



Family reunification for migrants under subsidiary protection in Germany:

An instrument for strategic political positioning

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The debate over migration policy played a major role in the recent collapse of German coalition talks, a first indication of how the AfD changed the country's political discourse.

For anyone unfamiliar with the current political climate in Germany, it may seem absurd that the topic of family reunification was a focal point in the country's coalition talks between CDU/CSU, FDP and the Greens. Nevertheless, the polarised views of party representatives on migration played an important role in the [collapse](#) of exploratory talks to form Germany's next coalition government.

Both CDU/CSU and FDP took a hard stance on limiting the right of the 200,000 persons currently residing in Germany under subsidiary protection – a level of protection below full refugee status - to bring their families into the country, while the Greens fully supported their right to family reunification. This position within CDU/CSU and FDP is particularly puzzling as the additional number of expected family migrants is estimated to reach only [50,000 to 60,000](#), if the partners and children of those under subsidiary protection were granted the right of family reunification. These numbers are relatively low since many refugees under subsidiary protection had arrived with their family members or had already been reunited before their reunification rights were suspended. Moreover, many of those under subsidiary protection are not married and do not have children. Thus, the number of additional family migrants is just barely higher than the allotment of asylum-seekers under the reallocation scheme. Both numbers in fact are miniscule compared to the [800,000 asylum applications](#) Germany has already accepted since the beginning of 2015.

In general, a number of reasons could be adduced as a plausible motivation for a political party to call for less family reunification.

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First, a restriction may look sensible from a purely public finance perspective. In the EU, family migrants form the most vulnerable group in the labour market and their [average employment rate](#) is even slightly below that of refugees. Since family reunification for those under subsidiary protection, as presently envisaged, would apply mostly to Syrians, employment rates would likely turn out to be even lower in this group due to the large number of females waiting to be reunited with their partners and [the wide gender gap in employment in Syria](#).

On the other hand, recent, more nuanced qualitative [studies](#) underline a large negative effect of family separation on the well-being of refugees settled in Germany. Whether these psychological effects would also translate into worse future labour market outcomes of this disadvantaged group remains unclear, but it certainly cannot be ruled out. In any case, it should be kept in mind that it will most likely be impossible for most of those under subsidiary protection to return to their home countries in the foreseeable future. Thus, denying them the right to family reunification may well have negative long-term consequences not only for the individuals but also for their families.

Second, to put things into perspective, it should be noted that, while in comparison to other [OECD countries](#), Germany is generally not overly restrictive on family reunification, the right is mostly limited to core family members. Relatives outside the core family such as grandparents or adult children can only enter Germany through reunification in [exceptional cases](#). But Germany does not stand alone in restricting family reunification as a response to the large inflows of refugees to EU countries in 2015 and 2016. Austria, Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden all tightened their rules on family reunification in 2016, particularly for those under temporary or subsidiary protection. Both the CDU/CSU's and FDP's strong stance could thus be interpreted as a natural move towards tighter restrictions following a very large inflow of migrants. Germany, in fact, has a history of reacting to large inflows of asylum seekers with restrictive policies. In the early 1990s, when [320,000 Bosnians](#) entered the country following the breakup of former Yugoslavia, only temporary protection status was granted to refugees, which prevented regular access to the labour market and organised family reunification.

Third, politicians may fear that opening family reunification could render Germany more attractive to asylum-seekers still on the march; it is debatable, however, whether the rights of the comparatively small group of persons under subsidiary protection would have a large impact on the incentive structure.

Our view is that none of these factors constitutes the main motivation driving those German parties to advocate more restrictive migration policies. The Union parties, in particular, traditionally attach much importance to the role of the family and view it as an essential part of German culture. Consequently, they would regard family reunification as an important building block in efforts to integrate refugees into German society. This conviction would clearly conflict with any attempt to restrict family reunification. And for the FDP, migration has simply never been a core issue.

In the context of the current political climate in Germany, it is thus much more likely that –the political parties are taking a hard stance on family reunification as a highly visible manoeuvre

to strategically position themselves against the Alternative for Germany (AfD) party in the new German Bundestag. The AfD is a far-right party that won 12.6% of the vote during the recent German federal elections by running a campaign mostly on an anti-immigration platform and inflammatory rhetoric. The party succeeded in persuading a significant number of voters to defect from the established parties, including more than a million from Merkel's CDU.

The emphasis any party puts on restrictions to migration thus provides a first indication of what can be expected from the future German government. The AfD, despite having won only 92 out of the 709 seats in the new German Bundestag, has already left its mark on German politics. A hard line on family reunification will not remain the last attempt to win voters back from the AfD. This is another reminder that the influence exercised by right-wing parties on national policies goes beyond their simple share of the vote and seats in parliament.