by Christian Jakob

CITY REPORT

Potsdam
A key player in bringing cities together across Europe.

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🌀 MOVING CITIES - Another migration policy is possible!

1. Abstract & Takeaways

Key Takeaways:

1

Potsdam is a leader in both municipal networking and advocacy work, both in Germany and in Europe more broadly. It helped inspire several other cities to become active by founding the "Cities of Safe Harbours Alliance" (Städtebündnis Sicherer Hafen).

2

Potsdam is advocating for a reform of the German Residence Act, which would allow municipalities to play a greater role in receiving people rescued at sea.

3

The city is moving to change the direction of its so-called "Foreigner Authority" towards less discriminatory practices. To do this, it has developed a new guideline together with civil society representatives, which asks caseworkers to enable a right of residence wherever legally possible.

What is unique about the city?

Advocating for the rights of refugees: Potsdam is one of the most important cities in Germany and Europe when it comes to migration policy. Following its long engagement in anti-racist work, Potsdam became one of the most vocal municipal actors speaking out for the rights of migrants after 2015. It improved living conditions for refugees in several areas—from simplified family reunion to increased access to integration courses. Moreover, the city is trying to improve its own admission of refugees by reforming the local "Foreigner Authority," with the help of churches, the local Seebrücke group, and other anti-racist civil society actors.
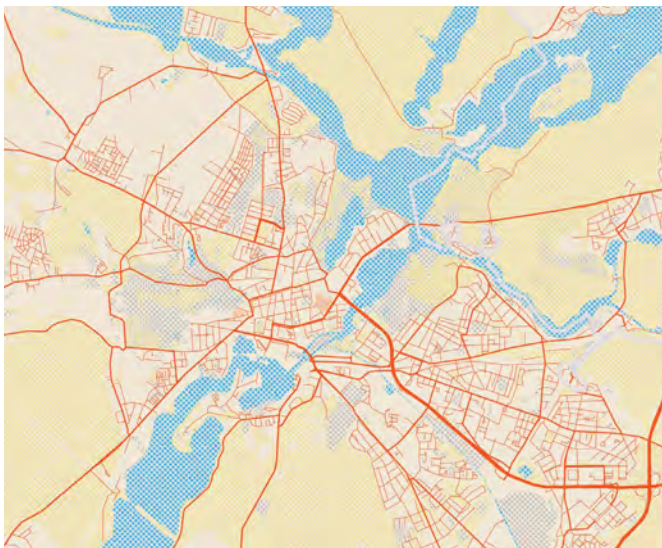
What are the key factors?

A proactive mayor: Since the fall of communism, Potsdam has, as a German state capital, had a left-liberal character. The recent engagement of Mayor Mike Schubert in advocacy work and the city's openness to collaborate with civil society initiatives are two other main factors.

What are the most outstanding results so far?

The "Cities of Safe Harbours" alliance: The "Potsdam Declaration" and subsequent founding of the "Cities of Safe Harbours" alliance in 2019 sparked a working dialogue with the German Interior Ministry. In June 2021, the city organised a Conference of Mayors together with Palermo, launching the first European Alliance of Safe Harbours. On the ground in Potsdam itself, the transformation of the discriminatory "Foreigners Authority" stands out.

Political activities and advocacy beyond the city level?

Potsdam is one of the key actors in Germany advocating for a reform of the Residence Act. This would allow municipalities to play a greater role in receiving people rescued at sea. It founded the "Cities of Safe Harbours Alliance," which includes municipalities all over Europe. The alliance has put political pressure on the federal government and successfully established a regular dialogue with the German Interior Ministry (BMI), that would be responsible for the intended reform. The "Potsdam Declaration," on which the network is based, is the most important document of the cities movement for municipal refugee reception in Germany.

Population

180.334[1]

Location/ region

Capital of the German state Brandenburg in East Germany

Mayor (party)

Mike Schubert (SPD)

1 https://www.statistik-berlin-brandenburg.de/publikationen/Stat_Berichte/2020/SB_A01-07-00_2019m12_BB.xlsx

2. Local background and context

Since the early 2000s, Potsdam has demonstrated a proactive approach against increasing right-wing influence in Eastern Germany. Over the years, the city developed several programs fostering tolerance and creating perspectives for young people. Continuing this tradition, Potsdam became one of the most vocal municipal actors speaking out for the rights of migrants after 2015 and improved the living conditions for refugees in several areas – from simplified family reunion to increased access to integration courses.

Early opposition to right-wing influences

Even though Potsdam, unlike other regions of Brandenburg, was never considered a "nationally liberated zone,"[2] racist violence was a problem here as well, and people with an immigrant background in particular suffered. Therefore, as early as 2000, the city founded the alliance "Potsdam shows its colours," which is still very active today in matters of local refugee policy. The action alliance is also an information pool. It unites civil society and governmental organisations, companies, parties, and parliamentary groups of the Potsdam City Council. The founding period was marked by right-wing extremist acts of violence against refugees. At that time, for example, the Stadtportbund tried to set an example against contempt for humanity, right-wing extremism, racism and xenophobia. The city launched a local action plan for the "development and opportunities of young people in socially deprived areas." A federally and EU-funded "Workshop for Further Training, Practical Support and Research in the Social Sector" developed measures to prevent German youths from joining the Nazi scene. At the same time, it organised meetings between the local population, migrants, and refugees. In 2006, Potsdam joined the "European Coalition of Cities against Racism" (ECCAR). In 2008, the city council adopted the "New Potsdam Tolerance Edict," a kind of mission statement as an "open and tolerant city of citizenship." All of these—and—many other - municipal activities probably contributed to the fact that extreme right-wing groups could hardly gain a foothold in Potsdam in the long term. This in turn facilitated the everyday life and integration of refugees in the city.

Making Family Reunion possible

In terms of local reception, the city was already trying to promote family reunification at the local level well before the Cities of Safe Habour network was founded. This is also because quite a number of Potsdam citizens were involved in humanitarian volunteer work in refugee camps in Greece from 2015 onward. In the process, they got to know refugees living there whose families were already in Germany and who wanted to move in with them. They approached the city council, which instructed the mayor to ensure that the relevant national and international agencies would facilitate reunification.[3] In 2017, the city instructed the mayor to hold talks with the state government and other municipalities on taking in Yezidis. Previously, in December 2016, the Brandenburg state parliament

2 "National liberated zone" is a central term in the recent strategy of right-wing extremists in Germany. It could be described as a no-go area for people that do not agree with right-wing ideas and practices. More than a geographical area, it is a milieu in which right-wing extremists have become influential to the degree that it impacts the everyday life of people living in these zones. (https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/National_befreite_Zone#cite_note-3)

3 Following a decision by the Bundestag in June 2013, almost all German states had enacted state admission programs for Syrian civil war refugees. According to this, refugees already recognised in Germany can bring first- and second-degree relatives to join them by looking for private sponsors themselves. The private sponsors must commit themselves to the responsible Foreigner's Authority to cover the travel and living expenses of the relatives joining them. The program initially expired in 2016. In 2015, Brandenburg applied to the Federal Interior Ministry to extend the program by three years.

had decided to take in a limited number of traumatized Yazidi women from northern Iraq outside the regular asylum procedure. In this way, traumatized victims of the genocide by IS were to be brought to a safe place.

Increasing access to integration courses

In its 2016 integration concept, the city of Potsdam committed itself to providing a "broad, continuous range of language and integration courses" in the city to meet demand and give everyone access to German courses at levels A1 to B2. This was decided against the backdrop of many refugees losing years for language acquisition due to a regulation that gives only refugees with a so-called "good perspective of staying" access to so-called integration courses.[4] This applies if more than 50 percent of all asylum applications from the respective country of origin have been positively decided in the previous year. This include Eritrea, Iraq, Iran, Syria, and Somalia. Conversely, this means that people from all other countries can only take the course once their asylum application has been approved. The new integration concept of Potsdam aims to change this restrictive policy.

Tackling accommodation shortage

Again and again, the focus was on the concrete living situation of refugees in the city. The situation is better than in many other regions of eastern Germany. Nevertheless, asylum seekers have to live in mass accommodation here too, sometimes for a long time. For some time now, the city had actually committed itself to understanding the accommodation in residential homes only as a "transitional situation," that serves the goal of "temporarily mitigating the effects of barriers to access in the housing market in terms of measures to secure a livelihood."[5] The most important integration policy goal is the "rapid provision of housing." But how quickly this actually happened remained an open question. In light of the increased risk of infection during the pandemic, Potsdam's city council therefore recommended "quickly and as a matter of priority dissolve shared accommodation facilities." In August 2020, the city administration presented a plan, according to which eleven percent of future housing places for refugees are to be created through new construction, and 24 percent through the renting of new apartments. Two-thirds of the places are to be created by converting existing shared accommodation into individual apartments.

4 Since 2015, asylum seekers during the ongoing asylum procedure and tolerated persons have access to Integration Courses. These courses in the German language and on living conditions in Germany ("Orientierungskurs") are paid for by the federal government and are considered important help in building a new life. The catch: the federal government only pays the costs of the measure, which comprises up to 1,000 hours, if people belong in the said category.

5 https://www.potsdam.de/sites/default/files/documents/integraionkonzept_2016-2020_14062017.pdf

3. Selected local approaches

3.1 Pioneering advocacy for communal reception

Potsdam is one of the key actors in Germany advocating for a reform of the residence act, which would allow municipalities to play a greater role in the reception of people rescued from sea. It founded the Cities of Save Harbours Alliance to team-up with other cities. The alliance not only created political pressure on the federal government, but also successfully established a regular and promising dialogue with the German Interior Ministry (BMI) that would be responsible for the intended reform.

One of the central demands of the Seebrücke[6] movement since 2018 is that the federal states and municipalities be given the right to decide independently on refugee admission. So far, this is not legally possible in Germany. Every admission must be approved by the federal government.

When the city of Potsdam decided to become a "safe harbour," the city council instructed the mayor to work for a change in this regulation. Since then, Potsdam has made possibly decisive contributions to change the German residence law accordingly.

The Cities of Safe Harbours Alliance

During 2019, Potsdam took a national leadership role by establishing the Cities of Safe Harbours Alliance. In November 2019, Mayor Mike Schubert was invited as an expert witness in the Bundestag's (Federal Parliament) Interior Committee on the topic of refugees. And as the city council instructed him eleven months earlier, he addresses the municipalities' desire for an independent right to admit refugees.

Schubert points out that the "cities of safe harbours" together are home to over 23 million people – over 28 percent of Germany's population. The demand to first save human lives – and then to decide in a lawful procedure whether there is a right to asylum – has been raised by both conservative and left-wing governed municipalities within the network, Schubert stated.

Reforming the Residence Act

He proposed a reform of the Residence Act that would grant municipalities this competence. In addition, a distribution key should be established for those seeking protection rescued from distress at sea. For this purpose, there should be an agreement between the federal and state governments on the direct admission of people rescued from distress at sea, he suggests.

However, the Federal Government remained reserved. Civil society groups and municipalities have repeatedly demanded a reform of the German Aufenthaltsgesetz (Residence Act). The state of Berlin wants to achieve an abolition of the consent requirement by going to court. Potsdam chose another way: It initiated an extensive dialogue process between the member municipalities of the Cities of Safe Harbours Network and the Federal Interior Ministry (BMI).

In dialogue with the Ministry of Interior (BMI)

BMI representatives were already present at the first working meeting of the network Potsdam founded. Afterwards, Potsdam handed over coordination to the city of Heidelberg, but remained active. The 77 municipalities selected state coordinators. From their circle, a working group was formed, in which representatives of the BMI are also involved. The working group is formulating a concrete reform proposal for an amendment to § 23.1 of the Residence Act, so that municipalities can more easily make admission decisions.

This is being done in close coordination with the BMI, which until now had always blocked local or state admissions. But here, the contact is "good at the working level," says Ursula Löbel, coordinator of the Cities of Safe Harbours Network in Potsdam. "Resolutions don't get us anywhere, we need to put our money where our mouth is – changes in the law," she says. The BMI also participated in the second meeting of the entire network in November 2020. The network's signal to the federal government was: "Here is a solid structure of safe harbours, we as municipalities are ready. You don't have to worry anymore, send a plane to Greece, we'll take care of the rest," says Löbel. A "certain regularity" has developed in the exchange between the network and BMI in this regard.

Löbel sees this kind of lobbying as complementary to Berlin's lawsuit against the BMI, or the many open letters different municipalities have written. "One does not exclude the other," she says. But she considers talking at the working level to be more promising. And indeed, on 23 October 2020, around 20 mayors spoke to Chancellor Merkel via video conference and underlined their willingness to admit refugees from the burnt-down Moria camp on the island of Lesbos. "Even the Chancellor can't get around the Alliance anymore," Löbel says. Although Merkel had referred to a "European solution" during the meeting, she had to listen to the mayor. "A year ago this was unimaginable." Löbel therefore believes that the draft law currently being formulated by the Cities of Safe Harbours Alliance has a real chance of ultimately being supported by the federal government.

3.2 Transforming a discriminatory institution

In the process of becoming a "Safe Harbour," Potsdam also addressed the work of the city's Foreigner Authority, which until then has not been particularly supportive in meeting the needs of foreigners. A working

group involving civil society and migrant representatives developed a new guideline which asks case workers to enable a right of residence if it is somehow legally possible.

In 2014, Potsdam was one of ten cities nationwide that transformed their foreigner's authority into a "Welcome Authority" service centre. This was a federally-funded project organised by the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF). "Appreciating cultural diversity and treating all Potsdam residents with respect is a special concern of ours," Mayor Mike Schubert said at the time. "The Foreigners' Authority should become an integral part of the welcoming culture in the state capital Potsdam." Antiracist activists demanded that the authority should no longer treat foreigners—including refugees—as supplicants and in a discriminatory manner.

Not everyone thought that was successful. The Potsdam Foreigners Authority does not stand out negatively, but is "far from being a welcoming authority," says an activist from a local anti-racism group. It is a "normal bad foreigners authority, as happens in the state of Brandenburg." Not only did people have to put up with extremely long waiting times in some cases—the authority had also shown little cooperation when it came to issuing residence permits. Refugee groups had repeatedly criticized the atmosphere in the authority over the years, without this having any practical consequences. "It was about attitude and communication," says Potsdam refugee pastor Bernhard Fricke, "who gets a chance for an integration process, who is allowed to move out of shared accommodation?"

Changing the Foreigners Authority

Meanwhile, the decision to position Potsdam as a "safe habour" also brought movement into the discussion about the city's foreigner's authority. "The Safe Harbour is a great project of the mayor, but it cannot be that there is at the same time a foreigner's authority that thwarts these efforts," says Fricke. In fact, the "Solidarity City" resolution passed by city council in December 2018 explicitly addressed the issue. It states: the mayor shall be instructing "the Potsdam Foreigner's Authority to exhaust all possibilities to create permanent legal prospects of residence and life for refugees in Potsdam."

Based on this, a process was initiated in Potsdam to reform the authority. Among others, churches and civil society, the Diakonie and the Migrants Advisory Council are involved. With the help of external lawyers, "discretionary directives" were to be developed. These were guidelines so that the authority's staff will compulsorily grant a right of residence if it is somehow legally possible. On the subject of family reunification too, the authority should be made to use its discretionary powers in favour of the applicants. A new "mission statement" for the authority should was to be created.

Since May 2019, the working group appointed by the mayor himself, which is formally part of the municipal network "Potsdam bekennt Farbe," has been meeting. The head of the authority is also a member.

In an interim report by November 2019[7], the working group criticises a "very restrictive decision-making practice." This "obviously results from a void in directives and guidelines at the municipal and state level." A practice of "rejection and defence" creates a "negative climate between the addressees and the case workers," the report states.

New guidelines for the administration

In order to change this, the working group developed a catalogue of recommendations for action. In a new guiding principle, it is to be stipulated that the "creation of permanent legal residence and integration perspectives" is to become the "yardstick for measuring success." There should be "proactive counselling" to secure residence prospects and to promote integration—in other words, the authorities are to point out to the persons concerned circumstances of which they are not aware, but which could help them. Interpreters are to be made available for telephone and video calls. Staff should be trained to "raise awareness and prevent racist and socially chauvinist behaviour." Applications for work permits should be "prioritised and decided on in a timely manner, so that employers have confidence that a decision will be made quickly and migrants can actually start work." For this purpose, an appointment should be made within two to three weeks of the application. At the appointment, the work permit would be granted or a reasoned rejection would be issued. Until then, the authorities had often delayed such decisions until the job had been taken elsewhere.

The proposals are divided into 13 blocks of measures. In August 2020, the foreigner's authority drew up an overview of their implementation. Among other things, the provision of interpreters during telephone or video conversations has already been introduced.

4. Advocacy and network activities

Since 2018, Potsdam has pushed for a change in reception policies to favour people rescued at sea. It has organised together with other cities in numerous initiatives like the "Potsdam Declaration" or the "Cities of Safe Harbours Network." In 2021, it co-hosted the transnational "From the sea to the cities" conference.

Around 100 people drowned in the Mediterranean Sea in the last week of July 2019, many more had to wait on rescue ships because Italy did not allow them to enter a port. Alliances were formed in many European cities to exert political pressure to get Europe's governments to distribute the rescued. In Germany, the cities of Bonn, Cologne, and Düsseldorf took the first step. In a letter to the Chancellor, the mayors offered to take in refugees in need.[8] It was the first letter of this kind.

7 Bestandsaufnahme und Handlungsempfehlungen – Inhaltliche Vorbereitung zur Umsetzung des Beschlusses der Stadtverordnetenversammlung „alle Möglichkeiten auszuschöpfen, um Geflüchteten in Potsdam dauerhafte legale Aufenthalts- und Lebensperspektiven zu schaffen". Bündnis Potsdam! bekennt Farbe der Landeshauptstadt Potsdam. Bearbeitung: AG Ausländerbehörde, Stand: 24.11.2019
8 https://www.duesseldorf.de/aktuelles/news/detailansicht/newsdetail/duesseldorf-koeln-und-bonn-angebot-und-appell-zur-fluechtlingshilfe-an-kanzlerin-merkel-1.html

Potsdam, Bonn's twin city, followed suit two days later. "The letter to the Chancellor, in which the mayors draw attention to the terrible situation in and around the Mediterranean, is a very good initiative," said Mayor Jann Jakobs and Potsdam joined the initiative.[9]

Four months later in December 2018, the city council decided Potsdam would declare itself a "Safe Harbour."[10] In the resolution, new mayor Mike Schubert, who had taken office in the meantime, was charged with a whole series of national lobbying measures. These include, for example, lobbying "within the framework of the *Deutscher Städtetag* (German Association of Cities) for the creation of legal foundations to facilitate the admission of refugees by the federal and state governments."

Furthermore, Schubert should publicly express solidarity with sea rescuers and take over sponsorship of a sea rescue mission.[11]

The Potsdam Declaration

In the following months, Potsdam joined forces with seven other German municipalities. On 3 June 2019, shortly before the 40th general assembly of the Deutscher Städtetag in Dortmund,[12] they published the "Potsdam Declaration."[13] In this, they affirmed their will to admit refugees, hoping that other municipalities would join. And they had success: By the time of the Städtetag conference, more than 50 municipalities joined the initiative.[14]

Soon after, the city of Potsdam was one of the co-organisers of the congress Leinen los für kommunale Aufnahme ("Cast off for municipal reception") of the Seebrücke initiative in Berlin's city hall on 14 June. There, 12 municipalities initially found the network "Cities of Safe Harbours."[15]

Potsdam created a part-time position to coordinate the new network. By doing so, it channelled the increasingly expressed desire of many municipalities for proactive refugee reception at the administrative level for the first time. The coordinating position is located in the "Participation and Tolerant Potsdam"department of the city administration.

Cities of Safe Harbours

Three months later, in October 2019, the network "Cities of Safe Harbours" held its first working meeting. They call on the federal government to transform the ad hoc solution negotiated to take in rescued people from the Mediterranean—known as the "Malta Protocol"—into a long-term solution. For this purpose, the municipalities should be given the opportunity to implement their offer of admission within the European distribution procedure. The alliance demands "adequate financial and organisational support."

In February 2020, the network made another push. This time it was about refugees stuck in camps on the Aegean islands. Mayor Mike Schubert travelled to Greece with a delegation from the state, municipality, church, and civil society to visit the Moria camp on Lesbos. "500 unaccompanied children under the age of 14 are officially registered in the

9 https://www.potsdam.de/475-potsdam-unterstuetzt-forderungen-von-bonn-koeln-und-duesseldorf

10 https://seebruecke.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/Potsdam_Beschluss_SVV_5_12_2018_Sicherer-Hafen.pdf

11 https://seebruecke.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/Potsdam_Beschluss_SVV_5_12_2018_Sicherer-Hafen.pdf

12 https://www.staedtetag.de/veranstaltungen/hauptversammlungen/hauptversammlung-2019

13 https://www.potsdam.de/potsdamer-erklaerung-der-staedte-sicherer-haefen

14 https://kommunalwiki.boell.de/index.php/St%C3%A4dteb%C3%BCndnis_Sicherer_H%C3%A4fen

15 https://www.potsdam.de/387-kommunen-gruenden-buendnis-staedte-sicherer-haefen

Greek hotspots. And 500 places for unaccompanied children have been offered by German cities. We could help immediately,"[16] said Schubert. After his return, the Cities of Safe Harbours Alliance published a statement and repeated its willingness to immediately take in up to 500 unaccompanied minors housed on the Greek islands.[17]

The German government announced shortly afterwards that it would allow an initial three-digit number of people to travel from Greece to Germany. But the cities still have no political power to decide independently on admissions.

16 https://www.potsdam.de/sicherer-hafen-potsdam/page/0/0
17 https://www.potsdam.de/sites/default/files/documents/2020_03_06_gemeinsame_erklaerung_gefluechtete_sofortprogramm.pdf

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The **Moving Cities** project provides an in-depth research of 28 progressive, solidarity-based cities and their strategies in Europe, exploring their most inspiring and successful local approaches to their migration policies.

Moving Cities is a project from Seebrücke, Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung and Heinrich Böll Stiftung, funded by Robert Bosch Stiftung and Stiftungsfond Ziviseenotrettung and supported by many more initiatives.

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