



Schader Stiftung

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Migration

**Table Talk with Rocío Guenther**  
**Fellow of the Schader-Residence**

**24 January 2024, Haus Schader, Darmstadt**

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Report: Valeria Elsesser

## **Introduction**

The host of the table talk was Rocío Guenther, Federal Chancellor Fellow of the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation and the third Fellow of the Schader Residency in Darmstadt (from September 2023 to March 2024). Previously, Guenther had worked as a journalist and in local government in Darmstadt's sister city San Antonio, Texas. As part of her Fellowships, Guenther is engaged in a project analyzing local government approaches to the influx of migrants and refugees in the City of Darmstadt in contrast with the City of San Antonio. Her goal is to produce a multimedia journalistic piece that tells the story of both sister cities amidst a global challenge facing governments all over the world. For this purpose, Guenther is conducting in-depth interviews with scholars, government officials, residents, civil society organizations, and individuals within the migrant/refugee community. She is also gathering European Union perspectives on migration by carrying out interviews with different political and civil society actors in Spain. The results of the interviews will be supplemented by current research literature, news articles, audio recordings and photographs.

During the first table talk titled "Migration", participants engaged in a comprehensive discussion on various aspects surrounding the recent protests against the far-right and their implications political action and political communication, as well as broader societal dynamics. The conversation was structured around three key questions, each prompting insightful reflections and analyses from the group.

## **Protests, Perspectives and Political Communication**

Guenther's first question centered on the current nationwide anti-right protests, which were sparked by the uncovering of a secret meeting between far-right activists, businessmen, members of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and right-wing party Alternative für Deutschland (AfD). According to an investigative report published by the nonprofit Correctiv in early January 2024, this meeting was used by right-wing actors to discuss "remigration", i.e. the expulsion of millions of people from Germany based on racist criteria. Guenther asked the participants what the protests indicate about the current political climate in Germany, how they might influence future approaches in migration policy and about the kind of journalism making such large-scale civil resistance possible.

Drawing on the first aspect of the question, participants delved into diverse perspectives emerging from urban and peripheral areas, highlighting the astonishing diversity and differing motives driving protest participation. One participant shared her frustration about protests happening later and on a smaller scale in rural areas of conservative states such as Bavaria. Along the same vein, they asked about alternatives for action, should protest participation be restricted. The discussion then turned to personal perspectives on the protests, with participants exploring their roles and responsibilities as educators, academics, and activists amidst the unfolding political events. Pessimistic and optimistic views were exchanged regarding the protests' long-term significance. Some participants expressed worry about the protests fading out without further action. Others expressed hope about the potential of the protests in strengthening democracy and political participation in light of the upcoming local, regional, and European elections.

Furthermore, participants discussed the role of journalism in promoting informed discourse, underscoring the importance of robust media coverage in shaping public understanding of political processes and policy outcomes. Depending on the framing of certain issues, the media can both expose societal injustices and potentially exacerbate social divides. Thus, as the fourth democratic power, the media needs to reflect on its modes of presentation of divisive topics such as migration. As a former editor for the San Antonio Report, Fellow Rocío Guenther additionally shared some insights into the coverage of the 2016 presidential election by media outlets in the US. It was only after Trump's election victory that media outlets turned their attention to the perspectives and stories of his voters. Guenther pointed out that this political event reminded many journalists of their responsibility to cover all parts of society in their reporting. How else could we engage in conversations with each other and start bridging existing divides?

The discussion then transitioned towards modes of political communication in the currently shifting German political landscape. The participants agreed that emotional and oversimplified messaging employed by the AfD is highly appealing to voters, but often fosters mistrust in democratic institutions. Questions arose on how other democratic parties could effectively engage with the wider public. Is it wise to exclude AfD voters from political conversations and are constructive discussions with those espousing hateful views even possible? One participant touched on the need for more accessible communication methods for complex

topics. This perspective emphasized the importance of confidently communicating ideas and desires for societal existence and negotiating common grounds, while avoiding oversimplification of complex issues. This approach could be crucial in re-gaining the public's trust in politics and strengthening the belief in our democracy.

### **Local Answers to a Global Challenge**

Guenther's second question addressed the significance of local government responses to issues concerning migration and the challenges related to funding. Participants discussed the responses of Hesse and Darmstadt to recent changes concerning migration, focusing on policy implementation, cultural approaches, and community engagement. A representative from the "WIR-Program", which is administered by the states' Ministry of Social Affairs, spoke on the importance of involving all members of society in integration efforts. They noted that, unfortunately, only a small part of the community actively participates in intercultural events, primarily individuals already engaged in integration work, such as social workers. A representative of the International Office at the Technical University of Darmstadt emphasized a shift away from a dichotomous view of migrants versus non-migrants, towards a multi-layered action plan facilitating dialogue across different segments of society. Additionally, participants from the organization PaSo GmbH highlighted the importance of establishing robust networks for integration, acknowledging the barriers faced by migrants and the need to address these to foster meaningful participation. They also pointed out the relevance of informal community work, which often does not receive the same recognition despite being an alternative form of democratic participation. No matter the initiative: funding limitations and precarious working conditions can hinder their sustainability, especially in the face of societal discourse shifts towards the right.

### **Sharing Best Practices**

The Fellow's third and final question focused on the importance of sharing best practices, particularly with a focus on transatlantic engagement. Participants underlined the value of collaboration between higher education institutions, like the ongoing cooperation between universities in Darmstadt and San Antonio. Further, one participant noted the significance of cultural exchanges, such as youth orchestra programs. Their power was truly transformative because they brought people

together to grow and exchange ideas. Integrating migrants into media platforms, as demonstrated by initiatives like Neue Deutsche Medienmacher\*innen and Westdeutscher Rundfunk, was also discussed as a means of fostering inclusivity and diversity in public discourse. Furthermore, transatlantic relations and cooperation between sister cities like San Antonio and Darmstadt were pointed out as avenues for mutual learning and collaboration on various topics reaching far beyond migration. The discussion concluded on a collaborative note, emphasizing the importance of sharing experiences and best practices to address migration challenges and promote cross-cultural understanding on both sides of the Atlantic.