

Turkish immigrants fear spread of xenophobia in German society

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A recent survey showing high levels of anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant sentiment in Germany alarms the country's Turkish community, which fears such beliefs could flare into violence. The study released this week indicates that xenophobic feelings are spreading from extremists at the margins of society to the middle-class heart of the European country

Recent survey findings that say xenophobic and racist sentiments have penetrated to the middle-class heart of German society have left a bitter taste among members of the country's Turkish community.

"What is most dangerous is that racism in Germany is going from a Nazi appearance to a 'black-tie racism,'" Kenan Kolat, a leader of the Turkish community in Germany, told the Hürriyet Daily News & Economic Review on Thursday. "The existing racism is heading toward the center of society, to cultural, white-collar racism."

Conducted by the University of Leipzig for the Friedrich Ebert Foundation, in connection with the Social Democratic Party, the survey released this week, "Right-wing Extremism in Germany 2010," shows a high number of Germans agree with xenophobic statements. Foreigners as well as Muslims are being treated with suspicion, according to the study's findings.

"Anti-Semitism is being replaced by Islamophobia," Bekir Alboğa of the Turkish-Islamic Union, or DİTİB, in Germany told the Daily News. "It is alarming that anti-Islamic sentiments are on the rise despite the German government's efforts to tackle the integration problem."

The survey, which was broadcast by Deutsche Welle, shows 32 percent of Germans approve of the statement, "When there's a shortage of jobs, foreigners should be sent back home"; 34 percent agree or strongly agree with the statement that "Foreigners only come here to exploit Germany's social welfare system"; and 35 percent think that "Germany has a dangerous level of foreign influence as a result of the many foreigners in the country."

The presence of such sentiments among Germans is not a new development, Kolat said, but added that the broader willingness to express them is worrying.

"Foreigners are met with suspicion here in Germany, but what's new is that the middle-class, white-collar-and-tie Germans, who have long refrained from expressing their opinions toward foreigners, are now speaking out," he said.

Germany has a sizeable Turkish community of around 2.5 million and a total Muslim population of some 4 million. German central bank board member Thilo Sarrazin recently caused outrage among Muslim immigrants when he accused Turks and Arabs of exploiting the welfare state, refusing to integrate and lowering the country's average intelligence.

"A policy of humiliation and exclusion is supported by German society," Kolat said.

Anti-Islam feelings on the rise

The survey showed the strongest negative opinions when it comes to Islam, with 55 percent of respondents saying they could understand that people find Arabs unpleasant, and 58 percent saying the practicing of the Muslim religion should be "considerably restricted."

Though members of the Turkish community have said they find the results "intimidating" and "thought-provoking," others have suggested that the way the questions were asked might have been manipulative rather than neutral, dramatically impacting the eventual results. Still, the community is troubled by fears that the sentiments expressed by middle-class Germans could erupt into tension with immigrants.

"We have serious concerns. Could violence take place? I hope it will not, but it is a possibility we cannot rule out," Kolat said.

Both Turkey and Germany emphasize the importance of integration for Turks living in the country. Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and German Chancellor Angela Merkel jointly attended a football match last week between the Turkish and German national teams, with the Turkish leader wearing a scarf combining both nations' flag in a symbolic move to highlight the importance of integration.

While calling on Turks to adhere to German rules and learn the German language, Ankara cautions against a policy of "assimilation," saying it would mean destroying a culture. The problem of integration will further be discussed when German President Christian Wulff visits Turkey later this month.

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