

Germany Puts in Place Tougher Checks to Control Migration

With the number of asylum seekers rising, along with support for the far right, the government has come under increasing pressure to act.



By **Graham Bowley**

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The German government on Wednesday announced that it was strengthening controls along its border with Poland and the Czech Republic, responding to increasing political pressure to deal with the rising number of people it said are crossing illicitly into the country's east.

The measures follow months of complaints from some eastern regions, where the far-right Alternative for Germany party, known as the AfD, has gained strength, that too many migrants and asylum seekers are entering the country. The step also comes ahead of two important state elections in Bavaria and Hesse early next month.

Immigration has become a major issue in German politics in recent months, with even mainstream parties urging action to address the rising number of asylum seekers. The calls have come amid increased support, even in some western regions, for the AfD.

The new willingness of the government to try to control the number of migrants and asylum seekers by putting in place checks on the borders of fellow European Union countries represents a change from an earlier era under Angela Merkel, the former chancellor, analysts said.

At that time, Germany had demonstrated a pronounced willingness to accommodate large numbers of asylum seekers and to try to integrate them into German society. But the rise in some regions of right-wing populism is forcing a reconsideration of the current German model for immigration.

“Germany has benefited from the spirit of openness of the European Union, and for the country now to put up even temporary borders shows that there is a lot of backlash in the country about migration,” said Sudha David-Wilp, a senior fellow at the German Marshall Fund, a research institute.

The government ordered what it said were “flexible priority checks” along smuggling routes to crack down on criminal gangs bringing migrants into the country. These would involve “mobile checks at changing locations,” according to the Interior Ministry.



A police officer searching a man during a patrol along the German-Polish border near Klinge, Germany, last week. Lisi Niesner/Reuters

It stopped short of the stationary border controls that have been carried out on the border with Austria since 2015, at the peak of the migration crisis. Stationary checks would most likely have brought Germany into conflict with E.U. rules, analysts said.

German police officers already carry out roving checks inside the territory of eastern states. But the new measures will give them the ability to carry out checks directly at the border, the government said.

“We must stop the cruel business of smugglers who put human lives at risk for maximum profit,” said Nancy Faeser, the interior minister. “For this reason, the federal police will carry out additional flexible focus checks on the smuggling routes at the borders with Poland and the Czech Republic with immediate effect.”

The influx of asylum seekers, from countries including Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan, peaked nearly a decade ago, when about one million people entered Germany in a one-year period, according to Gerald Knaus, the founding chairman of the European Stability Initiative.

Last year, there were about 217,770 first-time asylum applications; in the first eight months of this year, there were about 204,460 such applications, according to the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees.

But these numbers do not include the more than one million Ukrainians who have entered Germany since Russia’s invasion of Ukraine began and who are not required to

could cause congestion at crossing points and could slow trade.

The disagreement over how to handle the new arrivals has been felt within the governing coalition, which is made up of the center-left Social Democrats, the Free Democratic Party and the Greens and is led by Chancellor Olaf Scholz, a Social Democrat. The Greens and the Free Democrats have staked out opposite sides of the issue.

The Greens overruled rank-and-file members' concerns and recently agreed to a Europe-wide proposal that would bolster the bloc's external borders.

But the secretary general of the Free Democrats, a pro-business, somewhat libertarian-minded party, suggested in a newspaper interview that Germany should stop making welfare payments to migrants to reduce the incentive to come to Germany.

The Greens have also balked at declaring certain countries — Tunisia, Morocco, Algeria or India — as safe countries, which would allow the German authorities to more easily deport those whose asylum applications have been rejected.

As part of his re-election campaign in Bavaria, the conservative governor, Markus Söder, has suggested capping migration at 200,000 asylum seekers per year. Experts say such a move would be legally difficult.

In such a fraught atmosphere, said Ms. David-Wilp, the research fellow, Mr. Scholz's government felt it needed to act.

"They know that this is an issue that is tearing at the fabric of Germany right now," she said. "I don't think Scholz could just wave that away."



The German border with Poland is marked by a border pole in Germany's national colors near Lebus, Germany. Markus Schreiber/Associated Press

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