source / Quelle: Bundesverwaltungsamt

The second important fact is the shift towards younger Ethnic Germans, which is obvious from Figure 3. The rapid increase in migration in the late 1980s was largely due to the higher percentage of young immigrants. For the last few years, Ethnic Germans under 25 years of age have made up about 45 percent of all newcomers — up from only 35 percent 15 years ago. This represents an increase of almost one-third. The age structure of immigrating Ethnic Germans, therefore, differs significantly from Germany's total population.

The percentage of those participating in the labour market — over 50 percent — is much higher among Ethnic Germans than among the native population. Between 1988 and 1995 alone, from 2 million total Ethnic German immigrants, 1.1 million entered the labour force. Although this slows down the aging of German society and has favourable demographic effects, it also causes a lot of problems in terms of social integration as well as education, training, and employment.

3. Social and economic effects

Before the dramatic increase in immigration, the integration of Ethnic Germans took place in a virtually “quiet” manner. Admittedly, a tendency towards ghettoization and a difficult labour market situation for certain groups did exist in earlier years. The public, however, only became aware of this problem by the end of the 1980s when, for instance, housing-related problems emerged, and the presence of Ethnic Germans could no longer be overlooked. Since then, the same problems as those experienced in the integration of foreigners, keep arising.

Today, the concept of assimilation no longer applies to many Ethnic Germans. In the past, more older people — who often had closer ties to Germany in terms of language or culture — immigrated, whereas the majority is now composed of younger Ethnic Germans, for whom the opposite is true. They are the same age as the second generation of immigrants whose parents came to Germany as foreign workers in the '50s and '60s. The big difference, however, is that they did not grow up in Germany, they have serious language problems (despite passing a language test), and they basically find no cultural point of reference in Germany. This must almost inevitably lead to isolation and

segregation tendencies, and it becomes an enormous obstacle to economic integration. The reduction of funding for integration programs contributes to this trend. At the same time, however, people are showing less willingness to make use even of the existing offers. Politics and society will have to attend to the question of whether the assimilation strategy should be replaced by the concept of cultural pluralism.

One possible consequence would be to enhance the role of the Russian language in the school system. This would, however, contradict the notion that Ethnic Germans are part of the German people. It is therefore safe to assume that the assimilation concept will continue to dominate, even if it has lost some credibility.

In the early 1990s, Ethnic Germans became increasingly ghettoized, even to a greater extent than did foreign immigrants. Newcomers moved in with friends and relatives who had already settled in Germany. Although the beginning creation of network structures among Ethnic Germans makes sense economically, it sends out a negative integration signal, which had and still has an unfavourable impact on employment prospects. Along with that came an increase in crime and violence among Ethnic Germans.

The legislative response to this development was the so-called *Wohnortzuweisungsgesetz*, or “Assigned Place of Residence Act.” This law ties welfare payments to a particular place of residence that is assigned to every newcomer. On the one hand, this has led to a decentralization of Ethnic Germans. On the other hand, it restricted considerably the freedom of movement of this group. If the influx of Ethnic Germans remains at the same low level, this piece of legislation might be removed in the near future.

With the exception of these restrictions, the labour law treats Ethnic Germans — contrary to foreign workers — just like native workers. In this respect, their chances to succeed in the labour market are much better than those of foreign workers. Despite this fact, in many cases they experience difficulties with economic integration that are quite similar to those of foreign immigrants in Germany. While for some members of both

migrant groups occupational integration has been quick and easy, others have serious problems. In general, however, the difficulties for foreigners are much more severe.

The dominance of Ethnic Germans from the former Soviet Union went along with a change in the educational and occupational structure of *Spätaussiedler* as a whole group. The majority of professions among Ethnic Germans are still in the fields of industry, manufacturing, and simple services. In recent years the service sector has outweighed industrial professions. At the same time, however, a growing number of Ethnic Germans have professions in agriculture and forestry, or in fields that cannot even be categorized according to German qualification standards. In many cases, their qualifications do not meet market demands, or their education and training is practically non-existent. All this reduces the labour market prospects for Ethnic Germans further, and they are often limited to simple services or physical labour.

In Germany as well as in other countries, traditional industrial manufacturing jobs are in rapid decline. Technological progress takes its toll. It also offers new job opportunities in the service and technology sectors, but most of those jobs require high qualifications — at least at present. As a result of this development, less-qualified workers in Germany face an exceptionally high percentage of unemployment, even in an international comparison. Another reason for this dilemma is that Germany has great difficulties in creating a “service culture,” simple services, and a low-wage sector. In this respect, we are definitely lagging behind other countries, and that hurts our employment situation.

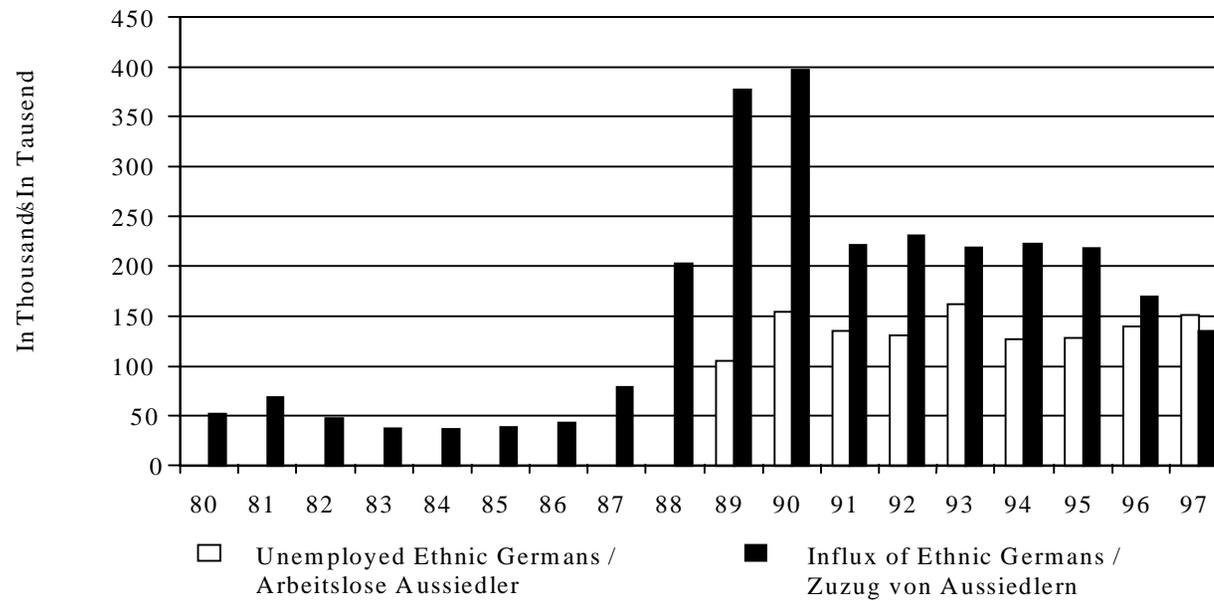
The negative effects on the less-qualified German workers are even more severe for Ethnic Germans — as well as foreign immigrants. Since there is often no demand for their qualifications and job experience, the consequence is unemployment. This especially affects Ethnic Germans from the former Soviet Union. An additional problem is that a large percentage of young Ethnic Germans, like young foreign immigrants, have not graduated from high school and lack vocational training. This has partly to do with information deficits, but it is also due to the fact that their families, out of financial considerations, find it more important for their children to take up work as soon as

possible than to get quality education and training. Unemployment, then, often becomes a permanent state of affairs, and it comes as no surprise that Ethnic Germans, as well as foreign workers, are over-represented among the long-term unemployed, namely those who have been searching for a job for more than a year.

Fig. 4: Influx and Number of Unemployed

Abb. 4: Zuzüge und Arbeitslose

1980 – 1997



Source / Quelle: Bundesverwaltungsamt, Europäisches Forum für Migrationsstudien

According to the available data, the year 1997 witnessed only a mild increase in unemployment among Ethnic Germans, back up to its previous levels in 1990 and 1993 (see Figure 4). We have to take into account, however, that Ethnic Germans are removed from the separate unemployment statistics after five years, since they are then only recorded as Germans. So there are no total numbers available. It is evident that unemployment among Ethnic Germans has not declined along with the number of newcomers. On the contrary, the rise in unemployment even exceeded the number of newcomers in 1997.

Of course, these findings also have to account for the fact that the total number of Ethnic Germans keeps growing with every newcomer. It can therefore be said that the integration of Ethnic Germans into the labour market was acceptably high in the economically better times right after German reunification. The economic integration in the late 1990s, however, was less successful. Unemployment among Ethnic German workers has definitely risen.

The major problem is an obvious one: well-directed job-training measures — especially for young Ethnic Germans — are necessary to prevent them from being permanently outclassed. The improvement of language skills should receive special attention. Considering that Germany is the European country with the highest rate of immigration, it is quite surprising that language has played a minor role in the German integration programs. There are various offers, but they are on a voluntary basis and not available everywhere. Germany also places too much emphasis on government-sponsored integration programs alone. In the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom, government assistance for immigrants is more limited. Rather than relying on the welfare state, their systems encourage private initiative, ethnic networks, and family assistance. Germany may have to reconsider its course accordingly to complement well-designed government integration programs.

Now, it would certainly be wrong to view the social and economic integration of *Spätaussiedler* largely from a negative perspective. In fact, German integration efforts have been quite successful, considering the high number of migrants. Various studies

show that the German economy has definitely profited from the continuous influx of foreigners and Ethnic Germans. This also holds true for the early 1990s. When the economic situation deteriorated further, however, the positive effects weakened. The overall economic impact of immigration is still positive, but the negative tendencies, such as the growing welfare expenditure for immigrants and Ethnic Germans, are gaining significance.

The rising burden for the welfare state, however, has more to do with the particular characteristics of the new migrants than with their behaviour. Equally defined natives cause even higher welfare payments than do the immigrants. This shows that there might be options to obtain even better economic results from a systematic German immigration policy and to counteract any negative tendencies.

4. Perspectives

Germany must now attend to the questions of whether its immigration policy needs a fundamental realignment, and whether the special treatment of Ethnic Germans should be maintained. At any rate, the immigration process has to become more transparent and predictable, and this has to be done immediately because the social acceptance of immigration depends on it. What is standard procedure for countries such as Canada and the United States — setting quotas and selection criteria for the admission of immigrants — is still taboo in Germany, but in the medium term little alternatives to this kind of policy will exist.

From an economic viewpoint, an immigration law in Germany seems inevitable. There is no other way to select immigrants on the basis of economic demands while keeping political control. The same applies to the question of predictability. Many Germans are uneasy with immigration and immigrants because the scope of annual immigration cannot be calculated in any way, and this causes a feeling of helplessness. Countries such as Canada or Australia demonstrate how to handle the issue in a more sensible manner without sacrificing social integration on the altar of pure calculation. On

the contrary, immigration is widely accepted in Canada not only because of the country's long tradition of immigration, but also because of the self-confidence that allows it to shape immigration actively instead of taking it for granted.

Of course, even in Canada and the United States there is a rising debate about the dimensions of future migration policies. However, this debate seems to be less marked or controversial than that in Germany, and is based on a better conceptual foundation of a national migration policy. The current situation in Germany is paradoxical. While the influx of Ethnic Germans is *de facto* regulated, no similar structure exists for foreign immigrants. The actual number of Ethnic German newcomers is currently about 50 percent below the quota.

- A language test is the first sign of a selection mechanism;
- applications can be sent in from abroad;
- integration programs exist, even if they have been reduced, and
- freedom of movement is limited at first.

The above points are exactly what a general German immigration law could be based upon comparable to those applied in Canada and the US, in addition to selection criteria and mechanisms for non-ethnic German migrants. There is no reason why this process should not be used in a comprehensive regulatory system for immigration to Germany. All groups of immigrants, in Germany as in other countries, should find themselves under a common legal roof that regulates their recognition, admission, and integration. This does not at all question the constitutionally guaranteed admission of Ethnic Germans, whatever the long-run perspectives of this guarantee.

Such a system, however, requires that people face uncomfortable truths, that they first of all define their own interests, and that they dare to select immigrants according to their interests. People also have to admit to themselves that the natural purpose of an immigration law is to limit immigration. To achieve this is not going to be easy in Germany, since we have had heated debates for years about whether or not Germany is an immigration country at all. Even though the facts speak for themselves, we are far from putting this fight over terminology to rest.

The conflicting interests of our European neighbours add to the problem. So far, they have relied on Germany to absorb the largest share of all immigrants and refugees in Europe. In the early 1990s, Germany's share was at times as high as 70 percent. A German immigration law would naturally change the situation, and our neighbors might face the problem of absorbing more immigrants themselves.

In other words, the European Union will soon have to engage in a common effort to control and distribute immigration from so-called third countries unless it wants to trigger a competition for the strictest anti-immigration legislation. The upcoming EU expansion to the east will cause potential internal migration, which makes an EU-wide regulation even more necessary. The citizens of the new member countries will likely have to accept limited freedom of movement for the first few years.

Migration flows will still take place, however — not only from east to west, but also vice versa — and their scope will depend on how successfully the eastern European countries can be integrated into the EU. For reasons of foreign and economic policy, the period of limited freedom of movement will have to be relatively short. Supporting measures to control immigration from outside the EU will be necessary to complete this task adequately.

Sooner or later, Germany will have to join the group of countries that systematically control immigration through quotas and selection criteria. Changing the way we see ourselves requires self-confidence and the awareness of a national identity. That will involve a lot of work for our country and our society, which, in reality, is already quite colorful and mixed. Nevertheless, the historically and legally unique role of Ethnic German immigration will remain. We will take it with us into the next century.

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