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Germany: fears of a wave of refugees over winter

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On 11 October, German Interior Minister Nancy Faeser (SPD), in a meeting with representatives of the states and local authorities, announced support for municipalities to accommodate more refugees during the winter. The aid will consist of increasing the number of places made available to them by the federal offices – up to a total of 68,000 (up from the 64,000 so far guaranteed in 300 federal properties). In addition, the German government will extend the random checks (introduced in 2015) at the border with Austria and intensify those along the border with the Czech Republic. The meeting was called in response to appeals from local authorities, who have been warning for several weeks that the situation in numerous refugee centres is making it impossible to take in any more people. Local authorities are therefore renting additional spaces such as sports halls, hotels and market facilities, which is reminiscent of the actions of 2015 and 2016. In a letter to Chancellor Olaf Scholz (SPD) at the beginning of October, municipal unions demanded that the influx of asylum seekers be restricted, indicating that they would not be able to cope with another refugee crisis similar to the one in 2015. Some municipalities, especially in eastern Germany (including Dresden, Gera, Halle), have stopped accepting refugees, including from Ukraine.

Since the beginning of the year, Germany has seen a significant increase in asylum applications. In September, the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF) received 19,000 applications, with a total of 135,000 this year. (these are so-called first asylum applications). Compared to the same period last year, there are 35% more applications. Almost 20,000 of this year's applications concerned children under one year of age born in Germany. The increase in the number of applications is primarily attributed to people moving along the Mediterranean migration route – from Tunisia or Libya to Italy and Turkey – or along the Balkan route, primarily through Austria, the Czech Republic and Slovakia.

Commentary

- The growing number of refugees is resulting in German pressure on the Czech Republic and Slovakia to seal the borders, and is generating increased pressure on Serbia to change its liberal migration policy that is more tolerant of people without visas (e.g. Indian or Tunisian nationals) staying there than is the case in the EU. Currently, the largest number of asylum seekers in Germany are Syrians (to October, 42,000), Afghans (26,000), Turks (12,000), Iraqis (12,000), Georgians (6,000) and Iranians (4,000). Furthermore, only a small proportion of those who have not been granted legal protection leave Germany. In the first half of this year, some 6,200 people were deported, of whom 1,800 were transferred to another Member State on the basis of the Dublin III Regulation.

Approx. 3,800 migrants voluntarily left the country during this period with financial support from the German government.

- The situation in refugee centres, although difficult, is incomparable to that during the 2015 crisis. Due to simplified registration (introduced by an EU executive decision), one million Ukrainians have been excluded from the complicated and protracted asylum procedure. By granting them similar social rights to those enjoyed by German citizens, most of them live in rented accommodation. In the largest federal states, such as Bavaria and Baden-Württemberg, around 20% of all Ukrainian refugees registered there stay in state-run shelters. The exception is Berlin - 70,000 people from that country have arrived there and about 3,000 of them are living in the capital's asylum centres. Furthermore, the German administration (at both the federal and local government level) is better equipped to manage the migration crisis after the experience of 2015; among other things, the BAMF has tripled the number of its staff (to around 8,100) and its budget (from €250 million in 2015 to around €760 million in 2022). In addition, federal funds, among other things, cover the cost of social assistance for refugees and the expenses for integration courses. The states also receive a targeted subsidy for refugee accommodation. In 2021, a total of around €12 billion was spent from the federal budget for these purposes. Following the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the government pledged to support local governments with an additional €2 billion.
- In the face of the economic and energy crisis, the willingness to help refugees is slightly decreasing in Germany. A report by the Centre for Integration and Migration Research (DeZIM) shows that in the summer, almost one in two Germans (47%) were willing to volunteer to help with Ukrainian arrivals (58% in March). At the same time, at the beginning of March, 27% of citizens were willing to temporarily host refugees in their own home (currently 17%). This situation is being exploited by fringe parties, above all the AfD, whose popularity has recently risen to 15% (it won 10% of the vote in the federal elections). Anti-Ukrainian demands are becoming more frequent at its regular demonstrations against high energy prices and in favour of concessions to Russia (including the lifting of sanctions). Slogans about Ukrainians taking advantage of the German welfare state are also prevalent in statements by representatives of other parties. CDU leader Friedrich Merz criticised the alleged "social tourism" of Ukrainian refugees before the state elections in Lower Saxony, in an attempt to attract part of the AfD electorate. As the economic crisis intensifies, similar suggestions will be made with increasing frequency.
- In Germany, there is an ongoing debate about different ‘refugee classes’. People from Ukraine are seen as privileged over other groups seeking refuge in Germany. There are essentially two positions in the discussion. According to the first, other refugee groups (e.g. those from Syria) should enjoy equal rights to those of Ukrainians. This view is predominant among the Greens, especially among the youngest MPs, and in NGOs dealing with refugees (e.g. Caritas). On the other hand, there are clear voices in favour of limiting the social rights of Ukrainians, as advocated mainly by the AfD. The party opposes equating their rights with those enjoyed by Germans, as it sees this step as an impulse for increased immigration.