

A welcoming policy in post-socialist East Germany

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Apparently, East European countries are less willing to accept refugees than other European countries. Their experience of ethnic and cultural diversity is weak and a genuine welcome has still to be developed.

As former East Germany is now receiving refugees as part of the national distribution scheme, towns there need to adapt to accommodating refugees. There is a range of different attitudes in the East-German context – from the highly defensive to the very open. Only the state of Thuringia has an outspokenly cosmopolitan and liberal approach, which has resulted in a high-profile ‘welcoming policy’.

There has long existed a high level of xenophobia in Thuringia, as in most of East Germany. The ‘welcoming policies’ introduced by the new state government in late 2014 nevertheless were intended to create a turnaround in the general attitude towards refugees. A new Ministry of Migration adopted the principle of decentralised housing for accommodating refugees in order to enable the refugees to move into their own apartments as soon as possible.

Although these government policies have made life easier for many refugees, most importantly Ministers have used the narrative of a welcoming policy to call for more understanding from the local population and a rejection of xenophobic resistance to hosting refugees. This represents a clear difference from politicians in neighbouring Saxony who largely use language that implies a certain sympathy for protests against refugees being housed there and who are calling for more forced returns. Despite still high levels of xenophobia, Thuringia’s new ‘welcoming policies’ also initiated innovative forms of communication at the local and regional level.

Mühlhausen

The city of Mühlhausen is in a not very densely populated district in Thuringia. Two so-called group accommodations (more precisely, refugee camps) have been opened

in small villages approximately 20 km from the city. Public transport barely connects the camps with the city where a small number of refugees also live. The government proposed using former military barracks in Mühlhausen to create one temporary camp for 1,000 refugees and one longer-term camp to host a further 1,000 refugees in single apartments or in 'group accommodation'. After the public announcement of these plans, neighbours of the barracks organised a protest against the opening of the reception centre for these camps.

The district commissioner, who is primarily responsible for the refugees' accommodation, reacted by establishing a 'round table' of all persons concerned with refugees. He asked senior citizens from the local church community to organise this round table, because they enjoy broad respect in the city and have substantial experience with people of different ethnic backgrounds from their previous community work. After three meetings, the round table gradually became more a place of reflection on experiences – and complaints – and less an organisational or administrative institution. The residents of Mühlhausen now have a forum for expressing these experiences and to seek more understanding and support for the long process of mutual adaptation, which is still at the very beginning.

Meiningen

In Meiningen, an outlying and somewhat marginalised city that has lost many residents in the last decades, the accommodation of refugees is mainly confined to Jerusalem, a high-rise estate from the pre-unification period on the outskirts of the city, which is part of an area with high and above average unemployment and poverty rates. The neighbourhood is clearly stigmatised and receives high media coverage whenever undesirable living conditions in pre-unification high-rise settlements are to the fore. There have been frictions between the established, mostly elderly residents and the newly arrived refugees, and some indications of xenophobic reaction. It seems that the authorities are afraid of further

reinforcement of the existing stereotypes about the neighbourhood and want to avoid any further negative media coverage. The official political discourse on the reception of refugees has been part of the 'welcoming culture' and the commissioner responsible has set up four working groups to address various matters. These working groups mainly involve experts from the local administration and there is little integration of civil society. However, citizens have also become active through the engagement of two social workers who work permanently in Jerusalem. Being already overloaded with caretaking for the area's older residents, the social workers have little capacity themselves for social work geared to the refugees' needs and their integration into the neighbourhood. Civil society's voluntary work therefore focuses on this social work and has produced a number of offers of assistance for the refugees.

Conclusion

The newly introduced discourse on 'welcoming' in Thuringia is only the first step not only in encouraging a more friendly tone towards the refugees and migrants, but also embracing cultural diversity and showing sympathy with otherness. It is necessary to bear in mind the very recent emergence of these developments, as well as the hard work needed and the inevitable clashes that will occur before compassion becomes a lived reality. For the refugees, the experience of being accepted will require long-term use of the word 'welcome'.

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