

Immigration Divides Europe and the German Left

A battle between regulated immigration and a utopian vision in line with international finance is splitting the German Left Party, giving an opening to the right, as Diana Johnstone explains.

By [Diana Johnstone](#)

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Freedom of movement is the founding value of the European Union. The “four freedoms” are inscribed in the binding EU treaties and directives: free movement of goods, services, capital and persons (labor) among the Member States.

Of course, the key freedom here is that of capital, the indispensable condition of neoliberal globalization. It enables international finance to go and do whatever promises to be profitable, regardless of national boundaries. The European Union is the kernel of the worldwide “Open Society”, as promoted by financier George Soros.

However, extended to the phenomenon of mass immigration, the doctrine of “free movement” is disuniting the Union.

A German Crisis

Starting in 2011, millions of Syrian refugees fled to neighboring Turkey as a result of the Western-sponsored war to overthrow the Assad regime. By 2015, Turkish president Erdogan was insisting that Europe must share the burden, and soon was threatening the European Union with opening the floodgates of refugees if his conditions were not met.



In August 2015, German **Chancellor Angela Merkel** announced that Germany would accept all genuine refugees. Germany had already taken in over 400,000 refugees, and another 400,000 were assumed to be on the way – if not more. Although addressed to Syrians, Merkel’s invitation was widely interpreted as an unlimited invitation to anyone who wanted to come Germany for whatever reason. In addition to a smaller number of refugee families, long lines of young men from all points east streamed through the Balkans,

heading for Germany or Sweden.

The criminal destruction of the government of Libya in 2011 opened the floodgates to immigrants from Africa and beyond. The distinction between refugees and economic migrants was lost in the crowd.

Germans themselves were sharply polarized between those who welcomed the commitment to Christian charity and those who dreaded the probable effects. The differences were too highly charged emotionally, too subjective to be easily discussed in a rational way. Finally, it depends on whether you think of immigrants as individuals or as a mass. Concerning individuals, compassion reigns. You want to get to know that person, make a friend, help a fellow human being.

As a mass, it is different because you have to think also of social results and you do not know whom you are getting. On the one hand, there are the negative effects: labor market competition which lowers wages, the cost of caring for people with no income, the potential for antisocial behavior on the part of alienated individuals, rivalry for housing space, cultural conflicts, additional linguistic and educational problems. But for those whose ideal is a world without borders, the destruction of the oppressive nation state and endless diversity, unlimited immigration is a welcome step in the direction of their utopia.

These conflicting attitudes rule out any consensus.

As other EU countries were called upon to welcome a proportionate share of the refugee influx, resentment grew that a German chancellor could unilaterally make such a dramatic decision affecting them all. The subsequent effort to impose quotas of immigrants on member states has run up against stubborn refusal on the part of Eastern European countries whose populations, unlike Germany, or Western countries with an imperialist past, are untouched by a national sense of guilt or responsibilities toward inhabitants of former colonies.

After causing a growing split between EU countries, the immigrant crisis is now threatening to bring down Merkel's own Christian Democratic (CDU) government. Her own interior minister, **Horst Seehofer**, from the conservative Bavarian Christian Social Union, has declared that he "can't work with this woman" (Merkel) on immigration policy and favors joining together with Austria and Italy in a tough policy to stop migration.

The conflict over immigration affects even the relatively new leftist party, Die Linke (The Left).

A good part of the European left, whatever its dissatisfaction with EU performance, is impregnated with its free movement ideology, and has interiorized "open borders" as a European "value" that must be defended at all costs. It is forgotten that EU "freedom of movement" was not intended to apply to migrants from outside the Union. It meant freedom to move from one EU state to another. As an internationally recognized human right, freedom of movement refers solely to the right of a citizen to leave and return to her own country.

In an attempt to avoid ideological polarization and define a clear policy at the Left party's congress early this month, a working group presented a long paper setting out ideas for a "humane and social regulated leftist immigration policy". The object was to escape from the

aggressive insistence on the dichotomy: either you are for immigration or you are against it, and if you are against it, you must be racist.

The group paper observed that there are not two but three approaches to immigration: for it, against it, and regulation. Regulation is the humane and socially beneficial way.

While reiterating total support for the right of asylum including financial and social aid for all persons fleeing life-threatening situations, the paper insisted on the need to make the distinction between asylum seekers and economic migrants. The latter should be welcomed within the capacity of communities to provide them with a decent life: possibilities of work, affordable housing and social integration. They noted that letting in all those who hope to improve their economic standing might favor a few individual winners but would not favor the long-term interests either of the economic losers or of the country of origin, increasing its dependence and even provoking a brain drain as educated professionals seek advancement in a richer country.

There was hope that this would settle the issue. This did not happen. Instead, the party's most popular leader found herself the target of angry emotional protests due to her defense of this sensible approach.

Sahra and Oskar

As elsewhere in Europe, the traditional left has drastically declined in recent years. The long-powerful German Social Democratic Party (SPD) has lost its working-class base as a result of its acceptance, or rather, promotion of neoliberal socioeconomic policies. The SPD has been absorbed by the Authoritarian Center, reduced to junior partner in Angela Merkel's conservative government.

Die Linke, formed in 2007 by the merger of leftist groups in both East and West Germany, describes itself as socialist but largely defends the social democratic policies abandoned by the SPD. It is the obvious candidate to fill the gap. In elections last September, while the SPD declined to 20%, Die Linke slightly improved its electoral score to almost 10%. But its electorate is largely based in the middle class intelligentsia. The party that captured the most working-class votes was the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD), considered far right populist – largely because its growing success at the polls is due to popular rejection of mass immigration.

There are two way of looking at this.

One way, the Clintonite way, is to dismiss the working class as a bunch of deplorables who do not deserve to have their interests defended. If they oppose immigration, it can only be because they have impure souls, besmirched by racism and “hate”.

Another way is to consider that the grievances of ordinary people need to be listened to, and that they need to be presented with clear, well-defined, humane political choices, instead of being dismissed and insulted.

Image below: Sahra Wagenknecht (sitting) with Angela Merkel (standing) (Source: n-tv)



This is the viewpoint of **Sahra Wagenknecht**, currently co-leader of Die Linke in the Bundestag.

Wagenknecht was born in East Germany 48 years ago to an Iranian father and German mother. She is highly educated, with a Ph.D. in economics and is author of books on the young Marx's interpretation of Hegel, on "The Limits of Choice: Saving Decisions and Basic Needs in Developed Countries" and "Prosperity Without Greed". The charismatic Sahra has become one of the most popular politicians in Germany. Polls indicate that a quarter of German voters would vote for her as Chancellor.

But there is a catch: her party, Die Linke. Many who would vote for her would not vote for her party, and many in her own party would be reluctant to support her. Why? Immigration.

Sahra's strongest supporter is **Oskar Lafontaine**, 74, her partner and now her husband. A scientist by training with years of political experience in the leadership of the SPD, Lafontaine was a strong figure in the 1980s protest movement against nuclear missiles stationed in Germany and remains an outspoken critic of U.S. and NATO militarism – a difficult position in Germany. In 1999 he resigned as finance minister because of his disagreement with the neoliberal policy turn of SPD **Chancellor Gerhard Schröder**. He is a consistent critic of financial capitalism and the euro, calling for a change of European monetary policy that would permit selective devaluation and thus relieve the economically weaker member states of their crushing debt burden.

After leaving the SPD in 2005, Lafontaine went on to co-found Die Linke, which absorbed the post-East German Party of Democratic Socialism led by lawyer **Gregor Gysi**. A few years later he withdrew into the political background, encouraging the rising career of his much younger partner Sahra Wagenknecht.

Lafontaine can be likened to **Jeremy Corbyn** in Britain and **Jean-Luc Mélenchon** as a left leader who has retained basic social and antiwar principles from the past and aspires to carry them into the future, against the rising right-wing tide in Europe.

The Wagenknecht-Lafontaine couple advocate social policies favorable to the working class, demilitarization, peaceful relations with Russia and the rest of a multipolar world. Both are critical of the euro and its devastating effects on Member State economies. They favor regulated immigration. Critical of the European Union, they belong to what can be called the national left, which believes that progressive policies can still be carried out on the national level.

The Globalizing Left

Die Linke is split between the national left, whose purpose is to promote social policies within the framework of the nation-state, and the globalization left, which considers that important policy decisions must be made at a higher level than the nation.



As co-leader of the Linke fraction in the Bundestag, Wagenknecht champions the national left, while another woman, the party co-chair **Katja Kipping**, also an academic of East German origin, speaks for the globalization left.

In a July 2016 [article](#) criticizing Brexit, Kipping made it clear that for her the nation is an

anachronism unsuitable for policy making. Like others of her persuasion, she equates the nation with “nationalism”. She also immediately identifies any criticism of mass immigration with scapegoating: “Nationalism doesn’t improve our lives, it makes the poor only poorer, it takes nothing from the rich, but instead blames refugees and migrants for all present misery.”

The idea that social reform must henceforth take place only on the European level has paralyzed left parties for decades. The most extreme of the globalizing left shove their expectations even beyond the European Union in hopes of eventual revolution at the global level, as preached by **Antonio Negri** and **Michael Hardt** in their joint books *Empire* and *Multitude*.

According to Negri, an alarmingly influential Italian theorist who has been dead wrong ever since the 1970s, the final great global revolution will result from the spontaneous self-liberation of the “multitude”. This is a sort of pie in the sky, projecting hopes beyond the here and now to some desirable future made inevitable by the new immaterial means of production (Negri’s boneless imitation of Marxism). Whether or not they have read him, many anarchist anti-globalist notions of The End Times are in harmony with Negri’s optimistically prophetic view of globalization: it may be bad now, but if it goes far enough, it will be perfect.

Since the globalization left considers the nation state inapt to make the revolution, its abolition is seen as a step in the right direction – which happens to coincide with the worldwide takeover of international financial capital. Its core issue, and the one it uses to condemn its adversaries in the national left, is immigration. Katya Kipping advocates “open borders” as a moral obligation. When critics point out that this is not a practical suggestion, the globalization left replies that it doesn’t matter, it is a principle that must be upheld for the future.

To make her policy line even more unrealistic, Kipping calls for *both* “open borders” and a guaranteed minimum income for everyone.

It is easy to imagine both the enthusiastic response to such a proposal in every poor country in the world and its horrified rejection by German voters.

What can motivate leaders of a political party to make such flagrantly unpopular and unrealizable proposals, guaranteed to alienate the vast majority of the electorate?

One apparent source of such fantasy can be attributed to a certain post-Christian, post-Auschwitz bad conscience prevalent in sectors of the intelligentsia, to whom politics is more like a visit to the confession booth than an effort to win popular support. Light a candle and your sins will be forgiven! Many local charitable organizations actually put their beliefs in practice by providing material aid to migrants. But the task is too great for volunteers; at present proportions it requires governmental organization.

Another, more virulent strain of the open border advocates is found among certain anarchists, conscious or unconscious disciples of Hardt and Negri, who see open borders as a step toward destroying the hated nation state, drowning despised national identities in a sea of “minorities”, thereby hastening the advent of worldwide revolution.

The decisive point is that both these tendencies advocate policies which are perfectly

compatible with the needs of international financial capital. Large scale immigration by diverse ethnic communities unwilling or unable to adapt the customs of the host country (which is often the case in Europe today, where the host country may be despised for past sins), weakens the ability of society to organize and resist the dictates of financial capital. The newcomers may not only destabilize the situation of already accepted immigrant populations, they can introduce unexpected antagonisms and conflicts. In both France and Germany, groups of Eritrean migrants have come to blows with Afghan migrants, and other prejudices and vendettas lurk, not to mention dangerous elements of religious fanaticism.

In foreign policy, the globalization left tends to accept the political and media mainstream criticism of Wagenknecht as a Putin apologist for her position regarding Syria and Russia. The globalist left sometimes seems to be more intent on arranging the rest of the world to suit their standards than finding practical solutions to problems at home. Avoiding war is also a serious problem to be dealt with at the national level.

Despite the acrimonious debates at the June 8 to 10 party congress, Die Linke did not split. But faced with the deadlock on important questions, Wagenknecht and her supporters are planning to launch a new trans-party movement in September, intended to attract disenchanted fugitives from the SPD among others in order to debate and promote specific issues rather than to hurl labels at each other. For the left, the question today is not merely the historic, "What is to be done?" but rather a desperate, Can *anything* be done?

And if they don't do it, somebody else will.

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This article was also published on [Consortiumnews](#).

Diana Johnstone is the author of [Fools' Crusade: Yugoslavia, NATO, and Western Delusions](#). Her new book is [Queen of Chaos: the Misadventures of Hillary Clinton](#). The memoirs of Diana Johnstone's father Paul H. Johnstone, [From MAD to Madness](#), was published by Clarity Press, with her commentary. She is a Research Associate of the Centre for Research on Globalization (CRG). She can be reached at diana.johnstone@wanadoo.fr.

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