

Naika Foroutan, “East Germans are Migrants, Too” (May 13, 2018)

Abstract

The East German share of the total German population is about 19%. People with a so-called migration background make up about 26%. Both groups are underrepresented in management-level positions. What other common features distinguish East Germans and migrants? Naika Foroutan's comparative study, “East [German]-Migrant Analogies,” starts with this question and triggered a heated feuilleton debate in 2018. Foroutan is a professor of integration research and social policy and director of the Berlin Institute for Empirical Integration and Migration Research (BIM) at Humboldt University in Berlin. She also founded and directs the German Center for Integration and Migration Research (DeZIM). She was a co-initiator of the Young Islam Conference and became known to a wider audience through her vehement rejection of the claims made by Thilo Sarrazin in his bestseller *Deutschland schafft sich ab* [Germany Cancels Itself]. Foroutan's book, *Die postmigrantische Gesellschaft Ein Versprechen der pluralen Demokratie* [The Postmigrant Society. A Promise of Plural Democracy], was published in 2019.

Source

A Professor on Identities

“East Germans are Migrants, Too”

East Germans and migrants both experience stigma, says Naika Foroutan. Our author, born in the GDR, had a conversation with her.

taz am wochenende: Ms. Foroutan, you study migration. Why are you interested in East Germany?

Naika Foroutan: Many of the experiences East Germans have are similar to those of migrants and children of migrants in this country. They include the loss of home, places of longing from the past, feelings of not belonging and the experience of being devalued. I find it bewildering that nobody has spoken about this up to now.

An East German was federal president, and another East German has been chancellor for many years.

Barack Obama was president of the USA and Blacks and Whites are still treated unequally. Go through the list of prime ministers of the East German federal states since the fall of the Wall. And who are the people who have become presidents of East German universities? Or the chairmen of the board of DAX companies? Diplomats? Mostly West Germans. A West German household has an average net worth of around 140,000 euros, an East German one of 61,200 euros. The promised equality is simply not an empirical reality.

When I started at the taz thirteen years ago, I told a West German colleague that I sometimes felt as foreign in Germany as an immigrant. She said that was ridiculous and there was no comparison. How stupid was I?

You were articulating a feeling that you share with many East Germans, and that isn't stupid at all. You could also have said, I feel like a second-class citizen in Germany. I face prejudice because of my background. People often react negatively when they find out where I come from.

How do you explain the strong reaction?

The colleague reacted the way she did because she didn't want you to compare yourself with people who have been here for 60 years and still experience racism every day. Her anger is also understandable. But these feelings of loss and this insecurity about fitting in are familiar to many migrants and their children too, even though they have been here so long.

Where does this similarity of experience come from?

East Germans are somehow migrants too: migrants abandoned their country; East Germans were abandoned by their country. This sets similar processes in motion, for example the glorification of memory. Many migrants also cling to an idealized past. We also share the experience of being ashamed of our origins. Belonging is also made more difficult because recognition is lacking.

The accusations are similar sometimes too.

Right, many West Germans accused Turks, Italians and East Germans of never learning how to work properly. Or the reaction when somebody talks about inequality. Whinging Ossis, they say for East Germans, or playing the victim card in the case of migrants. The accusation that people haven't really "arrived" is also similar. Like the one that people use the social safety like a hammock and live off welfare benefits or the solidarity surcharge. Even the accusation that they aren't compatible with democracy.

Why do I feel so small sometimes when I talk about facts like these?

This inequality is not just a feeling, it is empirically based. But the majority turns such facts into something emotional that they don't have to take seriously. East Germans and migrants live with similar normative paradoxes.

What do you mean by that?

The central tenet of German democracy is: Everyone should have equal access to resources, positions and privileges. That is from Article 3 of the constitution, according to which nobody may be discriminated against on the basis of sex, origin, sexual identity or religion. We have spoken so much in recent years about constitutional patriotism. Nevertheless, migrants and East Germans experience far more strongly than others that the principle of equality does not seem to apply equally to all.

What does that do to you?

This contrast between wishes and reality exists in all societies. The German constitution also states that the dignity of the human being is inviolable, and everyone knows that the dignity of the human being is violated every day. But it should be the aim of a modern democracy to level this discrepancy between norm and reality.

And how?

There are essentially two possibilities: Either you set the norm lower or you build up resources to make reality conform to the norm. At the moment, the tendency in society is to lower the norm. Many people no longer feel that everyone in Germany should have the same rights. If we wanted to do things differently, we would need to introduce quotas for everything, among other options. Then in a country with 20 percent migrants and 20 percent East Germans there would no longer be a cabinet with just one minister from East Germany and no one with a visible migrant background.

Do some of your colleagues and friends ask why you work on East Germans when there is still so much to do about migrants?

No, on the contrary. They see the similarities too. And politically speaking: We need strategic alliances in order to change things—an alliance of social groups without equal access to the central goods of society. Such a post-migrant alliance would fight for equal positions in society for everyone.

We often have competition instead of coalitions between minorities. For instance, many migrants have the impression that the East Germans got preferential treatment after the political turnaround.

This is primarily a Berlin phenomenon. East Germans and migrant Berliners do meet here in a very small space. But yes, East Germans and migrants heighten their own stigmatized positions in part by devaluing each other. Migrants in this case cannot resort as readily as East Germans to the precious commodity of national identity and their position is significantly more marginalized.

We have heard a lot in recent months about the need to finally start listening to East Germans. Why should we do that when the majority of East Germans clearly have no desire to listen to migrants or refugees?

I doubt that this is really a majority. Thus far there have been barely any efforts at such communication between migrants and East Germans. And the narrative about right-wing extremist East Germans is a dangerous one. We know from the research on anti-Muslim racism what happens when a minority position in a group is applied to the entire group.

And what do we know?

The general assumption that East Germany as a whole is racist does something to East Germans who do not approve of this racism. They, too, suddenly begin to adopt a defensive identity. We have seen this among many Muslims as well.

They began to defend terrorism?

No, but they were outraged by the generalization. And they began defending a religion that many of them previously considered a rather minor concern. A Muslim identity formed via this outrage. And a new East German identity is forming via a similar sense of outrage. I recently took a walk with a neighbor, who grew up in Dresden ...

... of course, Dresden...

... really, Dresden. She wrote her doctoral thesis about feminism in the GDR, left after the turnaround and now is married to a Bavarian. A completely West German identity, actually. And this woman told me she was considering for the first time voting for the Left Party. Up to now this was always a no-no for her because she associated the party with the dictatorship. But she can no longer bear the debates about East Germans. She feels a collective humiliation, and the rage is building in her.

I've been meeting more of these compatriots lately.

I said, if you express that, people will say you are only doing it because you come from Dresden and refuse to see the racism there. That happens to us too when we refer to the devaluing of Islam as anti-Muslim racism. Then people say: You just want to defend your compatriots. Do you deny that there is antisemitism within Islam?

How do you respond?

I ask: What does that have to do with it? I have no intention to deny the antisemitism among Muslims and my neighbor has no intention to deny the racism in East Germany. She simply wants to say: By no means do all people support this racism, but the way it is talked about affects all people.

I am suspicious of such explanations too. Because I grew up in a part of Germany where the elites claimed that there was no right-wing extremism problem. It was an overall German problem, but what this actually meant was that it wasn't our problem.

Do you really think that East Germany has been constructively criticized over the past nearly 30 years? Much of this occurred on the assumption that the civilized were speaking to the backward. It is predictable that people withdraw then. And who is fighting against this racism and the neo-Nazi structures?

It's also East Germans.

Exactly, the citizens' initiatives and NGOs on the ground. Just as Muslim women form networks against domestic violence or do prevention work in their own surroundings. They are fighting and need support. If we combined the fight against the Right in East Germany with the perspectives of a critique of racism and non-representation we could conduct a very progressive struggle. The struggle we are seeing at the moment among many liberals and leftists is regressive.

Which leftists do you mean?

Look at segments of the SPD and the Left Party, which argue that we have focused on women's and migrant issues for too long and neglected the topic of class. They embellish the whole thing with contempt for an allegedly out-of-touch cosmopolitan elite—without noticing the extent to which this attack latches onto the antisemitic narrative of the rootless cosmopolitan. And this splits an alliance that could be fighting inequality.

What is so wrong about some people in the SPD wanting to get interested in workers again?

Nothing. But who is the working class nowadays? Who has little money? First and foremost migrants, East Germans too, as well as single mothers. This illusion that we can separate the struggles for the representation of gender and background from class struggles is the fallacy of populism.

Many activist women nowadays also more strongly emphasize traits of identity: skin color, sexual orientation. Do you consider this reactionary too?

They are stuck in a dilemma familiar to me as a sociologist. On the one hand, people don't like being pigeonholed. On the other, they have particular concerns because of their identities. They want society to take note of these concerns. And if you want to be seen, you have to become visible.

You just said that many migrants are workers. Has the deindustrialization of the Ruhr region hit migrant communities as hard as the deindustrialization of East Germany has hit the people there?

The Federal Republic recruited workers abroad. And when they were no longer needed, they were told to try the service sector. That was inconceivable, however, because of the people's language skills. The majority society read this differently, though, as migrants not looking hard enough for work. And if you don't look hard enough for work you don't want to integrate.

Or are simply too lazy. That was the accusation that West Germans levied at my parents after the fall of the Wall. I found that especially hurtful as a child.

Right, the planned economy was inefficient and the winners, West German society, transferred that to East Germans, according to the motto: They just had to sit out their time over there. Even today they are accused of not being productive, an accusation also used against migrants. Think of Sarrazin's story about the idle greengrocers. The accusation of non-productivity was used to destroy many East German plants.

Many of them were indeed not especially efficient, though.

But by no means all. And the justification for closures was often a classic racist motif. If somebody wants to enforce something morally illegitimate, he has to dehumanize the others or at least denigrate them.

They're so lazy we can destroy their companies, too?

Yes, or: They're so lazy they won't succeed anyway. That is why we need to hire West Germans as bosses who will show them how to work properly.

When I was younger, I had the feeling that I had to protect my parents from such accusations. They seemed weak and helpless in the face of anything new.

That is perfectly in keeping with migrant logic. The first generation of migrants came here with no knowledge of the language and no notion of how things work here, but they worked very hard. The second generation shielded their parents from being devalued by the outside world. Parents in turn tried to raise the second generation up through education. Many succeeded in social mobility through education. But for many it remained a mere hope because they lacked resources and networks.

And today?

The third generation says: Look where you've ended up. Two generations of work and we are still at the bottom. My son recently said "We foreign kids." And I asked him, "Foreign kids? What passport do you have?" He answered, "a German one." Then I said, "You aren't a foreign kid." And he said, "Yes Mama, in your office in Berlin-Mitte they call it 'migration background'." We are and remain foreigners. You know, I wanted to be a new German, but now my children are foreigners again.

What is happening?

Something is brewing, something clearly defensive, resistant, rejecting.

Something we should be afraid of?

This resistance needn't be undemocratic, it is to some extent identity and angry. We have to learn to deal with this. We need to observe it, listen to the messages and remove the hate that has agglutinated around the crust. And then we have to try to change something of the decades of devaluation and non-recognition.

Will this resistance exist in East Germany too?

It is already happening in some places. On the other hand, though, there will also be more people building progressive networks and organizations, like many Muslims have done as well. I remain convinced that we will

need more strategic alliances in future. We cannot win these struggles against inequality on our own.

Source: Interview between Daniel Schulz and Naika Foroutan, "Ostdeutsche sind auch Migranten," *taz*, May 13, 2018. Available online at: <https://taz.de/Professorin-ueber-Identitaeten/!5501987/>

Translation: Pamela Selwyn

Recommended Citation: Naika Foroutan, "East Germans are Migrants, Too" (May 13, 2018), published in: German History Intersections, <<https://germanhistory-intersections.org/en/migration/ghis:document-117>> [June 30, 2025].