Select Committee on Citizenship and Civic Engagement

Uncorrected oral evidence: Germany and Citizenship

Wednesday 29 November 2017
11.50 am

Watch the meeting

Members present: Lord Hodgson of Astley Abbots (The Chairman); Baroness Barker; Baroness Eaton; Lord Harries of Pentregarth; Baroness Lister of Burtersett; Baroness Morris of Yardley; Baroness Pitkeathley; Baroness Redfern; Lord Rowe-Beddoe.

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Witness

I: Mira Turnsek, German Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth.

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Examination of witness

Mira Turnsek.

Q141 The Chairman: Hello. Thank you very much for coming along. I am sorry we have kept you waiting, but we were deep in discussion with local authorities. We are exceptionally grateful to you for giving up some time because, on this subject we are looking at, we can learn from all over the world. We would like to get your experiences in Germany as to what you have been doing, what has gone well and what has gone less well—as specific as you care to make it. If we ask you questions that you do not want to answer, say, “I do not want to answer”, and do not feel you have to answer them.

A list of interests of Members relevant to the inquiry has been sent to you and is available. The session is open to the public and is being recorded for BBC Parliament. A verbatim transcript will be taken of the evidence and put on the Committee’s website. A few days after the session you will be sent a copy of the transcript to check it for accuracy, and it would be most helpful if you could advise us of any corrections as quickly as possible. If, after the evidence session, you wish to clarify or amplify any points made during your evidence, or have additional points you would like to make to us, you are most welcome to submit supplementary evidence to us. Could I ask you to introduce yourself and then we will go to the questions?

Mira Turnsek: Thank you very much for the invitation; it is an honour to be here. My name is Mira Turnsek. I am a desk officer at the Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth in Berlin. I am not a senior official yet, as mentioned in the paper, but a desk officer. I am honoured to be here and will try to answer the questions that I can answer.

The Chairman: Can we begin with a German question: can you tell us a little about the scale of the problem Germany faces in promoting civic engagement?

Mira Turnsek: You call it a problem of promoting civic engagement?

The Chairman: An issue.

Mira Turnsek: I would call it an asset that we have a very big and active civil society in Germany. Our democratic society does not only live by what the state does but by what all those people who are engaged in various initiatives do to support that, independently and willingly. In order to understand the promotion of civic engagement in Germany, I would like to say a few words on how Germany is organised and the specificities of the German system. It is a federal state, as you all know, so the municipalities and the Länder—the 16 states in Germany—are very much involved in all the activities that the state does, which includes civic engagement. In federalism, there are chances and challenges at the same time and there has to be constant feedback between the Federal
Government and the Länder. It is well accepted in Germany that government on a local, regional and national level works very closely with civil society.

Let me give you a few numbers. According to a recent survey, we have seen that civil society is growing in Germany. We have more than 600,000 associations registered and, when we look at the particular topics that I deal with in my unit in the ministry, which is the promotion of democracy and the prevention of extremism, we are looking at around 700 civil society organisations. Looking at the number of people, there are about 30 million people in Germany, in total, engaged in any kind of civil society work, which is 43% of the population aged 14 or older.

Volunteering work changes from region to region. In the federal states of Germany there are big differences. In general, one can say that people in western Germany tend to be engaged in volunteering work a little more than in the east. It differs from rural areas to urban areas when you look at what kind of social work people are involved in.

The Ministry for Family Affairs is sometimes also called the Commitment Ministry. We are trying to encourage civic engagement through favourable framework conditions so that we can support civic engagement over the long term and try to strengthen a culture of recognition, as we call it. We have an annual prize for civic engagement, which is handed over by our ministry, and there is an annual national week of civic commitment.

When we look at the framework and the problems that Germany faces when it comes to promoting civic engagement, one problem we have seen a lot is what we call “Projektitis”, meaning that there are a lot of NGOs around, they do their work and lose funding at some point, they stop their work and there are other NGOs starting anew and sometimes reinventing the wheel. We have tried with the federal programme — “Live Democracy!” — which is dealt with at the Ministry for Family Affairs, to overcome that problem. Within that programme, we have some pilot projects and we fund the structural development of nationwide NGOs, for instance. We think that, while there must be room for pilot projects and for projects to try things out, (which includes that at some point we may realise that it is not going the right way and stop the funding), but there must also be room for projects to scale up develop what they have developed on a local and more concrete level at a national level and see if what they are doing can be implemented and rearranged for different settings. In that case, the Federal Government acts as an impulse generator.

The Chairman: We may pick up some of these later on. We will take some questions and, if there are things you would like to tell us at the end, we will give you a chance to wrap up, if we have missed some important things.

Baroness Redfern: You mentioned that civic engagement and volunteering is more prevalent in the west than in the east. Can you tell
me the reasons why?

**Mira Turnsek:** I would have to ask about the reasons why, as I am not familiar with it.

**Baroness Redfern:** I just wondered why the take-up was more in the west than in the east. The German Government have a strategy to prevent extremism and promote democracy. To what extent do you think that these two are linked? What do you see as the relationship between integration and civic engagement?

**Mira Turnsek:** The prevention of extremism and the promotion of democracy, as we see it in Germany, are closely linked and they have to go hand in hand for there to be overall success. The battle against politically or religiously motivated and extremist violence obviously includes security tasks, but security for the people also includes preventive action that strengthens democratic behaviour and measures that prevent radicalisation processes. Only if these two go together can the battle against any form of extremism and for democracy be successful, in our opinion. Germany believes in an encompassing and multilateral approach. We look at all forms of extremism and how different forms of extremism sometimes go together or reinforce each other. Because we think that these two things go together, we also have very close co-operation between our ministry and the Ministry of the Interior. These are the two ministries which run federal programmes. We have “Live Democracy!” in our ministry, which had a budget of €104.5 million in 2017, and we have the slightly smaller federal programme of the Ministry of the Interior, called “Cohesion through Participation”, which in 2017 had a budget of €12 million. These two ministries work together in an interministerial working group on the promotion of democracy and prevention of extremism. With these two ministries, and the shared leadership of that working group, it shows the importance of bringing those two things together. It was within that working group that the strategy that you mentioned was worked out. Your second question?

**Baroness Redfern:** My second question was about the relationship between integration and civic engagement.

**Mira Turnsek:** On one side, civic engagement can be a motor of integration. When we had the big refugee crisis and had many refugees coming to Germany, starting in 2015, the so-called Welcoming Culture, or Willkommenskultur, became quite famous. We had a programme within our ministry, “Menschen stärken unterstützen Menschen”, which translates into People Support People, where we tried to transform that spontaneous engagement that we saw in the wider population into long-term civic commitment. Within “Live Democracy!”, we also support migrant organisations, so we have the link between the two, and we have a Federal Commissioner for Migration, Refugees and Integration. According to them, in addition to being a motor for integration and civic engagement, it is an indicator for integration. Civic engagement is an essential element for successful integration, according to them; it strengthens the sense of belonging on both sides and the intercultural
learning processes. We have seen studies from the Federal Commissioner, which have shown that people with a migrant background are very committed, in particular, and when you compare young people with a migrant background and Germans you can see that civic engagement in the migrant population is higher.

Q143 Baroness Lister of Burtersett: This might follow on from that last point: how successful is the German naturalisation programme for new arrivals in fostering integration and civic engagement? We have been given a brief summary of what it contains, the language course and the orientation course, on your website, so you do not have to go through it all, but how successful is it, and are there any pitfalls?

Mira Turnsek: The Ministry for Family Affairs is not in charge of the naturalisation programme; that lies with the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees, so I am not able to go into much detail. You said that you have seen on the website what it contains. You have to submit an application, there are certain conditions that people must fulfil in order to become naturalised, and there are 33 questions, I think, in the naturalisation test and you have to pass at least half of them to become naturalised.

I would be quite careful in looking at how we measure success, which is the first question you would have to look at. According to the Federal Commissioner, there are very different perceptions about whether naturalisation is the very successful end result of complete integration or whether it is one step in the integration process. The studies so far have not given clear results. Some of those studies have compared wages of foreigners and people who have become naturalised in Germany, and the results leave room for interpretation, from what I know, although the naturalised people, on average, have better wages. They are not exactly sure how to interpret that, whether it simply means that it is precisely those migrants who are economically more successful who become naturalised or whether naturalisation has an influence.

The Chairman: Do you have a formal citizenship ceremony when you become a German citizen?

Mira Turnsek: I have never attended one, but I think you do.

The Chairman: It might be helpful, if you have one—not now but at some point—if you could send us some information about that so that we can see how it compares.

Q144 Baroness Pitkeathley: The German Government’s strategy mentions democratic values, basic human values and the values of the constitution. Is there an official definition of what these values are? How do the Government seek to promote these values among their citizens?

Mira Turnsek: When we look at these different values, we would always go back to the basic law in Germany. This is where there is a commitment to inviolable human dignity and the duty of all state authorities to respect and protect these rights. Those rights are inherent
in the provisions of the basic law, which is the basis of our social values. If you look at Article 1 of the basic law, human rights are the bedrock of every community, so this is what we would always refer to when we look at these values.

**Baroness Pitkeathley:** How do the Government go about promoting those values, or do the Government have a role in promoting those values and, if so, how?

**Mira Turnsek:** There are various ways for us to promote these values among citizens. There is a big role to play for the Federal Agency for Civic Education—Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung (BpB)—which, together with agencies for civic education at the Land level, promotes citizenship education. If you want, I can say a little more about the work of that federal agency. When we look at the basis for civic education since 1976, there has been the Beutelsbach consensus (“Beutelsbacher Konsens”), which is a consensus that has vital significance when it comes to how we teach political education in Germany. Besides the federal agency, the Federal Government supports political foundations, and we have churches and trade unions, which have their own educational offers. Schools, of course, play a big role in the education and promotion of these values.

**Baroness Pitkeathley:** We would like you to say a bit more about citizenship education.

**Baroness Lister of Burtersett:** If I can go beyond that and ask a question about the values, I was struck by various statements and what you said about the key value of the inviolability of human dignity, which is very much a human rights value. Is that kind of human rights approach made explicit in what is written and spoken about in Germany, and do you talk about German values? One of the things we are looking at is the discussion here about so-called basic British values. Do you talk about German values, as such, or, because you have a constitution, is it kind of constitutionalised and made more civic somehow?

**Mira Turnsek:** There are discussions in the German Government about German values. We would rather talk about constitutional values and always go back to the basic law. Depending on what political party you look at, some would probably say or try to explain that there are German values, but it is not the common understanding of the German Government that there are. There are discussions about what we call Leitkultur, a leading culture, but I am not sure how to explain that in English. There are discussions on that which would probably include German values and what it means to be German, but we would always go back to the constitutional values and the human rights approach and the basic law. When we talked about the naturalisation process earlier, one of the conditions for people to become naturalised is to make sure that they adhere to the values in the constitution and there is nothing about adhering to German values, but there are discussions on that.

**Baroness Pitkeathley:** I want to ask a bit more about education and where citizenship sits in the education system. Is it a compulsory
subject?

**The Chairman:** There is a question later about your comments on how we are teaching citizenship and, if you have any views on that, we might wrap it up together. Do not hesitate to be frank; we want the truth.

**Baroness Morris of Yardley:** If you are not aware of it, say so.

**Mira Turnsek:** I am not very aware of the British approach to citizenship education.

**The Chairman:** So back to Baroness Pitkeathley’s question.

**Mira Turnsek:** The main responsibility for civic education lies with the Federal Agency for Civic Education, which is subordinate to the Ministry of the Interior and gives information on political issues for all people in Germany. It is trying to promote awareness of democracy and participation in politics, which it does by different means. It takes up topical and historical subjects, issues publications, gives seminars, does events, study trips and exhibitions, and tries to motivate and enable people to give critical thoughts on all these political and social issues. It also supports events that are being organised by more than 300 approved educational establishments, foundations and non-governmental organisations, so it does not do everything by itself and, as I said earlier, it also works with similar agencies on a local level, which are called the Landeszentrale für politische Bildung. As I said before, the political foundations on top of that, the churches, the trade unions and the BPB, which is the acronym for this federal agency, work together with organisations, for instance, which are engaged in the “Live Democracy!” programme from our ministry, so they sometimes step in for as co-founders of those education projects that we do.

**Q145 Lord Rowe-Beddoe:** The German Government have found discrimination on the basis of race and gender to be barriers to integration. In the written statements here, they have very clearly set out their concerns with increasing Islamophobia, anti-Semitism, anti-ziganism, homophobia and transphobia, so that is clear. The next thing that the Government have said is how the people who are victims, if you like, or are suffering this can report it. What are the Government doing, if anything, to prevent these things from happening? What are they doing in the process of education in these areas?

**Mira Turnsek:** As I mentioned, we have two big federal programmes, one of which is in our ministry, the “Live Democracy!” programme, a very important part of which is to fund projects which try to do exactly that, promote democracy and diversity and prevent discrimination. In the summer of this year, we released the National Action Plan against Racism, which also tries to tackle these issues and looks at different areas—hate speech online and education for instance in different areas—to see what can be done to tackle the problem further.

**Lord Rowe-Beddoe:** You mentioned education, so how is the education being delivered to the people in Germany?
Mira Turnsek: In schools, that is the responsibility of the Länder and, besides what the federal civic agency does, we have a lot of civil society organisations which, for instance, go into schools and talk to pupils about democracy, the value of diversity and these kinds of things.

Baroness Lister of Burtersett: From my perspective, Germany has been something of a beacon in the way it has responded to the refugee crisis, but I know it has created a lot of problems in German society. How has that affected the work around this area of integration and dealing with hate crime, discrimination and so forth? From outside, it seems it has had an effect.

Mira Turnsek: It has had an effect in that it has made this work more difficult and has made the problems worse, but we are trying to be very clear about the fact that all these problems were there before, so they have not arisen because refugees came into the country. Two different things happened with the refugee crisis. We had, on the one hand, the problems that you just talked about, but we have had an amazing welcoming culture of thousands of people being very engaged, very happy to welcome those people and trying to integrate them into German society. Recent numbers from the BKA (Bundeskriminalamt), the Federal Criminal Police Office, show that nearly every day somewhere in Germany there are attacks on refugees’ homes or institutions, so it is manifestly a problem that we need to tackle and probably do not have the perfect answer. If we look at the last election, there is a lot of right-wing populism going on and, unfortunately, they have a voice which is a lot louder than we would hope for.

Q146 Lord Harries of Pentregarth: Do you have any views on the strengths and weaknesses of the British approach to integration?

Mira Turnsek: I do not know anything about the British approach to civic education for integration. I know that you have tried at some point to clearly differentiate between integration and extremism, from what I understand, which we would definitely see as a strength and which we try to handle in the same way—to have a very clear separation between integration and any form of extremism. It has not always been the case and in Britain that was a development as well. In Germany, for some time, we have mixed up these two things a lot more than we would today, so maybe this is one short answer I can give, but I do not have an extensive view on how integration is happening in the UK.

Q147 Baroness Eaton: Could you tell us about the Federal Agency for Civic Education, the BPB? What are the strengths of having civic education for all ages run by the same institution? How does it work with other parts of federal government, such as the Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, or with state governments and their education systems?

Mira Turnsek: As I said, it is part of the Federal Ministry and it is a subordinate authority to the Federal Ministry of the Interior, so I cannot say much about the strengths and weaknesses of its work, but, because it is the federal agency and started about 65 years ago or so, it has quite
a wide range of knowledge and adheres to certain standards—what I said earlier about the Beutelsbach consensus—and it has the possibility to feed back to the Länder.

**Baroness Eaton:** Different departments do not always relate and work from the same agenda; they have different staff and approaches and the financial arrangements can become complicated. How does it sit together so as not to have different aspects getting in the way of the delivery, because that, I would think, can so easily happen?

**Mira Turnsek:** They try to work ever more closely together, which is also translated in the fact that the Ministry of the Interior and the Ministry for Family Affairs work closely together.

**Baroness Eaton:** Do they have joint budgets?

**Mira Turnsek:** No, there are no joint budgets, but, as I said, there is co-financing, for instance. Within the “Live Democracy!” federal programme, there are projects that are co-financed by the BPB, for instance, which would be where both we and the BPB are putting money in and are both involved in and aware of the projects. There are common conferences that we organise within “Live Democracy!” where we try to bring in the Ministry of the Interior to join with people from the BPB to sit and look at the problem together, but that can be difficult when you have these different actors.

**Baroness Eaton:** So it is not all that smooth-running and it does have its issues.

**Mira Turnsek:** I would guess it does have its issues, yes.

**The Chairman:** Who knocks the heads together? We have a saying in Britain of “knocking heads together”. When disagreements take place between the various departments, how are they resolved?

**Baroness Eaton:** Who has got the upper hand? Would it be the federal agency?

**Mira Turnsek:** The federal agency is independent and non-partisan, which, for them, is a big asset compared to the political foundations, for instance. I do not really know; it probably depends on the issue.

**Baroness Eaton:** Is it down to the individuals, as is often the case?

**Mira Turnsek:** Yes. You would probably try to handle the problem in the first place at the lower level and, at some point, escalate it to the highest level.

**Baroness Eaton:** I can imagine.

**Baroness Barker:** You have already told us quite a lot about the sorts of things which the BPB does and you touched on the issue of separating out integration and extremism. How effective is the work of the BPB in fighting extremism?
**Mira Turnsek:** You would probably have to talk about how you measure success and how you can tell whether something is effective or not, which does not only apply to the BPB but to any other work that we do within “Live Democracy!” or “Cohesion through Participation”. It is quite hard to tell whether they are truly effective; you can never compare because you do not know how things would have gone had you not had these projects and the work that they do. Part of the truth is probably that we still have all those phenomena. Right-wing extremism has been around for a very long time in Germany and is still quite a big problem, along with Islamic extremism and many other group-related enmity phenomena. The question of effectiveness is a very hard one. Within our programme, for instance, and I think the BPB does the same, we have academics who follow the work we do and try to guide the projects and our work when they see that it is not going the right way.

**Baroness Barker:** So evidence-based policy?

**Mira Turnsek:** Yes. To be effective, you probably should not think that there is one solution to the problem but always try to feed back with all the actors involved—so the BPB, together with our ministry, with the Ministry of the Interior, with the Länder and a lot with civil society—to see what is going on on the ground to try to tackle problems, but I am not aware of any. I can try to give numbers or something afterwards, but I do not have them at the moment.

**The Chairman:** One of the things we are struggling with is red lines, points which cannot be crossed, and an important one is the question of women’s rights, particularly among some of the minority communities. Can you briefly tell us what Germany is doing, if anything, in addressing the issue of women’s rights among minority communities? I do not want to put you on the spot now, if you wanted to write in on that.

**Mira Turnsek:** I have a few things. I am always happy to give more information afterwards, but I have some information on it.

**The Chairman:** Yes, a couple of words on how you are tackling that very difficult issue.

**Mira Turnsek:** In the first place, going back to the basic law that I talked about earlier, in Article 3, equality between men and women is firmly anchored. In 1994, a new article was added to the German Constitution, which provided an obligation on the authorities to fight inequality between men and women. We have the General Act on Equal Treatment—Act—the AGG (Allgemeines Gleichbehandlungsgesetz)—which came into effect in 2006. It implemented four European directives: amongst them the racial equality directive and the gender equality directive—and-others. When you look at German basic law, women and men have equal rights, in principle, but the reality looks different still, unfortunately, in Germany.

To tackle those barriers, on the one hand, we have a federal antidiscrimination agency to which any person who has seen
discrimination can turn. There is a gender equality report and gender mainstreaming is a guiding principle. We have different projects which try to tackle the problem of discrimination, for instance. You asked about women from immigrant backgrounds, and there is we have an ESF-funded programme, Strong in the Work Place, where migrant mothers get on board, which is run through by our ministry and aims at facilitating the entry into employment of mothers with an immigrant background and improving access for them to the labour market. We have had some additional gender equality policies recently, looking at labour market participation, and we had a new Bill passed in 2014 which looks at the equal participation of women and men in top executive positions in both the private and public sectors. These are some of the things that we do.

**The Chairman:** Thank you very much indeed for dealing with all our questions so fluently and so insightfully; we are most grateful to you.