



GERMANY IN THE WORLD: CHALLENGES & OPPORTUNITIES



Why the Resettlement of Refugees Is Unpopular But Necessary

By Victoria Rietig

The Taliban's seizure of power in Afghanistan has not only triggered a humanitarian and political crisis in the country itself, but also sparked a debate in Germany about how the German government should deal with new refugee movements. The orderly admission of refugees via resettlement would offer many advantages – yet, to date, Germany and Europe have made too little use of this instrument. The new German government, together with a group of willing countries, should therefore establish a resettlement coalition. This would offer more refugees a safe, legal, and orderly pathway to protection; reduce the burden on the countries neighboring crisis regions; and equip Germany with a more comprehensive toolbox to handle the migration challenges of the future.

A Wake-Up Call from Afghanistan

The Taliban's seizure of power in Afghanistan is leading to growing concern in Germany that large refugee flows toward Europe are imminent. Yet the number of people who will actually flee and the routes they will use to do so depend on two factors that we can influence. The first factor is the border and admission policies that Afghanistan's neighboring countries are currently putting into place, as these policies will determine whether Afghan refugees see prospects within the region. The second factor is Europe's political will to create more safe, legal, and orderly migration pathways for vulnerable people from Afghanistan.

The German government should therefore pursue two parallel approaches: First, it should continue, together with other EU countries, to negotiate with Pakistan and Iran, Afghanistan's two largest neighbors, to determine what support they need in order to avoid closing their borders to Afghan refugees and to offer the refugees physical safety near their homeland. These negotiations are already ongoing, and both countries have announced their intention to host refugees in reception centers near the border. They are dependent on financial and technical assistance to do so, for example from UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, which is already assessing potential sites for tented camps and [reception centers](#) together with the Iranian authorities.

At the same time, however, the German government should also directly admit particularly vulnerable Afghans to Germany via a resettlement quota. This includes not only locally recruited Afghan staff who helped the German armed forces, but also female political activists and other particularly at-risk people who are in the Taliban's crosshairs. Leading politicians stress Germany's responsibility to Afghanistan, and the Bundeswehr did indeed evacuate more than 5,000 people in recent weeks. Yet Germany has still not brought itself to give a firm number of how many refugees it will admit – unlike Canada, which announced in mid-August that it would take in 20,000 Afghan refugees.

DETERMINING FACTORS
The Resettlement Crisis

Admitting refugees via resettlement should be uncontroversial – but that is true only in theory. In the UN Global Compact for Migration, Germany and the more than 150 other countries that endorsed it underline their aim that migration should be safe, legal, and orderly. That is exactly what resettlement is: a lengthy process in which recognized refugees are selected and screened in several steps, and then, following extensive planning, enter the receiving countries with valid documents.

Resettlement offers a long list of advantages. First, it is a controllable way of providing long-term protection to people in need. Second, resettlement offers security not only to the refugees, but also to the receiving countries, which can (and do) carry out intensive security checks during the many-layered process **before the refugees set foot in the country**. Third, it reduces the burden on the countries of first admission in the immediate neighborhood of war zones and cri-

sis regions and, thus, boosts the credibility of Germany and Europe. This is desperately needed in this 70th anniversary year of the UN Refugee Convention, which was marked in Europe more by discussions of illegal push-backs than by any spirit of celebration. The fourth advantage of resettlement (and, from the perspective of political decision-makers, perhaps the most interesting) is that it appeals to a broad political spectrum. Its supporters can emphasize aspects such as security and order, or humanity and ethics, depending on whom they are addressing.

Metaphorically speaking, resettlement is the mountain gorilla of migration policy: impressive and worthy of protection – and yet at risk of extinction. The number of resettlement places worldwide is low, despite the system’s many advantages. Over the past five years, fewer than a quarter of a million refugees have been able to begin a new life [via this pathway](#) – and the trend is downward. The biggest reason for this is that the United States, long the mainstay when it comes to the international protection of refugees, retreated from its leadership

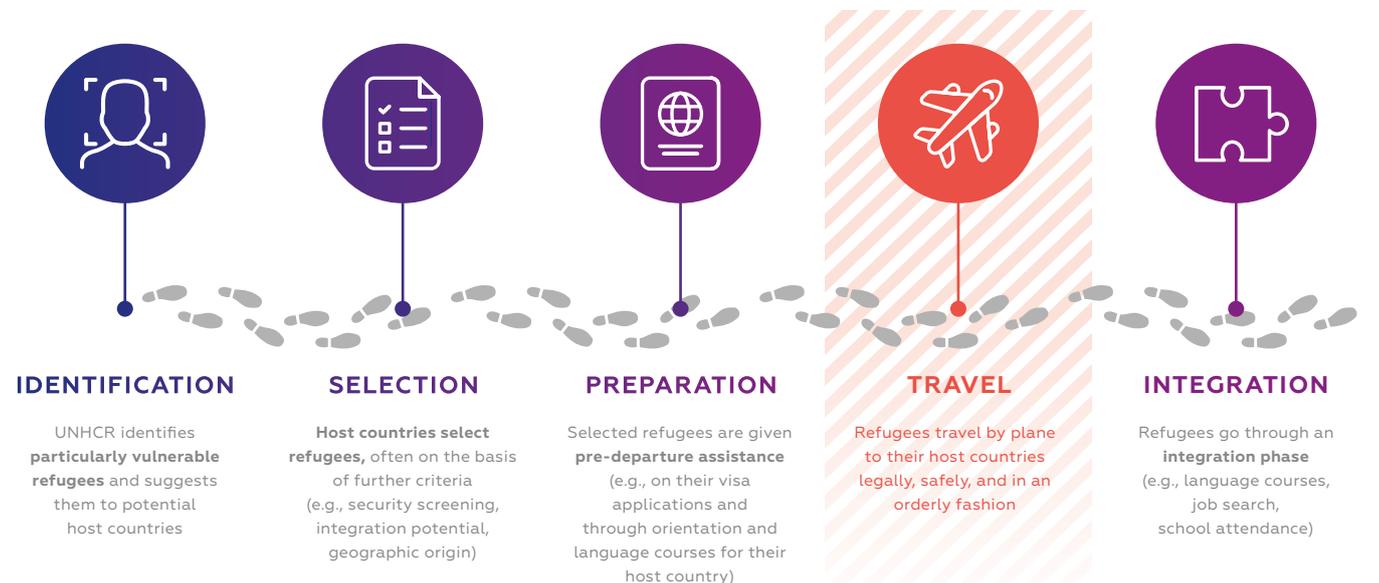
position under the administration of former President Donald Trump. The coronavirus pandemic pushed down numbers further in the past year. Yet even if US President Joe Biden plans to admit far more refugees in the coming year, we are seeing a decline in countries’ willingness to take in refugees, with fewer and fewer countries prepared to do so.

This trend is all the more worrying given that UNHCR calculates that the number of people in need of resettlement has now risen to 1.5 million, including 100,000 Afghan refugees. This estimate is likely to rise further in the coming months, as it was calculated before Kabul fell to the Taliban.

CHALLENGES
German Hesitancy

Germany is contributing to the resettlement crisis. In the past five years, it has admitted fewer than 11,000 refugees via this pathway. That said, Germany is far from the only hesitant country in Europe. Over the same period, all EU member states together admitted around 70,000 people, i.e.

A Long Road to Safe Arrival: The Resettlement Process



Source: Author's own compilation

roughly 10,000 to 25,000 each year. In view of these meager figures, the EU Commissioner for Home Affairs, Ylva Johansson, convened a high-level Resettlement Forum in July to explore ways to increase resettlement (together with representatives of the United States, Canada, and UNHCR). Although the participating countries subsequently stressed their determination to alleviate the resettlement crisis by making “tangible contributions,” they did not state any concrete figures.

There are many reasons why Germany and other EU member states are so hesitant about resettlement. First, a sense of aid fatigue is palpable across Europe, which is reflected not only in low resettlement figures, but especially in the growing curtailment of asylum legislation and, in some cases, active efforts to keep people from applying for asylum.

Second, pull-factor fears abound. There are two distinct camps: One argues that more legal pathways to enter a country can also lead to *more irregular migration*, as family members and friends in another country

make it much easier to find a footing in these countries. Those who take this view also sometimes believe that generous admission policies (or even just the perception of openness, irrespective of the reality) result in more people making their way to Germany. The other camp, by contrast, argues that more legal pathways to enter a country can lead to *less irregular migration*. That is because people who have legal migration options are more likely to use them instead of paying smugglers and risking their lives on dinghies. Those who fall into this camp may also criticize the idea that openness is invariably a pull factor because, according to this argument, hardly any legal migration could be permitted – whether by workers or people seeking protection. But that would be fatal for an ageing country like Germany that is in need of skilled labor. And from a purely legal perspective, it would be incompatible with German and European asylum legislation.

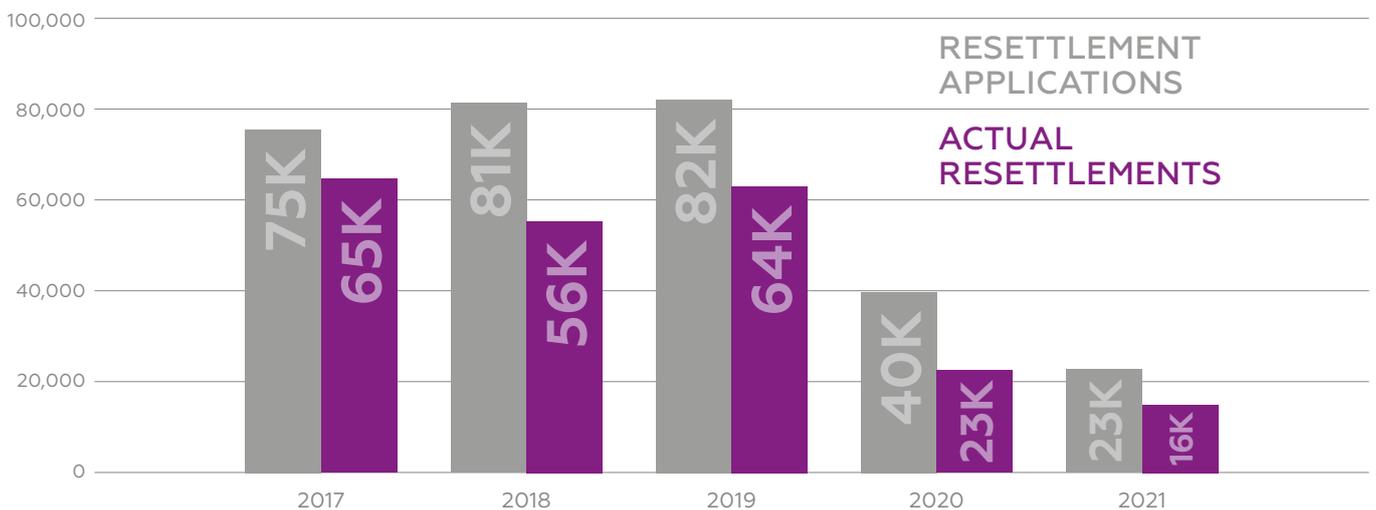
This pull-factor discussion is made more difficult by the fact that it is often driven by beliefs and political lean-

ings; hard data is rarely available. Robust scientific studies are nuanced in their findings: For example, a new study concludes, after an intensive analysis of the data, that the high number of arrivals in 2015 and 2016 was more the result of a steady upward trend since 2010, caused by adverse conditions in the countries of first asylum around Syria, than a consequence of Angela Merkel’s policies or rhetoric. However, the study also suggests that Merkel’s policy of welcoming refugees in the summer of 2015 may have had a short-term impact on migrants’ intention to come to Germany.

Third, the major advantage of resettlement – its controllability – is simultaneously its Achilles’ heel, as resettlement figures are fully in the government’s control, unlike asylum applications. As a result, growing concerns about rising asylum applications can lead to a decline in a government’s willingness to set generous resettlement quotas.

Fourth, and finally, Germany has no tradition of resettlement. Unlike the United States and Canada, which

A Lack of Will: Admission of Refugees Via Resettlement in the Past Five Years



Source: UNHCR

have admitted tens of thousands of refugees via resettlement each year for decades, and where the concept is widely known, Germany is a newcomer in this field. It did not establish its first pilot program until 2012 and initially admitted a few hundred people per year. As a result, much of the population is still unfamiliar with this instrument. Its popularity has also not benefited from its unfortunate German translation, *neuansiedlung* (literally, “new settlement”), which evokes negative historical connotations.

All these reasons may explain Germany’s limited engagement with resettlement to date. But they do not justify it. Even if resettlement and other legal pathways do act as an important pull factor (which, as mentioned above, has yet to be shown scientifically), we nonetheless need legal and safe pathways for people seeking protection to reach Europe if we are to have any credibility when we appeal to neighboring countries to show solidarity and be willing to take in refugees. In addition, such legal pathways would also restore some balance to our current policies, which are rather one-sided in their focus on deterring and reducing migration.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Potential of a Resettlement Coalition

The new German government should therefore work with a group of willing countries within and outside of Europe to establish a resettlement coalition. Concretely, all members should make a commitment to annually admit 0.05 percent of their population in this way. Some countries, such as Sweden, Norway, and Canada, already meet this target and show each year that it is realistic. For Germany, this would mean admitting 40,000 refugees per year. Taking into account asylum applications as well, which in the last two years have numbered between around 120,000 and 165,000,

the total amount of protection seekers admitted to the country would still be below the so-called upper limit of 180,000 to 220,000 that was hotly debated a few years ago – a figure that even Germany’s conservative parties regarded as reasonable. In addition to the aforementioned countries, potential coalition partners could include the United States, France, Portugal, and Finland.

Together, a coalition of this kind could admit more than a quarter of a million refugees per year, which would make a substantial contribution to reducing the burden on crisis regions, rather than the nominal contribution made so far. Another positive side effect would be that this coalition could serve as a new transatlantic project. It could show that Western democracies intend to move away from their current – primarily reactive – approach to international refugee protection, and instead adopt a more active approach and develop greater capacity for action. The countries in the coalition could also save resources by cooperating more closely on the practical implementation of resettlement than is currently the case, for example via joint identification and screening of the candidates, shared infrastructure in the countries of first asylum, and coordination of preparatory courses or transportation to the receiving countries.

The members of the new German Bundestag and those involved in the upcoming negotiations to form a governing coalition should therefore urgently seek to expand resettlement. If they did, Germany could not only deal more effectively with the current crisis in Afghanistan but also with the migration challenges of the future.

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The German Council on Foreign Relations (DGAP) conducts research and advises on current topics of German and European foreign policy. This text reflects the opinions of the author(s), not those of DGAP. DGAP receives funding from the German Federal Foreign Office based on a resolution of the German Bundestag.

Publisher

Deutsche Gesellschaft für
Auswärtige Politik e.V.

ISSN 749-5450

Translation Emma Hardie

Editing Helga Beck

Layout Lara Bühner

Design Concept WeDo

Photo © Reuters / Willy Kurniawan



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