

Germany passes controversial migration law



German Interior Minister Horst Seehofer | John MacDougall/AFP via Getty Images

The policy package both facilitates deportation of failed asylum seekers and migrants' access to the labor market.

BERLIN — Germany on Friday passed a controversial package of bills bringing major changes to the country's asylum and immigration policy following a fierce debate in parliament.

The package included the so-called *Geordnete-Rückkehr-Gesetz* — or “Orderly Return Law” — which facilitates the deportation of failed asylum seekers and expands related powers of police and immigration authorities.

The new law's aim, according to its draft version, is to “significantly increase” the proportion of successful deportations. Approximately half of the planned 188,000 deportations from Germany since 2015 failed or were not carried out, according to interior ministry data.

Yet the policy package also included measures to improve access to Germany's labor market for skilled migrants. For instance, migrants without asylum status who arrived before last summer will be able to stay for the time being if they have a job and speak German. In addition, it scrapped previous rules that required German employers to prove that they found no German or other EU citizen to take the job in order to employ a skilled non-EU migrant.

The package was mired in controversy, in particular due to the deportation legislation, and prompted a fierce debate in parliament, underscoring the extent to which Germany's political landscape remains divided over migration.

Ahead of Friday's Bundestag debate, the Greens and the far-left Die Linke party had unsuccessfully tried to remove the vote on the legislative package, which they said infringed on asylum seekers' rights and had been rushed through parliament,

from the agenda.

Interior Minister Horst Seehofer from the Christian Social Union, the Bavarian sister party of Merkel's Christian Democrats (CDU), insisted that the legislation was necessary to ensure failed asylum seekers would be deported.

"This is a turning point in our migration policy," Seehofer said in the Bundestag, adding that in his eyes "this migration package creates a set of rules that respects humanity and order." He also underlined that the importance of granting foreign skilled workers better access to Germany's labor market.

Ulla Jelpke, a member of Die Linke, labeled the new legislation a "catalog of atrocities" and said it amounts to "currying favor with racists." Jörg Schindler, Die Linke's secretary-general, called the policy package "unconstitutional."

The Greens' Filiz Polat spoke of a "dark day for democracy" and also raised concerns that aspects of the law might not be compatible with Germany's constitution.

Meanwhile, the far-right Alternative for Germany's Gottfried Curio said that if so many deportations failed, "maybe we should protect the borders."

In an op-ed in Germany's Handelsblatt on Friday, former German Social Democrat (SPD) leader Sigmar Gabriel expressed support for a more "robust asylum policy."

He encouraged his party, which has tumbled in the polls and found itself in the worst crisis of its post-war history, to look towards Denmark, where the Social Democrats won Wednesday's general election after campaigning on a tougher immigration stance.

"Mette Frederiksen has shown that the Socialists can win elections if they stand for a clear policy," Gabriel wrote. "The German comrades are far from it."

The Social Democrats' decline has raised questions over the viability of Germany's ailing coalition government, in which the SPD are the junior partner to Merkel's CDU. A recent poll found a majority of Germans favor calling a snap election.

But on Friday, the CDU's Thorsten Frei said his party's coalition with the SPD was not in crisis, adding that the migration package passing was the best "proof for

the grand coalition's ability to take action."

The returns law passed by 372 to 159 votes, with 111 abstentions. The labor market access law passed by 369 to 257 votes.

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