

From Welcome Culture to Welcome Realism.

Refugee Integration in Germany

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Abstract

In 2015, most Germans welcomed the 890,000 refugees which arrived unexpectedly, under the impression of the horrors of the Syrian war. The media covered the plight of the refugees, and the chancellor accepted the refugees stranded in inhospitable Hungary. An unprecedented wave of volunteers began to assist, and local government and the states provided accommodation. The federal asylum bureaucracy was less effective. Since it is not easy to find jobs for Syrians or Afghans in the highly specialized German economy, first hopes of an easy integration have been disappointed. Terrorist acts created fears. But the strong consensus about accepting refugees in need continues, even if the government tries to limit the amount of new arrivals. The German public is more realistic but still active, engaging and welcoming.

Welcome culture and the person of the year 2015

When Angela Merkel said "*Wir schaffen das*" on 31 August 2015, she responded to a wave of good will and hospitality in the population. She herself suddenly became an icon of openness in a time when many other governments closed their borders. It was an ideal moment: a people united with their chancellor in active hospitality. A few weeks earlier, in an emotional meeting with a Palestinian girl at a school, Merkel had cautioned that Germany could not take all the people in need in the world.

When Merkel agreed to open the borders on 5 September 2015, against the agonizing reports about smuggled refugees suffocated in an abandoned lorry in Austria, and the iconic picture of the little boy washed to the Turkish coast at the Aegean Sea, she won the hearts of a great majority of Germans, and beyond. People were used to politicians warning of new waves of immigrants and trying to keep them out in one way or another. This time, however, the discourse was about the idea that Germany had successfully integrated earlier waves of immigrants, and was strong enough to do it again. Waves of support for the refugees came from all ways of life: church communities, students, schools, elderly people, business and trade unionists. Volunteers organized themselves spontaneously, and fascinatingly effective, collecting and providing food, blankets, children's toys, all the things in need, and gave emotional support. Surveys show that 46 % of the German population in one way or the other doing something for the refugees, more than in any other time in German history.

These broad activities continue into the year 2017. Only eighteen per cent of the population said that they would not like to contribute anything (Ahrend 2017). Elderly women remembered the harsh times after their own expulsion from their homes in 1945/46, and wanted to help the refugees, out of their own experience. Against the ever-present memory of the Nazi past, this was a kind of positive redemption (The Guardian 2015). From the beginning, the reactions were polarized: there was a great feeling of solidarity and a wish to help with the majority of the population, and on the other hand deep-seated fear and hatred with a minority, particularly in the Eastern parts of the country, the former GDR. The international echo was polarized too. Obama and Trump, to mention only the most prominent, praised and condemned Merkel's hospitality.

Table 1: People who have supported or would support refugees, August 2016

	Already done	Could imagine
Donation in kind	40	26
Donated money	21	25
Distributed food or cloths	19	47
Support refugee centre nearby	12	44
Helped with language	9	37
Accompanied refugees to administration	6	40
Caring for children	4	34
Have refugees living in their home	1	14

Source: Ahrend 2017, p. 41.

Germans were not alone in their positive reaction. In many European countries, activists began working to aid refugees. Thousands of volunteers were active in Vienna as well as in Munich, well organized in both cities, and many other places. The tragedy of the Syrian refugees spoke to the hearts. <it was not Merkel but the Austrian Chancellor who took the initiative to open the borders, and asked Merkel to back up. However, chancellor Werner Faymann was never able to acquire the same aura as the German chancellor – even when Austria, like Sweden, took in more refugees per capita. Faymann was soon criticized by the right-wing opposition, and then by his conservative coalition partner. He resigned in Mai 2016. The Austrian grand coalition made headlines about internal quarrels and divisions day by day. Austria's popular foreign minister Kurz was instrumental in closing of the "Balkan route", together with other South East European governments, arranging coordinated border controls, and particularly controls at the border from Greece to Macedonia. Later he radicalized his position and came out with the idea to deport all asylum seekers to an island or to Africa, modelled after the Australian policy. Thus he outflanked the traditional xenophobes.

In Germany, however, the opposition parties were fond of Merkel's stance, and stood behind her, as well as her Social Democratic coalition partner. Merkel was an exceptional leader of a conservative party. Leftists suddenly told each other that they never ever had expected to like Merkel, but now they identified so much with her and were pondering if they should vote for her. She became the hero of welcome culture, all the other politicians dwarfed besides her, even when Green politicians were more enthusiastic about the welcome for refugees. It did not matter that vice chancellor Gabriel had said "*Wir schaffen das*" some days before Merkel (Heißler 2016). She was the chancellor. She had the stature and she became Time magazine's "person of the year".

Merkel was at the height of her power and popularity. She had been a successful chancellor since 2005, first in a grand coalition, at the cost of her Social Democratic coalition partner, then in a coalition with the liberals, until that party collapsed and did not make it into parliament again, then again in a grand coalition with a Social Democrats, again at their cost at the polls. She was the longest serving leader in the European Union. In contrast to Sarkozy, Blair, Cameron, not to mention Berlusconi, she had no scandals and was more and more respected as an anchor of European stability. In her public appearances she was not particularly entertaining but considered reliable – something often missing in politics world-wide. In her new year's addresses for 2015 and 2016 she had warned of "hatred in the hearts", positioning herself clearly against the xenophobic "PEGIDA" demonstrations in Dresden.

Welcome culture and the media

The German media were largely united in their positive reaction (Haller 2017). Refugees were the issue of the year. After the first wave of enthusiasm, many media would report on individual refugee's fates, thus longing for understanding, sympathy and compassion. It was particularly important that "Bild", the dominant tabloid, was actively supporting Merkel and the refugees, publishing emphatic stories about individual cases.

The German media landscape had changed after the turn of the century. Traditionally, left- and right-leaning media opposed each other. Around the student unrests in the late 1960s and the détente policies in the early 1970s, the conflicts had been most expressive. Leftist students blockaded the Bild-Zeitung and intellectuals decided to boycott the Springer media group. Spiegel, Stern, Zeit, FR and Süddeutsche Zeitung as well as the northern TV stations were considered liberal, FAZ, ZDF, the Springer group and Bavarian TV conservative. You would know what to expect as a reader.

That changed after the end of the Cold War and with the red-green coalition in 1998-2005. Even when "red-green" introduced some neo-liberal reforms, they did not satisfy the *Zeitgeist*. At the end of Schröder's chancellorship, the media were critically in unison, and urged people to vote the government out. Interestingly, they succeeded only partly, as many people became afraid of the proposed cuts in the welfare system, particularly the idea of a profound change in health insurance contributions. The next great campaign where "Spiegel and "Bild" argued hand in hand was about Sarrazin's book denouncing Turks and Muslims in 2010. Both papers brought pre-prints over weeks, thus making the book a sensation and a best seller. Chancellor Merkel as well as most other politicians publicly opposed Sarrazin's degrading remarks as well as his eugenic arguments about groups of people – arguments that are considered taboo in post-Nazi Germany. The debate was about the "political class", "political correctness", populism, Turks, Muslims and integration.

In 2015, however, the media, TV, radio and most newspapers, were united with the government, with both major parties and with the opposition. Thus Merkel's policies were unopposed, except for the Bavarian CSU. Soon Hungarian Prime Minister Orbán and Polish, Slovak and Czech politicians came out against any reception of refugees, producing nasty incidents and a harsh and inhumane treatment. In contrast, German generosity appeared even brighter in a largely inhospitable European and international environment, and people could identify with their chancellor.

The media presented Merkel as the actor, and thus she got a world-wide reputation. Critics accused her of having attracted hundreds of thousands to Europe. Fans and critics overstated her role. In early September 2015, when she took the decision, most refugees were already in Central Europe. Some were still on the Balkan route, and a majority already in Germany (Brücker et al. 2016, with a figure for the numbers in 2015). The humanitarian crisis in Hungary would have gotten worse if the borders had been shut. Merkel could only choose between a friendly and an unfriendly reception of the refugees.

Merkel's positive image unfolded against the brutalities of Hungarian Prime Minister Orbán's regime, and in direct confrontation with his policies. As she herself admitted later, much could have been done better in the months and years before – not just by German but by the international community.

Merkel was also only partly instrumental to end the great wave of refugees arriving in central Europe, As can be seen at the graph, the numbers of people arriving in Europe had already decreased before the treaty with Turkey and the closing of the Balkan route by the South East European governments.

The media, in their tendency to personalize and simplify, idolized Merkel and demonized Orbán. Both of them enjoyed it, and profited politically. Orbán played the role of the nasty guy, and thus became a xenophobic hero, outflanking the extreme right opposition in Hungary that had endangered his majority. He built a wall like the Greek, the Spanish and Bulgarian governments – in contrast to them without EU funding. Whereas the media used to characterize Greece as a victim and as helpless, they portrayed the Hungarian government as a bully. In the end, however, inefficiency and bureaucratic chaos in Greece produced a deterring environment for refugees, despite hundreds of millions of EU funding (Howden/ Fotiadis 2017).

Loss of control

Even if the great majority of the population agreed with the government's hospitality towards refugees, soon there was uneasiness. Refugees arrived in high numbers, the television pictures showed people marching over the borders, and there was a feeling of loss of control. Merkel herself added to this feeling when she said that it was impossible to close the borders. More and more people felt that the government did not have a plan.

“Wir schaffen das” implied that funding the refugees was not a problem. Indeed, the costs soon amounted to the size of the defence budget. This generous attitude contrasted sharply with the ongoing discussions about social welfare spending and the message to the working population that their future pensions would be less generous than those of the past generation, and that they should not rely on the traditional state pension system which over the decades had been a founding element of the “solidarity between generations” and of Germany's pride in its welfare state.

Moreover, it became evident that the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF) was unfit to cope with the mounting numbers of refugees. It could not even register them. States, local government and many volunteers worked hard and successful to house and feed the refugees but then they had to wait for a decision about the asylum applications for many months or even years. Since BAMF was not functioning properly, states and local communities had to house many applicants who would not have a chance to get asylum but would stay for a long time in the country.

Shock and CDU-CSU conflict

The New Year's Eve assaults in Cologne in 2015/16, mostly by North African men against German women, then changed the public climate. Many volunteers were women, providing help for mostly young men. Images of the refugees had been connected to human rights violations, hunger, distress, and all sorts of suffering. Images from the Syrian war had shown people suffering, resisting, helping their families and particularly children, and being killed. Now there was radically different image: Arab men going after German women, assaulting and touching them, encircling them in groups, raping them, and stealing their money or cell-phones. The news was shocking and explicit. Even really engaged volunteers now had second thoughts and felt some uneasiness. And as the police had been silent about the assaults in the first days, they were criticized of covering up.

Right wing protesters, particularly at the "PEGIDA" demonstrations in Dresden, shouted "Lügenpresse" (lying press) and a discussion unfolded about "political correctness" and the media not reporting negative aspects of the situation. Journalists who were accused of biased reporting began to hesitate to write sympathetic stories about refugees. Talk shows hosts wanted to make their shows attractive and invited controversial discussants, representing "the other side". Thus populist politicians were over-represented in popular talk shows where they complained about the media reporting too friendly about refugees and the government. Before they could find German populists, talk show hosts invited controversial Swiss populists. That happened so often that the Swiss parliament became nervous about Switzerland's reputation in Germany (Altwegg 2016).

From the beginning, the Bavarian CSU had not been part of the welcome consensus. On the one hand, Bavarian authorities worked quite efficiently to house and feed the incoming refugee, and to distribute them towards the rest of Germany, relying on the traditional "Königstein key" to allocate a certain percentage to each state, according to economic capacity and population size. Some embarrassing inefficiencies in the first days were easily overcome. On the other hand, the leadership of the party was sceptical about letting so many people in. Chancellor Merkel had not been able to contact the Bavarian Prime Minister Seehofer when she decided to let the refugees in. Soon he began to criticize the opening of the border, and offended Merkel by inviting the Hungarian Prime Minister Orbán who was harassing refugees. In November 2015, Seehofer attacked Merkel in public. For fifteen minutes, he lectured her on the stage at the CSU party conference in Munich, after she had given her usual speech at the "sister party's" conference. The media commented that she had stood there like a school girl. She left the scene but did not give in. The conflict was in the open.

After the Cologne assaults, Seehofer intensified his critique. In January 2016, he presented an expertise by the retired constitutional judge di Fabio, arguing the Merkel's federal government had violated their constitutional duties, to protect the country from uncontrolled immigration flows. Again and again, CSU politicians criticized Merkel's policies as being unlawful, unconstitutional, irresponsible and disastrous. Some members of Merkel's CDU were

sympathetic towards CSU positions. In the past they had themselves fared xenophobic campaigns. Wolfgang Schäuble, Merkel's finance minister, in November 2015 spoke of the refugee movements as an "avalanche", and about an "imprudent shier" who could trigger such avalanche.

This put the CDU candidates for the upcoming state elections in Baden-Württemberg, Rhineland-Palatinate and Saxony-Anhalt at 13 March 2016 in delicate positions. On the one hand, they relied on Angela Merkel's popularity, and invited her to support them in rallies. On the other hand, they felt the unrest in their regional parties and feared the competition from the "Alternative für Deutschland" (AfD), an oppositionist party which had been campaigning against the Euro and the bail out for Greece, and now found a new issue to attract irritated voters.

To handle the situation, the CDU candidates for Rhineland-Palatinate and Baden-Württemberg presented a "Plan A2" as an alternative to the chancellor's openness (Klößner 2016). Borders were to be closed, and refugees held in camps along the borders, to soften the burden for the receiving local communities. The candidates tried to distance themselves from Merkel's policies while at the same time assuring her of their loyalty and inviting her for campaign appearances. Such double bind backfired in both states. In Baden-Württemberg, Green Prime Minister Kretschmann won the elections sensationally, making the Greens for the first and only time the largest party in a state. He identified with Merkel's policy and told the public that he "prayed for Merkel" every night. In Rhineland-Palatinate, SPD Prime Minister Dreyer won, overtaking CDU candidate Klößner who had been the favourite in the months before. Both results were a humiliation for the CDU - and a backing for Merkel's policy. Thus the German party system got into a strange disorder. Instead of the traditional left-right competition, Merkel presided over a party system where the fiercest opposition came from her "sister party" - and the populist AfD. They had won seats in all three diets. Merkel's party was weakened but it was her internal opponents that had been punished by the voters.

In the rest of year 2016, the Bavarian CSU again and again proclaimed an "Obergrenze", a limit of 200,000 refugees per year to assure the population that the state would keep control. Compared to other countries, this is a high number. Britain had promised to accept 20,000 Syrian refugees over five years, or 4,000 a year. However, Merkel would not give in and stuck to the constitutional right for asylum. The conflict between the "sister parties", both with ministers in the federal government, continued over the whole year 2016. It held the issue in the news, and thus helped the AfD as the only alternative that voters could choose outside Bavaria, if they backed the positions of the CSU. 2016 was the success year for the AfD. They became also became popular, as the CSU critique against Merkel was not credible over a long time if the party continued to sit in Merkel's government.

For the other parties in parliament, SPD, Greens and Left, this situation was also delicate. Since Merkel was the star of the "friendly" side, and Seehofer for the "unfriendly", there was not much room for the rest of the political spectrum. In the "sisters" conflict, the other parties were bystanders.

Merkel's welcome, the federal bureaucracy and the media

While the conflict between the "Christian" parties occupied and entertained the public over more than a year, from October 2015 to January 2017, the internal conflicts in the Federal Government were less visible. As early as 2013, before the large refugee flows, the states had urged the federal government to fix the problems at the BAMF. Asylum seekers had to wait longer and longer, and BAMF needed more personnel. In the coalition agreement of 2013, the parties agreed that asylum decisions should not take more than three months. Yet the ministry of the interior did not provide BAMF with more personnel, and with the mounting numbers of asylum applications, the backlogs became longer and longer (table 2). Thus BAMF went into the asylum crisis unprepared, with long waiting lists, and organized inefficiently (Thränhardt/ Weiss 2016).

BAMF's efficiency problems had the further effect to attract people from the Balkans who did not have any chance to be recognized as refugees but could stay in Germany and get food, shelter and some pocket money if the asylum process took so long. In the years before, some people had used these possibilities over the winter. In 2014, however, rumours started in Kosovo about German generosity and offers of a house for every asylum seeker. People arrived in the tens of thousands, and were stuck in the faltering asylum process. Later, similar rumours brought hundreds of thousands of people from Albania and Serbia to Germany. Thus the backlogs had the effect of bringing more and more people into the asylum system - people who expected a better life in Germany but would in the end not be accepted as refugees. Comparisons with countries like Switzerland and the Netherlands demonstrate that the backlogs had the effect of bringing migrants from the Balkans into the German asylum system (Thränhardt 2016, 2016a). Facilitators profited from the situation. After denying the size of the refugee flows for eight months, the minister of the interior in August suddenly published a prognosis of 800,000 refugees for the year 2015. This number was widely spread internationally and made Germany the destination for even more refugees. Moreover, an internal BAMF mail ending any enforced return of Syrians to other countries under the EU "Dublin scheme" was made public, thus assuring Syrians that they would be safe in Germany, and motivating others to pose as Syrians.

Table 2: Backlog with asylum decisions

Year	applications	Decisions	Applications pending
2010	48.589	48.187	23.289
2011	53.347	43.362	33.773
2012	77.651	61.826	49.811
2013	127.023	80.978	95.743
2014	202.834	128.911	169.166
2015	476.649* + ca. 500.000 not registered	282.762	364.664
2016	722.370 new 280.000	695.733	433.719
1-5/2017	89.198	372.637	165.099

Source: BAMF, Asylgeschäftsstatistik

From early 2015 on, BAMF was not even able to register the applicants, or to count them. States were overwhelmed with asylum seekers who were left in a legal void but had to be cared for. After some months of protest, the chancellor reacted to the critique. In May 2015, the government decided to provide BAMF with more personnel. In September, BAMF president Schmidt resigned. He had repeatedly demanded more personnel but without success. He became a pawn sacrifice, whereas the minister of the interior, responsible for the problems, stayed on. However, the chancellor assigned her special minister at the chancellery with the task to coordinate the asylum policies from there on (Alexander 2017). Moreover, the new head for the BAMF did not come from the ministry of the interior. Instead, the president of the Federal Labour Agency took over BAMF, in addition to his task. He had a reputation as an efficient organizer.

To make up for the deficits and to demonstrate activity, the federal government produced a multitude of laws and regulations in 2015/16. It was a mix of easing of restrictions, new restrictions, less and more benefits and many more changes. Some of the changes were revisions of revisions some months before. The legal system became more complex, and states and local governments, overburdened with the incoming refugees, had to adjust to all the changes. The ministry of the interior deliberately did not transfer the EU Reception Conditions Directive of 2013 into national law. The deadline for Member States to transpose the Directive was 20 July 2015. After that date, the directive became binding law. Thus the legal situation for states and local communities became even more difficult.

All in all, the surprising and unannounced arrival of 900,000 refugees in 2015 alone was handled well by states and communities, backed by many volunteers. Problems were scandalized in the media: right wing bullying in Saxony, Berlin's inability to organize proper housing and care in time, overcrowded accommodation centres in Bavaria, intimidating security services in Westphalia, sexual assaults in Cologne and in Hamburg. The media scandalized state authorities, which had to cope with the crisis, and not the federal government, which was to blame for the chaos since BAMF could not fulfil its functions, due to the shortage of personnel and a deficient organization. A particular irony happened to the minister of the interior in Saxony. He had been one of the first to call for more BAMF personnel. But he was also the first to be scandalized because of problems at one of his asylum centres. The federal minister, on the other hand, was able to get through the crisis and again set the tone in the debates. It seems the story behind was too difficult for the media to present, and to identify responsibilities. It was easier to report about "bad" and "good" guys.

2017: Return to Normality?

After the “reconciliation meeting” between CDU and CSU on 5 February 2017, the open strife between the “sister parties” ended. The CSU did no longer accuse the federal government of acting illegally and unconstitutionally, and began to prepare her followers to vote for Merkel in the upcoming elections in September 2017. Moreover, the SPD on 29 January presented a new leader, and went back to traditional Social Democratic slogans about social justice. With new energy and optimism at the side of the Social Democrats, the normal party competition set in again, with the traditional ideological lines separating both sides. The competition between the large parties makes the smaller parties less interesting. There is much less desire for an anti-system party if the system itself is competitive and offers alternatives. The end of Merkel’s German version of TINA (there is no alternative) may also mark the end of Merkel as a hero, immigration as the only issue in politics, and a way back to competitive politics. Germany seems to have a good chance to make its two-party system work again, thus energizing normal democratic competition.

The chancellor and the minister of the interior spoke again and again about the necessity of more repatriation, and particularly enforced repatriation. The minister conspicuously organized repatriation flights to Afghanistan, and Bavarian authorities forced well-integrated Afghans from their workplace onto the planes. The minister then criticized “red-green” states for not cooperating with his new approach. In that way, he reintroduced the traditional cleavage between the parties, with the CDU/CSU pursuing a “hard” line. He also created the new category of a “schlechte Bleibeperspektive” (bad perspective to stay) for certain origin groups, among them Afghans who at the time had a recognition rate of 56 %. The media were full of reports about repatriation, and forgot to mention the ongoing problems with the backlogs at BAMF, still more than 400.000 at the beginning of the year.

Conclusion: Politics and the media

As usual, the media personalized. They created a moral hero, and a Hungarian villain. Through the crisis years, most media reported friendly, and in the first months emphatically. They did not follow the complex administrative processes. The backlogs in the asylum process and the responsibility of the minister of the interior and the government as a whole were not put on the table. Scandals then fell on state and local governments, even if they originated in the chaos at the federal level. The ministry of the interior was mostly able to set the agenda.

In talk shows, extreme positions were made prominent for the sake of political entertainment, even if speakers had to be imported from Switzerland. Immigrants were presented as masses and as objects (Goebel 2017). For over a year, the CDU-CSU sister party strife set the tone. The enormous volunteer activities were only reported in autumn 2015, and then put to the sidelines in the media. However, they are still there. And the administrative backlogs continue.

If we believe new surveys, eighty per cent of the population still want Germany to assist refugees in need. At the same time, they are aware of the problems that can arise. Realistically, they expect that it will take a long time to integrate the refugees, and they fear xenophobic reactions (Ahrend 2017; Bertelsmann-Stiftung 2017; Gerhards /Hans 2017). People seem to be more realistic and less agitated than the media discourse. Most of them still want to show a “friendly face”. And Germany took two thirds of all positive asylum decisions in the EU in 2016.

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