ASYLUM IN GERMANY: THE MAKING OF THE 'CRISIS' AND THE ROLE OF CIVIL SOCIETY

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Abstract

In most German cities today, refugees are welcomed and supported by a large and growing number of individuals and collectives whose volunteer work covers almost all aspects of refugee reception. At the same time, the arrival and establishment of refugees has been met with xenophobic protest and violence in many German localities. Focusing especially on the example of a local welcome initiative, but also considering exclusionary civil-society practices, this contribution explores recent civil-society involvement in refugee reception against the legal and political context of asylum in Germany. It will be argued that measures of forced dispersal, deterrence and discomfort, in particular, have materially and discursively produced the framing of current refugee movements as a 'crisis' and have triggered the differing actions and reactions among local populations. The fact that the 'refugee crisis' has been presented not only as a threat, but also as a 'humanitarian crisis' that needs to be tackled by both German state actors and civil society has encouraged the wave of positive reactions. Furthermore, taking into account local negotiation processes of asylum is significant if we want to understand the recent and often contradictory civil-society responses. The paper draws on observations from an ongoing research project on local migration regimes and urban asylum, as well as on other studies dealing with refugee reception in Germany.

Asilo en Alemania: La formación de la "crisis" y el papel de la sociedad civil

Resumen

En la mayoría de las ciudades alemanas de hoy, los refugiados son recibidos y apoyados por un gran y creciente número de personas y colectivos cuyo trabajo voluntario abarca casi todos los aspectos de la recepción de refugiados. Al mismo tiempo, la llegada y establecimiento de los refugiados ha sido recibido con protestas y violencia xenófoba en muchas localidades alemanas. Centrándose especialmente en el ejemplo de una iniciativa local de acogimiento, y también tomando en cuenta las prácticas de exclusión de la sociedad civil, esta contribución explora la participación reciente de la sociedad civil en la recepción

de refugiados contra el contexto jurídico y político del asilo en Alemania. Se argumenta que las medidas de dispersión forzada, la disuasión y la incomodidad, en particular, han materialmente y discursivamente producido la elaboración de los movimientos de refugiados actuales como una "crisis" y han desencadenado diferentes acciones y reacciones entre las poblaciones locales. El hecho de que la "crisis de refugiados" se ha presentado no sólo como una amenaza, sino como una "crisis humanitaria" que necesita ser abordada por actores estatales y la sociedad civil alemana ha animado a la ola de reacciones positivas. Por otra parte, tomando en cuenta los procesos de negociación locales de asilo es significativo si queremos comprender las recientes y, a menudo contradictorias respuestas de la sociedad civil. El artículo se basa en observaciones de un proyecto de investigación en curso sobre los regímenes de migración y asilo locales urbanos, así como en otros estudios relativos a la acogida de refugiados en Alemania.

Palabras clave: sociedad civil, solicitantes de asilo, Alemania, "crisis" de refugiados, cultura de acogimiento, la política de disuasión

Introduction

In November 2013, the municipality of a middle-sized city of about 165,000 inhabitants in the North-West of Germany, like many other German municipalities, started to look for possibilities to accommodate the growing quota of refugees allocated to them. The municipal authorities decided to open two new accommodation centers for refugees in the inner-city Rosenplatz neighborhood, which was designated as a deprivation hotspot in 2001 and has since undergone thorough urban and social restructuring. When the news about the opening of the accommodation centers spread, the reactions of the local population were mixed. At a neighborhood round-table meeting, some residents expressed their anger about the lack of transparency and public participation, because they had learned about the news through an article in the local newspaper. Several participants of the round-table put forward arguments against the reception of refugees, such as the classic

'Not in my backyard' argument: 'Why does the city accommodate refugees here in the district, where we already have so many problems?'.[1] However, there were also participants who proposed to form an initiative to welcome and integrate the newcomers. Even before the first refugees moved in, the newly created welcome initiative 'Refugee Assistance Rosenplatz' became active. They organized furniture to fully equip the accommodation centers. Since then, the initiative has continued to collect and sort donations, set up free German-language classes, provide assistance with appointments and paperwork and organize numerous leisure activities and events.

A plethora of refugee support initiatives like the one described above have emerged across Germany over the past three years. Established NGOs in the sector have been overwhelmed by a rush of people wanting to help refugees through volunteer work and donations. Some observers even speak of a 'new national movement of volunteering for refugees' (Karakayali and Kleist 2015: 9). However, the much-celebrated new German *Willkommenskultur,* the new culture of welcome, stands in stark contrast to the numerous incidents of xenophobic protest and violence. In the Rosenplatz neighborhood, despite the initial concerns voiced at the round-table meeting, there was no mobilization against refugee reception but, in many other localities, the opening of refugee accommodation centers – even the mere announcement of it – has been followed by negative reactions. These reactions range from angry letters and xenophobic commentaries in local newspapers and social networks, petitions and lawsuits, and the distribution of flyers and posters against refugee reception, to more-extreme forms of xenophobic and racist violence. Fueled by agitations against refugees at the initiative of so-called 'concerned citizens' as well as outright neo-Nazi racist groups or anti-Islam movements like PEGIDA, assaults upon refugees and refugee housing have multiplied; in 2015, there were 150 incidents documented of physical violence directed against refugees, 126 arson attacks and 404 other offences directed at refugee housing (the throwing of stones

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1   All quotes from interviews and citations of sources originally in German were translated by the author.

or firecrackers, rioting, and property damage) as well as 287 xenophobic protests against refugees (Amadeu Antonio Foundation 2015). The number of criminal offenses targeting refugee accommodation centers has shot up from only 24 registered cases in 2012 and 43 in 2013 to several hundred incidents all over Germany in 2015 (Bruns *et al.* 2014: 4).

This situation prompts many questions. How do we explain these recent civil-society responses to refugee reception? What has suddenly incited thousands of people to volunteer for welcome initiatives? And how do we explain the differences between these civil-society (re-)actions – i.e., the fact that, in some cases, enthusiastic helpers are offering initiatives of solidarity while, in others, refugee reception is met with violent protest? I approach these questions by first sketching out the broader legal-political context of asylum in Germany, focusing particularly on the policies and discourses that have marked the ongoing migration movements to Germany and the increasing number of asylum claims as a 'crisis' – with its twofold connotation as a humanitarian crisis and as a threat. I then attempt to place recent positive civil-society responses to refugee reception against a background of national asylum policies and dominant discourses, taking the case of the Rosenplatz neighborhood and the emergence of the welcome initiative there as an example. Asking why, in this case, there were no antagonistic responses, I underline the importance of also taking into account sub-national structures and policies, changing actor constellations and local dynamics. If we seek to understand how the responses to refugee reception differ across localities, we need, in particular, to take into account the local setting and the multiplicity of actors and factors that shape it.

The term 'refugee' here designates all persons seeking asylum, especially those who are not yet recognized as refugees or those whose asylum claims have been rejected but who remain in Germany with a *Duldung*, an exceptional leave to remain. These groups are not, or only in a very limited way, entitled to benefit from official integration support. Consequently, they are particularly targeted by both inclusionary and exclusionary civil society (re-)actions (cf. Aumüller 2009: 111; Scherr 2015: 360).

Policies of decentralization, deterrence and discomfort: the legal-political context of asylum in Germany

The aim here is not to discuss the complex multi-layered system[2] and history of asylum governance in Germany but to trace a few developments and characteristics of asylum policies and practices which are relevant to our understanding of the recent civil-society responses to refugee reception. I highlight, in particular, the decentralized organization of asylum in Germany and measures introduced to deter asylum-seekers which, I argue, have contributed to the making of the recent 'refugee crisis' and have triggered differing responses among local authorities and populations.

The German asylum system foresees a dispersal of refugees across the different federal states (*Länder*). Refugees are dispersed across the *Länder* on the basis of a quota system, taking into account both population and GDP. Refugees have little or no possibility to choose where they want to live (Boswell 2003: 319; Wendel 2014: 8). They have to stay up to six months and sometimes longer in a so-called 'first reception center' until they are either deported or (voluntarily) return to another country or are 'transferred' within Germany. The *Länder* are entitled to organize the further distribution and accommodation of refugees within their territories, which mostly means that, after the initial reception and registration phase, responsibility is handed over to the municipalities. For the refugees, this implies a transfer from the federal first reception center to another locality in the *Land*. German municipalities, unlike their counterparts in other European member-states such as the UK or Norway, cannot refuse to accommodate refugees but can largely decide how and where to accommodate them. While the decentralization of asylum and forced dispersal thus imply a high level of local control (Schwarz *et al.* 2004) and the presence of refugees in

2   For a good, even though in parts already out-dated, overview of refugee reception and accommodation in Germany, see Müller (2013); for a comparative perspective on refugee accommodation in the federal states, see Wendel (2014); for a critical appraisal of the living conditions in collective accommodation centers, see Pieper (2008).

localities across the country, the aim of the policy was arguably not to foster better integration into local communities but to ensure effective 'burden-sharing' and to make Germany a less attractive destination for refugees (Boswell 2003: 319).

Since the 1980s, and especially with the so-called *Asylkompromiss* of 1993, the previously generous German asylum law was successively restricted and turned into a regime aimed at the deterrence of asylum-seekers. This was fueled by discourses on 'bogus refugees' allegedly abusing the right to asylum and the German welfare system. A series of measures, such as residential obligations, the safe-third-country principle, the interdiction to work, the principle of benefits in kind, and the sojourn in collective accommodation centers were, as a rule, introduced with the explicit aim of keeping away potential asylum-seekers. Often located in isolated areas with little access to social infrastructure, the obligation to stay in such centers, in combination with the other measures, meant a rhythm reduced to sleeping, eating and waiting (Pieper 2008; Wendel 2015), a condition which has been described as 'organized disintegration' (Täubig 2009: 58). For the municipalities, the maintenance of collective accommodation centers often proved inefficient and costly, especially given that the numbers of asylum applications decreased from the mid-1990s onwards, partly as a consequence of the Dublin Regulation (Wendel 2015).[3] The various measures of deterrence, along with the actual decrease in asylum claims, meant that the arrival of refugees was a completely unexpected event.

At the beginning of the 2000s, the municipalities accordingly closed many collective accommodation centers and instead started to accommodate refugees in

private apartments. As more and more asylum-seekers arrived in Germany from 2012 onwards, both federal authorities and municipal actors found themselves unprepared and overloaded. Where the authorities had just adopted plans to decentralize accommodation, they now resorted again to accommodation *en masse* and put up 'emergency accommodation centers' in public buildings, tents or containers. In contrast to the peripheral mass accommodation centers of the 1990s, many of the more recently opened (emergency) centers are located in residential and inner-city neighborhoods, which means a heightened visibility of refugees, a point which is further explored below. The fact that mass and emergency accommodation is a consequence not only of increased arrivals, but also of a systematic reduction in the country's accommodation capacity in the preceding decade and a cutback on social housing more generally, is often ignored (Wendel 2015: 59).

Most *Länder* have loosened or abandoned some of the measures of discomfort introduced in the 1980s and 1990s – as, for example, the residential obligation or the principle of benefits in kind. Nevertheless the dogma of 'non-integration' or 'systematic disintegration' is still in place – particularly for some groups of refugees. The German government's response to the renewed increase of refugee arrivals has been one of opening and closure, of provisions for the fast-track inclusion of some and the fast-track exclusion of others. The Asylum Bill of October 2015 – the first of two recent major reforms of German asylum law – foresees, on the one hand, the opening of the labour market and integration schemes for those with a 'good likelihood of staying' (namely persons of Syrian nationality) and, on the other, accelerated asylum procedures and fast-track deportation for those without such a perspective.

Germany's 'refugee crisis'

In mainstream media and dominant political discourses, the movements to and throughout Europe and the high number of asylum-seekers in Germany have been framed as a 'refugee crisis'. State authorities have asserted time and again that Germany is especially touched by the 'crisis': 'Our country receives a dis-

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3   The Dublin regulation, which was signed in 1990 and which entered into force in 1997, stipulates that persons seeking asylum in the European Union must make their claims in the country of first arrival. Arguably, this principle contributed to the decrease in the number of asylum claims that Germany had to process. While in 1992 about 70 per cent of all persons seeking asylum in Europe made their claims in Germany, in 2000 only 20 per cent of all asylum claims were processed there. Nineteen other European countries were by then receiving proportionally more refugees than Germany (Engler and Schneider 2015: 6).

proportionally high share [of refugees] in comparison with other EU member-states' (Federal Government of Germany 2015: 1). Discourses on the 'German refugee crisis' point to the overload of local communities and institutions struggling to deal with asylum claims, as well as to the threat that such a massive flow of asylum-seekers allegedly poses to the social cohesion and stability of the country. As Mountz and Hiemstra (2014) have pointed out, references to chaos and crisis are omnipresent in the arena of migration, especially in the discourses of state actors and particularly in relation to undesired migration and migrants. As we can again observe today, discourses of crisis go hand-in-hand with the portrayal of some asylum-seekers as 'bogus refugees' who are supposedly motivated mainly by financial gains. The proposed solution to this problem is measures of deterrence:

> […] the German Federal government and the *Länder* agree that it takes […] measures to deal with the current inflow of refugees. These include, in particular, the acceleration of [asylum] procedures and the avoidance of false incentives (Federal Government of Germany 2015: 1).

Discourses of emergency and crisis serve to reduce rights to and spaces of asylum (Mountz 2010). In addition to the acceleration of asylum procedures, the German government has severely cut back the spaces of asylum by declaring entire sending countries as 'safe'. Asylum-seekers who are nationals of thus-labelled 'safe countries of origin' – e.g. the Balkan states – are no longer entitled to seek asylum and are excluded from German classes and other integration measures. In some federal states, this special treatment of asylum-seekers from the Balkans further implies their separate accommodation in special centers where they have to stay until the end of their procedure. Such geographical assertions of sovereign power often succeed declarations of states of emergency (Mountz 2010). Furthermore, they show how discourses of crisis 'signal[s] the justification of measures that previously would have been considered extreme and unjust' (Mountz and Hiemstra 2014: 386).

However, besides the interpretation of the refugee crisis as a threat, another reading of the crisis has surfaced: unlike two decades earlier and many other European countries, German state actors have also presented the recent 'refugee crisis' as a humanitarian obligation. For example, the German chancellor justified her decision to yield to the demands of thousands of refugees to open the German border and to disregard Schengen requirements for Syrian refugees in the summer of 2015 by saying that the country was witnessing a humanitarian emergency. Her decision was controversially debated across Germany and Europe. Similarly, her slogan '*Wir schaffen das*' (We can do it), calling upon German citizens and authorities to tackle the challenge of receiving and integrating hundreds of thousands of refugees in Germany, has marked the debate. The slogan resonated with the new German *Wilkommenskultur* as a concept forged not only by civil-society initiatives but also by policymakers and bureaucrats, with the aim of fostering social cohesion and integration (Eckardt 2015). What seem to be rather contradictory framings of the refugee crisis in fact often overlap and intertwine, as the following excerpt from a speech by the German Federal President illustrates:

> [I am] deeply impressed by the willingness to help and the dedication shown by the many thousands of voluntary and professional helpers […] But many people worry about how Germany can remain open to refugees in the future, if thousands more come to join the many who are already here. Will the influx overwhelm us one day? […] Will our prosperous and stable country be stretched one day to breaking point? […] Allow me to quote [a municipal representative]: 'The professionals and volunteers are at their wits' end. Our backs are against the wall'. […] And remember that this is the assessment of someone who helps, who plays an active role, and not the words of someone who just watches and complains. We want to help. We are big-hearted. But our means are finite (Gauck 2015: 2).

On the one hand, state authorities have called upon citizens to join the 'professionals' in shouldering

the challenge and fulfilling the humanitarian obligation of refugee reception. Where state institutions and structures do not suffice, civil-society involvement, in the sense of voluntary work, has thus been singled out as a solution. At the same time, state actors actually refer to the fears, to the division within society and even to the experiences of frustration and exhaustion of volunteers in order to back up their arguments of crisis and ultimately their calls for a more restrictive take on asylum issues.

Against the background of the decentralized German asylum system, measures of forced dispersal and deterrence, and current 'crisis' discourses, the next section elaborates on recent civil-society responses to refugee reception. The case of volunteering for refugees, in particular, will be discussed in more depth, problematizing the dangers, but also underlining the possibilities that emerge when civil-society initiatives take on a key role in refugee reception and integration.

Civil-society responses to refugee reception: a welcome initiative

I now return to the case of the Rosenplatz neighborhood and the emergence of the welcome initiative *Refugee Assistance Rosenplatz* (RAR) mentioned in the introduction. In 2015, I interviewed several members of the initiative and attended some of their meetings. In some ways, the emergence of the RAR can be taken as a prototypical case, as one of numerous welcome initiatives that have popped up of late in German localities. At the same time, the RAR or some of its members have gone beyond what has happened elsewhere not only by providing practical assistance to newcomers in the neighborhood but also by getting involved in political negotiations around asylum, thus illustrating the continuum between the apolitical 'humanitarian' engagement of volunteers and political involvement and even civil disobedience against the institutional discrimination of asylum-seekers.

In the case of the Rosenplatz, the interest of the local population in refugee reception was raised through the allocation of refugees to the city and the municipality's decision to open two collective accommodation centers in the neighborhood. Accom-

modating refugees in this way rather than in private apartments, and in residential neighborhoods instead of on city outskirts, renders refugee reception visible to the populations of these neighborhoods. When I asked one of the residents of the Rosenplatz why people in the neighborhood suddenly became interested in the issue, she first pointed to the heightened visibility of the topic in the media: 'You can look in the paper; every day they say something about refugees [...]'; however, above all she stressed the presence of refugees in the neighborhood: 'We see the refugees here every day. [...] that is, they are present' (personal interview, 8 July 2015). This presence of refugees in residential neighborhoods enables encounters and exchanges with the local population. Many welcome initiatives, like the RAR, actually take the opening of a collective accommodation center in the neighborhood as a starting point. At the same time, the opening of such centers can also trigger negative responses by the local population. In the beginning, some Rosenplatz residents expressed their fears of and resentment towards refugee reception in the neighborhood. These reactions were, at least partly, due to residents feeling not well informed about and excluded from decision-making processes concerning refugee reception and accommodation. If taken up and fueled by right-wing groups, such feelings can easily turn into protest or even violence against refugees, as has happened in many localities (Bruns *et al.* 2014).

In the Rosenplatz, the initial resentment expressed at the round-table meeting was not followed by any visible protest. Instead, the RAR took the lead in shaping refugee reception and integration in the neighborhood. The first action of the RAR was to organize furniture for the new accommodation centers: 'In the beginning it was a chaos, because the houses were not fully furnished when the first [refugees] arrived', recalled one of the volunteers (personal interview, 8 July 2015). Besides the wish to welcome and 'help refugees', the RAR thus also reacted to the insufficiency of state-run support structures. In some cases, the structural shortcomings are arguably due to the quick changes and high workload, to which bureaucratic structures take time to adjust, as evidenced by Karakayali and Kleist (2016: 66): 'When hundreds of thousands of refugees arrived in 2015, for example,

volunteers often spontaneously started to register refugees and to provide them with food and housing, as bureaucracies failed to cover those essentials.' In other cases, authorities explicitly rely on volunteers to take over. In fact, civil-society initiatives have always played a major role in facilitating the reception and integration of refugees. The example of German-language classes nicely illustrates this point. As the state only provides German classes to those likely to be granted the right to stay, civil-society initiatives, like the RAR, organize free courses for those excluded from official classes. Among those teaching German in the RAR are not only professional (retired) teachers or students, but also anyone who speaks German and wants to teach. In fact, as the coordinator of the RAR underlined, they are not giving 'real' German classes, but only 'language-learning help': 'We called it like this [...] because I don't think that volunteers can replace language courses' (personal interview, 17 September 2015). As they fill the gap left by bureaucratic failure and as they take over where no state-run support is foreseen in the first place, civil-society actors find themselves in a contradictory position: on the one hand, they provide essential services that otherwise the state would have to take care of. On the other, their intervention has critical political potential because it may foster personal relationships and the *de facto* inclusion of persons with an insecure legal status, who are not officially entitled to integration support measures.

An explorative study on the motivations of persons doing volunteer refugee work found that people mostly got involved to 'help refugees' (Karakalyi and Kleist 2015). Many *want* to actually *do* something, instead of simply passively observing the daily news of the refugee crisis. Others even feel *obliged* to help. An employee of the Catholic charity organization Caritas, which coordinates the volunteer refugee work of church communities in the Rosenplatz and elsewhere in the city, told me that she was '[trying] to take some of the pressure from the people, because politics and society [make that] many people here have a bad conscience'. In particular, she recounted one incident: 'The other day, I had a retired teacher here [...] who said "I have to teach German to refugee children now". When I already hear this "I have to",

I understand what's going on' (personal interview, 4 September 2015). In the beginning, RAR volunteers mainly wanted to offer daily and practical support to the refugees living in the neighborhood. However, their self-understanding changed when they were confronted with the pending deportation of their new neighbors. One active member of both the RAR and an antiracist initiative told me:

> It (the RAR) was some sort of help industry and everyone felt so happy, that was nice. Until the moment when the refugees received the letters announcing their deportation and then the mood turned. (...) Until then, it was basically all sunshine and roses and then the whole work (of the volunteers) was put into question, because the refugees were supposed to go away. Everyone was bewildered (personal interview, 6 July 2015).

The first time that a deportation was scheduled to take place from one of the accommodation centers in the Rosenplatz neighborhood, people gathered spontaneously in front of the building and managed, through their blockade, to prevent the deportation. After this experience the RAR, together with a local antiracist group, other collectives and individuals, formed an alliance against deportation. They organized a telephone list to mobilize people, preventing more than 30 deportations between March 2014 and September 2015. While many of the volunteers in the RAR had not pursued any political interests *per se*, the contact with their new neighbors led them to also take sides on political issues such as deportations. They might fill in bureaucratic gaps, but they do so 'under protest'.

The emergence of the RAR and other civil-society responses to refugee reception across Germany can only be understood against the background of Germany's decentralized asylum system. Furthermore, national policies and the twofold 'crisis' discourses of state actors – the crisis as both a threat to national security and as a humanitarian challenge and obligation that the authorities and citizens have to tackle together – have certainly influenced the intensification of both support movements and antagonistic responses, as

the numerous examples given here show. The alternatives would be structural solutions – like large-scale social-housing programs – and truly inclusive 'integration' measures. This said, the influence of national policies and state authority discourses should also not be overestimated, as they are just two elements among many that shape civil-society responses to refugee reception. In particular, if we try to understand why, in some cases, initial resentments and fears do not turn into protest or violence, it becomes clear that we must take a multiplicity of actors into account and look at local settings and dynamics.

Local negotiations of asylum

As mentioned above, federal and municipal authorities have significant scope for manœuvre with regard to how they handle refugee reception and integration. The policies adopted can present a rupture with national provisions, as local authorities often deal with questions of refugee integration in much more practical terms than national governments. They know the shortcomings of national provisions of non-integration, given that persons supposedly 'without a perspective to stay' often end up staying for years. However, there are great differences in the approach that, for example, municipalities take to refugee reception and integration, which depend amongst other things on prior experiences with refugee reception, the size and other socio-demographic aspects of the city, and political will, coupled with the municipalities' financial resources (Aumüller 2009).

The Rosenplatz neighborhood is set in a middle-sized and, in many ways, ordinary city. The city's unemployment rate has been more or less constant at about 7 per cent of the population, corresponding to the national average. Local politics have been dominated by the two main national parties, the Social Demcratic Party and the Christian Democratic Union, with right-wing extremist parties gaining relatively low (but rising) voter support. Almost a third of the city's inhabitants are migrants or descendants of international migrants, most of whom came as resettlers (*Aussiedler*) from Eastern Europe or with the so-called 'guestworker' programs. In 2013, the local authorities took a quite proactive stance on the integration of migrants and also adopted a plan for the integration of refugees and for decentralized accommodation. The idea was to house refugees either in small accommodation centers or in private apartments, depending not on their legal status but on their needs and length of stay in the municipality.

While researchers have long highlighted the importance of taking into account sub-national – especially municipal – structures and policies when analyzing asylum issues, the relation between these and civil-society reactions has thus far been largely neglected in scientific inquiry. A recent comparative study of responses to refugee reception and accommodation in six German localities, however, shows how differing actor-constellations and the way in which different actors and factors interrelate, are decisive for more or less positive responses to refugee reception (Aumüller *et al.* 2015). In what follows I highlight three aspects in particular.

First, how municipal authorities go about announcing decisions (e.g. the opening of an accommodation center), second, how they include local populations in decision-making processes, and third, how they work together with local initiatives,(compare Aumüller *et al.* 2015). The municipality had failed to include Rosenplatz residents in the planning process of the two accommodation centers. However, thanks to the various development programs, structures existed in the neighborhood to connect and include residents. This development has partly been about building a neighborhood identity and setting up structures, such as the round-table, for dialogue between locals, and between the authorities and the local population. This proved extremely important, as the round-table enabled locals to connect and discuss the issue of refugee reception in the neighborhood. The 'neighborhood developer', a sort of social worker or central, local contact person, organized and moderated the meetings, and helped to coordinate the emerging welcome initiative.

Second, the size and form of refugee accommodation may impact on civil-society responses. One of the centers opened in the Rosenplatz is a residential building with different private apartments, mainly for

families and single women. The other center is much bigger, housing about 80 men, but it is equally located in a residential house which does not stand out from other houses in the street or the neighborhood. Unlike many other, especially bigger, accommodation centers, it is neither fenced off nor surveyed. While the size and form of accommodation may not determine how local populations respond to the centers – there are cases of both rejection of small centers and very positive reactions even to mass accommodation centers for several hundreds of people (Aumüller *et al.* 2015: 122) – the way they are (not) marked as 'different' and possibly 'dangerous', as suggested by fences and security staff, has a great impact on the everyday life of their inhabitants (Pieper 2008) and may influence the way neighbors relate to them (Aumüller *et al.* 2015).

Third, welcome initiatives or other solidarity groups, as well as right-wing racist groups, all shape local responses to refugee accommodation. The emergence of the RAR, then, can be taken not only as the sign of a welcoming local population, but also in fact as having contributed to shaping positive responses among locals. Initiatives in many ways facilitate encounters and exchanges in the neighborhood and with the authorities. Equally, the absence of organized right-wing groups agitating against refugees probably contributed to the absence or invisibility of protests against refugee reception.

In short, the responses of local populations to refugee reception are influenced by a variety of actors and factors, including asylum policies and practices, discourses on asylum, local structures, and negotiation processes. Only by considering how these actors and factors come together can we understand the differences between civil-society responses across localities. And only by treating the local negotiation of asylum as a continuous process can we understand that responses may be quite different in the same locality over time. In turn, the focus on local negotiation processes of asylum also brings to the fore how civil-society initiatives, street-level bureaucrats and also, of course, the asylum-seekers, position themselves and reproduce or contest national policies of asylum. After all, the promotion of the *Willkommenskultu*r by state authorities can be seen as the success of the slogan

'Refugees welcome' long promoted and pushed by grassroots refugee support movements.

Concluding remarks

The intensification and multiplication of civil-society support for, and the negative civil-society responses to, refugee reception in Germany raise two questions. How do we explain the recent emergence of civil-society initiatives to welcome and support refugees? And how do we explain the often contradictory reactions and the differences in responses between localities? I have argued that it is not only the mass arrival of asylum-seekers in Germany that has triggered these reactions, but also the way in which this has been framed by state actors as a 'crisis'. The interpretation of this crisis by the German authorities has been two-fold. On the one hand, the crisis has been posited as a threat to national security, tying in with discourses of right-wing groups and 'concerned citizens' about 'bogus' refugees abusing the German asylum and welfare system and thus calling for further restrictions on the right to asylum. On the other hand, state authorities have framed the 'crisis' as a humanitarian challenge and obligation that authorities and citizens have to tackle together. Accordingly, the authorities have largely encouraged and celebrated volunteering and donations for refugees under the slogan of a new German *Willkommenskultur*.

The arrival of hundreds of thousands of asylum-seekers in Germany has also appeared as a crisis because policies of deterrence, coupled with an actual decrease in asylum claims in Germany in the preceding decades, had rendered this arrival an unexpected event. The sudden increase in asylum claims thus signified a crisis of migration control and an overload for unprepared bureaucratic institutions. In many localities, civil-society initiatives jumped in, where bureaucracies failed, to prevent chaos and negative consequences for those suffering from this bureaucratic failure. The question remains, however, as to where to draw the line between volunteers lending the necessary support and the assumption of core state responsibilities. Another question which remains open is how far the various welcome and volunteer initiatives get involved

in political struggles for the rights of asylum-seekers, as in the case of the RAR.

Taking the example of the Rosenplatz neighborhood, where the opening of a refugee accommodation center led to the emergence of the welcome initiative RAR and widespread local support for the new residents, I further explored the question of why, in some cases, there are (no) antagonistic reactions to refugee reception. The legal-political context in Germany and the current 'crisis' of German migration governance can, to some extent, explain this emergence of volunteer initiatives, as well as the negative reactions of frustrated local populations. However to fully grasp these phenomena, and especially the differing reactions across localities, we have to look at sub-national structures and policies and, above all, take the changing local actor-constellations and dynamics into account. The comparative exploration of negotiation processes around refugee reception and accommodation across different localities and over time seems ripe for further analysis – especially against a background of various self-organized refugee movements, which have struggled since 2012 for better living conditions and freedom of movement. This should also entail a reflection on the question of what role refugees themselves play in the new German *Willkommenskultur*.

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