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Abstract

In 2015, most Germans welcomed the 890,000 refugees who 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 states provided accommodation. The federal asylum bureaucracy was less effective, and could not process applications in due time for two years. First hopes of an easy integration have been disappointed, and it takes time to find jobs for Syrians or Afghans in the highly specialized German economy. Terrorist acts created fears, and the discourse became polarized. However, the strong consensus about accepting refugees in need continues, even if the government tries to reduce the numbers of new arrivals. The German public is more realistic but still active, engaging and welcoming. The media did not follow the complex bureaucratic processes, they personalized and created moral heroes and villains.

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 and in the media. 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. She had been criticized as cold-hearted.

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 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 46% of the German population in one way or the other doing something for the refugees, more than in any other time. 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 had supported or would support refugees, August 2016, in per cent

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

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 in many other places. The tragedy of the Syrian refugees spoke to the hearts. It was not Merkel but the Austrian Chancellor who first took the initiative to open the borders, and asked Merkel to back him up. However, chancellor Werner Faymann was never able to acquire the same aura as his German colleague – 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 May 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 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, and won the elections in October 2017.

In Germany, however, the opposition parties supported Merkel’s stance, as well as her Social Democratic coalition partner. Leftists suddenly discussed if they should vote for Merkel. She became the hero of welcome culture, all the other politicians dwarfing besides her, even when Green politicians were even more enthusiastic in welcoming the 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 in 2013, then again in a grand coalition with a Social Democrats, and 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. 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.

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 or listener.

This 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, most 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 fees. 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 and many 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, supported the government, together with both major parties and the opposition. Thus, Merkel’s policies were unopposed, except for the Bavarian CSU. Soon Hungarian Prime Minister Orbán, along with 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 Germany but by the international community.
The media, in their tendency to personalize and simplify, idolized Merkel and demonized Orbán. Both of them profited politically. Orbán played the role of the nasty guy, and thus became a xenophobic hero, outflanking the extreme right in Hungary that had endangered his majority. He built a wall like the Greek, 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 most Germans 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 remarked that it was impossible to close the borders, and gave the impression that there was no limit. 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 future pensions and the message that they would be less generous than those of the past generation, and that people 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 trust 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, and 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 cope with lots of applicants who would not have a chance to get asylum but would stay in the country for a long time, especially from South Eastern Europe.

**Shock and CDU-CSU conflict**

The New Year’s Eve assaults in Cologne in 2015/16, particularly 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 engaged volunteers now had second thoughts and felt somewhat uneasy. 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. Journalists were accused of biased reporting and began to hesitate about writing sympathetic stories about refugees. Talk shows hosts invited controversial discussants, representing “the other side”. Before they could find German populists, they invited controversial Swiss populists. That happened so often that the Swiss parliament became nervous about Switzerland’s reputation in Germany (Altwegg 2016). Populist politicians were over-represented in popular talk shows where they then complained about the media reporting too friendly about refugees and the government.

From the start, the Bavarian CSU had not been part of the welcome consensus. On the one hand, Bavarian authorities worked efficiently to house and feed the incoming refugees, 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. On the other hand, the leadership of the party was openly sceptical about the opening of the borders. Chancellor Merkel had not been able to contact 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 Hungarian Prime Minister Orbán who was harassing refugees. In November 2015, Seehofer lectured Merkel on the stage at the CSU party conference in Munich, after she had given her usual speech at the “sister party’s” meeting. 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 retired constitutional judge di Fabio, arguing that Merkel’s government had violated their constitutional duties, to protect the country from uncontrolled immigration flows. For more than a year, 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 skier” triggering it.
This put the CDU candidates for the upcoming elections in three states on 13 March 2016 in a delicate position. 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), a new 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 (Klöckner 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. At the same time, they invited Seehofer and even Austria’s Sebastian Kurz.

Such double bind backfired in both states. In Baden-Württemberg, Green Prime Minister Kretschmann won the elections sensationnally, 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 Klöckner who had been the favourite in the months before. Both results were a humiliation for the CDU - and a backing for Merkel’s policy. 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 government would keep control. Compared to other countries, this is quite a high number. Britain had promised to accept 20,000 Syrian refugees over five years, or 4,000 a year. Obama proceeded likewise, even when he praised Merkel. However, she would not give in and stuck to the constitutional right for asylum. The conflict between the “sister parties”, both sitting 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. Moreover, the CSU critique against Merkel lacked credibility since the party continued to sit in Merkel's government.

For the other parties in parliament, SPD, Greens and Left, this situation was 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 reduced to bystanders.
Merkel’s welcome, the federal bureaucracy and the media

While the conflict between the “Christian” parties occupied the public 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 not organized efficiently (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 a long time. In the years before, some people had used these possibilities over the winter. In 2014, 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. 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 to Germany, and not to other countries (Thränhardt 2016, 2016a). Facilitators profited from the situation. After denying the size of the refugee flows for a year, 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. Thus, the minister of the interior created a bureaucratic mess.
Table 2: Backlog with asylum decisions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Applications</th>
<th>Decisions</th>
<th>Applications pending</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>48.589</td>
<td>48.187</td>
<td>23.289</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>53.347</td>
<td>43.362</td>
<td>33.773</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>77.651</td>
<td>61.826</td>
<td>49.811</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>127.023</td>
<td>80.978</td>
<td>95.743</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>202.834</td>
<td>128.911</td>
<td>169.166</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2015</td>
<td>476.649*</td>
<td>282.762</td>
<td>364.664</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>+ ca. 500.000 not registered</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2016</td>
<td>722.370 new 280.000</td>
<td>695.733</td>
<td>433.719</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1-9/2017</td>
<td>168.306</td>
<td>514.732</td>
<td>99.334</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: BAMF, Asylgeschäftsstatistik

From early 2015 on, BAMF was not even able to register the applicants, or to count them. States had to care for half a million asylum seekers who were left in a legal void. After some months of protest, the chancellor stepped in. 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). Bypassing the ministry of the interior, 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. They had to act under a European directive that contradicted and overrode German law.

All in all, the sudden arrival of 890,000 refugees in 2015 alone was handled well by states and communities, backed by many volunteers. Local problems came up in the media: right wing bullying in Saxony, Berlin’s inability to organize proper housing and care in time, overcrowded accommodation centres in Bavaria, an intimidating security agent 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. When BAMF succeeded in processing the asylum cases in 2017, the bottle neck moved to the administrative courts. In July 2017, 324,000 cases were unresolved, and the poor quality of many BAMF decisions led to many revisions at the courts. In any international comparison, the figures were high. Two thirds of all positive asylum decisions in the EU in 2016 were taken in Germany.

2017: Election Surprises

After the “reconciliation meeting” between CDU and CSU on 5 February 2017, the open strife between the “sister parties” ended. The CSU no longer accused the federal government of acting illegally and unconstitutionally, and prepared her followers to vote for Merkel in the upcoming elections. The SPD
on 29 January presented a new leader, and went back to traditional Social Democratic slogans about social justice. Their ratings went up, and for some weeks the competition between the large parties set in again, with the traditional ideological lines separating both sides. It did, however, not last long. The Social Democrats’ survey results went down again, and it became clear that Angela Merkel would continue as chancellor. In May 2017, the Social Democrats lost two states, Schleswig-Holstein and North Rhine Westphalia. The Christian Democrats formed coalition governments with the Liberals and the Greens. Since the new leaders were in line with Angela Merkel, her control of the CDU seemed more stable than ever.

The chancellorship debate between Angela Merkel and SPD contender Martin Schulz was dull, and supported the perception that there was not much difference between them. The unresolved refugee crisis came up again in the last weeks of the campaign, and the government argued somewhat contradictory. They had done right, they said but such an influx should never happen again. Rejected asylum seekers should be forced to leave. This helped the smaller parties, and particularly the AFD whose ratings grew in the last weeks. In the end, they got 12.6 % of the votes in the federal elections of 4 September 2017. Both partners in the grand coalition lost out. The AfD was particularly successful in the Eastern Länder but also in Bavaria. Moreover, the liberals came back into parliament. Since the disappointed Social Democrats decided to go in to the opposition, a “Jamaica coalition” is in the making: black-blue-green, between CDU/CSU, FDP and the Greens, unlikely partners up to that time.

The asylum crisis and its handling by the parties has changed the political scene in Germany. It is no longer an exception, and has gotten a populist party like other European countries. Merkel’s followers are strong in the Länder but her prestige as a vote-getter is over. It is clear that her chancellorship will come to an end in the next years. She has softened the anti-immigration tendencies of the CDU, and let a new party to the right emerge.

### 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 failings of the minister of the interior. Scandals then fell on state and local governments, even if they originated in the chaos at the federal level. The government 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, the volunteers are still active, and more and more frustrated with the federal bureaucracy.

If we believe recent 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/ Schupp 2017). When pollsters ask people about their views about refugees in detail, their answers are more realistic and less agitated than the simplistic media discourse would tell us. Most Germans still want to show a “friendly face” to people in need.

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