From Welcoming to Wary: 
The SPD's Rhetoric on the Flüchtlingspolitik
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Abstract: This paper traces the response of the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD) to the European migrant crisis in the fall of 2015. In particular, I explore the change in the party's position, which initially had pledged full support of the admission of refugees to Germany but toned down its support over the course of the fall. I discuss this development against the backdrop of the rightward shift of the SPD. I argue that a possible explanation of the change in the SPD's position is the decision of Chancellor Merkel, leader of the rival party Christian Democratic Union, to grant admission to hundreds of thousands of refugees on September 5th, 2015. Mainly based on the SPD's own publications and media coverage of the party's activities, this paper examines the shift in the language of the SPD.

Since its inception in the mid-nineteenth century, the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD) has represented the working-class and the German left at large. After the West German Communist Party was banned in 1956, the SPD became the sole party in the Federal Republic on the left for nearly three decades before other leftist parties entered the political scene in the early 1980s. This included the Green Party (established in 1983) and the Party of Democratic Socialism (established in 1990). However, the SPD has been inching to the center since the 1990s—the SPD and the center-right Christian Democratic Union (CDU) are now almost indistinguishable on several policies. In light of such development of the SPD, the party's responses to the current migrant crisis, which has become a very controversial topic in German politics since August 2015, illustrates the SPD's rightward shift. From the outset of the Syrian Civil War in 2011 to the first week of September 2015, the SPD strongly supported admitting hundreds of thousands of refugees. The party asserted that refugees have a right to a safer and better future in Europe and that Germany has a responsibility to provide refuge to victims of war. Some party members even suggested that the inflow of refugees would benefit the German economy. However, over the month of September, the party changed. Presumably influenced by CDU leader and German Chancellor Angela Merkel's momentous decision on September 4 to open Germany's doors to refugees stranded elsewhere in Europe, the SPD has become increasingly wary of admitting a large number of refugees, even though the number of refugees that have entered Germany so far this year does not differ much from the number predicted by party leaders months before. In this paper, written in November 2015, I argue that, in September 2015, the SPD changed its rhetoric on the refugee policy (Flüchtlingspolitik) from welcoming to wary, which stemmed at least in part from the SPD's—especially party chairman Sigmar Gabriel's—political maneuver to take over the center. Since this paper analyzes an ongoing phenomenon, it faces the challenge of studying a limited perspective of a historical event that is still unfolding. Nevertheless, the value of the paper lies primarily in the documentation of changes among the Social Democrats, especially in the context of the party's long-term evolution.

Through a survey of German newspapers—namely, Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (hereafter FAZ), Der Spiegel, and Die Zeit—I trace the SPD's rhetoric and the response
of the media to it. A reason behind the preponderance of newspapers is simply the dearth of secondary literature. Given how recent the change in policy took place, few non-media sources exist. Other non-German media sources include the Associated Press, Politico, the New York Times, and Stern. The American Institute for Contemporary German Studies, German Politics and Society, the Journal of Refugee Studies, and the Migrant Policy Institute are non-newspaper sources of information on the SPD’s history and the German political landscape. Lastly, the SPD website and Facebook page provided statements released directly by the party. The party’s Facebook page proved particularly useful. Since Facebook posts are normally brief, they serve as one of the most direct forms of contact between the party and the public, and they often represent the core of the party’s messages. For this reason, while only two sources in the paper come from the SPD Facebook page, Facebook played a crucial role in the research process.

Before the first week of September 2015, in which Merkel announced her decision to suspend European Union (EU) asylum rules and allow refugees stranded in other EU countries to enter Germany, the SPD enthusiastically supported admitting refugees, even though many of the party leaders recognized the challenge of a large influx. The SPD website demonstrates the party’s support of the admission of refugees. The website published an article on the press conference of SPD leaders on August 31, in which Malu Dreyer, the Minister-president of Rheinland-Pfalz, and Martin Schulz, the President of the European Parliament, discussed where the party stands on the Flüchtlingspolitik. Dreyer and Schulz focused on three tasks: “humane admittance of refugees, social cohesion of Germany, and united European politics.” On the whole, they called for more help for local communities in order to implement a “humane refugee policy,” while exhorting the CDU to “at last undertake responsibility.” Dreyer and Schultz acknowledged the ever-growing challenge of absorbing nearly a million refugees, but the SPD emphasized the humanitarian cause of the Flüchtlingspolitik throughout the conference, suggesting that refugees legitimately deserve help. On the same day, the SPD website released another article, titled “SPD-Resolution: Flüchtlingspolitik in Germany,” that covered the same press conference in more depth. Again, refugees were described as people in need who have a right to European assistance:

"[refugees] seek freedom and security, they hope to be able to live in a better society, in which justice and solidarity are real. The refugees count on our fundamental values!"

Notably, the SPD left economic migrants out of the picture and instead argued that it is only right that Germany should lift refugees out of misery. In framing the issue in terms of freedom and justice, the SPD assumed a risk: once they described refugee’s claims to asylum as legitimate, any action less than full accommodation of refugees would be seen as reneging on earlier promises of delivering justice. Later in the article, the SPD positioned itself as a counterforce to “isolation and deterrence” (Abschottung und Abschreckung) that the Social Democrats ascribed to the political right. Germany was “not only economically strong, but also formed of great humanity” (Mitmenschlichkeit).

The SPD leadership’s optimistic stance in the last week of August is representative of the line that the party had been treading for the past several months. Party Chairman Sigmar Gabriel was quoted on the SPD Facebook page on August 19th as saying “we will accomplish
it” (wir werden das schaffen) on the Flüchtlingspolitik. Considering the criticism Merkel received over the past two months for her optimistic slogan We will do it (Wir Schaffen Das), from which even the SPD distanced. This did not deter Gabriel’s own assurance that Germany “will accomplish it,” which evinced the enthusiasm with which the SPD supported the admission of refugees. On August 9, the German weekly Stern reported on the meeting between Gabriel and filmmaker Til Schweiger. The latter had received both positive and negative attention in the media for his active support of refugees, as well as for tirades against those who demanded severe restrictions on the number of incoming refugees. Given Schweiger’s reputation as a strong supporter of the admission of refugees, this meeting sent a sign of approval. Gabriel presumably made a statement on where he stands on the Flüchtlingspolitik through the meeting (which both Gabriel and Schweiger publicized on their Facebook pages). All in all, two points have to be emphasized on the SPD’s stance up to September. First, the SPD did not mention the limits to Germany’s capacity or realism with respect to the Flüchtlingspolitik, despite both the mainstream media and Gabriel projecting earlier in 2015 that nearly a million refugees would enter Germany that year. Second, the SPD viewed refugees, except those they considered economic refugees, as deserving a place of security and freedom in Germany. Accordingly, the admission of refugees was the humane and right decision.

Between the last week of September and November 2015, when this paper was written, there has been a noticeable shift in the rhetoric of the SPD—the party now emphasizes the limits to Germany’s capabilities and the word realism. A joint statement titled “With Confidence and Realism” (Mit Zuversicht und Realismus) by Gabriel and Frank-Walter Steinmeier, the Minister of Foreign Policy and a top SPD leader, was released on the SPD website on October 9. They spoke against both the “We Will Do It” slogan that represents Merkel’s position and the “The Boat is Full” (Das Boot Ist Voll) slogan used to characterize the position of the Christian Social Union of Bavaria (CSU), the more-conservative sister party of the CDU, which calls for restrictions on the number of refugees. Gabriel and Steinmeier stressed that states and communities are overburdened by the vast number of refugees and demanded that Germany have “an honest discussion about realistic capabilities” (Gestaltungsmöglichkeiten).

The word “realism,” hardly used before September, now characterizes the current vacillation of the SPD.

When the CSU and PEGIDA (an anti-Islamic, far-right movement that has been staging demonstrations in major cities since late 2014) supporters insist that Germany is not capable of accommodating the large influx of refugees, the call to “realism” takes on a distinct meaning. Also on October 9, the newspaper Der Spiegel published an interview with Sigmar Gabriel, in which he criticized Merkel and again highlighted the limits to Germany’s ability to take in refugees. Gabriel refused to directly attack Merkel, the leader of the Grand Coalition between the CDU/CSU and the SPD. He denied that Merkel’s decision was to blame for the high number of refugees aspiring to receive asylum in Germany. However, Gabriel remarked, “next to confidence we also need realism...many places in Germany are already overburdened.” Later, he made an elusive statement that “naturally the right of asylum knows no limits (Obergrenze), but there are factual limits to the capability of the towns and communities.” In other words, the new position of the SPD reads, the Basic Law of Germany legally allows all refugees to live in Germany, but there are practical limits to how many Germany can admit. At the party congress on October 11, the SPD leadership again stressed
that Germany has limits and lambasted the CDU for inadequately handling the situation. Gabriel asserted that Germany cannot constantly absorb a million refugees year after year. Merkel too knows it, but “she does not speak about it” according to him.

Most of the SPD party leaders have taken part in the rhetoric shift from welcoming to wary, including Thomas Oppermann, chairman of the SPD parliamentary group. In September 2013, Oppermann posted on Facebook that it was “good” that Syrian refugees should come to his state, Lower Saxony. He called it an “imperative of humanity” that Germany should accept them; he even said that Germany should do more than simply take in nearly 6 million Syrian refugees. A year later, in November 2014, Oppermann maintained the same message, saying it was a “good chance” for Germany that refugees should stay for the long term, since the German economy needs manpower and many Syrian refugees are well educated. On October 5, however, the newspaper Die Zeit ran an article on the SPD in middle of the “refugee dilemma,” in which Oppermann was quoted to have said that Merkel should “say clearly” that a million refugees will exhaust Germany’s capacity to integrate them. Likewise, the newspaper Westdeutsche Allgemeine Zeitung asked him whether people in his circle believe Merkel when she says “we accomplish it” (wir schaffen das). He gave a qualified response, saying that Germany could accomplish it if Europe develops a common refugee policy and clear decisions can be made quickly in Berlin and Brussels. Oppermann represents the new, reserved tone among the party leadership on the Flüchtlingspolitik. Given how sanguine Oppermann had been a year earlier about refugees entering Germany, his change in opinion highlights the discrepancy in the SPD’s statements before and after September.

The migrant crisis has divided the SPD between its left wing faction that wants to continue admitting refugees and skeptics who want to restrict the influx.

The newspaper Süddeutsche Zeitung focused on the party’s internal discord in early October. The newspaper reported Sigmar Gabriel saying that “we must urgently achieve a clear reduction of the number of refugees in the coming year.” While party leaders like Steinmeier and Oppermann echo his message, others, like Jusos (SPD’s youth wing) leader Johanna Uekermann, said that it is not “worthy of social democracy” to join the opposition against the admission of refugees. On November 9, the FAZ released a detailed article titled “Where does the SPD stand in the migrant crisis?” The article likewise delved into the divisions within the SPD. In particular, it noted the “horizontal” division between the student council that actively engages in aiding refugees and “the traditional representatives of the workforce” among whom “social political fears and cultural reservations [against refugees] dominate.” In sum, the crisis has thrown the SPD into confusion. The Grand Coalition between the CDU/CSU and the SPD is replete with tensions among all three parties. Within the SPD, there is disagreement between the left wing and the party leadership (though the SPD is known for strong party discipline). Lastly, Gabriel himself gives conflicting messages. He speaks of both limiting the number of refugees and advocating the earlier stance of providing refuge to those in need.

However, the SPD’s change is more a shift than a reversal; by no means has the SPD turned its back on refugees. Despite its warnings and the caveats, the SPD still supports allowing hundreds and thousands of
Syrians, Afghans, Eritreans and others to resettled in Germany. Moreover, the SPD staunchly defends the right of asylum. The Social Democrats have been in the frontline against the PEGIDA and right radicals who commit violence against refugees. In response to CDU politician Markus Söder, who questioned the right of asylum itself, SPD General Secretary Yasmin Fahimi declared that the right of asylum is “not negotiable.” Still, the change in the SPD’s position is unmistakable. Die Zeit perceived the nuanced changes in the statements from the party leaders; Lisa Caspari, editor of Die Zeit, analyzed the SPD’s shift in an article titled “the SPD in the Refugee Dilemma” on October 5. “What is going on? Does the SPD now position itself to the right of Merkel?” Caspari asked. In particular, she brought attention to the fact that now “warnings instead of optimism” are heard over and over from the SPD.

There could be many reasons that motivated the Social Democrats to tone down its support of the admission of refugees, and the sheer number of refugees entering Germany must be counted among the most significant factors. The influx of refugees has already exceeded the capacity of numerous communities to accommodate them. Since Merkel’s momentous decision on September 4, her approval ratings have taken a severe hit, causing many to wonder whether the days of her government are numbered.

Many Germans fear the strain refugees exert on the treasury, the cultural change newcomers entail, and the instability following the influx of a million people.

Discontent has risen not only among the general population but also among rank-and-file Social Democrats themselves. In 1993, amidst the then refugee crisis following the onset of the Yugoslav Wars, the Bundestag (German parliament) amended Article 16 of the Basic Law, which guaranteed the right of asylum, to add restrictions that reduced the number of permissible refugees from Eastern Europe. The SPD opposed amendments to Article 16 before 1993, but, as Wolfgang Bosswick argues, eventually the pressure to allow the amendment came from “within the party from the level of communities” that had to cope with hundreds of thousands of refugees. The SPD has been the party of the working-class since the nineteenth century. Under current circumstances, the working-class are among the most vociferous opponents of allowing potential immigrant competitors who could limit access to employment and social services. On October 14, Magdeburg mayor Lutz Trümper, a member of the SPD since 1990, walked out of the party over the Flüchtlingspolitik. He criticized the regional party policy on refugees as “unrealistic,” demanding the limitation of the number of refugees given asylum. The Trümper incident demonstrates the challenge that the party leadership faces in addressing the discontent among party members at the local level.

However, a consideration that makes one question whether the discontent from below fully explains the SPD’s shift is that the SPD, especially Gabriel, had projected earlier in 2015 that between 800 thousand and one million refugees would enter Germany in 2015. The SPD already backtracked on its policy in 1993 due to the mounting number of refugees. It is not unreasonable, therefore, to surmise that party members must have known the implications of a resettling a million refugees for local communities and national politics when they spoke repeatedly in support of the admission of refugees. Insofar as a change in rhetoric, let alone in a change in policy, presents a liability for a political party, it is noteworthy that the SPD had been so supportive of admitting refugees before
September, even though it was aware of the complications that would eventually arise.

The SPD’s aspiration to become the governing party could be another reason that the SPD changed its stance. Currently, the SPD is part of the Grand Coalition with the sister parties CDU/CSU. Since 1998, the support for the SPD has gradually dwindled, in terms of party membership and votes; the SPD now faces challenges from both left and right: the Alternative for Germany (AfD) and PEGIDA from the right and the The Left and the Greens from the left. Meanwhile, the polls indicate that only around 25 percent of the population supports the Social Democrats—a disappointing number for the second largest party of Germany.\(^{20}\) In an article published in 2008 on an earlier coalition during the first Merkel government, the international affairs scholar Angelika von Wahl touches on the “ideological convergence and increasing moderation” in the SPD and the CDU. As more and more party members leave the parties, von Wahl argues that “pragmatists vying for the median voter” gain a stronger voice in both parties.\(^{21}\) In this context, the SPD’s support of restrictions the number of refugees can be interpreted as a political maneuver to exploit Merkel’s vulnerability and expand the party’s support base. Sigmar Gabriel has long supported the move to the center, which has been noted by the media for some time. In an article on August 3, \textit{Politico} described the SPD as representative of center-left parties in Europe that try to gain more support by moving to the center. The SPD, “a party without a clear profile,” does not differ much from Merkel in terms of policy. Gabriel supports the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) trade agreement opposed by the The Left and the Greens, who protest the loosening of trade and financial regulations that would result from the trade agreement. Gabriel “tried to walk a fine line” on Greece, in order to alienate neither the party base nor the majority of the population.\(^{22}\) Gabriel himself does not deny the criticism that he inches toward the center. At the party congress in Mainz on October 11, he declared to the party that anyone “who shuns the center does not wish to win.” He added, “[the party] should not shy away from reaching to the programmatic center of society.”\(^{23}\) Gabriel already announced on October 28 that he will run for Chancellor in the 2017 election. According to \textit{Die Zeit}, defeating Merkel as chancellor was previously considered unrealistic even by the SPD, but since Merkel shifted the CDU’s position on the Flüchtlingspolitik, the chancellorship is no longer out of reach for other parties.\(^{24}\) The SPD’s motivation behind the decision to distance itself from the earlier position on the Flüchtlingspolitik is not clear, but the decision nonetheless corresponds to Gabriel’s vision to take the SPD to the center and once again become the ruling party.

The migrant crisis will likely alter Germany’s political landscape. Merkel has already created a rift between the CDU and the CSU because of her September 4th decision, while the Grand Coalition between the CDU/CSU and the SPD is divided over the Flüchtlingspolitik. The PEGIDA and the AfD—suspicious of mainstream politics and antipathetic to refugees—have gained support in the meanwhile. In this context, the SPD shifts further to the center, with a gesture that makes the SPD appear almost as if the party turned its back on refugees. Where the SPD heads henceforth will have a far-reaching effect on German politics. The SPD could either decide to maintain its traditional position on the left, or it could attempt to become the governing party once again by assuming the center. For this reason, the SPD’s responses to the current migrant crisis carry special significance for the future of German politics.
NOTES:


5 "Flüchtlingspolitik in Deutschland," SPD.


Horand Knaup, “SPD gegen Union: Schluss mit Kuscheln.”


BIBLIOGRAPHY:


