

The World from Berlin

It's Time for Germany to Change Its Immigration Laws

Economics Minister Rainer Brüderle wants to make Germany more attractive to foreign specialists by offering them financial incentives to immigrate. It is not a new idea, and neither is the debate that has ensued. But commentators say the time has come to open up the gates to qualified workers.

It doesn't take much. It seems like every time the German economy shows any signs of life at all, warnings begin to crop up about a shortage of specialists in the country. This year, with a rising global economy boosting German exports, is no different. The Cologne Institute for Economic Research recently complained that the labor market could face a shortage of 200,000 engineers, scientists and technicians by 2014.

Politicians in Berlin have been quick to respond. In an interview with the business daily *Handelsblatt* last week, Economic Minister Rainer Brüderle suggested that German companies could try to attract more qualified foreigners by offering them financial enticements. "The issue of making Germany more attractive to foreign experts is at the top of my agenda," Brüderle said.

His comments echoed a similar demand made earlier last week by Education Minister Annette Schavan. Schavan is a leading member of Chancellor Angela Merkel's Christian Democrats (CDU) while Brüderle hails from Merkel's junior coalition partners, the business-friendly Free Democrats (FDP).

Recurring Debate

As with similar debates in the past, however, the call for an increase in the number of qualified immigrants coming to Germany has been met with resistance. On Tuesday, a spokesman for Chancellor Angela Merkel said the chancellor does not currently see a need for a change in the laws currently governing immigration to Germany.

Furthermore, Frank-Jürgen Weise, who heads up the country's unemployment office, the Federal Employment Agency, said that, instead of bringing in more foreigners, one should focus on domestic workers. "The existing potential in the country should be used first," he told the *Financial Times Deutschland*. "We cannot allow a situation wherein people are jobless just because their talents are not being used properly."

The current back-and-forth is just the most recent manifestation of a debate that has periodically flared up in Germany over the last decade. In 2000, the center-left government of Chancellor Gerhard Schröder introduced a "green card" system in an effort to streamline the immigration of IT specialists. Despite the need for computer experts, however, opposition to the plan was intense, with Jürgen Rüttgers, then campaigning to become the governor of North Rhine-Westphalia, coining the phrase "Kinder statt Inder" -- "children instead of Indians" -- to indicate his preference for training Germans rather than opening up the borders to foreigners.

Still, Schröder's green-card system did not fully solve the problem. Since then, Berlin has periodically considered the introduction of a points system for immigration similar to that used in Canada, as a way to promote highly qualified immigration. At the other end of the debate, a member of Merkel's CDU in Berlin recently demanded that **immigrants to Germany be subject to IQ tests**.

German newspapers on Tuesday take a look at the most recent discussion on how to attract highly qualified immigrants.

SPIEGEL ONLINE editor Yasmin El-Sharif writes:

"Merkel's (rejection of Brüderle's proposal) ignores one of the most serious problems facing the country. Germany's population is shrinking rapidly and is dependent on immigration. According to one study, the German workforce will shrink by 17 percent by 2035 -- a drop of 8 million people. In other words, Germany will soon be facing a massive shortage of qualified workers -- which could set off a deadly spiral: lower growth equals limited need for labor; fewer qualified workers equals lower growth."

"Few seem to have understood that Germany needs to make itself more attractive. The problem: Many here still have the impression that foreigners take jobs away from Germans. The reality, however, is different: Since 2008, Germany has actually been a country of emigration instead of immigration. More people are leaving than are arriving. In addition to qualified foreigners, well-trained Germans are also leaving. In the last few years, fewer than 700 highly qualified foreigners have chosen to make Germany their home -- a vanishingly small number."

The center-right **Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung** writes:

"For the most part, Germany has not had many positive experiences since the 1960s with adjusting its immigration policies according to economic growth. Back then, immigration was mostly fueled by a demand for cheap, untrained laborers. They came from southern Europe and Turkey -- and they stayed even when they were no longer needed. Germany's social welfare system took over responsibility for them, but the costs ultimately had to be paid in the form of higher taxes."

"Now, we are missing effective measures to take advantage of those qualified foreigners which have already arrived. Tens of thousands of highly trained immigrants earn their daily bread as low-wage laborers or are welfare recipients because the diplomas they earned and the work experience they gained abroad are not recognized here. The Education Ministry has long been talking about improving labor market opportunities for well-trained immigrants.... These people are not waiting for financial enticement. Rather, they are simply waiting for the opportunity to show what they can do."

The conservative daily **Die Welt** writes:

"The unspoken credo of German immigration has long been: The door should not be opened further than is absolutely necessary. Immigration has even been made unattractive for those who have an engineering degree or a Ph.D."

"Those who are in favor of such a policy are ignoring reality. They overlook the fact that the situation on the international labor market for highly qualified workers has fundamentally changed since the end of the Cold War. Almost all industrialized countries are facing an acute shortage of graduates, as are rapidly developing economies. The question is not so much what can they offer us. The question is what we can offer them."

The center-left **Süddeutsche Zeitung** writes:

"A look at the unemployment statistics quickly shows (that Germany's specialist shortage cannot be completely solved by retraining today's jobless). More than 20 percent of today's long-term unemployed dropped out of school and more than half don't have any kind of degree or diploma. University graduates make up just 3.3 percent of Germany's unemployed. The potential for transforming Germany's unemployed into specialists is not great -- it has proven difficult to turn high-school dropouts into computer experts."

"Many unemployed would be better served through an intelligently designed immigration program. Companies can only grow if they have the necessary specialists -- only then can they establish new departments where unemployed Germans might then be able to find jobs. The lack of specialists in Germany persisted even in the midst of the financial crisis -- a sure sign that the current laws, despite numerous adjustments in recent years, are not enough."

-- *Charles Hawley*

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