

Difficult Days for Germany
Jeremy Hexham – Guest Columnist
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Over the past year, Germany has accepted thousands of refugees and asylum seekers.

At the same time Germany has faced massive, sometimes, violent anti-immigration demonstrations.

Yet some German mayors have opened their arms to immigrants.

As a result of this influx, Germany's population has increased for the first time since 1992. But, one has to ask what on earth is going on and why are so many people disturbed by their arrival?

To understand the situation, one must go back to the fall of the Berlin Wall on Nov. 9, 1989, and the unification of Germany on Oct. 3, 1990.

We have all heard that these events made Germany the most powerful country in Europe, both economically and politically. But few people realize Germans did not benefit equally from unification or how the current flood of refugees is upsetting a delicate balance.

The truth is that people living in former East Germany, with the exception of Berlin and a few cities such as Leipzig, have not benefited much from reunification and are hard hit by the current situation.

We constantly hear how Chancellor Dr. Angela Merkel and State President Joachim Gauck are East Germans as though Easterners are key players in the new Germany. But this overlooks the fact Merkel and Gauck are the only high profile former East Germans in the government.

True, two other former East Germans are in the cabinet, but both have lowly portfolios. If one looks at German cabinets since reunification, East Germans have had little or no role in them.

It should also be noted that while most West Germans consider Merkel to be a "Ossi," that is a former East German, most former East Germans consider her to be a "Wessi" — West German at heart.

The root of this discontent is found in economic differences. The location of head offices is a sign of the economic strength and stability of a city.

Not only do head offices bring employment, they also attract professional services such as accountants, lawyers, and consultants.

In Germany, with the exception of Berlin, none of the top 30 listed companies are based in former East German cities. It is not surprising therefore that East German states have much higher unemployment than similar areas in West Germany.

At the same time, many West Germans think of East Germans as lazy without realizing that people living in the East work longer hours than their western counterparts for, on average, 25% less pay.

As a result, many young people from the eastern part of Germany have moved into western areas despite the fact they feel discriminated against in the West.

This means that eastern parts of Germany are facing a steeper decline in the birth rate than in other areas and local infrastructure is becoming hard to maintain. Health care and education also suffer because there is a declining tax base to provide services.

According to recent surveys, 75% of West Germans welcome immigrants, compared to only 50% of East Germans.

Yet, due to depopulation, there are large numbers of empty houses, abandoned buildings, and even abandoned military bases in the East. It is to these places that the current wave of refugees is being directed and this increases unemployment in already depressed areas.

This is why mayors and other bureaucrats in the eastern part of Germany are welcoming refugees in the hope of getting funds to house them. Unsurprisingly the extreme right National Democratic Party, the NDP, is doing increasingly well in East German state elections and loudly proclaims its anti-immigration views.

No wonder many Germans and outside observers look at the unfolding events in Germany with a sense of dread.

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