



## Germany and the refugee challenge

In early September 2016, a workshop and study tour was organised by the Robert Bosch Foundation on the “*Germany and the Refugee Story*”. AEIDL’s president, Márta Márczis, took part and now reports.



*A restaurant recently opened by Syrian refugees in Oberhausen. (Photo: BBC News)*

This first “[Robert Bosch Academy On Tour](#)” organised numerous round-table meetings and conversations with leading politicians, government officials, representatives of refugees, business leaders, members of relevant civil society organizations, NGOs and volunteers working on this issue in Germany.

The aim was to develop among participants a deeper understanding of how Germany was dealing with the challenges of integration, both in the short and the long term. It was an opportunity to look at the methods and practices of the German “*Willkommenskultur*” (welcome culture), which provides shelter, food and first aid for refugees, and also to discuss issues related to the integration of refugees in the German social security system, labour market, school and healthcare systems, etc.

Participants also analysed the rise of extremism in Germany, the threat posed by terrorism and how it is perceived by the Germans, and about Germany’s relationship with its EU partners in the context of the crisis.

## **Germany and the refugee crisis**

When Germany began accepting large numbers of refugees last year the response from the German public was exemplary, with refugees being welcomed at train stations, taken into homes and cared for. Public opinion overall was firmly in favour of supporting refugees.

At the time, Angela Merkel, the German Chancellor, was praised for her "*Wir schaffen das*" (we can do it!) stance, but since then there has been mounting opposition, especially from right-wing elements, and Chancellor Merkel has become increasingly isolated and criticised, including from within her own party, the Christian Democratic Union (CDU). There is an emerging counter narrative of "Keep Germany German". Recent unfavourable election results in both Merkel's home state of Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, and in Berlin, have also served to undermine her position and authority, illustrating the growing opposition to Germany's "open approach" to refugees. In recent days, Mrs Merkel herself has expressed some regret over Germany's initial response to the refugee crisis.

A question that remains unanswered is, what proportion of these refugees are likely to remain in Germany and will require ongoing support? However, a process of integration has begun, but one of the biggest challenges is that the majority of these people can't speak German, which makes schooling, training, employment and general communication difficult, even though many can speak English. School age children are likely to adapt more easily, but older people who lack both the language and recognised qualifications will find it difficult to obtain employment due to Germany's long-established, high and inflexible standards for training and employment.

## **Refugees in numbers**

The number of asylum seekers in Germany has increased significantly in the last few years. Since the summer of 2015, the influx of refugees has increased sharply as Germany – in order to avoid a humanitarian disaster - accepted increasing numbers from Hungary and Austria. According to the latest figures (April 2016), 441,899 initial applications were lodged in 2015. In total, including subsequent applications, 446,649 requests for asylum were submitted. However, the total number of asylum seekers in 2015 was significantly higher than this. Several hundred thousand people arrived in Germany but could not formally apply for asylum. According to the German federal government, almost 1.1 million asylum seekers were registered in the so-called EASY system.

The overwhelming majority came from war-torn countries, such as Syria, Iraq, Eritrea, Afghanistan, and from the Western-Balkans. Approximately half of all those assessed in 2015 were deemed to be in need of protection. The protection rate overall, which includes all forms of protection (i.e. eligibility for asylum, refugees received under the Geneva Convention, and subsidiary protection) stood at 50%. The protection rate for applicants from the Western Balkans stood at close to 0%, since the German government declared these countries as being safe. Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia have also been designated as safe countries, and applicants for refugee status from these countries have been rejected. Migrants from these countries are being advised to return home or they face deportation from Germany's "special reception centres." This measure entered into force in mid-March 2016.

The high level of protection for the first group of refugees, along with the large number of applications, led to several hundred thousand people being granted the right to longer-term or

even permanent residence in Germany, which also gives them the right to bring their spouses and children to the country.

### The top ten countries of origin and overall protection rates in 2015

Country of origin	Initial asylum applications	Registration with the EASY system	Overall protection rate
Syria	158,657	428,468	96%
Albania	53,805	69,426	0.2%
Kosovo	33,427	33,049	0.4%
Afghanistan	31,382	154,046	46.5%
Iraq	29,784	121,662	86.1%
Serbia	16,700	20,365	0.2%
Eritrea	10,867	25,505	92.4%
Macedonia	9,083	14,004	0.6%
Pakistan	8,199	28,392	9.2%
Iran	5,394	29,826	59.6%
<i>Total</i>	<i>441,899</i>	<i>1,091,894</i>	<i>49.8%</i>

Source: German Federal Office for Migration and Refugees, 2016.

### Who are they?

There is no reliable data on the background of refugees, including their social and educational profile, because the EASY registration system does not require such information. However, according to a survey of 2,100 refugees carried out in 2015, the following picture emerges: 73.8% of interviewed refugees were male and 26.2% female; 68% were younger than 33 years old and around half were married; as regards educational attainment, 25% had attended higher primary school, 26.7% had attended secondary school, 24.7% had attended high school, and, near one quarter ( 23.2% ) had a higher diploma (university or college.) Only 7% had no formal education. More than two-thirds of the interviewed refugees had work experience in industry, health and social care, trade, etc. Only a small number of those interviewed spoke German (2%) but close to 30% spoke English. This varies considerably by country. For example, 40% of Syrians but only 15% of Afghans spoke English. Most of the German speaking refugees were from Iran, but the proportion is still small, only around 3%.<sup>1</sup>

Some refugees destroyed or left behind identity documents and educational certificates when they left their homelands. The most problematic group are those above school age, who will need to go through a process of reaching a set standard in German competence of up to two years prior to entering training, which means it could be five years or more in total before they can seek employment.

The largest group is comprised of 18 to 30-year-old males, which without timely training and employment, could be susceptible to falling into anti-social behaviour, crime or even terrorism. There are concerns about cultural differences, especially in relation to the treatment of women. This came to the fore in Cologne over the New Year period, when there were mass sexual assaults and robberies in the vicinity of the famous Cathedral. Many Germans believe that their country's approach is allowing terrorists to enter the country under the guise of being refugees.

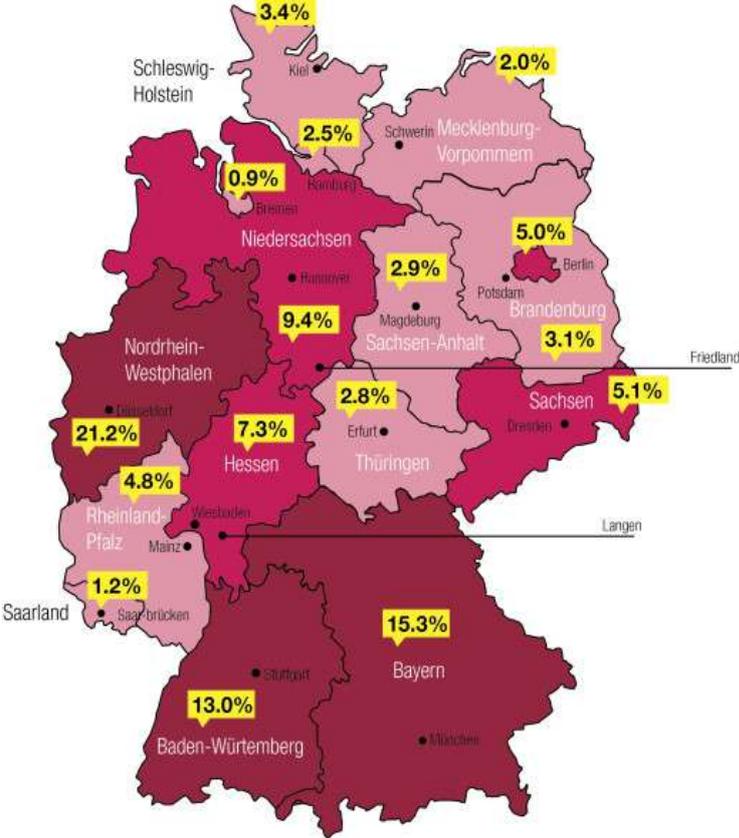
<sup>1</sup> Source: Sozialstruktur, Qualifications-niveau und Berufstätigkeit by Anna-Katharina Rich. In: BAMF Kurzanalyse, Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge.

A further challenge will come when the families of those permitted to stay are reunited, which could be positive in terms of support and social cohesion, but also problematic in terms of adding to the numbers of people to be accommodated.

**Distribution of refugees among German states**

Within Germany, refugees have been allocated across the 16 federal states. The approach being taken in German involves local governments taking most of the responsibility for housing, schooling and social services in the integration process. Most of the refugees are being settled in middle-size towns, based on the view that small communities have insufficient capacity and urban metropolises are too big to provide the necessary conditions for community integration.

To manage the 'distribution' process, Germany uses the *"Königsteiner Schlüssel"*, a formula for determining the distribution of asylum seekers across its 16 states, based on population (1/3) and on the tax income of each state (2/3). States then distribute refugees among the cities and towns within their jurisdiction and distribute funding accordingly. The federal, state and local governments share the costs of providing housing and services to the newly arrived asylum seekers. The recent massive influx has put considerable pressure on the system. Municipalities are sometimes only notified 48 hours in advance that they have to find or create accommodation hundreds of refugees.



% of total refugees to be settled in each state  
 ■ more than 10%    ■ 5 to 10%    ■ less than 5%

## Demographic changes in Germany

Germany has one of the oldest demographic profiles in the world and will be facing severe shortages of skilled workers in the future. If the current trend continues, between 2016 and 2030, the number of people in education age (5-29) will decrease by 4.1 million; the number of people of working age (18-64) will decrease by 6.0 million; the average age of the workforce will increase by six years; and the number of people of pensionable age (65+) will increase by 5.0 million.

Refugees and migrants could help to fill this gap, but as outlined above, gaining educational and employment qualifications in the interim will be a lengthy process, which will be costly and challenging for both the system and refugees.



(Photo: BBC News)

## Refugees in the local context

There is an optimistic, "can-do" attitude among many of the local mayors who are handling the refugee settlement with aplomb and effectiveness. It is also impressive how local governments, civil society organisations and religious institutions are working together to facilitate a successful integration.

A variety of local initiatives supported by volunteers and NGO's aim to assist refugees to fill in their days, learning German and adjusting to German society. Initiative such as the Caritas church group in Stuttgart, which is reaching out to help newcomers get a foothold in a new society, and the neighbourhood sports officials running a soccer camp for Syrian refugee kids, show how people come to the fore in a time of need.

The Lapp Gruppe, a family-owned high-tech firm in Stuttgart, manages a training centre where young refugees from Syria, Eritrea, Iran and Cameroon are learning skills in the expanding world of information technology. Lapp Gruppe's president regrets however, that only 20 other firms in the Stuttgart area, one of Germany's most prosperous regions, were following suit.

Overall, however, Germany is to be commended for its willingness to deal with this difficult and evolving situation.

## **Oberhausen: how one city is coping with the immigrant crisis**

More than 2,500 refugees, many fleeing conflicts in Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan, have recently been settled in Oberhausen (pop. 212,000), in North Rhine-Westphalia. Since November 2015, a *BBC News* team has visited the city several times to report on the evolving relationship between the refugees and their host community.



(Photo: BBC News)

November 2016: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-37990864>

April 2016: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-36148418>

November 2015: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-34606067>

### **Integration is a long-term process**

It is likely that a significant number of refugees will stay in Germany for a long period or permanently. These refugees constitute an opportunity for the ageing German society. They are young and, thus, could contribute to the stabilisation of German social security schemes and to reducing the shortage in skilled labour.

Integrating such a large number of refugees in such a short period, requires considerable effort. ***It is estimated that the basic integration process takes five years.*** The age profile of the refugees, many of whom have not attended school for a long period, also presents a major challenge for the German education and training system. Housing shortages have also been experienced, resulting in thousands of recognised refugees being forced to live in emergency

accommodation or community centres for long periods, which significantly hinders their integration.

An important factor of successful integration is communication and dialogue between refugees and the host community. This makes it possible for the host community to better appreciate the “human face” of refugees, through their own stories. Inversely, it also helps the refugees to better understand the culture of the host community. It should also be noted that most individuals show some variation in both their ideal and chosen acculturation strategies across different aspects of their lives. In the case of immigrants, it is often easier and more desirable to adopt their host society's attitudes towards politics and government than it is to adopt new attitudes about religion, principles and values.

*Márta Márczis (24/11/2016)*

## Sprint

### Building bridges between immigrants and the host society

**The Sprint cooperative in Wuppertal was the first organisation in Germany to train and provide professional language and integration agents to facilitate communication between migrants, public authorities and social service providers. The model has been transferred to about 20 cities and regions across the country.**



*(Photos: SprInt gemeinnützige eG)*

“SprInt gemeinnützige eG” (the Sprint non-profit cooperative) was founded in Wuppertal, North Rhineland, in December 2015. It aims to improve the care structure for migrants in the education, health and social services sectors through the use of professional language and integration agents. It also provides vocational qualifications, recognised by the German authorities.

"Since March 2016, we have already hired 15 language and integration facilitators at Wuppertal through contracts with the Department of Immigration and Integration, the Youth Office of the City of Wuppertal and Wuppertal Jobcenter," explains Achim Pohlmann, the cooperative's Managing Director.

“The number of refugees, asylum seekers and migrant workers is steadily increasing and poses ever greater challenges for municipalities and thus for society as a whole. Germany is faced with an urgent challenge: offering equal access to medical services, work and education, as well as social care, regardless of culture or what language people speak. Linguistic barriers and cultural differences often prevent an adequate, fast and goal-oriented solution. However, most specialists in education, social welfare and healthcare are not equipped to be able to communicate with

immigrants, even though adequate communication in their native language is an essential prerequisite to working with this group," Mr Pohlmann continued.

"The lack of orientation and communication possibilities of people with an immigration background in the host society and inadequate language skills cause inefficiency and additional transaction costs in dealing with the needs of each individual, from administrative requirements to healthcare, education, work, etc.", adds Detlev Becker, co-chairman of the cooperative. "The aim is to further develop the language and integration approach and to put it into practice in a practical way in order to support the necessary participation of people in the immigration society."

Professional language and integration managers ("SprInters") are bridge builders in the health, education and social services sectors. Their task is to improve communication between specialists and clients or patients with a migration background. The users of language and integration agents are diverse and include: public authorities, clinics, psychiatric institutions, child and youth welfare services, counselling centres, employment centres and schools. The services of the mediators can be provided either on an ad hoc basis or on a permanent basis.

For Jan Olshanskiy, a language and integration facilitator, and a member of the cooperative, it is a profession with many responsibilities: "As an intermediary, we have to be more than a reliable interpreter. Often we have to explain relevant cultural contexts, and overcome prejudices and mistrust, in order to facilitate a smooth communication between the processing department and the refugee. Language and integration agents provide a high-quality tailored service to enhance intercultural understanding in hospitals, schools and offices. SprInters are specially trained in these areas. We promote understanding by interpreting language and culture. By making linguistic and cultural communication possible, we help to save costs and prevent tragic mistakes."

To date, about 2,000 migrants have benefited from Sprint in Wuppertal since March 2016.

The Sprint language and integration facilitator model has also been transferred to other cities and regions in Germany. It has become a national [network](#) of 30 partner organisations operating in 11 federal states. The SprInt cooperative in Wuppertal coordinates and advises the network.

<http://www.sprachundintegrationsmittler.org/index.php/336-sprint-diakonie-wuppertal-2016-03-06>

(30/11/2016)