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GERMANY'S REFUGEE WELCOME WEARS THIN

Long read

Andrei Pungovschi/IRIN

Images of Germans greeting refugees at Munich's train station with cheers and teddy bears in early September were beamed around the world, but the welcome that asylum seekers receive after being dispersed to cities, towns and rural areas around the country is often quite different.

By Kristy Siegfried in Pirna, Germany

Frau Fischer's intermediate language class at the Vocational School for Technology and Economics in Pirna, a picturesque medieval town in the German state of Saxony, has 17 students, most of them young men from Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya.

On a recent morning, Fischer coaxed them to use the German words for 'sometimes', 'often' and 'always' to talk about their typical daily activities, which include attending her class every morning, five days a week.



German teacher, Marita Fischer, with two of her refugee students (Kristy Siegfried/IRIN)

This is one of the frontlines of Germany's effort to integrate the 570,000 asylum seekers who have arrived in the country so far this year. They join the 200,000 asylum seekers Germany received in 2014, while several hundred thousand more are expected before the end of this year.

The logistical challenge of housing, feeding and registering all of these new arrivals is only the first hurdle for German authorities. The next stage is likely to be much harder and could take decades.

The new refugees will need considerable support to integrate into communities that have little experience of other cultures. A long process of adjustment lies ahead for both the refugees and their new neighbours.

Most of the young men in Fischer's class arrived in Germany several months ago, before the number of new arrivals reached the levels seen today. Their transition from initial reception centres to longer-term housing in Pirna and surrounding towns was fairly smooth. They didn't have to wait long before starting state-funded German classes, although many are still awaiting a decision on their refugee status.

If they master the language and secure legal status to remain in the country, they will be able to make a new life for themselves in Germany, a country that needs youth and labour to reinvigorate its aging workforce. In the meantime, the German state provides them with free housing and a monthly living allowance.

“Most don’t have jobs. They can’t get them without German,” Marita Fischer, the language teacher, tells me. “They all want to work, but we tell them: ‘You have to learn German first’.”

Vocational schools like the one in Pirna are struggling to expand their German language programmes quickly enough to meet the demand created by so many new arrivals. The school currently has three simultaneous German classes daily, but Fischer said the education department had ordered it to start offering five.



Fischer fires a question at Libyan refugee, Mohamed Abu-Baker (Kristy Siegfried/IRIN)

Her task is made harder by the contrasting educational backgrounds of her new students. One 17-year-old boy in the class never attended school in his home country of Iraq and had not learned to read in his own language, let

alone in German. Others have been through higher education in their own countries and already mastered other languages.

Germany's rules concerning eligibility for government-subsidised language and integration courses are complex and evolving, but those lacking residency status are generally excluded unless they are aged between 18 and 27 (there's a separate programme to prepare school-age children to start attending German schools).

For older asylum seekers without residency, there are just a handful of pilot job training schemes that include a few hours of German instruction. A new programme funded by the Federal Employment Agency aims to make German classes available to all asylum seekers, even recent arrivals, but is still being rolled out. For now, the only way for many new arrivals to learn German is through the efforts of volunteers.

“It's a big problem,” said Petra Schickert, who coordinates a volunteer-led initiative aimed at helping refugees in Pirna. “We need professionals to do this. We can't solve it with volunteers.”

Out of 1,400 asylum seekers and refugees over the age of 27 living in the area, only 15 have been accepted into one of the pilot training schemes, Schickert said, adding: “For the rest, there's nothing.”

If opportunities for integration are limited for many refugees still struggling to learn German and break into the labour market, they are virtually non-existent for more than 700 recently arrived asylum seekers being housed in a former home improvement superstore in the nearby town of Heidenau.

Journalists are not allowed inside but Asmir and Ahmad, two young Syrians who have already spent nearly two months at the store, told me conditions were grim and the atmosphere tense.

“It’s too crowded. I think there’s 1,000 people in there and more arriving every day,” said Asmir who was still wearing the clothes he’d arrived in – shorts and a sleeveless t-shirt – despite the autumn chill. “The toilets are dirty. They clean every day, but there are just too many people using them.”



Asmir (left) and his friend, Ahmad, outside the asylum seeker housing in Heidenau (Kristy Siegfried/IRIN)

He showed me pictures on his cell phone of men, women and children sleeping in tents and containers inside the warehouse-like building, where fights regularly break out between residents who spend hours every day in queues for food, showers and laundry facilities.

Similar makeshift arrangements are cropping up all over Germany, and while the German Red Cross and other NGOs and volunteers are doing their best to provide the basic needs of the asylum seekers, the latter are forced to spend longer and longer in such places while they wait to register their asylum claims, which have to be made in person. Bottlenecks in local government offices also mean numbers trying to register have to be controlled.

“I’d like to get my papers and go somewhere else. I want to go to Berlin,” said Asmir, who knows very well he can’t leave Heidenau or access any state support until he is bussed to the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF) branch in Chemnitz, the only place in Saxony to register asylum claims.

The maximum wait to be registered used to be three months, but Germany’s lower house of parliament recently passed legislation that, if approved by the upper house, will extend the amount of time asylum seekers can spend in temporary reception centres to six months, an indication of further expected delays ahead.

BAMF says it is hiring 2,000 more employees to process claims, but according to Andrea Hübler, a counsellor with Opferberatung, a Dresden-based NGO, “nothing is happening and there’s too much bureaucracy.”

“You can’t keep people in these camps indefinitely,” she said. “We can give them food and clothing, but they want a life.”

The registration delays only lengthen the time it takes to identify so-called economic migrants who are further clogging up an already overwhelmed asylum system. The recently passed legislation included extending Germany’s list of “[safe countries of origin](#)” to include Kosovo, Albania and Montenegro. Serbia, Macedonia and Bosnia are already on the list. Applications from these Balkan countries made up 38 percent of the 303,400 asylum applications that Germany received between January and September this year.

In theory, asylum claims from these countries will now be speedily rejected and the asylum seeker deported. But in reality, Germany’s record for enforcing return orders has been poor. Of 128,290 people found to be “illegally present” in the country in 2014, only 27 percent were ordered to leave, and fewer than 22,000 were forcibly returned, according to Eurostat figures.

Mohamed Abu-Baker, 25, from Libya, one of the students in Fischer’s class, has already had his asylum claim rejected because he was fingerprinted on arrival in Italy and, under the EU’s [Dublin Regulation](#),

Italy is therefore responsible for processing his asylum claim. German authorities sent him back to Italy but he simply returned and is now living in refugee housing, receiving a living allowance and even an additional financial incentive to attend the German classes, although he lacks the right to work. He has yet to receive a return order.

“Germany is the best place, (be)cause the government respects you,” he said.

In the long-term, integration for people like Abu-Baker will be virtually impossible and their presence in the country provides further fuel for a growing anti-migrant backlash that has been particularly pronounced in Saxony.

According to Germany’s “Königstein Key”, which determines how asylum seekers are distributed across the country’s 16 federal states based on their populations and tax revenue, Saxony is expected to take in 5.1 percent of the new arrivals. It doesn’t sound like a lot until you consider that at least 800,000 asylum seekers are expected to arrive in Germany by the end of this year, meaning that Saxony will have to absorb about 41,000 new residents into its population of four million.

It will represent a significant [demographic shift](#) for a state where, before the current influx, recent migrants made up just 1.3 percent of the population and only 1 percent of the population practised religions other than Christianity as of 2011.

Until recently, Pirna’s exposure to diversity consisted of little more than a couple of Chinese restaurants and a handful of immigrants who were kept at arm’s length. As in many other parts of former Eastern Germany, foreigners, particularly those who are not Christian, are often regarded with suspicion and sometimes outright hostility.

PEGIDA, an anti-Islam, anti-migrant movement, started last October in Dresden, just a half hour’s drive from Pirna, and is linked to a doubling in the number of racist attacks on foreigners in the state, according to Opferberatung, which provides support to victims of hate crimes.

“As soon as it’s announced that new refugee housing will be opened, you can be sure that they’ll try to stop it,” said Hübler of Opferberatung. “Last night, Nazis burned down an old school that was going to house refugees in Prohlis [a Dresden district].”

German authorities have recorded more than [490](#) such attacks on asylum seeker housing this year, double the number for the whole of last year. Two-thirds of the attacks were carried out by local citizens with no previous criminal record.

PEGIDA (which stands for Patriotic Europeans against the Islamization of the West) was initially viewed as appealing to a small minority of right-wing extremists, but its vehement opposition to Germany’s policy of welcoming refugees is attracting increasing support from ordinary people who probably wouldn’t describe themselves as neo-Nazis. The grassroots movement celebrated its first anniversary last week with a [rally](#) in Dresden that attracted more than 10,000 people.



PEGIDA's first anniversary rally in Dresden attracted as many counter-protesters as it did supporters (Andrei Pungovschi/IRIN)

“We have a big problem because PEGIDA is bringing these racists out and encouraging them to attack people,” said Markus Kemper, who works alongside Schickert on the volunteer-led initiative in Pirna. “But there are also more people who want to volunteer to help refugees, and this motivates us that it’s possible to live here together.”

Every refugee and asylum seeker I met in Pirna and nearby Heidenau described multiple encounters with “neo-Nazis” – presumably PEGIDA supporters.

“The neo-Nazis view you as an enemy; I’ve faced them many times,” said Mohammed Stanikzai, a 19-year-old from Afghanistan who is staying in refugee housing in the town of Bad Schandau and attending German classes in Pirna. “They try to fight with me... They say, ‘Get out of our country! Go home!’ One of them spat beer on me.”

But Stanikzai also has neighbours who have helped him – lending him a bicycle and taking him and his housemates sightseeing. “Every country has different people,” he shrugged.

Although Stanikzai said the police had been helpful, according to Hübler there have been no prosecutions of perpetrators so far and the attacks on refugees are becoming increasingly violent. “The attackers see no consequences, so they carry on,” she said.

The [opening](#) of the asylum seeker housing in Heidenau in August sparked particularly violent protests and animosity towards those staying there has continued.

Although the building is fenced off and manned by security guards around the clock, Asmir said that neo-Nazis regularly drive by at night and toss fireworks over the fence. A week before I arrived, four Pakistani men were beaten up when they ventured into town. Now most of the buildings’ residents prefer to remain inside, despite the grim conditions.

One person who welcomes the arrival of more refugees to the area is Neamat Kanaan, a 30-year-old from Lebanon who has lived in Pirna with her two children for the past five years. “When we arrived, we were the

only refugees,” she said, recalling that for the first few months after they moved into a ground-floor flat in a tower block in Pirna’s low-income Sonnenstein neighbourhood, “Nazis used to come and make noise on the balcony.”



Two Afghan refugees walk through Sonnenstein where the majority of Pirna's refugee population are housed (Andrei Pungovschi/IRIN)

Now there are three other refugee families in the same building and Kanaan has gladly taken on the role of mediator and translator. “I have to help because nobody helped me when I came; that’s why it was so difficult,” she told me, explaining that her family was rejected for asylum but could not be returned to Lebanon and spent two years in an initial reception facility. They were only transferred to Pirna on a doctor’s recommendation after her daughter developed psychological problems.

Kanaan has lived in legal limbo ever since – unable to work or move away from Pirna and dependent on state support. She no longer has “Nazis” on her balcony, but she and her children have endured countless episodes of blatant racism. Just two days before I met them, two girls attacked Kanaan’s 13-year-old daughter Sara as she was walking in the street.

Sara was reluctant to talk about the incident but said she has no German friends at school. With the arrival of more refugee families to Pirna, she now has the option of mixing only with other Arabic-speaking kids. “Before, I was the only one, but now there are many,” she said.

The family is counting the days until Sara has been in the German school system for six years, at which point they will be eligible for three-year residency permits and can live wherever they like. Kanaan would like to go to Hanover, where she knows at least a few friendly faces.

As we talked, two of her new Syrian friends arrived for a visit. Kanaan busied herself making them coffee and plying them with snacks, while Aisha, 28, and Fidaa, 29, who are cousins from Damascus, told me how she had helped them register for German classes and find second-hand clothing and books, and showed them around Dresden.



Neamat Kanaan (middle) and her daughter Sara host Syrian friends in their living room (Andrei Pungovschi/IRIN)

“She is the best person in Pirna!” said Fidaa, who has a social sciences degree and will soon start a German course in Dresden. Once she learns German, she said, she wants to start an NGO to help other refugees.

The women, who already have refugee status, have no intention of staying in Pirna.

Chancellor Angela Merkel has been recognised for her leadership in condemning attacks on refugees and urging Germans to welcome newcomers, but support for her government’s open-door approach is waning. While Pirna may be more conservative than many towns in Germany, it is by no means exceptional, particularly for former Eastern Germany. Unless more Germans can be convinced that, with some help, refugees can make a positive contribution to their communities, more are likely to join PEGIDA’s rallies. Refugee dreams of a better life may only be possible in a few of the country’s more cosmopolitan cities.

Researchers Loren Landau and Elizabeth Wellman recently **warned** that Germany’s well-intended asylum policy could go “seriously wrong” if it is not accompanied by parallel efforts to secure political buy-in from local communities. They pointed as a lesson to South Africa’s descent into xenophobia despite its generous refugee policy.

“Unless there are programmes to incentivise aid and integration,” they wrote, “local communities – especially those that feel poor or marginalised – will strike back.”