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■ Five years on since “wir schaffen das”: taking stock of the German migration policy

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Coined by Chancellor Angela Merkel, the phrase “Wir schaffen das!” (“We will manage!”) has become the most recognizable symbol of the migration crisis. Some hold it to be an expression of “boldness and trust” that encouraged “pragmatic action” (Vorländer 2020). Others believe it was more of a manifestation of the naïveté of the German government unaware of the burden it was bringing to bear on itself and the German public. Other very different views have also been circulated suggesting the government had adopted a calculated stance looking to financially secure its aging society. The decision to open Germany’s borders in September 2015 sparked a debate in the European institutions on both Germany’s response that was not agreed with its partners and the cultural consequences of opening the borders to migrants from outside Europe.

In recent weeks, five years on since the “outbreak” of the migration crisis, scores of commentaries and studies have appeared that attempt to take stock of Germany’s migration and asylum policy. The impression one gets is that German commentators has approached the matter in an extremely matter-of-factly and thorough manner. Statistics and expert opinions seem to prevail over baseless emotional assertions. This study is an attempt to review them.

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How many people arrived in Germany?

Between 2015 and mid-2020, over 1.7 million people applied for asylum in Germany. They accounted for ca. 40% of all applications submitted in the European Union. According to the Federal Statistical Office, as of the end of 2019, a total of 1.8 million people seeking international protection (*Schutzsuchenden*) were staying in Germany with applications at various stages of processing. One third of them were Syrian citizens. A staggering 9.2% of the above were children born in Germany.

The *Schutzsuchenden* currently account for 2.2% of the German population. The majority of them already enjoy an official residency status. Some 14% are still waiting for their applications to be processed, while nearly 12% live in Germany despite not having been granted an appropriate protection status. For comparison, prior to the migration crisis, in 2014, the *Schutzsuchenden* accounted for a mere 0.9% of German society ([Statistisches Bundesamt 2020](#)).

It is worth noting that every year since 1999, the Federal Office for Migration and Asylum (*Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge, BAMF*) has recorded a positive net migration. This figure includes a wide range of migrant categories other than asylum seekers. After a record rise in net migration to +1.2 million, recent years saw the trend level off at approx. +400,000 to +500,000.

Refugees on the German labor market

According to the Federal Employment Agency, the share of post-2015 arrivals in Germany who had sought international protection and are now in gainful employment, is growing steadily. Nevertheless, statistically speaking, every third person from this category remains jobless. Notably, only those who have been granted international protection enjoy unlimited access to the labor market. Slightly different legal rules apply to all other *Schutzsuchenden*.

One of the few studies on refugee expectations regarding the German labor market has recently been published by the German Institute for Economic Research (*Deutsches Institut für Wirtschaftsforschung, DIW*). A survey of ca. 8,000 migrants who came to Germany in 2015-2016 shows that an astounding 67% of the refugee respondents expressed - in 2016 - the hope that they would secure a job in Germany within two years. Not all of these expectations have been met. A total of 43% of the surveyed secured a job in the first few years following their arrival in Germany. In 2015, the share of employed refugees was as low as 14% ([DIW 2020](#)).

The Institute for Labor Market and Vocational Activity Research (*Institut für Arbeitsmarkt- und Berufsforschung, IAB*), in its turn, highlighted that members of this group of migrants tend to find employment sooner than those who have come from the Balkans in the 1990s wave. The reasons for this may be more that the German economy is more stable and effective integration programs have become available ([IAB 2020](#)).

The most recent publications on unemployment among people of migrant backgrounds have focused on the adverse impact of Covid-19 on their employment in Germany. While the average unemployment among native Germans has risen from the pre-pandemic level of 4.7% to 5.5% during Covid, non-European asylum seekers have seen unemployment rise from 33.1% to 37.4%. These statistics show that employed women refugees are in minority in Germany, although for many of them unemployment is a matter of choice rather than of the lack of job opportunities.

Education and language skills

Regarding attempts to enroll in education in Germany, both the IAB and DIW note that, compared to the average in their countries of origin, refugees are relatively well educated. They nevertheless fall short of meeting some European standards pertaining to education. To bridge the gap and make themselves more marketable in Germany, refugees are eager to undertake further studies (or choose to enroll their children in educational programs) in the host country.

A mid-2018 survey has shown that around 23% of the refugees who arrived in Germany in 2015-2016 have studied in German general and vocational schools as well as universities. According to *Mediendienst Integration*, since 2015, roughly 10,000 refugees have been admitted to German universities. According to a DAAD report, Syrians were the sixth largest group of foreign students in 2018.

In the decade leading up to the “outbreak” of the migration crisis, an average of 114,000 people per year attended integration courses, which constitute the foundation of the German integration system. In 2016, this number soared to ca. 340,000, putting a huge strain on institutions responsible for organizing these courses and leading to multiple changes in the procedure of referring newcomers to them. The Federal Authority for Migration and Refugees has recorded a drop in the number of German language test takers at the end of their integration course (BAMF 2020). Nevertheless, considering that a large proportion of the refugees arrived with no knowledge of German, their command of the language is generally improving. While only 22% of refugees declared knowing the language of their host country in 2016, that proportion grew to 44% by 2018 (BAMF 2020a). Among children and adolescents, this percentage is as high as 86%. In view of these data and the above-mentioned statistics on refugee employment in Germany, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* concluded that “the investment in language instruction has paid off” (FAZ, August 29, 2020).

Social issues, crime and relations with host society

According to the Federal Authority for Migration and Refugees, the Socio-Economic Panel (*Sozio-ökonomisches Panel*, SOEP) and the aforementioned IAB, new arrivals have done relatively well in the housing market. While in 2016, only half of them rented an apartment or a house while the other half lived in a refugee center, by

2018, the percentage of tenants increased to 75%. The majority of refugees live in cities with only 28% having settled down in rural areas.

Many of the people given the *Schutzsuchende* status take advantage of social assistance. In March 2020, such individuals accounted for 18% of all Hartz IV beneficiaries, who receive not only financial aid but also reimbursements of some of their housing costs in Germany.

In addition to claiming that migrants abuse the German welfare system, many migration opponents point to an alleged increase in crime rates, to which foreigners are said to contribute. Such fears are only partially substantiated by the Federal Criminal Police, who since the beginning of the migration crisis have been publishing a special annual report titled “Crime and Migration”.

The share of migrants among all individuals accused of committing a criminal offense in Germany actually increased from 1.9% in 2011 to 6.5% in 2015, with a further rise to 9.7% posted in 2018. Meanwhile, the national crime rates in Germany have been falling steadily from approx. 3.2 million offenses in 2011 to 2.9 million in 2019. Last year, a decrease to 9% was also recorded in the share of people of migrant origin among all criminals. It is also worth noting that in the multicultural society that Germany has undoubtedly become, foreigners are not only perpetrators but also crime victims. Between 2014 and 2015, the number of attacks on refugee centers increased more than fivefold. In 2016, 4.3% of all victims of crimes committed in Germany were foreigners. By 2019, that number grew to 5%.

The annual refugee survey “Befragung von Geflüchteten” has found that 2/3rds of refugees feel well in Germany. Their overall sense of satisfaction with their stay in the host country increases slowly but surely every year. Things appear to be slightly worse from the point of view of the host society. A Bertelsmann Foundation poll from the summer of 2019 showed that 70% of the surveyed believe that migration to Germany puts an excessive strain on the German social system. 60% think that migration contributes to problems in the education system and on the housing market. Meanwhile, 67% of the Germans believe that migration makes life in their country more interesting. 63% think it effectively offsets their aging society problem (Kober, Kösemen 2019). Research by the Friedrich Ebert Foundation has found that, according to 45% of respondents in Germany, the government has done too much for the refugees. As many as 34% of the respondents said that the German government should not accept further migrants. 62% do not mind having refugees living in their immediate vicinity. More than a half (53%) of the respondents agree, at least in part, that immigration is an opportunity for Germany (Faus, Storks 2019).

The above statistics are not sufficient to proclaim the success of the German *Willkommenskultur* with any degree of certainty. While considerable progress has been made in each of the key areas of refugee integration thanks to extensive integration programs, there are also a number of evident shortcomings that are eagerly picked on by “open door” policy critics, including the AfD - a party that has gained much of its popularity during the migration crisis.

Conclusions

In an interview for RTL radio last summer, Thomas de Maizière, Minister of Internal Affairs in 2013-2018, maintained that the decision to open the border to refugees was appropriate, albeit very difficult. He noted that the government faced a huge ethical dilemma in 2015. On the one hand, the decision to open the borders attracted to Germany droves of migrants confident they would be granted asylum. This overstrained the German system of granting international protection. On the other hand, one could not have remained indifferent to the increasing number of drownings in the Mediterranean Sea. Although de Maizière did not characterize those decisions as flawless and well-thought-out, he asserted that the consequences of inaction would have been considerably worse. “On balance, we ended up doing more good than bad,” he concluded. An opportunity to assess the migration and asylum policy in Germany and, more broadly, across Europe, came not only with the anniversary of the opening of the borders to refugees headed for Europe in late summer 2015.

A stormy debate was also caused by the fire that broke out in an overcrowded Moria refugee camp on the Greek island of Lesbos on September 9, 2020. The tragedy that ensued demonstrated that no matter how well the developed countries of the Western world, such as Germany, handle migration pressures and integration policies, the overall global migration response leaves a lot to be desired. Based on the experience of the last five years, Angela Merkel's government realizes that while accepting further refugees is unlikely to cause major financial and logistic problems, having only one country assume responsibility (the so-called *Alleingang* - going it alone) will undermine the sensibility of many EU-level solutions that rely on the principle of solidarity as a key to handling migration. Lively debates on how to help refugees in centers similar to Moria suggest that the issue continues to evoke emotions and spark debates not only within the EU but also in individual political parties in Germany. Currently, a dispute over the German response to the Lesbos tragedy is raging not only between the opposition and the ruling parties but also within the ranks of the Christian Democrats themselves, with individual factions putting forth different arguments. While the Federal Interior Minister Horst Seehofer (CSU), among others, refuses to have Germany accept the affected refugees for fear of sending (again) an unintended signal to other migrants, other Christian Democratic politicians point to the Christian duty to help the weak. This precisely was the argument of Norbert Röttgen, one of the candidates for the future leadership of the CDU. Markus Söder (CSU), in his turn, emphasized that accepting a group of refugees from Greece would pose no financial or logistical problems to Germany.

As can be seen, the course of the current debate in Germany does not differ much from that five years earlier. It is worth noting that the current debate has been taking place in anticipation of a proposal for a new EU pact on migration and asylum, whose publication has been delayed by the European Commission for several months now. The pact has been proclaimed to comprehensively and finally “patch up” the EU's problem-ridden migration policy that came to light during the 2015-2016 crisis.



The coming weeks will show whether a fact-based cost and benefit analysis will prevail over rhetoric built on morality and humanitarianism.

The views expressed in this publication belong solely to its author.

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