

A Plea by Second-Generation Immigrants for Mutual Acceptance (May 13, 1982)

Abstract

In this text, second-generation immigrant and political activist Elcin Kürsat demands greater efforts in support of integration. Immigrants, he argues, should try harder to learn German, whereas Germans should exhibit greater tolerance and acceptance.

Source

Xenophobia Destroys Our Domestic Peace

“Integration” is a Matter of Education and the Goal for Second-Generation Immigrants Who Grow Up Here

Experience has already shown that weaknesses in social policy do not become apparent until years later. But politicians only react once a crisis has occurred. Suddenly, premature and ill-considered decisions are made under intense time pressure and insufficient and unsuitable solutions are pursued. Social policies pertaining to foreigners are a by-product of practical economic constraints, and they are subordinated to the needs of economic crisis management, where the problems arose in the first place.

Starting in the mid-1960s, the urgent labor shortage in German industry made it necessary to import foreign workers at breakneck speed. The German labor administration even set up branch offices in Turkey. Turkish recruits were examined right then and there to determine the state of their health, their physical strength, even the state of their teeth; then they were sent in droves to the Federal Republic. In the process, no one gave much thought to mid-range—much less long-term—plans to satisfy the basic needs of these hastily imported workers. For example: Where and how should these people live? How should they interact with their social surroundings? What consequences would arise in the area of family and education policies, etc., if they asserted their basic right to have a family life?

When the “foreign bodies” started attracting negative attention in German society, the magic formula of “integration” was invented, though it was never defined realistically or concretely. The adaptation of a minority to the majority by the majority is a long and laborious *educational process* for both sides. And it does not take place automatically or overnight.

Integration Must Occur on an Emotional Level

It is illusionary and unfair to expect that the Turks—the majority of whom come from the rural areas of Anatolia and who are used to a level of social and economic development that is about 200 years behind that of a major industrial city—will adapt within 10 to 15 years to the point that they act and think like Germans. The living conditions in Turkey were no secret. It is just as unfair to make sweeping claims that Turks do not want to integrate, simply because the magic formula did not work.

The ability to adapt—to learn a new language, to acquire a new culture—is largely dependent on one’s level of education. That is why I see the issue of integration as primarily an issue of education. Without education no integration can take place. But if the German majority is not prepared to take in the foreign minority, to assist them and even assume a leading role in this education process (socialization process), then no integration can take place either.

For the first generation of foreigners, “integration” can only mean: Learn the rules of the game for as long as you live in the Federal Republic. I am convinced that a significant portion of first-generation foreigners will return to their home countries at latest when they retire.

But for the second generation of foreigners, those who were born here or arrived at a young age as the children of foreign workers, the goal must be genuine integration in this sense of the word: The development of a feeling of belonging and of being part of a community of people with a common destiny; because true integration must occur on an emotional level. And that can only be achieved if the young generation of foreigners feels that it is being given fair and equal treatment—especially in the area of education—through legislation and by society.

One Year of German Language Instruction before Vocational Training and School

The more German citizens of Turkish, Greek, and like descent who live here and enjoy the same legal and political rights and responsibilities [as Germans], master the German language, and break through to a higher social status and more respected professions, the faster the “image” of the foreign minority in German society will change.

Without wanting to go into too much detail, I would like to mention one basic principle: We must avoid stopgap and special measures that actually promote, rather than eliminate, a system whereby foreign youths are put at a disadvantage and marginalized because they do not earn recognized degrees or career qualifications, such as the Measures for Job Preparation and Social Integration of Young Foreigners (MBSE).

In my opinion, the only realistic solution to the language problem is to offer foreign youths a one-year intensive German class overseen by the Ministry of Culture prior to the start of their pre-vocational training year (and prior to their entering *Hauptschule*^[1]). The goal should be for foreign youths to learn the German language and then be systematically transferred to the regular school system. This could then proceed as for all youths who have not completed *Hauptschule*: first a year of pre-vocational training, then a year of basic vocational training, the successful completion of which enables students to obtain a *Hauptschule* diploma. I believe the appreciable sums spent on such special measures [as the MBSE] would better serve society if they were used for apprenticeship positions at numerous companies for mixed groups of Germans and foreigners.

In my view, the well-intentioned recommendation that foreigners should preserve and foster their cultural identity is unrealistic. Examples of minorities who have kept their cultural identity intact for generations within a majority society do not exist. I do not think that a consciously directed continuation of national, cultural identity makes sense in the long run.

For the second generation of foreigners, on the other hand, the following applies: A sharp break from the cultural and social life of their own people would further intensify the social and psychological problems of these young people, because they can find no substitute for it, no support, and no acceptance in German society. They should not be forced to reject their background. Only in this case will the integration process become self-perpetuating, because the foreign youths who manage a social breakthrough can then act as problem-solvers and integration leaders: as social workers for other foreigners, as supervisors who train others in the workplace, and so forth.

Developing and introducing measures and institutions aimed at forging a new identity in this sense, however, is *our* problem, and it demands *our* initiative as foreigners, and not the initiative of Germans. In my view, educational models that pursue the dual goal of facilitating integration into German society *and* reintegration into Turkish society are unrealistic and misleading.

What is it that we foreigners have failed to do until now? We have failed to develop proactive community-

based initiatives and to find solutions on our own.

- We have failed to organize ourselves within major institutions that function as educational facilities in the broadest sense and to compensate for the shortcomings in existing German institutions, to resolve conflicts with the environment around us, to mobilize the Turkish population, and to attempt to forge a new identity.
- We have set the wrong course for political action. Activists in the Turkish community have created a political scene comprised of countless political, religious, and ethnic splinter groups that are oriented almost exclusively toward the patterns of *Turkish* political culture, that deal with political problems in Turkey, and that, if anything, tend to hinder integration.

To be sure, one of the most significant causes of a development of this sort is the exclusion of foreigners from political participation, political decision-making processes, and societal decisions.

The majority of our intellectuals and well-to-do compatriots, who could have played an important role in self-organization and integration solely on the basis of the social and educational status they have achieved, have failed to pay attention to the problems of their own people. It is with great bitterness that I must admit that they are more concerned with distancing themselves from their compatriots and having nothing more to do with them.

The way I see it, only after we have created suitable conditions within our population group will we have good prospects for cooperation with and support from progressive German groups.

In the face of growing economic difficulties and unemployment within a complex economic system that is incomprehensible to ordinary citizens, a segment of the German population is looking for someone to blame, “scapegoats” so to speak, at whom they can direct their aggressions. Numerically, Turks are the largest minority in Germany, and they are also the most different in terms of culture; for this they have become the target of attacks. Neo-fascist groups see this as their great opportunity to regain a foothold and to thrive by manipulating people’s fear of losing their livelihood.

I am of the opinion that massive, proactive measures against xenophobia, which is approaching dangerous levels, are long overdue. The purpose is not to dissuade the hate-filled German citizens who display fascist tendencies or the supporters of those groups, but rather, to reinforce the positive attitude of those citizens who express openness towards foreigners (about 30 percent according to the latest poll by the Institute for Applied Social Sciences, INFAS) and to provide objective information to that segment of the population that might distance themselves from foreigners, but who do not yet have strongly negative feelings towards them (50 percent). Above all, emotional prejudice against foreigners must be prevented from becoming engrained and embedded in the minds of young Germans.

Depict Foreign Doctors in Elementary-School Textbooks

I can only briefly mention a few examples of what needs to be done:

- An American initiative that aims to break down prejudices against people of color could be used as a model, and foreigners could be depicted as students, teachers, doctors, and so forth, in German elementary-school textbooks.
- In order to dismantle children’s prejudices against other races and ethnic minorities, the preschool television series “Sesame Street” showed black and Puerto Rican children and figures in the original U.S. version. It is precisely these segments that are not shown in the Federal Republic! The development of these sorts of children’s programs in German society is urgently needed.

Also necessary are informative television productions and commentaries that include concrete statistics and illustrations emphasizing, for example, the billions that foreigners have contributed to the gross national product over the years. (What percentage of the average family income does that add up to?) Or information on their contribution to the state pension fund. (What does that mean from the perspective of the individual German pensioner?) Or information on the employment distribution patterns of foreigners. (What would their sudden return mean for the mining, foundry, construction, service, and tourist industries? This should include interviews with employers in these sectors.)

To be sure, these short-term measures in the area of media policy cannot eliminate the actual causes of xenophobia, but they can act as a counterbalance to artificially elevated fears, the manipulation of emotions, and the deliberate destruction of our domestic peace.

NOTES

[1] A lower-level secondary school—trans.

Source: Elçin Kürsat, “Ausländerhaß zerstört den inneren Frieden,” *Vorwärts*, no. 20, May 13, 1982, p. 15. Republished with permission.

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